

LESSAY ABBEY, MOTHER-HOUSE OF BOXGROVE PRIORY

Some remarks on the restored Abbey Church, and notes
on visits to certain parishes mentioned in the Boxgrove
Chartulary

By LINDSAY FLEMING, F.S.A.

Many of the documents registered in the Boxgrove Chartulary¹ illustrate the close links that persisted, for some time after the Conquest, between Sussex and Normandy. Boxgrove Priory arose as a dependency of Lessay Abbey² (Plate I), and any study of the Sussex convent begets desire for some acquaintance with that great Norman foundation³.

Lessay Abbey, Manche, situated in the Cotentin peninsula of Normandy, in the Bishopric of Coutances, is in a district whence sprung several of the families associated with Boxgrove in the early days. To the north is La Haye-du-Puits, once patrimony of the Hay family, benefactors alike of Lessay and Boxgrove, and south-eastward is St. Martin-d'Aubigny, home of the Albini, or d'Aubigny, line, earls of Arundel. South of Coutances is St. Jean-le-Thomas, now a popular seaside resort, whence sprung the Sancto Johanne, or St. John, family.⁴

It may be questioned whether many English tourists have gone to Lessay for the sake of its architectural treasure, the abbey church.

¹ To be published by the Sussex Record Society for 1959 and 1960, volumes 58 and 59.

² Boxgrove Priory was probably the principal dependency, as at a visitation by the archbishop of Rouen in 1250 it was recorded that in many priories lived one monk only, contrary to the rule. There were dependent priories at Plessis, Orval, Pirou, Portbail, Avarreville and Barneville. A lepers' hospital at Bolleville, founded by the lords of La Haye-du-Puits, was later united to Lessay and became the priory of St. Mary of Bolleville.

³ There is an extensive French literature on Lessay Abbey. Besides the writings mentioned below see, especially, G. Desdevises du Degert, *Mon Vieux Lessay. Le Pays, les Gens, la Vie* (St.-Lô, 1928), and G. Rubillon du Lattay, *L'Ancienne Abbaye de Sainte-Trinité de Lessay 1056-1791*. (Mortain, n.d.). I owe thanks to Mlle. Desmier, librarian at Avranches, for showing me the latter book.

⁴ For much information on the Norman origins of English families, of whom representatives figure as donors or witnesses in the Boxgrove Chartulary, see Lewis C. Loyd, ed. by Charles Travis Clay and David C. Douglas, *The Origins of some Anglo-Norman Families*, Harleian Society, vol. 103 (1951). See also, M. l'abbé Charles Birette, 'Les Normands de la Manche à la Conquête de l'Angleterre,' in *Bulletin de la Société des Antiquaires de Normandie*, vol. 42 (1932), pp. 146-200.

They may more likely be attracted by the Fair held annually, 12th-14th September, on the Lande de Lessay, the heath near the town, on each side of the road to Coutances, scene of one of the romantic novels, *L'Ensorcelée*, of J. Barbey d'Aureville, the Walter Scott of Normandy. Near this bleak and mysterious terrain was established in the 11th century the Abbey of the Holy Trinity of Lessay, of the order of St. Benedict. In the immediate vicinity was marshy land now lush water meadows, while south and east of the abbey arose the township, composed to-day of two main streets, in the shape of a "T." Rebuilt in the 18th century, and again since the second world war, the town of Lessay, sheltering as of old under the great church, presents to the visitor an air of dignity, and also of progress.

But no doubt lovers of antiquity have rested at Lessay. Fortunate if they came before the last war, when they will have seen the abbey church in all its majesty, and, attached, the 18th-century conventual buildings that survived, except for loss of the founder's tomb and other such features, the French Revolution. The earlier turmoils that so harmed the ecclesiastical monuments of the country, the English wars and wars of religion, caused damage to the fabric, but this had been made good in a manner so sympathetic to the Roman style of the earliest building that the periods of construction became almost indistinguishable.

We do not see the same edifice now, but a very faithful reproduction in respect of the many parts that suffered, when Nazi mines nearly caused irreparable disaster in 1944.¹ One admires the skill and devotion of those immediately responsible for the rebuilding, from the architect M. Y.-M. Froidevaux, l'Architecte en Chef, Monuments Historiques, and contractors, MM. Dagand and Seyve, Périgueux, Dordogne, to the masons and carpenters. In the new sacristy is this inscription:—

CETTE ÉGLISE DEDÉE À LA
SAINTE TRINITÉ
FUT CONSTRUITE AU XI^E SC.
DEVASTÉE PAR LA GUERRE
EN 1944. ELLE FUT RELEVÉE
DE SES RUINES DE 1945 À 1957.

¹ The damage caused and the work of reparation are fully described and illustrated in the latest work on the Abbey: *L'Abbatiale de Lessay, Les Domages – Les Travaux – La Mise en Valeur – Les Fouilles et les Découvertes*, by Y.-M. Froidevaux, Note Préliminaire, by Jean Verrier, *Aperçu Historique*, by M. Lelégard, *Les Monuments Historiques de la France* (3, Rue de Valois, Paris 1er), Bulletin Trimestriel, No. 3, July-September, 1958. Many of the Nazi mines exploded, including those placed at the foot of three of the four main piers supporting the tower. So the tower collapsed, all the roofs, a length of the north wall of the nave aisle, part of a nave pier, some of the south wall of the nave aisle, and a great deal of the apsidal east end of the quire. See Plan.



FIG. 1

Drawn by John Broughton

Lessay Abbey was founded in 1056 by Turstin Haldup, or Halduc, lord of La Haye-du-Puits, his wife Emma, and their son Odo Capel. The foundation was confirmed by William the Conqueror in 1080, in presence of Queen Maud, his sons Robert and Henry, William archbishop of Coutances, Lanfranc archbishop of Canterbury and many others. The son, seneschal of the Duke-King, was regarded as the principal founder, and before his death, in 1098, the construction of the abbey was well advanced.¹ The nave of the church was completed in the early 12th century, in similar style. In 1105, the nephew of Odo, Robert de la Haye, or Hay, with consent of his wife Muriel and sons Richard and Ralph, made those great benefactions, including Boxgrove, besides other lands and churches in England, that eventually became the special endowments of the English house and are recorded in the Boxgrove Chartulary. These gifts enabled the building at Lessay to be completed, though dedication of the abbey church did not take place till 1178. One may assume that Boxgrove Priory church was completed even later, as result of the liberal grants of William and Robert St. John, grandsons of Robert Hay, noted in the Chartulary. Lessay Abbey suffered severely in about 1356 at the hands of the English and Navarrese, but restoration of the church was begun in 1385 and finished by 1444 in the original style. The abbey again suffered injury in the wars of religion of the later 16th century. The monks fled, and the monastery was pillaged by the protestants and the robber bands of Montgomery.

The plan of the abbey church is a typical Norman one, in the form of a cross. Those of the abbey churches of Cérisy-la-Forêt and of Boscherville may, for example, be compared.

The nave, with north and south aisles, is constructed in seven bays, divided by six pairs of compound piers (Plate II). Of these, the two easterly pairs, of different design from the remainder, are considered to be part of the earliest structure, that included the quire and transepts, probably completed by 1098. The supposition could not be fully confirmed during the recent rebuilding, as the easternmost bay of the nave was destroyed when the adjoining piers supporting the central tower were blown up.² But it was established that the vaulting of quire, crossing and transepts was part of the original structure, as the homogeneity of the rubble core proved that these three adjoining vaults were constructed as one operation, following on the building of the walls and preceding that

¹ During the recent reparations, the tomb of Odo Capel, as is considered, was discovered in the crossing before the quire, and a carved head was found, thought to have belonged to the 13th century effigy destroyed at the Revolution. See Bulletin, No. 3 (1958) of *Les Monuments Historiques de la France*, cited above, pp. 144-5, and 148, illustration.

² See Bulletin, No. 3 (1958) of *Les Monuments Historiques de la France*, p. 140, note 2. Also cited in this footnote are several of the authorities on the architecture of the Abbey.

contains five lights in each of two stages, and has a semi-domed roof. In the quire north aisle is the chapel of St. Benedict and in the quire south aisle that of St. Opportuna, Norman abbess, patron saint of the parish of Lessay. East of the south transept is a rectangular chapel of 15th-century date; it replaced an apse and was extended eastwards. This, now the baptistry, is lighted on the east by a traceried window of two lights supporting a quatrefoil centre-piece. In the newly paved floor is indicated, by a band of different material, the line of the foundations of the apse discovered during the recent work. A rectangular chapel, destroyed in the 18th century, occupied the similar position, adjoining the quire north aisle; a new sacristy has been built on this site.

Above the stone vaulting of the church has been reconstructed a timber roof covered with thick schist obtained from the Cotentin. The quadripartite covering of each bay, of nave, quire and transepts, is composed of diagonal ribbed vaulting, while that of nave and quire aisles consists of plain groined vaults.¹ The transverse arches of the aisles are supported on attached columns against the outer walls. There are no wall-arches. A feature of the end walls of the transepts is that in the centre of each an attached column rises the whole height of the wall. These walls are further broken by five moulded string-courses demarcating the stages, and level with the springing of the arches of the two lower stages of fenestration. There are similar string-courses below the triforium arcading and the clerestory windows in nave and quire.

The west end of the church, largely rebuilt, is of simple design, containing a semi-circular headed central doorway, plain on the interior, with two windows over and one larger window above these. The windows, internally, have moulded semi-circular heads and attached shafts. Moulded string-courses run below the windows, and a broken string-course crosses the wall in line with the springing of the arches of the lower pair of windows.

The extent of the re-building in the 15th century is unknown. The south aisle is thought by one writer² to have been added and not merely restored at that period. The vaulting of the four westerly bays of the nave may have been renewed then, as at the intersection of the diagonal ribs were magnificent carved bosses displaying coats-of-arms. These were surmised to belong to the principal donors to the cost of the repairs in the 15th century,³ or the shields might have been those of abbots.⁴ The credit for that reparation is traditionally thought to have been principally due to Abbot William de Guéhébert, who died in 1447, having resigned the abbacy some years before then, and to have been initiated by

¹ See Bond, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

² M. Élie Lambert, *op. cit.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Florent Richomme, *Abbaye de Lessay, Annuaire du Département de la Manche* (1841), pp. 255-60.

Peter Leroy who became Abbot in 1385 and in the next year was chosen Abbot of Mont-St-Michel.

It is the policy of the organisation charged with the care of the historic monuments of France, faced with such grave problems, to preserve so much as remains, rather than to recover a building's former state. But it was decided that special considerations applied to Lessay Abbey, one of the few examples of a great Norman church to have survived complete and unaltered in style, and that an entire restoration must be attempted, as had been done, in similar if less tragic conditions five centuries before. The magnitude of the task that was undertaken in 1945 cannot now be appreciated, and the extent of the risk can only be imagined, from unexploded mines and the chance of falling masonry. For not only had the mines destroyed great portions, but they had shaken and weakened much of the remaining piers and walls. And at the outset there was only one stonemason known in the locality, and he was a prisoner-of-war! But in one respect there has been a break with the past, or the immediate past. The furnishings of the church, the altars, window glass, pavements, have been carefully and thoughtfully re-designed, to emphasise, and not detract from, the magnificence of the church's general proportions, in consonance, besides, with the purity and severity of the architecture. Few of the old fittings remained. An 18th-century altar and reredos survived, though mutilated, in the north transept, the chapel of the Virgin Mary. They have not been completely renewed but left to remind of the agonies of war, except that, as an inspiration for the future, a restrained but impressive figure of St. Mary, carved in stone by the sculptor Cattant, has been placed in the arched recess over the altar. Statues of St. Benedict and of St. Opportuna, have been erected, but no others; the figure of Christ on the Cross, over the high altar, in wood, is the work of Lambert-Rucki. A stone plaque, probably from an altar tomb of the 14th or 15th century, containing eight figures in traceried panels, was formerly in the quire, and has been re-fixed at the west end of the nave north aisle. There once existed a similar plaque with ten figures, but this has gone.¹

Externally the abbey church has little ornamentation. The central tower on the lower stage is broken with semi-circular headed openings and arched recesses; on the principal stage are four small openings on each face, enclosed in arcading of tall attached shafts, with semi-circular moulded heads, features that dated from the 12th century and have been reproduced. The enormous slated dome, added to the tower in the 18th century, has been replaced by a simple

¹ Renault, *Essai Historique sur l'Abbaye de Lessay, Procès-Verbal des Délibérations du Conseil-Général du Département de la Manche (1850-51)*, pp. 585-619. This book was lent to me by M. André Lucas, notaire, Lessay, to whom I am deeply grateful for the kind welcome he accorded me. I also wish to thank M. Jeanson for the kind reception he gave me. He and his brother are proprietors of the abbey buildings and farm.

pyramidal roof, covered with schist as the church. The windows of the different parts are in some cases plain openings, but others are relieved with attached shafts and moulded heads. The 12th-century doorway at the west end is to be remarked: the outer framing is composed on each flank of three attached columns, and the semi-circular head is composed of two mouldings and a band of "saw-tooth" ornament. The sheerness of the walls is relieved by pilasters and string-courses, but the beauty of the cream-coloured stone atones for any lack of adornment. Three sorts of stone have been used, and will enable the three principal periods of construction to be distinguished in the future. In the 11th and 12th centuries stone from Yvetot-Bocage, about 30 miles from Lessay, was used, and in the 15th century, stone from Creully, near Caen. But these quarries are exhausted or no longer afford good material. So a stone was sought, distinct from, but harmonising with, the old material, and the requirements were met by the stone called Montanier, from the department of Oise, of which Beauvais is the capital.

One tarried at Lessay on account of the abbey, and for the proximity to Coutances cathedral, so miraculously spared in the war, the one recalling Norman grandeur, and the other telling so eloquently of the sublimity attained by the Gothic style in its fullest development. I had planned to visit from Lessay some of the churches mentioned in the Boxgrove Chartulary.¹ Among these may be mentioned that at Laulne which is a completely new church, the old one having been damaged in the war. Lastelle has a church of some interest. The chancel of two bays has been considerably restored, with a new altar in the centre, a new painting on the east wall, a new sacristy at the east end; on the external wall of the latter have been placed old carved heads of a bishop and of a pilgrim. The central tower rests on four 14th-century arches, some capitals carved. A new wooden circular stair affords access. In the south transept is an 11th-century font and a 13th-century piscina. A 14th-century double piscina, under a trefoiled arch, with credence shelf, is in the chancel. The nave, continuous with the chancel, is of two bays. In the south chapel, between nave and chancel, has been placed a five-foot wooden statue of Christ, holding a pascal lamb, with traces of colour. As old memorials have not often survived in French churches, it was interesting to find inscription on the south wall of the south transept, recording that the chapel of the Holy Virgin was decorated, and rent for masses given, in 1678, by the "noble homme" Langluin "escur" and his wife "damoiselle" Gillonne Morel: "priez dieu pour eux."

Meadows and trees, a Sussex setting, enclose the handsome but modernised church of St. Patrice de Clads. There is a long vaulted

¹ See *Sussex Record Society*, vol. 58, No. 41. M. le Chanoine Pinel, du Chapitre de Coutances, author of *Coutances et sa Cathédrale*, gave me a most kind welcome at Coutances and assisted me in identifying the places mentioned in the Boxgrove Charter.

nave and chancel with early 13th-century chancel arch. The south transept has a modern altar. The east end is filled by an 18th-century altar and reredos; the sacristy is beyond. The tower is on the north opposite the transept. There are plain semi-circular arches at the entrance of transept and tower. Of the 14th century are west window and porch, the latter restored in 1861.

At Marchezieux, the church is of the 14th century¹ (Plate IV). It has a cruciform plan, nave with aisles of the same height, choir and transepts. The nave arcades are supported on round piers, with cylindrical capitals ornamented with volutes. Since the war were discovered early paintings in the choir representing the Nativity, Massacre of the Innocents, Visit of the Magi, the Last Supper, and other Biblical scenes. A curious feature was pointed out by the Curé. Adjoining the ribs of the nave vaulted roof and close to each of three of the carved bosses was a reclining figure, of small dimensions, coloured, supposed to represent abbots of Lessay. Why they should be thus commemorated and in such uncomfortable attitudes is impossible to surmise.

Feugères church has nave and choir continuous, much restored, only the piers and arches of the crossing being original work of the 13th century.

Another church recorded in the Boxgrove Chartulary is that of St. Margaret of Baudreville. This church, as so many, was much restored and adorned in the last or present century. The chancel arch, with crudely carved capitals to the piers, would appear to date from the 14th century. The pulpit is of the 17th century and there is a plain ancient holy water stoup.

But in the church of Our Lady of Port-Bail we may still, in imagination, see the early benefactors of Boxgrove; this 11th-century church has suffered little from the hands of the restorer (Plate III). It was built, one read on a notice inside, to replace an abbey that existed in the 6th century. The roofs suffered in the last war, but the six tie-beams spanning the nave and supporting king-posts appeared to be ancient. The building is still in a state of considerable dilapidation, redolent of antique charm that will no doubt vanish when the contemplated restoration is carried out. There are north and south transepts, and at the crossing, above which rises the tall square embattled tower of the 15th century, are Norman arches with carved capitals showing traces of old colouring (Plate IV). On the west side of the north transept is a 15th-century chapel, entered from nave and transept by pointed arches. The church occupies a striking situation near the shore of the estuary of the Olonde.²

¹ Henry de Ségogne, editor, *Les Curiosités Touristiques de la France, Manche* (1952), p. 41.

² The church of St. Martin of Goney at Port-Bail also has carved capitals, 12th century. The church of Barneville has wonderful 11th century nave arcading.



PLATE I

LESSAY ABBEY. Exterior from the south-west. October, 1958.

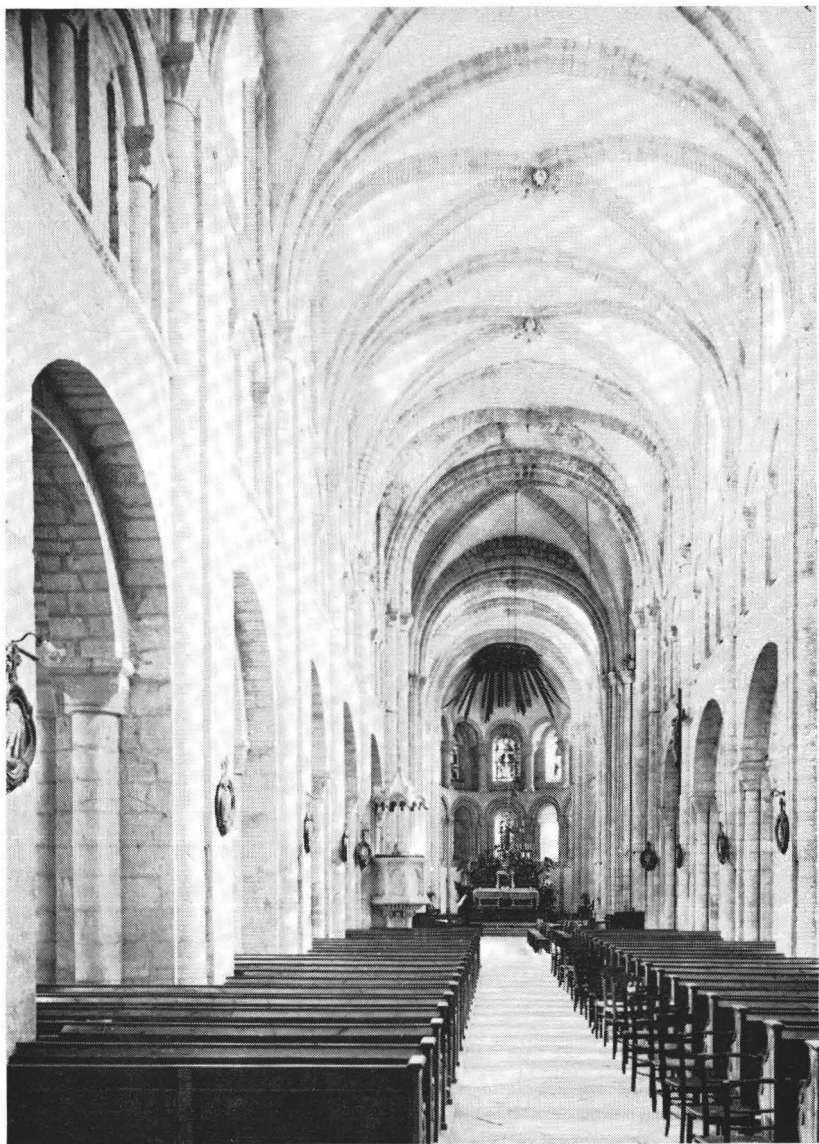


PLATE II

LESSAY ABBEY. Interior of the Nave in 1934.

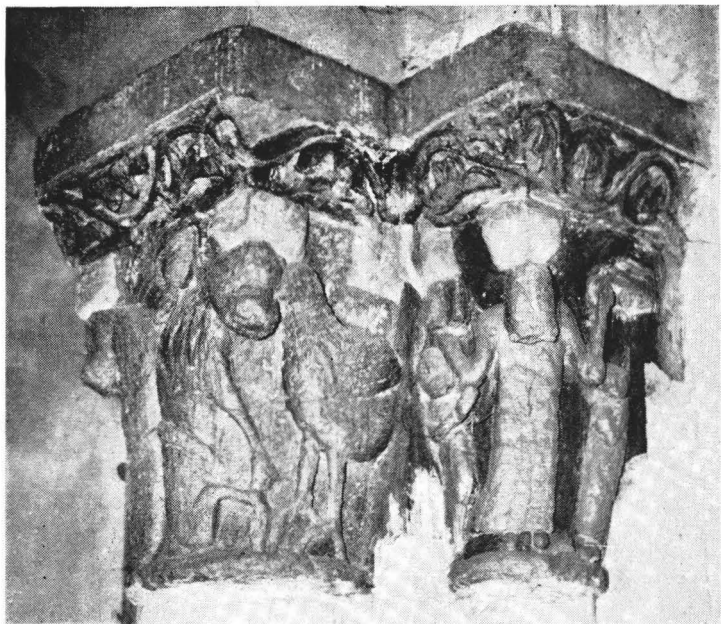
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CHURCH OF NOTRE DAME DE PORT-BAIL.
Exterior from the south-west. October, 1958.



CHURCH OF NOTRE DAME DE PORT-BAIL.
Interior. October, 1958.



CHURCH OF NOTRE DAME DE PORT-BAIL.
Carved Capitals. October, 1958.



CHURCH OF MARCHEZIEUX
Exterior from the south-west. October, 1958.

All these churches are not far from Lessay (see map). At considerable distance, near Cherbourg, is the church of Querqueville, once associated with Lessay, and etched by Cotman.¹ This is reputed one of the most ancient Christian shrines in France.

¹ *Architectural Antiquities of Normandy*, by John Sell Cotman; accompanied by *Historical and Descriptive Notices* by Dawson Turner, vol. I (1822), p. v.