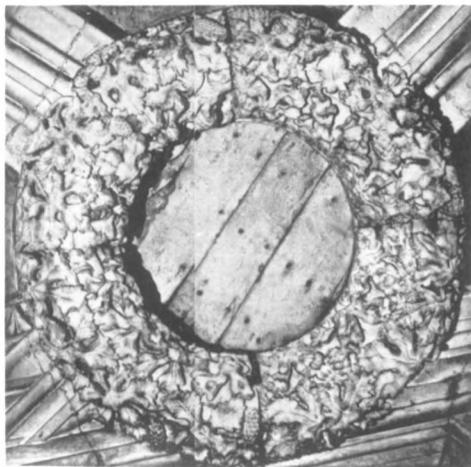




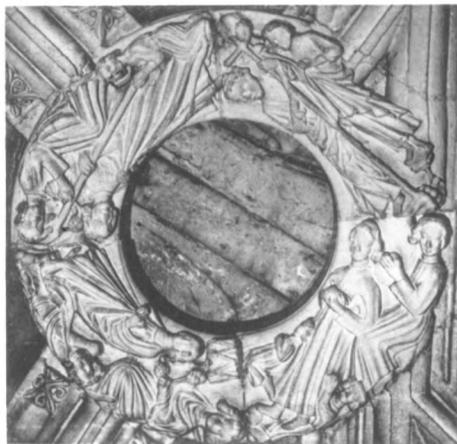
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ROOF BOSSES IN DURHAM CATHEDRAL CHURCH.

#### IV.—THE ROOF SCULPTURES OF DURHAM CATHEDRAL.

BY C. J. P. CAVE.

[Read on 28th October, 1936.]  
(By Oswin J. Charlton.)

The roof sculptures are of two dates, the latter half of the thirteenth century in the high vault of the quire, in the two eastern bays of the quire aisles, and in the chapel of the Nine Altars, and the latter half of the fifteenth century in the vaulting under the central tower.

There are five bosses in the high vault of the quire, and two of them are plaque bosses, that is flat plates with comparatively shallow carvings on their surface. Plaque bosses are the commonest form of roof boss in France, but they are quite rare in England, indeed I do not know any other bosses in this country that are so distinctly French in style as these two examples.

One of them, the western boss of the quire (plate III, 1), is bordered by a circle with an enclosed quatrefoil, within which is the seated figure of an old man with beard and long flowing hair; he sits in a chair, which has draperies over the arms, and in his hands he holds a large cloth, the middle of which rests on his knees, and in this cloth are three small human figures. This no doubt represents the souls of the just in the bosom of Abraham.

The other plaque boss (plate III, 2) is the third from the east end. On this, as though lying on a shallow plate with a perfectly plain rim, is the *Agnus Dei*, the Lamb with the cross-bearing halo, holding in one of its fore-feet the

base of the cross with the banner; the Lamb is in the usual attitude, looking backwards and upwards at the cross. This subject, though occurring in other places in England and Scotland, is not common on this side of the Channel, but in France it is extremely common.

The other three bosses on the high vault of the quire are all foliage with the addition of certain small figures; they are carved in the English style, they are not plaque bosses and the designs are fairly deeply undercut. The one at the east end shows signs that something went wrong when the keystone was put in place; it projects downwards below the level of the adjacent vaulting ribs, and it has not been finished off properly. Normally the mouldings of the ribs are carried across the sides of the keystone till they meet the design in the centre, as may be seen on the boss to the west of the one in question. Here, however, no attempt has been made to finish the edges of the keystone, which stand out clear of the vaulting ribs. It is very unusual to find keystones not properly finished off.<sup>1</sup> In this case it looks as though a slight miscalculation had been made and that the keystone when let down on to the vaulting ribs was found to be slightly too small. If this were so it would have been too late to rectify matters on the fault being discovered, and the builders seem to have taken the only course possible, namely to leave things alone.<sup>2</sup> The boss itself is carved with foliage of the Early English type; most of the leaves have four lobes; the mid-rib, which is fairly well marked, stops short before the tip of the leaf is reached; in some cases it seems to press down on to the leaf where a little hollow or ridge is formed, in others it just dies out on the leaf surface. The leaves are rather like those to be found in the Angel Quire at Lincoln. In the centre of the boss is a lion standing on

<sup>1</sup> There are examples in the nave and transepts, and in St. Hugh's quire at Lincoln.

<sup>2</sup> The method of putting the keystone in place was for the vaulting ribs to be built up to the point where the keystone was to come, and then the latter was lowered down gradually with the help of wedges.

leaves and partly hidden by one; there is another lion on the edge, and two small birds amid the foliage (plate IV, 2).

The second boss from the east contains foliage only, and this consists of leaves of the conventional thirteenth century type, with the addition of some clusters of fruit.

The fourth boss is ornamented with similar foliage (plate IV, 1) but there are a number of figures. On one side is a bearded man clad in skins, and holding up some object in his right hand; it may be meant for Samson with the jaw-bone of the ass. Behind him are two small kneeling or crouching figures, both most delicately carved, so that the folds of their garments and their narrow waistbands are clearly shown. Several beasts are depicted; these are probably meant for lions, as the fore parts of their bodies are covered with long hair; one of them has a grotesque head out of all proportion to the rest of the beast.<sup>3</sup>

In each quire aisle there is only a single boss, in the eastern bay. The one in the north aisle is carved with foliage only; the leaves look like an evolution from Early English trefoil; they are less stiff and, besides the central midrib, there is quite a lot of veining; many of the leaves have three holes in them, a peculiarity seen in some of the bosses in the nave at Lincoln. The foliage radiates out from an almost flower-like centre, another reminiscence of Lincoln.

The boss in the south aisle is rather similar, though the leaves are stiffer and more conventional, and there are a number of clusters of fruit. Almost hidden in the foliage are two dragons, only the tops of their heads and parts of their wings are visible; each is eating fruit; fruit-eating dragons are to be seen at Lincoln, Southwell, and other places. (Plate IV, 3.)

<sup>3</sup> Canon Greenwell, who described the bosses in his *Durham Cathedral*, p. 78 footnote, says that this boss and the one at the east end contain foliage and "nondescripts"; he evidently had been able to see that there was something besides foliage in the carvings, but he could not make out the details.

In the chapel of the Nine Altars there are two normal bosses, one at the south, the other at the north end. The one at the south end bears foliage that looks rather naturalistic but does not seem to belong to any real plant. The one at the north end (plate IV, 4) bears maple leaves and the unmistakable winged seeds of that plant; maple leaves and seeds occur many times on the bosses in the Angel Quire at Lincoln.

Apart from the bosses there are most important sculptures round the well holes that occur in the chapel of the Nine Altars. Well holes are a very common feature of French churches, but in England they occur very sparingly and chiefly in the towers of churches of a not very early date, where their function was probably to enable stone to be drawn up to the upper stages of the tower. In the nave of Norwich on the central rib and in the tenth bay, where a boss would normally occur, there is a well hole; this may have had some ceremonial use, for there is evidence that the figure of an angel carrying a censer was let down from the roof on great feasts.<sup>4</sup> There is also evidence that there was a similar hole in the roof of the nave in Old St. Paul's, and that through it a white dove was liberated at Pentecost.<sup>5</sup>

The well holes at Durham are encircled by richly carved borders. On the moulded edge of the central and largest hole are figures of the four evangelists (plate V); each figure is seated with a book resting on a desk in front of him, each has his appropriate evangelistic symbol beside him, and under the feet of each is a small human figure; these latter would be corbels if the main figures were upright on the wall, and I have little doubt that they are meant to be corbel figures; at any rate they seem to give a certain stability to the main figures, which, without them, would, to my mind, look as though they were perched

<sup>4</sup> The whole subject is dealt with by Dean Goulburn in his *Ancient Sculpture in the Roof of Norwich Cathedral*, pp. 276-278.

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 276.

very precariously on the roof. All the figures save St. John are bearded. Commencing at the east the first figure is St. Luke (plate v, 3); he is sitting sideways on a chair which is very well shown; he wears a pointed cap, like the traditional cap of liberty, an outer garment which is fastened by a knot over his left shoulder, and an undergarment seen on his forearm and round his neck. He is holding his left hand to his face, perhaps to his ear, and in his right hand he is holding a style with which he is writing. In front of the chair is the bull, not very well carved, indeed in a way it looks unfinished; it has no wings. Underneath the small figure is that of a man; his knees are doubled up, one coming across one side of the moulding, while his hand clasps the other side.

The figure on the south is St. Matthew (plate v, 1); he sits with his head bent over a book; he has a hood over his head and wears a full outer garment, hiding all of the undergown save the sleeve of the left wrist. The whole of the right hand is broken off, but he was evidently writing in a book. Above his left shoulder is the winged man, a small naked figure, possibly meant to be speaking into the ear of the evangelist. Below his feet is the small figure of a man who is placing his left hand on his heart.

The figure of St. John (plate v, 4), on the west, is nearly full face; he is bareheaded and his full gown is fastened near the neck by two buttons; the sleeve of the undergown can be seen at the right wrist. The hands seem to have been damaged. On the desk, which rests on his left knee, there is a small object which is probably meant for an inkpot. At St. John's right elbow is his eagle, and under his feet is a small female figure in a wimple; she has her arms against the mouldings and seems to be pushing to support the weight resting on her back.

St. Mark (plate v, 2) is seated sideways and his chair is visible; he wears a round cap with straight sides and a very small projection at the top; his full gown has a hood which falls back over the shoulders, and like the other

figures he wears an undergown; he is writing in a book with a style. In front of the chair is the winged lion sitting on its haunches, with its wings extended, and looking up to the saint. The "corbel" figure is a woman, and like the last one, she too seems to be making an effort to support the weight on her back.

The well hole on the north (plate III, 3) has a carved border of vine leaves and bunches of grapes; the foliage is distinctly naturalistic.

The well hole on the south (plate III, 4) has an elaborate border of figures; there are four main figures round the hole. The first is holding a long cross staff, the foot of which rests on something whose nature is obscure; the figure has short curly hair, and it is uncertain whether it is meant for a man or a woman; behind, standing on a small pedestal, is a second figure censuring the principal one. The next scene, going round in a clockwise fashion, shows a figure, probably a woman, with the hair done up in large cauls on each side of the face, and holding some object in her two hands; it is not possible to say what this object is meant for; it might be a loaf of bread, but it might be a number of other things; behind is another figure as large as the principal one, holding something in the hands, probably a censor; in front of the main figure is a small kneeling figure of a woman, and behind her another. The third scene also consists of a female figure, who is holding her gown in a bunch in her two hands; behind her is, above, a censoring figure, and below a kneeling figure with both hands raised in supplication. The fourth figure, certainly a woman, is holding what appears to be a spear; behind her is a censoring figure, and at her feet a small kneeling figure of a woman.

The main figures here are doubtless meant for saints, each being accompanied by a censoring figure, and three having one or more small figures praying at their feet. I am however unable to identify the saints.

The above are the only early roof sculptures. But in



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ROOF BOSSES IN DURHAM CATHEDRAL CHURCH.



the vaulting under the central tower there is another well hole of late fifteenth century date. Its rim is ornamented with very good foliage and fruit, a rather conventional vine. On the surrounding vaulting there are a number of very well-carved bosses, without however any very remarkable features; most of them are carved with foliage, in general rather conventional but with some slight tendency to naturalism; there are several large roses, and one rose surrounded by rays. There are also one or two figures, such as an angel carrying a shield, and a face with foliage coming from the mouth, without which no collection of fifteenth century bosses seems to be complete.

*Note on the photography of the bosses.*

The photographs which illustrate this paper were taken with a Leica camera and a 400 millimetre Astro lens, which has an arrangement for visual focussing. The magnification is high enough for spiders' lines to be visible on the original prints. The lighting was with a portable electric spot-light used with a twelve volt accumulator; the lamp was an Aldis daylight signalling lamp; the lamp and battery were mounted on a wheeled trolley. The films used were Agfa Isopan FF, and the exposures were about half a minute at  $f/11$ .