

# PORTSMOUTH CATHEDRAL

by Simon L Ablett, Cathedral Architect



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## Seeing the cathedral from a different viewpoint

One of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of being an architect is gaining access to spaces and getting close to historic fabric, often at high level, that others don't ordinarily see. There is a rare opportunity to see a different, perhaps unusual, viewpoint of a building or its interior, especially when temporary scaffolding for repair work is in place. The repair works at Portsmouth Cathedral have given several such opportunities. A project that commenced with roof repair work to the east end was followed by interior decoration and conservation work as well as significant access improvements. One of the joys of the work at Portsmouth was being able to share some of those views with

members of the public and enable them to see the repair work close at hand.

The most urgent recommendation of the quinquennial inspection report of 2011 was the condition of the roofs over the eastern end, which is the earliest part of the cathedral and dedicated in the eleventh century. The eastern roofs above the transepts and chapel of St Thomas are all clay tiled with lead lined parapet gutters, the side aisles had been added to the seventeenth century quire by the architect Charles Nicholson in the 1930s and are flat roofs covered with asphalt. The report drew attention to the very poor condition of the tiling to the west face of the north transept roof where there was a mixture of hand and machine made tiles of differing sizes and types, many of which were slipped, broken or decaying, ridge tiles were defective, the lead guttering had a split and rainwater disposal was not ideal.

The evidence of water ingress on the north side of the quire was a particular concern and was due to poor detailing of the copper coverings of the three large dormer windows, but the glazing needed repair and general roof tiling was very uneven. Other roofs had slipped and missing tiles, cast iron rainwater downpipes were split and corroded, asphalt needed repair and the cross finials to the apex of the transepts were leaning at odd angles. Water was entering the earliest part of the cathedral and repairs were needed.

A grant from the Joint Cathedral Fabric Repair Fund and an award from the Heritage Lottery Fund enabled the works to be put in hand. The cathedral has a strong education programme and this repair work was the ideal opportunity to expand this, so display panels were provided in the cathedral, a short film



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## PROJECT

## PORTSMOUTH CATHEDRAL

### PROJECT TEAM

Main Contractor  
(tile, lead and copper  
roofing and the  
interior project):  
Clarke Roofing  
(Southern) Ltd

Specialist  
Subcontractor:  
Tilleys Stonemasons  
Ltd

Lime Wash and  
Distemper Supplier:  
Rose of Jericho

Mortar Analysis:  
Heritage Testing Ltd

Dendro Work:  
Oxford  
Dendrochronology  
Laboratory

Quantity Surveyor:  
Sawyer and Fisher

CDM Co-ordinator:  
Moran Architects

Glass Engraver:  
Tracey Sheppard

Specialist Glass  
Installer:  
Nero glass

Blacksmith:  
Peter Clutterbuck

Automation of the  
South Porch Doors:  
Woodwood Door  
Controls Ltd

Porch Lantern:  
Great British  
Lighting



was prepared, plus seminars arranged for schools, university students, public and members of the congregation. This included group visits onto the roof to see the work in progress and even though some visitors had gingerly ascended aluminium staircases to

reach the north aisle roof, it was all received with great interest. Despite the very poor weather the eastern roof project was completed prior to Christmas 2012.

Approval was given by the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England for the dendrochronological dating of the roof timbers above the chapel of St Thomas and the two transepts. In the case of chapel of St Thomas the felling date was identified during the period 1389-1421 and the north and south transepts the timbers are likely to date from 1693, which corresponds with the dated plasterwork at high level in the quire.

The William Groves Legacy enabled Cathedral Chapter to consider interior



redecorating, especially as the fabric of the eastern end was beginning to look rather unloved and tatty. In late autumn of 2012 Chapter instructed the complete redecoration of the quire, the main transepts, the aisles and the chapel of St Thomas. This work was to include refurbishing the south porch with new automated etched glass doors (funded by other bequests) and an internal ramp. And, to complete the roofing works the south Quire was to be retiled.

After preparation of the drawings, specifications and tendering to several contractors the job was awarded and extensive temporary protection to flooring, joinery, the organ and the monuments commenced in January. The long and arduous task of threading hundreds of scaffold poles and boards into the cathedral also began. Deadlines were tight, as the aim was to complete all the work in the quire and transepts by Easter. The chapel of St Thomas had to be finished by early May, as a wedding was booked.

The first area to be tackled was on the north side with numerous lime plaster repairs to the sloping soffit of the lath and plaster ceiling and cleaning down ready for the decorations. The north transept and the south aisle followed on, with similar repairs, and, with the approval of the Fabric Advisory Committee a warm off-white limewash was applied to the main wall areas. The multiple coats of limewash could commence whilst the tallest scaffold, in the quire, was being erected.

I find it fascinating to get close to very high ceilings, perhaps it is in the knowledge that

this might be a once in a lifetime opportunity to see an interior from a different angle. The barrel vaulted ceiling of the quire was no exception and when standing on the top level of the scaffolding it felt like being inside a huge upturned boat. It was interesting to see the cornice on the south side following the outward curve of the wall, as well as getting close to the very large plaster ceiling roses and the view across the organ loft into the nave. >

## ADVERT TILLEY STONEMASONS

## ADVERT CLARKE ROOFING

- 01 South Tower view
- 02 Quire towards organ  
© Jonty M Sexton
- 03 Chapel of St Thomas  
vault looking east
- 04 Quire ceiling during  
the works
- 05 The north roof in  
progress
- 06 The north roof in  
progress



PROJECT

PORTSMOUTH CATHEDRAL



07 The south roof looking west after work

08 Glass doors after

09 Chapel of St Thomas  
© Jonty M Sexton

Getting close to the Victorian lath and plaster mock vaulting in the chapel of St Thomas was also rewarding. The bold plaster bosses had small pieces of charred material caught in the mouldings – presumably from the Second World War. The bosses were re-gilded as were the spheres on the rods supporting Nicholson's tester above Michael Drury's altar of the 1990s.

The outer south wall of the triforium of the chapel appeared from floor level to be in poor repair, but it turned out that the issue was a combination of soft mortar, modern cement repairs and plaster patches which gave an appearance far worse than it was. The mortar from the core of the wall was analysed and found to be an interesting mix, including large particles of flint, some limestone, reddish brown sandstone and fragments of shell. A close match to the main body colour was used for the re-pointing works whilst other wall areas were brushed down, the rendering repaired and lime washed. It was marvellous to see the very narrow the passageways, with their stone steps and walling of rubble stone.

Another rewarding aspect was getting close to the stained glass, which seemed to come to life after the dirt and grime were carefully cleaned away. The three east windows by Christopher Webb, dated 1952, are particularly vibrant, even on a gloomy day.

The final component of the project was to improve the main entrance to the cathedral. To replace steps in the south aisle a new internal stone ramp was provided with blacksmith made handrails to match the existing in the ambulatory. Because the south

porch appeared rather forbidding and not welcoming alteration to the outer panelled doors was undertaken and a new set of inner oak doors with large engraved glass panels by Tracey Sheppard were installed. Tracey's work is a pleasing contemporary design and includes symbols of baptism, references to the Portsmouth fishing fleet and the sun as a symbol of Christ, with the names of the donors in the panels above the doors. The glass allows views into the interior as well as natural light to permeate into the former gloomy entrance area. This work adds a suitably twenty-first century layer to a cathedral of many periods. ■

#### THE DEAN'S ACCOUNT

Portsmouth Cathedral Chapter had developed aspirations for some years to renovate and redecorate the medieval and Jacobean east end of the building, but the failing roofs were the first priority. A very generous legacy, together with grants for the roofing, enabled us to undertake the whole project in a year. Of particular interest were the educational aspects of the work, which thanks to a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund we were able to build into the project, enabling schoolchildren, university architecture students and members of the public to engage with the work in a variety of ways.

*The Very Reverend David Brindley,  
Dean of Portsmouth.*

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