

# The Elstow Pulpit

This, one of Bedfordshire's only 4 surviving medieval pulpits, originally stood in Elstow Abbey's convent church, located on the north side of the first pier west of the rood screen. One can get some idea of the larger size of the Abbey then, when one realises that the rood screen was located where the present-day Abbey church's east end wall now stands.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pulpit's medieval painted decoration was scraped and an artificial graining varnish applied. During the church's 1880 restoration, the pulpit was removed to the back of the building, where it remained until 1969, when it was moved here into Moot Hall.

Of 'wine-glass' design, the pulpit stands, even in its present incomplete state, 7 feet high and 29 inches wide. The simple cornice round the top matches that at the bottom. Two sides were re-faced at an early date but, from the remaining 3 sections, we can see that the cornice was originally green. Of the original seven sides, two comprise a door. The back panel was altered (post-reformation) to accommodate a pinewood seat for the preacher. The five remaining sides are decorated with two tracery panels, separated by a crenellated transom two inches wide.

The pulpit's fine proportions are set off by slender green-painted buttresses, of which five remain at the corners. They extend for almost the entire height of the drum, and terminate in beautifully carved gables and crocketed pinnacles.

At some stage, the pulpit lost its foot, whose shape would have corresponded with the coving above. The coving supports the platform, with plain ribs sprouting from a sort of knob. There is almost no colouring left here, except for faint traces of green around the top. Also, a band of black, about two inches wide, across the tops of the wedge-shaped panels, which would have intensified the shadow cast by the overhanging superstructure. The splays from each panel are ogival in section and were originally painted green.

The front surfaces of the tracery bear traces of red paint, while the spandrels and other surfaces were a rich deep green. The lower panels are of two cinquefoiled lights, with plain spandrels and foliated cresting at the bottom. The upper series are of three trefoiled lights, with conventional tracery.

The decoration of these lights is unusual, being a representation of leaded church windows; a fine black diamond pattern was painted onto a white background, with the iron armatures being depicted by thicker horizontal and vertical lines in red. Just under each intersection is a small red rectangle.

In the dimly-lit Norman Abbey Church, this paintwork would have created a lantern effect; with light seeming to pour from the pulpit's 'windows' - a nice piece of medieval symbolism, suggesting the illuminating qualities of the preached word.