

THE ARCHBISHOP'S RING

Brian Whitehouse uncovers a medieval mystery

This is a tale about one of the Minster's hidden treasures, so well hidden in fact that no one knows where it is – no one connected with the Minster that is.

For me the story began one day when I was putting something back in one of the cupboards in the Historic Library and my eye was caught by a small oval, cardboard box lying in the corner of a shelf. A closer look showed that the box bore a label, 'Archbishop's Ring'. Intrigued, for I had never heard that the Minster possessed such a thing, I opened the box. Imagine my disappointment on finding that it appeared to contain nothing but some corrugated cardboard packing. However, amongst the cardboard there were a few sheets of paper, one of which related events which had some of the elements of a Victorian novel – a churchyard, a skeleton, a stolen ring, a deathbed confession. Finally there was a mystery.

Go back to the year 1847 and imagine a mason at work on the south wall of the nave, which was 'in a state of great dilapidation'. As he worked on the stone some of it fell away, revealing a skeleton entombed in the thickness of the wall. Who was it apparently walled-up in this way?

Now go back much further - to the fifteenth century when there were two half-brothers: William, the elder, and Lawrence (or Laurence) Booth (or Bothe or even Bowthe). Both became Archbishops of York, the 51st and 53rd respectively (for comparison Archbishop Santanu is the 97th), and both were evidently fond of Southwell, as many medieval Archbishops were. In their time as Archbishops, an old chapel which stood against the south wall of the nave was repaired or replaced, and Lawrence founded two Chantries within it. Both brothers were interred at Southwell, William in 1464 within his chapel and Lawrence in 1480, first near his brother and later under an arch connecting the chapel to the nave, where an altar tomb is said to have stood, similar to the one that stands to this day in the north aisle.

The Booth Chapel Chantries were of course abolished at the Reformation: afterwards the building was used variously as a schoolroom and a library. A drawing of the west front of the Minster shows an end view of the chapel as it was shortly before the Chapter swept it away.

A seventeenth century antiquary wrote that the chapel "by negligence in the late wars (*the Civil War*, and since, is now utterly ruined, as is also a very fair marble tomb in it, whereunder 'tis like that one of them (*the 2 brothers Booth*) lies buried". Dilapidation evidently continued, until finally, in 1784, the Chapter ordered the demolition of the chapel, which they were able to do without a by-your-leave from anyone. An early nineteenth century writer said that it was "considered as a deformity, destroying the regularity of the building." (Imagine today's Chapter authorising the demolition of the Chapter House for the same reason!).

The arch under which Lawrence lay interred was blocked and his body continued its repose undisturbed. But what of the "very fair marble tomb", possibly that of William Booth? In the early nineteenth century a description was given of a "plain blue stone (*marble?*) making part of the pavement in the south nave aisle, with an inscription, the only legible part of which contained the name "Wilhelmus Booth ob. 1464". Thus, as the historian drily remarks, "was the founder turned out of doors (of his chapel) while his more, perhaps prescient brother retains his station in the wall, the outside of whose forms a part of its face".

Alas for the prescience of the younger Booth. In 1847, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who had recently usurped the old Chapter under the Victorian reforms, authorised a scheme to replace some of the windows in the south wall of the nave in what they evidently considered a more appropriate architectural style (Norman), and to repair the "great dilapidation". It was on this scheme that our mason was working at the start of my tale. His activities destroyed the tomb, and no part of stone or tomb is now to be found in the Minster.

From here, one of the papers I found in the little box takes up the story. I cannot do better than let the writer, Minor Canon Alfred Tatham, who had been one of the Vicars Choral of the old collegiate foundation, tell it himself.

"Archbishop William Booth was interred in the chapel of St John at the S.W. side of the south aisle of Southwell church. His brother Archbishop Lawrence Booth was also interred in the same chapel in the year 1480.

In the year 1847 it was found necessary to remove a window, and some of the ashlar work where it was known that Archbishop Booth's chapel stood. In doing this a skeleton was found, and from one of the fingers the enclosed ring was taken by John Lane (Master Mason). He said nothing to any person at the time it came into his possession. He died shortly afterwards and on his death he requested his son to give it to me. Alfred Tatham.

It is not clear to whom this note was addressed, but it is copied in a note written and signed by Mary Trebeck, who adds:

"The ring was given to me (Mary Trebeck) Sep. 1885 by the widow of the above, Mary Tatham, and I gave it to Archd Richardson Rector of Southwell, to give to his successor. July 14th 1900. Mary Trebeck."

So where is the ring now? Should I be asking the Dean for it? After all, he is now Rector of Southwell. The sad conclusion to this story, spanning six centuries, is written on another of the papers in the box *"Said to have been stolen "two or three years ago". 1949." RMB (Richard Beaumont – former Minster Librarian).*

EPILOGUE

And the mystery that I mentioned at the beginning? Maybe there are two mysteries, or even three, or more.

The first arises from another of the papers in the small box where this story began. Written in a tiny, almost illegible hand, possibly that of W.A. James who was Minster Librarian for about thirty years in the first half of the twentieth century it is a description of a ring exhibited by Mr C. Hodgson Fowler, F.S.A. at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries in London on 22nd January 1880 as *"found in Southwell church on the finger of a skeleton of Archb. Laurence Booth"*. Since it is the only description we have of something that is now missing it is worth quoting:

"The ring is silver gilt, large, and to be worn on the middle finger. The hoop is cut and engraved with flowers and quatrefoiled diamonds. It is set with a large blue stone, or glass, and had when I saw it before a crystal under it, but that is not now with it" (I am not sure what the last part of the description means. Mr Fowler says elsewhere that he was first shown the ring by Alfred Tatham in 1874.)

So far, so fairly clear. However, a writer in 1918, giving no reason. Says, *"This apparently is not the ring which was given to Archdeacon Richardson"*. Were there two rings? This writer seemed to think so then. However, in 1921, again without giving any reason, he blandly states that it *"was the one formerly in the possession of the Rev. Alfred Tatham, (i.e. the one that was given to Archdeacon Richardson) and which is now in the Minster Library"*. (No longer, alas!)

Finally, the location of the ring itself. Who "said" to RMB that it had been stolen in 1946 or '47, what were the circumstances, and was the theft reported to the police? More research into the documents of the time is required, or, better still, can anyone remember those days?

One nagging doubt remains. Most of the writers quoted above seem confident that the ring came from the skeleton of Archbishop Lawrence Booth, but how did they *know*?

Somewhere, I have no doubt, Archbishop Booth's ring (if his it was) still exists.

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