# Bath Abbey
## A Re-assessment of its Patronage and Architectural History

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*The established view that the late medieval reconstruction of the Romanesque abbey church at Bath should be seen as a comprehensive design exclusively attributed to Bishop King (1496–1503) is reassessed through a review of the documentary and architectural evidence. King arrived at Bath to find that work had already started, probably in the early 1480s under Prior Cantlow; the design followed late 14th-century traditions, drawing upon the rebuilding of St Mary Redcliffe Bristol and Somerset parish churches. King's larger architectural ambitions and his wish for a permanent personal association were reflected in the unusual iconography of the west front and his employment of Robert and William Vertue to create vaulting of a contemporary quality and design. King achieved the west front and east end of the new building before his death. The subsequent lack of resources meant that the partly demolished old and the incomplete new co-existed throughout the 16th-century, not reconsecrated until the 1590s. The building was unfinished until well into the 17th-century, when Harrington's myth of King's original unifying dream helped promote completion; it also served to obscure the history of the building before King's arrival whilst setting his aspiration as founder into the annals of history.*

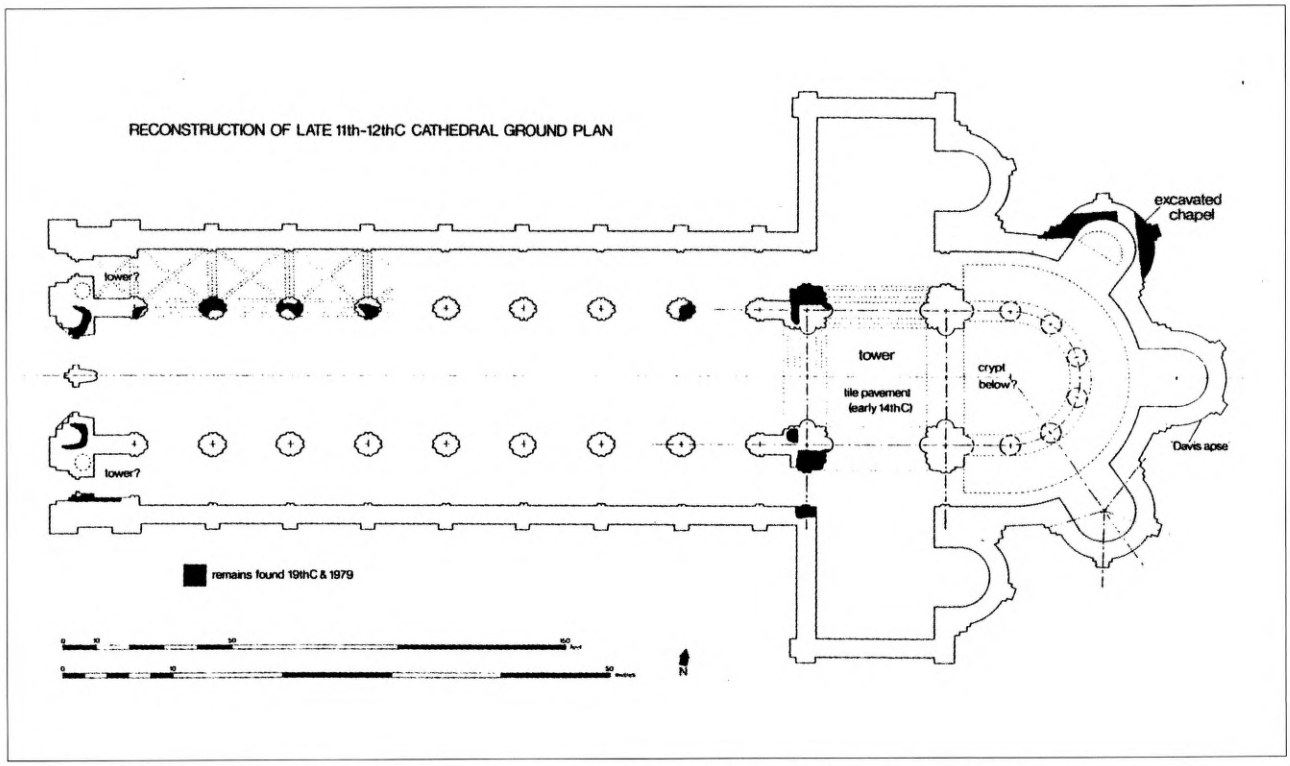


*Fig 1 – Bath Abbey in the 12th century, based on a plan by Warwick Rodwell in Davenport 1996, revisions to the transept plan have now been proposed (pers comm P Davenport)*

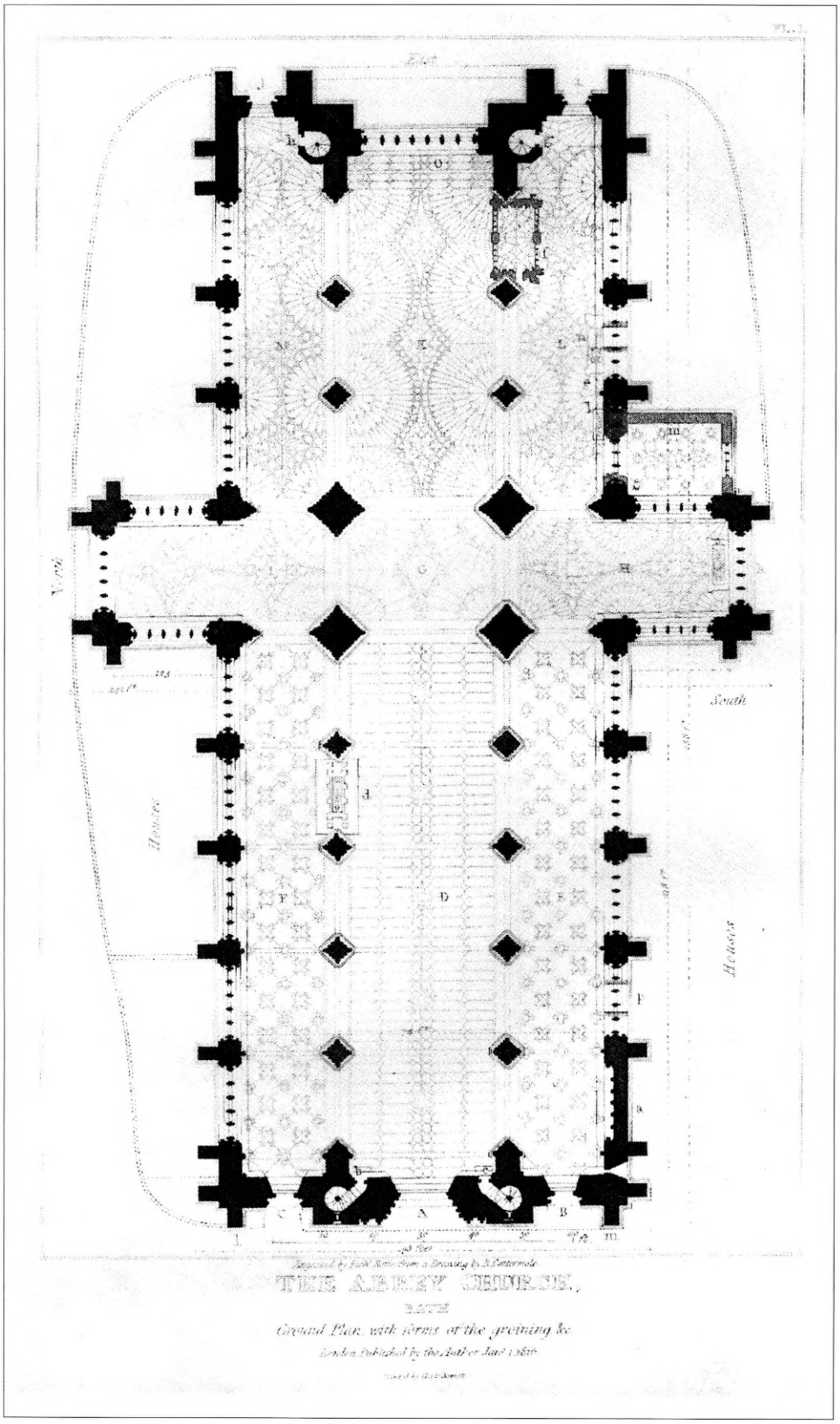


*Fig 2 – Plan of the late medieval church as constructed occupying the site of the nave of the earlier building*

The late medieval reconstruction of the cathedral-priory at Bath has a simple and well-established history: Oliver King, Bishop of Bath and Wells from 1496 to 1503, arrived in Bath in 1499 to find a large dilapidated Romanesque church, he had a dream about restoring it and subsequently commenced a rebuilding programme. The church is considered by almost all authors on the subject to be a single-phase 'very consistently designed' 16th-century monastic church (Forsyth 2003, 53).

Unlike all other major priory, monastic and secular foundations in the south and south west of England, the church at Bath remained essentially in its 12th-century form throughout the middle ages, and, when finally rebuilt the new church occupied only the nave of its Romanesque predecessor (Figs 1 and 2).

The history of the new church at Bath has been the subject of discussion by various authorities; and the often-quoted references to its documented patronage might imply that little remains to be investigated. The exclusive attribution to Bishop King and the construction of a church to one comprehensive design is generally taken for granted in histories of the monastic church. It is a re-assessment of these two issues, therefore, that forms the basis for this paper.

The arguments below will challenge the traditional reliance on a select documentary evidence for the church's history. Furthermore it will seek to relate this evidence clearly and comprehensively to the design, construction and progress of build of the new church, thereby providing an alternative hypothesis for the origins of the rebuilding campaign and its progress. Two particular issues that have been much debated in earlier literature will also be considered, namely the vexing issue of the relationship of the east window to the chancel vault and the reasons that the current building occupies only the nave of the earlier church.

The first part of the paper, therefore, will set out a background history to the building and a summary of the current state of understanding. Following this are two sections respectively addressing the documentary and architectural evidence in more detail; resulting from this analysis is a revised history of the building campaign followed by concluding remarks.

## *The history of the church*

The head of the See was moved from Wells to Bath by John of Tours after his appointment in 1088. It is recorded that John '*pullid down the old Chirch of St Peter at Bath, and erected a new, much fairer [one]*' (Toulmin Smith 1907, I, 143), the lower vaults of which were complete by John's death in 1122.[1] After the creation of the joint See of Bath and Wells in 1245 Bath's previously high status declined, and it was at Wells that episcopal heads invested their patronage. To this end, whilst Wells Cathedral was rebuilt in the 13th and 14th centuries, Bath appears to have remained largely in its Romanesque form throughout the later Middle Ages.

The building activity that occurred at Bath appears to have been peripheral to the main body of the church, although by no means insignificant. The eastern apsidal chapel of the Romanesque chevet was reconstructed in the 1260s under Bishop Bytton, who created a rectangular Early English Lady Chapel reflecting a general trend as seen earlier at Wells, Salisbury and Lincoln. Some minor repairs were carried out in the 1320s and the church was re-consecrated in 1325 (Irvine 1890, 87 and Davenport 1996, 25), perhaps relating to work evidently under way in c1330, as indicated by the documented presence of the master mason Richard of Farleigh at the priory (Harvey 1984, 106). The discovery of 14th-century tiles during excavations in the 1990s may belong to this apparently short period of activity and it has been suggested that these relate to the tiling of the crossing area referred to by Irvine in the 1890s (Davenport 1996, 25; Irvine 1890, 91 and Davenport 1991, 35). In the 15th century Bishop Bubwith constructed a chantry chapel within the church, as he did also at Wells Cathedral (1424–67), and Bishop Beckington financed a new dormitory (1445–65) (Harvey 1969, 295). Little is known of the appearance of these constructions. It seems that by the second half of the 15th century there existed an essentially complete Romanesque church with later alterations to fittings and floors, a new Lady Chapel and some new claustral buildings.

In contrast to the relative lack of information regarding the works at the priory throughout the 13th and 14th centuries, a number of documents exist from the late 15th century onwards. This information has been used to provide an account, now well established, regarding the date of the present building, the patron and the designers. Oliver King is said to have arrived at Bath and informed the prior of his resolve '*to build the church anew*' (see for example Davenport 1996, 25). For this task he employed royal masons, namely the brothers Robert and William Vertue. The availability of this detailed information is enviable, but perhaps as a direct consequence of its

survival, the circumstances of the rebuilding of the church have been taken for granted.

Three pieces of evidence combine to provide the basis for the attribution of patronage to Oliver King. Bishop of Bath and Wells from 1496 to 1503 and Secretary of State to successive monarchs (from Edward IV to Henry VII), he had been elected to replace Bishop Fox on the latter's translation from Exeter to Wells, and subsequently succeeded him as Bishop of Bath and Wells on his move to Winchester in 1496. A man of high reputation in the court circle, Oliver King was in constant contact with a number of leading prelates and nobles. His position as canon at St George's Chapel and registrar to the Order of the Garter placed him in direct contact with St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle during its reconstruction, and with those associated with its patronage, for example Sir Reginald Bray. Whilst prelate at Exeter (1492–1496) Oliver King had requested to be buried in the newly constructed east end of St George's Chapel, and a chapel was constructed for him in the south choir aisle, just east of the Bray's own chapel in the south transept.

It was the discovery, almost a hundred years ago, of letters between these two men in the Westminster Abbey Muniments that forms the first piece of evidence for the established story of the rebuilding at Bath (Robinson 1914, 1–10). The letters state that the masons Robert and William Vertue had been in Bath with Oliver King and that they were to design a vault for the church. The purpose of the letters appears to be to inform the recipient, Sir Reginald Bray, that a report detailing the situation could now be made to him. The letters, dated only 18th January, are thought to have been written between 1500 and 1503 (Robinson 1914, 4). Bishop King was largely absent from his new diocese until 1499, when his residency in Bath and Wells increased notably (Maxwell-Lyte 1939, 29, 36, 37 and 87).

Further evidence is associated with the circumstances surrounding King's visit on 30th August 1499, to initiate William Birde to the position of prior at Bath, after the death of Prior Cantlow. There remains a tradition that during this visit the bishop encountered a vision or dream, from which he was inspired to rebuild the priory church (Harrington 1804, 136–8).

A third piece of evidence is in the form of an injunction that Bishop King addressed to the newly created Prior Birde and dated 9 October 1500, which makes explicit reference to rebuilding plans. In outline this document accounts for the reallocation of a large proportion of the priory's income towards the rebuilding of the church, carefully listing small sums allowed for the prior and his monks (Dugdale 1819, XX, 270).

*Fig 3 – Bath Abbey, west front detail (Chris Elt)*

No doubt exists, therefore, to the fact of King's involvement and to the fact that he went to the most prestigious masons in the land as a direct result of his connections with the Court. In isolation this evidence presents a straightforward interpretation of the exclusive involvement of King and his masons, but one that does not stand up detailed scrutiny.

## *A reassessment of the existing documents*

### *The 'dream' theory*

Authors of the history of the church, almost without exception, explain the rebuilding of the priory church through King's vision. Bishop King's vision consisted of

> *'angels...ascending and descending a ladder from heaven...[with]...a voice [that] said: 'Let a King restore the church'...'* (Pevsner (1990), 100)

The quote, from Judges 9, begins *'Let an Olive establish the Crown'* (Wood 1765, 194), and is found inscribed on the west front, presumably relating to the name of Bishop Oliver King. The angels are found ascending and descending the ladders on the stair

turrets with a Heavenly Choir above and a representation of God the Father at the top and the Holy Spirit as the Dove in the apex of the west window. This iconography, unique on a church façade, is commonly interpreted as the direct representation of the dream (Fig 3).

The earliest mention of Bishop King as the patron of the new church is Leland, who wrote in 1543 (although he had seen the buildings nine years earlier as well) (Toulmin Smith 1907, I, 143). The first mention of the vision can only be traced back as far as the beginning of the 17th century. John Harrington recounts the dream in his *Nugae Antiquae*, in which he wrote a life of Bishop King:

> *[Bishop King] saw, or supposed he saw, a vision of the holy Trynitie with angells ascending and descending by a ladder, neer to the foote of which there was a fayre olive tree supporting a crowne, and a voyce that said 'let an Olive establish the crowne, and let a king restore the church'. Of this dreame, or vision, he took exceedingly great comfort...with his dreame, for the tyme, that he presently set in hand with this church...and at the west end therof he caused a representation to be graved of this his vision...* (Harrington 1804, 136–8)

Harrington's involvement with Bath goes further than this literary account. A tradition exists that whilst Harrington and the then Bishop of Bath and Wells, Bishop Montague, were walking in Bath on his first episcopal visit, a violent storm began and Harrington took the bishop into the nave for shelter. The bishop remarked that they were afforded no shelter and Harrington is said to have replied:

> *'Doth it not, my Lord? Then let me sue your bounty towards covering our poor Church; for if it keep not us safe from the waters above, how shall it ever save others from the fire beneath?'* (Britton 1887, 35 and note 4).

Also appearing in his *Nugae Antiquae*, this is a further example of Harrington's preference for metaphor.

Perhaps the unusual nature of the west front has resulted in the continuation of this tradition largely unchallenged. One unpublished account of the life and death of Sir Reginald Bray makes reference to the '*long and idle story of Sir John Harrington*,' (Bishop Kennett's Collection, BM) but Britton was, until recently, the only other author on Bath to question the validity of the story.[2] In stating that the story *'was clever enough to stimulate the zeal of... [his]... contemporaries, in the good works of completing the Abbey'*, Britton surely identifies Harrington's motives for writing a life of the bishop at a time when the church was in desperate need of repair (Britton 1887, 27, note 1).

Harrington was a politician during the Civil War and is probably best known for the survival of his diary. The significance of his writing methods is that he appears to have had a series of his own dreams which he recounts to explain events. Well known for the strength of his religious beliefs, Harrington made use of such visions in all his writings for establishing a standard of judgement. The visions tended to relate directly to biblical texts of analogies, and he used such examples from the Bible to illustrate his points rather than drawing on contemporary political situations:

> *'even his dreams appear to be little more than extensions of his principles. They confirm the strength of his religious commitment and his loyalty to the side which considered itself the defender of the true religion'* (Steig 1977, 7).

Harrington, therefore, appears to have created a story through which to explain the unusual nature of the west front of the church and to promote the completing of the nave. This leaves unaccounted for, however, the question of the west front iconography. That King created the façade seems certain by the presence of his badges and mottoes at aisle level. Rather than being the product of a dream it is more likely that the façade was intended to promote King's role in the construction of the new church. This he achieved, somewhat successfully considering Harrington's invention of the prophetic vision, by creating a Jacob's Ladder iconography. The story of Jacob's Ladder originates from Genesis 28:12, and Harrington has transposed the figures of Jacob and Bishop King in his own recounting of a story of a man having a vision of a ladder with angels.

The design at Bath combines several elements, including Jacob's Ladder, the Choir of Heavenly Angels, God the Father and the Holy Spirit represented by a Dove, the 12 Apostles, Saints Peter and Paul, the Emblems of the Passion, a series of biblical inscriptions on scrolls, and the personal rebus and arms of Bishop Oliver King.[3] The prominence of such individual commemoration is comparable to a chantry chapel rather than a west front, and in fact can be compared to his own chantry chapel already constructed in St George's Chapel, Windsor.

King appears to have used the west front as a means of demonstrating his piety and patronage and identifying the rebuilding programme with his burial. Cahn explains the Ladder iconography as

> *'the favoured Biblical citation for the invocation of divine sanction upon a new shrine or devotion, what anthropologists would call a foundation myth'.*

He further makes reference to the incorporation of the vision into the liturgy for the consecration of churches (Cahn 1989, 711–12 and note 29). The west front provided King with a means of inextricably linking the building work with his exclusive patronage, here identifying a re-foundation. The choice of the Ladder scene succeeded in providing him with the memorial for which he sought, that is, that of the sole patron for the re-foundation of Bath Priory church.

### *Bishop King's injunction and his letters to Sir Reginald Bray*

The rebuilding of Bath Abbey, and its patronage by King is set against a known history of the dilapidation of the monastery in the late 15th century. Many references exist suggesting the relative state of poverty that the cathedral-priory endured throughout the 14th and 15th centuries. The number of monks had declined from 41 in 1205 to 19 by 1539 (Knowles and Hadcock 1953, 59), and the total income of the priory at its dissolution in 1539 was recorded as £617.

Comparable to mid-sized monasteries in the region it rather pales into insignificance compared to major monastic houses such as Glastonbury, whose income at its dissolution, also in 1539 stood at £3311, a sum almost six times greater (Knowles and Neville 1953, 52–5).

The priory at Bath is named as being exempt from paying tenths to the crown in a series of years from 1485–96 as a poor house. In 1485 Bath is listed amongst other exempt priories on account of its poverty (Cal Fine Rolls 1471–1485, 1961, 308); whilst an exemption notice of 1492 states that it is '*on account of the ruinous state of its houses and buildings and its excessive poverty*' (Cal Fine Rolls 1485–1509, 1962, 171). These facts, concerning the general state of dilapidation, are confirmed by King's injunction seven years later in 1499. This document is worth recounting (in translation) in full, as follows:

> *'Oliver, by divine permission bishop of Bath and Wells, to our fellow-brother prior and convent of Bath loved by us in Christ, salvation, grace and blessing. At last, painfully among other matters, we have found our said cathedral church of Bath, through the neglect of many priors, not repaired or rebuilt, indeed is ruined from its foundations, and to have vanished in pleasures themselves, and we lament with fatherly compassion that the present prior, to whom we do not ascribe blame for his predecessors, is slack and not kindly disposed to the reparation or building of the said church. (We) therefore, having sent in advance considerations concerning the deliberations of many nobles, prelates and abbots and of other people learned in the law, in the mercy of God and relying on the protection of his apostles Peter and Paul, and indeed of other faithful ones of Christ, and depending on the alms of our friends, in order that we may see the swift execution and completion of the said work going on more freely, we have brought our men as helpers to be used beside the others, not sparing our work or expense. And so we hope the said work can be completed, wanting to do within a few years what never [would] be completed at the expense of the said prior and convent, or which we think could hardly be carried out properly in less that 100 years if our expense and that of our friends were left out or ignored. For this reason we want to restrain the aforesaid defection of the monks, the pleasures, the leisure activities, the ruin of the church by holding back from a superfluity of pensions, of clothing, of food and the increase in drinking. In order also that we may not take away their pious attitudes from other faithful ones in Christ by the generosity of their alms, if the said prior and convent do not reform or if we dismiss them from bringing compensatory expenses for the said work as well as practical skills, we have decreed that the present injunctions must be observed by the same faithful ones.'* (Dugdale 1819, XX, 270).

Several significant aspects of the injunction are immediately apparent, namely that Bishop King comments on the actions of previous priors in neglecting the building, that he has gathered financial aid from others of his circle, and that he desires a swift completion to the building. He excuses the present prior from criticism of his predecessors' neglect,

but adds that he is *'not kindly disposed to the reparation of the building'*. Standing alone this might be interpreted to mean only that the past priors, too involved in their own pleasures had let the building fall into disrepair. Further down the injunction King makes an interesting comment regarding his planned completion of the building campaign, stating that the priory could not carry out the completion within 100 years. Several factors contribute to an interpretation that King is speaking of an existing building, that at current rate of progress will take many years, and that with his intervention he can complete within a few building seasons.

In the letter to Bray, dated 18th January, King says that:

> *'Robert and William Vertue have been here with me that can make unto you* ***rapport of the state and forwardness of this oure chirch of bathe.*** *And also of the vawte devised'*.

Evidently they made an assessment of the progress of the building in c1502. The necessity to report back to Bray is probably related to the level of his personal involvement in the project, a fact confirmed by King's reference to the foundation of chantry chapels for them both within the new building. In the injunction King makes a revealing remark when he informs the prior that he has brought his own *'men* ***to be used beside the others****, not sparing our work or expense'*, with an implication that other men already exist working on the site, when he arrived with assistance. King has clearly consulted with and gathered donations from a network of contemporaries with the aim of fast completion of the project. The purpose of this, however, is stated as being to complete the work that the priory alone would never be capable of doing in so short a time span, and his role is to create the church as place fit for his burial. His dependence on the goodwill of his contemporaries is made evident in his comment to Bray, who he asks to

> *'give no licence to eny freemason to absent hym from this buylding...for to suffre theym to work in other mennys businesses'* (Robinson 1914, 4).

In his will King requests burial on the north side of the new choir near the altar (Weaver 1903, 44–5). Irvine refers to evidence of a vault that was discovered in front of the pier to the west of the north crossing pier (Irvine 1890, 90), and he interprets this as the remains of King's monument, which was set on the north side of the church in a traditional founder's location.

Returning now to the ambiguous phrase *'imo funditus dirutam...'*, here translated as ruined (or destroyed) to the foundations. 'Ruin' can be loosely interpreted in medieval documentation, often used to describe both a church in need of minor repairs, and as a synonym for a building in the middle of reconstruction. Bishop Drokensford (Bishop of Bath and Wells 1301–31) complained to the prior that the church at Bath was in a ruined state in the early 14th century (Hunt 1893, lxii), and this was followed by repair work in 1324, and again in 1335 (Davenport 1996, 25). The Cathedral Priory of Worcester was so described in 1346, when a grant was renewed, and the priory was described as burdened with debt, with a ruinous church and manors in need of repair. This was at a time when it is known that the nave was under construction, as in the 1340s the north nave arcade was under construction, and the south elevation was probably also begun, completed before the tower work of 1357 (Willis Bund and Page, 1906, 104 and Morris 1978, 116–43). An example of a direct reference to an unroofed building is found in the record of a visitation of Bishop Bransford of Worcester to Bristol in 1339. He found the church in 'ruins' and ordered that it be properly roofed (Morris 1997, 42 referencing Haines 1966, 27). The fact that the house at Bath is described as poor therefore does not necessarily mean that work on a rebuilding programme had not started, and the reference to ruinous has at least some precedent for referring to precisely this.

A revised interpretation of the documents, therefore suggests that Bishop King, arrived in his diocese to discover the rebuilding of the abbey already in progress. His injunction implies that this progress is hopelessly slow and under-funded, and after consultation with contemporaries decides to invest heavily in its completion. By doing so he desires the transformation of an ailing priory church into a building worthy of the burial place of prelates and nobles. Bishop Stillington, in the construction of his chapel off the east walk of the cloister at Wells Cathedral in the 1480s, had attempted a grand chantry chapel; but King had ambitions on an altogether larger architectural scale. The choice of Robert and William Vertue as masons was the most obvious way to achieve a 'royal' building, by the addition of the latest and most fashionable vault type, heavily associated with contemporary works for the monarch, that of a fan vault. King's plans for Bath were almost exactly contemporary to those of Henry VII's for the Lady Chapel at Westminster Abbey, and the vaulting of the

*Fig 4 – Bath Abbey nave and transept from the south (Debbie Wakeford)*



*Fig 5 – St Mary Redclifffe from the south (Matt Gibson)*

nave of St George's, Windsor, the latter which was largely financed by Sir Reginald Bray.

## *Architecture and Design: a re-assessment*

The architectural design of the church confirms the fact that rebuilding was underway before King's arrival. The present building, as is well known, is situated on the site of the nave of the Romanesque cathedral, the eastern wall of the present structure correlating with the western arches of the crossing of the old church. In plan the present church consists of a five-bay aisled nave and a three-bay aisled chancel with unaisled transepts, of unusually narrow proportions. All aisles are covered by stone fan vaulted designs, those of the nave being 19th-century copies of the 16th-century east end. The east end is filled with a large square-headed window, and the church, rather unusually for a church of its status, has no ambulatory or projecting eastern chapels.

The entire approach to the design, in terms of proportions and disposition (and excluding the fan vaults), has a close resemblance to the late 14th-century rebuilding of St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol (Figs 4 and 5).

The use of a sub-reticulated design for the clerestory windows emulates its earlier use for large clerestory windows at both Redcliffe (late 14th century) and Sherborne Abbey (from 1420s). Specific reference to the Redcliffe format is shown through the decision to abandon the supermullions favoured at Sherborne. Variations from the Redcliffe model introduced at Bath are supertransoms in the head of the window, and the addition of a main transom. The use of ogee heads to the main lights and segmental heads to those under the transom all betray the relatively late date of Bath compared with Redcliffe.

Although the use of segmental headed aisle windows at Bath further suggests Redcliffe as a model,

*Fig 6 – Bath Abbey chancel and east window (Paula Funnell)*

the 'alternate' pattern favoured for these windows at Bath is less obviously related to the aisles of the Redcliffe. This form is most commonly associated with late 14th-century parish churches in Somerset, for example, St Cuthbert's, Wells, and St John's, Yeovil. Two conclusions can be drawn from these comparisons: first, that the general model for proportions and planning at Bath was evidently Redcliffe, demonstrating the continued prestige of this building a century after its design. Secondly, that the designer of Bath appears to be relying on a local parish church tradition, which had been most extravagantly expressed at Redcliffe. This hypothesis holds good for an assessment of the architectural details of the church as well.

The piers, composed of four rolls separated by large double ogees, are a variation of the four rolls and hollows, or four rolls and waves so common in the parish churches in the region throughout the period. Equally, the single bell bases are too common to be usefully compared. A distinctive detail on the otherwise simple capitals clearly links this building with parish models: those capitals supporting the arcade arch have a single fillet that crosses the upper moulding above the capital and sits directly on the abacus,[4] a detail reminiscent of the same treatment at St John's, Yeovil and the parish church of Hinton St George.

The inspiration for the details and tracery designs therefore are deeply rooted in the parish church tradition of the late 14th century in Somerset. In fact, the church gains its status not through 'great church' mouldings, but from its dependence on the general form of the most prestigious complete church rebuilding in the locality, St Mary Redcliffe. Additionally, it is clear from the lack of moulded details and the plainness of the elevations that the priory at Bath lacked finance and support: the complete omission of panelling and the reduction of moulded detail is illustrative of its lack of wealth compared with the merchant funding of Redcliffe for example (Fig 6).

Neither the simplified Somerset-based parish church design, nor the lack of finance this betrays, can be easily reconciled with the patronage of a high ranking bishop and the artistic input of royal masons. Stylistically there is a dichotomy between the locally inspired building and the monarchial associations of the vault. As shown above, King invested hugely in the rebuilding at Bath, both from the income of the priory and from his own means, and those of his contemporaries. It seems somewhat surprising that King or the Vertues would create a building in which the details so clearly betray a lack of financial investment, and with no reference to the contemporary works in which they were also involved, especially when compared to the architectural pretensions of the vault design. A reading of the architecture, therefore confirms a sharp distinction between the body of the church and its roofing.

## *A revised history of the church*

### *Phase 1*

When William Worcestre visited Bath in 1478 he measured the building, and these measurements correlate with information on the Romanesque abbey; furthermore he makes no mention of a major rebuilding (Worcestre 1969, 141).[5] This provides a *terminus post quem* for the campaign.

Possible candidates for the initiation of a rebuilding campaign are Priors Dunster and Cantlow. Cantlow had succeeded Dunster probably by 1483 when he describes the

> *'soden ruyn of the most of the church of the seid Priorie [and] the charges and costs of repare...[of the ]...seid...place'.*[6]

In his statement Cantlow explained the reasons for the poverty of the priory, and included an accusation against Dunster for wilful damage, by his alleged removal of jewels and goods from the priory on his departure to St. Augustine's (Bradford 1911, 35–6, 38 note 2 and 38–49). Dunster was further accused of having left mortgaged the priory manors, releasing rents and depleting the manors of stock as well as carrying off plate and other items of value to Canterbury (Bradford 1911, 40). It is possible that Cantlow was erring on the side of exaggeration in making a case against a previous prior, although despite this it seems that the priory had suffered depletion of financial resources, and some degree of 'repair' was required on the church itself. In his defence Dunster cites the new prior's own extravagance as proof that the priory was not suffering such great poverty, although he says little of the buildings and makes no apparent reference to the perpetual debt repayments to the mayor of Plymouth, that had led to an annual levy on the priory (Bradford 1911, 49).

Both priors are recorded as having contributed towards new building programmes: Prior Dunster rebuilt the refectory, and Prior Cantlow is known for

his patronage of the hospital of St Mary Magdalen in Bath and a variety of other projects outside Bath.[7] Cantlow clearly earned his reputation as a builder in the locality despite his claims of severe poverty. He remains the most likely candidate for initiating works on an outdated and dilapidated church, placing the new campaign in the early years of the 1480s. His pleas of poverty succeeded in obtaining exemption for payments to the crown and allowed for the slow continuation of a massive rebuilding project. Despite this it is clear that the priory found considerable difficulty in maintaining the momentum and financial support for such a large scale, and evidently long-term, project.

The east end of the Romanesque church would have been used for services during this period of disruption, and considerable evidence exists to demonstrate that this older church remained attached to the new church until the mid-16th century. In 1497 ordinations are recorded as taking place in the Lady Chapel, which is specified as being behind the high altar (Maxwell-Lyte 1939, 84), and this must therefore refer to the 13th-century axial chapel constructed by Bishop Bytton.

### *Phase 2*

It is unclear precisely how far work had progressed by the arrival of King. What is known is that the chancel vault is keyed into the fabric at springing level (Wilson 1995, 141). King's belief in c1502 that the church would be covered by the winter (Robinson 1914, 4), suggests the building was approaching this level, at the tops of the clerestory walls, by this date. It is unrealistic that in two or three building seasons King could have demolished the entire nave of the Romanesque church and rebuilt to roof level and it seems likely that the nave was at least partially demolished and the new chancel elevation begun.

During this period the Romanesque east end still remained in use and functional: a series of wills specify burial in or near the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the years 1503 and 1507 (Weaver 1903, 57 and 108). As no new Lady Chapel was built as part of the late medieval campaign this must refer to the earlier axial chapel dedicated to Our Lady. This is further supported by the fact that the new east end was clearly not covered and ready to be used during King's episcopate. His ordering of glass demonstrates, however, his belief that the church, in the chancel at least, would be imminently completed.

With enough money and the appropriate masons King clearly saw an opportunity to associate the building of Bath Priory with his munificence. This enabled him not only to achieve the swift completion of the east end of the new church but the opportunity to create his west front iconography proclaiming himself as founder of the new church. It would seem that this claim was in fact a fair one, in that the resources King threw into the rebuilding were immense. If his death, and the death of Bray, both in 1503, had not ended the momentum the church might have been completed within a few years, with its construction running exactly parallel to that of Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey. The change in circumstances of the priory at the death of its two most generous patrons is striking, and the reversion to a struggling campaign obvious by the state in which the church was left over thirty years later at its dissolution.

### *Phase 3*

After King's death the building campaign was managed by Priors William Birde (1499 to 1525) and William Holleway (1525 to 1539), as the succeeding bishops appear to have taken no interest in the scheme. King's immediate successor was Cardinal Adrian de Castello, whose arms appear on the chancel vault, and his excommunication in 1518 therefore forms a convenient *terminus ante quem* for the east-end high vault (Underwood 1995, 65–81). His arms also appear with those of Prior Birde's in the aisle, suggesting that not even these were stone vaulted by King's death in 1503. Luxford points out that the presence of Castello's arms does not denote any personal interest in the project. It is clear that it is the priors who are left with the burden of completing the works and their choice of Castello's arms is to '*demonstrate the status of their titular abbot*' (Luxford 2005, 15). The arms of Lord Willoughby of Broke exist in a single boss in each of the choir aisles, and it must be assumed that these relate to Robert, second Lord Willoughby, who died in 1522 (Aubrey 1862, 400 and plate XXXVIII). At the west end the royal arms supported by the greyhounds symbolise the reign of Henry VIII, set above the arms of St Peter's at Bath, with the crossed keys and the saltire of St Andrew of Wells Cathedral. Amongst the Choir of Heavenly Angels that fill the gable of the west front are now two rather lumpy and indistinct shields; described as '*so nearly effaced as not to be distinguishable*' by Carter in 1798, who identified

them as those of Cardinal Adrian de Castello (Carter 1798, 7 and plate 6).

The site of the shields is still visible but the details have weathered even further. Assuming that the east-end of the new church was roofed soon after the death of King, it seems that the chancel was vaulted and the west end continued, so that by 1518 the west front was essentially complete. William Vertue continued as consultant or supervisory mason after the death of King, and that of his own brother in 1506 (Harvey 1984, 306–07), and it is to him that the vault construction must be attributed. He was probably also the designer of Prior Birde's chantry, which was probably constructed between 1515 (Davis 1834, 2), perhaps confirming the enclosure of the chancel by this date, and Birde's death in 1525 (Maxwell-Lyte 1940, 81).

Birde's successor, William Holleway, continued the work, but there is no evidence of his arms on the building. His arrival as prior in 1525 is seen as an indicator that the choir was in use by this date, as he was carried up to the high altar with organ accompaniment (Maxwell-Lyte 1940, 80–1). That the church was roofed and glazed by around this time is supported by the will of Thomas Chapman, who left money for the completion of a window, the glazing to be organised by his wife, in his will proved 29 October 1524 (Weaver 1903, 231). Finally then the 12th-century east end seems to have been abandoned. Certainly it was in ruins by the 1530s, as indicated by Leland's description of it in 1542. In his description of the role John of Tours played in erecting the new Romanesque church, he recorded that:

> *'This John pullid doun the old chirch of S. Peter at Bath, and erectid a new, much fairer, and was buried in the midle of the presbyteri thereof, whos image I saw lying there an 9. yere sins,* ***at the which tyme al the chirch that he made lay***

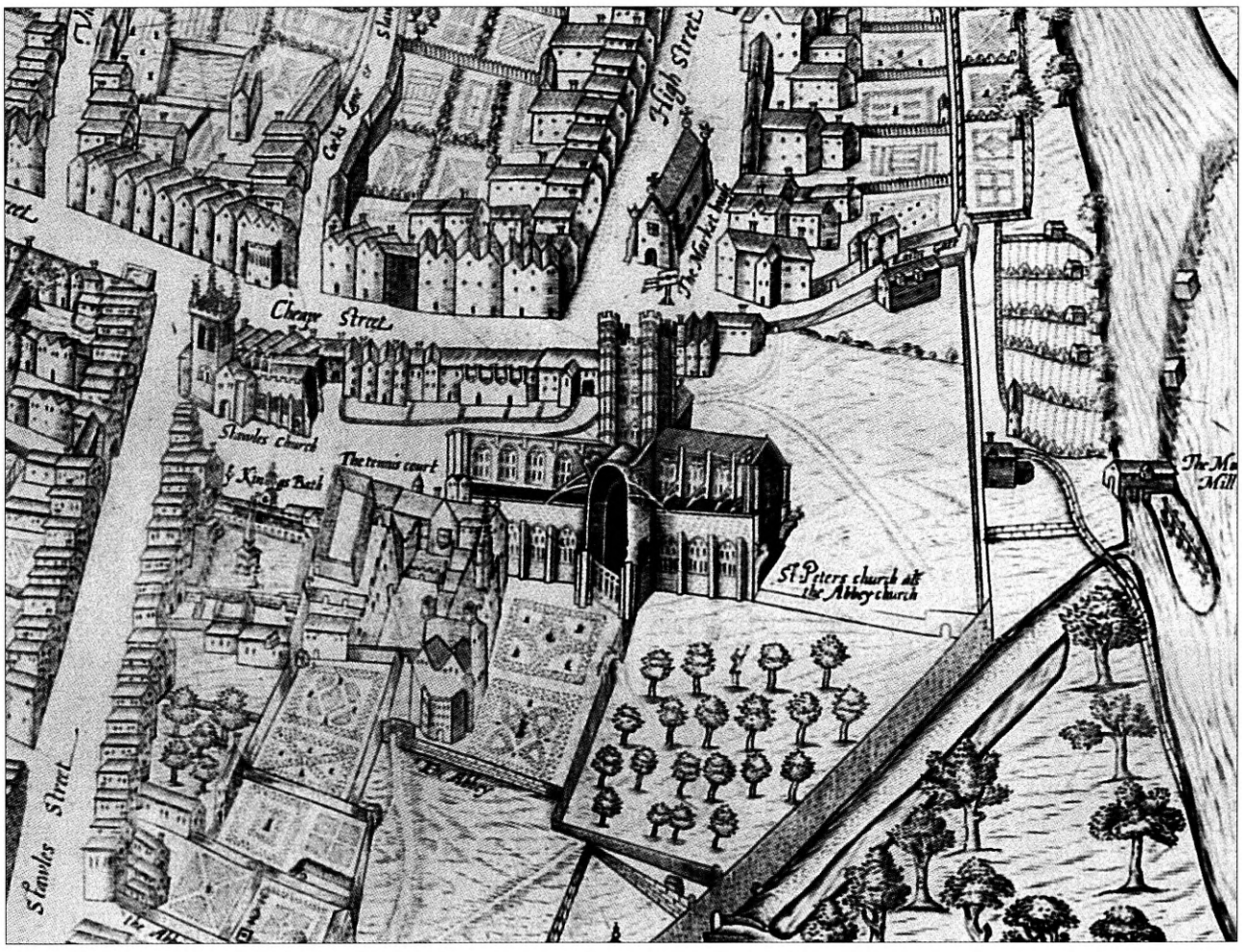


*Fig 7 – Henry Savile's map c1600*

***to wast, and was onrofid, and wedes grew about this John of Tours' sepulcre,***' (Toulmin Smith 1907, I, 143).

An understanding of the history of the building from the 1530s is crucial to an assessment of the two outstanding questions raised at the beginning. One of these is the argued presence by Manco of a new axial Lady Chapel, absent now she claims as a result of post-Reformation destruction (Manco 1995, 98).

Considerable evidence, subsequently discovered through archaeological investigation, exists to suggest that the unroofed east end of the Romanesque church remained keyed in to the east wall of the new church until the dissolution of the priory. This evidence is particularly helpful in laying-to-rest any suggestion that the new church had an axial Lady chapel by the 1530s.

The excavations by Irvine revealed a late 14th-century tile pavement *in situ* in the crossing of the Romanesque church. The remains of this floor were undisturbed, and showed no evidence of alteration or subsequent construction, such as early 16th-century walls (Irvine 1890, 89). Furthermore, drawn reconstructions of the Romanesque church have shown the transepts with a gallery level, carried by two arches across the opening to the transept at approximately aisle height. These have been suggested on the basis of evidence from Irvine's excavation, which revealed evidence of a dwarf wall at the entrance to the transepts that enclosed the choir with arcading (Davenport 1996, 22). That these 'gallery' arches remained attached to the new building is evident from the vestiges of an arch in the buttress of the north choir aisle at the east end. Correlating in height with the arches proposed by the drawn reconstruction by Davenport this appears to be the same arch as represented in the drawings by Henry Savile and John Speed in c1600 and c1610 respectively, and which show the church in its derelict state after the pilfering and selling off of materials at the time of its dissolution including the disappearance of the precinct buildings and the ruins of John of Tours abbey church. Savile shows two arches springing from the east wall of the new church, and these must be the remains of the gallery arches, just before their incorporation into the massive new buttresses added to the east end at about this time (Fig 7). That the Romanesque east end remained firmly attached to the new church is further shown by the survival of a Romanesque arch at the east end of the south aisle, which is keyed into the fabric.

*Fig 8 – Bath Abbey east end (Felix Haslimeir)*

After the Reformation a series of repairs was carried out that seem to be directly related to this junction between the old and new building (Browne Willis 1718, 223). In brief, after the Dissolution the priory was sold to Humphrey Colles, who quickly sold it to Matthew Colthurst in March 1543. By this stage however, it is recorded that bells, lead and iron had already been sold by the Crown Bailiff to city merchants. The church remained the property of Colthurst until his death in 1559 when it passed to his son, Edmund. He then gave the church to the city before selling off the rest of his father's properties (Britton 1887, 31–5 and Bartelot 1940, 90–1). The history of repairs starts from after the transfer of the church to the city, with a reference to Peter Chapman working on the church in the 1570s (Wood 1765, 201). Whilst the church remained in an unfit state for worship St Mary de Staulls was used as the parish church until the late 16th century (Irvine 1890, 89). Chapman's work was initially concerned with repairs at the east end of the north aisle. Subsequently a roof was erected over the east and north part of the church. Two documents refer to the efforts of the community to continue with the works to the church. In 1574 the

queen ordered collections across the kingdom for seven years for the restoration of Bath Abbey church (Bartelot 1941, 177), and in c1576 the city requested permission to carry out works to *'to finish building the fair church...not fully finished at the time of the suppression'* (Cal State Papers 1547–1580, 1967). This probably refers to the need to tidy up the east end of the building which was left scarred by the removal of the Romanesque walls directly after the dissolution. That this was a sign of its incomplete state is shown by the east walls of the aisles and remnants of Romanesque arches. The church was re-consecrated in the 1590s and the final stage of tidying the east end was carried out in 1616 when the large buttresses were completed (Fig 8). Work to the south transept and nave, and the re-instating of the west window were carried out in the early 17th century under Bishop Montague (Bishop from 1608) supposedly after Harrington's intervention (Rawlinson 1719, 163–72 and Britton 1887, 34). The presence of the arms of James I at the far eastern boss of the high vault of the choir further suggests repair work to the remaining fabric was carried out as well as reinstatement in the 17th century.

Despite Leland's comments, therefore, that Holleway had *'spent a great summe of mony on that fabrike'* (Toulmin Smith 1907, I, 144) there appears no evidence of an architectural contribution by him. The absence of his heraldry is at first surprising, but could be explained if his contribution had been in the form of fittings for the newly completed choir.

The evident absence of a Lady Chapel left the unusual appearance created by the sheer east wall and no ambulatory arrangement. Although in the event never built, the new church was surely intended to have a Lady Chapel, not least considering its dependence on St Mary, Redcliffe, and the clear allowance for the choir aisle to protrude past the present east wall. It seems reasonable to suggest that a plan similar to Redcliffe was originally intended when the church was begun in c1480.

The existing form of the east wall, with the panelled section of the fan vaulting ending flush with east wall, and a full length east window seems incompatible with such a plan. It seems most likely that the design and installation of this window signifies the moment at which it was realised that the original ground plan could not be completed. The truncation of the plan lent itself to a grand architectural treatment of the east wall. There has in the past been long and complicated debates about the relationship (perceived as awkward) of this square-headed window to the fan vault. To the extent that it has been assumed the window preceded the vault and therefore indicated the presence or planned presence of a flat timber roof. Harvey summarises this hypothesis as follows:

> *'An important afterthought at Bath was the decision to vault the main spans, instead of depending on a flat timber roof. When the change was made, the east window was already complete, but the west window...had only reached springing level'* (Harvey 1984, 309).

There is evidence, however, in the mouldings of the jambs and the design of the tracery that the window was designed by a royal mason and therefore that it must postdate King's intervention and in particular the construction of the fan vaults (by 1518). It was either designed by William Vertue, who remained consultant to Bath until his death in 1527, or his successor, also a royal mason, John Molton. Furthermore there are various precedents for the combination of similarly square-headed windows with stone vaults in works in London associated largely with royal masons that make the perceived incompatability one of historical prejudice.[8] Any awkwardness in the arrangement comes, not from it denoting a change to the roof, but rather it denoting a change in the termination of the eastern wall. A further suggestion that the window was lengthened after the demolition of the putative new Lady chapel should also be dismissed.[9] The new glazed east wall would present the appearance of a finished building from the interior, whilst its exterior faced onto the ruins of the Romanesque crossing and east end.

## *Conclusions*

It has been demonstrated that the loss of the motivation of King, who had a personal interest in the completion of the church, as well as his financial input, resulted in a distinct lack of momentum. In fact, this evident and considerable slowing up of the campaign seemingly proves King's concerns, as expressed in the injunction, that the priory itself would take over a hundred years to complete the church. It clearly took the priors nearly 40 years to achieve a serviceable east end, comprising a fully roofed, but not fully vaulted, building. This reinforces the notion of King as the driving force behind an otherwise slow and under-resourced project. It is for these reasons of resourcing that the decision appears to have been made to

abandon the Lady chapel of the new church, and 'complete' the east end with a great east window.

It has been argued that the construction of Bath Priory church occurred in three broad phases. From c1480 to 1499 the Romanesque nave was pulled down and the reconstruction of the fabric had begun from the east to west. By 1499 the chancel walls were in progress, but with the arrival of Bishop Oliver King a new phase was entered. Bringing with him working masons, consultant designers and noble patronage, King began a campaign to complete the church, by way of converting it into a church worthy of his burial. He had originally made a plan for burial at St George's Windsor but had changed this to Bath. Despite his attempts to quickly finish the building, it was left incomplete at his death and he was probably buried at Wells (Maxwell-Lyte 1939, 44–47, RCHMS 1914, 172 and Weaver 1905, 3). Not even all the walls were up to full height by his death in 1503.

After his death the campaign reverted to a poorly funded exercise, and with no further episcopal intervention slow progress was made. By 1518 the chancel vaults and west front had been completed and Prior Birde's chantry chapel begun. By c1525 the east end of the old church had been largely dismantled and left in ruin, yet still attached to the new east end. It was probably Prior Birde who finally abandoned the planned Lady chapel and completed the east wall under the designing hand of William Vertue so that it was finished by his death and the instigation of the next prior. The scale of the task of demolition and buttressing the east end was too great to be achieved before the commissioners' arrival and the dissolution of the priory. It was, therefore, only at the beginning of the 17th century that the new church stood separated from the earlier ruins and tidied at the east end, with vaulting finally constructed throughout.

Of the first phase it was shown that local precedents were chosen and Redcliffe's continued prestige and geographical proximity, meant it was the obvious choice for a complete church rebuilding. The introduction of royal masons into the project in the 16th century had a significant impact on its immediate future and appearance. Bath has been relegated to the 'poor sister' of the royal funded works at Windsor and Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster. The design of the fan vault, however, was the first fan vault in the country on this scale, preceding those at King's College chapel, Cambridge and the nave of St George's Windsor, and exactly contemporary with the laying of the foundation stone of Henry VII's Chapel. It should, therefore, be seen as an early idea in a series of monumental vault designs.

Rather than a homogeneous design by royal masons, the church building is a contrast between local and national influences. The nature of patronage goes a long way to explaining the appearance and the progress of the building: the impact on the project created by King's intervention was matched only by the impact of his departure. King's attempt to associate himself as the saviour and re-founder of the church was so successful that the personality of the major patron has hidden the identity and the struggle of the real initiators (and completors) of the church reconstruction.

## *Notes*

1 For a recent summary of the history and form of the Romanesque church see Davenport, 1996b, 19–25

2 For the more recent re-interpretations of Harrington's association with Bath see Monckton, 1999, 233–289 and Luxford, 2000, 313–336 and 2003, 299–323

3 A much more detailed analysis of the west front has been published by Luxford, who has also plausibly suggested that the iconography bears scrutiny in relation to chapter 7 of the Rule of St Benedict, (Luxford, 2000, 327–329 and 2003)

4 For an independent assessment of the relationship between the elevations at Bath and Somerset parish church architecture see Wilson 1995, 141–2

5 Harvey 1969, 141: Worcestre records the length of the church as being 180 steps. See also O'Leary 1991 in Davenport, 1991, 36, for explanation of Worcestre's measurements at Bath

6 Cantlow had been sacristan during Dunster's time at Bath. Some confusion, however, exists over the exact dates of the two men's terms of office, as Dugdale and Britton stated that Cantlow became prior as late as 1489. However, the statement made by Prior Cantlow was part of a petition against Dunster, which was made between 1483 and 1487 and it seems, therefore, that he was already Prior in 1483–4. (Dugdale 1819, 260; Britton 1887, 20 and Bradford 1911, 38 note 2 and 39 note 1)

7 Allegedly left ruinous by his predecessors, Cantlow requested the hospital to be united to the priory and subsequently repaired the buildings, (Manco 1995, 98, 91 and note 136). Dugdale 1819, 260: states Cantlow was responsible for rebuilding the chapel of St Mary Magdalen, Holleway and a small adjoining hospital. For an assessment of Cantlow's

other works of patronage and his devotional motivations see Luxford 2005, 84–7

8 For a fuller explanation of the issues relating to the supposed plan for timber vault, the architectural precedents for the chosen design and the association with royal masons see Monckton 1999, 267–77

9 Strips of inserted masonry on the east buttresses have been cited in support of this, for which see Manco, 1995, 100. Aside from the evidence against a Lady chapel ever being constructed, these inserted strips are more likely to refer to patching at the corners of the Romanesque crossing piers

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