

ART. IX.—*The Norman Priory Church at Carlisle.*
By C. G. BULMAN.

THE Norman portions of the present Cathedral Church at Carlisle, while receiving passing notice from the visitor or student, are very much overshadowed by the magnificent choir of a succeeding period. It is true to say that the Norman work which remains is not on the great scale of the contemporary structures at Durham and elsewhere, but these remains are the only surviving portions of the original Priory church which was erected in the early part of the 12th century, and which became the seat of a bishop in 1133. As such, the work ought to receive greater attention than it actually does.

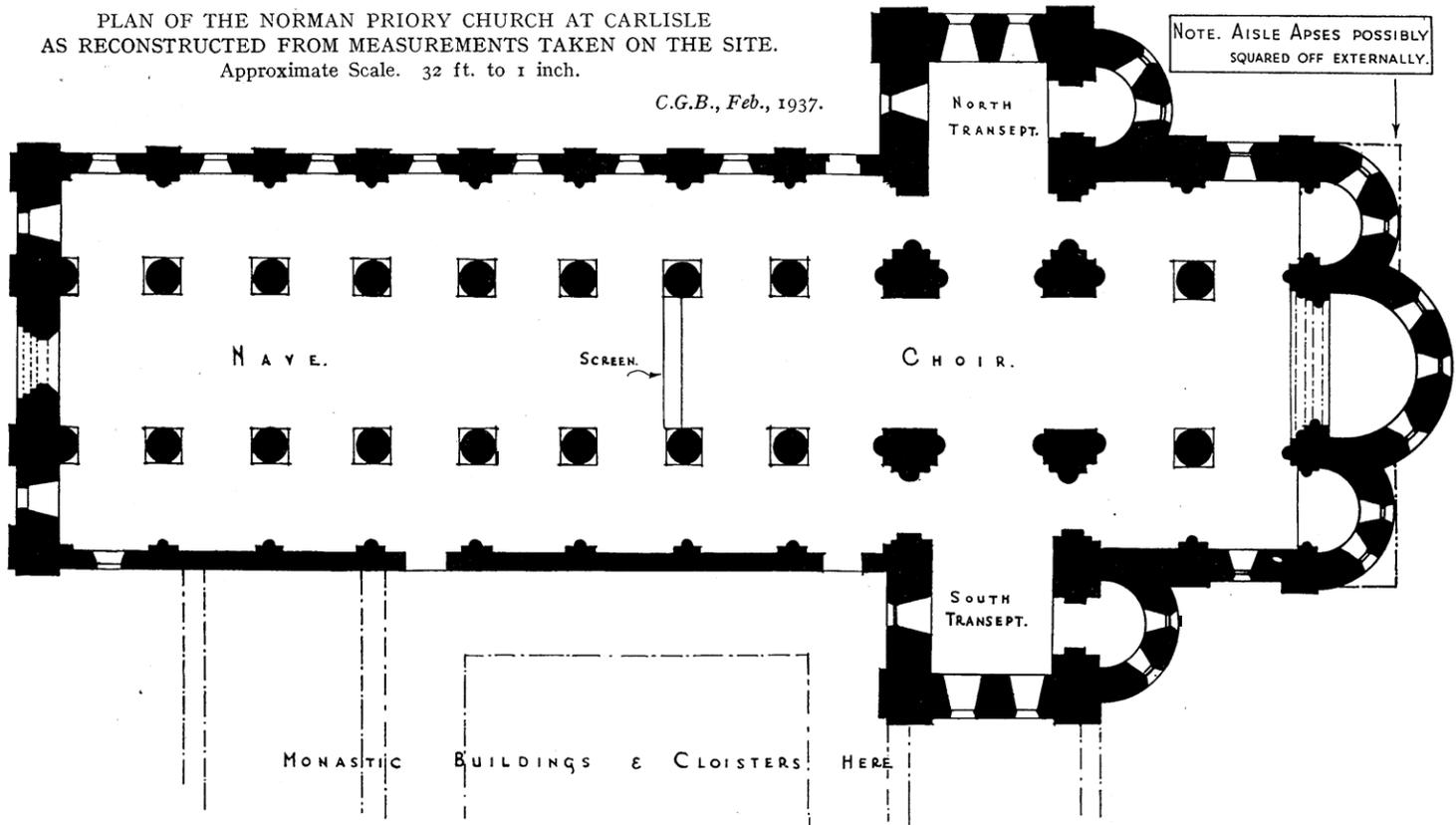
It is not my intention to record the events which led to the founding of the Priory church, or the creation of the See of Carlisle, but to attempt a reconstruction of the early Norman church as far as the evidence will allow.

The plan of the church as originally set out was that of a minster of more or less normal plan. It consisted of a short structural choir of two bays, short aisleless transepts, and an aisled nave. The choir probably terminated eastward in an apse, and its aisles similarly, and an apse also projected eastward from each arm of the transept. This general lay-out we know, but our information is scant if we wish to learn anything more definite about the parts which have vanished. Different authorities have given different figures for the dimensions and extent of the choir and the nave, and it has not been easy to ascertain with any certainty the exact number of bays to the nave, or the length of the original choir. Recent excavations, however, over the site of the destroyed

PLAN OF THE NORMAN PRIORY CHURCH AT CARLISLE
AS RECONSTRUCTED FROM MEASUREMENTS TAKEN ON THE SITE.
Approximate Scale. 32 ft. to 1 inch.

C.G.B., Feb., 1937.

NOTE. AISLE APSES POSSIBLY
SQUARED OFF EXTERNALLY.



portion of the nave have thrown more light on the matter, and it is possible that the extent of the old choir can also be recovered from certain slight evidences which still remain below the floor of the present choir. The margin of uncertainty which existed is revealed when we find that so great an authority as Bond, in his "English Cathedrals," gives only seven bays to the nave at Carlisle, whilst Nicholson, in his otherwise excellent pictorial restoration, shows nine. The actual number was found to be eight. The foundations of the west front were known to exist in the garden at the rear of the second canonry house, and were actually uncovered there during the excavations. The span of one of the surviving bays having been obtained, it was an easy matter to fit this into the distance between the position of the west front remains, and the surviving building. The result proved without a doubt that the nave, when entire, consisted of eight bays. The position of each pier-base was dug over, and the foundations exposed, but the results were disappointing on the whole. For a long period the site of the nave had been used as a burial ground for cathedral dignitaries and their families, and when interments had been made any stones uncovered were removed. In some cases little more than rubble or cobble foundations were uncovered. So much for the nave.

The choir presented more difficulty, as no portion of it now exists above the ground. Here again authorities differ as to the length. Some give the actual length as 80 feet, while others say "it reached to the end of the present choir stalls"; these are only some 48 feet in length. In an effort to solve this difficulty, I crawled along the heating duct beneath the floor and under the choir stalls on the south side. There is a fragment of masonry here at the east end, which begins a curve just before it is broken off, and is about two feet long. This I believe to be the foundation or footing of the original

apse wall which terminated the early choir, and measurement shows that this springing line is about 48 feet from the crossing. When plotted on paper and the apse struck on plan, it shows that the choir must have been some 60 feet long internally. If we allow two bays to the choir of the same span as exists in the nave, it coincides fairly accurately with the position of the apse, and I have ventured to draw a plan showing this arrangement. This plan shows the correct number of bays to the nave, and also the arrangement which probably existed in the original choir. This gives us the general planning and dimensions of the early church, but there is one difficulty still remaining, and this is the termination of the choir aisles. It is possible that only excavation in the interior of the cathedral can settle this point now.

Norman churches of any size almost invariably had an apse as the eastern termination of the choir, but there were two entirely different ways of planning the choir aisles. One way was to terminate each aisle with a small apse parallel to the central apse of the choir, and the other way was to continue the choir aisle round the apse, forming what is called an ambulatory, sometimes with chapels opening out. The parallel apse type was formerly to be seen at Durham, the latter type can still be seen at Norwich. There is no evidence now to show which of these arrangements obtained at Carlisle, but all the probabilities are in favour of the former and simpler way. The ambulatory plan was more complex and more expensive to build, as well as demanding more technical skill, and, as the whole of the Norman work at Carlisle was plain and severe, judging from what remains, it is fairly certain that the simpler plan was used. Besides, the more complex type of plan did not find much favour in the north generally, and when, we find the builders of so great a cathedral as Durham preferring the three parallel apse type, we may be certain that Carlisle was no exception

to the rule. If we take it then that each choir aisle terminated eastward in an apse, the only question which remains is, were the aisle apses circular externally as well as internally? At Durham the aisle apses were circular inside and squared off outside. As stated above, only excavation can now settle this question at Carlisle. The plan which I have drawn shows tentatively the features which I have described, and can be taken as an approximate lay-out of the original Priory church erected in the early years of the twelfth century.

ELEVATION.

It is difficult to say very much about the elevations and architectural design of the eastern portions of the original church, as they have almost completely vanished. The surviving bays of the nave, and the original work in the south transept, however, give us a key to the character of the work, and can be examined in detail.

In Romanesque times, as in the succeeding period, there were three main schools of architectural design in England. The southern school, was distinguished in plan by the great length of the nave, and in elevation by having the arcade, triforium and clerestory approximately equal in height, together with a greater abundance of mouldings and a tendency towards a lighter effect. Ely and Peterborough are examples of this type. The characteristics of the western school were the use of the round cylinder for the pier arcade, a more sparing use of ornament and mouldings, and a much shorter nave. Hereford and Gloucester show these characteristics. The northern school centred at Durham, and has its own distinguishing marks the most obvious of which is the use of the incised column. Other examples of this type are Selby, Lindisfarne, and Dumfermline in Scotland.

Curiously enough, it appears to have been the western school of Romanesque which influenced the work at

Carlisle. Here we have the comparatively short nave, the use of the cylinder in the pier arcade instead of the composite column, and the general absence of mouldings and elaborate detail, characteristics which can be seen at Hereford, Gloucester and St. John's, Chester. This is a reversal of what we might have expected, and contrary to what took place during the building of the choir at a later date, when the influence is derived from the northern school of Gothic design, as would appear natural.

The nave, then, was set out with a length of eight bays, and ended to the west, so we are told in Mr. C. King Eley's guide, in "a very fine west front with a handsome central doorway of four orders. The western wall was more than seven feet in thickness, and had four pilaster buttresses nearly seven feet broad and 15 inches deep." It was impossible to verify this, as the excavation uncovered a mass of rubble from which it seemed impossible to obtain any definite information, and I do not know Mr. Eley's authority for what he says. However, from what we know of other churches of the period this description is probably not incorrect.

The design of the nave generally is of the plainest character, and, even apart from any intention of design, its remote position in an unsettled part of the country and a probable difficulty of obtaining funds and skilled masons, are all facts which would operate in the direction of simplicity in execution.

The piers of the main arcade are massive cylinders nearly six feet in diameter, and are somewhat squat in appearance. The capitals to those on the south side are carved with a leaf ornament, those on the north side are plain. These carry semi-circular arches of two orders but of the barest character, with only a slight chamfer to the edges. Between the arches are beginnings of wall shafts intended to carry the roof, but these are stopped short at the base of the triforium stage. The triforium

is merely a semi-circular arch in each compartment, entirely destitute of ornament. A triforium of this type also exists at Norwich, but is there richly moulded and has attached shafts.

One of the problems which vexed the early builders was that of obtaining sufficient light for their naves and choirs. With thick massive walls and small windows the interiors were apt to be gloomy and various methods were adopted to get additional light. The "dim religious light" of the romanticists was not by any means desired by the early builders, and as soon as their technical skill was advanced enough to abolish the gloom they did so without hesitation; so willingly, in fact, that many of the later churches, deprived of their painted glass, are now overlit.

The Norman builder tried two alternatives to get more light. One was to raise the ground storey high and insert large windows in the aisle walls, as at Gloucester and Tewkesbury. This method resulted in a tall arcade and the triforium was built low and became a "blindstorey," i.e., with no external windows to the triforium chamber. The other method was to keep the ground storey low, or of moderate height, to make the triforium an important feature of the internal elevation, and to insert windows in its outer wall. If this latter method was adopted, it meant that the interior triforium arcade should be as large and as open as possible, in order that the light from the windows in its outer wall should be as unobstructed as possible.

Some builders, however, were illogical, and built large triforium openings, although it was not meant to get additional light through them, and Carlisle is of this variety. Here again the necessity for simplicity may have been the determining factor. It is interesting to note, in passing, that at the priory church at Hexham was built in Gothic days a large triforium which is of this

illogical type, although in itself a beautiful feature of the internal elevation.

The way in which the desire for more light thus determined the proportions of the interior shows that there was a logical reason behind it all, and that the proportions were not dictated simply by caprice.

The clerestory, as often, consists of a tall central arch containing a window, and flanked by two low blind arches. The capitals, as usual in early 12th century work, are scalloped.

The nave aisles are also of the plainest character and have little architectural detail. There is no wall arcade, and a single round-headed window would light each bay. There are attached wall columns between each bay, with typical caps and bases, but these stop short at the height of the arcade piers and do not fulfil any constructional purpose. There is a wall arch between each bay on the north side, but this is omitted on the south. The aisles of Norman churches are usually vaulted, but Carlisle is almost alone among the greater churches in having no aisle vaults. It appears that there was no intention of this from the beginning, as the aisle wall is exceptionally thin for Norman work. There was, of course, no high vault. This involved constructional difficulties which the Norman builder usually shirked, and the majority of the vastest and richest of the early cathedrals and abbeys were content with a wooden roof or ceiling to their naves and choirs. Durham almost alone had the courage to build a high vault at this period.

The arches next to the crossing have been partly crushed by the settling of the tower piers caused by a faulty foundation. This settlement appears to have occurred very early, probably even during the progress of the works, as although the sinking is very evident at arcade and triforium level, the settlement has been evened up and almost made good at clerestory height.

The piers of the crossing are only Norman in the lower stages, the upper portion having been rebuilt and added when the tower was constructed in the early part of the 15th century. The lower parts of the northern and southern faces of the piers are flat, their shafts being stopped by corbels instead of descending to the ground. This was to allow the canons to place their stalls close up to the piers. In the Norman church the canons sat in the crossing and the two eastern bays of the nave, the structural choir being used as the presbytery and sanctuary.

In contrast to the walls of the nave aisles, those of the south transept are thick, no less than eight feet. The triforium is a plain round headed opening. The clerestory is similar to that of the nave but more irregular and equally destitute of ornament except for some carving to the capitals. The south wall was originally blank in its lower stage, as the domestic buildings of the priory abutted here and the night stair would lead down from the dormitory level into the church. This has all vanished, and an elaborate modern doorway has been constructed which is now the main entrance to the cathedral. In the east wall are two arches, the first of these originally opened into the transept apse which was destroyed in *c.* 1250, when the present St. Catherine's Chapel was built. In character it is like the rest of the work, the arches are not even chamfered, but the capitals are scalloped. Next to it is the entrance to the choir aisle. This arch is also simply executed, but the arch is ornamented with a zig-zag ornament, and the capitals are of the cushion type. There is also some distortion apparent here due to the movement of the tower piers.

The north transept corresponded architecturally to the southern one, but the original work has mostly disappeared and the present structure is a rebuilding of the period 1400-1419, with much modern work added at the last

restoration. When the choir was rebuilt in the middle of the 13th century, the additional width was gained on the north side, and this necessitated the destruction of the N. transept apse. The arch which had originally opened from the transept into the north aisle of the choir was blocked up, and this opening can still be traced on the west side adjacent to the tower pier. Like the corresponding arch in the S. transept, it bears some zig-zag ornament.

It is difficult to say much or indeed anything about the vanished Norman choir. From the investigations described previously we may assume that it was two bays long and terminated to the east in an apse. In character it probably resembled the transepts with the addition of a little more ornament. The walls would be massive and thick with the characteristic round-headed windows. The proportions of the interior elevations would probably be similar to those of the nave, with round-headed arches, the whole being simple, strong and massive. As with the nave, we may be certain that there was no high vault to the choir, but it is possible that the short choir aisles may have had some sort of vaulting or groining. We have seen that the transept walls are of great thickness, and were probably similar to the work in the choir. The thickness of these external walls suggests that they had some work to do, and it is possible that the choir aisles had vaulting. However, this point is not now capable of proof or disproof.

EXTERIOR.

The treatment of the exterior would be plain, broad and simple, and characteristic of the period. The bays of the nave are separated by flat buttresses about five and a half feet wide and of small projection. The parapet wall above them is supported by a corbel table. In each bay is a single window with a circular head flanked by single columns, and a similar though smaller window

occupied each bay of the clerestory. On the eastern side of each transept projected an apse with a conical roof, and similarly at the eastern end of the church was the great apse. Above the crossing would rise a tower of moderate height, capped with a low pyramidal roof and of simple detail. The roof would be of fairly sharp pitch, corresponding more or less with the present nave roof. What ornament and elaboration there was would be reserved for the west front, where was an imposing west door which would receive all the ornament and detail with which we are familiar from surviving examples elsewhere.

Altogether, the early Norman priory church of Carlisle would be a building of moderate dimensions and simple detail, displaying no unusual features in either plan or elevation, and while the portions of this church which remain with us at the present day are interesting more for their historic and archæological value than for their artistic achievement, we must remember that in all probability this church was the first stone building of any size to be erected in Carlisle since the Roman occupation, and as such, would be a source of pride and satisfaction to its builders and contemporaries. It probably represented a greater effort of labour and money than many more elaborate and widely famed structures of later or modern times. If we could visualise the Norman church in its original setting we should see the rather grim and massive pile dominating the little town in a way that it is almost impossible to imagine to-day. It would have no other rivals apart from the keep of the castle, which came later, and the small one storey houses of the inhabitants would give scale to the building without rivalling it, an effect which would be even more striking in later days when the great choir was built on a more magnificent scale.