



A New Jerusalem: Reaching for Heaven 1130-1300

Professor Simon Thurley

1 December 2010

In my first lecture I argued that from the disappearance of Roman administration in 410 up to the 1120s builders of masonry structures strove exclusively to imitate the architecture of Rome. I said that I thought that while the Norman Conquest may have accelerated architectural change it didn't alter the course of building in England and that the strength of Anglo-Saxon aesthetics, the love of richness and ornamentation, very quickly pervaded the militaristic architecture of the immediate post conquest period.

I ended my last lecture by saying that by the early 1100s those aristocrats and churchmen who had invaded England in 1066 now saw themselves as English. This is very important for the development of building in the century or so after 1130. The growing wealth, self confidence and identity of the English ruling class led to an energetic patronage of architecture. Magnates reorganised their estates, built themselves castles and endowed churches; bishops reconstructed their cathedrals and abbots built new monasteries. The style in which these buildings were constructed was ambitious, original and, with hindsight, English.

The sheer volume of building they undertook exceeded even the achievements of the Norman invaders. This was partly because many patrons wanted to participate in a stylistic revolution but it was also functional - a response to changing society. Population growth was rapid, economic conditions were good too; the economy was swollen with silver, agricultural profits rose rapidly due to entrepreneurialism. The most successful cathedrals, like Salisbury, enjoyed an increase in income of 168% in a century. Towns grew, markets prospered, communications improved.

But it was a different sort of building boom to the one stimulated by the Conquest. There were now proper quarries, better skilled masons [X2] and few buildings were started anew; new monasteries were rare and no new dioceses were created till 1547 - only Salisbury Cathedral stands out as an entirely new structure. Most churches and castles were reconstructions and extensions of existing buildings.

But most of all architectural leadership lay firmly with the Cathedrals, whose age the thirteenth century was. England's cathedrals are collectively one of the greatest architectural achievements of the whole middle ages. This is partly due to the inventiveness of English masons and designers, but equally due to the wealth of English sees. English dioceses were larger than those on the continent and richer, the richest, such as Winchester (£3,000 a year), had incomes equivalent to the most prosperous earls. In fact by the end of the thirteenth century twelve out of Europe's forty richest dioceses were in England. It was this wealth which funded the extraordinary sumptuousness of cathedrals like Lincoln and Salisbury. A single bay of Lincoln, due to the profusion of carving, probably cost twenty times as much as its French equivalent.

The 1150s, 60s and 70s were a period of stylistic experimentation. For the men of the twelfth century style was important because it expressed hierarchy. In the Middle Ages most high-status architecture was about the ritualised display of power: ceremony, ritual, liturgy were the driving forces behind the appearance of buildings. Their structure and decoration expressed social, economic and religious hierarchies and so the architectural setting of an activity, whether it be dining or praying, had to be suitable to its importance - and the importance of the people who were doing it.

So for instance, the most important of all medieval secular spaces was the great hall and halls were singled out for special treatment. The magnificence of the carving around the doorway to the Bishop's hall at Durham Castle proclaim the room to be of utmost importance. In sacred spaces presbyteries and shrines

were most important and were, even in the most humble parish churches, given significance by their decoration. Antiquity conferred status too. When the east end of Canterbury Cathedral was rebuilt the great marble piers were given Roman proportions, bases and capitals echoing the early Christian basilicas of Rome.

So when we come to consider the stylistic changes that swept across England from the 1150s onwards we have to bear in mind the importance of hierarchy and function and the fact that new was not necessarily seen as better.

The term given to describe the new style that came to dominate the form of masonry buildings is gothic, which in the minds of many is associated with the pointed arch. But it is important to remember that pointed arches were actually reasonably common in Anglo-Norman buildings such as Durham Cathedral. Gothic architecture, as it developed in France in the 1130s, was about more than pointed arches: it was a manner of building that created stone vaults over very tall thin walls. The skeletal nature of the construction allowed the walls to be pierced by huge windows and the vaults to be supported by thin piers and external buttresses. This was an engineering revolution. As a structural system it was more rational and economical than the Anglo-Norman one concentrating supports only at points of real stress. This allowed the non-structural parts of walls to be cut away. The spatial effect was remarkable and apparently dissolved supporting walls into a filigree of arches, shafts and spaces.

These new fashions started to have an impact in England after 1130 just at the time when a new order of monks was making its presence felt. The Cistercians set out to avoid wealth and ostentation, over elaborate liturgy and complex intellectual pursuits; they wanted to be economically independent and their brethren were put to hard labour on their own estates.

By 1170 work had started on Byland Abbey, the most ambitious Cistercian church of its age. Whatever the Cistercian ideals might have said, this was no austere box. Its walls had three bands of gothic arches supporting a timber barrel vault; the west end was illuminated by a great rose (circular) window. But the architects of Byland were not using gothic as an alternative structural system like the French, they used it as an alternative form of decoration. This was the first manifestation of English gothic, retaining the massive engineering of Anglo-Norman buildings but adopting the decorative vocabulary of gothic architecture. Unlike in France, English gothic was a purely style and not a constructional system.

The adoption of gothic detailing at Byland was very influential in the north, but what had much greater national impact was the rebuilding of Canterbury Cathedral after the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170 and a serious fire eighteen months later. These gave the Canterbury monks the opportunity to create a spectacular new setting for their saint and his relics.

So what was new about Canterbury? Most obvious and visible are the huge windows - so different from those in Anglo-French (Norman) cathedrals. The glass in them is held together with massive iron ferramenta. These are made possible by some of the earliest flying buttresses anywhere. Inside the columns are thinner, the arcades taller and much of the most important masonry is polished limestone. This was an entirely different effect. Lighter, more spacious and thanks to the polished stone infinitely richer than anything seen before.

The experience of moving eastwards through Canterbury Cathedral towards the shrine of St. Thomas is breathtaking. It is necessary to ascend steps over both Lanfranc's crypt (which was retained) and William the Englishman's crypt and enter an extraordinary world of polished stone deliberately designed to replicate the heavenly Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. A pilgrim would have felt as if he had been shrunk and placed inside an enamelled reliquary like the Beckett casket in the V&A.

Canterbury was to be influential, not so much through the details of its style or construction (although these were important), but for its lavishness. It was the mother church of England and set the standard for all that came after, particularly in its extravagant use of polished stones. I haven't time to mention Wells, or any of the cathedrals which followed it, but I have to mention Lincoln. Lincoln was rebuilt between 1186 and about 1250. This was a cathedral that proclaimed its place at the top of the hierarchy together with Canterbury and York. As a result nobody stinted on money, scale or decorative effect. Lincoln set out to dazzle; and dazzle it does.

We saw last week how the English taste in architecture tends towards the decorative, the busy and the elaborate. We looked at Durham and saw that the noble simplicity of early Anglo-Norman building became enmeshed in surface decoration. In a sense this is what happened to the new English gothic style. At Lincoln the polished stone of Canterbury predominates, but look at the vaults. In the choir the shafts from

the vaults divide the elevation into bays. But the vaults do not reinforce the bay structure. For the first time there is a central rib running the length of the vault. Onto this, at seemingly random points, the transverse ribs join creating a pattern that at first defies comprehension. This was not structural necessity, it was pure decoration. So at Lincoln ribs are used for the first time in an English way - as surface ornament.

The Nave vaults are slightly later and less crazy but richer, denser, more complex and symmetrical. They succeed in making the vault as interesting and lively as the walls bringing the whole together in a restless sea of ornament. The nave elevations below have extraordinary depth. This is not only achieved by passages in the clerestory and triforium but by the 27ft span of the arches which allow a panorama of the aisle walls which are deeply moulded with blind arcading. The effect is accentuated by the nave piers, each pair of which is subtly different.

The design of Lincoln, extraordinarily experimental and hungry for novelty, had a huge impact on the next two generations of English builders. In 1817 the Victorian architect, Thomas Rickman, christened the style of Lincoln Early English, a term that nicely expresses the essential insularity of what was being built. The great churches described above, and the many others that followed them, were individualistic and original, taking French ideas and turning them into a decorative vocabulary unique to England. There is a real sense in which, by 1220 a national style had been formed.

In the 1250s England's distinctive brand of gothic architecture reigned supreme, but in 1245 Henry III's project to rebuild Westminster Abbey challenged the architectural consensus. The rebuilding of the royal abbey as a coronation church and shrine to the Confessor was the most lavish act of religious architectural patronage by any one individual in the entire Middle Ages. By his death in 1272 £45,000 had been laid out on the building.

Westminster Abbey was heavily influenced by French buildings and broke away from the style of recent work at Lincoln. But Westminster was no straightforward copy and the general richness of carving and surface decoration inside was firmly in long established English taste. The influence of the Abbey, rather like that of early gothic Canterbury, lay not in its composition but in its detail.

The most important new decorative element was undoubtedly window tracery. It was possible, using lancets grouped together, to let more light in, but it was still obvious that these were individual windows with sections of wall between them. The invention of tracery substituted much thinner stone which could never be confused as wall creating big windows. The adoption of bar tracery at a stroke, made anything built before the 1250s look old fashioned. Windows were now not only a gap in the wall; they were transformed into one of the primary vehicles for decoration and elaboration.

These changes can be seen churches like St Denys Sleaford, Lincolnshire with its wild and flowing tracery and west end covered in carving, or Holy Trinity, Hull begun in around 1300. Holy Trinity is one of England's largest parish churches and the first to be largely built of brick. Its chancel and transepts have some of the most inventive and beautiful tracery of their age flooding the presbytery with light.

This was not merely a stylistic development for it supported an important theological shift. The first came out of the council held at the Lateran Church in Rome by Pope Innocent III in 1215. This, the fourth reforming Lateran Council in 1215 the promulgation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood during the Eucharist. Transubstantiation, which could only be effected by an ordained priest, further elevated priestly status above the congregation and put even greater weight on the significance of the chancel, the part of the church where communion was celebrated. So in the thirteenth century thousands of new chancels were built up and down England, and these had new windows with thin tracery flooding the area with light.

The new chancels were longer with larger windows and had square ends, unlike the Anglo-Norman ones. The chancel remained separated from the nave by a wooden screen; few early screens survive, but there is a very rare in situ survival from about 1260 at St. Michael, Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire not only showing that views of the chancel were actually quite good, but that holes were cut at a lower level to provide a view of the elevated host for those kneeling. From the thirteenth chantry priests, assistants and deacons were increasingly present supporting the priest, this was partly a reason for the increased size of chancels, but it also explains the building, on the south wall, of special seats for the clergy. These Sedilia (from the Latin seat), usually built in threes, are first seen in Anglo-Norman churches but become very popular in new chancels.

The emphasis on the proper celebration of Mass meant that a small wash-basin or piscina was now to be provided to pour away water and wash sacred vessels. Nearby was often a cupboard or aumbry for the storage of precious items. Sedilia, piscina and aumbries provided opportunities for decoration and often had carved, arched or canopied frames; sometimes two or three were combined in a single decorative unit.

So just as in the great cathedrals the chancels of parish churches, flooded with light, stained glass, rich carvings meant that every village could have its own visualisation of heaven.

As the chancel became more actively defined as the sphere of the clergy so during the thirteenth century legislation was enacted making the construction and upkeep of the nave the responsibility of parishioners. From early times there had been no permanent furniture in the nave and the congregation may have brought their own wooden stools to sit on. By the late thirteenth century pews come in associated with a greater emphasis on preaching and sermons stimulated by the fourth Lateran Council. The earliest surviving pews are probably those at the beautiful St. Mary and All Saints, Dunsfold, Surrey of 1270-90.

During the thirteenth century many naves were extended by the addition of an aisle. These first appeared in churches in the hands of rich men or institutions who wanted to give greater status to their church by making it into a mini basilica; aisles also gave them more space for private side altars, elaborate processions and for burial inside the church. Less wealthy churches added aisles for more prosaic reasons: a rising population meant that for every churchgoer in 1100 there were three in 1300; so aisles simply fitted more people in.

I have talked about hierarchy and spent some time speaking of the attempts of masons bishops and abbots to create on earth a heavenly Jerusalem. These were astonishing buildings of power, light richness and colour. What of the highest status secular buildings?

It is worth dwelling, for a moment on the most spectacular royal residence of the 12th century, the great tower at Dover built by Henry II in 1180-85. It was built at a time when military engineering had moved away from square and rectangular towers to cylindrical ones. But this was no ordinary castle; it was built in a deliberately retrospective style to emphasise royal gravitas and dynastic durability. It was also a gateway to England a place where the king could receive important visitors many of whom were on their way to the new shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury Cathedral. Central to the building was the hall. Hospitality given in a ceremonial hall has already been noted as a key feature of Anglo-Saxon high status residences. Dover emphasises its continuing importance, indeed the hall continued to dominate high status English buildings into the seventeenth century. So while this was a military building, it was also a palace and guest house cast in the traditional language of dynastic triumphalism.

Dover was, of course, exceptional. For many hundreds of other castles rebuilding in stone took place piecemeal over a long period. In many instances timber palisades were replaced with stone walls while the residential buildings inside remained of wood. This can be seen at Restormel in Cornwall where the whole plan can be read in a single visit. It is most impressive. The kitchen, hall, lord's chambers and guest rooms are all arranged inside the perfectly circular outer walls with only the gatehouse and the chapel projecting outside the circuit.

These were fortified residences, not everywhere had a moat and battlemented curtain wall. Clarendon was the largest and most important royal house in the west of England. This house, the remains of which still stands and can be visited was a complex of one and two storey buildings with pitched and tiled roofs arranged in a long line running approximately east-west. At its heart was an aisled great hall with kitchens and larders to its west and the royal chambers to its east. The various parts of the building were arranged round cloisters containing gardens; these and other perches, linked the various parts.

A palace like Clarendon was not materially different in layout from its Saxon predecessor such as the seventh century Yeavinger mentioned last time. This continuity of plan suggests a continuity of function, with the royal households living much like their predecessors. At the heart of this was still the hall, a structure of fundamental importance to anyone of any means and pretension, not only to royalty. The hall was no mere structure it signified its owner's social standing and was the centre of his public life. One, although not a royal one, survives at Oakham, Rutland. It was built in around 1190, with a fire in the middle of the floor, long tables and heavy drinking; the scene on a feast-day can have hardly been much different from the time of Beowulf.

During the thirteenth century this all changed. Throughout the century incomes rose and landlords had increasing disposable wealth this contributed to social changes that were already underway. Communal feasting and hospitality remained at the heart of medieval life and lords found ways of making their halls

even larger and more spectacular. At the same time they increasingly wanted to spend time in more intimate spaces and withdrew from their halls to chambers where they could spend time with their families and peers. This led to important changes in the design of high status houses that become apparent after from the 1180s.

Houses begin to adopt a new arrangement which was to become the standard layout for all houses of pretension for the following 400 years. Essentially what happened is that kitchens began to be built on to one end of the great hall forming a single unit, then from the 1220s, chamber blocks too were constructed integrally with the great hall, but at the other end from the kitchen. This gave the great hall an 'upper' end adjacent to the lord's private rooms and a 'lower' end adjacent to the kitchens.

Access to the great hall was increasingly no longer from a door in the centre of one of its long walls but through a door at the low end, this door led to a passage that was screened off from the rest of the hall by a timber partition. Doors from the kitchen, from the buttery (for beer) and pantry (for bread) would lead into this enclosure which became known as the screens passage. This more integrated arrangement allowed lords to spend more time in the comfort of their chambers while coming and going through their halls. This private space was a badge of rank, part of the charisma of greatness and wealth. To be inaccessible was to be important.

Many of these innovations in domestic planning were led by the bishops who were single, rich, and less conservative in outlook than the monarchy or the magnates. In the shadow of Lincoln Cathedral lies the now ruined bishop's palace, once one of the most lavish buildings in the kingdom, here modern day visitors can see one of the earliest instances of a kitchen linked to the lower end of a hall dating from the 1220s. The standardisation of domestic plans was accompanied by a formalisation of household organisation. Household regulations began to be written down, fixed etiquette was adopted for service in the hall, and new officers appeared in noble households. By 1100, most aristocrats were accompanied by men holding posts such as steward, butler, constable, marshal, clerk and huntsman. They were the human backdrop to aristocratic power: a bishop's household would have had as many as 80 attendants, that of a duke or an earl, perhaps twice that.

These structured and hierarchical households with their integrated kitchens, halls and chambers presented new architectural opportunities. Stokesay Castle, Shropshire is a miraculously unaltered house of the 1280s built by the super-rich wool merchant Laurence of Ludlow, an early example of a man, enriched by trade, who set himself up as a country squire. Laurence built himself a fine great hall with tall windows and a central hearth; at its south end was a block containing his own chambers leading on to a tower with three large well-lit rooms. At the lower end of the hall were more chambers possibly for guests, or perhaps his family.

All medieval residences of any pretension were surrounded by hunting parks, 1,900 of which were created between 1200 and 1350. Most parks were between 100 and 200 acres in size but the size of the park reflected the wealth of its owner. The largest park in thirteenth century England was at Clarendon and covered over 4,000 acres. It was surrounded by an impressive earthwork 16km long and more than 3m high topped with oak paling. The purpose of this was to keep deer inside the park, at intervals special lowered sections allowed deer to vault the pale and enter the park, but because of a deepened inner ditch could not get out. Every part of the land was productive. In the woods slow growing oaks were cultivated as a crop, cows would graze on the wooded pasture in the south while the northern pasture supported deer and included man-made ponds for drinking and wallowing, troughs for feeding and deer houses for winter shelter. Rabbits and hares were bred here on an industrial scale and provided continuous supplies of meat. Even the wild birds were hunted by hawk.

But it was also a landscape of power, views were carefully contrived, buildings sited with view to them having the greatest impact on the viewer. No great lord's house was an isolated structure they were always closely integrated with their economic and visual setting.

Economically, of course, great houses depended on their estates. Their villages were occupied by what we call peasants. This term is unfortunate as it gives the impression of poverty-stricken and down-trodden illiterates eking out a living from the soil. Villagers, who made up 80% of the population, were in fact smallholders owning anything between 5 and 40 acres engaged in market activities, buying, selling and making money.

By the 1180s the economic stability of the richer peasants started having an impact on the houses in which they lived. This impact varied hugely across the country and even between adjacent villages. As I

explained last time dwellings were normally set in a banked or hedged toft of about a quarter acre within this, in some parts of the country (particularly the south west), was a single building or long house that contained space at one end for people and at the other for animals. This arrangement was becoming less common by the thirteenth century; by then most tofts in the midlands and the south-east had a principal cottage grouped with a barn or granary, and sometimes a byre. Richer peasants might also have a separate kitchen, a freestanding bake house and even a dovecot or cart-house.

So there were more buildings, but they were also differently constructed. The crucial development in the period between about 1180 and 1320 was the introduction of various types of foundation, either the full length of a building or just for its principal posts. The abandonment of earth-fast building (posts sunk in the ground) over most of England opened up the possibility for a variety of superstructures. Windows were small, glassless and furnished with shutters. Chimneystacks were rare and fires would be lit in grates or boxes on the beaten earth floors. Most of these constructional systems resulted in framed units of about 15ft making most houses either 30ft or 45ft by 15ft wide. So although peasant houses were dark and smoky, they were not any smaller than workers' housing in Victorian cities. They were also more private than might be imagined. Though the whole basis of village life was communal, the tofts, with their hedges and banks, and cottages with stout locked doors, gave peasant families individuality and privacy.

This constructional revolution affected the towns too. Between 1100 and 1300 the percentage of the English population that lived in towns doubled to 20%. In 1086 there were about a hundred boroughs, almost all founded by royal will. By 1300 there were more than 500 many founded by the church and the aristocracy. Towns were profitable business; rents from the burgesses were good, but landlords could also profit from market tolls and the borough court.

Technical improvement in the construction of timber urban buildings was important as it changed the appearance of English towns. Earthfast timber houses needed to be replaced or completely refurbished every fifteen or twenty years as their foundations rotted. Timber framed structures, built on stone foundations, lasted much longer, indeed, when well maintained, for centuries. Thus, owning a townhouse was now not merely the simple possession of a plot of land, it was a long term investment in a building. This meant that greater efforts were made in the building's appearance and decoration. Houses got taller too. Timber framing meant that they could be built three stores high; the first medieval domestic skyscrapers were constructed by the 1190s, and soon after their upper floors began to be jettied out.

Many townhouses were also shops. Trade was, of course, central to the purpose of towns and by 1234 Canterbury had 200 shops and by 1300 Chester had 270. No early medieval shops survive today unaltered. Lady Row, Goodramgate, York is a row of shops dating from 1316 that have lost their original windows. Lady Row is not untypical of what we know of a commercial development of shops built by a single landlord and then rented to shopkeepers. The upper rooms may have been separately let as housing, or traders may have lived above their showrooms.

Unlike in York most other towns had undercrofts rather than rear strong-rooms. A complete, though restored, example is 58 French Street Southampton built for a merchant called John Fortin in the 1290s. It was one of about sixty stone and timber merchants' houses in one of England's most important ports. As at Lincoln there was a shop at the front, but behind was a hall and private chamber for the owner and upstairs two bedrooms. The whole was set upon an undercroft built for the secure storage of merchandise. This was typical of its type, a building that was a home, a showroom, a warehouse and an office all in one.

We have not had time tonight to discuss as much as I would have liked but I hope I have done enough to show that the 130 years 1220-1350 stand out as amongst the most energetic, inventive and extravagant periods of building in English history; a period in which English architecture became as distinctive as its national character. The extraordinary building boom that started in the 1220s continued for more than a century although began to decline after 1300. This almost precisely mirrored an extraordinary period of economic growth and national prosperity underpinned by rapid population growth.

English architecture in the period 1220 to 1350 displays the confidence that comes with wealth and independence. The economy was booming, the population was growing, the prosperity, independence and influence of the aristocracy was increasing. Architects had mastered both the structural capabilities of gothic architecture and its decorative possibilities. Patrons wanted to translate their ambitions into stone, timber, glass and fired clay and were not ashamed of being vulgar about it.

In 1300 England was largely made up of the estates of the aristocracy, the church and the crown, all created landscapes that were in equal measure devoted to power, pleasure and production. Their

economic lessers aped them, but also made their own distinctive contribution. The crown didn't set the way, bishops, aristocrats and merchants all had their part to play in the creation of new forms of building. For everyone, however, architecture was about display, whether it was at Canterbury cathedral or in a townhouse in Oxford.

A strengthened sense England emerged as distinct from Wales, Scotland and the continental territories of the Angevin Kings and its architecture was equally distinct. England's gothic architecture does not occur anywhere else, even in Scotland and Wales, yet it pervaded all parts of England. But architectural style in this period is a phenomenon not a homogeneous movement; local and regional variation produced thousands of one-off variations.

This architecture was accessible to everyone in their church or cathedral, for everyone there was an opportunity to find their way to heaven, and for everyone they could get a foretaste of it in their own church.

Boom leads to bust. And the series of busts that hit English Society after 1300 came thick and fast: economic stagnation, climate change, famine, and disease. All led to changes in the way that the English built.

In the New Year I shall be looking at the catastrophes of the fourteenth century and how it changed the way men thought and the way they built.

© Professor Simon Thurley, 2010