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An Early Photographic Study of the Eighteenth-Century St Fin Barre's Cathedral

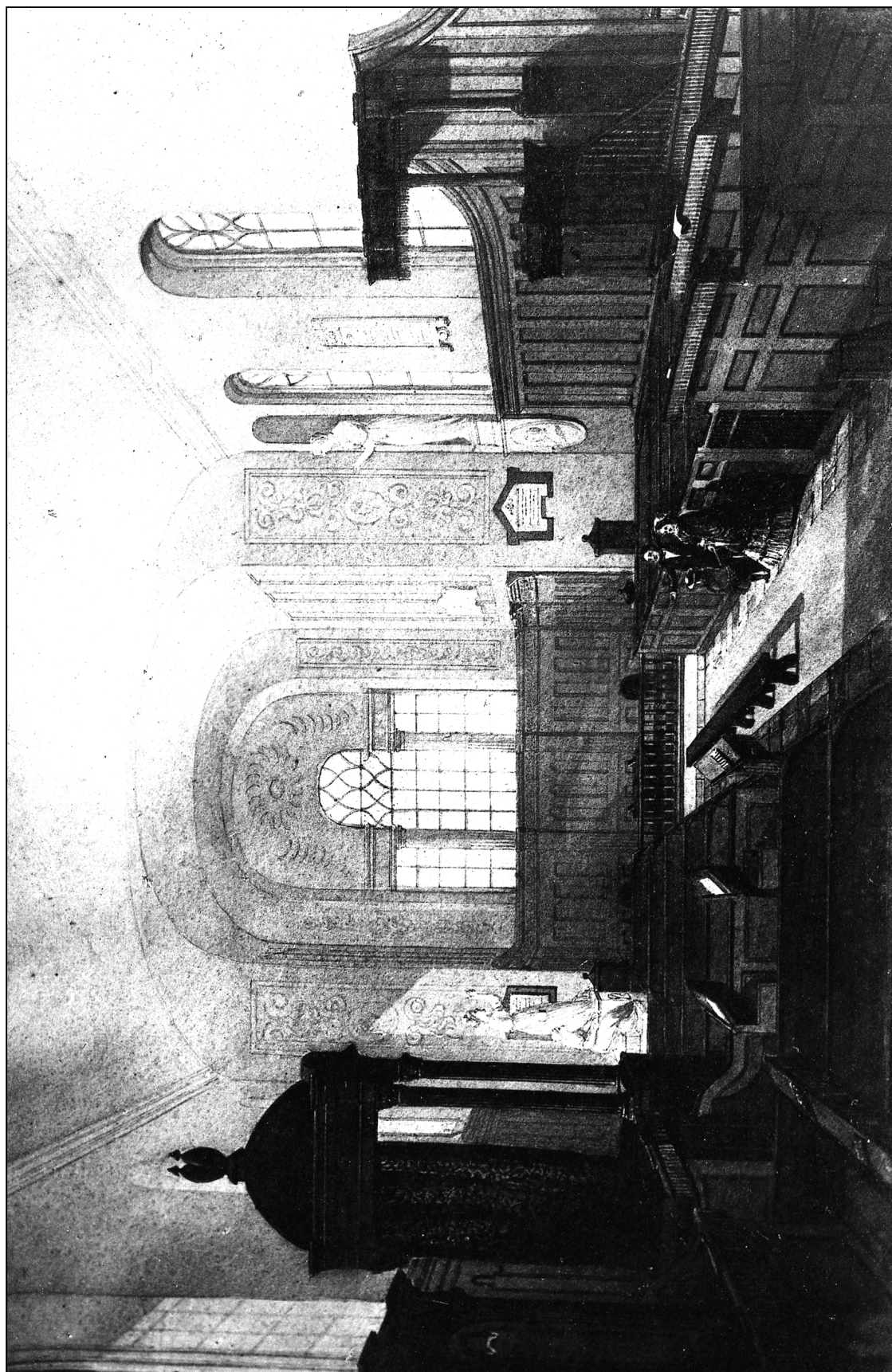
By COLIN RYNNE (*Dept of Archaeology, UCC*)
and BILLY WIGHAM

In 1862, Richard Caulfield (1823-87), the celebrated Cork antiquarian, became involved in the scheme to replace the existing St Fin Barre's Cathedral of 1735, eventually serving as a member of the building committee of the new cathedral in the period 1865-70 (McCarthy 1987, 9). The proposed demolition of the existing structure presented Caulfield with an excellent opportunity to examine its building fabric, and by this means attempt to elucidate its structural history. Caulfield's efforts culminated in a privately published photographic record – unique in nineteenth-century Ireland – of a series of important architectural features dating from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. Entitled *Vetusta Monumenta Corcagiae being Nine Views of the late Cathedral of S. Fin Barre's, Cork* (Gloucester, 1866), with superb photographs by Thomas R. Lane, and with notes by Caulfield himself, this is an important record of what is arguably Cork city's most important ecclesiastical site. The photographs are also amongst the earliest-known for the city of Cork, but thus far have not been widely available. The purpose of the present contribution is to provide an accessible version of the *Vetusta Monumenta* illustrations, complete with Caulfield's original picture captions and an up-to-date annotation of the architectural features first observed and recorded by him in 1865. But before

we turn to Lane's photographic record, let us examine what is currently known about the predecessors of William Burgess's French gothic cathedral, consecrated in 1870, in the light of recent scholarship.

THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CATHEDRALS

The site of the present St Fin Barre's Cathedral and its predecessors is generally assumed to be that of an early medieval monastic settlement. From at least 1199, and probably earlier, a cathedral was present there, although virtually nothing is known about its likely appearance. Nonetheless, the discovery during the dismantling of the eighteenth-century cathedral in 1865 of six carved Romanesque voussoirs in the form of human heads must surely point to the existence of a Romanesque-style structure. The examination of these carvings by Bradley and King (1985) indicates that they date to the second quarter of the twelfth century. While these authors do acknowledge that the voussoirs could possibly derive from an earlier church on the site of St Fin Barre's, they also suggest a more grandiose (and less plausible) explanation, to the effect that the stones came from the Church of Gill Abbey. The latter was founded by Cormac Mac Carthaig, who was also responsible for Cashel Cathedral, long hailed as the origin



Ill. 1. Interior of eighteenth-century St Fin Barre's Cathedral (*Day Collection*)

of the Irish Romanesque. However, there are no grounds for precluding the existence of a Romanesque-inspired cathedral at St Fin Barre's, and, if anything, the inclusion of these carved heads in the later medieval building fabric can only suggest otherwise.

Indeed, in even more recent accounts of the residual medieval carved masonry associated with St Fin Barre's, it has been proposed, without any evidence whatsoever, that this was brought onto site from elsewhere. The so-called 'chapter-house door' is said to have been brought from the Dominican Abbey to the north, but there is no supporting evidence for this other than an oft-quoted tradition. The doorway consists of a decorated-style gothic arch, of two orders (the inner one of local limestone, the outer of dundry stone, an imported oolitic limestone). But what has scarcely been considered – as Lane's photograph VI clearly shows – is that the doorway formed part of a later medieval cathedral of St Fin Barre, along with the three-light lancet windows above it. The Rev. Andrew Robinson, in his short history of the cathedral published in 1897, was in no doubt that the lower two stages of the west tower (containing the later medieval doorway and window) were medieval. Moreover, he was also able to show that the upper sections of the tower were begun in 1671 and completed in 1676 at the cost of £560 (Robinson 1897, 12). The three-light window above the medieval doorway, which has equilateral lancet heads with cinquefoil decoration, surmounted by carved stone heads (similar in style to the stone carving above the doorway), has not fea-

ured in any of the recent accounts. This window, along with the doorway, must date to the late thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries, and, from the photograph in the *Vetusta Monumenta*, both are clearly *in situ*. Thus the lower sections of the tower, taken down in 1865, were part of a late medieval church, most of which was demolished in the seventeenth century, but some of which was retained in the construction of the later cathedral in 1735.

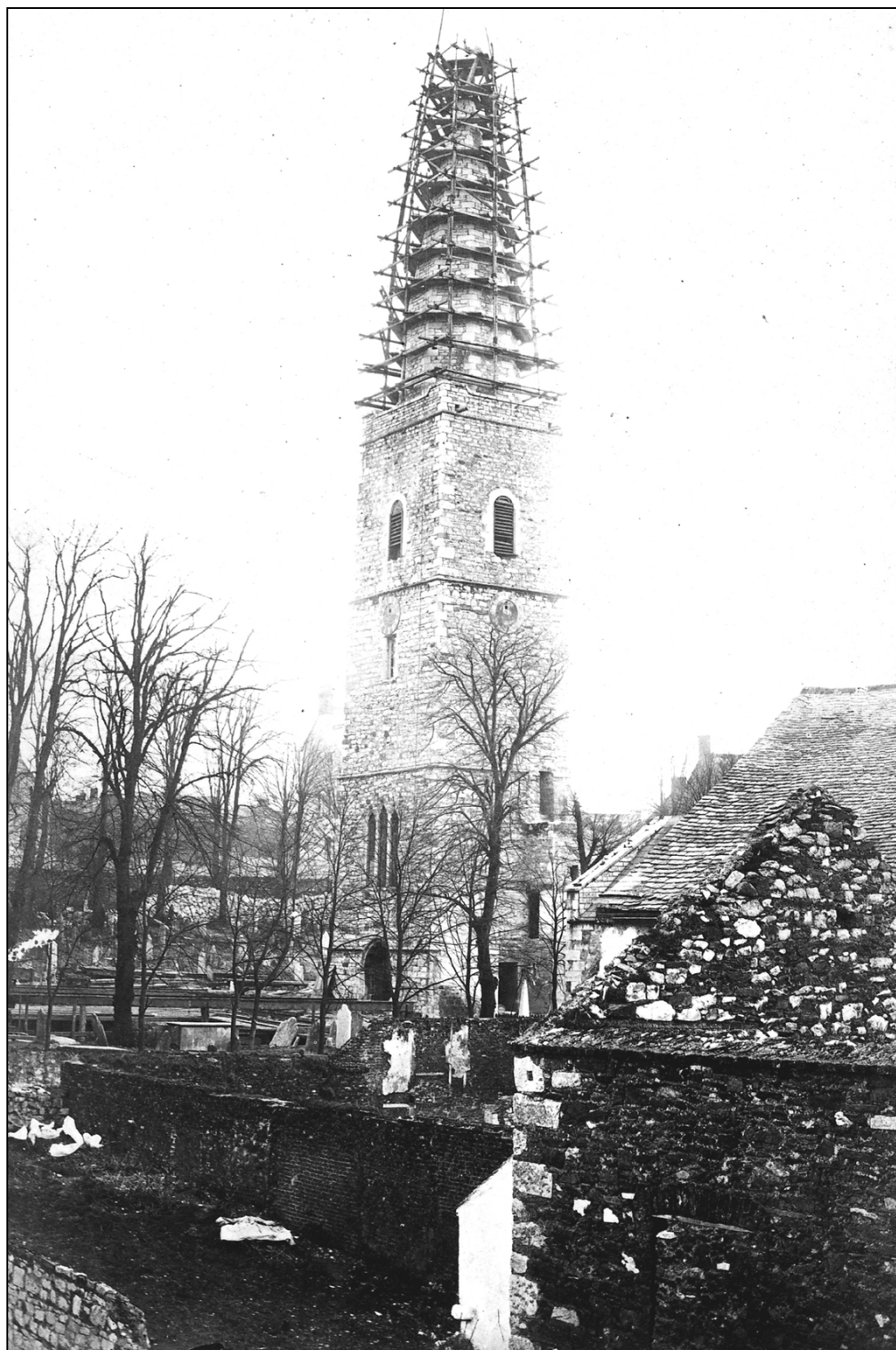
Some of the photographs (VII and VIII) also reveal details of the interior of the eighteenth-century cathedral, such as the elaborate plasterwork on the chancel, which is shown in an earlier illustration of about 1850 (Ill. 1). A number of the Irish oak stalls shown in this latter illustration were removed to the Cork Masonic Lodge on Tuckey Street, where they can still be seen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere thanks to Mr Chris and Mrs Amy Ramsden of Neptune Lodge, Glenbrook, Passage West, county Cork, for allowing them to create digital scans from the photographs in their copy of the *Vetusta Monumenta* and reproduce them here.

REFERENCES

- Bradley, J. and King, H. 1985 'Romanesque voussoirs at St Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork', *Jnl Royal Soc. Antiq. Ireland* **113**, pp. 46-51.
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- Robinson, A. C. 1897 *St Fin Barre's Cathedral*. Guy and Co., Cork.



Photograph I*

Represents the Steeple of S. Fin Barre's Cathedral, with the Scaffolding erected for the purpose of taking it down. The Vestry, which existed on the north side of the Tower, and the Chapter-House on the south, were first removed. The former was used by Dignitaries and Canons as a Robing Room; the latter by the Choir.

*In the text of the original captions, 'f' is used for 's'.



Photograph II

Depicts an ancient entrance, which was inserted here after the building of the late Cathedral in 1739. It was said to have belonged to the Monastery of 'S. Mary of the Isle', which existed on a Island a short distance north of the Cathedral. This Entrance has been carefully removed to a place of Safety, under the personal Superintendence of the Venerable Samuel Moore Kyle, LLD, Archdeacon of Cork.** The first Figure to the right is Charles Hewitt, Esq., MD, second the Rev. Frederick Dobbins, MA, Preacher Residentiary of the Cathedral; third, Richard Caulfield, Esq, BA, FSA, Author of "Life of S. Fin Barre", "History of the Bishops of Cork", &c, &c; fourth, Robert Walker, Esq, Contractor of the new Building.*

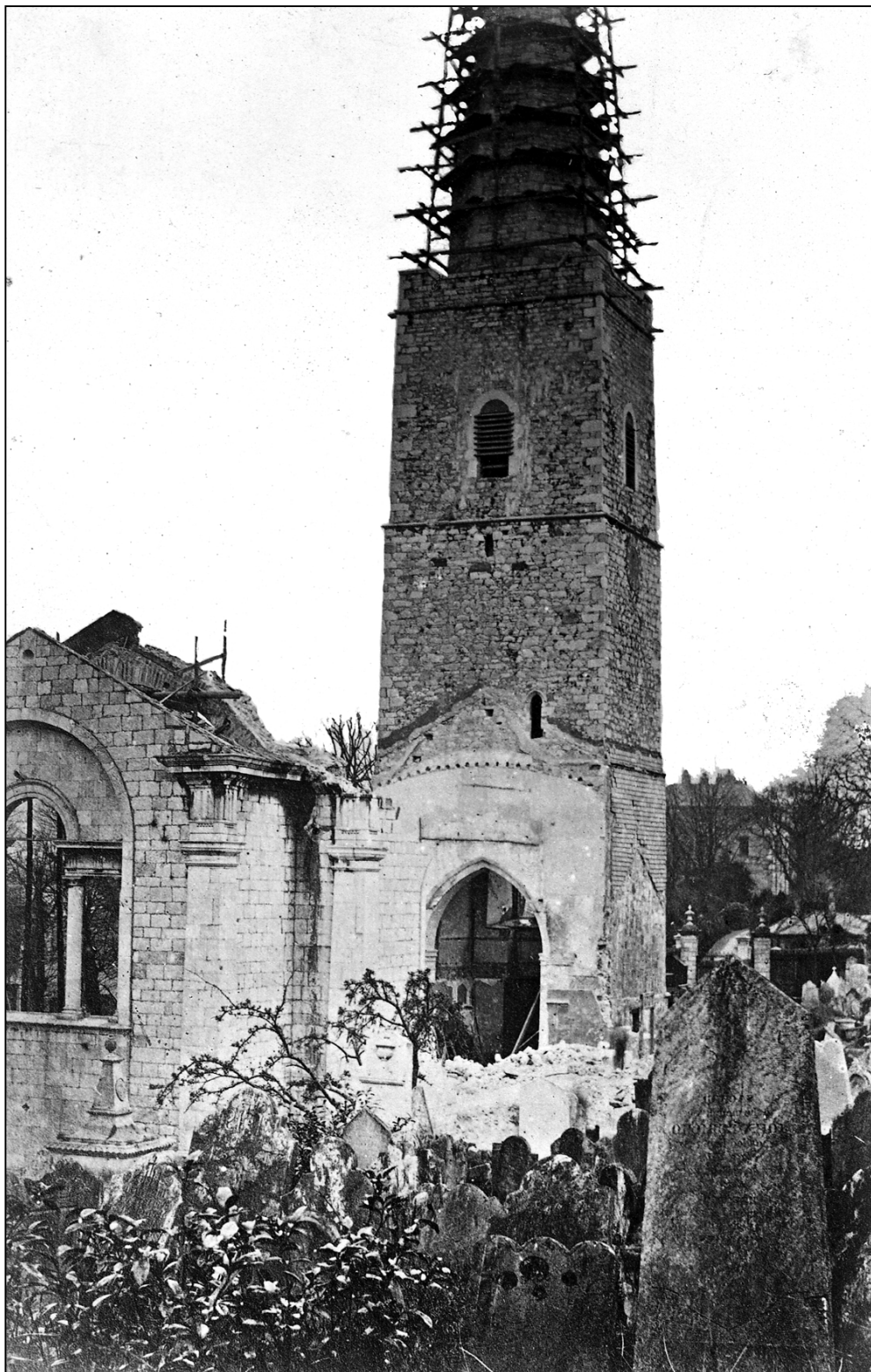
*From the photograph, it is clear that neither the later medieval triplet window nor the doorway were later insertions.

**This doorway is now in the south boundary wall of the cathedral.



Photograph III

Shows the Steeple and lower part of the Scaffolding, after a Portion of the Spire had been taken down. The Roof being removed, the interior of the Chancel is visible; also a considerable Part of the South-West of the Cemetery. The Injunction from the Ecclesiastical Court for the Demolition of the Cathedral may still be seen adhering to the Door.



Photograph IV

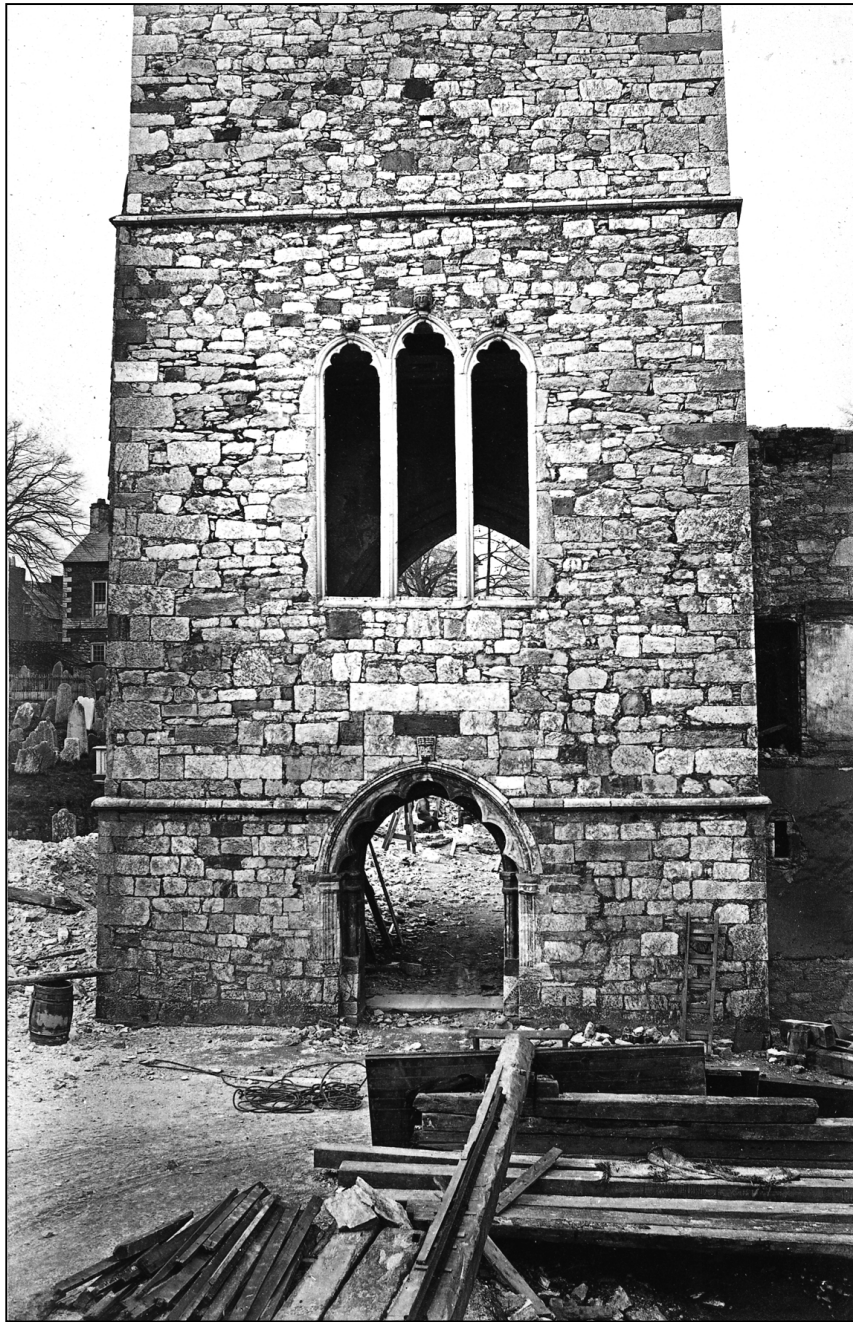
In the Foreground is the Exterior of the Doric Chancel of the late Cathedral. The large Tomb (now) removed below the Window was erected in 1800, to the Memory of Joseph Capel Esq. The East side of the Steeple is also visible, with the ancient Choir Arch. On the extreme left may be seen the Episcopal Residence of the Bishop of Cork, the western Gate of the Cathedral, and the south-east part of the Cemetery.



Photograph V

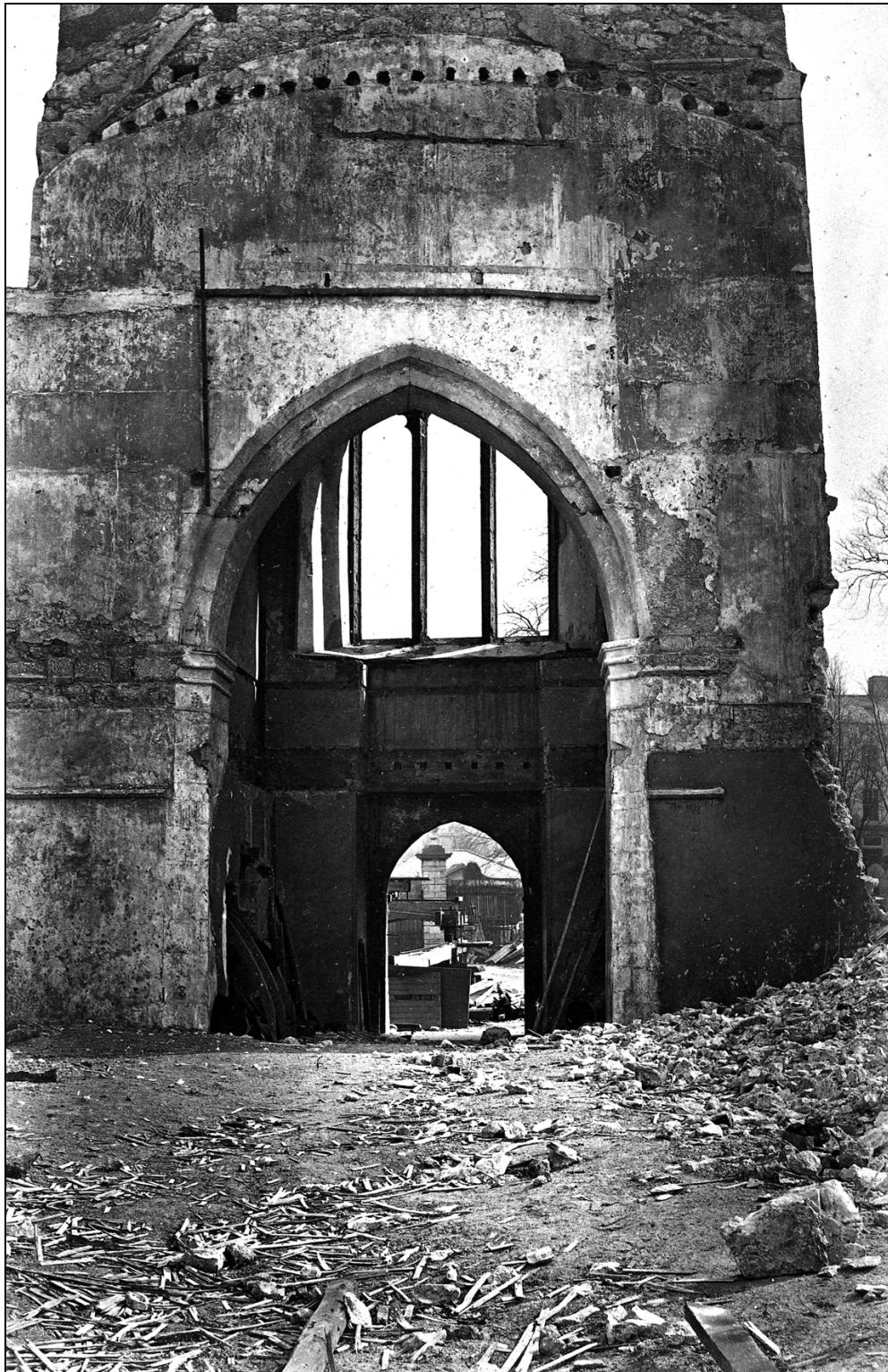
After the Wainscoting that surrounded the Old Vestry Room had been removed, the Top of an Arch, hitherto unknown and filled up with loose masonry, appeared just above the Level of the Floor, on removing which an ancient Doorway became visible. It was first explored by Richard Caulfield Esq., in presence of the Venerable the Archdeacon, Thomas R. Lane and Robert Walker, Esquires, and also Richard Neil the Verger. It was found to be a small detached Tower, leading, originally, to the centre or great one; it has since been demolished. The figures on the right are those of the Archdeacon and Mr Caulfield; that on the left, Mr Walker. The Houses visible on the left of the Tower constituted the ancient College of the Vicars-Choral.*

*The arch shown here was probably inserted in the seventeenth century.



Photograph VI

Here we have the ancient Doorway and triplet Window. Over each of the Lights was a finely carved stone Head, that in the Centre was much the largest and adorned with a Crown such as we see on the coins of Henry VII, the other two were probably Ecclesiastics – all are carefully preserved. The Interior of the stone Arch in which this Window was inserted, is decorated with a cinquefoil Ornament. With many Persons, capable of forming a judgement on the Subject, this Tower had always the Reputation of being Part of the early Cathedral, said to have been built in the eleventh Century; but on excavating, the Discovery of a Tombstone in the north-western Angle of the Tower, has put to rest, for ever, all further Doubts on this Subject. The Inscription, cut in old English Characters in Relief, is as follows: “Here lieth the body of W. Woodcock, who died on the eighth day of July, 1610, his wife being Diana, the owner hereof. This was done the 24 day of August, 1610”. This Flagstone is 5 feet long by 22 inches broad.



Photograph VII

The Choir Arch – doubtless one of the early Parts of the ancient Fabric. Its Removal was only effected by the use of large Quantities of Gunpowder. It was quite unornamented. The Arch was composed of small cut stones.



Photograph VIII

The Interior of the Chancel, which was highly decorated with Stucco Work, Portions of which may be seen in the Photograph. The niche on the left was occupied with a beautiful marble Figure of Eloquence, by the younger Bacon, placed there to commemorate the last Baron Tracton; it has been removed to the north Aisle of the Church of S. Nicholas. Opposite to it, on the Ground at the right, was a rather unsightly Group of three Figures in Terra-cotta, erected by the Friends of the late Rev. Dr Quarry; this is now to be put up in S. Mary's Shandon, where he is buried, and of which Church he was the esteemed Rector for many Years. Two marble Slabs, fixed in the Wall on the right hand and on the left, record the military achievements of some members of the Travers Family.



Photograph IX

Four ancient carved Stone Heads, originally Corbels, some of which are very peculiar from the manner in which the Hair and Beard is dressed, were found in the Walls of the late Cathedral, where they were inserted as building Stones. The Heads are now preserved in the Corridor of the Cathedral Library.*

*The carved stone heads (six in all) are actually voussoirs, which originally formed part of a door arch (see Bradley and King 1985).