

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

## **Bristol Cathedral**

by R. J. King  
1878-79, Vol. 3, 99-105

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## BRISTOL CATHEDRAL,

By RICHARD JOHN KING, B.A.

*Read in the Chapter House, 1st August, 1878.*

The best excuse for my appearance to-day as the describer of your Bristol Cathedral, is, perhaps, the fact that under special circumstances, I have been led to make a close study, not only of the Cathedral Churches of England and Wales, but of the Church Architecture of many of the principal English counties. There is nothing quite like this Cathedral of Bristol, either in England or on the Continent. It stands, in many respects, alone; and a minute acquaintance with other great English churches of the same period enables even an unprofessional student like myself to recognise and appreciate its very remarkable peculiarities. We are accustomed to think of the several styles of Gothic architecture as distinguished, one from another, by special mouldings, special forms, special ornaments; and of course we are quite right in so thinking. But what we do not so distinctly recognise is the fact that these forms and ornaments, whilst they preserve, in most cases, the character which marks them as Early English, Decorated or Perpendicular—as belonging to this or that century—are, nevertheless, varied in different parts of the country in a manner which can hardly escape some sort of notice, although few, perhaps, have opportunities of comparing group with group, or of knowing how widely different is the contemporary architecture of districts, all within the four seas of Britain, but as much separated, anciently, by difficulty of communication as if the sea or great mountain ranges had altogether isolated them. No one, for instance, can visit Lincolnshire or Northamptonshire, where the churches are of especial grandeur and interest, without recognizing a peculiar originality displaying itself in many ways—in ground plan—in the disposition and design of ornament—or in the outline given to

certain parts of the buildings, as in the Early English octangular tower of Stanwick in Northamptonshire, and in the later detached campanile, also octangular in its upper stage, at Irthlingborough in the same county. So when we pass along the north-western border of the fens—the so called Marshland of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk—we are struck, at once, by the magnificent and very peculiar character of the churches throughout the district; an especial richness of invention and of arrangement which ranges from the twelfth century to the sixteenth, but which seems to reach its climax in the Perpendicular period in the design and construction of such a wonderful church—the expression is not too strong, if we consider the solitary position of the building—as that of Terrington.

We hardly understand what admirable results may be produced by original genius, working on and in the recognized lines of a definite architectural style, until we have seen some of these remote churches, or some of the groups, belonging to the same period, in parts of Yorkshire or of Lincolnshire. We know so little of the ancient methods of working that it is impossible to say whether these marked local developments were due, in the first place, to the mind of a single architect, or to an almost unconscious growth in the companies of workmen to whom the erection of a great church was sometimes unreservedly entrusted. Probably both causes were at work. What has been called the most original design in the whole range of Gothic architecture, the octagon of Ely, was certainly thought out by one man—the Saint Alan of Walsingham, "*flos operatorum*" as he was rightly styled on his tombstone. But when we find a definite originality stamped on the work of a district from the beginning—and hardly disappearing until true Gothic itself disappears—we shall most likely be right in assuming that architectural traditions have been handed down from one period to another, and that the same causes which produced the original spirit of invention have aided in bringing about fresh outbursts of it from time to time and in the differing styles of the centuries. This is the case with the architecture of the district of which Bristol is one of the principal centres,

The ancient centre, so far as we can judge, of the architectural peculiarities which mark it, the source at which they were first developed and from which they spread, seems to have been Glastonbury. Early in the Transitional period, we find there certain features not to be marked elsewhere, and which the late Professor Willis pointed out as in all probability indicating a special school of workmen; a school which was somewhat behind in the general advance of architectural style, but which possessed an originality and a life that went far to make up for such a defect—if it is so to be regarded. From Glastonbury the peculiar characteristics of this school spread to Wells, where much of the work in the interior of the Cathedral is marked by a certain Norman heaviness, although we know that, at the time of its building, the Early English style had elsewhere been fully developed. Then from Wells it advances towards Bristol, and spreads itself gradually over those parts of South Wales which had become tolerably Anglicized, especially in Pembrokeshire and the district of Gower. It is distinctly to be traced in the great nave of St. David's Cathedral. Finally, it crossed St. George's channel with Strongbow and his Norman followers, many of whom, as we know, were from Pembrokeshire and Glamorganshire. The Cathedral of Christ Church in Dublin, which has just been so admirably restored under the care of Mr. Street, and the church of St. Canice at Kilkenny, both built by the Normans immediately after their Conquest of Dublin and the surrounding country, present features—such as the many-ringed shafts of doors and windows, and the peculiar management of the capitals in the great arcades, which are so completely the same as are to be found in Gower, at Wells, and elsewhere, as to leave no possible doubt that the Norman builders in Ireland imported their architect or their workmen, probably both, from this side of the Channel. These works, directly or traditionally imitated from Glastonbury and Wells, belong for the most part to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> But the originality of the school by no means died out. Later features, quite as striking, and quite as distinguishing, occur throughout the whole district over which the

<sup>1</sup> See Ante, p. 17.

school of workmen first spread themselves ; and amongst the most original, the most important, and I shall add, the most beautiful of their later works, however the school may have been influenced by the personal ability and superintendence of Abbot Knowle, was, as I believe, this great Church of the Augustinians at Bristol,—now the Cathedral.

The great beauty of this church has not always been recognised. Mr. E. W. Godwin, whose careful study of the fabric has rendered easy the labours of his successors, in describing the work of Abbot Knowle—that is, in its main features, the whole of the church east of the central tower—says : “ whatever may have been the actual extent of his work, that which now remains convinces me that it is but part of one bold continuous project, which, if carried out to the full length, would doubtless look full of design and originality, although like many old and new works of the same class, by no means pleasing.”<sup>1</sup> I scarcely understand what Mr. Godwin means by “ works of the same class ;” but Abbot Knowle’s project, with but slight modification, has now been carried out to the full length. The nave, so long wanting, has been added to the choir and transepts ; and how far the Cathedral, in its renewed condition, can be pronounced “ unpleasing ” may, I think, safely be left to the judgment of all who are visiting it to-day. There are some attempts at architectural originality, even in the best periods, which, are certainly not pleasing. Such for instance is the sharply pointed arch, which, without any necessity, the architect has used throughout the otherwise most beautiful north transept of Hereford Cathedral, the transept in which stands the base of the shrine of St. Thomas Cantilupe. But at Bristol, I confess that the great originality of the design seems to me to have resulted in nothing but what is admirable. It is quite true that nothing precisely like this church is to be found anywhere else. The great distinguishing features are :—the lofty main arcade, without triforium or clerestory, the aisles of equal height with nave and choir, and consequently admitting of

<sup>1</sup> Bristol Cathedral, by Edward Godwin, F.S.A., in the *Journal of the Archaeological Institute*, vol. xx., p. 51.

those lofty and magnificent windows which quite compensate for the absence of the usual stages above the arcade, the roofing, or rather the vaulting of the aisles, and the disposition and design of the sepulchral recesses. There are minor details which we shall see in passing round the church. Altogether none of these features are found elsewhere. There is no one church contains them all except this Cathedral of Bristol. But certain of the details do occur elsewhere, and in the district over which the peculiar school of Glastonbury spread itself at an early period. The remarkable form and decoration of the sepulchral recesses are found both at Llandaff and at St. David's; slight suggestions, but sufficient, as it would seem to intimate that some common tradition—perhaps embodied in one great guild of workmen—was still alive, and that the originality, which had in a former century displayed itself at Glastonbury and at Wells, was still capable of starting into life in new forms, and under new conditions.

We have thus before us if not one of the largest, yet perhaps the most peculiar, and by no means the least interesting, of English Cathedrals. Before we examine it in detail it may be as well to note, very briefly, the history of the church and the dates of its main portions. For all this I must again express my especial obligations to Mr. Godwin's paper.

**NORMAN.** 1st period.—1142-1148. Old church, and the Abbot's Lodging.

It is the sparing and judicious economy of the Provost of Bristol contrasting with a lavish and almost extravagant richness of the Baron Mouk.

*Norman Church.*—Small staircase in north aisle; portion of walls of south transept; base of the walls in the north transept; lower part of the tower piers.

Exterior of south transept. In west wall a blocked-up doorway, with nook-shaft and plain soffit, indicating the early work of the Prepositor. This doorway was a temporary entrance to the first Norman Church, blocked up when the Norman aisles were built.

Flat pilaster buttresses at angles of this transept set off in the wall, indicating the level of the old parapet, &c., &c.

Norman work of north transept confined to the coursed masonry between Early English jambs of great north window. Staircase, *Norman* work inside, consisting of corbel-heads of very rough character.

Norman Nave.—South wall of arch found in removing some old houses on the site.

Lower or Abbot's entrance.

The great gateway, though Norman in character, was rebuilt in the Perpendicular period, and partakes of some of the details of that style.

It was a monastery for Augustinian Canons—I purposely use the word *Augustinian*, we might as well talk of “Benedict” monks as of Augustine or Austin Canons—The order was founded by or at least in the time of St. Augustine of Hippo, but was not brought into England until after the Conquest, and was founded here by Robert Fitzhardinge in 1142.<sup>1</sup> In 1148 the church, or part of it, was ready for consecration. But in 1155 the King, Henry II., granted to Fitzhardinge the forfeited estates of Roger de Berkeley, by which means, says Mr. Godwin, “The founder was enabled to provide for the abbey to a much greater extent than at first contemplated.” Accordingly we find Norman work of two distinct periods, the first plain, in the transepts, the second, in St. Augustine's gateway and elsewhere, much richer, and belonging to the time after Fitzhardinge's increase of wealth. Unfortunately we have no documentary evidence to throw light on the building of the church until we reach the time of Abbot Knowle (1306-1332), and then it is scanty enough. The Norman church was however completed, and with nearly the same ground plan as that which now exists—nave and aisles, central tower and transepts, choir and presbytery. But the church can scarcely have been finished before a Lady-chapel was added projecting from the North transept, in precisely the same position as the much later Lady-chapel at Canterbury, and nearly the same as that of the Lady-chapel at Ely. This Lady-chapel was probably erected under the sway of the third Abbot, John (1196-1215). Some changes were afterwards, but also in the Early English period, made in the walling of the North transept; and the roof and East window of the Lady-chapel were renewed in the reign of Edward I. They are at any rate of early geometrical character, and must date sometime between 1283 and 1294. With these changes the Norman church

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fitzhardinge, the founder, became a Canon of this Monastery and died in 1170.—ED.

remained unaltered until Abbot Knowle began to rule the monastery in 1306. He entirely remodelled the Eastern portion of the church—that beyond the tower. Two chapels—the Berkeley chantry with its vestibule, and the Newton chapel, one at the Eastern the other at Western end of the South choiraisle, were added soon after Knowle's death, as we now see them, and are late in the Decorated style. Abbot Newland (1481-1515) remodelled the central tower, and re-constructed the roof of the North transept. The vaulting of the North transept is due to Abbot Elliot (1515-1526).

These have been the principal changes of the Church so far as they are at all recorded. The Norman nave was perhaps pulled down by Abbot Knowle ; since, in preparing the ground for the present nave, the bases of piers were found, apparently of the same date as his work in the choir. But that nave was, it is believed, never finished ; and it remained for the present generation to witness the completion of Abbot Knowle's design, in a manner which sufficiently proves that at least one architect of the nineteenth century can enter heart and soul into the feeling and the character of the great works of those "wise of heart in wood and stone," who lived when art was still religion.