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THE PREMONSTRATENSIAN ABBEY OF ST. MARY,  
BLANCHLAND, NORTHUMBERLAND.

By W. H. KNOWLES, F.S.A.<sup>1</sup>

The situation of Blanchland is wild and remote, even in these days of well-kept roads, and must have been so to an unusual degree at the period of its foundation. It lies in a secluded spot in the upper reaches of the river Derwent, which forms the boundary of the counties of Northumberland and Durham, and it is therefore one of the most southerly points in the former of the two counties. It is closed in on all sides by high moorlands, which on the north rise to an elevation of 1,345 feet at Burntshieldshaugh Fell. The nearest railway stations are Hexham, Stanhope, and Shotley Bridge, and are all more than ten miles distant.

Blanchland derives its name from an earlier foundation of the same order, having the same name (Blanche Lande),<sup>2</sup> in the diocese of Coutances in Normandy.

The foundation was established at the instance of Walter de Bolbec in 1165, for an abbot and twelve canons of the Premonstratensian order.<sup>3</sup> The only other house of this order in Northumberland was Alnwick, a more important and a wealthier establishment.

The history of the house may be briefly told. At the time of, or immediately after, its foundation, it was granted the churches of Heddon on the Wall,<sup>4</sup> Bywell St. Andrew, Kirkharle, and, later, Bolam, all in the same county. It was plundered by the Scots, and a picturesque story is told of how the marauders, after they had failed to locate the house, were guided by the sound of the bells, which the canons rang for joy at their supposed escape.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Read November 5th, 1902.

<sup>2</sup> The name occurs as Alblanda, Blacalanda, and Glacalanda.

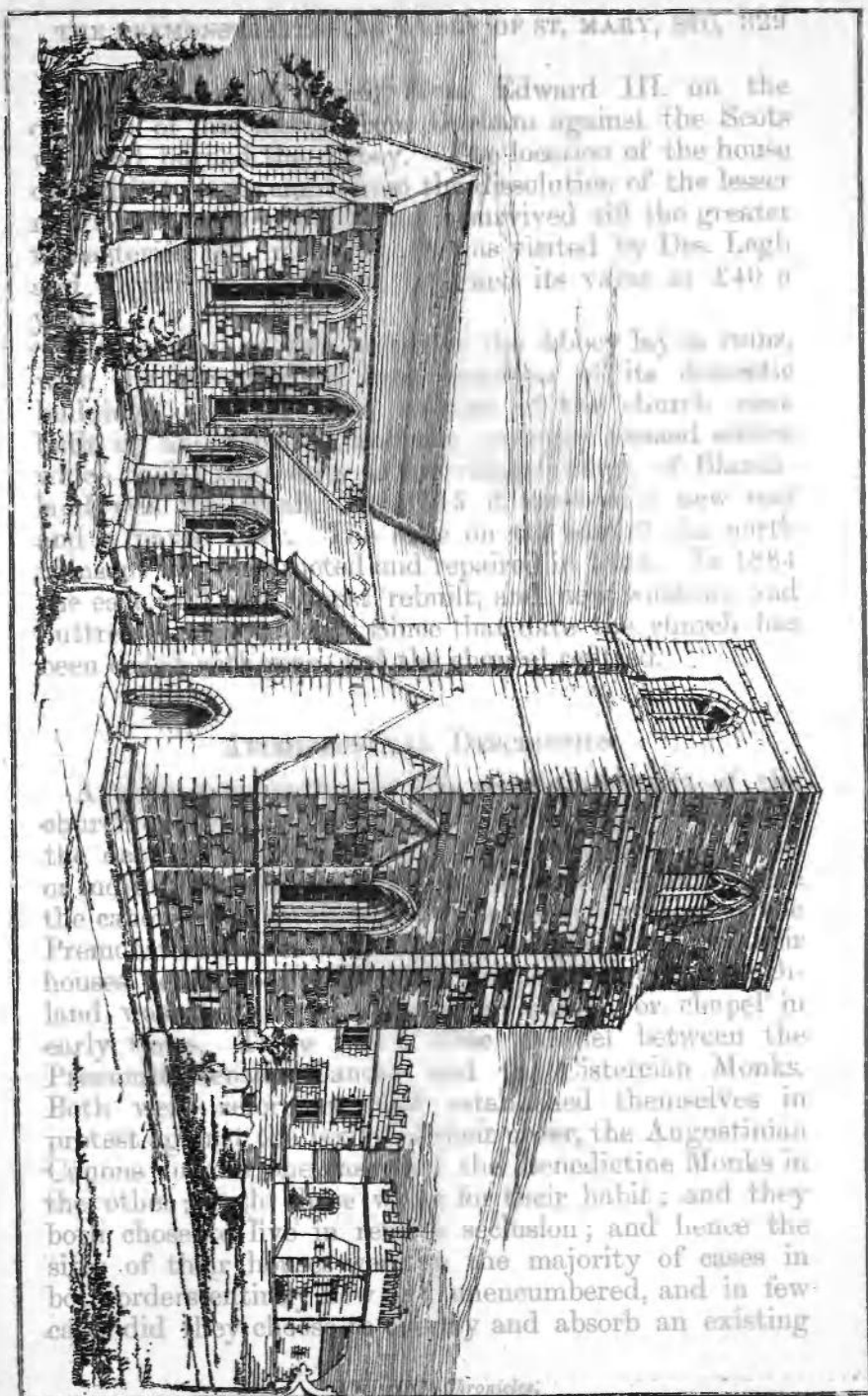
<sup>3</sup> *Chronica de Mailros*, Bannatyne Club ed., p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> At that church some additions to

the chancel may be assigned to the influence of the patronage of the Abbey, *Archæologia Aeliana*, XI. 246.

<sup>5</sup> The same story is told with regard to Brinkburn Priory in Northumberland.

BLANCHLAND ABBEY, FROM THE NORTH-EAST.



In 1327 it had a visit from Edward III. on the occasion of his march from Durham against the Scots who had burned the Abbey.<sup>1</sup> The location of the house caused it to be exempt from the dissolution of the lesser religious houses in 1536, and it survived till the greater monasteries fell in 1539. It was visited by Drs. Legh and Taylor in 1537, who returned its value at £40 a year.

For more than two centuries the Abbey lay in ruins, with the exception of some portions of its domestic buildings. In 1752 the remains of the church were built up and repaired, and the curiously formed edifice which to-day does duty as the village church of Blanchland was the result. In 1815 it received a new roof and a paved floor. The aisle on the east of the north transept was constructed and repaired in 1854. In 1884 the east wall was almost rebuilt, and new windows and buttresses were added. Since that date the church has been ceiled with pine, and the chancel refitted.

#### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION.

A close examination of the remaining parts of the church does not reveal any work earlier than, or even of the date of, the foundation. Nor are there any remains or indications of any church having existed there before the canons were established. The general custom of the Premonstratensians in the choice of the sites for their houses tends to preclude the supposition that Blanchland was the site of a parochial church or chapel in early times. There was a close parallel between the Premonstratensian Canons and the Cistercian Monks. Both were reformers, and established themselves in protest against the laxity of their order, the Augustinian Canons in the one case and the Benedictine Monks in the other; both chose white for their habit; and they both chose to live in remote seclusion; and hence the sites of their houses were in the majority of cases in both orders entirely new and unencumbered, and in few cases did they choose to overlay and absorb an existing

<sup>1</sup> Froissart's *Chronicles*.

parish church, as was so frequently the case with the parent orders.<sup>1</sup>

More than a quarter of a century must have elapsed before the canons began to build a permanent domicile. It is natural to look to the quire to reveal the period of the building, as it was almost invariably the first portion erected, when any great building or rebuilding scheme was entered upon in a conventual establishment.

The first decade of the thirteenth century may with reasonable safety be taken as the date of the beginning of the work. It is a plain, bold, and very characteristic phase of the robust and sturdy Early English of the northern counties.

The plan, so far as it remains, shows that the church consisted of a long aisleless quire and nave, apparently without the intervention of a dividing arch, a north transept with an eastern aisle, and a tower in a very unusual position, *viz.* at the north end of the north transept. The south transept seems to have been omitted and its usual location occupied by a sacristy in the same relative position as that which existed at Easby. The irregularities of the plans of the White Canons' houses were so great that it is extremely difficult to form any hypothesis as to the arrangement and existence of buildings where there is a complete blank in the plan.

In addition to the church, almost the whole of the western range of the claustral buildings remains, and the gatehouse, still further to the west.

Before describing the buildings in detail it will be an advantage to enumerate what seems to have remained at the time of the repair of 1752,<sup>2</sup> and what was then allowed to remain, for there can be no doubt that the ruins suffered at that time some paring down and mutilations after the custom of the guardians of churches at that period.

The tower was no doubt entire and made some use of, either in connection with the mansion of the Forsters, in the western range, or with the village school, which

<sup>1</sup> The whole question is very fully gone into in a valuable series of papers by the Rev. J. F. Hodgson in Vol. XLII of this series.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the liberality of Lord Crewe, Bishop of Durham, who held the estates.

abutted upon its western side, as shown by the modern raking cuts for roofs. The north and south walls of the quire are mainly ancient, and the former must have been practically entire. The east wall was rebuilt from beneath the sills of the windows to the gable. The greater part of the arch between the quire and the north transept was reset, and the wall it abuts upon on the west built with the external buttress. Walls were also built to the south, the east, and west of the quire, enclosing it, and on the east and west sides of the north transept. The former of these blocked the arcade of two arches, which appears to have been standing. The resulting church was of the form of the letter L, the roof being of low pitch and hipped at the south-west angle.

Had the buildings survived to our day as they were in 1752, the task of unravelling their story would have been greatly facilitated, for it is clear from the most cursory examination that the praiseworthy efforts of Lord Crewe to preserve what was left, and to provide Blanchland with a habitable church, have resulted in a most puzzling conglomeration of old and new work, with old details and parts re-used and rebuilt, not necessarily in their former places. Keeping these difficulties in mind, a careful examination of the vestiges of Blanchland Abbey may be made an interesting and instructive study.

The remains of the church show that it followed the unusual form, which seems to have been generally adopted by the Premonstratensians in laying down their churches. Some of these, as Easby, were subsequently altered and brought more nearly to the normal plan of a church with aisles,<sup>1</sup> but the larger number were long and narrow aisleless structures, and though they often had side chapels and transepts, these seem to have been generally walled off from the main alley. Though the exact length of Blanchland cannot now be determined without excavation, the remains

<sup>1</sup> The remaining aisleless portion of the church of Easby Abbey (see Mr. W. H. St. J. Hope's paper, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, X, 117), is 98 feet long and 23 feet wide. Langdon Abbey has a church 136 feet 6 inches in length and 22 feet 6 inches in width;

while Bayham, one of the longest and most characteristic churches of the order, is 257 feet long and 26 feet wide, and is aisleless, though broken by two transepts in the length (*Builder*, July 3rd, 1897).

above ground show that it was at least 155 feet long, and only 27 feet 6 inches wide.

The east wall seems to have been down in 1752, and was then rebuilt with two large two-light windows, similar to, but with less detail than, those in the west side of the north transept, and without shafts in the jambs. The windows may have been to some extent constructed of old materials rearranged. This, however, cannot now be determined, as the east wall was almost entirely rebuilt in 1884, when three lancet windows of Early English character replaced the former ones.<sup>1</sup> Below the windows the wall is ancient, and the two central buttresses do not appear to have been carried higher than the string course beneath the window sills, a characteristic which is seen in many Early English compositions in the northern counties.<sup>2</sup> There are two buttresses at each angle, which are quite plain with one inset and long sloping heads which die into the walls below the eaves. The north side of the quire retains two original lancet windows and a buttress between them. The windows have plain continuous chamfers on the outside, but inside are furnished with nook shafts with moulded caps and bases, and moulded arches with hood moulds. On the exterior the hood mould is carried across the buttress between the windows as a string and finishes on the west side of the western wind with a single "dog-tooth" flower as a termination. On the south side, less ancient walling remains, but the easternmost window is entire and like those in the north wall. West of this window the old work remains only in the lower part of the wall. The second window to the west has been rebuilt, and the nook shafts omitted. In the wall below are three *sedilia* with trefoiled arches, and dividing shafts with moulded caps and bases. The arches are restorations in plaster. On the outside at this point the plinth of a buttress remains, and to the west of it a short

<sup>1</sup> Fortunately Mr. C. C. Hodges made a plan and some notes in 1879, and he has most kindly placed these and other information at my disposal, for which I am much indebted.

<sup>2</sup> As at Corbridge, Bywell St. Peter, Ovingham, Stamfordham, Warden, Houghton-le-Spring, and other places.





length of plinth shows that the wall was increased in thickness before the plinth was returned towards the south, where it did duty as the plinth along the east side of the eastern range of buildings. A few feet further west the ancient wall gives out altogether at the eastern jamb of a doorway which has a filleted roll moulding between two quirks and which presumably once opened to a vestry. Up to the south-western angle of the present church the wall is entirely of the time of the repair and without an opening or other feature. The wall enclosing the church on the west is also of that date, and contains two windows of two lights each. These are apparently inferior copies of the windows in the west walls of the transept, which are partly ancient. From the south-west angle of the church for a distance of 64 feet 6 inches westwards an ordinary fence wall of modern date divides the site of the cloister garth from that of the nave, now the churchyard; but before the north-east angle of the western range is reached, the modern wall abuts upon a short length of ancient wall, and this is fortunately standing to almost its full height, though incorporated in the wall of the later building it abuts upon. It contains some interesting details. Near its eastern end is a short length of a half-round shaft, the original purpose of which it would be difficult to guess at. Further west, and now half buried in the turf, is a double *piscina* with pointed trefoil-headed openings. Just to the east of this are to be seen the toothings of a cross wall, probably the base of a stone screen.<sup>1</sup> The most interesting feature, however, is a lancet window, built up, but almost entire; the splayed jambs, the *voussoirs* of the arch, and some portions of the hood mould, though now weathered flush to the wall, can be distinctly traced. Beneath the window a short length of the string course remains, and shows that the windows were high enough to be clear of the cloister roof on this side, and also that the nave extended to a point situated further west than this window. The north wall of the nave has been traced in its foundations from time to time when graves

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Hope gives me a parallel to this from the church at Lilleshall Abbey, where the western bay of the nave is cut off by a screen.

have been dug in the burial ground, which now occupies its site.

About the middle of the thirteenth century the canons seem to have been in a flourishing condition, and to have made additions to their church. What the exact nature

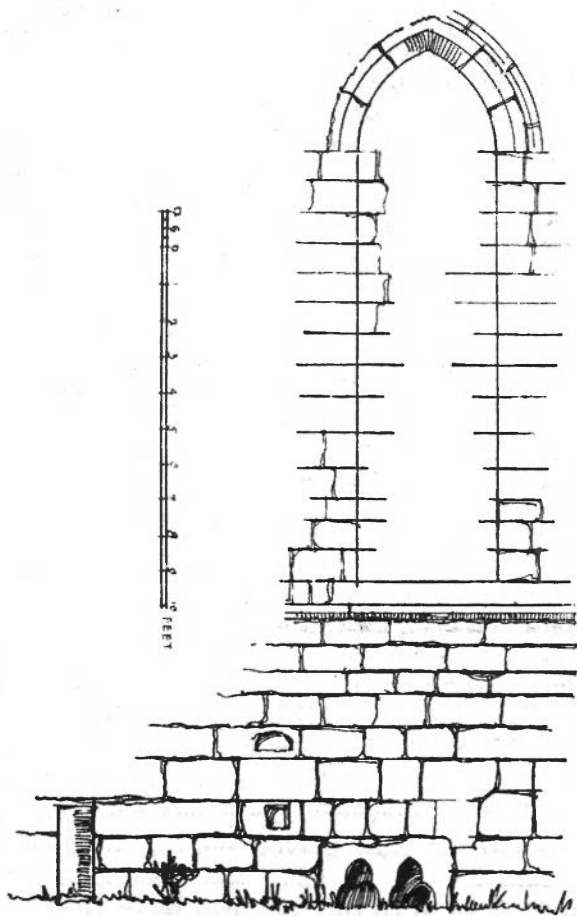


FIG. 1.—LANCET WINDOW, WEST END OF NAVE.

and extent of these were, it is now impossible to say. The remains as they exist comprise a small transept, with an aisle on its eastern side, and a tower to the north of it. It is likewise impossible to say whether a transept or other adjunct existed on the site of the

present one, of the same date as the quire. The tower is of small dimensions, being only 15 feet 2 inches square inside, but of exceedingly massive construction, and was no doubt intended to be used for protective and defensive purposes, as were many church towers of Northumberland and Cumberland. It was apparently never completed according to the original design, but it is clear that it was intended to have at least four stages, and was no doubt meant to be of a greater altitude than that to which it now attains. It is furnished with a bold and deep base course on the north and west sides, which is changed to one of much lighter section on the east side, where a building of some kind contemporary with the tower has existed. This was of no great height, but had a very high roof, the ridge of which reached almost to the top of the second stage. The first string course was carried over this roof and formed its weather moulding. The tower buttresses are perhaps its most striking feature. At its two southern angles they have no projection on the south side towards the church, but east and west they project equally with their fellows at the northern angles. That at the north-west encloses the angle and contains an ample newel stair with a well 6 feet 6 inches in diameter. At the north-east angle the buttresses terminate some distance below the second string course, in two bold gabled heads. The result of this is that the two higher string courses pass unbroken over this angle. The other three buttresses rise as high as the work of the earlier date remains and have evidently been intended to be carried to the contemplated summit, as they are now finished by rudely formed slopes, which die into the wall at the base of the later upper stage. Whether the tower as originally designed was ever completed cannot now be determined. The probability is that it was not, as its construction must have been a considerable undertaking for such an obscure and poor house as Blanchland. The fact of the upper stage being evidently added about the middle of the fourteenth century, when the Scotch raids had to a large extent become innocuous, as compared with their dire effects at the close of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries, seems to point to

the fact that the tower had not been completed when the abbey was burned. The upper stage forms the belfry to the church and has three windows, to the north, east, and west, of two lights with flowing tracery. That on the east is a reconstruction of 1752, at which time it would appear that the south-east angle of this stage was down at that angle; a great part of the south and east walls, as well as the parapet, which is divided from the upper stage by a plain oversailing course, were all then built.

The tower is entered by doorways on its east and west sides. The latter is the usual entrance to the church. The mouldings are of two orders and are continuous and relieved by a double hollow. There is a hood mould on the apex of which is a small carved finial. On the north side of this doorway is a niche or recess with a trefoiled head. This has at one time had a wooden door, the rebate for which is evident and the holes where the crooks were inserted. The hood mould of the doorway passes over the head of the niche. The doorway is furnished with a provision for a stout drawbar, which could be drawn across the closed door, or shot into a slot in the south jamb, long enough to contain it, after the manner of some of the northern pele tower doors. The east door is of the same size as that on the west, but of plainer character. It has two chamfered continuous orders and no hood mould. There are lancet windows in the north and west sides, both in the second stage. That to the north has externally three orders, chamfered and continuous, and a hood mould. That on the west, which has had its inner order cut out and reset in another form, has two orders only, and its sill is placed higher; beneath this is a supplementary string course which stops at the buttresses. Its hood, like that of the north window, is carried as a string course as far as the buttresses, where it stops. Internally these windows have deeply splayed jambs, rear vaults, and chamfered escoinson arches.

The tower opens to the north transept by a lofty arch of fine proportions of three chamfered orders with a hood mould. As the width of the tower is

considerably less than that of the transept, the two outer orders have no existence in the jambs on the north or tower side, but spring from the walls above the level of the caps. The aisle on the east side of the transept is divided from it by an arcade of two arches, consisting of two chamfered orders with hood mould towards the west. The arches spring from moulded corbels to the north and south, but at the centre are supported by a circular column with chamfered base and

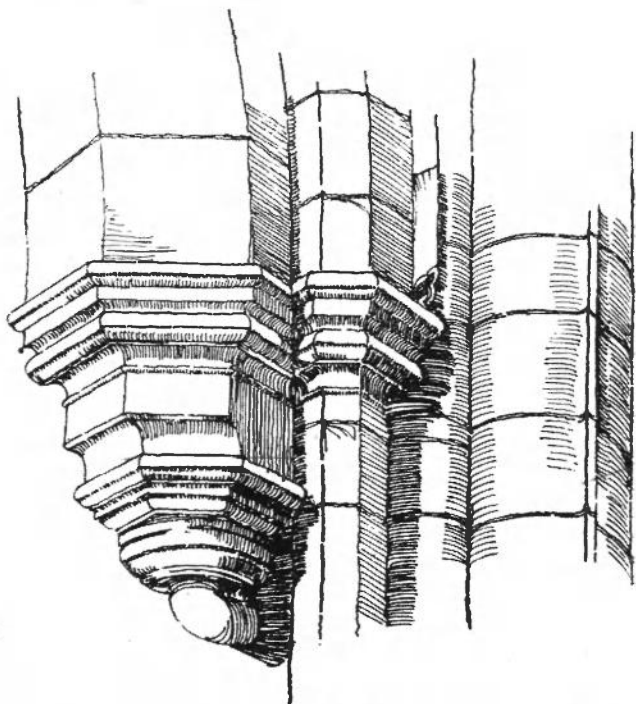


FIG. 2.—CORBEL OF ARCADE, SOUTH SIDE OF NORTH TRANSEPT.

moulded capital. The aisle walls date from 1854, when, during the incumbency of the late Archdeacon Thorpe, the wall blocking the arcade was removed and the aisle added to the church. In the south wall of the aisle is an aumbry, the original form of which is doubtful. A trefoiled head in one stone is built into the wall immediately above it. In this aisle is the ancient font, with circular bowl chamfered on the under side and supported by a



circular shaft on a chamfered base. The west wall of the transept has a base course similar to that on the north and west sides of the tower. The lower string course is stopped after passing round the small buttress, which projects from the west face of the large buttress at the south-west angle of the tower. This wall contains two windows of two lights of somewhat unusual character. They have apparently been partly reset in 1752 and may not follow too closely the original design, but they certainly retain some old details *in situ*. The north jamb of the northern window does not seem to have been disturbed, and a portion of the arch, which externally is of two chamfered orders and which rises from it, is also original. Externally the jambs had detached nook shafts, which have fallen away, but the moulded caps and bases remain. The mullions are moulded with double hollow chamfers, and they branch at the springing and strike the inner order of the arches in an abrupt and clumsy manner. On the interior, the outer order is moulded with double hollow chamfers. The windows are of large size and give a distinct character to the building as approached from the west. The transept opens into the choir by a lofty arch of three chamfered orders with hood mould. The arch springs from moulded jambs, which consist of a bold filleted roll between two quarter rounds and two small stopped chamfers. The caps and bases are moulded. Though probably following the original form, the arch bears distinct signs of having been tampered with, and probably rebuilt, with the exception of the western jamb and a portion of the arch on that side, as far as the hood mould extends. The wall to the west of it is also of the 1752 period. The sections of the base mould on the two sides differ.

The cloister garth occupied the usual position on the south-west of the church, and is now a lawn attached to the inn; it measures 81 feet 10 inches from north to south, and about 79 feet 6 inches from east to west.

The range of buildings forming the west side of the cloisters has been frequently altered by the Radcliffes, the Forsters, and the Crewe Trustees; it is now adapted to the purposes of an inn with the sign of "The Lord Crewe Arms." The northern or tower portion is two

stories in height and finished at the roof level with a battlemented parapet; the remainder of the block is three stories in height, covered with a slated roof. The walls of the ground floor, to the extent shown on the plan, are of mediaeval masonry. The chamber adjoining the south wall of the nave still exhibits its early structural features. Its lower story has a semi-circular vault, and is entered from the cloister by a simple pointed doorway, segmental on the inside; it was originally lighted by two small double-light square-headed windows, one at the west end, and one on the north side, the latter being placed beyond the assumed west end of the nave of the church. The window at

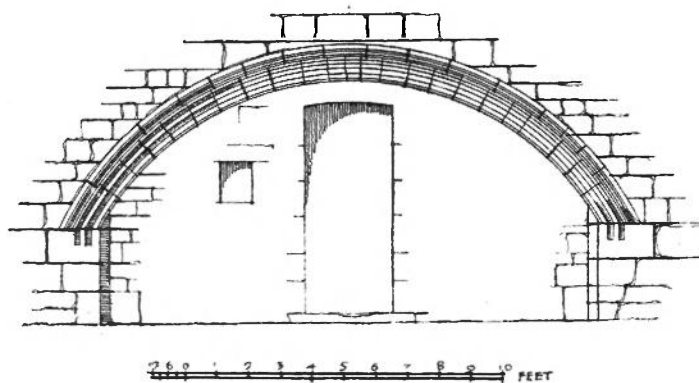


FIG. 3.—LAVATORY RECESS, WEST SIDE OF CLOISTER.

the north-east corner is an inserted one and opened on to the site of the nave. The doorway on the south side, and the one adjoining to it under the modern staircase, have both shouldered heads. An interesting feature, contemporary with the thirteenth century work of the church, is a wide moulded segmental arch with label, at the south end of the east wall of this range; it formed the lavatory recess.

In the interior is a large fireplace occupying the south end of the inn, in close proximity to the ancient refectory. It has a double-chamfered flat four-centred arched head and jambs, and the small opening on the west side of it a single-chamfered three-centred arch; it



is no doubt on the site and lines of the fireplace of the abbey kitchen. Similar masonry occurs in the modernized fireplace of a room which occupies the middle of the ground floor. The ceiling of this room is divided by massive moulded beams.

The walls of the room over the vaulted chamber are ancient; and the windows, of later date, are square-headed, with rude trefoil cusping. The remainder of the western range, which now forms the upper floors of the inn, possesses little of archaeological interest.

A row of cottages which encloses the cloister garth on its southern side appears to coincide in position and extent with the refectory or frater. The walls contain several fragments of mediaeval masonry.

The gatehouse of the abbey has suffered much from rebuilding; it is situated to the west of the church and opens to the north. It is two stories in height and comprises on the ground floor a passage with a flat vaulted ceiling of modern appearance, and two apartments (now used as shops), one of them with a vaulted ceiling. Above these rooms are two others, in one of which is an interesting fireplace of fifteenth century date. It is 7 feet 6 inches in width, with chamfered jambs and oversailing corbel courses, which support the head and projecting hood. The windows in this room are placed in the southern or inner side, and there are fragments still left of earlier windows than those which now fill the openings. Above the passage is a third chamber, now used as the village reading-room, and opening off it, in the buttress at the north-east angle, is a cupboard, possibly an ancient *garde-robe*. The buttress and chimney stack at the west end retain their mediaeval features, but the battlemented parapet which encloses the roof has been rebuilt.

The foundations of a wall connecting the east side of the gatehouse with the western range can be traced, and are shown on the plan.

The grave covers comprise two dedicated to the memory of ancient abbots, and another probably to a canon of the house. Two others preserve the memory of Robert Eglyston and T[homas] E[ggleston] who were possibly foresters of the abbey. In the fragments of

stained glass preserved in the windows, the figures of Premonstratensian canons in white habits are depicted. In the graveyard there is a very fine churchyard cross; it is of millstone grit and stands about 8 feet above ground.

There is not now any evidence of the more secular or domestic buildings. Possibly the guest-house, which was occasionally placed on the west side of the cloister, may have been so located at Blanchland in a portion of the buildings yet remaining; whilst the abbot's lodging may have been situated on the east side of the church tower, where, it has been observed, buildings once existed. The extent of the precincts no doubt included the area enclosed by the River Derwent, which passes about 100 yards south of the cloister, and by the Shildon Burn, which flows into the Derwent 50 yards west of the gatehouse. A short distance from the abbey, and on the west side of the Shildon Burn, is the supposed site of the mill and fish-ponds.

Although Blanchland was but a small foundation with slender endowment, it is greatly to be desired that a correct plan should be obtained of it. This might easily be accomplished by a little excavation, and could not fail to reveal a great deal about which so much has necessarily been left to conjecture.