

## A CATHEDRAL RECOVERED

*In this article, **Derek Barnard** tells us about the terrible condition that Rochester Cathedral was in at the beginning of the 19th century and of the restoration work carried out then which, with later additions, saved the building for our present day enjoyment.*

This year we received into our archives a type written report of 1972, copied from the notebook of Robert Stevens D.D., who was Dean during the Cottingham refurbishment of the cathedral in 1825 and 1826. I had never seen this document before and it explained to me the extent of the work undertaken in what was a critical time in the life of the building. I hope these brief notes will be of interest.

In late 1824 the Dean and Chapter decided to restore the choir of the cathedral and employed Mr Cottingham to give an estimate for the work. After surveying the fabric he reported that the roof of the choir, replaced only fourteen years before was badly affected by dry rot and was in danger of collapse. The Dean inspected the roof timbers himself and found they were as reported. Repair work was started immediately and another architect, Mr Smirke, was asked to survey the whole of the building. His report must have filled the Dean with dismay for it makes horrendous reading, although the condition of the cathedral must have been obvious even to the casual observer.

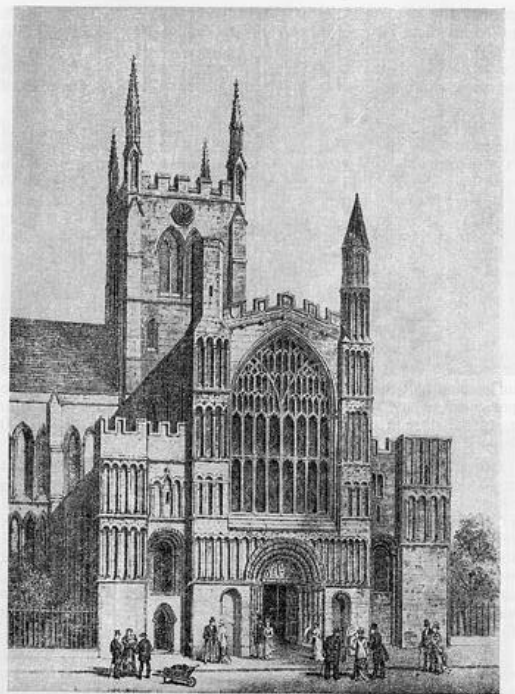
All around the base the external ground was higher than the floor by up to three feet, causing the lower outer walls to be damp and decaying. Damaged and blocked roof gutters and valleys were allowing water to penetrate. Adding to the problems at high level were the non-existent parapets and those that remained were in bad repair with lead hanging loose. Many of the stringcourses had stones missing and open joints. This water ingress together with lack of ventilation between vaulting and roof was allowing the rot to spread rapidly along the roof timbers. The remaining West Front turret was bulging in the middle and the stonework of almost every window needed urgent replacement including the large East and West windows that were particularly bad. The south choir transept was already fifteen inches out of upright, causing the vaulting in that area to crack and fall.

The spire, rebuilt 67 years before, was also in a dangerous condition. The bad lead work of the rebuild had let in the rain over many years, rotting the woodwork of both spire and tower. Removal or major repairs were recommended. In fact the situation was far more serious than thought for the great joists carrying the belfry floor went almost through the tower walls and the ends were very nearly non-existent. They would certainly have collapsed in a few years bringing tower and spire down through the building.

The good news was that because the columns and walls were set on natural chalk rock - the finest of foundations - the building itself was solidly based though some walls had fractures.

To everyone's credit the whole of the repairs were carried out within two years at a total cost of just over £8000. To this sum the Dean contributed £1000 and each prebendary £500, making £4000 in all. The Dean agreed to pay £100 per year and each prebendary £50 over five years and with the sale of some assets the costs were covered.

Soon after, the clock was installed in the tower, the precincts and Vines were macadamised and lit with gas lamps and walls and railings were built around the churchyard by St. Nicholas parish with the Dean and Chapter donating £150. What a shame after all that hard work that no one seemed to like Mr Cottinghams tower!



*The West Front of Rochester Cathedral circa 1830 after Cottingham's refurbishment (From an old lithograph)*

Derek Barnard, November 1996