

Shooting Gargoyles: making headway

Bob Trubshaw

‘Project Gargoyle’ was set up in 2009 with the aim of photographing and cataloguing all of the figurative medieval carvings which decorate the interiors and exteriors of around 300 churches in Leicestershire and Rutland. The project is organised by staff of Leicestershire County Council, and has the full support of the Dioceses of Leicester and Peterborough. The Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society is also represented on the committee. The photographs and associated information will form part of the Historic Environment Records for Leicestershire and Rutland.

No one has attempted to record all the medieval carvings in a county before, making this an ambitious and pioneering project. During 2010, a small number of churches were photographed to test out the best way of recording and documenting these carvings. By the beginning of 2011 ten churches had been fully recorded. At the time of writing in early 2012, the completed records for twenty-two churches have been added to Leicestershire County Council’s Historic Environment Records database. Public access to the images can be found via the Project Gargoyle website (1) through links to the English Heritage Gateway website which shows a small number of the photographs taken so far for the area, including: Allexton, Anstey, Barkby, Barrow upon Soar, Breedon on the Hill, Cossington, Countesthorpe, Diseworth, Foston, Frisby on the Wreake, Long Whatton, Newbold Verdon, Peatling Magna, Rothley, Seagrave, Shepshed, Swithland, Theddingworth, Thorpe Langton, Thurcaston, and Tilton on the Hill.



A human head between the arches in the north aisle of Frisby on the Wreake Church. (Photograph by David Morley.)



One of the more 'minimalist' medieval carvings, north aisle of Swithland Church. (Photograph by Steve Harris.)

The ‘head count’ from the project so far is more than a thousand carvings, many of which had never been photographed or recorded before. Most are in stone but some are wooden, the latter usually being interior decorations on fifteenth century roof timbers. The carvings depict a wide variety of subjects, ranging from stylised or caricatured human heads to weird and wonderful imaginary beasts. Collectively they provide an excellent insight into the minds of medieval people, as many are pulling faces, tongue-poking, or depict such fantastic entities as ‘green men’ or dragons. (2) One of the most splendid of these ‘green men’ has been up on the roof of the nave at Sileby for nearly six hundred years (although the paint and gilding was renewed about fifty years ago).

Many of these carvings are human heads. Some are rather simple and stylised but others are more realistic. Some have crowns, presumably being depictions of the king at the time; and are often paired with heads wearing ornate headdresses who were presumably their queens. But more often these heads are portraits - of the medieval men and women who paid for the churches to be expanded, or the clergy at the time, while others seem more like caricatures, perhaps depicting some of the stonemasons themselves.

Apart from the kings and queens, we will never know the names of these people from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but we can still have a good idea of what they looked like – and how fashions in women’s headgear and men’s haircuts and beards changed over the decades.

Along with these human heads are assorted animals, most often cows or sheep, and a whole host of monsters and beasties. Some, like those at Theddingworth, have clung perilously to the corners of the tower since the fifteenth century. The sheer imagination used to invent such grotesques rivals anything in modern comics and horror films. If these medieval masons were alive today, they might be working in the special effects workshops of film studios.



A good example of a foliate face or ‘green man’ at Thurcaston Church. (Photograph by David Morley.)

As to their function, a variety of purposes have been suggested. Clearly many of the external gargoyles served as water spouts with the practical purpose of channelling rainwater away from the fabric of the church building. Deeper symbolic and educational roles include to ward off evil; to help the church convey messages to the ordinary people (many of whom would have been illiterate in the medieval period), and possibly to frighten people into attending church.

Considering that they were also seen by some in the church as long ago as in medieval times as a form of idolatry, it is fortunate that they have survived in such large numbers, whilst the Victorian Gothic revival helped to conserve many, although the fashion for bare stone or wood meant any remaining traces of paint and gilding have largely been removed.

Impressive as the current one thousand or more carvings already recorded by Project Gargoyle is, this is only the start. There are probably more than ten thousand medieval

carvings in Leicestershire and Rutland – and there may be twice as many. Indeed, this was one of the main reasons for setting up Project Gargoyle – we simply do not know how much medieval sculpture there is in the counties’ churches. But clearly there is a massive amount of medieval art which deserves to be much better understood and appreciated.

All the photography for the project is done by volunteers working to a clear set of guidelines. The work done so far by the photographers is most impressive but what is really needed now is a much bigger team of photographers. The equipment needed is a digital SLR, long telephoto lens and a tripod. If you are interested in being part of this prestigious project to document the heritage of Leicestershire and Rutland, then detailed guidelines and relevant contact details are online at the Project Gargoyle website.

References and notes

1. www.leics.gov.uk/gargoyle
2. Bob Trubshaw, ‘Mawming and mooning – the minds of medieval masons’, *Leicestershire Historian*, 43 (2007), p32-5.

Bob Trubshaw first took an interest in the medieval carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland about 25 years ago and is the Volunteer Co-ordinator for Project Gargoyle. He is author of the *Good Gargoyle Guide: Medieval Carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland*, which is aimed at encouraging people who would not normally take an interest in church architecture to get out and about hunting further examples of these extraordinary sculptures. Bob can be contacted via email at bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk or by phone 01672 539077.



A serious-looking man to be found on the tower arch at Shepshed. (Photograph by Ernie Miller.)