

TRIBUTES TO
PAUL BINSKI

MEDIEVAL GOTHIC:
ART, ARCHITECTURE & IDEAS



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Edited by
JULIAN LUXFORD



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Fragments from Wisdom's House: The Lady chapel *Juxta Clastrum* at Wells Cathedral

Matthew M. Reeve

WHEN I ARRIVED AT CAMBRIDGE in 1998 as a graduate student I proposed to Paul Binski that I work on the early Gothic sculpture of Wells cathedral for my doctoral dissertation. Paul's response was suitably enthusiastic: 'that's a great idea!' he said, and it was. But new scholarship had just come out and the sculpture itself was far more disparate, damaged, and in many cases completely unstudied than I then knew, which posed serious challenges to a student aiming to complete a PhD in three brisk years, and so my doctoral work took a different path. This essay is offered to Paul with thanks for excellent advice that it took me some fifteen years to take. It focusses on the sculpture that quite certainly decorated the Lady chapel *juxta clastrum* at Wells. Built upon the site of a Saxo-Norman chapel just south of the cathedral in successive phases during the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, it was destroyed and rebuilt in 1477 by Bishop Stillington (1465–91). From that time, the subjects of this paper – the twenty-four or so carved spandrels that decorated its eastern chancel – became *dissecta membra* and were used as infill beneath Stillington's chapel and in the cathedral, while others were applied to buildings in the cathedral close and beyond.¹ To complicate matters, Stillington's chapel was, in turn, razed in 1552. But even in their fragmentary state, the spandrels are extraordinary survivals of thirteenth-century Gothic sculpture, and their range of imagery, from hagiography to foliage to Latin beast fables, draws from sources that are equally 'high' and 'low', sacred and ludic. New evidence has come to light in recent years, making a reconsideration of these important sculptures both timely and appropriate.



1 I am pleased to thank Prof. Rachel Fulton-Brown, Dr Stuart Harrison, Prof. Julian Luxford, Prof. Jill Mann, Dr Jerry Sampson, Prof. Kenneth Varty, and Prof. Paul Wackers for their help and advice with this ongoing project. The archaeological survey of the sculpture at Wookey on scaffolds was made possible by a generous grant from the Henry Moore Foundation. The author plans a more extended account of the Lady chapel sculpture in due course.

The evidence

As noted above, following the destruction of the Lady chapel to make way for Bishop Stillington's new chapel, some of the spandrels were reemployed as infill in the cathedral or beneath the chapel itself. Warwick Rodwell's 1979 excavations unearthed spandrels featuring St Eustace and a seated angel (Fig. 1a). Others were clearly used in other contexts: J.T. Irvine discovered the fox, crane, and St George spandrels around 1870 in the area around the west cloister, and a cache of fragments from seven or eight spandrels was rediscovered in the cathedral *lapidarium* in 1984 (Fig. 1b, c).² In 2014 two new fragments – featuring animals conducting the liturgy and Daniel in the Lion's Den – were discovered walled-up within the west cloister during excavations, expanding the total corpus at the cathedral to fourteen spandrels (Fig 2a, b). They are published here for the first time. Ten further spandrels have been reset into the projecting porch of Mellifont abbey, an eighteenth-century Gothic Revival mansion at Wookey (built c.1730–45) (Fig 3a, b). Mellifont is near to the cathedral and directly beside a former palace of the bishops of Bath and Wells built initially by Bishop Jocelyn (1206–42) around 1230.³ Mellifont includes substantial medieval fabric as spolia, and it has been suggested that it, as well as the spandrels, originated from the lost bishop's palace next door.⁴ In light of a recent examination of the Wookey fragments on scaffolding in 2016, it now seems more likely that they originated along with the other fragments in the cathedral Lady chapel. Three points bear this out. The Wells and Wookey spandrels are precisely the same size (maximum dimensions of 41.7 × 17.7 in.), and with analogous mouldings; they were all carved from the same fine-grained Douling stone; and now that better photographs are available, it is clear that the Wookey and Wells spandrels are intimately related stylistically, thus suggesting that they were carved in the same campaign, were cut from the same templates, and originated from the same building.

Fortunately, the broad outlines of the form and development of the Lady chapel have been established (Fig. 4a, b). Contemporary with the building of the cathedral in the 1180s and 1190s, the Saxo-Norman chapel was restored and joined to the new east cloister. It has been assumed – rightly, I believe – that the Wells spandrels (and those at Wookey, I suggest) belong to the three-bay chancel addition (internal measurements of 39.37 × 19.68 ft) built eastward from the aisled Lady chapel during the thirteenth century. Locating the spandrels within this space is not difficult.⁵ Putting the current corpus of twenty-four Wells and Wookey fragments together gives us at least 83.46 linear feet, which fits easily into the 100 linear feet of the three walls of the chancel. This confirms, as we should expect, that the current corpus of spandrels is incomplete. The Wells chapel was one of a list of Lady chapels added to great churches in England over the course of the later twelfth and

2 W. Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral: Excavations and Structural Studies, 1978–93*, 2 vols, London, 2001, pp. 173–7. To date, the spandrel here identified as St George has been described as the conquest of Jerusalem. I will discuss its iconography in a forthcoming essay.

3 J. Hasler, 'The Mystery of Mellifont Abbey', *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, 356, 2002, pp. 137–40.

4 In the 1990s Jerry Sampson suggested that, despite deriving from the same workshop as the Lady chapel spandrels, 'there is nothing to indicate that the spandrels have come from Wells Cathedral', and that their iconography suggested a 'secular' setting in the Wookey palace (Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral*, vol. 2, p. 437).

5 Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral*, vol. 1, p. 167.

thirteenth centuries.⁶ It stands in a sequence of distinct but attached, rectangular Marian chapels at Glastonbury (1184), Bristol (c.1220), Tewkesbury (c.1220), Peterborough (1280), St Albans (c.1300), and elsewhere.⁷ Richly carved spandrels forming continuous, low dados were a feature of many of these chapels, suggesting that they may have formed part of a broader typology. These chapels may well descend from the eleventh- or twelfth-century Lady chapel at Walsingham founded by Richeldis de Faverches, of which little is now known.⁸ But a particularly intimate connection with Wells can be made with the Elder Lady chapel at Bristol which bore an historiated dado of carved spandrels over an arcade that originally decorated two walls of the chapel, itself built by masons from Wells around 1220 (to which I return below) (fig. 5).⁹

The patronage of the chapel has been – rightly, I believe – ascribed to the Bytton family.¹⁰ Under Bishop William Bytton I (1248–64), his brother John (who served as provost), and his nephew William II (1267–74), the Lady chapel became a site for the burial of the Bytton family, making them the most likely patrons.¹¹ Bytton’s episcopate was defined by lengthy and expensive wranglings in the Roman curia that halted building works on the body of the church, thus suggesting that the Lady chapel was paid for by the Bytton family rather than the chapter as a family chapel in all but name.¹² But one difficulty with considering our spandrels as part of a single family commission is the heterogenous nature of style employed across them. Some of the spandrels employ the stiff-leaf foliage designs developed in the nave capitals and north porch and then refined in the work on the west facade, probably completed in the 1220s–1240s, while others employ a ‘naturalistic’ form of foliage more in keeping with the chapterhouse undercroft and staircase and the bishop’s chapel. Noting these seemingly ‘advanced’ motifs, Pamela Tudor-Craig suggested that the spandrels hailed from the c.1276 expansion of the aisles of the Lady chapel.¹³ While a second campaign is surely possible, against this conjecture is the common archaeology of the spandrels and a series of motifs that are found throughout. On top of this, there is a fact increasingly noted in discussions of sculpture and imagery at Wells and in West Country Gothic generally: namely, that style and motifs had an unexpected longevity within

- 6 Despite much attention to the subject, a careful overview of Lady chapels in medieval England is now needed. Existing literature includes P. Draper, “Seeing that it was Done in all the Noble Churches in England”, in *Medieval Architecture and Its Intellectual Context: Studies in Honour of Peter Kidson*, ed. E. Fernie and P. Crossley, London, 1990, pp. 137–42; M. F. Hearn and L. Willis, ‘The Iconography of the Lady Chapel of Salisbury Cathedral’, *Medieval Art and Architecture at Salisbury Cathedral*, ed. L. Keen and T. Cocke, Leeds, 1996, pp. 40–5; *Westminster Abbey: The Lady Chapel of Henry VII*, ed. T. Tatton-Brown and R. Mortimer, Woodbridge, 2003; T. Hopkinson-Ball, ‘The Cultus of Our Lady at Glastonbury Abbey: 1184–1539’, *Downside Review*, 130, 2012, pp. 3–53; G. Sumpter, ‘Lady Chapels and the Manifestation of Devotion to Our Lady in Medieval England’, PhD dissertation, University of Leicester, 2008.
- 7 M. Thurlby, ‘The Lady Chapel of Glastonbury’, *Antiquaries Journal*, 75, 1995, pp. 107–70; R. K. Morris, ‘The Gothic Church: Architectural History’, in *Tewkesbury Abbey: History, Art and Architecture*, ed. R. K. Morris and R. Shoewmith, Little Logaston, 2003, pp. 109–131 (at pp. 109–12).
- 8 Hearn and Willis, ‘Iconography’.
- 9 The east wall of the chapel was inserted in the late thirteenth century remodeling of the Lady chapel. The archaeology indicates that the east wall likely did not bear spandrels. My thanks to Jon Cannon for clarifying this point.
- 10 With a provisional date of c.1250–55 offered by Rodwell and Sampson: see Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral*, vol. 1, p. 195.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 12 J. Sampson, *Wells West Front: Construction, Sculpture, Conservation*, Stroud, 1998, p. 57.
- 13 P. Tudor-Craig, ‘Wells Sculpture’, in *Wells Cathedral: A Celebration*, ed. L. S. Colchester, Wells, 1982, pp. 102–31 (at p. 122).

masonic traditions that stubbornly refuse to adhere to later teleologies of style.¹⁴ Rather than suggesting different dates for the sculpture, the evidence would seem to suggest that either multiple hands were employed (which can certainly be assumed), or perhaps that a range of different sources was employed. The closest analogues can be found at Salisbury cathedral in its two major commissions of the 1260s: the tomb of Giles de Bridport (after 1262) which has both stiff leaf and naturalistic foliage populating its figural spandrels, and in the Old Testament spandrels and foliate sculpture in the chapterhouse (complete by 1266), which likewise blends both stiff-leaf and naturalistic forms.¹⁵ As this suggests, there is every reason to privilege the archaeological evidence and put these together in a program in the Lady chapel c.1260.

Turning to the imagery, the surviving fragments indicate that the imagery was deliberately miscellaneous – a mixture of hagiography, Latin beast fables, battling dragons, conjoined birds and beasts, running along the chapel dado. In this, it follows the earlier tradition of English Marian chapels, including those at Bristol and Worcester from the first half of the thirteenth century, which possess a similar range of seemingly disconnected motifs.¹⁶ Miscellaneous though it was, the imagery at Wells was not entirely without logic (a point I return to). It is far beyond the bounds of this paper to consider the imagery in its entirety, so I will instead focus on two specific examples that have been recently added to the Lady chapel corpus. Deriving from Wells and Wookey respectively, both represent one of the dominant types of imagery in the Lady chapel: satirical representations derived from the Latin beast fable, and the story of Reynard the Fox in particular, as represented in the *Ysengrimus* and the *Roman de Reynard*.

Recently discovered at Wells is a fragmentary spandrel featuring, from left to right, a cow or perhaps a pig playing the bells within a micro-architectural setting and a larger bipedal animal with a sparge of holy water (fig. 2a). Even in its partial state, the spandrel manifestly represents a mock-liturgical ceremony enacted by animals in the tradition of the Latin beast fables. Such imagery had an important local context on the exterior north door of the Lady chapel at Glastonbury abbey around 1184.¹⁷ One possible reading of the Wells spandrel is suggested by the *Ysengrimus* which features a grand parody of liturgical music enacted by pigs that begins, as here, with the ringing of bells. Guided by the abbess sow Salaura, pig musicians are an apocalyptic sign of evil, and the liturgical mob are responsible not only for vulgar and excessive feasting (their bellies are presented as shrines), but vulgar and excessive musical celebration. As Wilifried Schouwink famously suggested, whenever pigs, be they human or animal, lay their cloven trotters on the liturgy of the church, the result can only be apocalyptic chaos.¹⁸ But the imagery can be most closely compared to the funeral of the fox from the *Roman de Renart*. To avoid a gambling debt,

14 M. Thurlby, 'The Elder Lady Chapel at St Augustine's Bristol, and Wells Cathedral', in *Almost the Richest City: Bristol in the Middle Ages*, ed. L. Keen, Leeds, 1997, pp. 31–40 (at p. 37); M. M. Reeve, 'The Capital Sculpture of Wells Cathedral: Patrons, Masons and the Margins of English Gothic Architecture', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 163, 2010, pp. 72–109.

15 M. E. Roberts, 'The Tomb of Gilles de Bridport in Salisbury Cathedral', *Art Bulletin*, 65, 1983, pp. 559–86 (at pp. 565–71); S. Brown, *Sumptuous and Richly Adorn'd. The Decoration of Salisbury Cathedral*, London: The Stationary Office, 1999, 181–6.

16 U. Engel, *Worcester Cathedral: An Architectural History*, trans. H. Heltay, Chichester, 2007, pp. 137–8.

17 My thanks to Jerry Sampson for discussing this with me.

18 W. Schouwink, 'When Pigs Consecrate a Church: Parodies of Liturgical Music in the *Ysengrimus* and some Medieval Analogies,' *Reinardus*, 5, 1992, pp. 171–81.

Reynard feigns death and an elaborate funeral procession is enacted by the other animals involving music and bell ringing, sparging, etc. Reynard comes to as he is lowered into the grave, just in time to jump out, steal the cock and run off. If this is the case, we might expect this imagery on the other side of the spandel now missing, or perhaps on a different spandrel altogether. An early analogue for the scene is provided by the sixteenth century etchings of the capital sculpture from Strasbourg.¹⁹ A more extensive account is found in the well-known bas-de-page marginalia of the office of the dead in Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS 102 (of c.1300), in which several pages play out the elaborate funeral of Reynard the Fox. If this is the correct identification, it would be the earliest example of this iconography in England.²⁰

A second, and closely related example comes from Wookey. Although badly weathered, still readily visible from left to right is an animal wearing a mitre lying in bed with his head resting on a pillow. In the centre is another animal carrying a staff with a pack tied around his neck, and a third figure to the right. While the image can be superficially compared to the later iconography of the Fox Physician in the Smithfield Decretals of c.1340 (BL, Royal MS 10.E.IV, f. 54), the sick animal does not have a mitre and his attendant does not have a pack tied around his neck.²¹ I am not aware of any single source for the image in medieval art, but the image is very closely related to a scene in the *Ysengrimus* (Book IV).²² *Ysengrimus* the wolf declares his intention to go on pilgrimage (in actuality the cunning wolf feigns his interest to join a bunch of pilgrims in order to eat them). Knowing this, the pilgrims invite him in and serve him a feast of wolf heads that so terrifies the wolf that he falls back unconscious. 'Alas this bishop is pale! He has the colour of a sick man! I hope he's not ill. He either has, or pretends to have, the chills of a five-day fever' cries Reynard, knowing that they had bested the wolf.²³ As a clerical satire, the wolf is called 'the bishop' or 'abbot' in the text, which explains why he bears a mitre. If this identification is convincing, we have before us the moment of comeuppance represented in stone.

The spandrels represent some of the earliest images from the *Ysengrimus* or the *Roman de Renart* in English art. The *Ysengrimus* was clearly known at Wells from at least c.1200, when a scene was carved in one of the nave capitals just west of the crossing, suggesting that its clever, sardonic wisdom was *au courant* for the Wells canons.²⁴ Whether the sculptures at Wells descend from a single illuminated Reynard (which is certainly possible) or from a different source altogether is not central to my point: the early thirteenth century saw the wisdom of the Latin beast fable penetrate various aspects of medieval culture from sermon exempla to the bestiary, and of course representational art. The wolf's funeral also featured in Odo of Cheriton's *Animal Fables*, in which 'on the death of some rich plunderer or usurer, an abbot or prior' calls together an assembly of the beasts – i.e. of those who live bestially'; while Guillaume le Clerc's c.1210 *Bestiary* description of the fox directly employs

19 K. Varty, *Reynard, Renart, Reinaert and Other Foxes in Medieval England: The Iconographic Evidence*, Amsterdam, 1999, pp. 159, 161 and fig. 150.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 139–48.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 182–8 and fig. 168.

22 *Ysengrimus. Text with Translation, Commentary and Introduction*, ed. and trans. J. Mann, Leiden, 1987, pp. 364–419.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 382 (lines 360–4).

24 K. Varty, *Reynard the Fox*, Leicester, 1967, p. 37.



the example of Reynard the Fox rather than the conventional wisdom of foxes from the *Physiologus* or bestiary recensions.²⁵

The teaching and learning of the bestiary and fable texts were of course the province of clerical culture. Aside their inherent allegorical and religious interest, fables served as exemplars for the study of especially Latin grammar and rhetoric within the school curriculum that raised many of Wells' canons. Students not only practiced Latin word play through the study of fables, but they also wrote summaries i.e. prose translations (*abbreviatio*) and allegorical commentaries (*amplificatio*). *Amplificatio* allowed for active interpretation of texts and the creation of extended allegorical meanings for contemporary society.²⁶ Emblematically, the intention of the twelfth century elegiac *Romulus* (which purports to be from the Roman emperor Romulus to his son, Tiberius) is 'to increase your laughter and duly sharpen your character'.²⁷ But the new place of the Latin beast fable in thirteenth-century art was not without its detractors. Conservatives such as Gauthier de Coincy (1177–1236) could bemoan how his audience prefers stories of Reynard besting Ysengrin over improving stories of the lives of saints ('What pleases the ears are long fables and short sermons ... I want to follow the prophet rather than the poet'), and in his *Miracles de la Vierge* (1233) he would critique churchmen for failing to decorate their altars with divine images but enlivening the walls of their homes with images of Ysengrimus.²⁸ In light of this, it is significant that such anti-clerical satires involving animals (and there are others among the spandrels) form the very earliest marginal imagery in medieval books, and they hailed from the elevated setting of the papal curia during Innocent III (c.1200), as Carl Nordenfalk pointed out long ago.²⁹ Whimsical and clever though they might be, they, like the Latin beast fables to which they were associated, were the products of the Latin schools where the clerical viewers of Wells would have first encountered them.

Interpretation

I have noted already that spandrels forming low dados such as those at Wells were a feature of English Marian chapels from the late twelfth century. These chapels extended an earlier tradition of historiated dados from the eleventh century – whether painted or carved – as a zone for allegorical imagery that commented on or 'glossed' imagery above or around it, or that commented upon the very functions of the space in which they are set.³⁰ What

25 *The Bestiary of Guillaume Le Clerc*, trans. G. C. Druce, Ashford, 1936, pp. 42–3; N. Morgan, 'Pictured Sermons in Thirteenth-Century England', *Tributes to Jonathan J. G. Alexander*, ed. S. L'Engle and G. B. Guest, Turnhout, 2006, pp. 323–40.

26 E. Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers*, Gainesville, FL, 2000, pp. 52, 77–8.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

28 J. Cerquiglini-Toulet, *A New History of Medieval French Literature*, trans. S. Preisig, Baltimore, 2011, pp. 78–9; C. Leniant, *La Satire en France au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1859, p. 141. See generally J. F. Flinn, 'L'Iconographie du Roman du Reynart', *Aspects of the Medieval Animal Epic*, ed. E. Rombouts, Leuven, 1975, pp. 257–64.

29 K. Nordenfalk, 'Drolleries', *Burlington Magazine*, 109, 1967, pp. 418, 420–1; and J. Wirth, *Les Marges à Drôleries des Manuscrits Gothiques (1250–1350)*, Geneva, 2008.

30 J. Osborne, 'The Dado Programme in Giotto's Arena Chapel and its Italian Romanesque Antecedents', *Burlington Magazine*, 145, 2003, pp. 361–5; *idem*, 'The Dado as a Site of Meaning in Roman Mural Paintings ca. 1100', in *Roma e la Riforma gregoriana. Tradizioni e innovazioni artistiche (XI–XII secolo)*, ed. S. Romano and J. E. Julliard, Rome, 2007, pp. 275–88.

were these images commenting on, and what informed their miscellaneous character? While it would be hazardous to say much about a building whose key details are unknown (including its vaulting, wall painting and stained glass), we can reconstruct aspects of its function and liturgical topography from documentation. The main altar was naturally dedicated to the Virgin Mary whose image on the altar was surely the most prominent one in the chapel. Although we know nothing of this altar, it was certainly conceived in awareness of the famous miracle-working statue on the altar of the Lady chapel at nearby Glastonbury, apparently carved by Joseph of Arimathea at the insistence of the Archangel Gabriel.³¹ A life-sized head of the Virgin of c.1300 discovered during excavation has been associated with the Lady chapel, but this cannot now be confirmed.³² An altar to St Nicholas also existed in the chapel by 1301, and in the same years endowed Masses were performed for the souls of Edward I and Queen Margaret.³³

And while we are not fortunate to have a written commentary on the Lady chapel *juxta claustrum* from the middle ages, an important local example is provided by two letters of c.1220 from Abbot David of St Augustine's, Bristol, to the dean of Wells cathedral: 'We most devoutly beg of your generosity for your servant L. to hew out the seven pillars for the house of Wisdom, that is to say, of the glorious Virgin, if it suits your convenience.'³⁴ The subject of this letter is the Elder Lady chapel at Bristol, built or designed by a mason from Wells (possibly Adam Locke) (Fig. 5).³⁵ Although generally cited to support the abundant stylistic connections between Bristol and Wells, this passage also provides an important clue in allegorizing the Lady chapel as the House of Wisdom from Proverbs 9:1: *Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum, excidit columnas septem* ('Wisdom has built herself a house, she has hewn seven pillars'). Proverbs 9:1 of course had a long history in Christian exegesis. Understood to refer to Solomon in earlier exegesis or occasionally God the Father who built himself a virginal hall to house Christ (*virginalem aulem*), the image of Mary as the House of Wisdom became a commonplace of thinking on the Virgin Mary during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³⁶ According to Richard of St Victor and others, she is 'the work of the wisdom of God or the Holy Spirit, who is the maker (*artifex*) of all things'. Richard goes on to put the following words in the mouth of the Virgin: 'I will pour out doctrine as prophecy and will leave it to them who seek wisdom'.³⁷ As the embodiment of Wisdom, the Virgin was the mistress of the Seven Liberal Arts in the medieval curriculum (the trivium and the quadrivium), which was allegorized as the Seven Virtues, and Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This letter employed a trope that was readily understood by both men, and there is good reason to follow their lead in conceiving of these chapels in allegorical terms as houses of

31 Hopkinson-Ball, 'Cultus of Our Lady', pp. 14–21.

32 Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral*, vol. 1, p. 196; Tudor-Craig, 'Wells Sculpture', p. 122.

33 Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells*, 2 vols, London, 1907–14, vol. 1, pp. 23, 165, 221, 379.

34 S. J. Boss, 'Wisdom's House: Abbot David's Commissioning of the Elder Lady Chapel', in *The Medieval Art, Architecture and History of Bristol Cathedral: An Enigma Explored*, ed. J. Cannon and B. Williamson, Woodbridge, 2011, pp. 61–9.

35 Thurlby, 'The Elder Lady Chapel'.

36 Boss, 'Wisdom's House', pp. 65–6.

37 R. Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought*, New York, 2018, pp. 257, 259, 288–9.

Wisdom, architectural loci for, and even personifications of, the Virgin Mary.³⁸ We glean something of the tradition of which our chapels are a part in a Parisian *Bible moralisée* (Paris, BNF, MS lat. 11560, f. 46) in which Wisdom directs the building of her house in the guise of an elite Gothic architect of the period (fig. 6).³⁹ Mary's command of the art of building, and its cognate disciplines in geometry and mathematics is referenced again in the late fifteenth-century Pynson ballad on the Lady chapel at Walsingham which suggests that the 'artyfycers' of the eleventh- or twelfth-century chapel knew neither 'mesure ne mark', nor 'geometrye' and so the chapel could not be built without divine intervention of the Virgin; she erected it herself overnight such that 'eche parte conjoined sans fayle, Better than they coude conceive it in mynde'.⁴⁰ At Thetford priory in the mid-thirteenth century, an artist was apparently visited by the Virgin three times, encouraging him to ask the Prior to erect a new Lady chapel on the north side of the church. Work began in timber, but at the artist's urging (inspired by the Virgin), it was upgraded to stone. Seeking to endow the chapel with a Marian image, the miserly prior found an old wooden Madonna (doubtless a *sedes sapientiae*) which was then given to the painter to beautify with colour. In the process of colouring it, the painter discovered within the body of the statue a host of precious relics and a new and miraculous statue was made for the new Lady chapel.⁴¹ In architecture as in sculpture, the Virgin demands material upgrades from the pedestrian construction in wood to elaborate stone construction tricked out in vibrant colour.

The Virgin Mary's direct intervention in the construction of Marian architecture would have a long history, including the miraculous foundation of Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome, discussed recently by Lucy Donkin.⁴² But for my purposes, understanding the Wells chapel, and, perhaps other Lady chapels built before and after, as Houses of Wisdom, usefully glosses its extraordinarily miscellaneous imagery. To fully understand this, we must explore the imagery of Proverbs 9 evoked in the abbot's letter. In it Wisdom prepares an elaborate meal with wine and sends her servants out to those in need of instruction to join her to dine and learn to leave their simple ways behind and walk in the path of wisdom (an obvious allegory of the Mass). Wisdom advises: 'Whoever corrects a mocker invites insults / whoever rebukes the wicked incurs abuse. Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you / rebuke the wise and they will love you. Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still / teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.' (Proverbs 9:7–9.) While Wisdom's advice stands refreshingly abreast of contemporary moralities, it does offer a vital and supple gloss on the imagery the Lady chapel *juxta claustrum*. It was, to cite our dedicatee, a 'cognitive fiction providing further inventive thought, for which the Virgin Mary frequently provided stimulus'.⁴³ Blending exemplary images of the lives of the saints, anti-exemplary imagery

38 For other representations of the Temple of Wisdom in the history of architecture, see for example M. Fassler, 'Allegorical Architecture in *Scivias*: Hildegard's Setting for the *Ordo Virtutum*', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 67 (2014), pp. 317–78; T. Nickson, 'Moral Edification at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge', *Architectural History*, 48, 2005, pp. 49–68 (especially p. 63); A. Hertz, 'Borromini, S. Ivo, Prudentius', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 48, 1989, pp. 150–7.

39 See P. Binski, 'Working by Words Alone': The Architect, Scholasticism and Rhetoric in Thirteenth-century France', in *Rhetoric Beyond Words*, ed. M. Carruthers, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 14–52 (at p. 32).

40 For the text, see H. M. Gillett, *Walsingham and Its Shrine*, London, 1934, pp. 78–81. See most recently *Walsingham in Literature and Culture from the Middle Ages to Modernity*, ed. D. Janes and G. Waller, Farnham, 2010.

41 T. Martin, *The History and Town of Thetford*, London, 1779, appendix 6.

42 L. Donkin, 'Sta. Maria Maggiore and the Depiction of Holy Ground Plans in Late Medieval Italy', *Gesta*, 57, 2018, pp. 225–55.

43 P. Binski, *Gothic Wonder: Art, Artifice and the Decorated Style, 1290–1350*, New Haven, CT, 2014, p. 196.

of animal musicians and liturgists behaving badly, comic but nevertheless moral imagery from the Latin beast fable, the imagery of the spandrels is readily interpreted as expressions of the Virgin's wisdom in determining proper comportment, ethical conduct and behavior. Following the language of Proverbs 9, Mary/Wisdom – represented at the main altar, whose image must have stood above the level of the dado – presided over the meal in her House surrounded by metonymic images of her wisdom. Our imagery accords well with what E. R. Curtius and subsequently Mary Carruthers describe as the stylistic program of medieval *artes*, which, based on antique foundations, blended *seria* with *ludus* or *ioca* – i.e. serious things and things of duty (or sad things) with laughter and levity, or 'play'.⁴⁴

If I am correct in my speculations here, the Lady chapel *juxta claustrum* at Wells stood somewhere toward the end of this tradition of Lady chapels of which it and Bristol were a part. This tradition would change around 1300 when images derived from the life and miracles of the Virgin Mary replaced the allegorical representations I have discussed here. This occurs most extraordinarily in the Lady chapel at Ely (1321–49), where a grand (if miniature) series of spandrel figures recount the life and miracles of the Virgin. This new tradition of recounting the Virgin's life and miracles in Marian chapels would continue in the patronage of wall paintings and inscriptions (1420–40) in the Lady chapel at St Albans abbey by Abbot John of Wheathampstede, and in the miracles of the Virgin in the Lady chapel at Winchester commissioned by Prior Thomas Silkstede (1498–1524), which were based in part upon the grisaille cycle of Marian images at Eton (Winchester and Eton were both based upon Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*).⁴⁵ Paul Binski's remarkable account of the Lady chapel at Ely revealed that the building was likewise built upon biblical prototypes, namely the House of Solomon in III Kings chapter 7, informed by the later medieval tradition of the Virgin inhabiting the throne of Solomon. It is a pleasure to offer here a brief account of what must have been an ancestor of the Ely Lady chapel, and to provide it with a new genealogy.



44 M. Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 2013, p. 141.

45 M. R. James, 'The Sculptures of the Lady Chapel at Ely', *Archaeological Journal*, 49, 1892, pp. 345–62; M. R. James and E. W. Tristram, 'The Wall Paintings in Eton College Chapel and in The Lady Chapel of Winchester Cathedral', *Walpole Society*, 17, 1928–9, pp. 1–44. M. Gill, 'The Wall Paintings of Eton College Chapel: The Making of a Late Medieval Marian Cycle', *Making Medieval Art*, ed. P. Lindley, Donington, 2003, pp. 173–201.



Fig. 1. Spandrels from Wells cathedral: 1a) St Eustace; 1b) fox and crane; 1c) St George



Fig. 2. Spandrels discovered in 2014: a) animals conducting the liturgy; b) Daniel in the Lions' Den



Fig. 3. 3a) spandrels reused as spolia on the eighteenth-century façade of Mellifont abbey, Wookey; 3b) animal pilgrimage

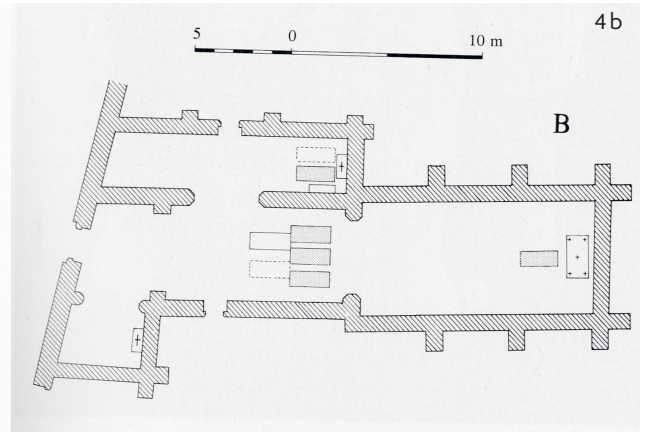


Fig. 4. 4a) Reconstruction of the Lady chapel *juxta claustrum* by Alan Rome; 4b) groundplan of the Lady chapel *juxta claustrum* (c.1260), from W. Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral: Excavations and Structural Studies, 1978–93*, 2 vols, London, 2001, vol. 1, figs 191b, 194



Fig. 5. Interior of the Elder Lady chapel, Bristol cathedral. © The Francis Frith Collection



Fig. 6. BNF, MS lat. 11560, f. 46. Illustrating Proverbs 9:1: Wisdom directs her mason to hew out the Temple of Wisdom.