

The Choir Screen, King's College Chapel, Cambridge. An Index of Imagery

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For a published analysis of the screen's iconography read:

['A re-appraisal of the iconography of the choir screen at King's College..pdf of Notes and Queries article\Notesandqueries2014.pdf.pdf Chapel, Cambridge'](#)

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The index begins with the West Face of the screen, and works systematically from panel to panel, North to South, left to right, top to bottom.

Left (North) side, West Face of screen

Bay 1

Pilaster: Classical decoration, includes bull's skull with male cherub

Coving upper left: Space filled by stonework

Coving left: HR under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Coving right: Cipher – HRExAS (Henry Rex, Sovereign Anne), under imperial crown

Coving center: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Upper frieze: Classical decoration, includes fleur-de-lis

Tympanum: Shield with RA, under imperial crown

Spandrel, left: Classical head

Spandrel, right: Classical head

Lower frieze: Roundel, man pointing to right

Central panel, above: Inscription – DIEU ET MON DROIT ('God and my right shall me defend').

Central panel roundel: HR under imperial crown

Central panel, below: Roundel. Man wearing a cowl (worn by monks) with a cabbage on his head. Since the mid-15th century 'cabbage head' was a term for an obstinate idiot, this was therefore a mocking jibe. (French Robert Dictionary: 'cabus', 'caboche' Old French for head (of cabbage); nitwit, blockhead).

Bay 2

Pilaster: Classical decoration

Coving upper left: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Coving left: Fleur-de-lis under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Coving right: Fleur-de-lis under imperial crown

Coving center: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Upper frieze: Classical decoration, includes portcullis

Tympanum: Henry VIII's coat of arms under imperial crown

Spandrel, left: Tudor rose

Spandrel, right: Tudor rose

Frieze: Roundel, Classical man's head with classical decoration

Central panel, above: Inscription – SOLA SALUS SERVIRE DEO ('Our only salvation is in serving God')

Central panel roundel: HR under imperial crown

Central panel, below: Traditional decorative motif – body armour with weapons

Bay 3

Pilaster: Classical decoration, includes Green Man. Despite their pagan origins, Green Men were a popular decorative device during the Protestant Reformation and were used on the frontispieces of many Lutheran tracts.

Coving upper left: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Coving left: HR under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Coving right: HR under imperial crown

Coving center: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Tympanum: Henry VIII's coat of arms under imperial crown

Upper frieze: Classical decoration, includes fleur-de-lis

Spandrel, left: Angel's head

Spandrel, right: Classical head

Frieze: Fleur-de-lis (no roundel) flanked by Tudor roses

Central panel, above: Inscription – Henri CVS 8 (Henry VIII, in an unusual combination of English and Latin lettering with an Arabic numeral)

Central panel roundel: HR under imperial crown

Central panel, below: Traditional decorative motif – body armour with weapons
Pilaster: Classical decoration

Central archway from nave to altar (leading from the West Face to the East Face)

Left (North) side

Coving upper left: Tudor rose

Coving left: HR under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Tudor rose

Coving right: HR under imperial crown

Coving center: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Spandrel, left: Classical head in roundel

Right (South) side

Coving upper left: Anne's falcon on a flowering Tudor rose bush, under an imperial crown

Coving left: HA cipher. Eric Ives noted the 'curiously formed letter 'A', with a stroke through the apex and the normal horizontal stroke written as a 'V'... Writing the letter 'A' in this way also creates the letters 'T' and 'M', so

making the Latin 'amat' ('loves'). The whole therefore means either '[Henry] loves A[nne]' or 'A[nne] loves [Henry]', or both'. See Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, p. 243.

Coving upper right: Anne's falcon on a flowering Tudor rose bush, under an imperial crown

Coving right: HA cipher, as above

Coving center: Anne's falcon crest under imperial crown

Spandrel, right: Classical head in roundel, with a bull's skull in lower spandrel. This image, found repeatedly on the screen, is a visual on the name Boleyn (sometimes written Bullen).

Central doors from nave to altar (- carved exactly 100 years after Anne Boleyn's death).

Pevsner wrote that the woodwork 'is of an especially high order, and the detail is entirely in accordance with the side panels. Yet the door carries the cipher C.R. and the date 1636 [and so they are] an extremely early case of period imitation.'

Top half: Partially-pierced fretwork with an English shield flanked by a lion and a unicorn in front of a flowering rosebush. Date 1636 on left door.

Bottom half: Symbols of harmony and fruitfulness, with one exception; the monk with a cabbage head (roundel on left door) is a reversed repeat of the roundel in Bay 1. This is an interesting inclusion given that the doors were carved later, during Charles I's reign.

Right (South) side, West Face of screen

Bay 4

Pilaster: Classical decoration, with bull's skull at top

Coving upper left: Tudor rose

Coving left: Portcullis under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Tudor rose

Coving right: Portcullis under imperial crown

Coving center: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Upper frieze: Classical decoration, with fleur-de-lis

Tympanum: HR under imperial crown

Spandrel, left: Flower

Spandrel, right: Classical head

Lower frieze: Roundel, with a classical man's head

Central panel, above: Decorative motif

Central panel roundel: HR under imperial crown

Central panel, below: A head held up by loops of be-ribboned hair, face distorted in agony. For many years it has been stated that the carving depicts the punishment of an

adulterous woman (in reference to Anne Boleyn's alleged crime - for which she was beheaded in 1536), but I suggest that it more plausibly represents Absalom, the rebellious son of King David.

For the Bible's description of Absalom's appearance and fate see: 2 Samuel 14:25-26, 2 Samuel 15:1-6, 2 Samuel 18:9-15).

Bay 5

Pilaster: Classical decoration, with Green Man

Coving upper left: Anne's falcon on a flowering Tudor rose bush

Coving left: Cipher – HRExAS (Henry Rex, Sovereign Anne) , under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Anne's falcon on a flowering Tudor rose bush

Coving right: Cipher – HRExAS (Henry Rex, Sovereign Anne) , under imperial crown

Coving center: Anne's falcon crest under imperial crown, between Tudor roses

Upper frieze: Male figure with staff, pointing to God below

Tympanum: A high-relief carving of God surrounded by cherubs, directing sinners downwards. In the background carved in very low relief is a classical temple with steps. Pevsner named this depiction 'the Descent of the Rebel Angels' (The Buildings of England, 88).

Spandrel, left: Classical head

Spandrel, right: Portcullis

Lower frieze: Roundel, with a man pointing to the right

Central panel, above: Decorative motif

Central panel roundel: HR under imperial crown

Central panel, below: Green Man motif with classical armory.

Bay 6

Pilaster: Classical decoration, with Green Man and Green Ram

Coving upper left: Classical decoration

Coving left: Fleur-de-lis under imperial crown

Coving upper right: Classical decoration

Coving right: Fleur-de-lis under imperial crown

Coving center: Tudor rose under imperial crown

Upper frieze: Classical decoration, with baby's head

Tympanum: Anne Boleyn's heraldic arms as Royal Consort under an imperial crown

Spandrel, left: Floral design

Spandrel, right: Floral design

Lower frieze: Roundel, with female head. See E. Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, plate 35.

Central panel, above: Bull's head

Central panel roundel: HR under imperial crown

Central panel, below: Decorative motif of classical helmet

Pilaster: Classical decoration

Above the ground floor panels

A parapet running the length of the screen with friezes, balusters, arched panels and two arched recesses containing high-relief carved male figures. The man on the left is naked

except for a loose sheet. He is seen from behind as if in retreat and appears to look up at the figure above the organ pipes. The figure on the right, by contrast, is richly attired in possibly contemporary dress, and faces forwards.

Above the organ pipes

In the centre is a three-dimensional sculpture of King David holding a harp. On the outer curves of the organ pipes are two mighty angels blowing horns. Because the existing organ was installed in 1605 it is unclear how, or if, the figure of King David was attached to the choir screen when the screen was installed in the 1530s. However, Pevsner refers to a carving on the screen of King David dating 'from the time of Henry VIII'. The depiction of King David is very similar to that on the frontispiece of Coverdale's English Bible (1535), with a noted difference; his lower robes appear more Tudor than biblical in style. This could be an important example of the transition of Henry VIII's philosophy which culminated in his depiction as King David in his illuminated psalter (c.1541, now British Library).

Central Archway

This leads from the West Face of the screen to the altar and is wide enough to support the organ above. Internal doors to the North and South lead to the organ loft. Pevsner noted that the decorated ceiling was a 'memorably early' example of Tudor plaster work.

East Face of screen

Four return stalls behind a raised parapet, on either side of the central archway. The coats of arms decorating the backs of the stalls on the North and South walls were added later, in 1633. However, the decorations on the East Face of the screen are contemporary with the West Face, and bear many examples of Henry and Anne's insignia.

Left (South) side, East Face of screen

There are four stalls with seating. The first three stalls are smaller and much less ornamented than the last, which is the Provost's Stall.

Pilaster decorations and frieze panels above the four seats: RA (in the 'amat' form that Eric Ives noted) under an imperial crown, classical man, HR, portcullis, RA (in the 'amat' form) under an imperial crown, an imperial crown held by angels on either side, HR, shield with HRExAS . This last is directly above the Provost's seat.

On the parapet in front of the stall desks are three-dimensional figures and heraldic beasts: Griffin holding a shield with RA (in the 'amat' form), Lion holding an empty shield, Lion holding a shield with HR, Greyhound holding an empty shield.

The Provost's stall

Coving upper left: H

Coving upper center: HR under imperial crown

Coving upper right: A

Coving center from left to right: Fleur-de-lis under imperial crown, HR under imperial crown, floral boss, HA under imperial crown, Fleur-de-lis under imperial crown.

Coving lower left: H

Coving lower center: A cross, flanked by floral decoration

Coving lower right: R

Tympanum: A high-relief depiction of God. It appears as if he is pointing with one finger upward to Heaven – and to Henry and Anne's initials directly above. However, the other fingers have been broken off and it is likely that two of the fingers would have pointed upwards in a gesture of benediction.

Spandrel, left: Empty

Spandrel, right: Empty

Central panel, upper section, Provost's stall

Two naked, muscular men reclined on the roundel's frame. The man on the left holds a pronged staff entwined with two snakes. The snake-entwined staff could represent the Old Testament story of Aaron and the supremacy of his faith over that of the Pharaohs (Exodus 7), or it might refer to the classical god Hermes. His staff, Caduceus, symbolised an eloquent messenger and was therefore used as a printer's mark in the 16th century. This might therefore refer to the support that Henry and Anne gave to the proliferation of translations of the Bible.

The Herculean man on the right clenches either several animals in his fist or else one creature with several heads. The fact that he points with his right hand to the one in his left hand indicates that the symbolism is significant, although obscure to the modern viewer. One possible explanation is that the delicately-featured animals might be ermine, and therefore indicate an aggressive stance towards the Church of Rome. Ermine was linked to the Papacy because the animal had come to represent purity, and since the 12th century had been used by Popes to trim their red caps and capes.

Central panel, roundel, Provost's stall

A dramatic, high-relief carving with intensely modeled and elongated forms that appear more Mannerist in style than Renaissance (Pevsner made this comment when pointing out the rider's billowing cape that flows over the roundel's frame). A rearing horse is depicted, whose armoured rider raises his right hand (now broken off, as is the horse's right hoof) to strike a strange dragon-like beast writhing below. The creature has a muscular, human-like torso, four stunted limbs ending in webbed feet, a long neck, and small fantastical wings. In the background, carved in shallow relief, is an elegant palace or city displaying many towers. Though battles with dragons are mentioned several times in the Bible, it seems highly likely

that the rider portrayed here is St George (and not St Michael, or the slayer of the Fourth Beast in the Book of Daniel). On the breastplate of the horse is a horned skull - possibly that of a bull, in reference to Anne Boleyn.

Central panel, lower section, Provost's stall

A naked woman, loosely draped, reclines in a landscape. A child suckles at her breast while another tugs fearfully on her arm. A tablet is lying by her feet. In the distance a third child is being eaten by a lion. The significance of this disturbing image is not obvious to the modern viewer. The signage at King's College Chapel says: 'Below is [St George's wife] Sabra who has just borne three boys, one of whom is being carried off by a lion. This romantic addition to the legend was current in the 16th century.' However, further research is advisable as I have been unable to find any mention of the saint having children.

The quantity of detail and the three-dimensionality of the carving in this bay set it apart from those on the west face of the screen, as do the subjects depicted. The placing of these vivid images at the Provost's seat indicates that the topics were of high importance. I suggest that the iconography, not just in the roundel but that of the figures above and below, should be further investigated. At present their significance, and how they relate to the iconography on the west face, is unclear.

Below central panel, Provost's stall

Lower frieze: Cipher - HRExAS (Henry Rex, Sovereign Anne).

Right (North) side, East Face of screen

There are four stalls, the first being larger and with more ornate coving than the other three.

Stall 1

Coving left: HR

Coving upper center: HR

Coving center: Tudor rose

Coving right: HA

Stalls 2- 4 Coving decorations: Tudor rose, HR in a shield, Tudor rose

Pilaster decorations and frieze panels above the four seats:

HA (in the 'amat' form) in a shield, HR, fleur-de-lis, RA (in the 'amat' form) under an imperial crown, portcullis, HR, fleur-de-lis, RA (in the 'amat' form) under an imperial crown

On the parapet in front of the stall desks are three-dimensional figures and heraldic beasts:

Griffin holding an empty shield

Lion holding a shield with HR

Greyhound holding a shield with HR

Griffin with a crown and chain around his neck, holding a shield with RA (in the 'amat' form).

'[Henry] loves A[nne]' or 'A[nne] loves [Henry]', or both'. Eric Ives.