

XIV.—THE CONVENTUAL BUILDINGS OF THE
 PRIORY OF HEXHAM, WITH A DESCRIPTION
 OF A RECENTLY DISCOVERED TWIN CAPITAL
 FROM THE CLOISTERS.

By CHARLES CLEMENT HODGES.

[Read on 30th April, 1924.]

THE CLOISTERS AT HEXHAM AND THE BUILDINGS SURROUNDING
 THEM.

The arrangement and area of the cloisters, and the disposition of the buildings, were dictated and governed by two main facts. One was the proximity of the establishment to the Scottish border, and the historical events occurring in the country on both sides of the border; the other, the previous occupation of the site by the extensive and important buildings of the time of St. Wilfrid, and their stubborn endurance long afterwards, owing to their very substantial nature.

The geographical position and the political state of Northumberland affected the churches and monastic establishments. When the buildings were erected, following the placing of Austin canons at Hexham, the district was under the rule of the king of Scotland, and hence the architecture more closely resembles that of the Scottish border abbeys, than it does that seen further south, even in Yorkshire. Notwithstanding this; the general disposition of the various parts of the whole group, does not differ in any essential from the normal plan of monastic establishments, which followed the Norman conquest, and was maintained, with but slight and unimportant variations right up to the time of the dissolution of the conventual houses in the reign of Henry VIII.

The earlier occupation of the site had much to do with the extent, and the order in which the erection of the various apartments was carried out. A glance at the plan of the buildings shows a great disproportion between the size of the four limbs of the church. The prime cause of this was that the nave to the last, was on the site of St. Wilfrid's basilica, while the later choir and transepts, extended far beyond the lines of the corresponding portions of the earlier church. The nave was five aisles wide, the width of the central area being greatly in excess of that of the aisles on either side, when taken together. The western limit of the nave is clearly defined by existing remains, both below and above ground. It was the length of the nave, which dominated the length of the north and south walks of the cloister, while those to the east and west were not hampered in the same manner. The result is that the four alleys are of unequal length, and the lines of the walls on the east and west sides are not parallel. The south walk was as much as nine feet shorter than that on the east.

The excavations made in 1907-9 revealed the plan of the basilica, and large portions of the conventual buildings of St. Wilfrid's abbey. Tentative excavations had previously been carried out in 1881-1882, when very important discoveries were made. The chief of these was the long foundation of the central part of the church, which part contained the raised platform where the high altar stood; also the east wall of the eastern range of conventual buildings. This foundation is under the south transept, crosses the slype near its western end, and extends across the chapter house vestibule, where a part of it is visible. It was where it crosses the slype that the great Roman monument, now erected in the south transept, was found, and clearly showed to what period the foundations belonged. Some remains of the west wall of the same range were uncovered in 1909, and showed that the present west wall of the buildings on the east side, is near the centre of those of St. Wilfrid's time in the same position. In other words, the medieval builders laid

down their eastern range of greater width, and to the east of the previous one. The east wall of the western range is no doubt on the line of that of the earlier one. It is safe to infer that St. Wilfrid's cloister was square, and occupied the greater portion of the north-western area of that of later date.

Accounts of St. Wilfrid's buildings, and their sumptuous character, are given in the life of St. Wilfrid, by his chaplain Eddius, and in the very valuable chronicle of Richard, prior of Hexham, written in the latter part of the twelfth century. He tells us that the canons adapted the edifices of St. Wilfrid's time to their uses, a clear proof that they were of ample extent, and substantially built. Further evidence of this is gained from the chronicle of Aelred of Rievaulx, from which we learn that the first new building that the canons erected was the eastern extension of the choir of the church. This was in 1153, so they must have made shift with the older buildings for a period of at least forty years. Their new choir, with its great semicircular apse, did not long satisfy their requirements, and as wealth increased they replaced it, about 1180, by the existing one of six bays, with a square east end. This accomplished, they began rebuilding the structures surrounding the cloister square on an ambitious scale, and, as was generally the case, the eastern range, extending southward from the transepts, first received attention. The apartment next to the transept is a passage through the range, called, in old English, the slype. This was formed to give access to the cemetery from the cloister garth. The cemetery of the religious bodies, whether monks or canons, was immediately eastwards of the claustral buildings, and was daily visited for prayer. The slype at Hexham is within the transept, instead of beyond it. The only other instance in England of this peculiarity, is in another great house of Austin canons, St. Frideswide's, Oxford, now the cathedral. The slype is in two divisions, the eastern part formed a porch, above which is a vaulted chamber with two windows to the east, no doubt occupied by the sanctuary man, as we know was the case at

Durham. The eastern doorway of the slype has a semicircular arch, a not uncommon form at the time of its erection. On either side are narrow windows. The west door has a pointed arch, with the cross-flower ornament, and well moulded jambs.

South of the slype is the chapter house, with a vaulted vestibule to the west of it. This is of greater size, and of more ornate character than is the same room in many religious houses larger than Hexham, and when perfect must have presented an imposing appearance. Its four pillars are gone, but there were some remains of them in the eighteenth century, and its beautiful west doorway survived till 1819. The doorway into the chapter house, or its vestibule, was generally the most ornate of any, and the extreme plainness of the remaining doorways at Hexham, makes the comparatively recent loss of this fine feature the more to be deplored. The east wall of the vestibule has a well moulded doorway flanked by side openings, as the western doorway also has. To the east was the chapter house, of which there are but slight remains, though its extent is known. It was lofty and vaulted, as its height was not restricted by the level of the floor of the dormitory. South of the vestibule, and at the same level, is the calefactory, or day room of the canons, where a fire was kept burning. This important adjunct was vaulted in two alleys, but in a much simpler manner than the vestibule. It was five bays in length, and its south wall was the limit of the range of buildings in that direction, unless the *necessarium* was placed further to the south, but of this no traces have been found or recorded.

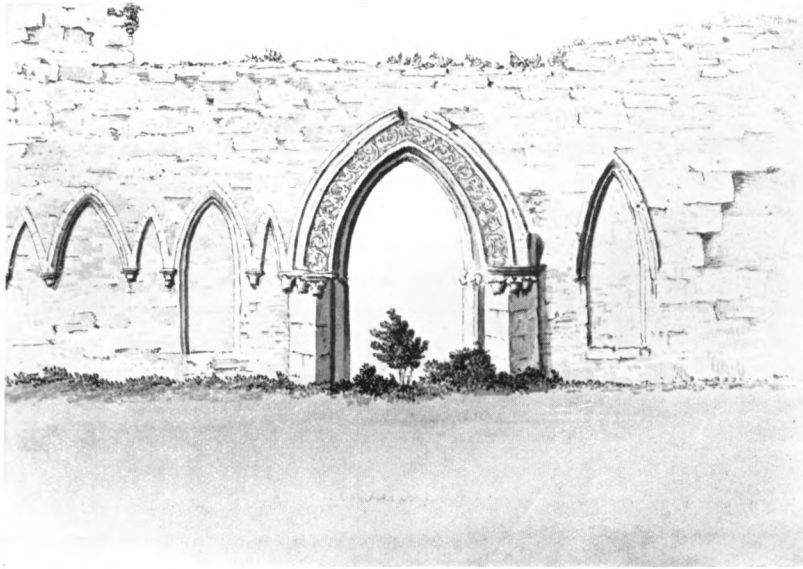
Over the vault of the vestibule was the dormitory. This extended from the south wall of the transept to the south end of the calefactory, and had a lofty roof. It had two entrances: the night stair, situated in the south transept, led to the door at its north end, which opened onto the gallery over the slype, and gave access to it from the church, and on its western side was the day stair, making it accessible from the cloister. Only the position of this can be seen; it intervened between the east

end of the frater and the west wall of the dormitory. The night-stair at Hexham is made an important architectural feature, and is the most impressive of any of those remaining in England. In the larger number of conventual churches it occupied a quite subordinate position, and at Durham, Fountains and Kirkstall, is a newel stair in the angle of the south transept. In some cases it was in the thickness of the west wall of the transept.

The most essential buildings were completed in their new form in the earlier years of the thirteenth century, and as those bounding the cloister on its south and west sides, were not undertaken as a continuation of the same scheme, until near the end of the same century, it seems that the pre-Conquest erections on their sites must have been in existence until that time, for it is highly improbable that such extensive buildings could have been erected twice in so short a period, and moreover, not a stone has been found that could have had a place in an early thirteenth century frater or cellarage. We know from documentary and structural evidence that the body of St. Wilfrid's basilica survived till 1296, and it is therefore not unlikely that two, of the four ranges of claustral buildings, were in use until the canons saw a possibility of consummating their great rebuilding scheme.

The new frater, also called refectory (*refectorium*), was undoubtedly the finest of its period that we know. There are but few remaining in Britain built at the same date and in the same style. That at Easby is almost complete, and of a not much later date than Hexham. The great hall was raised on an undercroft of an ornate character. It was vaulted in two alleys, and the pillars were octofoils, a single drum of one of them remains. The foliated corbel of the first springer of the vault, from the west end of the north wall, is to be seen, and Carter's plan of c. 1790 shows the western bays and one of the isolated columns as then remaining. These perished after the disastrous fire in the Abbey House in 1818.

The great hall is wholly gone, and the only remains of it in



WEST SIDE OF CHAPTER HOUSE VESTIBULE FROM THE CLOISTER.



THE FRATER DOORWAY AND LAVATORY FROM THE CLOISTER.

From drawings by H. S. Grimm.

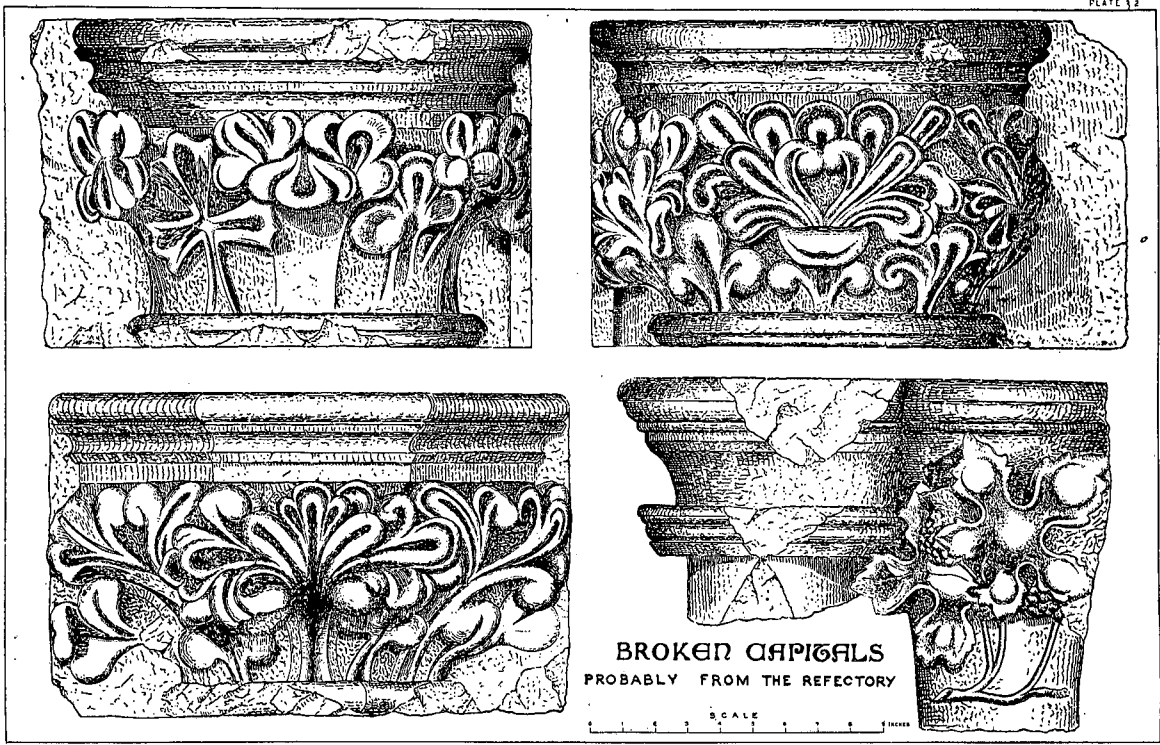


situ are portions of its richly ornamental doorway. Grimm's drawing of 1778,¹ here reproduced, shows it in a more perfect state than it now is. It was surmounted by an arch with many orders of delicate mouldings, and fine carvings of natural foliage. The western jamb, in the south western angle, remains and has jamb shafts with capitals ornamented with leaves of various local plants, closely copied from nature. The doorway was probably a double one, like the very beautiful and perfect example of the same period at Southwell, Nottinghamshire. Between the remaining western jamb of the doorway and the angle, is a single division of the wall arcade, which decorated the north wall of the frater, and the presence of such an unusual feature is clear evidence of the extreme richness and sumptuous character of the work. Some fragmentary details of carved and moulded work, pieces of window tracery, and three large foliated capitals have been found from time to time, and can be identified as having come from the frater. From these it can be learned that the great hall had large four-light windows, with richly moulded jambs and arches. The hood mouldings of the arches had carved heads as terminations. The main couples of the roof rose from wall shafts with large finely carved capitals, and the whole building must have been one of considerable grandeur.

The lavatory, near the main entrance, remains in great part. The washing troughs have been cut away, and the wall behind them refaced, but the very beautiful ornamental arcade which surmounted them survives, and is the chief architectural gem of the abbey to-day, there is not its equal in the country. Grimm's drawing shows it in a somewhat more perfect condition than it now is.

We now reach the cloister arcades and must locate the position of the fine capital before us. The arcades are all gone, as the whole area of the garth was converted into an ornamental

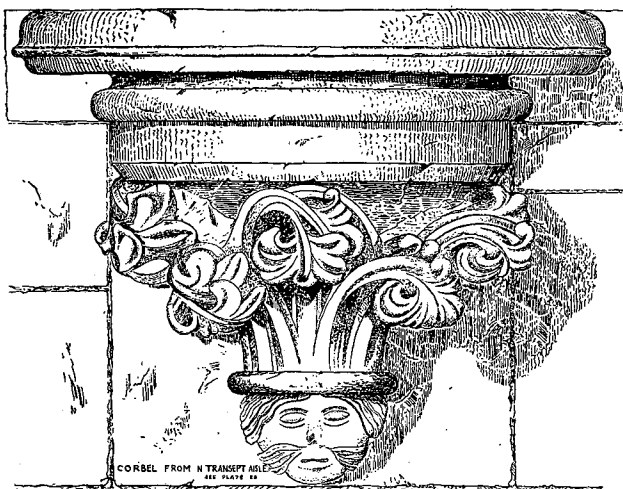
¹ Some account of H. S. Grimm and his work will be found in *Arch. Ael.*, 3rd Ser., XIX, p. 115 ff.



CAPITALS FROM THE FRATER AND CLOISTERS, HEXHAM PRIORY.

SEE PAGE 222.

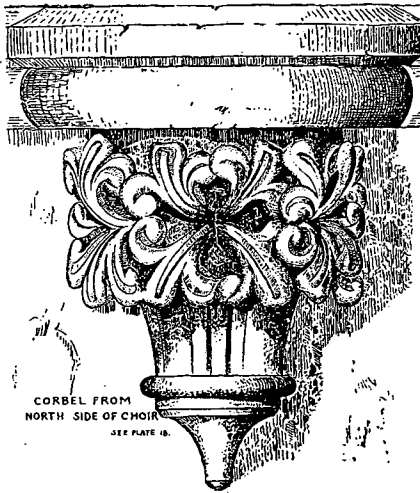
garden in connection with the Abbey House. This, the mansion of the grantee, sir Reynold Carnaby, absorbed the prior's house, and the western range of claustral buildings. The other two ranges do not appear to have been occupied. The eastern one was ruined or converted into cottages, and the southern seems to have been taken down to the foundations. It was probably in a more or less ruined state subsequent to the destruction of 1296-7.



All that we know of the cloisters on the north and east sides, is from the hook corbels in the walls that supported the roofs of the pentises. These two alleys were not vaulted in stone, but it is probable that the south and west alleys were so vaulted, or intended to be. An almost contemporary, and vaulted cloister, is to be seen at Lincoln. This is known to have been in course of erection in 1295, and from it we may judge what the appearance of the southern cloister arcade at Hexham was. It is certain that the recently found twin capital² came from this

² The thanks of the society are due to Mr. F. J. Guthrie of Hexham for sending this capital to our museum.

arcade, and though the most perfect and in many respects the most interesting, it is not the only one of the series which has survived. Two others are in the church, and are illustrated on plates 32 and 38 in the writer's monograph '*The Abbey of St. Andrew, Hexham*' (see *ante*, p. 220). Others were formerly on rockeries in Hexham. Mr. John Gibson was the first to observe, built into a wall in the garden of Hexham House, a twin base which came from the same arcade.



CORBEL FROM
NORTH SIDE OF CHOIR
SEE PLATE 18.

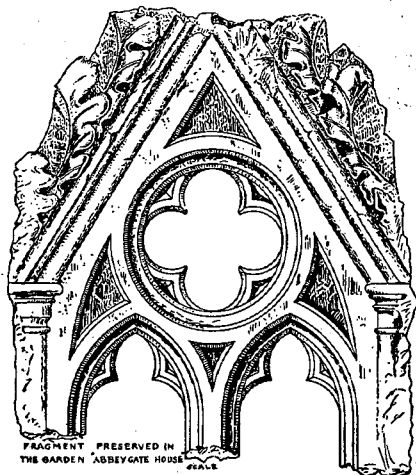
From an art point of view, the interest in the capital is, that it bears on the same stone two distinct phases of foliage ornament. The purely conventional of the earlier years of the thirteenth century, and the natural, which marks those of its close. The former is based upon a well-known plant, the water avens, or herb benet, and the whole evolution of the rise and development of this well-known feature is fully given in Browne's *York Minster*. In the right half of the stone, as seen on fig. 1, Plate XIV, the leaves are well cut, and seem to rise out of the stone and flow both upwards and downwards, as they



THE TWIN CAPITAL FROM HEXHAM.

From photographs by Parker Brewis.

appear on a corbel in the choir (Plate 38 ' *The Abbey of St. Andrew, Hexham* '), and are quite distinct from their treatment on a large corbel in the aisle of north transept (see *ante*, p. 221), which is the only piece of carving in the church of, what is known as, the York and Lincoln type. The other portion of the twin capital bears well cut vine leaves fully emerged from the conventional stage. One of the detached capitals in the church has a similar, but rather more elaborate, vine with fruit, the twin portion of which has mouldings only (see *ante*, p. 220).



The frater had a stone pulpit from which the lesson was read during meal times. A section of the rich arcade to this, with geometrical tracery under a gablet with hawthorn crackets, is on a rockery in the town. The late J. P. Gibson, found in 1908, a very beautifully carved diminutive capital, which is now in one of the recesses on the north side of the nave. This is no doubt one of the capitals of the open arcade to the pulpit passage or its adjuncts.

Refectory pulpits remain in a complete state at St. Wurburgh's, Chester, at Carlisle, and at Beaulieu in Hampshire.



OBVERSE OF COMMON SEAL OF CANTERBURY.

+^x ISTUD^x EST^x SIGILLVM^x COMMVNE^x CIVIVM^x
CIVITATIS^x CANTVARIE.