

VIII.—PRIOR LESCHMAN'S CHANTRY CHAPEL IN HEXHAM PRIORY CHURCH.¹

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[Read on 27th November, 1929.]

Rowland Leschman was elected prior of Hexham monastery on March 28, 1480, in succession to prior William Bywell. He was probably a native of Hexham and of somewhat humble origin. He did much to improve and adorn the church during his priorate, marking his work by placing his initials saltireways upon a shield, thus symbolizing in the one device St. Andrew the patron saint of the priory and himself. He died 1490-91, his successor, Thomas Smithson, being elected in June, 1491.² His chapel would most probably be built during his lifetime and its pleasant position chosen by himself in the second bay from the east of the north arcade of the choir; where doubtless he hoped to lie through the centuries, but he reckoned without the iconoclasts of the next century or the "restorers" of a later age. His chapel has been moved more than once and has only within recent years (1908) been replaced in its original position, but, because of the general raising of the floor level of the choir, it stands higher than when first built. It has also been much restored, the lower courses of the masonry upon

¹ I am indebted to our members Mr. John Gibson, F.S.A., and Mr. H. L. Honeyman, A.R.I.B.A., for many helpful suggestions, and to the former for the photographs from which the plates illustrating this paper have been made.

² *The Priory of Hexham*, pp. clxxiv. ff. (Surtees Soc., no. 44). For examples of prior Leschman's device see *The Abbey of St. Andrew, Hexham*, by C. C. Hodges, plates 38 and 50.

the north side being added during the re-arrangement of the choir in 1908.

The original work does not now fit properly together as the heads of the lower range of figures on the south side have been prepared as a support for something which does not now rest upon them. After the dissolution of the monastery the chapel appears to have been made into a comfortable private pew for the lord of the manor. The effigy and its slab were removed from the tomb and placed outside on the floor of the choir, where they remained until the "restoration" of 1858-60.³

The wooden screen of fine and delicate workmanship, on the north side, stands upon an embattled cornice, a portion of which is now missing. This is supported by nine grotesque heads, each one different, which form the capitals of nine moulded pilasters resting upon ingeniously carved brackets. A square panel, with moulded edges enclosing trefoil or cinquefoil headed arches, is between each pilaster. The general composition is good and the details ingenious, but the execution, though full of a rude vigour, is coarse to a degree.⁴ Within each of these compartments is a device or figure which, from east to west, are as follows (plates XXII and XXIII):

1. St. George, in armour, on horseback transfixing the dragon with his spear.
2. Interlaced work, with ivy leaves above it.
3. A crowned seated male figure with long crimped hair, clad in robes falling to his feet, holding with both hands the crucified Christ, in cross of saltire shape, upon his knees—God the Father holding the Son.⁵

³ See *History of Hexham*, by A. B. Wright, plate p. 78, and *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴ The woodwork is similar to that on prior Gondibur's screen in Carlisle cathedral. They are both apparently by the same architect. (Note H.L.H.)

⁵ This seems the most probable interpretation. It was a favourite figure in the later fifteenth century and often appears

4. Interlaced work, within a lozenge with cable mouldings.
5. An ape seated sideways, facing west, upon a moulded column, pushing food into its mouth⁶—Greed(?).
6. A lily growing out of a vase, with handle—The Lily of Our Lady.
7. A man standing, facing, with bare head and in loose robes falling in folds to his feet; he holds a circular object in his right hand into which he appears to be pushing his left forefinger.
8. A bare-headed man with curled hair standing, facing; his outer robe is gathered in loose folds round a book which he holds in his left hand.⁷

Beneath these compartments is a row of finely carved conventional Tudor leaves; below this nine grotesque rather gross figures are carved; from east to west they are as follows (plates xxii and xxiii):

1. A crouching lion whose body supports the east end of the stonework and whose head and forepaws project outwards.
2. A bare-headed man seated with his head crouched between his shoulders, his arms resting on his knees; he plays upon the bag-pipes, with double chanter and one drone, the bag being under his left arm.⁸ (Plate xxxii, fig. 2.)

on seals (e.g. *Durham Seals*, nos. 3152, 3157 and 3235). Usually Christ is represented held upright on His cross between the Father's knees and sometimes the Holy Ghost in form of a dove appears behind the Father's shoulder—the whole typifying the Trinity. It cannot represent Our Lady of Pity as the figure is crowned.

⁶ Apes appear often in satirical carvings of the later Middle Age.

⁷ Figures 7 and 8 are the only two of the series which have not a grotesque appearance.

⁸ Probably a satire upon minstrels. A common theme with mediæval carvers was to represent a grotesque beast playing upon bag-pipes.

3. A fox in monk's hood and cloak preaching from a pulpit to four geese.⁹ (Plate XXIV, fig. 1.)
4. A man seated upon a four-legged stool, facing to the east. He has a high bald forehead, curling hair, and wears tight-fitting clothes. He holds a small harp between his knees upon which he is playing with both hands.
5. A triple-headed grotesque. The heads upon legs covered in rough cloth and astride of a beast with a man's face, lolling tongue, a beast's ears and cloven feet. A cod-piece (?) is between his legs. The head, facing east, is a wide, grinning skull with beneath it the bare ribs of a skeleton; that facing west is a woman's head upon a clothed bust. The centre is a severe-looking man's face with turned down mouth and wearing a flat cap.¹⁰ (Plate XXIV, fig. 2.)

⁹ The deceitful cunning attributed to Reynard the fox was a favourite subject in mediæval literature and art. The scene here depicted of Reynard in hood and gown, preaching to a company of geese, is common. It probably represents the bitter feeling of the more settled and comfortable orders of monks against the energetic intrusion into their pastures of the newer orders, particularly of the friar preachers or Dominicans. A number of the *misereres* in Beverley Minster are carved with the story of Reynard, amongst others. The scene here illustrated was painted in a window in St. Martin's church, Leicester, and also on a wood carving in Ely cathedral. In both these places Reynard preaches from the text "*Testis est mihi Deus quam cupiam vos omnes visceribus meis*"—God is my witness how I long for you all in my bowels.

¹⁰ Since this account was written, the writer has read a note upon these figures, and this one in particular, in the August number of *Man*, p. 133. The writer of that article sees in this figure a "fertility," or, as she calls it in the text, "a phallic personage"; in the accompanying illustration it is called a "sheela-na-gig"—a term left unexplained. But from the context it seems that a female figure is meant, therefore this cannot be one as it has undoubtedly a man's face. The present writer can see nothing in it to support Miss Murray's conclusion. There are also obvious errors made in other details. A writer who can only see in a figure of God the Father holding the crucified Christ on his knees, however roughly carved, "a crowned phallic figure holding a sceptre across his body" and who knows so little of

6. A man seated upon a cushion, facing to the west. He wears a belted jerkin and tight hose turned up round the ankles. His bare head lies sideways, in a strained style, upon his right shoulder, and he holds, by its forelegs, a two-horned goat whose head and body lie upon his back. (Plate xxiv, fig. 3.)
7. A man with a very unhappy expression seated between his own legs, his feet turned inwards. He wears a tight-fitting jacket and hood, the top falling over on the left side of his head. On his right foot is a small basin and he holds in front of him a two-horned goat, its head upwards. (Plate xxiv, fig. 4.)
8. At the west end, supporting the stone-work of the superstructure, is a grotesque crouching figure. His head of a low type, with receding forehead, flat nose and thick lips, rests upon his hands supported by his elbows.

The west end of the chantry stands against the second pier from the east of the north aisle of the choir; a rudely carved figure of St. Christopher, forming the jamb of the doorway, stands at the south-west corner. (Plate xxvi, fig. 3.) This is of life size and is clothed in a long loose gown buttoned down the front and falling open below the knees. The hose are folded around the ankles and the feet are bare. The head is covered by a hood falling upon the shoulders and a stout staff is held by both hands diagonally across the body. Upon the head are remains of carving which probably represent part of the robe of

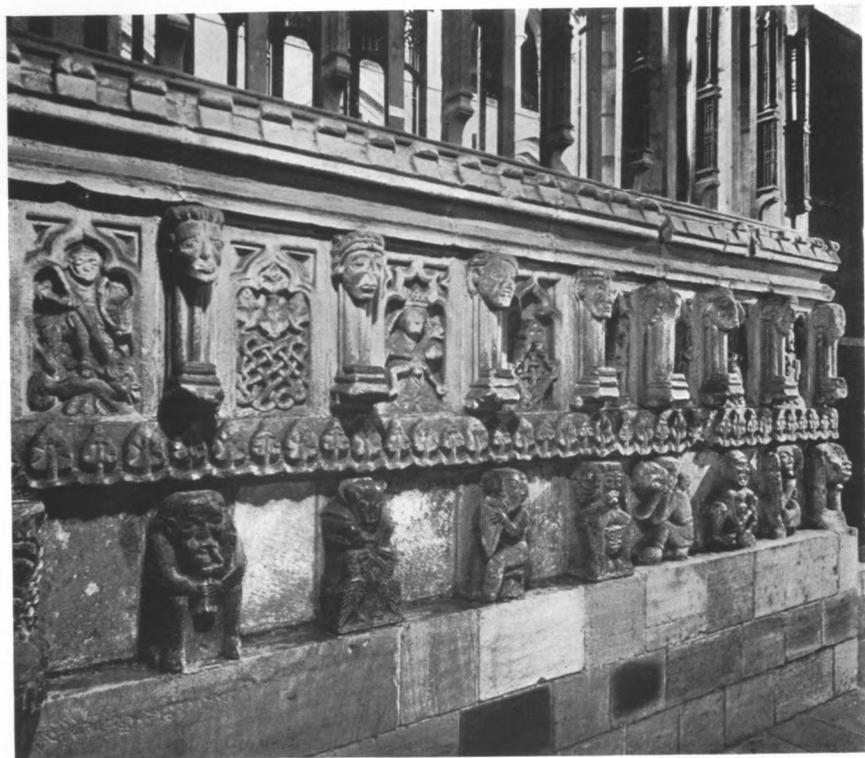
the story of Reynard the fox as to mistake that common mediæval motive for "a bear . . . holding its forepaws over four birds," or who describes a man whose head is turned sideways by the weight of a goat carried on his shoulder which he is straining at with both hands for "a man asleep with his arms clasped round his neck," can hardly expect her opinion upon any of these figures to carry much weight.

the child Christ whose figure is now destroyed. Stone panelling of a late crude style supports the beautiful traceried woodwork¹¹ of the screen upon the south side. (Plate xxv.) The finials of each of the ogee sub-arches are grotesque human heads similar in style, though smaller, than those on the north side. The bases of the arches have round mouldings after the style known as Early English. The buttresses of the wooden tracery each rest upon a human head more finely carved than the stone ones. A stone altar marked with dedication crosses stands inside the chapel at the east end. Interlaced work is carved on its west front on the north side, whilst on the south is a standing figure of St. James the Great. (Plate xxvi, fig. 2.) He is represented with long hair and wearing a wide-brimmed hat with an escallop in front; his scrip, also with an escallop upon it, hangs from a belt over his left shoulder. He holds his "bourdon" or pilgrim's staff in his left hand. Between these carvings is an aumbrey or square opening recessed into the west front of the masonry beneath the altar. Within this on the north side, a seated ape, holding his chin in his right hand, is carved. (Plate xxvi, fig. 2.) On the inner south side is a standing ass with the head and body of a nondescript animal appearing behind it; above both is a Tudor rose with leaves.

The panelled reredos is painted with the figure of Our Lord and the instruments of his Passion; on the south side are the ladder, spear and rod with sponge, in the middle Our Lord standing crowned with thorns, on the north side the pillar and scourge, cords, three dice and the thirty pieces of silver. In the foreground is a kneeling figure of the prior. Above in the centre is the figure of St. Andrew the patron saint of the priory with St. Peter on his left side and St. Paul upon his right.¹² The

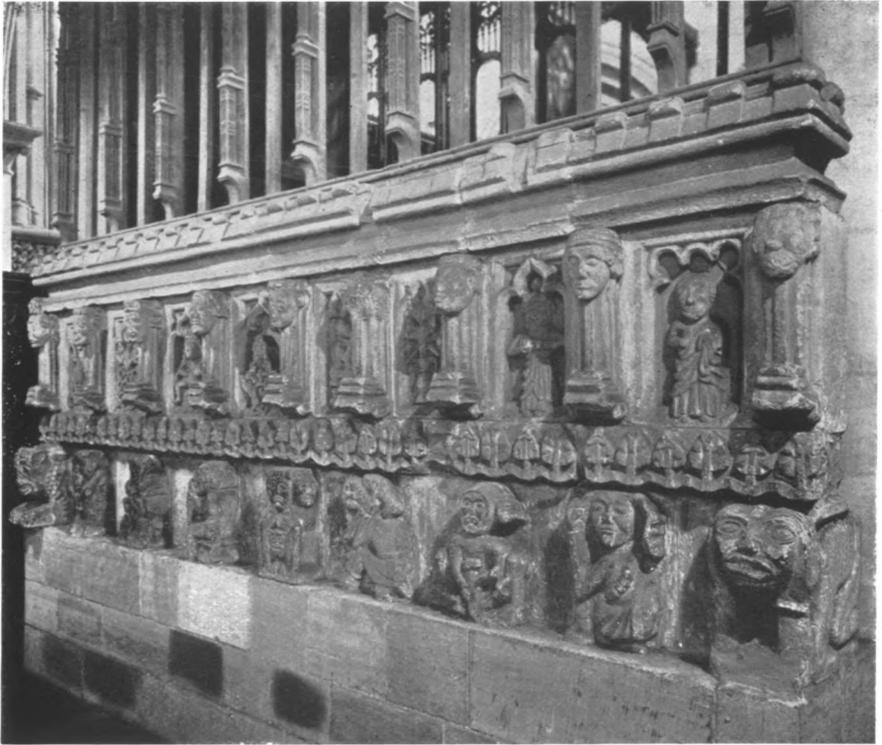
¹¹ For details of the wooden lattice work on south side see *The Abbey of St. Andrew, Hexham*, by C. C. Hodges, plates 48, 49.

¹² These paintings are now all very indistinct, but see *Priory of Hexham II*, p. lxi (Surtees Soc., no. 46); and *A History of Hexham*, by A. B. Wright, p. 79.



NORTH SIDE OF PRIOR LESCHMAN'S CHAPEL.

FROM THE NORTH-EAST.



NORTH SIDE OF PRIOR LESCHMAN'S CHAPEL.
FROM THE NORTH-WEST.



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

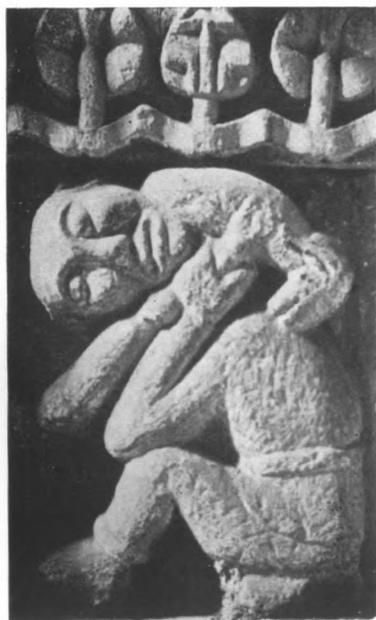


FIG. 3.



FIG. 4.



SOUTH SIDE OF PRIOR LESCHMAN'S CHAPEL.



FIG. 1.

PRIOR LESCHMAN'S EFFIGY AND TOMB FROM THE SOUTH.



FIG. 2.

FIGURES CARVED BELOW THE ALTAR
ON THE WEST.



FIG. 3.

FIGURE OF ST. CHRISTOPHER.



ceiling or tester of boards has been divided into panels by moulded ribs with bosses, of typical Tudor style, at the intersections. The centre one was the figure of an angel holding a shield upon which was the prior's monogram as mentioned above.¹³ The west end is now destroyed.

The tomb of prior Leschman and his effigy now stand in their original position against the north wall of the chapel. A shield of arms, with his monogram $\gamma\gamma$ in saltire upon it, is carved upon the easternmost panel of the south side. (Plate xxvi, fig. 1.)

¹³ See Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 78, and woodcut on frontispiece of *The Priory of Hexham* (Surtees Soc., no. 44).