

BATH AND WESTMINSTER

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It has long been known, but not perhaps enough publicised, that the designers of the present Bath Abbey were the Court Architects, Robert and William Vertue ; the point was in fact explicitly made by Dean Armitage Robinson.¹ But apart from this mere fact of its authorship, the church commenced in the reign of Henry VII is an excellent illustration of the way in which politics and architecture are apt to be inextricably mixed. The choice of designers, and therefore many features of the style of Bath Abbey, are only understandable in relationship to the contemporary history both of the country and of the See of Bath and Wells.

I need not here repeat the familiar details of the situation whereby the Cathedral Priory church at Bath had got into a bad state of repair by the year 1499, or that its rebuilding was started, whether or not as a result of his famous dream, by Oliver King who was then the occupant of the Somerset See. The preliminaries to the rebuilding are reasonably well documented ;² what the events at Bath do not in themselves explain is the choice of the Court architects and the non-local style of the work that was done.

Oliver King's career³ had been a typically medieval blend of State and ecclesiastical employment. He had been a scholar of Eton and a fellow of King's ; thereafter, the course was clear for a well-circumstanced life of official employment about the Court. Oliver King's first advancement was under the Yorkists, but he must have been less inflexibly of that party than Stillington who came two before him in the Wells succession, for though he saw the inside of the Tower under Richard III he was restored to favour and to more than a decade of official prominence under Henry VII. His, perhaps, was the virtue of the Civil Servant rather than the more dangerous

1 *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lx (1914) ii, 1-11.

2 'A Wells Cathedral Miscellany', ed. Dom Aelred Watkin, *Som. Rec. Soc.*, lvi (1941), 83 ; and Sir William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* (edn. 1817-30), ii, 270.

3 'Registers of Bishops King and di Castello', ed. Sir Henry Maxwell-Lyte, *Som. Rec. Soc.*, liv (1939), Introduction, vii-ix. *D.N.B.*, xxxi, 142-3.

loyalty of a politician. In any case it was long before he was free to devote himself wholly to the affairs of the Church whose high prelate he had become.

He may, however, have spent a considerable time as a don at Cambridge, for it was not till 1476 (when he may have been about forty) that he was made Chief Secretary in French by Edward IV. Four years later he was Chief Secretary and a canon of Windsor ; the Windsor connection lasted till his death, for he held his canonry for the rest of his life, was Registrar of the Garter and in the end was buried, not in one or other of his two Somerset Cathedrals, but in his little chantry in St. George's Chapel. Windsor and Westminster must indeed have been his most familiar places of residence for the best years of his life. For his income, in part, he looked elsewhere. In 1487 he became Dean of Hereford, in 1489 he formed a preliminary, and no doubt mainly financial, connection with Somerset when he became the holder of that well-trying recompense for high officials, the Archdeaconry of Taunton. In 1492 came a mitre and the See of Exeter. There is no suggestion that he ever resided in Devon, nor yet in Somerset for the first few years of his Bath and Wells episcopate. He was non-resident at the time of the Perkin Warbeck rebellion of 1497 ; we do not know exactly when or for what reason he ceased to be Chief Secretary. It may have been due to sheer weariness, for he had held the post for many years and during strenuous times ; his coming to Somerset by the summer of 1499 may at first have been the retirement of a tired public servant who, in any case had but four more years to live. None the less it seems that in those last four years he was busy enough on the work of his diocese, and the new Bath Abbey, insofar as it was planned and started in his lifetime, is the chief monument he has left to posterity.

It was natural enough that he should turn, when selecting the designers for so important a church as a new Cathedral Priory, to old friends of his official days ; the key to the architecture of Bath Abbey lies in those long years of his Court employment, of his close knowledge, at Windsor and Westminster, of those who were employed about the buildings commissioned by the king.

He may have derived some original inspiration from St. George's Chapel, Windsor, as it had been rebuilt for Edward IV and later for Henry VII, under the guidance of Henry Janyns who was there employed as architect by the king.¹ There are features about the

1 See, John Harvey, *An Introduction to Tudor Architecture* (1949), 17-9.

design at Windsor, notably perhaps in the West front of the chapel, that seem to anticipate the design got out by different architects for Bishop King at Bath. I am claiming no more than a kinship of basic inspiration between the two buildings, the link being in the mind of Oliver King, canon of Windsor and Bishop of Bath and Wells, rather than in the brains and on the drawing boards of the two separate pairs of designers who were responsible for the two churches. What is important for this study is that when Oliver King had taken his decision to have his Bath Cathedral rebuilt, he chose as his designers, not the craftsmen of the western counties (who were perhaps at that particular time more expert at the naves and towers of parish churches than in the work required in a 'great church') but members of the Court school whom he must have known well and often seen at work on the numerous buildings commissioned by Royalty in the three last decades of the fifteenth century.

Robert and William Vertue were brothers, sons of a master mason and trained in the family tradition, notably on work at Westminster Abbey. By the end of the fifteenth century they had taken their place, along with such men as the Janyns family and Wastell, among the group of designers whom one may fairly designate the Court School. They were, however, in all probability some years younger than Wastell or Henry Janyns, and it seems that the church at Bath, commissioned by one who was close to the Court, but not for the king himself, was among their earlier works of real importance; it was also a notable pioneering building in its own right.

There can be no doubt about the Vertues as the designers of Bath Abbey; Bishop King's own letter¹ is conclusive with its 'Robert and William Vertu have been here with me that can make unto you rapport of the state and forwardness of this our chirche of Bathe. And also of the vawte devised for the chancelle of the said chirche. Whereunto as they say nowe ther shal be noone so goodly neither in England nor in France. And thereof they make theym fast and sure'. There are many details of style that link Bath Abbey to other works of the Court school; the most important point is the design and dating of the great fan vault erected over the choir and specially mentioned by the Bishop to his friend Sir Reginald

¹ *Westminster Abbey Muniments*, 16,040, as quoted in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lx, ii, 4.

Bray. For before 1499-1500, when we may fairly assume that the Vertues, particularly William who was specially expert in the design and construction of vaults, were at work on the designs for Bath, fan vaults had been almost wholly confined to the covering of small spaces—aisles, chapels, chantries, cloister walks and the like. With the one exception of Sherborne Abbey they had not been used for the main structure of a church; and even at Sherborne the nave vaults did not form the ceiling of an entirely new building but were built to roof over a structure that in large measure survived from the earlier work and contained some remarkably solid construction, amply strong enough to take any unforeseen thrusts. The choir vault at Sherborne is far more completely of the fifteenth-century rebuilding, but that at Bath was loftier and bolder, and the plan there was to complete the *whole church*, both choir and nave, to the one fan-vaulted design. Had the Cathedral Priory church at Bath been finished according to the intention of King and the Vertues it would have been the first great church in England to be planned from the ground upwards in the Perpendicular style and with a fan vault. For St. George's at Windsor never had fan vaults over its main spaces, but only over the aisles and crossing, and William Vertue had not even started its main *rib* vaults as early as 1499. The great fan vault at King's College, Cambridge was not started till some years after 1500. The magnificent fan vault of Henry VII's chapel at Westminster, large enough to rank as a major work though actually only the vault of a chapel in a far larger church, was not started till after 1503 and then to the design of the Vertues themselves, by now well established in their profession and favoured with the direct patronage of the king. It is the work at Westminster, above all things, that would point to a common authorship for Bath and Westminster even if we had not Oliver King's letter to prove for Bath what was known from other sources for Henry VII's chapel.

The main vault at Bath is of comparatively simple design; at first sight the work recalls Sherborne or even Wastell's great vault at King's rather than the astonishing, detailed elaboration at Westminster. But there are certain details in both churches, and in the case of Bath Abbey in the aisles, that convincingly confirm Bishop King's evidence. Along the centre line of the main vault at Westminster, and also along the aisle vaults of the same chapel, there are rows of delicate pendants, each with its own miniature

'fan' pattern, that drop down from the main fabric of the vaults and so form delightful embellishments of a type not uncommon in fan vaults as a whole ; the larger pendants placed on each side of the centre line in the main Westminster vault are of a somewhat different design, particularly in their terminal pieces. In the choir *aisles* at Bath are pendants of a precisely similar type to those that fall from the three *centre-line* vaults at Westminster ; so alike are the Bath pendants to those in the aisles of Henry VII's chapel that without captions it is hard to tell their photographs apart.¹ If any trick of design were needed to prove the common authorship of Bath and the chapel at Westminster, these pendants would seem to provide it.

But there are other features found in the other works of the early Tudor Court architects that occur in Bath Abbey ; not all of them are in buildings by the Vertues, but they are in others that shared in the same tradition of design. A key building in this connection is not far from Bath, the great castle of Thornbury in south Gloucestershire whose rebuilding was started about 1511 by Edward Stafford, 3rd Duke of Buckingham and himself at that time in high favour and position at Court. His execution in 1521 put an end to the scheme, and we do not know for certain which designer he employed. But William Vertue could have been the man, and what survives of Buckingham's work (one wing of advanced design and a magnificently balanced main front with its gate-tower, one flanking tower, and part of another that never rose above the first storey), point conclusively to the authorship of some member of the Court school ; the most one can say is that William Vertue (his brother Robert having died in 1506) is as likely as any and more likely than most. For the gate front at Thornbury has the sculptured scrolls with their inscriptions that one finds on the west front at Bath, and the smaller doorways of this great castle, a rival in splendour to Hampton Court had it been finished as the Duke planned, are very similar to the side doors of Bath Abbey's west front. The main arches of the great gateway, whose chief space was intended to have a fan vault which was never built, are very similar to the comparatively simple arches of the main arcades in the nave and choir at Bath. There are other resemblances too at Thornbury to work elsewhere by the Court designers. Most notable perhaps, a

1 For illustrations, see Lawrence E. Tanner and R. P. Howgrave-Graham, *Unknown Westminster Abbey* (1948), Pls. LVI and LVII.

feature which Thornbury Castle shares both with Henry VII's tower in Windsor Castle and with Henry VII's chapel at Westminster, are the 'multangular' oriel windows in its domestic block. There are no windows of this pattern in Bath Abbey, and the multangular windows in the chapel at Westminster, particularly the one now famous as the 'Battle of Britain window', are not really oriels, for the oriel is essentially a feature of domestic building. But the Thornbury windows, so probably the work of one or other of the early Tudor Court school, give added conviction, when taken together with the Thornbury features that do have their more exact parallels at Bath, to the choice of the Vertues by Oliver King when he looked outside his diocese for architects and so set the non-vernacular precedent of design to be notably followed by the Palladian designers of Georgian Bath.