

A BOSS FROM THE WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL CHOIR-STALLS AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

The discovery of a foliage boss from a canopy of the Winchester Cathedral choir-stalls in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum has re-opened the debate as to the original seating capacity of this furniture. It is known that the stalls were shortened in the seventeenth century to make room for the Inigo Jones choir screen but not by how much. This paper aims to show that by using Lieutenant Hammond's record of the narrative sculptured panels above the seats of the stalls it is possible to resolve the problem. The opportunity is also taken to comment on the probable iconographical arrangement of the carvings whose destruction during the Civil War was a severe loss to English medieval art.

As long ago as 1897 the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert) acquired a small oak boss said to have come from Winchester Cathedral (V & A Museum Acq. No. 236–1896. Fig 1). It was omitted from the museum's catalogue of medieval woodwork and furniture published in 1923, but is discussed in the new edition (Tracy 1988). This fine specimen of early fourteenth-century foliage sculpture, dated by the museum to the fifteenth century, has lain for the last fifty years, at least, unnoticed in store. It comes, of course, from the early fourteenth-century choir-stalls instigated during the term



Fig 1. V & A Museum (Acq.No. 236–1897). Foliage boss from Winchester Cathedral choir-stalls.

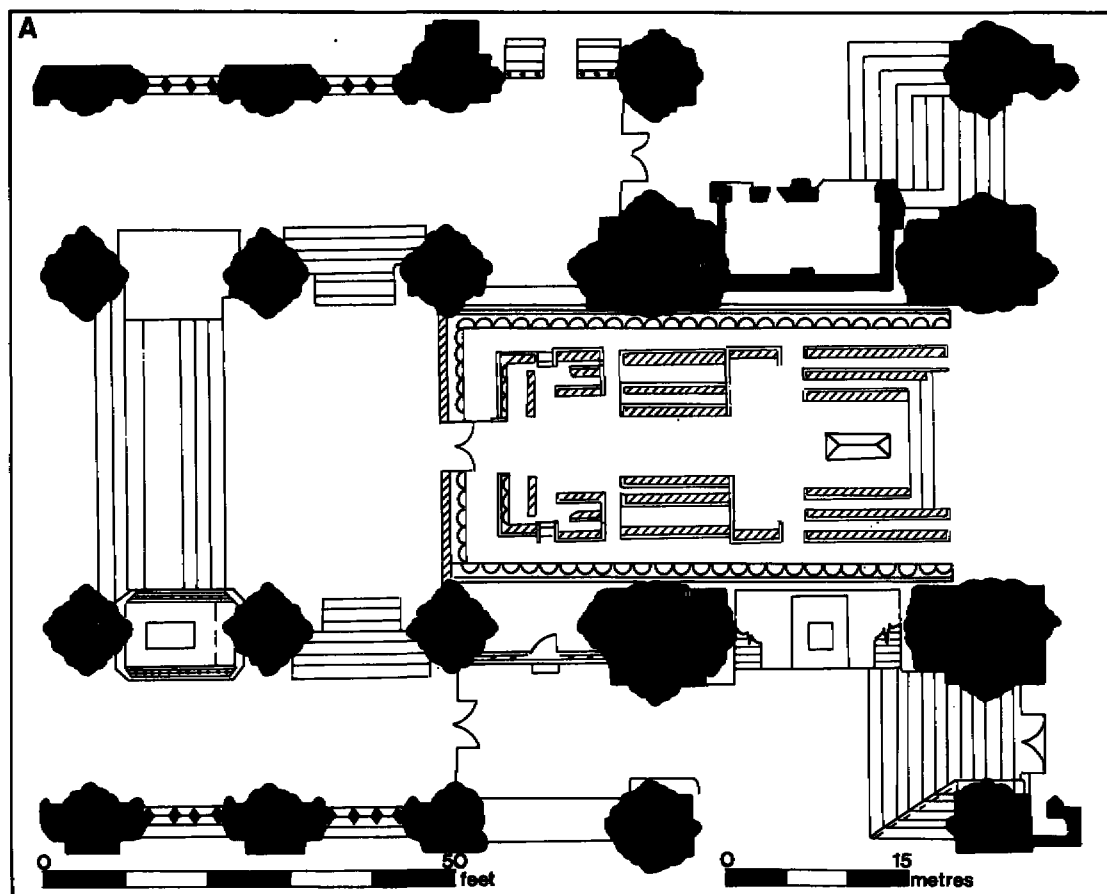
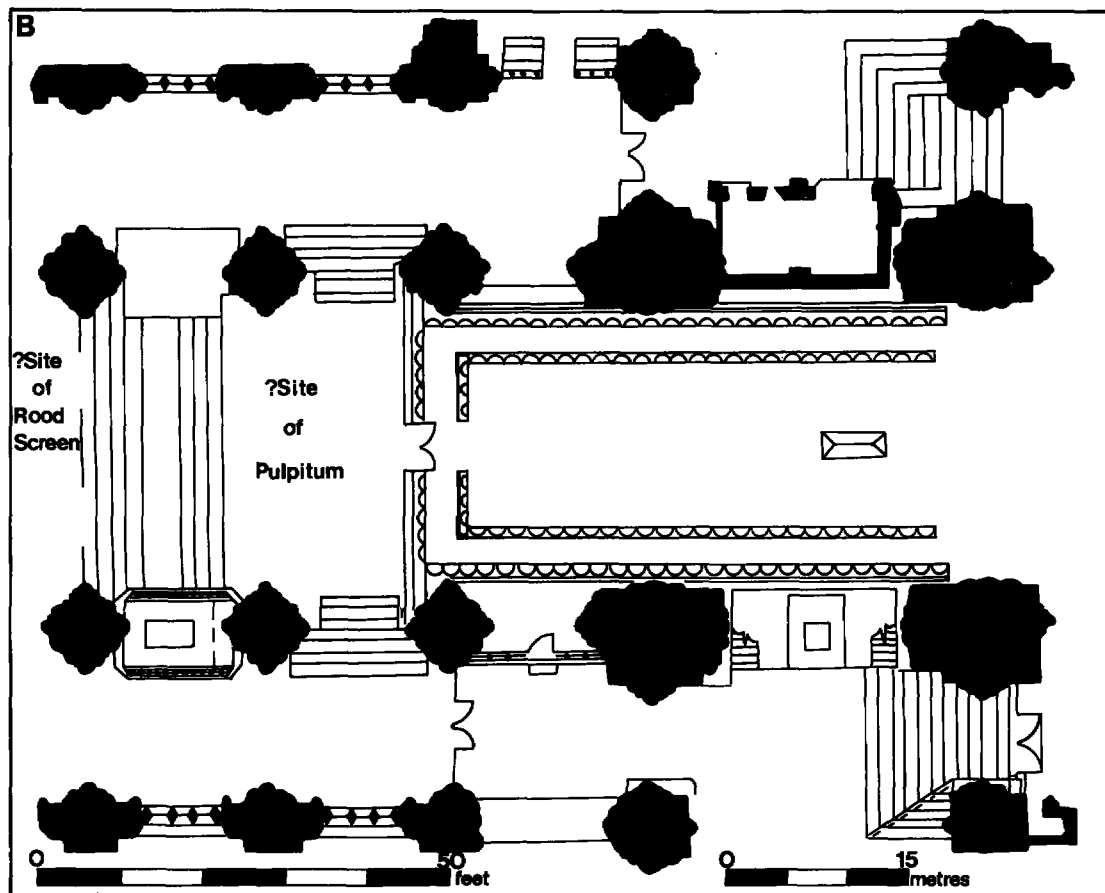


Fig 2. A: The Choir and adjacent areas as they are now. B: The Choir before the stalls were shortened by two places on either side. The plan includes the front row of stalls as they might have been, based on evidence of surviving medieval woodwork discovered by the Cathedral Architect. The sites of the Pulpitum (of which there were probably successive versions) and the Rood Screen are suggested. Divided access to the Pulpitum round an altar placed centrally against the Rood Screen is suggested by the broken line. The base of the Pulpitum would have been lower than the current floor level, perhaps with steps up from the north and south aisles, and steps up to the Choir. (Plans redrawn by Alex Turner).

of Bishop Woodlock (1305–16; Tracy 1987). It has always been understood that these stalls were shortened in the seventeenth century to accommodate the Inigo Jones screen (Blakiston 1976, 11). The existence of this boss, as well as the scars on the furniture itself, bear witness to the alteration. Apart from bringing the existence of this object to notice, it is the purpose of this paper to discuss the alterations that were made to the stalls to accommodate the classical choir screen. In addition an

attempt will be made to settle the debate about the exact number of seats that comprised the early fourteenth-century cathedral choir-stalls and the most likely arrangement of the carved Old and New Testament panels which originally adorned them.

At Winchester Cathedral the fourteenth-century choir straddles the first bay of the nave and the crossing (see Fig 2). This is the same position as occupied by its Romanesque predecessor (Vallance 1947, 50). The eleventh-



century pulpitum filled the second bay of the nave and, owing to the crypt that underlies the presbytery, stood upon a raised platform with steps at each side and others, now in two series of four, from the nave altar down to the nave level, as at Christchurch, Canterbury and Worcester Cathedral. I shall argue that Winchester Cathedral had sixty-six back stalls. In scale this was on a par with the thirteenth-century choir-stalls at Salisbury Cathedral (68). Winchester probably had fifty-six sub-stalls making a grand total of one hundred and twenty-two seats.

The uncertainty about the original number of stalls provided at Winchester Cathedral is due to the fact that the furniture is known to have been subsequently modified. Not only is

there physical evidence for this but the number of back-stalls extant today (62) is insufficient to accommodate the known complement of the establishment in the early fourteenth century. At what date this happened and by how much the stalls were shortened is not recorded. As Wilson (Mrs Bennett) pointed out (1976, 16–17):

‘At the west end of the main ranges the seat and capping rails have been cut through at the centre of a seat and the upper string-course on a division, and they are then joined across the back with an iron strap. Had such joints been part of the original construction, they would have been formed at a division throughout to help conceal

them. Such certainly was the method of forming the scarf-joint in the seat rail which occurs about mid-way along the line of stalls on each side.'

Proof that this break in the stalls must be part of a curtailment is provided by the fact that the foundations of the substalls are cut by those of the existing return stalls (Wilson 1976, 18). The curtailment is part of a process whereby the west end of the stalls was opened out so that the two western of the lateral stalls are pushed somewhat towards the nave piers. Carpenter-Turner was of the opinion that this alteration was associated with the erection of the Inigo Jones screen to allow a wider entrance arch (Wilson 1976, 17).

A manuscript note by Thomas Wharton in his own copy of his *Description of Winchester* (1760), taken from the Willis MS says: 'Charles I ordered . . . the present screen to be built 1637 and raise the Ascent by 2 or 3 steps so shortening the choir by two double seats'. If we assume that the alterations resulted from this royal prescription, we are then in a position to date the curtailment of the stalls. It has been shown that the work on the screen did not start until April 1637 (Blakiston 1976, 11).

Lieutenant Hammond's list of carvings on the stalls, made in 1635, now emerges as of critical importance in calculating the original number of seats in the choir (BL 1635). But before examining this, we should consider what was meant by 'shortening the choir by two double seats'. As Mrs Bennett asked, does this indicate two double seats on each side (Wilson 1976, 17)? This would have been a radical remodelling and implies that the original stalls were four single seats longer each side. In length this would be some 2.84 m and would have brought the original stalls about 1.35 m out beyond the line of the responds of the nave piers, that is, to about midway across the arcade. Since the second bay of the nave was formerly occupied by the pulpitum (Vallance 1947, 50), and the next bay west the steps down to the nave, it is very unlikely that the stalls would have projected as far west as this.

It is surely preferable to interpret Wharton's

annotation as meaning one double-seat on each side. As the seats are, uniquely, arranged in pairs the removal of two units would have reduced the seating capacity by four. This would have meant that the original stalls terminated exactly at the west end of the first nave piers. These calculations assume that there has been no alteration to the position of the east end of the stalls. It is true that the engraving in Britton (1817, Pl.I) shows the stalls ending in line with the first step whereas they now align with the second. But the plan agrees with the present arrangement at the west end. Britton's illustrations are not known for their reliability and it is most unlikely that anyone would have gone to the considerable trouble of moving the entire stalls a few feet to the east without good reason. The hard evidence at the west end for the curtailment of the stalls supports this view.

The discovery of Wharton's annotation has also helped to settle another contentious issue – the arrangement of the carved panels. These must have been situated on the back panelling on a level with the apexes of the sub-arches of the front screen (Jervis 1976, 19; Tracy 1984, 145, note 70). This space was decorated with gold stars on a blue ground at the Restoration. Two possible configurations of the panels have been put forward. The first (Warren 1935) was mooted before the discovery of Wharton's annotation. This was based on the existing number of side stalls (26) and suggested that the twenty-seven New Testament scenes were spread over the south side and the corner seat of the south return-stalls. The thirty-three Old Testament scenes occupied the northern side and return-stalls, and two or possibly more of the south return-stalls. For this hypothesis to be convincing and for all the seats to be accounted for, the Lieutenant must be expected not merely to have misnumbered one of the panels, which he did, but to have missed two of them out. A second possible arrangement of the panels has been put forward (Wilson 1976, 17–18) working on the supposition that there were no panels at all in return-stalls and that on the south side all the New Testament subjects were accommodated

with three spare Old Testament panels and that the north side was filled with the bulk of the Old Testament subjects. But this is not a satisfactory answer as it suffers from the disadvantages of the first hypothesis in that it is based upon the wrong number of seats. If we assume that there were originally twenty-eight lateral stalls a more satisfactory arrangement can be reconstructed.

Assuming that the Lieutenant made a clerical error and that there were originally only thirty-three Old Testament subjects, the entire north side of the stalls, including the returns, would have been devoted to that theme. The twenty-seven New Testament subjects, starting with 'The Angell appearing to Zachary in the Temple' over the prior's stall, could have spread around the southern stalls leaving six seats at the east end without any carvings at the time of the Lieutenant's visit. The fact that the recorder mistook the first scene of the New Testament strongly suggests that the two series were in sequence. It is understandable, if the Lieutenant was working his way around from the north-east end, that on crossing the choir entrance, he should be unaware that the theme had changed until he reached the 'Annunciation', which was one seat in from the main choir aisle. By the time he arrived at Winchester the final six panels must have disappeared. The subjects of these could have been Apocalyptic. A panel of 'Christ in Majesty' would have paired off well with the 'Trinity' represented on the other side.

The evidence of the Lieutenant provides corroboration for the suggestion that there were thirty-three stalls each side. If we correct his misnumberings between thirty and thirty-one and overlook his wrong attribution of 'The Angell appearing to Zachary in the Temple' (Warren 1935) to the Old Testament series, we have the evidence that we need for an understanding of his statement that the Old Testament subjects filled one side of the stalls. The New Testament subjects must have filled, as the recorder claimed, the other side. Any reconstruction which questions the integrity of his statement should be treated as *prima facie*

not proven. A total of sixty-six stalls would have accommodated exactly the known number of monks at Winchester in 1325 together with the prior and subprior.

There were two distinctive but clearly related campaigns in the making of the choir-stalls at Winchester Cathedral. The original stalls were erected, and presumably designed, by William Lyngwode, a Norfolk master-carver whose continued residence at Winchester was requested by the furniture's patron, Bishop Woodlock, in the summer of 1308 in a surviving letter to Bishop Salmon of Norwich, and again the following year (Goodman 1927). Sometime after this the stalls must have started to show the symptoms of imminent collapse which still can be seen today. A programme of renovation was put in hand by the same team of workmen who had made the original furniture and the work cannot have been finally completed much later than c 1315 (Tracy 1987).

The V & A's boss is part of the first campaign. Its size corresponds with the keystone bosses in the quadripartite rib vaulting of the choir-stall canopies (Fig 3). The sensitive semi-naturalistic carving to be found on the work of the first campaign with its distinctively 'humpy' Decorated style leaves can be recognised in the carving style. Other familiar characteristics such as the alternation of the inside and outside of a leaf, a period trait well exemplified in stone on the contemporary Prior Eastry choir parclose screen at Canterbury Cathedral, and prominent stalks with budded shoots are also present.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fig 3. Winchester Cathedral. Underside of choir-stall vaulting canopy (Copyright Murray Davison).

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