

Christ Church, Priory House: Discoveries in St. Frideswide's Dormitory

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SUMMARY

In the construction of a new staircase in Priory House the Norman door to the cloister was uncovered together with the steps leading up to the dormitory, which was raised some 2 m. above the present level of the cloister, on a stone vault. Fragments of a similar vault survive at the S. end of the dormitory. The interior of the door showed signs of burning. No features of the post-fire dormitory or any 13th-century work was observed, though some re-used rafters in the upper floors may indicate a roofing in the 13th century, and a possible roof-line was observed. In the 15th century, probably when the cloister was rebuilt by Robert Sherborne c.1489, the present front door to Priory House was made, with a dog-leg stair leading up to the dormitory, having a tiled landing and covered with a small area of vaulting. At the same time an aperture to the cloister was made, with a small window or ventilator. After the Dissolution, the dormitory was converted into a canon's lodging and the present choir practice room was made, apparently by William Tresham in the years before 1560. Traces of wall-paintings indicate that the dog-leg stair was filled in (the rubble included a fragment of St. Frideswide's shrine), whilst another stair was made to the room over the E. cloister walk. These rooms, which have fireplaces, were later used as the muniment room, and from below the floorboards came a 13th-century charter and an account roll of Osney Abbey.

The E. range of the cloister next to the chapter-house, known as Priory House and now the lodging of the Canon of the second stall, is the site of the monastic dormitory (and perhaps the Prior's house). In 1986/7 the attics over the chapter-house were detached from the remainder of Priory House and converted to Cathedral offices, for which purpose a new stair was built to give access to them from a lobby behind the front door of Priory House in the cloister. The stair rises through the dormitory undercroft, the choir practice room (the room S. of the chapter-house, which has now been truncated), and two small rooms on the upper floors. The insertion of the new stair in December 1986 necessitated the removal of panelling and flooring from the W. end of the choir practice room and the upper rooms. A number of discoveries were made which throw light on the entrance to the medieval dormitory of the Augustinian Priory of St. Frideswide's; some of the features that were revealed have been left open for inspection in the completed staircase.¹

¹The recording work was undertaken independently by the author, with the encouragement of the architect, Mr. David Scroggie of Peter Bosanquet and John Perryman Associates, whose surveys have been used for some of the figures. The assistance of the contractors, the Oxford Archaeological Unit and Oxfordshire Museum Services is gratefully acknowledged.

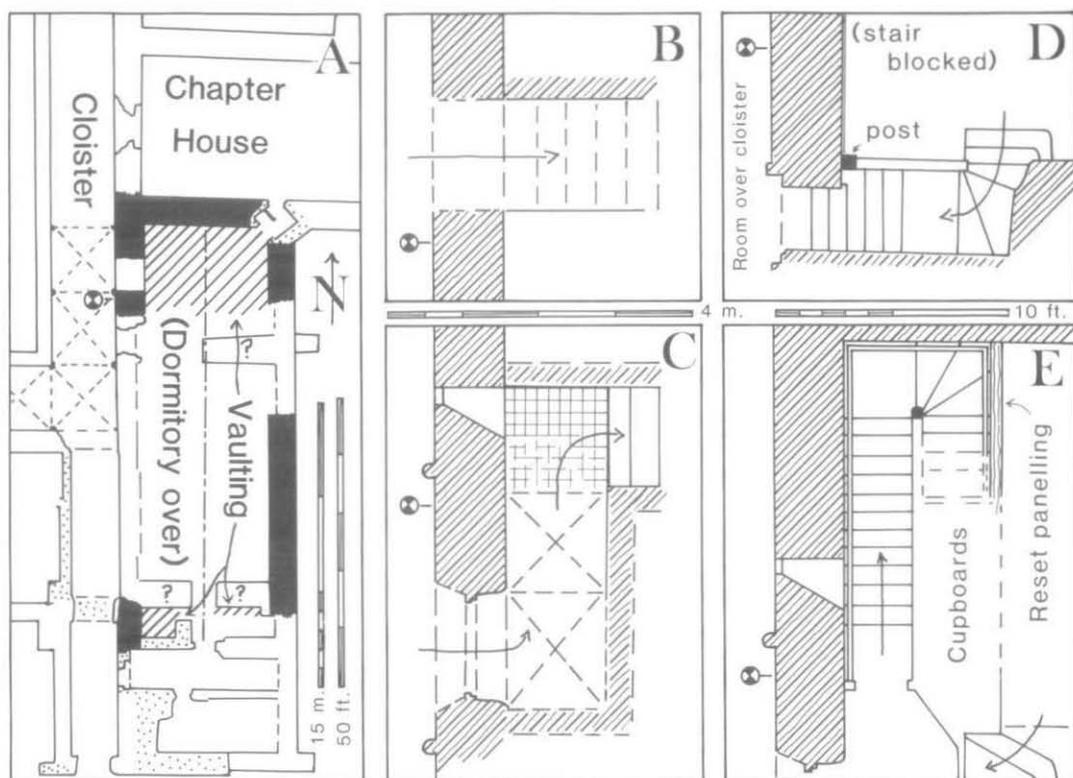


Fig. 77. Priory House (cloister E. range): A: Plan at ground level showing Romanesque walls and vaulting (note the position of the symbol shown in the same place on plans B to E.). B: 12th-century door and stair to dormitory. C: 15th-century door and stair. D: 16th-century stair to rooms over cloister. E: New stair to Cathedral offices.

THE NORMAN DORMITORY (Fig. 77)

Beneath the panelling on the W. wall of the choir practice room a round-headed arch was immediately visible (Fig. 79), with plain ashlar voussoirs set below an outer arch of rubble blocks set on end. These last, and the rest of the wall above and to the N., were all set in a brown mortar, and must have been original Norman walling; the N. wall of the room was of a different character, and perhaps belonged to the 13th-century rebuilding of the chapter-house.

A chamfer stop below the springing of the arch on the N. side continued as a plain chamfer down the door-jamb and ended in a plaster cast of a stop, the stone behind it having been removed. This plaster continued down to a level 2.98 m. below the soffit of the arch, where a single flat stone marked the level of the threshold (either as the actual step, or the base on which the step lay). This level was some 0.9 m. below the floor level of the room (i.e. below the crown of the stone vault), and some 1.1 m. above the present level of the E. cloister walk (Fig. 80).

The plastered reveal of the doorway also continued eastwards into the room as an ashlar wall (0.37 m. wide), extending as far as the excavations uncovered it (about 2 m.;

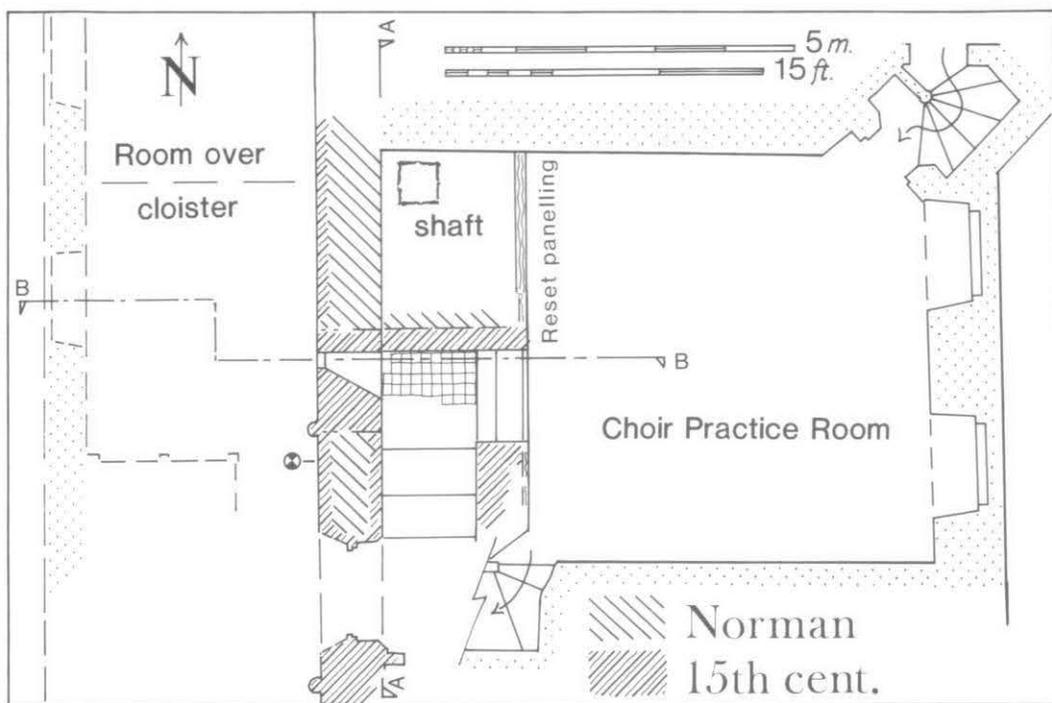


Fig. 78. Priory House: plan of features in choir practice room and section lines of Fig. 80.

Figs. 77B and 78). This wall presumably formed the N. side of the stair as it rose from the cloister up over the springing of the vault (the dormitory undercroft, aligned N.-S. along the range). Nothing else remained of Norman work here, and although the threshold level continued southwards for a short distance as a layer of brown gravel over the rubble footings and beneath later rubble blocking, the S. jamb of the door was removed by later works.

The arch itself was burnt red, like the exterior of the chapter-house door, but where the southern voussoir was cut back the colour did not penetrate very deep into the stone. This was no doubt a relic of the burning of the Priory in 1190, and the door must therefore pre-date that event. This entrance must have been the day stair (perhaps the only access) to the canons' dormitory.

In the N.W. corner of the room a stone-lined shaft descended between the cloister wall and the vault (Figs. 78 and 80). It was perhaps connected with a drain, and may have been a latrine, or a well used by the builders.²

At second-floor level a short sloping line of mortar on the chapter-house wall may have represented the original line of the dormitory roof on the W. side, whilst some of the floor joists at this level had mortices for notch-lap joints, indicating their former use as rafters. Samples from two of these were taken for dating by dendrochronology, one of them giving a tentative date about the middle of the 13th century.³

² The details of this feature were kindly supplied by David Scroggie.

³ See more fully in 'The Roof Carpentry of Oxford Cathedral', below p. 199.

The vault below the choir practice room at the N. end of Priory House is only the northern extremity of a vault that must have extended for the full length of the dormitory (Figs. 77A and 80). The middle section has been removed for the entrance hall and stair to Priory House, and further to the S. the 'Priory Room' is ceiled with timber joists, perhaps of 16th-century date. However, at the S.W. end of the Priory room is a small cupboard which contains a portion of vaulting, and in the cross wall of the bathroom opposite is the curved outline of its continuation to the east (Fig. 77A). The dated R.C.H.M. plan shows the thick cross-wall immediately to the N. of this vault as being 13th century, but on what evidence is not clear.⁴ It may be that the vault marks the S. end of the dormitory range, judging by the quoins by the side of the later door in the passage wall outside. The relationship of the vault to the wall on either side of it does not indicate any clear sequence of construction. The known extent of the vault would make the dormitory cover the width of the S. cloister range (which was rebuilt in the 15th century), but it may have continued further to the S.

At the N. end, below the choir practice room, the vault is plastered and whitewashed, with traces of masonry lines in red paint, similar to the decoration in the chapter-house. The fragment at the S. end has recently been stripped of plaster.

LATE-MEDIEVAL ALTERATIONS

The cloisters were rebuilt at the very end of the 15th century with a stone vault, as a gift from Robert Sherborne, then Dean of St. Paul's and later Bishop of Chichester.⁵ One of the wall-shafts of the new vault in the E. cloister walk blocks the southern side of the Norman door to the dormitory (Figs. 77C and 78), and it was probably shortly before the vault was installed that a new door was built a short distance to the S. (the present front door of Priory House). The door is square-headed, with a hood-mould enclosing a two-centred arch, with bold roll mouldings and $\frac{3}{4}$ hollows running round it. The corbels on the hood-mould have carved portrait heads on them.

Inside this door, the new arrangements made for access to the dormitory were revealed by the uncovering of the internal wallface, and the excavation of the new staircase (Fig. 79). The Norman door was blocked with ashlar, its southern jamb was removed, and a square opening was made in the wall, splayed inwards from a small quatrefoil aperture onto the cloister. Removal of its blocking uncovered whitewashed reveals, and it must have been a light or a ventilator for the stair. The Norman threshold was raised some 0.25 m. with rubble, and a tiled landing made for the new dog-leg stair (Fig. 77C).

The tiles are of standard 13th-century type, with patterns known from elsewhere in the Cathedral.⁶ Their date suggests re-use (or the re-use of an earlier landing), and a partial covering of mortar implies that some other surface was laid over them.

A new wall was also built immediately S. of the Norman E.-W. wall, with ashlar facing (mostly removed) and a rubble fill (Fig. 78). The edge of this wall shows in section where it toothed into the ashlar blocking of the door (Fig. 79).

⁴ R.C.H.M. *Oxford*, plan opp. p. 32.

⁵ *Sussex Arch. Colls.* xxix (1879), 25; S.A. Warner, *Oxford Cathedral* (1924), 169-70; A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, iii (1959), 1685-7. Cf. above, pp. 66, 97-8.

⁶ L. Haberly, *Medieval English Pavingtiles* (1937), Nos. XLIV and XXII. The tile floor was recorded by Brian Durham of the Oxford Archaeological Unit and lifted by Oxfordshire Museum Services.

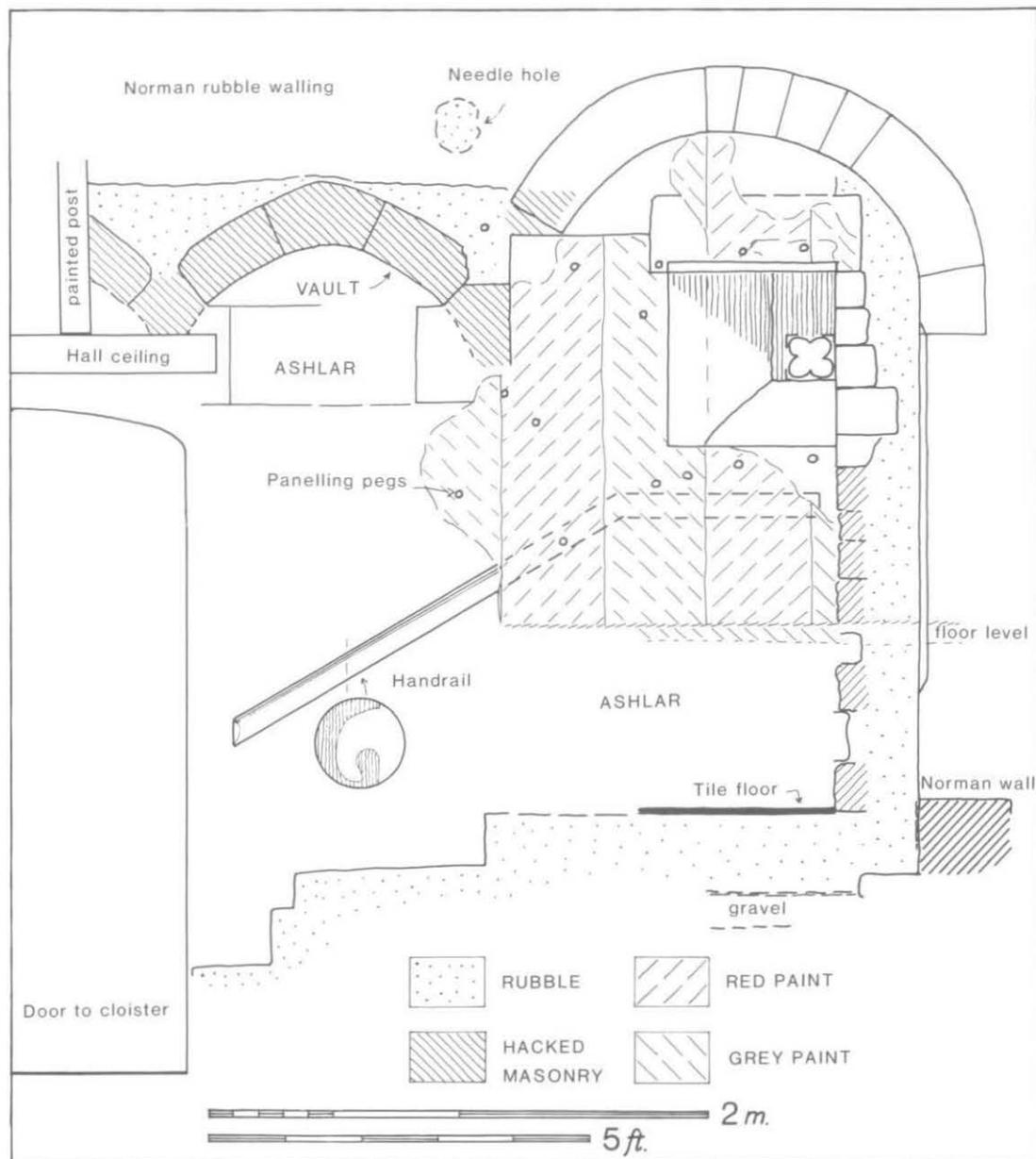


Fig. 79. Priory House: elevation of features uncovered on W. wall of choir practice room.

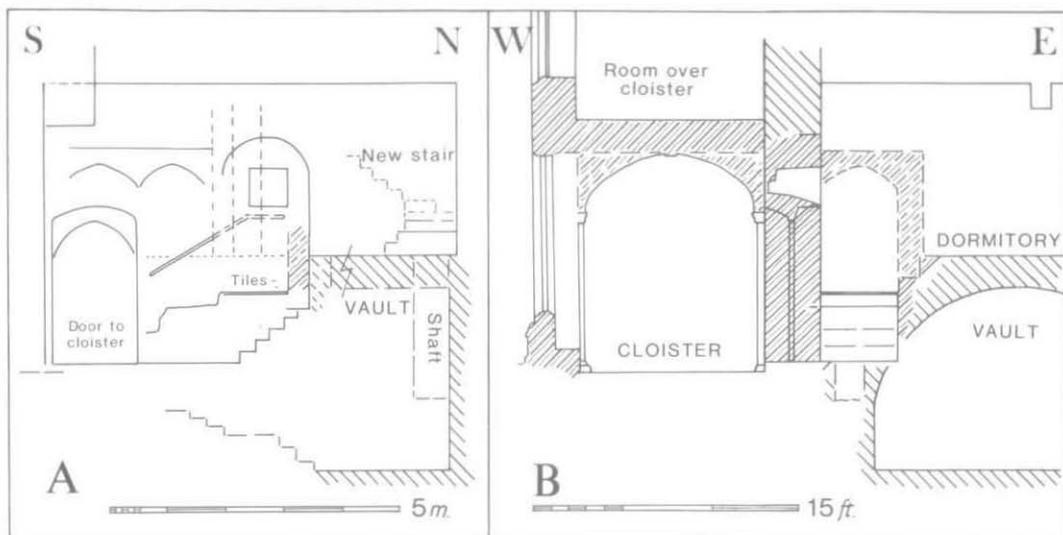


Fig. 80. Priory House: A: Sectional elevation of choir practice room, showing relationship of discoveries to floor-levels of dormitory, vault and cloister. B: section through cloister and choir practice room.

The stairs up from the new entrance did not survive (except for part of one at the bottom), but their general outline was given by the rising base of the ashlar blocking in the W. wall, and by the hollow handrail cut into the ashlar blocking of that wall (Fig. 79). On the return flight to the E., over the vaulting, the stairs themselves had been removed, but the stepped mortar surface on which they lay still survived. Parts of the L-shaped wall on the inner side of the staircase also survived, which gave the width of the stairs (Fig. 78).

A puzzling feature in the W. wall was the fragment of blind arcading immediately to the S. of the Norman arch, at about the level of the top of the splayed opening in the wall (Fig. 79). There was one arch of three voussoirs, resting on symmetrical responds, and the beginning of a second arch to the S. In the spandrels of the arches was a filling of rubble and white mortar, distinct from the Norman walling above (there was also a needle-hole in the wall over the N. respond, from the time of its construction). The surface of the arches and their responds had been hacked back (as had the end of the Norman arch), but the ashlar below them was smooth, and continuous with the ashlar blocking in the rest of the wall.

This feature was at first thought to be a blocked recess, but the character of the masonry suggested that this was unlikely, and that something more substantial had been removed. As John Ashdown observed, this was probably the side of a small two-bay vault covering the stair passage and entrance, with the vaulting later chopped back flush with the wall, and the rough spandrels representing the filling of the vault. The northernmost respond was opposite the corner of the inner wall of the stair, and the estimated position of the southernmost respond would be approximately over the southern jamb of the door to the cloister (Fig. 77C).

Assuming that all these features were contemporary (and the only evidence suggesting otherwise is the date of the tiles), the new entrance to the dormitory would

have been made at the same time as the cloisters were rebuilt, and consisted of a new front door, a vaulted passage and stair turning on a tiled landing, with a small ventilator to the cloister (Figs. 77C and 80B).

POST-MEDIEVAL: THE PAINTED PLASTER

The plaster covering the Norman door (uncovered behind later panelling) was painted with broad painted stripes of red and grey (Fig. 79). This plaster covered all the features which were subsequently uncovered on the wall (the handrail had been filled in), and the paint ceased at the modern floor level, but did continue around the S. side of the room, red and grey stripes being visible on the timber framing next the stair. One post of this framing also had a painted decoration on two sides of it, representing a strapwork cartouche in imitation panelling (Fig. 81), a motif known from other Oxford buildings and perhaps dating to *c.*1600.⁷ The painted timber was either *ex situ*, or was perhaps part of a decorative scheme on painted cloth (there are nail-holes on the back of the post). The stair behind the framing leads up to the room over the E. cloister walk, which contains two fireplaces and is probably of 16th-century date (Figs. 77D and 78). The 15th-century stair up from the cloisters was filled in at the time the room was decorated (if not before), and from the rubble fill came several pieces of moulded stonework, including another fragment from the shrine of St. Frideswide, painted with red and gold (Fig. 29 No. 19).

The ceiling of the room had plain chamfered joists, and a wallplate against the W. wall, integral with the framing in the S. wall. The ceiling of the first-floor room had re-used medieval rafters, mentioned above.

The broad painted stripes on the wall-plaster are similar to those in the much more elaborate scheme recently found in Trinity College, in a room below the Old Library, probably decorated for the first President's Lodgings in the reign of Queen Mary.⁸ The

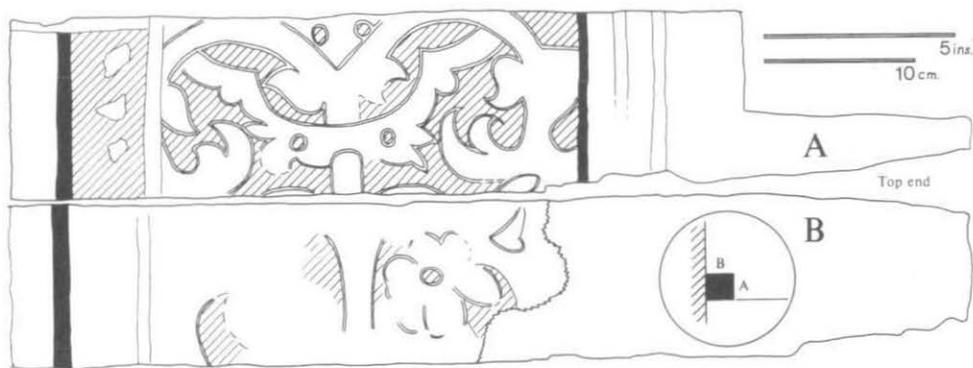


Fig. 81. Priory House: 16th-century painted timber post from S.W. corner of choir practice room.

⁷ Similar paintings have been found at 26 Cornmarket (Zacharias's) and 59-61 Cornmarket; see report on 'The New Inn', forthcoming.

⁸ B. Ward-Perkins, 'Newly Discovered Wall-Paintings', *Trinity College Oxford, Report 1985-86*, Pls. 1-3.

Priory House scheme may date to the time of Canon William Tresham, who is reputed to have made this room.⁹ Interestingly, Tresham was deprived of his canonry in 1560 for Catholic sympathies, and was the one who rebaptized the recast Great Tom as 'Mary'. He is better known as the maker of 'Tresham's Lane', now Blue Boar Street.¹⁰

LATER ALTERATIONS

The Priory House was badly damaged by fire in 1669, and part was apparently blown up to prevent the fire spreading.¹¹ Perhaps this was the occasion for inserting panelling into the room, for at some date holes were made in the plaster and stone for the insertion of wooden pegs to secure panelling (Fig. 79). The panelling, prior to its removal, seemed to be made up to fit the room, possibly as late as the 19th century, though parts of it were much older. That some part of the room was not panelled is indicated by fragments of Gothick wallpaper found near the ceiling in the S.-W. corner by the stair.¹² In about 1880 the access from the newly-restored chapter-house was altered with the insertion of a spiral stair in the N.E. corner into the pre-existing passage; the room was used for chapter meetings before becoming the choir practice room.¹³ The rooms above had partitions added to make passages, the framing of which was simply laid on the floor-joists and may be of 17th- or 18th-century date. That on the second floor will only have been needed when the attic space over the chapter-house was converted to rooms, perhaps about 1600 (the attics are shown on Sampson Strong's portrait of Wolsey, c.1610, Fig. 87).¹⁴

THE ROOMS OVER THE CLOISTER

The stair in the S.W. corner of the choir practice room leads up to the rooms over the cloister walk (Fig. 78). A landing at the top of the stair has doors to the Allstree Library (above the S. cloister walk) and the long room over the E. walk (now used as the music and book store). This has a lean-to roof and plain windows to the cloister, perhaps of 16th-century date. There are two fireplaces in the E. wall, the southern one with a plain chamfered arch of four-centered profile, the northern with moulded jambs and spandrels. The latter has partly been obscured by the wooden vaulting inserted into the cloister by Scott to clear the chapter-house entrance, which raised the floor-level of the central part of the room. Although the room over the S. walk was built in 1612¹⁵ that over the E. walk is probably older, certainly if the stairs leading to it were part of the mid 16th-century alterations to the choir practice room. It was used as part of the college Treasury, where Anthony Wood consulted the College deeds (the N. cloister range was converted in 1772 for a muniment room);¹⁶ in lifting the old floorboards two strays from

⁹ Warner *op. cit.* note 5, 170 & 175.

¹⁰ A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford A.D. 1501 to 1540* (1974), 1501-4; W.G. Hiscock, *A Christ Church Miscellany* (1946), 143.

¹¹ Wood, *Life and Times*, ii (O.H.S. xxi, 1892), 175 (1669).

¹² Cf. A. Wells-Cole, *Historic Paper Hangings from Temple Newsham and other English Houses* (1983), Nos. 39-40.

¹³ Warner *op. cit.* note 5, 175; P. Dearmer, *The Cathedral Church of Oxford* (Bell's Cathedral Series, 1897), 41; the window on the spiral stair is shown on the Oxford Almanack for 1828.

¹⁴ For works of 1600, see Hiscock *op. cit.* note 10, 212.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Wood, *Life and Times*, i (O.H.S. xix, 1891), 286 and ii (O.H.S. xxi, 1892), 112.