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A PLAN AND  
ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION  
OF THE MEDIEVAL REMAINS  
OF DAVINGTON PRIORY

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'It is not to the credit of Kent archaeologists that this notable house is without historical plan and an adequate description, as much of the nunnery survives. The greater part of the early church is roofed and used for services, and the cloister and some of the surrounding buildings can be traced. A very little research would probably reveal much more, including the form of the east end of the church.'

This was written in 1954 concerning Davington Priory by the late F. C. Elliston-Erwood in a contribution to volume lix of *The South Eastern Naturalist and Antiquary* on the subject of 'The present State of Monastic Archaeology in Kent'. The present article is an attempt to remove this reproach, and is also intended to record the results of some excavations carried out in 1977.<sup>1</sup>

Almost all that remains above ground of the Priory founded for Benedictine nuns by Fulc de Newenham in 1153 is the twelfth-century nave with the attached west range now occupied as a private dwelling. In 1845 the place was acquired by the noted antiquary and artist, Thomas Willement, who set about restoring the church and house with typical Victorian thoroughness. Fortunately, he left notes and drawings describing the buildings before his re-ordering of the interior, and these are of value in attempting to make out the architectural development. I am grateful to the present owner, our Member Mr. Christopher Gibbs, for allowing me to use Willement's manuscript notes and also for permission to excavate in the garden to establish the layout of the destroyed parts of the Priory.

In endeavouring to elucidate the architectural history of the

<sup>1</sup> A brief history of the Priory is given in *The Victoria History of Kent*, ii (1926).

buildings after their nineteenth-century restoration, it is difficult to be certain of the true age of some portions of the fabric.<sup>2</sup> The accompanying plan (Fig. 1) is simplified, with many post-Dissolution additions omitted, and one cannot be certain that some of the features shown as medieval are not, in fact, Victorian replacements. Nevertheless, I am confident of the general accuracy, and the finer points still open to dispute may one day be settled by the appearance of new evidence.

### *The Church*

The twelfth-century nave is of a very austere architectural character, opening into the north aisle by an arcade of unmoulded and unchamfered semicircular arches resting on rectangular piers. Above is a clerestory of round-headed windows matched on the south where they are blocked by a post-Dissolution building on the site of the north walk of the cloister. The lower part of the east wall consists of the medieval rood screen with blocked pointed-arched openings at each end. Above this, the wall containing a triplet of lancet windows is Willement's, including the painted glass.

Originally, the west end possessed two towers, only the southern of which remains to its full height, and both open into the aisles by plain pointed arches, the south aisle being a single bay in length. There is no evidence that it was ever longer, and recent stripping of plaster from the south side of the wall for a distance of 15 ft. east of the doorway into the cloister has revealed no trace of blocked arcade openings. We are led to assume that the position of the cloister was already established before the south aisle was planned and that its eastward extension was prevented by this factor.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that at the time of the founding of the nunnery the nave was unaisled and that the aisles and western towers were additions made soon after. The plain piers and arches suggest piercings and the general irregularity of the layout supports this theory.

In the south wall is a plain round-headed doorway communicating with the cloister and splayed *externally* instead of in the more usual manner. Its simplicity contrasts with the very elaborate late-twelfth-century doorway at the west end. Mr. John Newman has observed that mouldings on the abaci of this doorway resemble those of the pier arcade,<sup>4</sup> and this argues in favour of their contemporaneity.

<sup>2</sup> This applies particularly to the south aisle of the nave and the north wall of the refectory.

<sup>3</sup> A similar arrangement obtained at Boxgrove Priory in Sussex.

<sup>4</sup> *The Buildings of England-N.E. and E. Kent* (1969), 267.

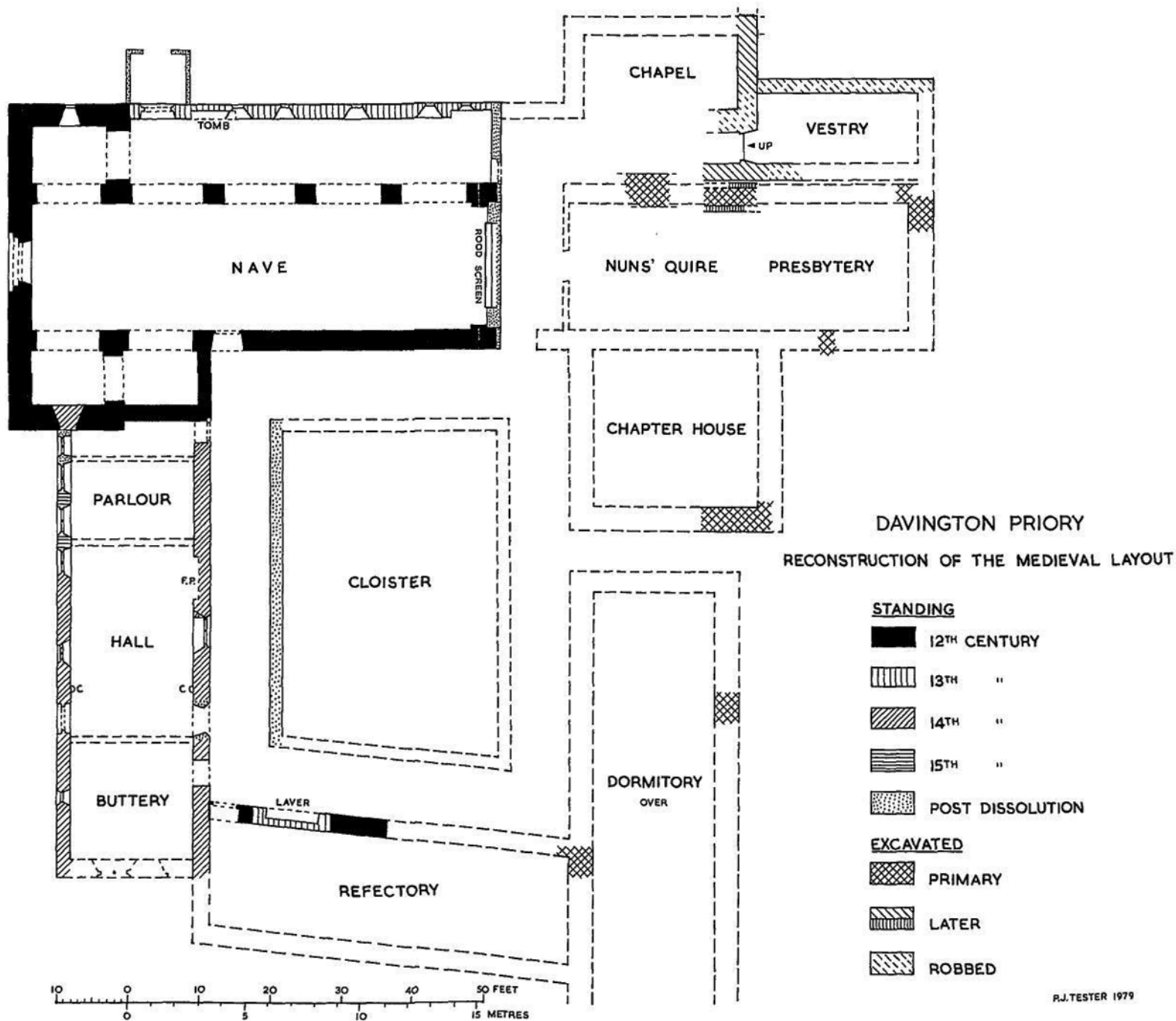


Fig. 1

Moreover, the pointed form of the tower arches towards the aisles favours a late date in the twelfth century rather than earlier.

The thin outer wall of the north aisle is of later construction and cannot be earlier than the thirteenth century. It contains five Early English lancet windows and its rubble walling can be seen externally to contrast in character with that of the north-west tower. There must have been an earlier aisle wall in this position, however, contemporary with the north arcade, and it is puzzling to know why it should have been replaced after so short an interval. The width of the tower arch would prevent the earlier aisle being more than a foot narrower than at present so that if the purpose of rebuilding was to provide more space the need for it must have been considered sufficiently pressing to justify the alteration. Perhaps it was connected with the establishment of a chapel in the aisle, for obviously the setting back of a length of the wall at the east end was to allow adequate accommodation for an altar and there is a piscina in the end wall towards the south. This end wall was rebuilt by Willement who left on record that it exactly reproduces its medieval predecessor and that the doorway and piscina were reset in their correct relative positions. The cill of the doorway, however, was raised on account of the burial vault he made for himself and his family beneath the floor of the modern vestry.

Willement was under the mistaken impression that the nuns worshipped in the nave while the laity used the eastern part of the church long since destroyed, and this has been repeated by later writers on the Priory.<sup>5</sup> The reverse is, of course, infinitely more probable as it would conform with the arrangement in the vast majority of medieval religious houses. Willement declared himself unable to find traces of the foundations of the eastern part, but some limited excavations directed by the present writer in 1977 produced enough evidence to allow a tentative restoration to be made.

One can assume that the twelfth-century eastern arm would be of the same width as the nave, and digging revealed the surviving lowest course of flint footings in several positions to confirm this. A footing of identical character marked the east wall towards its north end and from this the length of the presbytery may be deduced. On the north, we uncovered substantial remains of a wall lying north-south, containing pieces of plain roof-tile bedded into its ragstone construction and therefore unlikely to be earlier than the thirteenth century. Adjoining, a similar wall was found running east-west just outside the earlier footing and parallel to it. Only a short length survived as its eastern extension had been removed by post-Dissolution

<sup>5</sup> For example: C. V. Collier in his article on the Priory in *Arch. Cant.*, xxii (1897), 275-292. Elliston-Erwood, however, drew attention to this persistent error in his article in the *South Eastern Naturalist and Antiquary* referred to above.

building activity on the site. A cill and splayed jambs of a doorway occurred in the south end of the north-south wall and the structure into which it had led was represented by the clear outline of a rubble-filled trench from which the foundation of the north wall had been systematically robbed, the floor-level being 2 ft. 9 in. from the present surface. The eastern termination of the robber-trench coincided with the end of the presbytery so that its southward return could be assumed without further confirmation.

Such fragmentary evidence must, of course, be open to some uncertainty of interpretation, but it seems likely that it indicates the existence of a northern chapel with a vestry on its east side, as reconstructed in Fig. 1. The east-west wall outside the early footings may represent a widening of the quire and presbytery in the thirteenth century, probably as part of a general scheme of widening evidenced by the treatment of the north aisle of the nave previously described.

Upon part of the early footings were remains of two later thin low walls lying parallel east-west. Possibly they supported the platform on which the nuns' stalls were placed, and this explanation would accord with the widening suggested above, involving the destruction of the early side wall down to floor level.

Willement published a drawing of the outside of the east end of the nave as it was in 1845 before alteration.<sup>6</sup> It shows the springers of two destroyed arches—one in line with the north arcade and the other attached to the end of the south wall. While the former may be readily accepted as showing that the north arcade was at least one bay longer than at present, the other cannot be so easily explained. As already stated, there is no evidence of a south aisle ever having extended to that point, so there would be nothing for the arch of an arcade to open into except the cloister—a highly improbable arrangement. A possible solution is that the southern springer related to a doorway from the cloister at a point where an entrance into the area east of the rood screen was almost invariably located in monastic churches. A certain degree of artistic licence may account for depicting the two broken arches as though both were related to extensions of arcades and, if the suggested doorway was similar to that remaining to the west, with a plain semicircular arch, the misapprehension is understandable. In any case, there would have been an interval between the rood screen and the screen marking the western limit of the nuns' quire and the reconstruction of this admits of little uncertainty. The wall at the east end of the north aisle can be seen as a functional extension of the rood

<sup>6</sup> T. Willement, *Historical Sketch of the Parish of Davington and of the Priory there dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene* (1862). He also illustrates the west side of the rood screen and the laver.

screen forming the boundary between the people's church in the nave and the nuns' enclosure to the east.

### *The Claustral Buildings*

The position and width of the east range were traced by necessarily limited trenching in the lawn now covering the area east of the cloister. Flint footings similar to those of the early presbytery marked the line of the east wall and its western counterpart was uncovered at its junction with the north wall of the south range. To the north, a thick wall, plastered on both sides, ran east-west and returned northward at a point indicating that the building projected beyond the general line of the range. There can be little doubt that this was the south-east corner of the chapter house, which in medieval nunneries was usually joined directly to the side of the church. From the fact that the south wall of the chapter house showed no signs of the junction of the south part of the range, it is conjectured that a through-passage may have been located here.

On the opposite side of the cloister to the church are remains of a wall with a plain round-headed twelfth-century doorway at its west end. This was the entrance to the refectory and beside it in the same wall is a thirteenth-century trefoil-headed recess once containing the laver or washing place. The rest of the refectory was destroyed before Willement's time, but he recorded the outline of a building – partly of stone and partly of brick – standing on its site in 1845. This he rebuilt to form the existing drawing-room, which retains no other ancient features. On the assumption that its south wall stands approximately on the line of its predecessor – for which there is some support from Willement's plan – I have reconstructed the width of the medieval refectory as in Fig. 1.

Nothing remains of the cloister arcades, and the wall standing on the west side is post-Dissolution and its openings are omitted from the plan as having no significance to the medieval arrangement. The west walk is covered by a late-sixteenth-century ceiling with moulded joists, the setting of which near the church gives clear indications of the former width of the north walk now covered by a kitchen extending some way further to the south.

The west range is basically early-fourteenth-century, judging from the form of its earliest windows and the moulding of the outer doorway, and Willement noted that the north end overlies early windows in the south side of the church. Externally, the appearance of the range has been changed by post-Dissolution reconstruction of the roof, now presenting four gables to the western side. Internally, it has been divided on different lines from its medieval arrangement which is,

however, not difficult to reconstruct, the main clues being provided by the positions and character of the windows and doorway on the west side. These windows have had their tracery renewed, but Willement assures us that the new work was faithfully copied from the old. At the north end the two-light window is entirely Willement's own and replaces a doorway forming one end of a passage passing through the range, the opposite opening from the cloister remaining in the form of a pointed-arched doorway. This was the normal position for a communicating passage between the cloister and the outer court. Next are two windows of Perpendicular form, lighting one side of the parlour bounded originally by a partition separating it from the hall. An inserted floor now divides the hall into two levels although originally it was doubtless open from floor to rafters. There is the customary medieval arrangement of a lateral entrance, and a large window with exceptionally elaborate tracery of the fourteenth century lighted the high table on its dais at the north end. In the east wall are traces of a low-arched fireplace now concealed inside a cupboard. Just to the south is a window looking into the cloister—a most unusual arrangement and one difficult to accept as existing before the Dissolution. On either side of the hall, close to the opposite entrances, are two corbels (indicated on the plan by the letters *c*) carved in the form of human heads and early-fourteenth-century in style. They almost certainly supported the feet of an arched timber truss commencing low on the walls, 4 ft. 6 in. above the present floor level, and spanning the width of the open roof, similar to the arrangement in the well-known house at Sutton Courtenay (c. 1330) as illustrated in the second volume of Parker's *Domestic Architecture* (1853).

Immediately south of the hall entrance a partition would have marked off the buttery. This end of the range was extended by Willement and the south-west quoin remains to show the junction of the old and new work. In his 1845 plan he shows the original south wall with a window and doorway in it as restored here in Fig. 1. A doorway in the east side remains and seems likely to be of medieval origin.

From this description of the west range it is seen that it followed the normal arrangements of a medieval secular dwelling, with a central hall, a private parlour at one end and the domestic offices at the other. At Davington, as in many other religious houses, it provided a hall where guests were entertained, with the private accommodation of the prioress in the position of the parlour with a solar above. Apart from this it was not used by the nuns who occupied the east and south ranges.



PLAN AND DESCRIPTION OF REMAINS OF DAVINGTON PRIORY

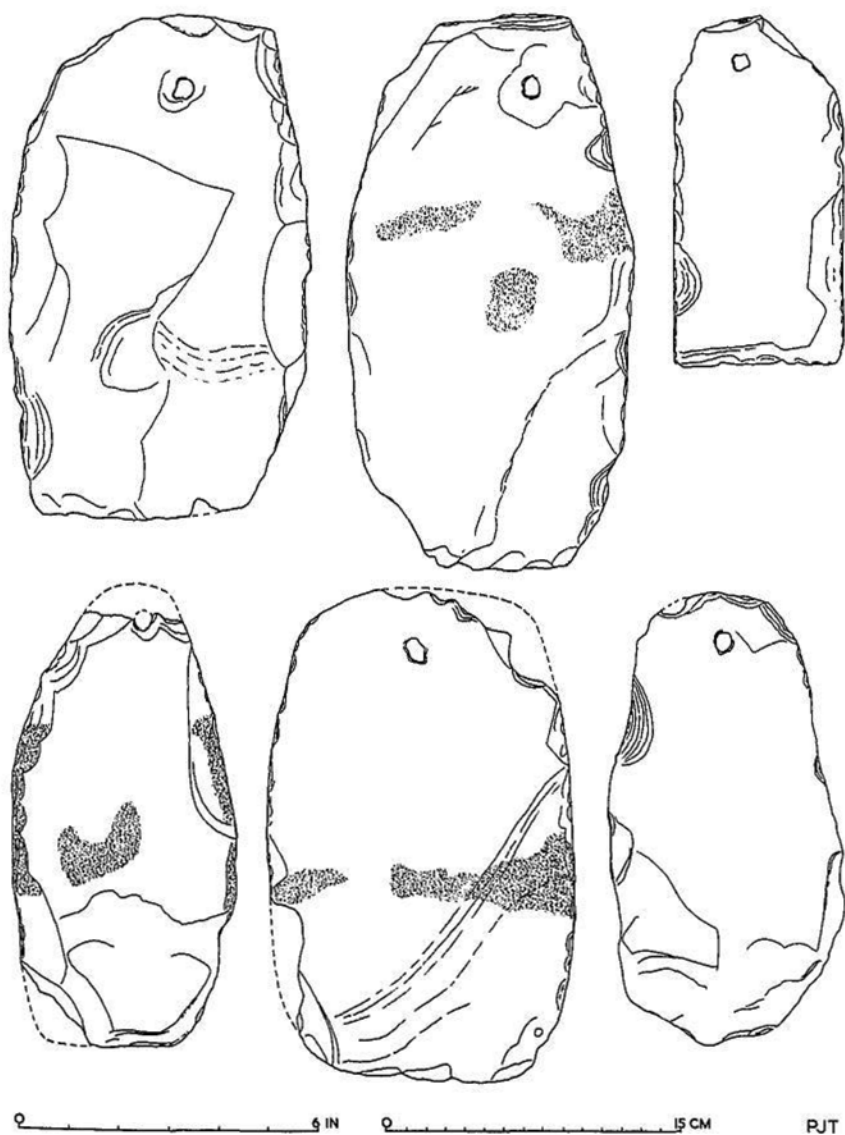


Fig. 2. Medieval Roof Slates ( $\frac{1}{4}$ )

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to our Hon. General Secretary, Mr. A. C. Harrison, for his support in the excavations and also to the following who shared in the labour: Mesdames L. Richards, S. R. Stanton, B. Theaker; Misses J. K. Boorman, S. Goderham, H. Jobey; Messrs R. J. Ansell, G. Champion, J. Haymond, F. D. Hughes, T. Ithell, D. Rouch, S. Thomas, P. Tomsett and W. Tomsett.

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## APPENDIX

## Medieval Roof-Slates

The back-filling of the robber trench marking the north side of the supposed vestry contained large quantities of grey roof-slates in circumstances indicating that they had probably covered the building at the time of its destruction. Most were broken, but some complete examples were recovered of which six representative specimens are figured herewith (Fig. 2). There can be no doubt of their medieval age and they are of the same general type as others found in the county at Dover,<sup>7</sup> Higham<sup>8</sup> and Strood.<sup>9</sup>

The Davington slates vary in length from 7 to 11 in. and in width from 3½ to 6 in., the commonest size being about 10 by 6 in. Their thickness is generally a little under ½ in. and is remarkably consistent. At one end there is a hole through which the slate was attached to the battens across the rafters and the faces bear traces of mortar showing that their overlapping areas were bedded in that material. In the accompanying illustrations the areas of mortar are shown by stippling.

It is now well established that such slates were extensively used in the Middle Ages, being quarried in the West Country and distributed by water transport along the south coast. Davington, adjoining the port of Faversham, therefore accords with this pattern of distribution, as do the other localities in Kent mentioned above. Further information on the subject is contained in *Sx. A.C.*, vol. 103, and *Antiq. Journ.*, xxxiv.

<sup>7</sup> *Arch. Cant.*, lxi (1955), 152-3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxxii., (1967), 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, lxxxiv (1969), 152.



General View of the Priory from the South-West

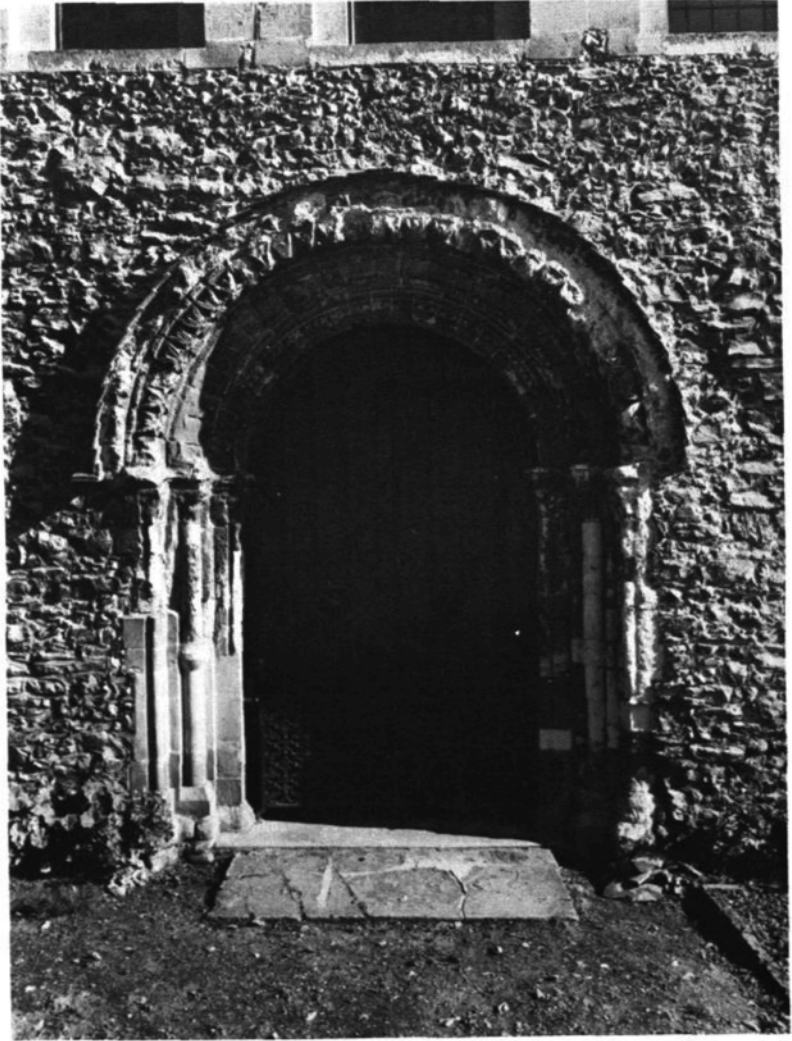
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The west Side of the west Range



Interior of the Nave, looking West



Late-Twelfth-Century west Door of the Church

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