

## The Infirmary of St. Albans Abbey.

BY WILLIAM PAGE, F.S.A.

THE conventual buildings of a Benedictine monastery may be divided into three groups. First and most important were the monks' living and working quarters, which were clustered round the Great Cloister, secondly, the Guest Houses and their offices which surrounded the Great Court just within the principal gate, and thirdly the Infirmary Buildings, which in the larger houses like St. Albans lay around the Infirmary Cloister. Each had its own establishment, its special place for religious services and its own accommodation for sleeping and feeding. There was a certain normal or regular plan upon which each of these groups was laid out unless some restriction in the site necessitated deviation from it. Westminster and Gloucester were abnormal on account of the restricted area available; Durham by reason of the precipitous nature of the site. But at St. Albans there was nothing to prevent the adoption of the normal plan and, so far as we know, it was carried out. Within the Great Gate, still standing to the west of the Church, was the Great Court in which stood the ash tree, whereunder the courts of the abbot were held, a survival of an early Saxon precaution against the influence of spirits which were supposed to pervade a house. On the west side of the court were the almonry for the relief of the poor and the stables to the south of it; on the east was the abbot's lodging where the most important guests were entertained and the guest houses for the ordinary visitors; on the south side were store houses and offices. The principal part of the monastery, however, was ranged round the Great Cloister. On the north side of the cloister was the nave of the abbey church; on the east, were the south transept of the church, the chapter house and part of the dormitory; on the south, the refectory or frater; and on the west were various offices. On the south of the refectory was another quadrangle with the kitchen on the west; the "oriole," which was apparently a misericorde or place where monks had special privileges as to fasting, etc., on the south; and the dormitory or dorter extending along the east side. Apparently to the

south of the "oriole" was the guest house of the White Monks or Cistercians, who, belonging to a stricter order than the Benedictines, required special accommodation; and near this guest house were the tailory and other workshops. The third group of buildings, that of the infirmary, lay to the east of the buildings last mentioned. It is probably to this group of buildings south of the "oriole" and to the infirmary that the foundations exposed in the meadow of Orchard House refer.

The infirmary was under the charge of the infirmarer, who was one of the obedientiars or chief officers of the abbey. At Westminster Abbey the infirmary cloister, now known as the Little Cloister, still remains, together with some fragments of the hall and chapel. The infirmary garden is now the Dean's Garden. Dean Stanley calls attention to the importance of the infirmary chapel, in which bishops were consecrated and councils were held.<sup>1</sup> To the infirmary came the processions of the convent to the sick brethren. Here, but not only here, was conducted the bleeding of the monks. In the chapel the young monks were privately whipped and in the infirmary lived "the seven playfellows," or those who had been professed for fifty years, who, as Dean Stanley states, were exempt from all the ordinary regulations, were never told anything unpleasant, and themselves took the liberty of examining and censuring everything.

There was an infirmary at St. Albans probably in the time of the Saxon abbots, and we know that one existed in the abbacy of Paul de Caen, the first Norman abbot (1077-93), which had its chapel and cloister. From the cloister was a door from which exit was forbidden, except for reasonable purposes, such as for baths and the like. Abbot Paul made strict rules as to diet and he ordered that silence was always to be maintained in the chapel, and after compline (about 7 p.m.) throughout the infirmary.<sup>2</sup> The church and monastic buildings, which would include the infirmary, were rebuilt by Abbot Paul,<sup>3</sup> but for some reason the infirmary was again rebuilt about fifty years later by Abbot Geoffrey de Gorham (1119-46). The new infirmary followed the usual plan and consisted

<sup>1</sup> *Memorials of Westm. Abb.*, 400.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abb. Mon. Sti. Albani* (Rolls Ser.), i, 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

of a hall with a chapel at the east end.<sup>4</sup> Abbot Geoffrey made fresh ordinances as to diet and silence and gave to the infirmary the church of St. Peter, St. Albans, the profits from which were to be devoted to the food and medicine of the sick and aged monks and for wine on certain feasts.<sup>5</sup> The custody of a cloister was committed to the infirmarer by Abbot William de Trumpington (1214-35), but this seems rather to have been the cloister of the kitchener's court than that of the infirmary.<sup>6</sup> Abbot Roger de Norton, a little before his death (1290), gave a hundred marks of silver towards rebuilding the infirmary, a work which was carried out by his successor, John de Marines.<sup>7</sup> About 1425 Abbot John Wheathampstead also spent much money on repairs which almost amounted to rebuilding. He also reconstructed the chambers or cubicles for the sick into which the aisles of the hall were divided.<sup>8</sup>

The various rebuildings of the infirmary recorded were not apparently complete reconstructions, for we learn from the Book of Benefactors of about 1463 that some of Geoffrey de Gorham's building was still standing. We do not know the dedication of the chapel, but there was an altar to St. Cosmos and St. Damian there and an altar to Our Lady in the aisle of the infirmary hall (*in ala partis corporis infirmariæ antiquæ monasterii ubi infirmi jacere solebant*), which was consecrated in the latter half of the fourteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

From these entries it is clear that the infirmary was rebuilt or drastically repaired at the end of the eleventh century, and again in the first half of the twelfth century, at the end of the thirteenth century, and about the first quarter of the fifteenth century. At first it consisted of a range of buildings round a cloister. We do not know whether the infirmary hall with its chapel at the east end, was on the north or south side of the cloister, but from the lie of the land it was probably on the south side, and the well in the outbuildings on the north side of Orchard House may be the infirmary well which possibly stood in the middle of the cloister garth. The kitchen and offices and probably a "table hall," forming a common room for the use of the convalescent monks, would be on

<sup>4</sup>*Gesta Abb. Mon. Sti. Albani* (Rolls Ser.), i, 79.

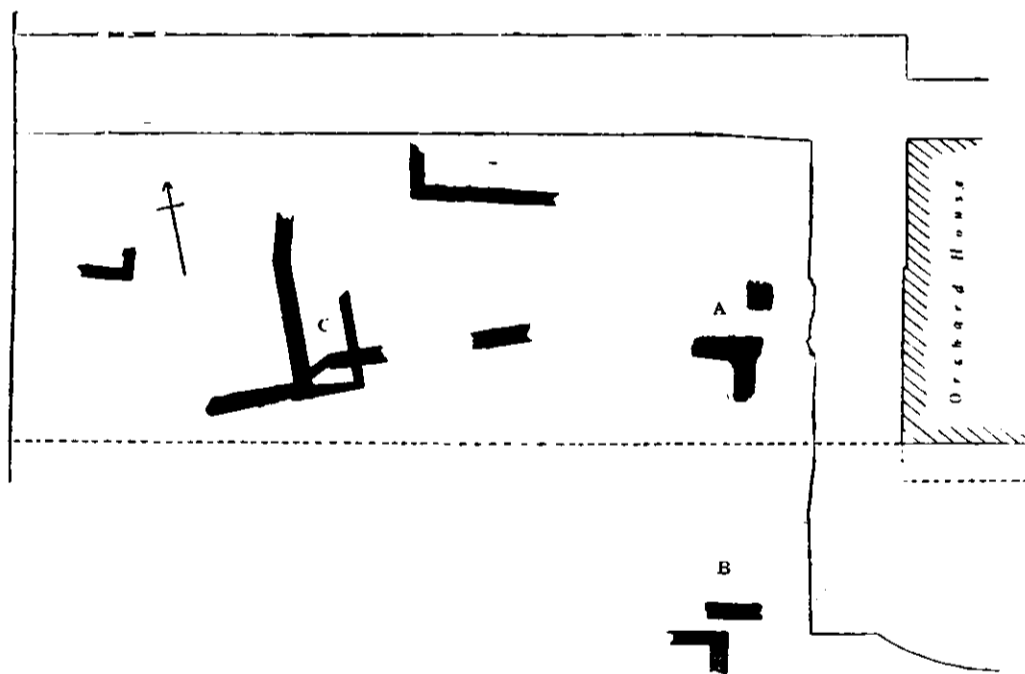
<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 76, 79. <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 290. <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 482.

<sup>8</sup>*Reg. Abb. Joh. Whethamstede* (Rolls Ser.), i, 456.

<sup>9</sup>Amundesham, *Annal. Mon. Sti. Albani* (Rolls Ser.), i, 449.

the other sides of the infirmary cloister. Nor do we know the arrangement of the early hall, but, as we have seen, there was an aisle in the hall in the latter part of the fourteenth century, which probably implies the usual plan of north and south aisles from the time of the previous rebuilding at the end of the thirteenth century. The separate chambers or cubicles for the sick were apparently in existence in the fourteenth century as they were "totally made anew" early in the next century. As in some other of the larger monasteries possibly the chapel at the east end of the hall consisted of a chancel and nave, but documentary evidence is silent on this point.

The results of the excavations carried out by Mr. and Mrs. Ashdown and Sir Edgar Wigram during the summer of 1920 are too fragmentary to show the plan of any building. Disconnected pieces of walls of various dates



SKETCH PLAN OF EXCAVATIONS IN THE MEADOW OF ORCHARD HOUSE, ST. ALBANS,  
ADAPTED FROM PLAN BY SIR EDGAR WIGRAM, BART., A.R.I.B.A.

and obviously of different buildings were uncovered, but no coherent plan could be made owing to the fact that the walls in places had been completely grubbed up. We may perhaps conjecture from the position and construction of the piece of 4ft. wall (A) uncovered to the west of Orchard House that it formed the west wall of the infirmary hall with the foundations of a buttress projecting to the west. The main part of the hall and the chapel would in that case be under Orchard House. There were

indications in the trench that was carried some 20ft. southward from this block (A) that this wall had continued in that direction but had been grubbed up. It may have joined the fragmentary piece of wall shown marked (B). If this were so we should have the width of about 45ft. from the north arcade of the hall to the south aisle wall, or a total internal width of the hall of 56ft., which would correspond with the internal width of the hall of the infirmary at Peterborough. The scattered pieces of wall are, however, too fragmentary to allow of any satisfactory conclusion to be formed. The piece of wall forming a right angle just southward of the fragment of wall last referred to is of brick and is probably post-monastic.

The other foundations westward had, so far as could be seen, nothing to do with the building which it has been presumed was the infirmary hall. They are probably of a later date and are of less substantial character. The central group of walls (C) represents buildings of two or more dates, the latest of which is curiously irregular. On the middle wall of this group running north is a plainly chamfered door jamb. The other walls exposed during the excavations, from their rough workmanship and setting out, suggest that they were possibly store-houses or workshops, and may have been the tailory and other workshops already referred to.

In the north-east part of the meadow a large dump of dressed clunch stone was dug up during the excavations. In it were several slabs measuring about 3ft. 9ins. by 1ft. 6ins. and 6ins. thick. They were slightly hollowed on the upper face as if they had formed the bottom of a channel. The purpose of these stones is unknown.

The beautiful piece of carved ivory discovered in the process of filling up the trenches forms the subject of a separate paper.

I am much indebted to Sir Edgar Wigram, Bart., A.R.I.B.A., for the use of the plan which he made of the excavations.

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