

Outline History of Michelham Priory
By Helen Poole - 2002

"The soft waters of the little Cuckmere coursing from their sources to the sea, wash no foundations more hallowed than the grey walls of Michelham. The situation and the security, girdled by the ever-circling stream, is now as when the abbots held sway over their sanctified home and their surrounding domain. There stands the square tower, yet unruined, from whence the warden looked out to welcome friend or guard against a foe. ... There, too, is the long-reaching roof that of yore gave shelter to the shorn heads of the monks and friars, and there the tall chimneys, whence up flew the smoke from the clean hearth and the wood-made fires; and there, too, the fish ponds, now called the back river, and many other specialities that gave the place a present and abiding interest."

So wrote Thomas Geering, the Hailsham-born author of *Our Parish*, which he published in 1884, evoking the qualities that make Michelham one of the most beautiful sites in Sussex. He begins with the most distinctive feature of the site, England's longest medieval water-filled moat, including over five acres of water and enclosing nearly eight acres of land. He then goes on to glorify the buildings of the Augustinian priory, many of which can still be seen in amongst the additions from Tudor times, and which came here partly because of the good water supplies.

The name of Michelham is traditionally said to mean "a large piece of hemmed in land with the strong indication that the river curves around three sides." The topsoil is mainly alluvial, though much disturbed, and below is blue Weald clay containing ferruginous sandstone, which weathers to rich yellow near the surface. The island site was cleared of its forest in Saxon times, perhaps for use as a farmstead, while on the other side of the water the great Forest of Dicker continued to flourish.

In 1066 Engulf de l' Aigle fought and was killed at the Battle of Hastings, where he "with shield slung at his neck, and gallantly handling his spear, struck down many of the English". Thanks to Henry I, Engulf's descendants became lords of Pevensey Castle and its Rape where they remained on and off until 1235 when the family links with England came to an end. The family came from southern Normandy and took their name from the legend that one of their ancestors found an eagle's nest on the site where they were to build their main castle. Their device of the red eagle on the yellow background survives in the Michelham flag.

One of this family, Richer de l' Aigle, employed Thomas Becket as a young man in the 1140s. Both enjoyed hunting and on one occasion

"had come to a rapid millstream crossed by a narrow footbridge. The knight dismounted, and led his horse swiftly across the bridge. Thomas followed, all muffled in his hood - it must have been a cold day and the bridge, a mere plank, possibly had a thin coating of ice on it. Halfway across, Thomas's horse stumbled; Thomas held fast to the reins, and boy and horse plunged into the stream. The violent current swept Thomas along toward the roaring mill, with Richer and the rest of the hunting party following on the banks "with great and piteous cries". It seemed certain that Thomas would either be drowned or crushed by the millwheel. At this moment the miller, knowing nothing of what was happening, suddenly shut off the water from his mill. In the ensuing silence he heard the shouts, came out of his mill, and "catching sight of Thomas in the water, quickly put in his hand and pulled him out, barely breathing and half dead"

Thomas then realized that he was destined for the church and the rest is history.

Local tradition ascribes this miracle to Michelham where the watermill is very old. Its first official record was as the cause of dispute between Peter, Prior of Michelham, and the Abbot of Battle in 1255 where the latter had a permit the former to have the flow of water to his mill at Hellingly & Michelham to a height of 2feet 9 inches.

Before this dispute, Richer's descendant, Gilbert de l' Aigle, founded an Augustinian house at Michelham Priory. He and his ancestors had supported many religious communities but this was their first foundation in England. He gave the prior of Hastings various properties to form the endowment of the new priory, though it was intended to be independent. He received royal approval from Henry III in letters patent of May 1229. In the charter of endowment Gilbert

"with the consent and allowance of the king, and for the health of his own soul and that of Isabel, his wife; as also for the souls of his children, brothers and sisters, ancestors and posterity, founded and endowed the priory of Michelham, in honour of the Holy Trinity. The priory and convent were endowed by the founder, with his lordship of Michelham, and Park of Pevensey (Ashdown Forest), and fourscore acres of marsh lands in Hailsham, and twenty acres of meadow land in Willingdon, and right of pasture in the Dicker and the Broyle of Laughton, and his other woods in Sussex, for sixty head of cattle, and pannage for one hundred hogs in the said woods. And he allowed them ... whatever timber they might want for their church and building there, and fuel for their fire, and brushwood for their fences and hedges. "

Gilbert lost favour with Henry III and was banished back to France in 1235, so he may have seen little of the early days of Michelham. Its future was secure, however, and 14 other people joined Gilbert's family in making donations to support Michelham

The first prior with the responsibility for establishing Michelham was Roger, who arrived to set up the new house with 12 canons. The structure followed the usual layout where the main buildings stood on all four sides of the cloisters, with the church to the north and the refectory and other secular rooms to the south. Between 1095 and 1250 the Augustinian canons founded nearly 200 priories in England, including six in Sussex. Known as the black canons from the normal colour of their habits, they followed the rule of St Augustine of Hippo (354-430), which became much less formal than that of the Benedictines. The Augustinians' main purpose in coming together was "to live harmoniously in your house, intent upon God in oneness of mind and heart." Their founder "drew his brethren to live together and tempered the rigour of his rule to their infirmity. Like a kind master, he did not drive his disciples with a rod of iron, but invited those who love the beauty of holiness to the door of salvation under a moderate rule." Members of the Augustinian order believed that "by joyfully receiving guests, the honour of the monastery is increased, friends are multiplied, enemies confounded, God is honoured, love extended, and copious reward in heaven is promised."

This commitment to hospitality was tested at Michelham by kings and bishops and many more whose names have not survived. Important visitors came and went – on 16 and 18 June 1283 the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Peckham, visited Michelham and afterwards the prior was fined 40s for "non-residence and other causes". A visit by Edward I on 14 September 1302 resulted in no such adverse effects, though in 1317 Robert Henry "who served the late king", was sent to Michelham to be maintained and the prior tried to protest. Ten years later William Alvered usher of the king's kitchen, was quartered on the priory.

The early priors were known largely from legal proceedings, whether witnessing charters or fighting to maintain their possessions. Men were imprisoned for "trespass in the Park of the Prior of Michelham" and in 1278 Thomas Alim, a notorious poacher and manservant to the Prior, was found guilty of killing a deer at Folkington, but the Prior paid his fine. In 1294 Prior Roger granted to the King "one tenth of the income from the benefices and goods for the Holy Land" He was succeeded by Peter who was followed by another Roger. Numbers varied and in 1353 records show that "the prior of Michelham holds of the Queen (as lady of the honour of Pevensey) by service of finding thirteen canons to celebrate divine rites for the souls of Gilbert de Aquila, his ancestors and his heirs for ever; and of these canons eight are now lacking." The Black Death was responsible for this dramatic decrease but the unfortunate prior was still fined 40 shillings for having too few canons.

John Leem stands out as the most outstanding amongst the priors. He took over from Thomas as prior from about 1374 and remained until his death in 1417. He also worked for John of Gaunt, the all-powerful Duke of Lancaster, as his receiver in Sussex for three years from 1379 and of the lordship of Pevensey from 1405 to about 1415. His relationship with his patron could be troubled: in 1382, for instance, he was reprimanded for not presenting his accounts for auditing after the Peasants Revolt, in which the Duke had suffered great losses. Leem's duties varied from weighty matters to less critical ones, such as setting aside 100 marks a year for the expenses of the duke's great wardrobe or selling the old bushes and other trees blown down by the wind in Ashdown chase.

Prior Leem's influence could be used for Michelham's benefit, enlarging the endowment and improving the site, with the help of a mortgage taken out in 1388. In 1399 Robert Rede, Bishop of Chichester appropriated to Michelham the churches of Fletching and Alfriston "in aid of the repair of their buildings, some of which had fallen to ruin, of the loss, probably for good, of some of their arable lands, meadows, etc, through floods of the sea, of their heavy burden of debt, of their daily expenses in respect of the sea shore and the due custody of their places near thereto, and of hospitality necessary through their situation near the king's highway".

Traditionally Prior Leem has been credited with digging the moat and building the gatehouse, both of which improved Michelham's defensive capability. At this period the French were launching raids into Sussex and in 1388 Leem was one of "a commission of array to resist the imminent invasion of the French." The Peasants Revolt of 1381 brought unrest to a head and Leem's position as John of Gaunt's receiver would lead people to think that the money that he collected might be stored here. A moat would also give the canons some protection from future epidemics like the Black Death, which had caused such devastation. More prosaically it would also keep cattle from straying and allow the canons to enjoy their island of tranquillity. [A small excavation on the bridge in 1999 shews traces of supports for a drawbridge that probably spanned a narrower moat. The solid bridge that now allows access dates from after the dissolution as it makes full use of the broken masonry that was available after the destruction of the main buildings. [*? add this to tour rather than here?*]

In 1402, when the Prior of Hastings resigned, he was replaced by Leem's nominee, Brother Richard Weston, canon of the Priory of Michelham, as there were too few canons at Hastings to undertake the vacant charge. In 1413 the exile returned and Leem confirmed that "we, by unanimous consent and assent, have granted to Richard Weston, late Prior of Hastyng, for the term of his life, a competent chamber within the precincts of our Priory and such eatables and drinkables as are supplied to one of our Canons in the Prior's hall at lunch and dinner, and also food and drink for a servant who waits on him. And we will that the said brother Richard Weston in time of sickness shall receive in his chamber the same food and drink as he would have if well and sitting in the hall. Moreover we have granted to him sufficient fuel and candles for his chamber."

After Prior Leem died, he was followed by another strong-minded character, William London. The Prior in 1423 wrote "a long letter... directed against the new abbot of St Augustine's Canterbury; but because it appeared most certain that it had not sprung from the root of charity, but on the contrary had been designed with no small degree of malice to the disparagement of the said venerable father; therefore the lords-president ordered that it should be 'buried with those that sleep'." In 1437 Michelham's great seal and the three keys of prior, sub-prior and grainger were lost to Sir Roger Fiennes of Herstmonceux who ejected the prior and seized all the goods of the house. The commissioners appointed to inquire into the matter replaced the prior and returned the seal and property to him.

The next prior was Laurence Wynchelsea, who took over in 1438. A survey was carried out in 1440 of the rents and farms of Michelham Priory, plus outgoing which included "to each of eight canons to serve God, £5 by the year" and stipends to William Edinge, sub-prior, Roger Faver, carver, and to the baker and "the cheesemaker and his fellow", Under Prior Laurence the priory buildings were neglected and the canons fell into bad ways, so

the authorities took action. On September 29 1441 there was a visitation of Michelham Priory, held in the Chapter House, with Wynchelsea and Edinge. The Bishop of Chichester was not satisfied with the conditions here and the list of injunctions sent to the Prior after the visitation required the following:

"The number of canons is to be increased by 3 for Easter or 100 shillings will be paid to Chichester.

The prior is to get a literate man learned in grammar to teach the younger canons.

The prior's household is to be limited to the following: one chaplain, one esquire, one chamberer, one cook and one valet to transact business and attend the door, and one page of the kitchen. He was to be content to have 4 horses in his stable.

The prior was to go over the accounts once a year with the convent or the elders.

The prior to make sure other officials of the house render their accounts once a year.

The Priory is see that buildings of the priory are repaired, especially the long room (or barn) near the brewery and the kitchen

Each Priest Canon to be paid 4 nobles a year, and no more, and the canons 20 shillings a year.

Canons to keep silence in the proper places and at the accustomed hours and they are not to frequent the tavern which is outside the gate of the priory.

Canons are not to sell any corrodies without the licence of the Bishop."

Five months later the Priory was revisited and further irregularities were exposed Prior Wynchelsea had sold a mass of timber, millstones, a silver goblet, 38 oxen, 6 cows, 12 horses and several valuable books belonging to the Priory, plus 2 millstones with other gear and "stones cut and shaped for three fireplaces". He appears to have been paying protection money to the priory's earlier tormentor, Sir Roger Fiennes at Herstmonceux: He donated lavish clothes to "certain persons in London". He removed the muniments from their chest to a secret hiding place. He himself held all the offices of the house and did not pay fees to the canons, so that they had "scarcely enough to keep them in food and drink". Despite this he remained as prior for several years and he was not unique amongst his contemporaries in trying to balance the books by selling off assets.

Matters did not improve with the next known prior, Edward Marley and his six canons. Marley was a canon here in 1441 and became prior in 1450, when Jack Cade's revolt took place. Afterwards 450 Sussex men were pardoned for their participation, including Richard Delve, the long-standing gamekeeper at Michelham.

The visitation in 1478 painted a gloomy picture. The buildings had deteriorated, particularly the dormitory and the granges, while the two mills that the priory owned were in ruins. The cellarer, Canon Thomas Stanaker, reported that at the time of their lawsuit with Bayham Abbey the jewels of the house were sold to pay the expenses. The sub-prior, John West, was punished for his association with Alice Ford, wife of a Priory servant. According to the Bishop's Injunction of about 1460 she had been visiting the prior and canons, and she "hath food and clothing from the monastery, to its hurt and damage." In 1478 the canons complained that Alice was "suspected as regards several of the brethren much to the prejudice and scandal of the Monastery." John West was ordered to fast on bread and water every Friday until his replacement as sub-prior arrived, and the rest were told to stop wandering out, breaking the silence and frequenting the tavern outside the gatehouse. Curiously in 1482 West was elected Prior by all his peers and remained in post until his death in 1509. Alice Ford's links with the Priory were clearly very important to her, as her ghost is still reputed to visit her old friends here.

The last prior was Thomas Holbeme and in the visitation of 1521 his fellow canons were Alan Morfote, subprior, Matthew Blackyndon, sacrist, Thomas Luck, precentor, Edmund Pellam, master of the novices, Martin Cater and Robert Forde, novices who had professed and Robert Mote and William Cooper, novices not professed Holbeme was a Sussex man and presumably related to John Holbeme who in 1478 had returned to the Priory after a 15 year absence and was "poisoning the whole convent with his strange and evil arguments."

In 1527 Prior Holbeme reported at the visitation that "all is well save that the Priory is somewhat ruinous." He was heavily involved in the 1520s in disputes with Sir William Pelham over rights to the waste ground in the

Dicker. Sadly he was fighting a losing battle as the end of monastic England was in sight Henry VIII's team valued the spiritualities and temporalities at Michelham at £191.19.4, which came down after deduction of payments to £160.12.6. Under the act of 1536 to dissolve the smaller monasteries, Michelham fell and on October 1, 1537 it became the first monastic site to be awarded to Thomas Cromwell, the king's first minister. The grant specified "the house and site of the suppressed priory", plus the church and the watermill, as well as the priory's other possessions.

John Morris, one of the King's Commissioners, was paid £10 to draw up a report on their new asset in 1537, where the house was deemed "in good estate" and included:

"Ornaments of the Church. Of the price of all the ornaments of the Church there; and also of the tablets, pictures, stones called paving stones and other things within the same Church, so sold to divers persons ... £15.13.2.

Goods of the house. Of the price of all the movable goods of the house there, in like manner sold to divers persons, beyond the beds of the Prior and Convent there given to them by ... the King's Commissioners £7.18. 2.

... *Lead.* Of the price of 13 waggon-loads and 1500 pounds of lead found. there by the Lord the King's Commissioners and by them delivered to Anthony Pelham and John Fawkenor to keep safely to the same the Lord the King's use ... Nothing. Because it *remains* to the Lord the King's use."

The priory had 5 bells and a brazier in Maidstone paid £20 for those he bought, probably to melt them down.

The commissioners also needed to consider the needs of the people at the priory when it closed. There were eight canons. and one novice, all of whom received pensions amounting to £13.13.4. Further pensions amounting to £24.17.4 were paid to the 29 servants, of whom 18 were described as waiting servants and 11 as hynds, who looked after the animals, with "common for 40 beasts". The prior lived on near Eastbourne until his death in 1545, receiving a pension of £20 a year "to supply his food and requirements properly." Most of the other canons went to Sussex parishes and they were also allowed to keep "the beds on which they had slept."

One of those who remained in the area was Canon Gregory Foote, son of Edward Foote who had been the bailiff at Michelham. He had been a novice in his teens at the priory in 1527 and gave evidence as a 53-year-old in 1564 over a piece of waste ground in the Dicker that had been the subject of an acrimonious lawsuit between Prior Holbeme and Sir William Pelham before the Dissolution. Evidence also came from Edmund Clifton, aged 56, who stated that during the suit between the prior and Sir William, the latter had sent word to the Prior "that he wolde make him sell his great Bell at Michelham before the sute were ended" to which the Prior "sent him worde again that before he sold his great bell, he wolde make him (Sir William) sell his manor of Laughton". Simon Holbeme, aged 70, brother of the former Prior, stated that "'he beinge the late prior's brother dwelled in the Priory by the space of twenty years and above" and that in the end the Prior recovered the parcel of waste and became friends with Sir William Pelham afterwards.

When Cromwell was executed in 1540 the Michelham estate reverted to the Crown. Henry VIII granted part of it to his former fourth wife, Anne of Cleves. She died childless in 1557 when her lands reverted to the Crown. (In 1542 Henry had organised a compulsory purchase with William Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel of lands including part of Michelham, but these were returned in 1554-5.)

The new owner of Michelham was John Foote, who was related to Canon Gregory Foote. He had been a tenant in 1542 of the Manor of Michelham Parkgate, which included 80 acres on the Dicker plus a mill and a brewhouse~ In 1556 he and John Roberts, a London draper, bought it from the Crown for £1,249.16.10¹/₂ . Foote started to build on to the old priory buildings to use as a farmhouse but he sold them in 1574 to Ambrose

Smith who transferred it to John Morley in

1584. On 31 October 1587 John Morley of Halnaker sold the "scite of Michelham priory (within the moate seven and a half acres thirty-two perches) together with 767 acres of land" to Herbert Pelham of Hellingly. The sale included the building "with orchards, gardens and vineyards, situated within the moat" plus three watermills, an orchard and areas of pasture.

Pelham was born in 1546, grandson of Sir Thomas Pelham of Laughton and son of Anthony Pelham, whose first connection with Michelham was to buy some of its chattels in 1537 and to guard some of the lead from its roof on behalf of the king. The family traced its distinctive buckle badge back to the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. Herbert Pelham was involved in the important Sussex iron industry and in land dealings. He was married twice, firstly to Catherine Thatcher and secondly to Elizabeth West, daughter of Lord de la Warr. They had a large family and one tradition said that he got into financial difficulties because of the need to provide dowries for his many daughters, though his land deals also helped to make him bankrupt by 1599. He started an ambitious building programme at Michelham, including the addition of the two rooms on the west of the ground floor, but he ran out of funds. The sale of Michelham for £4,700 enabled him to set up an annuity of £400 for life to maintain himself and his family.

Michelham was sold with some of Pelham's other properties on 6 April 1601 to Queen Elizabeth's cousin, Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst for £4,700. It remained in the ownership of the Sackville family for nearly 300 years, in the course of which they became Earls and then Dukes of Dorset. They installed tenants and an account of the 3rd Earl's rents and revenues in 1618 under the Manor of Michelham recorded payment by "Thomas Marshall gent for the capital message, together with two watermills under one roof £34 at Michaelmas and 4/- for 6 capons". The rent roll books of 1656-58 record the "house with a great moat, 300 acres of course brookes meads, mostly used for pasture, and 40 acres of upland meadows, all valued at 13/4 per acre. Also 120 acres of arable land, valued at 8/- per acre, and 164 acres of pasture land, mostly wrought ground, at 6/- per acre."

John Lulham, a later tenant, was taxed for 21 flues here in 1662. The 1667 map drawn by Edmund Clifton, a carpenter of Arlington, shows the farm and a stone building with five chimneys, with orchards on the other side of the moat. After Lulham came Richard Children and his family from Kent. In 1687 a lease from Lord Dorset to the recently widowed Elizabeth Children specified "the Lord reserving power to hold courts at the millhouse, to have tree access to the mill, liberty to let out water from the moat for use of the mill, so as not to harm the fish." Her will dates from 1692 and lists such items as "one great chest standing on top of the stairs with all the hemp and hempen yarn, coarse linnen and other things in the same chest... one feather bed With all belonging to it in the kitchen chamber ... the broad box in the maid's chamber" and so on.

After Elizabeth Children's death in 1693, her family moved away and the next tenant was John Walker. The family may have been Presbyterian as there is a mention of a Presbyterian meeting held at Michelham at Christmas 1727. The lease for 1705 mentions several working buildings on site, including dovehouses. A later lease on 10 October 1720 with the Duke of Dorset required him as tenant to do all repairs except to the Gatehouse and Tower and the Tower Bridge, ... but the Lord to allow £50 towards the repair of the farm, the same being now very much out of repair." He was also to provide "two days and nights board and lodging and food for the Stewards and servants to keep Courts every year". The Duke was also deriving income from the cutting of wood from the Mill Wood and Bramble Grove Wood at Michelham.

The Walker family lived at Michelham until 1791 when the Child family took over. At that time the house would have looked as it appears in the views by Grimm in 1784 and described by Sir William Burrell five years earlier: "Michelham Priory lies on the South side of the Dicker, is now the property of Ld Geo. Sackville Germain, the Situation is well adapted to the purpose for wch it was intended being seated in a bottom

surrounded with a moat rivulet and Sheltered at a little distance by a large Wood; very considerable remains of the Priory are still visible; the Porters Lodge is compleat the Kitchen almost entire a Crypt now used by the farmer as a Cellar is admirably vaulted & supported by Pillars; the Arch of a Cloyster forms the outer wall of the Kitchen, and on the No Side of the House is another Arched Wall wch was formerly covered, & some Building over it wch led from the Abbots Lodging a large room remaining tolerably compleat with a Chimney in it of Stone when I vizited the Priory in Septr. 1779."

William Child, a yeoman farmer from Chelsfield in Kent, with his wife Sarah came to Michelham and its farm of about 800 acres in 1791. The couple had eight children, the last five being born at Michelham. He was fond of shooting and had a game licence from 1793 till his death in 1821. On September 3rd 1798 the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* recorded: "A shepherd in the' service of Mr. Child of Michel ham was lately drowned in the moat of that place, as he was fording it, in a circumference, for a wager of a bottle of gin. Several of his fellow servants were present, but not one of them could afford him any assistance." Three years later the paper reported a further tragedy when "a fine boy five years old, the son of Mr Child was at play in the water-mill used by his father, the wheel of the machine used for dressing the flour caught his frock and soon became entangled with the handkerchief about his neck, which it drew so tight that the poor boy was strangled in an instant."

William Child leased two other farms and about 400 acres of land towards Arlington and also continued the family's interest in breeding Sussex Red beef cattle, as well as the Southdown sheep for which they won prizes at the Lewes sheep fair. The family's breeding of Sussex cattle was mentioned in 1760 and in 1819 one is recorded as winning first prize at the Bramber Stock Show for the best two-year-old bull owned by Mr Heath and bred by William Child of Michelham. From 1834 the Childs entered their own cattle in stock shows and for 24 years won the premier awards. The proud owner attributed his success in 1834 to the fact that he fattened his oxen on roots. Many of their female cattle had "Brandy" as part of their name, including "Michelham Brandy" which went to start the herd of another Thomas Child at Slinfold The obituary notice for William's son Thomas in the *Sussex Express* of 1854 commented: "The Michelham breed is both hardy and of a kindly disposition, and though its dispersion may be a subject of regret, it will no doubt be of public advantage. Michelham Priory has for nearly a century obtained a certain notoriety arising in great measure from the spirit with which the Child family devoted themselves to maintaining the superiority and purity of their herd."

On William's death his 28-year-old son Thomas Child took over. The 1st Nov 1822 inventory taken at this point showed 23 rooms in use at Michelham, most of them furnished. Several of these provided the drink they needed, such as a small beer cellar, ale cellar, brewhouse with brewing furnace of 120 gallons, cider room with press. As well as that, "Isaac's Hole" [the recess beside the Undercroft] contained nine stone jars with contents and 93 bottles of wine.

Thomas married Elizabeth Stace of Berwick in 1823 and they had ten children, one of whom, Francis, produced the book on Michelham which is on show, complete with delightful drawings.

The *Sussex Advertiser* again swung into action in August 1826 to report that a cat belonging to Mr Child of Michelham had been shot in a state of madness. It had developed the habit of biting everyone within reach, finally attacking a horse from whose heels it drew blood with its claws and teeth. Thomas Child appears in the register of Sussex electors of 1832, where his landlord is the Earl of Plymouth, though another Arlington landowner, Colonel Goldfinch, was noted as one who "will not be influenced".

The local paper of 12 October 1852 had the unhappy task of reporting heavy floods accompanied by high winds. The Cuckmere burst its banks and Mr Child lost about 150 loads of manure from Michelham. "The water was several feet deep in different parts of the brooks, and had it not been for the assistance of Mr Child's son, with the aid of two workmen who put off in a boat during the night many head of cattle would have been

drowned. The water rose several inches over the lower part of the mill, Mr Child's man arrived in time to remove several sacks of flour." That same year an 8lb pike was caught at Michelham in which was found another pike weighing $\frac{3}{4}$ lb and in that was a small roach, all perfect. Otters were also to be found, as were owls which "frequent the capacious roofs of the old buildings", according to the Rev George Miles Cooper in 1853.

Thomas Child died in 1854 and his son Francis continued at Michelham, though depression in the agricultural community made life hard here. (Thomas's eldest son had emigrated to New Zealand in 1853.) The widowed Elizabeth Child appeared in the census of 1861 as a "farmer and miller of 400 acres, employing 5 boys, 15 men". She and her three sons and three daughters left in October that year and the next tenants were the Browns from Surrey. Mrs Child met Mrs Brown at the sale of surplus furniture from Michelham and wrote: "She seems a nice person". In the 1871 census Thomas Brown was described as a farmer of 400 acres employing 10 men and 2 boys. His sons took over about 1876, until 1895 when William Mann became the last tenant of the Sackville family, at an annual rent of £200. Finally on 14 November 1896 Lionel Sackville West, 2nd Baron Sackville (grandfather of Vita Sackville-West) sold most of the family's Michelham property to James Gwynne (1832-1915). (The remainder, including the manor, was bought by Horatio Bottomley who added to a small cottage to create the exotic mansion that is now St Bede's School in Upper Dicker.)

The new owner was an engineer with his own company in Hammersmith, from which he retired in 1902 to Folkington Manor. There was serious agricultural depression in the 1890s and Gwynne bought several Sussex properties. Local tradition says that when he acquired Michelham, he rode over on a white stallion and evicted the tenant; in fact William Mann's lease was secure until Michaelmas. He remained at Michelham until 1897, though there was a court case afterwards in which Gwynne accused Mann of bad husbandry in one field and letting the buildings become dilapidated.

From 1905 Gwynne started to renovate the Priory, restoring the lavatorium and the western range. He also inserted the present ceiling and panelled the walls of the Prior's Room. He had owned a herd of pedigree Sussex cattle that he sold at Alfriston in 1906 and he also kept a flock of rare black faced sheep. When the *Sussex County Herald* of 27 March 1915 described James Gwynne's funeral, he was described as "the owner of an interesting ruin known as Michelham Priory, where some work in the character of restoration has been in progress. When Lord Michelham assumed the title by which he is now known, a protest - which came a little too late was raised by Mr Gwynne." (The new peer had been Sir Herbert Stem who was Lord of the Manor of Michelham by purchase.) Gwynne had four sons, including Rupert who was the father of Elizabeth David (1913 – 1992) the influential cookery writer.

Gwynne died in 1915, leaving Michelham in the hands of tenants, but on 24th June 1925 that Michelham Priory was put up for sale by his son, Lt-Col Roland Gwynne, DSO, a barrister who became High Sheriff of Sussex in 1926-7. The sale particulars described it as "containing oakpanelled dining room, two other reception rooms, and early English vaulted crypt, refectory, and five or more bed rooms. The old buildings afford an unique opportunity for restoration to form an old-world residence of quite exceptional character and charm." The article did not mention that Michelham lacked lighting, heating, plumbing, sanitation or mains water, as the water for the house came from the well.

A member of a Warwickshire family of industrialists and bankers, Richard Beresford Wright (1870-1950), bought the Priory and farmland for £ 12,250, with the intention "to preserve intact all that remained of the medieval building". It could not have been in better hands. With the help of the architect Walter Godfrey and the builders F Geering and Sons of Hurstpierpoint, he carefully and sensitively restored all the old buildings, including the old refectory, which had been used for farm buildings but was turned into modern accommodation. It now forms the offices but an interesting reminder of its earlier life can be seen in the unusual dog door on the south-east wall overlooking the lawn. The stables were transformed into the dovecote and doves were installed

to make it authentic. In 1925-8 Mr Wright also commissioned furniture from Gordon Russell and Arthur Romney Green. Thanks to the generosity of his grandchildren, many of these pieces can now be seen again in the house for which it was made.

Just before a ball was to be held during the 1927 Christmas festivities, much of the Tudor building was destroyed by a fire that was discovered at 4.30am on 19th December. Mr and Mrs Wright and their two daughters, Meg and Nancy, were in the house, as was the chef. Nancy Wright alerted the fire brigade on this bitterly cold night and the Hailsham Brigade arrived at 5.15am. One fireman had the unenviable task of breaking the ice on the pond by jumping on it. The blaze was gradually brought under control, with additional help from the Eastbourne Brigade, and the *Eastbourne Gazette* reported on the damage from both fire and water, for "everywhere hung icicles where the firemen had played their hoses."

The fire damage was considerable, including much of the wood panelling that Mr Wright regretted most. A careful programme of rebuilding was undertaken, much of which can be seen today. Livestock farming continued and a film was made in the 1930s, showing the processes through the seasons. The family played badminton in the barn and tennis outdoors. Farming continued on both sides of the moat in the hands of the tenant at Clifton Farm and animals often grazed right up to the house. There was some public access too, mainly to raise money for charity, such as the building of the village hall in the Dicker. Interest increased with the arrival of the model of the *Empress of Britain*, an 8ft model set up in a water tank and radio controlled. This was installed in the Barn with a grand opening ceremony on 11th June 1936, performed by Lady McClaren Brown, after which Mr and Mrs Beresford Wright invited those present to tea. Plans to send the model on to Canada were abandoned with the outbreak of war.

First to arrive in September 1939 were the evacuees. 13 children with their teacher, Mr Long, and his wife, from the New Road School, Rotherhithe lived at Michelham until they moved away to South Wales, after the evacuation of Dunkirk rendered the south-east at greater risk. They were well treated, having the ground floor of the Tudor wing as their dining room and games area. On Christmas Day they looked out to see on the frozen lake a sledge loaded down with their presents.

Michelham Priory played host to the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade in 1941, then to British troops, the 165th Infantry Brigade. On 14th October 1941 the 5 Canadians returned to the area with Michelham as the Officers Mess. They stayed through to 31st July 1942, in the build up to the Dieppe raid of 19th August 1942. The 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade was here for a week, to be replaced by the 9th Field Ambulance RCAMC, then the 5th Field Ambulance RCAMC until 5th May 1943 when the Canadians finally left Michelham. They left behind the wiring in the Gatehouse and at the very top of the gatehouse stairs many of the men stationed here wrote their names on the wall.

There is a plan scratched on the first floor wall, showing the Channel coast, drawn by Corporal Robert Johnson of Calgary, who was at Michelham in 1941-2. It was said to have been drawn in connection with the briefing of troops and the study of cross-Channel reconnaissance raids while the Canadian forces were in charge of the defence of south-east England. He was based in Upper Dicker but recalled: "We used only part of the Priory, the remainder was closed to us. It was cold and drafty that winter, and our army boots made quite a clatter on the floors. All rooms were bare, any furnishings having been removed for safe keeping. ...We all thought it would be a great idea to hide in the chimney if the Germans were to arrive. We would then open up the panel and 'Bop' them on the head as they came up the stairs. The Gate House was used as a guard post and the upstairs room where the map of Sussex is now located served as the Guard Room."

After the Canadians, Michelham was the headquarters of the East Sussex Sub-District of the Home Guard, with the 20th Sussex (Hailsham) Battalion, commanded by Lt Col F G Crompton, helped by mobile kitchens donated

by the Canadian Red Cross. It stood down on 1st November 1944. The Home Guard was followed by Army signals, and photographs survive of the Home Guard and the ATS here. Most of the Wright family moved to Scotland during the war but Mr Wright's youngest daughter Elizabeth and her husband Hugh Duncan remained on site to supervise the farm, along with her sister Nancy who bred dogs.

The Wrights returned after the war, celebrating their Golden Wedding here in 1949 but Richard died in 1950. In 1951 the estate became the home of Frederick and Joyce Storey. Mr Storey had been Director and General Manager (South) of Portsmouth and Sunderland Newspapers Ltd., but he left during the war to work on the radar control of naval guns with giro compasses. He had to use a wheel chair at Michelham where there was a lift to help him. He designed the chandelier in the Prior's Room and had it made in a forge in Hailsham. He had farmed in north Hertfordshire and Huntingdonshire, so when he came to Michelham, he continued farming on the remaining 300 acres with his prize-winning herd of Herefords, combining breeding and selling, though a foot and mouth outbreak inhibited sales. He also acquired the Aberdeen Angus herd that he bought with the estate. What is now the restaurant was used for boxes for the prize bulls. The farm eventually ceased to be viable and was sold to a large landowner, while Mr Storey returned to his newspaper life, with responsibility for plant and buildings. He and his wife retired to Hove and died there in 1970.

Mrs Storey sold Michelham (for £15,000 including millhouse, weir and moat) in 1959 to Mrs Ruth Honor Hotblack (1890-1972), known to everyone as Stella. Her maiden name was Skrine, an old Bath family, and she was the widow of a city industrialist, George Finch Hotblack (1883-1951). She and her sister Jill Hasluck saw the tourism potential of the site and quickly opened to the public. Mrs Hasluck's diary recalled that **first day, on 31st May 1959: "That day we worked all day. We had 130 visitors - they poured in and we spoke to them all and took them over the Priory and fed them with coffees and lunches and teas. By the evening 6.30 we sat down panting and sore footed but glad hearted ourselves - a miracle had happened and we had opened in a grand style exactly 3 weeks after my sister had possession."** They converted buildings in the yard to be a restaurant and car parks, whilst furnishing the house in period. They also developed the rosebeds and herbaceous borders at Michelham, helped by their gardener Ernest Hills.

Later in 1959, Mrs Hotblack started negotiations to present Michelham to the Sussex Archaeological Society for preservation and public enjoyment in perpetuity. She was helped by a substantial endowment from the Earl of Inchcape who had been Chairman of P & O when her husband was a director there. Lord Inchcape did this in memory of his Eton friend Lieut John Fletcher Boughey of Ringmer who was killed in action at sea on 31 August 1940, aged 21, during a mine-laying exercise. Michelham's deeds were formally handed over to the Sussex Archaeological Society on 9th April 1960 by Lord Inchcape, deputising for Mrs Hotblack who was ill.

Since then Michelham has become a popular attraction in Sussex and has been fortunate in the people who have cared for it. The first Curator was Commander Ramsay Harrison who found Michelham totally absorbing. He was much in demand as a lecturer and he recruited the first volunteer guides, training them in the house's history. He retained an interest in Michelham until his death in 1986. The Friends of Michelham Priory were established in 1964 to help in the upkeep of the Priory buildings and grounds, and they have supported many initiatives at the Priory. The statue of the canon reading in the Physic Garden has been put up in memory of one of the most active members of the Friends, Molly Pears (1908-1992). She was a real driving force at the Priory, as a guide and masterminding the restoration of the mill, and her daughter keeps the family tradition going strong here.

Excavations took place in 1959-60 in the church. More followed in 1964 under Ken Barton and Eric Holden, mainly to locate the monastic kitchens, and opening up the chancel which had been dug away and backfilled with domestic rubbish in the early 18th century. In 1971-6 archaeologists led-by Lawrence & Patricia Stevens

investigated the medieval hall at the end of the south lawn, which may have had some industrial use from monastic times to the 18th century, involving 14 kilns and ovens. It was built before the moat, as its footings were nearly 2 metres below the present water level. A watching brief was undertaken in 1988 by Jane Bellam when the fire escape staircase was installed from the Prior's Chamber, unblocking a doorway which was in use when James Lambert Junior painted the scene in 1792. Jane also wrote up the bellarmine or witch bottle which was found during the installation of mains drainage in 1973, under the area where the old western range once stood. The bellarmine was buried in the late 17th century, presumably to protect the house, and contained pins and a variety of seeds.

There are some visible changes too. The Iron Age buildings across the moat have been recreated in recent years by the East Sussex Archaeology and Museum Project, who are based at Anne of Cleves House in Lewes and have done similar reconstructions else where, including the Museum of London. The Physic Garden at the edge of the south lawn was set up in 1981 thanks to John G McCarthy of the Sussex Historic Gardens Restoration Society. Since 1998 there has been a link between Michelham and the Abbaye de Valloires near the mouth of the Somme. In the late 1990s there were two major projects funded largely by the Heritage Lottery Fund, one to restore the mill to full working order and the other to repair the roof. Many other plans have been implemented or are under consideration, so that Michelham as an attraction can move with the times. There is now comparatively little that would be recognised by the first canons who came to the site in 1229 but their influence survives in the peace and tranquillity that makes the Priory special.

Helen Poole, first draft, 19.4.2002, revised with IT's emendations 28.6.2002