

MINSTER ABBEY, THANET

By Brian R. Fagg

ABOUT one mile south of the Ramsgate-Canterbury road and four miles from Ramsgate town centre lies the pleasant and historic village of Minster-in-Thanet, not to be confused with its namesake on Sheppey, also in Kent. The heart of this unspoilt village has so far escaped the ravages of the "progress" which brings with it motorways and uninteresting development estates. The visitor can stand in Minster's spacious square and view the fine old parish church of St. Mary with its prominent Norman tower standing sentinel over the marshes, whilst beneath the shadow of the church, on either side of it, stand "The White Horse" (now closed) and "The Bell", two ancient inns. Opposite "The White Horse" stands a row of charming cottages backed by tall trees growing in the grounds of Minster Court or Abbey, which is barely visible from the square when the trees are in full leaf.

As its name implies, the village was the seat of a monastery, which in ancient times had an eventful history.¹ The great mediaeval chronicler William Thorne² (*fl. circa 1300*), a monk of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, tells us that Erminred, King of Kent, had two sons, Ethelbryth and Ethelred, and four daughters, who were all entrusted to the care of their uncle Ercombert, and on his death to their cousin Egbert. This Egbert, feeling that he would be more secure on his throne without his two nephews, ordered them to be murdered at the royal villa of nearby Eastry and there buried. One of the royal courtiers, Thunor, was detailed to perform this foul deed, and within a short time a celestial light of "miraculous brilliance" appeared over the boys' graves. The king then realised the magnitude of his villainy and the legal necessity to offer *weregild* (compensation) to the relatives of the

¹ There is a full account in W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (ed. 1817-30), vol. I, pp. 447-50.

² Twysden, *Decem Scriptores* (1906-12); and *Mon. Angl.*, vol. I, p.144. See also Victoria County History, *Kent*, vol. II, p. 151.



PLATE 2. Minster Abbey: the east side of the west block, with the tower abutment, showing the variations in the wall construction, the Norman doorway, and the original, 12th and 15th century windows.

(Sunbeam Photo, Ltd., Margate)



PLATE 3. Minster Abbey: the west front of the west block and tower, showing the varied stone and flintwork, and the fragment of an early window in the tower at gutter level.

(Sunbeam Photo, Ltd., Margate)

victims and so he sent messengers to Ermenburga, a sister of the murdered boys, to ask what she desired in compensation. Ermenburga, a princess of the royal house of Kent and better known as Domneva, asked permission to build a monastery on the island of Thanet and to have for it as much land as a deer could cover in its course. Legend has it that the members of the royal household were watching the course of the deer when, to their horror, the earth opened and swallowed up the murderer Thunor whilst he was trying to stop the deer in its tracks; so the site became known as "Thunor's Lepe". Lewis,³ the historian of Kent, says that the pit probably existed prior to Domneva's day and may well have been formed when chalk was being excavated for building the monastery.

In A.D. 670 Domneva, helped by King Egbert, completed her abbey and was appointed first abbess by Archbishop Theodore. She received grants of eighteen holdings of woods and fields in "Sturrie" and Thanet from one named Oswyn, and in time the abbey received so many other grants of land and buildings that it finally held almost half Thanet. It is quite unbelievable that Domneva acquired so much through one deer's course. Moreover, the land belonged to many landowners, including the Archbishop himself, who is said to have stood witness to the incident. In the reign of Richard II the abbey lands and rents were valued at £232 4s. 3d. per annum and the land was estimated at 2,149 acres.

The siting of the abbey, dedicated by Domneva to St. Mary, was quite deliberate. It was erected on the southern side of the island near the sea, on the Wantsum channel separating Thanet from the mainland. Here was a convenient port for trading with the continent, and at all times a safe harbourage. The resultant importance of the abbey can be judged by the fact that in 747 Ethelbold, overlord of Kent, granted the community exemption from taxes on one of its ships entering the port of London, and in the following year he granted half the tax and tribute on a ship purchased at the port of Lubeck on the Baltic Sea. The district, first known as Sudmynster, was in 824 called Suthmynster, later as Menstre and finally as Minster. The present parish church

³ Lewis, *History of Thanet* (1723).

of St. Mary is believed to stand on the site of this first abbey and it is just possible that the early turret at the south-east corner of the tower had some connection with the old monastery.

One of Domneva's daughters, Mildred,⁴ succeeded her mother as abbess and through her inspiration the community greatly benefited and the monastic lands and wealth increased considerably. Mildred came of a family of saints and her life was a continuous record of miracles and deeds of superhuman power so that on her death in 740 she was canonised. The abbey is now dedicated to her.

St. Mildred's successor, Edburga, immediately set to work building a larger nunnery a little to the east of the original one, and dedicated its church to SS. Peter and Paul. She had Mildred's remains moved to this new church and was buried there herself in A.D. 751. The site of the new abbey has been identified with that of the present Minster Court or Abbey. In the Domesday Book⁵ the place is called "Tanet Manor" in the Tanet Hundred of St. Mildred.

From A.D. 751 the Danes directed against the Isle of Thanet a series of raids which, under the direction of Sweyn, the father of Cnut, were intensified until finally the nunnery was plundered and burnt, and the abbess, the priests and the rest of the religious community were killed. Only St. Mildred's tomb survived. The actual date of this tragedy is disputed by historians, who variously give it as 940, 978 and 1011.

In 1027, Cnut, now king and convert, as an act of appeasement for his father's misdeeds granted the site and all customs to the Benedictine abbot and convent of St. Augustine's, Canterbury.⁶ One of their first acts was to remove the body of St. Mildred to Canterbury. Later, in 1035, the monks built a manor house or grange from the materials of the old nunnery. In so doing they did not completely demolish the monastic church and to this day the remains of the great west tower survives. In the twelfth century⁷ the manor house was enlarged to form a quadrangle

⁴ *D.N.B.*

⁵ *V.C.H., Kent*, vol. III, p. 243b.

⁶ *Mon. Angl.*, vol. I, 121-22, 139, 141.

⁷ The nave of the parish church of St. Mary seems to have been rebuilt at the same time.

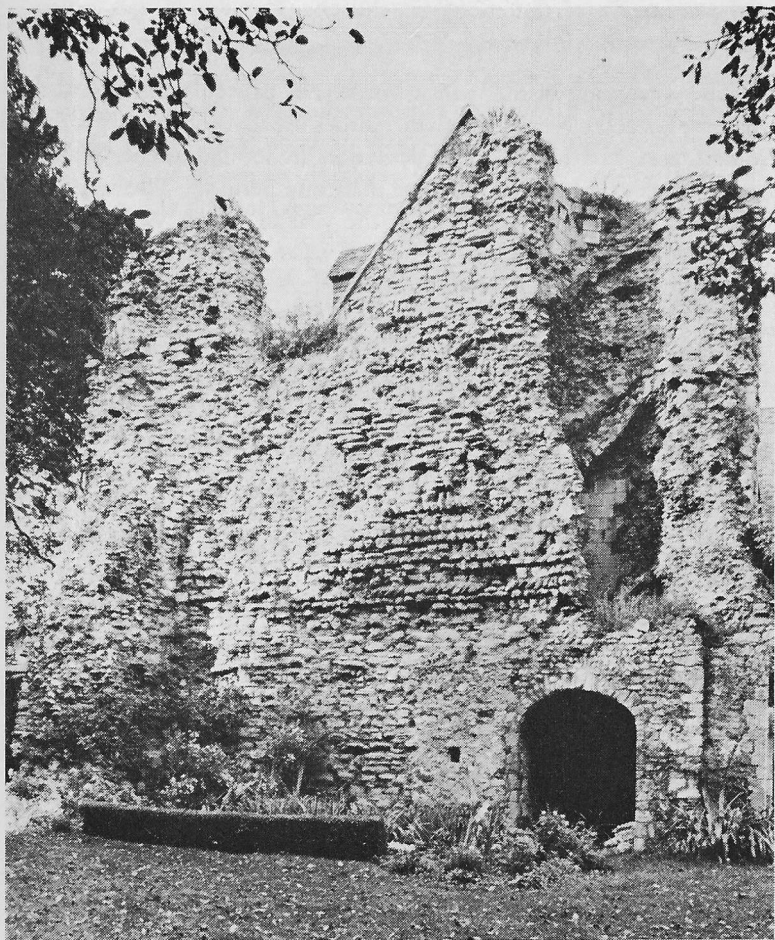


PLATE 4. Minster Abbey: the east face of the tower, showing the stone work and the remains of the staircase.

(Sunbeam Photo, Ltd., Margate)

open-ended on the east side. The new north range housed the great hall, the old west block was converted into kitchens and living quarters, and on the south side were left the great tower and other remains of the monastic church. The tower was given blind Norman windows.

The west wing of the manor house is of particular interest and deserves much closer study than visitors usually give it. It is the oldest part and has a slight deviation in its alignment, which suggests that it belongs to more than one period. The wing is believed to be, in part, pre-1085, the year in which William the Conqueror ordered Thanet to be laid waste to deprive the Danes of any stronghold. Probably the whole building was not razed to the ground but rather left in a badly damaged state: the monastic church had already been reported as neglected, with the roof falling in. There is evidence of cement mortar having been used over part, if not most, of the exterior walls of this west block at some time but fortunately it has disintegrated to reveal some of the original beauty and age of the work. On the eastern or quadrangle side the wall, apart from the large stones used around the Norman doorway (see below) is a mixture of flint and stone varying in size and manner of bedding. Near eaves-level there is much knapped flint whilst elsewhere there is evidence of stone herring-bone bedding. There are similar variations in the construction of the tower walls, where there is a series of double courses of long flat stones alternating with double courses of very large flints. Despite the mortar having worn away in places to a depth of eight or nine inches, the walling is still perfectly firm. At lower levels in the tower ruin are fragments of Roman tiles. A number of such tiles have also been unearthed elsewhere on the site and it may be that a Roman temple or villa once stood on the spot. In view of the Roman forts of Richborough and Reculver, each guarding the Wantsum channel, it is not unreasonable to assume the existence of Roman households in the vicinity and Minster would have been a suitable site.

As well as Abbot Hunden's large fifteenth century windows in the west wing there are very small much older rectangular openings, now partly filled in, over each of which is a single stone lintel,

another indication of Saxon work. These small openings would originally have given the only light to the interior.

At ground level the twelfth-century builders made a wide vaulted three-bay passage, with a Norman doorway, to give access to the new quadrangle from the west, and the south wall of this passage is the side wall of the great Saxon tower of the second monastic church. In the seventeenth century the west end of this passage was blocked up and today this space forms a small private chapel. The Norman doorway stands at the east end of this chapel and is built of large stones, with the door head squared off by a wooden lintel carrying fourteen large cut and carefully bedded stones forming a tympanum. Beside this door to the north is a small Saxon window containing some very early glass.

The north wing of the manor house comprised the twelfth-century great hall, in the east gable of which is a Norman window moulded internally and externally. The great hall was later extended westwards to cover the space at the north end of the west block, which was itself altered at the same time. A further extension eastwards of the hall, built from old material found on the site, was added in the nineteenth century. The north front, in which is the main doorway, is divided into two stages by a string course, at which level the upper floor is set slightly back. Buttresses, now missing but of which there are traces, once divided this front into bays pierced by plain Norman windows. Today only three such windows remain, the others having been filled in.

On 5th December, 1318, the tenants of "Menstre", about six hundred strong, joined forces with others from the district, surrounded the manor houses of Menstre and Salmanston near Margate, both under the abbot of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, and for five weeks besieged them, setting fire to the buildings and cutting down timber. This rising was due to distraints imposed by the abbot on his tenants for failing to pay their rents and dues.

A hundred years later, in about the year 1413, Abbot Hunden (1405-20) carried out at Minster extensive improvements which included the introduction of mullioned windows, the reconstruction of the great hall roof, and alterations to the main north entrance door, over which are his initials "T.H." and the arms of St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury. Of the windows only the



PLATE 5. Minster Abbey: the 13th century Christ in Majesty, reset.
(Sun'ean Photo, Ltd., Margate)

one nearest the present private chapel in the west block is to be seen in its original condition, the remainder having all been extensively restored although the original detail has been faithfully copied. The hall's great timber roof has trussed rafters, tie-beams and moulded octagonal king-posts, and the timber is extensively blackened by the smoke from the great open fires.

The manor house of Minster, originally a Saxon nunnery, was held by the monks of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, for 509 years. It then, at the dissolution of the monasteries, passed to the Crown and in 1668 came into the possession of the Marquis of Conyng-ham, in whose family it remained for 260 years. In 1928 it was purchased by Mr. C. H. Senior, and in 1937 a small group of Benedictine nuns from St. Walburga's Abbey of Eichstatt in Bavaria took possession and thus was resumed its early life of prayer.

Little is known of the actual buildings between Abbot Hunden's fifteenth-century work and the 1929 excavations. A tripartite church was then revealed with a western tower, a nave of about 48 by 25 feet, a chancel almost 20 feet square, and an apse. The nave walls were 5 feet in width, and the apse walls 3 feet. The overall length of the church was about 125 feet and it was accurately orientated. The massive tower, still partly standing, was more than 37 feet square and its walls averaged 7 feet in width, with the corners thickened out further to form buttresses. On the east face of the tower is a well-preserved Norman round-headed blind window with round shafts, cushion bases and caps, and within the recess is a Saxon narrow slit window whose round head is cut from one piece of stone. This opening, which lighted the staircase, is the full thickness of the wall, of even width throughout and slightly angled to the north. There are traces of similar blind windows on the north-east corner of the tower but the work there is very much mutilated. The remains of the tower staircase are clearly visible and whilst none of the stone treads and risers remain a number of stones lining the circular walls are still in position and gaps exist where the stairs were built into them. As there are no signs of entrance to these stairs from the twelfth-century passage next to the tower it is assumed that one gained access from inside the tower itself. A former entrance from the

nave is clearly indicated by a fifteenth-century fragment of stone moulding on the east face of the tower. Next to the tower today is another opening but this is of unknown date and has no significance: it did not form part of a doorway into the tower as some authorities have suggested. It seems to have been built up of odd pieces of stone and flint from the tower ruins, possibly in Victorian times. Above this opening was placed a thirteenth-century *Vesica Piscis*, "Christ in Majesty", which at one time formed part of the fifteenth-century fireplace in the refectory. To the west of the tower is now a circular mound of flint and stone, also believed to be of little significance. In clearing it of weeds a large knucklebone, possibly of an ox or a horse, was found embedded in the mortar, and this would certainly have come from the abbey farm.

As a result of the deteriorating stonework of the tower ruin, due mainly to weathering but accelerated by the overgrowth of weeds and creeper, it was necessary to embark on a scheme of restoration in 1968. It was found that valerian roots had penetrated considerably into the mortar and had also in places begun to split the stones: in one instance a root was traced over three feet into the wall. Every piece of root had to be traced and then removed or burnt out. It was essential, of course, not to alter materially the features of the ruin nor to effect a restoration which would make itself too apparent on completion. Consequently a series of close-up photographs were taken and the stones were numbered and measured. By this method it was possible to re-set them, firmly bedded, in the same positions as before. It was also essential to have the correct cement mortar-mix for the new work. It was found that variations existed in the ruin but that much of the mortar contained cockle and mussel shells, in earlier days readily available from the Wantsum channel; indeed even in 1905 a gravedigger in St. Mary's churchyard came across a bed of cockle and mussel shells only a few feet underground. The new shells were obtained from Faversham. The restoration is now complete and evidence of new work is very difficult to locate.

Minster Abbey is on the Grade I List of Statutory Scheduled Buildings and, thanks to grants from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (through the Historic Buildings Council),

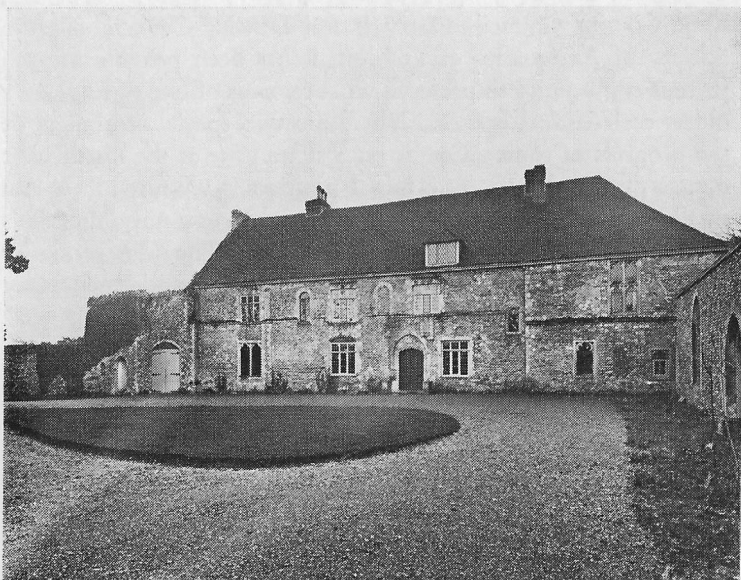


PLATE 6. Minster Abbey: the north front of the north block, showing the Norman and 15th century windows, Abbot Hunden's doorway, and the western extension.
(Sunbeam Photo, Ltd., Margate)



PLATE 7. Minster Abbey: Abbot Hunden's roof to the great hall in the north wing.
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(Sunbeam Photo, Ltd., Margate)

Kent County Council, Eastry Rural District Council and the Society of Antiquaries of London, it has been possible for the present community to preserve what remains of one of England's oldest ecclesiastical houses. There are two special reminders of the progress of time. One is on a stone now at the north-west corner of the abbey—its original position is unknown. It is a small sundial which would have recorded not only the sun's hours but also the hours of the call to prayer. The other reminder is another sundial now set high up on one of the modern chimney stacks, and its legend well sums up this story:

*Tempora labuntur;
Nobis pereunt et imputantur.*

The times glide on;
They perish and are laid to our charge.

NOTE: *A general view of Minster Abbey forms the frontispiece of this volume.*

