In the beginning...

It all began with water, essential to life and strong focus of religious faiths, in this case the springs or wells (which give the city its name) bubbling up from the limestone out of the silt, now to be found in the garden of the bishop’s palace. The largest spring, isolated from the other three, is by tradition known as St Andrew’s Well, and was possibly the focus, in pre-historic times of worship. Stone Age tools found in the vicinity point to interest in the site thousands of years ago, as people often followed water courses as an easier means of travel, and may indeed have worshipped nature spirits there. There is evidence too of Roman occupation but not a complete urban settlement. What was found, in the archaeological investigations of the late 1970s, was the base of a Romano-British mausoleum, with a stone-lined burial chamber still evident, most probably early Christian. The pure water of the springs gave a feeling of mystery and wonder to the site.

The first cathedral

It was not surprising therefore that King Ina of Wessex (688-726), in c.705, is said to have given permission for the founding of a minster church, with the ambition of christianizing Somerset. What is certain is that the bishop of the new diocese of Sherbourne, Aldhelm, founded this church. Sherbourne, a very large diocese, needed help if Christianity was to flourish throughout Somerset. Aldhelm remained closely connected to the area and died in Douling in 709. Almost nothing is known about this early church: it may originally have been wooden. The first written evidence dates from 766 when Cynewulf of Wessex endowed ‘the minster beside the great spring called Wielea (Wells)’ with an extra eleven hides of land. The original building undoubtedly grew and was
Looking up at the simple ribbed vault, again a feature of Early English Gothic, a blue and red leafy pattern can be seen throughout its length. This was rediscovered in the mid 1800s when much necessary cleaning and restoration took place. Two years were devoted to the so-called ‘great scrape’ (1842-44) to rid the building of its white lime-wash, originally applied at the time of the Reformation to cover all the dramatic medieval paint. A stencil of this pattern was made and the design reproduced throughout the nave and transepts. This decoration is based on the Persian Tree of Life, appealing to the Christian idea of eternity. When the plaster of the vaults was cleaned, repaired and repainted in the mid 1980s, more of this leafy design was discovered, revealing that not all the designs were identical, but evolved from east to west. However, for simplicity, it was decided to keep to the one design reproduced by the restorers of the nineteenth century.

The one scissor arch which dominates the nave so effectively will be dealt with in the next chapter, as it is essentially part of the crossing. However, the Rood figures belong to the nave area. Originally, similar figures were placed there in the latter part of the fifteenth century by Dr Hugh Sugar, treasurer of the cathedral. These may indeed have replaced even earlier figures (Colchester). During the Reformation, these figures were destroyed, with only the stump of the wooden cross remaining in its stone socket. As an experiment, Dean Armitage Robinson placed a simple wooden cross there in 1912, which was replaced c.1920 with the present, slightly more elaborate cross and the Rood figures of the crucified Christ, flanked by Mary his mother on the left and the beloved disciple John on the right. These were designed by the consultant architect, Sir Charles Nicholson and carved by Guglielmo Tosi of Brompton.
‘break’, noticing that they lean away from the crossing. At that time, extra strengthening was given to the nave arches at triforium level, not visible from the ground but still in position in the south nave aisle roof space. With the much increased height after 1313–1322, it is hardly surprising to find the structure in trouble.

Corrective measures in plenty were taken. The arcade arches on both sides immediately to the west of the crossing and those to the north and south had extra shafts added giving an additional 45 cm (18 inches) support. These are obvious from the new designs of the mouldings and capitals, quite different from the stiff-leaf carving and more perpendicular in style. Internal buttresses in the same area were inserted at triforium to clerestory level. High up in the clerestory on both sides of the crossing, partially blocked up windows with this extra buttressing are clearly visible from both transepts, and also in the first nave bay on each side. These probably did most of the work in stabilizing the structure. Two triforium arches on both sides of the nave abutting the crossing were also blocked as further buttressing: all part of the general campaign to stop the tower from collapsing.

Thomas of Whitney, master mason at the start of the proceedings, was succeeded by William Joy, who was certainly responsible for the spectacular scissor arches, built between 1338 and 1348. These have been much discussed as to the degree of weight transference and bracing. Modern opinion seems to be that their effect is not great in terms of structural efficacy but they are a powerful statement of confidence. Whatever the case, there has been no more movement in the structure since. Scissor arches were not unique to Wells. They were used on a smaller scale in the eastern transepts at Salisbury and in Glastonbury Abbey, where now only the springers are visible, rising from the ground. After the Black Death in 1348, and designed by William Joy who is presumed to have perished in the Plague, a very modern-looking grid system was inserted into the tower higher up on the inside, to strengthen and keep straight the lightened outer wall. This was the last measure to be carried out.

The Fan Vaulting
The original intention was of an open tower with light streaming down from above, from louvred windows and a hanging lantern. This was a popular concept at the time and indeed, to this day, beautiful rounded mouldings and shafts, designed to be seen from below, still exist above the present crossing vault. The fan vaulting was added c.1480 and was the work of William Smyth, master mason who was also responsible for the fan vaulting in the Stillington Chapel and for the canopy in Dr Sugar’s chantry chapel; he was subsequently involved with the nave and transept vaulting of Sherborne Abbey. The work in the crossing came some while after the collapse of the cap spire in 1438, which had been struck by a bolt of lightning. Although the spire was never rebuilt (could God have spoken?) decorative pinnacles in perpendicular style, apart from the original large corner ones, were added to finish off the parapet of the tower. Coupled with these repairs, it was decided to fill in the crossing with the fan vaulting, to prevent often quite strong down-draughts, uncomfortable for those processing into the quire. Enough of an opening was left for a hanging lantern still to give some down-light, nowadays substituted by large electric spot lights.

Right in the centre of the crossing is a circular Maundy Stone, dated 8th April 1993, in Belgian blue marble (a polished limestone) with a surround of York Crossland stone. It commemorates the visit of Her Majesty the Queen and was unveiled by Sir Walter Luttrell, Lord Lieutenant of Somerset. It was designed by the former cathedral architect Alan Rome who also designed the present organ case in 1974 when still in office. The lettering was cut by Leda Kindersley and Eric Morland.
the medieval glass. On the south, the window shows St Patrick, St Dunstan, and St Benignus. Installed in 1846, it was designed by Thomas Willement, who was also responsible for the restoration of the east window of the Lady Chapel.

At Whitsun 1847, after a lapse of over a century, processing was reintroduced into the quire, in an attempt to give more dignity to the proceedings. Mention has been made (Colchester) of an original bow-fronted throne, the cathedra, truncated to allow for more processional space. However, recent in-depth examination of the throne has been carried out by Andrew Budge from which it would appear that there is no evidence of an alteration in the structural shape at the front. Salvin did make several repairs and alterations, using Doulting stone in what is predominantly a throne constructed in Bath stone by the master mason William Joy. He moved the stone access door from the west side of the cathedra to the east, giving the bishop more space to take his seat. Also clearly visible is paler Bath stone used to heighten the crenellations on either side, presumably when the original decorative pinnacles topping them were removed. Canon Barnard described the stone as being painted to look like green marble with a landscape at the back (probably eighteenth century). This was laboriously scraped off. Opposite the cathedra is the nineteenth century pulpit, designed by Salvin and paid for by Dean Jenkyns and his wife. Also put in place was a new Willis organ, so large that Salvin was obliged to push out the centre section of the stone pulpitum to accommodate the pipes. The opening recital on the new organ was given on 2nd June 1857. Costs for all this work were a constant source of worry and in the quire alone, came to £4,694 8s. 9d. Despite generous gifts, such as that of £1,000 from Dean Jenkyns himself, a temporary loan had to be negotiated.

Further Developments
The Embroideries
The stall banners in particular, but also all the cushions and backs, give a welcome warmth to the general atmosphere of the quire. They were executed in the period between 1937 and 1952; a large proportion during the Second World War. Alice, Lady Hylton designed the needlework and gathered together about a hundred embroiderers of whom seven were men. Dean Malden (1933-50) chaired a committee, formed to co-ordinate the work and it was he originally who, impressed by the embroideries at Winchester Cathedral, planted the germ of an idea to enhance the quire at Wells. He was aided by the architect, Sir Charles Nicholson who suggested covering the backs of the stalls with decorative banners.

Spread over all the seats is a wealth of design and detail, ranging from myth and legend, kings and bishops, to organists, ancient music notation and illuminated manuscripts. The bishop’s seat is embellished with, appropriately, a jewelled embroidery of St Andrew, patron saint of the cathedral. Looking at the stall banners, there are five with gold backgrounds to denote the five canons (the quinque), who in medieval times formed the administrative chapter: the dean, precentor, chancellor treasurer and archdeacon of Wells. All the others have backgrounds alternating red and blue. They contain designs representing a selection of bishops through the ages, depicted in anti-clockwise direction, starting next to the dean’s stall with Bishop John Drokensford (1309-29), right round to Bishop Wynne Willson (1921-37), next to the precentor’s stall. All have coats of arms, names and dates and stories of their time, or particular interests of an individual bishop. All have mitres except two, who are distinguished by cardinal’s hats, namely Hadrian de Costello and Thomas Wolsey. This great enterprise still enthuses even those with no particular needlework skills, by the sheer variety of theme, colour and stitches, so beautifully executed.
early representation of the arms of the Dean and Chapter. The top panel in the centre light is the badge of King Richard II from the late fourteenth century, depicting his emblem: a white hart around whose neck is a collar and chain. In the top tracery light is the shield of the See of Bath and Wells (late fourteenth/early fifteenth century). Much of the glass in this window was assembled from other parts of the cathedral.

In the fourth window from the west in the top tracery, is a delicate and tender representation of the Virgin and Child. The Virgin is both crowned and haloed and the Child on her knee is touching her chin with his right hand and holding a small bird in his left. Mother and Child are looking at each other (1330-35). Below this image are two censing angels on the right and left, both angels are facing towards the Virgin and Child, swinging a censer in their right hand and holding an incense boat in the left (1330-35). There is a small section of a canopy in the main central light, which may have been moved from elsewhere.

The fifth and final window to the east has a depiction of St Michael in the top tracery. He is spearing a dragon at his feet with his right hand and has a shield by his left side.

**St Katherine’s Chapel**

From the south quire aisle, where the early medieval wall bench comes to an end, is the entrance on the south side to St Katherine’s chapel. This has many similarities to the corresponding chapel of Corpus Christi on the north side. Both were built as part of the eastern arm of five chapels, under the direction of Thomas of Witney, who had worked at Winchester. He was at that time living and working in Exeter cathedral but combining this with necessary visits to Wells. Corpus Christi and St Katherine’s were completed by 1328 and 1329 respectively, at about the time when William Joy replaced Thomas of Witney (c.1327) as master mason; by then Witney was over sixty. In 2003/4 dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) was carried out on the roof timbers of St Katherine’s chapel, giving a tree felling date of c.1325 which would confirm satisfactorily the date of the chapel.

The central boss of this chapel vault has been wrongly described as a Katherine wheel, which would of course have been appropriate until it is compared with the almost identical boss in Corpus Christi chapel. The only difference is that there are nine small heads (three in the centre and six round the outside) on the boss in St Katherine’s, elsewhere described as a group of virgins, except that three are definitely bearded!

![St Katherine’s chapel central boss](image)

This chapel is dedicated to Justice and Peace and, as a symbol, the Amnesty candle burns by the south wall with a prisoner of conscience named each month to represent all victims of injustice in prayer. This candle stands on the tomb of Dean John Gunthorpe (1472-98), a man of action who built a whole wing on the Deanery. His rebus of a cannon or gun can be seen on the outside of the structure. On the top edge of the tomb, on the right, an iron bar runs along, once thought to have held prickets for candles, lit before a fifteenth century Nativity scene. A modern sculpture placed on the tomb in 2011 is of an agonized face in Sicilian marble behind metal bars, entitled ‘A Second Home’; it is the work of Simon Burns-Cox.
evidently the work of two different people, it is possible to conclude that William Joy was working for Thomas of Whitney some while before he took over as master mason.

The elongated octagonal shape and what is in effect a domed roof was innovative in the extreme and showed Thomas of Witney’s genius for design. He was also known for his great skill as a geometrician, particularly of spherical geometry. Linzee Colchester has given a simple explanation of the basic geometry used in the construction of the Lady Chapel: “Its plan can be simply fitted in between two equal overlapping circles, within a larger circle of which the radius equals the square root of twice the square of the radius of the small circles. And that large circle turned on edge produces an east-west section showing the vault, which is a perfect semi-circle in this plain [sic], with the circumference of its lowest point exactly touching the middle of the floor.”.

Looking now at the striking features of the chapel itself, an upward gaze reveals all the intricacies of the star vault (opposite). The figure of Christ in Majesty showing his wounds is a symbol both of ‘divine rulership and Judgement’ (Ayers) and echoes back to the theme of the west front and the quire. Christ is the heart of the star from which the whole design radiates. The details of the main linking bosses have fine foliate designs, working from the centre, of vine, acanthus, oak and rose. Although the vault would certainly have been painted in medieval times, what can be seen now was created by Thomas Willement, the restorer of the east window in the mid nineteenth century. Apparently he offered to paint the vault free of charge.
and a table for their Hall, ‘for the use of the Vicars ... dwelling in the new building which the Bishop has built.’ Edward III’s licence in mortmain was dated 3 December 1348. Bishop Ralph’s deed of gift, the vicars’ charter, was dated 30 December 1348, endorsed by the Prior and Chapter of Bath on 1 January 1349 and by the Dean and Chapter of Wells on 3 January 1349. 1348/49 was the year when the Black Death was virulent in Somerset and it is known that almost half the clergy died. Consequently the houses of the Close were not completed, though under construction, for some considerable time.

Entering the Hall itself, there would have been a screens passage after the construction of Bishop Bekynton’s Chain Bridge, linking the two entrances to the Hall. To the west of this was the buttery and on the south wall can still be seen the remains of original window mullions: all that was left after the Chain Bridge was built. The first entrance to the Hall was covered in when the already mentioned dog-leg was made. The window high in the west wall was inserted because that end of the Hall was very dark, having lost two windows. They needed to be able to find the vats of ale! When repairs were made to this window in 1973, recycled sections of two mullions from the destroyed windows were found to have been used.

There are still three of the early windows in situ, typical of William Joy’s design, who as master mason (1329-1348) was responsible for the building of the scissor arches in the Cathedral. His recognizable two-light, tracered and transomed windows with wave mouldings still contain within the traceries some medieval glass: St Margaret on the south and St Katherine with her wheel on the north with possibly St Hugh in the adjacent one. The two oriel windows at the eastern end, on either side, were put in place by Richard Pomeroy, a wealthy vicar choral and also Keeper of the Fabric from 1488 to 1514. He is immortalized in the tracery on the north side as the donor, dressed in blue, and the arms of St Andrew encompassed with his name are in the south-east corner of the east wall. He was probably also responsible for the plainer oriel window at the western end of the north wall and he may even have constructed the present plastered, barrel-vaulted ceiling; this consists of nine and a half bays with plain chamfered ribs. Within this structure, on either side of the door on the north, there are still traces of where the screens were originally fixed.

Pomeroy’s considerable contribution to the Hall is also remembered in a carved inscription on the mantel-shelf of the Tudor fireplace. Loosely translated from the Latin, it says, “Pray for the soul of Richard Pomeroy whom God save.” There has been much discussion as to the initials in the upper corners of the fireplace, which are now taken to be K.S. Who this was is a matter for conjecture. The present fireplace was probably rebuilt from an existing one and incorporates a lectern or pulpit high up within the window embrasure so that a member of the vicars choral could read to his silent colleagues during meal times.

The plaster walls are clad with panelling, some medieval and possibly original (plain oak with v-jointed edges), on part of both the north and south sides. On the east wall is later, linenfold panelling, not seen in England until Henry VIII’s reign. Some of the rails are decorated with sphinx-like creatures and other Renaissance ornamentation. Above this panelling are two wooden figures (left and right), which without a doubt, by the style of their curved bodies, are contemporary with the Hall. These figures, beautifully carved with some paint still visible are usually taken to represent either the Annunciation or the Visitation. Opinion seems to be more or less equally divided. Both figures rest on corbels, the one on the north depicts the three kings offering gifts and on the south shows two boys wrestling, reputed to be Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptist. These figures doubtless lent a certain grandeur to the high table area.