

THE FLAT BOSSES IN THE NAVE ROOF OF ST MARTIN'S CHURCH, RUISLIP - continued

by Valery Cowley

The specification of works for George Gilbert Scott's restoration of the nave roof in 1870 included taking down 78 oak paterae, preserving and reaffixing 35 and providing and fixing 43 new flat bosses ca. 7" x 7" x 3", carving and repairing. There are wall plates and beams earlier than the present 15c roof. 12' 6" from the east end there was apparently a canopy of panelling or decorative plasterwork over the great rood which was replaced by boarding.

A ladder (Fig. 1) often features as one of the Instruments of Christ's Passion, recalling His deposition from the Cross, which was probably about ten feet high. Because the Sabbath began at sunset, Christ would have been buried as soon as possible, for Joseph of Arimathea had discovered that he was already dead and, when the centurion confirmed this, Pilate released the body. Like Christ's Incarnation this ladder was seen as a link between heaven and earth.



Fig. 1

In his seminal book, CJP Cave describes Passion emblems in the background of Books of Hours and in sculpture, where they are often carried by angels.

Early 14c examples are found at Tewkesbury Abbey, Gloucester Cathedral and churches in Lechlade, Gloucestershire and Salle, Norfolk.

Mostly on shields, by the end of the 15c these emblems are used as the armorial bearings of Christ and at St Cross, Winchester they are associated with the arms of the families of Wykeham and Beaufort. There may be several emblems on one shield. The choir of Winchester Cathedral has a very early 16c series of armorial Passion emblems, including (Cave ill. 243) a spear and a sponge on a pole, with a loincloth knotted through, in a motif similar to the crown of thorns at Ruislip I described in my last article (RNELHS Journal 2009).



Fig. 2

Ruislip's nave has a traditional fanwise arrangement of three Crucifixion nails, (Fig.2) on fabric artistically draped with a flourish of curling ends: one nail for each palm and one for the crossed feet; the cloth is that in which St John the Evangelist traditionally received the nails from Nicodemus (who assisted Joseph of Arimathea in the Deposition and

Burial of Christ's body). The nails also feature in a top light of our sanctuary east window.

In addition to the tower, which symbolises among other concepts, St Mary, another shield carries a Marian symbol, a heart pierced diagonally by a sword (Fig. 3). A heart alone signifies love, devotion and the theological virtue of charity or loving-kindness but when it is transfixing by a sword (and sometimes surrounded by a wreath of Mary's flowers, roses) it symbolises Our Lady's sorrow at the crucifixion of her Son.



Fig. 3

If you look at this shield upside down, you might think that a simplified long-eared owl is carved on it but the 'two eyes' are really the fixings to the intersecting roof beams. If you view the shield correctly, two-thirds of a wooden circle divided by a band sits on a wider wooden arch. Are these left-over fragments arranged to resemble an 'M' for Mary on the rim of a crown?

In elegant Gothic lettering, this is a frequent medieval motif for Our Lady, Queen of Heaven. However, these are basic curved pieces of wood and so may be merely a carpenter's 'doodle'.

Nevertheless, another possible piece of symbolism is suggested by a semicircular buckle (Fig. 4) with its tongue or pin (fibula) lying across it, as in the great gold belt buckle from the early 7c East Anglian Sutton Hoo ship burial. I have not observed this as a visual symbol before but Cirlot's Dictionary says that shields and buckles together may signify self-defence and protection, as in St Paul's spiritual armour metaphor (Ephesians 6, vv. 11 ff.) with its shield of faith and belt of truth. Other interpretations such as crescent moon, rising sun, pincers, knot of scourge or segment of a labyrinth are unconvincing, so I tentatively offer this solution to the puzzle.



Fig. 4

References: J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 1971 (1962)
C.J.P. Cave, *Roof Bosses in Medieval Churches*, 1948

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