

ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL, MEDWAY, KENT

REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING BEFORE AND DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW GLAZED PORCHES AT THE NORTH AND WEST DOORS (PROJECT CODE RCNWD 10) – NGR TQ 742 685

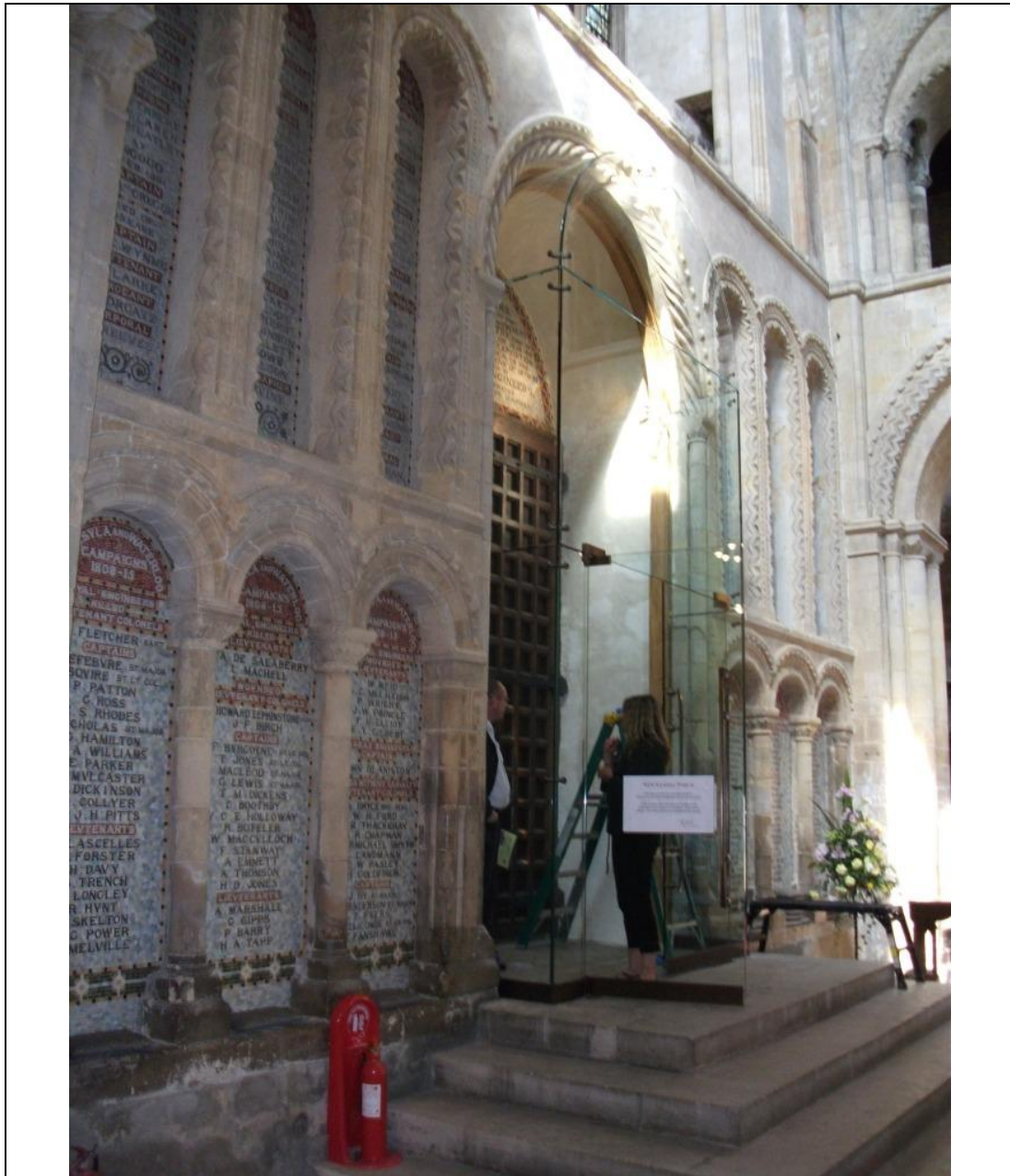
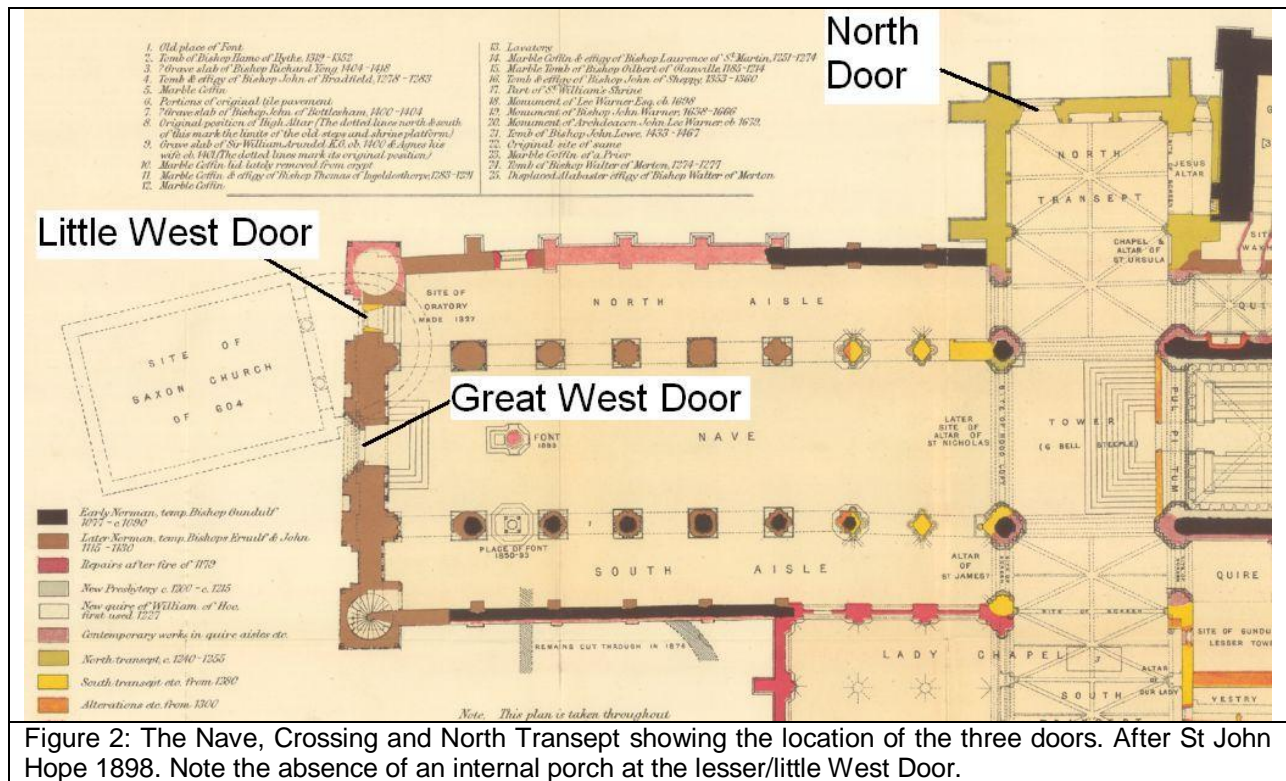


Figure 1: The new porch at the Great West Door, April 2010.

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Rochester Cathedral, Medway, Kent. Report on archaeological recording before and during the construction of new glazed porches at the North and West Doors (project code RCNWD 10) – NGR TQ 742 685



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief and photographic recording were carried out at various stages before, during and after the construction of new glazed porches within the Great West Door at the west end of the cathedral, and the North Door in the North Transept. The photography was principally carried out to record the condition of the proposed porch locations as part of the project appraisal. Various areas of graffiti were identified, all of which are fully preserved behind the built elements of the porch. The watching brief on a foundation pit excavation at the North Door recorded some disarticulated human bone, areas of bedding for an earlier floor in the North Transept, and the offset foundation of the transept's west wall. No other significant discoveries were made during the project. This short report therefore provides a simple description of the work.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Dean and Chapter of Rochester embarked on a major project to improve access to and provide better interpretation of the Cathedral in 2008. The project was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and included work both within and outside the building. One element of the internal work was to construct new glazed porches within the Great West and North Doors of the Cathedral,¹ thus allowing the wooden doors to be kept open all year round. This required the excavation of a foundation in the North Transept where the new north porch would be, and much less substantial excavations at the West Door. The work also involved the removal of an existing late 19th or early 20th-century timber porch at the Lesser West Door, in the north-west corner of the Cathedral. The location for the project elements is shown on Figure 2.

The proposed locations of the new porches and the existing timber porch were recorded photographically (using digital cameras) in August 2008 as part of the archaeological appraisal for the project submitted to the Fabric Advisory Committee and the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England. Further digital photographs were taken later in 2008 and into 2009 in advance of the construction contract. Three photographs of graffiti are included in this report (Figure 3, below), but the survey is not otherwise reported on here. The full set of digital photographs is part of the project archive, a copy of which is lodged at the Chapter Offices.

The foundation excavation at the North Door took place on 5 January 2010, and was carried out by hand by the main contractor, Kier Wallis, under a constant archaeological watching brief. The foundation pit was up to 3.13m long (east-west), 1.44m wide, and 0.3m wide deep. The existing paving slabs were lifted first, all intact except for one in the north-east corner of the pit where a small area had to be cut out to accommodate

¹ Rochester Cathedral is oriented from north-west to south-east. The orientation largely reflects the pre-existing topography of the Roman town. It is a broadly accepted convention, however, to describe church buildings with reference to a 'standard' east-west orientation even when the reality is significantly different from this, as at Rochester. This convention is followed throughout this report.

the closing mechanism for the door. All of the paving slabs were plain, with no traces of memorial inscriptions or indents for brasses on the top surface or underside. Kier Wallis carried out the excavations at the West Door during late February/early March 2010 and these were also monitored, but there was no archaeological impact. The excavations at the West Door are therefore not considered further in this report. The removal of the porch at the lesser West Door (Summer 2010) did not require monitoring. A few digital photographs were taken after its removal to record the condition of the area at that stage of the project.

2 DESCRIPTION OF THE RESULTS

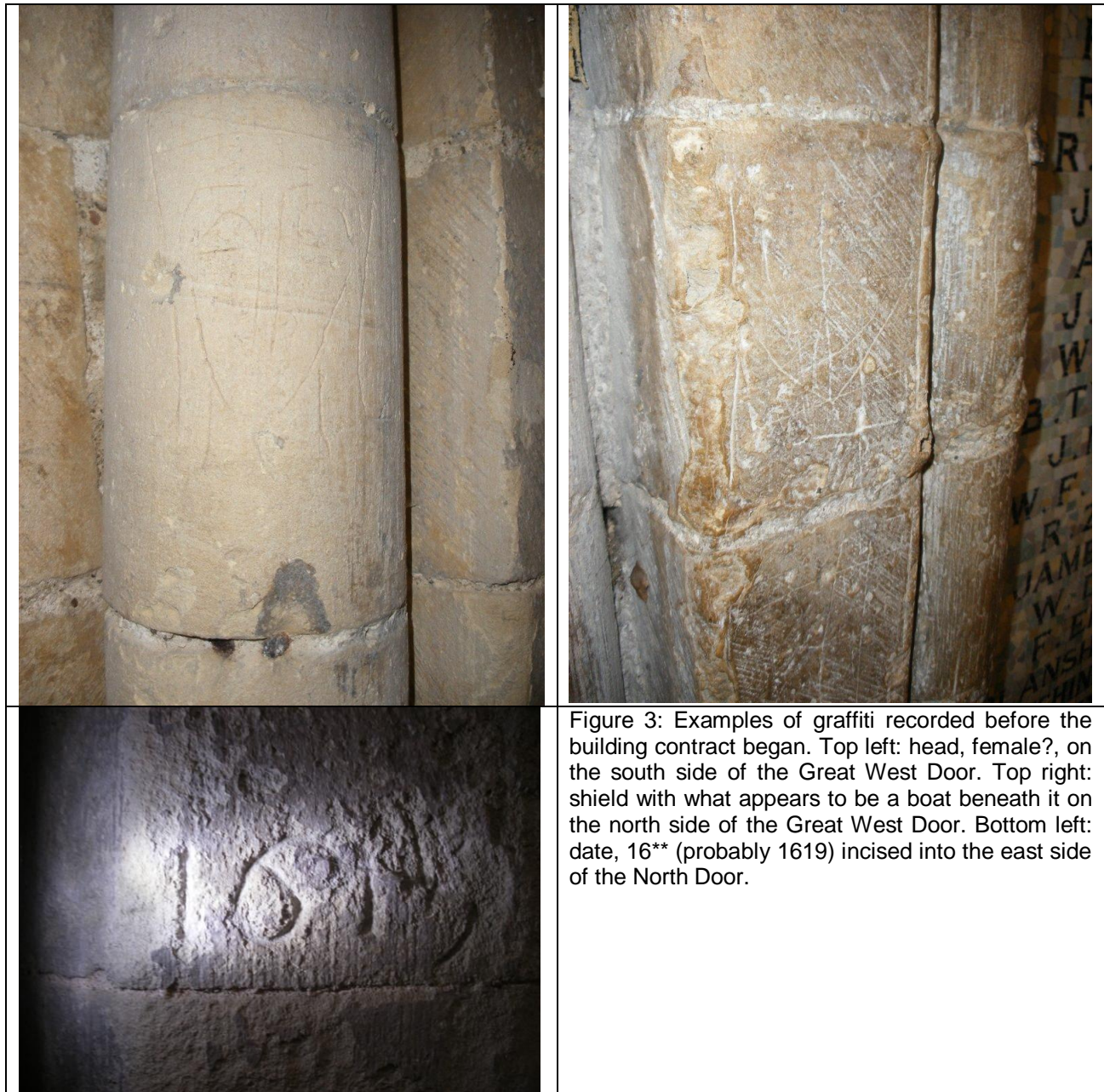
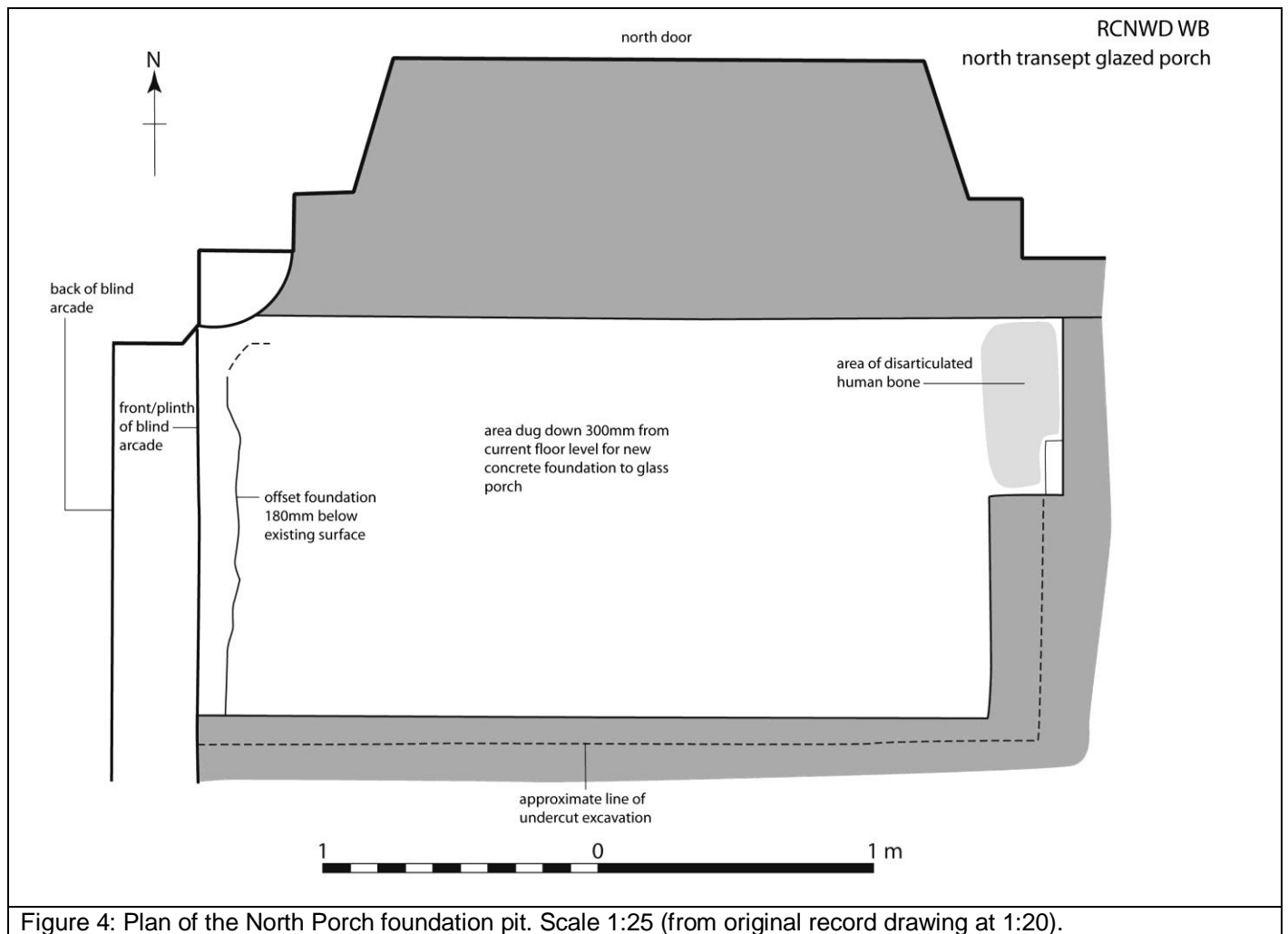


Figure 3: Examples of graffiti recorded before the building contract began. Top left: head, female?, on the south side of the Great West Door. Top right: shield with what appears to be a boat beneath it on the north side of the Great West Door. Bottom left: date, 16** (probably 1619) incised into the east side of the North Door.



Six contexts were recorded in the test pit at the North Door. Structure 1006 was the offset foundation for the plinth-wall in the northern arcade-niche of the transept's west wall. The Kentish Rag masonry lay 0.18m below the existing paving and was up to 0.15m wide. Its edge was somewhat irregular, suggesting that the foundation consisted of rubble. Its northern extent could not be traced with certainty, but it appeared to turn east as it approached the western jamb of the North Door.

The bottom 0.14m of the excavation area was covered with mid-brown silty clay (1004) containing pieces of stone rubble. None of this was datable, and none was retained. It was notable that the top of this layer lay at about the same level as the top of offset foundation 1006.



Figure 5: The North Door porch foundation pit as excavated, with layer 1004 visible across the base of the pit.



Figure 6: Detail of offset foundation 1006.

Approximately 15 fragments of human bone (context 1005) were found within layer 1004, all in the north-east corner of the pit. The bones were mostly from the lower leg (tibia and fibula), but a few vertebrae, ribs and toe or finger bones were also present. The long bones were all oriented north-south, ie at 90 degrees to the expected orientation for an *in situ* skeleton. The bones had clearly been re-deposited here. Fortunately it proved possible to leave them all in place and pour the foundation concrete around them (with a separating membrane and sand between them to protect the bones).



Figure 7: Long bones visible in the east section of the foundation pit.

Paving slabs, 1001.

Bedding 1002.

Mortar 1003, probably bedding for an earlier floor.

Human bones, 1005.

Rubble layer 1004.

Rubble layer 1004 was sealed by a 20-40mm-thick layer of mortar (1003), found over most of the foundation pit just beneath the bedding for the existing floor. Layer 1003 sloped slightly from north to south, being 0.16m below floor level on the south side of

the pit, but only 0.13m below it on the north side. The mortar is interpreted as the bedding for an earlier floor within the North Transept, sat a little below the existing one. It was notable that the layer was level with or just above the top of offset foundation 1006. The earlier floor would thus have run across the top of the foundation. The slight slope from north to south suggests that some settlement of the floor had occurred, perhaps over poorly consolidated graves. There is documentary evidence for extensive re-laying of floors within the cathedral during the 19th century (eg in 1825-48, when red brick paving in the nave was removed and replaced with stone²). Unfortunately there was no evidence for the form of the earlier floor in the North Transept, such as tile or paving slab impressions in the mortar surface. The remaining contexts were the lean-mix concrete bedding (1002) for the existing paving slabs (1001).

3 CONCLUSION

The excavation of the foundation pit provided evidence for an earlier floor level within the North Transept. The date of this earlier floor is unknown, but it could have been of medieval or early post-medieval origin. The coincidence with the top of the offset foundation for the transept's west wall is notable, as the foundation appears to be medieval. The North Transept retains a number of very fine ledger stones of 17th-and 18th-century date, although clearly these have been re-laid at the current height of the floor. Therefore they are not necessarily in their original positions, but they do suggest that graves were being dug here through much of the post-medieval period. While only circumstantial, this evidence at least suggests that the former floor represented by bedding 1003 pre-dated the burials. The digging of graves at such late dates within the history of the transept would also help to explain the presence of disarticulated human bone (1005) in layer 1004. Grave digging might rarely have penetrated as far as 'six feet under' during the 17th and 18th centuries, but it would have been more likely to proceed to a reasonable depth (perhaps 4 feet/1.2m or more) inside the cathedral than outside of it. Excavation to such depths could easily entail the disturbance of earlier graves, including ones which would originally have lain outside the cathedral before the North Transept was rebuilt/extended in the middle of the 13th century.

² DRc/Emf/135, in Holbrook D 1994, *Rochester Cathedral 1540-1983: a Record of Maintenance, Repair, Alteration, Restoration, Decoration, Furnishing and Survey of the Fabric*. Section II: Chronology – Vol 2, 1800-99