

Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

COCKERSAND ABBEY

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Cockersand Abbey originated between 1180 and 1184 – or perhaps a little earlier – when Hugh Garth, a hermit, established a hospital for the sick and a sanctuary for lepers on one of the many low clay hills that lie between Morecambe Bay and the higher ground of present-day Thurnham and Cockerham.

The lower areas were marshland until drained in the eighteenth century for pastures. The seclusion of the site made it suitable for a leper colony but it also soon attracted the attention of the Premonstratensian Order of monks. Founded in 1120 at Prémontré in France by St Norbert, this Order – called the White Canons after their robes – favoured a life of austerity in remote places.

St Mary in the Marsh at Cockersand suited them for an Abbey, as did Shap where they ran another of their 31 English abbeys. They also had a monastic house at Hornby. By 1189 or 1190 Garth's hospital had been taken over by the Order as a Priory and by 1192 it was officially an Abbey, though perhaps not operational on site until 1204/05.

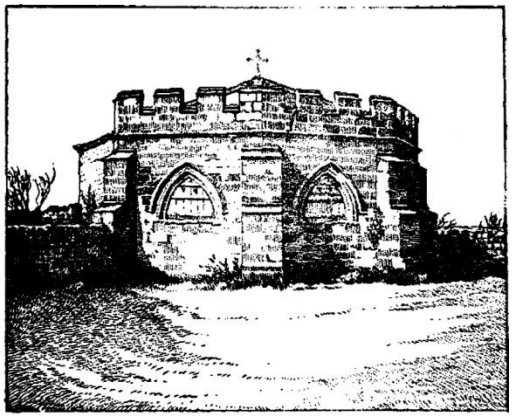
Today the only surviving building from the Abbey is the Chapter House, as shown in the photograph and sketch below.

Internally this building, where the monks held meetings, is octagonal, about 30 feet (9.1 metres) across and with walls about 2.5 feet (0.75m) thick. It dates from around 1230 and is in the Early English architectural style.

The external red stonework is the local Permian sandstone. A central post with a floriated capital supports the vaulted roof, once lead-covered and then slated in 1859.

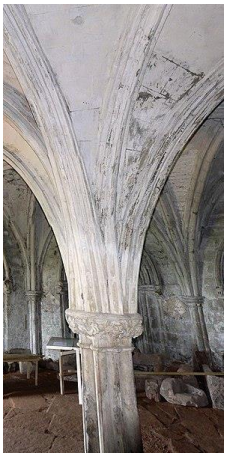


Cockersand Abbey today (Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, gratefully acknowledged)



An early twentieth-century sketch (Source: Victoria County History)





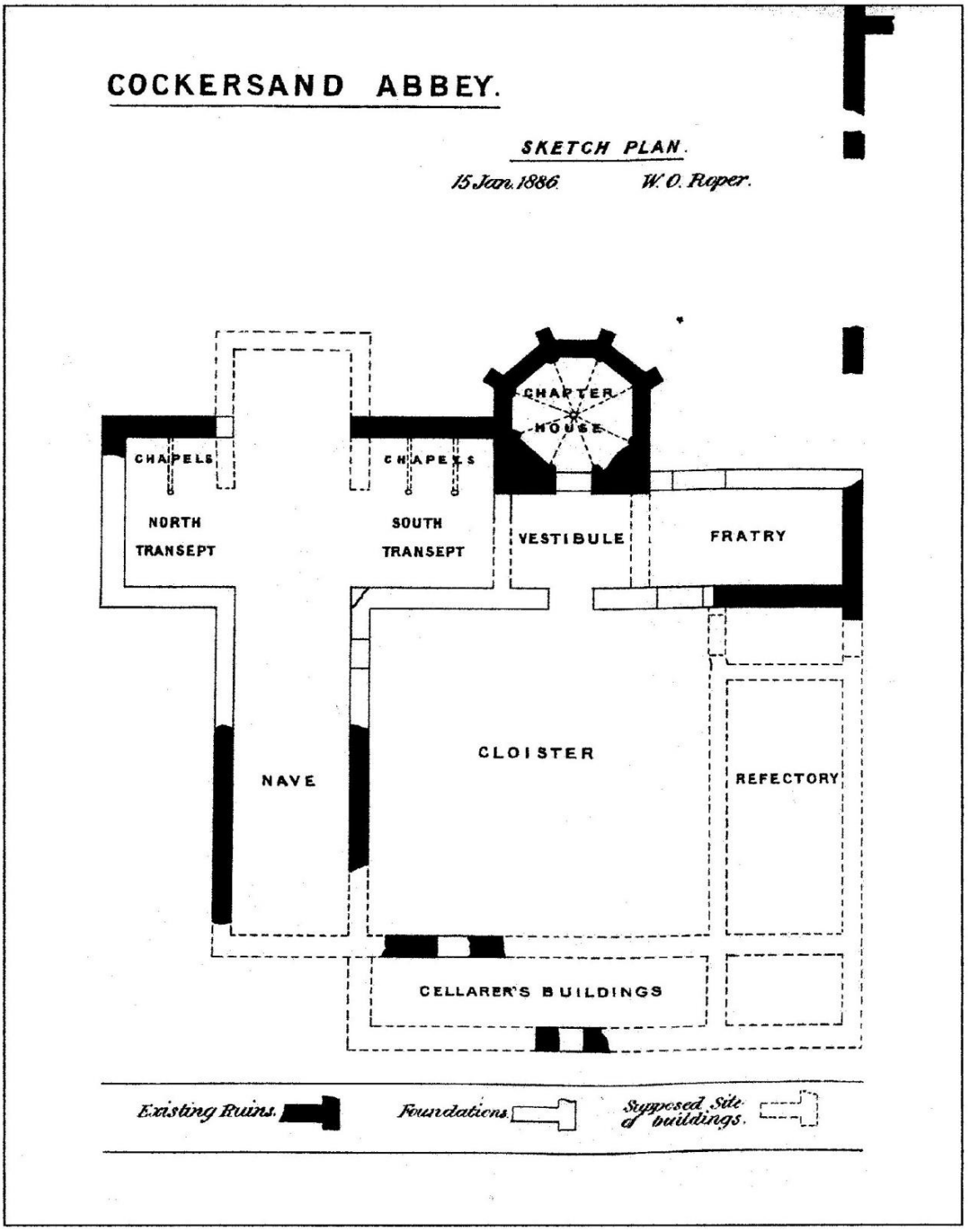


Left. Vaulted ceiling of Cockersand Abbey today
(Source: Lancashire County Council, Red Rose Collection, gratefully acknowledged)
Centre and right. The central pillar with floriated capital
(Source: Jim Walton, gratefully acknowledged)

However, the Chapter House was only one part, and not the most important, of the Abbey complex, which investigations in the 1880s, 1920s and recently have shown to have been extensive.

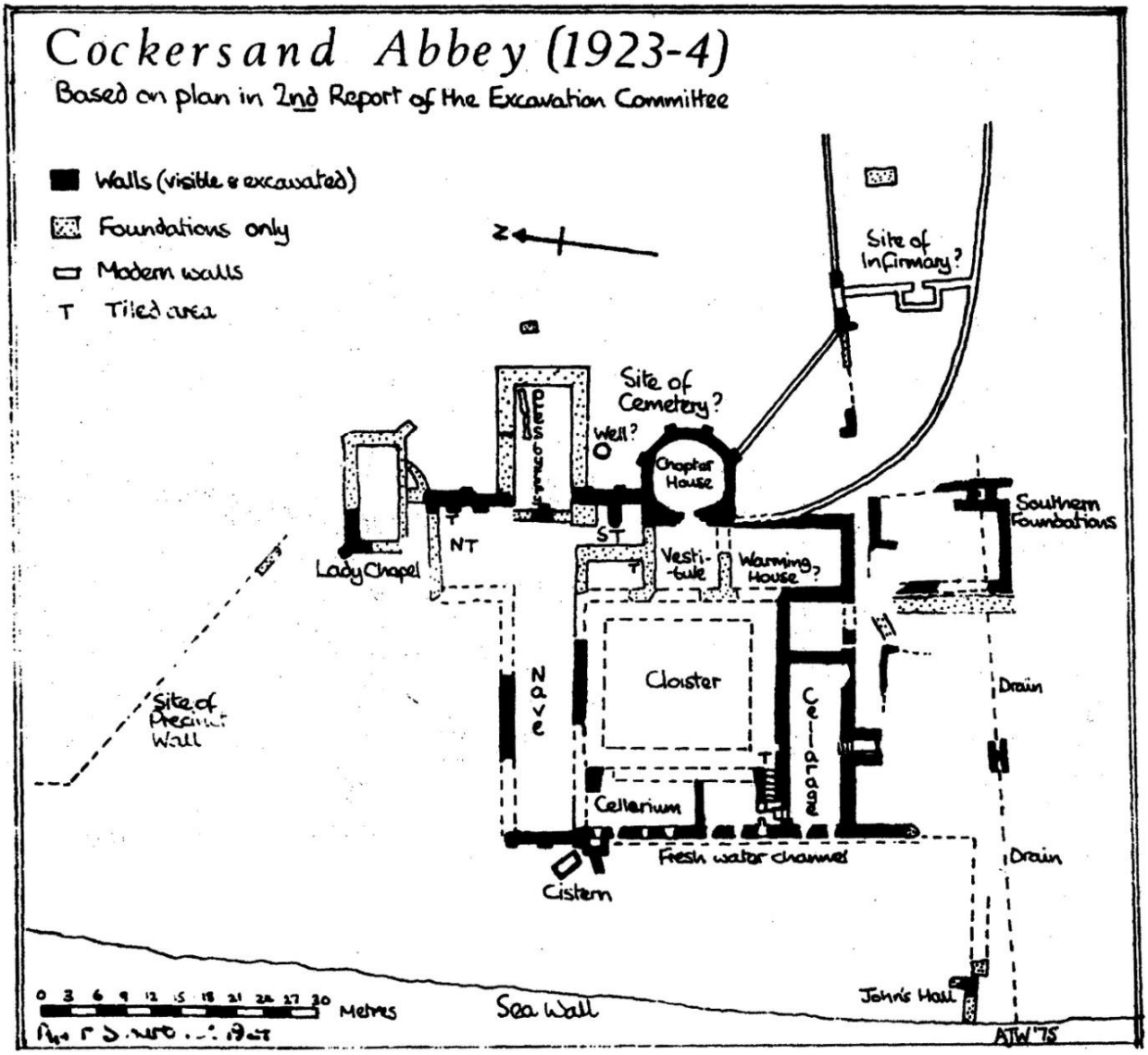
Roper's sketch of 1886 (below) was based on low lines of stone at or just below ground level, the gaps between them being joined up as walls, based on his knowledge of the usual layout of abbeys of the period.

The church had a long nave with north and south transepts. A cloister was surrounded by the refectory and storage rooms. The building of the whole Abbey complex probably stretched from the early 1200s into the fourteenth century as their finances permitted.



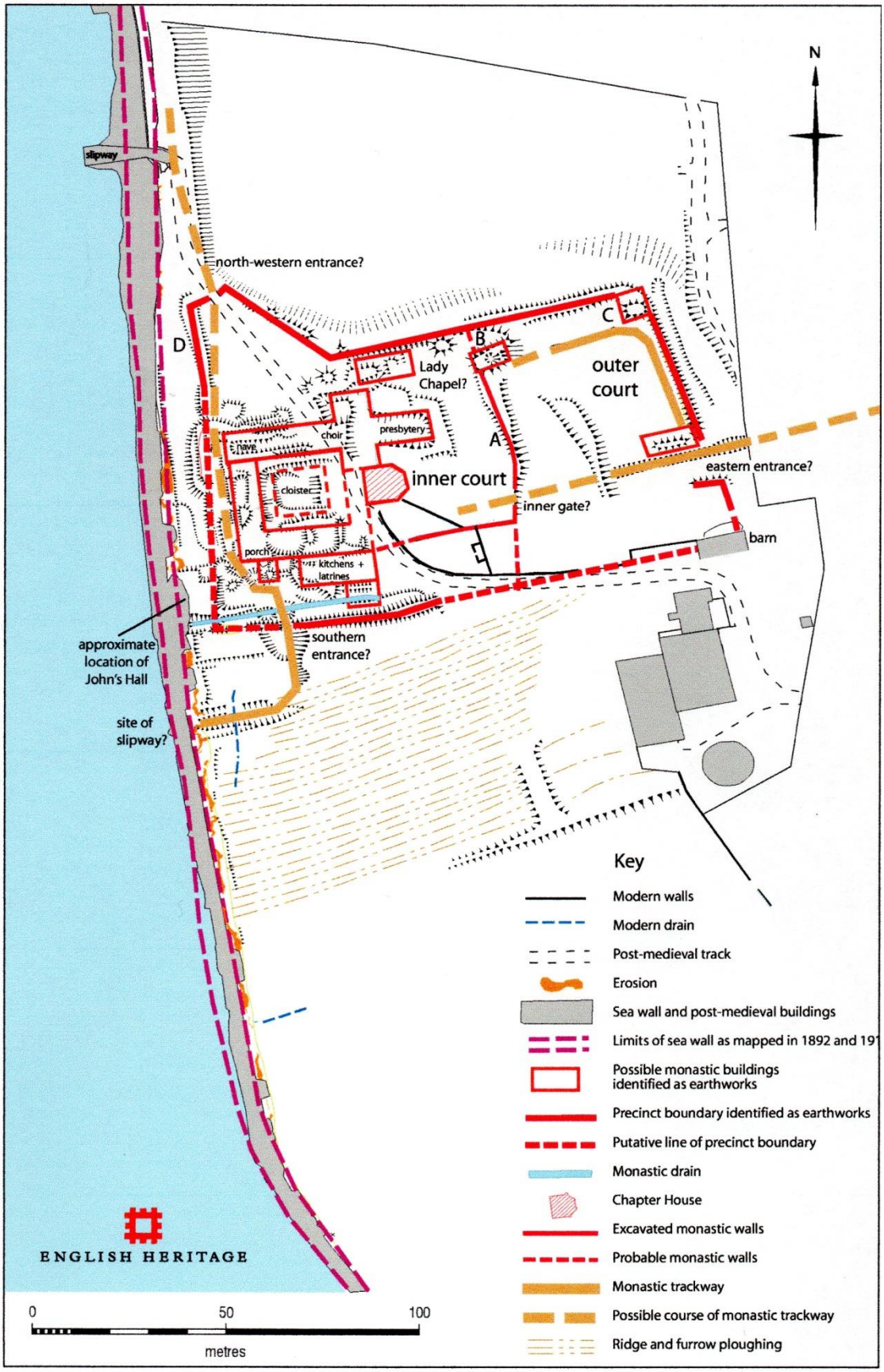
Roper's 1886 plan of the Abbey, showing the ruins, foundations and conjectured walls and buildings (Source: English Heritage Report 55-2009, gratefully acknowledged)

By the 1920s excavations had filled in more details. The Choir was shown to have been longer, a Lady Chapel had been found and an Infirmary and orchard had been located beyond the main buildings. A Cemetery for the canons was conjectured beyond the Chapter House (see below).



The Abbey's layout assumed in 1923/4, as drawn by Swarbrick and reproduced by English Heritage in 2009

Further studies in 2009 by English Heritage provided even more detail on the inner and outer court areas, the tracks across the marshes and the gateways into the Abbey (see below).



English Heritage's survey and interpretation in 2009 of the whole site's earthworks (Source: English Heritage Report 55-2009, gratefully acknowledged)

The scale of this complex for an Order devoted to an austere life demonstrates their need for income to build, maintain and staff the Abbey and its surrounding demesne of 346 acres (140 hectares).

At its peak the Abbey had income from rents on 35,000 acres (14,170 hectares) in Lancashire, Cumbria and other counties. They also controlled a church in Garstang and one in Mitton (Yorkshire). However, the poor agricultural quality of much of their lands kept rental income low.

The Abbey came to an end as part of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s. Originally due to close in 1535/6, it was reprieved in 1537 but finally closed in 1539. The 22 canons and 57 staff had to leave. The buildings were demolished, lead roofing salvaged and ready-cut building stone carted off to nearby farmhouses and farm buildings where some of it can still be found.

The site was sold to John Kitchin/Kechyn of Hatfield, Herts, whose daughter married into the Dalton family who bought Thurnham Hall in 1556. The Chapter House was reported to be in a ruinous state in 1727.

The Dalton family restored the Chapter House around this time and used it as a family mausoleum from 1749 (or perhaps earlier) until 1861. This is why the central pillar of the Chapter House is so short – the floor was raised 4 feet 6 inches (1.4 metres) to accommodate the coffins.

Today the site is a Scheduled Monument and the Chapter House is a Grade 1 Listed Building. The Chapter House is sometimes open to the public. Many of the finds from the various excavations are kept in Lancaster City Museum.

Other guides of interest include:
5 Gillow of Lancaster
90 Thurnham Church and Gillow Mausoleum

Reading

Marshall B 2006 *Lancashire's Medieval Monasteries.* Staining, Blackpool: Landy Publishing.
Burn A, Oswald A, & Jecock M 2009 *Cockersand Abbey, Thurnham, Lancashire: an Analytical Earthwork Survey.* Swindon: English Heritage, Research Department Report Series No. 55-2009

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