

# Ely Cathedral: The Ship of the Fens

Ely Cathedral was originally situated on a low island in the middle of the Fens, a region of marshland in eastern England lying inland of the Wash. Because of the flatness of the surrounding land the cathedral could be seen from great distances, appearing as the “Ship of the Fens.” The marshes were drained in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, but it is still easy to imagine the building floating above the waters: the embodiment of Auden’s image of the English cathedrals:

Luxury liners laden with souls,  
Holding to the east their hulls of stone.  
(Auden, 1936, p 43; also McDiarmid, 1978, p 292)

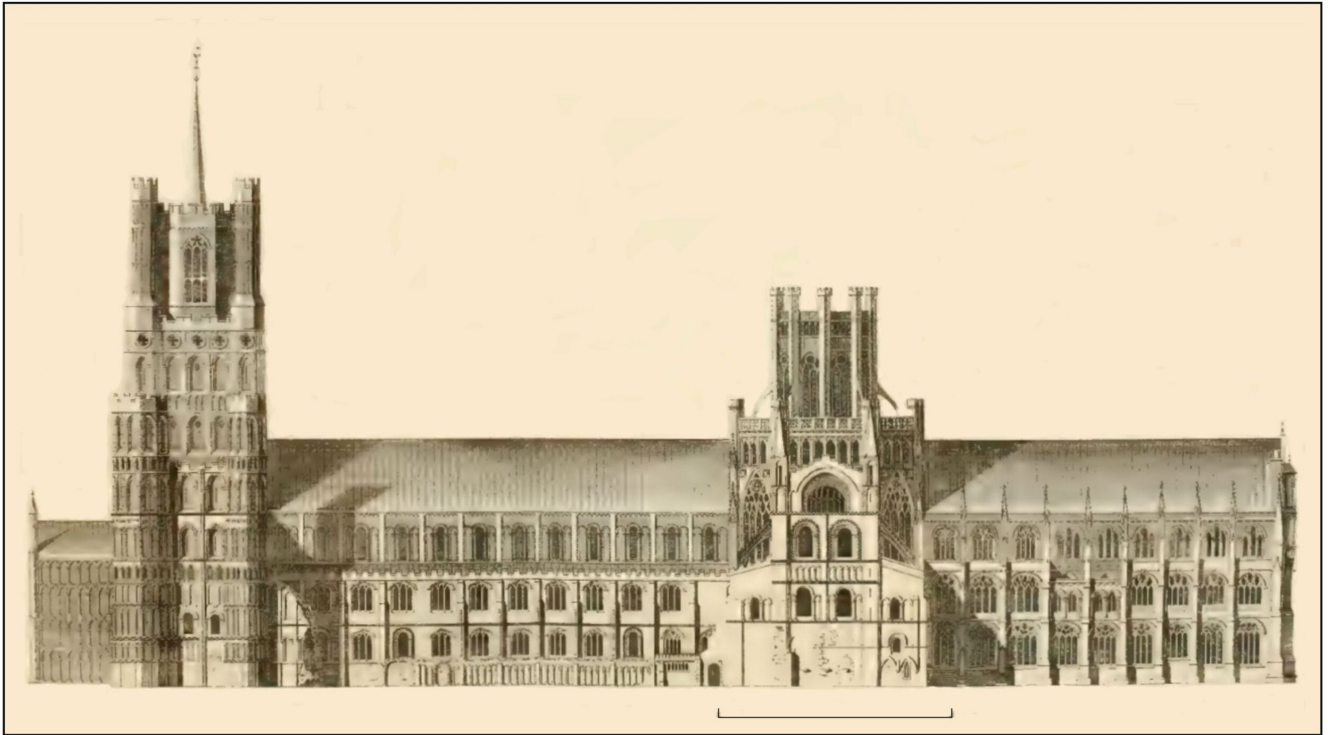
## The Present Cathedral

The following illustration shows the cathedral as viewed from the southeast.

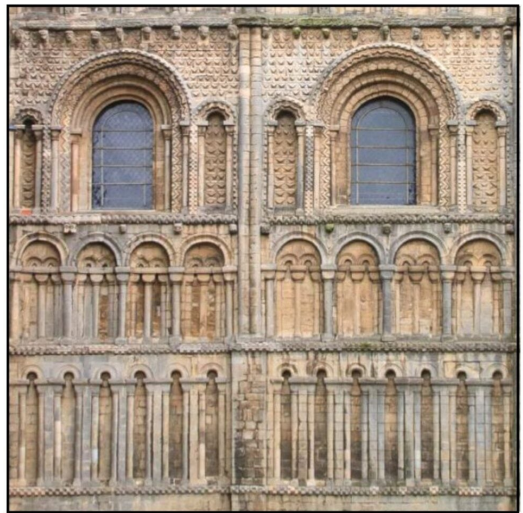
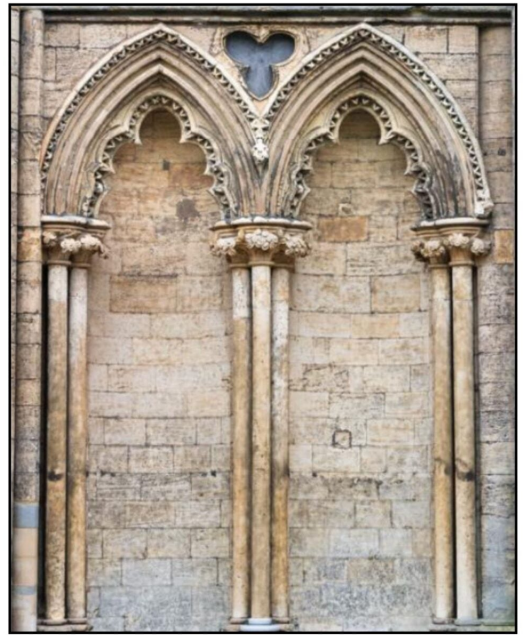
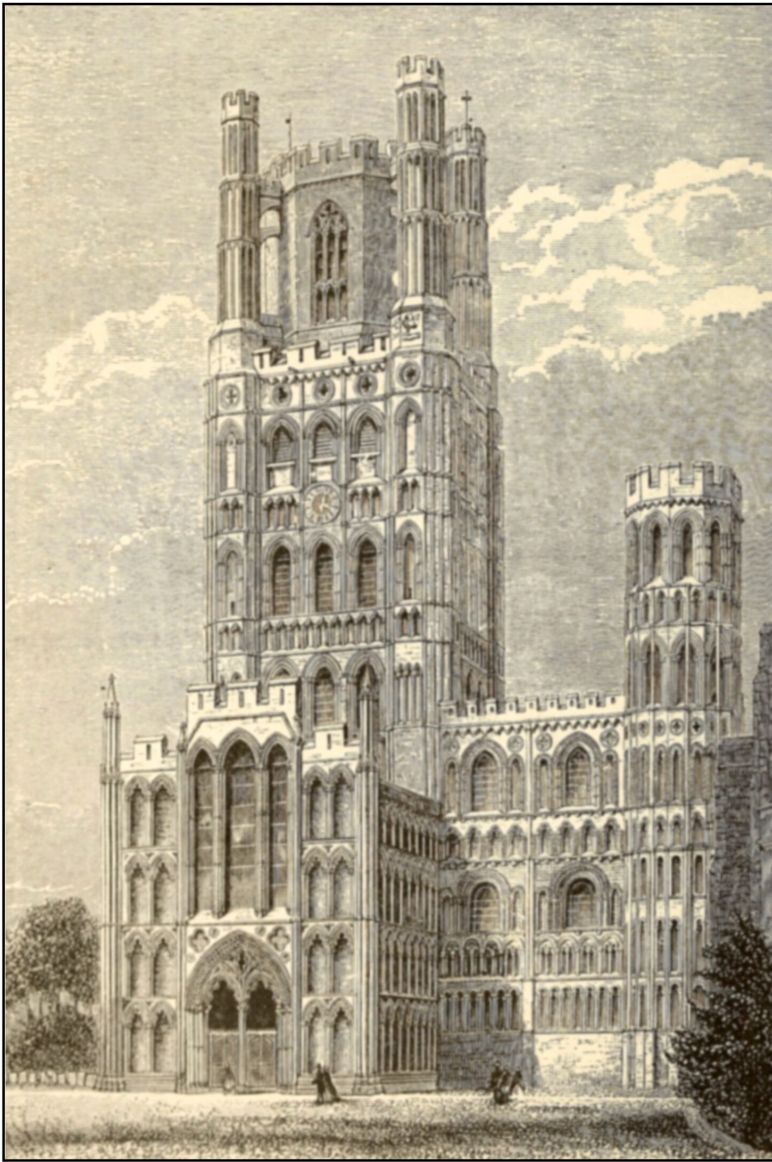


The present building was begun in 1083 by the Normans soon after their conquest of England. They brought with them a style of architecture known as “Romanesque” on the continent but considered “Norman” in England. The style was characterized by large weight-bearing columns surmounted by semi-circular arches. As the years passed, additions, collapses and renovations to the original building left it with a blend of styles that still somehow achieve harmony rather than incoherence.

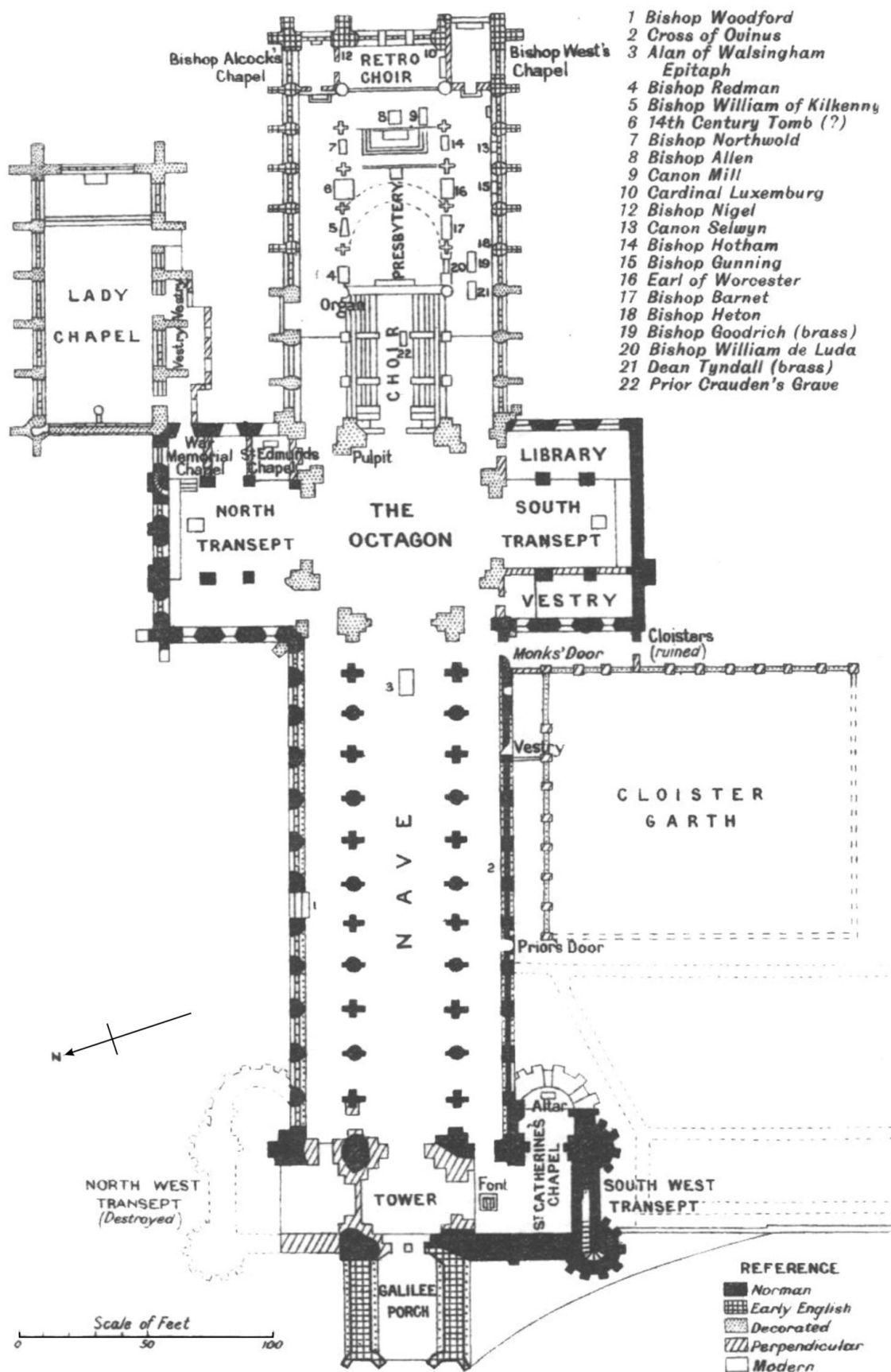
The following is the view of the cathedral from the south from Bentham (1771, Plate 42, scale 100 ft):



The West end of the cathedral shows its mixture of styles. The following illustration shows a engraving from King (1881, plate XII) as well as two modern photographs showing the Gothic arches on the Galilee Porch and the Norman arches on the south west transepts



The following is a floor plan of the cathedral:



The dashed semicircular lines in the Presbytery show the eastern extent of the original Norman cathedral.

## **Saxon Beginnings**

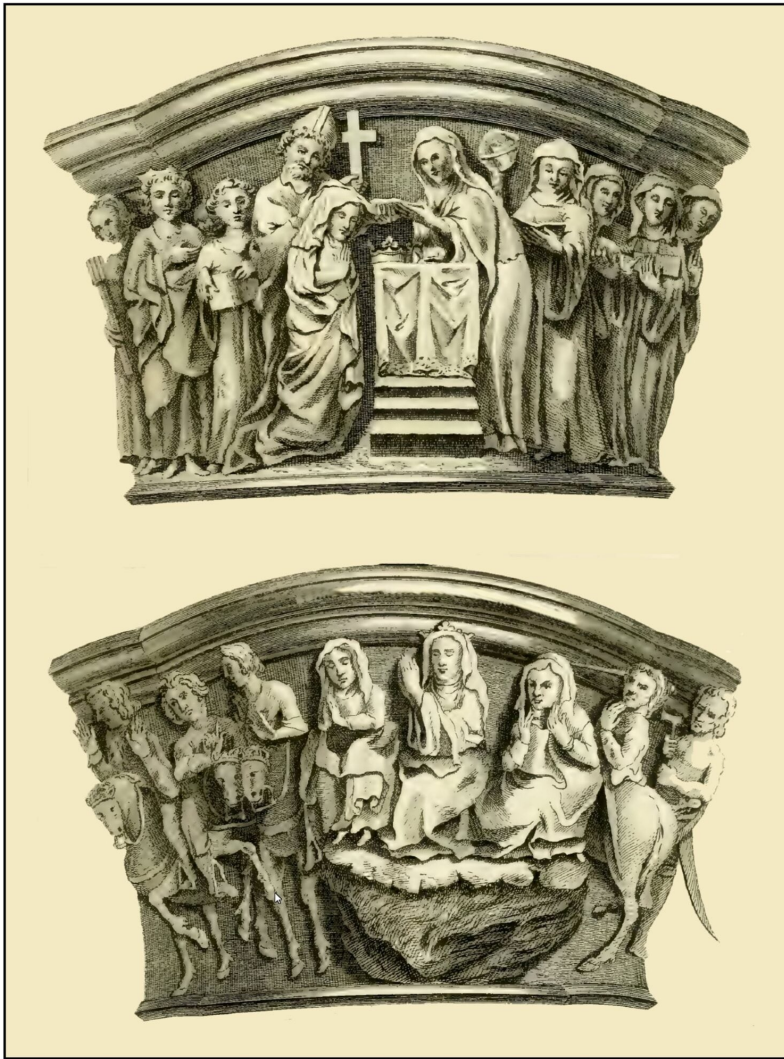
The region of England northeast of London – comprising the present counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex – was settled by Angles and Saxons in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE. Multiple kingdoms were set up on the island of Britain: East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, and Kent. Augustine of Canterbury arrived in England in 597 CE; and the various Saxon kingdoms in England soon converted to Christianity.

Anna, the king of East Anglia (reigned 636-654 CE), a devout Christian, probably reigned in Exning – just east of present-day Cambridge. A large ancient earthen wall, known today as the Devil's Dyke, stretching from the southern end of the Fens to the River Stour, appears to have been built as a defense against the Mercian kingdom to the west. The following map shows the kingdom of East Anglia at the time of Anna:



Anna's daughter Æthelthryth (or Etheldreda) was born in 636 CE (Keynes, 2003). In 652, at the age of 16, she was married to Tondberct, a prince who ruled over part of the Fens. This was a political marriage, designed to extend Anna's domain, and Æthelthryth insisted on maintaining her virginity. As a wedding gift she was given the Isle of Ely in the Fens. The name "Ely" probable comes from the Old English *elge* meaning "region of eels." Tonberct died in 655, and Æthelthryth retired to live in Ely.

After Anna died fighting against the Mercians at the battle of Bulcamp in 654, Æthelthryth was married in 660 for a second time to Ecgfrith, a 16-year-old prince of Northumbria. Once again, she insisted on maintaining her virginity. In 670, she formally took the veil as a nun and lived in the double monastery (for both monks and nuns) at Coldingham, in what is now southeast Scotland. In 672, in need of an heir, Ecgfrith decided that he wished to consummate his marriage, and sent armed men to apprehend his wife. She and her attendants fled to Ely; Ecgfrith's men were prevented from capturing her by the tidal waters of the Fens. Æthelthryth then founded a new monastery at Ely, where she presided as abbess until her death in 679. The following illustration shows two of the capitals on the octagon pillars in Ely cathedral (from Bentham, 1771, plates 9 and 10): Æthelthryth's taking of the veil, and her miraculous salvation by the rising waters of the Fens. On the right is a 1960 statue of Æthelthryth by Phillip Turner.



Little is known of the abbey at Ely after its founding. In 869 the Vikings conquered the kingdom of East Anglia and much of Northumbria and Mercia. Alfred the Great (849-899) ultimately prevented the Vikings from further expansion, but allowed the continuation of Danelaw in the eastern parts of England from 886 to 1066. The original abbey of Æthelthryth may have been destroyed or may have simply fallen into disuse during the early Viking period. However, Ely Abbey was re-founded toward the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century as a monastery for monks alone. As his boat approached Ely, King Cnut (reign 1016-1035) was impressed by the music of the monks and wrote a poem, a fragment (perhaps the refrain) of which survives (Parker, 2018):

Merie sungen ðe muneches binnen Ely

ðā Cnut ching reu ðer by.  
Roweþ cnites noer the lant  
and here we þes muneches sæng.

[Sweetly sang the monks in Ely  
When Cnut the king rowed by;  
'Row, men, nearer to the land  
So we can hear the friars' song.']

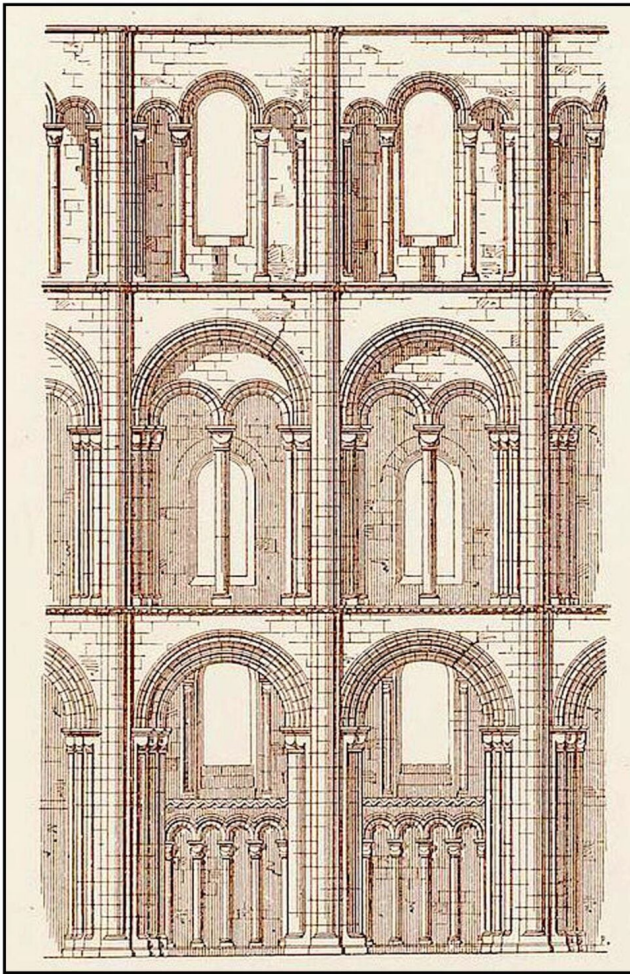
## **The Norman Cathedral**

Under the direction of Abbot Simeon, the Normans initiated the construction of a large abbey church in Ely in 1083. The remains of Saint Æthelthryth were moved from the old church to the new in 1106. Her marble tomb was placed in a shrine bedecked by gold and jewels behind the high altar. The building was granted cathedral status by Henry I 1109. The nave, central tower and transepts were completed by about 1140, and the western transepts and tower were finally finished by about 1190.

The nave is 72 meters long and 22 meters high. There are three levels: the arcade, gallery (or tribune) and clerestory, the last containing large windows for light (clerestory means "clear storey"). The proportions for these levels are 6:5:4 (Clifton-Taylor, 1986, p 36). The arcades of the gallery are divided into two and those of the clerestory into three. The columns alternate between piers with multiple shafts and piers with large cylindrical columns, providing a gentle visual rhythm. The aisles on either side of the main nave are each one half the width of the nave (Fernie, 2003). The roof was made of the same timbers that were used to provide the scaffolding when constructing the nave.

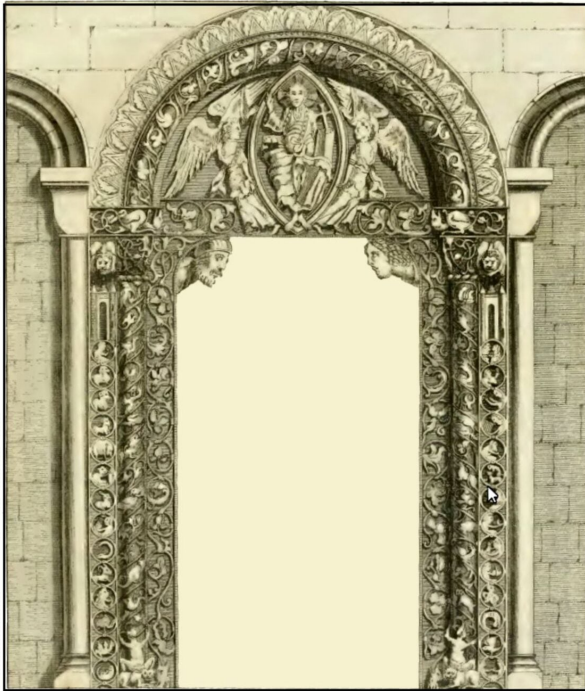
The following illustration shows on the left a diagram of the nave (Dehio & Bezold, 1887, plate 88), On the right is a modern photograph that shows its three levels, and at the

bottom a photograph that illustrates the alternation of the main columns.



The monk's door and the prior's door from the cloisters into the nave were likely built and decorated in the 1130s. Both

are intricately sculpted. The prior's door (shown below in a plate from Bentham, 1771, and in a modern photograph) is surmounted by a tympanum containing Christ in Majesty surrounded by two angels. Though far less accomplished than the Romanesque sculptures in France, it has its own charm.



## The Gothic Cathedral

The Galilee Porch was added to the west front of the cathedral in the first two decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. As we have already noted the style is early Gothic: the blind arcades decorating the façade have pointed arches, narrow columns, and trefoil openings.

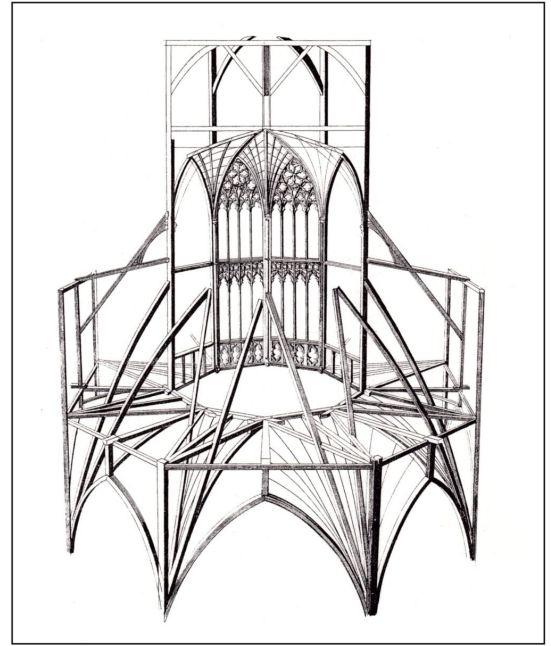
A little later, the east end of the Cathedral was extended to form a Presbytery: a space for the monks to worship separate from the choir and the nave. This extension in a richly decorated Gothic style was completed in 1252 (Maddison, 2003). The large columns of the arcade are divided into multiple smaller columns and the pointed arches are geometrically ornamented. The tribune gallery has twin trefoiled openings beneath a large pointed arch. The clerestory has lancet windows with an inner row of cinquefoil arches. The stone

vault is supported by tierceron ribs.

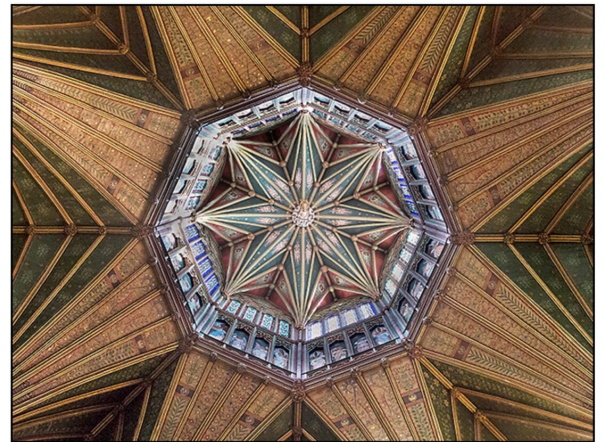
The following illustration shows a view of the choir and presbytery toward the east by John Eaton (2016) surrounded by two views of the north wall, the left by Arthur de Smet (1972) and the right from Broughton (2008):



In 1321, work began on a large separate Lady Chapel north of the choir and presbytery. Constructing the foundations for this new building led to the central section of the cathedral being undermined by water. The central bell tower of the cathedral collapsed in 1322, damaging parts of the north transept and the choir. Under the direction of Alan of Walsingham a new octagonal tower was built, with the stonework completed by 1328 (Maddison, 2003). The crowning glory of the tower was a magnificent “lantern” built of timber that allowed light to descend into the cathedral (completed in about 1340). The following illustration shows the octagon viewed from the western tower and a diagram of the carpentry underlying the lantern from Hewett (1974, plate 76):



The following illustration shows views of the lantern from the interior of the cathedral:

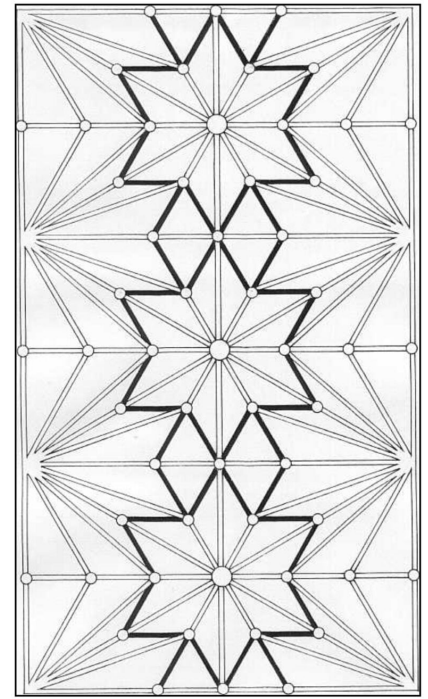


Because of the lantern, Ely cathedral provides a marvelous

interplay of light and shadow. Frederick Evans took many photographs in 1897 and published these in *Camera Work* in 1903 (Lyden, 2020). Two of his images are below:



After the stonework of the octagon was completed Bishop Hotham and Akan of Walsingham then returned to complete the lady chapel – a wonder of Decorated English Gothic. The vault is supported by interconnecting ribs forming star shapes (*lierne*, from French *lier*, to tie, or stellar vaulting). This approach supports a wider vault than the simple tierceron ribbing. The large windows are supported by thin vertical columns that extend outward to provide a buttressing effect. The following illustration shows a photograph of the chapel and a diagram of the *lierne* vaulting.



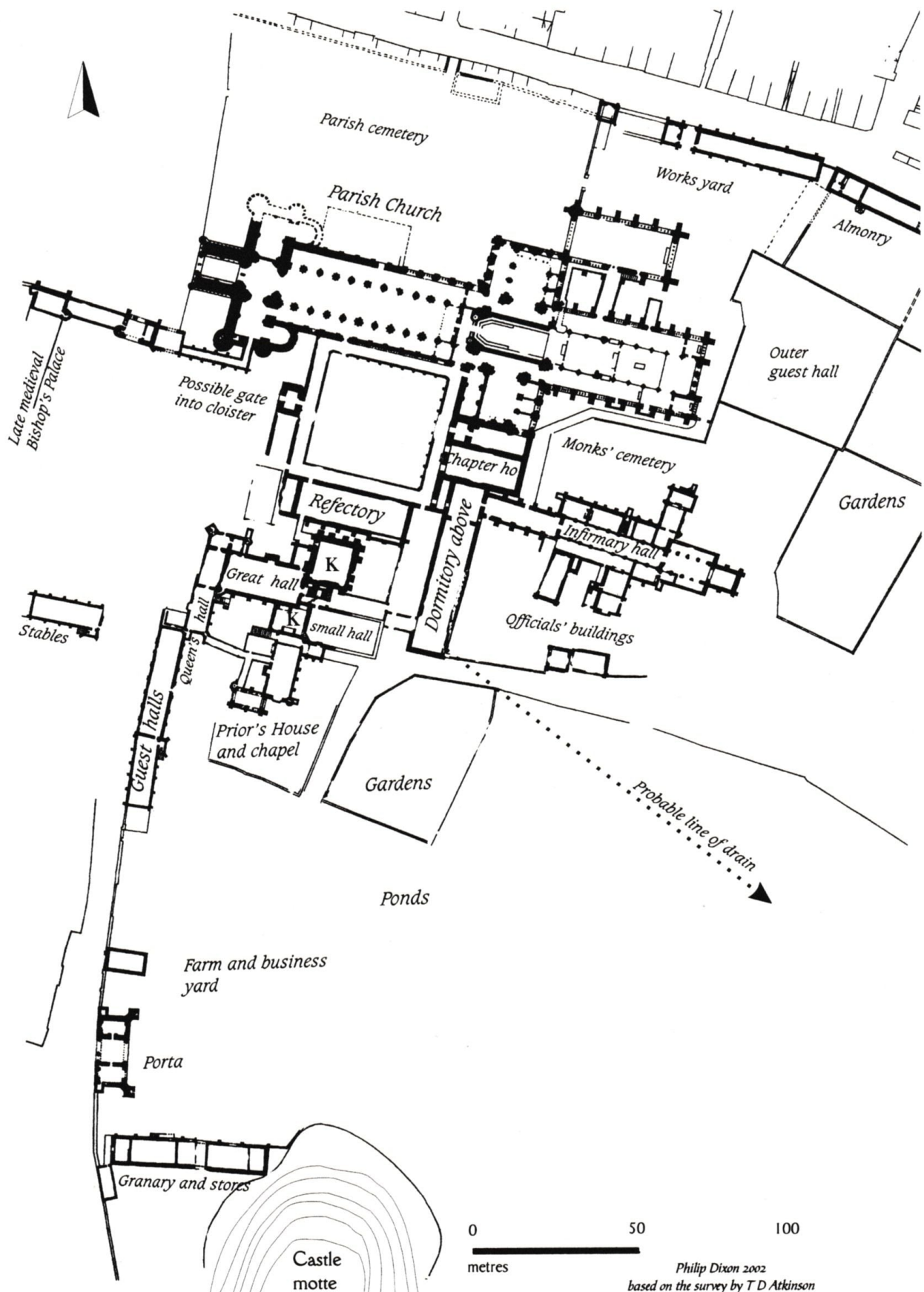
The chapel was completed in the 1340s. The lower sections of the walls are decorated with vegetal patterns, giving the visitor a sense of being in a garden (Broughton, 2008). The present chapel is very different from the way it was in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries. At that time, numerous painted sculptures existed in the niches, and the windows were made of stained glass.

## **The Monastery**

Ely Cathedral, like Canterbury, Durham, and Norwich, was a monastic cathedral. The monks at these cathedrals followed the Benedictine order. The bishop of a monastic cathedral was the titular abbot of the monastery, but the monks were essentially led by the prior. Although most of the old cathedrals in England were monastic, some cathedrals, such as Lincoln and Hereford were secular and had no associated monastery.

The monastery (or priory) at Ely was prosperous. Many of the medieval buildings of the monastery still stand. Some are used by King's Ely School. The following plan shows the probable layout of the monastery (Dixon, 2003). The castle motte is the

site of a fortress in Norman times.



## The Reformation

As the years wore on the monastery at Ely became rich. The sale of indulgences brought in much money. Death acted like the church's tax-collector, as those in need of heaven left their land and possessions to the church rather than to their children. Pilgrims to the shrine of Æthelthryth/Etheldreda were expected to make significant donations to the church. Æthelthryth was also called Saint Audrey. Ribbons bought at her shrine were called "St Audrey's lace," whence comes the word "tawdry" for overpriced finery. Some Bishops at Ely made special ornate chapels for themselves: Bishop Alcock (1486-1500) at the end of the north aisle and Bishop West (1515-33) at the end of the south aisle. It was easy to accuse the church of luxury and greed.

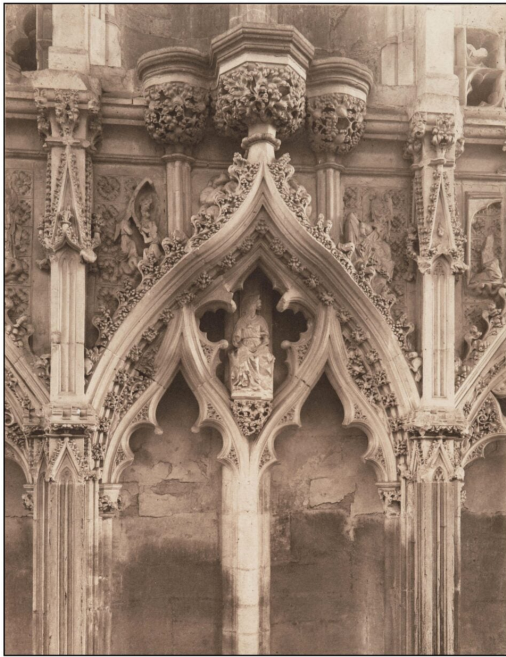
As the 16<sup>th</sup> Century progressed, Henry VIII came to need both a new wife and a source of gold. In 1533 Henry appointed Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer allowed him to marry Anne Boleyn. In 1534, Thomas Cromwell, the king's chancellor, arranged for Parliament to pass the Act of Supremacy declaring the king to be the head of the English Church. In 1537, Cromwell convened a synod of British bishops who produce a book *The Institution of the Christian Man*, espousing many of the principles proposed by Martin Luther. In 1539 Parliament passed a bill to allow the Dissolution of the Monasteries. All of the small monasteries were to be closed, their monks let go, and their assets expropriated by the king. The monasteries associated with the cathedrals were also to be closed, although some of their monks could remain as officers in the newly secularized cathedrals.

On 18 November, 1539, Prior Robert Seward and 23 other monks signed a deed of surrender of the monastery of Ely to Henry VIII (Duffy, 2020, pp 31-45). There was not much else they could do. The abbots of Gastonbury and Reading had been executed on November 13 for refusing to dissolve their houses.

The monastery and cathedral were held at the pleasure of the monarch and its riches were duly plundered. In 1541 the cathedral was given a royal charter as a secular cathedral. The church which had been devoted to Saint Etheldreda and Saint Peter, was renamed "The Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Ely."

The bishop during this time was Thomas Goodrich, a colleague of Thomas Cranmer. Trained in theology at Cambridge University, he was appointed Bishop of Ely in 1534 and remained bishop until his death in 1554. After the dissolution of the monastery, he ordered the destruction of the shrine of Ethelreda, the defacement of the statues in the Lady Chapel, and the removal of the statues in the chapels of Bishop's Alcock and West. Every one of the 147 statues of Mary and the other saints in the Lady Chapel was beheaded. Goodrich continued as bishop after the death of Henry in 1547; during the reign of Edward VI (1547-53), he was also appointed Lord Chancellor (1552). He died in 1554, before Mary (reign 1553-8) had time to pursue her vengeance.

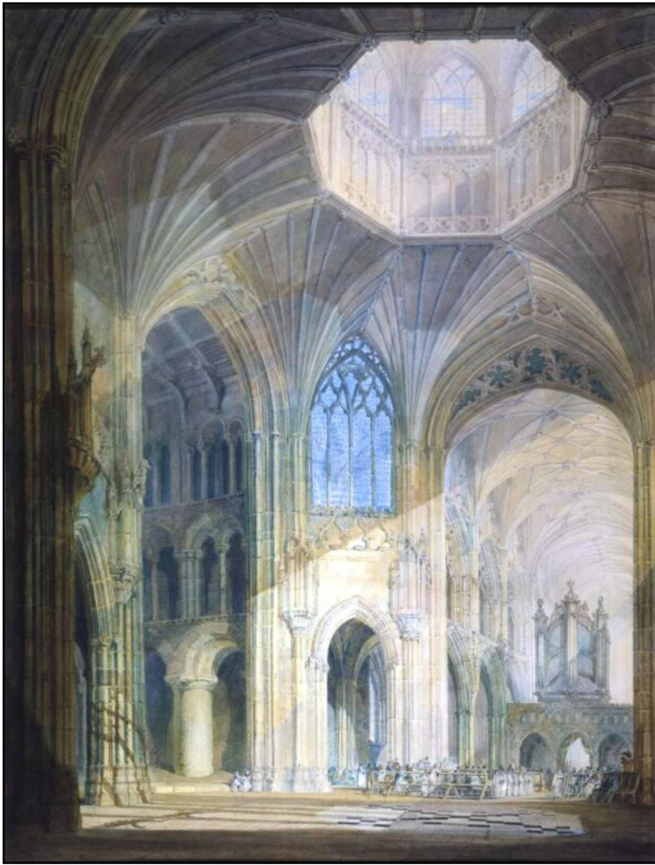
The following illustration shows two photographs from the 1890s by Frederick Evans showing the mutilation of the statues in the Lady Chapel and the empty plinths on the gateway to Bishop West's chapel. Also shown is the memorial brass to Thomas Goodrich, located on the floor of the south presbytery. The bishop holds in his right hand both a bible and the seal of England, emblematic of his chancellorship.



After the Reformation the cathedrals of England fell into disrepair. The architecture was contemptuously referred to as “Gothic” or barbaric (see Clifton-Taylor, 1986, pp 9-12). In 1699, the north west transept of Ely Cathedral collapsed (Fernie, 2003, p 96). There was no money to rebuild:

To this day, Ely looks like the wounded veteran of some forgotten war. (Jenkins, 2016, pp 91-2)

Watercolors by J. M. W. Turner from the 1790s show the cathedral octagon and the dilapidated Galilee Porch.



## Repair

The cathedral was extensively restored during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: The roof of the nave was retimbered and painted; the windows were provided with stained glass; the choir was provided with new stalls and a beautifully carved choir screen; the high altar received an intricate reredos (from French *arere*, behind, *dos*, back).

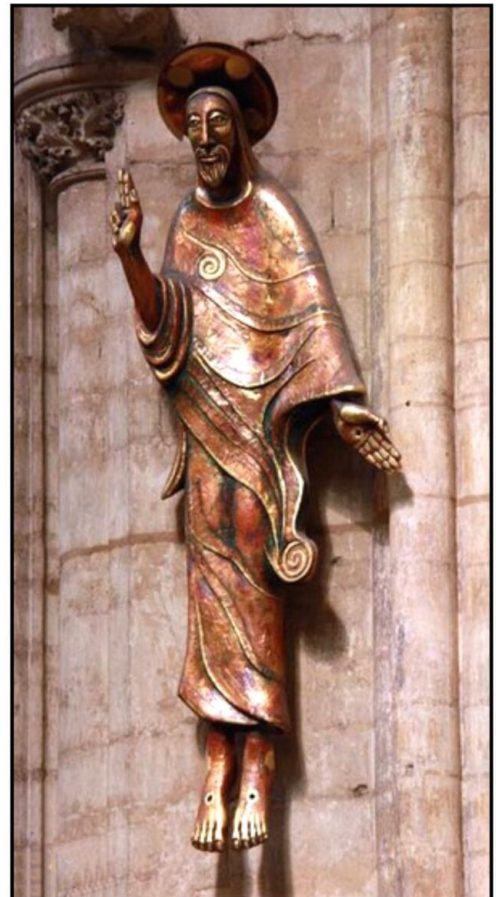
The following illustration shows some of the carvings above the choir stalls. These depict episodes in the life of Jesus: the supper at Emmaus, the appearance of the risen Jesus to Thomas, and the ascension:



## Ely in the Present

Most people in England no longer attend church, and those who believe that there is a God are equaled by those who believe that there is not. What should be the place of the church in modern society?

Intriguing to me are the modern statues that now adorn the cathedral. Below are illustrations of four of these works. Clockwise from the upper left are the Virgin Mary in the Lady Chapel urging us to exultation by David Wynne (2000), Christ and Mary Magdalene wondering at the mystery of the resurrection by David Wynne (1967), Christ in Majesty above the pulpit by Peter Ball (2000), and half-life-size statues by Sean Henry on the empty plinths in Bishop West's chapel, part of an installation entitled *Am I My Brothers Keeper?* in 2024.



An optimistic view of the future is from Nicholas Orme (2017, p 262):

The most astonishing feature of cathedral history, when one has journeyed through its seventeen hundred years, is its immense and varied creativity. If we take buildings, there is the evolving history of their plans and construction, the sourcing of the materials, the labours of craftsmen, the elaboration of the decoration, and the successive layers of repair and restoration. There is the worship, complex in its calendar, its liturgical texts, the ways in which it is done, and the application of the worship to God, saints, or popular, needs. There is the vast range of arts involved in producing worship and its setting: sculpture, painting, stained glass, metalwork, fabrics, singing, instrumental music, and chorography. There is the written and spoken word in prayer- and hymn-books, preaching, inscriptions, archives, libraries, guide-books, and service-sheets.

A more restrained understanding of what it is like to visit a church when faith has passed away can be found in a 1954 poem by Philip Larkin entitled *Church Going*, the last verse of which reads:

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

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