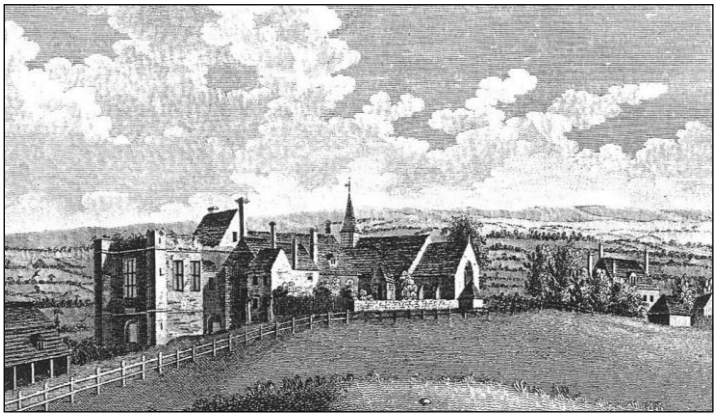
The Landmark Trust

WILMINGTON PRIORY

History Album



Researched and written by Julia Abel Smith, 2000

Re-presented in 2015

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BASIC DETAILS

13th century hall and western cross-wing with medieval additions comprising the SE wing, porch, drum tower, NE wing, and great chamber.

Listed Grade I and Scheduled as an Ancient Monument

Owner: Sussex Archaeological Society
80 year lease granted to the Landmark Trust.

Let for first holiday: March 2000

Repaired: January 1999 - February 2000

Architect: Ian Angus of Carden & Godfrey

Archaeology: Archaeology South East, David Martin, Barbara Martin, Casper Johnson

Structural Engineers: Hockley & Dawson; Clive Dawson

Builders: Quadric Ltd of Eastbourne
Contracts Manager: Mike Jones
Site Agent: Graham Tuthill
Carpenters: Mark Golds, Craig Callow, Nigel Smith; Apprentice: Roy Prodger
Bricklayers: Dave Carhill, Alan Alford, Simon Mentessi
Stonemason: Danny Elliott
Groundworker: Frank Breeze Brown
General Operatives: Gary Furmidge, Cliff Buttono
Roofers: Clarke Roofing Southern Ltd., Alan Mason
Plumbers: Spa Plumbing & Heating; Andy Buckham
Plasterers: IJP of Henley upon Thames
Decorators: Premier Services; Bernard Catt, Ronald Springate

Winner of a Sussex Heritage Trust 2000 Award

Contents

SUMMARY

As an alien priory Wilmington is an unusual type of monastic building. Alien priories were religious institutions, run by local incumbents, but dependent on parent houses, which were mostly situated in Normandy. As such they were viewed with suspicion during the frequent wars with France during the Middle Ages, and they were finally suppressed by Henry V in 1414. The Priory at Wilmington was a cell of the Benedictine Abbey of Notre-Dame de Grestain situated near the mouth of the Seine. It had been founded by Herluin de Conteville and his wife Arlette, the mother of William of Conqueror, lending it considerable prestige.

As it was so conveniently situated for the journey to Normandy, Wilmington Priory became Grestain Abbey's base for managing its extensive English estates. It was never a conventional Priory with cloister and chapter-house, but rather at the height of its fortunes it seems to have housed the Prior and perhaps two or three monks; their chief duties were those of a land agent. At the centre of the Priory today is an open space which is the site of the hall with its early 13th century entrance which still survives. The hall received additions in the form of a wing to the south-east, a two-storey porch, a drum tower, a wing to the north-east with an undercroft, and possibly after the suppression, a great chamber, which replaced the western service wing.

After it was suppressed the Priory came into the hands of the Dean and Chapter of Chichester Cathedral and in 1565 it was granted to Sir Richard Sackville. Quite remarkably, from then until 1925, the Priory was never sold but passed by marriage from the Sackvilles to the Comptons and then to the Cavendishes. Wilmington eventually passed to the 9th Duke of Devonshire and it was he who presented it along with the Long Man to the Sussex Archaeological Society in 1925.

The Archaeological Society's architect, Walter Godfrey of Wratten and Godfrey carried out repairs and opened up much of the Priory as well as creating quarters for a custodian in the south-east wing. A museum of rural life was set up much later in the present kitchen, the large room above and in the porch chamber. By the beginning of the 1990s this arrangement was no longer viable and so the Sussex Archaeological Society asked the Landmark Trust to take on the priory.

As our architect we chose Ian Angus who is a partner in Walter Godfrey's firm now known as Carden & Godfrey, thus keeping this historical link. Wilmington Priory is one of the most archaeologically complicated buildings with which the Landmark Trust has ever been involved. Alterations have taken place in almost every century since its foundation, and the result is a complex puzzle to try and unravel.

A TOUR OF THE BUILDING

Standing at the front door looking north towards the church, the open space on the left is the site of the earliest part of Wilmington Priory, the old hall built around 1225. This would have been a single storey room open to the roof. To the left of the archway into the porch are the remains of one of its windows in what was then an outside wall. The decorated doorway into the porch with its columns and capitals was originally the entrance into the hall. The area north of the old hall was an additional wing built c1400 with a vaulted undercroft below which can be entered via the steps from the garden.

The porch was a later addition to the hall and was built c1330. The window in its south wall was at this time the original entrance to the Priory. Surprisingly, the fine vaulting above, with its mask bosses, was added later and you can see how it cuts across the entrance arch. From here you would have entered the hall and on the left would have been the service wing. Today this site is occupied by the ruins of the great chamber added c1450. At the same time the entrance to the porch was fortified by the addition of a portcullis.

From the porch a door leads into the kitchen, a room which was added in the 17th century. By this time the hall was long since derelict and the north wall of the kitchen extended beyond the present one so that the massive fireplace stood in the middle of the wall.

Passing through this room you enter what was the south east wing built at the same time as the hall or very soon afterwards. This wing would have provided fine lodgings for the prior and his guests on the upper floor, whilst the ground floor rooms, which would have had lower ceilings than they do now, served as store rooms. However now it has much more of the character of an 18th century farmhouse. This wing originally extended further east towards the road, but it was truncated c1450.

Upstairs is the mezzanine landing under a lean-to roof added by Walter Godfrey after 1925 to accommodate the custodian's bathroom. Passing upstairs to the next landing there is a bedroom on your left and straight ahead another room. Back in the 13th century this would have been a chapel for use by the prior. The roof timbers are medieval and this room illustrates the contrast between this period above, and the Georgian character lower down reflected in the sash windows and their shutters.

Returning to the mezzanine you enter into the room over the kitchen. This, like the kitchen below, was also one of the main museum rooms and we have deliberately left it unconverted. From here a few steps lead up to the chamber over the porch which contains the remains of a decorative 14th century window. This would have been a high status room, originally reached from the great chamber opposite.

RESTORATION BY THE LANDMARK TRUST

It was not until 1999 that the Landmark Trust was able to commence repairs thanks to support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage, several charitable trusts, and the many donors who responded to our appeal.

The custodian's quarters had consisted of a kitchen and sitting room on the ground floor; a bathroom on the mezzanine level; and two bedrooms on the first floor. We removed the cramped bathroom from the mezzanine and formed one instead in the custodian’s kitchen which has made the staircase and landing airy and spacious. In the new bathroom we have left the fireplace from the old kitchen. The door that used to connect through to the sitting room has been sealed but shown expressed. On the east wall there are the remains of a grand stone-mullioned cupboard. The floor of the entrance hall has been laid with Purbeck limestone slabs to give a simple politeness to this end of the building.

The sitting room has an 18th century appearance due to its window joinery and shutters but the marble fireplace is Victorian. The fireplace was leaning away from the wall and its iron cramps had rusted. We removed years of soot accretions, carefully cleaning it with a wet snakestone. As this part of the building has the atmosphere of a plain farmhouse, we decided against putting up a picture rail and have stained the floor boards black, whilst the walls have been distempered.

From the hall there is a step down to the new kitchen which marks the division from an 18th century feel to the 17th century. The main work here is the new north wall, which is intended as a modern intervention at the same time as improving the room's appearance and letting in more light. It allows you to imagine how the kitchen extended north, with the fireplace then central to the room. We removed a pier that had been inserted into the fireplace in about 1895 probably for a range.

Archaeological investigation of the kitchen floor revealed footings of no fewer than three ‘south’ walls with the present one at the furthest extremity from the courtyard. A new floor was laid using bricks made locally at Godstone. They are

laid on sand without a sub-base or damp proof course so as not to interfere with the archaeology. The ceiling has been strengthened and the walls limewashed.

The treatment of the chapel bedroom was the subject of more philosophical debate and discussion than any other room in the Priory. Until the 18th century there was a wall (as there is now) between the space where we have the shower and the bedroom itself. When the room was given its Georgian windows, the wall was removed, and by 1851 a ceiling had been put in which obscured the roof timbers. By putting back the wall, we have made sense of the roof, now once more revealed. We have plastered around and painted over the lesser timbers and the plasterer has left his motif - a Tudor rose - in the top west corner of the ceiling. As we needed a WC/shower room upstairs, we have fitted it (together with a new rooflight) into a space where there is nothing to reveal or protect.

We hope that the result is a sensible compromise of the two very different periods in this room. Below the tie beams of the later 18th century ceiling, most is Georgian; above it, most is medieval. David Martin, our archaeologist, discovered the remains of a jamb of a lancet window in the splay of the south-east window which can be seen by opening the tiny door inside the left shutter housing. As we believe that this room was a first floor chapel with the floor three feet lower than today, it is likely that there would also be the remains of a piscina within the 13th century lancet.

The kitchen chamber has been left as an open space before going upstairs to the porch chamber. Its roof has deliberately been left unfelted - the tiles fixed with oak pegs in the traditional manner. Within the porch chamber, we thought at length how to treat the east window. The initial scheme, to glaze it and make it part of the room, was shelved as the main sash window to the south gave the room an 18th century feel. By making a lobby, we have created a linen cupboard in the corner and it makes an excellent platform from which to spot the crown-post roof above the small bedroom and shower room.

The entire roof of the Priory was completely stripped, repaired and recovered. The timbers were found to be nailed together rather than jointed. The salvaged tiles have been used up on the south side with the northern side, hips and ridges being made up with new Keymer tiles from the nearby village of Ringmer. The roof slopes are very uneven and the pitch varies which made this job extremely challenging.

On the south and west faces of the south-east wing, the cement based render has been removed and replaced with one based on lime. The garden path from the lane had been raised over the years and so we have removed some steps and made a gentle slope downwards, which has improved its appearance. The ruined parts of the Priory have been consolidated and the wall heads protected.

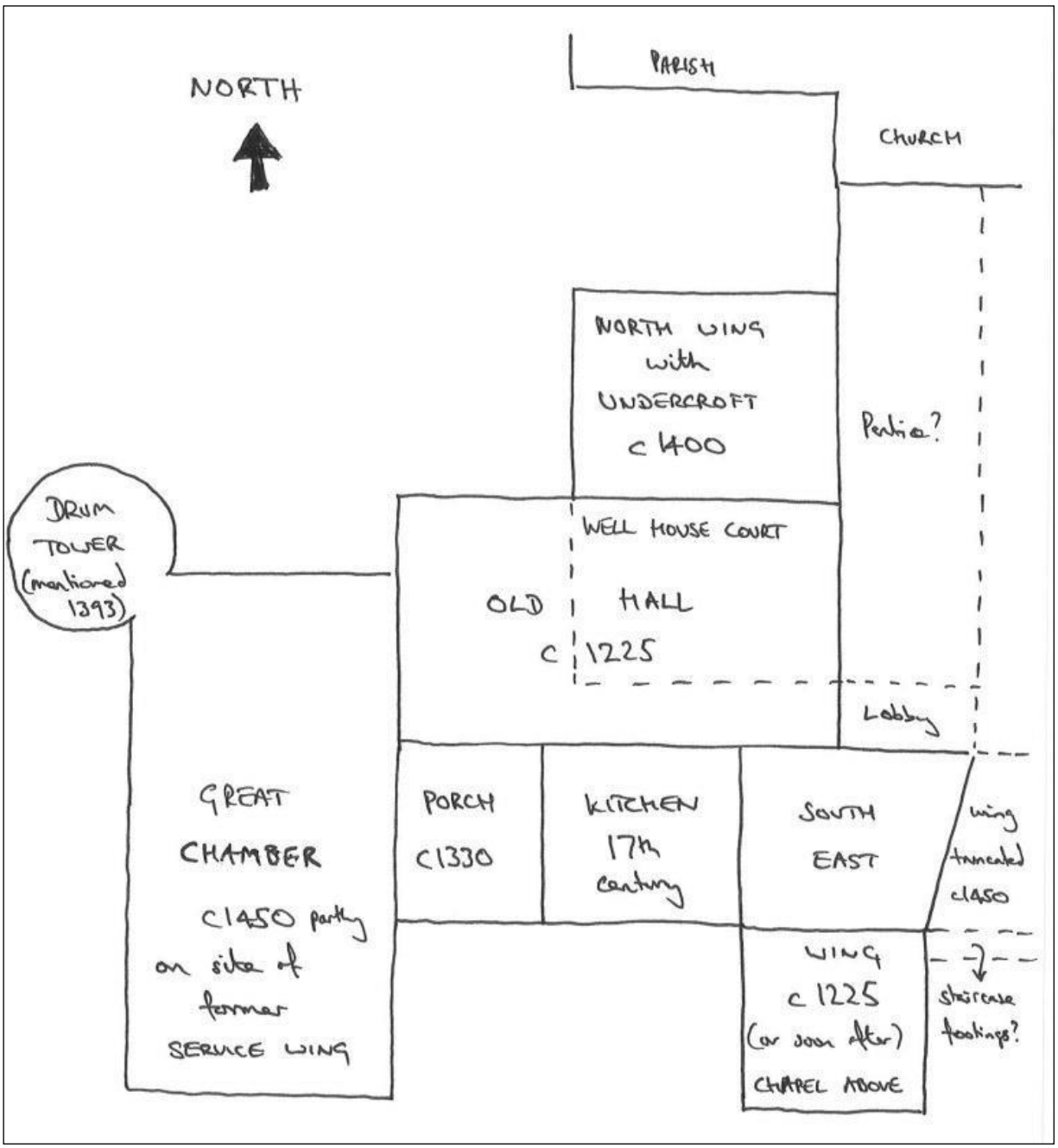
All this work was carried out by Quadric Ltd of Eastbourne, who had recently finished work on nearby Michelham Priory, also owned by the Sussex Archaeological Society. The result is another phase in the Priory's long history with the result that it can now be rented all year round through the Landmark Trust.

'So(uth) Front of Wilmington Priory' by S H Grimm 1783 (British Library). The first floor east windows of the great chamber still existed at this time

INTRODUCTION

As an alien priory, Wilmington is an unusual type of monastic building. Alien priories were religious institutions, run by foreign officials here, but dependent on parent houses, which were mostly situated in Normandy. As such, they were seen as a threat during the frequent wars with France during the Middle Ages and were finally suppressed by Henry V in 1414. The Priory at Wilmington was a cell of the Benedictine Abbey of Notre-Dame de Grestain (now almost completely demolished), situated near the mouth of the River Seine. It had been founded by Herluin de Conteville and his wife Arlette, the mother of William of Conqueror, lending it considerable prestige. As it was so conveniently situated for the journey to Normandy, Wilmington Priory became Grestain Abbey's base for managing its English estates. It was never a conventional Priory with cloister and chapter-house, but rather at the height of its fortunes it seems to have housed the Prior and only one other monk; their chief duties were those of a land agent. At the centre of the Priory today is an open space which is the site of the hall with its extant early 13th century entrance. The hall received additions in the form of a wing to the south-east, a two-storey porch, a drum tower, a wing to the north-east with an undercroft, and possibly after the suppression, a great chamber, which replaced the western service wing.

In 1414 the Priory came into the hands of the Dean and Chapter of Chichester Cathedral and in 1565 it was granted to Sir Richard Sackville. Quite remarkably from 1565 until 1925, the Priory was never sold, but passed by marriage from the Sackvilles to the Comptons and then to the Cavendishes. In 1681 it was left to Spencer Compton, later the Earl of Wilmington, by which time it had become a tenant farm-house attached to a holding of 800 acres. After Lady Elizabeth Compton married Lord George Cavendish in 1782, Wilmington was eventually passed to his descendant, the 9th Duke of Devonshire. He presented it along with the Long Man to the Sussex Archaeological Trust in 1925.

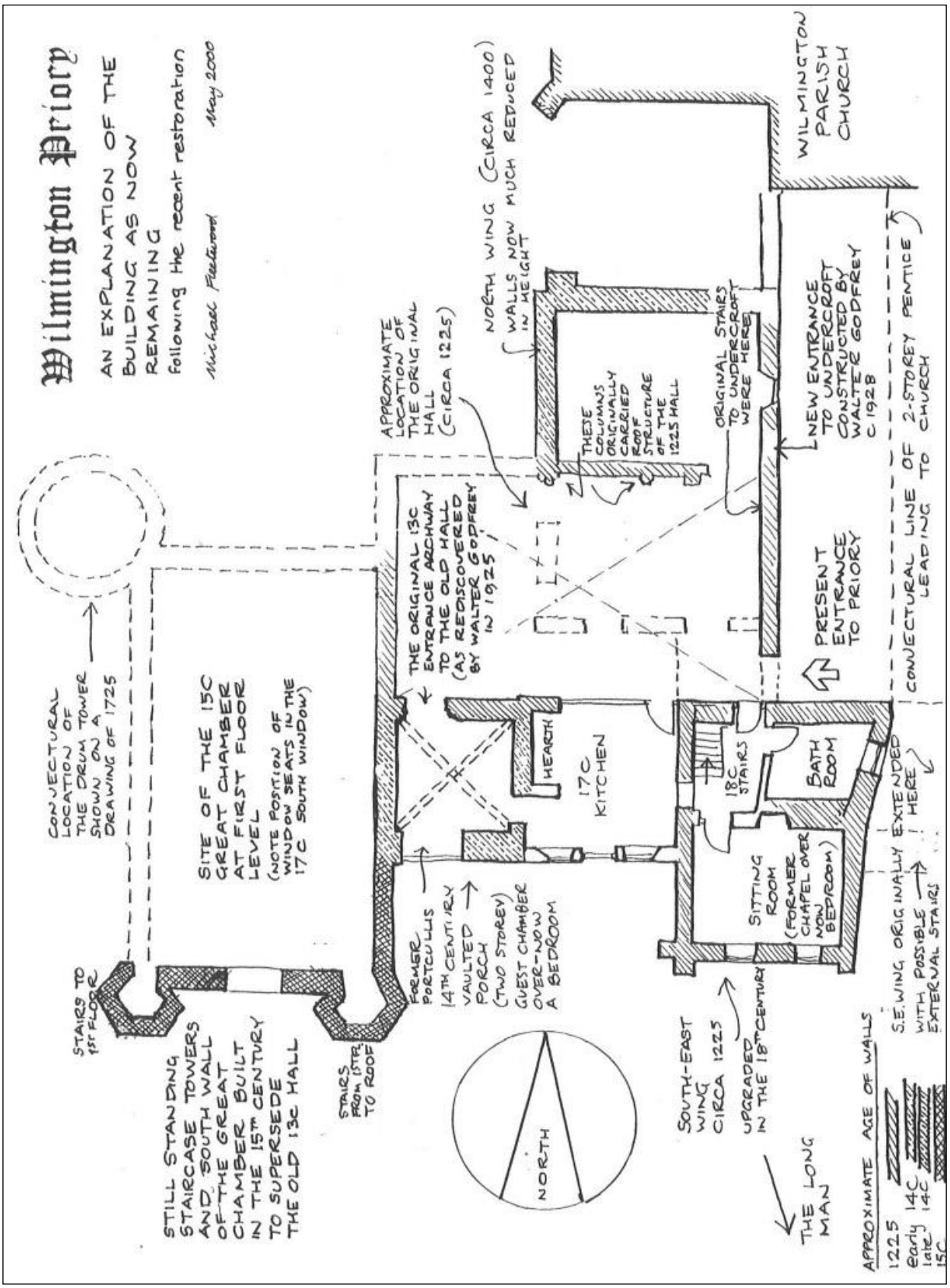


A simple interpretation of the development of Wilmington Priory

Soon afterwards, the Society's architect, Walter Godfrey, opened up much of the Priory and created quarters for a custodian in the south-east wing. A museum of rural life was set up much later in the present kitchen, the large room above and the porch chamber. By the beginning of the 1990s, this arrangement was no longer viable and the Sussex Archaeological Society approached the Landmark Trust for a solution in the summer of 1992.

It took time to resolve negotiations, but eventually an 80 year lease was agreed. We chose Ian Angus as our architect who is a partner in Walter Godfrey's firm, now known as Carden & Godfrey, thus keeping this historical link. Wilmington is one of the most archaeologically complex buildings that the Trust has been involved with. We have tried to reflect the different periods, with the south-eastern wing retaining predominantly the character of an 18th century farmhouse, whereas those areas to the west are more medieval.

The ground floor museum room has been brought back to its original use as a kitchen, whilst the chamber above has been deliberately left unconverted. We have moved the bathroom off the landing to what used to be the custodian's kitchen, and made a new bedroom in the chamber over the porch. All the ruins have been consolidated, and as with most Landmarks, much repair work has been done that is unseen. The work was started in January 1999, and our first visitors arrived in March 2000.


Wilmington Priory
AN EXPLANATION OF THE BUILDING AS NOW REMAINING following the recent restoration
Michael Fleetwood
May 2000
CONJECTURAL LOCATION OF THE DRUM TOWER SHOWN ON A DRAWING OF 1725
SITE OF THE 15C GREAT CHAMBER AT FIRST FLOOR LEVEL (NOTE POSITION OF WINDOW SEATS IN THE 17C SOUTH WINDOW)
APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF THE ORIGINAL HALL (CIRCA 1225)
THE ORIGINAL 13C ENTRANCE ARCHWAY TO THE OLD HALL (AS REDISCOVERED BY WALTER GODFREY IN 1925)
NORTH WING (CIRCA 1400) WALLS NOW MUCH REDUCED IN HEIGHT
THESE COLUMNS ORIGINALLY CARRIED ROOF STRUCTURE OF THE 1225 HALL
ORIGINAL STAIRS TO UNDERCROFT WERE HERE
NEW ENTRANCE TO UNDERCROFT CONSTRUCTED BY WALTER GODFREY C 1928
WILMINGTON PARISH CHURCH
PRESENT ENTRANCE TO PRIORY
CONJECTURAL LINE OF 2-STOREY PENTICE LEADING TO CHURCH
STILL STANDING STAIRCASE TOWERS AND SOUTH WALL OF THE GREAT CHAMBER BUILT IN THE 15TH CENTURY TO SUPERSEDE THE OLD 13C HALL
STAIRS TO 1ST FLOOR
STAIRS FROM 1ST TO ROOF
FORMER PORTCULLIS
14TH CENTURY VAULTED PORCH (TWO STOREY) GUEST CHAMBER OVER-NOW A BEDROOM
HEARTH
17C KITCHEN
18C STAIRS
BATH ROOM
SITTING ROOM (FORMER CHAPEL OVER NOW BEDROOM)
S.E. WING ORIGINALLY EXTENDED AS HERE
WITH POSSIBLE EXTERNAL STAIRS
SOUTH-EAST WING CIRCA 1225 UPGRADED IN THE 18TH CENTURY
THE LONG MAN
NORTH
APPROXIMATE AGE OF WALLS
1225
early 14C
late 14C
15C

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE BUILDING

The flint buildings at Wilmington Priory, are amongst the most important existing remains of an alien priory in England. They are memorably situated beside the parish church and in front of a great bowl of the South Downs, on which is marked the famous Long Man. Without doubt, the Priory is one of the most archaeologically complicated sites that the Landmark Trust has ever tackled. Its interpretation is not facilitated by the fact that the heart of the original building, the hall, is now an open space and its main entrance, now within the closed porch - can no longer be approached from the correct side, the south. This account begins on the site of the old hall facing south towards the original entrance and the porch.

The hall was probably built about 1225 with a two-storey cross wing running south at its west end. We can date it from its fine early 13th century doorway, now within the porch. The height of the hall is shown by the offset (where the wall becomes thinner) above the original window to the east of the porch entrance. The cut off wall to the west of the porch entrance, marks its west wall and this carried the double service doors, whose rear-arches are seen clearly in the water colour of 1783 by Samuel Hieronymus Grimm, commissioned by Sir William Burrell. The hall's east wall projected just west of the right hand window of the present front door and beyond this there was another room or rooms, probably ending with the present east wall. We cannot be sure about the width of the hall but the fact that the undercroft projects beneath the hall and the north wall has been rebuilt, signifies that originally it may have been less wide than appears today.

The hall seems to have begun to be abandoned with the building of the great chamber in the 15th century. In the 17th century, however, the room to the south of the north wing, described by Godfrey as the well house court, was provided with a large fireplace on its east wall. The 1783 Grimm drawing shows an inhabited building on the site of the western end of the hall. When the Sussex Archaeological Trust was presented with the Priory in 1925, many of the roofs of the buildings constructed within the old hall had fallen in - these included the kitchen extension to the North, a further lean-to on the same line behind the 13th century entrance, and the well house court to the south of the north wing,

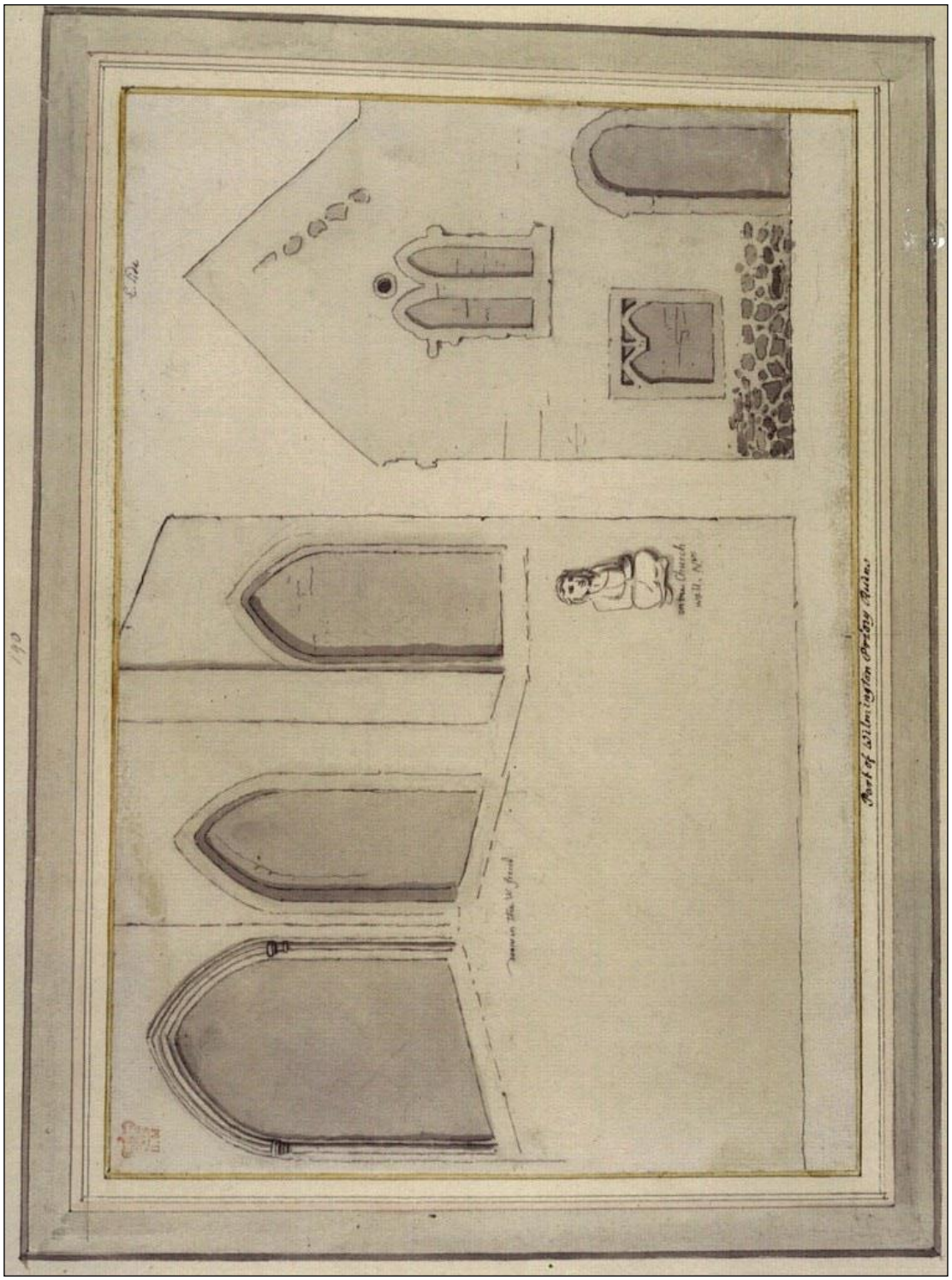
'West Side of Wilmington Priory' by S H Grimm in 1783 (British Library). The two linked and blocked doorways on the left are the service doors to the buttery and pantry from the old hall

which was also roofless, although a postcard with a 1906 post-mark shows it with a tiled roof and apparently inhabited.

The present entrance archway approached by the main path was not originally on the outside of the building. We know this because its rear-arch is now on the outside and indeed archaeological investigation has revealed remains of footings for either pavings or a wall, providing a small lobby in the corner. It also explains the strange angle of the east wall of the northern section of south-east wing which was partially demolished in the 15th century. When this happened the wall was rebuilt to join the existing lobby wall. The lobby may have been part of a two-storey pentice, or covered walk, running to the south entrance of the church.

The south east wing contains two parts: the section to the North containing the crown post roof, small bedroom and bathroom below; and that to the South which seems to have been the chapel, where we now have a bedroom, and the sitting room underneath. Another drawing by Grimm further on in the Burrell album is of the east wall of the chapel and it shows on the first floor a two-light lancet window with a small roundel above. The roundel may represent plate tracery, which dates it to the early 13th century. The present blocked-up door and now-masked square-headed window also shown by Grimm, on the ground floor, are 16th century.

The northern section of the south-east wing originally extended to about half way down the present path but was partially demolished in the 15th century when the crown post roof was built. To the south of this part we found substantial foundations running parallel part of the way down the wing, possibly for an exterior staircase like that at Stokesay Castle. If the door that is presently blocked up was cut through for the first time in the 16th century, it would not have conflicted with a 13th century exterior staircase, demolished two centuries later.

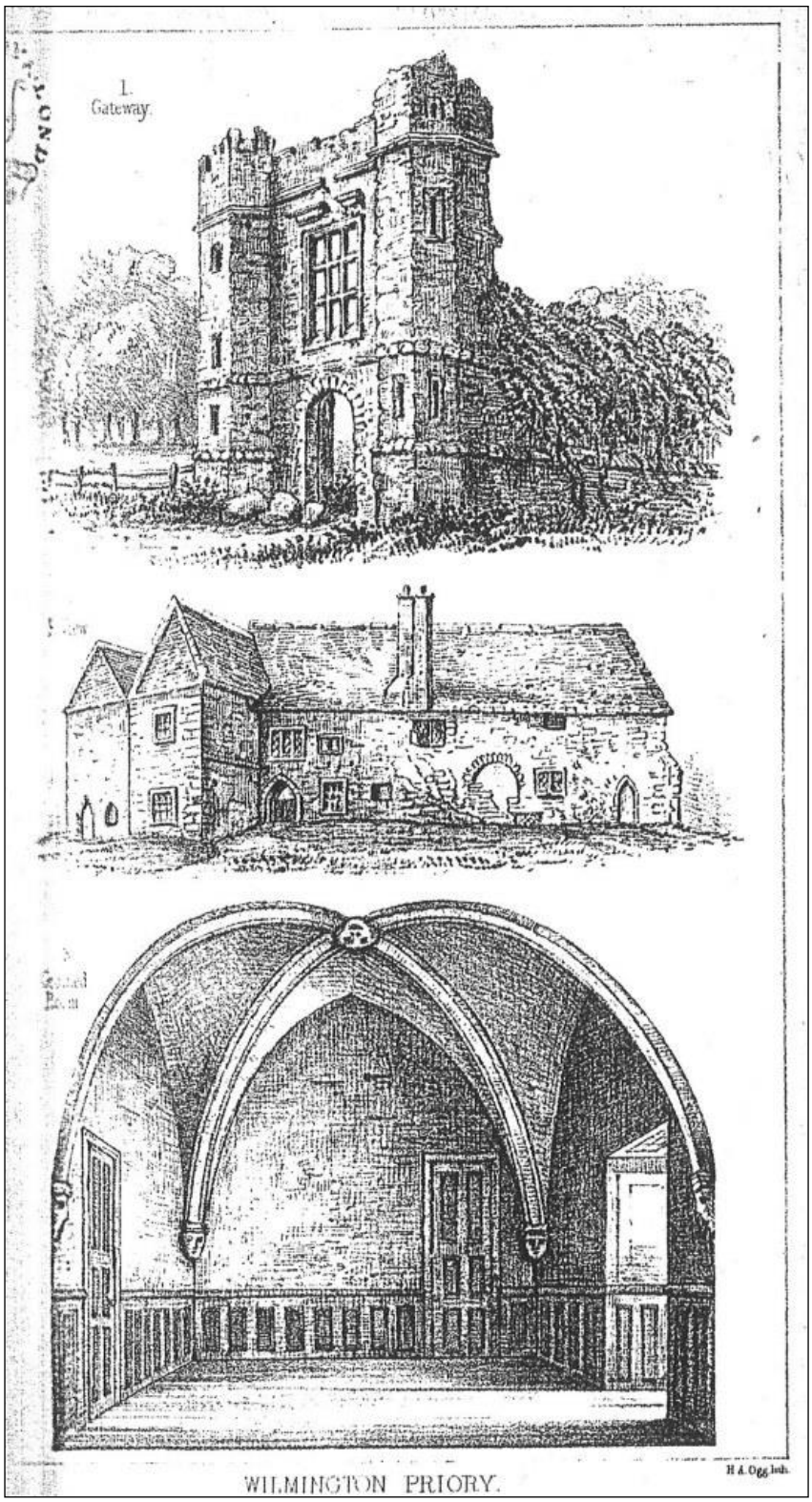


'Part of Wilmington Priory Ruins' by S H Grimm (after 1783?) (British Library). The drawing on the right is the east wall of the south east section – i.e. the sitting room with the chapel bedroom above. The doorway on the left is looking into the porch from the old hall

If the chapel was built in the first part of the 13th century and the adjoining northern part of the south-east wing was contemporary with it, (it is certainly not later) this would mean that the whole wing was built at much the same time as the hall. We know that there was a western service wing and therefore it is a possibility that the south east wing was a set of grand lodgings off the high end of the hall, with its own private chapel, most probably used by the Prior and his guests. It was also one of the functions of religious houses to provide accommodation for travellers.

In his paper on the Priory published in 1851, the incumbent of Wilmington, the Rev. Cooper, mentions that Princess Eleanor, daughter of King John and wife of Simon de Montfort, spent the night of 13th June, 1265, at Wilmington Priory. She was on her way to Dover a few weeks before the Battle of Evesham and her son, who came over from Pevensey to meet her, paid her expenses. If this is more than hearsay, it is likely that the Princess would have stayed somewhere with appropriately high status accommodation.

The **porch** was added after the hall, because in the courtyard, we can see one of the hall's original south windows, now blocked, to the east of the original entrance. It was probably built with two storeys from the start and must have towered over the hall. The cusped ogival window on the east side on the first floor dates the porch to the first part of the 14th century. This window is now on the inside of the building and has been damaged by the insertion of the kitchen chimney in the 17th century, when its third north light was removed. Although originally small the porch chamber was one of the best rooms at the Priory enjoying as it did, fine views to the south and east and it must have been intended for someone of importance. In 1267 the Archbishop of Rouen visited the Abbey at Grestain and requested the Abbot to visit his foreign priories more frequently, so we know that houses like Wilmington would have been expected to entertain their Abbot from time to time. Originally the porch chamber would have been a very private room with one door leading to the west wing (which provided the only access), the left hand rear arch of which is shown in Grimm's watercolour.



An illustration accompanying Cooper's article in 1951. The bottom picture shows the porch panelled, and the hall doorway on the left largely covered up. The door in the centre is the one into the kitchen (SAS)

The purpose of the porch was to protect the main entrance, the early 13th century archway. In his article on his work at Wilmington, published in 1928 in the Sussex Archaeological Society Collections, Walter Godfrey says,

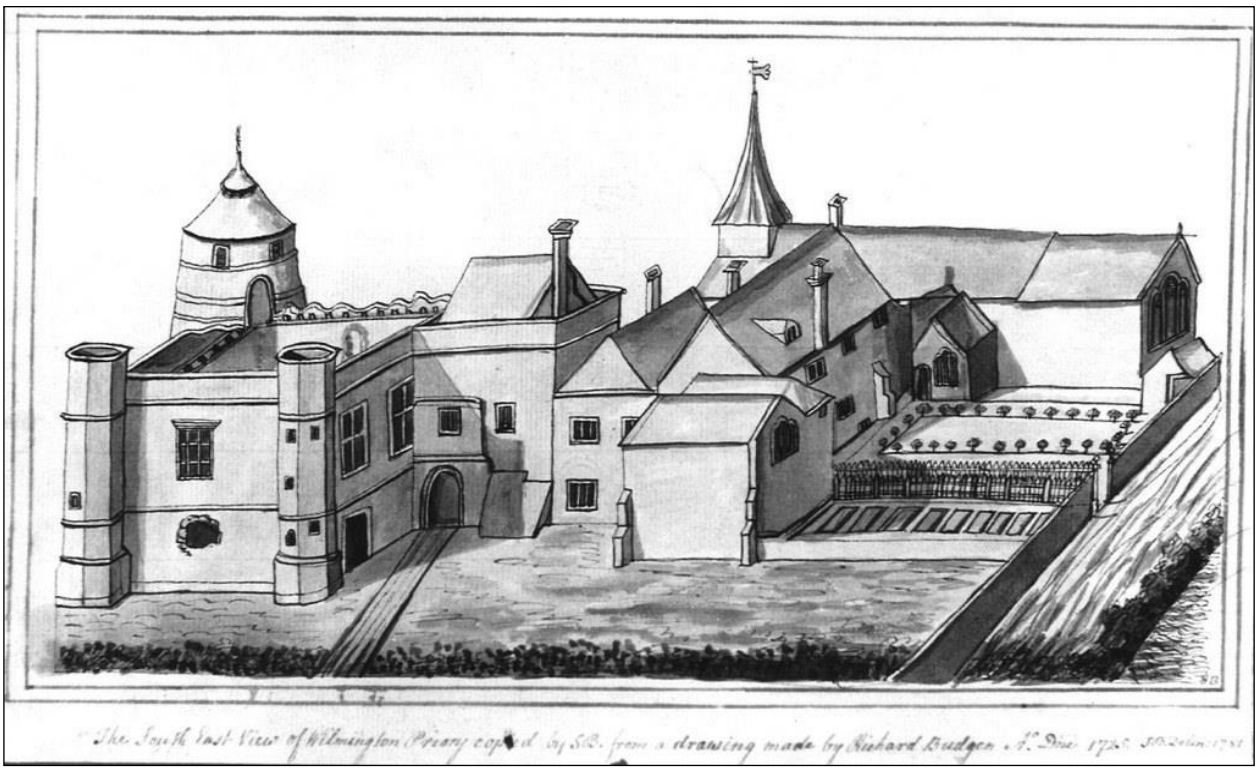
> *Until recently this doorway was entirely bricked up and unknown. It consists of three fully moulded orders … supported on three shafts at each side. There is a curious difference in the capitals of these shafts, the three eastern ones having been carved with foliage, two of the western ones being plain moulded bell capitals, and the third (the westernmost) moulded, but octagonal. It is not unusual to work the circle from the octagon and again to enrich the plain moulded capital, so that the explanation might be that we have here interrupted workmanship.*

The memorable vault with its four corbels and boss in the form of human faces was a second phase in the construction of the porch. Walter Godfrey continues:

> *The vault ribs are carried on four corbels, carved with masks, at the angles of the porch, and one corbel has been ruthlessly thrust through the moulded archstones, and rests on the westernmost capital and shaft of the door. From this the vault springs, and hides from view a considerable segment of the old* (13th century) *archway.*

However, the position of the west wall made the cramped nature of the new work a necessity because otherwise the builders would not have been able to fit in the vault. In an illustration published in the Rev. Cooper's article, this room is panelled at dado level with two six-panelled doors leading to the present kitchen and the old hall. We know that the vault formed the second phase of the porch because as W. H. Godfrey says:

> *When we turn to the outer doorway (in the south wall of the porch) we see a similar clash between vault and archway, though here the fourteenth century segmental inner arch just clears the vault itself. But the chalk relieving arch above is cut completely by the vault …*



A copy of a view of Wilmington Priory drawn by Richard Budgen in 1725. The roof of the great chamber has gone but the drum tower on the left is still standing. By the time Grimm painted the Priory in 1783 this feature had vanished as well as much of the walling of the chamber.

'Wilmington Place August 5th 1773' by James Lambert (West Sussex County Library)

Godfrey also points out that the boss in the centre of the vault is carved with a mask similar to those at Michelham Priory. On the west wall the survival of a left-hand reveal of a window indicates the remains of a porter's hatch from a room in the service wing.

The third phase in the history of the porch was its fortification by the addition of a portcullis. This was contemporary with the great chamber to its west because outside in the corner, there is no gap in the string course and the return is formed by the same piece of stone. Here we come to a particularly vexing question - what is the date of the great chamber and therefore the portcullis too? Godfrey firmly believed that it was 14th century but it now looks as if it is much more likely to be 15th century. The relationship between the porch and great chamber is also illustrated by the fact that the upper string course (that to the great chamber has now gone) and parapet were also continuous around both parts of the building. This is shown clearly in the drawing by Richard Budgen of 1725.

When drawn up, the portcullis was housed in a rectangular compartment, beneath an offset on the first floor. This may have displaced a three light window similar to the one on the east wall of the porch chamber. Grimm's drawing of the south front shows a lattice window later inserted into an ogival light. On the outside wall, the left edge of the recess marks the right hand edge of the portcullis housing.

In 1389 during one of the periods when the Priory had been sequestrated by the Crown, Sir Edward Dalingridge, the builder of Bodiam Castle, had a grant of the Priory for a fee of 100 marks per annum due to the King for his services. When he died in 1393, an assessment was drawn up of the damage allowed by him and the chaplain, Thomas Wisbech during his possession and it throws some light on the buildings at that time:

Waste committed by Edward Dalingregge, deceased, and Thomas Wisbech at Wilmington

... in the hall and a chamber called the Schudde annexed to the said hall, to the damage of 40s.; in another chamber and the steward's chamber and a drawth chamber with latrines, to the value of 100s.; in the kitchen with larder & the cook's chamber, 26s.8d.; in the chamber built like a Tower & another chamber annexed with latrines, to the value of 26s. 8d.; in three other chambers on the east side of the hall with chapel and latrines annexed 40s.; in the chancel of the parish church of Wilmyngton, £6; in the chapel being in the said church, 6s.8d.; in pales with other stone walls from the said chapel to the house called the Gatehouse ...

This list of damages is only so helpful in that we can presume that where there was no damage, the rooms would not have been listed, and on this basis there does not seem to be any specific mention of the porch or its chamber above. Possibly the *Schudde* (study?) referred to a room nearby the entrance or even the porch chamber; the steward's and cook's chambers and the kitchen were probably in the west service wing, the chamber built like a tower only appears in Richard Budgen's invaluable drawing where it is seen forming the north-west corner of the great chamber, but was previously attached to the former west wing. The tower seems to have been built for fortification purposes but by the time Grimm was doing his drawings in 1783, all trace of it had disappeared. The *three other chambers on the east side of the hall with chapel* etc. most probably represent the south east wing before it was truncated.

While the former is fairly plausible, what of the **north wing**? It does not seem to be mentioned: perhaps there was no damage there, perhaps it was the *steward's chamber and a drawth* (meaning unknown) *chamber with latrines*, or perhaps it had simply not yet been built. One reason for thinking that the north wing may have been built soon after the dilapidations schedule is that the Priory was worth considerably more in 1403 than it was in 1393.

The most remarkable feature of this wing is the undercroft which is described by Godfrey as:

> *a fine vaulted apartment underground, which has the same dimensions as the superstructure from east to west, but extends beyond it to the south. The vault is of four compartments, each having heavy chamfered diagonal and transverse ribs (but no wall ribs) of greensand stone, perfectly cut, and supported upon a low central octagonal pier, and on angle shafts at the four corners, with moulded bell capitals. The filling is chalk, plastered with a coarse grit mortar, still in good condition.*

The fact that the undercroft extends beneath the present line of the hall's north wall which has been rebuilt, may be explained by the possibility that the original hall was not as wide as appears today but stopped on a line with the edge of the undercroft. To the right hand side of the inner door there is an additional pier which seems to have been built later on to support the triple pier and one-time truss above.

The entrance and exit to the undercroft was ingenious: the main access lay beyond the original east wall of the hall (almost opposite our present front door). Once below, the door could be locked from the inside and the exit could be made up a spiral staircase within the east wall. Whatever was stored in the undercroft was worth securing. Godfrey removed the stair in the wall and made the present access into the undercroft from outside the east wall. Outside access to the ground floor of the north wing was originally by a door in the north east corner and immediately above it is evidence of a second door which led to some sort of outside staircase. Beyond the east wall of the north wing, a wall ran up to the church.

In 1541 this part of the old Priory became the Vicarage for the parish. In the Chichester Episcopal Register there is a *New Endowment of the Vicarage of Wylmyngton*, dated 15th October, and it reads:

> *The said Vicar and his successors shall have the Vicarage house there, where Henry* (Marshall) *now dwells, next to the eastern corner of the great old hall of the Manor of Wylmyngton on the north side, containing from north to south 18ft. and from west to east 30ft., with the chambers above and below built and belonging to the Vicarage, together with the kitchen on the south of the Vicarage, newly built, also the small court enclosed between the kitchen and said house … reserving to the Dean and Chapter and to any Canon when there on the business for the Church the right of walking in the garden, and of the use of the kitchen … also the right of access to the Vicarage by the door on the north of the new-built kitchen.*

A note in the Glebe Terrier of 1635 tells us that the north range was no longer the Vicarage and that it had been incorporated once more into the main house. Returning to the **great chamber** and the debate as to its age, it does not appear to be described in the *Schedule of Dilapidations*, although that, as we have seen, is not conclusive evidence. Whether it was built during the last years of the Priory as a religious house or after 1414 for the Dean and Chapter of Chichester is not clear either. In his unpublished paper on the Priory, however, Edward Impey states,

> *The moulding of the original rere-arches and the corner turrets, both clearly integral with the remaining fabric, preclude a date earlier than 1450, so that Godfrey's attribution of the building to the previous century seems unfounded.*

The great chamber was a first floor room and replaced some of the smaller rooms in the former service wing. It had access to the old hall by a door cut through just to the north of the 13th century entrance archway and the Grimm drawing shows a smocked figure emerging from it holding a stick. Secondary access to the first floor was gained by the south west turret, and from the first floor to the roof by the south east turret. Perhaps it was at this stage that the south-east wing was truncated (to reduce the number of rooms?) and the crown post roof built over the remainder.

The magnificent south window of the great chamber replaced a narrower one, and probably dates to the early part of the 17th century. In 1565, Sir Richard Sackville did a land swap with the Dean and Chapter of Chichester and thereby acquired the manor of Wilmington. His great-granddaughter Cicely Sackville, married Sir Henry Compton, the brother of the Earl of Northampton, who is listed as tenant in 1618 enjoying a relatively low rent. Sir Henry was MP for East Grinstead at that time and went on to build a grand new house in 1631 at Brambletye. He seems a likely candidate for building the south window with its nine large lights, double transoms and finely worked Renaissance hood-mould. The mullions and transoms are moulded in the same as those on the great Jacobean bow window on the east side of Herstmonceux Castle. Originally the Wilmington window had been bedded on oyster shells which allowed for movement. The great chamber was roofless by the time of Richard Budgen's drawing of 1725 and large amounts of building material must have been salvaged after this because the Grimm drawings of 1783 which show only the south and east walls still standing.

The present **kitchen** was built in the 17th century and it filled the gap between the porch and chapel. It replaced a series of shallower rooms and its north wall was taken out when the fireplace, which destroyed part of the ogival window above, was put in. The north wall was built out to the line of the present lean-to. The beams are carved with cyma stops, some with bars.

In 1840 there was a *Survey and Valuation of Estates in the County of Sussex: the property of the Rt. Honble. the Earl of Burlington*, carried out by Edward Driver. A description of the former Priory reads,

> *The buildings comprise an old farm house, tiled said to be 700 years containing good hall, parlour, drawing room, back parlour, counting house, kitchen, wash house, larder, dairy, bakehouse, excellent groined cellars of stone, a large room for servants over bakehouse and another room above but this part in bad repair. A very good staircase, 1 bedroom another ditto with brick floor over the groined back parlour. A large bedroom with fireplace - 3 ditto without. A walled Garden & flower ditto. A fine old gateway and 2 pinnacles.*

By this time, the Priory housed a prosperous tenant farmer looking after 800 acres of Downland.

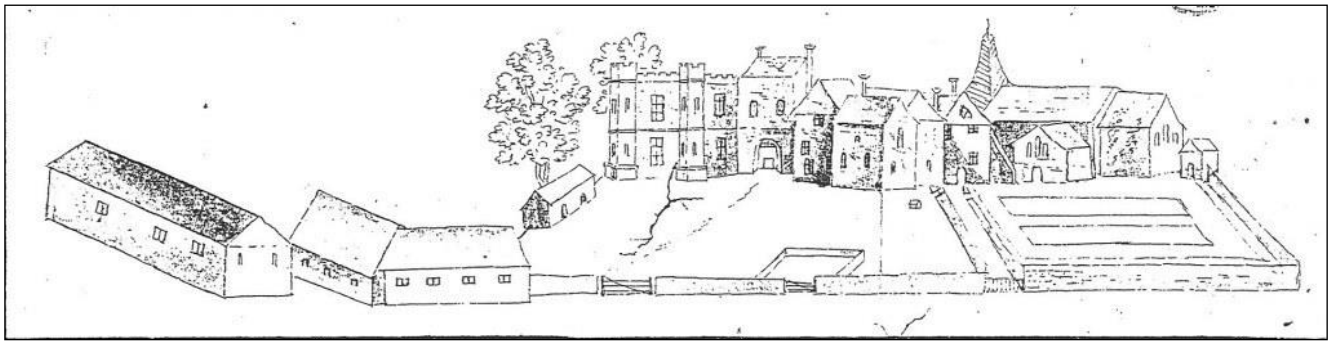
INSIDE THE PRIORY

The floor of the **entrance hall** was originally much higher because like much of the rest of the building, the first floor was the most important, with a low ground floor storey. The higher level went throughout the south-east wing under the chapel too. The present mezzanine represents the level of the medieval first floor. In the late 17th century, an extra floor was put into this part of the house, perhaps to accommodate extra farm labourers. This was done by retaining the ceiling of the ground floor, raising the ceiling which cut through just beneath the capital of the crown post, and putting another floor in between. Evidence of the three floors can best be seen by looking at the north wall of the north-east wing, just outside the present entrance arch, where there are the blocked remains of three windows, one above each other.

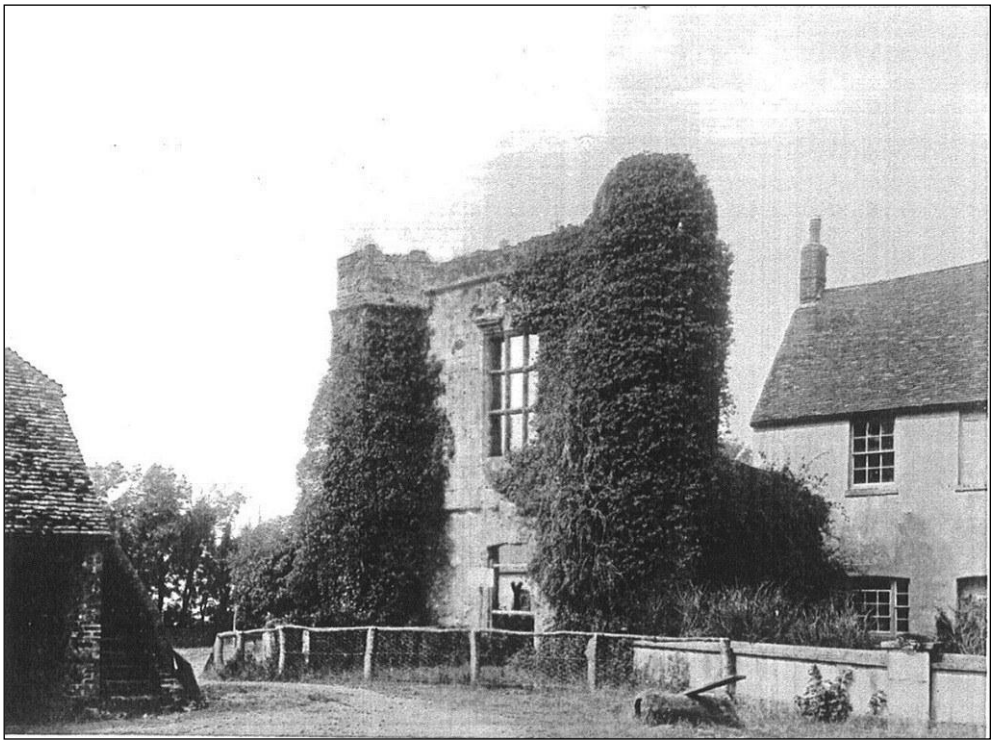
The window in the south wall serving the attic storey over the kitchen is shown in a Survey of 1710, but by 1725 this extra floor had probably been removed, as Budgen does not show it, and certainly by 1783, when Grimm shows the window in that position blocked up. The attractive Chippendale fretwork balustrade is mid-18th century and relates to the mezzanine level. Soon after, however, when the extra floor was removed and the first floor ceiling raised, the staircase was extended up from the landing to the new level and the balustrade was made to match. In the chapel bedroom a ceiling was put in at wall-plate level, obscuring the timber roof. Soon after Grimm's 1783 drawings, the porch and kitchen were placed under a single roof.

At the top of the stairs to the left of the door into the kitchen chamber, there is a piece of walling which is something of a puzzle. The left hand jamb represents the remains of a door leading to a guarderobe which was pushed southwards to avoid a feature in the corner but we do not know what. Next to it is a window incorporating two pieces of re-used 14th century tracery, which was cut through at mezzanine level and later blocked up. Finally, the present door was cut through.

During the 18th century, the south and west walls in the porch chamber, probably by that stage in a poor state of repair, were rebuilt much thinner than originally, to make more room. Coming out of this room beneath the original east window, its sill came across where the quoins finish.



'A survey of the Demesne Lands of the Manor of Wilmington belonging to the Honourable Spencer Compton' by John Rowley 1710



The great chamber c 1925 (NMR)

Wilmington Priory c 1970 (NMR)

KEY DATES AT WILMINGTON PRIORY

11thc Foundation of Notre Dame de Grestain in Normandy, by Duke Robert II, Herluin de Conteville and his wife Arlette.

c1130 Unusually long chancel of the parish church built

c1225 Great hall built with western service wing at Priory but likely that monks had been resident since late 11th century

1264 Henry III defeated at the Battle of Lewes

1265 1st parliament called, Simon de Montfort defeated at battle of Evesham

1272 Accession of Edward I

1294 English possessions of alien priories taken into Edward I's hands

1295 All members of alien priories living within 12 miles of the sea to be removed to other religious houses at least 20 miles from the sea – Abbot of Chertsey directed to receive the Prior of Wilmington

1297 Alien houses restored

1314 Battle of Bannockburn

1324 Alien houses seized by Edward II

1327 Murder of Edward II, succession of Edward III, **alien houses restored**

1337 Beginning of 100 Years War with Edward claiming throne of France, **alien houses seized**

1340 Battle of Sluys

1346 Battle of Crecy

1349 Black Death

1360 Peace of Bretigny – alien houses restored

1367 Birth of Richard II and of Henry IV

1370 Alien houses seized (French raids between 1372 and 1387)

1377 Death of Edward III

1379 Wilmington Priory granted to the Augustinians at Michelham Priory – mask boss and corbels in porch similar to some at Michelham

1385 King granted Priory to James de Berners

1389 Sir Edward Dalingridge given a grant of the Priory

1393 Assessment of destruction following the death of Sir Edward

1396 Truce with France – alien houses restored

1401 Walter Bristow, last Prior, takes oath of obedience

1403 For the last time, Wilmington along with other alien priories taken into the hand s of the King.

1413 Death of Henry IV and accession of Henry V. July 21 the Priory and manor of Wilmington and all manors, lands and possessions in Sussex late belonging to the Abbey at Gresain valued at 240 marks yearly and granted by the King to the Dean and Chapter of Chichester

1415 Siege of Harfleur, Battle of Agincourt

1541 New Endowment of the Vicarage at Wilmington, which constituted as a vicarage house a portion of the old buildings in which the vicar, Henry Marshall, was then living.

1565 Whole of the Susses possessions of the late priory granted to Sir Richard Sackville in an exchange of manors and lands with the Dean and Chapter of Chichester. (Now a manor house, and accommodation for courts was necessary, however, essentially a farm house with tenant farming 800 acres)

1647 Lady Isabella Sackville (daughter of 3rd Earl of Dorset) marries 3rd Earl of Northampton

1681 Spencer Compton (son of 3rd Earl of Northampton and his second wife, Mary d. of Viscount Campden) inherits Wilmington.

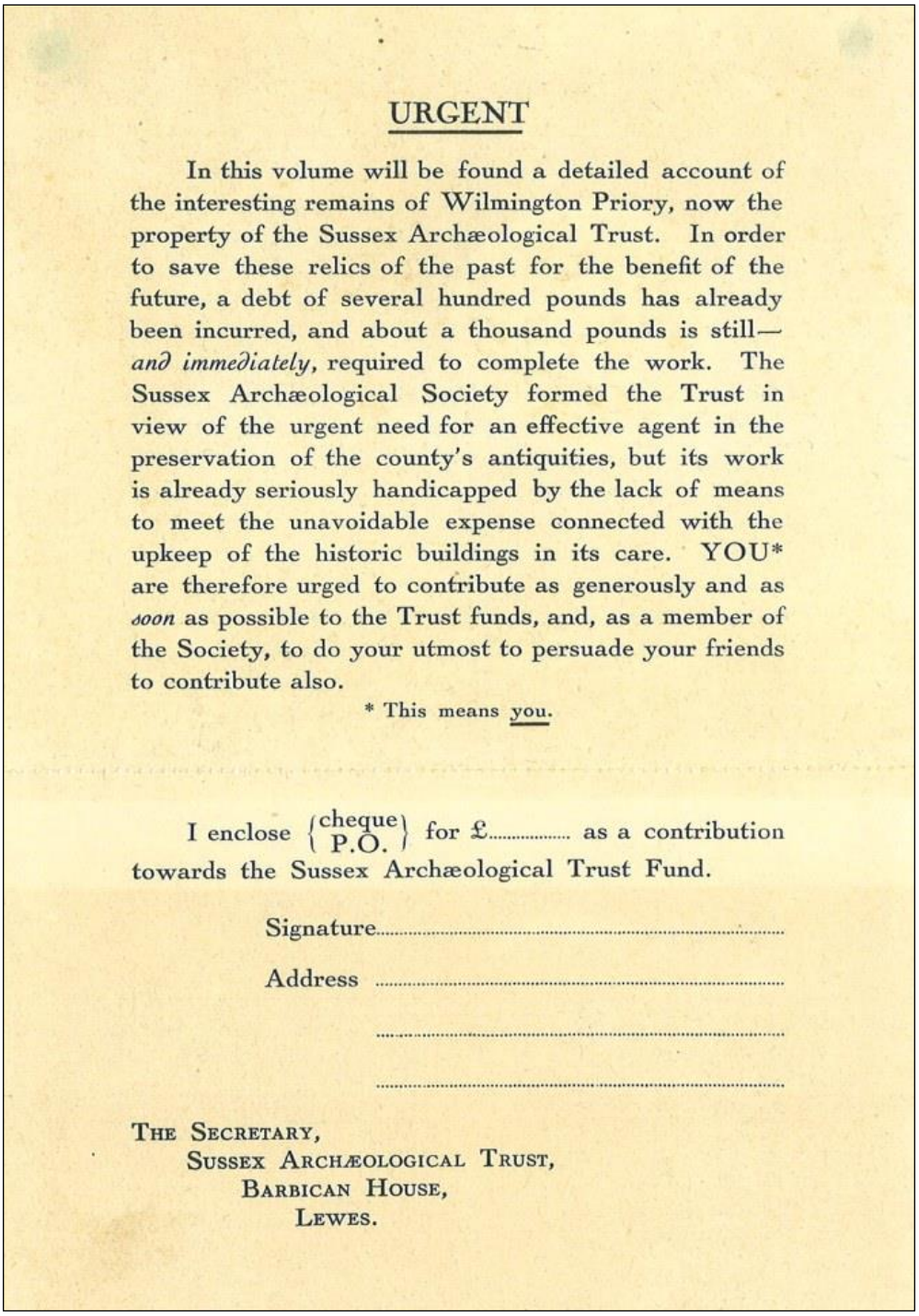
1782 Lady Elizabeth Compton, heiress of Charles, 7th Earl, marries Lord George Cavendish, younger brother of 5th Duke of Devonshire.

1925 The 9th Duke of Devonshire presents Wilmington Priory and the Long Man to the Sussex Archaeological Trust.

A SHORT NOTE ON THE BUILDING SINCE 1925

Walter Godfrey, who later restored Herstmonceux Castle and became the first Director of the National Buildings Record (now called the National Monuments Record, and the public archive of English Heritage), was appointed the Sussex Archaeological Trust's architect in 1925. He took on a partly ruinous building and was the main historian who saved it. He did much clearing and opening up but unfortunately the records of exactly what he did have not been found. We know that he uncovered the 13th century entrance archway and upstairs in the south-east wing, he exposed the roof and kept in the later beams. Outside he removed the lean-tos beyond the porch and kitchen, leaving the original north wall of the kitchen open. He created the present lean-to outside our front door into which he put a bathroom for the new custodian. He created the rest of the quarters in the south-east wing, with a sitting room and kitchen on the ground floor with two bedrooms above. The Priory was formally opened to the public on 25th May 1929.

During World War II the timbers of the 16th century truss resting on the triple piers in the north-west corner of the well-house court collapsed. Godfrey deemed reconstruction inappropriate and he protected the caps of the shafts with lead and removed the fallen timbers. In 1950 the Ancient Monuments Board recommended that the Priory should be Scheduled as an Ancient Monument. During the 1950s Godfrey's son, Emil, took over works at the Priory for the Trust. He oversaw improvements to the custodian's quarters in 1958 and in the early 1960s he recommended demolishing the west wall of the well house down to the level of the door head leaving one horizontal and one vertical timber in position. After the Society's appeal for funds, he carried out work repairing the south front of the great chamber, and the two angle turrets, previously open to the sky, were roofed over. These repairs were completed in October, 1961. In the 1960s Emil Godfrey was instrumental in setting up the museum of rural life, which meant boarding up the north wall of the kitchen to provide the main downstairs exhibition space.



URGENT

In this volume will be found a detailed account of the interesting remains of Wilmington Priory, now the property of the Sussex Archæological Trust. In order to save these relics of the past for the benefit of the future, a debt of several hundred pounds has already been incurred, and about a thousand pounds is still—*and immediately*, required to complete the work. The Sussex Archæological Society formed the Trust in view of the urgent need for an effective agent in the preservation of the county's antiquities, but its work is already seriously handicapped by the lack of means to meet the unavoidable expense connected with the upkeep of the historic buildings in its care. YOU* are therefore urged to contribute as generously and as *soon* as possible to the Trust funds, and, as a member of the Society, to do your utmost to persuade your friends to contribute also.

* This means you.

I enclose {cheque / P.O.} for £..... as a contribution towards the Sussex Archæological Trust Fund.

Signature.....

Address .....

.....

.....

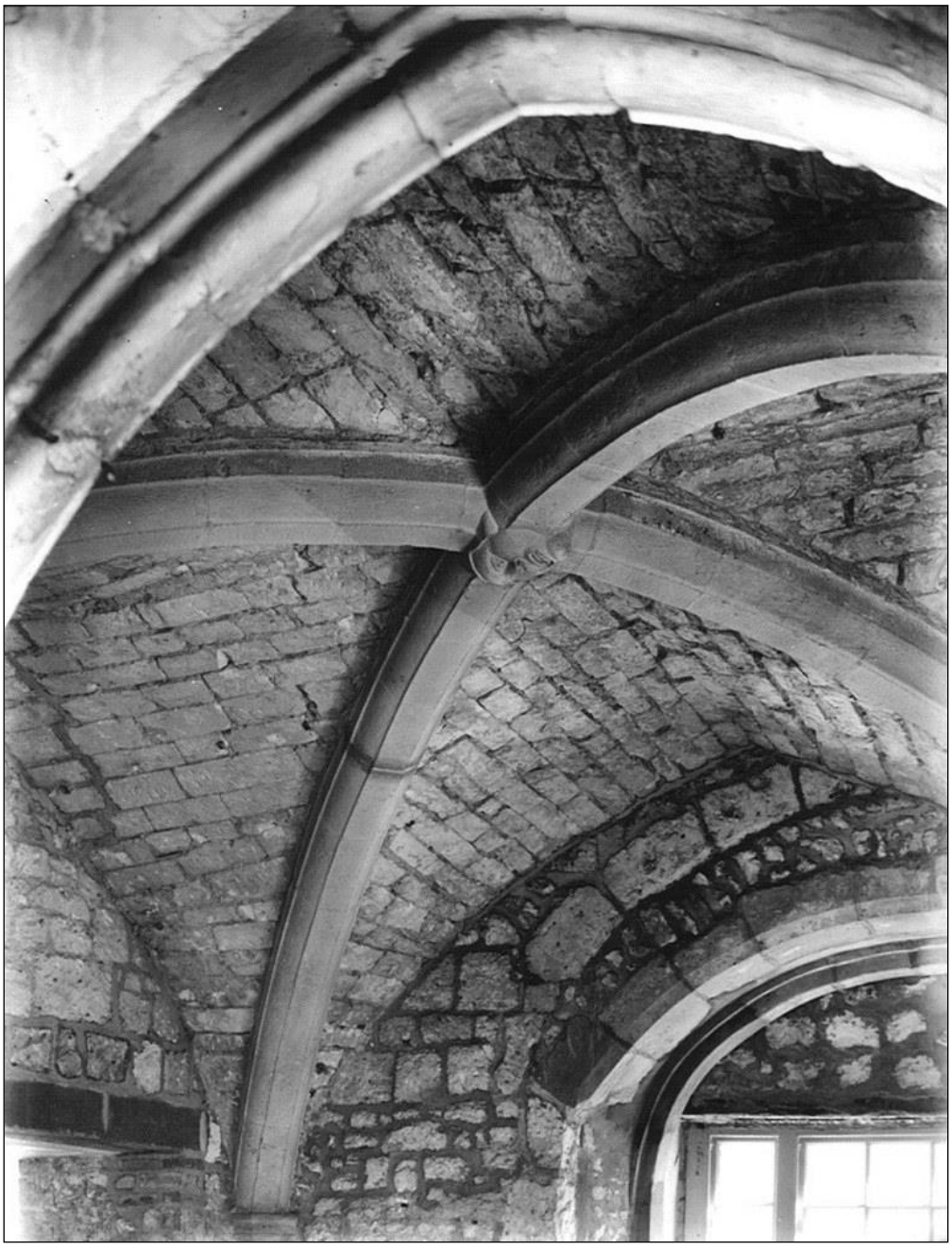
THE SECRETARY,
SUSSEX ARCHÆOLOGICAL TRUST,
BARBICAN HOUSE,
LEWES.

The Sussex Archaeological Trust's early appeal for funds. The detailed account referred to is in Volume II

The 13th century doorway to the old hall re-discovered by Walter Godfrey in 1925 (NMR)

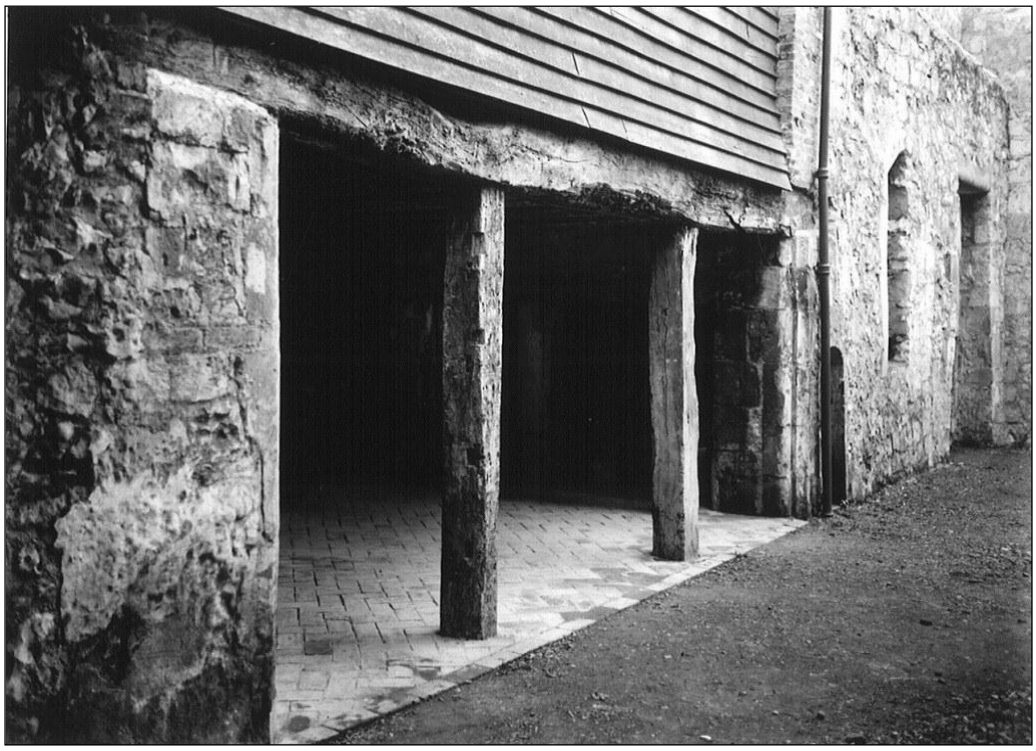
The interior of the original entrance into the porch. It shows how the later vault cuts across the entrance arch (NMR)

The great chamber c 1925 when the Sussex Archaeological Trust became the owners (NMR)



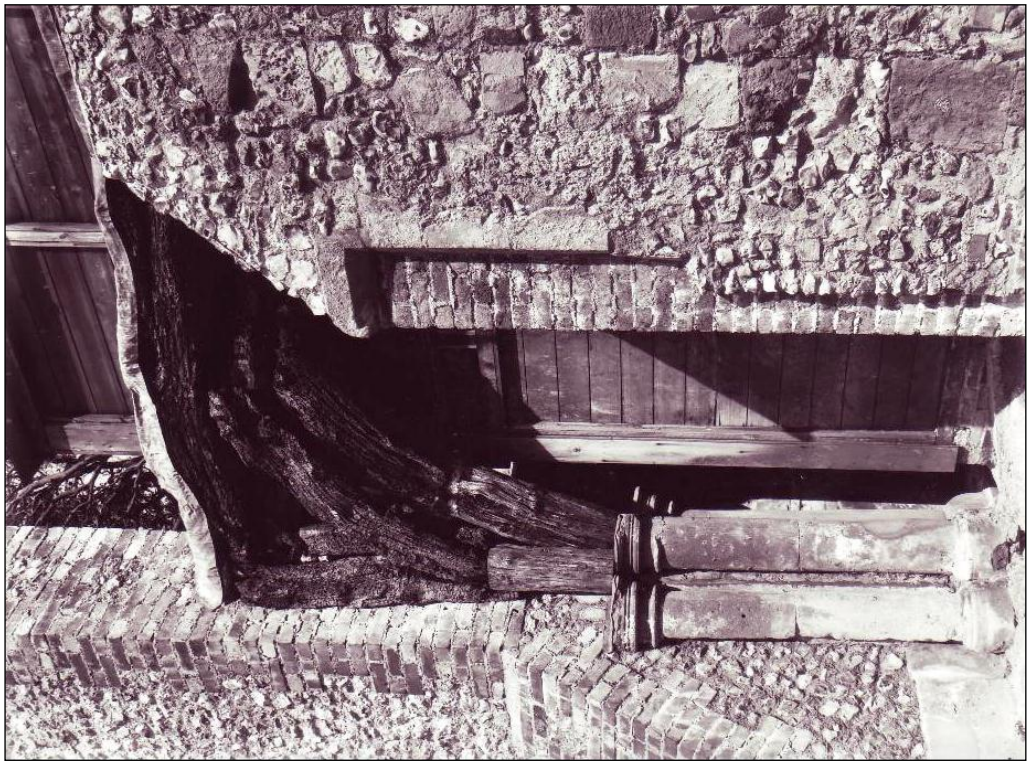
The vaulting added some time after the porch was originally constructed (NMR)

In the centre is part of one of the original south windows of the old hall. The offset above marks the original height of its walls (NMR)

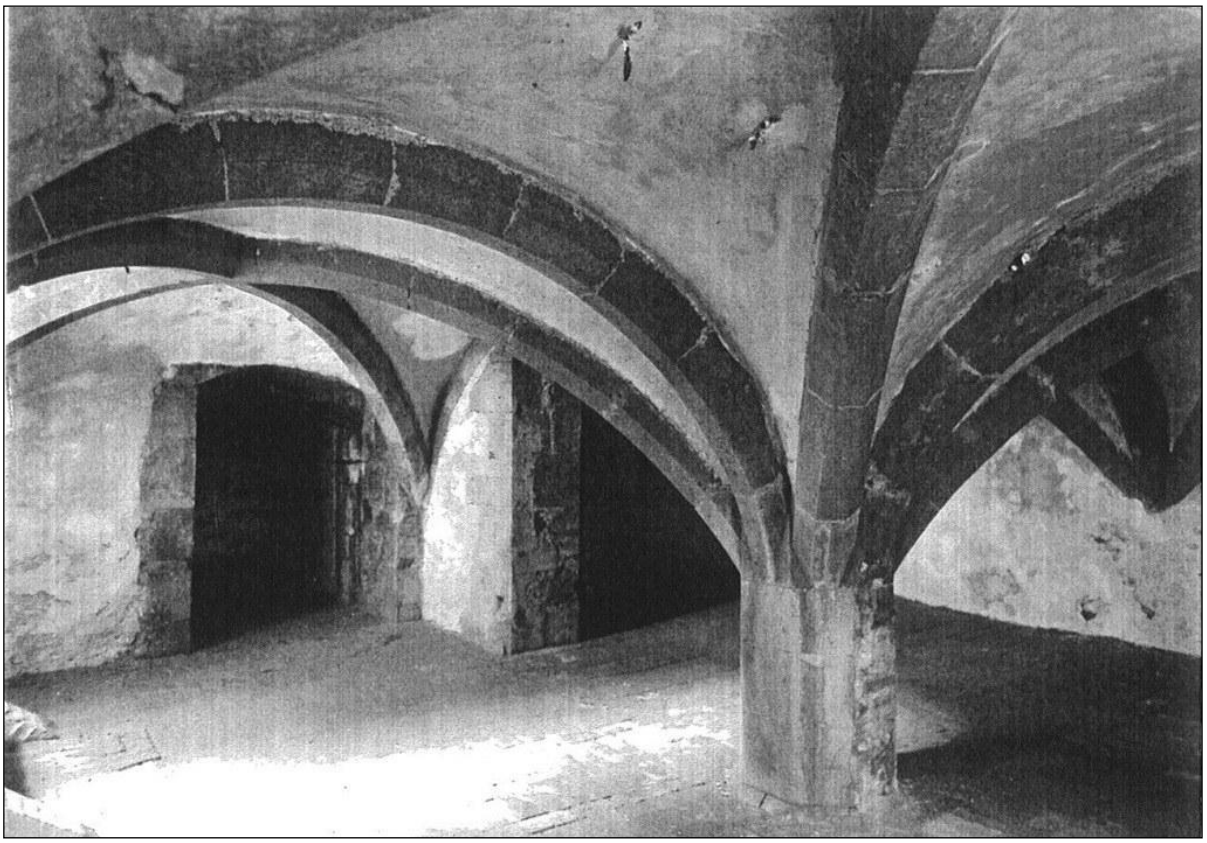


The kitchen wall before the museum was created (NMR)

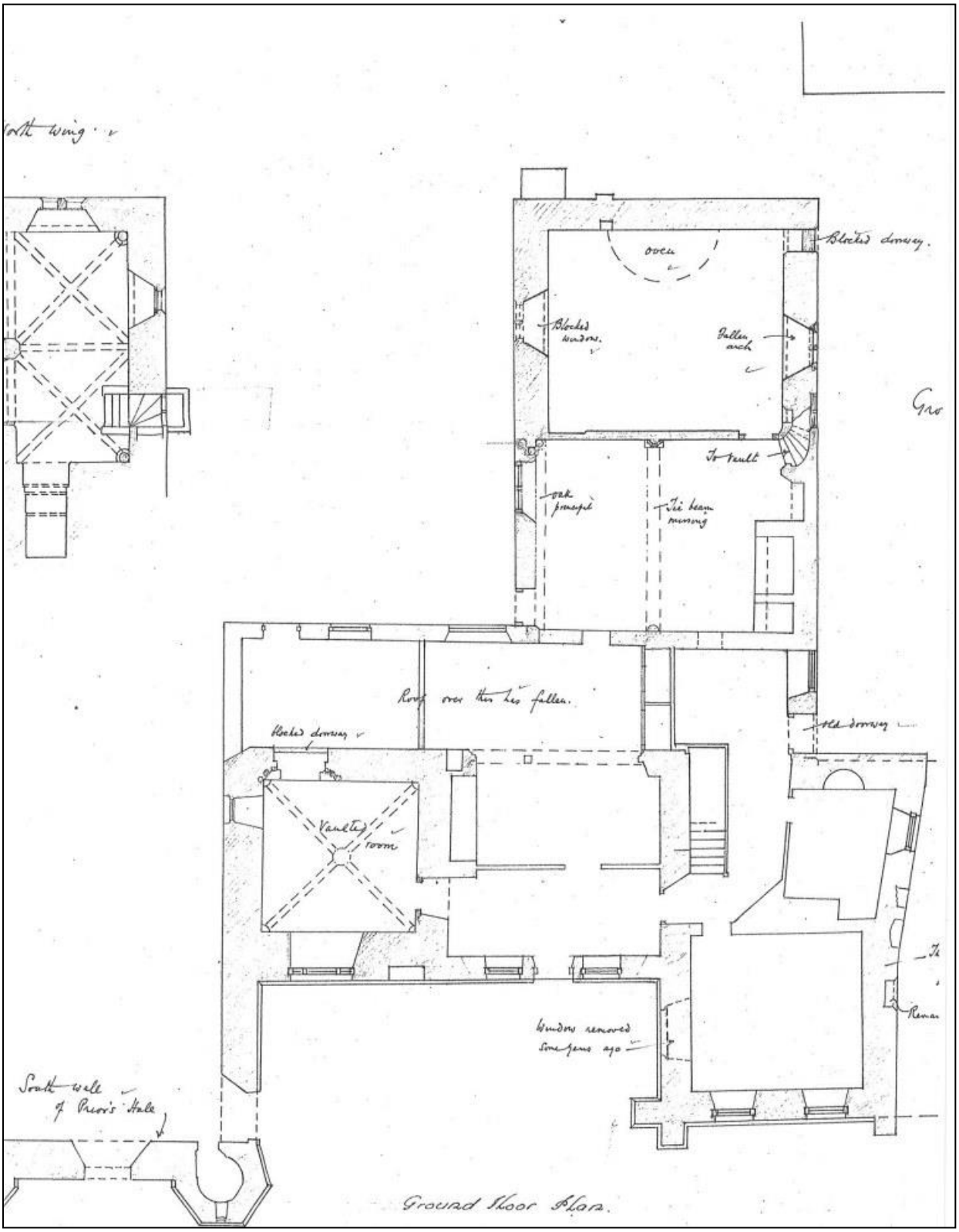
As it is today



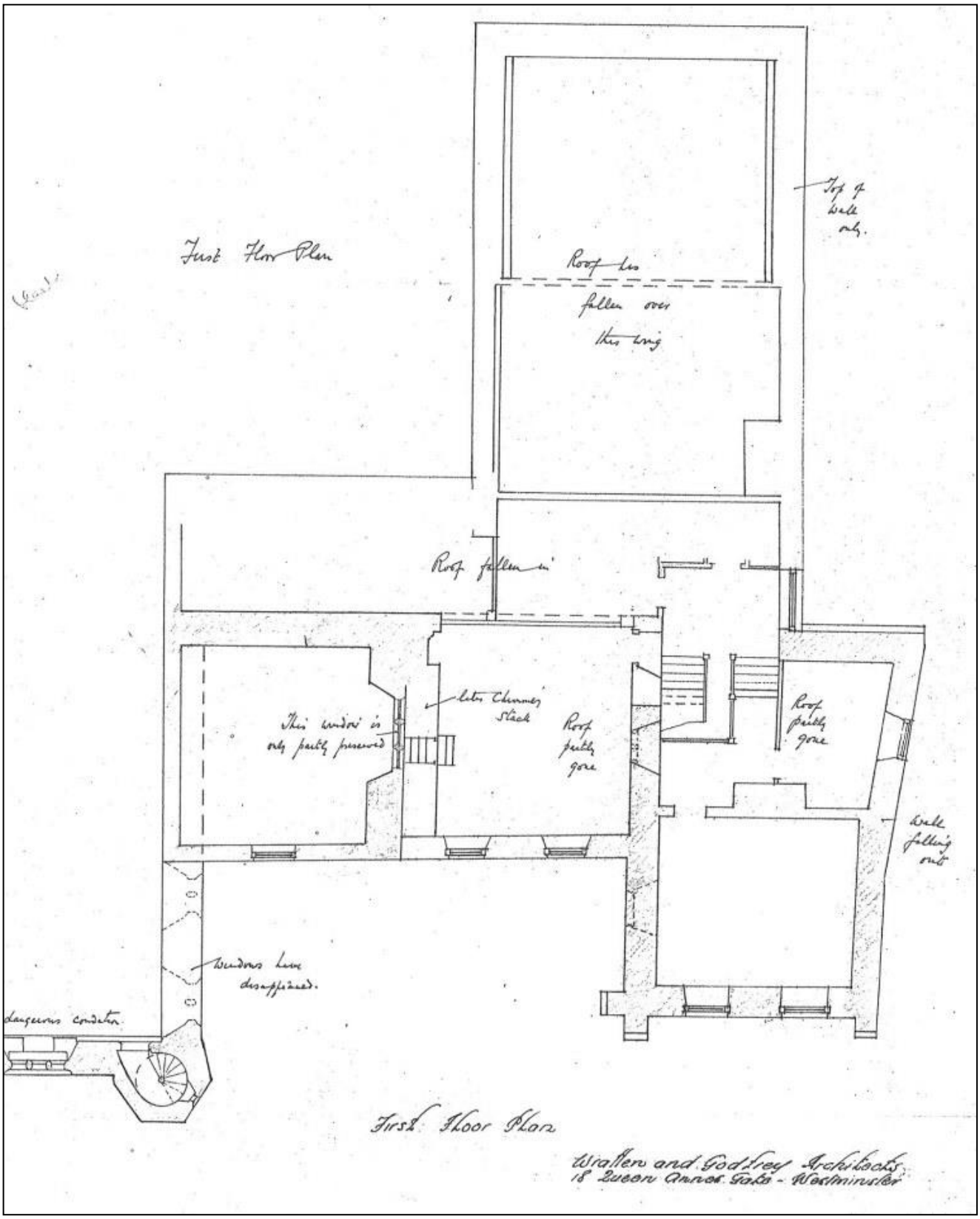
Before WWII when the timbers collapsed (NMR)

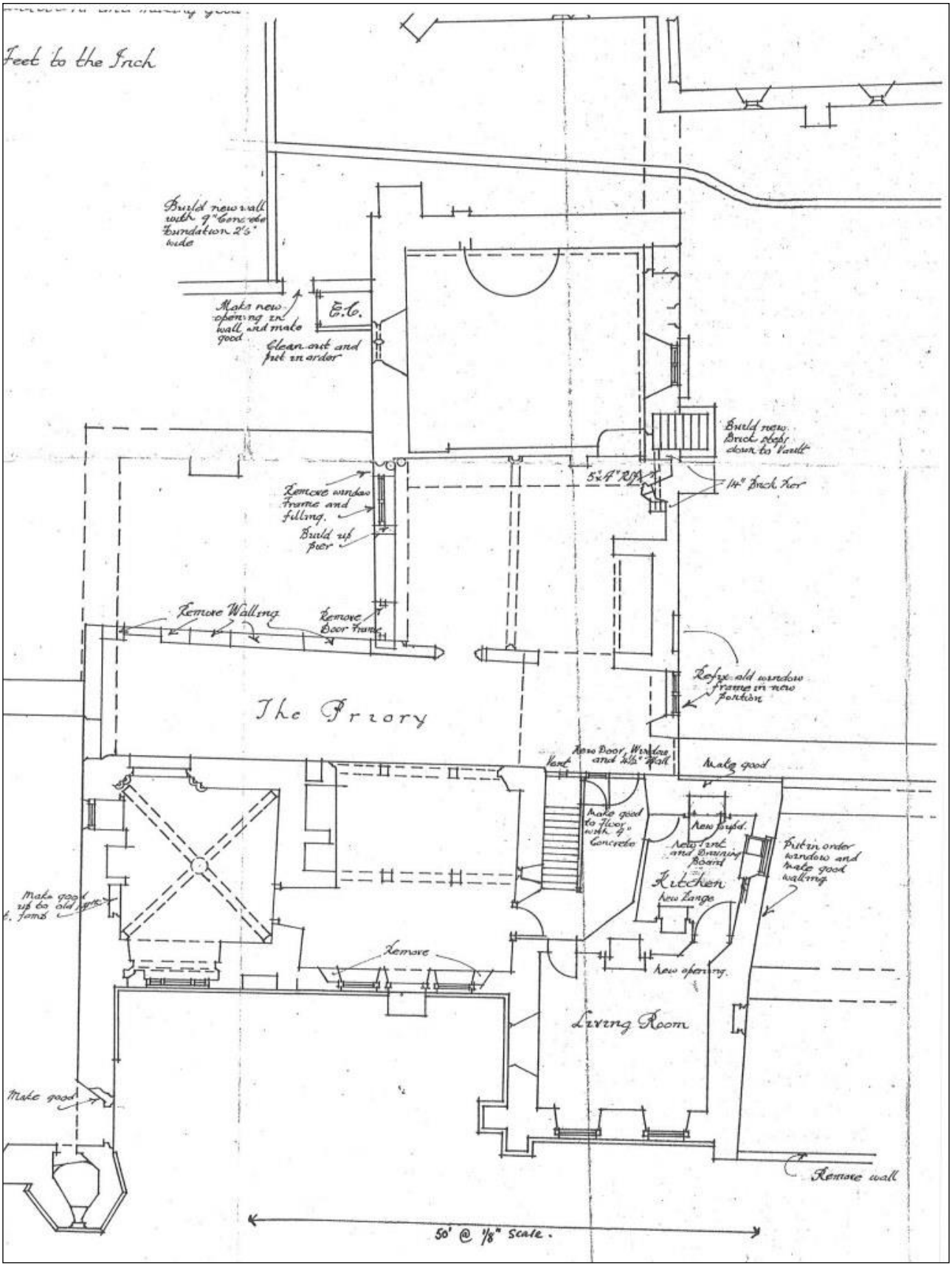


The undercroft post 1925 when the new entrance from the south was created (NMR)



Wilmington Priory as drawn by Walter Godfrey c 1925. The lean-to to the north of the porch and kitchen was still standing then. His written notes show what a poor state it was in


First Floor Plan
Roof fallen over this wing
Roof fallen in
This window is only partly preserved
Roof partly gone
Roof partly gone
Wall falling out
Windows have disappeared.
dangerous condition
First Floor Plan
Waller and Godfrey Architects
18 Queen Annes Gate - Westminster



Godfrey's plans for repair and conversion of the Priory

REPAIR OF THE PRIORY

Describing the architectural approach of his work at the Priory in January 1997, our architect Ian Angus of Carden & Godfrey (as in Walter) wrote:

> *The special quality of the buildings … is a result of a rich combination of their antiquity, the survival of significant elements from every period in the history of the site and the continuing repair and adaptation of the structures for changing uses during the centuries since the suppression. Most significantly, there have been no attempts to conduct conjectural restorations of the architecture. Parts of the structures lost through decay or collapse have not been rebuilt, and the alterations to the kitchen and north wing during the last 200 years have been carried out in contemporary styles suited to their occupations.*
>
> *In more recent years, the use of the Priory as a museum achieved a gentle balance between the presentation of the fabric itself, revealing glimpses into its many-layered history, and the display of local artefacts and images in an exhibition of rural life. The south-east wing remained occupied (as the museum custodian's quarter) until a few years ago, and the resulting character of the interiors far from being institutional has retained a domestic feeling. This character has informed and inspired the current alterations.*
>
> *It would be hard to find a building so important historically and architecturally, so undamaged by restoration and so responsive to the proven philosophy of conservative repair. The designs for the repair of Wilmington are inspired as much by the demands and suggestiveness of the fabric itself as by the client's clear brief to provide basic long-term accommodation as a development of the existing house.*

When we began this project, the custodian's quarters consisted of a kitchen in the place of the present downstairs bathroom, a sitting room with connecting door to the kitchen at the right of the fireplace, a bathroom on the mezzanine level and two bedrooms on the first floor. The late Charlotte Haslam, Landmark Historian, initially suggested that we should renew the north wall of the 17th century kitchen and reinstate its original use, which we have done. Above it, the room was to have been divided into two bedrooms with timber boarded partitions giving them the appearance of grain boxes with the space above open to the roof; in this scheme, the porch chamber would be left open but not used

The north wall of the kitchen before alteration

The kitchen when used as a museum

The landing before removal of the custodian's bathroom

The custodian's bedroom, now the chapel bedroom

as a bedroom. As the project progressed, we felt that it was a pity not to use the porch chamber as a bedroom, where you could lie in bed and look at the Long Man, so we abandoned the idea of dividing the kitchen chamber, and made a bedroom in the porch.

We removed the cramped bathroom from the mezzanine and formed one instead in the custodian's kitchen downstairs, which has made the staircase and landing airy and spacious. In the new **bathroom** we have left the fireplace from the old kitchen. The door that used to go into the sitting room has been sealed but shown expressed, and we have put down a new timber floor. On the east wall there are the remains of a grand stone-mullioned cupboard. By placing the bathroom downstairs, we have avoided any destruction of the medieval fabric. The floor of the **entrance hall** has been laid with limestone Purbeck slabs to give a simple politeness to this farmhouse end of the building.

The **sitting room**, has an 18th century appearance due to its window joinery and shutters but the marble fireplace is Victorian. When we arrived the fireplace was leaning away from the wall and its iron cramps had rusted. We removed years of soot accretions and began the process of carefully cleaning it with a wet snakestone - so-called due to its speckled nature, before reassembling and replacing it against the wall. As this part of the building has the atmosphere of a plain farmhouse, we decided against putting up a picture rail and have stained the floor boards black, whilst the walls have been distempered.

From the hall there is a step down to our **kitchen** which marks the division from the 18th century farmhouse, which has a mainly Georgian feel to it, to the 17th century kitchen (which used to be the ground floor room of the Sussex Archaeological Society's agriculture museum). The main work here is the new north wall, which is meant to be seen as a modern intervention at the same time as improving the room's appearance and letting in more light. It allows you to imagine how the kitchen extended north, with the fireplace then central to the room. We decided to remove the pier inserted into fireplace, probably for a range in about 1895, and this was done without difficulty.

The kitchen floor has been the source of much discussion and investigation. Archaeology has revealed footings of no fewer than three "south" walls with the present one at the furthest extremity from the courtyard. The ceiling was relatively low and so the floor level has been reduced to the best level to show

the quality of the space. We found and have retained the earlier 17th century herringbone brickwork. The new bricks, which are made locally at Godstone, are laid on sand without a sub-base or damp proof course as we did not want to interfere with the archaeology. The kitchen ceiling contains strengthening because we decided we did not want to cut into the main beam. It is not a refined ceiling but there are some good cyma stops at the ends of the secondary beams. This room, where we have tried to simplify the development, cutting out irrelevancies and distilling the atmosphere, has been limewashed.

On the stairs the 18th century balustrade remains at lower levels, but it has been extended onto the landing as stages since then. The mezzanine and landing are now more spacious and it is easier to puzzle out the development of the Priory and the complexities of the Medieval west wall, where we have stabilised the clunch construction after a crack appeared during works.

The treatment of the **chapel bedroom** has been the subject of more philosophical debate and discussion than any other room in the Priory. Until the 18th century there was a wall (as there is now) between the space where we have our shower and the bedroom itself. When the room was given its Georgian windows, the wall was removed, and by the time of Rev. Cooper's article in 1851, a ceiling had been put in which obscured the timber ceiling. By putting back the wall, we have made sense of the roof now once more revealed, and as we needed a WC/shower room upstairs, we have fitted it (together with a new rooflight) into a space where there is nothing to reveal or protect. We have plastered around and painted over the lesser timbers and the plasterer has left his motif - a Tudor rose - in the top west corner of the ceiling.

We hope we have made a sensible compromise of the two very different periods of this room. Below the tie beams of the later 18th century ceiling, most is Georgian, above it, most is Medieval. David Martin, our archaeologist, discovered the remains of a jamb of a lancet window in the splay of south-east window which can be seen by opening the tiny door inside the left shutter housing. As we believe that this room was a first floor chapel, with the floor three feet lower than today, we expect that there would also be the remains of a piscina within the 13th century lancet.

In an important building, it is unnecessary to find a use for every room and the **kitchen chamber** has been left as an open space before going upstairs to the porch chamber. Like the room below, it was also used to display items for the museum; its roof has deliberately been left unfelted, the battens are a smaller size and the tiles fixed with oak pegs in the traditional manner. So this central range remains somewhat agricultural in nature, in contrast to the medieval range to the west, and the more definably Georgian farmhouse range to the east.

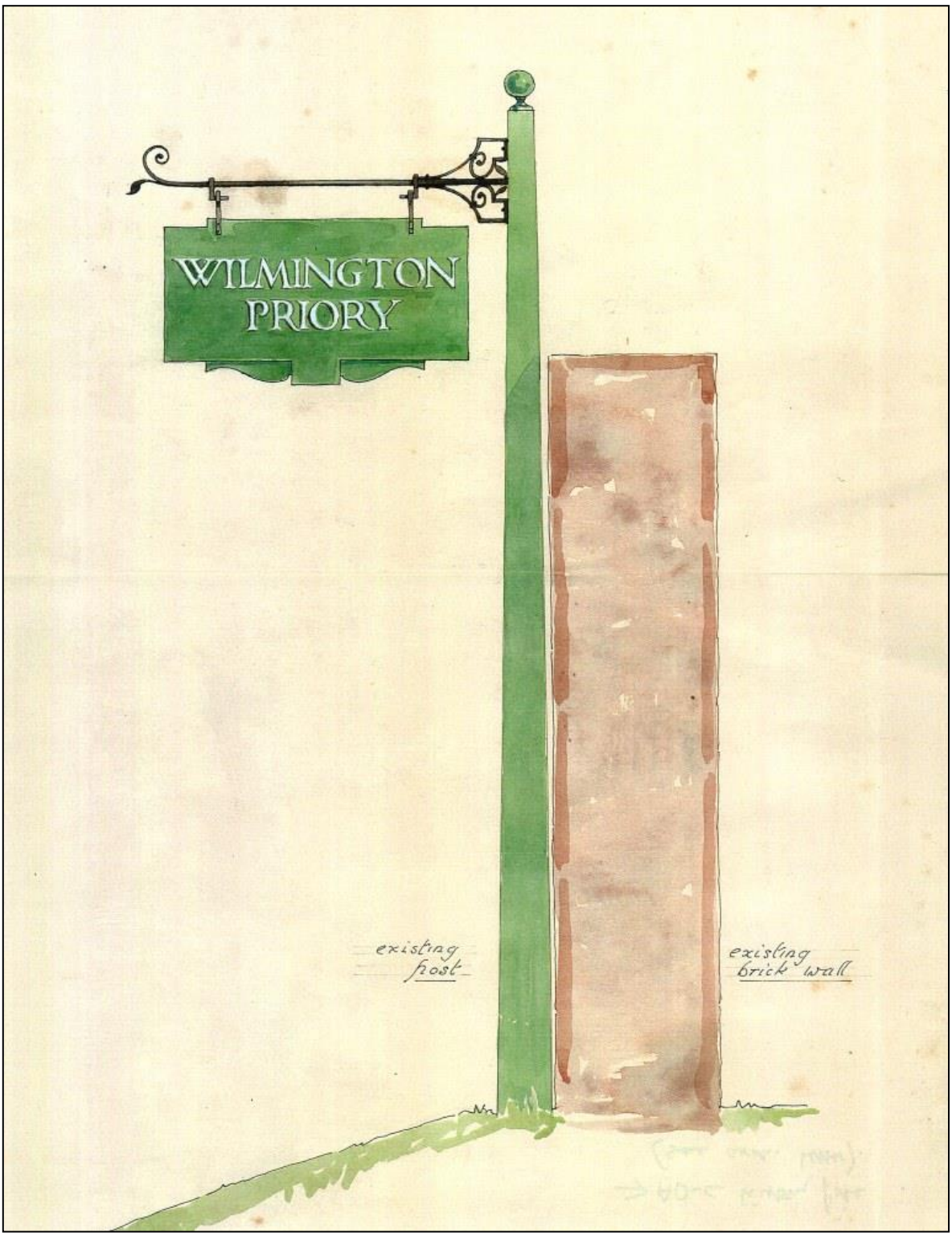
Within the **porch chamber**, we thought at length how to treat the ogival east window. The initial scheme, to glaze it and make it part of the room, was shelved as the main sash window to the south gave the room an 18th century feel. By making a lobby, we have created a linen cupboard in the corner and it makes an excellent platform from which to spot the crown-post roof above the small bedroom and shower room.

The **roof** was completely stripped, repaired and recovered. Nearly all the salvaged tiles have been used up on the south side with only the northern side, hips and ridges being made up with new Keymer tiles from the nearby village of Ringmer. The roof slopes are very uneven which has made this job extremely challenging. The pitches of the various slopes, particularly the hips, vary from 45 to 65 degrees and on the north slope, the rafters are fifteen inches shorter at one end than the other, which has meant losing about three courses at the chimney stack.

On the south and west faces of the south east wing, the cement based render has been removed and replaced with one based on lime. The garden path from the lane had been raised over the years and so we have removed some steps and made a gentle slope downwards, which has improved its appearance. The **sign** which used to stand by the entrance was designed by Walter Godfrey - it cost £5 5s with 10s for delivery.

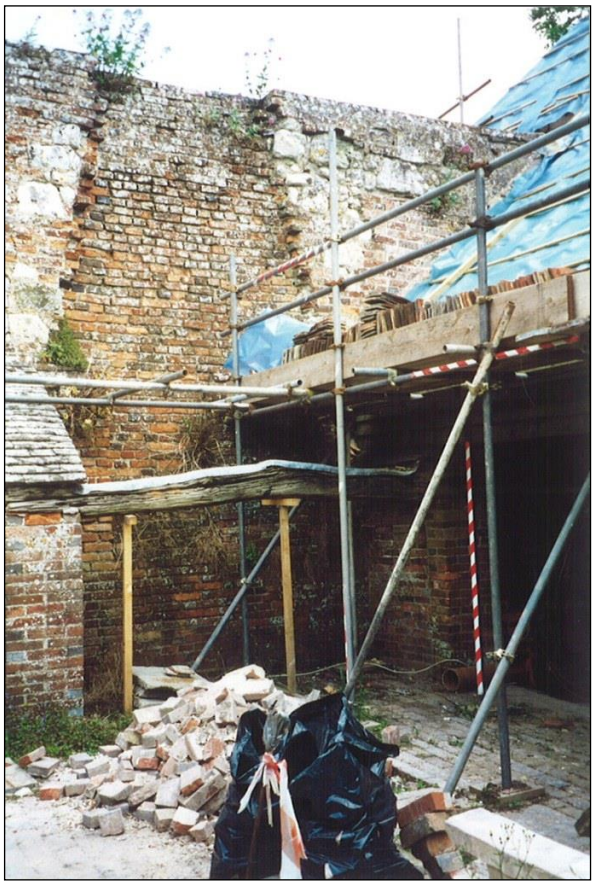
The room above the kitchen

Looking from the porch chamber to the room above the kitchen



The sign designed by Walter Godfrey with metal work by Bainbridge Reynolds

The old well



The old bressummer to the earlier kitchen hearth

Well House Court showing the original entrance to the undercroft

The stairs to the undercroft created by Walter Godfrey in 1925

SOME OWNERS AND OCCUPIERS

In his *Index Monasticus*, published in 1821, Richard Taylor presents a helpful account of alien priories and their role in medieval church history:

> *After the Conquest a great many benefactions of manors and estates in this kingdom were devised to foreign monasteries, and particularly to those of Normandy. Many of the nobles who accompanied Duke William to England were founders of monasteries in their native country, and the spirit of the times led them to enrich the endowments of those houses with a portion of the manors and lands with which their leader had so bountifully rewarded their services upon their arrival here. Their descendants, following the pious example of their fathers, from time to time, during the first two centuries after the Conquest, continued to patronise these ancient monasteries where rested the bones of their ancestors; and lordships and estates were often transferred to Norman abbeys, for the benefit of the souls of the illustrious donors.*
>
> *It was thus that so considerable a portion of the revenues of those houses was derived from England, and thus so many small priories or cells became subject to foreign control. In some cases, the foreign monasteries caused cells to be erected upon the lordships thus bequeathed to them, or merely constructed houses or granges, the principal object and use of both being the facility which they afforded for watching over and securing the revenues of the estates on which they were situated. They were occupied by monks of the same order as those in the parent abbey, which mostly sent over the requisite number of brethren and appointed the prior who was to govern them …*
>
> *As the revenues of these Alien Priories during periods of war were withheld from the monasteries on which they depended, they were during those times constantly seized by the crown, and were restored again on the return of peace. In 1294 King Edward I, having taken all the priories alien, with their possessions, into his hands, fixed an allowance of 18 pence per week for the maintenance of each monk belonging to these houses, and appropriated the surplus towards defraying the expenses of war. At length by an act of the 2nd of King Henry V, the whole of the Alien Priories were suppressed … The endowments of the suppressed houses were appropriated in the next reign principally in augmentation of the revenues of Eton and Cambridge colleges; and such of the laity as received any of these priories were bound to*

maintain mass priests therein to pray for the soul of the king, and sometimes of the founder.

The Abbey of Notre-Dame de Grestain was founded by Duke Robert II, Herluin de Conteville and his wife Arlette - the Duke and Arlette being the unmarried parents of William the Conqueror. It must have been founded before 1035 when Duke Robert died although some sources have put its foundation at c1050. It was thus favoured with important royal connections. After 1066, King William divided Sussex into six Rapes, or parcels of land running from the north of the county to the south, which gave him easy access to his capital in London from the south coast and Normandy. Each Rape was held by one of William's relations or supporters as tenant-in-chief: Hastings under the Count of Eu; Lewes, the Earl of Warenne; Bramber, William de Braose; Arundel and Chichester, the Earl of Montgomery; and Pevensey, wherein lay Wilmington, under the Earl of Mortain.

By the time of Domesday Book, 1086, Grestain owned lands in Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Dorset, Northamptonshire, Suffolk and Sussex, which had for the most part, been donated by the Conqueror and his half brother, Robert, Earl of Mortain, the son of Herluin and Arlette. It appears that Mortain presented the manor of Wilmington to Grestain Abbey, where he was buried about 1100. Although the earliest we can be sure that there was a Priory at Wilmington was about 1225 with the building of the entrance archway, there are good reasons for supposing that there was a community there much earlier. Within Mortain's grant to cut timber in Pevensey Forest is a line translated as "for his own (religious) house now being built" and contemporary grants of building materials (wood); also the unusually lengthy chancel with its stone seat suggests that the church was shared by the Priory and the Village. In 1243 we have the first mention of a Prior of Wilmington, by the name of John. In 1267 the Archbishop of Rouen visited Grestain where there were 26 monks in residence and two in England, presumably one was at Abbey's other Priory of Creeting St. Olave in Suffolk, which leaves only one at Wilmington at the height of Grestain's fortunes. His business must have been running the Abbey's estates on behalf of the Abbey, which would have meant a lot of travel and little time for regular monastic hours and services which explains the lay-out of Wilmington - more like a manor house than a claustral establishment.

Becoming Prior of Wilmington must have been like taking up a foreign posting from whence the incumbent was recalled after serving five years or so. Life there

must have been pleasant, with its fine buildings and good situation. Soon after 1320 when William de Blanville/Bauville was Prior, a list of defendants (in a court case) informs us that he had at least five servants - three porters, one cook and a palfreyman (a stable lad) and we may assume that he was regularly attended by the normal quota of servants to a large domestic establishment. Sometimes the Prior of Wilmington returned to Grestain to become its Abbot.

In times of hostility with France, alien houses were seen as threat by the Crown as well as a source of revenue for the war effort. Thus 1294 saw all the English possessions of alien priories compulsorily acquired by Edward I in anticipation of war and the next year, all members of alien houses living within twelve miles of the sea were removed to other religious houses at least twenty miles from the coast. The Abbot of Chertsey was directed to receive the Prior of Wilmington. From this time there were only four periods when the Priory was fully in the hands of its Prior, and the Abbey at Grestain: 1297-1324; 1327-1337; 1360-1370 and 1396 until 1403. These are the times at which we can expect building campaigns to have taken place at Wilmington. During war with France, the Priory was granted to the Augustinian Priory at Michelham just a few miles away and towards the end of the 14th century to a succession of lay farmers. In 1401 the last Prior, Walter Brystowe was installed and two years later his Priory was for the last time taken into the King's hands and later granted to the Dean and Chapter of Chichester. This arrangement was made permanent in 1414.

During this period we know that the Chichester Canons stayed at the Priory from time to time, as they were given permission to use the garden and the kitchen "newly built" in the New Endowment of the Vicarage of 1541. In 1565, Sir Richard Sackville acquired the Priory along with all its possessions in Sussex. He was described by his descendant Vita Sackville-West as:

> *a man of such wealth that he was punningly known as Fillsack, buying country properties in many parts of England, and obtaining from the Crown a grant of London property of immense value ... This Sir Richard, whose mother was a Boleyn, aunt to Queen Anne Boleyn, enjoyed the favour of his cousin, Queen Elizabeth, but never rose to very high office in the State.*

Owners of Wilmington Priory from the 16th century to the present day[1]

Sir Richard Sackville d 1566

Thomas Sackville
1st Earl of Dorset d 1608

Robert, 2nd Earl of Dorset d 1609

Richard m Lady Anne Clifford
3rd Earl of Dorset
d 1624

Cicely m Henry Compton
brother of Earl of
Northampton

James 3rd Earl of Northampton. m 1647
d 1681

1. Isabella Sackville

2. Mary Noel, daughter of Viscount Campden

George, 4th Earl of Northampton

Spencer Compton d 1743
1st Lord Wilmington
Viscount Pevensey

James 5th Earl George 6th Earl Charles

Charles m 1759 Anne, daughter of 4th Duke of Beaufort
7th Earl d 1763

Elizabeth Compton m 1782 Lord George Cavendish
b 1760 d 1834

William Cavendish d 1812

William Cavendish d 1891
2nd Earl of Burlington
7th Duke of Devonshire

Spencer Compton Cavendish d 1908 Lord Edward Cavendish d 1891
8th Duke (no heir)

Victor Cavendish 1868 - 1938
9th Duke of Devonshire

He handed over Wilmington Priory and the Long Man to the Sussex Archaeological Trust

1 Those marked in **bold** were owners of Wilmington Priory

The Rev. W. Budgen points out that this change of ownership would not have altered the status of the house which was still a manor-house and had to make provision for manorial courts but it was also a farm house at the centre of an estate of over 800 acres. At the turn of the 17th century, Thomas Culpeper and his wife, Elizabeth, were tenants of Lord Buckhurst, the son of Sir Richard Sackville. When Culpeper died in 1603 he was buried in the parish church and his widow continued to live there until she died three years later.

The next recorded tenant is Sir Henry Compton in 1618, enjoying a favourable rent as one of the family. The brother of the Earl of Northampton, Henry Compton was married to Cicely Sackville, whose brother, Richard, 3rd Earl of Dorset, was owner of Wilmington Priory. In 1618 Sir Henry was temporarily estranged from his wife and Lady Anne Dorset arranged a reconciliation on the basis that Sir Henry would retain his house in London a little longer! Did Henry Compton live at Wilmington whilst he was on his own? If so, he seems to be the likely candidate for replacing the south window in the great chamber with the magnificent transomed and mullioned window with its high quality Renaissance hood-mould. Intriguingly, when he came to build his own house at Brambletye, just outside East Grinstead in 1631, he incorporated a porch with a Gothic rib-vault and the whole front range was standing on a rib-vaulted undercroft too. Were these antiquarian features inspired by Wilmington?

In 1647, Isabella Sackville married James, 3rd Earl of Northampton and it appears that Wilmington formed part of this second Compton/Sackville marriage settlement. When Lord Northampton died in 1681, he left it to his younger son, Spencer Compton (c1674-1743). From 1676 and possibly a little before, the Priory was leased to a series of tenant farmers and by 1689, Spencer Compton's mother, Mary, Dowager Duchess of Northampton, was acting as his guardian and managing the lease of what was known by then as Wilmington Court Farm.

After Spencer Compton reached his majority, he acquired Eastbourne Place in 1724 and employed Colen Campbell to remodel the house, which is now known as Compton Place. In the world of politics, he became Speaker of the House of Commons in 1715, although in his speech on being presented to the King, he declared that he had “neither memory to retain, judgement to collect, nor skill to guide their debates”, but George I stated that he was quite content with the appointment. In 1730 Compton, a favourite of George II, became Earl of Wilmington and Viscount Pevensey. When Walpole was defeated in the House of

Commons in 1742, Lord Wilmington was appointed First Lord of the Treasury although he was regarded by his subordinates as a mere cipher and was much satirised and caricatured.

Although something of a political light-weight, Lord Wilmington has given his title to posterity by lending it to the American city on the River Delaware. The Dutch called this settlement Altena, but they were ousted by the English in 1664 when the settlement became part of New York. It was ceded in 1682 to William Penn who wanted an outlet to the ocean for his colony, Pennsylvania. Altena was made prosperous by the Quakers in the 1730s and they secured a borough charter from Thomas Penn, the proprietor, who named the town (1739) after his friend, Spencer Compton, Earl of Wilmington.

Lord Wilmington died unmarried on 2nd July, 1743 and was buried at Compton Wynyates, the family seat. Wilmington was left to his nephew the 5th Earl of Northampton. Charles, the 7th Earl died in 1763 leaving as his heiress, Elizabeth Compton, a little girl of three years old. It appears that after her father's death, Elizabeth's maternal grandmother, the formidable Duchess of Beaufort, took her affairs in hand and negotiated leases on the child's behalf with a great sense of business and determination. Some letters, now in the Compton Place Papers at Chatsworth, show that it was a relatively large and prosperous farm. In one written by the Duchess's agent, Thomas Partington, on 5th August, 1765, he describes "treating" with the tenant, Mr Marchant over the rent disagreement and says:

> *When we came to Mr Marchant's I looked over the buildings which including a malthouse I found to be no more than necessary for so large a farm, the expense of repairing them is unavoidable and tho' they are in that condition called tight yet, as they are old, are continually requiring something to be done to keep them so. The building your Grace mentioned, which is unroofed, is so connected with the house that I immediately saw that taking it down would endanger the House, probably your Grace was not near enough to observe this,*

he adds tactfully. Perhaps the building in question was the great chamber. In 1764 William Marchant's annual rent had been £298 and he told Partington:

> *I will give the Duchess £50 a year more and if she won't let me have it for that, take it who will.*

Partington advised the Duchess to accept his offer, pointing out the necessity of keeping a man of substance on so large a farm and that Marchant's father and brother had been good tenants. The Duchess replied from Badminton later in the month with some asperity:

> *I thought it long before I received your letter … upon the whole Merchant (sic) seems to me one of those farmers who themselves untitled to a Genteel estate out of their holdings; however as it is so near Michaelmas I will let him have the farm at £50 advanced rent but cannot consent to his continuing on those terms afterwards.*

Partington's reply:

> *I believe … that the Tenants of the Down farms in Sussex … are all substantial, most of them wealthy people, very different from farmers I have generally met with.*

The saga ended when Marchant and the Duchess could not agree upon a mutually acceptable rent, and the year after Richard Hart became the tenant at Wilmington.

When Elizabeth married in 1782 her grandmother's duties came to an end. (The Duchess did not die until 1799) Through this marriage Wilmington and the other extensive Compton estates in Sussex came to the Dukes of Devonshire. Her husband was Lord George Cavendish, the younger brother of the 5th Duke of Devonshire and his famous Duchess, Georgiana. The grandson of George and Elizabeth became 7th Duke (1808-1891).

The 1881 census shows that an Isaac Baker was farming 'Court Farm', presumably on behalf of the 7th Duke. Isaac is recorded as a 50-year old widower, who had his six year old son Arthur living with him (he is known to have had four other children, not present on census night) as well as a housekeeper and two servants. Isaac was farming 900 acres of land and employed fourteen men and four boys. Isaac was still in residence in 1885 (Kelly's Directory) and his farm records survive. Dorothy Baker, Isaac's granddaughter, inherited Isaac's silver topped Malacca cane, engraved with his initials, which she presented to the Sussex Archaeological Society.

It was Victor Cavendish, 9th Duke of Devonshire, who handed over the Priory and Long Man to the Sussex Archaeological Trust and he sold the farm separately to Lt-Col Gwynne. As part of his work at Wilmington, Walter Godfrey made a house for the custodian in the south-east wing, the nucleus of the tenant farmers' house. By 1935 the Ades were living there and that year Percy Ade wrote to the SAS about an October gale blowing away tiles and opening a considerable hole in the roof of the porch chamber. During World War II on the 8th July 1944 he writes again,

> *I think that it is my duty to report that the timbers forming the tie beam of the 13th century hall have collapsed, no doubt due to vibrations caused by military operations ... Fortunately, no one was near the timbers, but I heard the crash, and I fancy our cat got a scare*

and he concludes with admirable British phlegm:

> *The 'planes are very distracting at night, but of course everyone has troubles of that sort.*

Mrs Ade was still at the Priory in 1951 and she was followed by Mrs Stuart in 1958 when some improvements were made to the custodian's quarters in the form of new sanitary fittings and kitchen floor, timber treatment and redecoration. However, by 1960 the SAS were having financial qualms about retaining the building. In December that year the Secretary wrote a letter describing his reasons why he was not prepared to consider selling the Priory. The Priory, he wrote, was held upon trust to preserve all or any of the features of the property which may be of historical, archaeological, or antiquarian interest; Walter Godfrey and W. Budgen had lavished considerable time and energy there with a formal opening on 25th May, 1929 and the Priory became and has remained one of the Society's recognised activities. Likewise, Walter Godfrey's son, Emil, wrote in support of the building saying that it has outstandingly fine examples of a moulded 13th century doorway, a mask-bossed vault and a "mint-fresh" crypt.

They won the day and the Society launched an appeal for funds to restore the south front of the great chamber. In 1961 admission to the Priory was one shilling for adults and six pence for children - the ticket to be obtained from within. At this time the idea was mooted for the Priory to house a museum of rural life in the old kitchen, and upstairs in the kitchen and porch chambers. Major Townsend, the custodian in 1973 informed the Society that Cluttons, the estate agents, intended to apply for permission to convert the neighbouring barn into a house. By July, 1992, with the prospect of the last custodian leaving and the museum no longer a viable proposition, Derek White, the Executive Secretary of the Sussex Archaeological Trust telephoned Robin Evans, Director of the Landmark Trust at that time, to see if we could help to find a solution for the building. We now hold the Priory on an 80 year lease from the Society and you, the reader and occupier, are forming the next part of its history.

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Julia Abel Smith,
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