



The fan vault ceiling at King's is perhaps the widest of its kind

Press watch - My first sight of King's College chapel

taught me buildings could be art

In this season of carols, thoughts turn to the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. On Christmas Eve its service of nine lessons and carols will be heard around the globe. The chapel is one of the architectural wonders of the world, Simon Heffer writes in *The Daily Telegraph*.

I remember walking along the Backs in Cambridge with my parents as a young child and seeing the great, golden Gothic edifice across the river; it was the most astonishing building I had ever seen, and I think the first time it had ever occurred to me that a building could be a work of art as well as having a practical function. It was certainly the moment my interest in architecture started.

The two buildings that frame the chapel when seen from the Backs enhance its setting: the imposing south range of Clare College to the left, one of the earliest baroque buildings outside London, finished just before the first civil war in 1642; and, to the right, the grand baroque Portland stone Gibbs building, named after its architect and finished in 1729. I did not set foot inside the chapel until I was an undergraduate at another college 15 years later. Chance had it that my second year room was in a college hostel over a shop opposite the main gate of King's; and every morning when I drew my curtains the first thing I saw was that great building, proclaiming itself opposite. Youth takes much for granted, including having one of the great views on the planet on tap. Even now, when I look at the chapel, I still see aspects of its design and of the genius of its master masons that I had never appreciated before.

However overwhelming the exterior is, nothing can prepare the uninitiated for the experience of going within. The chapel was begun in the 1440s, and the last furnishings were not installed until the 1540s. Throughout, a succession of monarchs funded the construction, finishing with Henry VIII. Both the north and south limestone walls comprise 12 soaring five-light windows, each between a pair of stone buttresses that rise to slender crocketed pinnacles; and at either end is a massive broad window, with elaborate turrets at each corner.

The chapel is massively long, but the full impact of its size (stipulated in the will of the founder, Henry VI, dated 1448) only comes within the great space inside. It is not just the near-100 yard length – which, broken up by a great screen though it is, still seems immense – but also the sheer height of the chapel (80ft inside, 94ft out) as though the

founder was consciously trying to reach heaven. It is when one looks towards the heavens that one sees the main glory of the chapel: the elaborate fan vaulting adorning the roof. *Pevsner's Cambridgeshire* says it is possibly the widest such vault ever built. Its only fault is that it creates a roof of such beauty that one almost forgets to note the elaborate decoration of the rest of the interior, the intricacies and art of the stained glass – the finest example of such work from the reign of Henry VIII. The fact of its survival in an East Anglia that was, in Cromwell's time, ravaged by iconoclasts is, as Pevsner also says, "astonishing". One should not miss the exquisite carving of the woodwork in the choir, and the gem-like artistry of the side chapels, particularly in the lierne-vaulted roofs. And the apogee of the furnishings is the sumptuous *Adoration of the Magi* by Rubens adorning the reredos under the great east window, a baroque intrusion into this late Gothic monument.

The vast windows create an overwhelming sensation of light inside, albeit, at this season, mainly in the late morning and early afternoon. In high summer the sun floods in. But if one is lucky enough to attend the Christmas Eve service – as I was a few years ago – the atmosphere, created by the mixture of the grandeur and timelessness of the architecture and the approach of night, is unforgettable even before the act of worship has started. The sun sets during the service; before it starts, the chapel is sparingly lit; and although the service many of us will hear on Christmas Eve dates back just a century, one feels a connection as daylight fades with the time of the Plantagenets and the Tudors when the great building was made, an age before science began to undermine the traditional attitude to religion. Above all, it is a reminder that few works of art provide us with such a sense of continuity with the past as our great architectural monuments: they don't come much greater than King's College chapel.