

SOUTHWELL CHAPTER HOUSE

By Jos Hall, 2001

Possibly due to the despoiling of the ancient library during the Civil War, contemporary written evidence about the Chapter House is confined to two letters from the Archbishop, copied into the White Book. Very little seems to have been written until the early C18th when writers such as Dugdale, Thoroton and later Rastall (Dickenson) Dimock, Leach, Livett and Shilton published material, mainly privately, on the Minster generally and on Southwell. Most of this material is out of print but we have been fortunate enough to have available the transactions of the Thoroton Society and in recent years the writings of Dr Norman Summers and Richard Beaumont that have thrown much light on the subject. The material below comes mainly from these sources.

On the 25th January 1288 when John le Romaine (or Romanus), Archbishop of York, was in residence at Southwell he authorised the Chapter to make a levy for the building of the Chapter House in the following terms. "For the levying of the arrears of the subsidy appointed for the construction of the chapter house at Southwell and for the sequestration of the prebends of those who do not pay To the Chapter of Southwell. The proctors of your church aforesaid have advised us that it is lawful for you, after a special meeting of you all, to ordain the levy of a fixed subsidy for the necessary construction of your chapter house, which should be raised for this purpose, by general agreement of the colleagues, out of the established incomes of the different prebends, by a fixed date; some people however, have not as yet paid the aforesaid subsidy according to the rate provided, though others promptly acquitted what they owed; and on this account have humbly besought us to provide action against those who have not paid." The document then threatens sequestration by the following Easter against those who have not paid by then.

It must be remembered that a number of the Canons were resident overseas and probably came to Southwell (where their obligations were carried out by vicars-choral) only occasionally and the archbishop had to remind the Chapter of their responsibilities on a subsequent visit in 1294 in very strong terms as follows:- "You have an obligation to ensure that the houses of the canons from overseas which are threatening to collapse should be repaired within the year; we will and command under grave penalties that these men should be compelled to repair these and in like manner the chapter should be compelled to deal with the deficit of the subsidy which is allocated to the building of the new chapter house".

This clearly implies that by 1294 the building was well on its way and it can be safely assumed from the first letter that the building was either started, or about to start by 1288 although collecting the money was obviously a difficulty.

As an aside it is interesting to note that the Archbishop about that time had also decided to increase the number of canons by two ie. to 16 after standing for many years at 14. Eaton (1290) was a new endowment but North Leverton (1291) was created by dividing Beckingham. Note that Ripon had only 7 canons and Beverley 9. York as the principal church had 36.

Was there a chapter house on site before the present building was erected? Dimock in his book says the canons met in a smaller house on the same site but there does not appear to be any evidence to support this suggestion. Lincoln had had a chapter house since 1230. Beverley possibly a little earlier c1220. Litchfield c1239 and Salisbury c1263, and it was quite common for monastic and collegiate establishments to provide such meeting houses although unlike Southwell most of them seem to have been on the south side of their respective churches often opening off from a cloister. With so many absent prebendaries/canons it would be interesting to know who was the driving force locally in the planning and construction of the chapter house. Unfortunately no records have survived from this period with the exception of the Archbishop's letters.

Actually, it was not unusual in those times for one of the clergy to take on the role of builder although in most cases a master mason would be in charge and indeed their names have survived in several cases but regrettably not at Southwell. Examples of clergy at work in this way include Abbott Hugh at Selby described as "devotus architectus" who set out the foundations in 1100. In 1242 monks at Gloucester were reported as finishing the vaulting in the nave and in 1220 the new shrine of St Thomas Becket was constructed by Master Walter of Colchester (Sacrist of St Albans) and Master Elias de Dereham (Canon of Salisbury). Clearly whoever was appointed was a master of his craft, be he priest or layman, and he was assisted by carvers almost as skilled. At Southwell it would appear that there were at least three and possibly four craftsmen at work, one of whom may have been somewhat older than the others and unwilling to adapt to this new style of decoration (see cap 17 with its stiff leaf carving).

Whoever was appointed it is clear that he was aware of the developments in style which had been taking place in some French cathedrals, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that, following the fashion of his craft, he had travelled to France with his notebook and observed the more naturalistic style emerging at Rheims (1250 -1260), The Ste Chapelle in Paris (1243 - 48) or even at Naumberg near Leipzig (1255 - 1265).

Southwell is noted as the first place in England where this naturalistic style of foliage was used as the main decorative theme and this, coupled with the superb craftsmanship make Southwell rather special; indeed descriptions or illustrations of the Chapter House are to be found in most architectural works covering this period.

G.E.Street, the noted ecclesiastical architect (1824 -81) wrote "What either Cologne or Ratisbon or Wiesen Kirche are to Germany; Amiens Cathedral or the Sainte Chapelle are to France; the Scalgere in Verona to Italy, are the Choir at Westminster and the Chapter House at Southwell to England". Alec Clifton-Taylor later wrote "The Chapter House at Southwell represents the supreme example of mid Gothic nature worship". The Penguin Guide to Medieval Europe says unequivocally that the best examples of this style of English carving are here while Martindale's "Gothic Art" says it (the foliage) appears more famously than anywhere else in Europe in the Chapter House at Southwell.

So the carvers created at Southwell a novelty of its day and a work of art for succeeding generations. But they did not confine themselves entirely to the foliage theme. Instead they

included among the leaves fruit and flowers, small animals, birds, hares, goats, human heads and fabulous beasts, some obvious, some hidden, some perhaps reflecting religious experience and some harking back, no doubt, to superstition and fable. The stone columns around the perimeter on either side of the seats rising through the foliage carvings to the elaborate ribbed vault lead one to speculate whether the concept of a "sacred grove" had entered the minds of the builders consciously or unconsciously but perhaps this is a speculation too far.

The whole of the work appears to have been executed between 1288 and the turn of the century with the vaulting to be the last part of the construction. The boss in the centre of the vaulting shows an undulating style which is possibly an indication that a younger hand was at work. This indication of a new form of architecture comes at the end of what is regarded as the classic age of Gothic architecture. Again, to quote Alan Clifton-Taylor "The unceasing experiments of medieval church architecture is one of its most striking characteristics and greatest sources of satisfaction".

Apart from the inclusion of the animals and birds etc. mentioned above, much interest is caused by the 10 so-called "green men" in some of the canopies over the seats. There is a separate note about the presence of these carvings and their possible significance; indeed several books have now been published on the general subject of "green men" as they appear in medieval work throughout Europe. Suffice it to say here that the workmanship ranges from very crude to one very fine example on the north wall that could almost have served as the prototype for the later examples to be seen in many continental Cathedrals.

Mention should also be made of the goatherd blowing his horn high up over the windows on the north side. The goat with him is shown eating an ivy leaf, and is said to refer back to a trade practice of the glaziers of the time and raises sharply again the lack of documentary information about the men who carried out this work and their understanding of these symbols.

The Chapter House is erected to the north of the Quire and connected to it by a covered passageway that is roofed in wood. Originally the passage was open to the east and possibly a small cloister or yard existed there (note the columns doubled in the thickness of the wall). The passageway leads to a higher-vaulted vestibule or anteroom from which access is gained into the Chapter House proper by means of a spectacular double archway to the east

The entrance from the Quire is through a decorated arch that gives the first view of the foliage carving. On the left the arch contains carvings of hawthorn and buttercup and on the right maple with winged seeds. The original wooden doors of the passageway were replaced in 1934 by wrought iron gates made by Frederick Cauldron, blacksmith from Brant Broughton. The Arms shown are those of the bishop (left) and on the right a former Provost (Conybeare).

In the passageway the buttresses of the Pilgrims' Chapel can be seen protruding into the left side. On the right the (now enclosed) little cloister has windows by Patrick Reyntiens in the style of his Great West Window. The capitals of the columns on both sides increase in complexity approaching the Chapter House and are surmounted in nearly all cases by a

great variety of carved heads well worth careful study. The passageway saw many alterations in the C15th, including a flatter roof than the original but it was also altered in the C19th. The passageway leads to a vestibule with the entrance to the Chapter House proper through a magnificently decorated doorway possibly the finest example of the craftsman's art and surely done by the Master Mason himself. Note the contrast with the other side of the doorway with its plain surfaces.

The plan of the Chapter House is a regular octagon with a ribbed vault in stone, built without the usual device of a central column and relying for support on massive buttresses at the angles. Only at York and Southwell were the masons bold enough to dispense with a central column, but at York the vault is of wood so Southwell alone has a stone vault without a central prop.

The vault is a development of style from the Early English Quire. The arched ribs which span diagonally from angle to opposite angle have additional, intermediate ribs between them which spring from the same piers but met obliquely at the ridge instead of on the central boss. These are "tiercerons" an English device despite the name; the junctions being developed with carved bosses to enrich the whole design. The central boss seems to indicate a further progression into the more undulating style of the C14th.

The external buttresses relieve the walls of much of the load of the vault and have enabled the builders to insert slim stone mullions in the windows with trefoils and quatrefoils at the head. This pattern is repeated on the windowless walls on the west. Some small fragments of medieval glass have been placed in the windows. (See John Beaumont's book on the Minster glass for details). It is interesting to compare these windows with the plain lancets of the Quire made some 50 years previously.

Below the window level are 36 seats separated by slender columns supporting pointed trefoiled blank arches. Above these arches are steep gables resting on carved heads or foliated corbels. Foliated tympana fill the spaces between arches and gables. The gables carry crockets and reach with their finials into the stringcourse above.

All this structure is of Mansfield stone, fine-grained Permian sandstone that lends itself well to the profusion of carvings which abound on all sides. This is a beauty of foliage decoration unlike any other. The so-called "Leaves of Southwell" spread over the 45 columns that separate the seats as well as the tympana, crockets and finials of the gables above the seats. Profs A.C. Seward and E.T. Salisbury who were consulted by Prof Nikolaus Pevsner on the botanical details of the carvings identified (with some slight disagreement) 10 different species within the Chapter House, most of them occurring several times. They are Maple 30 times; Oak 26; Hawthorn 19; Ranunculus 19; Potentilla 19; Vine 18; Ivy 12; Hop 8; Rose 2; Bryony 2.

As mentioned earlier the entrance archway contains the most splendid examples and is probably the work of the master carver himself. Unfortunately the two small dragons on either side have been decapitated but otherwise the archway has survived almost intact. The botanical species represented here are from left to right: Vine along the moulding, then hawthorn, maple with ranunculus flowers, (Prof Salisbury suggests ranunculus leaves and

flowers), maple in the moulding above then ranunculus in the capital next to the doorway. On the other side firstly ranunculus (Prof Salisbury prefers potentilla), then vine (Salisbury - a lobe-leaved form of mulberry) with again maple in the moulding above and finally oak with vine down the right-hand moulding.

A remarkable feature of the Chapter House already mentioned is the 10 so-called "Green Men" to be found mainly in the tympana above the seats. They are remarkably varied and extend from a very crude representation to a finely detailed example on the north wall. This latter head with hop and strawberry issuing from the mouth is very different from the others and could be possibly meant as a warning, for here is bitterness and sweetness springing out together giving word of caution to those who understand its significance. The "Green Man" is the subject of much speculation and a separate paper.

From the evidence of the quality of the carvings it would appear that the master carver and 3 assistants largely undertook the work. Compare the doorway and cap.36; Cap, 11 with its coarser - at least not so delicate - work: Cap.20, where the work is clearly in 2 horizontal strips and Cap.17 echoing the stiff leaf of an earlier age. As mentioned earlier the central boss of the vaulting seems to move towards a later undulating style and may indicate another (perhaps younger) hand at work. Professor Andrew Martindale in referring to the changes that occurred towards the end of the C13th and the beginning of the C14th says "independence of subject gave way to standardisation in the interests of overall unity" and this could well be demonstrated by the contrast between wall carvings and this rather beautiful boss.

Whilst the foliage decoration is predominant, nevertheless the carvers exercised their ingenuity, and perhaps their superstitions, not only in the "green men" but also in the birds, animals and mythical beasts, and in the portraits or caricatures over many of the seats. High above the entrance is a curious face together with a docile lion and high on the north can be seen a goatherd with his goat eating an ivy leaf. In the vestibule a blackbird reaches for a hawthorn berry while his companion waits on a nest on the Chapter House roof. The passageway abounds with such carvings.

The Chapter House has not escaped damage over the centuries and has several alterations to the roof. The structural cracks in the walls have been the subject of expert investigation in recent years and appear to have occurred within a few years of construction due to different intensities of loading on the foundations. The damage to the carvings comes partly from weaknesses in the construction techniques and in the stone used but also from pollutants and neglect. Records of the maintenance are sparse until the middle of the C19th. However windows were left unglazed for considerable periods in the C17th. There was a coal-burning Gurney stove installed from 1886 until 1917 and in 1981 the internal stonework was cleaned using hot water. The water activated the gypsum in the stone and caused weakness in the stone layers. There has also been a certain amount of vandalism. Since 1991 a team of experts under the direction of the Cathedral architect (Martin Stancliffe) and including Seamus Hanna has been investigating and carefully monitoring the situation and is expected to publish its final recommendations in the near future.

And see Jos Hall's fact sheets No 6 & 24