Robert Beech

Doctoral researcher

Department of Art History, Film and Visual Studies

About

PhD Title: Hammer-beam: High Status Carpentry in the Late Middle Ages
PhD History of Art (/postgraduate/courses/research/histart/history-art.aspx)

Qualifications

Previous Academic Experience in the Field of Art / Architectural History:

- BA: Combined Studies, Modern Languages and Art History, University of Leicester; dissertations on Thomas Gainsborough, William Hogarth.
- MA: Humanities with Art History, University of Leicester; dissertation on Brutalist architecture.

I have also worked as a traditional carpenter.

Research

The literature on gothic architecture is vast, but in such studies the work of the carpenter has always been the poor cousin of the more obvious delights of the mason. Yet without the ingenuity of the carpenter, the architectural and engineering feats of the Middle Ages could never have been accomplished. The hammer-beam roof, the apogee of which is in Richard II's Westminster Hall (Hugh Herland, begun 1393), is the pinnacle of that ingenuity. But the hammer-beam roof is not only a great technical achievement. At its best, it is a form that can display an aesthetic sensibility of both subtle refinement and jaw-dropping grandeur. To walk into an edifice such as Westminster Hall, or even a village church such as St Mary's, Woolpit in Suffolk, is to have one's eyes drawn aloft in wonder. Such structures also became the repository of sculpture programmes of intriguing, arcane symbolism, programmes which have attracted little academic interest.

The literature on medieval carpentry is relatively sparse, surprisingly contentious and sometimes highly flawed. A multidisciplinary field - of necessity encompassing the work of archaeologists, medieval historians, structural engineers, architects and art historians - published research is often dogged by obsessive concentration on minutiae and / or interdisciplinary snootiness. My research will attempt to knit some of those sometimes divergent interdisciplinary strands together. Focussing on the development of the hammer-beam roof, a peculiarly British phenomenon, from its rudimentary beginnings in the late thirteenth to its full flowering the early fifteenth century, I will address not only the technical details of what happened, but also more panoramic questions as to why. My research will place the hammer-beam in the context of its fourteenth-century architectural milieu. It will examine the sometimes conflicting perspectives of client demand and contemporary carpenter 'know-how', a metier rooted in tradition but spurred to innovate by new aesthetic trends and technical challenges.

From a handful of mainly crude and unprepossessing early examples, the hammer-beam suddenly blossomed into hundreds of structures of great sophistication and splendour. Ultimately, then, my research will answer the question of why what appeared to be a developmental dead end in the fourteenth century led in the fifteenth to some of the most outstanding (if underrated) works of art in the English medieval canon.

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