

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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VII. ANCHORITES IN CHURCH AND CLOISTER

Recluses who dwell under the eaves of the church.—*Ancren Riwe*.
He sawe a chappel where was a recluse whiche hadde a wyndowe
that she myghte see vp to the Aulter. —Malory, *Morte d’Arthur*.

The anchorite differed from the hermit in that he lived in stricter seclusion, and was not free to wander at will. He was not merely, as the word *reclusus* signifies, withdrawn from the world : he was *inclusus*, shut up in a strait prison, whether in church, chapel, convent, or castle.

Various names were given to the enclosed person : *inclusus*, *inclusa*, *reclusus*, *reclusa*, and the indefinite *anachorita* are used synonymously in records. *Ancre* was of common gender in Middle English ; *anker* and *ancrese* occur later. Lucy “ye ankereswoman” is mentioned in the *Hundred Rolls*. A study of the Christian names which appear in the Appendix to this volume seems to show that more women than men undertook this austere vocation. So large is their number, indeed, that for lack of space only a few typical persons can be mentioned.

I. THE ANCHORITE

1. *Adjoining Parish Churches*

The author of the *Ancren Riwe* [this was a book of rules that governed the way an anchorite lived and worshipped] makes a play upon the word *ancre* ; she is “anchored under the church as an anchor under a ship, to hold the ship so that neither waves nor storms may overwhelm it”. Enclosed persons were usually attached to some church in order that they might derive spiritual advantages from it, and at the same time confer spiritual benefits upon the parish. Being a holy place, it was suitable for a dedicated person, and it was also a frequented spot for one who lived partly upon alms. The churchyard not only stood

for a wilderness, but seemed a fitting habitation for one, as it were, dead to the world.

The most celebrated anchorite of mediaeval England was, perhaps, Wulfric, enclosed for twenty-nine years at Haselbury, a village near Crewkerne. Wulfric was born at Compton, probably Compton Martin. He became priest of Deverill near Warminster, but at that time he was more addicted to sport than to spiritual exercises. Upon his conversion, he determined to devote himself entirely to a life of contemplation and rigorous asceticism at Haselbury—"burying himself in Christ in a cell adjoining the church". Sir William FitzWalter had a great respect for his saintly neighbour ; he sent provisions to him and visited him from time to time. Wulfric numbered among his intimate friends Osbern, the village priest ; William, a lay-brother of Ford Abbey ; and Brictric, who seems to have joined him as a disciple or attendant. During the reigns of Henry I and Stephen, he exercised a powerful influence, not only in his own neighbourhood but also at the court. The story of Wulfric as prophet and wonder-worker is related elsewhere.

Wulfric died in 1154, and was buried in his cell by the Bishop of Bath who had visited him on his death-bed. The monks of Montacute sought to obtain possession of the saint's body, but Osbern the priest interposed, and the remains were translated to the adjoining church. Miracles subsequently took place there, and the shrine became a place of pilgrimage. The north chapel is still known as "Wulfric's aisle".

Another interesting recluse was Laurretta, Countess of Leicester. Her mother and brother were amongst those persons "miserably famished" at King John's command. Her father, William de Braose, a man of singular piety, escaped, and died in an abbey in France. Lady Laurretta wedded Robert Fitz Parnell, Earl of Leicester, who, after distinguishing himself in the Crusades, died in 1204, and the widowed countess eventually retired into solitude at St. Stephen's, Hackington.

A more familiar name is that of Katherine of Ledbury. She was the daughter of John Giffard, Baron of Brimsfield, and was born in 1272. Her husband, Nicholas, Baron Audley, died in 1299, leaving her with two young sons and a daughter.¹

No more is heard of the Lady Audley until 1312, when she gave away into lay hands a portion of her maternal inheritance. Since the deed is witnessed at Ledbury by the bishop and the vicar, it may be presumed that she had already taken up her abode there, or was about to be enclosed by the bishop. In 1323, "Katherine de Audele, recluse of Ledbury," was receiving £30 a year through the sheriff, and as the sum was paid out of lands which were in the custody of her husband's executor, it seems probable that she had made some arrangement about her property in order to obtain a pension.

Around these prosaic facts the following poetic legend grew up. In obedience to a vision which bade her not to rest until she came to a town where the bells should ring untouched by man, Katherine and her maid Mabel wandered from place to place, following out of Worcestershire into Herefordshire the hoof-marks of the lady's mare which had been stolen—prints still shown in the sandstone at Whelpley Brook. The expected miracle was manifested at Ledbury, and there, it may be under the shadow of the bell-tower, the Lady Katherine determined to remain. The story is familiar through Wordsworth's sonnet :—

When human touch (as monkish books attest)
Nor was applied nor could be, Ledbury bells
Broke forth in concert flung a down the dells,
And upward, high as Malvern's cloudy crest ;
Sweet tones, and caught by a noble Lady blest
To rapture! Mabel listened at the side
Of her loved mistress : soon the music died,
And Catherine said, *Here I set up my rest.*
Warned in a dream, the Wanderer long had sought
A home that by such miracle of sound
Must be revealed :—she heard it now, or felt
The deep, deep joy of a confiding thought ;
And there, a saintly Anchoress, she dwelt
Till she exchanged for heaven that happy ground.

The title "Saint" Catherine of Ledbury is a late addition to the tale, suggested, doubtless, by the dedication-name of the hospital of St. Katharine, a house founded years before the birth of Katherine de Audley.

There were also cells attached to many town churches. The foundation of some of these was so remote as to be lost in obscurity. Chester, for example, had an anchorage by the collegiate church of St. John. The tradition handed down by

--75--

Giraldus Cambrensis was, that King Harold, sorely wounded, fled from Senlac to Chester, "and lyued there holily an ankers lyf in Seint Iames celle faste by Seint Iohn his chirche, and made a gracious end".²

At Oxford there were six or seven churches where recluses were dwelling between 1180 and 1280.³ One, Matthew, was enclosed at Holywell, outside the town. It was said to have been revealed to this holy man that the church of Dorchester contained the bodies of two Saxon bishops. He heard a voice saying : *Birinus in pavimento, Bertinus retro ostium* ; and when the relics were discovered, miracles occurred—a dead man came to life, a leper was cleansed, and one learnt to speak French in three days. These startling events were duly recorded at an inquiry held by the archbishop in 1224. Soon after this, Henry III issued an order for a *recluserium* to be made at Holywell church of which he was the patron. Another was founded at St. Budock's :—

“Intimation to R[obert Grosseteste] bishop of Lincoln that, yielding to the prayers of Alice, the bearer, who has made a vow to serve God in some solitary place, the king has granted that on the north side of the church of St. Bodhuc, Oxford, she may build herself a cell, where she may for her life serve God and the Blessed Virgin.”

In the quietude of the closet, many a solitary strove to shut out the city's turmoil. Edward III gave alms to eight anchorites, as well as to three hermits, in London and the suburbs.⁴ It was the same in other cities, e.g. Norwich, Lincoln, York. By comparing scattered records, it is possible to gather a few facts about some of these persons. There was, for example, a cell at St. Leonard's, Exeter. In 1397, the bishop commissioned John Dodyngton, canon of Exeter, to enclose a certain Alice in a house in the cemetery. Three years later, when the canon died, he bequeathed 40s. to her. That same year the bishop permitted Alice Bernard to choose a confessor with plenary powers. The rector of Little Torrington left to her 20s. and a book of sermons in English. Another bequest was made as late as 1430.

--76--

Fifteenth-century wills abound in references to persons living the solitary life. Lord Scrope bequeaths money to anchorites in twenty villages and market towns, as well as to those in and about London and York, and to any others found within three months of his death.

(2) *In Conventual Houses*

The great Benedictine communities of Crowland, Durham, Westminster, Worcester, and Sherborne had their solitaries, as had also many other monastic houses. Mottisfont Priory was founded by William Briwer, and his brother, a wonder-worker known as “the holy man in the wall,” probably dwelt in the precincts of that monastery. Even the more secular hospital might be used as a place of seclusion. The Bishop of Exeter founded a cell by the chapel of St. Laurence, Crediton, and appointed Brother Nicholas as the first inmate. Alice was enclosed at the church of St. Giles in the suburbs of Hereford (1321) ; and clearly this was the hospital, for a will of the previous year mentions not only the anchorite of St. Giles but the brethren and sisters there. With the assent of the master and brethren of Holy Innocents' outside Lincoln, the king, as patron, permitted Elizabeth de Elm to become a recluse by the chapel of the hospital. Probably the infirm materially benefited by the presence of such persons in their precincts.

The Austin Friary at Droitwich had a cell on the south side of the choir of the conventual church. It was founded by Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, who stipulated that the candidate nominated by the founder's heirs, should be religious and devout, of the same order as the convent, or willing to submit to the prior ; and that he should not be a burden on a house which was pledged to poverty.

The White Friars and the Black Friars favoured the solitary life. The Carmelites of Norwich had two cells. Thomas Bradley (p. 163) dwelt in that next the entrance of the friary. Dame Emma, daughter of Sir Miles Stapilton, was probably enclosed in the chamber under Holy Cross chapel, set apart for women. She was buried in the church of the friary in 1442. Other Carmelite nuns took similar vows, e.g. Alice Wakleyne of Northampton, Margaret Hawten, Joanna

--77--

Catfelde of Lynn, and Agnes Gransetter of Cambridge. Bale mentions elsewhere that Mistress Alice Wakelyn, a woman of illustrious family, died on 13 June, 1426, and was succeeded by Margaret Hawton, who died on 17 November (the year is not recorded).

Dominican friars were enclosed at Lynn, Lancaster, Newcastle, Arundel, and Canterbury ; and Dominican sisters at Norwich, Bristol, and Worcester.

(3) *Adjoining Chapels*

There were cells attached to chapels which were neither parochial nor directly monastic. Henry II pensioned Geldwin, *inclusus* of St. Aedred at Winchester, and Richard, of St. Sepulchre's, Hereford. Henry III appointed others to several royal free chapels, including those of the fortresses in London and Dover. In 1237, he ordered the Constable of the Tower to admit Brother William to the cell by St Peter's church in the bailly which was dedicated to St. Eustace. Idonea de Boclaund afterwards occupied this chamber, and received the daily dole of a penny, and every year a robe. Emma de Skepeye was enclosed by the church of St. Mary in Dover Castle (1234). Twenty-three years later, the king, before setting sail from Dover, ordered that the customary alms (three halfpence a day) should be made to her for life.

In the tower of Bristol Castle there was a chapel and anchorage dedicated to St. Edward. Directions were sent by Henry III for certain alterations in the fortress :—

“Block up the doors of the chapel beside our great hall there, and let a door be made in the chancel towards the *recluserium* : in which *recluserium* let there be made an altar in the chapel of the blessed Edward, and above that *recluserium* in the turret let the chamber of the clerks be made”.

A chaplain, probably a recluse, was to perform masses for the soul of Alienora of Brittany, the king's cousin.

During the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, a succession of solitary women dwelt in the chapel of St. Helen by the castle at Pontefract. They were in receipt of a pension from the lords of the town.⁵

--78--

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ANCHORAGE AT HARTLIP

Plate XXVI : Anchorage at Hartlip.

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Cells were frequently situated in places of thoroughfare, e.g. “in the midst of the town” at Wakefield, at the end of Frenchgate Street in Richmond, by bridges at Doncaster and Derby. Speed’s plan of Kendal marks the *Ankeriche*, which tradition describes as a small beehive hut, concealed by fences from the road which encircled it.

II. THE CELL

The place of seclusion is called indifferently *domus anachoritæ*, *recluserium*, *inclusorium*, *reclusagium*, and *anchoragium*. Since English sources of information are scanty on this subject, we are obliged to turn to foreign writers. Grimlaic in his *Regula Solitariorum*⁶ directs that the dwelling be very small and surrounded, if possible, by an enclosed garden. Two anchorites might share a single chamber. If the recluse had disciples, they dwelt in a separate apartment and served him through the window. The cell communicated with the church ; but if the inmate were a priest, he also had a consecrated oratory. A Bavarian Rule directs that the cell be of stone, 12 feet square. Through one window,

towards the choir, the recluse partook of the Blessed Sacrament ; through another, on the opposite side, he received his food ; a third, closed with glass or horn, lighted the dwelling.⁷

In the *Ancren Riwle*, particular instructions are given concerning the windows. “Hold no conversation with any man out of a church window, but respect it for the sake of the holy sacrament which ye see therethrough. “Communication was held through a parlour window, small, narrow, and always fast on every side.⁸ Even when the recluse unclosed her shutter, she was hidden by a curtain—a black cloth bearing a symbolic white cross. “The black cloth also teacheth an emblem, doth less harm to the eyes, is thicker against the wind, more difficult to see through, and keeps its colour better against the wind and other things.”

The house, which might consist of several apartments, often

--79--

included an oratory in which Mass was celebrated from time to time. There was an austere simplicity about the building. Abbot Aelred did not approve of covering the naked walls with pictures and carvings, or of decking the chapel with a variety of hangings and images : such ornaments savoured of vanity. He decreed that the altar should have upon it only a fair white cloth and a crucifix :—

“Now shal I shewe the how thou shalt arraye thyn oratory. Arraye thyn autier with white lynnyn clothe, the whiche bitokeneth both chastite and symplenesse. . . . In this autere sette an ymage of cristis passion, that thou may have mynde and se hou he sette and spredde his armes abroad to resceyve thee and al mankynde to mercy, if thai wil axe it. And if it plesse the, sette on that oo side an ymage of our Lady, and a nother on that other syde of seynt John.”⁹

The Rites of Durham contains a description (1593) of one such chamber within the cathedral. It was a loft, evidently a wooden structure, close to the high altar and behind St. Cuthbert’s shrine :—

“At the east end of the North Alley of the Quire, betwixt two pillars opposite, was the goodlyest faire porch, which was called the Anchoridge, havinge in it a marveillous faire roode, with the most exquisite pictures of Marye and John, with an altar for a Monke to say dayly masse ; beinge in antient time inhabited with an Anchorite. . . . The entrance to this porch or anchoridge was upp a paire of faire staires adjoyninge to the north dore of St. Cuthbert’s Feretorie.” [a Feretory is a shrine that contains the bones or relics of a saint.]

There was also an anchorage adjoining Chichester Cathedral. William Bolle, rector of Aldrington, resigned his benefice, and obtained permission to construct a cell and retire thither. It was agreed that after his death it should pass

into the bishop's hands. The chamber, 29 feet long and 24 feet wide, communicated with the Lady chapel.

The anchorite attached to Sherborne Abbey dwelt in the chapel of St. Mary le Bow on the south of the thirteenth-century Lady chapel (now part of the School). An inmate of this place is mentioned in the codicil to the will of Lady Alice West : "Also, for hit was for-yete byfore in this testament, I

--80--

bequethe to the Reclus of Shirbourn, whos Surname is Arthour,¹⁰ xls. for to do and to preye as othere Reclus forseyd Shulleth don and preye".

The cell at Worcester was next the cathedral on the north, between the porch and the west end. In a fifteenth-century account-book of the priory is an entry of xs. paid : "for brycks, lyme, and sonde, to y^e repa' con of y^e anckras house by y^e chanel howse".¹¹

There was no rule as to the situation of such dwellings. The records are apt to be vague, as, for instance, that a religious woman abode "in a remote corner of the church". Information is sometimes supplied incidentally, e.g. a testator of Faversham desires to be buried on the north side of the churchyard, opposite the door of the anchoress. Occasionally, however, some particulars are given. Juliana, anchoress of Worcester, dwelt at the north-west corner of the church of St. Nicholas, in an angle of the churchyard, bounded by the main street and by a side street. She petitioned for the enlargement of her courtyard, and the king, satisfied that this would not be to the nuisance of the city, granted permission to widen the court on three sides, by 7, 5, and 4 feet, respectively.¹² Situated in a busy thoroughfare (now "The Cross") it was conspicuous to all passing to and from the Foregate.

Writing of the Norwich church of St. John Baptist, Timberhill, Blomefield says : "Anciently a recluse dwelt in a cell joining to the north side of the steeple, but it was down before the Dissolution". The anchorage at St. Edward's was also on the north. From numerous examples it seems that the ascetic would deliberately forego the sunshine with the rest of Nature's gifts. Rare instances occur of a brighter aspect. The Westminster anchorage was on the south side of the chancel of St. Margaret's.¹³ [13] The cells at Droitwich and Polesworth

--81--

were also on the south. That at the west end of Crewkerne church was still standing in the seventeenth century.

Although so many recluses were dwelling "under the eaves of the church," the church itself has in many cases been rebuilt, and no traces of the cell can be found. Thus even in ancient buildings (for example, in St. Michael's and St. Peter's at St. Albans) there is no clue as to the position of the annexed chambers. In none of the eleven fine churches described by Mr. McCall in *Richmondshire Churches* have indications of cells been found, although recluses are known to have dwelt in three of those parishes, viz. Burneston, Kirkby, Wiske, and Wath.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the dwelling might stand apart in the churchyard, as at St. John's, Chester.

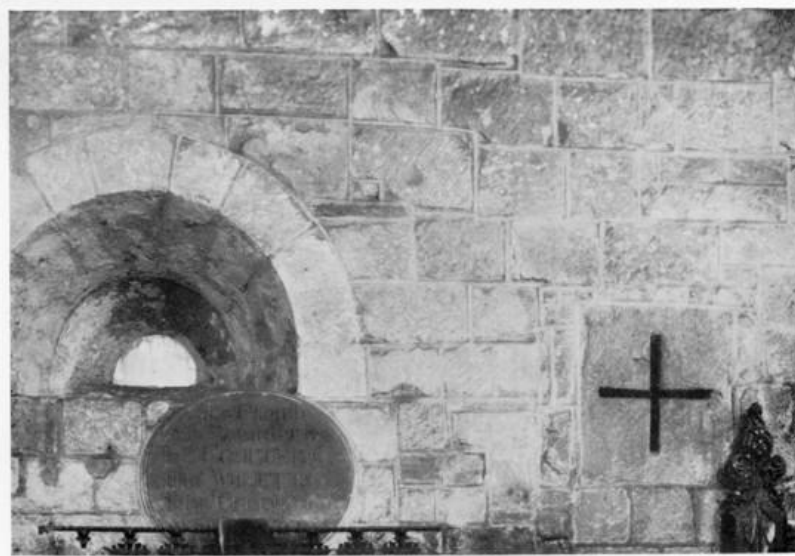
In several churches architectural features confirm the records. Two cells in the south have been described by Mr. P. M. Johnston, and three in the north by Mr. J. R. Boyle.

Hartlip (Kent).—That of Hartlip (Plate XXVI), where a certain Robert was anchorite, remains at the west end of the north aisle.

Hardham (Sussex).—The same writer¹⁴ traces the site of a chamber on the south side of the chancel, which may have been the abode of the recluse to whom the bishop bequeathed half a mark in 1253. All that remains is a thirteenth-century squint.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne.—The vestry on the north of the church of St. John Baptist seems originally to have been an anchorite's house. This conjecture is supported by a document, dated 1260, confirming to Christiana Umfred a place (*locum inclusionis*) in St. John's churchyard to be her habitation for life. The original grant had been made by the bishop, prior, and convent of Carlisle (patrons of the mother-church of St. Nicholas), with the assent of the mayor and burgesses. Christiana probably witnessed the services through the cross-shaped opening shown in Plate XXVII, which is about 14 feet above the present floor. The chamber was probably of two stories. There is a blocked thirteenth-century window on the north. It may be observed in passing that the cell founded in

--82--



ANCHORITES WINDOW, NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE

Plate XXVII : Anchorites Window, Newcastle-upon-tyne

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Gateshead churchyard in 1340 was replaced by a vestry, which retains the name Anchorage.

Staindrop.—Mr. Boyle describes a chamber with an ancient fire-place over the vestry of this church. At the head of the stone newel staircase is a square-headed window of three lights, the mullions of which are cut askew from east to west in order to command the high altar.

Chester-le-Street.—This church has retained what is probably the most complete anchorite's house remaining in England. It is at the west end of the church, on the north side of the tower, partly within and partly beyond the ancient walls. Two of the four rooms, one above the other, have been formed by walling off the western bay of the north aisle. This inner room is about 18 by 10 feet, whilst the two outer rooms are about 10 feet square. The recluse's upper chamber had a hagnoscope [an inside window] commanding [a view of] the altar in the south aisle ; the slit on the church side is only about 10 inches high and 1 or 2 inches wide. The west window consists of a large slab pierced with four rectangular openings and a lancet. Below the floor is a well, which is probably ancient. There appears to have been an outside stairway to the upper story of the outer room, which has a window and a slit aperture. There is no architectural clue to the date of "the ankers house," which is mentioned in the Chantry certificate of 1548. Its subsequent history is told in chapter xiv. The house contains several doors, windows, and recesses, but it has suffered under alterations, and is now used for heating apparatus and lumber. The small upper chamber, once a museum of antiquities, contains a fine sculptured Saxon cross-shaft.

York : All Saints', North Street.—At the west end of the north aisle are the supposed traces of a two-storied cell, which was inhabited by a recluse famous during the reign of Henry VI (p. 35). Both the upper and lower windows command [a view of] the high altar.¹⁵

It may be well to mention certain supposed cells, which have not at present been authenticated by documentary evidence.

Bengeo (Herts) and Chipping Ongar (Essex).—These

--83--

"ankerholds" were investigated by Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite and Mr. Dewick.¹⁶ In both cases openings were found in the north walls, and above them holes which might have held the timbers supporting a lean-to building. At Chipping Ongar traces of a shuttered lancet window were discovered.

Letherhead (Surrey).—The foundations of a chamber on the north side of the chancel were excavated by Mr. Johnston, and were described and illustrated in the *Surrey Archeological Collections* (XX).

Compton.—Another Surrey church has a chamber annexed to it on the south side. A narrow window communicates with the churchyard, but the outer doorway is blocked. The arch of the inner doorway, leading into the church, springs from the capital of the sanctuary arch. The hagnoscope [inner window], deeply splayed, is so close to the high altar as to be over the aumbry [cupboard] adjoining the piscina ; it is cruciform, of graceful and uncommon design.

Michaelstow (Cornwall).—On the north side of the chancel are traces of a cell. About 4 feet 8 inches from the floor is a diamond-shaped stone, pierced with a quatrefoil aperture.¹⁷

Traces of the anchorage, then, may reasonably be sought near the chancel. It might be an upper room, but a chamber in the tower or over the porch was a most unlikely abode for the recluse. Since the term “leper’s window” has become discredited, there is a tendency with some to describe any inexplicable low-side window as an “anchorite’s squint”. It is well to bear in mind that even where a habitable room exists, with fire-place, seat, or book-desk, it may have been a sacristy or a priest’s lodging. There is abundant opportunity for research on this subject, and it is much to be desired that architects should follow up the clues supplied by records.

--84--

Footnotes ~

1. For genealogy see *Staffs. Coll.*, N.S., IX. 264.
2. Higden, *Polychron.*, J. Tevisa (Rolls S. 41), VII. 245.
3. See Appendix. The vision of the Eynsham monk concerns a recluse, possibly at St. Thomas’s.
4. F. Devon, *Issues of Exchequer*, 395, cf. 160.
5. P.R.O. Duc. Lanc. Accounts (Various) Bdle. 27, No. 3 ; Lanc. Bk. 79.
6. L. Holstenius, *Codex Reg.*, II. 464-600.
7. Ducange, *Glossarium*, “Inclusagium”.
8. In the Norwich Museum is preserved an old oak window frame, about 2 feet square, with iron bars. It was found in the south wall of the Cathedral (choir), and may possibly have communicated with a cell [per Mr. F. Johnson][sic].
9. Bodl. MS. 423, f. 186, 186 b (cf. *Informacio*, cap. XI. in *Englishe Studien*, VII. 315-6) ; *Regula*, cap. XXXIV., XXXVIII.
10. Since going to press Canon Wordsworth sends an extract dated 1397. *Indulgencia pro Edmundo Artur, anchorita* “capelle B. Marie vocat’ le Bowe infra scalare cimiterii ecclesie conventualis de Shireburn”. *Reg. Metford*, f. cxxi. b.
11. The charnel vault under the courtyard, near the Deanery gate.
12. The cells at Droitwich (p. 77), and Winterton (p. 92) had enclosures (*clausura*).
- [13.] The decision to build the anchorage on the north side of the church may have more to do with the fact that the church or monastery grave yard was usually on the north side. The Anchorite, being symbolically dead to the world, might logically choose this side for her enclosure.]
14. *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, XLII, 176-7 ; *Arch Journ.*, LVIII, 66-8.
15. The lower window was carefully opened out by the Rector an Miss M. Leaf, 1909.
16. *Arch. Journ.* XLIV, 26-9 ; XLV, 284-7, with plates.
17. J.C. Cox, *County Churches*.

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