

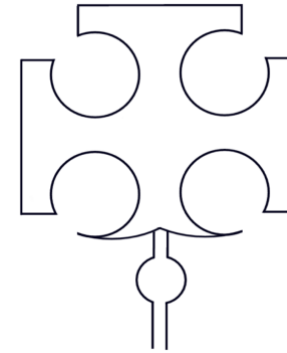
# **Carbrooke and the Commandery**

**(of the Knights Hospitallers)**

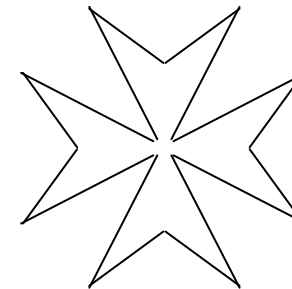
*A brief history of the Commandery at Carbrooke  
—how it got there, what it was and what happened to it*

Compiled by

Helen Riley



The Hospitaller's Cross as depicted on the tombstones in Carbrooke Church



The Maltese Cross as used by the Order of St. John today

*Published by Helen Riley on behalf of Carbrooke Church  
as part of the Carbrooke Heritage Project  
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A more detailed history of the Carbrooke Commandery can be found in Eric Puddy's book *A Short History of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in Norfolk* which is long out of print but some copies are available in local libraries.

On the first tombstone is inscribed:

Mater Clarensis generi quo milite claram anglia se jacta  
hic tumulata jacet

*A mother of the family of Clare, by a soldier of which family  
England boasts herself renowned, lies buried here.*

While on the second is inscribed:

A dextris natus requiescit matris humatus hunc petiit  
portum proprium revolutus in ortum

*At the right hand of his mother rests a son interred. He has  
sought this haven, to his own birth returning.*

From this early form of the Hospitaller's cross, as depicted on the tombstones in Carbrooke church, evolved the eight pointed cross which we know today as the Maltese Cross.

The Maltese cross has been the proud badge of the Knights Hospitallers for many centuries now and is the one we associate with their descendents, the St. John's Order of today. Their members are easily recognised, wearing their distinctive black uniforms adorned with a white Maltese cross as they provide their first aid and ambulance services at many of our public functions.

The Norfolk Branch still maintains the historical links by holding their special services in Carbrooke church every year.



The Commandery of the Knights Hospitallers at Carbrooke was in existence for three hundred and forty-seven years. It was founded at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century around 1193 and closed down in 1540, when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries and seized their lands and property for the Crown.

The Knights Hospitallers were a monastic Order, the brethren taking the standard vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and a unique fourth vow, to be *the serf and slave of our lords the sick*. The main role of the Order was the building, furnishing and improvement of hospitals, research in medicine, the training of doctors and surgeons, care of the poor and sick and the support of the Great Hospital of the Order in Jerusalem. They later took on a second role of defending pilgrims in the Holy Land and the Holy Land itself.

During the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Carbrooke consisted of two parts, Great Carbrooke (*Carbrooke Magna*) and Little Carbrooke (*Carbrooke Parva*) the latter was also known as West Carbrooke and comprised the area along Drury Lane and Caudle Springs towards Ovington.

The connection between Carbrooke and the Knights Hospitallers was forged by Matilda, Countess of Clare. The Clare family were wealthy and influential, related to Royalty and to many of the noble families in England. They founded sixteen Monasteries in all and were also great benefactors to the Hospitallers Order.

The first known link between Carbrooke and the Hospitallers was when Countess Matilda made a gift to the Order of the church of Little Carbrooke and sixty acres of land at a place called *Durcote*. The exact date of this gift is not recorded, but it was before 1180. The Hospitallers built a nunnery on this land

and placed Sister Basilia, a member of the Order, in charge of it. The Order was very enlightened in its outlook, not only in its knowledge and facilities to care for the sick but also in having nuns as nursing Sisters. The nuns would have provided nursing care to the sick and injured in the locality in addition to their normal religious duties.

Many churchmen at this time considered nursing to be an unsuitable occupation for nuns. Thus sometime between 1180 and 1185, Henry II gave the Priory of Mynchin, at Buckland in Somerset, to the Order on condition that all the Sisters of the Order who were spread around a number of nunneries in England were brought together at Buckland. This was agreed and Sister Basilia, along with other nuns from Carbrooke and elsewhere in the country, moved to Buckland. Once there, the Sisters became a contemplative Order, staying in their Nunnery and concentrating more on prayer than nursing.

A field in Carbrooke at the south end of Cuckoo Lane was known locally as Nun's Hill until quite recently. Perhaps Durcote and the nunnery were located in this vicinity?

At this time it was common for both rich and poor alike to donate what they could to religious institutions, in return for prayers and masses to be said for themselves when they died and for their ancestors.

The established church taught then what is known as the *Doctrine of Purgatory*. Put simply, this said that when a person died their soul went into Purgatory (a kind of halfway house) for an unspecified period of time, before it went on to its final destination (heaven or hell). While it was in Purgatory, the soul's final destination could be influenced by prayers and masses said on behalf of the dead person by those still living.

At this time (the beginning of the 13th Century) burials within the church were still rare, normally an honour reserved for a founder. This suggests that the tombs are those of Matilda, Countess of Clare, founder of the Carbrooke Commandery, and her son.

Matilda is known to have had two sons and a daughter. Her eldest son Richard succeeded his father as Earl of Clare and is buried at Clare. Her younger son Jacob was sickly as a child and his life was despaired of on more than one occasion.

When Jacob was taken ill, quite a common occurrence by all accounts, his mother regularly appealed to the Saints to cure him. It is recorded that on one occasion Jacob was apparently so far gone that he was laid out for burial, but his mother wouldn't accept this. The records say that Matilda prayed to St Thomas á Beckett and miraculously Jacob was cured.

It is understandable how a pious and devoted mother with such a sickly son might have been drawn to the Order of the Hospitallers, which was fundamentally a nursing order. It is more than probable that mother and son would both have been Donat Associates of the Order, and buried in Carbrooke church with full monastic honours as members of the Order.

Down the centre of both of the tombstones is carved the form of the cross used by the Order at this time. The inscriptions on the tombs are written in Latin, then the language of the church. The lettering is continuous, without any gaps or punctuation and does not run completely round the edges of the stones, but only from the underside of the cross (an indication that they are very early tombs of this type). The carvings show signs of wear and some of the letters have been worn away by the feet of many worshippers over the years.

England. The members were forbidden to wear the distinctive dress of the Order or to use any of its special titles.

The confiscated land and properties went to boost the King's Treasury, and many were given or sold to court favourites. By July 1541 Sir Richard Southwell, one of the King's favourites, had obtained the lease of *the manor of Carbrooke Hospital* from King Henry VIII, with the exception of the timber which the King had reserved for his own use.

In November of the same year, an inventory of the late Carbrooke Commandery was made by the Kings Commissioners, (one of whom was Sir Richard Southwell). It is interesting to note that in 1338 records show the Commandery was valued at £192 2s 4½d, but in 1541 the Kings Commissioners wrote it down to a value of £46 19s 4d. Sir Thomas Coppledyke, as the last Commander of Carbrooke, was to receive a pension of £50 a year plus one sixth of the value of his Commandery, provided he lived within the King's Dominions. This amounted to just eight pounds, based on the value the Commandery was written down to.

The site of the Commandery, the manor and the rectory were granted to Sir Richard Gresham of Holt and Sir Richard Southwell of Woodrising in 1543. Today the land still remains in private hands. The site of the Commandery is owned by a local farmer and mainly used as pasture for grazing sheep.

In the chancel of Carbrooke church, just in front of the altar steps, two stone coffin-lids are set side by side in the floor. There are no names on the tombs and the Latin inscriptions record simply that they are a mother of the House of Clare and her son, who is buried at her right hand.

Making gifts to religious institutions was one way of ensuring the members of those institutions and their priests would say prayers and masses for the dead, and include these prayers and masses as a regular part of their religious routine and duties.

Henry II died and was succeeded by his son, who became Richard I (better known as Richard the Lionheart). During Richard's reign Matilda made a further gift to the Hospitallers of "*the Church of St. Peter at Carbrooke with its appurtenants and a half of the same village with all its appurtenants*". The *appurtenants* included tithes, glebe land and the Manor, which extended into Great Carbrooke and included over half of the village lands.

A record of the gift survives today, but it was made about 240 years after the event by Brother John Stillingfleet, while he was compiling a book of Founders and Benefactors of the Order in England. He records that this gift to the Hospitallers was made at Westminster, sometime during the fifth year of King Richard's reign.

Dates at this time could be confusing. There was more than one calendar in use, with some starting the New Year in September others in January. As a result, official documents were dated by referring to the year of the Sovereign's reign. The fifth year of Richard I's reign is documented as being from 3rd September 1193 to 2nd September 1194 by today's calendar, so Matilda would have made the gift of the second church and lands to the Hospitallers sometime between these dates.

The church of Little Carbrooke has long disappeared but is thought to have stood along the Ovington Road, in the field on the Watton side of the road, between the junction with Drury Lane and the little bridge over the river Wissey.

The Church of Great Carbrooke still stands today and dominates the village with its imposing tower, but in 1193 it would have been half the size, having no tower and consisting only of the smaller building on the front, which is the chancel area today.

It was Matilda's gift of the second church and the village lands in Carbrooke that led to the Order setting up the Commandery in the village. A Commandery (also called a *Preceptory*), was run by a Commander, was subordinate to a Priory and was the basic administrative unit in the Hospitaller's organisational structure.

The role of a Commandery was to collect in rents for its properties and alms and gifts from the people, deduct as much as was essential for its own support and forward the remainder to the Priory. A Commandery also recruited and trained new members for the Order, offered hospitality to travellers, cared for the sick and infirm and helped the poor in its locality.

The Priory in charge of the English Branch (known as a *Tongue*) of the Order was the Priory of St John at Clerkenwell in London. The Prior would collect in the monies and goods from Commanderies all over England and forward these to Great Hospital of the Order which was initially located in Jerusalem, later on Rhodes and finally on Malta.

The Hospitaller's Order was directly under the protection of the Pope in Rome and therefore directly answerable to him, which made them independent of the control hierarchy of the established church in England. As property of the Order, the two Carbrooke churches were exempt from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Norwich Diocese, unlike the other churches in the area. This meant that the Bishop's Archdeacon had no right

and others. Of higher social standing would be the brother of the store, the brother of the infirmary and the brother of the hospital. To assist the brothers of office would have been hired servants, who were not members of the Order.

A record of Carbrooke Commandery in 1338 recorded an establishment of 27 people, of whom the majority were hired servants and only three were professed brethren. They were named as Sir Alan Macy, the Commander, brother Thomas Hinton, a chaplain and brother William de Boyton a serjeant-at-arms.

In addition to the professed brethren and the hired servants there were also Associate members of the Order. These were pious folk who wanted to share in the spiritual advantages and blessings enjoyed by the Hospitallers, but who could not fully embrace the severe discipline, celibacy and basic lifestyle of the brethren. As spiritual associates of the Order they could enjoy and share the blessings and benefits of the Hospitallers without giving up their secular pleasures.

Associates of noble birth were known as Donats, and the Order would benefit by a substantial donation from them. Associates of humbler origins were known as Confratres and they would give an annual contribution to the Order on the Festival of St John the Baptist (24th June). Associates were allowed to wear a demi-Cross (a Cross without the top arm) on their clothing. On the death of an Associate, they were buried in a cloak of the Order, bearing the white Hospitallers cross, and accorded the same rites as if they had been one of the brethren.

Carbrooke Commandery continued its existence until 1540. On 7th May of that year Henry VIII dissolved the Priory of St John at Clerkenwell and confiscated all the property of the Order in

First were the *Military Knights*, who had to come from noble families and were normally younger sons. The Knights were expected to undertake tours of duty defending the Holy Land and later, when this was lost, protecting the seaways in the Mediterranean. A year of this active duty was known as a *Caravan*.

Once a Knight had undertaken three Caravans and resided for at least two years at the Convent (the Headquarters of the Order) he was eligible for a higher post such as charge of a Commandery.

The second group of brethren were the *Chaplains of Obedience*, ecclesiastics for whom there were no restrictions on birth, but they had to be well educated. They were all ordained priests and as such were eligible for elevation to become Priors or Bishops of the Order, in addition to Commanders.

The third category of brethren were the *serjeants-at-arms*, who were fighting men like the Knights, but were not from noble families. Together with the Knights they formed the crack cavalry divisions of the Order who defended Jerusalem and the Holy Land and later the seaways in the Mediterranean, serving on the galleys.

The fourth category of brethren were the *brothers of office*, the ordinary monks who formed the majority of the Order. Their destiny depended on their breeding, education and craft, since the regulations of the Order laid down that anyone who entered the Order should *do in the House that same service which he was accustomed to do in secular life, or otherwise if he be ordered*. It is in this category that we would find the brother shoemaker, the brother almoner and the brother of the kitchen

to visit and inspect the Carbrooke churches unless invited, he couldn't tax them and they did not pay any fees to him. It also meant that the Hospitallers had the privilege of keeping their churches open during an interdict (an official closure of the churches by the Pope as a punishment).

King John (who was Richard's brother, Regent during his absences on Crusades and eventually succeeded him) managed to fall out with the Pope, who punished him by putting England under an interdict and excommunicating her people. This resulted in all the other churches in England (that were under the control of the established church) being closed, but the Carbrooke churches (which were under the control of the Order and therefore exempt) were able to remain open and continue their services as normal.

As rector of the Carbrooke Churches, the Hospitaller's Order was responsible for providing a vicar to carry out normal parochial duties (such as Sunday services, weddings, funerals and baptisms) in the two churches.

The Prior of St John at Clerkenwell had the privilege of choosing a vicar, who would be inducted into the post by the Archdeacon. Very few of the Brothers of the Order were priests, most were only monks, so they were not qualified for the appointment, since only an ordained priest could be appointed as a vicar.

One of the earliest recorded vicars of Great Carbrooke was a member of the Order called Brother Robert Drury, who became vicar in 1332. It has been speculated that Drury Lane may have acquired its name from him, because he would have walked that way regularly when travelling between the two churches to conduct services. He died in 1348, when the Black Death was

sweeping England and was eventually replaced in 1349 by a secular priest, who was not a member of the Order.

In 1424 the vicar of Little Carbrooke resigned and the Bishop of Norwich agreed to consolidate the vicarages of Great and Little Carbrooke into one. The church of Little Carbrooke must have been in a poor state of repair, as records show it was pulled down shortly after this date.

The church of Great Carbrooke was much smaller then, consisting only of the smaller building at the front that we know today as the chancel area. It is also around this time (1424-1450) that the church was extended and the nave, tower and new bells were added. The builders probably re-used some of the material from the other church during the construction, a common practice at the time.

Located in what are now fields behind the church and school, nothing remains of the Commandery above ground today, except for a number of lumps and bumps in the grass. Aerial photographs of the site during a dry summer sometimes show whitened outlines on the ground where the buildings used to stand.

The Commandery appears to have been surrounded by a rectangular moat which enclosed an area roughly 150 yards by 90 yards with a 30 foot span of water. The remainder of its layout can only be guessed at based on what is known of other similar establishments of that time.

Around a central cloister were likely to have stood the Commander's House, the chapel (dedicated to St. John the Baptist), the Refectory where the brothers would have eaten, the kitchen, a dormitory where they would have slept and a

chapter room in which the weekly Chapter was held on Sundays and in which the Commander, as lord of the Manor, would have held his manorial courts.

There would have been an almshouse, where travellers were given food and lodging, along with stables to look after their horses in addition to those of the Master, the vicar and any Knights residing at the Commandery.

The almshouse was also where in 1338 the Carbrooke brethren "*received and fed thirteen poor persons daily*" according to their records of that year. It was probably where any *corrodies* would have been cared for as well.

A *corrody* was someone who was not a member of the Order, but in return for a loan or some other assistance given to the Order was provided with board and lodging at the Commandery, either for a number of years or often for the remainder of their life. It was one way for the wealthier members of society to make some provision for their old age.

The Commandery would also have had a tithe barn and farm buildings, to store the tithes (tenths) of grain and animals that would be paid to them as Rector of the two churches. Outside of the moat would have been the fish ponds, to provide fresh fish during Lent and on fast days, plus a Dovecote, housing hundreds of pigeons and providing a source of fresh meat through the winter. The buildings would probably have been constructed of flint walls with thatched roofs, like the churches of that time.

Within the Commandery, the brethren would have been organised into a number of distinct groups, which reflected the social groupings of the time.