



# The Archaeological Journal

## Book Reviews



### **ROBERT WILLIS AND THE FOUNDATION OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY.**

By Alexandrina Buchanan. Pp. xviii and 452, Illus 83. The Boydell Press (The History of the University of Cambridge, 8), 2013. Price: £60.00. ISBN 978 184383 800 5.

Every architectural historian and archaeologist who has worked on English cathedrals is familiar with the name and writings of Robert Willis (1800–1875). He was effectively the founder of the discipline of ‘cathedral archaeology’ through his investigations and numerous publications in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. He also left behind a substantial archive, so large that even Nikolaus Pevsner was daunted by it, writing in a footnote, ‘there are thousands of [papers] and a student in search of a thesis would find them rewarding’ (*Some Architectural Writers of the Nineteenth Century*, 1972, p. 59). The footnote inspired Alexandrina Buchanan to do just that (p. xv), and Cambridge University Library employed her to catalogue the Willis papers in their possession. There are more in other collections, including the Society of Antiquaries’ Library in London: the list of acknowledged institutions is long.

Buchanan was not daunted by the task and set out to track down and read everything that Willis had written, a project that took many years and resulted in this eagerly anticipated volume which will be welcomed by researchers in numerous fields. It is a work of outstanding scholarship, comprehensive in its coverage of Willis’s life and activities, elegantly written, eminently readable, well-illustrated and meticulously referenced.

Willis was a Victorian polymath, born illegitimately to a distinguished family with strong connections with both medicine and the Church. Before the age of twenty he had made several technical inventions and was beginning to take an interest in architectural history. His circle of acquaintances was wide and embraced scholars and practitioners in science, technology, engineering, architecture, classics, theology and natural history. In 1820–1821, while at King’s Lynn School, Willis undertook a landmark archaeological survey of the Red Mount Chapel, before going up to Cambridge University, where he graduated in 1826 and was ordained the following year. The university now became his permanent base, where his scientific work resulted in his appointment in 1837 as Jacksonian Professor of Natural and Experimental Philosophy. This is covered by Buchanan in Chapter 2, before moving on to chapters analyzing Willis’s rapidly developing interest in architectural history, both theoretical and practical. His seminal study of the construction of stone vaults in the Middle Ages, published by the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1842 (*On the Construction of the Vaults of the Middle Ages*, *Trans. Royal Inst. Brit. Architects* 1 (2), 81–7), remains a standard work of reference. Particularly outstanding is Willis’s analysis of Henry VII’s Chapel in Westminster Abbey, which contains the most elaborate of all fan vaults.

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In Chapter 5, Buchanan traces the progress of Willis's cathedral studies from 1840 onwards: they heralded the opening of a new era in architectural history. Over the course of three decades, Willis obtained access to seven of England's most important medieval cathedrals, as well as many other buildings, during the great upheavals caused by restoration. He was able to see and record evidence that had been unavailable to all previous commentators, and he analyzed the results from the perspectives of architectural history, structural engineering and archaeology, a hitherto unheard-of combination of disciplines. Most dramatic of all is his detailed account of the fall of the central tower and spire at Chichester in 1861. Many of Willis's seminal papers were delivered to and published by the Royal Archaeological Institute.

Willis's cathedral publications on Hereford (1842), Canterbury (1845 and 1869), Winchester (1846), York (1848), Chichester (1861), Lichfield (1861) and Worcester (1863) remain not just relevant, but fundamental, to present-day students. Although some reinterpretation was necessary in the light of excavations in 1992–2003, the present reviewer found Willis's observations at Lichfield to be crucial in understanding the plan and development of the Romanesque and Early English cathedral.

Add to these his monograph on Glastonbury Abbey (1866) and his four-volume study on *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* (1886), and the scale of Willis's legacy becomes ever more awe-inspiring. No less inspiring is Buchanan's treatment of her subject: she has not merely done justice to Willis, but has given us a superbly scholarly volume of lasting value. It will not be superseded for several generations.

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