Medieval Churches

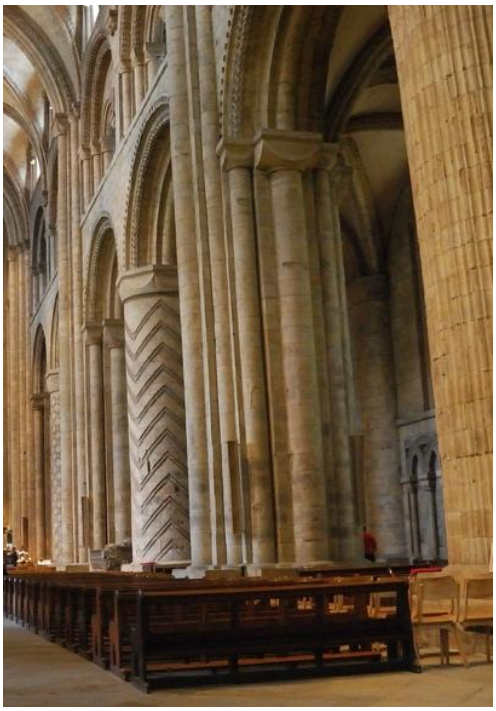
Churches and Cathedrals are places of worship often at the centre of their communities. They also have a story to tell about the people who built them and who have worshipped in them over the centuries. This article will explore the ecclesiastical buildings that emerged during the Medieval period from 1066 until the Reformation that started in 1532 under the aegis of Henry VIII. It was a period that in England began with a rupture and finished with a rupture but gave rise to the most creative period of ecclesiastical architecture in English history. It will examine not only the architecture but also explore how the devotional life of the people influenced the buildings and how the buildings influenced the devotional life of the people.

Romanesque Period 1066-c1160

The defeat of King Harold by William Duke of Normandy was more than a violent overthrow of a king. It led to wholesale change in England that encompassed every area of life. William clothed his invasion as a crusade fighting under a Papal banner and was expected to make good his promise to Pope Alexander II, to bring the English church more into line with his reforming agenda. There were three changes which were brought about quite quickly with regard to the Church: Norman bishops were appointed in place of Anglo-Saxon bishops; some episcopal seats were moved from the countryside into town and a great wave of church building began. As William of Malmesbury put it: *You might see churches arise in every village and monasteries in the towns and cities built after a style unknown before*. Part of the underlying rationale for the upsurge in building churches and abbeys was down to guilt at the taking of lives during the battle of Hastings. In 1070, the *Penitence Ordinal* was approved by the Papal Legate, which fixed a scale of penance for all members of the Norman army who fought at Hastings and in the following years as William consolidated his hold on England. With one year for every man killed in battle and three years for every life taken while plundering, it meant that many would die before their penance was complete. As an alternative, building or endowing a church or monastery was proposed as an acceptable alternative.

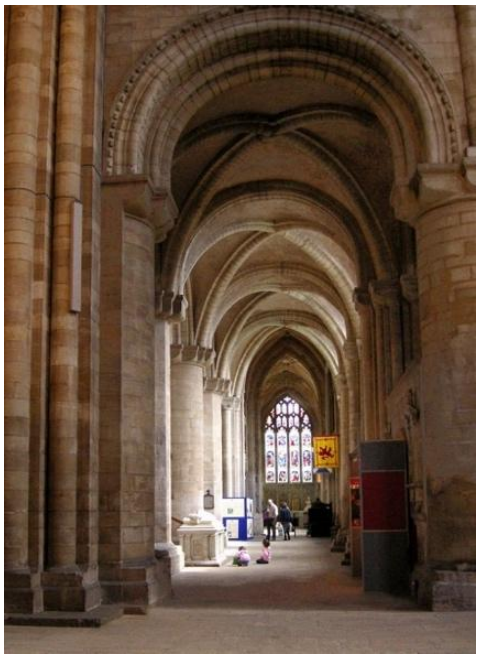
The conquest helped to accelerate changes in England which were already taking place in Western Europe where the church was becoming more organised and centralised. Church Councils were meeting and enacting Canon Law to define what people should believe and how they should behave. Another major change was the spread of Monasticism during the C12th, which came from France where many of the new Orders such as the Cistercians originated. Many people felt that monks were superior to the secular clergy some of whom held hereditary positions. A monk chose the religious life deliberately and so, it was felt, that their prayers and worship must be the more efficacious. Many patrons came forward to build the abbeys and recruit their members and the ruins which still inhabit the countryside remain icons of the medieval building programme.

The Normans not only changed the location of several cathedrals, which led to new buildings being required, but also rebuilt and enlarged the existing cathedrals, a project that was complete by the end of the C12 except for Salisbury Cathedral due to it being a later foundation. The visual impression given by Norman or Romanesque architecture is one of massive solidity and strength and the cathedrals in particular reinforced the Normans need to defend themselves in a conquered land by emphasising its power and presence through use of a French inspired architecture. It is recognisable by its sturdy pillars and piers and double thickness walls with comparatively small openings for windows because of the reliance upon semi circular arches which were less effective in weight-bearing than the Gothic pointed arch. [i]



The Arcade at Durham Cathedral showing rounded arches and decorative columns

Both the walls and piers were filled with rubble to increase their strength. Large square towers were also a common feature serving as both an architectural feature and a defensive structure. During the civil wars of 1135-54 both Hereford and Lincoln Cathedrals were used to attack the neighbouring castles. Vaulting echoed the semi-circular pattern of the arches, the earliest and most simple form being a simple tunnel or barrel vault. In the early C12th two diagonal semicircular ribs were added to strengthen the vault.



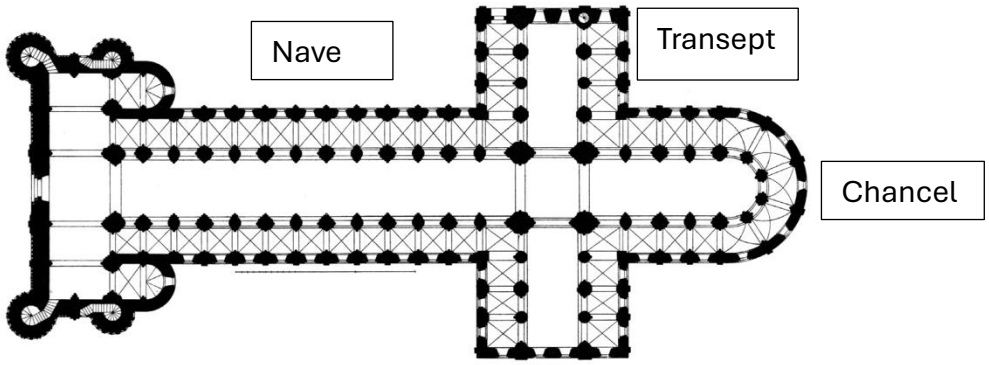
Early ribbed vaulting at Peterborough Cathedral

As well as introducing rib vaults decoration was used to make them visually appealing. This was mainly zig-zag or chevron – like designs, which in Durham was echoed by etching on the pillars. The same patterns were seen again on the arches of the main doorway that were often several Orders deep to accommodate the thickness of the walls.



Norman doorway several Orders deep and chevron-based decoration

The basis of every church was a two-fold division into an Eastern Chancel in which the daily Office and Mass were said and a Western Nave where the people gathered. A rounded or squared Apse was sometimes added onto the chancel. This was commonplace in larger churches (known as Greater churches) but less common in smaller churches (known as Lesser churches). Greater churches would have aisles separated from the central nave by arcades of arches and a stone screen or *Pulpitum* separating the nave from the chancel. Lesser churches did not have such an absolute barrier, the separation was achieved by narrowing the view between them by means of a wall that had an archway in the middle. The floor plan of the Greater churches was



usually that of a cross with two transepts forming the arms and above the crossing was a large central tower. Within the transepts altars were placed on the East wall for clergy who were priests to say Mass and also around the East wall behind the main altar. Above the arcades was a gallery and above that a clerestory of windows which allowed light in.

Although the impression of Norman architecture was one of strength and solidity a church was not considered complete until its walls, according to William of Malmesbury, glistened with colour. Wall paintings were inexpensive and easy to produce using the secco (dry) method of painting onto dry plaster and had been found in English churches from Anglo Saxon times. Paintings had multiple uses; they could perform a decorative function, act as an aid to devotion, be overtly educational or be a combination. As to be expected Romanesque paintings reflected the Norman ideals of power and authority with subjects taken, for example, from the Book of the Apocalypse such as the second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgement (a Doom painting) The north wall would have scenes from the Old Testament, while the South wall would have scenes from the New Testament. The chancel arch showed figures of the Apostles, prophets or twenty-four Elders looking inwards towards a figure of Christ or his symbol a lamb at the top of the arch.





Wall paintings at St Albans Cathedral

The Birth of Gothic c1150-c1190

Around the middle of the C12th architects began to move away from the ideals of the Romanesque style and explore the geometrical and aesthetic potential of the pointed arch. Mention has already been made of the discovery of the rib vault, and this was one of the roots of the change. Rib vaults in the Romanesque style posed inherent structural and design problems in that the diagonal spar was longer and higher than the transverse spar. In England this was solved with the introduction of pointed arched ribs which allowed the height of both the transverse and diagonal to be varied in proportion to each other. With more of the weight of the vault acting as a support, architects had the confidence to replace walls with larger windows and other openings. East Ends became longer, and many were rebuilt with flattened East Walls, which were turned into ornamental arrangements of windows usually in the lancet style.



Arrangement of lancet style windows on an East End. All Saints Ockham

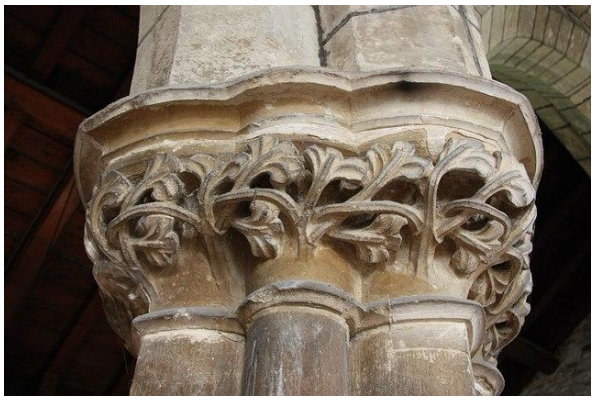
Early English c1190-1260

Towards the end of the C12th a consensus about style developed in England resulting in the Early English style of architecture. Its defining features are the pointed arch, ribbed vaults, lancet windows and the use of clustered or *en delit* piers with an attached shaft. These were frequently made of limestone shafts with columns made of Purbeck Marble. The columns were slimmer than in the Romanesque style and so appear less strong enhancing the effect of weightlessness sought by Gothic architects.



Clustered columns using Purbeck marble and limestone. Worcester Cathedral

New motifs also appeared; the chevron was gradually replaced by *nail head* decoration which was rows of tiny sharp pyramids or *dog tooth* where the sides of the pyramid were cut away. On pillars and other stone fittings *stiff leaf* foliage was used to decorate the capitals.



Stiff leaf foliage

This period also saw new features appear in churches all of which increased the emphasis on the High Altar at a time when the doctrine of Transubstantiation was being promulgated after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Built- in stone fittings were added near to the altar in the form of a *sacrarium*, a special sink used for the reverent disposal of sacred water. It had a shallow basin with a cover and a special drain that emptied directly into the earth below, rather than the sewage system. *Sedilia* which were a group of stone seats for the clergy were also built into the south chancel wall. These too were canopied and decorated with stiff leaf foliage. On the north wall there might be a sepulchre for the Easter ceremonies though not every church had a permanent structure. The sepulchre was a central part of the Holy Week liturgy giving dramatic expression both to the saving power of Christ's Passion and Resurrection and Eucharistic doctrine.[ii] With a plethora of lights and night time vigils it became a very solemn form of public worship of the Eucharistic Host and a way in which the laity could contribute both devotionally and financially as the sepulchre with its associated iconography was a major piece of patronage ranging from donating the making of or decoration of the sepulchre down to providing one of the lights.

As Eucharistic doctrine developed in the Church it was inevitable that practice changed with it. By the start of the C13th the focus on communion found in the early church had disappeared and the movement of the altar away from the people had inexorably led to the liturgy becoming the sole responsibility of the clergy. The laity instead became listeners and observers. They heard Mass, they saw Mass and only rarely participated by receiving communion usually to fulfil their Easter duties as laid down by Clause 21 of the fourth Lateran Council. The doctrine of Transubstantiation, which increased the importance of the sacrament led to demands from Rome that everyone must see the consecrated host for seeing it had the same efficacy as receiving communion. On the part of the laity, they believed that observing the host would save them from death, hell, and destruction. Changes in the ritual were demanded and the Great Elevation was introduced heralded by the ringing of bells to alert the kneeling congregation to lift their eyes and adore the host held high above the priest's head immediately after the words of Institution had been repeated thereby bringing about the miracle of transubstantiation-

the high point of every Mass. But this new action and response caused architectural problems. Rood Screens, which now separated the Chancel from the Nave often blocked sight lines for the kneeling laity and eyeholes or squints would be drilled into the wood where possible to enable those at the front to still see. Larger squints would be created in the internal walls by removing a block of stone to enable those inside aisles or chapels to observe the elevation of the host. But there were other types of squint, of more elaborate construction and they served to aid three different groups of people: the outcasts, the sinners and the recluses or Anchorites and each had a slightly differently constructed squint.

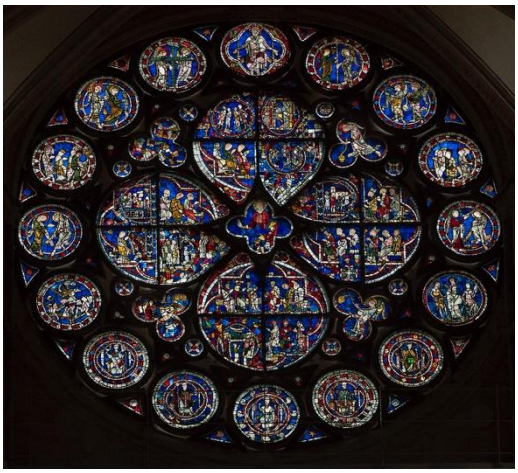
People were terrified by viruses germs and infections. Fear of contagion meant sufferers were ostracised and cast out of society. During outbreaks of Bubonic Plague such as the Black Death in 1347 crosses were placed on the doors of houses of the infected partly to warn people to keep away and partly because of superstitious belief that sin and disease went together. Anyone noticeably sick was shunned even by the Church although the construction of squints did allow these outcasts to attend Mass. They were always constructed at a steep angle on an outside wall and gave the watcher a clear view of the High Altar; the sick person could watch Mass and observe the Great Elevation, but they could not see the people inside the church and this was important as it avoided the sick from infecting the congregation. For in the medieval mindset, as William of Conches (c1020-1145) a French natural philosopher explained, the ray or gaze of a person carried his properties and so a sick eye could infect the healthy if the observer met the gaze. Therefore, the squint prevented the sick person from looking at and thereby infecting the congregation. In this case the squint was both an inclusive and exclusive device, for it allowed the outcast access to grace and maybe healing, but it also excluded them placing them apart from the main body of the worshipping community.

In the medieval church, there was a difference between the popular concept of purgatory as a place that arose in the late C12th and its actual definition which was first stated at the Second Council of Lyons held in 1274. This defined purgatory as a state where some souls are purified after death and that such souls benefit from the prayers and pious duties the living do for them. The notion of purification quickly caught the public imagination and the revelations of horror that awaited one and passed on through visionaries such as St Bridget of Sweden ensured that many resources, both financial and penitential were diverted to try and ease purgatorial sufferings. But as Eamon Duffy points out penance for sins was more easily achieved in this life – a time of grace, rather than after death which was the time of justice. [iii] The vivid accounts of the state of purgatory were designed to move the individual to action in the here and now: by completing penances, trying to avoid venial sin and be generous in charity. But it did not prevent the rich, in particular, from trying to buy their way out of purgatory, for example Henry VII who died in 1509 made a donation for 10,000 masses to be said after his death to ease his purgatorial passage. For those attending Mass, there was a new division; those whose sins were mortal and therefore excommunicated were completely cast out as before, those doing penance were temporarily shut out of the building but allowed to stand outside and observe through the squint.

In the medieval world those who chose to live a solitary life were greatly respected. Anchorites lived a solitary life in a cell attached to a church where they stayed living a life of prayer with the Eucharist as their focus. Although solitaries, they were often searched out for their wisdom and counsel such as Julian of Norwich, perhaps the most famous

English Anchorite. Hermits were also solitaries but not fixed to a particular place and many wandered the country offering their prayers and counsel. With the Eucharist as their focus, the Anchorite would require a squint that allowed them to receive the Eucharist and have a good view of the Mass as it progressed, but at the same time remain unseen by the congregation. Many Anchorite cells or *reclosoriums* were connected to the church in such a way that the Squint was placed in the apse, which guaranteed a good view of the altar while leaving the Anchorite unable to be seen by the congregation. The squint would also have allowed for food and other items to be handed in, and also for counselling or praying with the people who sought them out so was a slightly deeper and larger opening than the other forms of squint. When the Anchorite first entered their cell a form of funeral was held with Psalms from the Office of the Dead sung, the doorway was sealed up and the Anchorite remained there for the rest of their life. So, for the Anchorite, the Squint was life sustaining: nourished spiritually by observing and receiving the Eucharist and dispensing wisdom; nourished bodily by food and the reception of other physical requirements such as for example, pens and paper if they chose to write down their thoughts.

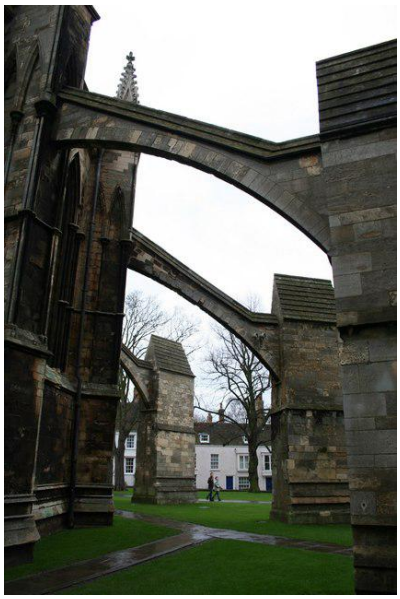
Windows in Early English architecture became centrepieces of the style. Window tracery was invented in Reims in c1210 but the earliest examples in England are mid century. However, there was an evolutionary stage which became known as Plate Tracery because the individual lights have the appearance of being cut out of a flat plate of masonry. The "Deans Eye" window Lincoln Cathedral is considered to be the high point of this form of tracery. As masons got more confident in the strength of their buildings plate tracery gave Way to bar tracery which divided the large lights from each other by moulded mullions which could be pre-manufactured off site unlike plate tracery where every stone had to be individually manufactured.



Dean's Eye window at Lincoln Cathedral

Another important innovation of the Early English style was the buttress. This was a stone column outside the building that reinforced the walls against the weight pressing outward and downward from the vaults. This later evolved into the flying buttress, which carried the thrust from the wall of the nave over the roof of the aisle. Extra support was given by a heavy stone pinnacle.

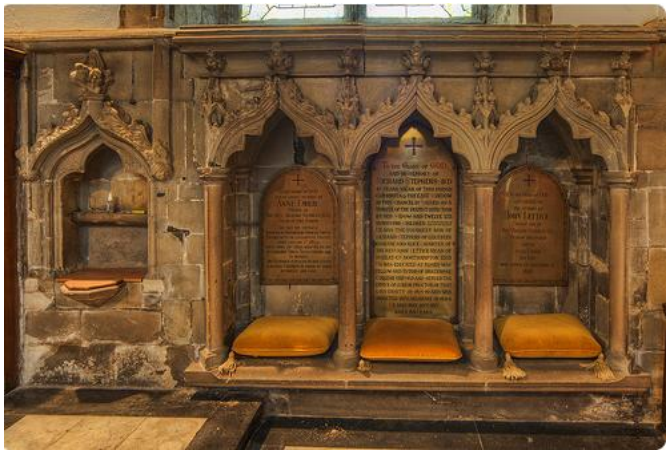
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Flying buttress at Lincoln Cathedral

Decorated Gothic 1260 – c1360

This form of Gothic architecture had two sub periods, the Geometrical which lasted until the start of the C14th and the Curvilinear period. The idea of Decorated Gothic aimed to blur the distinctions between architecture and fittings. Within buildings of this era was a form of micro- architecture where items like tombs and sediliae were treated as one off pieces of architectural design styled as fantasy houses. Details included trefoils and quatrefoil spandrels, stiff- leafed foliage and sculpted gables.



Decorated style Sedilia

The Decorated style created buildings that were overwhelming environments using a wide variety of craft techniques such as stained glass, tile work, sculpture and painted decoration to create a powerful and all-encompassing effect. The geometrical period

was in some ways a transitional time between the Early English style and the curvilineal period.

At the Lateran Council of 1215 a decision was taken that ordinary people should make their confession annually and to learn the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith in a systematic way. In 1281 the English bishops adopted an education programme known as Ignorantia *Sacerdotum* which required Parish priests to instruct their parishioners in the key articles of faith and behaviour. Essentially, this was a catechism that could be remembered orally and visually and the changes in artistic and architectural styles had far reaching consequences for wall painters. There was Gothic elegance with figures adopting the sinuous ogee shape which was synonymous with the Gothic style. New subjects and designs placed a greater emphasis on teaching the fundamentals of faith and a decision in the early 1300's made the laity responsible for the nave. In an age where most people could not read, but some could pay for decoration, the images and painted texts both verified and legitimised the spoken word.

One of the most influential inventions of the Geometric period was the *Tierceron vault* where additional ribs were inserted between the cross ribs. Each rib runs from the springing of the vault to its ridge at the apex of the vault. It gives a spreading organic quality and reduced the viewers sense of its underlying structural form. These ribs are not structural necessities but decorative elements that add complexity to visual interest to the vault.



Tierceron vault in Wells Cathedral

In the curvilinear period the vault became more complex with shorter ribs or *liernes* added between the ribs giving star like patterns. They also provided opportunities for additional bosses at the junctions. In its most elaborate forms, it appeared to be a network stretched below the roof creating a pattern that ignored the tradition of vaulting individual bays



Lierne vaulted ceiling at Ely Cathedral

Arches too underwent change in both in their use as structural forms and in windows especially in the curvilinear period. The ogee curve is made up of two arcs one convex and one concave that together form an S shape. If used in a mirror fashion they come to a pointed apex sometimes with a capstone linking them. Windows in the curvilinear period also used the Ogee curve giving what was felt to be a more elegant outline.



Window using the Ogee curve

Perpendicular Gothic c1360-Reformation

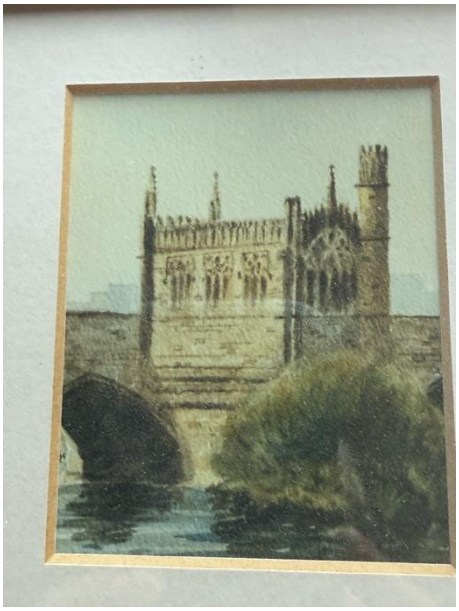
The Perpendicular style stands in marked contrast to Decorated Gothic. The sinuous Ogee curve was replaced by the sobriety of the straight line. Inventiveness and variety were replaced by repetition and freedom replaced by a set of stylistic rules. The Perpendicular style is uniquely English and there are a number of reasons that can explain this including the Black Death of 1348 which caused national and international trauma and the relative isolation of Britain from French influence as a result of the Hundred Years War. But it is also true that European architecture was beginning to fragment into distinct national styles.

The three main characteristics of Perpendicular are the straight line, large windows with elaborate tracery and the fan vault. The Arch was flattened to what was termed the four centred vault as can be seen in the photograph below, which also shows the straight lines running through the window and stonework below. Unlike the Tierceron vault, the fan vault is made up of ribs spreading out from a central point creating a conoid shape which gives a more visually unified pattern.



Kings College Cambridge Chapel with fan vaulting and perpendicular East window

It is a fact that more Perpendicular fittings have survived than of any other style. It is partly a reflection of the fact that this style is historically the most recent but also an indication of late medieval piety. Ordinary people invested large amounts of disposable income into religious activities thereby creating a rich popular religious culture focussed very much on preparation for death and on prayers for the souls of the departed who were believed to be held in Purgatory. A lot of parish churches were rebuilt or modernised by pious donors and new fittings proliferated. Guilds or individuals would supply the money for an altar paying for its lights, decoration and priests. Some altars had a special focus and used specifically for praying for the soul of an individual/s. Some were in independent buildings such as the bridge Chantry in Wakefield, which was built with money from the



Chantry Chapel of St Mary the Virgin, Wakefield

townspeople and opened in 1360. Others were much simpler in form being panelled rectilinear enclosures made from wood or stone and inserted into an existing building.

It was also in this period that crypts disappeared with burials of notable people such as bishops and aristocracy being now above ground with elaborate tombs and shrines bearing effigies erected. Niches for statues appeared. Belief in Transubstantiation meant chapels and altars had to be screened from the public to provide a holy place for Christ to appear. Chapels were shielded by stone screens and altars screened by wood or metal frames all with lockable doors so that the priest and clerk were secluded and people watched from a distance.

The largest chapel in a cathedral or abbey often lying behind the High Altar became known as the Lady Chapel. There had always been devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary; by the C13th her statue stood at the south side of the High Altar, and she was also depicted on the right-hand side of Christ on Rood screens and there would be an altar dedicated to her somewhere in the church. But there was now a wish that in the larger churches an exclusive chapel was dedicated to Mary. They were often highly decorated and towards the end of the Medieval Age they were the place where innovative church music could be performed whereas only Gregorian chant was allowed to be used in the Quire, both in monastic and non-monastic foundations.



Lady Chapel in St Albans

The late Medieval Age produced some of the most creative architecture and buildings in our history, but much was destroyed during the Reformation. What is left can only indicate the colour and magnificence of the buildings that served the people from the smallest parish church to the greatest cathedral. To the people, who invested heavily in them, their churches were a glimpse of heaven on earth and in them they met God.

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[ii] For a full description of the Holy Week Liturgy see Duffy E., *The Stripping of the Altars (*Yale University Press 1992) 22ff
[iii] Eamon Duffy *The Stripping of the Altar ch 10*