FURNITURE IN WELLS CATHEDRAL

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INTRODUCTION

Churches contain interesting furniture, and particularly so cathedrals, but it rarely receives recognition. Furniture and furnishings are not the most obvious things to attract the attention of antiquaries. As one would expect much of the furniture is essentially ecclesiastical but there are often other pieces that have a wider use. Wells cathedral is no exception.

The furniture needs to be viewed in the context of its setting. The cathedral was built between 1175 and the mid 14th century to replace the earlier Saxon cathedral to the south of the present building. Compared with others it survived the reformation and troubles of the 17th century relatively unscathed, and, again by comparison, the gothic revival in the 19th century though the much mutilated 14th-century wooden stalls in the quire were replaced. The only major change since medieval times was the demolition of the lady chapel by the cloisters, or Stillington's chantry, in 1552 and following years. In the 1850s the Vicars' Hall and adjacent house in Vicars' Close was leased to J.H. Parker, a distinguished antiquary and there survives some of the furniture designed for these premises by either himself or William Burges, the architect who supervised restoration for him.

This paper deals with the principal pieces of furniture and associated items in the cathedral and the Vicars' Hall. Those which have been well illustrated in published works have not been reproduced but referenced appropriately.

THE FURNITURE

Cope chest

The cope chest now in the retro-quire (Fig. 1) has been dated by dendrochronology[1] to the 1120s. It must have been made from green oak close to felling date else it would not have been possible to steam the front to a convex shape from a single plank. This makes it the oldest positively dated piece of furniture in the country that has not been subject to major restoration and replacement of damaged portions.

Cope chests were made for larger churches in the 12th and 13th centuries and many, including the Wells chest, would have been used also to store the choir cloaks worn in the long hours of services in an unheated building. When the style of copes altered in the 14th century from limp voluminous materials to heavier damasks, copes tended to be kept in cupboards instead of being laid flat and folded in a quadrant-shaped chest such as Wells,[2] though St Peter's abbey, Gloucester, now the cathedral, has a chest that is a full half circle.

By its date the Wells chest will have been moved across from the Saxon cathedral. From at least the 16th century to the 19th century it was in the undercroft of the chapter house[3] and subjected to flooding to which the area was prone. The sides of the chest were arcaded in a Romanesque manner with the bases of the arcade and the rounded arches at the top cut proud along the top and bottom rails, with pilasters planted on the panelled sides hiding the joints. These no longer exist but are evidenced

Fig. 1 Cope chest

by nail heads and nail holes. The lids are not original and may date from repairs carried out in 1408–9.

In 2007 it was apparent that there were structural problems with the chest and the bottom rails were becoming increasingly friable as a result of past water damage. In the following year a programme of conservation with minimal intervention was carried out by Donal Channer in co-operation with Dr Nigel Bamforth, senior furniture conservator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Dr Warwick Rodwell, the cathedral archaeologist. The conservation report and detailed description of the chest is appended. It appears that at some point, possibly when moved from the undercroft, the chest had been dismantled and reassembled slightly out of true. To correct this would have caused undue intervention.

Pyx canopy or sacrament hoist

A very special piece of medieval carpentry on a small scale in the late 13th century is the pyx canopy which currently hangs in the arch of the north-west tower (Fig. 2). Hung above an altar it was used to reserve elements consecrated at the mass. After the Reformation it was stored in the undercroft of the chapter house and is a remarkable survival. Other pyx covers in any way comparable such as that at Milton Abbey, Dorset, are all later.[4]

Cylindrical in shape it is 1.22m (4ft) high with a diameter of 0.37m (14½in). It is made of oak but with soft wood repairs; the sides are openwork arched arcading with traces of red and white polychrome.

Iron-plated door

In the north-west corner of the north transept are steps in the thickness of the wall leading to a room

Fig. 2 Pyx cover

also within the thickness of the wall. It has a series of lockers on the south wall and would have been constructed when the transept was built in the 12th century. This room appears to have been a strong room for muniments and valuable items. It has long been wondered where the iron-plated door (Fig. 3) stored in the triforium came from but it fits exactly to the doorway of this room. Its identification occurred during preparation for publication of John Carter's drawings of the cathedral made between 1784 and 1808 where it is illustrated amongst his working notes and captioned 'iron door up steps in the north transept'.[5] There is a similar door to the sacristy in the south ambulatory to the quire in Tewkesbury Abbey.

Seats and benches

Though not specifically ecclesiastical there are long seats with backs which have been in the cathedral or Vicars' Hall from the 16th century and in some cases obviously earlier though difficult to date with precision. They are at present in the transepts and

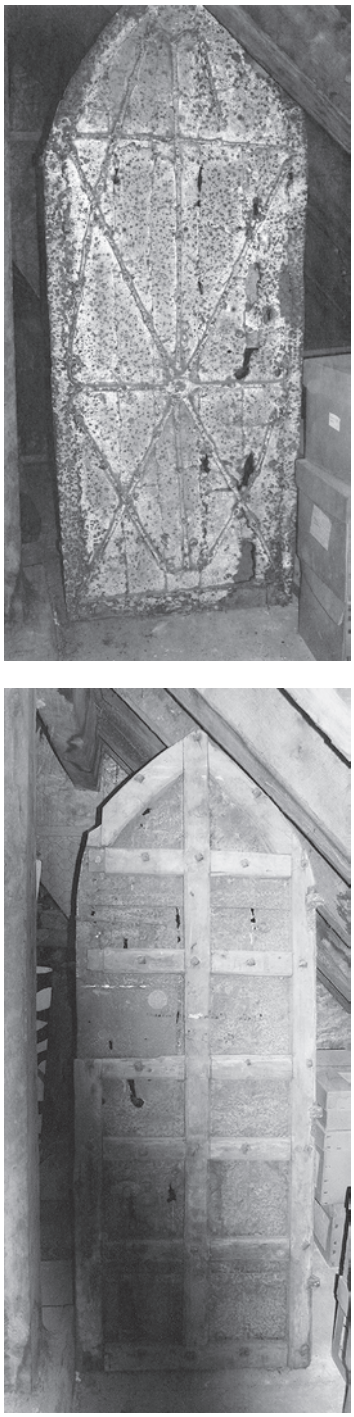

Fig. 3 Iron plated door: above front; below back

retro-quire. The most interesting is that with a swivel back that can be turned at right angles to provide a desk or table (Fig. 4) – such an arrangement is more usually found with a high backed seat that can be swivelled to become a table. This design was taken up by Sidney Barnsley and other members of the Arts and Crafts movement in the late 19th century under the name of monk's settle and included in furniture made for Rodmarton Manor, Gloucestershire. There are also a number of backless benches once thought to be a reproduction by the architect Benjamin Ferrey in the mid 19th century, but they are clearly older for they appear as seating in front of the choir stalls in a watercolour by R.W. Ellis dated 1826. All these pieces have stout splayed legs morticed into the seat as can be seen in Fig. 4.

Chairs

At the present time in Beckyngton's chantry is a substantial if somewhat plain armchair (Fig. 5). It was clearly made for important use for the seat is unduly high and probably designed for use with a footstool. It has been dated to the mid 17th century. Its back and seat are upholstered in red silk with a gold damask design which could be original. For many years it languished in a storage area up the north-west tower until its interest and quality was recognised recently by Prebendary van der Zee, keeper of the fabric.

Grander are the pair of episcopal chairs (Fig. 6) bought in 1783 which stood on either side of the high altar when not in use.[6] The maker was named Lockyer. A person of that name worked at making picture frames for Sir James Dutton at Sherborne House, Gloucestershire, in 1730[7] and it is possible that it was one and the same family. The chairs, made of mahogany in a somewhat old-fashioned Chippendale style, have padded armrests and backs which swoop up to terminate in a bishop's mitre. The overall design may well emanate from one of the many pattern books available to craftsmen at that time. The dimensions of the seat seem to follow an acknowledged standard. The chairs are upholstered in deep crimson velvet with a damask design in silver thread that has tarnished. They are commodious and handsome and frequently used.

There is also a nice little 17th-century desk-seat designed for two boys which was in the old school room above the west cloister. When the room was leased out to the Wells masonic lodge this piece was placed in the library.

Fig. 4 Bench

Fig. 5 Chair (17th century)

Fig. 6 Episcopal chair

In the Vicars' Hall there is a wide seat with linen fold panelling. One end is rough on the outside which indicates it may have been a pew.

Lecterns

There are two lecterns in the cathedral different but fine of their type. The great brass lectern given by Dean Creyghtone (1660–70) is now in the retro-quire The wooden eagle lectern given in memory of Dean Goodenough (1831–45) is in the quire.

The Creyghtone lectern,[8] 1.97m (77½in) to the top of the cresting above the book desks, has triangular sides decorated with incised fleur-de-lys which support a book desk on either side. The ornamental cresting carries the arms of Creyghtone impaled with those of the cathedral. The lectern revolves to enable the use of separate bibles for each lesson. Both book desks have engraved above Creyghtone's arms 'God grant grace' and are inscribed 'Dr Rob^{t} Creyghtone upon his return from fifteen years exile wth our sovereign Lord King Charles 2nd, made Dean of Wells in ye y^{r} 1660 gave this brazen Desk with God's holy worde thereon to the said Cathedral Church.' Engraved on the baluster stem is 'Guilemus Burroughs me fecit ano. dni. 1661.' Burroughs, who was based in London, is known to have made lecterns for Canterbury and Lincoln cathedrals and Queen's College, Oxford.

The lectern is designed for the quire with the reader standing on the north or south side whose voice would project east and west. It is too tall for a reader to speak over the top but there exists an early 19th-century set of steps in a vaguely gothic style to

enable this to be done. The two great bibles that the Dean provided for his lectern, printed by Cambridge University Press in 1660, are in the cathedral library.

The Goodenough lectern is a handsome example of Victorian craftsmanship and has a note placed within it recording it was made be William Henry Webb 'gothic carver of Exeter' and 'from heart of oak 318 years of age from an ancient house in Exeter'. It was given in 1846 by Miss Annabella Goodenough in memory of her father, Dean Edmund Goodenough. It takes the usual form of an eagle with outspread wings to which the book rest is fixed.

The height of the lectern may indicate it was intended to be used in the lady chapel with the reader standing on one of the eastern steps which had been altered in the restoration. Currently a small platform is provided for the reader to stand on. The restoration of the lady chapel was in progress when the Dean died.

Furniture in the Vicars' Hall and adjacent rooms

Bread cupboard

The great bread cupboard (Fig. 7) is believed to be part of the original furnishings dating from 1348. It consists of three narrow cupboards below which are three sloping lids to the bins in which the supplies for 42 Vicars Choral were kept. It is a unique piece of medieval furniture of massive size, 2.695m (106¼in) long, 0.736m (29in) wide and 1.765m (67½in) high.

Cauldron

The large cauldron until recently in the Vicars' kitchen is now in the muniment room beyond the library. Although the capacities are markedly different, it has been associated with the brass vessel that Alice Swansee, mother of a Vicar Choral who died in office, bequeathed for use in the hall in her will dated 3 January 1348/9.

J.H. Parker's furniture for the Vicars' Hall

J.H. Parker FSA, a member of the family of Oxford booksellers, rented the Vicars' Hall, its undercroft (now the chapter meeting room) and an adjacent house in the Vicars' Close from the 1850s to the 1870s. An enthusiast for all things gothic, he commissioned William Burges, one of the most flamboyant of gothic revival architects, to design the painting of the walls and ceilings in the undercroft.

Fig. 7 Bread cupboard

'The lower part of the walls were painted in imitation of curtains which might not be strictly correct for the date of the buildings but he could not afford silk curtains. The walls and roof arches were painted lively colours in accordance with high authorities in medieval decoration'.[9] The stencil patterned ceiling has been conserved which gives some idea of the setting for his furniture but the wall decorations are now so fragmentary that they have been covered with a finish capable of removal if wished.

The dresser of 1863 (Fig. 8) is attributed to Parker himself or perhaps Burges. It has a high shelved back with a coved top in a sturdy medieval style, typical of sophisticated gothic revivalism of that date. It is large, 1.85m (74in) long, 0.71m (28in) wide and 3.03m (119¼in) high.

Other furniture in the Vicars' Hall

Some of the benches now in the cathedral were in the Vicars' Hall with two tables of an ordinary nature and 17th-century date between them. A lightly built 'metamorphic' chair which folds out to a set of steps is a relic of Parker's occupancy. He used the Hall and undercroft as residential accommodation.

The chequer, muniment room and treasury

These rooms are in the tower above the staircase to the Vicars' Hall and reached by a spiral staircase from the Hall.[10] The chequer has a corner cupboard over the staircase where the clerk kept writing materials and nearby is a piscina in which he could wash his equipment and his hands. The room also contains a chest dated 1633 where *inter alia* the seal of the Vicars Choral was kept on a ledge inside for that purpose.

Fig. 8 J.H. Parker's dresser

The muniment room opens out of the chequer and has a series of filing drawers *c*. 1420 (Fig. 9) of which each drawer is shaped with a small difference so no drawer can be placed in other than its proper position. It was used to hold leases and documents of the Vicars' endowments. From the muniment room stairs in the thickness of the wall lead down to the treasury which has along one side a row of high cupboards again *c*. 1420 in which vestments, plate and other valuables were kept. The treasury is secured by a wooden bolt which can be dropped down behind the door from the muniment room above and concealed below the floor.

The library

The cathedral library was built above the east cloister walk between 1425 and 1433 under the terms of the will of Bishop Bubwith. It is divided into two sections; the five bays to the north are an open area and the remainder to the south were furnished in 1686 when the chapter minute records they were repaired with Dr Busby's benefaction and

Fig. 9 Muniment filing cabinet; Vicars' Hall

'beautifyed as ye sd Dr Busby doth desire'.[11] Richard Busby is best known as headmaster of Westminster School but was also Canon Treasurer at Wells. Conscious of his absences from residence he gave books to the library and paid for its re-ordering, necessary in view of the bequest of other books at that time.

The re-designed library was slightly old fashioned for its time with a section of chained books and presses between the windows at right angles to the wall, with desk shelves and double-sided benches between each press. The walls between the presses are panelled in untreated red pine which has mellowed attractively. The northernmost press was added to accommodate the bequest of books from Bishop George Hooper (1703–27). At the southern end of the library is a muniment room with a number of pieces of pleasant but unexceptional antique furniture. The open area at the northern end was re-furnished in 2001 under the supervision of Canon Chancellor Melvyn Matthews, bringing in 19th-century softwood presses similar to those in the main library and adding well-designed oak tables and matching chairs for readers.

In this area there is also a 15th-century oak book chest. The chest section is accessed by two doors in the front, inside it had shelves and the top takes the form of a sloping reading desk. The hinges on the doors and furnishings are similar to other such items in the cathedral, eg the cupboard doors in the Vicars' Hall treasury which gives a date of *c*. 1420/30. The chest originally had legs but these were apparently cut off *c*. 1950. It is possibly the one remaining piece of the medieval furnishings of the library but there can be no certainty as so much of the furniture in the cathedral has been moved around over the years. The Vicars' Hall is another possible place for its original location.

PAST FURNISHINGS

Any review of the furniture and furnishings of the cathedral would be incomplete without mention of that which no longer exists but had a significant impact on the appearance of the building.

The pulpit testers or sounding boards

The tester to the nave pulpit shows how legend can perpetuate itself. Until the early 19th century a large tester dominated Bishop Knight's pulpit of 1547 and probably was part of the original scheme. A drawing made by John Carter in the 1780s[12] shows it in position. The note accompanying the drawing in the Carter portfolios in the British Library records the cornice was painted green with Bishop Knight's arms in yellow and an inscription 'qui ex deo verba dei audit' – 'He that is of God, heareth God's words'.[13] It has been long believed that a table in the room next to the hall in Dunster Castle is the tester reused but if one looks at the drawing the tester had a ribbed underside which would not be suitable on a table and the top would have been rough work. It is a different shape to the table and its deep cornice is integral to it; furthermore a fragment of the cornice was in Bishop Law's museum at the palace in the 1830s which indicates it came down long before Anthony Salvin's involvement with the cathedral or Dunster Castle.

It is conceivable that the Dunster table top came from the quire pulpit tester when the pulpit was removed in Salvin's reordering of the quire but there is no sufficiently clear picture of the old quire pulpit to form a conclusion.

The prebendal stalls in the quire

The most significant change in the appearance of the cathedral was the replacement of the wooden stalls of the 1320s by Salvin in 1848 with the present stone stalls set back within the arcade. The original stalls, which were proud of the arcade, had twisted canopy columns and fretted canopy work though this was cut down in the 16th century to provide galleries accessed by stairs from the aisles. Two of the traceried gallery fronts survive as reredos in the chapels in the retro-quire and south-east transept. The misericord seats were retained though one was given to the Victoria and Albert museum.

It is difficult to judge the state of the mutilated stalls when they were replaced. Sir Stephen Glynne writing in 1825[14] described them as 'gaudy, covered with gilding and neither elegant or in good taste'. Canon C.M. Church[15] recorded that in the 1840s 'the choir had been covered with many coats of whitewash and yellow daub' and 'the old stalls of the 14th century had been ruthlessly truncated, carpenters had made havoc with carved work and delicate tracery so that galleries might be built above the stalls with panels of painted woodwork'. The bishop's throne had been painted to resemble green marble and the back panel decorated with a painted landscape. He says it was very difficult to clean all this off. A watercolour in the possession of the dean and chapter shows the quire prior to Salvin's intervention. The pulpit was draped with a curtain and the 17th-century altar rails had flat cut pierced baluster shafts, a typical Somerset style.

The consistory court

The consistory court in the base of the north-west tower was dismantled over 50 years ago. This area has since been used as a vestry, the cathedral shop and currently is an equipment store. No photographic or other record was made when it was destroyed and knowledge is based on recollection and its layout can be seen on plans made for other purposes.[16] In date it would seem to have been 17th or early 18th century with benches along the sides, a table in the centre and a podium for the chancellor's seat on the back wall.

The lady chapel

There is no evidence of its medieval furnishings except for the stone bench around the sides. In the centre was the tomb in 'blew marble' of Bishop William Bytton I (1248–64) taken down in 1727 as unsafe. From the Reformation to the 17th century it would seem the chapel was unfurnished, or very sparsely so. In 1676 the chapter resoved ' holy table to be set up in the eastern part of the Lady Chapel',[17] and its damaged reredos was panelled over and perhaps further damaged in the process. Two rows of pews with panelled fronts and gates were installed on either side aligned east and west. The office services were conducted in the chapel in winter months when the unheated quire was far from hospitable.

This arrangement was in place in 1813[18] but gone by 1824[19] and thereafter the chapel was unfurnished except for altar and altar rails until Dean Goodenough commenced restoration with Benjamin Ferrey as architect.

The Minton tiles date from that time and an additional step was made at the east end with a base of ledger slabs taken up when the tiles were laid. Subsequently the chapel was used by Wells Theological College and heavily chaired. It remained so till 2000 and schemes exist for its refurbishment.

MORE RECENT FURNITURE AND FURNISHINGS

Mothers' Union chapel

St Stephen's chapel in the north-east corner of the retro-quire was designed for the Mothers' Union by Sir Ninian Comper in 1939 and completed in 1950 at the end of his long career. Comper was essentially a decorator and skilled in the creation of detailed space often on a small scale exemplified by this chapel which is a delightful example of his mature style influenced by continental and particularly Spanish gothic. Sadly it is now not exactly as intended, for the oriental carpet in front of the altar has been stolen and the altar hangings replaced with a different shade of blue. Colour was important to him and the banner at the entrance embroidered by the Sisters of Bethany demonstrates his skill.

Nave altar furniture

The furniture and choir stalls around the nave altar were made in 1997 by Illingworth and Partridge of Milborne Port who also provided the design which in its final form owes much to Douglas Hogg RIBA, a member and now chairman of the Fabric Advisory Committee.

The use of high-backed chairs for the lay clerks gives form and presence to the scheme. The wood is fumed oak carefully matched so as to contrast but not simulate the surrounding stonework. It is certainly effective and a great improvement over its predecessors with the appearance of permanence and not of a temporary structure though it can be moved out of the way when necessary.

This paper does not purport to be a comprehensive inventory of the cathedral's furniture. There are a number of incomplete pieces of medieval and later woodwork, one encapsulated in a 19th-century pew front and other furniture of lesser interest.

Acknowledgements

The assistance and knowledge of Prebendary van der Zee has been most helpful as has been that of Frances Neale FSA, former cathedral archivist and Anne Crawford FSA, the present archivist. Illustrations are from photographs taken for the purpose by Sarah Buttenshaw.

Endnotes

1 Dendrochronology by Dan Miles supervised by Dr Warwick Rodwell FSA
2 Howard, F.E., and Crossley, F.H., 1917 *English Church Furniture 1230–1550*, London, 346
3 'Architectural Records of Wells by John Carter FSA 1784–1808', *Somerset Record Society* 92, pl. II, 50–1; Carter's portfolio VIII in British Library f91 verso and 94 recto
4 Howard and Crossley 1917, 138
5 'Carter Records of Wells', *SRS* 92, 54; Carter's portfolio VIII, f111
6 Colchester, L.S. (ed.), 1982 *Wells Cathedral, a History*, Shepton Mallet, pl. 81; 'Carter Records of Wells', *SRS* 92, pl. VII
7 Pers. comm., Dr James Yorke FSA (Curator, furniture, V&A Museum)
8 Colchester, L.S., 1987 *Wells Cathedral*, The New Bell's Cathedral Guides, London, illus. p.143
9 *Ibid*., p.166; see copies of the portfolio of photographs by J.H. Parker taken in 1866, Wells chapter archives, PL/93
10 *Ibid*., illus. pp.170–2
11 *Ibid*., illus. p.103; Colchester 1982 pl. 87
12 'Carter Records of Wells', *SRS* 92, fig. 5
13 John 8: 47
14 'Sir Stephen Glynne's Church Notes for Somerset', *Somerset Record Society* 82, 362
15 Church, C.M., 1897 *Wells Cathedral*, London, 66, 70
16 'Carter Records of Wells', *SRS* 92, pl. III
17 'Chapter Act Book 1666–83', *SRS* 72, 59
18 Colchester 1982, pl. 80
19 Britton, J., 1824 *The Cathedral Church of Wells*, London, pl. XVII

APPENDIX: COPE CHEST CONSERVATION REPORT

Introduction

The cope chest was conserved in 2008 by Donal Channer with advice and oversight from Dr Nigel Bamforth, senior conservator of furniture at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Description

This should be read in conjunction with the photographs and the measured plan (Fig. 10). The chest is segmental in plan with a radius of 2m (6ft 6in) and an angle of 70 degrees. It is made of English oak throughout. The top has two lids hinged at the edges and a fixed apron section at the apex. The apron section is rebated into the back leg and there is clearly some form of carved decoration missing from the top of the leg/apron.

The lids are each made of five tapering boards V-jointed and held together by battens nailed on the inside. The apron has grooves carved in it radiating from the apex. The lids have marks of three previous sets of hinges which match marks on the top rails except for two 30mm (1¼in) holes in each top rail which presumably are the marks of the original hinges. The lids are early replacements and possibly date from repairs carried out in 1408–9. The V-jointing system is used in medieval doors in the cathedral from this date. The lids are heavy and when they are opened and closed they bend slightly. The left lid has three original curved ledges nailed on but the right one has two extra short modern ones screwed on. Parts of the upper surface have split off at the joints. The hinges are blacksmith made and are 20th-century replacements.

The legs are of heavy sections and only the left and middle ones are intact. The back and right legs have new bottom sections. The back leg has had an extension added at the bottom to support the right rail and the stretcher, both of which joints are open. The lower side rails are both intact but both were soft and friable at the bottom edges. The lower front rail has a friable area at the back and towards the right which appears to be an area of bark and sap. The upper right and front rails are intact but the left rail has a piece spliced in at the left end.

The front leg supports the bottom rail, which it is tenoned up into, as well as the main stretcher from the back leg, which supports the floor of the chest. The front leg is friable and had a 20th-century patch on the front let into the rail. As found the leg tilted forward and had separated from the rail, probably because the chest had been lifted without support to the front leg which would have been pushed down and outwards by the main stretcher and the weight of the floor of the chest.

The lower rails have a repetitive stepped carved decoration and the upper ones also have a repetitive carved decoration with the same spacing. The side panels are composed of several boards which overlap where they meet. The joints were covered by strips (now missing) which coincided with repeating carved decoration of the rails. The remains of the nails holding these strips may still be seen on the edges of some of the side panels and towards the right of the front panel. Some of the side panel boards are missing and those which remain have not been replaced in their correct positions. Each of the sides has a replacement panel; the one on the right was previously a drawer bottom.

The curved front panel is of one piece of wood 13mm (½ in) thick, steamed, bent and held in position by the curved front rails. It has a split at the right hand end and iron strips have been fixed inside to keep this split stable. The lower front rail to leg joints have been reinforced with iron brackets below them. The upper rail to right leg joint has a bracket fixed inside the chest.

The inside of the chest was lined with linen and this is the last of many linings the nail marks of which can be seen inside the chest. No sign of textiles from previous linings was found.

The floor of the chest (Fig. 11) is supported by a main stretcher running from the back to the front leg with sub-stretchers from the side rails to the main stretcher. The floorboards are roughly chamfered to fit into grooves in the rails and legs and are rebated over one another at the long joints while the short joints are butted. The main stretcher has a dowel running across it and cut off flush with the surface. No function has yet been suggested for this dowel.

The workmanship is crude, vigorous, and ambitious. The profiles of the mouldings vary considerably suggesting they have been carved and not planed. The lower front rail has an area of sapwood and bark at the back towards the right which suggests that the curved rails were hewn from a curved tree. The surfaces are not smooth particularly the front panel which suggests that they were expected to have a paint finish with a gesso base, however no sign of any gesso or decorative finish is visible.

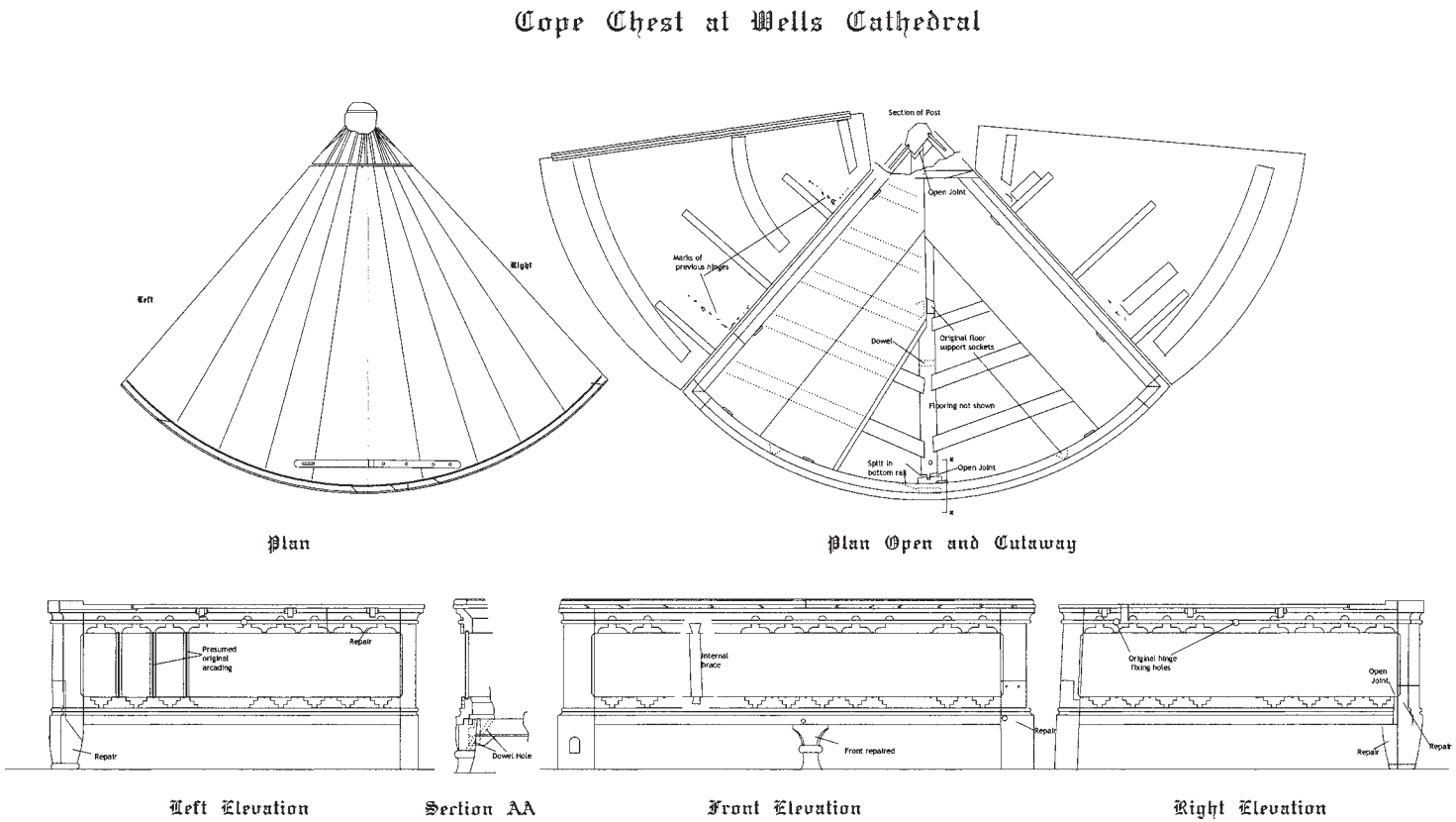

Fig. 10 Plan of cope chest; drawn by Donal Channer; scale 1:40

Fig. 11 Floor of cope chest

The surface finish is dark brown or black and generally opaque. It was flaking in places particularly on the bottom rails and apron and had worn through on most edges.

Condition

The main problems were originally identified as

1 The open joints between the lower right rail and the back leg and the associated deformation of the chest;
2 The side panels were loose and wrongly positioned;
3 The soft friable areas and the flaking paint;
4 The front leg had been interfered with in an attempt to deal with problems which were not apparent without further investigation and it had an inappropriate patch let into the front.

Conservation proposals

It was proposed that

1 The linen lining should be removed;
2 The friable areas be treated with a consolidant to make them firm and to make the paint re-adhere to the wood;
3 Areas where the paint was missing be sealed with a reversible acrylic sealer and then coloured with a reversible acrylic coloured wash;
4 Decisions about the front leg and structural deformation would be discussed and agreed at a meeting with Dr Nigel Bamforth senior conservator at The Victoria and Albert Museum, Dr Warwick Rodwell, cathedral archaeologist, and Donal Channer, the conservator;
5 The boards of the side panels would be arranged so that the joints would coincide with the carved decorations of the rails. They would be stabilised.

Opening up

The linen lining was removed by pulling out the tacks which held it, following which it was apparent from previous tack marks and holes that linings had been fixed at several different levels previously.

The top and bottom rails were held by braces in dovetail slots. The braces showed signs of machine sawing, and were therefore modern – but sockets were old as was shown by one of the sockets which was positioned very close to the left end and had a modern repair crossing it.

The floorboards were not fixed and lifting them revealed that the front leg was tilted out at the bottom, and that the tenon of the stretcher was only just engaged in its mortice. Removing the loose floorboards also revealed a pair of notches in the stretcher and a corresponding pair in the front rail. These suggested that the present floor support rails are not the originals and that the original ones ran parallel to the sides with the flooring at 90 degrees to the present arrangement.

The patch on the front of the leg rested on the round moulding at the middle of the leg, and was let into the bottom rail, there was a gap between the shoulder of the leg and the bottom of the rail of about 6mm (¼in). Attempts had been made to close this gap and pull the leg square by nailing through the leg into the rail – round nails being used on the right and square ones on the left – and this resulted in bits having been split off the leg. The leg had a split in it at the back. A dowel hole ran down at an angle through the stretcher beside the tenon and had originally run into the leg when the joint was closed. The tip of the dowel fell out of the leg when it was lifted. A similar dowel was found at the other end of the stretcher.

Meeting

At the meeting it was decided that

1 It would not be possible to close the joint of the right lower rail to the back leg or the main stretcher to the front and back legs. The floor board which runs parallel to the right side is housed in grooves in the back and right legs. If the legs are to be moved closer together the floorboard must penetrate further into the legs

which it cannot do. It had been put in while the joint was open and is too long to allow the joints to close. There was no obvious reason why the front and right legs should now be some 25mm (1in) or so further from the back leg than when the chest was made. However the fit of the new floorboard showed that the situation had not changed since it had been fitted.

2 The front leg would have to be removed and examined. It was proposed to replace the front patch with a more sympathetic version and to pack the gaps between the leg and the rail and stretcher with pieces of oak to make it more rigid. The split in the back of the leg would also be filled with new oak.

3 Paint samples would be taken from crevices in the rails, the lids, and other areas to see if any trace of polychromy could be found. These would be sent for analysis in a separate study.

The works

When the patch was removed from the front leg an area of patina was revealed which matched the side of the leg. It was concluded that the patch had been fixed to the original surface. The nails were removed, and it was found that the leg would run up and fit tight against the rail in its original position. It was now vertical and allowed the tenon of the stretcher to penetrate by 30mm (1¼ in). Also the shoulders of the leg/stretcher joint were parallel and much closer. The gaps in the joint with the stretcher were filled with new oak when the legs were refixed. The split in the back of the leg was filled with new oak and when reassembled this had the effect of allowing the new oak to carry the weight of the stretcher and the floor of the chest directly to the ground. The joints were glued with a polyester paste (Ipol) so as to achieve adhesion and bridge gaps.

A penetrating epoxy resin (Trimol 34 from Triton Chemicals) was spread by brush on the friable areas and encouraged to soak in, which it did readily. The bottom left and right rails, an area at the back of and towards the right of the front rail, the bottom of the left leg, and the middle section of the back leg were all treated.

It was found that three of the panels in the left side could be removed by lifting them up into the upper rail but all others were too long for this treatment and could not be removed; although they could be rattled. They were stabilised by gluing strips of cotton cloth across the joints at the back using Copydex adhesive.

All the pale areas were sealed and coloured in using an acrylic wash (Daler Rowney colour in Rustins acrylic sealer). The modern replacement panels were toned to match the original rather better. The aim was to harmonise the appearance while making it still possible to read the history of the chest.

The chest was finally given a light coat of turpentine and beeswax polish (Briwax) and buffed up by hand.