



***THE  
NAVE CEILING  
OF  
ELY CATHEDRAL***

by  
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## **THE ROOF - EARLY HISTORY**

A ledge running along the tops of the columns in the great romanesque Nave of Ely indicates that the current roof structure is not the original: the original roof beams rested here and the openings by the clock at the west end are entrances to plank walkways which ran over these beams. The ceiling would have appeared Dalter and lower than today's.

Bishop Northwold paid for the reconstruction of the nave roof around 1240, only one hundred years after it was first built and at a time when the Cathedral was being greatly extended. This structure largely survives today and is based on a series of 'A' shaped frames with additional cross or 'scissor' braces.

The technology of stone-vaulted ceilings, developing during the hundred-year life of the first roof, was employed to embellish many Norman naves in this country and hide the carpenters' work from view. There may have been plans to insert a ceiling, but they were not carried out and the complex of beams and rafters was to remain clearly on view from below.

## **DEAN PEACOCK AND THE SCOTT RESTORATION**

Many thought the open roof a great visual detraction from the beauty of Ely's interior. Dean Goodwin describes it as a 'mere wooden tunnel without any pretension to beauty.

There was still some controversy, however, when Dean George Peacock had a boarded ceiling constructed during the 18505 restoration of the Cathedral by the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, through which the building largely assumed its present aspect.

A Oak ceiling would have obscured the top of the lofty eastern arch inserted during the building of the Octagon by Alan of Walsingham. Instead, it followed the contours of the A-frames and scissor braces above to produce the five-sided half-barrel shape we see today.

## **LE STRANGE AND THE PAINTING**

Henry Styleman Le Strange, squire of Hunstanton, Norfolk, was a friend of the Cathedral clergy. He appears to have been something of a resident artistic consultant, arguing with Scott over the construction of the lantern and having a hand in the reconstruction of the North Range and Sacrist's Gate in the High Street.

In 1853 Dean Peacock, having noted Le Strange's enthusiasm when traces of medieval decoration were discovered in the nave arcade, suggested that he paint the ceiling of the west tower, recently opened up by the removal of a lower floor. Le Strange completed the work in 1855 and in July 1856 he agreed to Peacock's suggestion that he paint the entire nave ceiling.

The inspiration for his ideas is not known: whilst it is true that there are similarities with the ceiling in the Michaelskirche at Hildesheim, Germany, Dean Goodwin for one asserts that Le Strange did not visit it until after his own design was achieved. Work commenced in 1858.

## **HOW IT WAS DONE**

Le Strange devised an ingenious system for his commission. His original small designs were divided into squares and scaled up to full size mechanically. These were pinned to the ceiling (already given a background coat of off-white), over a sheet of paper covered in red ochre. A boy then traced over each line, leaving the design in place, as an outline in red ochre. House-painters moved in to fill in the backgrounds, drapery etc whilst Le Strange himself concentrated on the faces and other crucial areas. His models included Dean Peacock himself, who appears as Isaiah in the sixth panel from the west end - compare this figure with Peacock's portrait hanging in the South Transept. The artist himself appears in the easternmost roundel on the north side. Le Strange preferred rather less august personages for his models however, remarking that 'bedesmen make the best prophets!'

He took infinite pains over the toning of his work, avoiding bold colours. He would descend frequently to ground level to judge the effectiveness of each shade used.

## **PARRY'S COMPLETION**

Progress on the ceiling was interrupted half-way by Le Strange's sudden death on 27th July 1862, whilst working on another project in London. He had been absent for some time and an already concerned Dean and Chapter (Dean Goodwin had succeeded George Peacock in 1858) were now faced with the problem of how to complete the work. Le Strange had left no definite plans for the remainder, other than vague ideas for a 'Tree of Jesse' design.

Goodwin was fortunate to remember Thomas Gambier Parry, Le Strange's Eton schoolfellow and executor. Parry, another squire, of Highnam Court in Gloucestershire, was an artist of higher repute than his friend. This remarkable man's work also included painting at Tewkesbury Abbey and Gloucester Cathedral. He devised his own technique, called 'Spirit Fresco', involving pretreatment of the ceiling (or wall) to be painted with a mixture including spike oil, derived from Lavender: he would mix the highly flammable substance himself and swiftly douse any spontaneous flames! One of his sons was the eminent composer Sir Hubert Parry.

Parry was initially wary of Dean Goodwin's proposal that he should complete the ceiling, but soon overcame his misgivings and, taking up residence at the Lamb Hotel, set to work furiously on the project. Parry conceived what he viewed as a more dramatic scheme: the marked change in style is made clear by comparing bays six and seven. Le Strange's figures are rather stilted and float in their backgrounds. Parry's larger, more detailed figures make a much bolder composition, heightened by the use of more reds and blues. The work was completed in 1865, having taken seven years in all. Parry went on to paint the Octagon and Transepts.

## **1988 - RENOVATION**

Part of Ely's great £4 million rescue repair programme, begun in 1987, involved the complete overhaul of the roof, with repair and replacement of rotten timbers and re-leading. A gigantic scaffold covered the entire nave. Inside high-level scaffolding allowed easy access to the ceiling, and a separate renovation project was begun funded by three generous and anonymous trusts. Smoke from the redoubtable collection of coke-fired Gurney stoves (now thankfully converted to gas) had caused considerable discolouration, which was painstakingly removed to reveal the glowing colours beneath. Fascinating details were revealed on close inspection, including some doodles presumably carried out by the housepainters in idle moments. A figure in stove-pipe hat might even be Le Strange himself.

What also became clear was the detail and quality behind this curious and remarkable achievement by two accomplished but unsung artists, now recognised as one of the finest examples of nineteenth century church art in Europe - the painted nave ceiling of Ely Cathedral.

## **THEOLOGICAL NOTES ABOUT THE NAVE CEILING PANELS IN ELY CATHEDRAL**

The whole painting depicts the sacred history of man to the final consummation in the glorified humanity of the Son of Man reigning in majesty. Beside the central panels are figures of patriarchs, prophets and evangelists.

### **1. THE CREATION OF MAN**

**'Which was the Song of God'**

The first panel of Mr le Strange and Mr Gambier Parry's ceiling illustrates the creation of man as told in Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, is a book of beginnings; but, although everything else had a beginning, God has always been. So the bible always assumes and never argues God's existence. Man is the climax of God's creative activity and God has crowned him with glory and honour and made him ruler over the rest of creation.

*(Genesis 1 and 2)*

### **2. THE FALL OF MAN**

**'Her seed shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel'**

Sadly it is not long before things begin to go wrong. Satan, that great deceiver, disguises himself as a serpent, championing human logic and wisdom against the apparently senseless expectation of God that the humans, whom God has so generously installed in his world, will obey him. The serpent questions the order that God has set up and persuades the woman that if the forbidden fruit is eaten, the humans will become 'like God.' Thus, by causing the woman to doubt God's word, Satan brings evil into the world.

*(Genesis 3)*

### **3. NOAH AND THE FLOOD**

**'I do set my bow in the cloud, to be a token of covenant between me and the earth'**

Noah's godly life was a powerful contrast to the wickedness of his contemporaries, and the story of Noah's salvation from the flood illustrates God's loving concern for his children. God promises that creation will never again be violated and he sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign of that promise. A rainbow is one of the most sublime and majestic experiences of the natural world. Whatever rainbows do for God, they ought surely to remind us of our duty to preserve the beauty of God's creation.

*(Genesis 6 to 9)*

### **4. ABRAHAM AND ISAAC**

**'Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the burnt offering?'**

God puts faithful Abraham to the test by instructing him to sacrifice his only son Isaac. But in his darkest hour, when what is most precious has to be given up, Abraham proves himself. God rewards him richly - not only by providing a ram as a substitute sacrifice at the last moment, but also by promising to bless Abraham's descendants. God always provides the means, whether we fail or we obey - but it is only through our obedience that God is ultimately able to proceed.

*(Genesis 22)*

### **5. JACOB'S DREAM**

**'In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed'**

Jacob had run away from home because his brother was planning to kill him. On the journey he lies down to sleep when, in a most beautiful display of divine grace, God meets with him, accompanied by a whole company of angels. We talk about Jacob's 'ladder, but it was nothing so precarious. It was a stairway, and God came down the stairway to find Jacob, just as he comes down to earth to find us - sometimes in the most surprising ways.

*(Genesis 28)*

### **6. THE MARRIAGE OF RUTH**

**'The Lord makes the woman like Rachel and Leah. Be thou famous in Bethlehem'**

The story of Ruth is a story of gentleness and hope. The heroine is a Moabite woman who protects

her dead husband's mother and is faithful to the God of Israel. Ruth had not been born into the chosen people, but she is one of the 'choosing' people. By her marriage to Boaz of Bethlehem, she becomes an Israelite. Her great-grandson will be David, the great king and ancestor of Jesus.

*(Ruth)*



## 7. THE BRANCH FROM JESSE

**'There shall come forth a rod out of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots'**

The prophet Isaiah lived through stormy times some eight centuries before Christ. His strong faith forced him to see all that happened as a part of God's will. Although there was much suffering and defeat for his people, Isaiah was convinced that all things must in the end work together for good. God is faithful, and the promises he made to his people would be fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah - a shoot from the stem of Jesse (King David's father) who will be filled with the Spirit of God.

*(Isaiah 11)*

## 8. KING DAVID

**'Of the fruit of thy body shall I set upon thy throne'**

David!, the young shepherd harpist from Bethlehem, seemed an unlikely candidate to be King of Israel, but he soon proved his worth - not only as a musician but also as a brave soldier on the battlefield. He was also a great poet who wrote many beautiful psalms of praise to God. Although he made mistakes and did wrong, he never failed to repent and ask for forgiveness. He was 'a man after God's own heart.'

*(Samuel 1 and 2)*

## 9. THE ANNUNCIATION

**'A virgin shall conceive and bare a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel'**

God's initiative and creative power are brought to birth in Jesus, a person so new and significant that he must be born in a way that allows God to be involved to a unique degree - he was born of a virgin. Mary was no-one in particular and nowhere in particular. She had done nothing to deserve the experience, but her response to the angel's message was a whole-hearted and humble acceptance that has been an inspiration to Christians ever since.

*(Luke 1)*

## 10. THE NATIVITY

**'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us: full of grace and truth'**

Bethlehem was David's city, and 'it was the right place for David's greatest son to be born. But the new born baby was no more welcome there than the full grown man was to be in Nazareth. In all its picturesque beauty, the Christmas story is an authentic cameo of a Saviour for whom poverty and rejection were to be the constant conditions of life - and death. Yet any birth is a cause for rejoicing, and this one never fails to warm the world's heart year by year.

*(Luke 2)*

## 11. THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS AND THE MAGI

**'Unto us a child is born: Gentiles shall come to thy light,  
and Kings to the brightness of thy rising'**

The Nativity story sets glory and humility side by side. The skies are full of heaven's messengers, but the first to be told of Mary's child are shepherds, a despised class because of their reputation for dishonesty and their neglect of religious observance. But they are soon caught up in joy and praise - as are the wise men from the East, astrologers from a distant land who were the first foreigners to acknowledge the influence of this tiny newcomer into human affairs.

*(Luke 2 and Matthew 2)*

## 12. CHRIST IN GLORY

**'I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star'**

The last panel of this Victorian ceiling is a picture of Christ in heavenly glory. He has shared our earthly conditions and sufferings and, after a cruel death, has now been vindicated through resurrection. Jesus went to the Cross, not as a defeated man but as the conqueror of sin and saviour of the world. His resurrection is the living proof to all believers that the Son of God belongs both to history and eternity. Jesus the Lord is the powerful expression of God who was and is and is to come.

*(Revelation 1)*