WOOD-CARVINGS FROM THE NAVE ROOF OF MARKET HARBOROUGH PARISH CHURCH

by

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Early in 1953, the nave roof of the parish church of St. Dionysius, Market Harborough, was found to be so badly affected by the ravages of the death watch beetle that it had to be taken down and a new one erected in its place. It consisted of a central ridge-beam and two purlins running east and west, supported on six massive tie-beams aligned north to south, of which one abutted the east wall over the chancel arch, another was set out about one foot from the west wall above the tower arch, and the remaining four spaced at equal intervals between. These tie-beams, which were embattled along the top, were adorned with a number of carved figures, while morticed on to the centre of each of the four inner ones, and occupying the space between it and the ridge-beam above, was an oblong block with a carved figure at either extremity, one facing east, the other west. The new roof is a complete replica of the old, minus the carvings.

Two of the inner tie-beams were so badly affected that they had to be burned entire, but the carvings from the other four and all the morticed blocks were preserved by the joint efforts of the late Frank Strongman, Curator of Market Harborough Museum, and the Antiquities Department of the City of Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, with the ready co-operation of the contractors, Messrs. Frank Hickman & Co., Ltd., of Market Harborough. The central section of one tie-beam and two of the blocks are now in Market Harborough Museum, the rest in Newarke Houses Museum, Leicester.

Neither Nichols nor any other writer, so far as I can trace, has ever detailed the layout of these figures or left a description of any of them. I know of no picture or photograph extant showing the whole in situ before the work of dismantling began, and with one or two exceptions, the exact position occupied by any particular item cannot now be established with certainty.

The total number of carvings appears to have been 26, as under:

- Bosses on 4 inner tie-beams: 4
- Figures on 4 inner tie-beams: 8
- Figures on 2 outer tie-beams: 2
- Minor carvings on 2 outer tie-beams: 4
- End figures on morticed blocks: 8

Total: 26
of which the following still remain:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Market Harborough</th>
<th>Newarke Houses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bosses on inner tie-beams</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Figures on inner tie-beams</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Figures on outer tie-beams</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor carvings on outer tie-beams</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>End figures on morticed blocks</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
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They consist of the following:

(I) On inner tie-beams:

(i) Rose-boss and 2 busts, both crowned; one (Pl. Ia) with arms, the hands joined in prayer; the other (Pl. Ib) a head and shoulders only. The boss faced downwards, the 2 figures respectively east and west; the praying figure was presumably the one facing east.

(Market Harborough Museum)

(ii) Rose-boss; on either side (a) half-figure of an angel in amice and alb, wings raised, cross on forehead, between the wings 2 leaves (Pl. Ic)—this probably faced east; (b) a head in some sort of foliated head-dress or aura (Pl. IIa)—whether this has any symbolic significance or was a mere quirk of the carver's imagination, I am unable to determine.

(Newarke Houses, Leicester)

(II) On outer tie-beams:

(i) The pelican in her piety (Pl. IIb), typifying Our Lord; this apparently faced downwards; alongside of sinister wing is carved a crown; what was carved on the other side has rotted away. This, according to Mr. Tuckey, who was present at the taking down of the roof, was in the centre of the most easterly tie-beam, abutting the east wall. It still retains a residue of red colouring.

(ii) Half-figure of angel in amice and alb, wings half open, holding a shield (Pl. IIc). This also appears to have faced downward. Carved alongside of dexter wing are three large serrated leaves in a fleur-de-lis pattern (?typifying the Trinity); on opposite side, a crown. This was apparently in the centre of the most westerly tie-beam, i.e. the one nearest the tower.

(Newarke Houses)

(III) End figures on blocks:

(i) 2 half-figures of angels in amice and alb, wings closed, one in attitude of prayer; the other (Pl. IIIa) holds a shield; head of praying one badly decayed.

(Newarke Houses)
(ii) Another pair of angels with closed wings, similarly dressed, save that the arms of the praying one (Pl. IIIb) are garbed in feathers; heads of both badly decayed.

(Newarke Houses)

(iii) 2 half-figures of angels, wings closed, hands at sides. One (Pl. IIIc) is wearing a woman's horned head-dress with the hair-nets (or caul) decorated in a lozenge pattern and veil scalloped round the edge. This is the solitary example known to me of an angel in a female head-dress. The second (Pl. IVa) is identical with Pl. IIIc, save that it is bareheaded.

(Market Harborough Museum)

(iv) 2 half-figures, (a) angel in amice and alb, with closed wings (Pl. IVb), (b) a grotesque grinning monster with bat's wings and a most formidable array of teeth, its chin supported on its paws (Pl. IVc); this, as probably typifying the Evil One, presumably faced west.

(Market Harborough Museum)

Most of these figures are more or less badly cracked, and the cracks have at some time been stuffed with wool and varnished over to match the colour of the wood. This is particularly observable on Pl. IIIc.

The nave arcades were rebuilt during the Perpendicular period, and if, as seems almost certain, the old roof was coeval, the rebuilding probably occurred after the middle of the fifteenth century; this can be inferred with reasonable confidence from Pl. IIIc. The horned head-dress first makes its appearance soon after 1410; the hair was gathered up into two large bunches and confined in a flat-topped jewelled net (caul) on either side of the face, with a veil thrown over the top. About the middle of the century the caul began to be heightened on either side and the process developed until by about 1470 they were brought almost together on top, approximating in shape to a mitre. The earlier flat-topped form disappears almost entirely from monuments by about 1450, but curiously enough, two later examples, both of the same year (1467) remain in Leicestershire, one on the incised slab of Thomas Hesylryge, esq., and wife Elizabeth at Noseley, the other on the fine brass of John Boville, esq., and wife Isabel at Stockerston.

While, therefore, on the evidence of the angel's head-dress the work could conceivably be as early as c. 1420, it is noticeably lacking in refinement, and indeed definitely coarse for the most part by early fifteenth-century standards. The hair of the angels is also a pointer to a date well into the second half of the century, for most of the first three-quarters of which men's hair was worn short, and it was not till about 1475 that the fashion of growing it long, prevalent in the previous century, came back into vogue. I am therefore inclined to date these carvings c. 1470-80.

I would express my acknowledgements to Messrs. Albert Herbert, F.S.A., H. W. Jones, B. Hickman and P. E. Tuckey for their kind help. Pls. Ic, II, IIIa and b are from photographs in Leicester Museums; Pls. Ia, IIIc, IVb and c are from photographs by M. H. Webb; Pls. Ib and IVa from photographs by S. W. A. Newton.