

THE CHAPTER HOUSE

By Jos Hall 1991

Why is it so called?

The name springs from the monastic custom of opening the daily business meeting with the reading of a chapter of the Bible or other sacred work. The custom, and the name, were extended to colleges of secular canons.

Where is it?

Unusually, on the North side. Most chapter houses are on the South side of a church, especially if it had cloisters, as they were almost always on the South. Lincoln is an exception as the ground drops away steeply on the south. If there are cloisters the Chapter House is invariably on their east wall.

Lincoln was the first non-monastic foundation to build in this way, followed by Beverley, Lichfield, Salisbury, Southwell, and York, in that order.

The chapter house was built later than the church as it was low in the order of priority; BUT was very elaborate, as a symbol of the Chapter's authority.

How did it come to be built and when?

25.1 1288: Archbishop John Romanus (Romaine), when in residence here, authorised the church to raise a levy for the building, and implied that work had already started.

12.1.1293: a letter from J.R. to say that fines from absentee canons for not repairing their houses should be used "ad fabricam novae capitulae" (for the fabric of the new chapter house).

At the same time the number of the canons was increased from 7 to 12 and later 16. Some were foreign appointees residing abroad.

The church took possession of the building between 1295 and 1300.

What is it made of?

Alec Clifton-Taylor in Stone Buildings of England says "fine-grained Permian sandstone from Mansfield or M. Woodhouse (though Pevsner says limestone).

Who built it?

Ivo de Wroughton, master mason from York, worked in the 14th cent, in York (shrine of St. William), Beverley, and Selby (east window) about 1330; and his mark, like an upturned umbrella, is on the Southwell pulpitum; but the gap between dates makes it unlikely that he worked on the chapter house.

We do not know the names of the builders.

What makes it so different from all others?

Alec Clifton-Taylor: "The supreme example of medieval nature worship." Natural foliage in medieval sculpture:

Earliest examples: 1248 la Sainte Chappelle, 1255-65 Naumburg, 1250-60 Rheims

These set a fashion copied throughout Western Europe. Previously, Foliage was decoration subordinate to the illustration of a story eg. the tympanum at Autun.

Probably brought here by masons who began to take notebooks and make sketches of continental carvings, and improved upon them. Possibly brought here by French masons but this very unlikely, as they would have been too old by 1295.

Penguin Guide to Modern Europe says Southwell has the best examples of this type of carving in England. Martindale's Gothic Art says the best in Europe. Fashion later changed back to stiff-leaved (i.e. stylised) foliage based on the acanthus: this can be seen in the Quire.

A Tour of the Chapter House

1. The entrance from the North Choir Aisle
 - a) Probably built last: Chapter House first, then passage, then hole made in wall and entrance inserted. Internal string-course and window had to be altered. Vestry door the original exit from this aisle
 - b) Foliage on arch and capitals:
 - left: hawthorn and buttercup
 - right: maple with winged seeds
 - c) Gates: 1934 wooden doors replaced by wrought iron gates made by Frederick. Cauldron, blacksmith from Brant Broughton. Bishop's arms on left, Provost Conybeare's on right.

2. Passageway
 - a) Buttresses of Pilgrims' Chapel built into the S. wall.
 - b) Roof originally more steeply pitched. 1430 many alterations above string course, incl. insertion of east windows and blocking of doorway into N. transept. Present roof put in by Ewan Christian; he also
 - c) put in the little doorway, and the larger one leading to the spiral staircase to the roof space.

3. Archway into Chapter House
 - a) Carved by principal master mason as very important.
 - b) Left capitals: from left., hawthorn, maple with potentilla flowers, buttercup (ranunculus)
 - c) Right capitals: " " buttercup, vine, oak
 - d) Centre capital: buttercup
 - e) Arch: inner: - maple outer: - vine, with man gathering grapes - Note also blackbird on right capital over window on left of archway.

4. Inside Chapter House
16 varieties of leaf: 30 maple, 26 oak, 19 hawthorn, 19 buttercup, 18 vine, 12 ivy, 8 hop, 2 rose, 2 bryony, and single examples of various others, but slight disagreement between two botanical experts

People: 4 bishops, possibly including Archbishop John Romaine 1286-98, Archbishop Henry of Newark 1298-1300, a former canon; Thos. Corbridge 1300-1306.

10 green men; 4 master masons.

Variations in style of carving of different examples of the same leaf, eg. vine, suggests at least 4 different carvers. Every capital is unique: carvers allowed to express their own individuality;

BUT by the time the roof was completed, foliage carving, on the bosses, was again subordinated to overall design; perhaps done by a younger mason?

N.B. Originally all would have been brightly painted.

And see Jos Hall's Fact Sheets No 24 & 96