

## St Chad's Rochdale: Where Genuine Medieval Work and Victorian Fakery Unite

The church of St Chad in Rochdale, Greater Manchester (**Fig.1**), is a particularly curious and also leading example of the Victorian penchant for recreating and forging medieval Gothic architecture and interiors. St Chad's is also especially relevant to me, given the involvement of George Shaw from Upper Mill, Saddleworth, on the periphery of Manchester, in the creation of supposedly medieval furniture for the church's interior in 1847 (**Fig.2**). Shaw is a local Victorian forger extraordinaire, the subject of a chapter in my forthcoming book on antiquarian forgery in Georgian and Victorian Britain arising from my Leverhulme-funded Early Career Research Fellowship, and the subject of an essay I jointly authored with Dr Jonathan Foyle that will appear in an upcoming issue of *The British Art Journal*.

Guiding some of his forgeries, although, admittedly, not in an immediately obvious way, including his work on St Chad's, is a remarkable State Bed made for Henry VII (**Fig.3**) that was housed in what was one of the most important, but now sadly destroyed, medieval apartments in the Palace of Westminster: the Painted Chamber (devastated in the 1834 fire, refurbished thereafter, and pulled down finally in 1851). The bed can be found now, after a quite an exceptional recent history, in The Langley Collection in Northumberland, and a documentary on the bed can also be found on YouTube, below:

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allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture"
allowfullscreen></iframe>
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A more recognizable name involved in the Victorian renovations of St Chad's, namely working on the church's west window (in the tower) depicting Faith, Hope, and Charity, is the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones. The glass was also made by the notable Arts and Crafts figure, William Morris.

Why, then, have I not written about St Chad's earlier in my sequence of blog posts on Visit Manchester exploring Mancunian Gothic? Well, put simply, differentiating between 'genuine' and 'fake' medieval Gothic architecture and furniture requires what is known as the 'eye'; a certain amount of knowledge enabling one to look at, interpret, and differentiate between real and forged medieval workmanship. Hopefully those keeping up with these posts will now possess such knowledge.

St Chad's is a quite exceptional thing. It is grade II\* listed by Historic England (list entry number 1045812, [here](#), first listed 25 October 1951). The tower dates to the thirteenth century, although the far more ornate upper register was added in 1870 (**Fig.4**); the nave's arcade columns are partly from the fourteenth century; the south aisle arches are also from this period; and the clerestory—that top register of the main vessel which lets light in through the tracery windows—dates to 1557 (**Fig.5**).

Most of the clerestory windows added in 1557 alternate between what architectural historians refer to as Decorated and Perpendicular Gothic; the latter is a version of Gothic architecture that developed in England and which first came to prominence in the south transept of Gloucester Cathedral. With antecedents in London, particularly the chapter house and cloisters of Old St Paul's Cathedral, and St Stephen's Chapel in the Palace of Westminster, Gloucester's refinement of the London models, particularly in its choir (**Fig.6**), was perpetuated by the church's eminent status on the English pilgrimage circuit courtesy

of the body of Edward II being interred there to the north west of the high altar in the ambulatory (**Fig.7**).

This style of Gothic, known for its regimented, rectilinear grid-like tracery patterns found in windows and applied to walls and shrines, such as Cardinal Beaufort's chantry chapel in Winchester Cathedral in Hampshire (**Fig.8**), it became the last 'true' and popular style of Gothic in medieval England. Earlier churches, such as St Chad's, were 'updated' in this version of Gothic to make them, essentially, fashionable.

To my surprise, the rather detailed listing entry for St Chad's made by Historic England fails to mention George Shaw's involvement at the church. The 2004 Pevsner *Lancashire: Manchester and the South-East*, on the other hand, refers to Shaw's work at St Chad's, namely in relation to him as a 'collector and recycler of old carved woodwork and manufacturer of high quality repro'.<sup>1</sup> Shaw's understanding of medieval furniture was conditioned by what he could access or what he came across, such as the Henry VII bed. In Shaw's diary entry for 15 and 16 May 1829 he records his impression of the pulpit at St Chad's, some eighteen years before he undertook work on the eastern limb of the building, noting the historic pulpit and its black, ebony-like finish that, in the Victorian period, was considered to be one of the principal indicators and characteristics of ancient furniture:

There is nothing very particular in it except it be pulpit which is a very handsome one, made of oak and covered with carving[.] It is very old, and nearly as black as ebony. Mr Hay the Vicar of Rochdale told Mr Raines when he was there that it was the grandest pulpit he believed in England. Every thing about it is so very perfect. The sounding board is a large and beautiful one.

Heraldic ornament was also crucial to his understanding of the building's history, where he notes that:

there is a coat of arms painted on the roof over the [old, immense] pew, and likewise one in the window, which gives it light. I was told that they were the arms of the Byron family, to whom the pew formerly belonged, and of whom it was purchased along with their Rochdale Estates by Jas Dearden Esq<sup>r</sup>.

As this second quote demonstrates, Shaw was keenly interested in heraldry, and he employed heraldry to afford his forged ancestral furniture the appearance of age and authenticity even though he did not, on all occasions, get the heraldry right!

Shaw's choir stalls at St Chad's (**Figs 9–10**) are based upon medieval examples (**Fig.1q**), particularly evident in the form and ornament of the uprights between each seat—the standards—but their execution is eccentric in that each standard is finished off not as a typical medieval standard, but, instead, as a pew end (**Fig.12**). They are also ornamented with Gothic tracery in the form of blind window heads within which are set coats of arms and (mostly blank) banderoles (or banners).

The president's stall—the president being the person leading the service—features a chair set under a canopy and behind a desk modelled upon choir stalls, however the ends are finished with incredibly unusual and, hence, curious, finials that can be best described as preying-mantis-like (**Fig.13**). The chair itself is particularly noteworthy (**Fig.14**): it is based

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<sup>1</sup> See Hartwell, Hyde, and Pevsner, *Lancashire*, St John the Baptist, Birtle: p. 131, p. 589.

upon a design that, by 1847, was considered a classic example of Gothic furniture: the Glastonbury chair. The 'Glastonbury chair' was made popular by its adoption by Horace Walpole as suitably ancient and fit for Gothic interiors.

Examples of the Glastonbury chair can be found in public and private collections, in private and collegiate chapels, as well as churches, and cathedrals throughout the country. St Chad's is part of this eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition. The chair's form is ancient, and this connection is underwritten by the name carved into the right-hand arm of the 'original' that Horace Walpole acquired and displayed in the Holbein Chamber at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham (**Fig.15**).

Walpole first writes about the chair on 1 February 1759:

I am deeper than ever in Gothic antiquities; I have bought a monk of Glastonbury's chair full of scraps of the psalms, and some seals of most reverend illegibility. I pass all my mornings in the thirteenth century, and my evenings with the century that is coming on. Adieu!

And in the 1784 edition of Walpole's *Description* of Strawberry Hill, the chair is described thus:

A very ancient chair of oak, which came out of Glastonbury-abbey; on it are carved these sentences, *Joannes Arthurus Monachus Glastonie, salvet eum Deum: Da pacem Domine: Sit Laus Deo*. Lord Bathurst has several chairs copied from this.

Joannes Arthurus is an anglicisation of Jöhes Arthur—a monk of Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset who subscribed to the Act of Supremacy. Although this appears to legitimise the age of the chair, it is not sufficient evidence to link it to the abbey. Indeed, Gabriel Olive, in his seminal article on the Glastonbury chair, argues that the name was intentionally chosen to play upon connections to Britain's past made by antique collectors.

It is not known how Walpole acquired his 'Glastonbury chair', which is strange given the importance he allotted to it, and its current whereabouts is unknown. But as already indicated, chairs of this type proliferated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Shaw appears to have made his own version of the Glastonbury chair for St Chad's.

A similar X-frame chair is illustrated in the 1920 sale at Shaw's home, although the arms are notably different. This, nevertheless, indicates Shaw's awareness of the X-frame chair type (**Fig.16**).

St Chad's also has a lectern supplied by Shaw (**Fig.17**), and it is a simpler example of that which he supplied to Manchester Cathedral (**Fig.18**). Much like his forged ancestral furniture, Shaw's reuse of the lectern design demonstrates his repetitive work.

Refashioned in the Victorian period, St Chad's in Rochdale recreates the impression of what medieval church furniture was thought to be, but the mediating 'genius' of Shaw meant that it took on a particular appearance. It is the most impressive of Shaw's surviving interior schemes and well worth a visit (once open following the relaxation of COVID-19 limitations)!

### Image Captions

Fig.1: Exterior view of St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.2: General overview of the interior of St Chad's Church, Rochdale; view of the choir from the nave. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.3: Henry VII bed. The Langley Collection. Courtesy of Ian Coulson.

Fig.4: Detail of the tower of St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.5: Side elevation of St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.6: Choir of Gloucester Cathedral. Diliff (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Fig.7: Detail of the shrine of Edward II in Gloucester Cathedral. Chris Gunns (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Fig.8: Cardinal Beaufort's chantry chapel, Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.9: Detail of the choir stalls at St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.10: Detail of the choir stalls at St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.11: The choir stalls at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.12: Pew end, c.1470. W.94-1911. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig.13: Detail of the president's stall at St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.14: Detail of a second Glastonbury chair at St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.15: Chair of oak from Glastonbury Abbey. Folio 49 3582 (Oversize). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Fig.16: Bedroom over Dining Room at St Chad's, Upper Mill, Saddleworth. 1920.

Fig.17: Lectern at St Chad's Church, Rochdale. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.18: Lectern at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.