

Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and Natural History.

EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF THE AUGUSTINIAN ALIEN PRIORY OF GREAT BRICETT, SUFFOLK.

HISTORY. Brieseta is mentioned in Domesday in the account of the lands of Roger of Rheims, the church and fifteen acres of land being referred to. This was probably Little Bricett, as Robert, a descendant of Roger, granted this to the Priory of Thetford. There were two manors in Saxon times—

- (1) At the Survey held by Fulcho, of William de Otburville.
- (2) A manor held by Ralph, son of Brian, of Ranulph Peverell.

This was in 1096 still vested in Ralph Fitz Brian.

By the time of Henry I. there was only one manor. It was then part of the honor of Peverell, held by William Peverel le Mechin.

In 1110 a Priory was founded by Ralph Fitz-Brian and Emma his wife under the protection of Herbert de Losenga, Bishop of Norwich.

Fitz-Brian dedicated his foundation to St. Leonard, and endowed it with the tithes of Bricett, and Losa with its chapel, the churches of Wattisham and Little Finborough, a moiety of the church of Stepla (Steeple), and church of Stangate* Essex, and also the tithes of Smithfield in London, as well as various plots of land in the vicinity of Bricett. The founder also gave to the Canons a large garden to the south of the monastery and a smaller one to the east. When he was in Suffolk the Canons were his chaplains and received tithes of his bread and beer.

The grant was confirmed by his son and grandson, and by Sir Almeric Peche who married his great granddaughter and heiress.

About 1135 King Stephen granted a charter to the Prior and Canons to hold a market on Tuesdays, and two fairs, on the festivals respectively of St. Leonard and St. Lawrence.

In 1250 a chantry was licensed in Sir Almeric Peche's chapel. This was not in the church, but in his private garden, and conditions were made to prevent its damaging the interests of the Priory Church. From the distance of time this can hardly be, as stated, the Sir Almeric who married Fitz,-Brian's heiress, but was probably a descendant of the same name. The manor was granted by the Peches to Roger Loveday, who died in 1287.

In 1295, after many claims and disputes, Bricett was permanently settled as an alien priory, subject to Nobiliac in the diocese of Limoges in the Duchy of Berry. This decision was confirmed in 1310 by the Bishop of Norwich. Through the thirteenth century

*This church in the late XIIth century itself became a priory.

various licenses occur for divisions of the manor, but by 1350 the whole lordship had been vested in the Priory.

In 1346 the Prior was summoned to Westminster for a discussion on the subject of the Alien Priories, doubtless due to the imminent French war.

In 1414 from a similar reason it came into the hands of the Crown with the other Alien Priories, and was suppressed with them. In 1423 John Groves, the last Prior became rector of Hemingstone.

In 1444 Henry VI. granted the whole to King's College, Cambridge, and this was confirmed in 1452 and 1462.

In 1545-6 the annual value was set down at £33 11s. 8d. There is no account given of it in Valor Eccles. 26 Henry VIII., but a short account is given in a book of surveys 37 Henry VIII in the Augmentation Office.

THE SITE. Great Bricett is now a hamlet consisting of a few houses of modern date and a number of half-timber cottages of considerable age, lying in a little valley, from which it climbs up the side of a ridge on the north, upon which to the west of the village stand the church and manor house, the latter being attached to the former at its north-west corner, overlapping the west end of its nave. The surrounding country is a rolling upland plateau, forming the watershed of south central Suffolk and remote from large towns and railways. To the west of the church and manor house lies an ancient moated site consisting of two flattened areas surrounded by a moat in the form of a rough figure of eight. No signs of buildings at present exist on either of these, but the immediate

neighbourhood of a Norman church, and their close resemblance in form to that of the typical Early Norman palisaded fortress, render it extremely likely that they represent the site of the fortress and bailey of the Norman owner of the manor. This moated site is locally known as Nunnery Mount, though no nunnery is known to have existed in the neighbourhood, and the church and priory are well known to have been those of Augustinian Canons, from the beginning of the XIIth century. The explanation of this must remain in doubt for want of data, but it may be remarked that it is no unusual history for an early Saxon conventual foundation, originally provided for women, or as a "double" monastery, to become at a later date the focus of a male monastic establishment. Examples occur both before and after the Conquest. The cause in many cases was destruction of the nunnery by the Danes, the convent then lying waste for many years and finally being refounded for monks or canons.

PRESENT CONDITION. The present church exists in the form which it probably assumed on its becoming entirely parochial on suppression of the alien priory in the reign of Henry V. Its transeptal chapels were then swept away, together with any monastic buildings attached to them, and it became the long rectangular building of to-day. It is 110 feet in length with a width of 20-ft. 6-in. at the west, increasing to 22-ft. 2-in. in what is now the chancel, owing to irregularities of reconstruction when the transepts were first altered, and then removed. Its masonry is throughout of flint rubble, with cut stone jambs to doors and windows, arch voussoirs, and angle quoins, from various quarries, including Barnack, sandstone, Caenstone, firestone, and early brick (probably Roman), used and re-used at various dates.

Alien Priory of Bricett (Aug. Canons) Suffolk.

Standing or excavated parts of Church planned in 1110

Conjectural Restoration do.

Later Norman addition to do.

End of XIIIth century.

Excavated. Date uncertain.

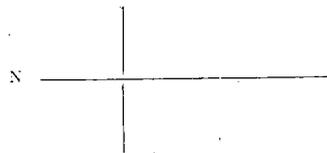
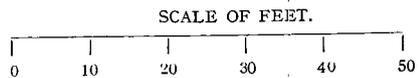
XVth century Rood loft stair.

Later doorways and blockings of various dates.

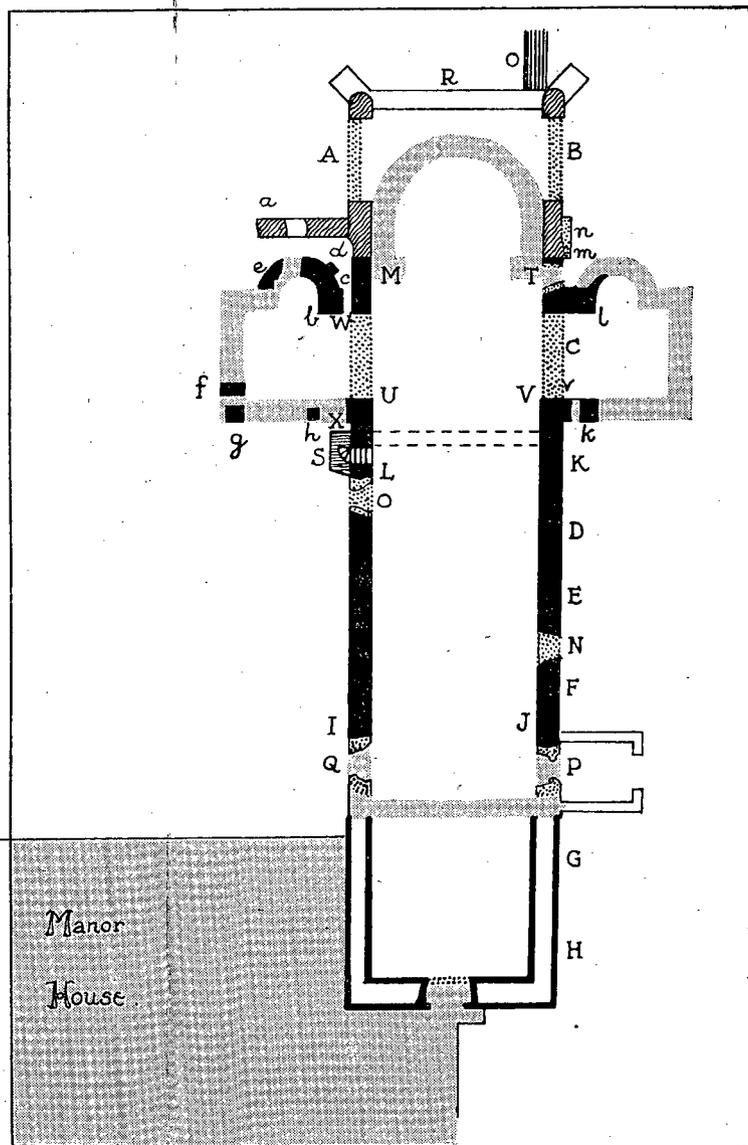
Modern Restoration.

Site of Roof Loft in XVth century.

The Plan is throughout below the level of the windows.



F H.F. mens. et del. 1926.



At the extreme east end at (A) and (B) the walls are pierced on north and south by late XIIIth century arches, formerly leading to lateral chapels, but now blocked. At (A), in the blocking wall, has been inserted a window, probably from the destroyed chapel, of late XIIIth century date. A row of similar lights, appears in the south wall of the nave at C, D, E, F, G, some of which are also reinsertions. At (K) is a light of late XIIth or early XIIIth century date, and at (H) is one probably of the same period but now much modified by restoration. At (I) and (J) are two small single lights probably of the third quarter of the XIIth century, obtusely pointed, and constructed of very early brick, possibly Roman. In the north wall at (M) is a large window of the XVth century and finally at (L) its outer opening blocked by the projection carrying the XVth century stair to the rood loft (S), is the only remaining original Norman light in the building. The great curvilinear window in the east wall at (R) is probably restored from the original XIVth century design as the beautiful glass panels of that period now inserted in one of the south windows of the nave, and of peculiar shape, evidently came from some of its spandrels.

The jambs and some voussoirs of the original Norman south door, now blocked, remain in the south nave wall at (N), and over this is an early sundial. West of this, the present south door, within the porch, is a good specimen of late Norman work of about 1160. It is not in its original position, and has been moved from some other place, and re-erected here. Some of the stones of its western jamb have been formed from stones bearing an inscription, in which the name of the patron saint of the Priory, Leonardus, appears.

Opposite this doorway, in the north wall, is another, built of brick, with a depressed arch, of XVIth century

date (q). At (o) is a XIIIth century doorway with molded arch, built of firestone, and on the south side of the chancel at (r) is a small doorway of XIVth or early XVth century date. The rood loft stair (s) is entered by a small four-centred archway and is of the XVth century. A XIVth century niche has been inserted in the blocking wall of the arch to the south chancel chapel.

At the west end of the church a very lofty arch of Caenstone with a round Norman head is the inner arch of the west door. Its outer arch is very much lower and so disfigured with plaster as to be uncertain in date. It has, curiously enough, been included in the building of the kitchen of the Manor House, from which alone it can be seen. The arch is blocked close to its eastern jambs by a wall.

It is evident from the above description that at the close of the XIIIth century the church possessed a long nave, with two lateral chapels opening out of it, at the level of the extreme east of the present building, the arches opening from them into the choir still remaining at the present day. These chapels must have given the church a more or less transeptal plan.

There is, however, evidence of earlier transepts preceding these. The inner face of the nave walls is slightly recessed outwards at (u) and (v), and on the north side the external wall shows at (w) a projecting member of the jamb of an arch, built of sandstone, facing west, while at (x) is clear evidence of a breach in the wall, the fracture facing east. It is evident then that here was an arch with a span of some 11 feet opening into a lateral building and, judging from the jamb at (w), of Norman date. On the south external wall also, a projection, now made into a buttress (y), terminates with its eastern face corresponding with the recessing at (v).

THE EXCAVATION. It was with the hope of recovering the plan of these early transepts that it was decided to excavate the available parts of their areas in the Spring of 1926. The north side, lying in the Manor House garden, was first commenced, by kind permission of the owner.

To determine the extreme eastern limit of the transept chapel a trench was commenced at (a) and run westward. A foundation wall of solid construction formed of flints was at once struck. It was found to be 2-ft. 9-in. thick and ran northwards from the church wall for 10-ft. 7-in. Taken in conjunction with the arch at (A), this was evidently the western wall of the northern XIIIth century chapel and it was obvious that any remains of the earlier, Norman, transept must be west of it.

Work was next begun at the projecting jamb (w) and a line of flint foundation was found to run northward from it for 4-ft., then turning eastward at (b). The thickness of this was next sought for, and found to be 3-ft. next to the church, its eastern edge extending 1-ft. 9-in. from the church north wall, and then turning eastward at (c). These two eastward turns at (b) and (c) were next followed, and were found to run in a curve north eastwards with a projection on the outer face at (d), evidently the base of a pilaster buttress. Progress at this point was interrupted by a path, but the wall was struck again beyond it at (e), completing the semi-circular curve. It was evident that this was a small apse on the eastern face of the transept, with a wall thickness of about 2-ft. 3-in. Beyond (e) it was much broken and shrubs (the planting of which had very likely done much of the damage) hampered investigation.

A trench at (f) however clearly established the north wall of the transept, again with a thickness of 3-ft.,

and another at (g) proved the line of its west wall, a portion of which was again struck at (h) where it was in damaged condition.

This gives us the complete plan of a little transept 11-ft. from east to west, and 13-ft. from north to south with an apse in the centre of its Eastern face, the opening of the latter to the transept 5-ft. wide, and with an internal projection of 4-ft. 6-in. The foundations were entirely of packed flints, with the larger ones carefully laid at the wall edges.

The south side of the church opposite this point was next explored, only a small area next to the church, wall being available. The east wall of the transept and angle at the entrance to the apse (i) were found exactly as on the north side, but in very damaged condition. The west wall however was found in good condition at (k), a portion of the buttress (y) being the fractured end, now refaced, corresponding in the interior of the church with the recessing at (v).

This gives the complete Norman transeptal plan on a tiny scale, but of course, in this case, without a central tower at the intersection of nave and transept, as the former is twice the breadth of the latter. The writer ventures to suggest that these transepts may have been continued up as squat towers, a condition paralleled in the Norman period on the north side of Godmersham Church, Kent, on about the same scale, where the tower and its apse still stand. They were most likely duplicated on the south side, but destroyed for the erection of a later transept and aisle. Among the larger churches (and therefore not such a safe comparison), Exeter Cathedral, and Ottery St. Mary, still retain their transeptal towers in this position.

The termination of the central portion of the church at Bricett in its Norman portion, is necessarily con-

jectural, as the evidence lies beneath the floor of the present chancel. The south wall of the Norman Church was however certainly returned northward at (m) where the quoin of this return, built in Barnackstone is still visible, level with the west end of a large buttress (n). It must be understood therefore that the reconstruction given in the plan is definitely conjectural. There is strong probability however that the eastern termination was apsidal originally, both from the period (Early XIIth century) and from the existence of the apses found on the transepts.

It is evident from the remains of the openings to chapels at (A) and (B) that the Norman church underwent a considerable alteration and enlargement eastward. It is not improbable that this extended beyond the present east wall, and a trench at (o) revealed a strong foundation 2-ft. 9-in. in thickness running eastward for about 7-ft. from the outer face of the present east wall. It is hoped that at a future time this can be traced further. It was sounder and more solid than the Norman transept foundations and probably belongs to the XIIIth century extension, but may be earlier.

THE WEST END. It will be noticed in the plan that the nave of the church shows an excessive length in proportion to the other parts of the Norman Church. There is a certain amount of architectural evidence to suggest that the present western portion was added at a later date, probably the middle of the XIIth century, from about the position of the door in the porch, and its fellow on the north. This is best seen on the north side where a suggestive fracture shows just to the east of the doorway, from which point, westward, the technique of the masonry coursing also shows an alteration. The corresponding point of division on the south is unfortunately hidden by the addition of the porch. The use of Caen stone

in the large western arch, as opposed to the, probably earlier, Barnack ragstone employed in the early south door at (N), and the quoin at (M), is also suggestive of a later date for this portion of the church.

As regards the development of the plan it is to be remembered that an existing church was granted to the canons in the foundation charter, and probably some portion of this was retained and added to by them. It is not unlikely that this retained portion is represented by the part with Barnack quoins, and consisted of a plain rectangular nave, and apse*, to which the canons added transepts with apsidal chapels, with sandstone quoins, later lengthening the nave westwards to its present dimensions, and finally, in the late XIIIth century, destroying the Norman choir termination and adding a new east end with lateral chapels.

MONASTIC BUILDINGS. The positions of the east and west doors on the north side of the nave, and the lines of the west wall of the Norman transept, and of the east wall of the Manor House, are distinctly suggestive of the existence of a cloister court within these limits. There is also an offset on the nave wall which may have given support for the roof of the south cloister walk.

Excavation however on the line of the west transept wall, further north, gave no result, and the Manor House itself shows no definite sign of having been a portion of the western range, though its site is very suggestive. The development of the cloister in these smaller priories was moreover, uncertain. Prof. Hamilton Thompson observes "Where these small alien priories are known to have existed, we need not expect to find any trace of monastic arrangements in the parish church. Still less need we look for traces

*Of the type shown at Swyncombe in Oxfordshire and Copford in Essex.

of a cloister." [English Monasteries, p. 10]. At Bricett the monastic arrangements in the church may be said to be quite normal, the cloister must remain uncertain, until further research produces definite data.

In conclusion, the writer desires to express his most cordial thanks to Mr. Wright for his kind permission to work in the Manor House garden, to the Vicar of Bricett for the same facilities in the churchyard, and to the Rev. H. A. Harris, of Thorndon Rectory, for his very kind assistance in the excavation.

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