

FIRST REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT GREY FRIARS
MONASTERY, DUNWICH, SUFFOLK.

JULY, 1935.

By NORMAN E. S. NORRIS.

The convent of the Grey or Franciscan Friars at Dunwich was founded by Richard FitzJohn and his wife Alice, and afterwards enlarged by the benefactions of Henry III.*

The church of the convent had many benefactors, some of whom appear to have been buried within its walls. Among others Gardner notes :—

1472 Cecilly Lacy, near the window of St. Cecilly.

John Moreff, before the cross.

John Lewk, before the window of St. Andrew.

1479 Matilda Moreff.

1525 Robert Lentylson.

“ All whose graves are overrun with nettles and briars, masking the remains of the ragged foundation of the church whose ruins are an habitation of dangerous reptiles and vermin.”†

According to Gardner, an urn with a brass lid bearing the inscription “ Ave Maria gracia plena ” and on the reverse side : “ NVC LARNER N.GSA GLADIR A LILIV KU ” was found by workmen when carting away a hillock which stood in the convent grounds. It was supposed by that historian to have contained the heart of Dame Howise Poynings, who was buried in the church.† This mound was perhaps part of the old city defences, as in an early manuscript we read :—

“ In the reigne of King Henry II it (Dunwich) was a towne of great and strong defence, environed with great dykes, and banks, with many sundrye high hills about and within the said towne and libtie : whereof eight of them remayne within the towne and within the Palesdyke (palace dyke) and one without in Middlegate Street.”‡

The convent was at one period a Bishop's Palace.

The “ high hill ” in Middlegate Street still remains, although on the very edge of the cliff. It was excavated in the latter part of 1935 by Mr. Reid Moir, I understand, when several pieces of mediæval pottery and glass fragments were obtained. The lane, deeply sunken between earth banks, which was formerly Middlegate Street, emerges at the cliff close to this hillock, which may well be the one mentioned in the manuscript. If the mound in the grounds of the monastery were

* Vide Weaver's Funeral Monuments, page 721.

† Vide Gardner's Hist. of Dunwich, p. 59.

‡ MSS. dated 1590.

levelled, the earth from it would probably be spread over the field. The soil at plough-level is full of mediaeval sherds of the same date as those found in the Middlegate Street hillock, though this is the case in all the fields outside the convent walls.

A considerable part of the convent, including the church and probably most of the living quarters, were demolished by the reformers, the remainder being used as a residence, a town hall, and a jail at different periods. §

In 1516 Katherine Read bequeathed "three shillings and fourpence" for the repairing of the church.

In July, 1935, with the kind permission of Captain Barne, I proceeded to carry out excavations in the monastery field.

The work then carried out was of the nature of an investigation to ascertain how much of the present ruins are part of the original convent, and the extent of the foundations of the demolished buildings, if any remained.

Several small trenches were dug near the east, west, and south walls of the ruin, and the foundation appeared to be from a foot to nine inches below the surface, on a very insecure footing of loose sand. It must therefore be very doubtful whether a large building was supported by these walls. On examining the north wall (shewn in the accompanying photograph, fig. 1) in a similar manner, a thick, substantial footing, some eighteen inches below the surface, was found, the wall being raised on large blocks of sandstone and huge beach boulders. Several off-shoots of the foundation in a northerly direction were noticed. This wall is built primarily of dressed flint, but has been extensively patched with beach pebble and modern bricks. Six of the windows in this wall are of dressed stone, have pointed arches, and have contained tracery. At the west end of this north wall is a dressed stone door jamb.

Acting on the valuable information given by a Mr. Arnold in Dunwich, that he had, some years ago, struck a hard stone or cement foundation about thirty feet east of the east wall of the ruin, a trial hole was dug on the line of a post-fence (the erecting of which had necessitated Mr. Arnold's digging).

At about one foot from the surface a solid foundation faced with brick, and filled with brick and rubble was encountered. It was of the shape of a T with a short, thick horizontal stroke, the vertical stroke being reinforced on each side with a dressed stone coping, the position of which, and of a chamfered dressed stone coin, will be seen on reference to the plan. It was considered at the time, and the opinion has since been strengthened, that it was the base of a brick buttress, pierced with an arch, to allow of a passage way along the area in which this and the companion buttresses stood.

§ Vide Suckling's Hist. Dunwich.

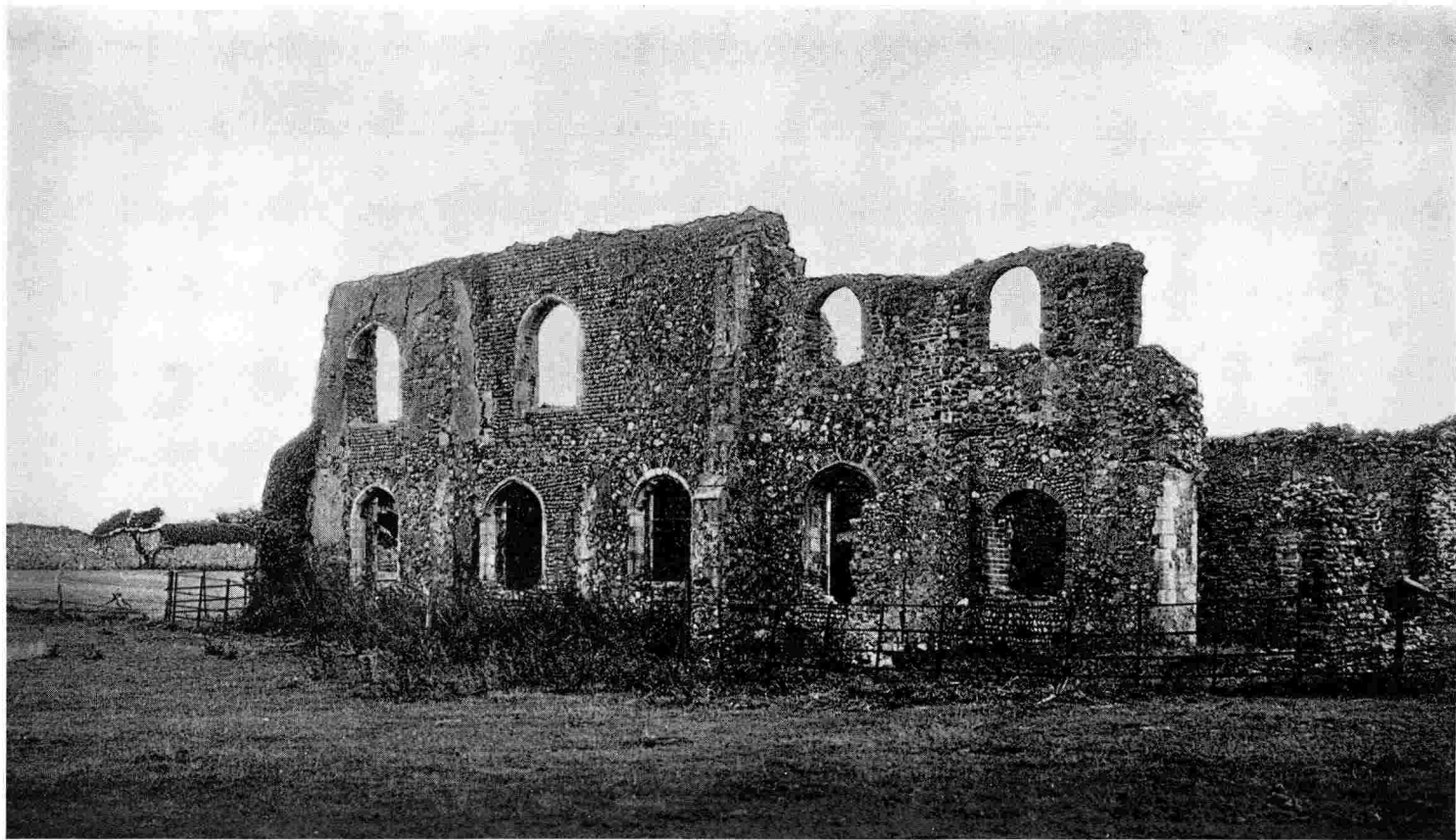


Fig. 1. Ruins of Grey Friars Monastery, Dunwich, North Wall. Note carved gargoyle over second window, top row.



Fig. 2 Foundation of third brick buttress shewing stone-paved area, from the south east.



Fig 3. Some of the dressed stone work from the area to the north of the third buttress. Sections of drip moulding, mullion transoms, and window bead moulding are included.

To the south, this base ended in a broken surface, and the length could not be determined. The surface of the brickwork was found to be faced with soft, white cement, which had crumbled off in places to expose long, thin, Dutch bricks of compact, sandy clay. The photograph (fig. 2) shews the base of the buttress, and was taken from the south east. It shews the exposed brickwork of the foundation, the black slabs which paved the passage through the arch in the buttress, and at the bottom centre of the picture, a brick paving which sloped towards the south and ended at a drainage channel of beach pebble embedded in loose sand.

To the west of the buttress the paving had been torn up, but on the sand thus exposed were found two layers of bright red, sandy roofing tiles, lying just as they had fallen from the roof, and all cracked. On these were several chips of stained window glass in a very decomposed condition, with the lead in which it was set. It appeared to be of late fourteenth to early fifteenth century type, not being cut with a diamond, but flaked by pressure at the edges. To the north of the buttress a very large quantity of tracery and dressed stone was uncovered, a selection of which is shewn in the accompanying photograph (fig. 3). Several chips of stained glass were found actually remaining in the grooves of some of the window heads, cemented in with mortar.

Large detached masses of brick walling were found in clearing the trench, faced with cement and lime-whitened.

At this point work was stopped for the season.

SECOND REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT GREY FRIARS
MONASTERY, DUNWICH.

AUGUST, 1936.

In order to ascertain the nature of the building to which belonged the buttress uncovered last year, a trench, I (see plan, fig. 4), was driven northwards. A rubble wall 23 inches thick was encountered between which and the inner face of the buttress was laid a pavement of a soft, fine-grained stone with a black coating. It was expected that a floor, either of tile or brick, would be found to the north side of the wall, but no trace was seen of such a floor. A trial trench was sunk through the rubble until a stratum of clay with sand was struck, on digging down through this for some five feet, work was just about to be abandoned when a layer of white, very thin cement was encountered, which layer appeared to extend evenly all over the area inside the wall. No rubble or mortar were on or within three feet of this layer, so that the possibility that it was the bedding of a tile floor (from which the tiles had been removed) is very remote.

At II (see plan) the face of another buttress, similar to the one exposed, was found. It appeared to be in better condition. Several sections of $\frac{3}{4}$ -round pillaring came from this hole. The paving and brick floor had been stripped up here.

At III a trench was dug out to meet the other buttress in that direction. It was found that only a single course of bricks remained to mark the position of it.

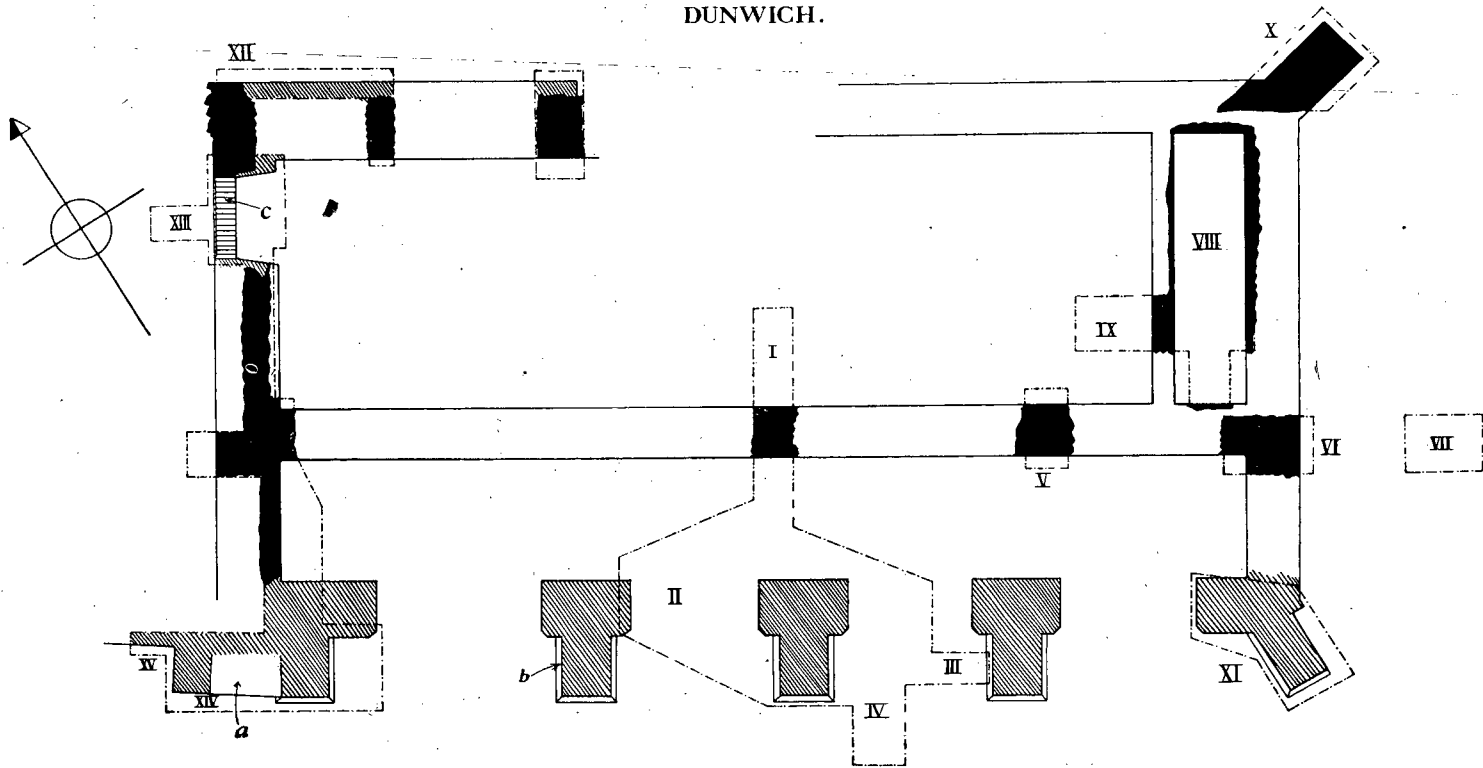
At IV a small tunnel was driven southwards without anything being encountered. The pavement, of cobbles set in loose earth at this point, still sloping down. A trench was dug some three feet out in the field to the south of IV and rubble in large quantities prevailed.

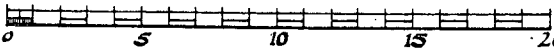
Trench V was dug to aid the locating of the rubble wall, as were trenches VI and VII. At trench VII no sign of buildings was met with.

At trench VI the wall was found to end and to give off two arms north and south. The southern one presumably the retaining wall at the end of the area in which stood the buttresses. The eastern side of the wall in VI was the outside and the natural earth came nearly up to the top of the foundation, and contained sherds of fourteenth and fifteenth century pottery with mortar droppings.

Trench VIII was dug so as to skirt the inner face of the east wall, and on widening it in a westerly direction, another wall, of flint rubble, was found, being a partition wall of $10\frac{1}{2}$ ins. thickness. Tunnels were driven north and south and the space proved to be an oblong chamber

GREY FRIARS
DUNWICH.



SCALE  OF FEET.

with no visible entrance remaining. A trodden clay stratum was present as in trench I and some three feet below it a cement layer. On the clay were numerous bones of the chicken, cow, sheep, etc., and plain window glass fragments. These objects were embedded in a stratum of ashes about a foot thick with much charcoal. Lumps of freestone had been calcined to lime which remained round the core of unburnt stone. A section of window transom was burnt and firmly embedded in lime thus formed, which had set hard round the section. The flints in the face of the inside of the east wall were also calcined. The bones and objects found in the stratum were untouched by fire.

A branch trench No. IX was made and sunk down to clay level without encountering flooring. The lower cement layer was present, and was thicker than hitherto. Several much mutilated portions of a large E.E. window were noticed, with part of a floortile. These occurred in the rubble filling.

Trench X located the north east corner of the building in the form of a corner buttress of flint rubble. No freestone corners or coping were noticed. The walls in this trench were found to be in a very mutilated condition. Outside this north wall was natural earth without much rubble, and a trial hole some twelve feet northwards shewed undisturbed ground.

The trench numbered XI on the plan was sunk in line with the previous buttresses, and the corresponding south east corner buttress found, being similar in construction to those seen in trench II, but having the narrow part at a south east angle. There being no area to the east, no coping was necessary on the east side of the projection. It is probable that the wall connecting the main building with this buttress is contemporary, and is of brick, as are the southern buttresses. It is quite near the surface and has suffered by exposure at some period.

Trench XII was dug as a cross cut on the line of the north wall, and brought to light a thicker wall faced with brick and square tiles on the outside, where was also a trodden lime floor, sloping upwards to the east. The brick facing was burnt bright red, together with the mortar between, and the whole had the appearance of a flue. It was not thoroughly investigated. The western end of this wall was not located. A long trench was carried off at right angles to this wall and was found to follow a loose, rubble wall, possibly the west end of the building. At 3-ft. 7-ins. from the facing of the burnt wall a brick step neatly built, with an exterior chamfer on the sill and jambs, was found, the main wall being splayed off on the inside, where it was faced with brick and cobbles. A small trench at XIII shewed that there was natural earth at about three feet, with a stratum of earth containing brick and rubbish overlaying it, probably to form a pathway.

The trench was continued southwards and the end of the main south wall of the building found abutting on to the west wall. The

west retaining wall of the area was then followed up, and the west end of the area investigated, with the result that a double layer of red, sandy, roofing tiles was discovered as they had fallen from the sloping roof. The paving slabs had been stripped up previously.

On carrying the trench southwards to XIV on plan a very thick mass of brickwork was found, in which could be seen the original stone-cornered buttress embedded in a more roughly constructed secondary buttress which embodies a brick slope, faced with white cement. This later and clumsier addition has been constructed out of alignment with the older building. Work was brought to a close at this point and it is a matter for speculation as to what the massive structure is. The trench XV shewed that the brick and rubble wall continued in a westerly direction for an unknown distance. A hole was found quarried out of the top of the massive foundation, and is of doubtful origin. It may have been the work of some "mediaeval treasure seekers" attracted by the dome-shaped appearance of the buttress.

The trench, No. XIV, has been left open owing to the interest of the peculiar structure.

SUMMARY.

No professional opinion has yet been obtained on the remains, and no definite conclusions are intended to be stated here. Facts learnt from practical investigation are carefully, and as accurately as possible, set down in this report, with suggestions for an explanation that came to the writer's mind.

1. The foundations opened can apparently be placed under two periods; that in which pure flint rubble and freestone were used, and that in which the one type of early Dutch brick was incorporated. From the small part of the building investigated it would seem that the earlier building was that bounded by the thick rubble walls (marked black in plan) to which at one or more later dates the area, buttresses, and an extension on the west end, with the western door, were added. The north east buttress was with little doubt part of the original edifice, and a similar one probably existed at the south east corner found in trench XI, where incidentally a ragged projection of the footing of the wall tended to support this view. The addition found in trenches XIV and XV was of later date still than the buttresses, and is quite roughly built, some parts being out of square. The untraced wall running westwards is of brick with cobbles. This type of masonry is to be seen in precisely the same form in the west wall of the ruinous remains above ground, also at Mettingham Castle to an extensive degree, and in the chapel ruin at South Elmham Hall, both in the county.

2. In his plan of ancient Dunwich, Aggas shews extensive buildings near or on the site of the present ruin, and in particular an eastern wing directly in line with All Saints Church. Now the foundation

excavated by the writer covers a site which corresponds fairly closely with that of this wing. The west end is joined to the main building in his plan, which main building presumably is represented by the present foreshortened ruin. On Aggas' plan a large wing is seen projecting northwards. In sinking a trial hole some ten yards north of the present ruins, hard rubble work was encountered, but not investigated owing to the proximity of a cricket pitch. This rubble may indicate the position of this north wing.

3. As to the use to which the building investigated was put, finds have been so few and of such an unspecialized character that this question is difficult to answer. The stained window glass points to it having been no common domestic quarters, but the investigations seem to shew that it had a boarded floor, and hence it was probably not a chapel. A building which does fit these requirements, however, is the refectory.

Aggas marks a tower with no appendage in the north east corner of the field. This may have been all that was left of the church at the time (c. 1580). This area was not investigated at all.

KEY TO THE PLAN.

- a. Sloping wall of 15th to 16th century brickwork, faced with white cement.
- b. Coping of dressed freestone.
- c. Step of western door, formed of red bricks, each measuring 10-in. by 4½-in. by 2-in., chamfered on the outside edge.

The chain line indicates roughly the position of the trenches excavated.

The Roman figures are the numbers of the trenches, or portions of a trench, mentioned in the text.

Walls marked in black signify that they are here of rubble.

Shaded areas represent brick walls.

Walls left white are those uninvestigated and their position is purely conjectural.

The second and fourth buttresses are shaded although they were not fully uncovered by excavation. Sufficient evidence was obtained by probing, however, for them to be completed on the plan.