

The Monastic Infirmary, Norwich

BY THE LATE WILLIAM BUSTON

In the Lower Close, Norwich, and parallel with the south side of the cathedral cloisters, is what appears to be another survival of the Norman Transitional Period consisting of three massive pillars ranging east to west—evidently the remains of an ancient arcaded building. The two outermost pillars are of clustered design with three-quarter round columns at the angles and ornamental shafts between, forming a "square" on plan, each side measuring three feet. The middle pillar is cylindrical, three feet in diameter, and has four small pedestals at each angle of the square base, showing that the pillar originally had four slender shafts disposed round it. The bases of these pillars are low, with mouldings consisting of two rolls and hollow between, and trefoil carvings at each corner. It is interesting to note that the detail of the "square" pillars is somewhat similar to that of a fragment of masonry adjoining the south wall of "Isaac's Hall" in King Street, hidden away in the north-east corner of the cellar of Paston House (afterwards known as the "Music House") which adjoins the Norman house. The similarity is made all the more remarkable by the fact that, in the hollows of these bases, as in the King Street base, there are curious little nicks, or incisions, crosswise, at regular distances. Not only would the three columns in the Close and the fragment next Isaac's Hall appear to synchronise closely in date, but they would seem to be the work of the same mason.

The three pillars were repaired in 1896. The bases were evidently then renewed; and they, with various "new" patches, exhibit the ordinary grey colour of stone, whereas the ancient crumbling masonry is of a pinkish tint. In the absence of a definite ruling, one might conjecture that this tint, or discolouration, was caused by the fire which resulted from the attack of the citizens in 1272, and which did so much damage to the conventual buildings. The present bases may be taken to be exact reproductions of the original ones, as evidenced by authentic drawings made in 1804. At this latter date the capitals were intact together with two arches and the springs of two others. Now, alas! the capitals have almost entirely gone.

The nature of the building of which these pillars formed a part is a matter of fascinating conjecture. It happens, however, that it was the subject of learned discussion and of valuable papers and drawings by certain antiquaries early in the last century. One paper, on the "*Cathedral Dormitory*", by F. Sayers, M.D., was read to the Society of Antiquaries, London, on 29th

November, 1840, in which the writer states that after the Dissolution (1538) the Dormitory, or Dortour, was used as a public eating hall for the inferior inmates of the monastery. The common table was abolished in the 5th year of Charles I. In 1744 the building was converted into a workhouse; in 1756 the poor were removed; and in the summer of 1804 the building was demolished. Sayers, dwelling on the remarkable beauty of the roof, says "the pillars of the front arches, which were laid open, were very massy and ornamented with rich capitals; some of these, together with the inside of the arches above them, were stained with various colours, much of the brilliancy of which still remained; the whole of the *original front* of the building was clearly to be traced A part of the west end, together with two of its pillars, have been taken into an adjoining house". The three pillars now under discussion are undoubtedly here referred to, and the writer looked upon them as having been embodied in the cathedral dormitory. The "original front" is a matter for subsequent comment.

Another paper, entitled "*Observations on the remains of the Dormitory and Refectory which stood on the south side of the Cloisters of Norwich Cathedral*", by the Rev. W. Gibson, A.M., F.S.A., was read before the same Society on 17th January 1805; they having had submitted to them in the meantime drawings of great merit and exactitude made by John Adey Repton in July, 1804, when the building was being demolished and almost destroyed. Gibson refers to "certain remains of a fabric discovered in taking down the decayed dormitory and refectory, apparently of a more ancient date than the structure of which they made a part, viz.: three pillars picked out and disencumbered of the wall of the demolished building into which they had been incorporated, evidently in some period subsequent to their first erection". In describing the pillars he also speaks of their handsome sculptured capitals, and the remains, in several places, of a yellowish, a dark crimson and a black paint, with here and there a patch of pale green with which they were anciently adorned. He says the range of these pillars must originally have extended farther both towards east and west, as is evident from the spring of other arches towards other centres, which they contributed to sustain, still adhering to both the outside pillars, as well as to the middle one. He is satisfied that "what completed the next arch towards the east was a half pillar, worked up into a wall, which probably terminated the building on that side, but in pursuing the direct line towards the west, two arches are discernible in the ancient side-wall of a contiguous dwelling-house¹, upheld by pillars, which, judging by what can be seen of them, are similar to those above described, and can scarcely be doubted to be a continuation of the same range. How far that range might be prolonged this way cannot now be determined, as the space beyond these arches is occupied by buildings of a much more modern date. Yet, from what appears, they were all parts of one and the same edifice,

¹ No. 63 Lower Close.

whatever that edifice might be; nor, is it hazarding much, perhaps, to conjecture that it was a church or chapel, of which these remains were some of the pillars, forming one of its side aisles, and ranging against the nave". The writer, while admitting that "it would be too presumptuous to decide positively," then draws a curious conclusion in saying that, as the arches are circular in form, according to the Saxon mode of architecture, there are, perhaps, good reasons for thinking that the structure of which they were originally a portion, was a Saxon work. He states, further, that before the monastic buildings were finished (c. 1101), there stood a chapel in this area belonging to the mother church at Thorp, built in some unknown time for the inhabitants of Cowholm: that Bishop Herbert took this chapel down, in great likelihood, because it stood in the way of his necessary buildings, especially of the monks' dormitory and refectory, which he placed on the very spot where the chapel stood; erecting in its place the church of St. Mary in the Marsh, a little farther away: finally, that as parts of old Saxon fabrics may perhaps be found incorporated in the then new work of the Normans, "Bishop Herbert availed himself of the solid arches of one of the side aisles of a chapel, which it was convenient to him to destroy, to incorporate with, and add their massive strength to, the structure he was raising for another purpose . . .¹".

It will be observed that both writers speak of this last-mentioned building as being the monks' dormitory, and that the existing pillars, built into the south wall of the same structure, were picked out and isolated in 1804. It would not seem to be of such importance and interest to know the precise use of the building (or buildings) that was pulled down in 1804 as to discover what was the nature of the earlier one of which the three pillars formed a part; but the question is unanswered.

John Adey Repton, F.S.A., in a Paper read to the Society on February 21st, 1805, expressed a view somewhat contradictory to that of Gibson. ". . . . I am led to suppose that the building is part of the monastery . . . and when we consider the many heavy and massive buildings erected by Bishop Herbert, it is curious to observe how the same person, who, in designing a cathedral, has given such proof of attention to massive dimensions and cumbrous plainness of character, yet in this small building, of nearly the same date, he has displayed a considerable degree of taste, with richness of the parts, and a lightness in the whole design; which is perfect Norman, except a small pointed arch, a few small shafts in the pillars, and the arch moulding wherein the small beads are pointed". Repton, in ascribing the pillars to Bishop Herbert, was no more correct than Gibson, for, from what is known of church architecture, the deviations from the Norman style that he dismissed—lightness of design, a small pointed arch, a few small shafts, etc.—are amongst those points

¹ Gibson then refers to damage by fire towards the close of the 13th century, but considers the outside walls of this structure were too thick and strong to be destroyed.

which we now take as indications of Transitional Norman of late 12th century.

The great service done by Repton in the discussion was, however, the series of plan and drawings made by him in July 1804, when the old "dormitory" was almost destroyed. He wrote—"this building has only a single row of pillars, which have been joined together by a modern wall, filling up the arches; and there is a floor between the arches and the windows above . . ." He found the upper part of the great arches and the windows above them entirely pulled down; but with the assistance of a sketch made by Dr. Beckwith, and examination of fragments remaining, he was able to picture the arcade as it was when intact.

The *plan* shows: (1) a small part of the presumed south aisle wall of the Transitional building—that part containing, on the elevation, the three windows (two round-headed and one pointed) mentioned below: (2) the south arcade itself, consisting of five pillars and two responds (supporting six arches), pillars 1, 3 and 5 clustered, 2 and 4 round, with shafts: (3) a three-foot wall on the north, with splayed window openings, continued along the north side and west end of what is now No. 63 Lower Close, which latter is shown as occupying the whole width of the west end of the (presumed) nave and holding within its south wall the two western pillars and respond of the arcade. If ever there were a corresponding north arcade it must have occupied the line of the north wall shown on the plan. The foundation of the east end of the arcade is marked as "discovered". The next three pillars are those now under discussion.

One plate shows the elevation of this south arcade from within. It consists of six round-headed arches, supported on five pillars, with responds, of alternating design as above. Over it is another arcade, or twelve round-headed windows with side shafts, apparently about six feet high, the lower arches appearing to be about fifteen feet high to the soffits. Through the arches the outlines of the above-mentioned two round-headed windows and a lesser pointed one can be seen in the aisle wall. One of these round outlines is directly opposite the middle of the fourth arch, and it, with the adjoining pointed one, can be seen at the present time in what is the garden wall of No. 64 Lower Close. In the same plate are drawings of the capitals of the three existing pillars. They are represented as very ornate, with detail suggestive of acanthus, horse-shoes, volutes, oak leaves, etc. Repton says "the capitals are highly enriched", and also shows the cap of the eastern respond as being classically voluted.

Another plate reveals the inside elevation of the 5th pillar (taking the east respond as the first), and the inside of the fourth arch with a specimen of its decoration. Here are seen two of the slender shafts as they originally appeared, attached to the cylindrical column by triple bands in the centre. Repton says, "The only appearance of gilding is in the leaves of the capital; the arches and upper part of the caps are curiously ornamented with various colours, representing Norman mouldings, as the zig-zag, the wavy line, the pellet and also the flower de lys, although this

was not in the armorial bearings of our kings before the reign of Edward III". The subject of this plate, if still in existence, is within the south wall of No. 63 The Close.

According to Repton, the approximate measurements of the building, taking the line of his north wall as identical with that of a north arcade, are as follow:

External length, 100 feet; internal length, 92 feet.
 Width of presumed nave, between pillars, $26\frac{1}{2}$ feet.
 " " " including pillars, 33 feet.
 Diameter of bases of pillars, 3 feet, 3 inches.
 Spaces between pillars (bases) (Gibson) $10\frac{1}{2}$ feet.

Henry Harrod, F.S.A., in his *Gleanings among the Castles and Convents of Norfolk*, (1857), quotes at length from two authorities on the subject of the fire of 1272. These do not substantially disagree as to the shocking extent of the damage done. The excerpt from the writings of Cotton¹ recites details of this destruction, concluding thus: ". . . the dormitory, refectory, strangers' hall, infirmary, with the chapel and almost all the edifices of the court were consumed. . ." Harrod, in dealing with this statement, made some observations which are germane to the present discussion. He said: "there is a building a little south of the refectory, running east and west, of which extensive remains may be found in the house occupied by Commander St. Quintin, and 3 pillars are in the open space in front of his house in the Lower Close. This building was conjectured by Prof. Willis to be the Infirmary When a part of the building was pulled down in 1805² Dr. Sayers, Mr. J. A. Repton and others conjectured this large building to have been appropriated to two purposes, that of a refectory below and a dormitory above". An etching exists (he says) made by the Rev. Andrew Gooch at the time of its destruction, the view being taken from the railings of the Lower Close, to the S.E. "The evidence in favour of the building to the south of the original refectory being the infirmary appears to rest wholly on its resemblance to a church, and the style of it being of the time of John of Oxford, who rebuilt the infirmary after the fire of 1171."³ Harrod gave reasons against this. ". . . the beauty of its architecture and the decoration it had certainly received in painting and gilding, being inconsistent with the purposes to which it is supposed it was applied". Harrod, in short, considered the building was not the infirmary. He pointed out traces of foundations at the N.W. angle of the Deanery which extended a considerable distance north and suggested that these foundations may have contained the original Prior's Hall, and the large hall within the Deanery (part of which is the kitchen) may have been the Prior's Hall or the Infirmary. He said that at Canterbury the Prior's apartments closely adjoined the infirmary on its north side.

¹ Bartholomew Cotton, a Norwich monk. Died c. 1298.

² 1804.

³ An earlier, and accidental, fire.

A tablet in front of the railings that now surround the 3 pillars has the following inscription: "Remains of Cathedral Infirmary, 1175-1200".

The present Diocesan Surveyor puts their date at 1175, and this may be taken as approximately correct. Therefore the building of which they formed a part was erected more than 50 years after Bishop Herbert's death (1119), and may be ascribed to John de Oxford (1175-1200).

Standing by the easternmost of the pillars, with the massive old house, No. 63, in front, immediately to the right, we can see that the range is in direct alignment with the south wall of that house, and just within its outer surface. It is an interesting fact that this south wall contains within its substance much of the remainder of the range. The half cylindrical column forming the west respond is to be seen at the end; also something of the next pillar; and the third pillar is doubtless embedded within the south-east corner of the house. The outline of the second arch from the west is clearly visible in the wall; and, higher up, slightly to the west and filled in with walling, a fine specimen of masonry has been brought to light. It is probably the third of the round-headed small arches of the upper arcade.

One has to realize, also, that the north wall of the house is the western end of the old 3-foot wall shown in Repton's plan, and therefore that the width of the house is the width of the original "nave" or main hall of the 12th century building, the house occupying about one third of this nave. Mr. Cooke, the present occupier of No. 63, very courteously showed me a small capital inside a cupboard near the N.W. corner. This capital, the Diocesan Surveyor afterwards said, marked the entrance to the "Infirmary" garden where, in fact, there was a gateway in the north wall.

Bearing in mind the magnificence of the building as described and delineated by the authors quoted, the questions arise whether it were erected for dormitory, refectory or infirmary, and especially whether there were ever a north arcade. Dr. Sayers, in his paper, referred to the original front of the building, and said the whole of it was clearly to be traced. It must therefore be conceded that the front then faced south, and contained all the pillars and arches. An interesting question arises: was this the *original* front? If the building were designed for sacred purposes and contained nave and two aisles, then the front may well have been west or east. We can *imagine* a south front with entrance through the arches, and a pierced wall in the north, but the building must have been a curious one. In Repton's plan the north wall is shown as having splayed windows irregularly placed. Possibly this wall may be a century or so later than the (south) arcade. The present writer can think of only one solution to the mystery: that, in the disaster of 1272 when so much damage was done, this Transitional building suffered severely in having its north arcade destroyed; and that it was cheaper to replace it by a wall than by a new arcade. If this could be substantiated, the great question would yet remain: what was the nature of the original

building? Gibson's conjecture that it was a church or chapel and that the pillars formed one of the side aisles must be incorrect, for, in view of our present knowledge, there cannot be any reasonable doubt that the pillars and arches were part of the Infirmary.

In the issue of the *Eastern Daily Press* of 17th January, 1940, were two pictures: one, a copy of a water colour said to have been painted by John Crome, about 1805, and the other, a copy of an etching by David Hodgson, from a drawing by his father, made in the same year. Both purport to be representations of the demolition of the Cathedral Infirmary. In the same issue was an article by Mr. Percy Moore Turner on the two pictures, in which he speaks of the water colour as being a characteristic work by John Crome, showing intense feeling because of the wanton vandalism going on in the demolition of the "glorious pile", and suggesting that he wished to make a record of it before the destruction had been accomplished. The implication is that, in 1804, Crome saw the demolition in process.

Both pictures have a marked general resemblance, but they vary considerably in detail. Both are from the same view point, apparently the S.E. angle. Crome's work is the more artistic: he gives his fancy free play and produces a fine Romanesque effect. Hodgson's etching is the more accurate in architectural details, and his perspective is better than Crome's.

The Crome water-colour shows an arcade of four round-headed arches, rather stilted, resting on five pillars of a composite character, with bold dripstone over, and evidence of a superstructure. Immediately at the back of the fifth pillar is a wall, up to the level of capital. At right angles to the arcade, presumably facing east, is another, and wider, round-headed arch, of equal height with the others; and over it is a three-light Decorated, or Early Perpendicular, window. Above the first arch of the arcade, breaking the dripstone, is what looks like a door in an upper wall. The pillars alternate in design; the corner one being presumably cylindrical with four shafts disposed round it; the second being unmistakably clustered, and so on.

The Hodgson etching shows a similar subject, but with an arcade of *five* round-headed stilted arches, and another arcade above it consisting of a double number of small round-headed arches—the whole facade bearing a close resemblance to Mr. Repton's drawing of 1804. At the presumed east end is a wider and lower round arch, with a 3-light window above it, somewhat similar to Crome's. The pillars are clearly drawn as alternating clustered and cylindrical, with four surrounding shafts. But whereas in the etching the corner pillar is clustered, in the water-colour it is the second pillar that is so. The two artists differ in their alternations; and in this respect, having regard to Repton's drawings, Crome's is the correct delineation.

Beyond, in both pictures, pointed openings in what may have been an opposite arcade wall, suggest a later style of architecture. In Crome's water-colour there are other architectural details of a later date than the main arcade, and, between the second and

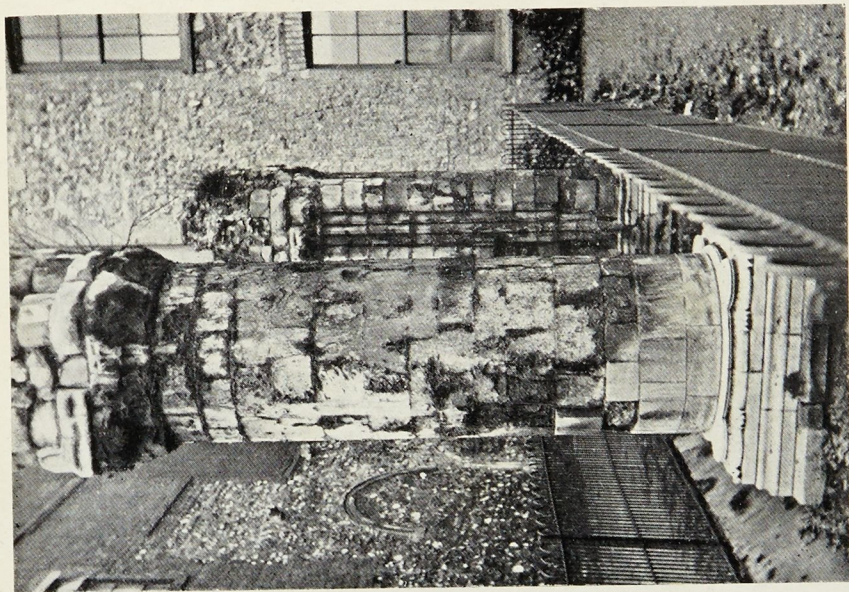


PLATE II

TRANSITIONAL PILLARS IN LOWER CLOSE, NORWICH.

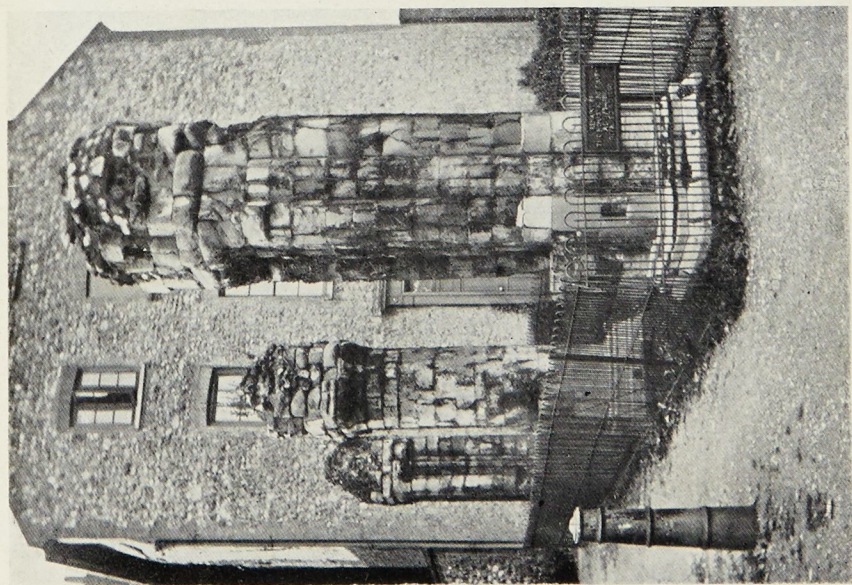


PLATE I

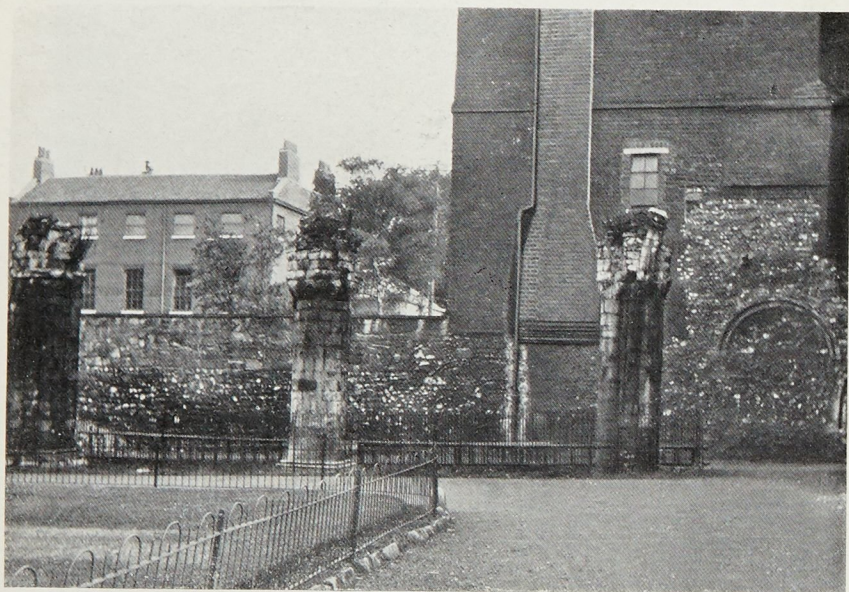


PLATE III
TRANSITIONAL PILLARS IN LOWER CLOSE, NORWICH.

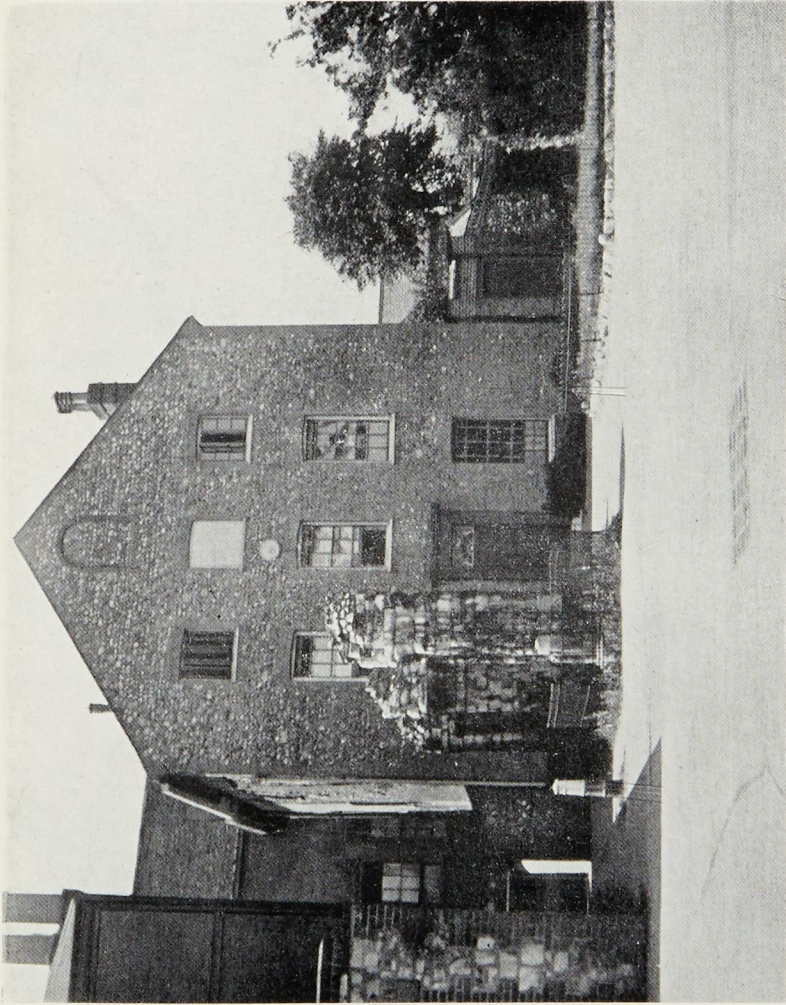
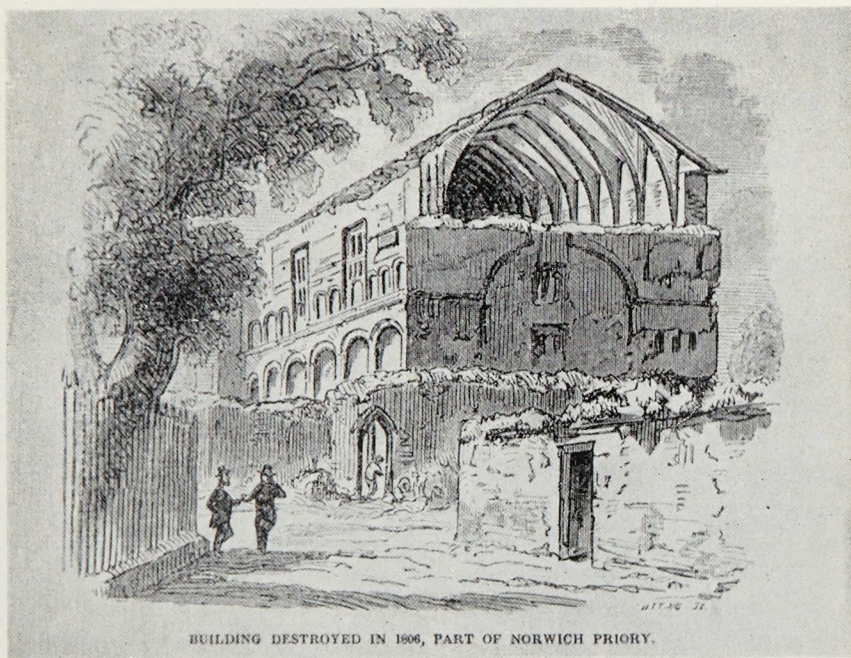


PLATE IV

HOUSE IN LOWER CLOSE, NORWICH.

Destroyed in the early morning of June 28th, 1942.

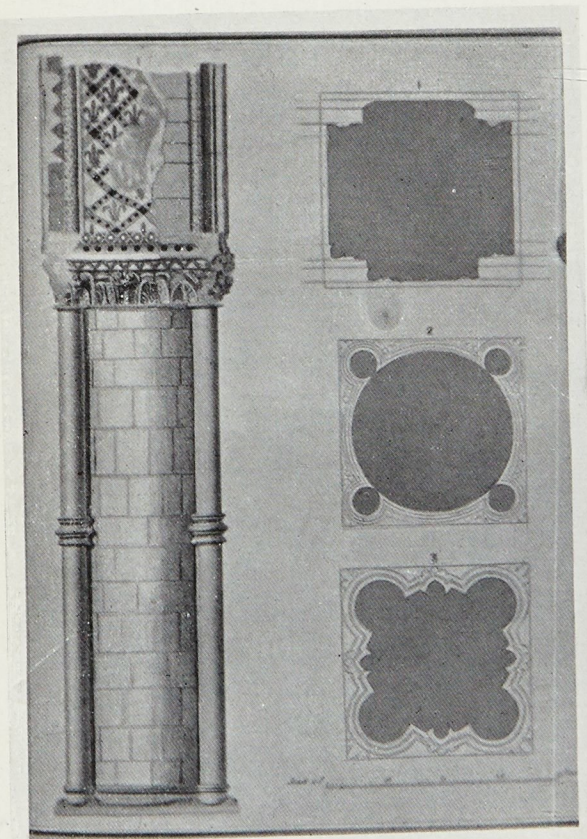
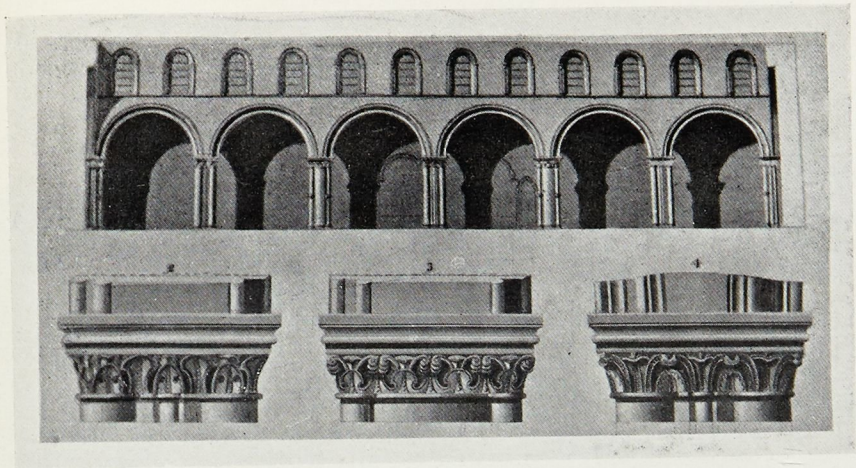


BUILDING DESTROYED IN 1806, PART OF NORWICH PRIORY.

PLATE V

COPY OF ENGRAVING BY THE REV. ANDREW GOOCH, OF
THE BUILDING DESTROYED IN 1804

(From Harrod's "Castles and Convents of Norfolk").



PLATES VI AND VII
 "RECONSTRUCTED" ARCADE
 OF OLD BUILDING IN LOWER
 CLOSE; OF WHICH ALL THAT
 NOW REMAIN ARE THREE
 COLUMNS: ALSO DETAIL OF
 ONE OF THE PILLARS WITH
 CAPITAL AND PART OF ARCH,
 AND GROUND PLAN OF
 THREE COLUMNS.

*Drawn by
 John Repton, 1804.*

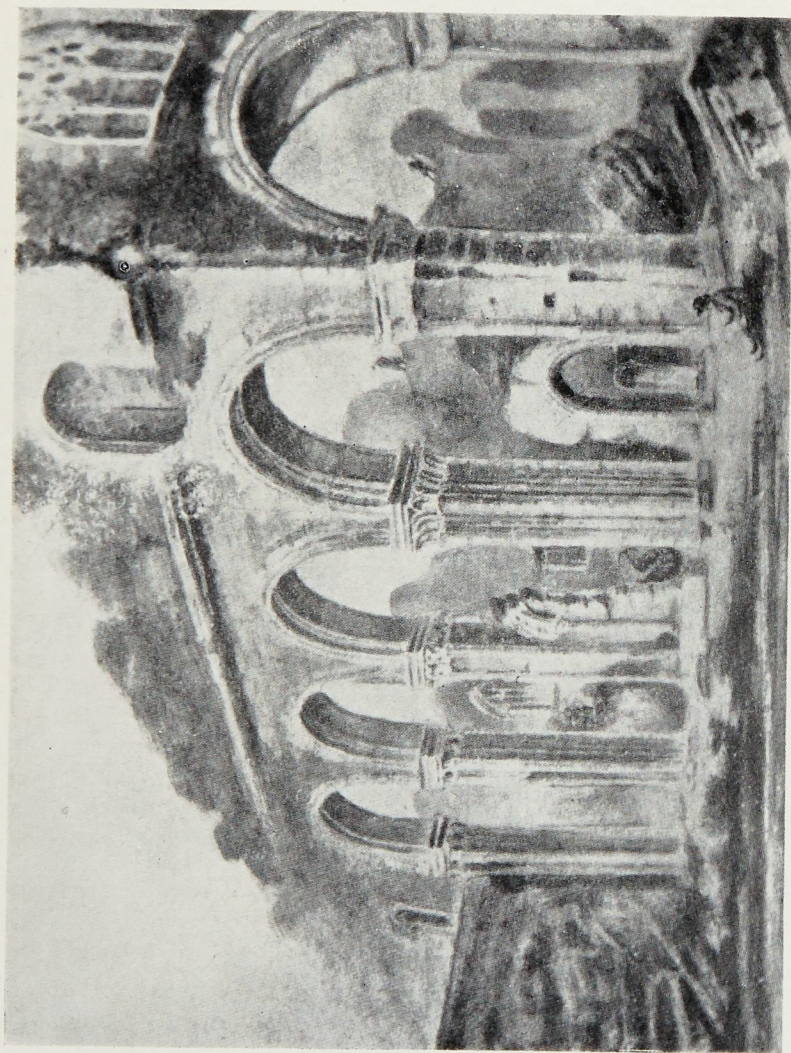


PLATE VIII

THE MONASTIC INFIRMARY, NORWICH.
From a water colour by J. Crome, c. 1803.

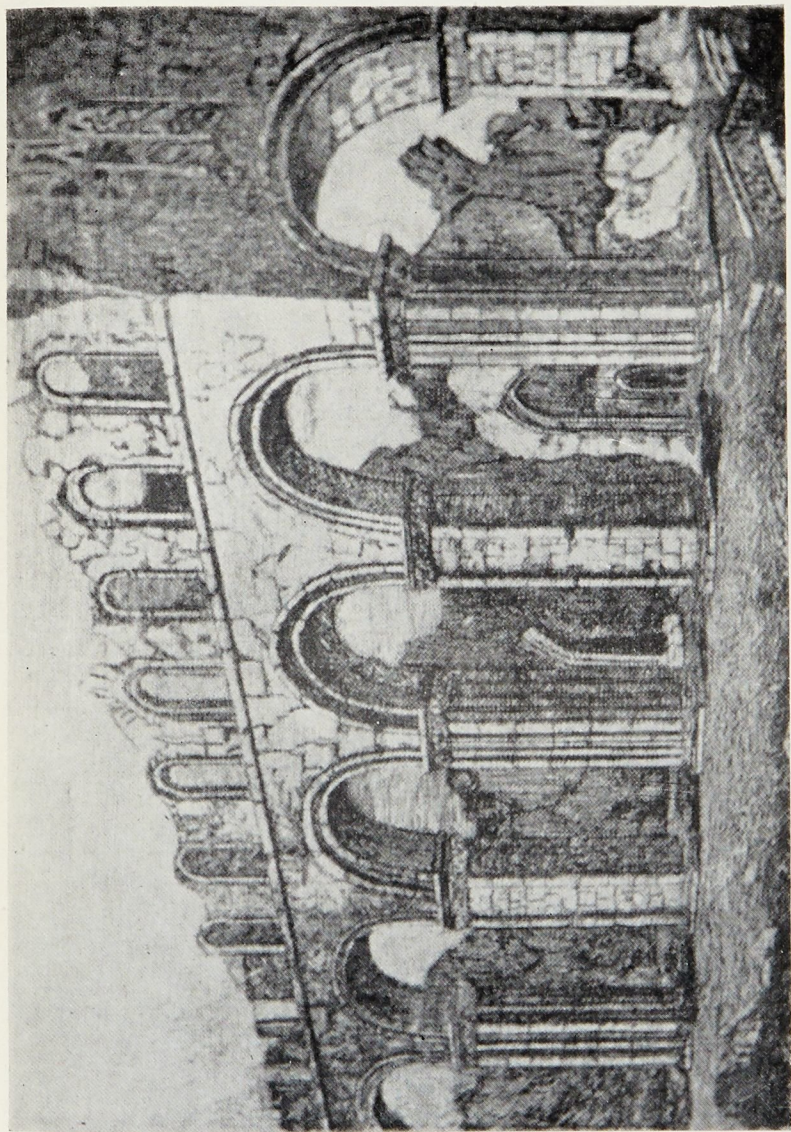


PLATE IX

THE MONASTIC INFIRMARY, NORWICH.

From an etching by D. Hodgson.

third pillars a fragment of what must have been the south wall of the old building that was cleared away in 1804.

Accepting the correctness of Repton's drawing of the conjectured arcade, the arches in both pictures appear to be too tall. As the walling which for centuries had filled up these arches was not wholly cleared away in 1804 (and is not even yet), it seems clear that both pictures must be somewhat conjectural especially having regard to their divergencies.

These two pictures still further complicate the puzzle of the original building. The most remarkable feature in each is the transverse arch at the east end, with window over. Gibson thought that the east end of the arcade was completed by a half pillar "worked up into a wall, which probably terminated the building on that side". Repton, in his drawing, shows this half pillar ("respond", we have called it) against such a wall, and a similar construction at the west. His ground plan, however, shows a "Norman" foundation, more than four feet square, adjoining the respond at the east end, with another and more definite mass of foundation 24 feet distant at the east end of that 3-foot north wall which has been mentioned. These two masses, opposite each other, may well be the bases of piers supporting an arch as delineated by the two artists. This must indeed be a definite conclusion, because of the dotted lines connecting the two bases, and because Repton shows a drawing of the capital "of the great arch near the first pillar". This great arch is nowhere else referred to. As the dotted space is double the width of any single arch in the arcade, it must have been very imposing.

What did this great arch open into eastward? We know that the arcade was aisled. Was there something similar at the east? Repton indicates a passage-way farther north, between a "modern" wall and Norman buildings against the south side of the cloister. In this portion of wall are shown, on his plan, the positions of bases of columns which he understood "were formerly taken from the east side of the building and placed there regularly, to form an open walk as a cloister." This is vague, but it may mean that there *was* an east walk outside the great arch.

A further problem is raised by Repton's drawing of the elevation of the fifth pillar. If he meant the fifth pillar from the east, that pillar is one of the two which are still embedded (with west respond) in the south wall of "63", and therefore the east wall of the house was built after the demolitions of 1804. If he meant the fifth pillar from the west, then the pillar in question is the middle one of the three now standing.

The Rev. Andrew Gooch's drawing is interesting but confusing. The date given as 1806 should be 1804. It shows the main arcade of six arches on the south and that of lesser arches above, and these identify the building with the one we have been considering. The number of small arches is incorrect. The east side of the building would seem to be out of proportion, and the whole much too wide for its length. The immense arch marked in the east wall does not in any way correspond with the archway

depicted by Crome. The upper part of this wall had been demolished, revealing rafters of the roof of what may have been a monastic dormitory, afterwards degraded to workhouse purposes. This roof appears to have been finely constructed. The massive outer boundary wall, running far to the south, seems to be proof of an east walk outside the great arch. Further speculation is profitless, and the drawing must be left, with grave doubts as to its accuracy.

POSTSCRIPT

BY THE DEAN OF NORWICH

Mr. Buston has reprinted much valuable information about the Infirmary. Since the papers were read to the Society of Antiquaries early in the 19th century much light has been thrown on monastic buildings. Again and again, notably at Ely, the Infirmary of the 12th century took the form of a nave and aisles, with a chapel to the east. I had a great regard for Mr. Buston and am sorry he did not live to see the publication of his important article. He was a first-rate photographer and, in the latter part of his life, was specially interested in the period represented at the Infirmary and in the 13th century.