

## CHAPTER 1

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*Introduction*

## ARRANGEMENT

This book is designed so that it can be read in preparation for a visit to Cambridge, as an introduction to the buildings of the University and colleges. But it is also intended to contribute to an understanding of architecture more generally.

It is arranged chronologically. Each chapter contains some comments on the characteristics of the architecture of the period concerned before considering a number of examples in detail. These have usually been chosen for their intrinsic worth but some are included in order to give an idea of the variety of buildings which warrant attention. Each chapter is provided with a map which identifies the principal buildings discussed, so that the concise guide can also be used to plan an afternoon's visiting and to accompany the visitor in front of the buildings themselves. Technical terms have been used but these are usually introduced in the first part of each chapter and a glossary has been included at the back. There are frequent cross-references so that works elsewhere of the same period, or by the same architect, may be mentioned, or neighbouring buildings of a different period alluded to in order to make a comparison. Finally, at the end of each chapter are some notes for further reading. This guide is necessarily dependent upon the original research of others and on previous treatments of the same buildings in other guide books; the references are intended to serve as an acknowledgement of this debt. Full titles are given in the bibliography at the end of the book.

Most of what is described is readily visitable, though permission may have to be sought to see some of the interiors. Colleges often limit visits during the early summer, in the examination term. In his 1925 *Illustrated Guide to Cambridge* Frank Rutter reassured his readers that public access to the Cambridge courts was 'practically unrestricted in daytime, and the College servants will be found usually to be civil, obliging, and sometimes communicative'. These were words written before the huge

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increase in tourism: a phenomenon which has benefited all of us in that we have seen and experienced more places in the world than most of our forefathers were able to, but which has its obvious drawbacks. We are all tourists, but I hope this book will help to turn an appreciation of Cambridge and its buildings into something more than merely touristic.

#### WAYS OF SEEING

There are many different ways of seeing Cambridge. It is possible to appreciate the buildings as compositions of mass and line and to enjoy the way in which their planes and surfaces catch the low East Anglian light. We can admire the way in which the architect has handled wall surface, observe the depth of the reveal within which the window has been placed, and note the smooth creamy texture of the stone and its contrast with the cobbled courtyard. Not only is the eye involved; we feel the texture of the fabric and are aware of the echo of our footfall.

Another level of our understanding (not necessarily more profound than the reverie that may be induced by a sensuous appreciation) can be reached by understanding where these materials come from and how they were put together – whether the stone is Ancaster or Clipsham or whether the brick is from nearby Burwell and was fired in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. We may also admire the compositional skill of the architect in the arrangement of the building on plan, something that is less easy to appreciate immediately from the vertical expression in façade: how has the pattern of staircase and room, of column frame and massive wall, been manipulated both to meet the needs of the patron and to affect us who use or visit the buildings? What was the contribution of the architect and how much did the condition of patronage determine what it was possible to build? How then does the building reflect, represent or even symbolise the social conditions within which it was conceived?

We will note the effect of the British climate on the placing of whole buildings, the weathering of materials and also the way in which even small-scale details have been fashioned in response to it. In some cases the financial constraints within which the schemes have been conceived will be obvious; in others we will never know the struggles that the designer encountered in reconciling conflicting claims of budget and brief. It would take many books this length to look at even the selected examples in all of these ways, so the way in which each building is discussed is necessarily partial. I hope that cumulatively an experience of analysing buildings may build up so that readers can remedy the many deficiencies for themselves.

One thing is certain: the way in which we ourselves understand buildings is inevitably conditioned by the society we live in, and by the history of the ways that these buildings and places have been seen in the past. ‘The Backs’ (the stretch of fields and

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gardens either side of the River Cam running behind St John's, Trinity, Trinity Hall, Clare, King's and Queens') may serve as an example. Until 1750 this area acted as the town drain and a commercial waterway for barges, and the college buildings turned their backs to it (this accounts for the different façade treatments in Wren's Trinity College Library, p. 60) though Loggan's 1688 plan shows a bowling green and lawn behind King's. By the time of the King's Fellows' Building (p. 64) Gibbs was happy to plan rooms symmetrically facing on to the court and out towards the Backs and Charles Bridgeman proposed a project for improvements, which was never carried out. In 1779 'Capability' Brown, perhaps Britain's most famous landscape architect, acting on behalf of St John's, drew up a scheme (also unexecuted) for treating the whole area as a unified park, and in 1831 Rickman and Hutchinson's New Court for the same college (p. 72) boldly fronted this landscape with its stone screen and arcade.

In this century Giles Gilbert Scott's University Library (p. 95) began the collegiate and university development of the other side of the river. The Backs were seen by Pevsner in 1970 as the 'campus of the future . . . a precinct much larger than the precincts of the individual colleges had been in the past, yet a precinct all the same'. Meanwhile twentieth-century film and television documentaries and dramas that are set in Cambridge invariably show a disproportionate footage of the Backs because they have become not only a central physical focus, but also a potent symbol of Cambridge. Though it is possible for us to construct the historical state of the Backs at any one period, it is inevitable that our understanding should be conditioned by how we have learnt to see it. It is the same with our reading of individual buildings and the messages they convey.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF ARCHITECTURE

In many instances in this book, especially when talking about classical architecture and when looking at façades, I shall use a linguistic analogy – architecture as a language. There are other analogies we could employ, of course, and each of them has its advantages. The gastronomic analogy is a common one: the architect has a number of ingredients out of which everything from an unwholesome *mélange* to a cordon bleu masterpiece can be concocted; we discriminate between the products by the exercise of taste – and so on. Both these analogies presuppose that the business of architecture is a self-conscious activity: buildings do not just turn out one way or another according to the circumstances and constraints we have touched upon, they are consciously conceived. At different periods of history those who conceive them may be technicians (masons or engineers), dilettantes (the Master of a college for example) or professionals (acting on behalf of clients for a fee), and very frequently combinations of all of these. It is because buildings are self-conscious artefacts that they can tell us something not

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only about the society which produced them, but also about the individuals who were principally responsible for their design. They can convey messages to us that the designer intended, often by the use of symbols which the viewer would be expected to understand, or by a whole system of symbols (an iconography). So at a number of levels we may expect to 'read' a building somewhat as one might read a text. This linguistic analogy (which is convenient but by no means comprehensive) incidentally has a longer pedigree than the fashionable 'structuralism' of the twentieth century, and can be traced back to French books of the mid-eighteenth century.

### CAMBRIDGE STYLE

The architectural character of the city and University is therefore created by the assembly of individual buildings, many of which have been crafted by the designers and their patrons with purposes which transcend the merely utilitarian. Between these consciously crafted works, and acting in some sense as a foil, survive buildings whose aspirations are less elevated and which speak in a common tongue or vernacular. Often it is the conjunction of high art and the vernacular which gives a place its unique character. One example would be King's Parade where shops and houses of many different ages and styles lie opposite the neo-Gothic screen designed in 1823 by William Wilkins. Much of this book is necessarily concerned with this use of style (what do we mean by neo-Gothic, and what did Wilkins intend by it?) but stylistic description and analysis is used not as an end in itself, rather as a means for understanding the aims of the architect. Because style is the most obvious and easily describable of a building's attributes, it is often asserted that a change of style will improve the quality of the architecture, or even hasten an improvement in the society which produced it (see the description of Pugin's position on p. 73). Though this is demonstrably not the case, it is arguable that at any given period only a limited range of styles would appear to be available to the designer. An original architect makes acceptable for the first time, or very frequently rehabilitates and re-authenticates, a manner which was previously regarded as incapable of carrying appropriate meanings. These are the controversial buildings of their time. Meanwhile most architects are working within a manner (or paradigm) that has already been established where their skill, or otherwise, is evident in the way in which they handle the architectural language they have inherited. Examples of both types of architecture form the detailed studies in the chapters which follow.

Architecture is a complex art, intimately related to the social conditions within which it is created, and can therefore be as profitably studied at a theoretical level through the discipline of social anthropology as through aesthetics. But this book concentrates on the close examination of the architecture itself, in particular by paying attention to the way in which individual architects articulate the language they choose or are constrained

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to adopt. Buildings for the colleges in Cambridge are specially pertinent examples to study because, unusually, the way in which they are inhabited has changed so little over the centuries. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the arguments for a new style of architecture were frequently based not only on the emergence of new technologies but also on the need to provide for uses which were unprecedented – the railway station for example, or the laboratory. Rooms for undergraduates on the other hand or the requirements of a college library in Cambridge have changed remarkably little. Central heating is considered normal and more bathrooms have been provided (often to meet the needs of conference delegates rather than students); the library catalogue may be on disk or microfiche but the space needs of students to read books in natural light with ready access to other volumes in a college collection are unchanged. The brief for a new college, such as Churchill of 1958 (p. 105) or Robinson College of 1974 (p. 106), has not altered fundamentally since the middle ages, though for a college to be built all at once is a relatively recent phenomenon. The survival of particular patterns of planning is therefore not merely conservatism and nostalgia, though these are powerful influences at certain times. An argument for a changed external expression in buildings within the same college may require subtler functional justifications (see the comparison between Christ's College Fellows' Building of 1640–3 and the adjacent nineteenth-century building by J. J. Stevenson on p. 50).

### *Other guides and histories, and notes on further reading*

There are many guides to the buildings of Cambridge. This concise guide is intended to be complementary to them. Some have numerous illustrations with captions describing the images and are arranged topographically. Others are histories of the University and mention buildings incidentally. This book borrows its title from John Willis Clark's volume, first published in 1898 and last reprinted in 1949, which took most of its material from the monumental *Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* (1886, reprinted by Cambridge University Press with a new introduction in 1988) which he had earlier written with his uncle, Robert Willis. As reference works the two-volume Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *City of Cambridge* (1959) and the Victoria County History, *Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely* (1948) are invaluable, as is the indefatigable Nikolaus Pevsner's *Cambridgeshire* of 1970, part of the Buildings of England series. The most recent comprehensive survey is Tim Rawle's *Cambridge Architecture* (1984). An excellent walking guide is Kevin Taylor's *Central Cambridge*.

For an extended meditation on the 'pastness' of the past, see David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* and for a recent analysis of tourism as a sociological phenomenon John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze*.

For the analogy touched on here with the way certain historians have thought about how scientists work, and in particular the use of the term 'paradigm' as a framework within which 'normal' science (or in this case architecture) takes place, see Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

## CHAPTER 2

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*Cambridge before the University*  
(up to 1280)

## ORIGINS

As its name implies, Cambridge has always been a significant crossing point on its river, where there was sufficient firm ground either side to allow a ford, a ferry and later a bridge. To the north the Fens, not drained or enclosed until the eighteenth century, were a continuous marshland almost as far as Lincoln. Cambridge lies on a diagonal swathe of level firmer ground, later to be the course of the Roman Icknield Way, from the Thames valley northeastwards towards the Brecklands and Norfolk. There is archaeological evidence for settlements in the late Bronze Age (1000–500 BC) and Iron Age (500 BC to the Roman occupation in AD 43). The Romans established a civil settlement on Castle Hill, just above the crossing point of the Cam on the site of the present Magdalene Bridge. The town wall went up Pound Hill and Mount Pleasant, encircling the present Shire Hall, and ran slightly north of Chesterton Lane about on the line of the southern façade of St Giles' Church. St Peter's (discussed below) contains Roman bricks which may have formed part of this wall. The settlement was bisected (roughly SE–NW) by the Via Devana, crossing Akeman Street north of the river; its route northwards is marked today by the long straight Huntingdon Road.

It is not certain what the Roman name for Cambridge was. But the name of the river above the town, the Granta, is the cause of the present name because Bede (c. 673–735) refers to 'Grantacaister', and in the Domesday Book of 1086 the town is called 'Grentebrige' and had 375 houses around the castle. Only in the late eleventh century do we find 'Cantebrige', and only when Cambridge got its present name were the lower reaches of the Granta named the Cam.

During the so-called dark ages Cambridge lay between the rival kingdoms of Mercia and East Anglia and archaeological evidence for the two settlements on either side of the river is furnished by cemeteries. Those on what is now St John's College playing

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fields, at Madingley Road, and at Newnham Croft have yielded grave goods dating back to the fifth century which indicate that the Mercian settlers were connected with Slesvig in Denmark, but may also have included surviving Romano-British elements. The newer arrivals, the Angles, left evidence of burials in the area of what was to become the medieval town: Jesus Lane, Sidney Street and Rose Crescent. Arthur Grey surmised that the river crossing had been destroyed and was only reconstructed by King Offa in the eighth century. A Viking invasion of 875 brought both townships under Danish control and the area around Bridge Street became the centre of the community and an important trading port. The dedication of the nearby church to St Clement (patron saint of Danish sailors) recalls this important period of the town's history. In 921 the Danes submitted to the Saxon King, Edward the Elder, but the Anglo-Danish town was destroyed by fire in 1010 as part of the last wave of Danish invasions. Presumably it was quickly rebuilt because the construction of St Bene't's Church (see below) had begun by 1025. Apart from churches, all the buildings have disappeared. They would have been timber framed, with wattle and daub, and thatch-roofed, or built of cob (mud reinforced with straw), a building technique that survived into the twentieth century in Devon.

#### NORMAN ARCHITECTURE

The 1066 Norman invasion brought with it not only a confident and effective people who established a lasting dynasty, but also a style of architecture, for both secular and religious buildings, of much greater sophistication than the primitive pre-conquest Saxon style.

Like Britain, Europe had been subject to violent political and social upheavals for several hundred years, but from the coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 AD sufficient stability had been maintained to allow the development of a massive round-arched architecture, where the most important volumes were vaulted. The principal ingredients of the monastic plan emerged during the same period: a church with a cloister on its south side with dormitory, refectory (or dining room), kitchen and ancillary rooms either attached or above the arcades; nearby would be a library, houses for the abbot, guest houses and hostels for pilgrims. Despite nearly two centuries of unrest following Charlemagne's death, the round-arched style became the basis of 'Romanesque' and the monastic plan was to appear in the important cultural centres of northern Europe, and be echoed in the arrangement of the Cambridge colleges. The Viking invaders who settled in Normandy had converted to Christianity and by the middle of the eleventh century, at Jumièges and St Etienne at Caen, had developed one of the most powerful versions of the Romanesque style. Norman buildings in England derive from these examples; indeed after 1066 all the most



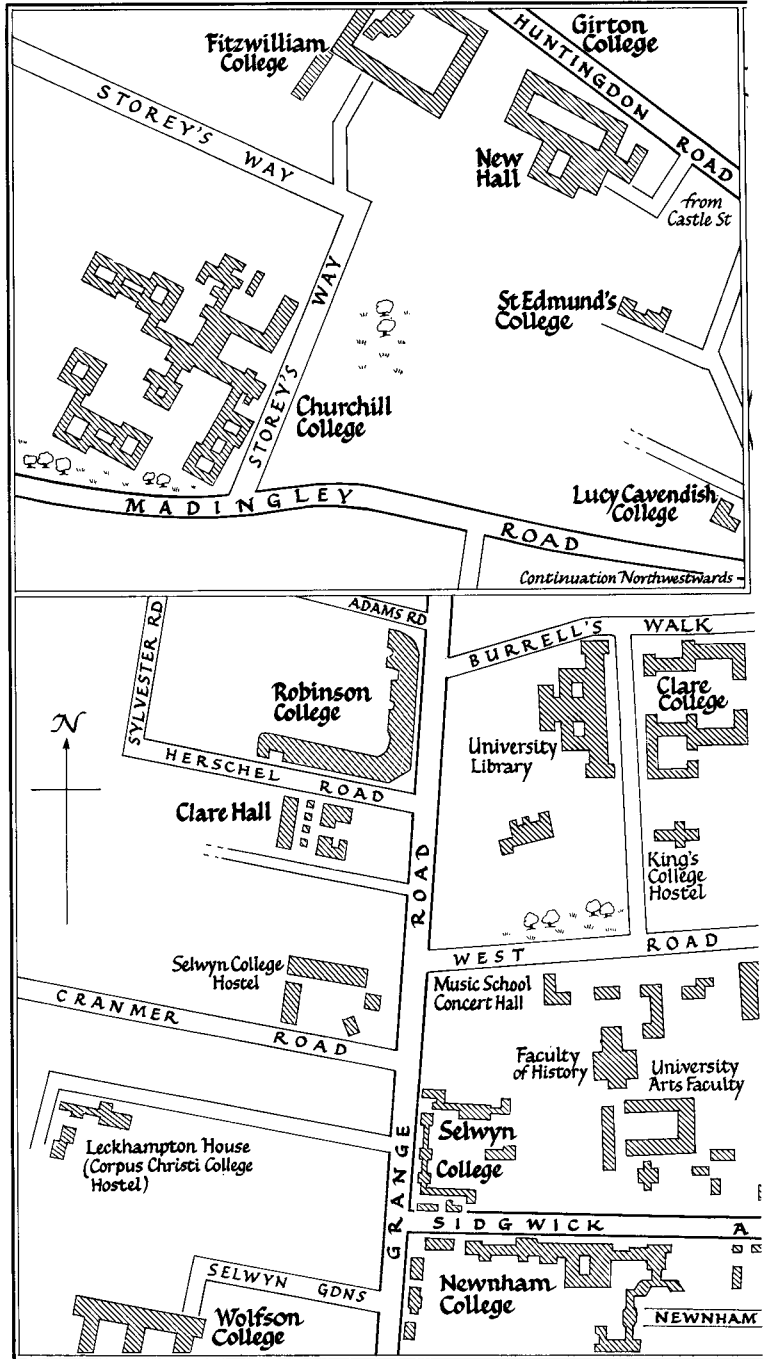
Cambridge architecture

Map 1

- Ⓐ St Bene't's Church
- Ⓑ Church of the Holy Sepulchre (The Round Church)
- Ⓒ St Peter's Church

*Other sites and buildings mentioned*

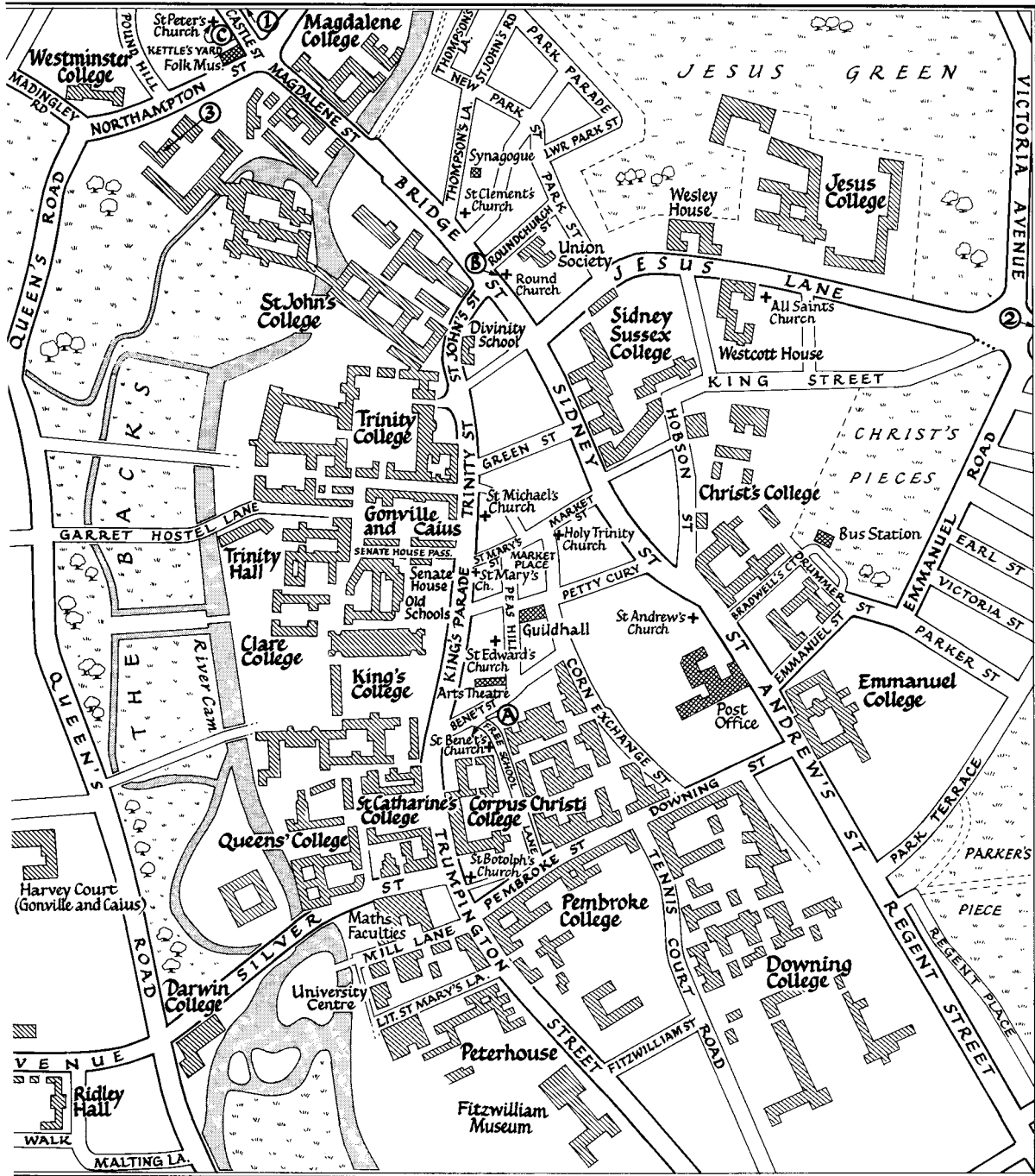
- ① Castle Hill
- ② Barnwell Priory (St Mary Magdalene)
- ③ School of Pythagoras





Cambridge University Press  
0521458552 - Cambridge Architecture: A Concise Guide  
Nicholas Ray  
Excerpt  
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original and impressive Norman buildings are in England rather than in France, perhaps because William brought with him the most inventive and ambitious of his subjects. Durham, with its castle and cathedral at either end of an island citadel, is the clearest indication of the forceful character of its makers; the cathedral is perhaps the most imposing work of architecture of its date anywhere in Europe. The cathedral at Ely, some 20 miles north of Cambridge, begun in 1083 is almost as fine. Unlike Durham's, its nave is not vaulted, but the wall architecture is astonishingly complex and powerful. There are three levels: the arcade, a gallery and high-level windows or clerestories. All have round arches, or rather layers of arches. In the arcade and gallery these are held on stumpy blocks on cylindrical shafts attached to massive composite piers, or (in alternate bays) on the capitals of huge cylindrical columns. The surfaces are bare: only in places do the zig-zag mouldings characteristic of the Norman style appear, but in the middle ages all of the surfaces would have been painted. Ely was a Benedictine foundation, and fragments of the extensive monastery lie to the south of the cathedral and have been incorporated into buildings for the cathedral authorities and the King's School.

#### THE NORMANS IN CAMBRIDGE

In Cambridge, William the Conqueror's sheriff, Picot, destroyed twenty-seven houses on Castle Hill to create a stronghold in 1068. He was travelling south from York, and raised castles at Lincoln and Huntingdon *en route*. As the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments points out, 'what the Roman doubtless had in mind in Claudian times, the Norman achieved a thousand years later, and thus made possible the future prosperity of the borough'. Picot's castle had a mound or motte 13 m high, which remains today as an admirable point from which to survey the city. In 1092 Sheriff Picot established a priory on the site of the present St Giles'. Later, in 1112, it was moved to a site at Barnwell, some two miles east of Cambridge, and housed Augustinian Canons. About twenty years later there was a second religious foundation to the east of Cambridge, St Radegund's, though the church was not constructed there for another quarter century, on the site of what is now Jesus College (p. 33). Beyond Barnwell Priory the Leper Hospital was established, and nearby was Stourbridge Common, the site of a fair held every summer that was nationally important.

The diminutive chapel of St Mary Magdalene is all that remains of the Leper Hospital. Even though it is now set below the noisy dual carriageway leading out from Cambridge to Newmarket, as Rawle suggests, 'there is something about this modest little building that is very alluring'. Apart from early fifteenth-century re-roofing, a mid-nineteenth-century east window and the west windows installed by George Gilbert Scott during a restoration in 1867, very little has altered in eight and a half centuries. The massive flint walls and the south-facing windows and doors are untouched, and this