

# Priory Gatehouse



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This Grade I listed structure is all that remains of the Dunstable Priory gatehouse dating from the middle of the 15th century. It is built of stone from the nearby Totternhoe quarries that belonged to Dunstable Priory. The wall on either side of the gateway is also partly built of Totternhoe stone.

## Annals

The gatehouse is likely to have replaced an earlier entrance on the same site. The Priory Annals, which were diaries begun by Prior Morins in the early 1200s, record that there was a porter in 1291 who was also responsible for any prisoners, possibly held in cells in the gatehouse. It is known that the gatehouse was rebuilt in stone around 1294, as well as a number of Priory walls, which had collapsed because of bad weather. The entry in the annals for that year state that 'the broken walls were hard to repair'.

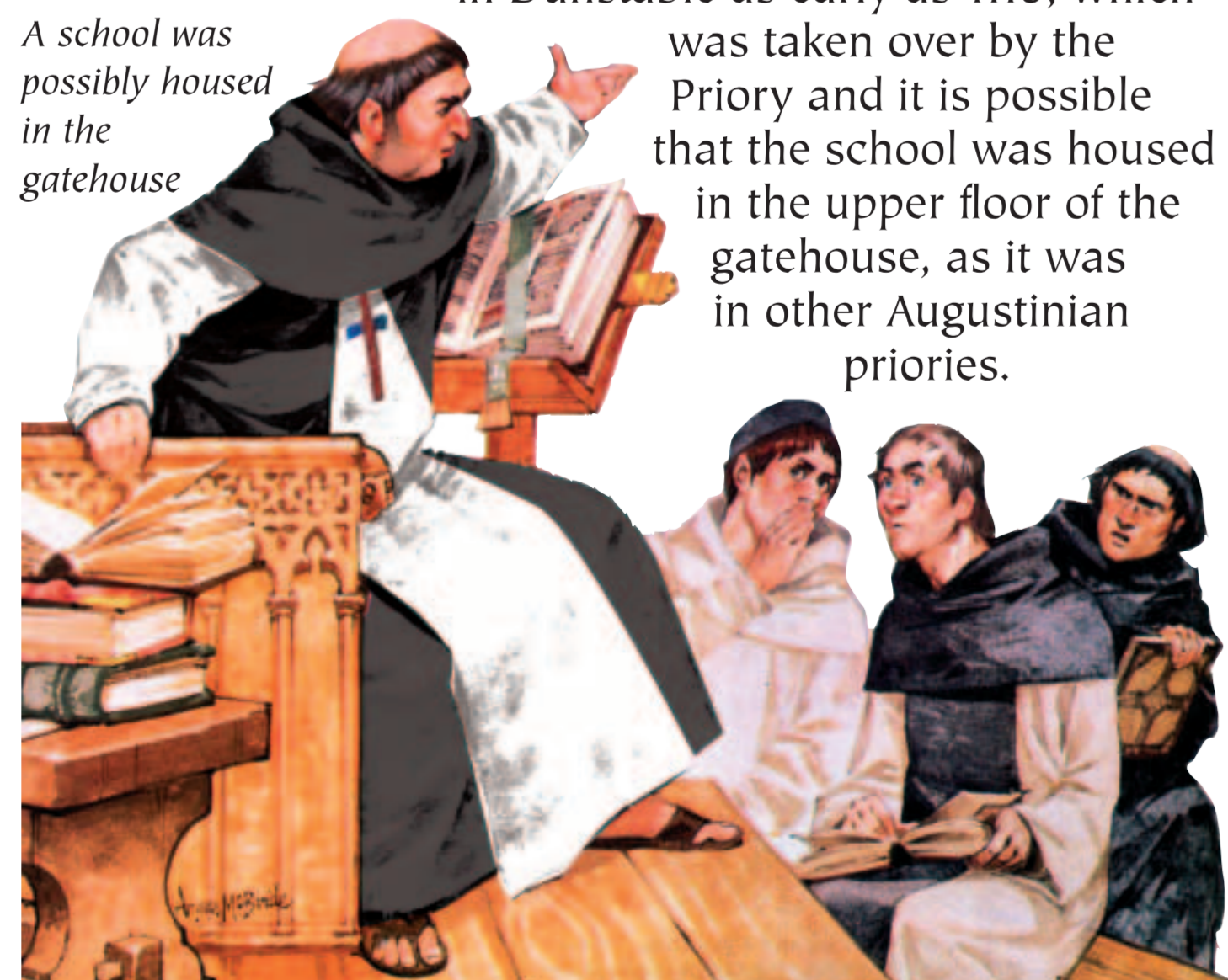


Prisoner in the gatehouse

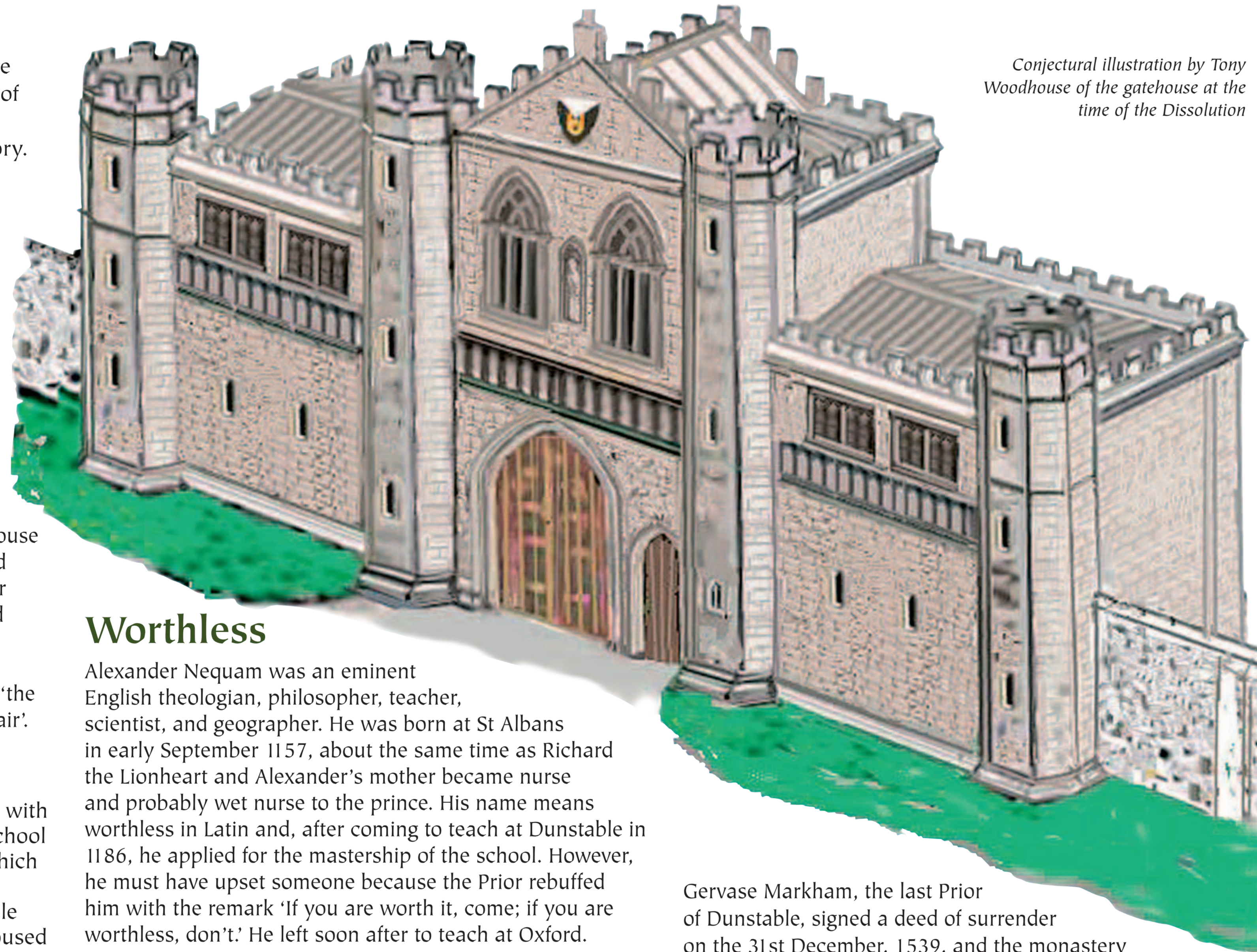
## School

Priory gatehouses were usually two-storey structures with a chamber over the entrance. There is a record of a school in Dunstable as early as 1110, which

was taken over by the Priory and it is possible that the school was housed in the upper floor of the gatehouse, as it was in other Augustinian priories.



A school was possibly housed in the gatehouse



Conjectural illustration by Tony Woodhouse of the gatehouse at the time of the Dissolution

## Worthless

Alexander Nequam was an eminent English theologian, philosopher, teacher, scientist, and geographer. He was born at St Albans in early September 1157, about the same time as Richard the Lionheart and Alexander's mother became nurse and probably wet nurse to the prince. His name means worthless in Latin and, after coming to teach at Dunstable in 1186, he applied for the mastership of the school. However, he must have upset someone because the Prior rebuffed him with the remark 'If you are worth it, come; if you are worthless, don't.' He left soon after to teach at Oxford.

## Dissolution

The annulment of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, which was held in Dunstable at the Lady Chapel in 1533, was the catalyst which eventually led to the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the destruction of the Priory buildings.

Gervase Markham, the last Prior of Dunstable, signed a deed of surrender on the 31st December, 1539, and the monastery was dissolved in January 1540. The prior and the twelve canons were all granted pensions. Before the Dissolution, the gateway of such a religious establishment was a scene of great activity. A throng of poor people waited patiently for the daily handout of food from the refectory, and there was a constant coming and going of travellers, pilgrims and merchants who sought food or shelter.

## Destruction

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, most of the Priory buildings, including the eastern end of the church, were demolished and the building material was plundered for use elsewhere in the town. Apart from the nave of the Priory church, which had been used by the townspeople as the parish church since 1392, only the Gateway and wall have survived.

## Fortification

The gatehouse was possibly a semi-fortified structure as had become increasingly common in monastic houses following the Peasant's Revolt in 1381.

A geophysical survey, undertaken by the Manshead Archaeological Society in 2004/5, seems to indicate it was part of a large structure. There is likely to have been another gatehouse located along the Watling Street which could have been considered the main entrance, given that it is likely to have experienced more traffic.



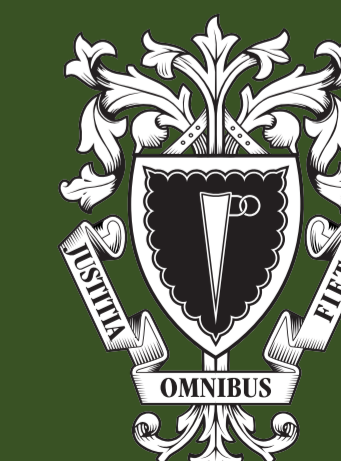
Dunstable Priory was plundered of its riches by Henry VIII's men after it was dissolved in 1540

Dunstable Town Council would like to thank the following for their generous donations towards the cost of producing the oak gates:

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