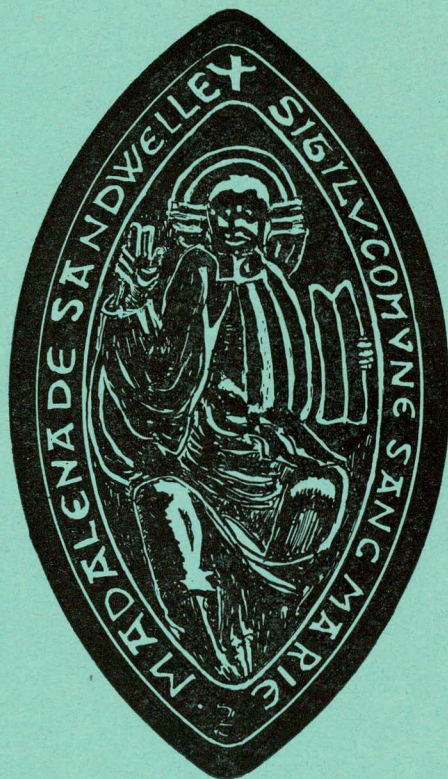
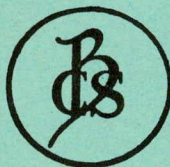


SANDWELL



PRIORY

By
D. DILWORTH

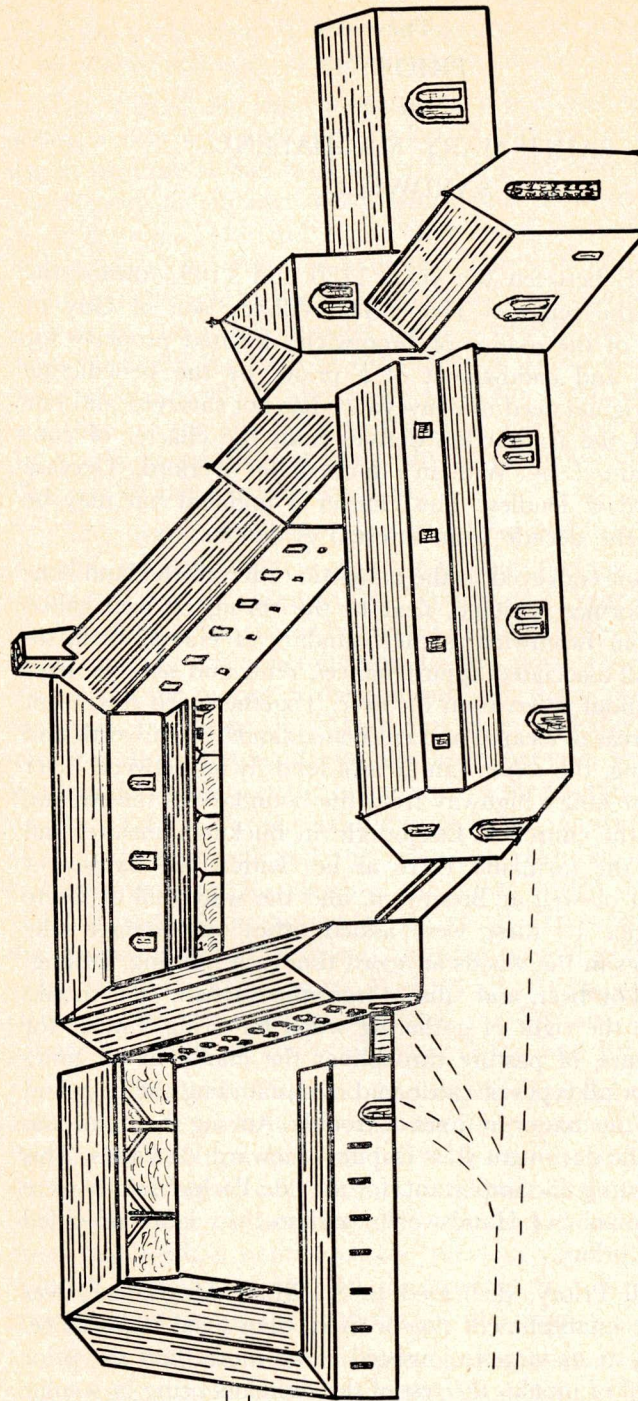


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SANDWELL PRIORY
A RECONSTRUCTED VIEW BY D. DILWORTH
DRAWN BY RON MOSS

The
PRIORY
of
SAINT MARY MAGDALENE,
SANDWELL

SOMETIME between the years 1180 and 1189, toward the end of the reign of Henry II, William, son of Guy of Offney, lord of the manor of Bromwich, donated property for the founding and endowment of a priory by the Benedictine order. The original deed of conveyance has not survived and our knowledge of the transaction derives from the charter of confirmation granted by William's immediate overlord, Gervase Paganel, Lord of Dudley. This charter is undated but may be fixed within the decade from internal evidence.

This grant conveyed to the monastic order all the land containing the former heritage, next to the spring or well called Sandwell, from Bromwich to the boundary of Handsworth, together with all associated appurtenances, rents and services, freehold and without reservation for ever. Together with this, went the assarts (areas of cleared and cultivated lands) of Ruworth and Duddesridding, the *solum* (an area of land) lying between Peter Green and the king's highway from the boundary to the stream, the living of the church of Esselburgh (in Buckinghamshire) and so much of the farmland there as lies within the barony of Dudley, a pit or well at Bromwich, and the watermill at Grete (Great Bridge). To these were added tithes on pannage (the grazing of pigs in the woods at acorn time), on hunting, milling, on bread and on beer, and 'dishes from the kitchen.' The monks were to have the right of gathering wood for firing, timber for building repairs, of pasture throughout the manor at all times of the year for all types of cattle and of demanding the help and protection of the manor in times of trouble. Among the numerous witnesses to the document was 'Dapifer' (steward) de Parles. This is both interesting and important, for the 'de Parles' family were lords of the manor of Handsworth, and so their lands adjoined those of the priory.

Sandwell Priory, dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, was never a large establishment nor of more than local importance. The convent, at its largest, consisted of no more than the prior and a handful of monks, the rest of the residents being in secular

positions, lay-brothers. The history of such a small establishment is inevitably the story of the priors who ruled over it.

As with all the lesser monasteries, it is almost impossible to obtain a complete and accurate list of the priors. The first of whom we hear at Sandwell was a Prior John, who appeared as a witness to an undated deed, which must however have been made between 1194 and 1216. Of his acts we know but one. About this time there was built the church of Handsworth. It seems that the right to the advowson, that is the right to nominate a cleric to the living (usually for a consideration), was to be shared between the lords of the manor of Handsworth and the priors of Sandwell. It also seems the Prior John conveyed his half share of the advowson to the prior and convent of Lenton (in Nottinghamshire), but how, why or when, we do not know. This was to cause trouble later on.

The next to hold the rank was Prior Reginald. The only fact that we can definitely associate with his name is that he was nominated for the position by William de Parles during the reign of King John, that is between 1199 and 1216. This appears rather strange since nomination to the post usually followed election by the monks in the convent with the nomination later confirmed by the bishop. About this time, probably during the tenure of Prior Reginald, disputes arose between the prior and William de Parles over the boundaries of their respective properties. In 1211, de Parles sued the prior in the matter of ten acres of land in Sandwell and the following year for ten acres in Handsworth. For his defence the prior called Richard fitz William, lord of the manor of Bromwich. He was the son of the original donor. The dispute dragged on and only ended ten years later, in 1222, when William de Parles withdrew his claim to the ten acres in Sandwell on Richard fitz William paying him 100s. in compensation, a large sum for those days.

In 1224 Prior Reginald had departed, dead or resigned, and a dispute arose as to the next nomination. William de Parles claimed from William fitz William, brother of Richard, the latter having died in 1223/4, that he had the right to half of the advowson of the priory. He based his claim on the statement that he had nominated the previous prior. Reginald fitz William strongly objected on the grounds that his family had been responsible for the founding of the priory.

Prior William, who was apparently appointed at that date, was a rather more important person than his predecessors. He

had held the office of judge delegate for twenty-two years under Archbishop Langton. It may be that Sandwell was in this case regarded as a sinecure position, a reward or pension for long years of service. In 1230 the question of the living at Handsworth once more arose. It was settled on this occasion by Prior William remitting his claim to a half share of the advowson to the de Parles family in exchange for a property in Birmingham, yielding as rent one mark per annum. It was about this time, 1230, that the church at West Bromwich, now All Saints, which had been the responsibility of the monks of Worcester, was handed over to the Sandwell Priory on payment of six marks. The priory undertook the care and maintenance of the church, the provision of a priest and the holding of services, the provision of books and church fittings, and the payment of diocesan dues to the bishop. As a result of this agreement, the church has always been served by a vicar and not a rector, and the advowson and tithes have been the perquisites of the priory and their successors, as owners of the land, the Whorwood family and later still the Earls of Dartmouth.

Following Prior William there was Prior Richard. Of him we know little for certain. It may have been his appointment to the post which caused yet another outbreak of animosity between the priory and the de Parles family. In 1260 the prior of that time accused yet another William de Parles of leading a band of armed men on to the priory ground, of destroying crops, driving off cattle and assaulting the priory servants. In 1279, William de Parles was hanged for some crime unstated, and at an inquiry as to his estate, it was stated that the prior was paying an annual rent of 20s. for the use of the Handsworth manorial cornmill at Hamstead.

By 1293 Prior Richard had been replaced by Prior Thomas. In 1294, Prior Thomas sued Nicholas Comitassone of Grete for the possession of a mill and a half acre of land on the boundary of Tipton and West Bromwich. This was the Sheepwash Mill at Great Bridge, which had been conveyed as part of the original endowment of the priory some hundred years before. Nicholas failed to put in an appearance and contest the case; the priory ownership was confirmed as a consequence. An undefended case of this type was used, at that time, as a legal fiction for the conveyance of property without paying the required dues. This was considered highly improper. So, two years later, the case was reopened under the Statute of Mortmain, and since the

prior could prove the ownership since the endowment by William fitz Guy, the charge of collusion was dismissed. By the end of the century, the male line of the family having ceased, the lordship of the manor of West Bromwich had descended to two sisters, Margaret and Sara. The former married Richard de Marnham and the latter Walter Devereux. For a time the manor was held in moiety by the two families. 1293 saw the culmination of a number of disputes between the priory and Richard and his wife Margaret, in cases brought at Stafford. In the first, according to the relevant documents, 'Roger' the prior sued the de Marnhams for seven acres of land in West Bromwich, of which he claimed they had unjustly disseized his predecessor, Prior Richard. The prior lost his case when the de Marnhams showed that the papers were inaccurate and that there was no Prior 'Roger,' the prior's name being Thomas. In the next case they sued the prior for feeding animals on three acres of their 'waste,' to which he had no right. The prior sought to prove his right by stating that the land in question was the property of Devereux and not of the de Marnhams, in which claim he was unsuccessful. In the third case the prior claimed his rights on forty acres of common pasture. A jury was called to investigate and found the prior's claim substantiated for two successive years during the open season and for the whole of the third year, a finding which gives some insight as to agricultural management of the period.

Brother Robert de Parke was drowned in the river while dipping skins, possibly cleaning them for the making of vellum or leather, in 1293. It has been stated often that this unfortunate incident occurred at Sandwell. However it seems more probable that it was at Friar Park, for he was a probationary monk of Hales (Halesowen) Abbey, an Augustinian foundation. The area of Friar Park was bestowed on Hales at its foundation in the thirteenth century and held by that abbey until its dissolution in the sixteenth. About 1297 the lay fees of the monastic houses were confiscated to the crown by Edward I. The prior of Sandwell was among those to whom the fees were restored on the payment of a subsidy. Thomas resigned his office in 1316.

On the departure of Thomas, the monks of the priory elected John de Duckebroc, a cluniac of Wenlock, as his successor. The cluniac order was a reformed branch of the Benedictines. At first the bishop refused to appoint him as prior but later in the year, 1316, he confirmed the appointment. De Duckebroc remained as prior and resigned in March, 1323.

The next prior was Richard de Eselberg who was appointed in 1323, following election by his fellow monks, for he was a monk of Sandwell. When he took over, the priory was apparently in a state of disorder, no doubt a reflection of the troubled times of Edward II. The prior obtained letters of excommunication against lawless men whom he said were invading the priory lands, stealing crops, taking fish from the pools, cutting down priory timber and generally making life very difficult for both priory and tenants. In 1324 Bishop Norbury issued orders to the monks to mend their ways and obey the orders of the prior. Particularly did the bishop order one monk, who was in the habit of leaving the priory and wandering about the countryside in 'lay' dress, to desist and return to the priory. In 1330 the bishop visited Sandwell where he found Prior Richard to be aged and infirm. The prior resigned and the bishop ordered that the priory should provide him with a room near to the dormitory, attendance, food for himself and an attendant monk, 20s. per annum for clothing and other necessities, a piece of land near the grave yard for a garden, a fishpond and a dovecote. When he died, these properties were to be set aside for the use of any brethren in the infirmary.

At the retirement of Richard, the monks elected one of their number, William de la Lee. The election was not at first approved by the bishop, but later in the same year, 1330, William was officially appointed. However he did not remain prior for long.

In 1333 William Harell, a monk of Thorney in Cambridge-shire, was appointed prior. Of him we know no more.

By 1341 we find that Richard le Ward was prior of Sandwell. In that year he, together with a number of others, was arrested for attempting to prevent the appointment by the king, Edward III, of a Codsall prebend to the living of Tettenhall. Among the others named was Edmund, the prior's priest. Prior Richard died in 1349. It seems a distinct possibility that the Black Death had affected this small community, for it was stated that there was in that year only one surviving brother.

The last remaining monk was Nicholas de Cumpston, whom the bishop appointed prior of the otherwise empty convent. In 1354, the bishop, still the same Bishop Norbury, complained of the mismanagement of the priory affairs and the waste of its assets. He specifically mentioned the felling of the woods and the letting of priory lands on long leases. One aspect of the life and

work at such an establishment as this might be indicated at this point. That is the recruitment and training of men to hold office in the church. In the ordination lists for 1360 we find the appointment to the order of sub-deacon of Richard Felkyn of Bromwych at Stoneleigh Abbey, and Thomas de Lyndon (in West Bromwich) to the House of Sandwell, while John atte Water of Honnesworth (Handsworth) was appointed deacon at the same priory. In 1361, these three were promoted one grade, Thomas de Lyndon to deacon and John atte Water to priest. These are examples of many such appointments. Despite this work, there was once more only one monk left at Sandwell in 1361 when Prior Nicholas died.

This remaining monk of Sandwell, Henry de Kidderminster, was duly appointed prior. The relevant document is of such interest that it is worth quoting. It was issued at 'Heywode,' the palace of the Bishops of Lichfield at that time. 'The Bishop appoints Father Henry de Kydermynstre, priest, the sole monk of the Priory of Sandwell, to the priory of the said House, vacant by the death of Father William del Ree (Lee?); the said Henry having submitted the provision of a prior to the bishop.' It was dated October, 1361. Henry could not hold an election on his own so he appealed to the bishop. The name of his predecessor raises questions. Was this a slip of the memory on the part of the scribe? Why should he omit three priors, William, Richard and Nicholas?

At this point it would be as well to consider the position and conditions of the diocese in which Sandwell was situated during the Middle Ages. It was a vast sprawling area stretching from one side of the country to the other and reaching as far north as Preston. Its main centre was variously at Lichfield and Coventry and at one period at Chester. There was a constant struggle for the lucrative and influential right to nominate the bishop to the see. The main protagonists were the monks of Coventry and the canons of Lichfield, with other bodies standing on the sidelines, ready to add their weight to one side or the other in the hope that they might increase their own importance and, no doubt, finances. Frequently one side would appeal to the king for aid while the opposition would try to obtain the more distant good-will of the pope. It is little wonder that similar struggles should occur lower down the ladder of appointment.

Henry of Kidderminster ceased to be prior about 1369/70. His place was taken by John de Kyngeston, a clun'ac monk

from Bermondsey, who had held the position of prior of Canwell, a priory nine miles north-east of Sandwell, from 1355 to 1369. This appointment raised a storm of opposition. Richard de Tudenham had been nominated by the Abbey of Shrewsbury and he claimed that he was the rightful prior, a claim which did not receive the support of the bishop. Richard, however, was not without his local backers. Prior John claimed that he was attacked at the priory by an armed gang, led by William de Marnham, and was wounded in the arm by an arrow. In the same year, 1370, he started legal proceedings against the Abbot of Shrewsbury. The matter was brought to a conclusion when in 1379, at the instigation of the abbot, a party including two monks from Shrewsbury and the Rector of Handsworth, forcibly removed the prior to a house in Shropshire and compelled him to resign his post.

The following document of April, 1379, continues the story. 'Sandwell Priory being vacant by the cession of Fr. John de Kyngeston, the last prior and the said Fr. John and Fr. William de Dunstapull, monks of the said priory, who, since there are, as is said, no more monks, make the convent thereof, having submitted the provision of a prior to the bishop, by letters patent under the seal of the priory, the bishop accordingly appointed Fr. Richard de Westbury, monk of the order of St. Benedict, priest, to be prior.' Since de Westbury was a monk of Shrewsbury, this might have done something to appease the abbot, but it certainly did nothing for Richard Tudenham. He started an action against Richard de Westbury and sought papal support. The latter immediately brought a counter-action, had Tudenham arrested and finally won his case. John de Marnham sued the prior, whom he alleged had retained a bond belonging to de Marnham, in 1387. In the following year, Richard, Prior of Sandwell, sued Henry Rydere of West Bromwich for breaking and entering priory property, stealing a cow value 20s. and other goods to the value of 40s. The rule of Prior Richard ceased about 1390.

Once again there was only one monk left at Sandwell and he, no doubt under duress, 'elected' William Pontesbury, a monk of Shrewsbury, as the next prior. This did not meet with the approval of the bishop who promptly annulled the appointment and himself appointed John of Tamworth, a monk of Coventry. This was a decided reverse to the Shrewsbury Abbey and its supporters. At such a troubled time as that which marked the end of the reign of Richard II, it was scarcely to be expected

that the priory was to enjoy complete tranquility. In 1397, it was attacked by an armed band, led by Alexander Leddeston, said to be an apostate monk, who drove out the prior and occupied the buildings. John regained his priory in 1398 but resigned his position in 1400, receiving a pension of 11 marks.

Shrewsbury was to be once more in the ascendancy, for in 1401 during a visitation of the diocese, Archbishop Arundel appointed John de Acton, a monk from St. Peter's Abbey, Shrewsbury, to be the next prior. We know nothing of any of his actions nor the length of his period of office.

John of Acton was succeeded by Richard Dudley, of whom we hear only in the period 1413 to 1416. In 1414 the prior was accused of giving shelter to some robbers. He was given his liberty and pardoned. We do not know the circumstances which led to this charge but it may be a case of criminals claiming sanctuary.

William Pruyne followed Richard Dudley, but we know nothing of him other than that he resigned in 1436.

He was followed in turn by John Atton another monk of Shrewsbury elected 1436. Though his name occurs until 1461 we cannot be sure how long he survived as prior. The interests of the priory at this time were certainly not confined to Sandwell. In 1450 the monks were operating a fulling mill at Fazeley, near Tamworth.

It is quite possible that there existed a prior, following John Atton, of whom we have no record, for we have no mention of a prior of Sandwell until 1484, when he was John Newport. The gap is rather a long one if we consider the length of time which most priors held the position. Prior Newport held the post until 1487 when he resigned with a pension of £8 granted by the bishop.

After the resignation, the monks declared that they could not agree by election and appealed to the bishop who appointed Thomas Wynnysbury in 1488. He was a monk from Evesham. For some reason now unknown he resigned the same year.

Again the monks referred to the bishop, who this time appointed John Sawyer, a cluniac monk from Lenton in Nottinghamshire. It is unfortunate that information on the priory during the reigns of Henry VII and VIII until the dissolution is not available. In fact all we do know is that Prior William was admitted to the Guild of Lichfield in 1518, and that John Baylye was the last to hold that office. At the time of the closure in 1525 there was, beside the prior, one other monk. They were

transferred to other Benedictine houses. A document, valuable to the historian, is the inventory of the priory properties, made at the time of the dissolution. This includes a quite detailed description of the buildings.

As was customary in a Benedictine house, the principal buildings were arranged in the form of a rectangle around an enclosed yard or garth. In this case the south side was occupied by the cruciform church, the east side by a two storey residential block, the north by a hall, which no doubt served as the refectory, while to the west were the kitchens and other domestic offices, and the gate house. Stables, barns and other agricultural buildings formed another enclosure to the west, while surrounding were the gardens, orchards and a grave yard. Other buildings specified were the priory mill, built of wood and thatched, then in a neglected and decayed condition, and the Joan Mill, a water corn mill at Wigmore, West Bromwich, out at rent, and also in a dilapidated state for 'lack of timber.' The mill at Great Bridge was no longer a part of the property. In addition there were extensive areas of land, ranging from arable to woods and heath, numerous small dwellings houses, not all at Sandwell, and the rents of scattered properties covering a wide area of the West Midlands. There were also the advowson and tithes of West Bromwich and a half share of those of Ellesborough. With that amount of income it is rather difficult to account for the state of neglect and decay reported in all the priory buildings.

Following the closure in 1525, the property was given by King Henry VIII to Wolsey in January, 1526, and he conveyed it to the dean of Cardinal College (later Christ Church), Oxford, as an endowment, in the next month. On the fall of Wolsey in 1530 the king reclaimed the property. The share of Ellesborough was bestowed on the Carthusian priory at Sheen while the manor of Sandwell, including the living of West Bromwich, was granted to Lucy Clifford. It was the property of the Whorwood family through the seventeenth century and of the Earls of Dartmouth through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The priory buildings were largely demolished in the sixteenth century and the later Sandwell Hall stood on the site. On the demolition of Sandwell Hall in 1928, a small portion of a wall, including windows, of the ruin of the old priory stood revealed, but this was finally destroyed by vandals about 1940. The one remaining trace is the spring, still flowing, the original 'Sand Well.'

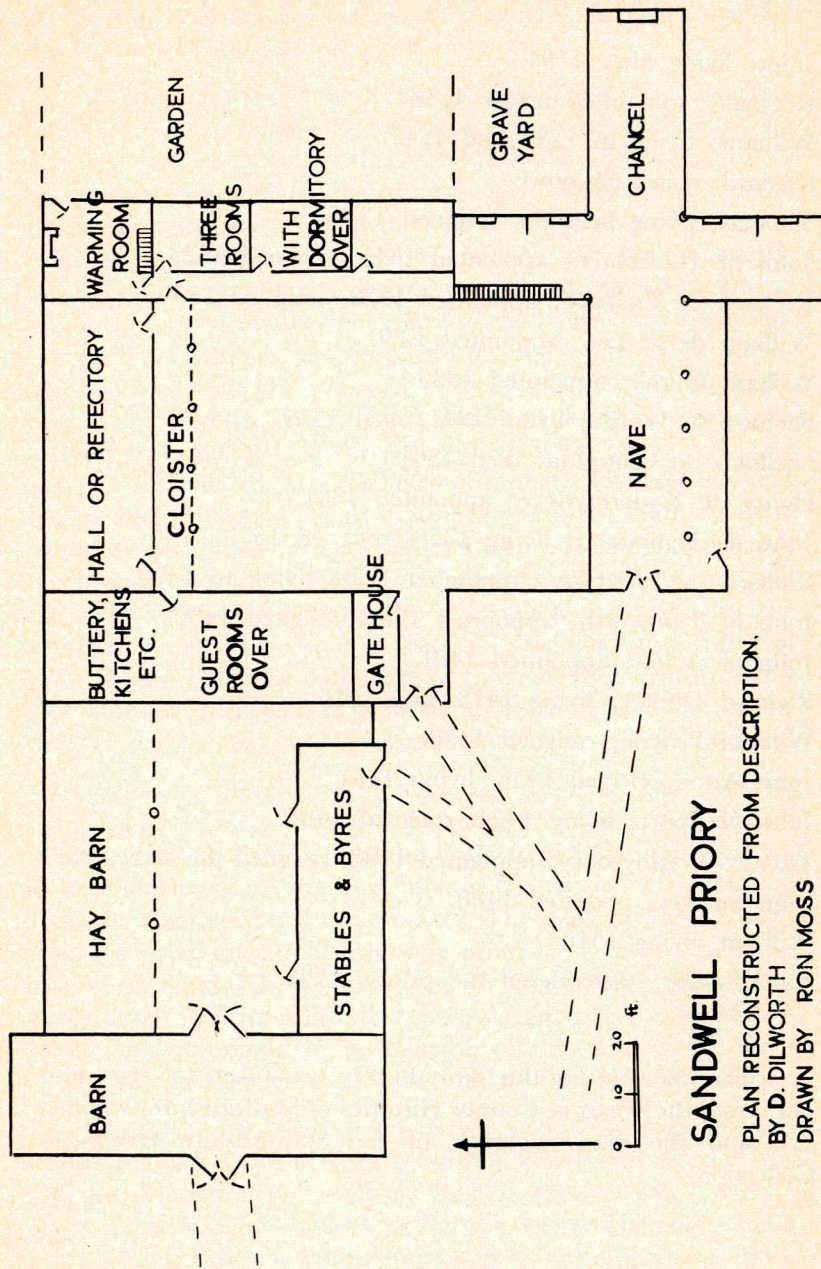
Priors or Sandwell

(Priory founded between 1180 and 1189).

John; living after 1194.
Reginald; appointed before 1216.
William; living in 1230 and 1247.
Richard; dates unknown.
Thomas; living in 1293, resigned 1316.
John de Duckebroc; appointed 1316, resigned 1323.
Richard de Eselberg; appointed 1323, resigned 1330.
William de la Lee; appointed 1330.
William Harell; appointed 1333.
Richard le Warde; living 1341, died 1349
Nicholas de Cumpston; died 1361.
Henry de Kydermynstre; appointed 1361.
John de Kyngeston; living 1370, resigned 1379.
Richard de Westbury; appointed 1379, living to 1390.
John of Tamworth; appointed 1391, resigned 1400.
John of Acton; appointed 1401.
Richard Dudley; living 1413, and 1416.
William Pruyne; resigned 1436.
John Atton; elected 1436, living 1461.
John Newport; living 1484, resigned 1487.
Thomas Wynnysbury; appointed 1488, resigned the same year.
John Sawyer; appointed 1488.
William, living 1518.
John Baylye; surrendered the priory, 1525.

The material for this short history was taken for the most part from the Victoria County Histories of Staffordshire, volume III, and the many volumes of the Staffordshire Historical Collection.

D.D.



SANDWELL PRIORY

PLAN RECONSTRUCTED FROM DESCRIPTION.
 BY D. DILWORTH
 DRAWN BY RON MOSS

POSTSCRIPT

by

Dr. John M. Fletcher, President, The Black Country Society.

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