Minchery Farm, Littlemore[1]

By W. A. Pantin

THE Priory of St. Nicholas, Littlemore, commonly known as the Minchery (from the Old English 'mynecu' or 'minschen', a nun), was a small house of Benedictine nuns, founded in the reign of Stephen by Robert de Sandford.[2] It was never a large house so far as we know ; in 1445 there were a prioress and six nuns and three lay boarders ; in 1517 a prioress and five nuns.[3] The priory was suppressed by Cardinal Wolsey in 1525, and part of the buildings subsequently became a farmhouse. There were considerable remains in the early 18th century, as described by Hearne,[4] but the only part of the priory buildings now remaining above ground is a long building about 77 feet long by 21 feet wide internally, lying north and south, which was until recently occupied as a farmhouse (PLS. VII, VIII ; plan, FIG. 7 ; sections, FIG. 8). This clearly represents the eastern range of the cloister garth, and would have contained the dormitory on the first floor, and the chapter house and other rooms on the ground floor. It was probably rebuilt in the middle or second half of the 15th century, as at a visitation in 1445 the dormitory was described as so ruinous that the nuns were afraid to sleep there.[5] Of the 15th century work the most notable remains are in the east wall : two windows (PL. VIIIC, 9 and 12 on plan) and a moulded plinth on the ground floor, and a series of five small windows at regular intervals on the first floor (PLS. VIIIA and B, 22–26 on plan). These windows would have lit the dormitory ; such windows at regular intervals were a characteristic feature of monastic dormitories, each window lighting a bed-space or cell. The dormitory at Littlemore may have been divided into a series of cells or cubicles when it was rebuilt in the 15th century.[6] At the 1445 visitation it had been complained

[1] Thanks are due to the present occupants, to Mr. P. S. Spokes for photographs, and to the members of the Oxford University Archaeological Society who helped to survey this building in 1956. The plans show the building as it was in 1956 ; since then it has been restored, some modern partitions have been altered or removed, the two northern chimney stacks have been lowered, and an external door made in the southern gable wall.

[2] *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, II, 75. The priory church was being rebuilt in 1245.

[3] *Visitations of Religious houses in the diocese of Lincoln* (1420–49), ed. A. H. Thompson (Lincoln Record Society, 14, 1918), II, 217–8 ; *Visitations in the diocese of Lincoln*, 1517–31, ed. A. H. Thompson (Lincoln Record Society, 37, 1947), III, 8–12 (cited below as *Visitations*).

[4] See below, p. 26.

[5] *Visitations* (1420–39), II, 217–8.

[6] For the development of separate cells or chambers in nunneries, see Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 318 ff ; for examples of the furnishing of such chambers at Minster in Sheppey, see *Archaeologia Cantiana*, VII (1868), 296 ff.

that the nuns were sleeping two in a bed, even the prioress having to share her bed with a nun ;[7] this over-crowding (though normal by lay standards) was perhaps due to the need to make room for the lay boarders, who would be a financial necessity. The rebuilt dormitory would have provided plenty of room. The spacing of the windows suggests that the dormitory contained seven bays, each about 10 to 12 feet wide. The whole of the northern-most bay (about 21 feet by 16 feet) may have been the prioress's room, unless she had a separate lodging in the western range of the cloister ; a visitation record of 1517 refers to the prioress's ' parlour ', which contained her bed.[8] The other six bays of the dormitory could have contained six cells on each side of a central passage, each cell being about 10 by 8 feet. There must have been stairs up from the cloister, but we cannot now trace their position. Nor can we trace the original internal divisions of the ground floor ; this presumably

[7] *Visitations* (1420–39), II, 217–8.
[8] *Visitations* (1517–31), III, 9.

KEY TO PLANS OPPOSITE

(1) Door with wooden lintel (18th/19th cent.).

(2) Three-light window with wooden frame (18th/19th cent.).

(3) Two-light window with segmental head (18th/19th cent.).

(4) Door with four-centred arch, stop chamfer moulding and drip mould (*c.* 1600).

(5) Modernized window.

(6) Two-light window with ovolo mould and drip mould (*c.* 1600, recut?).

(7) Modernized window.

(8) Blocked window, single-light, with plain chamfer (*c.* 1600).

(9) Two-light window with trefoil head (15th cent.).

(10) Door with four-centred arch, stop chamfer moulding, no drip mould (*c.* 1600).

(11) Two-light window with plain chamfer (19th cent.?).

(12) Two-light window with trefoil (15th cent.).

(13) Position of post, now removed.

(14) Site of former stairs?

(*First floor*)

(15, 16) Two-light windows with segmental heads (18th/19th cent.).

(17) Two-light window with ovolo moulding (*c.* 1600).

(18) Modernized window.

(19) Single-light window with ovolo moulding (*c.* 1600), originally lighting stairs.

(20) Two-light window (*c.* 1600 recut?).

(21) Modernized window.

(22) Single-light window, blocked, with cinquefoil head (15th cent.).

(23)–(25) Single-light windows with cinquefoil heads (15th cent.).

(26) Single-light window with trefoil head (15th cent.).

(27) Four-light window (*c.* 1600).

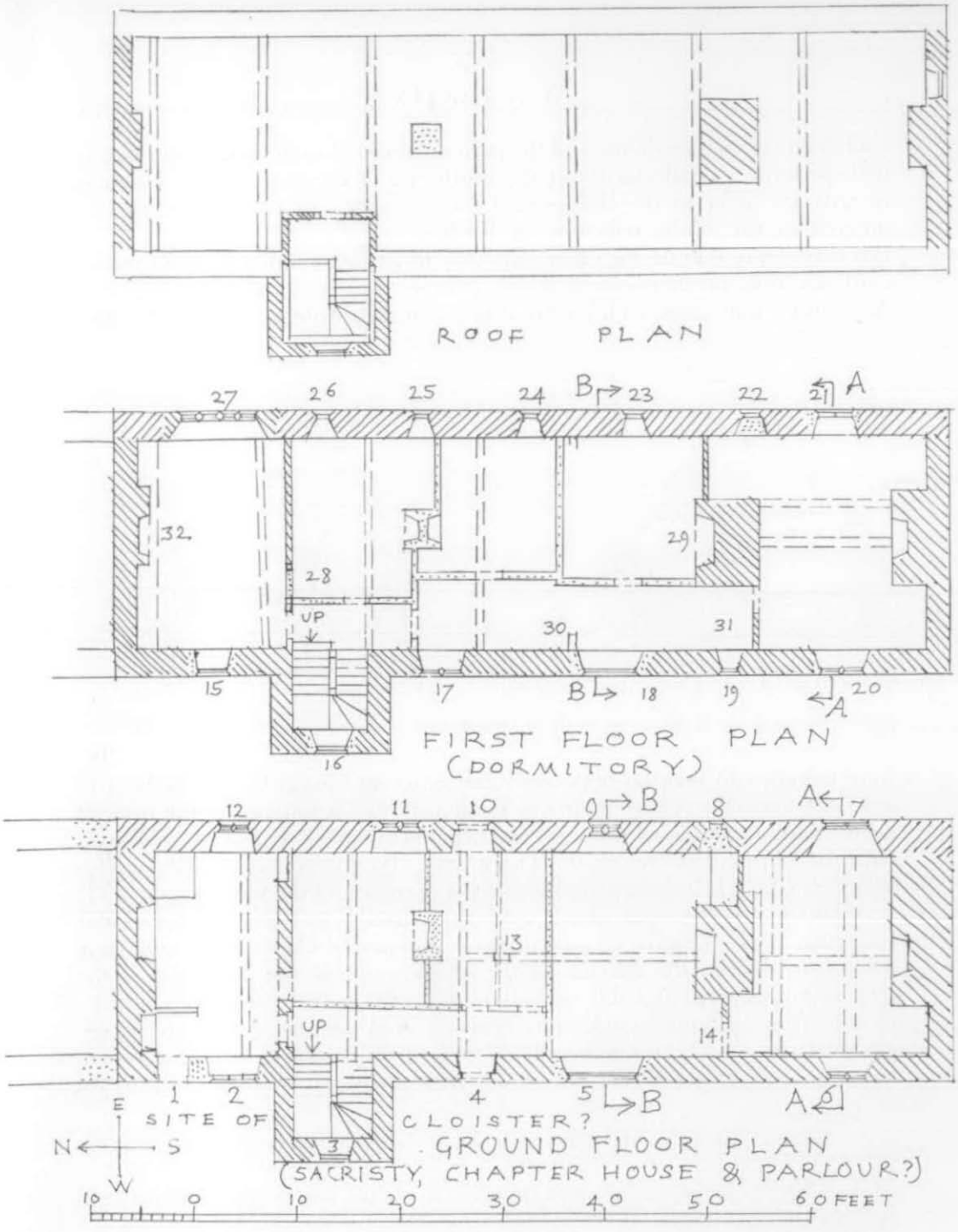
(28) Blocked door (*c.* 1600).

(29) Stone fireplace with four-centred arch and stop chamfer moulding (*c.* 1600).

(30) Wooden corbel or brace supporting tie beam.

(31) Site of former stairs?

(32) Small stone fireplace with four-centred arch (*c.* 1600).



MINCHERY FARM, LITTLEMORE

FIG. 7

contained the chapter-house and the parlour (referred to in visitation records),[9] with perhaps a small sacristy at the north end of the range. The visitation records also refer to the cloister and the refectory ; in 1445 the nuns were ordered to eat in the refectory on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays ;[10] this may imply that on the other days they might use another room (a misericord) set aside for meat-eating, unless perhaps they used the parlour for this. As at other nunneries, children were taken in as boarders ; in 1445 the nuns

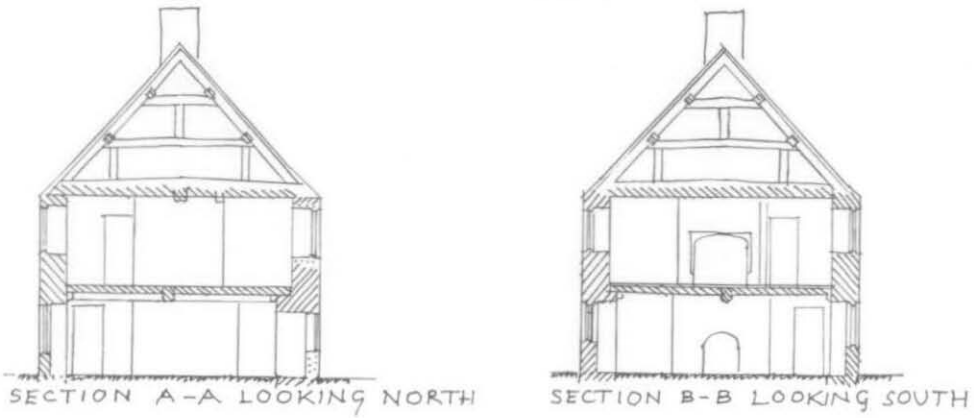


FIG. 8

were enjoined to take no boys over nine years and no girls over twelve ; in 1517–8 a boy of seven or eight was mentioned as accompanying the prioress on her walks, and one of the nuns was accused of romping (*Ludendo et luctando*) with the boys in the cloister.[11] There were also complaints of more serious disorders which help to explain the early suppression of the nunnery.

About 1600 (or soon after), after the building had passed into secular use, there was extensive reconstruction : the west wall, which would have been disfigured by the remains of the cloister and of the abutment of the refectory range, was probably entirely rebuilt ; the staircase wing was added ; new floors and chimney stacks were inserted ; and the roof was reconstructed, except that the tie-beams may go back to the 15th century. Good features of the 1600 reconstruction are the stairs with their carved balusters, newel

[9] *Visitations* (1517–31), III, 11–12.

[10] *Visitations* (1420–39), II, 219. There is no evidence here of a division into several *familiae* or households for meals, as at some other nunneries (cf. E. Power, *op. cit.*, p. 317 f) ; perhaps Littlemore was too small for that.

[11] *Visitations* (1420–39), II, 218 ; (1517–31), III, 10–11 ; for the reception of boarders and pupils at nunneries, see E. Power, *op. cit.*, pp. 262 ff.

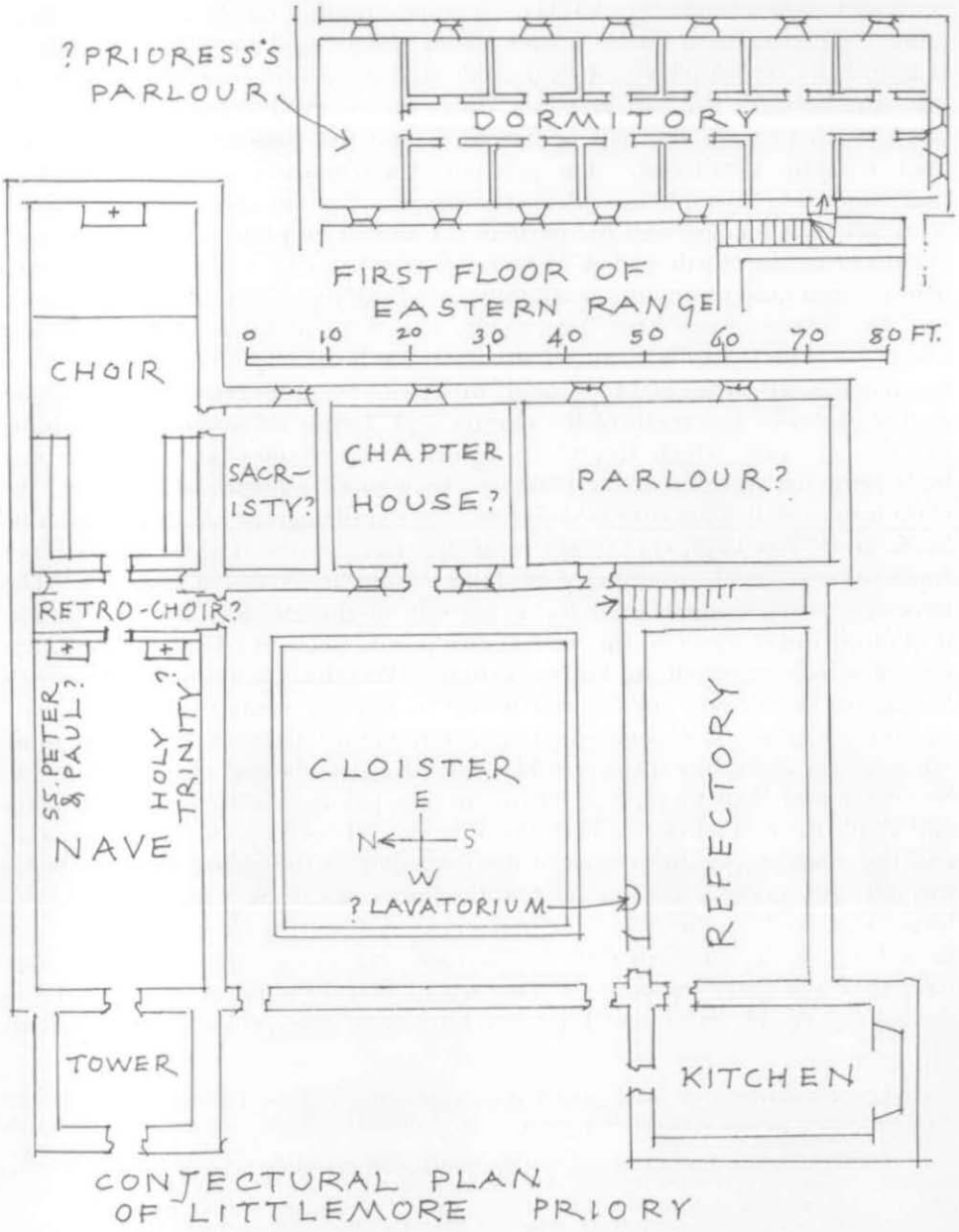

? PRIORESS'S PARLOUR
DORMITORY
FIRST FLOOR OF EASTERN RANGE
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 FT.
CHOIR
SACR-ISTY?
CHAPTER HOUSE?
PARLOUR?
RETRO-CHOIR?
SS. PETER & PAUL?
HOLY TRINITY?
NAVE
CLOISTER
E
N
S
W
? LAVATORIUM
REFECTORY
TOWER
KITCHEN
CONJECTURAL PLAN OF LITTLEMORE PRIORY

FIG. 9

posts and arched heads (PL. VIIID) ; a stone fireplace on the first floor (29 on plan) ; the two main doors (4 and 10 on plan) ; and some of the windows (e.g. 6, 8, 17, 19 on plan). It is possible that there was some kind of ' screens passage ' between the east and west doors on the ground floor (4 and 10 on plan), with perhaps the hall to the south and the parlour beyond, and the kitchen at the north end. The position of a window (19 on plan) suggests that there was a small secondary staircase in the thickness of the chimney stack between the hall and the parlour (14 and 31 on plan). There is a short extension to the north end of the range, which seems to have no medieval features and may represent an addition or rebuilding of the 18th century.

Until excavations have been made, it is difficult to say much definitely about the priory plan as a whole, though something may be conjectured from surviving descriptions of other small nunneries.[12] The priory church seems to have been to the north of the cloister and dormitory range ; the building to the north east, which Hearne identified as the chapter-house, may in fact have been the remains of the choir.[13] In a small nunnery of this type, the church may well have consisted simply of a parallelogram about 21 feet wide by 60 to 80 feet long, containing choir and nave, without aisles and without transepts ; a small community of nuns would need few side-altars. The refectory was presumably on the south side of the cloister, abutting on the dormitory range ; and to the west of this was the convent kitchen, the chimney of which survived in Hearne's time. Whether there was a prioress's lodging or guest-house on the west of the cloister, we cannot tell.

The legacies of Thomas Mokking, a London citizen, 1427–8, add some information about the priory.[14] He desired to be buried in the chapel of SS. Peter and Paul there, and left money for paving the chapel of SS. Peter and Paul, the chapel of the Holy Trinity, the retro-choir, the chapter house, and the cloister ; for the repair of the *lavatorium* in the cloister (no doubt by the refectory door) ; and for oil for the lamps before St. Lawrence and the high altar, and in the choir and dormitory. The two chapels named may have been in the nave, in front of the rood screen, and the retro-chair may have been the space between the rood screen and the choir screen (a space so named by W. H. St. John Hope) ;[15] Littlemore was probably too small to

[12] Cf. the description of twelve small Yorkshire priories in *Yorkshire Arch. Journal*, IX (1885–6) 196 ff, 321 ff ; the cloisters averaged 60 feet square, the churches 60 to 80 feet long, the choirs occupying a half to two-thirds of the length.

[13] On the conjectural plan I have shown the church abutting on the north end of the surviving dormitory range ; it is possible however that the latter may have formerly extended a bay or two further north, in which case the church would have lain a corresponding distance further north.

[14] *Some Oxfordshire wills*, ed. J. R. H. Weaver (Oxfordshire Record Society, 39, 1958), pp. 13–4.

[15] *Archaeologia*, 68, 1916–7, pp. 68–70.

have had a retro-choir in the other sense of a space east of the high altar reached by ambulatories.

After its suppression, the priory passed to Cardinal College and then, after several rapid changes, it came *c.* 1549–50 to the Powell family, who held it until the 18th century. The Powells did not live at the Minchery, as they had another, larger house nearby at the Preceptory at Sandford-on-Thames ; they evidently let the Minchery to tenants.[16] But it was perhaps the Powells rather than their tenants who were responsible for the considerable reconstruction of the house *c.* 1600, already mentioned.

Littlemore Priory is specially interesting because it apparently preserves the dormitory of a small nunnery, a feature which comparatively rarely survives in religious houses ; it was more commonly the lodgings of the superior or the guest-house, often situated in a western range of the cloister, which were likely to survive, being most easily adaptable to domestic purposes after the Dissolution.[17] Littlemore was a very small house, and if, as has been suggested, the prioress's chamber or ' parlour ' was in the dormitory, it may be that there was no separate prioress's lodging in a western range, and this might explain the preservation and adaptation of the dormitory range.

Littlemore raises the general question of the planning of very small priories and cells, whether of monks or nuns, which needs more study. When small priories were founded in the 12th century, it was evidently hoped that they would grow into full-sized communities, and they were therefore provided with the standard monastic lay-out of cloister, refectory, dormitory, and so forth. This often proved over-optimistic, the houses sometimes having six inmates or less, for whom the normal claustral lay-out, with a cloister, say, 60 feet square, a dormitory or refectory 60 feet or more long, must have been unsuitable and uneconomic ; to have a handful of inmates rattling about in a comparatively large and decaying building must have been demoralizing, just as the enlargements and improvements of a flourishing home would be encouraging. The realistic step for a very small community would have been to adopt a more domestic type of plan, with hall, kitchen, chambers and chapel, like a small manor-house, and there is some evidence that this was sometimes done in small cells, alien priories and granges ; a good example is Salmestone Grange,

[16] Edmund Powell in 1592 bequeathed to his daughter Catherine, for her life, the rent coming from the ' howse and scite of the mynchery ', at that time let to Herman Smith for £16 a year ; other lands belonging to the Minchery were left to his son Edmund Powell, being late in the occupation of John Atherton at a rent of £80 a year (Bodleian, MS. Wills. Oxon. 50/1/69). Herman Smith, the occupant of the Minchery, was quite a substantial yeoman, leaving goods worth £94 7*s.* 4*d.* on his death in 1602 (MS. Wills. Oxon. 193, fo. 193v.). The Powells were a Recusant family ; cf. B. Stapleton, *A History of the post-Reformation Catholic Missions in Oxfordshire* (London, 1906), pp. 198–202.

[17] Cf. J. C. Dickinson, ' The buildings of the English Austin Canons after the Dissolution of the Monasteries ', *Journal of Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, III ser., XXXI (1968) 60 ff, esp. pp. 69–71 ; cf. p. 72, on the rarity of an eastern range being adopted.

a dependency of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, and the alien priories of Ogbourne, Steventon, Wilsford and Minster Lovell.[18] Finchale Priory, where the visiting monks on holiday from Durham lived in the prior's house, represents a half-way step towards this domestic plan. Similarly small communities of chantry priests were sometimes accommodated in a building planned like a manor house (as at Stoke-sub-Hamdon, Mere and Ilminster), rather than in the quadrangle plan favoured by larger colleges of chantry priests (like Thoresby College, King's Lynn). But it seems unlikely that any nunnery was sufficiently bold deliberately to adopt a domestic rather than a claustral plan.

APPENDIX

Description of the Minchery by Thomas Hearne, in *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury* (Oxford, 1722), pp. xvii–xxi.[19] (See PL. VIIB.)

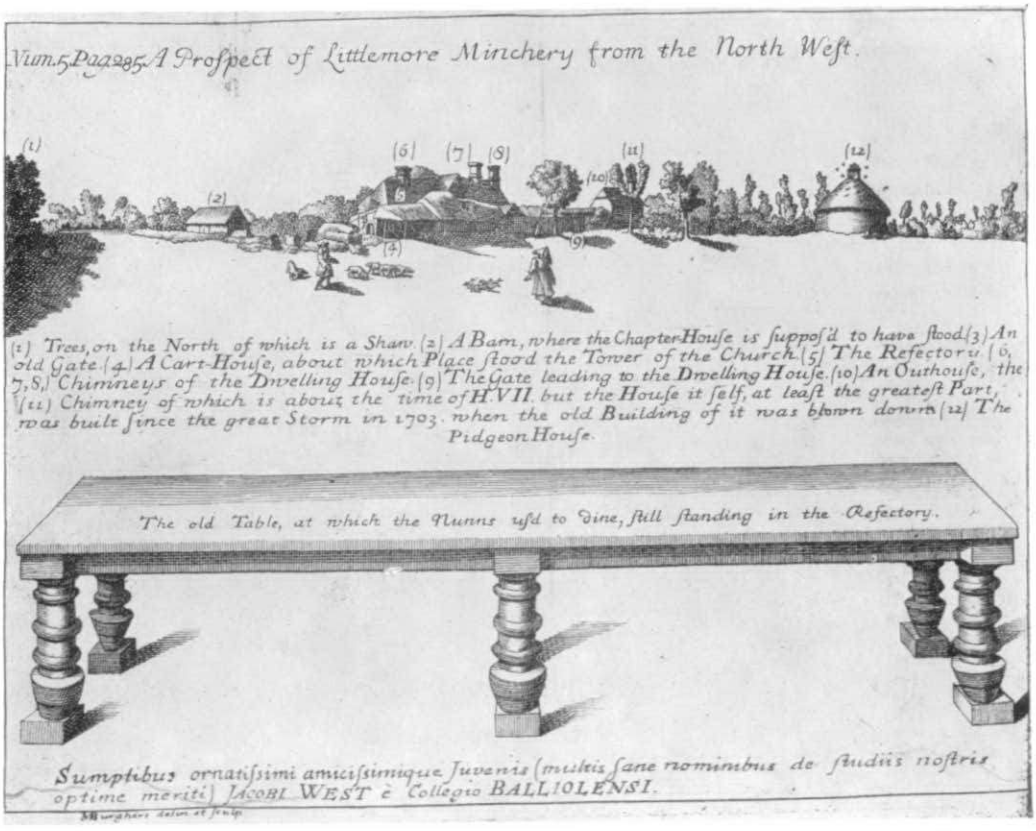
> Here I have several Times seen the Ruins of many Buildings, of which the Church or Chapell (now quite destroy'd) was part. The Refectory (commonly called the Hall)[20] in the North Part of it is still standing, tho' much altered, and divided now into more than one Room. In the said Refectory or Hall is a strange old Table (about 13 foot 10 inches in Length, and about two Foot 8 inches in Breadth) now almost decay'd, which was certainly the Table that the Nunns us'd to dine at in common, with the Prioress . . . I am told that this Table is still us'd now and then at Harvest-Homes and Sheep-Shearings, and that many Coffins and Bones have been found on the North (and North-West) Side of the House . . . one Part of the North End of the House is turn'd into a Stable. On the West Side of the whole Building is a distinct House, that hath a strange odd Chimney ; but this (all but the Chimney, which seems to be of the Age of Henry VII) is of a late Erection (and was not long since a Dary House) being built out of some of the old Ruins, the Nunnery Kitchen having been here in old Time, as the Pidgeon House, still more Westerly, was built out of other Ruins. There is a Barn on the North East end of the House, at a little Distance from it, in which I have been inform'd Coffins have been dug up. This is also a late Building (made out of other Ruins) but I believe the Chapter-House stood in the very same Place. However this may be, without doubt here was a Building that joyned to the Church.

[18] Cf. M. M. Morgan, ' Inventories of three small alien priories ', *Journal of Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, III, ser., IV (1939), 141–9 ; *Oxoniensia*, II (1937), 103 ff (Minster Lovell).

[19] This account seems to be based on Hearne's visit to Littlemore in April 1722, when Anthony Yates was farmer ; *Hearne's Collections*, Oxford Hist. Soc., 48 (1906), VIII, 351–3 ; cf. also Anthony Wood's description in 1661, *Wood's Life and Times*, Oxford Hist. Soc., 19 (1891), I, 404.

[20] This identification with the refectory seems mistaken ; it is more likely to represent the chapter house or parlour. Wood (loc. cit.) calls it the common hall. The table, to judge from Hearne's illustration, looks post-dissolution.

A : Minchery Farm, Littlemore : Dormitory range, from the east, showing the windows of the cells on the first floor (22–26 on plan). *Photo : P. S. Spokes*



B : Minchery Farm, Littlemore : view from the north-west, in 1722, by M. Burghers (from Thomas Hearne, *The History and Antiquities of Glastonbury*, Oxford, 1722).

A, B : Minchery Farm, Littlemore : 15th-century windows of the cells in the dormitory (23, 24 on plan). *Photo : P. S. Spokes*

C : Minchery Farm, Littlemore : 15th-century two-light window on ground floor of dormitory range (12 on plan). *Photo : P. S. Spokes*

D : Minchery Farm, Littlemore : 17th-century staircase on the west side, at first floor level. *Photo : P. S. Spokes*