

Robert Willis's lecture on the architectural history of Rochester cathedral, 31 July 1863

The Archaeological Institute held its annual congress at Rochester and Maidstone in July 1863, and one of the highlights in the programme was a lecture by Robert Willis on the architectural history of Rochester cathedral. Unhappily for us, the lecture was never written up for publication, but we know enough to form a fairly clear idea of what Willis had to say. The following extracts are (1) a paragraph from the report of the congress proceedings in the *Archaeological Journal*, (2) a report of Willis's lecture, partly verbatim, published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for October 1863, and (3) the full text of his description of the crypt, presbytery, choir and transepts, printed by Hope (1898) from a copy of Willis's notes made and kept by one of his friends.

(1) *Archaeological Journal*, 20 (1863), 389–90 – proceedings 31 July 1863

The last memoir included in the proceedings of the morning was, *The Architectural History of Rochester Cathedral and of the Conventual Buildings*; by the Rev. Professor Willis, F.R.S. This important discourse is reserved for future publication. At the close of the afternoon service, the Professor accompanied his large audience in a minute examination of the Cathedral and of its structural peculiarities.

(2) *Gentleman's Magazine*, Oct. 1863, 448–50

The remaining paper was that by Professor Willis, on "The Architectural History of Rochester Cathedral and Conventual Buildings." This was a most valuable contribution to the Institute, and was looked forward to with considerable interest.

The Professor exhibited a ground-plan, and also a section of the cathedral. He said that there is no doubt that an entire Norman church existed on the present site, but not extending so far eastward; the present crypt retains a portion of the western part of the Norman crypt. The examination of Mr. Ashpitel in 1854 shewed that this church did not terminate with an apse, but was square-ended. The Professor entirely ignores the claim of Gundulph to having erected the present nave, the building itself proving beyond dispute that it was erected at different periods. There is little doubt that the whole cathedral was formerly of the Norman style, but the only portion of Norman now remaining is in the nave, the remainder being of the Early English style. The only portion which he was disposed to attribute to Gundulph was the crypt, and possibly the great lateral tower, but "certainly not another stone." The Norman portion of the nave he was disposed to assign to Ernulph, who built the crypt at Canterbury, as well as a portion of Peterborough Cathedral, when he was abbot, before his removal to Rochester. The documents shew that the choir was erected by William de Hoo, out of the offerings at the shrine of St. William, who was murdered by his servant when on a pil-

grimage to the Holy Land, being afterwards interred in Rochester Cathedral, and subsequently canonized by the Pope.

Taking the cathedral as it now stands, we have, going from east to west, first, an Early English presbytery, including two transepts; the former, as regards the north and south walls, with piers constructed so as to dispense with exterior buttresses, is well worth examination. This is the earliest specimen of the Early English portion of the cathedral; it appears to have been, with its crypt, the work of Helias, and may be set down at about the year 1200.

The choir between the two sets of transepts was constructed next. On examination, it is evident that this is fitted on to the presbytery, not the presbytery to it; it is therefore later. William de Hoo constructed it out of the offerings to the shrine of St. William, before the year 1227, when the choir was entered.

The remainder of the Early English part of the church to meet the Norman nave, including the south-west transept, the north-west transept and the contiguous work, was finished in time for the whole church to be dedicated in 1240; but the Norman nave was never pulled down, as was perhaps intended.

There were two fires, the last in 1179; but the nave does not seem to have been greatly injured. The pillars are all unlike, except that they are twins, each being like that opposite to it.

Two bishops, St. Paulinus, who came with St. Augustine to England, and Ithamar, the first English Bishop of Rochester, who died in 655, were buried in the cathedral, and their tombs remained in the presbytery down to the time of the Reformation.

After the afternoon service at the cathedral, Professor Willis accompanied a party round the building to explain its more remarkable

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features. He placed himself under the tower at the north-west corner of the transept, and looking towards the Norman nave, said, –

“You will observe that the piers are not, as at Romsey Abbey, built one after another at following dates, but seem to have been erected all at once: they answer, an already stated, each to that over against it; but otherwise are all dissimilar, so as to give the appearance of a set of patterns, such as is presented in some of our cathedrals where different persons have been suffered to insert memorial windows without any reference to harmony or congruity. The tower outside to the north of the cathedral I am willing to allow may very probably have been built by Gundulph; but any one who scans this nave with an intelligent eye will clearly perceive that the work is of a more refined and advanced character than his times would present, and therefore it must be assigned to a later date – to a period in the reign of Henry I., after the death of the prelate. The Norman clearstory is, you observe, gone; and the shafts running upwards stop short; the fires which occurred may probably account for much in this part of the church.”

The Professor now proceeded to remark upon the eastern or Early English portion of the building. He said: –

“I consider this part of the structure presents many features of interest and beauty; and I would especially advert to the northern façade of the transept at the north-east of the nave (where the stained glass is inserted to the memory of the late Archdeacon King), as presenting a good piece of architectural composition: not that this is by any means one of the earlier parts of the present cathedral; for I consider [here the Professor advanced to the east of the choir, nearly opposite St. William’s Chapel] the presbytery at the extreme east end was clearly the first part that was erected, when in the time of Helias it was determined to supersede the old Norman church by an improved edifice. Here you will observe the late use of the billet-moulding in Early English work. A minute examination of the walls north and south shew where the next portion of the building, viz. the choir, was added and adapted to the existing structure by William de Hoo after no considerable interval of time. The jointure of the walls shews that the westernmost structure is of later date: moreover, the details of the architecture in the triforium and elsewhere exhibit as you advance westward a progressively subsequent age. It is remarkable that the choir is closed from the aisles by solid walls. Beneath the present stall-work I find the original Early English benches which served in place of after arrangements, before misereres were invented. Emerging from the choir beneath the central tower we look to the north transept as the part of the building which comes next in point of date, whereas the south transept exhibits in windows and otherwise a changing style, and what look like mullions.”

The Professor next proceeded to the crypt, the westernmost part of which alone is allowed to be Gundulph’s; where not only the round arches but the ruder masonry point to his period. Leaving the crypt, the party went out by the south transept door into the garden of the house now occupied by the <*> Master of the Temple, where the remains of the cathedral cloisters are to be seen. Here a pause was made to contemplate Mr. Cottingham’s work on the outside face of this transept, and the Professor observed: –

“Mr. Cottingham, in spite of the period at which he lived (and he repaired parts of this cathedral some forty years ago), shewed skill as a constructor: we must consider, before we criticize severely such a work as this outer face of the transept, the ignorance of the artisans who carved the details; for at that time there were no workmen who had had any experience in Gothic mouldings. Whether this will

<*> [Thomas Robinson DD 1790–1873, master of the Temple 1845–69, canon of Rochester \(3rd prebend\) 1854–†>](#)

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account for that entire want of appreciation of the style which appears in the execution of those mouldings, may perhaps be doubted: at all events, no one can excuse the extreme depression of the gable. It was Mr. Cottingham who mended the figure on the jamb of the chapter-house doorway in the ridiculous manner in

which it now appears. It was a female figure representing the Church that was broken; Mr. Cottingham, seeing the flowing robes, imagined it must have been an ecclesiastic, and put on a bishop's head.

“In this cathedral the nature of the ground has caused the cloisters to be erected so as to adjoin the choir in a more easterly situation than is usual: you observe the remains running southward from the eastern part of the church – they may be traced for some distance; but the monastic remains about the cathedral are too inconsiderable to repay any extended investigation.”

(3) Hope 1898:233–42

The architectural history of this part of the church cannot be better described than in the words of the late Professor Willis:/‡

“There can be very little doubt that the monks of the thirteenth century intended to replace the church of Gundulph and Ernulph with one of their own; but fortunately for us, who are the students of an art which is

/‡ Professor Willis's manuscript account of the architectural history of Rochester unfortunately cannot be found among his papers, access to which has been most freely and courteously granted to me by my friend Mr. J. Willis Clark, M.A., F.S.A., Registry of the University of Cambridge, and a nephew of Professor Willis. Another kind friend, the late <*> Rev. D. J. Stewart, M.A., a former co-labourer with the Professor, luckily made a transcript of the lost notes on Rochester, which he most obligingly placed at my disposal, and from it I have printed the important section relating to the works under notice. A few obvious corrections are given in brackets [], as are the notes, which throughout are mine.

<*> David James Stewart 1813/14–1898, HM inspector of schools 1851–91>

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almost lost, their plan was never completely carried out, but came to an end when they reached the old nave.

The early-English crypt is by its plan [see PLATE III.] divided into four distinct parts by the thick walls and arches that serve as the foundations of the upper work.

First we have one long rectangular hall, corresponding to the eastern transept above, and bounded by long eastern and western walls pierced by arches, and by short north and south walls beneath the gables of the transepts.

This area is vaulted by means of two rows of intermediate pillars,/* which divide it into three aisles running north and south.

Eastward of this is a second chamber or chapel corresponding to the whole length of the presbytery above,

and divided by pillars into three aisles running east and west./*

On each side of this is a large double chapel beneath the chapels of the transepts above.

The peculiarity of this crypt is in the long rectangular vestibule, which in the crypt at Canterbury does not exist under the small transept, because the foundation wall of the pier arches above is carried uninterrupted across the small transept.

This hall at Rochester supplies a convenient vestibule to the whole of the altars of the crypt, as well to those of the lateral chapels as to that of the centre.

There were two altar places in each side chapel. A piscina is still visible in one of those of the north end, but the next is encumbered with rubbish,/† and those of the south end are built up for the support of the fabric.

At the east end of the great central chapel are three recesses./‡ The northern contains a plain piscina in its [north]/§ wall, and the southern a similar piscina, or

/* [In the western hall the responds or half-pillars throughout are semi-circular. The pillars of the western row are circular. Of the eastern row the first, third, fourth, and sixth pillars are octagonal, the second and fifth round. (See FIG. 10.) In the eastern and later part of the crypt the responds and pillars are alternately round and octagonal.]

/† [There is no piscina in this chapel.]

/‡ [These recesses are vaulted, and were evidently built to hold altars.]

/§ ["East" in MS.]

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rather lavatory, in its [south]/* wall. In the presbytery above there is a large and curious lavatory in the [north]/† wall, apparently for washing sacred vessels. The walls of the vestibule are built wholly with semi-cylindrical responds; the responds on the eastern face of

/* ["West," in MS.] /† ["East" in MS.]

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its eastern wall are also cylindrical. The vaults of the vestibule have no wall ribs, but the vaults of the crypt east of the vestibule have wall ribs and are 6 inches higher. The reason for the difference of height is to raise the pavement of the presbytery, for in the church above it will be seen that the bench tables of the chapels and eastern arm of the cross are also raised 6 inches above the level of the bench tables of the eastern transept,

indicating a step from one level to the other.

Wall ribs serve to strengthen the junction of the vaults with the walls. They were not introduced until after the commencement of the pointed style, and, as this cathedral amongst others distinctly shews, were not universally employed at their first introduction, for, although we find them in the eastern crypt, they are used only in the chapel aisles of the eastern transept and not in the high vaults, either of the presbytery, east transept, or choir. They appear in the high vaults of the north-west transept and in the south-west transept.

Ridge ribs, it may be added, appear in this cathedral, first in the west transepts, north and south, and next in the Perpendicular vault of the north aisle of the choir, where they are used as horizontal, longitudinal, and transverse ribs.

A vault intended to bear a pavement, in the manner of a crypt, has its haunches filled up level with earth or rubbish, and the wall ribs give a firmer connection with the side walls; but the high vaults carry no floors, therefore the wall ribs are not so necessary, and walls were often left rough above the ashlar.

The north side of the east gable, and the small courts east of the great transept, preserve tolerably well the ancient exterior, which is principally of rubble with ashlar quoins and nooks. [See also FIG. 14.] The crypt story of the north gable is of ashlar,/* the buttresses of ashlar; the plain wall above the crypt of rubble nearly up to the window-sills; the windows are in a high belt

/* [Only in the arch range of the crypt windows.]

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of ashlar; then rubble is resumed, and then another belt of ashlar for the clerestory windows./*

It appears from the junction of the north-east turret

/* [This is not the case.]

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of the north gable with the wall of the crypt chapels that the walls of the vestibule were built complete and the work of the eastern part next. In fact, the compact form of this part of the crypt, and the greater simplicity of its vault, wanting the wall rib, seem to indicate this mode of proceeding; but the eastern part was im-

mediately added. At Canterbury the crypt of St. Thomas's chapel was vaulted before the walls of the superstructure were carried up.

The early-English part of this cathedral is remarkable for the absence of a triforium, by which the general design is greatly influenced.

The only side aisles in this part are on the east of the eastern transept, where they were employed as chapels. The choir is bounded by solid walls, so that, although there is a narrow aisle upon the north and a very broad aisle on the south, there is no communication from the choir to these aisles by arches or other openings. The western transepts are also without side aisles.

The walls of all these parts of the church are divided in height into two portions, which may be called the pier-arch story and the clerestory. The clerestory has a gallery which runs at the same level completely round from the north-western tower pier to the east end of the presbytery, and so back again to the south-western tower pier.

The clerestory string of the nave is also at the same level as the former, and in all probability there was a Norman clerestory in the usual form of a gallery, to which the eastern clerestories were built in continuation.

The present clerestory of the nave is a late work, consisting of a flat wall with four-centred windows of the plainest and meanest character, the same in number as the pier arches below them, but awkwardly arranged, so that no one window stands above the centre of a pier arch, each being more or less to the west of it as the section shews./*

/* [The Professor's drawing has not been preserved.]

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The early-English clerestory gallery has been unfortunately blocked up in several places for the purpose of strengthening the fabric, so that the only portion now accessible by the staircase is the north aisle of the choir, the north-eastern transept, and the presbytery. The other parts of this gallery can be reached only by ladders.

The clerestory of the east part, like that of the choir, has a single light window in each sever, in front of which is an arcade of three arches resting on two lofty single Purbeck shafts [and/*] on two responds, each having a short shaft resting against the pier, which receives the great vault shaft and the vault ribs in the usual manner, the passage or gallery passing behind.

The choir, compared with the eastern transept and presbytery, appears to be at first sight one work, but it is now time to enumerate the differences which affect the unity of style.

The blank walls of the choir account for the change of distribution in the lower parts; but it is in the clerestories and vaults which crown the walls that we must seek the history of the progression.

It must first be mentioned that the east end of the choir wall on each side is separated from the west wall of the eastern transept by a straight joint in the masonry, reaching from the floor to the clerestory string, and partly concealed by a return in the wall of the choir about 5 feet from its eastern end. This affords a recess for a lofty shaft, which at its upper extremity simply terminates under the clerestory string. The lofty strip of masonry, altogether 5 feet 8 inches wide, thus cut off from the east end of the choir wall, has its beds at levels totally discontinuous from those of the latter wall, and, as before mentioned, is separated from it by a straight joint. It is, in fact, the end of the transept wall, which wall rests on the early-English crypt wall already described as closing the Norman crypt.

The two structures were therefore erected independently, and we have to determine which was built first.

/* ["Or" in MS.]

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But this problem is not so difficult a one as might be thought by a casual observer, for, in addition to the evidence existing in the structure itself, there are documents which make the investigation a tolerably simple one.

We are told that 'Richard de Eastgate, monk and sacrist [of Rochester], began the north aisle of the new work toward the gate of St. William, which brother Thomas de Mepeham nearly completed. Richard de Waldene, monk and sacrist, made the south aisle towards the court (curia). William de Hoo, sacrist, made the whole choir from the aforesaid aisles from the oblations to St. William,' afterwards being made prior.

The word *ala* in the above account must be interpreted 'transept,' a sense which it frequently bears.

The description of the position of these transepts, the north opposite to St. William's gate, and the south opposite the monastic curia, coincides with the western transepts and not with the eastern, for the south-eastern transept faces the cloister; the cathedral of Rochester having this

peculiarity, that the cloister is to the south of the choir or eastern arm of the cross, and the outer court or curia of the monastery to the south of the nave.

The order of the masonry, as well as the progressive order of the architectural style, has shewn us that the order of the work was, firstly, the presbytery, choir, etc.; secondly, the north transept; and thirdly, the south transept, so that the above paragraph does not follow the order of time in appropriating the work to the three sacrists respectively. But the choir was entered in 1227, and therefore William de Hoo's work was then finished. The church also was dedicated thirteen years afterwards, in 1240, the year after William de Hoo was elected prior. The dedication shews that the church was completed at least as to its walls and roof, and therefore we must suppose that in the thirteen years which had elapsed since the entry into the choir in 1227 the transepts had been built and connected with the nave./* As these two

/* [As will be shewn in its place, there is every probability that the dedication in 1240 did not include the transepts, but only the new quire and presbytery.]

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transepts were the work of two different sacrists, it follows that William de Hoo must have quitted that office at least thirteen years before he was made prior.

We have no specific mention of the commencement of the previous early-English work, namely, the crypt, presbytery, and eastern transept; but in the list of benefactions/* we first find that prior Radulfus 'roofed the great church and leaded the greater part of it' (fecit magnam ecclesiam tegere et plurimam partem plumbare). Next it is stated that prior Helias, who

/* [The following is the list of benefactions referred to so far as the church is concerned.]

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succeeded him, 'leaded the great church' (fecit plumbare magnam ecclesiam), which statement probably means that he completed what his predecessor had begun; but it is also recorded that 'while he held the office of sacrist he never spent less than £20 sterling upon the novum opus ecclesiæ.' This is the first mention of the novum opus, a phrase which, as is well known, is always applied to some entirely new construction or enlargement of a church, and in this case plainly means the crypt and super-

structure at the east. This view is confirmed by the particulars of donations and bequests by the contemporaries of Helias which follow this sentence, in which windows and altars in the crypt continually occur, as well as decorations of the high altar.

Unfortunately the exact period during which Helias was in office cannot be fixed with precision, but it is sufficient to know that he was an active supporter of work done at the very beginning of the thirteenth century.

There can be no doubt from the architectural evidence which the church supplies that the building was erected in the order of (1) the crypt, presbytery, and eastern transept, (2) the choir and its aisles, (3) the north-west transept, and (4) the south-west transept, with the eastern part of the nave, by which the work was joined to the old cathedral."/*

/* Here Professor Willis's notes unfortunately end.