Hands off the Abbey!

by

JOHN PHYSICK

For several centuries the Dean and Chapter of Westminster had been unable to find suitable space for a sacristy. When funds were offered and an architect chosen in 1926, the solution appeared to be at hand, but this represented merely the beginning of a prolonged and salutary public wrangle which ended only with the withdrawal of the offer four years later. Westminster Abbey still lacks an adequate sacristy.

Everyone has his own special horrors that were perpetrated or planned at cathedrals and major churches by architects during the late eighteenth century or the nineteenth century. They might be about James Wyatt at work at Durham where he was narrowly stopped from demolishing the Galilee; George Austin pulling down the Norman north-west tower at Canterbury; Sir Gilbert Scott almost everywhere; J.L. Pearson at Peterborough, where he proposed a tall central tower with a spire, or at Rochester where he tried to remove the medieval pulpitum. Not all the blame can be levelled at the architects, for Deans and Chapters would have had to be consulted, and they must bear a high degree of responsibility for permitting and funding much of the work. In some cases they initiated schemes, as at Westminster Abbey at the end of the eighteenth century, where the Dean proposed a liturgical re-ordering which probably would have resulted in the destruction of the Confessor's Chapel, with its royal tombs. At times, one has to wonder about the degree of consultation between the Dean and his architect. Did the Dean of Westminster, for instance, know that Pearson had decided to put in his own rose-window in the north transept, rather than carefully replacing the medieval design? When Pearson was forced, by protests, to replace the stained glass designed by Sir James Thornhill, it had to be mutilated to make it fit into the new and smaller tracery. As is well-known, it was 'vandalism' such as this that led William Morris to found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. But Deans and Chapters remained masters of their buildings.

The Ancient Monuments Bill of 1913 proposed that churches should be brought under state protection, in the same way as secular historic buildings, but Archbishop Davidson of Canterbury assured the S.P.A.B. and others that the church would look after those of its buildings in use, and by 1923 Advisory Committees for the Care of Churches had been established in most dioceses. Thus was born the 'ecclesiastical

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exemption'. It was not until the 1990s, however, by the Care of Cathedrals Measure that a Fabric Advisory Committee for each cathedral became mandatory, under the watchful eyes of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission. Although Westminster Abbey is a Royal Peculiar and is not a cathedral, some years ago, the Dean had set up his own Architectural Advisory Panel. What would have been the outcome in 1929, if such a Panel had then been in existence?

For several centuries there had been no suitable space at Westminster for an adequate sacristy. It was welcome news to William Foxley Norris, Dean since 1925, when an anonymous donor told him that she would pay for one to be built. On 9th March 1926, the Chapter agreed that 'Mr Tapper or some other architect' should be consulted about a sacristy and its site. By October 1926, a location had been found in the north-east angle formed by the North Transept and the northern chapels. Three months later, however, the Chapter had decided to adopt a smaller scheme on the south side, outside Poets' Corner, a site suggested by Walter Tapper. By July 1927, this area had been dismissed and the Chapter, after consultation with the Sacrist, Dr Jocelyn Perkins, decided to ask Tapper to prepare plans for a building on the east side of the North Transept. These he delivered on 14th November 1927. He stated [Westminster Abbey Muniments, 58923] that there was not a more convenient place: 'The Sacristy can be entered (1) by the existing doorway in the east aisle of the north transept, and (2) by forming a doorway in the window of the Islip Chapel'. He went on to suggest that the 'Sacristy proper should be detached from the Abbey, as it has to be some 38 feet square, and in order to get it in good proportion, some 25 feet high. To keep things in good preservation the Sacristy must be well lit and well ventilated. The building connecting the Sacristy to the Abbey will be kept low, some 11 feet high so that their roof will come under the window sills of the Abbey chapels and will not interfere with them'. The advantage of his building, thought Tapper, was that, as it would be between the Abbey and St Margaret's Church, it would not interfere with the familiar view from Parliament Square.

Early in 1928, the Dean and Chapter publicly announced that the site for the Sacristy had been selected and a major factor in their choice had been that, to a large extent, the building would be masked by, not only the transept, but also by St Margaret's and trees as well. The Dean and Chapter proposed to erect a full-sized mock-up, designed by Tapper, by then the President of the Royal Institute of British Architects (Fig. 1).

Immediately following the Dean's announcement, pens were put to paper. Letters began to flood into *The Times,* and other papers and the architectural journals, so that for many months the wrangle that developed can be followed in the public print.

The architect, C.F.A. Voysey (5th March) championed the building being in a Gothic style, 'as surely the architecture of the Abbey cries out for sympathetic harmony for all its immediate neighbours'. The *Architect and Building News* (9th March) asked why so eminent an architect as Tapper had been thought necessary for an addition which was to be 'so carefully screened from view?', and went on to

Fig. 1
The Sacristy mock-up by Walter Tapper, 1928, east of the North Transept, between the Abbey and St Margaret's Church
The Dean and Chapter of Westminster

state that if there were to be any controversy over the scheme, it hoped that this would be confined to the legitimate sphere of 'additions or no additions'. There were 'among the laity, many rabid opponents of any extension', who, totally unqualified to judge, criticised not only the architect but also the whole profession.

Dean Foxley Norris, instantly on the defensive because of the growing clamour, stated at a dinner of the Royal Society of British Sculptors (reported in most of the architectural press during March), that it was essential that there should be additional accommodation if the Abbey were to be a living church and not a kind of Stonehenge. The site had been chosen, not because he was ashamed of the building, but because he did not wish to interfere with the well-known view of the Abbey, so familiar to the public. He thought it a little hard to be blamed for this.

At about the same time, John G. Noppen, author of *Westminster Abbey and its Ancient Art* (1926), entered into the argument with a call to the Government to reconsider whether all the great medieval churches should be placed under the protection of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, as the Commission would not ignore the needs of the Church, but would meet them without injuring

the fabric. 'If it had to demand some sacrifice of convenience, is that a matter of serious protest?', he asked. The Dean did not reply immediately, as he could well have done, that the Abbey had already made this sacrifice for centuries.

The Secretary to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Arthur Powys, supported Noppen: 'The guardians for the time being of these, the finest buildings in the world, even when these buildings serve a living purpose, should adapt their needs to the building and not change any of these . . . to suit their own requirements'. The *Architect and Building News* (16th March 1928) considered this an audacious contention which, if admitted, 'would lead logically to putting the Abbey in a glass case as a branch exhibit of the Victoria and Albert Museum'. But at the same time, the journal's editor began to display doubts about the site, hinting that the Sacristy might be somewhere on the south side, or even inside the church. Thus, the lines of battle were becoming evident, and the Dean's troubles had not really begun.

Some months later, the same periodical commented on the thirty-first annual report of S.P.A.B. which appeared to think that the Dean's desire for a sacristy was 'more of a fad than an urgent requirement', and that the Society implied that Professor Lethaby's resignation as Surveyor was not unconnected. Perhaps the Society and Lethaby had a useful suggestion to offer the Dean – but neither took the hint. So soon as Tapper's mock-up had been built, the storm began to beat around the unfortunate Dean with renewed vigour and there were complaints that the building encroached on to St Margaret's land by nearly five feet. *The Builder* admitted that while a considerable portion of the north-east elevation of the Abbey was masked, the proposed building was not 'the mean shed' its critics had claimed: 'Any interference with the beauty and charm of Westminster Abbey is, of course, to be deprecated, but so, also, is ignorant and misplaced criticism'. But *The Builder* also wondered whether all the possibilities for other sites had been fully explored (16th November) (Fig. 2). A week later, it put forward its own solution – to use the Chapter House, for which it would not be difficult to pass a Bill through Parliament. On 19th December 1928, the First Commissioner of Works was asked in the Commons by Sir Philip Pilditch if the Government would offer the Dean and Chapter the use of the Chapter House for the storage and display of old and modern vestments and plate and as a place where the clergy and others may vest and robe on occasions of special importance. Sir Vivian Henderson, in a written reply, stated that, without committing himself, any communication on the subject from Dean Foxley Norris would receive full and careful consideration, but that none, so far, had been received.

It was an historical fact that the Chapter House at Westminster was not under the Dean's authority. In the thirteenth century, the King's Council met in the building and then the Commons assembled there until the reign of King Edward VI, when they were allowed to meet in St Stephen's Chapel in the Palace of Westminster. Following the Dissolution of the Abbey, the Chapter House remained the property of the Crown, and was maintained by the Office of Works. This is the reason why for centuries, until its restoration by Sir Gilbert Scott, it was used to

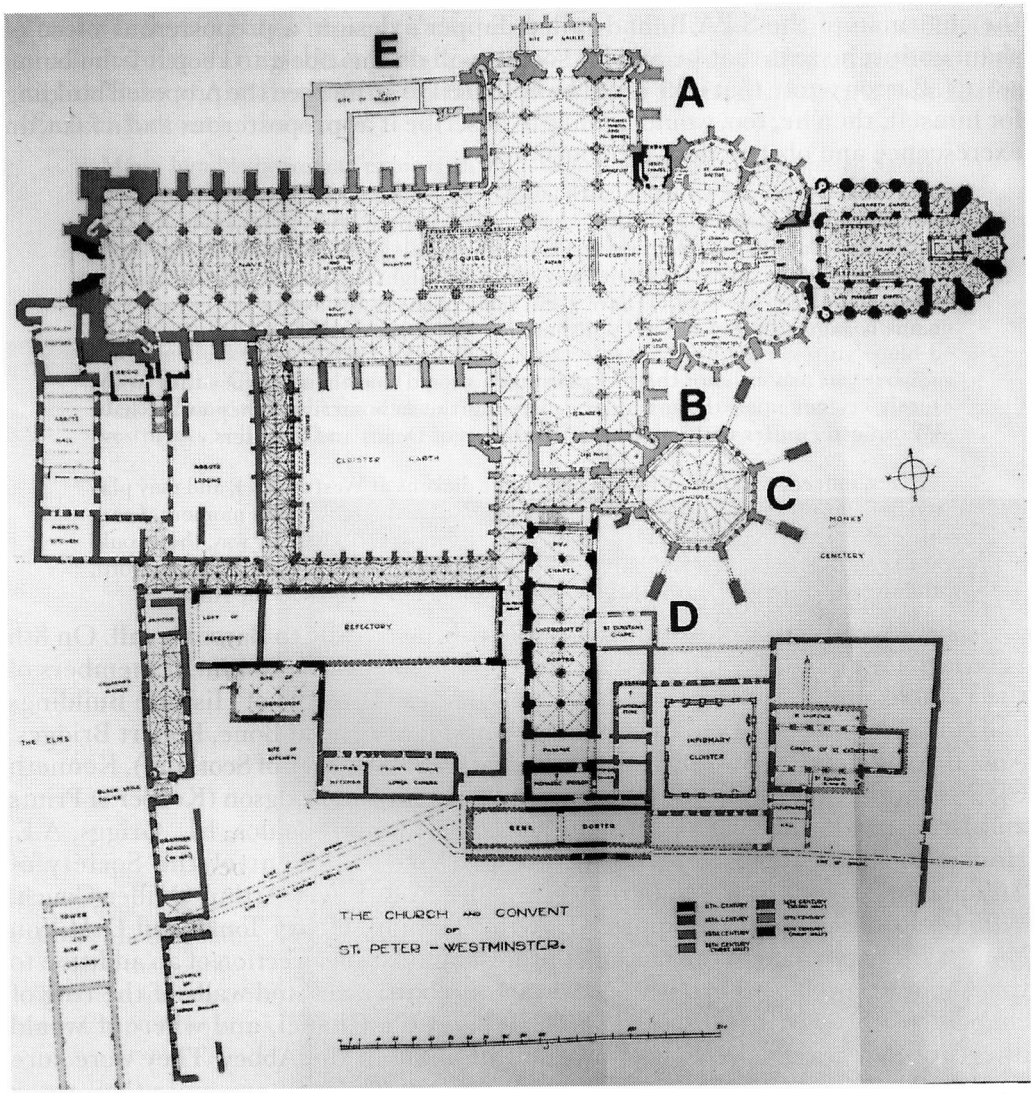

Fig. 2
Plan from H.F. Westlake's *Westminster Abbey* (1923), superimposed with the main sites considered for the Sacristy: A. East of the North Transept; B. Exterior of Poets' Corner; C. The Chapter House; D. St Dunstan's Chapel (Westminster School's gymnasium), east of the Library; E. Site of the demolished medieval sacristy, north of the north Nave aisle
The Dean and Chapter of Westminster

house the public records. The Chapter House is now under the guardianship of English Heritage, which charges for admission.

Oswald Barron now thought it time to stir things up even more. He wrote 'The Londoner' column in the *Evening Standard* and on 29th November he recalled that

the chairman of the S.P.A.B. had called Tapper's design 'a preposterous piece of sham gothic; he says that he and his society will do their best to keep it from being set up'. Barron wrote that if he could be bothered to go and see the proposed building for himself, then he, too, would be sure to describe it as preposterous and a fake, an excrescence and obstruction. He continued:

> If it were to be set up in any other place, beside any church but the one at Westminster, that would be another matter. This church is not as other churches. It is the holy place in the middle of our land, the middle place of our empire, to which all roads lead. I cannot argue with any man who might say, and reasonably, that he has seen nobler churches. So have I, but none of them was as this one, whose very name is august in the ears of Englishmen.
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> . . . but you may be sure that if Englishmen should find their tongues they would surely cry out upon those who are planning the new sacristy. They would have Westminster suffer nothing more at the hands of Deans and Chapters.
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> . . . Yes, indeed, that authority has played the dickens at Westminster, and may play it again. I grow so angry at the thought of this authority that, at this moment, I care little where the Dean and Chapter keep their surplices. If I had my way, they would not keep them in a new sacristy to be built out beside the old walls. For my word, and the word of every faithful Englishman, would be: 'Hands off the Abbey!'

There were plenty of people ready and willing to rally to Barron's call. On 8th February 1929, *The Times* printed a letter from nearly fifty prominent members of the Establishment, among them Sir Frank Baines (Director of Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments in the Office of Works), Muirhead Bone, Robert Bridges, Noel Buxton, James Caw (Director of the National Galleries of Scotland), Kenneth Clark, Edward Conder, the Marquess of Crewe, Campbell Dodgson (Keeper of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum), George Eumorfopoulos, F.L. Griggs, A.E. Housman, Lord Ilchester, John L. Myres (Vice President of the Society of Antiquaries), Henry Newbolt, Bernard Partridge, A.R. Powys, Arthur Quiller-Couch, William Rothenstein, J.H. Squire, H. Avray Tipping, Henry Tonks and E. Hilton Young. They appealed to the nation to protest against the erection of an addition to the Abbey at a point where it would dwarf the buttresses and walls of the ring of chapels, of the north transept, and of Henry VII's Chapel, and where it would interrupt and cramp the view of a beautiful angle of the Abbey. They were sure that the Dean and Chapter needed a sacristy (but why now, any more than three hundred years earlier?), but the Dean and Chapter should make sacrifices. The Dean was asked if he had referred the matter to the Royal Fine Arts Commission or the Society of Antiquaries? Although the correspondents were sure that the Dean and Chapter knew best what were the needs of the Abbey, they did not acknowledge the Dean and Chapter 'as the best authority to balance those needs with the artistic and historic demands made by the great building itself'.

The next day, Roger Fry wrote to associate himself with the letter which he would have signed but for his reluctance to see such matters dealt with by the Fine Arts Commission. Dean Foxley Norris also wrote that the questions raised by the letter would be considered by the Chapter. A third letter published that day in *The*

Times was from a lady who was to ally herself with John Noppen and cause the Dean much anguish during the coming months – Lady Frances Balfour, daughter of the eighth Duke of Argyll and sister-in-law of the former Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour (Earl of Balfour). She wrote:

> May a humble laywoman express an opinion on the model of the proposed Sacristy or wardrobe which has been erected against the splendid architecture of Henry VII's Chapel [*which it was not*]? I have been to view it with several people, and all have turned away convinced that public opinion would never allow it to be built. No woman can be an authority on ecclesiastical vestments, but we all know that they are consumed by moths. They are made typical of decay in the Bible. Is it necessary to destroy the matchless beauty of the outline of the Abbey to store vestments in an outside cloakroom? Processions can be formed in the nave, and vesting could be done in the Chapter House (Fig. 3), vestments can be stored in the large regions devoted now to lumber and the relics of ages, as forgotten and set aside as these vestments will be when the present fever for 'outward adornment' is past. The

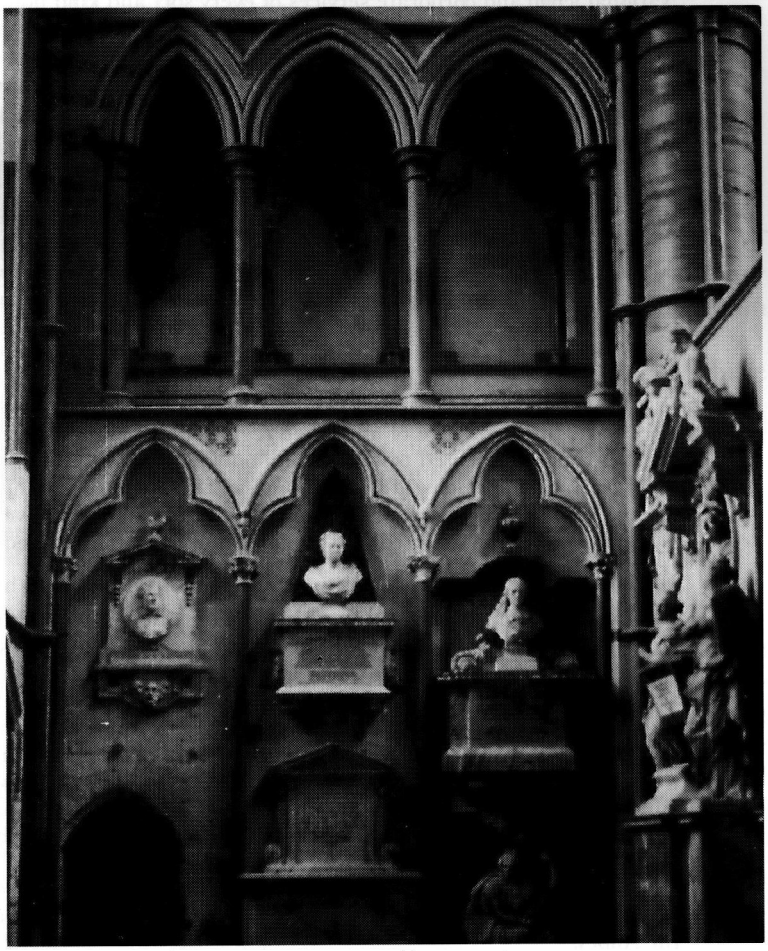

Fig. 3
The door in Poets' Corner in the south wall ofthe South Transept, leading to the Chapter House Crypt

signatures attached to the letter . . . may yet lead the nation to rise up and protect the Abbey, which is their possession, and not the Dean and Chapter's peculiar Sacristy and Robing Room.

Before the Dean had time to reply, a distant relative of King George V, Lord Edward Gleichen wrote that once the Sacristy had been built, 'not one person in 500 . . . would even know it was there. Sentiment is all very well in moderation, but sentiment driven to extremes is apt to become slightly ridiculous . . .'.

The Dean, for whom Lady Frances Balfour's breathless letter must have been exasperating, somewhat unwisely replied at length in *The Times* on 19th February 1929:

> . . . The paramount consideration is that the Abbey is not merely a national monument but a living church, growing and increasing in usefulness year by year. And I want to say as emphatically as I can that so long as I am Dean I will do all I can to protect the amenities of the Abbey as a 'national monument', but I will not allow that aspect of it to eclipse the other, which is very much more important. National, civic and corporate services of every sort and kind now take place in the Abbey. In addition to the growing number of these, and of annual and special services of the great Church societies, and the periodical consecration of Bishops, and other ceremonies of an imposing character, the Abbey is used by hundreds of people week by week and day by day. Sir Frank Baines and his co-signatories express wonder why there should be more need of a Sacristy today than for the last 200 years. I will not waste time in answering a question which is not a question that anyone would ask who gave the matter serious consideration. We are living in the 20th century, not the 18th century, and not only the nation, but the Empire and the Church demand that the Abbey shall be at its disposal for its great sacred ceremonies, and the plain fact is that the Abbey is not equipped for such services. One correspondent tells us that 'processions can be formed in the nave' and that 'vesting can be done in the Chapter House', and that 'vestments can be stored in the large regions now devoted to lumber', and perhaps I may be forgiven if I take that letter as typical of the opinion of those who are not very conversant with the situation. The answer to the first two points is too obvious to need statement; and I need only say that we at the Abbey are quite unaware of any 'large regions devoted to lumber', unless, indeed, the Triforium is referred to. That could only be brought into use by means of the erection of an enormous lift, and I may say that, with our architect, we have, we believe, explored every means of using the Triforium, and have finally turned it down. Let it be remembered that we have not, like many cathedrals, an available crypt or empty chapels.
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> Two facts are significant. The first that the only new cathedral in building at the moment (Liverpool) has provided a range of rooms for vestry and sacristy purposes. And the second is that at the Coronation robing rooms of a temporary character actually had to be erected at the Abbey. But we are expected to carry out great and stately ceremonies, as well as our ordinary services, without even the accommodation that every parish church possesses. You cannot carry out great ceremonies without a considerable mass of 'properties', and these have to be kept somewhere. At present ours are going to rack and ruin (including Elizabethan and Caroline copes and many other things ancient and modern) because they have to be folded up and packed away in boxes and cases in any odd corner we can find. I do not suppose there is a single cathedral, whether at home or on the Continent, so completely devoid of accommodation for storing and generally dealing with its possessions as the Abbey.

> I do not think that anyone who knows anything about the management of these things can question the need of a Sacristy; that question is not really open. The questions that are open are where to put the Sacristy and what it is to look like. We are assured that there are 'other places' than the one that we have chosen, and that there are people who may be able to show us a better way. But for two years, with the best expert advice, we have been examining every plan that has been suggested. We have had no fewer than nine different sites and schemes before us, but on examination every single one has turned out, for one reason or another, to be impossible or impracticable, and the site we have chosen, appears to us and to many others to combine the maximum convenience with the minimum of any real interference with the artistic and historic demands of the great building.
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> On the question of the need for a Sacristy the Dean and Chapter are the best judges, and would, I feel sure, have behind them the support of everybody who understands the management of great ceremonies. On the second question, the suitability of the proposed site, the Dean and Chapter are perfectly willing to take advice on the aesthetic side and to give it due weight. But they are not prepared to say that a body, however weighty, which is formed with a view to estimating artistic, archaeological, and architectural considerations, is necessarily qualified to decide a question in which those considerations form only half the problem. On the third question, that of the style and appearance of the building, if building there is to be, we do not consider ourselves to be in any sense the competent authority. We may have our opinions, like other untrained people, but we are perfectly willing that that question should be decided by experts, and we have endeavoured to meet this by getting the highest advice which appeared to be available.

The Dean ended by regretting the need to build at all and he gave notice that the 'dummy building' would soon be taken down. To reply publicly to letters of criticism in the national press is, in almost every instance, simply to invite further argument and brickbats, and usually very little support. This happened to Dean Foxley Norris: the knives came out.

In a letter, dated 18th February, the architect Walter Godfrey stated that there were three objections to Tapper's design:

> 1. The structure is too lofty, having apparently been designed to allow of the windows over the cupboards and presses for vestments, and thus it obscures one of the most valuable views of the Abbey. 2. There is a two-fold objection to the site in that access must be through the east aisle of the transept which is filled with beautiful monuments, and through the Islip Chapel, which involves an unnecessary disturbance of old work. 3. Its Tudor character is neither in keeping nor in contrast with the noble lines of the Abbey buildings.

Godfrey took the opportunity to point out that there was once a sacristy to the west of the north transept (Fig. 4) and he suggested a 'low building, erected cloister-wise', which would obscure nothing of importance, and would be an excellent setting to 'the fine cliff-like façade of the nave'. If it were to be built in the Renaissance style, Godfrey was sure that it would provide a 'charming contrast' to the medieval building. Another correspondent wanted to know why the sacristy could not be provided north and west of the transept, but underground?

Other objections were raised by G.W. Wright of Stockwell, who repeated that the proposed building encroached into St Margaret's churchyard by several feet:

Fig. 4
Exterior of the north nave aisle showing the door which led from the medieval sacristy

> The boundary between the churchyards . . . is marked by a line of stone posts set in the turf which runs from east to west from the closed double gate at the Palace-yard end, and then round the main north door of the Abbey. In addition to this intrusion, the foundations of the Sacristy would cause grievous disturbance and eviction of the human remains which lie thickly in both churchyards at that site. It will be realised that permission to level and turf over the gravestones was obtained in 1881 only on condition that the contents of the graves were not disturbed, and that the memorials should remain in the soil over the graves to which they severally referred . . .

Wright suggested that a suitable place for the sacristy already existed

> in the modern structure which adheres to the west front of the Jerusalem Chamber. It is at present occupied as an office by the Receiver-General, who could be suitably housed elsewhere near the Abbey, as for example in the buildings in Dean's yard now used as a boarding school for the Abbey choirboys, which the Dean proposes to abolish and let out as offices. In view of the Abbey's chronic lack of office room it seems somewhat of a mystery why the houses in the Abbey garden on the Great College Street frontage, which were built in Dean Bradley's time for the Abbey staff, should now be occupied, as they are, by business men.

The Receiver-General's office had been built by Edward Blore when he was Surveyor, assisted by the young William Burges. (It has now been converted as the bookshop.) The Receiver-General, Edward Knapp-Fisher, was not at all enamoured

of Wright's suggestion and replied two days later, pointing out the unsuitable size and shape of his office and, that in order to reach the church it would mean passing through the Jerusalem Chamber and two other rooms, before arriving at the extreme west end of the nave – the sacristy was required at the east end of the church. He added that there was no mystery about the houses in the Abbey garden as, under an Act of Parliament, the number of canons had been reduced and the Act stipulated how the rents of the houses rendered vacant were to be applied. He and the Dean, moreover, were surprised at the news that the boarders of the Choir School were to be abolished.

This letter brought an instant reply from Wright, who reminded the Dean of the report of 1927 of the Cathedrals Sub-Commission (C.A. 245): 'The school costs the Chapter about £3,000 a year . . . there is no doubt that the conversion of the school into a day school would mean a considerable saving of costs, and would enable the Chapter to charge profitable rents for the parts of the present large buildings which would no longer be necessary for the school . . .'. The Dean was, wrote Wright, one of the seven who had signed the report, which he had done without stating any reservation.

Fig. 5
The view from the east showing, in the background, St Dunstan's Chapel (Gymnasium), below the Abbey Library

Fig. 6
The east view, showing the Poets' Corner site, behind the flying buttresses of the Chapter House

Dean Foxley Norris did not reply to Wright, but *The Times*, on 26th February, published a letter from him, as the Dean wished to make it known to the public that he and the Chapter had considered alternative sites for the Sacristy, and also gave the reasons for their rejection:

> They comprise two plans for enclosing space between buttresses on the south side close to Poets' Corner door but we could not get sufficient room here; the Crypt of the Chapter House; the Triforium, involving a very large lift; St Dunstan's Chapel (not available) (Figs. 5 & 6); cellar under Jerusalem Chamber; western aisle of the North Transept; two schemes involving new building on the north side between the Abbey and St Margaret's. Other suggestions have been before us – e.g., the little chamber where the effigies are; the Chapter House; the Chapel of the Pyx.

The *Sunday Times* had published a letter which sided with the Dean insofar as that it was unthinkable that such a question as the Sacristy should be settled by antiquarians who may be out of sympathy with the present-day work of the church, as 'some obviously are'. But the only reaction was another attack by Powys, Secretary of S.P.A.B., on 28th February. He added four more names to the signatories of the letter of 8th February – Laurence Binyon, R.B. Cunningham-Graham, Sir Thomas Horder and Sir John Stirling Maxwell, and asked again what advice had been given to the Dean by Lethaby, and why was the Dean withholding such important evidence? Powys also wanted to know why St Dunstan's Chapel was unavailable since it was used only by Westminster School as a gymnasium: 'In a matter of such great importance, this difficulty cannot in reality be insuperable. There is other land on which, by arrangement, the school could build a gymnasium'.

The Dean gave an interview to the *Architects' Journal*, which was published on 27th February, and in its comment on this the periodical wished that Tapper had displayed his skill (rather than his learning) and designed a modern building in sympathy with the Abbey, and left the 'period-mongers to grumble as they wished'.

But, unwisely, Dean Foxley Norris could not resist writing yet another letter to *The Times*, which again served only to fuel the argument. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings had suggested no new plan, 'but our old friend the "St Dunstan's Chapel scheme" . . . which has long been abandoned'. All that has to be done, continued the Dean,

> is to cut a doorway through an old wall below a Norman window, make a thoroughfare across the Chapter House passage, cut a large hole into the wall of the Abbey (because it is obvious that the existing little door would be of no use), make a thoroughfare through St. Faith's chapel, and there you are! The condemnation of the scheme lies upon the face of it.

The one thing that the Dean and Chapter would never allow, was to disturb the peace of the Chapel and its usefulness to be destroyed. The letter of S.P.A.B. was but one illustration of the futility of those who had only an academic knowledge of the matter, trying to solve a very complicated problem. The Receiver-General also added his confirmation that St Dunstan's Chapel was the absolute property of the Governors of Westminster School. Therefore he doubted whether

> it would be so easy to pass a private Bill to oust the School from this most valuable freehold, as Mr Powys seems to suggest. The provision of an alternative site for the School and the payment of adequate compensation to them would prove formidable, if not insuperable, difficulties, even if they were willing to be ejected.

This was not good enough for Powys who immediately replied that the Society was not speaking from 'only academic knowledge'; it was fully advised, and had answers to every one of the Dean's objections. He regretted that the Society had to differ so definitely. To the Dean's defence came William Iveson Croome (later Chairman of the Cathedrals Advisory Committee) who stated that the scheme must not be criticised on the same grounds as a scheme for enlarging the building. The abbey was more than an archaeological treasure; it was a glorious and stately church, where Christian worship was offered daily. Still Powys was not satisfied and returned in print a few days later:

> . . . My committee feels it its duty to ask Professor W.R. Lethaby two questions:– What was the advice he gave to the Dean and Chapter in regard to the proposed Sacristy, and what in his own opinion about an addition to the Abbey? It is of the utmost importance that these questions should be asked and answered . . . the guardians for the time being of these, the finest buildings in the world, even when these buildings serve a living purpose, should adapt their needs to the building and not change any of these wonderful works of man to suit their own requirements.

He was backed up by William Davison M.P., who thought that Powys's letter spoke for a large section of the public, and proffered his opinion that by blocking the space between St Margaret's and the Abbey by what 'looks like a large hatbox dropped on the pathway, would have finally disposed of the matter'. On the Dean's side, Sir John Simpson, a past President of the R.I.B.A., wrote: 'Let the Dean and Chapter take heart and carry on, "nothing wavering". Contemporary opinion will count not a jot hereafter, as has been shown time and time again', a view that was supported by another past President, Sir Guy Dawber, who was certain that 'the addition of this harmless building would have passed unnoticed'. So, as *The Builder*

stated (22nd March 1929) somewhat prematurely, 'it may be taken that the best and most influential opinion of the profession is in favour of the carrying out of Mr. Tapper's design'.

During the second week of April, the Dean published a letter from the Society of Antiquaries. In this, the Secretary, Ralph Griffin, stated that his Council considered that the Dean's choice of site had fatal objections, and suggested instead, that the Dean should think of a location to the west of the North Transept, on the site of the medieval sacristy. Once again, this provoked immediate correspondence. Lord Northbourne, for one, considered that if carried out it would completely change an aspect of the Abbey, perhaps of all the most familiar and conspicuous and therefore the most important to preserve. Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith, a former Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, wrote that as the Dean's opponents had nothing better to propose, they should give way:

> Everyone knows that in a matter of aesthetic controversy like this the assemblage of opinions for or against is only a matter of time and energy. We have, fortunately, no recognised canon of taste nor (with all due respect to the Fine Arts Commission) any public body who can authoritatively settle such questions . . . I am sure we could get interesting opinions from the Ancient Order of Buffaloes, or the M.C.C. Committee, or Mr Bernard Shaw. But most of us would still, I fear, remain unconvinced.

Frank Pick, Vice-Chairman of the London Passenger Transport Board (and later also Chairman of the Council for Art and Industry), wanted to know why people were so afraid of additions to the Abbey? His own answer was that we had forgotten how to build: 'We lack a living ecclesiastical architecture which disables us from adding to Westminster Abbey, and until this living architecture returns we had perhaps best leave the present structure alone'. Walter Godfrey, writing once again, wondered if there was 'any more humiliating comment on present day thought that St Margaret's, Westminster, is to function as a fig-leaf to hide the building we are ashamed of, but which our forefathers built openly on the proper site west of the transept?'

In view of this continuing controversy, the Chapter decided, on 23rd April 1929, to postpone any further decision until they had met with the Fine Arts Commission. However, less than a month later, the Chapter reversed this decision and resolved to proceed with the North Transept site, and that *The Times* would be informed.

Throughout April and May more letters were published in the press, a few in support of the Dean, but the greater number in opposition, neither side giving way to the other. Then, in June, Lady Frances Balfour reappeared on the battlefield: she became a founder-member of the Council for the Protection of Westminster Abbey. This new Council's chairman was Lady Audrey Worsley-Taylor and its Secretary was the John Noppen who had fired off one of the first letters to the press. Presumably the Council's membership was limited, on the day of its foundation, 13th June 1929, to those who signed the announcement, a total of twenty-six including the three already named. Among others were Arnold Bennett, Sir Frank Baines, Sir John Bradford, Lord Chalmers, Campbell Dodgson, R.B.

Cunningham-Graham, Lord Howard de Walden, M.R. James, the Lancaster Herald (A.G.B. Russell), J.C. Squire and Emery Walker.

One of the Council's first moves was to lobby the House of Commons for support, and to organise a question to the First Commissioner of Works, George Lansbury; publicity announcements let it be known that Lansbury was to be asked whether the Office of Works had any power to prevent the building of the sacristy; if not, would he seek it, or would the Office of Works prevail upon the Dean to do nothing until the public had pronounced?

In the meantime, however, the Royal Fine Arts Commission delivered its verdict on 21st June, which Dean Norris hastened to pass on to *The Times*. The Commission had considered only two sites, (a) that on the east side of the North Transept and the other (b) on the west side. Therefore,

> after careful consideration the Commission have come to the conclusion that site (a) is less open to objection than site (b), for the following reasons:
>
> (i) It is concealed to a considerable extent by St Margaret's Church on the north side, by the existing north transept, and by the trees.
>
> (ii) A building on the site (b), to the west of the north transept, would seriously interfere with the appearance of the Abbey by concealing the lower part of four of the buttresses of the north aisle and probably two of the transept buttresses. The result would be to break into the sequence of buttresses rising sheer from the turf. Moreover, a building on this site would be far more conspicuous than one to the east of the transept.
>
> Site (a) also appears to be the more convenient of the two for practical purposes.

The Commission expressed doubts concerning Tapper's design and hoped that they would see revisions before final approval was given. However, the Commission regretted that any addition to the Abbey was considered necessary. The Dean told the Commission that he was glad that the Chapter's site had been preferred, and that he was sure that Tapper would give every consideration to their views: 'This has brought us to a final decision'. Both letters were published in *The Times* on 23rd June, and as a result the Dean soon had cause to regret his sentence about the 'final decision'.

The Times at the end of July published support for the Dean, signed by among others, Sir Herbert Baker, Earl Beauchamp, D.Y. Cameron, Sir Guy Dawber, Archbishop Lord Davidson of Lambeth, the Bishop of Durham, Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith, Sir William Llewellyn (President of the Royal Academy), Sir Eric Maclagan (Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum), C.F.A. Voysey, Sir Aston Webb, Lord Northbourne and Sir Charles Peers (Director of the Society of Antiquaries); but the Council for the Protection of Westminster Abbey was still lurking and biding its time.

The July edition of the *Connoisseur* urged those who opposed this 'notorious (and shockingly designed) sacristy' to join the Council and published its address. Moreover the Council received the thanks and support of S.P.A.B. Thus strengthened, the Council wrote to the Dean to ask him not only to receive their

deputation, but also to postpone his final decision. In reply the Dean stated that he had only one day on which it was convenient for him to meet the Council, and that was 13th August. Noppen also asked the Dean if the Fine Arts Commission was aware that it was planned to cut an entrance into the Sacristy through the window of the Islip Chapel? (Fig. 7)

Fig. 7
The lower window of the Islip Chapel in the North Ambulatory, through which it was proposed to enter the Sacristy
The Dean and Chapter of Westminster

Dean Norris gave an interview to the press in which he stated that 'we at Westminster are not prepared to allow our policy to be shaped by irresponsible people all over the country, who are necessarily not acquainted with the facts in a most difficult and delicate problem'. The Sacristy would be a self-contained building which would not cut into any ancient walls and it was 'monstrous' to suggest that

the Islip window could have to be removed. But the rumour had already been made public: the *Daily Telegraph*, on 10th August, reported that an offer for the window had been made by Raymond Henniker-Heaton, a former Director of the Art Museum at Worcester, Massachusetts, who had become the Museum's European adviser. Henniker-Heaton told the *Sunday Times* that he had indeed asked whether the window were for sale:

> I am very much against any alteration or addition to any really old monument such as the Abbey . . . and I have done all I can to oppose the building of this new sacristy. Apparently it is inevitable, as the Dean is all-powerful, and he has decided that the building is to go on. As an alternative, I thought that perhaps the window could be taken out and preserved in a museum. At the moment I have had no reply to my letter.

Nor was he going to, as the Abbey authorities told the *Sunday Times* that they had no information about the offer.

The embattled Dean continued to be put under pressure. The artist Henry Tonks complained in the *Morning Post* on 21st August about the statement on irresponsible people, for 'I cannot feel that the Dean is meeting the opposition to his proposal in the proper spirit'. Christian Barnard (later a Royal Designer for Industry and President of the Society of Industrial Artists) was at the time Editor of the *Architects' Journal*. He wrote in the issue of 21st August that the

> English people will not allow the open ground along the north side of the Abbey to be built upon . . . But surely the finding of an alternative site is the business of the Dean and his architect, not the business of the public. The Dean . . . has taken much trouble to prove that no other site can be found that is not utterly impracticable. Very well, if no other site exists other than the open space to the north of the chevet, then the Dean will (to our universal regret) have to do without his sacristy.

The journal repeated the S.P.A.B.'s questions that Lethaby ought to answer. As Lethaby had not responded, perhaps his silence could be interpreted as an answer. Therefore, let him now be asked to say, 'does he agree that it is impossible to contrive a suitable passage from the school gymnasium to the Poets' Corner . . . without making impossible the private prayer that is now daily offered up in St. Faith's Chapel'. There was no reply.

In *The Times* the Dean stated that he himself could not countermand any instruction issued by the Dean and Chapter, but he would write to all members of the Chapter to ask if they would agree to a delay in the start of work, while further investigation was undertaken into the other possible schemes. In a very long letter to *The Times*, published on 12th September, Dean Foxley Norris announced that the Chapter had agreed to a postponement of three months. He repeated all the arguments for and against various sites and ended with a complaint about the 'provocative' title of the Council for the Protection of Westminster Abbey:

> For a body with such a name to approach the real custodians sets up at once an atmosphere in which the friendly atmosphere – which I am persuaded is the only useful attitude – becomes very difficult . . . Friendly help for the Abbey which we all love will be heartily welcomed. The advances of a self-appointed organisation whose very name predicates rival claims will be coldly received.

The Council answered by refusing to change its name until the Dean announced his intention to abandon his proposal for the Sacristy on the north side of the Abbey. The Council had been incensed by the Dean's offer of only one date for a meeting, and could not agree to it. Sir Frank Baines loftily told a *Sunday Times* reporter that this was in protest at the Dean's action in proposing a date without waiting to see if it were convenient to the Council.

Two weeks later the Dean, again in *The Times,* stated that the Chapter proposed to invite a committee to re-examine the various schemes, together with any others that may be put by those anxious for the best possible solution. This was hardly good enough for the Council for the Protection of Westminster Abbey as the Dean could appoint only those people who held his own view. Instead, the Council proposed to promote a Bill in Parliament in order to control the power of the Dean and Chapter to make additions and alterations to the building.

In the middle of the argument about the Sacristy, the Dean had a meeting with both Archbishops, Lord Peel (representing the Prime Minister), Lord Crawford, Hugh Cecil, Ramsay Macdonald and others, about the inability of the Abbey to receive any more monuments. They looked at several plans, including one by Sir Herbert Baker, but the one that commended itself to them was by 'old Pearson' to be built on to the north aisle. The meeting decided that it was fatuous to continue with the Sacristy scheme until the monument building had been settled – but no more seems to have been heard of this. Arthur Powys asked the Dean on 4th October for plans relating to 'proposals made by your Surveyors in regard to the Gymnasium & St. Dunstans site' or alternatively if the Chapter would commission accurate plans of those buildings with door heights and so on. He informed the Dean that if the Advisory Committee were chosen without regard for their personal opinions and if their terms of reference were 'free and full', then S.P.A.B.'s committee, should the decision go against it, would accept the result, but be at liberty to express its regret publicly (Westminster Abbey Muniments 58778 A & B).

On 22nd October 1929, *The Times* announced that the Committee had been appointed on 8th October, its members being Archbishop Lord Davidson (the chairman), Sir William Llewellyn, President of the Royal Academy, Sir Banister Fletcher, President of the R.I.B.A., Charles Peers and J.F. Green, the acting chairman of S.P.A.B. Later Lord Newton and Sir Kynaston Studd, Lord Mayor of London, were co-opted. Even this did not suit everyone, as there were grumbles that due to delay in forming the Committee, time had been lost. It was hoped that the Dean's promised pause of three months would date from the announcement in *The Times.*

At a meeting of the Committee on 21st November, 'A letter was read from Mr A.R. Powys . . . asking if he could give evidence' on behalf of S.P.A.B. It was agreed that Green would ask Powys if there were any special reason for this. A manuscript note (deleted) on the draft minutes commented, 'I suppose, really, that Powys thinks Green wants stiffening'.

At the Committee's meeting on 28th November, the Dean and Chapter were present for part of the time, which revealed divisions within that body, and worries about financial implications. The Dean felt that the scheme should be abandoned,

as storage was not so important and there were other more urgent matters. The sub-Dean thought that accommodation could be found elsewhere among the Abbey's buildings and the Archdeacon of Westminster was strongly opposed to the model site, as he did not think that it could be built for the £10,000 offered, as it was more likely to cost £40,000. Lord Davidson pointed out that these considerations were not matters for the Committee, which had been appointed to adjudicate only upon a site, and would have to report on this to the Dean and Chapter. The Committee reviewed fourteen suggestions for possible locations. They were: 1. A building on the east side of the north transept (the Model site); 2. Several suggestions for a sacristy outside Poets' Corner; 3. The gymnasium site, which incorporates St Dunstan's Chapel; 4. The Chapter library; 5. The Crypt of the Chapter House; 6. An underground sacristy; 7. The medieval sacristy site; 8. The Triforium; 9. The north cloister, in part or whole; 10. The west aisle of the north transept; 11. The cellars of the Jerusalem Chamber; 12. The garden of the Deanery; 13. The Norman Undercroft (museum); 14. The refectory site. Before the Committee were six criteria for a sacristy: 1. It should be as near to the high altar as possible; 2. It should be easy of access; 3. It should have full space for storage, together with accommodation for future additions; 4. It should have adequate arrangements for cleaning vessels and proper lavatory accommodation; 5. It should not be necessary to pass through the open air; 6. The passage way to the sacristy should not interfere with the public use of the Abbey.

Obviously, many locations proposed could be dismissed immediately – the triforium, the gymnasium, the Library and the Chapter House crypt, the underground sacristy, and the medieval site. Of the Model site, the Committee held that it had strong points in its favour, but they recognised that there was reluctance to see any modern building on the north side of the church. With respect to three suggestions for a building outside Poets' Corner between the buttresses of the south-eastern chapels and the Chapter House, adequate space would be difficult, and there would also be objections to building there. Nevertheless the Committee recommended that the Dean and Chapter should reconsider a site at Poets' Corner. If it proved to be inadequate, they should consider a scheme:

> a combination of the Poets' Corner site with the octagonal crypt of the chapter house by means of an underground passage and stairway. This scheme would entail cutting through the north wall of the crypt, which is 17 ft. thick, and we are fully conscious of the objection of interfering with ancient masonry, even when, as in this case, such interference would be practically out of sight. But we feel that perhaps such interference can be justified by the fact that it would enable one of the most interesting parts of the Abbey – at present almost unknown and unused – to be brought into daily use . . .

The Committee pointed out that it was only advisory, and that the final decision rested with the Dean and Chapter, who, because of the Committee's strong recommendation, agreed to reconsider the Poets' Corner site.

In view of the past history of the affair, it is not at all surprising that there were immediate objections to the Committee's recommendation. C.R. Grundy, editor of the *Connoisseur* pointed out, in a letter to the *Morning Post,* that it would mean the

removal of the 'fine Caroline altar tomb' of Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex and his wife (in St Benedict's Chapel), as well as the monument to Dryden. Driving a tunnel through the foundations of the Chapter House would be likely to imperil its stability, and the Sacristy would be below ground, in a building not intended for the purpose, to which 'it can only be imperfectly adapted by a series of alterations, if not mutilations, which will entirely change its character'. *The Architect and Building News,* and *The Builder* voiced similar reservations. On 27th January 1930, C.B. Mortlock complained that the proposal would mean the 'virtual destruction of the perfect chevet which . . . is one of the peculiar glories of the Abbey'. He continued,

> One would hesitate to imply that the committee rejected the "model" site . . . out of reluctance to oppose ill-informed opinion, but since they are committed to the principle of building, it is difficult to understand how they brought themselves to favour a disastrous modification of the design of the Abbey instead of a small separate structure which would diminish little, if, indeed, any, of the beauty of the building, and, as the model proved, would not be perceived as an excrescence by one in a hundred of passers-by.

Others thought the same, and opinion began to swing in favour of the Dean and Chapter and the argument that had begun two years earlier, looked as if it were set to begin all over again, even if, for the moment, both S.P.A.B. and the Council for the Protection of Westminster Abbey were quiet. The Chapter decided on 28th January that they could not authorise a passage to be cut through the north wall of the Chapter House crypt, although Tapper was asked to provide plans, elevations and specifications for a sacristy outside Poets' Corner.

Then, the Dean had a crucial setback. He asked the anonymous donor if she were still prepared to fund a sacristy, but heard on 5th June, that she expressed her regret that, in the altered circumstances, as the result of the long controversy, she could not support the new scheme. The end came, a month later on 5th July, when the Dean issued a statement:

> The Dean and Chapter . . . have for some months, with the assistance of their architect, been trying to make an effective scheme out of the plan recommended by the Advisory Committee . . . for a small sacristy on the south side . . . near Poets' Corner. This site was one of the first considered, not only by the present Dean, but by his predecessor. It is not feasible to make an adequate sacristy in this position, but the Dean and Chapter felt that as it had been deliberately chosen by so weighty a committee, it was their duty to go into the whole question once again and see what could be done. The project, however, has now been brought to an end because the donor declines altogether, not without reason, to accept this plan in place of the complete scheme for which the generous gift was originally offered. The Abbey, therefore, is left not only without the accommodation that it requires, but without the necessary means to provide it.

On behalf of S.P.A.B. Powys said that perhaps the Dean would now reconsider the Westminster School's gymnasium, while Noppen for the Council of Protection stated ungenerously that 'it would have been well for Westminster Abbey, and many other churches and cathedrals if, during the past one hundred years, funds had been less plentiful, for much damage has been done under the name of restoration'. After this blast, no more was heard of Noppen or his Council, and Lethaby managed

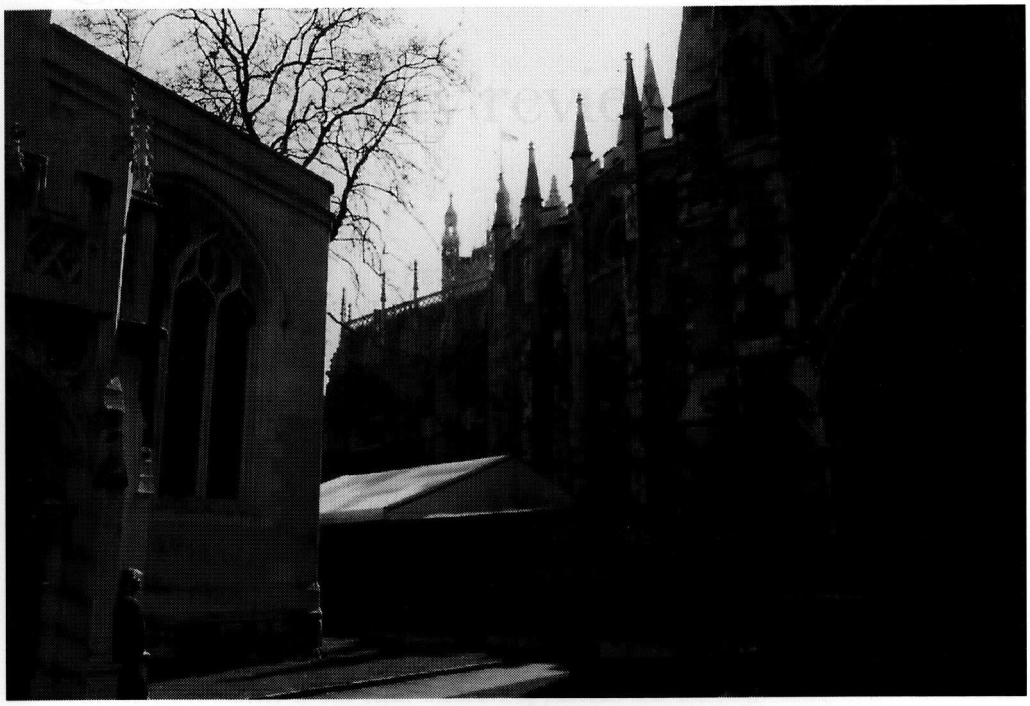

Fig. 8
The North Transept site in 1996

to preserve his silence. All that the Dean said to the press was: 'There is now no scheme. The gift has been withdrawn. It is quite over. It seems a great pity'. More than sixty years later, there is still no adequate sacristy (Fig. 8).

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