The Early English Style:
Gothic Architecture in England, c. 1175-c. 1260

Gothic Cathedrals
AAHVS 225
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The three stylistic divisions of English Gothic architecture

EARLY ENGLISH (c. 1175-c. 1260)
Canterbury Cathedral → Westminster Abbey

DECORATED (c. 1245-c. 1340) (October 28th)
Westminster Abbey → Gloucester Cathedral

PERPENDICULAR (c. 1320- c. 1540) (November 2nd)
Gloucester Cathedral → The Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1538-48)

Map of medieval dioceses in England (crosses indicate cathedrals)

Two archidioceses in a relentless, bitter power struggle: Canterbury vs. York
The Romanesque style in England

Winchester Cathedral, south transept

C. 1080-90
Ely Cathedral, nave
c. 1130-50
The Cistercians as “missionaries of Gothic” in England, c. 1150-80

Fountains Abbey, west façade
Fountains Abbey, nave
C. 1170-80
Timeline for Canterbury Cathedral: The first “real” Gothic building in England

1088-75 – Building of the first Romanesque building under Archbishop Lanfranc

1120-30 – Building of a new east end by Archbishop Anselm

1170 – Martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket

1174 – Fire destroys the Romanesque cathedral

1174-1182 – Rebuilding of the E end in the Gothic style by two architects, William of Sens and William the Englishman

Martrydom of St. Thomas Becket, manuscript from early C13
Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore
Canterbury Cathedral, ground plan
Canterbury Cathedral, choir
Architect: William of Sens, 1174-1178

Alternating circular/octagonal piers – abaci and shafts of Purbeck marble -- sexpartite vaults – Romanesque antecedent
Canterbury Cathedral, Trinity Chapel
Architect: William the Englishman, 1178-1182
(Compare to Suger’s east end – what is similar, what is different? Would he approve?)
Canterbury Cathedral, ambulatory Stained glass panel, c. 1180

Becket emerging from his shrine to cure a woman on her deathbed
Canterbury Cathedral, Corona (far east end)

Originally housing the reliquary for Becket’s severed skull
The final destination for pilgrims
Wells Cathedral, nave c. 1180-1210

The first “full” expression of Early English style

- Complex pier design
- Intricate arch moldings
- Exclusive use of the pointed arch
- The English “tunnel effect”
  - low, insistently horizontal
- Capitals with stiff-leaf foliage
- Clerestory with thick piers

Strainer arch in crossing, c. 1180
Wells Cathedral, nave
Design of piers and capitals
Wells Cathedral, north elevation of nave

Arcade, triforium, and clerestory conceived as three independent levels

“Band” triforium set off by string courses with continuous molded arches

Quadripartite vault carried on corbels – cut off by the middle story

No linkage or vertical integration (compare to French Rayonnant)
Wells Cathedral, west front c. 1210-30

The first example of the English “screen” façade

Towers completed c. 14

Enormous width
Three separate tiers
Lack of portals & tympana
Doors vs. aisles
Massive theatre for sculpture

The entire “company of heaven” brought down to earth as revealed through the power of the bishop
Buttress niches for statues

Ely Cathedral, close-ups of west façade

Niches flanked by enormous Purbeck shafts
7 tabernacles for sculpture, originally painted and gilded
Wells Cathedral: What Does the Façade Mean?

It is conceived as a spectacle which occurs simultaneously on earth and in heaven. The W front is a physical rendering/evocation of the heavenly Jerusalem, made visible to the visitor in real time.

Wells is the largest repository for 13th-century sculpture in England.

Restoration in the 1980s revealed evidence of gold leaf and red, blue, green, purple, and turquoise paint -> the façade was originally a vibrant blaze of color and texture, visible from miles away.


Dedication plaque with inscription from John 14:2 – “In my Father’s house, there are many mansions” -> each position on the west façade is both a literal and cosmic depiction of the celestial hierarchy (cf. Abbot Suger).

The revealed heavenly order = the means by which the diocese asserts its earthly and spiritual authority, and its right to tax the local population. Great buildings don’t come cheap!
Lincoln Cathedral, West façade

Romanesque W front with 5 aisles, c. 1140-50, incorporated into Gothic screen façade

Blind arcading and octagonal end buttresses added to surround it, early C13

Twin towers begun in the late C13 and finished c. 1340
Lincoln Cathedral, choir (St. Hugh’s Choir)
1192-c. 1210
Trefoiled arches (the tell-tale sign of E.E.)

Lincoln Cathedral, choir

“Syncopated” blind arcading in the aisles

Front shafts of Purbeck marble
Lincoln Cathedral, choir
The “crazy” vault, designed c. 1200

The best evidence for English strangeness: What were they thinking?!!
Lincoln Cathedral, nave

c. 1210-35