

THE SIMPSON STALLS
by Canon E. Eric Roberts. Vice-Provost
Talk to The Friends Annual Meeting 19 June 1976

When in 1884 Southwell became the See town for the newly-formed diocese and the Minster was raised to Cathedral status, the Chapter concerned itself with improvements and new furnishings. The work was carried out under the authority of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, of which Ewan Christian was the architect, and it included the provision of twelve new stalls in the quire to replace box pews, which had presumably been there since 1711 at least.

Part of the total contract was to the firm of Messrs. Cornish & Gaymer, ecclesiastical builders of North Walsham (not now in business). A copy of their invoices show that the work undertaken in the quire consisted of new floors for the sum of £1,094 and fittings (stalls) and carvings for the sum of £862.

Charles Henry Simpson

The stalls were made by Charles Henry Simpson and a brass plate on the end of one of the stalls records the fact. He was born in North Walsham in 1856 and on leaving school at the age of fourteen went to work as a woodcarver for Cornish & Gaymer. He remained in the service of the firm for sixty-five years until a few months before his death on 3 September 1936. The cartoons of his carvings were presented to the Minster Library in 1934 on condition that they were not copied.

Enquiry reveals that this talented man undertook his first piece of work when he was sixteen years of age and this consisted of carving on the altar in the parish church of North Walsham. The predominant feature in this early work is birds among foliage and this theme was later to be extensively developed and used in Southwell and elsewhere.

In the years which followed he carried out work in many Norfolk churches and examples of his work may be seen also in Boston, Lincolnshire; Durham Cathedral (the war memorial screen); Norwich Cathedral (the Bishop's Lodging or choir stall which depicts no less than ninety heads, and also Britannia in the War Memorial Chapel); Winchester College Chapel (stalls, panelling and seating); and Selwyn College (all the carvings in the chapel). A guide book of 1907 to a church near Thetford refers to the work carried out by him in that church in 1904 as follows:

"Modern methods of construction, often flimsy on account of the use of machinery, especially in regard to wood work, have, however been avoided. The work will be found to reflect in all its details these principles which distinguished the finest work of the medieval builders but which have been so consistently ignored in most of the Gothic revival work of the nineteenth century."

The Southwell Stalls

A detailed description of the Simpson stalls in the Minster (they are situated at the west end of the quire and consist of two blocks of three rows on the north side and on the south side and also of the two return stalls and the aisle screen panels) cannot be given in a short article, but even a cursory examination reveals the skill and technical dexterity of the woodcarver. Like Pygmalion's Galatea, the carvings possess all the qualities of life except actual movement, though made of wood. Here is a kingfisher in

flight with a fish in its mouth, a bird on a nest of eggs a thrush in a cherry tree, a field mouse in the corn, a butterfly and a bee, flowers, fruit, a bird hung on a plant by a rope (said to be a common practice among gamekeepers to scare off other birds) and a wide variety of leaves, grasses and symbols of the Passion and the Lordship of Christ.

On the south side of the quire there is a stall, one end of which depicts the good tree which brings forth good fruit. Birds, blackberries, fig leaves, and lilies abound in the deeply undercut wood of the panels. At the other end of the stall the corrupt tree is portrayed and here the evil fruit is to be seen - deadly nightshade, fungus and bats and a very fearsome dragon.

At first sight it might seem that the figures have been carved at random but careful study and comparison of the Southwell carvings with those executed elsewhere suggests that Mr Simpson sought to express through the symbolic figures of his carvings his own deep spirituality personality and genius. It is clear that this work portrays his personal conviction of God in man and in nature and his belief in the reality of evil.

Further Research

A great deal of research needs to be undertaken to gain further knowledge about the man and his work, leading to an interpretation of his art. Sources of information are few and far between. The records of the firm for which he worked do not exist, the files of ecclesiastical architects are meagre, the family is dispersed abroad and only one known contemporary worker in the firm survives and he is an elderly gentleman living in a Norfolk village.

Copied from the Friends of Southwell Cathedral: Report 1976

Other Factsheets dealing with Woodwork in the Minster:

FS215 is Mary Skinner's sketch of the Simpson Pews detailing the different animals and plants.

FS273 is a record of Canon Nigel Coates's talk to the Friends about the repairs in 2015.

FS169 is an introduction to Charles Simpson and his carving of the stalls.

FS26 is the account of Harold Brooke's talk in 1992 about all the different woodwork items [now also .doc]

FS175 is a similar account of David Turner's talk in 2011. More recent and includes Peter Ball's work.

FS2 & 251 have overviews of the woodwork along with all the other artefacts, fittings and architecture.