

# Westminster Abbey

28 November 2008

A visit to Westminster Abbey any day is inspirational, but this RFS visit was quite exceptional. Polly and Michael Legg had arranged access to parts not normally accessible to the public: the library and muniment room (upstairs overlooking the choir). Our guide around the library was Dr. Tony Trowles and, in the muniment room, Dr. Richard Mortimer and Michael Legg.

The library, beneath a hammer-beam roof (new in 1450 after a fire), has a dozen rows of projecting bookcases on each side of a central pathway. These date to 1623 when the then dean, Dr John Williams, provided a benefaction for them and £2,000 for books. The library, which had been dispersed in 1540 at the dissolution of the Abbey, was by the end of the 17th century an important public chained library. The chains were removed during the 18th century and now, after a period of neglect in the 19th century, the library is again a fascinating place for visitors.

The muniment room has an extraordinary group of three boarded 13th century chests and an armoire, all standing on a 13th century tiled pavement. In fact the felling date range for one chest was given as 1167-1199 in a recent dendrochronology test report (2005/6). One of the chests is a colossal 4 metres long by 1.2 metres deep with a double-hinged lid. The massive cupboard known as the Richard II armoire (1377-1393) is made of Baltic oak and has a row of three upper doors and three lower doors, each with detailed strap hinges. Michael Legg talked us through them, which was a real treat. Afterwards we were shown a further two chests and a cope chest (all pre-dating 1400) in the ground floor Pyx Chamber. After a pleasant lunch across the road in Central Hall, we reconvened for a cathedral tour with James the Verger, which took in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the royal tombs of Edward the Confessor, Henry V, Queen Mary and Elizabeth I (to name but a few), Poets' Corner and of course the Coronation Chair. Our thanks go to Michael and Polly Legg, Dr Tony Trowles, Dr Richard Mortimer and James the Verger for a most enjoyable day.

*Simon Green*