

Who Built That?

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We know that one of the reasons that coursework was abolished and replaced by 'controlled assessments' was the problem of assuring who had done the work. I have just spent a bit of the Easter break with my brother in Ely – a fascinating city – and the very same problem arose there. The difference however, in the Ely case, is that the problem appears to stem from the 11th century.



I was shown around the ancient Ely cathedral, which is a truly astonishing place standing on the crest of a hill that would have been an island rising out of the swampy fenland flatness. It is so visible – from so far away – that it has acquired the name 'the ship of the fens', sailing boldly across the horizon. But whose work is it? Some accounts say it was built by William the Conqueror. Some say Athelwold Bishop of Winchester in 970; some say Abbot Simeon (1082-1094); and some say Abbot Richard (1100-1107). Thereafter all sorts of additions and modifications were created by others... Bishop Eustace and Bishop Northwold contributing to a long list.

But common sense tells us that this is all wrong. It is very unlikely to be true.

I am quite prepared to acknowledge that the building was *commissioned* by (and perhaps largely paid for by) William, and that its construction was undertaken during the period of office of any number of Abbots. But that is a very long way from saying that any of them 'built' it. It would be like saying that the Millennium Commission built London's splendid wobbly bridge, when we know that

the design and construction was Foster and Arup. During my perambulations around the cathedral, I was forced to reflect on what the designing process might have been like in 1100. How did they end up with one of the longest cathedrals in England? How did the strange octagonal lantern-in-the-roof emerge?

Actually, building processes for that period are really quite well understood. They were typically under the direction of master-masons who (in a practical way) knew how to cut and fit stone. Critically however they also had the knowledge of how to create all the building features that were typical in their day – the foundations and pillars and doorways, and how these might be engineered heavenward with the vaults and naves and towers that we see so commonly as part of our ancient built environment.

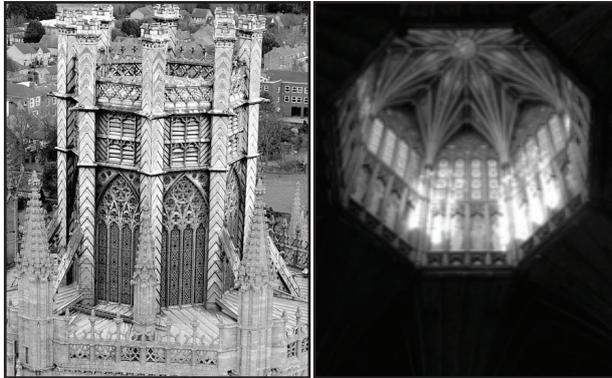
That such massive construction is typically seen only in castles and cathedrals is merely to acknowledge that the church and the king were the only ones rich enough to pay for all that work.

But how did the *design* originate? There are no drawings of Ely cathedral as it was when it was being built. Nor indeed are there any such architectural plans of buildings for another 500 years or more. And those very early drawings suggest a dual approach – ground plans to show layout, and illustrations to show visual appearance. But all this leaves a huge amount of uncertainty to be filled in with the wisdom of the master masons. Its interesting to note that the word *architect* is originally Greek – and translates as 'chief builder, carpenter, mason'.

We might fancifully imagine William the Conqueror saying "I want a REALLY BIG Cathedral", and we might even imagine Abbot whatevsname drawing out a plan in discussion with the masons, but the vast majority of the decision-making would still remain to be done. And it was left in the skilled hands of those who knew how to manage materials.

It turns out that there is a genuinely intriguing design story embedded in Ely Cathedral, concerning a chap called Alan of Walsingham. He was a practical man. A goldsmith who understood some of the science and art of mechanics and who was first heard of as a junior monk at Ely in 1314. By 1320 his practical capabilities were well known by the

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community and he was elected 'Sacrist' of the cathedral – responsible for the fabric of the building. In 1322 the great central Norman tower of Ely collapsed and Walsingham was given the task of overseeing its restoration. He created a masterpiece that is quite unique in cathedral building. His vision was not for a replacement square tower, but for a quite enormous octagonal 'lantern' soaring high above the nave. Each of the corners of the octagon was made from a huge oak tree. He designed the structure in association with William Hurley, a master carpenter from Hurley in Berkshire. Hurley was later to take charge of the timber-work in many royal building projects including the Tower of London, Windsor Castle and the Palace of Westminster. He held the title 'the king's master carpenter' under Henry III. It must have been a fascinating collaboration as Walsingham and Hurley worked out the design of the lantern and moreover also designed a way of lifting it all into the roof and securing it. Having constructed it on the ground, it was disassembled and hoisted - like a giant LEGO construction - piece by piece to be re-assembled in the roof of the cathedral. The whole structure contains about 200 tons of wood and a further 200 tons of lead sheeting protecting the outer surfaces from the weather. And all hanging over the empty space of the cathedral crossing. 750 years after Walsingham and Hurley managed this feat, Fred Dibnah was asked to go and see it and to suggest how it might have been done. He described it as almost unbelievable. It remains standing today and marks Ely as unique in cathedral architecture.

But the story does not end there. For those with an interest in conspiracy theories, there is a great novel to be written about Walsingham. He was clearly a successful designer/engineer as well as being (by 1341) elected

prior of the convent. When the resident bishop died, Walsingham was elected by the community of the church in Ely to be the new bishop of Ely. But the Pope intervened and over-ruled the decision, appointing instead the Dominican friar Thomas L'Isle from France. L'Isle proved to be a controversial appointment, who engaged in deadly conflict with the family of Henry III (burning houses, murdering servants and being sued as a result). When L'Isle died in 1361, the community tried again to get Walsingham as the new bishop. And again the Pope intervened to prevent it – appointing instead Simon Langham. Walsingham died in 1364.

There is much scope for speculation about why Walsingham – who had been such an outstanding success at Ely and who had the support of the whole religious community there – was not acceptable to the Pope. Perhaps he was too earthly; spending more time with carpenters and masons than with his books. Perhaps he was too much his own man; and not sufficiently the Pope's. But whatever the reason, his is the legacy that makes the cathedral so special today.

On my way home from Ely I dropped in on Bury St Edmunds and was interested to see that the cathedral there has a new tower. I mean *really* new. It was a Millennium project. The design is not at all radical and fits comfortably with the overall building. From the point of view of the issues raised in this piece however, it is interesting to note that the new tower is not attributed to a Bishop or Abbot or Archbishop or King. Rather, on a prominent stone set in the wall above the crossing is the name of the design company and of the chief stone-mason.

So the next time you find yourself in one of the many architectural gems of the country – and the guide tells you that it was built by Bishop this or Sir Henry that – feel free to say 'Oh no it wasn't. Tell us the *real* story'.