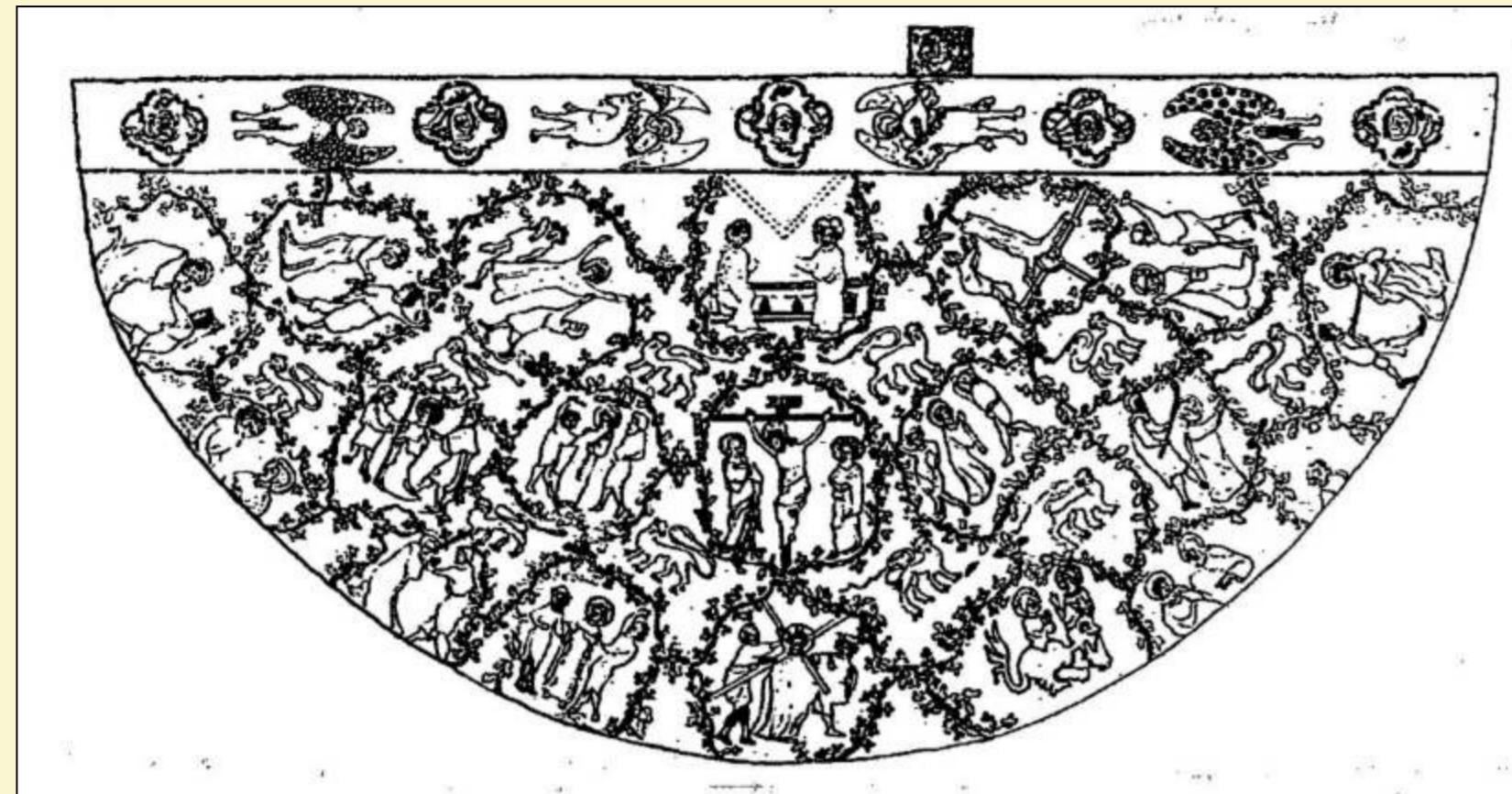


COPING WITH THE COPE



Major fund raising for a programme of church repairs was in progress in the early 1980s and the highlight of activities was when one section of our world famous cope returned home. Michael Hayter, Rector, describes the complex preparations in his articles in Steeple Aston Life, April and May 1983:

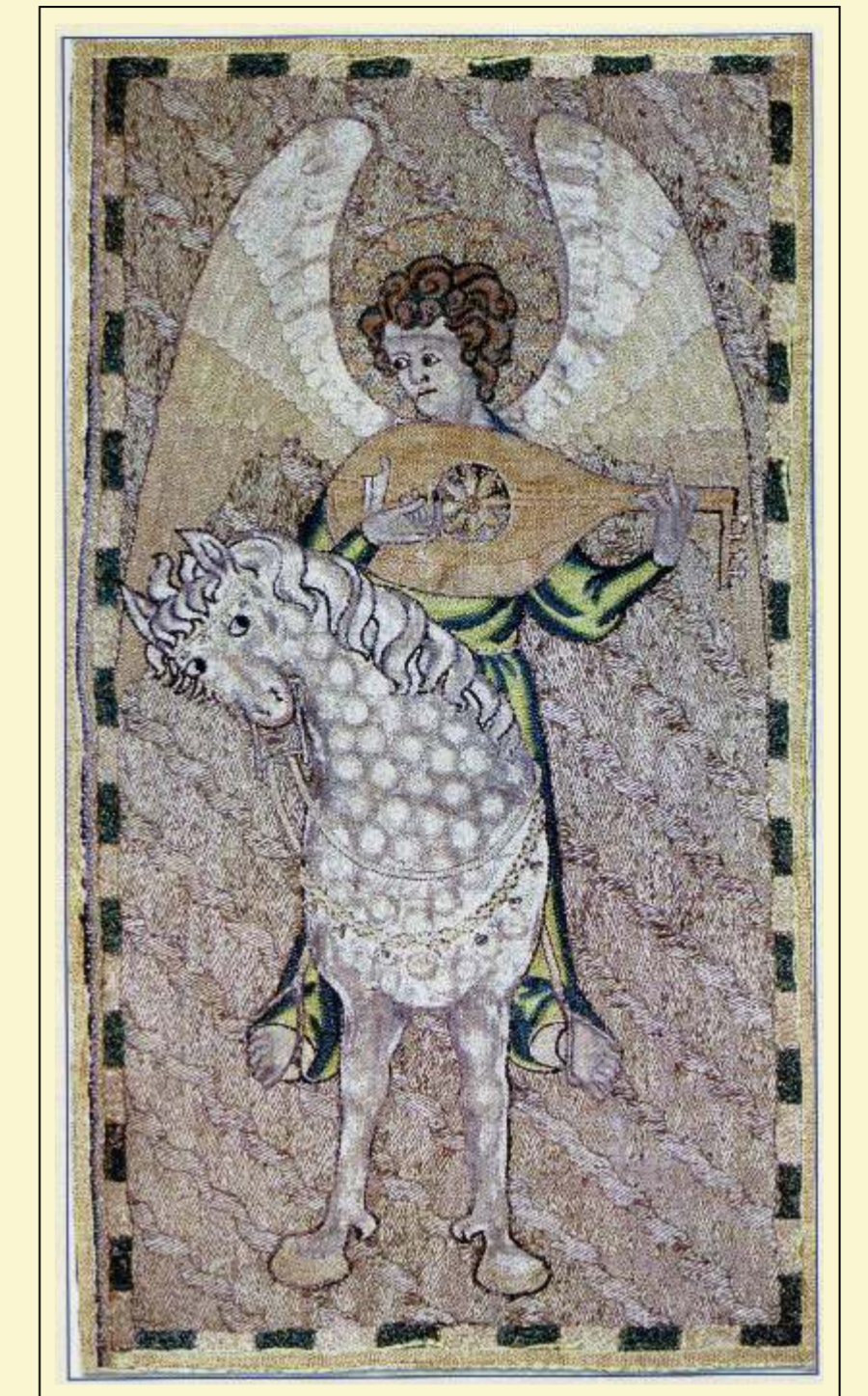
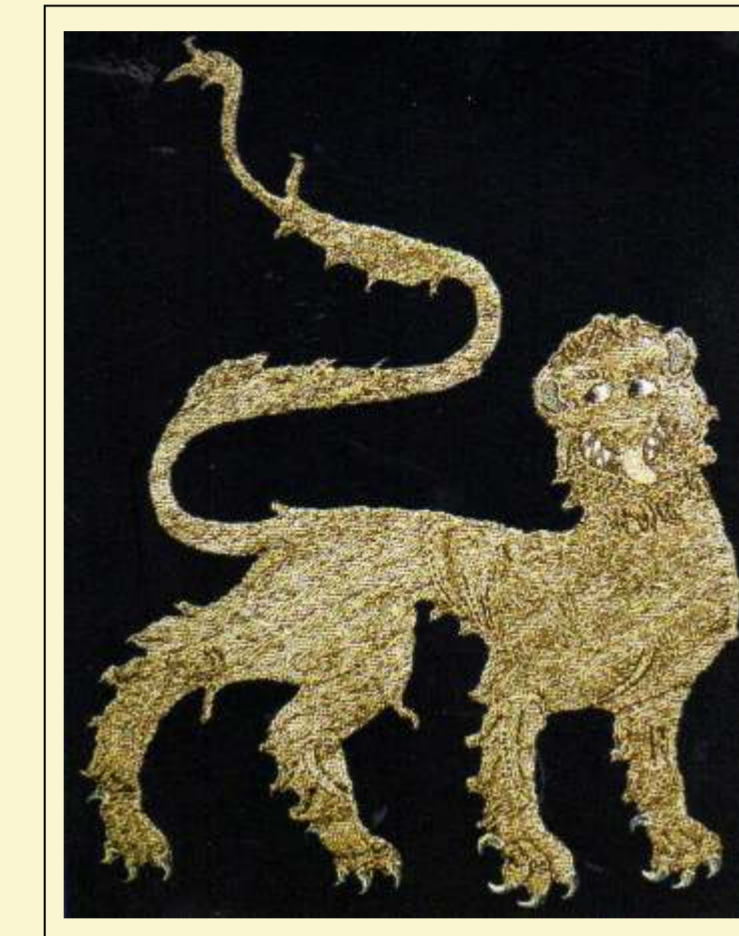
Church Historical Weekend

We are organising a major fund raising effort at the Whitsun weekend, May 21 and 22nd. We are borrowing back from various museums historical treasures belonging to or connected with the church. The treasure to be displayed will be a section of the mediaeval Steeple Aston Cope which for the past 70 years or so has been held by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Display cases are being borrowed from the Ashmolean Museum and controlled lighting arranged. Security will involve not less than two men on duty in the church night and day while the display is there. The Cope which does still belong to the Rector and Churchwardens is a national treasure needing the most careful guardianship. There will be guided tours of the church, its history and architecture, each day, and we expect to cater for teas for the visitors. We shall need all the help we can get from the parish to staff this effort, and there is an appeal elsewhere in this magazine for volunteers.

Besides the Victoria and Albert, various other museums are helping us - Roman bracelets from the Ashmolean, our former tower clock movement from the Museum of History and Science, the first register from the Bodleian, and several items from the Woodstock museum which we have lent to them. Altogether there should be about thirty objects or groups of objects on show, as well as church fixtures of historical interest.



The recent photos above of the Cope (courtesy of the V&A) show how it looks today - the lower photos showing how several pieces cut from the original have been joined together. A reconstruction of the original is shown top centre.



In the noughties more large sums of money had to be raised for repairs to the leaking church and in 2003 the Cope returned once again to the village to help raise money for the Church Restoration and Improvements Appeal. Once again David Armitage (below left) led the committee, and he wrote in Steeple Aston Life:

The Exhibition Weekend will be a rare opportunity for the village to see the Cope in its former home together with other important church artefacts and items of local history. There is also to be a display around the altar of six other Copes, which will include the one that Archbishop Fisher wore when he crowned HM The Queen in 1953.

David continues:

I am sure you will appreciate that the security of the objects borrowed from museums and churches is very much part of the conditions specified in the loan agreements. We estimate that we shall need about 10 staff on duty at any one time in the Church during opening hours.

The exhibition was widely published and merchandise was ordered: jigsaws, biscuit tins, postcards, notelets, mugs, paperweights and fridge magnets. There were two talks by Linda Woolley, curator of the V&A Museum and refreshments were laid on in the village hall. The exhibition was a huge success, described as stunning.

How the Cope originally found its way to Steeple Aston is a mystery. This inspired Roger Mason to write a Medieval Musical Mystery play. The performances were on 24th- 26th May and starred shadow puppets, the Steeple Aston Players, the Choral Society and the School Choir. They raised an incredible £2,712 for the Restoration Fund.

By the end of May the outside repair work to the church had been completed, and by the end of June £82,000 had been raised towards the target of £120,000 needed by Easter 2004.



The Cope, embroidered in England, probably in London, is known by its Latin name, "opus anglicanum", which translates simply as "English work". It is a supreme example of this type of work and is from the "great period" of opus anglicanum, probably made in about 1325.

The quality of the work was such that it was in demand and highly prized throughout Europe. It was the best available and was ordered by Kings, Dukes, Popes and Cardinals. The embroidery was done in workshops by professional embroiderers. Both men and women were involved and served an apprenticeship of seven years. It is thought that workshops employed about twenty workers.

Embroidery is very labour intensive and this, together with the high cost of materials at the time, such as silk, gold and silver thread, not to mention, in some cases, precious stones, resulted in a garment that only the very rich could afford to buy. In 1317, Queen Isabella, wife of Edward 111, paid about £40,000, at today's prices, for an embroidered cope.

Embroidery, in the Middle Ages, as an art form, enjoyed equal status with other forms such as manuscript illumination, carving in ivory, silver gilt metalwork, stained glass or sculpture. Costly embroidered textiles were a visible symbol of wealth, power and high status, whether for Princes or ornate copes for Popes.

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