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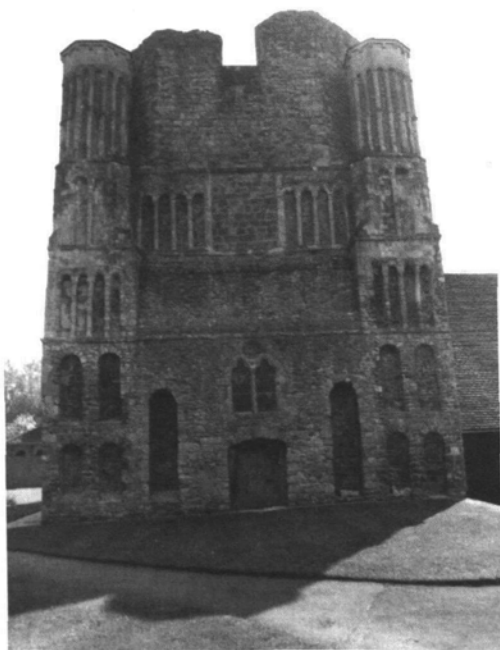
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ST MARY'S ABBEY, WEST MALLING

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Dating from the mid-twelfth century¹ the magnificent west front of St Mary's Abbey at West Malling is probably one of the least known pieces of Norman architecture in the County (**Plate I**). The west front has never been studied in detail but consists of three structural phases. The earliest is the mid twelfth-century work to which an octagonal tower was added in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century. The area

PLATE I



St Mary's Abbey, West Malling: the west front.

between the two Norman turrets, including the central door and two niches, dates from the post-medieval period.

The abbey was founded in the late eleventh century by Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester, as an abbey for Benedictine nuns and was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1538. After passing through lay hands the site was brought back to its original purpose in 1892, and in 1916 the present community of Anglican Benedictine nuns became the beneficiary tenants of the Abbey. The nuns are a monastic community and their enclosure is not open to the public, but one of the few 'perks' of full-time archaeology is that occasionally individuals such as the writer are able to undertake work on sites and monuments not usually accessible.

Early in 1995 Peter Kendall of *English Heritage* approached the *Canterbury Archaeological Trust* in an attempt to help the Abbey meet archaeological specifications laid down for the insertion of new water pipes across the Abbey grounds. The nuns (even more so than archaeologists) have taken a vow of poverty and consequently any archaeological on-site work has been undertaken on a voluntary basis, the Abbey meeting administration costs only. In May 1995, December 1996 and October 1998 the present writer undertook watching brief work.

The first part of this paper describes the twentieth-century archaeological investigations at the Abbey. Those carried out in the 1930s and 1960s in the Abbey Church were primarily to establish the shape of the east end. The results of the watching briefs undertaken by the present writer in the 1990s at various locations in the Abbey grounds are then summarized. The second part consists of a record made by the present writer of the Abbey gatehouse and an attempt at analysis of its structural phases.

PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

In 1932 F. C. Elliston Erwood, with assistance from Dr F. H. Fairweather, conducted an excavation along the medieval nave (**Fig. 1**). This excavation was published in 1954 after the excavation notes, which had been stolen (although Mr Erwood is too polite to use that word), 'mysteriously' reappeared in the Kent Archaeological Society library (Erwood 1954). The major part of the excavation was undertaken at the east end of the church with a view to establishing its shape and comparing it with that suggested for the Norman cathedral at Rochester. In the late nineteenth century Sir William St John Hope had put forward an interpretation that the original east end of Rochester

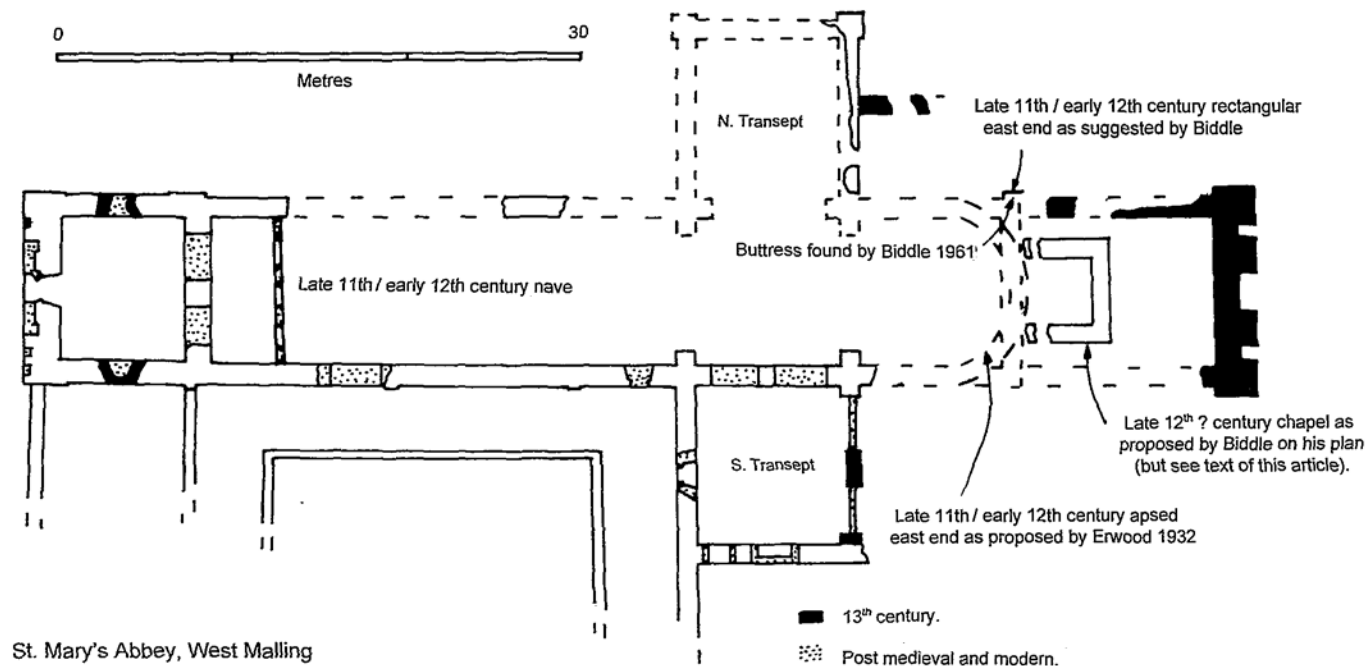


Fig. 1. Plan of the Abbey Church, after Elliston Erwood (1932) with additional notes.

Cathedral was of rectangular form, rather than being the more usual apsidal shape for the period (Hope 1898). Several architectural historians have since disagreed with his interpretation, the first being Dr Fairweather (Fairweather 1929). The shape of the eleventh-century east end of Rochester cathedral still remains the subject of debate (Ward 1997; and in preparation a).

Erwood rejected the idea of a rectangular east end arguing that such a design was too early for either Rochester or West Malling. The earliest dated (as known in 1954) rectangular east end for a large church being Southwell (1108-1114) which he regarded as '.... far too late in date to be compared with Malling ...' (Erwood 1954, 58). Erwood regarded the early Norman east end at West Malling as apsidal, but unfortunately the walls in this area, being built directly upon bedrock without foundations, had been completely destroyed by the digging of service trenches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His interpretation was therefore not based upon any physical evidence and was obviously liable to be disputed.

Excavations undertaken on the medieval abbey site in 1961 by Professor Martin Biddle on behalf of the Ministry of Works in the same area as those undertaken by Erwood remain unpublished. However, a brief interim report in *Medieval Archaeology* (Wilson and Hurst 1962-3, 316) states that excavations in 1961 showed that the Norman chancel of c. 1100 ended in a square termination rather than an apse and that there was a *contemporary* square-ended chapel extending further east. However, again no evidence has yet been produced for this interpretation. The present writer has seen an unpublished (draft?) plan of the 1961 excavation trenches which indicates that the projecting chapel may be of late twelfth-century date *rather than being contemporary* with the main body of the church (see notes on Fig. 1). The interpretation offered by the plan is perhaps to be preferred over the brief text. The areas uncovered in 1961 were apparently not large and for the most part wall lines are represented by 'robber' trenches.

It is not known upon what evidence Biddle regarded the rectangular chancel as being the same phase as the Norman nave and transepts. However, two suggestions can be put forward. First, it is possible that the south face of the trench for the north wall of the rectangular chancel survived in which case it might have shown whether or not the construction trench for this wall cut through the foundation of an earlier apse. If a trench for an apse was not visible then a rectangular chancel may then become more likely. However, the presence of trenches (of any phase) presumably means that Erwood's statement regarding destruction of the area was incorrect. The second suggest-

ion is that mortar samples taken from the north-east buttress of this rectangular chancel, the western sleeper wall of the crossing and the south wall of the nave were all identical. This might argue for a contemporary date. However, care on this point is necessary. The present writer has seen considerable colour and texture (and by implication mineral and chemical) variation in mortar, bonding short lengths of wall which are undoubtedly of one structural phase (Ward, in preparation, b). Until publication of the 1961 excavation takes place, which at this late date seems unlikely, there is still room for doubt as to the shape of the east end. That rectangular east ends for large churches were being built in the late eleventh century has been confirmed by excavations at St Gregory's Priory, Canterbury (Hicks and Hicks 1991; forthcoming; and personal knowledge). On the evidence currently available a rectangular east end seems distinctly possible. If this is correct, it has implications for the shape of the east end of Rochester Cathedral (Ward, in preparation, a).

RESULTS OF RECENT WATCHING BRIEFS (Fig. 2)

Trench 1

In May 1995 a trench situated at the east end of the precinct and dug for the insertion of a new water pipe, produced no stratified deposits although a few fragments of medieval pottery, mainly of thirteenth-century date, were recovered from the topsoil.

Trench 2

In December 1996 a further water pipe was laid directly in front of the main gatehouse. Other than a flint cobbled surface (immediately below the modern asphalt), probably of post-medieval date, no archaeological deposits were encountered. Below the cobbled surface only brown soil was observed in the 0.50m deep trench. It seems unlikely that medieval yard surfaces are at a lower level for this would mean that the threshold of the door and gate would themselves have to be lower. This would create taller openings, which would be out of proportion to their width. On balance it is considered that the medieval surfaces were more likely to be at the approximate level of the cobbles observed and that, perhaps because they were badly disturbed, they were removed.

Trenches 3 - 7

In October 1998 further service trenching took place about 35m to the west of the gatehouse. Five small trenches were excavated by con-

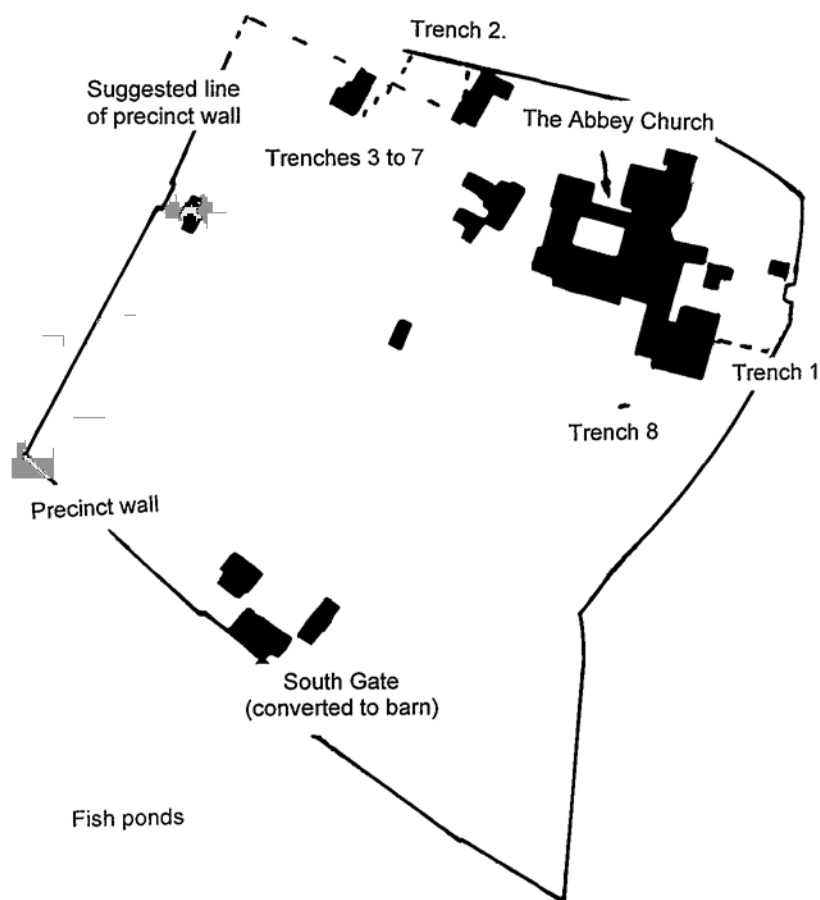


Fig. 2. Location plan showing areas of archaeological watching briefs 1995-99.

tractors (Trenches 3 to 7). Only within the confines of the 0.70m square of Trench 1 was anything of archaeological interest observed. In the grass verge, just on the north side of the access road and at a depth of 0.30m below the modern ground surface, a layer of gravel was seen in the side of the trench. There was a mix of gravel and clay forming a build-up deposit below the compacted surface. At the base of the trench a more impressive flint surface was also visible. These two surfaces almost certainly represent road or yard surfaces in front

of the gate area. Whilst it is tempting to regard them as being of medieval date there is no positive evidence to that effect and they could just as likely be post-medieval. Only extensive open area excavation could resolve the situation.

Trench 8

In November 1996 a trench (not seen by the present writer) about 2.50m x 1.00m by c. 2.50m deep was excavated to the south of the main building complex. At the base oyster shells and a thin layer of ragstone, possibly a floor was uncovered. Below the ragstone deposit a piece of V shaped tile was found. Both medieval and Roman pottery sherds were found throughout the soil excavated.

THE GATEHOUSE

In December 1996 internal refurbishment of the gatehouse (**Plates II and III**) was also being undertaken. As this was likely to be the only opportunity to undertake some recording of the structure, an internal

PLATE II



The Gatehouse looking east. Note the difference in the coursing of the stonework of the northern chimney-stack from those to the south and how the upper string-course extends to the south of the modern garden wall.



The rear of the Gatehouse looking west with the chapel of St Thomas of Canterbury on the north.

as well as an external plan was drawn (**Figs 3 and 4**). This work was hurriedly undertaken in a three-day period between Christmas and New Year before sisters of the Community of the Holy Family from St Leonard's on Sea moved into the refurbished structure. (It is emphasised that the structure is worthy of a far more detailed and accurate study by more qualified individuals than the present writer.) Four structural phases have been positively identified (**Fig. 5**). One of these phases (Phase 3) can perhaps be subdivided. A possible fifth phase, the earliest in the sequence, is conjectured.

Phase 1

It must be emphasised that no positive physical evidence was seen for the *conjectured* earliest phase. The presence of this phase is based first upon the fact that it seems highly unlikely that there were no buildings in the area before construction of the fourteenth-century chapel. A print of 1823 shows a building forming a range extending to the west of the gatehouse (**Plate IV**). This building has a large door with a round-headed arch that suggests a date prior to c.1200.² The east wall of this structure almost certainly aligned with the west wall of the still standing gatehouse. Secondly an early structural phase is

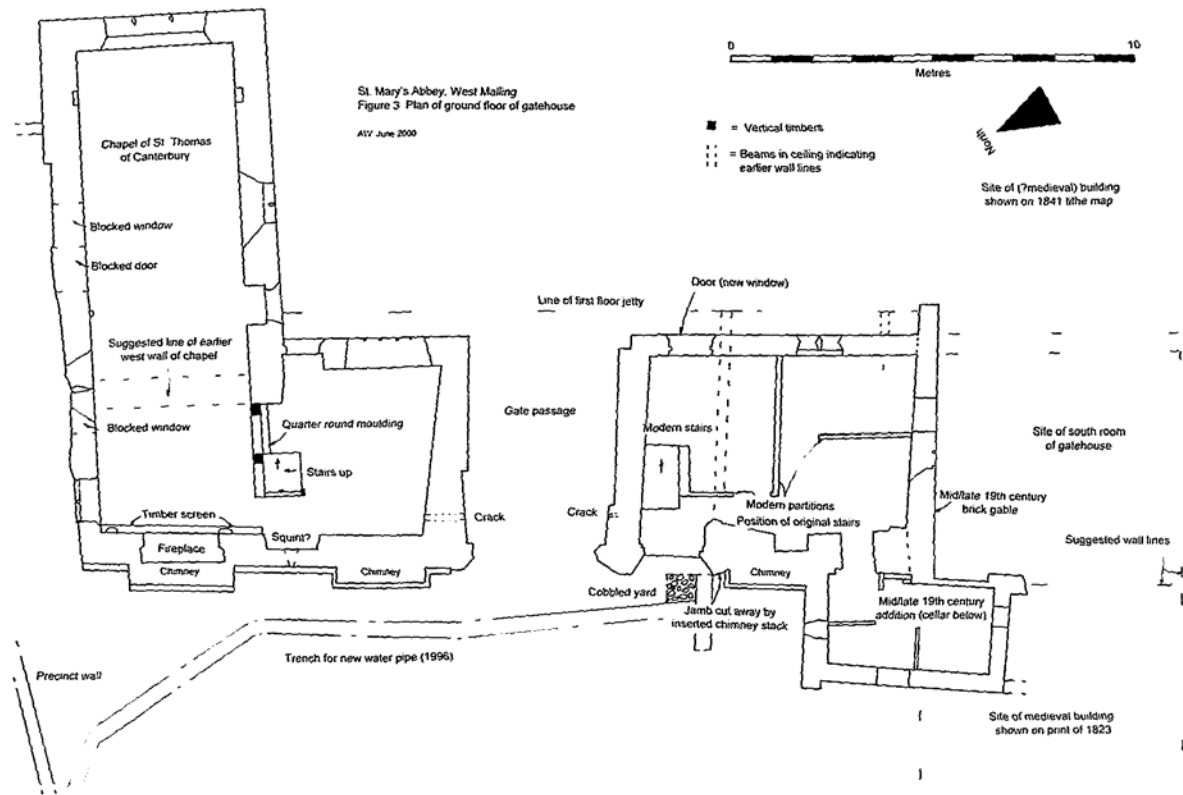


Fig. 3. St Mary's Abbey Gatehouse: plan of ground floor.

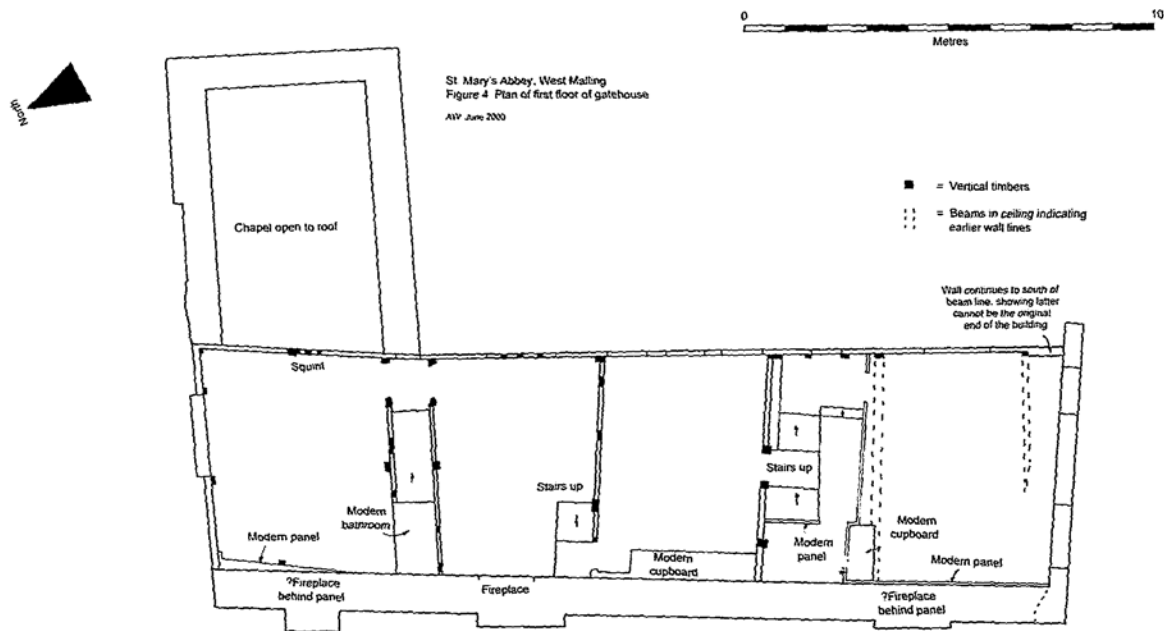


Fig. 4. St Mary's Abbey Gatehouse: plan of first floor.

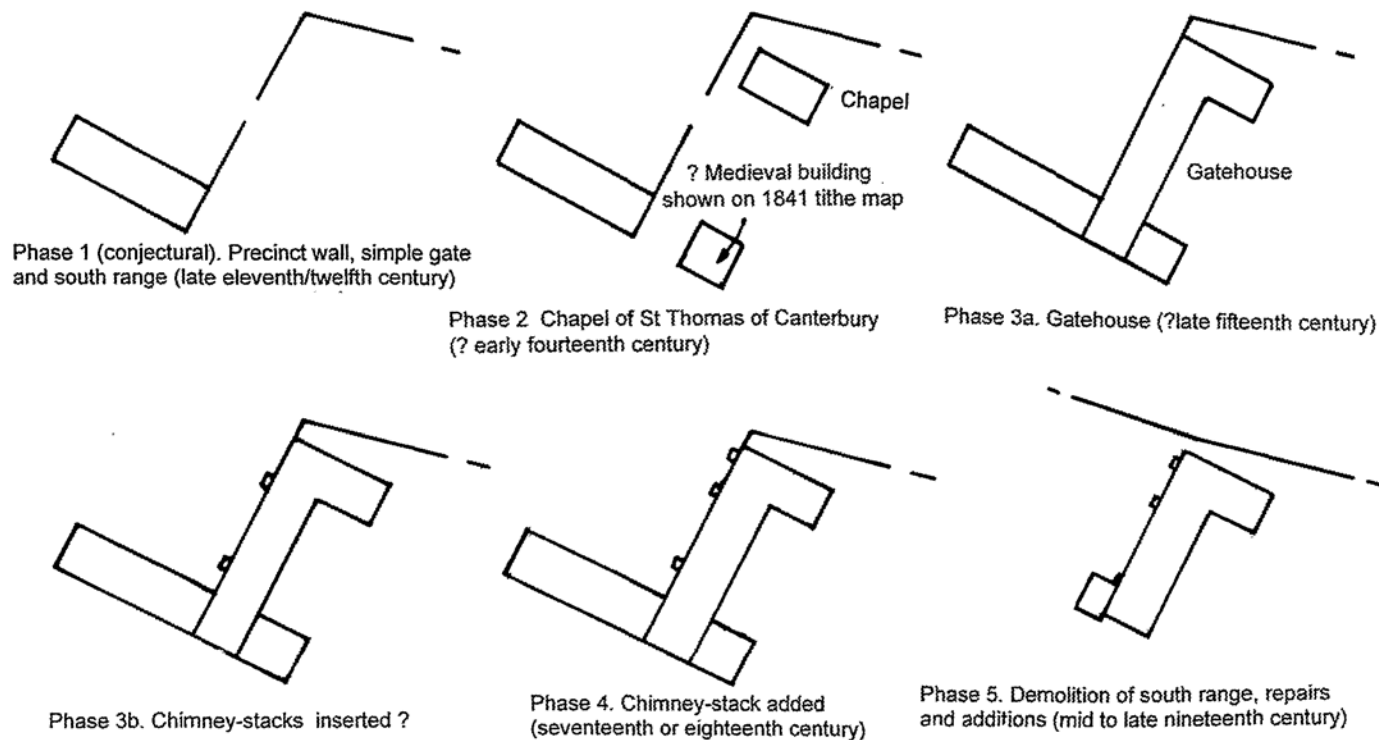


Fig. 5. St Mary's Abbey: suggested phasing of Gatehouse area.



Print dated to 1823. Note the Romanesque arch of the south range and the door still in use in the north wall of the former chapel.

offered as an explanation for the large cracks that can be seen in the gate passage walls (see Phase 3 below).

A precinct wall or other form of boundary (e.g. a hedge) would almost certainly have surrounded the abbey from its earliest years³ and it seems a reasonable assumption that the entrance point to the precinct would have been in the position still used as the gate passage. The gate would approach the impressive west front of the church and if a twelfth-century range existed on the south and a chapel was later built on the north then the entrance had to be between the two. There may, and probably were, many alterations and additions between this conjectured initial phase and what is regarded as Phase 2, the earliest period visible. Only major excavations within the precinct would give us a more detailed picture.

Phase 2

As one enters the precinct through the gate passage a chapel, dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, still stands to full height on the left (north). An early to mid fourteenth-century date (pre-c. 1340) can be put forward on architectural grounds⁴ and the earliest documentary references are dated to 1320 and 1322.⁵ It is assumed that this chapel



North wall of the chapel showing the blocked door.

would have had the conjectured late eleventh-century precinct wall immediately to the west and the gate to the south. It seems certain that the chapel in its original form was shorter than it is now. The western portion of the south wall (to the west of the south door) is now within the gatehouse and it seems likely that it ended at the point where a vertical timber now exists; a lath and plaster wall now continues the line westwards. The vertical timber probably demarcates the line of the original west wall of the chapel. The ratio of nave and chancel, differentiated by a single step, would then be much more in harmony with one another.

Externally the eastern 3.50m of the north wall of the chapel remains unaltered, but thereafter the wall is a 'hotchpotch' of alterations and rebuilding (**Plate V**). A blocked north doorway has cut an earlier blocked window. So called 'salt and pepper' mortar bonds the stone blocking of this door. This grey coloured mortar probably derives its hue from the large quantity of ash within its matrix, charcoal flecks are also prominent. This mortar with its distinctive colour and texture has been dated to about 1750 and carries on into the nineteenth century. In this period the structure was apparently used as a meeting house and later as a carpenter's shop and accommodation.⁶ The door was still in use in 1823 when it was shown on the print mentioned

above (Plate IV). The stripping of plaster within the chapel revealed the inside of this blocked door. A further blocked window is visible internally and has been cut by one of later date. The westernmost surviving window in the north wall is a relatively modern feature.

At the point where the suggested original west wall was situated, substantial repairs are visible in the external face of the north wall. These repairs disguise any clear indication of the conjectured junction between fourteenth-century chapel and late fifteenth-century gatehouse. From ground level for a height of 0.65m however, a vertical edge can be seen which may represent this point of demolition and juncture. The materials from this conjectured demolition may well have been used to construct the north wall of the gatehouse and a plaster render perhaps hid the 'shoddy' nature of the work.

According to the Sites and Monuments Records there are a series of steps situated below the fireplace at the west end of the chapel which apparently lead down to a vault. The lower end of the stair, presumably extending eastward below the chapel floor, is blocked. As the gatehouse is regarded as belonging to the next phase this would make it difficult (but not impossible) to construct steps then. It is *conjectured* that the steps formed an external stairway and passed below the suggested earlier west wall. The vault may be an undercroft and have given rise to the tradition of a so-called Pilgrims Bath.⁷

Phase 3

The next phase saw the construction of the gatehouse. As it stands today it is primarily a late fifteenth- (or even early sixteenth-) century structure, made from brown tinged ragstone ashlar blocks. It consists of a stone-built west front with ground floor rooms either side of the gate passage. To the rear only the lower storey is of stone, a jettied timber-framed first floor exists above. The floor of the room above the gate passage is at a slightly higher level than those either side. As it survives today the gate passage is more or less in the centre of the structure but when first constructed there was at least one further room to the south (see below). This room (or rooms) would have joined with the suggested earlier range extending westwards. If it is assumed that this destroyed southern room was approximately the same width as that between the beam representing the south wall of the internal corridor and the existing brick gable then the approximate position of the earlier south wall can be conjectured.

As previously mentioned, the walls of the gate passage have cracks from top to bottom. That in the northern wall extends for its complete thickness. These cracks may show that differential settlement has taken place and could be due to the western metre or so of the passage

walls being partly built on the suggested earlier precinct wall. This would therefore have a more solid foundation than the rest of the gate passage walls which may have subsequently moved and created the crack.

On the right (south) of the gate passage a door gives access to the ground floor. Directly opposite in the east wall a door, now blocked and used as a window, exists at the other end of the internal corridor and at one time gave access to the Abbey precinct. The solid wall of the gate passage forming the north side of this corridor would argue against these doors merely indicating the presence of a pedestrian access into the Abbey grounds. If a purely pedestrian access was required at this point there was no reason to construct the wall. The latter would be situated to the south of the door and thereby form the main wall of the building. The front door is an impressive piece of perpendicular architecture and this alone would suggest that its purpose was to give access to the structure itself. Pedestrians requiring access to the Abbey grounds would more likely enter through the main two-leaf gate.

Access to the northern ground-floor room is via a door in the east wall of the gatehouse immediately adjacent to the earlier chapel. The small lobby gives access to a stair to the upper floor. A small slit in the west wall probably provided light for an earlier version of this stair. Although this small opening is usually regarded as a porter's squint it could only provide that function when viewing at a distance. It was of no use once someone came close to the main gate, for the angle of the opening prevents observation. The window in the east wall of this room, although repaired, is an original feature.

The present writer regards the southern and middle chimney-stacks as an afterthought and these are shown on Fig. 5 as a sub-phase (3b). Both stacks are of the more usual grey coloured ragstone and form a notable contrast to the brown-tinged stone of the gatehouse wall. Also the one piece of archaeological stratigraphy within the water-pipe trench excavated in 1996 showed that the southern chimney was a later insertion. It could be seen that the base of the south door jamb had been hacked through so that the chimney could be inserted (**Plate VI**).⁸ However, other than at the base of the southern stack there appears to be no sign of insertion into the wall face. Upper and lower string-courses are obvious features on the wall face. As they go around the two chimney-stacks they must be contemporary. All three elements, wall, stacks and string-courses seem to fit neatly one with the others.⁹ It seems likely that the brick-work at the top of the stacks has been added at a later date, perhaps in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries and possibly belongs to the next phase.¹⁰



Damage to the south jamb of the door, almost certainly due to the insertion of the southern chimney.

Phase 4

The ragstone of the northern chimney-stack is not bonded to the main wall and in addition can be seen to be coursed less neatly (Plate II). That it represents a further structural phase than the other stacks is shown not only by the difference in stonework but also by the fact that the upper string course does not go around the stack and that the lower, whilst present at the front, is absent on each side. The latter suggests that there was not enough of the chamfered stone (now being reused) to go all the way around when rebuilding took place. Further support for this chimney-stack being a later addition is provided by the fact that it partially blocks the view from the northern window at first floor level. If of the same phase one or other of these features would have been sighted in a different position. Repairs to this window suggest that the northern half was destroyed on insertion of the chimney. If (as seems probable) of two lights, rather than the one now visible, it would have formed a twin with that above the door.¹¹

Phase 5

Old prints show that a range extended westwards from the south end of the gatehouse. Initially it was believed that the north wall of this

range was situated along the line of the modern garden wall and pedestrian gate giving entry into the precinct. However, the 1823 print shows that the string-courses were (unsurprisingly) in existence by that date. Plate II shows that the upper string-course extends to the south of the present garden wall. On internal examination of the building a small length of the lower string-course was also found to the south of this line. A decorative feature such as this would not be covered by a structure, nor indeed would the ashlar wall face. The earlier range must therefore have been situated further to the south and its northern wall was probably in line with the brick gable forming the present south end of the gatehouse. The demolition of this range would have occurred some time in the mid or late nineteenth century. No doubt detailed documentary research would give a more exact date. The brick gable, outhouse and garden wall were all presumably constructed soon after this demolition.

The present writer's internal examination of the gatehouse was necessarily superficial. The ground floor at the south end of the gatehouse has modern partitions dividing the area into three. A beam within the ceiling indicates that the surviving portion was originally divided into two with a corridor from door to door, a room to the south, and probably another separate room (rather than one large space) in the destroyed portion. Although not visible in the internal ceiling, a beam below the jetty supports the idea of a partition and hence a further room to the south. The window in the east wall is an original feature. On the west the lower string-course was found within the nineteenth century lean-to structure added to the south-west angle. A small cellar exists below this added structure which, although no evidence can be produced, *may* be a surviving portion of an undercroft belonging to the demolished range extending to the west.

In the most southerly room at first floor level the partition walls were again originally in different positions than those that exist today. A beam in the ceiling just 0.75m to the north of the brick gable shows that an earlier wall line existed; this beam has at least two infilled rectangular mortise holes. Whilst this 0.20m wide timber could have formed the upper horizontal helping to support vertical timber studding for an external wall, the lower storey would (as with the east and north walls) almost certainly have been made from stone and consequently would still be in existence. The latter does not exist immediately below the beam and as the gap between the beam and the brick gable is too small to serve any practical function the conclusion has to be that the beam represents an internal partition. A 0.75m continuation of the rear jettied wall to the south of the beam also argues



The south wall of the Gatehouse looking north. Note how the stonework of the ground floor curves over the brickwork of the window; there is no sign of the latter being inserted into an earlier wall.

against the beam line being the position of the medieval south wall. That the beam was not inserted is shown first by the fact that today it appears to serve no practical function and secondly by the presence of another beam, also having mortise holes, set slightly to the south of a modern partition. The two beams together represent the position of original internal partitions.

Although the lower storey of the south wall is made from stone it can be seen that it is of one phase with the brick surround of the window. The stone work curves over the shallow arch showing no sign of insertion (**Plate VII**). There is also a butt joint between this wall and the rear wall of the gatehouse showing that they are not contemporary. Both of these factors, along with the evidence stated above, show that the original wall line was not in this position. As a wall could not have existed to the north (i.e. within the building) it must have been to the south. The existence of another room, or rooms, to the south of the standing gatehouse is assured and its suggested approximate position is shown on Fig. 3.

The present landing has seen much alteration this century; the stairs

were apparently at one time aligned north to south against the west wall rather than east to west as now. Lack of time meant that a detailed study of the remaining first floor rooms could not be undertaken, but they all seem to retain their original partition lines and timbers. The first-floor room to the north of that over the gate passage has a fine late fifteenth- or sixteenth-century fireplace. This fireplace appears not to have been inserted and would lend support to the suggestion that the two earlier ragstone stacks were an afterthought during the course of a construction phase rather than being added after a long time gap. Behind modern panelling in both the southern and northern rooms further fireplaces probably exist. The northernmost room has a squint into the chapel.

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NOTES

¹ The writer is indebted to Tim Tatton-Brown for correcting his original entry of c. 1100.

² Tim Tatton-Brown thinks such an early date unlikely and that this structure may have butted up to the standing late medieval gatehouse and was perhaps nearly contemporary. However, based purely on the visible evidence of this illustration a date in the twelfth century for this feature seems distinctly possible. The building could, of course, be reusing earlier material. Further illustrations of this area exist which as yet have not been seen by the present writer.

³ Tim Tatton-Brown believes that no such wall existed. To the present writer however, that some form of boundary (even if only a hedge) and an earlier stone gate (even if only with stub walls supporting an arch) existed seems a reasonable deduction.

⁴ The writer's thanks to David Carder for this information.

⁵ The writer's thanks to Sister Mary David for this information.

⁶ Sister Mary David kindly provided these details.

⁷ The writer's thanks to Sister Mary David for all the information in this paragraph.

⁸ Tim Tatton-Brown regards these chimneys as integral with the gatehouse and thus forming part of Phase 3. The present writer is the first to concede that he has very limited architectural knowledge and can merely comment on what he has observed. For the southern chimney-stack there seems to be a definite insertion of at least one ashlar

block at ground level; the ragstone of the stacks and wall face is of different colours; there is a definite cut through the base of the door-jamb. For the latter no other discernible reason for the damage other than the chimney-stack being inserted can be observed or deduced. Indeed the position of the damage (at present ground level and below) makes it extremely difficult to create such damage other than by the insertion of the stack. If the stack and wall are contemporary it is also difficult to believe that damage would occur only to the jamb, the stack would have been damaged as well. To ignore such observations and the most obvious consequent deductions would be the height of archaeological folly. Whether the lapse in time between construction of gatehouse and construction of the stacks is very great is a different point entirely. The time lapse may only be a matter of months, weeks or even days. The overall neatness of the string-courses in relation to the stacks and wall face would suggest the time period is very short, but to give emphasis to this afterthought the chimneys are shown in Fig. 5 as a sub-phase.

⁹ Just as with the two chimney stacks mentioned above, Tim Tatton-Brown thinks it is unlikely that the string-courses could have been added as part of a totally separate phase. Indeed, structurally no evidence for such an insertion can be seen. Physically however, such insertion could probably be undertaken. Even though it seems likely the string-courses are original this does not contradict the points made in note 8. The stack could indicate a redesign whilst work is underway; the different coloured stone forming a later delivery for that redesign.

¹⁰ Tim Tatton-Brown also regards the brickwork as post-Dissolution, sixteenth- or seventeenth-century.

¹¹ The writer's thanks to David Carder for much of the information in this paragraph.

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