

BISHOP ALCOCK'S CHAPEL

New Altar Panels by John Maddison



The painted panels installed in December 2004 are intended to provide a decorative and symbolic backdrop for the celebration of the Eucharist which takes place weekly in this chapel. The chapel itself was built by one of Ely's late medieval bishops, John Alcock (1430-1500), as a chantry in which a priest would celebrate the mass in perpetuity for the founder's soul. The chantry was suppressed and the funds that endowed it were turned to other charitable purposes in the reign of Edward VI. At this time the chapel was deprived of the great cycle of religious sculpture which occupied its many niches. Subsequent

centuries have removed nearly all traces of its original painted decoration.

The six central panels illustrate some of the Instruments of the Passion. The Instruments became a popular religious image in the later middle ages and are frequently shown in paintings and engravings of the Mass of St Gregory. Pope Gregory the Great (c.540-604) celebrating mass in the church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome saw Christ, battered and bleeding, above the altar. The image of Christ, known as the Man of Sorrows that arose from this miraculous apparition became the focus of intense devotion in the later middle ages.

The Instruments of the Passion were intended to aid this devotion by reminding Christians of the precise ways in which the son of God had been humiliated, tortured and put to death. Somewhat earlier, in the thirteenth century, the portals of certain Gothic cathedrals carried images of Christ in Judgement, displaying his wounds and surrounded by the Instruments of the Passion. The Instruments were to develop a kind of heraldic significance. They were often shown on the coats of arms – as in the tomb of Bishop Redman on the north side of the presbytery at Ely, five bays west of Alcock's chantry – and were sometimes referred to as then *Arma Christi*.

The Instruments have therefore a two-fold purpose. First of all they are a reproach to all of us, complicit in the Crucifixion through the mistreatment of our fellow beings by neglect, cruelty or disregard. In this context they are linked – as they were in the thirteenth-century cathedral portals – to judgement. Secondly, their display as a form of heraldry represents Christ's triumphant victory over these evils. The depiction of the Instruments, in the present case, against fields of bright pattern is intended to convey this victory.

Panels 2 and 6 (counting from the left) have a pair of cockerels (painted from a ceramic bird by the Norfolk potter Robert James). These refer to the coat of arms of Bishop Alcock (seen clearly over the right-hand door arch of the chantry_ but more importantly they represent the cockerel that crowed to signify Peter's denial of Christ on the eve of the Crucifixion (Mark 14. 68-72).

Under the left-hand cockerel is the scourge, or birch used in the Flagellation. Christ's bonds are represented by the shackles under the right-hand cockerel. These shackles were drawn from some preserved in the Ely Museum (on Market Street) which was built as the bishop's prison. Until 1837 the bishop exercised jurisdiction over the Isle of Ely. His magistrates, in common with those elsewhere, handed down severe sentences which by

today's standards were disproportionate to the crime. For example in 1816 five of the Littleport rioters were hanged for violent demonstrations against "low wages, unemployment and high food prices".

Ely has had a very turbulent history and has seen much bloodshed and arbitrary cruelty.

On the adjacent panel is a spear which stands for the lance which pierced Christ's side. It is painted from an ancient spear head (now in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge) found at Braham Farm about a mile south of Ely in 1929. It was made in the 10th or 11th century and will have been wielded by either an Anglo-Saxon or Viking warrior. The sword in the corresponding left-hand panel, 3, which traditionally represents one of the weapons used when Christ was taken in the garden, was found in the bed of the Ouse in 1845. It dates from the period 1340-1400 and is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. It is also intended to refer to the prophecy given by Simeon to Mary "Yea and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul" (Luke 2; 35).

The two central panels, 4 and 5, are occupied by the hammer and nails which pierced the feet and hands of the crucified Christ. The crown of thorns which was placed on his head to mock the title given to him by the Roman governor, Pilate, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". The hammer comes from the painter's tool box and the nails from the cathedral roof. The crown is based on a model made by prop maker Tina Kennedy after the one shown in "The Crowning with Thorns" by Hieronymus Bosch in the National Gallery of 1590-1400.

Several of the objects depicted have connections with St Peter. He was an important saint to the medieval community at Ely and in the early days was one of the dual dedications of the church. In his embarrassingly inadequate behaviour during Christ's Passion, he stands for all of us; first in his ineffectual violence towards the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear with a sword in the garden of Gethsemane; then in the repeated denial – punctuated by the prophesied cock-crow – of any connection with Jesus. The shackles, by contrast, may be taken to refer to his redemption through a steadfast life of preaching and suffering for his faith. His release from prison and the miraculous breaking of his chains is one of the most dramatic stories in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 12.7).

In the middle ages, the eastern part of the cathedral (always referred to as the presbytery) was intended for the display of relics. In addition to the bodies of Etheldreda and Ely's other saints there were other venerated objects including the shackles of Bricstan, a twelfth-century resident of nearby Chatteris, who was released from prison through the miraculous severing of his bonds by Etheldreda and St Benedict. Until the reformation, the broken shackles themselves hung on one of the pillars of the presbytery, a local equivalent of the chains of St Peter, preserved in the church of St Peter Ad Vincula in Rome and a much venerated Ely relic.

The depiction of the objects here with a reasonably high degree of realism is intended to give the idea of a kind of reliquary of the instruments and in this way to make a connection with the past history of the presbytery at Ely. The use of archaeological and museum objects of local origin signifies the universality of the Passion as a model of human suffering throughout history and today.

The joinery was machines by Button Joinery of Ely and was installed by Peter Hotine. The plans for the framing were drawn up by Anjali James of Purcell Miller Tritton architects. The Master and Fellows of Jesus College (founded by Bishop Alcock in 1497) have contributed to the costs of the new altar panels and have for many years assisted with the repair and decoration of the chapel.

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