

RIEVAULX ABBEY: THE SHRINE IN THE CHAPTER HOUSE

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Rievaulx Abbey holds a high place among the monasteries of the north. Not only is it exceptionally fortunate in the beauty of its situation and buildings, but it can claim precedence in point of age over every other Cistercian house in Britain, Waverley and Tintern alone excepted. In the whole Cistercian order it stands 52nd. It was the direct result of a mission sent to establish the Order in the north of England, under the auspices of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and headed by a monk of Clairvaux, a man of English birth, and a special friend and pupil of St. Bernard, by name William.

The date of foundation is given as March 5th, 1132, the founder being Walter l'Espece, lord of Helmsley, a man of wealth and importance. Though the original grant of lands is on a moderate scale, it is evident from the remains of the buildings that the monastic colony had no need to postpone building for lack of money. The church must have been begun very soon after the settlement on the site, and was carried through and finished without any sign of a break in the work. Moreover it is not like the first churches at Waverley and Tintern, of modest dimensions and without aisles: it had from the first a fully developed plan with an aisled nave; the chapels and aisles had stone vaults, and there was a tower over the crossing. The nature of the site imposed one very unusual modification on the setting out: it occupies the lower slopes on the east side of Ryedale, which here runs nearly north and south, and the space between the river and the hill was so narrow that a level site for the church could only be obtained by setting it

along the hillside and not at right angles to it, which an east and west situation would have entailed. So it happens that the church stands nearly north and south, with its presbytery to the south, and having the cloister on the west side of the nave. But for the sake of clearness, I have thought it better to speak of the monastic buildings as if they were set out on the normal orientation.

The constitution of the order led to great uniformity in the buildings of the various houses, and there can be no doubt that at Rievaulx the main lines of the whole monastery were laid out from the first, and occupied by temporary buildings where it was not possible to proceed at once with the permanent structures of masonry. The chapter house seems to have been, next to the church, the first permanent building to be undertaken, and its side walls can be seen to be definitely earlier than the adjoining parts of the eastern range of the cloister. For the rest, to judge from what is left to-day, practically the whole of the administrative buildings of the monastery were finished before the end of the twelfth century—a very considerable achievement, considering the nature of the site and the need for basement stories to make up for the rapid fall of the ground towards the river. This work must be associated with the rule of the best known of all the abbots of Rievaulx, Ailred, afterwards canonised, who held office from 1147 till his death in 1167. But it is evident that the work did not cease at his death. The refectory on the south side of the cloister was rebuilt in the early years of the thirteenth century, with the warming house and the kitchen, to conform to the Cistercian fashion of setting the refectory at right angles to the cloister instead of parallel with it: a fashion which seems to have set in about the third quarter of the twelfth century, and to have owed its origin to the vast development of the system of lay brothers or conversi and the need to give them the exclusive use of the western range of the cloister where they lived. Nor was this the end of great building schemes. The whole of the eastern arm of the church was rebuilt and greatly enlarged about 1230, while the transepts were heightened to match the new work, and a new tower built over the crossing. The expense of all this must have been very great, and we know from various sources that such work was commonly paid for

with borrowed money, and that this was provided mainly, then as at other times, by the Jews. So we find, in the latter part of the thirteenth century, Rievaulx heavily in debt to the Jews, in common with many other monasteries. So general indeed was this, that King Edward I, who was known for having a short way with such people, set himself in the earlier part of his reign to buy up a great many of these obligations at his own price, which was very far from corresponding with that claimed by the unfortunate lenders. The monasteries then had to find this lesser sum, and so got rid of considerable burdens at a very easy rate. But however this may be, there was little more building at Rievaulx after the enlargement of the church was finished. Since 1918, when the Abbey came into the guardianship of the Commissioners of Works, the greater part of the site has been cleared of the debris in which it was buried, and we now have a pretty accurate idea of its plan and story as the buildings tell it. I have already remarked upon the uniformity of Cistercian plans, and Rievaulx now shows itself as a specimen of a great Cistercian house following the usual lines, and challenging comparison with any other of the greater monasteries of the Order. Curiously enough, it is in one point far less well provided than most, and that is in the accommodation for the lay brothers. If the western range at Rievaulx be compared with those at Fountains, Byland, or Kirkstall, it looks very insignificant—so much so that in view of the story that in Ailred's time there were 600 lay brothers here, one wonders whether other buildings once existed on the ground now covered by the little village west of the cloister, in what must then have been the outer court. We are, I fear, never likely to know.

There is one other feature in the plan which invites attention on account of its unusual character. The early Cistercians, in following the severity and simplicity enjoined by the Rule, avoided the apse and used square ends to their churches and chapter houses. Here at Rievaulx we see a chapter house with an apse, the only one of its kind in Britain. There is indeed evidence that as originally designed it was square ended, but about the middle of the twelfth century it was remodelled as we now see it, with an apse and aisles on all four sides. Why this variation from type



A. SHRINE FROM THE EAST



B. SHRINE: EAST FACE AND INTERIOR



A. SHRINE : WEST FACE



B. STONES WITH INSCRIPTION : SCS WILLMVS ABBAS

was sanctioned we are not told: perhaps the personality of Ailred had something to do with it. Among its other uses, the chapter house in the earlier days of the monasteries was the burial place of the abbots, and the practice of burial in the church only becomes usual when the chapter house contains as many graves as it can conveniently hold. At Rievaulx there is evidence of some ten burials, three of which retain their inscribed cover stones, and record William, 6th Abbot, who died in 1203, Peter, 20th Abbot, 1307, and John, 22nd Abbot, 1327. In the middle of the chapter house, occupying what may fairly be described as the most prominent position, is an empty stone coffin without a cover.

When the west end of the chapter house was cleared, it revealed the normal arrangement of a central doorway between two unglazed window openings; and owing to the unusual plan, there were beyond these, to north and south, doorways opening to the aisles of the chapter house. The window openings had been of the usual type with shafted jambs, subdivided by central shafts into two roundheaded lights under a round enclosing arch. The southern window had been destroyed except for part of its southern jamb, but the northern remained as high as the springing of its arch. Into it had been built, at a date which may be estimated at the middle of the thirteenth century, the construction here illustrated. It opened east and west, i.e. to the cloister and to the chapter house, with acutely pointed arches springing from shafted jambs, set on either face of the wall, the space between being covered in with a sexpartite vault with moulded ribs and a keystone carved with an *Agnus Dei* (Pl. v). Above the arch on the cloister side had been a gabled pediment, projecting about 1 ft. 9 in. from the face of the chapter house wall. At the springing of the arch had been a large slab of stone, 6 in. thick, of the full width and breadth of the opening, forming a shelf, and the soffit of the arch above the slab on either side was left blank, without any mouldings, for a height of 10 inches. At 2 ft. 3 in. below the underside of the slab was a second slab, 6 in. thick, forming the sill of the opening.

All these features were found in their original position, or were capable of being replaced with practical certainty: it must be understood that replacement of all portions that

were found would have involved the addition of new masonry, and has not been attempted.

With them were found an altar slab, notable for having its chamfered edge ornamented with a twining vine-pattern still showing remains of colour, and two slabs of stone with a projecting moulding on their upper edges. On the top member of the moulding on one slab was an inscription (Pl. iii, B) carefully cut; SCS WILLMUS Abbas; and scratched on the plain face of the other slab, in cursive script of fifteenth century date: Willmus primus Abbas Rievall.

We have here a structure which has the essential parts of a shrine, using the word in its extended sense. There is the stone shelf or slab on which the chest containing the relics of the saint can rest, and below it an open space comparable to the recesses in the pedestal of a normal shrine, which permitted close access to the place where the saint's body rested. The usual form of chest—the *feretrum* or portable shrine properly so called—was that of an oblong box with a gabled top, and the gabled pediment towards the cloister seems to have significance here, as if reflecting the use of the structure.

The two stones with inscriptions can not have been constructive features of the shrine, but this is not to say that they do not belong to it. At the east and west ends of the upper slab, which is 7 ft. long, there must have been something of the full width of the arch above, and about 10 in. high, since the soffit mouldings of the arch stop at this point, leaving a plain rough face which was not meant to be seen. Some sort of blocking courses must have stood here, and the two slabs may have formed part of them, their height being what is required, and their length such that both of them together would be too long for the span, while singly they are too short. One of them has what may be called the official inscription, the other had none originally; but if it occupied the other end of the slab, the addition of an informal inscription would be quite natural. Moreover such a graffito might be expected to be scratched at or about eye level, and a position on the slab would meet this requirement. As to the altar slab, it was found lying against the east side of the shrine, on which side the base-mould below the lower slab has been squared on the top



STONES FROM GABLED HEAD ON WEST FACE



KEYSTONE OF VAULT

as if to give a bearing. The altar stone resting on this would have its upper surface approximately level with that of the lower slab of the shrine, which has two crosses scratched on it near its eastern end—but it must be noted that no foundations for pillars or a block of masonry to carry the stone exist here. And an altar so placed would be at the east end, instead of the west, as would be natural in such a case.

However this may be, though the matter falls short of actual proof, we may say that the evidence points to the fact that this structure was set here to receive the relics of William first abbot of Rievaulx, under the title of Sanctus. As to the date of the work, besides the evidence of style, we must note that on the broken sill of what remains of the window corresponding to this, on the south side of the chapter house door, is part of an inscription, A° MCCL V KAL M., i.e. *quinto kalendas Maii or Martii*: which may have been a record of the work done at that time in the chapter house.

We must now consider the question of the saint. There are many Williams in the Calendar, but St. William of Rievaulx is not among them. As I have already said, we know something of the man. There is a life of him, entitled *Vita Beati Willelmi*, at p. 241 of the first volume of the *Fasciculus Sanctorum Ordinis Cisterciensis*, printed at Coln in 1631. This is a reprint of the first edition, and is from the pen of Dom Chrysostom Henriquez, the *historiographus generalis* of the Order, who wrote at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and it is in his writings that Abbot William first appears as Beatus. On this point the words of the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum*, under August 2nd, must be quoted. Under the heading *Praetermissi et alios dies rejecti*, is this statement:

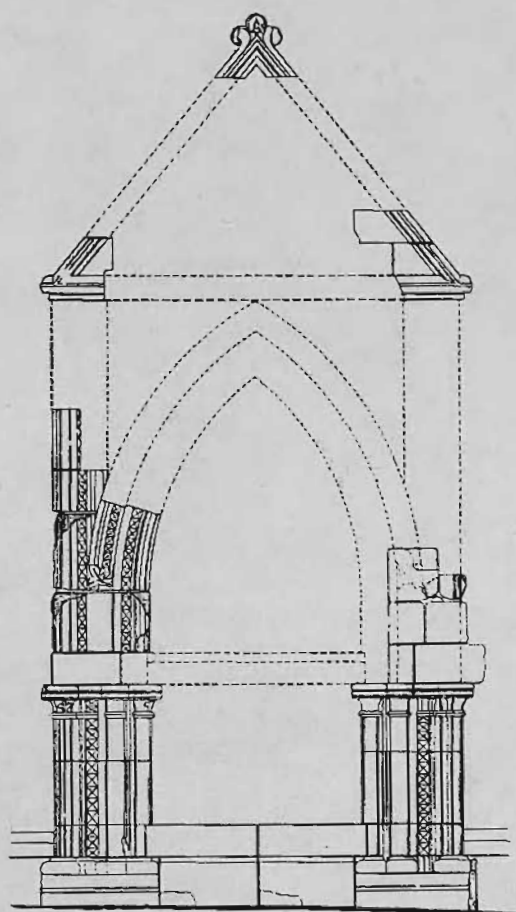
William, of the same Order (i.e. Citeaux), a most praiseworthy man, is mentioned by Henriquez only, and is also proclaimed Beatus with a notable eulogy; but hitherto I can find no proof that the honours of a saint have ever been lawfully assigned to him.

From his life in the *Fasciculus* we get the following details:

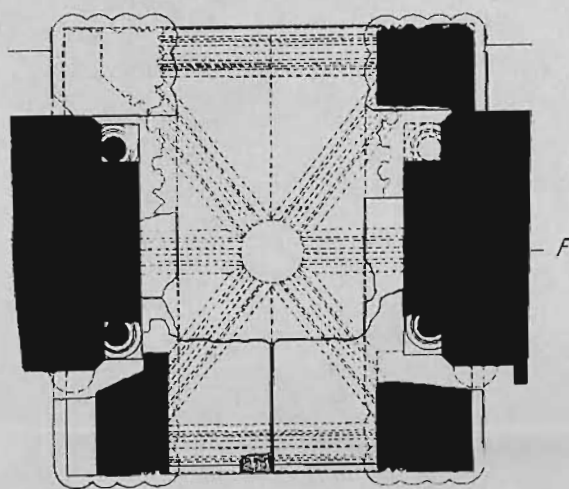
He was born in England, of good parentage, and well versed in liberal studies. Being attracted by the monastic

ideal, he went abroad to Clairvaux, and became one of St. Bernard's favourite pupils. He served him as secretary and appears in the story of St. Bernard's life in connexion with one of his miracles. St. Bernard was dictating a letter to one of his monks, Robert by name, who had deserted Clairvaux for Cluny, exhorting him to return. William was writing the letter, the two were in the open air, and a shower of rain began to fall. St. Bernard continued to dictate and William to write, but no drops fell on the letter, which was finished without any interruption. When the important question of the mission to the north of England was being considered, St. Bernard's choice of a leader of the mission fell on William, and in 1131 he was sent out with the twelve companions which the colonising of a new monastery required, as being symbolical of Christ and the apostles. He succeeded in his task, and proved not only an excellent administrator, but won the respect and affection of those with whom he had to do. His abbey of Rievaulx not only prospered in itself, but fulfilled its purpose of a mission centre most successfully. In 1136, when only four years old, it sent out its first colonies to Melrose in Scotland and Warden in Bedfordshire: in 1142 a third to Dundrennan in Galloway and in the next year a fourth to Revesby in Lincolnshire. The life of his more famous successor Ailred contains ample evidence of the affection which he inspired. Waldef, as Abbot of Melrose, paying his yearly visit to the mother house at Rievaulx, would go into the chapter house to pray at Abbot William's tomb, and Ailred when he died was buried next to William, by his own desire. As the life of Ailred, written by Walter Daniel his friend and pupil, puts it: he was buried in the chapter house next to his predecessor, that venerable and holy man William, the first abbot of Rievaulx.

There were not wanting other witnesses to his merits: a sermon of Gilbert Abbot of Swineshead, a contemporary, is extant, in which his virtues are set forth, and a set of verses by Nicholas of Rievaulx praises him, calling him the first architect, founder and enlarger of the Abbey. But of his beatification we have no record till the time of Henriquez, and much less of his canonisation—yet in the thirteenth century we have him called Sanctus in his own Abbey. That such 'unofficial' canonisations existed is of course

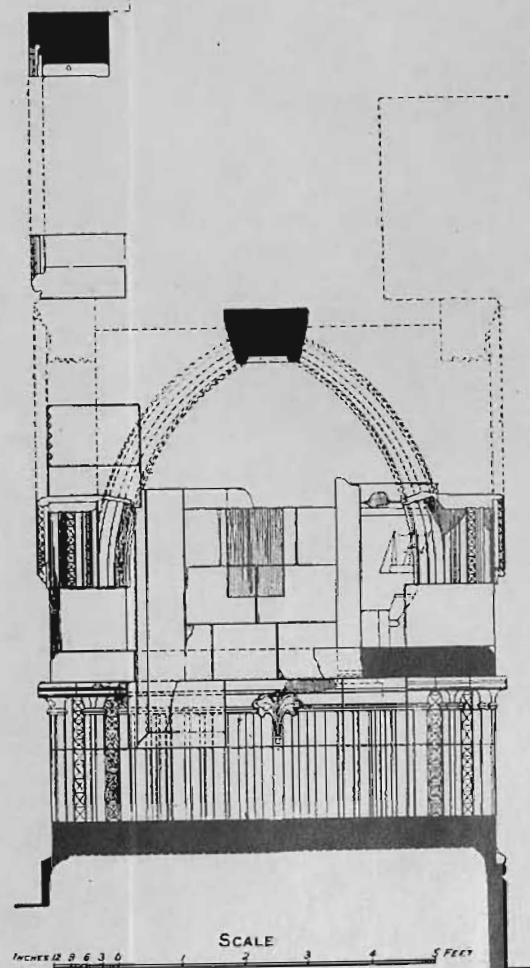


INCHES 12 9 6 3 0 SCALE 1 2 3 4 5 FEET

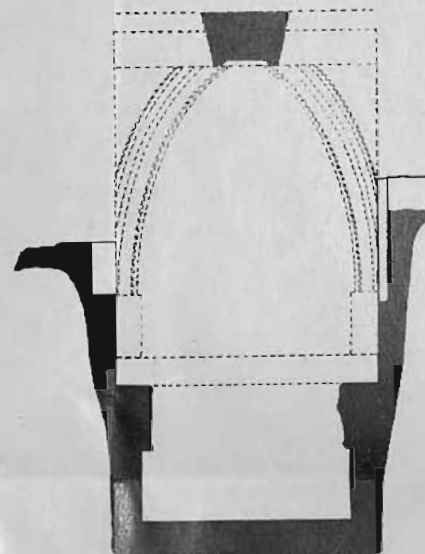


PLAN AT C-D

A. WEST ELEVATION OF SHRINE, AND PLAN



INCHES 12 9 6 3 0 SCALE 1 2 3 4 5 FEET



SECTION E-F

B. LONG SECTION AND CROSS SECTION OF SHRINE

well known, and on this point it may be of interest to quote a letter written to me last year by F. Paul Grosjean of the Societ  des Bollandistes at Brussels.

‘It is well to remember that the formalities of canonisation are comparatively modern, and that the “*vox populi*” with the local ecclesiastic approval still constituted a formal canonisation, if I am not mistaken, in the latter half of the twelfth century. It is indeed interesting to have archaeological evidence that the title “*Sanctus*” was locally conferred on William (and no doubt approved by the local Ordinaries, who would have had ample opportunity of putting an end to such cultus, if they had considered it superstitious, at any time before the sixteenth century). But the modern official title of William is the less exalted one of “*Beatus*.”

In a further communication, M. Grosjean adds :

‘I am very sorry we can find here no record of the precise date of the use of *Beatus* style in the case of William of Rievaulx. It is likely enough that no formal decree was ever issued in this case by any authority, but that the historiographer of the Order, probably Henriquez, though he must have known that William had been called *Sanctus*, thought it safer in such cases to use the lesser title, in order to avoid the trouble and burden of a proof which would have been required for the latter. There has indeed been a kind of toleration in Rome, even after the formal processes were in full working order, for the holy personages of the various Orders who had enjoyed from a remote antiquity the title of *Beatus* ; though they are not usually recognised as such in the Universal Church Kalendar.’

If the Cistercian records are thus silent on the subject, one might expect some mention of him in English documents such as the York Wills. But though I have made enquiries, and especially of Professor Hamilton Thompson, there seems to be no mention of him anywhere. Perhaps the reading of this paper may produce something, as often happens, but for the moment I can only put on record the facts as I know them. One other suggestion may be made. Why, at a little more than a century after his death, was he thus translated to a place of honour as a saint ? The possession of a saint’s relics in any church attracted visitors and with them offerings at the shrine of the holy man.

By the middle of the thirteenth century Rievaulx, as you have heard, was heavily in debt on account of its great new buildings, and any fresh source of revenue would be eagerly sought for. The sympathies of the heads of the church may well have induced them to agree to this canonisation, with the intention of helping the Abbey in its financial straits, and we may hope that it did so ; but of this, as of so much else, there is no surviving record.