

ON THE DATE OF THE LADY CHAPEL AT WELLS

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The importance of fixing the date of the Lady Chapel at Wells will be recognized by every student of the history of English medieval glass.¹ It is desirable, therefore, to set out with some fulness the evidence offered by extant records and by architectural variations, with a view to determining the place this chapel must have held in the series of building operations which occupied the last years of the thirteenth and the first thirty years of the fourteenth century.

In 1239 Bishop Jocelin had marked by a solemn consecration the practical completion of the church which had been begun under Bishop Reginald some fifty years before.² This was three years before his death, which occurred on November 19, 1242. In the period which followed the chapter was involved in enormous debts, incurred at the Roman Court in the contest with the monks of Bath over the election of bishops; and the successive bishops were themselves burdened with the extortions of papal officials. After twenty years, however, the financial position would seem to have become easier; for in 1263 Bishop Bitton I was able to restore to the chapter the two-thirds of the fruits of all vacant benefices, temporarily surrendered for the payment of his debts, and to appropriate the profits as in earlier days to the fabric of the church.³

In 1275 came Bishop Robert Burnell, the king's chancellor and intimate friend, the owner, moreover, of great estates in Shropshire, and an enthusiastic builder. In the hall of his splendid house at Acton

¹ Reference must here be made to an article on 'The Fourteenth Century Glass at Wells' in the forthcoming volume of *Archaeologia*.

² This stage in the history of the

building has been elaborately investigated by Dr. Bilson in a former number of the *Journal* (xxxv, 1-68).

³ Church, *Early History of the Church of Wells*, 266 ff.

Burnell the parliament met to pass a famous statute; his hall and chapel at Wells were on a yet more magnificent scale. Moreover, in 1284 the chapter elected as their dean Thomas Bitton, the nephew of a former bishop, and a man of energy, who himself made his mark as a builder at Exeter after his promotion to that see.

It is not surprising that under these favourable conditions attention was once again directed to the fabric of the church and a new era of building activity commenced. At the instigation, as it would seem, of the bishop a special meeting of the whole chapter was held on April 26, 1286, to confer on the state of the fabric. It was then agreed that, in view of the pressing necessity of 'finishing the new structure long since begun,' and also of repairing and maintaining the older work, each of the canons should contribute a tenth of his prebend for the next five years.¹

What, then, was the 'new structure' which had been left unfinished for so long a time? There can be little doubt that Professor Willis was right in saying that it could be no other than the chapter house.²

¹ The unique significance of this meeting of the chapter is indicated by the elaborate form of its record in the register (Reg. i, 198 b: *Cal. of Wells MSS.*, i, 237). It begins: 'Memorandum, that when Thomas the dean and the chapter of Blessed Andrew of Wells, in accordance with the will (*juxta voluntatem*) of the venerable father the lord Robert by the grace of God bishop of Bath and Wells, all and singular the canons of the church of Wells who were bound to be summoned according to the approved custom of that church were duly and peremptorily called to appear in the chapter of the church of Wells on the Wednesday next after the Sunday on which is sung *Quasimodo* in the year of our Lord 1286, to treat of various concerns of their church, to do and receive such things as, for the utility and honour of God and the church there, with unanimous consent by the said dean and chapter should be ordained, wholesomely defined or decreed, even if it should happen that order be there made concerning a contribution to be bestowed for the necessity or honour

of that church. There appearing the said day and place certain canons in person but others by proctors having full authority for this purpose, when there had been set forth the various concerns of that church, and diligent discussion had regarding them; After consideration among other matters of the urgent necessity under which the church labours, as well for the completion of the new structure long since begun, as for the repair and maintenance of the old fabric thereof (*tam in nova structura jam diu incepta perficienda, quam antiqua fabrica ipsius reficienda et sustentanda*), and the insufficiency of the supplies thereto assigned; The said dean and chapter present and the proctors of the absent . . . This is but half of the document, which proceeds to record the self-taxation decreed and the penalties attaching to defaulters. To this solemn decree, by the unanimous consent of all, the common seal was affixed on April 26, 1286.

² *Proc. of Archaeol. Institute* (Bristol, 1851), p. xxviii; *Proc. of Som. Archaeol. Society*, XII, i. 20 (1863).

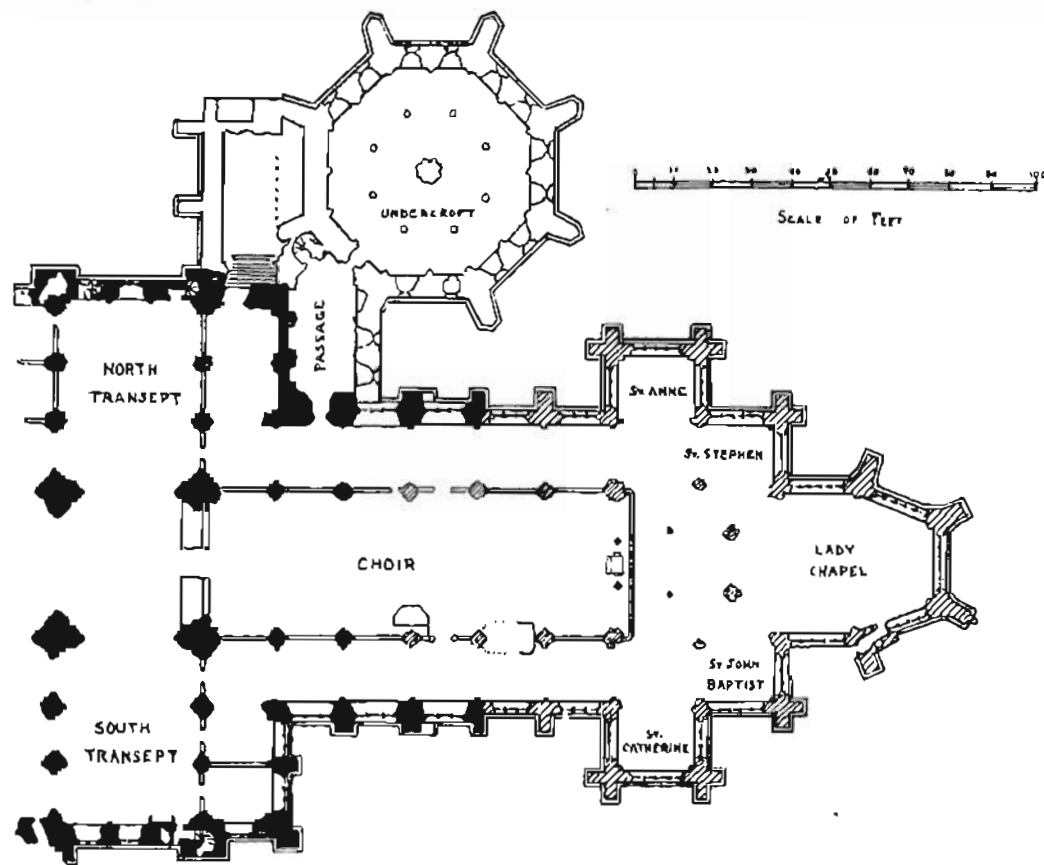


FIG. 1. WELLS CATHEDRAL: PLAN OF CHOIR AND LADY CHAPEL

The design of the chapter house falls into three divisions: (1) the undercroft, erected practically on the same level as the church itself, and entered by a passage leading from the north aisle of the choir; (2) the great staircase, built outside this to the west, and entered from the door in the north transept aisle; (3) the chapter house itself.

The undercroft, with its massive masonry and its narrow and heavily barred lancet windows, was meant to be the treasury of the church as well as the substructure of the future chapter house. If we examine the tooling of the stones in the interior of this building, we find that up to the sills of the windows—a height of about eight feet—it is diagonal, but above that it is vertical. This is the case on seven sides of the octagon; but on the side next to the entrance-passage the tooling is diagonal all the way up, as it is also, with occasional exceptions due to later modifications, in the passage itself. On the exterior it is precisely the same, and the diagonal tooling is found not only on the walling but also on the whole of the plinth both of the walling and of the great buttresses of the chapter house. Moreover, when we pass on to the west wall of the chapter house staircase we find the diagonal tooling up to the same height as before. Here, then, we have the indications of one building operation, cut off by a straight joint, at the one end from the north aisle of the choir, and at the other end from the north transept. Building was for a time discontinued at the height of eight feet from the ground; but the passage had already been built up and perhaps temporarily covered in to serve as a sacristy or treasure-house.¹

Now the change from diagonal to vertical tooling is to be traced in the walling of the nave; and according to Dr. John Bilson's investigations the latest diagonal tooling, viz. that found in the central tower, may be attributed to about the year 1220. This seems to show that the complete scheme for the chapter house, though not part of the original design, had by that date been determined on, and that its execution had

¹ The portions of the building blank outlines of the walls in the plan above referred to are indicated by the (Fig. 1).

for a while been energetically carried forward. This, then, may well have been 'the new structure long since begun,' which in 1286 it was desired to complete. How much more had been done in the interval it is not easy to say : but it seems likely that the walls of

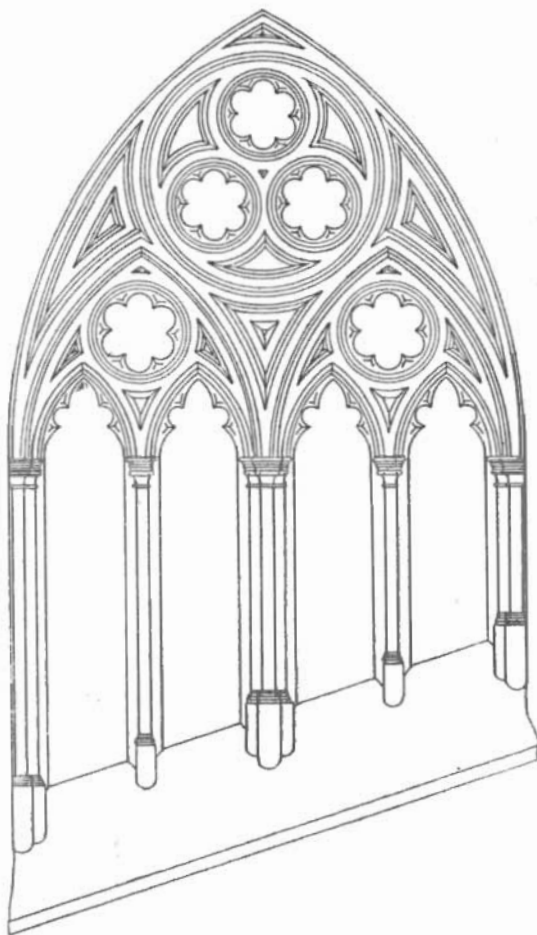


FIG. 2. WINDOW ON CHAPTER HOUSE STEPS

Scale : $\frac{1}{4}$ inch = 1 foot.

the undercroft had been carried up and its sturdy vaulting completed ; and it is possible that the passage from the north choir aisle had received its vaulting and finely carved bosses.

We are on surer ground when we come to the staircase. 'The style of the chapter house itself,' says Professor Willis, 'is so greatly in advance of the substructure and staircase as to show that a considerable interval of time elapsed between the one and the other. The great windows of the staircase are in the earliest geometrical style, rather in advance of those of Salisbury and Westminster. The windows of the chapter house, although of geometrical tracery, have patterns of much greater intricacy, such as belong to the development of such tracery.'¹ Now the windows of Westminster chapter house were in place in 1253, those of Salisbury not until after 1272. It is not then unreasonable to suppose that the staircase at Wells was in building about the year 1286. And this is borne out by the fact that the tracery lights show a groove for the glass, whereas in the long lights the glass was set, according to the earlier fashion, in a wooden frame fixed against a rebate on the exterior of the stone-work.² The fine traceries of the two arches of the vestibule of the chapter house are of the same period as the staircase.

At this point we have another break in the history of the building, and a pause of at least twenty years. Such an interval is indicated, as Willis observed, by the traceries of the windows. The chapter house windows were doubtless originally planned on the lines of those on the staircase; but the later mason worked out the design in the terms of his own period. The mouldings and the traceries, which begin to show the ogee form, are such as belong to a date not much earlier than 1310. Moreover, the sides of the windows display that profusion of the ball-flower ornament which is so conspicuous in Abbot Thoky's windows of 1318 in the south aisle of Gloucester nave. Accordingly we are not surprised to find that the first documentary evidence that the chapter house was actually in use is on the occasion of a special meeting of all the

¹ *Som. Arch. Soc. Proc.* XXI, i, 20 (1863). For the traceries of these windows see Figs. 2 and 3.

² Sir Charles Peers tells me that he has not found the groove earlier

than 1270. I desire, without making him in any way responsible for my conclusions, to thank him for several suggestions which proved very helpful.

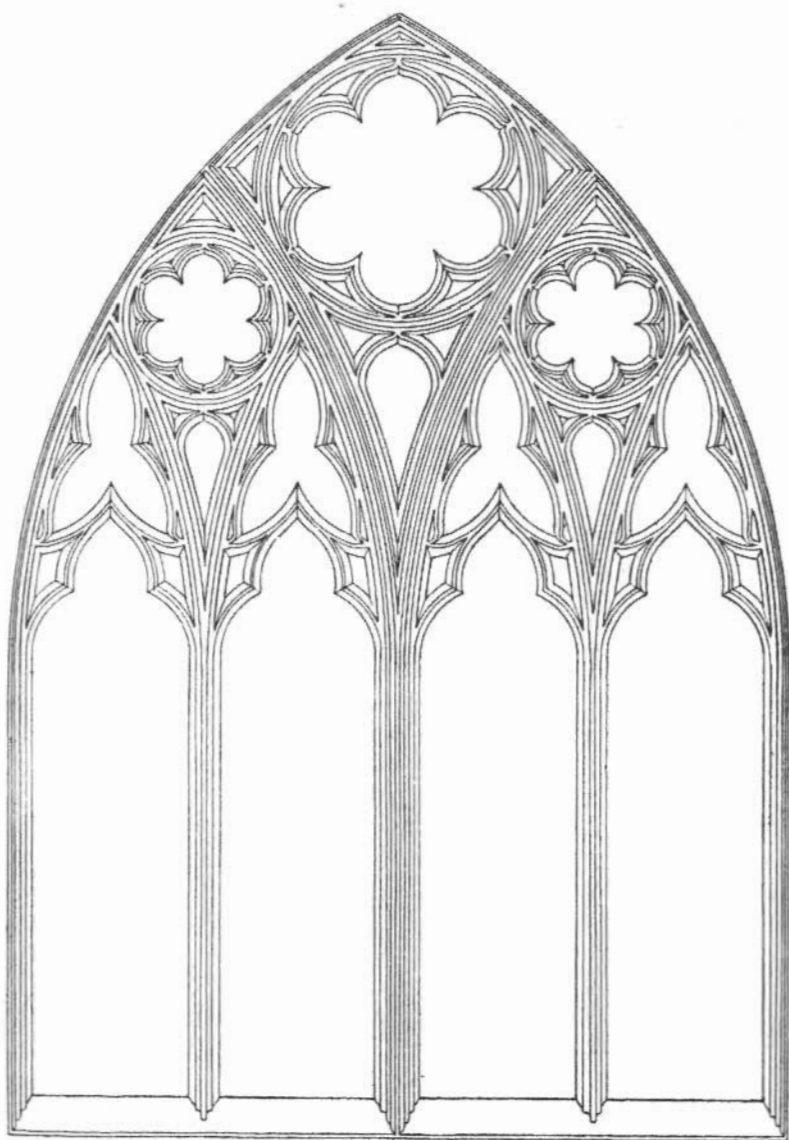


FIG. 3. WINDOW IN CHAPTER HOUSE
Scale : $\frac{1}{4}$ inch = 1 foot.

canons summoned to assemble *in domo capitulari* on July 11, 1319.

How are we to account for the long break of some twenty years, and what was happening in the interval? The pause may have begun as early as 1290 and have lasted till a little after 1310.

Now in 1292 Bishop Burnell unexpectedly died while he was on the king's business at Berwick, and in the same year Thomas Bitton, the dean, passed to the bishopric of Exeter. New leaders appear on the scene: William de Marchia was bishop from 1293 to 1302; and in this short period there were two deans, William Burnell (1292-95) and Walter de Haselshaw, who was promoted to the bishopric in 1302. It is just possible that the change of men was responsible for the change of policy by which attention was diverted from the chapter house, and a vast scheme was initiated for the reconstruction of the eastern portion of the church—a scheme which involved the building of a new Lady Chapel and the lengthening of the choir by three bays, as well as the erection of an eastern transept between the Lady Chapel and the choir. But the matter deserves a closer consideration.

In seeking the motive of so extraordinary a change of plan it is well to remember how many were the personal links at this period between the chapters of Wells and Exeter. To speak only of our deans: Edward de la Cnolle was a canon of Exeter, and on his death in 1284 he was succeeded in his prebend by Henry Husee, who had already held another stall there. Thomas Bitton became bishop of Exeter, William Burnell was a canon, and, though Walter de Haselshaw was not, his brother Robert was: so also was John de Godelee. And in addition to these deans several of the canons were holding prebends in both churches.¹ Now at Exeter a like scheme of eastern enlargement was already in progress.

But it was not only Exeter that afforded a stimulus to Wells. Behind both of these was Salisbury, where the new church was begun in 1220 and finished, so far

¹ I have worked out the details in *Som. and Dors. Notes and Queries*, xix, 25-9 (June 1927).

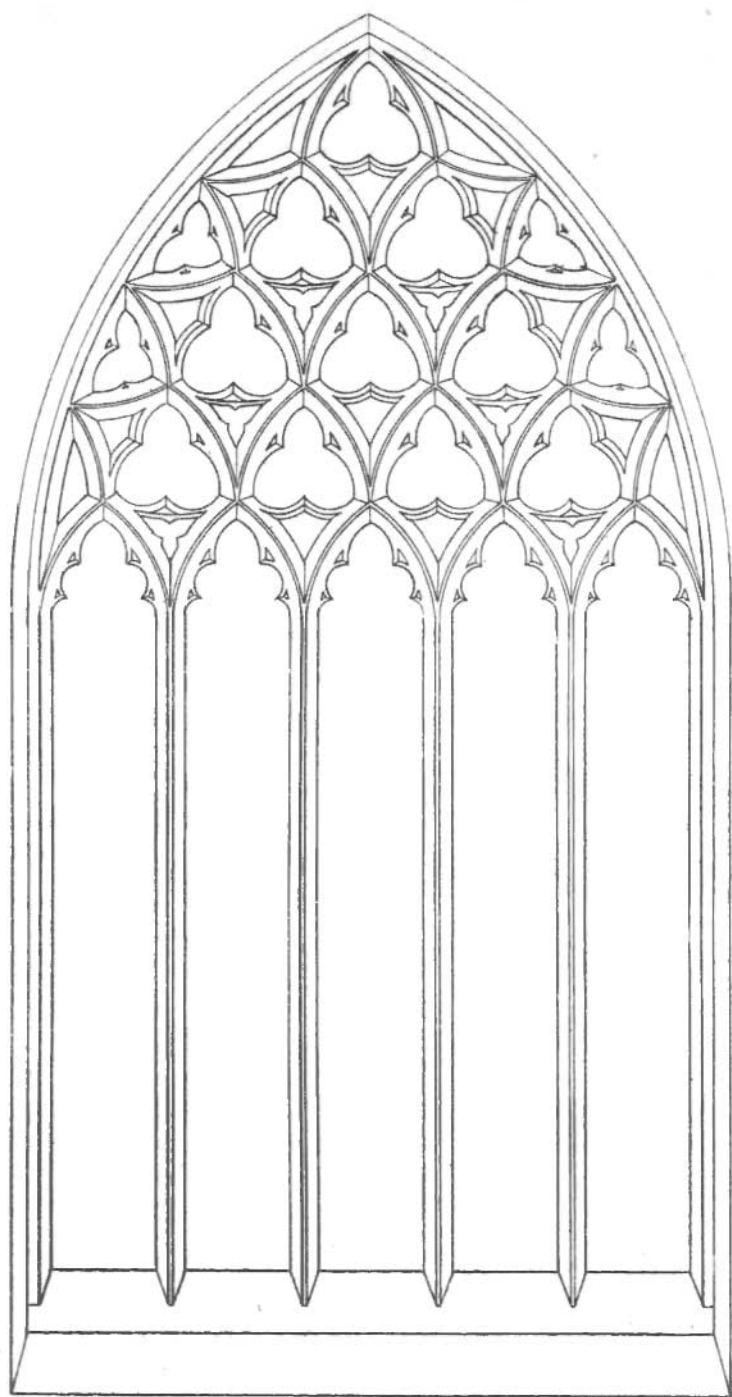


FIG. 4. WINDOW IN LADY CHAPEL
Scale : $\frac{1}{4}$ inch = 1 foot.

as the interior was concerned, by 1258. The amazing proportion of its eastern limb was a challenge to the two cathedral churches further west. Salisbury had offered a new ideal in St. Osmund's constitution of dean and chapter, and in the liturgical rites which were gradually developed after his time. Wells had taken over St. Osmund's constitution in 1140, and thenceforth regarded Salisbury as its guide in liturgical matters: Exeter had followed suit under Bishop Bruere in 1225. And here, it is to be borne in mind that these great extensions, which were indeed everywhere the order of the day, were not mere displays of architectural genius or ambition: they were the response to a cultural demand. The narrow spaces of the eastern parts of Exeter and Wells were quite inadequate for the due performance of the elaborated ceremonial of Salisbury. Exeter was the first to go forward on the inevitable path of enlargement: it was not hampered by the building of a chapter house—Bishop Bruere had seen to that. Wells could not lag behind, and the completion of its chapter house had to wait, though work upon it may not have entirely ceased.

It has been suggested above that Bishop Burnell's death in 1292, and the departure of the dean, Thomas Bitton, in the same year to the see of Exeter, might possibly account for the change of policy, by which the completion of the chapter house was postponed in favour of a new scheme for the reconstruction of the eastern part of the church. But it is worth while to consider an alternative explanation.

Something may be learned by observing the burial-places of the successive bishops.

Jocelin (†1242) lay in the middle of the old choir.

Roger (†1247) was buried at Bath.

William Bitton I (†1264) rested at first in the old Lady Chapel, and was afterwards removed to the new.

Giffard was translated to York in 1266.

William Bitton II (†1274) lay between two pillars on the south side of the choir.

But after this we find a change, and no bishop is buried in the eastern part of the church until 1329.

Robert Burnell (†1292) was buried in the nave ;

William de Marchia (†1302) in the south transept ;

Walter de Haselshaw (†1308) near Burnell in the nave.

Drovensford (†1329), however, was laid in the new eastern transept south of the Lady Chapel ; and

Ralph of Shrewsbury (†1363) in the middle of the new presbytery.

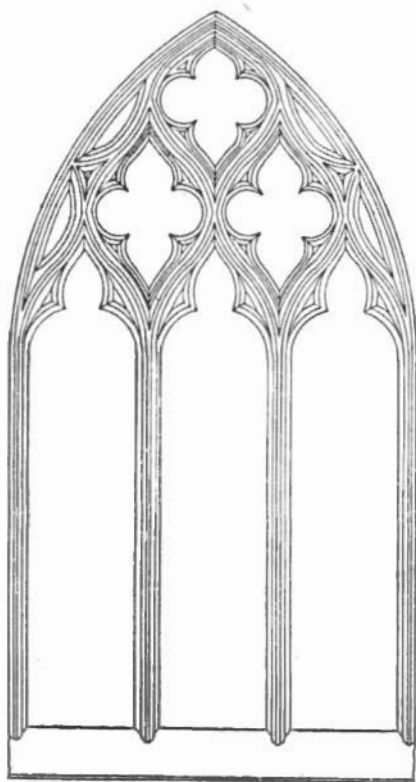


FIG. 5. WINDOW IN W. BAY AND 4TH BAY FROM W. IN S. CHOIR AISLE, 4TH BAY FROM W. IN N. CHOIR AISLE, W. SIDE OF CHAPELS OF ST. KATHERINE AND ST. ANNE, E. WALLS OF CHAPELS OF ST. JOHN AND ST. STEPHEN

Scale : $\frac{1}{4}$ inch = 1 foot

Why was Bishop Burnell buried in the nave? Must we not suppose that he was well aware of the work which was in full progress at Exeter under his contemporary Bishop Quivil (1280-92), and that he foresaw that Wells must soon follow suit? May we not even believe that his was the master-mind that planned the great scheme of reconstruction; that he intended to press it on with all possible speed, and had therefore chosen a place for his tomb where he might hope to rest undisturbed as the work went forward in the years to come?

But, to return from this digression, we have now to ask what was the next work taken in hand, when the chapter house staircase was completed. Here again, the traceries of the windows offer us guidance. The design of the five great windows of the Lady Chapel is perhaps unique.¹ It is not the network tracery which presently became common. The style is still geometrical, though of a later type than on the chapter house staircase, and it is devised with extraordinary skill. It has been adjudged to be such as might with probability be found between the years 1290 and 1305. It is certainly earlier than the traceries of the chapter house, of which we have spoken above.² And here it is important to observe that the ball-flower ornament, which occurs in the chapter house within and without more than three thousand times, is altogether absent from the Lady Chapel, as it is also (except as an isolated ornament) from the rest of the great scheme of enlargement—the eastern transept and the new work of the choir.

So we are led to the conclusion that the next great operation after the completion of the staircase (*c.* 1290

¹ See Fig. 4. In the clerestory of the nave at Exeter the second pair of windows from the W. show a closely similar pattern, but the workmanship is of a much later date (? *c.* 1350).

² The chapels next to the Lady Chapel begin to show the flowing tracery of the Decorated period, yet later stages of which appear in the aisles of the choir. From the windows of these chapels the hood-mould found outside the Lady Chapel windows is absent, and there are

various irregularities in the masonry which may perhaps be taken as indications of a considerable pause in the operations after the completion of the Lady Chapel. See Figs. 5, 6. Fig. 7 shows the tracery of the great east window, the 'Jesse,' at the close of this period of building (*c.* 1330). I owe these measured drawings and the plan to Mr. A. Wheeler, till lately assistant to Mr. F. W. J. Bray, our master mason, whose valuable help I also desire to recognise.

or 1292) was the erection of the new Lady Chapel. This was planned on a site so far east of the older Lady Chapel as to be capable of completion without disturbance of the existing buildings or interference with the accustomed services of the church.

We have unfortunately no fabric rolls of the period which would enable us to control by documentary

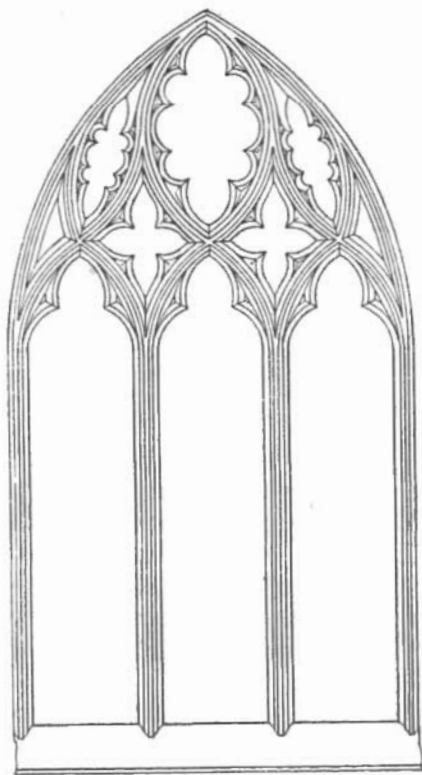


FIG. 6. WINDOW IN 2ND AND 3RD BAYS FROM W. IN S. CHOIR AISLE, AND 3RD BAY FROM W. IN N. CHOIR AISLE

Scale : $\frac{1}{4}$ inch = 1 foot

evidence the conclusions which we have seemed justified in drawing from the fabric itself. But there are a few incidental notices in charters which give us a little help.

Thus the obit arranged in 1300 for William de

Welynton, one of the canons, mentions that among other benefactions he had given forty marks towards 'the fabric of the chapter (house) and of the said church' (R. iii. 284 : *Cal.* i. 447).

Of more interest are the arrangements for the obit of Bishop Burnell, which were not completed by his executors until the end of 1306. Here we are informed (R. i. 164 : *Cal.* i. 204) that he had purchased for the church of St. Andrew the churches (i.e. the advowsons) of Yeovilton, Burnham, Stanton Drew and Chelworth ; with the further intention of appropriating the church of Burnham to the dean and chapter for his obit and for the maintenance of the fabric. Such appropriations were troublesome to secure, and it was doubtless this appropriation of Burnham that caused so much delay. It was carried through at last by Bishop Haselshaw, who pleaded in its justification that 'their manors of North Curry and Winscombe were greatly burdened on account of the heavy expenses incurred about the construction of their chapter (house) and other things for the perpetual utility of the whole chapter' (Charter 165 : *Cal.* iii. 583).

This obit has a further importance for us. Bishop Burnell was buried in the middle of the nave, some 20 feet from the door then leading into the old choir.¹ His anniversary was to be celebrated at the altars of the Blessed Virgin and St. Andrew, which had been constructed for the purpose (*ad hoc constructa*) near the entrance of the choir (Charter 166 : *Cal.* iii. 584). Similarly in the obit of Dean Husee, arranged a few months later (June 23, 1307) we find mention of 'two new altars by the entrance of the choir' (R. i. 52 : *Cal.* i. 61).

It is a fair inference from this that by the end of 1306, if not some time before, the Lady Chapel was finished and the progress of the work required that the old Lady Chapel should be pulled down and the eastern part of the choir dismantled. The services

¹ For an account of his remarkable stone coffin see *Som. & Dors. N. & Q.* XV, 153 ff.; and add the description of his tomb by Leland (c. 1542): 'He lay not many Yeres

sins in a high Tumbe with an Image of Brasse: now undre a plain Marble' (*Som. Arch. Soc. Proc.* XXXIII, ii, 107).

must thereafter be confined to the nave ; and, to take the place of the old Lady Chapel altar and the high altar of St. Andrew, temporary altars of the Blessed Virgin and the patron saint were erected against the old screen of the choir.

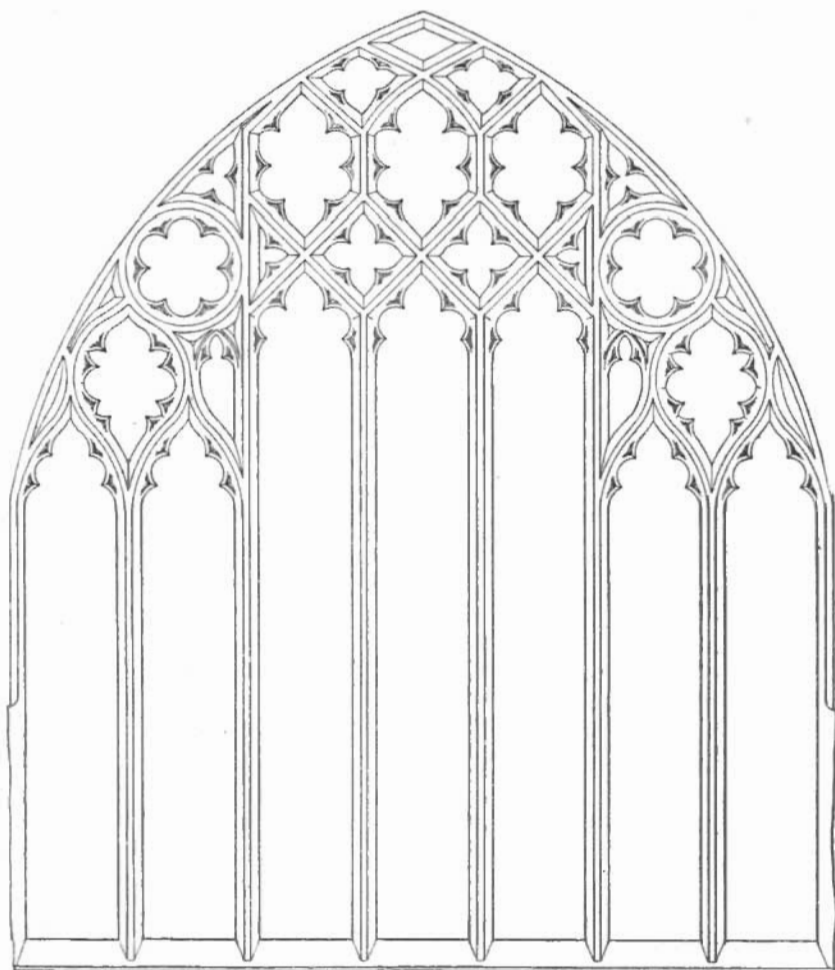


FIG. 7. EAST WINDOW OF CHOIR

Scale : $\frac{1}{8}$ inch = 1 foot.

We come finally to the evidence of the glass in the Lady Chapel which has been set forth elsewhere. Hitherto the whole credit for the building of the present

Lady Chapel has been given to Dean Godelee (1305-1333). The reason for this was that Bishop Drokenstord, when granting in 1326 a portion of garden-ground to one of his canons, spoke of it as situated fifty feet from the wall of the newly constructed Lady Chapel (*a muro capellae beatae Virginis noviter constructae*, Reg. Drok. f. 252b). Willis, who was the first to call attention to this document in an address to the Archaeological Institute in 1851, too hastily concluded that 'there is therefore no doubt that the Lady Chapel was finished a few years before 1326.'

But it has to be borne in mind that in Wells there were from early days two chapels dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. One of these stood as a separate structure in the churchyard south of the choir, being entered from the east walk of the cloister: the other was at the east end of the church itself. For the sake of distinguishing between them such phrases were used as 'the chapel of St. Mary by the cloister' and 'the chapel of St. Mary behind the high altar' (e.g. in the arrangement of the obit of Bishop Bitton II in 1279, where both these designations occur: R. i, 62; *Cal.* i, 71). The new Lady Chapel might quite naturally be described by way of distinction as 'the chapel of the Blessed Virgin newly-constructed' even as late as 1326, when the buildings uniting it to the old work of the choir were still incomplete and the new high altar was yet to come.

The discovery in the glass of one of its windows of the name of Dean Godelee's predecessor (*Magister Henricus Huse*) has destroyed the belief, always precarious, that the Lady Chapel was not finished until 'a few years before 1326.' Henry Husee had been a canon since 1284; he became dean in 1302, and died in 1305. The evidence of the glass therefore is in full harmony with the other evidence that has come before us; and we may reasonably hold that the Lady Chapel was in building not long after Bishop Burnell's death in 1292, and was completed not later than 1305. Indeed, it is quite possible that it was begun in Bishop Burnell's lifetime, and finished before Master Henry Husee became the dean in 1302.