

THE OLD RECTORY OF ST. ALPHEGE, CANTERBURY

By E. W. PARKIN

THIS very interesting corner of Canterbury has been in the gift of the Archbishop for something over nine centuries. Here we find the ancient church of St. Alphege with a small churchyard behind it, a plot of glebe land, and a small building, no. 8 Palace Street, now an antique shop. This shop, however, is not now part of the church property, as it was sold into private hands by the Church Commissioners only a few years ago, and a part of the glebe land was rented out as a garden.

In this garden, between no. 8 and the church, some old brick foundations may be seen. These were part of the Old Rectory, built in 1665 and finally demolished in 1876, as the living of St. Alphege had been attached permanently to the Mastership of Eastbridge Hospital.

No. 8 is very much older than this, and is believed to have been built originally about the year 1250 as the priest house, and to have remained the church house until the seventeenth century.

Bede mentions a church hereabouts in his account of the great fire in Canterbury in the year 624, then dedicated to the four crowned martyrs of Roman days, and again Somner mentions it in his notes on Liminge, or Lyminge, in 804. The earliest site is thought to have been a little to the east of the present one; a clue to the reason for this re-siting is given in that most famous of all records, Domesday, which informs us:

'Ad hoc manerium pertinuerunt T.R.E. in civitate LII masurae et modo non sunt nisi XXV quia aliae sunt destructae in noua hospitacione Archiepiscopi.'

(In the time of King Edward, 52 messuages in the city pertained to this manor, and now there are not more than 25 because the others have been destroyed for the new dwelling-house of the Archbishop.)

The Cathedral buildings at this time did not extend so far westward as they do now, their western boundary being shown on the accompanying sketch map (Fig. 1), as a finely broken line. Part of an early external tower still survives at T, near the famous Norman staircase (NS). N marks the site of the Northgate, from which point eastwards the walls and the towers erected by Prior Chillenden (1390-1411) still stand. Behind these walls once ran Queningate Lane (Q), with the older Norman Court Wall behind it.¹ It was usual to have always a

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, vii (1868), 202.

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clear passage-way behind town walls, for obvious defence reasons, and parts of these lanes still survive in Canterbury and elsewhere.

Northgate formerly had the chancel of St. Mary Northgate over it, and through this point the original line of the Roman road ran southwards, as indicated on the plan, Fig. 1. When Lanfranc decided that he needed more space, he pushed the old boundary westwards to the present line of Palace Street (P), thus creating the awkward double bend in the part now known as the Borough (B), and so providing himself with enough land for his new palace, parts of which

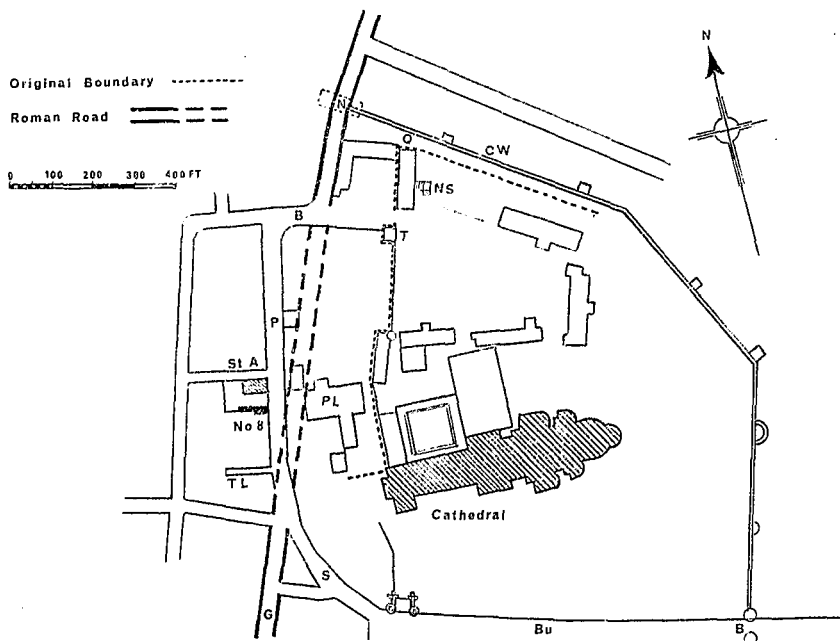


FIG. 1. Sketch Map.

- N Northgate, Site of.
- CW City Walls and Towers, temp. Prior Chillenden (1390-1411).
- Q Queningate Lane, with the Norman Court Wall.
- NS The Norman Stairway.
- T Norman Tower.
- B The Borough.
- P Palace Street.
- St A St. Alphege's Lane and Church.
- PL The Archbishop's Palace.
- TL Turnagain Lane.
- S Sun Lane.
- G Guildhall Street.
- Bu Burgate Street.
- B Site of Burgate.

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still survive (PL). It may be assumed that in requisitioning the twenty-seven messuages and, as we have hinted, one church, alternative plots were offered on the western side of Palace Street. A fact which supports this is that there are just twenty-eight plots there today, the famous old leaning building, the King's School shop at the north end, being no. 28.

In any case, the church must have been newly sited here at the corner of St. Alphege's Lane (St A) and re-dedicated to Canterbury's latest saint and martyr, Alphege.

Alphege, or Alphage, was Archbishop of Canterbury during that city's greatest disaster, its destruction by the Danes in the year 1011. Although an old man, Alphege personally conducted the spirited defence of the city, which held out for three weeks against overwhelming odds. Eventually, however, a traitor is said to have opened one of the gates,² and the Danes fought their way in house by house, and street by street. Finally, Alphege was forced to yield, and he was held to ransom, being taken to Greenwich, where the Danes had their main camp. Here, a year later, on the Vigil of Easter of 19th April, 1012, he was pelted to death with ox-bones by Danish warriors, during a drunken orgy after a feast.

Sweyn, the Danish king, later became a Christian, and Alphege was proclaimed a martyr in 1023, when his remains were moved to Canterbury. His tomb was lost when the newly-rebuilt cathedral was consumed by fire again, this time accidentally,³ in 1067. The site of his interment is thought to be in the present presbytery, just behind the tomb of Archbishop Bouchier.

The present church of St. Alphege has a little Norman work at its west end, but it was practically rebuilt in the thirteenth century, and again much altered towards the end of the fifteenth century, when a new nave roof and arcade, and larger windows were inserted.

The small building known as no. 8 Palace Street is of exceptional interest, as much of the ground floor dates from about 1250, when the church was largely rebuilt. It was then a small dwelling in the typical Norman style, with a first-floor hall and an undercroft. Its overall dimensions of some 16 by 25 feet may seem small, but it must be remembered that in the thirteenth century only very important houses were larger than this. Even today there are still many narrow plots in the centre of Canterbury and elsewhere, which are unaltered in size since the twelfth century, as Dr. Urry has proved.⁴

On entering no. 8, the most striking feature is a central pier, or pedestal, with double stone arches right and left, supporting massive

² E. F. Lincoln, London, *The Story of Canterbury*, 1955.

³ *Arch. Cant.*, vii (1868), 2.

⁴ W. G. Urry, *Canterbury under the Angevin Kings*, 1967.

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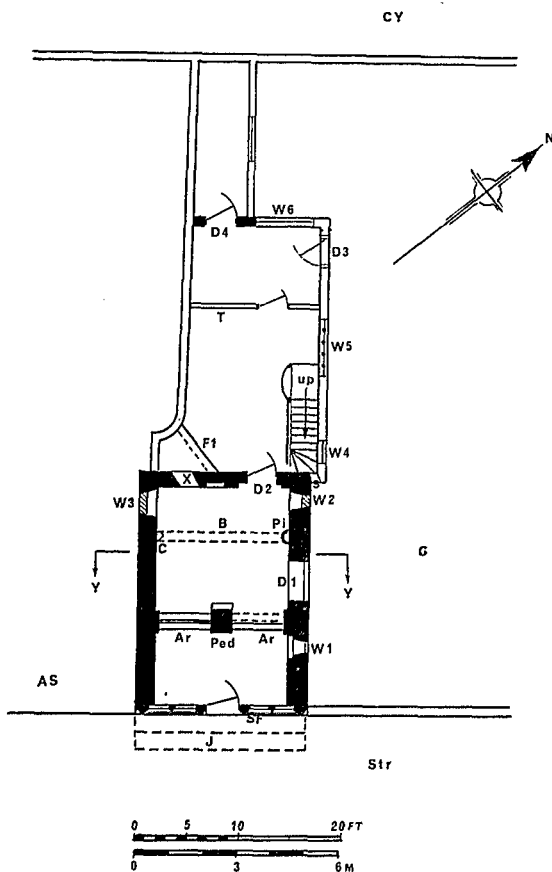


FIG. 2.

oak joists. Behind the pedestal, the joists are a foot wide, and yet they have the support of a great beam. This enormous strength is at first a little puzzling, but an examination of the floor above reveals the interesting fact that it is not a boarded floor, but apparently paved with heavy stone flags, now mostly smoothed over with a modern composition material. The flagstones still show here and there, however, and two have been left loose, apparently to allow electric wiring to be laid between the joists. This is indeed an important discovery, as it has never so far been proved how the Normans could have had an open hearth on a floor supported by wooden joists. This very question was debated in the last volume of *Archæologia Cantiana*,⁵ when dis-

⁵ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiii (1968), 151.

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KEY TO FIGS. 2 TO 5. In alphabetical order.

- Ar Stone Arches, springing from Central Pier.
- AS Adjoining Shop, no. 6.
- B C13 beam, now encased.
- Ba Modern Bathroom.
- C Corbel, carved in the Form of a Head.
- C2 Crowned Head, carved on Keystone.
- CY Churchyard.
- D1 C13 Stone Doorway, now partly glazed.
- D2 C17 moulded Doorway with square Head, and Heck Door.
- D3 1888 Doorway.
- D4 Rebuilt C13 Stone Doorway, with original Pin Hinges.
- D8 Main Doorway of 1665 Rectory, demolished 1876.
- D9 Gothic Stone Doorway still connecting Street with Garden.
- F1 Tudor Stone Fireplace removed from the first-floor Front.
- F2 Tudor Fireplace, still *in situ*.
- G Garden.
- J Jetties, or Overhangs, on the Street Front.
- K Kitchens of no. 8, and the Old Rectory, both seventeenth century.
- M Mortises for C15 Framework, before Wall was removed.
- P Parlour, both in no. 8 before 1888, and in Old Rectory.
- PD Priest's Door, leading into Chancel of Church.
- Ped Stone Pier. or Pedestal.
- Pi C13 Capital on Pillar.
- PL C17 Panelling.
- R C15 Rafter and Wall-plate, piercing 1740 Wardrobe.
- S Small glazed Squint, 5 in. wide, by 1 ft. 3 in. high.
- Str Street.
- Sc Scullery of Old Rectory.
- SF Old Shopfront, brought from elsewhere.
- Sh Shop.
- St C17 Winder Stairs.
- Sto Storeroom.
- W1 C13 Lancet Window, with some old Glass.
- W2 Blocked thirteenth-century Lancet.
- W3 Blocked Opening, possibly Stairs.
- W4 Blocked pointed Window, Date unknown.
- W5 Fancy Victorian Window, five-pointed Lights, brick Mullions.
- W6 Large modern Window, constructed of ancient Stones.
- W7 1665 window in Old Rectory, now believed re-used in no. 8, first-floor rear Bay.
- WC Earth Closets.
- WL Line of thirteenth-century Wall on first floor, since removed.
- WR Eighteenth-century Wardrobe, built around Wall-plate and Rafter.
- X Opening to Flue, part of old Window with Stone Tracery?
- YY Section through no 8, looking south-east (see Figs. 2 and 3).
- AA (on Fig. 5) Section shown in one of G. Gambier's 1876 Drawings.

coveries in the ancient Lake House at Eastwell indicated a similar situation, but could not quite prove it.

The walls which remain of this ancient building are of flint rubble with stone dressings, and measure some 1 ft. 10 in. thick. Various interesting features which survive include a stone lancet window designed to have glass only within its pointed arch, and rebated for a shutter in the main rectangular part. (W1 in Fig. 2, and Plate II, A.) The lower part now has modern glass, but there is still some old glass

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in the upper part. In the same north wall is another blocked lancet, and a stone doorway with a Gothic arch, now made into a window. There appears to have been another window in the rear wall and a partly blocked opening near the left-hand corner which may have led to a circular stone staircase. In a rear room is a reconstructed thirteenth-century stone doorway, complete with its original pin hinges, and this may have been once the principal doorway leading to the street (D4).

The heavy beam (B) supporting the joists is now encased in fancy boards, and rests on a stone corbel (C) at the south end, carved in the form of a head, and at the north end on the stone capital of what appears to be a pillar, now encased in brick (Pi).

On the first floor, nothing remains of this early house, except the flagged floor, and a stone doorway at the rear, with a keystone carved into the shape of a crowned head.

Both the church and the priest house apparently remained unaltered until about the year 1495, when both were brought up to date in style. The plain stone front of the priest house was replaced by timber framing and a jetty, or overhang, the height of the building still being only of one storey.

An examination of the ceiling joists inside the present shop shows that beyond the central pier and arches, there are only six very heavy ones, measuring a foot across, while in the front part of the shop there are nine, some 7 inches square. The six rear ones belong to the 1250 house, and the nine lighter ones to the 1495 alterations, the reason for this being that the protruding jetty could not have been added without using longer joists.

The difference of these joists raises the interesting point that if the use of flagstones was continued in the room above, how were these fitted? The answer seems to be that they are laid with their long sides across the joists in the rear part, and along the centres of the joists in the front part.

On the first floor, the 1495 timber-framing appears to be complete in the south wall, and on the street front. A bay-window has been added at the rear, and the north wall is covered with seventeenth-century panelling.

On the present second floor, part of the fifteenth-century roof can still be seen inside the front room. Part of the corner-post protrudes through the floor, and on this rests the end beam, or wall-plate, and the end rafter. More extraordinary still, a handsome wardrobe of about 1740 was built around these timbers, and has remained there until this day (Fig. 4, and Plate II, B).

During the sixteenth century, back-to-back Tudor fireplaces and chimney were built on the first-floor open hearth, that is, directly over the stone pier and arches. The fireplace in the rear part is still



A. The Site of the Old Rectory, with no 8 on the left, and the Church of St. Alphege on the right.



B. The massive Stone Pier and Arches, with original Joists at the Rear of the Shop.

PLATE II



A. Impost of Arch and Lancet in north Wall.



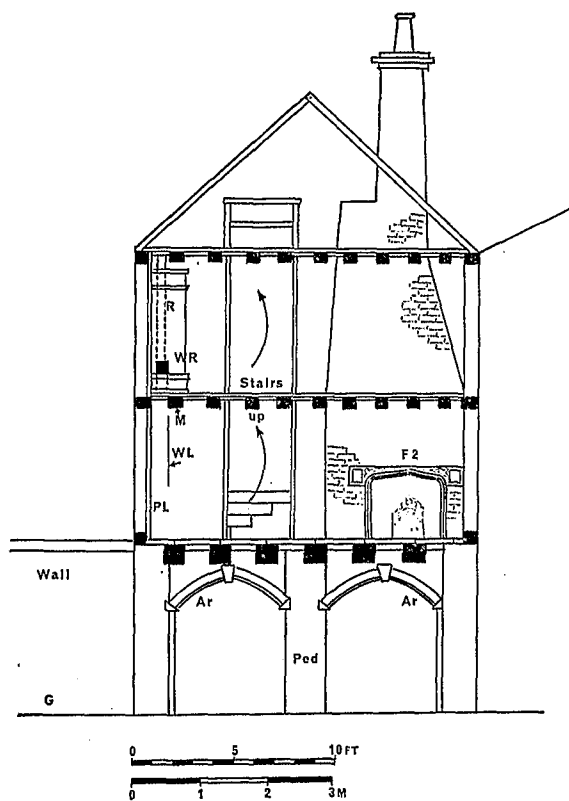
B. Remains of 1495 Roof Timbers, and the 1740 Wardrobe built around them.

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in situ (F2 in Fig. 3), but the fireplace in the front room was replaced by a small Victorian stone one in 1888, and the fine Tudor one, also of stone, was moved, it is believed, to the sitting room behind the shop (F1 in Fig. 2).

It speaks much for the strength of the early stone pier and arches at ground level that they still carry the weight of the fireplaces and chimney, for which they were not designed.

By 1665, the little priest house must have become too small for its purpose, and a new, and larger rectory house was built adjoining it, on the glebe land. The former was then adapted, and let off separately. The 1495 roof was removed, except the end-timbers already mentioned, and the present second floor and roof added. Any thirteenth-century stairs were taken out, and oak stairs built from ground level, up three floors to the roof space. These stairs still remain on the first and second



Section YY

FIG. 3.

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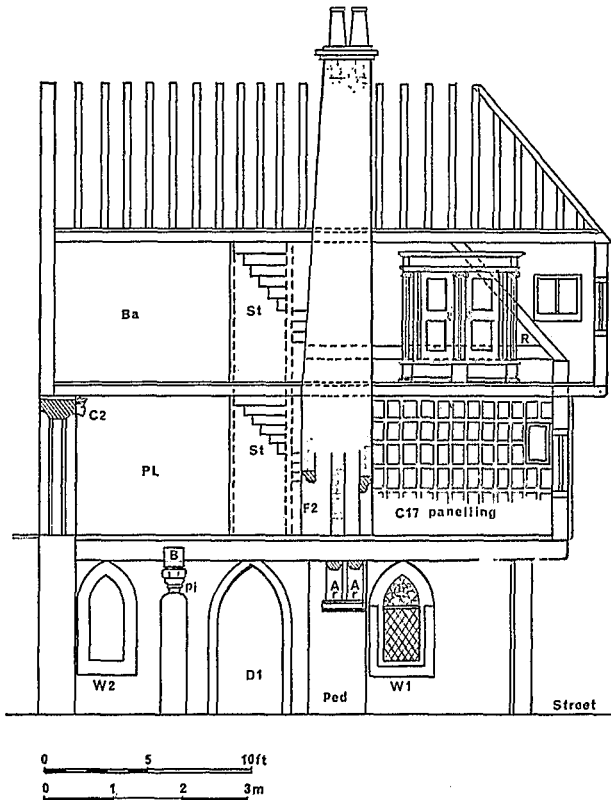


FIG. 4.

floors, complete with most of the original doors (Figs. 3 to 6), but the ground floor flight was removed in 1888. The position of this staircase explains why one of the stone arches is missing in the shop.

A kitchen with a wide fireplace was added behind the earlier building in 1665, and shows in the plans of 1876.⁶ It was taken out during the 1888 alterations, and the present curious five-light window inserted (W5 in Fig. 2).

The plans, dated 1876 and signed G. Gambier, contain some errors, but these have been checked against available evidence and re-drawn in Fig. 5. A photograph, dated January 1876, and taken of the garden side of the Old Rectory, shows that the Old Rectory still had its original front-door and doorway in the garden, with a moulded surround, and a flat hood supported by carved brackets. Several of the 1665

⁶ The plans of G. Gambier, and a photograph are kept in the church safe.

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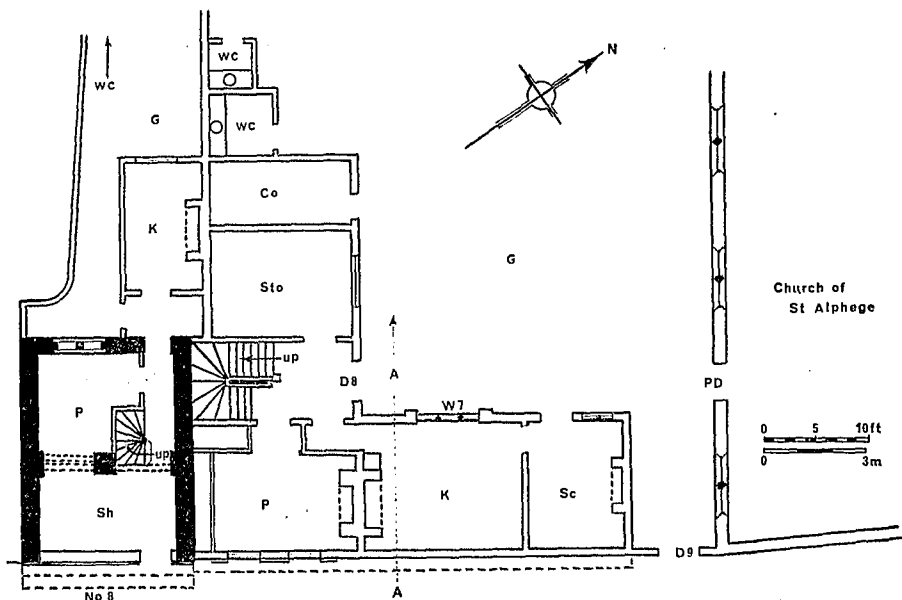


FIG. 5.

windows had also survived, with their diamond-paned casements with heavy oak mullions of 'ovolo' section.

The Rectory was approached through a Gothic, thirteenth-century stone doorway in the wall bordering the street, next to the church, and this still remains *in situ*. Nothing now remains of the Jacobean rectory, except traces of brick foundations in the garden, and part of its roof where it joined that of no. 8, and which can be seen in Plate I, A. The 1876 drawings show clearly the lay-out, and this is reproduced in Fig. 5. The parlour (P), the kitchen (K) and the scullery (Sc), were on the street front, the house was timber-framed, as there was a continuous overhang at the front. The staircase was immediately behind the main entrance (D8), and behind this was a room for stores (Sto), coals (Co), and two outside privies. A vertical section in one of Gambier's drawings at A . . . A shows that there were cellars under the front part.

The same plans show that in 1876, no. 8 had a small shop in front of the central pier, and a small parlour (P) behind it. The 1665 stairs were still there, by the pier, and the kitchen (K) of the same date was still behind the shop, with a small garden (G) behind that.

After the demolition of the Old Rectory, alterations and additions were made at the rear of no. 8, and this involved the owners in a lawsuit with the neighbours in 1878, whereby the neighbours were awarded £34 in damages.

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The last phase in the fascinating story of this quiet plot in the heart of Canterbury came in 1888, when the church, which was then in a deplorable state, was thoroughly restored, and most of the interior fittings and glass date from then. No. 8, too, underwent more changes. The present old shop-front was brought from elsewhere and fitted to it, the fancy carved fascias were put on the bressummers, and the old and weather-worn timbers on the street front were renovated by applying strips of new oak to them. One can easily see which is old and which is new woodwork, if one looks closely. The 1665 stairs were taken out of the shop, and replaced by the present stairway in the room behind the shop (Fig. 2), and the Tudor fireplace F1 brought down from the first floor front.

The list of rectors of St. Alphege's church is complete from 1311, so that we may know the names of some of the early occupants of no. 8, and later of the Old Rectory.

No. 8 has recently been granted the historic buildings plaque issued jointly by the Kent Archæological Society and the Committee for the Preservation of Rural Kent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the Rev. Derek Ingram Hill, M.A., rector of St. Alphege and St. Peter in Canterbury, for so readily allowing the use of old plans, photographs, and of his booklet on the history of these churches.

To Dr. W. G. Urry, for making available photostat copies of several plans, and one photograph.

Last of all, but not least, to the owner of no. 8, Mrs. E. M. Gough, for patiently allowing such a searching examination of this historic and delightful property.

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