

# DISCOVERIES IN ETON COLLEGE CHAPEL

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DURING the years 1959–61 extensive works were carried out at Eton College Chapel under the direction of Sir William Holford. The former timber roof, which had been badly affected by death-watch beetle, was removed and replaced by a ceiling resembling a Gothic vault, but in fact suspended from light metal girders. At the same time the external stonework was extensively repaired.

The whole of the interior of the chapel and much of the exterior were scaffolded, affording a unique opportunity to examine the masonry. It had long been known that there were peculiarities in the construction of the arch of the great east window, whose distorted shape can, indeed, be perceived from the ground. Willis and Clark (who did not, of course, have the opportunity of making a close inspection) suggested that the arch was “constructed out of the blocks prepared for, and perhaps once actually laid in, one of a smaller span”.<sup>1</sup> From the scaffold it could, however, be seen that this was not the case, for whatever the original destination of the blocks in question may have been, it was not an arch. Each voussoir was formed from a piece of stone whose mouldings were not segmental, but straight, resulting in the irregular profile which can be seen from below (Plate XII). The cusped panels which decorate the crown of the arch were also designed for a different situation, for the gaps between them had to be made good by wedge-shaped gussets roughly carved to continue the design (Plate XIII). As it is known from the building-accounts that ironwork for the “upper storey” (*historia superior*) of the great east window was purchased in 1460, the makeshift construction must be attributed to the financial difficulties which beset Eton during the final years of the founder’s reign. The stones themselves were probably shaped for use in the chapel begun in 1441, but pulled down in 1448 before it was completed in order to make way for the present building.

Further traces of this change of plan came to light during the repair of the external stonework. Henry VI’s directions that the building should be faced with “Yorkschiere and Teynton ston medlyd and couched to gyder” are well known, and the distinction between the white Yorkshire limestone and the yellow Oxfordshire oolite is obvious enough. What is not obvious is that much of the white stone is in fact not from the Yorkshire quarries but from those at Caen in Normandy. The difference is not easy to detect, even at close quarters, but the Yorkshire stone has in fact stood the weather better than the softer Caen stone, and nearly all the ashlar renewed in 1959–61 proved on examination to be Caen

<sup>1</sup> *Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, i (1886), p. 426.

stone. What is more, almost every piece of stone cut out of the walls was found to bear a complete suite of mouldings on the inner face. Most of these mouldings were destroyed in the course of the work, but a number were rescued by the writer, and full-size drawings of them made by Mr. Thomas Rayson, F.R.I.B.A., have been deposited at the National Buildings Record. It is natural to suppose that they too were originally destined for (and were perhaps actually incorporated in) the first chapel whose construction was abandoned in 1448. The Caen quarries, were, of course, situated in English-occupied Normandy, and the supply of stone depended on the maintenance of English authority there. By 1448 the military situation was such that no further stone was forthcoming from this source, and by 1449 the quarries were in French hands. It follows, therefore, that the Caen stone used at Eton must have been procured before the new chapel was begun in 1449, and it can hardly be doubted that the mouldings were cut for use in its predecessor. The fact that several of them are of a decidedly more elaborate character than those employed in the existing building suggests that the change of plan in 1448–9 was accompanied by a change to a less elaborate architectural style.<sup>2</sup>

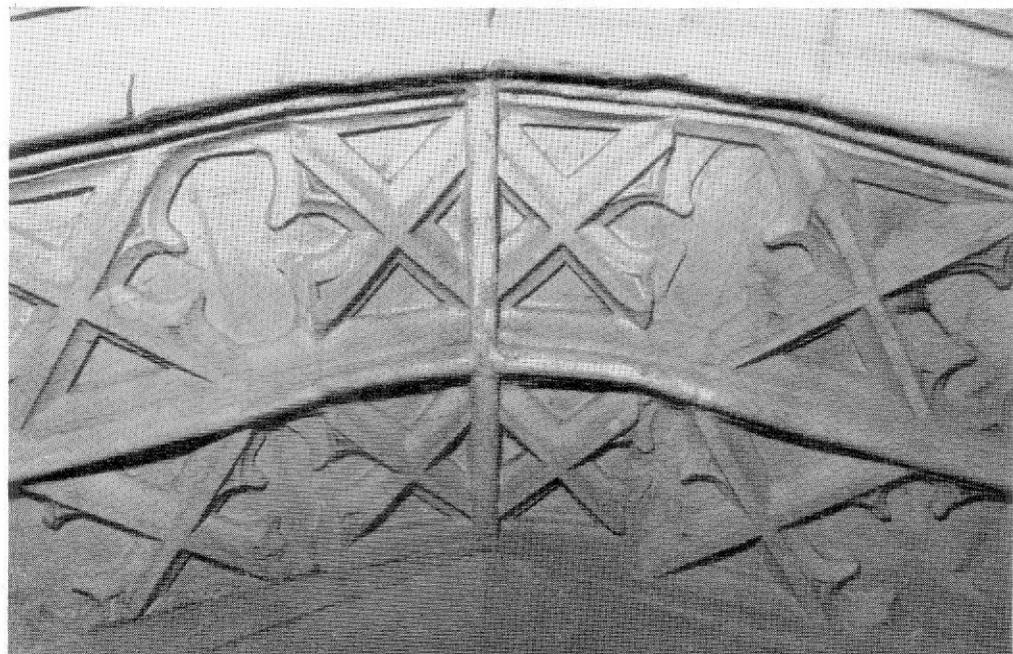
Many masons' marks were visible from the internal scaffolding. These were recorded by Mr. R. H. C. Davis, who has kindly allowed a copy of his notes on them to be deposited in the National Buildings Record.

<sup>2</sup> The architectural characteristics of the two chapels are discussed at greater length in chapter V of *The History of the King's Works*, ed. Colvin, i (1963).



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PLATE XII. Eton College Chapel. East window. North side of top centre.



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PLATE XIII. Eton College Chapel. East window. Top centre panel.