

**THE MISERICORDS OF EXETER
CATHEDRAL; THE HOUSE OF STUART
AND THE CARY FAMILY JAMES II AND
TORRE ABBEY; THE PRIORY FOR NUNS
OF ST. MARY, CORNWORTHY, DEVON**

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THE
MISERICORDS
OF
EXETER CATHEDRAL

BY
KATE M. CLARKE

EXETER
JAMES G. COMMINS
1920

THE MISERICORDS OF EXETER CATHEDRAL.

THE carvings on misericords show us the secular aspect of the mediæval mind, and this gives them a special fascination, but their interest does not rest only on the subjects, the handiwork of the artist deserves study. In the later ages of misericords there was a tendency to disregard beauty and finish so long as a story was told; this is not so at Exeter, where, with very few exceptions, the carvings are boldly designed and admirably worked.

Before considering them in detail, it may be as well to say a little about the evolution of the misericord.

In the primitive church people stood to pray, with the arms extended, as is shown by the "Orantes" in the catacombs of Rome. Later, it became the custom to kneel, but sitting was never permitted, participants in the service had to stand or kneel throughout. In the tenth century, stalls were placed in the choirs of cathedrals and monastic and collegiate churches; they were still places for standing, not seats. The word "stall" comes from the Anglo-Saxon, and means a standing place: it retains its primary meaning when applied to a stall in a stable, wherein a horse stands, also when used to designate a booth at a fair or a fancy bazaar, otherwise a "standing."

It is obvious that to stand or kneel all through the numerous daily services was a great physical strain to the aged and infirm, so they were allowed to use crutches, which were placed under the armpits, and afforded some support. However, before very long, seats were placed in the stalls in the form of brackets, which worked on pivots. They were only used during the Epistle and Gradual at Mass, and during the Responses at Vespers; at all other times they were turned back out of the way. Peter de Clugny in 1121, referring to the conduct of

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services, says at certain times, "Here the seats are turned up"; so they must have been generally adopted by that date. The occupant of the stall would soon find that the solid edge of the bracket offered some little support; then the device was hit upon of fastening a piece of wood on this edge, at right angles to the bracket, so that when it was turned up another seat was brought to light, narrow, it is true, but a boon to weary bodies. The use of this little ledge as a seat was permitted at times when long periods of standing produced exhaustion, and was looked on as an indulgence to the infirm, so it received the name of misericord—mercy—and was sometimes called a "patience," the word being used in the sense of indulgence, as it is in Shakspeare in such phrases as "by your patience," though the strictly correct name is "sub-sedilia." The term "miserere" was never applied to it; this is inaccurate and ungrammatical, as it is a verb and not a noun. It seems to have been first used by Bishop Milner, early in the nineteenth century, in an account of Winchester Cathedral; it was quoted in some architectural publications, and for a time was commonly used in England; now it has given place to "misericord," the popular term by which it was first known.

From the thirteenth century onwards it became the custom to adorn with carvings the under sides of the seats which would be visible when turned up. In some churches, perhaps in all, the occupant of the stall turned round to kneel, and used the misericord as a desk. Monks and canons are but human; these interesting carvings no doubt gave a little relaxation during a long service.

The Exeter misericords date from the thirteenth century, and are the oldest complete set in England. The Fabric Rolls of the Cathedral were begun by Bishop Bronescombe in 1279, the year before his death; they were continued by Bishop Quivil and his successors up to 1439. They have no entry of the original erection of the misericords, which must have been finished before the record began. Tradition says they were carved during the episcopate of Bishop Bruere (1224—1244). From

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the internal evidence of the carvings themselves, that may be taken as the approximate date of most of them, though they could not all have been finished till some time after. With a few exceptions, they appear to have been the work of one hand; the style varies very little, and what divergence there is, is no more than would be accounted for by the passage of time and the growth of new fashions. It seems as if the carver had worked at high pressure for a time, then, either his energy slackened, or from some other cause he worked more intermittently. Some might well have been carved in 1230, and some there are that can hardly be earlier than 1260. Two are later still, as will be shown presently.

The stalls containing the misericords are now in the usual situation, on the north and south sides of the west end of the choir, with return stalls against the screen between the choir and the nave, but it appears that this was not their original position, for there is an entry in the Fabric Roll, 1309-10, recording that they were moved, as follows:—

“Custos vitri et stallorum. Stip. mag. John de Glaston ad removand stallos per 14 sept., 52s. 6d.”

(Cost of glass and stalls. Payment to Master John of Glaston for 14 weeks removing the stalls, 52s. 6d.)

We are not told whence they were moved, nor where they were placed: perhaps they had been in the nave; in Norman cathedrals the clergy and choir sat in the transepts, and this practice may have been continued in Exeter until the enlarged choir was able to receive them, and the Bishop's Throne had been erected. Mr. Francis Bond, in *Cathedrals of England and Wales*, says definitely that it was so at Exeter, but does not give his authority.

When the stalls were moved in 1309-10, they were probably set up in much the same position as at present, at all events they were there before the restoration of 1870. An account of the misericords by the Rev. J. W. Hewett, published in 1849, gives a numbered list, which shows that each side of the choir had twenty-five stalls, of which six on the north side and four on the south were return stalls against the screen.

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The stalls and misericords are mentioned occasionally in the Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society. "The stalls retain their misereres, and the seats, which alone can be called genuine, lift up to show the quaint device carved on the other side" (*On the Woodwork of Exeter Cathedral*, by Edward Ashworth, Architect, July 25, 1852). "There are in the Cathedral Choir some stall seats, hidden and rather disguised by seventeenth century additions, but still the carving of the under-side of the moveable seat is good Early English, and supposed to be of Bishop Marshall's time" (*Ancient Woodwork in Devon*, July 8th, 1867.)

On examination it will be noticed that all the misericords have been cut down, and let into a framework of new wood. This process was so ruthlessly followed that seventeen of the carvings were mutilated by having portions cut away. When this was done it is impossible to say. At all events before 1849, for Mr. Hewett speaks of it with regret, adding "This mutilation appears to have been an early one." Here I must join issue with him. The framing must have been done by way of repairs. The edges no doubt had become worn or splintered, and it was decided to tidy them up in this drastic way. It is not at all likely that it would have been done when the stalls were moved in 1309; for one thing, they would be practically new, and not be in need of repair, and also because it was not until later times that the artistic work of a by-gone day was treated with indifference. Mr. Ashworth, in the paper from which I have already quoted, published in 1852, says that the pews at that time in the Choir, which he characterises as "tasteless in the extreme," were probably erected in 1684, the date of the elaborate pulpit. Very likely something was done to the stalls at the same time, for in the same paper the writer speaks of their being hidden and rather disguised by seventeenth century additions, and at that period it would not be at all unlikely that the carvings would be irreverently handled; Gothic art was in disrepute, and the great marvel is that they were allowed to escape with mutilation only.

When the seats were originally made, they had projecting wooden pivots which worked in sockets at the

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sides of the stalls, so that they could swing up and down. When they were cut down and inserted in the new frames the same method was adopted, and the pivots were cut with the frames. But later it appears that supplementary hinges were affixed to the misericords.

Each misericord has four nail-holes, which in nearly every instance are taken quite through the thickness of the wood, making scars on the face, and sometimes splitting it, so that new wood has had to be inserted.

I have been fortunate enough to see photographs of all the fifty misericords, taken after they had been removed from the stalls for the restoration of 1870, but before anything had been done to them, and I am permitted to reproduce any of them to illustrate this paper. As would be expected, they show several important points. In these photographs the misericords all have their pivots, and the marks where nails of the hinges scarred the wood are very evident, as they are to-day. In some cases the wood is splintered and broken. The misericord which is now in stall 48 has wooden battens nailed on each side; at present new wood has been inserted. The shelves of No. 23 (Cockatrice), and No. 38 (Mermaid and Mermaid), have broken edges. All damage of this kind was made good at the restoration.

All the misericords have now lost their pivots. The late Mr. Harry Hems in a letter to the Honorary Secretary of the Exeter Pictorial Record Society, November 4th, 1914, stated that up to the time of the restoration (1870-71), "All had their original wooden pivots in perfect order, fit to work for a few more centuries."

This is not quite accurate; the pivots were not the original ones, but were a part of the modern frames, into which the carvings had been inserted, which Mr. Hems, curiously enough, does not seem to have noticed. Nor does he refer to the supplementary hinges, which, as mentioned above, had produced scars on practically all of them, as shown in the photographs of 1870; they have no connection with the present hinges, and looked just the same then as now.

To return to Mr. Hems's letter. He says that the misericords were taken out and sent to a firm of carvers