

ART. XXII.—*The Priory of Wetheral*. By J. H.  
MARTINDALE, F.R.I.B.A.

*Read at the site, September 14th, 1921.*

BEFORE attempting to describe Wetheral Priory, I will just mention the name. The House is always known as "the Abbey," and probably always will be so called, but the title of abbey is not quite correct. It never was an abbey, in the monastic meaning of the word. It was a Priory and governed by a Prior. Priors were of two kinds; one where the Crown, or the founder, as the case might be, appointed the prior, in the same way as an abbot, as for instance, the Augustinian Priory of Carlisle: the other, where the priory was attached to a larger monastic house, and was called "a cell," and the abbot of the mother house appointed the prior.

From the Register of Wetheral we learn that Wetheral Priory was founded by Ranulph Meschin as a cell of the great Abbey of St. Mary, at York, for a prior and twelve monks of the Benedictine order.

The first charter records this, but is undated. The late Chancellor Prescott gives as the limit of the date for this charter, 1092 to 1112, the last 8 years of William Rufus or first 12 of Henry I., and says that the best manuscripts read "William" as the name of the king mentioned, though the witnesses to the charter would seem to agree better with the later date. That is, it was a little before or a little after the year 1100 (Prescott, *Wetherhal*, 6n.). It was then probably the only monastic house in Cumberland at that time, and no later house was founded in the county for the Benedictines. The Benedictine was the greatest of all the monastic orders, and famous for its

studious character and learning, and the site is rather an unusual one for them to select. The Cistercians always chose beautiful and secluded sites, far from the haunts of men, because they were the agricultural order ; but the Benedictines usually selected sites adjacent to towns or important centres of population, and the selection of Wetheral would seem to indicate some existing importance in the place. There already existed a church at Wetheral and also a chapel at Warwick. It was on the " Via Regia " or king's highway between Carlisle, then newly re-founded by William Rufus, and Appleby, the chief feudal seat of its founder, and further, was known in Roman times, as testified by the inscribed rock, higher up the river. Historic or traditional interest seems to have been regarded as of weight by church-founders in other instances ; as, for example, when Crosthwaite church was built in the 12th century, on a site which was believed to have memories of St. Kentigern.

The founder was the nephew of the great Hugh, Earl of Chester, whom he eventually succeeded, and had just been granted the " honor " of Cumberland. It was quite natural that he, the first Norman feudal owner, should endow a religious house in his new possession, and he did this right bountifully, as testified by the first four charters. The priory, on its foundation, was endowed with the churches of Wetheral and Warwick, and in succeeding years very many other churches were added to its patronage, which, at the Dissolution, were granted to the Dean and Chapter of Carlisle, together with all the revenues of the priory ; from the endowments of this ancient site springs part of the extensive patronage now enjoyed by the Dean and Chapter of Carlisle.

Henry I., Henry II., Richard I. and Henry III., also Earl David, afterwards David I. of Scotland, and brother-in-law of Henry I., were all royal benefactors of the house c. 1107 ; but benefactions were not confined to the great.

The humble tenant and even the porter of the monastery left their legacies ; and the gifts were not confined to land. Roger Beauchamp, c. 1223, gave his body to be buried in the church of Wetheral Priory, and all his land to provide vestments and lights for the altar of the Virgin, with the services of his serf John Golti (Prescott, *Wetheral Register*, p. 280).

The right of sanctuary was granted by Henry I., and apparently the privilege was not common in the district. It was marked by six boundary crosses, the positions of which are given in Machel's manuscript. The area included may roughly be said to extend from the Eden on the east, Warwick on the north, and Scotby, Cumwhinton and Armathwaite, west and south.

Edward II., when Prince of Wales, paid two visits here, in 1301 and again in 1306-7, and received, as prisoners, the two brothers of Robert de Bruce, King of Scotland, who were a few days later, executed at Carlisle (Prescott, *Wetheral* p. 402). The late Chancellor Prescott gives a list of 28 priors, and many of these were promoted to be abbots and priors of great and important houses, as Durham, St. Mary's York, etc.

The first prior mentioned in the charters is a Radulph or Ralph, about 1130. Leland gives the name of a " Richard " as first prior, but no such name appears in the Register. The last prior was Ralph Hartley, who surrendered the priory on the 20th October, 1538, about 440 years after its foundation.

The site still retains its natural charm and is similar in character to such beautiful sites as Fountains, Easby or Bolton,—a bank sloping down to the river, with the monastic buildings on the plateau above. Of the buildings very little remains, except the gatehouse, which is a fine specimen of the architecture of the later days of the priory. All other traces seem to have been removed when the modern farm-buildings were erected, except a

wall to be mentioned later and, very probably, foundations below the ground.

The block of the gatehouse is some 36 feet by 29 feet, with a projection for a stair at the north-east angle. The entrance-passage runs east and west and is not in the centre of the block, but to the north end. The passage has a barrel-vault. The western or outer arch is segmental, 12 feet 3 ins. span, of two orders, the inner order being continued down the jambs; there is also a good hood-mould over the arch. The portion of the west wall, in which this arch is placed, projects two feet in front of the general walling, and this gives a total thickness of 6 feet 6 ins. to the wall, and space for the mural chambers on the upper floors. The other walls are 4 feet 6 ins. thick: all the walls continue the same thickness up to the parapet. The arch at the eastern or inner end of the passage is 13 feet 2 ins. span, that is, the full width of the passage, the arch springing directly from the walls. It is segmental, but slightly flatter than the western arch.

In the north wall of the passage is a door with a Car-narvon arch, now blocked. This opened into the buildings to the north, as indicated by the stone label for a roof on the north external wall. These buildings are now removed. The projection on the north-east angle contains the circular stair, 6 feet internal diameter, and continuing up to the roof. It is entered by a semicircular-headed door in the east wall from the outside of the tower, and at a level of three steps above the present ground. The south end of the tower contains a room about 17 feet 6 ins. by 10 feet, entered from the east side by a door with a pointed arch. It has a barrel-vaulted ceiling and has been lighted at each end by two loops: the west one has been enlarged and the east one is blocked.

Just outside the tower, to the south, is a cellar, about 5 feet below the present ground, approached by a straight flight of steps from the modern building on the east. It

- ST. MARY'S ABBEY - WETHERAL -

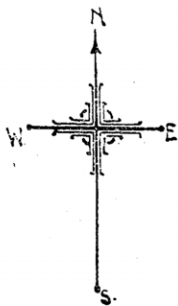
BLOCK PLAN

SCALE 100 0 100 200 300

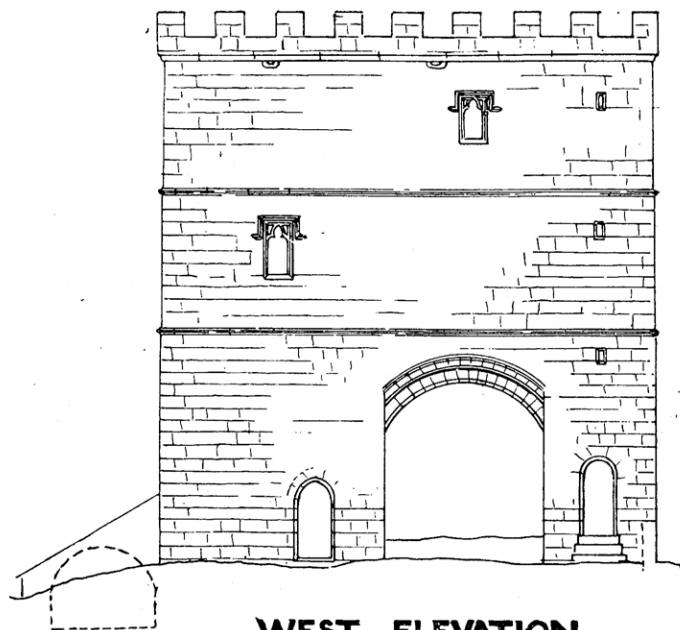
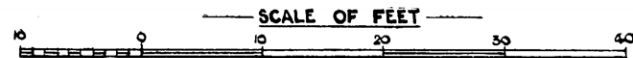
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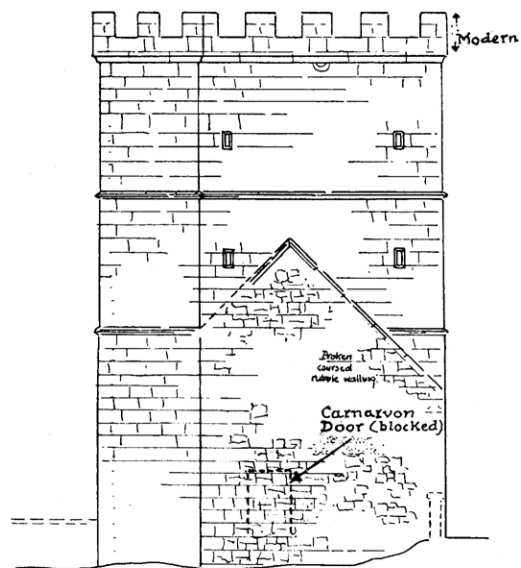
→ River Eder



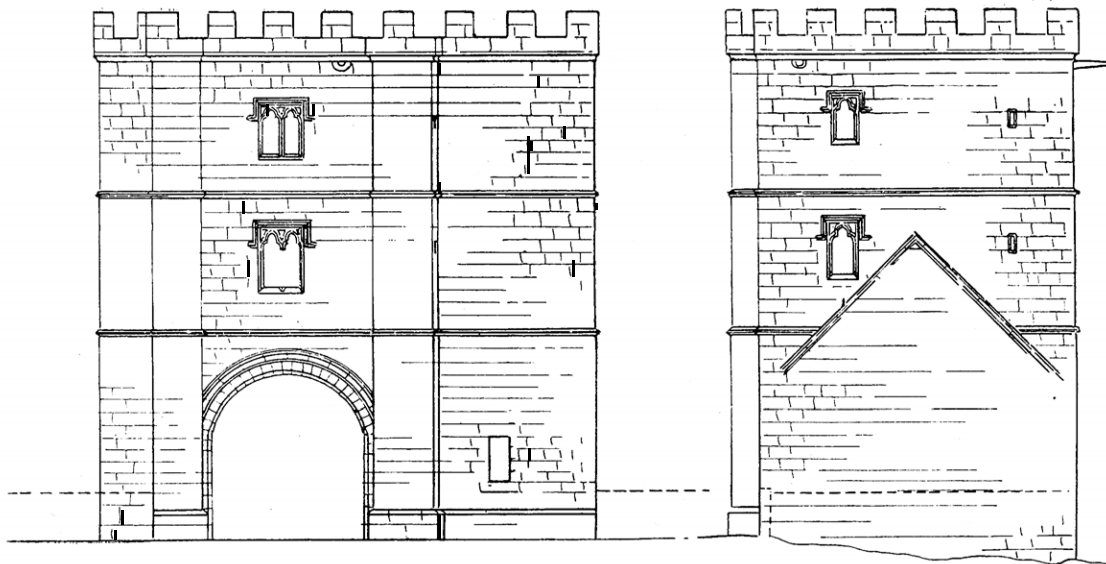
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**WEST ELEVATION**



**NORTH ELEVATION**



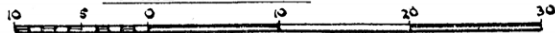
**EAST ELEVATION**

**SOUTH ELEVATION**

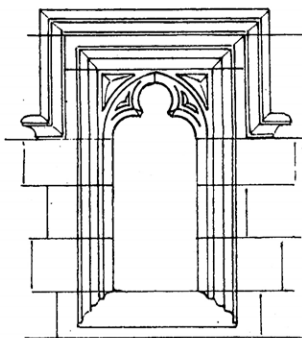
THE GATEHOUSE, WETHERAL PRIORY.  
Measured and drawn by C. J. F. Martindale, A.R.I.B.A.,

# ST. MARY'S PRIORY WETHERAL

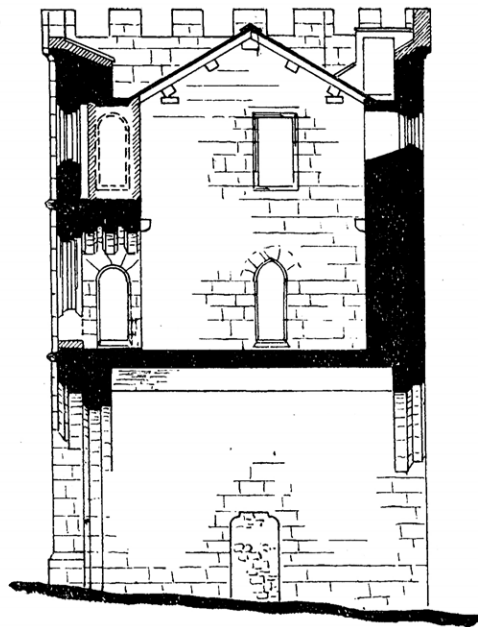
SCALE OF FEET



MEASURED & DRAWN BY  
C. J. F. MARTINDALE, A.R.I.B.A.

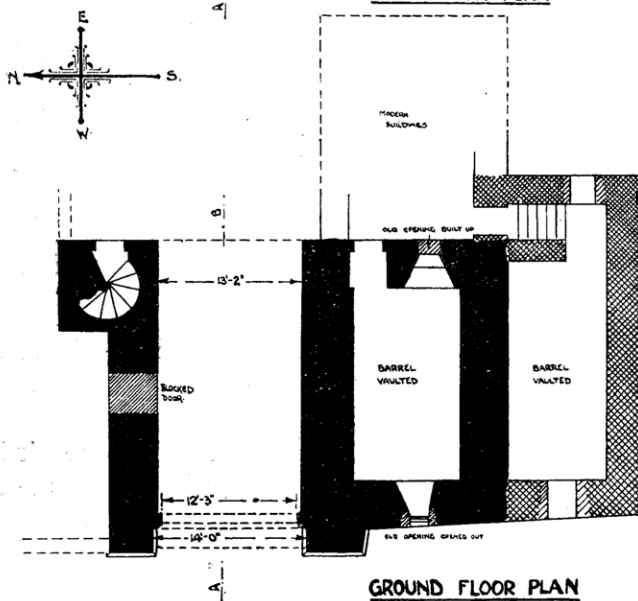
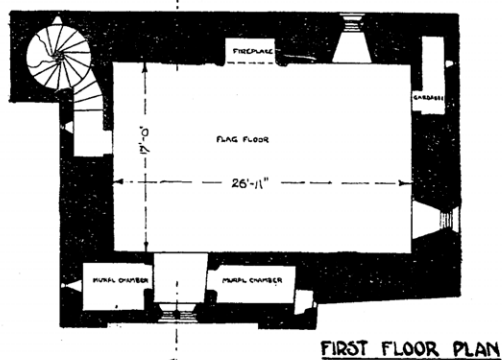
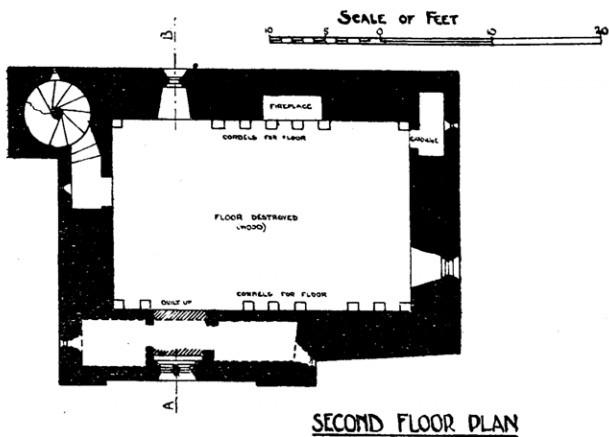


DETAIL OF WINDOW



SECTION





is about 23 feet by 9 feet and has a barrel vault. In its present condition, it is very uncertain as to its date, but I think it is later than the tower, although the roof-labels on the south wall again indicate buildings. The proverbial underground passage to Corby Castle started in this cellar. I daresay there is a cavity below the floor, but it probably has some connection with certain mural chambers, to be mentioned shortly, in the upper part of the tower.

The first floor is entered with a short mural passage from the circular stair by a pointed arched door. It is a single room 25 feet by 17 feet, lighted by three windows. The one over the entrance arch is a two-light: the other two, one east and one south, are single-light. All are well moulded, with cusped trefoil heads, and have external hood-moulds. There is a fireplace in this room in the east wall, and two mural chambers in the thick wall over the entrance arch, entered by doors in the deep reveals of the two-light window; each has a loop, one to the north, and one, contrived evidently for observation, in the angle formed by the projection, to look south to the open country. There is also a garderobe in the south-east angle lighted by a loop. The deep reveals of the two-light window have fine ribbed rear arches, somewhat similar in character to the windows in the prior's room in the tower of the Deanery at Carlisle. The sill and mullion of this window have been cut away, and the opening cut down to form a door when the tower was used for other purposes.

The large stone corbels to support the second floor remain, and are all on the long sides of the room, and are irregularly spaced, indicating a longitudinal wallplate and cross-beams resting on the top, rather than separate beams from corbel to corbel.

The second floor is approached by the circular stair in the same way as the first floor, that is, with a short mural

passage. The room, a single one, is similar to the one below, except that the single-light window on the east wall is on the north side of the fireplace.

There is a garderobe over the one below, now inaccessible. The two-light window in the west wall is blocked up from the inside, but there are evidently the two mural chambers, entered from the reveals as below ; the loops to light them can be seen externally. The internal door-openings to these rooms all have stone dressings and splayed thresholds, indicating a step down into the main room in every case. The internal face of the wall is coursed and dressed ashlar, but at some later period, the walls have been plastered.

Continuing up the circular stair, the roof is reached, now covered with stone slates ; but it is not the original roof, which was at a level of some 4 feet higher, as shown by the old level of parapet and gutter. The present door giving access to the roof is not the original, but the stair continued up about another turn to the level of the gutter, and was probably finished with a turret rising above the parapet. This turret is shown in one of Buck's views.

The external walling of the tower is regular coursed ashlar. There is a splay plinth on the west side only, and moulded strings at the upper floor-levels, on all sides. The oversailing course of the parapet is also original, but not the parapet itself. The stone shoot-pipes from the gutters remain on all faces, and fix the level of the ancient roof, and also indicate a gutter all round ; that is, alures across the gabled ends on the thick walls, and the roof probably stone-slatted ; Buck's view again indicates this. On the north and south faces, as mentioned before, stone labels remain for steep-pitched roofs of buildings adjoining, and possibly contemporary with the tower, especially the one on the north front, where we have the door from the entrance passage, and the stronger evidence still in the wall face, below the roof line, being broken-coursed

facing, not ashlar. The existing building on the east front is much later in date.

So much for the entrance gatehouse of this once beautiful Priory. What remains are there of its monastic church and buildings? I am afraid, very few; few, at least, that are visible; but from appearances there may be more, below the surface. That the buildings were to the east of this gatehouse is certain, but the exact position of the church, and whether the monastic buildings were north or south of it, is uncertain. I am rather inclined to think they were to the north side. The church was always the most important part of the monastery, and St. Benedict laid down the principle that "nothing is to be preferred to the *Opus Dei*." The position of the church, therefore, influenced the whole plan. In England, for climatic reasons, it was usually on the north of the domestic buildings, but Canterbury and Chester are both examples of the church to the south; and if that were the case here, then the west end of the church would be facing you, as you entered the precincts by the gatehouse.

On the extreme east of the farm-buildings, some 250 feet away, a wall remains some 75 feet long, and 7 or 8 feet high, with a two-light window at its northern end, of about the same date as the window in the gatehouse, and I think three square-headed narrow windows, coming south. The extreme south end of this wall is broken away, but there are indications of a stair here, which is very like the fragment we found at Holme Cultram in a similar position, during the excavation, adjoining the Chapter House. There is a splay plinth the whole length on the east face of this wall. If this is a part of the eastern wall of the Chapter House, etc., then the cloister-garth would be about the present farmyard.

There are one or two carved corbels and many ancient stones built into the farm-buildings.

The monastic church had at least two altars: one

dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the other to the Holy Trinity, and the charters give various dedications, as St. Mary and St. Constantine and Holy Trinity and St. Constantine. Two chapels are mentioned in the Register as belonging to the priory, one of St. Anthony and the other of St. Servanus or St. Severinus. The site of the former is supposed to have been on the road from Wetheral to Cumwhinton: the site of the latter has not been identified, but there is a tradition it was on the bank of the river to the east of the priory.

The priory had extensive fishing rights on the Eden, and, as usual a mill, so important an adjunct, lower down the river, just where the railway viaduct is now built.

The famous caves or cells of St. Constantine are a short distance up the river, and consist of three cells cut out of the solid rock, with an entrance corridor enclosed by a wall, containing windows looking over the river, and also a fireplace. Further up the river again is the Roman inscription on the face of the rock, recording the Twentieth Legion.

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