

ARCHBISHOP WALTER DE GREY

by Christine Bowering

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I sometimes wonder exactly how many faces there are in the Minster, and how many of them are of people and friends that the masons knew, rather than created for fun and amusement. The masons of the day were skilled and well-travelled, and so had possibly met or seen the famous people such as nobles and royalty that they have carved. Sadly, we only know for certain the identity of a few faces, but the carving of Walter de Grey, the Archbishop of York responsible for the rebuilding of the Quire in C13th is placed exactly where we would expect to see it, and match carvings of him on his tomb in York Minster

Walter de Grey (also spelt Gray), was a very important person at the cusp of the 12th and 13th centuries. He was a favourite of King John who made him his Lord Chancellor in 1205 when he was in his 30's. He was made Bishop of Worcester in 1214 and witnessed the signing of the Magna Carta in June 1215. He was appointed as Archbishop of York in 1214 through the influence of King John and the Pope, paying the Pope more than £10,000 for the privilege! This was despite the opposition of the clergy in York who thought he was not sufficiently intelligent!

On the death of King John, Grey played a key role during the minority reign of Henry III and was present at his coronation in 1216. The latter was an unusual occasion, as the King was only 9 years old. He was crowned at Gloucester, as a foreign army occupied half of England and Prince Louis, the son of the King of France who was residing in Westminster, was also after the crown. The Archbishop of Canterbury was not present and there were no crown jewels or crown as these had been lost in the Wash along with King John's baggage! Walter de Grey worked to defeat the opponents of the young king Henry throughout his reign.

As Archbishop, Walter de Grey was a reformer and an architect. During this period architecture flowered, with many facial representations being included. Archbishop de Grey appointed allies at the Chapters at Beverley, Ripon and Southwell Minsters, which operated like satellite cathedrals for York. In 1215 he helped rebuild the east end of Beverley Minster after the collapse of the tower and Ripon received a two towered west façade. He built the South Transept at York in 1220 and bought the village of Thorpe St. Andrew in 1226. This was later to become Bishopthorpe which is now a village and civil parish three miles south of York. He demolished the old manor house of St Andrews's to build the new Bishopthorpe Palace. An Archbishop of York has been resident at Bishopthorpe Palace from 1241 to the present day, excepting only the ten years during the protectorate from 1650 – 1660 and during interregnum periods.

Walter de Grey provided Southwell with its own common fund and, as we know, in 1234 he built a new quire. He also tried to enforce clerical celibacy and improve the morals and education of the clergy. He died, probably in his 80's on 1st May 1255.