CHOIR STALLS AND CONNECTIONS THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Generations of incumbents and visitors in Winchester Cathedral have gazed with awe on the woodcarvings that adorn the 14th century choir stalls. Due to the comprehensive nature of the Cathedral and Diocesan archives in Winchester it has been possible to estimate the date when the choir stalls were carved. In other archives, there are accounts of how the choir stalls would have appeared before their partial destruction during the Civil War in the 17th century, and these are briefly described on through to the 20th century. But apart from destruction by human intervention, there has been a fight to preserve the wood in the choir stalls from damp, fungi, death watch beetle and other insects. Through the personal accounts of those involved, we then move on to the development and use of agents to preserve the choir stalls over the last 80 years, and the outlook for the future.

Julian English, a guide in the Cathedral, starts the story with the extract in figure 1 below from the register held at the Hampshire Records Office of Henry Woodlock, Bishop of Winchester from 1305 to 1316.

Figure 1 Two pages of the register containing a copy of Bishop Woodlock’s letter
This register contains at the bottom of the first page and top of the second page a copied letter of 1308 that reads as in figure 1a below.

Figure 1a The Latin text of Bishop Henry Woodlock’s letter

**English translation of the letter [see footnote]**

To the Venerable Lord Father in Christ John, by the grace of God Bishop of Norwich, his brother H(enry) etc. Since William of Lingwode, carpenter, your tenant in your manor of Blofield, has already begun a work of his craft in the choir of our Cathedral Church of St. Swithun at Winchester, which, without his continuous presence, could not be finished within the due time, we cordially ask, by your sincere friendship, about which we have special confidence, how long you think it right, in as far as you are able, to have the absence of the said craftsman, your tenant, excused for a good reason, provided that you agree, giving instructions to your stewards and bailiffs that they do not in any way, on behalf of your Manorial Court, disturb or pester this same man in his absence until the said work is finished, from the feast of St. Michael next for a full year. If you want us to do anything confidently, write back the gracious purpose of your will. May the Most High preserve you in increasing health through all the times of our Lord to come. Dated etc.

1. etc: this would be something like “sends greetings”.

2. etc: the previous three letters are undated, but the one before that is dated June 28, 1308, so it is reasonable to assume this letter is of the same date.

**Footnote:** With thanks, admiration and appreciation to Phil Ferris and Brian Collins for the translation. Thanks to Roy Weller for his help with the illustrations.
Then it is thought the two faces in figure 2 below are those of William and of his wife, which are in the south west corner of the stalls.

Three centuries later in 1634 a Lieutenant Hammond set off from Norwich to travel 1,200 miles round the country, which included a visit to Winchester in August 1635. Here he described the ‘...rich Joyners worke...ravishing the eyes of the beholders...’; and went on to record all 56 biblical scenes carved on what is now the starred frieze above the original back stalls. Examples include ‘Noah is drunke, and his 3 Sons describ’d’ from the Old Testament on the north side, and ‘Christ tempted by ye Devill at 3 places in ye Wildernes’ from the New Testament on the south side.

Then early in the next century in 1715, Samuel Gale’s History of Winchester Cathedral was published, which refers to the stalls as being ‘adorned with spire-work gilded’. Indeed colour and gilding can be seen in James Cave’s 1801 painting of the stalls, which provides such a valuable visual record of the stalls at that time. But then it is assumed that at some point in the 1800s the stalls were all stained to preserve them, as part of the overall restoration and tidying process started by William Garbett, the Cathedral Surveyor from 1809 to 1834.

So we move into the 1900s, when the story is taken on by a former fellow Winchester Rotarian of Julian English, in the person of Barry Richardson, whose father Stanley Richardson set up the business of Richardson and Starling in Hyde Close here in Winchester – see figures 3 & 3a.

It was this business the Dean and Chapter employed in the 1930s to treat the roof timbers with a newly developed odourless product appropriately named Wykamol. Then in the 1950s the business was employed again to treat the choir stalls with the same product, when one of their employees was a Mr H J Viney – see more below. The Wykamol product had been developed from the pioneering work of...
Harold Maxwell Lefroy, Professor of Entomology, who had been investigating ways, based on orthodichlorobenzene, to kill death watch beetles that had infested Westminster Hall, and who founded what eventually became the Rentokil Group in 1960.

It is at this point Peter Bateman takes on the story of events in 1967, when he was the Editor of the Rentokil house magazine, for which he wrote an article titled *Restoring Winchester’s Choir Stalls*, a copy of which he handed to Julian English at the end of a pre-booked group tour back in 2012. So the connections got made, and the story came together as above, leaving Peter to take it on in his own style under his adapted title.

**MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH WATCH**

The smiting of the Winchester woodworm that gnawed at William Lyngwode’s 14th century masterpiece, as in figure 4, was accomplished by a specialist team from Rentokil, whose laboratory chemists met the exacting requirements of restoration expert Mr. H J Viney, as above. One chemist, John Trueman, still describes it as the most exciting work of his career, being able to develop an insecticidal preservative that would avoid all toning down of the original stripped back wood. I myself was privileged to see Mr Viney working on the dismantled panels, as in figure 5, and the next Christmas joined with some of my family to worship in the Cathedral. The work was under the direction of the then Cathedral architect, appropriately named Mr W J Carpenter Turner.

The restoration included the removal of old stains and varnishes from the choir stalls and over 500 carved figures. It revealed scorch marks from the lighted candles and grease from the tonsured heads of Benedictine monks, as they leaned back from the misericords. Today the choir stalls are as they appeared when Edward II was on the throne.
An incidental discovery when the panels were removed was that of twigs of the Broom shrub. Traditionally a token of humility, its botanical name Plantagena genista is that from which the reigning royal house of Plantagenet took its name. When the choir stalls were carved, Edward II was soon to be defeated at Bannockburn and murdered at Berkeley Castle. Among the carvings above the choir stalls are the heads of Edward II, his stepmother, Margaret, and his wife Isabella.

Of the destructive agents, signs of three wood boring beetle species were found. First and foremost is the death watch beetle, so called because of the sound of it tapping its head on the oak beams in which it lives and feeds, which can be the only sound in the stillness of a morgue. Its complete life cycle may take up to ten years from egg, to soft white larva, to chrysalis, to adult about 7 mm long. It seldom flies out of doors and prefers a diet of old oak, preferably softened up by fungal decay.

Hence the urgent need for such expert restoration and treatment in 1967, following which the story will be brought up to date through a final section to be added in 2015.