

The Angel Roofs of East Anglia – talk by Michael Rimmer on 12/11/16

MR's talk encompassed the angel roofs produced from the 1390s to 1530, and introduced his book of the same name. Suffolk has over 500 medieval churches, while Norfolk has almost 650, but most were not endowed with angel roofs.

Of 170 surviving medieval church angel roofs in England and Wales, about 70% can be found in Suffolk, Norfolk, and Cambridgeshire, here referred to as East Anglia. MR stressed their importance as surviving examples of medieval art as he estimated that 90% of medieval figurative art had been destroyed in two major waves of iconoclasm.

In 1547 Edward VI ordered the destruction of shrines, and the removal of images which encouraged veneration of the image or statue. Objects like angel carvings did not of themselves attract veneration and so could survive this edict.

Puritan Parliamentary Ordinances of 1634 and 1644 required the destruction of all remaining "monuments of superstition". Some angel roofs suffered decapitations and removals, but most survived because of their inaccessibility.

Angel roofs were often associated with hammer beam roofs, which could be single or double hammer beams. Of England's 32 surviving double hammer beam roofs, 100% are found in East Anglia. For the 188 surviving single hammer beam roofs, 65% are East Anglian.

The first angel roof built with a hammer beam construction was at Westminster Hall in 1395/98, supervised by the royal carpenter, Hugh Herland. The first East Anglian example of an angel roof was the Chapel of St Nicholas at Kings Lynn, built 1400 to 1410, but with tie beams, not hammer beams.

Hugh Herland had been given the job of building a new harbour at Yarmouth in 1398. One of his associates there was William Oxeneye of Yarmouth, who had links to Lynn. MR suggests that Herland may thus have brought the idea and design of Angel roofs into East Anglia. Local carpenters at these ports were used to building the massive timber frames of ships, and could apply these skills to elaborate roof structures.

Mr Rimmer showed a video clip to illustrate examples of the various angel roofs which survive, and showed examples of his stunning close up photographs taken with a 600 mm lens and a tripod, with a long shutter time to penetrate the darkness of many roofs.

He also described some of the master craftsmen who he believed may have been responsible for these roofs. These included John Goneld from Bury St Edmunds, the Rollesby brothers of Bacton, Richard Aleyn of Bury and John Derman of the same town, some employed by Bury Abbey.

Masterpiece roofs pointed out included Methwold angels and perhaps the best at St Mary's in Bury St Edmunds. MR attributed the roof commission at St Mary's to John Baret, a

wealthy clothier, and even suggested a date around 1445 for its construction. Very few church roofs have such obvious connections to a named benefactor. Baret lived at 3 Chequer Square in Bury, was a confidant of the abbot, and in favour with the Crown. His collar of silver 'SS' displayed on his tomb was probably awarded to him in 1447 by William de la Pole for the King.

Baret died in 1467, and in his detailed will he wanted everybody to know of his achievements. He referred to "all the work of the angels on loft which I have do made for a remembrance of me and my friends." Mr Rimmer agreed with Margaret Statham that this was good evidence that Baret financed the angel roof at St Mary's and that the faces might be portraits of Bury worthies.

St Mary's roof is 148 feet by 28 feet and contains eleven pairs of hammer beam angels, each 6 feet tall, arrayed as if in procession to the altar. MR calls it "one of the finest of all angel roofs," and agreed with J B L Tolhurst that the main angels depicted the King's betrothal to Margaret of Anjou, but also contained the double meaning of the coronation of the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven.

One other dateable roof is at Bardwell, where a painted book held by an angel bears the date 1421, linking it to Sir William de Bardwell as the likely benefactor. Only 4 of the original 26 angels survive at Bardwell's church of St Peter and St Paul, and the destruction is recorded in a parish invoice of 7th February, 1644. Workmen were paid for "pulling down the images "and "defacing pictures in glass and wood."

In December, 1643, The Earl of Manchester appointed William Dowsing, born in Laxfield, but living at Stratford St Mary, as "Parliamentary Visitor for demolishing the superstitious pictures and ornaments in churches." Dowsing appears to have visited throughout Suffolk and Cambridgeshire until Autumn, 1644, when Manchester fell from favour. He attended destruction at 250 churches, charging each one a Noble (3 Nobles to £1) for his work. Often he would destroy windows and leave instructions with parishioners for further, more difficult removals, before quickly moving on. As the angel roofs were so inaccessible, they were often left to come down to us today, although a number were defaced in whole or in part.

The audience were left with the feeling that this was an impressive and ground-breaking study of a hitherto neglected topic.