Newly discovered work in England by the Master of Hakendover*

In the church of St Martin, Dorking, there is an octagonal wooden pulpit of great art-historical interest (fig. 1). When the church was rebuilt in 1835-37, the task of finding a pulpit suitable for the new building seems to have fallen to the curate, Stephen Isaacson, and its purchase from London antique dealer John Webb was under way by 16 March 1837. The pulpit survived the second rebuilding of the nave in the 1870s and is still in the church today.

The pulpit is a hybrid work, presumably assembled by or under the supervision of John Webb, and probably to customer requirements, since a 16th-century wooden relief of St Martin, the patron saint of the church, is prominently mounted on the southwestern side. Small statues have been placed at the corners of the pulpit, and these include an incomplete set of early 15th-century apostle figures carved of walnut which are of high quality.

The figure to the left of the steps (statue A, fig. 2) is badly wormeaten, the head is broken off and the right hand and drapery are damaged. Nevertheless, its skilled craftsmanship is immediately obvious, for example in the finely boned hands, the fingers bent to support the imaginary weight of the book with its naturalistically shabby, simulated leather cover and individually delineated pages. The erect, slender figure is swathed in a delicately carved robe turned back at the neck like a collar and stretched across the figure in a swinging fold, characteristic of the International Gothic style. Tellingly, however, the folds of the robe below are more angular, anticipating the broken drapery folds distinctive in Netherlandish painting and carving from c.1420-30 onwards. The edges of the sleeves, and the edge of the robe meandering to the ground to the left, are sharp-edged and precariously thin, demonstrating the virtuosity of the carving.

John the Evangelist, holding his cup, is clearly identifiable on the left corner of the west face of the pulpit (statue B, fig. 3). This is the only figure of the group in which a foot (bare as befits an apostle) protrudes below the drapery hem. This statue is in excellent condition and is arrestingly lifelike in the gently turning pose, long, delicate fingers and fixed, pensive gaze. The folds of drapery held up with the base of the cup wind one inside the other in an exquisitely decorative but utterly logical manner. The neat facial type is distinctively unstylised, with wrinkled brow, heavy-lidded eyes and wig-like curling hair, and it is carved in a deft, unfussy way designed to capture effects rather than described in detail. Unlike many contemporary northern carvings, the head itself is very slightly small rather than large in relation to the body which, together with the slender figure, give the figure an elegance of proportions.

The adjacent figure to the right of the western side of the pulpit (statue C, fig. 4), again in excellent condition, turns as if stepping forward, one knee suggested beneath the drapery. The raised hand held a now missing attribute, and in the other is
a book carried in its cloth cover in accordance with 13th-century custom. The unidealised face of the saint is more angular to suggest age, but compares closely with the St John in its slight elongation, the furrowed brow, the rough but remarkably descriptive chisel marks around eyes and mouth, slightly ungainly nose and wide mouth. The sharp-edged meandering drapery lines recall the headless figure A, while below the book, one fold of drapery winds inside another as in the robe of St John.

The next corner of the pulpit is occupied by a 16th-century female saint. Adjacent, however, is a fourth apostle (statue D, fig. 5) without distinguishing attributes and, like figure A, badly worm-eaten, and it is possible that something, including perhaps an attribute, has been lost from the left edge. Like figures B and C the figure turns slightly, the gaze apparently fixed (here downwards), as if in active response. The distinctive wrinkled forehead and slightly wide mouth and ungainly nose reappear but the drapery seems heavier and softer, and the narrow shoulders and more swaying stance betray a slightly more archaic style. One of the folds bends into a characteristic horizontal motif as it hits the ground. The downward-pointing finger has been broken but carefully repaired. On the reverse of this figure is flaking brown paint, perhaps decayed varnish rather than the remnant of overpainted polychromy.