‘Belief Made Manifest’: tangible religious and cultural history

Saturday 10 December 2011

It is often assumed that the beliefs and values of past generations can only be accessed through specific written records which were created to document these very things – but those who know where to look are well aware that our forebears left a wealth of evidence about what they believed (and indeed what they did not believe), often in a form which is easily overlooked. The contributions for this study day fall into two categories – in the morning we will hear two papers from experts in the study of misericords – the carved decorations which are hidden from view on the underside of hinged seats in the east end of many medieval cathedrals and great churches, and are only revealed when the seats are tipped up. The imagery found on misericords is often secular rather than religious, and tends towards the ribald rather than the pious: they can tell us a great deal about the concerns of the carvers, and indeed those who sponsored their creation. In the afternoon we will hear two presentations focused around issues of gender identity and the locations – again easily overlooked – where evidence about the attitudes of the past can be found. The first contribution focuses on prison reformers and the evidence that an oblique reading of documentary evidence can provide, whilst the final paper returns us to the medieval era, with an examination of the written and visual evidence that the cult of St Ursula can provide us with about attitudes to gender in the late Middle Ages. Expect to be surprised and fascinated – you may well find that a whole new light is cast on the past!

10.00 – 11.00 Mind your mannerisms: cultural idioms in North West Misericords - John Dickinson, Lancaster University

11.00 - 11.30 Coffee/tea & biscuits

11.30 - 12.30 Birds, Beasts and Popular Belief on Misericord Carvings – Professor Paul Hardwick, Leeds Trinity University College

12.30 - 1.30 Lunch

1.30 – 2.30 ‘The benevolent exertions of Mrs Fry and her friends’: prison reform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – Jenny Paull, independent scholar

2.30 - 3.00 Tea/coffee & biscuits

3.00 - 4.00 Relics of gender identity – the cult of St Ursula, the 11,000 virgins and sundry other followers – Dr Sam Riches, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, Lancaster University