

## BEHIND THE SCENES

**By Andrew Todd**

**Reproduced from Pepperpots of Summer 2022**

Our founding statute includes an obligation upon us “to help in preserving for posterity the fabric of the building.” Yet, high up, there is much of the superb medieval building that we cannot see and know little about. Here, Andrew Todd, the former Head Verger and new member of the Council, takes us on a privileged tour behind the scenes.



When I took my set of keys from the Rector in my first job as verger in December 1989, he told me that “this is the thing that makes you the most relevant member of staff, the person that everyone will come to and the one who has access to everywhere. The most powerful person in this church. Keys are the access to all the hidden places above or below ground. Keys are the thing that when the great British public enter the building, they wish they had – ‘I want to be up there’”.

The job of the verger in most places includes access to all areas, which is a tremendous honour in a parish church or cathedral. Though the job of Head Verger is not the same the world over. I had spent the best part of an afternoon having lunch with the Head Verger of a major cathedral when, having put the Church of England to rights over a couple of glasses of “lemonade,” we walked back down the side streets to his cathedral where I challenged him: “all these people wandering about looking at your cathedral and pointing at things, I bet you gloat sometimes when they point at a door above ground and say ‘I wonder where that goes’” - I gestured to a door in one of the towers. “I have no idea where that door goes and I have never seen it before!” came the reply.

One of the joys of being Head Verger at Southwell Minster is that you really do have ‘access all areas.’

Most people will have noticed a door in the north transept, but where does it go...?

The thing about Southwell Minster is that it is a double-skinned building and as soon as you are off the floor you pretty much have that access to all areas. From the door in the corner of the north transept I could go everywhere, bar the library and the rooms above the Chapter House.



One of the things that brought a smile to the Head Verger's face was taking a new verger up into the roof space above the Chapter House and set them about sweeping the stairs, or some such task. The point was always that they never wondered about getting out and, in the days before electric light up there, they would descend the stairs anxious to reach the door, as it grew ever darker, before they reached the underworld. This practice came to an end when young recruits turned up with torches on their phones and now, since the Leaves project, there are lights all the way up the stairs.



Part-way up the stairs is a small door that leads you outside on to the vestry roof. In these two photographs you see the door and the library wall with, at the bottom of the picture, the roof of the Slype (Chapter House passage).



From the Slype roof you can lower a ladder to clean out the two areas between the Pilgrims' Chapel and the walls of the Slype.



The alternative way is to squeeze through the small hatches low down in the Slype. However, other than lifting the ladder up on a rope from the outside of the Minster, the only way to get it out onto the roof of the Slype and vestry is to pass it out through the vestry roof light. It just fits.

Carrying on up the steps, above the Slype and Chapter House, you find two rooms: one is the Muniment Room where all the bits of stone that, over the centuries, have fallen off the Minster are kept and inspected periodically by the Surveyor of the Fabric.

There is a storage cupboard for some of the smaller items, seen here shut and open.



Shut



Open

The next door leads you into the low-ceilinged Chapter House roof vault, with its concrete floor installed as part of Ewan Christian's Victorian restoration of the building. This is where glass fragments and window templates are stored.



It now houses as well the controls for the new Chapter House lighting.

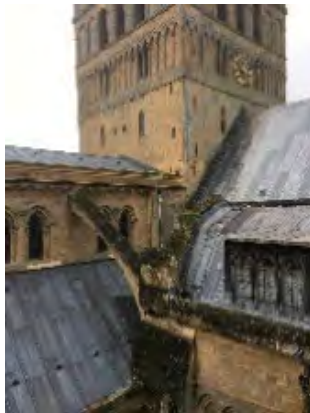
The Minster has an impressively designed fire protection system with smoke detectors, heat detectors and lasers; all very high tech. Below, you can see a picture of the smoke detector in the roof of the Chapter House positioned as high as it will go up into the spire.



You can just make out the chord pulley used to lower it down for inspection.



Finally, at the top of the steps you can climb an elderly, but sturdy, ladder out onto the roof.



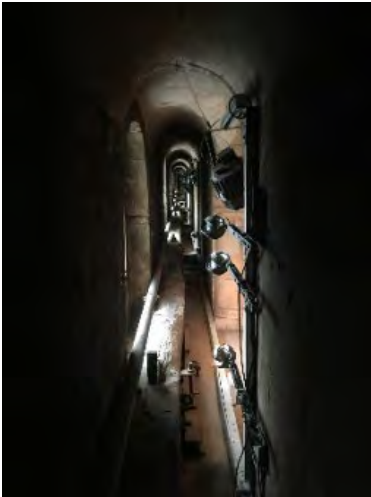
The view from the doorway looks out towards the dormer window of the Library. Under the base of the flying buttress is a brand-new door that I will come to in a moment.

Back on *terra firma*, we head now for the door in the corner of the north transept - the one with the tympanum above that you see vergers disappearing through to fetch things off the Triforium. Once you are through this door - and provided you have the keys - you can reach the whole of the building except the Library and the Chapter House.



The Triforium is a great storage place. Here we see the chairs on the south side that are lowered for big services such as Christmas and Ordinations. The chairs are fastened in threes and you can lower eighteen on one lift, but it takes about seven minutes from start to finish and we have to move two hundred or so. It also requires three vergers to operate the lowering system efficiently and safely.

If you walk to the west end of the Nave Triforium, you enter the western towers – the ‘Pepperpots.’ These have doors at ground floor level but this way, from the Triforium, is much easier. Heading upwards, there are several rooms on either side, some without floors so you have to be careful!



Below, you can move out onto the clerestory through a fire door and squeeze along to change lightbulbs.



While we are at this level, you can see the carved-out dish in a wooden beam. This was made some thirty years ago now when a contractor’s work lamp was left turned on over the weekend and the beam started to smoulder. Thankfully, the smoke was seen by an eagle-eyed verger during a Saturday evening concert and the Fire Brigade summoned.

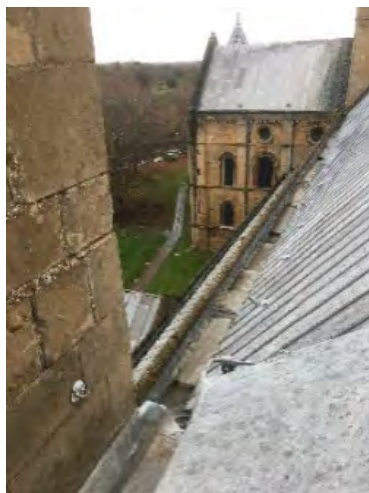


Below, is a view of the Angel Window taken from beside the white fire boarding of the north west Pepperpot tower.



About halfway up is a door allowing access to the whole of the Nave roof.

Note the eyebolt and, looking closely, the cable of the man-safe harness system which runs the length of the roof, protecting vergers from meeting a grizzly end should they slip while cleaning out gutters.



Heading further up the north west tower we reach the room at the top.



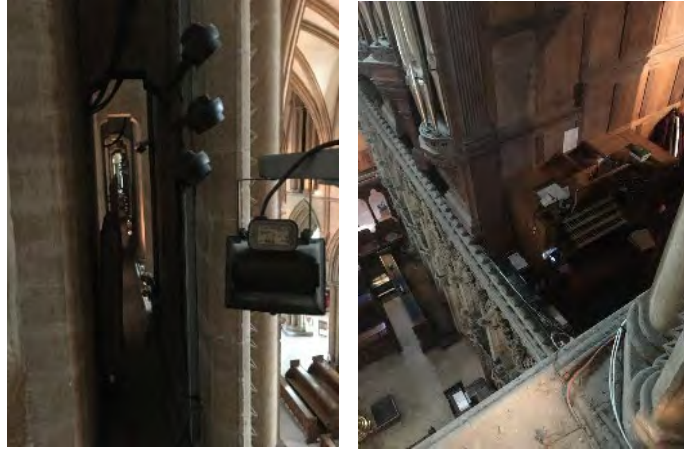
Note the corbel in the wall that would have supported the roof before the 'pepperpot' spires were reinstated, circa 1888, and the bottom of the framework supporting the lead.



Descending the tower, we go all the way back along the Triforium, over the Crossing and in through the door where the Quire organ blower is - just above the north Quire aisle.

This leads us into the Quire Triforium. Different to the Nave Triforium, this has no storage space. We can see the back of the fire boarding that should prevent fire from jumping from the aisle roof into the Quire, or the other way round. The large metal cabinet is home to thirty different dimmer racks that control the main lighting. It is one of several such cabinets around the building.





The large lamp seen above in the foreground is part of the emergency lighting, giving half an hour's illumination with which to leave the building safely, should the power go off. The battery bank for all of these is on the north Nave Triforium. This area also provides a good view down into the organ loft.

This new door is the one I mentioned earlier



It was installed to allow for easier access onto the north Quire low roof when the roof was replaced a couple of years ago. Before we had this, access was from a window on the north transept clerestory, over the Library roof and up a ladder, over a wall and then down a second ladder - not much fun in the rain, so much easier now. The smaller raised part of the roof seen here is the air intake for the Quire organ blower.

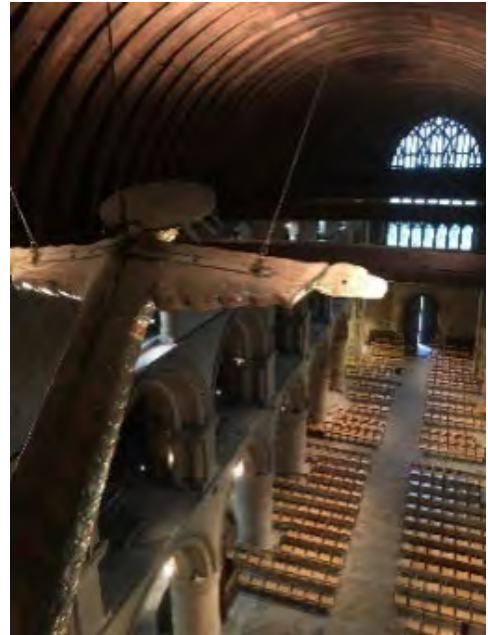






The last place I want to show you is high up above the Nave. Next time you are sitting beneath, look up and you will see the walkway which runs along the length of the Nave.

Apparently, years ago, the Fire Brigade used to bring new recruits in and get them to walk up here. If they could manage it, then they got the job. In the foreground of the picture, you can see the hoist that keeps the Christus Rex in position and, here, the Christus Rex from an angle I imagine most of you have not seen before.



Southwell Minster is a wonderful building and over the past twenty-six years I have enjoyed showing it to people. I do hope that this article has enabled you to see places that you haven't seen before, or that you are now able to make sense of some of those 'secret' doorways.