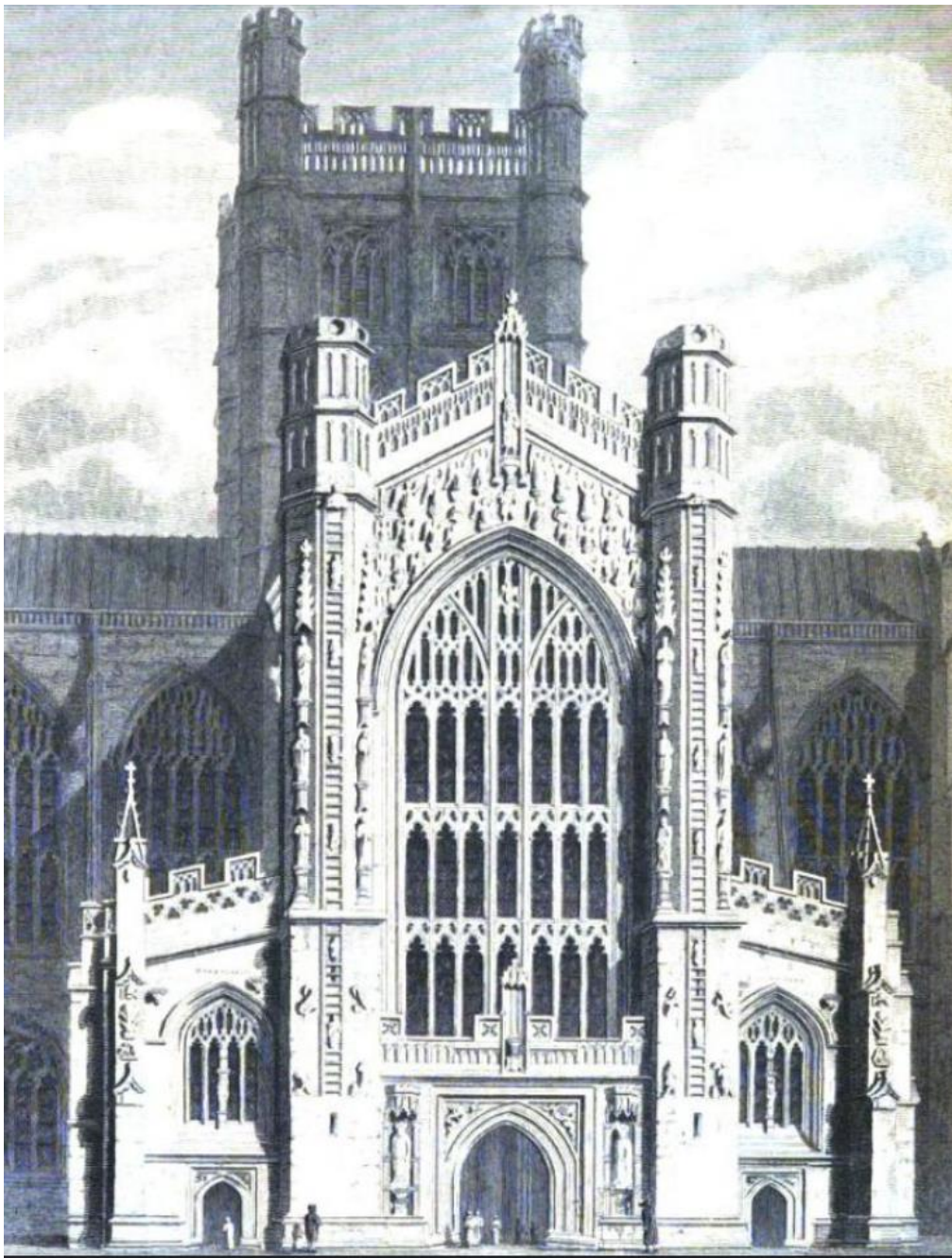


BATH ABBEY – WEST FRONT

Chris Dixon – November 2021



Photo: René & Peter van der Krogt, <https://statues.vanderkrogt.net>



The West Front – prior to 1825¹

¹ Britton, J., *The History and Antiquities of Bath Abbey Church*, London Printed by J. Moyes, Bouverie Street, 1825, Print available from Google Books (Public Domain) at https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=FRMNA_AAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PA82-IA4&hl=en_GB, [Accessed 11th November 2021]. Printed copy is available at The Royal Academy Collection: Book, Record Number 12/2651.

This visual image is neither located in an archive, nor a library, nor a museum. It is itself an archive and, being located in the centre of a major city, is accessible to millions. Most paintings are two dimensional, a statue in a museum is three dimensional but, as I shall endeavour to demonstrate, this image is four dimensional – the fourth dimension being time.

Bath Abbey has a long history. The first record is in a charter dated November 676 by which Osric, King of Hwicce (Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and including Bath), granted to the abbess land in Bath for the erection of a 'monastery of holy virgins'.² The abbey is famous for being the site of the first coronation of an English King – King Eadgar on May 11th 973. In 1088, the abbey was destroyed when city was burnt³. The next 400 years were a time of turbulence and mixed fortunes for the abbey. In 1499, Oliver King, bishop of Bath and Wells, visited Bath and was shocked at what he found. The abbey was in a 'hopelessly ruinous condition' and he was appalled at the 'lax discipline of the monks'.⁴ He therefore instigated the demolition and rebuilding of the abbey church and the work started in about 1500. It was Bishop Oliver King who designed the 'beautiful ornaments of the grand western front'. This was reported by Sir John Harrington (1560-1612) who was the author of the rumour that Bishop Oliver King saw the Jacob's Ladder of angels in a dream. This is reported in an article in 1837 which also includes an engraving of the west front at that date.⁵

The construction of the west front, incorporating the designs of Bishop Oliver, was commenced but the bishop died in 1503 and work progressed slowly until 1539 when the abbey was closed by Henry VIII's dissolution of monasteries. It was left to decay and not rebuilt until the late 16th century (completed in 1620). It thus took 120 years for Oliver King's vision to be fully implemented.

The earliest image of the completed work is a copper plate engraving by Daniel King, dated 1655.⁶ This image is interesting, but it differs to such an extent from other images that it seems doubtful that the engraver ever saw the abbey. The west front was restored in 1899-1901 and Sir George Frampton was commissioned to make new statues to replace those which had disappeared or been destroyed. That leads us to examine what is and was in the image.

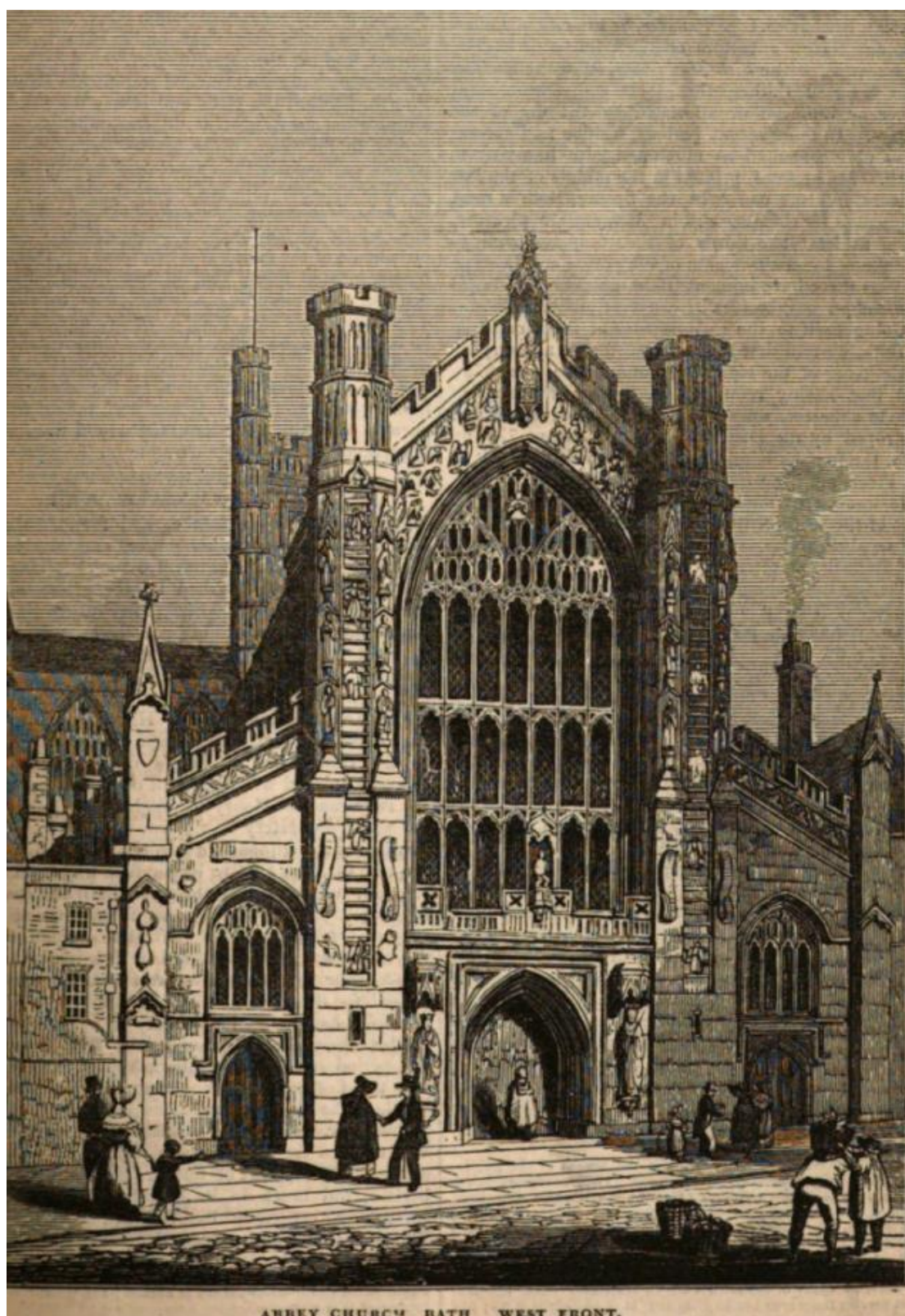
² *A History of the County of Somerset*, Victoria County History, ed William Page 1911 (Vol 2), pp 69-81 (Can be viewed at British History Online <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol2/pp69-81> [Accessed 9th November 2021]).

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Unnamed, 'The Abbey Church of Bath', *The Saturday Magazine*, 11th March 1837. Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015082315519&view=1up&seq=99&skin=2021> [Accessed 9th November 2021] (Public domain image shown on next page).

⁶ *Rare Old Prints*, <http://www.rareoldprints.com/z/2702>, [Accessed 9th November 2021]



Engraving of West Front taken from The Saturday Magazine, 11th March 1837.⁷

⁷ (See footnote 5).

CONTENT

At the top centre is the figure of God, the Father, seated in majesty and judgment. This figure is often taken to represent Christ but according to Paul Fisher's useful guide, in 1798 John Carter from the Society of Antiquaries said that there had been a representation of the holy trinity there 'which was once more conspicuous. There now only remains the statue of the Father'⁸. This replacement statue was carved by Sir George Frampton in c1900. In my view it is more likely to represent God the Father because the image is that of an old bearded man, and it is at the highest point of an aspect intended to represent heaven.

Beneath this there are some heraldic images carved in c1900. They consist of the symbol of the Tudor Rose underneath a crown and flanked by two greyhounds – the emblem of the Beaufort family (Margaret Beaufort was Henry VII's mother). These are not part of the original design by Oliver King.

Below and surrounding the throne of God are 30 carvings of the angelic host (according to Revelation 5:11, there should be ten thousand times ten thousand). Carved between 1500 and 1523, these are now very eroded but it is possible to see in the earlier prints that these angels are looking upwards and expressing adoration.

At the top of the window (centre) is a statue of a dove – representing peace. According to Paul Fisher, this was created in 1960 from an uncarved block of stone left there from the mid 19th century restoration.⁹

At the foot of the window, central, is a statue of King Henry VII together with his escutcheon. It was carved by Frampton as the original had disappeared. Apart from the general principle of showing loyalty to the king, Bishop Oliver King was also Chief Secretary to King Henry VII which might have emphasised his decision to include the statue and shield.¹⁰ There is some doubt as to which statue was here originally.

⁸ Fisher.P, *Bath Abbey The West Front*, Bath, Paulish Books, 2010,p14.

⁹ Ibid, p15.

¹⁰ *Historic England, Abbey Church of St Peter and St Paul*, <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1394015>>, 2010, [Accessed 9th November 2021].



God the Father surrounded by the heavenly host.

Photo: René & Peter van der Krogt, <https://statues.vanderkrogt.net>



The Dove of Peace



Henry VII



Arms of Henry VII

Photos: René & Peter van der Krogt, <https://statues.vanderkrogt.net>

Below this is the ornate carved oak west door. After the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, the abbey fell into disrepair largely due to the looting of the roof lead, bells, timbers and other parts of the abbey. There is a story that around 1608 the bishop (James Montagu) visited the abbey together with Sir John Harington but was caught in a shower of rain. They went inside but were not protected from the rain. 'How can that be', asked Harington, 'seeing that we are within the church?'. 'True', quoth the prelate', but your church is unroofed, Sir John'. 'The more is the pity and the more does it call for the munificence of your Lordship', was the response¹¹. The work commenced with a donation of £1,000 by the bishop. His work and generosity are celebrated by the work of his brother, Lord Chief Justice Sir Henry Montagu, who was in charge of 'embellishing the great west doors'.¹² These can be seen as the originals containing three shields showing the arms of the Montagu family (the lozenge is a representation of a pointed mountain – 'mont aigu' which is the origin of the Montagu name). Bishop James's escutcheon includes the motto 'Honi Soit Qui Mal y Pense' indicating he was invested with the order of the Garter. The spandrels are interesting as they represent the passion of Jesus Christ showing the bleeding hearts (sacre Coeur) together with a tangled crown of thorns incorporating the wounded feet and hands of Christ.¹³

On each side of the door are statues of the Saint Peter (left) and Paul (right). Dating from the time of the rebuilding by Bishop James Montagu (early 1600s), Peter is shown holding a bunch of keys and an inscription (no longer legible) which translates as 'The keeper of the keys of the gates of heaven is Peter made from Simon'¹⁴ The head of St Peter looks odd. This is because during the civil war in 1643, the head was lopped off. A new face was carved into the beard!

¹¹ Britton, J. pp58-59.

¹² Ibid, p62.

¹³ Fisher, p22.

¹⁴ Ibid, p17



Photo: René & Peter van der Krogt, <https://statues.vanderkrogt.net>



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The most famous carvings on the abbey's west front are the depictions of Jacob's Ladder on the buttresses on both sides of the edifice. These show the ladders together with angels climbing up (two are actually climbing down). Most of the 16th century sculptures were so badly weather worn that they were re-sculpted by George Frampton in c1900. It is generally thought that Frampton's work bore little resemblance to the original carvings. 19th century images of the abbey show no signs of angels descending. The company responsible for the reconstructions said this of Frampton's work: 'The 1900 angels suffer from all the worst points of restoration carving – flattened perspective, rigid form, ludicrous positioning of the heads of the falling angels'.¹⁵ The lowest angels on each of the two ladders are the 16th century originals (much eroded).

The symbolism of these ladders emphasises the overall impression that what is shown here is a depiction of heaven and earth including the ladders dreamt of by Jacob (Genesis 28: 10-19). It is also relevant to note that Bath Abbey was at the time a Benedictine Priory and the ladder to heaven is described in the Rule of Humility (7th rule) of St Benedict who said '...We go down through pride and up through humility'¹⁶.

It may be important that the two ladders are not symmetrical because the right hand ladder has three fewer rungs. The original carvings at the top of the ladders are believed to be of Christ (left hand ladder) and the devil (right hand ladder). It has been suggested that this could be taken to indicate that it was easier to reach hell than heaven.¹⁷

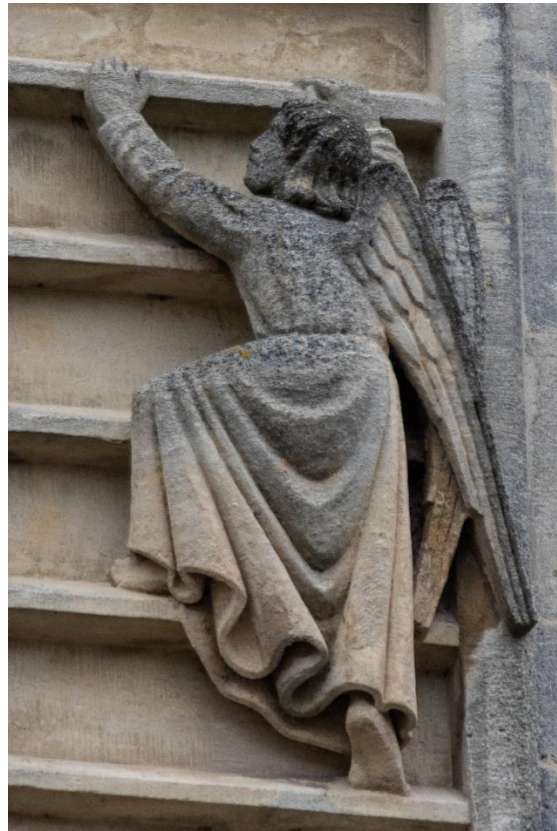
The fact that the ladders do not reach the ground may be intended to imply that access to the ladders, and thence to heaven, was only available from within the church.

There are four very eroded carvings at the foot of the ladders. These are thought possibly to have represented shepherds.

¹⁵ Fisher, p20.

¹⁶ Ibid, p6-7.

¹⁷ Ibid, p20.



20th century carvings

Photo: René & Peter van der Krogt, <https://statues.vanderkrogt.net>



16th century carving.

On either side of the top rungs of the angels' ladders there are the statues of 10 of the apostles together with John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. Nine of these statues are still the originals from 1518-23. Just one (St Bartholomew) was done by Frampton in c1900. That of St Matthew was done during the restoration in 1960 and one in 1992.

In front of the aisle windows there are some strange carved figures which are hard to identify and also a matter of conjecture as to their purpose. That on the left window shows a figure apparently holding a scroll. That on the right is of a figure clutching what may be a money bag. A story reported by Fisher is that the significance is that the legal and administrative business of the priory was carried out in the North-West corner of the abbey (left hand side), and the financial business on the South-West side.



Original carvings from 1500-1523

Photos: René & Peter van der Krogt, <https://statues.vanderkrogt.net>



St Philip – carved in 1992

As signature for his work, bishop Oliver King arranged for the carving of a rebus on each side of the west front of the abbey. This consisted of a bishop's mitre and below this an olive tree growing through a crown. This indicated 'Bishop', 'Olive[r]', 'King'. Beneath them was a plaque with the inscription which read 'Trees going to chuse [sic] their King said be to us the Olive King'. This appeared in Latin on the left hand side and in English on the South side. This is a quotation from the parable of the trees (Judges 9: 8). The inscriptions are no longer legible and the carvings were remade in 1960.¹⁸

There are other inscriptions on the west front only some of which are still legible. Above the North window are the words 'Domus Mea' (My House) and over the south window the words 'Domus Oronis' (House of Prayer). 'Oronis' is an abbreviation for 'Orationis'.

¹⁸ Fisher, p23.



The Rebus of Bishop Oliver King

CONTEXT

This image was conceived at the beginning of the 16th century. This was a time when the church in England was Roman Catholic and religious images and ecclesiastical iconography was heavily based on the scriptures. Bath Abbey was a Benedictine Priory at the time and when Bishop Oliver King visited around 1500 his decision to rebuilt the ruin of the abbey was at least partly based on the fact that he found the monks' behaviour severely wanting. This was perhaps the reason why his vision was to emphasise the path from earth to heaven and to show God in his heaven, the saints, apostles, angels and the Virgin Mary and to indicate the way to heaven (the ladders) in keeping with the rules of St Benedict (humility).

Oliver King was the conceptual artist, but he was not the mason who produced the finished images. In fact, Oliver King died in 1503 – before the west front had been built – so he never got to see his vision being realised.

Initially, the work took over 100 years mainly because the initial works between 1510 and about 1525 suffered greatly due to the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. Work recommenced under John Harington in the early 17th century under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth I. The ravages of weathering meant that the abbey, particularly the exposed west front, was the subject of repeated attempts at restoration in 1833, 1865, 1900, 1960 and 1992. Each time, the context of the image changed to reflect the historical period of the restoration.

This is why I say that this image can be said to exist in the fourth dimension of time. Today, we see the original artistic intentions of the early 16th century together with modifications and re-interpretations right up to the later 20th century. Most of the restorations have attempted to remain true to the original concept but the variations make this one of the most interesting of visual images spanning the medieval to the modern.

MEDIUM/MATERIALS

Bath is famous for its stone. This is an oolite limestone of a honeyish colour known as Bath Stone. It is a 'freestone' meaning that it has no grain and therefore can be easily cut or carved. It was chosen for the original building and carving mainly because it was available. However, as most limestones are, it was susceptible to weathering and wind and rain erosion. This is why some of the original artwork is not as it originally was. I feel that examining these original sculptures, despite the limitations caused by aging, is more meaningful sometimes than seeing the modern replacements.

PRODUCERS

The names of the architects and builders and even some of the stone masons are known but not particularly interesting¹⁹. The original design was by Bishop Oliver King. This was extended by Bishop James Montagu and Sir John Harington 100 years later.

AUDIENCE/SETTING

The setting is stunning. The west front of Bath Abbey is on one side of a large square where it is in clear unobstructed view. This was not always the case as there did exist some church buildings which were demolished. When originally built, the intended audience was in all probability the monks of the Benedictine Priory and the people of the city of Bath to demonstrate Oliver King's devotion, his repentance on behalf of the monks who had misbehaved and an inspiration to observers to see the abbey church as a place to assist man's passage to heaven.

OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE

The most significant aspect of this visual image is that what the observer sees is the joint work of artists, designers, builders, masons and sculptors over a period of about 500 years. The original sculptures, like Oscar Wilde's 'The Picture of Dorian Gray', age over time so what we see today is different from the aspect in previous centuries. Later restorations have never been complete – new sculptures replaced those most damaged but the restorers were careful to retain the original work as far as possible.

Many cathedrals have decorated west fronts. That of Wells Cathedral is larger, more ornate and mainly consists of about 300 stunning sculptures reflecting stories from the bible from Adam and Eve through to the Apostles as well as all the bishops of Wells (including one depicted naked!).²⁰ However, at Bath Abbey, the depiction of heaven and earth as seen through the imagination of one man (Bishop Oliver King) in around 1500 is unique.

The final point of its significance is its accessibility. It is seen and wondered over not just by churchgoers or students of medieval iconography but by Bath residents, tourists and passers-by.

¹⁹ For those who ARE interested, in 1499-1523 the architect was Robert Vertue and the sculptor Lawrence Ymber, the 1833 restoration was by GP Manners, 1865 George Gilbert Scott, 1900 the builder was Sir Thomas Jackson and the sculptor Sir George Frampton, in 1959 builder was Oswald Breakspear and sculptor Peter Watts and in 1992 the building company was Nimbus Construction and the sculptor Laurence Tindall.

²⁰ Cockerell, C.R., *Iconography of the West Front of Wells Cathedral, 1851*, Public domain copy available at <https://archive.org/details/iconographyofwes00cock/mode/2up?view=theater> [Accessed 15th November 2021].

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