

LIONEL GREEN has been considering the layout of the early work at Merton priory.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Question. Where is a foot only $11\frac{11}{16}$ inches? Answer. At Merton priory.

Early 12th-century buildings in England were often set out in Norman feet, which were smaller than imperial feet. This is the same size as this A4 paper you are now reading, that is 297mm.

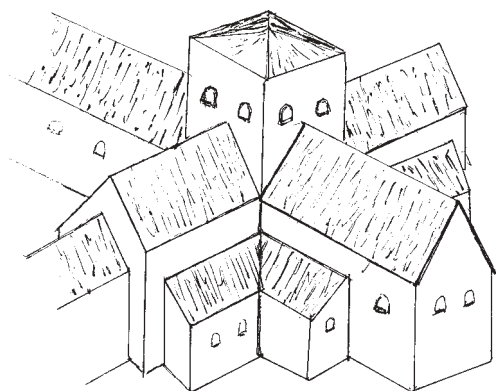
It would appear that Merton priory was measured in Norman feet, with a layout consisting of squares of 40 Norman feet, or roughly 12 metres. The master-mason must have set out on the ground a simple grid of lines which determined where the walls were to be built.

I outlined this proposition in an article written 30 years ago and published in volume 71 of Surrey Archaeological Society's *Collections*.¹ Since that time extensive archaeological excavations by the Museum of London Archaeological Services and others have confirmed the building foundations of the church, and the use of Norman feet.

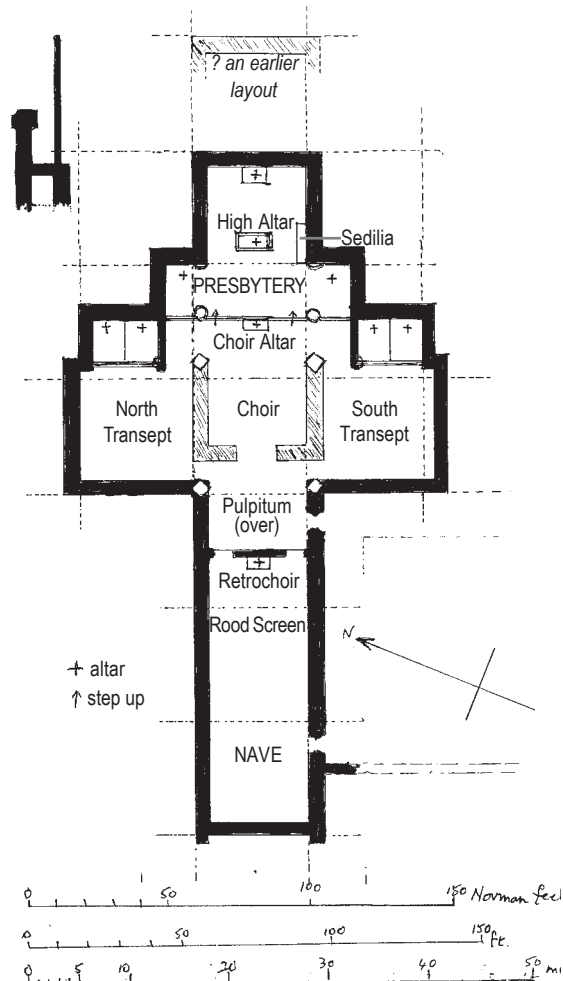
The plan suggests a square-ended chancel or presbytery with short aisles on either side. There were transepts north and south, and the choir was probably at the crossing. The nave had no aisles. This follows the layout of many Augustinian priory churches of the period.

Measurements were from one wall face to another face on the same side. That is, north side to another north side, or east side to another east side. They were not centre to centre, although it resulted in the same measurement. The mason set out the first line along the axis east to west, followed by another set out at right angles, corresponding to the east wall of the transepts.²

In March 1125 Gilbert the sheriff, founder of the priory, laid the first stone of the church. Footings prepared before the ceremonial laying suggest that building preparations began in the previous summer. Unfortunately Gilbert died only four months later in 1125, and, without the founder's support, work was hindered. To some, the project was too costly and too ambitious, and work was destroyed "except part of the front and the foundations, where the sheriff had laid the first stone and the prior had set the second stone".³ The founder would have had a say in the design because he was providing the resources. Thereafter the canons were free to build, alter, pull down or rebuild as inclination prompted and means allowed. This was not unusual.



Conjectural perspective view of Merton priory church from the south-east (1130-1154)



*Plan of Merton priory
Twelfth-century layout in squares of 40 Norman feet*

The first stone church was completed in the early 1130s, for the record says: "Finally after fifteen years, the monastic structures were peacefully constructed with the aid of the faithful at different times according to their will and means".⁴

It will be noted that foundations exist to the east of the church, which are within the 40-foot grid. Could this have been the site of the east front built by Gilbert and the first canons?

This design would have been based on the previous timber church, with a square-ended termination and a gabled roof, which was probably covered with wooden shingles.

On both sides of the presbytery was a short aisle which provided additional side chapels, and assisted with the

Sunday processions around the high altar. The windows were small and admitted little light, but above the high-arched crossing was a 'lantern tower' which gave additional downward light with a lofty view upwards. From the outside it gave rise to a pleasurable feature.

Dover priory

In 1131 archbishop Corbeil, a former Augustinian canon, began to build a new church of St Martin at a location outside the town of Dover, intending it to be for the institution of canons regular. It was a sumptuous structure built of creamy-yellow Caen limestone, and Henry I granted Corbeil a quarry at Caen, Normandy, which also took the name of St Martin. The stone could be transported by barge from Caen, on the river Orne, across the Channel to Dover.

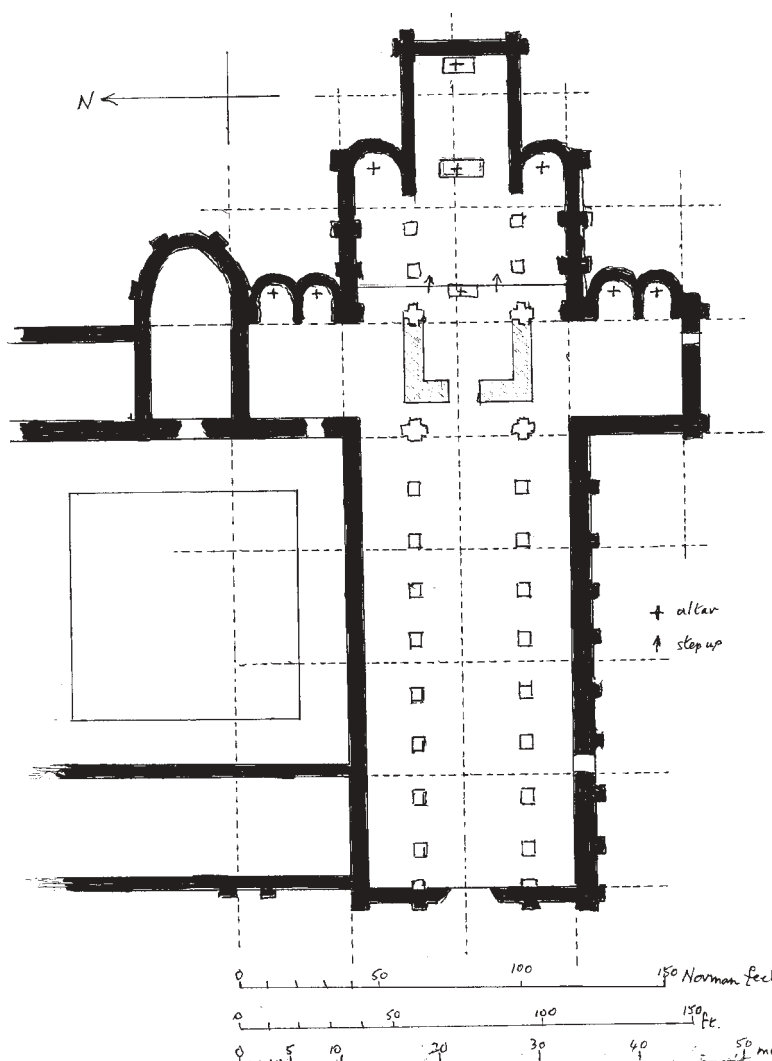
In 1123 archbishop Corbeil requested canons from Merton to assist in the foundation of St Gregory's priory at Canterbury and would have known about Gilbert's plans at Merton. The archbishop's new priory at Dover was similar in style, with a square-ended eastern termination, and was set out within a grid of 40 Norman feet. It differed in that the side chapels contained eastern apses for the altars, and the nave had aisles. The cloister and associated buildings were to the north.

By 1135 the 'new work' at Dover had been completed, and the archbishop requested canons from Merton to be introduced, to follow the rule of St Augustine. They were duly inducted early in 1136, but the sub-prior of Canterbury protested that the church belonged to his monastery. The bishops who had inducted the canons then asked them to return home to Merton, whilst they sought guidance. Dover priory thereafter followed the Benedictine tradition.⁵

The design of a monastic church had to meet requirements for daily worship, with choir stalls where the regular canonical 'hours' could be sung, chapels for celebrating mass, and space for liturgical processions. All canons were priests, and as masses had to be said by each priest between the hours of daybreak and noon, at least ten side altars would have been required for a community of about 30 canons.

Processions were a form of worship with singing of joyful hymns and psalms to show respect to the Almighty. They also enabled the canons to have exercise and a change in routine. They began at the west end of the nave and the station made at the rood screen. The brethren processed either side of the nave altar into the retrochoir, and reunited to enter the choir under the pulpitum.⁶ All continued to the high altar, where each bowed in turn, and returned to the choir stalls.

Between the high altar and the choir stalls was the choir altar, which was used for the morrow mass at about 9.00 am in the summer months. Space in front of the high altar was provided for prostrations.



*Priory of St Mary and St Martin, Dover
Built 1131-1135 for canons from Merton priory but claimed as
belonging to the monastery of Canterbury
Layout within a grid of 40 Norman feet (11.911 metres)*

1 L Green *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 71 (1977) pp.95-100

2 The setting-out of the monastic plan would have been prepared on plaster of Paris (partly dehydrated gypsum) floors near the workshops. Foundations discovered at Merton north of the high altar may be of the tracing house.

3 M L Colker *Studia Monastica* 12 (1970) pp.245, 263

4 *Ibid.* p.251; A Heales *Records of Merton Priory* 1898 pp.3, 4

5 For further information on the Dover episode see L Green *Daughter Houses of Merton Priory* MHS (2002) pp 24, 26.

6 The siting of church furniture (choir stalls, rood screen etc.) in the attached plans are the author's suppositions.