

A FEW NOTES ON SOUTHWELL MINSTER

by The Very Rev.W.J.Conybeare, M.A., Provost of Southwell

1 - THE NAVE is the oldest part, built about 1110, and is an unsurpassed example of pure Norman, with vast pillars and round-headed arches, and the cable moulding of the transepts and tower. The West window and others are insertions of the Perpendicular style about 400 years later. The Font is also comparatively modern, the old Norman font having been probably taken away in Cromwell's time. It is thankworthy that Cromwell did not carry out his threat to pull down the Nave, and leave only the Choir. We owe the preservation of the Nave to a Mr Cludd, who, though a non-conformist, pleaded with Cromwell and so saved the Nave for us.

The pillar, opposite the pulpit, has had part of its capital cut away. This was done in medieval times to fix a canopy over an altar of "Our Lady of the Pike" (pillar), and the outline of the Angel Gabriel and Mary with a lily in a vase can still be seen. The Greek attitude of supplication is used, and so the date is early, about 1212.

It must be borne in mind that the massive building of the Normans, reflects their spirit. The Normans were strong and determined characters, and so they built accordingly. Our Nave, therefore stands for FAITH.

2 - Passing into the CHOIR we find ourselves in a very different atmosphere. It was built in 1234, in the middle of the great thirteenth century when men were aspiring after freedom (Magna Charta was signed 1215, and the first Parliament started about 50 years later) and after knowledge (Roger Bacon the scientist lived then), and so our Choir with its pointed arches and lancet windows all pointing upwards stands for HOPE.

The Screen is very richly carved and was made about 1340, cutting off the Choir, where the college of clergy held daily services, from the Nave, which served as the Parish Church. The Archbishops of York built the Minster, and the finely carved stall was used by them. Cardinal Wolsey used to worship there. There are over 170 heads on the screen, many restored by the Italian artist Bernasconi about 1820. In the centre is a beautiful Madonna and Child, and the "beckoning Angel" should be noticed on the north side.

Looking up to the triforium on the north, there are two corbels carved, one with the head of Archbishop Walter de Gray, the builder, the other King Henry the Third. It is unusual to find the triforium arches carried up so as to include the clerestory windows.

The first set of steps marks the spot where the original Norman church ended. In 1234 the Sanctuary was added, and the Norman work demolished as far as where the screen now stands. The builders then proceeded to build from that point towards the Sanctuary. It was a difficult task, and to get a true alignment was too much for them. So the string course on the north side is seen to drop about three inches at the meeting, and the archway opposite does not correspond with its neighbours, being wider and not so high.

The Eagle Lectern was originally at Newstead Abbey. When Henry VIII was coming to take their property, the monks put their title deeds into the ball, and threw it all into the lake. There it was for over 200 years, when Lord Byron dredged the lake and came across this treasure. The name of the man in whose memory the Lectern was made can be easily read. It is possible that it was used for collecting Peter's Pence, the money being put into the Eagle's beak.

The East Window is remarkable because, unlike other Early English windows, it consists of an even number of lights. The four lower lights are filled with most interesting pictorial glass made (except the baptism scene) in Flanders about 1550 for the royal chapel at Paris. The three lights depict the Raising of Lazarus, the Triumphal Entry, and the mocking and scourging. They were probably seen by Marie Antoinette on her way to execution. After that they were taken down, and eventually in 1818 they were bought by an Englishman from a pawn-broker in Paris and brought over to Southwell.

Contemporary persons are drawn, Francis I, Louis XI and Martin Luther among them.

On the wall of the North Choir aisle is fixed a medieval Latin epitaph - "here lies William Talbot a miserable unworthy priest, waiting for the resurrection of the dead, under the mark Tau". The mark Tau in ancient hieroglyphics in Egypt was the sign of life, and was written T the sign O standing for nothingness or death. For Christians the sign T becomes the Cross, and so under the mark Tau, is equivalent to "under the sign of the Cross", i.e., the sign of life. See Ezekiel 9:4, where the prophet is told to put the mark T on the men's foreheads to show they are not to be killed. (N.B. The ancient game of noughts and crosses is a game of death and life).

3 - The CHAPTER HOUSE brings us into yet another frame of mind. Here we see the most exquisite carving, amazingly rich in detail, a wonderful attempt to break loose from all conventionality in art, and to represent in stone the realities of nature.

How were those leaves with their delicate veins and tendrils carved, those birds with their features, those vines and oaks and buttercups? May we not say that now we see LOVE? Only one who loved nature and loved his work could have done this. It is the "Benedicite" done into stone. And the artist was a mechanic too. Look at that stone roof with its great central boss poised above, and yet no central pillar to support it. There it has been safe and sound, since it was built in 1300. And nothing is known of the maker, but tradition maintains that he has given us his face, for on the north is a man wearing a mason's cap. It is a clear portrait, as those eyebrows prove. He was a man of humour, as well as a keen observer of nature. Hidden under a capital of oak leaves, low down on the S.E. side are two pigs eating the acorns. High up on the N.E. side a goat is eating the ivy while the goatherd blows his horn. And over the doorway is a man peeping slyly and laughing at the meeting. His dog, too, is enjoying the fun.

We return to the Nave, and, after the rich carving of the Choir and Chapter House, we are almost relieved by the sense of repose and confidence the Norman work gives to us. But the Church of Christ must needs present the fulness of the Christian character, and each part of Southwell Minster has its special message.

The North Transept steps lead down into the little Chapel where the Airmen's altar is an example of modern workmanship worthy to be compared with that of long ago. Its unique story is told in the illuminated account placed on the wall.

Opposite the entrance to the chapel are the only remains of the older, and much smaller, Saxon church, a tympanum, carved with scenes of David and the lion, and Michael and the Dragon.

Close to the South Porch, before leaving the church, a glimpse of something far older can be had. Lift up the flooring of the old seats, and there is some Roman tessellated pavement. That pavement was laid down within 150 years of the life of our Lord. Possibly the Romans had a place of worship here, following a yet older worship, near the Three Wells which gave Southwell its name.

So we leave this Minster, now the Cathedral Church of the Diocese, looking back. So we gain inspiration from the past for our own time and the future.

Even the ground plan of the Minster is a cross, the Nave and Choir with the transepts purposely built in the form of the Cross, reminding us that the Church exists to make known and acknowledge Christ crucified, whereby alone we are saved.