

PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL

As arranged with Mr. Al n Cave,

I visited Peterborough on June 28th this year with Dr. Pamela Tudor-Craig and spent several hours examining the Cathedral from the triforium. It was an enlightening experience, and I must repeat what has been said countless times before that the ceiling of the Cathedral is unique. It is a marvellous example of English mediæval art.

I was greatly assisted by the Dean who accompanied us. We worked our way down each side at triforium level from where we were able to examine each subject carefully, the paintings now being properly lit. We could see where here and there new pieces of timber had been inserted, particularly at the east end of the ceiling probably because of damage when the tower was repaired. It was here that we found the worst of the repainting.

The scheme as a whole has certainly suffered considerably from amateur repainting. This was carried out in the 16th century and again in 1834. The repainting was tackled in several ways. Sometimes only the background was repainted in a darker colour in order to make the subject matter show up more clearly. Where the heads had been repainted, the restorer's unskilled work was obvious - the cheeks were pink and the eyes heavily outlined. Where outlines were strengthened the restorer was often completely lost, in fact on one panel a foot was in the wrong place.

According to Archaeologia 37, 1938, "The first repainting was done about 1740 -1750." In 1773 the Bishop of Peterborough wisely sent for the man who had carried out the work and questioned him. "The restorer told him that they always repainted in oil, that he had found several of the figures encrusted in dirt but on sponging them they became clear and bright, and he therefore concluded the last coat was oil. He said he only retraced the figures, except in the third and fourth compartments from the west door where the old figure peeled off and he endeavoured to imitate the style of the other paintings. The second repainting took place prior to 1835, when ~~Mr. Orkney~~ Charles Layton for the repainting of the Ceiling."
 £30 was paid to

Mr. Cave thought the painting was in distemper and that it was remarkable how little it had essentially destroyed the character of style of the original work. In his view, "In varying degrees the unmistakable features (were) present." (CJP Cave and Tancred Borenius)

I agree in substance with this and think that apart from the east end of the ceiling where it is clearly mostly new work, the painting has only been touched up here and there and small areas repainted. The repainting is so bad that it is easy to identify.

The paint scheme originally covered both nave and transept, but now only the former painting remains. This appears to be higher than the nave walls, the sloping side panels having been repainted I would have thought in the 17th century. The subject matter is framed in diamond shaped panels, the central line of 20 panels being about 22' by 10', all with figure paintings. The inner diamonds are about 7½' by 3½' in size and the panels are elaborately ornamented with

with many kinds of pattern. Every other panel is ornamented with scroll work and the rest with figures. The subjects cover a vast range, with allegorical figures, beasts, grotesques, kings, bishops and abbots. The Agnus Dei, St. Peter and St. Paul are also featured.

Centre Panels

1. Four lions passant. (Two boards renewed and repainted in the area of the lions' legs.)
2. A head of Janus. (Much repair and repainting, but the design is original.)
3. A beast bearing a banner and possibly intended to symbolise death.
4. Agnus Dei with chalice into which blood pours from wound in lamb's breast.
5. St. Peter bearing the keys. (Some repainting on face and drapery.)
6. Monkey riding face to tail on a running goat and holding an owl.
7. St. Paul holding the sword in his right hand and a book in his left. (Some repainting. Timber on right hand side appears to be new. Left foot of figure badly drawn and different from right foot.)
8. A king holding a sceptre and (apparently) a cup, possibly intended to represent St. Edward, King and Martyr.
9. An archbishop. (Some repainting.)
10. A king. (Repainting of head.)
11. An archbishop. (Partly reconstructed.)
12. A king.
13. A bishop.
14. A king.
15. A bishop.
16. A king.
17. A bishop.
18. A king.
19. An eagle.
20. Figure in a chariot.

North Side Panels

1. A head, with foliage issuing from mouth.
3. A monster.

5. A woman playing a violin-type instrument.
7. A figure playing a psaltery.
9. An angel seated on rainbow.
11. A woman and child.
12. Scroll pattern.
13. Figure playing organistrum.
15. Figure holding set-square and compasses.
17. Seated figure on a bench, and holding up an object which is probably a crook.
19. A rampant lion.

South Side Panels

1. A beast's head with trefoil foliage springing from it.
2. A beast resembling a wyvern.
5. An ass standing on its hind legs and holding a harp in its forelegs.
7. A figure playing symphany.
9. A figure playing a stringed instrument like a violin.
11. A seated figure holding the tables of the Law in the left hand.
13. A seated figure, blessing, and a small figure in front holding what appears to be a crocketed finial.
15. A figure, holding up two objects difficult to identify.
17. A figure seated in a chariot.
18. A ram's head, with foliage issuing from mouth.
19. A figure.

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The nave is a very precious survival and, although much restored, retains its painted decoration. The work is highly coloured throughout and was executed in the early 13th century (circa 1220). It is 204 feet long and 35 feet wide. Professor Tristram thought that it was essentially Norman in character.

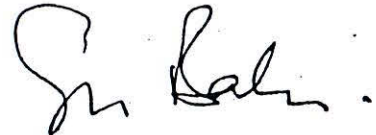
This is the earliest example of a flat painted ceiling remaining to us, although we know others once existed - such as in Canterbury Cathedral and possibly in Norwich and Ely. There is a later one in St. Albans Abbey.

We have found evidence of flat ceilings in our 12th century churches, such as Clayton and Hardham, which have long since been destroyed, possibly by fire. A timber ceiling must have been a great fire risk, particularly if the church was thatched. There are clearly many wooden ceilings in our churches which have probably been destroyed by fire.

In St. Michael's, Hildesheim, there is a very elaborate ceiling and others are to be seen at Zillies in the Grisons (1150) and Smaland, South Sweden (1275).

The restoration of the Peterborough ceiling has involved partly, or even completely, covering the work with coarse and unskilled as well as unsympathetic repainting. This should clearly be removed. The restoration referred to above does not mean that the original work has been totally destroyed. In our experience such work invariably remains underneath the repainting. If a painting were to be repainted it is very unlikely indeed that the restorer would first get rid of the original scheme.

There can be no question about the importance of this ceiling. At some time the repainting must surely be removed and the original retrieved. Would it therefore be possible to do a section in the not too distant future? To retrieve ^{even} an example of the original work would certainly be well worth while.



Evo Baker, ARCA.

August 8th, 1977.

"Hillside"
South Newington
Banbury
Oxon.