The Chapter House at St Albans.

By Sir Edgar Wigram, Bart.

THE Chapter House at St. Albans was probably planned and commenced by Paul de Caen, the first Norman Abbot and builder of the great Norman church, since he (and his three successors) are all stated to have been buried within its walls. But the merit of its completion, or perhaps of its reconstruction, must be assigned to his fourth successor, Robert de Gorham, the 18th Abbot, who ruled the Monastery from 1151 to 1166, and who (amongst other works) is recorded to have built up the Chapter House "from its foundations."

Abbot Robert appears to have been a relative—possibly a son or nephew—of the 16th Abbot, Geoffrey de Gorham, who had died in 1146. Their family has perpetuated its name in the estate of Gorhambury, where this Abbot erected a residence; but they derived it originally from Gorram in Maine, which was the home whence they sprang. Geoffrey de Gorham was a scholar, and (as evinced in later life by the superstitious deference which he paid to the visions of his hermits) a man of a rather mystical and impressionable turn of mind. But he was not a monk of first choice. He had come over from Normandy at the invitation of his predecessor, Abbot Richard de Albini, in order to become the Master of the Abbey School. But his journey was delayed, and the vacancy had been filled before his arrival, so Geoffrey started another school in the rising town of Dunstable, and there he wrote and produced a Miracle Play, setting forth the legend of St. Katharine. To stage his play more effectively he borrowed a number of rich ecclesiastical vestments from the Abbey Church at St. Albans, and these were all accidentally burnt, together with his house and library, the very night after the play had been performed! Aghast at a catastrophe which was far too great for him to remedy, the schoolmaster offered himself in atonement, and took the monastic vows; and when, on Abbot Richard's death, he was raised (unwillingly) to the Abbacy, the Chronicler notes that he was particularly diligent in securing the replacement of the destroyed copes.

Geoffrey's preferment to the Abbacy appears to have

attracted many of his relatives from Normandy, for several " de Gorhams " are mentioned among the monks in the Abbey at this time. Robert, the second Abbot of that name, appears first as Prior to Abbot Ralph de Gobion; and another Geoffrey and another Robert were sent by him as delegates to Rome.

The great outstanding event which coloured the whole of Robert's Abbacy was the election of Adrian IV. to occupy the Papal chair. The new Pope, as Nicholas Brakspear, had been born at Abbot's Langley, and his father, " Robert of the Chamber," had become a monk of St. Albans after his wife's death. Young Nicholas himself wished to follow his father's example, but apparently there was some sort of Pass Examination for aspiring novices in the 12th. century, and though even such a notable monk as Adam the Cellarer could be described as "*illitteratus*," and Robert of the Chamber himself as only "*litteratus aliquantulum*," yet Nicholas seems to have failed to reach even this modest standard, and was " turned down " by the Abbot with the advice to apply himself to his studies more diligently.

Abashed by this reproof, the young man repaired to Paris, and resumed his neglected studies so earnestly that he soon obtained admission to the Monastery of St. Rufus, near Valence, and rose ere long to be Abbot of that house. The ability which he displayed on certain embassies to Rome won him preferment to the bishopric of Alba. He gained still greater esteem as head of a special mission despatched by the Pope to preach Christianity in Norway, and in 1154 this " stone rejected of the builders " was chosen as " head stone of the corner " and planted in St. Peter's chair.

Eager to use his opportunity, Abbot Robert rushed over to congratulate him, bearing gifts well calculated to mollify the chagrin of the luckless examinee. He himself (if Matthew Paris is correct) had been the yet more luckless examiner! But this does not really seem possible, for it would allow far too short a period for the rise from postulant to Pope.

To his intense relief he found the Pontiff most amiable, —full of pleasant memories of St. Albans, and even prepared to argue that, as ex-bishop of Alba, he was " an Albanian " in a double degree! St. Albans was made a

" Mitred Abbacy," exempt from all Episcopal jurisdiction, and was given precedence over all other Monasteries in England. His Holiness graciously accepted the Abbot's gift of three mitres,—chefs-d'oeuvre no doubt of that wonderful school of art-work which was flourishing in St. Albans in those days,—and (a charmingly modern touch!) a pair of embroidered slippers specially worked for him by the ex-anchoress Christina, who was now Prioress of Markyate Cell. Further guerdon he rejected, " because you rejected me, you know," he added slyly! And the prudent Abbot used this surplus of " unrighteous mammon " to " make himself friends " of the cardinals and dignitaries of the papal court.

His prudence bore fruit later; for the dignities conferred on St. Albans aroused the warm resentment of the Bishop of Lincoln, now robbed of his control over the Abbey, and of the Abbot of Westminster, now relegated to second place. But Robert de Gorham still remained *persona gratissima* at Rome even after the death of his patron, and could always count on the backing of Adrian's successors in the Holy See.

These disputes caused the Abbot much trouble during all the remainder of his incumbency, but he still found time and money to complete the Chapter House and to carry out other notable works. Probably he received much assistance in this from a very able subordinate,—the " illiterate " Adam the Cellarer, who (despite his deficiencies in book-lore) is recorded to have been " very discreet and circumspect in temporal matters," and who " on account of his skill and diligence " (not his piety and virtue, be it noted) was eventually adjudged to be worthy of burial among the Abbots in the Chapter House itself.

Adam's" skill and diligence " do not seem to have been confined exclusively to the operations associated with the name of his office. He acted rather as Steward of the Abbey's extensive estates, and he showed in this work all the ability which had marked his administration at Croyland, whither he had gone as Cellarer when his uncle Godfrey had been appointed Abbot of that House. At St. Albans, " illiterate " though he was, he kept a sort of record of current events which has caused some authorities to regard him as the founder of the famous St. Albans School of Chroniclers; and, after his death, he

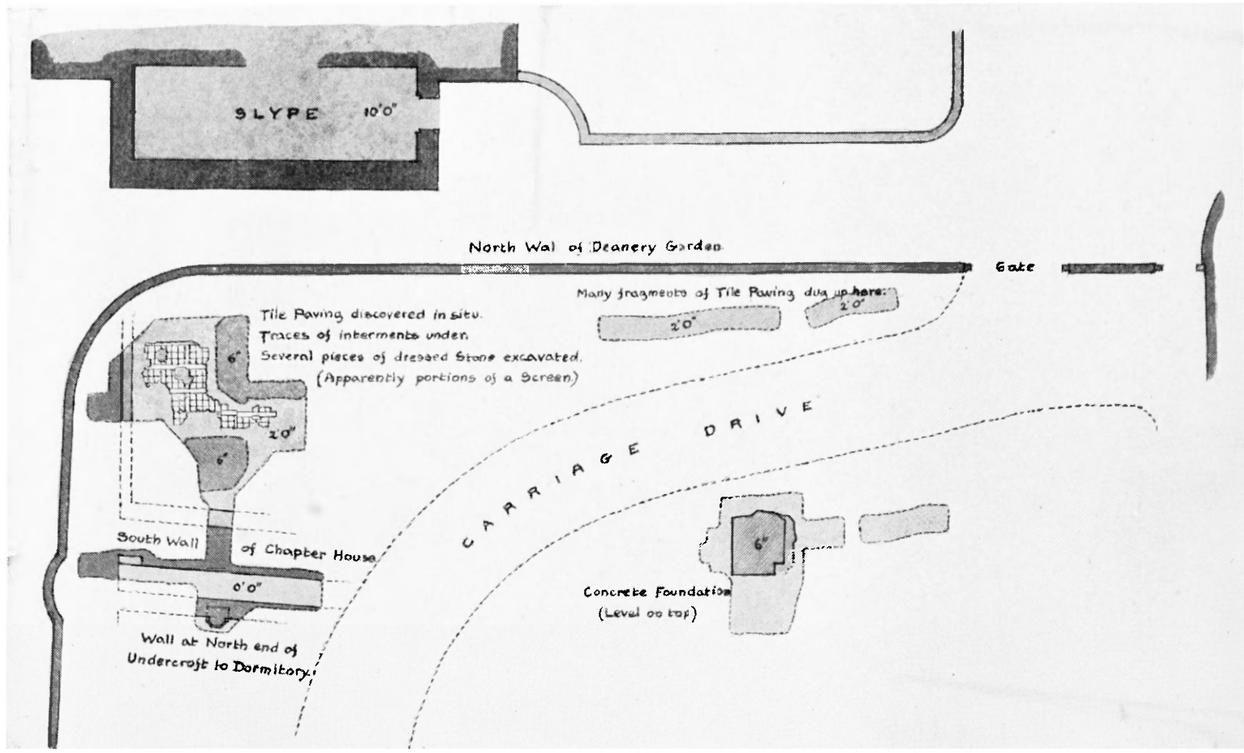
attained a sort of semi-canonisation,—his "day" was observed annually, and the dust from his tomb was regarded as a specific against disease.

The doorway of the South Transept, and the Slype through which it gave access to the Chapter House, were no doubt constructed by Abbot Robert de Gorham and his henchman Adam the Cellarer at the same time when they were engaged in building the Chapter House itself. And the beauty and delicacy of these works—the only examples of late Norman architecture which still remain to us at St. Albans—may serve to bear out the assertion that the Chapter House itself was the most magnificent example of late Norman architecture that the realm of England could boast.

That building, alas! was completely destroyed at the Dissolution, and Sir Richard Lee of hateful memory must have broken down all that matchless "carved work" to serve as the raw material for the construction of his new house at Sopwell and the park walls around his estate. Not a vestige remains above ground; but a small fragment of the foundations of the North-west corner was uncovered at a depth of about four feet in 1877, by the workmen laying the piping to supply the gas lamp near the Slype; and this may again be revealed by some future excavator whenever an opportunity may recur.

We are indebted to Miss A. A. Venables for the sight of a sketch of this fragment, which was made by her father, the Rev. Canon Venables when the work was thus temporarily revealed. Unfortunately no scale is given, nor is there any absolute indication of the exact position of the fragment, but the sketch seems to prove the existence of a range of elaborately carved arcaded sedilia along the side walls of the Chapter House, enriched with foliated chevrons and paterae exactly in keeping with the work on the South door of the Transept and on the arcading from the Slype.

The building must have closely resembled the contemporary Chapter Houses at Bristol and Gloucester, but it must have been yet more richly ornamented and constructed on a much grander scale. The Chapter House at Bristol measures only 45ft. by 25ft., and that at Gloucester 68ft. by 34ft., but the St. Albans Chapter House was at least of equal dimensions with Canterbury, which was reconstructed in the 15th century, and which



PLAN OF WALLS AND TILING DISCOVERED ON SITE OF CHAPTER HOUSE AT ST. ALBANS DURING EXCAVATIONS IN 1920.

measures 90ft. by 38ft. Whether the eastern end was square or apsidal is questioned, as it is still questioned by some people in the analogous instances at Bristol and Gloucester.

The dimensions and situation of the Chapter House, and of the adjacent Monastic buildings, are indicated somewhat hypothetically on a conjectural plan of the Monastery compiled by the Rev. H. Fowler in the year 1878. This plan was principally based on descriptions contained in the Monastic Records, and may be considered quite accurate on all essential points.

A valuable opportunity for verifying it was afforded in the autumn of 1920, when the Dean of St. Albans, the Rev. G. W. Blenkin, gave permission to the St. Albans Archæological Society to excavate the site of the Chapter House in the North-west corner of the Deanery garden. These excavations were carried out under the direction of the late Mr. C. H. Ashdown, and resulted in some interesting discoveries.

The Society did not succeed in obtaining all the data which it hoped for. It did indeed succeed in discovering the foundations of the western end of the south wall of the Chapter House, proving that the internal width of that building was approximately 38 feet. But it failed to discover any trace of the foundations of the eastern wall, and consequently could neither determine the exact length of the building, nor solve the vexed question whether the eastern end was square or apsidal. Sir Richard Lee and his satellites had unhappily done their work too thoroughly. They had not only demolished all the work above the ground level, but had even grubbed up and removed the very foundation stones themselves. And perhaps, under such circumstances, the Society may consider itself fortunate in having found, actually *in situ* some fragments of the original paving.

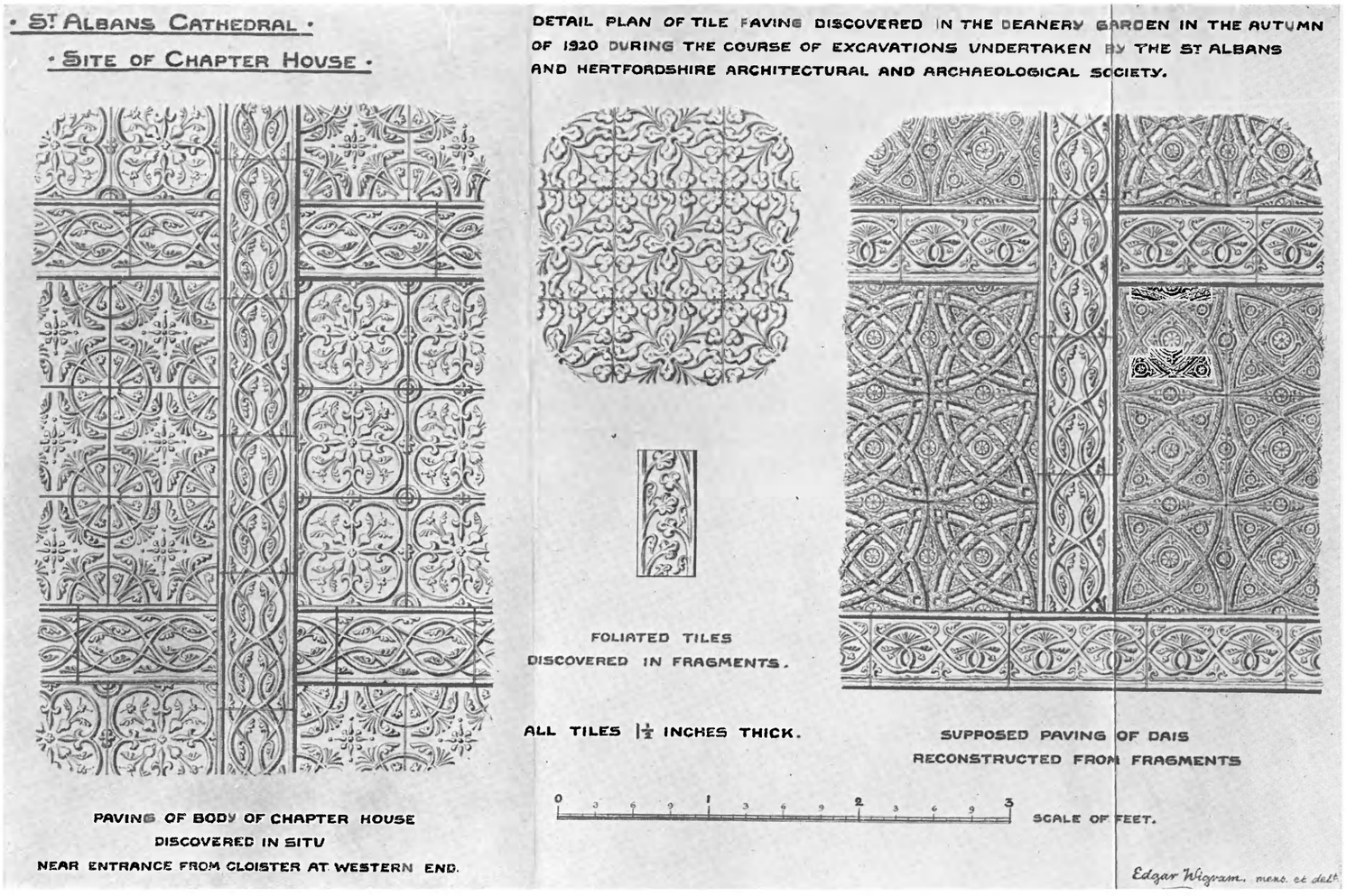
The site which the Monastic buildings occupied slopes down from the Church to the river at an average gradient of approximately 1 in 10. And, conforming to this fall, the floor level of the Chapter House is about eight feet lower than that of the adjoining transept:—say 18 inches lower than the floor-level of the Cloisters, from which it was entered; and five feet below the original floor-level of the Slype.

The tiles with which it was paved are about $8\frac{1}{2}$ ins. square and $1\frac{1}{2}$ ins. in thickness,—very similar in size, colour and texture to the red paving "quarries" which are familiar to us in old farm houses. They are highly glazed, and the devices with which they are ornamented are embossed upon them in bold relief, a method of decoration which has its unpractical side, as the raised pattern is necessarily much subjected to wear, and the recessed surfaces must have been very awkward to clean. It cannot be denied, however, that the appearance is extremely effective; and for use on vertical wall surfaces the fashion well deserves to be revived.

The glaze appears in itself to have been a deep, rich bottle-green. But inequality in the firing has produced many gradations in the finished tones of the tiling, from olive green, through various shades of brown, to an almost Venetian red. And the variegated and mottled effect produced by these manifold gradations must have been one of the chief charms of the finished expanse of the tiling. Unfortunately this effect is lost in the modern replicas which have been used in paving the presbytery of the Abbey Church, and in which more modern and careful methods of manufacture have resulted in producing too uniform a brown.

The tiles appear to have been made locally, and probably in a brickfield under the direct control of the Monastery, for no similar tiles are known to have been found elsewhere, except on the site of the Church of St. John at Hertford, which was one of the Monastery cells.

Most of the paving had evidently been removed at the Dissolution for re-use in other buildings, and the tiles which were found still *in situ* may be presumed to have owed their preservation to the fact that they lay just within the entrance, and had consequently suffered from wear to a greater degree than the rest. Only one straggling patch—about six dozen tiles in all—was actually found it its original position, but this patch was most interesting as furnishing the key to the arrangement of the tiles, which had been in groups of nine, chequer-wise, with running bands separating the chequers. When Sir Gilbert Scott, in 1860, used his reproductions of these tiles for paving the Presbytery, he also arranged them in groups of nine, chequer-wise, guided probably by some



Details of Tiling in Chapter House at St. Albans, discovered in 1920.

fragment of paving which he had uncovered elsewhere. But he omitted the running bands, and the omission is a distinct loss to the design.

Examples of the three patterns which were used on the tiles *in situ* had already been discovered in fair numbers both at Hertford and St. Albans. But only a few broken fragments had previously been found of the geometrical and foliated patterns which are also shown in the illustration. The suggestion that these latter tiles were used for the paving of the dais is grounded on the fact that they were mostly unearthed in excavations at the eastern end of the Chapter House.

The character of the designs seems to point naturally to the inference that the tiles generally are of 13th century date. The Chapter House was certainly paved with tiles in that century, for Matthew Paris, when mentioning that "Robert of the Chamber" was buried in the Chapter House, adds that the site of his grave was "now concealed by the tiling." And tile paving at that period was coming into pretty general use. The geometrical patterns may be later, but this is only conjectural. No type can be said, on the average, to show more signs of wear than any other, and any such difference might be quite misleading, since the tiles in the centre of the building would get naturally more worn than at the sides.

All the broken tiles that were unearthed were preserved and removed to the Vestry, but those which were found *in situ* were carefully buried once more. It was found impossible to raise them, for though they appeared superficially to be in sound condition, yet actually they were almost disintegrated, and were traversed in all directions by innumerable microscopic fissures. To leave them exposed to the weather would have led to their speedy destruction, but they may yet last for years in their present position, and, as their exact site is known, they can be uncovered at any time if desired. The only other objects of any interest which were found in the excavations were a few fragments of dressed clunch, of 15th century date, which may have formed part of a screen.

The Monastic Chroniclers give the names of no fewer than eleven Abbots who were buried beneath the floor of the Chapter House. The list includes the first ten of the post-Conquest Abbots, from Paul of Caen who died in

1097 to John of Hertford, who died in 1260. Among them, as already mentioned, was buried Adam the Cellarer: and Robert of the Chamber, in compliment to his illustrious son. The very positions of the graves might in many cases be identified by indications given in the Chronicler's account, but any hope of finding their coffins was speedily dispelled by the discovery that the graves had been already rifled. The coffins had been buried at a very shallow depth, only just below the level of the paving, but only the looseness of the earth, and the presence of a few disjointed bones, afforded any evidence as to their position.

All memorials marking the resting place of the pre-conquest Abbots were destroyed (as Matthew Paris tells us) by Paul of Caen himself, and almost all the later Abbots, from Roger of Norton to Ramryge, were buried in the Presbytery, where their monuments are still preserved.

Just south of the Chapter House wall, and at a 2ft. lower level, were discovered the foundations of the end wall of a building, 24ft. wide, running north and south at right angles to the Chapter House. This building was divided longitudinally by a range of columns which doubtless supported a floor, and the base of the end half column (of 14th. century date) was discovered still in position. This was doubtless the undercroft of the Monks' Dormitory, similar to the undercroft (now incorrectly known as a "cloister") under the Great Dormitory at Fountains Abbey. The ground floor was probably used as a Store House, and divided up into sections by a series of transverse partitions; while the upper floor was occupied by the single great chamber of the Dormitory. The narrow space that intervened between this building and the Chapter House was probably occupied by the staircase by which the Monks descended from their Dormitory to the Cloister.

It is hoped to supplement these excavations at some future date by re-opening the North-West corner of the Chapter House, and tracing the course of the North wall from the end of the Slype eastwards. But this portion of the work lies under a public footway, and the task may be left in abeyance till funds and opportunity permit.

[*The writer tenders his thanks to the Editor of "The Builder" for permission to use the illustrations published in that journal in 1922.*]