

TJ Murfin's Repair to the Simpson Choir Stalls

TJ provided these notes of her talk to the Guild on 8th November 2017

Hello everyone. It is very kind to be invited here to speak with you today. I must confess – I have never done any public speaking before!! I have been a woodcarver for over twenty years and I'm based in Nottinghamshire. I was contacted, by John Coxon (a joiner) who I believe has done work for you in the past, and asked if I would be able to repair damage to a pew end at Southwell Minster.

Understanding

I visited Southwell Minster to look at the damaged section and find out what was involved.

There were a few challenging aspects to the repair:

It was carved on both sides and also pierced.

It had broken across the short grain at numerous points.

The proximity to the seat made it very awkward to work on.

Holding the oak firm whilst carving.

Having to do the majority of work off site.

For reference I secured two rulers, one to the horizontal and the other to the vertical axis of the broken section and took photos, for me to refer back to in my workshop, as I could not take the pew away with me. Fortunately, in the library at Southwell Minster, they have the original working patterns that were used to construct the pews back in 1880. These would have been used by the woodcarvers on the original commission and were a terrific help. The patterns are cardboard templates that are the actual size of the work and were used in the setting out process. I took a photocopy of the appropriate pattern and marked on the break points of the missing section. I took this home to my workshop, so that I could make my own cardboard template to work from. The more information I could gather the better.

Trial in Lime

I had to try and work out the thickness and size of the oak required to make the repair. I made a rough pattern in lime, as this let me work out problems, such as the depth of the carving (especially at its deepest points). Also, how the carving of the bramble was going to flow through the wood, as it can't do an ugly dog leg, when you find that you have miss the break point - it has to flow. When I had finished the pattern in lime, it showed that the oak needed to be thicker overall. The actual carving uses a significant depth of timber, as it flows from front to the back and curves across the panel. It is a very beautiful panel and the carving is very intricate.

The small demo piece I have here today, in lime, shows the raised and incised carving techniques involved in showing the veining on leaves. The raised veining takes a lot longer than the incised, because you have to remove the wood away to leave a vein prominent on the leaf surface. The original carver used both techniques.

Choosing Oak and Carving

Once I had the lime model fairly close to the original, I sourced a piece of oak with a similar grain pattern to that of the pew, with no knots or sap wood and a “kind straight grain” for carving.

Final Piece

I drew on the pattern and used a bandsaw to take off the majority of waste material. To enable me to hold the piece of oak in place to allow carving; I had to add a layer of glue to one side of the wood, add a sheet of paper, a further layer of glue and then plywood, which I could then screw down to my work bench to hold the oak in place, yet allow me to easily remove on completion, as the paper acts as a weak point. I could then start carving. I wanted to remove as much wood as I could, while the oak is glued down and held secure. The more wood removed, the more fragile the carving. I carved the most intricate side first while the oak was held stable.

Once one side was mostly roughed out, I took it to Southwell Minster, while it was still glued to the board, and checked it by eye – making little alterations. I brought it back to my workshop, removed the plywood board and marked on the depth of the broken stems. I now started on the reverse side of the carving. I made a lime former to support the piece whilst carving the back. I made numerous visits to the Minster, to compare and contrast throughout this process, to ensure that the final section would work and fit with the original.

Fixing and Staining

Once I got it finished, to a point where I was happy, I contacted my brother, who is a very skilled joiner and carpenter. I needed someone who knew what they were doing when it came to fitting the carving, as there were 7 fixing points to fit on one section and two on the other, and no room for error. The carving is dual aspect and the fixing points needed to be seamless. As I was fitting one side, my brother was the other side of the pew to ensure that we got it right from both angles. This took quite a while, as cleaning up the broken faces and fitting the joints is the hardest part of the job. Once we were happy with the dry fit, we glued it using a mitre glue, which is a two part contact adhesive, as we needed something that would glue and hold pretty much instantaneously, but this also meant we had a very short working time (a matter of seconds) to get things right. This was the most nerve wracking part of the job – if I got it wrong, I would have to start again.

The staining was completed by John Coxon who originally involved me in the project.

Any questions? Thank you all for your time. I hope that I have given you an insight into the process and the techniques used in carrying out the repair work. You have some really exceptional carving here at Southwell Minster and it was a great privilege to be able to carry out the repair.

This FS wants to read in conjunction with No 273 – Canon Nigel Coates’s report to the Friends in June 2015, concerning the repairs together with photograph.