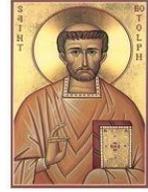




# The Botolphian

Newsletter of  
The Society of Saint Botolph

[www.botolph.info](http://www.botolph.info)



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## Highlights this month

- **The development of the market town of Boston in Lincolnshire.**

### Editorial

As I write this month's issue I am back on my boat in Sicily where the temperature today is 35 degrees Celsius. When I arrived I found the Sicilians to be taking the threat of Covid seriously in terms of wearing masks although social distancing was less in evidence. I felt as safe or safer here than in England - but we now hear that Europe seems destined to follow in England's footsteps and Italy is on Amber Watch.

Four weeks ago on my arrival, I was welcomed by my Finnish friends Harriet and Gustaf (from a neighbouring boat) who ensured that I did not go hungry during my 5 days quarantine. My friend and crew Peter arrived last Sunday and he has now just finished his quarantine. The sails are on. The boat is almost ready and we hope that within the next few days we will be heading off on a circumnavigation of Sicily.

-0-

We have already looked at St Botolph's church Boston, Lincolnshire in these issues and the building has been 'named in despatches' many times due to its important link with our saint.

For many years it was thought that Boston must be the site of the famous Icanho Abbey founded by St Botolph in A.D. 654. The theory was linked with the town's name which is said to derive from *Botolph's Town*. In a previous issue we discussed the founding fathers' journey to Boston in Massachusetts and the close links that exist today between the two Bostons. There is also a close link between the Society of Saint Botolph and Boston USA's *Saint Botolph Club* which is a

prestigious foundation dedicated to supporting the arts and located centrally in the American city.

Although it is now generally felt that Icanho was *not* at Boston but at Iken in Suffolk, like many conundrums of the Anglo-Saxon period we can never be completely confident that we 'have it right' due to the long time span and the destruction of much of the 'evidential parchment trail' by the Vikings and the activities of the Reformation. Nevertheless, Boston, Lincolnshire remains a major waypoint in the Saint Botolph story - but a waypoint in the *second phase* - not in the first phase as was originally thought.

It is unlikely that this will be the last time that we feature this market town but in this issue we are going to study its development and the factors causing its rise to importance in the high middle ages.

### Feature

## **B**oston, Lincolnshire

**Approach:** *From the south, if you are coming from the London area you will probably drive on the A1(M) and then take the A16 from Peterborough and this makes Boston hard to miss.. After crossing the Witham Bridge turn left at the next roundabout and keep The Stump in your sights until you find a suitable parking place.*

**Location of St Botolph's church:** *Church Street, Boston, Lincs PE21 6NW. 52.978623, -0.025286. TF326441.*

**Rector:** *Revd Alyson Buxton. The Parish Office, 1 Wormgate, Boston PE21 6NP. Tel: 01205 354-670. [www.parish-of-boston.org.uk](http://www.parish-of-boston.org.uk); [parish.office@virgin.net](mailto:parish.office@virgin.net).*

**Listed Grade: I.**

## The development of Boston and its association with Saint Botolph.



Fig. 1. The location of Boston, Lincolnshire.

The town lies 100 miles due north of London at the western edge of a large inlet known as ‘The Wash’ which is said to derive from an Old English word ‘wase’ meaning ‘mud’.

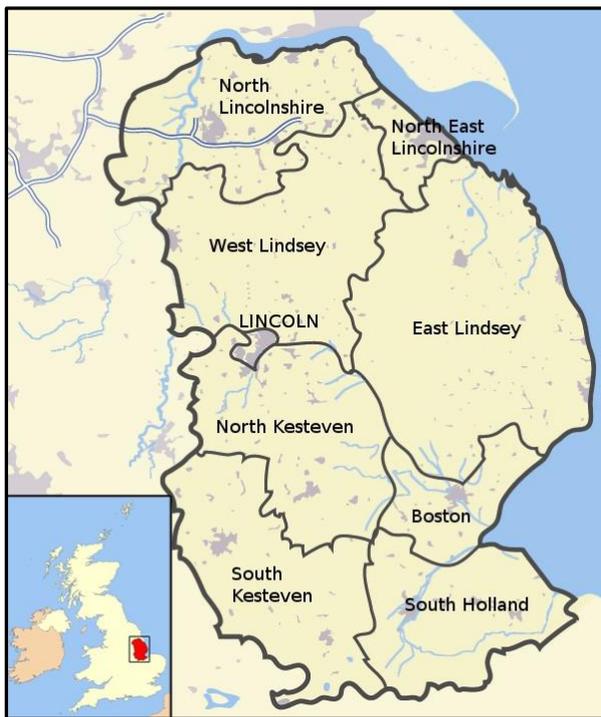


Fig. 2. Districts of Lincolnshire.

The county of Lincolnshire is divided into eight districts which are generally low-lying and liable to flooding. Sewers and drains criss-cross the landscape in an attempt to keep the land reasonably dry.

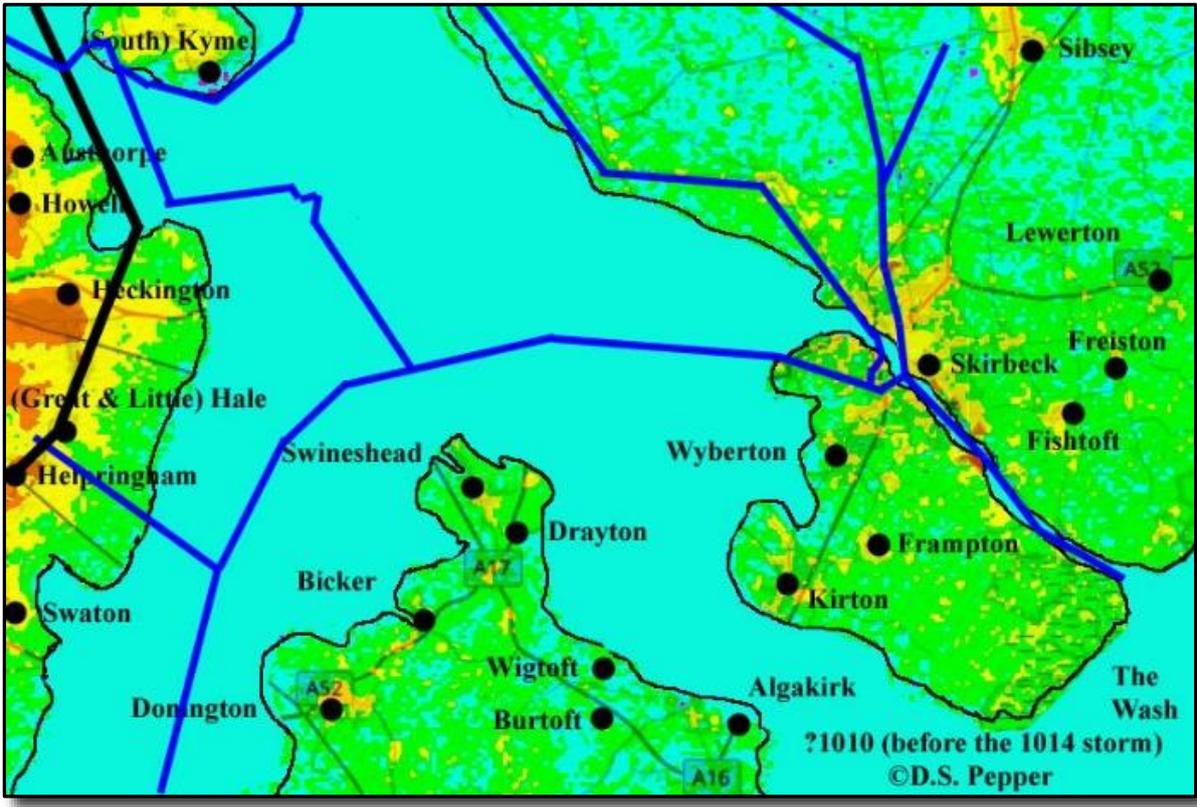


Fig. 3. Tributaries of The Wash.

The tributaries of The Wash are the rivers Witham, Welland, Nene and Great Ouse and it is the first of these which concern us today as it flows innocently northwards past Boston towards Lincoln looking for all the world as if this was always the case but this is far from so.

### The Flood

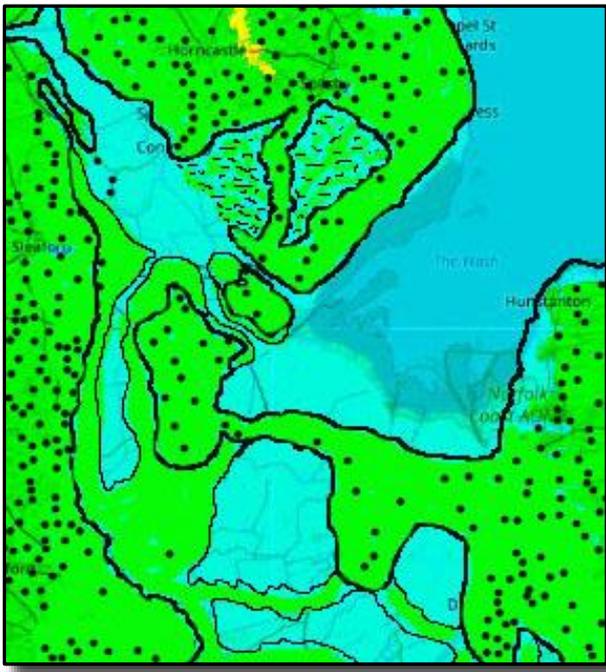
It was c. 1014 when the topography was massively altered as the result of a severe storm which caused serious inundation. As has happened in so many other places, the flood waters re-sculptured the land abolishing some waterways and creating new ones. Before this catastrophic event the town in question, Boston, did not exist as an entity but was the northern section of a settlement called Skirbeck. As the name suggests, rather than lying on a major river, the only waterway associated with it was a *beck* which was far too small to accommodate sea traffic. Before the storm the main port in the area lay 8 miles to the southwest at Bicker.



*Fig. 4. A conjectural view of the area in 1010.*

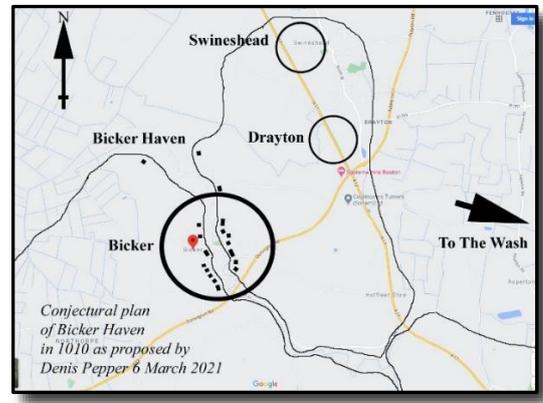
The Domesday Survey, held 72 years after the 1014 flood, tells us a great deal about the new landscape by what it does *not* say - since it lists only those settlements which survived.

Above we see each Domesday-recorded settlement identified by a black dot. We can be fairly certain that the areas without the black dots were either marshland or frankly covered by water.



*Fig. 5. Domesday-recorded settlements.*

In 1010, four years before the storm, evidence suggests that the landscape would have looked as seen in Fig. 4. Shallow draught vessels entering from The Wash (seen on the lower right) would have accessed the inner meres by turning northwest until they reached Swineshead<sup>1</sup> (the name of this village suggests a headland around which vessels would turn) and then turning south again to enter the port of Bicker.



*Fig. 6. Bicker Haven*

<sup>1</sup> Swineshead Abbey was founded in 1135 as a Savigniac monastery, but in 1147 was converted to Cistercian by Robert de Gresley.

The picture above provides us with an idea of Bicker Haven's potential for the accommodation of trading vessels. A major attraction of the port would have been the safe shelter it provided while onshore gales raged outside in the German Ocean - known nowadays as the North Sea. Another attraction would have been its proximity to the major trading port of Lincoln.

### Bicker Haven

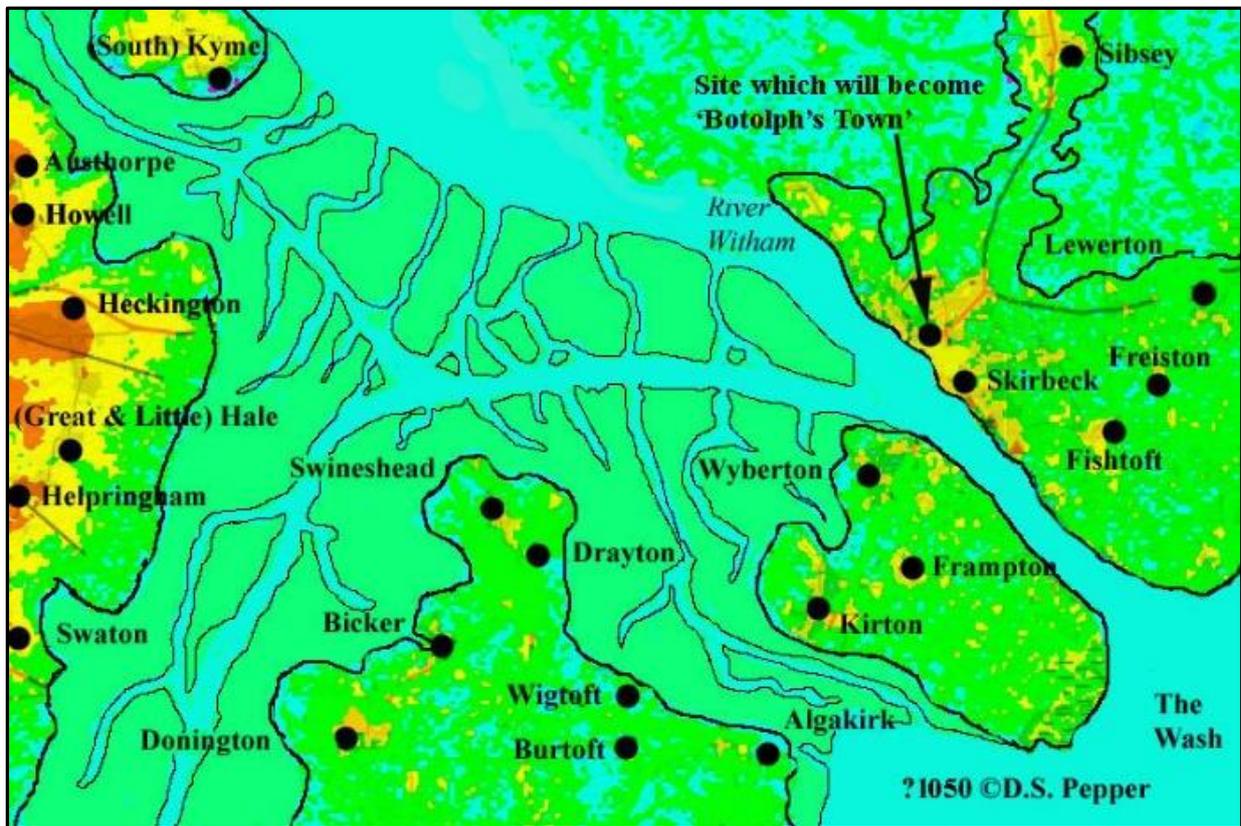
In an article on the Bicker Parish Council website, Hilary Healey writes: "Today Bicker is some 8 miles (13 km) from the sea, but was once on a large tidal inlet known as Bicker Haven ...the medieval settlement developed at the head of a navigable waterway and its location was important for trade."<sup>2</sup>

I would very much have liked to have discussed with Hilary the history of her home-village of Bicker but sadly she died several years ago and I have been unable to find anybody else with the

same interest and knowledge. It is worth noting some of her other comments about Bicker:

*The village as we know it, was probably founded in the seventh century ... the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records: 'the great sea-flood ... washed away many towns and a countless number of people' while Thomas of Malmesbury called it 'a tidal wave ... grew to an astounding size such as the memory of man cannot parallel'... Following the floods the River Witham changed course. Boston, hitherto of little importance, began to thrive as a port. Bicker gradually silted up as a harbour. The mainly dry river still runs through the centre of the village, making its layout unique in this region.*

During the 400 years between C7 and C11 Bicker Haven would have seen a brisk trade with increasing numbers of vessels from Scandinavian ports joining the British ones. The little port would foster a dynamism which eventually passed to Boston when it took over as the major port.



*Fig. 7. Awaiting the arrival of Boston c. 1050.*

By the time of the conjectural map shown above, which we might date to mid C11, silting of the waterways has reduced the potential for navigation to a few narrow channels one of which leads from The Wash to Lincoln along the track of the River Witham. The town of Skirbeck has

begun to rise to prominence as it concerns itself with the trading and social needs of the sudden influx of visiting sailors and a settlement in the north east suburbs of Skirbeck is acquiring some notoriety. It will shortly assume the name of *Botolph's Town*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bickerparishcouncil.wordpress.com/about-bicker/history-of-bicker/>

## Discussion with Neil Wright

On 6th March 2021, when the village of Bicker first presented itself as an important clue in the Botolph Mystery, I wrote to **Heritage Lincolnshire** asking for my contact details to be passed on to anybody who might be able to help in my quest for further details. Kate, from HL's administrative team forwarded my message as a general request and Matt Bentley MSc IHBC, HL's Conservation Project Manager, contacted Neil Wright who wrote back to me.

Neil has written several books on the history of Boston and wrote that he '*has recently developed the idea that St Botolph's church in Boston might be the original church of Skirbeck parish, and that St Nicholas was built to give Skirbeck a new church after their old one became the church of the new parish of Boston.*' He attached a copy of his draft article which he noted has not yet been published.

Neil's article was entitled:

### *Where was the Original Parish Church of Skirbeck?*

and was both informative and well-considered.

His original premise was that Boston has no entry in the Domesday Book whereas Skirbeck's entry lists it as having two churches. He surmised that one was perhaps for the parish of Skirbeck and the other was "*for the new town that became Boston, whose parish was carved out of the north-west corner of Skirbeck.*"

A later revisit to the subject prompted him to wonder if St Botolph's was on the *original* site of the Anglo-Saxon church of Skirbeck. He backed up his argument with the realisation that "*the most important place in the original Skirbeck (before Boston was detached from it) would be where the main road through the townlands (east and west of Boston) crossed the river Witham. As the tide flowed in and out twice a day that would be a dangerous crossing (presumably by ferry in those days) and St Botolph was, like St Christopher, a patron saint of travellers, so it would be logical for the Anglo-Saxon church of Skirbeck to be built next to the dangerous crossing and dedicated to St Botolph.*"

Neil's thoughts suggest the possibility of a Skirbeck Anglo-Saxon chapel on a river crossing to serve the spiritual needs of travellers. Such a chapel could date from any time between C7 and C11.

Further details come from **British History Online** which writes of the Boston site<sup>3</sup>:

*The monastery, which was erected on the north side of the present church, was destroyed by the Danes in 870, and its remains have been converted into a dwelling house, styled Botolph's Priory.*

**Historic England** joins in with<sup>4</sup>:

*The origins of St Botolph's Church, Boston have their roots in the former priory church of the Benedictine monastery. The first church of St Botolph was granted to St Mary's Abbey, York, shortly after 1089 and a priory of monks was constituted. The foundations of this first church were discovered during restoration work on the north side of St Botolph's, 1851–3. There is no record of the priory after 1281, and the present church was not begun until 1309.*

The St Mary's Abbey mentioned above, has several Botolphian connections:

- It was a very powerful Benedictine abbey - and St Botolph is frequently credited with introducing Benedictinism to England.
- It was founded in York in 1088 on the site of a previous 1055 church which had been dedicated to St Olaf - so there would seem to be some strong Danish (Cnut the Great/Edward the Confessor) links.

## Lindsey

The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Lindsey, sections of which are shown in Fig. 2 above, was absorbed into Northumbria in C7. The name *Lindsey* means the 'Isle of Lincoln' (*Lindum* being Lincoln's Roman name).

In 697, south east of Lincoln on the east bank of the River Witham, King Aethelred of Mercia had founded Bardney Abbey as a Benedictine monastery and Partney Abbey used to lie in the south of the island before, like St Botolph's Icanho Abbey, it was destroyed by the Danes in C9. I mention these to establish the presence of monasteries on the island and the consequent likelihood of pilgrimage.

## Pilgrimage

It is not easy to distinguish *pilgrimage* from *routine travel* since many wayfarers travelling for non-religious purposes used monasteries, abbeys and chapels as places of shelter.

There was a resurgence of "pilgrimage" in late C10 during the period of Monastic Reform led by St Dunstan of Canterbury and Aethelwold Bishop of Winchester. During this resurgence St Botolph's body was one of the first to be disinterred and this in itself can be taken as an indication of the high esteem in which he was

<sup>3</sup> 'Boston - Botwell', in *A Topographical Dictionary of England*, ed. Samuel Lewis (London, 1848), pp. 309-314. *British History*

Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-dict/england/pp309-314> [accessed 16 March 2021].

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston\\_Priory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boston_Priory)

held. His relics were taken from Icanho and (perhaps not until c. 1025) enshrined in the newly founded (or re-founded) abbeys of Thorney, Ely, St. Edmundsbury and Westminster.

As the news filtered out concerning these momentous new events it would have presented an enormous attraction to people eager to ‘take the tour’ and to visit and worship at the new shrines. Clearly people to whom St Botolph might already be especially important would have been even more enthusiastic to make the journey.



*Fig. 8. The route from Spilsby on the island of Lindsey to Thorney Abbey. The small black dots in this picture show the settlements that were recorded in 1086.*

Travellers from Lindsey would have had the choice of using the Sibsey Causeway or the Wolmersty peninsula to reach Skirbeck. In 1010, before the land was remodelled by the storm, they would have been able to ford the beck but by 1025 they would have had to take a ferry across the now deep and fast-flowing River Witham (perhaps after paying their respects at an adjacent St Botolph’s chapel). They would have then made their way south by foot and ferry to Thorney itself. Quite an adventure. Quite a challenge. At Thorney they would have had the opportunity to visit the shrine of St Botolph and view his ribs and chest bones before perhaps journeying onwards to Ely Abbey to view his skull. After resting for the night at Ely another ferry journey would take them east to the mainland where, at the Abbey of St Edmund, there was yet another St Botolph’s shrine to visit offering an inspection of

more of his parts. Somewhat macabre maybe but part of the culture of the time.



*Fig. 9. The route from Lindsey to St Edmundsbury Abbey via Boston, Thorney and Ely, shown on a modern map.*

### **The second phase of St Botolph’s fame.**

Thus far we have seen that Boston itself did not rise to any prominence until after 1014 and St Botolph’s Church (aka ‘The Stump’) was not founded until 1309. We have therefore entered the *second* phase of our saint’s history. The two phases (the first being his C7 lifetime) are joined by a slender thread - and that thread is **his importance as the patron saint of wayfarers and farmers.**

Markets and fairs and churches and chapels dedicated to his name were already well established on the eastern side of Britain when the great wool trade made its dramatic debut in about **1240.**

Indeed it was in the churchyard of that little church which eventually found itself at the crossing of the River Witham that the annual traditional St Botolph fairs began to be held in earnest starting on 17th June and extending for several days while the farm trading continued. The date that the first one was held is anybody’s guess. The first might

easily have been before the 1014 storm when there was but a beck to cross.

The trade in sheep had of course been going on for centuries controlled by strong characters who were making big profits - but in a way that was of little consequence nationally. It was not until about 1240 that it became apparent that the English fleeces were vastly superior to those of Scandinavia and the continent. English businessmen suddenly became aware of the huge profits to be made in the wool market.

This potential was also recognised by **Hanseatic** businessmen from the German continent and they quickly muscled in on the action, focussing their attention particularly on Boston. Over the next two centuries the League brought good fortune and grief in equal measures to the English traders. Boston was an early success story and in early C13 its wool exports exceeded those of London.

The trade lent strength to England's power and spawned entrepreneurs many of whom associated the name of St Botolph of Boston with their good fortune. This was at a time when religious actions and superstition were the bread of life and in this particular case St Botolph was the saint upon whom many relied and to whom they prayed for his intercession with God to provide them with safe passages and successful sales. It was not only in England that his name resounded but it also spread along the trading routes into Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Schleswig Holstein to name but a few.

## Conclusion

I hope that I have successfully shown - perhaps to the chagrin of some - that Boston is not the *be all and end all* of Botolphian history but a milestone in his journey; a *major* milestone nonetheless. Without Boston's trading success being associated with his name it is doubtful that

- his life of good works,
- his patronage of wayfarers, farmers, and trading route sailors,
- his fostering of the Benedictine Rule in England
- the multitude of fairs and markets that were held in his name etc.,

would have generated sufficient momentum for him to be remembered so well until the latter centuries of the second millennium. Today of course, we remember him through his churches but church patronages are fickle things and what is given can so easily be taken away. Boston remains as a Botolph beacon for all to remember him in the same way that its Stump acted as a beacon for mediaeval sailors, so ... thank you Boston.

## Thanks

My thanks also to Kate and Matt Bentley from Heritage Lincolnshire for showing an interest in my quest for information about Bicker - and particular thanks to Neil Wright for his generosity in sharing his scholarship. There are more things to be written about the origins of other churches and religious institutions in Boston but I felt limited by time and space and unable therefore to make full use of all the information Neil provided. However ... in another issue ... ?

## Correspondence

As far as I can see from a brief look no correspondence is outstanding. I have enjoyed several email chats with members over the past couple of months but until the end of September when I return home I am afraid that I will probably be rather taciturn - but do not let that stop you from writing - it is just that my answers may be rather delayed.

### REGULAR END-NOTES

If this is your first *Botolphian* and you have acquired it by circuitous means but would like to receive an email copy each month then just send an email to [botolph@virginmedia.com](mailto:botolph@virginmedia.com) saying 'YES PLEASE'. If you wish to UNsubscribe then send the message 'NO THANKS'.

You will frequently see the 'twin' towns of *Boston* mentioned in these newsletters, - one in Lincolnshire and the other in Massachusetts USA. The relevance to the Society is that the name 'Boston' is said to be a contraction of '*Botolph's Town*'.

### Classification of Botolph Church sites: -

The list of classifications I use has been subject to constant revision over the past six years. The current version, revised December 2020, is as follows:

1. A church on a site which might have been founded directly by St Botolph during his life or by his acolytes soon after his death.
2. A church the original of which is thought to have been the product of Danish landowners (c.878-890, c.1016-1035).
3. A church originating from and as a result of Monastic Revival (c. 950 - 1016).
4. A church which, even if it had a humble predecessor on the same site, mainly blossomed as a result of opulence gained from the wool trade (c. 1150-1450).
5. A church lying on or close to one of the major ancient trackways, Roman roads or city gates, the proximity of which merits the suspicion that a major aspect of the function of the church has for a long while been closely linked with long-distance travel.
6. A church lying on or close to a pilgrimage route. For the moment until a pattern becomes clear, this classification has been sub-divided in the following way:
  - a. Churches founded for this purpose before A.D. 800.
  - b. Churches similarly founded but between the years A.D. 800 to 1066.
  - c. Churches founded after the Norman conquest.

### Typical Characteristics of early St Botolph Churches.

1. Nearly all are in the eastern half of England
2. Most have Saxon foundations.
3. Many lie within 3 miles of a Roman road or well-used waterway.
4. Most are situated close to the bottom of an escarpment but well clear of water levels.
5. Many are strategically placed in areas which represent the beginnings, middles and ends of long journeys.

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