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# THE LADY CHAPEL AT ELY: ITS PLACE IN THE ENGLISH DECORATED STYLE

Nicola Coldstream

The Lady chapel at Ely is a glorious wreck: bare of almost all it once contained, it stands to the north of the cathedral choir, sunless, chilly and mute. Yet it was once, and in many ways still is, one of the triumphs of the English Decorated style, and, like its fellow Decorated buildings, has not until recently been accorded the attention it deserves. Even now, its significance escapes, for scholarly preoccupations with the more formal aspects of architectural history have led us away from the really interesting question: what the Decorated style was all about.

Fourteenth-century architecture in England is famous for its use of patterned vaulting, the ogee arch and flowing tracery, and daring architectural trapeze acts. It is a style of fantasy and fun. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's lyrical descriptions of such buildings as the cathedrals of Bristol and Ely in the *Buildings of England*<sup><1></sup> have done as much as anything to invite us to celebrate its marvellous virtuosity. But the Decorated has puzzled scholars with its disparateness, its resistance to classification. Perceptions of the style as a whole have been further distorted by the manner in which, since the early 1950s, the discussion has been conducted. The main problem, of which all the others are seen as a part, is that of the beginnings of the Perpendicular style: while the bulbous heavings of the Decorated were at their most exuberant, as in such monuments as the Percy tomb at Beverley (Pl. 1), a cuckoo appeared in the nest in the form of Gloucester cathedral transept and choir (Pl. 2) and inaugurated a style of thin rectilinear panelling, which had no apparent reference to contemporary taste. The two main supplementary questions, intricately linked with the first, have been the extent and nature of French influence, and whether the Decorated and incipient Perpendicular are inventions of the Court at Westminster or of the provinces <sup><2></sup>.

In all this discussion, especially of the origins of Perpendicular, the Decorated style has suffered immeasurably. Scholars have plundered the latter for signs of the former, and ceased to consider Decorated in its own right. In recent years only two books have been devoted to the Decorated style as such, and of these, Henning Bock's *Der Decorated Style*<sup><3></sup> is at least partly concerned with a study of the origins of Perpendicular. Both Bock and Jean Bony in his *English Decorated Style*<sup><4></sup> adopt the same general approach, concentrating heavily on the architectural elements, analysing elevations, vaults and window tracery. Bock saw developments as regional, while Bony, transcending regions, saw the Decorated in some respects as a creative reaction to French Court architecture of the thirteenth century.

The method which confines itself largely to formal analysis is all very well, but over the years it has become obvious that it does not take us very far. Although Decorated inevitably has its structural elements it is more than just architecture. It is a mass of sculptured and painted decoration directed towards one over-riding purpose. The nature of the style was recognised by scholars of the turn of the century<sup><5></sup>, and later by the late Dame Joan Evans, whose *English Art 1307-1461*<sup><6></sup>, published in 1949, has long been neglected to the great peril of the subject. Alone of post-war writers, Dame Joan saw the Decorated style as a whole. The younger generation swept her approach aside in favour of minute analysis of detail, which meant, paradoxically, that they did not really bother to look at the style, nor, which is more serious, have they asked themselves what the style was *for*. A phenomenon like Decorated, luscious, self-conscious and extremely expensive to produce, does not just grow: it has a purpose. If we examine the Lady chapel at Ely and related buildings we can not only see what the purpose was, but we can also see that the problems outlined earlier are easier to solve if they are looked at in context.

The Ely Lady chapel does not represent the beginnings of the Decorated style. These are, surprisingly for the medieval period, agreed upon by everyone. A phase of development from the mid-thirteenth century was boosted and transformed by specific developments in the 1290s. Westminster Abbey introduced the use of surface decoration together with large traceried windows, so that the whole wall, vault and in some buildings the floor, were covered in pattern and colour. Lincoln and St. Paul's (London) developed this further, Lincoln especially adumbrating future taste, for in the Angel choir are not only huge traceried windows and arcading on blank walls and the use of coloured marble and stained glass, but also the sculptured figures of angels in the triforium spandrels. Colour and figure sculpture are essential elements in the Decorated style. Other characteristics can be found in late thirteenth-century buildings elsewhere: the chapter houses of York and Southwell have the open space defined by intense decoration, which was to be a preoccupation of the fourteenth century<sup><7></sup>; and certain works of the 1290s provided the decorative repertory of the next few decades.

In the 1290s an artistic revolution occurred mainly outside the context of large buildings, and, as one might expect, in the leading lay and ecclesiastical circles of the day. Edward I busied himself with building memorial crosses to mark the stopping places on the route taken by the funeral cortege of Eleanor of Castille between Lincoln and London; he also built several magnificent tombs in what thus became the family mausoleum in Westminster abbey; and he refounded the chapel of St. Stephen in the Palace of Westminster<sup><8></sup>. In the space of ten years a great change was wrought on the superficial appearance of things.

Leaving St. Stephen's chapel for later, it is worth looking more closely at the tombs and crosses, for many of their component details were to become leitmotifs of the Decorated style. Each of the surviving crosses is different, but they are different in the same way. The Northampton cross at Hardingstone (Pl. 3) may be taken as

exemplar. The base is a two-tier hexagon, below a square block which supported the cross-shaft. The lowest level has an arch-and-gable motif, with a pinnacle between each. The gable is crested with foliage, the arch has continuous mouldings and geometric tracery. Each has a heraldic shield and a sculptured open book. The upper tier, behind an elaborate cornice, consists of open tabernacles, each with a carved figure of the queen. These are again in the form of arch-and-gable separated by pinnacles. Here, however, the arch has a slightly reversed curve, the gable is filled with foliage, and a second, block-like gable sits behind and above it. There is more foliage cresting here, too. The square base to the cross-shaft has more pinnacles, blind tracery motifs with continuous mouldings, gables and behind them a series of blind panels. The other crosses have details which do not appear here, but which occur on the tombs built at the same time for Westminster abbey.

Although the tombs are more varied than the crosses, one will have to represent them all. Edward I entombed his father and his first wife beside the shrine of Edward the Confessor behind the high altar, and at the same time or shortly after tombs were made in the sanctuary for Edward's brother, Edmund Crouchback, and his first wife, Aveline. Crouchback's tomb (Pl. 4) is a developed form of Eleanor's. It fills a whole bay between two sanctuary pillars, and the enormous open canopy divides the sarcophagus into three, with the effigy in the middle part. The box is decorated with the small, lively figures of weepers, with a row of shields above them showing the family and lineage of the deceased. The weepers stand in niches formed of the arch-and-gable, with pinnacles, continuous mouldings and foliage cresting. The canopy is a masterpiece of miniature architecture. The three sets of gables are divided by pinnacles rising through several tiers and decorated with miniature battlements. These, together with the bead-and-reel at the neck of the huge fleuron of the central gable, were to become leitmotifs of the Decorated style. The side gables have blobs of foliage in circles, and taller gables rise behind them. The central gable has pedestals for statues and is covered in rosette diaper, reflecting the decoration of the abbey building itself. Very slight ogee curves appear in the blind tracery and the foliage is beginning to resemble seaweed.

Recent restoration of the sanctuary tombs revealed an aspect one is inclined to overlook: the colour. Decoration was applied to every surface which could hold it. The bundles of shafts supporting the gables were painted with sets of tiny lions alternating with *fleurs de lys*. Gilding was used copiously. Gesso was made up to look like marble, glass to imitate enamel. Everything was done to make this and the other tombs into glittering jewelled objects.

The Hardingstone cross and Crouchback tomb can be described either as large sculpture or as miniature architecture. They fall into a class of object which has the characteristics of both, displaying the ambiguity which seems to permeate the Decorated style. Together or separately they show certain features: a polygonal groundplan, surface decoration and detail, the love of overlapping forms, figure sculpture, the combination of several materials in one object, and the use of faked

materials to give the impression of great luxury. Not only was this economical, it was also illusionistic, and we shall find illusionism again. The style is miniaturistic, closely related to metalwork: the shrine of St. John of Beverley, ordered from a London goldsmith in 1292, was to have plates and columns like masonry, to be covered in figures, and to have tabernacles and pinnacles both in front and on the back<sup><9></sup>. Its resemblance both to surviving contemporary shrines and to the Westminster tombs is quite apparent.

The makers of the tombs and crosses were mostly the masons employed about Westminster by the king. Known as the Kentish masons because they have Kentish names, they found their creative inspiration in France. This aspect will be left until the end of the discussion, for it is important now to see how the style spread.

It should be emphasised that these royal works were on display. The tombs would have been at least partly visible to visitors at the shrine of St. Edward, and one of Eleanor's two other tombs, which closely resembled the London one, was in the Lady chapel at Lincoln cathedral<sup><10></sup>. The Eleanor crosses were spaced at intervals across the east midlands and northern Home Counties, visible to all who passed that way. Other, similar, objects quickly adopted their characteristics, and some, indeed, may have anticipated them. The series of so-called Court tombs<sup><11></sup>, beginning with Canterbury and Ely in the 1290s, through Winchelsea to Beverley in the 1340s (Pl. 1), shared and developed the style of the Westminster tombs and were all, naturally, made for grandees. The bishop's throne and sedilia at Exeter and the tomb of Edward II at Gloucester (Pl. 5) transformed the canopies into delicate birdcages, each in its relation of part to part a further exploration of spatial depth. Shrine bases, many of which were renewed in the years around 1300<sup><12></sup>, were eminently suited to the applied motifs: the shrine of St. Alban, made by 1308<sup><13></sup>, has the arch-and-gable with continuous mouldings, foliage cresting and blobs, pinnacles, and decoration including ogival tracery and figure sculpture. The shrine of St. Edburga, now at Stanton Harcourt, has nodding ogees dating from c.1310, among the earliest surviving examples of such a feature<sup><14></sup>. Nodding ogees were possibly adumbrated at St. Stephen's Westminster<sup><15></sup>, but whether or not these are directly Court inspired, it is worth remarking in passing that many details of mature Decorated flourished vigorously a long way from Westminster and almost certainly developed independently: an example is the flowing tracery of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire.

If the motifs of the Decorated style were spread by things which were not strictly architecture, how was the transition made to a monumental scale? It was presumably encouraged by current ideas about the nature of the church building. If contemporaries could see the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris as a large stone reliquary<sup><16></sup>, and reliquaries themselves were ever more closely resembling church buildings, it did not take much imagination to merge the one with the other. The polygonal groundplan of the Hardingstone cross is matched by the interest in polygons shown in for instance the Lady Chapel at Wells, which is an elongated octagon, and another irregular octagon, the new crossing at Ely cathedral (Pl. 6). It is also found in

octagonal and occasionally hexagonal shaft bases. The open flying ribs in the vault of the Easter sepulchre at Lincoln, dated to c.1300, reappear in the vestibule to the Berkeley chapel at St. Augustine's Bristol, and in another form in the south aisle of the same church. Small decorative details suddenly become daring experiments with space and supports. And this brings us back to the Lady chapel at Ely. For the other characteristics of the Decorated style, and to explore the question posed at the beginning of this paper, what the style was for, it is worth examining in more detail two buildings which represented the style at its most completely realised: St. Stephen's chapel at Westminster and the Lady chapel at Ely. As the former has been destroyed and the latter is mutilated, their significance as the buildings which for modern scholars hold the key to all the rest tends to be overlooked.

The Lady chapel at Ely (Pl. 7) is an exceptional building, both for its size, 97' × 42' vaulted in a single span, and for the completeness of its artistic achievement. Today, scraped and bare, it requires a great effort of the imagination to visualise it in its glory. Built mainly from 1321-49, it is a rectangular building of five bays, with the wall surface reduced to a dado beneath the windows and such buttressing as was required. Most of the wall space is taken up by huge traceried windows, once filled with stained glass. The decoration extended to all surfaces, for the vault is covered in a net pattern, and the floor was probably paved with decorated tiles.

The decoration employed every device known to the masons of the period. The dado (Pl. 8) consists of a series of stalls with a bench, each stall framed in an elaborate niche-like structure with an arch-and-gable. Under the windows these have an elaborately decorated nodding ogee arch, with a straight gable, all heavily encrusted with seaweed foliage, and flanked by pinnacles with miniature battlements and partly made of Purbeck marble. On the buttresses between the windows the stalls are divided into two niches, each with a nodding ogee arch, which are embraced by a third nodding ogee. The fleurons of these arches act as bases for statues higher up the wall, and the double niche idea is repeated twice up to the spring of the vault, the mouldings becoming thinner and the foliage content less as they climb. Narrower niches rise beside them on the deep window embrasure. The forms tend to overlap one another, and at the lowest level the tops of the nodding ogees are made as if to run behind the containing arch and then to reappear above it. The fat shaft at the back of the niche seems to vanish behind the nodding ogees to reappear as the vault shaft. In fact, none of them does any such thing. They are not continuously coursed shafts, and the design is deliberately illusionistic.

All this encrustation is merely the background for the real decoration of the chapel, the figure sculpture. Every one of the upper niches held a figure which must have been over life-size. This vast crowd, destroyed during the Civil War, once numbered nearly a hundred, but has been reduced to one pair of feet high in the north-east bay. The figures probably represented saints attending on the Virgin, although it is not impossible that they included some contemporary figures.

They are not the only occupants of the chapel to have gone missing. Each of the stalls beneath the windows has the small figure of a cleric on the back wall, and originally had another at the apex of the ogee canopy, but very few of these survive. Less vulnerable were the large seated figures in the double niches and the relief sculptures in the spandrels of the stalls; here the heads were smashed but the bodies remain. The single figures represent the ancestry of Christ in the Tree of Jesse, and the spandrel reliefs unfold the story of the Life and Miracles of the Virgin in about 111 carved scenes<sup><19></sup>. Set against a background of carved and gilded rosette diaper, the scenes were brilliantly painted, as were all the other figures in the chapel.

Thus, the Lady chapel, whose greenish glass and clean white stone make it resemble nothing so much as an aquarium, once glowed with paint and coloured glass. From the surviving fragments we know that the stained glass included architectural canopies, making the windows an extension of the walls and dado in a fusion of different media which was typical of the time. The building was encased in colour, pattern and figures; glass, paint and sculpture were used together with the enveloping architecture to create a complete and closed world, a theatre with a permanent audience of stone figures, a world which required for its effect the use of all these things combined.

The other building in which the Decorated style was most fully worked out was begun a generation before Ely Lady chapel, but finished later. It has for all practical purposes completely disappeared. St. Stephen's chapel, Westminster (Pl. 9), was gutted in the fire of 1834, and the crypt, the only part to survive, is so much restored that most people prefer to rely on such drawings and records as were made either before the fire or in the immediate aftermath<sup><20></sup>. Our main concern here is the appearance of the chapel when it was complete, but a brief outline of its building history is necessary in order to understand not only the controversies surrounding the chapel itself, but also the problem of the origins of Perpendicular, and how this has been allowed to impinge on the study of Decorated. For St. Stephen's has been claimed as a source of both.

The chapel was refounded by Edward I in 1292, but it was not finished until the 1360s, which was a long period for a building of that size even by the standards of the day<sup><21></sup>. Almost certainly inspired by the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, it was a two-storey rectangular building of five bays, a little smaller than the Lady chapel at Ely. The crypt was vaulted in stone, but the upper chapel was roofed in wood, and a feature which made it very different from the French prototype was the large clerestory inserted above the big cornice and later removed.

The first phase of building lasted for five years, when all work was stopped to divert the money to support the cost of wars in France and Scotland. For more than twenty years the only work recorded on the chapel was occasional maintenance, such as thatching unfinished walls and storing cut stones. The next building campaign was under Edward II, lasting from 1320 to 1326, when work stopped again, to be



resumed by Edward III in 1331. From then on it continued with one or two breaks until the structure was completed in 1348. At this point the decorators took over and worked for another fifteen years. Although sculptured figures had been put in place as the walls rose, the glazing, woodwork and painting were done after the stonework was quite finished.

The reason St. Stephen's is so controversial is that, despite copious building records, it is difficult to establish exactly how much of the building was actually up when work stopped in 1297 and again in 1326; and as it has been claimed as a source both of Perpendicular and Decorated, much depends on the building history. Certain details of the stonework, in particular the panelled effects over the crypt windows and beside the windows of the upper chapel, have persuaded Maurice Hastings and later scholars that in St. Stephen's we have the first hints of the Perpendicular style, of which this panelling system is an essential part; that experiments here and at Old St Paul's prepared the way for Gloucester in the 1330s. Concentration on the role of St. Stephen's in helping to create the Perpendicular style, coupled with the belief that the two styles are in some way opposed to one another, has deflected scholars from its possible role in creating the Decorated. Here indeed we have a classic example of a Decorated building being distorted to prove that it is Perpendicular. Happily, the balance is now being restored. The main chronological difficulty has been the question of how far the lower chapel had proceeded when work ceased in 1297. If the lierne vault was then in place, St Stephen's was advanced for its time; if, on the other hand, the vault was not built until work resumed in the 1320s, St Stephen's was, if not unfashionable, at least not in the vanguard, the vault of the rood screen at Exeter dating as it does from 1317<22>. It has recently been suggested that by 1297 not only was the crypt complete and vaulted, but the upper chapel had been almost fully designed, and most of its moulded stones carved; that the carved stones were kept safely in the interim, and put in place during the campaign of the 1320s<23>. This view helps to explain some relationships to other buildings which are otherwise rather puzzling, and brings St Stephen's back to us as a formative influence on the Decorated style.

Although most of the decoration was delayed until the middle of the fourteenth century, it is clear that it was planned from the start. The big clerestory, ungainly though it must have looked, allowed vastly increased amounts of stained glass with its coloured light to irradiate the interior. Although the glass has been destroyed, some fragments of the other decoration, a miniature battlement and some fresco, were rescued from the ruins and are now in the British Museum and the Society of Antiquaries of London. From these and from descriptions we can see how the chapel was treated. To quote Colvin: 'Every available surface was painted, gilded, diapered or stencilled.'<24> The shafts between the windows and the window mullions themselves were painted with alternate lions and *fleurs de lys*, which must have been large scale versions of the decoration on the Westminster tombs fifty years earlier. There were many sculptured figures in both metal and stone, but there was no narrative sculpture. The illustrative scenes on the walls were painted, but the

paintings had stamped gesso backgrounds, and the architectural frames in which the figures were placed were miniature exercises in architectural illusionism <25>. There are figures in niches, painted in grisaille to imitate stone, and large grisaille figures stood on the entrance wall to the chapel. The altar wall had figures of Edward III, Queen Philippa, their children and their patron saint, George, beneath a picture of the Adoration of the Magi, combining real people, a saint and a biblical scene in one picture. The settings of these figures apparently combined real with fictive architecture.

In all this we have something very central to the Decorated style. Real and imaginary are combined, contrasted and fused. The edge between the real and the unreal is blurred, just as the edges of the real architecture are blurred. It is possible that the canopies lining the walls beneath the windows were early attempts at nodding ogees, giving the walls the same rippled effect as at Ely. The spectator moves constantly from make-believe to reality: stone turns out to be paint, marble to be gesso, paint to be stone. The worshipper is tightly enmeshed in a world where nothing is quite what it seems. He is surrounded by people who are both real and imaginary, the figures of contemporaries, of saints and of angels. It is an intensely theatrical world, complete within itself and cut off from outside.

Few buildings explored the possibilities of the style as deeply as St Stephen's and Ely, for few patrons could afford to do so, and secular churches must imply accessibility in a way not required of royal chapels or Lady chapels in Benedictine monasteries. Reflections and adumbrations of their ideas are nevertheless found everywhere. A style which consists, as this one does, of essentially unarchitectural motifs, can be applied to anything, and it is no exaggeration to say that it touched every aspect of people's lives. The motifs can be found on stained glass, embroidery, manuscripts, ivories and metal, on anything in an ecclesiastical or domestic context which could be decorated. The parish clerk in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* had shoe buckles in the form of the rose window pattern of Old St Paul's. People were literally engulfed in the style. In architecture it could be applied to any structure capable of supporting it, which is why two such extraordinarily disparate buildings as the two-storey choir of Selby and the hall choir of Bristol can be called Decorated with equal justification.

The creation of a world within the world, which I have suggested was one of the aims behind the creation of Ely and St. Stephen's, survives in the choir of Tewkesbury abbey, dated by Dr. Richard Morris to the 1320s and 1330s <26>. Dr. Morris sees it as an attempt by the Despenser family to glorify their family name. The roof bosses, in a sequence running eastwards from the nave to the choir, depict the Life of Christ, and by the time the choir is reached events have appropriately reached the realm of Heaven, with the Passion and the Ascension. The choir itself, surrounded by large windows and screened from the rest of the church, is intended to symbolise Paradise. The flower-like radiations of the vault may be taken, Morris

suggests, to represent the Paradise Garden. In the clerestory windows, the Lords of Tewkesbury, with emphasis on Hugh Despenser himself, were carefully displayed in Paradise in the company of Old Testament prophets. In the creation of this paradise, architecture, glass and paint all played their part. The Paradise Garden theme was popular in contemporary poetry: the story of Pearl, for instance, is set both before and within such a Paradise, and that story also reflects the idea of a live congregation and a fictive congregation of carved and painted figures, together forming part of Christ's mystical household<27>.

As we have seen, the tendency to enfold and unify was already present in the late thirteenth century. The chapter house of York (Pl. 10) shows one of the paradoxes of the style, in that the opening out of the building, achieved by the removal of the central column, merely serves to accentuate the tentlike effect of the interior. Although the edges of the building are blurred by the undulating line of canopies, the chapter house itself can be comprehended at a glance. We find similar tentlike effects, with light concealing limits and creating uncertain depths, in the choir of Bristol and the octagon at Ely. The manipulation of the edges, so essential a part of the Ely Lady chapel and St. Stephen's, was practised on a smaller scale on such objects as the reredos at Beverley Minster, all vaults and tracery, and even more in the chapel built by the same masons in the Beverley parish church (Pl. 11). There, vault and window mouldings run smoothly into one another: the south side of the vault intersects with the choir arch mouldings, and the north opens out like an umbrella, uninterrupted by capitals. In an entirely open chapel, the play of the mouldings has the effect of shutting out the rest of the church.

The decoration of surfaces and the use of sculptured figures are not to be found in such profusion outside Ely and St. Stephen's, but they are ubiquitous. To give a very few examples, the chancels of Heckington (Lincolnshire) and Hawton (Nottinghamshire) were refurbished with new windows, sedilia, piscina, Easter sepulchre and tomb for the patron. There are lavish displays of foliage and figure sculpture, and although we find no narrative sequences on the scale of Ely, there are smaller series of scenes on the Easter sepulchres. At Hawton (Pl. 12) the sleeping soldiers are carved at the bottom, and the Ascension at the top. In the recessed middle register Christ and the three Marys, almost lifesize, enact their drama. Action and drama are found everywhere: the effigy of Sir Robert de Stapeldon at Exeter is accompanied by his squire, page and horse, and the Despenser tomb at Tewkesbury supports a statue of the dead man kneeling in prayer to the high altar.

Less active, witness figures also occur, particularly in the north and east. In the Lady chapel at St. Albans the window mullions and embrasures have little niches with nodding ogees, under which stand small biblical figures; a stem of Jesse is carved on an east window at Dorchester abbey. At York Minster a row of figures once stood in the nave triforium, some of which have been put back: about four feet high, they include a soldier, a man with a hawk on his wrist and a priest. On the outside, busts of figures gaze down from the parapet. There are groups of figures on

the outside of Beverley Minster, now restored, but originally a little later than York<sup><28></sup>; and Selby, like York, has figures both inside and out. Figures on the parapets of churches are related to castle architecture, where at Middleham small stone soldiers threatened approaching armies from the battlements. It is difficult to establish priority, as the earliest surviving castle figures, at Chepstow and Caernarvon, were put in place later than York, but the whole idea has a secular feel<sup><29></sup>.

To put parapets, often battlements, on the outside and to use such decorative devices as miniature battlements from temporary theatre boxes on the inside <sup><30></sup>, speaks both of the encroachment of the secular upon the spiritual world, and of the element of fun and fantasy which was inherent in the Decorated style. Masons built jousting pavilions as well as churches, and the idea that the effect of tentlike enclosure was a deliberate aim is encouraged by the surviving fourteenth-century painted ceiling of a chapel in Canterbury cathedral, where the vault ribs are striped like the supports of a tent. With the use of figures, and more secular figures, went enhanced realism: the corbel heads in the guest hall at Ely may well be studies from the life (Pl. 13) and they are not unique <sup><31></sup>. The fusion of the visual arts, the mixture of fantasy and reality, can be found in the literature of the time, where closely observed details of every day are placed in a transcendent world, whose existence alongside and within the temporal world is taken for granted. Artists, probably encouraged by the growth of liturgical drama at this time, used whatever device was necessary to make the Kingdom of Heaven palpable on earth, assisted by an intellectual outlook in which the real and imaginary were both separate and fused<sup><32></sup>.

What has all this to do with the problems outlined at the beginning, the origins of Perpendicular, the extent of French influence, and whether Decorated is a Court or provincial style? These can most usefully be taken in reverse order. The question of Court versus provinces is surely a non-controversy. To argue over whether a style was 'invented' in Westminster, Kent or the West Country is to ignore the nature of the Court and of patronage<sup><33></sup>. It makes no sense to oppose Westminster artistically to the rest of the country, nor Westminster masons to provincial masons wherever they may have been working.

At the risk of uttering a truism, it should be repeated that a style like the Decorated depends on large sums of money, and this can only come from the wealthiest in the land, be they lay or ecclesiastical. Members of these circles formed the royal household, or, if the term is preferred, the Court. But the senior members of the royal household had households of their own. There was not one single court in England, but many, all of whose members were inextricably bound up in the affairs of the other households. These households, including the royal household, were constantly on the move, and members were as constantly leaving and returning. In other words, there was not a static, isolated court at Westminster, surrounded by an amorphous provincial mass, but something much more intricate, more elastic and

continuously shifting. Patronage of the arts was confined to a very limited circle, for whom the whole country was its playground. In this context, the word 'provincial' has no meaning. Members of the household, and the king more than any, were indulging in building projects all over the country. The artists themselves were also on the move.

In her study of the fourteenth-century sculpture of Lincolnshire<sup><34></sup>, Veronica Sekules has shown that the masons did not work in tight unchanging groups, but came together and separated in different workshops for different jobs. An idea can come from one place to be executed by people from another: if the Lady chapel at Ely was inspired in any way by St. Stephen's, its masons and sculptors were not men of Westminster. The figure styles of Ely and Westminster tell us as much, although a particular form of moulding at Ely suggests that a St. Stephen's mason may have assisted in the design<sup><35></sup>. Worse, the makers of the Crouchback tomb may have made the Pecham tomb at Canterbury before they made the tombs at Westminster. The archbishop of Canterbury was a member of the Court. His tomb was at Canterbury. Stylistically, it was inspired from France. Does that make its style Court or provincial? Westminster made a significant artistic contribution in the 1290s; that much is clear. But a considerable contribution was made elsewhere, both before and after. Before the 1290s the handling of unified space and decorative detail was manifest at Lincoln and in the chapter houses of York and Southwell. After the 1290s, the north-east invented patterns of window tracery for which there is no apparent precedent in London, and the south-west produced patterns of vaulting which, *pace* the crypt of St. Stephen's, surpass what we know of London vaults. To call any of this provincial, however, because it is outside Westminster and the patron is not a member of the royal family, is to misread the evidence.

The problem of French influence has also been handled without sufficient detachment; that is to say, it has been pushed to the centre of the stage, when it ought to have remained at one side. Jean Bony sees the Decorated style as a creative reaction to the French Court style of the thirteenth century, which style is agreed also to have influenced the emerging Perpendicular<sup><36></sup>. It may help to isolate the characteristics of a building by comparing it to the architecture of another region, but to use that region as a standard of judgement does not aid understanding. It is clear that France did not influence the figure sculpture, and that the painting is permeated with ideas from Italy<sup><37></sup>. This is the point. There is no doubt that the English masons were well acquainted with French architecture, for the buildings are full of details from France, just as the Eleanor crosses and Westminster tombs are based on French prototypes<sup><38></sup>. But French ideas had been permeating English architecture for centuries, and it is more instructive to see how those ideas were handled. While the major English buildings of the later thirteenth century certainly experimented with French ideas about tracery and big windows, only one even tried to emulate the complete French Court style. The nave of York Minster has a flat internal elevation with the triforium and clerestory combined on the inner plane, which with the vaulting shafts running uninterrupted to the floor, makes it look

quite passably French. But York is isolated. It exerted little influence even in its immediate neighbourhood<sup><39></sup>; confronted by a building which really tried to be French, people did not so much react to it as ignore it. Masons at this time were behaving and continued to behave in a traditional manner: they did not adopt or react to an architectural system so much as take any foreign ideas which suited their own and apply them out of context to a style of building which went on structurally as before.

The relation of the Decorated to the origins of Perpendicular is only a problem if the infant Perpendicular is seen as a revolutionary style. There has been too great a tendency to dwell on the differences between the two styles instead of seeking the common ground. Recent work has suggested that many Decorated buildings were later than was previously thought: Wells has been placed a decade later, Tewkesbury dates from the 1320s and 30s, and Decorated in the north-east matured around 1330 and flourished until the choir of York Minster was built from the 1360s<sup><40></sup>. St. Stephen's chapel was not decorated until the 1350s. The chapter house of Old St. Paul's and the choir of Gloucester, joint claimants for the honour of inaugurating the Perpendicular style, were started in the 1330s, Gloucester perhaps finished c.1365<sup><41></sup>. They are thus exact contemporaries of mature Decorated, with much distinguished Decorated work still to come. Gloucester is at first sight a great contrast to a Decorated building (Pls. 2 and 7): in place of crawling seaweed and nodding ogees, overlapping layers and illusionistic treatment of forms, we find fastidious clarity and fine mouldings over as flat a wall surface as can be achieved. But for those who look, some characteristics of this early Perpendicular can be found in quintessentially Decorated buildings<sup><42></sup>: on the east walls of Howden in Yorkshire and the Lady chapel at Ely, the niches above the windows exactly match the mullions of the windows themselves, aping the panelled look of early Perpendicular. In addition, Dr. Christopher Wilson has demonstrated the close relation between Gloucester and St. Stephen's<sup><43></sup>: he thinks the architect of Gloucester was the man in charge at Westminster in the 1330s, and argues, with Bony, that St. Stephen's is a source of both Decorated and Perpendicular. Gloucester grew from the attitudes which produced the Decorated style, possibly from the same building, and was designed by a man with intimate knowledge of that building.

Leaving aside the details of mouldings, cusps and tracery patterns upon which that argument depends, we can reach the same conclusion from a different direction. Gloucester is the same closed world as Ely or St. Stephen's, literally fenced off by its net of tracery from the outside world. It has a Decorated vault, and one of the greatest Decorated tombs in the country, that of Edward II. The overall decoration of the surface is just as important here, as is the dominance of the human and angelic figure, in the glass and the vault. It is surely significant that, despite the nascent choir of Gloucester, decoration at St. Stephen's went on as originally planned. Gloucester was no doubt viewed as a less luxurious version of the Westminster building.

Nowadays we see a revolution in style which may not have been either apparent or intended by people at the time. They continued their preoccupation with enclosure and surface decoration, and Gloucester did not change the desire for a closed world, which is found right to the end of the middle ages. In the Beauchamp chapel at Warwick, c.1450 (Pl. 14), the effigy of the Earl of Warwick prays to the Virgin in a boss above his head. He and his family are depicted in the east window glass, while angels in the side windows sing hymns to the Virgin. The Nine Orders of the Angels are carved on the east window mullions. In essence this is little different from the world of a century earlier. The idea of fusion of the real and imaginary world is echoed in every picture down the years of a donor with the Virgin, saints and angels. We cannot give back to Ely her glass and statues, but we can restore to her a pre-eminent position as representative of a world of the imagination which we are in danger of forgetting.

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## NOTES

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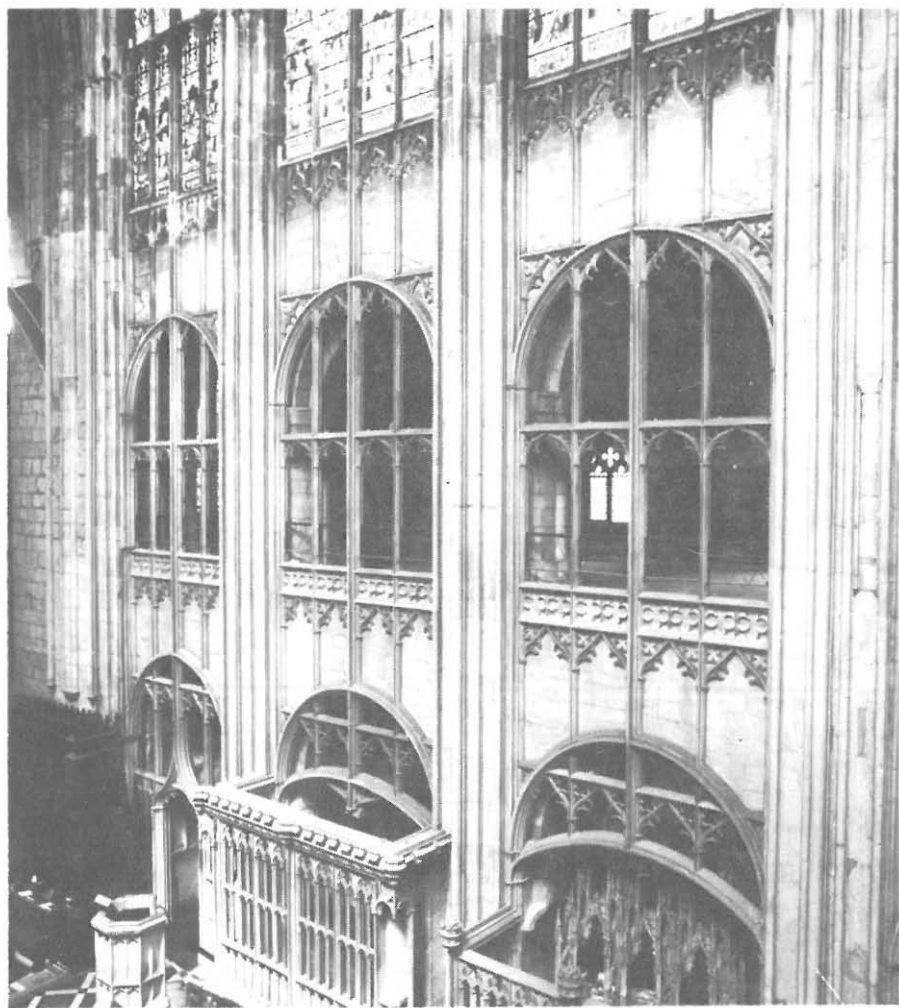


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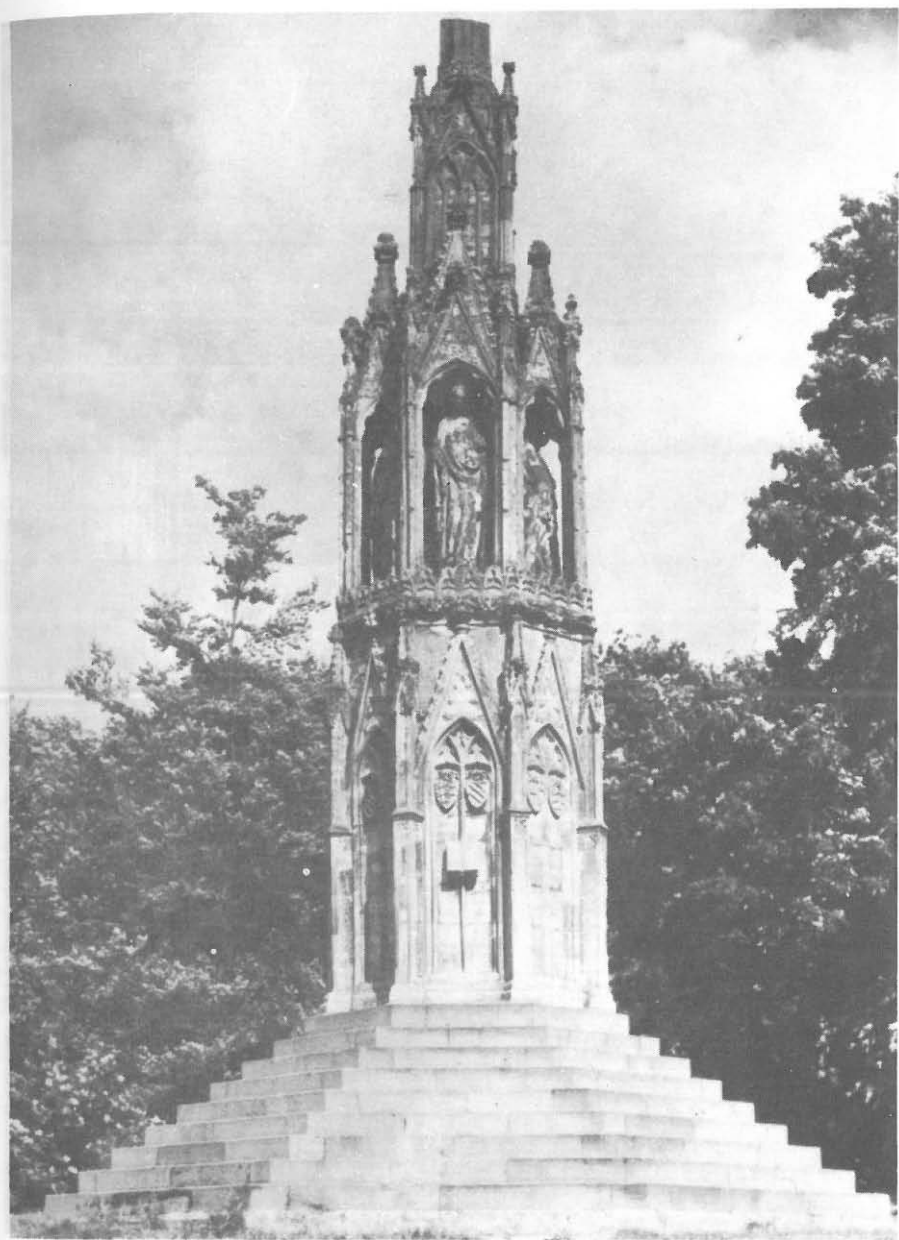
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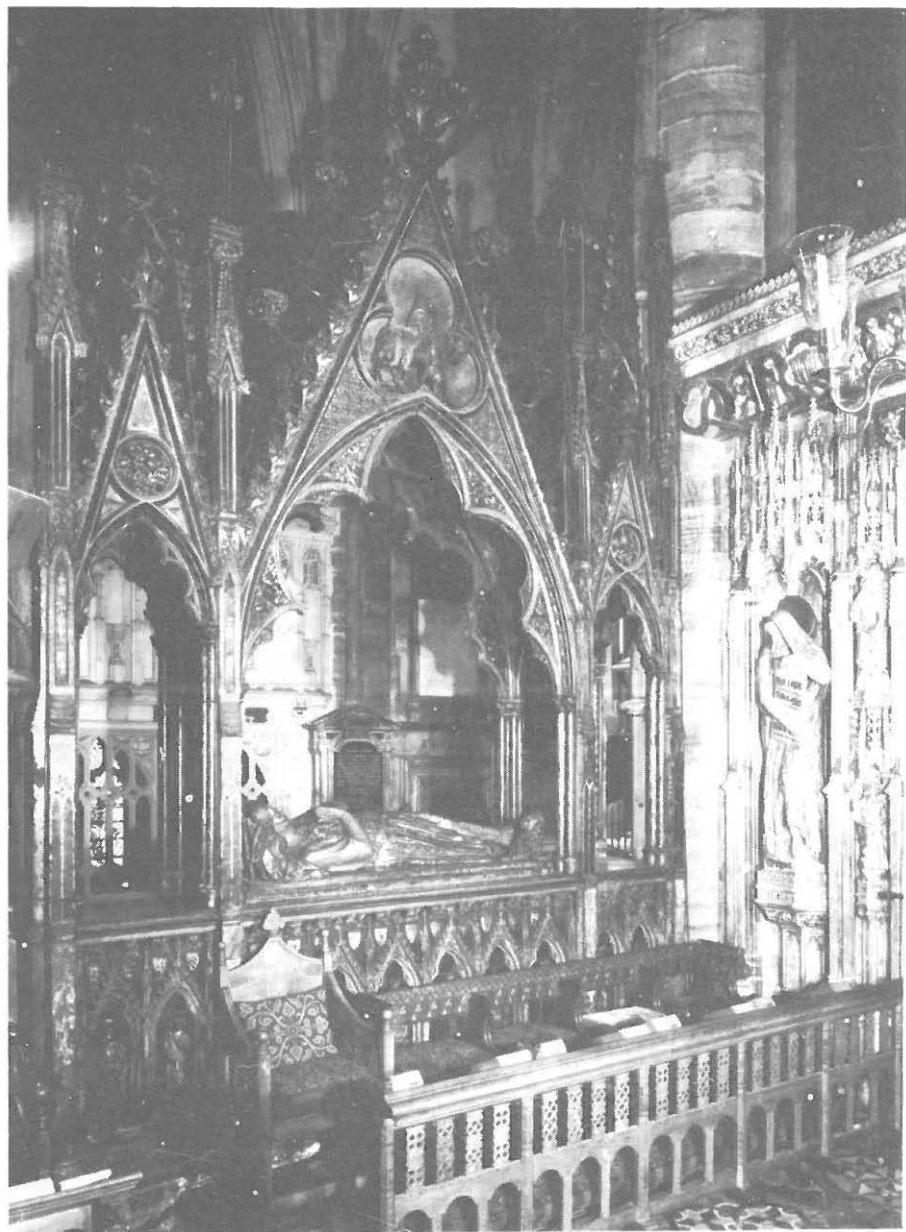
1. Beverley, Yorkshire, Percy tomb.  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art).



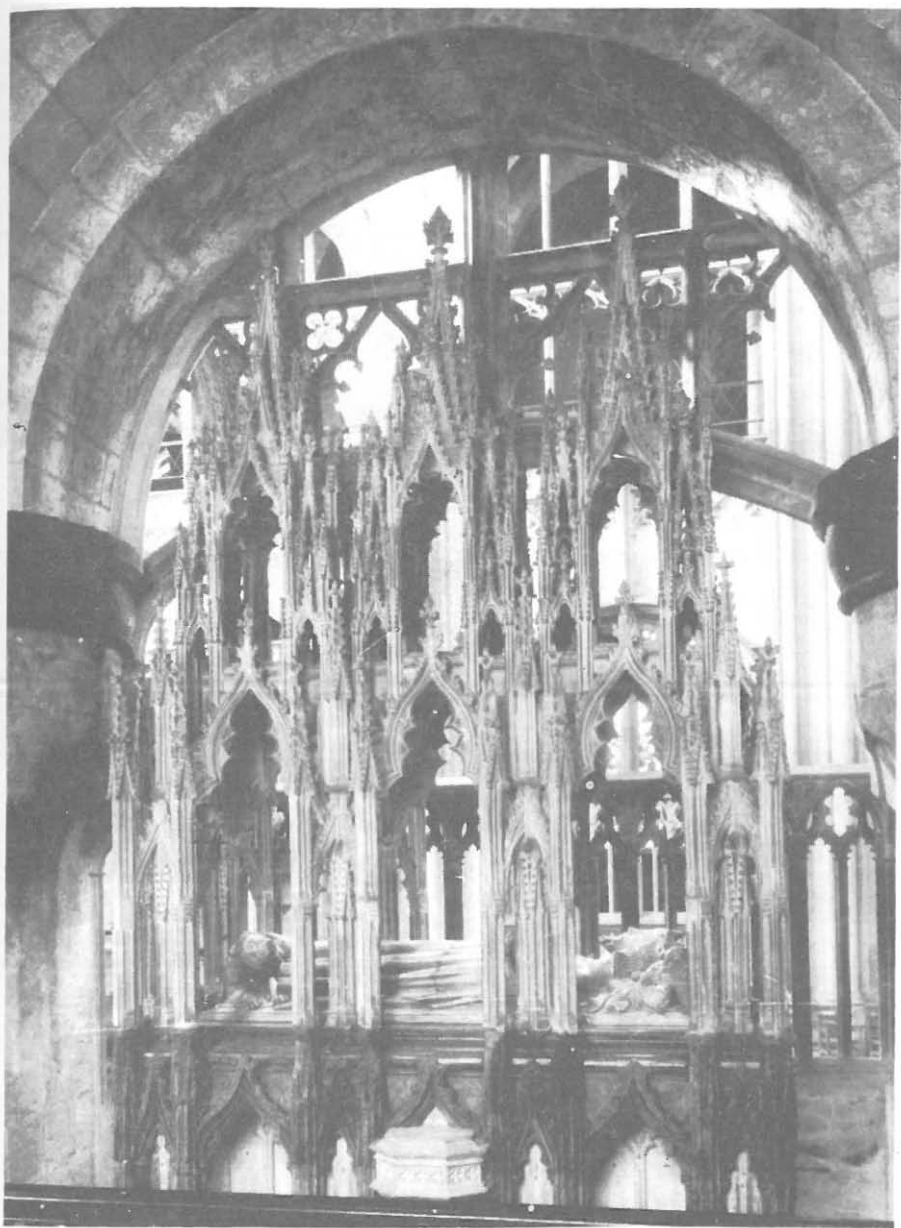
2. *Gloucester cathedral, choir, detail of north side.*  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art).



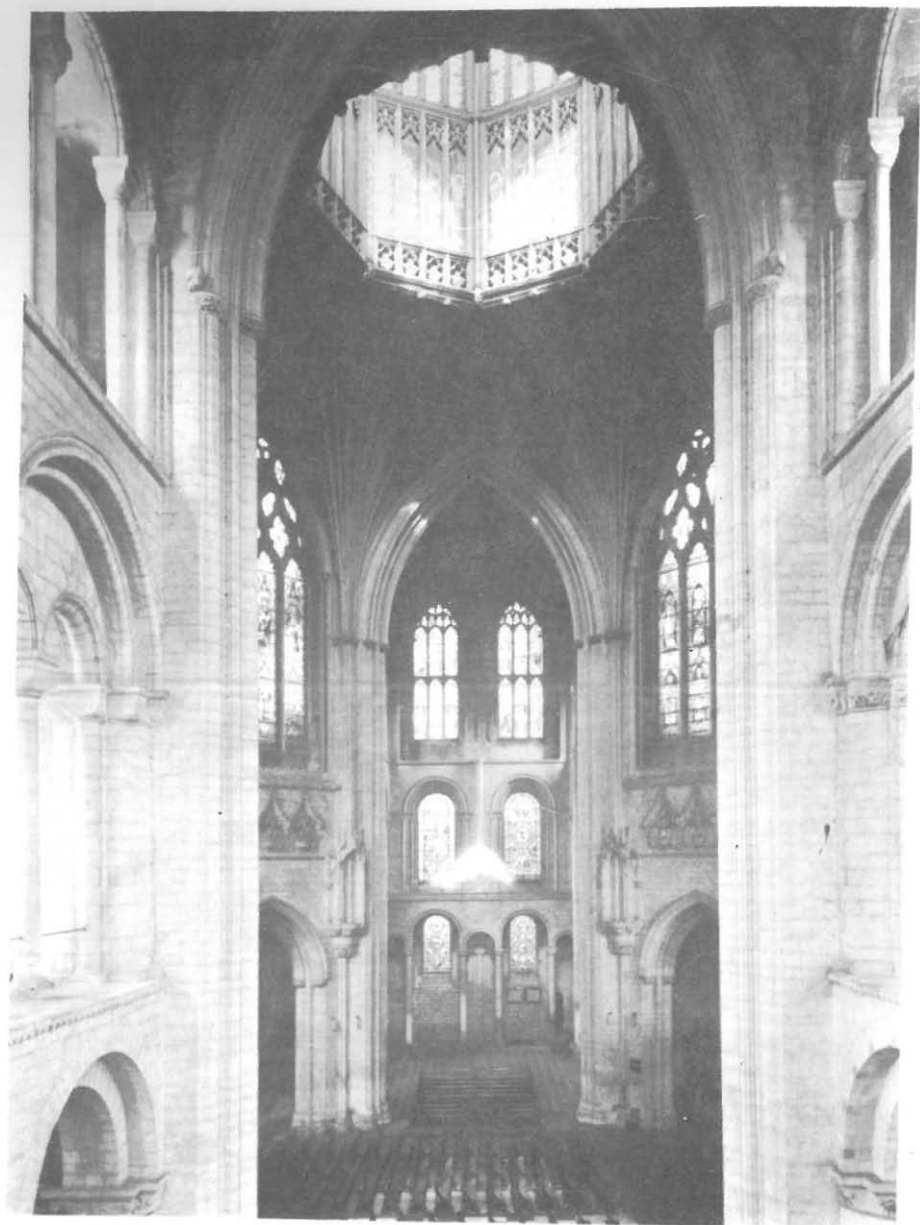
3. *Hardington, Northampton, Eleanor Cross.*  
*(Photo National Monuments Record).*



4. Westminster abbey, tomb of Edmund Crouchback.  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art).

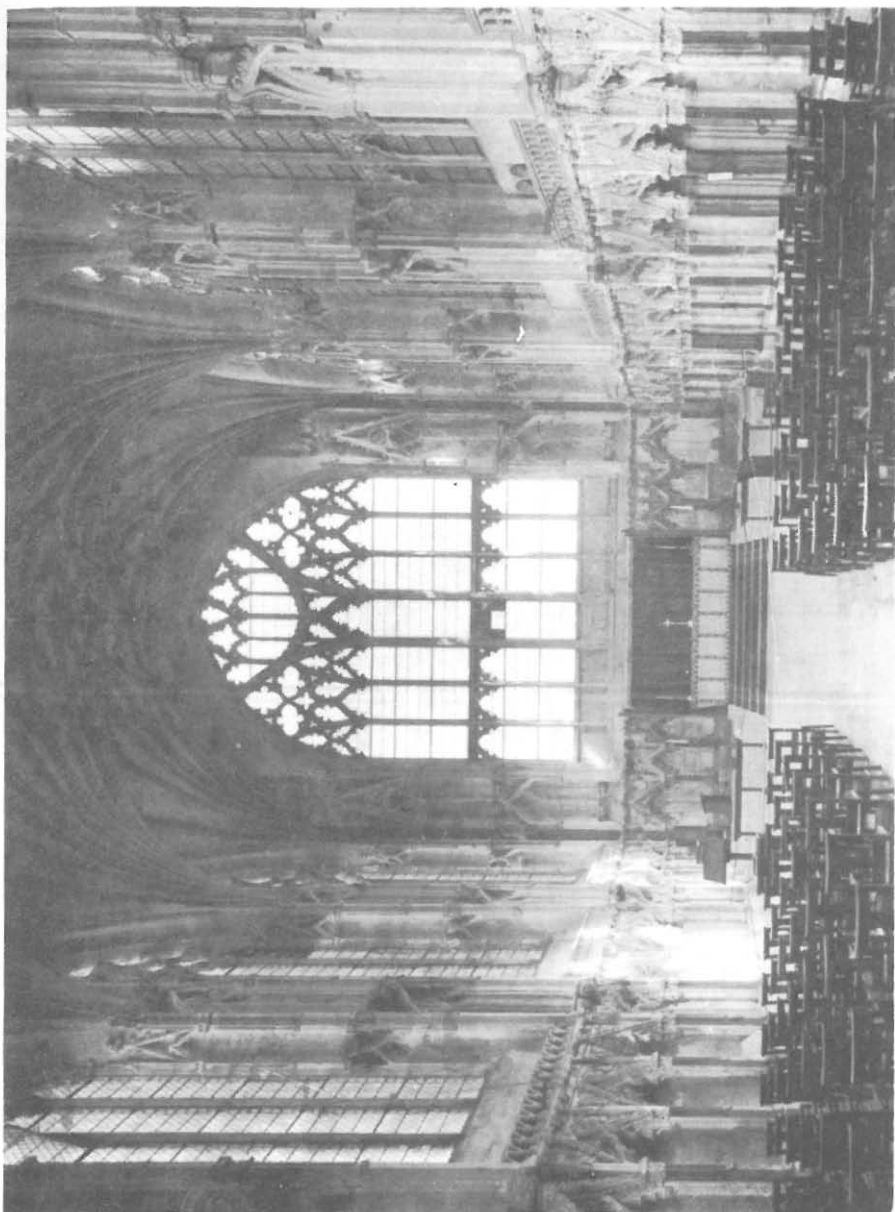


5. Gloucester cathedral, tomb of Edward II.  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art).

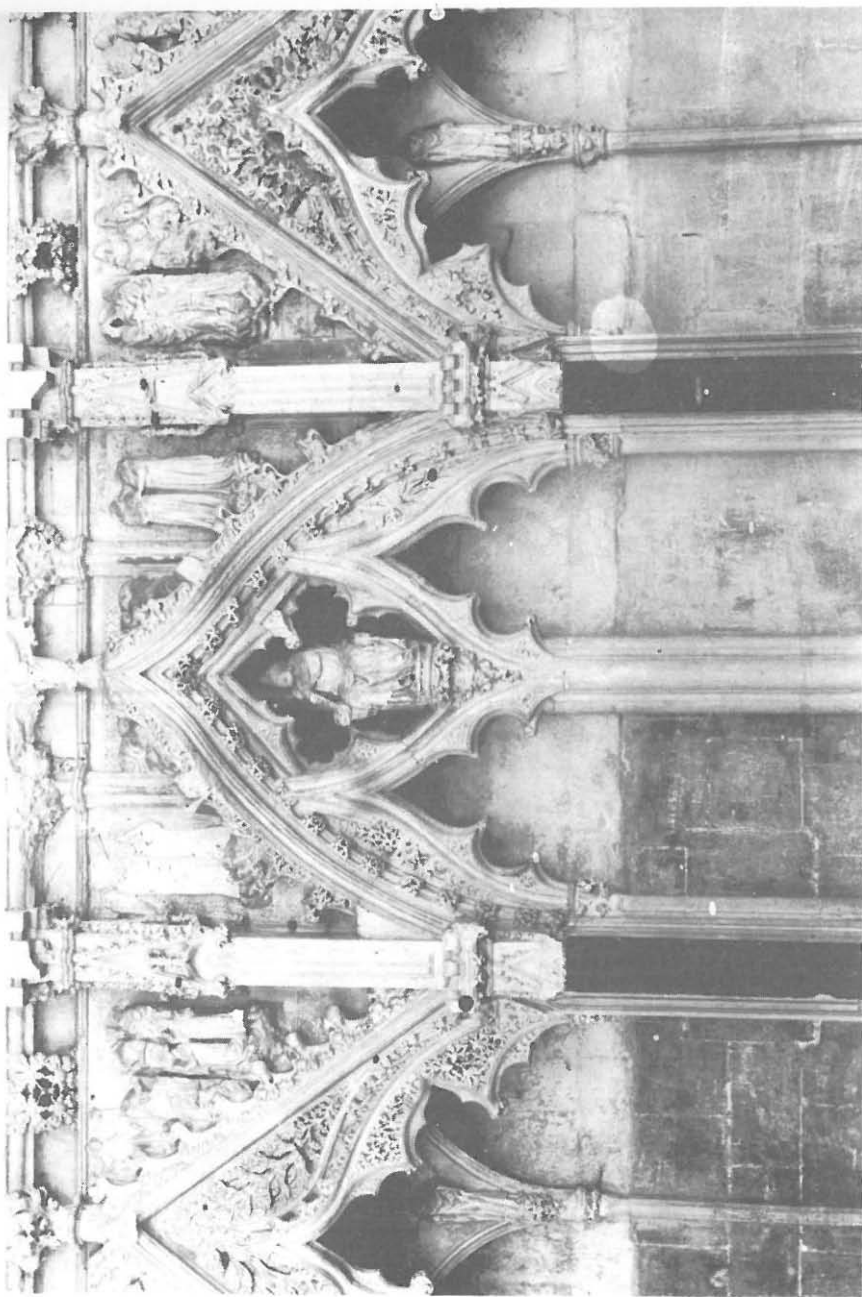


6. *Ely Cathedral, Octagon.*  
*(Photo National Monuments Record).*

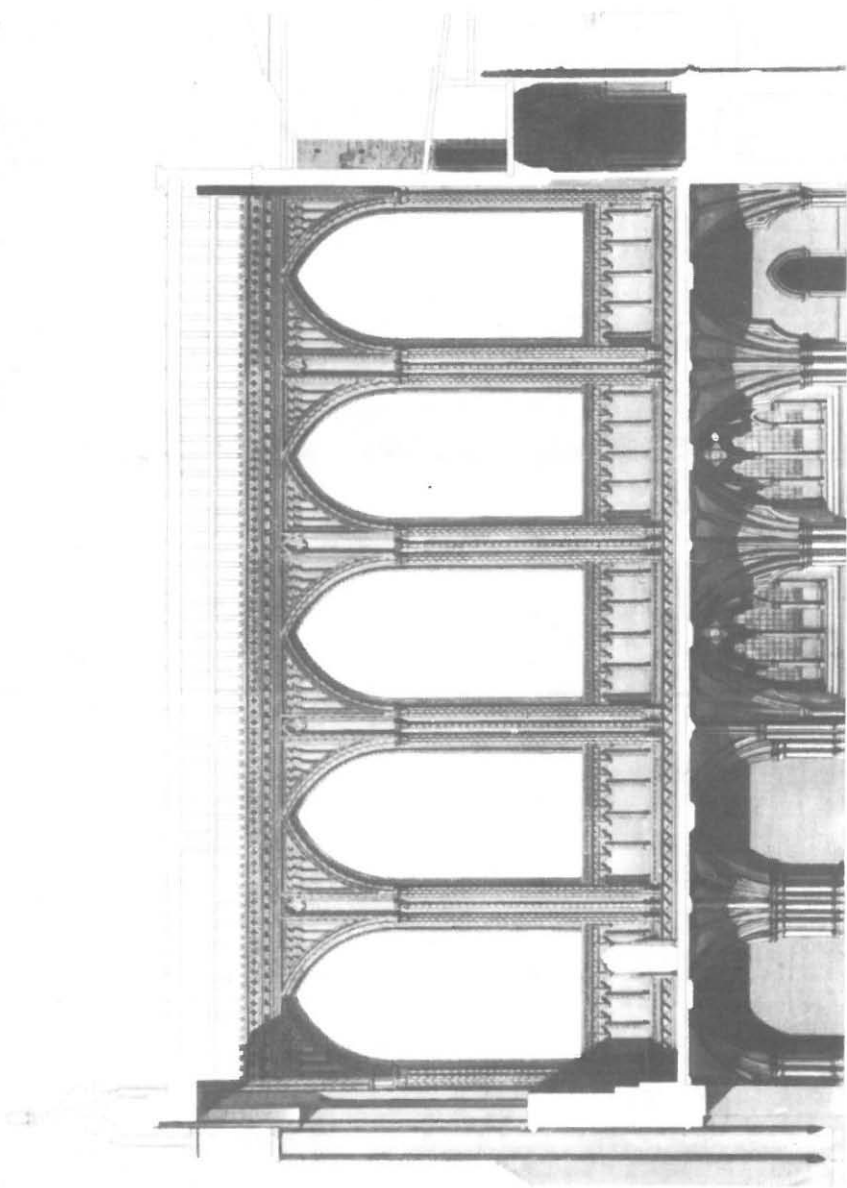




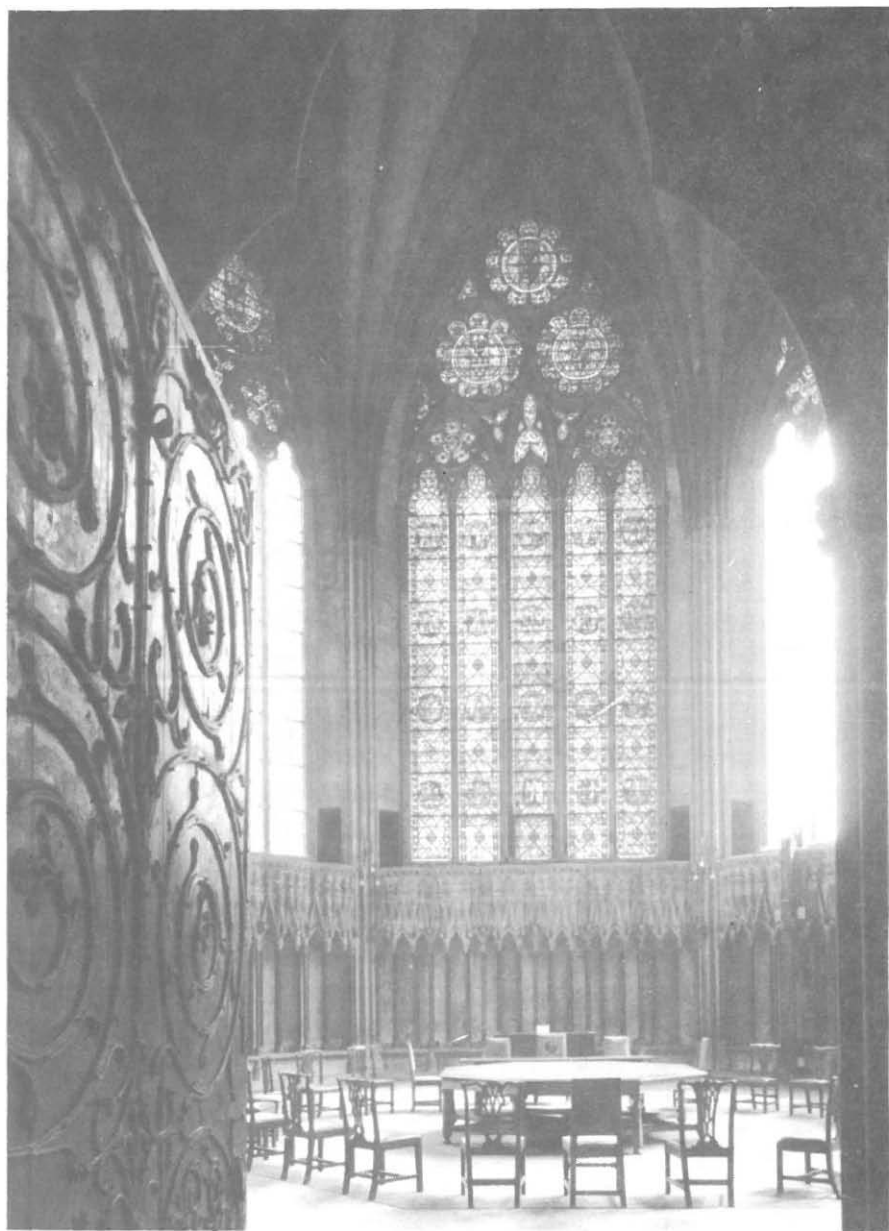
7. *Ely cathedral, Lady chapel, interior.*  
(Photo National Monuments Record).



8. *Ely cathedral, Lady chapel, wall arcading.*



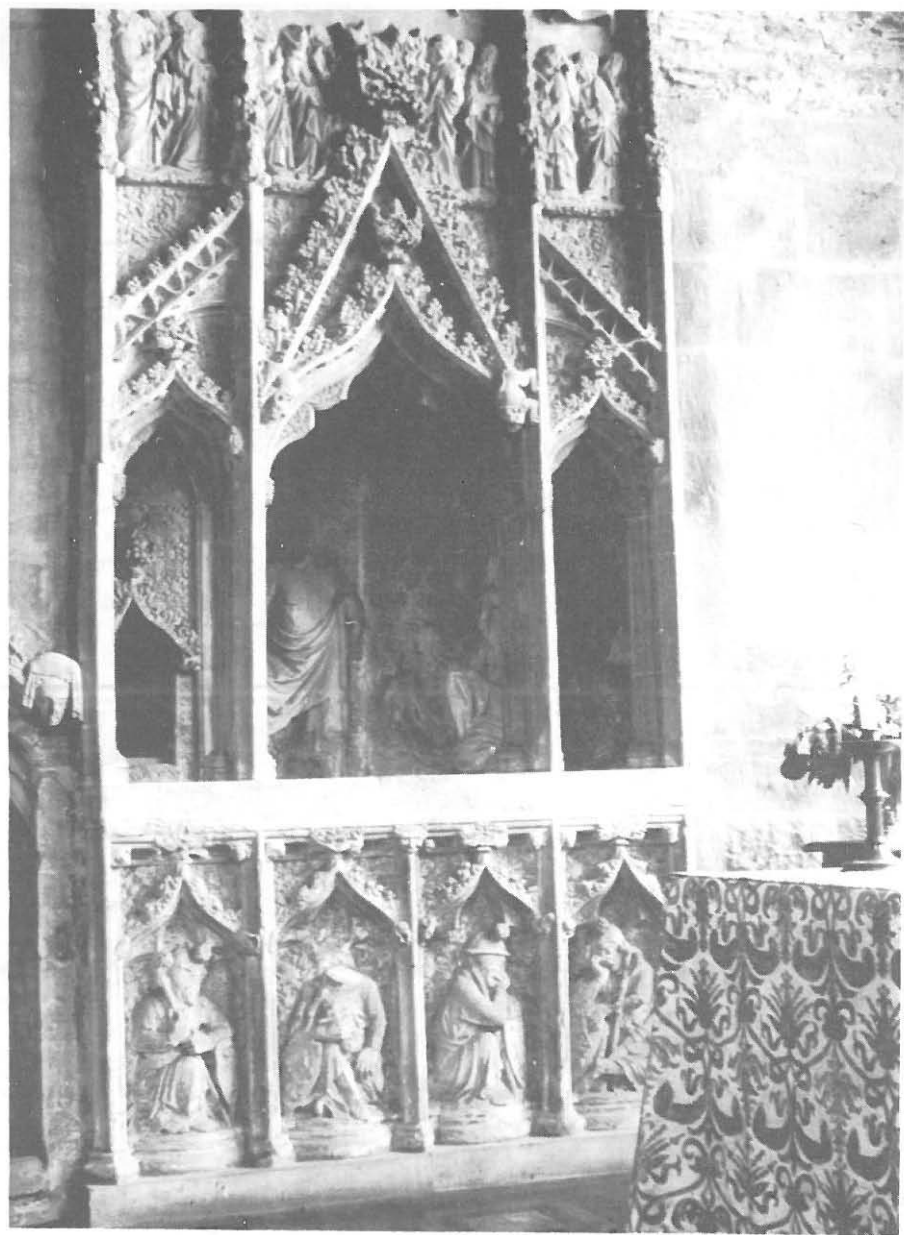
9. Westminster, St. Stephen's chapel, longitudinal section.  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art).



10. *York chapter house, interior.*  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art)



11. *Beverley, St. Mary, North chapel.*  
*(Photo National Monuments Record).*



12. *Hawton, Nottinghamshire, Easter Sepulchre.*  
(Photo courtesy Courtauld Institute of Art).



13. *Ely, Bishop's House, corbel.*  
(Photo N. Coldstream).



14. *Warwick, St. Mary, Beauchamp chapel.*  
(Photo courtesy University of Warwick).