

ART. XXXI. *The Bears at Dacre.* By the WORSHIPFUL  
CHANCELLOR FERGUSON, F.S.A., President of the So-  
ciety.

*Read at Appleby, July 3rd, 1890.*

**B**ISHOP Nicolson writing of Dacre in Cumberland,  
which place he visited on Feb. 26, 1704, says:—

At each corner of the churchyard (which is indifferently well fenced) there stands a Bear and a Ragged Staff, cut in Stone: which looks like some of the Atchievements of the Honourable Family which so long resided at the Neighbouring Castle.

This is the earliest mention of these figures that I can find. The next is in Hutchinson's "Excursion to the Lakes," published 1776, he says, p. 77:—

In the churchyard at Dacre are four remarkable monuments, being the effigies of bears in stone, about five feet high, sitting on their haunches, and clasping a rude pillar, or ragged staff, on which two of the figures have their heads rested; the other two carry on their backs the figures of a lynx, the one of which is in an attitude as if endeavouring to rid himself of the animal on his shoulders, with head twisted, and paws cast behind. Their position is such, as to form a square, two to the east of the church, and two to the west. There is no traditional account of the occasion on which they were placed there; and it seems probable they are the remains of the decorations of the monastery to which the the Warwick family were benefactors. Plate Fig. 1.

He gives a drawing of one of the figures. Nicolson and Burn in their history of the two counties, published in 1777, say:—

At each corner of the churchyard, there stands a bear and ragged staff, cut in stone; which bishop Nicolson says looks like some of the atchievements of the honourable family that so long resided at the neighbouring castle: which has since been illustrated by a very  
worthy

worthy descendent of the family \*; who supposes they were cognizances taken by the family, on account of their claim to the hereditary forestership of Englewood forest. And the more so, as one sees these jagged branches over and over introduced into the chapel at Naward Castle, which is so rich in arms and cognizances, and where this jagged branch is in some places even thrown across the Dacre arms fess-wise. Ranulph de Meschines lord of Cumberland, granted this office of forester to Robert D'Estrivers lord of Burgh-over-Sands in fee. His arms were Argent; three bears sable. The heiress of D'Estrivers married Engain. The heiress of Engain married Morvill. The heiress of Morvill married Multon. And Dacre married the heiress of Multon, and by her had the same right as the others to the forestership of Englewood: which was so honourable, and so great command, that there is no wonder the family should wish by every means to set forth their claims to it: and (amongst others) by cognizances taken in allusion thereunto: especially as the crown about this time seems to have interfered with them in regard to this right. And surely nothing could be more naturally adapted to this idea, than this bear, which was the arms of their ancestor, the first grantee of the office. And the branch of a tree, which seems so very allusive to forests and woods, agrees with the same notion. And it is not improbable, but that this might be a badge used by Robert D'Estrivers himself; and that he chose the bears in his arms because they were inhabitants of the forests.

Hutchinson in his history of Cumberland 1794, vol. I, p. 473, merely reiterates what he said in his Excursion, and then copies the conjectures of the "worthy descendent" given by Nicolson and Burn.

In the following year 1795, W. M. furnishes the *Gentleman's Magazine* vol. 65 p. 985, with drawings of four bears, extremely ill done, and quotes what Hutchinson has said of them, and on p. 1077 D. H. criticizes these drawings, but as he had not seen the originals, his remarks are of little value.

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\* The worthy descendant is probably Mr. Recorder Milbourne, editor of the Milbourne-Gilpin edition of Denton's History of Cumberland (see the preface to this Society's edition). The daughters of Sir Humphrey Dacre of Naworth, married among the lesser gentry of the north: one of them is believed to have married a Milbourne of Talkin.

Messrs. Lysons (published 1816 p. ccvii) say :—

At the four corners of Dacre churchyard are rude figures of animals, five feet high, sitting on their haunches, and clasping a rude pillar or ragged staff: they seem to have been designed for bears, though they do not much resemble them, or indeed any other animals. It has been supposed that they refer to some armorial device of the Dacre family, as the ragged staff appears connected with the scallop shell, in several of the ornaments of Naworth Castle; though we do not find it anywhere recorded among the arms or cognizances of that family.\*

Jefferson in his *Leath Ward* 1840, p. 190, simply follows previous writers, but adds

They (the figures) are now so much defaced that it requires great assistance from the imagination to discover the likeness of any animal or even of the branch of a tree.

I myself have always been puzzled to understand what the Nevill badge of the bear and ragged staff has to do with Dacre, and I think the writers I have cited must fail to carry conviction to their readers.

There is another theory: Clarke in his "Survey of the Lakes," published 1793, p. 23 says :—

Justus, Bishop of Rochester having obtained authority to create bishops in this island created Paulin bishop of York: he, in the year 626, converted Edwin King of Northumberland and his minister Coifi (likewise chief of the Pagan Priests) to Christianity: he likewise converted one James a learned and good man whom Bede reports to have been alive in his days, and to have lived at Catterick in Yorkshire. Coifi and James having done much service to the Christian cause, were in the year 633 deputed by Paulin to travel, as well for the purpose of converting the neighbouring Pagans, as for the founding of churches to secure the ground which Christianity might gain. Accordingly we find that Coifi came into Cumberland, baptised great

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\* In the Oratory at Naworth Castle is the badge of a silver cord twined round the ragged staff and the scallop, an allusion to the marriage of Thomas de Dacre de Gilsland with Phillippa, daughter of Ralph, Earl of Westmorland. *These Transactions*, vol. iv, p. 503.

numbers,

numbers, and founded a church at Kirkoswald in that county \* \* \* \* Coifi and James, wherever they built a church, affixed to it in some conspicuous part the arms of Edwin and Paulin, together with their own. Edwin's was a bear seiant, holding a quiver; Paulin's a bear seiant holding a crucifix; and their own, each a bear seiant with an image upon its back.

Clarke gives no authority for this statement, and though he cites it in connection with Dacre castle, he does not mention it in connection with Dacre church, nor does he mention the four bears there, though he must have had them in his mind, when he wrote the foregoing passage. Hutchinson in a foot note to his history of Cumberland cites it as an explanation of the four bears in Dacre churchyard, but these beasts do not carry the crucifix, quiver, and image, mentioned by Clarke, unless indeed we take image to mean a small beast.

Let us now see what the four beasts or bears in Dacre churchyard really are: previous writers have not always seen the figures about which they have written. A careful examination of the figures in company with Mr. Whitehead and the vicar of Dacre has convinced me that they tell a consecutive and amusing story. The animal, in each case is a bear, sitting upright on its hind quarters and grasping a short pillar between its four paws. Bear undoubtedly the bear is, though the artist has given him a long tail with a tuft at the end like a lion, and also a good deal of mane.

No. 1, at the N.W. corner.—The bear is asleep with his head on the top of a pillar, snuggled in between his paws so as to be almost concealed: in fact this figure is often supposed to be headless, but it is not so: the head is turned to the bear's right and doubled down on or between his paws. The long tail is not visible: the bear sits upon it.

No. 2, at the S.W. corner.—An animal, about the size of a small cat, has sprung upon the bear's back and is  
clinging

clinging on his left shoulder. The astonished bear has has awoke and lifted up his head, which is turned to one side in attitude of surprise. His long tail comes out between his thigh and body and curls up the pillar.\*

No. 3, at the S.E. corner—a most vigorous composition. The bear now fully aroused, takes active measures: his right forepaw is reflexed over his right shoulder, and clutches the little beast, which is painfully elongated, just above where its tail joins on to the small of its back. The bear's head is turned to his left, and masses of dishevelled mane hang to that side. The tail is invisible, underneath the bear.

No. 4, N.E. corner—repose.—The little beast has disappeared down the throat of the bear, who rests his chin on the top of his pillar, while his face presents every sign of intense gratification: his mane has been carefully combed, and his tail curls up between his thigh and belly round his back.

The figures are about 5 feet high, and rise, two from circular bases and two from bases about 18 inches square, each with a heavy chamfer. Although the artist, who produced these figures, had heterodox views on the length of the bear's tail, he was no mean performer with a chisel, and has managed to put into these figures a most surprising amount of vigour and humour—the last quality being very apparent in the 3rd and 4th figures.

These figures have been the tops of pinnacles, and probably sometime or other adorned the top of Dacre church tower, or possibly the gateway or other part of Dacre castle: they have been in their present position since Bishop Nicolson saw them in 1704, and probably for a much longer period. Such pinnacles were not unusual: M. Viollet le Duc says;—

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\* The tail in this position gives the pillar the appearance of a ragged staff.

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The decorations of religious and civil edifices present an infinite variety of fantastic animals during the middle ages. The bestiaries of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries attributed to real or fabulous animals symbolic qualities, the tradition of which has long remained in the mind of people, thanks to the innumerable sculptures and paintings which cover our ancient monuments: the fables come next to add their contingent to these bestial representatives. The lion symbol of vigilance, force and courage; the antula of cruelty; the dove of gentleness: the siren: the pelican, symbol of charity; the aspic, guarding precious balms and ever vigilant; the screech-owl; the wyvern; the phoenix; the basilisk, personification of the devil; the dragon, to which such marvellous virtues were attributed, all these animals are met with in the capitals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in friezes squatted on the angles of monuments, crowning buttresses, seated on balustrades. At Chartres, at Rheims, at Notre Dame in Paris, at Amiens, Rouen, Vezelay, Auxerre, in the monuments of the west and centre of France, are populations of quaint animals, always rendered with great energy. At the summit of the two towers of the cathedral of Laon, the sculptors of the thirteenth century placed, in the open pinnacles, animals of colossal dimensions. At the angles of the buttresses of the portals of Notre Dame at Paris are to be seen enormous beasts, which, standing out against the sky, give life to these huge masses of stone.\*

England is far and more barren in such monuments than France or Germany, but instances could be found.

I have not yet been able to trace in classic fable or mediæval bestiary the beast fable, or beast epic these figures tell, but I hope shortly to light upon it.

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\*Cited in the *Sacristy* vol. I from *Dictionnaire raisonne de l'Architecture* by M. Viollet le Duc vol. I, p. 22.