

ART. VI.—*Furness Abbey — an archaeological reconsideration.* By J. C. DICKINSON, F.S.A.

*Read at Keswick, April 1st, 1967.*

IN 1900 W. St John Hope published in our Transactions<sup>1</sup> his extensive report on excavations carried out at Furness Abbey under his direction in 1896, 1897 and 1898. Since this time surprisingly little fresh work on the abbey has been published. The present paper aims to record archaeological evidence not considered by Hope for one reason or another, and to note a few *errata* in his paper: it is based on research undertaken in the preparation of the new official guidebook to the abbey.<sup>2</sup>

Next to no new documentary evidence concerning the architectural history of the abbey of Furness has been noted since 1900 though the great cartulary of the monastery has been fully published.<sup>3</sup> Doubtless the considerable wealth of the abbey (it was the second richest Cistercian house in England), and its possession of abundant building stone in nearby quarries rendered unnecessary those gifts and appeals for financial aid which are the main sources of our knowledge of most medieval church building after the Norman Conquest. The new archaeological evidence, if not great in quantity, is of considerable interest, most of it being the result of work on the site which followed its transfer to the guardianship of the Office of Works by Lord Richard Cavendish in 1923.

<sup>1</sup> CWI xvi 221-302. For interesting comments by J. Bilson on the plan published here see *App.* I.

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Dickinson, *Furness Abbey* (H.M.S.O., 1965).

<sup>3</sup> *Furness Coucher Book* (ed. J. C. Atkinson and J. Brownbill), 2 vols. in 6, 1886-1919; J. A. Knowles, *The York School of Glass Painting* (1936), p. 149, notes work at Furness by John Petty of York (d. 1508).

### The choice of site.

As the writer has pointed out elsewhere<sup>4</sup> a dominant factor in the selection of the site of any medieval monastery was the provision of an adequate water supply. There can be no doubt that one chief reason for the monks of Furness choosing the particular site in the area which they did was the existence there of a vigorous beck and of a series of springs (now largely lost). The former was the primary source of drainage as Hope's plan shows very clearly, but it also supplied a now lost dam as well as fishponds<sup>5</sup> and water mills.<sup>6</sup> One or two of the springs served for subsidiary drains and apparently a conduit now destroyed. Much lead piping has recently been discovered, notably a length which apparently conveyed water from the abbot's house to the kitchen.

In certain other respects, however, the site of Furness Abbey was awkward. Because the narrow valley in which it was set ran roughly north and south<sup>7</sup> there was not enough space for the main gatehouse and ancillary buildings to be set in their usual position west of the church. Instead they were placed on the roomier ground north of the church, which had the additional advantage of being the side nearest to Dalton, then the only significant local centre of population. Because of this the great ceremonial door which was normally in the west wall of the church was set in the highly unusual position of the north wall of the north transept. The massive door we find here contrasts vividly with the small portals in this position at other Cistercian houses such as Rievaulx and Fountains. A further result of this siting of the

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Dickinson, *Monastic Life in Medieval England* (1961) 5-9.

<sup>5</sup> T. A. Beck, *Annales Furnestenses* (1844) 361.

<sup>6</sup> CWI xvi 297.

<sup>7</sup> Beck, *op. cit.* Although the orientation of the abbey church and attendant buildings is not exactly due east and west, for the sake of convenience it is here assumed so to be.

abbey was that shortage of space led to the conventual church abutting on the western side of the ravine and on its eastern side to the first abbot's house being built against the living rock. As we shall see, experience soon showed that the site was not well suited for the erection of large buildings without precautions which the first builders at the abbey did not take. (below, p. 57).

### **The church.**

Following the placing of the remains of the abbey in the guardianship of the then Office of Works (now Ministry of Public Buildings and Works) a series of excavations was made chiefly in connection with the repair of the church and chapterhouse. In view of their interest and importance it is greatly to be regretted that reports of the work in progress or any adequate later digest of the discoveries made have not survived. The sole account in print is apparently the brief report of Sir Charles Peers' address to our Society when he visited the abbey in September 1928, preserved in our Transactions<sup>8</sup> and elsewhere.

This informs us that the "walls (of the church) were built on waterlogged soil and were ultimately a source of great danger to the abbey. The monks dug down about eight feet into the ground until they came to a bed of gravel and on that they built the foundations of their walls. As a result of boring operations in recent years, it has been found that the bed of gravel was only seven or eight inches thick, and they had bored down twenty-two feet and found no bottom whatever. The Savignians for some reason or another did not go down to the gravel bed, but they laid down great logs of oak on two feet of peat and built their walls on that. The result was that the weight of the

<sup>8</sup> CW2 xxix 334. The fortnightly reports of work on the site were pulped before or during World War II.

building tipped up the foundations and the walls leaned over considerably. No definite evidence of repair having taken place until the beginning of the 15th century when parts were rebuilt . . . in recent years it has been necessary to do a considerable amount of work to protect them from complete ruin”.

To these much too brief notes the following comments may be added :

- (i) The writer’s recollection of the speaker’s talk on this occasion that the mass of repair work concerned the foundations of the north transept, the crossing and the chapter house (notably its eastern wall) is confirmed by a number of official photos of the restoration in progress.
- (ii) One of the workers on the repairs, the late Mr R. Caine, informed the writer that the wooden piles consisted of lengths of thick oak trunks laid in threes at a depth of five feet below the present ground level; above them was a bed of rubble on which were the ashlar foundations; this rubble was replaced by concrete by H.M. Office of Works. All or most of the logs found were removed.
- (iii) Oak piles of a similar type were found long before in the chancel of the church. Beck notes that some tombstones “were found to be supported by oaken piles upon which they were laid cross-wise and thus formed a foundation for a thick wall of grout work, the substructure of some former portion of the chancel”.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately the exact site of these tombstones is not clear, but it is possible that the piles were part of the eastern end of the Savigniac church which was apparently square-ended as Hope suggested.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.* 388.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.* 228.



- (iv) A very considerable number of these piles was removed from the site and made up into various articles. Before the last war about half a dozen were kept in the infirmary chapel but only two of them now remain.
- (v) Mr A. J. Taylor points out that some, at least, of the piles here mentioned would probably have been laid on a foundation of other piles driven into the ground, this being the stock medieval method of coping with marshy sites of the type found at Furness.

With regard to the west end of the church one or two corrections to Hope's remarks may be made. In the west wall of the north aisle of the nave are the remains of a doorway some five feet above the floor level, to which it was joined by a shallow stair of which much remains. According to Hope access to this from outside "must have been by a causeway or bridge of some kind extending across the north side of the tower from the bank beyond".<sup>11</sup> Such a mode of entry is as unusual as it is improbable, and the present Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Mr A. J. Taylor, has confirmed the present writer's opinion that there is not the slightest sign of any such causeway ever having existed. The aisle door was originally entered at first floor level for the simple reason that the steep western side of the ravine here ran straight down to the church at this height, having been cut back by drastic clearing in post-monastic times, perhaps that ordered by Lord George Cavendish.<sup>12</sup>

Equally unlikely is Hope's suggestion that the tower may not have been finished.<sup>13</sup> He dates it to the fifteenth century, but it is improbable that so rich

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 250.

<sup>12</sup> *Below*, n. 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.* 251.

a house as Furness would not have finished its tower by the time of its dissolution half a century afterwards (1540). Further, it is clear that when the tower was cleared, considerable remains of it were found. Jopling's useful guide speaks of "the enormous mass of masonry that was cleared away in the general excavation about twelve years since, by Lord G. Cavendish. Previously to this there was a road through the window".<sup>14</sup> The masonry below the sill of the window today is clearly original and undisturbed, so that the passage mentioned must have passed through the window itself. Jopling surmised reasonably that "the tower was once carried a very considerable height",<sup>15</sup> a view supported by the immense thickness of the tower's walls — nine feet at the side and eleven feet at the west end. Beck notes that "the rubbish in this tower accumulated by the fall of the superstructure, which filled up the interior to the window sill, was rendered so compact by its fall, so tenacious by the rains and was composed of such strongly cemented materials" that Lord George Cavendish's workmen had to use gunpowder to clear it.<sup>16</sup>

An interesting constructional point in the north arcade of the nave has hitherto gone unrecorded. Its central piers have quite clearly been constructed in two distinct sections as a clean break running east and west is clearly visible in them. There seems little doubt that this is due to the construction here of a temporary wall which preceded the arcade and was later demolished to allow the completion of the piers.

### **The chapterhouse.**

Our member Mr J. L. Hobbs and the late Mr T. W. Ogilvie noticed that the present level of the floor of

<sup>14</sup> C. M. Jopling, *Sketch of Furness and Cartmel* (1843). 113 n.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.* 374 n.

the Chapterhouse did not look like the original one, and were informed by Mr Maxwell, the then custodian of the abbey, that at the time of the restoration of the fabric between the wars Sir Charles Peers ordered the burial in the chapterhouse floor of various stones found amongst the debris here. About 1946 at Mr Hobbs' suggestion a small excavation was made here which revealed well-worked octagonal bases at least a foot below the present level.<sup>17</sup> It is greatly to be hoped that this floor will be fully explored. In this connection it is worth bearing in mind the worthy Beck's note "the ancient level of the cloister was much below that of the church".<sup>18</sup> All this makes it seem highly likely that the level of the original chapterhouse floor was well below that of the present one and other evidence supports this view.

- (i) we know that the original level of the east end of the church and of the small court north of it recently revealed were a yard below that of the later ones,<sup>19</sup> thus suggesting that the first buildings here were laid out on soil that turned out to be waterlogged and were necessarily rebuilt at a higher level. This early waterlogging may possibly be partly due to alterations in the course of the beck made to ensure it flowing under the monastic rere-dorter not far from the chapterhouse.
- (ii) the present chapterhouse is very much later than the time of the first Cistercians, who would normally build it at an early stage in proceedings, extending it later when increased numbers so demanded as at Kirkstall. Here we have no

<sup>17</sup> Information *ex* Mr J. L. Hobbs.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.* 394.

<sup>19</sup> Hope found the base of the present sedilia was 3 ft. 5 in. above the level of the early floor (*op. cit.* 301-302) and recent excavations show that the second floor level of the small court north of the chancel was three feet above the first one.

certain trace of any work, before the very end of the 12th century at the earliest. (Appendix I).

- (iii) this late reconstruction may be due to the certain fact that the site of the first chapterhouse was not a sound one (before the Office of Works restoration of the abbey its eastern walls were leaning outward in a very pronounced way) so was rebuilt at a higher level like other buildings.

#### **Cloister buildings.**

Of the buildings on the south side of the cloister next to nothing remains. The present writer does not feel at all convinced that the elaborate development here posited by Hope is accurate. Certainly there can be no doubt that the little Savigniac refectory was demolished, or that the first Cistercian's refectory was built at right angles to the refectory in their normal manner. But the evidence for its reconstruction and the addition of a two-storied misericord as urged by Hope is very much thinner than modern archaeological standards demand. Such features are not shown in Hope's plan published in *The Builder* in 1895<sup>20</sup> nor borne out by the very scanty remains found in the area thereafter.

In regard to the buildings west of the cloister investigation showed some small doubtful features in Hope's plan as published in our *Transactions* and utilised in the *Victorian County History*,<sup>21</sup> which have been corrected in that made by the Ministry officials for the present writer's guidebook and the simplified version of it given here. On the eastern side of the cloister the very thick wall which ran between the Infirmary and the abbot's house was demolished in 1952. Its date was uncertain. Hope had no hesitation in assigning it to the 15th century and put forward

<sup>20</sup> 6 July 1895.

<sup>21</sup> *VCH Lancs.*, viii (facing p. 288).

the startling suggestion that it had originally had a gallery on top<sup>22</sup> without producing any evidence to support this highly unusual plan. The present writer cannot accept this solution but supports Hope's view that the wall was "certainly ancient". As the wall is shown in the print of the abbey of 1727<sup>23</sup> it is not to be classed as modern. But its exceptional thickness and (if the writer's memory is correct) the fact that it was made of dry walling, as well as its position do not suggest a medieval date. It is not impossible that it was made from demolished material soon after the Dissolution to provide some degree of privacy.

In the east wall of the great infirmary in the south side of the doorway which leads from it into the infirmary chapel is an almost square niche, of uncertain use. It is 27 inches wide by 26 inches high and 29 inches deep with a grooved edge for a door, signs of two hinges on top and a lock of some kind below, with roughly made interior walls.

Opposite the abbot's house remain foundations of a small building with latrines, of late medieval date, marked by Hope as "? Camera of visiting abbot". However there is no positive evidence for such an attribution and by the time this building was constructed the primitive Cistercian habit of visitation seems to have largely broken down. There are various signs that English Cistercians of the 15th century were taking in what modern man would term paying guests, for some of whom quite elaborate quarters were provided. For this little Furness building some such use may be suggested.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.* 296.

<sup>23</sup> Mr R. Gilyard Beer points out signs that the abbot's house was in ruins when the wall was built.











### **The site north of the church.**

The site north of the church was given very little attention by Hope, doubtless because it was a subsidiary part of the monastic area with nothing much of interest visible, whilst the existence of the Furness Abbey Hotel and its extensive grounds at this time would not have allowed much work here. In the area near the southern boundary wall of the former hotel gardens and the land north of the conventual church some small but useful discoveries have since been made.

In or just before 1925 a rewarding dig explored the angle of the area close to the stream, and revealed two sets of foundations at different levels. (Fig. 1.) The lower, some three feet below the later one, belonged to the late 12th century. Its most interesting feature was a porch facing west. The base of its door remained and had neat cable moulding, whilst on the door sill nearby was scratched a nine men's morris board. East of the porch were traces of what may have been a small courtyard. Here, as with the church and the chapterhouse, clearly it was found necessary to rebuild at a later date at a higher level. In the early 14th century a new courtyard was laid out three feet above the old one; of it much of the western side of the plan remains. It had a smaller porch on a slightly different alignment from its predecessor, attached to a wall running north and south a little to the east of the earlier one. To the south was a rectangular building projecting slightly west of the wall. This was divided into two chambers and shows what was perhaps the base of an external stair on its south side. The purpose of this building is not known, but may have been connected with monastic hospitality.

Later these buildings were evidently removed and their site overlapped, by a simple rectangular build-

# FURNESS ABBEY

-  12th. Century
-  Early and Mid to Late 12th. Century
-  Early to Mid 13th. Century
-  Early to Mid 13th. Century
-  Early 14th. Century
-  Early 14th. Century
-  Late 15th. Century and circa 1500
-  Late 15th. Century and circa 1500
-  Uncertain
-  Post dissolution and modern

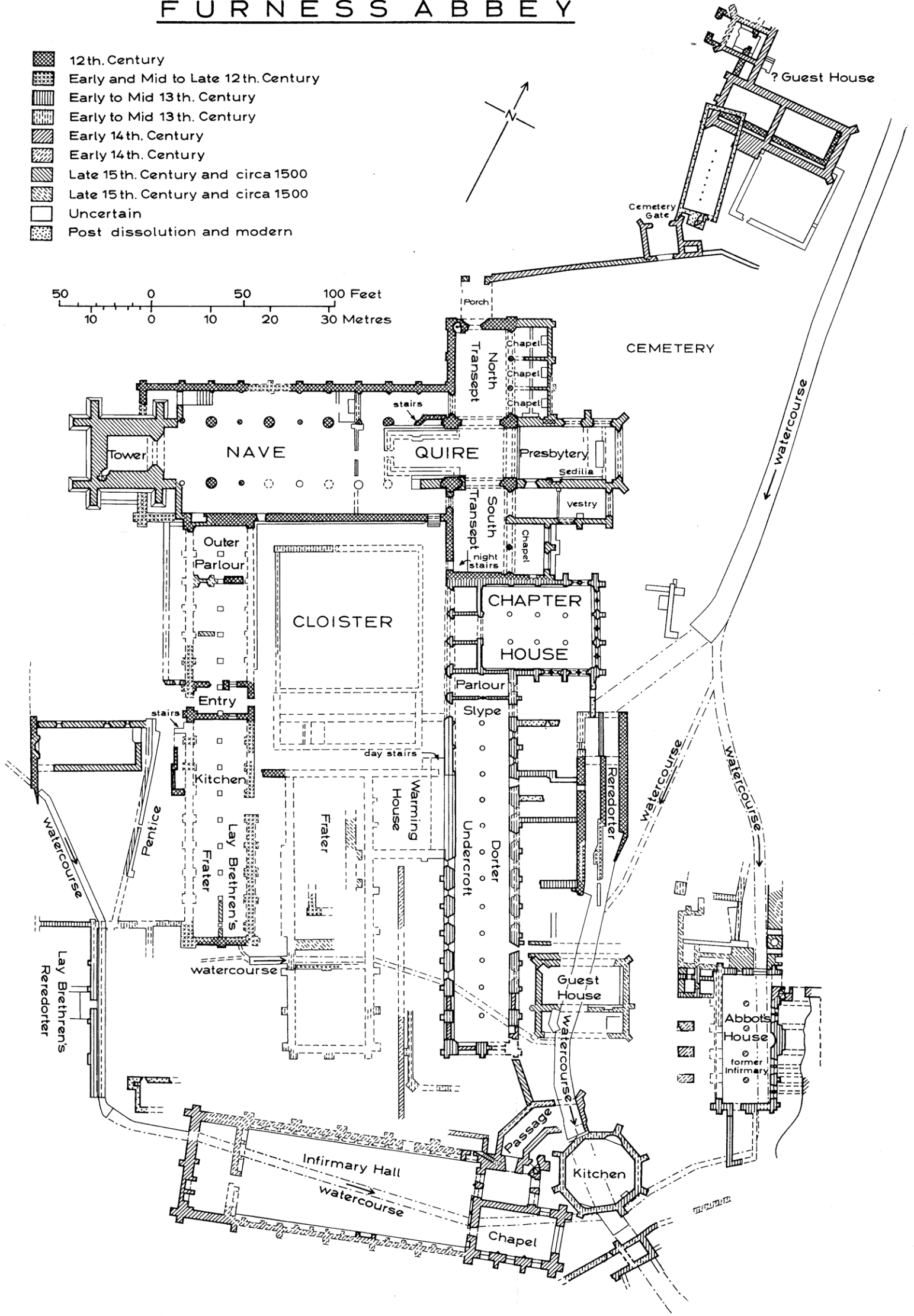


FIG. 1.—Furness Abbey

(based on plan prepared by H.M. Ministry of Public Buildings and Works by kind permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office).

ing, running very roughly north and south, of which substantial parts remain including a row of crude stone bases for timber supports which runs down its centre. This building is shown in the print of 1727 as intact with two floors and a small door at its southern end that led to a vice, of which the base remains. It was almost certainly post-Reformation in date, and may have been built as a stable with a hay loft over it. Near its south-eastern corner is the substantial arch and other remains of a porch to the monks' cemetery. The print of 1727 shows a small cottage on its site and it is not clear whether this porch was then incorporated therein or was a later reconstruction though this seems unlikely.

#### **The outer court.**

As has been noted, for sufficient reasons Hope paid very little attention to this outer court. Changed conditions have allowed a fuller study of it, which, it is hoped, will do something to fill the very slight attention not very excusably given to it in the *V.C.H. of Lancashire* where only a few lines are devoted to this area. Before turning to a detailed consideration of the part of the site till recently occupied by the Furness Abbey Hotel, a note or two may be inserted concerning the *capella extra portas* or gatehouse chapel fully described by Hope<sup>24</sup> which stood to the north of it.

This chapel was normally used for those dependents of the abbey, who were not bound to attend worship at the local parish church. It has two unusual features. In the first place it is of surprisingly late date for so important an adjunct of the monastic buildings. Such chapels normally belong to the early or middle years of the 13th century, as at Coggeshall

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.* 234-236.



and Rievaulx. It is of course possible that there was an earlier building on the present site, though there is no indication of it. However, another explanation is possible, namely that no *capella extra portas* was built here until the time of the present one, previous worshippers using the north transept of the abbey church. Such use of the transept prevailed at some Augustinian houses, e.g. St Bartholemew's, Smithfield, Creake and Hexham but was very rare, if not unique, in English Cistercian houses. However, there are certain indications that this may have been the case at Furness. Hope found remains which suggested that there was originally a wall separating the north transept from the crossing,<sup>25</sup> and one or two tombs seem originally to have been in this area, again an unusual feature but not impossible if it was being used for secular worship. A little documentary evidence hints at the same direction.

The last volume of the printed edition of the great cartulary of Furness Abbey, shows us that, with the aid of grants of indulgences by an interesting collection of northern bishops including those of Whithorn, Dublin and Durham,<sup>26</sup> the abbey was, for a while at least, a small pilgrimage centre, though it had no great relics or very illustrious statue of Our Lady, nor was this sort of thing normally encouraged in Cistercian abbeys. One may hazard the guess that it gained here official support because of the almost complete lack in north-western England of those places of pilgrimage which were so popular in medieval times. These indulgences show us another highly unusual fact — namely that the pilgrims were accustomed to hear sermons in the monastic chapter-house,<sup>27</sup> a thing highly irregular in so strictly an en-

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 242.

<sup>26</sup> *Coucher Book* ii 799-801.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 800-805.

closed community as the Cistercians, and one which must have greatly interfered with their cloister life on the admittedly rarish occasions when it occurred.

Now it may not be coincidence that the *capella extra portas* of Furness Abbey, which is admittedly of mid-14th century date, is first mentioned in 1344 when bishop Thomas of Lincoln granted an indulgence to those who venerated at Furness a statue of the Virgin either "in the conventual church of the said monastery or the chapel constructed outside the inner gate".<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps significant that, rather earlier, similar indulgences all refer to the sermons being delivered in the chapterhouse. It is not impossible that, as was common enough at these times, a statue of Our Lady, having attained some local repute, became the centre of a small pilgrimage movement in the mid-14th century and was moved by the brethren from their church to the newly-built chapel, where, interestingly enough, the base for such a statue was discovered by Hope. The largish size of the chapel would doubtless suffice for the normal numbers of pilgrims it attracted. Whether the north transept was hereafter used for worship by outsiders we cannot say, or whether they continued to hear sermons in the chapterhouse on occasion.

#### **The Furness abbey hotel site.**

The history of the Furness Abbey Hotel site is one of complexity. It adjoins much of the site of the great gatehouse and indeed incorporates the eastern side of this building. There was undoubtedly in and around this area a series of early buildings of considerable importance, reflecting the great local influence of Furness, whose wealth at the Dissolution was second only to that of Fountains abbey, and which certainly

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 803.

maintained a fairly extensive variety of social benefits, to judge by an interesting post-Dissolution lawsuit.<sup>29</sup> The area was well away from the cloister where silence had to reign and was on the side of the abbey nearest to Dalton-in-Furness the only local centre of population. It was therefore the natural place to erect buildings for some, at least, of the abbey's manifold secular responsibilities. It may be here that were taught the school children mentioned in the lawsuit, the great room over the entrance to the main gatehouse's passage would certainly have various secular uses, the *capella extra portas* was near at hand as were probably also stables. There adjoined the east side of the main gatehouse a substantial guest hall with a kitchen nearby that would serve its members and other sections of the community<sup>30</sup> such as the inhabitants of the "lay infirmary" mentioned as early as 1250,<sup>31</sup> the thirteen poor maintained from the abbey's foundation<sup>32</sup> and various dependents. Very recently part of what was apparently an extensive drain has been found running north from the small courtyard on the north side of the chancel, already mentioned.

There has recently been removed the low wall which divided the north side of the abbey grounds from the former gardens of the Abbey Hotel; it contained medieval work of varying dates all re-used in modern times.<sup>33</sup> The considerable area between it and the site of the Hotel buildings has not been excavated, and nothing is known of its medieval use. Its excavation might be interesting in view of our limited knowledge

<sup>29</sup> T. West, *The Antiquities of Furness*, ed. W. Close (1805) 195.

<sup>30</sup> Below, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Coucher Book* ii 123. Close points out (*op. cit.* 366) that "the (lay) cemetery belonging to the abbey was situated on the north-west side of the vale above the church". It was on the high land north of the small house west of the church; traces of the cemetery have been found recently.

<sup>32</sup> Beck, *op. cit.*, 333.

<sup>33</sup> Information *ex* Mr J. Caine.

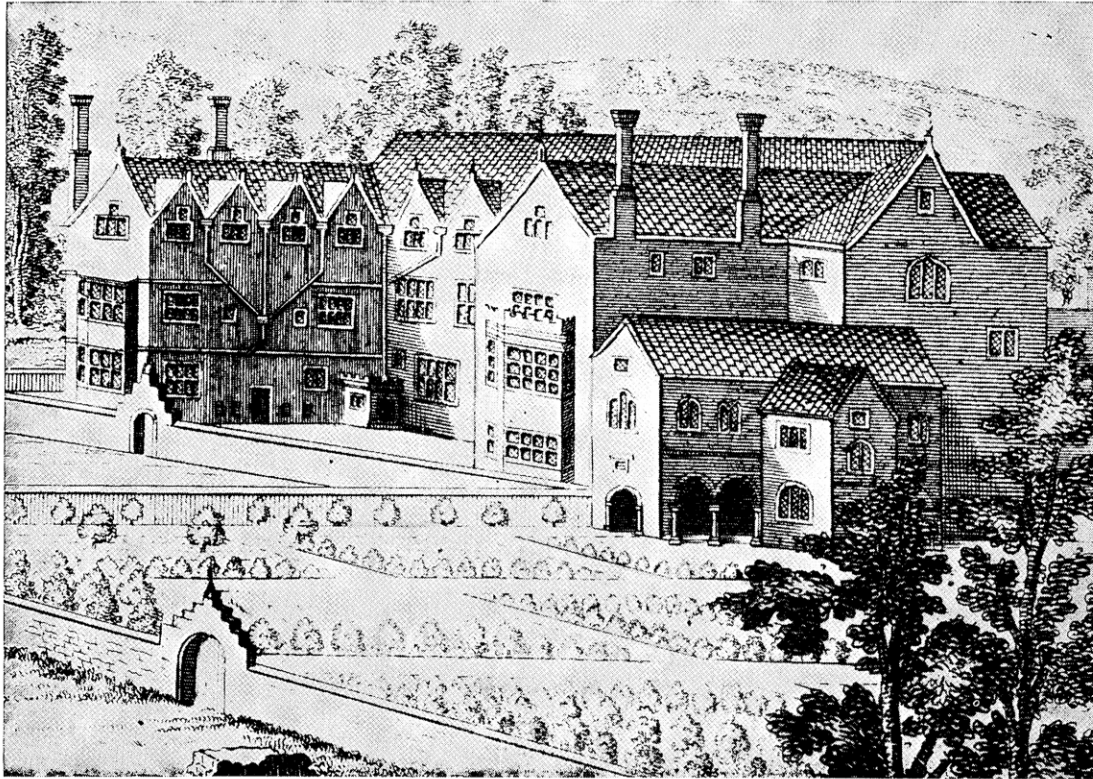


PLATE I.—The Manor at Furness Abbey in 1727  
(from part of *Vetusta Monumenta*, i pl. xxvii, published by the Society of Antiquaries) (enlarged)

of the layout of the outer courts of medieval monasteries; slight remains of the wings of the old Manor House are still traceable.

The history of that part of the site on which the Hotel was built a century ago is interesting and involved. There is no doubt that at an uncertain date it became the site of the house of the Preston family who held the abbey site for a century and a half after the Dissolution, for long by a complex series of leases, of which the details are not all clear.<sup>34</sup>

As the writer has recently pointed out elsewhere,<sup>35</sup> at the Dissolution it was usual to dismember the conventual church and the main living buildings of the monastery, but to keep for the new secular occupant some convenient set of old buildings, most often the apartments used by the head of the monastery. The later Cistercians tended to build rather a large abbot's apartments and we know that Furness was no exception, the old infirmary being adapted and extended for this purpose in the 14th century. Probably, if not quite certainly, it was this place, as was usual, which was left for the first lay occupant.

A survey at the time of the suppression of the monastery tells us that there had been left standing "For a Fermour (*i.e. tenant*) to inhabyte and dwell in a Fayer Hall with a buttrye, a Pantry, a Kechyn . . . a Larder, a Seller, a Bachhouse, a Brewhouse, and a Leade to brewe in, a great malting House, a Garner a stable and many other houses necessary for a Fermour and xi Chambers greete and smalle, with a greate yarde and a great orchard hard adjoyneng to the late Abbottes lodging . . ."<sup>36</sup> All the buildings here named may not have been in the same part of the abbey precinct, but some may have been

<sup>34</sup> *VCH Lancs.* viii 311-312.

<sup>35</sup> *Monastic Life in Medieval England*, 139.

<sup>36</sup> Hope, *op. cit.*, 296.

in the region of the later manor house where ancient guide-books wrongly located the abbot's house. That the latter was the building across the stream from the new infirmary is beyond all archaeological doubt. Such a site fits much better with the undoubted facts that a Cistercian abbot's house was nearly always on the south-east side of the cloister, as it is here, and in any case would have to be in a secluded area well away from the secular noises and activities of the outer court, whilst as Hope points out, the existing remains of the abbot's house at Furness fit well with the surveyor's description.<sup>37</sup>

However, an extremely interesting document printed by Hope<sup>38</sup> shows us that only a few years later in 1549, a Hall and attendant buildings here were "vereye ruinous and in great decay" and that the new tenant, John Preston, desired "to have a newe Halle, parler, Chambres and other howses or offices bilt". He was given permission to build a new house "meet for a gentleman of one hundreth pounds to dwell in", and granted 100 marks towards the cost, with the right to use timber and stone from the old buildings, except the barns and stables. It is unfortunate that this document does not make clear where this "newe Halle" was to be, nor is it absolutely certain that John Preston took advantage of the permission granted to him. Certainly the old abbot's house built against the rock on sharply-sloping ground with no fine view or room for a fine garden in front of it was no place for a country gentleman's seat, and it is not surprising that the building should have been discarded for a noble, largely new house on an admirable site facing south with room for a garden in front and the majestic ruins of the abbey church beyond.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>38</sup> 297 n.

The first firm piece of architectural news of the new manor house which we have, comes from Sir Daniel Fleming, who, writing about 1671, notes of Furness Abbey site "here is now a stately new house whose owner is Sir Thomas Preston Baronet".<sup>39</sup> This may confirm the statement of the learned West that the abbey house was built by the John Preston who died in 1643.<sup>40</sup> If so, we are still in the dark as to whether this building stood on a new site or merely replaced the one envisaged almost a century earlier. However, soon after this, the architectural darkness lifts. In 1727, the sixth centenary of the foundation of the abbey of Furness, the Society of Antiquaries published a large and invaluable print of the abbey which gives *inter alia* our sole known picture of the "stately new house" (Plate I).<sup>41</sup> The place was termed "the Manor House" and was built on a scale which made it vie with Levens and Sizergh.

Unhappily, by the time the print was published the importance of the noble house at Furness was already declining. This was initially due to the fact that the branch of the family of Preston which had held the site for so long now died out. In 1674 the Sir Thomas Preston whom Fleming mentions being, like not a few of his ancestors, a Roman Catholic, became a Jesuit in Holland where he died in 1709 after a remarkable but ineffective attempt to convey the site of the abbey to the Jesuits.<sup>42</sup> Complex legal steps over the estate followed which ended with the site being leased by the younger branch of the Preston family. It passed thence to the Lowthers who lived at Holker Hall and showed no disposition to change their family seat. As a result this magnificent building at Furness slid slowly down the social scale.

<sup>39</sup> *Fleming Senhouse Papers*, ed. E. Hughes (Carlisle, 1961) 30.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.* 255-256. He gives no authority for the statement, but it may well be correct.

<sup>41</sup> *Vetusta Monumenta* i, pl. xxvii.

<sup>42</sup> *VCH Lancs.* viii 312; West, *op. cit.*, 256-257.

By 1606 we find Thomas Preston of Holker leasing "houses at the Mannor called the Deyary, Paint house, 2 rooms up, the stone stairs at the Mannor house, half the high barn and beast houses 'to' James Gardner of the Mannor and two husbandmen".<sup>43</sup> In 1710 Madame Elizabeth Preston of Holker granted a similar lease to Thomas Dodgson of the Manor husbandman.<sup>44</sup> By this time for unexplored economic and social reasons various of the country houses in the area such as Cark Hall and Canon Winder Hall were evidently declining and probably nothing but the establishment here of a great family could have saved the building, which from now on for a century seems to have been left to lesser breeds, though one Thomas Atkinson of Furness Abbey who died in 1774 was armigerous.<sup>45</sup> Our next mention of it occurs in West who notes here, much too briefly, "a manor house and modern buildings with some remains of the walls of an ancient passage . . . adjoining the abbot's apartments occupy one side of the vale".<sup>46</sup> The *Lancashire Directory* of 1825, less helpful than usual, notes its occupant as William Townson<sup>47</sup> without telling us his position or employment. Beck's magnificent *Annales Furnesienses* gives surprisingly little attention to the manor house, merely noting its existence and adding "what part of the original is embodied in the modern structure it would now be difficult to point out".<sup>48</sup> Evans, in 1842, terms it only a manor house of modern date with its offices.<sup>49</sup> It seems likely, though not certain, as we shall see, that by now the north wing of the house had gone, and the southern one had been reduced in splendour.

<sup>43</sup> R. Sharpe France, *The Holker Muniments* (Penrith, 1950) 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Memorial in Dalton Parish Church.

<sup>46</sup> ed. Close, 361.

<sup>47</sup> E. Baines, *Directory . . . of the County Palatine of Lancaster*, ii 655.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.* 401.

<sup>49</sup> Furness and Furness Abbey (Ulverston, 1842) 197.



However at this point the place unexpectedly took on a new lease of life through the initiative of the directors of the newly founded Furness Railway. Their minutes of 18 July 1845 note "they also examined a plan for the station at Furness Abbey, showing the proposed method of uniting it to an inn there, of which a plan had been prepared in the event of the creation of such inn being eventually decided by the Earl of Burlington".<sup>50</sup> The minutes of 27 February 1847 record "The Hotel at Furness is very nearly completed" and adds that it would be ready for opening in "the early spring" at which time the recently purchased "Steam Boat" was to start plying between Furness and Fleetwood.<sup>51</sup> The following year was noted (21 November 1848) the letting of the hotel to "Mr Parker of the Sun (Hotel) Ulverston at £100 per annum clear of taxes, and so from year to year".<sup>52</sup> On 28 February 1849 it was "arranged with the Earl of Burlington that the term for the lease of the Abbey Hotel should be 60 years at £1 a year".<sup>53</sup> This nominal rent is doubtless due to the fact that the hotel buildings were being extended by the Earl and account for the very sparse information on the early architectural history of the hotel in the directors' minutes. No useful documents on this have been found apart from two invaluable plans dated 1854, which will be considered below. According to a likely enough note in papers of the late P. V. Kelly, now in the possession of Mr J. Melville, the architects were Messrs. Sharpe and Paley, later Austen and Paley, who were responsible for a number of Victorian Gothic buildings in Lancashire.

These developments did not escape notice in the growing flood of local guide-books. Thus Mannex's

<sup>50</sup> British Transport Historical Records, Fur. 1/3, p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 1/1, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 1/3, p. 93.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 1/3, p. 103.

*Directory of Lancashire* for 1860 notes "the inn or hotel at Furness Abbey is a large establishment replete with every accommodation for tourist visitors to this hoary fane. Until some years ago it was called the Manor House and was occupied by a farmer".<sup>54</sup>

An undated *Handbook for Visits to the English Lakes* by Wilson tells us that "the Duke of Devonshire has since the introduction of the railway converted the Abbot's House (*sic*) into a commodious hotel and laid out the area adjoining as a pleasure ground in a style according well with the monastic character of the place".<sup>55</sup> As late as 1913 alteration was still going on, the minutes now noting "a new sitting-room called the Abbot's Room with ecclesiastical stained glass windows has been opened on the first floor, the celebrated base reliefs being its principal feature".<sup>56</sup> With a certain disregard for harsh, geographical fact a full-page advertisement for the place in *The Railway News* for 5 July of this year claimed "Furness Abbey Hotel is the Centre for Lakeland". However, by now it had become far from unpopular. The minutes show that the gross takings in 1898 were £3,738 and £4,329 the next year.<sup>57</sup>

In between the First and Second World Wars the hotel continued to fulfil its function on a modest scale, but war brought evil days. After being inhabited by the military (who seem not to have added to its amenities), the place was left largely unoccupied with disastrous results to its roofs and floors. Repair having become too costly the building was bought by Barrow-in-Furness Corporation in 1951, and finally demolished three years later, except for part of its northern wing where the old refreshment-room con-

<sup>54</sup> p. 410.

<sup>55</sup> p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> B.T.H.R.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 1/36, p. 467.

tinues after the closure of the Furness Abbey Station to provide sustenance of a not altogether Cistercian type.

Present evidence is entirely inadequate to give us any clear picture of the original layout of this outer court of Furness Abbey, which, as we have seen must have been a considerable one with a variety of buildings, most of which have disappeared at various dates. Today almost all we have visible of the court is the *capella extra portas* — well preserved except for its roof — and much of the foundations of the great gatehouse which adjoined the manor on its western side.

Of the medieval work on the site later occupied by the Furness Abbey Hotel our evidence is scanty, coming principally from the print of 1727 (which, though useful, must not be taken as accurate on every point of detail and is occasionally obscure) and, secondly, from the mid nineteenth-century plans for the reconstruction of the hotel to a copy of which Mr Melville has most kindly put at my disposal. These plans (dated November 1854) show the ground floor of the hotel (Fig. 2) and its upper floor which is termed "the Chamber Plan". In the original copy old work was shown in black and new work in yellow, but the black and white copy consulted by the writer sometimes makes these two difficult to distinguish. To these may be added a brief account of the building made in 1931 by Mr P. V. Kelly (*App.* II), lent to me by Mr Melville.

The 1727 engraving shows a fine house with eastern and western wings boldly projecting from a substantial cross wing which has a very medieval look about it (apart from its windows). At its north-east corner is the end of what is clearly an external stair going up to first-floor level, a very common feature in the great medieval halls of this type. The Victorian plans

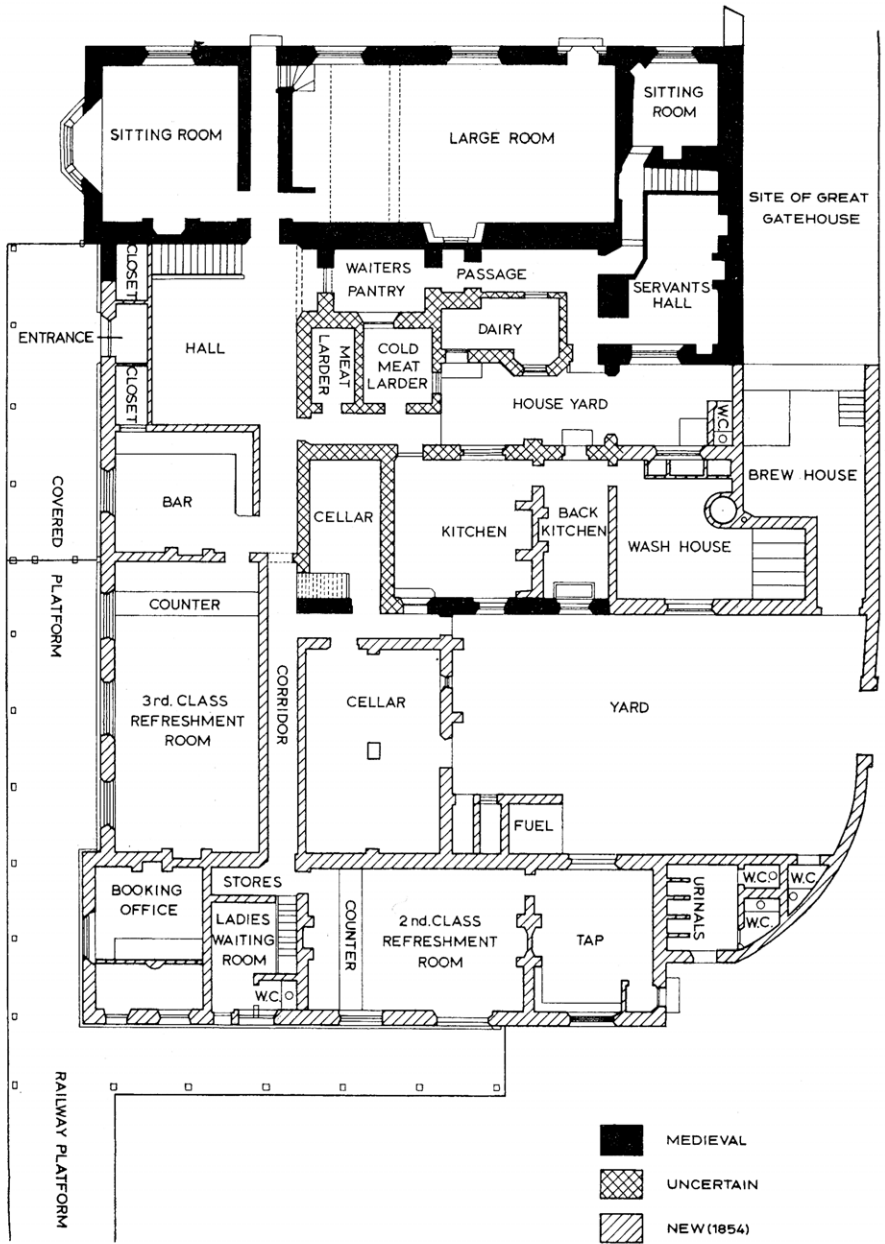


FIG. 2.—Plan of Furness Abbey Hotel (1854)  
(based on the copy in the P. V. Kelly papers).

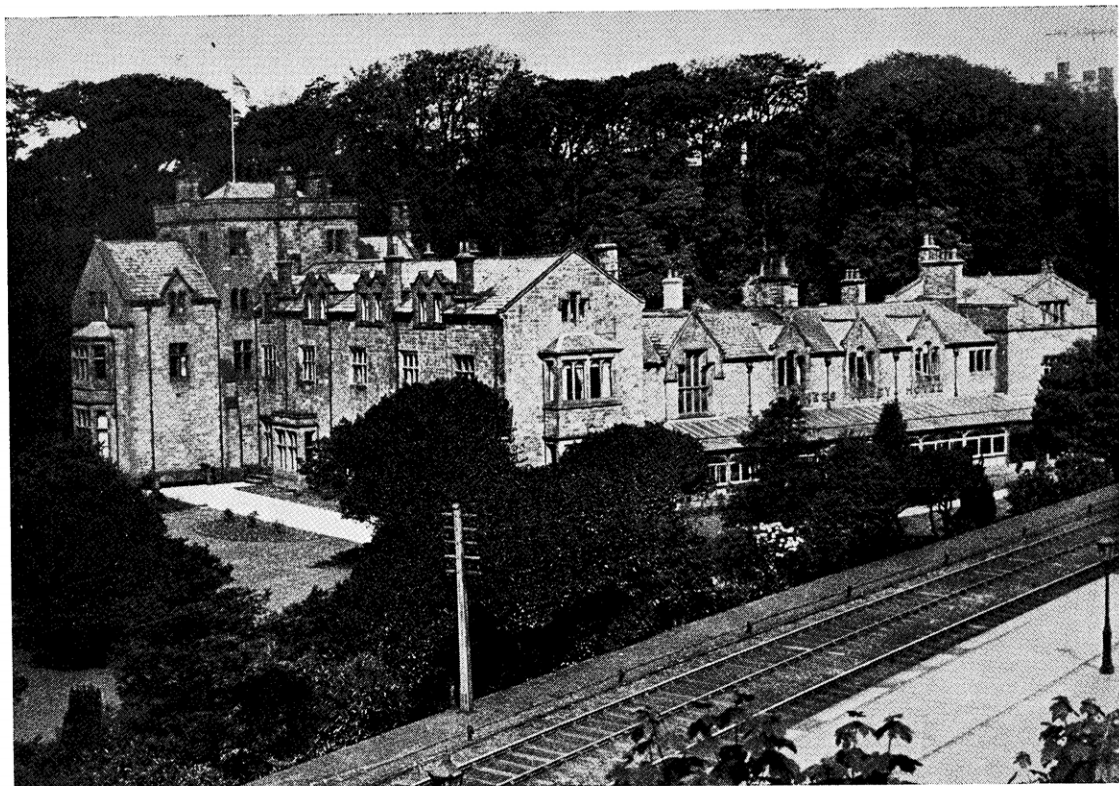


PLATE II.—Furness Abbey Hotel *c.* 1900  
(Photo by permission of British Transport Historical Records).

tcwaas\_002\_1967\_vol67\_0009

completely confirms this, showing a staircase in exactly the position where one expected it to be. It also confirms the impression that the whole of this centre block of the manor house was of medieval work for it shows that most of its walls as having that considerable thickness which often tends to differentiate medieval work in our area from that of later centuries. The ground plan also shows a through passage at the southern end, which is also a common enough medieval feature. Parts of a wall to the north of the hall seems to have belonged to another side of a square court, so usual in medieval architecture, and probably belong to this period. There can be little doubt that the centre part of the manor house, as shown in the 1727 engraving, is a medieval guest-hall adapted for domestic use after the Dissolution.

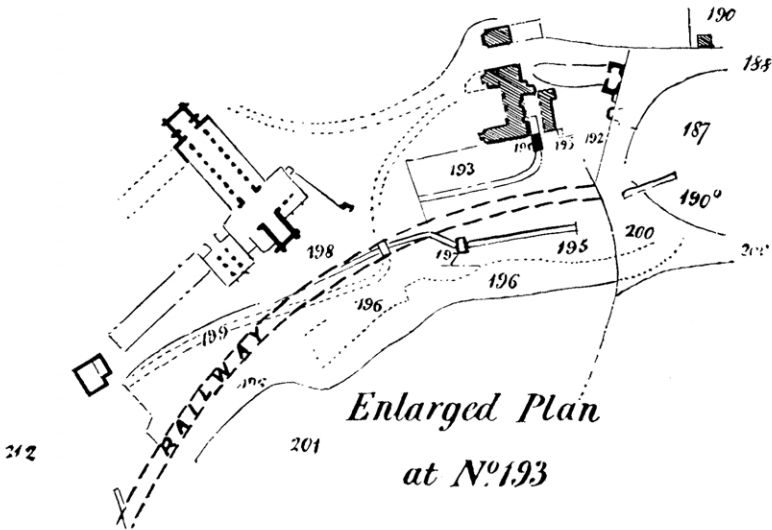


FIG. 3.—Enlarged Plan of Furness Abbey site (1843)  
(from the original survey for the project of Furness Railway,  
now in the Barrow-in-Furness Library).

The wings which project from it in the 1727 engraving are not shown in the plan of 1854 though the outline of the southern one is hatched in and marked "South wing removed". The thick walling shown at the north end of the hall suggests that this is also medieval work.

A plan of 1843 (Fig. 3) to which Mr Melville has also drawn my attention shows the gatehouse and both wings of the mansion at a time when part of them, at least, were probably no longer in existence so may well have been copied from an older and out-of-date plan. This 1843 plan also shows a small L-shaped block running parallel to the centre block of the house and very close to it. From its position it is unlikely to be medieval, nor is it visible in the 1854 plan, so is probably to be identified with the modern buildings mentioned by Evans. The plan of 1843 shows the gatehouse area intact, but had the old gateway existed complete at this time, it could scarcely have escaped mention by one or other of the various contemporary guide-books. There is, unhappily, no evidence to show us when the gatehouse fell into disuse. It is by no means impossible that it was incorporated in the original manor-house and only allowed to go to ruin in later times.

In the garden east of the manor a small T-shaped building is shown in the 1727 print. The drawing of it is unfortunately not careful enough to enable us to identify the date or purpose of the structure, nothing of which remains above ground. In such circumstances one guess is as good as another; is it post-Reformation work, with a chapel on the first floor?

The upper floor plan of the hotel is not here produced, but copies of it are being deposited in the library of Barrow Corporation and the Record Offices at Kendal and Preston. It suggests that, as one would expect, the original medieval hall was open to the roof, none of the upper partitions having anything

but a modern look; it is shown split up into five sitting-rooms, the northern one being smallish with the "Oak Room" opposite and a bedroom adjoining this on the south. The old stair is still shown at the north-east corner incorporated in a hall and landing. The other two wings of the houses (i.e. those on the east and north) are all shown as modern work and are given over to various bedrooms. Behind the east wing lay a billiard-room "lighted from the roof", manservant's bedroom and the kitchen marked as "open to the roof". On the ground floor a back kitchen, washhouse and brewhouse formed a single unit, connecting the north side of the kitchen with hotel stabling on the south side of the brewhouse. All these offices were of one storey only.

It is unfortunate that the hotel should have been demolished before any detailed survey of it had been taken, even though there seems no doubt that little of archaeological interest survived. The present writer was able to pay a brief visit to the site in the late stages of demolition when observation was much hampered by the large amount of material dumped around but was unable to detect any worked stone clearly of medieval or even pre-Victorian date. Almost certainly the restoration was of that ruthless kind to which the Victorians were so unhappily addicted. The description of the Furness Abbey Hotel by a valued former member, Mr P. V. Kelly concludes the "whole appearance of the house is so altered that no one would even suspect that it was not built within the last fifty years"; a judgment almost certainly sound.

Most of the chief books on Furness Abbey make mention of certain interesting pieces of carving preserved in the house whose history we have discussed. It has not been found feasible to include detailed study of them in the present paper, but they may



form the subject of a future communication. The largest of these is of red sandstone, probably local, and depicts the Creation of Man. Two smaller panels depict (i) St Mary Magdalene wiping Christ's feet; (ii) the woman with the bloody issue. There are also twin statues of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist with inscriptions beneath. All these four are made from alabaster which is probably foreign.

It is certain from the lettering and style of the alabasters that these are not medieval work. A report on them from the Victoria and Albert Museum assigns them all to the late 16th century and suggests the likelihood of their being Flemish work though not necessarily made abroad. In this connection two points are worthy of being borne in mind. Firstly, that the Prestons of this period were undoubtedly largely Roman Catholic in sympathy and seem to have kept up contact with foreign parts from religious reasons. Secondly, that in the early 17th century a younger member of the family, Thomas Preston of Holker Hall, was responsible for the creation of the exquisite choir screens of Cartmel Priory Church, which were always traditionally claimed as Flemish work, an attribution recently confirmed by Mr F. J. A. Watson, Keeper of the Wallace Collection. This close and interesting contact with the Low Countries at this period is not easy to parallel in the history of our area, and was doubtless greatly facilitated by the propinquity of the port of Peel, in a coastline where good harbours were as rare as governmental snoopers.

All these sculptures are now in the Barrow-in-Furness Museum together with about fifty small finds which are of very minor interest, apart from a hand cresset stone and some lead piping.

### Acknowledgements.

The writer wishes to record his thanks to the following for their valued help in the preparation of this paper: the late R. Caine and Mr J. Caine for information regarding excavations on the site; Mr E. Atkinson and Mr E. H. Fowkes of the British Transport Historical Records for providing the extracts quoted from Furness Railway records, Mr J. Melville for the loan of papers of the late P. V. Kelly now in his possession, Mr A. J. Taylor, F.S.A., Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, for help on architectural detail, and Mr F. Barnes, F.S.A., for a variety of helpful suggestions on Furness material.

### Appendix I.

The following memorandum, now in the writer's possession, appears to be comments on Hope's dating of the earliest parts of the Abbey. Its author, John Bilson, was an eminent medieval archaeologist.\*

### FURNESS ABBEY.

My general impression is that the second work (brown) is for the most part merely a continuation of the first work (black), and that, with the exception of the lengthening of the transepts and the remodelling of their eastern chapels, it is very difficult to place any definite boundary between first and second. I should say it is probable that the buildings were not commenced until some time after 1127, and, that when the abbey became Cistercian in 1147 or 1148, only a first instalment had been built — of the church at most only the choir and transept chapels, parts of crossing piers and transept chapels were ready for use if sound. I do not think the transepts can have been carried very far, because it is not likely that, with so much else to do, the Cistercian would pull down more than was necessary, and the work of the first period can hardly be traced above the lowest string in the transepts. On the west side of the north transept inside is a short length of string [ ] which *may* be first work, with a bit of shaft over it which is difficult to explain.

\* Square brackets denote small gaps in the text.

The later string [ ] is at a slightly lower level. But there really seems to be no evidence that more than the lower parts of *any* walls had been built before 1148, except that the side arches of choir look like first work. Still the corbel of crossing piers look more like *after* 1148 than before. I am the more inclined to put *very* little before 1148, because the building works could certainly go forward without much interruption, and the brown work can scarcely be put earlier than 1160, or more likely 1170.

On your plan, you show the piers to arches at east end of each aisle of nave as first work. I think those at the north are quite certainly second. The bases have the same profiles as those of transept arcades (continued also in nave), and the two inner orders of the arch at east end of north aisle are the same section as those of north transept arcade; while the outer order on each side of arch from S. aisle to S. transept is the same section as the outer order of N. transept arcade and the second order of S. transept arcade. Besides at the west side of N. transept (inside) the older walling clearly stops short just to the north of the northern pier of this arch to N. aisle. Sharpe gives a section of this arch (called nave arcade, but it is not) in his buildings of the 7 Period, with the date of *c.* 1170, which I should say is near the mark. The bases of shafts to main crossing aisles are of an earlier section [ ], and I suppose that this is the section you found to the eastern respond of north arcade of nave. But the cap to this respond is apparently of the brown date.

On your plan, should not the jambs of arches on each side of choir (just to east of crossing) be shown with a clean straight line, at any rate for a little distance back from choir face? Of course I have not seen the footings of choir wall, but I do not think it likely that the first eastern termination would be altered in the 12th century. There would be no object whatever in altering a square end to an apse, and if there ever was an apse at all, it would be almost certainly pre-Cistercian. Turner† says there is a buttress to S. apse of S. transept, which is not shown on your plan.

I thought I saw in your proof a statement that the doorway in N. gable of N. transept superseded an earlier doorway. If my recollection of the proof is correct, I do not see it. The doorway is of the same date as the transept remodelling.

The wall rib in the transept chapels is [ ], and this occurs also over easternmost arch of S. arcade of nave, although on

† Guide at the abbey.

the two other sides of this bay (E. and S.) the later section [ ] is used as in the rest of the nave aisles. This seems to indicate that the transept chapels were built just before the nave aisle work went on. Not very definite, but perhaps worth noting.

If your black is intended for work *before* 1148, I do not think the north end of the cellarium should be black. It is true that it seems to be the same kind of work as the rest of the S. aisle wall, though the thickening out here on plan looks like a later casing. But I do not think that the cellarium detail of this end *can* be as early as 1148. Sharpe in his Cistercian book (which shows a restoration of the Domus Conversorum, as he called it) put it at *c.* 1160, which is more like its date. Indeed *all* the visible *detail* anywhere in the abbey looks to me more like *after* 1148 than before. This, of course, does not apply to the eastern *foundations*, though I think it does even to the crossing pier section and bases, though it is difficult to speak positively to a year or two either way of these. I saw a solitary rib stone (now near western range) of this section [ ] which looks rather earlier than any vault rib *in situ*, but it is apparently impossible to say where it comes from.

The doorway immediately beyond the triple doorway of chapter house like the N. transept doorway, but clearly a little later. Putting the latter 1170, the former would be 1180 or 1190. The doorway just to the south of the former is probably the same date or nearly so, but shows later detail, and the triple doorways are later still.

The leafed corbels you pointed out are, I think, of the same date as another I saw [ ] indicating a date somewhere near 1200.

John Bilson.

11 September 1900.

## Appendix II.

The following notes are the work of the late Mr P. V. Kelly and were brought to my attention by Mr J. Melville.

### MANOR HOUSE OF THE PRESTONS

(30/10/35).

#### DESCRIPTION OF THE FURNESS ABBEY HOTEL

(Personal inspection made 6/5/31).

Consists of a large hall facing the N. transept of the abbey to the south with west wing and a low square tower over at west end of hall.

*Hall (south face). Ground floor.*

Two doorways one in W. corner near wing, other towards E. and (both modern). Two square-headed windows in centre each with 3 long and 3 short lights (may be old). Two other bay windows (modern).

*1st floor.*

Five square-headed windows each with 3 long and 3 short lights, east one is certainly modern. The other 4 look distinctly ancient and probably are original. Modern leaded glass.

*2nd floor.*

Three double dormer windows and 1 single dormer window. Square headed, each with 2 long lights. Dormer gables flush with outer wall. May possibly be the original dormers.

Three modern chimneys and slated roof.

Battens between E. doorway and east ancient window of ground floor and directly under east 4th window of 1st floor.

The line of juncture between old and new work plain above E. doorway to eaves.

Whole appearance of house is so altered that no one would even suspect that it was not built within the last fifty years.