

A 15th-Century Drawing of Gloucester Abbey Church

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The construction of Gloucester abbey's Gothic crossing tower during the 1450s altered the topography of the city in a fundamental and enduring way (Fig. 1). Observers from John Leland to Beatrix Potter have considered it a defining landmark. 'This tower is a pharos to all partes about from the hilles': Leland's observation, made shortly after the dissolution of the monastery in January 1540, is still valid, and indicates the success with which Abbot Thomas Sebroke (1451–8) and his convent used architecture as a means of institutional promotion.¹ Size and richness of treatment account for the tower's physical and symbolic prominence. It is 68.6 m high, and clothed on all sides in a rich mesh of panelling, which culminates in a highly ornate crown of openwork battlements and turret pinnacles. Modern scholars murmur of visual excess, but Leland's enthusiasm for this 'exceedinge faire' structure is a more reliable indication of medieval opinion.² Both aspects of the tower's embellishment were variously admired and copied elsewhere, particularly the crown, which, in addition to its fundamental visual appeal, must have suggested to receptive minds the architectural magnificence of the New Jerusalem, the holy 'city [which] lieth in a foursquare', 'of pure gold, like to clear glass', 'coming down out of heaven from God' (Rev. 21: 2, 16, 18). The extent to which this feature was imitated, not only in parochial Gloucestershire but also at Great Malvern, Bristol (St Stephen's and Dundry), Cardiff, Llandaff, Glastonbury, Taunton, and elsewhere, is powerful testimony to the impression it made on contemporary minds.³

A drawing of St Peter's abbey church in a genealogical roll of English and Scottish kings made during the reign of Edward IV (1461–83), not previously published, also appears to reflect this impression (Fig. 2). It is not certain that it does, but the matter is worth pursuing both for the interest it adds to an artistically modest image and for what it suggests about the medieval provenance of the manuscript. The roll is now in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (shelfmark BMS Typ 40), to which it was given in 1946.⁴ It previously belonged to the great Victorian bibliophile Sir Thomas Phillipps (d. 1872), but its medieval

1. J. Leland, *Leland's Itinerary in England and Wales*, ed. L.T. Smith (5 vols., London, 1964), II, p. 61. See also Beatrix Potter, *The Tailor of Gloucester* (London, 1903), p. 16.
2. For mild censure see, for example, J. Harvey, *The Perpendicular Style* (London, 1978), p. 230 ('rather fussy panelling'); D. Verey and A. Brooks, *The Buildings of England. Gloucestershire 2: The Vale and the Forest of Dean* (London and New Haven, 2002), p. 54 ('almost excessive panelling').
3. It is remotely possible that an earlier example of such a crown existed on one of the great lost church towers of the diocese of Worcester. This would qualify our view of Gloucester's influence.
4. The roll is described and discussed in K.L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* 6 (2 vols., London, 1996), II, pp. 313–15 (cat. no. 115). She mentions the presence of the drawing without comment. For other, briefer descriptions of the manuscript see W.A. Jackson, *Houghton Library Accessions 1945–46* (Cambridge, MA, 1946), p. 2; C.U. Faye and W.H. Bond, *Supplement to the Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada* (New York, 1962), pp. 254–5; R. Wieck, *Late Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts 1350–1525 in the Houghton Library* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 120, 168. The entire manuscript can be viewed online at: <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/3680635?n=1&imagesize=2400&jp2Res=1>



Fig. 1. The crossing-tower of Gloucester abbey church (now cathedral) from the east. Photo reproduced by permission of the Courtauld Institute.

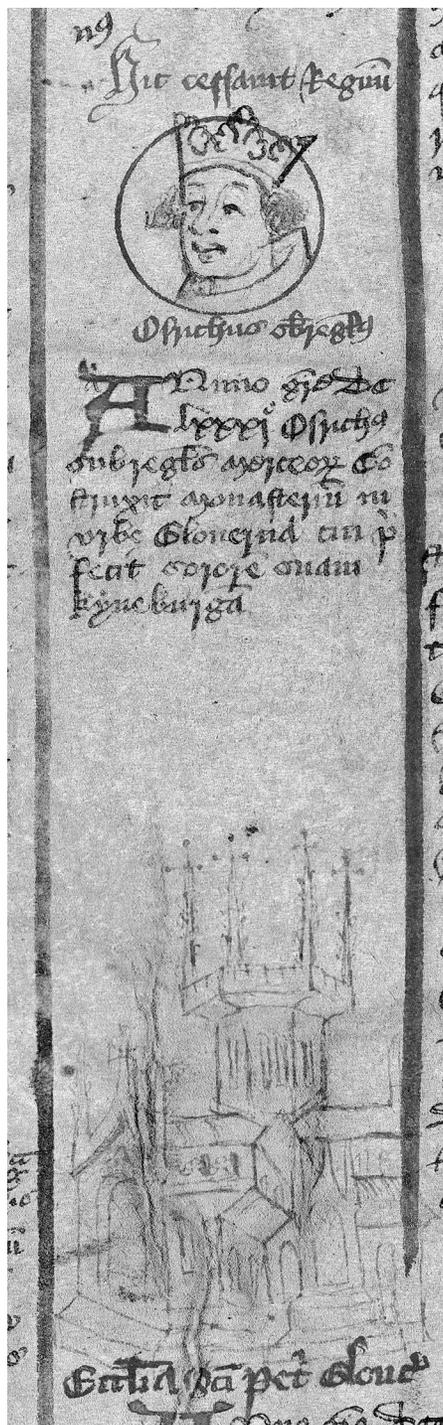


Fig. 2. Harvard University, Houghton Library, bMS Typ 40, membrane 9 (detail): The drawing of the abbey church, with the account of Osric and his 'portrait' in a roundel. Reproduced by permission of the Houghton Library.

provenance is unknown. In a manner far more detailed than most royal genealogies of its period it plots the descent of the post-Conquest English kings from Adam, through Brutus and the other legendary British monarchs, and the rulers of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy: all of this occupies fifteen membranes of parchment, giving the roll a total length of 8.64 metres. The genealogy concludes with Edward IV, but does not mention his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville. This has been thought to imply a date of execution of between 1461 and 1464; but because many royal genealogies made in the same period end without supplying a history of the incumbent monarch, a broad dating between 1461 and 1483 seems safer.⁵ There are other drawings on the roll, most of them heads of rulers in roundels positioned above short prose descriptions of their reigns.

The roll's opening membranes include typically stylised drawings of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem (membrane 1), and the walled cities of London, Canterbury, Winchester, and Shaftesbury (labelled 'Septoniam' in red ink) (membrane 3), the last three presented in a row and all damaged by chemical reagents applied at some stage to make the images clearer (Fig. 3).⁶ London is not identified by name, but rather by the arms of its founder, Brutus, the legendary first king of Britain supposed to have reigned in the first quarter of the 11th century B.C.E. These arms, a red lion passant on a yellow (or gold) field, are also found immediately beneath the portrait roundel of Brutus at the end of membrane 2, making the link explicit. Other drawings include Adam and Eve, the world divided into its three continents (Europe, Asia, Africa), Noah's Ark, the Nativity of Christ, and the anointing of King Lucius as Britain's first Christian monarch.⁷ The text of the early part of the roll is derived substantially from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, and its illustrations are related to those found in later medieval copies of this work. Thus, drawings of Canterbury, Winchester and Shaftesbury side by side (their foundation is mentioned in close succession by Geoffrey), with Jerusalem and London shown separately and a little earlier, are also found in other manuscripts.⁸ Examples include British Library MS Cotton Nero D II (fols. 19v, 20v, 21v), an early 14th-century manuscript from Rochester cathedral priory; BL, MS Royal 13 A III (fols. 9r, 14r, 17v), which is of similar date but uncertain origin; and BL Cotton Claudius E IV (fols. 4r, 5r), where the drawings belong to a sumptuous copy of Thomas of Elmham's *Chronica regum nobilium Anglie*, the early section of whose text is also based on Geoffrey's *History*.⁹ The appearance of these cities in the roll can thus be disregarded as evidence of patronage or provenance.

Such is not the case with the drawing of Gloucester abbey church. This appears approximately halfway through the roll, on membrane 9, in the fourth of eight parallel columns devoted to the descent of the heptarchy's rulers. Apart from those on membranes 1 and 3, it is the only architectural drawing in the manuscript. It is unrelated to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, being linked instead to an account in the roll of the abbey's foundation by Osric, a ruler of the Hwicce and under-king of Mercia during the 670s and early 680s. This account, located beneath a portrait roundel of Osric with the title '*Osrichus subregulus*' in red, is short: '*Anno gracie Dclxxxj Osrichus subregulus merciorum construxit monasterium in urbe Glouerna cui perfecit sororem suam kyneburgam*'. ('In the year of grace 681 Osric, the under-king of the Mercians, built a monastery in the city of Gloucester which was completed by his sister Kyneburga'.) However, the scribe then left a

5. Scott, *Gothic Manuscripts*, II, 315, suggests 1461–4: the other three sources cited in n. 4 above all suggest c. 1470.

6. Scott, *Gothic Manuscripts*, II, 313, mentions these illustrations, but does not identify London or Shaftesbury.

7. The drawing of the anointing of Lucius is reproduced in Scott, *Gothic Manuscripts*, I, ill. 429.

8. *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth I: Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568*, ed. N. Wright (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1985), p. 18 (foundation of Canterbury, Winchester and Shaftesbury).

9. B[ritish] L[ibrary], MS Cotton Claudius E IV does not include a drawing of Jerusalem.



Fig. 3. Harvard University, Houghton Library, bMS Typ 40, membrane 3: Drawings of the city of London, with the arms of Brutus next to it, and the cities of Canterbury, Winchester and Shaftesbury beneath. The damage has been caused by application of a reagent. Reproduced by permission of the Houghton Library.

relatively large amount of space for a drawing of the abbey church, at the bottom of which he wrote, again in red ink, '*Ecclesia sancti petri Gloucestrie*' ('The church of St Peter of Gloucester').¹⁰ St Peter's is thus privileged in the roll, both spatially and in terms of text and decoration. This suggests that the manuscript was made for someone with a particular interest in the abbey. Indeed, the emphasis on Osric as both the abbey's founder and an illustrious Anglo-Saxon ruler is close enough to the monks' historical interests during this period (interests which led them, among other things, to construct the grand retrospective tomb of Osric to the north of their high altar) to encourage the hypothesis that the roll was made for them.¹¹

A little support for this conclusion is provided in the account of Edward II's death in membrane 14. The description of the method used to kill the king is taken almost verbatim from Ranulf Higden's popular universal history, the *Polychronicon*.¹² However, while the *Polychronicon* mentions Edward's popular reputation for miracles, it does not state where he was buried. The roll does give this information, concluding that '*in monasterio Sancti Petri Gloucestrie sepultus ubi divina clemencia plura fuit miracula*' ('he is buried in the monastery of St Peter at Gloucester, where by divine grace there were many miracles'). Other historical texts which document Edward II's death, including the two most popular, the prose *Brut* and the so-called *Considerans* chronicle, do mention his burial at Gloucester, so it would be wrong to consider this strong evidence of provenance *per se*.¹³ But these texts do not record the dedication of the abbey to St Peter, or offer unqualified testimony to miracles. That the king was buried in 'a monastery' at Gloucester is the most that is usually recorded. It is these specific details which, when set alongside the presence of a labelled drawing and the unique status of this drawing in the roll, suggest a Gloucester provenance for the manuscript.

10. The title of the church shows that the space was planned to receive the drawing. It would otherwise be possible to conclude that the space was intended to accommodate more text (about Osric, Kyneburga, or the abbey for example) and that the drawing was added as a substitute when the necessary information could not be obtained.
11. Compare the black letter inscription at the east end of Osric's monument in Gloucester cathedral: '*Osricus Rex primus fundator huius Monasterii 681*'. The manuscript being considered here is connected by artistry to another roll of c. 1450 apparently made for a Gloucestershire patron. This juxtaposes the Sudeley-Boteler pedigree with a descent of the kings of England and must have been made for the Botelers of Sudeley castle. With characteristic insight, Kathleen Scott (*Manuscripts*, II, 314) attributes three of the royal busts in this Sudeley manuscript, now New York Public Library, MS Spencer 193, to the artist of the roll under discussion here. The Sudeley roll is described and partially translated in Lord Sudeley and D. Winkless, 'Medieval Sudeley. Part I, The Sudeleys and Botelers of Sudeley Castle; Part II, The 15th-Century Roll Chronicle of the Kings of England, with the Sudeley and Boteler Pedigree', *Family History: The Journal of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies*, 10 (1977), pp. 9–39. See also Sotheby & Co, *Bibliotheca Phillipica. Medieval Manuscripts: New Series: Part VII*, sale catalogue, 21 Nov. 1972 (London, 1972), pp. 74–6 and pl. 22. For another roll of c. 1450 which presents the Sudeley-Boteler pedigree alongside not only the kings of England but also the descents of the Roman emperors, popes, archbishops of Canterbury, bishops of Worcester and abbots of Evesham, see College of Arms, London, *Heralds' Commemorative Exhibition 1484–1934* (London, 1970), p. 59 and pl. 41.
12. '*Cum veru ignito [inter] celanda confossus ignominiose peremptus [est]*' ('he was shamefully killed with a burning iron in the secret posterior place'): cf. *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, monachi Cestrensis*, ed. C. Babington and J.R. Lumby, Rolls Series 41 (9 vols., London, 1865–86), VIII, p. 324.
13. *The Scroll Considerans (Magdalen MS 248) Giving the Descent from Adam to Henry VI*, ed. and trans. J.E.T. Brown (Oxford, 1999), p. 31: '*Gloucestrie sepelitur in monasterio*' ('he was buried in a monastery at Gloucester'); *The Brut or The Chronicles of England*, ed. F.W.D. Brie, EETS os 131, 136 (2 vols., London, 1906–08), I, p. 253: 'he was enterede at Gloucestr[e]'

Kathleen Scott, who has described the roll, tentatively suggests that it was made in London, which is, reasonably, the default assumption of art historians for manuscripts of this type. Wherever it was made, the drawing of St Peter's abbey church seems to have been inserted independently of the rest of the text and illustration, though clearly in the same period. It is in a lighter shade of ink, is less firmly drawn than the other illustrations (including the cities represented in the prologue), and sits rather awkwardly in the space provided for it. While highly stylised, the architecture is more detailed than that shown in the roll's other illustrations. (As noted below, it is at least broadly relatable to the actual appearance of the abbey church.) These discrepancies can be explained by supposing that a distant, perhaps London-based, maker with no idea of the abbey church's appearance left to his patrons the task of inserting a drawing of particular importance to them.

People living in the late middle ages were keenly interested in the size and grandeur of architecture. English manuscripts of the period refer to and occasionally contain the dimensions (or supposed dimensions) of particularly impressive religious and secular buildings: such statistics seem in some cases to have had a devotional function.¹⁴ The vast area and dimensions of St Paul's cathedral in London were even displayed on a public notice-board affixed to a column in the nave of that church.¹⁵ This interest is reflected in contemporary illustrations of buildings and cites independently of any concern with technical accuracy: such illustrations are not exercises in realistic architectural observation, but aim rather to convey general visual and emotional impressions. Accordingly, the subject of the Harvard roll drawing is hardly recognisable at first sight. To begin with, it shows the building like a sculptural model, sitting on a high, sloping plinth. Whether the view is from the north-east or south-west is uncertain, but a basic correspondence of elements to those of the south side of the church, and the fact that medieval drawings tend to show churches from the south, suggests the latter perspective. If this is correct then what can be seen is a west front with a large, round-headed window or portal and a gable with exaggerated lateral finials and central cross; a central vessel with clearstory and flanking aisles along the length of the building; a transept with a large terminal window and western aisle (the aisle may in fact reflect the artist's knowledge of the 15th-century south porch); and a very large crossing-tower, the parapet and pinnacles of which are shown in particularly ostentatious proportion. Initially this tower appears to be hexagonal, but the fact that only four pinnacles are shown could indicate a structure of square plan represented with the east and west sides canted out to exaggerate its size. In either case, if the drawing was executed locally, or intended for a local patron, then the intention seems to have been to suggest the magnificence of an actual tower whose size, embellishment and novelty gave it an extraordinary reputation.

The drawing of the Temple at Jerusalem on the first membrane, and that of St Paul's cathedral in London on the third (a church famous in the middle ages for the size of its central steeple), show large buildings equipped with polygonal crossing towers and overhanging parapets. In neither

14. Examples include London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 1106, f. 96v; London, College of Arms, MS Arundel 30, f. 214r; *Customary of the Benedictine Monasteries of St Augustine, Canterbury, and Saint Peter, Westminster*, ed. E.M. Thompson (2 vols., Henry Bradshaw Society 23, 28, London, 1902–04), I, p. 32. An example with a probable devotional function existed at Glastonbury abbey, where at the end of the middle ages the length and breadth of the original wattle-and-daub church were displayed on a brass plate in the Lady chapel: see J.A. Goodall, 'The Glastonbury Abbey Memorial Plate Reconsidered', *Antiquaries Journal*, 66 (1986), pp. 364–7.

15. *A Chronicle of London, from 1089 to 1483*, ed. N.H. Nicolas and E. Tyrrell (London, 1827), p. 174, 181. See also D. Keene, 'Tall Buildings in Medieval London: Precipitation, Aspiration and Thrills', *The London Journal*, 33 (2008), pp. 201–15; P. Binski, 'Reflections on the 'Wonderful Height and Size' of Gothic Great Churches and the Medieval Sublime', in *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics*, ed. C.S. Jaeger (New York, 2010), pp. 129–56.

case are the proportions so exaggerated, but it is nevertheless possible that the crossing tower in the Gloucester drawing is simply an inflated version of towers represented earlier in the roll. If this were true then it might be thought to weaken the hypothesis that the artist was influenced by the reputation or appearance of Sebroke's tower. Conversely, the similarity could be understood to signify a deliberate and ennobling association of St Peter's with two of history's pre-eminent religious buildings. Ultimately, of course, it is possible that the drawing of the abbey church in the Harvard roll is based on no more direct acquaintance than are the fanciful illustrations of Gloucester represented in the British Library manuscripts mentioned above.¹⁶ However, the evident Gloucester connections of the roll, and the fact that the drawing was inserted after the rest of the work was complete, lend the theory enough support to make it worth airing, over and above whatever intrinsic interest a medieval image of Gloucester abbey church is thought to possess by readers of these *Transactions*.

16. BL MSS Cotton Nero D II, f. 25r; Royal 13 A III, f. 41v; Cotton Claudius E IV, f. 13r. The image from Royal 13 A III is illustrated in D. Welander, *The History, Art and Architecture of Gloucester Cathedral* (Stroud, 1991), pl. 4.