



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

A Few Notes On Bench-Ends. Written And Illustrated By J. Henwood
Blamey.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-69992](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-69992)

Bench-ends



"LE THÉÂTRE DU MARAIS IN 1636"

FROM THE ORIGINAL DRAWING
BY T. THOMAS

piece than the *Veille du Sacre* side by side with it; yet its cost must have been much less than half if it is correct, as I am given to understand, that the gold embroidery on Josephine's train alone cost more than £600. The figure of Napoleon standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece watching the fitting on of the Empress's robe is not altogether successful to my mind. "Le Petit Caporal" cuts a much better figure in M. Thomas' preliminary sketch. Finally, let me mention the two domestic scenes entitled *Le Fiancé* and *Un Baptême*, the former an interior of 1820, the latter a scene of 1830 outside a church at the conclusion of a christening.

Whilst mentioning M. Thomas it would be well to take the opportunity of drawing attention to the work of this excellent black-and-white artist, whose drawings for the Palais du Costume are here reproduced for the first time. They include several designs which are of special interest, since it was decided for various reasons not to carry them out.

It is to this master in the art of *mise en scène* that we owe some of the finest dramatic creations of the modern French stage, that is, from the point of view of dress. The marvellous dress

worn by Mme. Sarah Bernhardt in *Théodora* was his, as also the principal costumes worn in *La Tosca*, *Les Danicheff*, *Michel Strogoff*, *Les Mille et une Nuit*, *Patrie!* and *La Haine*—all masterpieces of their kind.

The Palace of Dress may or may not—opinions differ—be calculated to have the effect of improving public taste in matters of dress. Personally I am inclined to believe that it will, that the millions who visit it will—unconsciously perhaps—be influenced for good by what is best, deterred from copying those fashions which when they were invented seemed so becoming, but upon which now we look with horror. There is a tendency at present, especially in America, to go back to the Empire for

our inspiration. Certainly no better period could have been chosen. It is to be hoped that in these days, when so much improvement is possible, that this tendency will not be found to be one of those vagaries of which the history of fashion can show so many examples.

FREDERIC LEES.

A FEW NOTES ON BENCH-ENDS. WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY J. HENWOOD BLAMEY.

THE object of these few notes and drawings is to call attention to the artistic excellence of the bench-ends in many of the country churches in West Somerset.

In spite of the ravages of fire, and destruction by fanatical zealots and the modern "restorer," few have any idea of the amount of fine old carvings hidden away in our country churches, which are deserving of far greater attention from the student than they receive. The Somerset churches have been justly famed for the beauty of their carved

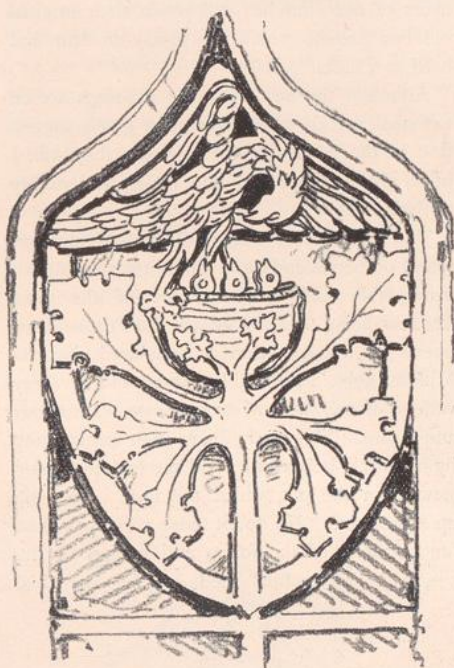
Bench-ends

stone and woodwork. In no district in England were local traditions more vigorous and lasting, and these traditions give a charm and historic interest to the carvings.

Tradition has so completely faded out of English carving that it is difficult at the present time to realise its full meaning and value. The only way is to study the art locally where it grew, and by so doing it is possible to learn much of the general features and sentiments of the work of a particular district for centuries.

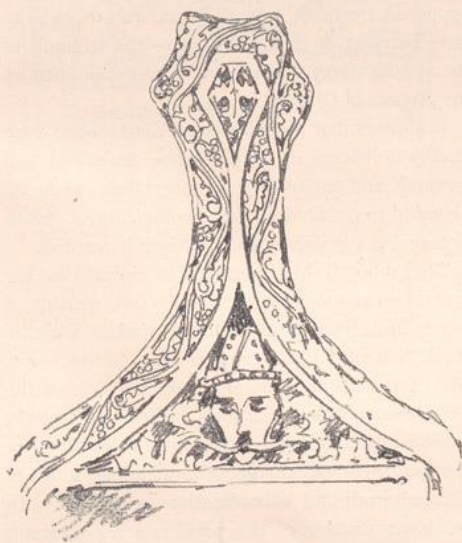
This sense of consecutive tradition was of the greatest use to the mediæval craftsmen, and one feels that their work was designed to form a part of the building it adorns. Although the woodwork as a whole is in perfect harmony, this in no way fettered the imagination of the carver. There is an absence of mechanical repetition, and no two bench-ends are exactly alike, but all are full of fresh and original design.

And in judging these old carvings we must remember that in mediæval times there were no architects, in the modern sense of the word, who designed everything down to the handle of a door. No doubt someone de-



BENCH-END AT EAST BRENT

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY



BENCH-END AT SOUTH BRENT

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

signed the main proportions of a building, but the stone and woodwork were left to the local craftsman; his sense of tradition kept him right, and his imagination and sound workmanship gave it beauty. Most of the best carvings on old bench-ends date from the 15th century and early part of the 16th century, but in many districts, where old traditions lasted longer, excellent work was done well into the 17th century.

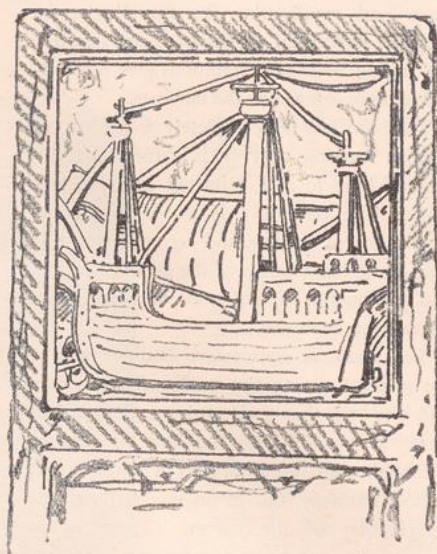
The material of which the old bench-ends were constructed was, almost without exception, good English oak of splendid quality, almost free from knots, and of extraordinary and apparently unnecessary strength, which is characteristic of all early woodwork. This is, no doubt, due to the ease with which large blocks of timber could then be obtained, and in the old days when all timber was hand-cut it must have been a great deal cheaper. It is, however, quite as much due to the excellence of their construction as their massiveness that

Bench-ends

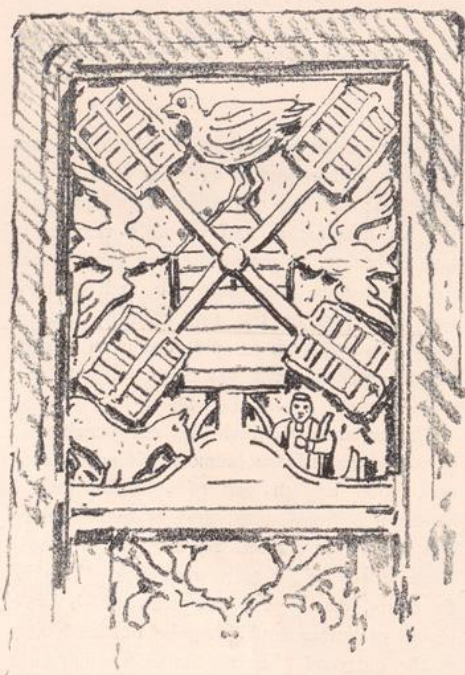
many of our churches still retain their original old bench-ends, which are to-day as firm and hard as a rock.

Although the accompanying drawings are on too small a scale to do more than give a suggestion of the beauty of the originals, they will, I hope, give a fair idea of the variety and vitality of their design.

The subjects of many of the old carvings found on bench-ends and misereres were drawn from fable and romance, one of the most frequent being that of Reynard the Fox, satirical poems of which were very popular during the Middle Ages. This fable was treated in every variety of way with a strong sense of humour and satire. The crafty fox is often being hung by his would-be victims; and the hunter is seen stewing in the pot, whilst the hare is keeping up a good fire. No doubt these carvings poked fun at many of the follies and wrongs of the age, and were often used by the parochial



BENCH-END AT BISHOP'S LYDEARD FROM A SKETCH BY J. H. BLAMEY



BENCH-END AT BISHOP'S LYDEARD FROM A SKETCH BY J. H. BLAMEY

clergy for a satire on the preaching orders and abbots of some neighbouring abbeys whose interference with their flocks continually gave rise to bad feeling in mediæval times.

There are three bench-ends at South Brent which are good examples of this class and are supposed by those learned in church history to have been set up to commemorate the triumph of the secular clergy of South Brent over their enemies the Abbots of Glastonbury.

It appears that the Abbots of Glastonbury were worthy followers of St. Dunstan, ambitious and grasping, and one of their members had made up his mind to get hold of the emoluments of South Brent; but the incumbent successfully resisted.

The abbot is here held up to ridicule as the crafty fox in monastic robe and cowl, wearing a mitre, and holding a pastoral crook. On the crook hangs a fleece, showing that the flock was not "guarded" for nothing. At the feet of the fox are three swine heads protruding from cowls, sarcastically alluding to the low intellect of the monks; there are also geese and various kinds of birds, all in dutiful subordination to the fox. In the lower division of the panel is a pig on a spit roasting over a roaring fire; on each side sits an ape, one holding a plate and spoon, and the other

Bench-ends

a bellows. In another panel the geese have rebelled, and their chosen leader, the ape, is sitting aloft, *bâton* in hand, evidently passing sentence on the fox below, who has been deprived of his robes of

humour. The animals introduced into the designs of the Middle Ages are very frequently symbolical, and are used, as in the panels at South Brent, to represent some moral character; others are very grotesque and wonderful, evidently drawn from the *Bestiaria*, or Book of Beasts, the natural history book of mediæval times. In an age when pictures were rarely if ever seen in out-of-the-way parts of the country, and those that could read were few, the carvings on the bench-end must have excited a deal of interest in a quiet neighbourhood, and advantage was often taken of the fact to carve a sermon in wood.

These old craftsmen were, in their way, very realistic; there was no compromise with them; they carved the Devil as they imagined him to exist, and they have a quaint way of mixing up



BENCH-END AT SOUTH BRENT

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

office, and sits on his hind legs in handcuffs. In the lower division of the panel the story is continued. The fox is here in the stocks, with the mitre hanging before him, and an ape with a battle-axe on guard. (This bench-end is illustrated on page 241.) In another panel vengeance is being carried out: here the fox is hanged by the geese.

The execution of these panels is wonderfully bold and full of "go" and with plenty of old-world



BENCH-END AT SOUTH BRENT

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

Bench-ends

broad humour with the most tragic and solemn events.

There is a bench-end at Crowcombe where the Devil is represented as a two-headed dragon of a most repulsive and hideous appearance, in combat with two naked figures (symbolical of lost souls), and at the bottom of the panel a monster with wide-open jaws (symbolical of hell's mouth) is waiting to receive them. No doubt this bench-end conveyed a forcible and admonitory sermon in wood to our simple and very Devil-ridden ancestors, with whom the idea of eternal punishment was a strong and definite belief, and Hell and Heaven well-defined places.

Amongst the most historically interesting sub-



BENCH-END AT CROWCOMBE

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY



BENCH-END AT SPAXTON

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

jects found on old bench-ends are those representing some local industry. They give an insight into the manners and customs of the period, as at Spaxton, where the worthy fuller is at his bench working at a piece of good cloth, with the implements of his trade arrayed around him.

The old craftsmen were often at their best when they left moralising and satire alone and were content simply to decorate. No awkwardly-shaped panel was any trouble to them; they seemed to have worked much as they do in the East, from instinct and tradition, and to have taken a loving interest in the results of their labours.

The foliage which is introduced into many of

Bench-ends

the bench-ends is nearly always well-treated and often very graceful, while in very few cases has any attempt been made at realistic representation. At the same time one cannot help feeling that the designer must have been quite familiar with plant life in all its phases, and had chosen the most characteristic and decorative forms. Heraldry and figures were introduced in a great many cases

period, and their forms may be rather rugged at times, but they bear the stamp of the "go" and imagination which, after all, is the substance of true art.

Of their workmanship, apart from their design, much praise must be given. Whatever may be said of the roughness of the carving, these old craftsmen understood the tool and the material. There is no attempt to carve in very high relief, for, as a rule, such work is unsuited to the material, while on bench-ends it would be out of place owing to the liability of its being knocked off. But the object is gained in fairly low relief by the boldness and clean cutting of the carver; every cut tells that there has been no hesitation. No amount of mechanical accuracy and polishing up would make these bench-ends one penny the better; as a matter of fact such an outrage



BENCH-END AT EAST BRENT

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

with most delightful and charmingly decorative results. What could be better in their way than the treatment of the ship and windmill at Bishop's Lydeard? They are simple enough, but how beautifully they fill their panels! (Illustrations of these two bench-ends appear on page 238.)

Many excellent bench-ends will be found at Trull, Bloomfield, Kingston, and East Brent, all of which churches, with those already mentioned, still retain most of their original benches. Their design may lack the technical perfection and grace of the Italian and French woodwork of the same



BENCH-END AT SOUTH BRENT

FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

Bench-ends

would destroy their charm, individuality, and texture—most important of qualities in wood or stone carving.

And how well these old craftsmen understood the effect of light and shade! One feels that each bench was carved for the space it occupies and has not fallen there by accident; and, after all, however well work may look on the bench, the proper time to judge it is when it takes its final place amongst its intended surroundings.

These old bench-ends are not only a delight, but a serious lesson to the craftsman of to-day; for however excellent an architect's design may be, all is liable to be spoilt if the hand that guides the tool is not in communication with a "head" as well.



BENCH-END AT CROWCOMBE FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY



BENCH-END AT KINGSTON FROM A SKETCH
BY J. H. BLAMEY

It is time that the authorities at South Kensington fully recognised that we had in England a school of really great craftsmen, in their way quite equal to any on the Continent, which latter are well represented at the Museum. The original carvings should not, and fortunately cannot, in most cases be removed from their surroundings, but casts could be easily obtained and the student would have an opportunity of studying them.

It is to be hoped that some day, not far distant, the State will see its way to make itself responsible for the safekeeping of all that is old and beautiful in our churches, for owing to the want of taste or to the carelessness of many of the clergy and churchwardens, numbers of fine things are being

A Decorative Painting by Sir J. D. Linton



"BOCCACCIO; THE OPENING SCENE IN THE DECAMERONE"

BY SIR JAMES D. LINTON

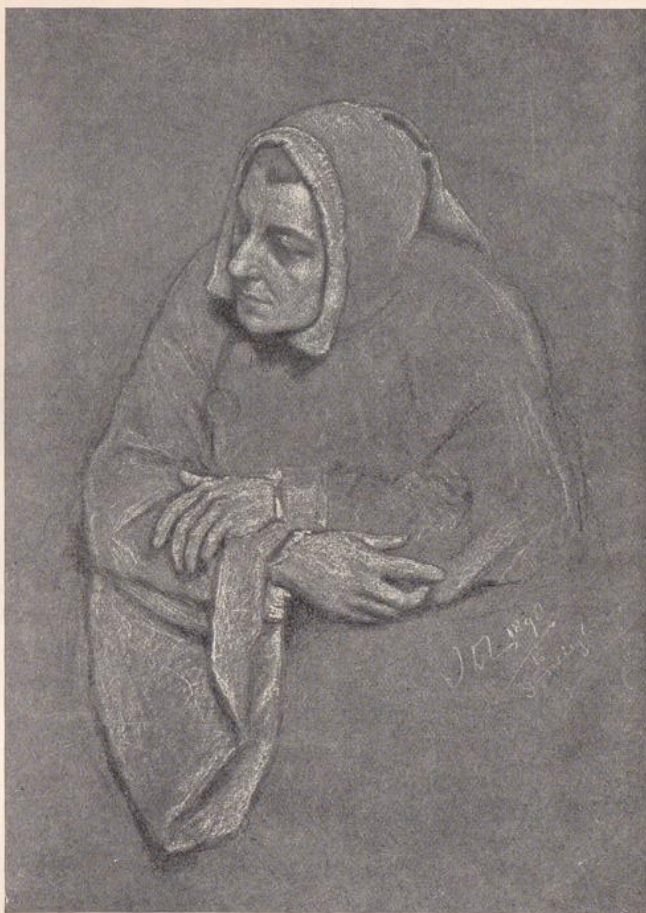
(By permission of the Fine Art Society)

gradually, but surely, swept away. I have myself seen excellent old woodwork thrown on the grass in a churchyard to rot or to be carted off by the villagers as firewood.

J. HENWOOD BLAMEY.

DECORATIVE
PAINTING BY
SIR JAMES D.
LINTON.

THERE is at the present time a very evident tendency in certain sections of the art world to take an unnecessarily narrow view of the possibilities and functions of decorative art. This tendency has had its origin, partly in a rather widespread misconception of the real purposes of decoration, and partly in a fashion that is based upon a wholly irrational notion that the shape and character of ornamental design have been fixed for all time by the products of certain styles and periods. The crowd that follows these ideas, with the misdirected enthusiasm that is too often the vice of the unoriginal, professes to regard idiosyncrasies and tricks of expression as being really in the nature of revelations of the greatest truths of art; and,



STUDY FOR "BOCCACCIO; THE OPENING SCENE IN THE DECAMERONE"

BY SIR JAMES D. LINTON