

## THE REUSE OF THE MONASTIC BUILDINGS AT CHESTER, 1540–1640<sup>1</sup>

*Alan Thacker*

### I

St Werburgh's abbey was surrendered by its last abbot, Thomas Clarke, in January 1540 and refounded as the cathedral church of the new see of Chester in August 1541, when the entire precinct was handed over to the newly constituted dean and chapter.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that in the short term at least there was a considerable measure of continuity between the old monastery and the new cathedral. Though, as with other cathedrals of the new foundation, the dedication was changed (from St Werburgh to Christ and the Blessed Virgin), and though some eighteen months elapsed between dissolution and resurrection, the break was more apparent than real. There was, for example, continuity (albeit briefly) in personnel. At the dissolution the old monastery contained some twenty-eight monks, of whom ten were made members of the new cathedral establishment. The abbot became dean, the prior and three other monks prebendaries, and a further five monks petty canons. So of the senior clergy of the new foundation only three were not ex-monks of St Werburgh's. In addition, the organist and choirmaster was the former master of the old monastic

1 I am grateful to Dr G. W. Bernard and the late Dr B. E. Harris for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 *V.C.H. Cheshire*, III, pp. 144, 188.

school.<sup>3</sup> The immediate circumstances of the changeover seem to have been accomplished with a minimum of disturbance. The ex-abbot continued to live in his old lodgings, assigned to the bishop by the royal letters patent, until his death a month or so after his appointment as dean, and there were probably other monks also residing in the precinct during the break between dissolution and refoundation.<sup>4</sup>

The main building in the precinct was the former abbey church, reconstructed *c.* 1260–1360, in the late fourteenth and the early fifteenth century, and *c.* 1485–1530. Though under Abbots Ripley (1485–93) and Birkenshaw (1493–1524, 1529/30–8) the nave, south transept, and west front were substantially completed, the work was still unfinished at the dissolution: vaults, planned throughout the building, had yet to be inserted, and only the first stage of the south-west tower had been built. As late as 1525 considerable sums were still being spent on the monastic buildings.<sup>5</sup> The most striking feature of the church was its very large south transept, originally expanded to provide accommodation for extra altars,<sup>6</sup> but at the dissolution housing the parish church of St Oswald. The abbey had an extensive ancient parish, both within the city itself and in the countryside to the south, probably deriving from its origin as a major Anglo-Saxon minster.<sup>7</sup> By the thirteenth century, that parish was served from an altar dedicated to St Oswald in the south aisle of the abbey church, but in the mid-fourteenth century the parishioners were moved out to a separate building in the abbey precinct, the chapel of St Nicholas, new in 1348 and extensively reconstructed in the

3 *V.C.H. Cheshire*, III, p. 144; R. V. H. Burne, *The monks of Chester: the history of St Werburgh's abbey* (London, 1962), pp. 178–85; R. V. H. Burne, *Chester cathedral from its foundation by Henry VIII to the accession of Queen Victoria* (London, 1958), pp. 3–5.

4 *Lancashire and Cheshire wills and inventories from the ecclesiastical court, Chester*, I, ed. G. J. Piccope, C.S. [1st ser.], XXXIII (1857), p. 115; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 1–2.

5 Burne, *Monks*, pp. 134–40, 142–4, 154–6; *V.C.H. Cheshire*, V (forthcoming).

6 Since the claustral buildings were to the north, it was the south transept which was easiest to enlarge.

7 A. T. Thacker, 'Chester and Gloucester: early ecclesiastical organization in two Mercian burhs', *Northern History*, XVIII (1982), pp. 199–211 at 203–6.

late fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, by the late 1530s, when the monastery clearly had little time left, the parish church had been moved back into the main abbey, this time into the large and recently finished transept.<sup>9</sup> This must represent either an attempt by the monks to preserve their threatened church by finding a parochial use for it, or, more likely perhaps, a move by the civic authorities, who from the fifteenth century if not before had been closely associated with St Oswald's,<sup>10</sup> to obtain grander premises. At all events, it suggests that services continued in the south transept throughout 1540 and 1541, though whether the ex-abbot and those monks who stayed on still used the choir must remain uncertain. Despite the fact that it was thus not entirely abandoned, the fabric of the church seems not to have been maintained. In November and December 1541, only a few months after the refoundation, an extensive programme of repairs was undertaken, involving a large number of workmen, including glaziers, masons, bricklayers, tilers, and carpenters.<sup>11</sup>

Almost certainly there was little disturbance of the interior fittings at the dissolution. Thus when shortly before his death Thomas Clarke made his will on 13 September 1541 he ordered that his body was to be interred before the high altar within the choir.<sup>12</sup> The only major structure inside the building at all likely to have been destroyed at that time is the shrine of St Werburgh. There is little evidence of interest in the saint herself in the 1530s, though one relic, her girdle, was said in 1536 to be 'in great request by lying-in women'.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere in Chester, at St John's, the relic of the Cross in its gilded reliquary had already been removed on the orders of the then diocesan, the bishop of Lichfield, *c.* 1536, and even if St Werburgh escaped then and in 1540–1 it is hardly likely that the shrine survived the attentions of Edward VI's

8 *VC.H. Cheshire*, V (forthcoming).

9 Burne, *Monks*, p. 139; *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. XXX, p. 2; below, pp. 30–1.

10 The indenture of 1488 records an agreement between Abbot Ripley and the mayor and parishioners of St Oswald's: Burne, *Monks*, p. 136.

11 Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/1, pp. 1–6.

12 *Wills and inventories*, I, ed. Piccope, pp. 125–30.

13 *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, of the reign of Henry VIII* (21 vols, London, 1862–1910), X, p. 141.

commissioners.<sup>14</sup> The shrine base was later broken up: in 1635 two substantial portions had been incorporated in Bishop Bridgeman's new throne, and at some time other fragments were used in walling in the north choir aisle.<sup>15</sup>

The letters patent of 1541 reconstituting the abbey a cathedral provided for an establishment headed by a dean and six prebendaries.<sup>16</sup> Draft statutes were issued on 4 June 1544, apart from those of Norwich (which were exceptional) the first to be issued to any cathedral of the new foundation. As elsewhere, the statutes were never formally confirmed, but achieved authority on the basis of custom and tradition, and indeed are still in force at Chester. They provided for a considerable inferior staff including six petty canons, an epistoler and gospeller, six conducts, eight choristers and a choirmaster, a butler, two cooks, two under-sextons, and two porters. There were also six bedesmen, and the old monastic school was reconstituted a grammar school with two masters and twenty-four scholars. The dean and prebendaries, provided their income did not fall below a certain level, were expected to keep separate houses within the precinct,<sup>17</sup> but the minor canons, choirmaster, conducts, and schoolmasters were expected to eat together in a common hall, under the presidency of the precentor, a requirement which seems in fact to have been observed at least until 1600.<sup>18</sup>

There was, then, a considerable community at the new cathedral, which preserved many of the functions of the old abbey, still reciting the ancient offices, for example, and still

14 *V.C.H. Cheshire*, V (forthcoming); Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 35; R. H. Morris, *Chester in the Plantagenet and Tudor reigns* (Chester, [1894]), pp. 150–4.

15 E. Barber, 'St Werburgh and her shrine', *J.C.A.S.* new ser. X (1904), pp. 68–85 at 76–85; J. M. Maddison, 'St Werburgh's shrine', *Annual Report of the Friends of Chester Cathedral*, June 1984, pp. 11–17.

16 *L. and P. Hen. VIII*, XVI, p. 535; *Foedera, conventiones, litera, et cujuscunque generis acta publica*, ed. T. Rymer (20 vols, London, 1704–35), XIV, p. 717; *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. XXV, pp. 49–54, 56–60.

17 The sum specified was £40 p.a. for the prebendaries, but though at Chester they initially received only some £20 p.a., they nevertheless appear to have been expected to maintain houses in the precinct: Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/1, pp. 23, 89, 103, etc.; and see below.

18 The earliest copy of the draft statutes to survive is dated 1592: B.L. Harleian MS. 2071, ff. 136–47. For a 19th-century copy and translation see Ches. R.O., EDD 2/55.



fulfilling their predecessors' eleemosynary and educative role. How long this relatively undisturbed semi-monastic regime persisted at Chester is not very clear. The former abbot died within a month of his appointment as dean and was succeeded by another ex-monk, the former prior of Sheen, who survived until 1547.<sup>19</sup> By 1544, however, only two of the original chapter were left and the replacements do not seem to have come from a monastic background. The new dean in 1547 was from a cathedral of the old foundation—he had been treasurer of York minster—and was a conformer who contrived to achieve promotion under Henry VIII and Edward VI and to retain his preferments under Mary.<sup>20</sup> Until the late 1540s the cathedral adhered to the old rituals and probably presented a relatively unchanged appearance. That at least is suggested by various items in the accounts, which record regular payments for the observance of Corpus Christi day and expenditure on censers, the sacrament house, and the canopy under which on certain feast days the Host was carried in procession.<sup>21</sup> Changes, however, were clearly introduced as early as 1548, when the dean and chapter sold a cross and two silver censers, devoting the money to 'the reparation of their houses'. In December 1550 the accounts record payments for 'the bearers of stones from the altars', and shortly afterwards the great high altar itself was 'laid' (arguably meaning buried) and replaced by a new wooden holy table.<sup>22</sup> In 1553 when the royal commissioners came to Chester the cathedral's ornaments seem already to have been depleted,<sup>23</sup> and after their departure the church must have seemed bare indeed.<sup>24</sup>

The cathedral authorities had a poor record in the reign of

19 Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 3.

20 Ibid. pp. 15, 18–20.

21 Ibid. pp. 15–17. For regular payments relating to the observance of the feast of Corpus Christi see Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/1, pp. 161, 163, 170, 178.

22 Morris, *Chester*, p. 152; Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/1, pp. 213–14 (excerpts quoted in Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 21).

23 The items sold fetched considerably less than those of St Mary's, Chester, and only marginally more than St Oswald's: Morris, *Chester*, p. 151.

24 See for example the lists of the cathedral possessions in 1628, in B.L. Harl. MS. 2103, ff. 68–9 (one quoted in Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 108).

Edward VI. Quite apart from the removal and destruction of the ancient fittings, they were later accused of pulling down certain buildings, of stripping lead from the roof of the church, and of 'other disordered doings', including the embezzlement of rents and profits from the sale of ornaments.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, only two prebendaries were replaced after Mary's accession in 1553. It seems unlikely therefore that the cathedral regained the full panoply of its medieval and Henrician adornments, though doubtless the ancient rituals were restored. At the accession of Elizabeth there were no changes in the chapter and there seems to have been little interference with the church, except for the erection in 1561 of a table of commandments 'to give some comely ornament and demonstration that the same is a place of religion and prayer'. The last vestiges of personal contact with monastic life among the chapter were, however, soon to disappear with the death of the senior prebendary and former prior in 1567, and of the sub-dean and former warden of the Greyfriars in 1573. The first clearly Protestant dean appears to have been Richard Longworth, appointed in 1573, having been expelled from the mastership of St John's College, Cambridge, for his Puritan tendencies in 1569.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever their theological opinions, however, the senior clergy do not seem to have been particularly enthusiastic in the performance of their duties at the cathedral during this period. In 1559 the royal commissioners were told that the deanery had not been filled for two years and that only two of the canons were resident.<sup>27</sup> In 1578 the metropolitan visitors found that the dean and most of the canons were non-resident: the dean had not been to the cathedral more than twice since his installation in 1573, one prebendary had attended not more than once in ten years, and another three were present only very infrequently. Only the sub-dean and one prebendary were at all conscientious.<sup>28</sup> An anonymous

25 *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, 1552-4, pp. 163, 218, 230; York, Borthwick Institute, V.1578/CB.3, responses to item 9 of interrogatories; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 24-6.

26 Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 29-59.

27 *Ibid.* p. 35; R. W. Dixon, *History of the Church of England from the abolition of the Roman jurisdiction* (6 vols, Oxford, 1878-1902), V, p. 154.

28 York, Borthwick Inst., V.1578/CB.3, extracts quoted in Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 55-8.

report addressed to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, at about this time relates that the houses which the dean and canons were obliged by the statutes to maintain within the precinct, and in which they were expected to offer ungrudging hospitality, were set out for rent, 'and no house kept by any of them, the more pity'.<sup>29</sup>

Accompanying this neglect of cathedral duties was a neglect of the fabric of the church itself. Already in 1557 the parish church of St Oswald's was said to be in need of repair, and little seems to have been done beyond a bare minimum in the 1560s and 1570s. The major expenditure was on the windows of the parish church in 1573, a repair perhaps occasioned not so much by the ravages of time as by the removal of the medieval glass. Certainly the anonymous report to Cecil alleges that by then £100 a year was necessary for the maintenance of the cathedral, which was 'in great decay, and the glass whereof was carried to [the prebendaries'] private benefices'. The report expressly named the sub-dean, John Nutter, one of the two resident prebendaries, for removing glass to the church of his living at Sefton (Lancs.). Such accusations were confirmed at the archbishop's visitation in 1578, when it was alleged that the church itself, together with other buildings, was 'in some ruin and decay', for want of lead, glass, and slate. At the same visitation the headmaster complained that the state of the grammar school, then possibly in one of the buildings round Abbey Court, endangered the lives of masters and pupils 'by reason of great stones falling down and breaking their heads, and extreme driving in of snow, hail, and rain for that it is open on every side'.<sup>30</sup>

One of the reasons for the problems of the 1560s and 1570s was undoubtedly the decay of the cathedral's finances. Initially, the new foundation was treated quite generously, St Werburgh's had been a comparatively rich community, and the new cathedral was allowed to retain the former abbey's spiritualities intact together with the great bulk of the temporalities. It received all the landed endowment held

29 Historical Manuscripts Commission, 58, *Marquess of Bath*, II, p. 19.

30 *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. I, p. 32; P.R.O., SP 12/10, pp. 318-19; *V.C.H. Cheshire*, V (forthcoming); Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/2; Hist. MSS. Com. 58, *Marquess of Bath*, II, p. 19. The glass is no longer at Sefton.



locally, in Cheshire and Lancashire, the only major loss being the abbey's substantial bailiwick of Weston on Trent (Derb.), valued at just under £90 in 1535.<sup>31</sup> In all, the annual income of the abbey at its dissolution had been some £1,070, while that of the new cathedral was perhaps £965 in the early years of its existence.<sup>32</sup> Most of the endowment had been granted away in a series of long leases in the period immediately preceding the dissolution,<sup>33</sup> a development hardly to the new institution's advantage in an era of sharply rising prices. But even so the financial difficulties which were soon to engulf the dean and chapter were partly of their own making, or at least the product of exceptional bad luck. Charges of embezzlement and mismanagement preferred by the cathedral clerk and his assistant resulted in 1553 in the imprisonment of the dean and two prebendaries in London at the Fleet, and to obtain their release the chapter was obliged to farm out the bulk of the former monastic lands to Sir Richard Cotton, the comptroller of the king's household, at an annual rent of some £600, almost £100 less than they were thought to be worth.<sup>34</sup> In consequence, the chapter was left with an income which fluctuated between £810 and £885 in the middle decades of the century, and since its fixed expenses amounted to about £826 it had very little left over for the repair of the cathedral and the maintenance of the precinct.<sup>35</sup> Successive deans tried to regain control of the endowment, alleging that the grant of 1553 was void, and in 1575 Dean Longworth seemed finally to have made good his case, when it was found that by virtue of a defect in their wording the original letters patent were void and that hence the dean and prebendaries had granted what was not theirs to bestow. But the chapter was outmanoeuvred. Cotton and his heir, aware of the weaknesses in their position, sold the lands to a number of local gentlemen, thereby ensuring that most of the county's principal landowners thereafter had a

31 *L. and P. Hen. VIII*, XVI, pp. 535–6; *Valor ecclesiasticus temp. Henr. VIII* (6 vols, London, 1810–34), V, pp. 205–6; B.L. Harl. MS. 1995, f. 285/31.

32 *Valor ecclesiasticus*, V, pp. 205–6; Ches. R.O., EDA 3/1, p. 47.

33 *V.C.H. Cheshire*, III, p. 143.

34 *Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, 1553, p. 100; above.

35 *V.C.H. Cheshire*, III, p. 189; Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 83.



vested interest in preventing the cathedral from recovering control of its endowment. After the case had finally come before the Exchequer in Westminster, the fee-farmers contrived to get it withdrawn by offering a large bribe to the earl of Leicester. Instead they 'got a commission out', under the presidency of Burleigh and Leicester, and in the award made by that commission in 1580 they were allowed to keep the lands, though the rents payable to the chapter were raised by about £200. The remainder of the cathedral's lands held under the defective instrument were regranted to the chapter, and they were left in the 1580s with an annual income of some £985, and temporarily at least were financially secure.<sup>36</sup>

In making the award the commissioners had recommended that part of the chapter's increased income was to be spent upon 'reparations of the greatly decayed church there and other edifices thereto belonging'.<sup>37</sup> The dean and chapter seem to have paid some heed to this. At the visitation of 1583, though the cathedral fabric was still said to be in decay, the chapter was said to have set aside over £200 for repairs, of which £100 had already been spent. In particular, eight new windows were provided for the choir. A further sign of improvement was the fact that by then the dean and at least three of the prebendaries were said to keep 'worshipful houses' in Chester.<sup>38</sup> Other work was done on the grammar school. But though repairs continued throughout the 1580s, the cathedral could still be described in an unsympathetic letter of the period as little better than a good parish church: 'it lieth unpaved like a barn floor'.<sup>39</sup> The dean and chapter were perhaps conscious of this, for in 1600 they caused the 'long west aisle' of the cathedral to be flagged. They also repaired the lead and timberwork of the roof, and further considerable sums were spent by Dean Mallory (1607-19).<sup>40</sup>

36 B.L. Harl. MS. 1994, ff. 149, 259-63, 279-86; Harl. MS. 2060, ff. 49-61; Harl. MS. 2071, ff. 136v.-137; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 24-6, 72-82, 84-5.

37 Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 84.

38 F. R. Raines, *The rectors of Manchester and the wardens of the collegiate church of that town*, 2 vols, C.S. new ser. V-VI (1885), I, p. 79.

39 Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 80-1; B.L. Harl. MS. 2071, f. 147.

40 Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/3, pp. 356-63; EDD 3913/1/4, pp. 19-26, 65-74, 101-8; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 72, 77, 92.

## II

St Werburgh's occupied the north-east quarter of the intramural area of the city. By the sixteenth century the entire precinct was walled, the north and east sides being enclosed by the city defences, the south and west by walls provided by the monks themselves. The main entrance was the great west gate (no 22 on the plan, Fig. 2), north of which there was a lesser entrance. On the east side a postern in the city wall gave access to an area known as the Kaleyards, which formed the monastic garden and was itself surrounded by walls and ditches. On the south side was the cemetery of the parish church, bounded by a stone wall running west from the city wall along St Werburgh's lane and enclosing within the precinct the chapel of St Nicholas, the former parish church. The circuit was completed by a further stone wall running northwards to the great west gate.<sup>41</sup> A fairly detailed plan of this precinct was drawn by one of the family of eminent Cestrian antiquarians, the Randle Holmes, probably by Randle Holme II (d. 1659).<sup>42</sup> The plan can be dated quite securely to some time before 1626, since it does not show the four choristers' houses built on the site of the great kitchen (no 13) in that year. At some later date the plan was labelled, numbered, and given a key. That must have been after 1635, since it shows the consistory court at its new site in the south-west tower (t on the plan), whither it was moved in that year.<sup>43</sup>

The only monastic building lost to the newly constituted cathedral chapter when it took over in 1541 was the former church of St Oswald, which had been leased to the city for ninety-nine years in 1539.<sup>44</sup> In 1545 at the expense of the then mayor it was enlarged and converted into a common hall, a function it continued to fulfil throughout the seventeenth century (though it seems to have housed the grammar school temporarily some time before 1612).<sup>45</sup> The parish church moved back into the large south transept, a convenient space

41 Morris, *Chester*, p. 135.

42 B.L. Harl. MS. 2073, ff. 80-2; below, pp. 32-3, Fig. 2.

43 Below, p. 41.

44 *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. XXX, p. 2.

45 B.L. Harl. MS. 1994, f. 61; Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 122.

(f), large enough to accommodate parishioners who regularly included the mayor and corporation until a quarrel with the bishop in 1624.<sup>46</sup> The south transept was still under the jurisdiction of the dean and chapter, who were also responsible for its maintenance, but it does appear to have been separated from the main body of the cathedral by a wooden screen (l): such at least is implied by a reference in the accounts for 1589 to expenditure on two boards and nails 'to make the partition between the two churches'.<sup>47</sup> To the south lay the churchyard, certainly there from the thirteenth century, and in 1509 described as bounded by an old stone wall crossed by stiles at both ends.<sup>48</sup> The paths which crossed it were paved only in the 1590s, and throughout the later sixteenth century the area was evidently in a state of scandalous neglect. In 1557 it was said to be defiled by animals, and from then on the churchwardens repeatedly complained of filth being thrown into it. It was not until 1619 that the area was finally levelled and properly enclosed, and even so at his visitation of 1634 it was still necessary for the bishop to require that 'a noisome dunghill' be removed from 'the green churchyard'.<sup>49</sup>

North of the former chapel of St Nicholas lay the abbot's lodging, designated by the letters patent of 1541 as the bishop's palace (nos 25–33). The complex, which does not appear to have been an especially grand one, included two halls, a kitchen, a chapel, a wine cellar (in the ground floor of the north-west tower, no 30), a parlour, and various chambers in an unlocated tower. The bishop also received the great monastic kitchen, redundant with the departure of the monks, and probably soon in ruins. Everything else apparently survived until the Civil War, when the complex suffered extensive damage, though there had doubtless been modifications such as those introduced by Bishop Bridgeman in the 1630s.<sup>50</sup>

46 Below, p. 38.

47 Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/3, p. 43; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 64–5; and see G. T. O. Bridgeman, *The history of the church & manor of Wigan*, 4 vols, C.S. new ser. XV–XVIII (1888–90), II, p. 449.

48 Morris, *Chester*, p. 135.

49 *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. V, pp. 4–15; Ches. R.O., EDC 5/1634/96.

50 *Foedera*, ed. Rymer, XIV, p. 717; *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser. XXV, pp. 53–4.



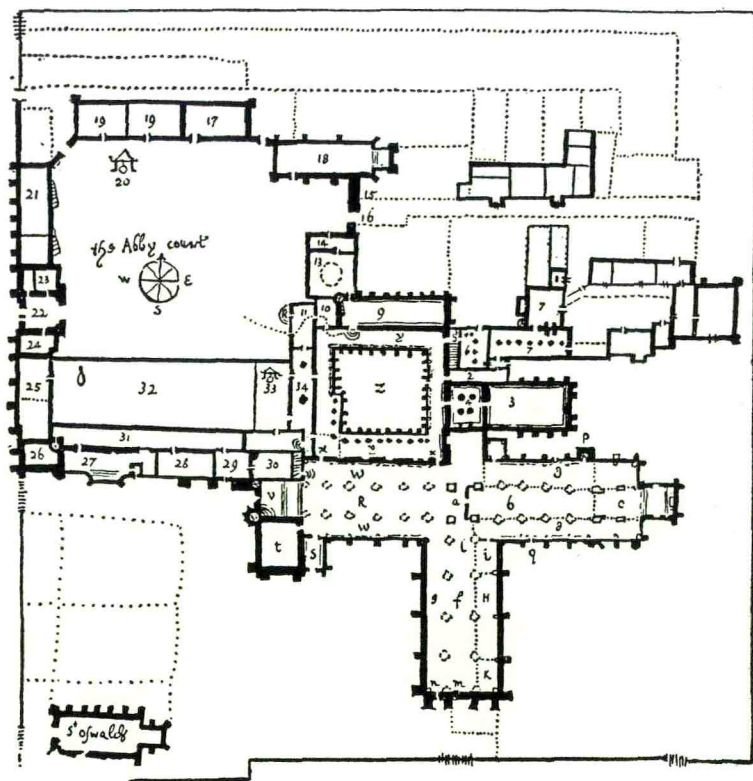


Figure 2 *Randle Holme's plan of Chester cathedral*

The monastic refectory (no 9), another communal and therefore redundant building, was also clearly soon out of repair. In 1578 the headmaster of the grammar school reported that it had housed the school shortly after its foundation and again in the 1570s, but that it was derelict at the time of the visitation: 'it hath been spoiled more and more' and was 'little better than a common privy'.<sup>51</sup> In the award of 1580 the refectory was one of the buildings expressly mentioned as in need of repair and refurbishment, to be converted into a hall 'wherein the . . . dean and chapter shall

51 York, Borthwick Inst., V.1578/CB.3, Thomas Purvis's responson to interrogatory 9; quoted by Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 12.

Key to Randle Holme's plan of the cathedral (B.L. Harl. MS. 2073, ff. 80-2)

a	the body of the C. & great square steeple	10	munks cellar
b	the quier	11	passage from abby court throw celler into cloisters & so to the church or dining hall
c	La Mary Chapp.		
d	the sid iles of quire	12	Bishops gate or porch of his pallace
e	the vestri		
f	parish church	13	the kitchen now quarestors houses
g	the trough ile		
h	the chauncell	14	the pantry now the consistory office
i	Mary Magdalan Chapp.		
k	St Nich Chapp.	15	the passage
l	the screene	16	east gate of abby court
m	steeple doore	17	backhouse with 2 ovens the one 19 foot diamater
n	south doore entring p.c.		
o	the 2 pullars whereon steeple stands	18	St Tho Chapp. now deanes house
p	turing stares over La Ma Chap.	19	brewhouse and storehouse
q	dore into green church yard	20	great well
R	broad ile	21	the great kill & drying floors
s	singing schoole porch	22	abbey gates
t	the old steeple now consistory	23	St Tho court
u	west doore	24	porters lodge
w	side iles to the broad ile	25	abbots kitchen
x	cloister doores	26	the tower & larder
y	the cloisters	27	serveing mens hall over which is great dineing rome
z	sprise garden		
2	maidens ile	28	strong beare cell. over it darby chamber
3	the archflemings temple now chapter house	29	the pantry over it the stone hall
4	the entrance	30	the wine seller
5	passage & staires to dormitory	31	the gallary
6	enciant preists cellers	32	bishops garden
7	the preists kitchens	33	abbots well
8	cellers	34	the great celler over it the great hall & green hall
9	munkes hall or fratry now freeschoole		

keep their commons together at the several times of their two general chapters and their audit'.<sup>52</sup> Nothing, however, seems to have been done and eventually in 1613 it was given over again (at least in part) to the grammar school. At that time

52 Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 84.

various repairs were made: it was reroofed with slates and some internal partitions were inserted.<sup>53</sup>

The fate of the buildings on the east side of the cloister is more obscure. The thirteenth-century chapter house (no 3) continued in use throughout the period, and seventeenth-century drawings in the Harleian manuscripts show that the main vessel was much as at present, but that there was a room over the western vestibule which has since disappeared.<sup>54</sup> It was said to have suffered severely in the Civil War, and in 1660 was described as 'ruinate and in decay', so perhaps changes were effected then.<sup>55</sup> The first storey of the east range formed the monastic dorter, now quite vanished but in use in 1589, when the roof was repaired and locks were fitted to the doors. It had probably been subdivided, to form *inter alia* the room over the chapter house vestibule, and in 1631 it contained a chamber inhabited by one Mark Bunting, perhaps one of the conducts.<sup>56</sup> The dormitory was clearly in extreme decay by the early nineteenth century, and probably it suffered with the chapter house in the Interregnum. Certainly, there are few if any references to it as in use after the Restoration.<sup>57</sup>

The cloisters were reconstructed at the very end of the monastic period, in the 1520s. The vaults of the new work exhibit a ruthless disregard for the arrangement of the existing walls of the monastic ranges, cutting into the arches of the lavatorium and into the main claustral entrance at the south end of the west walk. Probably, therefore, it was intended to follow up the rebuilding of the cloisters with further work on the monastic buildings, particularly the west range, which housed the abbot's lodgings, a relatively mean complex for the head of a community the size of St Werburgh's.<sup>58</sup> Though such plans would have been interrupted by the dissolution, the cloister itself must have been in relatively good condition in the later sixteenth century. There is no record of work until

53 Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/4, pp. 52, 54, 56.

54 B.L. Harl. MS. 2073, ff. 83-4.

55 Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 133.

56 Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/3, p. 43; EDV 6, petty canons' presentments, no 19; Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 64.

57 Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 235.

58 I am indebted to Dr J. P. Greene for this suggestion.



1589–90, when some of the windows in the walks were roughly repaired with bricks.<sup>59</sup> It was only in 1660, presumably after damage inflicted during the Interregnum, that the cloisters were seriously out of repair.<sup>60</sup>

Little is known of the buildings to the east of the eastern claustral range (nos 6 and 7). The whole block looks as if originally it was the monastic infirmary, and the seventeenth-century designation, priests' kitchens and cellars, suggests that it may have been used by the minor canons for common rooms and lodgings. Certainly accounts from the 1570s and 1580s reveal that their dining hall was in the former monastic misericord, a room usually associated with the infirmary complex.<sup>61</sup> After 1600, though the petty canons continued to receive monthly commons, references to the hall are found rarely if at all in the accounts.<sup>62</sup> The fate of the buildings is unknown, and they probably disappeared well before the nineteenth century, perhaps during the Civil War.

The condition of the buildings grouped round the northern half of the outer court of the abbey was by the seventeenth century the cause of scandal and dispute. Most (nos 17, 19, and 21) were by then a bakehouse and a brewhouse, functions which allegedly rendered the court a disagreeable and unhealthy place to live.<sup>63</sup> The only building deemed to have been put to a proper use was the former chapel of St Thomas (no 18), which had been converted into the deanery, probably shortly after the dissolution.<sup>64</sup> The location of other buildings within the close, such as the prebendaries' houses, is uncertain. Despite the fact that their income was below the £40 recommended by the statutes, all the prebendaries seem to have maintained some kind of residence within the precinct, though generally, it seems, they did not live in them, but rented them

59 Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/3, pp. 94–6; Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 67.

60 Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 133, 157.

61 e.g. Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/3, p. 7.

62 The last reference I have found is in 1597: *ibid.* p. 194. Cf. Durham, where the petty canons' hall disappeared in the early seventeenth century: *inf.* from Mr M. G. Snape.

63 Below, pp. 39–40.

64 The fabric of the chapel survived until 1791: Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 226.

out to the minor canons and schoolmasters. In 1578 one of the prebendaries' houses, then let to the headmaster of the grammar school, was in very poor condition, and though after the award of 1580 they seem mostly to have been put back into repair, they were nevertheless regarded as wholly unsuitable for occupation by the cathedral dignitaries in the early seventeenth century, when they were described by the bishop as 'base, little, noisome, and unfit for habitation, both in regard to site, room, decay, and manner of building'. By then at least one, and perhaps all, were in Abbey Court, not the most desirable part of the precinct, since it was occupied by the brewhouse and bakehouse.<sup>65</sup>

### III

John Bridgeman was bishop of Chester from 1619 until his flight from the city in 1645 (he died at Oswestry in 1652). He took an exceptional interest in the cathedral, and seems to have intervened frequently in its affairs, not always to the satisfaction of the dean and chapter. The Henrician statutes had provided for greater episcopal powers of visitation and correction than had been the norm in the cathedrals of the old foundation, and at Chester the bishop's influence had been considerably increased in 1558, when in lieu of the advowson of Workington (Cumb.) he had been granted *inter alia* the right to present to the cathedral prebends.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, as an extensive property owner within the precinct the bishop, if resident, was a powerful neighbour. Such circumstances enhanced his position, even though the framers of the Henrician statutes had been careful to maintain a balance between bishop and chapter,<sup>67</sup> and up to Bridgeman's time the bishops appear not to have played an especially prominent role

65 York, Borthwick Inst., V.1578/CB.3, quoted Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 101; below, pp. 39–40.

66 *Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, 1557–8, pp. 260–1.

67 *The statutes of the cathedral church of Durham, with other documents*, ed. J. M. Falkner and A. H. Thompson, Surtees Soc. CXLIII (1929), pp. xxxviii–lii.

in the life of the cathedral. Bridgeman, however, took an immediate interest in both church and precinct, planning his first visitation in the year of his appointment, 1619.<sup>68</sup> The injunctions issued after his visitation in 1623 reveal his dissatisfaction with the cathedral clergy's performance of their duties and with their maintenance of the church and precinct. Dean, prebendaries, and minor canons were censured for absenteeism and were required to attend services properly vested. The organist was criticized for his neglect of the choristers, which the bishop claimed 'hath insufferably impeached and impaired the service of God and almost utterly spoiled the children'. The bishop also had hostile words for the chapter's previous administration of its endowment, condemning the 'harsh and ravenous disposition of those who formerly have been members of this church'. Above all, he was concerned about the state of the precinct. The main problems were the 'noise, filth and smoke' engendered by the brewhouse and bakehouse and the rowdiness associated with an alehouse by then established in the abbey gatehouse.<sup>69</sup>

The bishop was not alone in thinking that the precinct was put to unsuitable uses in the 1620s. In 1623 and 1624 there were complaints to the city Assembly that unlicensed traders had established premises there: 'divers persons not free of the company of tailors within the . . . city do exercise the said trade in the liberties of the Abbey'; others, 'mere strangers and foreigners', were retailing ale, tobacco, soap, and flax.<sup>70</sup> Such complaints reflected growing tensions between corporations and those urban liberties remaining outside their jurisdiction, tensions already exemplified in Chester by the dispute in 1607 over the bearing of the mayor's sword point uppermost in the cathedral,<sup>71</sup> and considerably increased in 1624 with a quarrel between the bishop and the corporation over new furnishings in St Oswald's.

68 Ches. R.O., EDC 5/1619/20. Only the preparatory interrogatories survive, and it is not clear whether the visitation actually took place.

69 Ches. R.O., EDA 3/1, ff. 254v.-255v., printed in *Cheshire Sheaf*, 1st ser. III, pp. 199-200, 204-5.

70 *Calendar of Chester city council minutes, 1603-1642*, ed. M. J. Groombridge, R.S.L.C. CVI (1956), pp. 125, 132; Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 102.

71 Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 87-8.



The mayor and corporation had been closely linked with St Oswald's at least from the later 15th century,<sup>72</sup> and since the dissolution had been in the habit of attending the 'reading service' and sermon there, sometimes to the disturbance of the services in the cathedral choir.<sup>73</sup> In 1624 they sought and obtained a faculty to refurbish the church with new seating and to move the pulpit to a more 'convenient' position. In 1626, when he next came to reside in Chester, the bishop was outraged to discover that the effect of the new work had been to move the pulpit to a more central site and to enhance the seating customarily provided for the civic dignitaries at the expense of that for the dean and chapter. Bridgeman responded by ordering the morning sermon henceforth to be preached not in St Oswald's but in the cathedral choir, and later at the west end of the nave, where a new and handsome pulpit and 'wainscot seats and other forms for the people' were erected at his own expense. Though the dean tried to mediate, the dispute remained unresolved for twelve years. It appeared finally to have been settled in 1637–8, when the then mayor, a former chorister and pupil at the cathedral school, returned to the sermon and service then held (presumably in the evening) in the cathedral choir. The dean, however, ordered the mayor to be kept out of what was regarded as his customary seat in the choir, with the result that the civic authorities again abandoned services in the cathedral. On this occasion the bishop ranged himself against the dean, alleging, rather curiously, that the dean had no jurisdiction in the matter, and that his action ensured that 'we have scarce five lay persons present beside the consistory and my family, whereas formerly the whole city came to it'.<sup>74</sup> The outcome of the dispute is uncertain, though it is possible that morning sermons were again being preached in St Oswald's by 1642, since in that year Bridgeman caused to be erected on the south side of the church, beneath the great south window,

72 Burne, *Monks*, pp. 136–7.

73 Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, p. 368.

74 *Cheshire Sheaf*, 1st ser. I, pp. 47–8; 3rd ser. IV, pp. 75–6, 78–9, 85–6; *Cal. Chester city council mins 1603–42*, ed. Groombridge, pp. xxii–xxiii; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 104–5; Ches. R.O., EDA 3/1, ff. 130v., 220 and v.; P 29/7/2, p. 306; Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, pp. 295–305.

'a fair seat', with three storeys, 'the highest whereof was for the bishop, the dean and chapter, and chancellor to sit in; and the middle . . . for the choir and consistorians . . . ; the lowest . . . for the choristers and scholars with others belonging to the church and churchmen'.<sup>75</sup>

By the 1620s, then, the cathedral precinct seems to have been a somewhat disreputable place, a scene of rather sordid industry, illicit trading, and disorderly drinking and gaming. Few if any of the cathedral dignitaries resided there, and it was also eschewed by the civic authorities. This was the environment which Bridgeman set out determinedly to improve. One of his earliest projects was the building in 1626 of four houses for the cathedral conducts on the site of the old monastic kitchen, episcopal property since 1541. Hitherto, the conducts 'had been utterly unprovided of sufficient dwelling houses within the precincts of the church and abbey', and as a result had been forced to rent lodgings in the city. The new houses, each of which contained a kitchen and hall, two chambers, two upper lofts, and cellars, were to be let only to conducts, and were to be maintained by the dean and chapter.<sup>76</sup> A more pressing improvement, however, first set out in the injunctions of 1623, was that the dean and chapter should desist from leasing out the buildings on the north side of Abbey Court, and reserve them to their or other church members' use. The injunction, however, was repeatedly ignored, and in 1638 Bridgeman solicited the intervention of Archbishop Laud. As archbishop of Canterbury, of course, Laud had no jurisdiction over the see of Chester, which was in the northern province, but he nevertheless wrote to the dean and chapter, allegedly at the king's especial command. His tone was very severe. Though the bishop had sought to prevent them from leasing the property in Abbey Court for unsuitable purposes, when the brewer died in 1634 the dean and chapter had not hesitated to renew the lease for the 'poor sum' of £30. Now in 1638 when the brewer's wife was dead they were ordered not to let 'any part of that court to any other than some of the prebends or other necessary members

75 Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, p. 449; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 116–17.

76 Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 107–8; Ches. R.O., EDA 3/1, f. 226v.

of the church', and in particular not to renew for any term whatsoever to either brewer or maltster. The intervention seems to have had some effect, for in December 1638 Bridgeman wrote to Laud:

I owe you for this as much as my health and perhaps my life comes to. For truly ever since my being bishop of this see . . . I have scarce had a month's health together whilst I lived at Chester by means of the smoke and other annoyances which came thereby.

Laud replied that the dean had promised obedience, and after that no more is heard of the malthouse in Abbey Court.<sup>77</sup>

One reason for the growing intensity of Bridgeman's demands about the improvement of Abbey Court was his increased residence in the palace at Chester from 1630. Before that date he had lived chiefly at his rectory house in Wigan, but in 1629 as part of a general attempt to tighten up episcopal administration the king issued injunctions requiring bishops to live in their see cities. Bridgeman obtained a brief respite, but from 1631 he spent at least half the year in Chester.<sup>78</sup> It was probably then that he also set about restoring the former abbot's lodgings:

The bishop's palace was in great decay, where he covered the tower with lead, and built two lodging chambers . . . where never was chamber before. Those chambers he new wainscotted and made a cabinet of strong boxes . . . for to keep the bishop's evidences safely ever after. He also bestowed new wainscot on the great chamber of the tower. And he built up two chambers for the porter next to the porch at the first entrance unto the palace.

Elsewhere in the same source he is also said to have put in new stone 'stances' in the palace windows, to have floored five rooms with boards, and to have made other improvements in the 'stone chamber' and the 'abbot's chamber'.<sup>79</sup>

The bishop also effected improvements in the cathedral itself. At his visitation in 1631 it emerged that the windows, especially those of the choir, were greatly out of repair, to such an extent that stones from one of them had fallen into the church only shortly after the departure of the congregation. Work was immediately put in hand by the dean and chapter

77 Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, pp. 403–8; Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 112–16.

78 Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, pp. 332–4.

79 Ibid. II, pp. 446–9; Ches. R.O., EDA 3/1, f. 130v.



but the bishop seems to have been responsible for a more ambitious scheme, which also involved the refurbishment of the choir in the best Laudian manner:

He caused the stalls to be fairly painted, and some of them gilt . . . He built the bishop's stall in the choir, 1635; and a fair new pulpit right against it, 1637; and gilded the organs in the cathedral, and made a new set of pipes for it. He raised the steps towards the communion table and made the wall and partition there, and took in the two highest pillars at the end of it, to enlarge the choir; and he glazed the east window with the story of the annunciation, nativity, circumcision, and presentation of Our Saviour; and built two lofts behind the north and south sides of the choir, and the partition between the body of the cathedral and St Oswald's church.<sup>80</sup>

After the metropolitan visitation in 1633 similar improvements were made to St Oswald's, then found to be 'very indecent and unseemly'. The 'rushes and other filthiness' were removed; the pews, which were 'patched and pieced and some broken', were made uniform and no more than a yard in height; the chancel was paved, the communion table made decent and placed against the east wall, and altar rails were provided.<sup>81</sup>

Other improvements included the whitewashing of the whole cathedral, the construction of a new font, and the removal in 1635 of the consistory court from its former location in the lady chapel at the east end of the cathedral to its present site on the ground floor of the south-west tower. There Bridgeman supplied it with new and substantial furnishings, which still survive. Bridgeman too was almost certainly responsible for the beautifying of the bishop's chapel (now St Anselm's) with a fine new plaster ceiling and a handsome screen and altar rails. Though no date is known for this work it probably dates like so much else from the 1630s.<sup>82</sup>

One other action is especially revealing. After the removal of the consistory court the lady chapel was left empty and Bridgeman wished to refurbish it. Interestingly his idea of an appropriate mode of doing so was to raise the great stone altar, buried in the 1550s, and erect it at the east end of the chapel. This seems to have been done without the approval of

80 Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 116; Ches. R.O., EDA 3/1, f. 131.

81 Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, p. 447; Ches. R.O., EDV 6.

82 Bridgeman, *Hist. Wigan*, II, p. 447; Burne, *Chester Cath.* p. 117.

a full chapter, and in particular without the knowledge or consent of the Puritan sub-dean, John Ley. Ley, who was also vicar of Great Budworth, heard there of the bishop's doings entirely at second hand, from a Roman Catholic parishioner he was seeking to convert. He was deeply shocked. 'It seemed to me', he wrote to Bridgeman, 'more strange than true that a papist dwelling at least fourteen miles from Chester, and coming thither seldom, could know better what was done in the cathedral than I, the sub-dean of the church, who was there almost every week throughout the year.' After seeing the offending structure with his own eyes he informed the bishop that he would have tried to dissuade him from such an action, and Bridgeman, conscious perhaps of the weakness of his position, seems to have surrendered without a fight, claiming with curious lack of conviction that he 'had no thought of an altar' when he re-erected the stone, 'but meant it only for a repository to the preacher (in use of a table) in that place'.<sup>83</sup> The altar was quickly removed.

All this seems to show that by the mid-1630s when he was frequently in residence in Chester the bishop envisaged his role as including the most active supervision of the fabric of his cathedral. Evidence of his close daily involvement in the life of the cathedral comes from the injunctions which he issued in 1640: 'Sermons have been oftentimes to seek upon Sundays and holy days, even when the psalms hath been singing', as a result of which 'the lord bishop hath many times been enforced to preach upon little or no preparation'. There would, for example, have been no sermon on Palm Sunday that year had not the bishop 'suddenly on half an hour's notice of the neglect made a supply'. In liturgical as in architectural matters the bishop seems to have been the dominant figure.

#### IV

Chester, then, for much of the century before the Civil War was not a well endowed cathedral, and in consequence

83 Burne, *Chester Cath.* pp. 117-19; J. Ley, *A letter (against the erection of an altar) written June 29 1635, to John, Lord Bishop of Chester* (London, 1641).

suffered particularly from the non-residence and neglect of its dean and chapter. In such circumstances relatively little new work was done, a factor in the exceptionally complete survival of the monastic complex at Chester. The most substantial programme of rebuilding and restoration in both cathedral and precinct was at the instance of the bishop rather than the chapter in the 1630s. Though the statutes of the cathedrals of the new foundation allowed for increased episcopal supervision, Bridgeman seems to have gone well beyond what was envisaged in his interventions at Chester, and what is more generally to have obtained the acquiescence of the dean and chapter. Even the Puritan sub-dean Ley when protesting about the lady chapel altar merely claimed that the bishop had sometimes kept the dean and chapter from his counsels (*a consiliis*).<sup>84</sup> That quiescence stemmed perhaps from a certain lack of interest engendered by the poverty of the endowment, which caused Dean Mallory and even Ley customarily to reside on their benefices. At all events Bridgeman's interventions undoubtedly brought results. Regrettably, however, many of his improvements were to be but short-lived: in 1646 after the parliamentary forces entered Chester they defaced the choir, vandalized the organ, and broke the painted glass. The bishop's palace, the chapter house, and much else in the precinct suffered extensive damage. The destruction wrought then was in many ways greater than that accomplished by the previous century's neglect, and certainly marked a new phase in the breach with the monastic past.

84 Ley, *Letter*, p. 4. Nevertheless, he appears to have taken the initiative by May 1642, when the accounts record a payment 'for defacing an image in the east end of the quire and plastering it over, by Mr. Subdean's appointment': Ches. R.O., EDD 3913/1/4, p. 323.

