



A PAIR OF HERONS—CHESTER

MISERICORDS IN LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE CHURCHES

By A. Wolfgang

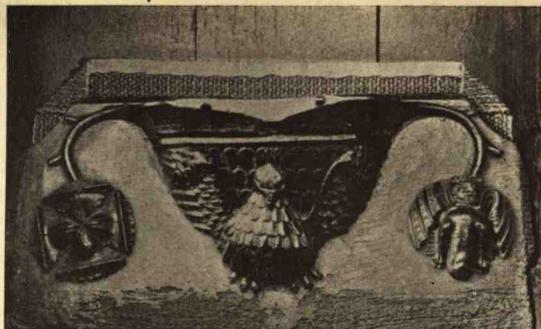
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IN presenting some notes on the misericords existing in the churches of Lancashire and Cheshire, it may be well to say a few words to explain the use of these miniature rests, contrived by a ledge on the upturned seats of the stalls for the clergy in the greater churches and in some minor ones. Misericords were provided to enable the monks, canons, and other clergy to stand, or to keep up the appearance of standing, during the long services of the mediæval monasteries and churches. The ancient offices to be said daily were seven: Matins with Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline, and every day in monastic and cathedral or collegiate churches there was High Mass, at which the whole community was present. These services occupied several hours each day, and a standing posture was originally the rule. Peter Damiani, in the eleventh century, condemned the canons of Besançon for sitting in church. But where the monks or canons were weak or old, some relaxation of the severity of the rule was inevitable, and was gradually extended to all. In the Customary of Lincoln Cathedral mention is made of *reclinatoria*; these were leaning staffs or crutches which, when placed under the armpits, provided some support.

Even these had been condemned by such disciplinarians as St. Benedict. Amalarius, too, required the reclinatoria to be laid aside during the reading of the Gospel. A further indulgence, or *miseri-cordia* (act of mercy), was to construct the stall seats with pivots, and to fix on the under side a small projection which gave some support to the body when the seats were turned up, and thus enabled the clergy to comply with the ancient discipline where it enjoined a standing position.¹ Of late years the name "miserere" has been used; it has no ancient authority, and should be discarded. It appears to have been used first in 1809, in Bishop Milner's *History of Winchester*.

The number of misericords in Lancashire and Cheshire is unfortunately very small, these, in common with the screens, pews, and other woodwork, having suffered very much from the hand of the church restorers. While in the eastern counties one generally finds the ancient stalls with misericords attached in the old parish churches, it is the exception to find them in those of Lancashire and Cheshire. The misericords which survive in Lancashire are as follows:—Ten in Blackburn Parish Church, now placed in the west porch under the tower. Twenty-six in Cartmel Priory, still *in situ*; some of these date from 1500 and some from 1620. St. Helen's, Garstang, has eight of the original twelve. In Halsall Church, near Southport, there are seven ancient and five modern misericords in their original position. Lancaster has five or six which are used as sedilia, and probably date from the end of the fourteenth century; they are commonly said to have been brought from Cockersand

¹ The origin and use of misericords are very fully described in the works of Miss E. Philson and Mr. Francis Bond; also by the Rev. E. F. Letts in his paper on the misericords of Manchester Cathedral in the *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*.



PEACOCK—CARTMEL



ST. GEORGE AND DRAGON—CHESTER



DRAGON—CARTMEL

or Furness Abbey. Manchester Cathedral has thirty-six, and these date from 1508. There are eight in Middleton Parish Church, and some plain ones at Prescot. Whalley Church possesses eighteen, which may be dated 1435. There are some modern ones in Wigan Parish Church.

In Cheshire, Great Budworth has some plain misericords. Lower Bebington has three ancient stalls with misericords probably dating from the fifteenth century; these are now used as sedilia. In Chester Cathedral there are some fifty, which date from 1390. Malpas Church has three, evidently in their original position, and Nantwich Church possesses twenty-five, which date, according to Mr. Francis Bond, from 1390.

Let us examine some of the subjects of the carvings. St. George and the Dragon was a great favourite with the carvers, and is to be seen at Chester, Manchester, Nantwich, and Whalley. The Phoenix occurs at Manchester. The Peacock, finely carved, is in Cartmel Priory. The Mermaid: Of all subjects this is the most popular, perhaps because her curling tail fitted so gracefully the space on the misericord. Normally she is represented with a comb in one hand and a looking-glass in the other, as at Cartmel; also at Nantwich and Malpas. The Dolphin is seen at Lower Bebington. The Wodehouse or Satyr is seen at Chester, and is common on misericords; he was the actor in a satiric drama at Athens, who assumed the goat-skin dress of the Satyr or Wild Man of the Woods. In mediæval days his classic origin seems to have been forgotten, and he was called a Wodehouse or Woodhouse.

To trace the origin of the composite animals seen on the carvings one must needs go back to primitive myths. The union of human bodies with the heads of beasts and birds, or *vice versa*, is especially

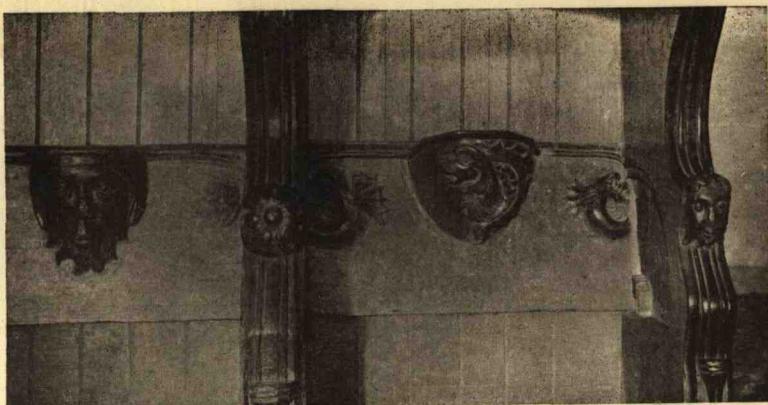
characteristic of Oriental religion. The hybrid creatures of fancy, whether the sphynxes which guarded the portals of the Temple of Thebes, or the colossal winged lions of Nineveh and Persepolis, originated in the priestly proclivity to symbolise and to express mystical esoteric ideas in material form. These composite animals appear on the carvings in all the churches, the winged and crowned lion being a very popular one. At Lancaster are two very extraordinary beings with human hands, animals' feet, and birds' heads and wings. Winged Lizards are at Halsall.

The Lion is represented at Chester and Manchester. The Tiger: The stratagem of its hunters is thus told by Pliny:

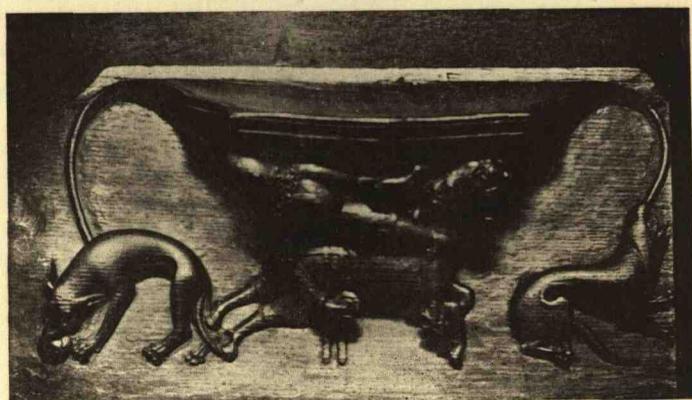
India produces the tiger, an animal of tremendous swiftness. The hunter who seizes the whelps has to be provided with a very fleet horse. When she finds her lair empty, the tigress darts forth and tracks them by smell. When she comes up the hunter throws one of the whelps to her, with which she returns to her lair. Then she rushes back, and he throws her another. This goes on till he reaches the ship.

All this is shown at Chester. The Elephant and Castle: Examples are given at Cartmel and Manchester. The Antelope's nature, so ran the story, is that it has two horns with which it saws through trees and fells them; the moral is that the Devil cannot stand up against the Old and New Testaments. Manchester Cathedral has a finely carved antelope.

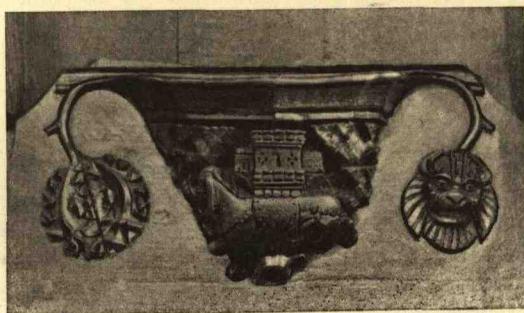
The Fox, says the Latin Bestiary, is a very crafty and cunning animal. When he is hungry and cannot find anything to eat, he looks for a place with red soil and rolls in it till he seems to be all bloody, and holds in his breath till he is quite swollen. Then, seeing him lying on his back thus bloody and swollen, the birds think he is dead, and settle on him to eat him. But the fox snaps them up.



DOLPHIN—LOWER BEBINGTON



TIGER—CHESTER



ELEPHANT AND CASTLE—CARTMEL



MERMAID—CARTMEL



MERMAID—NANTWICH



MERMAID—MALPAS

This is represented at Chester, Whalley, and Nantwich. In the Chester example the birds are gaping at the fox, who lies on his back feigning death. In the right supporter he has come to life, and is gobbling up one of the birds. At Manchester Cathedral, Dame Malkin is seen running out of her cottage after the fox, who is carrying off a goose, illustrating Chaucer's Nuns' Priest's Tale. At Halsall is a very crude carving of the fox running off with a goose.

The touching symbol of "the Pelican in her piety" is frequent in religious art. It occurs on a misericord at Lower Bebington, on the benches at Bury, and at Chester on the supporters of a misericord. The Unicorn is seen at Chester, where is depicted its capture by the device of placing a pure virgin near its abode; when the unicorn sees her, it runs to her and lies down, doing her no harm, and then come the hunters and kill it. Also at Cartmel, where its capture is depicted in another way; the plan was to retreat behind a tree, whereupon the unicorn charged the tree, and his horn piercing it, he was held fast. This method is mentioned by Shakespeare, who says that Cæsar "loves to hear that unicorns may be betrayed with trees."

Dragons are seen at Cartmel and Chester. The Gryphon occurs at Cartmel. But time fails to tell of the many examples of ecclesiastical zoology which are to be seen in the carvings.

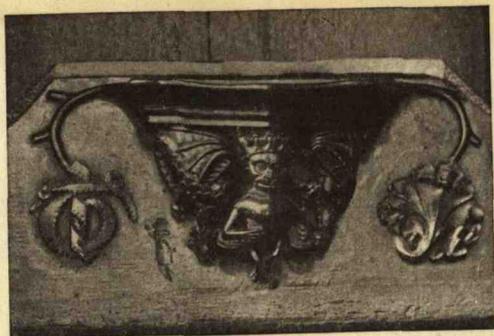
A source of some of our subjects is to be found in the mediæval romances. One entitled *The Shifts of Reynardine, the Son of Reynard* (published in London, 1684), is illustrated at Manchester. Zani, the Ape, recommends Reynardine to turn doctor, and promises to supply him with the necessary articles. "Leave that to me," says the Ape; "not long ago I and my companions, going out for a frolic, found a pedlar asleep with his pack lying

by him. The pack we took away, and as well as we could equally divided his goods among us. By this means I am stored with razors, scissors, lancets, &c." A thirteenth-century romance tells how Sir Yvain on horseback pursued another knight across the drawbridge and under the gateway of his castle; as Sir Yvain followed, the portcullis was let down and fell on the hind-quarters of his horse. Sir Yvain was taken prisoner, but escaped by the aid of a damsel in the castle. This is shown at Chester.

The Eagle and Child, the Lathom legend, might be expected in Lancashire. It is depicted at Manchester on a misericord. In the centre is a tall tree containing the eagle's nest; in the nest is a child gripped by an eagle, while woodmen with axes and wallets, who had seen the child carried off, are hurrying to the castle to tell the news. This also occurs at Whalley.

Another mediæval romance, depicted at Chester and Cartmel, is known as "Alexander's Flight." It is found in a letter written by Alexander to his mother Olympias, describing how, when he had reached the end of the world, he was desirous to prove whether the sky there sloped down to it. So, says Alexander, "I ordered two of the huge white birds of the place to be caught and kept without food for three days. On the third day I ordered a piece of wood to be made like a yoke, and a basket to be fastened in the midst thereof, with two spears having horse's liver on the top." The birds were made fast to the yoke, and Alexander climbed into the basket. Immediately the birds flew up to devour the liver on the spears, and Alexander was carried up with them in the air so far that he thought he had reached the sky. Then he turned the spears downwards, and the birds carried him to earth again.

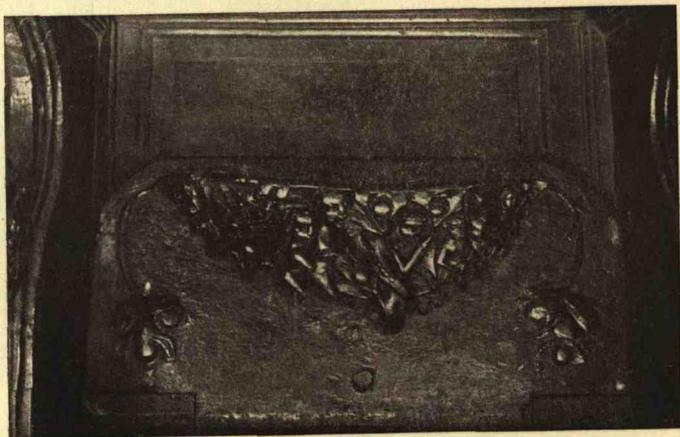
Another large and interesting class of subjects is



ALEXANDER'S FLIGHT—CARTMEL



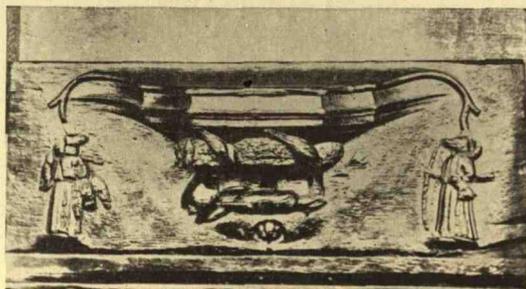
WRESTLERS—HALSALL



ADAM AND EVE—BLACKBURN



FOX SHAMMING DEATH—CHESTER



FOX SHAMMING DEATH—NANTWICH



CAPTURE OF UNICORN—CARTMEL

found when the carver had no ulterior intent beyond portraying faithfully the daily life of country folk. At Manchester are two men playing backgammon or trictrac. Husband and wife are on a stall at Chester. Both at Halsall and Nantwich are men wrestling. Very finely carved fowls are to be seen at Cartmel, as well as hunting scenes, which indeed occur frequently. A kite is seen at Chester, also a very finely carved pair of herons. Floral designs are frequent, no doubt being popular with the carvers because they could thus give their workmanship and designing full scope. Mr. Francis Bond, in his superb book on this subject, says:—

The work of the carvers must not lightly be passed over. The art of the easel picture is a great art, but there is another, humbler it may be, but, unlike the former, indigenous, and that savours of the soil. Beginning with the lovely illuminations of psalters and missals, it passes into the carvings of stalls and bench-ends and into popular chapbooks and almanacks. Many a figure scene on the misericords is well worth study, while from the carvings of leaf and bloom modern designers might well take lessons.

At Whalley is represented the old "wise saw" of shoeing the goose, and the whole blacksmith's shop is shown. This shoeing of the goose was evidently an ancient saying. Rabelais has it. Of Gargantua he says, "He would flay the fox; he shod the goose; he tickled himself to make himself laugh." At Whalley the explanation is given below in black letter: "Whoso melles of (meddles with) what men does Let him come here and shoe the goose"; meaning that if a man, instead of attending to his own business, which he understands, tries his hand at other people's, without understanding it, he will make failure.

Another favourite subject was that of foxes dressed as friars preaching to geese and fowls. This is to be seen at Blackburn. At Chester a

fox dressed as a friar is giving a nun a present ; other nuns are watching behind the trees. It is evident that these carvings are meant as satires. Not on religion, for that would not have been permissible in a church, but on the preaching and mendicant friars who preached at the crosses, in the market-place, and by the roadside the sermons the laity liked to hear but could not always get from the parochial clergy. Monk, canon, and parish priest resented the implied reproach upon themselves, and it would seem they allowed their feelings about preaching and preaching friars to find vent in the misericords. Sometimes the very text of a preaching friar was given ; formerly one was to be seen in a window in St. Martin's, Leicester : " Testis est mihi Deus quam cupiam vos omnes visceribus meis"—God is my witness how I desire you with all my heart.¹ The last two words admit also of being rendered " inside my stomach," and this was thought so excellent a pun that it was repeated very often. At Nantwich one of the friars is represented with a fox's head, marching along with a goose in one hand and in the other a hare slung over a stick.

Biblical subjects are not very common in Lancashire and Cheshire misericords. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with the serpent and the apples and the expulsion, are shown at Blackburn. At Cartmel is a mask which has three faces on it ; it is known locally as the " Trinity." At Nantwich is a Demon holding a child's face with his fingers in the child's mouth.

At Chester the legend of St. Werburgh is depicted, as might be expected in her abbey and near her shrine. One misericord shows a famous story about her miraculous gifts. When she was prioress of Weedon, Northamptonshire, she was asked to free the crops from a devastating flock of wild

¹ Adapted from Philippians i. 8.

geese. She bade them come to her and shut them in a stable for the night. When she came in the morning one was missing, which the other geese told her one of her servants had killed and cooked. She restored the cooked goose to life, and it went off with its companions, and the crops were for ever inviolate as far as wild geese were concerned.

Masks are very common on the stalls, and may have been portraits of the reigning sovereign or the leading ecclesiastic, or some local patron.

The quality of the carving varies a good deal, and it seems as though the larger the church the finer the quality of the carving, for the quality is sometimes rather crude in the smaller churches. In Chester Cathedral the misericords have been magnificently polished and restored generally. Mr. Francis Bond, in his exhaustive work on this subject, says the excellence of the carving seems to be higher in the northern counties than in the southern, and especially mentions Manchester and Chester, the pair of herons in the latter cathedral being in his opinion the finest specimen of a carved misericord in England.

I am indebted to Mr. H. E. Illingworth for the excellent photographs of the Cartmel misericords. It is to be regretted that restrictions at Manchester prevent photographs being taken of the misericords.