

# *Excavations at Cahir Abbey*

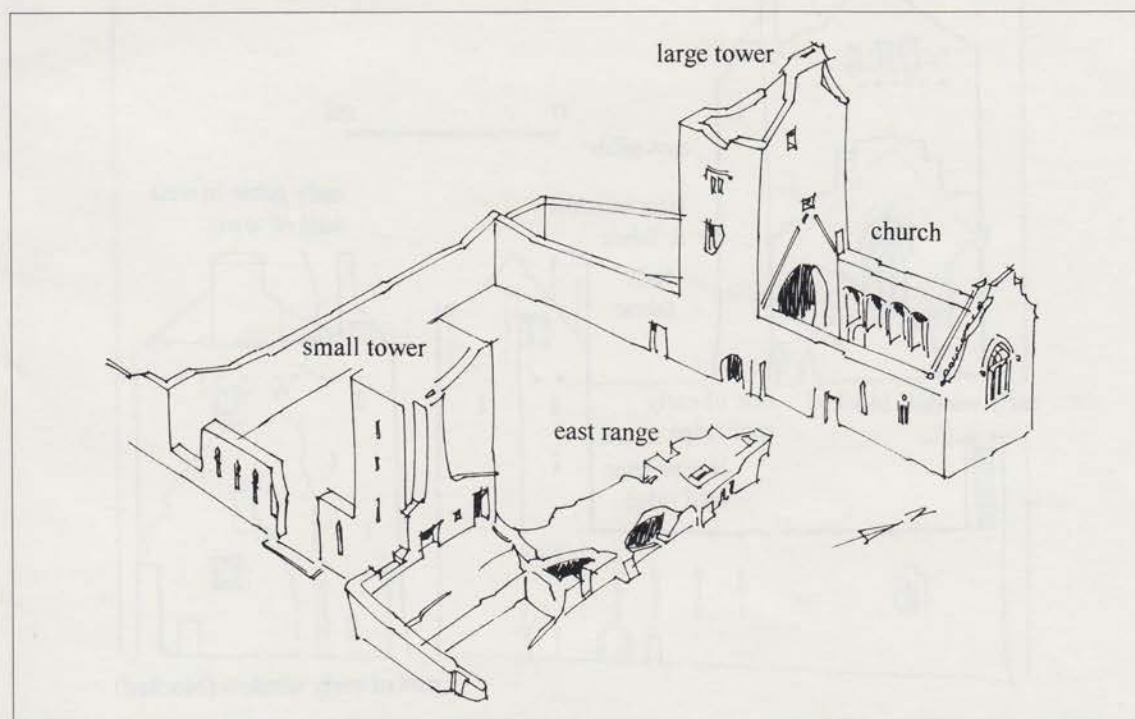
By Dave Pollock

## **Introduction**

Over six weeks of August and September 1994 excavations were carried out on the east range of Cahir Abbey ahead of consolidation (94E124). Part of the south range associated with a fallen arch was also investigated. The excavations threw a good deal of light on the building history; amongst the usual noise of small changes and repairs was a simple sequence of construction and repair.

The church was built first, and apparently completed before the claustral ranges were contemplated. Somewhere close to the dissolution of the abbey both church and ranges were substantially altered. Cahir Abbey, the Augustinian priory of St. Mary, had a prior by c. 1200 AD (Brooks, 1936, 326).

Although the priory was founded in the closing years of the 12th century, the church may be older. It was not unusual for Augustinian canons to be granted existing parish churches as part of their endowment. Three-and-a-half centuries later, at the dissolution, it was successfully claimed that the church building had served as the parish church 'from time immemorial' (White, 1943, 331).



**Fig. 1** – sketch of surviving fabric.

Little survives of the early church. Fortunately the only original wall standing is the one at the junction with the east range, and it is clear from the junction that the range was not part of an original design; its masonry has largely peeled off the church wall. Much of the church, the smaller tower in the angle between the east and south ranges, and the barrel vaulting in the east range are late, evidence of thorough renovation in the late 15th century or 16th century.

### The upstanding remains

**The Church.** The church is roofless, but its walls are in good repair, standing to roof level. A tower rises above the west end of the current church shell, where we might expect the junction of the original nave and chancel. The tower is late 15th century or 16th century, erected when the church underwent major alterations. The east gable of the church was largely rebuilt, with a single distinctive window replacing lancets. The entire north wall was rebuilt from ground level; it is wider than the older south wall, and carried a walkway at roof level, drained by a row of spouts. The wallwalk was approached from the tower and crossed the new gable on stone steps between parapets. A parapet would have surmounted the spouts on the new north wall.

The arrangement of windows in the new wall suggests a screened division between nave and chancel east of the row of lancets; the entire late church was housed in the current shell, between the partly rebuilt east gable and the west end of the new tower (Fig. 2). The W wall of

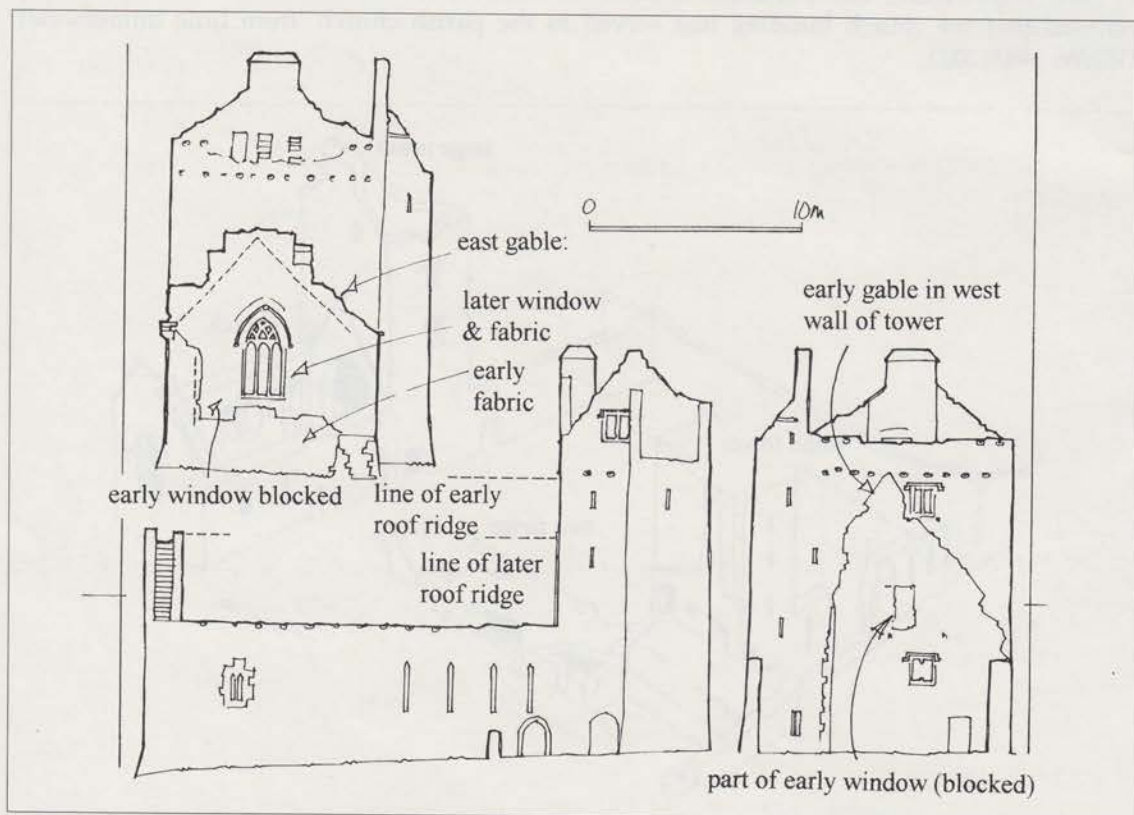


Fig. 2 – east, north and west elevations of church.



the tower is interesting; the late hammer-dressed limestone rubble of the tower is built on to the coarser mixed stone rubble of a gable wall. The gable is the W end of the church standing before the late alterations took place, with the scar of a single small central window. The roof pitch in the gable is considerably steeper than its replacement.

The gable is associated with a wall continuing W in the appropriate position for one side of a nave. Corbels on its south side supported a cloister alley, but there is no indication, that a nave was ever built beside the cloister.

**The claustral ranges.** Part of the church is older than the east range. At the junction of the two, holes were cut into the church wall to tie in the main walls of the range (Fig. 3). The main door from church to cloister is adjacent to the east range; an elegant, semicircular moulding over the door has been removed and the space patched with characteristic hammer-dressed limestone rubble. In the NW corner of the cloister another door entered from the north; this never had an elegant moulding and may not be early. It is now blocked. (A third door, immediately west of the tower, is recent.)

There was probably a W range. The cloister alley was carried on corbels along a west wall pierced by at least three doors, all now blocked (Fig. 4). The door beside the south range is represented by part of a relieving arch and appears original. The next is an insert, poorly framed in rough stone. The third has largely disappeared, leaving only its west jamb. The finish and fit of the stonework suggest that this opening was original. The cloister wall split at this point and a length to the north fell or was dismantled. A fourth door may have weakened the wall at the other end of the breach; no moulding or relieving arch survives, but a door here would balance the overall arrangement around the cloister.

The presence of doors in a wall does not prove the existence of a roofed building, but in this case there is a hint of a parallel wall to support a roof. The apparent west end of the south range is post medieval, built to continue the line down the west side of the cloister. The south range originally extended further west; a wall might be expected heading north in line with the gable at the end of the range. This wall would allow a west range behind the doors.

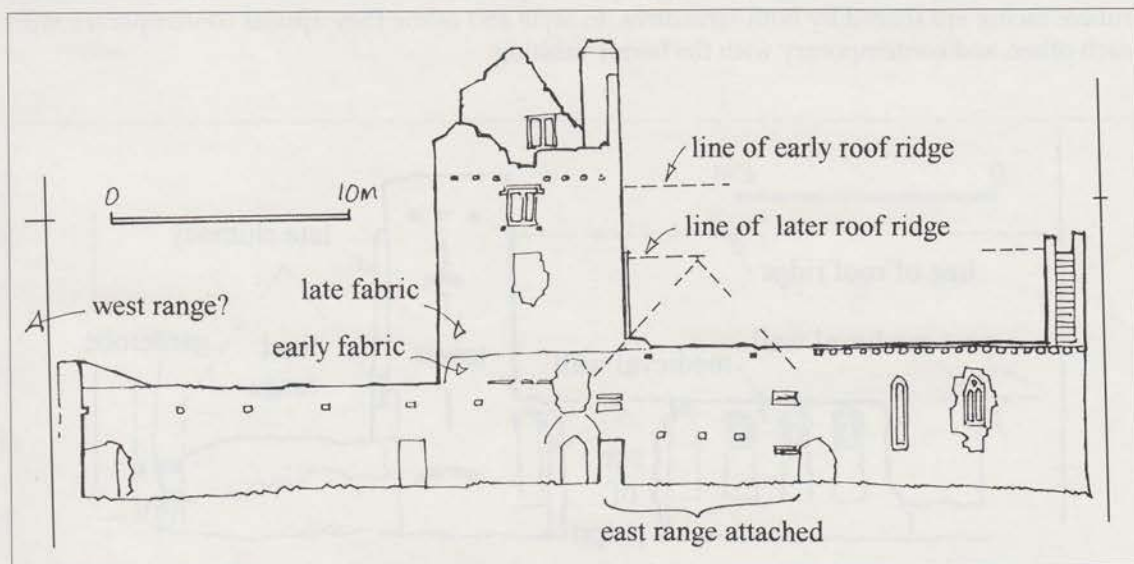


Fig. 3 – south elevation of church.

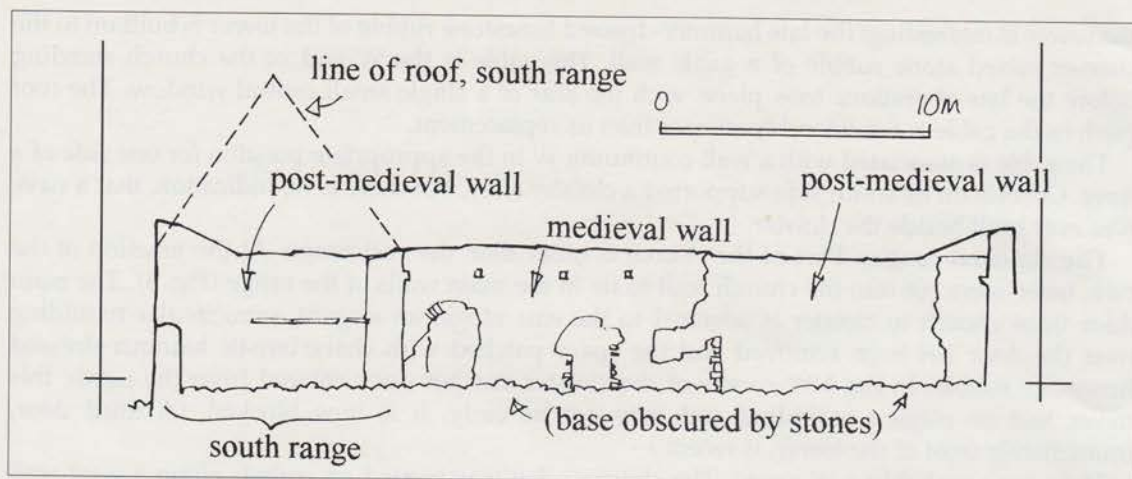


Fig. 4 – west range elevation.

Most of the south range was a dining room, with a floor at ground level and no second storey below the top of the walls. The room was lit by a row of lancets in the south wall (and probably by windows in the lost west gable). There would have been no space for windows between roof and cloister alley in the lost north wall.

The lancets in the dining room were reduced in size and a new pulpit was added (Fig. 5); otherwise the structure was largely unaltered during its use. The east end of the range and the adjoining east range were substantially modified with the insertion of barrel vaulting and the construction of a second tower.

The second tower is lower and very much smaller in plan than the tower on the church. However, window mouldings, drainage spouts, quoins, and the hammer-dressed limestone rubble facing are shared by both structures. In style and fabric they appear contemporary with each other, and contemporary with the barrel vaulting.

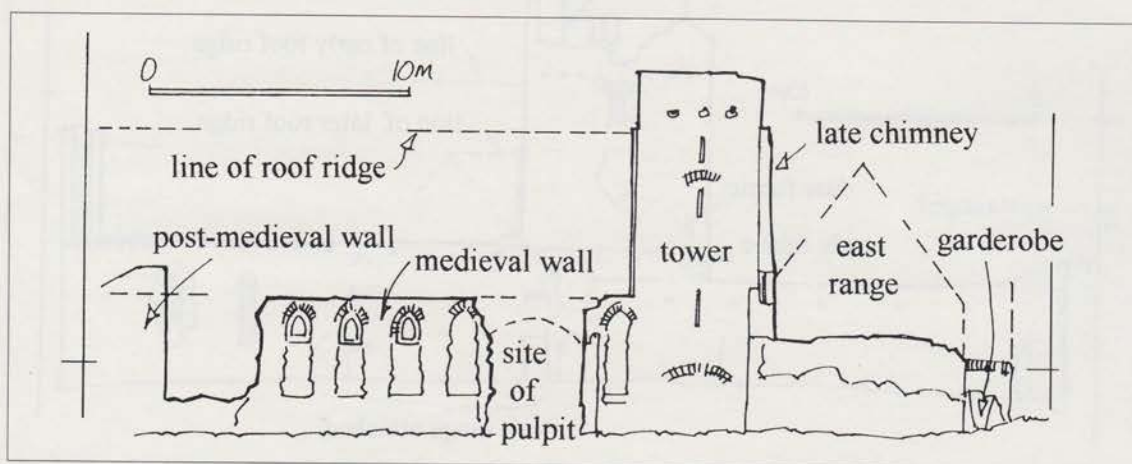


Fig. 5 – south range elevation.



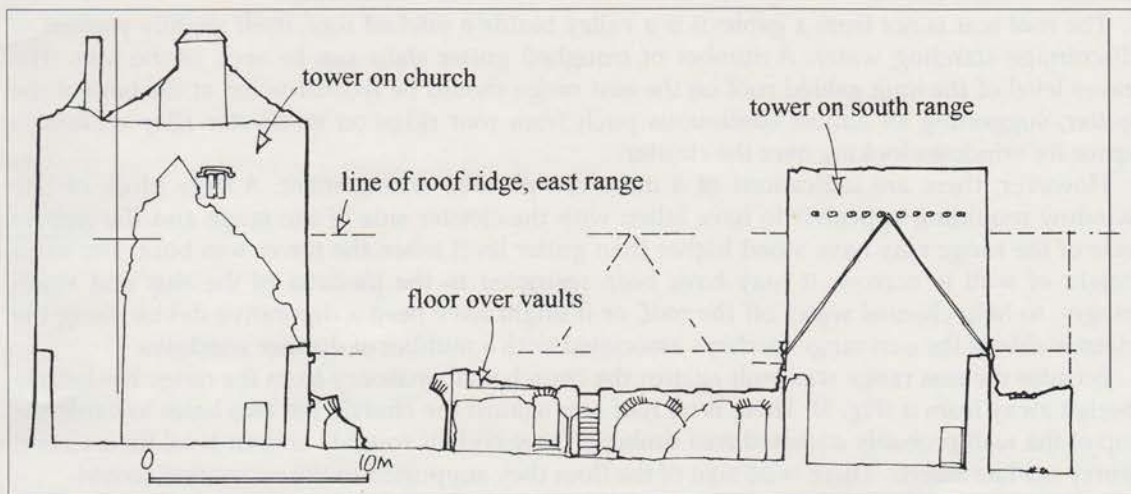


Fig. 6 – east range and towers elevation.

The east range stands in places to second storey level, to the floor level of the storey over the vaults (Fig. 6). Scraps of information on the second storey above the floor can be gleaned from the junction of the range and the second tower.

The east side stands in places to second storey level, to the floor level of the storey over the vaults. Scraps of information on the second storey above the floor can be gleaned from the junction of the range and the second tower (Fig. 7).

The east side of the tower boasts an elegant fireplace with chimney, an earlier chimney flue, and a very low pitched roof scar, associated with the second storey of the east range. The fireplace with chimney is an addition, replacing the simple flue in the tower wall; the addition is almost certainly post monastic, heating and decorating a private apartment. The earlier flue indicates heating in this part of the east range when the tower is built.

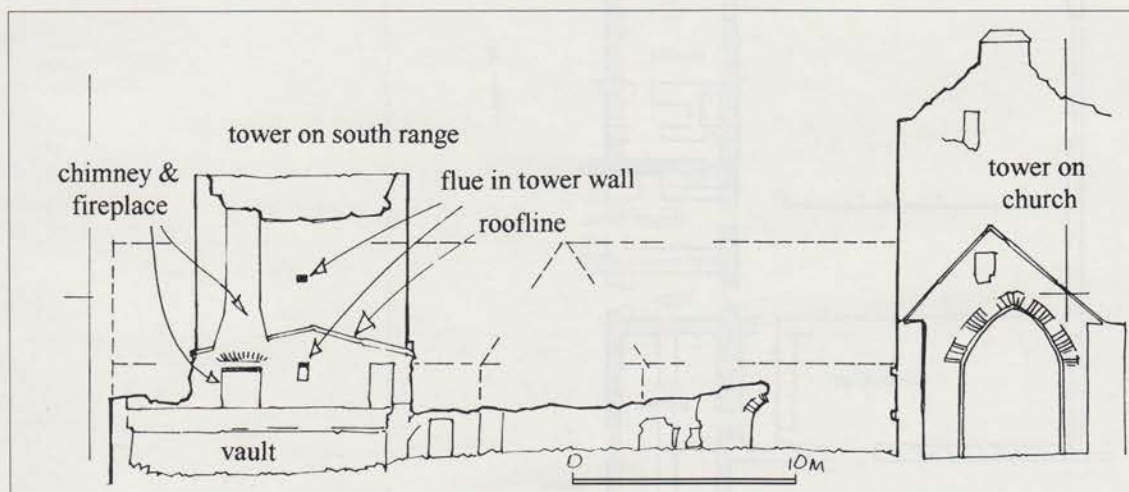


Fig. 7 – east range elevation, from east.

The roof scar is not from a gable; it is a valley beside a pitched roof, itself slightly pitched to discourage standing water. A number of troughed gutter slabs can be seen in the scar. The eaves level of the long gabled roof on the east range should be reconstructed at the base of the gutter, suggesting an almost continuous pitch from roof ridge on to cloister alley without a space for windows looking over the cloister.

However, there are indications of a more complicated arrangement. A large block of late window moulding appeared to have fallen with the cloister side of the range and the cloister side of the range may have stood higher than gutter level when the tower was built. The extra height of wall is narrow; it may have been restricted to the junction of the east and south ranges, to help channel water off the roof, or it might have been a decorative device along the cloister side of the east range, perhaps associated with a number of dormer windows.

Because the east range was built against the church wall, masonry from the range has largely peeled away from it (Fig. 3). There is no roof scar against the church, but two holes towards the top of the wall probably socketed roof timbers. Three corbels roughly at floor level for a second storey are late inserts. There is no sign of the floor they supported in the excavation record.

**Other remains.** Mortared stone walling to the south of the claustral ranges was not investigated.

### The earlier remains (E range)

The east range was built as three rooms and a slype (passage) (Fig. 8). Beside the church was a large sacristy, beside this the chapter house, beside this the slype, and beyond this probably the kitchen.

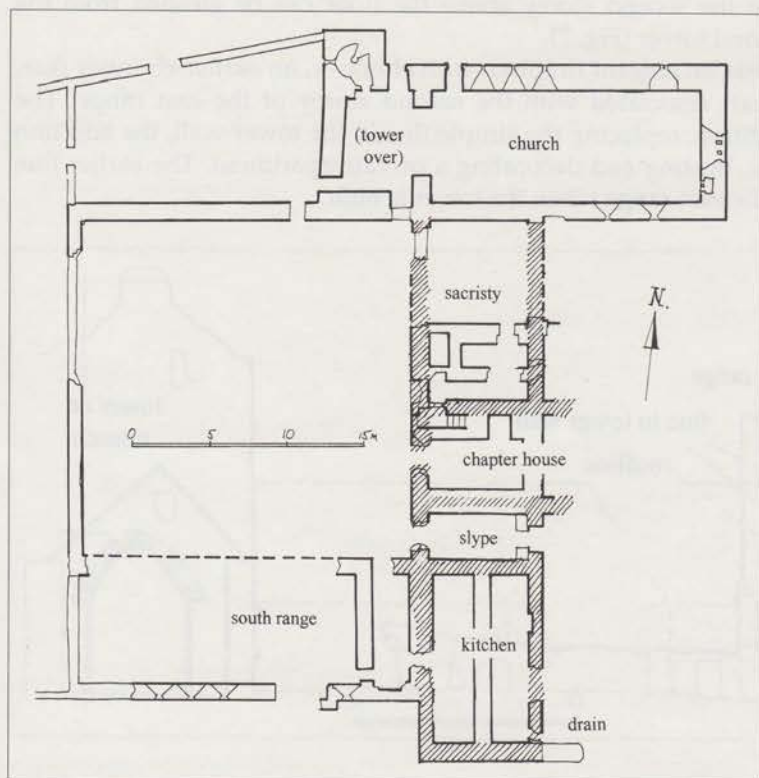


Fig. 8 – east range (original shaded).



**The Sacristy.** A wide door close to the church gave access from the cloister to a large chamber (Fig. 9). A clumsy late window arrangement in the east wall suggests original lighting from tall lancets on this side; the surviving openings are the remains of a lancet divided and modified to accommodate inserted floors and walls. There is no surviving trace of an original second storey over this room (nor over the original chapter house), and no sign of an original stairs to it.

At some stage (undated) the room was divided with an unusually wide wall. The N end kept its high ceiling, but the south end had a second storey and stairs inserted. The stairs were stone, supported by a clay-bonded barrel vault, and the new floor was wooden. The upstairs room may have been the parlour; a fireplace was built in its corner (Fig. 10).

**The Chapter House.** The second original room from the church projected east beyond the range and had burials inserted below its floor; it is most likely the chapter house (Fig. 11). Its floor and ceiling have not survived and the lighting arrangement, from the east end, is unknown.

The house contracted to end flush with the rest of the range, and probably changed function at the same time. Its new east wall had two lancets and a central door, more in keeping with an elegantly lit passage than a chamber. The rest of the original chapter house was unroofed but its side walls were not taken down to ground level.

The contraction is undated and may be associated with inserting the second storey next door in the old sacristy. There is a suggestion of a second storey built into the contracted chapter house probably at this time; a single joist impression was found at the top of the surviving wall plaster. It would certainly seem sensible to extend the second storey all the way from the (assumed) dormitory over the kitchen to the new stairs, rather than inserting a single chamber at the top of the steps. In this case the lancets in the new east wall must have lit both storeys (Fig. 12).

**The kitchen and toilet.** The largest room in the range was shared by the south range (Fig. 13); it occupied the corner and probably serviced the large dining room next door. At least one fireplace in the original east wall suggests a function as parlour or kitchen; the size and position of the room argue for the latter.

The currently unvaulted half of the room has been damaged below its original floor level, apparently by gravecutting, clearing, and cutting a drain. The room was only partly excavated in 1994, and areas of disturbance were not dug. Amongst the casualties is a major wall which once separated the room from a drain.

The drain appears too high to service the kitchen, and too high to service a ground floor latrine. It may well have flushed a first floor latrine, accessed from the canons' dormitory over the kitchen. The floor level of the toilet is indicated by a rebate for joists in the east gable, partly sealed under the stonework of the later vault.

### Major alterations (E range)

The wooden second storey floors in the east range were removed and replaced over barrel vaults (Fig. 14). A fire in part of the range, represented by scorched plaster high on the walls of the former chapter house, probably prompted the decision to renovate in stone.

The vaults were built over wicker centering. The formidable weight of the new stonework was transferred and braced with some success against the gable of the dining room and the substantial cross wall earlier inserted in the old sacristy. The east wall of the kitchen withstood the pressure for perhaps as long as the wall in the sacristy. Both finally succumbed.

A second stone stairs was built alongside the first and at great effort a passage was inserted

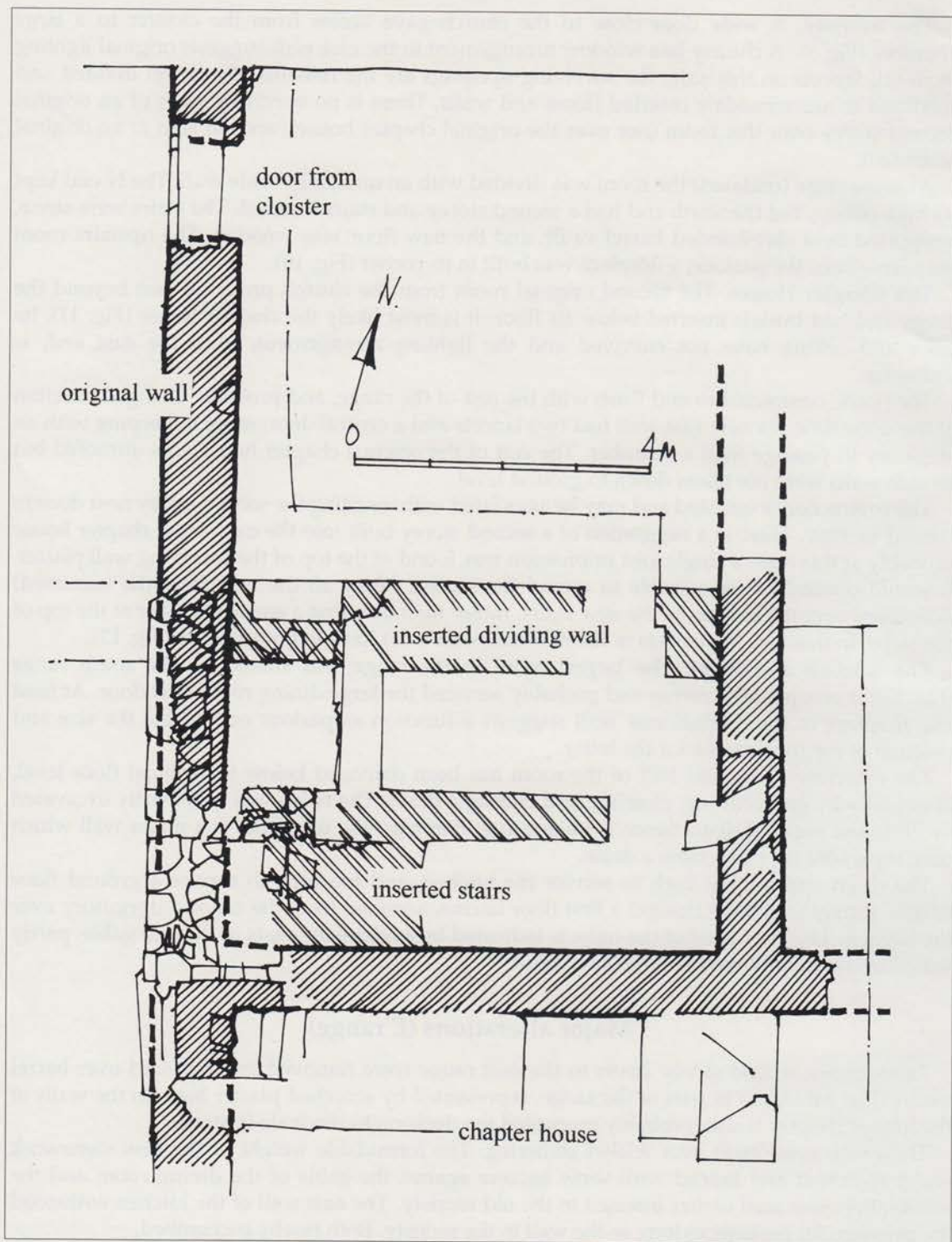


Fig. 9 – Sacristy.



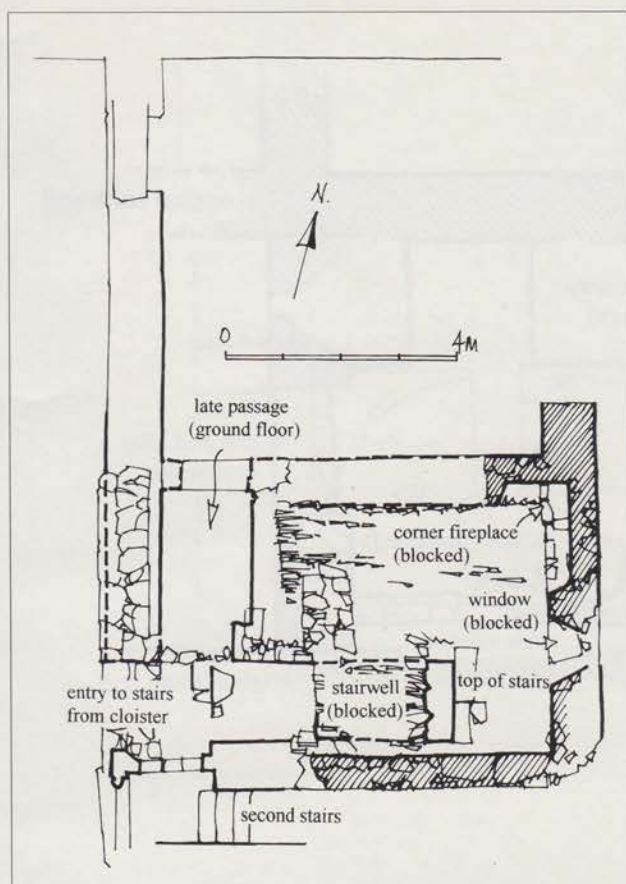


Fig. 10 – Sacristy, inserted second storey.

in the range to connect the feet of both flights of stairs with each other and with the (former?) sacristy. The cloister walk should have made such a passage unnecessary.

Both passage and sacristy had a wooden floor. The sacristy was extended east along the wall of the church at some stage after its shortening, perhaps when the rest of the range was vaulted.

Upstairs a single room ran from the landing of the new staircase to a crosswall over the slype/kitchen wall. A second room, with a slightly higher floor level, continued to the south end of the range. The first room is probably a dormitory; the second is probably not. It has a chimney flue in the wall it shares with the smaller tower.

The tower was built over a vaulted passage between the kitchen and dining room. The dining room was not vaulted, but the construction of a pulpit in its south wall can be ascribed to this period by the characteristic hammer dressed rubble used to block redundant windows (Fig. 5).

**Dating the alterations.** The pulpit must have been built in the dining room before 1540; thereafter it was obsolete. Unfortunately there is nothing stronger than a similarity of rubble stonework to link changes in the dining room with changes in the church and east range.

Certainly the church and east range appear to be rebuilt together. Their vaults use the same wicker formers, their walls the same rubble masonry, and more importantly the same dressed limestone door jambs and window mouldings.

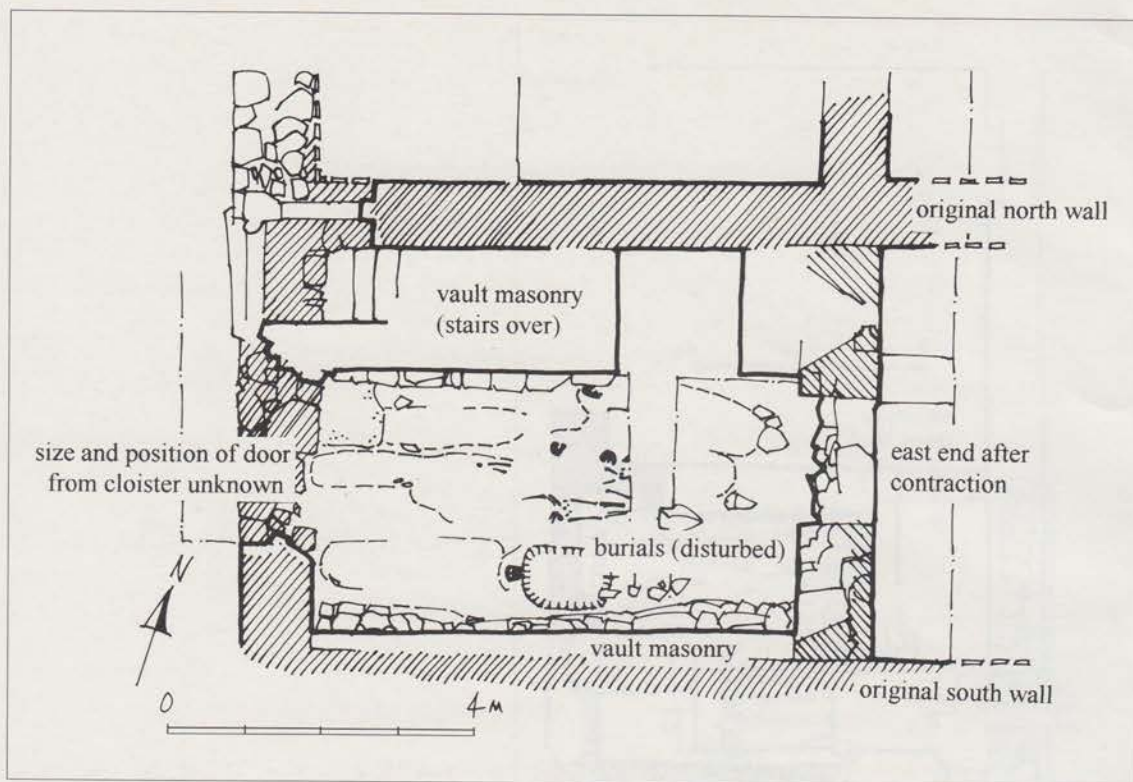


Fig. 11 – Chapter house.

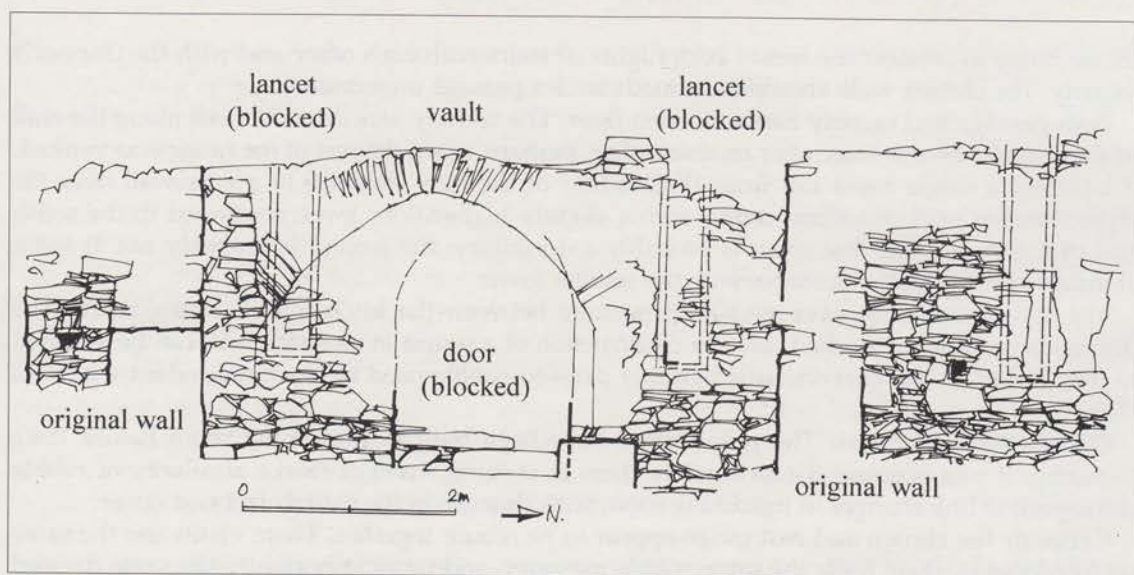


Fig. 12 – Chapter house, profile elevation.



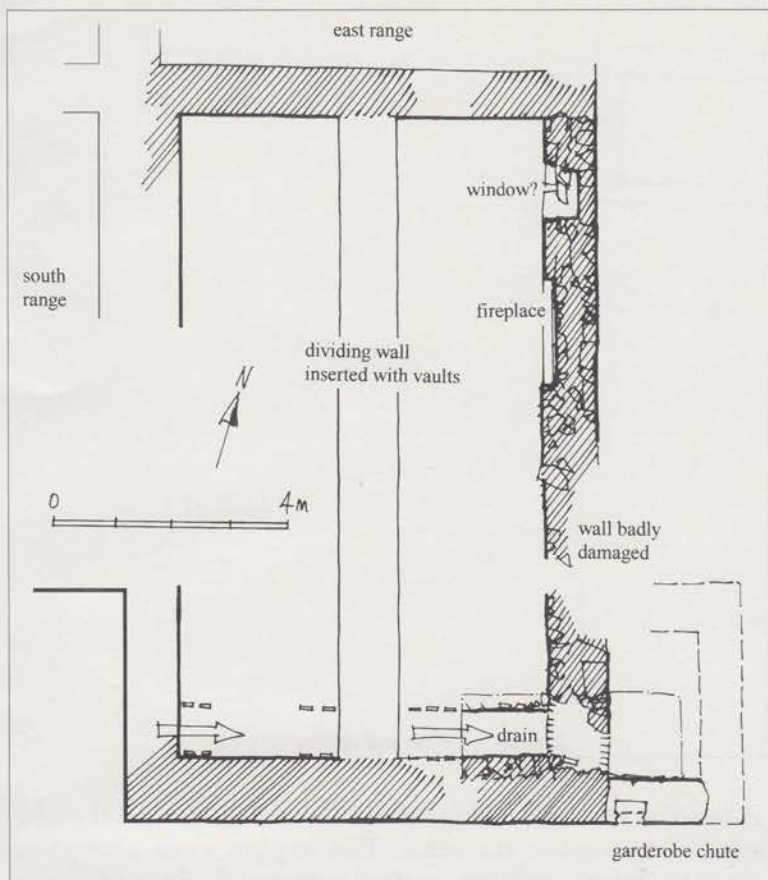


Fig. 13 – Kitchen and drain.

For three reasons the rebuilding is thought to predate the surrender of the priory in 1540. Firstly, the door from cloister to church was maintained despite the need to strengthen the wall with the door (to take the weight of the vaulted tower). Secondly, a window on the smaller tower was built short to accommodate the pentice roof of the cloister walk. If the roof on the cloister walk and the door to the church were retained, there is a strong chance that canons were in residence.

The third reason is more fundamental. The building work undertaken would have been costly. If a patron was rebuilding the parish church and constructing a residence next door, he would probably build a residence more to his lay needs.

**Alterations after 1540.** The church continued in use after 1540, with the former prior as vicar. The rest of the buildings, an orchard and an acre of garden became the property of Sir Thomas Butler. The east range by now had a poorly lit barrel vaulted ground floor. (The lancets in the former chapter house were blocked when the vault was built) (Fig. 12). The kitchen may have retained its function but the chapter house had moved, perhaps to the better lit sacristy.

A large number of burials have been cut into the site of the sacristy; unfortunately it was not possible to tell whether any were inhumed when the room was roofed. By the time the vaulting was inserted the drain beside the kitchen was out of use and the wall between kitchen and former drain removed. Later a small tower with garderobe was buttressed onto the SE corner of the range (Fig. 13).

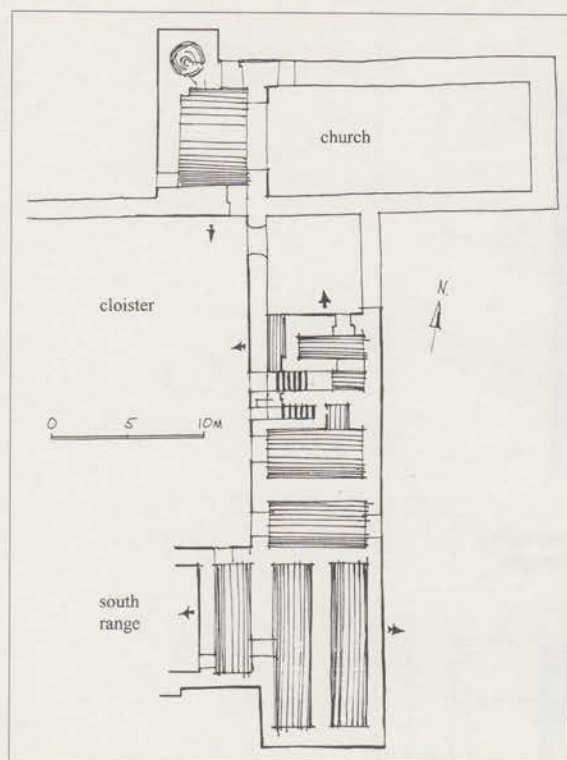


Fig. 14 – Vaults and stairs.

There appears to be an interval between the drain silting up and the construction of the new toilet in the tower; one does not directly replace the other. This implies some alternative arrangement during the latter days of the priory, probably another toilet and flushing drain just south of the gable end of the range. Such a toilet may well have operated from the start, and its drain may still have operated when the garderobe was built.

The garderobe (a single seater) serviced the storey over the kitchen. A fine 16th century fireplace and flue belong to the apartment, replacing the modest flue constructed with the smaller tower before 1540 (Fig. 7). The garderobe is associated with the apartment but may have been built for the earlier priory room. The apartment over the kitchen was entered by one or both of the stone staircases; they remained in use together until the east range finally lost its roof.

#### REFERENCES

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