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Bristol's Gothic Baptist Chapel: Buckingham Chapel

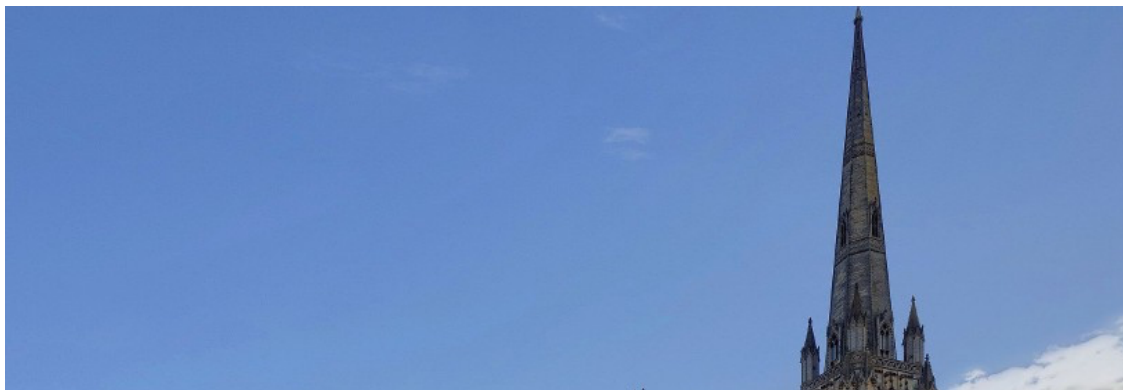
In [Haunt Bristol](#)

Explore the fascinating architectural history behind Buckingham Chapel, the building currently serving as an Independent Evangelical Baptist Church on Queens Road in the Clifton area of Bristol. A striking example of the Gothic Revival style, it is less well-known and less-covered by architecture articles which are orientated towards more widely-known structures such as Bristol Cathedral and St Mary Redcliffe.

For Haunt Bristol, Gothic architecture expert Dr Peter N. Lindfield sheds light on Buckingham Chapel's extraordinary design...

Dr Peter N. Lindfield FSA is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of History and a member of The History Research Centre, The Centre for Gothic Studies (English), and the Manchester Country House Network at Manchester Metropolitan University. At Haunt Manchester he has contributed an ongoing article series covering Greater Manchester's Gothic architecture, history and heritage — and now expands his range of coverage to the Bristol area.

Gothic is a label used by art and architectural historians to describe a style of architecture—and design more broadly—that developed in the medieval period. Originating in twelfth-century French church architecture, the Gothic style spread to the continent and in Britain. Numerous structures in Bristol—and, indeed, throughout Britain—came under its influence, including churches, such as St Mary Redcliffe Church (Fig.1), Bristol Cathedral (Fig.2), as well as defensive architecture, such as Bristol Castle, and also domestic architecture.



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Fig.1: St Mary Redcliffe. Zhurakovskiy (CC BY-SA 4.0)



Fig.2: Entrance façade of Bristol Cathedral. NotFromUtrecht (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The style, consequently, had a large range of different applications: a church, designed to express, symbolise, and facilitate Christian worship, with its large windows to let in as much light as possible and highly ornate internal (Fig.3) and external decoration, were hardly appropriate for defensive or all but the most lavish domestic structures. Despite Gothic being seen as a 'dark' culture, and, indeed, Horace Walpole celebrated Gothic because of what he termed 'gloomth', medieval churches had large windows to let as much light in as possible because light was representative of God.





Fig.3: Interior of Bristol Cathedral. Diliff (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Whilst Britain in the seventeenth century shifted towards Classicism—and this is especially evident in Bristol, with the use of regularised proportion, square-headed windows, simplicity of form, and pared-back external decoration, as exemplified by the Old Council House, (Fig.4), Gothic was still practised in the eighteenth century and after. But buildings erected during and after the eighteenth century are really quite different in form and appearance compared with their medieval counterparts: the architects who designed them often had only a small grasp of medieval examples, and they fashioned structures in new way.



Fig.4: Exterior façade of The Old Council House. Image in public domain

This, which is my first post for Haunt Bristol, examines one such building: Buckingham Chapel. Built in 1842, this Baptist Chapel is really quite exceptional given its early choice of Gothic, and the stylistic contrast it shows when compared with the neighbouring Classical buildings (Fig.5). Its most striking feature is its exterior. Modelled upon medieval shrines (Fig.6), and with a general form that also imitates the great medieval coronation throne (Fig.7) on display in Westminster Abbey, its entrance façade is covered with niches designed to hold sculptures, which imitates some of the greatest medieval church façades, including Wells Cathedral in Somerset (Fig.8). The rose window on this façade, and the three entrances are also taken directly from the great medieval churches, such as Westminster Abbey's transept façade (Fig.9).





Fig.5: Exterior entrance façade of Buckingham Chapel. Matt Neale (CC BY-SA 2.0)



Fig.6: Shrine of the Three Magi, Cologne Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield

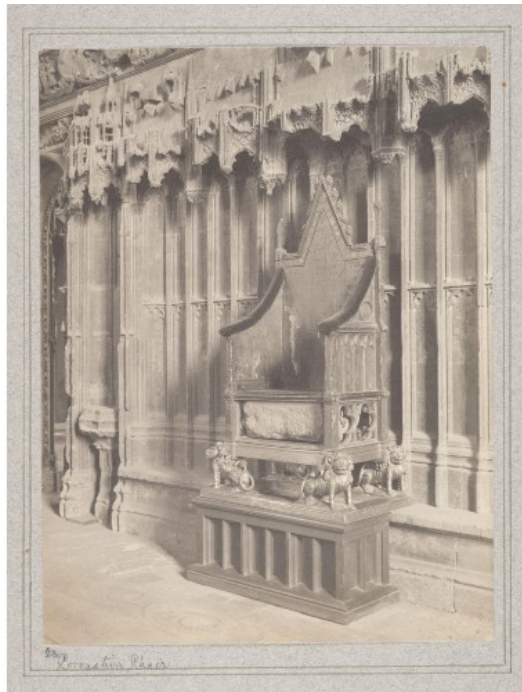


Fig.7: Coronation Chair, Westminster Abbey. RPS.3684-2018. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

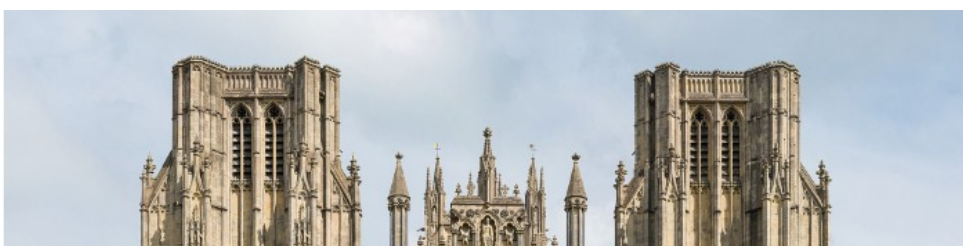




Fig.8: Entrance façade of Wells Cathedral. Diliff (CC BY-SA 3.0)

It also features other characteristics typical of medieval architecture, namely the large buttresses designed to keep the structure true, the tall, pointed pinnacles, pointed arch-windows, and the tooth-like 'C-shape' decoration, known as cusps.

Grade II* listed by English Heritage, see here, meaning that it is highly significant and of national importance (92 per cent of all listed buildings are of the lower Grade II type, see here), this chapel is a remarkable addition to early Victorian Bristol, and it demonstrates the longevity and variety of the style. My future posts for Haunt Bristol will examine a variety of the city's Gothic heritage hidden in plain sight, or, like Buckingham Chapel, incredibly obvious.

By Dr Peter N. Lindfield FSA

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