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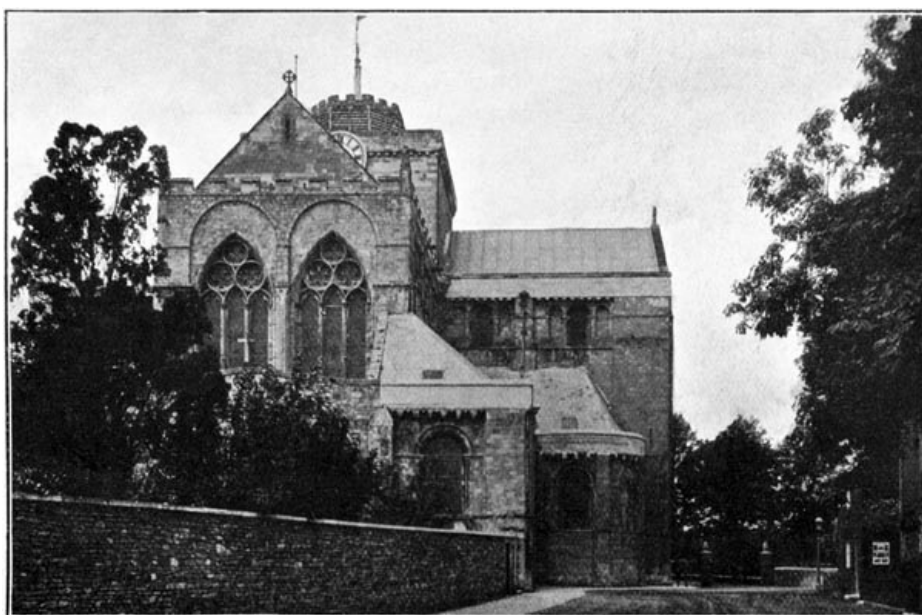
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ROMSEY ABBEY FROM THE EAST

ROMSEY ABBEY

A DESCRIPTION OF THE FABRIC AND NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE CONVENT OF SS. MARY & ETHELFLEDA

BY THE REV. T. PERKINS

RECTOR OF TURNWORTH, DORSET
AUTHOR OF "AMIENS," "ROUEN," "WIMBORNE
AND CHRISTCHURCH," ETC.

WITH XXXII



ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON GEORGE BELL AND SONS 1907

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PREFACE

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The architectural and descriptive part of this book is the result of careful personal examination of the fabric, made when the author has visited the abbey at various times during the last twenty years. The illustrations are reproduced from photographs taken by him on the occasions of these visits.

The historical information has been derived from many sources. Among these may especially be mentioned "An Essay descriptive of the Abbey Church of Romsey," by C. Spence, the first edition of which was published in 1851; the small official guide sold in the church, and "Records of Romsey Abbey, compiled from manuscript and printed records," by the Rev. Henry G. D. Liveing, M.A., Vicar of Hyde, Winchester, 1906. This last-named work contains all that is at present known, or that is likely to be known, of the history of the abbey from its foundation early in the ninth century up to the year 1558. To this book the reader who desires fuller information and minuter details than could be given in the following pages is referred.

The thanks of the writer are due to the late and present Vicars for kind permission to examine the building, and to take photographs of it from any point of view he desired.

TURNWORTH RECTORY,
BLANDFORD, DORSET.
MARCH, 1907.

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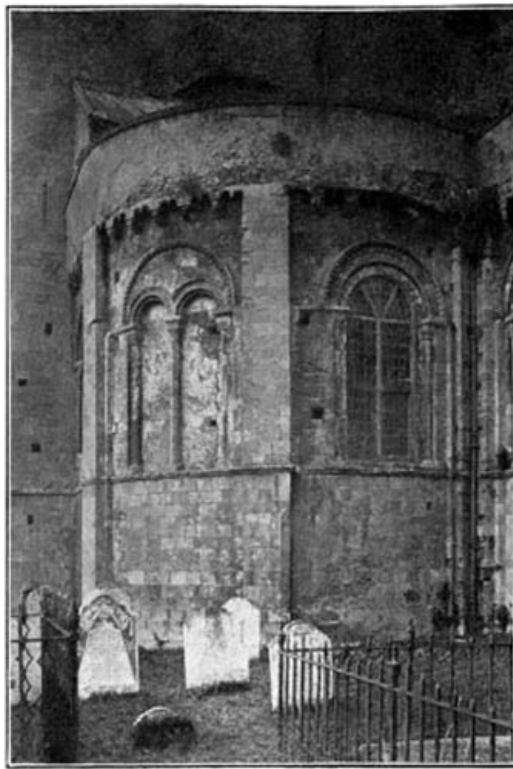
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APSIDAL CHAPEL, SOUTH TRANSEPT

ROMSEY ABBEY

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CHAPTER I

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HISTORY OF THE BUILDING

The etymology of the name Romsey has been much disputed. There can be no doubt about the meaning of the termination "ey"—island—which we meet with under different spellings in many place-names, such as Athelney, Ely, Lundy, Mersea and others, for Romsey stands upon an island, or rather group of islands, formed by the division of the river Test into a number of streams, which again flow together to the south of the town, and at last, after a course of about seven miles, empty themselves into Southampton Water. But several derivations have been suggested for the first syllable of the name. Some writers derive it from Rome, and regard Romsey as a hybrid word taking the place of "Romana insula," the first word having been shortened and the second translated into Old English, or Saxon as some prefer to call it. Now it is true that there were several important Roman stations in the neighbourhood: Sorbiodunum (Old Sarum), Brige (Broughton), Venta Belgarum (Winchester), and Clausentum (near Southampton), and in passing to and fro between these the Roman legions must frequently have marched either through or near to the site of Romsey. Roman coins found in the immediate neighbourhood clearly show that the place was inhabited during the Roman occupation. Another derivation is the Celtic word "Ruimne" (marshy); this would make the name mean "Marshy island," and there can be no doubt that this would be an apt description of the place in olden times; against this may be alleged that again the word would be hybrid. Yet another derivation which avoids this objection is the Old English "Rùm" from whence we get "room" and if we adopt this derivation Romsey, or Rumsey as it is still sometimes written and more often pronounced, would mean the roomy or "Spacious Island." The reader can form his own opinion as to which is the most probable of these three suggestions. The writer is inclined to favour the third. But the visitor who, arriving at the railway station either by the branch line via Redbridge or by that which runs from Eastleigh, or from Salisbury, or Andover, proceeds to the Abbey, would not realize when he arrived at his destination that he was in an island, for the minor streams are not spanned by bridges, but have been completely covered in and run through small tunnels beneath some of the streets.

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We have no records of Romsey before the original foundation of the Abbey, nor indeed for many years afterwards. The first authentic mention of the abbey is found in the chronicle of Florence of Worcester, who died in 1118, and whose work, at least that part of it which deals with English history, is a Latin translation of the Old English Chronicle. He writes "In anno 967. Rex Anglorum pacificus Edgarus in monasterio Rumesige, quod avus suus Rex Anglorum Eadwardus senior construxerat, sanctimoniales collocavit, sanctamque Marewynnam super eas Abbatismam constituit." ^[1]

This Eadward, also surnamed the Unconquered, was the son and successor of the greatest of the Old English Kings, Ælfred, and reigned from 901 to 925. Sometime during his reign he founded the Romsey nunnery. There is no documentary evidence to fix the exact date, but it is

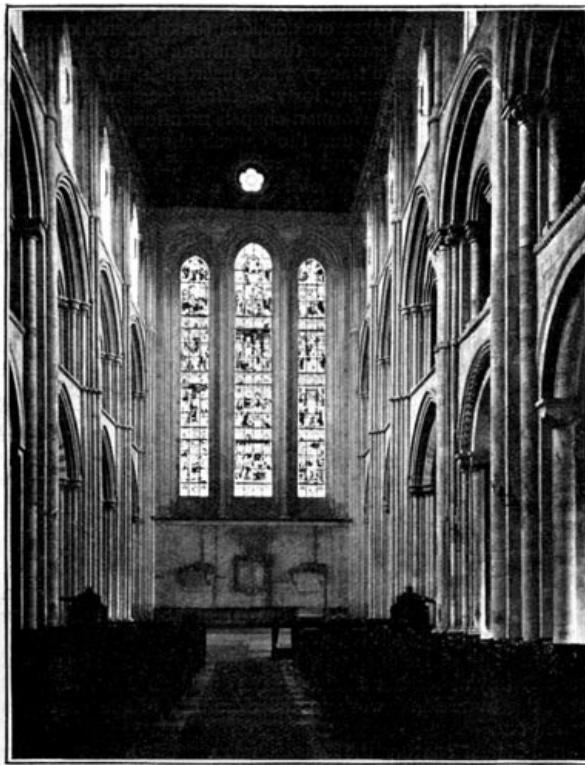
generally assumed to have been 907. It is said that about two centuries earlier there had been a monastery at Nursling nearer the mouth of the Test, and on the tideway of the river. It was here that the great missionary to the Germans Winfrid or St. Boniface had been trained, but it was within reach of the ships of the Danish pirates, and in 716 they had ravaged it and reduced it to such utter ruin that scarcely one stone remained on another to mark the site. This monastery was never rebuilt, and Eadward, probably having its fate in mind, now chose a safer position for the new foundation, for the river at Romsey was too shallow to allow of the seagoing vessels of the marauding Danes to reach it. Eadward's eldest daughter Ælflæd and her sister Æthelhild both adopted the religious life, and lived for a time at the monastery at Wilton. Here Æthelhild was buried, while Ælflæd was buried at Romsey. Their half-sister St. Eadburh became abbess of St. Mary's Abbey at Winchester; and it is highly probable that Ælflæd ruled as abbess over the sister establishment at Romsey. Probably this was only a small religious community. Whether it was continued or not when she died no record remains to tell, but, as we have seen, it was refounded by Eadgar the Peaceable in 967, and on Christmas day of the year 974 St. Meriwenna was put in charge of the completed Abbey, which was constituted according to the Benedictine Rule. Some traces of this church still remain, though only discovered in 1900. Under the pavement of the present church, immediately below the tower, the foundations of an apsidal east ending of a church were found; now as it is well known that this is a Norman form for the east end, it must not be supposed that this apse was built in the time of Eadgar, but it very probably occupied the same position as the choir of his church. Other foundations were then looked for and found. And as a result of this investigation, it appears that the nave of Eadgar's church extended as far to the west as the fourth bay of the present nave, that its crossing lay immediately to the west of the present transept, and that the apsidal choir was as wide as the present nave, and extended eastward as far as the screen now dividing the choir from the transept. Thus the total interior length of the church was about 90 ft. instead of about 220 ft., the length of the present building. Although the church was comparatively small, Eadgar made provision in the domestic buildings for one hundred nuns, a number rarely exceeded in after days. Peter de Langtoft, a canon of Bridlington who died early in the fourteenth century, writing of Eadgar says:

Mikille he wirschiped God, and served our Lady;
The Abbey of Romege he feffed richely
With rentes full gode and kirkes of pris,
He did ther in of Nunnes a hundreth ladies.

Eadgar's church, however, was not destined to last long. Early in the year 1003, according to one of the few legends connected with the abbey, the form of St. Ælflæd appeared during mass to the Abbess Elwina, and warned her that the Danes were at hand, and would plunder and destroy the abbey; whereupon she, not disobedient to the heavenly vision, gathered her nuns together, and, collecting all the treasures that could be carried away, sought safety at Winchester, and there they abode until the danger was past; on their return they found the abbey in ruins. The inroad of the Danes in this year, led by Swegen, was undertaken as a retribution on the English for the cowardly and barbarous massacre on St. Brice's Day, November 13th of the previous year, in which Swegen's sister, in spite of the fact that she had embraced Christianity, had been condemned to death by Æthelred. ^[2]

There is no record of the rebuilding of the abbey after this destruction, but it could not have been long delayed, since we hear that in 1012 Æthelred's wife Ælfgifu (who afterwards married Knut, and is known under the name Emma) gave lands to the abbey, and shortly after Knut came to the throne, we learn from a still existing list that, including two who are marked as abbesses, there were fifty-four nuns at Romsey. ^[3]

The church restored after the raid mentioned above probably remained untouched until after the Conquest, when possibly the apsidal east end was built. It would seem that about 1120 the present church was begun, as usual from the east. As this church is so much larger than the earlier one, it is quite possible that its outer walls were built without in any way disturbing the eleventh century church within them, so that the services could be conducted without interruption. The general character of the work is late Norman. At this time a double eastern chapel measuring about 21 ft. from east to west and 25 ft. from north to south, as we know from excavations made by the late vicar, the Rev. Edward Lyon Berthon, was built to the east of the choir. This was entered by two arches, which may still be seen leading out of the ambulatory. Traces of the position of two altars were found; the floor was lower than that of the rest of the church.



THE NAVE, LOOKING WEST

The three western bays were added in the thirteenth century, and at the end of the same, or the beginning of the fourteenth, two windows with plate tracery were inserted in the east wall, and two chapels measuring forty feet from east to west took the place of the double Norman chapels mentioned above.

It will be seen, then, that the church shows specimens of Norman, Early English, and Decorated work, all of the best periods of the style, and therefore it is a splendid example for the student of architecture. We may be thankful that, with the exception of a few windows on the north side there is no Perpendicular work. When we remember that the wealth which flowed into the coffers of many cathedral and abbey churches during the Middle Ages chiefly in the form of offerings from pilgrims at wonder-working shrines, was often used in almost entirely rebuilding, or, at any rate remodelling, the churches in the fifteenth century, we may be surprised to find so little work of this period at Romsey. Possibly it is due to the fact that it did not possess any such shrine, and so did not attract pilgrims.

It is not improbable that Henry of Blois, the builder of the Church at St. Cross, near Winchester, may have had something to do with designing the Norman part of the church at Romsey. We know that Mary, the daughter of his brother, King Stephen, was abbess from about 1155 until she broke her vows, left the Abbey, and married Matthew of Alsace, son of the Count of Flanders, about 1161. Henry was Bishop of Winchester from 1129 until 1171. What more likely, then, than that Mary should consult her uncle, known to be a great builder, about the erection of the large church at Romsey?

In the time of Juliana, who probably succeeded Mary, and was certainly abbess for about thirty years before her death in 1199, the transitional work in the clerestory of the nave was carried out.

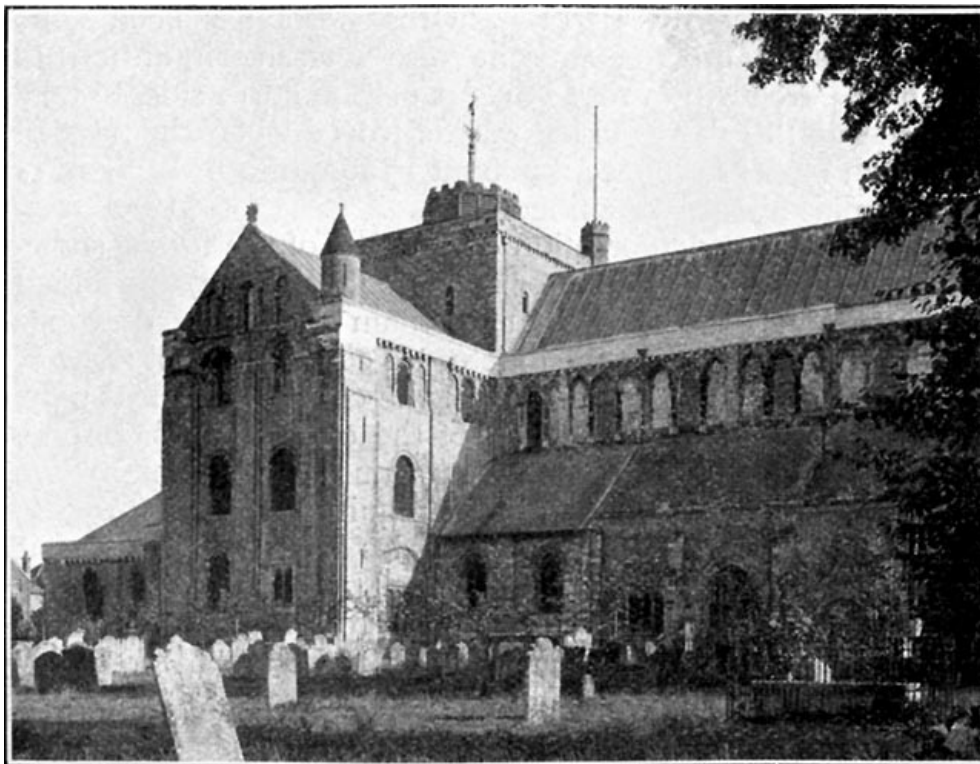


**JUNCTION OF NORMAN AND EARLY ENGLISH WORK,
ON THE NORTH SIDE OF THE NAVE**

In the next century the church was extended westward by the erection of three bays and the west front with its three tall lancets and the small cinquefoil window above the central one, all inclosed within a pointed comprising arch. This work was done during the time when Henry III was king; there are records of several gifts to the abbey of timber by him from the royal forest. This was no doubt used in constructing the roof of the westward extension of the nave and aisles. The next work was the insertion of the two large east windows and the building of the pair of Decorated chapels, one of which was dedicated to Our Lady, and the other to St. Æthelflæd, or Ethelfleda, as her name was then spelt. They were probably divided by an arcade, and stood until the dissolution of the Abbey, when they were pulled down, being of no further use in the church of the abbey which was purchased by the people of Romsey and converted into a parish church.

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VIEW FROM THE NORTH-WEST

It has been said that little Perpendicular work is to be seen in Romsey Abbey, but some did exist at one time. At Romsey, as at Sherborne, there were disputes between the abbey and the town, though fortunately at Romsey an amicable arrangement was arrived at. The north aisle of the abbey church had been for many years set apart for the use of the people of Romsey as a parish church, and was known by the name of St. Laurence; in the year 1333 the abbess endowed a vicarage. As the town increased in size the north aisle became too strait for the parishioners, and at times of great festivals they used to encroach on the nuns' church. This led to disputes,

and the matter was referred to William of Wykeham, the celebrated Bishop of Winchester, remodeller of his cathedral church, and founder of Winchester School, and New College, Oxford. He persuaded the nuns to give up the north arm of the crossing to make a choir for a new parish church to be built adjoining the abbey church, in such a way that the north aisle should be cut off by a wall and included in the new church. The north aisle of the abbey church thus became the south aisle of the parish church, the new building its nave, and the north end of the transept of the abbey church the parish chancel, the Norman apsidal chantry attached to the transept made a fitting eastern termination to the chancel. A chantry of the Confraternity of St. George, built on the north side of the new church, took the place of a north aisle. This was separated from the nave by a carved oak screen, part of which has been utilized in the construction of the screen between the nave and choir of the existing church. The building of this new parish church unfortunately involved the destruction of the north porch of the abbey church. When, after the dissolution of the nunnery, the people bought the abbey church of the King, the nave and north aisle of the new parish church were no longer needed, and were therefore demolished, the windows were inserted in the arches that had been cut in the wall of the north aisle of the abbey church, when these openings were again walled up. Two of these have, however, been removed, and modern Norman windows constructed on the old mouldings have taken their place. A doorway which had been cut in the north wall of the transept when the new parish church was built was no longer used after the church was pulled down, and a low side window near it has been blocked up and converted into a cupboard. The two eastern chapels were also demolished, and their east windows were inserted in the masonry used to block up the entrances into the chapels from the ambulatory. During the time that succeeded the Reformation many changes were made in the fittings of the church, galleries were erected in the transept and at the west end of the nave where the organ was placed. The walls were covered with whitewash, and probably with a view to make it easier to warm the church, walls were built behind the triforium arcading all round the church. These walls are shown in some of the illustrations made a few years ago; they have now been entirely removed. The internal appearance of the church about the middle of the nineteenth century was extremely distasteful to those affected by the Gothic revival, and drastic changes were made. "Restoration" was begun at first under the direction of Mr. Ferrey, who also restored Christchurch Priory. The inner roof of the three western bays of the nave aisles which had not been, like those of the other bays, vaulted in stone, were restored in wood and plaster about 1850, when the Hon. Gerard Noel was vicar; the nave roof was rebuilt a little later. Under the direction of Mr. Christian, architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, the chancel roof was restored, and the roof of the north arm of the transept was taken in hand by Mr. Berthon. Other work has been done more recently, and the present vicar has the intention of building a porch with a room over it on the north side, to take the place of the porch which was destroyed when the nave of the church of St. Laurence was built in the time of William of Wykeham, as already described.

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The curious wooden erection on the top of the tower, somewhat resembling a hen coop or gigantic lobster pot, was added in comparatively recent times to contain the bells; drawings made at the beginning of the nineteenth century do not show it, but, those made about the middle of the century do. It is ugly, and adds nothing to the dignity of the church; probably the tower was originally crowned by a pyramidal roof which gave it the appearance of height so much required.

The east ends of the two choir aisles have in quite recent years been provided with altars and fitted up as chapels for week-day services. The two apsidal chapels attached to the transept are used as vestries, the one on the south for clergy and that on the north for the choir.

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THE ABBESS'S DOOR

CHAPTER II

THE EXTERIOR

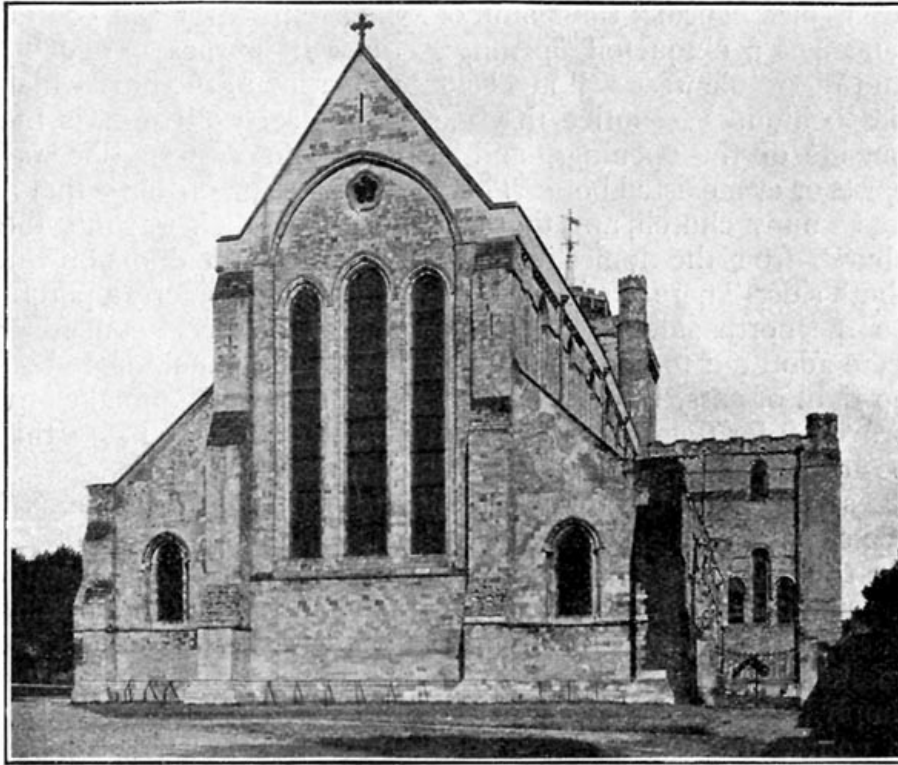
The site of Romsey abbey church is not a commanding one. There are some cathedral churches, such as Ely, built on marsh-formed islands which rise considerably above the surrounding flats, and so form conspicuous objects in the landscape seen from far or near; but this is not the case with the abbey church with which we have to deal. The level of its floor does not rise much above the level of the river valley in which it stands, the building is not large or lofty, the parapets of its central tower, about 92 ft. above the ground, rise little above the ridges of the roofs of nave and choir and the north arm of the transept. But it has one great advantage: there is no part of the exterior of the building that cannot be fully examined. Perhaps we might be glad if the space from which it may be seen were here and there a little wider, yet nowhere do we find a garden wall or a building barring our passage as we make the circuit of the exterior of the church. On the north side lies the churchyard stretching a considerable distance to the north, from which an admirable general view is obtained; and again, there is open ground to the west, so that the unique and splendid western façade can be well seen. The space to the south side of the building is more limited; it is entered through an iron gateway running in a line with the west front; should this gate be locked, the space to the east of it may be entered by passing from the inside of the church through either the nuns' or the abbess's doorway; when access to this little strip of churchyard has once been gained, it is easy to pass right along the south side of the nave round the south end of the crossing and then to the eastern wall of the ambulatory.

As we follow the winding lanes and streets that lead from the station to the church, we get our first view of it from the road that skirts its northern wall. On the left hand there is a wall running from the north-east corner of the choir, which conceals indeed a few details of the lower part of the east end, but does not hide the two beautiful geometrical windows in the east wall of the choir, inserted within the semicircular headed mouldings of the original Norman windows. We may also see the square-faced termination of the north choir aisle projecting eastward of the wall that forms the east end of the choir. The next noteworthy object is an apsidal chapel or chantry running out from the east wall of the transept, its walls pierced by wide round headed windows. This is also a good point from which to study the clerestory as seen in choir and crossing. The same general arrangement prevails throughout the building, though here and there certain modifications will be noticed. Each clerestory bay on the north side has a window consisting of three arches, the central and wider one is glazed, the two others are blocked with stone. Three tiers (two in each) of round headed windows light the ends of the transepts.

On the north side the windows of the nave aisle are very irregular; this is due to the fact, mentioned in Chapter I, that considerable alterations were made in this part of the church at the beginning of the fourteenth century in order to provide a parish church for the inhabitants of the town. The north wall of the aisle was largely cut away in order to throw this aisle open to the new building erected parallel to the Abbey church, which was to be used as the nave of the parish church. Joining this on the north side was a chantry of the confraternity of St. George which formed a kind of north aisle for the parish church. Windows would of course be required to light

this new building and would of necessity be designed in accordance with the style—the Perpendicular—then prevailing. When, after the dissolution of the nunnery, the Abbey church became the church of the parish, the recently erected Perpendicular church would be no longer of any use, and the keeping of it in repair a continual source of expense; hence it was pulled down, the openings in what had been the original north wall of the nave aisle of the Abbey church were walled up, and the mouldings and glass of the Perpendicular windows on the north side of the parish church were inserted in these new walls. Hence we get windows of different heights and levels between the great north door and the transept: recent alterations have still further increased the irregularity. The parish church did not, apparently, extend so far to the west as the Abbey church, hence the two windows to the west of the north door were not interfered with when the parish church was built. It has been already pointed out that the three western bays of the nave are of later date and later in style than the rest of the nave; they were built in the thirteenth century, and consequently all the windows found in this part of the church have pointed heads.

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THE WEST END AND SOUTH TRANSEPT

The **West Front**. A unique feature of this church is its west front. It is one of singular beauty, but its beauty does not depend on any enrichment of decoration, for a simpler front it would be impossible to find: there is not a single carved stone about it. Its beauty is due to the exquisite proportions of the various parts. The nave and aisles are of the same length. At the corners of the aisles are rectangular buttresses and two similar ones stand at the ends of the main walls of the nave. String-courses, starting from the aisle buttresses, run below the aisle windows and round the buttresses of the nave, but are not continued across the nave beneath the lancet windows. The buttresses do not quite rise to the full height of the side walls of the nave, and not a pinnacle is to be met with anywhere. The sill of the west window is about fifteen feet from the ground, and from it three tall lancets about four feet wide rise to a height of nearly thirty feet. They are placed under a comprising pointed arch, just beneath the point of which, and over the central lancet, is a cinquefoil opening. The wall finishes in a gable and the whole west wall is a true termination of the nave which lies behind. We notice that the glass is set well towards the outside of the openings, and also that no western doorway exists or ever existed here. The probable reason of this is that it was a nuns' church, and that the nuns found their way into the church from the domestic buildings through the doors on the south side. There is still a doorway (there was formerly a porch) on the north side, by which, on special occasions, outsiders were admitted to the north aisle, but as the parishioners had no right of entry into the nave it was unnecessary to make any provision for them in the form of a west doorway. From this position at the west of the building we notice that the roof of the south end of the transept differs from that at the north end. We can see no tiles above the parapet. Originally, no doubt, all the roofs had a high pitch, their central ridge rising almost to the parapet of the tower, but here, as in many another church, when the timbers of the roof decayed, it was found more economical to decrease the slope of the roof, and in some cases simply to lay horizontal beams across the tops of the wall, which of course did not give rise to the outward thrust of sloping timbers. This appears to have happened at Romsey; but, since the time when the restoration was begun, all the roofs save that of the south end of the transept have been raised to their original pitch. This roof, no doubt, will in due course be altered in a similar way.

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A fine and noteworthy feature in this church is the corbel table which runs nearly all round it. Here and here only do we find any carving on the exterior walls, but these corbels are carved into many fantastic devices: among them we find the very common forms of evil spirits and lost souls

driven away from the sacred building. A legend is connected with a corbel stone near the west end of the north aisle. It is fashioned into the likeness of a grindstone and it is handed down by tradition that once upon a time towards the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth a nobleman ran away with a blacksmith's wife, but afterwards repented of his sin and had imposed on him as penance the completion of the west end of the Abbey church. The grindstone, emblem of the blacksmith's calling, was, it is said, placed on the newly erected western bay to commemorate the incident.



SOUTH TRANSEPT, FROM THE WEST

The **South Side** of the Church differs from the north in some respects: there is not the same rich arcading along the clerestory level of the nave, only the real windows appear, not the blind arcading. The windows of the south aisle have not been altered and re-altered as have been those of the north aisle. Their sills are set sufficiently high to allow the cloister arcades to be placed below them, but the cloister alleys have all disappeared. There is a fine late thirteenth-century door in the second bay from the western end of the south aisle, and another very beautiful one known as the Abbess's door at the extreme east end of the wall of the south nave aisle, in Norman style (see p. 26). The mouldings round the head are richly ornamented, and two twisted columns stand on each side of the door. Unfortunately a slanting groove has been cut through the upper mouldings of it. It is said that at one time a stonemason's shed stood here, probably the mason employed after the purchase of the church by the town, to keep the building in repair. We may regret the mutilation of the doorway, yet at the same time not condemn the existence of this shed as an unmixed evil, for it covered and protected a most interesting relic on the west wall of the transept from destruction by wind and sun and rain—the celebrated **Romsey Rood**, which, as far as England is concerned, is absolutely unique. The illustration reproduced from a negative taken about twenty years ago will give a better idea of the character and position of the rood than verbal description. Since the photograph was taken, a projecting pent house has been very wisely erected over the crucifix to protect it from the weather, but at the same time the addition does not exhibit it to advantage; hence the photograph which shows its previous condition has become valuable. Various opinions as to the date of this crucifix have been held. The first hasty opinion likely to be formed is that it is not older than the wall in which it appears, and therefore must be of Norman date, but careful examination of the stone work will show that it is older than the wall, and has been inserted in its present position, probably at the time when the existing Norman transept was built. Mr. Edward S. Prior, in his "History of Gothic Art in England," says that it is the best work of its date, in high relief of any size to be found in England, and adds that it is by some considered to be of Saxon date. This seems very probable. It is Byzantine in character. The limbs are clothed in a short tunic; the figure does not hang drooping from the nails, the arms are stretched out horizontally, the head is erect, and the eyes open. It represents not a dead Christ, but Christ reigning on the Tree; above the head the Father's hand is shown surrounded at the wrist by clouds. This may be taken to represent the pointing out of the beloved Son, in whom the Father is well pleased, or we may suppose that the hand has been extended downwards in answer to the words "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." Some clue to the date is given by a drawing in a manuscript in the British Museum—the homilies of Archbishop Ælfric (about 994)—in which a crucifix almost identical with this may be seen. By the side of the figure is a rectangular recess, with small holes at the top to carry off smoke: probably it was customary to keep a lamp or taper constantly burning within this recess. The crucifix, considering its age and position, is in a wonderful state of preservation. How it escaped mutilation in the seventeenth century is hard to explain, for a crucifix would be particularly obnoxious to the Puritan mind, and, standing as this one does almost on the level of the ground, it

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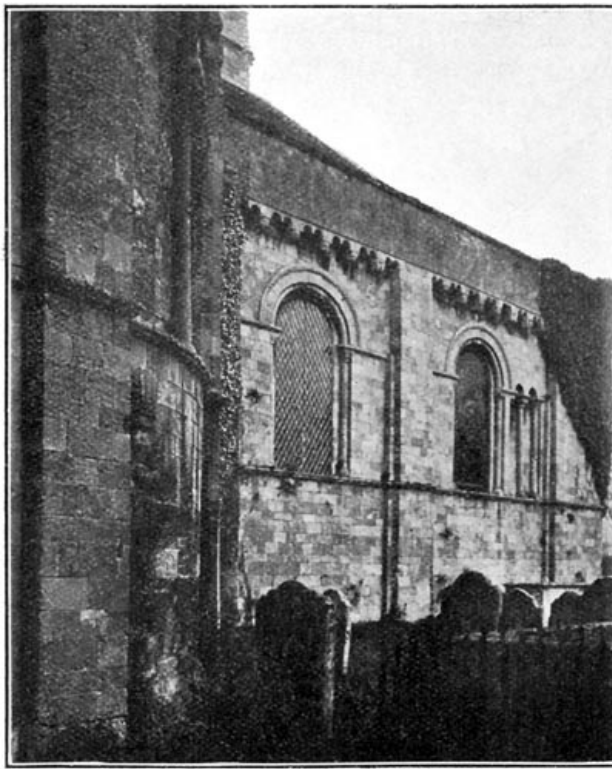
would seem to have been especially exposed to risk of destruction. Fortunately, however, it has escaped with only the loss of part of the right forearm and shoulder.



THE SAXON ROOD

Passing round the south face of the transept, we come to the **apsidal chapel** attached to its eastern wall. (See illustration, p. 14.) The round-headed windows and the original parapet are worthy of notice. Quite recently a new high-pitched roof has been placed over this chantry. The illustration shows it before this change was made. Beyond this we come to the south aisle of the choir, with its three bays, each containing a round-headed window. The arrangement here is rather peculiar. The east wall of the choir, containing the two fourteenth-century windows side by side, rises just to the east of the second bay; the outer eastern wall of lower height at the extremity of the third bay is the east wall of the ambulatory or retro-choir. This was originally pierced by two arches, leading into the two parallel chapels, dedicated respectively to St. Mary and St. Ethelfleda, which were built in the fourteenth century, taking the place of two chapels, in Norman style, only about half their length measured from west to east. These two chapels were pulled down after the parish bought the church, to save the expense of keeping them in repair. The two arches leading into them were built up, but the geometrical east windows of the chapels were inserted in them, and now give light to the retro-choir. The ends of the choir aisles are apsidal within, but flat without. This arrangement leads to great thickness at the corners of the walls.

At one time there was a detached campanile for the bells of Romsey. This was pulled down in 1625 and the bells placed in the wooden cage erected for them on the roof of the central tower. At this time there were six bells only, but in 1791 they were, according to one account, taken down and sold, and a fresh peal of eight bells cast for the church. According to another account the six bells were melted down, fresh metal added, and from this the larger peal of eight bells was cast. It is said to be in perfect condition now, the tenor bell weighing 26 cwt.



THE CHOIR, SOUTH SIDE

The stone of which the Abbey Church is built, was quarried at Binstead, in the Isle of Wight. These quarries are now entirely worked out, so that no stone can be obtained thence for repairs.

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It is not to be expected that the restoration has met with universal approval, but it may be truly said that the alterations have been far less drastic than in many churches, and that the interior of the Abbey Church, as we see it to-day, has much the appearance which it had after it had become the parish church of Romsey about the middle of the sixteenth century.

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THE NAVE, NORTH SIDE

CHAPTER III

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THE INTERIOR

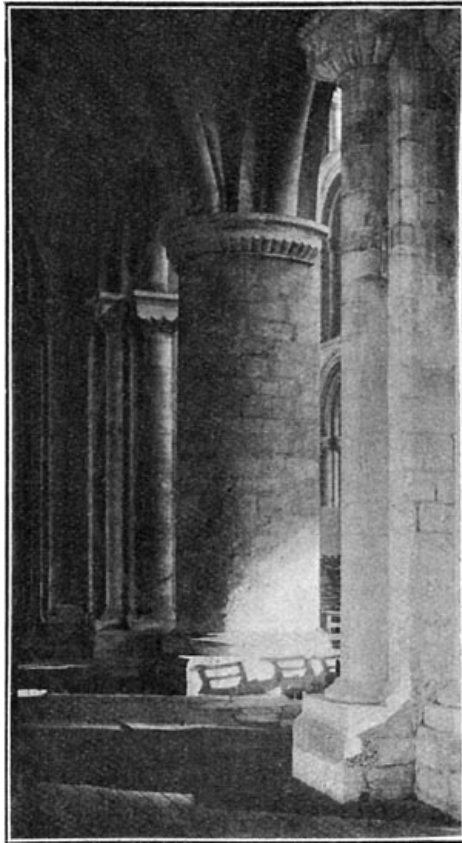
Immediately after entering the Abbey Church by the north door, it will be well, in order to get a general idea of its size and beauty, to take one's stand close to the west wall under the large lancet window. There is nothing to break the view from the west to the east walls of choir and ambulatory, a total distance of about 250 feet; for the wooden screen which separates the choir

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from the crossing is too light and open to break the vista. It will be noticed that with the exception of the western bays of the nave, and the three-light geometrical windows in the eastern wall of the choir, and the two windows of the ambulatory, everything is Norman or transitional in character. The aisles have stone quadripartite vaulting except in the added bays to the west, where the vaulting is merely plaster. The high roof, like many in Norman churches, is a wooden one, for Norman builders rarely dared to throw a stone vault over the nave or choir, for as yet the principle that allows such a piece of engineering to be carried out with safety, namely, the balancing of thrust and counter-thrust, by means of vaulting ribs and external flying buttresses, had not been fully realized in England. In some few cases it is true that late Norman vaults may be found, but more often where stone vaults exist in Norman churches they were added in after times. In Romsey Abbey one of the most noteworthy features is that very little alteration was made in the church when once it was built. True there was a westward extension in the thirteenth century, and some insertion of windows in the fourteenth century, but nothing of the original church seems to have been swept away, as was so often the case, to make room for extensions and alterations.

The **Nave** has seven bays, to the east of which is the transept, and beyond it the choir, which has three bays. Further to the east, as we shall find in due course, may be seen the low vaulted retro-choir or ambulatory of one bay.

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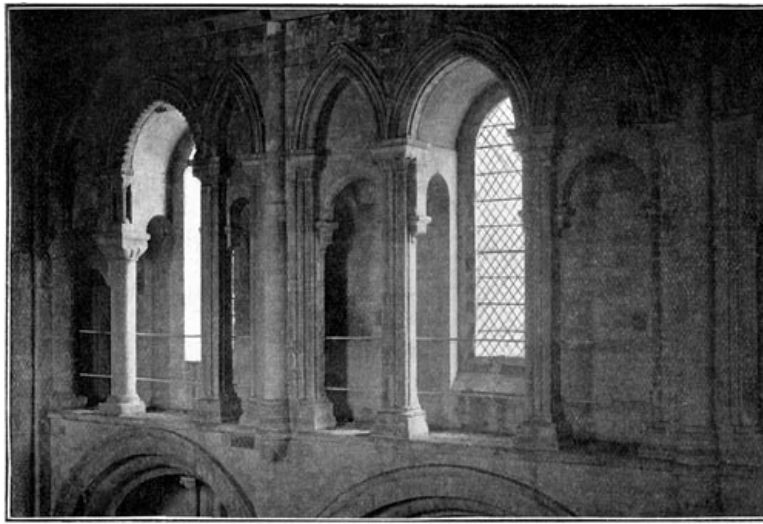


CYLINDRICAL PIER: NORTH NAVE ARCADE

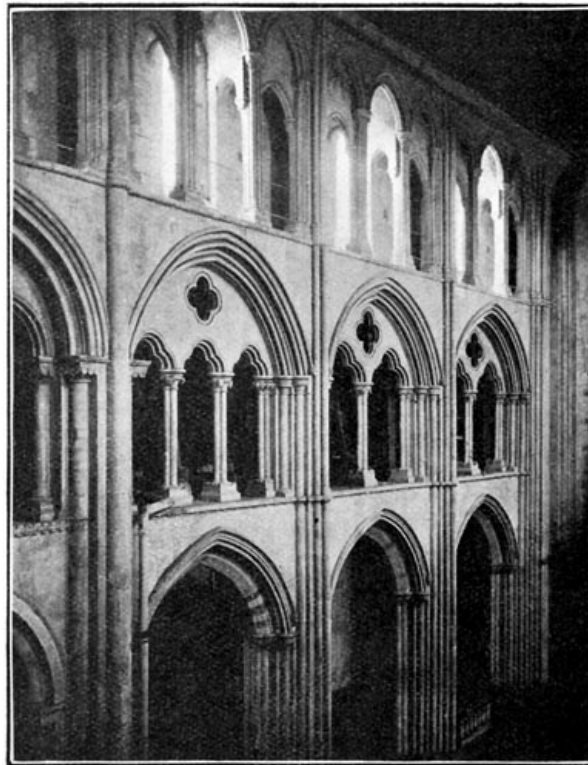
It is well known that Norman choirs were generally short, and that when we find a considerable length of building eastward of the crossing, this eastward extension was made in the thirteenth or fourteenth century; the new building being often begun to the east of the Norman choir, and the choir left untouched until the eastern part was finished, when very frequently the old Norman choir and presbytery were demolished, and the new work joined on to the transept by masonry in the later style.

The inconvenience of a short architectural choir was very often avoided by bringing the ritual choir westward into the nave, an arrangement which exists up to the present day at the Abbey Church at Westminster. This seems to have been done at Romsey, the choir extending across the transept as far as the third pillar of the nave, counting from the east. But although the eastern bays of the nave and all of those of the choir are Norman, yet they are by no means of an ordinary type. There is much about this church that is unique, and certain arrangements are found only here and at St. Frideswide's, now Christ Church, Oxford, Dunstable Priory, and Jedburgh Abbey. There is no strict uniformity: one bay frequently differs from another in its details.

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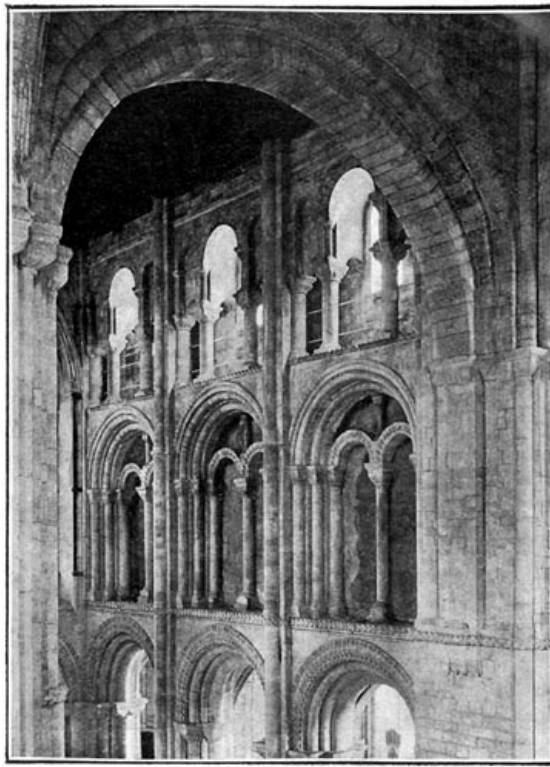


THE CLERESTORY OF NAVE: SOUTH SIDE

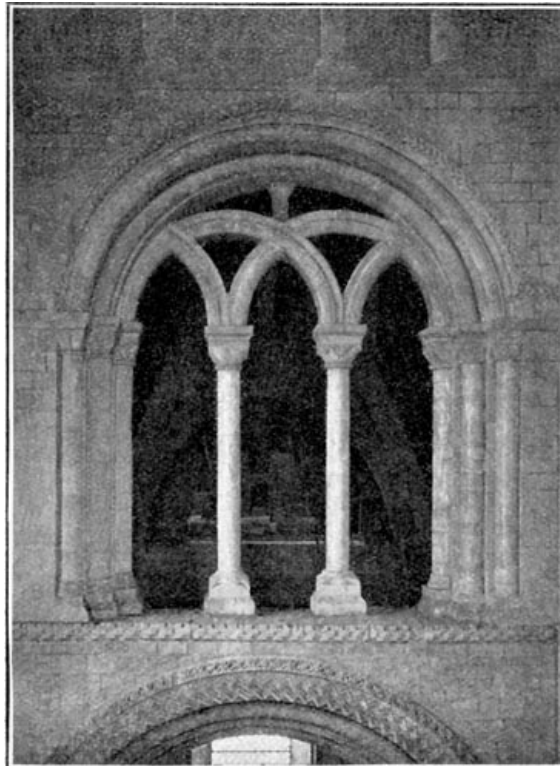


EARLY ENGLISH BAYS OF THE NAVE

It may be well at the outset to point out that of the three horizontal divisions of the nave the main arcading occupies approximately three-sevenths of the total height of the wall, while the triforium and clerestory each occupy about two-sevenths.



THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE CHOIR



TRIFORIUM ARCH IN THE NORTH TRANSEPT

The three western bays are early English in date and style, but they differ considerably from the typical early English of Salisbury; we do not find the detached shafts of Purbeck marble, nor the central cylindrical shaft; the bases, too, are rectangular, nor are there any enriched mouldings with dog-tooth ornament. In the triforium in some cases there are three, in other cases two subordinate arches, each with cusped heads, and the wall space above these smaller arches and the comprising one is pierced by a quatrefoil opening. The clerestory throughout the nave, whether in the Early English bays to the west or the Norman bays to the east, is of the same character, having three pointed arches in each bay with a window on the outside of the middle one. A passage protected by two iron rails runs right round the church at this level, and it is well worth ascending to this passage, as from it a good idea of the height of the church may be obtained. The clerestory of the transept and also that of the choir bear a general likeness to that of the nave, but are of earlier date, the arcading having semicircular and not pointed arches. The illustrations will show how shafts run on the face of the arcading right up from floor to roof. In the Norman part of the building the triforium is very peculiar; generally speaking, there are two subordinate round-headed arches, under the general round-headed comprising arch, but the tympanum or space above the former is left open, and from the point where the two smaller arches meet a shaft runs up to the centre of the main outer arch. I do not know of any similar

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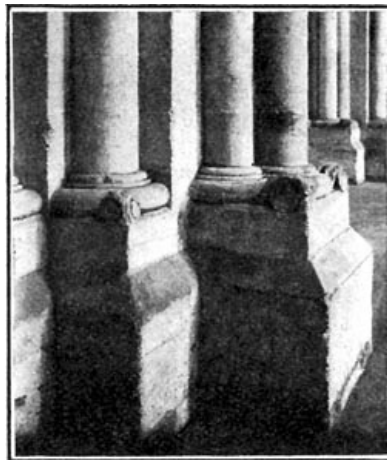
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arrangement in any other church, and, as it is a very peculiar one, hard to explain clearly in words, the reader should carefully study the illustrations in which the triforium appears. On the east side of the north arm of the transept a more elaborate arrangement of one of the arches may be seen. Here there are three, instead of two, subsidiary arches, which are interlaced, but here, also, the shaft above them appears, though necessarily much reduced in height. These shafts do not add to the beauty of the triforium, and they hardly seem necessary to give support to the outer arch (see illustrations, pp. 44, 45).



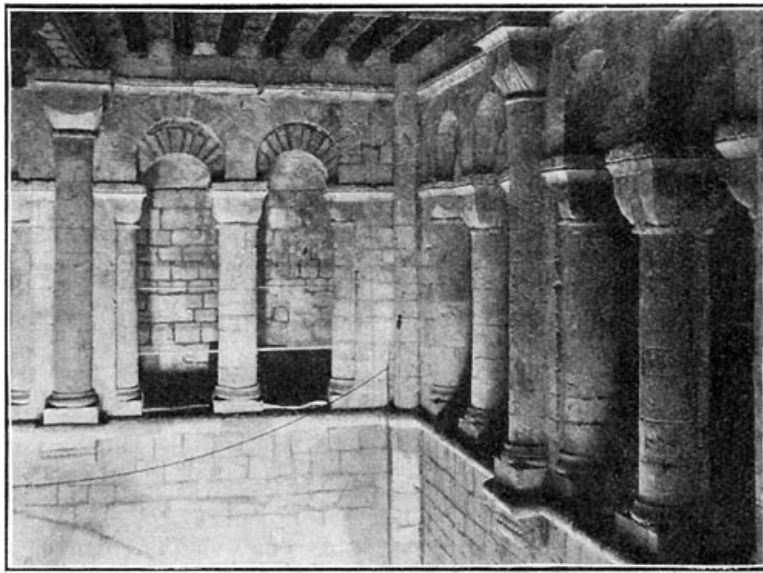
THE INTERIOR FROM THE WEST



BASE OF A PIER IN THE NAVE

The arch at the east end of the triforium on the south side, which opens out to the transept, is worthy of special notice. Under the outer round-headed arch is a solid tympanum, beneath which are two very narrow round-headed arches, separated by a huge cylindrical shaft which has as its base a large plain rectangular block of stone.

The two eastern bays of the nave on both sides are peculiar. Between them runs up a solid cylindrical pier, which has its capital at the level of the spring of the main arches of the triforium. The arches of the main arcade spring from corbels on the sides of these great pillars, so that it seems as if the triforium gallery were hanging beneath the arches which spring below the clerestory. A somewhat similar arrangement may be seen at the cathedral church of Christ Church at Oxford; some authorities have from this similarity asserted that the buildings must have been contemporaneous, but this does not seem to have been the case. Mr. Prior considers the Romsey work forty years earlier than that at Oxford, dating it about 1120 against the Oxford work, to which he assigns the date of about 1160. It may be noticed that the Romsey builder did not continue this arrangement throughout the nave and choir, whereas this was done at Oxford.

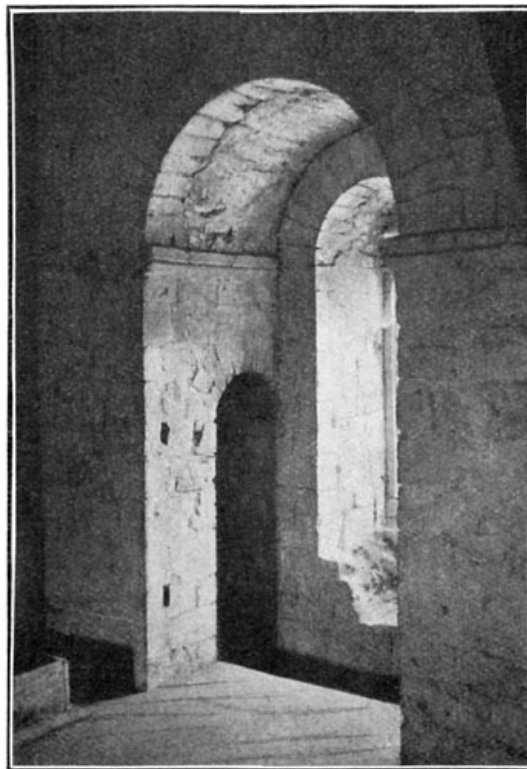


ARCADING IN THE TOWER ABOVE THE MAIN ARCHES

Generally speaking, the Norman piers at Romsey are compound ones, formed of many minor shafts. The plain cylindrical form seen at Gloucester and Waltham is not met with at Romsey except in the pillar described above. The Norman aisles have stone vaults, except in the three western bays, and it is noteworthy that the arches leading into the transept are of horseshoe type. These are very elaborately moulded, the outer sides being ornamented with chevron decoration. The capitals in the choir aisles are elaborately and grotesquely carved, though it is not easy to interpret the subjects of this carving; on one capital in the north aisle is represented a fight between two kings, stayed by two winged figures; in the south aisle a crowned figure stands, holding a pyramid, possibly intended as a symbol of the church, while near by a seated figure and an angel between them hold a V-shaped scroll on which may be read the words, "Robert me fecit." Another somewhat similar chevron bears the words, "Robert tute consule x. d. s.", but who Robert was it is impossible to say. Henry I had a son Robert, Earl of Gloucester, who is spoken of as "Consul"; he it was who fought for his half-sister Maud against Stephen. He would have been alive at the time the church was built, but whether he had any part in the erection of it we cannot say, though he seems to have been interested in building, for the castles at Bristol and Cardiff and the tower of Tewkesbury Abbey Church are attributed to him.

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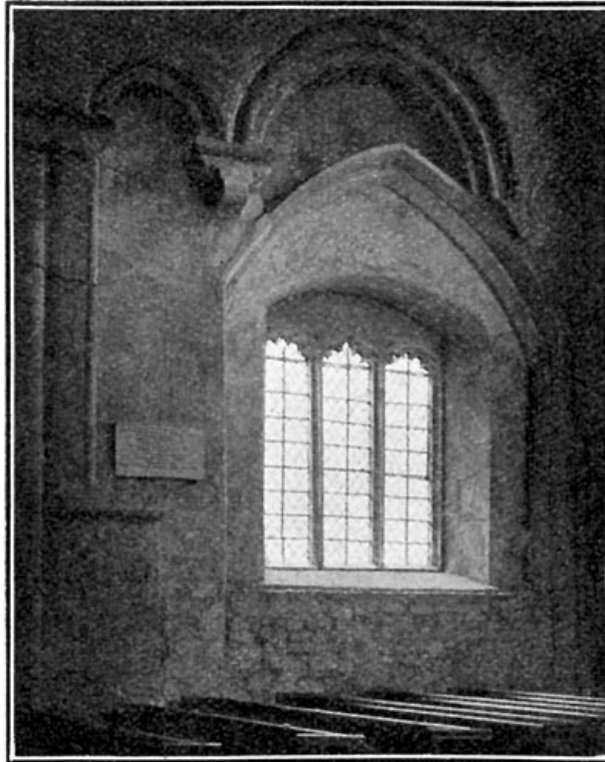


IN THE RINGERS' CHAMBER OF THE TOWER

The tower of Romsey was at one time a lantern, open to the roof, but when the bells were placed in the wooden cage on the roof, a ringing floor was inserted below. The arcading running round the interior of the tower is very beautiful. The ringers' chamber is a spacious room, a good idea of the plain architectural character of which is given in the accompanying illustration. In the west wall of the north end of the transept a perpendicular window has been cut through a group of Norman windows, showing how little regard mediaeval builders had for the preservation of earlier work. Opposite to this is one of the two apsidal chantries, which in its time has served various purposes. Originally it was a chapel or chantry where mass was said for the repose of the soul of some private benefactor of the Abbey; then it became the eastern apse of the parish

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church of St. Lawrence; still later it was used as a school, and now serves the purpose of a choir vestry. There are within it two piscinae and two aumbries at different levels, indicating, no doubt, an alteration of level in the altar itself during the period that this chantry was in use. An elaborate monument now stands under the eastern wall.



THE WEST WALL OF NORTH TRANSEPT

In Mr. Spence's "Essay on the Abbey Church of Romsey" (1851), this tomb is described as standing in the south ambulatory. It commemorates one Robert Brackley, who died Aug. 14, 1628.

A man that gave to the poor
Some means out of his little store
Let none therefore this fame deny him,
But rather take example by him
In spite of death in after dayes,
To purchase to himself like prayse.

The tomb, which is of imitation porphyry, takes the form of a sarcophagus, beneath an arch the soffit of which is adorned with red and white roses. Corinthian pillars of black marble support the structure.

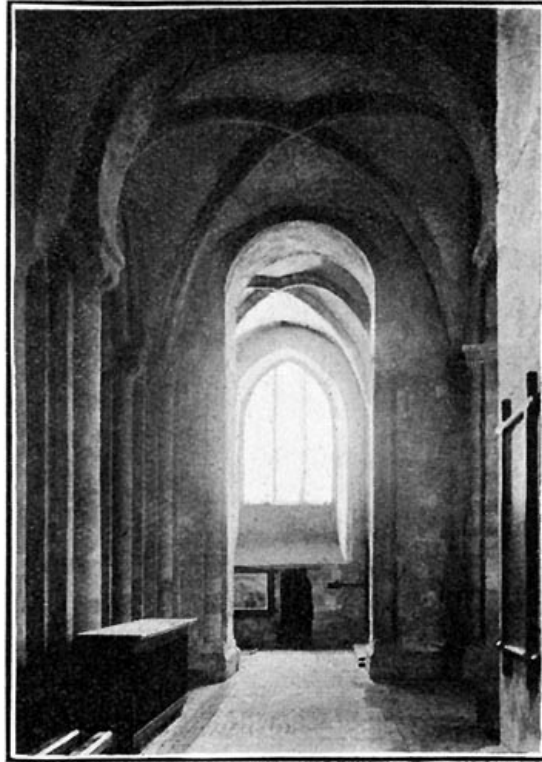
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THE NORTH CHOIR AISLE

In the **North Choir Aisle**, on opposite sides, may be seen two interesting mediaeval relics. On the north side is part of a fourteenth-century reredos, probably that which stood behind the high altar. It was found at the back of the present altar, concealed behind the regulation panels on which the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments were painted. It had evidently been itself partially repainted in a rougher style than the original. The painting represents the Resurrection. The portrait of an abbess is to be seen in the left-hand corner; above is a row of ten figures—saints, bishops, and holy women. On the opposite wall, carefully preserved behind a sheet of glass, is a piece of fifteenth-century needlework; originally it was a cope, and was in more recent times used as an altar cloth, its shape having of course been altered to adapt it to its new use.

The east end of the north choir aisle, internally apsidal though not externally, is now fitted up with an altar as a chapel for week-day or early morning services. Passing to the south we enter the ambulatory. It is vaulted in stone, and the plain horseshoe arches at the end without any ribs (see illustration), are worthy of notice. In this space several interesting relics of the old abbey, and some conjectural models of the church in its former condition, may be seen. Here, too, is a fifteenth-century walnut wood chest: and here are two stone cressets, possibly used by the builders, which when done with were built by them into the walls, where they remained until discovered during the nineteenth-century restoration of the church.



THE AMBULATORY, LOOKING NORTH

Among the relics is a very curious one which was found in 1839. A grave was being dug in the south aisle near the abbess's door, and about five feet below the floor the workmen came upon a singular leaden coffin. It was 18 in. wide at the head and tapered gradually to 13 in. at the foot; it was only 5 ft. long and 15 in. deep. The lead was very thick, and the seams were folded over and welded, no solder being used. The lead was much decayed. The curious thing about it is that when it was opened not a bone was found within it; the lead coffin had contained an oaken shell which crumbled into dust on exposure to the air, but within the coffin lying on a block of oak, so shaped as to receive the head of the corpse, was a tress of auburn hair forming a plait about eighteen inches long. It was in perfect condition and looked as if the skull had only recently been removed from it. Why the hair and the block on which it lay should alone have been preserved is sufficiently mysterious; but there are other problems difficult of solution connected with this relic; it was found beneath a mass of concrete and rubbish; moreover the coffin lay partly beneath one of the piers of the main arcading of the nave, and was not placed in the usual direction, east and west, but the head was turned towards the north-west. This leads one to suppose that this coffin was originally buried in one of the earlier churches, and may have been somewhat disturbed from its original position at the time when the Norman church was built. Anyhow, it is strange that we should be able to look on that tress of golden hair probably belonging to some young damsel of high degree, one akin, it may be, to the royal house of Wessex, who was being educated at this Saxon nunnery so many centuries ago.

This relic was at one time left exposed, but as it was thought that the hair was shrinking and losing its colour, it was covered with glass and kept in a locked wooden case.

Here, too, may be seen several coins, including a "long cross" silver penny, not earlier than the second half of the thirteenth century, which was dug up in the churchyard; a ball probably discharged from a Parliamentary culverin which was found embedded in the north face of the tower; a clumsy pair of forceps which were used for extracting the teeth of nuns suffering from toothache; a mason's punch found under the floor of the destroyed Lady Chapel, and a Roman spearhead found at Greatbridge, a short distance to the north of the town.

But among many precious relics, one recently recovered for the church is of the greatest interest, namely, the Romsey Psalter.

This is a small octavo manuscript containing thirty pages of vellum measuring 6.9 by 4.7 inches, each page containing as a rule twenty-two lines. The approximate date is probably about the middle of the fifteenth century. This is arrived at partly from the character of the writing, and partly from the fact that the Kalendar in it contains no mention of the Feast of the Visitation of the Virgin on 2nd July, a feast which was ordered to be used by the convocation of the province of Canterbury in 1480. Hence it would seem that this Psalter with its Kalendar must have been written before this date. The capital letters are painted either red or blue, and besides these there are eight illuminated initial letters, seven of which occupy a space equivalent to eight manuscript lines, and the other a space equal to nine lines. Connected with these illuminated letters are floral borders on the left-hand side of the page, and in most cases at the top or bottom also. The first and last pages of the book are soiled, probably from the book for some long period of its existence having been left lying about without covers. The present binding is of much more recent date.

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There are reasons for supposing that the book was the private property of some abbess or nun, or, at any rate, of some one connected with the nunnery, and not a public service book.

It is also thought that the book was written by a Franciscan friar for the use of some one in a Benedictine house. For in the invocation of saints in the Litany which the book contains, the names of the monastic saints are arranged in the following order: Benedict, Francis, Anthony, Dominic (Bernard being omitted), instead of the usual order: Anthony, Benedict, Bernard, Dominic, Francis.

The fact that the death days added to the Kalendar in the sixteenth century are chiefly those of the abbesses of St. Mary's nunnery, Winchester, seems to indicate that the book somehow before that date had passed from Romsey to the nunnery at Winchester. Of its further history nothing is known save that at one time it belonged to a certain T. H. Lloyd, whose name is written in it, until at last it was advertised for sale by Quaritch in his catalogue of old books in 1900. The Dean of Winchester happened to see this list, and called the attention of the Vicar of Romsey to the fact that a book of such interest might, provided the money to purchase it could be found, once more pass back into the possession of the church, where it had been used in its early days. There was little difficulty in collecting the money, and the book may now be seen preserved in a glass case in the ambulatory at Romsey.

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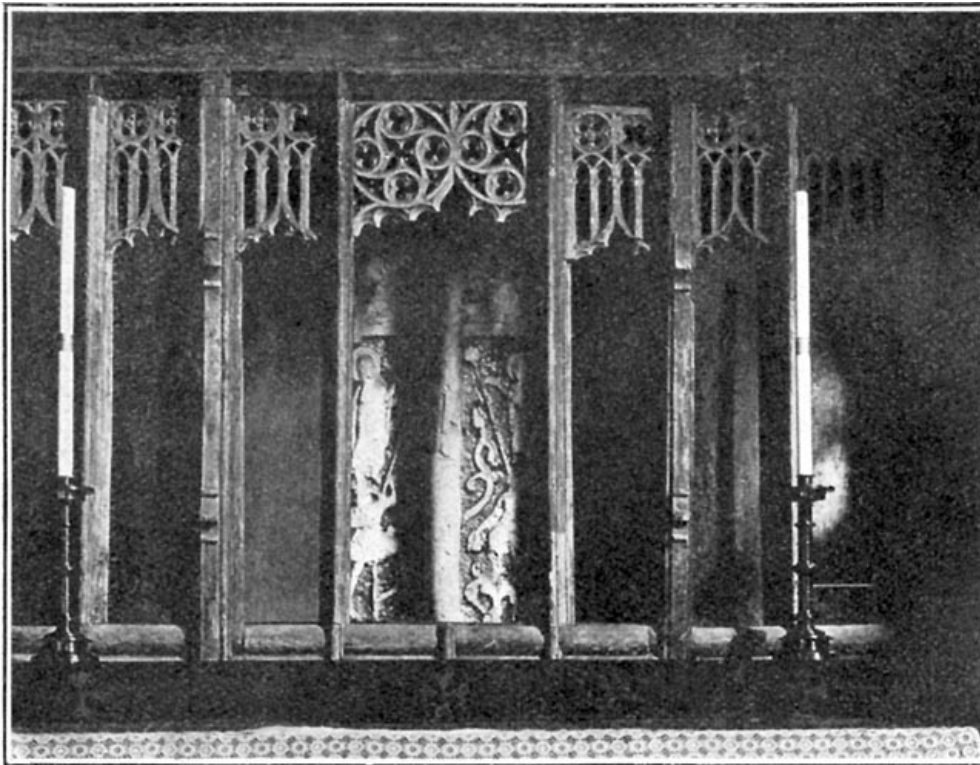


THE SOUTH CHOIR AISLE

It is worth notice that in this book the Psalms are so divided that the first 109 would be recited at Mattins in the course of a week, the others being used at Vespers during the same time.

There are certain hymns appointed for use on Sundays, canticles from the Old and New Testament, the Te Deum, Benedicite, and Quicunque Vult. Also a Litany, and sundry additional prayers.

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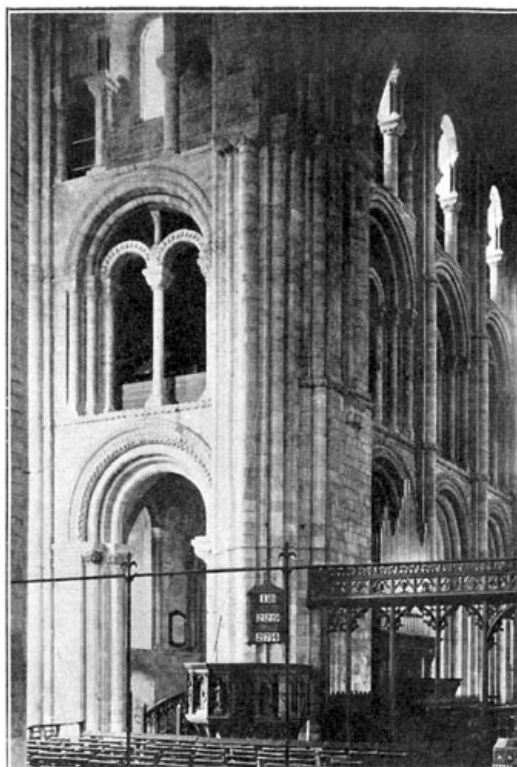


SAXON CARVING AT THE EAST END OF THE SOUTH AISLE

The east end of the **South Choir Aisle** corresponding to that of the north choir aisle is now fitted up with an altar for week-day services. But this chapel has in it one of the oldest if not the very oldest piece of carved work connected with the abbey. Taking the place of a reredos, is a carving of the Crucifixion of unmistakable pre-Conquest character, its probable date is about 1030. The figures are Byzantine in character, and besides the Virgin and St. John who are so often represented in carvings and paintings of the Crucifixion, there are two of the Roman soldiers, one holding the spear with which afterwards the side of Jesus was pierced, and the other offering the sponge of vinegar on the hyssop rod.

What the original position of this carving was we do not know, it is described in 1742 as being on the south wall near the communion table; then it appears to have been built face inwards, into the wall, and was placed in its present position by the late vicar, the Rev. E. L. Berthon.

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THE NORTH-EAST ANGLE OF THE CROSSING

The apsidal chantry attached to the east wall of the southern arm of the crossing is now used as the clergy vestry, and contains in a frame the deed of sale of the abbey church to the parishioners of Romsey after the dissolution of the nunnery. It is dated 20th February, 1544.

The Screen. The screen that divides the choir from the crossing looks at first sight distinctly modern, yet it contains some ancient carving dating from 1372. It has occupied various positions in the church. At one time it was used to separate from the Abbey Church the chancel of the

parish church, formed as already described from the north arm of the crossing. It was afterwards placed across the nave, near the west end, under the organ which blocked up the great triple lancet window. In a guide book in the abbey, published in 1828, we read that "there is a curious oaken screen of neat Gothic workmanship, which now separates the west end from the part which is fitted up for worship. It formerly stood in the northern transept, and separated it from the body of the church, but when the alteration in the pewing was made, it was removed to the place it now occupies, immediately under the organ: it was then painted. The top of the screen is crowned with running foliage, underneath which, in twenty-three Gothic trefoils, are as many carved faces. They are evidently portraits very tolerably executed, and on this account curious and interesting. One of them is crowned, and all of them have their heads covered with flowing hair, or wigs, or caps; the last on the right hand is a head thrusting out its tongue, perhaps a sportive essay of the carver." When the restoration was begun about the middle of the nineteenth century, this screen was removed, treated as useless lumber, and stowed away in the triforium, which at that time, as already described, was separated from the church by a wall. Here in 1880 the vicar, the Rev. E. L. Berthon, found, to use his own words, "the ancient oak-carvings of heads in trefoils with a curious cresting above." He resolved to utilize it in the construction of the chancel screen. The lower part is modern, designed to match the old work. The seats in the choir were designed by Mr. Berthon, and the heads intended to represent various kings, saints, and abbesses, were carved in the town. The pulpit was erected in 1891, the figures being carved by Harry Hems of Exeter, who has done so much wood and stone carving in restored reredoses and screens in various churches.

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The **Organ** stands under the westernmost arch of the choir on the north side.



TOMB AND EFFIGY IN THE SOUTH TRANSEPT

The mediaeval **Monuments** remaining at Romsey are not numerous, being for the most part the graves and coffins of former abbesses, many of them incapable of identification. The Old English chronicle states that Eadward the Elder, his son Ælfred, his daughter Eadburh, St. Æthelflæd, Eadmund, brother of King Æthelred, were all buried here, but their graves are unknown, and not a stone remains to commemorate them. There is one very beautiful effigy of Purbeck marble now placed under an ogee canopy at the south-east corner of the transept, but whom it represents we cannot say. The slab is about 7 ft. long. A small piece at the left-hand upper corner is broken off: were this replaced the stone would be 2 ft. 3 in. wide at the head, tapering downwards to about 1 ft. 3 in. at the foot. The recumbent figure is itself about 6 ft. in length. The lady is dressed in a tight-sleeved loose robe, which falls in folds to the feet, but is girt about the waist with band and buckle; the right hand holds a fold of the robe; the left hand, lying on the bosom, is in the position seen in so many of the figures on the west front of the Cathedral Church at Wells, grasping the cord that holds up the mantle to the shoulders; the head rests on a cushion; beneath the head-dress the wimple may be seen passing beneath the chin. The pointed shoes rest on an animal, possibly intended for a dog. This effigy bears a strong resemblance to that of Eleanor, wife of Edward I, at Westminster, and is certainly late thirteenth century work. There is no staff or other symbol to show that the lady was an abbess. By some it has been supposed that it was erected to the memory of Isabella de Kilpec by her daughter, Alicia Walrand, who was abbess from 1268 to 1298. At any rate, the date fits in well with the character of the monument. Its original position in the church is unknown. It was found somewhere towards the west end of the nave, by some workmen who were engaged in digging a grave, and as it chanced to fit the ogee canopy in the transept, it was laid under it, but it must not be supposed that it originally had any connection with it. Near by is a seventeenth century monument of John

St. Barbe, and Grissel his wife, whose family owned the estate of Broadlands, near Romsey, which was afterwards bought by the great-grandfather of the well-known statesman, Lord Palmerston. Several coffin lids of various dates have been found, among them, that of the Abbess, Joan Icthe, who died in 1349, of the terrible scourge that visited England in the fourteenth century, known as the Black Death. Almost all the persons buried in the abbey were women, but one curious exception may be noted. In 1845 a coffin was discovered in the nave, under an enormous slab of stone, measuring 11 ft. 5 in. by 3 ft. 9 in. Mr. Ferrey, the architect, under whose supervision the restoration of the abbey was then being carried out, thus describes the discovery:

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“Great care was exercised in raising the stone. Upon its being moved, there was discovered immediately under it a stone coffin, 5 ft. 10 in. long, by 2 ft. wide in the broadest part, and 1 ft. deep; containing the skeleton of a priest in good preservation, the figure measuring only 5 ft. 4 in. in length; the head elevated and resting in a shallow cavity worked out of the stone, so as to form a cushion. He had been buried in the vestments peculiar to his office, viz., the alb and tunic. Across the left arm was the maniple, and in his hand the chalice covered with the paten. Considering these remains to be about five hundred years old, it is remarkable that they should be in such preservation. The chalice and paten are of pewter, ^[4] the latter much corroded: a great portion of the linen alb remains; the maniple is of brown velvet fringed at the extremity, and lined with silk; portions of the stockings remain, and also all the parts of the boots, though from the decay of the sewing, they have fallen in pieces. About 2 ft. from the end of the coffin is a square hole through the bottom, with channels worked in the stone leading to it. This was probably a provision to carry off the fluids, which would be caused by the decomposition of the body. On the sides of the coffin could be traced the marks of the corpse when it was first deposited, from which it would appear that the deceased had been stout as well as short of stature. It is to be regretted that the inscription being stripped from the verge of the slab, we have no means of knowing whose remains these are. The Purbeck marble slab has never been disturbed, being found strongly secured by mortar to the top of the stone coffin. It is curious that the covering should be so gigantic, and the coffin under it so small: judging by the size of the slab and the beauty of the large floriated cross, it might have been supposed to cover some dignified ecclesiastic. This is clearly not the case.... In the absence of any known date, judging from the impress on the marble, and the shape of the stone coffin, I should assign both to the early part of the fourteenth century.”

There are sundry mural tablets of modern date, and near the west end an altar tomb, with the recumbent effigy by Westmacott of Sir William Petty, the founder of the Lansdowne family, who was born at Romsey in 1623, and was buried within the abbey, and on the north side a tomb on which a child lies on its side as if asleep, with its limbs carelessly stretched out.

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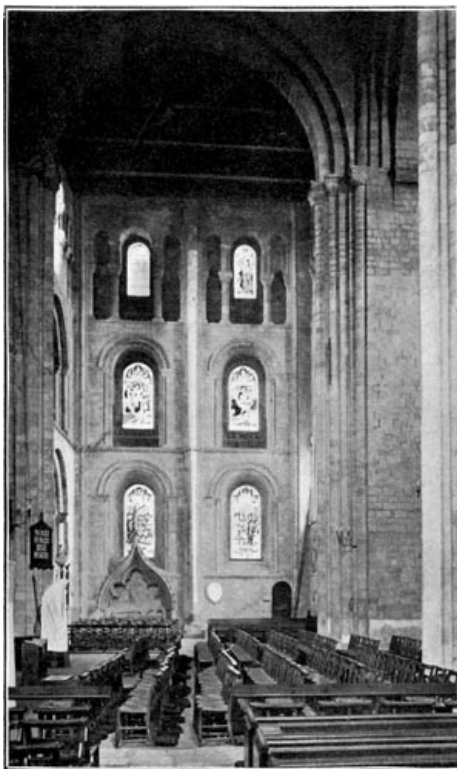
THE NORTH AISLE OF THE NAVE

There is no painted glass of mediaeval date to be seen in the church; such as we find is modern. The three lancets at the west are the work of Messrs. Clayton and Bell, and were inserted as a memorial to Lord Palmerston, who died in 1865. The glass in the windows in the east wall of the ambulatory commemorating C. B. Footner, who died in 1889, was painted by the same firm. The two east windows, painted by Messrs. Powell, were inserted as a memorial to Lord Mount-Temple, who died in 1888. To the same firm are due the windows in the transept, which commemorate the Hon. Ralph Dutton, Lady Mount-Temple, Mr. Tylee, Professor Ramsey, and the Rev. E. L. Berthon, and the one in the north chancel aisle erected to the memory of the wife of the Right Hon. Evelyn Ashley. The window at the east end of the north aisle is by Kempe, and

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commemorates Mr. G. B. Footner.

The **Font** is in the north aisle of the nave, dates from about the middle of the last century, and stands on the same spot as the ancient font of the church of St. Laurence. The conventual church, of course, would not need a font. But in post-Reformation times one stood on a raised platform at the west end of the church.



THE SOUTH TRANSEPT

CHAPTER IV

THE ABBESSES OF ROMSEY

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A complete list of the abbesses who ruled the religious house at Romsey is not in existence; there are several gaps of many years in the succession. The exact dates of the election of some of those whose names have been handed down to us are not known. The following list is as complete as possible. The names printed in ordinary type are taken from a board suspended in the retro-choir, those printed in italics are added from a list given in the "Records of Romsey Abbey," by the Rev. H. G. D. Liveing, 1906, which embodies the result of the most recent research. Whenever the date is uncertain *c.* for "circa" is prefixed; the date of death when known is added, marked with *o.* for "obit." The spelling of many of the names is uncertain; in the list below the spelling follows that given by the authorities quoted above:

- c.* 907 Ælflæda, *o.* *c.* 959.
* * * * *
- 966 S. Merwenna.
- c.* 999 Elwina.
- c.* 1003 Æthelflæda.
- c.* 1016 *Wulfynn.*
- c.* 1025 *Ælgyfu.*
* * * * *
- c.* 1130 Hadewis.
- c.* 1150 Matilda, *o.* 1155.
- 1155 Mary, married 1161, *o.* 1182.
- c.* 1171 Juliana, *o.* 1199. ^[5]
- 1199 Matilda Walrane.
- 1219 Matilda (Paria), *o.* 1230.
- 1230 *Matilda de Barbfe,* *o.* 1237.
- 1237 *Isabella de Nevill.*
- 1238 *Cecilia.*
- 1247 *Constancia.*
- 1261 *Amicia de Sulhere.*
- 1268 Alicia Walerand, *o.* 1298.

- 1298 *Philippa de Stokes.*
- 1307 *Clementia de Guildeford, o. 1314.*
- 1314 *Alicia de Wyntereshulle, o. 1315.*
- 1315 *Sybil Carbonel, o. 1333.*
- 1333 *Ioane Jacke (or Icthe).*
- 1349 *Iohanna Gervas (or Gerneys).*
- 1352 *Isabella de Camoys.*
- 1396 *Lucy Everard.*
- 1405 *Felicia Aas.*
- 1417 *Matilda Lovell.*
- 1462 *Ioan Bryggys.*
- 1472 *Elizabeth Broke, o. 1502.*
- 1502 *Joyce Rowse, resigned 1515.*
- 1515 *Ann Westbroke, o. 1523.*
- 1523 *Elizabeth Ryprose, dispossessed 1539.*

About the majority of the abbesses little or nothing is known; some, indeed, were women of exemplary piety, others were remarkable for their administrative abilities, and did good work in their own way; but of many all that can be said is that

In due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun. ^[6]

In this chapter will be narrated any incidents connected with the lives of the abbesses and the nuns over whom they ruled that seem to the writer likely to be of interest to the general reader. It is noteworthy that the story of the nunnery is, for the most part, pre-eminently credible; with a few exceptions we hear nothing about visions or miracles; here and there we have touches of romance, which show that the life of discipline within "narrowing nunnery walls" is not always able to quell human passion, especially when pressure had been brought to bear by friends and relations upon women scarcely more than children, to induce them to take the veil. And as time went on grave scandals arose, which even the energetic action of reforming bishops was not altogether successful in stopping, so that although the greed of Henry VIII and his courtiers was, no doubt, the prime factor leading to the suppression of the religious houses, yet the unholy lives of the inmates gave them some valid reasons, or at rate excuses, for their action in closing nunneries and monasteries.

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A story is told of King Eadgar which, indirectly, has some bearing on the Abbey of Romsey. About the year 960 he heard of the surpassing beauty of one Ælfthryth, ^[7] daughter of Ordgar of Devon, and possibly never having heard of the mischief that befell Arthur when he sent Launcelot to ask at her father's hands his fair daughter Guinevere, or to Mark when he sent Tristram on a similar errand to Iseault's father, he sent his trusted and hitherto trustworthy friend Æthelwold to Ordgar. But Æthelwold as soon as he saw Ælfthryth fell hopelessly in love with her, and so hid the king's message, and wooed and won the fair damsel for himself; and on his return told the king that the accounts of her beauty were altogether false, that she was vulgar and commonplace. So the king, believing his friend, turned his thoughts to other ladies; but before long some rumours of the way in which he had been deceived came to the king's ear, and he, dissembling his purpose and not telling him of what he had heard, simply told Æthelwold that on a certain day he intended to visit the lady himself. Æthelwold, in alarm, hurried to his wife and begged her to conceal her beauty and clothe herself in unbecoming attire, so that she might not win the king's admiration; but she did just the reverse, and enhanced her natural beauty by donning handsome raiment and jewellery. Her plan succeeded, the king fell in love with her and, according to one account, slew Æthelwold with his own hand while they were hunting, and when no man was by; or, according to another version, he sent him to hold a dangerous command in the north and slew him by the sword of the Northumbrians. It is, however, doubtful if Eadgar compassed his death at all, but two years after it he married his widow, whose beauty was her chief recommendation, for though it has nothing to do with Romsey, it may be mentioned in passing that it was she by whose order Eadgar's eldest son by his first wife, Eadward the Martyr, was murdered at Corfe gate, where the well-known castle afterwards rose and where its ruins remain until this day. Now Æthelwold had previously had to wife one Brichgyfu, a kins-woman of Eadgar, and had had by her many sons and daughters, the last born of them was named Æthelflæd; according to other accounts, Æthelflæd was born after her father's death, and therefore must have been Ælfthryth's child. Be this as it may, she was in any case akin to the king or queen, and was by them entrusted to the care of St. Merwynn of Romsey. A true mother in God the abbess proved, and a dutiful and loving daughter was Æthelflæd. In due time she took the veil, and the sanctity of her life was shown in various ways, and was attested by miracles. She made no display of her austerities, pretended to eat and drink with the other nuns but hid the food in order to give it to the poor, and used to leave her dormitory at night, even in winter time, to plunge naked into one of the streams and there remain until she had chanted the Psalms of the day. Once in her younger days, when the abbess was cutting some switches from the river banks wherewith to chastise the girls under her charge, the stone walls of the nunnery became clear as transparent glass to the eyes of Æthelflæd, and she saw what the abbess was doing, and when she came in she besought her with many tears not to beat her or her companions. The abbess, much astonished, asked her how she knew that she was going to beat them; to which Æthelflæd

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replied that she had seen her cutting the switches, and that they were even now hidden under her cloak. Another miracle is recorded which, for the saint's reputation, one would hope was a pure invention of the chronicler, since if it were true it might lay her open to the charge of performing an easy trick with phosphorus in order to gain credit for miraculous power. It is said that one night when it was her turn to read the lesson the lamp which she held in her hand went out, but that her fingers became luminous and shed sufficient light upon the book to enable her to read the lesson to the end. Other miracles are related of her, and though she was not elected abbess on the death of St. Merwynn she obtained that honour three years afterwards on the death of Abbess Ælwynn.

The next sainted woman who calls for mention is Christine, daughter of Eadmund Ironside, and sister of Eadgar the Ætheling, and of St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland, who became a nun at Romsey, and is supposed by some to have been Abbess, though this is very doubtful. The Scotch king Malcolm Canmore and Margaret his queen, sent their two daughters Eadgyth and Mary to be educated by their aunt Christine. Aunt Christine acted on the principle of the proverb, "Spare the rod, spoil the child," and Eadgyth spoke in after days of the whippings she had received because she refused to wear a nun's veil. Professor Freeman tells us how on one occasion the Red King came to Romsey to woo Eadgyth, for it must be remembered that she was now the eldest female representative of the old Wessex kings, and a marriage with her would do much to weld together Normans and English. But, although he was admitted to the nunnery, Christine persuaded Eadgyth to put on a nun's garb as a disguise—she was at the time about twelve years old—and told her to go into the choir; to allow time for the change of raiment she invited the king to come and see the flowers in the cloister garden. As he went thither, he caught sight of Eadgyth in her veil, and imagined that he was too late, for even he, bad as he was, would not care to press his suit, especially as it was prompted by policy, not by love, and a marriage with a nun would be counted illegal and so would fail to have the result he desired.

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This took place in 1093. Later in the same year it is said that another king, her father Malcolm of Scotland, came to see her and was vexed to see her wearing a veil and tore it from her head, saying he did not wish her to be a nun but a wife.

Another suitor in due course came to woo her, a more eligible one than Rufus, namely his brother Henry I. In this case the union was dictated not only by policy but by love. But there were certain difficulties. There was no doubt that Eadgyth had worn a veil, but whether simply as a disguise or a professed nun was open to argument; so a solemn assembly was called by Anselm to hear evidence on the subject. The decision it came to was that she was not a nun, and, to use Mr. Freeman's words, Anselm "gave her his blessing and she went forth as we may say Lady-Elect of the English."

On her marriage she laid aside her English name Eadgyth, and assumed that of Matilda or Maud. Robert of Gloucester calls her "Molde the gode quene." And Peter de Langtoft says of her

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Malde hight that mayden, many of her spak,
Fair scho was, thei saiden, and gode withouten lak.

* * * * *

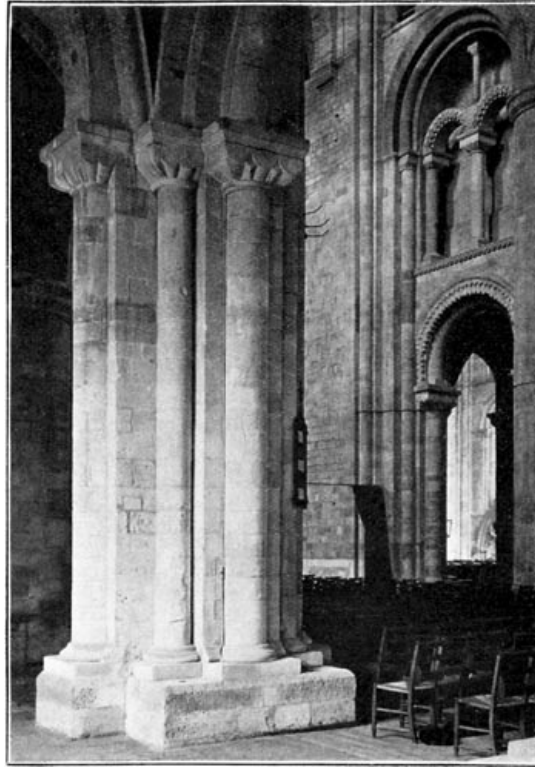
Henry wedded dame Molde, that king was and sire,
Saynt Anselme men tolde corouned him and hire.
The corounyng of Henry and of Malde that may,
At London was solemply on St. Martyn's day.

Henry and Matilda were benefactors to many abbeys, and naturally the queen was not forgetful of Romsey when the days of her girlhood had been passed. She was the mother of the prince who perished in the White Ship, and of Matilda who married the Count of Anjou, and carried on warfare against Stephen on behalf of her son Henry. Matilda of Romsey died in 1118 and was buried at Winchester.

The next abbess worthy of notice was Mary, daughter of King Stephen, of whom a true and romantic story is told, and who, by breaking her vows and marrying caused a great scandal at the time. She was the youngest daughter of the king, and a granddaughter on her mother's side of Mary, whom Christine had brought up with her sister Eadgyth. She was educated at Bourges, then was transferred with other French nuns to the abbey at Stratford le Bowe, but as the original English nuns and the imported French ones did not agree, the latter went to a Benedictine house near Rochester, which had been founded by Stephen, and later on, about 1155, Mary became Abbess of Romsey. Her brother William, Count of Boulogne, died about 1159, and his estates passed to his sister. Matthew of Alsace cast covetous eyes on her broad lands and encouraged, it is said, by Henry II, who thought thereby to gain a powerful friend on the continent and, at the same time, annoy Thomas Becket, sought the abbess's hand in marriage. He persuaded her to leave Romsey and become his wife: it is thought that Henry II may have brought some pressure to bear upon her to induce her to take this step. Anyhow, she was married in 1161. Her new people gladly received her, and her kindness of heart won and held their affection. For ten years Matthew and Mary lived happily together, or would have been happy if it had not been for the ban of the church. Then either on account of conscientious scruples about their past conduct, or on account of the disabilities imposed on them by the church, they separated, and Mary once more took on her the religious life, but not at Romsey. No doubt she thought it better to go to a convent entirely new to her, that at Montreuil, where she would not be constantly reminded of her former misconduct. Here she died in 1182, aged forty-five. It is noteworthy that her two daughters were legitimized, their names were Ida and Maud.

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Ida, the elder, married first Gerard of Gueldres, and then Reginald of Damartin, and the younger, Maud, married the Duke of Brabant, so that it would seem that the pope did not take a very serious view of the Abbess Mary's broken vows.



PIER IN THE NORTH NAVE ARCADE

The thirteenth century abbesses followed one another in quick succession, no good thing for the discipline of the abbey. When Matilda died in 1219, the old gallows on which the abbess had had the right of hanging offenders condemned by her court, fell into disuse, but the right was restored by the King to Amicia. Towards the end of the century, episcopal visitations began, and the Bishop of Winchester looked into various disorders that had grown up among the abbesses and sisters. The various methods of procedure and the things forbidden give us some idea of the abuses that prevailed. The abbess was required in the injunction issued about 1283 not to exercise an autocratic power but only a constitutional one, being guided by the advice of her chapter. It was forbidden to any men except the confessor, and the doctor in case of illness of a nun, to enter the convent; all conversation with outsiders was to take place in the presence of witnesses and in an appointed place. The nuns were forbidden to visit the laity in Romsey, and other like ordinances were enjoined.

Philippa de Stokes and Clementia de Guildeford were infirm, and Clementia's successor, Alicia de Wynterseshull, was poisoned soon after her election, but no evidence could be produced to convict the murderer.

Many episcopal visitations took place during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The injunctions issued at many of them are in existence: these deal only with what is blameworthy, not with that which calls for no reproof. Some of the things objected to seem to us very trivial. On one occasion the nuns were forbidden to keep pet animals, as the abbess was charged with giving her dogs and monkeys the food intended for the sisters. Sometimes the abbess was forbidden to take into the convent more than a certain number of nuns. In 1333 there were ninety-one, but after a time the numbers decreased, and at the dissolution there were only twenty-six. The injunctions of 1311 were very strict, some of them deal with the locking of doors, forbid the presence of children, whether boy or girl, in the dormitory or in the choir.

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Romsey, like many other religious houses, suffered severely at the time of the Black Death. The number and names of the ninety-one nuns voting in 1333 at the election of Johanna Icthe has come down to us. The pestilence reached Weymouth from the east in August, 1348, and of it died the abbess Johanna, two vicars, one prebendary, and no doubt many of the sisters, as in 1478 the number of nuns had dropped from ninety-one to eighteen, and after this there were never more than twenty-six nuns at Romsey. The reduction in the nuns not only decreased the importance of the abbey but led to a terrible relaxation of discipline.

The worst scandal arose when Elizabeth Broke was abbess. The evidence given before Dr. Hede, Commissary of the Prior of Canterbury, is still extant. There were various charges against her, that she allowed some of the sisters to wear long hair, did not prevent the nuns going into the town and drinking at the taverns, treated some with great severity, did not keep the convent accounts accurately, suffered sundry roofs to get out of order, and that she was much under the influence of the chaplain, Master Bryce. Some years before this she had been charged with adultery; this she seems to have denied with oaths, and finally, when she could brazen it out no further, she confessed to adultery and perjury and resigned her office, the only thing she could do; but the most remarkable part of the story is still to come: the sisters being required to fill the

vacant post by the election of an abbess, almost unanimously re-elected Elizabeth Broke. Two only, Elizabeth herself and one other, did not vote for her. The bishop thereupon restored her to her position as abbess, but to mark his displeasure with her he forbade her to use the abbatial staff for seven years. The remaining years of her rule were not satisfactory. The sisters took advantage of the scandal she had caused to act in an insubordinate way towards her. The next abbess was Joyce Rowse, but she was utterly unable to reinstate the old discipline—we hear of her revelling with some of the sisters in the abbess's quarters. Bishop Fox in his injunctions in 1507 forbade sundry priests to hold any communication with the abbess or with any of the nuns. William Scott was forbidden to gossip with the nuns at the kitchen window. Nature it would seem was much the same in the sixteenth century as it is now, and the convent servants loved gossip as much as ours do.

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The abbess, finding that she could not maintain her authority in the abbey, resigned, and Anne Westbrooke, formerly mistress of the convent school, was appointed to succeed her in 1515. She died in 1593, and was succeeded by the last abbess, Elizabeth Ryprose; she seems to have been a capable woman, and tried hard to do her duty. But it was too late to purify the abbey. Various nuns were reprimanded or punished in 1527 by the vicar-general. Alice Gorsyn confessed to having used bad language and having spread false and defamatory stories about the sisters; on her confession she was admitted to penance, but it was ordered that if she transgressed again in like manner she was to wear a tongue made of red cloth under her chin for a whole month, and the abbess was ordered to see the sentence carried out.

Clemence Malyn was deposed from her office of sub-prioress and sextoness on account of the careless manner in which she had performed the duties of these offices, and she also, in answer to questions asked by the vicar-general, acknowledged that she had frequently hidden a key of the abbey church in a hole so that a certain Richard Johans might find it and enter the church, and might drink in the sacristy wine with which she provided him, though she denied having ever drunk with him or otherwise misconducted herself. Margaret Doumar confessed that she had been guilty of incontinence with Thomas Hordes, and she was severely punished: she was to be imprisoned for a year, to hold no conversation with any sister save her gaoler, she was to eat no food except bread and water every third and sixth day of the week, and to receive chastisement on those days in the Chapter House.

The nunnery was suppressed in 1539, and the fact that no pensions were given to the abbess or sisters seems to point to the fact that the abbess did not voluntarily surrender. Where this was done the monks or nuns were generously treated by the King's commissioners, but when they refused to surrender they were expelled without any provision being made for them. What became of the majority of these expelled monks and nuns we do not know, possibly any of those who were in priest's orders found work in parish churches, but the case of the nuns was harder. We hear nothing of the after life of any of the Romsey nuns save Jane Wadham, who married one John Forster, who had been the collector of the abbey rents. She declared that she had been forced to take the veil against her will, and he said he had been similarly forced to enter the priesthood.

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After the suppression the domestic buildings of the abbey disappeared—but the church was sold to the people of Romsey by Henry VIII for the small sum of £100. The deed of sale may still be seen in the clergy vestry at Romsey. Queen Mary, at the beginning of her reign, restored some of the church plate.

And so the history of the religious house at Romsey ends. In one respect it was more fortunate than the neighbouring nunneries at Shaftesbury, Wilton, and Amesbury. The abbey church remains until this day, and enables us to form an idea of the arrangements in force in the churches of Benedictine sisterhoods. Many monastic churches remain, some having become cathedrals, as Gloucester, some parish churches, as Sherborne, but few of the churches belonging to nunneries survived the suppression of the religious houses; one at Cambridge, now used as the chapel of Jesus College, and the church at Romsey, are, however, among the few exceptions. We could wish that we knew more about the history of this religious house, but sufficient is known to show us that it was once a very famous abbey, and a place of instruction for many royal and noble ladies, in its early days the discipline of the Benedictine rule seems to have been well maintained, though in later years faith grew cold and worldliness prevailed within its walls, as indeed it did in many another monastery and nunnery, so that when the old order changed giving place to new, the people of the country, especially in what was once the original kingdom of the West Saxons, saw them suppressed without any great feelings of regret. The architectural student and the archaeologist, indeed, regret that so many of the abbey churches have become little more than picturesque ruins such as Glastonbury, or mere grass-covered foundations such as Bindon and Shaftesbury, and when so many have perished we cannot be too thankful that the splendid abbey church at Romsey still stands in all its pristine beauty and interest.

VICARS OF ROMSEY

As given in a list suspended in the Retro-choir

128Solomon de Roffa, Prebendary of St.	1586Samuel Adams.
129Laurence Major.	1620Anthony White, M.A.

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1304	John de Romese, Prebendary of Edington.	1648	John Warren (an intruder).
1312	John de London, Prebendary of Edington.	1662	Thomas Doughty.
1322	Gilbert de Middleton, Prebendary of Edington.	1666	Jacobus Wood.
1325	Edington.	1669	Samuel Walensius.
1342	Henry de Chilmark.	1680	Thomas Donne.
1344	Richard de Chaddesley, D.C.L.	1690	William Mayo.
1349	Nicholas de Gutleston.	1727	John King.
c. 1360	Nicholas de Ballestone.	1746	John Peverell.
1371	John de Minstede.	1781	John Woodbron.
1380	Thomas Eggesworth.	1808	Daniel Williams.
1400	John Ffolliott.	1833	William Vaux, Canon.
1420	Roger Purge.	1841	Gerard Noel, Canon.
1464	John Winfrey or Umfray.	1849	William Carus, Canon. ^[8]
1482	John Bayley, M.A.	1855	Charles Avery Moore.
1500	John Green, M.A.	1860	Edward Lyon Berthon.
1519	Edward Coleman, M.A.	1892	James Cooke Yarborough.
1546	John Hopwood.		
	John Newman, LL.B.		
	Roger Richardson.		

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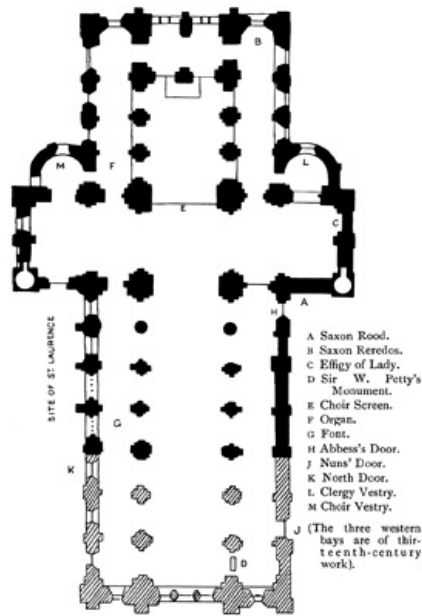
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DIMENSIONS

Total length of church, including buttresses	263 feet.
" " from outer faces of walls	256 "
Total width of nave and choir from outer faces of walls	86 "
Total length of transept: exterior	140 "
" " interior	127 "
Length of nave, interior	165 "
" choir "	54 "
Width of retro-choir, interior, east and west	15 "
" nave, interior, between centre of piers	39 "
" aisles, interior, from centre of piers to walls	18 "
Height of nave walls to wall plate	70 "
Height of tower	93 "
Length and breadth of tower, interior	28 "
Total area	21,470 square feet.



GROUND PLAN OF ROMSEY ABBEY CHURCH

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 In the year 967, Eadgar the Peaceable, King of the English, placed nuns in the monastery which his grandfather, Eadward the Elder, King of the English, had built, and appointed St. Meriwenna abbess over them.
- 2 According to some accounts, the raid in which the abbey was destroyed took place in 994, but the later date is more probable since it is said that Swegen's son, Knut, who was born in 994, took part in it.
- 3 This list shows us what were the names most in favour at the time. Eight nuns bore the name of Ælfgyfu, six of Ælflæd, four of Eadgyth (Edith), four of Eadgyfu, three of Wulflæd; besides these there were two, each bearing the names of Æthelgyfu, Ælfgyth, Ælfhild, Byrhflæd, Wulfthryth, Wulfrun. It is worthy of note that none of these, and only one of the remaining seventeen nuns, namely, Godgyfu, had a scriptural or Christian name. The old names common among their heathen ancestors still survived, no less than ten being compounded of the word Ælf, the modern Elf, or mountain spirit.
- 4 It was common to bury not the real silver vessels used by the dead priest, but imitations in baser metal.
- 5 Christina is mentioned as abbess in 1190, in the list suspended in the church, but it is uncertain if she was an abbess.
- 6 "A Toccata of Galuppi's," R. Browning.
- 7 The Elgiva of school histories.
- 8 Well known at Cambridge, where the Carus Greek Testament Prizes perpetuate his memory.



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