

## FURTHER EXCAVATIONS AND REPAIR AT LESNES ABBEY, KENT

The excavations at Lesnes Abbey carried out by the London County Council under the direction of the writer and the supervision of the Ministry of Works have this year been directed to a further clearance of the dormitory undercroft and the repair and preservation of the chapter house. This latter presented many problems, and the solution of them may provoke controversy, though it is difficult to see how the work could have been done otherwise. In the last report mention was made of the uncovering of a double bank of seats round the interior walls of the chapter house. These, of course, are quite normal, though at Lesnes there was a possibility that these were of late construction and inserted for some function such as the installation of a new abbot or an important visitation. Further examination, however, this year made it clear that these benches were much earlier, though still later than the main fabric. Their construction was not very substantial, consisting of a low retaining wall to support the seating, behind which was a filling of pure sandy clay or at times building debris. All seating, whether it was of marble slabs, wood or tiles, had gone. This construction was ample for a building possessing a roof, but when it came to preserving these features within roofless walls and exposed to the ravages of rain and frost, it was clear that something more weather-resistant was necessary. Last year's work ended, therefore, with a trial reconstruction of the south-west corner of the chapter house in rag rubble. Thus it was left to the fierce blasts of winter weather and official criticism. It survived both, the former better than the latter, but no alternative was forthcoming, so it was proposed to continue the work this year. But further clearing of this benching and its adjacent walls in preparation for reconstruction revealed another disconcerting factor, viz., that the seats at the east end were at a higher level (about 1 ft. 4 in.) than those at the west, this being confirmed by the plaster levels on the remaining walls. This discovery called for a reconsideration of the whole question of the chapter house arrangements, for no parallel example of this change in seat level could be instanced. Lesnes Chapter House is a large one (51 ft. by 26 ft.) and could easily accommodate a hundred persons. Considering that the total number of inmates was never more than twelve, normal chapter meetings could only have occupied a small part of this large room. It has already been

established that there was no passage over the chapter house to the church, so the whole was probably vaulted to its full height throughout in three bays, as shown on the plan in Clapham's "Lesnes Abbey." It is, therefore, quite in order to imagine that the western of these three bays might easily have formed a vestibule, while the two eastern compartments formed the Chapter House proper. No structural features to confirm this were found except some capitals probably from vaulting shafts (these are now in the V. and A. Museum).

In this connection the change in seat level may be of importance. The high level seating can be traced westwards from the east end for some thirty feet or more while the lower level seats extend from the west end fifteen or sixteen feet eastwards. This seems to point to a meeting spot about 17 ft. from the west end, i.e., one-third the total length, or one bay of the triple vaulted roof.

This solution has been adopted and the change in seat level has been made to coincide with the end of the first bay. What was the nature of the demarcation between vestibule and Chapter House cannot be said, nor can anything definite be laid down about the means of access from the one part to the other. A screen of wood, perhaps removable for important and crowded functions, can be visualized, with a few steps up from one level to the other, but in view of the fact that nothing at all remains of these details it is proposed to turf the whole of the interior at the proper levels, connecting them by a grass ramp. Thus the levels which are certain will be indicated and doubtful matters eliminated.

F.C.E.-E.