Lewes Priory and the Preservation of Its Ruins

When I started to prepare this lecture I realised that there were many strands to the subject, certainly beyond that of pure technical repair, and they were all very much interlinked: the history of the site, the philosophy of repair, the history of repair methods, the history of those connected with the site, the development of a statutory framework for preservation, and more. I have tried to weave the strands to create a sequential story, but failed in particular in reference to the techniques of repair, and that strand I am afraid I treat somewhat separately at the end.

It seems fitting in a Lewes Priory Trust Godfrey Memorial Lecture to refer to Walter Emil Godfrey, who was responsible for the repair of the Lewes Priory ruins after his father’s death in 1961 until his own death in 1982 on his way to a Lewes Priory open day, and after whom this Lecture series is named; and to refer also to his father Walter Hindes Godfrey, who was responsible for starting the programme of repair of the Priory ruins in the 1950s. Walter Hindes Godfrey’s history and eminence, and in particular his role in establishing the National Monuments Record during the War, do not need restating here; suffice it to say
that he and his family started life-in-Sussex in Buxted in 1915; in 1932 he moved his office and his family to Lewes, where he lived and worked for some 20 years, moving then to Steventon near Abingdon when the National Monuments Record moved to Oxford. Godfrey had been interested in Lewes Priory before his move to Lewes, writing his guide to the Priory of St Pancras in 1927, the same year he took a party from the Sussex Archaeological Society around the ruins. His presence in Lewes however involved him more closely in the Priory ruins, and in proposals to repair and consolidate the remains, while at the same time he was closely involved in the analysis and repair of many other historic buildings in the town.

As a young and green architect in 1975 my first monument conservation project was working on Lewes Priory with Emil Godfrey: I had spent much of my university time working on archaeological excavations, and had worked summer seasons on William de Warenne’s castle at Castle Acre before joining Carden and Godfrey, and it may have been my mixture of architectural training with archaeological sympathy which prompted Emil Godfrey to ask me to work on Lewes Priory. It may also have been that Jonathan Coad was then the Inspector of Ancient Monuments responsible for Lewes Priory, and Norman Hodgson was ministry architect, both of whom I had worked with at Castle Acre, and both of whom I had seemed to get on with well.

My first memory of visiting the Priory in 1975 was during the Richard Lewis excavations. The site was fenced, the second phase reredorter and other areas had higher internal ground levels than exist now, and prior to the national interest in health and safety I was sent up a ladder to the top of the south wall of the Reredorter to crawl along it and record the window openings before proposals for consolidating them were agreed: the consolidation was ingenious, and has lasted over 40 years without decay, rendering the cills over a stainless mesh held at the sides by the piers of masonry between the windows.

In those days Historic England’s predecessor, which as you may remember went through regular name changes from its first manifestation as the Ministry of Works, was run by inspectors, architects, and technical people, who were also responsible for the repair of monuments then in Guardianship, and who consequently combined philosophy of conservation with technical acumen. In those days small grants were offered to help the consolidation of monuments, and my joining Carden and Godfrey was just after the start of a 20 year grant-aided programme of initial consolidation work had been agreed, to the walls that had been revealed by the Lewis excavations, as well as to repair the visible standing fabric.

The repairs were carried out seasonally by Pennells and Spooner, masons and general builders from Burgess Hill. Largely under Emil Godfrey’s direction Bob Pennells and Roy Spooner developed a remarkable sympathy with the historic ruins over their time, and perfected techniques to give the appearance of old ruins in newly consolidated structures; I was privileged to learn from Emil, and from Bob and Roy, much of the techniques associated
with consolidating masonry, particularly when that masonry was built substantially of chalk as was the case at Lewes, as indeed it is in much of Sussex and Hampshire.

I shall start with a brief history of the ruins as far as their survival and repair is concerned, from the construction of the railway line in 1845, and from the first consolidation works in the 1950s. To remind you of the extent of the Priory, the line of the railway, and the extent of the ruins, I will use the plan used in the 1949 Lewes Priory appeal leaflet, which Bella Hobson kindly sent me earlier this week, and which still remains one of the clearest plans, even though some of the descriptions have been superseded.

I should say that most of my information has come from records in the Keep, the East Sussex County Record Office, with by far the larger part from the Godfrey archive, which over six packed files revealed what actually happened in the post war period, and the emotion behind it. Fortunately much of the Godfrey archive consists of letters and postcards confirming meeting dates and times and requests to be picked up from one railway station or another, topics of correspondence which I remember fondly from early days as Emil’s assistant.

In the 17th C and earlier, interest in the monuments and historic objects of the past was haphazard, and most regularly pursued by heralds on their visitations; where records of
antiquity are included in the visitations: however there tends to be little between prehistoric sites and church and churchyard monuments. For the most part it was artists who recorded the building ruins of the past, but with varying accuracy and varying interest in accuracy – the engraving shown seems to show more interest in the sheep than in the Priory ruins in the background.

Antiquarianism in Britain may be said to have formally started with the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1707; for much of the 18th C and the early 19th C, interest was perhaps more in objects than architecture, as the Cruikshank engraving of a meeting of the Society suggests; outside its circle antiquarianism was considered a topic for humour, not least because of a somewhat ghoulish interest in historic interments, as the following aquatint by Rowlandson of 1816, following the opening of the tomb of Edward I in Westminster Abbey, shows; Combe accompanied the aquatint with a verse about the antiquaries: ‘a curious wish their fancies tickled, to know how Royal Folk were pickled.’

A rare occasion when architecture was considered, and protected, was in 1721, when, at the instigation of William Stukeley, the Society of Antiquaries paid ten shillings for the erection of two oak bollards to prevent Waltham Cross being damaged by passing carts, perhaps the first time that payment had been made to protect a historic monument by anyone other than the owner. The picture of 1789 by Jacob Schnebbelie, draughtsman of the Society, shows Waltham Cross with the two protecting bollards in the foreground.
Cruikshank engraving of a Society of Antiquaries meeting

Rowlandson 1816

Waltham Cross, Schnebbelie, 1789
Most ruins were on private land, and the prevention of decay was not a responsibility unless the landowner chose to carry out works. The buildings of Lewes Priory having been variously undermined, demolished, pillaged and robbed for their materials following the dissolution - yet leaving substantial ruins surviving above ground - and with their associated vegetation and trees around - provided a picturesque scene which attracted numerous and various artists. This unknown artist of the ruins preferred cows to sheep. If the owner could be persuaded that antiquarianism was more important than the picturesque it was unlikely that any repair would be preceded by academic examination and more likely that a fancifully imagined reconstruction of how the building may once have looked would result.

The 18th C engravings previously shown are not true likenesses of the Priory and its environs, but are a very good indication of the picturesque attitude of artists to ruins such as these; but we also find emerging at the same time in the Grimm engravings (see over), commissioned in Sussex by the antiquarian Sir William Burrell in the 1780s, a closer look at the architecture, and perhaps a greater interest in the accuracy of the image.

The first mention of Lewes Priory in modern times is in 1838 when it is recorded that a dinner was given in the grounds of Lewes Priory to 3900 poor persons to commemorate the coronation of Queen Victoria; but there is no mention of the ruins, picturesque or otherwise.

Serious antiquarian interest in the Priory might be considered to start with the construction in 1845 of the railway, a branch of the London Brighton & South Coast Railway from Brighton to Hastings, which in its route through Lewes cut through the site of the Priory. The navvy work of construction was preceded by more careful excavation, which revealed the
remains of the east end of the church, the chapter house and adjoining structures, which were then destroyed to allow the railway line to be built. The discovery of William de Warenne’s and Gundrada’s tombs in the chapter house aroused considerable and wide interest, and it is unlikely to be coincidental that the following year the Sussex Archaeological Society was founded.

Grimm engravings of Lewes Priory 1783

John Blaker, solicitor and one time Town Clerk, had a house and garden in Priory Crescent, and owned much of the railway site including the Priory ruins south of the railway line. After the construction of the railway line, in 1847 he purchased from the Railway the open land north of the line between his garden and the railway; the conveyance of this land survives in the Keep, and the abstract of title of the land is interesting in that it includes the earliest
plan of the ruins, dated 1837, which clearly shows that the main surviving and visible elements of the ruins before the railway were the frater south wall, the dorter and its vault, and the south or second reredorter. I will repeat the plan to remind you of these buildings.

Blaker seems to have combined archaeological and picturesque interests in the site. He is believed to have conducted his own archaeological excavation in 1850, although there is no published record. In 1853 at his invitation the Royal Archaeological Institute visited. In 1855 he built the folly tower, or perhaps more correctly the prospect tower (see over), at the northwest corner of the present Priory Park, utilising a number of architectural fragments from the Priory ruins – these can be clearly seen on the window and door arches, as well as elsewhere; and in 1860 he obtained permission from the railway to construct a tunnel under the railway connecting his land on both sides of the railway, and incorporated many more architectural fragments in that.

It is tempting to see the pedestrian gate in the north wall of the land north of the railway line as the start of a progress to see the ruins, walking past the west end of the survival of the southwest tower of the Priory church, perhaps a detour to see the lavatorium – or monks’ prison, or lantern, as it has been variously called in the past – then down a slope to the tunnel, emerging on the south side of the railway line at the prospect tower, which he could ascend to view his ruins with some complacency.

The next news of the Priory lands seems to be some 14 years later, when in 1874 Blaker rented some of the land to Amram Thomas Kenward, market gardener; Kenward’s
commercial interest in the site grew, for there exist several leases and agreements culminating with the conveyance of the land north of the railway to Kenward in 1898.

It is worth reminding ourselves that there was no statutory protection for ruins such as Lewes Priory until well into the 20th C. On private land, such ruins relied on their picturesque quality for their survival, although this would have been in the face of attacks from vegetation – ivy, shrubs and trees, which of course added to the picturesque. While other countries were quicker to provide protection - Hesse in Germany introduced protection in 1818, France in 1830, even Greece in 1834 - protection in Britain was not introduced until the Ancient Monuments Protection Act was passed in 1882.

The 1882 Act only protected certain named prehistoric sites, with in the accompanying schedule 68 sites listed as protected sites due to come into public ownership, including ‘the group of stones known as Stonehenge’. It also introduced penalties for injury to ancient monuments: ‘a fine not exceeding five pounds, or imprisonment with or without hard labour for a term not exceeding one month’. General Pitt-Rivers, considered by many to be the father of modern archaeology, was made first Inspector of Ancient Monuments under the 1882 Act, and held the post of Chief Inspector until his death in 1900.
At Lewes Priory, in 1886 William St John Hope, in the year after he became assistant secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, and presumably at Blaker’s request, conducted archaeological excavation of the remaining claustral buildings, which produced the first detailed plan of the ruins. Further excavation by Hope between 1899 and 1902 on the eastern end of the site recovered a second smaller church of late 11th C date; this was exposed by little more than clearance of accumulated destruction debris, in places up to 8ft thick. This church was thought to be the infirmary Chapel because of its proximity to the Infirmary Hall, but is now understood to be the first monastic church. In 1902 Harold Brakspear, Hope’s protege, investigated the remains of the lavatorium north of the railway line.

Mounting national concern about the state of certain medieval buildings led in 1900 to a second Ancient Monuments Protection Act. While churches and occupied buildings were excluded, this Act enabled castles slighted during the civil war, and monasteries dissolved at the reformation, to qualify for protection and in particular cases to be taken into state care.

A third Ancient Monuments Protection Act followed in 1913. This introduced a system for issuing a preservation order on a building at risk of demolition by a private owner; complex and cumbersome it was, because each order would need an act of parliament to confirm it, but it established the principle that some buildings in private ownership might warrant the intervention of the state to save them. It was under this Act that the ruins of Lewes Priory became a Scheduled Ancient Monument in 1928, at the same time as Battle Abbey and the Chichester Market Cross, although subsequent and continuing fond hopes that the state might take over the Priory ruins came to nothing.

Following Pitt Rivers death, the new Inspector of Ancient Monuments under the 1913 Act was Charles Reed Peers, an architect with impeccable historical and antiquarian credentials; he was for the first time given funds for a specialist works division for the repair and maintenance of the sites, which did sterling work until English Heritage in recent time chose to disband the works department and lose nearly 100 years worth of accumulated technical skills.

The Priory ruins and the land they were on were left by Blaker to his grandson Dendy, who in 1923 sold the land to Kenward, the market gardener who you will remember had purchased the land north of the railway in 1898. Kenward, seems to have used the land for little, concentrating his business north of the railway line, and allowing the cloak of vegetation to continue to cover and grow, to the increasing detriment of the ruins.

Three Ancient Monument Protection Acts had little impact on the ruins of the Priory. The impact of WH Godfrey’s summer meeting tour for the Sussex Archaeological Society in 1927 may have been greater, and may indeed have had something to do with the scheduling of the ruins the following year, but at the time the overgrowth must have made them difficult to appreciate, as the somewhat blurred photograph shows. Remaining in private ownership
there was little that could be done without the support of the owner, who according to Godfrey was more interested in birds than buildings.

Godfrey – and there he is on the screen - and others were increasingly concerned, not just about the decay and vegetation but about the missed opportunity to make clear the ‘significance of the whole…to the visitor’: the area of the great dorter was ‘covered with the remains of the undercroft, much of which is still unexcavated, and the plan is therefore difficult to follow’.
The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings – SPAB – was next to get involved. In 1931 Colonel Freeman, a member, visited and wrote to Powys, the SPAB secretary, calling attention to the condition of the ruins:

‘The scanty remains of the old walls were overgrown with ivy and other creepers, and had numerous small trees and bushes rooted in their bricks, which are bound to penetrate and disintegrate the interior of the noble walling. The effect was very picturesque, but in a short time I should think there would be no walls left above ground’.

At this point Powys contacted Godfrey, whose interest in the Priory must by then have been well known, and Godfrey notified Peers, the Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, who promised to inspect; Godfrey wrote back to Powys that Peers had undertaken to visit, Powys placed Godfrey’s letter showing that there had been action in front of his committee; Powys invited Godfrey to Luncheon. However, nothing further seems to have been done by Peers, Powys or Godfrey, until Kenward died, and his successors sold the ruins and the land to Lewes Borough in 1945.

The sale prompted SPAB to write to the Council in 1946 expressing their pleasure that the Borough had acquired the Priory, but noting that the ruins were suffering wilful damage by hooligans who now have free access; SPAB’s solution was to introduce an entrance fee, the Borough’s to set up a sub-committee, but they also in 1947 procured a report on the condition of the ruins from the Ministry of Works, which concluded that the condition was ‘poor’.

Two years later SPAB again wrote to the Borough Council, wondering what was happening; this coincided with a letter from Godfrey to the Council expressing alarm ‘to find the place full of children with no adult supervision. They were climbing over the walls and displacing and damaging the masonry’. He concluded that the grounds should be closed, which advice it seems the Council was happy to follow, ‘until it is possible to consider proceeding with a programme of repair’, as they informed SPAB that year.

In 1949 a committee was set up very much under Godfrey’s direction to launch an appeal for funds to start repair of some sections of the ruins which were thought to be in imminent danger of collapse and decay. The condition of the ruins was still somewhat speculative, as they were still substantially covered in ivy – the photographs are from the appeal leaflet of the same year.

At that time it was thought that the repair of those parts above ground could be carried out for £10000, with another £10-20000 needed for excavation and repair of those parts below ground – I should say that the excavation proposed was not archaeological, but needed because of the considerable quantities of tumble and soil and masonry waste around areas of the site.
In the event the appeal raised £1200, £500 of which was from the Pilgrim Trust, with the promise of a further £500 from the Trust for the following two years. Godfrey’s plea to the Pilgrim Trust in April 1949 touches a cord: ‘the Lewes Borough Council is not prepared to spend anything on the repair of the masonry. The present state of Lewes Priory is such that they think of it only as a picturesque ruin, and most of the ratepayers have the same view. Its former owner was more interested in bird life than in buildings, and let it get overgrown’. That may be somewhat unfair on Kenward, but he certainly did nothing to tame the growth.

How were the repair works to be carried out? Godfrey involved Messrs CF Bridgman, monumental and general masons of Lewes, initially in some simple clearance work in 1948, and it is clear that Bridgman was almost as enthusiastic about the work as Godfrey: throughout this first phase of work Bridgman gave his time for nothing.

In 1949, with funds available again from the Pilgrim Trust, there was enough money to start work, and in July Godfrey wrote to the committee saying ‘it is hoped to engage a workman familiar with local flintwork to start consolidation of the walls to the frater and dorter undercroft. Bridgman will supervise at no cost, and the architect to the Ministry of Works has promised to assist with guidance and periodic supervision’; the Ministry of Works in this time of post-war rationing also had to assist with a licence to permit building materials to be used at Lewes Priory up to the value of £500.

The workman familiar with local flintwork was Charles Chrismas, who started work in August 1949. A lad was added in October, but as he proved uninterested and unteachable (according to his grandfather) he was soon replaced by someone of greater maturity.
In this early phase of work there arose many of the philosophical and technical issues which continue on the site today, as well as issues to do with instructing a workman, and then finding out how he interprets that instruction. Godfrey was very busy on many projects in Sussex as well as in Oxfordshire at the time, and as he had moved to Steventon at this point did not have the availability to monitor the works that he did when he was living in Lewes. Clearly the Sussex Archaeological Society had more time to monitor, and in March 1951 Godfrey received a letter from the Society pointing out ‘Christmas is restoring a wall in such a way that there appears to be a corner where there seems to be no good evidence that one formerly existed’. There is a note on Godfrey’s file in November 1951: the arch over the window of the old reredorter [this is in the hole known to Priory aficionados as UX1] has a root growing right in and I am inclined to say have it down’ – no doubt a sound pragmatic response, but not one that would be supported by the Ministry of Works, without lengthy discussion at least.

At this time Godfrey was joined in the work on the Priory by his son Emil, and it is clear that there was regular discussion about the right approach: in April 1951 on how to restore the unusual double-splayed window in the frater, in June of the same year on how the facing of the frater should be detailed. And there were problems: a letter from son to father in May 1952 says: ‘it is as I feared. Bridgman and Christmas just couldn’t stomach building ruins and have done a piece of face work beneath the windows and halfway up the splays, partly flat and with some stones inserted. It is about 1 ½ ” back from the old finished face. It is beautifully built and looks very nice indeed. In fact it is what I originally wanted (though I wanted it flush) but without the tile course to show it is modern’.

The photographs show precisely what was done: on the left you will note projecting facing, the original masonry, above the window, with Christmas’s refacing below; on the right a
detail of the window, with the projecting facing and two voussoirs, and also projecting masonry within the arch. The following photograph shows the typical finish of the wall tops carried out by Chrismas, finishing in a layer of flint – this would not be done today, but it is remarkable how it has survived for 70 years without further intervention.

Part of the concern no doubt would be what the Ministry of Works would say, but there is no evidence of their view. For my part this part of the frater is one of the best bits of the Priory ruins, although I hesitate to say so when it dates only from 1952.

In October 1952 Chrismas left – his doctor said that a skin complaint which had occurred was caused by the ivy. Whether that was so or not, the work no longer had a mason, which proved convenient enough as by then funds had all but run out.

After some years the idea of a Lewes Priory Restoration Committee was germinated, which was to lead to a fresh appeal. Walter Hindes Godfrey died in 1961, and the restoration work and the masterminding of the appeal passed seamlessly to his son Emil. At that time Godfrey Senior’s builder of choice was Norman & Burt of Burgess Hill. Using the term ‘builder’ of Norman & Burt might seem dismissive, for Norman & Burt worked in London, Oxford, and all over Sussex for the Godfreys, including at the great restoration project at Herstmonceux Castle; they even supplied stone for the repair of Westminster Abbey.

The Restoration Committee was set up in the early 1960s, starting with some £1100 of funds accumulated largely from saved past allocations from the Borough Council, and with
the balance of the last appeal fund; a national appeal started in 1964 with an illustrated booklet.

The search for a mason carried on, and in January 1962 Norman & Burt wrote to Emil Godfrey to say that ‘Mr Lovell is retiring from our employ and would be interested in part time repairs’; Mr Lovell had had a stroke, and perhaps it was fortunate that this suggestion came to nothing. But the enthusiasm for the project continued, and in February 1964 Emil Godfrey met Norman & Burt on site to arrive at some broad cost estimates, which he communicated to Gilyard-Beer the then new assistant inspector of ancient monuments, in the hope of prompting some grant aid to add to the funds raised by the appeal. Works were considered to be necessary on the Infirmary Chapel, the reredorter and the dorter.

The restoration of the Priory walls was not the only thing that went through the Committee’s mind – in January 1964 the Committee, thinking to the future, considered a suggestion that some of the fabric should be pulled down to ground level, leaving an outline plan of the buildings in stone foundation on the ground. Emil Godfrey spoke against this, saying he would raise it with the Ministry of Works - knowing of course that they would not support such a proposal: in fact it prompted them to produce a further full report on the condition of the fabric, and may have helped provide the first state grant aid to Lewes Priory later that year.

In 1964, following grants from the Ministry of Works – at a third of the cost of the works - and from the Pilgrim Trust - a lump sum - in addition to private sums of money given, work restarted with Norman & Burt working on the frater and the dorter. This was not straightforward, and as might be expected there was a learning curve for the new masons. The ones used were considered by Godfrey to be unteachable, and Norman & Burt from their cost sheets clearly tried several masons; there is no recorded comment about the others, but this is the first season where a Spooner is mentioned, no doubt the Roy Spooner who after Norman & Burt closed down, worked on the Priory with Bob Pennells in the 1970s and 1980s. At this time it was suggested that there was a need for an archaeologist to be present at the least to manage the clearance of rubble and fill, although it does not seem that one was employed.

Annual spends on the ruins by Norman & Burt of around £2500-£3000 took place in 1966 and 1967, but work came to a halt in 1968 when the problem of how to support the overhanging and incomplete dorter vaulting emerged. Godfrey called in Dick Birch, an exceedingly eminent and clever structural engineer who was at that time involved in the design of the cover building at Fishbourne Roman Palace; unfortunately the Ministry of Works had equally many, if not as eminent, advisers, and there were so many alternative solutions put forward that nothing happened for over a year. Eventually Godfrey proposed to the Ministry of Works that they design and supervise the works using Norman & Burt, to which they agreed – the three following photographs show what was done: in the third you
will notice small holes in the centre of stones where the stones are being hung on reinforcing rods, and at the top left is a nut and washer again where stones are being hung.

Shortly thereafter the Ministry of Public Buildings & Works, as the ministry had been renamed, agreed to increase the grant percentage from one third to one half of the building cost, which helped the funding considerably, and enabled a proper programme of repairs to be planned.
At the same time Richard Lewis received no objections from the Ministry for the newly created Lewes Archaeological Group to carry out excavation on the Priory site, and excavation, including of areas not previously explored, continued until 1982, finally being published after Richard Lewis’s death through the perseverance of Malcolm Lyne. It is interesting to remember that whole scale excavation took place at that time without the requirement for Scheduled Monument Consent, whereas now SMC is required for as little as a hole for the insertion of a fence post.

Once the dorter vaulting had been stabilised, growth removal and consolidation on the site continued through 1970 and 1971, with repointing on the Infirmary Chapel in 1972; however, Norman & Burt, whose workload had started to tail off according to the firm’s files in the West Sussex County Record Office, were taken over by Llewelyn of Eastbourne and effectively ceased trading. As a phoenix out of the ashes Bob Pennels and Roy Spooner, ex employees, formed their own firm, and started work at the Priory in 1973.

1974 was a significant date for consolidation work on the ruins, as following a new Ministry of Public Buildings & Works report on the condition of the monument, there was a commitment to an annual match-funding grant of £5000 to see the initial consolidation of the Priory ruins completed in 1994; the match funding was to be from the District and Town Council to allow around £10000 to be spent annually on repairs.
As with all things of this sort, the work proved more extensive than funds permitted, and the initial consolidation was not completed by 1994: that did not happen until the Lewes Priory Park project, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and a grant of £90000 from English Heritage, was completed in 2010.

Having dealt with the past history of the preservation of the ruins, I shall move on to the philosophy and techniques of repair and consolidation, then and now, and start by returning to Peers, who in 1913 with a specialist works division under his control, was given unprecedented powers to shape the appearance of ancient monuments, and particularly of course those in state ownership.

Peers approach was to apply a very rigid intellectual framework to the sites: he saw uninhabited monuments as structures where ‘the story of the building is definitely at an end,’ and therefore the aim must be ‘to preserve with as little change as possible, what the lapse of Time has spared’; in other words, ‘repair and not restoration is the essence of the matter’. But repair was, and remains, an aesthetic as well as a technical activity. For Peers, as indeed for Godfrey, the appeal of the buildings was not in ivy-strewn decay, but in what lay beneath. It might be considered fortunate for the Priory ruins that the money available for the repairs was small, and the interference from the state service at the time was little, no doubt due to the considerable amount of work taking place to consolidate other monuments which had been taken into state care – by the time Peers died in 1952 over 400 sites including some of the greatest abbeys and castles were not only in state care but had been cleared and given the Peers repair treatment. So Godfrey, who had at one time envisioned Lewes Priory as well repaired ruins surrounded by manicured lawns – how he would have liked the Priory Park! - perhaps against his better judgement was forced to be pragmatic and look to doing the least that was enough to preserve the monument and the story it could tell.

He had several technical problems to resolve, problems which we are still tackling today. Some walls had been collapsed by Portinari and were unstable as a result; much of the stone robbing that had taken place had left perilously hanging masonry; much of the wall cores were exposed, and indeed the chalk interior facing of some of the buildings had become exterior and in danger of decay through water erosion and frost action.

The principle techniques available then, as now, involved removing loose material and providing a new waterproof wall top - wall capping - or rebuilding the side of the core of a wall which had lost its face – known as rough racking - often involving the introduction of reinforcement to support surviving facework above, or an overhang or an unsupported arch; so really little technically has changed over near on 70 years, although now we might use stainless steel instead of delta metal, phosphor bronze, for the reinforcement.
The techniques are perhaps less important than the understanding of the implications of what one is doing: if there is any essential purpose in the consolidation of ruins it is to retain by faithful re-creation the original features and appearance of the ruin, but in a stable and lasting fashion. For example, if a wall has been robbed of its face, it is left with a core set back from the face by the distance of the depth of the facing stone. If that core needs rebuilding, it is important that the rebuilding does not impinge upon the zone where the face would have been. Of course it is possible that higher up some of the facing remains, which needs support if it is not to fall away, or the springing of an arch or vault occurs, which may project further than the line of the face below; in the first instance a metal support will probably suffice, as in the picture shown, but in the second instance it will often be necessary to create a false corework pier which projects slightly into the face zone; the visual success of this will depend on the skill of the mason, as well perhaps as encouragement from the architect.

While it is important not to create new features, as Chrismas was accused of doing, it is just as important not to lose original features in the refacing and repair work. You will all have noticed the open put-log holes on the masonry faces – holes to insert baulks of timber as Medieval scaffolding, and you will no doubt have noted the long holes or slots within the north wall of the south reredorter, as shown in the photograph; early Sussex antiquarians in 1850 speculated that they were either to save materials, or to admit a draught of air to dry the massive walls, or to ventilate the apartments, but their purpose is somewhat more prosaic, for timbers to hold the walls together until the lime mortar had gone hard: such features have been retained during the repair with no little artistry from the masons. Other original features which the mason needs to be alerted to – and I put it that way because
when he is working close up to the masonry some of these are difficult to see - might be vertical straight joints in the masonry, which could indicate an opening or where a building was extended, or horizontal mortar lines in the walls which indicate where one season’s work stopped and the next began.

Godfrey, no doubt with Ministry of Works encouragement, used Portland stone as a replacement for chalk from the beginning – there is a record of Portland being purchased in 1951. Chalk is not durable if not capped or provided with a roof, as the Romans found when they had to rebuild their Saxon Shore Forts in more durable materials so soon after their initial construction in chalk. Portland stone was readily available, cheap, durable, white, and not too far away to collect – the mason could go from Lewes down to Portland and collect a lorry load of stone offcuts and be back within the day.

However, there are two problems with the use of Portland stone in repairs. The first was that the white stone picked up algae and pollution from the environment and turned grey, quite a dark grey, which does not look anything like chalk – the photograph is of a section of the repaired south reredorter. More serious, the Portland was much harder and shed rainwater, which ran down the walls eroding the chalk below, or wetting it sufficiently to make its face crack when there was frost – the photograph shows two instances of this on the dorter, where the adjacent grey Portland can also be seen. The result was that the chalk eroded, and many of the early capped walls became necked, with a band of Portland stone masonry above a rapidly diminishing chalk core. The failed chalk was repaired with Portland
stone, the problem reappeared further down, and before long a chalk monument became a Portland stone one in several shades of grey.

As an aside I would remark that we have tried other stones, and in particular limestones from Normandy, Richemont and Lepine Levox, with no greater success, and more recently we have imported a particularly hard chalk from Yorkshire which we have been using to
create a sacrificial zone to try to keep as much of the historic chalk below as possible – the photograph shows this on the second reredorter south wall, below a band of Portland and above the surviving original facing; this has had some success, but the Yorkshire chalk has bands of flint within it which makes conversion of the block into usable pieces expensive in sawing.

Of course with all buildings, and especially so perhaps with ruins where the intention is always to use a light touch in repair, repairs have a limited life, and repairs that tend to last a long time are more invasive of the historic fabric. There is clearly a balance to be sought between the impact on the historic fabric and the time before repair is again necessary. On monuments a life for repairs of around 25 years is sought, but that is not easy to predict. At Lewes Priory it is possible to see repairs on the frater for example which are nearly 70 years old and in sound condition – did Christmas intervene too much? – while on the same piece of wall it is possible to see 10 year old refacing which is already cracked.
The preservation of ruins such as Lewes Priory is akin to the maintenance of the Forth Bridge. At present annual inspections are carried out followed by small scale repairs, small scale because that is all that is necessary. But at some point in the future small scale will not be enough, and a major intervention will be needed again if the Priory ruins, and indeed Priory Park, are to maintain their existence and continue to educate visitors at whichever level the visitor chooses. The expectation must be that a further major intervention will be needed by 2035, and it is to be hoped that there will be able successors to Walter and Emil Godfrey to ensure that the ruins are given the love and technical attention put into practice by those two exemplary conservation architects.