

THE CHOIR OF CHESTER CATHEDRAL

by J. M. Maddison, M.A., Ph.D.

Recently published work on the choir of Chester Cathedral¹ has sought to relate its distinctive elevation design to English and continental traditions, and has suggested a position which it may have occupied in the overall picture of English architectural development at the end of the 13th century. This article² is in a sense complementary, and attempts to place the individual campaigns of construction in the context of Early Decorated architecture in the medieval diocese of Lichfield and neighbouring areas. There can be few buildings in England that manage to compress quite so many evident hesitations and changes of design into so small a compass, and it is this phenomenon which makes it such an interesting structure to the student of medieval masonry. The succession of more or less rigorous restorations which saved the church from falling to pieces in the 19th century did involve certain alterations to the design, particularly in the upper levels, but the overwhelming bulk of the choir of this former Benedictine abbey survives intact. It can be interpreted as an eloquent record of that turbulent and exciting period in the history of Chester when the city became the base for Edward I's assaults on Wales.

The scope of this essay is limited to the main structure of the monastic choir which in the Middle Ages included the crossing and everything to the East apart from the Lady Chapel. It can deal only superficially with the late medieval modifications and concentrates on the period c. 1260 to c. 1340, when the abbey was ruled by three abbots, Simon de Whitchurch (1265-91), Thomas de Burchelles (1291-1323) and William de Bebington (1324-49). Discussion of the important choir furnishings, the sedilia, the aumbries, the fragments of the pulpitum, and above all the shrine of St. Werburgh must await detailed treatment elsewhere.

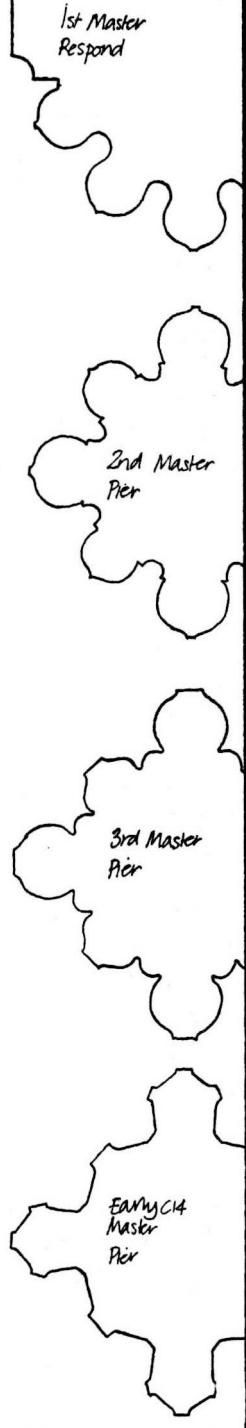
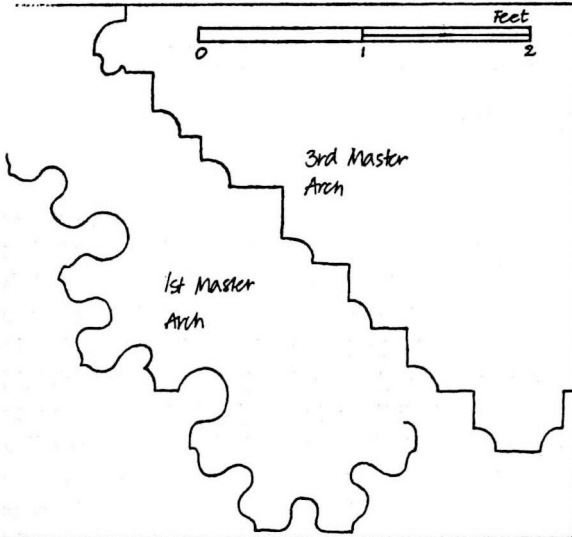
The Romanesque choir of the church founded by Hugh of Avranches was begun in 1093 and little can be said of it. Hussey discovered its groundplan through

¹ V. M. Jansen, 'Superposed Wall Passages and the Triforium Elevation of St. Werburgh's Chester', *Journal of the Society Of Architectural Historians*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1979, pp. 223-43. See also V. M. Jansen, 'The Architecture of the Thirteenth Century Rebuilding at St. Werburgh's Chester', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1975, an interesting and detailed account of the Early Gothic work.

² The research for this article was undertaken as part of a doctoral thesis: J. M. Maddison, 'Decorated Architecture in the North-West Midlands — an investigation of the work of provincial masons and their sources', University of Manchester, 1978.

The Choir of Chester Cathedral

Fig. 1



GROUND PLAN

Not to Scale

1st Master

2nd Master

3rd Master

Late 13th

Early 14th Master

Crossing Master

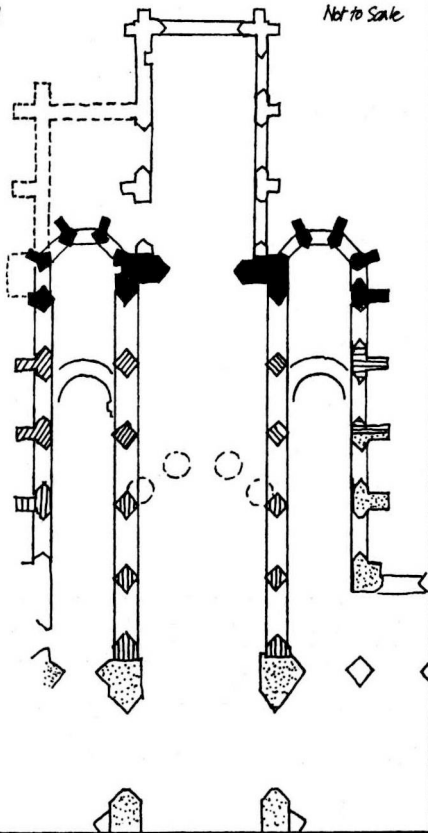




Plate 1 — The choir of Chester Cathedral, North side.

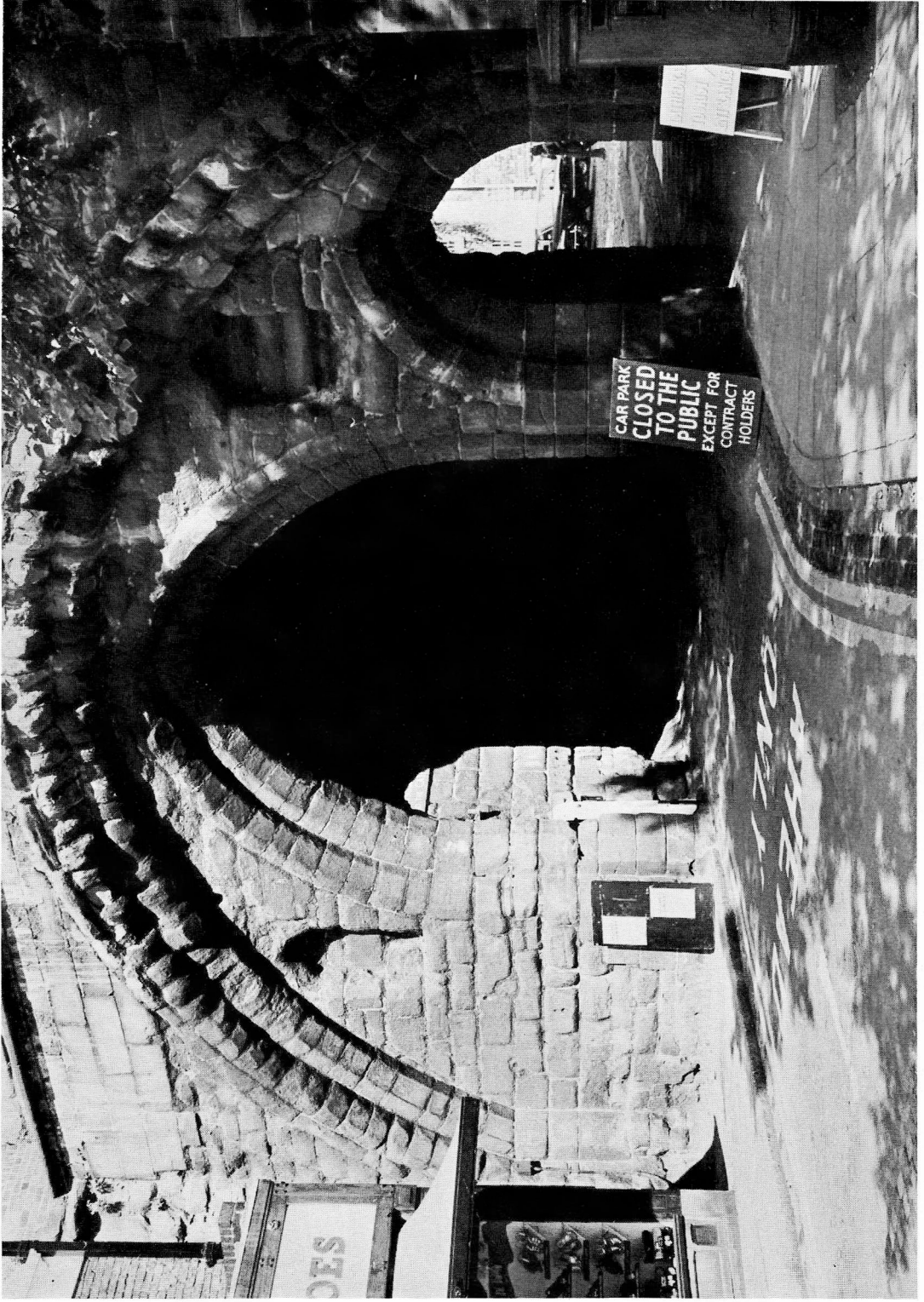


Plate 2 — Chester Abbey Gatehouse.

excavation;³ it seems to have had an apse and ambulatory flanked by two apsidal chapels at the aisle terminations. A much quoted and slightly suspect documentary record of the building states that in 1211 'the choir of the cathedral [*sic*] of Chester as also the stately tower steeple (upon which a lofty steeple was intended to have been built) was completely finished'.⁴ The implications of this statement are difficult to interpret and it is not possible to say whether the Norman choir remained incomplete until the early 13th century or whether in fact an Early Gothic choir was built to replace it c. 1200. It is clear, however, from the architecture of the existing building, that in the second half of the 13th century the convent embarked upon a lengthy and much interrupted rebuilding process that was eventually to carry through the reconstruction of the entire East arm of the abbey church. This work began with the building of a Lady Chapel. As other authors have pointed out, it was possible to construct the Lady Chapel without prejudice to the old choir if, as seems likely, this was the Norman building whose ambulatory wall lay almost two bays to the West. The naturalistic foliage of the bosses on the Lady Chapel vault suggests that it could hardly have been completed before the 1280s; but the design of the walls, with their finely moulded lancets, shows that the vaulting may have been part of a distinct and later campaign and that the main structure is the work of the mid century. At some time between 1250 and 1280 a decision was made to build westward. The intention may have been to link the Lady Chapel to the old choir, but it is just as likely that complete rebuilding was proposed.

The relationship of the Norman groundplan to the present building is shown in the diagram (Fig. 1), as are the principal phases of construction of the new work. The eastern limb of the church was, until the early 16th century, composed of a five bay aisled choir with polygonal eastern chapels flanking the rectangular volume of the Lady Chapel. At the beginning of the 16th century the polygonal chapels were demolished and replaced by square ended two bay terminations. The southernmost 16th century chapel was in turn pulled down by Gilbert Scott in the restoration of 1868-76 and was replaced by a speculative reconstruction of its predecessor.⁵ The diagram restores both polygonal chapels to show the design of the 13th century builders. The apsidal termination of the 13th century aisles was perhaps a reference to the general form of the Norman plan and if this is so, it is not the only aspect of the new work that seems to have made a conscious acknowledgement of the Romanesque design. The elevation of the choir (Pl. 1) was to employ the low, continuous, arcaded triforium that is a feature of the late

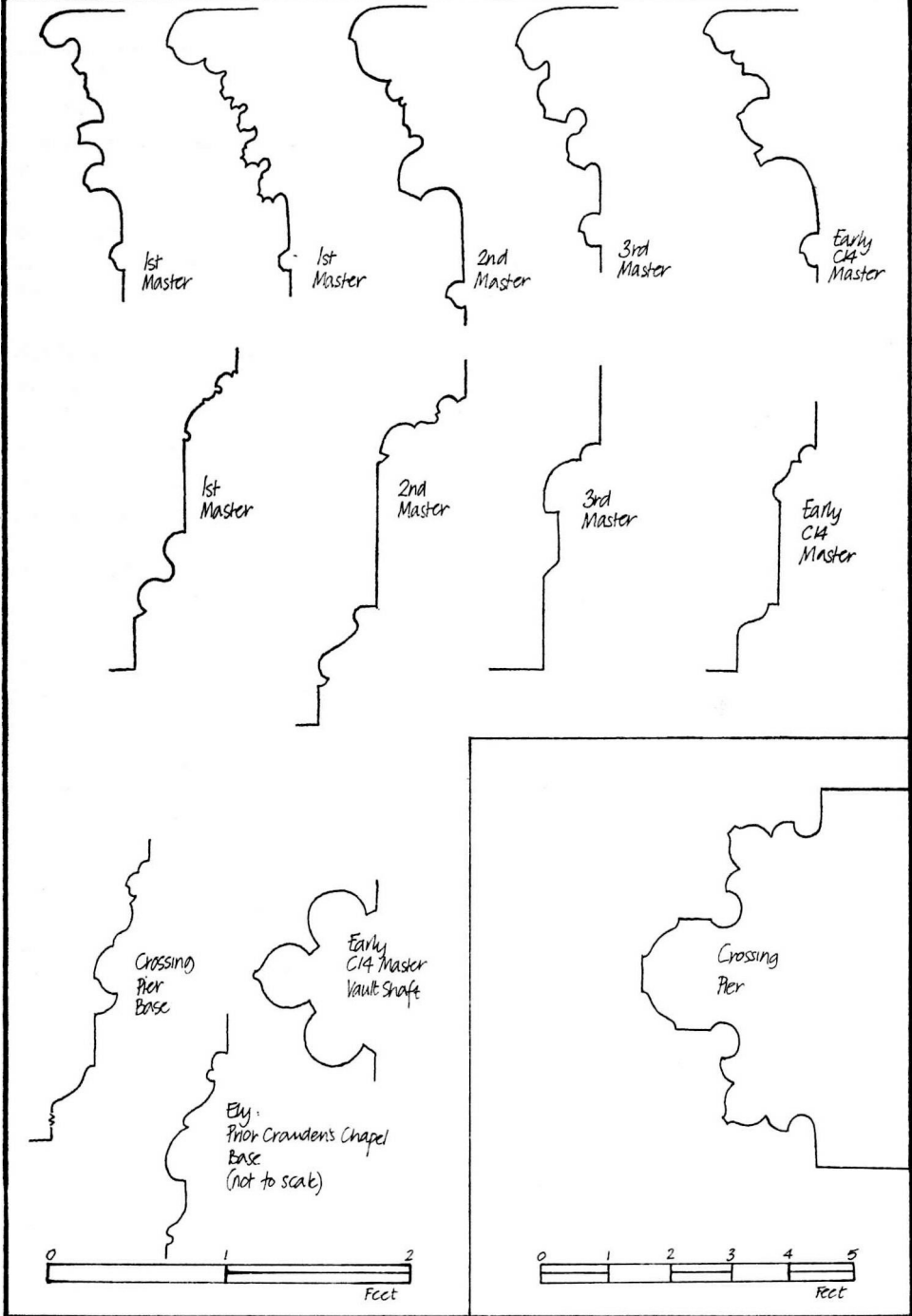
³ R. C. Hussey, 'Notice of Recent Discoveries in Chester Cathedral', *Archaeological Journal*, vol. 5, 1848, pp. 17-26.

⁴ MS. in Dr. Foote Gower's collections cited by R. V. H. Burne, *The Monks of Chester*, 1962, p. 24.

⁵ Though a drawing of 1810 by J. Buckler, British Library, Add. MS. 36360, f.59, confirms that tracery of the southern window of this chapel as well as the beginning of the sloping stone roof.

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Fig. 2



11th century North transept and which also appears, in fragmentary early Gothic form, at the West end of the nave. The proportions of the choir elevation have been interpreted by Dr. Jansen⁶ to indicate a reawakened interest in the High French Gothic elevation scheme epitomised by Chartres and Rheims; she draws a comparison between the polygonal aisle chapels here and those of St. Urbain at Troyes (begun 1262). These continental comparisons are certainly apt given the widespread reproduction of French ideas in English architecture during the second half of the 13th century, and the appearance of the distinctive trefoil tracery type of St. Urbain in one of the windows of St. John's, Chester,⁷ adds weight to the theory. In an article on the local affiliations of the choir it is perhaps important to emphasise the unbroken western English tradition of continuous triforium arcades that can be traced from the transepts of Chester Cathedral and Pershore Abbey (finished 1102) through the Early Gothic work at Wells (late 12th century) and Cartmel (c. 1200) to the nave of St. John's, Chester (early to mid 13th century).

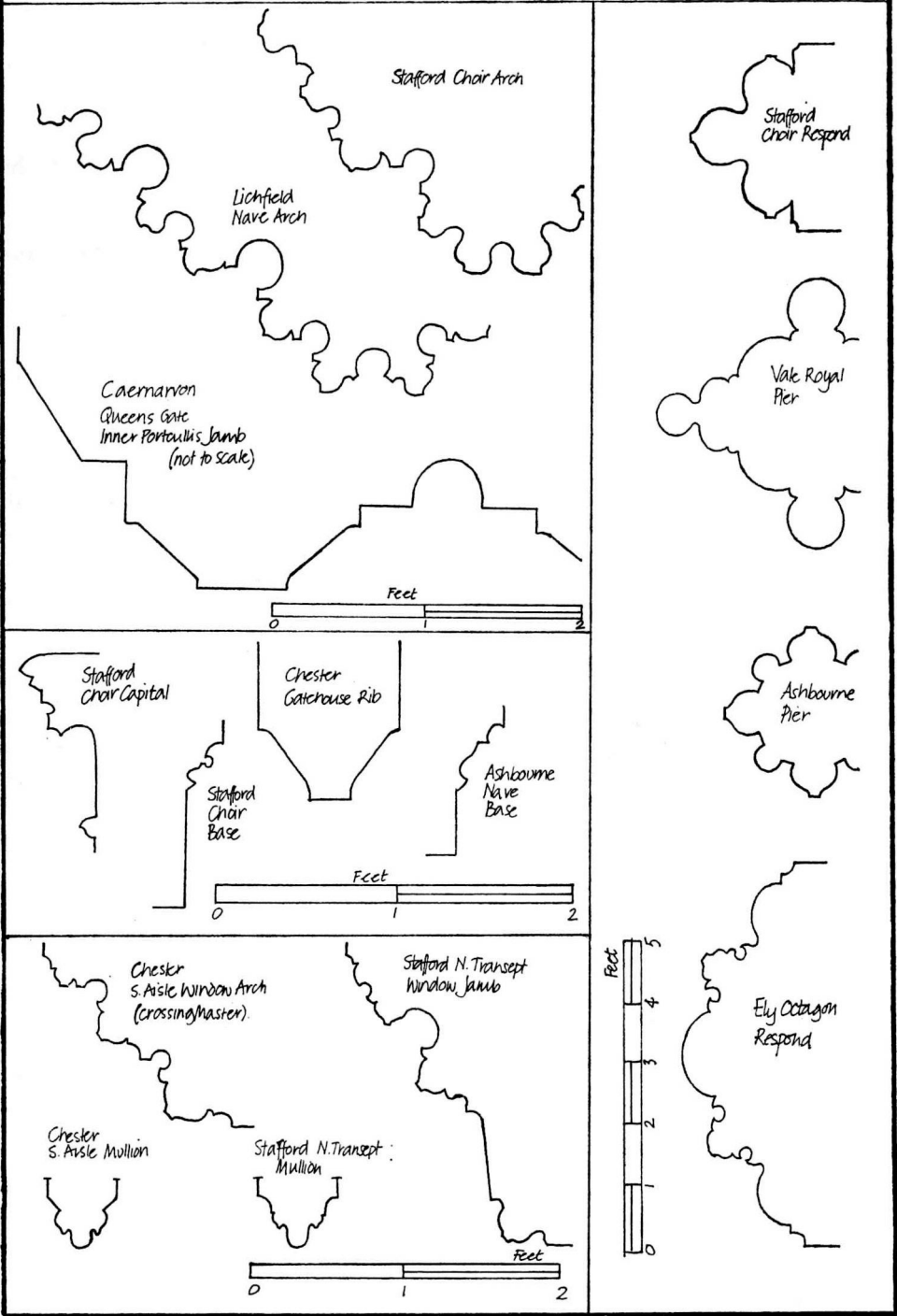
A study of the moulded masonry suggests that at least six master masons directed the design and construction of the principal components of the choir over a period of about seventy years. Each used his own vocabulary of detail within the overall proportions adopted by his predecessors. The first master's work is only found at the eastern extremity. In this area, consistency of detail shows that he built the arch to the Lady Chapel, the two polygonal aisle chapels, the eastern responds of the choir arcade and part of the first arch on the North side (Fig. 1). The continuous nature of external plinth mouldings made it desirable to extend the plinth of the Lady Chapel and, insofar as the 19th century restorations can be trusted, it appears that this detail was retained until the South transept was reached in about 1340. The responds designed by the first master (Fig. 1) are of a clustered type formed of thick shafts, alternately filleted and ogee keeled, connected to one another by deep, curved hollows. The bases (Fig. 2) are all of one kind and are typical of the 1260s with a very delicately moulded upper section standing on a rather more broadly moulded plinth. Two types of capital are used and neither employs foliage. One (Fig. 2), supporting the arch to the Lady Chapel, is comparatively simple, but the other (Fig. 2) represents a point of ultimate complexity in the development of 13th century profile design. At least thirty arcs were necessary to create this remarkable design, which looks more handsome in three dimensions than it does in section. By contrast the arch mouldings (Fig. 1) are enjoyable both in profile and in their built form, possessing the organic energy and crisp chiaroscuro of the best Early English work. The window jambs of the polygonal chapels remain in the reconstruction of Gilbert Scott to the South and

⁶ Jansen, 'Superposed Wall Passages and the Triforium elevation of St. Werburgh's Chester'.

⁷ This window is now at the East end of the South choir aisle of St. John's. Buckler's drawing of 1810 (B.L. Add. MS. 36360, f.79) shows an identical window at the end of the North choir aisle. The main vessel of the choir at St. John's was closed by a very large window whose tracery was, again, similar to that at Troyes. All three windows were probably *ex situ*.

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Fig. 3



projecting from the walls of the early 16th century chapel to the North. They have some of the mannerisms found in the responds and one should note in particular how the jutting section of the jamb which contains the half mullion profile is related to the rolls on either side, and compare it with the similar junction between the respond section (Fig. 1) and the spur wall to which it is attached. Both are characterised by the use of flat backed hollows, right angle junctions and small, hollow chamfers. The jamb and vault shaft bases of the chapels can also be closely compared, in the minute complexity of their details, with those of the eastern responds and Lady Chapel arch.

Tracery designs of high quality by the first master survive in the piscinas of the two chapels. They have double openings with simple but handsomely detailed geometric tracery incorporating encircled quatrefoils and trefoils.

All these details help us to date the first master's work with a fair degree of accuracy. Bar tracery of the type used in the piscinas was made fashionable by Westminster Abbey in the 1240s and 1250s and continued to be used in major projects until the 1270s. The ultimate source of some of the mouldings may also be Westminster, and this applies especially to the bases of the window jambs. In the light of this it is important to compare the Chester work with the nave of Lichfield Cathedral. The Cathedral, naturally, occupies a position of central architectural importance in one of the largest dioceses in medieval England and its nave is one of the most impressive provincial reinterpretations of the French architectural formula stated with such authority by Henry III's rebuilding of Westminster Abbey between 1245 and 1269. It is generally agreed that the nave of Lichfield was in building from about 1260. The overall proportions and elevation design are very different from the effect that was to be achieved at Chester but there is a sort of familial relationship between the details of the two buildings. The refined elements of the Chester bases are, for example, matched by the rather different formations of the Lichfield work. The bases of piers and window jambs at Lichfield have in common with those of the vault shafts at Chester, a horizontally keeled upper section which is lavishly and minutely ornamented at the point where it joins the shaft. The arch mouldings at Lichfield (Fig. 3) are rather more complex than their equivalents in the first master's work but they are clearly of the same period and are related by the use of adossed scroll mouldings on the soffit. All these similarities are what we should expect to find in two contemporary buildings built in the same diocese by different masons who were no doubt interested in one another's work. The very close affinities between the work of the first master at Chester and the South choir aisle of St. Mary's, Stafford can however, in the writer's opinion, only be explained by common authorship.

The details at Stafford are simpler than those at Chester but this is only to be expected in a much smaller building. The piers are quatrefoils in section (Fig. 3) with generous filleted shafts linked to one another by deep rounded hollows. The profile illustrated is the western respond and it will be observed that it does not grow immediately from the massive crossing pier behind it, but sprouts from a

short length of spur wall finished with hollow chamfers. It is also the case that, as at Chester, three faces of the respond are 'released' from the wall to which it is attached. The bases at Stafford were replaced in Scott's Draconian restoration of 1841-44,⁸ but there is no reason to suppose that they do not reproduce the original design (Fig. 3). The very precise and delicate curves and hollows are familiar mannerisms of the first master at Chester, as are the minute convex arcs which appear in the lower parts of the unrestored capital (Fig. 3). The similarities between the arch mouldings (Figs. 1 and 3) clinch the comparison. If these three bays of the South aisle at Stafford are the work of the first master it may be significant that they, like his work at Chester, are small in extent. The North arcade at Stafford was not attempted until the 14th century and here the pillars and arches emulate the South arcade in the gentler profiles of the Decorated style. If, as we have seen, the first master's work can be dated on stylistic grounds to the 1260s, its impetus may well have been the arrival of the new abbot, Simon de Whitchurch, in 1265.

The next work to be undertaken at Chester must have been the first two piers on the North side of the choir and probably the corresponding length of the North aisle wall. The pier section of the second master (Fig. 1) resembles that of the first but is a less elegant design. It is of considerably greater thickness and the shafts are dissociated from one another by the intrusion of little steps on either side of the hollows. The great bases (Fig. 2) are more broadly handled and the capitals (Fig. 2) are likewise composed of thicker and less numerous members. In the design of the windows on the adjacent aisle wall the same deficiencies are apparent. The jambs have altogether more routine mouldings than those of the polygonal chapels and the tracery which filled the openings before Hussey's 1844 restoration was of an uncusped geometrical type that is associated with rather minor provincial work. That the workmen at Chester had now begun to demolish the eastern parts of the old choir is clear from the plan, and the style of the second master's work suggests that it dates from the 1270s. There is no hint of the Decorated style which was to make itself felt suddenly and clearly in the two opposite bays of the choir.

It was, of course, preferable to build these two southern bays rather than extend the North arcade westward which would have rendered the old building unusable until the completion of the new choir. It was a prudent way of proceeding that was entirely justified by the events of the next few years, for the work of the third master was as swiftly curtailed as that of his two predecessors. The simple profiles of the two south eastern pier bases (Fig. 2) are of an entirely different character from the other base profiles so far considered and although the pier section (Fig. 1) is not unsympathetic to the earlier piers, it will be noted that it has broader fillets, no keels and small convex curves where the other piers had

⁸ While the moulded details of the arcade are trustworthy, the complete rebuilding of the South wall means that the profiles there are not to be relied upon.

hollows. Only the capitals (Fig. 2) have the dark concavities of the earlier 13th century. The arches (Fig. 1) make no attempt to emulate their earlier counterparts; the second master had been prepared to continue with his predecessor's arches but this new mason contented himself with stepped hollow chamfers. The design of the adjacent aisle wall is confused and difficult to interpret. The two windows are of different sizes and have two dissimilar but related patterns of geometric tracery, one of which is very like the aisle windows of Lichfield nave. The relationship to Lichfield in this case is not on the same level as that evinced by the first master's work, where one sensed a kinship between two buildings of equivalent stature. These aisle windows are imitative and unsophisticated. Beneath them on the interior is a double tomb recess whose capitals and bases are replicated in the two curiously designed bays of triforium arcading on the North side, indicating that this part of the upper northern elevation was tackled at the same time as the South aisle wall. Mercifully, at this point work came to a complete halt before the process of building could become any more involved and difficult to follow. Rather than inquire into the possibility of a fourth master mason responsible only for two bays of the South aisle wall and of the North triforium, it might be more profitable to comment on the probable cause of this uneven progress and sudden halt, for it is clear that the work left unfinished in c. 1280 was not to be carried forward properly again until the first or second decade of the 14th century.

Chester, as is well known, was the operational base of Edward I's three campaigns against the Welsh in 1277, 1282 and 1294. These campaigns were of course architectural as well as military, and their most tangible survival is the great chain of castles that was one of the mightiest undertakings of the King's Works.⁹ The urgent demands for labour which the building of these castles caused could not be satisfied without the widespread impressment of provincial workmen from every corner of England. The Abbot of Chester's labour force could hardly have been more vulnerable and on 13 August 1277, the Chartulary of the Abbey records the king's undertaking that the loan of one hundred workmen by the abbot for the construction of Flint Castle should not be cited as a precedent for any future operations.¹⁰ New hostilities were opened in the Summer of 1282 and on 26 June of that year the Chartulary records an agreement with the king that the help which the abbot had given him in the loan of men, horses and carts during his Welsh expedition should not be drawn into a precedent.¹¹ This implies that the king had once again made use of the abbey's resources for the 1282 war and that the protests of the convent had required a second assurance. The king

⁹ The building of the castles and the role played by the city of Chester is well documented in Dr. A. Taylor's chapters in H. M. Colvin (ed.), *The History of the King's Works*, 1963, pp. 293-395.

¹⁰ J. Tait (ed.), *The Chartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester*, Chetham Society, 2nd series, vol. 79, 1920, p. 215.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 212.

does indeed appear quite frequently in the monastic records at this time: the *Annales Cestrienses* (compiled 1265-91) describe a royal visit in 1282:

Our lord the king and queen came to Chester after the conquest of Wales [and] on St. Augustine's day [May 26th] the king heard mass in the church of St. Werburgh's at Chester and offered a valuable cloth. The king himself took [an oath] to preserve the liberties of St. Werburgh.

Further palliatives were forthcoming from the king two years later when in 1284 precepts were directed to the Justiciar of Chester, Reginald de Grey, to allow venison from the forests of Delamere and Wirral to support the monks occupied 'in the great work of rebuilding their church'.¹²

It would seem logical, therefore, to postulate that the second master's work was brought to a halt by the outbreak of the first Welsh war in 1277, and that the muddled and unproductive period that followed was a direct consequence of sustained heavy building activity in the King's Works in Wales. Another local royal project that must have swallowed up any masons who were not yet involved in castle building was Vale Royal Abbey which Edward I founded in 1277 near Northwich. The church, which in its time was the second largest built by the Cistercian order in Europe, was designed by Master Walter of Hereford, and although the site of the abbey is now tragically bare, one major pier base survives whose upper parts indicate the pier section (Fig. 3). It appears to have possessed the small convex protuberances between the main shafts that are a feature of the third master's piers at Chester and this suggestion of influence from Vale Royal fits well with the circumstantial and direct dating evidence that the documents provide.

The frenzy of military activity that followed the Welsh prince Madoc's revolt in 1294 stimulated extensive works at Caernarfon and Beaumaris; and the large scale diversion of labour to Scotland after the outbreak of war there in 1297 placed additional pressure on the royal works which may well have been transferred, with disruptive consequences, to the masons of Chester.

The design of the remaining four piers and western responds of the choir and the work above them is distinctly early 14th century in character. They and the triforium and clerestory show a greater degree of consistency than any other part of the building, and it is clear from their details that a deliberate attempt was made to draw together the disparate elements that composed the partially completed eastern bays. In spite of the efforts of the three master masons whom we have already clearly identified, and notwithstanding the possible involvement of a fourth, the two north eastern bays do not appear to have stood higher than the lowermost courses of the clerestory, while on the opposite side, the intermingling of the early 14th century mason's details with those of another 13th century

¹² Quoted in R. V. H. Burne, *The Monks of Chester*, p. 38.

designer in the easternmost triforium bay, show that the work there was even less advanced.

The early 14th century mason was prepared to compromise in the interests of visual unity. He therefore continued the arch mouldings of the first and second masters on the North side and the simple hollow chamfered profiles of the third master's arches on the South. He did, however, find himself unable to follow the bizarre triforium design on the North elevation. The manner in which the low, trefoiled arches of these two bays appear to be impaled on dossierets that rise from the capitals is a highly individual solution for which it is difficult to find any exact parallels. The new triforium arcade is therefore a rationalisation in which the trefoiled spans spring quite normally from the shaft capitals. Other small but important changes in detail should also be noted. Monolithic shafts were used for both the north eastern triforium bays and the two tomb recesses in the South aisle that are contemporary with them; these were abandoned by the early 14th century master in favour of coursed shafting. Whereas bases in the older sections of the triforium have narrow polygonal socles on the North side and cylindrical ones on the South, the solution adopted for the rest of the upper works employed elegant fluted socles that have a very decorative effect, and which were essentially a compromise between the round and polygonal forms. The vertical sections of major and minor pier bases throughout these remaining choir bays are of one type (Fig. 2) whether in the clerestory, the triforium or the arcade. The capitals also follow a uniform design (Fig. 2) that is to be found throughout the country in the early decades of the 14th century. The really striking feature of this work is, however, the employment of the sunk chamfer. This profile is used conventionally in the jambs of the clerestory windows, but its use in the arcade comes as a complete surprise. Whereas the earlier masters had favoured piers composed of bundled shafts the new man adopted a cross shape (Fig. 1) with re-entrant corners using sunk chamfers and broad fillets as the only means of ornament. Although sunk chamfered piers are occasionally found in parish churches, their use on such a large scale in an abbey church is quite unknown outside Chester. The combination of such piers with conventional rounded capitals and bases is wayward and unorthodox.

The author's research¹³ has established a military origin for the sunk chamfer. It seems to make its earliest appearance at Caernarfon and it may well be that the inner portcullis jamb of the Queen's Gate (Fig. 3) dates its arrival to the period 1283 to 1292. In any case, the examples in the passage of the King's Gate can be dated to 1305.¹⁴ The sunk chamfer is in fact a variant of the wave moulding (good examples of which can be seen in the eastern bay of the nave at Chester) in which the shallow central curvature is completely suppressed. The wave moulding, once again, seems to appear for the first time on a large scale at Caernarfon perhaps as

¹³ Maddison, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-100.

¹⁴ Colvin, *op. cit.* p. 383. Drawbridges were provided for Caernarfon at this time.

early as 1282 in the jambs of the former Watergate attached to the Eagle Tower. These two mouldings, the wave and the sunk chamfer, have the virtue of being both ornamental and robust, so their invention in a military context would make sense. It can be shown that they found their way into the church architecture of western England in large numbers during the early 14th century; and it is also the case that the nearer one approaches the main area of castle building in North Wales the more frequently ecclesiastical buildings resort to their use; in the nave and West front of St. Asaph Cathedral they are indeed the only form of ornament.¹⁵

The other place at Chester where the sunk chamfer is much in evidence is the Abbey Gatehouse (Pl. 2), once a marvellously impressive and awesome entrance to the monastic precincts which, despite its present commercial environment and eroded state, just manages to hold its own. The interior is still splendid, and its vault has some of the most beautiful early 14th century sculpture in the North West. The ribs are sunk chamfered (Fig. 3) and so are the various arches that compose the town façade, though most of the arrises are completely worn away. A monastic gatehouse is essentially a military structure. A great many of them were built in English monasteries c. 1300 but none so far as the author is aware has a façade like that at Chester. The segregation of equestrian and pedestrian traffic by two arches of different proportions is common enough, but the containment of both beneath a vast sweeping relieving arch of segmental form is most unusual. It has been pointed out by Dr. A. J. Taylor that the Welsh castles of Edward I make much use of segmental arches and that they are probably a Savoyard feature introduced by Edward's master of works, James of St. George. The most monumental use of such an arch in the castles is at Caernarfon where it spans the great niche in the centre of the Queen's Gate. It provides a striking and significant comparison for the great relieving arch at Chester.

The design of the nave of Ashbourne Church in Derbyshire serves to strengthen the links between the Abbey Gatehouse and the eastern bays of the choir. Ashbourne nave is the only place in the medieval Lichfield diocese where one can find bases like those in the early 14th century choir bays (Fig. 3). While one cannot find a parallel there for the extraordinary Chester piers, it is worth noting that the pier sections of the single Ashbourne arcade (Fig. 3) are organised in a precisely analogous manner to the early 14th century vault shafts at Chester (Fig. 2). There is also a distinct similarity in style between the sculptured head stops at Ashbourne and those in the abbey choir. The author strongly believes, in fact, that Ashbourne nave is the work of the same master mason; and if this is the case, the rather ugly and awkward trefoiled niches that appear to be jammed between the buttresses and windows of the North wall at Ashbourne are of special relevance, since precisely the same incongruous niches appear on the gatehouse, stuck, where there is far too little space for them, between the two entrances and the relieving arch.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

The apparent connections with Caernarfon and military architecture in general are particularly significant for the light which they cast on the authorship of the early 14th century work. Most authors record the fact that in 1310 and 1312-13, the abbot of Chester made recognizances, for £40 and £20 13s. respectively, in favour of Master Richard the Engineer.¹⁶ These sums could certainly form part of the wages of a master mason engaged upon the design and supervision of the choir and gatehouse during the period in question. Richard the Engineer is one of the principal figures in the building of the Edwardian castles who appears to have been right hand man to Master James of St. George for several years. He supervised construction at many of the castles and was no doubt thoroughly familiar with the work at Caernarfon. He was essentially a military engineer, and the sort of robust detailing which is encountered at Chester and accompanying solecisms are precisely what one would expect of a man with only limited experience of church architecture.

There is no window tracery in the choir that we can ascribe to the period of Master Richard the Engineer. The westernmost window of the North aisle is Victorian, and although it would be tempting to put the windows of the two western aisle bays on the South side with the work that has just been considered, it will emerge that these two designs actually belong to the period of the crossing. The clerestory window design which Gilbert Scott inserted in all the lateral windows is in fact verified in a Buckler drawing¹⁷ which shows it to have survived in two windows nearest the crossing on the North side, but as will be seen, there are also good reasons for associating this pattern with crossing campaign. The other clerestory windows were at some time in the late Middle Ages, or even later, filled with Perpendicular tracery of a crude type. The simple Y tracery of the Ashbourne windows may possibly indicate the sort of designs that might have been intended for the Chester clerestory in the early years of the 14th century. The *terminus ante quem* of the main body of the choir is generally taken to be 1323, the year in which Abbot Thomas Burchelles was buried 'on the south side of the choir between the pillars'; and Burne¹⁸ has suggested that his place of burial indicates that he had a special interest in the work. The stylistic and documentary evidence certainly does not contradict this suggestion, and the fact that most of the earlier abbots had been buried in the Chapter House and its vestibule does seem to point to a close relationship between Thomas Burchelles and the early 14th century work. The inference of Injunction 9 of the Episcopal Visitation of 1315 also implicates Burchelles directly with the construction of the building: 'The abbot is to surrender all the monies which he has received for the fabric of the church and is to receive no more'.¹⁹

¹⁶ e.g., Burne, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁷ B.L., Add. MS. 36360.

¹⁸ Burne, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 67. However, it was quite common for the Sacrist or some other officer to be responsible for the fabric.

When his successor, Abbot William de Bebington, died, presumably of the pestilence, in 1349, he also was buried 'on the south side of the choir almost between the pillars',²⁰ and it was during his time that the full length of the choir was finally finished with the rebuilding of the crossing, if the author's interpretation of the archaeological evidence is correct, for stylistic factors suggest that the crossing is in fact work of the 1330s.²¹

It is suggested that the crossing and the two western bays of the South aisle were designed by a very competent master mason whose work can also be identified in the North transept of St. Mary's, Stafford, and in the chancels of Audley in Staffordshire and Shifnal in Shropshire.²² Although there is no documentary evidence with which to associate this mason's work, his buildings can be dated with a fair degree of accuracy from the clearly distinguishable details that they appear to borrow from other documented buildings. He was, it seems, intimately acquainted with the fabric of Lichfield Cathedral and was thoroughly familiar with two other important 14th century works. Exeter Cathedral nave seems to have provided the inspiration for much of his window tracery, while the choir of Ely Cathedral may have furnished him with many of his rich mouldings and ornamental details. It is interesting, though, that the work of William Ramsey at Lichfield (1337-49), and the almost exactly corresponding work at Ely, is not acknowledged in his buildings, as it is almost inconceivable that a provincial mason would not emulate the work of this distinguished royal mason had it existed in his time. Much of the nave of Exeter dates from 1327, and work on the upper walls was not entirely complete until 1342.²³ We are thus provided with the period 1327 to 1337 as the time when this mason was active in the diocese.

The two western windows of the South aisle at Chester are close relatives of the West window of Stafford's North transept. In both buildings the pattern in the head is composed of a moulded quatrefoil placed above and between two trefoils. Chester is in fact slightly different in the use of vertically elongated quatrefoils in the lower register. It is the appearance of these vertically elongated foiled forms in the windows of the clerestory which suggests that the surviving clerestory and westernmost aisle patterns belong to the same phase of construction. These particular tracery shapes are unusual. They are also found in the windows of St. Katherine's Chapel at Ledbury in Herefordshire,²⁴ and it is possible that the source of both buildings is the original West window of Lichfield Cathedral that was destroyed in the siege of 1646 but faithfully recorded in

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 84.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 78-79. One of the discoveries of Scott's restoration was that the north eastern pier of the crossing rested on a foundation of 13th century tomb slabs laid one upon the other. Burne suggests that a decent interval would have elapsed before these memorials were reused as hard core.

²² Maddison, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-15.

²³ V. Hope and J. Lloyd, *Exeter Cathedral*, 1973.

²⁴ A point made by Dr. Jansen in her doctoral thesis. She does, however, date the Chester windows to c. 1300.

an etching by Hollar.²⁵ As far as profiles are concerned, a telling comparison can be made between the aisle window arches and jambs at Chester (Fig. 3) and the window jambs at Audley (Fig. 3). The main elements are similarly disposed and the profiles make extensive use of semi fleur de lis forms. Some of the window jambs in Stafford North transept (Fig. 3) have the same forms, and there is a very strong similarity between the unusual mullion profiles of both buildings (Fig. 3). The use of the fleur de lis is widespread at Ely, and there is a good instance in the piers of the Octagon (1322-28) (Fig. 3). Here the fleur de lis elements continue without interruption into the arches, whereas the cylindrical shafts between them are stopped, in the conventional manner with capitals. Although they are more broadly handled, the same description could be applied to the crossing piers at Chester (Fig. 2). The Chester capitals make use of the square fleurons that are very much a feature of the Ely ornament, while the bases (Fig. 2) provide one of the very few good comparisons for the curious bases of the beautiful little chapel built by John of Crauden at Ely in the period immediately after he became prior in 1321 (Fig. 2). The bases of the Octagon are of a related type. Due credit must be given to the mason of the crossing for his recognition and solution of the aesthetic problem posed by the monks' stalls, which in most abbey churches would have entirely masked the lower mouldings of the crossing piers and their bases. His piers were built on high, plain stone plinths so that the bases of the principal arches would appear above the stallwork which, in the 14th century, would have run straight through the crossing.

The panelling which runs up the soffits of the East and West arches poses something of a problem because its manifestly Perpendicular character is at odds with the Decorated period to which the author assigns the crossing piers. It is a problem that can be solved by detailed scrutiny of the masonry coursing and again by reference to other buildings in the diocese. The panelling does in fact belong to a late 14th century remodelling of the crossing that is connected with the construction of the present tower. The panelling does not course with the work to either side, and although the period to which it belongs is outside the scope of this article, it should perhaps be pointed out that very similar work can be found at Nantwich, Acton, Shrewsbury Abbey, Ellesmere and, particularly valuable for the purposes of this paper, in the late 14th century clerestory that is so clearly a later addition to the Decorated North transept at Stafford. This group of early Perpendicular buildings in the Lichfield diocese can be dated to the period c. 1385 to 1400,²⁶ and when it is realised that the Chester crossing was once again remodelled during that period, there is very cogent reason for the installation of the outstanding late 14th century choir stalls.

²⁵ In Thomas Fuller's *Church History* of 1655.

²⁶ This argument is made in detail in Maddison, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-98.

There is, as has been hinted, much more that could be said about the late 14th century at Chester, and indeed about the later 1340s when the author believes that the shrine of St. Werburgh and the lower parts of the South transept were built. The construction of the choir is, however, a complicated story and one that deserves to be treated separately. Such a building is in reality a section through the architectural history of the area in which it was built and the writer has tried to show in this paper how the identification, in other buildings, of work by the various master masons of the choir has an important bearing on our understanding of its development and significance.