

RECENT EXCAVATIONS AT HINTON PRIORY, SOMERSET

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THE Charterhouse of 'Locus Dei' at Henton was dedicated by Ela, Countess of Salisbury, in the year 1232, traditionally on the same day as Lacock Abbey, and is the second oldest charterhouse in England, the oldest being its near neighbour at Witham. Accounts of its history may be found in Miss E. M. Thompson's two books :— *The Somerset Carthusians*, pp. 202-366, and *The Carthusian Order in England*, pp. 147-156 ; also in *V.C.H. Somerset*, ii, p. 118, and in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xli and lvii. The existing buildings consist of the Chapterhouse (M)¹ and the Refectory (N),² which are fully described with plans and drawings, in *Proceedings*, xli, 92-98.

At Hinton, as at Witham, the lay brothers had their own quarters and church about a mile away. In the later charterhouses both monks and lay brothers occupied the same site, and this change had obviously an influence on the monastery lay-out.

It is remarkable that no excavations ever seem to have been carried out at Hinton—at any rate no record of such exists—and this may partially be explained by the fact that, since the mid-nineteenth century, the house has been occupied by a series of tenants, who appear to have taken little interest in archaeology.

Ever since I acquired the property nearly twenty years ago, I have had an intense desire to find out what lay concealed under the grass, but we had to wait until the end of the War, before we were able to make our home here, and it took us several years to get the place into order. When the Office of Works architects inspected the monastic ruins just before the War, they stated in their report that there was at present no evidence to show whether the Great Cloister lay on the north or south side of the church.

This mystery at any rate I determined to clear up. Accordingly in April 1950, with the assistance of my sons, who have throughout

1 The theory put forward by F. T. Elworthy (*Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, xli, ii, 96-98) that it is the lay brothers' church is surely incorrect.

2 Letters in brackets refer to the Plan (Pl. X).

done the most laborious part of the work, excavation was started in earnest. Even an amateur archaeologist could hardly fail to notice the corbels on the south side of the Chapterhouse and Refectory, which indicate the previous existence of a pentice, while, during the unusually dry summer of 1949, distinct traces of foundations had appeared in the paddock to the west of the walled garden, which now occupies the greater part of the Great Cloister (marked L on the plan) (Pl. X).

I have always thought that my house once formed part of the gatehouse and guesthouse of the monastery, and this view was further confirmed by the discovery of an estate map of 1785, which showed 'bartons' on the west side of the present large lawn in front of the house. It is reasonable to infer that, where barns and stables existed in 1785, they also existed in the time of the monks, and that this, therefore, was the site of the outer court of the monastery. In accordance with the usual lay-out of a charterhouse, the Great Cloister must have been situated on the south side of the existing monastic buildings, in order to preserve, as far as possible, the solitude of the Carthusian monk.

We started work, therefore, on the west side of the walled garden, along the path, which tradition has correctly named 'The Monks' Walk', and soon found that we were on the right track. First we uncovered the west wall of the Great Cloister and subsequently laid bare two garden walls, which we had marked with pegs during the drought of the previous year, and which were only a few inches beneath the surface. The excavation of the cell, belonging to this garden (A), caused us far more trouble, as it was distinctly fragmentary and had completely disappeared in places. Moreover the whole area, below the surface, resembled a mason's yard. Piles of fallen debris made it hard to dig and harder still to identify the original foundations. Fortunately the south-east corner of the cell was quite clear, as it was bonded into the cloister wall.

On the south side of the wall separating this garden from the next one further south, we made a most interesting discovery. Here unsuspecting cattle had been grazing for centuries over the spot where the monk had been accustomed to take his daily exercise in his garden. Once again, after nearly four centuries, lay exposed to view the paved walk (B) the drain under the wall (C), to carry off the surface water, and most intriguing of all—the stone edging to the path, in its original upright position (Pl. XI, 1).

Meanwhile I had discovered a well preserved wall, a few inches below the surface, along the west side of the paddock, parallel with the west wall of the cloister. This wall (not shown on plan) I took at first to be the back wall of the gardens, but its unusual thickness (2 ft. 8 in.) and its distance from the cloister wall (105 ft.) led me to the conclusion that it must have been the boundary wall of the monastery. Later in the summer I found distinct traces of a wall in a similar position on the south side of the cloister.

At the SE. corner of garden (A) the base of a doorway was uncovered at right angles to the cloister wall. This position was puzzling, as, instead of being, as might have been expected, in the south wall of the cell, it was in the wall dividing the two gardens. There was no trace of a passage, and no similar door-jambs could be found at any other point along the cloister wall.

I then found the back wall of the gardens on the south side of the cloister at several points. Repeated proddings with an iron spike, or a fork, and the removal of a turf at likely spots also met with success on the east side, and the position of the cloister wall, as well as that of the back wall of the gardens, could clearly be made out. The south-west corner of the cloister had fortunately survived, so that we were able to establish the length of the west side.

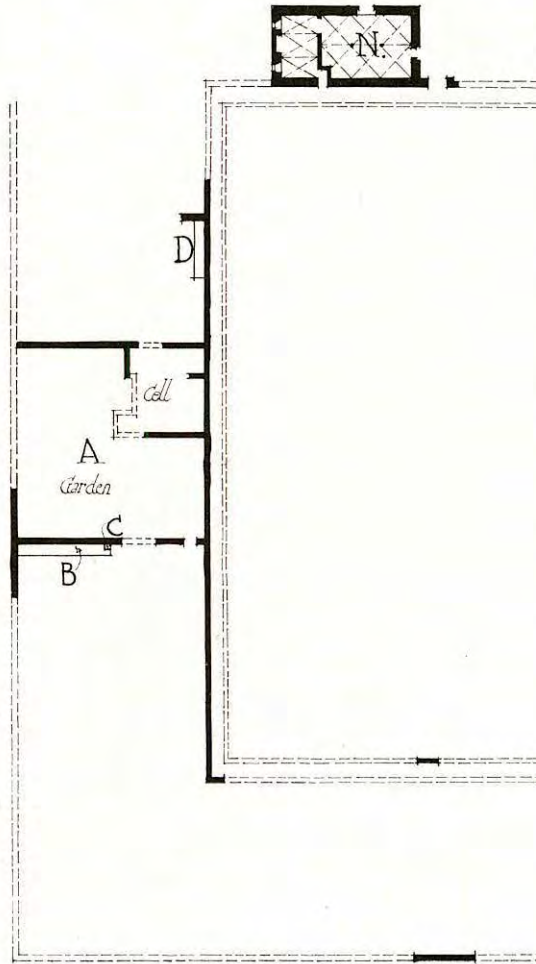
At this juncture I was fortunate in obtaining the enthusiastic collaboration of Mr. R. S. Cockrill, without whose technical knowledge any accurate survey or detailed plan of the monastery would have been beyond my powers.

In the autumn the uprooting of a venerable walnut tree brought to light a stretch of stone paving (D) for some twenty feet along the west face of the cloister wall to the north of plot (A). It was impossible to say whether this had formed the floor of a cell or of an interior passage.

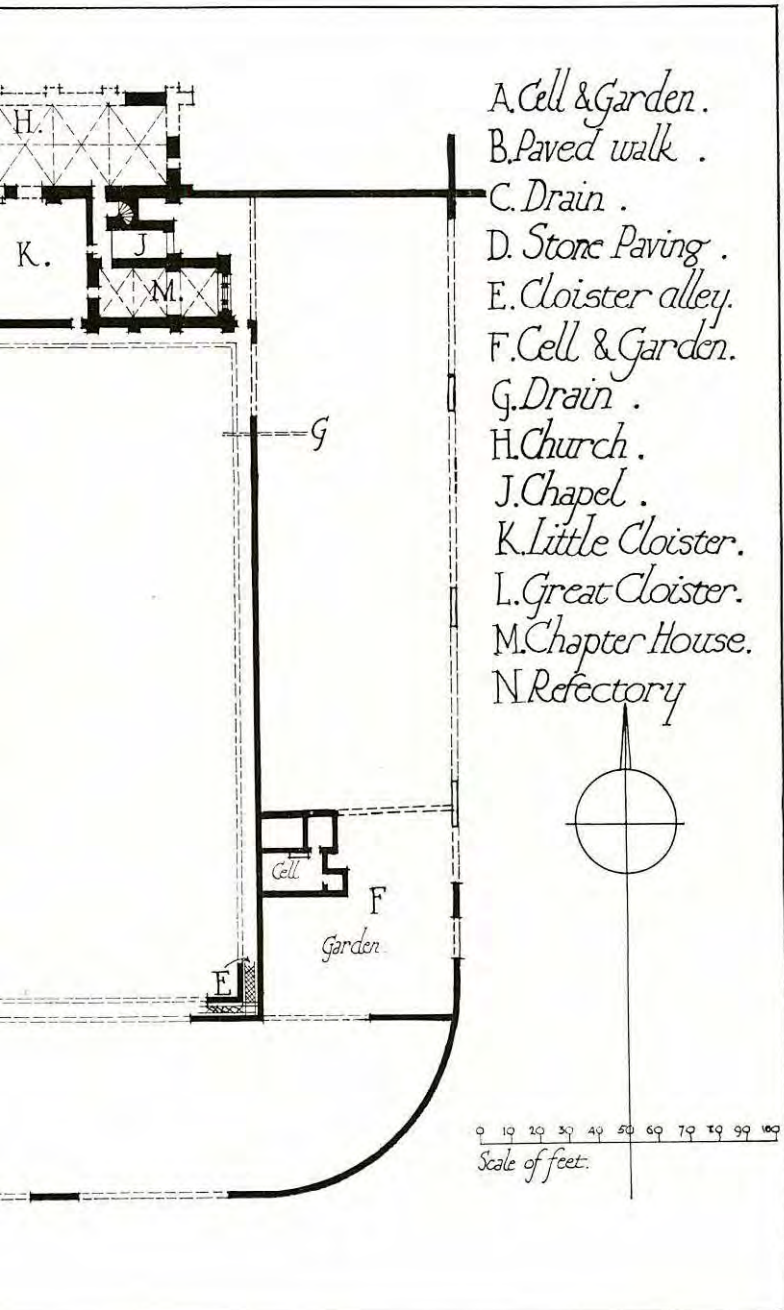
We were now able to get the dimensions of the whole cloister garth, and the accuracy of our measurements was proved by the fact that the peg, with which we had marked the supposed position of the SE. corner of the cloister alley was found to be only six inches out, when my son and I uncovered that corner (E) in July 1951 (Pl. XII, 1).

This piece of excavation proved that the cloister alley was only $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft. wide and revealed not only the pattern of the original tiling, but also the corner of the cloister alley wall, on which the pillars supporting the pentice must have rested. The tiles were badly worn and mutilated, but enough remained, combined with the fragments

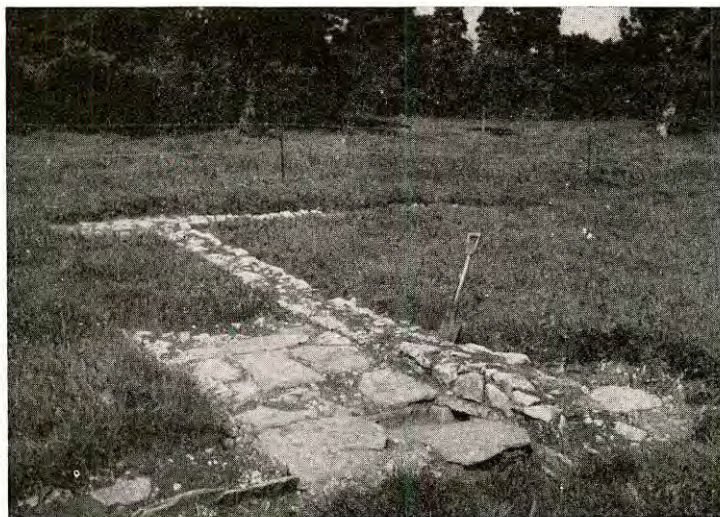
PLAN OF THE CHARTERHOUSE
AT HINTON SOMERSET.



Plan of the Carthusian Priory, Hi



Wormesley, as revealed by excavation, 1950-1.



1. Hinton Charterhouse : Garden Path (B), showing stone edging, and surface-water drain under garden wall (C), W. side of Great Cloister; seen from SE.



- 2 Fireplace and Doorway of Cell (F) on E. of Great Cloister; seen from W.

found elsewhere, to show that they were encaustic tiles of the early fourteenth century, later verified by Mr. A. D. Hallam. The pattern along the south side was in diamond squares, while on the east side the tiles were laid in diagonal strips, with a clearly defined dark blue edging 2 in. wide on either side.

We then turned our attention to a cell (F) on the east side of the cloister, which we found to be in a far better state of preservation than the one on the west side, which we had excavated the previous year. This cell was roughly 30 ft. square and had, besides the living room, three other rooms, one of which was rather small. The chief discoveries, however, apart from the general lay-out, were firstly two threshold stones, indicating the doorways from the living room to two of the other rooms—the doorway to the NW. room had vanished—and secondly the hearth, with its stones cracked and discoloured by the heat of the fire, just as the last monk had left it. (Pl. XI, 2). An interesting sequel to this was the sudden realisation that the doorway, leading from our spare bedroom to a small adjoining room, was identical, both in the shape and size of the threshold stone and the moulding of the jambs, proving that the builders of the house in the sixteenth century had taken a complete cell doorway and re-erected it. On one of the jambs, at the base of this doorway, there is carved the letter 'Q' in Gothic type, by which, as at the London Charterhouse and at the modern Charterhouse of St. Hugh, near Cowfold in Sussex, the number of the cell was indicated. There was no trace in the cell (F) of any interior passage or staircase, but the access to the upper storey, if such existed in a charterhouse of this early date, may have been by a ladder. At the SW. corner a large flat stone may indicate a doorway from the cell into the garden. No trace of a doorway could be found in the cloister wall, nor was there any evidence of any interior paving. Numerous fragments showed that the cell had been roofed with stone tiles and the walls coated with thick plaster. It will be seen from the plan that the east end of the cell had rather a curious shape. I think it by no means improbable that future excavations at Witham might reveal its prototype. While vainly searching later for the corner of any garden walls, along the east wall of the cloister, further north we came across an interesting drain (G), composed of stone slabs, which ran under the wall and which we traced for a short distance on either side.

The excavation of three corners of the Church (H) in the spring of 1951 effectively exploded the myth, which (like that of the underground passage from the Priory to Norton St. Philip) is surprisingly common, that it was a magnificent edifice, as large as Bath Abbey. In actual fact, in accordance with Carthusian practice, it proved, as I expected, to be a plain rectangular building, with no sign of aisles or transepts, measuring internally 96 ft. in length, and 26 ft. in width. From the fragment of the south wall still standing it is evident that it had five bays on each side and five long narrow windows, each consisting of a single lancet. There does not appear to have been a tower, though a bell-turret probably existed. The wall of the church was 4 ft. thick, resting on massive footings 6 ft. wide. The SW. corner was only found after some hard digging, as it was three feet down under piles of debris. On the other hand the NE. corner (Pl. XII, 2) and the SE. corner were only a foot below the surface and caused us little difficulty. The remainder of the east wall had practically disappeared, but, after digging down for three feet, we found enough of the footings to prove that it was not apsidal. I dug a trial hole near the supposed position of the High Altar, in the hope of finding a tiled floor, but with no result. Unfortunately the floor level is over two feet deep, so that a complete excavation of the church interior would have been a most laborious operation.

During the Christmas holidays 1951 we definitely established the position of the west wall of the Little Cloister (K). At the north end, where it joins the Church, there is a beautifully preserved corner of ashlar, while at the south end some eight feet of the wall were uncovered, as well as about two square yards of the north side of the cloister alley, with paving and tiling much the same as at the SE. corner (E). The east face of the west wall of (K) had been badly crushed, but the west face was generally in good condition. The Little Cloister formed almost an exact square of $38\frac{1}{2}$ ft.

There still remains much to be done, but at any rate the main lay-out of the monastery has for the first time been definitely established. I fear that the wholesale robbery of the site for building purposes, together with its use for many years as an orchard, has caused the complete disappearance of much that must have been there originally, as deep digging at measured intervals on the east side failed to reveal any more cell and garden walls. Even the



1. Hinton Charterhouse : SE. corner of Great Cloister alley (E), showing tiling, paving and corner of front wall, on which supports of the pentice rested: seen from NW.



2. N. Wall of Church (H), NE. corner; seen from W.

foundations have vanished at corners, where we confidently expected to find them. This has been the one really disappointing result of our labours.

For various reasons we have had to fill in most of the excavations, but I trust that our efforts will make it easier to carry out any further operations in the future, as all our discoveries have been carefully measured and recorded.¹

1. Since going to press, at the end of March 1952, both the NE. and NW. corners of the cloister garth have been found. The former was covered in again, as it was in poor condition, but at the NW. corner further excavation revealed the doorway of a cell, in excellent condition, and several square feet of tiling and stone paving. From this it seems that the great cloister alley was a foot wider on the north side than on the other three sides.