

SGI 3 Lesnes Abbey

London Borough of Bexley

Lesnes Abbey, Abbey Road, Abbey Wood, DA17 5DH

Grid reference: TQ 478 788

Stones of Lesnes Abbey

Lesnes Abbey was founded in 1178 by Richard de Luci. At that time it may have been directly accessible by boat. Built of stone brought in, mainly Kentish Ragstone from the Maidstone area with some stones suitable for fine carving brought in from as far away as Normandy. It is now very much a ruin with most of the stones sold for building material after its suppression in 1525 by Cardinal Wolsey. Between the ruined walls you can see that they have been in-filled in places with locally-sourced chalk and flint. There were extensive repairs in the 1950s, mostly using Kentish Ragstone. Please respect this ancient monument.

The abbey lies on a sloping site about 15m above sea level and good views can be had across the Thames floodplain. The riverside owned by the abbey was marshland and prone to flooding and the need to repair dykes and river walls partly explains why the abbey was never wealthy. Between 1279 and 1291 the monks enclosed and drained (inmed) most of the marshland between here and Crossness.

Between 1515 and 1551 the river banks were breached several times and some 2000 acres flooded. At this time a number of extra banks were built at right angles to the river bank so as to link the River Thames to the high ground and divide up the drained marshes. The raised path, which the Green Chain Walk follows north from the railway, is based on one of these banks known as Gravelly Wall. The last 550 acres or so of these flooded marshes were not recovered until 1623 by the Dutchman Joas Croppenbergh. He was paid by being given half the reclaimed land. All these marshes were again flooded by the great surge tide of 1953 that gave rise to the notion of building the Thames Barrier.

Viewpoint above the Abbey

The best views across the Thames floodplain are from the viewpoint to the southeast above the Abbey, designated by metal outlines of Abbey windows. Almost due west through the 'window' in the foreground the Millennium Dome (now O2) can be seen with the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf and the Shard beyond. On the horizon to the right is the high ground of Epping Forest. Turning to the right (very slightly east of north), between two concrete tower blocks is the ridge of Hainault Forest. Both these ridges are remnants of the geology that once covered the entire Thames Valley 50 million years ago, with the full depth of the London Clay, including the silty Claygate Beds at the top and the near shore Bagshot Sand above. Right at the top are the protective gravels of a former tributary of the Thames, dating back only about 2 million years. Further west the Hampstead Heath ridge displays the same sequence but cannot be seen from this point. None of these rock-types underlie Lesnes Abbey Woods. The youngest rock here is the 55 million year-old Blackheath Beds. The rest have been eroded.

Access

The park is open access. Lesnes Abbey is about a 10-minute walk from Abbey Wood station where there are link signs to the Green Chain Walk to Lesnes Abbey. Alternatively bus routes 229 and 469 run along Abbey Road. A new Visitor Centre, Lesnes Lodge, with a snack bar and toilets opened in 2017 is used for occasional and educational events in relation to Lesnes Abbey Woods. A short walk south up the hill brings you to the Fossil Enclosure (GLA1) and, further on, to Chalky Dell (GLA 38).

References

Green Chain Walk Geotrail: www.londongeopartnership.org.uk/gcgeotrail.html.

General reference

Ellison, R.A. 2004. *Geology of London: Special Memoir for 1:50,000 Geological sheets 256 (North London), 257 (Romford), 270 (South London) & 271 (Dartford)*. British Geological Survey.



General view of Lesnes Abbey



Close-up of wall
Photos: D. Clements