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978-1-108-00241-7 - Architecture in Cambridge: Examples of Architectural Styles  
from Saxon to Modern Times

David Theodore Fyfe

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

*and*

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## INTRODUCTION

Cambridge can show to a remarkable extent the continuity of the architecture of England from later Saxon times to the present day. We could never expect the buildings of a single town to be quite comprehensive, but possibly no other English centre is so completely equipped: Oxford, which is more representative in some respects, notably for Norman work, has no outstanding example of either Saxon or Early Gothic; and Cambridge is also more representative because Oxford has stone buildings only; but brick was an important building material in England from the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, and in some centres—Cambridge being one of them—it was in use from the later part of the fifteenth century. The very limitations of its constructive and decorative possibilities gave the brick building a value of its own.

### STYLES IN ENGLISH ARCHITECTURE

There is no more common form of question put to the historian of architecture than ‘How are we to know that a building belongs to a particular style or period?’ We must begin with *construction*, as in any consideration of architectural styles we cannot ignore the limitations of particular materials; and what we call a ‘style’ was something which was made by a gradual process, controlled, more or less strictly, by local methods of handling materials. The vertical projecting strips, for example, that we often find in Saxon towers, may have had a remote origin far removed from England, but the constructive method of building these

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strips in Saxon walls is peculiarly native; and we could find similar explanations for many distinctive forms in other countries. In such ways arose much of the expression of architecture as we know it. In England, as in other countries, its various phases have been classified in terms that will be used here in considering English 'styles', or in greater detail, 'periods'.

All these local groupings, however, are governed by the large phases of expression that were common to Europe in general. Thus, in England, the Saxon and Norman buildings erected before the end of the twelfth century were versions of the ROMANESQUE style; and from that time till the middle of the sixteenth century, buildings show versions of the GOTHIC or POINTED style: more broadly still, all of this, from Saxon to the beginnings of Renaissance, can be classified as MEDIAEVAL.

Before any further definitions of particular styles or periods are attempted, the practical fact that a building rises from its *plan* should not be overlooked; and because the plan is the form of a building as laid out on the ground, it is bound to influence the form of the upper structure. Thus, the prevailing form of the large Early Christian church, one of the most important types of Mediaeval building left to us, was based on a particular kind of Roman building known as the 'basilica'; and the motive for the adoption of this form was a practical one, arising from a type of plan that made the construction of roofs simple; while it gave also ample light, ample space and full processional facilities.

Broadly speaking, all building expression in England during the 1100 years that elapsed from the end of the seventh till the end of the eighteenth centuries is classifiable into the three stylistic terms of ROMANESQUE, GOTHIC and RENAISSANCE; of which some more precise definition should now be given.

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## ROMANESQUE

We call buildings ‘Romanesque’—in this country, Saxon and Norman buildings—in the first place, because, where the arch was used for arcades or for openings such as doors and windows, it had the round (i.e. semicircular) form, and this form was a Roman one; in the second place, because, as mentioned already, the larger Early Christian churches adopted an established Roman type of structure; this latter reason being important, because a building may be Romanesque without having arches, and the earliest Christian basilicas in Rome used the lintel, the original Classical medium for spanning all openings. Lastly, there was a direct though more accidental connection between Roman buildings and the earlier Christian churches, because many of these churches used, for their internal (and occasionally external) supports, the valuable marble or porphyry columns of disused Roman temples or secular buildings.

When all is said, however, the use of the *round arch* is the most easily understood sign that a Mediaeval building is Romanesque. The Saxon Romanesque arch was usually built in one ring of stones or bricks, unornamented, like the Roman arch; but the more important arches in Norman Romanesque were built in receding planes of two or more rings, often carved with ornament\* (see Plates II and III and Fig. 1a).

Saxon buildings were never—so far as we know—of great size, and the walling of those left to us is comparatively thin, though better constructed than it appears to be. In Norman masonry we find small *short squared* stones that were used as a facing to a poorer form of construction in the core of the wall, especially in the larger buildings, where walls and

\* Each individual stone on the face of an arch-ring is still called in England by the French term *vousoir*.

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pillars were usually much more massive than would have been necessary if the construction had been better; but though we may be willing to admit that space was thereby wasted, our appreciation of architecture is fortunately not dependent on a sense of its mechanical efficiency, and we

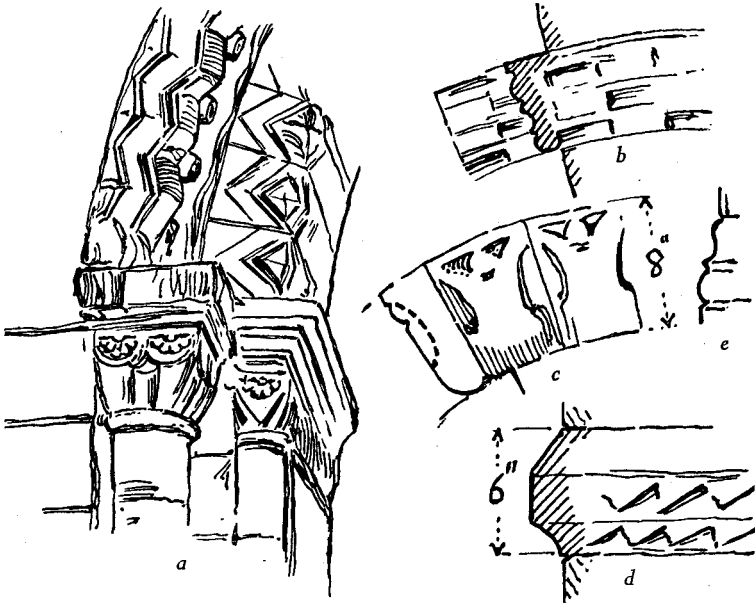


Fig. 1. Details from Sturbridge Chapel, twelfth century.

*a*—chancel arch. *b* and *c*—external arch-rings. *d*—external wall-band. *e*—external shaft-base.

cannot withhold our admiration for the amplitude and grandeur of Norman architecture, with its amazing contrast to the constructive ability of the succeeding period in the middle of the thirteenth century, when vaulting was assembled on a single clustered shaft of Purbeck marble, so slight that it is hard to believe it is not made of iron.

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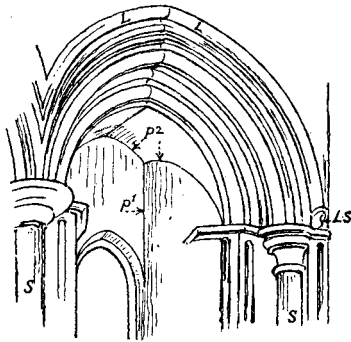
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## GOTHIC

The 'Early English' period of Gothic developed without any sense of effort from Norman Romanesque, the successor of the Saxon Romanesque that prevailed in England from the end of the seventh century till the Norman Conquest, or even later. The beginnings of Gothic can be seen to great advantage at Ely Cathedral, in the late twelfth century work of the upper part of the south-western tower; where the window arches, though pointed, have a blunt form hardly distinguishable from a semi-circle. This form, used with the receding planes that were characteristic of Norman arches, is called 'Transitional', i.e. a bridge between Norman and Early English, and the term is appropriate as marking the beginning of the far-reaching developments of pointed arch construction; but it should be noted that Transitional arches were often round, and when pointed, were not always blunt. The chancel arch of that period in Soham Church, near Cambridge, for example, has a normal pointed form; while it should also be noted that many arches of the Early English period were blunt, and that this characteristic was often intensified by the great mass of deeply undercut mouldings surmounted by the hood-mould,\* composing the arch (see Fig. 2).



*L-Label. LS-Label stop. S-Purbeck Shaft  
P<sup>1</sup>-Penetration of window head and splayed  
jamb  
P<sup>2</sup>-Penetration of arched soffite with jamb  
and head.*

Fig. 2. The 'Abbey Church' (St Andrew the Less). First half of thirteenth century.

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\* Sometimes called a 'label', or 'label-mould'.

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Side by side with this kind of arch we get the more sharply-pointed Early English form that can be seen, for example, in Westminster Abbey.

Gothic architecture is the style of the pointed arch and the pointed vault; in England, passing through three well-defined phases or periods, that it has been found convenient to name 'Early English', 'Decorated', and 'Perpendicular'; these terms being broadly synonymous with the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.\*

Questions that will arise naturally are

(1) *How are we to distinguish these three phases of Gothic architecture in England?*

(2) *When did the Gothic style of building end?*

Some information about both of these questions will be found in the descriptions of Pls. IV to XVII: it can be supplemented as follows:

#### THE DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GOTHIC PHASES IN ENGLAND

It is best to begin with *window* treatments. In EARLY ENGLISH Gothic we find single undivided windows, sometimes of considerable height, but narrow in proportion (Pl. IV); windows of this type being known as 'lancets', sometimes grouped in twos or threes without any loss to their individual character; a treatment that is also found in late Norman work, used with round arches.

\* Just as Norman is broadly synonymous with the twelfth century. The periods, stated more exactly (J. H. Parker's classification has been followed), were: Norman 1100-1175; Transitional 1175-1200; Early English 1200-1275; Decorated (Early) 1275-1325, (Late) 1325-1375; Perpendicular (Early) 1375-1425, (Late) 1425-1525. It will be seen that at least 75 per cent of each particular period, taken as a whole, falls into one century.



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The next development in windows—again based on Norman precedent—was the closer grouping of two or three lancets, with a plain geometrical opening or openings above the group, the whole of these enclosed in a single outer arch; the result being known as ‘plate tracery’, associated with the first half of the thirteenth century, of which an example—difficult to see—can be found in the upper storey of the tower in Jesus College Chapel.

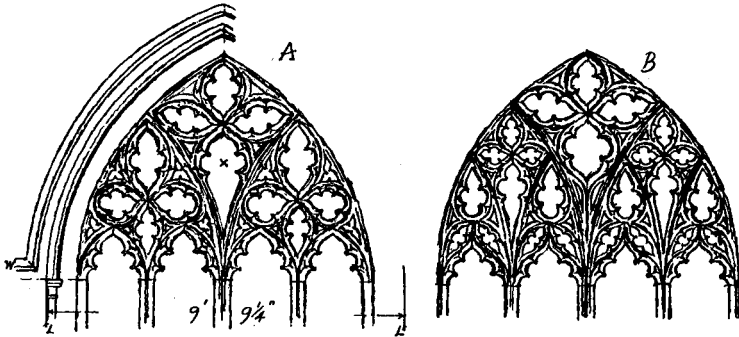


Fig. 3. St Mary the Less, fourteenth century.

A—Third window, north.

B—Fourth window, north.

The next step was the grouping of these assembled units in two or groups of two ‘lights’ surmounted by moulded and cusped<sup>1</sup> tracery, using circular forms and enclosed in moulded outer arches, the division bars of the lights being more elaborate. This result is called ‘geometrical tracery’; it is associated with the summit of English Gothic in the last two quarters of the thirteenth century, seen at its best in the great Cistercian Abbeys, notably Tintern.

The next step was the DECORATED period of the fourteenth century, when windows were often of larger area and were composed of many lights divided by thin mullions (or

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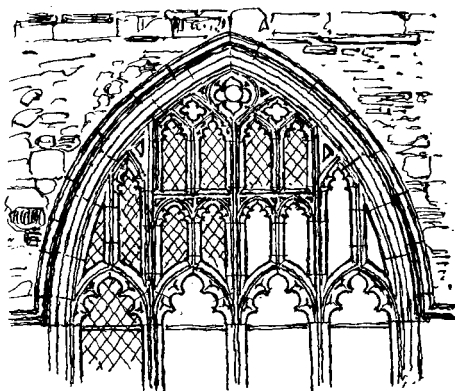
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upright stone division-bars), surmounted by elaborate tracery that gradually developed freedom of line; this later phase of 'flowing tracery' belongs to the second and third quarters of the fourteenth century (see Pl. V and Fig. 3 for examples that border on 'geometrical').

Lastly, we get the PERPENDICULAR phase, introduced at the end of the fourteenth century, when the controlling lines of all the tracery were upright (Fig. 4). At first, the



*Little St. Mary's*

Fig. 4. A.D. 1447.

window-arches that enclosed the tracery were of normal pointed form, but as the phase progressed, they were raised at the springing, giving increased light and becoming more flattened though still pointed; and as each side had to be set out from two curves instead of one, the result was what is known as the 'four-centred' arch (see Figs. 5, 6 and 7). A more unusual form, occasionally used in the fifteenth century, where each side of the arch is a simple though flat curve, can be seen at Cambridge in the aisles of St