

A MASTER SMITH OF THE MIDDLE AGES

THOMAS OF LEIGHTON

By JANE GEDDES

THOMAS of Leighton stands out among blacksmiths of 13th-century England because he is the only one whose name, bills and commissioned work survive. Other smiths such as Henry of Lewes and William of Uffington are known through royal records, but their works are lost. About a dozen pieces of decorative ironwork, comparable to those of Thomas of Leighton, survive, but their creators are unknown. They are found, for instance, at St George's Chapel, Windsor (where the smith stamped his name, Gilebertus, in the iron), Merton College, Oxford, York Chapter House, Chester Cathedral and Norwich Cathedral School. Because all these works have a certain family likeness, some writers have suggested that Thomas of Leighton might have made a good number of them.

hammered into a straight mould producing a continuous, indented profile. To cover an unsightly weld between two rods, smiths could affix either a small leaf or a short decorated bar.

Although at first sight the stamps used on the great 13th-century works at Windsor, Merton College, Oxford, York Chapter House and so on, appear roughly the same, it is possible to pick out small characteristics which help to identify the work of individual smiths.

Using plaster casts taken from Plasticine impressions of the stamps, one can make accurate comparisons of technical details. Although the 13th-century smiths shared a basic repertoire of stamp designs, each one made his own stamps and can therefore be more or less identified by the types he used.

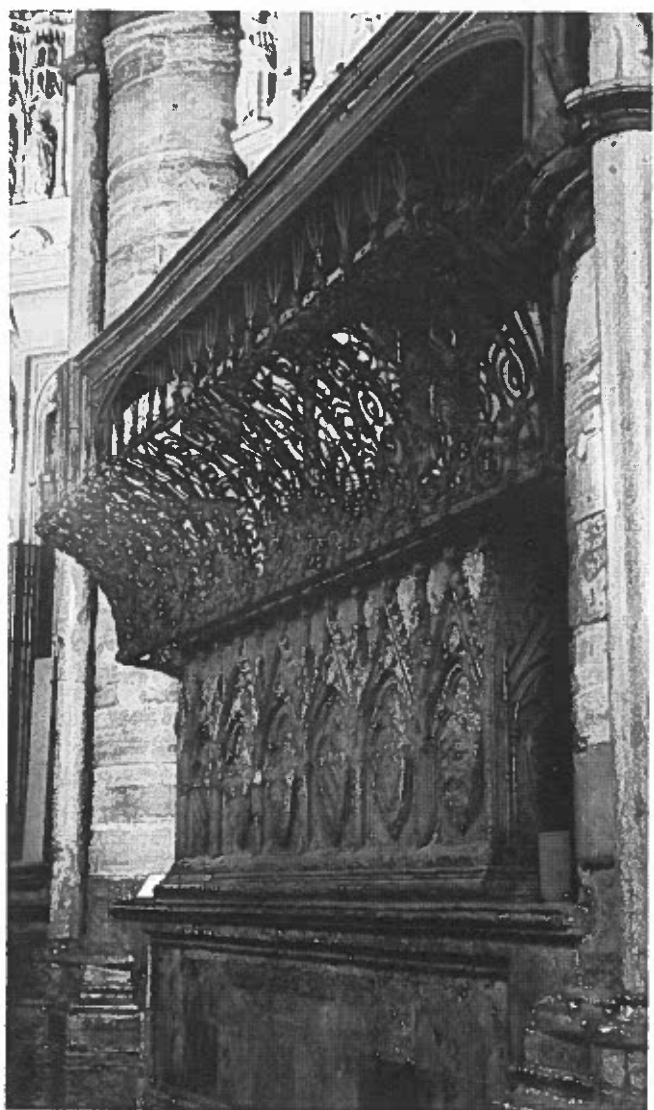
The only documented work of Thomas of Leighton is the grille (Fig 1) around the tomb of Queen Eleanor, Edward I's wife, in Westminster Abbey. The executors of Queen Eleanor's will record in 1294-95 payments to "Master Thomas of Leghtone, smith, for making ironwork around the tomb of the Queen at Westminster". The last payment gives a clue to Thomas's origins: "£12 for the making of the aforesaid ironwork and for the carriage of the same from Leghtone as far as Westminster and the expenses of the aforesaid Thomas and his men while they stayed in London, for placing and setting the same ironwork by the tomb."

The grille itself is easily overlooked because, from the Confessor's chapel, one is immediately attracted to the graceful effigy of Queen Eleanor by Trol, and from here only a small portion of the back of the grille is visible. From the ambulatory, the grille is too dark and high up to be seen clearly. So little was it appreciated in the last century that it was removed and only rescued by the timely action of Gilbert Scott. It was originally needed to prevent pilgrims or thieves climbing from the ambulatory, over Eleanor's tomb, to reach the Confessor's shrine. It therefore had to be very strong and densely patterned. Thus in some places it has as many as three layers of iron riveted together.

The spikes on top (some of which are replacements) are made as deterrents. Along the bottom are various animal heads including a monkey, pig and dogs. Thomas might have seen the long-eared dogs on the doors in St George's Chapel, Windsor (1240-49), which stud the whole design. He did not use them elsewhere on his own doors. However, on the grille he uses at least ten different stamp designs, and four of the most unusual ones are found on the doors he decorated. Surprisingly, the very common rosettes, trefoils and asymmetrical leaves do not correspond on his various works. The four characteristic stamps he uses are (Fig 2): a three-grooved disc (1); a broad cinquefoil with three grooves at the bottom (2); a double stamp composed of a seven-lobed scallop tipped with a trefoil, the latter having raised dots on the two side leaves (3); and a fleur-de-lys (4). They are to be found on the bars of figure 2 as marked. Frequently Thomas covers a join

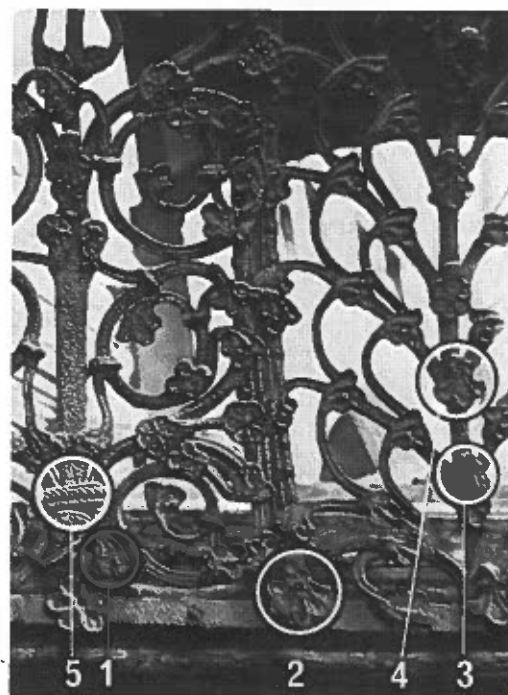
with a cable patterned bar, as illustrated (5).

Using this evidence from the Eleanor Grille, it has been possible to identify the ironwork on two doors in Bedfordshire as the work of Thomas of Leighton. Although this was surmised in the last century by M. D. Wyatt and J. S. Gardner, no proof was put forward. The ironwork on the west door of All Saints, Leighton (probably the Leghtone mentioned above) Buzzard, shares sufficient characteristics with the Eleanor Grille to be attributed to Thomas of Leighton (Fig 4). The door itself was replaced and much of the ironwork restored in 1842. The drawing made by William Twopeny in 1827 shows what actually remained of Thomas's work and is more valuable as evidence than any recent photograph of the door (Fig 7). It also enables a comparison to be made between

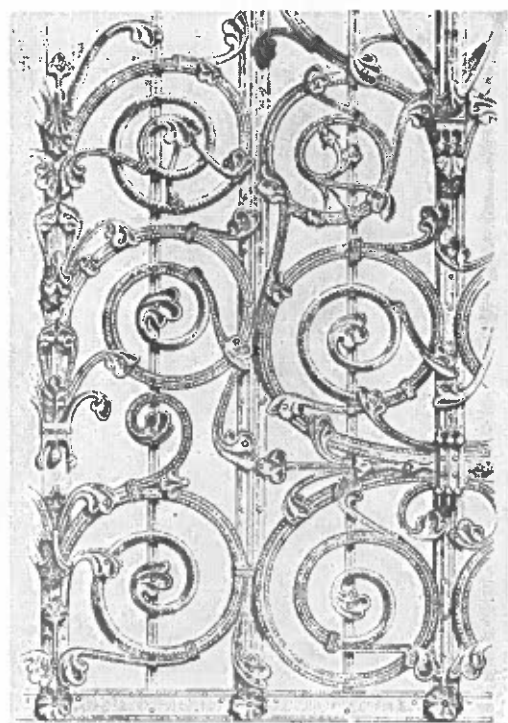


1—TOMB OF QUEEN ELEANOR, WIFE OF EDWARD I, AT WESTMINSTER ABBEY. The grille enclosing the top is the only documented work of the 13th-century smith, Thomas of Leighton

It is necessary to explain briefly how iron was wrought in the 13th century. A smith acquired his iron from the smelter in rough shapeless lumps called blooms. As yet the techniques of melting, casting and rolling iron had not been invented, so his most difficult task was to hammer a simple straight bar from the bloom. This contrasts with modern restorers who are able to buy their iron in evenly rolled rods with trim straight edges. To decorate the bar it was common to heat one end and carefully hammer it into a mould or stamp. In this way it was easy to duplicate a pattern of small rosettes and leaves all over a particular structure. Often the bar itself was



2—DETAIL OF THE ELEANOR GRILLE. The numbers refer to types of stamps that are characteristic of Thomas's work. (Below) 3—GRILLE FROM ST DENIS IN PARIS, ILLUSTRATED BY VIOLETTE-LE-DUC IN HIS DICTIONARY OF 1863

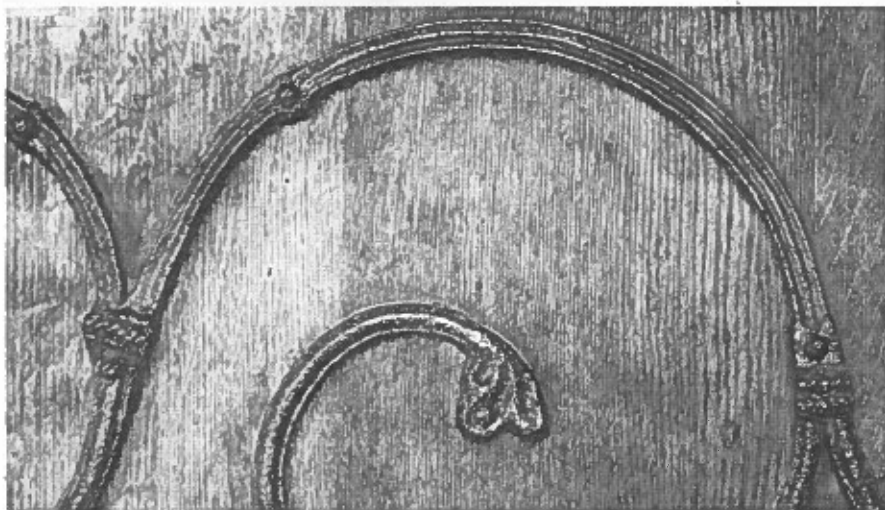


13th- and 19th-century smithing techniques.

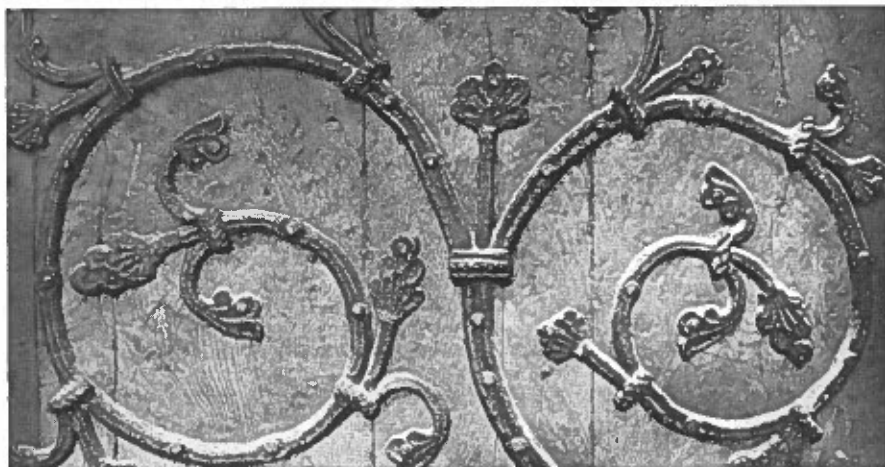
On the lower hinge, both the three-grooved disc (1) and the fleur-de-lys (4) are used, and some of the joins are covered with the same cable pattern (5) as on the Eleanor Grille. The handle, held by a ghoulish skeletal hand, is decorated by small leaves folded backwards. The difference between Thomas's work and the restorers is visible in Fig 4. At the junction between branches on the left side, a screw (originally a nail) is fitted simply through the raised profile of the stem. This is old. At the junction on the right, the grooved profile stops and a small area is specially flattened to receive the screw. This is a replacement. On the stem between the two junctions is a screw marking the repairer's weld. Fortunately, at Leighton Buzzard a document records that, in 1288, the Prebendary Nicholas de Heigham "left sufficient of his goods to complete the church", and in the same year the church was consecrated by Bishop Oliver of London. So, perhaps it was on the strength of his recently completed door

is used both on the upper hinges and on the triangular motifs. On the other hand, the two broken circles at the bottom centre are a later addition. The iron pieces used are probably medieval but have been salvaged from some other lost work. The doors themselves are original but seem to have been repaired in the 17th or 18th centuries. It is very likely that the lower additions were made then. It is interesting to compare these fragments with the excellent but self-consciously antiquarian repair at Leighton Buzzard. They are a minor example of how man's attitude to the past has changed.

It would appear that the Turvey doors (Fig 6) are an earlier work than the two already discussed. Thomas had not yet developed his remarkable neatness



4—IRON WORK ON THE WEST DOOR OF ALL SAINTS, LEIGHTON BUZZARD. The junction on the left is by Thomas; that on the right is restored. (Below) 5—DETAIL OF ONE OF THE SOUTH DOORS AT TURVEY. The stamp designs are comparable to those of the Eleanor Grille



at Leighton Buzzard that Thomas gained the commission for the royal grille.

The south doors at Turvey, Bedfordshire, can also be assigned to Thomas because of comparable stamp designs used here and on the Eleanor Grille (Fig 5). They are the broad cinquefoil (2) and the double stamp (3), as shown in Fig 2. Unlike at Leighton Buzzard, the stamps used here are not duplicated exactly on the Eleanor Grille. They are the same design but scaled down to match the delicacy of the grille. The handles of the door stand out in relief. Their shape is similar to the handle on the doors of York Minster Chapter House, but they are more crudely made. The two triangular motifs at the top of the doors fit rather awkwardly with the scrolled hinges below. However, they are clearly part of the original design because the same damaged stamp of an asymmetrical leaf

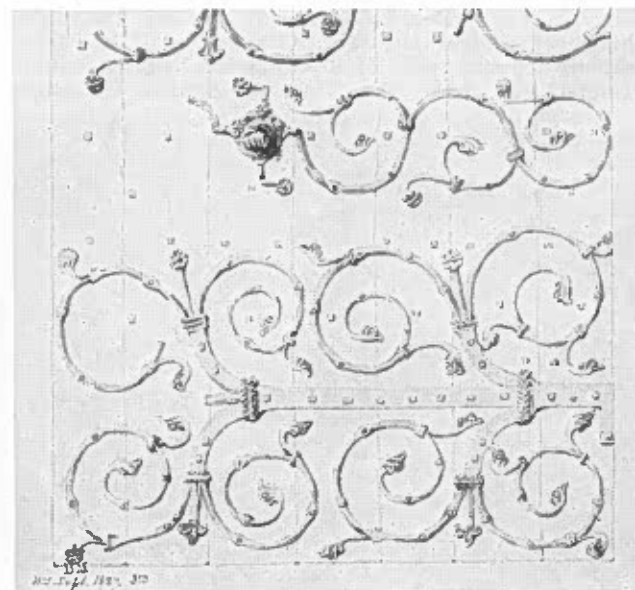
of execution. Compare for example the joins in Fig 5 with those at Leighton Buzzard (Fig 4). Where the branches join the main stem, they jut out to one side in an ungainly fashion. However, the design already shows Thomas's liking for the asymmetrical which is such a feature of the Eleanor Grille. At Turvey, no two pairs of scrolls are alike.

The third Bedfordshire door often associated with Thomas is at Eaton Bray. The history of the door poses many problems not yet resolved, but it is now fairly certain that Thomas did not make it. None of the stamps compare with those on his other works and the iron is more crudely wrought.

There is one final work which may throw some light on Thomas's career. This is a grille from St Denis in Paris (Fig 3). It was illustrated by Viollet-le-Duc in his *Dictionary* of 1863. He apparently found it in a store room,



6—SOUTH DOORS AT TURVEY, BEDFORDSHIRE. (Below) 7—WEST DOOR AT ALL SAINTS, LEIGHTON BUZZARD. A drawing made by William Twopeny in 1827



but attempts to trace it recently have so far been unsuccessful. The construction of the French grille is exactly the same as that of the Eleanor Grille, with leafy scrolls covering vertical bars. The only difference is that the French grille has some stamps shaped like small raspberries and an animal-head terminal.

Nonetheless the similarity between the French and English grille is so striking it would be fair to suggest that Thomas had either seen it or even helped to make it, and it is likely that through Thomas's local reputation for his work in England and possibly some acclaim in France, he was awarded the commission for Queen Eleanor's grille.

Illustrations: 1 and 2, By Courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster; 4, 5 and 6, the author; 7, British Museum.