CHANGES TO THE 14th CENTURY QUIRE STALLS
by Stephen Jones

Julian English’s article “Choir Stalls and Connections” [1] recorded a number of the changes made to the quire stalls across the centuries and ended with an account of action in 1967 to restore and protect them against attack from wood boring insects. It mentioned a follow-up piece which would include present day views about protection and treatment. This article seeks to fulfil that undertaking, but first reviews the most important changes made to the quire stalls since their creation between 1306 and 1309.

Figure 1 The Quire, overall view

Differences of view over past events and developments are of course an inescapable part of historical inquiry. The Cathedral is no exception and the quire stalls are a case in point. Here are passages quoted from articles by two different authorities, each concerned with the original position of the monks’ stalls, before the installation of William of Lyngwode’s 14th century stalls.

“It may be taken as granted that the stalls of the Norman monks at 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 Walkelin’s brother”. [2]

“Evidence suggests that when Walkelin… constructed his great cruciform cathedral, the monks had their seats in what is now called the presbytery, east of the central tower, but which was then so very different, terminating in a vast Norman apse and lined with arcades of Norman arches, carried on great drum columns. In the centre of the apse, raised behind the high altar, was the Bishop’s throne (as at Norwich), with seats for the monks ranged either side…[This arrangement] left little space for ceremony, and the stalls were later moved west… to the space under the tower and one bay of the nave, so that the Norman choir could be transformed into what we see today.” [3]
Concerning the 14th century quire stalls themselves, another matter of debate is whether the oak from which they are carved is native or imported. It is sometimes argued that there was in medieval times a shortage of English oak, because of the demands of shipbuilding. The consensus now is that this became true in Tudor times, but that there was an abundance of oak until then. However, there is an important distinction between oak used for heavy timbers on the one hand and oak used for planks or boards on the other. Knotty and twisted oak is fine for heavy timbers; straight grained oak is needed for planks or boards. There was plenty of the first type in early medieval England but, from about 1300, the second type came only from mature forests and was being significantly imported, from Poland and the Baltic countries. The imported timber also tended to be from slow growing woodland: slow grown oak is less dense than fast grown oak, and thus is better for intricate carving. Since the quire stalls date from 1306-9, the carpenters could well have made use of imported wood. But it is equally possible that the wood was sourced from local monastic woodland, still being managed for the long term and yielding good quality timber.

The author of the present article has no pretensions to attempt to resolve these uncertainties. Differing views about changes will be recorded as they arise, in the belief that they add to the richness and interest of studying the Cathedral. The changes are categorised as structural changes, decorative modifications or preservation measures.

**STRUCTURAL CHANGES**

**c.1330** - William of Lyngwode’s original support for the gables was a cluster of four columns resting on the armrest, except for an outer column or thin buttress which extended to the floor. This outer column may have buckled; at all events, an excessive strain was placed on the armrests which showed signs of cracking, so diagonally set posts reaching the floor were introduced, probably around 1330 (Figure 2).

![Figure 2 - Diagonal posts](Photo: Simon Newman)
This work is sometimes ascribed to Thomas of Witney, Master Mason at Exeter Cathedral, but Wilfred Carpenter-Turner [3] says: “The defect must have become apparent very shortly after William Lyngwode returned to his Norfolk home. Lyngwode was not available but repairs were carried out by a local carpenter who removed the outer columns or buttresses and replaced them with square posts set at an angle...” Simon Jervis [4] similarly ascribes the remedial work to a local craftsman. It is possible that original pinnacles between the gables were added at this time (see also below).

1637 – The medieval pulpitum was replaced by the Inigo Jones screen and the quire shortened from the west by one pair of seats on each side. Thus there are now 26 stalls on each side instead of 28 originally, with ten return stalls (which face east, rather than north or south) and six return sub-stalls (i.e. the stalls below and in front of the return stalls) at the west end (Figure 3).

The medieval stalls also included 20 other sub-stalls but only scattered pieces of these survive as components of the present stalls. There is wide agreement on these figures apart from a statement by Wilfred Carpenter-Turner [3] that there were at one time 36 seats each side plus the ten return stalls, and probably 68 sub-stalls - a total of 150 seats.

Late 1660s – The fourth and fifth canopies plus the vaulting on the North side were destroyed when the Thamer organ was constructed in the late 1660s, though Simon Jenkins notes [4] that “the damage may have been done when the earlier organ was moved from the quire screen (presumably the then pulpitum) in 1634. The gables were replaced when the present organ case was constructed in 1825, but the vaulting was not restored until 1970”.

Figure 3 North side return stalls and return sub-stalls

Photo: Simon Newman
1820s – (i) Possibly dating from the early 1700s [4] and until the 1820s, the side sub-stalls were arranged as panelled box pews joined to those at the west end of the presbytery, and incorporating long open settles on their fronts. All was reorganised by Garbett in 1824, providing open desks for the choristers. The Tudor panels towards the east end of the quire were incorporated at this time (Figures 5a and 5b); their location prior to that is unknown.

1820s – (ii) Garbett replaced the Inigo Jones screen (Fig 6a) with his Gothic stone screen modelled on the mouldings of Edington’s north porch (Fig 6b); this was in turn replaced by George Gilbert Scott’s wooden screen in 1875.
1975/6 – Some pews were removed. “...and the removal of the little pews will create more space and help to banish the sense of the Quire being cramped and cluttered. The pulpit will be returned to its original place and, to prevent its being masked by having the Lectern almost beside it, the latter is being re-sited at the west end of the Quire.” [5]

1989 – Two new misericords were installed, carved by Susan Wraight (Figure 7). They were to replace two that were missing, these having perhaps at one time been judged excessively earthy.

**Figure 6a** Inigo Jones Screen, engraving from Gale’s History and Antiquities of Winchester reproduced from Winchester Cathedral - 900 years by permission of Dr John Crook

**Figure 6b** Garbett Screen - photograph reproduced with kind permission of Winchester Cultural Trust /Winchester City Council

**Figure 7**-Susan Wraight misericords

Photos: Simon Newman

**DECORATIVE MODIFICATIONS**

In pre-Reformation times, nearly all the visible woodwork in the Cathedral was brightly painted or gilded. This was part of the “vision of splendour” offered to the pilgrim, alongside painted walls and pillars and stained glass windows. Edward Joy notes this [6] and goes on: “Carved
woodwork was nearly always gilded except for its interstices which were difficult to cover with gold leaf and so were painted. Coloured wood work was offensive to the Puritans who either covered it with another coat of paint of dull uniform colour, or removed it altogether.....Today, only the roof bosses above the quire and presbytery, and the boarding [i.e. the starred panels] above the quire stalls....can give us any idea of what the woodwork looked like in its medieval finery.”

1642 – Biblical carvings were destroyed by Waller’s troops. There is a degree of uncertainty about their position when they were in place; they were either at the back or the top of the stalls (see also below).

1662 – Pinnacles were added between the gables. It is uncertain whether they replaced originals, but this is likely given that the Feretory Screen, contemporary with the fourteenth century quire stalls, has bas-relief pinnacles between each pair of canopy tops. (See Figure 8)

Wilfred Carpenter-Turner [3] suggests the original pinnacles could have been added when the supporting posts were introduced, noting that “with all the canopy work carried on slender columns, the designer would aim for an effect of lightness; insertion of the posts gave the whole composition a feeling of greater strength which might demand pinnacles”. Such originals could also have been destroyed by Waller’s troops in 1642. If this is so, it is worth asking the question: why? It was usually unacceptable images that were attacked or destroyed; pinnacles appear neutral in this context. In a few instances, the lower portion of the pinnacles, below a small platform, is as elaborately decorated as the gables, whereas the top portion, above the platform, is invariably much plainer in design. It could be that only the top portions of the pinnacles were found objectionable by Waller’s troops and destroyed, perhaps because unacceptable figures, such as saints, occupied that position. Or it could simply be that the pinnacles had become significantly damaged, as had the decorative crockets on the gables, only a few of which, says Wilfred Carpenter-Turner [3], are original. Here and there, there appears to be damage to decorative crockets at the base of gables.
An article for the Cathedral Record by Barbara Carpenter-Turner [7] makes no distinction between lower and upper portions, noting simply that pinnacles carved in 1662 would account for the rougher workmanship observed in them, compared with the other carving. Whether new or replacements, the pinnacles were in 1662 gilded and painted by John Jerome, when he also painted the Stuart bosses in the Tower vault, and repainted the mortuary chests.

Jerome may also have been responsible for the painting of the starred panels above the stalls (see Figure 4). However, T. D. Atkinson [2] is of the opinion that this colouring is authentic medieval work. Edward Joy [6] argues from this that, if so, it is difficult to explain why the religious carvings should have been placed in front of the panelling, where they would have hidden its painted decorations; he says it is much more likely that the carvings were at the back of the stalls and not above them. By contrast, Simon Jervis [4] writes that: “There seems no reason to doubt the 1642 (Lieutenant Hammond) account which sets these carvings at the top of the stalls: had they been lower down…they would have been obscured by monks during services, and the slender arches in the central stage would have been ill-adapted to (the) narrative scenes (depicted).”

1715 – (see also [1]) Gale’s History of Winchester describes the stalls as “adorned with spire-work gilded”. A picture of the stalls painted by James Cave (Figure 10) in the early 1800s shows that there was some gilding and that the panels above the stalls had the same colour scheme as at present.

1824 – (see also [1]) The quire stalls were stained and varnished, as part of Garbett’s restoration process. The effect of this was warmly welcomed in the Hampshire Chronicle of the day: “The choir of our Cathedral, which has been closed for several years on account of the extensive repairs which time had rendered necessary, will be re-opened to the public for the performance of Divine Service next Tuesday...The beauty of the antique stalls and pulpit is now
seen to its best advantage, the carved work having been made perfect and the whole richly varnished...The whole interior of the venerable edifice will be viewed...with feelings of reverence and delight". [8]

Simon Jervis [4] refers to the panels above the stalls as being “obscured by red paint in the 1820s”. Whereas Edward Joy [6] says that, “during the first half of the nineteenth century, the whole of the colouring of the quire stalls was hidden under a coat of dull red paint.”. However, Wilfred Carpenter-Turner [3] says firmly that “a recent statement that the stalls were painted dark red all over is quite incorrect”. It may be remarked that, if it is Edward Joy’s statement that is referred to here, it is not unequivocally clear that it meant the stalls were wholly covered in red paint. There is however evidence in correspondence held in the Cathedral Archive [9] that the panels were coloured red prior to 1929/30, when this paint was removed. It was then that the panels were re-painted to match the blue shown in Cave’s painting, and the gold stars added.

**1967 onwards** - During the cleaning of the quire stalls and the removal of their varnish (see below), the blue paint applied to the panels in 1929/30 was also removed. Until 2012, the gold stars appeared on a plain wooden background, apart from traces of the former blue colour here and there.

**2012** – the blue-painted background was restored. (See Figure 4)
PRESERVATION MEASURES

Barry Richardson (see also [1]) is the author of an extensive study of wood preservation [10]. In a fascinating account of its history, he records that wood treatment was practised at the beginning of recorded history in Noah’s treatment of the ark with pitch. Under the rule of Alexander the Great in the 300s BC, bridge wood was soaked in olive oil. The Romans took up that idea and Pliny the Elder, who perished at Pompeii during the eruption of Vesuvius, claimed that wood well rubbed with oil of cedar was proof against woodworm and decay. The age of chemical wood preservation arrived by the second half of the eighteenth century.

The staining and varnishing process undertaken at the Cathedral in 1824 would have had a preservative as well as a decorative function, since varnish acts as a protection against most wood-boring insects.

Three types of wood preservative were adopted under the relevant British Standard: tar oil, as in creosote, water-borne, and organic solvents. The organic solvents included chlorinated naphthalene, which was the principal toxicant used in Wykamol. This was the product used to treat the roof timbers of the cathedral in the 1930s (see also [1]).

1950s – the varnished quire stalls were also treated with Wykamol, together with Western face of the quire screen (see also [1]).

1967 onwards – work on removal of stains and varnish from the stalls (and most of the remaining paint) was begun, together with their restoration and treatment with Rentokil fluid; the work was completed by 1976 (see also [1]).

The most recent statement conveying present-day views on wood treatment is from Peter Bird, Cathedral Architect until 2010. It reads as follows;

“For some time the blanket treatment of timbers against death watch beetle – and indeed any other forms of insect attack – has been of doubtful value. Such blanket treatment of the timbers in Winchester Cathedral ceased in 1989, for certain, and possibly earlier.

This was governed by a concern for the environment, and some doubt about the efficacy of the methods used. This was reinforced by a research project undertaken in the early 1990s by English Heritage – which used Winchester as one of their trial sites. The project was funded by the then Cathedral Grants Scheme, and was undertaken by Ridout Associates.

The research discovered that death watch beetles are not susceptible to chemical treatment; that they fly from existing flight holes; that eggs are laid in flight holes; so that there is little chance of catching the beetles or their larvae with chemical means. The certain victims of treatment are the predators of the death watch beetle – lacewing flies, other beetles, and spiders amongst others. Death watch beetle do not in fact flourish where the conditions are dry and warm – which obtains in the roofs of the Cathedral. Given this information, the use of chemical in an attempt to control beetle attack was abandoned as a matter of policy; and spiders, and other predators, are nurtured.

Treatment is still used in association with particular repair projects but only where severe activity is proven, and where timber has been significantly weakened. In such cases strictly limited and controlled amounts of specific pastes are applied in very small and well-defined areas of the roof structures.” [11]
The present Cathedral Architect, Nick Cox, has confirmed that the approach remains broadly as set out in Peter Bird’s statement, and is being adopted in current work on the Presbytery roof. The same approach would no doubt broadly be applicable to the quire stalls, given that they are oak and relatively resistant to attack.

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As a lexical postscript, it may be noted that we have a “choir” and a “quire” at Winchester Cathedral. It would be tidy to establish that “choir” refers to the singers and “quire” to the place where they sing, but Winchester College choristers are “quiristers” so “choir” and “quire” are most likely to be alternative spellings of the same word, deriving from the Greek chorus. At all events, the glorious music that sounds regularly round the quire stalls is one of the great joys of the Cathedral. The stalls themselves are renowned for the quality and vigour of their carvings. It is hoped this résumé prompts the thought that there is interest also to be derived from the way their appearance, and the care of them, has evolved over the centuries.

Stephen Jones is a guide at Winchester Cathedral and leads a team of guides specialising in Tours of the Woodwork.

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