

A TEMPLAR IDOL IN EAST ANGLIA?

By John Tyrer

Last September, whilst on holiday in North Norfolk, my wife and I visited Denny Abbey, an ancient monument situated just off the main A10 between Ely and Cambridge. I had been alerted to visit the Abbey as a result of re-reading Shirley Toulson's *East Anglia: walking the ley lines and ancient tracks* (London, Wildwood House, 1979), in which the author refers to two stone heads kept in the Abbey, one resembling a lion, the other a bearded man's head which, she conjectures, resembles the face on the Turin Shroud.

We discovered the two heads on a shelf under the window of one of the surviving ground floor rooms, and found that the one in question did indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to the Shroud face. We took such photographs as were possible, although because we needed to use flash, some of the modelling has been lost.



Head from Denny Abbey



Head from Wighton

The Abbey is now owned by British Heritage, and research has shown that it was founded around 1159 by a Benedictine community from Ely. About 1170 the priory and lands were transferred to the Knights Templar who altered and added to the then existing buildings, using them as a preceptory or commandery, and perhaps a hospital for sick or aged members returning from the Middle East. The Templars stayed on until their suppression in England in 1312, after which the Abbey became a house of Poor Clares until the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when it became used as a farm.

Enquiries with the British Museum and English Heritage have revealed that the lion's head is an import to the site, and was made within living memory. But little appears to be known about the bearded head, except that it was found among rubble in the Abbey grounds during comparatively recent archaeological excavations.

Worthy of note in the vicinity is the Templar round church in Cambridge, a story about the presence of a relic of the "True Cross" at Broomholme Priory near Bacton on the north east coast, and a roof boss in the porch of the church at Wighton, North Norfolk, which we were again surprised to find resembled the Shroud face. There is also a remarkable 14th. century reredos in North Creake Church which features a painting of Veronica holding the impress of the Face of Christ on her cloth.