

## MINSTER COURT, THANET

By P. K. KIPPS

Situated on the east side of the village of Minster in Thanet is an interesting but little-known building of the twelfth century. Minster Court (or Minster Abbey as it is now called) stands on the alleged site of a religious house founded late in the seventh century where the parish church now stands, but moved, perhaps to this spot, during the first half of the eighth century. The story of its origin is set forth with picturesque detail by William Thorne, a monk of St. Augustine's, Canterbury,<sup>1</sup> and by Thomas of Elmham.<sup>2</sup> The latter furnishes the text of several doubtful charters granted to the Abbey by early Kentish kings. These authors' accounts, reproduced by Lewis<sup>3</sup> and Hasted,<sup>4</sup> state that Egbert, King of Kent, was guardian to two young relatives said to be his nephews, to whom the succession of his kingdom had been promised. Two nieces, called Domneva and Ermengitha, were also under his charge. The youths, it appears, had been entrusted to the care of a courtier named Thunnor, who urged the king for the better safety of his crown to have them put to death, Thunnor himself undertaking the deed. Egbert, stricken by remorse, proceeded to seek pardon of, and offer satisfaction to, Domneva for the murder of her brothers. Domneva, previously married to Merewald, son of Penda, king of Mercia, had by now taken the vow of chastity and urged the king, by way of expiation, to grant her a place in Thanet for the founding of a nunnery in which prayer would be offered for his forgiveness, and Egbert in response granted a site together with a considerable endowment of land. The abbey, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary

<sup>1</sup> Twysden, *Historiae Anglicanae, Scriptores X Chronica Guill: Thorne Monachi S. Augustini Cant.* 1906-12.

<sup>2</sup> *Historia Monasterii S. Augustini Cantuariensis*, by Thomas of Elmham (Rolls Series) 215-25, pp. 288, 305, 310, 314. See

also the *Victoria County History of Kent*, Vol. ii (1926), p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> *History of Tenet.*

<sup>4</sup> *History of Kent*, 1799, Vol. 4, pp. 314 et seq.

and afterwards known as St. Mildred's, was built where now stands the existing parish church,<sup>1</sup> and Domneva, appointed first abbess by Archbishop Theodore (669-90) about the year 670, presided over seventy nuns. Her name is given in earlier charters as Aebba, and by some she is called Ermenburga.

It has been suggested<sup>2</sup> that the story of the murder is doubtful and that king Egbert, with no other reason than that of desiring the advance of Christianity, founded the nunnery, appointing his niece Ermenburga (or Domneva) as Abbess and endowing it with lands immediately surrounding, these being subsequently added to by exchange or other arrangement.

Domneva, or Ermenburga, was succeeded by her daughter Mildred who had been a nun at Chelles, near Paris, and who afterwards became the principal Kentish saint with the exception of St. Augustine. Eadburga,<sup>3</sup> said to have been a daughter of King Ethelbert, followed Mildred. Finding the dwelling too small for the nuns Eadburga built a new church and conventual offices on another site, said to be that of the present Minster Court.<sup>4</sup> This church was dedicated by Archbishop Cuthbert (741-58) to SS. Peter and Paul and the body of St. Mildred translated thither c. 750. Eadburga died in 751 and Sigeburga,<sup>5</sup> ordained by Cuthbert, held office for the long period of 47 years.

Its proximity to the coast left the nunnery a ready prey to sea-raiders, and in the latter part of the eighth century, during the rule of Sigeburga, it was first ravaged by the Danes. Their visitations, repeated at various intervals during the ninth century, notably in 980,<sup>6</sup> culminated in the destruction of the convent by fire in 1011, when the nuns and clergy, together with people who had taken refuge for sanctuary, were killed and the abbess Leofruna was taken captive by Sweyn.<sup>7</sup> It is said that the Danes spared the two churches of St. Mary and of

<sup>1</sup> Thomas of Elmham, as cited, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> 'St. Mary's Minster in Thanet and St. Mildred,' by Canon R. C. Jenkins, *Arch. Cant.* xii, 177.

<sup>3</sup> Twysden, as cited, p. 1783. *Hist. Mon. St. Aug.*, xvi, p. 305.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas of Elmham's words are 'alium templum juxta'; there appears to be no

precise evidence as to the site of this new convent, and the popular identification of it with that of Minster Court must be received with all reserve.

<sup>5</sup> *Hist. Mon. St. Aug.*, p. 221.

<sup>6</sup> Twysden, col. 1780.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1908.



A. 'MINSTER COURT': THE NORTH FRONT



[Photos: P. K. Kipps]

B. THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN RANGES, AND (ON LEFT) REMAINS OF THE  
SOUTH-WEST TOWER



SS. Peter and Paul, and that the remains of St. Mildred were miraculously preserved from destruction. The site and whatever buildings remained passed into the possession of King Cnut, and were afterwards granted by him to the Abbey of St. Augustine, Canterbury, c. 1027 or 1030. The relics of St. Mildred were again translated, now to Canterbury but not, it is alleged, without determined local opposition, the removal taking place at night and with a narrow escape of failure. The date of the second translation is recorded as 18th May, 1030.

From this time the Abbey of St. Mildred ceased to exist as a religious house in the accepted sense of the term and became a dwelling for those engaged in the management of the monastic estates.

The status of the building during the medieval period does not appear to be known and a careful search at possible sources of information has, so far, been unsuccessful. One interesting fact may, however, be gleaned from the architecture itself, namely the several improvements made under the rule of Thomas Hunden, Abbot from 1405 to 1420.<sup>1</sup>

The church and manor of Minster were still included amongst the possessions of St. Augustine's Abbey when these passed into the hands of the king in 1539.

James I in 1610-11 granted the lordship and manor of Minster to Sir Philip Carey, Knt., William Pitt, Esq. and John Williams.<sup>2</sup> The estate being subsequently divided between Carey and Williams, the latter received the Court Lodge. A female descendant and sole heir, then the widow of the Earl of Shelborne, carried it in marriage at the latter end of Charles II's reign to Col. Henry Conyngham, who became a major-general under William III and died in 1705. The Court remained a possession of the Conyngham family until 1928, when it was purchased by its present owner, Mr. C. H. Senior.

The house, as now standing, consists of N. and W. ranges of buildings, originally two sides of a quadrangular space about 46 ft. from N. to S. On the S. side was the church, but it is not certain whether there was any building on the E. side. The N. building was the great hall, originally 63 ft. long and 26 ft. wide, and the two-storied W. range

<sup>1</sup> Pat. 6, Henry IV, pt. 2, m. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hasted, *History of Kent*, 1799, iv.



probably contained the kitchen, parlour and dormitory. At the S. end of this range are two and a half bays of vaulted passage, flanked by a very thick and ruined wall, once forming part of a tower at the W. end of the church.

The buildings externally retain much of their original character, particularly the N. side of the hall, but continuous occupation during the last three centuries has left its mark and tended to obliterate or obscure many of the ancient features. Internally the change has been more than thorough, and nothing earlier than the work of the nineteenth century now meets the eye, the roof-trusses excepted.

The hall appears to have been built during the first half of the twelfth century, and the walls are of roughly squared stones in narrow courses, with ashlar dressings which generally exhibit diagonal tooling. The W. range would seem to be of an earlier date and the walling here is mainly of undressed flints with squared stone sparingly introduced, and with one or two courses of herring-bone. No doubt the work was restored or partially reconstructed in the twelfth century, when the passage-way was built. The remaining portion of the ruined tower, enclosing a turret-staircase, is probably contemporary with the hall; on its E. face is an arched recess with detail similar to the window in the E. gable of hall. The wall is of considerable thickness and possibly incorporates earlier work.

The improvements made *circa* 1413, during the time of Abbot Hunden, consisted principally of the introduction of mullioned windows and the north door, with his initials; also the shortening of the hall on the W. and the reconstruction of its roof. The western part was probably made two-storied at this time, but it is pretty certain that the whole of the present upper floor was introduced during the early part of the seventeenth century, together with a large fireplace and chimney stack which stand midway and towards the E. end.

The buildings adjoining the E. end of the hall were added during the nineteenth century and embody a large amount of re-used stone.

The hall was no doubt originally a one-storey building. Externally it is of two stages, and the walls are about 4 ft. in thickness with a slight set-back above exterior string-course.

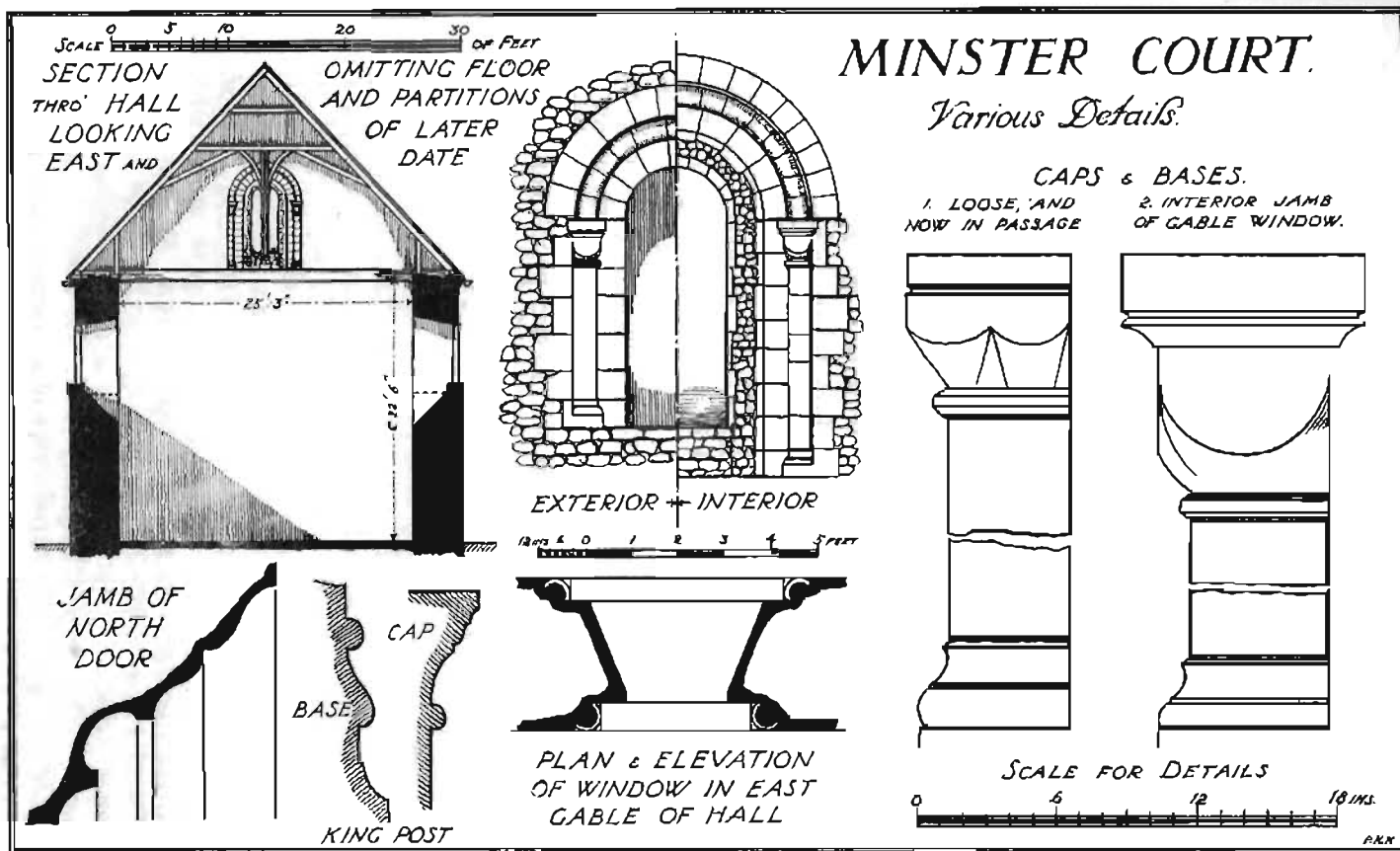


FIG. 1



The N. and S. fronts were formerly divided into four bays by pilaster buttresses and pierced in the upper stage by round-headed windows. This arrangement has survived very imperfectly, there remaining but three windows, one complete buttress, and a portion of the string-course. The N. elevation has, between the first and second bays from the E., a complete buttress with ashlar quoins; it diminishes in width above the string-course. A portion of the buttress formerly separating the third and fourth bays remains just below the string-course. The greater part of the latter feature is still in position and is a plain ashlar band with chamfered under-edge returned round the buttresses. In the second bay is a plain round-headed window with ashlar jambs and arch, its size increased at some later date by cutting down through the string-course. In the third bay is a blocked window; the upper part of the jambs and arch have a shallow rebate holed for fixing bars or some kind of framing. Traces of windows remain in the first and fourth bays. The windows have splayed jambs internally, and the sills, now horizontal, were also probably splayed, as restored in the section, Fig. 1. The fifteenth-century doorway is placed in the western extremity of the third bay, partially obliterating the original buttress (Pl. v, B). It has a three-centred arch under a two-centred head, and the mouldings are continued down the jambs. The tympanum of traceried panels contains a circle enclosing a quatrefoil, and a shield charged with a cross, the arms of St. Augustine's Abbey, and it is flanked by two trefoil-headed panels. The first panel has traces of a letter T, and the second panel contains a black-letter H, the initials of Thomas Hunden. Above the doorway are marks of a gabled porch. The later windows, like the doorway, were introduced without any regard to the original scheme, and perhaps in the seventeenth century, although the fittings, etc., are of subsequent date. Built in the arches of the first and second windows, just below the eaves, are two square stones with twelfth-century ornament. At the extreme W. end of the fourth bay and half-way up the height of the wall is a single-light window with cinquefoiled and square head. It appears to be contemporary with the doorway, and its position suggests the introduction of a staircase at that period.



A. 'MINSTER COURT' (NORMAN HOUSE): WEST RANGE



[Photos: A. H. Siminon, Ramsgate

B. GROINED VAULT AT SOUTH END OF WEST RANGE



[Photo : Gordon Home

LATE ELEVENTH- OR EARLY TWELFTH-CENTURY MASONRY  
OF WEST RANGE

The original features on the S. front consist of two round-headed windows in the second and third bays from the W., portions of a string-course, and a buttress between the first and second bays from the W. At the extreme ends are half-pilaster buttresses. The details of the doorway are modern, likewise the three grouped windows, although these are set in splayed jambs probably of seventeenth-century date. On one jamb is part of an incised sundial.

The E. gable of the hall rises above the modern buildings. The wall, about two-thirds up, sets back slightly above a moulded string, the parapet has been rebuilt and terminates in a narrow chimney of uncertain date. The gable is pierced by a round-headed window, set in a recess which has a roll-moulded round arch and angle-shafts with cushion caps and moulded bases (Fig. 1). The northern shaft, etc., is missing. Internally the window has a wide splay and was originally flanked by angle-shafts with caps, bases and arch similar to that on the outside, but here also the northern half has disappeared.

The hall at Minster may be compared with the refectory of Dover Priory (now Dover College), built in 1135 by Archbishop Corbeuil. The dimensions of this building are 100 ft. by 27 ft. internally, with walls 26 ft. high by  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. thick. The corresponding dimensions at Minster are 63 ft. by  $26\frac{1}{2}$  ft., with walls about 23 ft. high by 4 ft. in thickness. The refectory is also in two stages, separated by a chamfered string-course which is carried round pilaster buttresses. The upper stage, too, is pierced by round-headed windows with splayed internal jambs, flanked by angle-shafts in recesses, of detail rather similar to that of the gable-window at Minster.

The W. range is internally about 73 ft. long, including passage, by 19 ft. wide, and adjoins the W. end of hall. It is two storied, the eaves are level with those of the hall, and the walls are about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. thick. The E. front is the best preserved, and in the upper storey are two small blocked original windows with ashlar quoins and flat lintels (Pl. iv). N. of the doorway is a small original window with round head cut out of one stone and with splayed internal opening. The doorway which gives access to the passage appears to have been modified; it has ashlar jambs and plain round arch with slightly recessed tympanum of coursed blocks carried

by a wooden lintel (Pl. v, A). In the ground storey, midway in elevation, is a fifteenth-century two-light transomed window, with the lower lights trifoliated and the upper cinquefoiled within a square head. Internally it has splayed jambs, and the mullions, etc., are rebated for shutters. The remaining windows are modern restorations of fifteenth-century detail.

The N. end-elevation projects slightly from the adjoining face of the hall and is of similar material with ashlar quoins; the string-course is at a lower level. In the ground storey are two single-light restored windows, probably of fifteenth-century date; they have square cinquefoiled heads and splayed internal jambs. Between them is a rectangular patch of blocking, possibly marking the position of a former window. Above is a modern two-light transomed window similar to those in the E. elevation. Reset in the N.E. angle is a stone with an incised sundial.

The W. elevation has three large buttresses which appear to be modern, and adjoining the southernmost is a modern lavatory addition. The wall between the buttresses has been partially thickened and includes a reset fragment of a twelfth-century carved arch. At the extreme S. end is a projecting half-bay of the passage, enclosed by a flint and rubble wall probably of seventeenth-century date; the wall is pierced by a small window with wooden frame and mullion. Adjoining the half-bay northwards is a one-storey addition. Part of its N. wall is of old materials and includes a blocked doorway with two-centred chamfered arch and jambs; possibly fifteenth-century work. The western half of the addition is modern and on the external face are reset fragments of twelfth-century worked stones.

Opening from the main building to the addition is a doorway of fifteenth-century date with moulded ashlar jambs and three-centred arch on the outer face. Immediately N. of the addition is a two-light and transomed window of the same period, uniform with that in the eastern elevation.

At the S. end of the W. range are the remains of the tower which formed the western termination of the church. The lower part consists of a wall averaging 9 ft. in thickness by about 37 ft. from E. to W. and with a short and broken return wall of roughly 7 ft. at the W. end. The visible

portions, that is to say the N. side and the E. and W. ends, rise in places to the level of the apex of the roof adjoining ; they are in a ruined and broken state and very considerably overgrown with ivy. The eastern part formerly enclosed a circular stair ; part of the internal ashlar facing remains, together with the broken ends of steps. The lower part has been converted into a modern alcove. The eastern face is in two stages with the fragment of a third ; the ground stage is of rubble with some ashlar next the angle and on the N. return, and the upper stage is of roughly coursed and squared stones with ashlar quoins. In the ground stage is the broken end of a wall formerly extending in an easterly direction, together with the moulded and rebated jamb of a doorway composed of large stones ; one is 2 ft. 6 in. in length. It is probably of fifteenth-century date. Above is the commencement of a two-centred rear-arch and externally, but not in position, is a piece of a hollow moulded label. In the upper stage is a shallow round-headed recess with roll-moulded arch, and angle-shafts with splayed bases and cushion caps, all of twelfth-century date. The recess is pierced by a small round-headed window opening to the former circular stair. The window head is cut out of one piece of stone, similar to that of the small window in adjacent wall.

The N. face, at the W. end, projects slightly ; it is of coursed stone with a few ashlar quoins, and fragments of a roll-moulded arch to the recess.

The W. and S. sides are of roughly coursed rubble and flint, having lost most of their outer facing. A collection of fragments has been built up against the W. face ; they include a four-centred fifteenth-century arch formerly spanning a fireplace opening. The outer face is moulded and has a square head with quatrefoil and tracery in the spandrels. Above this is a damaged carving of a robed and seated figure of Christ within a vesica ; the head has a nimbus, the right hand is raised in blessing, while the left holds an open book. It is probably of thirteenth-century date.

The passage at the S. end of the W. range is of two bays with half of a former bay, very likely a porch, projecting from the main building on the W. side. It is entered from the E. by a doorway already described, and later doorways have been cut giving access to the main building and the



addition, the latter now blocked. The bays are covered by plastered semicircular and groined vaults separated by plain round arches of ashlar, rising from responds with simple splayed imposts. The N. and S. walls are recessed for nearly the full width of the bays and have arches concentric with the vaulting. The inner bay on the S. side has a further deep recess with roughly coved head. The wall surfaces are mostly plastered and limewashed, but that of the first bay on the S. side has ashlar facing. The flooring is partly of squared stones and partly of brick.

The principal feature internally is the fifteenth-century roof, formerly open to hall. It has a central king-post and half posts at the ends. These are octagonal with moulded bases and caps supporting curved struts.

No part of the church remains above ground-level. It was probably demolished at or soon after the suppression and the materials re-used locally. Lewis, writing in 1736, states that some people then living could remember seeing part of the old walls, so it would seem that the disappearance was accomplished gradually.

In May 1929 a trial-hole was dug to ascertain whether and to what extent foundations remained. The selection of a particular spot was guided by the appearance of the lawn in dry weather and resulted in the discovery of the N.E. angle of the chancel. Digging was continued in July, when the foundations of an apse were brought to view together with the sleeper-wall across the chord. The site of the church is now a well-kept garden with lawns and flower beds, and this circumstance prevented extensive trenching or disturbance; but as the previous finds were of so promising a nature further excavations were recently made (May 1930), with the help of a grant from the Archaeological Institute, and several holes were dug on the lines of supposed walls. The results, although somewhat meagre, were sufficient to indicate the plan of a small church of late eleventh- or early twelfth-century outline, consisting of a chancel 20 ft. by 19 ft. terminating in an apse of  $9\frac{1}{2}$  ft. radius, also a nave 47 ft. by  $23\frac{1}{2}$  ft. At the W. end of the nave was a large tower 25 ft. by 23 ft., the N. side of which, as already noted, still remains. As the measurements were taken within the foundations, the structure above ground would most likely be a little larger.



A. ENTRANCE TO VAULTED PASSAGE AT SOUTH  
END OF WEST RANGE



*Photos : P. K. Kipps*

B. EARLY FIFTEENTH-CENTURY DOORWAY OF  
NORTH RANGE



*Photo : P. K. Kipps*

A. THIRTEENTH-CENTURY MAJESTY, RE-SET



*[Photo : A. H. Siminson, Ramsgate*

B. FOUNDATIONS OF THE EASTERN APSE OF THE SOUTH RANGE  
(CHURCH), 1929

The most remarkable feature of the building was the enormous tower, comparable in size to a castle keep and probably intended to serve as a place of defence in times of emergency, a precaution well warranted by the exposed situation close to the coast. The massive tower of defensive character in this position can be paralleled at St. Leonard's, Malling, Kent, where, unfortunately, little is left of the attached chapel; and, less closely, at Fingest in south Buckinghamshire.

The foundations just discovered were nearly all on the N. side. The S. side, with parts of the E. and W. ends, appeared to have been at some period entirely dug up, but very fortunately the S.E. angle of the tower and its junction with the S. wall of nave, and the base of the wall between tower and nave could be identified. Radiating from the N.E. surface of the apse are two buttresses of later date, and on the N. side of the nave is a short projection, either a buttress or the start of a wall. The foundations of the apse are  $3\frac{1}{2}$  ft. thick, those of the church vary from 4 to 5 ft., while below the tower they are 7 ft. in thickness. The material consists almost wholly of very large flints with angles formed of Kentish rag and local sandstone, also occasional pieces of hard material resembling York stone. A certain amount of chalk was found next to the angles. In the N.E. part of the tower and about  $2\frac{3}{4}$  ft. below ground-level was a cement surface, but of what period is uncertain.

About 25 ft. W. of the tower and northwards, a piece of wall extending E. and W. has been uncovered; it is 2 ft. thick and about 2½ ft. below ground, composed of flint and pieces of sandstone. Whether it connects with the tower cannot at present be ascertained, and its W. end has been destroyed to make way for a drain.

There were no finds of especial interest during the recent excavations beyond some human bones found under the passage floor, a few sherds of pottery, scraps of metal, fragments of charred wood, etc.

It is a pleasure, in conclusion, to express thanks to Mr. C. H. Senior, the owner of Minster Abbey, not only for allowing the investigation to be carried out, but also for continuous personal help and encouragement. I am also greatly indebted to Mr. A. W. Clapham, F.S.A., for advice in the preparation of the report.