



Angel in the roof at St Peter Mancroft © Derek Leak

NNAS Lecture. Sat. 9th Sept. 2017 at the Town Close Auditorium, Castle Museum, Norwich *Norfolk's Medieval Angel Roofs* by Sarah Cassell.

Sarah explained that she was doing a PhD study at the UEA and her talk used images from her work and that of Michael Rimmer, Gerald Adams and George Plunkett. The earliest documented Roof Angels are those built into the majestic hammer-beam roof of Westminster Hall (1395-1398) to promote Richard II's kingship, since each of the twenty-six angels is carrying a shield with his coat of arms. During the late C14th to C16th, timber roofs with Angel figures appeared in over 170 English churches. A map of angel roof locations showed that 55% of these are in Norfolk and Suffolk.

Puritan iconoclasm, particularly the activities of William Dowsing, empowered by the 1643 Act of Parliament to destroy all Church altars, pictures and images, caused the loss of some carved angels but roof decoration often escaped because of the difficulty of access and now constitutes the largest surviving body of major English Medieval wood sculpture. Sarah is attempting a detailed study from the ground and from scaffolding looking at construction, painting and damage to establish the relationship between structure and image in these roofs.

By focusing on churches such as King's Lynn St. Nicholas, Mildenhall St. Mary, Emneth St Edmund, Gissing St. Mary, Knapton SS Peter & Paul, and St Peter Mancroft, Sarah was able to illustrate and explain the great variety of styles created by local craftsmen supported by communal funding from merchants and Guilds or elite patronage from important families such as the Pastons as at St. Peter Hungate. Using numerous photos and architectural line drawings of several churches, Sarah drew attention to the variety roof types and their contrasting effects. Tie-beam, arch-braced and single hammer-beam structures predominate in Norfolk, where there are only two surviving true double hammer-beam roofs, in contrast to Suffolk, where the majority are found.

The lecture also explored the wide variety of angel types, their facial features, hair, clothes, wings, what they are doing and the messages they convey to the congregation. Angels are carved in different sizes, either as large beam carvings or as small demi-angel reliefs attached to the beam ends. Both types coexisted throughout the period. Some are painted, but others lack evidence of pigment. Unlike the Westminster Hall carvings, they are often depicted in ecclesiastical dress or feathered garments, with wings, often carrying emblems of the Mass or Christ's Passion and musical instruments. They are mostly guardian angels able to look down on the congregation, comforting the men and women below who can look upwards at Eucharistic emblems of the Passion and redemption, a focus for the lay audience participating in the mass. In schemes spanning the nave and chancel, as at King's Lynn and Mancroft, these angels demonstrate the changing relationship between clergy and laity.

Sarah has adopted a program of numbering and colour coding to seek out a pattern, to see whether there it is a piecemeal or cohesive design. Several overhead diagrams of different church roofs demonstrated thematic symmetry especially the exceptional hammer-beam roof of St. Peter Hungate with its complex and deliberate positioning of pairs of angels at particular junctions.



Sarah Cassell

The deliberately orthodox liturgical costumes and religious emblems of many East Anglian roof angels were deliberate choices, initiated in an influential design at King's Lynn in the wake of the execution of the first Lollard martyr (who had been a local priest) and developed with particular sophistication at St Peter Hungate following Bishop Alnwick's heresy trials. This imagery prevailed in Norfolk roofs in dialogue with the Rood, consciously signalling lay devotion and support for the church.

Destruction of roof imagery is hard to date. Some schemes have been distorted by iconoclasm, the elements and restoration work, but generally roof angels appear to have been spared the fate of some more accessible free-standing carvings below. The variety of roof structures and corpus of surviving late-medieval carving represented by Norfolk roofs are rivalled only by those in Suffolk. Across both counties, they are unsurpassed.

Sophie Cabot thanked Sarah for an interesting and stimulating talk and invited questions from the audience.

Edmund Perry, Hon. Secretary.