

Zeitschrift: Archives héraldiques suisses = Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik = Archivio araldico svizzero : Archivum heraldicum

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Heraldische Gesellschaft

Band: 127 (2013)

Heft: 2

Artikel: York Minster and the role of heraldry in obtaining benefactions for the rebuilding of a great cathedral

Autor: Fox, Paul A.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-746841>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 29.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

York Minster and the role of heraldry in obtaining benefactions for the rebuilding of a great cathedral

PAUL A. FOX

The city of York is known to have had a bishop in the year 314, but nothing survives above ground of the earlier cathedrals because a complete programme of rebuilding was initiated in the 1220s which was to last about 200 years.

It is a curious fact that heraldry is scarcely to be found in British churches until the later 13th century, apart from some rare examples on tomb effigies. The earliest architectural example of church heraldry in England of which this author is aware is the nave shields of Westminster Abbey dating from the 1250s and 60s. Either it did not occur to anybody to use arms in this way in the first century of heraldry, or perhaps there was some clerical opposition to having shields of arms in churches because of their role in warfare and bloodshed. The new fashion for church heraldry happily coincides with the rebuilding of York Minster. The prebends of York soon saw visible heraldry as a means of rewarding benefactors and thereby encouraging further donations. The benefactors of every subsequent

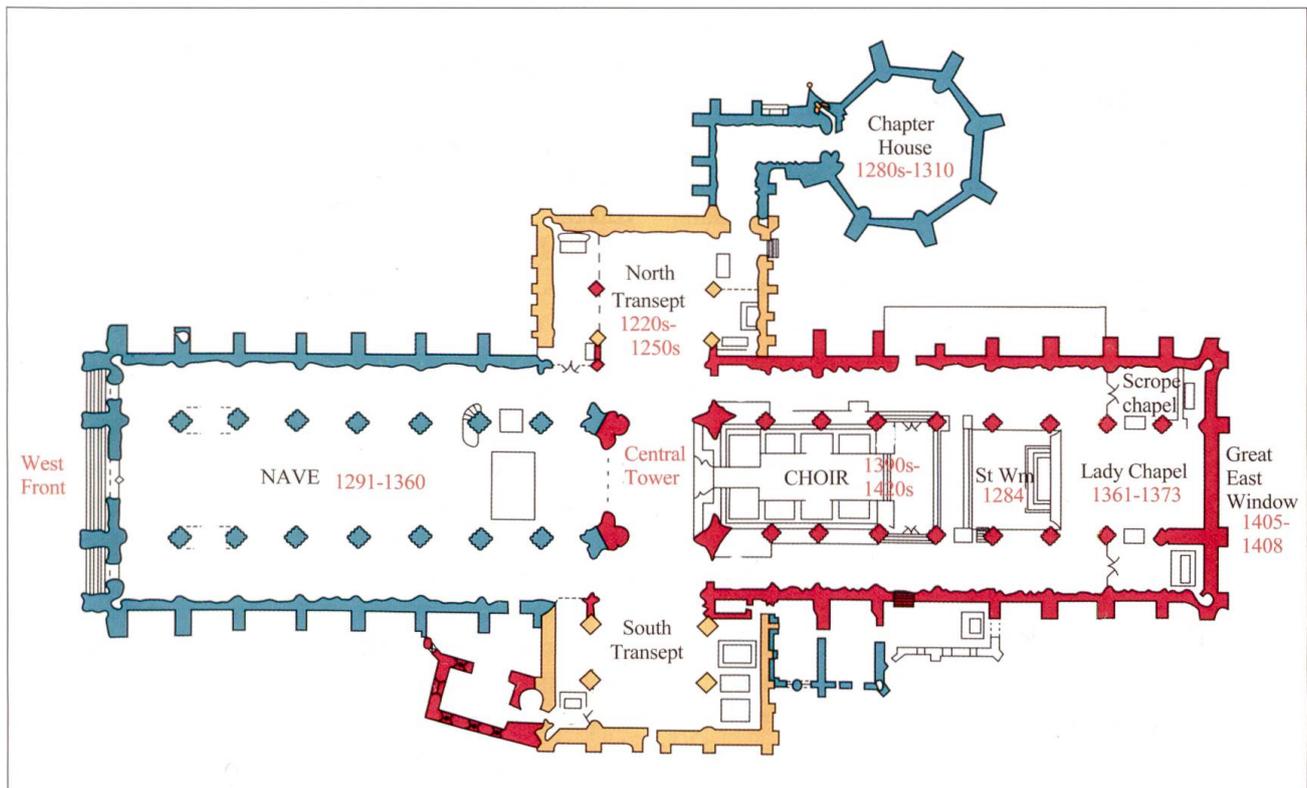
phase of construction can be easily delineated in their arms both in glass and stone.

We find no early heraldry here in the transepts which were built from the 1220s to the 1250s, but by the 1290s when the chapter house and nave were under construction church heraldry was evidently very much in vogue. It all began with the Chapter House, paid for by the cathedral chapter, which was a wealthy one, having well over 30 prebends.

The Chapter House

It was far larger than was required for the purposes of a chapter meeting and without doubt it was designed with the intention that parliaments might be held here, as indeed they were from almost the moment of completion.

The heraldic glass in the Chapter house forms a matching series and must have been commissioned as a unit after 1299 when Edward I married Margaret of France (the arms of France are prominently displayed). In the heraldic



Plan of cathedral

borders of some of the windows are castles alternating with fleurs de lis, a clear allusion to the two wives of Edward I, Eleanor of Castile and Margaret of France. In the passageway leading to the Chapter House can be found the arms of some of the prebends, notably Bogot de Clare (d 1294) a younger son of Richard de Clare earl of Gloucester; Peter de Roos, and John de Warrene an illegitimate son of John de Warrene Earl of Surrey (d 1304). It is noteworthy that these three benefactors were apparently using the same arms as their fathers. By this time in England it was normal for knights to difference their paternal arms, but perhaps because they were non combatants this was not considered to be necessary. The presence of the arms of de Montfort *gules a lion rampant queue fourche argent* here is a curiosity since Simon de Montfort had been declared a traitor and killed in 1265. His younger son Amaury was Treasurer of York Minster, but that title had been rescinded. In his will of 1289 he still clung to many titles of which his family had been deprived: Papal Chaplain, Treasurer of York, Canon of Rouen and by hereditary right Earl of Leicester Palatine Earl of Chester, and Steward of the King. In view of Simon de Montfort's role in the development of the English Parliament it is perhaps fitting that his Montfort arms should grace a chamber so often used by parliament.

The Nave

The foundation stone of the nave was laid in 1291. Between 1298 and 1338 as a consequence of the Scottish wars the Exchequer was based at the cathedral for long periods, and many parliaments were held here. The new nave was financed by the barons who assembled here to fight the Scots. In return for their donations their arms were recorded in glass and stone. No less than 14 of the 32 stone shields carved in the nave are of knights who occur in the Falkirk roll of 1298. The nave shields were complemented with matching stained glass arms in the clerestory windows above, at the centre of each group being the arms of Edward I. The more money that was donated, the more frequently the benefactor's arms were incorporated, and thus in the nave we have four consecutive shields for the family of Roos, *gules three water bougets argent*.

In one instance a benefactor is represented not by a coat of arms but by an emblem. This was a representation of the horn of Ulf which had been placed on the altar to celebrate a major 10th century bequest to the church. The horn

still exists in the cathedral treasury. Its inclusion must have been of great encouragement to later donors. The prebends were effectively stating that they would never cease to remember a benefactor, however long ago the gift had been given. The stone horn is located close to a shield bearing six lions rampant, and this has been a source of antiquarian confusion. In the clerestory windows are to be found the arms *vert six lions rampant or* which from the Boroughbridge roll of 1322 are the arms of Sir Nicholas de Langford. In the same window are these arms with a label of four points gules for Langford's son. In the 19th century the stone version was painted to correspond with the Langford arms in the glass. This was probably an error since the 6 lions occur very prominently by the great west door and elsewhere, suggesting a major benefaction. Such a gift is unlikely to have been made by the Langfords. The correct painting of these arms should probably be azure six lioncels argent for Sir William de Leybourne (d 1309), an extremely wealthy baron who was at the siege of Caerleverlock in 1300. On his death in 1309 he left an infant daughter Juliana whose wealth was so legendary that she became known as the Infanta of Kent. She followed her father in being a major benefactor of churches. To add further to the confusion around the six lioncels, a belief has arisen that they are the attributed arms of Ulf. There is no documentary evidence to support this conclusion, and it would seem unnecessary to depict the horn if arms had been devised for him.

The Nave Isles

There are some notable heraldic windows in the isles of the nave belonging to the first quarter of the 14th century. The window donated by Canon Peter of Dene is thought to date before 1309 as it contains a depiction of a Templar knight, and also a hospitaller, and we find here also the arms of the kingdom of Jerusalem. 1309 was the year when the Pope excommunicated the Templars, although the order was not suppressed in England until 1312. The same widow pays homage to Edward I and some of his family members, including the paly arms of his mother Eleanor of Provence and the double headed eagle of his uncle the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II.

The window paid for by Archdeacon Stephen de Mauley, who died in 1317 constitutes a wonderful early example of cadency. The window depicts Stephen and three of his brothers. The eldest brother Sir Peter de Mauley, 1st baron Mulgrave, bears the undifferenced shield

or a bend sable, Sir John de Mauley has three dolphins argent on the bend, Sir Edmund, killed at Bannockburn in 1314 has three wyverns (incorrectly restored as one wyvern); Sir Robert de Mauley who was buried in the Minster has three eagles and Stephen himself has three crosses crosslet (incorrectly restored as three dolphins). The window suffered some damage from shot during the civil war which led to some inaccurate nineteenth century restoration: a salutary warning of the dangers of interpreting medieval glass. This window also makes homage to Edward I, in the upper panels are the arms of England, France and Castile.

A final window of interest in the nave has a heraldic border alternating the chevrons of Clare with the lions of Mowbray. It was donated by John 2nd lord Mowbray who here celebrates his descent from his grandmother Rose de Clare. He was governor of York in 1312 and executed for treason in 1322, as were two of the men commemorated with stone shields in the nave.

The Choir and central tower (1390–1420)

By the time the choir was being constructed the idea of enticing donors by promising to display their shields had been in operation at York for 100 years.

In the choir clerestory and also the carved shields we have a device unique in English heraldry in depicting a lion in umbra_in other words the outline or shadow of the beast. They are arms used by Lord Scrope of Masham who was executed as a traitor in 1415. The great Hugh Stamford London in 1949 published a very erudite paper on this subject.¹ Heraldic legend has it that to place a charge in outline might be used to indicate that its bearer had hope for an inheritance which was being denied. It is not certain whether lord Scrope of Masham had such a hope. He dropped the label of three points argent which distinguished his cadet line from the Scropes of Bolton, and adopted the ghostly lion instead. His wife was the last representative of the Holand family who were Earls of Kent until 1408 and who bore the lion passant on their arms.

The great central tower fell down in 1407 because it was built on the insufficiently substantial foundation of a roman fort, perhaps the place where Constantine the Great was proclaimed as emperor. Contemporaries found a more other worldly cause for the catastrophe

as two years earlier the King had executed the Archbishop of York, Richard Scrope.

This brings us once more to the important topic of attributed arms. The central tower has within it the largest carved arms in the Minster, two of which are attributed arms.

Edwin king of Deira (d 633) who built the first stone Minster at York, is given three crowns, two and one. His successor King Oswald who completed the church is given three crowns in pale. Both arms were painted in the modern era with the tinctures azure crowns or, but it is known from William Jenyns' Ordinary (c 1380) that the arms of Edwin were *gules three crowns or*. The arms *azure three crowns or* by the year 1407 were long established as the ancient arms of the kingdom, with particular reference to King Arthur. A variety of manuscripts from the early 1300s illustrate stories of Arthur with the three crowns shield, so it is evident that by then it had widespread currency.² The earliest known drawing of the three crowns is in the Herald's Roll which has been dated 1270-80, but in this roll they are given not for Arthur, but for St Edmund.

Matthew Paris during the reign of Henry III ascribed numerous arms to pre-heraldic kings, but not one of them has a shield of crowns, and it is therefore highly probable that the three crowns motif was invented during the reign of Henry's son Edward I. The invention of the new arms *azure three crowns or* for King Arthur can be plausibly dated to the year 1278 when Edward I opened Arthur's tomb at Glastonbury. He gifted a new tomb for the king which bore many similarities to the one in which he himself was later buried. It is clear that Edward regarded himself as the living embodiment of King Arthur and the inheritor of his kingdom. While the legendary Arthur had many kingdoms, Edward I at that time only had three. He styled himself Edward by the grace of God King of England, Lord of Ireland and Duke of Aquitaine. If Edward wished to underline his own link to Arthur then three crowns were the obvious multiple to go for.

It is important to try to understand the motivation for the prominent placement of the attributed arms of these very early donors, Edwin and Oswald. What was the significance of these attributed arms? This is an enormous question, but it is clear that shields of arms in the middle ages might be regarded as an embodiment of the deceased. For instance the placing of the arms

¹ H Stanford London. The ghost or shadow as a charge in heraldry. *Archeologia* 1949; 93: pp 125-149.

² Brault, *Early Blazon* p 44.



Roos family St William window

of friends and kinsfolk on a tomb would enable them to benefit from the prayers being said for the deceased. The benefit might also work in the opposite direction: placing the arms of revered saints and great heroes of the past in a church encouraged them to watch over it. Their spiritual presence in the building thus secured would facilitate their readiness to intercede in heaven for the church and for those who supported it.

The final heraldic donation to the Minster which warrants mention in this brief resumé is the great window known as the St William window which was constructed to shine light onto a new high altar and the tomb of St William. It was paid for by the family of Roos circa 1415, being glazed quite a long time after the window was constructed, for want of a donor.

At the bottom of this vast window we have the kneeling figures of the donor and his wife following the accepted tradition of such placements.

Unusually, John Lord Roos (acceded 1413 d 1421) and his wife Margery de Spencer are depicted together twice, once with John having the label of three points on his tabard to donate an elder son (although such a usage was not at that time firmly established), and once without the label. The heraldic dress of Margery makes it clear that John's father is not being depicted. The likely explanation is that his father died, and he inherited the barony, while the window was still being made. Four other male members of

the Roos family are also commemorated, bearing cadency marks of crescent, annelet, mullet and trefoil. It might be supposed that these were the sons of Lord Roos, but they were in fact his brothers. Also probably shown were John's two married sisters, although only a fragment of one of them survives. The third sister who was a nun was perhaps considered devout enough not to require being interceded for.

Something notably wanting at York are heraldic roof bosses. There are some, which all date from the 1420s when the choir aisles were being vaulted, possibly directly influenced by the Canterbury cathedral cloister.

In summary, heraldry played a crucial role in the building of York Minster from around 1290. To some extent it was commemorative of previous donations, but quite quickly it became an incentive to future donors, their arms would grace the building for all time as a memorial to their generosity. To some extent then the inclusion of Ulf was a smart move: the canons were here showing that they would respect the memory of a donor however far back his bequest has been. It was an innovative way of paying not just for windows, but for the entire building project.

Address of the author: Dr Paul A. Fox
12 Rosebury Road
Fulham
UK-London SW6 2NG