

## Gothic beyond Architecture: Manchester's Collegiate Church

My previous posts for Visit Manchester have concentrated exclusively upon buildings. In the medieval period—the time when the Gothic style developed in buildings such as the basilica of Saint-Denis on the outskirts of Paris, Île-de-France (**Figs 1–2**), under the direction of Abbot Suger (1081–1151)—the style was known as either simply ‘new’, or *opus francigenum* (literally translates as ‘French work’). The style became known as Gothic in the sixteenth century because certain high-profile figures in the Italian Renaissance railed against the architecture and connected what they perceived to be its crude forms with the Goths that sacked Rome and ‘destroyed’ Classical architecture.

During the nineteenth century, critics applied Gothic to more than architecture; they located all types of art under the Gothic label. This broad application of the term wasn't especially helpful and it is no-longer used. Gothic design, nevertheless, was applied to more than architecture in the medieval period. Applied arts, such as furniture and metalwork, were influenced by, and followed and incorporated the decorative and ornament aspects of Gothic architecture. This post assesses the range of influences that Gothic had upon furniture, in particular by exploring Manchester Cathedral's woodwork, some of which are the most important examples of surviving medieval woodwork in the North of England.

Manchester Cathedral, formerly the Collegiate Church of the City (**Fig.3**), see [here](#), was ascribed Cathedral status in 1847, and it is grade I listed (Historic England listing number 1218041, see [here](#)). It is medieval in foundation, with parts dating to between c.1422 and 1520, however it was restored and rebuilt numerous times in the nineteenth century, and it was notably hit by a shell during WWII; the shell failed to explode. Of the Cathedral's notable external features, the West tower (**Fig.4**) was rebuilt in 1867. The exterior is almost entirely in the English Perpendicular style; the last phase of medieval architecture characterised by a grid-like arrangement of verticals and horizontals, exemplified in the window tracery (**Fig.5**) that forgoes the organic Decorated style, seen, for example, in the windows of York Minster (**Fig.6**).

Despite being largely rebuilt and extensively modified since its foundation, the Cathedral preserves a number of remarkable wooden fittings: the early sixteenth-century pulpitum (or screen separating the Nave and Choir), and the choirstalls dating to c.1500–6. The stalls' canopies are remarkable and are without doubt some of the finest surviving late-medieval choir stalls in North of England. There are also other important later notable additions to the Cathedral's furnishings, including the Bishop's throne from 1906 by Sir Charles Nicholson, and the lectern, c.1850 by George Shaw of Uppermill, Saddleworth. These late-medieval and Victorian additions demonstrate the ways in which Gothic design went beyond architecture to guide the design and execution of architectural furniture.

The Pulpitum seen in **Fig.7** is clearly based upon architectural principles: the screen is effectively composed of tracery windows that are not filled with stained glass. The tracery is of the rigid Perpendicular style (**Fig.8**) that is also characterised by the vertical glazing bars (mullions) continuing straight up to the touch the top of the window. This particular type of ‘super mullion’ is a central feature of England's last and most refined form of medieval Gothic design. The rigidity of this Perpendicular tracery contrasts with the blind tracery

below on the pulpitum's wooden panelling (**Fig.9**) that is curvilinear and is based upon the previous form of medieval Gothic architecture—Decorated—as exemplified by the window tracery seen in the large main window of the Western façade of York Minster seen in **Fig.6** above. Another characteristic of Perpendicular Gothic seen applied to the screen—the fan vault—was invented and first executed at Gloucester Cathedral's cloisters in 1351 (**Fig.10**). Characterised by Perpendicular blind tracery carved into the vault, which is shaped as a half conoid, the fan vault can also be found supporting the pulpitum's canopy (**Fig.11**). As such, the screen, made from carved wood, is an architectural installation within Manchester Cathedral made according to the principles of medieval architecture.

The second remarkable survival in the cathedral are the choir stalls (**Fig.12**). The choir stalls are based upon the well-established formula for such seating: an articulated seat that can be lowered and raised, with a support—misericord—incorporated to its underside to enable monks to effectively perch whilst appearing to stand for parts of the liturgy (**Fig.13**). These seats are located beneath canopies that are modelled upon the type of architectural canopies incorporated into niches designed to hold sculptures (**Fig.14**); most niches, courtesy of iconoclasm—purging of icons in England's churches following the Reformation—are now left vacant or mutilated as is the case with Manchester Cathedral's Lady Chapel Screen (**Fig.15**). Canopies—a sign of honour and status—consequently bestowed significance upon those occupying the stalls. As with most medieval choir stall canopies, the form of the superstructure of the Manchester Cathedral choir stalls is far more elaborate than the typical niche; the verticality drawing the eye upwards (to heaven; a principle of Gothic architecture).

The form of the canopies is entirely architectural (**Fig.16**), with cusped ogee arches, pinnacles, finials, and vaulting forming the structure. Window tracery is also incorporated into both registers of the canopies, and this tracery blends Perpendicular Gothic with the simplicity of Early English tracery patterns. The pattern of the blind tracery applied at the base of the canopy is of a more complex form; the overall impression is of a highly wrought, shrine-like construction.

Later additions to the Cathedral include the lectern, made c.1850 by the Uppermill forger George Shaw, and the Bishop's throne, or Cathedra, made in 1906 by Sir Charles Nicholson. The former (**Fig.17**) is modelled heavily upon a bed—belonging to Henry VII and his wife—that Shaw acquired and used as a mine for architectural ornament in the furniture he supplied to various noblemen, including the Duke of Northumberland, but it also relates to examples of medieval furniture included in Henry Shaw's and Samuel Rush Meyrick's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture Drawn from Existing Authorities* published in 1836 (see [here](#), **Fig.18**). It was made to appear old, but, in reality, it is a modern (Victorian production) aping the late-Tudor Gothic woodwork Shaw had in his collection. Nowhere is its modern production made obvious, and the choice to stain the lectern dark brown is intended for it to harmonise with the rest of the Cathedral's medieval woodwork.

The Bishop's Throne (**Fig.19**), in comparison, includes dates on the canopy that help claim its modern, late-Victorian production. The throne is an elaboration upon the choir-stall concept already discussed, but it is a stand-alone entity commensurate with the importance of the bishop. Whilst there is a clear attempt to align the architectural features of the Cathedra's

canopy with the choir-stalls' superstructures, it is of a simpler, pared back form, lacking the sophistication and elaborate workmanship of the late medieval examples (**Fig.20**).

Despite differences, it is possible to see direct correlations between Gothic architecture and furniture. Working in wood rather than stone offered different challenges to the carvers, and the material itself also governs the now darkened colour of ancient woodwork.

Manchester Cathedral has been extensively rebuilt, refurbished, and extended since its medieval foundation; its interior fittings preserve authentic, ancient examples of medieval applied design, as well as more modern imitations; its contents are national treasures.

### Image Captions

Fig.1: Façade of the basilica of Saint-Denis after restoration. Thomas Clouet (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Fig.2: Rayonnant Choir of the basilica of Saint-Denis. Pierre Poschadel (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Fig.3: Exterior elevation of Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.4: Nineteenth-century rebuilding of the Cathedral's Western Tower. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.5: Two bays of the Nave showing Perpendicular Gothic windows and crenulations. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.6: West façade of York Minster, showing the Decorated 'Heart of Yorkshire' window. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.7: Early sixteenth-century pulpitum in Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.8: Detail of the upper Perpendicular Gothic tracery in Manchester Cathedral's pulpitum. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.9: Detail of the lower Decorated Gothic blind tracery in Manchester Cathedral's pulpitum. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.10: Gloucester Cathedral Cloisters: detail of the fan vaults. Christopher JT Cherrington (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Fig.11: Fan vaults supporting the pulpitum's canopy, Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.12: Overview of the Choir of Manchester Cathedral, facing the Nave. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.13: Choir stall seating; seat in the 'up' position revealing the misericord carvings. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.14: Pulpitum at York Minster with original figurative sculptures of the kings of England. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.15: The mutilated carvings on the Screen of Manchester Cathedral's Lady Chapel. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.16: Detail of Manchester Cathedral's choir-stall canopies. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.17: Lectern by George Shaw. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.18: Plate XLII, from Shaw's and Meyrick's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836).

Fig.19: Overview of the Cathedra at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.20: Detail of the upper canopy of the Cathedra at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.