

Report for the September 2015 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 11 September 2015 we resumed our monthly talks, starting with the return of an excellent speaker, Duncan James, who spoke to us this time about the Hereford School of Romanesque Sculpture.

Duncan's professional background presents ideal credentials for this topic: he worked for famous sculptors in London such as Enzo Plazzotta (who trained under Giacomo Manzù) helping him with casting and taking photographs of his models and as well as working for Michael Ayrton, a writer, painter and sculptor. He also worked for Henry Moore. Duncan's work included researching methods of casting bronze statues. He moved to Herefordshire thirty years ago and has been recording and analysing buildings for the last fifteen years.

We admired a range of illustrations of work done by the Herefordshire sculptors in churches mainly across Herefordshire, but also in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Warwickshire. There are also links with Reading Abbey, through Leominster Priory church, formerly a cell of Reading. Duncan's knowledge and easy style of presentation taught us much, inspiring us to visit these fascinating works of art. First we focused on Kilpeck and Pipe Aston churches, the latter being one of the earliest examples, then examined Shobdon and many others, admiring the diversity of ideas and inventiveness of such beautiful carvings.

The works of this group of sculptors were completed during a relatively short period of time, between 1135 and 1155. Duncan gave examples throughout the period, showing us photographs of church tympana (a tympanum is the area between the lintel over a doorway and the arch above), church fonts and other exquisite design work. He highlighted connections in the designs from different churches so that we came to recognise the prevalent features such as birds, snakes and lions carved in a particular way. For example, the birds have curved wings, which we saw in both Kilpeck church and Rowstone. Lion masks and birds are on the exterior walls of Leominster Priory and on Brinsop church. Stretton Sugwas and Leominster display the same lion claws. In some carvings in this group's work there is a Scandinavian influence - comparable works in Hylestad stave church and Forutn, Norway were highlighted.

There was a lively question-and-answer session, where Duncan was asked about the source of the sculptors' ideas. In the absence of written evidence from the period, he suggested that we have simply to speculate, and thought that their ideas came from monastic manuscripts, wall hangings and imported fabrics from the East. The carving stones possibly came from France and from quarries in Britain that are now lost. Most of the stone used is sandstone. In general, the group moved together, had members across two generations and, apart from Reading Abbey and Hereford Cathedral, they did not work on major buildings but moved around small sites.

Duncan concluded by saying that although religion has been responsible for a lot of conflict it has also been responsible for the production of some remarkable works of art.

This was our penultimate meeting at Christ Church, as we move in November to The Eden Church, next to the Malvern (Spa) Hotel in Grovewood Road. Chairman Clive Hooper thanked Christ Church for hosting us over the past few years and presented Angie Green with gifts in appreciation for the warm welcome she has given us all, putting on refreshments and doing all she could to make us comfortable. The Civic Society has supported Christ Church by holding meetings and concerts there, thus making a contribution to church funds and hopes to be able to do so in the future by putting on events.

Clive flagged up forthcoming events, including a holiday in Italy in 2016 to be jointly run with the National Trust. For further information on Civic Society events, please see <http://www.malverncivicsociety.org.uk>. Additionally, there is a Childline Benefit dinner organised by Colin Butler at Café Zam Zam on 18 October. Our next talk will be on Friday 9 October and is entitled "The Construction of the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal" by Nigel Jefferies. It will be held at Christ Church in Avenue Road at 7.30 pm.