

A TOUR ROUND THE OUTSIDE OF THE MINSTER

JOHN MEREDITH 12.05.01

John Meredith took us on a most interesting tour of the outside of the Minster, starting at the North Door. The South West tower, the North Porch and the top of the Central tower, were the last things to be completed in the Norman Church. The round windows are of interest, as far as we know Southwell Minster was the only Norman church built with a complete set of round windows, these formed a frieze round the top of the church. In Norman times the Western towers and the Central tower were topped with shallow caps. Underneath the parapet of the Norman Nave is unusual Nebular moulding. In the 15th century the Nave windows were enlarged, except for one. The Minster now illustrates the four main types of medieval architecture. Above the North Porch a Parvis room, and to the right a pinnacle in the form of a chimney. Around the windows are carved Norman dragons, one over the centre window is swallowing a man.

The central path from Church St, which turns right just before the North Transept is of special interest. Once there was a doorway in the end of the transept, but this was stoned over to prevent people taking short cuts through the Minster. The Norman door is still present inside the wall. John plus the stonemason are possibly the only two persons to see it in the last hundred years. The gables of both transepts are decorated with the Norman ball and zig-zag design, and both were raised during the Victorian restoration, and at the apex a carved bear. On top of the parapet of the Central tower, are four Norman pinnacles. [Please see another Fact Sheet for details of the carved heads and animals etc, on the North West corner of the Chapter House vestibule].

The windows in the Pilgrims chapel are not the original, the present ones were enlarged in the 14th century. The tomb by the Chapter House wall, is in fact only a ventilation shaft for the central heating. The pointed spire on the Chapter House is not original, the present one dates from 1880, and is supported by a King post. There was once a doorway in the end of the Eastern transept [St Thomas Chapel], but now stoned up. Flying buttresses which support the Quire were added in the 14th century. Under the parapet of the Quire [north side], are carved heads depicting saints and bishops etc, from the Book of Common Prayer.

Vicars Court is Georgian, but prior to this, in medieval times stood a refectory and a lodging house for the Vicars Choral.

John said that one could often tell the period of a church by

looking at its windows. The ones in the east end of the Minster are interesting, and it is worth noting that on the outside, twelve can be seen, whereas inside only eight, the four highest being above the vault, It is also unusual to have them divided into an even number - Early English churches normally have an odd number: this is because the central rib of the Quire vault acts as a support to the East end.

There was once an entrance door in the end of the South Eastern Transept [Candle Chapel]. In the 15th century a library was constructed outside the south wall of the Quire, this was removed during the 18th century. On the East wall of the South transept stood a semi-circular Norman Chapel, this was pulled down in the early 13th century, when the present Quire was being constructed, and the opening in the wall stoned up. The markings of the arch and roof can still be seen, plus lower down a Norman doorway. There are three heads carved at the base of one of the Quire flying buttress pinnacles. The South transept Norman doorway is very unusual, as the arch above the door is almost flat, around the arch is Zig-Zag moulding, and around the transept windows, cable moulding. Constructed south of the Nave in 1480 was the Booth Chapel, this replaced a previous one. Both brothers, William and Lawrence Booth, former Archbishops of York, were buried there. After the reformation the chapel had a varied life, and was pulled down in 1784.

The only genuine Norman window in the lower level of the Nave is in the north-west corner [between the north-west tower and the porch]. Originally the West end, in Norman times, was very different to what you see today, it would have been similar in design to the transepts. The present perpendicular style window was inserted in the 15th century. In 1712, after the fire, a new roof was constructed, but the Nave was once again re-roofed during the Victorian restoration. Notice that the two western towers are not identical. The "A" on the northern one is probably pre-reformation. It is thought that a crucifix may have been attached to the wall, with a weather-board above. The great West Door originally had iron gates across, and to the side once stood a sentry box.