

Cleeve Abbey: recent discoveries

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THE Cistercian Abbey of Cleeve has been described with some fulness in vol. xxxv of this Society's *Proceedings* and its history on the documentary side has been recounted in vols. vi and lii. The Rev. Mackenzie E. C. Walcott, who conducted the excavations and preservation work with Mr. C. H. Samson in 1875-6, printed a general account of the buildings in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* for 1875-6 and in the *Journal of the British Archæological Association* for 1876 and also in the form of a small handbook, and certain outstanding architectural features have been frequently illustrated or described.¹

The monastic buildings which remain in the rare completeness of being actually roofed, certainly deserve much more detailed illustration and description than they have yet received, as the late Mr. Buckle's plans and elevations in vol. xxxv of the *Proceedings* are on a very small scale. It is not intended to attempt this here.

There are two parts of the site which were not adequately excavated by Mr. Mackenzie Walcott, namely the nave of the church and the ground occupied by the infirmary. The late Sir William St. John Hope carried out some investigations of the infirmary before the War, but unfortunately the particulars he recorded and any plans he made appear to have been lost.

¹ A list of the principal printed sources of information about Cleeve Abbey is given by the Rev. F. W. Weaver in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lii, ii, 40.

Circumstances have lately made it possible to ascertain rather more about the nave. The recent removal of a large walnut tree which hindered previous investigations and the consequent need of tidying this portion of the site have provided the opportunity of clearing up certain matters which were formerly in doubt and have made possible some interesting discoveries which will now be placed on record.

For the convenience of readers who have no other account of Cleeve Abbey at hand it may be well to recall certain facts. Founded in 1188 by William de Romara, a grandson of the Norman Earl of Lincoln who founded Revesby Abbey in Lincolnshire, it was colonised by Revesby monks, as Revesby itself was colonised from Rievaulx, and Rievaulx from Clairvaux. The bulk of the buildings date from the thirteenth century, and while little more than the foundations of the church remain, the rest of the main buildings and the gate-house are unusually complete. A special value they possess is their illustration of the change back to the ordinary Benedictine plan of the south side of the buildings, consequent on the loss of the *conversi* or labouring monks, which is usually regarded as a consequence of the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century. This change in the buildings took place actually in the fifteenth century when the present splendid frater or refectory alongside the cloister and parallel to the church was substituted for the earlier refectory at right angles to it. The rich tiled floor of the earlier frater still remains, while the newer frater has one of the finest roofs in the West of England. Later reconstructions also affected the west side of the cloister and also the gate-house. The south-west corner of the buildings which formerly contained the refectory of the *conversi* and their dormitory or dorter above it, with the kitchen between it and the monks' refectory, was rebuilt as a lodging for the Abbot, although the rule really required him to sleep with his monks. Even when he had more developed accommodation this was more usually close to the monks' dormitory. However, there is abundant evidence here and elsewhere that in the later mediæval period such rules were relaxed and Cistercian houses tended to be arranged more and more like those of Benedictines and Canons Regular.

Recent excavations have added considerably to our knowledge of what the church of Cleeve Abbey was like. Many points left in uncertainty have been cleared up and it has been found that Mr. Mackenzie Walcott, and after him Mr. Buckle, were mistaken in some important particulars. For example the nave consisted not of five but of seven bays. No trace can be found of any side screens in the nave where Mr. Buckle's plan shows a part of one near the west end of the south side. The grave slab attributed by Walcott to Gilbert de Woolavington in the north transept is not in the centre but north of it. And there was no altar where Mr. Buckle shows one in the west cloister. Moreover, we are now in a position to speak much more definitely about the west end of the building.

The church included a short structural choir not projecting far east of the transepts. Each transept had two equal-sized chapels in its eastern side divided from the choir and from each other by screen walls. The nave had north and south aisles of seven bays each. The stone foundations of the pulpitum and of the choir stalls remain, and show that the monks' choir occupied the eastmost bay of the nave and part of the space beneath the central tower. The pulpitum crossed the church immediately to the west of the first pillar west of the crossing, and was probably of wood. No trace could be found of any other screen further west or between the nave piers, so it may be concluded that the rood-screen and the side screens of the *chorus conversorum* were of wood. The rood-screen was very probably at the third pillar from the east end.

The church itself must have been lofty. The south wall of the south aisle of the nave remains intact to above the level of the cloister roof and above that can be seen the bases of three windows, showing that the height of the aisles must have been considerable. The bays of the arcade must have been tall and comparatively narrow. The pillars were circular with simple but deeply cut moulded capitals and bases. The arches seem to have had two recessed orders chamfered. At the crossing and in the transepts the arch mouldings were continued down the pillars and responds, no doubt with the slight break of a narrow capital. The bases which remain here have only a chamfered offset. The 'water-holding' bases to the round

pillars in the nave may indicate slightly later date. There was a single lancet window in each bay. There seem to have been a pair in each of the transept chapels, probably three tall ones in the east end, and the same, or perhaps two, in the west front. The roofs were almost certainly not vaulted, save in the chapels east of the transepts. The roofs above the vaults in the chapels in the south transept were evidently entered from the north-east angle of the dormer or dormitory where the doorway still remains. Those over the chapels on the opposite side may have been entered from a staircase on the north side, but no definite trace of this has been found up to the time of going to press.

The excavations in the nave have exposed the bases of the three westmost piers on the north side in a good state of preservation and the foundations of the others. The westmost retains the moulding at the top of the base. A good deal has been discovered about the treatment of the west end that was not known before. The space from the westmost pier to the west wall is greater than between the piers of the arcade, but this is accounted for by the absence of remains of the responds. The large, rough footings of the responds however have been found, in the case of the north arcade projecting from beneath a late piece of walling which very much confuses the internal line of the remaining base of the west wall. This remnant of walling runs north and south just within the line of the west wall: the stones are large and roughly set, and it probably formed part of a shed or cottage erected after the destruction of the nave. Its eastmost face is 3 ft. 10 in. within the line of the west wall and it extends 6 ft. 8 in. to the south of the north arcade. To the superficial observer it gives an impression of the north part of the west wall being much thicker than the south. In actual fact the west wall of the nave was 5 ft. thick and the lowest course of dressed stones remains across the west front in sufficient condition to prove that there was no west doorway, which is most unusual in a Cistercian church. The west front had a buttress on either side in line with each arcade, and there were found the footings of double buttresses at the north-west corner. The line of the west wall of the nave outside is slightly in advance of the line of the west wall of the

south aisle, as the buttress projects 3 ft. from the nave wall and 3 ft. 10 in. from the aisle wall. Probably it was the same on the north side but only the foundations remain here, and it cannot be said that there is actual proof.

Very careful investigation has been made to determine the character of the south-west corner of the nave where it joins the north end of the west range of cloister buildings. Mr. Mackenzie Walcott believed he had found the base of a circular staircase to the dormer of the *conversi* at this point, and it is indicated on his and Mr. Buckle's plans, but no trace of it has been found.

At present the south wall of the nave ends at the junction with the west wall of the existing cloister enclosure and a fairly well-finished corner has been made here in later times which at first sight disguises the fact that the south wall of the church projected westwards of this point. Actually it not only projected to meet the west front of the church but went far beyond it, forming the north end wall of the original building of the outer west range, which contained the quarters of the *conversi*. Excavation has revealed sufficient of the foundations to tell us that this structure was 22 ft. wide internally at the north end and that it belonged to the original scheme of this part of the buildings, and that it had double buttresses at its north-west corner. Its west wall has been traced southwards for 52 ft., where the beginning was found of a cross wall running eastwards to a point immediately to the north of the entrance from outside into the cloister. No attempt has yet been made to follow the foundations of this building further on southwards.

No trace has been found of any doorway leading diagonally from it into the adjacent corner of the nave as at Tintern, or into the extreme west end of the side of the nave close to the west front as at Croxden, but there certainly was a doorway long since blocked leading into the nave a little further east, from what is now the west alley of the cloister. At this point there is a very unusual arrangement. The west side of the cloister was rebuilt, as part of the Abbot's quarters most likely, with glazed windows, about 1534, but the north-west bay—the westmost of the north cloister walk—is entered on either side by an arch of much earlier date, not later than the beginning of

the fourteenth century. These two arches are segmental, of three recessed orders plainly chamfered outside, of two such orders inside, and were evidently built to support some superstructure at a time when the rest of the cloisters were of wood. It would seem as if there was at first a night stair from the dorter of the *conversi* leading to the cloister walk near the processional doorway to the church, but that before long it was desired to secure more direct access to the church and so these arches were built to support an upper storey entered from the dorter on the west side and containing a doorway on the north leading to a wooden staircase directly into the church. Such a doorway exists, although largely rebuilt, and seems to be the explanation of the arches below; Mr. Buckle regarded it as recent, but although reconstructed the probability seems to be that it is partly ancient, and its existence would go far to explain the unusual construction of the buildings at this point. Although there has been much rebuilding here, it is important to notice that the north-west corner of the cloister is intact within and that the responds of the two arches are bonded into the original walls of the church and of the west range.

The western part of the north wall of the nave seems to have been practically rooted out, as only parts of the foundations were discovered. Further east there are some remains of it above ground, and a small part of the plinth near the east end. A small portion of the plinth is left on the exterior of the north wall of the north transept. No certain trace of the usual doorway was found here.

Mr. Buckle's plan shows an altar on the west side of the west cloister walk—an unheard-of position. By some unaccountable mistake he seems to have misread the recess for a post-dissolution fire-place as provision for an altar. In view of this mistake it was decided to investigate the site of another altar shown on his plan in a not very usual situation, viz. against the pier dividing the two chapels on the east side of the north transept. Here the remains of an altar certainly exist, in the form of rough masonry, now little more than a foot in height, continuous with the remains of the base of the pier behind, of which there is one course of dressed stone remaining on the north-east side where it adjoins the wall dividing the chapels.

This stands on the remains of a large foot-pace level with the chapels behind and framed by a dwarf foundation wall 2 ft. wide which supported the now lost stone edge, and projects westwards from the base of the step at the entrance to each chapel. There are traces of slates laid in mortar which formed the foundation of the tiled floor, but all the dressed stones had gone with which the surface of the altar must have been finished. It is clear that this altar was a subsequent addition to the original five at the east end of the church, and there must have been some special reason for its erection: it seems probable that Mr. Walcott was right in his theory that it was connected with the chantry founded by Gilbert de Woolavington, rector of Huntspill, in 1297, who built and endowed a chantry chapel in Woolavington churchyard at the same time.

The normal enlargement of a Cistercian church was by adding a series of chapels east of the high altar and opening out the chapels on either side of the presbytery so as to form a processional way to give access to this eastward extension: this arrangement is found, with variations, at Abbey Dore, Waverley, Tintern and other churches where more altars were required, and where there was enough money for a large and comprehensive scheme. Here we find an additional altar placed in the only position where it would be practicable without enlarging the church.

In this connection a discovery of special interest has been made on the eve of going to press. Excavations carried out to determine the size of the buttresses on the north side of the nave have revealed the existence of a chapel added outside the nave wall in the angle between it and the west side of the north transept. The base of an altar, the foundations of pavement with a few thirteenth or fourteenth century tiles in position, leave no doubt that this was the case, although it has not yet been possible to determine the nature and extent of this addition. The only parallel to such an arrangement in a Cistercian church which the writer can recall is the extensive scheme of chapels added to the side of the nave opposite the cloister at Melrose in two sections in the fifteenth century.

The foundations of the choir stalls and of the east face of the pulpitum are thin lines of stone, not at all firmly built, and are

merely bases for wooden superstructures. No trace of a similar stone base for the west side of the pulpitum could be found.

While a very large number of tiles and fragments of tiles were found in the nave, there were no connected pieces of pavement. This and the condition of the graves points to the destruction of the nave having been both drastic and complete. It would seem as if the material was all removed northwards and as if the graves were searched for valuables.

The discovery of so large a number of ornamental tiles in the nave shows that the whole church was paved with them. This, coupled with the splendid floor of the old refectory or frater, suggests that any number of such tiles was available. Tiles of exactly similar design and manufacture are found at St. Decuman's, Dunster, and a group of other churches, more or less in the immediate neighbourhood,¹ including the chapel of Leighland. This grouping suggests local manufacture. Leighland chapel would be a highly unlikely place to be in a position to procure tiles from a distance, but it is very easy of access from Cleeve. The evidence points to these tiles being made at Cleeve, presumably by the monks themselves. That tiles were made at religious houses in mediæval times is certain. Not only have we the magnificent tiles from Chertsey, but the actual kilns were discovered at Repton.

There were several burials in the nave which no doubt came to be used for this purpose after the middle of the fourteenth century when the Black Death led to the abolition of the *conversi* and it would no longer be needed for their accommodation.

In the middle of the nave, opposite the second pier from the west end, was found a grave, 6 ft. 4 in. long within, roughly built of stones and shaped at the west for the head, like many stone coffins. In it were portions of two skulls, proving that it had been disturbed at some time. Over it were the shattered remains of a blue lias cover of extraordinary thickness—9 in.—broken most probably by the fall of some heavy material. By no means all of it could be found. Upon it, or rather upon certain surviving portions, are deeply incised a cross fleury with a hand on the dexter side grasping a crozier. This shows

¹ Bicknoller, Old Cleeve, Withycombe, Timberscombe, Luccombe, Exton.

it was the monument of an abbot, probably of the latter part of the fourteenth century.

Somewhat further east, opposite the third pillar on the south side, was found a thin slab of fine greyish sandstone much worn and badly broken. No cross or other ornament is now visible, but round the edge remain parts of an inscription in Lombardic letters. It runs as follows, so far as it can be read, for some of the letters are almost entirely gone :

[+ HIC IACET] + RANDV[L]FVS + FYZHOVRS + CVIVS/
+ CVIVS + AN/IME + PROPICI[ETVR + DEVS + AMEN]

The portions between square brackets are conjectural. The word CVIVS has been repeated by mistake.

The slab is 5 ft. 10 in. long, 2 ft. 3½ in. wide at the head, 1 ft. 7 in. wide at the foot and 2¼ in. thick. It has now been placed in the chapter-house.

On the north side of the nave near the west end was found a grave slab of Purbeck or similar shell marble, not over a grave. It had had an inscription round the edge, and it bears an incised floriated cross with its head within a circle and similar floriation at the base of the shaft. The surface is decayed and had been scaling badly. In general treatment it may be compared with the slab at Dunster which commemorates Adam of Cheddar, Prior of Dunster, 1350–1360, and no doubt belongs to the same period. It has now been placed for safety in the chapter-house. It is 6 ft. 3 in. long, 2 ft. 6 in. wide at the head, 1 ft. 4 in. wide at the foot, and is broken in several pieces.

The grave slab in the north transept is 6 ft. long, 1 ft. 11½ in. wide at the head, 1 ft. 3 in. wide at the foot : it has a chamfered edge and bears a plain heater-shaped shield incised in outline. This is a clear case of a monument that must originally have been richly painted.

On the north side of the nave, close to the third pillar from the west, were found two empty grave pits roughly lined with mortar. Apparently their contents, no doubt including stone linings, had been removed. They are close together, and measure 6 ft. 9 in. long and 2 ft. 9 in. wide.

On the north side of the structural choir, not far from the high altar a grave was found close to the north wall, consisting

of lias stones, trimmed on the inside, rough on the outside. It was lined with clay at the bottom and had evidently been disturbed though there were remains of bones. It is 6 ft. 3 in. long, 1 ft. 8 in. wide and 1 ft. 2 in. deep. Not far from here were found pieces of Ham Hill stone mouldings with roll and fillet, apparently parts of the cusping of the large arch of a monument, no doubt placed close to the wall above this grave, and similar in character to the monument of Christian Segrave or Mohun on the south side of the Priory Church, Dunster. It may well be that an isolated fragment, found in the nave, of the upper part of the mail-covered leg and part of the surcoat of a small effigy, belonged to this monument.

There are a number of fragments found at different times which seem worthy of notice.

A piece of Dundry stone with large cusps sub-cusped, not grooved for glass, and a section of a cornice with a hollow moulding ornamented with pateræ indicate a canopied monument of the fifteenth century.

Two pieces of Beer or some similar white stone are evidently remnants of another monument procured from a Devonshire source: one of these contains two cinquefoiled panels, the other is part of a cornice with a hand holding a scroll, evidently belonging to an angel.

The fragments of a fourteenth century monumental canopy of Ham Hill stone have already been noticed.

From this it is evident that the church possessed at least three fine monuments, one at least having a fourteenth-century effigy of a knight, in addition to the slab in the north transept and the four slabs or portions of slabs now in the chapter-house.

The foregoing attempts to supplement earlier accounts of Cleeve Abbey have been confined to the church.

It is very much to be hoped that similar treatment may at some time be accorded to the rest of the buildings, particularly the infirmary, the foundations of which exist and could be cleared of soil without much difficulty. There are also certain problems hitherto unsolved regarding the outlying parts of the site which require further investigation.

The work done in 1875-6 by Mr. Mackenzie Walcott and Mr.

Samson was very careful, Mr. Walcott's account of the buildings in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* for 1875-6 is very full and has many references, while Mr. Buckle's account of the buildings in vol. xxxv is also exceedingly good. But there were certain things they did not do or were unable to do, and our knowledge of monastic buildings has advanced considerably since these earlier accounts were written.

As soon as funds permit an endeavour will be made to complete the excavation of the newly discovered chapel on the north side of the nave already referred to. This will enable a new plan of the church to be completed, which Mr. G. Durand has been preparing, and which it is intended to reproduce on a future occasion.