

PLANS OF, AND BRIEF ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON,
KENT CHURCHES

SECOND SERIES. PART III

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THE CHURCH OF THE CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF ST. MARY, BOXLEY

No excuse is offered for confining this instalment of "Notes on Kent Churches" to one building—and that not a parish church, not even a church in being, but a none-too-easily seen and comprehended ruin.

The Abbey Churches of Kent have not received generous treatment from investigators. The general history of each house is given in *V.C.H. Kent*, II, but notes on the fabric or extant remains are not included. The two Cathedral Priories of Canterbury and Rochester are fully described in *Archæologia Cantiana*, though the plan of Rochester Cathedral Church in Vol. XXIII is not now regarded as entirely satisfactory, and the amended version in *Arch. Jour.*, LXXXVI, by the late Dr. Fairweather, while more reasonable, is but a suggestion based on no certain authority. The accounts of the two Premonstratensian houses of West Langdon and of Bradsole (*Arch. Cant.*, XIV and XV), the Benedictines of St. Augustine, Canterbury (Plan in *Arch. Cant.*, XL) and Dover Priory (*Arch. Cant.*, IV, only partly superseded by Dr. Haines' book, 1930) comprise practically all the useful material on Kent monastic planning and architecture in our Journal. Publications elsewhere include "Lesnes Abbey, Erith" (Clapham, 1915), "Malling Abbey" (*Arch. Jour.*, LXXXVIII and a forthcoming paper in *Antiq. Jour.*), the Blackfriars of Canterbury (*Arch. Jour.*, LXXXVI), the Greyfriars of Greenwich (*Arch. Jour.*, LXXX) and of Canterbury (Cotton, 1924, though with an impossible plan corrected in *Franciscan Architecture in England*, 1937).¹ Boxley is the subject of this account.

The omissions from this list are considerable. Faversham, Davington, Higham, Minster-in-Sheppey, Monks Horton, Bilsington, Combwell, Tonbridge and Ledes, and practically all the friaries except Aylesford (*Arch. Cant.*, LXIII) and those above mentioned are without any published plan. Nor is this gap in our architectural history likely

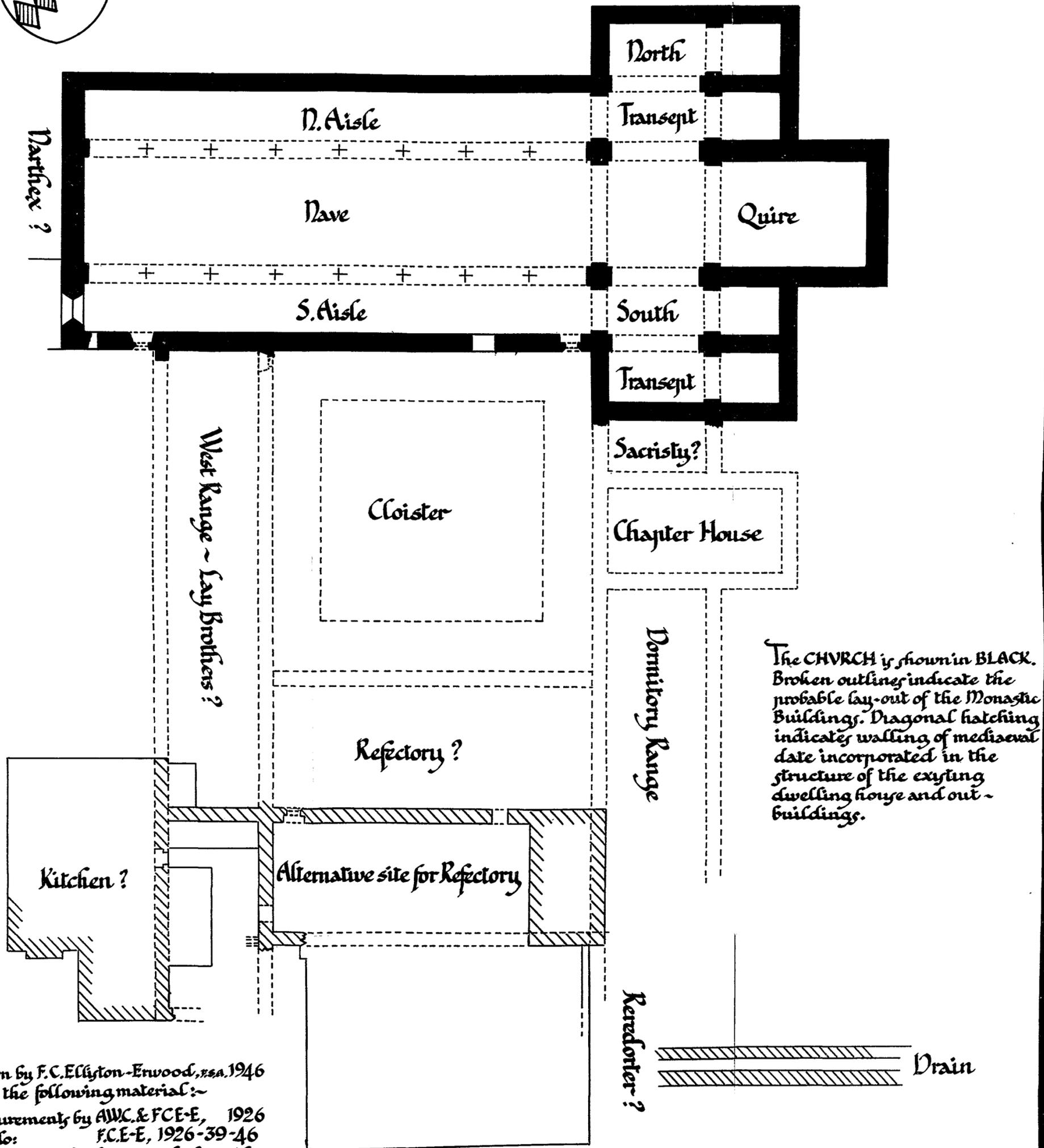
¹ The Report of the Annual Meeting of the Royal Archæological Institute at Canterbury in 1929 and the part of the Journal (Vol. LXXXVI) containing that report gives briefly all the available information concerning the monastic institutions of East Kent, with many plans, including a very good one of Canterbury.

to be filled. Apart from the fact that several of the sites are not possible subjects for excavation, medieval studies of this nature are not in favour at the moment and the cost of any such investigation, being for the most part pure navvying and not the brush and hand-trowel technique that is the vogue to-day, is almost prohibitive. The great priory of Ledes was excavated over a century ago and it is said that a large crypt was discovered, but no records appear to have survived and there is little or nothing now above ground. Boxley was very nearly another example of the same sort: its rescue from oblivion is the reason for the following description.

The first mention of Boxley Abbey in the Society's proceedings was in 1882 when the Annual Meeting was held at Maidstone. The site was not visited, but a paper was read by Mr. F. R. Surtees (the occupier of the house) wherein he described all that was visible, and hazarded a guess that the "Chapter House, Slype and Day Room" lay under a high raised bank that is still visible on the east side of the lawn fronting the present house. This lawn was correctly described as the site of the cloister, and the church was located, also accurately, as being covered by a terrace of masonry running east and west from the said high bank. Nothing more transpired till 1901, when again the Society met at Maidstone, and this time visited the Abbey site. There is very little in *Arch. Cant.* about this meeting and most of the information concerning it is derived from newspaper accounts of the gathering. From these sources it seems that in 1898 or thereabouts, George Payne, one-time Secretary of the Society and an indefatigable antiquary (he has been described as the "Sir William Hope of the K.A.S.") and Major Best, the then occupier, carried out some examination of the remains. Payne discovered by means of his "divining rod" some of the walls of the original building, parts of which were plastered. Further details are vague, but a paper was read to the members, evidently incorporating much of Mr. Surtees' material. What, however, is of greater importance is a paragraph in the newspaper account to the effect that "Mrs. William Mercer laid out the chancel as a rose garden, the lines of box plants in which represented the nave of the church and the paths the transepts." This is not a very lucid note but the implication seems to be that walls were found, and their position marked by box edging and/or gravel paths.

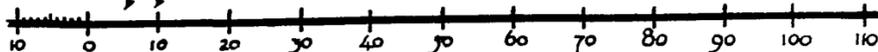
No other written or printed account of this examination is known to me but evidently a plan was made. It cannot now be traced but it may survive in a photograph taken by the Rev. Gardner-Waterman and of which I have a copy (? the only copy). This plan is a very poor production, ill drawn and far from clear in its details and at first glance unlike any known Cistercian plan. It is difficult to believe that it was drawn by Mr. Hubert Bensted, who was, I believe, an architect, though

The Cistercian Abbey of S: Mary, Boxley, Kent.



Drawn by F.C. Elliston-Erwood, r.s.a. 1946
 from the following material:-
 Measurements by A.W.C. & F.C.E.-E., 1926
 do: F.C.E.-E., 1926-39-46
 Information & photography from the
 Rev. W. Gardner-Waterman, m.a. 1926.

Scale of feet.



his name is associated with it. A note on the plan says "Rough ground Plan out of proportion."

Again the matter of Boxley Abbey was forgotten until the spring of 1920 when the late Sir Alfred (then Mr.) Clapham and I made a tour of the Monastic remains in the county, measuring and planning as much as possible in the limited time at our disposal. We visited Boxley and from measurements then taken produced a plan of which I possess a tracing. This, of course, did not show anything that was still buried but it did fit the visible walls into a reasonable scheme. This was, of course, Clapham's work, his extraordinary flair for matters monastic, making this, for him, an easy task. But the eastern termination of the abbey church as our plan showed it, was impossible. We had faithfully followed the tradition and carefully plotted box edging and path, but the result made it obvious that either the tradition was wrong or that (not a very difficult matter) we had misinterpreted the information. The quire and transepts were just what should have been expected save that they were shrunken to a ridiculous proportion. The incongruity was apparent but the solution was elusive, and Boxley once more lapsed into limbo.

For the third time a forthcoming visit of the Society was the reason for revived interest and as it fell to me to be the guide on this occasion, I set about the task of putting the available material in some sort of order, and for this purpose I once more visited the site with all the plans. In a momentary flash of inspiration the whole thing became crystal clear: instead of the paths being *on* the buried walls they were *inside* them, and the box edging marked their inner faces. The truth of this was soon confirmed by my "divining rod," a stout steel probe, and the problem was solved. The redrawn plan accompanying this paper was the result. (Fig. 1.)

The Abbey of Boxley was founded in 1146 and its history thenceforth is detailed in *V.C.H. Kent*, Vol. II, so there is no need to repeat it here, especially as none of the entries seem to refer to building operations. The church as shown on the plan is clearly that of an early Cistercian type, based in the main on Fontenay (France) founded 1118. The first house of the order erected in England was Waverley in Surrey, built from 1128 onwards, and excavation¹ there showed the first church to have been without aisles but with an eastern arm as at Boxley, though the later church, commenced in 1203 and not consecrated till 1278 was on a much grander scale that does not appear to have been achieved at Boxley. Tintern seems to have been the first church built with aisles (1131) and though Boxley has no associations with that house being colonized direct from Clairvaux, it is evident that the Fontenay plan was the source of this and of many other small houses at home and

¹ *Waverley Abbey*, H. Brakspear, F.S.A., Surrey Archæological Society, 1905.

abroad. Among these were Bonmont (Switzerland) 1137, Buildwas 1135 (though this house started as a Savignac foundation), Hauterne (Switzerland) 1137, Alvastra (Sweden) 1143, Roche 1147, Noirlac (France) 1150, and Fossanova (Italy) 1208. In all of these the aisled nave, the transepts with two chapels in each, and the quire projecting one bay east of the transepts, were common features and this plan appears to have survived unaltered at Boxley till the dissolution in 1538 which, it will be remembered, was accompanied by the unpleasant incident of the "Holy Rood of Boxley" that so exercises most writers on the Abbey.

Of the actual remains of the Abbey church there is, in truth, not much that can be identified and just as little to say about them. The whole of the eastern arm and transepts are below ground and only the outlines have been preserved by the box edging. The nave is a water garden with a pool extending almost the entire length of it, and when I saw it last a generous growth of lush vegetation obscured any details that may survive. The nave arcades are destroyed completely and the position of the piers on the plan, though probable, is hypothetical.

At the west end of the south wall is a doorway that was opened out by Payne; it is original and may have given on to a porch which would have served as an entry to the western range. Now it leads into a recess used for storing garden implements, but in the western wall are the remains of a blocked window and on its sill are kept some fragments of fourteenth century tabernacle work, part, most likely, of a tomb or recess, but not *in situ*. On the exterior of the south wall is the jamb of a doorway. This gives the line of the eastern wall of the western range and the opening probably was either the entry to the outer parlour or was in some way concerned with the lay-brothers' quarters. The lesser and modern buttress a few yards west of this, may mask the tear-away of the west wall of the same range, but so much of the fabric has been tampered with that it is not easy to be certain of anything.

On the west wall of the church are some indications of a structure abutting against it. The remains look medieval and it may be that here was a narthex or porch for which there are many parallels. They are so described on the old plan above mentioned but are shown as extending only across the south aisle and an interment is indicated where a normal narthex might be expected to extend. The same plan also notes the remains of a sedilia in the quire and patches of tiled pavement in various places. There is a photograph of some of this tiling on a photograph by Mr. Gardner-Waterman, but with the exception of a neatly laid border of plain lozenges placed herring-bone fashion, the remainder appears somewhat of a patchwork. This is about all that can be said concerning the church but I feel that wherever original

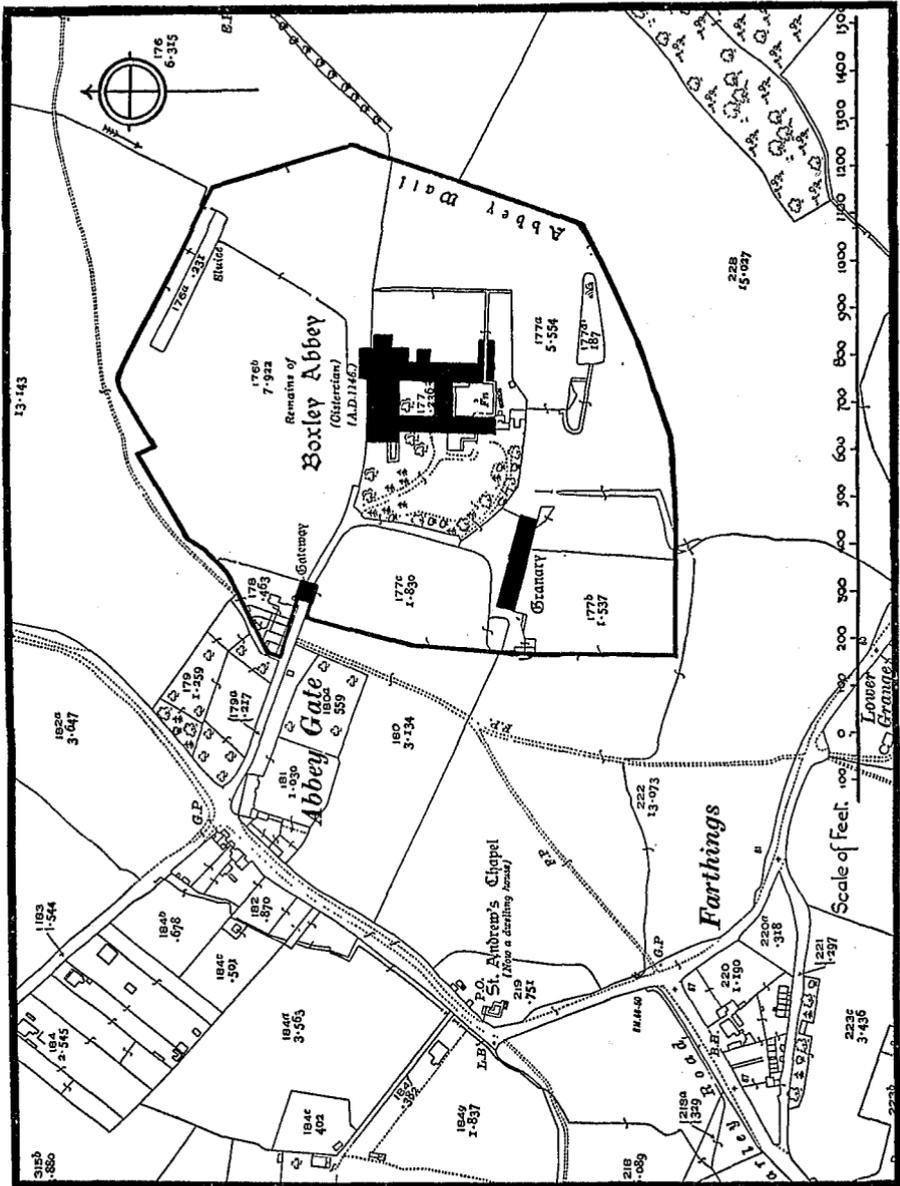
work exists it belongs to the period of the foundation and there is little or no evidence of subsequent enlargement. A rather disconcerting statement on the Bensted plan says of the area comprising the western end of the quire and the mouth of the south transept "Roman debris found all over this area."

It was not the intention of the writer to go further than this and deal with the vestiges of the monastic buildings as excavation can only settle the many disputed points, but as some reference has of necessity been made above to some parts of these buildings, this paper might end with a few comments on what still remains visible and the interpretation of these fragments. The account can thus serve till excavation and a new generation of archaeologists, according to ancient custom, proceed to indicate how and where their predecessors erred.

The PRECINCT (Fig. 2) comprises an area of about 23 acres surrounded by an irregular polygonal wall which appears to be of various dates and some of it clearly recent, and there seem to be indications of entrances and door openings other than the great gate to the west. This GATEHOUSE is built in the main of red brick and cannot be much earlier than the date of the dissolution. It lies back some hundred yards or so from the major road, being approached by a lane. The abbey site is some distance removed from the village with its interesting church and even now has that seclusion and privacy that the Cistercian communities demanded. The only feature of note within the precinct other than the Abbey buildings is the GREAT BARN 200 ft. long which is likewise of fifteenth/sixteenth century date. There are traces of dried out fishponds and on the north side of the enclosure are other ponds with the remains of a sluice, obviously to control the Abbey water supply, obtained from a stream coming down from the hills above.

Under the great bank to the east of the site are undoubtedly the remains of the SACRISTY, CHAPTER HOUSE and the undercroft of the DORMITORY. Of these nothing can be said except that the extension of this range southwards is limited by the presence of the Great Drain of the RERE-DORTER. This drain extends for some distance and is in good condition and retains much of its covering. Its date is somewhat problematical, as the masonry is rather crude and of large stones, but there seems to be no other reason why it should not be contemporary with the foundation.

The WESTERN RANGE has been mentioned in connection with the church, and it extended in all likelihood at least a hundred feet to the south where two parallel walls of the existing dwelling house seem to belong to this building. It was characteristic of Cistercian planning to have a long western range to accommodate the lay brethren who were part of the organization and whose dormitory and frater were located here.



NOTES ON KENT CHURCHES

These walls at the southern end look definitely medieval and have openings and fragments that confirm this diagnosis and the part of the house south of these walls, also with medieval details, has likewise the remains of a large fireplace which may indicate the Abbey KITCHEN being sited to serve both the frater of the monks and that of the lay brethren.

It is, however, the position of the REFECTORY that gives the greatest difficulty. At first sight the present house appears to suit the purpose admirably. It is of the proper dimensions and has ancient features in undisturbed positions. True it is constructed on an east and west axis but the Cistercian plan of a north-south frater is generally a later innovation and many of the earlier foundations commenced with a normal Benedictine frater and some, like Cleeve, for instance, preserved it to the end. But if this building is accepted as the refectory then the cloister becomes a rectangle with its north and south dimension longer than its east-west measurement by just the width of the refectory. It might be possible to counter this by presuming a lane (similar to that at Salisbury and several friaries). There is such a lane at Buildwas, but this is on the western side and I am not disposed at present to offer this as a solution. Instead I suggest that the present frontage of the dwelling house is the rear wall of the refectory and that its northern façade was some 30 ft. further north and that its foundations might be discovered beneath the lawn. This is indicated on my plan. I am unable to suggest a purpose for the two corbels, carved with variants of the Abbey arms at the eastern end of the house and with that admission the attempt to reconstruct the architectural history of the only Cistercian house in Kent must come to a close.

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