



The Devonshire Association

Buildings Section

Newsletter Winter 2020

Welcome to the first edition of the DA Buildings Section Newsletter. Members with email have received already a message from the Committee, but we want to communicate with *all* our members with something that we hope will both connect and entertain.

During this trying period of isolation, the DA, along with many other organisations, are producing online events. Some members will be taking part in these but, again, there are those for whom this is not an option, for whatever reason.

In this Newsletter, we have first a contribution about a visit to Exeter Cathedral, exploring lesser-known parts of the building. Member Clive Betts of Crediton, then provides a tour in words and images of his historic town house. Finally, Sue Andrew describes two really fine roof bosses in the churches at Ilsington and Highweek.

We plan to produce another Newsletter in the Spring. So if you would like to write about your house, a favourite building, a book, or anything relevant that interests you, do get in touch.

Helen Wilson, on behalf of the Buildings Section Committee

Exeter Cathedral

Exeter Cathedral is an iconic Devon building that many know well. On a recent visit, we were given a tour by Diane Walker, co-author of the forthcoming book on the Cathedral. It involved many flights of stone spiral staircases but was worth it to see some of the hidden and less well-known corners of the building.

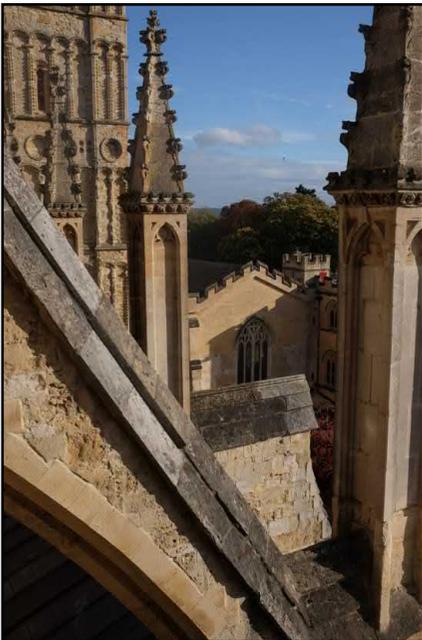


The first surprise, housed in a cupboard in a room above the north porch, was a recent rediscovery by Diane of what is known as a 'heart monument'. This is a form of divided burial, tolerated by the church in the late C13. It is carved from Purbeck marble, 53 cm high, and shows a demi-effigy of a male holding an item with a domed top, which may well be a heart casket. Sally Badham, the foremost authority on heart burials, reveals more on this exciting revelation at: <https://churchmonumentsociety.org/>.



North of the High Altar is the tomb of Walter de Stapledon, Bishop of Exeter 1308-1326 and founder of Exeter College, Oxford. Hidden within the canopy is an intriguing figure of a king, thought to be a remnant of the glorious medieval reredos that once sat behind the High Altar.

On the way up to the roof, we peered out of various doors off the spiral staircase and glimpsed



views of the decorative work above the nave, as well as the vast expanses of leadwork and complex drainage systems that keep the building watertight.

Back at ground level, we visited Bishop Grandisson's Chapel, which is contained within the thickness of the C14 West Front.



One of its splendid features is an almost life-size figure of Risen Christ extending across the width at the apex of the vault, with the head to the west.

People generally pass out of the Cathedral through the south porch of the C14 west front and yet many do not notice the carving of a Nativity within. Yet



the beautifully carved ox and ass are in full view, here dappled with Autumn sunlight.

Helen Wilson and Anthony Lewis

Powne's House in Crediton 'A very complete mid-C18 town house'



Fig. 1: Powne's House front aspect, facing onto High Street

As the quote from the Historic England listing¹ suggests, while there are many C18 houses in Crediton, few have retained much of their original layout and interiors.

The name Powne's House is derived from a locally well-known surgeon, Dr Leslie Powne, who occupied the house from 1901 to 1939. A house at this site was destroyed by the 'Great Fire' of Crediton in 1743, so the current house (Fig. 1) has to be mid-C18 (John Heal, pers. comm.).

Entering, there is a large hallway (Fig.2) featuring intact C19 encaustic tiling along its length. The gracefully curved staircase retains its original rail, caps, balustrades and newel posts.

The treads and risers are single pieces of thick, beautifully-grained wood.

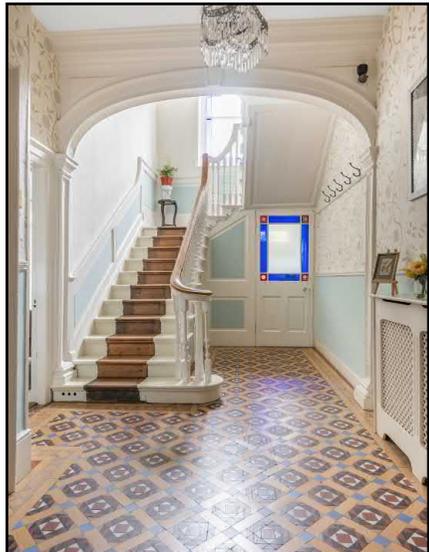


Fig. 2: The hallway and staircase

The woodwork throughout is an important survivor and includes window-bay panelling, functional shutters in two rooms, deep skirting, architraves and original six-panel (downstairs) and two-panel (upstairs) doors. The downstairs study (Fig. 3) includes many of these features with additional ornate corncicing and an imposing marble fireplace.



Fig. 3: The study

The ground floor 'blue room' (Fig. 4) retains its original wall panels and is elaborately decorated, showcasing the fireplace and its surrounding fluted pilasters and intricate coving, almost certainly to a design by the Adams Brothers.² The fireplace insert would originally have been square with a shallow register



Fig. 4: The 'blue room'

grate.³ The later extension with arched casements is clearly visible on a map from 1890.⁴

Across the hallway is an impressive dining room (Fig. 5) that features a large open fireplace with oak surround and mantel (perhaps early Victorian).



Fig. 5: The dining room

The stairs to the first floor are lit by a Victorian arched window (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Arched window and staircase

On the first floor, while there have been many alterations, there remain C18 and C19 fireplaces, C18 cupboards and original doors with a range of early door furniture, including exposed hinges (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Early door hinges

The front room at the east end of the house is connected to the next room, and that room to the next: it is debatable whether this is its original layout, although the doors and their cases are C18 in style.⁵

Above the 'blue room, what is now a master bedroom (Fig. 8) may once have been an 'upper salon' for entertaining guests. During renovation, evidence was found of earlier panelling and mouldings. Victorian casements



Fig. 8: Master bedroom

open onto the flat roof of the extension below.

In the middle of the West corridor a staircase leads up into the roof space (Fig. 9) which was home to the servants and is now a cavernous, carpenter's delight (or perhaps nightmare!).



Fig. 9: The loft space

Here there are the remains of the servants' fireplaces (Fig. 10) and, while the ceilings and walls have long since disappeared, there are scraps of wallpaper and newspaper still glued to the plaster in places.



Fig. 10: A servant's fireplace

The rear of the house (Fig. 11) clearly shows that several original windows have been altered and one added to serve the kitchen (second from left on the ground floor). Concealed spaces in the loft and other alterations suggest a service stairway to the kitchen may have been in the original design.



Fig. 11: Rear of Powne's House

The backdoor to the house (Fig. 12) has provoked speculation about its age and origin, centring on the curved design on its lower half. Possibly C17 or earlier, this may be a door or part of a door salvaged from a building perhaps destroyed in the 'Great Fire'.

We love this beautiful and historic house and cherish the incredible workmanship that has enabled it to stand on this site for nearly 300 years in, largely, its intended form.

Clive Betts

If you would like to write about your house for the Section Newsletter, do get in touch: dabschair@devonassoc.org.uk

References

1. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1197105>
2. Miller, J. and Miller, M. (1989) *Period Details: a source book for house restoration*. London, Mitchell Beazley. On p. 19, the fireplace in image 8, from an C18 house in Bristol, is a very close match to ours.
3. *Ibid.* On p. 122, image 4, in particular.
4. Devon County Series map 1:2500 published in 1890. Source: EDINA historic map service.
5. Miller, J. and Miller, M. (1989) *Period Details: a source book for house restoration*. London: Mitchell Beazley. In particular, p. 34 onwards.



Fig. 12: The rear door

A Tale of Two Bosses: Medieval carvings in churches at Ilsington and Highweek

High in the roofs of churches at Ilsington and Highweek are two remarkably fine medieval oak roof bosses that were almost certainly carved by the same hand over five hundred years ago. The bosses are unusual in their form, being octagonal, and in their iconography. At Ilsington, the carving is of a lion over a boar, while at Highweek a sword-wielding armoured knight rides a lion. Both bosses have floriate and foliate carvings on their chamfered sides.

Oak bosses in parish churches tend not to be structural like the great stone bosses at Exeter Cathedral that act as keystones locking a vault into place. Instead, they act to cover the joints of the roof timbers,

affording a sense of completion, and offering an elevated surface for decoration of a sacred space.

The Ilsington boss is almost certainly in the position for which it was intended – at the crossing of the nave and transepts. It has a particularly complex joint to cover – the coming together of eight different timbers (hence its octagonal shape). At Highweek the boss is likely to have been repositioned during a major restoration/rebuilding of the church in the late nineteenth century.

Any attempt to understand quite what the bosses meant to those who gazed upon them in the Catholic church of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is fraught with difficulty, but that



The roof boss at Ilsington



The roof boss at Highweek

they did have a particular symbolism when they were commissioned seems clear. The Ilsington boss does, at least, retain much of its original context. The timbers of the crossing at Ilsington spring from granite corbels with much mutilated oak figures, probably representing saints, in niches above. Higher up, restored angelic figures cover more joints. The lion and boar boss is at the apex of this heavenly scene and it should be interpreted accordingly.

It has been suggested in church guides and elsewhere (e.g. B. Ransom, *A History of Ilsington*, Phillimore, 2005, p. 38) that the lion represents Henry VII standing in triumph over the boar badge of Richard III, who was defeated at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. While it may be that the heavenly mandate of Henry VII was depicted in this way (and there are two bosses carved with male and female crowned heads in the nave), an alternative interpretation is much more likely.

Other figural bosses at Ilsington are carved with animals and birds (hares, eagles, a goat) which appear in medieval books of beasts. In these bestiaries, characteristics of the animals were used to instruct sinful man so that he could reflect on his behaviour and seek redemption.

A distinguishing feature of the lion in both the Highweek and Ilsington bosses is its long tasselled tail. Bestiaries relate that when hunters come in search of a lion, he wipes out his tracks with his tail as 'our Redeemer, the spiritual lion of the tribe of Judah... hid the tracks of His love in heaven, until, sent by the Father, He ... redeemed lost mankind' (R. Barber, *Bestiary*, Folio Society, 1992, p. 24). The boar may be seen as 'the devil because of its fierceness and strength.' (Barber, 1992, p. 87).

Thus the central boss at Ilsington reflects the central message of the church – the triumph of good over evil through the sacrifice of Christ. It may be that the Highweek boss also symbolises Christ as the lion of Judah, with the knight wearing the armour of salvation and carrying the sword of the spirit – Christ as the conquering soldier in the battle against evil.

However we interpret these bosses, and they may carry multiple meanings, we can but marvel that they have survived in the roofs of two parish churches in Devon for over five hundred years. The craftsmanship of their anonymous carver speaks to us still, even if interpretation of the spiritual message of the carvings is no longer clear.

Sue Andrew