

The Art of the Woodcarver

A loan exhibition at Marwood House, Honiton, Devon,
13 October 2013

Roderick and Valentine Butler kindly remounted a loan exhibition of woodcarvings at Marwood House. They had previously assembled it from a number of sources for Honiton Antiques week in November 2012. The idea was to complement and lead on from the Christopher Gilbert lecture by John Allan on Breton woodworkers and visits to notable mid-Devon churches to see carved woodwork that had taken place the previous day.

A primary part of the exhibition was the display of well over one hundred fragments on seven boards from the well-known ecclesiastical restoration firm of Herbert Read, which closed in 2003–04. Herbert Read started his own business in Exeter, the Saint Sidwell's Art Works, in 1892, having previously been manager at the 'Ecclesiastical Art Works', Exeter, whose owner Harry Hems had started that business in 1866. Herbert Read was succeeded by his son, and then followed by his grandson and so the firm continued throughout the 20th century and was responsible for much high-class church restoration work in Devon and beyond.

This collection served as templates for carving replica parts used in restoration work. They represented a large variety of motifs found in medieval church screens and elsewhere in the church. Many retain their polychrome and date from the 15th century.

Also from the workshop are pieces of late 19th- and early 20th-century copy-carving which have never been installed; it was interesting to compare these with the original work. Perhaps the most intriguing group of fragments came wrapped in newspaper dated 1940. Now assembled, they depict a dragon inhabiting fruiting vines. The previous day we had seen another dragon by a different carver at Sampford Courtenay church, set up high at wall-plate level in the chancel.

Four mangle boards were mounted as a group. They were all particularly well-carved, probably intended for display, and perhaps an expression of status. Notable were a finely carved polychrome board, the uppermost scene depicting the Resurrection with, below, a cartouche dated 1601. Two angels, Philosophy and Truth were depicted below the arms of the Dutch Republic (1581 to 1795); at the base, a trumpeting angel accompanied by an eagle, a symbol of Christ's Ascension. Another mangle board possibly from Friesland and dated 1740 had roundels portraying justice, commerce and sea power and therefore prosperity.

Two miniature scenes portrayed a village dyke and a village square in astonishing detail, typical of the intricate

carvings of Cornelis Bavelaar, a sculptor of wood in miniature. He was born in Leiden in 1785, and worked there until his death in 1835. His work includes scenes in and around Leiden, room interiors and inn scenes, all populated, giving an air of reality.

An eye-catching cheese press or follower in elm, probably c. 1837 celebrating the coronation of Queen Victoria was exhibited. Numerous examples of Victorian cheese followers with the Royal Coat of Arms are known, often with initials, which are probably those of the carver or owner, in this case, R. H. Two of the earliest examples recorded are dated 1603 and 1618. Another early example can be seen in Strangers Hall, Norwich. This was a good example of 'intaglio' carving, the skilled craft of carving in reverse.

A deeply carved oak 17th-century board depicted a little owl. Associated with Minerva, daughter of Jupiter, the owl appears on the reverse of Greek coins featuring Minerva. It became a symbol of wisdom and can sometimes be found depicted perched on a pile of books. A 16th-century carving in oak with polychrome showed a woodwose or wild man. Finely carved, his hairy body showing through at the knees and elbows, it bore the initials I W, perhaps a rebus for the name Wildman. The legend of the hairy wild man that flourished in the mountainous regions of present-day Germany and Switzerland was known throughout medieval Europe. Depictions of wild men can be found in stained glass, silver, tapestry, manuscripts, carved stone and other media. Another example was seen on a bench end at Sampford Courtenay the previous day.

A Jester misericord, now lacking both supporters, bore an unmistakable resemblance to a group in the Victoria & Albert Museum. These bear a close similarity to those in the church of St Peter, Leuven, east of Brussels, which were carved between 1438 and 1441 by Claes de Bruyn. A clear similarity between this misericord and those in the Victoria & Albert Museum, both in the detail of the facial features, and the cut, texture and colour of the oak, together with the shape of the seat, make a compelling case for attributing this misericord to Claes de Bruyn. English misericords depicting jesters in similar costume are recorded at Beverley, Rotherham and Boston.

A superbly carved oak panel of the Dartmouth Arms, probably dating to the 16th century, depicted the Dartmouth Corporation seal as it is shown on the Royal Charter granted by Edward III to the town in 1341; the robed and crowned king, presumably Edward III, holding an orb and sceptre and flanked by lions sitting in a typical merchant 'cog' of the 14th century. The cog first appeared in the 10th century and was widely used for trade from the 12th century onwards and generally constructed of Baltic oak. Decks appeared in 13th century, with bow and stern



Carved oak coat of arms for the city of Dartmouth, Devon

castles added later for defence against pirates. This carving was possibly originally part of fixed panelling in a merchant's house or council chamber.

An oak and polychrome carving *circa* 1480–1500 of The Annunciation, probably from NW Europe, represented one of the most popular biblical stories. The Virgin, Archangel Gabriel with wings neatly folded to fit, and the lilies set the scene. Of added interest were the two pieces of medieval furniture; the table with the table-carpet, and book-desk on the left, both with linenfold panels. Probably no book desks of this form survive, but examples are known from illustrated manuscripts and are recorded in early inventories.

An oak and polychrome plank and muntin section of pew front from St Mary the Virgin, Bishops Lydeard probably early 16th century, was unusual for two reasons. First, it shared with just a few other Somerset churches, 'background colour' in the fixed woodwork. While some observers consider this comparatively modern, others believe it to be early or original. The second and specific reason for its inclusion in this display was the mark near the base that must surely be the carver's or a carpenter's mark. Few instances of carvers or joiners' marks appear to be recorded. The Ludlow misericords, the Exeter Cathedral misericords, the bench ends at Bideford in north Devon and Padstow in north Cornwall are among the few. To the left of this mark are a series of chisel assembly marks.

These are common and frequently found on roof timbers and studwork in buildings.

A pair of oak panels, *c.* 1550, carved with Romaine heads, were fanciful and whimsically stylized, probably influenced by the influx of Italian craftsmen to England, who had been encouraged by Henry VIII earlier in the century.

Inscribed bellows in birch and ash with traces of polychrome, dated 1692 were notable for the ditty they bore rather than the quality of the carving: DO YOY YOYR PART AS WELL AS I AND YOVL HAVE FIER BY AND BY.

Finally, of very local interest was a rare, if not unique, carved door catch, almost certainly an original fitting in Marwood House, built by Dr Marwood between 1616 and 1619. Stuffed inside was a crumpled piece of paper, a doctor's list of drugs, dated 1658, probably in Dr Thomas Marwood's hand.

Space precludes further explanation of the green men, roof bosses, knitting sheaths and other artefacts in the exhibition; suffice to say they were all excellent examples of the carver's art. This was a scholarly and truly memorable exhibition for all our members who were able to visit. It was a great tribute to the hard work and research that Roderick and Valentine had undertaken. Our very grateful thanks to you both for your warm welcome, infectious enthusiasm and generous hospitality.

David Hannah