

Garendon Abbey



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Garendon Abbey

Introduction

Our society is now engaged on the excavation and recording of what is probably the most important medieval monastic site yet unexamined in the County. It is the only Cistercian House we have and one of the earliest in the British Isles. The word Garendon conjures but the vision of a school to the young, to the middle aged and old a large hall set amid a deer park and rolling estates between Thorpe Acre and Shepshed. But to ask of Garendon to a man locally from the 12th to 16th century would have meant almost the power of the area, a great abbey whose possessions and influence overshadowed the district and known by these things in many other places up and down the country.

In order to put our work into correct perspective I hope to preface each report with some of the historical background into which it fits. This first historical report is a little more general than those which will follow but I feel appreciation justifies this.

Historical Back ground (Part I)

The Cistercians took their name from Citeaux a locality in Burgundy. The founders were a group of monks from Molesme who were dissatisfied with the relaxed rule of their abbey. They persuaded the Abbot Robert in 1098 to lead them to a desert place where they could observe St. Benedict's rule to the letter. Shortly after this was done the monks of Molesme demanded St. Robert's return. The new monastery at Citeaux was confirmed as an Abbey under St. Alberic (died 1109). St. Alberic was succeeded by another monk of the original group, an Englishman from Sherbourne, St. Stephen Harding (1110-1134)

He had great determination and a genius for legislation. He made a wholly new order or institute to observe solitude and simplicity of life. He reintroduced manual work for monks as a principal feature of life, cut out much of the accretions to the religious service and rejected clothing and food that implied contact with the outside world. The monks wore a habit of undyed wool which led people to call them the grey or white monks. They were the first to employ lay brothers in agriculture. In 1119 St. Stephen Harding devised a system whereby each abbey was to be visited yearly by the abbot of the founding house and all abbots assembled yearly for legislative and general chapter at Citeaux, thus making the Cistercians the first systematically organized religious order.

In 1112 or 1113 the order was joined by a novice with some thirty relatives and friends. This novice became St. Bernard (note Mt. St. Bernard's Abbey in the Charnwood Forest). In 1115 he was sent as the founding Abbot of Clairvaux. Thenceforth after former struggles the growth of the order was spectacular. No religious body had ever before or ever since increased at such a pace. 'The whole world is going Cistercian' was a term used in the 12th century. At St. Bernard's death in 1153 the number of Cistercian Abbeys had grown to 338, spreading from Sweden to the Levant; England and Wales by this date had 53 of these Abbeys.

In the 12th century, the golden age of this Order, when England lay under the feudal system, with compact broad estates and a large disciplined unpaid labour force, the Cistercians were able to develop all branches of farming without hindrance of manorial customs. In reclaiming marginal land and increasing the production of wool this Order played a large part in the economic progress of the 12th century. It should also be noted that to establish an Abbey on marginal waste land between villages and towns and the development of the site and buildings by lay brethren made it relatively inexpensive and simple for both the landowner and donor and the monks themselves. The story is not always so simple since there are many instances including Garendon of the founding of Abbeys that also involved not only marginal land but the destruction of small villages that happened to be there. History is all too often silent as to what became of such displaced people or the upset it caused for the greater 'glory of the founder's soul.'

We shall see in future notes on Garendon how the strict observances of the Order began to lapse in the 13th century into the practice of land transactions and in the holding of livings of various churches. Gradually wealth accumulated and discipline went into decline. With the Black Death in 1349, the great shortage of labour this caused hit the Cistercians hard, all but drying up their supply of lay brothers. From that time on until the dissolution (1536 - 1539) they tended to work their estates on more commercial and capitalistic lines. Now the first Cistercian Abbey in England was founded at Waverley in Surrey in 1128, Rievaulx in Yorkshire followed in 1132.

In 1133 the third Cistercian house was established from Waverley at Garendon under the patronage and foundation of Robert Bossu, Earl of Leicester. The founding body normally consisted of 12 monks, 6 lay brothers and an abbot. (This number could grow considerably. At Rivaux under St. Aldred there were 140 choir monks and 600 lay brethren). The founder endowed the Abbey with 5 carucates and 3 yardlands or virgates in Garendon, 2 carucates in Ringlethorpe, certain lands at Dishley and Ravenstone and the wood of Shepshed, containing a mile and a half in length, and a mile in breadth; and Michelholm in the lordship of Lockington for a fishery in the Trent. He gave them also a burgess in the town of Leicester.

The Doomed Villages

Much of the land at Garendon covered the south side of the rich meadowland bordering the Black Brook between Shepshed and Thorpe Acre and running south into the northern reaches of the Charnwood Forest along that stretch. Although some may have been uncultivated border wasteland Garendon was already very much in existence as a village. The name derives from the Saxon 'Gaerwald's Dun,' the first being a personal name, the second part meaning settlement. The site is known and listed in the records of the lost Leicestershire Medieval Villages map [ref. nat. grid. 43/502199](#). The village field system lay on the south side of Black Brook and is shown by aerial photographs. Although not mentioned in the 1086 Domesday Survey when its lands were probably counted in with Thorpe Acre and Dishley (a common practice) it receives distinct separate mention in the Leicestershire Survey made in 1125 as 'Geroldon' some eight years previous to the coming of the Abbey. Further on this, point the generosity of Robert Bossu is somewhat marred by the implication that not all he gave was his to give. We find one William Gerebertus writing to the founding house of Waverley pointing out that certain lands belonging to his father at Garendon were taken unjustly from him without enquiry but that he William made no further

claim on it but rendered it to Waverley Abbey for the soul of his father and mother and all his family.

Garendon Abbey also acquired Ringlethorpe (nat. grid. 43/776235) on the Melton Mowbray side of the county which like the Garendon village ceased to exist. Of Michelholm on the Trent the site of this is not yet recorded. Beside the extensive wood at Shepshed the land given at Garendon must have been considerable. The acreage is difficult to assess, 5 carucates (each carucate represented the amount of land one plough could manage a year) and 3 yard-lands (each yard-land could be anything between 30 and 80 acres).

Garendon was established. It should be useful to study in future Bulletins the episodes and life this great Cistercian House was to go through during its existence.

Material Remains

Two main facts must be born in mind in examining the Cistercian house of Garendon. First St. Bernard himself objected to 'immoderate length, superfluous breadth, costly polishing and strange designs' in architecture. At the very height of Norman decorative work he violently attacked sculpture and allied decorative arts we find so interesting today.

"To what purpose are those unclean apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half men, those striped tigers, those fighting knights, those hunters winding their horns? Many bodies are there seen under one head, or again, many heads to a single body. Here is a four-footed beast with a serpent's tail. There, a fish with a beast's head. Here again the forepart of a horse trails half a goat behind it, or a horned beast bears the hinder quarters of a horse. In short, so many and so marvelous are the varieties of diverse shapes on every hand that we are more tempted to read in the marble than in our books, and to spend the whole day wondering at those things rather than in meditating the law of God. For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?"

Figural art was forbidden in the Cistercian Order and gave rise as can be seen in their abbey remains to great simplicity relying largely on the grace of mouldings for effect. Also the Cistercian use of a bell shaped capital with waterleaf decoration became widespread. Decorative designs sometimes very intricate in their pattern were used on their tiles and in their glass but this strict adherence to non figural work lapsed in the later middle ages.

The Excavation

In deciding where to excavate for the Abbey foundations with no substantial evidence as to just where it was the following points were considered and taken. The Hall was by repute built on the site of the Abbey. It lay on a north, south axis which despite its size if it were in fact on the Abbey site meant that it could only straddle it since the Abbey itself would tend to be on an east, west axis. If this was to be correct one would therefore expect to find evidence on excavation on the east and western sides of the Hall. On the day before the hall was demolished Mr. G.A.A. Marche Phillips de Lisle, the present owner, conducted a small group over the Hall. This included the cellars, many of which were stone lined (sandstone) having two simple 13th

century type doorways which despite limewashing appeared to be possibly in their original position, Two stone lined wells also existed in the cellars. This appeared to substantiate the ' Hall on the Abbey ' belief greatly. Permission was obtained to make tests on the eastern side of the Hall just beyond the drive on that side on the grass. Here it was possible to make tests with the resistivity meter (see map plate 3). Some 12 ft. to the east of the drive edge a line of fairly high readings were made, running parallel to the Hall, north to south. Their proximity to a large and ancient looking stone drain or passage (see plan) was another promising indication.

A test square on the line of the reading mentioned measuring 6 ft, square revealed a layer of packed rubble just below turf level consisting of mainly forest stone with an occasional old brick and fragment of 18th and 19th century pottery. Below this set in thick puddled clay at a depth of 14 to 15 ins. was found first an edge and finally a fine section of 6 ft. 6 in, thick stone foundation walling in forest stone on a North-South alignment parallel to the Hall, (see squares 4A and 4A.a an plan).

Throughout the Summer and Autumn of 1965 this walling was systematically excavated in a series of squares, leaving both one and two foot baulks between. (The following notes should be studied with the excavation plan plate 4) The 'B' squares later had their baulks almost entirely removed to record its length unhindered. As can be seen from the plan three sides of a long rectangular building whose north end has not yet been established were uncovered; the overall width being 40 ft. C ins. and an internal width of 30 ft. The length cannot be accurately determined as yet but the overall length of the western wall excavated was 77 ft., its northern end broken away but no resistivity trace could be found for 39 ft. further on the same northerly alignment but after this high readings were made. The eastern wall was excavated for a length of 82 ft, before foundations appeared robbed away to a depth of 4 ft. Resistivity readings, however, indicate that this wall continues north for at least another 30 ft.

The foundation walling throughout consisted of rough forest stone set in rich red puddled clay with traces of lime mortar. It lay at an average depth of 14 ins. covered with a mixture of pebble, forest stone rubble and, just below turf level, 18th century pottery fragments and evidence of army Nissen huts from the war period.

The west wall averaged 6 ft. wide, having- two possible walls leading off to the west from it at points 9A/10A and 6A/7A. In both cases a joint line was noted and were probably later added walls (if walls they prove to be). At the south west corner, however, a distinct integral wall 5 ft. thick can be seen in square 1A to run west. The south wall continues 6 ft. thick eastwards and along that stretch shows as yet no obvious connection with the possible monastic main drain which runs parallel to it. The corner was found in square 1B but only by excavating considerably deeper to a depth of 4 ft.6 ins. The corner was a little broken. The wall had a central core of puddled clay (see centre 1B) with no stone at all within. It is possible the corner of the building was dressed with dressed sandstone which had all been robbed: hence the disappearance of the foundation to a greater depth.

The eastern length of wall averaged 5 to 5 ft. 6 ins. thick. This also had evidence of two possible walls running eastward from it (See squares 3B and BB). At several points along this foundation walling were small groups of forest stone blocks set some 6 ins, in from the inner and outer edges which are all that survive of the actual vertical walls the foundations supported. These are shown on the plan with superimposed shading - see squares 9A, 8A, 7A, 6A, 5A, 4A, 11/b, 4B to 5B, and 6B. Later interference with these

foundations was found in squares 6A (concrete flooring to a probable army Nissen hut), 5A (lead pipe and brown glazed drain alignment), 2B (lead pipe probably same one as 5A), and 5B (brown glazed drain possibly in connection with the one in 5A).

Conclusions

It is early yet to be able to state precisely what part of the Abbey this building represents but some comparison may be made on plate 3 between the excavation and the plan of 'Waverley Abbey, the Mother House drawn approximately to the same scale. The alignment, size and proportions together with its close proximity to the suspected Abbey main drain would indicate a strong possibility of it being either the lay brothers' frater or the undercroft and dorter range of the monks. Again it could possibly be a part of the farmery block.

If it is the monks' dorter range and if the plan is not much different from the daughter house of Waverley since Garenden was founded only five years later, the proportions and actual size are very close indeed - to within a foot in width and also in length (up to present; investigation). Also the western portions of the Abbey would run under the Hall, making the stone cellars noted in the Hall fall into the right position for having been the Abbey storage cellars usually built beneath the lay brethren's dorter and parlour range.

The general ground level would support this inasmuch as the site lies on a distinctly level table of land that would nicely accommodate Abbey and main buildings if in this position before falling slightly away and taking on a rougher and more undulating nature.

Garendon Abbey Chapterhouse

The chapterhouse was the administrative heart of a monastic community. It was the place where the monks met, under the leadership of the abbot. Here discipline to their order was maintained and decisions made as to the running of the house.



Often elaborate in design and decoration its importance was marked by its position next to the church. Abbots were often buried inside or close by.

With a vaulted ceiling and wall benches for the monks, the floors were laid with patterns of tiles examples of which can be seen in the adjoining case.

Shown here is an artist's impression of Garendon Abbey based on archaeological and historical evidence.

Below shows the excavated chapterhouse. The position of supporting pillars and grave covers can be seen.



Garendon Abbey reconstruction drawing

