

THE CLOISTER OF SOUTHWARK PRIORY AND OTHER EARLY CLOISTERS.

By W. R. LETHABY, F.S.A.

The rebuilding of Westminster abbey in the middle of the thirteenth century was the end of one chapter and the opening of another in the development of our Gothic architecture. Its cloister, begun in 1245, was, so far as we know, the earliest vaulted one in England. Early cloisters, for the most part at least, were stone arcades supporting wooden lean-to roofs. I have found it possible to make a restoration of the Norman cloister-arcades at Westminster from many fragments. Britton and Brayley, in their account of the palace of Westminster,¹ illustrated a capital, now lost, which was inscribed with the names of abbot Gislebert and William Rufus, together with the word 'claustrum.' Other capitals of the same sort are preserved at the abbey, also several abacus-blocks and bases which clearly corresponded with them. The bases showed that some of the columns were of a quatrefoil section, or rather square with semicircular projections on every side. I sought for fragments of shafts of this form and was fortunate enough to find one about 4 feet long, with square beds at the top and bottom, which is almost certainly a whole shaft. An excavation in the cloister green uncovered the dwarf wall on which the columns had stood, and its coping showed marks of the bases about two feet apart. Later, many arch-stones were found, some moulded and others richly ornamented with zig-zag : they formed little arches about two feet in span. These discoveries allowed of a complete restoration of three or four bays of the cloister-arcades, which have now been set up in the abbey museum. Several of the capitals were ornamented with figure-sculpture, others are varieties of the scalloped capital. One of the sculptured capitals represents the Judgment of Solomon ; a second Hell-mouth ; and a fragment (now missing) has a woman's

¹ *The History of the Ancient Palace of Westminster* (1836), plate 35 and p. 446.

figure with two dragons biting at her, very like a relief at Auxerre figured by Viollet-le-Duc. This was Luxuria, so, probably, a set of virtues and vices were carved on some of the capitals. These capitals and arches can hardly be earlier than the middle of the twelfth century. The capital with the names of the king and abbot seem to have been as late as any of them in style. The inscription must have been later than the lifetime of the persons named, and indeed its wording suggests as much. Some were 'three-quarter' capitals, so it is evident that there were square piers at the angles of the cloister.



FIG. I. SOUTHWARK PRIORY: CLOISTER CAPITALS.

Most of the existing fragments seem to have been discovered by Sir Gilbert Scott during the 'restoration' of the later cloister, and recently another piece of shaft of quatrefoil form has been found in the wall of the cloister. It is evident that the Norman cloister was destroyed and its materials re-used when the Gothic cloister was built.

During the recent works at Winchester, a Norman capital was found which is illustrated in Sir T. G. Jackson's fine work¹; it is so exactly like the Westminster capital

¹ *Byzantine and Romanesque Architecture* (1913), vol. ii, p. 247.

that it becomes certain that it belonged, as suggested, to the Winchester cloister. In the Winchester museum is a capital, lately found not far from the cathedral on the north side. It is finely carved with eight seated figures (bishops?). They may be Wessex saints, and it probably belonged to the cloister. In the same museum is another similar capital sculptured with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac: it is said to have come from Hyde abbey. The

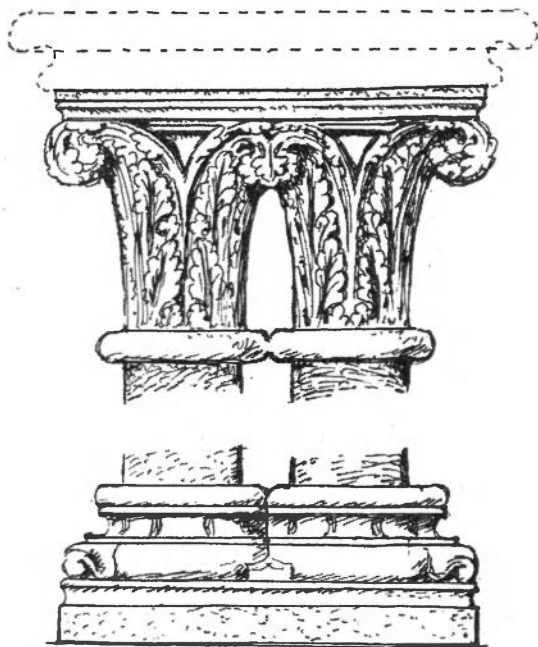


FIG. 2. SOUTHWARK PRIORY: CAPITALS AND BASES FROM THE CLOISTER.

museum also contains some twisted shafts of black (Tournai?) stone which look to me like cloister-shafts.

It is clear that it was customary to make the cloister-arcades particularly rich and interesting. In the twelfth century it became usual to couple the columns transversely to the wall. Such an arrangement offered a better resistance to the spreading tendency of the sloping roof. An early example of this type of cloister is represented by some half-dozen twin capitals which are preserved in

the cathedral museum at Norwich. They are delicately carved with intricate foliage and 'stories.' I recognised them at once as being cloister-capitals, and then found that, according to the label, they were taken out of the walling of the buttresses of the fine fourteenth-century cloister. As at Westminster, the old material had been re-used when the cloister was rebuilt.

At Kirkstall abbey the cloister-arcade has been fitted



FIG. 3. SOUTHWARK PRIORY :
FRAGMENT OF CLOISTER CAPITAL.

together from fragments by Mr. J. Bilson, who says : " The arcade was of the usual twin-shaft type with semicircular arches and water-leaf capitals." Mr. Bilson has cited the somewhat earlier arcade of the narthex of Fountains abbey, and small fragments of a similar cloister-arcade at Kirklees. He has also recently put together some beautiful fragments of a twelfth-century cloister-arcade at Bridlington. Some interesting bays of early thirteenth-century cloister-work may be seen at Canterbury.

On referring to Viollet-le-Duc's article *Cloître*, I find only one of the early

type with a single row of columns, but there are many with coupled shafts. In the article *Chapiteau* a very beautiful example of twin capitals, now in the Toulouse museum, is illustrated, which is said to have come from the cloister of the famous church of Saint-Sernin.

Among many interesting fragments preserved in Southwark cathedral church are two almost complete combined pairs of capitals, which obviously belonged to a cloister of similar type. These capitals, moreover, are extremely beautiful and of the earliest Gothic style. They are of French character and evidently belong to

what may be called the Canterbury school. Doubtless French masons were poured into England during the time of transition. These Southwark capitals may be dated



FIG. 4. SOUTHWARK PRIORY : CLOISTER CAPITALS.

about 1190, and are of the same age as the work in the lower part of the walls at the west end of the nave. The cloister was on the north side of the nave and was doubt-

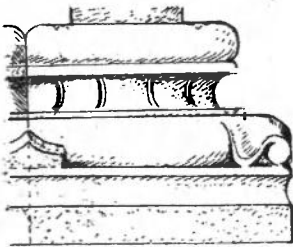


FIG. 5. SOUTHWARK PRIORY :
A BASE FROM THE CLOISTERS.

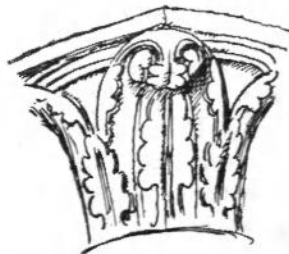


FIG. 6. A CAPITAL FROM
CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL.

less built with it. These capitals are in pairs, cut from one stone and combined under one abacus; they have the charming French characteristic of a circular member

appearing between the carved 'crockets' of foliage, beneath the square upper member. Figs. 1 and 2 represent the most perfect of the fragments; fig. 3 is an enlarged detail of a piece of foliage from the angle of another capital. Fig. 4 is from a capital which had a pair of boldly-carved dragons on the bell. There are also two coupled bases which were certainly associated with the capitals: these bases have spurs at the angles and there are little



FIG. 7.
SOUTHWARK PRIORY:
A BAY OF THE CLOISTER
RESTORED.

vertical channels cut in the hollows (figs. 2 and 5). This is a quite remarkable feature; the 'transitional' pillars of the ruined infirmary of Norwich cathedral have exactly similar bases. Altogether these capitals and bases at Southwark are very valuable examples of Gothic art in its first strength. They should be in a museum, or, better still, used in some fine way in the church; if they are not used they will surely be broken and lost. I would suggest that short shafts might be supplied and a slab top to form a sort of table. Fig 6, a sketch of a capital at Canterbury, shows how closely the work at Southwark followed the Canterbury model. Fig. 7 is a sketch of the probable form of a bay of the cloister at Southwark.

As before said, Westminster cloister, as rebuilt from 1245, is probably the earliest vaulted cloister erected in England. It was also the first which had tracery in the bays, the upper parts of which were glazed. These characteristics are found in some French cloisters earlier than that at Westminster (Laon, Noyon, Soissons), and our abbey must be the centre from which this new type was distributed over England.