

A NOTE ON THE EAST END OF WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL

By NIKOLAUS PEVSNER

The case of Willis must be unique in any field of historical research. His work was done a hundred and more years ago, and yet, whichever building or group of buildings he decided to tackle, his results have remained valid to this day. Nowhere has he been superseded to the extent that a scholar now could afford to neglect his writings. In the particular case of Winchester Cathedral, Willis's paper of 1845 in the *Proceedings of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* is still the student's principal source of information. This is why an attempt to correct even a small part of his findings may deserve publication.

At the east end of the cathedral Willis seems not only to have left some of the problems unsolved, but even not to have noticed one or two of them. Willis's suggestion is that Bishop de Lucy, who died in 1204, was responsible for the whole of the east end. According to John of Exeter's *Liber Historialis*, written about 1430, it was de Lucy who vaulted '*ab altare beate Marie ad finem cum aliis (= alis)*' and was buried '*extra capellam beate Virginis*'. Willis noted only that the east responds of the arcades between retrochoir 'nave' and retrochoir aisles are not bonded in with the walls. Yet there is plenty more that needs explanation.

The most easily noticed detail on which Willis does not comment is the difference in the rib-mouldings of retrochoir 'nave' and retrochoir aisles (Pl. XVA). The arcade piers carry the aisle vaults and their ribs have fine roll mouldings. The 'nave' vault is higher and rests on special corbels (Pl. XVb), and the ribs here are simply single-chamfered. The arcade piers and the aisle vaults convince as work of about 1200. The 'nave' ribs might be of any date in the 13th century, but the corbels as well as the bosses still have stiff-leaf decoration. So the change of plan indicated by this heightening of the 'nave' took place before the late 13th century. When was it made, and why? The first of these questions seems to me to be answerable, the second does not.

An answer to the first question lies in the east chapels. The evidence here is blurred by the work of Priors Hunter and Silkstede about the year 1500, but it is not obliterated. The east responds of the arcade are formed by a cluster of Purbeck marble shafts: they are the ones which are not bonded in. The shafts are indeed detached from the wall. But the abaci are bonded in; and they connect smoothly with the south respond of the entrance arch into the north-east chapel and the north respond of the entrance arch into the south-east chapel. Within the north-east chapel the rib-vault is preserved, and this corresponds with the retrochoir aisle vaults (Pl. XVI). The east capitals of the chapels also correspond with the capitals at their west entrances. They vary between leaf-croquets and stiff-leaf, and in the east responds of the

retrochoir 'nave' there are also pure crockets on the north side. However in other respects these east responds of the 'nave', that is those at the entry to the Lady Chapel, show unmistakable signs of confusion. Evidently pieces were re-used in a way not originally intended for them.

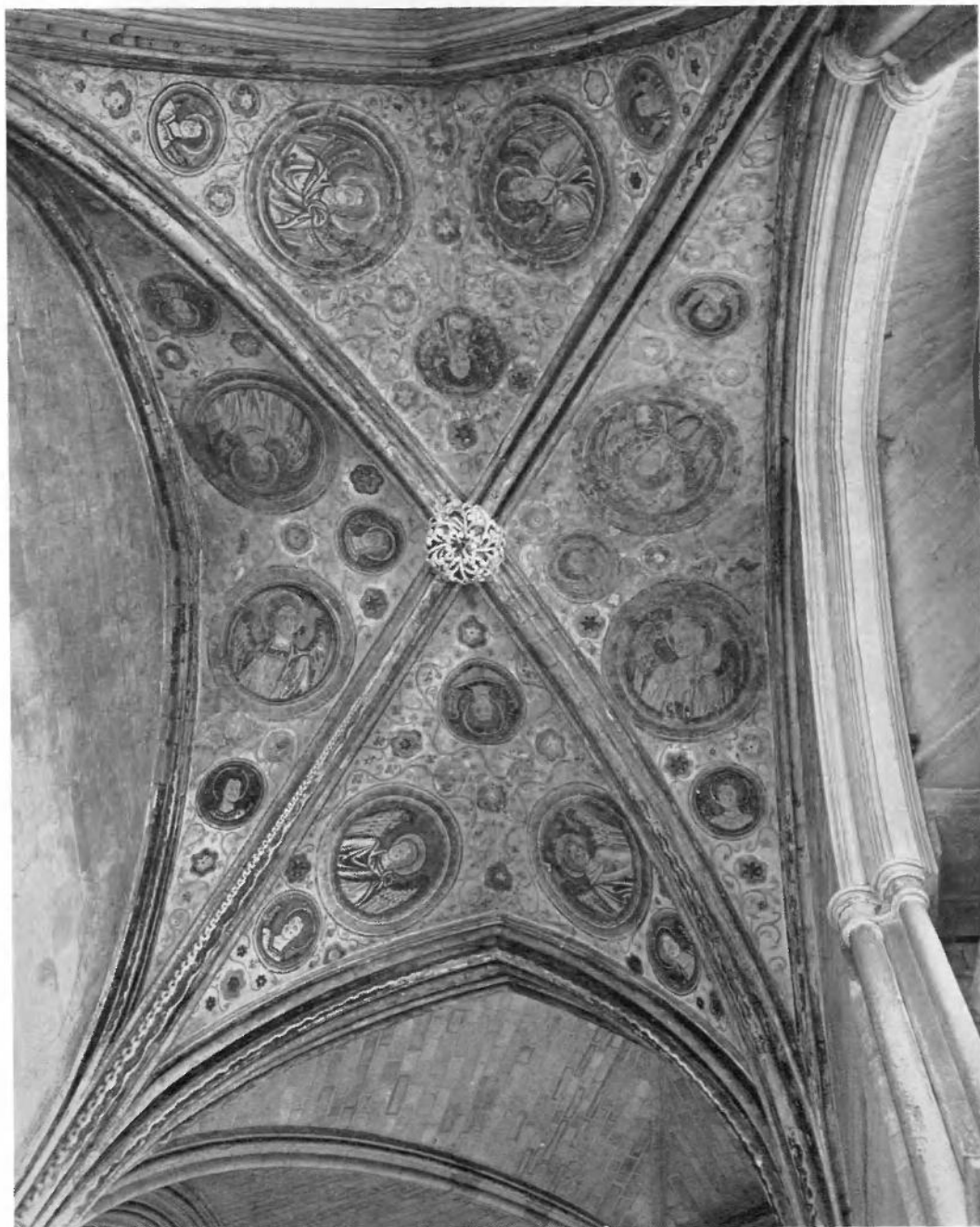
This is most patent in the remains of the screen with head and nailhead ornament. What we find is this. On each side is preserved one Purbeck shaft which continues the system of the chapel entrances. Its base is original, but it was truncated at a later date (and more shafts probably removed) and replaced by a taller stone shaft. This runs up to the height of the abaci of the chapel shafts and the shafts of the entrance arch and is then continued by another short shaft. At the top however a group of Purbeck capitals follows; these belong to the original scheme and are re-set. Their details correspond so exactly with those of the chapel arches and the entrance arch to the Lady Chapel that there can be no doubt about this. Their abaci indicate the complex mouldings of the original entrance arch. How did this confusion come about, which is made even more puzzling by the survival on one cluster of shafts of a human bust and with dog-tooth and a rich stiff-leaf capital which probably belongs to a former screen? The explanation of the disturbances is connected with a change of mind concerning the height of the vaults. In fact the east bay of the retrochoir 'nave' rests at its east end on yet another two capitals immediately above the re-used Purbeck capitals.

But these facts alone do not answer the question as to why and when this change of mind took place. At this stage an examination of the Lady Chapel will help us on. If we had the original vaults here, all might be more lucid. But in their absence, the side walls are suggestive enough. They have an ornate system of decoration (Pl. XVII B). It consists of three pairs of tall lancets on either side, each pair tied together by a trefoil-arch the top foil of which is not a semicircle but nearer two-thirds of a circle. In the spandrel above is a large pierced quatrefoil flanked by two pierced trefoils. All this is clearly of a piece, it is also clearly of the 13th century and the trefoils and quatrefoils are a motif used a little before on the exterior walls of the retrochoir aisles and the north-east and south-east chapels. But this composition, with the apex of its crowning quatrefoil, reached up higher than the height of the retrochoir-aisle vaults. Therefore, when this wall-decoration was made, the heightening of the Lady Chapel and the corresponding heightening of the retrochoir 'nave' must have been decided upon.¹

There is yet another sign of the same change of plan. The six lancets of the Lady Chapel wall screen a narrow wall-passage. This has towards the north-east and south-east chapels a very odd motif—real windows. They are

¹ After this paper had been completed, Mr. A. R. Duffy pointed out to me that the west responds of the retrochoir 'nave', where they join the east end of the choir proper have shafts which, according to their style, belong to the retrochoir and not the 14th-century choir; and that these shafts run up without interruption or confusion to the capitals

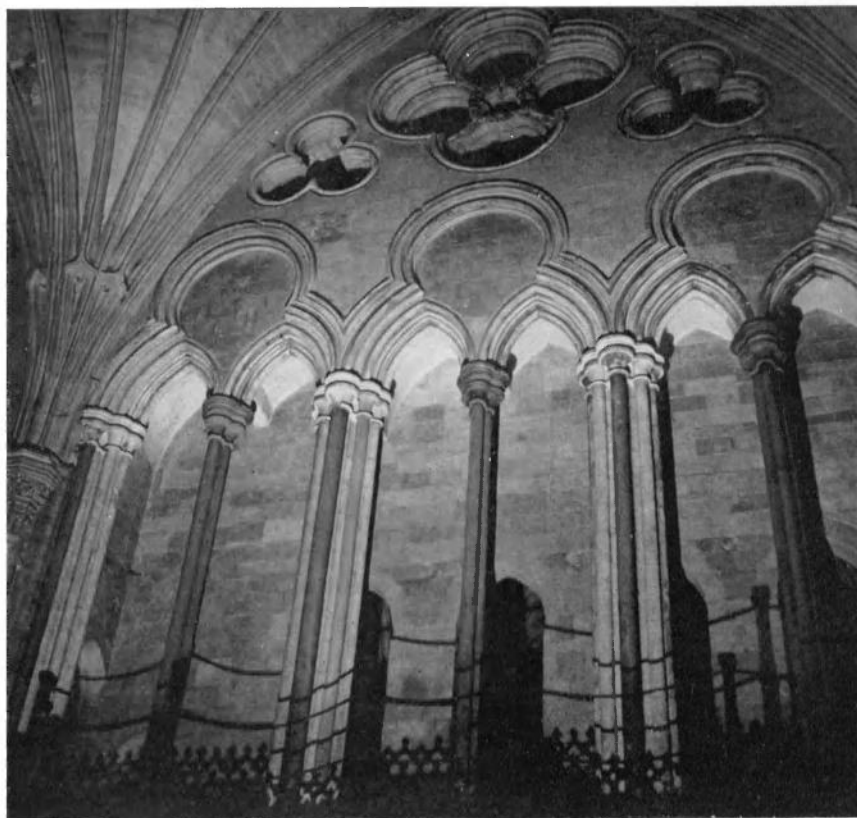
which are at the level needed for the ultimate height of the retrochoir 'nave'. So de Lucy's new east end was probably built from east to west, as was usual; and by the time the west responds (which were intended to link up with a new choir of the future; see above) had been reached, the change with which this paper has been concerned had been made.



Winchester Cathedral. The vault of the N.E. chapel
(*Photograph by courtesy of A. W. Kerr*)



A. Detail from the S.E. chapel



B. S. wall of the Lady Chapel

(Photographs: Frank Smith, B.Sc.)

visible in the south chapel, but blocked by the Portland Monument of 1634 in the north chapel. These windows do not tally with the three pairs of lancets towards the Lady Chapel, thereby once again proving that the decorative wall-arcading was an afterthought.

Now the questions with which this note is concerned can be asked again. When was the change of plan made? The date can only be assessed very approximately by the more developed stiff-leaf capital of the corbels for the 'nave' vault and perhaps the richness of the quatrefoil and trefoil arrangement in the Lady Chapel. The second third of the 13th century may be indicated. The simple single-chamfered ribs of the 'nave' are repeated in the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre whose ceiling paintings and stiff-leaf work both point to a date *c.* 1230.

Finally, what determined the change of plan? One possible answer is that the cathedral authorities may have begun to give some thought to a new presbytery. It is almost impossible to imagine that the designers of the new retrochoir would not have had a vision of how it ought to be connected with the rest of the cathedral. The present east arches of the presbytery are of *c.* 1320. They would be too high, if the retrochoir 'nave' had been kept at the height of the aisles. So perhaps in turning to this problem they had decided by about 1230 that the retrochoir 'nave' would need greater height and accordingly raised the height of the Lady Chapel as well.