

## **The Grand Entrance**

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I gazed up at the abbey's impressive doorway. There was a neat row of columns and concentric arches, some plain, some decorated with zig zag patterns. Together these formed a magnificent entrance. The two hundred year old stonework was still immaculate. The carved capitals of the columns were alive with animals, scallops and sea creatures. It was delicate but also imposing, solid work of the highest quality.

My job was to figure out how much of the stone we could use when the demolition work started. I still can't get over it. Call me romantic if you like but to me the idea of knocking this fine building down, moving the stone from Minsmere to Leiston and starting all over again seems like a criminal act of wanton destruction. I am a master mason and I know good workmanship when I see it.

My boss, Robert, has other ideas. The abbey floods so regularly that the foundations have been undermined and his plan is to build a larger, more modern structure a few miles inland. He wants to demonstrate his wealth and save his soul in the process. That's his vision but I have my doubts.

We don't have much fresh stone in these parts. I can't undo the carvings of my predecessors and the stones will always be of their time. I suppose we *could* move the whole building, but the boss is adamant, he fancies a totally new design, something like he's seen on the way back from the wars in France. No heavy entrances, just tall, light and airy columns that appear to hang from the sky on their own. And a lot more chapels as well.

The king granted permission to build last year and the Abbot of Durford has agreed to come to Leiston together with some of his existing canons and some from Welbeck. Robert is not short of money and ambition, but he really doesn't understand building work or what it involves.

He's hired someone called Guy who has had a hand in constructing these new style cathedrals in France, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he didn't put this character in charge. This Guy won't have a clue about how we do things here and

there will be nothing but trouble. I've worked for the boss all my life, but that's not likely to count for much. I'm going to find out more at this meeting he wants me to go to at Ufford.

## **Ufford**

Robert: Thank you so much for coming to Ufford today, and especially to Guy (Ghee) who has had to travel such a long way. We are going to be building the finest abbey in the county. You are to work together, you Edward with your local knowledge and you, Guy (Ghee) with your skills in design and engineering. We need a plan and a schedule. This is a huge task.

We'll need to build a big camp for the workers and we'll need to improve the roads in the area - the Theberton road especially. Moving all that stone will not be easy and we'll need a lot of wagons during the building season. We'll need to spread news of the job. Since the plague we don't have the labour here do we Edward?

Edward: No, and to be honest with you Sire, there isn't the stone either. Not for what you want to do. I'm sorry you've gone to so much trouble, getting Guy over here and all, but in my professional opinion, it's impossible.

Robert: We'll have to see about that. Guy (Ghee) what will you need?

Guy: If you want a pure, slender structure, it is true you will need a lot of good quality stone.

Edward: you see, we just don't have that here. Your normal points and chisels won't work with pebbles and flints. It's true there is some stone in the current abbey but a lot of that is already carved in the old style. If you ask me, it can't be done.

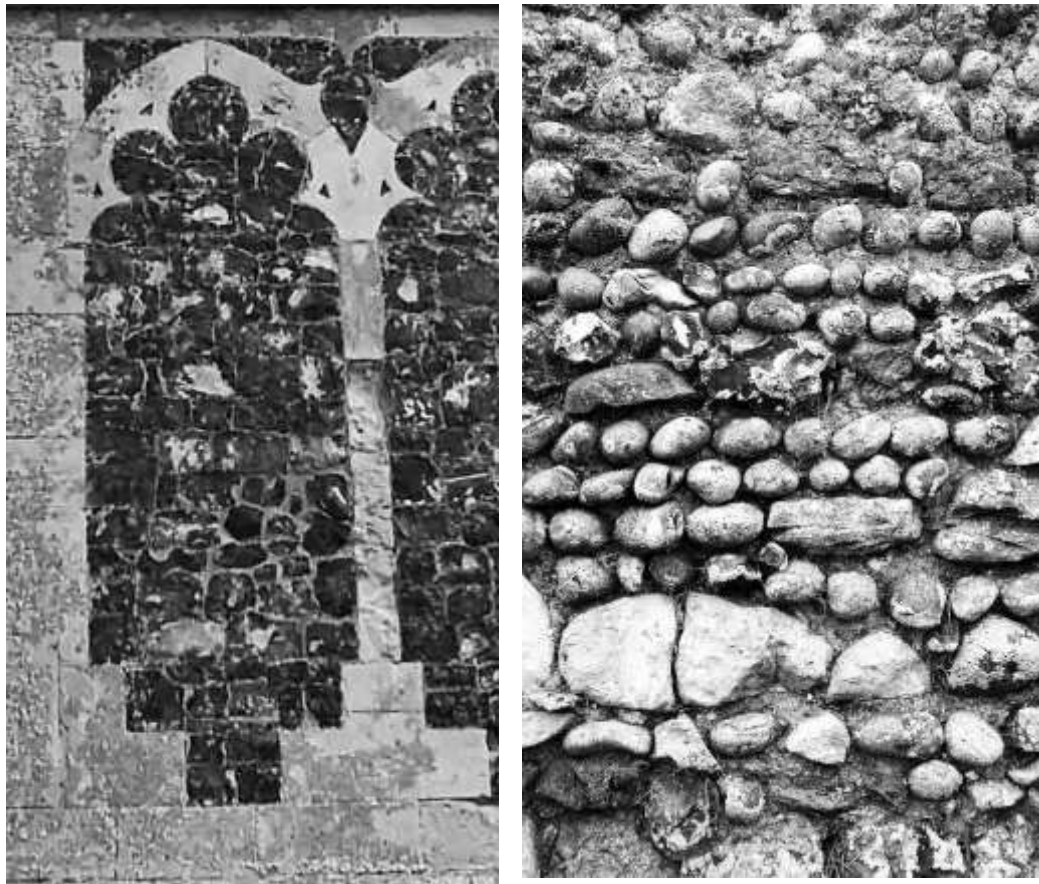
Robert: There must be some way forward. There always is.

Guy: Edward, what about flush flintwork panels? I've never seen that technique before, but Robert showed me some of your work and it was truly amazing. We could use that method to give a sense of lightness and height. What do you think? Could you do it?

You'll find it's not so hard to work in the French way, not for the columns and ribs. We can teach you how. You'd never be short of work after that.

Edward: We still don't have the stone. We'd have to find a use for all the carved material around the doorway, and there would be no way of hiding that.

Guy: I agree it will be a bit of a jumble, but we could do a *grand bricolage*, as we say in French. Some of your flint panels for the façade, the old stone for the cloisters and hidden parts of the chapels: if we did that we'd not need much more. We could even use brick.



Edward: Now that's an idea. We can get that from my cousin's brickworks in Aldeburgh, no problem. And you are right, flush flintwork might do the trick. But I don't know, we'll need a lot of mortar to hold it all together.

Robert: Never mind the detail. I don't care how you build it. I need it large, I need it fast and I need it to look good.

### **Another Grand Entrance**

All my family had come along for the big day. Everyone from the work camp was there, and so were *mes amis* - the masons that Guy (Ghee) had brought over from France. The scaffolding was now down and we could see the result in all its glory: the grey flint, the delicate tracery of white stone – some only an inch thick - and the tall windows, glinting in the sunshine. We had worked so hard and learned so much and, in the end, it was true, this *was* the finest abbey in the county.

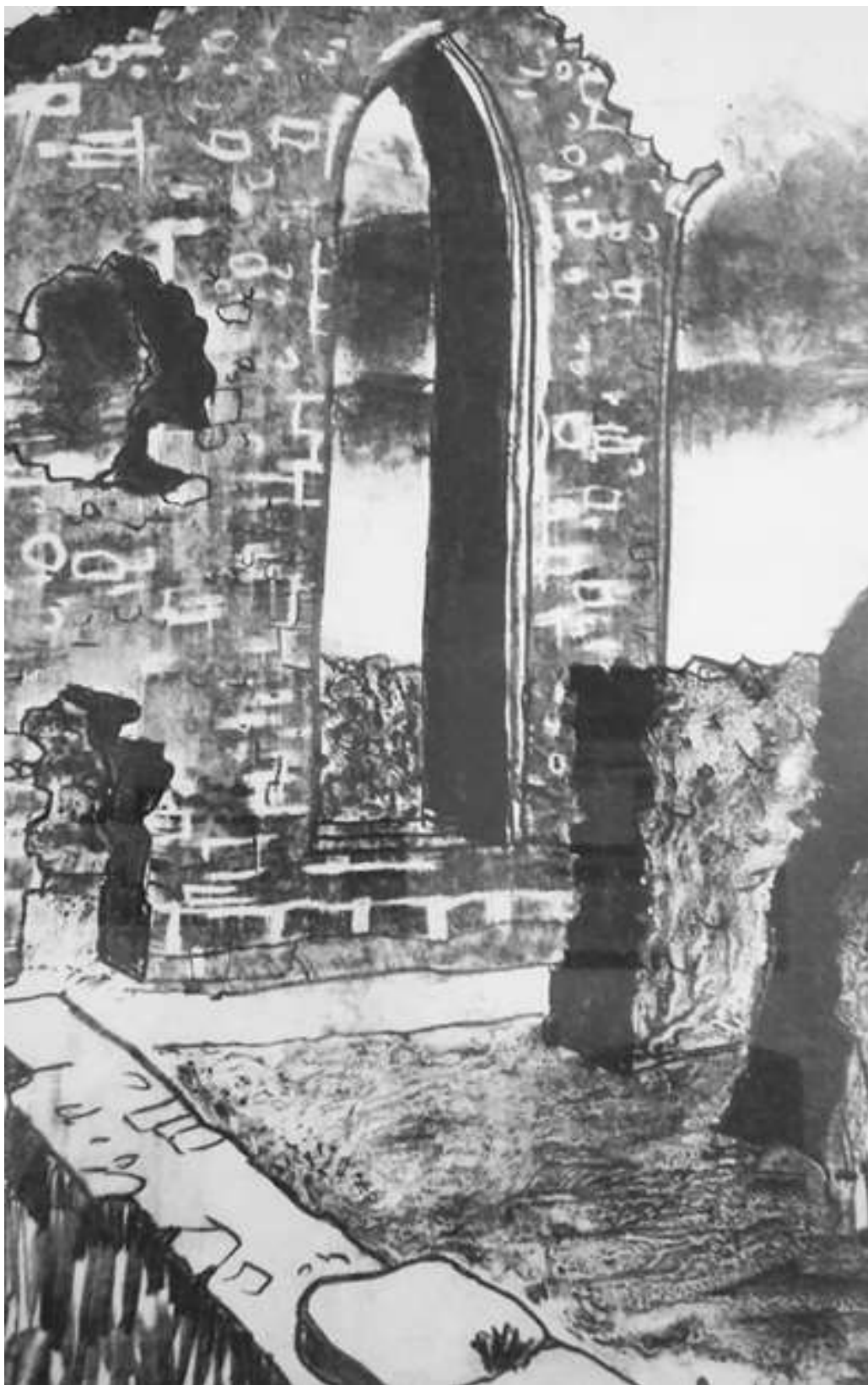
There was a fabulous feast of beans, eggs, oats, bread and roast pig. The boss was always good at that kind of thing. The children scampered about and the beer flowed. We chattered on in a mixture of languages, blurred through years of cooperation the mingling of tradition.

The abbot and his retinue were due to arrive any time now. We'd got the ceremonial staff ready. The minstrels were sitting in the shade with their drums and horns – waiting to perform. Finally, we heard the sound of hooves on the Theberton Road. It was them!

We lined the way and the procession came to a halt in front of the building. There was a pause. The abbot and the canons regular looked around, puzzled: where was the door?

A moment later, Robert flung open the heavy wooden panel – disguised to look as if it was part of the façade. The abbot dismounted and Robert strode towards him, with the key to the abbey in hand.

The musicians went wild, the crowd cheered. I gave Guy (Ghee) a brotherly hug. We both had tears in our eyes.



Leiston Abbey today: print by Joss Shove