

An exploration of the ideas presented in
Dual identities of some Exeter Cathedral carvings published online by John Ramsden
(<https://highranges.com/2021/03/16/dual-identities-of-some-exeter-cathedral-carvings/>)

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Introduction

John Ramsden has published a blog detailing his ideas about the possible identities of six heads which can be found at the bases of great corbels in the nave of Exeter Cathedral. Five heads are on the north side and one on the south. The south head and three of the north heads are located at the base of large foliage clusters, whilst the remaining two heads on the north side support depictions of processional tabernacles.

In his blog two possible sets of identities are proposed with a suggestion that they did not originate in the Exeter workshops, but were acquired from demolished stonework at Westminster Abbey. In support of one scheme of identities, suggestions are made about the perceived development of the thickness of stems within the foliage clusters in the context of iconography of the royal family tree.

When proposing the identities, it is reported that they had previously been associated with these heads by earlier writers, including EK Prideaux, and surprise is expressed that modern guide books, cathedral guides and staff 'apparently do not claim to know *any* identification'.

In this review I look at the visual evidence of the carved foliage on these corbels and nearby, and at the forms of these heads and other crowned heads on bosses and other corbels in Exeter Cathedral. I also provide evidence about the construction date of the west end of the nave where the six heads are located and details from the writings of EK Prideaux and GR Holt Shafto (*Bosses & Corbels of Exeter Cathedral*, 1910) about these six heads.

Carvings of Foliage on Corbels at the West End of Exeter Cathedral Nave

Although four major foliate corbels in the western part of the nave are carved with heads at their bases, these are not the only major corbels in this area carved with foliage. There is no obvious distinct theme in the foliage of these four corbels and some forms are repeated in other corbels without heads at their bases.



In the blog, the above sequence of illustrations is discussed as evidence that the size of the foliage stems increases in correspondence to the succession of people identified by the crowned heads beneath. With reference to the rightmost corbel above, the blog notes it as being the 'final adornment with the flowers and reconstituted thicker trunk' above the head of King Henry II, the

last figure in the identities scheme 1 sequence (reproduced below in 'Discussion of Some Specific Details of Identities'). Whilst dark overpainting picks out the stems in the first three corbels, it has been used on both leaves and stems in the foliage of the fourth corbel which can give the illusion of a 'thicker trunk', but it is only an illusion. The stems of this foliate corbel are no thicker than the others. Also, this is not the only corbel with flowers in bloom. The adjacent corbel (without a head) to the west has similar flowers which have been overpainted white, in contrast to the red blooms on the corbel with a crowned head at its base.

Below left is a detail from the foliage above the scheme 1 head of King Henry II. Below middle is a view of the adjacent corbel with white flowers, similar leaves (including some also overpainted with dark paint) and no head.



Finally, the blog refers to the corbel adjacent to the west wall on the north side as 'an inconspicuous vertical bunch of dark stalks, a tree of sorts' representing 'the English race ... before the Conquest', and appropriately positioned before the first of the crowned heads, identified in scheme 1 as William the Conqueror. However, this corbel (above right) depicts far more than a 'bunch of dark stalks'. It includes not only leaves, but also flowers which according to the arguments in the blog would represent the end of the sequence of royal heads, not their precursor.

Carvings of Crowned Heads in Exeter Cathedral

Numerous examples of crowned heads can be found throughout the carvings which adorn the interior of Exeter Cathedral. They can be found on major and lesser corbels, on bosses, and on capitals. In some places a single head is depicted on its own, whilst in other places a crowned head may be part of a more complex sculpture. Crowned full-length figures are also found. All the crowns are in the form of circlets.

Crowned figures of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child are found on several major corbels. The Coronation of the Virgin is carved on roof bosses and major corbels where the crowned figure of Christ (as King of heaven) is placing a crown on Mary's head confirming her as the Queen of heaven.

Crowns are also found on other heads. One can be confirmed as the full length figure of St Catherine with her wheel. However, most would appear to be depictions of kings, queens and possibly princes. Heads on two bosses and at the base of one of the major corbels are topped by

pointed headwear surrounded by a circlet crown which is interpreted as the depiction of an early form of papal crown.

Numerous carvings of kings have beards and long wavy hair with a fringe showing from beneath the circlet crown, whilst each large carving of a crowned queen shows almost no hair, being enclosed in a wimple with veil.

Kings' and queens' circlet crowns include carvings of jewels around the band. The upper part of the crown is in the form of scallops. On some crowns all the peaks are terminated by carved details, whilst on others alternate peaks are plain.

The following heads from the major corbels of the crossing show a range of details described.



Pope



Queen



King

Distinguishing between carved male and female heads is often the subject of discussion. The length and style of hair is no guidance when attempting to identify clean-shaven faces, some of which are crowned. Veils and wimples can identify women, with or without crowns. Hence, clean-shaven heads without veils/wimples are generally assumed to be male youths, or princes if crowned.

Heads at the Bases of Nave Corbels L', M', N', O', P' and N

The standard labelling of all carvings in Exeter Cathedral uses letters for the major corbels, starting with A for the most easterly corbel on the south side of the presbytery running through to Q for the half corbel on the south side of the nave adjacent to the west wall. The corresponding major corbels on the north side are labelled A' to Q'.

The six corbels discussed in the blog are P' (head 1n in the blog), O' (2n), N' (3n), M' (4n) and L' (5n), from west to east on the north side of the nave and N (3s) on the south side of the nave.

The detail on the right is of head 1n at the base of corbel P'. This head supports a circlet crown which is clearly seen both in this monochrome photograph taken before the present repainting and in colour photographs of this corbel included in the blog.





The above images are of head 2n at the base of corbel O'. The area above the head is sometimes seen as a crown or as a mitre. However, the lop-sided triangular area appears to be no more than an area within the geometric divisions of the stylised arrangement of the foliage of this corbel. The view from slightly above the head on the left emphasises this lop-sided area. If this were a mitre, the shape would be distinctly a regular triangle with a clear vertical line in the centre as found on mitre carvings elsewhere, including on bosses in this part of the nave. The apparent floral circlet remains to be explained. It is a highly unusual feature which doesn't seem to have a precedent as a crown.



The above images are of head 3n at the base of corbel N'. Clearly there is no crown on this head. Whether the head is male or female is difficult to confirm, particularly with the form of modern overpainting. The online catalogue of Exeter Cathedral carvings notes this simply as a head without assigning gender. The style of hair is very similar to that of head 4n.



The above images are of head 3s at the base of corbel N. The repainting clearly defines a circlet crown which can also be distinguished in the monochrome image taken before this overpainting. As there is no veil or wimple this is most likely to be a male head.



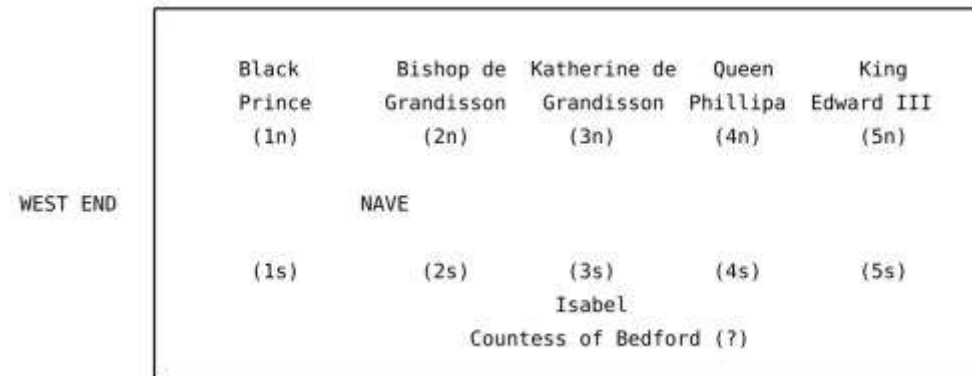
The above images are of heads 4n and 5n at the bases of corbels M' on the left and L' on the right, respectively. These heads are depicted supporting tabernacles taken in procession to display statues or relics. These would not have been carried by women. Hence both these heads represent male figures, the one on the left being a youth. Careful inspection of the area immediately above head 4n (on the left) reveals that it is decoration at the base of the tabernacle and not a crown. On first inspection, the decoration above head 5n (on the right) appears to be a circlet crown. However, it appears more likely that it is also decoration at the base of the tabernacle, corresponding to its partner. Furthermore, if tabernacles were carried on supporters' heads, as apparently depicted here, they wouldn't have been balanced on top of a crown.

In conclusion, only two of the six heads discussed in the blog can be confirmed as crowned heads.

Identities 'assumed by Prideaux'

The blog contains the following:

Scholarly books of the 19th and early 20th century, such as [Prideaux] (which is pretty much the standard work on the carvings of Exeter Cathedral), claim the identities are as follows:



Modern guide books, and (dare I say) cathedral guides and staff, are no help in deciding the matter because they apparently do not claim to know any identification. It seems even the second lot of identities, assumed by Prideaux and other authors in relatively modern times, have been largely forgotten.

'[Prideaux]' is referenced at the end of the blog as "Bosses and Corbels of Exeter Cathedral an Illustrated Study in Decorative and Symbolic Design", by E K Prideaux & G R Shafto (1910)

I cannot find this list of identities for the heads of these corbels in Prideaux and Shafto. However, they state (p.203) that the heads on corbels N, N', O' and P' are all crowned and comment that they 'are much of one type, might all belong to members of one family'. Prideaux and Shafto also state that these heads 'are not probably intended for any specific royal persons', adding that 'The features are well cut and there is a fair amount of modelling in the faces, but they do not appear to be anything more than the work of a well-trained hand – there is obviously so little thought behind them.'

With reference to the heads on corbels L' and M', Prideaux and Shafto state (pp.203-4) 'The large-sized heads at the bases with upstretched hands and arms carrying these canopied niches are popularly described as portraits of Edward III and his beautiful wife, Queen Philippa. Apart from the fact that these faces have no distinctive marks of portraiture, it is doubtful in the extreme whether this description is correct. The fact that these heads are not crowned renders it very doubtful that royal portraiture is intended.'

Prideaux and Shafto then examine the area immediately above each of these two heads and conclude (p.204) that what appears at first to be a possible crown is 'most evidently an integral part of the bracket above the head, not a tiara on it'. They end their discussion about this pair of heads (p.205) 'We are disposed rather to conclude that there is no sufficient ground for identifying these heads as those of any king or queen; so far as portraiture is concerned it is fairly evident that the faces conform to a type commonly in use among stone-carvers at this period, and, though more carefully executed than some, seem to belong to quite the same family as the lesser heads already noticed in the decadent foliage corbels just described.'

Whether or not there is agreement with the detailed statements by Prideaux and Shafto, there is no indication in Chapter VIII 'The Vaulting-Shaft Corbels of the Great Piers' of any identities attributed to the six heads under discussion.

It is unclear in which 'scholarly books of the 19th and early 20th century' may be found the list of identities quoted in the above extract from the blog.

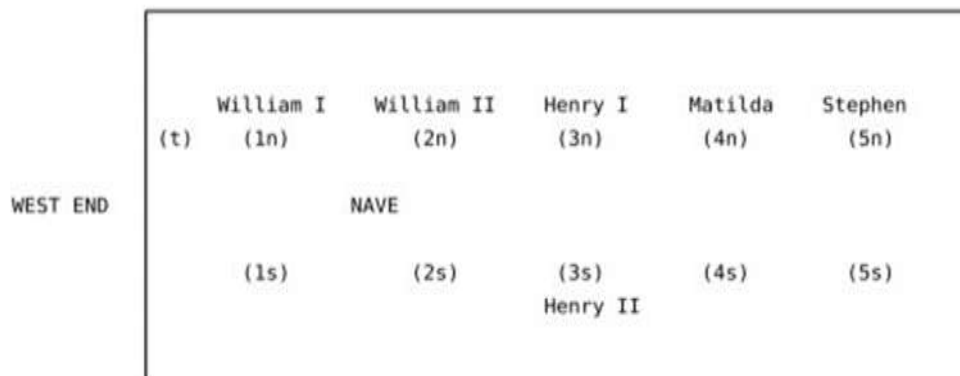
Discussion of Some Specific Details of Identities

When considering details of the proposed identities, discussion swaps between the two schemes of identities. Sometimes the discussion is about an attribution from only one scheme.

- 1n from corbel P' Only William I from scheme 1 is discussed.
- 2n from corbel O' Bishop John de Grandisson (scheme 2) is discussed and William II (scheme 1) is mentioned by quoting William of Malmesbury's description.
- 3n from corbel N' Henry I (scheme 1) is discussed and Katherine de Grandisson simply named as an alternative.
- 4n from corbel M' Only 'Empress Matilda' (scheme 1) is discussed.
- 5n from corbel L' Stephen (scheme 1) and Edward III (scheme 2) are discussed.
- 3s from corbel N Only Henry II (scheme 1) is discussed.

Furthermore, there is some confusion when identifying and discussing some of these people.

The proposed identities scheme 1 is:



In the discussion of these figures, there is confusion about the identity of Matilda. The statement 'the marriage of Henry I to Matilda, who was descended from the English royal family, and had borne fruit in Henry II' implies that Henry II was the son of Henry I and his wife Matilda. Later head 4n is identified as 'Empress Matilda' in 'the fourth position in the ... consistent with the fact that Matilda was fourth in line after William I (although her reign was contested throughout by Stephen)'.

Empress Matilda (wife of Henry V Holy Roman Emperor) was daughter of King Henry I and his first wife Matilda of Scotland. Henry II was the son of Empress Matilda and her second husband, Geoffrey, Count of Anjou.

The proposed identities scheme 2 (reproduced above in 'Identities 'assumed by Prideaux') includes Katherine de Grandisson as the identity of head 3n. Referring to the feminine appearance of this

head, we read in the blog 'This was handy for Bishop de Grandisson, as it meant he could have the carving reidentified [*sic*], with a minimum of change, as his own wife, positioned next to his spot at (2n).' However, Katherine de Grandisson was the bishop's sister. Furthermore, John de Grandisson did not have a wife as bishops at this time were not permitted to marry. Interestingly, suggesting that this head may be of Katherine de Grandisson would imply acceptance that head 3n is not crowned.

Given Bishop Grandisson's devotion to St Thomas Becket, it seems highly unlikely that he would include a special representation of King Henry II in Exeter Cathedral (a proposed identity for head 3s in scheme 1), especially not too far from the central boss depicting Becket's murder.

Spare Carvings from Westminster Abbey?

The discussions in the blog centre around the following assumptions and proposals put forward in the blog:

In the final phase of the work [completing the Nave of Exeter Cathedral] in the early 1350s, when the barrel roof and supporting arches were due to be installed, de Grandisson had a big problem: Following the Black Death of only a year or two earlier, skilled stone carvers (whether English or foreign) must have been impossible to find. So how would he acquire decent corbel carvings to complete the project?

I once read that contemporary carvings of Norman and Angevin kings had been in the Confessor's old Westminster Abbey, where after all they had been crowned. Irritatingly though, I can't now find a citation for this. So the reader will have to take my word for it!

If the new layout for the Abbey had no place for these carvings, or larger replacements were planned, then de Grandisson could perhaps salvage and reuse them in Exeter, re-identified as a (then) contemporary lot of worthies who he was keen to impress.

Alternatively [*sic*], even if the Abbey rebuilders would have preferred to keep and reuse the carvings, perhaps they were short of funds (again!) and de Grandisson with a sufficient payment was able to entice them into parting with the carvings.

But how could he plausibly "re-identify" them? I suggest it would not have been hard for even a young and inexperienced stone carver to apply a skim layer of plaster as necessary to each and repaint them, with a droopy moustache on the Black Prince for example.

Luckily, it appears that either de Grandisson chose not to allow parts of them to be chipped away, to improve their intended resemblances where necessary, or this was prohibited as a condition for their release from the Crown's possession.

Whether or not he was also constrained to preserve their order, he evidently did and at the same time ingeniously managed to assign the alternate identities that would allow Edward III and his wife to occupy the most prestigious positions closest to the altar.

Unfortunately, evidence does not support these ideas.

The main structure of the nave of Exeter Cathedral was completed before the arrival of the Black Death with some minor works (mainly glazing the windows) remaining to be carried out. There are numerous entries in the building accounts for 1340-41 detailing payments for the purchase and transportation of various types of stones and also for the carving of heads of various sizes. From these accounts it is clear that work in the nave was well advanced by this time. There are many

different heads in the cathedral, not just on bosses and the main corbels but also on capitals high up around the windows and elsewhere. An interesting entry shortly after Easter 1341 notes a payment for '*sculpant iiii capita in corbell*' (carving 4 heads on corbels). The amount concerned indicates these are large carvings and it is tempting to conclude that they may be the four foliate corbels with heads at their bases discussed in the blog.

Stones, such as for corbels, are cut according to the structure of a specific building. Incorporating a cut stone shaped for another building isn't practical without reworking. The suggestion made in the blog is further complicated by the old Westminster Abbey stones described in the blog being from an earlier style of building. Note also that the heads are not on separate pieces of stone but are part of larger carvings, the details of which are typical of the Exeter workshop.

The suggestion that Exeter might need to source scrap stone from another site, especially as far away as London, is highly improbable as there was a plentiful supply of new stone from local quarries, including quarries owned by the cathedral. These local quarries supplied the vast majority of the stones used in the construction of the medieval building.

It also seems highly improbable that the Westminster Abbey rebuilders (ie, the King) would need to obtain finance from the Bishop of Exeter.

None of the nave heads 'occupy the most prestigious positions closest to the altar'. A prestigious position would be in the quire close to the high altar. There wasn't a single medieval nave altar in Exeter Cathedral. The nave would have contained several altars with various dedications but none would have been considered prestigious in the sense indicated by the phrase in the blog.

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