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on May 28 2020

Furnishing the Minshull Street City Police and Session Courts

In [Haunt](#)

The eighteenth instalment as part of an ongoing series for Haunt Manchester by Dr [Peter N. Lindfield](#) FSA, exploring Greater Manchester's Gothic architecture and hidden heritage. Peter's previous Haunt Manchester articles include features on [Ordsall Hall](#), [Albert's Schloss and Albert Hall](#), the Mancunian Gothic Sunday School of [St Matthew's](#), [Arlington House](#) in Salford, [Manchester's Modern Gothic in St Peter's Square](#), what was [St John's Church](#), [Manchester Cathedral](#), [The Great Hall at The University of Manchester](#), [St Chad's](#) in Rochdale and more. From the city's striking Gothic features to the more unusual aspects of buildings usually taken for granted and history hidden in plain sight, a variety of locations will be explored and visited over the course of 2020.

In this article he reflects on Manchester's Minshull Street City Police and Session Courts and their furniture, visited exclusively and with kind permission of the Court Administrator and Security Staff, before the Covid-19 lockdown. The Courts are usually open to public access, but photography is normally prohibited; special dispensation was sought and granted to take photographs of the interior of Worthington's buildings and publish this essay. The author wishes to thank the Court Administration for facilitating this research and publication.

Pictured below: Fig.1 - Exterior of the Minshull Street Crown Court as it is in 2020. © Peter N. Lindfield



Dr Peter N. Lindfield FSA is a Senior Research Associate in the Departments of English and History at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has published widely on Georgian Gothic architecture and design broadly conceived, as well as heraldry and the relevance of heraldic arts to post-medieval English intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic culture. Last year, as part of Gothic Manchester Festival 2019, he co-organised an event at Chetham's Library Baronial Hall with Professor Dale Townshend titled 'Faking Gothic Furniture' (it also features, along with The John Rylands Library, in a previous article by Peter, [here](#)). This involved discussing the mysterious George Shaw (1810-76), a local Upper Mill lad who developed an early interest in medieval architecture and heraldry, going on to create forgeries of Tudor and Elizabethan furniture for a number of high-profile individuals and places at the time, including Chetham's!

Currently Peter is completing his Leverhulme-funded research project exploring forged antiquarian materials in Georgian Britain, and also working on the recently re-discovered Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed, which itself was the inspiration behind many of Shaw's so-called 'Gothic forgeries'.

Furnishing the Minshull Street City Police and Session Courts

In my earlier Haunt Manchester post from 5 February 2020 on Minshull Street Crown Court, see [here](#), I considered the exterior architecture of the imposing Grade II* listed building (Fig.1). I concluded that the architect, Thomas Worthington (1826-1909) of Manchester, designed the building using architectural forms taken from defensive buildings, including bartizans, machicolations, and arrow-slit windows. The general character of the court building, built between 1867 and 1873, also resonates with Victorian civic architecture and the polychrome style promoted by John Ruskin.

This is a follow-up post exploring the interior fitting-out and furnishing of Worthington's building. Special dispensation to examine and explore the court, as well as take photographs, was granted, and it is very much appreciated.

The Victorian courtrooms survive remarkably intact since Worthington fitted them out in the mid-Victorian period. Having never seen the interior of the courts, I was shocked to see them; I was expecting to find them in a Gothic style somewhat related to the building's external, defensive-like style, perhaps even with polychrome. Instead, the Victorian courts' fixtures and furnishings repurpose traditional forms found in medieval church furnishing. If the exterior shows the rule of law, the interior, instead, is based upon ecclesiastical, redemptive forms.

Below - Fig.2: Interior of the Minshull Street Crown Court as it is in 2020. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court.



Planed and varnished pine dominates the court's surviving Victorian corridors, waiting rooms, and courts. A notable feature of this woodwork is the chamfered edges to the paneling. Seen, for example, in **Fig.2** of an internal wooden staircase (or bridge), the vertical boards' edges have been carved at 45° to give what is known as a chamfered edge. This was a typical form of decoration applied to Gothic furniture in the nineteenth century, with A.W.N. Pugin, co-designer of the Palace of Westminster, or Houses of Parliament, using this in his Gothic furniture from especially from the 1840s. It is, for example, applied to the legs on an

1852–53 X-frame table now at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (W.26-1972) (**Fig.3**).

Below - Fig.3: A.W.N. Pugin, Table, c.1852–53. W.26-1972. © Victoria and Albert Museum.



The seating found outside of the courtrooms in the waiting areas, or vestibules, are also made from this same panelled pine construction. The 'bench' found outside of court number five (**Fig.4**) is also based upon the traditional ecclesiastical seating of choir stalls—admittedly without the traditional canopies seen in Manchester Cathedral's examples (**Fig.5**). Note, in particular, the similarity between these two examples in the circular 'arc' of the uprights, or standards. This derives from the arc created by medieval misericords, or the seats of choir-stalls, that pivot to a vertical position to provide a perch for standing parts of the liturgy, and lowered to become a traditional, horizontal seat. The misericords in **Fig.5** are in the 'up' position. In general form, this bench in Fig.4 is a far less ornate version of a fourteenth-century German choir-stall in the Oppenheim Collection, Cologne (**Fig.6**). This is not to suggest Worthington was familiar with the Oppenheim choir-stall, but, instead, that he followed the conventions of medieval choir-stalls in the design of his Minshull Street benches.

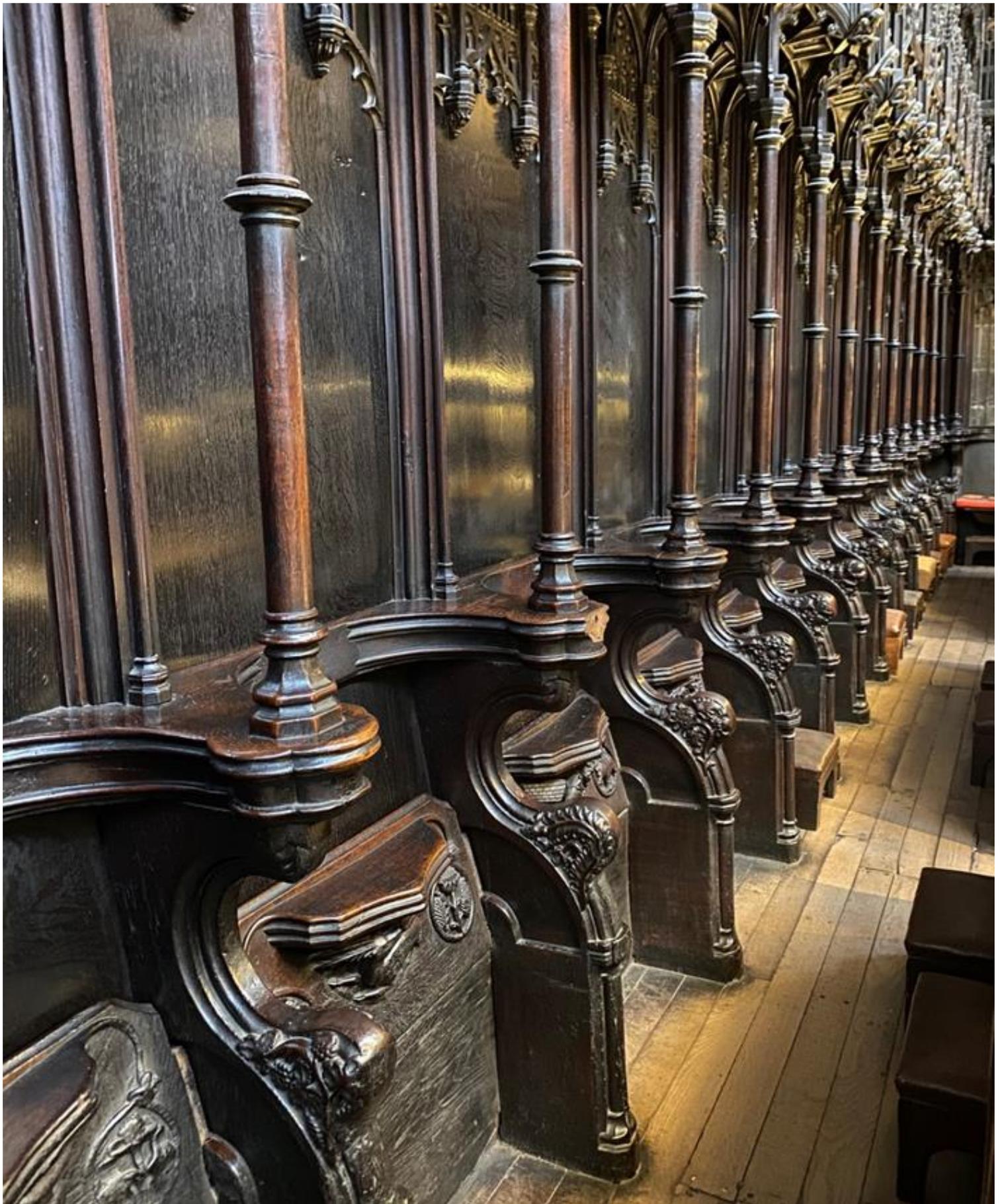
Below - Fig.4: Bench outside of Court 5. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court.





Below - Fig.5: Choir-stalls at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.





Below - Fig.6: Photograph of a fourteenth-century German choir-stall in the Oppenheim Collection, Cologne. 1253-1909. © Victoria and Albert Museum.





Turning to enter the court rooms proper, Worthington's ecclesiastical models continue to inspire the design of the fixtures and furniture (**Fig.7**). Perhaps the most notable feature is the Judge's bench. As typical in court rooms, this bench is raised up on a dais to symbolise the power and authority of the judiciary, and, recreating an aesthetic device found in ecclesiastical architecture, this seating is covered by a canopy. This canopy is a symbol of honour, and, hence, status, and it can be seen in many contexts. These include choir stalls (**Fig.8**), where the canopy symbolises the immortal mansions of heaven, and perhaps the most lavish is the Baldacchino di San Pietro over the high altar and tomb of St Peter at the crossing of St Peter's in Rome (**Fig.9**).

Below - Fig.7: Interior of one of the Victorian courtrooms at Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court.





Below - Fig.8: Detail of the intricate choir-stall canopies at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.



Below - Fig.9: Baldacchino di San Pietro in the basilica of St Peter, Rome. Dennis Jarvis (CC BY-SA 2.0).





The stalls flanking the judge's central position on the bench (Fig.10) also mirror choir-stalls' standards (the pieces of vertical woodwork between seats), and from each standard rises a column in much the same way we find in Manchester Cathedral's choir-stalls.

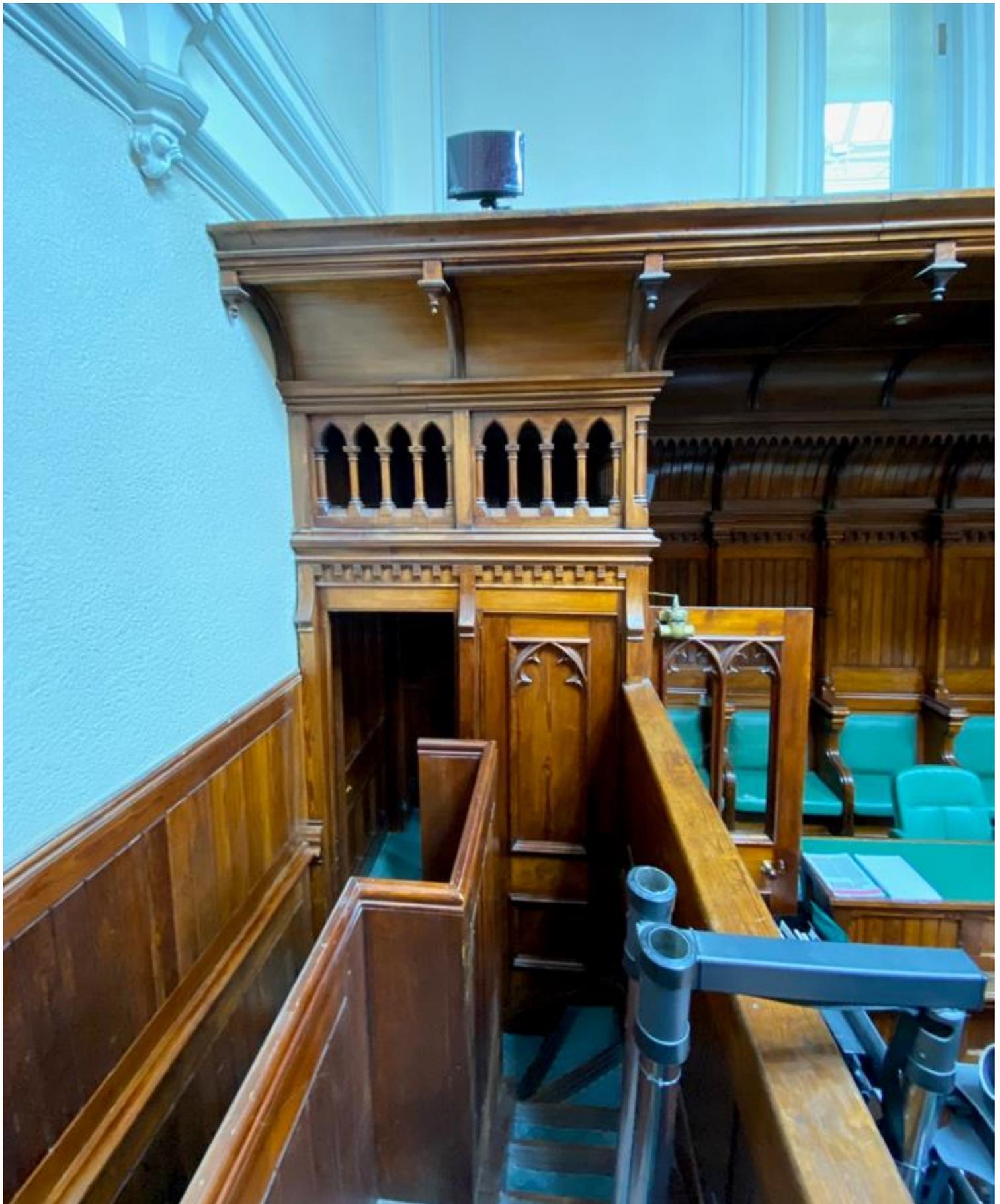
Below - Fig.10: Detail of the stalls in the Judge's Bench in one of the Victorian court rooms at Minshull Street Crown Court. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court.



To either side of the bench are enclosed vestibules (**Fig.11**); these are made in imitation with church architecture, notably with the use of buttressing as seen on the exterior and interior of Manchester Cathedral, including its early sixteenth-century pulpitum (or screen) separating the Nave and Choir (**Fig.12**). These passages also feature blind and pierced Gothic tracery applied to the doors and panelling, once again mirroring ecclesiastical architecture.

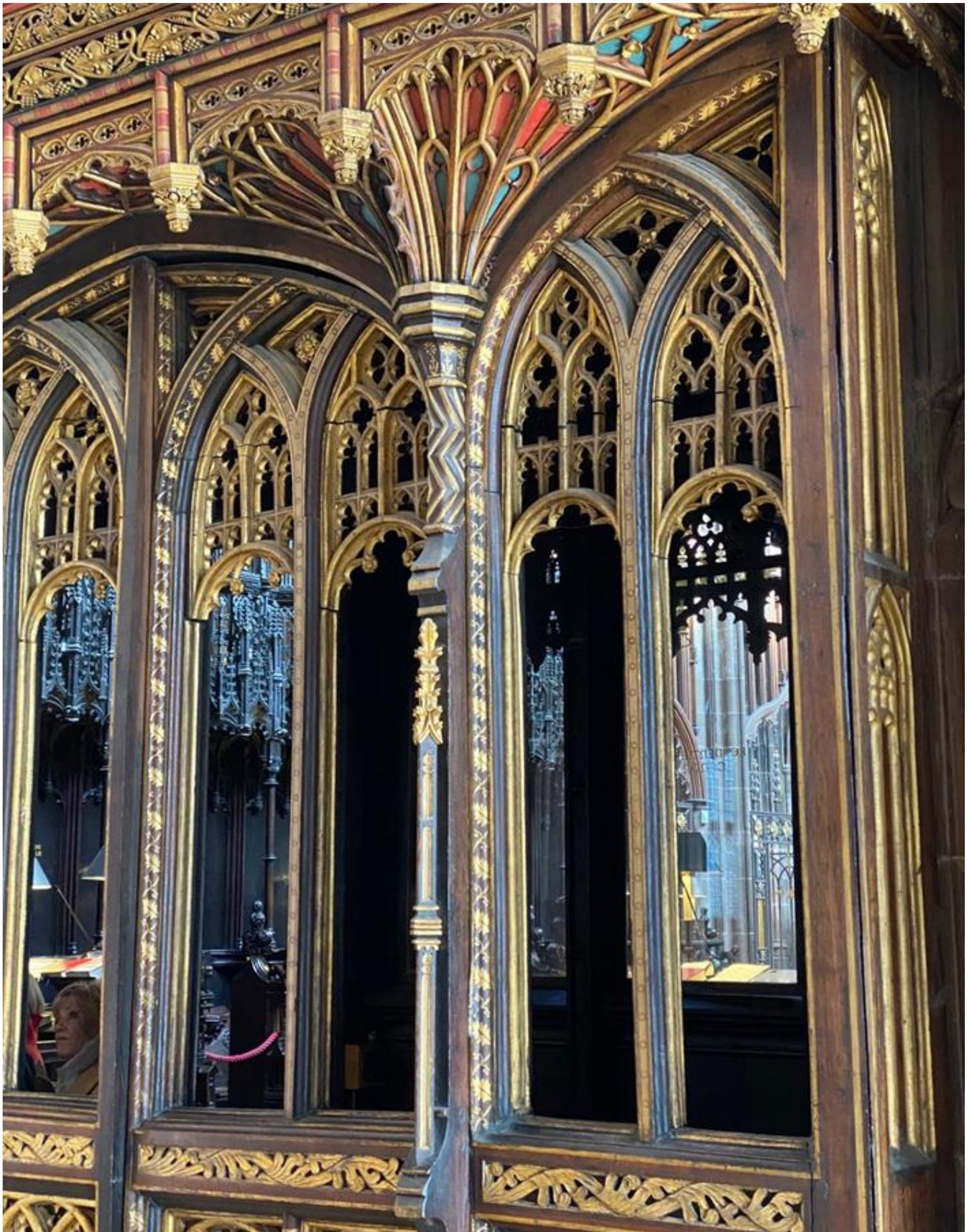
Below - Fig.11: Detail of one of the enclosed passages to the side of the Judge's Bench in one of the Victorian court rooms at Minshull Street Crown Court. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court.





Below - Fig.12: Detail of the early sixteenth-century pulpitum at Manchester Cathedral. © Peter N. Lindfield.





Below - Fig.13: A fireplace found in one of the jury deliberation rooms. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court



This Gothic theme continues throughout the rest of the surviving court interiors. For example, fireplaces found in jury deliberation rooms match the Victorian quality of the building's external style (**Fig.13**). Notably, the short stubby columns match those flanking the courthouse's former main entrance on Minshull Street (this is not the 'back' of the building given that the twentieth-century renovations to the building relocated the main entrance to Aytoun Street) (**Fig.14**). The tall pitched roofs found on the building's exterior are also recreated for the top of the chimney.

Below - Fig.14: Detail of the former main entrance of the court building on Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.





There is also an interesting, graduated application of ornament on first-floor doors on the corridor closest to Minshull Street. The doors closest to entrance feature cusped tracery, and further away the windows are of more plain design (Figs 14–16). This hierarchy matches the relative status of these respective parts of the building, and similar hierarchic gradation of windows can

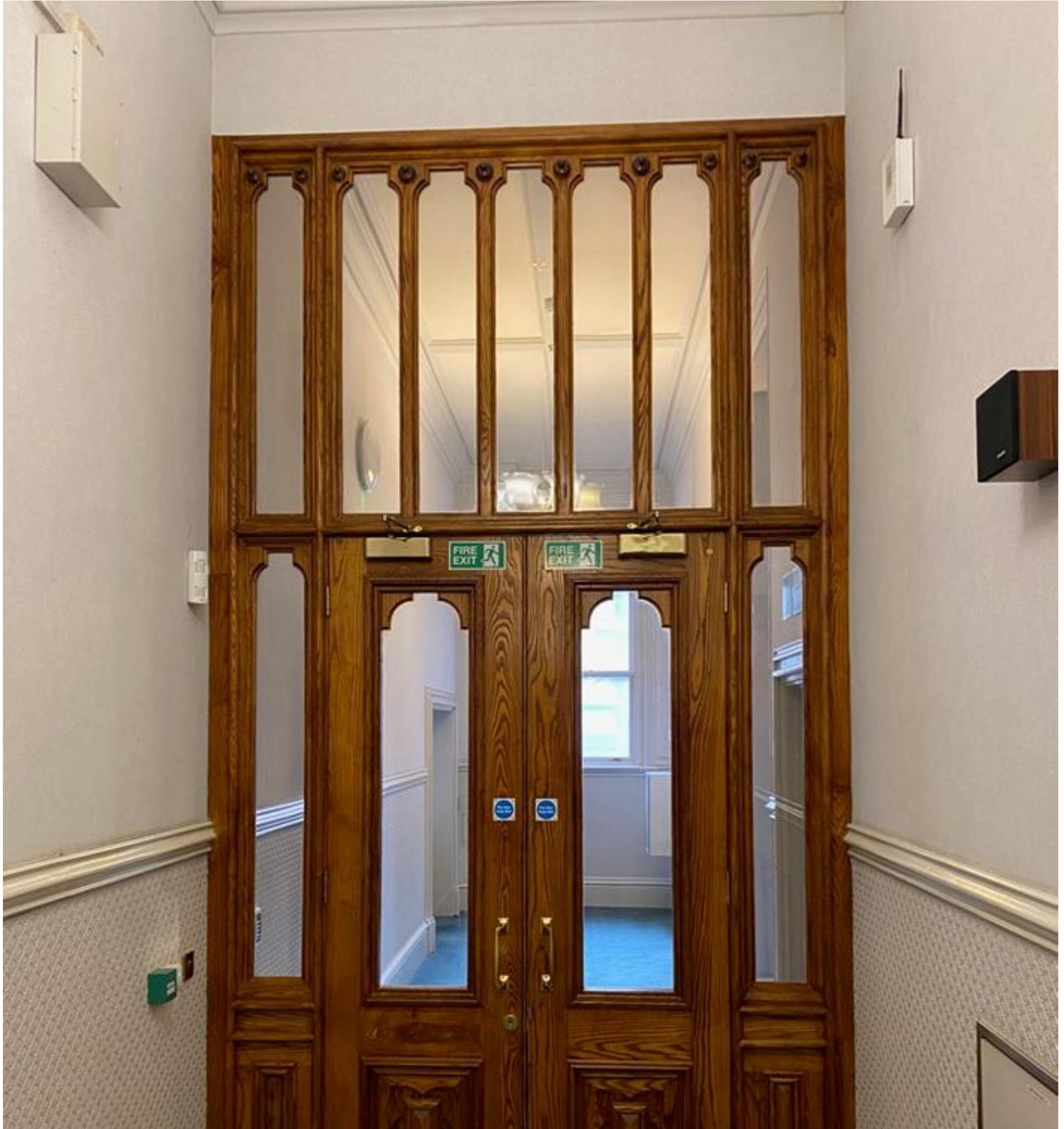
also be seen on the building's exterior where complexity increases with each higher floor.

Below - Figs15-16: Details of the doors on the Minshull Street corridor. © Peter N. Lindfield; reproduced with permission of Minshull Street Crown Court.





In sum, the interior of Minshull Street courthouse matches certain aspects of Worthington's architectural style as found on the building's exterior. Of particular note is the repetition of architectural forms and the hierarchical grading of ornament relative to each part of the building's importance. The most intriguing aspect of Worthington's interiors is the almost consistent reliance upon ecclesiastical architecture and furniture as models for his work.





By Dr Peter N. Lindfield

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