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Ill. 1 The west portal of York Minster in 2024

Christopher Norton

The West Portal of York Minster
In memoriam Paul Crossley

Large-scale sculpted portals are relatively rare in England. Compared to the great sequence of magnificent examples created in France from the twelfth century onwards, the English portals are few in number, and are often poorly preserved. They are also notably varied in design and iconography, and therefore merit individual attention. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the early fourteenth-century west portal of York Minster – one of the best-known cathedrals in the country – has never been the subject of a dedicated study. This paper presents some results of research into the history, archaeology, design and iconography of the portal which was prompted by a major campaign of restoration in the 1990s.

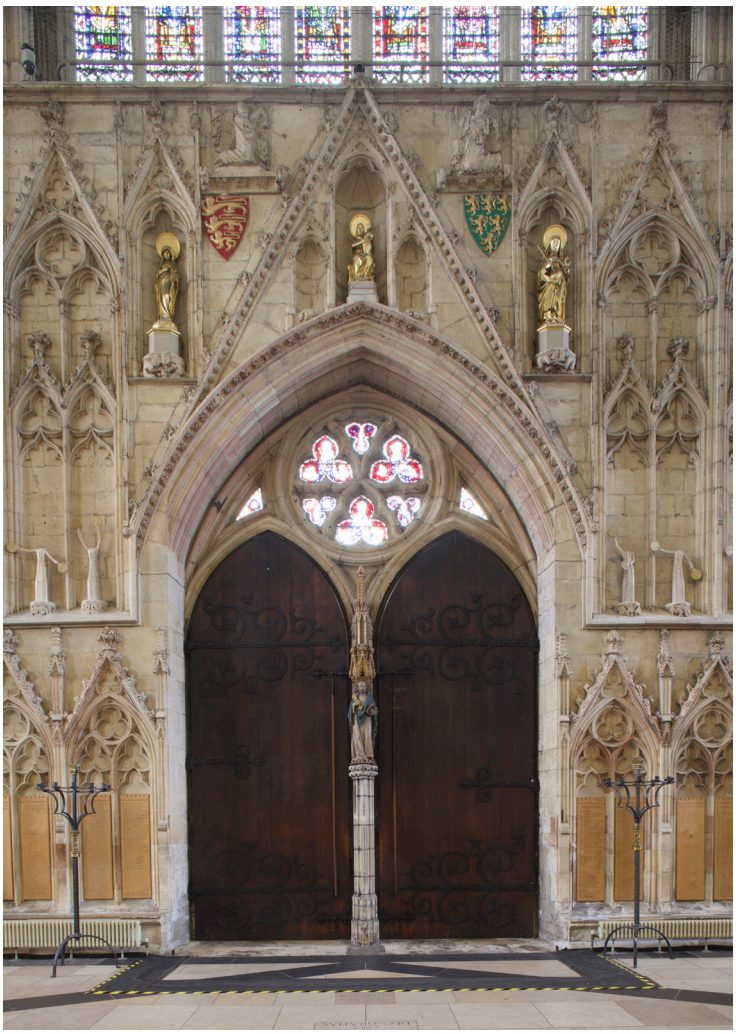
As the seat of the archbishop of York, the Minster is the premier cathedral in the northern province of the English church, equal in status to Canterbury Cathedral in the south. The vast scale of the building, the boldness of its architectural design, the quality of the masonry, and its outstanding collection of stained glass windows – all attest to the determination of successive archbishops and Minster clergy to create a cathedral worthy of its status.[1] The west portal was the principal ceremonial entrance – and also the main ceremonial exit, a fact which is reflected in the importance given to the doorway on the interior as well as on the exterior (ills. 1–2). The main approach to the west front is, and always was, from the south-west. The broad street which leads towards it, flanked by substantial buildings on one side and tree-lined public gardens on the other, is however a product of nineteenth-century urbanism. In the Middle Ages the street was narrow and lined with houses on both sides, and it led not to the existing open piazza, but to a gateway in the wall of the Close which separated the cathedral precinct from the rest of the town. Only the towers and the upper part of the west front would have been visible above the gateway, and the west portal itself would only have come into view after the visitor had passed through the gateway into the modest enclosed space within.[2] Here, the eye would have been drawn to the central portal and to the great traceried window above it. When the façade was built, the sill of the doorway (which is level with the floor of the nave) stood about three feet (nearly a metre) above the exterior ground surface, so the portal would have appeared slightly elevated above the approaching visitor. A striking engraving published by John Britton in 1819 (ill. 3) gives an impression of how it would have looked when approached in this way.[3]

The fine-grained, cream-coloured magnesian limestone of the façade (ill. 4) looks its best in the westering sun of the late afternoon and early evening. But it is also exposed to the full force of the prevailing westerly winds. These blow with such force that passers-by at the west end have sometimes been blown off their feet, or even lifted into the air. It is therefore not surprising that the west front has suffered disproportionately from the elements, and it has undergone more campaigns of restoration over the last two hundred years than any other part of the building. The central portal itself has been the object of several significant interventions.

Restoration History

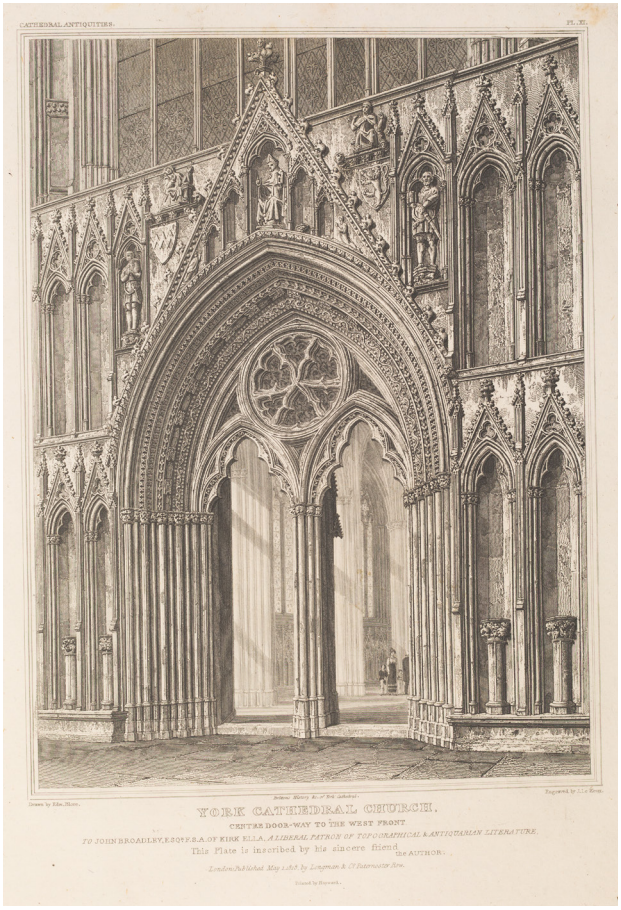
There have been three major campaigns of restoration of the west portal, one in the early nineteenth century, one in the early twentieth century, and the third in the run-up to the millennium. The first of these was supervised by William Shout, the Minster's resident master mason from 1802 to 1816, who carried out an extensive programme of work covering the whole of the west front.[4] Surviving stone-by-stone drawings and a collection of wooden templates which he made for carving replacement stones attest to the care with which Shout approached the task. He used a fine-grained magnesian limestone which closely matched the original, and the quality of his masonry is very high. So good was his work that, after two centuries of exposure to pollutants and the elements, it is often extremely difficult to distinguish from the medieval masonry.

The precise extent of Shout's intervention on the actual portal is not documented. Engravings of it and some of its details had appeared not long before in a volume of plates illustrating the 'Gothic Ornaments' of the Minster by Joseph Halfpenny (ills. 5 and 10). Halfpenny remarked that he had "been induced to represent this elegant specimen of Gothic Ornament as al-



Ill. 2 The inner face of the west portal of York Minster in 2024

most perfect, notwithstanding time has greatly preyed on it; however, sufficient of the mouldings remain to ascertain the design".[5] Although there are slight discrepancies in the proportions and some of the details, the physical evidence confirms the essential correctness of Halfpenny's plate. Already in the earliest photographic records, dating from around 1850, Shout's repairs are indistinguishable from the medieval stonework, the whole surface being streaked and begrimed with soot and dirt.[6] However, stone-by-stone analysis in the 1990s demonstrated the extent of Shout's interventions; though in places it only became clear which stones were Shout's when they were taken out for replacement. In the case of some stones which were not replaced, final certainty was not possible. Shout's work included all of the jambs and the trumeau; the whole of the tracery supported on the trumeau, whose outermost element constitutes the innermost order of the arch; the lower sections of the second, third and fourth orders of the arch, plus some pieced-in surface repairs to the original medieval voussoirs in the upper parts of these orders; much of the fifth, moulded order, and all of the carved hood-mould over the arch; the main gable; and much of the canopy work both within and flanking the gable. The seated archbishop in the central niche and the standing figures of knights on either side were carved by the York sculptor Michael Taylor on the basis of the 'mutilated originals', while other lesser figures were carved by him or under his supervision. These included the censing angels, the small kneeling figures within the gable, and some of the small figurative carvings which alternate with exceptionally complex architectural canopies in the third order of the arch.[7] It emerged during the 1990s restoration that the medieval voussoirs had unusually long tails running back about three feet (almost a metre) into the depth of the wall. When Shout replaced some of the voussoirs, he cut them back to a depth of only about 350 mm, leaving almost two-thirds of them *in situ* in the thickness of the wall so as to provide structural stability. His replacements were then inserted in front. A similar modus operandi was followed in the thoroughgoing restoration of the arch in the 1990s so as not to compromise the structural integrity of the portal.[8]



Ill. 3 Engraving of the west portal of York Minster from the south-west, from Britton 1819, pl. XI

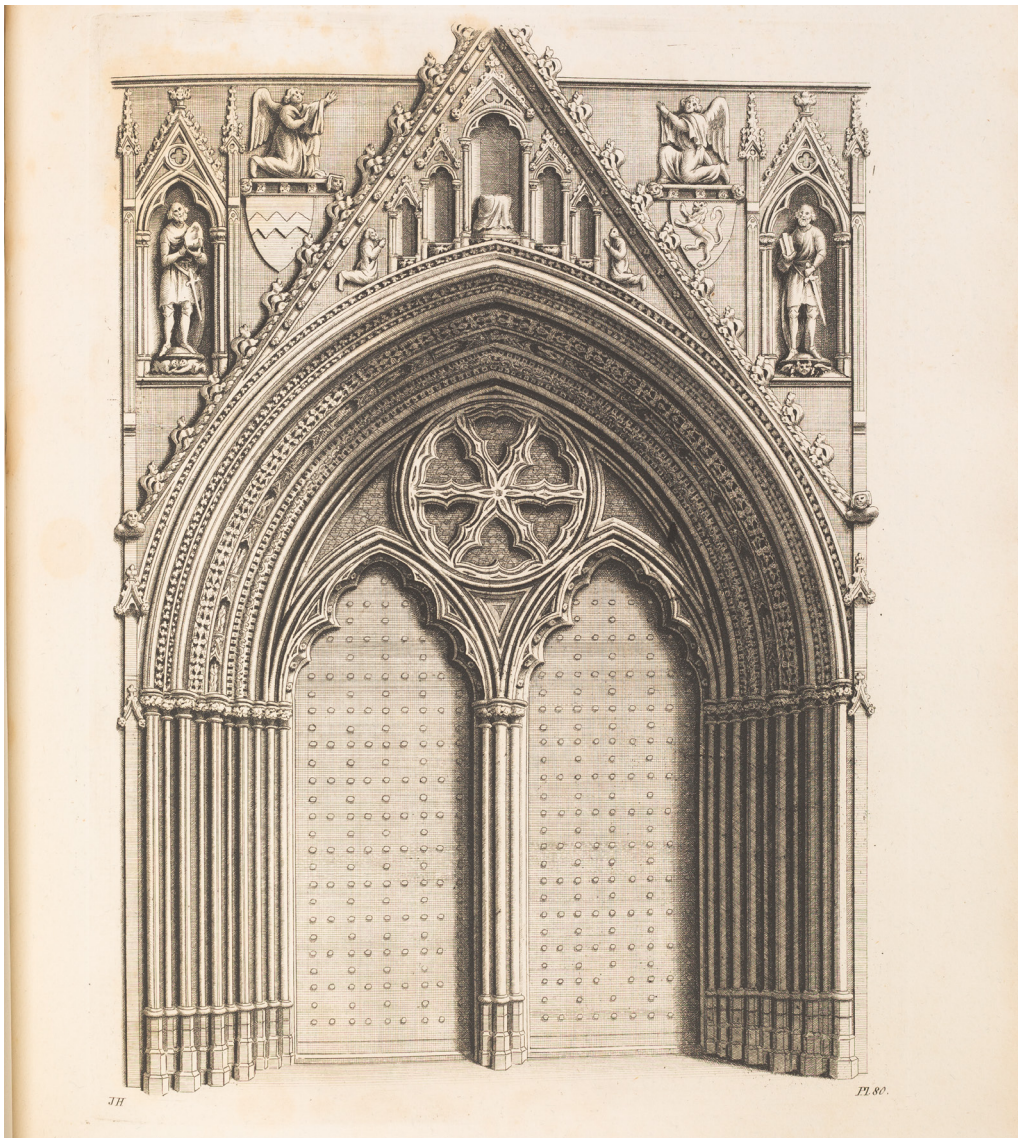
Ill. 4 The west façade of York Minster c. 1990

A second major restoration of the west front was carried out between 1899 and 1907 under the supervision of the architect G. F. Bodley. The portal was one of the last sections to be restored.[9] By then, not only had the medieval masonry suffered further decay, but some of Shout's stonework was itself in need of attention. At the time, the portal was black with pollution, and Bodley employed a brown Ketton stone which, it was hoped, would be more resistant to corrosion. He also used a black mortar designed to match the soot-encrusted surface – a common practice at the time. However, now that the façade has been cleaned, neither his replacement stones nor his mortar harmonise with the rest of the masonry. Aesthetically, the result is unfortunate, but it does make it easy to identify Bodley´ s repairs. As regards the portal, these were concentrated in the architectural detailing above the main arch, including the pinnacle at the top of the gable. He also replaced some of Shout's masonry in the jambs of the doorway. In 1927 the installation of the enormous bell known as Great Peter in the north-west tower necessitated the removal of the trumeau and of the tracery which it supports, there being no other doorway wide enough for it to pass through. When Shout's trumeau was rebuilt, three courses were replaced in brown Ketton stone, and the whole trumeau was reset in black mortar. This has resulted in an unfortunate series of horizontal black strips all the way up the trumeau. The tracery was also reset slightly awry.[10]

Between 1966 and 1972 a massive programme of works affecting the entire Minster was carried out by the conservation architect Bernard Feilden. At the west end, attention focused on the foundations and the structural stability of the western towers. The masonry was also cleaned of centuries of grime with a water treatment, revealing the warm colours of the magnesian limestone. By then, the sculptural details of the arches of the portal were in a parlous condition. In particular, the figurative carvings and their architectural canopies in the third order of the arch, and the deeply-undercut foliage in the fourth order, were in a terrible state (ill. 6). Eventually, in 1980, as a desperate measure of last resort, an experimental chemical treatment was tried using silane (Brethane).[11]

It was hoped that this would stabilise the carvings sufficiently to enable casts to be made; but this proved impossible. The treatment did stabilise the surface for a while, but the process of decay continued beneath. By about 1990 it was evident that the treatment had failed. Fragments of carved detailing were falling off at the slightest touch, the body of the stone was turning to dust, and the figure sculptures were continuing to deteriorate. Although some of the moulded voussoirs in the fifth order (partly medieval and partly by Shout) were still in reasonable condition, it was decided to replace all the voussoirs of the arch, except for the innermost order and the tracery-work above the trumeau which is integral to it. Shout's work here was retained, except for some piece-meal repairs to individual stones. The project was initiated by the architect Charles Brown and his successor James Simpson. The majority of the work was carried out under the supervision of Ian Curry (1995–1998), and it was completed in time for the millennium by Richard Carr-Archer.[12]

Close analysis of the masonry by the cathedral architects and the Minster masons was supplemented by some specialist reports commissioned at an early stage to inform the decision-making process. The Minster's consultant archaeologist, Derek Phillips, recorded the extent of the surviving medieval masonry and of the various phases of restoration, though, as noted above, Shout's repairs were often difficult to distinguish from the medieval stonework. A stone conservation specialist, Seamus Hanna, advised on the best method of consolidating the friable



Ill. 5 Engraving of the west portal of York Minster, from Halfpenny 1795, pl. 80

sculptural details of the arch *in situ*, with a view to preserving the carved voussoirs (if at all possible) after they had been removed. Some of the least decayed ones, still in an extremely fragile state, have subsequently been exhibited in the Minster. The present author reported on the imagery of the portal and the iconography of the sixteen historiated voussoirs in the third order.[13]

Replacement scenes were designed by Rory Young and carved by the Minster carvers. A fine-grained magnesian limestone from the quarry at Walmsworth, near Doncaster, was used for the sixteen figural voussoirs and their accompanying architectural canopies. At close range, the Walmsworth stone is speckled with tiny black inclusions, but these are hardly visible from ground level. Its great advantage, however, is that it is able to take a very fine level of detail. The new voussoirs for the other orders (and the other replacement stones) were carved in stone from another quarry near Doncaster at Cadeby. This is a coarser magnesian limestone which hardly did justice to the skills of the masons and carvers working on the architectural mouldings and the foliate carvings. It will be interesting in the future to see how the two different stones compare in durability. As well as the main arch, most of the foliate hood-mould was replaced, apart from some of Shout's replacements which are still in good condition. The line of the crocketed gable was also completely renewed, apart from the foliate pinnacle at the top; and some piecemeal replacements were made to a few of the less well-preserved stones within and flanking the gable, and to some of the bases and capitals of the jambs.[14]

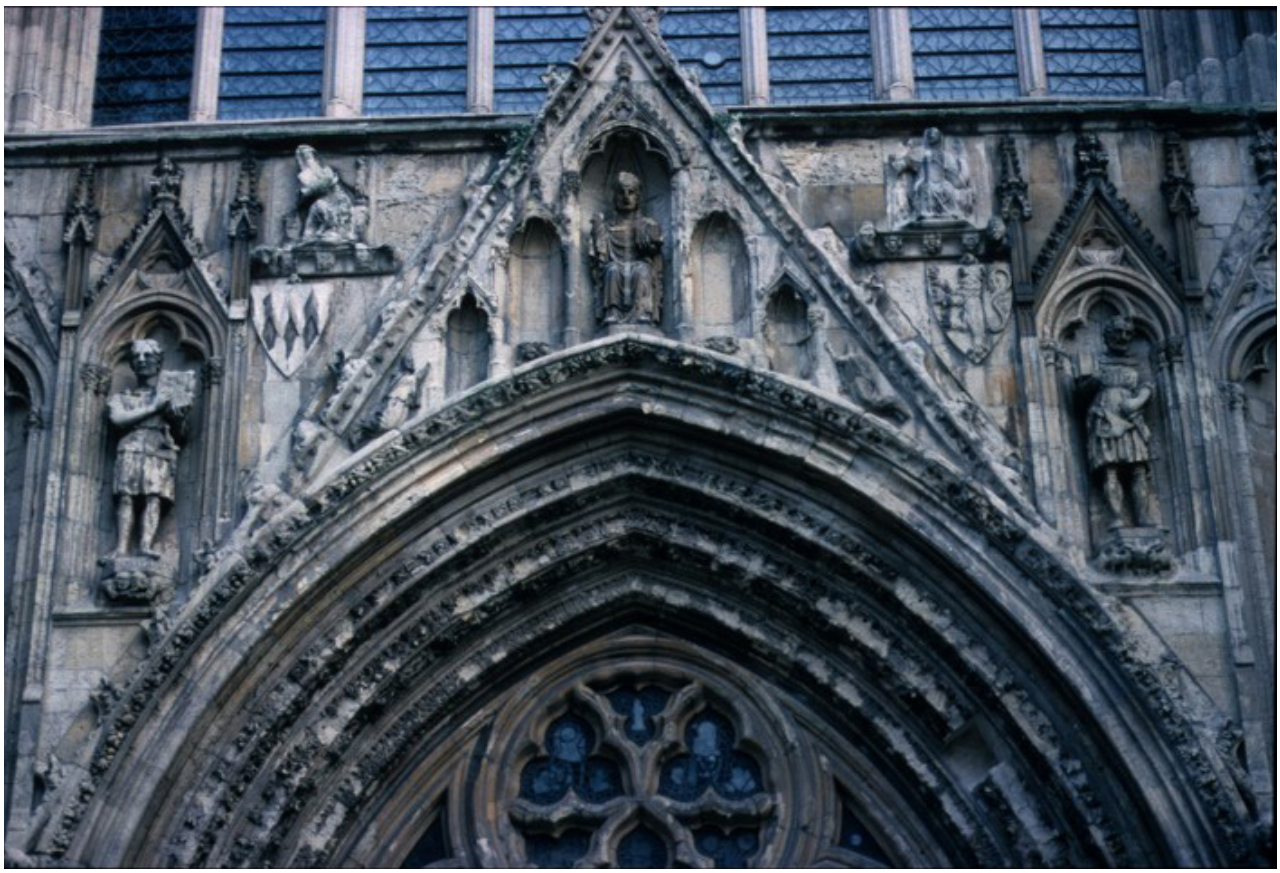
The results of two centuries of restoration may be summarised as follows:

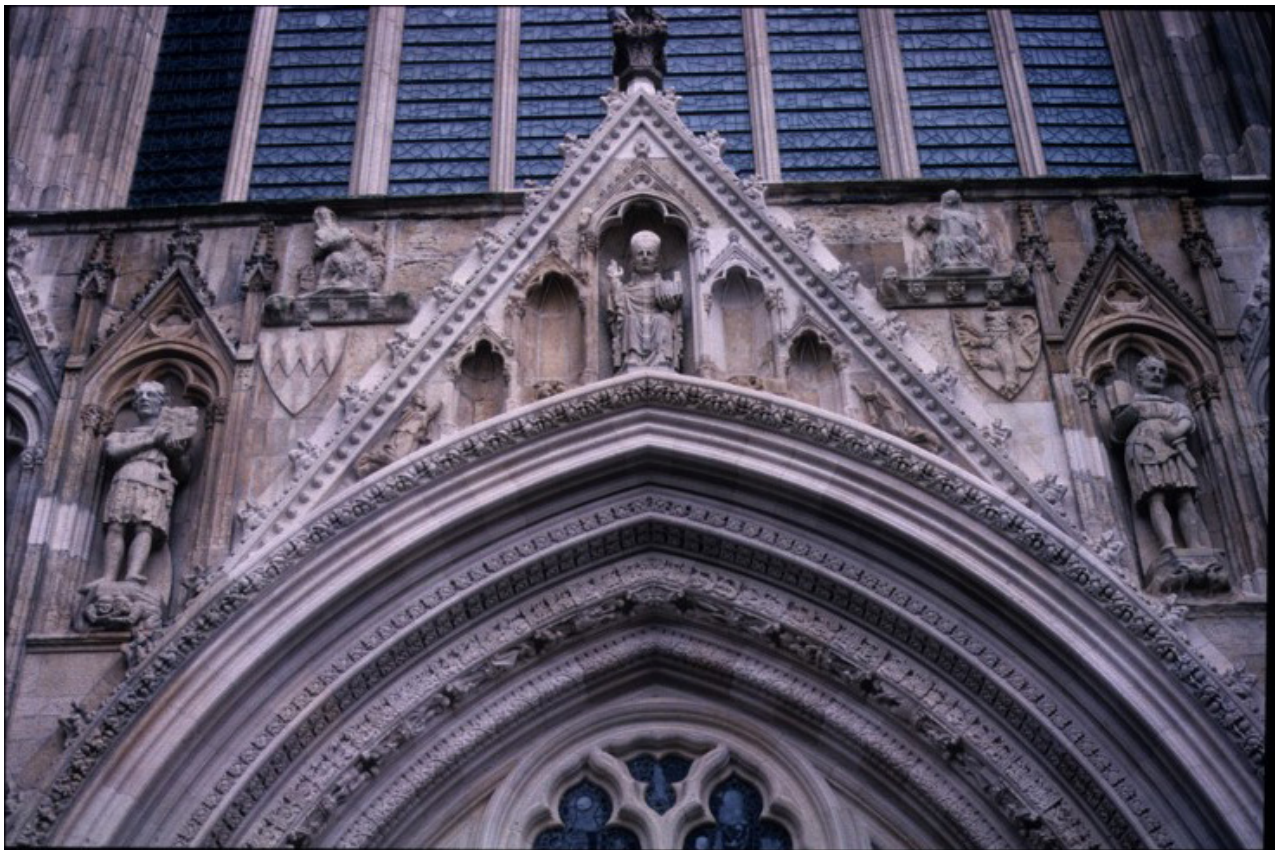
- The jambs of the doorway (including their capitals and bases), the trumeau, and the tracery above it are by Shout, with a few later replacements from the early twentieth century and from the 1990s.
- The remaining four orders of the main arch date entirely to the 1990s.
- The hood-mould, the line of the gable and the masonry both within and flanking the gable are a combination of work by Shout, by Bodley and from the 1990s restoration.
- Original medieval stonework survives, if at all, only in small areas within the gable and at the level of the seated angels to either side.
- In spite of this, the essential elements of the portal are, as far as we can tell, faithful to the original design.

The interior face of the portal (ill. 2), while protected from the ravages of wind, rain and pollution, fell victim to fire. Through the carelessness of some workmen, a fire started in 1840 in the south-west tower.[15] It spread to the high wooden vault and roof of the nave and to the south nave aisle roof. Massive burning timbers fell to the ground and continued to burn fiercely against the piers of the arcades and the west wall. Much of the surface of the limestone was turned red by the flames, and in places the intensity of the heat caused the surface of the masonry to explode or spall off. The bottom of the west wall and the first tier of blind arcading were badly affected, and much of the medieval masonry had to be replaced. However, enough fire-reddened original stonework survives to show that the replacements followed the original design faithfully. The reveals of the doorway were almost entirely refaced up to the level of the springing of the rear-arch; but the rear-arch itself is mostly original, though fire-reddened. The trumeau and the tracery above it were not significantly affected and remain essentially as left by Shout and the early twentieth-century repairs. The figure-sculptures in the niches were placed there in the twentieth century and gilded all over. The censing angels in relief flanking the gable are original. The polychromy on the shields of arms is modern. In short, as on the exterior, the inner face of the portal is largely restoration, but the medieval design has been preserved.

Architectural Context and Design

The west façade was just part of the total rebuilding of the nave. The foundation stone was laid at the south-east corner of the nave by Archbishop John le Romeyn (1285–1296) in 1291, though preparatory work must have started several years earlier. The nave and west front together constitute one of the largest single Gothic building projects in England, and it is not surprising that the work dragged on for many decades, through the archiepiscopates of six of Romeyn's successors. It was only in the 1350s (after the visitation of the Black Death, which reached York in May 1349) that the work ceased; but even then, not everything was finished. The new archbishop, John Thoresby (1352–1373) turned his attention to rebuilding the east end of the Minster (begun in 1361). He completed the essential work on the nave, but he left the west front unfinished at the level of the nave roof. The western towers were not erected until the mid-fifteenth century, while the flying buttresses of the nave had to wait until the beginning of the twentieth century. The exact chronology





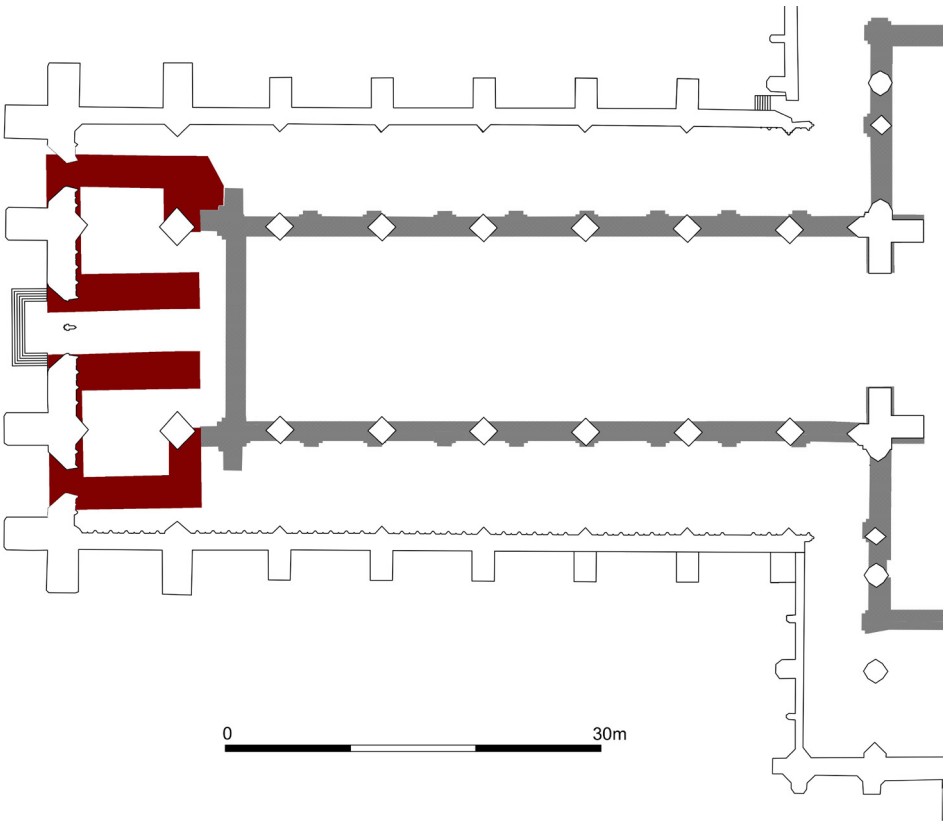
Ill. 6 The main arch of the west portal of York Minster prior to restoration in the mid 1990s (above) and post-restoration (below)

of the work between 1291 and the mid-1350s is for the most part undocumented. The only precise date for the west front comes from the contract for glazing the great west window, which was signed in 1339, almost half a century after the laying of the foundation stone. The façade must have been completed up to nave roof level by then, and the portal must have been built some years earlier, perhaps c. 1320. Careful analysis of the various strands of evidence by Sarah Brown has shown that the work proceeded, broadly speaking, from east to west.[16]

However, it was by no means a simple linear progression, bay by bay. The Gothic nave replaced a late eleventh-century nave which was of unique design among the great churches of the period. It was a vast, aisleless rectangular structure with a clear internal span of 48ft (c. 14.6 m). Its west façade was originally a simple, towerless affair; but in the late twelfth century a twin-towered western block was added on (ill. 7). This was wider than the eleventh-century nave, but not as wide as the Gothic west front, whose west wall overlies the base of the twelfth-century west façade.[17] Faced with a pre-existing nave that was extraordinarily wide by English standards, the Gothic master mason decided to place the new arcades on the line of the eleventh-century exterior walls. This enabled him to re-use the eleventh-century foundations (which were, and are, exceptionally strong), while placing the new exterior aisle walls in open ground to the north and south. This resulted in a building of unusual width and spaciousness, with a very broad façade to match. It also meant that the aisle walls could be laid out and constructed while the old nave and west front were being demolished. Consequently, it appears that the aisle walls were erected in advance of the main arcades, and the aisles were probably for the most part completed before the clerestories of the main elevations were raised. It also appears that, broadly speaking, the south side went up in advance of the north. The sequence of work seems therefore to have been both protracted and unusually complicated. It is all the more striking, therefore, that the design was carried through with remarkable consistency across the whole of the nave. Only in the west front are there signs of changes of design, particularly in the upper parts of the west façade.

This complex structural sequence has implications for the west portal. Like the rest of the nave, work on the portal seems to have proceeded on the south side ahead of the north. This at any rate would explain some curious anomalies in its construction. On the interior (ill. 2), the low wall-bench at the base of the lowest tier of blind arcading, which runs right up to the reveal of the door-jamb on either side, is about four inches (c. 100 mm) higher on the south side than the north. Similarly, the horizontal string-course above the lowest row of blind arcading is higher on the south than on the north. The difference in heights becomes a problem at the level of the rear-arch of the portal. This springs from the same height on either side, and the hood-mould and gable also spring from the same height above the floor on either side. This means that the springing-point is further above the string-course on the north side than on the south. The discrepancy in levels between the two sides has been fudged so successfully that it seems to have escaped attention hitherto. Even at the level of the second string-course, at the base of the great west window, there is a slight dip downwards on the north side.

Clearly, the builders were aware of the problem by the time they reached the springing of the arch. But how can they have built such an anomaly into the base of the walls? The explanation is that the discrepancy was caused by errors in setting-out at the east end of the nave. The difference in levels between the base of the walls on the two sides of the portal continues to the north and south ends of the west wall, and it carries on round the north-west and south-west corners of the building along the full length of the aisle walls. At the east end, where the aisle walls meet the west side of the transepts, the difference between the wall-bench at the base of the south aisle wall and the one at the base of the north aisle wall is about seven inches (c. 175 mm). Similarly, the bases of the main piers of the north nave arcade are lower than their opposite numbers in the south nave arcade. The original bases of the north arcade piers are buried about seven inches (c. 175 mm) below the present floor.[18] In fact, the whole of the north side of the nave is several inches lower than the south side. This discrepancy has nothing to do with differential rates of settlement, or with the weight of the towers. It is built into the structure. Odd though it is, it can easily be explained if the two aisle walls were set out while the eleventh-century nave was still standing. It would have been very difficult to establish a level right across the width of the new nave, and a discrepancy of a few inches could easily have occurred. When the old nave was demolished, perhaps one side at a time, it would have been natural to match the bases of the north and south arcade piers to their adjacent aisles. Similarly, if the south and north sides of the west wall were constructed separately, it would have made sense to set them out at the same level as their respective aisles. The error may only have become apparent at a fairly late date, and it was of little



Ill. 7 Plan of the nave of York Minster, showing the base of the walls of the aisleless eleventh-century nave (grey) and the late twelfth-century western towers (red) underlying the Gothic nave

consequence, structurally or visually, across such a wide building. Only where the masonry of the north and south sides of the building met, in the middle of the west façade, did the anomaly become problematic; and it was disguised in the manner described above.

On the exterior, as noted above, the west façade was designed to accommodate a ground level which was three feet (nearly a metre) lower than the nave floor. Indeed, this difference in level exists the entire length of the nave. This means that the bases of the outer faces of the aisle walls and the west façade wall must have been set out and levelled independently of the interior faces of the walls. The bottoms of the walls to either side of the west portal are covered by steps, so it is not possible to determine if there is any difference in levels between the two sides at the base of the plinths. The bases of the jambs of the portal are level.

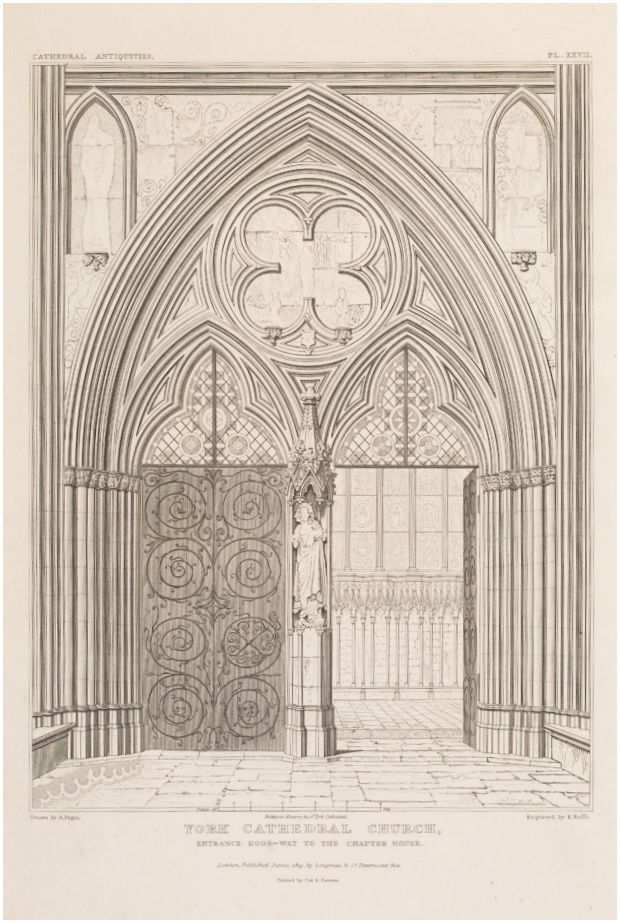
However, there is a horizontal discrepancy between the two sides. The exterior wall-face on the north side of the portal is set about three inches (c. 75 mm) further west than the south side. The masonry over the doorway continues the line of the north side, and the misalignment is corrected at the point where the south side of the portal meets the adjacent blind arcading to the south. Because of the complex arrangement of niches and micro-architectural buttresses, the discrepancy is scarcely noticeable, except for a slight horizontal offset in the string-course beneath the base of the great west window. This anomaly could easily have arisen if the two sides of the west front were set out separately, rather than, as might be expected, as a single unit. It would be consistent with other evidence that the south side of the west wall was built in advance of the north. The jambs of the portal course through with the masonry of the adjacent blind arcading on either side and were presumably constructed at the same time. At the level of the upper tier of blind arcading, however, there are breaks in the coursing on either side where the blind arches meet the statue-niches flanking the main gable. So it may be that the main arch and gable (together with the flanking statue-niches) were constructed as a separate unit. It is possible therefore to envisage a three-phase process of construction: firstly, the wall to the south of the portal along with the south jamb; secondly, the equivalent masonry on the north side; and thirdly, the arch and gable unit to complete the portal. There could have been gaps of some years between the different phases.

So, the portal reflects the extended and complex history of the nave as a whole; and this helps to explain the anomalies in its setting-out and construction. And although it would be useful to know the precise date of construction, it may be helpful to think of it as the

product not so much of a particular moment as of an on-going creative process. There must have been some sort of design for the west front, however sketchy, from the time that the first plans were drawn up c. 1290. The nave has been attributed to a master-mason called Simon, who is first documented in 1301 and who was granted the honour of burial in the nave in 1322.[19] If he was indeed in charge of the project from the laying of the foundation stone until his death, this would help to explain the remarkable homogeneity and consistency of execution which is one of the most striking features of the nave. If Simon was still active when work began on the west portal, its final form could well represent an updated version of a design dating back to c. 1290.

The nave of York is generally considered the closest thing in England to a thorough-going Rayonnant design on the grand scale.[20] Although various individual features can be paralleled at specific sites in France and the Rhineland, no single source can be found for the particular combination of Rayonnant ideas evident at York. Rather, it appears that the York master drew on a wide knowledge of continental Rayonnant designs of the preceding decades and applied them in a unique manner to a building which in a number of important respects reflects both the constraints of the earlier Minster and the established norms of English Gothic. The result is a sophisticated design which brilliantly integrates ideas from a variety of sources into a harmonious whole. The west portal could be seen to exemplify this process in microcosm.

A feature of the nave – which could almost be considered a signature of its designer – is the crocketed gable. This can be found throughout the building, from the smallest micro-architectural details to the largest components of the elevations, and it achieves its fullest expression on the west front. In addition to the countless gabled niches on the façade, the portal picks up the motif of the large gables which cap the traceried windows of the aisles throughout the nave, while the great west window is surmounted by a steeply-pointed gable which pierces the parapet in front of the actual gable-end of the nave roof. The motifs of the gabled window and the gabled portal can of course be found in French Rayonnant buildings from the middle of the thirteenth century onwards. However, the immediate formal precursor of the portal design is the splendid doorway which forms the entrance to the Minster chapter house, which dates from c. 1280 (ill. 8).[21] This in turn harks back to the internal elevation of the entrance into the chapter house at Westminster Abbey of c. 1250, which was at the time (and still is) the most celebrated of the great English polygonal chapter houses (ill. 9).[22]



Ill. 8 Engraving of the entrance into the chapter house of York Minster from the chapter house vestibule, from Britton 1819, pl. XXVII

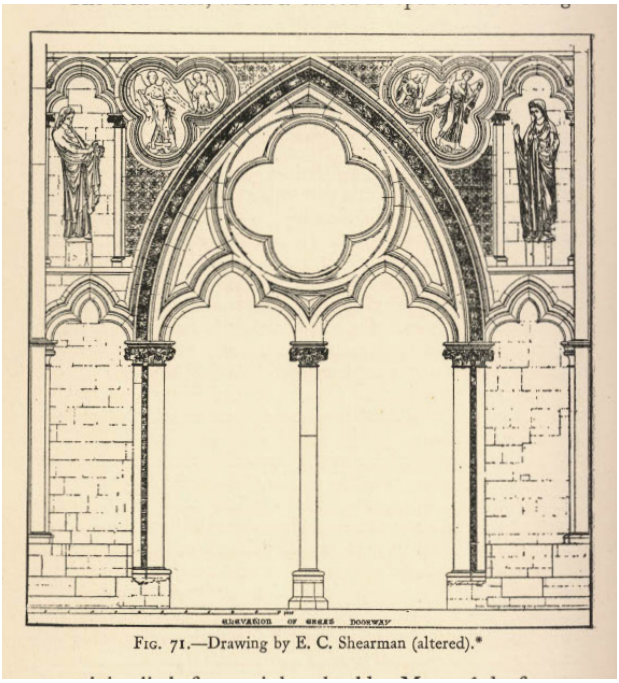


Fig. 71.—Drawing by E. C. Shearman (altered).*

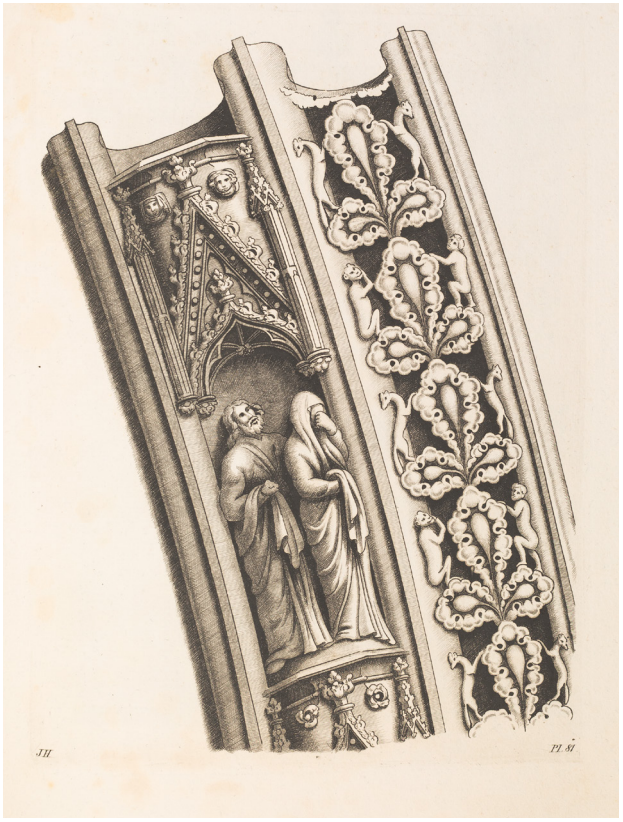
Ill. 9 The inner face of the chapter house doorway at Westminster Abbey, from Lethaby 1925, fig.71

Ill. 10 Detail of the junction of the over-arch and gable on the west portal of York Minster, from Halfpenny 1795, pl.41

At Westminster, a low vaulted vestibule leads via a short flight of steps up to the chapter house entrance. The pierced, openwork tracery of the double doorway enabled the ascending visitor to glimpse the magnificent interior within, though this effect was largely lost when the central oculus was filled with sculpture during the mid nineteenth-century restoration. On the inner face of the entrance wall the portal forms part of a full-height elevation. The doorway and its flanking blind arches form a discrete rectangular unit which is clearly separated by a strong horizontal element from the traceried window above.

At York, the exterior elevation of the portal adopts the same elements, but adapted to the different proportions and structure of the chapter house and its vestibule. Here, the vestibule is vaulted at a much higher level, and the portal is integrated into a full-height elevation, being surmounted by a blind traceried design covering the upper part of the chapter house entrance wall. The large traceried oculus within the entrance arch is also blind, since a passage runs through the thickness of the wall behind it. And at York the entrance is approached on the level of the portal, so the eye is not drawn upwards in the same way as at Westminster, but onwards and through. The entrance bay on the vestibule side is narrower than the interior bay design at Westminster. Instead of the blind arches flanking the doorway at Westminster, the York doorway has much wider jambs (composed of a combination of coursed shafts and *en délit* shafts in Purbeck marble), and the mouldings of the over-arch are wider and deeper. The least satisfactory element of the design is the pair of simple niches within the spandrels. The niches sit very uncomfortably within the spandrels, their inner corners cut off by the arch. The equivalent niches at Westminster (which contain their original sculptures) are placed above the blind trefoil arches flanking the doorway, with the result that they are not cramped, even though they are taller and wider. At York, too, the niches originally contained sculptures, while the plain masonry beneath and to the sides of the niches contained decorative and figurative paintings, now lost.

The west portal of York Minster employs the same architectural elements as the chapter house doorway (ill. 1). The portal is wider and taller, but still forms a discrete unit which is visually distinct from the two tiers of blind arcading on either side. The jambs of the doorway (which are all in coursed masonry) are much wider, reflecting the great width of the nave. The widely-splayed clustered shafts of the north jamb provide a welcoming reception for the visitor approaching from the south west (ill. 3). The trumeau, unusually, contains a niche for a statue on its inner face, but on the exterior consists only of a cluster of fine shafts. The tracery above, as at Westminster, is pierced, but here it is glazed. This has the effect, on the interior, of drawing the eye to the doorway as soon as one leaves the choir. The five orders of the main arch are a combination of moulded and sculpted orders, the latter predominately foliate. The early thirteenth-century south transept portal at York combines a deeply-undercut order of stiff-leaf foliage with moulded orders, while the Westminster chapter house doorway combines mouldings with a sculpted order incorporating small figures; but the orders of the arch are more substantial on the west portal. Characteristically, the intertwined branches in which the figures sit on the voussoirs at Westminster are on the York west portal replaced by micro-architectural niches capped by gables (ills. 11 and 12). The main sculptural ensemble is here placed in gabled niches beneath the main gable (ill. 6). The influence of the chapter house doorway is demonstrated by the way in which, unnecessarily one might think, the inner corners of the statue niches are truncated by the main arch. The spandrels between the statue niches and the main gable are here filled with



Ill. 11 Engraving of voussoir R7 (God calling Cain) and its canopy on the west portal of York Minster, from Halfpenny 1795, pl.81

Ill. 12 Voussoir R2 (the remorse of Adam and Eve), c.1810, on the west portal of York Minster, prior to the restoration of the 1990s

two carved angels and coats of arms (no doubt originally painted), instead of the painted decoration in the equivalent positions on the chapter house portal. On the interior, the same elements are repeated in slightly compressed form (ill. 2). Instead of the widely-spreading jambs, the reveals are plain and steeply angled, in order to accommodate the doors when opened. Consequently, the whole composition is narrower, and the gable is slightly lower. The lateral statue-niches are slightly taller, and although not curtailed by the main gable, they still sit rather uncomfortably right up against it. The junction between the portal unit and the flanking tiers of blind arcading is also managed rather awkwardly.

There is nothing in the architectural composition of the west portal that could not have been conceived when the plans for the nave were first being drawn up c. 1290. The chapter house and its vestibule were being finished off even as work began on the nave, so it is no surprise that the chapter house doorway was drawn on for inspiration for the west portal. The design of the lower tier of blind arcading flanking the portal on the interior certainly goes back to the beginning of the nave, since it is the same as the blind arcading which runs the entire length of the aisle walls from the very earliest work. On the other hand, there are details in the portal which cannot have been envisaged c. 1290. The main gables on both the interior and exterior are ornamented with rows of small ball-flowers, a type of ornament which is common in some parts of England in the first half of the fourteenth century, but very rare in Yorkshire. Ball-flowers also appear on the canopy above the statue-niche on the inside of the trumeau.

The portal also incorporates the discrete use of ogee arches. The ogee first appears in royal building works from 1291 and became very popular in the first half of the fourteenth century in window tracery and other elements of architectural decoration. At York, it is notable by its total absence from the aisle walls and the main elevations of the nave. It appears for the first time unobtrusively in one or two places low in the façade wall underneath the north-west tower – but not at the base of the south-west tower.[23] In fact, its most prominent appearance in the lowest part of the west front is in the tracery of the large oculus in the west portal, where the three large and three small trefoils all employ the ogee (ill. 6). More revealing, though generally overlooked, is the appearance of elaborately decorated *nodding* ogee arches in the micro-architectural

canopies above the figural voussoirs in the third order of the arch (ills. 11 and 12). Much larger nodding ogees appear prominently in the fourth tier of arcading right across the west façade and at the equivalent level on the interior west wall, flanking the great west window. These nodding ogees, which are characteristic of the mature curvilinear style of English Gothic, are generally held to mark the first significant change of design in the entire nave project, one which is also evident in the magnificent curvilinear tracery of the great west window and the flanking clerestorey-level windows beneath the western towers. Large-scale nodding ogees would generally be dated no earlier than about 1320. Highly ornate, smaller-scale nodding ogee arches also appear on the tomb-shrine of St William, which was constructed over the saint's burial-place at the east end of the nave by Archbishop Melton (1314–1340). It has generally been dated c. 1330.[24] The existence of similar nodding ogees in the west portal suggest that the main arch, at least, is unlikely to have been built before 1320. The lower parts of the portal, however, as noted above, particularly on the south side, may have been begun some years earlier.

So, it seems likely that the portal as we know it represents an extended process of design and construction extending back to an early date in the nave campaign, inspired originally by the chapter house portal.[25] The same may apply, *mutatis mutandis,* to the figurative sculpture.

The Figure Sculpture

The third order of the main arch of the York west portal contains one of the few examples in English medieval sculpture of a Genesis cycle. Eight scenes on either side, each carved on a single voussoir, are surmounted by elaborate micro-architectural canopies incorporating nodding ogees. The tomb-shrine of St William also features figural carvings as well as nodding ogee canopies, and it may be that the same sculptors were responsible for both schemes; but the advanced state of decay of the portal sculptures makes stylistic comparisons hazardous.[26]

It has been recognised since at least the eighteenth century that some of the scenes represent Adam and Eve, but they have never received more than a few sentences in print.[27] During the 1990s restoration, the programme of work required a decision to be made about the figural scenes before it was known how many of them were medieval, how many by Shout; and before the iconography had been fully elucidated. It was decided to replace the scenes with a new Genesis cycle designed by Rory Young. This was not to be a copy of the earlier carvings, but to be sympathetic in scale and composition to the earlier work. The cycle extends from the creation of the world at the bottom left, up to the apex of the arch, and down to the sacrifice of Isaac at the bottom right.[28]

When the arch was dismantled, it was finally established that the bottom three scenes on the left (L1-3) and the bottom two on the right (R1-2) were Shout replacements. The other eleven were medieval. The Shout carvings were no better preserved than the medieval ones. A full discussion of their iconography and significance is beyond the scope of the present paper, but the individual scenes can be identified with reasonable confidence (see chart below).

The cycle extends from the Fall to the story of Cain and Abel. There are no creation scenes – not even the creation of Adam and Eve – and none of the theologically important events subsequent to the expulsion of Cain. It is therefore an unusually focussed Genesis cycle, and it is organised in an unusual, not to say awkward manner. Instead of reading in linear order up or down the curves of the arch, the scenes are arranged in pairs across the span of the arch, reading from the bottom

L8	God centences Kain	Cain driven out by the angel	R8
L7	Cain kills Abel	God calls to Cain (ill. 11)	R7
L6	The sacrifice of Cain/Abel	The scarifice of Cain/Abel	R6
L5	Eve spinning	Adam digging	R5
L4	The expulsion fo Eve by the angel	The expulsion of Adam by the angel	R4
L3	Eve hiding in the garden	Adam in the garden	R3
L2	Adam takes the apple from Eve	The remorse of Adam and Eve (ill. 12)	R2
L1	Eve tempted by the serpent	Adam watches	R1

upwards. Many of them form two halves of episodes which are normally represented as single scenes. Thus for instance the Expulsion is shown as a pair (L4 and R4), with Eve being driven out by the angel on the left and Adam on the right. The angel thus appears twice. At the top, the final four scenes depict successive moments in the narrative, and here each pair of voussoirs reads from left to right, up to the apex (L7, R7, L8, R8). This makes it quite difficult to decipher the cycle, and the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the scenes are carved on the soffits of the third order voussoirs, not their outer faces. From straight in front, the scenes cannot be read from any distance (ill. 6), while as one approaches from the south-west only the left-hand half of the cycle can be seen (ill. 3). In fact, the only way to read the whole cycle at once is by standing close up beneath the portal, craning one's neck upwards and looking from side to side. Not a comfortable experience.

The closer one gets, the more difficult it is to see the large figure-sculptures above the arch. Halfpenny's 1795 engraving (ill. 5) shows the five niches within the gable empty, except for the lower legs of a seated figure in the centre, now lost. Other, older engravings of the façade confirm that the figures had been lost at an early date, probably as a result of iconoclasm.[29] The small relief figures kneeling in prayer flanking the niches are replacements by Shout (ill. 13). They appear to be clerics, though their vestments are rather unconvincing, the one on the right has lost its head, while the one on the left has a replacement head, bearded and mitred, of uncertain date. They probably represent two of the archbishops who contributed to the work, or an archbishop and another Minster cleric. The kneeling figures in relief flanking the gable, above the shields of arms, were described by Halfpenny as being *"much injured by the weather"*. He used the better-preserved angels which occupy the equivalent positions on the inside of the portal as the basis for the ones shown in his engraving. Halfpenny's interpretation of them as angels appears to be correct, though the current reliefs, themselves now much affected by weathering, are by Shout.

In 1736 Francis Drake identified the figure in the central niche, which he described as *"much abused"*, as Archbishop Melton.[30] During Shout's restoration the broken remains of the original sculpture were replaced by a figure of an archbishop by Michael Taylor, itself repaired in the 1990s (ill. 14); and the identification as Archbishop Melton (or another archbishop of York) has held sway until recently. This cannot be correct. The draperies of the broken figure

Ill. 13 Kneeling figure of an archbishop in the gable of the west portal of York Minster, carved c.1810 but with a twentieth-century head, prior to the restoration of the 1990s

Ill. 14 Statue of Archbishop Melton by Michael Taylor on the west portal of York Minster, c.1810, prior to the restoration of the 1990s

shown by Halfpenny do not appear to be vestments. More to the point, no archbishop of York would be adored by kneeling clerics and flanked by censing angels. St Peter, the patron saint of the Minster, has been suggested as an alternative, as has St William, the twelfth-century archbishop whose tomb-shrine was reconstructed by Archbishop Melton.[31] However, St William would certainly have been represented in archiepiscopal vestments, as also most probably would St Peter; and neither saint would have been honoured with censing angels. The angels suggest that the central figure would have been either a seated Virgin or a seated Christ.[32] Either would have been appropriate to a Genesis cycle depicting the first Adam and Eve. If it was the Virgin, the four lateral niches could have contained saints (perhaps female) or musical angels; if Christ, then apostles, evangelists or angels holding the instruments of the passion. In favour of Christ is the fact that the late twelfth-century west front contained a large Christ in Majesty flanked by Evangelist symbols.[33] Archbishop Melton was presumably one of the clerics kneeling in adoration beneath.

To either side of the main sculptural group stands a knight, each identified as a member of a prominent Yorkshire family by the accompanying shield of arms: on the right, the arms of the Percy family, on the left the Vavasours (ills. 15 and 16). Halfpenny's 1795 engraving (ill. 5) confirms the essential reliability of the copies made by Michael Taylor during Shout's restoration. Vavasour has a replacement head of probably twentieth-century date. He looks straight ahead, while Percy looks down to the right. Halfpenny's engraving shows both men facing inwards towards the central group beneath the gable, which is more plausible iconographically. Two unpublished sketches by the antiquarian John Carter, made prior to the Shout restoration, suggest that the heads were considerably eroded, as no doubt were the surfaces of the statues. Taylor may have borrowed some of the details from some contemporary statues of knights which originally stood in the openings of the nave triforium.[34] There is a long tradition, extending as far back as James Torre c. 1690, that the figures were holding building materials which they had donated to the fabric, Vavasour a stone, and Percy a piece of timber.[35] However, as John Browne pointed out as long ago as 1847, charter evidence from the late twelfth century onwards proves that both the Vavasours and the Percies were generous donors of stone over many decades, indeed centuries.[36] Both families held estates near Tadcaster in the area where magnesian limestone was quarried. There is no evidence that either family gave timber for the Minster, so both figures were probably represented offering gifts of building stone.

The arms of Percy and Vavasour recur on sculpted stone shields set into the south face of the south-west tower, below the clerestory-level window. They must have been broadly contemporary with the west doorway, though the shields themselves appear to be replacements by Shout. Seldom noticed nowadays, when painted in their proper heraldic colours they would have stood out clearly against the creamy Tadcaster limestone whose donation they record. A few decades later, another pair of statues of Percy and Vavasour (now lost) were placed in niches at a low level on the north and south buttresses of the east façade of the new Lady Chapel.[37] Inside the Minster, the arms of many noble and knightly families are displayed on stone shields carved in relief in the spandrels of the arcades of the nave. It is assumed that they represent donors. Many more secular shields appear in stained glass in the tracery of the windows of the chapter house and in the chapter house vestibule, dating to the 1290s, and in the nave aisle and clerestory windows of a few decades later. Some of the

Ill. 15 Statue of Vavasour by Michael Taylor on the west portal of York Minster, carved c. 1810 but with a twentieth-century head, prior to the restoration of the 1990s

Ill. 16 Statue of Percy by Michael Taylor on the west portal of York Minster, c. 1810, prior to the restoration of the 1990s

latter are accompanied by images of the donors. There were also statues of knights and secular lords and ladies in the openings of the nave triforium. All in all these add up to one of the most extensive displays of chivalric and heraldic imagery inside any cathedral.[38] Coats of arms of secular benefactors were sometimes displayed on ecclesiastical gatehouses, as at nearby Kirkham Priory; and the iconography of founders and patrons holding models of the churches they paid for is well known. However, it is hard to find a parallel for images of secular figures (who were neither founders nor official patrons) holding building materials placed in such a prominent position over the principal portal of a cathedral.

On the south-west tower, the arms of Percy and Vavasour are accompanied by the royal arms of England in their pre-1340 form. Torre recorded that the apex of the main gable of the west portal also bore the arms of England, in the form adopted by Henry IV c. 1406 and borne by his royal successors for the next two centuries. The arms can just be seen in an engraving of 1672, but seem to have disappeared by the early eighteenth century.[39] Although this might seem an incongruous, not to say presumptuous position for the royal arms, the trio of arms on the south-west tower suggest that the shield recorded by Torre may have been a replacement for one bearing the pre-1340 royal arms. During the Scottish wars, from the 1290s to the 1330s, Edward I, Edward II and Edward III all spent time at York and some departments of the royal administration were based in York for periods of some years. Edward II was married to Philippa of Hainault in the Minster in 1328, and could well have passed through the west portal. If the chivalric and heraldic emphasis of the interior decoration of the Minster is in part a reflection of the political and military importance of York at the time, a visible declaration of royal affiliation on the portal would have been particularly appropriate.

The arms of England survive on the inside of the portal, paired with the arms attributed to Ulf, who was a great benefactor of the Minster in the eleventh century (ill. 2). Both reappear in the spandrels of the arcades at the east end of the nave.[40] The rest of the medieval sculptures on the inner face of the portal

have been lost, apart from the two censing angels. The statues which were placed in the three principal niches in the twentieth century are badly out of scale and grossly gilded. The original scheme was presumably a compressed version of that on the exterior. The two lateral niches would have contained statues of Ulf and the king, while the niches within the gable – here just a trio, without the kneeling figures beneath – mostly likely contained a Virgin and Child or a figure of Christ (whichever was not on the exterior), with supporting figures. There are no historiated voussoirs on the interior, but there is a statue-niche on the trumeau. Unlike the Virgin and Child on the chapter house trumeau (ill. 8), this figure was not integral to the structure, and it disappeared before the earliest antiquarian records were made. The statue of St Peter is of nineteenth-century date.

In conclusion, the structure of the portal preserves the integrity of the medieval architectural conception on both the exterior and the interior, even though the actual stonework is mostly of nineteenth- and twentieth-century date. The design draws on the chapter house doorway of c. 1280, adapted for its position in the centre of the west façade and updated in some of its detail. The sculptures have suffered greater losses. In their present state, on both the inner and outer faces of the doorway, they incorporate elements from the fourteenth century, the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century combined to form ensembles which are fragmented and iconographically incoherent. Nevertheless, enough remains to reconstruct the broad outlines of the medieval scheme, whose most interesting and original elements were the Genesis cycle on the voussoirs and the strikingly prominent commemoration of the most important benefactors of the Minster's fabric fund. The relationship of these sculptures to the other figure sculptures on the fourteenth-century west façade and to the sculptural array on the late twelfth-century west front which preceded it are topics for further investigation.

Notes

1 The cathedral at York is traditionally known as the Minster, a term applied to a number of the more important churches in England, but with no exact significance in terms of status. The best general history of the Minster is Aylmer, Gerald E./Cant, Reginald (eds.): A History of York Minster, Oxford 1977. The standard work on the architecture of the Minster is Brown, Sarah: 'Our Magnificent Fabrick'. York Minster, An Architectural History c. 1220–1500, Swindon 2003. I am indebted to Sarah Brown for many discussions about the Minster over the years.

2 The narrow street leading towards the west front can be seen in photographs of the 1840s and 1850s (see Murray, Hugh: Photographs and Photographers of York – The Early Years 1844–1879, York 1986, pp. 13, 37 and 47); but the gateway into the Close, which would have restricted the view still further, had already been demolished in 1828. The very restricted view from the gateway itself can be seen in a pre-demolition drawing reproduced in Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 118, fig. 3.45.

3 The ground level at the west end has risen over the centuries. In the late eleventh century it was about six feet (nearly two metres) below the level of the nave floor. By the time the present west front was constructed, it was three feet (nearly a metre) below the nave floor, as was confirmed during the 1990s restoration. The ground level continued to rise thereafter, but it was lowered again during the reconfiguration of the space around the west end in the second decade of the nineteenth century; and it has been re-adjusted and resurfaced on various occasions since. The engraving (ill. 3) is from Britton, John: The History and Antiquities of the Metropolitical Church of York, London 1819, pl. XI.

4 Britton 1819 (see note 3), p. 40; Browne, John: The History of the Metropolitan Church of St Peter, York, 2 vols, London 1847, p. 318.

5 Halfpenny, Joseph: Gothic Ornaments in the Cathedral Church of York, York 1795, pls. 41 and 80. Other details from the west portal are shown on pls. 35, 42, 43, 81 and 88.

6 See for instance Murray 1986 (see note 2), pp. 45–46.

7 Britton 1819 (see note 3), p. 40; Browne 1847 (see note 4), pp. 138 and 318; Purey-Cust, Arthur, P: Restoration of York Minster: Sixth Occasional Paper, Leeds 1903, p. 24.

8 See the booklet entitled: The Great West Door, York c. 1999, pp. 1–4.

9 See Purey-Cust, Arthur P: The Restoration of York Minster, Tenth Occasional Paper, Leeds 1907.

10 Potter, David: The Bells and Bellringers of York Minster, York 2009, pp. 57 and 61. It is possible that the trumeau and the tracery had been removed and reset on previous occasions for the passage of bells or other large items. This could also have happened in the fifteenth century so as

to allow large items of equipment and materials into the building when the western towers were being constructed.

11 Feilden, Bernard M.: The Wonder of York Minster, York 1975, pp. 41–42 and 122–124; E. Leary: Report of the Brethane Treatment of the Great West Doorway at York Minster, unpublished report, N 66/81, Building Research Establishment, May 1981.

12 The Great West Door (see note 8); Mills, Stephen: The restoration of the great west door of the Minster, in: Friends of York Minster Annual Report, 68 (1997), pp. 45–48.

13 Copies of these reports and other documentation relating to the 1990s restoration are in the Minster Archives.

14 The extent of the 1990s stone repairs can be seen clearly in the photograph on the front cover of The Great West Door (see note 8). After twenty years, the new stone blends in much better with the rest of the stonework.

15 Browne 1847 (see note 4), pp. 324–327. Toy, John (ed.): The Fires of York Minster from AD 741 to 9 July 1984, London 1985, pp. 6–8.

16 Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 87–136, citing previous literature.

17 Harrison, Stuart/Norton, Christopher: York Minster, An Illustrated Architectural History 627 – c. 1500, York 2015, pp. 19–33. For full discussion of the eleventh and twelfth-century Minster, see Harrison, Stuart/Norton, Christopher: An Architectural History of York Minster c. 1070–1220 (An Architectural History is still forthcoming!).

18 This was confirmed when the floor-slabs were taken up around the bases of the north arcade piers, see Hall, Richard: Archaeology at York Minster, in: Friends of York Minster Annual Report, 71 (2000), pp. 69–74. There is not space here to examine the significance of this discrepancy in full.

19 Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 116–117.

20 Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 94–101 and references there cited; Wilson, Christopher: The Gothic Cathedral, London 1990, pp. 186–188.

21 On the chapter house, see Britton 1819 (see note 3), pl. XXVII and Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 46–85 and references there cited; also Wilson, Christopher: Not without Honour save in its own Country? Saint-Urbain at Troyes and its Contrasting French and English Posterities, in: Gajewski, Alexandra/Opačić, Zoë (eds.): The Year 1300 and the Creation of a New European Architecture, Turnhout 2007, pp. 107–121, esp. pp. 114–15.

22 Lethaby, William Richard: Westminster Abbey Re-examined, London 1925, fig. 71; Rodwell, Warwick/Mortimer, Richard (eds.): Westminster Abbey Chapter House. The History, Art and Architecture of 'a chapter house beyond compare', London 2010, especially the chapter by Wilson, Christopher: 'The chapter house of Westminster Abbey: harbinger of a new dispensation in English architecture?' on pp. 40–65. The Salisbury Cathedral chapter house entrance was also inspired by the one at Westminster, but adapts the design in different ways.

23 Ball-flowers and ogees are discussed by Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 111–114.

24 Wilson, Christopher: The Shrines of St William of York, York 1977, pp. 12–17.

25 The Westminster-York genealogy of these portals is confirmed by counter-examples of other portals whose design is quite different, such as the south transept portal of York Minster of the second quarter of the thirteenth century, the Judgement Portal at Lincoln of the third quarter (see the article of Jennifer Alexander in this volume), or the west doorway of St Mary's Abbey, York of c. 1290.

26 Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 123; Wilson 1977 (see note 24). Dawton, Nick: The Percy Tomb at Beverley Minster: the style of the sculpture, in: Thompson, Frederick Hugh (ed.): Studies in Medieval Sculpture, London 1983, pp. 122–150 at pp. 143–146 discusses the stylistic affinities of the nave sculptures, but omits the figures on the voussoirs and on the tomb-shrine of St William.

27 Drake, Francis: Eboracum, London 1736, p. 484; Halfpenny 1795 (see note 5), pls 80–81; Browne 1847 (see note 4), p. 138; Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 120.

28 The new cycle is fully illustrated in The Great West Door (see note 8); see also Young, Rory: The new Genesis cycle for the west front of York Minster and Toy, John: The message of the Genesis cycle in the new great west door, in: Friends of York Minster Annual Report, 68 (1997), pp. 48–56 and 56–62.

29 One earlier engraving of c. 1705, after a drawing by the topographical artist Francis Place, does show an intact figure in the central niche which could conceivably be a Virgin and Child (Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 120). However, this is only a tiny detail in a much larger image, and it is probably artistic licence. A few years earlier, the York antiquarian James Torre, who made extraordinarily detailed records of the Minster fabric c. 1690, noted: "Above the said door is an arched work raised inclosing severall statues probably in allusion to Christ and some of his Apostles." (James Torre: The Antiquities of York Minster, manuscript notes, York Minster Archives, MS L1/7, f. 17r). It is not clear whether this refers to anything more than the fragmentary sculpture in the central niche and the kneeling figures in relief below, as shown by Halfpenny a century later. Torre describes the statues of the knights on either side separately.

30 Drake 1736 (see note 27), p. 484.

31 Wilson 1977 (see note 24); Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 120–121.

32 One might compare the late thirteenth-century seated figure of Christ from Rievaulx Abbey illustrated in Alexander, Jonathan/Binski, Paul (eds): Age of Chivalry: Art in Plan-

tagenet England 1200–1400 (Exhibition Catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts), London 1987, pp. 344–345.

33 Norton, Christopher: The stone which the builders rejected..., in: Romanesque - Stone Sculpture from Medieval England (Exhibition Catalogue, Henry Moore Institute), Leeds 1993, pp. 8–17; Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 121.

34 John Carter drawings, British Library, ms Add 29929, f. 79. The triforium sculptures are discussed and illustrated by Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 125–129.

35 Torre manuscript (see note 29); Drake 1736 (see note 27), p. 484 and numerous later authorities.

36 Browne 1847 (see note 4), pp. 46–50 and 139. The Percies also granted the church of Topcliffe to the fabric fund, and this continued to provide an important source of income for work on the building throughout the Middle Ages. See also the charters printed by Raine, James: The Fabric Rolls of York Minster (Surtees Society, 35), Durham 1859, pp. 142–148 and 153. The Vavasours again supplied stone for the restoration of the east end after the fire of 1829. See Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 300.

37 Britton 1819 (see note 3), I, p. 15 and pl. VI; Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 155.

38 See discussion in Brown 2003 (see note 1), pp. 47–83 and 122–136.

39 Torre manuscript (see note 29), including a sketch of the arms; Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 121.

40 Brown 2003 (see note 1), p. 278.

Credits

Ills. 1, 2, 7: Stuart Harrison
Ills. 3, 5, 8, 10, 11: Borthwick Institute, University of York
Ill. 4: Ross Dallas
Ills. 6, 13-16: Christopher Norton
Ills. 9, 12: University of York