

# St Mary's Hall and the Medieval Architecture of Coventry

Anniversary Address 1987

by

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*This paper is based on the Address given in Coventry on Saturday 4 July 1987. It was intended to have been delivered in St Mary's Hall, but the uncomfortable proximity of a rock concert in the ruins of nearby St Michael's forced it to be given in various locations in the centre of the city.*

Those who attended the Coventry meeting will be aware that my peripatetic Address was concerned with all the medieval architecture in the historic core of the city, bordered on the north by the site of the former cathedral priory and on the south by Bayley Lane; and including St Mary's Guild Hall and the parish churches of Holy Trinity and the ruined St Michael's (elevated to cathedral status in 1918 and bombed in 1940). The original invitation was to give a paper specifically on St Mary's Hall,\* but I have never undertaken any substantial original research into this complex of buildings and adequate up-to-date publications already exist about their history and development (see bibliography at end). Rather I wish to take this opportunity to examine the style of the extant fabric of St Mary's hall\* in the context of the Gothic architecture of the city and its immediate vicinity, especially in the fourteenth century. In doing so, my aim is to draw attention to the outstanding quality of Coventry's medieval heritage, despite the depredations of the last war and the not always helpful attentions of civic and church authorities. Many of these buildings have yet to receive thorough architectural study, and nothing more than an interim appraisal of the main problems and relationships is offered here.

The fourteenth century is the crucial period for the development of Coventry's surviving medieval architecture. It is estimated that the city was then the fourth in importance in the kingdom, with its prosperity based particularly on the wool and cloth trades. During this century there grew up a class of wealthy merchants who were to form the basis of the oligarchy which was to rule Coventry during the later middle ages. As an aside, it is

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interesting to reflect that the prosperity of the city in more modern times is rooted in a distant descendant of the cloth trade—the sewing machine—which led through bicycle making to the automobile industry (Singer *et al.*).

In 1340 the merchants' control of their own trade matters was formally acknowledged by a royal charter licensing the merchant guild of St Mary. The first St Mary's Hall was built for this guild, though the present hall is almost entirely a rebuilding of the late fourteenth century, by which time the guild had united with the other guilds created during the century to become the Trinity Guild. In 1345 another royal charter granted incorporation, and within ten years the records indicate that the administrative and judicial business of the mayor and bailiffs was being conducted from St Mary's Hall. The building thus came to symbolize the interdependence of the merchant guild and the corporation, in much the same way as the famous guild chair which still survives in the Old Council Chamber (Fig. 7). The exceptional width of this piece of furniture, which is usually dated to the mid-fifteenth century, suggests that it was a double chair to accommodate the mayor and the master of the Trinity Guild side by side.

Without a doubt the guilds and their wealthiest members constituted the major source of architectural patronage in the city in the later middle ages. The former names of chapels in the two great parish churches of St Michael and Holy Trinity testify to this (Cappers, Dyers, Girdlers, Mercers, Drapers, Tanners, etc.), and tradition ascribes the funding of the magnificent tower of St Michael's to William and Adam Botoner, both mayors of the city and members of the family which included the wool merchant, John Botoner. It is to the guild of St John-the-Baptist that we owe the foundation of the collegiate church of that name, as its guild chapel, in 1344.

Other indicators of the wealth of the city in this period are the foundation of new religious houses and the favour enjoyed from various members of the royal family. The Franciscans (Greyfriars) had arrived as early as 1234: a major Carmelite friary (the Whitefriars) was founded in 1342 by Sir John Pulteney (better known as lord mayor of London and the builder of Penshurst Place): and a Carthusian house (the Charterhouse) was established outside the walls in 1381–82. Royal favour is evidenced in the above-mentioned charters of Edward III in the 1340s, which seem to have been gained especially through the influence of his mother, the dowager Queen Isabella, who had acquired Cheylesmore manor house in the south of the city in 1330. She was a benefactress of the city in other ways too, giving land for the site of St John Baptist's church, as did her successor at Cheylesmore, the Black Prince. The

latter was attracted by the hunting in the vicinity, as were the Lancastrian kings, following John of Gaunt's lead at Kenilworth five miles south of Coventry. Thanks to the great artificial lake which almost completely surrounded it, Kenilworth Castle offered excellent sport on the water and as well as in the adjacent Forest of Arden. John of Gaunt's work at the castle in the late fourteenth century established it as a major palace and it enjoyed regular royal visits during the next two centuries, as did Coventry itself. An honour reserved for visiting members of the royal family was membership of the city's Trinity Guild, and almost certainly it was for the ceremonial admission of King Henry VII and his Queen that the splendid Tournai tapestry was commissioned which still adorns the dais end of St Mary's hall.

Turning to architectural matters, it will be best for my purpose to review the main stone buildings in chronological order, so as to suggest relationships between them and the possible influence of one work upon another. Until the early fourteenth century the edifice which must have dominated the city was the church of the Cathedral Priory of St Mary, founded in 1043 by Earl Leofric of Chester and his famous wife, Lady Godiva. This substantial church, four hundred and twenty-five feet long by the early fifteenth century, was almost entirely demolished in the years following the Dissolution in 1539, and most of what little we know about it is summarized in Brian Hobley's report of 1971 (see bibliography). It was cruciform in plan, with a crossing tower and two west towers. The foundations of the latter are the only remains still visible of the early Gothic church, and are generally ascribed to the later thirteenth century, though a detailed study of the mouldings could shed more light on their affiliations and date.

To the south of St Mary's lay the other main buildings of the early medieval townscape—Holy Trinity church directly adjacent to the cathedral priory, then St Michael's and, beyond, the castle of the earls of Chester. Nothing certain is known about the architecture of the castle, and the signs are that it was abandoned as a residence in the thirteenth century in favour of Cheylesmore Manor. Bayley Lane, from which one enters the courtyard of St Mary's Hall, is thought to mark the northern periphery of the castle's bailey, and it has been suggested that the kitchen and adjacent Caesar's Tower of St Mary's Hall incorporate parts of some of the castle's buildings, though this looks hard to prove from the visible fabric.

Holy Trinity was the grander of the parish churches at this early period, with the same basic plan and amplitude as the present building. The arches of the west bay of the chancel and those that lead from the transept arms into the chancel aisles and the nave

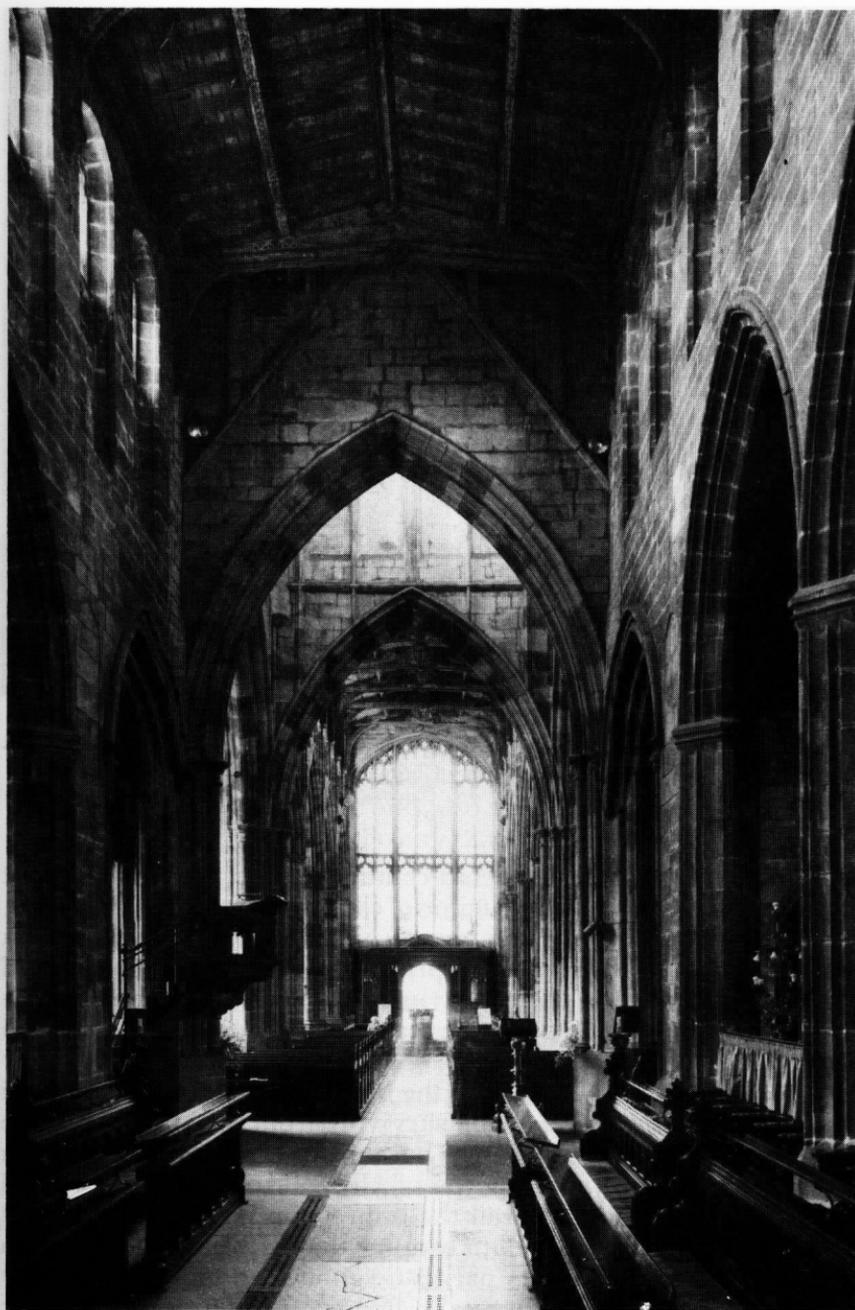


Fig. 1  
Coventry, Holy Trinity Church: chancel and crossing, looking west  
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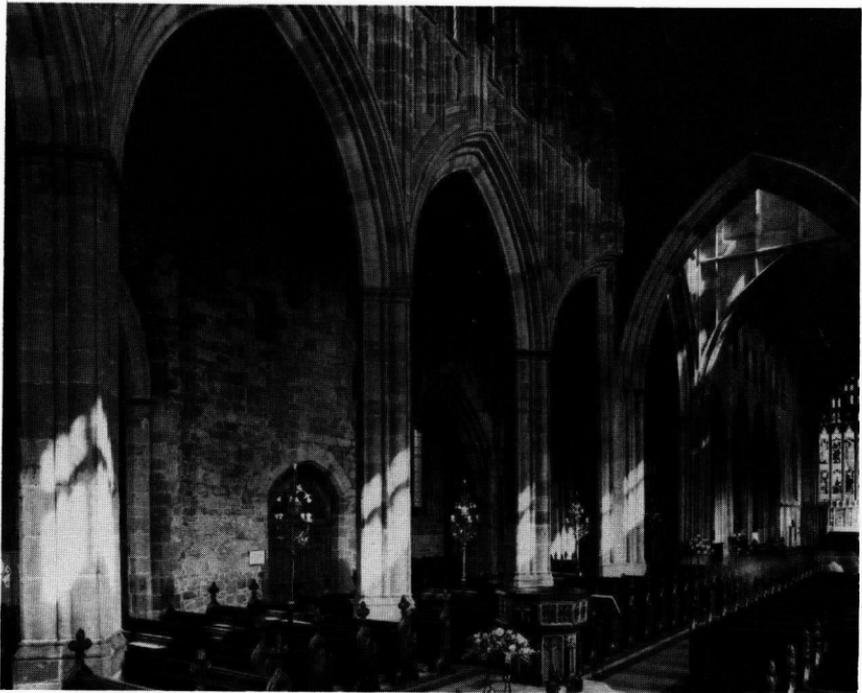


Fig. 2  
 Coventry, Holy Trinity Church: nave, looking east  
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north aisle are all later thirteenth-century in style, and indicate that a substantial aisled and cruciform church existed by that date, presumably with a crossing tower (Figs 1 and 2). It was thus a smaller version of the cathedral priory's church, and indeed it had been appropriated to the priory in 1259–60. The evidence for St Michael's in the same period reveals a narrower nave with south aisle, but no greater elaboration of plan (see further the article by the late Philip Chatwin cited in the bibliography). Its only feature of any architectural pretension surviving from this date is the late thirteenth-century south porch, perhaps inspired in general form by the fine vaulted north porch of Holy Trinity, which appears to be slightly earlier. Overall the impression is firmly given that it was not until the fourteenth century that St Michael's began to vie architecturally with its parish neighbour, doubtless aided by its proximity to the newly established centre of city government and trade regulation across Bayley Lane in St Mary's Hall. It is to this century that we must now turn, for it contains the evidence for a veritable explosion of architectural activity in the city and its vicinity.

From the 1340s on, Coventry must have resounded to the regular sounds of the masons' adze, hammer and chisel. The supply of New Red sandstone seems to have been quarried very locally, of both pink and grey colourations. Victorian restorers employed quite a lot of Bath stone, as in the west front of Holy Trinity—a most unsympathetic choice—and more recently Hollington sandstone from Staffordshire has been widely used.

Works under way around the mid-century included a new church for the twelfth-century Hospital of St John; the new Whitefriars, founded in 1342; and a major rebuilding undertaken by the Franciscans around 1359, perhaps ruffled by the arrival of their Carmelite cousins and not wishing to be outdone by them. The Hospital's church survived the Dissolution as the Free Grammar School, though very mutilated, but all that remains of the Whitefriars' church today are the foundations of a very considerable edifice about three hundred feet long, excavated in the 1960s. The plan was cruciform, the prestigious church plan in Coventry as we have seen, but little more can be said about the architectural style until the loose stones are studied. The plan of the Greyfriars was typical of other Franciscan churches in this country, in that the nave and the friars' chancel were separated by a central bell-tower, which is all that survives. The octagonal tower dates from the Decorated period, with ogee reticulated tracery, and if the much restored spire above belongs to the same period, as seems likely, then it is probably the earliest of the famous 'three spires of Coventry'; and also the lowest, at 204 feet. The others, of course, are Holy Trinity (230 feet) and St Michael's (298 feet).

There is evidence from around the mid-century for further works at both the city's parish churches. At Holy Trinity the north-east chapel (later used as the Consistory Court) incorporates a large east window with late Decorated ogee reticulated tracery, which looks to be *in situ* and therefore provides the date for the building of this chapel and its arcade to the nave north aisle. At St Michael's, the larger of the two crypts (known today as the Chapel of the Cross) may belong to this period and, if so, it indicates how far north the eastern parts of the church had expanded before the massive widening of the nave in the fifteenth century produced the present plan.

However, with hindsight, the most important new undertakings of the 1350s were the official commencement of the city walls, and the erection of the earliest extant work on the new collegiate church of St John Baptist (f.1344). The circuit of stone walls was a tangible expression of the city's incorporation, a massive undertaking which eventually included twelve fine gates—'many



Fig. 3  
 Coventry, Holy Trinity Church: nave, south aisle  
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fayre towers in the waulle' commented Leland in the 1530s. Only two are standing today. At St John Baptist, a donation of 1357 for a 'new aisle' provides a possible starting date for the south wall and tracery of the nave south aisle and what was to become the south transept. Around 1375 the city annals indicate that a more ambitious scheme was under way, involving almost a total rebuilding which probably created the present cruciform plan. Much more remodelling followed in the fifteenth century, but today one can still appreciate the nave as the main feature surviving from the late fourteenth-century work. A large clerestory seems already to have been part of this nave and, with the prestigious cruciform plan, it bespeaks the aspirations of this newcomer to the Coventry churches' scene. To enter it is to enter a miniature cathedral, and Sir George Gilbert Scott is reputed to have said that he knew no interior more beautiful (Fig. 5).

St John's was part of a church-building boom sweeping Coventry in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, which also involved St Michael's, Holy Trinity, the cathedral priory, the



Fig. 4  
Coventry, Holy Trinity Church: nave roof  
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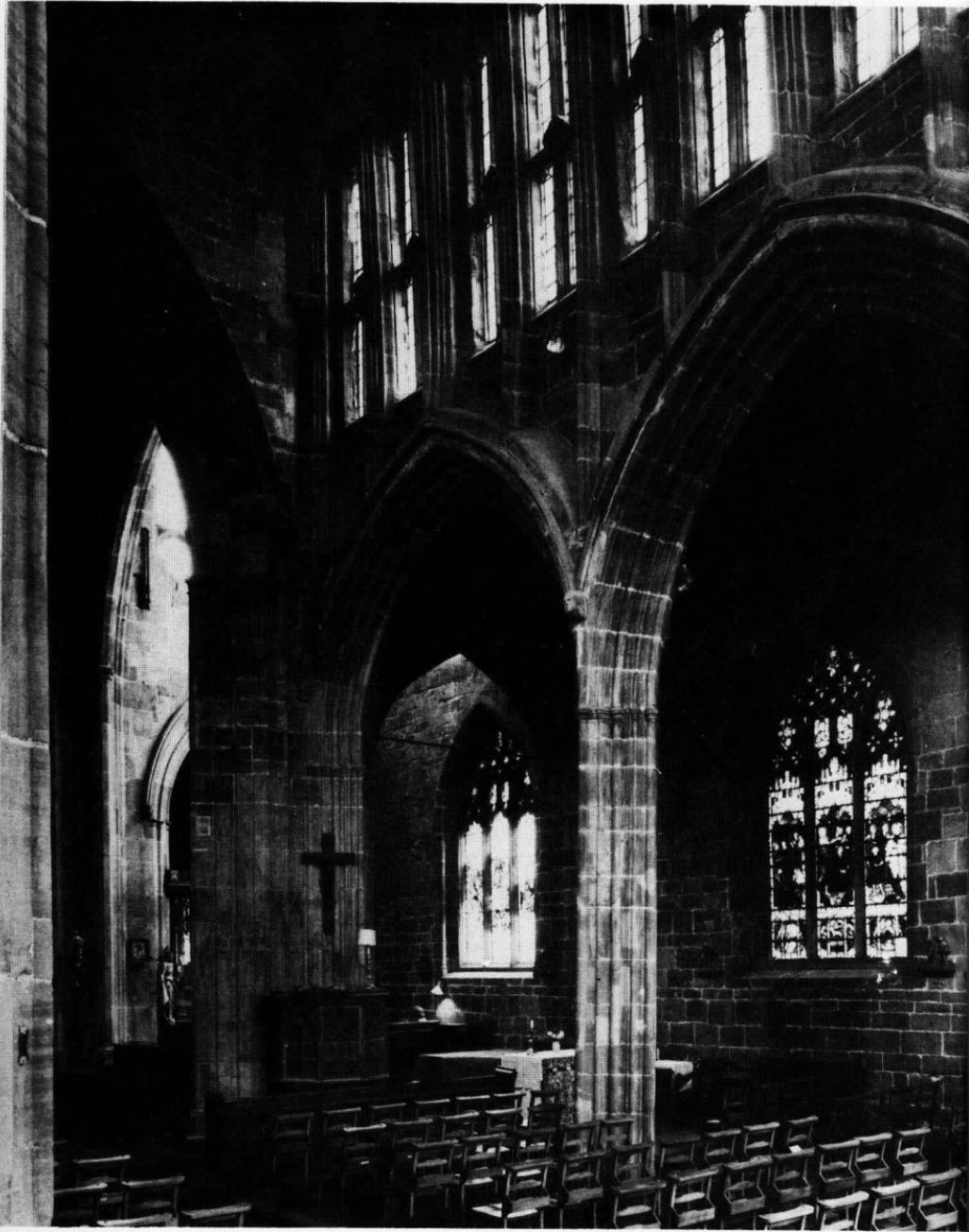


Fig. 5  
Coventry, St John Baptist's Church: nave, south elevation  
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nave of the White friars (c. 1350-1400), and the new Carthusian church about which so little is known (foundation stone laid in 1385 by Richard II). Moreover, beyond the city, the collegiate church of St Mary's at Warwick was being totally rebuilt in grand style under the patronage of the Beauchamp earls of Warwick between 1369 and 1394. As we shall see, the architecture of the chancel of St Mary's was influential on St Mary's Hall in Coventry, but in more general terms the aristocratic work at Warwick may have spurred the merchants of Coventry to update the churches in which they worshipped. Their success is symbolized in the steeple of St Michael's, one of the most outstanding architectural designs of the later middle ages (Fig. 6). At just under three hundred feet (it was shortened by two or three feet in the late nineteenth-century restoration), it is the tallest steeple of any parish church in England and only two cathedrals, Salisbury and Norwich, have steeples which are higher.

The traditional dates for the tower are 1373 to 1395, but whether the fine drum and spire were added directly thereafter, or whether attention turned about 1400 to rebuilding the chancel, has never been settled. It is generally accepted, however, that the spire was complete by 1434 and the rebuilding of the whole body of the church by the 1460s. The design of the latter revolutionized the established church-building traditions of the city, omitting a crossing tower and relying for effect on enormous interior space flowing between nave and chancel (Fig. 6). The clerestory incorporated two windows per bay, a feature more usually associated with Norfolk and Suffolk churches, and the possibility of East Anglian influence at St Michael's is also suggested by the octagonal drum of the tower. It is hard to appreciate the majesty of this interior today, standing in the pathetic ruins kept as a reminder of the 1940 bombing. On the positive side, however, one unforeseen advantage of Sir Basil Spence's advice to preserve them and to build the new church to the north is that St Michael's now offers a prime site for archaeological investigation in the historic centre of the city, which should be pursued.

Without further research, one can only guess at the possible relationships between the work of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries at St Michael's and other contemporary works at churches in the city. There can be little doubt, however, that it outdid them all in scale, audacity and innovation. It might be anticipated that the cathedral priory would react to this architectural rivalry, and excavations in 1955 revealed that the east end of the church was extended or modified in the later middle ages to produce a polygonal chevet with intermittent polygonal radiating chapels (the foundations of which were inspected briefly during the Society's visit). It has been speculated that this may be the 'new work'

mentioned in a document of 1409. If this proves to be the case, and if it precedes the rebuilding of the chancel at St Michael's, it may have influenced the choice of a polygonal termination there (though without chapels). Experimentation with polygonal forms is most usually associated with the Decorated style in English Gothic architecture, but it is clear that they continued to hold a fascination for some masters of the Perpendicular period, not just in church design (e.g. the octagonal drum of St Michael's) but in secular buildings. Locally, one need look no further than the oriel window of St Mary's hall and the great bay window of John of Gaunt's hall at Kenilworth for contemporary examples.

The place of Holy Trinity in this sequence of building works is difficult to assess, for neither documents nor the fabric yield many easy clues as to the dating of its various medieval parts. The present east bay of the chancel (but not the east window, which is a post-war design) may be work referred to in 1391, and the main arcades of the chancel (except for the earlier west bay) belong stylistically with the Dyers' Chapel at St Michael's, perhaps of the 1460s (Fig. 1). On the other hand the dating of the nave and central steeple are more problematic. The profile of each nave pier looks fourteenth-century at the latest, and more Decorated than Perpendicular (Fig. 2). However, their bases are clearly Perpendicular, as are the windows of the south aisle (Fig. 3). The tracery patterns of the latter are no longer reliable, but the way in which the window rerearch is carried down the wall like a slender interior buttress is reminiscent of some East Anglian churches from the early Perpendicular period onwards (e.g. Sutton-in-the-Isle, Cambridgeshire); and the unusual pairing of the windows per bay may also relate to East Anglian clerestories—or more directly to the clerestory of St Michael's (see above). The actual nave clerestory at Holy Trinity is undoubtedly fifteenth-century (Fig. 2), but it is not necessarily an addition to the present arcades as some authors have stated.

'What is one to make of all this' (to borrow a phrase from Pevsner)? Any solution must assume that the mouldings of the piers are somewhat archaic, either to blend in with the pre-existing thirteenth-century fabric of the church or, less likely, because parts of earlier piers were re-used. Do the nave arcades and south aisle represent an important rebuilding of the later fourteenth century, to which the existing clerestory was added in the fifteenth century? If so, the slender piers and sense of lateral space would find contemporary parallels in the naves of St John Baptist and probably the Whitefriars (judging from the excavation plan); and all these works would have encouraged the clergy and parishioners of St Michael's to rebuild the body of their church in the fifteenth century.

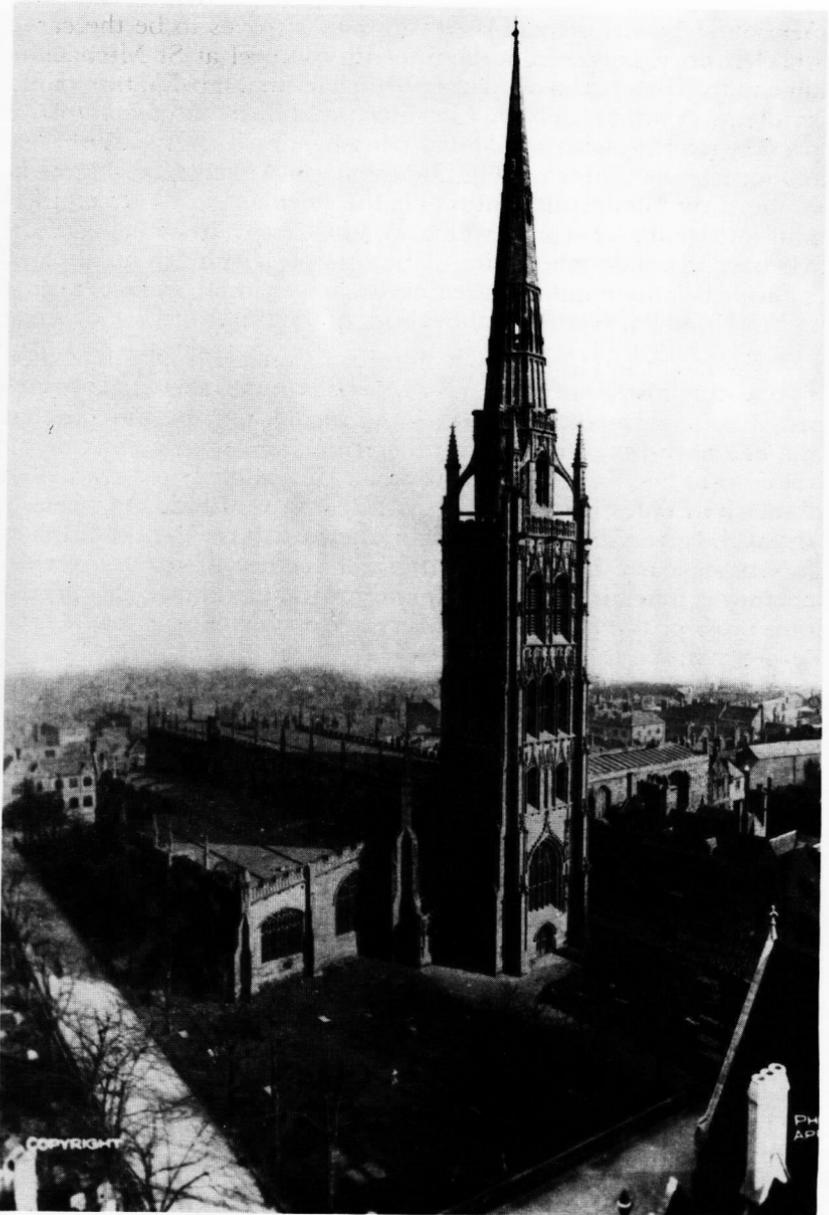


Fig. 6  
Coventry, St Michael's Church: general view from the tower of Holy Trinity,  
before the Second World War; St Mary's Hall is visible in the middle distance  
just to the right of St Michael's  
*Copyright, Richard Bailey Photographers, Coventry*

Alternatively was the whole elevation of Holy Trinity, including the clerestory, executed in the fifteenth century at about the same time as the comparable works of St Michael's, and perhaps inspired by them? A similar dilemma attends any stylistic discussion of the present steeple, with the added complication that the spire was rebuilt after a collapse of 1665 and the tower was recased externally in the early nineteenth century. Is the steeple a work of, say, the mid-fourteenth century, which goaded the parishioners of St Michael's to undertake their great masterpiece? Or is it an attempt by Holy Trinity to update their earlier tower in the wake of events at St Michael's? Certainly the design of the tower lacks coherence and gives the impression of having been heightened at least once.

Until more inspection and research is undertaken, such issues will remain unresolved. Indeed, in some cases one must accept that the evidence may never be sufficient for an entirely convincing solution to be found. The heart of the difficulty, however, lies in the lack of dates for works in the fifteenth century, and priority should be given to establishing a framework of relevant exemplars for these years. In contrast, the architecture of the fourteenth century is much better charted, and fortunately it is to this period that most of the fabric of St Mary's Hall belongs.



Fig. 7

Coventry, St Mary's Hall: the Old Council Chamber, with the guild chair to the left

*Copyright, Coventry City Council, Photographic Department, c. 1980*



Fig. 8  
Coventry, St Mary's Hall: the great hall, looking to the services end  
*Copyright, Coventry City Council, Photographic Department, c.1980*

The documentary evidence for the Guild Hall is brief and straightforward. A hall is mentioned in 1342, and a hall, gatehouse and tower in 1392: then one version of the city annals records that the hall was erected between 1394–1414 (presumably a rebuilding). The hall is a two-storey building, with the hall proper set above a rib-vaulted undercroft. The location of the hall on the first floor may be a conscious reflexion of aristocratic examples at Warwick and Kenilworth castles (*c.* 1340 and *c.* 1390), and indeed the interior was disposed for feasting like a baronial great hall. The dais end, with an early example of an oriel window (*cf.* Kenilworth) is balanced by a bay for the screens, with the classic arrangement of three doors to the kitchen, buttery and pantry, and a fourth door for stairs leading to the minstrels' gallery (Fig. 8). By 1441, one of the service rooms had been converted into a council chamber, as apparently there was no access to a retiring room off the dais end of the hall until the later sixteenth century (the 'Mayoress's Parlour' over the gatehouse). One must assume that any heating in the hall was provided by braziers, as there is no wall fireplace or record of a *louvre* in the roof for an open hearth.

The undercroft was used for storage and is divided into two compartments, the main one ('the Crypt') of four bays with a centre row of piers (Fig. 10), and the north undercroft of one bay under the dais end of the hall, with a two-foot wall between them. Nowadays the Freeman's Guild uses the north undercroft as a meeting room, so it is not open to the public. In the official guidebook, Joan Lancaster put forward the ingenious idea that the Crypt belongs to the hall of the 1340s, and that the north undercroft represents an extension of *c.* 1394 when the hall above was rebuilt in the present form. One problem with this hypothesis is that the wall between the two undercrofts is extremely thin if we are to believe that it was once the original end wall of the hall. An analysis of the architectural detail of the Crypt fails to resolve the matter with certainty, for though the design of the piers and vault responds recall in general the hall undercrofts of Warwick Castle (*c.* 1340), the narrow profile of the vault rib is more typical of the second half of the fourteenth century (Fig. 10). (Without having inspected the north undercroft, it is impossible to comment on whether there are any differences of detail in its vault, though I suspect not.)

Overall one is disposed to think that the hall and undercrofts of St Mary's Hall represent one design of the late fourteenth century. There appear to be no obvious discordances in the fabric to contradict this view except that the south wall around the three service doors may be inherited from the earlier hall (Fig. 8). Certainly the style of the architectural detail of the main hall fits the traditional date of 1394 quite well, and the roof bosses include

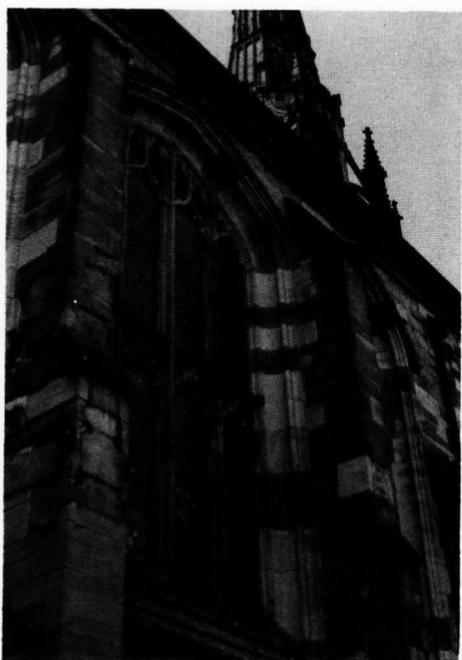


Fig. 9  
Coventry, St Mary's Hall:  
courtyard window of the great  
hall, with St Michael's spire  
visible behind  
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Fig. 10  
Coventry, St Mary's Hall: the  
Crypt, detail  
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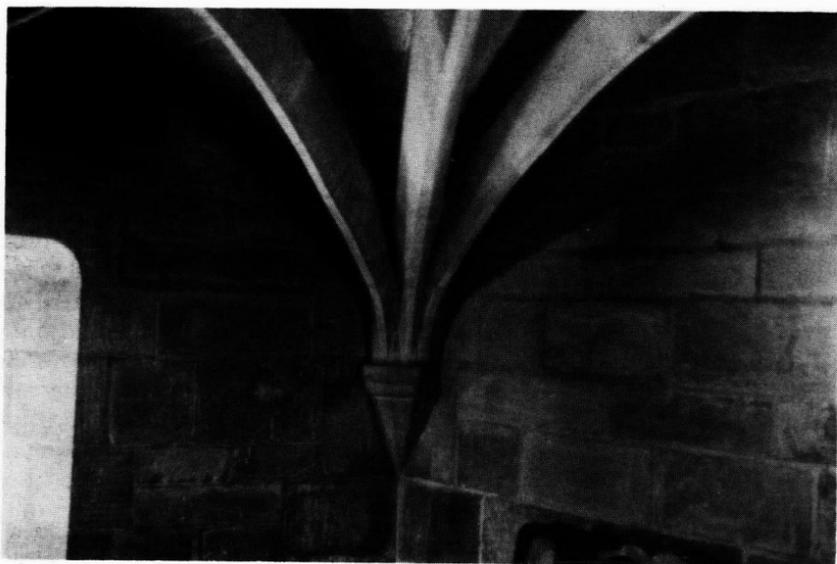


Fig. 11

Coventry, St Mary's Hall: the Treasury, corner detail (rebuilt in facsimile of the original after the Second World War)

*Copyright, author*

the hart of Richard II. (The fabric of the roof is almost entirely modern replacement after war damage, but some idea of its pre-war effect was gained by the Society's visit to Holy Trinity to see the original nave roof there, still with substantial traces of colour (Fig. 4)).

It is the window tracery which provides the most useful evidence for dating. The north window is a replacement of *c.* 1500, but the lateral windows belong with the main rebuilding of the hall and are related to the tracery of the chancel of St Mary's, Warwick, of *c.* 1370–80. Both window designs are divided by a transom, with cusped ogee heads to both rows of lights, and it is particularly in the large cusped and pierced spandrels beneath the transom that the connexion with Warwick seems close (Fig. 9). The tracery in the heads is simpler than at Warwick and nearer to the Perpendicular norm, which one would expect if the hall is after 1394, and the rerearches are a slightly more angular version of four-centred, perhaps reflecting the 1390s work at Kenilworth (Fig. 8). A preliminary assessment of the moulding profiles suggests that they have affinities with Warwick, but also with those of St Michael's tower (1373–95).

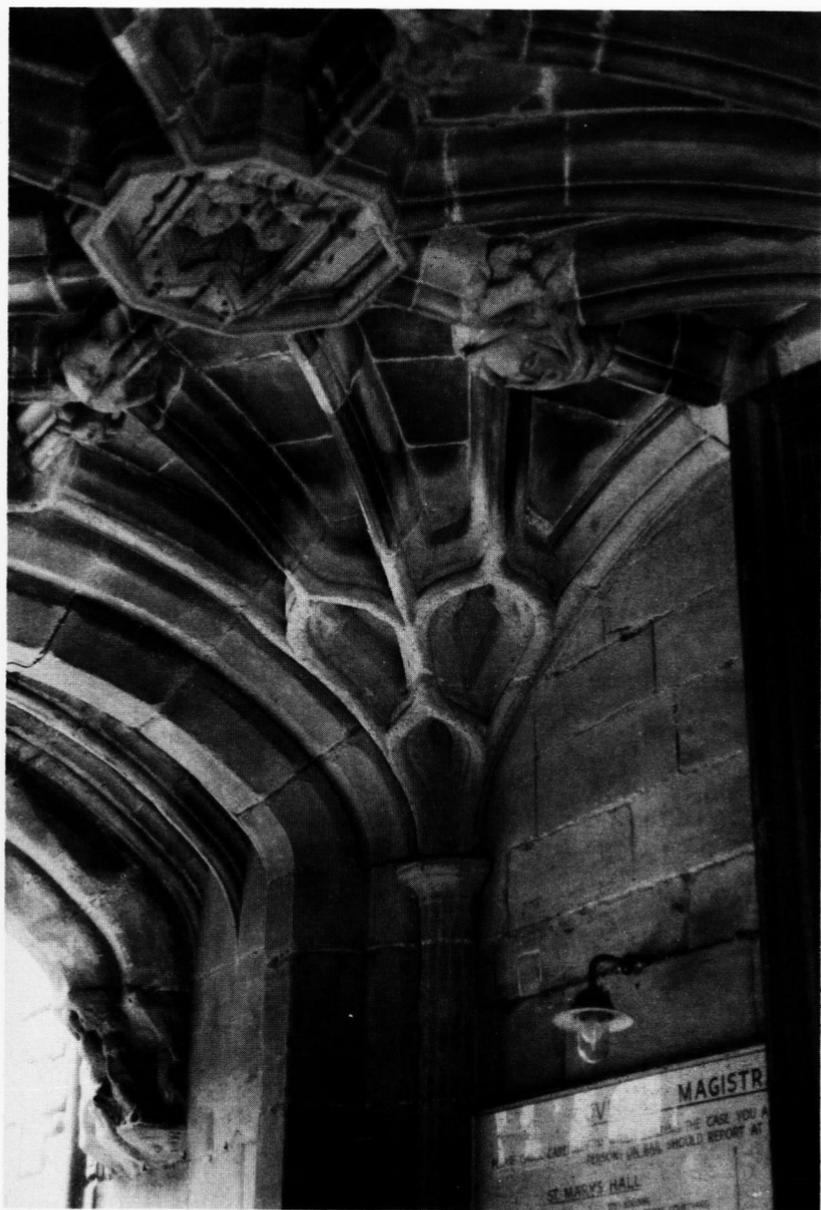


Fig. 12  
Coventry, St Mary's Hall: the Gatehouse, vault detail  
*Copyright, author*

Further links with Warwick are implied by the design of the gatehouse from Bayley Lane. The official guidebook states that this is part of the first Guild Hall of 1340–42 but if the vault is an integral part of the gatehouse's construction, as appears to be the case, then the date must be later in the century: either the gatehouse mentioned in 1392 or a rebuild shortly afterwards. The centrepiece of the vault is a large octagonal boss with its centre hollowed out, containing carving (Fig. 12), a distinctive design employed for the chancel and vestry vaults at Warwick. Furthermore, the way in which the gatehouse vault springs from a series of fan-vault panels (Fig. 12) also implies a link with the same workshop, for although this type of springer was not used at Warwick, it is a feature of Gloucester and other centres in the lower Severn valley, whence came the architectural inspiration for the chancel of St Mary's. At this point it is worth noting that a further connexion with Warwick, though with a different workshop engaged at the Castle, is to be found in the vaulted Treasury of Caesar's Tower at the back of St Mary's Hall, off the Old Council Chamber. The very narrow profile of the rib, the form of corbel from which it springs, and the type of stop carved on the door frame are all employed in the upper floors of the Castle gatehouse of *c.* 1350 (Fig. 11). So the Treasury would appear to predate the rebuilding of the hall range.

More than one authority has suggested that the sophisticated character and precocious style of St Mary's Hall might be explained by the transfer of masons from the work on neighbouring St Michael's tower. I hope that my survey has shown that the hall's architecture is not really so precocious for the date in question, given the wealth of important and up-to-date buildings in the Coventry area in the later fourteenth century. And that the sophistication (perhaps better phrased by the late Stuart Rigold as 'showiness') is more likely to be the result of employing a master who had previously worked at St Mary's, Warwick.

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\* NOTE: St Mary's Hall—in this article, '(Guild) Hall' is used to denote the group of buildings in the complex, and 'hall' for the great hall only.

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