

The Stone Chair in the Church of the Holy Rood, Rodbourne, Malmesbury

Standing by the altar in the chancel of The Church of the Holy Rood, Rodbourne is a stone chair carved from a single block of stone. It is both intriguing, unique and, it can be argued, of high status in the past.



Sir Harold Brakspear the English restoration architect and archaeologist, described it as a *“Curious stone seat of medieval date carved out of a single stone”*

In a list of Wiltshire architects Brakspear is quoted as saying that there is *“also [a] curious stone seat found in a farmyard restored to church”* Brakspear had asked his workmen to place it in the chancel at the time of his extensive renovation of the church in 1903.

Brakspear wasn't certain of its origin as he states in a note: *It is not quite certain that the sedilia, which at present stands in chancel now, belonged to church. If we find signs of it having done so we shall build it into original place, otherwise it will simply be placed in chancel*

The chair is freestanding and was not fixed to the chancel wall by the builders Downing & Rudman, therefore it is assumed that at the 1903 restoration of the church there was no evidence found to support the sedilia having been originally fixed to the chancel wall.

The likely source of the Bath stone from which it was hewn was the Hazlebury quarry near Box.

The following is a description of the Rodbourne stone chair from the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture website: *A stone seat, with the rounded back carved from a single piece of stone, is now in the liturgical position of a sedile on the S side of the chancel. The arms end in knops, of which the left has been broken off. It is difficult to date but is very tentatively placed in the 13thc. by Pevsner. The right foot is missing, suggesting it has been moved.*



The Corpus for Romanesque website suggests that this is an unusual chair as most stone seats in parish churches are benches enclosed by stone uprights.

The Rodbourne stone chair has parallels with a 12th Century style of Sedalia associated with the Sedes Sapientiae (Throne of Wisdom) on which sculptures of the Virgin and Child are seated. This style was a Byzantine tradition that had become common throughout Europe. King Stephen (1092 or 1096 – 25 October 1154) is depicted seated on such a throne in an image by Mathew Paris, and the Empress Matilda (c. 7 February 1102 – 10 September 1167) is seated on a throne of the same style on her seal.



King Stephen by Mathew Paris



The Empress Matilda (an impression of her seal)

This style of chair is also depicted in one of the biblical scenes on the outer arch of Malmesbury Abbey Porch that of the Annunciation (see photograph below).



In conclusion it would appear that the stone chair now in The Church of the Holy Rood Rodbourne is indeed unique and of a status associated with the Virgin Mary and adopted by monarchs and bishops; its style suggests that it dates to the 12th century. It is unlikely to originally been in this small parish church, and the damage suggests it was moved from its original site to the farmyard before being placed in Rodbourne Church. It might be interesting to speculate that it was originally sited in either Malmesbury Abbey Church or perhaps in the former anarchy period castle at Malmesbury. Could it have been commissioned by Bishop Roger of Salisbury (bishop 1101 - 1139) who it is thought conceived the present abbey church and built the castle in Malmesbury?

References

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Image King Stephen: Stepan

Blois.jpg, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Stepan_Blois.jpg&oldid=593349339

Image of seal Empress Matilda

File:Matilda.JPG, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Matilda.JPG&oldid=594817019>

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