

**THE
CHAPTER HOUSE
OF
READING ABBEY**

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2021

CHAPTER HOUSES

The monks of Reading Abbey belonged to the Benedictine monastic family. That is to say, their way of life was based upon the rule of St Benedict of Nursia (Norcia, near Perugia, Italy), who died in 547 AD.

Unlike the eremitic ('of the desert' and so 'hermitic'), monks such as St Anthony of Egypt (d.355 AD), St. Benedict founded a community where all lived communally. Their monasteries are often referred to as 'coenobia', or 'coenobium' in the singular. This is a word that comes from the Greek for 'common' and 'life' (*κοινός*, *koinos* and *βίος*, *bios*).

Consequently, it was expected that all the brothers in the community would eat, pray, sleep and work together, though of course certain tasks would be apportioned to individuals or groups. In fact, it was highly unusual for individuals to work alone, the norm was to be in a group of at least three.

The daily practicalities of how the Rule should be interpreted in each monastery was often written down in 'customaries', *consuetudines*. These are very detailed instructions covering just about every imaginable aspect of life in the monastery.

The Rule was therefore of upmost importance to each monk. Along with passages from scripture, it was to be read and studied every day. The main place where this took place was in a building which came to be named after it, the Chapter House. For it was here that a chapter of the Rule was read out each day, and, very often, a study, or homily, concerning that chapter would have been delivered to the assembled community.

Chapter Houses were therefore built to accommodate the whole community. Almost invariable they were alongside the chancel of the church and access was through the cloister. As such their orientation followed that of the church, being on an east-west axis, with the entrance at the west and the abbot's, or prior's seat, at the east end.

Architecturally, there are two main types of chapter houses. The earliest, as at Reading, are rectangular, some with an apsidal east end. Others, as at Wells and York, are round. These date from the 13th century onwards.

Many abbots, priors and other notable persons, such as benefactors, were buried in the Chapter Houses.¹

The following is an architectural study based upon my own research and that undertaken in preparation for the conservation work before the re-opening of the ruins at Reading in 2019.

CHAPTER HOUSES - comparative sizes

The following is a list of some major chapter houses in England. Reading had one of the largest, if not the largest, in the country.

	LENGTH		WIDTH		AREA	
	ft	m	ft	m	sqr ft	sqr m
WINCHESTER Norman (ruined)	88	26.8	38	11.58	3344	310.67
CANTERBURY Late 14th c	90	27.43	35	10.67	3150	292.64
DURHAM Early 14th c. rebuilt 19th c	80	24.38	34' 6"	9.14	2100	223
(For more details of these dimensions see page 6)						
EXETER	65	19.8	30	9.14	1950	181
GLOUCESTER	65	19.8	30	9.14	1950	181
NORWICH	60	18.2	30	9.14	1800	167
MUCH WENLOCK	49	15	29	9	1421	135

READING. There are differences in the measurements given in various accounts. As the building is still standing, and essentially the same as when built, we can only attribute this either to faulty measurements or to different reference points in the process of measurement.

STOKESEY (1721)	84	25.6	48	14.6	4032	373.76
DORAN (1835)	85	26	40	12.2	3400	315.87
ENGLEFIELD / HURRY 1800 –1900)	78	23.8	42	12	3276	304
OS	80	24	42	12	3360	312.15

I will next look at the first three of these chapter houses in the list above, as they are the largest, and nearest in size to that at Reading. We shall see that there are, however, significant differences between them in style and date.

WINCHESTER CHAPTER HOUSE

RUINED

Dates to Walkelyn's time 1079+

Style: rectangular, barrel vaulted ceiling

LENGTH		WIDTH		AREA	
ft	m	ft	m	sqr ft	sqr m
88	26.8	38	11.58	3344	310.67

As befitting the monastery with the longest church in Europe, its chapter house is one of the largest in the country. All that remains is part of the north wall and, to the west, the southerly window and door arches, with pillars and capitals, which would have led into the chapter house.

The chapter-house, immediately to the south, is also of Walkelin's time, and was a rectangle 88 ft. by 38 ft., covered with a barrel vault of stone, and having on the north, south and east a round arched wall arcade with shafts and cushion capitals, but only the arcade on the north wall now remains. At the west, five round-headed arches on large circular columns with cushion capitals opened to the cloister, the middle arch being wider and higher than the rest, and these still remain perfect, a most valuable example of the arrangement of an 11th-century chapter-house entrance (Victoria County Histories).

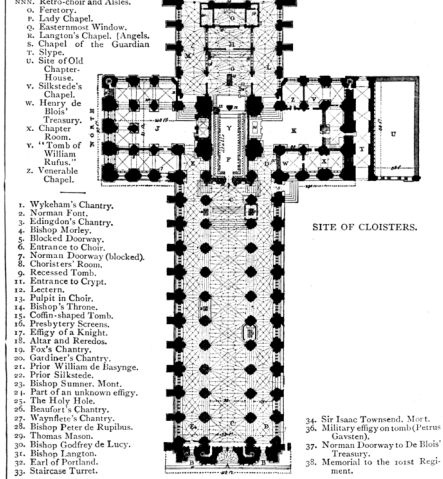


Fig 1. Plan of Winchester Cathedral

I have started with Winchester as its dimensions are very similar to those at Reading, and it was built in the same architectural style, within fifty years of Reading. Although it did not have an apsidal east end, it did have similar vaulting and its remaining west end is comparable to that at Reading, leading into the cloister.



Fig 2. View of the windows and doors, from 'inside' the chapter house looking west.

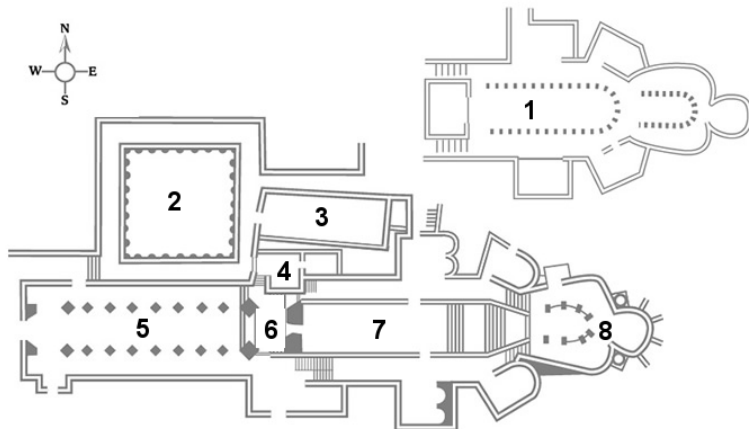
CANTERBURY

STANDING, 14th century

The chapter house at Canterbury is near to Reading's in size. It was built in the late 14th century, but it stands partly on the footprint of its Norman predecessor. It is of special interest not just on account of its size, specifically its width, but, despite being built 200 years later, because it has a barrel vaulted ceiling. It should be noted that the lower section, or storey (as it is described in the Project Gutenberg below), was built mid-way between the building of Reading and its completion by Prior Chillenden.

It differs from Reading in not having an apsidal east end. It is also somewhat unusual in that it lies, along with the adjoining cloister, to the north of the church.

The Chapter House lies eastward of the wall of the cloister, on the site of the original Norman building, which was rather less extensive. The present structure is oblong in shape, measuring 90 feet by 35 feet. The roof consists of a "barrel vault" and was built by Prior Chillenden, along with the whole of the upper storey at the end of the fourteenth century. The windows, high and four-lighted, are also his work; those at the east and west ends exceed in size all those of the cathedral, having seven lights. The lower storey was built by Prior de Estria about a century before the work was completed by Chillenden.³



- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. The Crypt | 5. The Nave |
| 2. The Cloister | 6. The Crossing |
| 3. Chapter House | 7. The Quire |
| 4. The Martyrdom | 8. The Trinity Chapel |

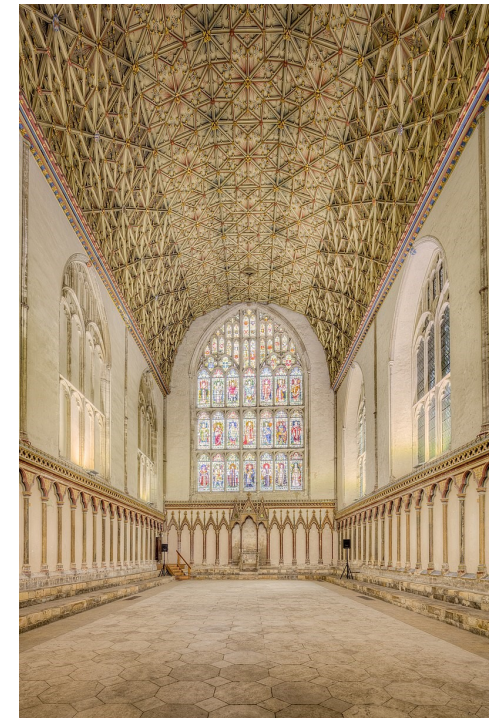


Fig 3. Canterbury Cathedral, Chapter House.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Canterbury_Cathedral_Chapter_House_
\(249775103\).jpeg#/media/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Canterbury_Cathedral_Chapter_House_(249775103).jpeg#/media/)

DURHAM

SOME STANDING REMAINS 11 – 12th c. REBUILT 19TH CENTURY

LENGTH		WIDTH		AREA		(BRITISH HISTORY FIGURES)
ft	m	ft	m	sqr ft	sqr m	
78' 6"	23.92	34' 6"	10.5	2400	223	

The Durham Cathedral Chapter House is, to a large extent, a reconstruction of the original and dates from 1895. The original Chapter House was partially demolished in 1796 because its large scale and high ceiling made it difficult to heat, and the 18th century clergy did not like it! ⁴ (Durham World heritage Site).

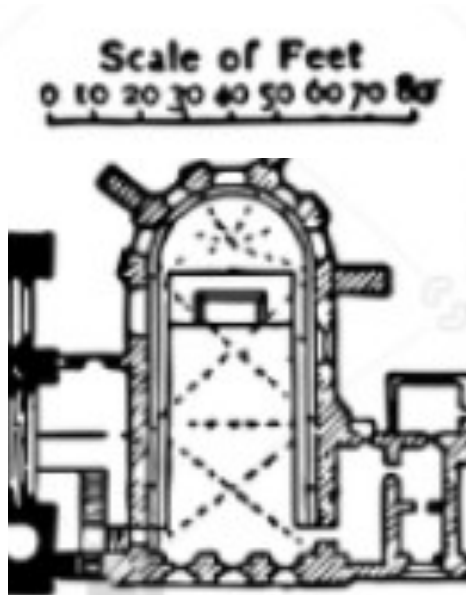


Fig 4. Plan of the Chapter House, Durham



Fig 5. Apsidal east end of the Chapter House, Durham

Before the destruction ... it was 78 ft. 6 in. in length, with a breadth of 34 ft. 6 in. In the apse were five three-light windows with flowing tracery inserted in the 14th century and at the west end above the cloister roof a large 15th century pointed window of five lights. It consisted of two bays, each covered by a quadripartite vault, and a third bay over the apse, the vault of which was set out by keeping the four western ribs in straight lines on plan, thus making them of unequal length and throwing the keystone to the east of the centre of the apse curve.

The transverse arches were semicircular, and the ribs of the vaults had a slightly pointed soffit roll flanked by cheverons of convex profile: in the apse the ribs sprang from large figure corbels and the soffit roll was flanked by a row of star ornaments and cheverons. A wall arcade of semicircular intersecting arches ran round the building.

The rebuilding of 1895–6, under the direction of Mr. C. Hodgson Fowler, restored the chapter house to something like its former appearance, the east end being erected on the old plan, though the original design of the apse vault was not followed, and round-headed windows of 12th-century type take the place of the 14th-century windows destroyed by Wyatt. The height to the crown of the new vault is 44 ft., above which is a low-pitched lead-covered roof. The stone bench and steps round the building have been reconstructed and the wall arcades renewed. The removal of the floor in the western part, constructed in 1796, brought to light several fragments of early sculptured crosses, probably of late 10th-century date, and also the arms of the stone chair, which have been worked into a new chair in the original position.⁵ (Victoria County History).

COMMENT

I have included the above brief descriptions as I feel they help us build a picture of Reading's place in this architectural story of the when, why and how these chapter houses were built.

In the next section I will look at the post Reformation evidence concerning Reading's chapter house.

READING CHAPTER HOUSE — KEY POST-REFORMATION RECORDS

In 1539 Reading Abbey ceased to exist. The Dissolution, with the expulsion of the monks, meant that the building no longer had a major role to play in the life of the town. Some of the monastery's buildings were converted to other uses, including a royal residence. There are sound historical records concerning its destruction and the disposal of its material assets. This has been written about extensively elsewhere.

The following is an account of later evidence, written and pictorial, which helps us piece together a picture of what the chapter house would have looked like before its destruction. I do not claim this is a complete record, but I hope that it gives a representative overview of the records.

1. 1650 PARLIAMENTARY SURVEY

Towards the end of the 17th century Civil War, Parliament carried out a nationwide survey of Crown lands which now passed into the ownership of the Commonwealth. In Reading this included the old Abbey. The survey is reproduced in *The History and Antiquities of Reading* by Charles Coates.⁶

There is on the East side of the said mansion-house a great old hall with a very large cellar under the said hall, arched, with some other decayed roomes between the said hall and the mansion-house, with the ruins of an old chappell, a kitchen and several other rooms, fit to be demolished. (Spellings as in the original, as quoted by Coates).

Comment:

The existence of a significant cellar under the 'great old hall', raises the question as to which building is being identified. The 'great hall' often refers to the Chapter House. This term dates back to the 13th century, at least. There is reference to the *aula* in the commemoration services for Henry I.⁷ This is where thirteen poor people are to be fed. There is no means of knowing if this referred to the refectory, chapter house or some other building. On one hand it may seem strange that the chapter house should be converted into a refectory for the occasion, on the other hand, we know that it was used as a meeting place, such as when parliament convened there and when Edward IV announced his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville. It may also be considered equally unlikely that the refectory should be handed over for the feeding of the poor of the town. This latter was an event that took place on the first of each month in commemoration of the death of Henry I.

As the two buildings are so close, it is interesting, in either case that, if the report is correct, there was a large cellar in the area, under at least one of them.

2. 1721 STUKELEY

Stukeley describes the Chapter House *as one large room 16 yards broad, 28 long, semi-circular towards the East end, with five narrow windows, three doors to the West with three windows above them. It is arched over and seems to have supported a chapel in which we fancy King Henry I was buried with his queen.*

Comment:

The measurements here are slightly greater than later, and contemporary, ones. Also note the error about Henry's burial place and that of Queen Adeliza.

If Stukeley's drawing is accurate, the ashlar stone blocks were still in place at this time, and the windows were rounded. This latter feature needs to be borne in mind when comparing it with Englefield's account, which we shall see later. We should also note how the curvature of the vault shafts start at ground level. The standing remains and other drawings show that this was not the case.



Fig 6. William Stukeleys' drawings of c.1721 are among the first, if not the first, of the Abbey. View from the west of the Chapter House from the Cloisters.

(Courtesy Reading Library)

3. 1773 ILLUSTRATION



Fig 7. 1773 Godfrey (Grose)

Reading Library

This view, drawn only six years before Englefield's detailed report (below), shows the Chapter House behind part of the refectory wall.

We can see the three western openings, with two complete windows above.

To the east (far right), can be seen two of the great windows in the apse of the Chapter House.

The western windows appear rounded, whilst those in the apse may be pointed. This needs to be read with Englefield's statement in mind, that all the windows appear pointed.

I am perplexed by the refectory wall which should, at this time, have reached further west.

Perhaps the artist was allowing himself some liberties, in order to give a view of the openings into the Chapter House.

4. SIR HENRY ENGLEFIELD 1779.

Englefield's survey was described by Dr Slade, in the 1970s, as the first *factual survey and the starting point for modern studies*.⁸ It is worth reproducing this in full.

South of that (the south transept), and separated from it by a passage arched two stories high, is the great hall, once most probably the chapter house, open to the cloisters by three semicircular arches, with a window over each, and terminated to the east by a semicircle with five large windows in it. It is now difficult to say, whether or not the windows were round headed; they have much of an appearance of an obtuse point, as have all the other windows remaining in the abbey, though the doors are every one round. The hall, though forty-two feet by seventy-nine was vaulted with one semicircular arch from wall to wall, apparently with stone ribs, and the intervals filled up with a very curious substance, of which a specimen accompanies this. All those vaults which were to bear nothing were turned with this, which is evidently a tophus formed by some petrifying spring, and enclosing the impressions of twigs &c. One leaf is very fair. The substance is very soft and extremely light, bearing only the proportion off 66 to 161 of Portland stone ...

*Going southwards round the outside of the building, we come to a small door, and near it the remains of a stair-case. The door opens into a dark passage, once vaulted, and communicating with the cloisters by a great door.*⁹

Englefield then describes other parts of the ruins such as the Refectory, Cloister and North Transept. In conclusion he makes some general observations. When discussing the gateway he talks of *the semi saxon style which seems to prevail over most parts of the building ...*(I have retained Englefield's spelling). Below is part of Englefield's plan, showing the Chapter House (B), the north transept (D), the cloister area (A), the refectory (K), the slype (I), and the south aisle of the church (E).

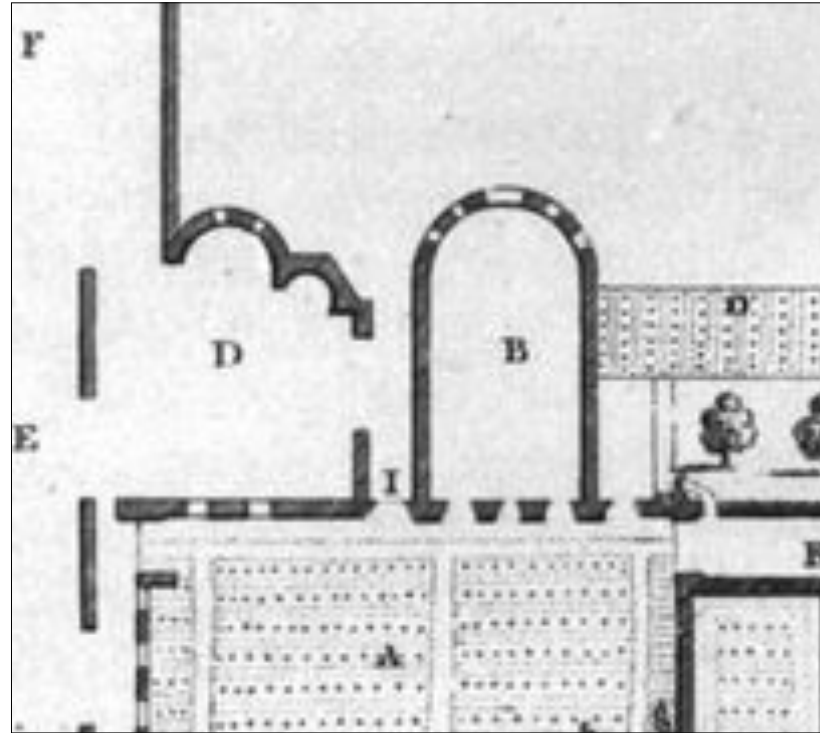


Fig 8. Englefield's 1802 version of the plan of Reading Abbey, *The History and Antiquities of Reading* by Charles Coates

5. 1791 ILLUSTRATIONS

Dating to 1791, looking from the east of the Chapter House, it is possible to see where a great hole had been made in the apse of the Chapter House, nevertheless the outer frame of the two windows can be made out (fig 9). Figure 10 is another view, this time from the inside, looking east.

If the representations are accurate, the windows had deteriorated since the 1773 illustration.



Fig 9. 1791 Reading Abbey. The ruins, from the east. The pinnacles of St. Laurence's Church appear in the background, and the east end of the Abbey Church is to the right. 18th century : print, entitled "East View of the Great Hall" [i.e. Chapter House], drawn, engraved and published by Charles Tomkins, 1791. No. 5 of his *Eight Views of Reading Abbey* (Reading Library)



Fig 10. 1791 1791 Ruins of the Chapter House, looking west. There is a thatched, wooden lean-to building against the south wall, and two ladies pose by the north wall. Print, drawn, engraved and published by Charles Tomkins in 1791, entitled "Inside of the Great Hall". (Reading Library)

6. 1802 HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES OF READING, COATES

As we have seen, Coates collaborated with Englefield in writing the section about the Abbey. Englefield redrew his original plan, adding greater detail, whilst Coates' description of the Abbey and Chapter House is taken from Englefield's report.

7. 1835 THE HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES OF THE TOWN AND BOROUGH OF READING IN BERKSHIRE (1835), JOHN DORAN

*The remains of the great hall or chapter house can be viewed from the exterior; the inside being occupied by the erection of the National School. This beautiful room was eighty five feet long, and forty feet wide, with three large entrance doors from the cloister each surmounted by a window; and five large windows decorated the East end, the roof was an arched ceiling springing from eight pilasters in the side walks, each twenty feet high, the height of the room from the flooring to the centre of the ceiling was about forty feet; the walls were six feet thick above the foundations; below they were 12 feet thick, to the depth of 7 feet.*¹⁰

The National School had been built within the walls of the Chapter House. By 1835 the school had closed and its house was demolished by 1837. Reading Corporation created a trust to buy and manage parts of the ruins. The trustees were evidently conscious of the need to protect the area against vandalism and further deterioration of the site. However, the Borough (Corporation) as trustees, who were responsible for this section of the ruins, had run out of money and decided they could do no more for the moment. Nevertheless, they asked the county of Berkshire, which owned the prison land, and James Wheble, who owned adjacent land, to fence in the area. Their comments also noted that this would prevent *the encroachment* of workmen employed by speculative builders on neighbouring sites. For a fuller account of how the ancient abbey area came to its present state of ownership see *Reading's Abbey Quarter, an illustrated history*.¹¹

The measurements differ slightly from those given elsewhere. Once again, this may be owing to differing points of reference. However, note that Doran considered that the west end openings were all doorways.

8. REMINISCENCES OF READING. BY AN OCTOGENARIAN [IE. WILLIAM SILVER DARTER] 1888

Before the present gaol was built there was a good sized meadow between the great hall of the Abbey (where the National Schools of that period were situate), over which were lying large blocks of the ruins, ... about the year 1810 or 1811.

The National School was in the Chapter House. It is worth mentioning that Darter uses the term 'great hall' to mean the Chapter House.

9. 1847 ILLUSTRATION

The next drawing, by W Brown, is dated 1847. It shows the upper windows as having, what may be, pointed arches. Whether the sills, over the arches are original is open to debate. The upper windows are pointed. But again, are they original?

However if they are not, the question needs to be asked who replaced them and why. The rest of the building was being allowed to fall into ruin. Why rebuild these windows?

There is also one obvious mistake, namely placing Reading in Yorkshire.

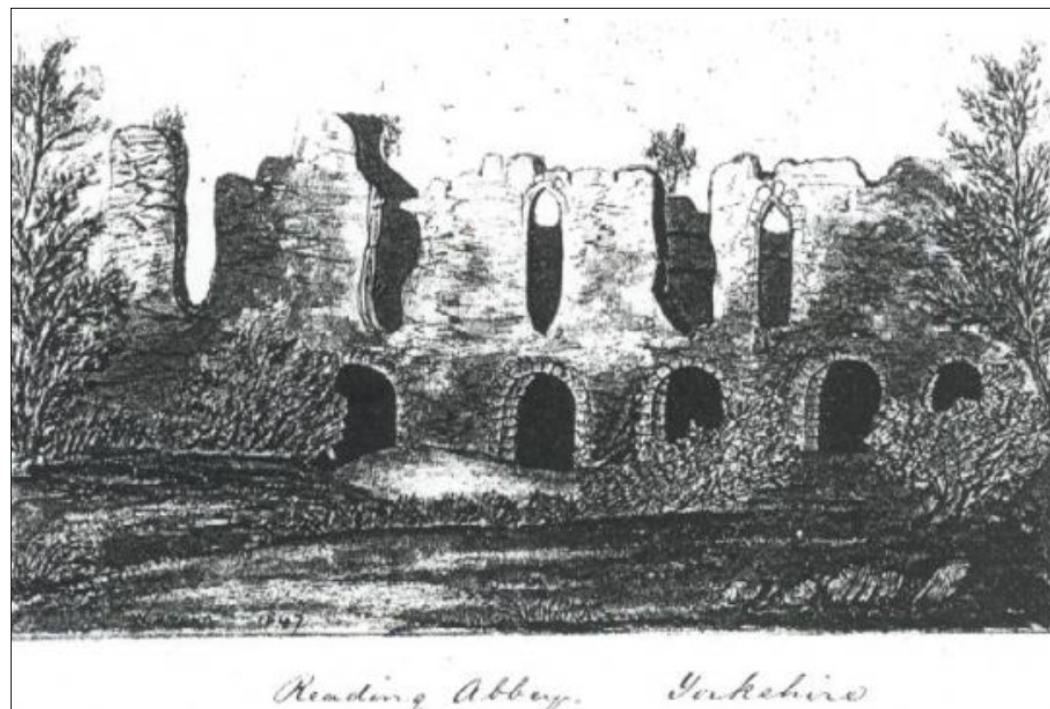


Fig 11. 1847. The east walk of the Cloister, showing the arched entrance and upper windows of the Chapter House, 1847. 1840-1849 : scan of a drawing by W. Brown, with the handwritten caption, "Reading Abbey, Yorkshire". (Reading Library)

10. EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS - THE 1870S TO THE EARLY 1900s

Figure 12. This is one of the earliest photographs of the Chapter House. It shows what may be pointed windows. As ever, though, one must remember that this does not mean they are the original openings.

Contrast this photograph with the next (fig 13), taken in the early 1900s. There is considerably more vegetation, especially around the upper windows. This would be the cause of more deterioration and structural damage.



Fig 12. 1870 –1880 Ruins of the Chapter House, looking west towards the cloister, c. 1870. A man, probably a park-keeper, sits at the base of the wall to the right. 1870-1879 ; Glass negative by H. W. Taunt, Box 22 No. 1542 (Reading Library)



Fig 13. 1900 –1909 Ruins of the Chapter House, looking west towards the Cloister, 1908. A man wearing a hat stands on the south side. 1900-1909 : postcard by Francis Frith and Company, (Reading Library)

11. MID TO LATE 20TH CENTURY

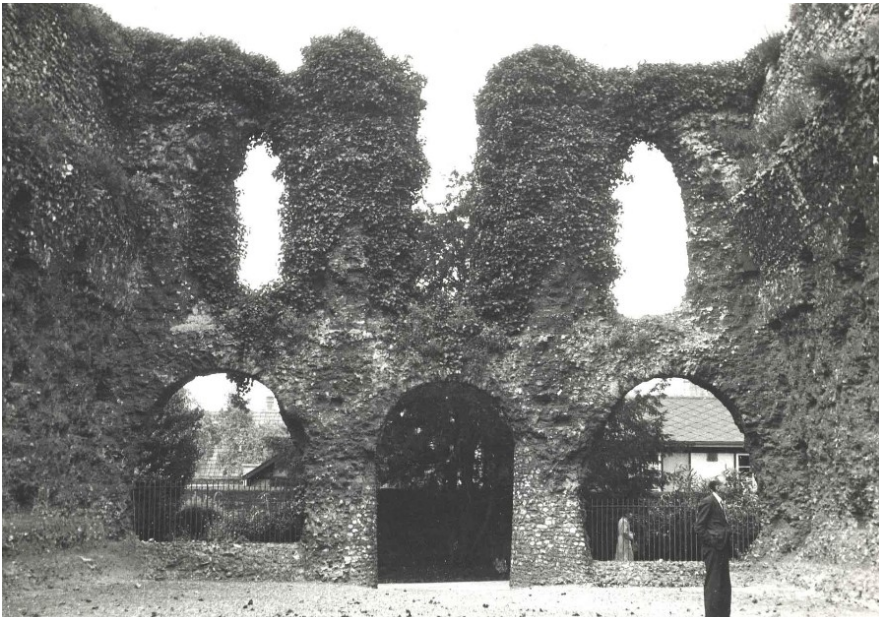


Fig 14. 1955. To the right, a gentleman in a suit appears to be staring at the wall. 1950-1959 : photograph by Francis Frith and Company,

Reading Library No. RDNG20

By the 1960s the fabric of the ruins was in such a state that they posed a threat to public safety. In 1982 they were closed to the public. Works were undertaken and partly completed by 1991. As money ran out a section of the dormitory wall was not included in the conservation project.

As Dr Slade noted *medieval type lime mortar had been used and flints generally replaced as they had been*. A photographic record had been made prior to the works.

In the 1970s Slade excavated part of the apse of the Abbey church. This lay under the car park of the then prison. He noted that the Abbey mortar was readily identifiable by its yellowish colour.¹²

12. THE 21st CENTURY

The restoration works of the 21st century were preceded by an architectural survey conducted by Stuart Harrison. This is a unique analysis of the site, together with a photographic record of the ruins before conservation.

The works themselves consisted of using a slaked, hot, limestone mix to consolidate the flint and remaining stonework. Unfortunately, unlike the previous conservation project, it would appear that no forensic photographic record, still or film, was made as the flint and stones were replaced, nor were samples of the mortar conserved or analysed, as the restoration work proceeded. Consequently, there is no visual evidence of the ongoing work, and so of the detailed structure as it was being revealed and subsequently covered over with the lime mix. This may make future comparative analysis difficult.

READING CHAPTER HOUSE

An architectural survey

Despite the variations in different measurements, there is no doubting the imposing size of Reading's Chapter House and that it was one of, if not the largest, in England.

	LENGTH ft		m		WIDTH ft		m		AREA sqr ft		sqr m	
ENGLEFIELD and HURRY	78	23.8	42	12	3276	304						
OS	80	24	42	12	3360	312.						

STYLE

Although certain aspects of its architecture have been interpreted in different ways, such as whether the windows were pointed, there is little doubt but that the chapter house was built in the so-called Romanesque style. The ceiling was most probably barrel-vaulted and the decoration, such as the blind interlocking wall arcade, is typical of that period. (See fig 14).



Fig 15. Durham chapter house

However, we should also recall that the mid-12th century was a transitional period, and places such as Durham had what I will call proto-gothic features, such as pointed arches and vaulting.

The east-end apse of Reading's Chapter House would have had vaulting similar to that at Durham. Although what we see at Durham is a 19th century reconstruction, it gives us a fairly accurate idea of what Reading would have looked like (fig 15).

Controversially, could one make a case for similar vaulting in the body of the building? Harrison is adamant that the remains do not support this view. There are no signs, he points out, within the standing remains, of arching support shafts. These would surely be evident in between the pilasters, if the ceiling had pointed vaulting.

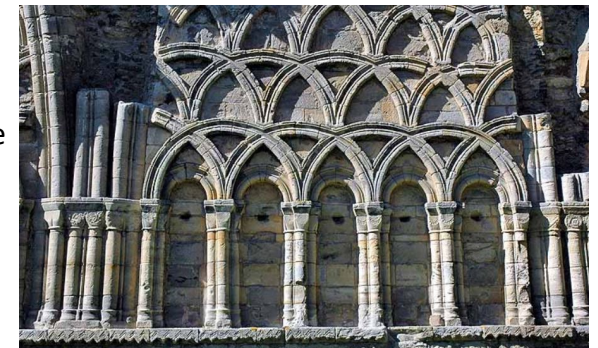


Fig 14. Wenlock. Interlaced blind arcading.

In order to build a picture of what the Chapter House would have looked like, I will examine evidence from the standing ruins, their analysis by Harrison, and the historical record from previous commentaries and illustrations. In addition, I will add features from buildings contemporary with the Abbey, including those still in existence.

THE WEST ENTRANCE FROM THE CLOISTER

This consists of three ground floor arches and three windows above, of which the outer two are complete, the central opening having lost its top courses. Illustrations show that this was the case by the 1720s.

The doorway: There is evidence of three stepped orders. In all probability there would have been a hood mould above. The windows on either side indicate the existence of at least two orders.



The lower windows: The window to the south of the doorway, according to Harrison's 2015 survey, shows signs of a *flanking order at each side and a projecting core along its centreline, This must be related to the plate tracery subdivision of the main opening into two sub arches supported by a central shaft.*¹³

The illustration, fig 16, is an example what this may have looked like. It is possible that the flanking orders extended the full height of the window. The possibility of plate tracery raises the question as to whether this would have been glazed.

Harrison goes on to point out that the sides of the windows have socket holes showing where the capitals have been removed. The arches over the openings are of more modern date. The upper windows and the walls above them, he says, are *almost entirely modern fabrications*.

This analysis presents us both with challenges and information on which to base any projected visual re-construction of the west end of the Chapter House. First of all it is necessary to distinguish original from later work. There is also the contrast between the 1720s illustrations and what the 2015 survey indicates.

I am inclined to the view that the illustrations are not reliable, but I would not wish to discount them out of convenience. Probably the best way forward is to take note of these, but also use Harrison's survey and make comparisons with chapter houses contemporary with that at Reading.

Fig 16. A cloister window at Silvacane Abbey, France.

C EmDee https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Abbaye_de_Silvacane_-_galerie_nord_06.JPG

It needs to be noted that in Cluniac monasteries, almost invariably, there was a set plan for the positioning of the cloister, the church, chapter house, refectory and dormitory. The cloister was the space which led to all the other main monastic buildings. The entrance to the chapter house would, therefore, have been from the covered cloister walkway, similar to that in figs. 17 & 18.



Fig 17. Lincoln cloister with door to left.
Photo by DAVID ILIFF. License: CC BY-SA 3.0"



Fig. 18. Vézelay cloister and chapter house.

This held true in Reading. There is also the question as to extent to which the surfaces would have been painted. It was normal practice to paint capitals and walls.

The upper windows: These would have looked out over the cloister roof (fig 19). They appear to have had two arch orders. However, most of the flint-work is modern. Once again, it is useful to refer to the illustrations that I showed earlier, dating from the 18th century. (pages 9,10 and 12)



Fig 19. Monreale 12th c

VIEW OF THE WEST WALL FROM INSIDE THE CHAPTER HOUSE

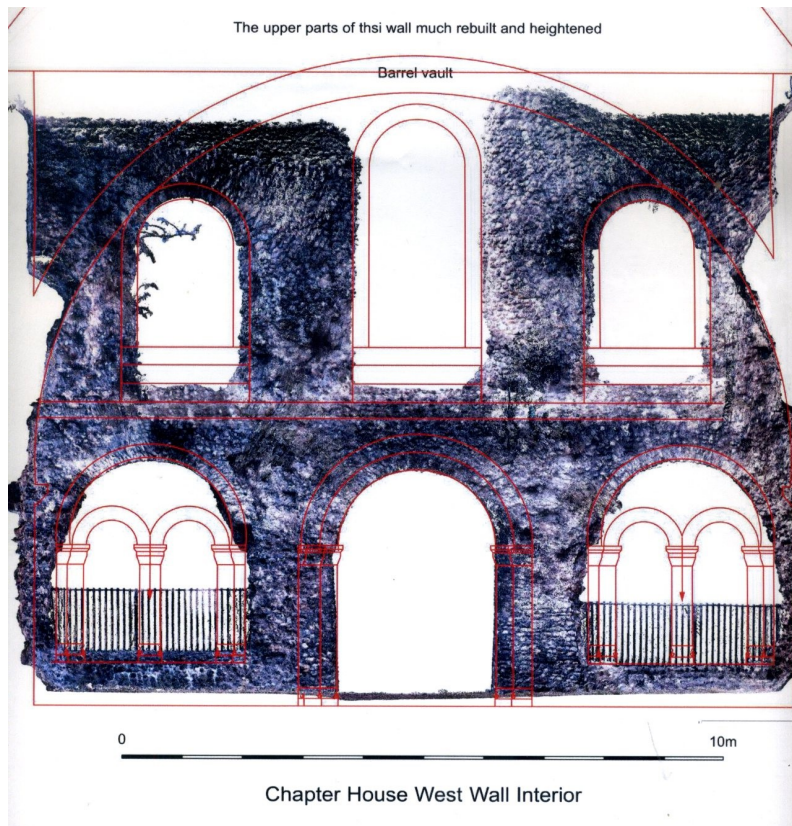


Fig 20. West wall of the Chapter House
from the 2015 Archaeological Survey

Once inside the Chapter House, and looking back at the interior west wall, we note the following,

1. The upper flint work is of later construction, not the original.
2. The curvature of the barrel vault would appear only just to clear the upper window heads. Harrison suggests that to compensate for this, the ceiling web may have been angled slightly upwards. If we recall that these are not the original window heads, and that Englefield was convinced that what he saw in the late 18th century, were slightly pointed windows, then I am not sure we can be certain as to exact nature of the vaulting, especially in relationship to the windows. Fig 20 shows Harrison's survey with suggested outlines (red lines), for the original openings.

When we come to consider how the walls would be decorated, we can be certain that the upper windows would have been glazed and almost certainly this would have been with lavish stained glass. The light of the setting sun would have bathed the interior in spectacular colours.

As for the wall surfaces, it is very likely that they were painted in much the same way as we see in the chapter house at Westminster Abbey (fig 21).



Fig 21. Westminster Abbey chapter house. Covering the walls are murals depicting the Apocalypse. They date from the 14th century.
<http://www.wilsonmj.com/2013/03/dust-jacket-bye-and-bye.html>

THE VAULTING

The vaulting is completely lost and even the earliest illustrations, dating to the first decades of the 18th century, show this to have been the case at that time.

It is possible that the Parliamentary 1650 survey, when mentioning the *great old hall*, was referencing the Chapter House. The ceiling is described as *arched*. I would suggest that this survey was indeed talking about the Chapter House. It is less likely that the only alternative building, the Refectory, would have had a barrel vaulted ceiling, and the standing remains show no indication of supporting shafts. We cannot tell whether the comments in the 1650 survey are from observation of an existing arched vault or, more probably, based on the pilasters.

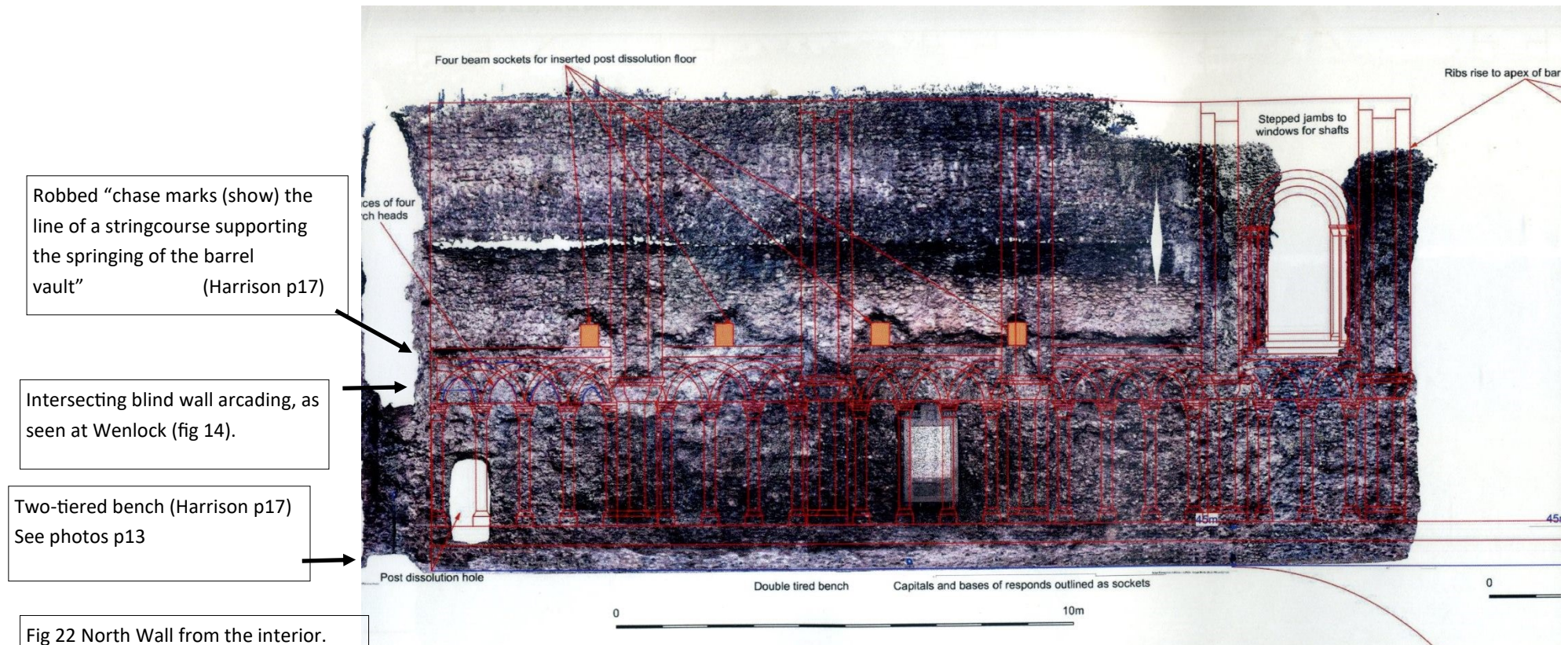
The breadth of Reading's Chapter House is indeed great. Englefield describes the vault as *one semicircular arch*, supported by stone ribs. The weight of the infill, had it been limestone, would have been very heavy. Englefield says that the vaulting between the ribs was composed of tufa. Comparing it with Portland stone, he noted that the tufa he found was *very soft and extremely light, bearing only the proportion of 66 to 161 of Portland stone ...*

We now know that most, by a great extent, of the stone used at Reading, came from Taynton quarry, west of Oxford. This is a robust rock and may be placed towards an upper density of between 1900-2050 kg/m³, whereas tufa, of the type described by Englefield, would be between 1400-1800 kg/m³.

It is worth while making the distinction between tufa found in the British Isles and that used in Rome. The former fits in with Englefield's description, namely a calcareous nodular spring water deposit. He comments upon *a tophus formed by some petrifying spring, and enclosing the impressions of twigs &c. One leaf is very fair*. This contrasts with Roman tufa, which describes a geologically recent, low density volcanic rock. The word 'Travertine' is now generally used to replace the term 'tufa' in this context.

THE NORTH WALL FROM INSIDE THE CHAPTER HOUSE

The following photograph shows the north wall, with red lines indicating the position of the pilaster responds, or shafts, which supported *the vault springing ... sockets for the capitals and abaci* (Harrison p17). These were of separate stone and supported the transverse rib arches which would have been the backbone of the vault across the building's 12 plus metre width.



It is also possible to make out the two-tiered bench, which can be seen in the late 19th and early 20th century photographs shown in figures 12 and 13.

The whole building was articulated; that is there were five bays, separated by the six pilasters and ceiling transverse ribs.

Close examination shows evidence of intersecting wall arcading. I wrote about the likelihood of this feature some years back, making reference to the more elaborate example at Wenlock Priory. The improved photographic technique appears to confirm this hypothesis.

THE APSE

The barrel vault, as at Durham, extended to where it joined the apse vaulting. The apse was divided by six supporting pilasters respond shafts, into five bays.

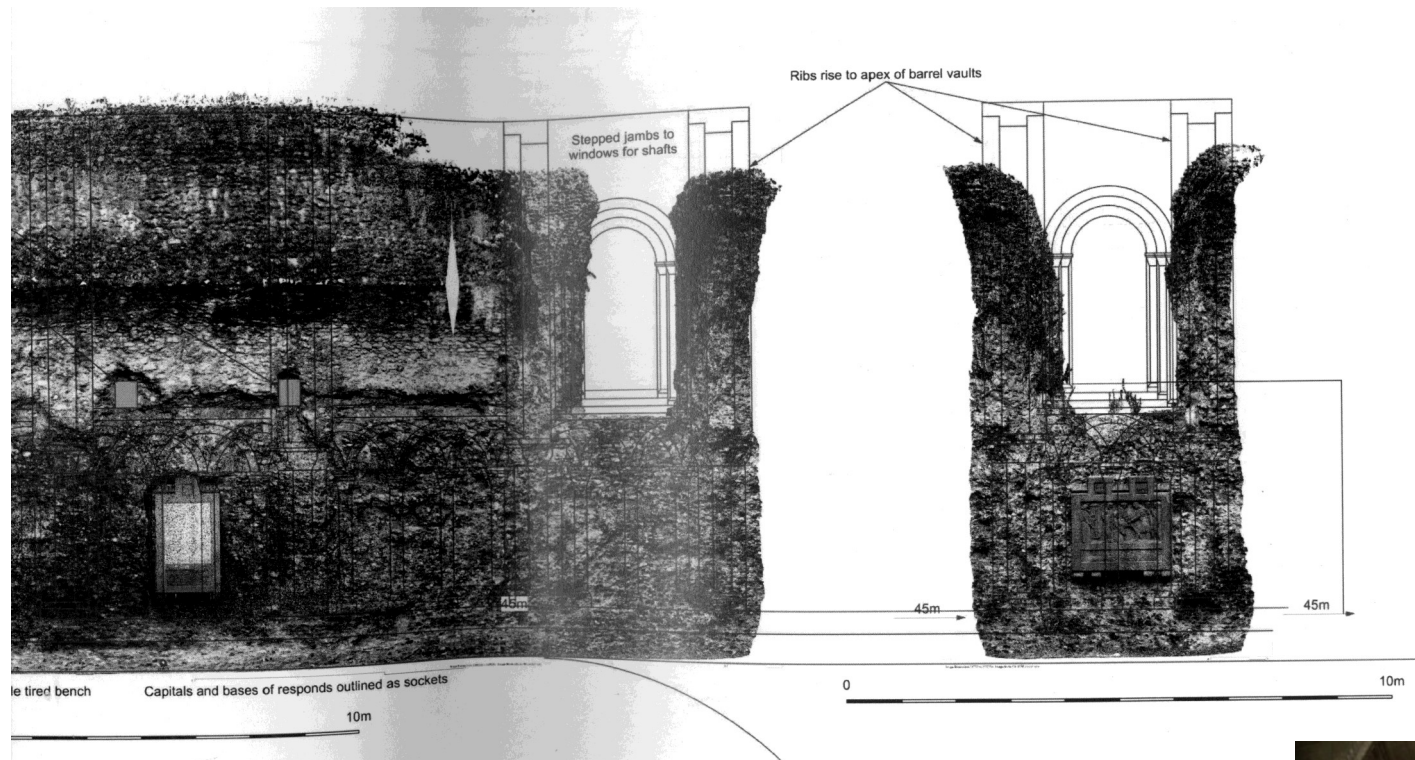


Fig 23. The joint of the apse and north wall

These supported ribs which joined at the apex of the barrel vault, in a manner similar to that as seen in the photograph of Durham.

As at Durham there were three windows to the east with two more on the north and south sides, all within the arc of the apse.

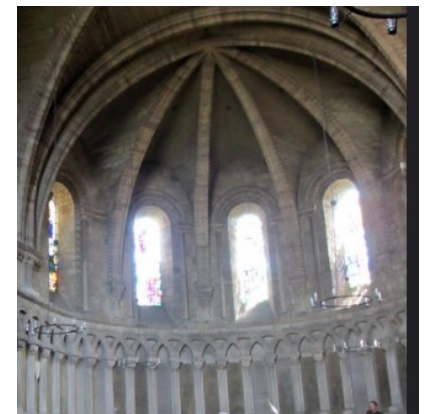


Fig 23. Durham apse

THE INTERIOR

From the surviving remains, there is little evidence of the interior appearance of the Chapter House. However, by comparing it with other similar buildings, it is arguably possible to come to some understanding as to what it may have looked like.

To begin with, it is necessary to remember its purpose. All the main customaries of similar religious houses mention the central role that the chapter house played in the life of a monastery. It was where the whole community gathered daily.

The English word 'chapter', as in chapter house, comes from the Latin word *capitulum*. A chapter of the Rule of St Benedict was read here each day, giving its name to the building. The Abbot or Prior would also have given a sermon or homily. Sometimes this was taken from one of the Fathers of the Church, such as St Augustine. We know this was the case at Reading. If required, the business of the day would be discussed.

Each morning the monks would sing *Prime*, one of the 'little hours' of the great Divine Office, which derived its name from being the 'first hour' of the day. Because it was partly sung in the Chapter House, it was known as the *Office of the Chapter*. The list of martyrs dating to the earliest days of Christianity, the *Martyrology*, was read, along with the *necrology*, the names of the community who had died. Accompanying prayers for the dead were sung or chanted. Reading's first monks had been Cluniac Benedictines, and praying for the salvation of the souls of the dead, was central to Cluniac life. The other 'hour' that was sung in chapter was the last of the day, *Compline*.¹⁴

The importance of the Chapter House is evident in that it is mentioned in the very first lines of Cluny's customary. This concerns the election of a new abbot. The customary states that the whole community is to gather *in capitulo*. The abbot's reign began in this place. It was also from the chapter house that the monks would make their many ritualistic processions, and to which they would return.

But the Chapter House at Reading was also a meeting hall; the great hall, the *aula*. It was here that Edward IV announced his secret marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, and where Parliament met on several occasions, when it fled London to avoid the plague. And so the Chapter House was a centre both of prayer and business.

It is not certain if it is the Chapter House that is being referred to in the account of the commemoration of Henry I's death, but it was either here, or in the refectory, on the first of December, that thirteen poor people of the town were fed a special meal. On the first of each month a less elaborate meal was likewise served to the poor of the town, in honour of the founder.¹⁵

Doubtless, special hangings and cushions would have been added to the furnishing on these occasions. These are mentioned as decorating the church for the commemoration of Henry's death.

It would be almost unthinkable that the windows did not have lavish stained glass. The walls would have been richly painted with biblical or other religious themes. The church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and to St John and of course, by the third quarter of the 12th century the Abbey became a centre of pilgrimage to St James, with the Hand of that saint as the main relic.

The ceiling itself would most probably also have been painted. It is unlikely that it would have featured rich mosaics such as at Monreale in Sicily. The two tiered seating area may have been of stone or wood, possibly with wooden backs fitting into the intersecting blind arcade.

In the centre there would have been a great double-sided lectern. Here a magnificent volume, containing the martyrology, would have been placed, as would other books, as their contents were read, or sung.

The abbot's throne would have been at the centre of the great apse.

We can be almost certain that many of the monastery's abbots would have been buried in the Chapter House, along, possibly, with other dignitaries.

One mystery is whether there was a crypt. We have seen that the 1650 survey mentions *a great old hall with a very large cellar under the said hall*. Could this be the Chapter House, the Refectory or some other building?

Whatever lay beneath it, the floor itself would have been laid with encaustic tiles. These may well have been produced locally. There are known to have been tileries dating to the 12th and 13th centuries in Reading, some having been recently excavated in south Reading on Silver Street. ¹⁶



Fig 24. Medieval encaustic tiles

John Mullaney



Fig 25. The Chapter House looking east, Reading gaol in the background.

John Mullaney

CONCLUSION

By comparing Reading's Chapter House with others built in a similar style, and at approximately the same time, we can begin to build a picture of what this magnificent building may have looked like. On page three I give a list of some of the major chapter houses in England. Different sources do vary in their statistics and, wherever possible, I use the official websites of each.

The trail of illustrations and commentaries, though by no means exhaustive, along with the most recent survey of 2015, all add to our knowledge of Reading's Chapter House. Fundamental is the principle that the design was based on its intended use as a general meeting place, as well as a space of spiritual significance.

We do well to remember that the twin pillars of the rule of St Benedict are 'prayer' (the *opus Dei*) and 'care', both physical and spiritual, for the traveller, the stranger, the pilgrim. The Chapter House most certainly featured significantly in the former, and it may be that it played a role in the latter.

What is more, Reading Abbey was built by Henry I as his royal foundation. He intended it not just as his mausoleum, but as the resting place of his successors, his dynasty. As witnessed in the account of the commemoration of Henry's death, the Chapter House played a prominent role in the rituals of the Abbey.

There is no doubt, that at the time it was built, and for many years after, it was an imposing building and one befitting one of the most important monasteries in the country.

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