

CHESTER CATHEDRAL, Saturday 5th April 2003

We were met at the Cathedral by Nick Fry, the Visitor Officer for the Cathedral, to whom we owe a vote of thanks for a most interesting, if all too brief, visit. He took us straight to the Choir to see the choir stalls and the misericords and gave an outline of the history of the Cathedral, stressing the continuity at the dissolution of the monasteries when the church of the Benedictine Abbey became the Cathedral for the new diocese, the Abbot became bishop and 6 of the monks became canons. The choir stalls have been the subject of much alteration, having been moved from their original position under the tower during the 17th century, returned to the original position during restoration work of the 1830s and then moved to their current position, to the east of the crossing, during Sir Gilbert Scott's major restoration of the Cathedral between 1868-76.

Christa Grossinger gives a detailed account of the stalls and misericords in 'Chester Cathedral Misericords: Iconography and Sources' in *Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture at Chester*, The British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions XXII, 2000. The surviving diary of the Sir Gilbert Scott's clerk of works, James Frater, records much of the 'restoration' work carried out to the choir stalls at this time by the firm of Messrs Thompson of Peterborough. The stalls were dismantled and all paint and varnish removed; it is recorded that the canopy had several coats of paint, all removed. Any work found to be in deal was replaced in oak; 35 of the large topmost finials were missing or had been replaced in deal and the canopies at the west end were all renewed. It would be interesting to know the date of the work in deal. The standards that originally supported the canopies were cut away and replaced with carved angels on the pendants. The original positions were ignored when the stalls were re-erected, with the result that the carved corbels on the choir stalls are no longer in sequence, for

example two of the three Magi have been left with no one to adore. It has been suggested some of the corbels may represent characters in the Chester mystery plays. Five of the original 48 misericords were replaced during this work as their subject matter was considered indecent; these replacements were carved by R. Bridgeman of Lichfield, then working for Thompson's, (The Resurrection), and the Altrincham carver G.F. Armitage (three of Aesop's fables and one of St George fighting the dragon, the latter not carved until 1919).

Despite these alterations, the very fine choir stalls and misericords are important as they demonstrate a connection with the stalls and misericords at Lincoln Cathedral, and also with the parish church at Nantwich. The stalls at Lincoln, thought to be by William and Hugh Hurland, have been dated c 1377. Sixteen of the central scenes on the misericords at Chester are based on designs at Lincoln, as are some of the supporters. Six of these patterns also appear at Nantwich, together with designs that appear at Chester but not at Lincoln. Lincoln and Chester are thought to be close in style and iconography, Nantwich not being as close in style. By comparison with Lincoln, the Chester stalls and misericords have been dated c 1380. Much of the dating evidence seems to be based on the costumes depicted. The stalls at Lincoln are also related to those at St Katherine, London, a Royal foundation, and it may be that they are all part of a metropolitan tradition; it is possible that the King's master carver, William Newhall, was in Chester between 1377-1411. Christa Grossinger suggests that, while Lincoln patterns were used at Chester, possibly only one of the carvers worked at both Lincoln and Chester, and that the Nantwich series, thought to date c1400, are the work of a more provincial group of carvers following the same designs.

We asked Nick Fry if it would be possible to see the late 13th century oak armoire in the Chapter House, and we are very grateful he was able to arrange this. The opportunity to look closely at this important article was a highlight of our visit; it would certainly repay a more detailed examination and much more time. The armoire is illustrated in the *'Dictionary of English Furniture'*, Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards, 1924, Vol I, p4, fig 1 and *'Medieval Furniture'*, Penelope Eames, Furniture History Society, 1977, pl 27, catalogue no. 22, pp 44-6.

The framing of the armoire and the alternate billet style cornice seem to be relatively recent, although the armoire appears in this form in the 1924 illustration in the *Dictionary*. The four doors, mounted with wrought iron scrollwork, are medieval, thought to date from the late 13th century. The wrought iron scrollwork is stylistically similar to the documented wrought iron screen on Queen Eleanor's tomb in Westminster Abbey, made by Thomas de Leghtone from Leighton Buzzard in 1294. It is possible that the doors originally fronted stone recesses, perhaps in a muniment room or treasury, and it may even be that they were assembled in their present form during Sir Gilbert Scott's programme of

restoration. It is possible some information on this may survive in the extensive documentation relating to this period, much of which is now in the Cheshire Record Office (CRO,EDD 3913/22).

The sides of the armoire are formed of riven oak boards, jointed up to width with a type of tongue and groove joint, and mounted with a wrought iron square pattern grille – its simple design suggesting security rather than decoration. The now-exposed plough groove at the back of the sides indicates these series of boards may have been wider at some time than they are now. A more detailed examination of this armoire may help to solve some of the problems it poses, nevertheless it was a fascinating visit.

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