Medieval architects and masons would have known that the great churches they helped to create would not be completed until well beyond their own lifetimes. Famine, pestilence and war were commonplace and the other great certainty was God. Secularism was inconceivable then, and the promise of an afterlife in return for their labours must have been a great incentive. Another human imperative of course is the need for stories, and Beverley Minster provides as many of them as stones in its walls.

We had a flavour of some of these tales from our volunteer guide, John Phillips, who has spent the past twenty years researching the building of the Minster and last year published a book, ‘Of a Fair Uniforme Making’ The Building History of Beverley Minster. This volume details his research, and credits that of many others before him. We’ve purchased this for our group, and it will be on loan from next month.

John’s research draws on many primary sources. Eyewitness accounts of miracles performed at the shrine of St John accidentally reveal the geography of the early church. Account books show us what was spent, and on which materials. Other churches in the region and country give clues to chronology, the work of regional master craftsmen and their design influences. Dendrochronology and other high tech dating techniques tell us how old the timbers are. One of the most intriguing methods of John’s, and clearly one that has become a passion to him, is the study of masons’ marks.

John has climbed and crawled all over the Minster, cataloguing the masons’ marks, and matching them to those in other churches of the region built in the same period. These marks are, he told us, the medieval equivalent of a payroll number. They would record a mason’s completion of a stone if
they were paid by piece work, and were also a means of quality control for the gaffer. He showed us several of these marks, and of templates cut by the masons to show the lines of pillars. He also explained categories of masons, ranging from those who cut the raw blocks from the quarries, to those ‘bank masons’ who did the more detailed cutting on their ‘banks’ or benches, either at the quarries or in situ at the church. At the top of the hierarchy would be the master craftsmen who cut the detailed and beautiful carvings, such as of minstrels or tombs.

The older, eastern parts of the Minster are quarried from Jurassic Cave oolite at Newbald, with some Purbeck marble, whereas the later, western parts of the church are mostly Magnesian limestone, quarried at Tadcaster. John pointed out some of the joins, or bits where old stone had been re-used in newer parts of the church, and he asked us to imagine what a large-scale industry church building must have been: including the quarrying and transportation of the stone along the Rivers Humber, Hull and Beverley Beck. “They’re all built on a full stomach,” he reminded us, and the Minster, largely built between the 12th and 14th centuries, reflected the wealth of Beverley and of the Church and monastic orders at the time, mainly from the prosperous woollen industry.

One of the interesting theories that John has found evidence for is that the present Minster bears much more similarity to the great northern abbeys of Jervaulx, Byland, Meaux and Guisborough, rather than to Lincoln Cathedral, which was for many years accepted as the template. He suggests that Beverley was one of the leading churches in a distinctively northern style of church architecture.

In fact Beverley Minster is the story of not one, but probably five churches. The original 8th century building where John of Beverley died in 721 was probably destroyed around 867 when the Danes first attacked the region. We know a monastery became a collegiate church here in 937 after King Athelstan stopped here to seek blessing at the shrine of St John before his victory against the Scots at the battle of Brunanburgh. This was also the beginning of the Minster’s great wealth as it was also granted land and a tax called ‘thraves’, on corn sheaves. It was granted sanctuary at this time too.

In 1037 the Pope sanctified John of Beverley and this was the beginning of Beverley’s medieval pre-eminence, as the second most important shrine in the North after St Cuthbert’s at Durham, and as the country’s 11th largest town. St John’s sanctity may have been one of the reasons for the sparing of Beverley during William 1’s Harrying of the North.

The first Norman church was destroyed by fire in 1188 (along with most of the town) and it is now believed that most of the current church building began soon after that and was completed by the late 14th century, including another major rebuild from 1220 when a tower collapsed.

Beverley Minster has been described as a “perfect example of English Gothic architecture” and John began his tour with the east end of the church, the oldest. A few of the windows here hold the oldest stained glass, 12th century, and I was intrigued to learn that the lead becomes brittle and needs to be replaced after 150 years, which explains the rarity of original windows. By the 17th century the windows were dangerous and a great storm of 1608 blew out most of the remaining glass, so replacement began then. However, this meant waiting for donors to be found to cough up the cash. We can assume, although there is no evidence, that walls were also lavishly painted in the medieval church.
Interestingly, the weekend before our visit, on a city break to Oxford, and while attending Evensong at Queen’s College Chapel, I had looked up during the music and to my astonishment and delight seen a beautiful stained glass window of a saint, described as “Johannes de Beverlacc.” Here’s our saint as a possibly 15th century Oxford artist imagined him. I think he looks gentle, don’t you?

The east end of the Minster contains the oldest and newest bits, as here too are Helen Whittaker’s millennium stained glass “Pilgrim” window, statue, candle stand and benches, creating a modern space for contemplation. The letters in the floor here relate to the memorials scattered around the area.

As we passed the Percy tomb, I photographed Doreen Osuch, one of our members contributing her own piece of history. Her family history research has revealed a long line of Lancashire weavers and pitmen, but extraordinarily too, alongside these everyday folk and through her paternal grandfather from Calverley, her 21st great grandfather was the same Henry Percy of Leconfield Castle buried in pomp here.
And what a family they were. As John explained, few died in their beds. This Percy, Fourth Earl of Northumberland was murdered by a mob near Thirsk in 1489, having been sent to collect taxes by the king, Henry V11, possibly in punishment for his being a Yorkist. However, this Percy was apparently also deeply unpopular among the Yorkist locals due to his less than wholehearted support of Richard 111 at the Battle of Bosworth where he’d commanded troops but never actually committed them to battle. This tomb was once outside the walls of the church.

The other great tomb of a Percy nearby, possibly Eleanor, was much earlier, built in the 1330s, and has the gorgeous Percy Canopy, which is recognised as a masterpiece of English Decorated carving. John was greatly enamoured of its “nodding ogees”, where the faces are carved to look down to the viewer on the ground. We learnt a lot of new words on this visit.

One of the new words for some of us was “piscina”. This is the stone basin placed by the altar to drain the holy water into the ground so it cannot be stolen or misused. There aren’t any at Beverley Minster which is one of the mysteries of the church. John hopes that one day, like so many other bits and pieces of the ancient church, like the old altar rails, they’ll turn up somewhere, probably in someone’s garden.

We sat in the Choir as John described how the wonderful misericords (mercy seats), by the Ripon School of carvers in the 1520s, were designed so the singers could cunningly sit down without being seen to do so by the luckless congregation who had to stand throughout the service. One of the best things for me about today’s visit was that the church had been cleared of pews for a vintage fair the following weekend, which meant we could view the nave in its original uncluttered glory.

As we sat, John pointed out how many changes had been made to the choir over the centuries. For example, there is some bog standard Victorian plywood backing the misericords, as these panels had once been knocked through to let in light. More in keeping was James Elwell’s late 19th century carved surround to the 18th century organ. There had been a ceiling once too, to keep out draughts.
Layers upon layers of history. One wonders how tricky it will be for future historians to work out the history of today’s buildings, should they still be standing, considering how short-lived our refurbishments can be, especially how often we change our kitchens.

We passed the stepped entrance to the Chapterhouse, which was demolished in 1550, and moved on to the transept and nave, where the west end reflects the grand Perpendicular style of the later Gothic period. Where St John’s tomb lies would have been the public area of the church where miracles were said to take place, and which would have been something of a doss house in the 14th century, with pilgrims sometimes camping out for weeks around the shrine hoping for a cure.

The nave itself was a stop-start work of art, affected by crises of the time, particularly in the 14th century. First the Great Famine of 1315-17, then the Black Death of 1348-9 killed off many of the masons and those contributing to the funding of the building. The West Towers were probably completed around 1420 shortly after Henry V’s victory at Agincourt, for which he gave thanks at the Minster. The great West Window, celebrating the lives of the Northumbrian saints was installed later, from 1859-61, and the West Door was carved in the 18th Century by the famous York carver William Thornton. The animal figures at its base are worn smooth by the hands of children who can’t resist touching it. The lovely font, made of Frosterley marble, is a survivor of the early Norman church, and its cover was also carved in the 18th century by Thornton.

The upheaval of the Reformation nearly meant the end of the Minster. It could have gone the same way as Meaux Abbey, and disappeared completely. The Chapterhouse went, and St Martins’ Chapel at the west end, but the town council saved the rest of the church by raising the princely sum of £100. This explains why, despite the minster being larger than one third of the country’s cathedrals, it became just one of three of Beverley’s parish churches. At this point the Saint’s shrine also disappeared as Reformation booty. His bones were apparently rediscovered in 1664 and reinstated in their present position.

By the 18th century the church was in a sorry state, but by then Beverley’s decline of the 16th and 17th centuries had reversed and a further restoration was financed by public contributions. Nicholas Hawksmoor was shipped in, and at this point William Thornton (the same designer of the font cover and west door) joined the team. His genius enabled the whole of the north wall of the transept to be jacked up by a fearsome contraption that he designed, and its 4 foot tilt from the vertical rectified. It’s this massive restoration project to which we owe the magnificent church we see today.
For more info on the Minster visit http://beverleyminster.org.uk.

Many thanks to John Phillips for his fascinating tour. I hope he finds his piscinas.

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