

HERITAGE CIRCLE

David Berwick, Medieval Stone Bosses in Norwich Cathedral

David Berwick told the June meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about the medieval stone bosses that decorate the ceiling of Norwich Cathedral. There are 1,108 stone bosses that depict stories from the Bible and are the centre piece of the star shaped array 70 feet above the nave of the cathedral and in the Bauchon Chapel.

The bosses were carved from one piece of stone during the episcopate of Bishop James Goldwell (1472-1499). They all tell a story. In the Bauchon Chapel the stone bosses are based upon the *Sergeant of Law's Tale* by Chaucer where good overcomes evil. An empress is wronged by her brother-in-law but she eventually cures him of leprosy and everyone lives happily ever after.

The stone bosses in the nave illustrate stories from the Old and the New Testament. The first shows the creation of the world and has the image of a sun. In the next, God has a lion and a unicorn by him which symbolise his power and regality. Other stone bosses show a variety of stories including Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Jacob dreaming of a ladder to heaven, and the life of Moses. All of the carvings are 3D. The stone bosses have been painted and it is estimated that about 65% of the paintwork is original. The last restoration work was undertaken in 1935.

It is likely that the stone masons came from Cambridge and had been involved with the decoration of King's College. Some of the carvings have been damaged and this may have happened when Cromwell occupied the cathedral in 1643 and stabled his horses in the nave. Puritans were opposed to the ornate decoration of churches.

The stone bosses continue with the New Testament. They show the annunciation where the Virgin Mary is visited by the Angel Gabriel. The birth of Christ is followed by episodes in his life, culminating in the Last Supper, his death on the cross and the resurrection. The final stone bosses are concerned with the Day of Judgement. The images of hell and the devil are very gruesome.

The people who carved the stone bosses were unlikely to have travelled very far in their lives and so there are some 'odd' images. The Temple in Jerusalem showing Solomon's coronation looks like Norwich Cathedral. The funny looking elephant on Noah's Ark may have been influenced by a carved chair in Exeter Cathedral which records an elephant sent as a gift to Edward III by the King of France in 1350. Finally, there are only seven apostles attending the Last Supper.

The oldest stone bosses in Norwich cathedral are to be found in the cloisters and these date from about 1315. This small collection shows the death of Christ.

The talk indicated the importance of looking up to the ceiling when visiting the cathedral so as to appreciate the beauty of the work undertaken in the late 15th century.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 26 July at 7.30pm at Rickinghall Village Hall when Georgette Vale will give a talk entitled *The Widow Kett: Kett's Rebellion 1549*. New members and visitors are welcome. Further information is available at www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net. Gerry Gurhy