

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

AT ITS THIRTY-THIRD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 19, 1873,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY

(INCLUDING THE ANNUAL REPORTS XXVII—XXXII),

1866—1873.

ALSO

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XVII.

BEING No. 3 OF THE THIRD VOLUME.

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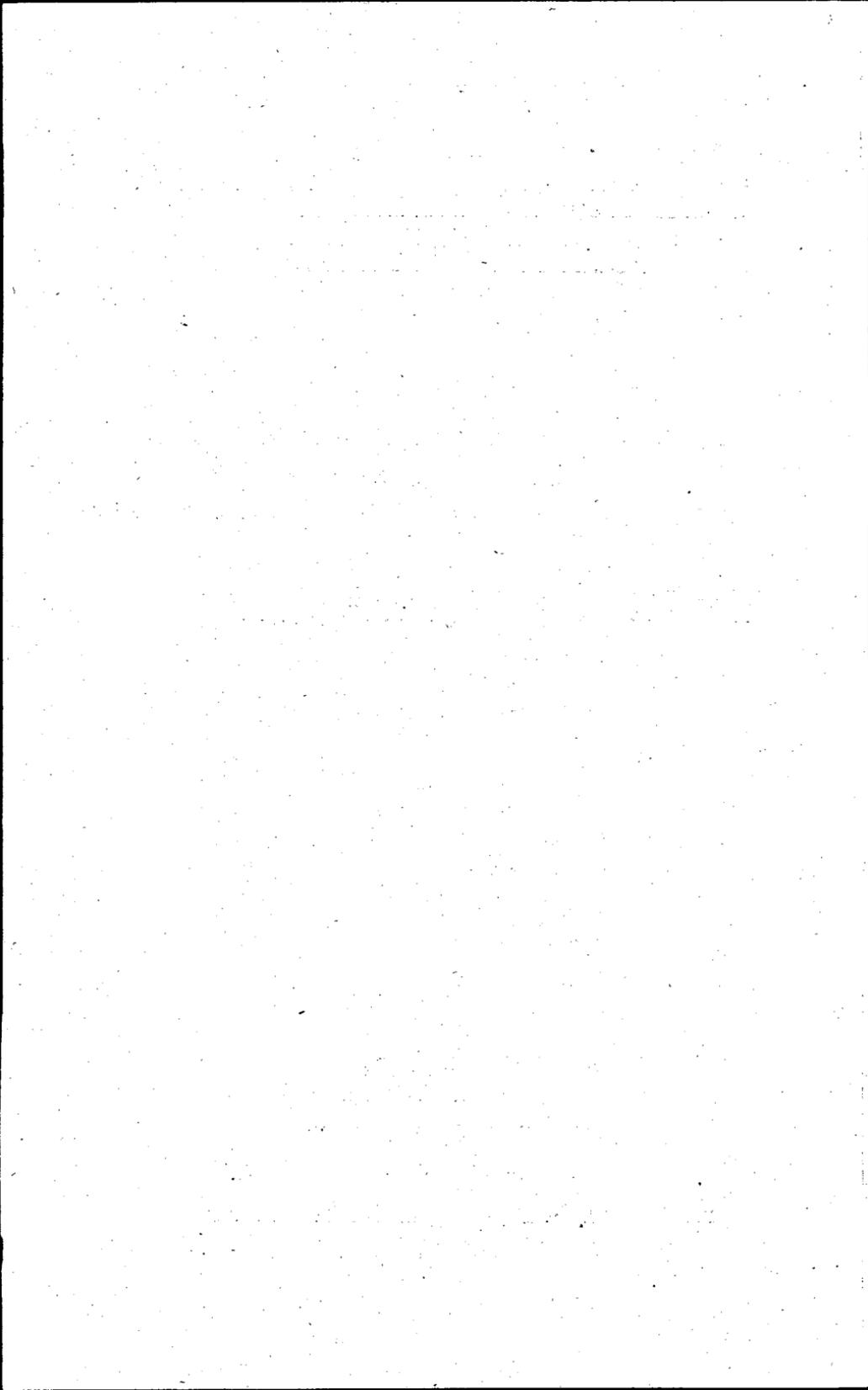
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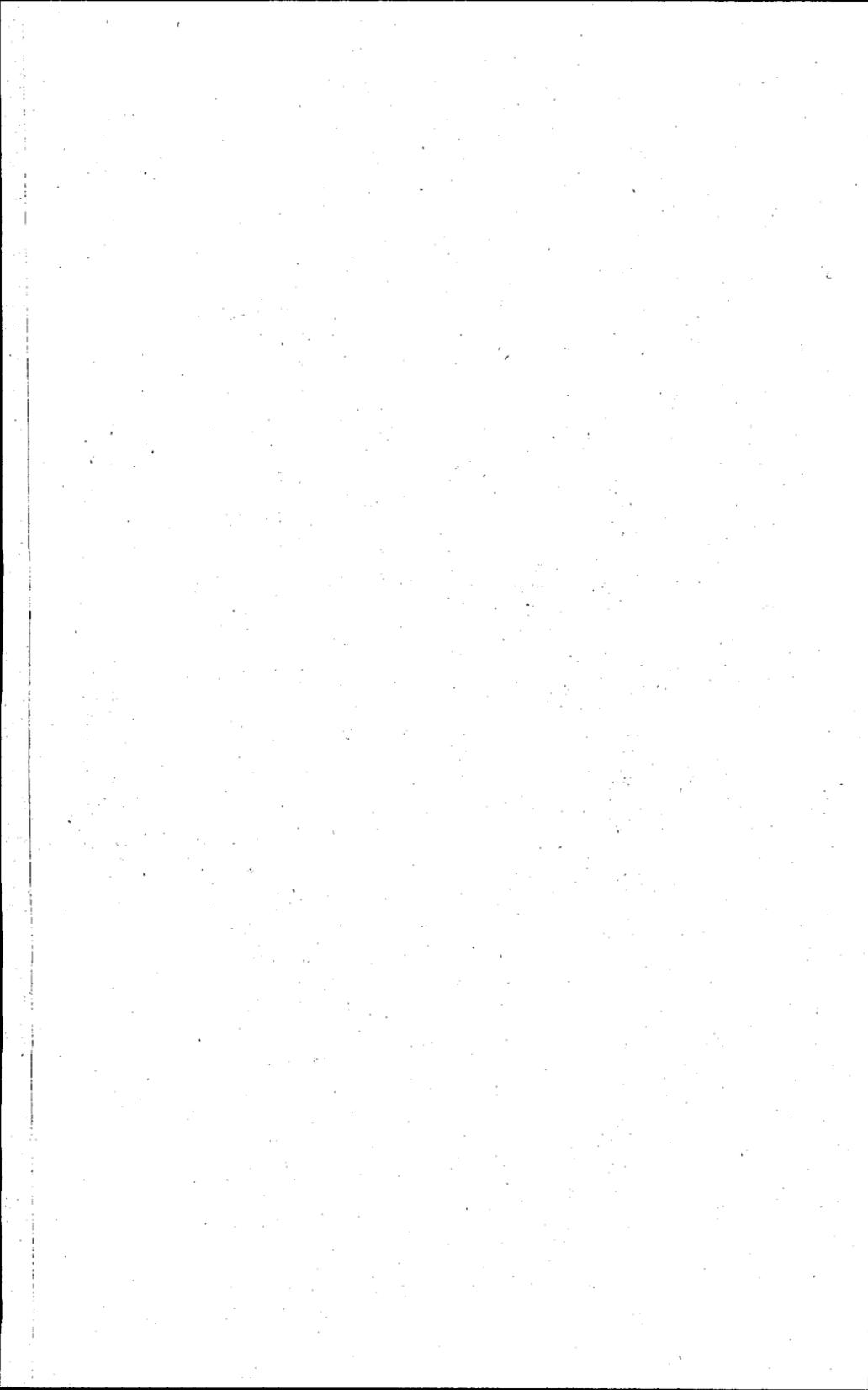
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XXIV. ON THE WEST TOWERS OF YORK MINSTER.
Communicated by F. A. PALEY, ESQ., M.A.

[Dec. 4, 1871.]

I AM not aware that any writer on the history of York Minster, not even Professor Willis, has noticed the important and interesting fact, that the original nave was not designed or constructed to carry any western towers. The date of the nave, it is well known, is early Decorated, or geometric, that of the upper half of the present west towers is early Perpendicular; and the stone of the upper half, being from Stapleton, near Pontefract, is different from the magnesian limestone of the nave generally, which is from Bramham Moor.

The two lower stages of the west towers are in all respects identical with the plan of the nave, that is to say, the aisle and clerestory nave, windows north and south, and even the parapets over both aisle and clerestory, and are carried on in the towers, north and south; the upper or clerestory parapet extending also along the whole west front, forming a gallery or passage from tower to tower above the great west window, and round the towers by doorways through the great tower buttresses.

The clerestory windows forming the second stage of the towers north and south differ only from the nave clerestory windows, in having flowing instead of geometric tracery. I think these were constructed, still without the intention of completing two towers above them, when the more highly

ornamented front was added at a somewhat advanced period of the Decorated style.

The square, or rather the rectangle, of the west towers is about sixteen yards by eighteen below; though the upper half forms a true square. The tower-buttresses on the north and south sides are merely the old aisle-buttresses which have been thickened and projected by an extra-casing of masonry. The proof of this lies in the fact, that the space between the buttresses and the windows, as compared with the others on the sides of the aisle, is diminished by the amount of the extra-thickening. In other words, the buttresses in this part come closer up to the window jambs. For the original nave windows, including the lower side window of the towers, were originally placed at perfectly equal intervals.

The two great buttresses at the western extremity are richly pannelled, and have been remodelled and probably rather heightened when the elaborate west front was constructed. They were never meant for tower-buttresses, and are still somewhat incongruous from their great projection in the two lower stages. In general character they resemble the great west buttresses at Salisbury and Wells. A glance at them will show that they were not built as tower-buttresses from the foundation.

The two lower stages of the west towers then, including windows and parapets, are simply and entirely parts of the original nave. It is from the upper parapet that the towers proper, which were an after-thought, commence. The middle stage of the towers is a transeptal projection of the clerestory on the north and south sides. But I suspect this transeptal bay, from the difference I have mentioned in the window tracery, was itself an after-thought on the original geometric nave; and this is the reason why, as it forms a strong abutment to the nave clerestory, the flying-buttresses, of which the lower and upper extremities may be seen, were never com-

pleted, especially as the nave-vault was carried out in wood, and not, as intended, in stone. The heavily pedimented heads of the western nave-buttresses mark where they ended before the towers were completed. To do this, they were, of course, carried up higher than had been intended, and above the great pedimented and originally terminal weatherings.

But the conclusive proofs that no towers were intended are derived from the inside. Here there is a perfect uniformity of plan; the nave pillars and arches are the same, the clerestory the same, and even the internal arcade is carried round aisles and west front without any change. The sole difference is this: the pier that stands first from the west end on the north and south sides has been, like the external buttresses, thickened to carry the weight of the towers. The masonry of these was almost rebuilt, at least, entirely recased, after the great fire that burned the nave roof some twenty years ago, so that evidences of masonry jambs, size and kind of stone, changes of foliage or mouldings, &c., are wanting. But this curious fact is in itself conclusive; the thickened pillar is twenty-seven and a half feet round, while the other pillars are twenty-one feet round. The space on each side between the thickened pillar and the next pier is eighteen and a half feet, while the wider space between the original piers in the rest of the nave is uniformly nineteen and a half feet. Therefore, the thickened pier was originally uniform with the rest. Of course, the arch above it was rebuilt of a slightly narrower span accordingly.

Yet further, the vaulting shafts in the north and south aisles, that bear the larger arch supporting towers across and above the aisles to the east, have been widened so as to cut off half an arcade, whereas the other and less thick vaulting shafts are placed, as usual, between the arcade compartments. Thus the extreme western bay in each aisle has only five and a half instead of six lower arcade arches. The same feature occurs

in the western wall, where the arcades have been interrupted by thickening the bearing shafts for the tower vaulting.

As I regard this matter, not as a speculation, but as capable of demonstration, I shall not go further into the question, itself an interesting one, of the original or intended plan for completing the west front.