

Report for the January 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 8 January Chairman Clive Hooper welcomed a packed audience to the first monthly meeting of 2016, held at the Eden Church Conference Centre. The speaker was Chris Flower, whose talk was about church misericords (literally meaning “mercy/kindness to the heart” and so “seats of mercy”) and their extraordinary and surprising carvings, illuminating life and satire for us in the medieval world. Chris talked about those in the Priory Church, Malvern, set against the context of carvings throughout other churches in the UK.

In the 1100s monks and nuns had “leaning staffs” to support them when they participated in characteristically long sermons. By the 1300s this system of support had evolved to become a small carved shelf to the underside of the choir stall, thus providing a ledge for the monks or nuns to sit on but giving the appearance however that they were standing. We saw wonderful illustrations of misericords from 1250 to 1530, starting with ones from Kidlington, Oxford, which were some of the earliest. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the carvings on these seats became more ornate, with floral arrangements.

Typical carvings were of mythological beasts and animals such as foxes and apes. The beasts were dragon-like creatures such as griffons. The figures and the scenes shown were allegorical about human behaviour and were often meant to be instructions from God to mankind on how to behave. Griffons being attacked by lions (good creatures) showed good triumphing over evil, for example. A pelican pecking its own chest to feed its babies with her blood was symbolic of the Eucharist, portraying the redeeming blood of Christ. Owls represented Jews, viewed at the time as those who had not seen the Christian light and so were seen as a nuisance. Images of harvesting and hunting showed how everyday life was led, examples of which we admired from local areas such as Malvern, Ludlow and Ripple. Apes and pigs represented lust, whilst a fox was often shown as a priest in disguise. In Malvern, a cat was being hanged by a mouse, indicating a back-to-front world but where the tables are being turned.

Beasts, birds and flowers were copied from patterns onto the misericords, carved mostly from a single block of oak. There were many wonderful depictions too of how people dressed and humorous scenes, for example, of a man and a woman fighting each other, with the woman usually winning. Women were portrayed as sinful, rebellious people with one inference being that rebellious people needed to be kept in their place. With a cautionary note, though, Chris said how difficult it is for us to get into the medieval mind to understand what exactly the correct interpretation is. The expulsion from Paradise consistently implied that there was sin, foolishness and wrong in the World. In the Brancacci Chapel, Florence, in 1425, Masolino shows the serpent with a woman’s head, so the woman is seen as a temptress, the root of evil, indicating what a misogynistic age it was.

In Exeter Cathedral an extraordinary carving for that age shows a monk chatting up a woman but they are both caught out and end up in the stocks.

A Chichester misericord shows a stolen kiss, where two people are bending over backwards to kiss each other, with their heads shown as upside down on the supporter brackets of the misericord. This world, shown by Bruegel’s Proverb painting in the 1500s, is indeed an upside down world, demonstrating how much of our behaviour is human folly in a world at odds with itself.

There is very little evidence about who carved the misericords, however we do know that they had a master carver who did drawings from a pattern book. There are similar misericords in continental Europe, mostly in Northern Europe. Only the English ones have ‘supporters’ on the side of the carving, and not those in Europe.

On Civic Society business, Clive summarised the latest news. For further information on Civic Society events, please see <http://www.malverncivicsociety.org.uk>.