

William Morris Letter re the Refurbishment of the Minster: 1878

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

26 Queen Square,
Bloomsbury
17 Apr 1878

To
The Ecclesiastical Commissioners for
England and Wales.

My Lords & Gentlemen

On behalf of the Society for the preservation of Ancient Buildings a Society whose objects are explained by the circular enclosed herewith I beg most respectfully to address you with regard to the works proposed to be done to the Collegiate Church of Southwell.

The Society recognises with satisfaction that since the building has been under the control of the Commissioners the security of the fabric has been considered and its condition as regards stability improved but at the same time many alterations have been made which in the view of the Society have been destructive of its artistic and historical character.

The removal of the modern fittings of the choir which were in themselves of no great value, but inasmuch as their removal also involved the destruction of the very interesting side screens was a step which the Society greatly regrets should have been taken, and the rearrangement of the pewing of the choir appears to them to have been an entirely unnecessary alteration as though the design of the pewing was modern and poor in quality it was quite adequate to the requirements of Cathedral Service.

It is understood that the Commissioners have sanctioned a scheme for removing the present lowpitched roofs and the flat ceilings and substituting high pitched roofs open internally throughout the Church. Against this proposal the Society desires to enter its energetic protest & respectfully asks the Commissioners to reconsider their decision for the following reasons which the Society trusts that the Commissioners as guardians of one of the most important public monuments in the Kingdom will not consider unworthy of their consideration. The proposed alteration if carried out will necessarily involve the destruction of the present wooden ceilings of the Nave & Transepts. These ceilings were laid shortly after the fire of 1711 and are in all probability rude but still not unsatisfactory copies of those which were destroyed by the fire. They have an excellent effect are broad & simple in design and are much more in accordance with the architecture of the Church than an open roof. The ceilings are of oak and are apparently perfectly sound, no flaw being perceptible from the floor of the Church. The outer roofs do it is true admit water in places after heavy rains or continuous snow but as they are covered with slate this is no more than what would occur in the roof of any other building of a similar size.

The Norman Nave was in all probability covered originally with a flat roof similar to Gloucester & St Albans, this was replaced in the middle ages by a pitched roof but we have no evidence to show that the alteration was an improvement, but on the contrary, the subsequent removal of this roof and the substitution of a flat roof tends to show that its effect was not found satisfactory.

Although the present roof dates back no further than the beginning of the last century, it is indisputable that the lowering of the roofs took place at least a century earlier as Hollar's engraving of the Cathedral (which was made in 1672) seems to show them in their present condition.

All trace has been lost of the design of the medieval roofs so that any restoration must be entirely conjectural and therefore unsatisfactory whether regarded from an antiquarian or

architectural point of view.

A matter of even greater importance arising out of the contemplated raising of the roofs is the obliteration of the wooden lantern between the western towers which would be swept away if any other roof is substituted for the present.

In all probability the destruction of this lantern was not present in the minds of the Commissioners when the question of the alteration of the roofs was under consideration and the Society earnestly hopes that now that the entire effect of the proposed raising is brought to their notice that the Commissioners will hesitate before they give their sanction to a proposal which will inflict an irreparable injury upon the Church and deprive it of one of its most interesting & characteristic features.

The Lantern is perhaps unique of its kind and though exceedingly simple in design, it is so dignified in expression and adds so much to the charm of the church that its removal would be a source of the deepest regret to all who are truly interested in what is most native in one of our finest and best preserved national monuments.

The Society trusts that the Commissioners will for these reasons refrain from carrying out an alteration which is perfectly unnecessary & uncalled for, which will in no sense add to the safety or beauty of the Church, and that they will devote the funds at their disposal to the preservation in its present state of the interesting building committed to their charge.

It would be a lasting disgrace to the Century if it should happen that through injudicious interference the Collegiate Church of Southwell after having escaped the rapacity of Henry 8th and the followers of Edward 6th and has come down to us almost unimpaired in its essential features from very nearly the earliest historical times should in these last days have its identity destroyed & its value as a national record placed in jeopardy by a mistaken zeal for restoration.

I have the honour to remain
My Lords & Gentlemen

Your obed^t servant

William Morris

Hon. Sec.

The Soc^y for the Protection of Ancient Bldgs

[The letter was transcribed, from the original by Corinne and David Moore.]

When we enter the Minster today, we have to realize that we see it through the prism of the Victorian restoration and how they decided to present the Cathedrals to us - commonly, scraped stonework, repaved at changed levels, more access to the chancel main altar .

The C19th was a time of great change in social affairs, industrialisation and church matters, all interrelated. In the C18th the Anglican church had been generally in decline – the clergy were in disarray, the buildings were falling apart and non-conformism was blossoming. The culmination came when the Bishops failed to support the 1832 Great Reform Act. Many organisations were formed, with typical Victorian zeal to present the resurgent Catholic opinion, Anglicism, Methodism and Evangelism all with their sub-groups as well as socialism. There were two distinct visions of the repair of the buildings – conservation or restoration. Some thought, notably George Gilbert Scott, that they could improve on the medieval gothic style. However, Ewan Christian, the architect for the newly formed Ecclesiastical Commissioners, responsible for Southwell Minster, was more conservative.

William Morris, probably now best known for his fabrics and wall papers was an active and vociferous participant in many reform, design and artistic matters. He formed the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings with John Ruskin and several of the pre-Raphaelites and others, which is still active today. This is a good example of his interventions.

Martin Everitt March 2018