



Extracts from the Chapter minutes from 1701 onwards
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THAT SCREEN



The prolific architect and designer George Gilbert Scott (1811–1878) and now little-known metalworker Francis Skidmore (1817–1896) met in the 1850s. At the cathedrals of Hereford, Lichfield, and Salisbury, they collaborated on innovative and spectacular ironwork choir screens, made in the Gothic Revival style, and designed to complement and enhance the cathedral interiors in which they were situated. In Britain, the use of ironwork in this context was new. The screens synthesised medieval and modern aesthetics, and combined ambitious construction with meticulous craftsmanship.

Left, *courtesy of Wikipedia.*
Right, *courtesy of Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry.*

Scott often worked on a number of projects concurrently in different parts of the country and within tight timescales, and subcontracted the specialist craftsmanship required to realise them. For metalwork, he usually recommended Skidmore, although he also worked with John Hardman and Thomas Potter (who were both considered for the Hereford Screen). Sometimes the metalwork delegated was a major structural undertaking, as at Salisbury Cathedral where the civil engineer F. W. Shields used iron to brace the main tower.



Scott was lauded in his lifetime, even if he was not universally admired. Skidmore has not often been written about despite having worked in twenty-two cathedrals, three hundred parish churches, and twenty town halls. On the reverse of “postcard format” photographs he produced of his work he proudly listed cathedrals and the other locations of his significant creations. At the height of his career he employed over one hundred people, but he seems to have been a perfectionist and destroyed work with which he was not satisfied, and therefore was not commercially successful; his firm went into liquidation in 1872.

Only a decade earlier, Scott and Skidmore’s most successful collaboration had resulted in the Hereford Screen, described at the time as “the grandest and most triumphant achievement of



modern architectural art . . . the most important and successful example of modern metalwork that has ever been executed” (Above, courtesy of Wikipedia). Although much influenced in style by metalwork of the past, Skidmore was a technical innovator. A chalice shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851 featured the new technique of electroplating, which involved using an electrical current to deposit a thin layer of silver onto another metal. He was also interested in newly invented gas lighting which he installed in several buildings including Holy Trinity Church, Coventry, in 1856, where his fourteen light fittings still provide the main light source for the interior. These fittings were the precursor to those commissioned from Skidmore for Hereford Cathedral, no longer in situ but recorded in old photographs. Similar Skidmore fittings at Ely Cathedral feature his characteristic twisted columns and flamboyantly curling foliage, elements seen on the Hereford Screen.

In the 1860s—the decade of these three screens—Skidmore’s career was at its peak. In 1865, his company in Alma Street, Coventry, employed seventy-four men and fifty-four boys, many apprentices from local charity schools, on an average wage of about £1 per week. The premises included an extensive showroom, drawing offices for designs and photographs, a large general workshop, pattern shops, a photographic studio, enamelling rooms, a furnace, a stamping room, an electrotyping room with bath and stone figure models, a boiler-house, stores, a carpenter’s room, and a packing shop. By 1865 “Skidmore’s Art Manufactures Limited” had expanded to become “Skidmore’s Art Manufactures and Constructive Iron Company Limited”, marking a shift to include larger scale construction. A new letterhead proudly included the wording used when Skidmore was awarded a medal in 1862 for the Hereford Screen: “for progress, elegance of design, and for excellent workmanship”.

I am indebted for the above to Alicia Robinson, Senior Curator at the V&A.

Although the screens were much admired at the time they later caused a great deal of controversy, mainly fuelled by those ideologically opposed to any sort of barrier between clergy and congregation, resulting in Salisbury's screen being removed in April 1959. This precedent encouraged the opponents of Hereford's screen to follow their example which resulted in the V&A's largest fund-raising drive ever. These screens are what we would call 'marmite' objects but I believe, viewed in the context of the Victorian Gothic Revival, that they are amazing examples of the architectural blacksmiths' skill and truly great works of art - let me know if you disagree.

THAT CHEST

As you can imagine, the more one looks into something, the more complicated the story becomes. Below is information supplied by our colleague Sue Allenby who has made an in-depth study of the period.

Neither Old Sarum (when Archbishop Hubert Walter set up Department of Jewish Affairs and the Archa structure as Chief Justiciar in 1194), nor New Sarisbury (don't get excited – that would have been the local pronunciation – pace 'Leydenhall') were at any time set up as Archa towns in the entire period the king's Jews were in England prior to their expulsion in 1290.

The 'Archa' chests were there to house the chirographs (posh tally sticks) – the legal documents drawn up between Christians and Jews, - hence four locks for the scribes – two for each who lived in the 'Archa' town. The 'Archa' could be kept in a private home, with the chirographers and sheriffs responsible for sealing and transporting the 'Archa' to London. The complicated structure of the Archa system was set up after the 1190 massacre in York in a vain attempt to try to contain Jews in recognised 'centres' to make administration easier; Jews had been used to living in small communities in France. I think the first instance we come across of a Jew in Salisbury is in 1275 when 'Michael', living in Fisherton Anger, had inadvertently bought some stolen goods.

Has the chest ever been dated, by the way? Do we know when the extra locks were put on? Does it appear in an inventory at some point?.

At the end of the twelfth century there were far fewer Jews in the west country than there were in the east and south east, and none recorded in Sarum – Winchester, Exeter and Bristol, yes. Subsequently, I did not find a



single reference to Jews in all of Richard Poore's writings (Richard's eye for detail was beyond belief – woe betide you if you left a child unattended in a room with a fire, for example!)

The cost of borrowing money was set by government; *inter-est* was something else, denoting the gap between what was owing and what was paid on default. Jews, through no fault of their own, became the cause of ill-will and bloodshed. The Norman kings had invited them into the country, but the tensions between the Church and the Jews, and the Church and the State, and the State's perennial problems in raising money, meant any integration or even proper use of their expertise floundered, not least in the lack of understanding of capital and debt, transferable bonds, futures, derivatives and all their sophisticated financial instruments. By the thirteenth century it was the crown that cottoned on to the capitalisation of feudal landholdings as debts were brought to market! Westminster kept their own records in Latin and Hebrew and employed its own justices, clerks and serjeants responsible for all aspects of tallage* and taxation.

By the thirteenth century the Jews were lending further down the social scale as the Christian Italians entered the market.

The King ran a very effective protection racket - squeezing vast sums of money out of the Jews when he wanted to go to war (as in 1215), so they in turn had to call in loans to pay him and were vociferously blamed by their debtors. This disquiet often ended in violence. I am convinced that one of the reasons Salisbury was compared to the 'Garden of Eden' was because of the absence of that strife that stalked the old cities. There are recorded instances of friendships between Christians and Jews: 'my very good friend...', but it was not encouraged.

So these Archa (Latin for chest) were restricted to certain towns, twenty-six in the thirteenth century. So we are left with a conundrum: why would we have one if we were not an Archa town? Also, why has it got so many locks? The chest was removed from the Muniment room in 1970.

Incidentally the Jewish clauses in our Magna Carta do not appear in subsequent versions, probably due to their community's importance as a source of taxation. However, by 1290 Edward I decided to expel the Jewish community. As the Times of Israel puts it: *England's Jews had simply outlived their usefulness and the king knew his decision would be popular with both people and Church. Edward's decree was one of of Royal Prerogative and not an Act of Parliament. The Edict of Expulsion was proclaimed on July 18th of that year which just happened to be Tisha B'Av (day of disasters). This gave the estimated 2,500-5,000*

community until the Christian holy day of All Saints (November 1st) to quit the realm. They had endured persecution, massacres in both London and York and the first blood libel and ritual murder accusations, soon to be taken up enthusiastically elsewhere.

* Tallage: A tax arbitrarily imposed upon a community, which was made collectively responsible for the entire sum (Jewish Encyclopaedia).



THAT ELIAS

Elias, working for the Archbishop of Canterbury, was tasked, along with the Sacristan of St. Albans to translate the remains of St. Thomas Becket (Right, from a window in Canterbury Cathedral, *courtesy of Wikipedia*) from Canterbury's cathedral crypt to a magnificent shrine which they should erect at the east end. A Sacristan incidentally is a person who has charge of the contents of a church, especially the sacred vessels, vestments, etc. In 1180-4 a new Trinity Chapel was constructed in the form of a curved ambulatory. Beyond this was the Corona, a circular chapel which housed further Becket relics, supposedly including the crown of his head struck off during the assassination. The chapel was completed in 1184 and the translation took place in 1220.

The shrine was spectacular with the gold casket created by Master Walter of Colchester. Desiderius Erasmus who visited the shrine in 1512-14 recorded that the cover was raised *and the Prior pointed out each jewel, telling its name in French, its value and the name of the donor; for the principal of them were offerings sent by sovereign princes*. Alas, the shrine was removed in 1538. Elias was described as an *Artifex Incomparabilis* meaning that he was regarded not only as a capable administrator but also a man of exceptional artistic achievement.

The Crown owned Clarendon and Old Sarum so the space available for a new cathedral and town was limited. Luckily the Bishop owned property at Milford so 260 acres were set aside, of which 83 acres were allocated to the cathedral. New Sarum was a rare opportunity to build a Cathedral on a greenfield site.

We do not know if Stephen Langton offered to transfer the 55 year old Elias to Salisbury or if Bishop Poore asked for him, but his multiple skills made him the man to go to. Designing and building a Cathedral was enough to entice him from Canterbury but his ability to also raise the money made him invaluable to the Bishop. Of course, when the town was built, the revenue from the rents put the finances on a sound footing; Salisbury becoming the seventh largest town in England within 200 years. The initial fund required was 42,000 marks (£28,000, say £20.4 million at today's prices). The canons committed a ¼ of their income for seven years. The King, the Bishop and the Earl and Countess of Salisbury also contributed. The clergy raised money in London and the Archbishop gave a 30-day indulgence.

Elias could also trade his skills for finance. We know he worked for the King on Clarendon and Winchester and it could be he built Hinton Charterhouse priory (left, Samuel Hieronymus



Grimm 1790 *courtesy of Wikipedia*) for Ela Longespée (1232). Into this mix must also be added the oak which the King provided from Royal forests in Ireland and the Purbeck 'marble' gifted by Alice Brewer.

As you know, Elias built the first canonry - Leadenhall. A *sumptuose* state of the art and an *exemplum* for the canonries that were to follow. I am indebted to Adrian Hasting's booklet on the Cathedral for some of the above.