The origins and symbolism of the Great Gatehouse at Battle Abbey

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In March 2015 English Heritage commissioned Archaeology South-East to record the Great Gatehouse at Battle Abbey, East Sussex, in order to inform its re-display to the public. This represented the first thorough investigation of this famous building, which originated in the Norman period as part of a complex of prominent structures marking the main entrance to the abbey precinct, including a gateway-chapel dedicated to St John and a possible courthouse. The original gatehouse was remodelled on a grand scale c. 1338, and the present civic courthouse constructed in the late 16th century. The gatehouse and its attendant suite of entrance structures to the abbey are interpreted here as a complex symbolic of martial power and temporal lordship which doubled as a metaphor for the entrance to heaven.

INTRODUCTION

Battle Abbey was founded in 1070 on the site of the Battle of Hastings as an act of penance for the bloodshed during the battle and the subsequent Norman Conquest of England.[1] Consecrated in 1094, it became one of the richest Benedictine houses in the country. Dissolved on the orders of Henry VIII in 1538, the church and other buildings were demolished, the west range was converted into a country house, whilst the Great Gatehouse was retained as a fine ceremonial entranceway with a rebuilt civic courthouse attached. The west range was leased to Battle Abbey School in 1922; the site came into public ownership in 1976, after which the Great Gatehouse was refurbished as a museum.[2]

In March 2015 the opportunity was presented to record thoroughly the gatehouse as part of English Heritage's new *Conservation Management Plan* for Battle Abbey and the on-going re-display of the building to the public.[3] It was quickly realised that far more of the original Norman gatehouse survived above ground level than had hitherto been assumed, and that it may have articulated with a suite of other structures to form a symbolic entrance complex to the medieval abbey.

Despite its relative fame and importance as one of the largest and most impressive survivals of its type in England, the gatehouse has not previously been subject to thorough study. Discussed by a number of antiquarian publications in the 19th century,[4] Harold Brakspear produced a brief analysis and phase plan of the gatehouse as a result of his excavation and restoration of the abbey during

the 1920s and 30s.[5] A more thorough description is contained within the 2001 *Conservation Plan* for the abbey,[6] whilst the present guidebook contains additional useful discussion and context.[7] The gatehouse was subject to a programme of archaeological excavation adjacent to the present pedestrian entrance during the early 1990s, but the results have yet to be written up.[8] A set of measured drawings of the gatehouse and adjacent courthouse were prepared in the late 1970s,[9] and the courthouse was the subject of a detailed study in 1992,[10] which unfortunately cannot be located.[11]

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Battle Abbey and town were laid out along the ancient ridgeway (the modern A2100) on which Duke William met the Saxon army at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, at the 'hoary apple tree' which marked the probable meeting place of the Anglo-Saxon hundred of Hailesalte.[12] The Great Gatehouse lies at the north-west corner of the abbey's walled precinct, providing access to the monastic outer court from the new town of Battle via a large triangular expanse known as the Abbey Green, which marks the point of deflection of the old ridgeway around the abbey's northern precinct boundary on its foundation *c.* 1070 (Fig. 1).[13] As well as funnelling traffic to the gatehouse, the Abbey Green provided an open vista of the gatehouse and abbey behind for traffic approaching from the north-west. The fact that the town, Abbey Green, gatehouse and road were all planned as a unified scheme implies that this piece of architectural showmanship was intended from the start.
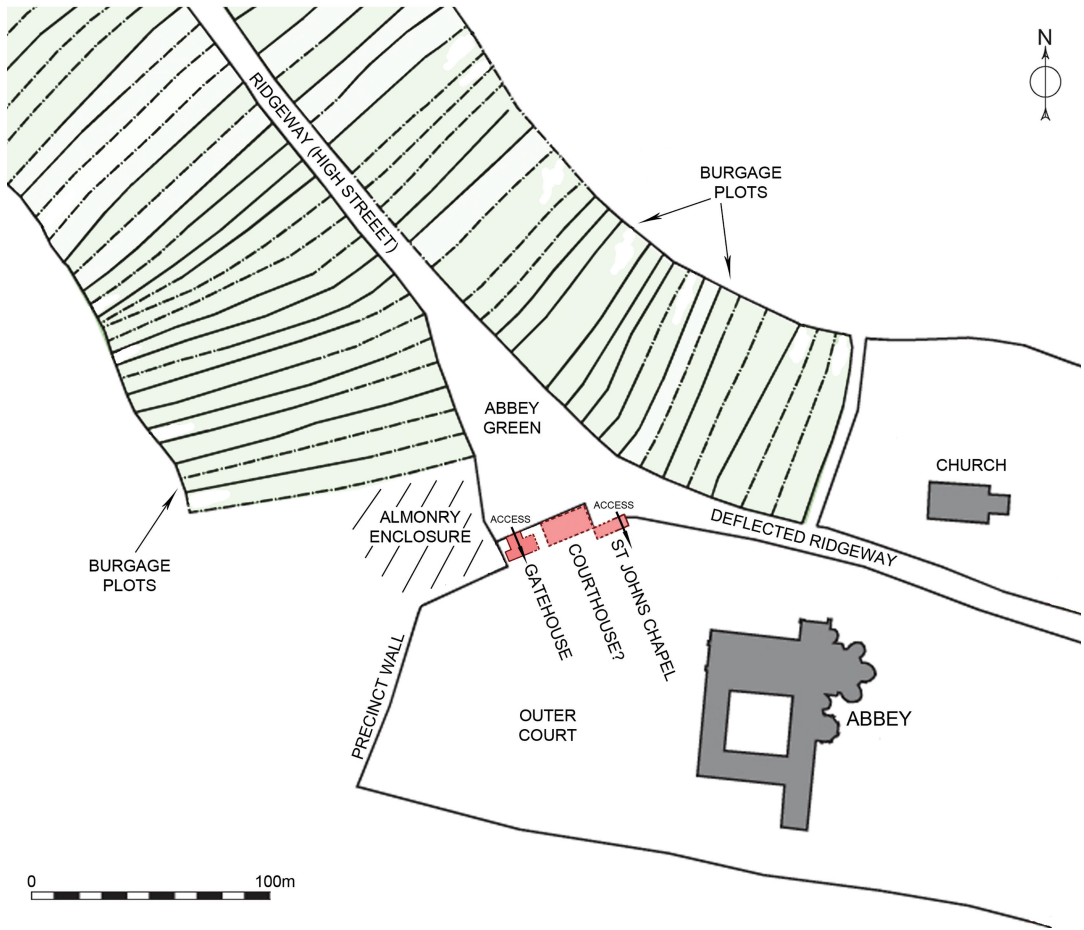
Fig. 1. Plan of Battle town and abbey *c.* 1105. Note the gatehouse-courthouse-chapel entrance complex extending along the open green in front of the abbey. Adapted from D. Martin, B. Martin and C. Whittick, with J. Briscoe, *Child of Conquest. Building Battle Town, an Architectural History, 1066 to 1750* (Burgess Hill: domtom Publishing, 2016), with kind permission.

The gatehouse, which was substantially rebuilt *c.* 1338, presently consists of a tall central tower flanked by two-storey wings to the east and west (Figs 2 and 3). The western wing retains the core of the original Norman gatehouse, whilst the eastern annexe was largely rebuilt as a civic courthouse soon after the Dissolution. The ruins of a Norman chapel dedicated to St John and associated pedestrian gatehouse lie on the courthouse's eastern side. The entrance complex to the abbey therefore consists (from west to east) of gatehouse-courthouse-chapel-gatehouse, extending along the entire southern side of the Abbey Green.

THE NORMAN GATEHOUSE

A significant part of the original three-storey Norman gatehouse lies preserved within the two-storey western wing of its extant 14th-century successor (Fig. 3). That the Norman gatehouse was incorporated in this way rather than being demolished suggests that it was kept in use whilst the 14th-century building was constructed adjacent. The Norman work consists of roughly coursed sandstone and ironstone rubble of various sizes, some laid herringbone-fashion, whilst the 14th-century masonry is characterised by coursed and roughly-dressed sandstone rubble with ashlar quoins and dressings.

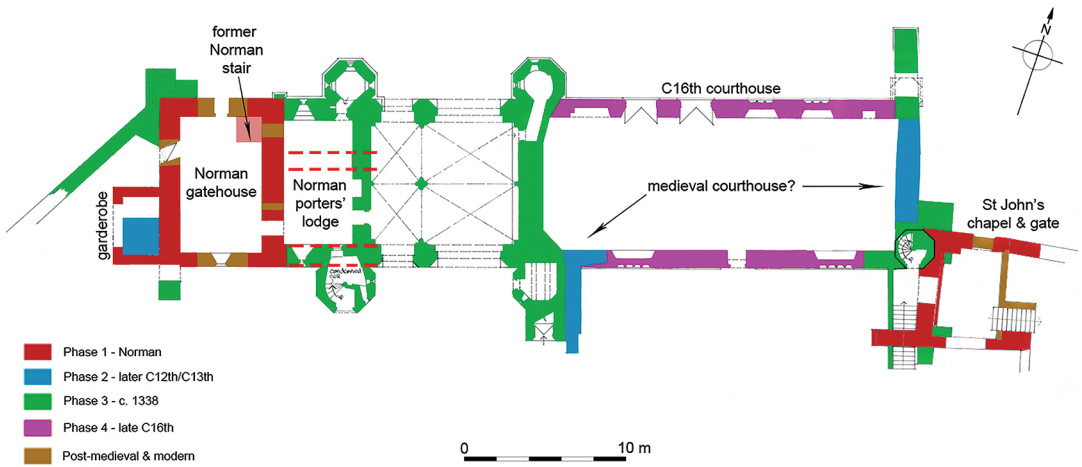Fig. 2. General view of the Great Gatehouse from the north.

Fig. 3. Phased plan of the Great Gatehouse, based on English Heritage drawing no MP_BAT0284.

The north elevation of the gatehouse's western wing is substantially Norman at ground floor level across its western half (Figs 4 and 5). The significant break in masonry lies above a slender buttress towards the east side of the elevation, which aligns with the west wing's internal spine wall, demonstrating that the present spine wall originated as the external east wall of the primary gatehouse structure. The Norman features of the north elevation are as follows. On the east side

of the elevation are a pair of small round-headed openings, which lit a newel-stair occupying the north-east corner of the building. A 19th-century doorway lies towards the west end of the elevation, which was inserted into the blocking of an earlier, larger round-headed archway visible in a late 18th-century illustration (Fig. 6). The ghost of this opening remains in the surrounding masonry: it represents the original main entrance-way through the Norman gatehouse, which measured
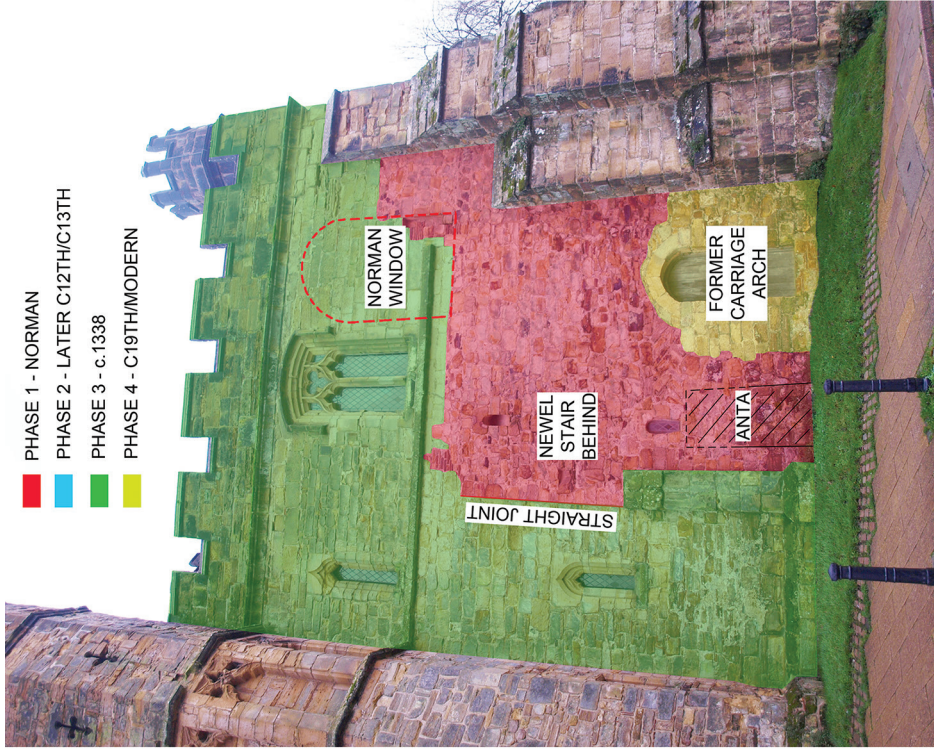
Fig. 5. Interpretation of the north elevation of the Norman gatehouse.

Fig. 4. North elevation of the Norman gatehouse.

Fig. 6. S. H. Grimm's view of the Great Gatehouse in 1783, from the north. Note the survival of the Norman carriage arch towards the right of the image. © The British Library Board, Add. MS. 5670, f. 38 [74], reproduced with permission.

approximately 3 metres wide by 3.6 metres high, making it sufficient for vehicular as well as pedestrian access. This is almost identical to the dimensions of the roughly contemporary western land-gate at Portchester Castle (Hampshire).[14]

The wall between the northern archway and the slender buttress to the east bears a second protrusion, which survives only a few courses above present ground level, but which is originally likely to have finished immediately below the lower of the newel-stair windows above. This protrusion, which is far too slender to have been a useful buttress, can be interpreted as an *anta*, a form of engaged pier known from a number of early medieval and Romanesque buildings across North-West Europe.[15] Thought to derive from very early timber analogues, a pair of *antae* would typically have flanked the principal entrance to a church or ecclesiastical gatehouse: the evidence for a western *anta* at Battle is obscured.

The final Norman feature visible on the north elevation lies immediately adjacent to the lower 14th-century string-course, which – significantly – does not extend across the whole of the north elevation due to the presence of a small area of surviving primary masonry. Here, the jamb of a Norman window of the type preserved on the west elevation has been converted into a statue-niche, incorporating the turned base of a former engaged colonnette. This indicates that a window of this elaborate type would originally have lain above the main entranceway of the Norman gatehouse on its principal elevation. In her antiquarian description of the gatehouse, the Duchess of Cleveland records that:

> Another round-headed window has been filled up in the front of the building at some remote date, and so successfully obliterated that it is now difficult to distinguish it from without, but it is visible enough in the interior, where it has been left as a recess or cupboard in the wall, within a more modern arch.[16]

The south elevation of the west wing bears evidence for at least four phases of construction (Figs 7 and 8). At ground level, its western side bears a large, later, flying buttress, which is surrounded by random uncoursed sandstone and ironstone masonry indicative of the building's primary Norman phase. This is continuous across the garderobe on the building's western side, demonstrating that this garderobe is original to the Norman gatehouse (Fig. 9). Adjacent is a pair of early 19th-century lancet windows, one above the other, wholly surrounded by an area of rebuilt masonry which lies in the original location of the southern entrance arch to the Norman gatehouse. Built into the blocking of this arch is a small piece of re-used Norman dog-tooth moulding, which may indicate something of the archway's original decoration.
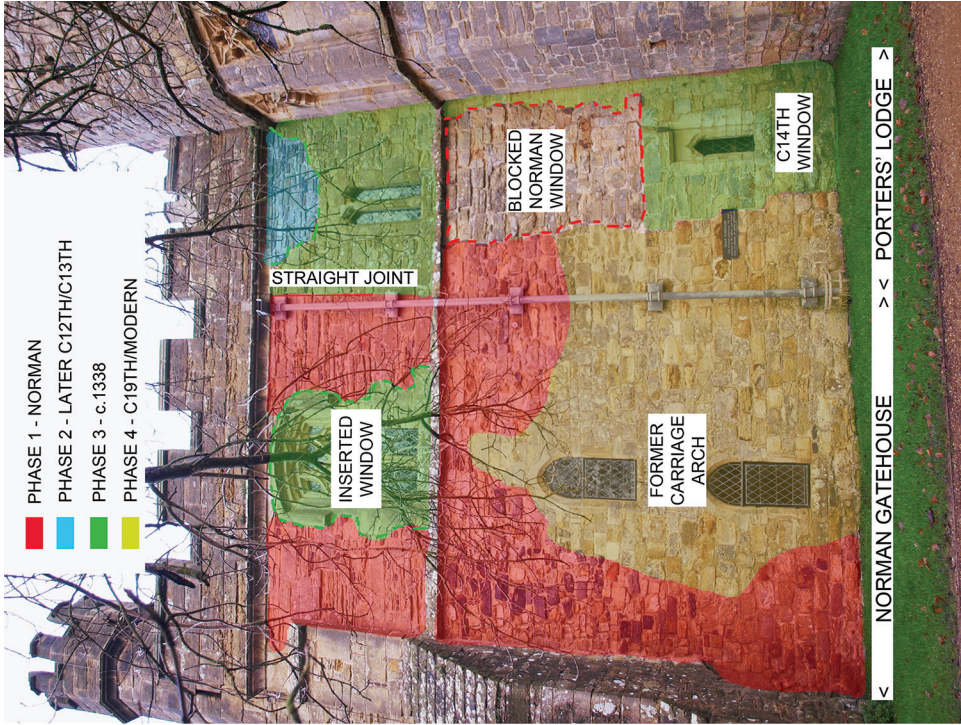
Fig. 8. Interpretation of the south elevation of the Norman gatehouse.

Fig. 7. South elevation of the Norman gatehouse.

Fig. 9. Rear view of the Great Gatehouse, looking from the south-west towards the Norman garderobe tower.

a quantity of randomly coursed rubble, including a proportion of ironstone, implying that much of it is of pre-14th-century date. A large two-light window with Decorated tracery lies on the western side, where an original Romanesque window to the Norman gatehouse is likely to have been. To the east lies a 14th-century window, consisting of two lights with trefoil heads. There is a vertical break in the masonry between these upper windows, which is also visible on the internal elevation, and marks the division between the Norman and later phases of the west wing.

The west elevation of the gatehouse is dominated by the Norman garderobe tower, which incorporates a broad round-headed opening at ground level for emptying its cesspit by hand (Fig. 9). The garderobe was extensively modified in the later medieval period, prior to the 14th-century rebuild of the gatehouse's west wing. Of the two original toilets, the southern was removed and the waste chute beneath partially infilled, leaving cesspit access for the extant northern toilet only. A small chamber – which is no longer accessible – was inserted in the former northern waste-chute, and a stone drain-run installed, the purpose of which is unclear. A chimney stack and flue was subsequently installed in the thickness of this wall during the rebuild of *c*. 1338, and the upper part of the garderobe rebuilt.

The wall to the north of the garderobe is also substantially Norman in date, and is of characteristic sandstone and ironstone rubble construction. An important survival is an original upper-level window, of the type for which fragmentary evidence survives on the upper part of the north elevation (Fig. 10). Its outer order has turned colonnette jambs with round bases and cushion capitals which support chamfered imposts from which springs a round-headed arch with roll-moulded voussoirs. Two inserted openings – a 14th-century doorway

A further pair of windows lies on the eastern side of the ground-level elevation. The earlier window is now blocked, but can be seen on 18th and 19th century depictions of this elevation,[17] and is visible internally as having a round head and no internal splay. A 14th-century lancet window with an ogee head and a wide internal splay replaced this earlier window at the bottom of the elevation, presumably *c*. 1338. The earlier, blocked window appears to be contemporary with the Norman fabric of the rest of the west wing, which indicates the presence of a (?)two-storey structure appended to the eastern side of the Norman gatehouse, suggested below as a porter's lodge.

The upper part of the south elevation, above the string course, is also quite complex. It bears

and a post-medieval window – lie in the wall beneath.

Internally, the ground floor of the west wing is divided into a pair of chambers, of which the western preserves the original Norman gatehouse passage. This originally had a much lower ceiling-height, since it was subdivided by an extra floor, as shown by a number of substantial beam-slots in the primary fabric of the east and west walls. Its north internal elevation has a 19th-century doorway inserted into the blocking of the former Norman entranceway. Its south elevation has been substantially rebuilt on at least two occasions, removing all evidence for the former southern archway. High up towards the southern end of the west elevation is a blocked doorway which accessed the garderobe at the former first floor of the Norman gatehouse. It is not clear whether this doorway accessed a former first-floor privy to the Norman gatehouse, or whether this doorway was inserted when the garderobe waste chute was partially infilled during the 12th or 13th century.[18]

The Norman gatehouse passage is accessed from the east via an extant round-headed doorway which is almost certainly a primary feature, but which appears to have been an internal doorway since it lacks a rebate for any external door. This is further evidence that the Norman gatehouse had an eastern component, suggested here as a porters' lodge, as at the comparable mid-12th-century Green Court gatehouse at Canterbury Cathedral (Fig. 11).[19] The remains of such a structure may have been revealed during the unpublished 1990–94 excavation of the 14th-century gatehouse's pedestrian foot-passage. 'Significant archaeological deposits, and the foundations of the Norman gatehouse' were uncovered here, but no further detail is known.[20] Fragments of an upstanding Norman structure are certainly preserved within this part of the 14th-century gatehouse: as discussed above, the upper of the two southern windows at

Fig. 10. West elevation of the Norman gatehouse, detail of surviving Norman window.

ground level appears to be original to the Norman structure.

A fragmentary newel stair lies in its north-east corner of the Norman gatehouse, and is of distinctively early construction: rather than being integral with a central newel post (like those in the 14th-century parts of the gatehouse), its stone steps simply rested on a helical barrel-vault of rubble which wound its way up the stair.[21] It was accessed via an external doorway in the east wall of the Norman gatehouse, whose round head originally appears to have incorporated a tympanum, framed by ashlar voussoirs. This tympanum would have been an impressive feature, and would almost certainly have belonged to an external doorway: an imposing tympanum would have been wasted
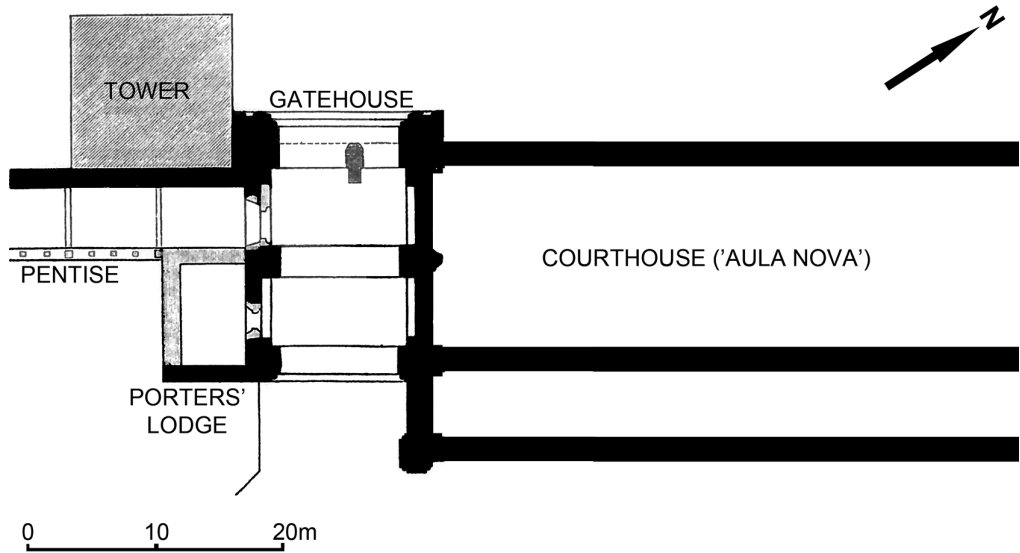
Fig. 11. Plan of the mid-12th century Green Court Gatehouse, Christ Church, Canterbury, suggested here as a close parallel to the Norman gatehouse/courthouse complex at Battle Abbey (compare with Fig. 3). Based on R. Willis, 'The Architectural History of the Conventual Buildings of the Monastery of Christ Church in Canterbury', *Archaeologia Cantiana* **7** (1868), Fig. 31.

on the cramped interior of the putative porters' lodge. This implies that the stair (which itself would have been a high-status feature at this time) and its impressive doorway would have been entered via a pentise, as at the comparable Green Court gatehouse mentioned above (Figs 11 and 12). The first floor is likely to have been rather low and ill-lit, but the second-floor chamber would have had plenty of natural light and been served by the garderobe tower integral to the building's western side. This feature, together with the opulent access stair, suggests that this room was intended to accommodate a high-status function from its inception, perhaps the housing of honoured guests, a role continued by the rebuilt gatehouse in the 14th century.

The Norman gatehouse (Figs 13 and 14) had certainly been erected by the abbacy of Ralph (1107–24), who was responsible for building the abbey's precinct wall: the precinct wall abuts the quoins at the north-west corner of the gatehouse, demonstrating that the gatehouse was the earlier structure. Two aspects of the gatehouse's architecture support a late 11th-century date. The first is its suggested use of *antae*, which is an archaic feature for which the closest parallels are the late 10th-century gatehouse to Glastonbury Abbey and the early 11th-century monastic gatehouse at

Glendalough (Co. Wicklow, Ireland).[22] The second is the newel stair, which had a helical barrel-vault of rubble supporting separate steps, rather than its steps being integral with a central newel-post. This is a predominantly Anglo-Saxon form of construction, although a number of early Norman examples are known, such as at nearby Hastings Castle.[23] The prominent use of a tympanum and herringbone masonry are also characteristically early building techniques, although not themselves indicative of a particular date.[24]

The surviving evidence for such singularly early Norman monastic gatehouses in England is thin, with most examples dating from the mid-12th century and later. The upper parts rarely survive, e.g. at St Augustine's Abbey in Bristol (*c.* 1170) or the Green Court Gatehouse at Canterbury Cathedral (built 1153–67), although a contemporary depiction of the latter was made shortly after its construction (Fig. 12). This shows a three-storey structure with a ground-level gate, a decorative first-floor arcade and a pitched roof with a two-light window in its gable end. The outstanding exception is St James' tower at Bury St Edmunds (built 1120–38), which is a tall gate-tower of four stories with decorative arcades gracing its upper half. Although perhaps half a century later than the example at Battle, these three
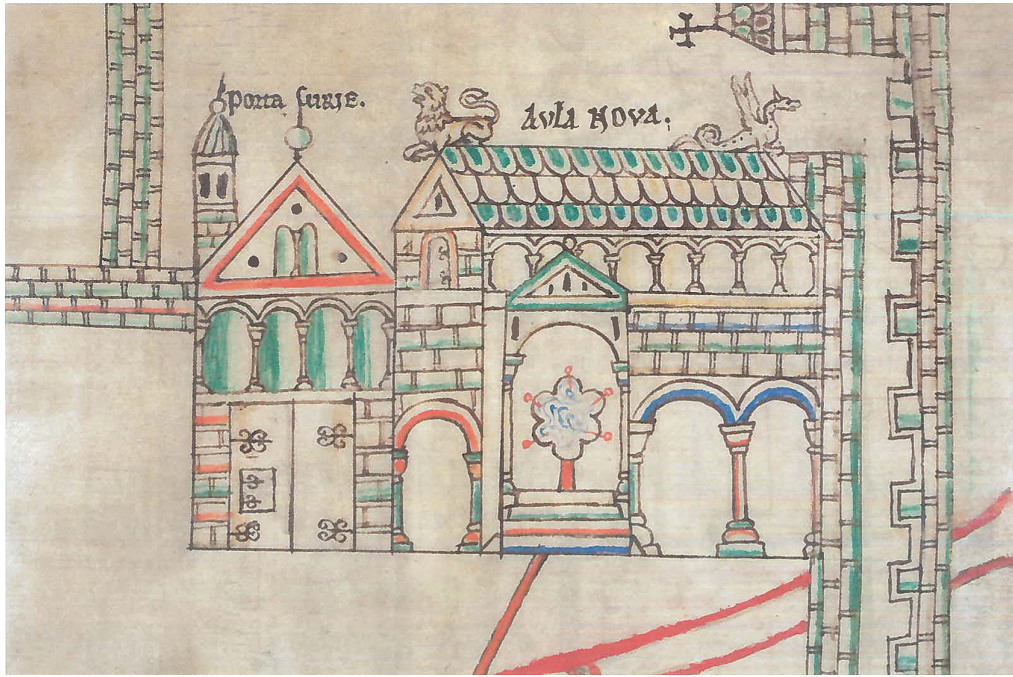
Fig. 12. Illustration of the Green Court Gatehouse, Christ Church, Canterbury (compare with Fig. 11). Detail from the 12th-century 'Waterworks Plan' on the Eadwine Psalter, Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.17.1, by courtesy of the Master and Fellows.

sites give the best impression of the appearance of monastic gatehouses of this early date.

THE 14TH-CENTURY GATEHOUSE

The rebuilt Great Gatehouse is one of the most impressive and best-preserved examples of a monastic gatehouse in England, executed on a grand scale in full Decorated splendour, probably soon after the granting to Battle Abbey of a licence to crenellate in 1338 (Fig. 2).[25] The Great Gatehouse, which is no less architecturally elaborate on the southern elevation facing into the monastic precinct as it is on the northern elevation facing onto the town, consists of a tall, square central tower of three stages, flanked by a two-storey wing on its western side which was converted from the original Norman gatehouse structure. Externally the gatehouse is characterised by prominent octagonal corner-turrets, large windows, blind tracery, a crenellated parapet with corbel-table and gargoyles, and numerous bestial and figurative heads. A rib-vaulted passage runs beneath the central tower of the gatehouse, accommodating pedestrian and vehicular access, which preserves

some exceptional carved bosses including a Green Man and a lion. The third stage of the central tower bears a pair of now-empty niches which, in comparable locations, are known to have held the figures of the Annunciation.[26]

Internally the Great Gatehouse was divided into three quite separate parts, each of which had a distinct function and independent external access. The central tower was accessed via a stairway and a ground-level fore-building with a small but richly decorated rib vault supported by four corbel-heads: two women, one hirsute male and one hunched, cowled figure sat cross-legged, whilst the central boss bears a dragon coiled around her egg. Within the corner turret itself, the stairwell vault bears a pair of slit-like murder holes and a groove for a portcullis, operated from a chamber within the turret immediately above. The efforts made to make this stair unusually wide, together with the fine bosses and the martial flummery of murder holes and portcullis, emphasise that this was the entrance to the principal part of the gatehouse interior. Within, the two chambers at first- and second-floor level are well appointed with fireplaces,

Fig. 13. Conjectural reconstruction of the Norman gatehouse with the putative medieval courthouse adjacent, from the north. Courtesy of Phil James.
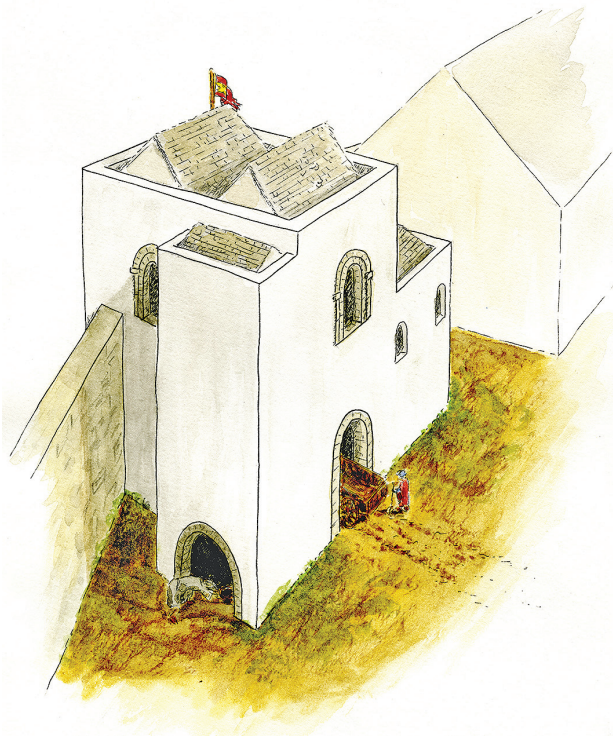

Fig. 14. Conjectural reconstruction of the Norman gatehouse, from the south-west. Courtesy of Phil James.

large windows with window-seats, and a large number of cupboards both within the thickness of the walls and inside the corner-turrets.[27] These lavish upper rooms lack a garderobe, however, making high-status accommodation unlikely; they may have housed an exchequer, as indicated by the profusion of cupboards, which are consistent with use by the abbey's secretariat. The abbey accounts for 1365 do mention work on an exchequer, although they do not give its location. If these rooms were used for storing money and valuable documents it may also explain why the gatehouse's strongest entrance – the south-east corner turret, with its portcullis and murder holes – faces *inwards* to the

precinct rather than *outwards* in the monastery's defence.[28]

As to the west wing, the ground level was directly accessed from the main gate-passage, and is likely to have functioned as a porters' lodge. It had a fireplace, and a garderobe and cess pit converted from the old newel stair of the original Norman gatehouse. Here, the octagonal corner-turrets variously accommodated a probable prison cell complete with an iron ring in the wall, and a suggested guard-chamber, set with a possible candle-niche, for porters to observe those wishing to enter the abbey at night. The rebuilt upper level of the west wing is a likely candidate for high-status guest accommodation. It had a dedicated external access stair and boasts large windows with window-seats, a capacious fireplace with integral cupboard adjacent, and access to the upper parts of the old Norman garderobe-tower, which was partially rebuilt at this time.

THE COURTHOUSE

The present courthouse, on the eastern side of the Great Gatehouse, is a two-storey rectangular structure substantially dating to the late 16th century, probably soon after 1569, when the town courthouse in Mount Street fell out of use (Fig. 2).[29] Preserved within its fabric are the remains of an earlier structure of medieval origins, interpreted below as an earlier courthouse (Fig. 3).

The courthouse's eastern wall is largely contemporary with the rebuilding of the gatehouse *c*. 1338, but incorporates blocked openings of still earlier date. The east wall of the Great Gatehouse itself was constructed without doors or windows, showing a building was already present adjacent at this time. The Great Gatehouse also incorporates the west wall and double-pitched roofline of this pre-existing building. A blocked medieval ground-floor doorway survives, in the west end of the south wall of the present courthouse, only visible internally. The east wall of the south-east turret of the Great

Gatehouse is likewise built against the upstanding west wall and pitched roof of an earlier building, which appears from the roofline to be the southern range of a double-pile structure. Part of the splay of a former west-facing external window survives relating to this structure. The integral pitched roofline further demonstrates that this earlier structure was upstanding when the main part of the gatehouse was built *c*. 1338. It can be identified with the double-pile medieval building excavated in this location during the archaeological campaign of 1990–94.[30] Interestingly, the closest parallel to this presumed medieval courthouse (see below) is the 'aula nova' appended to the mid-12th-century Green Court gatehouse at Christ Church, Canterbury, which was also a double-pile structure (see below; Fig. 11).

Fig. 15. Remains of St John's gate-chapel, from the north-east.

THE NORMAN CHAPEL OF ST JOHN

To the east of the courthouse is the stub of a blind Romanesque arcade which rises a considerable height above ground level, whilst the wall beneath incorporates an apparently Norman gate passage (Fig. 15). Running from the southern side of this arcade is a stretch of wall encased within a later external stair, within which is a wide round-headed opening with chamfered impost-stones. Norman in appearance, it resembles neither a window nor an external doorway but an internal archway, conceivably a chancel arch which cuts a previous round-headed arch of even earlier date. The manorial survey of 1367 describes nos 89–90 High Street – which lie across the road – as being 'opposite the arch of the chapel of St John of the abbey'.[31] These remains can therefore be identified with this otherwise unknown gatehouse-chapel to the Norman abbey precinct of 12th-century or earlier date, whose scale implies it was reserved for pedestrians.

To summarise, a Norman gatehouse-chapel dedicated to St John lay a short distance to the east of the abbey's original gatehouse. In between the two lay a third building, which was remodelled on a grand scale around the time the gatehouse itself was rebuilt *c*. 1338 (Fig 1). The function of this intermediate building is unknown, but circumstantial evidence (see below) points to it being the medieval abbey's courthouse, a role which the post-Dissolution courthouse perpetuated.

THE MONASTIC GATEHOUSE: FORTIFICATION, JURISDICTION AND SYMBOLISM

Medieval monastic gatehouses are traditionally seen as a rather half-hearted attempt to protect monks from attack, by way of imitating secular castle gatehouses.[32] They certainly regulated access to the monastic precinct, and many displayed the architectural language of martial power, but more nuanced interpretations of recent decades have emphasised these buildings as symbols of power and control rather than practical military installations.[33] The security of a monastery lay not in the defensive effectiveness of its precinct but in its metaphysical power as a sacred place set apart from worldly affairs: its walls were a spiritual cordon and its gatehouse a form of apotropaic defence. Even the most forbidding portal could be circumvented by climbing over a secluded length of precinct wall (not least at Battle), meaning that gatehouses were often attacked and damaged for what they symbolised rather than through military necessity. This symbolism was twofold: temporal lordship and access to the Heavenly City.

In crude terms, elaborate gatehouses manifested the wealth of the monasteries which built them, the ability of these monasteries to impose themselves on the countryside or townscape, and their control of the environment over which they had jurisdiction. During the medieval period, abbots and other high-ranking ecclesiastics had doubled as regional magnates with considerable temporal power, for which gatehouses were eloquent statements: it was not for nothing that they had so much in common with secular castle architecture.[34] More subtly, they expressed and demarcated immunity from lay justice, which almost all monasteries enjoyed, marking the transition from lay to ecclesiastical franchise.[35] Thus, they were commonly associated with courtrooms, although they are also known to have housed chapels, guest accommodation and private abbatial chambers.[36]

More profoundly, perhaps, monastic gatehouses were charged with symbolic meaning as the portals by which the sacred world of the abbey precinct was accessed and the profane world of earthly things left behind. Medieval monasteries were conceived as earthly manifestations of the Heavenly City: the precinct wall was the city wall, the church itself was the palace where dwelt the Lord of Heaven, whilst the gatehouse was a triumphal arch for the Heavenly Host.[37] Thus, the Heavenly City, be it an analogue of Rome or Jerusalem, was made accessible to pilgrims on earth.[38] This has its origins in the Biblical story of Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven: 'How awesome is this place! Truly it is the temple of God and the gateway to heaven' (Genesis 28: 10–19).

This metaphor was explicitly applied to churches as early as the 470s,[39] and would have been widely understood by the medieval inhabitants of Battle. Entwined with this symbolism was the assertion of the seclusion of the monks in the service of God, which stemmed from the withdrawing from secular life demanded by the Benedictine Rule.[40]

INTERPRETING THE NORMAN GATEHOUSE

The gatehouse at Battle has been the main entrance-place to the abbey precinct since its foundation *c*. 1070. This is evident in the burgage plots of the

Norman high street, which are very deliberately deflected to form the open triangular Abbey Green that, unlike the market place to the north-west, was never encroached or built upon (Fig. 1).[41] This uncluttered space would both have facilitated traffic into the abbey and, perhaps more importantly, maximised the gatehouse's architectural impact on the core of the medieval planned town and traffic passing through from the north. The gatehouse lay at the south-west corner of this triangular space, and St John's chapel at the south-east corner, with the putative courthouse set in the middle. Together this line of related structures would have formed an imposing, multi-function entrance range to the Norman abbey, emphasising aspects of its military power, legal jurisdiction and function as a place of worship and pilgrimage.

Although our understanding of the Norman gatehouse is incomplete, it was clearly an imposing Romanesque structure, at least three stories in height and of tower-like form (Figs 13 and 14), akin to the surviving gatehouse of St James at Bury St Edmunds. The presence of an integral stair and garderobe indicates that it had a high-status function, presumably accommodating guests. Nothing is known of any statuary or symbolic ornament that it may have had, save for its suggested *antae*, for which the closest comparison is the early 11th-century monastic gatehouse at Glendalough (Co. Wicklow, Ireland), which incorporates a chapel at first-floor level.[42] As previously mentioned, *antae* generally flanked the principal entrance to a church or ecclesiastical gatehouse, presumably to emphasise their role as portals to the Heavenly City. The earlier, insular, example at Glastonbury (late 10th century) also incorporated a chapel, dedicated to St John, together with a flaming beacon which has been interpreted as a both a landmark for pilgrims and a metaphor for Jesus, the 'light of the world'.[43] Although there is no evidence for any such beacon at the Battle gatehouse, it was similarly associated with a chapel, also dedicated to St John. Significantly, this would have further emphasised the transition to the sacred space of the monastery: 'I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture' (John 10:9).

This said, unlike at Glastonbury and Glendalough, the secondary gatehouse-chapel at Battle appears to have lain adjacent to the main gatehouse rather than being incorporated into it. We might therefore imagine two distinct entrances, the one for wagons and tradesmen under the martial gate-tower, leading to the hurly-burly of the outer court, and the other a pedestrian entrance under St John's chapel itself, for pilgrims to access the west front of the monastic church.

What, then, should be made of the building which lay between the gatehouse to the west and St John's chapel to the east, on the site of the 16th-century courthouse? It would not have been the almonry, which is recorded as occupying the opposite side of the abbey green by the early 12th century.[44] It is therefore tempting to interpret this building, which pre-dates the 14th-century rebuilding of the gatehouse, as the medieval predecessor to the later courthouse. Although the town courthouse is recorded at Mount Street between 1367 and 1569,[45] it should not be forgotten that the greater monasteries exercised considerable legal autonomy prior to the Dissolution. This would have been particularly true for Battle Abbey which, as a royal peculiar, was exempt even from episcopal jurisdiction, and was answerable only to the king. Canterbury Cathedral, for example, hosted no fewer than three ecclesiastical courts, those of the sacrist, prior and cellarer.[46] These were housed in the 12th-century *aula nova* appended to the contemporary Green Court Gatehouse (built 1153–67): both are visible in a contemporary depiction (Figs 11 and 12). It is tempting to postulate a similar arrangement at Battle, with an ecclesiastical courthouse appended to the principal gatehouse throughout the medieval period; the documented courthouse on Mount Street may therefore have been reserved for civic business. There was a long-standing dispute between medieval Battle Abbey and the Bishop of Chichester over the independence of the former from the latter (see below): the construction of such a prominent courthouse building could be interpreted as a potent architectural statement of the abbey's independent jurisdiction.

INTERPRETING THE 14TH-CENTURY GATEHOUSE

The rebuilding of the Battle Abbey gatehouse *c.* 1338 falls during a 14th-century surge in monastic gatehouse construction, of which the most influential was the great gate at St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury (1300–10), whose turrets are thought to have been modelled on St Stephen's chapel at Westminster Palace.[47] Turrets had not previously been usual in monastic gatehouse design, but they would go on to have an obvious

influence at Battle, and a number of other sites besides. These similarities were probably less to do with the agency of individual architects than they were a common expression of a coherent set of architectural messages by a group of monasteries in close mutual communication.[48]

The immediate context for rebuilding Battle's gatehouse was the granting of a license to crenellate, a powerful statement of royal favour and protection which merited prominent architectural expression.[49] As to why this licence was sought, and granted, two likely scenarios present themselves. The most likely is the Hundred Years' War and the abbey's role in protecting the area against the French, most famously when Abbot Hamo led forces in defence of the town in 1377, whilst in 1338 Abbot Alan de Retlyng mustered the defence of Winchelsea.[50] As discussed above, however, the gatehouse should not be seen as a serious military installation, despite the ostentatious trumpery of its murder holes, arrow-loops, battlements and portcullis. The gatehouse's vulnerable large windows and the abbey's extensive precinct wall rendered such things superfluous: the ultimate purpose was to prominently display this message of martial power and security in order to reassure the local population (on the previous site of a successful conquest of England) as much as it was to deter any French threat.

The second possibility as to why a license to crenellate was sought and the gatehouse rebuilt is provided by its architectural exemplar, the great gate at St Augustine's Abbey. This is argued to have been built as an assertion of independence from archiepiscopal influence emanating from the adjacent cathedral, which had been a long-standing source of contention.[51] Likewise, Battle Abbey had been involved in a seemingly perpetual conflict against the Bishop of Chichester – in whose diocese the abbey lay – during much of the 12th and early 13th centuries. Due to its status as a royal peculiar, Battle Abbey was theoretically removed from episcopal influence, although the resulting dispute is thought to have dwindled after the 1230s.[52] Nevertheless, the ostentatious new gatehouse could be seen as part of an ongoing desire to assert the abbey's independence and royal status in increasingly uncertain times.

A final unusual feature of the gatehouse is that its internal elevation is just as splendid as the external, unlike almost every other known example in England. That the gatehouse had an equally important audience within the monastic precinct as from the external townscape is an eloquent statement as the extensive public use of the outer court. This large expanse was the centre of the medieval abbey's commercial, industrial and agricultural operations, and is known to have housed a bakehouse, brewhouse, barns, stables, cider-house, dovecote, granary, outhouses, skinner, and probably a horse mill and a cider mill, as well as the extant remains of a barn.[53] That there was such an extensive lay audience for the internal face of the gatehouse would also accord with the exceptionally close links throughout the medieval period between Battle Abbey and the town established in its service.

CONCLUSIONS

Famous as an exceptional piece of 14th-century monastic architecture, the Great Gatehouse at Battle also preserves probably the most complete late 11th-century monastic gatehouse in the country. This earlier structure survives embedded in the western wing of its better-known successor, and consisted of a three-storey central tower with a garderobe on its western side and a suggested porters' lodge to the east. The ground floor consisted of a carriageway, whilst the upper two were reached via a newel stair on the building's eastern side, accessed via what is thought to have been an elaborate external doorway. The first-floor chamber was probably cramped and tenebrous, but that at second-floor level would have been lit by large windows on at least three sides and benefitted from the adjacent garderobe: it probably served as high-status guest accommodation. Rebuilt *c*. 1338 on receipt of a licence to crenellate, the gatehouse continued its earlier function, as well as housing a possible exchequer.

Monastic gatehouses were arguably far more important for their symbolic potency than for their defensive efficacy, although their warlike form was certainly part of the architectural message they were designed to express. At Battle, the gatehouse appears to have formed the western component of a suite of structures which were strung out along the southern side of the great triangular expanse – the Abbey Green – which fronted the entrance to the monastic precinct from its inception around 1070. At the eastern end was a second, pedestrian, gatehouse of Norman date surmounted by a chapel of St John. In between these two structures are the

fragmentary remains of a large building certainly in existence prior to the early 14th century; there is circumstantial evidence that this was the medieval predecessor to the extant 16th-century courthouse building which replaced it. If this identification is correct, this tripartite entrance complex expressed the abbey's military power, legal jurisdiction and sanctity. The imposing main gatehouse, whose architectural is in keeping with that of Norman castles, provided vehicular access to the agricultural and mercantile bustle of the monastic outer court, as well as accommodating guests. The putative courthouse manifested the abbey's legal jurisdiction over its own estates, whilst the pedestrian gatehouse-chapel of St John was well-placed for pilgrims to access the abbey church, its dedication emphasising the symbolic transition from the secular world of the town to the sacred space of the abbey precinct beyond.

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NOTES

[1] Recent suggestions that the Battle of Hastings was actually fought elsewhere have been convincingly refuted (R. Porter, 'On the Very Spot: In Defence of Battle', *English Heritage Historical Review* **7** (2012), 5–17): there is every reason to believe that the high altar of the Norman abbey church did indeed lie on the site where Harold was killed.

[2] J. N. Hare, *Battle Abbey: The Eastern Range and the Excavations of 1978–80* (London: Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England, 1985); J. G. Coad, *Battle Abbey and Battlefield* (London: English Heritage, 2007).

[3] P. Masters and M. G. Shapland, 'Battle Abbey, Battle, East Sussex: Conservation Management Plan' (unpub. ACTA/ Archaeology South-East report, 2015).

[4] e.g. L. A. Vidler, *Gleanings Respecting Battel and its Abbey* (Battle: F. W. Ticehurst, 1841); the Duchess of Cleveland, *History of Battle Abbey* (London: William Clowes, 1877).

[5] H. Brakspear, 'The Abbot's House at Battle', *Archaeologia* **83** (1933), 139–66; H. Brakspear, 'Battle Abbey', in L. F. Salzman (ed.), *The Victoria History of the Counties of England, Volume 9: The Rape of Hastings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 102–5.

[6] J. G. Coad, 'Battle Abbey and the Battle of Hastings: A Conservation Plan' (unpub. report, 2001).

[7] Coad, *Battle Abbey and Battlefield*.

[8] R. B. Harris, *Battle Historic Character Assessment*, Sussex Extensive Urban Surveys (2009), 28, provides a brief summary report; available at www.westsussex.gov.uk/ media/1716/battle_eus_report_maps.pdf.

[9] English Heritage archive, Swindon, drawing nos MP_ BAT0284 to MP_BAT0291.

[10] R. B. Harris, 'Battle Abbey Courthouse' (unpub. English Heritage report, 1992).

[11] This was sought across English Heritage's libraries and archives, together with the East Sussex Record Office and the library of the Sussex Archaeological Society, as well as at Battle Abbey itself. The author, Roland Harris, no longer retains a copy.

[12] According to the 'D' version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. by M. Swanton (London: J. M. Dent, 1996). For the role of hundred meeting-places in Anglo-Saxon warfare, see J. Baker and S. Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage: Anglo-Saxon Civil Defence in the Viking Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[13] The topography, development and historical significance of the town which grew up to serve the abbey are fully explored by D. Martin, B. Martin and C. Whittick, with J. Briscoe, *Child of Conquest. Building Battle Town, an Architectural History, 1066 to 1750* (Burgess Hill: domtom Publishing, 2016).

[14] B. Cunliffe, *Excavations at Portchester Castle. Volume 3, Medieval: the Outer Bailey and its Defences* (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 1977).

[15] T. Ó'Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 31–3.

[16] Cleveland, *History of Battle Abbey*, 230.

[17] 'South-west view of Battle Abbey', engraving by Samuel and Nathan Buck, 1737 (East Sussex Record Office, PDA 236/4); view of the entrance gate at Battle Abbey, Sussex, by William Buckler, 1850 (British Library, Add. MS 37120, f.6).

[18] It is unknown whether a garderobe chamber still survives beyond the blocking of this doorway, which would repay further investigation.

[19] P. Fergusson, 'The Entry Complex at the Cathedral Priory', in A. Bovey (ed.), *Medieval Art, Architecture and Archaeology at Canterbury*. British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions **35** (Leeds: Maney, 2013), 82–105, at 87.

[20] Harris, *Battle Historic Character Assessment*, 28.

[21] This form of construction is characteristically Anglo-Saxon or early Norman: see D. Parsons, 'Barrel-vaulted staircases in England and on the Continent, with special reference to Brixworth Church, Northamptonshire', *Zeitschrift Für Archäologie des Mittelalters* **6** (1978), 129–47.

[22] F. B. Bond, 'Glastonbury Abbey: sixth report on the discoveries made during the excavations', *Proceedings of*

the *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* **59** (1913), 56–73; T. O'Keeffe, *Romanesque Ireland: Architecture and Ideology in the Twelfth Century*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 83–4.

23   Parsons, 'Barrel-vaulted staircases'.

24   H. M. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, **3** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 760.

25   For a full architectural description and visual record, see ASE, 'The Great Gatehouse, Battle Abbey, East Sussex: Historic Building Record', Archaeology South-East report no. 2015070 (unpub. 2015)

26   Julian Luxford, pers. comm.

27   Two additional cupboards were discovered within the second-floor chamber during the recent refurbishment of the gatehouse, accessed by stairs within the thickness of the eastern and western walls (Roy Porter, pers. comm.).

28   I am grateful to Michael Carter for his thoughts on this point.

29   Martin *et al.*, *Child of Conquest,* 157

30   Harris, *Battle Historic Character Assessment*, 28–9. If published, the 1990–94 excavations should greatly enhance our understanding of the form and development of this structure.

31   Martin *et al.*, *Child of Conquest,* 85.

32   e.g. R. W. Morant, *The Monastic Gatehouse* (Lewes: The Book Guild Ltd, 1995); P. Harrison, *Castles of God: Fortified Religious Buildings of the World* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004).

33   C. Coulson, 'Hierarchism in Conventual Crenellation: an essay in the sociology and metaphysics of medieval fortification', *Medieval Archaeology* **26** (1982), 69–100; J. Luxford, 'Architecture and Environment: St Benet's Holm and the Fashioning of the English Monastic Gatehouse', *Architectural History* **57** (2014), 31–72, at 56–7.

34   Coulson, 'Hierarchism'; Luxford, 'Architecture and Environment'. The abbots' temporal power was further enhanced in 1374 by a papal bull permitting the abbot and his successors to wear the mitre, ring and other pontifical insignia, which further entitled him to sit and vote in the House of Lords (Henry Huntington Library, BA Vol 29, f. 47v; T. Phillips and G. Vassall Webster, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Original Charters, Royal Grants, and Donations, Many with the Seals, in Fine Preservation,* *Monastic Chartulary, Official, Manorial, Court Baron, Court Leet, and Rent Rolls, Registers, and other Documents, Constituting the Muniments of Battle Abbey* (London: Thomas Thorpe, 1835), vii). I am grateful to David Martin and Christopher Whittick for this information.

35   Coulson, 'Hierarchism', 74.

36   Luxford, 'Architecture and Environment', 54–5

37   G. Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning*, new edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 92–3, 278–9; Luxford, 'Architecture and Environment', 59–64.

38   P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14.

39   R. Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. 128–32 and 314.

40   Coulson, 'Hierarchism', 72; *Regula S. Benedicti* 66: 6–7 (*RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. by T. Fry (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1981), 288–9).

41   Martin *et al.*, *Child of Conquest,* 21–24.

42   O'Keeffe, *Romanesque Ireland*, 83–4.

43   Matthew 5: 14–16; M. G. Shapland, 2012, 'Buildings of Secular and Religious Lordship: Anglo-Saxon Tower-nave Churches' (unpub. PhD thesis, University College London, 2012), esp. 479–80.

44   Martin *et al.*, *Child of Conquest,* 101–7.

45   Martin *et al.*, *Child of Conquest,* 125 and 157.

46   Fergusson, 'The Entry Complex at the Cathedral Priory'

47   J. Luxford, 'The Great Gate of St Augustine's Abbey: Architecture and Context', in Bovey, *Medieval Art, Architecture and Archaeology at Canterbury*, 261–75, at 263; Luxford, 'Architecture and Environment', 46.

48   Luxford, 'Architecture and Environment', 39.

49   Coulson, 'Hierarchism'.

50   Coad, *Battle Abbey and Battlefield*, 40.

51   Luxford, 'The Great Gate of St Augustine's Abbey', 268–70.

52   Coad, *Battle Abbey and Battlefield*, 34

53   E. Searle and B. Ross, *Accounts of the Cellarers of Battle Abbey, 1275–1513*, Sussex Record Society **65** (1967), 111 and 157–8; Masters and Shapland, 'Battle Abbey' **2**, section 8.1.