

## THE CARMELITE FRIARY OF AYLESFORD

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IN 1237 a General Chapter of the Carmelite Order decided to abandon the Holy Land, threatened with complete submergence beneath the advancing waves of Moslem might. The first contingent of Carmelite refugees joined the army of Richard, Earl of Cornwall, brother of Henry III, on its evacuation to England ; in 1241, on Christmas Eve, the friars were presented to the king at Westminster. Thereafter they split into two parties, one going north to establish a home at Hulne by Alnwick and the other settling upon a manor of Richard Grey of Codnor situated on the left bank of the Medway close to the village of Aylesford.

The first friary consisted of wooden huts, separate in accordance with the cenobitic custom of the Carmelites of that period, and a humble chapel, the whole enclosed within a moat (Fig. 1). Six years after the foundation of the friary the first European General Chapter was held there and elected the Prior—Simon de Stock, later canonized as St. Simon Stock—General of the Order. Simon reorganized the Order by abolishing its eremitical character and bringing it into line with the traditional monastic custom of the country. A claustral layout was planned to the east of the moat, the eastern arm of which was filled in, converting the original site into an outer court or curia. A new church, probably still of a very humble character, was consecrated in 1248.

The south and west ranges of the claustral buildings which remain to-day are probably in the main of this period ; though no architectural details remain to indicate this there is masonry of the thirteenth century visible in the cloister. Apart from this, however, the buildings seem to be mainly of the fifteenth century, a period during which they were remodelled.

The claustral plan (Fig. 2) illustrated the arrangement followed by the architects of the thirteenth century when setting out a monastic house on a new site. The cloister is a square completely enclosed by buildings, those on the south and west incorporating within their lower stories the cloister alleys which are, however, arranged as in the older plans along the other two sides. The whole complex is carefully set out to give a square cloister arranged with each side in five bays ; that of the contemporary friary at Hulne is similarly set out and is of identical dimensions.

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The original church was on the north as is usual in monastic plans. On the east side was the friars' house having upon its upper floor their dormitory: this, 80 feet in length, would have just accommodated comfortably the twenty friars known to have been in residence in 1326.

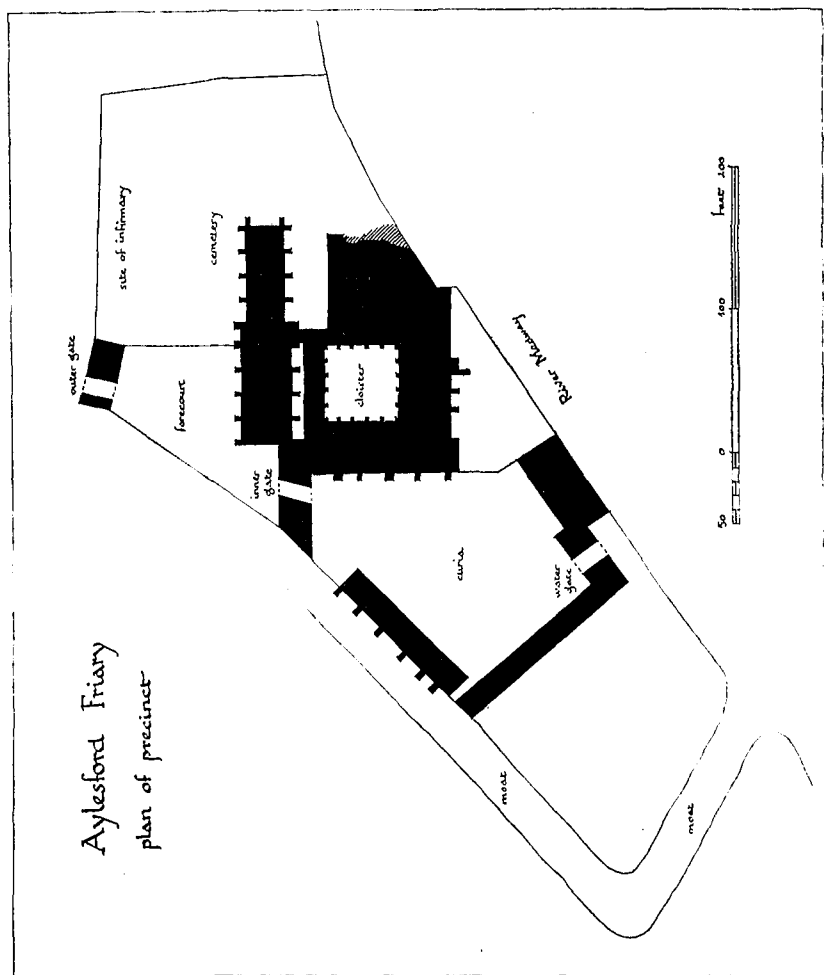
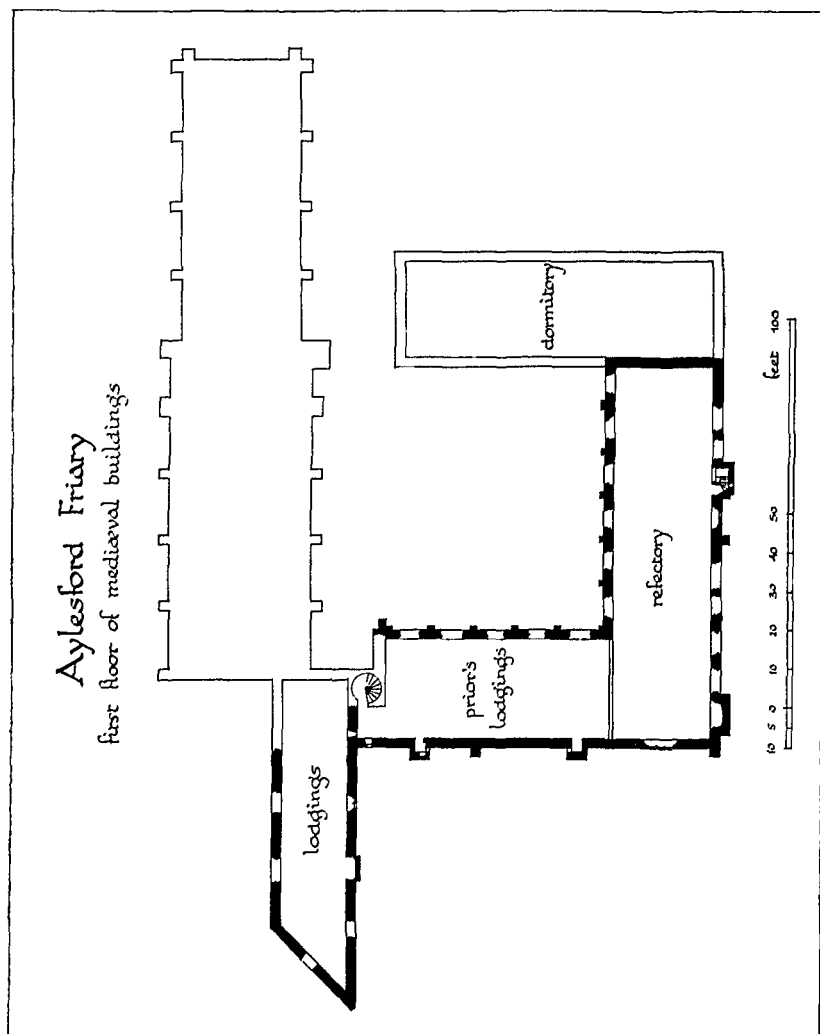


FIG. 1.

The east range has now vanished and its site is buried beneath a high flood-bank making exploration difficult; thus the position of the chapter house has not yet been ascertained. Several drains cross this area; the mouths of two of them may be seen in the river wall just east of the presumed site of the chapter house.

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The ground floor of the friars' house has not been explored; its southern end was probably their common room. The east wall of the structure is unbroken throughout, indicating that the chapter house was a separate building not incorporating part of the lower story of the



friars' house. The narrow building flanking the north side of the presumed site of the chapter house is paralleled by a similar structure at Hulne.

The refectory of the Northumbrian house is a ground floor hall

Aylesford Friary  
medieval buildings

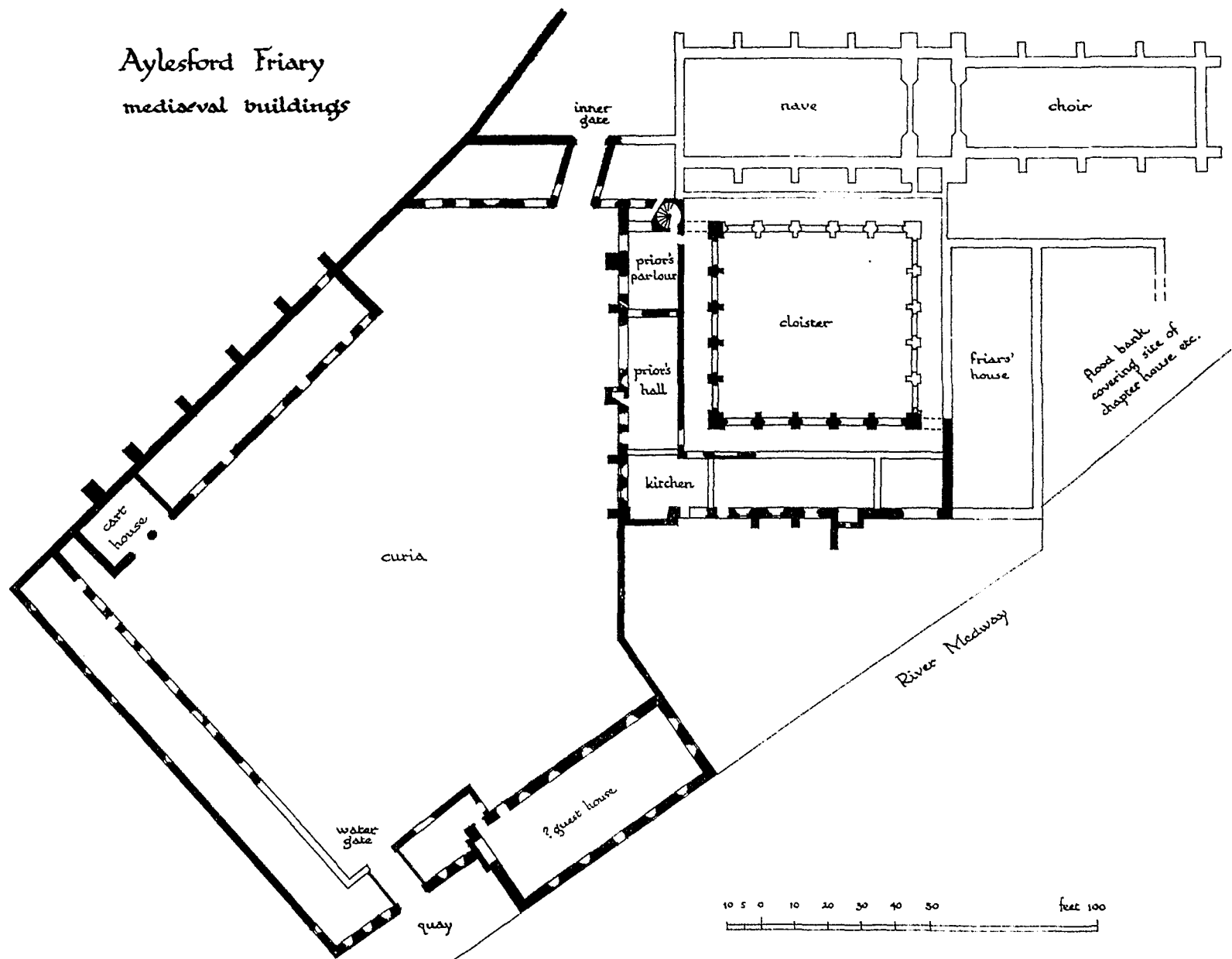


FIG. 2.

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whereas the friars' dormitory passed over the eastern alley of the cloister ; at Aylesford the reverse is the case (Fig. 3). The lower storey of the south range of the latter house has been so altered that its plan and arrangement cannot now be ascertained ; it is, however, clear that it had several windows looking out over the river and was entered by a door in this front near its western end. Nor can the original disposition of the western range of the thirteenth century be ascertained to-day.

In 1348—the year of the Black Death—a rebuilding scheme was inaugurated by the foundation of a new church which was, however, so slow in building that it was not until 1417 that it was ready for consecration. Its plan was that normal to the churches of the friars. The whole structure was 154 feet long of which the presbytery occupied 70 feet and the nave 64 feet ; the latter was 30 feet in span and the eastern arm 6 feet less. Separating the two was the transept or “ walking space ”, peculiar to the friars' churches, surmounted by a slender bell-tower. The foundations of the two screens filling the tower arches remain but the doorways shown on the sketch (Fig. 4) are conjectural and based upon comparative examples ; the three altars indicated in the “ valance ” at the east end of the nave are mentioned as having been consecrated in 1417.

The elevation of the church has been tentatively restored by comparison with the remaining buildings and the local style of architecture as illustrated by Maidstone parish church, a structure of similar scale and period.

Following the completion of the new church the claustral buildings were restored. Of this period remain a few surviving windows—or rather their reveals, for nothing else can be said to be original. The refectory has a pulpit set in a projecting turret next to which is an original window ; the large west window is a later insertion, its tracery entirely a modern reconstruction. Two medieval window reveals remain in the monastic kitchen and another may be seen in the adjoining apartment which is possibly the prior's hall, at the upper end of which is a charming aumbry with a foliated head. The doorway leading from the curia is medieval but appears to have been moved from elsewhere ; it has lost its dripstone.

The means of access to the refectory is not now in evidence. The medieval doorway in the south wall of the ground story may have been connected with it. In the cloister walk may be seen the remains of the lavatory.

The prior's lodgings were on the first floor of the western range. In a turret projecting from the west wall was his privy ; another turret to the south of this was provided with a small window overlooking the entrance to the curia. From the lower story of this turret and again

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in the walling further north other loops enabled him to keep a watch upon this point. Part of the stone newel-stair connecting the two storeys remains.

The site of the parlour is not now ascertainable. It must have passed through the western range; possibly it was set between the prior's hall and the kitchen.

In the middle of the fifteenth century—work was in progress in the year 1451—the cloister arcades were restored in their present form. They have no tracery and were never glazed; the wide internal splays have small shafts with simple caps of standard form. The stones have draughted margins highly polished: a feature of ragstone dressings which is also met with in the post-Reformation work.

Late in the fifteenth century a wing was built out from the angle between the west front of the church and the end of the western range in order to provide the curia with a proper gatehouse. This wing with the lodgings over the gate-passage remain; several contemporary fireplaces may be seen in the former but the gate-passage is now blocked up with walling.

The precinct wall appears to date from the fifteenth century. Pentagonal on plan it enclosed both the cemetery area and also the curia; the forecourt of the church, which extended before the north door of the nave, was entered through a fine gatehouse of late fifteenth-century date. This structure has a lodging for the porter consisting of a ground floor apartment—now divided into two by a floor—with a chamber over, the latter with a good fireplace of contemporary date. On the other side of the gate-passage is what appears to have been a prison.

The oldest building in the curia is the two-storied structure overlooking the river which may have been the guest house. It is built in five bays; the fifteenth-century doorway on the ground floor has been moved from its original position in the bay at the west end of the building while a second doorway has been added in post-Reformation days. In the centre of the river wall of the structure is a small doorway leading directly over the water. At the lower end of the ground floor is a large fireplace contained in a stack passing up the gable; the precinct wall begins from this stack which suggests that the former is of later date than the presumed guest house.

In the precinct wall near the end of this interesting building is the watergate leading onto a quay beside the river; it has a wide two-centred arch and was once accompanied by a small apartment having a charming fifteenth-century window with a foliated head—the only complete medieval window now remaining at Aylesford other than a few featureless loops—in its west wall.

This room is now incorporated within a long barn passing across the western side of the curia. It is of late-fifteenth or early-sixteenth

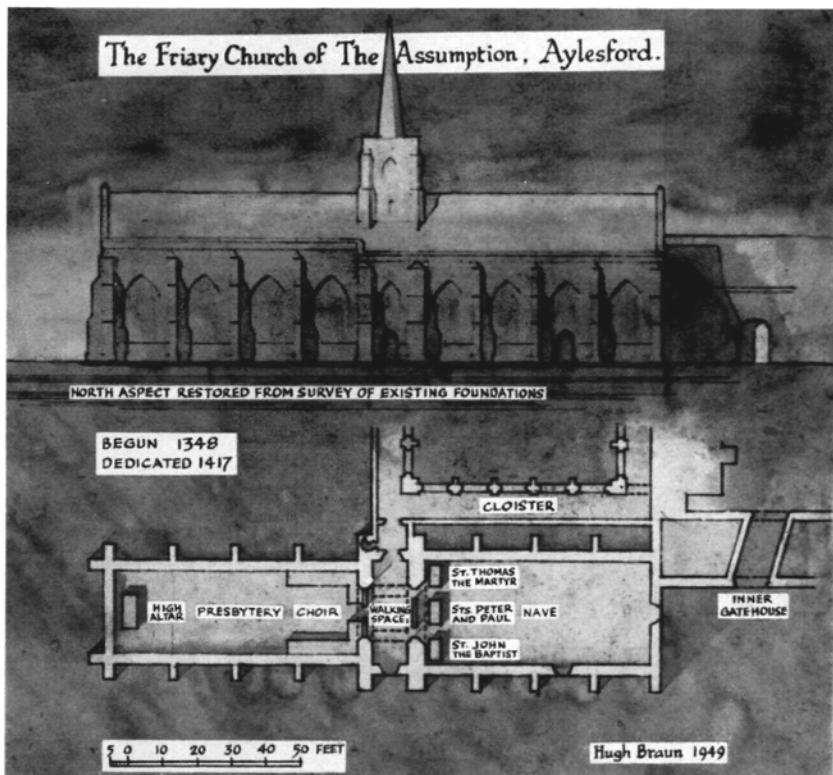


FIG. 4.  
Description is on p. 53.

century date and has a contemporary roof some of the king-posts of which remain at its northern end. All the buildings of the curia have their medieval roofs but practically all were deprived of their trusses by the Elizabethans to provide attic accommodation.

The building on the north side of the curia seems to have been a range of farm-buildings and offices. Of late-fifteenth or early-sixteenth century date it has several original doorways including the double-archway of a cartshed mentioned in the post-Dissolution grant. Between this structure and the long barn is a curious lobby of uncertain purpose, possibly connected with now-vanished latrines.

The document referred to above mentions stone structures on the north side of the churchyard adjoining the outer gate; this was probably the infirmary. In the curia was "a granary over the lime house" and a "stable adjoining to a stair besides the carthouse." The friary water supply came through an aqueduct from a spring at Hawksgarden in the parish of Burham to a conduit in the "convent garden"; nothing of this has as yet been explored.

The house was surrendered late in the year 1538 and given to Sir Thomas Wyatt who, having a house nearby—Allington Castle—allowed the church, chapter house, and friars' house to be pulled down for the materials. The selection of these buildings for destruction was probably due to their having been roofed with lead instead of the tile used in the remaining structures. These were probably used simply as farm buildings.

In the last decade of the century the derelict friary was given to John Sedley who built a new farm nearby and began to convert the whole of the friary buildings remaining into an Elizabethan mansion. The south range was divided up into rooms and two new chimneystacks built for these; another stack was constructed in the middle of the west range. A number of fine fireplaces remain from this date, notably that in what was once the prior's chamber. Over the site of the west end of the friary church was erected a new block containing in its lower story a dining room with another good fireplace.

The interior of the house was covered with panelling, some of which remains in the lodgings above the inner gate. The outer gatehouse, which was provided with another story by inserting a floor across the old porter's lodge, also received a new stack containing fireplaces on both the new floor and the ground story. The gatehouse retains practically the whole of its Elizabethan panelling and also the stair built at the same period to give access to the new story.

To provide attic accommodation all the medieval roofs were deprived of their king-post trusses and provided with a series of fine dormer windows. At the same time the whole of the buildings were re-fenestrated, thus losing at a blow most of their medieval character.



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At the middle of the second half of the seventeenth century the house was again remodelled by the Banks family. The cloister arcades were filled in with walling to provide facades in the fashion of the day. The new windows were of Restoration type with brick surrounds covered by flat arches with scrolled keyblocks in stone and filled with a cruciform arrangement of wooden mullion and transom. A new front doorway was set in the middle of the east façade of the west range and covered by a pillared porch the remains of which may still be seen scattered about in the buildings and grounds.

Within the house was beautified with richly-moulded ceilings. The whole of the main block of the house as far as the wing enclosing the inner gateway of the ancient curia was destroyed by fire in 1930 ; the subsequent rebuilding enabled the cloister arcades to be reopened and restored and a number of medieval features exposed. Advantage was also taken to remove the intrusive partitions from the ancient refectory which may thus now be seen in its former proportions.

In 1949 the house returned to its medieval owners the Carmelite Order. Thus once again the white scapular may be seen in the cloisters of Aylesford.