

# A NOTE ON THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF LEWES PRIORY

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The plan of the church of the Cluniac priory of St. Pancras<sup>1</sup> copied on a smaller scale the third church at Cluny itself, begun in 1088, of which the most remarkable feature was the double transept. Although such imitation by the first and most important English house of the order, founded between 1078 and 1081,<sup>2</sup> is not surprising, its dating has caused difficulties which are summarised with characteristic clarity by the late Sir Alfred Clapham as follows;<sup>3</sup> 'A dedication is recorded between the years 1091 and 1098, and a second between 1142 and 1147. It is difficult to believe that the whole church was laid out within a year or two, at most, of its model at Cluny; this argues an immediate contagion of ambitious ideas little in accord with the resources available; on the other hand, it is almost equally difficult to believe that the later dedication represents an enlargement on the precise pattern of a building which was already half a century old.' Although he offered no solution, elsewhere in his book Clapham seems by implication to have referred the dedication of 1142 to 1147 to the completion of the nave; he dated the base moulding of the south-west tower to c.1140.<sup>4</sup>

Before dealing with the architectural evidence something must be said about the history of the priory and the two dedications. It was founded by William de Warenne and Gundrada his wife, who settled at Lewes a few monks from Cluny, to whom, in the words of the first charter, they gave 'a church which we had converted from wood into stone below our castle of Lewes, which had from old time been dedicated to St. Pancras'.<sup>5</sup> A charter of William the second Earl of Surrey records the dedication of 1091-8: 'And when the church of St. Pancras had been completed, I was invited by Prior Lanzo to cause it to be dedicated . . . and I called together the

<sup>1</sup> W. H. St. J. Hope, *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. 34, 71; 69, 66; also W. H. Godfrey, *The Priory of St. Pancras at Lewes* (1927).

<sup>2</sup> David Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales*, 97. Joan Evans, *The Romanesque Architecture of the Order of Cluny*, 48, dates the foundation to 1077.

<sup>3</sup> A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture after the Conquest* (1934), 71, and plan, 72. For the dates of the dedications see W. H. St. J. Hope, *Arch. Journ.* vol. 41 (1884), 32-33; L. F. Salzman has modified them slightly (see below, n. 5).

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, 119, fig. 39.

<sup>5</sup> The relevant Charters of Lewes are most easily accessible in the edition (in translation) of L. F. Salzman, *The Chartulary of the Priory of St. Pancras at Lewes*, Part I (Sussex Record Soc., XXXVIII); the foundation charter is at pp. 1-7 and its authenticity is discussed in Part II, pp. xix-xx.

bishop of that diocese, Sir Ralph, and Bishops Walkelin of Winchester and Gundulph of Rochester to dedicate it.<sup>1</sup> Another charter, very similarly worded, refers to this dedication and is ascribed by Mr. Salzman to c.1095,<sup>2</sup> so that the range of date can be narrowed a little to 1091-c.1095. The third charter, granted by a later Earl William and ascribed to 1143-7, concludes a list of lands and tithes with the words: 'These abovesaid things I have granted . . . when I caused the church of St. Pancras to be dedicated . . . Witnesses: Theobald Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry Bishop of Winchester, Robert Bishop of Bath, Ascelin Bishop of Rochester who dedicated the same church'.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Salzman later dated this Charter more exactly to 1147.<sup>4</sup>

The principal excavator of the site, Mr. (later Sir) W. St. John Hope, assumed that the church and cloister had been enlarged, and since his arguments have been tacitly accepted by all later writers except Clapham, they need to be recapitulated.<sup>5</sup> 'We must not lose sight of the fact that this was a building of gradual growth. It is almost certain that at first the monks' church was the newly built one dedicated to St. Pancras, which was given them by the founder. It is also more than probable that this was found too small and converted into a monastic church by building a choir and transepts. Now one striking feature about this great church is its narrowness in proportion to its length . . . it occurred to me . . . that the cause of the narrowness was the pre-existence of the founder's church, with which the earliest additions were incorporated, before it was itself re-built.' Hope goes on to discuss the form of the first monastic church: 'From analogy with contemporary buildings, we should expect the church, after the first additions to the founder's, to consist of an eastern arm with aisles, three bays long, with an apse (cf. Chichester), an aisleless transept with an apse in each wing, and a bell tower at the crossing . . . an average sized monastic church.' Seeking to explain the anomalous oblong shape of the cloister, Hope postulates an extension westwards of the nave, which he thought was confirmed by signs of extension to the refectory. The dedication of 1091-8 he applied to the first monastic church and that of 1142-8 to the extensions east and west.

Moreover, 'about the same time that Lewes was being enlarged from the little church of St. Pancras into a more convenient monastic one, the mother church of Cluny was undergoing extension. The new works, which were dedicated in 1131' (and included the double transepts) 'made the monks desire to enlarge and glorify their church'; so, says Hope, they added four bays and a west tower to

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 24-26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> *Chartulary of . . . Lewes*, Part II, p. xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Arch. Journ.*, XLI (1884), 11-13.

the nave and an eastern transept and ambulatory to the choir, the whole being dedicated between 1142 and 1148.

This complicated development appears to have been accepted in turn by Mr. W. H. Godfrey<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Joan Evans<sup>2</sup> without any comment and certainly without explicitly rejecting any important part of it; although Dr. Evans seems to apply to the extension of Lewes the dedication of 1131 at Cluny,<sup>3</sup> and follows Mr. Godfrey in terminating the nave with two towers, not one. Thus Mr. Godfrey dates the main part of the church to the early twelfth century and the east and west extensions to the late twelfth century; Dr. Evans places the eastern arm 'towards the middle of the twelfth century.'

Only three pieces of archaeological evidence were adduced by Hope in support of his theories; (1) the narrowness of the nave; (2) the shape of the cloister, and (3) signs of rebuilding such as the variation in the line of the south wall 'and other indications'<sup>4</sup>—in the refectory. From this he deduced three enlargements in two phases of the original church given by William de Warenne. Yet when we look at the plan of the great church it shows not the slightest divergence of axis, variation of wall thickness, or change of form in the piers and buttresses. Although many churches can show as many successive stages of rebuilding, all, surely, reveal some signs of it in their plans. The absolute regularity of the plan of Lewes makes Hope's postulated development quite incredible and leaves the position exactly as Clapham stated it. Mr. T. S. R. Boase evades the issue by ignoring the earlier dedication.<sup>5</sup>

The problem is a real one, not to be ignored, which can perhaps be resolved by taking into account the small church adjacent to the eastern transept and the ambulatory, on the south side, that is said to have been the infirmary chapel.<sup>6</sup> It no doubt did serve that purpose, but its plan presents one peculiarity which suggests that it was not built as such. The nave walls are no less than 7 feet thick, much thicker than those of the great choir and its double transepts; they can only imply a barrel vault. This form of vaulting was customary in the Romanesque churches of Burgundy, Cluny III among them, so its adoption in an English church of the order is to be expected. Since barrel vaults were extremely rare in England and confined in buildings of any size to the late 11th and beginning of the 12th centuries, this small church can be presumed to fall within that period.

<sup>1</sup> *The Cluniac Priory of St. Pancras at Lewes* (1927) and V.C.H. *Sussex*, VII, 45ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, 74.

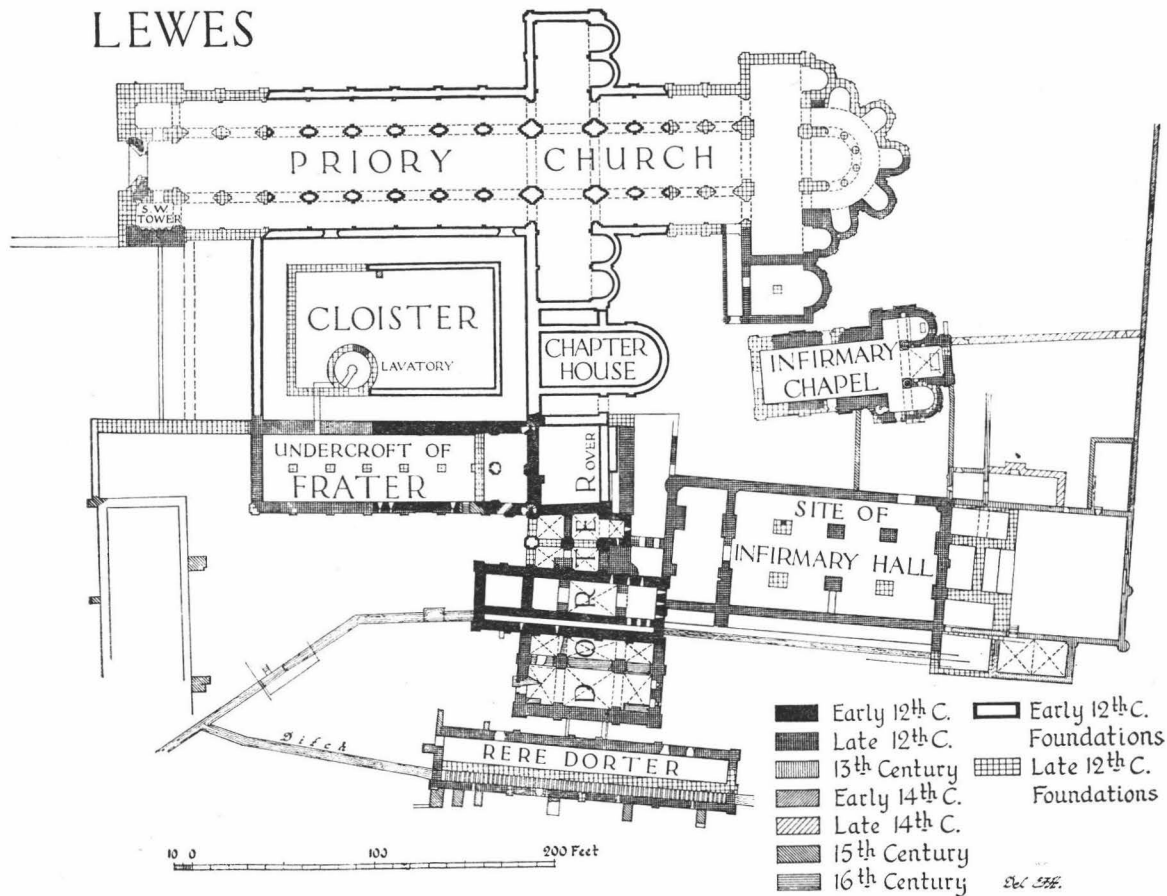
<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*, n.5.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> *English Art 1100-1215*, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Godfrey, *The Priory of St. Pancras*, followed by Joan Evans, *op. cit.*, 145.

# PRIORY OF ST. PANCRAS LEWES



What are the established views on this church? Mr. Godfrey refers it, with the infirmary, to the late 12th century. He remarks further that it follows the plan of Cluny in being independent of the infirmary hall, in its different orientation from the priory church, and in its triple east end. 'The difficulty in orientation may be due (as has been surmised at Cluny) to its being on the site of the original church of St. Pancras given by the founder.'<sup>1</sup> This destroys incidentally that part of Hope's theories relating to the narrowness of the nave, but is not incompatible with the rest of his ideas about an 'average sized monastic church as a first stage towards the church with double transepts.' Nevertheless if the infirmary chapel were on the site of William de Warenne's stone church, it is surprising that no foundations of the earlier structure were discovered. Moreover a late 12th century date for a barrel-vaulted nave of this size is hard to accept, and even a groined vault—which the plan permits—is no more likely at so late a date.

Mr. T. S. R. Boase identifies the 'infirmary chapel' with the church given by William de Warenne in 1077 to the monks who founded the conventual life of the priory.<sup>2</sup> This means that it was built before 1078-1081, and indeed the founder may have built such a barrel-vaulted church in the first decade after the Conquest, although it would be a remarkably early date for such a structure.

Dr. Joan Evans sees in the square-ended presbytery a sign of Cistercian influence and accordingly places it after 1132,<sup>3</sup> the date of the statutes of Peter the Venerable wherein the same influence appears; a barrel or groin vaulted Cistercian church is not impossible though no English example is known to have existed.<sup>4</sup>

Amid these conflicting interpretations and datings it is the writer's opinion that the problem so clearly stated by Clapham may be resolved in the following manner. The first church of the monastery was a small one, aisleless and barrel-vaulted, its size according with what was reasonable for a newly-founded house and its structure with Burgundian custom. This church was begun some time after 1078 and consecrated between 1091 and c.1095. Meanwhile the rapid growth of the priory necessitated a larger church, so a second was begun soon after the first was finished. It was this church, consecrated in 1147, which copied the plan of Cluny III; it must have been laid out within a few years of the consecration of the eastern parts of Cluny in 1095. The narrowness of the nave, about 24 feet, may be accounted for by assuming the close copying of Cluny

<sup>1</sup> V.C.H. *Sussex*, VII, 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, 54. Mr. Boase's statement that the leaden coffins of William de Warenne and Gundrada were found in the church seems to be wrong; Hope says they were found in the Chapter House (*Arch. Journ.* vol. 41, 19); cf. *Archaeologia*, vol. 31 (1846), 438-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, 76.

<sup>4</sup> Clapham, *op. cit.*, 79.

to extend to a vaulted main span. The plan of the piers suggests either a barrel-vault with cross-arches or a groined vault. The nearly contemporary nave of Chepstow Priory, built c.1120 with a width of about 25 feet, had a groined vault.<sup>1</sup> Less easy to explain at so early a date is the square-ended presbytery, though such a feature need not of itself denote Cistercian influence, as the presbyteries of Southwell, begun before 1114, and of Romsey (c.1120)<sup>2</sup> prove. Nor, apparently was a square east end rare in Burgundy,<sup>3</sup> so that suitably early precedent can be found for that feature in isolation. Parallels for the plan of a square-ended presbytery flanked by apsidal chapels are rare; recently an early example has been excavated in the church of St. Etienne at Waha in Belgium, consecrated in 1050.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless in the last resort the only ground for rejecting Mr. Boase's dating is probability; there is no direct evidence to refute his opinion.

After the completion of the second church the example of the mother house was again followed in preserving the superseded building and putting it to other uses. Cluny II lasted in part at least until c.1680<sup>5</sup> and the early church at Lewes until the Dissolution. Though the preservation may have been partly utilitarian, it must have sprung also from veneration for a relic of the origins and earliest years of the house. Such regard for their early buildings was not confined to Cluniac houses; the first tiny stone chapels at Citeaux, Pontigny, Clairvaux and Ourscamp were all likewise preserved for many centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The rectangular cloister is no doubt another result of copying Cluny, where the shape was arrived at c.1120 by extension of an earlier cloister.<sup>7</sup> Hope relied on the slight change of alignment in the south wall of the refectory 'and other indications' unspecified, as proof of extension. Again the argument from the change of alignment cannot be refuted, but by itself such change might equally represent a partial rebuilding rather than extension.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 56-7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 44-5.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Aubert, *L'Architecture Cistercienne en France* (2nd ed., 1947), I, 165, n.l. cites three late-11th century examples; cf. also C. Enlart, *Manuel d'Archeologie Francaise*, pt. 1, *Architecture Religieuse*, I, 247-8, with list of Romanesque square east ends at 248 n.l.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mertens, "L'église St. Etienne à Waha," *Archaeologica Belgica*, vol. 40 (1958).

<sup>5</sup> Joan Evans, op. cit., fig. 13b, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Aubert, op. cit., I, 152-3.

<sup>7</sup> Rose Graham and A. W. Clapham, "The Monastery of Cluny 910-1150," *Archaeologia*, vol. 80 (1930), 159.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Professor V. H. Galbraith for reading this note, though the responsibility for the conclusions is mine. Mr. L. F. Salzman kindly drew my attention to his discussion of the charters in Part II of his edition of the Chartulary. Mr. R. B. Pugh, General Editor of the Victoria County History of England, gave permission for the plan to be reproduced.