Riches not measured in coin

The Cathedral of St Mary and St Ethelbert, Hereford

This year marks the 700th anniversary of the canonisation of Thomas Cantilupe, Bishop of Hereford. **John Goodall** looks at the story of this building and the way it was shaped by a remarkable figure

Photographs by Paul Highnam

AT about 6.30pm on April 17, 1786, the west end of Hereford Cathedral collapsed under the weight of its tower. The disaster had seemingly been long expected and no one even troubled to interrupt a dinner party of cathedral clergy with the news. It took three further days for the *Hereford Journal* to report the collapse of 'that beautiful and magnificent structure'. It judged that: 'The ruins, though awful, afford a pleasing view, especially to behold the statues of kings and bishops resting one upon the other.'

This disaster marked a turning point in the story of the cathedral, one of the most ancient church institutions to survive in Britain. In its aftermath, there began a prolonged sequence of restoration campaigns, which transformed the appearance of the building. Before that, the fabric of a church developed from the early 12th century had remained remarkably intact. That medieval building, however, itself replaced at least ➤

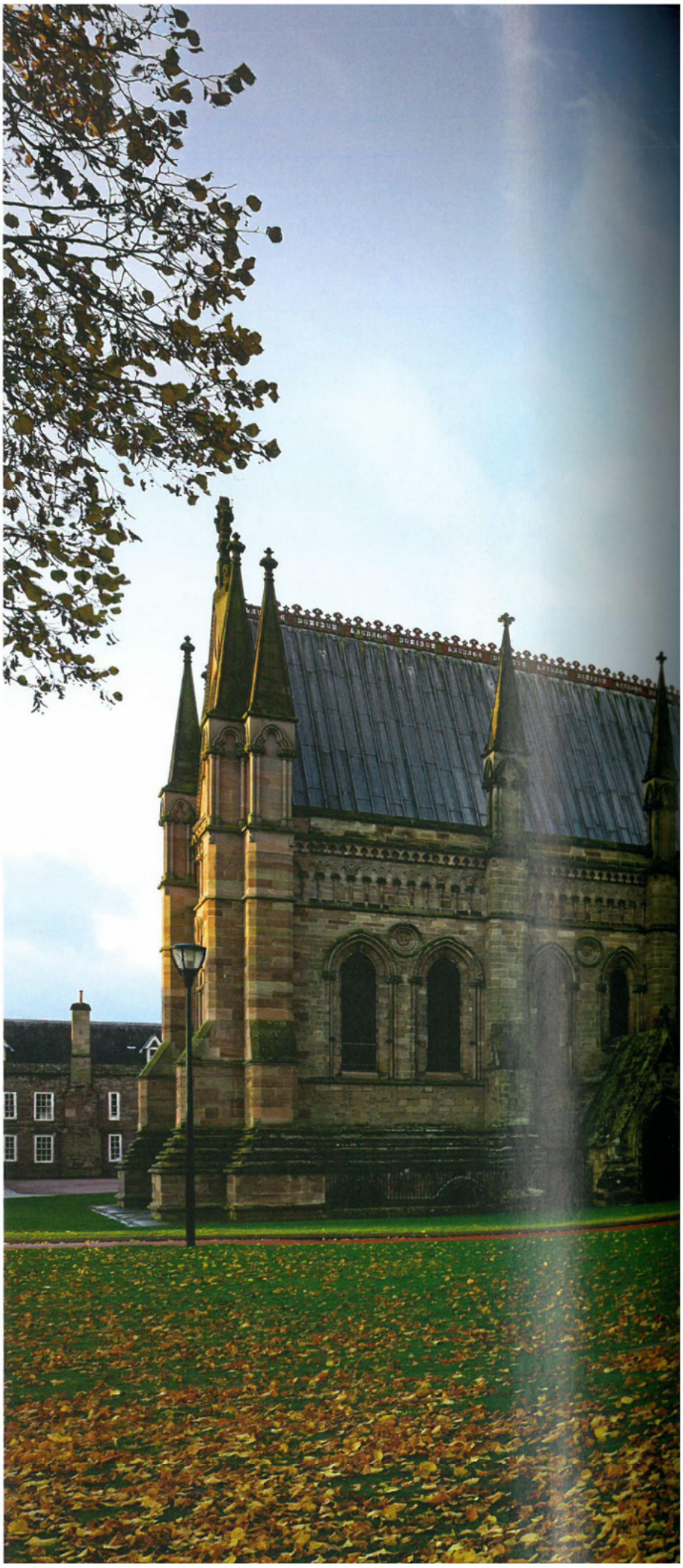
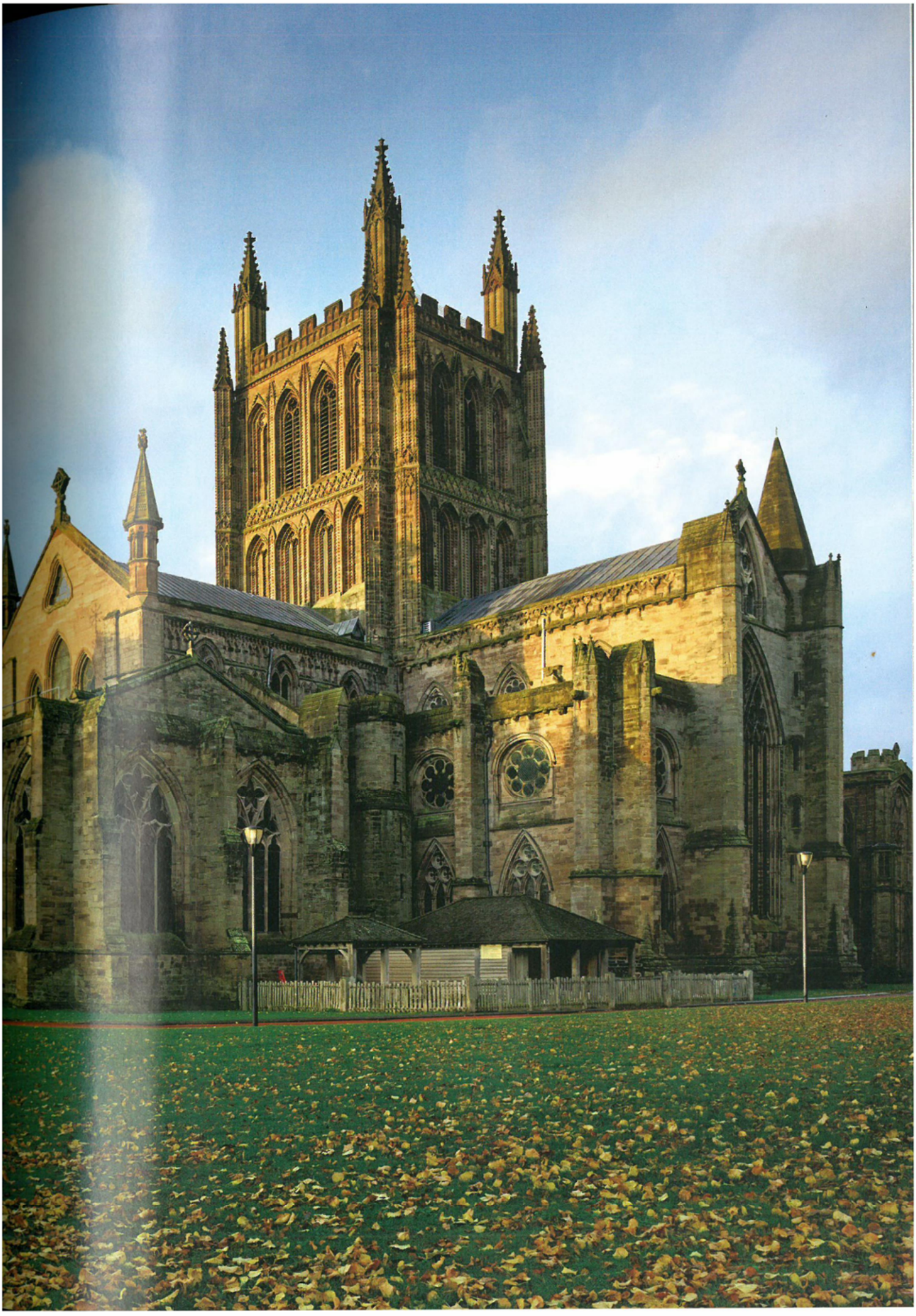


Fig 1: **The cathedral from the north-east. The Westminster-inspired north transept is to the right and the Lady Chapel to the left**



two predecessors created since the foundation of the see, an event that is traditionally ascribed to the year 676.

Commanding a crossing on a bend in the River Wye, Hereford came into being as an English frontier town on the border of the Welsh kingdoms. The settlement may have been first fortified by King Offa of Mercia in the late 8th century, in conjunction with his celebrated dyke demarcating the border of his kingdom. Certainly, it was in this period that the cathedral was supplied with its first patron saint, King Ethelbert of East Anglia, who was reputedly beheaded nearby on the orders of Offa's queen, Cwenthryth.

> ‘Hereford was never a monastery, but was served by a community of priests, a reflection of its relative poverty’

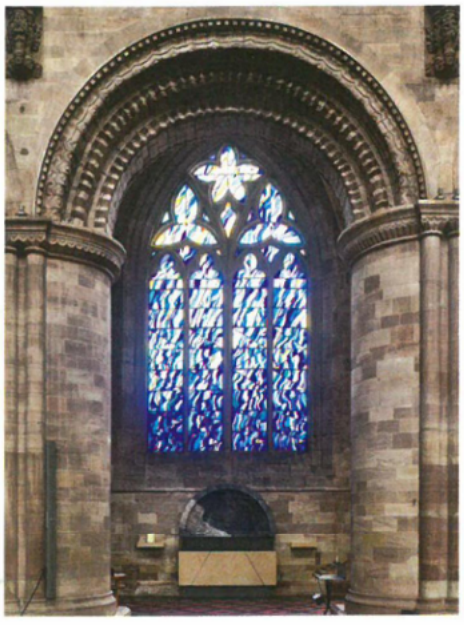
The precise location of the early cathedral remains a matter of speculation. It was apparently grandly rebuilt between about 1020 and 1040 by the long-serving Bishop Athelstan and is described as being burned and looted by an Anglo-Welsh force, together with the town, in 1055. Three of the cathedral clergy died defending the doors of the church. Several more were killed in battle, including the then bishop, in a revenge attack on the Welsh the following year.

Unlike the majority of great English church foundations during the Anglo-Saxon period, Hereford was never constituted as a monastery, but was served by a community of priests. That may be a reflection of its relative institutional poverty; a monastic community required a considerable endowment.

In 1066, Hereford passed into the control of one of William the Conqueror's most trusted henchmen, William FitzOsbern, who worked with extraordinary speed to secure the Welsh border (an area already settled by Normans at the invitation of Edward the Confessor). By August 1067, within a year of the Battle of Hastings, FitzOsbern had established a castle on the banks of the Wye east of the cathedral and extended the town with a new market.

The first post-Conquest Bishop of Hereford was appointed in 1071. Robert was from Lotharingia (the area of northern Europe that now includes Belgium and the Netherlands) and was an active figure in the movement of church reform that was sweeping western Christendom. As a consequence, he regularised the cathedral community as a body of 28 priests, called canons, who ➤

Fig 2 facing page: **The nave and choir.** *Fig 3 above:* **The north transept with the tomb and modern shrine cover of Thomas Cantilupe.** *Fig 4 below:* **The SAS Memorial in the nave.** *Fig 5 right:* **Peter of Aigueblanche's tomb**



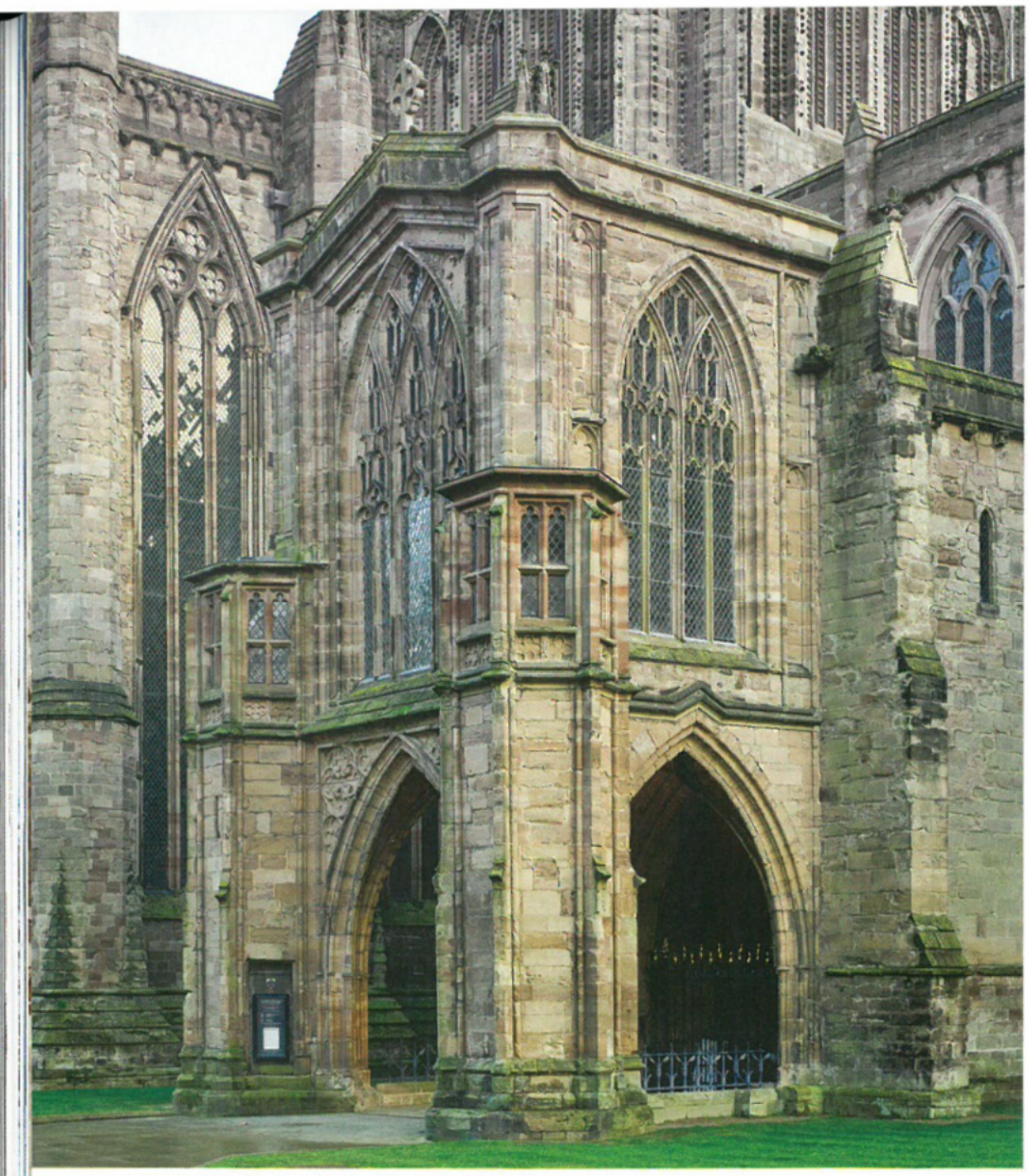


Fig 6 left: **The north porch, with its oversailing chapel built by Bishop Booth (ruled 1516–35).** *Fig 7 right:* **A view of the Lady Chapel**

did not live in community. He probably also instituted the governing office of Dean.

Bishop Robert was also responsible for erecting a two-storey chapel at Hereford just south of the present cathedral, a project that perhaps distracted him from the task assumed by so many first-generation Norman bishops of beginning a new cathedral on a monumental scale. Tragically, this unusual building, which was inspired by imperial palace chapels, was reduced in the 18th-century to a single wall in the garden of the bishop's palace.

The task of cathedral construction fell, therefore, to a successor, Bishop Reynhelm. After 1107, he began a church on a cross-shaped plan that constitutes the architectural bones of the present building. It compares in many points of technical detail to a group of the most ambitious Romanesque churches across the wider region, including St John's, Chester, and Llandaff Cathedral (COUNTRY LIFE, *April 8*).

First to be completed was the choir to the east, which was aisled and probably vaulted in stone. Projecting beyond its flat east end were three semi-circular apses, now lost. That in the centre was framed by a single and richly ornamented arch set on the axis of the building over the high altar. Externally, there were turrets over the eastern end of both choir aisles, as well as a belfry tower over the crossing.

Work to the eastern arm and transepts was complete by 1140, when Hereford was overwhelmed by the events of the civil war known as the Anarchy. The cathedral was pressed into service as a fortification and catapults were raised onto the crossing tower in order to bombard the neighbouring castle. It was probably about a decade after these dramatic events that an eight-bay nave, supported on huge columns and with aisles to either side (***Fig 2***), was finished, together with a second tower erected at the end of the nave, an unusual detail in England.

Soon after it was completed, the Romanesque church began to be adapted. In about 1190, its eastern apses were swept away and replaced by a new retrochoir, an alteration presumably intended to aggrandise the setting of the high altar and improve circulation around it. Next—beyond this and undoubtedly conceived with it, but built in about 1200—an ornate Lady Chapel was constructed (***Fig 7***). It was erected over a vaulted crypt with its own external porch. This rare arrangement, paralleled at Old St Paul's in London, possibly identifies the crypt as a discrete church for the cathedral parish of St John (***Fig 10***). The names of the master masons responsible for these changes are not known, but the technical details of the work suggest a knowledge of contemporary buildings in the South-West, notably Wells.

In 1240, on the appointment as bishop of Peter of Aigueblanche, a member of the Savoyard circle that enjoyed Henry III's favour, the lines of influence shifted decisively. Probably in the 1250s, Bishop Peter began a new north transept, with details directly inspired by the coronation church of Westminster Abbey, then being extravagantly reconstructed by the King. The topography of Hereford made the north transept the most prominent arm of the cathedral (***Fig 1***).

Fig 8: **The magnficent chapel of Bishop Audley (ruled 1492–1502) is inspired by the architecture of St George's Chapel, Windsor**

Every element of the transept was richly detailed and the vast main window was actually enlarged in the course of construction, truncating an elevated passage in one wall. It's clear the transept was admired, because many of its details were subsequently copied in buildings across the region. These include straight-sided arches and ornamental spur bases, such as famously appear in the towers of Goodrich Castle further down the Wye.

Bishop Peter also reformed the constitution of the cathedral community by Papal confirmation in 1245–46 and authorised new governing statutes for it soon afterwards. He appointed numerous Savoyards to the chapter, including four nephews, and, in 1268, was buried —contrary to the terms of his will—in his own transept in a tomb with an exceptionally delicate Gothic canopy (***Fig 5***). His bearded effigy does not accord with the hostile description of him by the Benedictine monk Matthew Paris, as fox-like, diseased, stinking and deformed by a polyp in his nose.

Bishop Peter's magnificent tomb, however, was soon decisively upstaged. Bishop Thomas

> 'Bishop Thomas was credited with more than 500 miracles, a number exceeded only by Becket'

Cantilupe (ruled 1275–82) was a high-minded and well-connected clergyman described by one contemporary as having 'a face like an angel... and was well bearded with a long nose with the hairs of his beard and head part white and part red'. It was his ability to work miracles from beyond the grave, however, that posthumously secured him celebrity. As a result, in 1287, Bishop Thomas's body was translated from its original burial place near the high altar to the north transept (***Fig 3***).

Over the next 25 years, he was credited with more than 500 miracles, a recorded number exceeded in medieval England only by Thomas Becket (with whom he was often paired). A papal investigation of these in 1307, with interviews of those involved, preserves an astonishingly vivid insight into the lives of ordinary people at the time—one narrative about how the Welsh brigand William Cragh was spared by the bishop has been engagingly narrated by the historian Robert Bartlett in *The Hanged Man* (2006). In 1320, following the papal investigation, Bishop Thomas was canonised and his relics were moved to a new shrine in the Lady Chapel of Hereford in 1349 (leaving his earlier tomb in place). His feast day is October 2.

In the meantime, the revenues of pilgrimage and offerings to the shrine contributed to the complete renovation of the building at the hands of Bishop Swinefield, who actively promoted the cult. The full length of the nave was vaulted in stone and the aisles rebuilt with new windows between about 1290 and 1310. Curiously, this is the same date range of the cathedral's most celebrated treasure, the *Mappa Mundi*, map of the world, which may have hung near the relics.

Over the same period, work also began on a new crossing and upper stage of the western tower, both extravagantly decorated ➤

Fig 9: **The 1590s chained library began life in the Lady Chapel. It was removed in the 19th century and, in 1996, was re-housed with the *Mappa Mundi* in a brilliantly judged new building by Whitfield Partners**

with thousands of tiny carved ornaments of the kind termed ballflower. A related development was the commission of 10 posthumous effigies that memorialised Hereford's bishops back to 1079.

The popularity of the cult was already waning when a new chapter house was begun in 1337 and, soon afterwards, in 1340–55, the bishop's throne and choir stalls were installed. Most of the later additions to the church took the form of new chapels, notably those built by the Bishops Stanbury (ruled 1453–74), Audley (ruled 1492–1502) ***(Fig 8)*** and Booth (ruled 1516–35), the latter constructed as an outer porch to the nave ***(Fig 6)***. In the 15th century, a cloister was raised to the south of the church, as was accommodation for the Vicar's Choral, clerical deputies of the canons.

Because there was no monastic wealth to seize, the Reformation was slow to touch the cathedral. It was probably not until the late 1540s that the shrine of St Thomas was destroyed (leaving his vandalised tomb in place). Later in the century, the Lady Chapel was converted into a library and chains were supplied to secure its books in 1596–97. The chained library was removed from the Lady Chapel in 1841 and, since 1996, has resided in a superbly judged purpose-built home that was designed for it and the *Mappa Mundi* by Whitfield Partners ***(Fig 9)***.

During the 1640s, the Civil War and the siege of the city were attended with damage to the cathedral fabric and its tombs. It's not clear now who was really responsible, although tradition blames Scottish Covenanters.

A period of repair followed the Restoration and culminated in 1721 with the complete refurbishment of the choir by Bishop Bisse to include a huge new reredos by John Paty and a large stained-glass window. It was at about this time that the cathedrals of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester established a rotating annual music festival. The Three Choirs Festival was first documented in 1719 and has commanded huge attendances ever since.

The great collapse of the west tower in 1786 demanded a radical rethink of the building, not least because even the extant medieval fabric was now badly deformed. The architect James Wyatt initially repaired the whole with radical accompanying changes. He reduced the pitch of the roof, shortened the nave by a bay, removed the central spire and created lath and plaster vaults. Regardless, by the 1840s, the crossing tower was in peril of collapsing. That spurred on the restoration of the entire east end from 1841 by the architect Lewis N. Cottingham (and, later, his son).

Cottingham's antiquarian interests, and those of his patron, Dean Merewether, determined that the interior be scrupulously restored according to the evidence of the medieval fabric. Less happily, it also involved the destruction of many 17th- and 18th-century elements, including tombs.

The great cathedral restorer George Gilbert Scott assumed control of the ongoing work of restoration in 1858, laying the magnificent floor of the choir and installing an ironwork screen by Skidmore across the entrance. This latter was controversially removed in 1967 and now spectacularly ornaments the atrium of the V&A Museum in London. Scott oversaw massive further repairs and underpinning of the fabric until 1863, at which point attention focused on the removal of Wyatt's west end. That work finally began to designs by Scott's second son, Oldrid, and was completed in 1908.

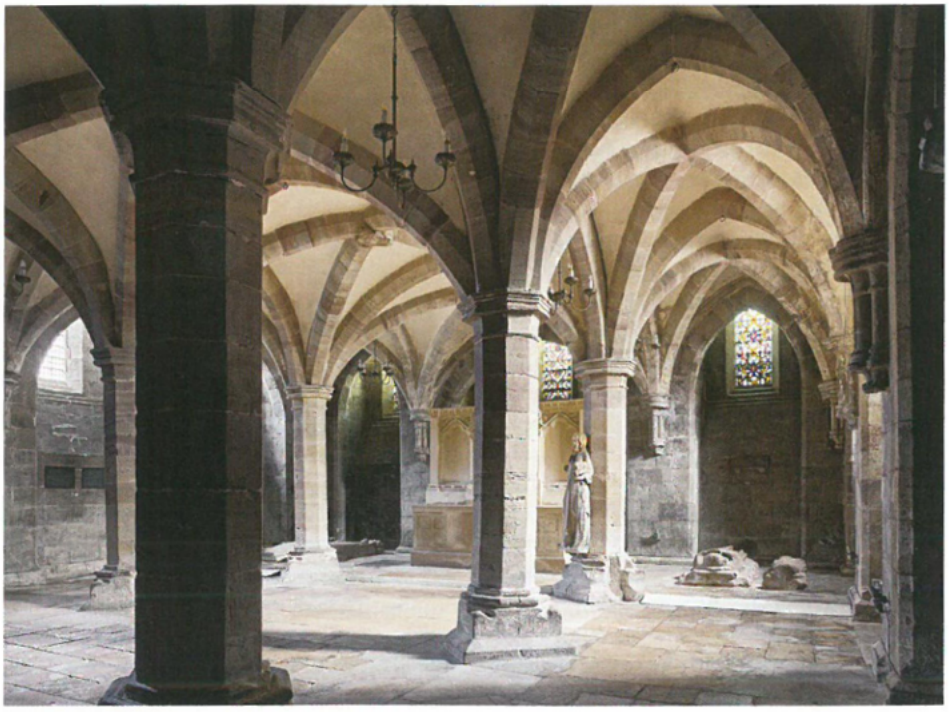
The 20th century has seen further major restorations to the cathedral fabric and also the 2017 installation of a large-scale memorial to the Special Air Service in the nave by the sculptor John Maine ***(Fig 4)***.

> 'The great collapse of the west tower in 1786 demanded a radical rethink of the building'

One other alteration deserves particular attention this year. In the 1970s, the first attempts were made to interpret St Thomas Cantilupe's tomb and, in the new millennium, the cathedral architect Robert Kilgour, with the help of craftsmen Stephen Florence, Peter Murphy and Neil Lossock, created a striking new superstructure for it in the manner of a shrine. It was paid for by Sir Roy Strong and incorporates a relic of the saint on loan from Stonyhurst College. This year, the retiring Dean, Michael Tavinor, who oversaw the work, has published a short life of the saint.

Seven centuries after his canonisation, St Thomas still has a place at the heart of this ancient cathedral.

Fig 10: **A view of the Lady Chapel crypt, which perhaps served as a parish church**



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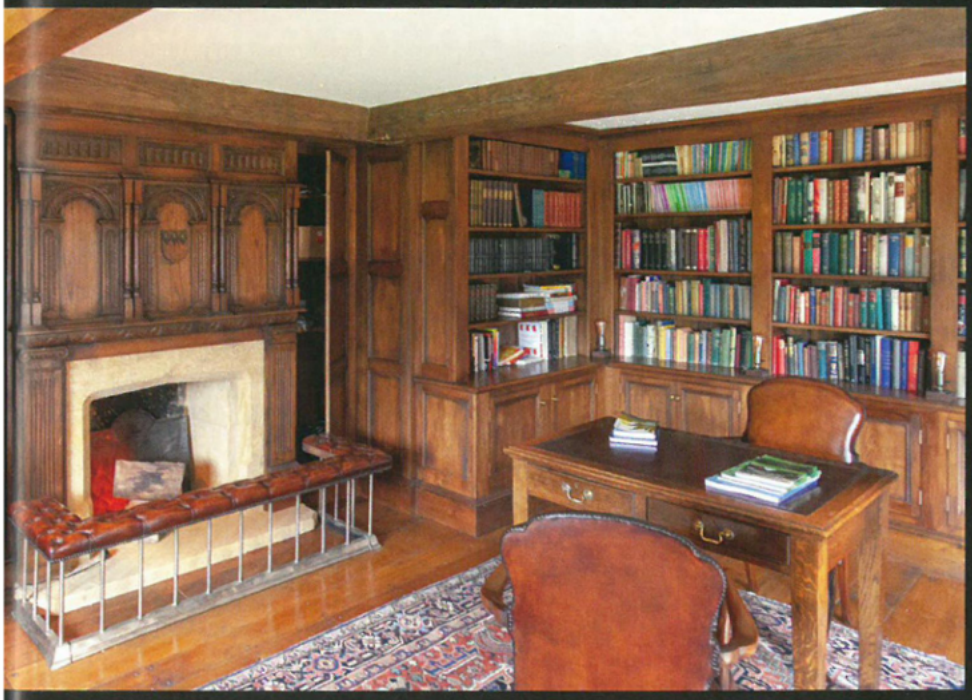

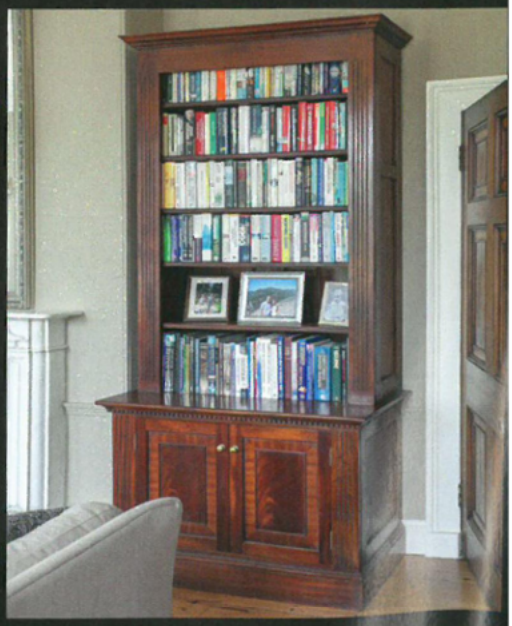

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