

Basingwerk Abbey



View from Nave, looking east

Basingwerk Abbey



South Transept, looking south-west



Notes on the Architecture of Basingwerk Abbey, Flintshire

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IT was my intention to have written an account of the architecture of the Abbey of Basingwerk, to have appeared in the Journal immediately following our visit to the ruins in July 1901, which many of our members will remember with much pleasure; circumstances have, however, unfortunately prevented me doing so until the present time.

Founded in or about 1157, Basingwerk does not appear to have been a Cistercian House until some fifty or sixty years later, when the present buildings must, for the most part, have been commenced; but considerable additions and alterations took place in the 15th century, probably at the time when much building was going on in the neighbourhood, especially at the Holy Well of St. Winifred.

Of the work of the 12th century not a trace now remains; but it is, doubtless, to this building that Giraldus Cambrensis refers as "Celula de Basingwerk," and where he stayed in 1188.

Of the buildings of the 13th century there still remain fragments of the south and west wall of the nave, and one pier of the central tower of the church; and of the monastic buildings, the chapter-house, parlour, day-room, and refectory.

The south wall of the south transept (the then most conspicuous part of the ruins) fell in the spring of 1901; but through the kindness of Mr. J. A. Waite of Liverpool, who has placed some of his most valuable photographs at my disposal, I am enabled to give several views taken before this most deplorable collapse. I should like here, too, to thank Mr. Newstead for many excellent photographs of the Abbey (and especially the refectory and its pulpit): his wonderful resources as a photographer have made him the first, I think, to overcome the inaccessibility¹ of this beautiful, and often overlooked, part of the ruins.

The 15th century alterations and additions consist of the room over the chapter-house; the kitchens; the exceedingly interesting two-storied range of buildings, of massive half-timbered construction, running east of the kitchen (undoubtedly cellarer's buildings, with, probably, guest-house over); and another of very similar construction, but of one story only, at a considerable distance from the main abbey buildings, to their south-west (apparently the barns); in immediate proximity to this last is a small stone lodge.

Fragmentary as are the remains now existing of Basingwerk Abbey, they are sufficient to shew that the place is one typical of a small Cistercian House;

¹ I understand that within the last few weeks the Refectory has been cleared out of all trees, shrubs, and ivy.

Basingwerk Abbey

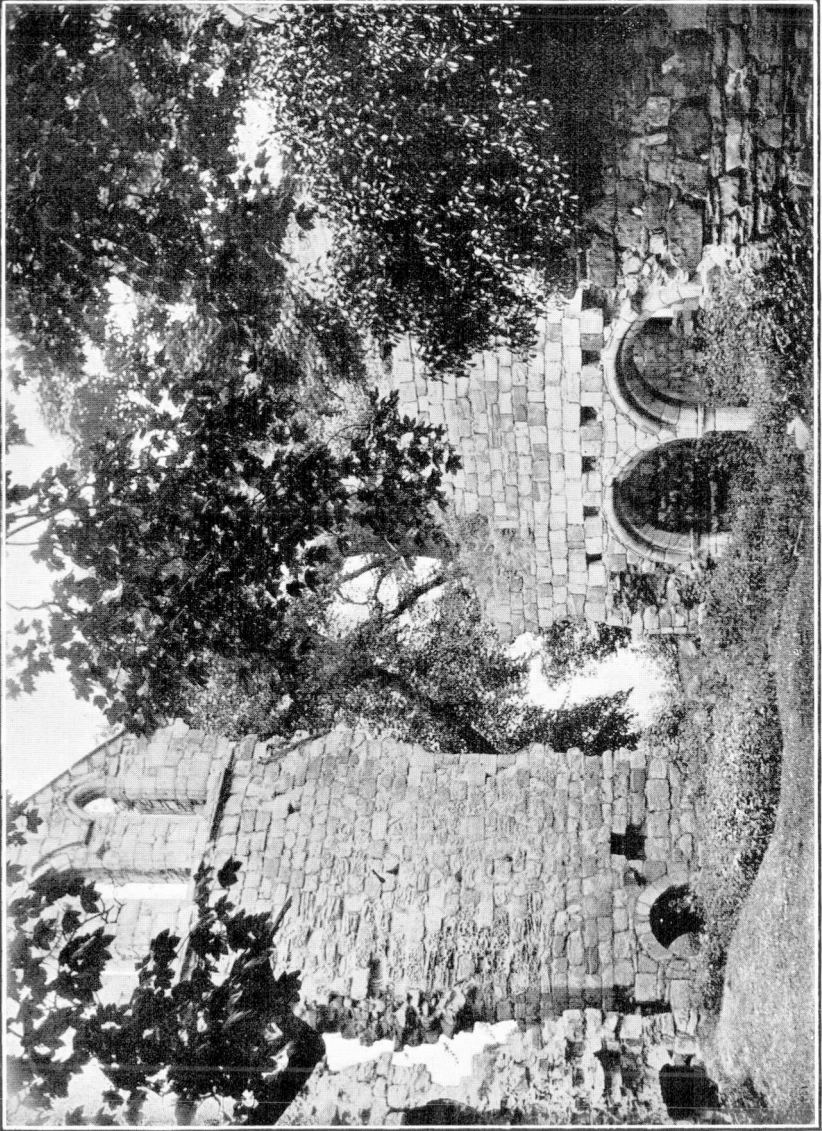


Plate C.

South Transept and Entrance to Chapter House, looking north-east

J. A. Waite, Photo.

Basingwerk Abbey



The Chapter House

J. A. Waite, Photo.

Plate E.

Basingwerk Abbey



The Chapter House

R. Newstead, Photo.

one almost identical in arrangement with those two well-known to our Society—Valle Crucis and Buildwas.

Built on the usual cruciform plan, and standing almost on the brink of a steep declivity at the north-east, the church consisted of a nave, crossing, north and south transepts, and presbytery. Adjoining the south transept came the sacristy, the chapter-house, the parlour, the day-room, and the kitchens; whilst to the west of the latter (forming part of the south side of the cloisters) came the refectory, in itself standing north and south. No further buildings west of the refectory can now be traced.

On examination of the architecture in detail, it will be found that of the 13th century to be of a refined and simple type, as will be gathered from, in the first place, the illustrations of the scanty remains of the church. (*See plates A, B, and C*).

Of the nave walls sufficient remain to give a length (roughly) of ninety-eight feet, and a width of forty-eight feet. The arcade seems to have been divided into six bays; nothing, however, of which remains but the semi-circular respond, and part of the arch to that nearest the south-west (and only remaining) pier of tower; this, together with the west wall of the south transept (containing the arch between it and south aisle of nave; and a window immediately above where was the cloister roof, and which lighted in the day-time the stairs from dormitories into the church) are well shewn on *plate A*.

Of the south transept nothing now remains but the west wall; the south falling in 1901. Of the features at present standing (*see plate B*), the archway into the

nave is still quite perfect, and consists of three simply splayed orders, springing from an abacus in the east side, and of two orders only on that to the west. Conspicuous, also, on the transept side, is the fine triple-shafted and capped corbelling, from which sprang the south arch of the central tower.

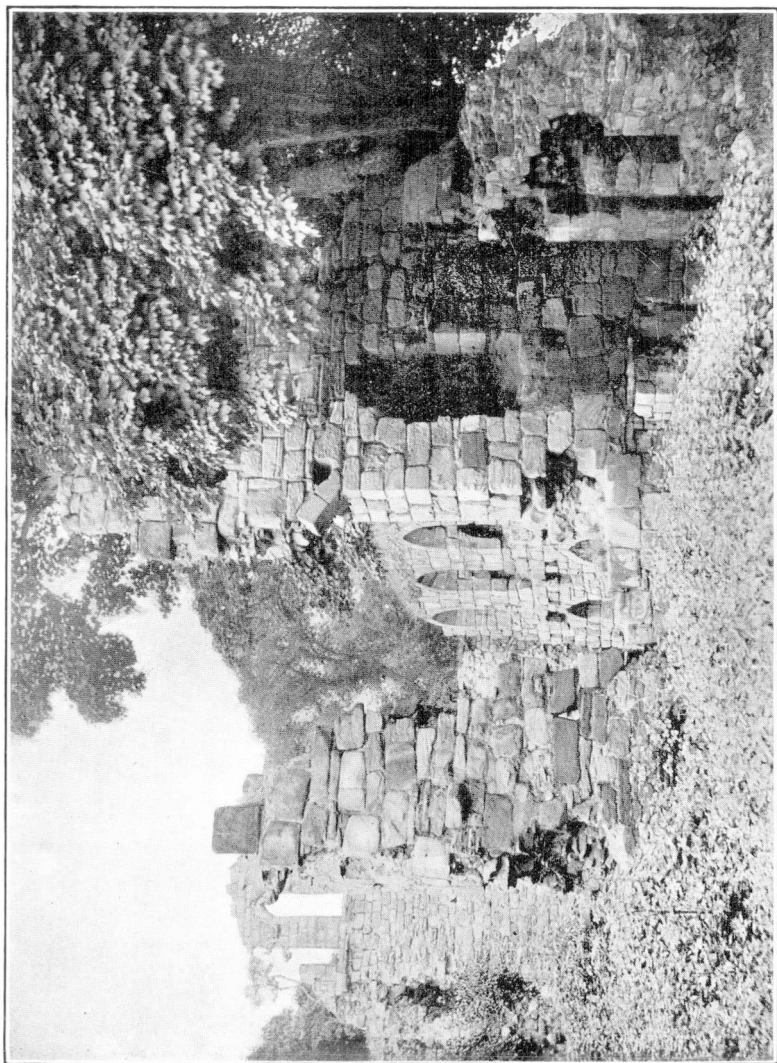
The fallen south wall of the transept is shewn on *plates B and C*. It contained three simple lancet windows in the gable; a small round-headed entrance into the sacristy; and the opening, through which ran the night-stairs, from dormitory.

Nothing remains of the presbytery or eastern-arm of the church; but, from the nature of the site, it could have been but short, following, most likely, a very frequent proportion in churches of this size, *viz.*, the length of the crossing (in this case twenty-four feet), equalling about two bays of the nave.

Prominent in the ruins, and well shewn on *plate C*, are the two round-headed arches which belonged to the chapter-house, and formed the entrance to the chapter-house proper (*plate D*), from its vestibule. Small as this compartment is, its more elaborate detail, and dignified groining, point to its importance; and, to my thinking, clearly refute the idea of the late Mr. Loftus Brock,² that it was but an adjunct to the chapter-house, and not the chapter-house itself. In the 15th century a room was added over it, the gate and one window of which still remain; and, for the addition of which chamber (possibly a library), the beautiful groined ceiling was sacrificed.

² "Archæologia Cambrensis," vol. VIII., 5th series, page 131.

Masingwerk Abbey

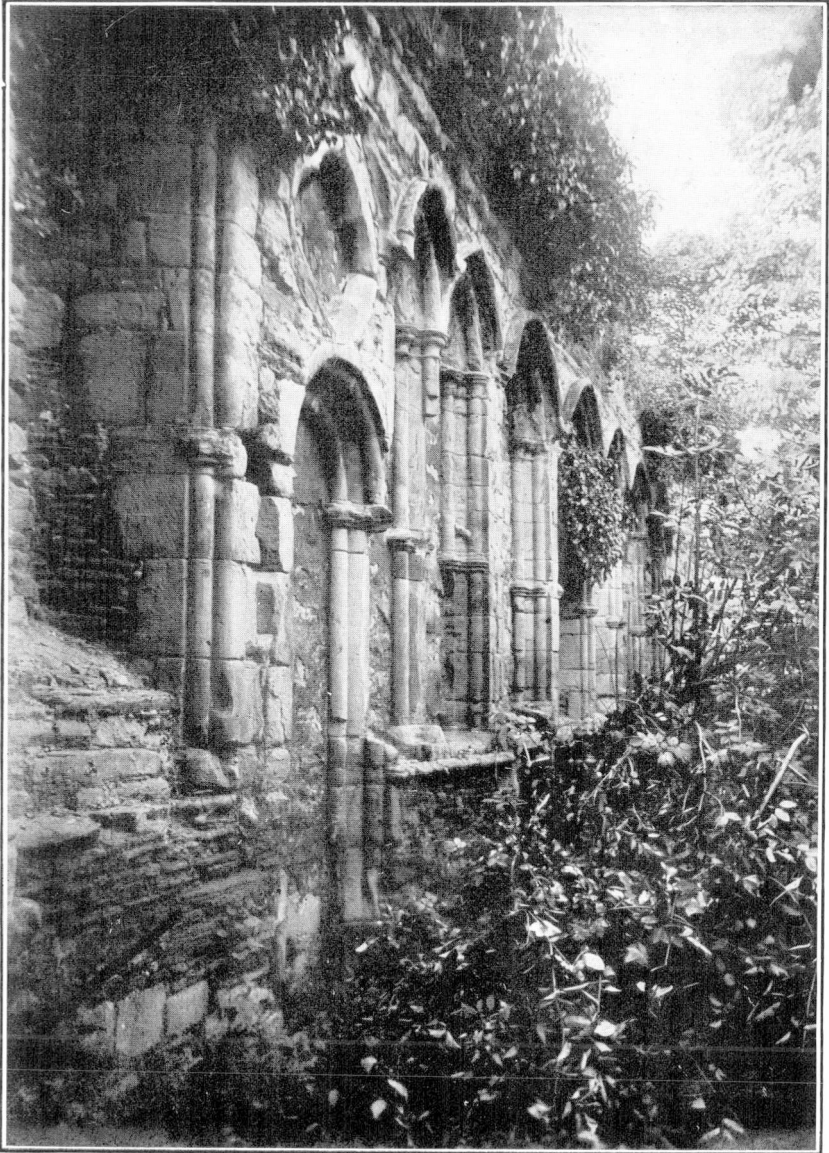


View from Kitebens, looking north

J. A. Waite, Photo.

Plate G.

Basingwerk Abbey



Refectory, west-side

R. Newstead, Photo.

Adjoining the chapter-house comes the parlour, and then the day-room, of which the east wall and part of the south wall alone remain. This latter marks the end of the 13th century work in this range; but the kitchens were erected against it in 15th century times, the eastern wall of which was built up to the buttress of the south-east angle (*plate F*).

The dormitories extended, apparently, over the whole of this 13th century range; some of the windows, as well as those of the day-room and parlour, still exist, and are broadly splayed single-lancets, which may be seen in the view taken from the kitchen (*plate F*).

Adjoining the kitchen, on the west side, and running in itself north and south, is the exceedingly fine refectory,³ the dimensions of which are, roughly, sixty-seven feet in length by twenty-eight feet broad; as, however, the north wall is not original, the probable length of the room was nearer eighty feet, which would admit of the usual serving-door from kitchen, the locker-sideboard to which is still extant in the extreme north corner of the east wall, and upon which the more modern north wall slightly impinges; this locker is pointed, headed, and contains the grooves for shelves and shutters. The west wall (*plates G, H, and I*), which is, architecturally, the finest piece of work in the abbey, contains, besides a series of beautifully moulded, capped, and shafted single-lancet windows, a fine and hitherto almost, if not quite, unknown reader's pulpit. The south wall is broken down to the string under the windows, which consisted of four simple lancets. The

³ *Pennant*, in his "Whitfield and Holywell" (1796), makes the curious mistake of describing this room as a Knight-Templars' Chapel; and the Chapter-House as the Refectory.

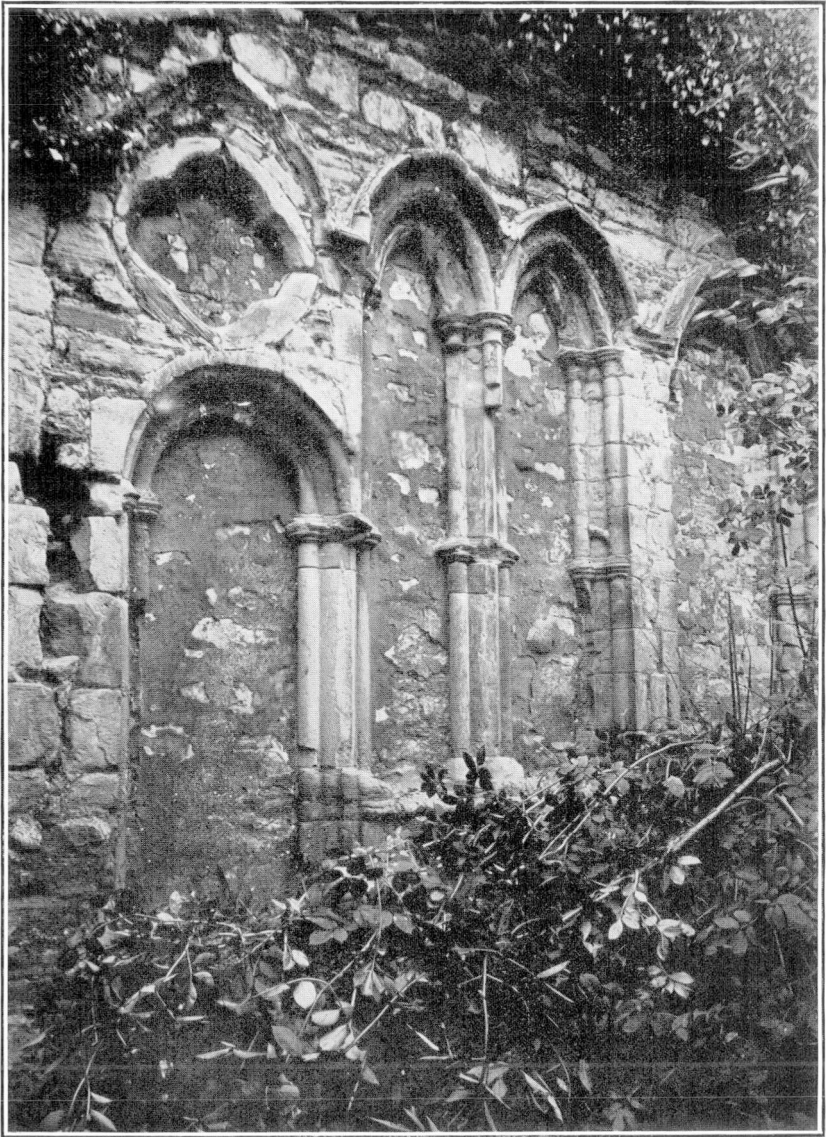
pitch of the gable can be made out from the knee-stone, which is still standing at the angle of the south and east walls. The east wall is intact, but contains no windows. The main entrance from the cloisters has, of course, disappeared with the original north wall.

If the refectory may claim to be, architecturally, the finest part of the abbey, the wonderful half-timbered range of buildings (*plates J and K*) may certainly be said to be of the greatest interest. These are, no doubt (in the ground level), storage cellars; the floor above, in all probability, being used as a guest-house, &c. The enormous scantlings of the timbers; their framing; and the way in which the natural curves of the great timbers have been selected for the design, are worthy of the closest attention. At the east end of the range, a short arm runs at right angles south, the upper floor of which is approached by a flight of stone steps; but whether they are original or not, their condition makes it impossible to decide. Two very interesting entrances to the ground story still remain (*plate L*). On the west side of the cloister-garth, where one would naturally look for the cellarer's store-houses, there are no traces of buildings at all.

Tradition, as with so many of our abbeys, has apportioned many parts of Basingwerk to various churches in our neighbourhood. To St. Mary's-on-the-Hill, of Chester, its choir; to Cilcain, in Flintshire, a roof; and to Llanrhaiadr, in Denbighshire, some glass. No documentary evidence of these acquisitions exist, to my knowledge, except in the case of the first-named church; and this is an entry in the churchwardens' accounts for 1536: "In there tyme the quere was boght at basewerke, and sette uppe with all costs and chargis belonging to

Basingwerk Abbey

Plate H.



Refectory—Reader's Pulpit, Entrance and Stairway openings

R. Newstead, Photo.

Plate I.

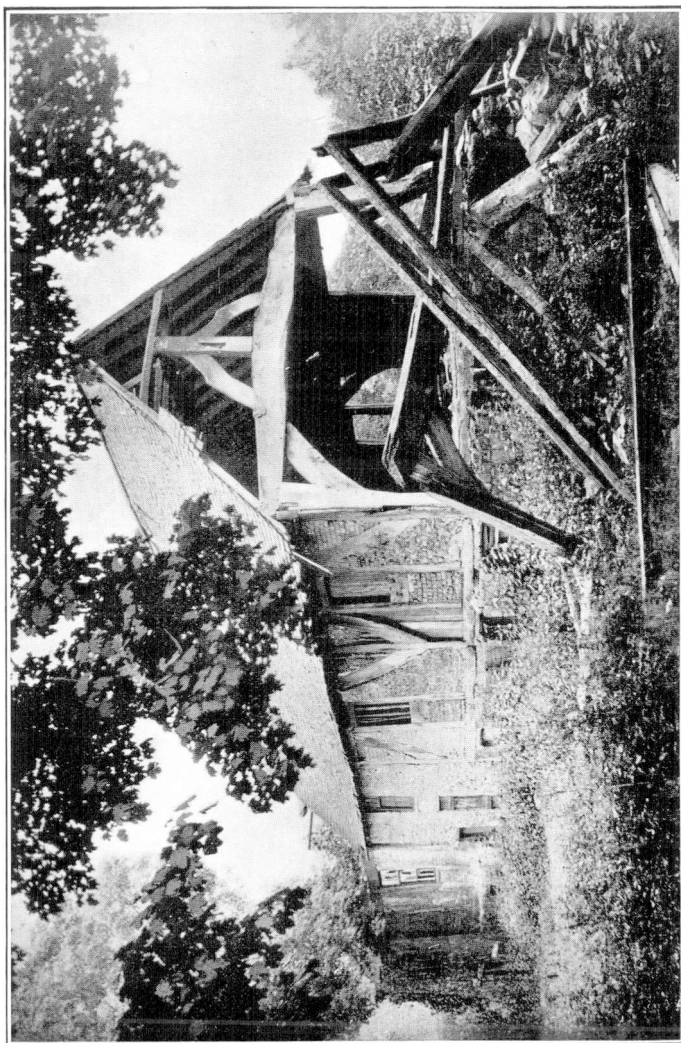
Basingwerk Abbey



Refectory—Pulpit and Locker underneath

R. Newstead, Photo.

Masingwerk Abbey



Cellarer's Buildings, Guest House, &c., north side

J. A. Waite, Photo.

the same." I can see no reason to doubt, whatever, that this entry referred to the purchase of the choir stalls and, possibly, screen; and this opinion was held by the late Mr. Earwaker, the historian of St. Mary's Parish.

When the word "quere" began to be understood to mean "quere roof" it is difficult to say; but the recent state of the roof of St. Mary's-on-the-Hill,⁴ and its necessary and costly repair, has revived the tradition, even to the further more liberal translation of the word "quere" into "roof of nave."

At all events, as I have stated earlier in these notes, the nature of the site on which the abbey stood, made it impossible for the choir or presbytery of the church to be of more than three bays, or something like forty feet in length; the more probable length was, however, that of two bays, or the internal dimension of the tower.

Of the state of the ruins of the once beautiful Abbey of Basingwerk it is painful and useless to speak. Our Society, and many of our members individually, have done everything possible to raise up some enthusiasm for their care in their immediate neighbourhood and elsewhere, but, unfortunately, without avail.

Not many years must now elapse before every vestige of this once important house (save, perhaps, the remains of the refectory) will have disappeared.

⁴ It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to call attention to the most able and exhaustive paper on the roof of St. Mary's Church, by its Rector (the Venerable Archdeacon Barber), so recently as Volume VIII. of our Society's Journal.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLATES.

Plate A is a view taken from the centre of the nave, looking east, and shews very prominently the arch between the south aisle of nave and the south transept. On the left is the half-round respond and springing of the arch to the easternmost bay of the south arcade of nave; and on the right the much-broken jamb of doorway from south aisle to cloister.

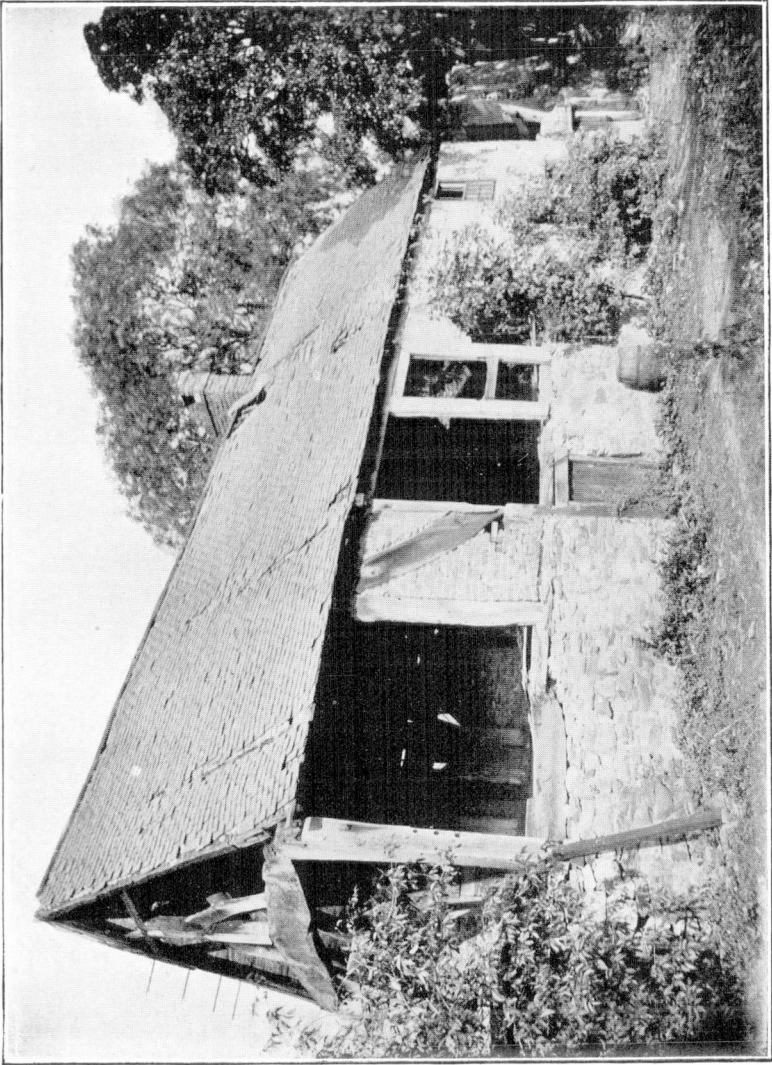
Plate B is looking into the south transept, shewing the gable and its windows, now destroyed. The small round-headed doorway is the communication between transept and sacristy; and the fissure in the masonry on the right marks the position of the night-stairs from dormitory. The archway is that leading in the south aisle of nave; and above it will be noted the fine corbelling to the springers of the south arch of tower.

Plate C shews, from the exterior, the fallen south transept; the position of night-stairs from dormitory; and doorway from sacristy. The two round-headed arches, with column, are the entrance to the chapter-house from its vestibule, over which run the dormitories, the floor to which is plainly indicated by the position of its beam-holes.

Plate D—The chapter-house, looking north-west, shewing the springers and line of the original groining, and position to floor of room added over in 15th century. The small doorway on left is entrance to sacristy from cloisters.

Plate E—Chapter-house, looking north-east, and shewing gable of room added in 15th century.

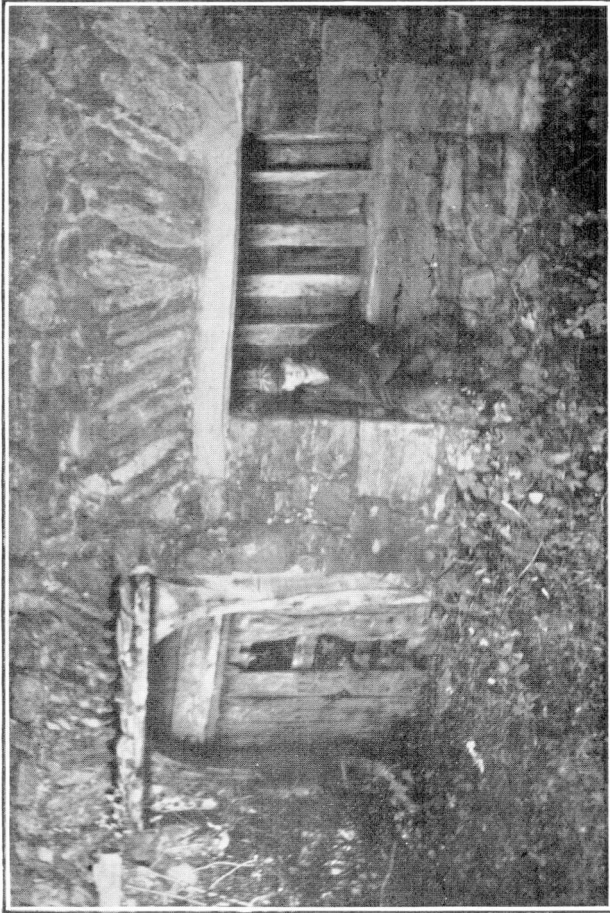
Basingwerk Abbey



Cellarer's Buildings, Guest House, &c., south side

R. Newstead, Photo.

Basingwerk Abbey

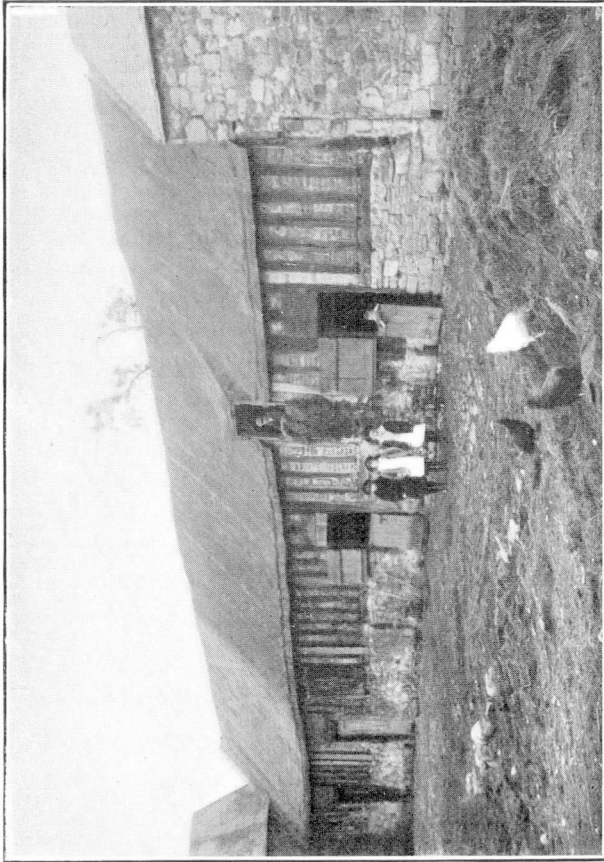


Door and Window—Cellar's Buildings

R. Newstead, Photo.

Plate M.

Basingwerk Abbey



Barns, &c.

B. Newstead, Photo.

Plate F—View from kitchen, looking north through day-room, parlour, dormitories, &c. On extreme right is 15th century wall of kitchen, built against buttress of 13th century work.

Plate G is the west wall of the refectory; it contains a series of lancet windows, and reader's pulpit.

Plates H and I are views of the reader's pulpit: the former, the entrance and stairway openings; the latter, the pulpit itself and locker underneath.

Plates J and K are north and south sides of cellarer's buildings and guest-house over.

Plate L is a door and window at east end of north side of cellarer's buildings. Another door, of similar character, is opposite this on south side.

Plate M shews a range of half-timbered buildings, probably the barns, at some little distance south-west of the abbey.

