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THE VANISHING HOUSES OF KENT

3. LEEDS PRIORY GATE HOUSE

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OUTSIDE the main entrance to the site of Leeds Priory, near Maidstone, stands an attractive house of stone, timber and plaster known as the Old Manor House. This name is, of course a misnomer, as the manor house of Leeds is, and always has been Leeds Castle, the present owner of which, the Hon. Lady Baillie still owns most of Leeds village including the site under discussion. It was indeed an early Lord of this manor, Robert de Crevecoeur who in A.D. 1119 gave land to the Black Canons of St. Augustines for the purpose of founding a priory there.

Before the Dissolution, the main gateway of such a religious establishment was a scene of great activity. A throng of poor persons waited patiently for the daily dole of food from the refectory, and there was a constant coming and going of travellers, pilgrims and merchants who sought food or shelter. As the popularity of pilgrimages increased, and especially following the emancipation of the yeoman classes after the Black Death of 1349, traffic along the tracks and roads leading to Canterbury and the coast increased to enormous proportions. This may be seen in studying, for example the great medieval hostels in Canterbury—some eight in all, of which part of the famous 'Checker'¹ inn, built between 1392 and 1394 at a cost of £867 14s. 4d., the 'White Bole', and others remain. On a smaller scale, the growth of a cluster of buildings outside the gates of such religious institutions as the Archbishopal Palace at Charing, and Leeds Priory, tells the same story.

The old 'Manor House' in Lower Street, Leeds village, is the only surviving building of such a group. A section of it is stone, and this, marked A on the plan (Fig. 1) is the oldest part, being the lower half of a Norman type 'hall-and-cellar' house measuring 13 ft. by 21 ft. 6 ins. One or two odd corbels which now support nothing, suggest that the original upper part was of timber and plaster. The front of the stone part has an interesting window of two small lights with trefoil heads, while at the side, facing the Priory entrance, is a smaller blocked window, 1 ft. 4 ins. wide by 2 ft. 6 ins. high. Locally this is claimed

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, XXIX, 62.

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to be the 'alms' window, a similar one to which may be found close to the main entrance of the Priory in New Romney and elsewhere. The one at Leeds is rebated inside for a shutter, and it was probably here that visitors knocked to speak to the priest-warden, or gate keeper.

The main timbered part of the 'Old Manor' marked D, and the existing solar above the stone part were built towards the middle of the fifteenth century, perhaps by John Surrynden, who was Prior for

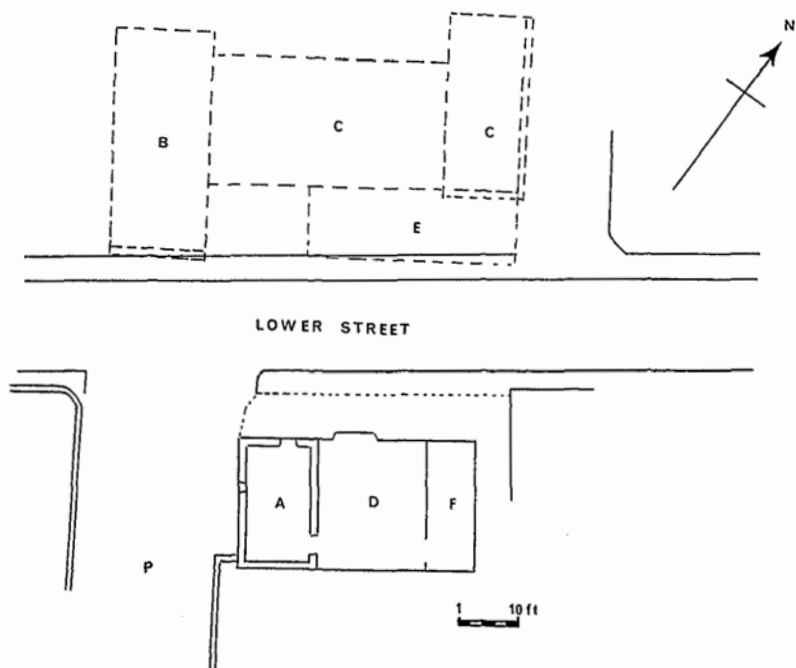


FIG. 1.

nearly forty years, between 1409 and 1447. This part is well worth studying, both inside and out for the richness of its detail. The crown-post has a carved capital and base, and the wall-plates, the tie-beams and the collar purlin are all moulded.

Opposite the 'Old Manor', on the other side of Lower Street is a patch of grass with a few odd bits of brick and stone showing in the ground. This marks the position of a further group of buildings which was demolished during the summer of 1960. These, as they stood, presented a range of dilapidated old buildings of brick, tiles, and plaster, which had been converted into four cottages in the eighteenth century, one having an old shop front. Referring again to our plan, it was then

discovered that the part marked B had been originally a small, complete hall house with a single end jetty, and of a very early type. The part C C was a much larger timbered hall and solar wing built on to B, as double posts between the two sections proved. The part E was an eighteenth century brick addition, with the old shop front.

A closer examination of all these buildings made it fairly certain that B, C and D had been consecutive additions to the original small stone building A, doubtlessly dictated by the ever growing volume of travellers calling at the Priory.

The small building B shown in Plate I and as an axial section in the drawing (Fig. 2) is of particular interest. It was certainly the oldest timber building of the group, and is believed to have been a familiar type of rest house provided by the Church between 1250 and 1350, preceding the well known 'Wealden' house which was erected in such numbers between 1380 and 1485 in Kent and parts of counties adjoining.

Examples of this small house with the single end jetty can still be seen in such places as Sandwich, Barham, Bethersden, Shadoxhurst, and Throwley, and others have been demolished at Etchinghill, Upper Deal, etc., all of them standing in a one-time strategic position. Note the central hall, open to the roof with a clay floor and central hearth, also the solar, reached by steep stairs with solid steps, this being the only upper room. For the technical, the 6 in. x 4 in. rafters were in pairs, notched on to the wall-plates, and halved and pegged at the ridge. Each pair of rafters was joined by a collar resting on a collar purlin which ran the length of the roof, but there was no crown-post.

The partition on each side of the hall was complete right up to the ridge in order to keep smoke out of the other rooms, and the two central pairs of rafters had been rebated to take a louvre, or smoke outlet.

The hall had a large unglazed window each side, while the solar and parlour each had one small window only, facing the roadway, the mortises here showing that they were fancy windows, probably with oak tracery though still unglazed, as each had a groove for a sliding shutter.

The very small room at the rear of the hall must have been a store as it had several stone steps leading down into it, and a very small window opening each side, up under the eaves.

The overall size of this house was 35 feet long by 16 feet wide.

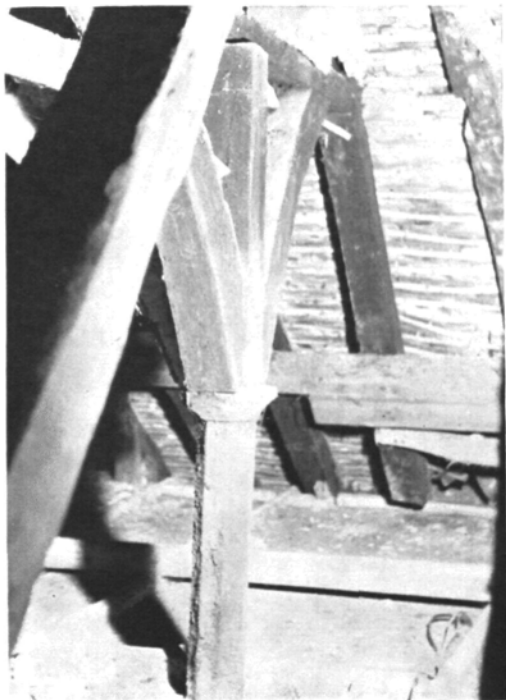
Next came the section marked C C on the plan, which was erected adjoining the east side of B on a larger scale, being 50 feet x 21 feet overall, and consisted of a large hall and a solar wing. The date of this part would appear to be sometime during the second half of the fourteenth century, corresponding with the great increase in pilgrimages during this time. An advance in building technique could in several



A. View of the building B from the Priory entrance.



B. The solar wing of C in course of demolition.



A. View inside roof of building C, showing the Crown-Post.



B. The range of buildings B and C prior to demolition.

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instances be observed, for example, the solar wing now had a dragon beam, and thus an overhang on two sides, also the roof had a crown post (or king post) though of simple design surmounted by four heavy curved braces. The roof timbers around this crown post were very heavily encrusted with black carbon.

It will be noticed that the addition of this 'T' shaped building to the earlier hall-house converted the whole into a Wealden type house,

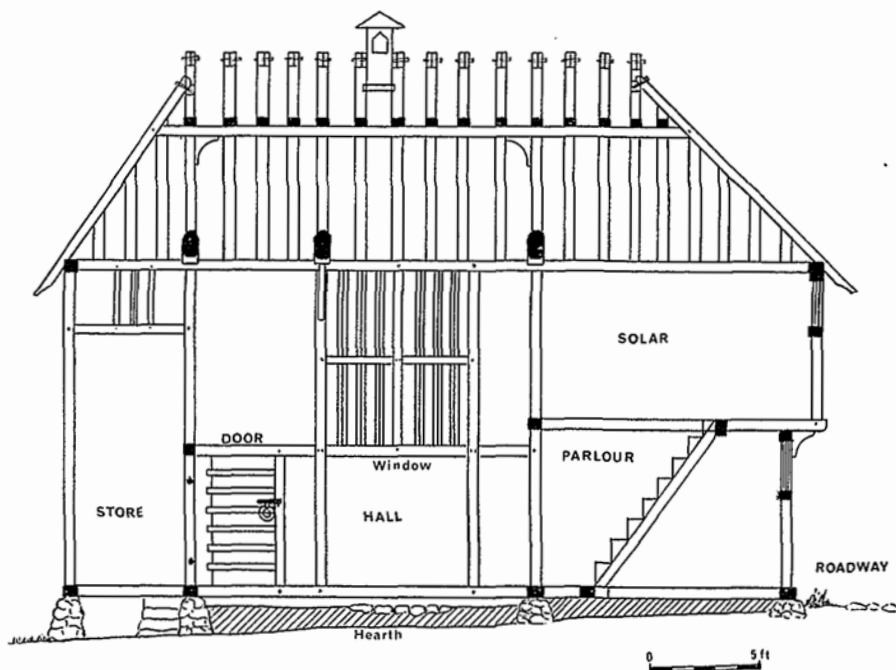


Fig. 2.

sometimes described as an 'H'-plan house which was becoming the vogue in the second half of the fourteenth century. Several such conversions have been observed, and where the roof and other parts can be examined closely, the two periods of building may be proved. One example is Pound Farm, at Newington near Folkestone, where the three periods of building seen at Leeds are incorporated into one house, including a fragment of a thirteenth century stone house with a blocked window similar to the 'alms' window at Leeds.

As is usually found, fireplaces had been added to the Leeds group during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The largest one was in the house marked C, between the old hall and solar, this had

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wide back-to-back fireplaces with plain chamfered beams, and incorporated some worked stone in its construction, obviously from buildings of the late Priory.

During the eighteenth century additions were made both to the front and the rear, and the range was converted into four small dwellings. Timberwork was covered with tiles or plaster, and the general appearance became very much as seen in Plate II B.

The remaining building, the 'Manor House' has already been mentioned. It was constructed in the fifteenth century when the Priory was at the height of its material prosperity, and is the finest of the group. At this period the establishment boasted a prior and twenty canons, and before it was closed in 1539 records show that its net income was £362 per annum.