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A Twelfth-Century Door in Bristol Cathedral

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Note

A TWELFTH-CENTURY DOOR IN BRISTOL CATHEDRAL

A notable addition to the surviving examples of Romanesque doors in English churches has been identified at Bristol Cathedral. This is the door at the head of the night stairs which provide access from the south transept to the former dorter or dormitory and to a room now used as the sacristy. When the diocese of Bristol was created in 1542, the former Augustinian abbey in Bristol became its cathedral; the door is a remarkable survival from the earliest years of the abbey which was founded in 1140. Through this doorway the Augustinian canons came from the dorter on their way to the night services in the abbey church.

The door (Fig. 1) had been thought to date from the 17th century because of the date 1667 on the front or north side but its unusual construction and similarities with the west door at Kempley old church, which has been dated to *c.*1120–40, were recognized by Hugh Harrison when carrying out conservation work on the Bristol door in January 2000.¹ Subsequent research has been undertaken on the timbers, jointing, paint, hinges, decorative ironwork and other features of the door. In spite of the fact that non-invasive dendrochronological analysis proved inconclusive, the construction of the door and its similarity with the Kempley west door, as well as with other Romanesque doors, provide sufficient evidence to place it firmly in the mid 12th century. It is likely therefore that the door was part of the original monastic buildings which were constructed soon after the foundation of the abbey by Robert FitzHarding, a process described in the late medieval Roll or Chronicle compiled by Abbot John Newland (1481–1515) as follows:

This goode lord [Robert fitz Harding] primere fundator and Chanon of the Monastery of Seint Augustines bi Bristowe began the fundacion of the same in the yere of our Lord MCXL. And bilded the church and all other howses of offices according to the same bi the space of vi yeres.²

The original door consisted of eight oak boards counter-rebated, top and bottom, and attached to four horizontal cross-pieces or 'ledges' which were fixed by flat-headed nails. Counter-rebating was a feature of many Romanesque doors, but was little used after the 12th century. The fifth board in the door has been shaped to fit exactly an irregularity in the adjacent board. Strap hinges with split curl terminals are fixed level with the upper and lower ledges. The boards are joined together by oak dowels where the counter-rebating occurs. Both boards and ledges are $1\frac{1}{4}$ in (13 mm) thick. There is no evidence that the door was not made for the opening in which it is now situated. During the 17th century the front of the door was panelled in oak, and the date 1667 was formed in nails at the top of it. The panels were nailed to the original door and the nails were clenched over on the reverse side. Although this was a time when much work was being carried out in the cloisters and elsewhere in the cathedral, the chapter minutes and accounts make no mention of any work on the door.³ The date 1867 is also represented in nails on the surface of the door, again there is no record of any major alteration to it at that time.⁴ The date could possibly commemorate a minor refurbishment and repainting.

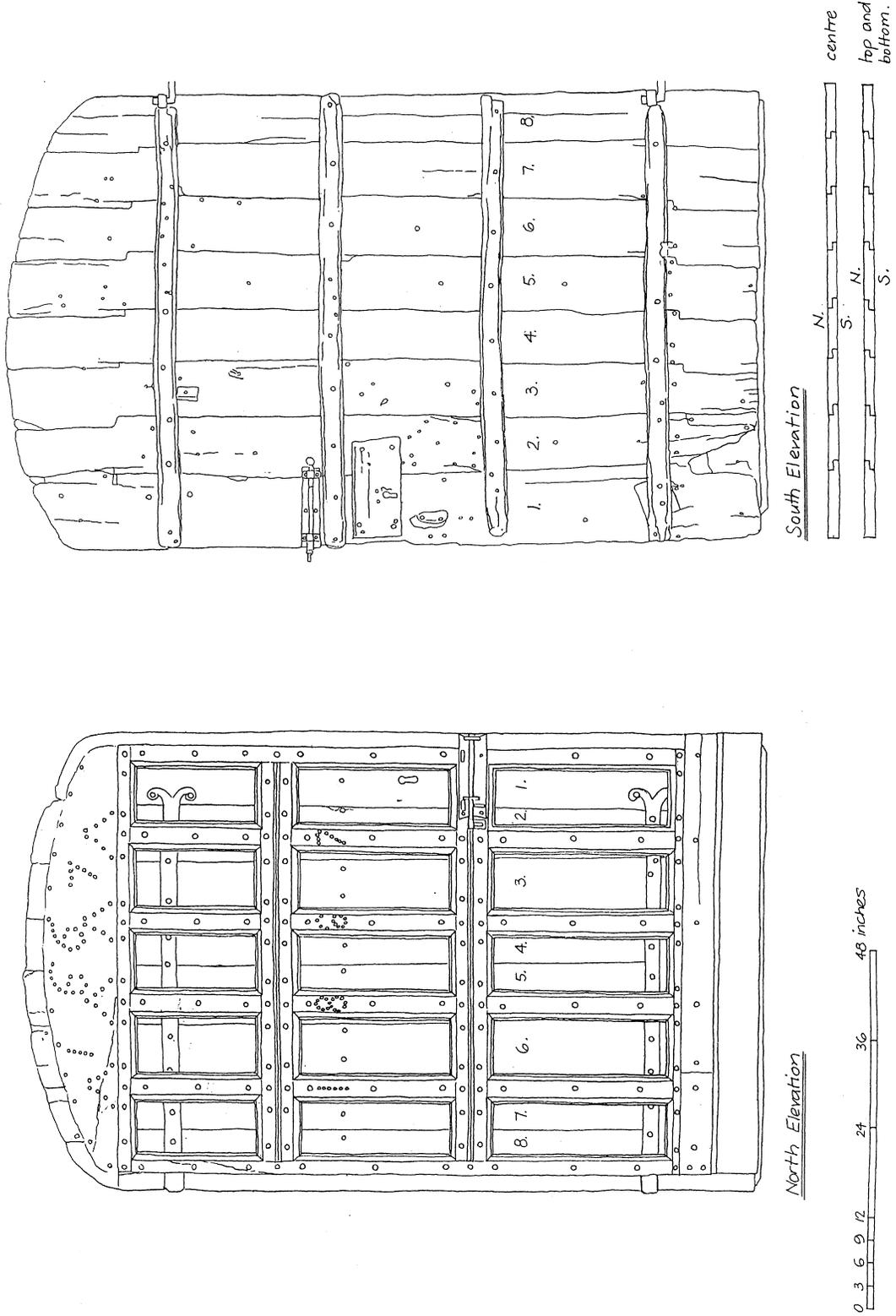


Fig. 1. Bristol Cathedral: door at the head of the night stairs to the sacristy (drawing by Peter Ferguson, Dip. Arch., R.I.B.A.).

On the basis of the construction, jointing and other features, there can be little doubt that the door is mid 12th century and remarkably complete, with no restoration to the original fabric. Due to its size, age and condition, the door is of great importance.

Notes

1. For details of the Kempley door, see B.M. Morley and D.W.H. Miles, 'The Nave Roof and Other Timberwork at the Church of St Mary, Kempley, Gloucestershire: Dendochronological Dating', *Antiq. Jnl.* **80** (2000), 294–6. A full report by Hugh Harrison on the Bristol door is kept at Bristol Cathedral.
2. I.H. Jeayes, 'Abbot Newland's Roll', *Trans. B.G.A.S.* **14** (1889–90), 124–5.
3. Bristol Record Office (BRO), DC/A/8/1 Chapter Minutes 1663–1751; DC/A/9/1/7 Computa 1660–83.
4. BRO, DC/A/8/7 Chapter Minutes 1858–79; DC/A/9/1/13 Receipts and Disbursements 1864–69.

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