



## The Misericordes in Chester Cathedral

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*(Read November 7th, 1892)*

**O**N the 27th May, 1874, the late Dean Howson, at the end of a paper on Randolph Higden, the author of "Polychronicon," briefly described to the Chester Antiquarian Society the beautiful series of stall carvings in the Cathedral Church of St. Werburgh in that city. Unfortunately, the Dean had no manuscript, and therefore no account exists of the very interesting examples of this series of church decoration which existed, and still exist, in Chester Cathedral.

My late father (Mr. Thomas Hughes, F.S.A.) took the precaution to have the stalls all photographed whilst they were off their hinges for cleaning purposes, during the restoration of the Cathedral under the direction of the late Sir Gilbert Scott. I regret to say that the negatives of those photographs have perished by fire, but I possess one copy of the prints taken from them before they were destroyed, and some of the more notable examples illustrate this paper.

The Chester misericordes are in the main 14th century work, but seem to range themselves into three classes, according to their sculptors. The first carver devotes his attention to allegorical scenes, and to biblical and

mythological subjects. He carved, I should imagine, the stall depicting the coronation of the Virgin, the so-called "Adam and Eve in Paradise," and "Red Riding Hood," and other subjects. The second deals with animals and monsters of various descriptions. The third is quite an apprentice, and carved some unfinished animal types. Rev. E. F. Letts thinks that the stalls of Manchester Cathedral are similarly distributed between three workers.

Scriptural examples are, as in the other Cathedrals and Collegiate Churches of England, conspicuous by their rarity; but some few do occur—for example, the coronation of the Virgin, and the Madonna and Child. Far the larger portion consists of fabulous monsters and strange birds and beasts familiar to the students of the bestiaries. In Chester the carvings are arranged in the usual fashion of a central subject, and two side lobes having more or less bearing on the central panel.

It has frequently been alleged that the misericorde carvers used a series of working drawings which were reproduced in several churches. This is certainly the case in Chester, notably in the instance of the struggle between a dragon and a mermaid rising from a spiral shell (No. 31.) This occurs in exactly the same form at Chester and Worcester, but in the former case, unfortunately, the head of the mermaid is broken off (see photograph in Mr. Noake's book on the "Worcester Misereres.") Examples of these stall carvings only occur (so far as I am aware) in four Cheshire churches—Nantwich, Bebington, Malpas, and Chester Cathedral—though they have formerly existed (amongst other places) at St. Mary's, Chester, and Astbury, near Congleton. I hope to return, on some future occasion, to those at Nantwich and Bebington, which I have not yet seen. At Malpas three only remain, and have been carefully

reinstated in their original positions by the Hon. and Rev. W. T. Kenyon. One depicts a struggle between two fully-armed men, and, though slightly damaged, bears evidence of very beautiful workmanship. This specimen has been photographed. The second example, coming westward, is a mermaid with a brush and comb, which occurs in another combination at Chester (No. 31), and in a very similar form to this at Exeter, and in other parts of England. The third—a monster with a double body and one head—occurs in the Chester series (No. 42), and is reproduced on the new north front of Westminster Abbey.

Before passing to a detailed account of the Cathedral specimens at Chester, I may mention those at Gresford, just over the Welsh border, for a description of which I am indebted to Mr. Trevor Parkins, Chancellor of St. Asaph.

“There are fourteen stalls,” says my informant, “seven on each side of the chancel. Three on each side face the east. They have all had misereres, but one or two of them have now plain fixed seats. The carvings of the misereres are a good deal mutilated; some of them are extremely curious; several are grotesque; and one is extremely indecent. Several of the carvings represent animals, some of these are fabulous, but there is a very remarkable carving which represents a fox in a pulpit, in the dress of a priest, preaching to a number of fowls and geese. Another miserere has a woman riding on a beast. On one miserere a devil is represented wheeling in a barrow two people to a wide mouth which is opened to receive them. The mixture of subjects is extraordinary; there are several angels who hold shields in the usual manner of such representations; and there is one miserere, a good deal mutilated, which appears to have represented the ‘Annunciation.’”

The fox preaching to the geese is not unusual—it occurs at Beverley Minster, Bristol Cathedral, Cartmel

Priory, Nantwich Church, and other places. The casting or wheeling of sinners into hell-mouth also occurs in the fine series at Ludlow.

Mr. T. A. Martin kindly informed me that he had notes of misericordes at Great Budworth, Frodsham, and Stockport, but, after careful inquiry, I have not been able to find any traces of these examples.

I am much indebted to Mr. Romilly Allen's "Early Christian Symbolism," and to a paper in *Archæological Journal*, vol. 4, by Mr. J. L. André, F.S.A., on "Symbolical Animals in English Art and Literature."

The numbering of the stalls commences with the entrance of the Choir on the left—No. 1 being the Vice-Dean's Stall.

NO. 1.—THE VICE-DEAN'S STALL depicts in the main subject the pelican in her piety plucking her breast to feed her young. This is a very frequent topic on misericordes. Examples occur in the Cathedrals of Lincoln, Gloucester, and Carlisle, and in Beverley Minster, and on one of the side finials at Nantwich. Of this bird Mr. André writes—"From very early Christian times the pelican has been a favorite symbol of our Lord, and appears to have never been entirely disused. But the ancient and modern ideas concerning this bird differ; the present notion is that it feeds its young with its blood; the ancient, that it revived them with it, as Swan rightly puts it, 'by piercing his breast he reviveth his young ones with his own blood when they are bitten and killed of serpents; or, having killed them with his bill, he reviveth them again by his blood after three dayes.'" The supporters in this misericorde are grotesque masks.

NO. 2.—THE THIRD CANON'S STALL: A knight on horseback, fully accoutred, with tasselled lance over left shoulder, and shield on right arm with St. Andrew's Cross; the supporters, grotesque animals.

No. 3.—THE FOURTH CANON'S STALL: An angel seated, bearing emblems of the Passion; of frequent occurrence; floral supporters.

No. 4.—A griffin biting his wing; with highly-finished floral supporters. Repeated at Carlisle.

No. 5.—This stall is at present uncarved, but it is believed that, like Nos. 7, 8, 9, and 10, it was of an indecent nature, and was therefore destroyed at the restoration of the Cathedral.

No. 6.—The subject is unique, and has given rise to much surmise. It depicts most probably a set of scenes from the life of St. Werburgh. The story is told at some length in Bradshaw's "Life of St. Werburgh" (*Chetham Society*), and has relation to an alleged miraculous detection of the robbery of some geese at Weedon by St. Werburgh. The central group shows two figures—one a female with a crozier or crook, standing beside what appears to be a font; the other a kneeling man, presumably the thief returning the stolen birds. The left-hand supporter portrays the detection of the culprit, with the birds, in a sort of pound; the right-hand, the culprit confessing to a person who carries what has been, when perfect, a crozier.

No. 7.—A modern example, drawn from Æsop's fable of the fox and grapes, and carved, like Nos. 8 and 10, by Mr. Armitage.

No. 8.—The fox and crow, with griffins as supporters.

No. 9.—Modern, carved by Mr. Bridgman. It depicts angels rolling away the stone from the grave of Christ, with sleeping Roman soldiers. On one side is Mary of Magdala, on the other the gardener.

No. 10.—Again Æsop supplies the subject: this time the fox and stork.

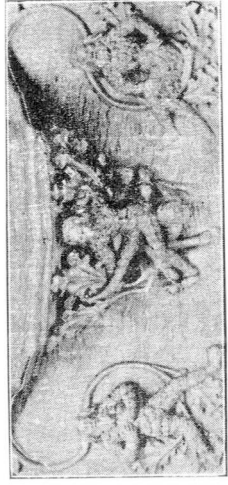
No. 11.—One of the simpler misereres, probably the work of the third artist. Grotesque masks, as in



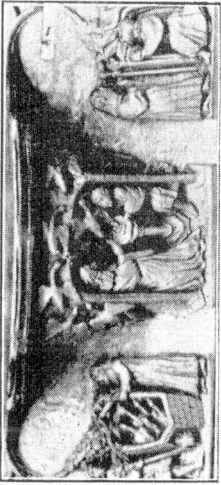
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Chichester Cathedral, Stratford-on-Avon, and many other churches.

No. 12.—A winged beast seizing with its claws another animal (said by some to be a pig.) The same subject occurs at Carlisle, and there is a similar figure on an early sculptured stone at St. Andrew's, Fifeshire, figured in Stuart's "Sculptured Stones of Scotland" (vol. ii., plate 61,) and on a font in Lincoln Cathedral. The supporters are goats.

No. 13.—A vigorous representation of a lady chastising her spouse, with spirited workmanship. The reproduction of the lady's drapery is particularly effective. This subject is of common occurrence on misericordes, and is supposed to be a sarcasm on married ecclesiastics. Times are quieter in matters domestic since this miserere was carved. The Married Women's Property Act is on the Statute Book, and Mrs. Jackson, of Clitheroe, has recently proved to the husbands of England that the combative spirit of this old carving is not yet dead where husbands go beyond their proper position.

No. 14 will best be described by the following quotation from Mr. J. L. André's Paper:—

"Philip de Thauin tells us that the fox was accustomed to lie on his back and cover himself with red earth, pretending death, to allow birds to come and eat his flesh; so says this 12th century author, and Swan, in the 17th, states the same, as follows:—'When cold and hunger shall oppresse him, coming near some farm or mansion house, he feigneth a kind of barking, like a dog, that thereby the household beasts may more confidently keep themselves without fear, being often used to the barking of a dogge; and so, having gotten himself near his prey, he will lie upon his back, with his belly upwards, mouth open and tongue out, and every way seeming as if he were dead, then when the hens or geese, or whatever else be fit for him, are suddenly surprised and cunningly caught while they little dreamed of such a subtiltie.'"



The Norman doorway at Alne, in Yorkshire, represents a fox pursuing the above tactics, with the word "Vulpis" over the panel.

No. 15.—Two storks, supported on the left by a dragon, with the head of a man, apparently mitred, possibly a manticora; on the right by a griffin.

No. 16.—A crowned figure seated between two birds. Mr. Romilly Allen thinks a similar set of figures on a tympanum at Charney, Berkshire, may mean the ascent of Alexander. In Lincoln and Gloucester Cathedrals.

No. 17.—An angel harper; a frequent subject, *e.g.*, at Lincoln, Carlisle, and Worcester. Supporters—angels on clouds.

No. 18.—A serra, a sea monster with the head of a lion and the tail of a fish, double-bodied, and with immense wings.

No. 19 has given rise to much discussion. Some explain it as Adam and Eve in paradise, others as emblematical of a royal marriage; but Mr. F. H. Williams, of Chester, has suggested more probably that it represents an incident in the romance of Tristan and Isoude, which is depicted on an ivory casket described by the late Thomas Wright at the Chester Congress of the British Archæological Association, 1849 (*see Journal Brit. Arch. Assoc., vol. v., p. 266.*) The supporters give curious examples of costume. This subject occurs again at Bristol.

No. 20.—A struggle between two wild men, possibly a representation of the story of Valentine and Orson.

No. 21.—A horseman in helmet and mail, hurling a quoit at an animal, presumably a dog, which in the left supporter is shown picking up the missile with its mouth: this occurs also on the stalls at St. Botolph's, Boston.





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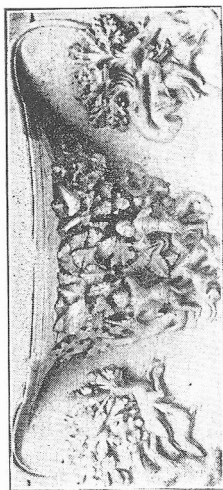
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No. 22.—Another pair of fabulous monsters, back to back, with tails entwined. The supporters are double *fleur de lis*, and are reproduced at Lincoln.

No. 23.—A man riding on a chained lion, with manticoras as supporters. Of these animals Pliny says: "Ctesias informs us that amongst the Æthiopians there is an animal found which he calls mantichora; it has the face and ears of a man, is the colour of blood, has the body of a lion, and a tail ending in a sting, like that of a scorpion." It occurs in a 12th century bestiary at Souvigny, in France, and on the map of the world in Hereford Cathedral.

No. 24.—A hunting scene, with dogs and trees. The left supporter is a stag followed by a hound; the right, a helmeted knight on a charger. These appear on a Norman tympanum, at Little Langford, Wilts., and in a chancel arch at Caistor, Northamptonshire. The stag is of very frequent occurrence on Celtic crosses, generally being hunted by men on horseback, followed by hounds, as here.

No. 25.—Here we change to a figure subject. The central boss is the head of a king with a long flowing beard; the supporters, other human heads in profile, that on the left apparently a jester. Similar specimens occur at Lincoln.

No. 26.—Lion mask, supported by two of smaller size.

No. 27.—Grotesque head, with foliage growing out of the mouth; supporters, two heads.

No. 28.—By many alleged to represent David or Samson and the lion. The subject occurs on stalls at Windsor, Chichester, Bristol, Nantwich, and Worcester. Dean Howson suggested that this depicts Richard Cœur de Lion; but Dr. H. Colley March, of Rochdale (a

learned authority on symbolism), conjectures, apparently with much reason, that it represents the overthrow of Paganism. The best evidence of the "David and the lion" theory arises from a comparison of these misericordes with crosses at Kells and Kilcullan, figured in Mr. Romilly Allen's Rhind Lectures, page 204.

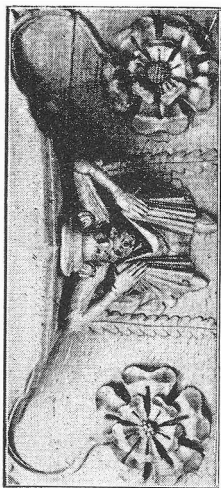
No. 29.—A bitter struggle between a lion and a dragon, types respectively of Christ and the Devil. This is a favourite subject, and forms a misericorde at Carlisle, Worcester, Gloucester, Exeter, and on the north side at Nantwich.

No. 30.—One of the most interesting stalls in the Cathedral. It has been called the "Red Riding Hood" example. A cowed fox faces a girl with a hood, and two men overlook. Some persons think it has a far wider significance on the bearings of church history than our old nursery tale, and is emblematical of the unchastity of the clergy in the Middle Ages. The floral supporters are exquisitely carved. So far as I am aware, the subject of this stall is unique.

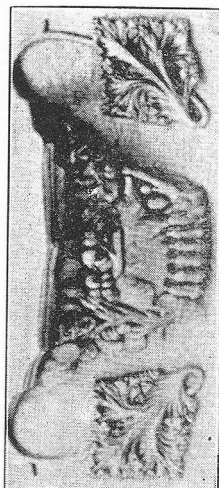
No. 31.—A very interesting specimen, exactly reproduced at Worcester, but there unbroken. It shows a mermaid rising out of a spiral shell, and struggling with a dragon. Similar subjects occur on misericordes at Lincoln, Durham, and Amiens, and on a font at St. Peter's, Sandwich. On the right is a combat between two figures, one with a scimitar, and half-animal form. The arrangement of the female figure is very similar to one of the Malpas stalls. On the left is a jester holding a bird by the neck.

No. 32.—The third Malpas example is here reproduced, but the figure is crowned; the supporters are human heads.

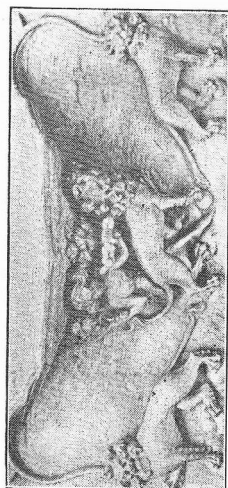




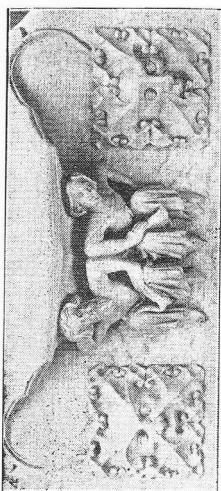
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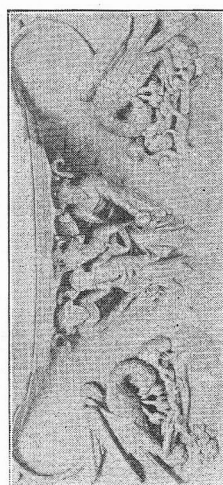
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No. 33.—A crowned two-bodied single-headed animal, reproduced at Exeter, Carlisle, and Chichester. The supporters are fabulous monsters, that on the right particularly vigorous.

No. 34.—The first family tiff: notice the very determined mien of the lady.

No. 35.—Very much damaged, but shows the Virgin and Child, and apparently attendant angels. The pelican plucking her breast to feed her young, as supporters. The subject occurs in a painted glass window of the 13th century in Bourges Cathedral, and is a favourite subject in stall carvings—notably at Beverley, Lincoln, Carlisle, Gloucester, and Nantwich. The same subject occurs in No. 1 as the central panel.

No. 36.—An armed knight struggling with a chained lion; the supporters, two lions (compare No. 23.)

No. 37.—An interesting example of costume (occurring also at Lincoln.) In the centre a man wearing a round cap and long scalloped sleeves, with floral supporters.

No. 38.—Sow and litter of pigs; repeated at Winchester and Worcester, and on a corbel at St. Mary's Church, Chester.

No. 39.—A man with a club leading a lion.

No. 40.—A wrestling match. Though broken, the carving gives evidence of much beauty and interesting details of costume. Notice the two umpires with their wands. Angel supporters.

No. 41.—The legend of the Unicorn. "The horn of the Unicorn," according to a legend quoted by Mr. Romilly Allen, "is so powerful that the hunter dares not go near it, but the animal can be caught by stratagem in the following manner. A pure virgin of great beauty is sent



on alone in front of the hunters into the wood where the Unicorn dwells, and as soon as it sees her, immediately it runs towards her and kneels down and lays its head on her lap quite simply. Whilst the Unicorn sleeps there the hunters seize it, and hasten off with it to the royal palace. Christ is the spiritual Unicorn, who became man by being born of the Virgin Mary, and was taken by the Jews, led before Pilate, presented to Herod, and then crucified." See Rev. J. Hirst's paper on "The Symbolism of the Unicorn," *Archæological Journal*, vol. 41.

No. 42.—Very nearly approximates to the third Malpas example, and is of frequent occurrence in Carlisle amongst other places; also on the font at Rownton in Yorkshire, and on the capitals of the columns of the chancel arch at Steetly, Derbyshire.

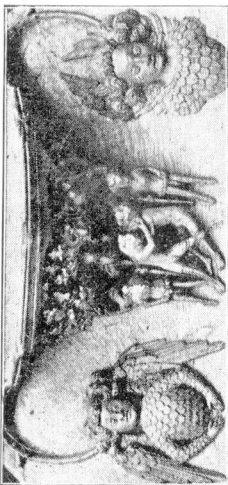
No. 43.—An animal with the wings of a dragon and the back part of the body like a lion, and with a scaly and horned head—possibly a chimera—struggles with and tramples under its feet an armed knight; the supporters are dogs. Reproduced at Carlisle.

No. 44.—Floral roses.

No. 45.—A falcon with a duck in its talons.

No. 46.—Has generally been supposed to represent an elephant and castle. The elephant appears on our earliest English misereres at Exeter; but Mr. T. A. Martin offers a suggestion that it depicts a legend of a horse going under a portcullis and being cut in half, in a similar manner to the horse in Baron Munchausen's experiences.

No. 47.—Grotesque animals; winged lion in centre. Occurs on tympanum at Houghton-le-Spring, Durham; Long Marton, Westmoreland; Stoneleigh, Warwickshire, and other places.



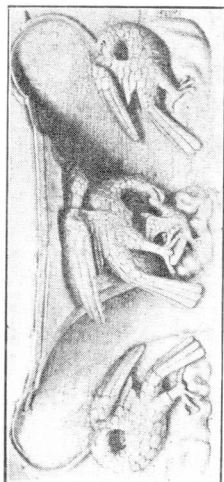
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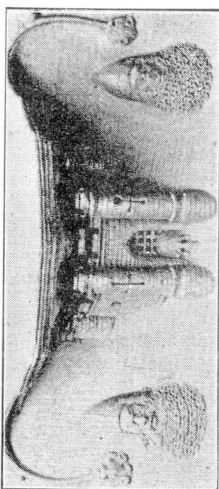
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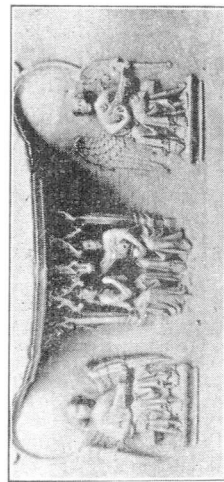
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No. 48.—Illustrates the coronation of the Virgin; a subject dealt with on the misericordes at Lincoln and Gloucester, the tympanum of the south doorway of Quenington Church, Gloucestershire, and is supposed by some to typify the final glorification of the church. The supporters are angel harpers.

