**The Angel Roof of St Nicholas Chapel, King’s Lynn**

Author : Adrian Parker. Given at a Town Hall lecture – November 2015

The Chapel has recently undergone major repair and alteration works thanks to a large Heritage Lottery Fund grant, to replace most of the roof covering, carry out extensive joinery repairs, insert user facilities such as heating and toilets, and to provide visitor interpretation.

This *(pic)* is the largest building in the portfolio of 347 redundant churches in England maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust. However, in Lynn it is a ‘chapel’, meaning that legally it was merely an appendage of the Parish Church of St Margaret’s (recently made a Minster).

A Chapel was on this site from about 1150, but the oldest stonework to be seen now dates from about 1200. A complete rebuilding apart from the tower probably began in the late 1370s, and as the west wall on the outside displays the armorials of Richard II we can presume it existed in 1399, whilst in 1405 it is recorded that there was an Easter service at which a bribe was paid, and so we may presume there was a roof.

Of course this angel roof was used as the icon for the financial Appeal that took place in 2012-13. As the oldest angel roof in East Anglia, this is simply one of half a dozen aspects of architectural history which make the Chapel notable on a national scale.

The plan of the Chapel is a rectangle, into which the retained tower was absorbed in the southwest corner, and two vestries were made later in the eastern corners. This is a model church similar to the friaries being built at that time (including in the Hanseatic towns of the Baltic), where preaching to the congregation had become more important than processions around the building.

The interior *(pic)* is stately and continuous from the west door to the east window; there are 12 and a ¼ bays. The chancel or choir area including the organ is bays 8 to 11, and the narrower sanctuary is bay 12.

This became a cathedral-sized area of steel as the scaffolding took over in 2014 *(pic).* The access that could be achieved right up to the angels provided a once-in-many generations opportunity to get up close, and several researchers were able to do this. Whilst the roof and its supporting beams were scheduled for major repairs, the carved roof timbers and the angels were not. My purpose in getting up there was to see their condition more thoroughly, and to see if we could work out what had been lost from the figures.

The roof is an arch-braced truss roof, with Queen posts and purlins; *(pic)* this view is from west to east – showing plain and renewed beams, and then *(pic)* from east to west, showing the lines of demi-angels on each side of the five trusses above the choir area.

The angels are not part of the essential roof structure, but are held by false hammerbeams and centred for display over each clerestorey window. You are supposed to see them, and be comforted by the protection of this heavenly host overhead. Here *(pic)* is the most spectacularly carved and emotional of the original angels, holding the hammer and nails for Christ’s crucifix – one of the standard “Symbols of the Passion” that occur frequently in medieval churches.

We turn to the sanctuary, bay 12, where the only paintwork in the roof occurs. There is no trace of paint on any other angels. Here *(pic)* is the better-preserved of the two figures in the sanctuary, and you see the painted rafters and wall coving behind. In recent years we had begun to wonder if these might be human figures, of major benefactors in the rebuilding of the Chapel, although the attributes they are holding are a book or Missal, and a Pax.

However it is now certain that they should be regarded as Angels acting as Sub-deacons to assist in the celebration of Mass – and the reason for my certainty is that all these roof figures can be seen to have come off a production line, based on a branch of oak, to be 56 inches long by 11 inches wide and 9 inches deep. On each figure, half of each arm and much of the attribute they are holding is all held onto the basic figure shape by wooden dowel pegs; if these shrink too much, then the additional parts may drop off. In addition, on the back of every original figure *including these two* is a channel about 6 inches long into which the wings could be slotted. The wings themselves were boards only ¼ inch thick; later repairs use thicker boards, and lose the feather detail.

Here *(pic)* we see the human character and carving quality of the painted faces, with eyes, and carved deeply down the neck behind the collar.

This *(pic)* is the second sanctuary sub-deacon, with the Pax, who has lost his feet and one hand to wet rot. And *(pic)* this shows the extent of painted sanctuary roof timbers.

In the centre is a single large painted boss mounted on the central rafter crossing, the sub-principal.*(pic)*  This is a demi-angel, with wings closed and a hairstyle of the time, and the strange red and blue effect below is not a shield of arms but indicates the heavenly clouds.

I have mentioned the demi-angels, half-angels, on the chancel trusses – here *(pic)* is the south-east corner coving, in the painted section. Here *(pics)* are some of the many half-angels on the trusses across the Chapel; and one *(pic)* by an apprentice, with cross, crown of thorns, and scourge. Another *(pic)* on a truss showing also the quality of tracery work in the spandrels.

***So, what did we find out about the angel musicians in particular?***

This *(pic)* is one of the best, in Bay 8 south side. He is a standard angel with a 7ft wing span, body around 48 inches long down to his feet standing on the clouds. The bottom of this figure has been replaced, and the toes are terrible; the wood used for the repair was of poorer quality and has decayed a little. He holds a large lute, which is carved with all the detail that might have been observed from an active musician. The strings are right, and the hands and fingers on them; one hand holds a plectrum, whilst the pegboard in the return angle head of the instrument is also fully detailed.

Next is one of the leading musicians, *(pic)* right up by the sanctuary in Bay 10N, playing a psaltery – a sort of zither. We should look at the detail *(pic)* on the right side, where the vertical join is clear, and something is missing. We can then see the dowel holes where a part of the hand and the edge of the psaltery have dropped off.

This construction is more apparent in the next image *(pic),* the angel right opposite (10S), where half the arm is missing and there has been an inserted repair to the thorax. We can only point out that the right hand was higher than the left, and something was mounted between them – whether a religious symbol or an instrument we just cannot say – it might have been a position for a rebec.

A fourth example in detail is at Bay 3 south side *(pic)* – a full angel figure with hands around something, but nothing in them. In the mouth is this detail *(pic)*, and our conclusion after looking at the lips is that this is the dowel peg for the mouth-piece of a trumpet, and the fingers are properly angled to hold and play it.

There is a similar problem opposite in Bay N3 *(pic)*, where there are no hands left but there are beautifully carved pursed lips. We think this is most likely to have been a pipe player. Someone tried very hard to make her keep hold of it, with animal glue and many small dowel holes made into the wrist stumps. She has a headband with daisy flowers in her hair.

The next angel in N4 became obvious once we were close up *(pic).* This angel has straps from the waist to hold a tambor, a type of drum. It is apparent that this disc is the bottom section and the dowel holes exist for the upper surface that dropped off, whilst her hands are perfectly aligned for the left to rest on the top edge and the right to hold the beat stick.

Here is another religious one, *(pic)* Bay9S – an angel holding the crown of thorns, which has been carved in two parts. What you see still is part of the body timber, and there is a tongue on the end that made a joint with the second part of the circle. Sometimes the thorns are highly carved on panels, but in this situation one just sees the intertwined branches from the thorn bush.

Apart from musicians and Mass assistants there is a third group in the roof – the supervisors and authority figures. First there are two angels with bishops’ croziers – like this *(pic)*, but a new head on the crozier has been scarfed together behind the upper hand. Secondly there is a central group of four in the roof, in pairs opposite each other at Bays 5 and 6, and all distinctly women. Before the Reformation, when angels had profound meaning and some had their own names, the heavenly host was ranked in 3 orders called Choirs, each of three different types of angel. The Counsellors are found around the throne of God, in cathedrals and basilicas; Governors are the second group, divided into Dominions, Virtues, and Powers; and the third group are Messengers, who are the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.

In this roof there are two Principalities who wear a tiara and have different dress, a kirtle with elaborate edging and heavy belts; this one *(pic)* on the south side has suffered some heavy repairs. They both hold out their right hand, and the left hand rests on the belt. I believe what they have dropped was a sceptre or processional staff of some kind, as the bottom end is the reason for an infill repair which is evident low down on the original dress (of N5). Next to them are the Dominions, *(pic)* each with elaborate dress edging again, and holding open a book as their role is to spread the Word of God.

Looking at the roof overall, it becomes clear that the angels are in deliberate groupings – those who are part of the liturgy and Mass, and some who emphasise the authority of the church, and then the musicians. In the 14th century music was divided by timbre into “high” and “low”, meaning the volume of sound rather than the pitch. The eastern musicians are seen to be playing soft instruments – lutes, a psaltery, and perhaps a rebec; and the western group are playing the tabor, woodwind and louder instruments. Out of 24 angels, I think that 10 were musicians.

Nearing the end, we look again at another musician – a figure who has been well-publicised as the first known sculptural representation of a recorder player. *(pic)* Clearly this is the longer tenor instrument, and it is detailed with a mouthpiece cap (fipple) and the right holes. Unfortunately what you can also see is that this figure is much more crudely carved than the other figures we have seen, and indeed it is in pine not oak, and we conclude that the Victorians who were in this roof doing repairs in 1852 or 1868 had three of the angels completely re-carved. At that time, the world of musicologists did not know of any surviving medieval instrument, and examples were only found in Germany 30 years ago – but that enables us to say that the carver must have copied carefully from the original figure but did not know the proportions for the cap.

Two other figures were re-carved in pine - a crozier holder and a gittern player, and on both the deeply moulded carvings that are so convincing from ground level are seen to be crude and incomplete frontal carvings only when close up.

Apart from the various types and sizes of angels in the roof, we also identified a whole new spectrum of carving which cannot be seen in the gloom and the distance from the ground. In the narrow spandrels of every Queen post, on both sides, is non-religious carving – of people and animals – such as *(pic)* this carving of two monkeys fighting with bows and arrows. Unfortunately the opportunity to carry out a methodical photographic survey of the whole roof was neglected by CCT, and this particular aspect of the carvings has mostly proved too difficult for the amateur efforts of the researchers who climbed up.

My final picture is to lay to rest another assumption made about the Chapel. This *(pic)* is one of the many stone niches along the entire level above the arches and below the clerestorey windows. You can see that there is no trace of anything having been stood or fixed in the niche. Whatever it was that the designer had in mind, during the final building period around 1405 Bishop’s Lynn was in an economic recession and we may assume that the money just ran out.

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