

## MATTERSEY PRIORY, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

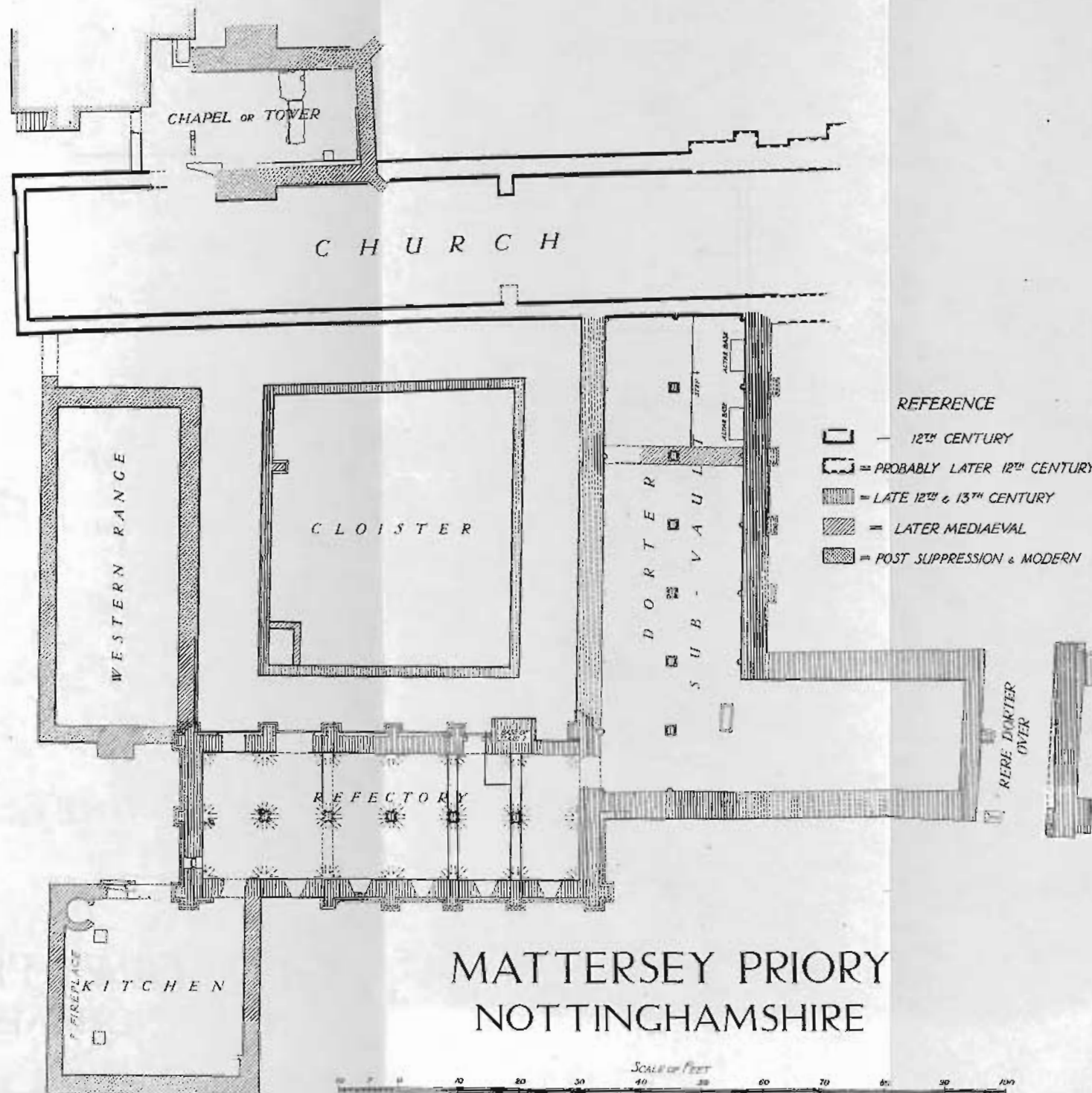
By C. R. PEERS, C.B.E., PRES. S.A.

The origin of the Gilbertine Order may be seen in the construction by Gilbert, rector of Sempringham in Lincolnshire, of a cloister and offices to the north of the parish church of St. Andrew there, in or about the year 1131, for the reception of seven maidens of Sempringham who desired to lead the religious life, under his direction. They were strictly enclosed, having no means of communication with the outer world but a small window. They were, however, served by lay sisters, and for the management of their external business certain lay brothers were appointed. They adopted the Cistercian rule for their form of observance.

In 1139 Gilbert accepted land in Sempringham from his feudal lord, Gilbert of Ghent, and as the first building was too small, Sempringham Priory with its double church cloisters and buildings was built on the new site, not far from the parish church, and dedicated in honour of the Virgin.<sup>1</sup>

These were the great days of English monasticism, and the new order took root and began to spread, with the result that further organisation became necessary. The first nuns at Sempringham depended on the parish church for their mass-priest, but in the new foundations special provision had to be made, and to each was attached a body of chaplains, following the rule of St. Augustine. In this way the monasteries became double houses, inhabited by Augustinian canons and Cistercian nuns, the numbers varying according to the importance of the house. At the largest house of the Order, Watton in East Yorkshire, there were 70 canons and 140 nuns, and at Sempringham 60 canons and 120 nuns. In all, twenty-six houses came into being in England, but by a curious modification of the rule, only half of these were double houses, with canons and

<sup>1</sup> *V.C.H. Lincs.* ii, 180.



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nuns, the other half having canons only. Of thirteen founded after the death of St. Gilbert in 1188 only one, Shouldham, was a double house. This is the more remarkable because the founder's intention had clearly been to establish an order for women, and the regulations contemplated the control and administration of each house by the prioress and her officers. The careful and elaborate provisions for the exercise of this control, combined with the strict seclusion of the nuns, are well known, and their effect on the planning of a Gilbertine monastery is shown in the case of Watton, the largest house, which was excavated over thirty years ago, and the results published, with a coloured plan, in the *Archaeological Journal* and the *Proceedings of the Yorkshire East Riding Antiquarian Society*.<sup>1</sup> The principal church had on its north side the claustral buildings occupied by the nuns, while the canons had a separate cloister, with church and all other buildings complete, at a little distance to the east of the nuns' cloister, and connected with it by a narrow corridor, in the middle of which stood the *domus fenestrae*, or window-house, which was the means of communication between nuns and canons.

At Chicksands, in Bedfordshire, such buildings as now remain are in a good state of preservation, since they were adapted as a dwelling house at the Suppression and are still so used. They consist of the three ranges, east, south and west, of a cloister attached to the south side of a church, of which only part of the south wall remains. There is nothing to show whether the cloister was that of the nuns, whether there was a separate set of buildings for the canons, or where such buildings were placed.

At Old Malton, in Yorkshire, a great part of a fine church exists, and it seems probable that parts of a cloister to the south of it are included in the buildings of a house in this position; but the site has never been planned.

This represents the extent of our present knowledge of the arrangement of Gilbertine houses, and further investigation of the sites of the larger houses of the

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Journ.* lviii, 1-34; *Trans. E.R. Soc.* viii, 70-170.

order is much to be desired. The subject of this paper is the small house founded about 1185 by Roger, son of Ranulph de Mattersey, on an island in the river Idle, and called the Priory of St. Helen on the Isle of Mattersey. It was to contain six canons, and there is no provision for nuns and no evidence that there were ever any at Mattersey. So that the question of a double set of buildings does not arise. It was a small house, and not well endowed. The few records that remain mention that it was very severely damaged by fire in 1279, and that on account of its poverty it was allowed in 1280 to appropriate the church of Mattersey.<sup>1</sup> Its revenue is given as £52 in the Taxation of 1291, while in 1534 it was £53. It contained five canons at the Suppression. Its site and buildings were granted to Anthony Neville, the church and its steeple being mentioned in the list. The site of the Priory was placed in the guardianship of the Commissioners of Works in 1912, and during that season and the two following the process of clearing and repair brought to light the plan here reproduced. The site is open and unoccupied, but immediately to the north is a farm house, parts of which are stone built and of considerable antiquity, though probably all later than the date of the Suppression. It is not possible to say whether old foundations underlie the farm house and its gardens, though there is some slight evidence to suggest it.

The plan shows a cloister 62 ft. from east to west by 66 ft. north to south, having buildings on all four sides. To the north is the church, of which nothing but wall bases and foundations remains. It was an aisleless building about 21 ft. wide internally and some 136 ft. long from east to west. Its east wall has entirely disappeared, and no trace of internal arrangements exists. Except at the east end, the walls are thin and entirely without buttresses. On part of the north wall stands the south wall and south-east angle buttress of what may have been a fifteenth-century tower, set in such a way that it is clear that this part of the church was ruined to the ground level when the tower was

<sup>1</sup> *Register of Archbp. Wickwane* (Surtees Soc. 63-70).



A. MATTERSEY PRIORY : THE REFECTORY FROM THE WEST



B. SOUTH WINDOWS OF SUBVAULT OF REFECTORY



A. REFECTORY : PART OF WEST WALL



B. HATCH TO KITCHEN, FROM SUB-VAULT OF  
REFECTORY



built. It is possible that it may never have been rebuilt after the fire of 1279.

The eastern range is 79 ft. long by 23 ft. broad, and was vaulted in two spans on the ground stage, and in seven bays, with octagonal pillars and round wall shafts. The ground floor was open from end to end, but at some date the two northern bays were cut off by a cross wall and fitted up as chapels, the altar platforms and bases of the altars still remaining. This, taken in conjunction with the evidence of the abandonment of the western part of the church, suggests the theory that no part of the church was in use in the later years of the Priory, the two chapels in the eastern range serving all purposes. But against this there is the mention of church and steeple in the Suppression grant to Anthony Neville, which would naturally be taken to imply that the church existed as a distinct building. If this be so, only the eastern half, at any rate, can have been roofed. Miss Rose Graham has kindly called my attention to a papal indult of 1402 (*Cal. of Papal Registers*, v, 548: Boniface ix) to those contributing to the conservation or repair of the church of St. Helen of the Gilbertine Priory of Mattersey.

There is no structural evidence of a chapter house in the eastern range, though part of the northern half of the ground floor would normally be planned with this object, nor is it clear how the upper story of the range, which must have contained the canons' dormitory, was reached. At the south end is an eastward return, on the same scale as the main range, and probably vaulted on the ground floor. At its east end is a paved passage which indicates the position of the reredorter on the floor above. If this was originally flushed by water from the river, the water levels must have been considerably higher than they now are.

The southern range of claustral buildings had a ground story vaulted in two spans, like the eastern range, but is of later date, being built with a straight joint against the south-western angle of the latter. There is, moreover, evidence, in the existence of an external plinth, that the eastern range originally stood



free at this point, and had no building against its western side. Such irregularities in monastic buildings are not unusual, and doubtless arise from the gradual replacement of temporary buildings by permanent ones. But it is hard to believe that a southern range was not contemplated when the eastern was built. It is sufficiently preserved to possess details giving a date at the end of the thirteenth century for its erection and is therefore work undertaken after the fire of 1279, while the eastern range is probably of earlier date than the fire. The ground storey is of six bays, with two light windows in its south wall, and has two doors towards the cloister. At its east end two bays have been cut off by cross walls, and it is probable that it was further subdivided, but its ruinous state gives no definite evidence of this. At the north-east is a block of masonry projecting into the cloister which may have served to carry the steps forming the day stair to the dormitory. We must conclude that the frater was on the upper floor, but how it was approached is uncertain. It must be noted that the west end of this range, like that of the eastern range, was designed to stand free, the plinths and remains of the angle buttresses making this clear.

A large square kitchen was added at its south-west angle, with a doorway to the range and an external doorway in its north wall. Except for an oven and traces of a wide fireplace in its west wall, it has lost all distinctive features.

On the west side of the cloister little more than the foundations of the western range exist, 57 ft. by 27 ft. over all, with a passage between its north end and the south wall of the church.

The ruins of the Priory have lain neglected, and served as a quarry for stone, for so long that their contribution to our knowledge of Gilbertine houses is far less than could be wished. But only two other houses, Watton and Chicksands,<sup>1</sup> have so far been planned and published, and a third example can now be placed on record.

<sup>1</sup> *V.C.H. Beds.*, ii, 274.