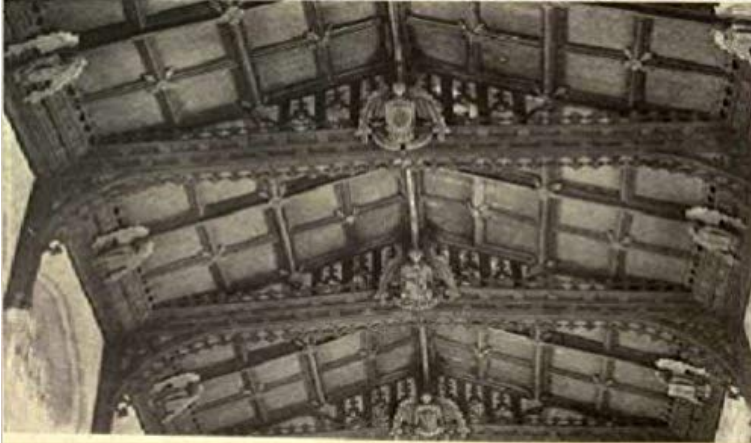


English Church Woodwork; a study in craftsmanship during the mediaeval period, A.D. 1250-1550



English Church Woodwork

by Frank E. Howard

I INTRODUCTION THE mediaeval woodwork of England is one of the most magnificent legacies of our forefathers. It is extraordinarily difficult to realise that our race, now enthralled in the wonders of mechanical science, and one of the least artistic in the world, was once equally devoted to the delights of beautiful craftsmanship. Yet this is the case. The Middle Ages, and above all the fifteenth century, produced in vast quantities the most wonderful woodwork the world has ever seen ; and that of England, though its superiority or inferiority to that of the Continent is a matter for dispute, is of the greatest importance. It has been particularly fortunate in escaping destruction, though it is pitiful to reflect that not more than a tenth part of the lovely church fittings of pre-Reformation days remains for our admiration, and that much of this work has suffered so grievously from time, neglect, and mutilation as to be almost unrecognisable by its designers. Of the hundreds of fine reredoses which are known from documents to have once existed, only a few scanty and unimportant fragments remain ; while rood-lofts, once the most magnificent adornment of every parish church, are now so rare that when, by exception, one has survived, latter-day antiquaries have been at the pains of inventing absurd legends to the effect that these purely parochial ornaments of the church have been brought from an abbey at the Dissolution. In the face of this widespread destruction it is marvellous that so much is left for the delight of those who care to seek for it, not only in those well-known architectural districts, the west country and East Anglia, but in practically every county. There are few parts of the country which do not possess interesting and beautiful local types of medieval woodwork. The lovely group of timber porches in the south-eastern counties (62-67), the grand roofs of Cheshire (113,

114), the stately screens of Yorkshire (223, 257), are instances, and the enthusiastic student will find similar remains of beautiful and strongly constructed woodwork almost everywhere. Nevertheless, until recent years it has passed almost unnoticed. The astounding richness of the Devonshire churches in elaborately carved woodwork appears to be known to comparatively few. Vast numbers of visitors see the magnificent screen at Dartmouth, but they are left with the impression that it is an isolated phenomenon, or a relic of some monastery, whereas, beautiful as it is, practically every west country church once had a screen rivalling, or even surpassing it in beauty, and several hundred still retain one. Again, thousands of visitors to the East Coast are entirely unaware that they are in a district where scores of fine churches are still glorious with mediaeval carving and painting, and that this work is one of the highest achievements in art that the English race has attained. In Wales the churches are humble, and certainly not calculated to catch the eye of the tourist. They are indeed utterly insignificant amid their solemn surroundings of great hills. Very few visitors ever enter them, but, if by chance they do so, they cannot fail to be impressed with the skill and devotion of those mediaeval wood-carvers who could make even these mean structures glorious with rood-lofts such as those of Llananno (42), or Llanrwst (270). It cannot be too strongly emphasised that fine woodwork, though now found in comparatively few churches, was once possessed by all. Every church had its pews, its rood-loft, its font-cover; and there is no reason to suppose that those which have survived have escaped destruction because of their exceptional beauty. Indeed the reverse is far more likely. What is the secret of the charm of mediaeval woodwork? In the first place, the ancient craftsmen were gifted with an eye for proportion and a sense of scale which can only be properly appreciated by comparing a work of the Middle Ages with some effort of a modern

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