

SALISBURY AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

13th September 2000

On another of Gabriel Olive's excellent and carefully-planned Wiltshire peregrinations, we met at Wren Hall in the Cathedral Close, an early 18th century brick building with no known evidence of Wren's involvement. The curator Christopher Compton gave a talk about this charming backwater which had been the Choir School from 1715 until

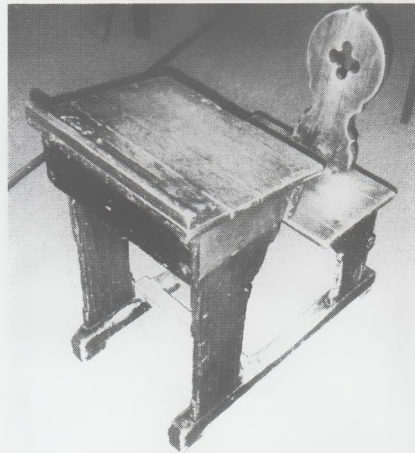


Fig. 5 Pupil's desk

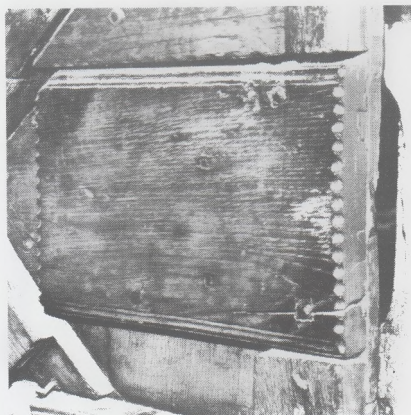


Fig. 6 Detail of one of the lock casements

The octagonal Muniment Room with its tiled floor retains an oak cupboard (fig. 7) for scrolls, thought to date from 1329 but maybe nearer to 1500. Most of the other 13th and 14th century iron-bound chests of a variety of types were distributed round the Cathedral in 1970.

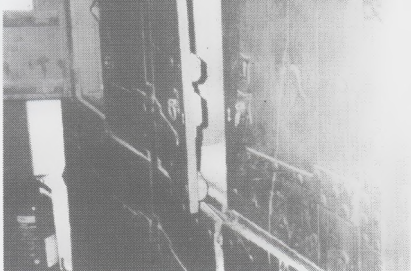


Fig. 7 Detail of oak muniment cupboard at Salisbury Cathedral

1947. The panelled schoolroom still contains the oak master's desk on a raised dais (with a seat below it, possibly for a dunce!), the monitor's desk at the other end, a pupil's desk (fig. 5) and two late 17th century oak forms.

In the Cathedral we were most skilfully guided by the Head Verger Chris Crooks to parts not normally seen by the public, including the Treasury and the Muniment Room up a narrow staircase. Both these rooms displayed a wealth of security precautions, including original 13th century double doors which lock from both inside and out; another with a central cranked iron bolt, and barred and shuttered windows.

We looked closely at a number of these, inside and out, including one (fig. 8) with three locks and four original padlocks which still operated as if they were new (fig. 9). This was also fitted with two rings at either end for carrying

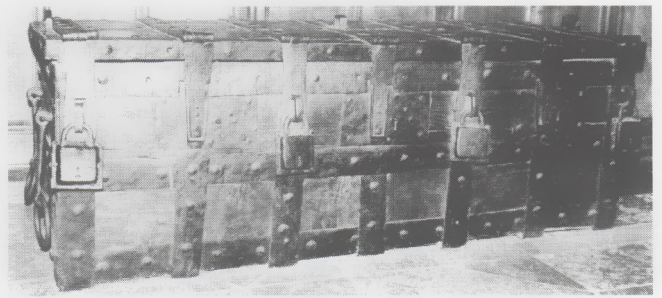


Fig. 8 A 13th century iron bound chest

on poles and could have been made for the move from Old Sarum in the 1250s. Another large six-board chest on buttressed ends had a divided top with a locking iron band



Fig. 9 Detail of one of the padlocks used on fig. 8

across the join and surface-set locks, while a clamped chest on bracket feet, which originally probably incorporated pillars, had had its lid turned over when it had become damaged.

We moved on to the choir stalls with their 13th century seats, some late 17th century work by the local master joiner Alexander Fort (much employed by Wren) Victorian restoration by G. G. Scott and canopies of 1911, and then to an intriguing Dean's desk with elaborate carving of the late 17th century donor's rebus of Brideoak (fig. 10). There was general agreement that the desk had been reconstructed and redated 1672. Finally, at the west end

we opened the enormous semi-circular Cope Chest, one of only two of this form in England, possibly commissioned in 1245. The dovetailed ties inside the lid were very early examples and the mismatched legs fascinating. Nearby stood what is thought to be the earliest working turret clock in England, supposedly of 1386, although a payment made in 1529/30 may indicate a more likely date.

Keeping scrupulously to time, we adjourned to lunch, pausing at the 13th century, tomb of William Longspee, half-brother of King John, with its rare arcaded wooden base and original colouring, a solid oak pew with raked back - said to be part of the first (18th century) nave seating - and a problematical and clearly altered pierced Gothic circular table, painted in the 19th century and now in the Chapter House.

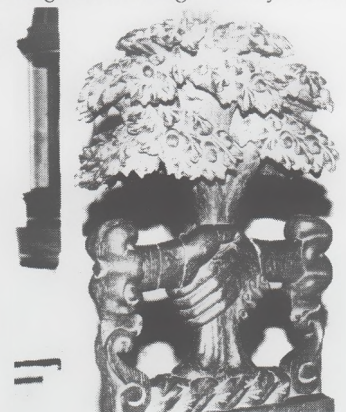


Fig. 10 Carved end from the Dean's stall dated 1672 & forming a rebus on the name Brideoak

Christopher Claxton Stevens