

# ‘THE BENCHES IN YE QUIRE’ FURNITURE FROM WIMBORNE MINSTER, DORSET

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In 1985 the churchwardens of Wimborne Minster donated a seventeenth century bench to the Priest's House Museum on long-term loan. The museum, housed in a sixteenth century building, was a small concern then of three rooms only. Under the curatorship of Stephen Price the museum was extensively restored and renovated, currently extending over ten rooms, and the bench now forms part of the display in the seventeenth century hall. It is reputed to be one of ten benches made by Jesser Crosse for the Minster in 1655, costing the churchwardens £1.0s.0d. This article investigates the case.

A guide to Wimborne Minster written by a former vicar, Douglas. J. Strickland (n.d.), confirms the history and adds further details. “A very old custom is still continued in the use of Houseling or Eucharistic cloths covering three oak benches which now form the Communion rail. The use of these cloths dates from mediaeval times, though the benches were made during the Commonwealth when the Independents preferred to sit for their Communion. Originally, and until 1852, ten of these benches were used in the presbytery, and it was the custom for the clerk after morning prayer to go to the lectern and announce, ‘All who are prepared to receive the Holy Communion, draw near;’ and those who wished to stay went into the chancel and sat round on the benches. The most recent edition of the guide is more circumspect and refers only to the three oak benches now in the Minster, made during the Commonwealth period.

On examination, the bench is indisputably of seventeenth century origin, constructed in oak with elm aprons or rails. The measurements are: 75" long, 11 1/2" deep and 23" high. (Figure 2). The oak is soft, suggesting use of either imported timber or wood from trees grown in a sheltered position, which have not developed the hard, resilient texture of oaks exposed to the elements on wind-whipped hillsides. Saw marks on the underside show that the timber was converted in a saw-pit. It was then cleaned by a plane with a rounded iron, (the modern equivalent would be a *Bismarck* plane).<sup>1</sup> The rails and supports were profile cut with a bow saw and the arrises trimmed with a chisel, producing a small bevel. On the long sides of the top, the edges were moulded with a plane. Plane marks are clearly visible on the underside and supports but the surface of the board has been cleaned more finely and on cursory sight appears smooth. However, against the light, shallow ridges are clearly perceptible and tangible. It would appear to have a planed finish with movement taken across the board to reduce the ridges. The top is fixed to the rails with wooden pegs secured from the top down using clasp-headed iron nails, confirming a seventeenth century origin. Marks in the grain at the end of the board indicate the use of a dog (a piece of metal with teeth) to hold the oak firmly while work was in progress.

Much skill has been exercised in attaching the rail to the end supports, which are shaped with a re-entrant at the base. The rail is jointed in two planes; firstly slotted vertically and secondly housed horizontally, making a secure join. The wood has darkened, possibly a natural process brought about by oxidisation in sunlight, but in view of the longevity of its survival and the general condition of the bench, it is more likely to have been finished with a coat of linseed oil followed by varnish.

The bench was cheap to produce and in style typical of the plain, functional furniture required during the Commonwealth era, a style which provokes a variety of opinions from profound denigration, as voiced by John Bly:

*'The 1650s were notoriously dull years as far as furniture is concerned, and everything that could be associated with gracious living was discouraged. All goods and chattels were made to be strictly functional, without unnecessary adornment, with precious little comfort, and lacking in artistic sensibility.'*<sup>2</sup>

to praise from Therle Hughes for its simplicity:—

*'The Cromwellian Period dispensed with tasteless over-decoration and offered opportunities, once fighting was over, for the small provincial craftsmen to produce honest work on traditional lines.'*<sup>3</sup>

The second quotation is truer to the bench in question. Whether or not Jesser Crosse was the carpenter, the work was produced locally and the pleasing clean lines and honest strength have in themselves an intrinsic beauty. (Figure 2).

Unlike Poole and the other coastal towns of Dorset, who supported the Parliamentarians, Wimborne remained staunchly Monarchist. The Minster escaped the depredation meted out to churches in some areas by not overtly opposing either King or Protector, but suffered constantly from broken windows and minor inconveniences such as horses being stabled in the crypt and 'one of the surplis being taken by a soldier', the recovery of which cost the churchwardens 6d. In the year 1650 came the reluctant acceptance of political reality: 'It. paid Shitler for washing out ye Kings arms . . . 00.2.8d.' The association of Jesser Crosse with the benches seems to have been established by G.F. Score, Parish Clerk, in his guide book of 1922. He quotes a 'quaint entry' in the churchwarden's accounts of 1655: 'For making and setting up of the benches about ye Communion table in ye quire ' £1.' He also mentions that since the first edition of this book in 1893 (unseen) it had been brought to his notice that the benches are a copy of those used formerly in old Monastic churches.

On recourse to the original manuscript accounts<sup>4</sup>, we find that although 'The Account of John Polden and Matthew Raindle' is dated 1655, it covers the year 1655/6, The actual entry reads:

24 Aprill 1656. It.pd. Jesser Crosse for making  
and settinge up of the benches about ye  
comunion table in ye quire

l. s. d.  
01. 00. 00.

This is puzzling in two respects. The number of benches paid for is not stated, and by comparison with an account a few years previously when 12s. was paid for one seat and one bench, £1 does not appear to be a reasonable sum for ten benches. Secondly, throughout the churchwarden's accounts Crosse (who has few entries compared with other local carpenters) is always referred to as 'ye joyner', therefore one who would normally use mortice and tenon joints.

These are the entries relating to Crosse:

*l. s. d.*

1645.	<i>It. for a Seate for ye minister to sit in at ye deske &amp; for a Bench for ye clerkes deske to ye joiner (unnamed but probably Crosse)</i>	0. 12. 0.
1646.	<i>It. paid Crosse ye joiner for a borde to fix ye declaration on with hanger up in the church</i>	0. 1. 4.
	<i>It. paid to Crose (sic) joyner for ye standard to sett ye bason on</i>	0. 4. 6.
	<i>It. paid more to Crosse for varnishing of ye standard</i>	0. 0. 8.
1656.	<i>It. paid Jesser Crosse for making benches . . . (already quoted)</i>	01. 00. 00.
	<i>It. paid Jesser Crosse for mending the Ministers seate in the deske</i>	00. 00. 06.
1664.	<i>It. pd. Crosse for altering of the seates under the pulpit</i>	0. 12. 0.

His work at the Minster appears to have come to an end sometime before the last entry in his name:

1679.	<i>For the Hearse and pullpitt cloathes for Jesper Crosse</i>	00. 02. 00.
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One serious setback in researching the history of the benches is that no mention at all is made of them in the accepted authority on the history and antiquities of Dorset, J. Hutchins. Peter Hall, in his guide of 1830 has no reference to them, nor Charles Mayo, although in his *History of Wimborne Minster* of 1860 he cites the restoration of the Minster in 1855–1857 as an opportunity for collecting materials for its history.<sup>5</sup> Neither do the benches figure in N. Whittock's beautiful engravings on wood published in 1839.<sup>6</sup> The quest is further confused by the appearance of a jointed bench situated in front of the choir stalls in his engraving of the Choir. The communion rails shown here disappeared in the nineteenth century renovation. (Figure 4).

It may be significant that before the turn of the century the citizens of Wimborne were beginning to realise the scale of their loss. A poster advertising the forthcoming auction of church fittings on 9th November 1858 lists 59 lots 'lately removed from the Chancel of the Minster' (Figure 5), including lot 53, 'A 22ft. run of massive oak altar-railing with pair of folding doors.'

In 1874 the *Parish Magazine* ran a series of articles on aspects of the Minster's history. In April the writer rejoiced over the Minster's Jesse window 'especially since a similar hap might have befallen ours had it been erected at the time when the iconoclastic troops of the rebel Parliament converted our House of God into a stable for horses'.

After Score's publication, all subsequent guide books of Wimborne and the Minster repeat the story of the benches and extol the remaining antiquities. Preference seems to incline towards the ornate. Mayo neglected the benches but enthused over the choir stalls

erected in 1608 and regretted their mutilation because they were a 'rare example of a choir fitted up in this fashion for the services of an English church in a Puritan age.' The heavy carved oak, decorated with gilding and resembling the work of two centuries earlier, was much to his taste. (Figure 6).

In 1895, the young architect C. R. Mackintosh visited England on a sketching trip, passing through Dorset, Devon and Somerset. He stopped at Wimborne to look at the Minster and his sketches of the choir stalls, the font and the old benches are now in the Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow University (Figure 7). Mackintosh expressed alarm at the 'irremedial vandalism' of careless and excessive renovation. 'Ignorance and restoration – they usually go together' was his opinion.

It was fortunate, therefore, that in ridding the church of the more recent oak railings, some of the earlier oak benches were preserved. Under the houseling cloths, the benches appear similar in appearance but Mackintosh's sketch shows two types of support detail – one re-entrant, the other ogee. Of the two, the ogee design is not only more visually pleasing but, as it was made for church use, more practical too. As there was less wood at the base in contact with the floor, it was easier to avoid any humps and bumps and achieve a steadier stand. In churches like the Minster where burials within the building were common, uneven flooring was the norm.

There are other dissimilarities. One bench with the re-entrant style support has measurements of 74½" long, 13½" deep, 23¼" high; the other is 75⅝" long, 13⅞" deep and 23¼" wide and 23¼" high. This bench is slotted not housed. The apron on one side has eroded revealing square cut pegs of 1" at least below the seat. Single iron nails attach the rails to the supports.

Another smaller bench, damaged but repaired, stands in Trinity Chapel, where formerly there were two. Thus, if there were originally ten boarded benches, then five survive. None of the 59 lots in the 1858 auction includes oak benches, so it must be assumed that damage or decay accounted for the other five.

It would seem that the surviving benches were the work of more than one carpenter. Reverting to earlier churchwarden accounts for the period 1581 to 1636,<sup>7</sup> we find records of carpenters who made benches or forms as well as other items.

*l. s. d.*

1616.	<i>It. to Galpen for three newe formes to stand in the church</i>	<i>xj. vj.</i>
1618.	<i>It. paid to Thomas Galpen for a seat where Mr. Collett did sit</i>	<i>x. –</i>
	<i>It. for two longe formes in the church</i>	<i>viii. –</i>
1625.	<i>Itm. paid Thomas Galpin for to sett up a bench for people to set on in the ile were Mr. Trinder was buried</i>	<i>x. –</i>
1628–9	<i>Itm. paid Henrye Galpen for making a new desk for vernishing of him &amp; of the pulpitt and for removing of the old desk</i>	<i>iii. v. o.</i>

After the Galpen family came James Purchase. He began his career by cutting down two elm trees, one by Klack Lane and the other in the churchyard. In 1633–4 he was paid 6 vs. for a new deske for ye Ministers to catechise' and in 1635–6 he was kept busy repairing doors and windows in the Minster 'to keep forth the pigions'.

Interesting information can be found in the Governors Orders;<sup>8</sup> the Minster Governors ran the school as well as the Minster. These do not appear to have been consulted by Score or later writers of the Minster guides. Most of the disbursements recorded here refer to work in the school or the minister's house but in 1663:

*l. s. d.*

<i>It. payed to Purchase the carpenter for mending the stayres in the church</i>	<i>0. 1. 6</i>
<i>It. for mayles</i>	<i>0. 0. 6.</i>
<i>It. pd. him for setting up the benches and deskes in the Quire</i>	
<i>for the singing boyes</i>	<i>0. 5. 0.</i>

The Governors Orders also record the rents and revenues of the Grammar School and place Crosse in the 'Town and Burrow': in 1651/2 Crosse, Jesser, paid a quarterly rent of 00.01.8, and in 1652/3 Crosse Jasper late Jones paid 0. 1. 8, and so on.

In the 1660s and 70s, payments are recorded for a John Crosse of Blandford, who supplied the Minster with bell ropes. Possibly there is a family connection here to follow up. The quest is far from over. As more private archives come into the public domain, so more information comes to light.

In conclusion, it must be said that the case is unproven. Certainly benches were made by Crosse the joiner and by Galpen and the Purchase family who were carpenters, all of whom were working in the town and specifically for Wimborne Minster during the seventeenth century. Of the benches that have survived at least two, possibly three craftsmen were involved in their manufacture. The two joined benches examined by Stephen Price in 1994 in the chamber over the north porch of the Minster are those seen in situ in Whittock's engraving of 1839 (Figure 4). They had been fixed in front of the choir stalls, probably their secondary position, and are the most likely to be Crosse's handiwork.

The bench in the museum, even though it may not live up to its stated history, nevertheless is a true example of ordinary seating used by a family in such a room setting. The seventeenth century hall is of great interest to visitors examining the social history of the times and regularly forms the backdrop to a spirited re-enactment of the family life of a Wimborne merchant after the Civil War.

In the Minster the sterner precepts of Puritan belief were abandoned with the restoration of the monarchy. Mr. Shitler returned to paint in the King's arms and familiar Anglican worship was resumed. Throughout all the changes brought about by the Reformation and by war, there remained a core of continuity, and the medieval custom of using Houseling cloths is still practised. To housel means to communicate; literally to give house-room to Christ. It was a custom well known to Shakespeare. The ghost of Hamlet's father laments his unprepared death due to the suddenness of his murder:

*Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin,  
Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,  
No reckoning made, but sent to my account  
With all my imperfections on my head.*

Hamlet I, v, 76.

Traditionally the linen cloths are laid over communion rails or benches for more reverent reception of the consecrated Host and to catch any particles should they fall. (Figure 9).

With an ironic turn of fate, the benches made to seat participants in the days when kneeling before the altar was considered to be contrary to biblical teaching, now form the communion rail. (Figure 8). Every Sunday Anglican worshippers of Wimborne kneel before these humble benches with hands poised over the houseling cloths to receive Holy Communion.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

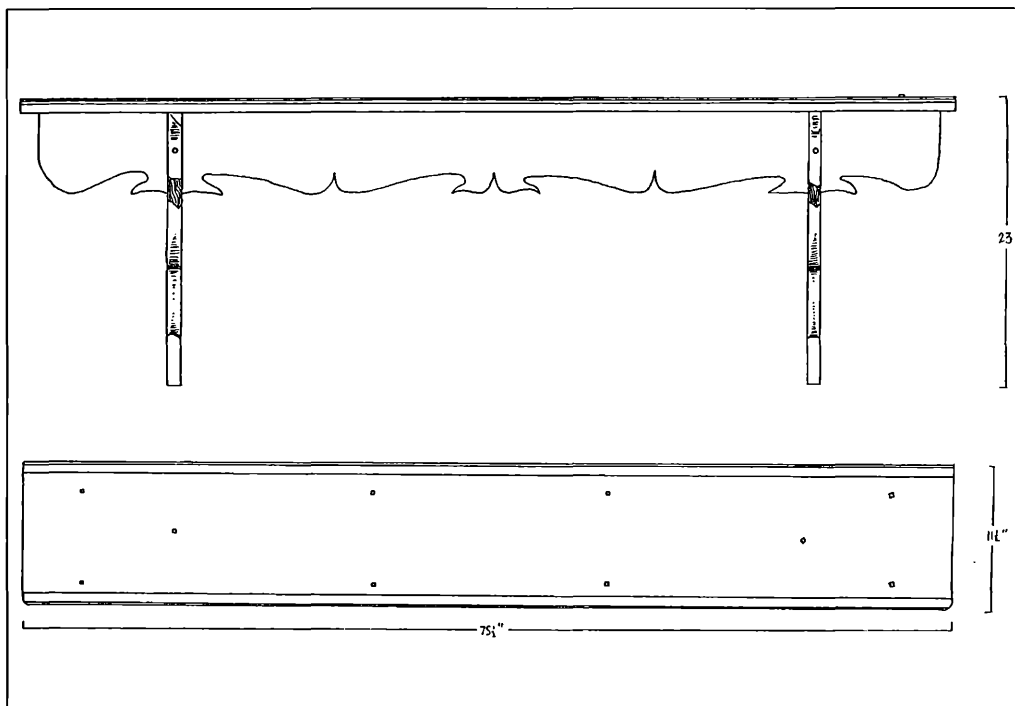
I would like to thank Kate Osborne, curator of the Priest's House Museum for all her help and Stephen Price, former curator, for his great kindness in allowing me access to his notes on the benches. Particular gratitude is due to Michael Legg, of Michael Legg Antiques, Dorchester, for his expert explanation of technical details which otherwise would have gone unrecorded, and not least for opening my eyes and making me look. I am grateful for the help given by the staff at Dorset Record Office and Wimborne Library. Any subsequent errors and omissions are, of course, entirely my own.

#### REFERENCES

1. Bismarck planes are short planes with a rounded blade and upstanding horn handle at the front that enables the joiner to use firmer pressure on the front of the plane to deal with rough-surfaced wood. *Christie's Collectors Guide to Woodworking Tools* p.93, cites these planes 'known as Bismarcks in recognition of their 'German origin' and made in the UK after 1850.
2. Hughes, Therle, *Old English Furniture*, The Collector's Library, 2nd edition, 1950, p.23.
3. Score, G.F., *Guide to Wimborne Minster its Monuments and Curiosities*, London, 1922 edition, p.32.
4. *Churchwardens Book of Accounts 1640-96*, Dorset Record Office PE/WM CW/1/42.
5. Mayo, Charles, *History of Wimborne Minster*, 1860, preface.
6. Whittock, N. *Views of the Exterior and Interior of the Collegiate Church of St. Cuthberga, Wimborne Minster, Dorset*, 1839. (2nd enlarged edition published by William Hoade, Wimborne, 1982).
7. *Churchwardens Book of Accounts 1581-1636*, D.R.O. PE/WM CW/1/41.
8. *Governors Orders*, D.R.O. PE/WM GN 3/84 to 3/87.



1. Wimborne Minster, Dorset, from the south east  
*Photo: Jeremy Marks*



2. The seventeenth century bench now in The Priest's House Museum, Wimborne, Dorset.

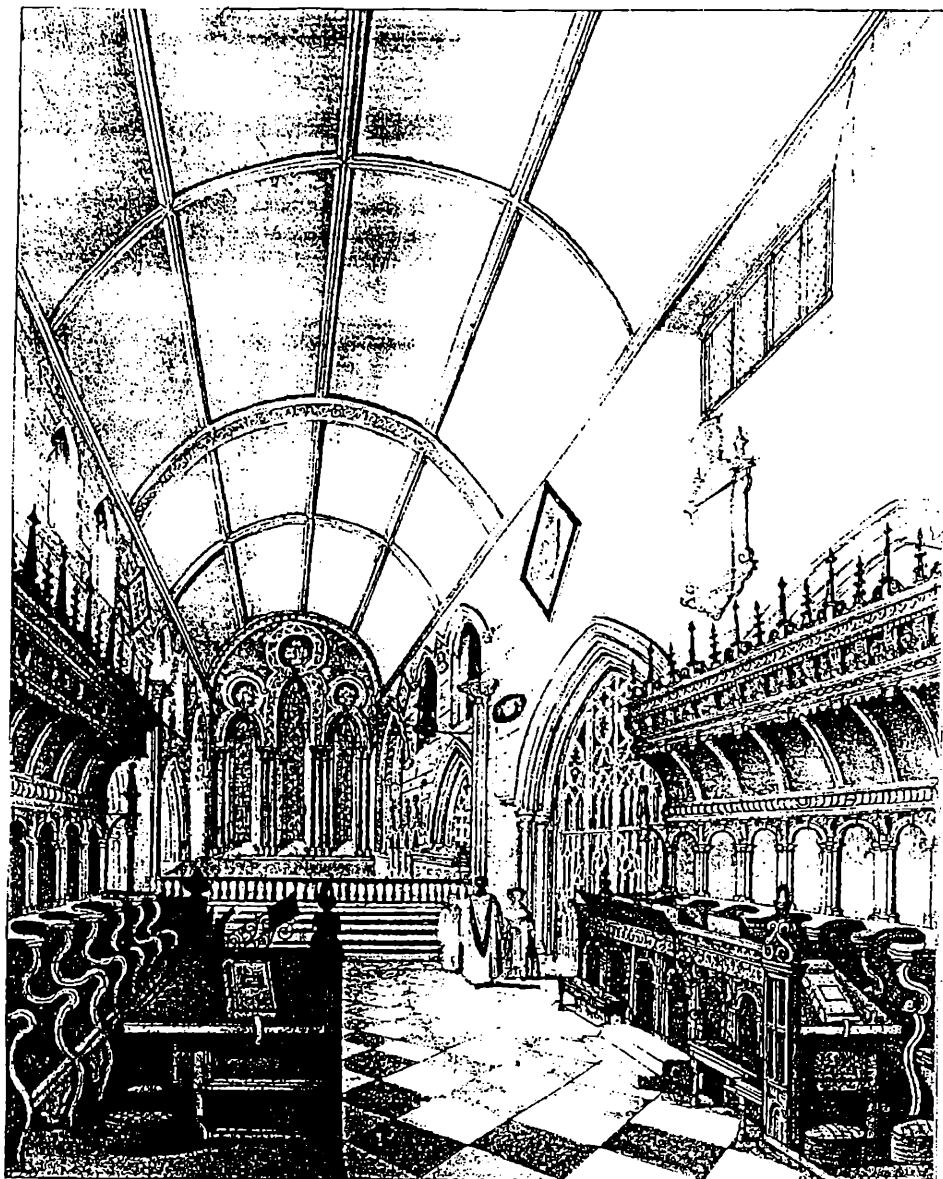
Measured drawing

*Courtesy Stephen Price*





3. The seventeenth century bench now in The Priest's House Museum, Wimborne, Dorset  
*Photo: S F James*



Drawn & Engraved by N. Whittock

Printed from Zinc by J. Griese, Nicholas Lane London

THE CHOIR — WIMBORNE MINSTER

4. The choir, Wimborne Minster, N. Whittock. engraving on wood, 1839

Illustrated in N. Whittock

*Exterior and Interior of the Collegiate Church of St. Cuthberga, Wimborne Minster*

# WIMBORNE MINSTER, DORSET.

TO ARCHITECTS, BUILDERS, CLERGYMEN, AND DEALERS IN  
OLD OAK AND ANTIQUE CARVING.

## TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION

BY

### WATERMAN AND HARGOOD

On the Premises situated behind the NEW HALL, in the WEST BOROUGH,  
On **TUESDAY the 9th. of November, 1858,** at One o'Clock,  
THE FOLLOWING VALUABLE

# CHURCH FITTINGS

*Lately removed from the Chancel of the Minster,*

Consisting of a quantity of Elizabethan, Decorated, Perpendicular, Oak and Deal Fittings, large & elaborate Doors,  
Door Heads, Screens, Windows, &c., in Oak and Deal, of which the following is a Catalogue.

#### LOT.

- 1 Three deal forms
- 2 Three ditto and kneeling stone
- 3 Twelve cruciform frames and flutings
- 4 Four pieces of deal gothic framing, 3ft. 6 by 1ft. 6 each and 5 inches thick
- 5 About 100 feet of run of deal egg and tongue moulding various and quite new
- 6 A quantity of carvings various
- 7 A large quantity of ditto
- 8 Ditto of remaining mouldings, architraves, cornices carved and plain in great variety
- 9 A piece of 1 in. oak framing with moulded rails, windows and curved top rail 10ft. by 2ft. 2 and jambs
- 10 A 1ft. deal 4-panel door 6ft. 6 by 3ft. 2 and jambs
- 11 A massive deal gothic window or doorway cornice, with battlements 12ft. long and 12 in. deep, with moulded brackets
- 12 A ditto as rule
- 13 Two ditto door jambs or pilasters, 11ft. high, 9 in. by 6 with battlement caps
- 14 Two ditto
- 15 Three ditto 10ft. high 12 by 3, and 2 pieces of 10 in. moulded cornice 12ft. long
- 16 A pair of fine, deal gothic doors glazed with ornamental glass in lead lights 9ft. 4 high by 4ft. wide each, from Somerset House
- 17 A pair of the panel door 9ft. 4 by 3ft. 6
- 18 A very handsome gothic window, on axle with 1ft. 6 in. high by 6ft. wide from Somerset House
- 19 Two fine pieces of deep deal gothic framing 8ft. high by 2ft. 10 each, with doorway in one piece
- 20 A the deal framed gallery front, painted in oak, 12ft. 6 by 2ft. 4
- 21 A quantity of gothic carvings and paper mache, into

#### LOT.

- 22 Few partitions with seat, 8 doors and 8 other pieces, and a piece of lin. deal framing 7ft. 6 by 1ft. 6
- 23 The broken up organ case in various parts (portions of which are richly carved) and well adapted for a variety of ornamental purposes
- 24 Six pieces of deal finely framed recently used in ceiling, all on axle each as follows—5ft. by 6ft. 6, 6ft. by 2ft. 6, 5ft. by 2ft. 6, 4ft. 6 by 2ft. 6, 2ft. 6 by 2ft. 6 and 2ft. 6 by 2ft. 6
- 25 Four pieces of 1ft. deal framing with gothic moulded brackets painted in dark oak, 7ft. 6 by 1ft. 6 each, and forming part of a screen and gallery into the property of Sir Wm. Haskins, Bart.
- 26 One piece of ditto with gothic headed door in centre 9ft. by 2ft. 3
- 27 Ditto gallery front with gothic heads to panels and paper mache mouldings in copies to ditto 11ft. by 2ft. 6
- 28 The massive gothic framing for supporting gallery, with door, jambs, and mouldings
- 29 A pair of 2 1/2 inch folding doors with fancy glazed lead lights in ditto 8ft. 6 high by 2ft. wide each
- 30 One ditto 7ft. 3 by 4ft. wide
- 31 A pair of ditto 8ft. 6 by 8ft. wide each all to match, and this completes the whole saved in lot 23
- 32 Three pieces of old oak framing set 6ft. of deal ditto
- 33 An Elizabethan pipist beautifully carved in oak
- 34 A modern oak trifling desk on fluted pillar
- 35 A ditto circular staircase on front of principle with scrolls and hand rails 9 ft. 6 in. steps
- 36 A quantity of oak pilasters, carved mouldings and scrollings
- 37 2ft. run of 15th. Elizabethan carved oak cornice and 8 ditto panels

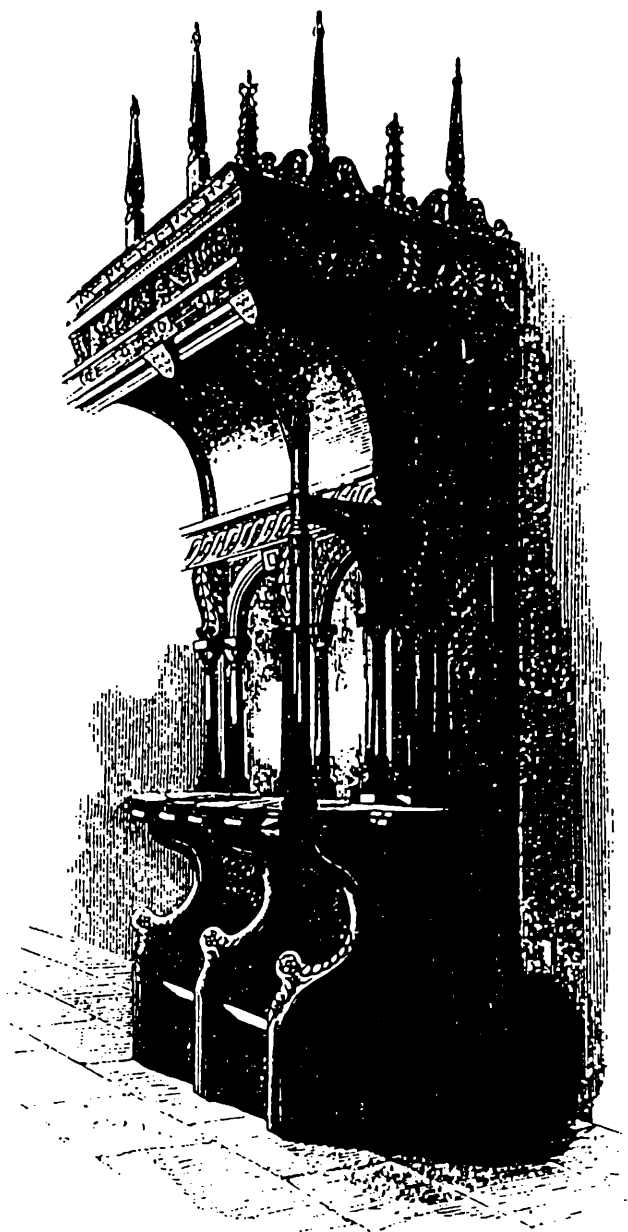
#### LOT.

- 38 A pair of 6ft. elliptic carved door heads
- 39 One ditto and 4 brackets each 9 in. in thickness
- 40 A pair of 7ft. ditto to match 12 in. thick
- 41 A pair of solid moulded oak door jambs and head, with battlement finish to ditto size of jambs 12 in. by 7 in
- 42 A pair of 1 in. gothic doors in the above open on top with drapery panels at bottom beautifully got up
- 43 A magnificent gothic head in date in the same style springing 7ft. in the point
- 44 A pair of gothic doors to match the last 10. 6 by 2ft. 6 each
- 45 A pair of ditto 7ft. 6 by 1ft. 10 each
- 46 A gothic head to match lot 43 springing 8ft. to point
- 47 A pair of dia. oak carved doors and jambs 7ft. 6 by 2ft. 6 each
- 48 Oak carved frame for communion table 6ft. by 2ft. 3
- 49 A quantity of carved oak canes or mouldings 3 in. by 2 in.
- 50 About 200 ft. run of carved mouldings of various lengths, sizes and patterns
- 51 14ft. ditto carved half moulding in 3 lengths
- 52 14ft. 14 in. of heavy oak canopy or cornice, with carved moulding, and moulded ribs projecting 2, 3, and rising the same, together with ornamental carving and scrolls, and 21 ft. 6 in. turned 3 in. columns
- 53 22ft. run of massive oak altar-railing with pair of folding doors
- 54 Five pieces of stout stained oak gothic pew front framing about 18ft. by 3ft. 6 with moulded capping
- 55 2ft. 6 in. piece of massive oak carved brackets, trusses, &c.
- 56 A 36 in. door cover for foot
- 57 Sixty pieces of oak moulding
- 58 A 9 in. oak chest cut from a solid block 18 in. by 16 in. and fitted with 6 locks and keys very antique
- 59 A 4ft. 6 in. barrel with iron axle and wheels

May be viewed at any time previous to the Sale between the hours of 10 and 4 by applying to the Auctioneer.

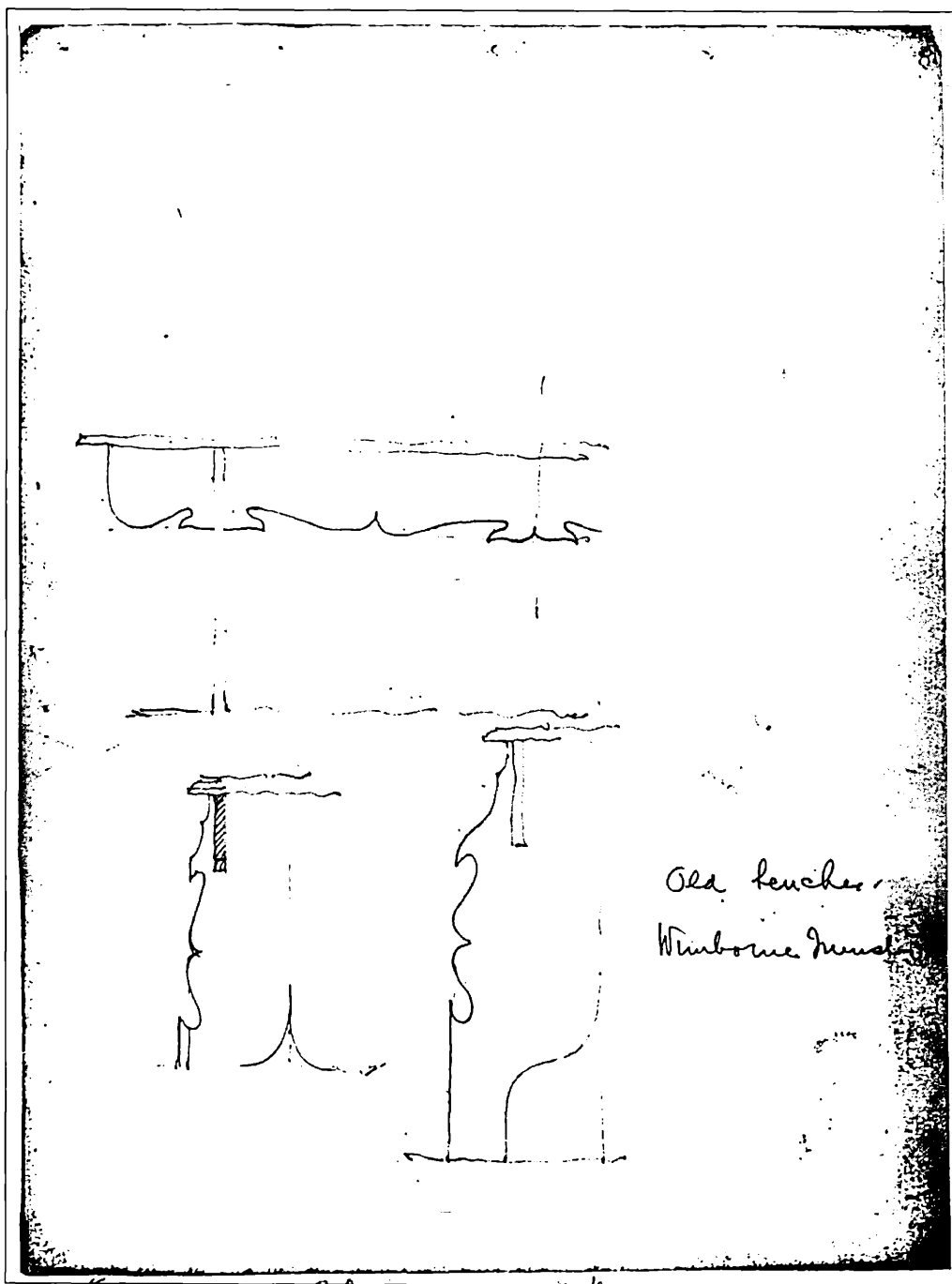
W. LOW, PRINTER, BOOKSELLER, &c. WIMBORNE.

5. Poster advertising the sale of woodwork from Wimborne Minster,  
9th November 1858  
The Priest's House Museum



PART OF THE OLD STALL-WORK.

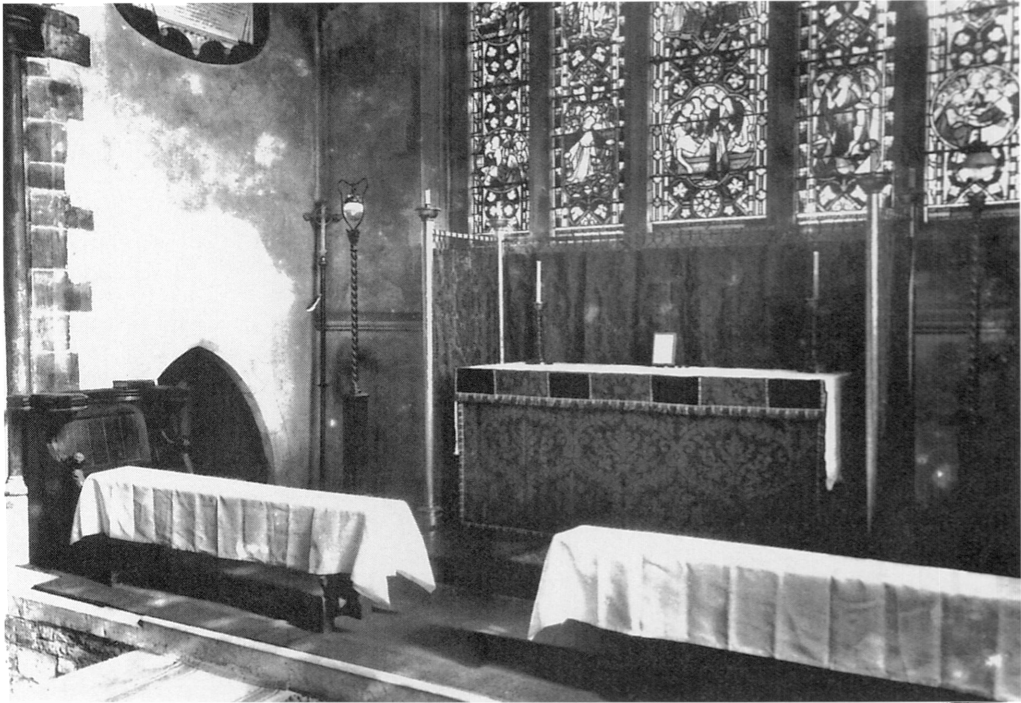
6. Part of the old stall work. Illustration from *History of Wimborne Minster*, 1860 by Charles Mayo, p.43



7. Sketch of the old benches, Wimborne Minster, 1895, by Charles Rennie Mackintosh  
*Courtesy Mackintosh Collection, Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow*



8. The benches arranged as a Communion rail  
*With kind permission of the Revd. David Price, Wimborne Minster*  
*Photo: Tony Giles*



9. The benches covered with Houseling or Eucharistic cloths in preparation for Communion  
*Photo: S F James*