

St. Nicholas, Dersingham, Norfolk: the Dersingham Chest

Thursday morning, 23 July

Those members fortunate enough to visit the church of St. Nicholas, Dersingham as a pre-conference visit, were rewarded with the opportunity to examine this remarkable 14th century piece. The chest, which measures 6ft 7in x 2ft 4in (2m x 0.7m) is believed to be the one mentioned in the inventory of church ornaments in 1360.

The Dawson-Turner collection at the British Museum holds a drawing made by J.S. Cotman in 1838 before half of the lid was lost. His drawing indicated what might have been the initials of the vicar and churchwardens of the time, RSA and RA. Richard Winklewood (de Wicklewood), possibly the R, was vicar of Dersingham from 1344 to 1349. Around the top surface of the lid is the inscription *Jesus Nazarenus Crucifixus Rex Judaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, King of the Jews). With the aid of this drawing a new half-lid was made in 1984 by Kenneth Bowers, and features his trade mark depicting an acorn and leaves in the lower right-hand corner.

The front panels contain large carvings of the four evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John depicted as man, the lion, the ox and the eagle. Around the border are further carvings of birds and foliage. The tracery designs on the stiles are recognisable as decorated gothic period work.

Much discussion concerned the hinges and whether they were original or a century or two later; or had the lid originally been pin hinged? Difficulty in deciding on this and other aspects rested upon the fact that the chest had more recently been lined in modern timber for storage purposes. There was evidence of inserted timber of possibly 18th or 19th century date around the hinge areas. Clearly three locks had once been in use, but discussion centred on whether there had originally been just one with others added at a later date.

The faint remains of polychromy on the stunning carved front was of particular interest, with the use of red and blue being evident.

Mention of the 14th century chest at York Minster and others (Eames, *Furniture History XIII*, 1977 plate 36, p145-8) seems appropriate, as in each the stiles are carved in compartments although the subject matter differs. Some similarity can be seen with the chest at York Minster in the construction of the ends which, although remade in the York example, are considered to follow the original design.

This remarkable survival was, for some of us, the most interesting piece of furniture to be seen during the conference and we were immensely grateful for the opportunity to study it.

Valentine Butler

