Curios and Relics
Architectural Features
Lincoln Imp
Lincoln Cathedral, England

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection
The Lincoln Imp

Collectors of Lincolniana are sometimes confronted with an odd object of art (brass or bisque) called the Lincoln Imp, which in reality has no connection with the Sixteenth President. The Foundation has collected two; one, a bisque figurine and the other, a brass door knocker.

The story of the Lincoln Imp can be traced to the Cathedral City of Lincoln, England. Located in a magnificent edifice in an area known as the Angel Choir, the Lincoln Imp in a secluded niche is a matter of interest for all those who visit the Cathedral.

The British Travel Association of London has published an attractive folder on Lincoln, England, with a brief history of the Cathedral:

"The Normans started to build their great Cathedral around 1074 when Bishop Remigius moved the seat of his Diocese (stretching from the Humberside to the Thames) to Lincoln. The Norman work that was carried out under his direction and modified by Bishop Alexander, the third Bishop, can still be seen on the west front, surrounded by fine Early English arcing.

"After losing its roof in a fire in 1141, the main structure of the Norman church fell in ruins as the result of an earth tremor in 1185. St.

A bisque figurine and a brass door knocker depicting the Lincoln Imp which are a part of the Foundation's museum collection.

Hugh (1186-1200) began rebuilding the Cathedral from a central point to the east end, starting with St. Hugh's Choir. Later when the nave was completed and joined to the Norman west front, the alignment of the vault was slightly out of true. This irregularity can be seen clearly by looking back along the nave from the choir screen. From the same point the two glorious round stained glass windows of the transepts, known as the 'Dean's Eye' and 'Bishop's Eye', can be admired. The 'Dean's Eye' in the north transept dates from 1225. The flowing tracery of the 'Bishop's Eye' is 14th century and includes early glass arranged in a random pattern.

"In the mid-13th century the apsidal east end of the choir was removed so that the Cathedral could be enlarged to accommodate St. Hugh's shrine. Known as the Angel Choir, this extension takes its name from the thirty stone figures of angels high up in the triforium. The well-known Lincoln Imp, a small grotesque figure, is found here.

"The magnificent central Tower (271 feet) was finished circa 1311. Originally it was crowned by a lofty spire of wood and lead which brought its total height to 525 feet. The Wren Library was added in the 17th century and contains many first editions and other treasures. One of the four remaining original copies of Magna Carta is kept in the Cathedral Treasury."

For those who visit the Lincoln Cathedral there is available for sale a little booklet entitled The Legend of the Lincoln Imp, first published in 1904 and which has gone into twenty-six editions up to 1967. The legend was written by H. J. Kesson. The publication also contains illustrative cuts of the Cathedral, the Angel Choir (with an arrow pointing to the location of the Lincoln Imp) and a close-up view of a photograph by S. Smith.

Those readers of Lincoln Lore who visit Lincoln, England, to see the Lincoln Imp, should remember that even before the Romans came to Lincoln and set up a military garrison in A.D. 48 the site of the city was occupied and known as Lindon ("hill fort by the pool"). Later it became a walled town and was given the status of a colonia, a chartered town in which legionary soldiers were settled on retirement. The Roman name Lindon Colonia became shortened to Lincoln. So the name Lincoln was a place name first and afterwards it became a sur-name, particularly for those families (Abraham Lincoln was a descendant) who moved to other English cities, counties or colonies beyond the sea.

Mrs. A. Lincoln—A Needlewoman

In the archives of the Lincoln Library-Museum is a letter written by M. Lincoln (Mary Harlan), the wife of Robert T. Lincoln, dated September 3, 1929, in which she described her mother-in-law as "a beautiful needlewoman."

The letter, addressed to "My dear Miss Jackson," was in answer to one received on August 20th. Miss Jackson sent a little garment for Mrs. Lincoln to see, and she wrote in reply, "I have no doubt whatever that it was made by Mrs. A. Lincoln, for she was a beautiful needlewoman—I think the Gurleys must prize it highly! We have several specimens of her handiwork—the most interesting perhaps is a little linen shirt, made for my husband before he was born! And you know when ladies sewed at night in those days, it was by Candlelight."

Another interesting bit of information in Mary Harlan Lincoln's letter is her mention of the Lincoln portrait by T. W. H. Healy. She wrote: "The portrait of President Lincoln which is hanging in our hall in Washington, was painted by Healey (sic), and we think it the best likeness in existence."

Legal Rarity

It was known when Richard M. Nixon became chief that 3 former presidents were living: Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John B. Johnson. Generally unknown was the unique situation existing after A. Lincoln's 1861 inauguration: 5 living former presidents: Martin Van Buren (1782-1862), John Tyler (1790-1862), Millard Fillmore (1800-1874), Franklin Pierce (1804-1869), James Buchanan (1791-1868).