

# THE EASTERN ARM OF THE ABBEY CHURCH AT BURY ST. EDMUNDS

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When the Borough of Bury St. Edmunds placed the eastern parts of the site of the abbey in the guardianship of the Ministry of Public Building & Works in 1955 the area of the abbey church was covered by a considerable depth of overburden derived from the destruction of the abbey, and by accumulated soil supporting bushes and full grown trees. The main lines of the plan of the abbey church had long been known from partial excavations, but the visible remains were mostly scattered crags of flint corework protruding above the overburden and barely intelligible even to the most practised eye.

The earlier excavations, carried out sporadically from the eighteenth century into the twentieth century, have been conveniently listed in Mr. A. B. Whittingham's study of the abbey,<sup>1</sup> and it is a remarkable tribute that complete excavation of the eastern arm of the church since 1955, whilst adding much to our knowledge of detail, has in no way impaired the validity of that penetrating study.

The present account is confined to a general review of the Ministry's excavations and an assessment of the significance of the plan revealed by them. A more detailed architectural description and dated plan will eventually be provided in the Ministry's guide book to the abbey by Mr. Whittingham.

## THE EXCAVATIONS OF 1957-1964

The Ministry's excavations have so far been restricted to exploring the transepts, crossing, eastern chapels and crypt of the church down to their various floor levels, and the standing masonry above those levels has been fully consolidated.<sup>2</sup> Trial sections were first excavated, after which the area of the church was excavated on a grid pattern in an order that permitted continuous sections to be watched as a control on any significant variations in the post-dissolution overburden, the position of fallen masonry being

<sup>1</sup> A. B. Whittingham, 'Bury St. Edmunds Abbey', *Archaeological Journal*, cviii, 1951, pp. 168-87.

<sup>2</sup> The excavations were directed by Mr. A. D. Saunders and Dr. M. W. Thompson of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments; the Ancient Monuments Architects in charge of the work successively were Mr. B. L. Burge, Mr. P. A. Faulkner and Mr. R. L. Connelly; the Area Superintendent of Works throughout was Mr. E. A. Bowen, and the Chargehand was Mr. F. A. Webb.

recorded before it was removed. The general plan (Fig. 33) distinguishes between masonry visible before and after excavation and marks the position of fallen masonry. In the crypt, only the bottom layer of fallen masonry is shown on the plan, for here masses of stonework lay over one another to a considerable depth and were often of great size, some weighing several tons. Although the majority were featureless corework, some were found to contain important fragments of stonework re-used from earlier structures, and they were therefore wholly dismantled and the re-used stonework within them was recorded and preserved.

Excavation proceeded continuously for seven years. The first trial sections in the north transept were begun in May 1957, followed by full excavation. Work on the crossing and the south transept started in July 1958 and the whole area of the cross-arm had been completely excavated by June 1959. Meanwhile, work was started on the crypt, the Lady Chapel, and the Chapel of St. Botolph, all of which were excavated between March 1959 and May 1964.

The average depth of overburden was 5 ft. in the crossing and transepts, increasing to 14 ft. in the crypt. This overburden proved to have been so extensively disturbed by recorded and unrecorded excavation in the past that it provided little information of real significance. Two sample sections are here published (Fig. 34). Below the layer of humus, the overburden consisted of rubble from the destroyed walls mixed with buff mortar and loose flints and interspersed with layers of dark soil from earlier digging.

The destructive activity immediately following the dissolution was illustrated by the nature of the great masses of masonry that had fallen from the higher parts of the church. Practically all these had been systematically stripped of their dressed stonework, even from the under surfaces, and as the very great weight of some of the masses makes it highly unlikely that they have ever been moved it may be inferred that much of the ashlar was robbed from scaffolding before the high walls of the church collapsed or were felled. Two fragments of collapsed stonework retained a certain amount of detail, and these have been preserved lying in the positions in which they were found.

The only other indication of dissolution activity was the survival of thin patches of yellow sand here and there just above the medieval floor levels, containing a few minute fragments of window glass and traces of burned daub, and probably representing a layer of breakers' debris from the ransacking of the church.

The floor surfaces had been entirely removed except for a small area of stone flags, badly shattered but each originally about 1 ft. 3 ins. square, in a corner of the south transept chapel.

The mortar beds of two distinct floors were encountered in places, but so sporadically that their relationship could only be

studied in very small areas that may not be representative of the whole transept. The lower floor was of mortar varying in colour from yellow-buff to light brown, unevenly mixed with sand and gravel and varying in consistency. It was bedded on a layer of dark brown gravel and near the centre of the north transept was covered by a thin smear of black silt. Immediately above this the upper floor of chalky white mortar was mixed with small flints and pieces of broken tile. Neither of these mortar beds was primary, for the dark gravel bottoming of the lower one contained bone, charcoal, small fragments of dressed stone and, west of the base of the northernmost pier of the north transept arcade, a silver penny issued *c.* 1307 but current during the rest of the fourteenth century.

Both entrances from the transepts to the crypt were found between the first pair of piers north and south of the eastern piers of the crossing. The southern entrance has been consolidated and left exposed in the condition in which it was found.

The northern entrance proved to have decorated wallplaster on its north and south walls. The pattern is a diaper of diamonds outlined in double black lines on a yellow ground, each diamond containing a pointed quatrefoil counterchanged in red and white. The outline of the steps down to the crypt is marked on the plaster by a white line, showing 1 ft. 6 in. treads and 6 in. risers. This northern entrance had been deliberately sealed before the dissolution with a filling of greenish clay and chalk covered in turn by a layer of white mortar and yellow sand, a thin layer of dark brown sand, and the white mortar bed of the transept floor. The entrance has been backfilled to preserve the wallplaster, and is no longer visible.

Within the crypt itself there were traces of white wallplaster decorated with false-masonry in thin red and black lines. Indications of both western responds and of nine out of the fourteen main piers of the crypt were found, but the ten lesser piers had vanished without trace although the line of their responds can be seen on the west wall. The three chapels of the crypt ambulatory were found to be in an encouraging state of preservation, particularly the south-eastern one which retains its altar and other ritual arrangements. Despite the Borough's addition of a strip of land to the guardianship area in 1964, the east end of the axial chapel was not reached, for it was appreciably longer than its neighbours and lies beneath the modern tennis courts.

North of the crypt the great Lady Chapel built in 1275 by Abbot Simon de Luton has been exposed. It is three bays long and two bays wide, and near the centre of its north side a grave has been found that can be attributed to Prior Thomas Gosford. In this area the excavations have also added a well, a cistern and other details

BURY ST. EDMUND'S ABBEY CHURCH

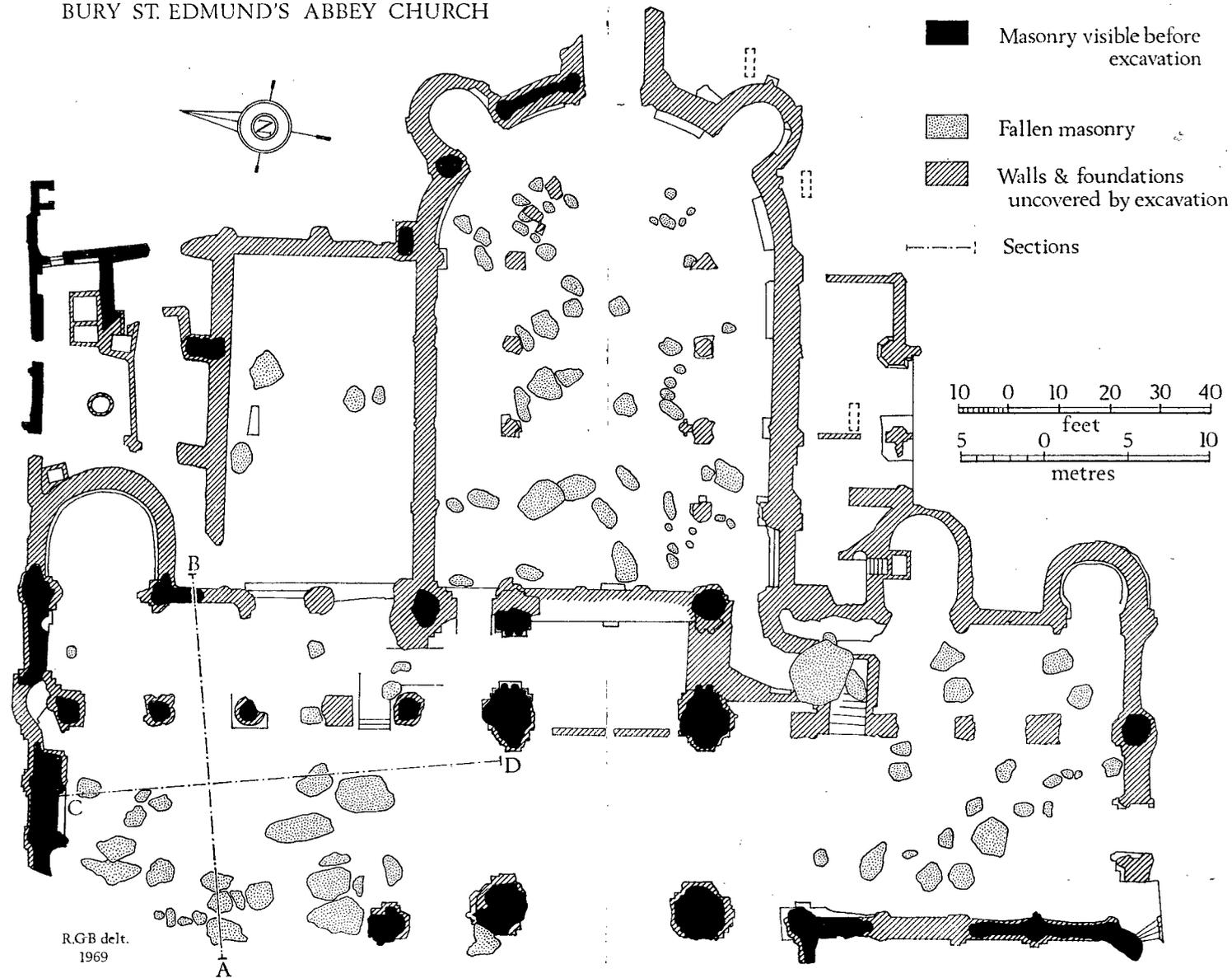


FIG. 33.

to the plan of the vestries lying between the Lady Chapel and the Trayle.

South of the crypt the Chapel of St. Botolph built between 1279 and 1301 by Abbot John de Norwold is represented by the remains of its vaulted undercroft. It is three bays long and one bay wide and is appreciably smaller than the Lady Chapel, its west wall abutting the inner apsidal chapel of the south transept. The central bay of the undercroft was open to the south, but the presence of a house prevents the exploration of the projecting feature that must have existed here. One grave was found in the undercroft and two more farther east near the outside wall of the south-east ambulatory chapel. The space between the undercroft of St. Botolph's Chapel and the south transept has a small oven, probably for the preparation of eucharistic wafers, with a steep flight of steps up into the inner apsidal chapel of the transept.

The most significant of the smaller finds from the excavation of the church were the fragments of re-used stone found in the fallen corework. The majority of these came from corework found collapsed into the crypt, and their associations suggest that they were used in the reconstruction of the upper parts of the church after the great fire of 1465. They demand more detailed study and publication, but it may be said here that they include fragments of marble panels decorated in relief with stiff-leaf foliage of high quality, and a number of pre-conquest baluster shafts that may well have belonged originally to the 'rotunde chapel' of St. Edmund, built between 1021 and 1032. This chapel is known to have been pulled down to make way for the Lady Chapel, and excavation has shown that the ground level north of the presbytery was raised at the same time, blocking the northern windows of the crypt. As excavation has in general been restricted to removing overburden from the later medieval floor levels of the church, there is a heartening prospect that deeper excavation in this area may still reveal the remains of this rare example of a centrally-planned chapel of the time of Cnut.

#### THE PLAN OF THE EASTERN ARM

The abbey church at Bury was one of the greater Romanesque churches of western Europe, and now that excavation has uncovered the whole of its transepts and presbytery the significance of their plan calls for a brief assessment.

The new church was begun by Abbot Baldwin about 1081 and its presbytery was completed by 1095 on a fully developed apse and ambulatory plan with radiating chapels. The ancestry of this plan

can be traced back to the middle of the tenth century in France<sup>3</sup> and Baldwin himself would long have been familiar with it from his native Chartres where it had been used *c.* 1020–1037.<sup>4</sup> Its characteristic feature is the ambulatory that provides a circulation route round the main eastern apse and gives easy access to projecting chapels, and it was therefore particularly suitable to churches that possessed important relics and consequently attracted pilgrims in large enough numbers to create a traffic problem within the church.<sup>5</sup> In Normandy it had already been used at Mont-Saint-Michel *c.* 1023–1048,<sup>6</sup> at Rouen *c.* 1030–1063<sup>7</sup> and at Jumièges *c.* 1037–1067.<sup>8</sup> Nor was Bury the first example of its use in England for it was being employed at Battle Abbey *c.* 1071–1094<sup>9</sup> and at St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury *c.* 1073–1094.<sup>10</sup> Bury and Canterbury, each with an apse of seven bays and a presbytery of four bays, represented the most ambitious use of the plan up to that time, presbyteries on the continent being usually no more than three bays long, and Bury itself had greater length and a more highly developed axial chapel than Canterbury. It is clear that Abbot Baldwin had in mind the problems of circulation caused by his abbey's possession of the shrines of St. Botolph, St. Thomas, St. Jurmin, and especially St. Edmund.

It can be assumed that Baldwin intended his church to have the type of Anglo-Norman transept then most commonly in use, a simple rectangle with one or more apsidal chapels projecting from its east side, for the design of his presbytery makes no provision for access to aisled transepts. But when work was resumed at Bury *c.* 1107–1120 a fifth bay was added to the western end of the presbytery and the main span of the church was increased. This fifth bay was designed to give access to aisled transepts, each of which was built in five bays giving the church the largest cross-arm of its time in the country, measuring no less than 226 ft. across externally.

<sup>3</sup> H. du Ranquet, 'Fouilles du chevet de la cathédrale de Clermont', *Bulletin Monumental*, 1909, p. 311; for the dating see M. Aubert's additions to R. de Lasteyrie, *L'architecture religieuse en France à l'époque romane*, p. 765, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., 1929.

<sup>4</sup> René Merlet, 'La cathédrale de Chartres', *Petites Monographies*, 1926.

<sup>5</sup> Well expressed by H. Focillon, *Art d'Occident*, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., 1947, p. 62: 'Le plan des églises de pèlerinage semble dessiné par les foules immenses qui les parcourent, par l'ordre de leur marche et leurs stations, par leurs points d'arrêt et leur écoulement'.

<sup>6</sup> J. Vallery-Radot, 'La crypte du choeur roman de l'abbatiale du Mont-Saint-Michel', *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France, séance du 31 mars 1965*, pp. 70–77.

<sup>7</sup> G. Lanfry, 'La crypte romane de l'onzième siècle de la cathédrale de Rouen', *Bulletin Monumental*, 1936, pp. 181–201.

<sup>8</sup> G. Lanfry, 'Fouilles et découvertes à Jumièges, le déambulatoire de l'église romane', *Bulletin Monumental*, 1928, pp. 107–137.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria County History, *Sussex*, ix, 1937, pp. 102–5.

<sup>10</sup> Sir A. W. Clapham, *St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury*, H.M.S.O., 1955.

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NORTH TRANSEPT, sections through overburden.

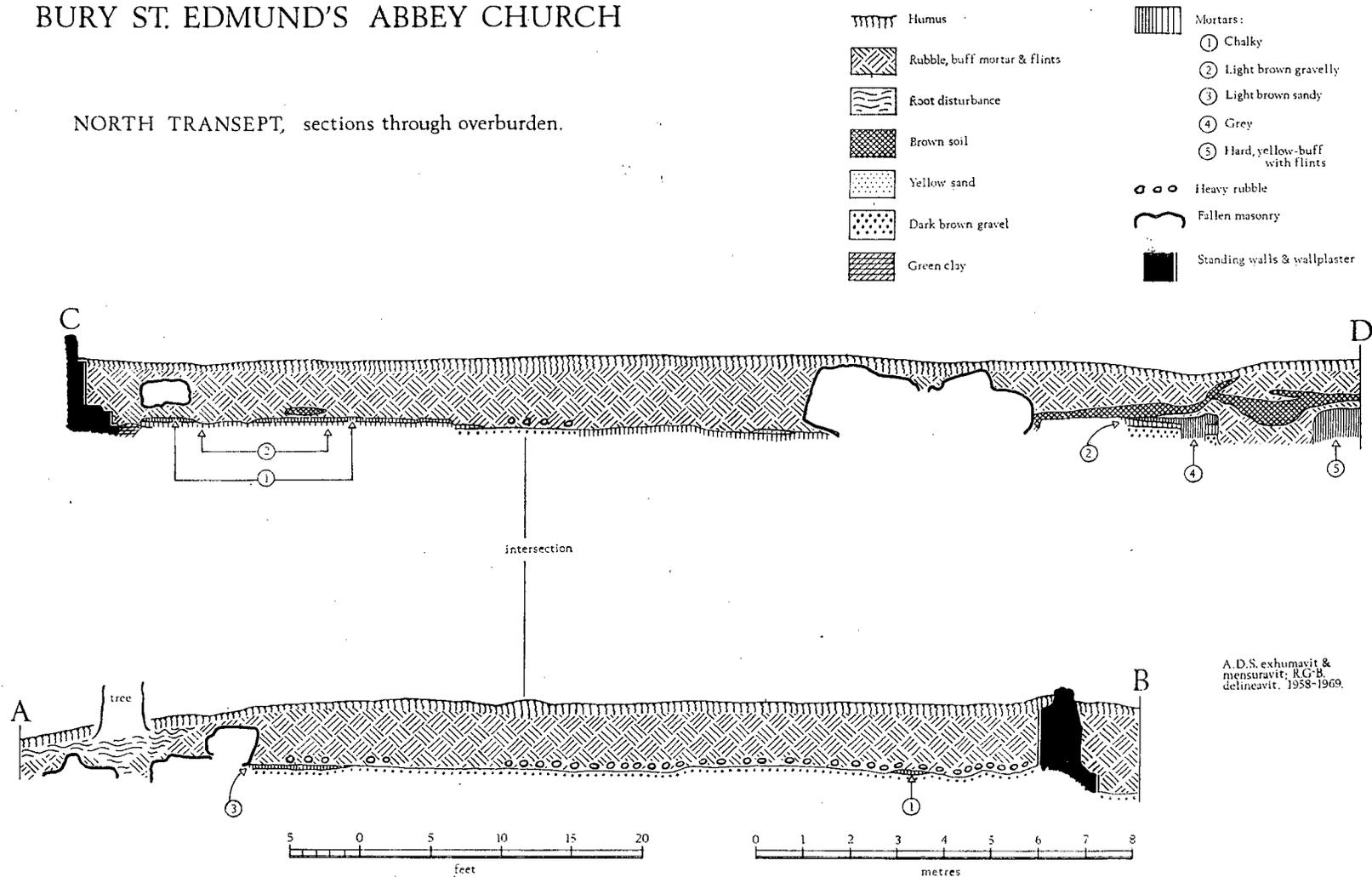


FIG. 34.

Some idea of its prodigious scale can be gained by comparing it with a Romanesque monastic church of respectable size like Castle Acre Priory, the whole length of which would have fitted comfortably inside the Bury transepts.

Impressive as their size may be, it is a less important feature of the Bury transepts than their plan. Romanesque transepts with single (Durham and Peterborough) or double aisles (Winchester and Ely) are not uncommon in England. Bury only had eastern aisles, but it also had two apsidal chapels projecting from each aisle and not from the body of the transept. It is a plan found nowhere else in Britain and only in a few major continental Romanesque churches.

The earliest appearance of this plan is perhaps at Sainte-Croix d'Orleans<sup>11</sup> and at Saint-Martin de Tours<sup>12</sup> in the last years of the tenth century and the first years of the eleventh. During the course of the eleventh century and into the earlier part of the twelfth there followed Saint-Remi de Reims,<sup>13</sup> Sainte-Foi de Conques,<sup>14</sup> Saint-Martial de Limoges,<sup>15</sup> Saint-Sernin de Toulouse<sup>16</sup> and Santiago de Compostela.<sup>17</sup> Bury rivalled the transepts of these churches in scale but not in elaboration, for the continental examples had western as well as eastern aisles<sup>18</sup> and most of them had return aisles or galleries across the ends of the transepts, giving continuous circulation at tribune level. The real significance of these churches and of Bury as well is the relationship between the eastern aisles of the transepts and their chapels, for this represents an extension into the cross-arm of a relationship already existing in the apse and ambulatory with its radiating chapels—a relationship dictated by the need to provide for the circulation of crowds of pilgrims flocking to the major shrines that each of these

<sup>11</sup> G. Chenesseau, 'Les fouilles de la cathédrale d'Orléans', *Bulletin Monumental*, 1938, pp. 72–94.

<sup>12</sup> F. Lesueur, 'Saint-Martin de Tours et les origines de l'art roman', *Bulletin Monumental*, 1949, pp. 7–84.

<sup>13</sup> Discussion of the dating in Lesueur, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–4; see also Demaison, 'Saint-Remi de Reims', *Congrès archéologique, Reims*, I, 1911, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> F. Lesueur, 'Conques II', *Bulletin Monumental*, 1966, pp. 259–65.

<sup>15</sup> Lasteyrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 282, 448.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>17</sup> V. Lampérez y Romea, 'Historia de la arquitectura cristiana española', II, 1930, pp. 157–66; for the excavations distinguishing the work done c. 1075–1080 for Bishop Diego Peláez from the western parts of the presbytery and transepts built c. 1100–1128 for Bishop Diego Gelmírez see René Louis, 'Fouilles exécutées dans la cathédrale Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle par Don Manuel Chamoso Lamas', *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 1954–5, pp. 152–3.

<sup>18</sup> The first church at Conques appears to have been designed without western aisles to the transepts, but they were provided in an early twelfth-century remodelling.

churches possessed, not least of which was the shrine of St. Edmund, King of the East Angles.

Even in its present half-excavated state therefore the abbey church at Bury can be seen to be remarkable on three counts. First is its exceptional size, with an apse and ambulatory of seven bays, a presbytery of five bays, transepts each of five bays, a nave of twelve bays and a western transept beyond it, giving a total length of more than 500 ft. Second, clarified by the recent excavations, are transepts of a type unique in Britain and connected only with a handful of the greater pilgrimage churches of western Christendom. Third is its western transept, the largest and most highly developed in this country, the articulation of which is successfully obscured by the houses built into its ruins.