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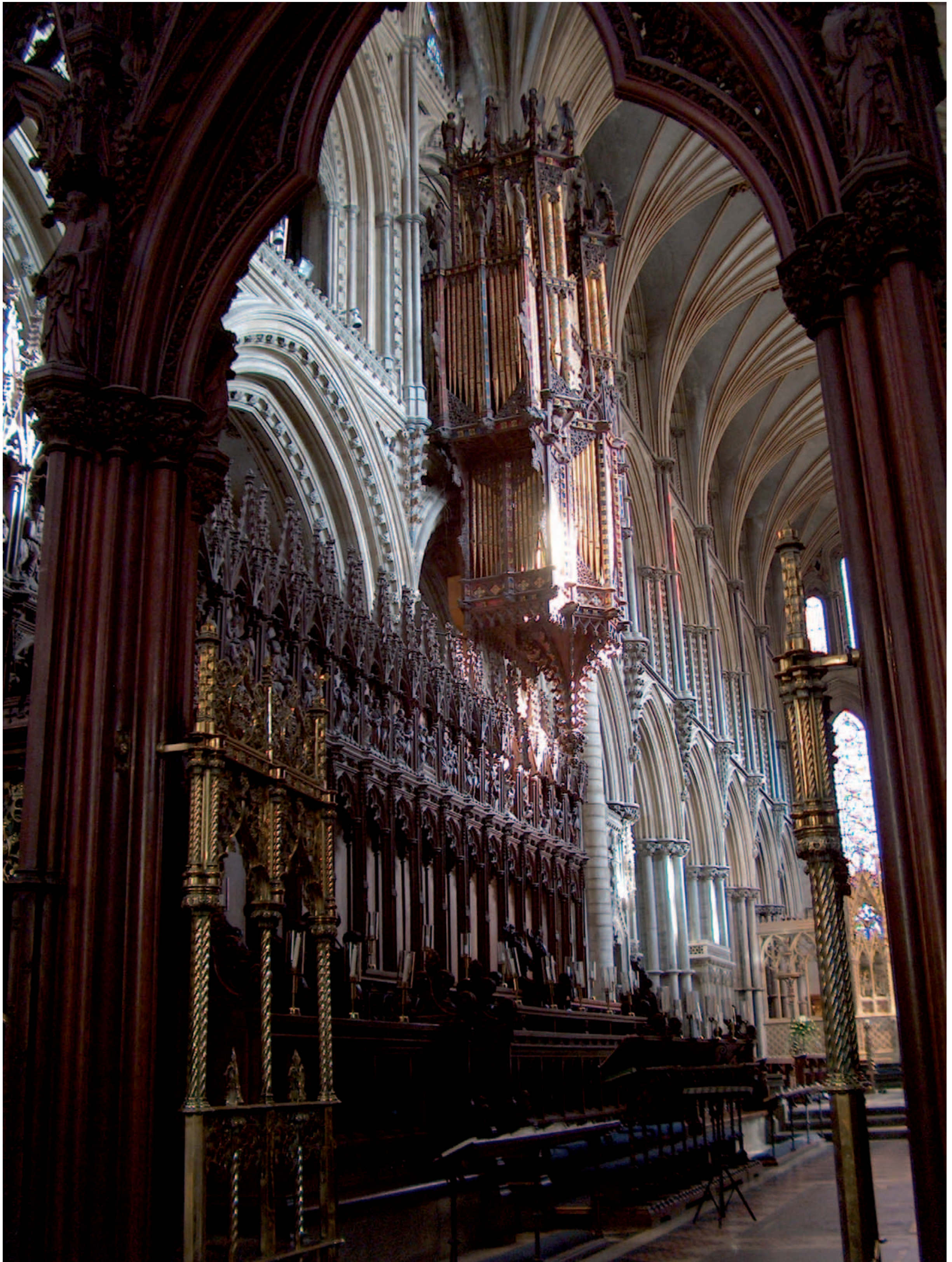

# Introduction

*Opposite: A view of the choir, organ and presbytery*

Any description of the fall of Ely Cathedral's Norman crossing tower in 1322, and its replacement with the famous Octagon tower and its Lantern, needs to be preceded by an account of the early history of the religious foundation, and some account of the geology and geography of the Isle of Ely. Alan of Walsingham included many references to that early history in his designs for his 'new work', which occupied the twenty years from 1322 to 1342.

Approaching the city across the flat fields of the reclaimed 'fens' that stretch the sixteen miles or so northwards up the A10 from Cambridge, one learns the basic geography of the place in one journey. The City of Ely, at an elevation of eighty-four feet (twenty-six metres), is situated on a low hill of clay, with a thin and insubstantial cap of 'lower greensand', a kind of sandstone. The Isle of Ely is about eight miles by seven in extent, with a small drained marsh in its centre, and its highest point is around ninety-eight feet (thirty metres) above sea level. For much of its history, up to the seventeenth century when determined attempts at draining began, the Isle of Ely was surrounded by huge marshes locally called 'fens' that extended from Cambridge as far north as Lincolnshire. The fens cover an approximate area of some 1300 square miles. To the south and west of the Isle the fens are peat fens, formed during periods of fresh water flooding in ancient times, whilst there are 'silt' fens to the northeast, formed during incursions by the sea in pre-history.

In the early seventh century, this huge morass with shifting watercourses, vast fisheries and limitless reed beds, formed the important western boundary of the Saxon kingdom of the East Angles. Its local chieftain Tondberht was selected by Anna, the King of East Anglia, as someone who should be drawn into an alliance to protect their mutual interests. Anna's daughter,

Æthelthryth (or Etheldreda to give her her Latinised name) was accordingly married off to Tondberht, receiving as her dowry the Isle of Ely, already a settlement of some significance with its own Christian church endowed with funds sent by Ethelbert the King of Kent. This political marriage, which was also loveless (at Etheldreda's insistence), lasted only two years or so before Tondberht died. Despite now owning the Isle in her own right, Etheldreda was not able to realise her long-held ambition to found a monastery there until after her second platonic and political marriage of alliance to Ecgfrith, the heir to the kingdom of Northumbria. He was eventually persuaded to allow her to become a nun, and after many adventures and miracles she evaded his attempts to take her back forcibly, coming south to found her community at Ely in AD 673.

Here the monastery for monks and nuns, in two very separate communities within the same monastery, found not only seclusion from the world but fertile farms on the Isle, limitless resources of food from the fens, and copious quantities of rushes, sedge and clay for building purposes. Good building stone was also available in the high ground to the northwest of the fens that could be transported to Ely by boat down the River Nene, across the Wash and up the Great Ouse.

Etheldreda's fame in the short period of six years or so she was Abbess of Ely grew as pilgrims became convinced of her holiness, purity and power, and many thousands of them began to make the difficult journey to the Isle of Ely. The market town of Ely began to grow at the gates of the monastery, and even today one can establish the northern boundary of the monastery simply by walking down the High Street. For much of its length the buildings on the south side are what remains of two departmental buildings of the monastery, i.e. the Almonry and the Sacrist's establishments.

Etheldreda's reputation as a powerful and popular saint has survived many vicissitudes down the years. In 870 the Vikings destroyed the monastery, but roughly one hundred years later the Saxon King Edgar, taking advantage of the peaceful period instituted by his reign as one of the first 'Kings of All England', reinstated the monastery as one of the Benedictine jewels of his new religious realm, with renewed benefactions and grants of land and estates. The legends and stories of Etheldreda received a new polish at this time, and her reputation as a saint was still so strong in 1072 that when the Normans finally captured the Isle, and dismantled the Saxon minster and monastery, they reinstated

Etheldreda and her three saintly relatives, Seaxburh, Ermenilda, and Withburga, in shrines at the east end of their new cathedral.

As the events of the fourteenth century unfold in the following pages we will see that the power of the St Etheldreda story was still firmly fixed at the forefront of the minds of the designers and craftsmen who built the Octagon. We will see represented in the fabric and statuary the life and miracles of St Etheldreda, and a deep reverence for the Saxon benefactors who reinstated the monastery in the tenth and eleventh centuries. If we piece together the evidence of lost windows and obscure carvings, I am convinced we can also detect a considerable gratitude to King Edgar, who seems to be recognised as the true founder of the Benedictine monastery through his ecclesiastical officers, the three saints, Ethelwold, Dunstan, and Oswald.