

THE PRIORY OF ST. MARY IN THE MEADOW OF THE ORDER OF PETERSTONE, BEESTON NEXT THE SEA, NORFOLK

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and excavation report by John A. Davies

SUMMARY

The repair of this 13th-century priory and the archaeological excavation of the cloister and chapter house have provided the opportunity to re-examine the unusually extensive remains. This paper attempts to provide a complete picture of the surviving buildings including Abbey Farmhouse which has recently been restored. A short discussion on the status of the monastery is followed by an analysis of the priory church and an attempt to find its art historical context. A reconstruction of the conventual buildings and the farmhouse is proposed followed by the excavation report.

Introduction

The wooded ruins of the priory are situated in a low lying area surrounded by fields just to the east of the town of Sheringham (Fig. 1 and Plate I). An inhabited former farmhouse, which has a relatively modern appearance, borders the site to the south and two large ponds to the north and east further enclose the site.

The ruins are remarkably complete with most walls of the church standing to full height. It is surprising that this interesting building has received little attention from antiquarians during this century. This paper proposes to re-open discussion on what was one of the most impressive early Gothic structures in the county.

The farmhouse had stood empty and derelict for many years and the church ruins were totally overgrown when Norfolk County Council, after a lengthy legal debate, compulsorily purchased Abbey Farmhouse in 1983 and subsequently acquired the ruins. The farmhouse was restored under the supervision of the Norfolk Historic Buildings Trust and the Council became guardian of the ruins. It has initiated a programme of conservative repair with generous grant aid from English Heritage which involves the removal of the destructive ivy and the consolidation of the flint masonry.

The Norfolk Archaeological Unit arranged to excavate the cloister area before the new owner of the farmhouse landscaped it. New evidence on the form of the conventual buildings was revealed and it seemed an appropriate time to conduct a full scale survey of the surviving structures for a publication which will coincide with the opening and presentation of the ruins to the public.

The Documentary Evidence

The documentary background to the priory has been published several times¹ and in order to avoid repetition it is intended here to discuss only those salient pieces of information which have a bearing on the status of the monastery and the fabric of the buildings.

There is some confusion around the identity of the founder of the priory. The prior, in a plea of Quo Warranto dated 1284, quotes Margaret de Cressy as the foundress. Her daughter-in-law Isabel de Rye is credited with the foundation by Blomefield. One would assume that the earlier reference is more likely to be accurate yet it is quite possible that both ladies were responsible in part for supporting the monastery in its early days. The date of foundation was during the

early years of the 13th century when both Margaret and Isabel were active. Tanner gives the end of the reign of King John or the beginning of that of Henry III (1216) as the year of the foundation and this accords well with the architectural evidence.²

Whilst there is no doubt now that the inmates of Beeston were canons there was some confusion during the Middle Ages as to the status and Order to which they belonged. They are sometimes described as Friars, other times as Hospitallers. The report of the Mixed Commission at the time of its suppression states that it belonged to the Order of Peterstone and this may have been the cause for the confusion. The mysterious Order is described by Knowles and Hadcock as a local congregation not coming under the Augustinian general chapter.³ The small houses belonging to this local group were Peterstone itself (Burnham Overy), Great Massingham,

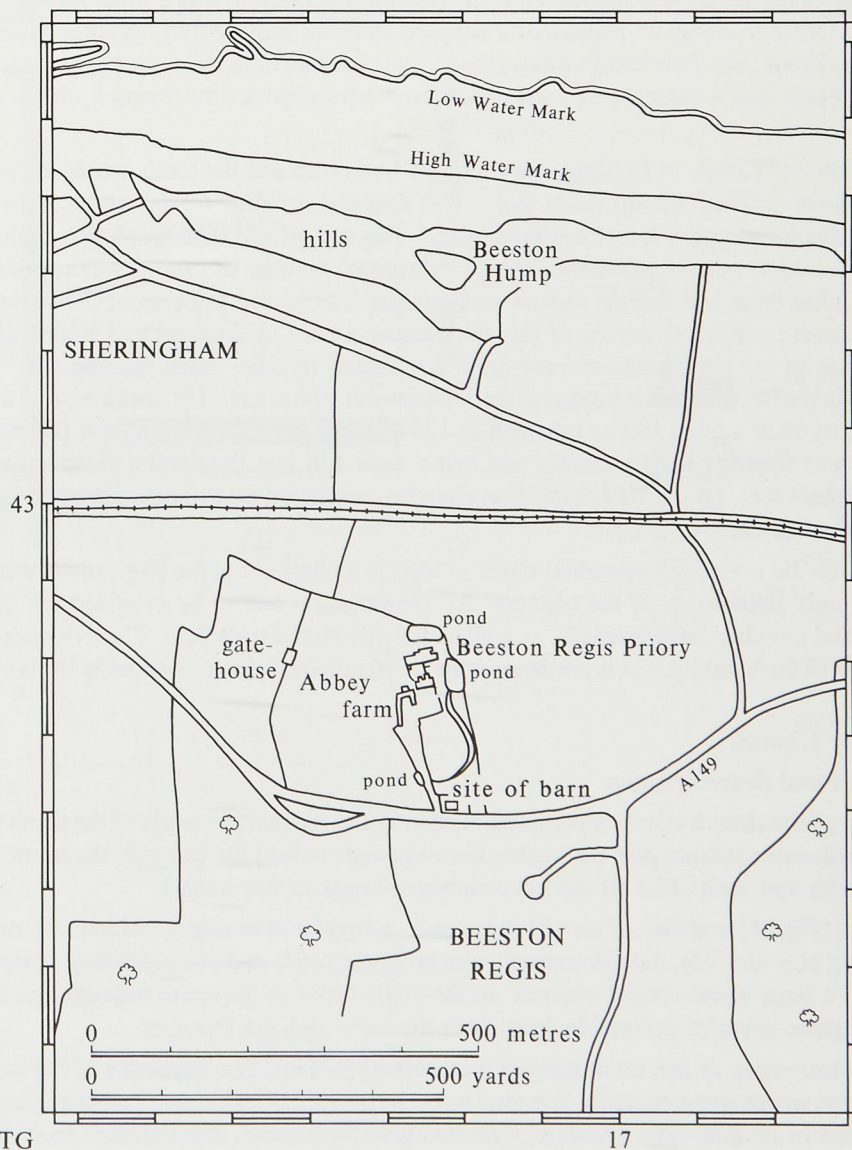


Fig. 1
Site plan.

Weybridge (Acle) and Beeston. The only medieval reference of significance to this Order is found in a sermon of John Capgrave dated 1422.⁴ In this sermon the different orders which follow the Rule of St. Augustine are likened to the twelve sons of Jacob. The section devoted to the twelfth son, Benjamin, deserves to be quoted in full.

The xij son hite Benjamin; he is the son that longith to the rite hand, as euery religious man with the mercy of God doth. This son, be-cause he is yongest of age, is likned on-to an ordre which is not in the world, as thei sey, but in Northfolk. Four houses had thei and on of hem is fall on-to the kyngis hand, and he gaue it to Walsingham; the house hite Petirston: other informacion of hem haue I not at this tyme.

This tells more of how Norfolk was regarded during the 15th century than of the order of Peterstone. To all intents and purposes it would appear that Beeston was a small priory of Austin Canons differing from others insofar as it supplemented its income by providing accommodation for travellers. The four houses belonging to this order were in the same region, each house having no more than 5 canons and it may have been advantageous for them to join forces over certain activities.

The number of canons at Beeston was recorded five times and the totals varied between two (1494) and six (1520).⁵ Jessop states that it was founded for four canons and a Prior but the source of this information is not contemporary.⁶ The size of the foundation was undoubtedly small in relation to other Augustinian houses. The usual number of canons was approximately thirteen.⁷ It has been said that the canons were greatly overhoused at Beeston;⁸ however Robinson's exhaustive statistical survey of the Augustinian Order in England and Wales illustrates that the sizes of the church and cloister garth are similar to other small foundations.⁹ For example Haverfordwest had five canons at the Dissolution with a nave 161 feet long and a cloister garth area of 5329 square feet as opposed to 135 feet and 4,422 square feet at Beeston. Also Shubbred was founded for six canons and had a nave 136 feet long and a cloister garth area of 3,600 square feet. Of the 70 Augustinian churches measured by Robinson Beeston is recorded as having the narrowest nave.

The church did not have a parochial status as well as monastic, but the five canons were clearly not the only inhabitants of the convent. Accommodation had to be provided for the many servants, and possibly farm workers, as well as for guests and travellers. The evidence is clear that the size of the building is in accordance with the requirement for a community of five canons.

The Priory Church

Description and Reconstruction

The plan of the church is nearly complete with only the east wall or walls of the south transept and the north-east crossing pier not visible above ground. Indeed the chancel, the north transept and the north and west sides of the nave survive almost to full height.

The plan (Fig. 2) consists of an aisleless nave, a regular crossing of which one originally freestanding pier survives, a north transept with an eastern aisle and one projecting square-ended chapel and a large square-ended chancel. In the angle between the north transept and the nave is a rectangular porticus accessible from both the nave and the transept.

The reconstruction of the south transept presents a problem. The existence of the south-east crossing pier which was originally intended to be freestanding and which has provision for arches on each of its four sides shows at least that a south transept was intended from the first. The scar of a wall which ran southwards from the south wall of the chancel suggests that an eastern aisle similar to that of the north transept was also built (Plate II). The surviving wall

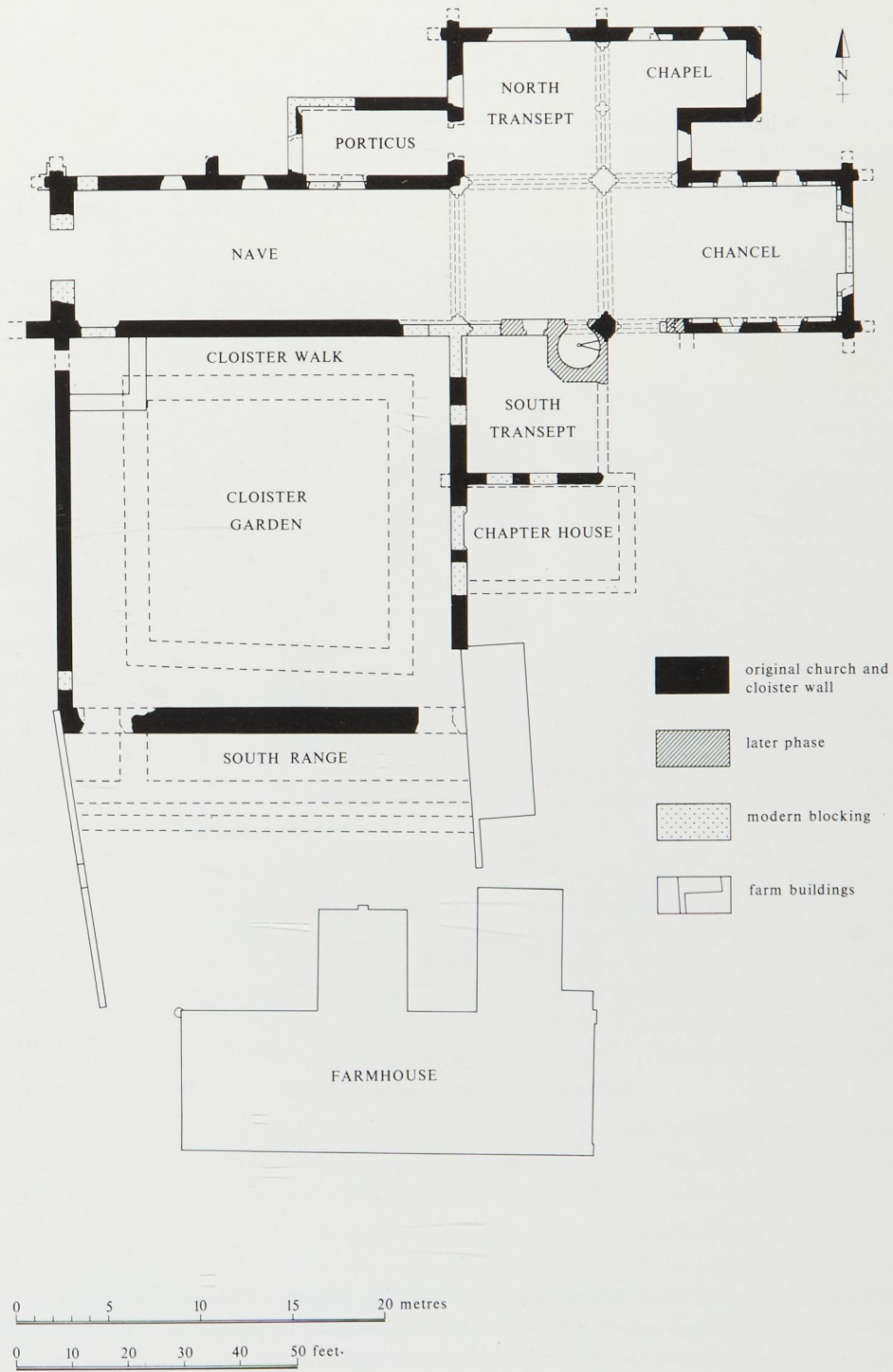


Fig. 2
Plan.

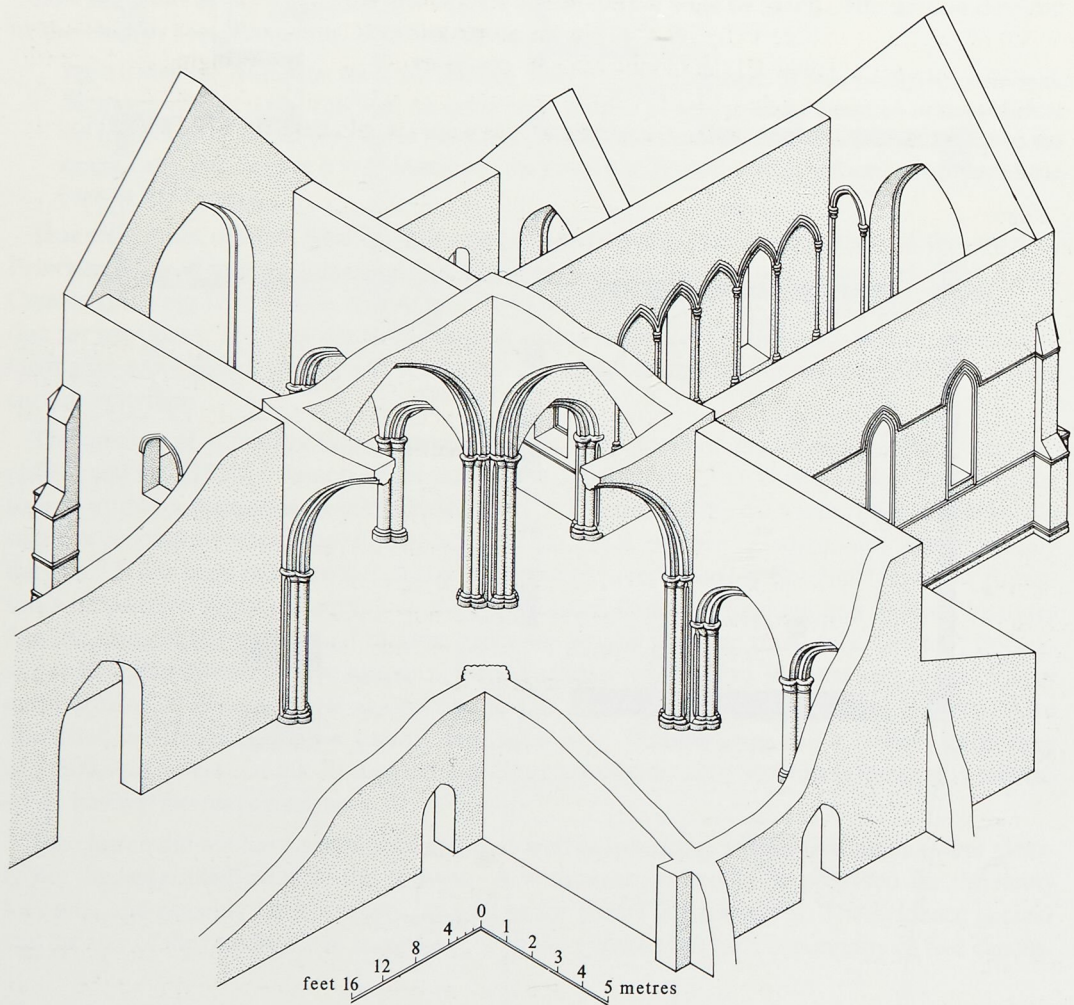


Fig. 3
Isometric reconstruction of east end.

which stands in the correct position for a south wall is too thin to have served that purpose measuring only 0.65 m as opposed to the 0.88 m thickness of its northern counterpart. An examination of the south face of this wall reveals however that the facing masonry has been removed leaving an untidy jagged surface. On this evidence an original wall thickness of about 0.88 m may be reconstructed and it can be assumed with a considerable degree of certainty that the original south transept was in most respects similar to the north.

Both transepts had eastern aisles. The evidence for a reconstruction of its general lines (Fig. 3) may be seen in the surviving crossing pier which has provision for arches to the south and east, in the existing archway which led into the south east aisle from the chancel, albeit entirely robbed of dressings and partially blocked, in the sloping dripstone above this arch indicating a former lean-to-roof (Plate II), and in the remains of a respond and arch springing on the north wall of the north transept (Plate III). The openings between the transepts and the aisles probably consisted of two-bay arcades rather than single arches which would have required spans slightly greater than those of the crossing.

There is no visible sign of a chapel having projected from the south-east aisle as in the case of the north transept. In all the other aspects for which evidence survives the arrangement appears to have been symmetrical suggesting that a similar chapel did exist to the south. Only excavation would answer the question.¹⁰

The materials employed in the construction of the priory church are primarily the ubiquitous flint which is used in three distinct ways. The earliest parts of the building to the east and south are in broken flints with galletting of flint and limestone chips (Plate II) whilst the western and northern parts are in large coursed whole flints. A small intermediate phase uses little flints without galletting (Plate VI). These techniques do appear to relate to the order in which the different sections of the building were erected. The following belong to the early phase: the chancel, the first phase of the north east chapel, the remaining parts of the south transept, the south wall of the nave (which survives only to a height of about 2.5 m), the remains of the cloister walls, the north transept up to the level of the north window sill, to the same height on the west wall of the transept to the point of junction with the porticus and about half the length of the north wall of the porticus. The intermediate phase consists of the lower sections of the east and south walls of the porticus to the height of the top of the opening connecting the north transept to the porticus. The third technique is employed for the north and west walls of the nave, the upper parts of the north transept, the heightening of the north east chapel and the blocking of the south crossing arch.

Associated with the earlier phase of masonry is the very remarkable use of brick. The lower sections of all the internal quoins including those formed by angle buttresses are of brick (Plate IV). Similar bricks also indicate the position of the former south transept arcade (Plate II). They are large rectangular bricks in various hues of yellow and pink. They may have been imported from the Low Countries or North Germany and used as ballast in ships returning to the north Norfolk coast. They represent a very early use of first hand bricks preceded only by Little Coggeshall priory¹¹ in Essex. They are also used in conjunction with tiles to form putlog holes in the earlier flintwork only.

Limestone ashlar was, of course, the most common dressing used. It has been very extensively robbed but it survives in some areas, the most important being the interior elevation of the south wall of the chancel and the remaining crossing pier (Fig. 4, Plate V).

The second phase of masonry is associated uniquely with the construction of the porticus and there are complex indications in the masonry which suggest firstly a long pause between the second and third phases and secondly a change in the design of the porticus roof. On the interior elevation of the south wall of the porticus the topmost courses of second phase masonry were left with a series of troughs which probably represent provision for rafters to support a temporary roof (Plate VI). At this point it must be assumed that work was abandoned for an indeterminate number of months or years. The chancel, the eastern aisles and the first phase of the north-east chapel were complete whilst the transepts were unfinished and open to the skies.

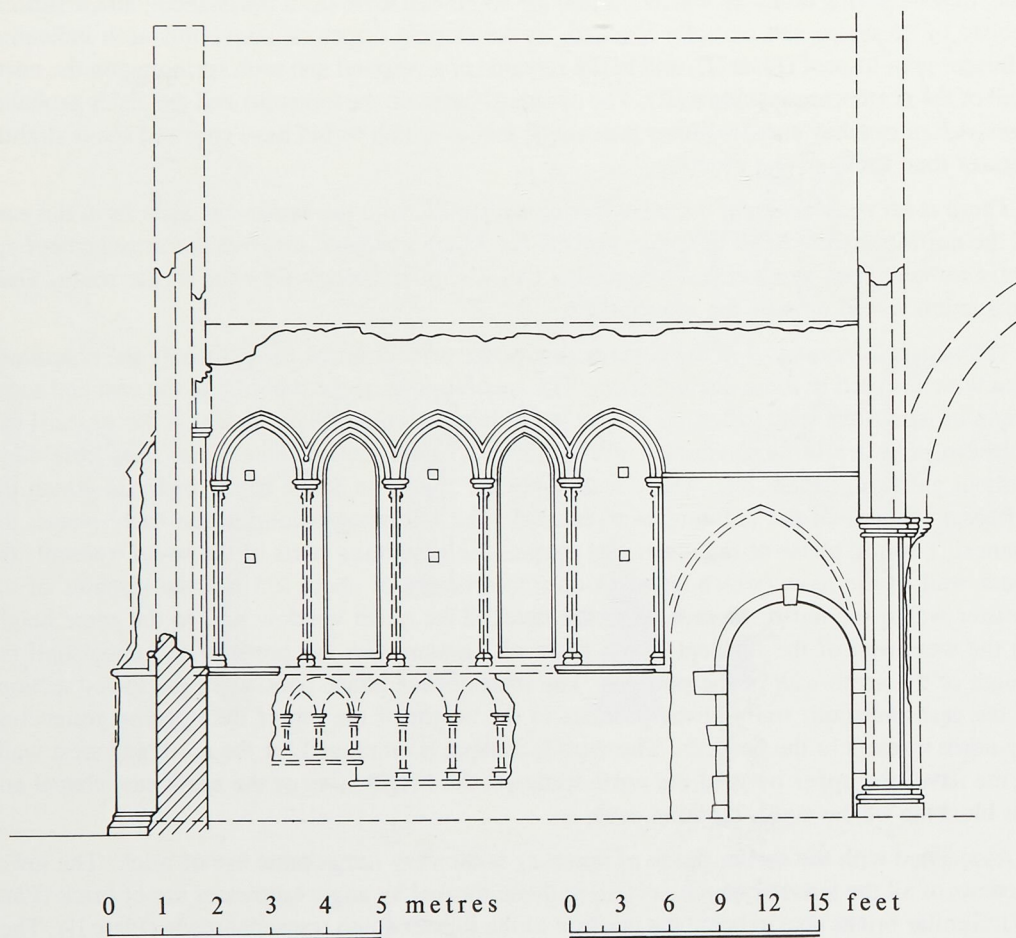


Fig. 4
Interior elevation of south wall of chancel.

Half of what was to become the porticus was roofed. During the third phase work recommenced on the east and south walls of the porticus and provision was made, in the form of an ashlar dripstone and roof plate corbels, for a steeply pitched lean-to-roof (Plate VII). This roof was either short-lived or never built because it would have run straight across the easternmost nave window, one jamb of which survives directly above the western half of the porticus. Out of the several possible explanations for this anomaly there is not one which is entirely convincing. It may be that the porticus was originally intended to be smaller stopping short of the nave window but there is no sign in the masonry of any such intention. It is possible that the nave window in question was thought not to be necessary at first; or, more likely, the anomaly is simply the result of an error. This theory is supported by the fact that the builders solved the problem

by repositioning the roof after having carefully removed most of the valuable ashlar dripstone and making good. A lean-to roof of much shallower pitch was erected by cutting deep channels into the masonry to take new roof plate corbels and the probably re-used dripstone which has since been robbed (Plate VII).

Of late medieval alterations to the church the most interesting was the construction of a stair turret around the south-east crossing pier. It provided access probably to the upper floors of the lantern tower.¹² Unfortunately the stair turret collapsed in 1903 and only the base survives although several drawings and old photographs exist. Of particular interest is a detailed measured survey belonging to the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society drawn by Edward Preston Willis in 1885 showing that the turret was polygonal and that it rose higher than the crossing arches. A drawing from the Willis collection of the Society of Antiquaries (Plate VIII) is also particularly informative. The reconstruction (Fig. 5) proposed in this paper surmises that the south transept was completely demolished except for the wall bordering the cloister and chapter house and that the south crossing arch and aisle entrance were blocked. It is established that the stair turret was built some time during the later Middle Ages and that it obscured at least half of the crossing pier and caused the demolition of the eastern aisle arcade which was replaced by a solid wall (Plate II).

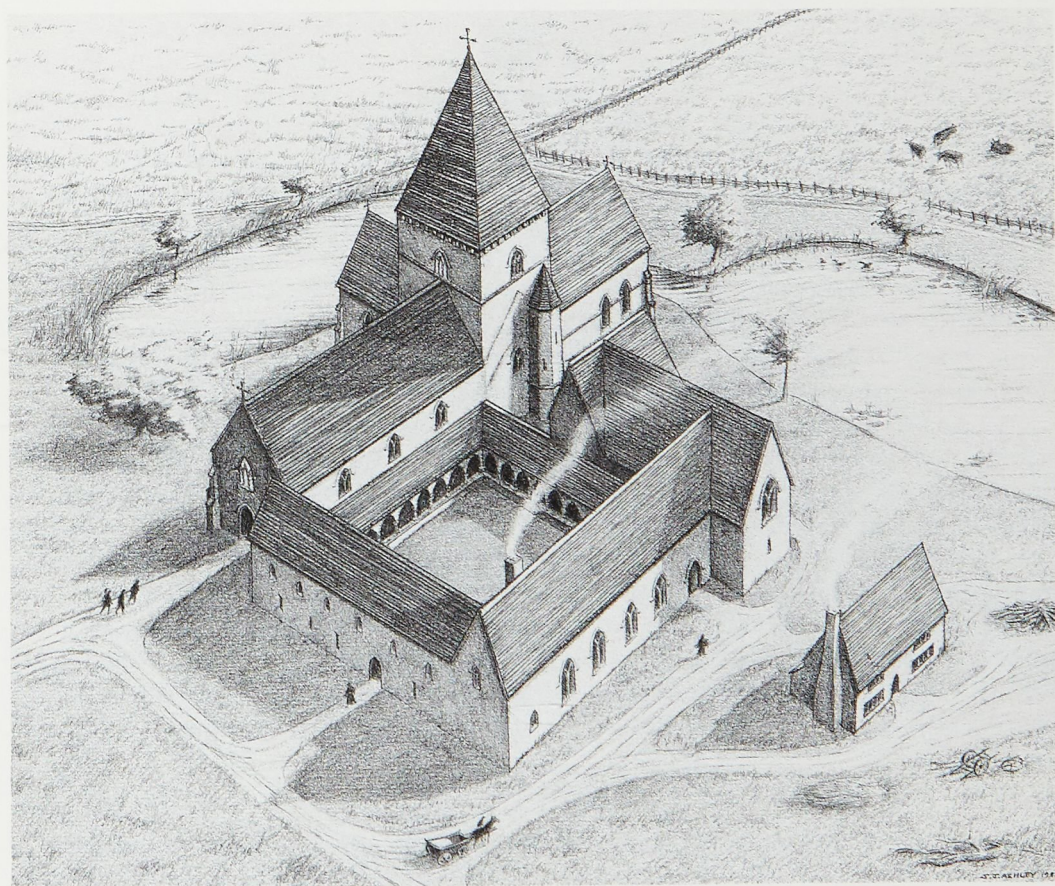


Fig. 5

Beeston Priory as it may have appeared on the eve of its suppression.

The prominence of the turret suggests that the threat of structural failure, or even a partial collapse in the region of the south transept and crossing arch, prompted the necessity to block the aisle entrance and crossing arch in order to provide extra support for the subsiding piers. The ashlar dressings to the aisle entrance were removed before blocking, presumably leaving a small opening. Only a narrow section of the late medieval blocking survives, the opening having been replaced in modern times with a semicircular brick and stone archway (Plate V).

A second curious later medieval alteration was the heightening of the north-east chapel. The evidence for this is clearly seen on the east wall where the 13th-century gable has been 'fossilised' (Plate IX). The two windows in the north wall of the chapel were heightened also and provided with Y tracery.

As regards the dating of the priory church the supposed foundation in 1216 corresponds well to the first phase of masonry which contains architectural features such as freestanding shafts, busy deeply undercut mouldings (Plate X) and lancet windows typical of the first half of the 13th century. The nave and north transept windows are fragmentary and thus difficult to date. However, their wider dimensions and the evidence for Y tracery in the north-east chapel suggest a 14th-century date. The very large gable-end window in the north transept and the nave west window which retains some stubs of Perpendicular tracery (Plate VIII) suggest that the church was not completed until the late 14th century at the earliest.

Concerning the added stair turret the recorded or surviving evidence does not allow a date more precise than late medieval. However it is probable that the emergency works to the south transept took place before the nave of the church was completed because the blocking masonry is similar to third phase masonry and because the one surviving window reveal in the blocking is identical to those of the nave north windows. It remains to decide at what date the works were carried out. It is tempting to surmise that the terrible flood in 1400 referred to in the Episcopal Register¹³ was responsible for causing subsidence in the area of the south transept entailing the dismantlement of the transept, the blocking of the crossing arch and eastern aisle arch and the construction of the stair turret against the south-east crossing pier. As the nave was completed shortly afterwards or simultaneously it is possible to deduce that the building of the priory church was drawing to a close during the early years of the 15th century. The Perpendicular tracery in the west window would correspond well with this date.

After the Dissolution the building served as a limestone quarry and most of the ashlar dressings were robbed. Remarkably the walls remained more or less intact which suggests that the church was maintained as a farm building. Probably in the early 19th century its antiquarian and aesthetic qualities were recognised and it was decided to present the building as a romantic ruin. This involved the rebuilding of the central section of the facade incorporating a brick archway and re-establishing the west window. A similar brick archway with iron gates was built into the former eastern aisle entrance, new walls were built up to sill level at the eastern gable-end and in the region of the former south west crossing pier. Several 19th-century drawings, engravings and photographs survive which indicate that it was a well known beauty spot.¹⁴ By the early 20th century ivy had taken hold of the building and in 1903 the stair turret collapsed.

Parallels

The most distinctive aspect of the plan of the priory church is the contrast between the highly articulated east end and crossing and the plain aisleless nave. This is a characteristic of early Augustinian churches and was the case for example at Norton Priory (Cheshire),¹⁵ Haughmond Abbey (Salop),¹⁶ Portchester (Hants)¹⁷ and Leonard Stanley (Gloucs)¹⁸. A problem with this

type of plan was gaining access from the nave to the transepts (in particular the north transept) without having to negotiate the choir stalls which traversed the crossing. For this reason, as at Beeston, small porticus or passages were sometimes incorporated behind one or more of the crossing piers. By the second half of the 12th century, however, new Augustinian foundations were being designed with a north aisle as a Lanercost Priory (Cumberland)¹⁹ for example whilst earlier churches were having north aisles added as at Norton Priory (Cheshire). In this respect Beeston is markedly old-fashioned in retaining the aisleless nave with porticus arrangement.

The plan of the porticus differs from earlier examples however in being much longer and having large openings rather than small doorways. It is significant that the opening between the north transept and porticus had a door which could be barred from within the transept as attested by the surviving draw-bar hole whilst the archway between the nave and porticus is larger and had no door. This implies that the pulpitum stood between the western crossing piers and the nave porticus entrance and that laymen could be thus prevented from entering the eastern parts of the church reserved for the canons. Given its larger dimensions it is permissible perhaps to interpret the Beeston porticus more as a short aisle with one bay than as a simple passageway.

The architectural and sculptural features which survive are just sufficient to reconstruct the main lines of the east end, crossing and transepts which formed one of the most ambitious Early English choirs in the county. The treatment of the internal chancel elevations consisting of moulded

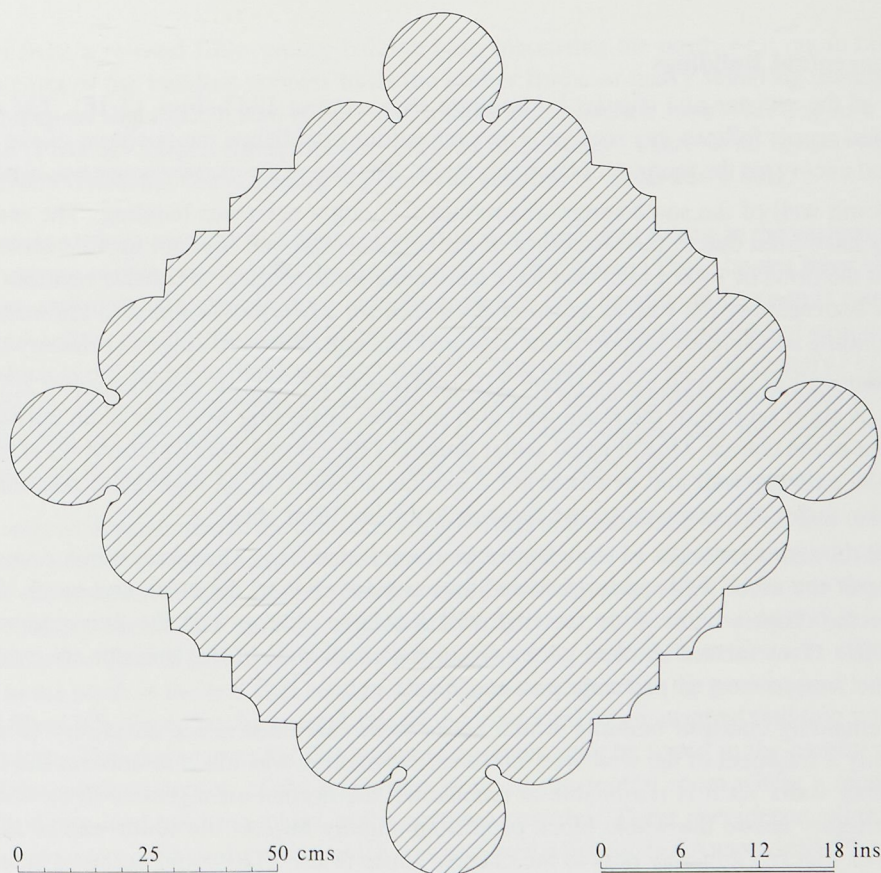


Fig. 6

Section of south-east crossing pier.

arches on freestanding shafts with blind bays between the windows is typical of the period and is comparable to the clerestorey at West Walton (Norfolk). Less typical is the profile of the crossing pier (Fig. 6) which attempts to give the impression that the principal four shafts are freestanding by hollowing out the junctions between them and their adjacent engaged shafts. This device is most commonly used on quatrefoil piers and may be seen for example in the main arcades of the parish churches of Swaffham and Little Dunham (Norfolk). The crossing piers must be interpreted as versions of this type, the hollow chamfered intermediate orders being interposed in order to increase the girth to the necessary dimensions for a crossing pier.

Particularly disappointing is the loss of the sedilia and piscina of which enough shattered fragments remain to reconstruct only their general dimensions (Fig. 4). They were most probably richly decorated, comparable no doubt with the finest examples of the period.

The only surviving yet severely mutilated capitals are on the crossing pier and moulded arches. They appear to be of the simple bell type with deeply undercut abaci.

Finally there is a tantalising fragment of architectural sculpture on the western extremity of the stringcourse marking the window sills on the interior elevation of the south wall of the chancel (Plate XI). It is difficult to interpret but it may represent an animal head swallowing the end of the stringcourse. It continued to the right combining with a lobed ornament which may have formed part of the capital to the eastern aisle respond.

The Conventual Buildings

Parts of the cloister and chapter house were excavated in 1984 (Figs 13-16). The detailed excavation report follows this section. The excavations established the positions of the cloister walks and uncovered the footings of the south range. The size of the chapter house was established.

The south wall of the south range was rebuilt forming a narrower building. The reason for this may have been due to the instability of the original wall and it is not unreasonable to surmise that the flood of 1400 which may have caused the south transept to subside was also responsible for undermining the wall in question. Evidence for a hearth was found to the western end of the building which lends support to the expected function of a south range as refectory (Fig. 5).

The east wall of the west range (Plate XII) survives to a height of approximately 2.5 metres (8 feet). A short section of the north wall also survives projecting from the south corner of the west front of the church. One blocked ashlar dressed 13th-century doorway survives at the south end of the existing wall and evidence for a similar doorway in an equivalent position to the north now forms the entrance to the modern brick and flint shed.

The north and west walls of the chapter house are standing. The excavations revealed the positions of the other walls and uncovered masonry benches to the north and south. The entrance to the chapter house from the east walk has been blocked and the dressings removed (Plate XIII). Two further blocked doorways in the south wall of the transept are evident, of which the westernmost is probably post-medieval.

The remaining claustral building which needs to be discussed is the dormitory (Fig. 5) of which only a fragment of the west wall survives. No attempt was made to uncover the footings of the other walls yet it is reasonable to reconstruct the normal arrangement of an undercroft with dormitory above the whole block projecting slightly beyond the south wall of the south range. The blocked doorway next to the chapter house (Plate XIII) could not have been an entrance to the dormitory undercroft because it would have led directly into the south wall of the chapter house.

A barn of late medieval date stood until 1981 to the south of the site adjacent to the main road (Fig. 1). Its ancient fabric had been entirely obscured from view by later additions. It was demolished without a decent record having been made but it is known that it had staged ashlar dressed buttresses with diagonal buttresses at the angles.²⁰

A gatehouse is thought to have stood to the west of the site in the line of a present field boundary. All that is identifiable in the undergrowth at the moment are mounds without any visible masonry.

The Farmhouse

The farmhouse (Plate XIV and Figs 7-12) lies approximately 40 yards to the south of the ruins of the priory church and the rectangular building is roughly on the same alignment as the church. Until its recent renovation the exterior appearance was that of a typical late 18th-century farmhouse of galletted flint, stuccoed brick dressings with double rusticated keystones, a pedimented doorcase and a brick dentil cornice of the three-header type. However, the earlier core of the building and its proximity to the church has naturally led to speculation about it having been a conventual building. The building history is extremely complex, but the scanty surviving evidence of the earlier fabric does suggest the possibility of a pre-Reformation date.

Apart from a re-used 13th-century column base supporting the north-west quoin one of the earliest parts of the building appears to be the timber frame of heavy scantling mainly hidden in the thickness of the north wall (Fig. 7). A small section was left visible serving as a window or hatch (Plate XV) when the frame was encased in masonry. There is no feature which can be precisely dated but the scantling suggests the possibility of an early date.

It is reasonable to suppose that some of the first floor principal beams in the eastern and central rooms are contemporary with the fragmentary timber frame. These beams have very wide chamfers and plain straight-cut stops at right-angles to the chamfer in the central room (Plate XVI) and ordinary stepped run-outs in the eastern room. The straight-cut type of stop is an early form which is not found in buildings later than the first quarter of the 16th century.²¹ Only two of the beams in the eastern room are original, the others being additions and repairs. The run-out stops and the presence of a stack so close to the other suggest that the beams have been re-positioned in order to accommodate a new stack at a later date.

The original arrangement in the central room consisted of a transverse beam set into the chimney breast and a spinal bridging joist. The chimney stack appears to be contemporary with the beams because the transverse beam has no chamfer on its chimney side and it is set into the masonry of the chimney breast. The stack is aligned markedly south of the present central axis and this eccentricity is reflected in the position of the spinal bridging joist. Both axial stacks were corbelled out to the north in the late 18th century in order to correspond to the present roof ridge (Plate XVII). Thus it is clear that the central axis of the main roof of the original building was further to the south. The explanation for this apparent anomaly may be found in the careful examination of the northern section of the transverse beam of the central room where a modern softwood bridging joist has been added in the northern corridor. There is evidence, slightly to the south of this beam, of a straight stop which was removed when the beam was added (Plate XVIII). It is clear therefore that there was a load bearing wall or partition in the position of the modern bridging joist creating a narrow corridor along the north side of the building (Fig. 9).

The present width of the house could not be the result of a later widening because the transverse beam is continuous. Thus there must have been an outshut in this position with a lean-to or catslide roof and the main roof supported on the inner wall. There is a blocked six-light diamond mullion window to the eastern end of the north wall of the upper floor. This window appears to have been part of the timber framed north wall, albeit a later addition, suggesting that the outshut was two-storeyed.

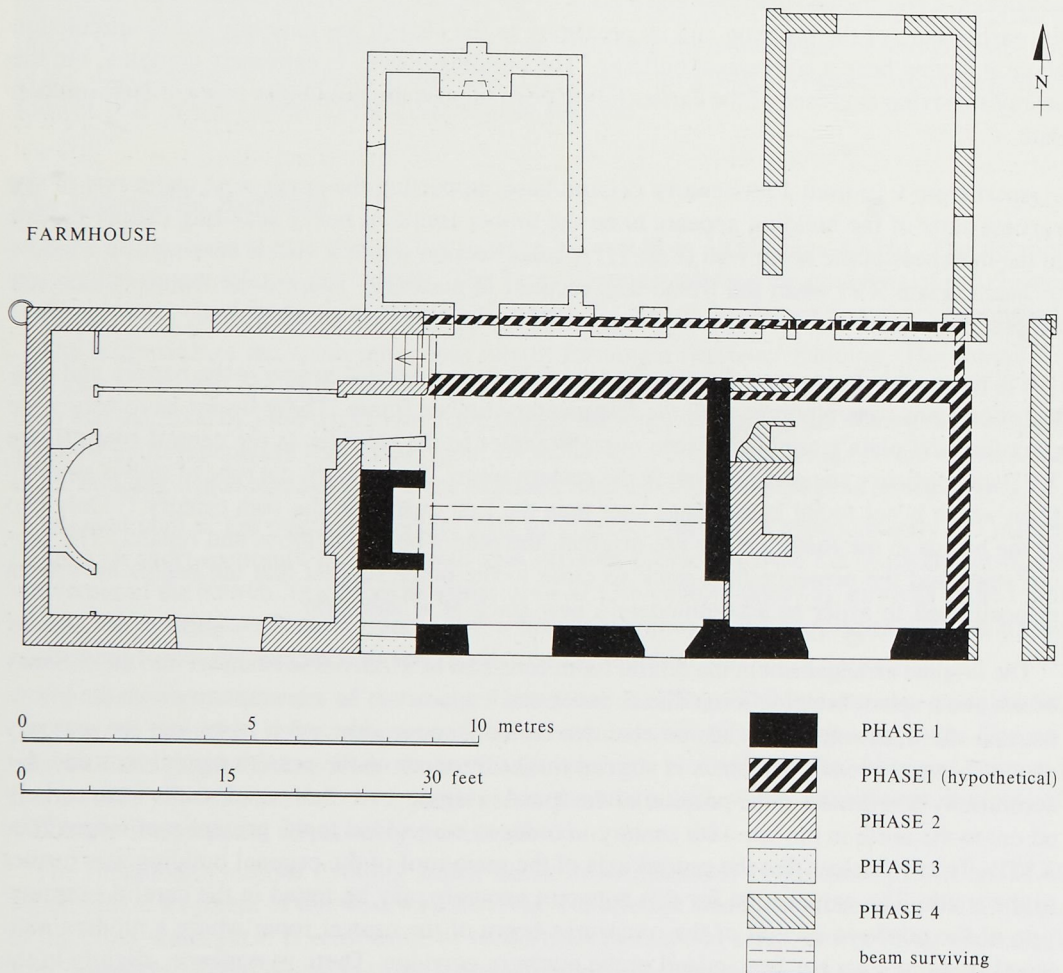


Fig. 7
Plan of farmhouse.

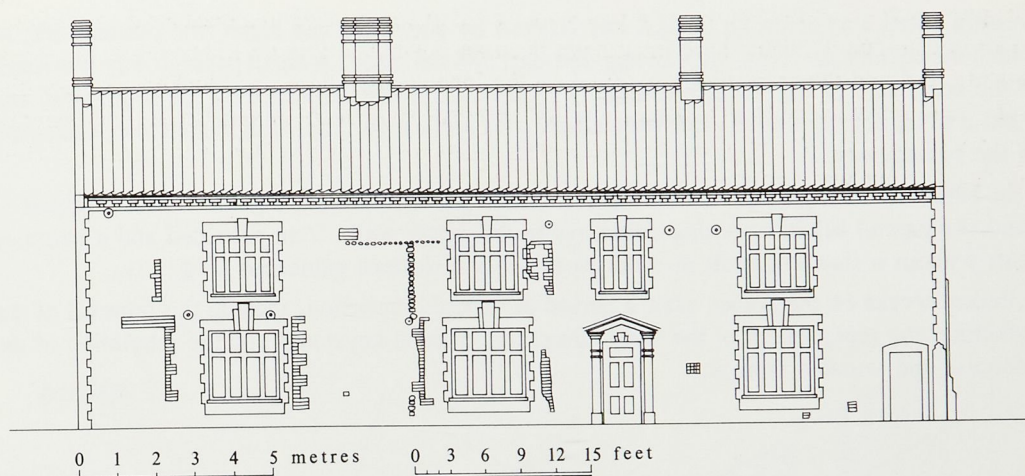


Fig. 8

Elevation of farmhouse facade.

On this evidence we may tentatively reconstruct the original building as probably of masonry with a timber framed outshut (Fig. 9). It extended eastwards from the central room but it is not known in exactly what form. There were at least two storeys and there was an external gable-end stack as can be inferred from the former broken flint and brick quoins on the south facade (Fig. 8). The axial stack was probably part of a 17th-century rebuild of the eastern room re-using the wide-chamfered beams and recarving the stops.

The only definite evidence for a 17th century phase is two re-used pieces of ovolo-moulded beams in the upper rooms at the eastern end. However, it seems likely that the axial stack was built during this phase because its position corresponds to the earlier central axis. It is also possible that the diamond mullion window belongs to this phase (Fig. 10). Further works were undertaken which probably belong to this period but may be later. The most important was the building of the western extension. A surviving roofline on the western gable-end of the original block shows that the extension was single-storeyed with attic or of one and a half storeys. Extra chimney flues were added to the existing stack retaining the earlier axis. The various redundant brick keyed window jambs, revealed by the removal of the galletting, represent an asymmetrical arrangement of large windows probably belonging to this phase. There was also a doorway opposite the western axial stack possibly creating a 'lobby entrance'. It has been well blocked and is barely discernible on the exterior, but on the interior the wall thickness of the blocking is six inches less than the surrounding masonry.

A campaign of *c.*1800 was responsible for the general appearance of the building until very recently (Fig. 11 and Plate XIV). The whole facade was heightened including the western extension which became a fully integrated bay. The fenestration was divided into three symmetrical bays, the doorway with pedimented doorcase and three-light window above creating a fourth off-centre bay. The principal windows had four-light mullion and transom frames and stuccoed dressings with projecting keystones — double to the ground floor windows. The facade was galletted using black mortar. The cornices were provided with brick corbel tables of the three-header type. The timber framed outshut wall was encased from both sides with masonry becoming the main outside wall and the former main wall was removed. The roof was reconstructed with the ridge, of course, further north necessitating the realignment of both axial stacks (Plate XVII). The west gable-end was rebuilt and provided with a small internal stack. Internally the

western room was given an apsidal end flanked by doorways and some fine plasterwork, of which the cornice survives, with an egg-and-dart derived motif. A small passage way was made to the north side of the stack, presumably replacing a former entrance on the south side, and it has a small domed plaster vault with narrow ribs and a rose. The straight staircase is adjacent to the passageway.

In 1891, according to the date displayed on the gable, the eastern gable-end was rebuilt in banded flint and brick, opposing doorways in the gutter walls were provided and a chimney shaft without a flue was built in order to match the western gable-end (Fig. 12).

Recent works on the house, after a period of virtual dereliction, include the removal of the galletting, the replacement of the stucco dressings without keystones and the rebuilding of the doorcase and window frames.

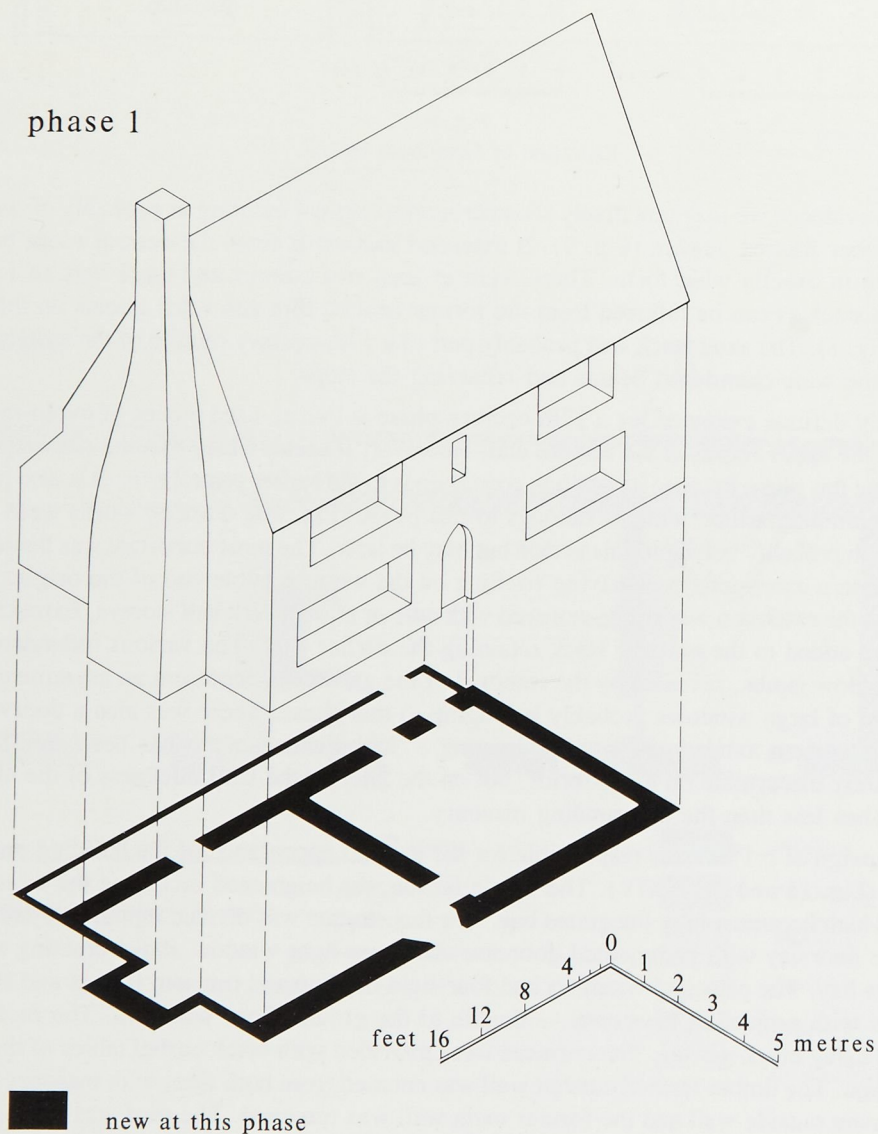


Fig. 9

Plan and isometric of phase one of farmhouse.

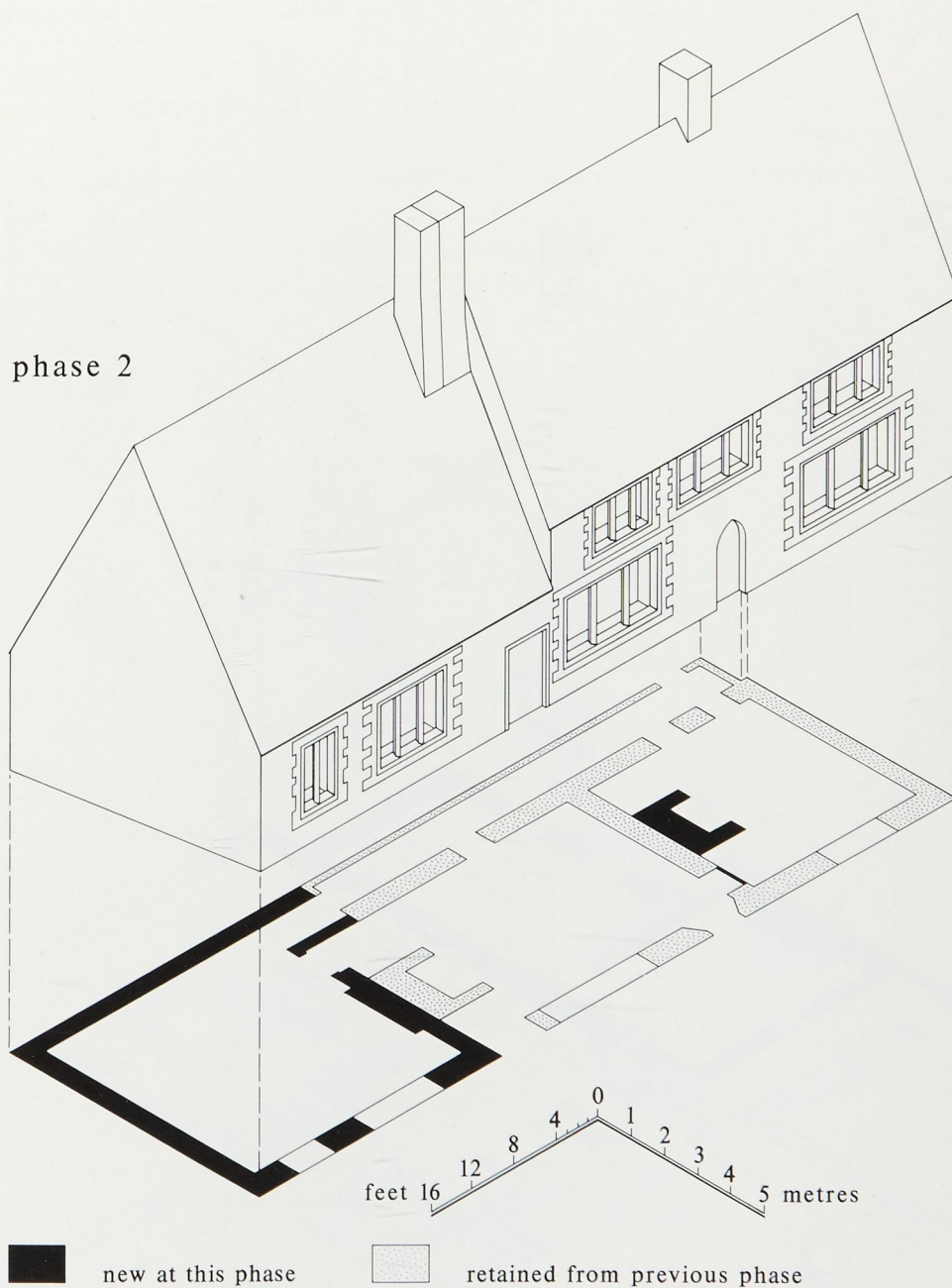


Fig. 10

Plan and isometric of phase two of farmhouse.

In conclusion the admittedly slight visible architectural evidence suggests that the first phase pre-dates the Dissolution. As a conventual building its most likely function was as the prior's lodging. It is common that the only building to survive on a monastic site is the abbot's or prior's lodging presumably because it was easily adapted. For example the abbess's lodging at Carrow (Norwich) and the prior's lodging at Castle Acre continued in use as dwellings after the

phase 3

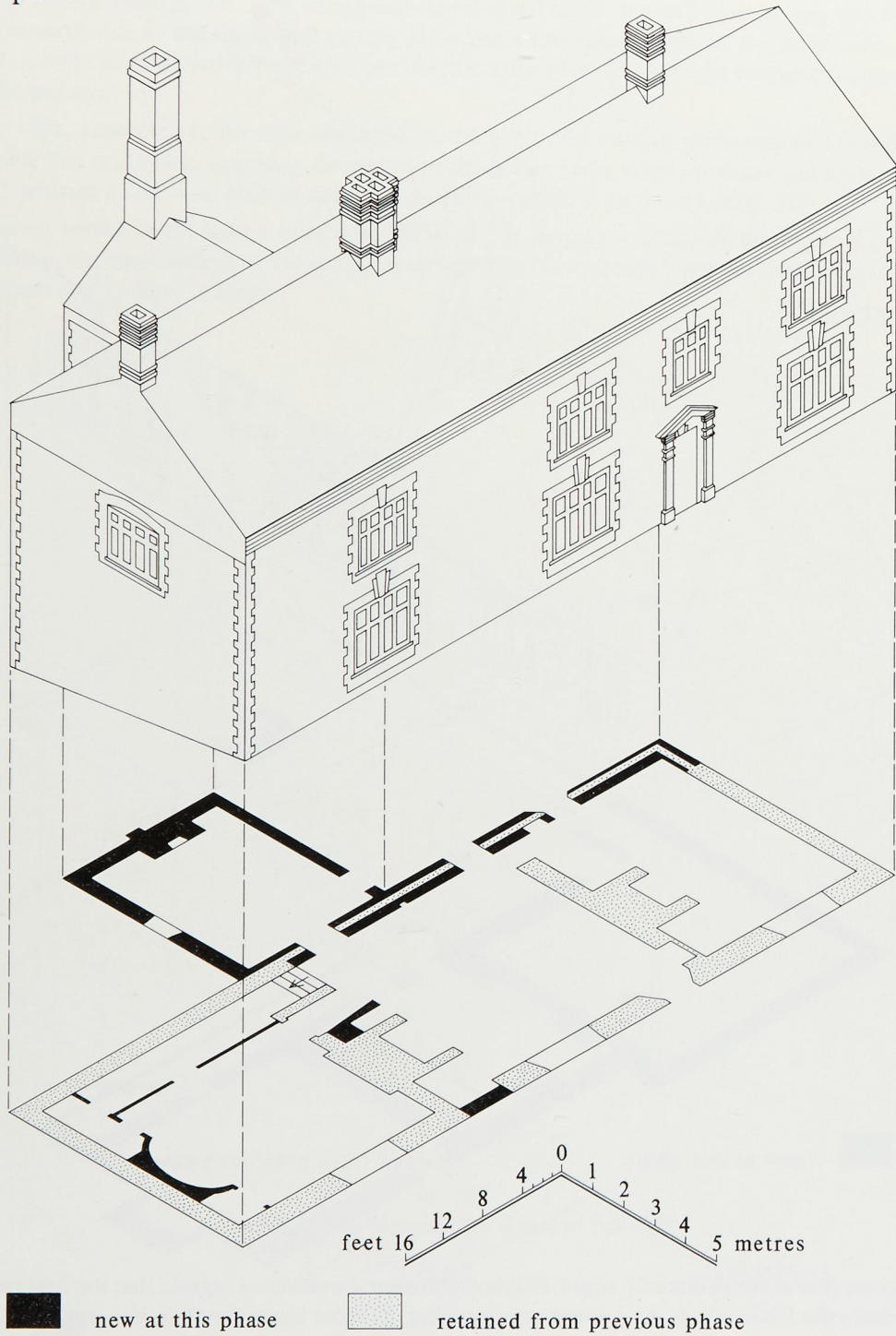
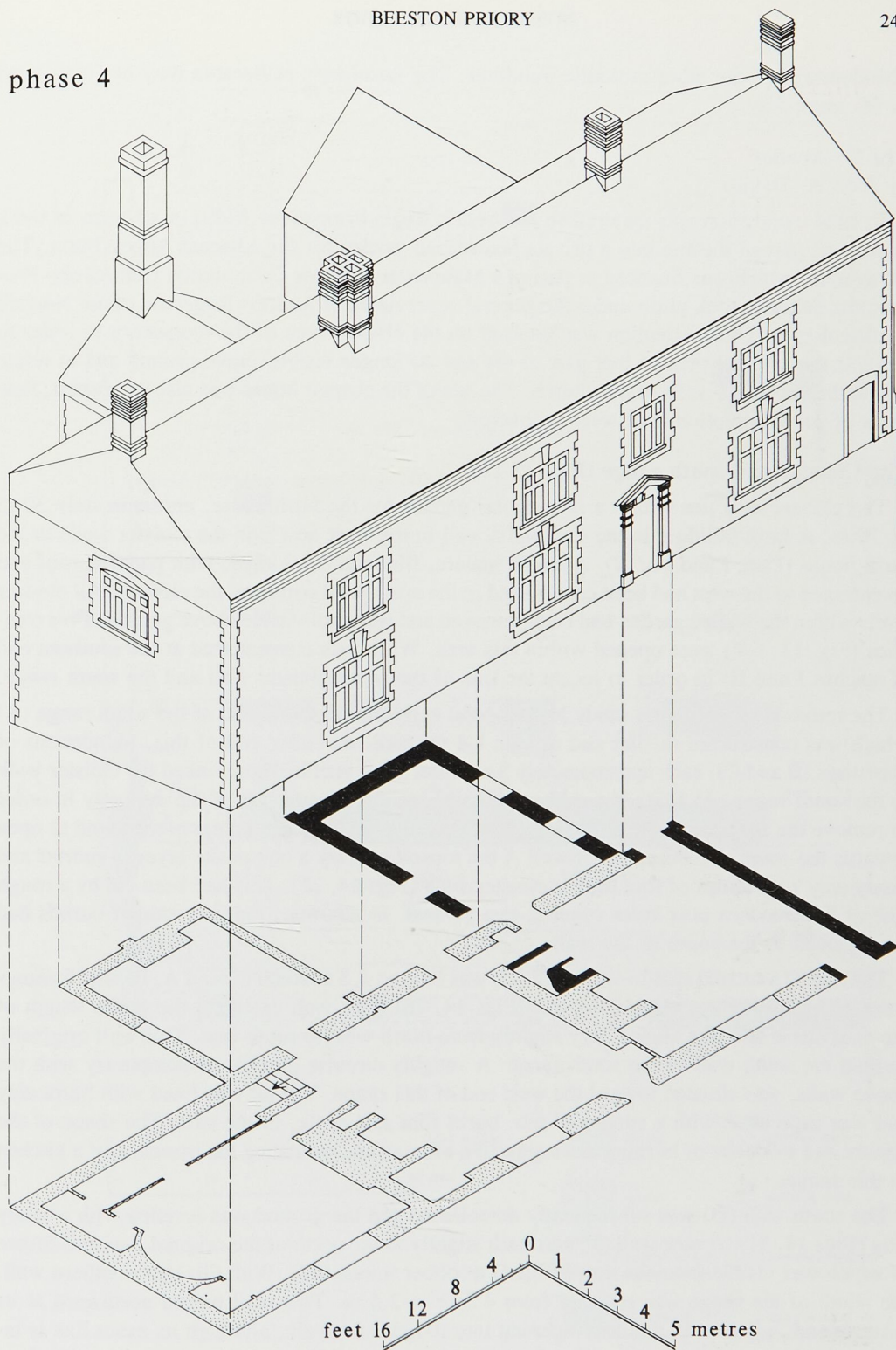


Fig. 11
Plan and isometric of phase three of farmhouse.

phase 4



new at this phase



retained from previous phase

Fig. 12
Plan and isometric of phase four of farmhouse.

abandonment of the other monastic buildings. The farmhouse at Beeston may be interpreted in the same way.

The Excavation

by John A. Davies

In 1984 excavation was undertaken at Beeston Regis Priory (site 6349) in advance of work to convert part of the site into a private landscaped garden for the adjacent Abbey Farm. The excavation, which was financed as part of a Manpower Services Commission Community Programme Scheme, took place under the general supervision of Andrew Rogerson of the Norfolk Archaeological Unit. Attention was focused on the cloister area of the monastery in order to recover the original plan of that part of the site no longer visible above ground and to relate this to the surviving walls of the church. The site of the chapter house was also excavated. Few finds of pre-Dissolution date were recovered.

The Cloister and south range (Figs 13-15).

The cloister area lies within a rectangular garden for the farm house, approximately 30 m × 20 m. A farm building in the east and a wall in the west now join the cloister walls to the farm house (Plate I and Fig. 2). A small, square, flint and brick shed, with pantiled roof and an entrance to the west had been constructed in the north west corner of the cloister. All cloister walls within the walled garden had been removed and were not visible above ground. Five trenches (Fig. 13, I-V) were opened within this area. Work was concentrated at the southern end (Trenches I and II) in order to locate the line of the south cloister wall and the south range.

The removal of turf and a sandy loam topsoil exposed the north wall of the south range (A) which was constructed in flint and mortar 1.4 m thick. At either end of this, foundations of doorways (B and C), each approximately 2 m wide, were visible; these linked the cloister walk to the south range. At Door B a robber pit had been dug at one side of the doorway in order to remove the more substantial masonry door footings. The door openings were found to open towards the south. To the north of wall A the topsoil overlay a composite layer of mortar and sandy clay with lumps of flint for the cloister walk (Figs 14, 27). This had been cut by a rough line of five modern post holes running east-to-west. In addition, four pet animal burials had been placed to the south of the wall.

The line of a second east-to-west wall (D) was located 4.5 m south of wall A. Its flint footings were embedded in the original topsoil (Figs 14, 76). The wall extended the entire length of the excavation and was angled very slightly from north-west to south-east. This wall originally formed the south wall of the south range. A roughly circular pit (E), contemporary with the above walls, was situated toward the west end of this range. The pit was lined with burnt clay and was associated with a spread of ash, burnt flint and chalk, to the east. The shape of the feature and evidence of burning are suggestive of an oven, indicating the presence of a kitchen in this range.

The south wall (D) was subsequently demolished and the ground was levelled with a sandy clay (Figs 14, 31). A new wall (F) was built slightly to the north of the original line, the course of which was visible from the mortar fill of a robber trench (48). With this new southern wall, the width of the range was reduced from 4.5 m to 2.5 m. This wall turned northward at its western end, adjacent to the door opening into the cloister walk, although its exact line is indistinct in this north-to-south section because of the later robbing. When this wall was subsequently demolished and robbed, the whole area south of wall A was flattened and levelled-off with a sandy loam (26).

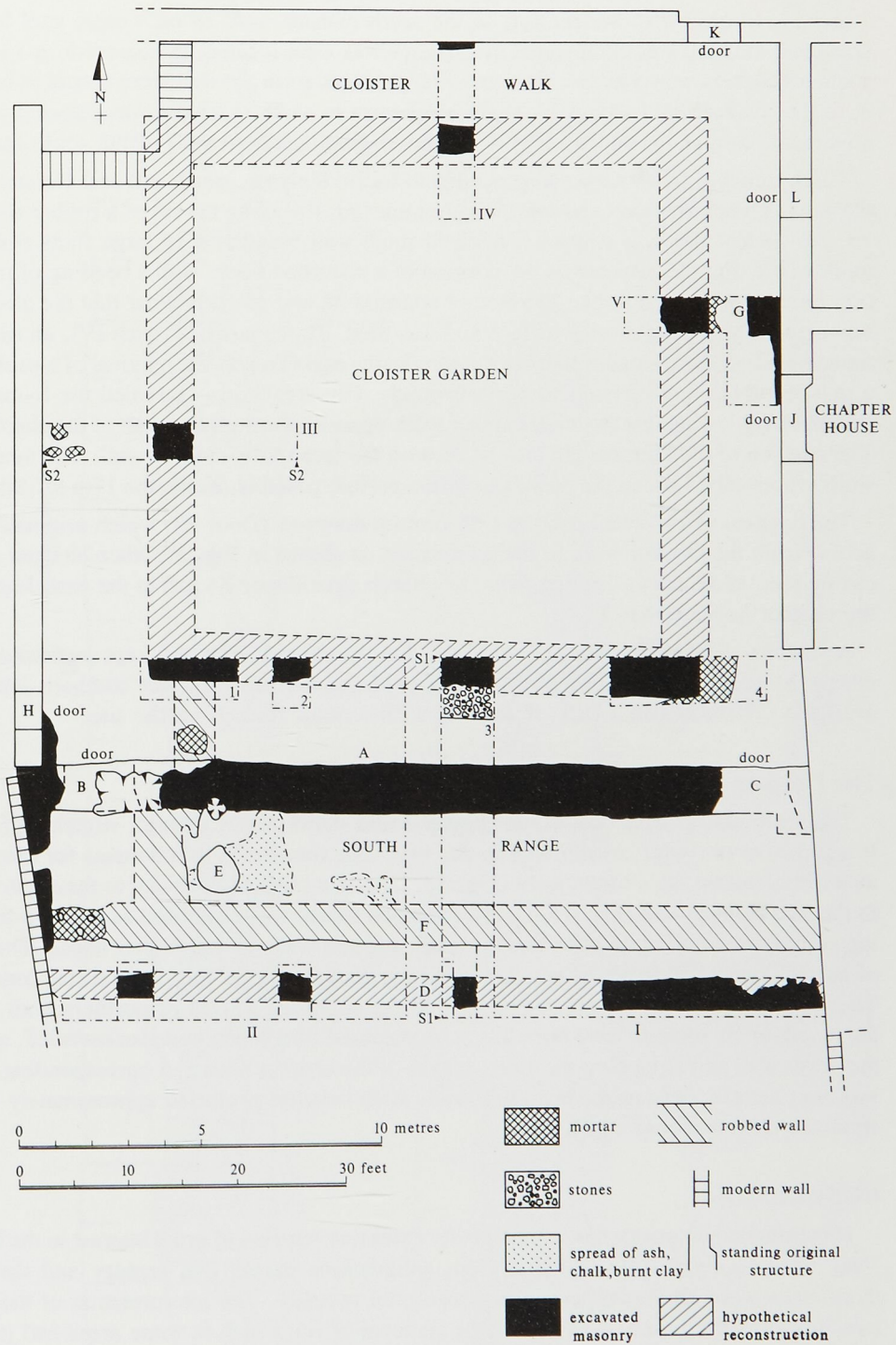


Fig. 13
Plan of cloister excavation.

Four box sections (numbered 1-4) were excavated to the north of wall A, within trenches 1 and 11, in order to trace the line of the south cloister wall. In each case, wall footings of small and medium flints embedded in a pale mortar were located; in box sections 1 and 4 both southern corners were located. An area of large stones from the wall were spread in box section 3, to the south of the footings. A slight north-west to south-east slant was detected in the wall alignment, similar to, and parallel with, the original southern wall of the south range (D).

Three trenches (III-V) were also opened to locate the west, north and east cloister walls. In the west (Trench III), turf and topsoil were removed, revealing the fill of a robber trench (Figs 15, 28). Below this was situated a north-to-south wall foundation of large flints embedded in mortar (29). Fig. 15 also shows the position of a disturbed floor, with a bedding of mortar and tile, *in situ*, positioned at the interface of contexts 32 and 39. It is clear that the cloister walk was originally given a mortar surface and was tiled. To the north (Trench IV), an east-to-west foundation contained smaller flints in mortar. To the east (Trench V), removal of topsoil revealed a mortar rubble footing running north-to-south. This trench also revealed the foundations of a buttress (G) set against the outer cloister wall, opposite the northern wall of the chapter house. The position of the buttress can also be seen on the face of the cloister wall. The inner cloister walls were robbed-out in the post-Dissolution period, possibly during the 17th to 18th century.

The position of a blocked pointed 13th-century doorway (Door H), which originally allowed access from the cloister walk to the west range, is shown in Fig. 3. Other blocked doorways can be seen in the north, leading from the church nave (Door K) and in the east, leading from the chapter house (Door J).

A scarcity of pre-Dissolution finds show that the cloister area was kept meticulously clean during its use; consequently, direct dating evidence for the narrower southern range is not available. There is also a lack of 16th- to 17th-century finds from the site.

The Chapter House (Fig. 16)

The north east-to-west wall of the chapter house stands above ground, stretching for 7.1 m. It is joined to the outer cloister wall in the west. The foundation of a buttress for this wall was discovered within the cloister walk (Fig. 13, G) and a blocked doorway to the room is visible in the east cloister wall (Fig. 13, J). An L-shaped trench was excavated adjacent to the surviving east-to-west wall in order to find the south and east walls of the chapter house. The removal of topsoil located both walls, which were again found to be of flint and mortar construction. The east wall was located one metre beyond the surviving stretch of northern wall, showing the length of the room to have been 8.3 m. A rendered flint bench was also revealed, set against the north wall and stretching the entire length of the chapter house. A corresponding structure was also located, set against the south wall. Both benches projected approximately 40 cm in from the chapter house walls.

CONCLUSION

This little known priory has left unusually extensive remains of great interest to the historian. They have received little attention from antiquarians during this century and the remains themselves were abandoned and overgrown until recently. The interpretation of the standing structures has been made possible by the removal of ivy which in some areas had grown unchecked for at least a century totally obscuring important archaeological features. Most striking in this respect is the south face of the blocked south crossing arch where one can now see clearly the scar of the eastern aisle arcade.

Section 1

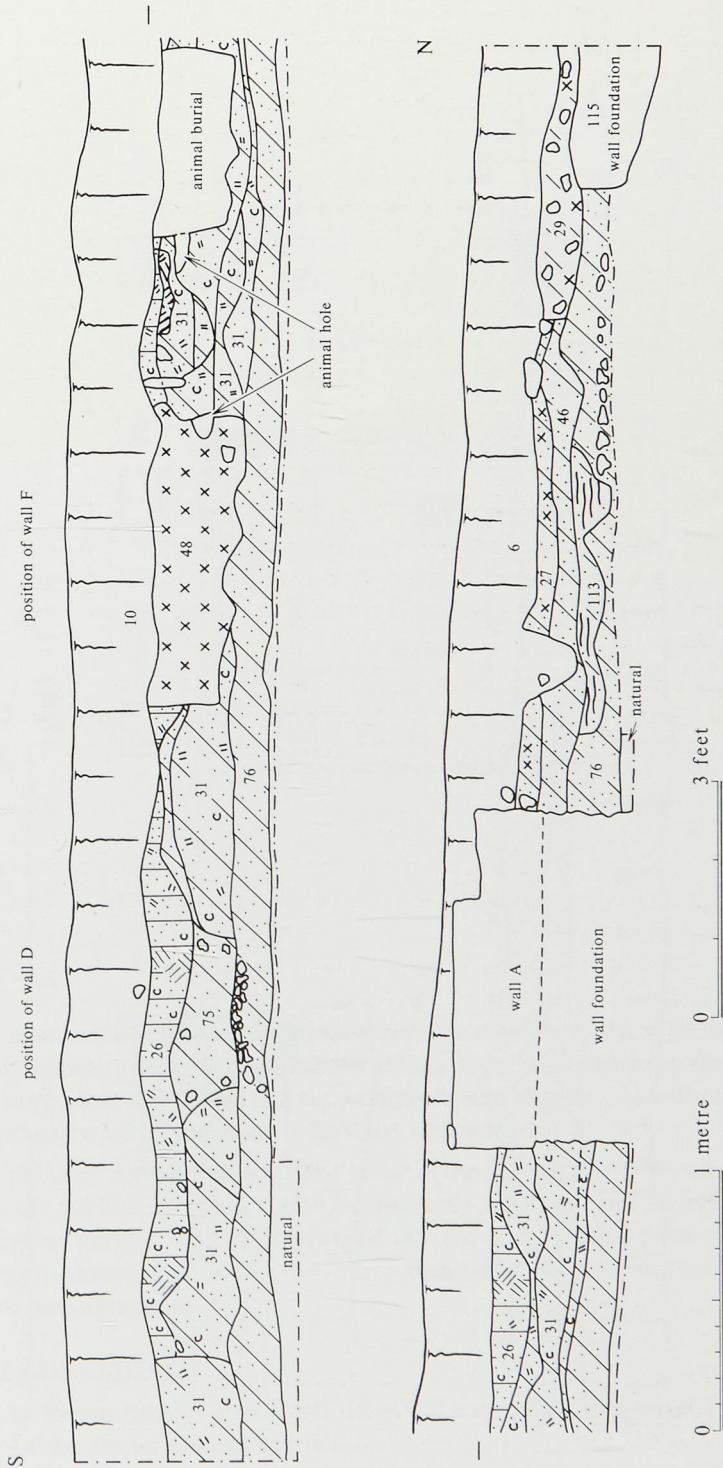


Fig. 14
Section 1 — cloister excavation.

Section 2

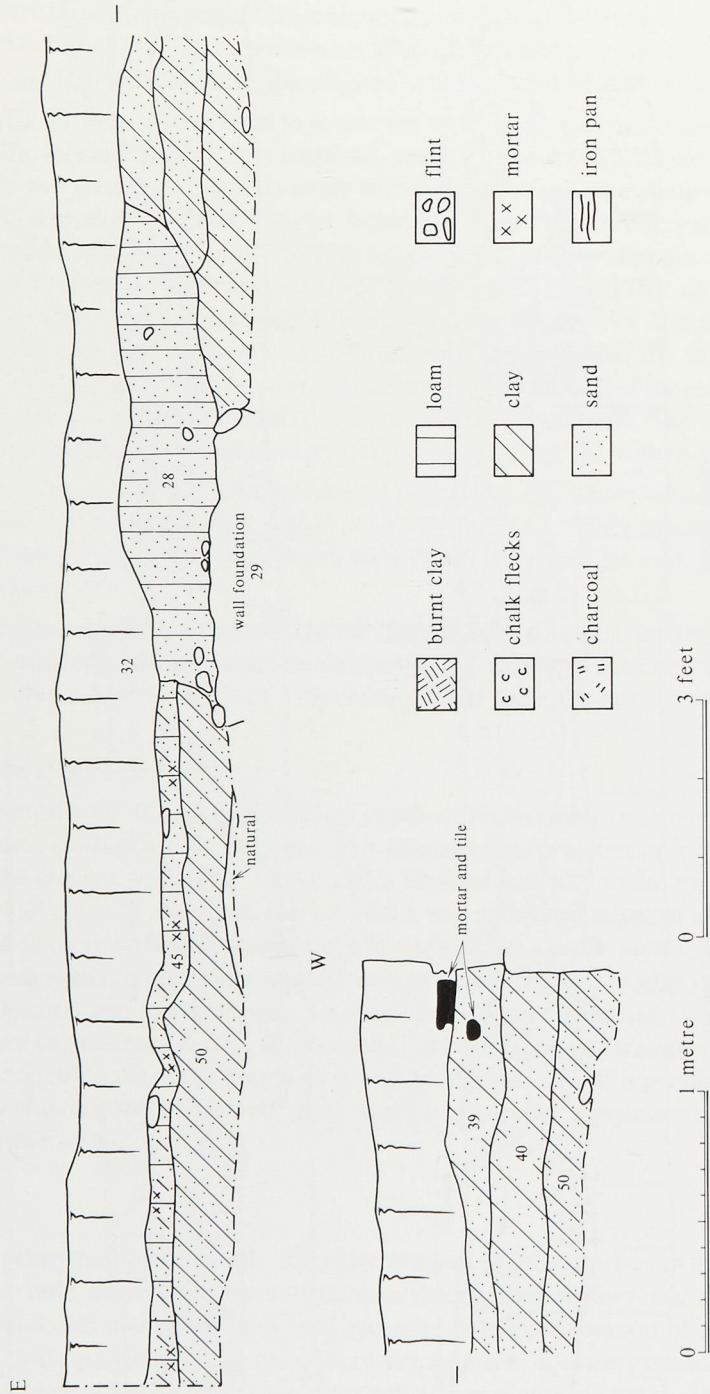


Fig. 15
Section 2 — cloister excavation.

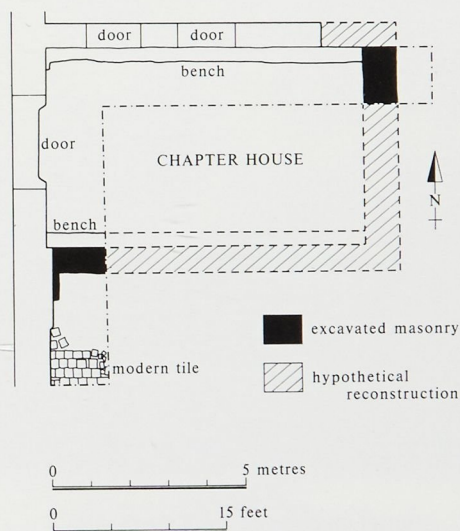


Fig. 16
Plan of chapter house excavation.

In combination with this process of uncovering the standing walls is the archaeological excavation itself, which revealed the foundations of the cloister walk, the south range and the chapter house. It is hoped that this article has successfully bound together the different skills required in the interpretation of standing and excavated structures.

The final phase of repair is due to take place in the summer of 1990 when the site will be presented to the public. Information will be discreetly displayed and maintenance will consist simply of regular grass cutting. It is intended that the area remains peaceful and a haven for wildlife where members of the public can inform themselves about the ruins or simply appreciate the evocative atmosphere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Drawings by Steven Ashley; plates I-VII, IX-XVIII copyright S. Heywood; plate VIII published by courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries.

July 1989

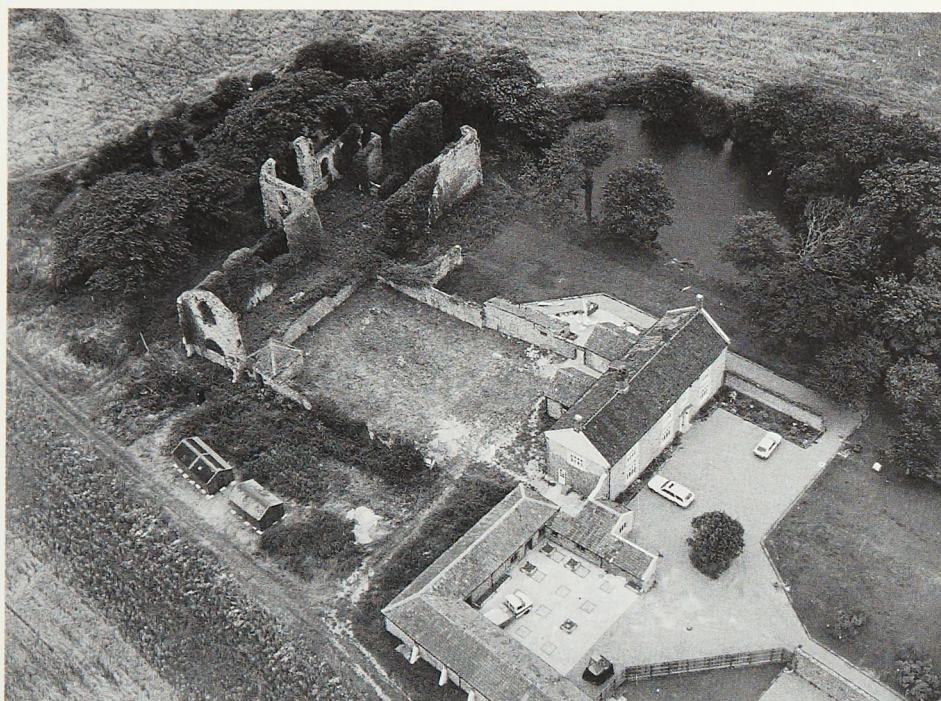


Plate I
Aerial photograph from south-west.



Plate II
Chancel and former south transept from south-east showing position of eastern aisle and the partly encased crossing pier. In the foreground first phase masonry.



Plate III
Springing of former north-eastern arcade from east.



Plate IV
Internal quoins of brick in north-east corner of chancel.

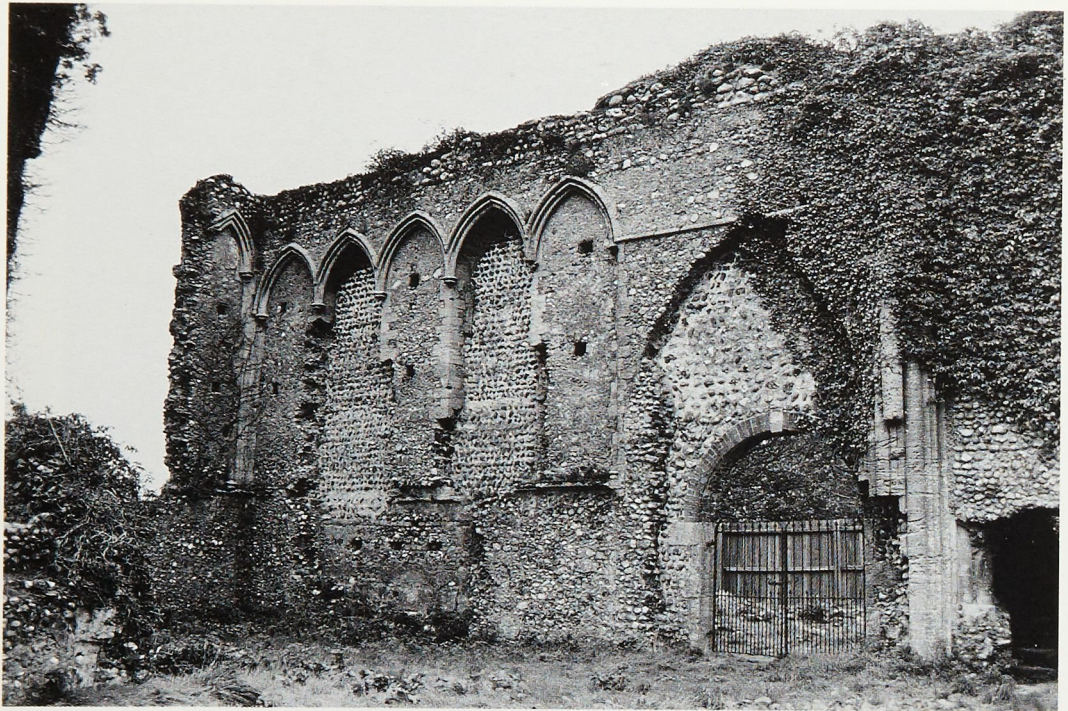


Plate V
Interior elevation of south wall of chancel.

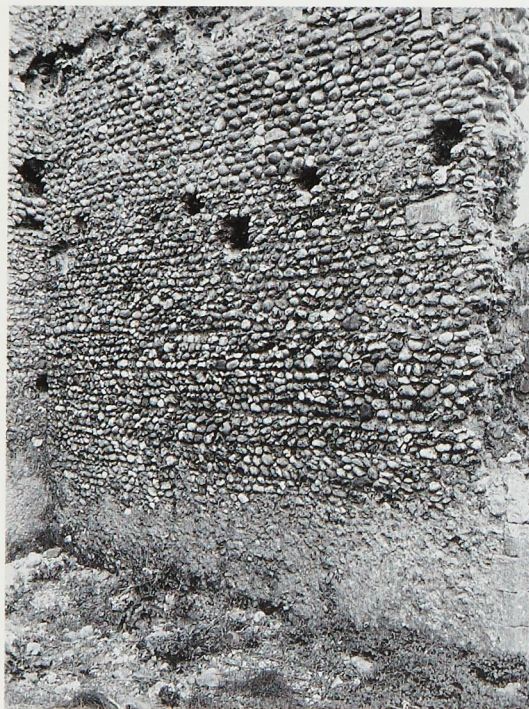


Plate VI
Interior elevation of south wall of porticus showing second and third phases of masonry.

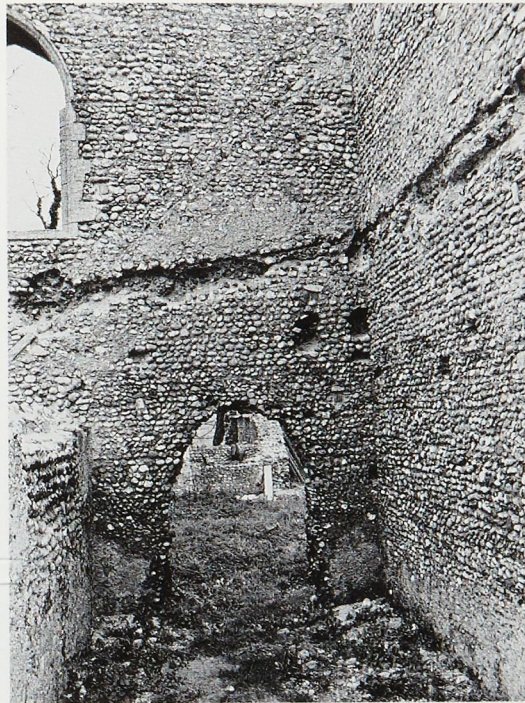


Plate VII
Interior elevation of east wall of porticus.



Plate VIII
Pencil drawing of Beeston Priory from west. Willis collection (1800-1875).
Society of Antiquaries, Volume III, 234.



Plate IX
East wall of north-east chapel from east.



Plate X
Detail of arch mouldings in chancel.



Plate XI
Carved stringcourse terminal in chancel.



Plate XII
East wall of west range of former cloister from east.



Plate XIII
Former cloister from south-west.



Plate XIV
Facade of farmhouse before restoration.



Plate XV
Section of timber frame embedded in thickness of north wall.



Plate XVI
Detail of transverse joist in central room showing straight chamfer stop.

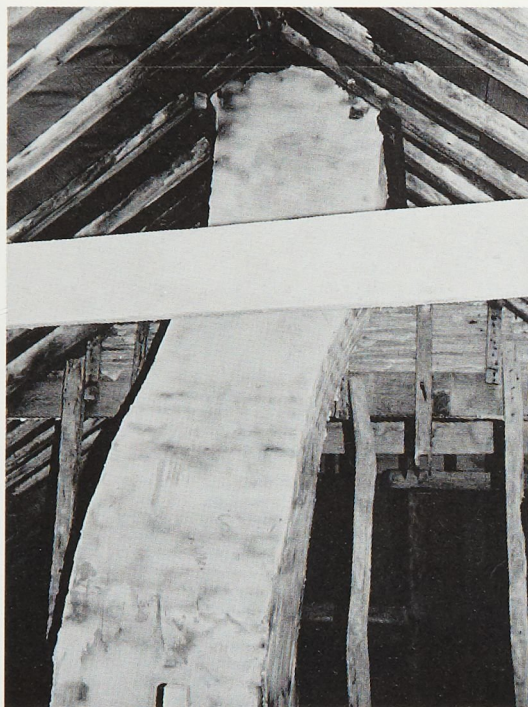


Plate XVII
Corbelled chimney stack.



Plate XVIII
Extension of central room transverse joist showing position of former chamfer stop
and modern softwood beam.

1. F. Blomefield, *An essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, VIII (1809), 91-2; W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, eds J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel, VI pt.1 (1830), 568; A. Jessop, 'Beeston Priory, otherwise Moulney' *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany*, 3 (1887), 439-461; W. Rye, 'The Foundresses of Beeston', *ibid.* 462-464; *Victoria History of the County of Norfolk*, (V.C.H.), II ed. W. Page (1906), 372-4; A. C. Erroll, *A History of the parishes of Sheringham and Beeston Regis in the County of Norfolk* (1970), 41-52.
2. For plea of Quo Warranto see W. Rye, *Some Rough Materials for a History of the Hundred of North Erpingham in the County of Norfolk* (1883-9), 41; Dugdale, 568.
3. D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales* (1971), 137 and 170.
4. J. J. Munro, 'John Capgrave's Lives of St. Augustine and St. Gilbert of Sempringham and a Sermon', *Early English Text Society* 140 (1910), 148.
5. D. M. Robinson, *The Geography of Augustinian Settlement* (1980), 163-167 and 399.
6. Robinson, 164.
7. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (1948-59), 259.
8. Jessop, 446.
9. Robinson, 155-163 and 397-8.
10. A resistivity survey was undertaken by the R.C.H.M. in 1984. The results were not forwarded to the Norfolk Archaeological Unit despite requests.
11. J. S. Gardner, 'Coggeshall Abbey and its Early Brickwork', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 18 (1955), 19-32.
12. Ever since Jessop this tower has been interpreted as a bell tower. It clearly housed a vice stair and it is extremely unlikely that it also accommodated bells.
13. V.C.H., 372 note 31.
14. The Colman and Rye local history library in Norwich holds a considerable number of photographs and engravings. The Norfolk Record Office has two of particular interest: MS 4577/24 and MS 2158/11.
15. J. P. Greene, *Norton Priory, The Archaeology of a Medieval Religious House* (1989).
16. W. H. St. John Hope and H. Brakspear, 'Haughmond Abbey', *Archaeological Journal* 66 (1910), 281-310.
17. B. W. Cunliffe (ed), *Portchester Castle 3, Medieval*, Society of Antiquaries Research report 34 (1977). Augustinian Priory by A. Borg and D. Baker, 97-120.
18. C. Swynnerton, 'The Priory of St. Leonard of Stanley in the Light of Recent Discoveries', *Archaeologia* 71 (1921), 199-226.
19. J. R. H. Moorman, *Lanercost Priory* (1967). For a discussion on the development of Augustinian church plans see Greene, 84-87.
20. Mr. J. Denny observed the demolition of the barn and was able to make a rough sketch of the building. A copy is held in the Sites and Monuments Record, Norfolk Archaeological Unit, Gressenhall.
21. A dated example (c.1400) of this type of chamfer stop may be seen in the first floor chamber in the Byward Tower, the Tower of London. See R. Allen Brown and P. E. Curnow, *Tower of London* (1984), 41-2.