

THE CHOIR STALLS, WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL

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It may be taken as granted that the stalls of the Norman monks of Winchester stood approximately where their successors now stand, under the tower and in the first bay of the nave, as in the sister church of Ely, which was built by bishop Walkelin's brother. These Norman stalls were replaced by the present stalls during the first decade of the fourteenth century. That is generally agreed on the internal evidence of the woodwork itself. The architectural treatment and the character of the carving fix the work with fair certainty within, or very nearly within, that decade. The rich tracery and the fanciful carvings are too well known to need description. It may, however, be noted, as an instance of the medieval craftsman's disregard of his employer's purse in squandering his labour (which was time-work) that in one of the miserere brackets, a tiny human head about the size of a walnut, has an open mouth and a tongue pivoted on a small pin so that it will wag.

The woodwork is now the rich treacly brown beloved of the nineteenth century, entirely out of tone with its surroundings. There can be little doubt that it was originally enriched with colours and gilding, or that the decoration shown in the oil painting by James Cave was medieval work. This picture, the property of Sir William Portal of Laverstoke House, was painted about the year 1800. It shows the woodwork dark brown except the boarding at the back of the stall heads which is a blue-green powdered with gold stars, and the cusps, label-stops and other bosses which are gilt. I believe that this was the medieval scheme, for it was characteristic of medieval design, while a close examination of the remains showed a medium and a ground work closely resembling undoubted medieval work. The gilding of the bosses may be late, for we find in Cave's picture that some of the ornaments of the seventeenth or eighteenth century organ case were gilded.

But the decoration of the back of the stall heads can hardly have been done at any other time than the middle ages. The Laudian period is the only other possible one and that does not seem to me to be very likely.

Some doubt has been expressed on the authenticity of the colouring, and even of the boarding as medieval work. But the boarding runs through from top to bottom of the stall backs, behind the line of tracery which separates the upper and lower panels, in long lengths most skilfully scarfed: a first rate piece of joinery impossible to renew or to rework without first taking to pieces the whole fabric or the stalls.

Unfortunately the whole of this pleasant scheme was effaced some time between 1800 and 1850 by a particularly hard setting and adhesive ugly red paint. This has lately been removed and with it every fragment of the fragile blue paint beneath it. The backs of the stall heads have been repainted the same colour as that shown by Cave, but rather greener than the actual remains, and gold stars have been fixed. The gilding of the heads carved on the cusps and of the bosses has not been renewed. A copy of Cave's picture hangs in the Chapter Room.