

THE SITE OF THE SAXON CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF WELLS.¹

By W. H. ST. JOHN HOPE, M.A.

During the meeting of the Institute at Bristol six years ago, I had the honour of submitting certain views on the architectural history of the cathedral church of Wells. So far as these related to the existing buildings I was able to demonstrate them on the spot when we visited Wells; but there was one point which could only be dealt with very briefly, owing to the loss of the evidence once above ground, namely the story of the beginnings of the cathedral church.

As my remarks at the evening meeting were from notes only, and those relating to the point in question are represented in the report in the *Journal* by under a dozen lines,² I have ventured to commit my story to paper, that it may be available for discussion in a more extended form, with the documentary and other evidence on which it is based.

So many attempts have been made to unravel the architectural history of the cathedral church of Wells, and such conflicting views have been put forth to explain it, that it may seem hopeless now for anyone to get a hearing for an entirely new theory as to its beginnings. Yet I am going to be so bold as to put forth such a theory.

In vol. xix of the *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society* there is printed a paper by Mr. J. T. Irvine, entitled "An attempt to separate and describe in the proper order of their erection the various portions of the fabric of the cathedral church of Wells." In the ground plan which illustrates this paper, Mr. Irvine shows to the south of the transept the outlines of two buildings, the one rectangular, the other octagonal, as projecting from the east side of the cloister into the vicars' old burying ground. The former he elsewhere

¹ Read before the Institute, 2nd March, 1910.

² *Archaeological Journal*, lxi, 215-216.

calls "Stillington's chapel" and states that "the valuable information on the plan respecting" it was "obtained by the kindness of .Prebendary D. M. Clerk, from his measurements obtained when he had excavations made in 1850."¹

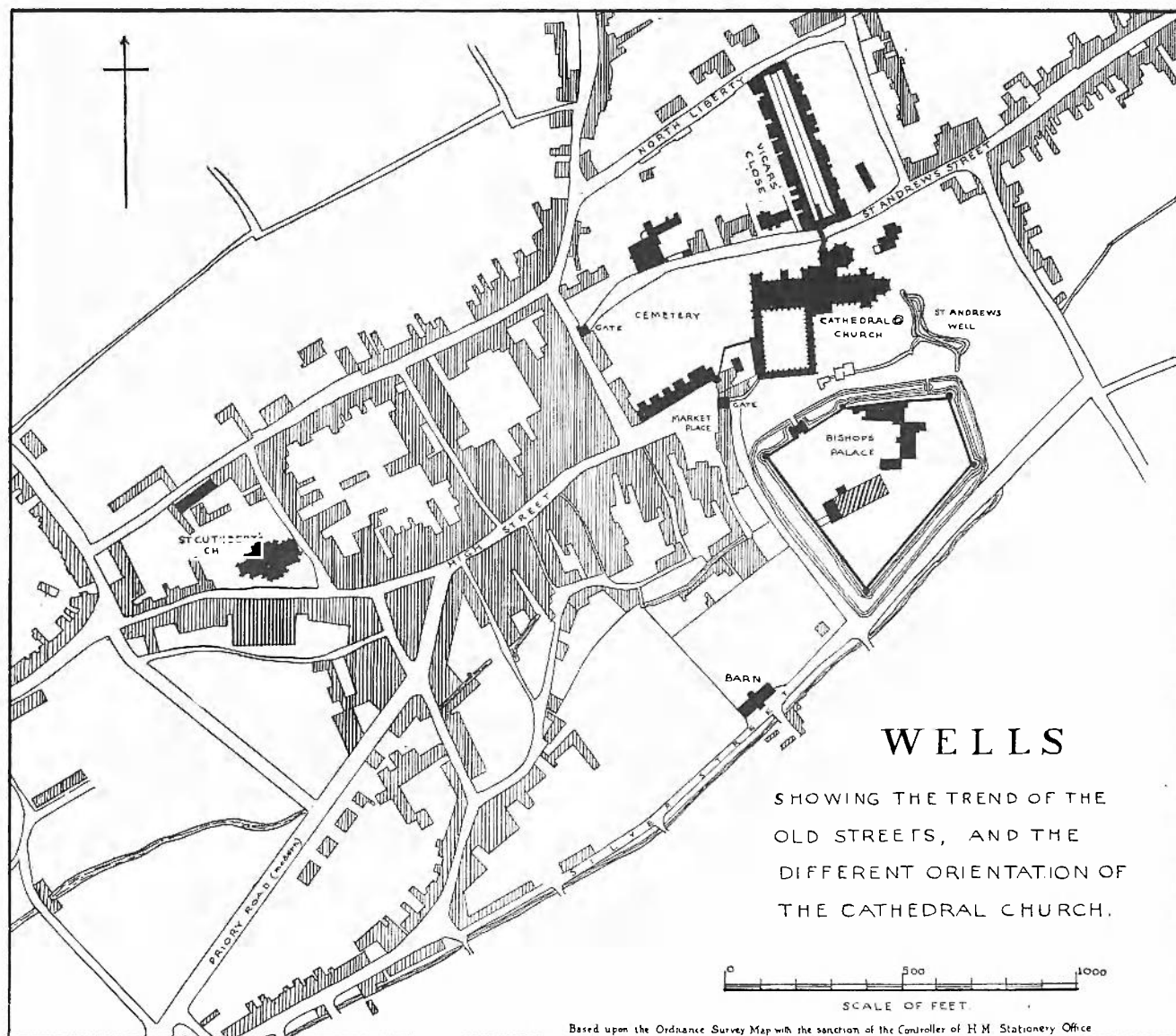
The evidence as to the existence of the octagonal building, which was apparently discovered during the same excavations, had always seemed to me so slight, that in 1894, at my representation, the site was again examined through the kindness of the Dean and Chapter. The results are embodied in a paper "On the Lady Chapel by the Cloister of Wells and the adjacent buildings" by Mr. Edmund Buckle, printed in vol. xl of the *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*.

The fragmentary foundations disclosed by the excavations have been ingeniously shown by Mr. Buckle to have belonged to two distinct buildings. One of these was a large cruciform structure (fig. 1), the west wall of which still remains to a considerable height, and formed the lady chapel built by bishop Robert Stillington during the later years of the reign of Edward IV.

The other building was of a totally different character and of more than one period. The oldest fragment apparently belonged, not to one of octagonal plan, but to the eastern portion of a square-ended structure fifteen feet wide and of early date. To this aisles had been added in the thirteenth century. But the most curious feature of these foundations is, that while those of bishop Stillington's chapel were exactly square with the cloister and cathedral church, the earlier fragments belong to a building which makes with the cloister an angle of twelve degrees (fig. 1).

This obliquely placed building has been conclusively shown by Canon Church to have been identical with the "chapel of the Blessed Mary which is situated on the south side of the greater church of Wells" mentioned in a charter of 1250, and which was apparently enlarged, probably by the addition of the aisles, by members of the Bitton family about 1275, when an altar of St. Nicholas

¹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* xx, part ii, 2.



was constructed in it. A chapel of St. Katherine within it is also mentioned in a will of 1392,¹ and her altar was afterwards transferred to the new chapel (see will of 1486).² The fragments of the older building showed that the aisles extended as far eastward as the chapel itself, and that it was of three bays, with arches opening into the aisles in the two western bays. The western respond of the south arcade still remains embedded in the cloister wall which formed in later days the west end of the chapel. This wall is believed by Mr. Buckle, and I have no reasons for dissenting from his view, to be contemporary with the north porch of the cathedral church, which he assigns to a date *circa* 1185. The wall contains a large doorway (now blocked) that led into the earlier lady chapel, but this doorway is an insertion by bishop Joscelyn after 1220. South of it is a smaller doorway, also now blocked, that led westwards from the cemetery, but this is contemporary with the wall. Mr. Buckle also pertinently argues that since the chapel stands so obliquely with regard to the wall, it must be older than the wall, and that possibly it occupies the site of a chapel of our Lady which was endowed in the eleventh century by bishop Giso with a virgate of land in Wotton. "If this is so," Mr. Buckle continues, "the difficulty caused by the oblique position of the chapel vanishes at once; for in that case the chapel is of higher antiquity than the present cathedral, and nothing is known of the direction or even of the exact site of the earlier Saxon church."

Mr. Buckle thinks also that the obliquity of the direction of the chapel is to be accounted for by the existence, parallel with it, of the stone conduit that carries off the overflow from the smaller of the two St. Andrew's wells to the east. Here I must leave Mr. Buckle and revert to my own theory of the beginnings of the cathedral church of Wells.

And first let me direct attention to the Ordnance Survey plan of the city of Wells (plate 1).

It will at once be seen from this that while the general axis of the city and the trend of its roads and streets is

¹ F. W. Weaver "Somerset Mediaeval Wills" (1383-1500), *Som. Record Soc.* 16, 1.

² *Ibid.* 261.

generally some twelve degrees north of east, the cathedral church and the contemporary portions of the cloister and bishop's palace alone stand nearly due east and west. Why church and palace should have been so set is at present immaterial, but it is all important to notice that the general direction of the town and its streets coincides nearly if not exactly with the obliquity of the older lady chapel.

In explanation of this I must revert to the early history of the church of Wells.

A church is believed to have been founded here by Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne, between 705 and 709. This church, which was collegiate (that is to say, it was served by a college of priests) was made cathedral in 909, when Athelm was consecrated first bishop of Wells.

No mention of the structure of the church occurs until the days of Giso, the fifteenth bishop, consecrated in 1061, who himself says that on taking possession of his new see :

Seeing that the church of my see was but a middling one and also that four or five clerks were there without a cloister and a frater, I devoted myself of my own free will to the building of them.¹

Giso accordingly obtained from king Edward the grant of Wedmore, and from queen Edith lands in Merken and Modesley. He also recovered the vill of Wynesham which had been alienated from the church, and bought other property for the augmentation of the canons and their support. The bishop goes on to say that having compelled his canons to live according to rule :

I prepared for them a cloister, a frater, and a dormer ; and everything which I knew was necessary and fitting for them, according to the manner of my own country (Lorraine) I laudably added.²

Giso died in 1088 after ruling the see for twenty-eight years and was buried

¹ Tunc ecclesiam sedis meae perspicies esse mediocrem, clericos quoque quatuor vel quinque absque claustro et refectorio esse ibidem, voluntarium me ad eorum astruxi adinstauracionem. *Historiola de primordiis Episcopatus Somersetensis*, etc. *Camden Society*, 8, 16, 17.)

² Claustrum vero et refectorium et dormitorium illis praeparavi, et omnia quae ad haec necessaria et competentia fore cognovi, ad modum patriae meae, laudabiliter advocavi. *Historiola*, 19.

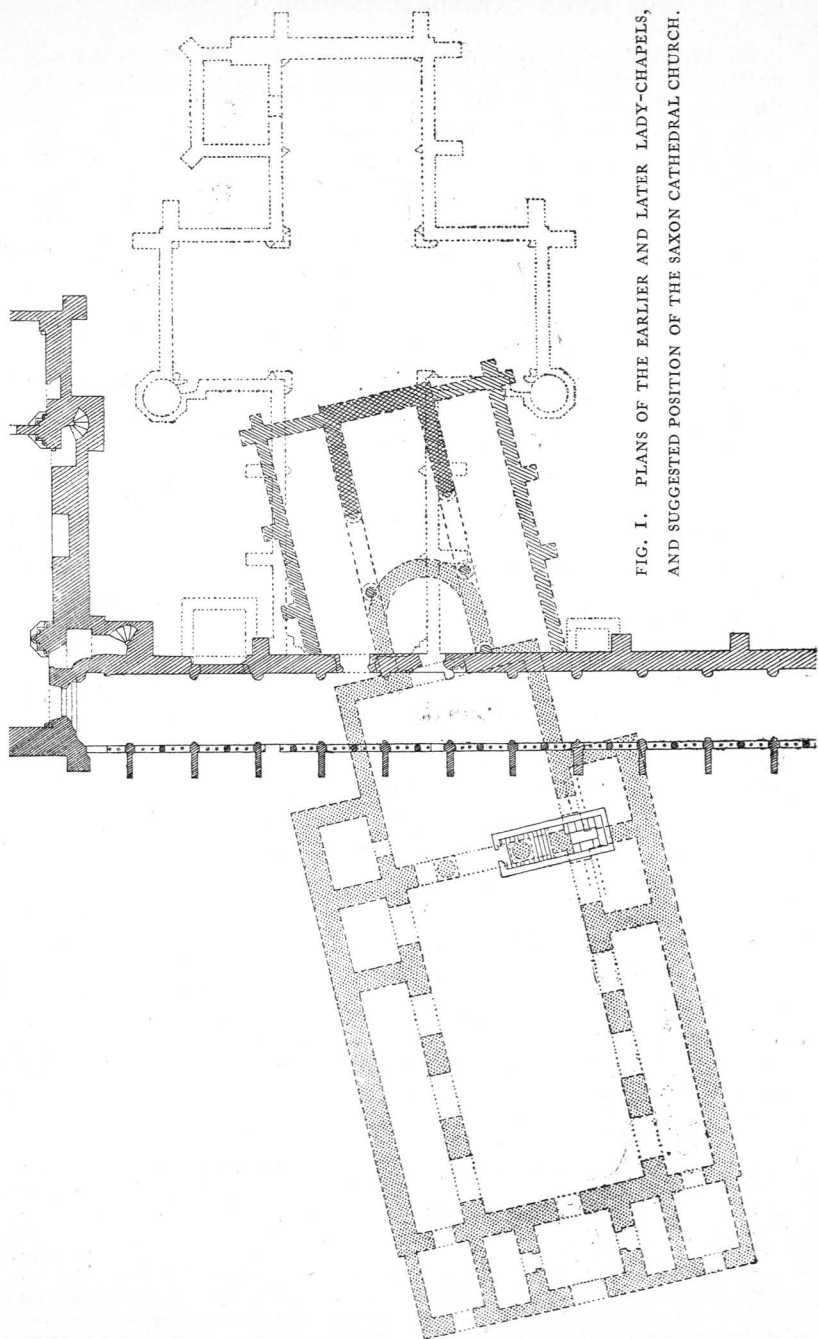


FIG. I. PLANS OF THE EARLIER AND LATER LADY-CHAPELS,
AND SUGGESTED POSITION OF THE SAXON CATHEDRAL CHURCH.

In the church which he had ruled in a recess made in the wall on the north side near the altar, as Dudoc his predecessor was buried on the south beside the altar ¹

It is clear from this that Giso did not rebuild the cathedral church, despite its being *mediocre*.

Giso was succeeded by John of Tours, who in 1090 removed his bishopstool from Wells to Bath as being the more important town, and deprived the canons of part of their revenues.

The houses also of the canons which the venerable Giso had built, namely the frater and the dormitory, also a cellar and other necessary offices, with the cloister, having been destroyed, the canons, whom Giso had taught to live by rule and religiously, were turned out of doors and driven to live a common life with the people. ²

So says the *Historiola*, but the canon of Wells adds, apparently without any authority :

And the site on which they first dwelt he usurped for himself and his successors, and built his episcopal palace there. And although when broken by age he repented of it, he neither repaired the destroyed buildings of the canons nor restored to them the site unjustly taken away. ³

Of the German bishop Godfrey, who succeeded John in 1123, nothing particular is recorded, but a charter of bishop Robert incidentally mentions his having hallowed the church of St. Cuthbert, and endowed the rectory with half-a-hide of land in North Wootton.

Bishop Robert succeeded Godfrey in 1136, and as Canon Church has pointed out, "set himself at once to the recovery of Wells from the humiliation under which it had been left by the rule of bishop John of Tours." He removed the provost who had hitherto governed and oppressed the church, and instituted in his stead a dean with a subdean, a precentor and subchanter, a treasurer and a chancellor. The manor of Biddisham was set apart "to repair the church of the blessed Andrew and

¹ In ecclesia quam rexerat in emiciclo facto in pariete a parte aquilonali prope altare, sicut Duduco praedecessor ejus sepultus est a meridie juxta altare. *Historiola*, 21.

² Domicilliis quoque canonicorum quas Gyso venerabilis construxerat, refectorio scilicet et dormitorio, necnon et cellario, et aliis officinis necessariis, cum claustris, dirutis, canonici foras ejecti, coacti sunt

cum populo communiter vivere; quos Gyso docuerat regulariter et religiose cohabitare. *Historiola*, 22.

³ Et fundum in quo prius habitabant sibi et suis successoribus usurpavit; palatiumque suum episcopale ibidem construxit. Et licet ipse confractus senio inde poeniteret; tamen edifica canonicorum destructa minime reparavit, nec fundum eis injuste ablatum restituit.

to buy ornaments for it" (*ad reparandam ecclesiam beati Andreae et ornamenta emenda*). The same charter also tells us of the half-hide in Wootton which bishop Giso gave with a virgate of land to the chapel of St. Mary.

The *Historiola* contains a very important statement with regard to bishop Robert. After describing his new building of the church of the blessed Peter at Bath, together with the chapter-house and cloister, the dorter, the frater, and the farmery, it continues :

Moreover it must not be forgotten that the church of Wells was built by his counsel and aid. And so it was, that when the church of Wells was finished by the same lord of Wells, having associated with him three bishops, famous and of good memory, Goscelin of Sarum, Dan Simon of Worcester, and Dan Robert of Hereford, he hallowed and dedicated the same church.¹

From the dates of the assisting bishops this consecration must have taken place between 1142 and 1148.

What is precisely meant by the statement of the chronicler is a little difficult to understand. In describing bishop Robert's work on the Bath church he says "cum magnis expensis construi fecit," that is, "he caused it to be built;" but of the Wells church that "suo consilio et auxilio fabricata est."

A fifteenth century writer on Wells states that bishop Robert "finished the fabric of the church of Bath begun by John of Tours; dedicated the church of Wells in the presence of bishop Goscelin of Sarum, Simon of Worcester, and Robert of Hereford; and admirably repaired many ruinous portions of the same church (which were) threatening in destruction in divers places" (*multas ruinas ejusdem Ecclesiae destructionem ejus in locis pluribus comminantes egregie reparavit*).

In attempting to reconcile these statements (1) that bishop Robert helped to build anew the church of Wells, and (2) that he only repaired it, we are met with the difficulty that practically no remains of any Norman church have hitherto been met with at Wells, while there is ample proof that the new abbey church of Bath was

¹ Porro non est oblivioni tradendum, quod ecclesia Welliae suo consilio fabricata est, et auxilio. Et factum est, cum perfecta esset ecclesia Welliae ab eodem domino Welliae, ascitis sibi et adjunctis grandis

et praeclarae memoriae tribus pontificibus, G. Sar et S. domino Wygorn. Roberto domino Herefordiae, consecravit et dedicavit ipsam ecclesiam. *Historiola*, 25.

of quite imposing dimensions. That too escaped rebuilding until the close of the fifteenth century, while Robert's church at Wells, if ever it existed, must have been swept away within fifty years of its building.

The hallowing of it, on the other hand, which is so explicitly recorded, certainly points to some rebuilding or enlargement, and the question is, what was the nature of it?

I should like to suggest that bishop Robert first repaired the old Saxon church, and at the same time, to make more room for his newly-founded chapter, enlarged the church by extending it eastwards. And I should like to feel that the early square end among the fragments excavated east of the present cloister was a remnant of this enlargement. In that case the addition to the old church may have included a new lady chapel, and this may be the reason why it alone was kept when the rest of the church was destroyed. But I have no documentary proof of this, and merely submit it as a suggestion.

It should be noted, however, that it presupposes one important fact, that the site of the Saxon church is not to be looked for within the area of the present cathedral church, but in the cloister known of old as Palm Churchyard, to the west of the obliquely placed foundations laid bare in 1894.

Excavations here are unfortunately impossible owing to the number of graves, in the making of which any foundations were probably destroyed, but a church in this position, somewhat on the original lines of that at Brixworth, which was built in 680, and therefore a little before the first church at Wells, would have sufficed for all the spiritual needs of the place for quite a long time (plate II).

I regard the conduit that runs parallel with its line as having been made rather as a drain to carry off storm water from the roofs of a considerable church, than as a means of supplying water to it.

In connexion with the position of the Saxon church I should like to call your attention to another fact. In a charter which, though undated, must be earlier than 1160, since it is witnessed *inter alios* by Ivo the first dean, bishop Robert recites how "it is well-known to the experience of some, that the tumult of the fairs which have

hitherto been wont to be held in the same church and in its forecourt (*atrium*) brings dishonour and injury to the same church, and is particularly burdensome to those ministering in it, by reason of its hindering their devotion and disturbing the quiet of their prayers." "Nevertheless," continues the bishop "lest we suffer contrary to the Lord's word the house of prayer to become a den of merchandise, we appoint and firmly ordain that whosoever assembles thither on the three feasts of the Invention of the Holy Cross, the feast of St. Calixtus, and the celebration of St. Andrew to do business, shall perform their business in the broad places of the town . . . and that they in no wise presume to violate the church or the forecourt of the church."¹

Now it will be noticed that on the west side of the existing cloister, between it and the market place, there is still an irregular shaped area, entirely out of square with the cloister, but with north and south walls having the same general direction as the market place and High Street and almost exactly parallel with the axis of the foundations in the vicars' cemetery. And I submit that we probably have here the site of the very *atrium* or forecourt referred to in bishop Robert's charter, and so are able approximately to fix the place of the Saxon church. The forecourt would be conveniently at the head of the market place, and this led quite naturally to the chief church of the city. It is also possible that until the northern side of it was built upon in the fifteenth century,² the market place was as wide as the forecourt east of it; and it is quite easy to suppose that the fairs which were at first held in the market place would overflow in time into the convenient court between it and the church whence they were removed by bishop Robert.

¹ "Nonnullorum autem constat experientie quod tumultus nundinarum que in eadem ecclesia et in atrio ejus hactenus esse consueverunt ad dedecus et incommodum ejusdem ecclesie accidit, cum in ea ministrantibus quam maxime sit importunus, quia et eorum devotionem impedit et orationum quietem perturbat. Verumne contra vocem divinam domum orationis speluncam patiamur esse negotiationis, statuimus et firmiter precipimus ut quicunque illic in tribus festivitibus,

videlicet in Inventionem S. Crucis et in festivitatem S. Calixti, et in celebritate beati Andree, negotiaturi convenerint, in plateis ville illius negotiationes suas securi et ab omni prava consuetudine et in quietudine libere exercent, et nullatenus ecclesiam vel atrium ecclesie violare presumant." C. M. Church, *Chapters in the early history of the Church of Wells* (London 1894), 360.

² Patent Roll, 30 Henry VI, pt. i, no. 11. (*Calendar*, 1446-1452, pp. 516, 580).

It will be seen from the plan in plate 1 that it is quite possible that the High Street may have continued originally in a direct line to the straight part of St. Andrew's Street, beyond the present cathedral church. The Saxon church and its *atrium* in that case would have stood parallel with that line and on the south side of it. The western part of St. Andrew's Street looks suspiciously like a line diverted on account of the later church.

If my theory as to the position of the Saxon cathedral church be accepted, it clears up some other difficulties.

To mention one, it has always been a puzzle why the present church, if built upon the site of a former one, should be so singularly free from older influences in its plan and from all traces of older materials in its construction.

But if the old church continued standing in the cloister while the new one was rising on another site both these difficulties vanish. There was also nothing to hinder the new church from being laid out with a different axis from the older, as it certainly was, though I am unable to offer any tangible reason for it.

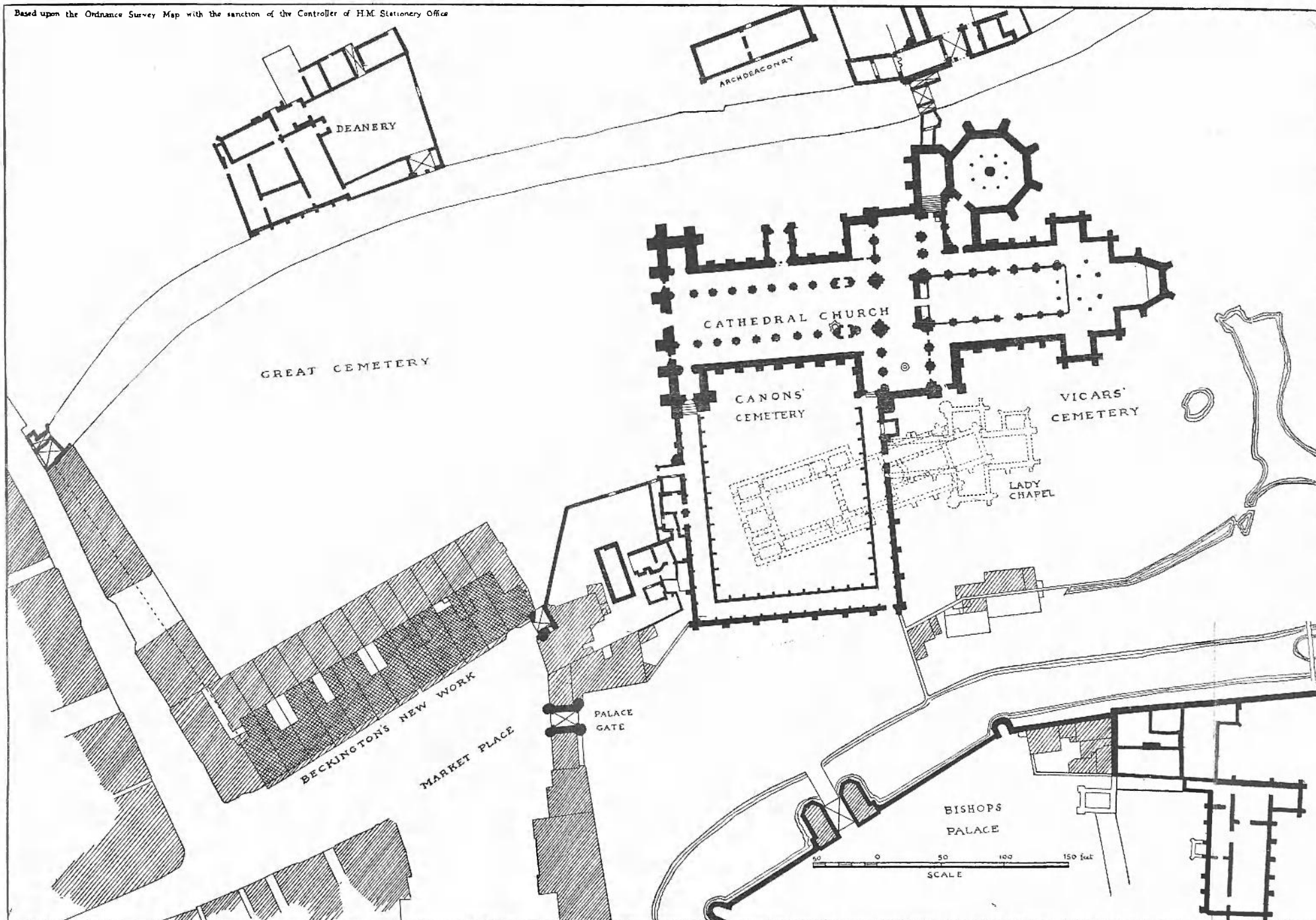
That bishop Robert had nothing to do with the building of the new church is sufficiently evident on architectural grounds, and Canon Church has demonstrated beyond doubt that it must have been begun by bishop Reginald FitzJoscelyn, who succeeded Robert, after a vacancy of nearly nine years, in 1174.

To bishop Reginald is certainly due, not only the ground plan, but a very considerable section of the existing building. After his death in 1192 the work probably proceeded, but slowly, under bishop Savaric, who was largely an absentee. He instituted however the daily mass of Our Lady, and possibly completed the lady chapel at the east end of the church, the altar of which is mentioned in 1206-7.

Savaric was succeeded in the bishopric in 1206 by Joscelyn. He was in exile from 1206 to 1213, and this fact, as well as a great struggle with Glastonbury as to the independence of the abbey, which lasted until a final concord in 1219, must practically have stopped all work upon the new church.

The resumption of extensive building operations is

Based upon the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office



PLAN SHOWING THE SUGGESTED POSITION OF THE SAXON CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF WELLS.

perhaps marked by the royal grant in 1220 of sixty great oaks from the Cheddar woods "to make a certain limekiln for the work of the church of Wells."

The new church was hallowed by bishop Joscelyn in 1239, and in a charter of 1242 the bishop speaks of it in terms which show that it was then finished.

That it was so, except probably as regards the upper works, is proved by an act in chapter of 9th July, 1243, a year after Joscelyn's death, as to the arrangement of the burial grounds.¹

To the canons residentiary was assigned the area of the cloister south of the church, beginning at the south door and then southwards and back again.

No layman or vicar was to be buried among the canons, but the vicars were to be buried "in the cemetery towards the east behind the chapel of the Blessed Mary." That is, in the already existing burial ground around the lady chapel on the east of the cloister.

The lay folk were to be buried "in the cemetery towards the west" and their burials were to begin "beside the elms there planted alongside the place where the jousting ground was wont to be, and so extend themselves towards the west," but no layman was to be buried before the west doors of the church.

The dignitaries might be buried in the nave (which was therefore now finished), if they or their friends so willed it.

This interesting award brings us back again to the question of the site of the earlier church.

It is clear that the lay folks' cemetery before bishop Joscelyn's new west front was also new, since it is directed where burials shall begin, and the site is expressly stated to have adjoined the jousting ground. It cannot therefore

¹ "Statutum est inde ut de cetero canonici residentes sepeliantur in clauastro per ordinem secundum dignitatem ordinis et conditionis, ita quod majores minoribus proponantur [nisi forte sepulturus alibi vel in ecclesia vel extra designaverant in vita sua] et ut incipiat sepultura eorum ad ostrum ecclesie versus austrum, adeo prope sicut fieri poterit, et ut extendet se usque ad angulum claustrum directe, et sic deinceps, cautum est etiam ut nullus laicus vel vicarius sepeliatur inter eos,

sed vicarii sepeliantur in cemeterio versus orientem retro capellam beate Marie [et alibi in cemeterio] laici vero in cemeterio versus occidentem et incipiat sepultura eorum juxta hulmos ibi plantatos juxta locum illum ubi consuevit esse Hastillaria et sic extendet se versus occidentem. ita quod de cetero nullus laicus sepeliatur ante ostia ecclesie versus occidentem. majores autem persone de ecclesia sepeliantur in nave ecclesie si voluerint ipsi amici eorum." *Archaeologia*, i, 338.

be the same as the *atrium* or forecourt of the old church from which fairs were excluded.

The area of the cloister is also assigned for the first time as a burying ground, perhaps because it had lately been cleared through the taking down of the old church and any adjoining buildings.

The cemetery behind the lady chapel was apparently an old one, which was henceforth to be reserved for the burial of the vicars only.

Concerning the entrances into the present cathedral church Canon Church has reminded me of the important bearing which they have upon the points raised in my paper. The doorways in the west front are not the chief entrances at all, but merely the means of communication with the cemetery. The great north doorway, with its protecting porch, was the entrance for the canons and other officers, all of whom lived on the north side of the church. The main entrance from the city was under the south-west tower, through part of the western alley of the cloister, which in turn was entered through a regular gatehouse from the site of the very *atrium* referred to above.

Here I think I may end my paper, and it is for the Institute to say whether it is satisfied now that the Saxon church must have stood obliquely across the present cloister, westward of the lady chapel uncovered in 1894 ; and also that the existing cathedral church knows no other beginning than that by bishop Reginald, on a new site, in the third quarter of the twelfth century.