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EDITOR: SAM RICHES

## THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY CHOIR STALLS OF LANCASTER PRIORY

James Alexander Cameron

*This paper is a much shortened version of a 13,000 word dissertation written for Manchester University in 2008/9. The full version includes discussion of the misericords, a comparison of the technical construction of the stalls to other English stallwork of the fourteenth century, some further stylistic considerations and a number of other elements. The author is currently researching the Decorated Style in greater detail with the intention of placing the stalls in a firmer artistic context and intends eventually to publish a fuller version of the work.*

### I. Introduction

The county of Lancashire is not well endowed with surviving monuments from the Decorated Period (c.1290-1350) of English Gothic architecture. The occasional cusped piscina in a chancel is usually all one will come across as a legacy of this period of inventiveness in English Art, in which the potential of the Gothic to convey sacred meaning was explored with greater creativity than ever before.

This context makes the oak choir stalls at Lancaster Priory all the more curious. Accepted as dating from the 1340s, no other set of choir stalls in the country has such a level of exuberance in both foliate decoration and tracery. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner described them as having "about the most luxuriant canopies in the country".<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of two of the stalls in the Age of Chivalry exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1987 is testament to their importance,<sup>2</sup> yet despite this they have been afforded little scholarly attention.

<sup>1</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *North Lancashire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969) p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (eds.), *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1987) pp. 427-8.

Choir stalls are ecclesiastical furniture located in churches of all sizes, from cathedrals to parish churches, and were used by the medieval clergy during the many daily liturgies. In Lancashire there are a few surviving medieval sets, such as those at St. Helen's Church, Garstang, which is little more than a series of seats with crude misericords, but there are also the impressive fifteenth-century stalls at Whalley church (formerly in the adjacent abbey); a further set at Manchester Cathedral have lofty canopies above the seats similar to the arrangement at Lancaster.

However, the Whalley and Manchester stalls' canopies are of a style much more typical in English stallwork, deriving as they do from the tabernacled form initiated at Lincoln Cathedral, c.1370. The Lancaster stalls' canopies utilise a flat construction similar to that found at Winchester Cathedral, c.1300, but unlike Winchester their stylistic character, with lush foliage and tracery unique to every canopy, is associated with the height of the Decorated period, the 1340s, just before the Black Death struck England in 1349.

There are a number of unresolved issues about the stalls. Firstly, the stalls have been much mutilated in their afterlife. Their original arrangement has never been fully considered, but, with the recent rediscovery of an early nineteenth-century sketchbook, it can be established that they were previously – even at the beginning of the nineteenth century – more numerous and intricate in design. Secondly, their provenance is unknown. The building in which they stand dates from the century following their construction, and this has led many to assume they came from another location. Thirdly, some of the tracery used in the stalls is clearly atypical for Lancashire, having more in common with the later continental Gothic style of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, known as the Flamboyant, than with the English Decorated style. Each of these issues is considered to some extent in the discussion below.

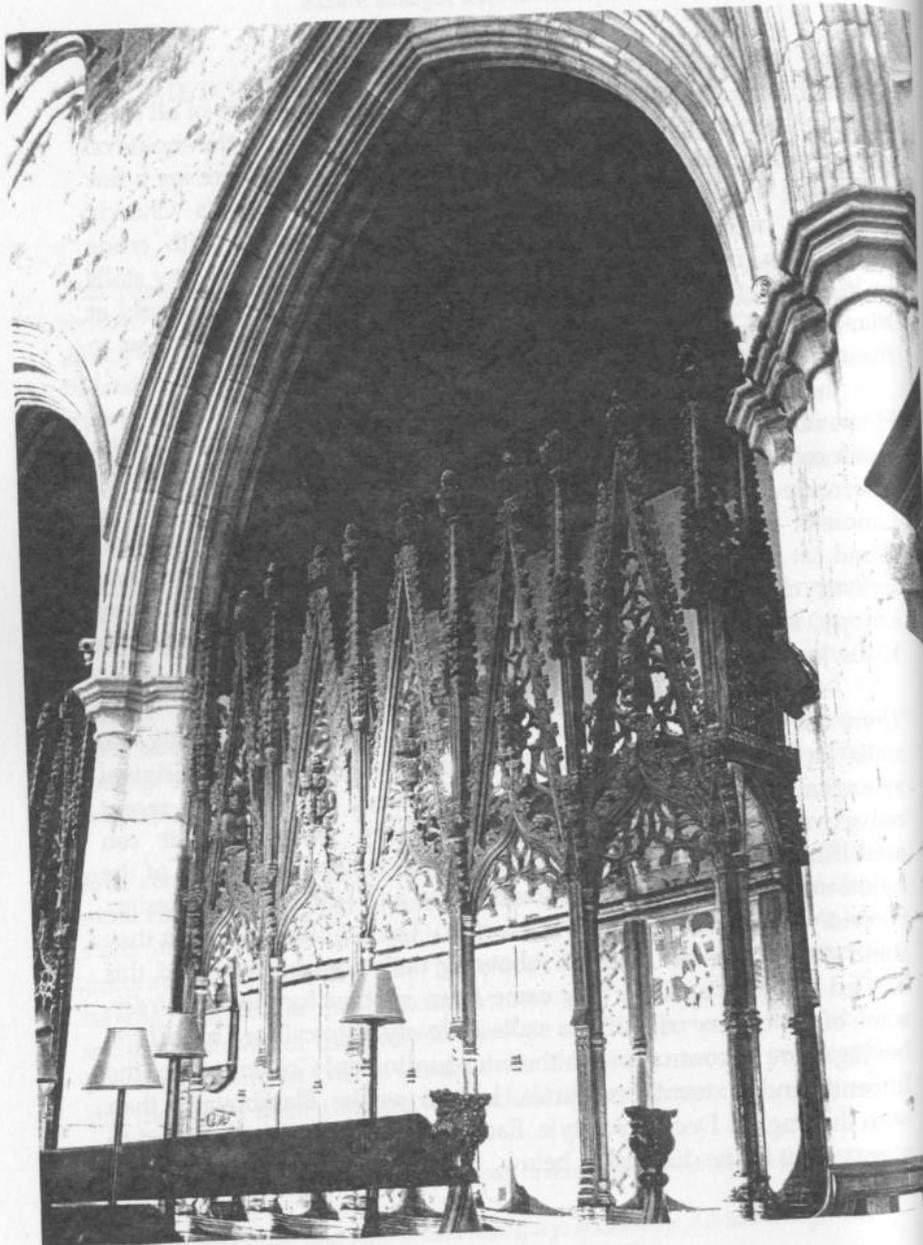


Figure 1: Lancaster Priory stalls. Photo: Folio Photography, Lancaster University

The medieval stalls consist of fourteen canopied seats; two sets of five (figure 1) and two sets of two; there are also two further medieval canopies in the south side of sanctuary forming a sedilia, and two panels of blind tracery (figure 2) flanking a bishop's throne. It should be remarked that the two larger-scale canopies in the sanctuary are modern, with tracery copied from one of the original canopies on the south side. The other obvious modern addition to the stalls, beyond the tapestries now in their backs and further seating in front, are the two eastern-most elbows of a green man and a man's head.

Otherwise the stalls are mercifully unrestored. The fact that they are not in a cathedral has probably saved them from controversial Victorian restoration. Stalls in many cathedrals are entirely modern, and where medieval ones do survive they have often received so much restoration work that it is difficult to ascertain which parts are modern and therefore to glean any information about their original form and lost sections.

The Lancaster canopies consist of an ogee (S-shaped) arch rising to a small leaf covered finial (see figure 3 for a labelled image). Inside this ogee is intricate tracery, unique to each stall. Behind this a steep gable is in-filled with openwork tracery and a crocket design based on a close observation of indigenous leaves unique again to each canopy; species include oak, hawthorn and maple. All of the extant leaves are evidently original, as many portions of them have been broken off and not restored.

In between the gables are architectural forms known as pinnacles. They are carved with many little grotesque faces at their tops. The seat elbows have either carved faces showing distinct physiognomies, or foliage. The south pair of seats has extra decoration, the head of a bishop and king, which may mean that this was the seat of the abbot or prior. The shafts supporting the canopies and the rear of the stalls are decorated with tracery patterns.

Underneath the seats are carved misericords, or "mercy seats", which are often said to have been intended to support the older, tired clergy

Figure 2: (right) The right blind tracery panel in the sanctuary north side.  
Photo: Author

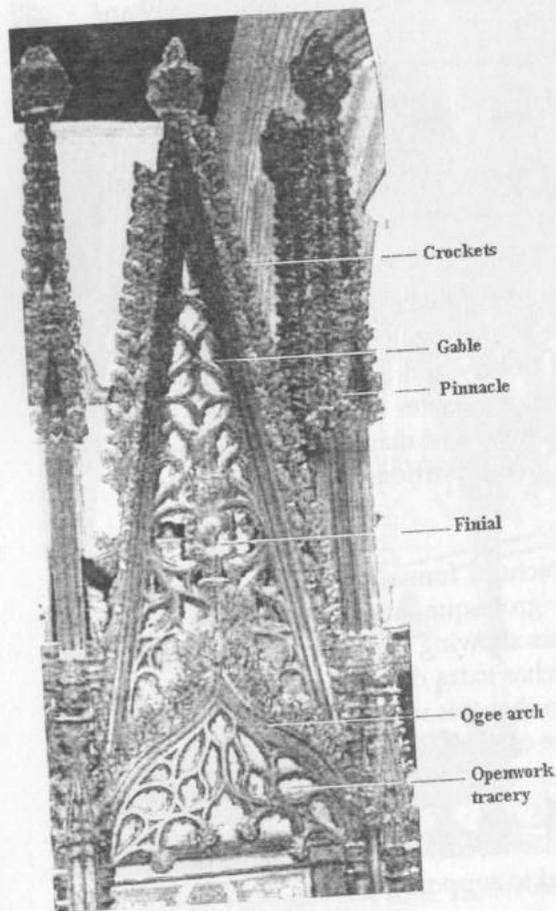


Figure 3: Labelled diagram of west-most canopy of south laterals. Photo: Author

when the seats are folded up during the long periods of standing which are required in the medieval liturgy. Like many sets of misericords, they are carved with fantastic creatures and narrative scenes, although they are much damaged.<sup>3</sup>

## II. New findings on the original appearance of the stalls

The stalls are clearly not in their original position and have been dismantled and moved about the church, possibly many times.

A sketchbook by Joseph Michael Gandy, relating to a journey to Lancaster he made in 1806, gives us, in a series of measured drawings, the appearance of the stalls at that time.<sup>4</sup> The sketchbook was in private hands until its purchase by Sir John Soane's Museum in 2001 and has never been considered in connection with the stalls until the current author's research. Gandy was an architect who probably drew the stalls as part of his research for the design of the seat canopies in the Shire Hall in the adjacent Lancaster Castle (although his eventual design, as seen today, owes little to the stalls). With his perceptive recordings of the stalls, which predate the Gothic revival in England by a few decades, Gandy has provided us with vital evidence of the lost portions of the stalls that were removed in subsequent years by those less appreciative of medieval art.

As has been recognised in previous literature,<sup>5</sup> the two-seat sections are clearly the returns, i.e. intended to be set at right angles to the main range of seats, which run east-to-west; the modern elbows mark where they would have attached to the laterals, which curve at their east end indicating a change in direction. Gandy recorded a plan of

<sup>3</sup> See John Dickinson, *Misericords of North West England. Their Nature and Significance* (Lancaster: Centre for North-West Regional Studies, 2008) pp. 9-24; the current paper offers some new findings which extend Dickinson's conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Goodall and Margaret Richardson, "A Recently Rediscovered Gandy Sketchbook" *Architectural History* 44 (2001) p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Tracy, *English Gothic Choir Stalls 1200-1400* (London: Boydell Press, 1987) p. 40.

the seats in 1806 "as they are now", indicating that the two-seat sections were originally comprised of three seats. The current elbow carvings, where these return seats linked to the lateral stalls, are modern; the corresponding areas are marked as "broken off" in his drawings, which also indicate two carvings, now lost, on the other side of the section, which closed off a third seat. The canopies now in the sanctuary would certainly have originally surmounted seats, giving us a total of at least 16 stalls.

Comparison of Gandy's drawings of the canopies and with the ogee traceries as we see them today indicates that the canopies were not always over the seats that they are now and suggests that they were entirely disassembled sometime between his visit and 1874, when the stalls were recorded in the general form that they take now by W. Goddard in the *John O' Gaunt Sketchbook*.<sup>6</sup>

Most significantly, Gandy records that the stalls originally had traceried openwork in their backs, where the tapestries are now displayed (figures 4 and 5). His sketches of these traceries show that they were just as flamboyant and intricate as the ogees. All of the seats' traceries were sketched, although by his time two had already been lost as they are omitted on his diagram with the note "this is a door at present". By this date the screens were probably being used as a barrier for the consistory court at the rear of the priory. His drawing of the back of the laterals also shows us the lost corner section (figure 5).

The fully openwork backs would appear to be unique in English medieval stallwork. Pevsner was quite convinced that the seventeenth-century canopies added to the medieval stalls at Cartmel (figure 6) were influenced by the Lancaster stalls, as much of their openwork tracery has exactly the same motifs.<sup>7</sup> With the rediscovery of the Lancaster openwork backs, his case for a direct influence is clearly strengthened.

<sup>6</sup> *John O'Gaunt Sketchbook* Vol. 1 (Lancaster: E.G. Paley and H.J. Austin, 1874-5) plates 9-13.

<sup>7</sup> Pevsner (1969) p. 20.

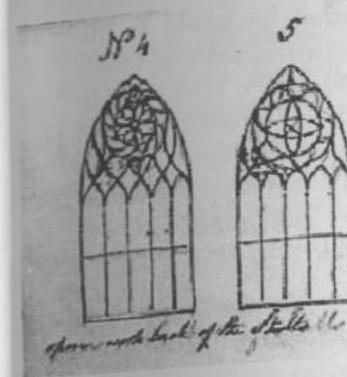


Figure 4: Gandy sketchbook: 'Open work back of stalls'. Courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum

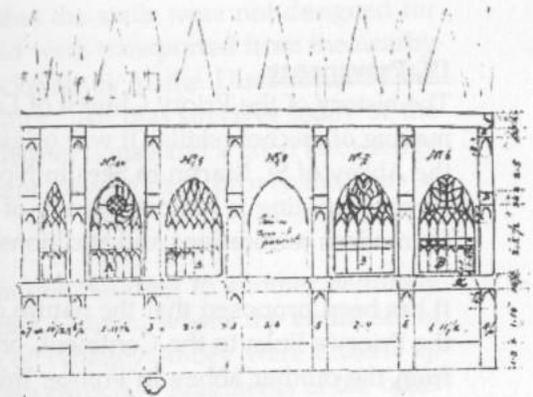


Figure 5: Gandy sketchbook: Sketch of back of stalls. Text in centre arch: 'This is a door at present'. Courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum

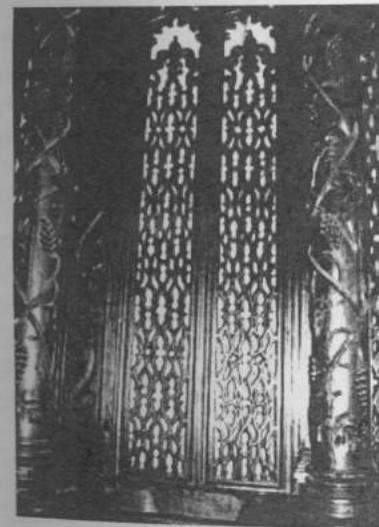


Figure 6: (left) Cartmel priory stall backing, seventeenth century. Photo: Author

Gandy also provides us with sketches of what he labels as the original desk fronts and other portions of woodwork, some of which survives today as the tracery on the west end of the returns. He records all the current misericords except the "Monastic School" (which must presumably be one of those noted as "these two so mutilated so as not to be seen") and another one that is purely foliate in its design. One of the elbows that appears ambiguous today is rendered as what seems to be a Virgin and Child.

### III. Provenance

The history of the Priory Church of Lancaster sheds little light on the making of its choir stalls. It was originally founded as an alien cell of the Abbey of St. Martin in Sées in Normandy in 1094. However, the current building is almost entirely of the fifteenth century (allowing for modern restorations and additions).

It has been proposed that the nature of the stalls can be attributed to the Priory's links to the Continent, or even have formed a direct gift from the mother abbey in France; this is unlikely, however, as their aesthetic is more closely associated with the burgeoning Decorated style of Yorkshire than any contemporary continental monuments. The alien houses, before their complete suppression in the fifteenth century, were taken in to the English crown's hands numerous times during the French Wars of the fourteenth century,<sup>8</sup> so Lancaster's connections to France would probably not be strong enough in the 1340s to allow for any stylistic transmissions anyway.

No other set of choir stalls in the country pre-dates the structure they are in, as they are always either contemporary with or post-date the building, unless we include small fragmentary portions incorporated into entirely new furniture, such as some misericords at Exeter and at Henry VII's Chapel in Westminster Abbey. It would seem that the trend in the middle ages was that when a building was renovated the

<sup>8</sup> 'Alien house: The priory of Lancaster' in *Victoria County History of Lancashire* volume 2 (1908) pp. 167-173.

furniture would also be renewed. Lancaster would be unique if it had kept its original stalls. Furthermore, this building was arguably of a political character, and intended to replace the French-allied alien house with an almost entirely new, modern structure. If this reading is accurate we might reasonably assume that the stalls, carrying as they would associations with the previous building, would not have survived.

An opinion frequently stated is that the stalls were not designed for the church at Lancaster but instead were transported from the nearby Premonstratensian Abbey at Cockersands at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the sixteenth century. All that survives today of the Abbey is the thirteenth-century chapter house and a good knowledge of the ground plan.<sup>9</sup> This persistent view of their provenance can be attributed to a number of factors.

Firstly, the removal of stalls from one building to another definitely occurred at nearby Whalley Parish Church, where the entire set of fifteenth-century monastic stalls of Whalley Abbey were broken up and eighteen moved into the parish church.<sup>10</sup> Fragments of the other 18 seats can be seen in Blackburn Cathedral and Holme-in-Cliviger, Lancs. This situation is very different to the one at Lancaster, however, as Whalley Parish Church is only a few minutes' walk from the abbey, and the fragments at the two other churches are seats and misericords only. It is not impossible that the Lancaster stalls were shipped largely intact all the way from Cockersands, but it is clearly a different situation from that at Whalley.

Secondly, objections have been raised to the contention that the stalls were built for Lancaster Priory on the grounds that it was a church of limited size, and thus limited income, in the mid-fourteenth century, and hence would be unable to afford the stalls. For example, it has been noted that the Priory's revenue in 1367 was eighty pounds and

<sup>9</sup> Clare Hartwell and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Lancashire: North* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Tracy, *English Gothic Choir Stalls 1400-1540* (London: Boydell Press, 1990) p. 4.

hence quite adequate to pay for the stalls.<sup>11</sup> However, this is at least 17 years after the stalls' date and the social and economic upheaval of the Black Death. Another assessment shows that in 1341 the Priory's income seemed to be about half the later total.<sup>12</sup> The first set of rejected furniture from St Stephens' Chapel, Westminster, was sold to the nuns of Barking at £33 6s. 8d in c.1350,<sup>13</sup> so we can see that stall work may well have been beyond the finances of the Priory at this time.

Cockersands certainly did possess stalls, as they are mentioned in the inventory of the abbey at its dissolution in 1536,<sup>14</sup> but it is doubtful that these stalls are to be identified with the Lancaster stalls. The total is known to have been thirty; this number may include lost laterals or front seats but the estimated value, even in the buyer's market of the Reformation, of 65 shillings and 8 pence seems altogether too low for the craftsmanship we see on the Lancaster stalls. The materials alone for the second set of stalls at St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, purchased between 1351 and 1357, totalled over £15.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the choir at Cockersands was only 20 feet wide and 40 feet long, so fitting 30 stalls which were on the scale of the Lancaster examples, and allowing either for front stalls or further laterals, would seem to be a tight squeeze, especially in comparison to the current chancel of the Priory, which is 70 by 60 feet. The choir and nave of the Abbey have been shown to be aisleless,<sup>16</sup> and this would also indicate that the Lancaster stalls did not originate in Cockersands, for their design, with the tracery patterns on the backs of the stalls and their lost openwork back panels, would evidently be

<sup>11</sup> Francis Bond, *Wood Carvings in English Churches I. – Stalls and Tabernacles Work II – Bishops' Thrones and Chancel Chairs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910) p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> 'The parish of Lancaster (in Lonsdale hundred): Church, advowson and charities' *Victoria County History of Lancashire* volume 8 (1914) pp. 22-33.

<sup>13</sup> Tracy (1987) p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> William Farrer, "Chartulary of Cockersand Abbey of Premonstratensian canons, Vol 3. part 3" *Transactions of Chetham's Historical Society* 40 (1909) p. 1171.

<sup>15</sup> Tracy (1987) p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Hartwell and Pevsner (2009) p. 250.

unsuitable for the building, as one would reasonably expect the stalls in such a ground plan to be placed up against the walls of the choir.

Another objection to the theory that the stalls were built for Lancaster that is often raised relates to the number of staff within the Priory, which was recorded in the 1320s as a prior, five monks and two chaplains.<sup>17</sup> These eight seem not to account for the (at least) 16 seats of the stalls, which perhaps points us towards the conclusion they did indeed come from a larger house rather than this minor alien cell. However, it is worth noting that although Westminster Abbey had 64 seats in its stalls it never recorded more than 52 monks in residence.<sup>18</sup> We know that Cockersands had 30 stalls, yet it was recorded at the Dissolution there was a prior and 21 canons at the abbey.<sup>19</sup> This shows that an excess of seats for clerics may have been typical in late medieval churches.

Gandy himself did not suspect the stalls came from another church. In fact, he sketched a plan of how he believed the stalls would have originally stood in the current chancel, between the arcades, much as they do now. His view is rather in the minority in the literature, and even though there is no direct evidence that the stalls do not originate from Lancaster Priory, we can see that the air of suspicion about their provenance is warranted. Cockersands Abbey, however, does not hold particular claim to be the source of the stalls, any more than the alternative of Furness Abbey in Cumbria, or even buildings with little to no remains, such as Lancaster's Dominican House, where Dalton Square now stands, or the Franciscan house in Preston. Being exclusively urban, the houses of the mendicant (begging) orders such as the former two were almost entirely obliterated in this country at the Reformation, unlike those of the monastic orders, which leave remains due to their rural, isolated nature.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew White, *A History of Lancaster 1193-1993* (Keele: Keele University Press, 2003) p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Bond (1910) p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> 'Houses of Premonstratensian canons: The abbey of Cockersand' *Victoria County History of Lancashire* volume 2 (1908) pp. 154-9.

#### IV. Style

The issue of the unique style of the stalls will be considered here in three parts – the intricate tracery patterns, the design of the steep gables and the foliage.

#### Tracery

Exuberant and complex tracery designs in windows, based on the reticulated S-shaped curve, are perhaps the most obvious hallmark of the English Decorated style.

The two blind panels, now used as flanks to the bishop's throne, most closely resemble window tracery. The right screen reminds one of the general shape of the famous west window of York Minster (figure 7), whilst the top of the left panel resembles the common decorated "sprouting" form of tracery, as seen at Patrington (figure 8) and Hull, E. Yorks and Durham Cathedral west window, all of the 1340s. Thus these panels are demonstrably based upon patterns established in Yorkshire window tracery, elaborated to a level that would not be possible in heavy stone masonry.

Meanwhile, the patterns in the ogees under the gables of the canopies begin to move further away from comparable patterns in other media. The west front of the parish church of Snettisham, Norfolk, also of the 1340s, has been cited as a comparative monument, indicating that, despite the exuberance, it is the English rather than the continental craftsman at work.<sup>20</sup> This is one of the few extant windows that arguably show a similar freedom and fluidity in pattern. Some of the ogees recall the Bishop's Eye window of the 1330s at Lincoln Cathedral in their resemblance to paired leaves. Many other designs of the same period move more towards intricate "webs" of quatrefoils and daggers, and perhaps the closest relation in the realm of tracery is the east window of Selby Abbey, again from the 1330s (figure 9).

<sup>20</sup> Bond (1910) p. 40.



Figure 7: (left) York Minster west window. Photo: Author

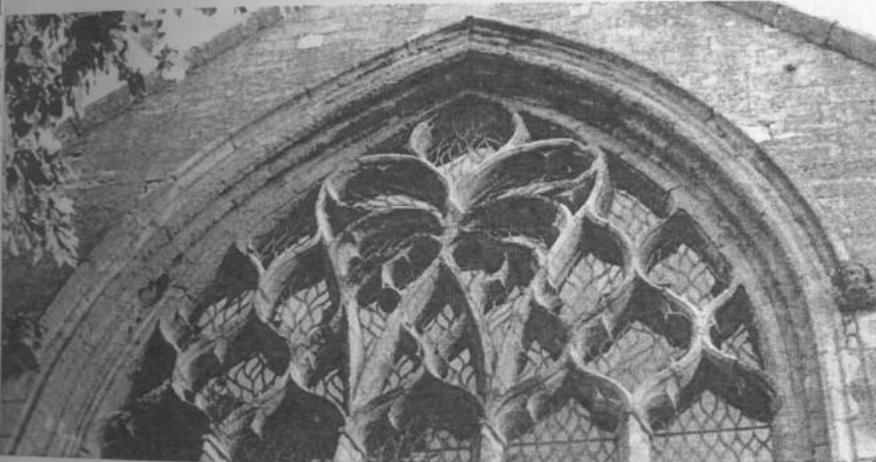


Figure 8: (below) Patrington church, W. Yorks. West window. Photo: Author



Figure 9: (left) Selby Abbey, N. Yorks. East window. Photo: Author

There are very few surviving Decorated windows in the immediate vicinity of the Priory, but they are not unknown. The closest to Lancaster is the surviving tracery, c.1300, at St Peter's Church in Heysham.<sup>21</sup> Slightly further afield are the Town Choir window of Cartmel Priory,<sup>22</sup> and the north chapel at Ribchester. These examples demonstrate that the Decorated style of the stalls would not be an anomaly in the local area.

One of the most impressive of the ogees in its complexity is in the south side of the sanctuary, an asymmetrical spiralling pattern that is more akin to Flamboyant tracery at Milan Cathedral, from the latter part of the fourteenth century,<sup>23</sup> than contemporary English work. The lost openwork backs recorded by Gandy are also often reminiscent of this design. Similar circular designs are difficult to find in contemporary English monuments, but the Cistercian abbey in Tilty, Essex, shows what may be a similar pattern of experimentation. The recorded designs of the other lost backs have similarities to the traceries located in Yorkshire previously discussed.

The general design of the canopies, in their traceried openwork and very steep gables, is reminiscent of much later monuments such as the fifteenth-century façade of St. Maclou, Rouen. In England, the c.1500 Gondibour screen in Carlisle Cathedral shows similar web-like flamboyance (figure 10). Indeed, the tracery of the Gondibour

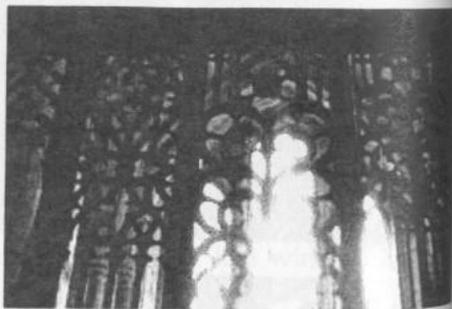


Figure 10: Detail of Gondibour screen, Carlisle Cathedral, late fifteenth century. Photo: Author

<sup>21</sup> Hartwell and Pevsner (2009) p. 333.

<sup>22</sup> Tracy (1987) p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Martindale, *Gothic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967) pp. 256-8.

screen has, in its uniqueness, been compared to the Lancaster stalls, and attributed to the "defiantly independent and innovative" character of north-country craftsmen,<sup>24</sup> but ultimately has been felt to have Flemish and French influence.<sup>25</sup>

#### Gable design

The tall gables of the stalls must be seen as ultimately finding their roots in the ogee and gable form pioneered in England on the Hardingstone cross, c.1290s.<sup>26</sup> The fact that the ogee arches are surmounted by a large, leaf-covered finial is perhaps the Lancaster furniture's biggest departure from the Winchester stalls, which only have a finial on the top of the gable itself. The Wakefield chantry chapel of the 1340s<sup>27</sup> has similar lofty gables, but no finial over the ogee; the gable is simply filled in with tracery. However, the two flanking gables on the stone pulpitum in Southwell Minster, Notts, c.1320-40, are very similar in design, as they have a statue on top of an ogee. It has been suggested that the pulpitum is the product of an East Anglian school employed to undertake decorative work across an area from Yorkshire to Cambridgeshire.<sup>28</sup> This might be analogous to the situation at Lancaster. The pulpitum is not directly comparable to the stalls in any aspects outside of its gable design, but it does, however, provide an interesting parallel in its position as something of a geographical oddity.

#### Foliage

The second quarter of the fourteenth century generally shows a move towards "seaweedly" foliage, particularly in Yorkshire, as seen in the

<sup>24</sup> Charles Tracy, "The Stylistic Antecedents of the Gondibour Screen at Carlisle Cathedral" in Mike McCarthy and David Weston (eds.) *Carlisle and Cumbria: Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology* (Leeds: British Archaeological Association, 2004) p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> Tracy (2004) pp. 192-3.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Bony, *The English Decorated Style: Gothic Architecture Transformed 1250-1350* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1979) p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Tracy (1987) p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner and Priscilla Metcalf, *The Cathedrals of England: Midland, Eastern and Northern England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) p. 310.

reredos at Selby Abbey. The Percy Tomb in Beverley Minster has quite lush and naturalistic foliage, but it has a more bulbous character. The Lancaster stalls show a discontinuity in design by having clearly identifiable species of leaf. This frustrates any direct connections of the stalls with work in Yorkshire as the tracery patterns suggested.

The foliage of the Lancaster stalls is more comparable with that of the Winchester stalls, both characterised as "dry, brittle and flat".<sup>29</sup> The crocketing of the Winchester stalls, however, is largely of one character, and resembles standard *rayonnant* abstract crocketing. One of the Lancaster gables has crocketing in this style, but the others, as noted, are all unique. Perhaps the closest match in the balance between decoration and the copying of natural forms can be seen in stone in Ely Cathedral's fourteenth-century work. In wood, the fourteenth-century screenwork at King's Lynn (figure 11) and the much-restored stalls at Norwich Cathedral, c.1420, show an interest in varied crocketing, indicating perhaps the influence on the stalls of an East Anglian school.



Figure 11: Detail of varied crocketing on fourteenth century screen work reused as stall canopies. St Margaret, King's Lynn, Norfolk. Photo: Author

<sup>29</sup> Tracy (1987) p. 42.

The mouldings of the seats and shafts are agreed to be characteristic of the 1340s,<sup>30</sup> and the misericord sculpture has been compared to figurative art of the decade such as the Luttrell Psalter,<sup>31</sup> further strengthening the date of the work. It is clear that much of the design of the stall tracery shows the very strong influence of the Yorkshire Decorated style of the 1340s, and any attempt to date them past the 1340s to fit in with the later continental Flamboyant seems misguided.

#### V. Conclusion

It is this author's conclusion that the Lancaster stalls are an important work in Gothic art, and that they foreshadow later styles thanks to the relative freedom the craftsmen had to develop their designs due to the advantages of working in the medium of wood rather than stone. They occupy a unique position among extant monuments, particularly in view of the discovery of a record of the lost openwork backs. They demonstrate the heights attained by the English Decorated style in its fin-de-siècle period, as Pevsner put it in the *Englishness of English Art*: 'the English love of embodying the anti-corporeal in the love of the "flaming line"',<sup>32</sup> and are a fine example of the fostering of artistic invention by the Church at that time.

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<sup>30</sup> Bond (1910) p. 40.

<sup>31</sup> Tracy (1987) p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956) pp. 132-4.

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