The Misericords of Winchester Cathedral

by Michael J Callé

In 1994, Friends of Winchester Cathedral published this text in the form of a small booklet, which is now out of print. The author, Michael Callé was a voluntary guide at the Cathedral and was also Chairman of The Friends at the time of his death in January 2009. His widow, Mary, has consented to his work being republished online in Record Extra. It is illustrated with new photographs taken by Simon Newman.

Foreword

The glories of the Quire in Winchester Cathedral are renowned; many would say that it is furnished with the finest set of mediaeval choir stalls in the country. The skilled carving of the canopies, the stall-backs, and indeed the bench-ends are there for all to see and admire. This article sets out to show, in photographs, details that the visitor could not otherwise see. The photographs are in sequence, starting at the stall next to the pulpit and continuing round to the bishop’s throne. The six sub-stalls are shown within the North and South ranges. The numbering follows that established by G L Remnant in his Catalogue of Misericords in Great Britain, 1969. The Woodcarver from the anthology “It won’t last for ever, but it’s not done yet” by the late Patrick Mace is reprinted with permission of his widow, Mrs Mace. Denise Willows and John Hardacre have been generous with time, encouragement and helpful suggestions, but this article would never have happened if my wife had not committed me to lecture on the subject almost before I knew what a misericord was.
Introduction

The canons and monks who served collegiate or monastic churches were required to attend many services every day. Within the Benedictine foundation at Winchester these were nine. Mattins and the seven daily Offices enjoined by Psalm 119 [1] together with Mass.

In early times all participants were required to stand throughout the services. However the real needs of elderly, infirm canons and monks, who rose at midnight to say Mattins and Lauds, led to a gradual relaxation of this rule. By the early 12th century it had become customary to provide tip-up seats with a small ledge on the underside which could be used as a support while standing.

The first documented reference occurs in the writings of Abbot Peter of Cluny in 1121. This act of mercy - misericordia - led to seats of this type being called misericords. It was not long before the craftsmen making them started to embellish the bracket supporting the ledge with decorative carving. There are no known 12th century misericords surviving in England. The earliest examples are two 13th century seats, of unknown provenance, at Christchurch Priory, Dorset, which have been dated to 1210 and 1220 respectively. The famous series of seats in the Victorian stalls at Exeter were carved between c1230 and c1260, while the earliest complete set in their original stalls, those at Salisbury, have been dated c1245-55.

The Quire at Winchester was constructed during the episcopate of Henry Woodlock, the only Prior of the Monastery of St Swithun ever to become Bishop. In 1927 Canon Goodman transcribed and translated Bishop Woodlock’s Registers and found a letter [2] from the bishop to John Salmon, Bishop of Norwich. Thanks to this work, we know both an exact date for their creation, 1308, and the name of the master craftsman responsible, William of Lyngwode. Lingwood, a village which lies just to the east of Norwich, was part of the manor of Blofield, then owned by the Bishop of Norwich. Without Bishop Woodlock's intervention Master William would have had to return to Blofield to do service in the manor court.

When first constructed the Quire extended further to the west. There were an additional pair of stalls on either side and there would have been a complete range of sub-stalls. Thus there would have been twenty-eight back stalls and five returned stalls on either side and some forty sub-stalls ranged below them. It seems probable that they all had carved misericord seats. This total of 106 equals the number to be found at Salisbury today, where one may see the largest remaining number of mediaeval stalls.

Sadly, several re-arrangements of the Winchester Quire since the Reformation have depleted the number of stalls. The first took place in 1637 when the mediaeval pulpitum [3] was replaced by the Inigo Jones Screen. Two stalls on either side were removed at that time and this would have forced changes to, and removal of some of the sub-stalls.

The watercolour by James Cave shows that, by 1801, all but a few sub-stalls at the west end had been replaced by pews. Today, only six much mutilated sub-stalls situated below the return stalls remain, and these, together with a number of standards re-used...
as pew ends, are all that is left to remind us of the original appearance of the lower pew range of stalls. In total 68 stalls remain, 66 of them with mediaeval misericords.

The fate of the two missing ones is not recorded, but it is possible that they suffered in the same way as five seats at Chester Cathedral where a Victorian Dean ordered the removal of ‘these lewd scenes’. In 1987 the Dean & Chapter decided to replace the two missing misericords and the search for a craftsman began. The artist chosen was Susan Wraight, an Englishwoman working in Australia. Curiously, she was selected on the basis of her carvings of netsuke; she had been inspired to create these miniature works of art by her knowledge of English misericords!

The next problem was to find suitable timber. The mediaeval seats were carved from solid oak six inches thick, but properly seasoned wood of this size proved impossible to obtain. After long discussion with practising woodcarvers and other experts it was decided to laminate three inch timber. Suitable English oak was located - again in Australia - and work commenced. The two new seats arrived in Winchester in the late spring of 1989 and were on display in the cathedral treasury during the summer. One final difficulty remained. The mediaeval seats were fixed with iron strap hinges which had long since disappeared. Local blacksmith Charles Normandale, from Warnford near Winchester, was commissioned and faithfully reproduced the original pattern. The new seats were fixed in place on 11 April 1990 and a service of dedication was held on 26 May 1990 at which Susan Wraight herself was present.

In the long tradition of sacred art, donors came forward to pay for these wonderful new misericords. The Pelican is dedicated to the memory of the Reverend Alfred Lovell, while the Lion commemorates the late Mr William Halstead.

**The Misericords**

The presence of supporters (on either side of the central bracket) is a characteristic of English misericords. It is a feature rarely seen on continental seats. Whilst the carving under most misericords gives great prominence to the central bracket and relatively little emphasis to the supporters on either side - which are often no more than decorative scroll or leaf work - the supporters at Winchester are given equal treatment with the central bracket. This characteristic feature is most pronounced where the supporters take the form of portrait heads, N29, and foliate masks, N23, but may be seen in them all. The subject matter of the mediaeval Winchester seats is drawn from a wide variety of sources. The craftsmen have clearly drawn on their own everyday experience as well as that medieval best seller, The Bestiary, but one class of subject is absent. There are no Biblical scenes. The carvings may be grouped under six headings:

- Portrait heads,
- Domestic scenes and pastimes,
- Animals,
- Monsters and mythical beasts,
- Green men, and
- Foliage.

The portrait heads speak for themselves. They are so alive and full of expression, for
example N29 and S5, that one is forced to believe that they were intended to portray people known to the carvers. Sadly, their names must remain a mystery to us. Even the crowned head, N7, is difficult to ascribe, but it is probably meant to be Edward I - it is very like one of the two crowned heads used as label stops on the canopies above the stalls.

The absence of Biblical images does not mean that there are no “Sermons in Wood“. The carvings of domestic scenes and pastimes and of animals and other beasts should not be taken at face value.

While it is difficult to interpret the mediaeval mind, the fact that the majority of the musicians are depicted as animals, and that even the dancing couple, S28, are apes dressed as people, surely implies that such pleasures derive from man's baser instincts and are to be shunned. The message of the Devil flanked by two attractive ladies, S11, would have been only too clear to the monks. Creatures that went abroad at night were often associated with the forces of darkness. Thus the owl, N19, was sometimes seen as a representation of the Jews who had turned away from God's light, and the cat came to be associated with witches. The supporters on the seat at N10 are open to two interpretations: that on the right shows a seated woman spinning, her cat beside her, while on the left is a man fighting a wild beast, but might not the woman be astride her familiar, her cat, riding to a coven and might not the good man be trying to overcome
the forces of evil by killing the witch’s familiar? Similarly, the much loved cat with a mouse, N28, may be a portrayal of the Devil with a Christian Soul in its mouth.

By contrast, the iconography of the two modern seats, S20 & S21, is clear and deliberate. Medieval man believed that the lioness gave birth to dead cubs, and that, on the third day, the lion came and breathed upon them, thus giving them life - a clear symbol of the Resurrection. Contrast the dormant cubs in the right-hand supporter with the playful ones to the left. Similarly, the self-sacrifice of the pelican, who was believed to feed her young on the blood from her breast, was symbolic of the self-sacrifice of Christ, and therefore of the Eucharist.

There are a variety of monsters and mythical beasts to be seen. Some, like the centaur, S6, and the harpies, of which LS2 is a particularly gruesome example, derive from Greek mythology. By mediaeval times the siren of the Greeks, also half woman half bird had evolved into the mermaid, N8. The fish being carried by her mate was symbolic of the human soul ensnared by the lusts of the flesh. The strange creature in the foliage, N14 right, is a Blemya, a headless man with its face in the centre of its chest fabled by early Roman writers to inhabit Ethiopia. Such myths persisted into Tudor times; both Hakluyt’s Voyages and Raleigh’s Description of Guiana claimed that such creatures inhabited South America [5].

No reference to monsters is complete without mention of the dragon and its kind, the traditional symbols of the devil. There are no dragons on the Winchester misericords, but there are several wyvems, N12 and N30, a beast with a dragon’s head, the wings and talons of an eagle and the tail of a serpent.

The foliate mask is an ancient form of sculptural decoration which, like many pagan symbols, has been adopted by Christianity. Sometimes the facial expression is evil, but often it is benign and in that form may be associated with the May Day ceremonies, Jack-in-the-Green and the regeneration of spring. Examples include both supporters, N18 and S7, and one central bracket, N11.

Representations of foliage form is by far the largest class of subject to be found on the misericords. Oak, hazel, hawthorn, ivy, maple and geranium may all be identified as well as the formalised ‘stiff leaf decoration’. In some cases squirrels, N28, and birds, N3, are to be seen feeding among the leaves.

Over the centuries, many of the seats have become damaged. Woodworm has taken its toll, features have been rubbed away by contact with the coarse cloth of the monk’s habits and rust has destroyed several of the original strap hinges. Much of this will be apparent from the photographs. Two other changes have occurred which will be less obvious and merit comment. As a result of a very skilled repair the misericord at N20 has no supporters. The original seat must have been so badly damaged that it was only possible to salvage the central bracket, which has been inserted into a new board. This can just be seen in the photograph.

The other change relates to the sub-stalls. When they were last re-arranged, they were stretched to fill the available space with the result that the original seat boards were no longer wide enough. To overcome this problem four of the carvings were sliced from the
front of the old boards and fitted to new ones. The effect is far from pleasing, but at least it has preserved the famous "wagging tongue", LNI.

Plan of The Quire showing the Position of the Misericords

Misericords on the North Side of the Quire from east to west

N31 Green man tongue out Crouching man hands around knees Green man

N30 Wyvern eating tail Man’s head Wyvern eating tail

N29 Woman’s head wimple + gorget Woman’s head wimple + gorget Bearded man

N28 Squirrel + nuts Cat + mouse Squirrel + nuts
N7  Crowned King  Posture maker  Man’s head
         missing head  with curly hair

N6  Ivy leaves  Man playing pipe  Ivy leaves

N5  Maple leaves  Posture maker  Maple leaves
         grimacing

N4  Scroll foliage  Foliage  Scroll foliage

N3  Birds in foliage  Harpy in  Birds in foliage
         wimple + gorget

N2  Oak leaves  Crouching man  Oak leaves
         + acorns  + acorns

N1  Oak leaves  Head of Ecclesiastic  Oak leaves
         + acorns

LN3  Maple leaves  Man’s head  Maple leaves

LN2  Leaf  Large head with  Leaf
         elaborate headdress

LN1  Female  Hooded figure  Cowled monk’s head
         head  with wagging tongue
Misericords on the South Side from west to east

LS1  Fig leaf  Man with head on knees  Fig leaf

LS2  Hazel nuts with leaves  Harpy with large talons  Hazel nuts with leaves

LS3  Harpy  Man in chain mail  Harpy

S1  Missing  Monk’s had cowled  Ivy leaves

S2  Ivy leaves  Man supporting bracket with head and shoulders  Ivy leaves

S3  Maple leaves  Dog lying down  Maple leaves

S4  Leaves  Recumbent ram  Leaves

S5  Woman’s head  Man’s head  Man’s head

S6  Maple leaf  Young centaur  Maple leaf

S7  Green man  Hooded man with hunting horn  Green man
S8  Man’s head  crouched woman  supporting seat
     Man’s head

S9  Foliage  Hare or rabbit feeding  Foliage

S10 Oak leaves  Hooded man  bent backwards  Oak leaves

S11 Woman’s head  Demon with horns and tail  Woman’s head  wimple + gorget

S12 Maple leaf  Winged harpy  Maple leaf

S13 Green man  Lion’s mask  Green man

S14 Ivy leaf  Tusked boar  Ivy leaf

S15 Stiff leaf  Woman’s head  Stiff leaf

S16 Leaves  Drowned female monster with long serpentine tail  Leaves

S17 Cockerel  Fox emerging from its earth  Cockerel
Notes

1. Psalm 119 v 62 At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee and. at v 164 Seven times a day do I praise thee. Thus Mattins and the seven daily Offices (Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers and Compline) enjoined by the Benedictine Rule.

2. Transcript of Letter from Bishop Henry Woodlock to The Bishop of Norwich

Registrum Henrici Woodlock

Brother Henry &c to the worshipful Father in Christ, the Lord John by the grace of God, bishop of Norwich: William of Lyngwode, carpenter, a tenant of your manor of Blofield, has already begun a piece of work belonging to his craft in the quire of our cathedral church of St Swithun, Winchester, and his continual presence is needed for its satisfactory accomplishment. Relying on your sincere friendship, we earnestly request, that so far as you fairly may, you will excuse the absence of your tenant from doing suit in your court for a year from the feast of St Michael next ensuing until he has finished the said work, and that you will give instructions to your steward and bailiffs not to disturb him in this behalf. In reply write to us your wishes, and rest assured we will fulfil them. May the Most High have you in his keeping and prolong your days.

3. The pulpitum was a stone screen which divided the nave from the quire. It was located at the front of the present nave dais. Some authorities suggest that the space within was used as the monks’ vestry.

4. The word supporter is used in its heraldic sense. The supporters are purely decorative.

5. cf Wm Shakespeare Othello Act I ii *... The Anthropophagi, the men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders.*

* Editor's note: The leaves identified as geranium are more likely to be alchemilla mollis as cultured geraniums were not known in England in the early 1300s.

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Tailpiece: The WOOD CARVER

Brother Odo saw my carving first
And hurried off hot foot to tell the Prior.
I’d be for the high jump, he said;
He hadn’t denied the world and the flesh, he said,
To have it lurking each day under his rump:
He said he’d never sit in that stall again;
He said that that sort of thing gave his soul a pain –
What had happened was this; I was a wood carver
Working on the monks’ misericords –
You know what misericords are - those tip-up seats
Where the monks sat to sing their offices –
Well it was like this: I was always one for the girls
And my chisel ran away with me: I carved a fiddler,
Added a woman and caught the two of them kissing –
My fancy made up for what my flesh was missing,
That’s what the Prior said - for along he came to look
With Brother Odo - and the Almoner fluttering behind,
Muttering behind about sinful suggestions and hell fire
And that kissing in the cathedral was a matter for the Curia.
Father Prior pulled them up short.
Carnal affection, he said, was the gift of God;
Love lay holy in the April time of youth
And what better place to bring it than the church?
He gave us a homily on sex until Odo and the Almoner,
Red above the ears, went off to dinner. Then Father Prior
Moved to my other carving on the North side;
Its a laughing man and when you lift the seat
He sticks his tongue out at the congregation - like this!
The Prior stood there looking; then he put his finger –
And waggled the tongue; then he glanced sideways at me,
Then he sighed and then - well, then. I think,
If he hadn’t been the Prior what he would have done
Was wink!
“Brother Carver”, he said, “The irreverent laughter below the stairs
Is as much a part of faith as piety. You teach
As excellent a sermon in wood as I can preach
In words. Though the blessed saints call Paradise down
To our eyes, the best of us must remain half clown,
 Redeeming with laughter the weight of the world’s impieties.”
That’s what he said; what he meant - well, this is the fact,
All its meaning for me at the time was I hadn’t been sacked!

Patrick B Mace