

Cartmel Priory

Saturday afternoon, 3 October

On a beautiful Lakeland afternoon Bob Johnson introduced us to Cartmel Priory, first with a quick-fire question and answer session as to why the priory church of St Mary and St Michael had been built on that particular spot. We learnt that that it had been founded by William Marshall in about 1189 and was initially inhabited by a community of 13 monks who came from Bradenstoke Priory in Wiltshire. Work had begun on the church, constructed from stone quarried locally, and the domestic buildings which had projected out of the south transept. However, in the mid-14th century the southern end of the domestic range collapsed, probably due to marshy underlying ground, and was rebuilt on the northern side. The unsuitability of the ground was apparently recognised during the building of the priory as the tower was constructed in two sections, the upper section being built diagonally on top of the first in order to stop it from collapsing.

One of the highlights of the visit was undoubtedly the misericords and screen in the choir, where the monks would have met nine times in every 24 hours for the offices and daily Mass. Prayers would have been said standing, but crutches would have originally been provided for the infirm and, later, seats which tipped up to reveal a small projecting shelf giving support to those who could not stand. These 'misericords', from the Latin *miseriordia* meaning 'mercy', number 26 at Cartmel Priory and date from c.1450. In general, they gave great scope to medieval carvers and we saw a wide variety of subjects including arabesque designs, the pelican in its piety, an eagle in flight, various leaf designs and clawed demons. Particular noteworthy examples were the ape holding a

urine bottle, perhaps a scandalous comment on the medical profession, a mysterious carving of a unicorn with its horn embedded in a tree on the sub-prior's stall (maybe an obscure reference to baptism) and a large double rose with leaves, possibly the rose of Lancaster, reflecting that this part of Cumbria was in Lancashire until 1974.

Discussion took place as to whether there may have been two carvers at work, one on each side of the choir.

Apparently, the 15th century choir stalls would have had a screen behind, with canopies above to protect the monks from the down-draughts of a large unheated church; only the sockets remain at the back of the stalls for the canopies and it is likely that they were damaged at the dissolution of 1536-37 when it was known that the roof was taken down for its lead and the choir left open to the elements.

The condition of the surviving pew ends provoked great interest and debate among members, and various suggestions were made as to the agency responsible for their distressed state. Bob Johnson informed us that it was commonly asserted locally that the weathered, slanting areas of wood show where the stalls were exposed above the fallen rubble. This led to an animated discussion during which it was even suggested that the choir may have been used to pen animals post-dissolution and that the damage to the pew ends was caused by grazing.

The screen that can be seen in Cartmel Priory today was erected between 1618 and 1622, on the initiative of George Preston of Holker

Very worn poppy head at Cartmel Priory



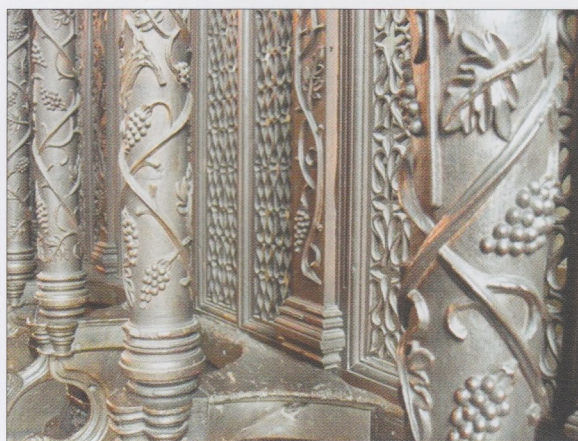
Part of the screen at Cartmel Priory with misericords in the background



Worn bench end at Cartmel Priory



Vine carving above the choir stalls at Cartmel Priory



Hall, who took a great interest in the priory and was responsible for a major programme of repair as well as the introduction of new woodwork. In his very useful guides, Canon Eric Rothwell suggests there is evidence that the screen was constructed with reused wood from earlier priory fittings; the pillars were fashioned from square sectioned timbers and some show at their base that they were too thin to be properly rounded.¹ Some also have holes in them at an angle to the upright – dowel holes in former roof timbers? He also points out that the panelling on the nave side of the screen has been cut to fit and appears to be of a different wood, containing some interesting non-ecclesiastical carving including the coat-of-arms of George

Preston himself. This led him to the conclusion that this section is likely to have come from Holker Hall.

The carving of the screen is traditionally ascribed to Flemish craftsmen due to its exceptional quality. It consists of panels in pairs with a pierced design in each pair, and no two panels are alike. The panels at the west of the chancel were made so that they could be opened and still retain their original wrought iron hinges. Above the chancel doors are two panels depicting three dragons and the text: *Enter into his gates with prayse/ And into his courts with love/ Be thankful unto Him/ and speak good of His name.* On the inner side of the doors are the words *I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, then/To dwell in the Tabernacles of wickednesse.* The pediment is supported on columns decorated with twisting vine leaves and bunches of grapes rising from the arms of the stalls as in medieval



The 17th century carved and pierced screen at Cartmel Priory

same craftsmen as at York), the parish chest with its ironwork consisting of big square nail heads and jointing, and an early font and lid dated 1640, later painted in the estate colours. A visit to the priory gatehouse with Dai Hunt was an added bonus.

Members were invited to climb the tower onto the roof and further on up into the bell tower where Dai Hunt showed us the old timber bell frame dating from 1661 or possibly earlier. This had been replaced in 1988 by a steel and cast iron frame to mark 800 years since the founding of the priory, and four new bells had been cast by the Royal Eijsbouts Bell Foundry at Asten in the Netherlands. Bells dating from 1661, 1726 and 1729 were retained and hung in the new frame so that they could still be rung, forming an 'old peal' of six with the two trebles alongside the new peal. The old 1661 tenor is apparently still used for tolling and clock chiming. We were lucky to have a demonstration of this and a Victorian clock, which completed a thoroughly enjoyable visit.

Vanessa Clarke



Members on the roof of Cartmel Priory

¹ Rothwell, E, *The Misericords and Screen in Cartmel Priory*, RJL Smith and Associates, Much Wenlock, 1997 and Rothwell, E, *The Priory Church of St Mary and St Michael*, RJL Smith and Associates, Much Wenlock, 2000.