

John Cannon and Beth Williamson (eds.), *The Medieval Art, Architecture and history of Bristol Cathedral: An Enigma Explored* (Boydell, 2011) ISBN 9781843836803 (Hardback); 476 pages; £60.

Encountering the east end of Bristol Cathedral for the first time is to be reminded of the exceptional inventiveness, wit, and imagination that marked the greatest European architecture of the period. From the last decade of the thirteenth century, and for the first time since various familiar forms had coalesced into the Gothic style in France in the 1140s, the locus of architectural invention moved to England as a series of major projects were conducted in London and elsewhere. The sober, lofty, graceful architecture of the thirteenth century became lush, inventive, and luxurious. Lines which were once straightforward curves and parallels were transformed into double curves ('ogees'), twists, and floral ornamentation. At Bristol alone there are at least seven different types of arch, as well as probably the earliest 'nodding ogee'. Microarchitecture proliferated, filling what would once have been empty walls with fiddly, rippling canopies and vaults. The name given to the style by nineteenth-century antiquarians is unusually apt: 'Decorated'.

Bristol, like so much built in England from around 1290 to the late fourteenth century, is thrilling to visit. The architecture feels clever, complex, and urban, even cosmopolitan, without being mannerist. It takes delight in its own ingenuity and richness, a strong aesthetic answer to any erroneous modern ideas that medieval churches were great bare masses of stone.

Such is the architectural historian's concern with the origins and genesis of forms, however, that Bristol's claim to architectural importance, rather than quality alone, lies in its dating. If the east end belongs to 1298, as its first great modern champion, Nikolaus Pevsner, claimed then it is in the vanguard of the Decorated style and of exceptional inventiveness. If it is of the 1320s, as a detailed monograph on the work by Richard K. Morris suggests, then it is just one clever-clogs design among many.

That this question is still unresolved might seem surprising. Thirty years is a big difference after all, and indeed, no other comparably important church of this period is so poorly dated. One of the most significant essays in this new collection is a forensic examination by Christopher Wilson into the dating of the east end and its role in the development of English and European architecture. Wilson combines documentation and archaeology to argue persuasively for the earlier date, and therefore against Morris's analysis. In doing so he returns the cathedral, or at least its choir, to the centre of questions about the development of English, or even European, architecture.

Attached to the issue of dates are two other points of controversy: the number of master masons, or architects, and with it the number of design changes; and the question of which design sources the church draws upon. Wilson argues for a fast building time, with less space for design changes. More importantly, he argues that sources for the church were not limited to Exeter and Hereford Cathedrals in the

southwest but include designs in eastern England that proceed from the radical inventions of Michael of Canterbury, in turn brilliantly reinvented from French Rayonnant architecture. Claiming Michael as a source for Bristol (although for the liberated use of a multitude of forms and ideas in a single church, rather than for specific features) is in opposition to Morris's claims for regional sources alone. Michael was the doyen of contemporary English architects and designer of much of St Stephen's Chapel in Westminster Palace in 1291-92, now destroyed above crypt level (which is free to visit) but the source of much of the design ideas that dominated English architecture for the following 250 years.

To focus exclusively on Wilson's chapter is, however, to miss some of the most important contributions this book makes to the study of the cathedral as part of the development of English architecture. The scene setting is relatively brief – John McNeil's chapter comprehensively lays out the evidence for the structure of the earliest abbey church. The first building was fairly large and vaulted throughout, and McNeil expounds on the important Chapter House and gatehouse. Interesting too is the historical context for its foundation by the important abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris. Roger Leech provides an account of both the abbey's economic relationship with the town and the early history of the site, including the obscure but enduring cult of St Jordan.

Built as an Augustinian abbey outside the centre of Bristol beginning in the 1140s and stretching over the next few decades, the church did not become a cathedral until after the Reformation. As a mid-ranking religious house, Bristol is of particular interest – so few survived the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s that those that did are important for what they reveal about monastic architecture away from the great monastic cathedrals. Indeed, their high architectural quality (consider, for example, other Augustinian foundations such as Oxford Cathedral, Southward Cathedral, and St Bartholomew-the-Great in Smithfield) suggests the importance attached to these institutions. Jon Canon provides as comprehensive a survey as possible of links between documented acts of generosity to the abbey by the Berkeley family and dated works of construction in the early fourteenth century.

Julian Luxford's analysis of the substantial amount of late medieval work at Bristol, of lesser architectural significance than the 1298 campaign but indicative of a thriving monastic culture (a point also made in James G. Clark's interesting chapter, regarding training, polyphony, and economy, if not academic achievement), is both long overdue and highly important. Luxford's survey of the tower, transepts, nave, cloister, and main gate, as well as other image making in the cathedral, are important contributions to the study of late medieval monastic architecture, while his study of the documentation regarding patronage places the abbey, and not the Berkeleys, at the forefront of providing funds. Of particular note, moreover, are the two choir aisle reredoses, of which I was unaware, and Luxford's accounts of the iconography of the gate and transepts (including a boss of Edward II, looking over his shoulder like a coquettish glamour model and exposing his anus).

The story of the abbey's transformation into a cathedral by Joseph Bettey is

important (probably some rather cunning courting of Cromwell was involved) and invites wider study of other buildings. The reordering of the interior and the destruction of the nave makes for a sad chapter even in a monastic church that survived. Catherine Oakes' account of the unusual survival of Reformation era wall paintings in the Old Deanery sheds new light on image making in a period of religious conflict, often iconoclastic.

Paul Crossley's magnificently erudite examination of the intellectual context for Pevsner's ground-breaking analysis of Bristol's precocity in the 1940s (which accounts for much of the cathedral's reception today) reminds us just how sober-minded modern scholarship is. Gone are the rich, subjective descriptions of walking through long ecclesiastical spaces, and in its place are close analyses of archaeological and documentary evidence. This is as true of scholars working in traditions based in archaeology (McNeil or Luxford in this volume) or the analysis of documents (the most 'theoretical' piece, by Sarah Jane Boss, chronicling the identification of Mary with 'Wisdom' or its house). As Crossley points out, however, Pevsner's analysis of Bristol as a precocious example of the late medieval German hall church is just, well, wrong.

If only every great church could receive a scholarly work on this scale, covering not just its architectural and artistic history but an analysis of its historiography, and geographical and intellectual context. Bristol Cathedral may, however, be peculiarly suitable for study, because of its exceptional fourteenth-century architecture and its overlooked earlier and later histories. I would encourage any prospective PhD student scouting for ideas to read Beth Williamson's epilogue – there cannot be many more promising objects of study than this church, the medieval Augustinian order or the development of English architecture around and after 1290.

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