



RUNNYMEDE BOROUGH COUNCIL

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Abbey Field

This Field once formed part of the outer precincts of Chertsey Abbey. The Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter, the first religious house in Surrey, was founded in the year 666 by Erkenwald, later Bishop of London. The land was at that time a sandy waste, famed for its "flourishing plantations and excellent weirs for taking fish" but was always prone to flooding.

After destruction in Viking raids the Abbey was refounded and went on to rank among the greater monastic houses, owning over 50,000 acres of land by the time of the Domesday Survey.

A great rebuilding programme took place from 1107, under Abbot Hugh of St. Swithins, and from this time the great buildings arose which eventually covered four acres. These buildings were concentrated in the Eastern arm of the precincts, and this Western side was probably given over to the market gardens and orchards required by the Benedictine order. The 66th chapter of the Benedictine Rule states;

"A Monastery, . . . ought to be arranged that everything necessary — that is, water, a mill, a garden, a bakery — may be made use of, and different arts be carried on within the monastery so that there shall be no need for the monks to wander about outside. For this is not at all good for their souls."



Artists impression of Chertsey c 1300

At the Northern corner of the field can still be seen Chertsey Abbey's fish ponds, in an area surrounded by its own moat and today containing an orchard. It is quite possible that fruit trees were also cultivated here during the 14th Century when the ponds were constructed.

After the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536/7 Chertsey Abbey was dismantled and the buildings used as a quarry for other buildings being erected in the area. By 1673 the demolition was so complete that Aubrey wrote;

"... of this great Abbey scarcely anything of the old boundary remains except the outwalls about it. . ."

Fragments of these walls, recently restored, can be seen over on the Eastern side of the field.



CHERTSEY ABBEY TILE SHOWING THE GATEKEEPER 1250-1300

The field was surrounded by a moat, which probably had a wall on the inside. A section of the moat remains, running alongside Colonel's Lane. Until road-widening operations in 1958, the moat ran along Windsor Street, where the present footpath lies, and the rest of the moat can still be seen on the opposite side of the field beyond the pavilion.



No eye-witness account of the appearance of the Abbey precincts survives, but it quite possibly resembled the Abbey of Clairvaux as described in the 12th Century;

"The back part of the Abbey terminates in a broad plain, no small portion of which a wall occupies, which surrounds the Abbey with its extended circuit. Within the enclosure of this wall many and various fruits constitute an orchard resembling a wood. . . where the orchard terminates, the garden begins, distributed into separate plots, or rather divided by intersecting rivulets. . . This water serves the double duty of supporting the fish and watering the vegetables."



The Abbey Seal