

THE EARLY NORMAN CHAPEL AT BALSDEAN

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THE secluded valley of Balsdean is situated on the South Downs about two miles north of Rottingdean. Before 1939 the valley contained two farms, one called Balsdean and the other Norton, both in the parish of Rottingdean. The farm of Balsdean consisted of a late eighteenth-century farmhouse, two cottages, together with its group of farm buildings, and at a little distance from these there stood a building called the Chapel. The buildings at Norton, half a mile north of Balsdean, consisted of a small farmstead. The manor of Balsdean together with its tithes was possessed by Saint Pancras Priory, Lewes, before the end of the twelfth century.

The site of the medieval manor house at Balsdean is at present unknown, since the Georgian farmhouse showed no traces of an earlier building incorporated in its structure. When advertised for sale in 1790, this farmhouse was described as 'recently built.' The east front of this rather pleasant house is shown in Fig. 1. During the occupation of the South Downs by the military after 1939, all the buildings at Balsdean and Norton were demolished. Since 1945 the sites have been cleared of rubble and levelled, thus leaving no trace of these buildings above ground. With the levelled site it was realised that an unusual opportunity offered itself for the excavation of an early chapel.

The history of the chapel commences about 1147 when Earl William de Warenne confirmed the grant of the chapel of Baldesdene

to the Priory of Saint Pancras at Lewes. In a charter of 1121, although Rottingdean church is mentioned, the chapel of Balsdean is not. In 1381 it was described as being annexed to the parish church. It was granted in 1577 to Peter and Edward Grey. Two years afterwards there was written a document whereby the Vicar of Rottingdean was required to say service four times a year in the chapel of the "village" of Balsdean. It is soon after this, presumably, that the chapel ceased to be used as a place of worship. In the visitation report of 1724 by Bishop Bowers, under the heading of Rottingdean, he mentions a "farm called Baseden in which there is an old chappel and chappel' yard and a small parcel of land

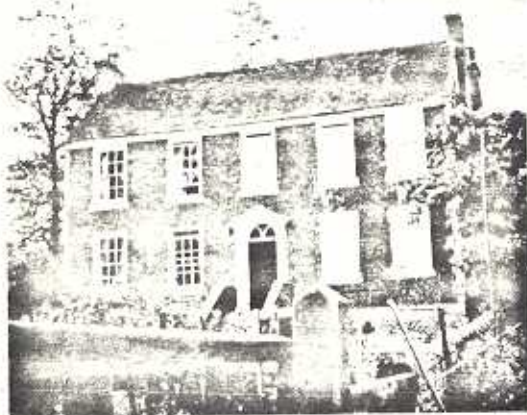


View by Lambert, circa 1775, in the Burrell Collection, British Museum (Fig. 2). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum

leading up to the hill belonging as is said to the Vicar and called the Butt."

The earliest view we have of the chapel (Fig. 2) was drawn by James Lambert about 1775 and shows the nave roofed with thatch, and the ruined chancel walls projecting from the east end. Between these can be seen the chancel arch, and in the north wall a small round-headed window together with a doorway with a flat lintel. By 1780 the chapel had been desecrated and the nave used as a stable. At this time some of the surrounding ground was lowered, when several burials were disturbed. In 1850 Hussey, in his *Notes on the Churches of Sussex*, described the thatched roof as having three tie-beams with king posts and braces. The *Victoria County History of Sussex*, Vol. 7 (1940), under Balsdean, gives a plan of the nave showing the extent of modern alterations and a conjectural outline of the chancel. As already stated, the chapel ceased to exist when the nave was destroyed during army training in the late war.

The excavation of the chapel was started by making a cutting down the centre of the chancel. This revealed that the chancel floor had been cleared away, probably in 1780, since there were no features between ground surface and the natural coombe rock about two feet below. No east wall of the chancel was found, there only being footings of the blocked chancel arch in the east wall of the nave. This east wall was then cleared to find out whether any traces remained showing where the north and south walls of the chancel met the nave. From the excavation, the position of the north wall was indicated by a four-inch thick layer of chalk, which represented the lowest portion of the footings. This thin footing, owing to the gradual slope of the ground down towards the east, soon rose to the surface, and, after ten feet, disappeared completely. The disappearance was probably caused by the levelling operations mentioned by Hussey.



Balsdean Farmhouse before the war (Fig. 1)



North doorway with glazed tiles from south-east (Fig 6)

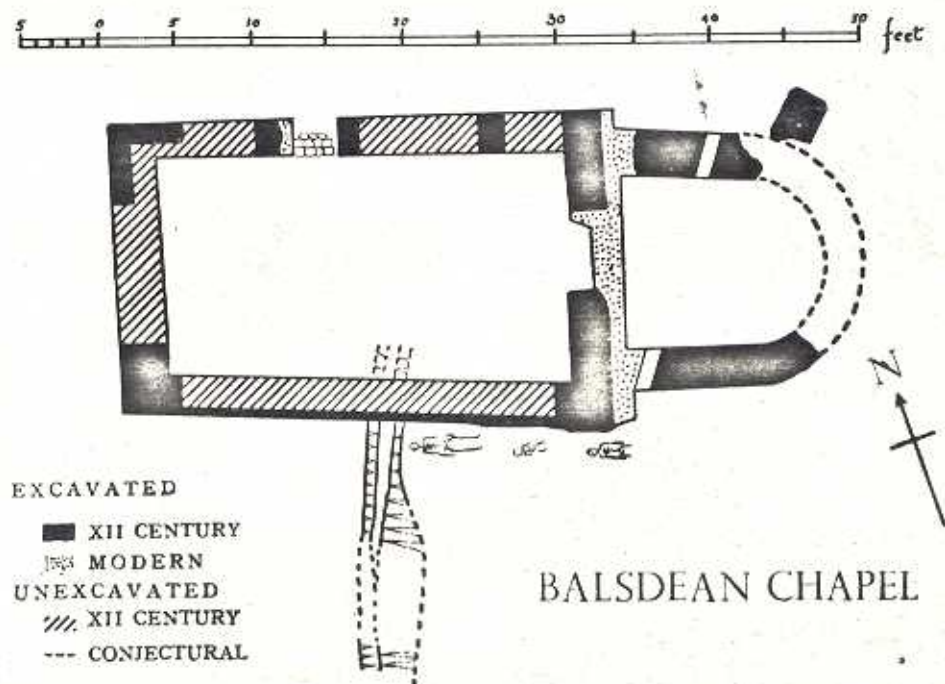
Adjacent to where the chalk ended an area of packed flint was discovered which proved to be a rectangular footing, almost certainly of a buttress. Owing to its peculiar inclination to the north wall of the chancel it suggested that the north east corner of the latter had not been square. The south wall of the chancel was next examined, when it was found that the footings were a few inches lower in the ground. On being completely uncovered it was seen that the easternmost portion, which was constructed of flint, showed the commencement of a definite curve to the north (Fig. 4). This is evidence for an apsidal chancel, which also explains the angle of the buttress on the opposite side.

Having recovered as much as there remained of the ground plan of the chancel, attention was turned next towards the nave. The east wall, when exposed, showed that the chancel arch had been blocked, and later the wall refaced on the outside. In this refacing bricks were incorporated. The south wall of the nave was then followed up on the outside, carrying the cutting down to the level of the natural coombe rock. In the course of this work three burials were discovered, two of children aged about 5 and 6, and one adult, probably a man aged about 40. From their condition it is probable that the burials were of medieval date, but no proof of this could be obtained.

About half way along the south wall a ditch was discovered and found to run under the footing of the wall. From this ditch several sherds of Norman pottery were obtained, and also in the upper filling a small bronze book-clasp. The ditch had almost certainly silted right up before the chapel had been built

over it. The south west corner of the nave, on the outside, had one greensand quoin remaining (Fig. 5). The materials used for the construction of the footing for the south and north walls of the nave were found to be of two materials. The western portion is constructed of flints, while the eastern half is of rammed chalk. This was no doubt necessitated by the position of the building on the hill slope.

The plan given in the *Victoria County History* shows a blocked-up doorway in the north wall of the nave. A cutting made at this point showed that underneath the blocking material was a floor made of glazed tiles (Fig. 6). These were 9 inches square and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick, and had originally been covered with a dark green glaze of poor quality. During the period when the doorway was in use the glaze on these tiles had been considerably worn, and the tiles cracked. On uncovering the floor inside the nave, underneath a layer of cobbles which had formed the stable floor,



Plan of Balsdean Chapel as revealed by the recent excavations (Fig. 3)

there were several laid tiles similar to those in the doorway. These probably represented the surviving traces of a floor which was completely tiled.

The pottery from the ditch, which must precede the chapel in date, is thus prior to 1147. It consists of pieces of a large Norman dish and of three cooking pots. Many small sherds of Late Bronze Age ware occurred in the soil on which the chapel was built, this soil having accumulated as a large field lynchet at the bottom of the hill during prehistoric Roman or early medieval ploughing. Near the south wall of the nave a post hole was found which contained large pieces of a barrel-shaped vessel, also dating from the Late Bronze Age. A flint arrowhead of the Bronze Age was also found in this area.

The plan of the chapel is shown in Fig 3 where the apse is completed in outline. Apsidal chancels are known to have been used from the end of the Roman period until early Norman times in England. We have shown how records tell us that the chapel was built some time before 1147, but the early Norman date of the pottery from the ditch makes it clear that it was built after the Conquest. This evidence, together with the solidity of the ditch filling, suggests that the chapel was erected early in the second quarter of the twelfth century.

During the excavation of the parish church of Excete (*Sussex Archaeological Collections*, Vol. LVIII, pp. 138-170) a central grave was found in the nave, but this feature was not present in the Balsdean Chapel. In many respects the Excete church is a very close parallel in plan, but apparently earlier in date.

In conclusion we wish to express our thanks to the Brighton Corporation Waterworks and their tenant Mr. A. W. H. Dalgety for permission to carry out this excavation. We are also most grateful for the kind help and encouragement given by the Waterworks Engineer and his assistant, and by Mr. R. G. Hecks, the farm bailiff.



South chancel wall from the east, showing curve of apse (Fig. 4)



South wall of nave with greensand quoin in foreground and earlier ditch beneath wall—marked by the farther measuring rod (Fig. 5)

106
3.770

Norton Farm

105
1.306

93
12.460

94
208

Tank
226

Sheepwash
Well House

95
1.343

Balsdean

97
1.767

98
5.200

96
936

BM. 228.01

Well House

Pump House

