

VI.—TYNEMOUTH PRIORY.

BY R. NEVILLE HADCOCK.

[Read on 29th May, 1935.]

The promontory at Tynemouth, protected on three sides by steep cliffs and the sea, forms one of the strongest natural fortifications in Britain. The site was used, both as a religious centre and as a castle, from the seventh century to the suppression of the monastery in 1539, from then it served as a fortress, and is still used for that purpose. This continuous occupation has resulted in the site being covered by buildings and walls of all periods from Norman to modern. In places the mediæval walls have been allowed to remain, gradually to crumble to ruin; in other places the old walls have been built upon, rebuilt, or entirely removed for the erection of military buildings.

The excavations carried out by the Office of Works during the last few years have brought to light important remains of the monastic buildings. The mounds which stood on the site of the cloister have been cleared away, but unfortunately its foundations had been removed in several places for the deep magazines which these mounds protected; some foundations and walls, however, remained there as well as below the bastion on the south-east which was also removed. These include a part of the western range, the south wall of the frater with a building on the south side, the eastern range in its entire length, the rere-dorter and buildings beside it, and the inner defensive wall on the south side. Several new discoveries have also been made in the church, and it is hoped that future excavation may reveal more.

The history of the priory has been written by Gibson in *The Monastery of Tynemouth*, and by Dr. H. H. E.

Craster in *The County History of Northumberland*, vol. VIII. The architecture and ruins of the church have been described by Mr. W. H. Knowles in the same history and in *The Archæological Journal*, vol. LXVII, pp. 1 ff. These have proved valuable sources of reference. In both accounts there is a print of the coloured Elizabethan plan in the British Museum, and in the latter volume Mr. Knowles gives a reconstructed plan and a copy of the record of buildings from the Elizabethan commission's report. Mr. Knowles supervised the first excavations in the church, and he has kindly allowed foundations which he measured but which are now under the ground to be inserted in the new plans.

No pre-Conquest foundations have yet been discovered at Tynemouth, and the earliest existing remains are Norman.

Tynemouth was refounded as a priory of Benedictine monks dependent upon St. Alban's abbey about the year 1085. The usual procedure was for a parent abbey to send a few monks and a number of lay-brothers to colonize a new dependent priory or cell, and to begin constructing the church and conventual buildings. The first part to be erected was usually the western range, to house the monks and brothers while the work was being done. The first western range at Tynemouth appears to have been connected with the two west bays of the Norman nave, making the cloister about 63 feet long. The south wall of the nave, to the east of the later western range, is 9 inches thicker at this end.

The church was begun about 1090, and the choir and east end were apparently completed by 1110, in which year the relics of St. Oswin were translated there. The plan of the foundations of the Norman presbytery have been laid out on the site from the excavations of Mr. Knowles, who describes it minutely in the accounts referred to above. This presbytery was apsidal, with ambulatory and three radiating chapels, while two other apsidal chapels opened into the transept. The nave was originally of seven bays, giving the Norman church an internal length

of 180 feet. The north wall of the Norman nave is also thicker at the west end; and in the western bay the plinth course is stopped, showing the position of the original north door which was walled up when the nave was extended in the thirteenth century.¹

Work was still in progress upon the church in 1111, and in the same year the dormitory was being built, as two accidents were recorded.² The dormitory normally formed the upper story of the eastern range in a monastery; and it occupied this position at Tynemouth. The northern part of this range, south of the chapter house, is of this period, and this side was not affected by the later enlargement of the cloister, though it underwent considerable alteration in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The great walls of the rere-dorter are also early twelfth century, but later walls have been built against them in a very puzzling manner. In one place there are two walls against each side, giving a thickness of 14 feet.

The increasing prosperity of the monastery soon made it necessary to provide a larger cloister. The western range was therefore rebuilt about 1140. It was placed further west, overlapping the west front of the Norman church, and increasing the size of the cloister by about 20 feet. The north wall of this range remains, incorporated in the south wall of the nave. (Fig. 1.) It has a large central doorway, with wall arcading consisting originally of four arches resting on attached shafts on each side. Only three shafts appear on the west of the doorway, as this side of the range was again rebuilt in the thirteenth century, when the west end of the nave was extended.

The frater was completed before about 1150, when an interesting story was recorded of a fire in a building close by, formerly used for guests.³ A fragment of wall of this

¹ For description of Norman church see *Arch. Journal* LXVII, pp. 7-12. by W. H. Knowles.

² *Hist. of Northd.* VIII, p. 57.

³ *Hist. of Northd.* VIII, pp. 60, 61.

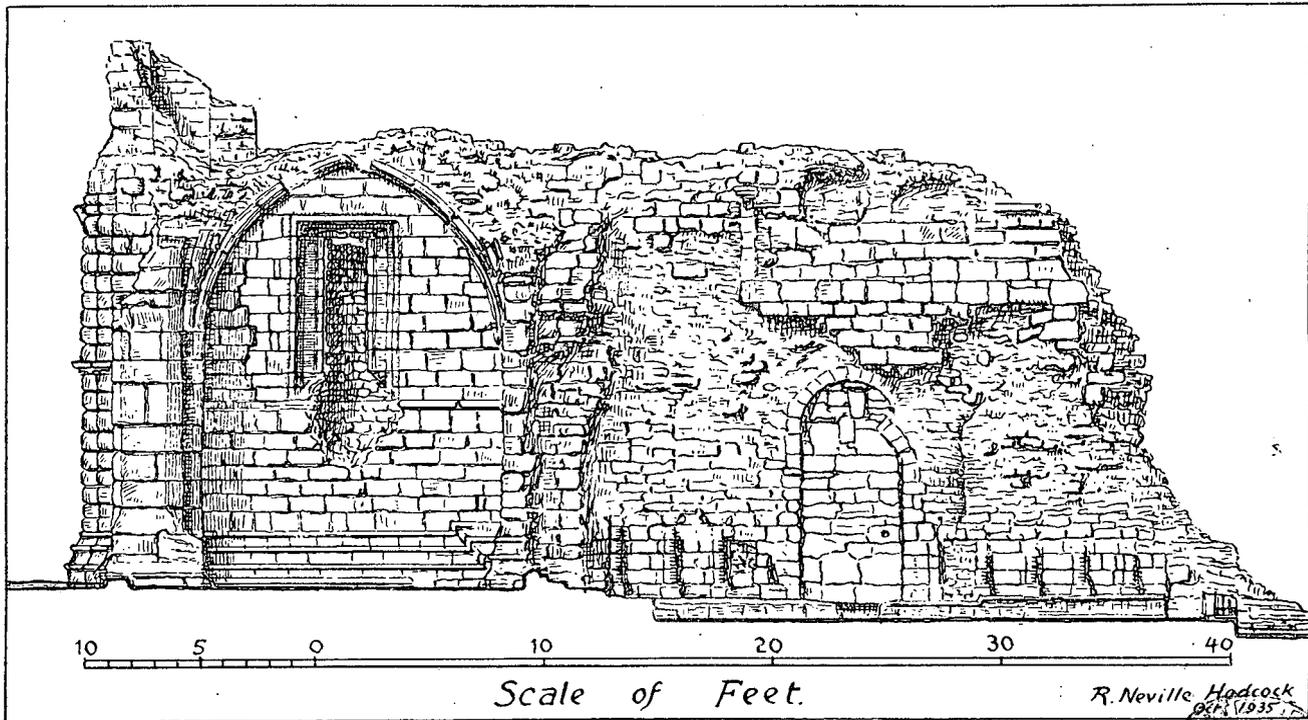


FIG. I. NORTH END OF WESTERN RANGE.



period which coincides with the position of this guest-house has recently been discovered in the building to the south of the frater, and it may have been left as a support for a floor. The outer face of the south wall of the frater was rebuilt in the thirteenth century, when the massive buttress was erected.

The enlargement of the east end of the church has been attributed to prior Akarius, who later became abbot of Peterborough. Abbot John de Cella was extending the nave at St. Albans about the same time, 1195. The monks always endeavoured to interfere as little as possible with existing arrangements until their new ones were nearly completed; Tynemouth shows two good examples of this in the extensions of the east end and of the nave. The pillars of the new choir were placed outside those of the Norman presbytery, giving a span of 31 feet instead of 21 feet. The builders realized that such a large work would occupy a considerable number of years, and it may be presumed that the Norman presbytery was walled up between the pillars to serve the monks temporarily.

The arches on the east side of the transept, which were to open into the side aisles of the new choir, were built at an early stage into the Norman walls, replacing the apsidal chapels. These arches were probably walled up temporarily, and were built before the choir proper to obtain the general lay out of the new work, and to act as buttresses to the central tower. A very definite joint at the west end of the south choir aisle shows very clearly that these arches were built first, with the presbytery at the east end, and the work on the choir connecting them then proceeded from east to west. The south wall of the choir does not run truly parallel to the main arcade, and there is a similar joint in the narrow western bay of the presbytery.

The great unaisled presbytery, of which the east and south walls remain, has been acclaimed to be without rival among transitional buildings in its combination of strength, grandeur and beauty. The ambry, *piscina* and *sedilia*

show the approximate position of the high altar, which would be a little to the east of them. The shrine of St. Oswin was attached to the high altar until its translation to another part of the church in the fourteenth century, the altar of St. Oswin stood below the broad arch at the east

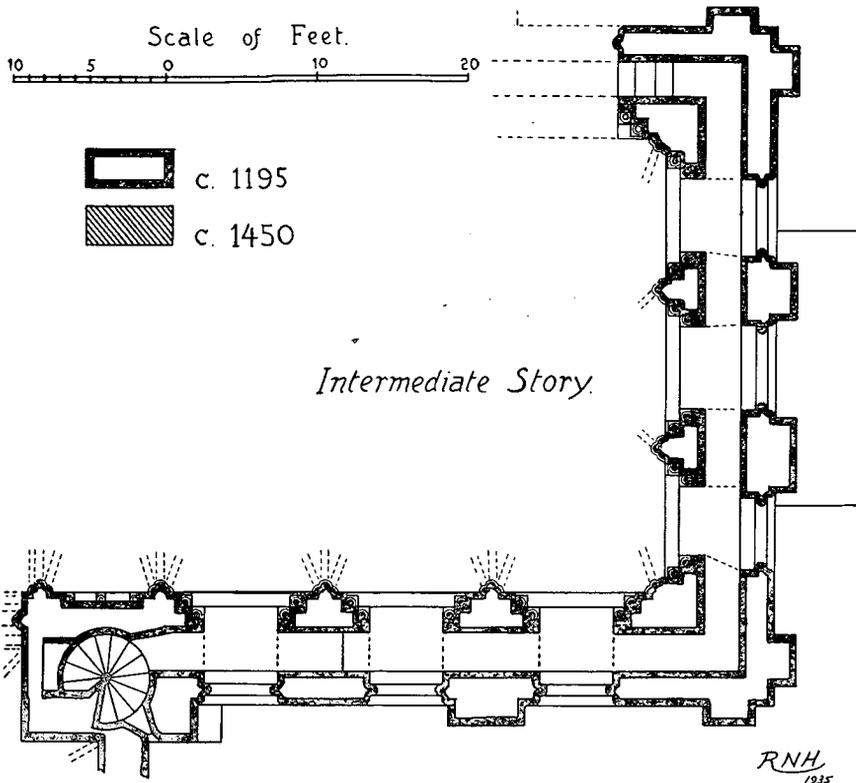


FIG. 2.

end which was later made the doorway of the Percy chantry. The walls of the presbytery are of great strength, being 7 feet 3 inches thick. Large scale plans show the irregularities of the buttresses and windows at the east end which may have been for the purpose of admitting more light. (Figs. 2 and 3.)

Very little remains of the beautiful aisled choir, which was of five bays. Drawings by Buck, Brand⁴ and Waters⁵ all agree in essentials, and show the architectural details of the south side admirably. The pillar attached to the

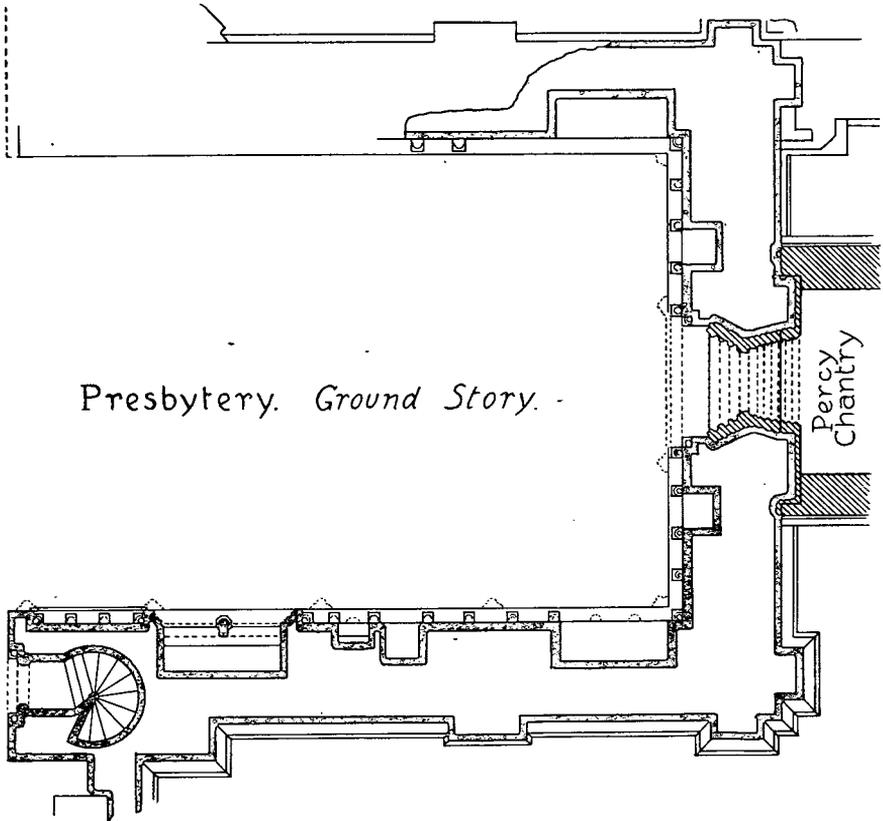


FIG. 3.

south-east side of the crossing remains, from which the design of the other pillars may be known. The different treatment in connecting this pillar and the corresponding one on the north side furnishes one of the many problems

⁴ Brand, *Hist. and Ant. of N/c* II, p. 65 (*Arch. Journal* LXVII, p. 3).

⁵ Illus., *Hist. of Northd.* VIII, p. 140.

still unsolved at Tynemouth.⁶ Three other bases and some plinths remain, and these show a later development of the pillar design used at Byland and Jervaulx. The pillars of the second bay from the east were connected by a narrow stone partition, and there was possibly a chantry here. The pavement of the choir was $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches below the level at the time of writing, making the level of the nave more than two feet higher than the choir.

The triforium and clerestory were very similar in design to those at Ripon, where they can still be seen in the three west bays on the north side of the choir. At Tynemouth the triforium was a walled blind-story, with a narrow wall passage. This can be seen in all the drawings referred to, and the arrangement is still visible in the treatment of the western bay of the presbytery. The wall shut off the space over the vault of the aisle, and on the south side this was later converted into a long room by heightening the outer wall and raising the pitch of the roof. A fireplace with a small oven at the west end of this room were probably introduced in the fifteenth century. This oven is built over another puzzling feature; below it is a narrow wall stair leading down to a door opening into the transept. There was formerly a door on the choir side also, which was later blocked by the arcade. The stair is of the same period as the arch below, about 1195, and the door is on the same level as the Norman blind-story of the transept. It would seem too high to open on to a screen, and the purposes of the stair and door are still unexplained. (Fig. 4.)

The room over the south choir aisle was possibly used as an addition to the north walk of the cloister, which was the monks' place of study. The cloister at Tynemouth was never large enough for a monastery of such size and importance. The north walk would only accommodate the carrels for eleven or twelve monks, while in times of prosperity there were more than double this number, and even

⁶ *Arch. Ael.*³ XIX, 112, by C. C. Hodges.

at the time of the suppression there were sixteen monks and three novices. At Wenlock the triforium chamber over the western bays of the nave was utilized in this manner.

Five important chapels were lost through the extension of the choir, and it appears that a low eastern transept was built to replace them.

The stone rood screen was built as soon as the new choir was completed, to divide the monastic church from the parochial nave. The screen was built against the west side of the Norman pillars of the crossing, and the inner west side of these pillars was cut away to give more room for access to the two doors of the screen. The *pulpitum* stood between the eastern pillars of the crossing, with a central door leading into the choir.

Much building was in progress from about 1220 to 1250. The dormitory range was extended to the south as far as the site would allow. The division between this and the Norman work is very definite, and the range takes an angle to the west. The south end of this range was in all probability the priors' hall and lodging, with his chapel at the south-east corner. The latter building retains its stone vaulting springing from corbels, and the whole range was vaulted in this manner, as is shown by a scale section made in 1784, of which the Office of Works have a copy.

Gibson conjectured that the priors' lodging stood on the north side of the nave, from the designation of a building there on the Elizabethan plan; but a study of the plan in the British Museum shows that the word is written in very roughly. It might be *Prois*, *Preis* or *Provs*; but the first letters might not be *Pr* at all. On the other hand, Priors Haven is spelt *Pryours Haven* on the same plan. The building on the north of the church had a door into the nave, or parish church, and it was in all probability the lodge for the secular priest in charge of the parish church. The bishops of Durham had jurisdiction over the parish church from the middle of the thirteenth century,

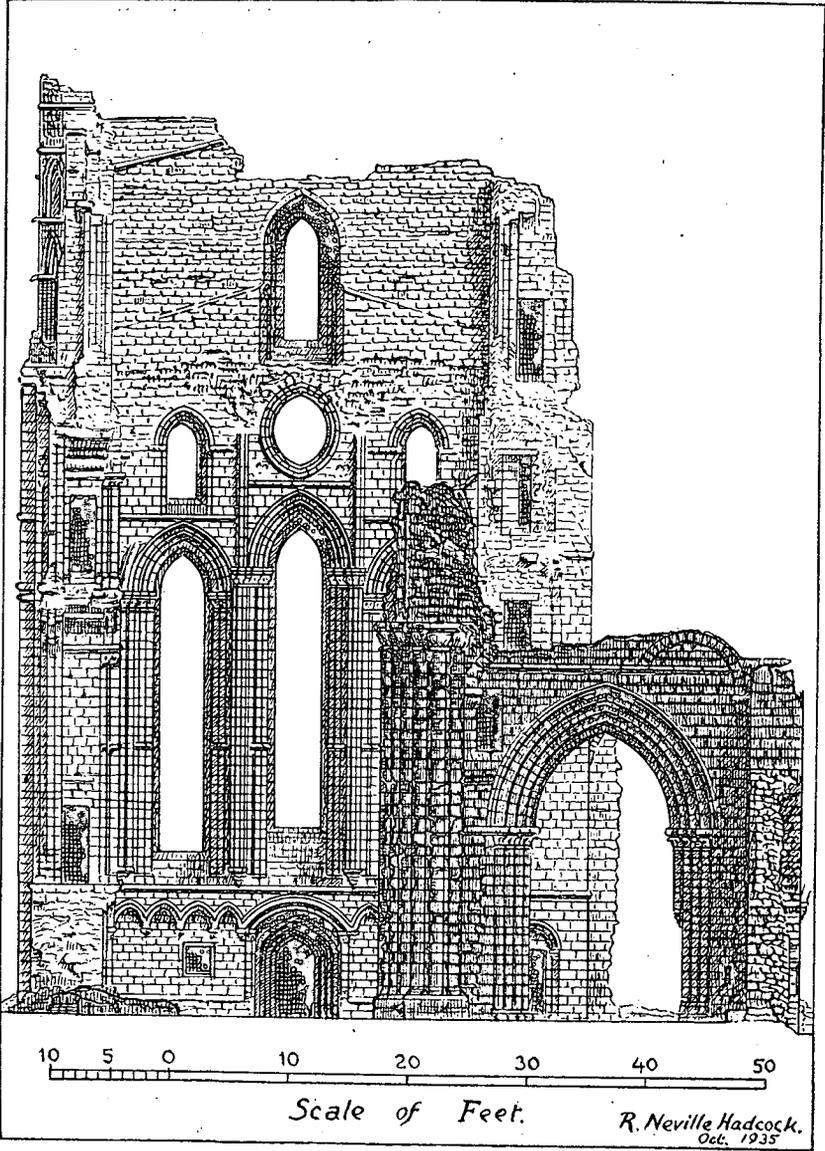


FIG. 4. SOUTH TRANSEPT AND PRESBYTERY FROM THE WEST.

and the monks maintained a secular vicar with a competent chaplain and clerk. These received a very ample daily allowance of beer and bread from the monastery.⁷

The whole of the south end of the dormitory range is designated *Lords Lodging* on the same plan. The prior was lord of the monastery, and in large houses he was often styled lord prior; also, owing to its situation and the strength of its fortifications, Tynemouth was often called upon to provide hospitality and shelter to guests of all classes, so much so that the monks had to complain frequently of the heavy expenditure thus incurred. Kings, princes and nobles travelling to and from the Scottish wars stayed sometimes at Tynemouth. The ruler of a monastery, whether he was abbot or prior, would entertain noble guests himself, and they would sit at his table and lodge with him. After the suppression, Sir Thomas Hilton occupied the monastery, probably living in this part as being the most comfortable. After his death in 1559, Sir Henry Percy became governor, and lord of Tynemouth.

The west front and two western bays of the nave were added to the Norman church about 1220. These two bays are evenly spaced, but the next which united the extension to the Norman church is much wider, due to the thirteenth century west end being completed as far as possible before the Norman west end was removed. This may explain the low wall between the third pillars from the west, which is probably post-suppression work, to wall off the Norman nave for service owing to the weakness or collapse of the wide bay.

The south wall of the extension is very irregular, and in the western bay it tapers towards the east. It would appear from this that the west front was built first, with the intention of pulling down the north wall of the western range; but it was decided later to incorporate this in the wall of the south aisle, thus upsetting the alignment.

⁷ *Hist. of Northd.* VIII, p. 124.

The western range was rebuilt about the same time, its breadth being diminished by nearly four feet. A portion of the west wall remains, with an attached vaulting column. This retains a beautifully moulded plinth and base of the water-holding pattern, similar in design to those in the eastern range at Lindisfarne. This type of moulding was only used, with rare exceptions, from the late twelfth to late thirteenth century.

The south wall of the frater was probably rebuilt about the middle of the thirteenth century. The frater stands at a lower level than the cloister, which would be accounted for by a sub-vault. On the south side is a massive angular buttress which possibly contained the stair to the reader's pulpit.

The chapter house may have been rebuilt about the same period, though the arcading on the north wall looks earlier, but it is so weathered that no mouldings remain. The bases of the doorway show that this must have been a beautiful feature. Gibson suggests that the chapter house may have been rebuilt by prior Ralph of Dunham after 1252.

It is not definitely known when the water supply was brought in to the priory, but it is known that it was brought by a pipe line from a place about two miles away. About 1260 there is a reference to a man who was good at laying on water who was to be sent to Tynemouth by one of the canons of Hexham.⁸ The advent of running water on the rock monastery must have been an important event, and it made possible the rearrangement and improvement of the drains, sanitary arrangements and re-dorter. The curious medley of walls in this part of the monastery, and the great drain chutes, were probably the gradual results of sanitary improvement.

License to crenellate the priory was granted in 1296, and a great part of the outer walls date from this time. These turned Tynemouth into one of the strongest

⁸ *Hist. of Northd.* VIII, p. 76.

fortresses in the north, with an enclosed area greater than almost any English castle except Windsor, and resulted in the great influx of guests already referred to. Edward I stayed here in 1298, and his was only the first of many royal visits.

The extensive buildings to the south-west of the cloister seem to have been largely for such guests. The outer wall of this part still stands on the south and east, but the inside was filled up with stones and earth, and a row of brick houses now surmounts it. The buildings here consisted of a hall, buttery, kitchen and *Yalewe Chamber*, with an entry on the north, beyond which was *Edmunds Chamber*, the old kitchen, another kitchen called *Ewryall* (ewer-hall) and a stewards' chamber. "Then out of the hall southward was a chapel and a chamber," probably meaning southward of the monastery and referring to the prior's chapel and lords' lodging. These were connected to the hall by a long building called *New Hall*, which may have been little more than a passage. The south wall of this building remains, but the foundations have given way so that it now leans outwards. There were four windows in this wall, but no trace of the north wall has been found. The door which led into the hall is in the west wall.

Between this and the frater were a group of buildings. Next to the frater is a fourteenth century building; the floor was at the same level as the cloister and western range, and covered the Norman wall referred to on page 124. On the south side, opening outwards, is a well-preserved oven, and at the south-east corner are strong buttresses of unusual pattern. This may have been a part of the old kitchen or *Ewryall*. Buildings were erected to the south of this at a later period. The east walls have foundations going down to 12 feet, and the foundations of the eastern range are of a similar depth, from which it would seem that there was originally a deep ravine between them which the monks filled in to build upon.

Another group of buildings stood to the west of the hall. These are called the *New Lodging* in the Elizabethan plan, and seem to coincide with the inner and outer parlour, lodgings and chambers of the Elizabethan report. This cannot refer to the regular monastic parlours, which were invariably near the cloister. Adjoining these buildings was the gallery, about 80 feet long and one of the most interesting portions of the walls that remain. The plinth course drops towards the east, where there is a small semi-circular tower, until it is well below the present ground level. It continues to drop steeply for a distance of 125 feet, and terminates at the interesting tower by Priors Haven. The wall of this forms an arc, and the tower retains a newel stair and wall passage.

The Lady chapel, begun about 1326 by prior Adam of Tewing, was built on the north side of the presbytery. It was specially endowed, and served by a warden monk. Nothing remains of this chapel above ground except the south-east foundation, which was built in prolongation of the north wall of the presbytery. Foundations, discovered below the ground on the north side, show that the chapel was 25 feet wide, and with the broad east bay of the choir aisle, at least 80 feet long. The height can be gathered from the roof marks on the north-east buttresses of the presbytery.

Prior Thomas de la Mare spent a large sum of money on new buildings and alterations after 1346. He translated the shrine of St. Oswin to another part of the church so that pilgrimages should not interfere with the monastic services. He built a new brew house, and made many alterations to the dormitory range, which probably included the large windows at the south end. A large room was formed above the vault of the chapter house, and the fireplace of this can still be seen on the north side. This room may have been used as library, having ready access to both cloister and triforium chamber referred to above. He also built some of the traceried windows in the church,

including probably the great west window. There were formerly early Gothic lancets and arcading here, of which traces remain on the south side, with a wall passage from the triforium.

High up in the outer wall of the southern section of the west front is a spring of an arch, with traces of others. To the west of this are some strong foundations of a building which must have been joined to the west front by arches resting on these springers, forming a high porch. This building seems to coincide with the little tower, called *Hye Prison* in the Elizabethan commission's report. There was another porch on the west side of the western range, where it joined the nave, and springers and wall ribs show that this was also stone vaulted. (Fig. 1, p. 125.)

The purpose of the large upper chamber built over the entire length of the presbytery and choir, above the vaulting and ceiling, is still unknown. This chamber was 115 feet long, 31 feet wide and about 20 feet high; there is no upper chamber of such size or importance in any church in Britain. The side walls contained large traceried windows which were apparently early fifteenth century; here the wall passage runs outside, with openings through the buttresses, and at the east end through the thickness of the wall to the window which was the central feature of the gable-end before the chamber was built. It is interesting to note that in 1426 abbot Whethamstede of St. Albans issued an injunction to Tynemouth in which he ordained that all priest monks must say Mass daily; even if chapels did exist on the south side of the choir there would not have been enough altars for so large a community. Durham and Fountains had built large extensions for altars many years earlier. Hexham followed in the fourteenth century with a new chapel of five altars, and there was already at Hexham room for many chapels in the great transept, which Tynemouth did not possess. Seventeen altars existed at Hexham, but apparently only seven at Tynemouth, excluding the nave, or parish church, which

had its own staff of clergy; and Tynemouth was far the richer house of the two.

The Elizabethan plan shows a group of important buildings on the south side of the choir and presbytery, where there is now a mound covered with grave-stones. One of these buildings appears to have been a large chapel, but this site has not so far been excavated.

The gate house tower and barbican were built after 1390 by prior John of Wethamstede, uncle of the famous St. Alban's abbot of that name. Richard II and John of Gaunt gave large sums of money towards the work. The arrangement of the gate and barbican at Tynemouth are similar to those at Alnwick, from which they were in all probability copied.⁹ The external appearance of these buildings at Tynemouth is marred by a brick building which has been placed on the top of the barbican and of the court between the barbican and gate. The barbican is entered from the west by a vaulted passage with guard rooms on each side. The western arch is modern, and the portcullis, for which the grooves remain, came in front of the second arch. The passage leads to the court which has now a flat ceiling instead of being open to the sky. A moat, crossed by a draw-bridge, ran below the similar court at Alnwick. Here there is a wide arched opening, now partly walled up, in the north connecting wall. A stair led up over this arch to the upper floor of the barbican, and there is a modern stair on the south side of the roadway. Another vaulted passage leads from this court, under the gate house, to the Great Court of the monastery. The room on the north side contains a garde-robe chamber in the thickness of the west wall, with a very deep drain running in two directions, west and south. The gate house tower is of four stories, and served as the keep of the castle.

Attached to the south-east side of the gate house is a tall building, called the *Mount Chamber*, with on its east

⁹ *Arch. Ael.*³ v, pp. 286 ff., by W. H. Knowles.

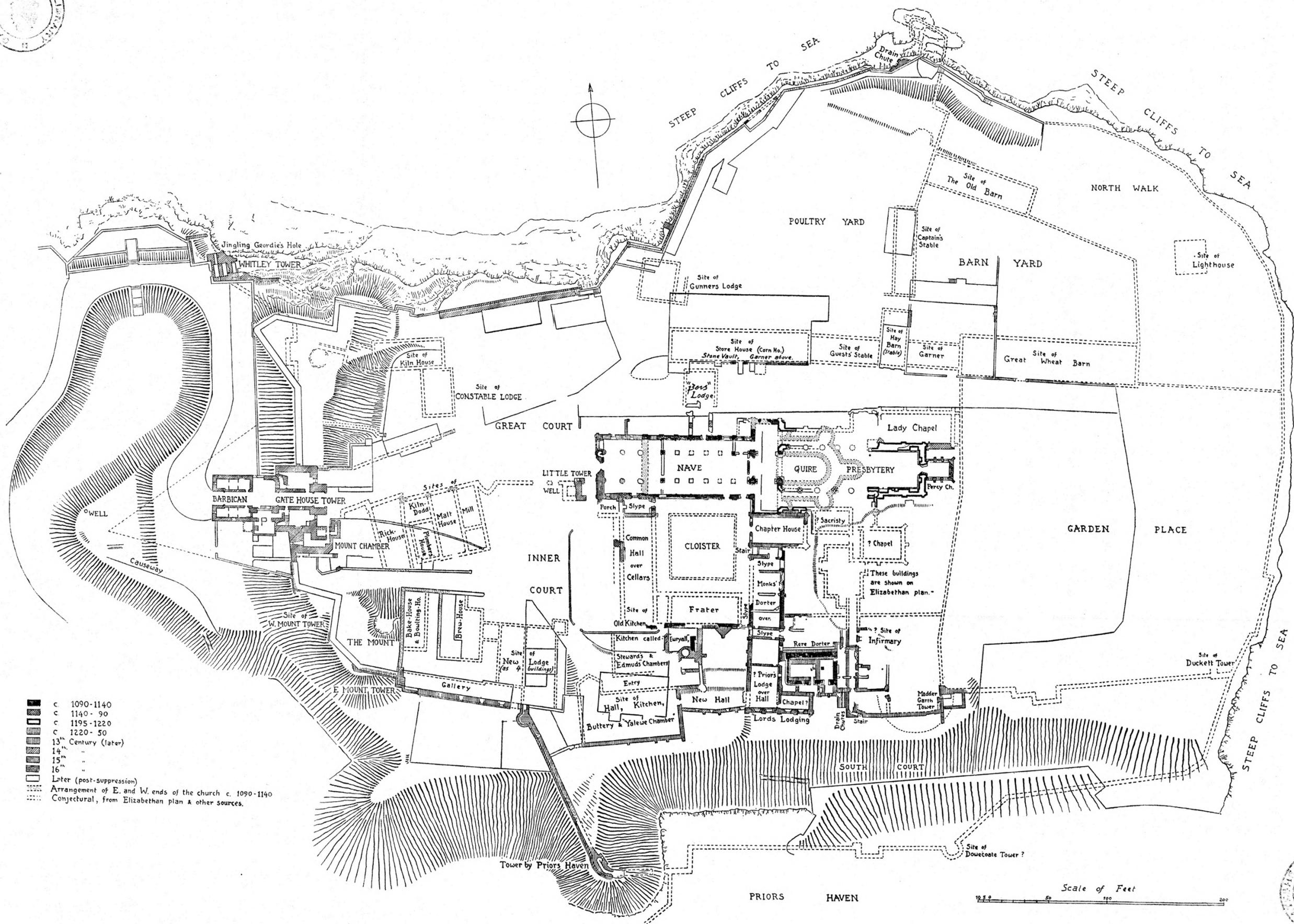
side another garde-robe. Beyond this is the *Mount*, almost certainly the *Motte* of Mowbray's stronghold.

The *Whitley Tower*, at the north-west corner, is of the same period as the gate. Only the lower part of this strong tower remains, and the basement appears to have served for drainage. There are some remains of a stair on the crumbled wall to the south of the tower. Beyond this, to the east, are the north walls perched on the top of the cliffs; these have been largely rebuilt since the suppression, but long stretches of mediæval masonry are still apparent, and at the very north point is a large drain chute, probably from the stables.

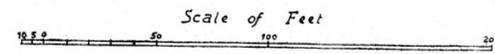
The last important addition to the priory was the Percy chantry. This was built about the middle of the fifteenth century, against the east wall of the presbytery, the doorway being formed between the buttresses. Mr. Knowles has described this chapel fully in the account referred to above.

After the suppression of the monastery in 1539, the site continued to be occupied, by a royal garrison; while the nave of the church continued in use, as a parish church. Elizabethan walls occur in many places amongst the monastic buildings which were still made use of. These appear at the east end of the nave, in the north-east bay and above the screen, where they were built to wall off the parish church, and in the eastern range and buildings to the east of it.

The appearance of the site has changed beyond recognition during the last years, and Tynemouth can now boast of having one of the most beautiful, as well as most instructive, monastic ruins in the country. His Majesty's Office of Works deserves the highest praise for so successfully preserving, excavating and laying out what has proved to be one of the most difficult sites under its control.



- c. 1090-1140
- c. 1140-90
- c. 1195-1220
- c. 1220-50
- 13th Century (later)
- 14th "
- 15th "
- 16th "
- Later (post-suppression)
- Arrangement of E. and W. ends of the church c. 1090-1140
- Conjectural, from Elizabethan plan & other sources.



PLAN OF TYNEMOUTH PRIORY IN 1935
By R. N. HADCOCK



