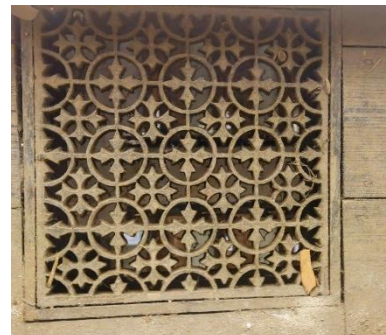


Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 11:

‘Just be careful’: Following the footsteps of the stone masons

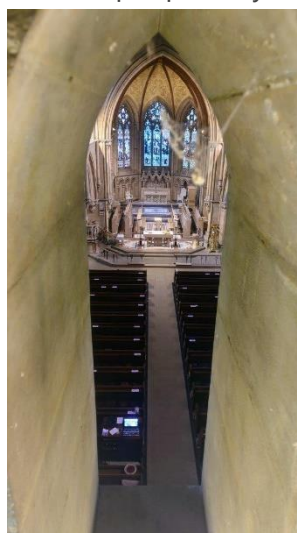
‘Just be careful not to step on the grills’, says Mark Gregory with the confidence of a man who knows what he is doing. Mark is a church warden at St John's and part of his job is to look after what you might call the 'back church', the parts that parishioners don't see or even know much about. On Sunday 14 July the part in question is the triforium, a narrow passage high above the nave, and Mark is giving us a tour. The grills he warns us about are metal, square, punched with a pattern of crosses and circles, set every few feet in the floorboards and letting in light from the nave.



Why are we in the triforium? The answer is that we are researching our talk on Job Stone and the other stone masons who perhaps built St John's (see below for details). Our usual beat is the Sheffield archives and local studies library. We also spend hours online, scrutinising Ancestry, the British Newspaper Archive and the like. We meet up in cafes a lot, to share our latest discoveries and discuss difficult enquiries. But we are always up for a challenge - in this case, literally up. Mark discovered the initials and symbols left by the stone masons in the

triforium and has shared his photographs with us. We want to see the marks for ourselves. We want to examine them for details photographs just don't show – for example, how deeply the marks are incised into the stone. We want to get a sense of how and where the stone masons worked.

The triforium, we learn, is a passage between the lower and upper nave of a church and bounded by windows overlooking the lower nave. It is built over the side aisles, helping to support the structure of the church. The nave includes the central area where the congregation assembles, and just under the roof, the clerestory with its set of windows. The triforium is sometimes wide - a gallery from where people may view services; or it may be narrow – a walkway used by workmen for access and construction. In St John's the triforium is narrow, built over the left and right aisles, with a connecting passage above the vestibule and font at the back of the church. It was never meant to be a public space. To reach it, Mark unlocks a small door in the vestibule, revealing a spiral stone staircase. Up and up we go. The triforium is narrow, cramped, low, dusty, with sharp corners. There are lights at intervals, and as we



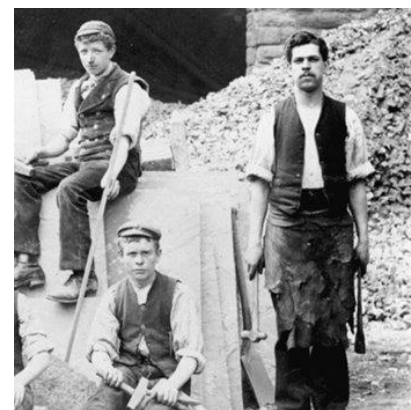
scramble along, we are conscious of the bright nave on the one side, and on the other, a dim crawlspace beyond the triforium, where we glimpse huge beams and stones. It is disorientating. 'Just be careful not to step on the grills.'

With Mark's help, we inspect the marks, which are found all along the triforium. Some are clearly modern, like 'P Leslie', an electrician who left a neat note of name and job in 1991. Did P Leslie perhaps see the other marks and decide to leave a permanent reminder? Most of the marks are clearly much older. The carvings are black with the ingrained dust of the years. For the most part they are serif capitals, skilfully and deeply incised into the stone. They look solidly Victorian. Some are less skilfully (or more hurriedly?) rendered, but still clear. The symbols – a jug, a flower and two crosses – are delicate and attractive. For all the differences in skill and style,



all the marks suggest purpose and determination. The triforium is not a comfortable place. When the church was under construction, it must have been dark and confined, dusty, busy and even dangerous. This is not casual vandalism. For W Thornton, WBP and the others to invest time and effort in leaving their mark, it must have been important to them.

Like most historians, we relish the hunt for answers and are pleased with our progress in identifying the stone masons of St John's. But in a different sense we now feel we know who these men were. Walking the triforium – scrambling over obstacles, bumping our heads and stumbling more than once - has given us a strong sense of the Victorian stone masons, their craftsmanship, their strength, their will and endurance. These men deserve our admiration.



Sue Roe and Val Hewson
22 July 2024

Many thanks to Mark Gregory for his patience and support. The images above were taken by Mark, Sue Roe and Val Hewson.

*Val and Sue's talk, **'The life of Job Stone and other stone masons of Ranmoor'**, will take place in St John's on **Saturday 7 September, at 5.30pm**. It is free and part of St John's contribution to the Heritage Open Days festival.*