

The final talk was by Hugh Harrison, on **Church Woodwork and Joinery**. Hugh modestly introduced himself as a 'jobbing carpenter' but his experience and knowledge gave us insights into the complexities of construction that less practised eyes would simply overlook. He revealed jointing techniques that sometimes defied what we think of today as good joinery practice, and left us marvelling at the skill and ingenuity of those medieval craftsmen who truly understood the material in which they worked.

His talk began by outlining his early career with Herbert Read of Exeter back in the 1970s. This old established firm of ecclesiastical joiners and carvers, founded in 1888, still employed craftsmen whose skill and understanding was equal to those medieval carpenters and joiners.

He examined joinery construction more or less chronologically, beginning with the basic laminated techniques of the 11th and 12th centuries, examples of which are almost entirely confined to doors. The construction was simple yet sophisticated in understanding the long-term requirements of a door, which are that it should remain flat and rectilinear. Vertical boards with rebated edges were held together with strap hinges spanning the width of the door on the front and ledges spanning the width of the door on the back. These were attached with nails driven from the front, through roves shaped to the ledges on the back, which were then cut off and flattened like rivets (Staplehurst and Hadstock). This was quickly modified with the even better system of counter rebates approximately a foot (30cm) from the top and bottom edges of the door (Bristol Cathedral and Kempsey, Gloucestershire). The external faces were often decorated with scrolling wrought ironwork such as that found on the door of the church at Staplehurst (c.1050), or with applied wood tracery to the outside and a false framed construction on the inner face, with ledges and vertical fascia pieces applied between to give the impression of multi-framed construction. An example of this three-skinned form can be found at the church of St. Nicholas at King's Lynn (c.1420).

Hugh peppered his talk with acute observations of joint

detailing or a medieval joiner's solution to a problem. He shared some of his insights into the comparatively recent restoration of the nave ceiling at Peterborough Cathedral. This, the largest painted wooden ceiling in England, dated around 1230, is still as tight a construction now as it was when made over 800 years ago; it is Hugh's contention that this is the first example of the use of Baltic oak. The transept ceilings, built 60 years earlier to a similar design, still used local English oak. This staple of fine English joinery and cabinetry, first traded by Hanseatic League merchants and later by the Dutch right through to the late 19th century, is recognisable everywhere.

With the introduction of frame and panel construction, Hugh took us through the evolutionary process from mason's mitre to fully scribed junctions and convinced us of the medieval joiner's desire to let appearance dictate technique. His example of the half-scribed, half mason's mitre on the rood screen mullions at Mere in Wiltshire illustrated his point perfectly; and it was here that he raised the question of Flemish joinery influence.

Hugh stressed the need for accurate recording before work or removal and the importance of very detailed drawings as essential conservation tools. The *pièces de résistance* of his lecture were his own drawings of the ingenious joinery of the capping pieces to the choir stalls at Amiens. Where these joints could not be hidden to the top they were made decorative, with serpentine interlocking curves; below, hidden from view, were the crisp, functional, lock-tight dovetails that held everything in place; this complex jointing surely represents the apogee of the joiner's art.

Colin Piper