



The Vergers Voice

The news blog of the Vergers Guild

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Friday, February 20, 2015

Who do we think we are? James Armstrong - National Chairman Church of England Guild of Virgers



A virge from the 17th Century (or is it?) from the collection of Carlisle Cathedral in England

By Ken Holloway, News Manager, VGEC, with James Armstrong, National Chairman of the Church of England Guild of Vergers (CEGV)

As the agenda for the [2015 VGEC Conference in St. Louis](#) was formed, a topic near to my heart grabbed my attention. On Friday morning is James Armstrong's Keynote address entitled "Who Do We Think We Are? Our Ancestry as Vergers."

I wrote to him saying, "The title of your address is intriguing. I am a avid student of church history, so I anticipate that your presentation will be like chocolate candy to me." I asked him how he became a verger and what led him to his post as Head Verger of [Carlisle Cathedral](#). I also wanted to know why and how he began accumulating this body of knowledge.

He responded, "My career as a verger began in [St Mary's Parish Church](#), Wooler, Northumberland England when I had just left school in 1979. I took over the role from a gentleman who had been a family friend who became ill. This was no great surprise to anyone as I had been worshipping at the church all my life and was always keen to help and I was possibly a nuisance to him always hanging around. So I became the voluntary verger of St Mary's for the next eight years as well as working as an Agricultural Chemist in Tweedmouth which is on the border between England and Scotland. I was next appointed, after an interview, to the post of verger of [Hexham Abbey](#), Northumberland - a building which dates back to 674, although most of what is above ground was built in the 1200's. My next move was to become the Head Verger of Carlisle Cathedral to succeed John Campbell when he moved to Lincoln. Both John and I now have been in our positions for almost 25 years!

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"I joined the [CEGV](#) in 1983 while I was at Wooler and have served the guild on various committees and held positions both at branch and national level. It was during our various meetings and conferences that as a young verger the older members were talking and giving advice as well as reminiscing on times past, I thought to myself, "... if this information is not written down it will be lost." So whenever the gin and tonics were poured and talk turned to the formation of the CEGV, I started to make notes of all that was relevant. This I later turned into a time line and have added to it through reading old meeting minutes and back copies of "[The Verger](#)" magazine. During this process I accumulated a lot of snippets and bits about vergers and our ministry that were just sitting in a file. It finally dawned on me that I needed to do something with this pile of hand written scraps of paper. This is the foundation of my knowledge and indeed my presentation."

You see, therefore, that James has for a long time collected artifacts and documents supportive of his study of the history and evolution of the verger ministry in the Anglican tradition. As head verger at Carlisle Cathedral in the UK, his residence there has a room set aside solely as a repository for the result of his research.

As we talked, I became more and more thirsty for "verger-history brew," Carlisle-style, when he told me, "I became increasing aware that although we all assume that we trace our roots back to the Roman temple servants and guards there was no evidence. This has become a bit of a quest. Then thoughts turned to, was there any shape or design that was universal among early virges and what date did they come into use? That led to my appealing to our members to send me pictures and as much information on their virges as possible. I had some success but I have drawn no conclusions as to what early virges looked like and what date they were first introduced into our liturgy. There are a few from the 1600s still in use in cathedrals today. So many questions, so many of them still unanswered, but I have made a start."

Finally, he shared just one example of what we'll be privileged to hear during the Keynote Address at the VGEC 27th Annual Conference in October:

"1160 [Old St Paul's Cathedral](#) London; The Treasurer was a canon of very great importance; the tithes of four churches came to him. He was entrusted with the duty of providing the lighting of the cathedral, and had charge of the relics, the books, the sacred vessels, crosses, curtains, and palls. The Sacrist had to superintend the tolling of the bells, to see that the church was opened at the appointed times, that it was kept clean, and that reverence was maintained at times of service. Under him were four Vergers (wand-bearers), who enforced the Sacrist's rules, and took care "bad characters" were not harboured in the church."

I have a scant notion of what those "bad characters" may have looked like. Can you see them being approached by the wand-bearers? What conversation may have transpired? [Register now](#) to come to St. Louis on October 1-4, 2015 and find out first hand from James Armstrong!

James tells us about the virge in the photograph above, "This virge does have a story attached to it, it was said to have been carried before [Bishop Owen Oglethorpe, Bishop of Carlisle 1557-1559](#) on the occasion he crowned Elizabeth I. Unfortunately no evidence supports this claim, and it has no hall marks to establish its date or provenance. It does bear the arms of the Dean and Chapter so was probably made for the cathedral, but it has been judged stylistically to be of seventeenth century date and probably the "one silver mace" which is listed in the inventory of 1674."

Who could resist learning more from the leader of the vergers of the Church of England? Join us in St. Louis for a fascinating experience reaching into and examining our rich world-wide history of the ministry of the verger.

[Register for the 2015 Annual Conference](#) being held October 1 to October 4, 2015 in St. Louis, Missouri by clicking on the big red button:



Abstract: 25 years as Head Verger at Carlisle Cathedral. Current National Chairman of the Church of England Guild of Vergers, and our Keynote Speaker at the VGEC 27th Annual Conference, this year in St. Louis, MO. He brings to us an in-depth commentary on the history of the verger supported by serious research to tell the story, "Who Do We Think We Are? Our Ancestry as Vergers".

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Posted by [Ken Holloway](#) at 8:00 AM



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