

“Demon Carvers and Mooning Men”

The East Midlands School of Church Carving

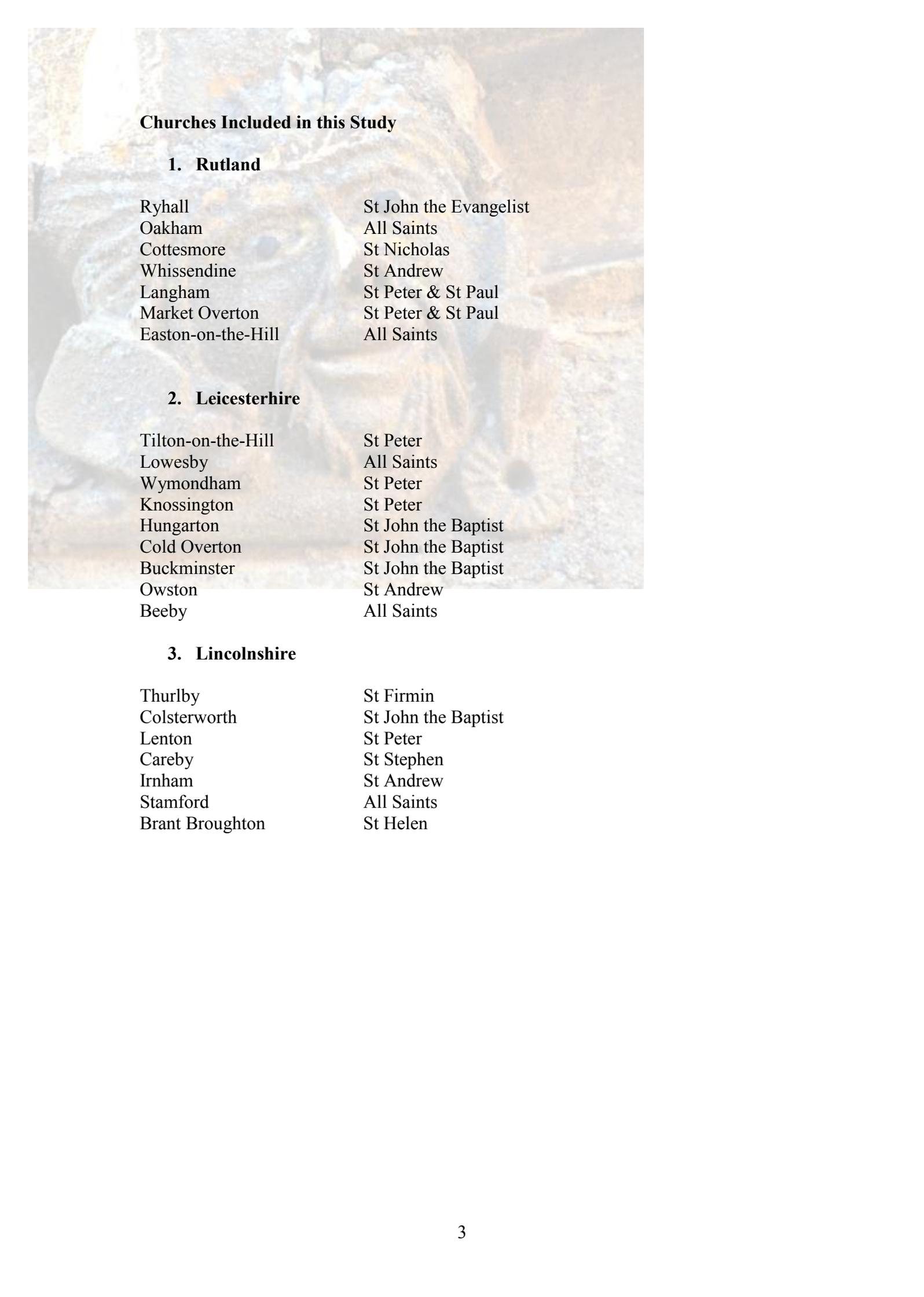
Researched and written by Lionel Wall of Ryhall Rutland



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Churches Included in this Study

1. Rutland

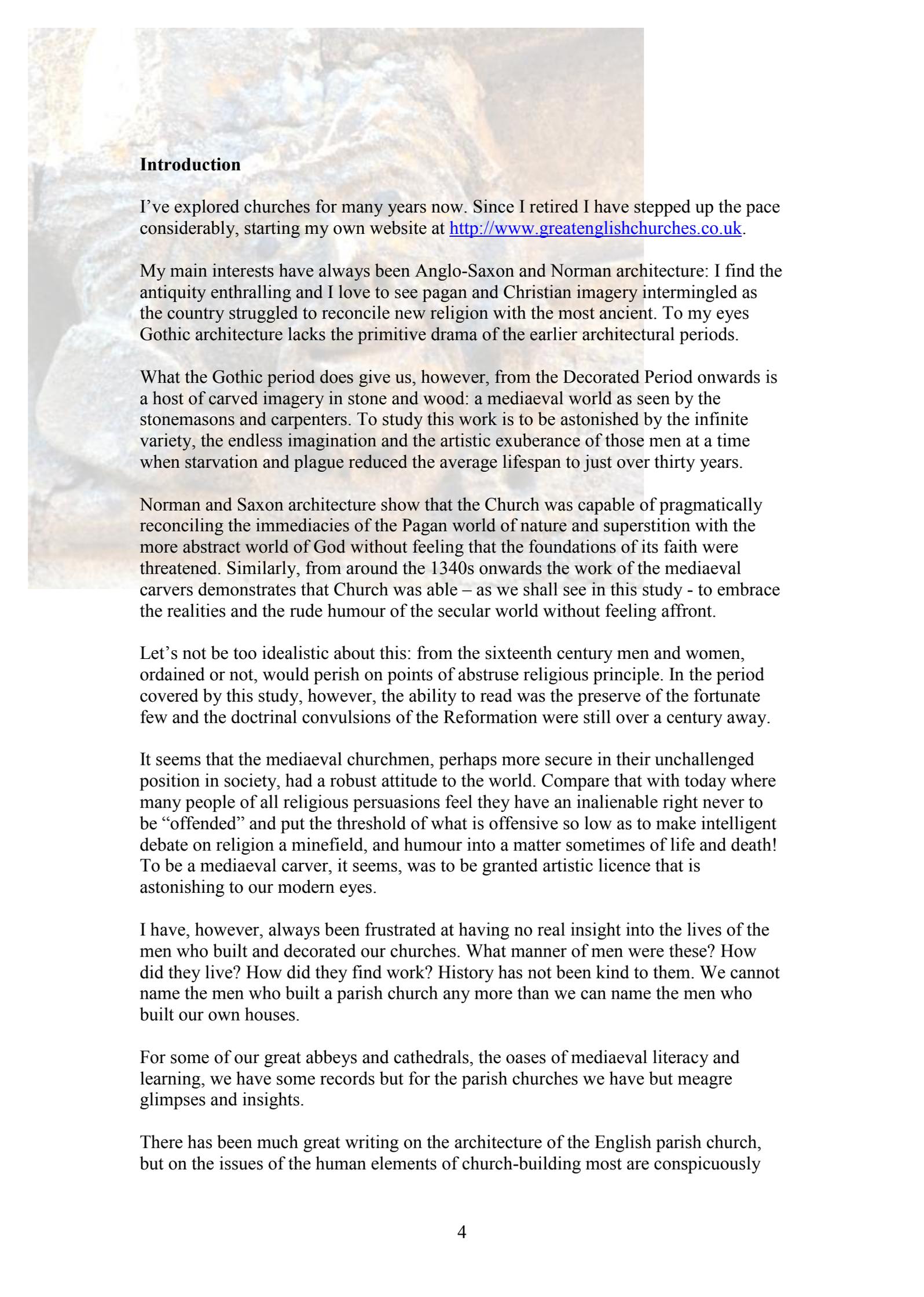
| | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| Ryhall | St John the Evangelist |
| Oakham | All Saints |
| Cottesmore | St Nicholas |
| Whissendine | St Andrew |
| Langham | St Peter & St Paul |
| Market Overton | St Peter & St Paul |
| Easton-on-the-Hill | All Saints |

2. Leicestershire

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Tilton-on-the-Hill | St Peter |
| Lowesby | All Saints |
| Wymondham | St Peter |
| Knossington | St Peter |
| Hungarton | St John the Baptist |
| Cold Overton | St John the Baptist |
| Buckminster | St John the Baptist |
| Owston | St Andrew |
| Beeby | All Saints |

3. Lincolnshire

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Thurlby | St Firmin |
| Colsterworth | St John the Baptist |
| Lenton | St Peter |
| Careby | St Stephen |
| Irnham | St Andrew |
| Stamford | All Saints |
| Brant Broughton | St Helen |



Introduction

I've explored churches for many years now. Since I retired I have stepped up the pace considerably, starting my own website at <http://www.greatenglishchurches.co.uk>.

My main interests have always been Anglo-Saxon and Norman architecture: I find the antiquity enthralling and I love to see pagan and Christian imagery intermingled as the country struggled to reconcile new religion with the most ancient. To my eyes Gothic architecture lacks the primitive drama of the earlier architectural periods.

What the Gothic period does give us, however, from the Decorated Period onwards is a host of carved imagery in stone and wood: a mediaeval world as seen by the stonemasons and carpenters. To study this work is to be astonished by the infinite variety, the endless imagination and the artistic exuberance of those men at a time when starvation and plague reduced the average lifespan to just over thirty years.

Norman and Saxon architecture show that the Church was capable of pragmatically reconciling the immediacies of the Pagan world of nature and superstition with the more abstract world of God without feeling that the foundations of its faith were threatened. Similarly, from around the 1340s onwards the work of the mediaeval carvers demonstrates that Church was able – as we shall see in this study - to embrace the realities and the rude humour of the secular world without feeling affront.

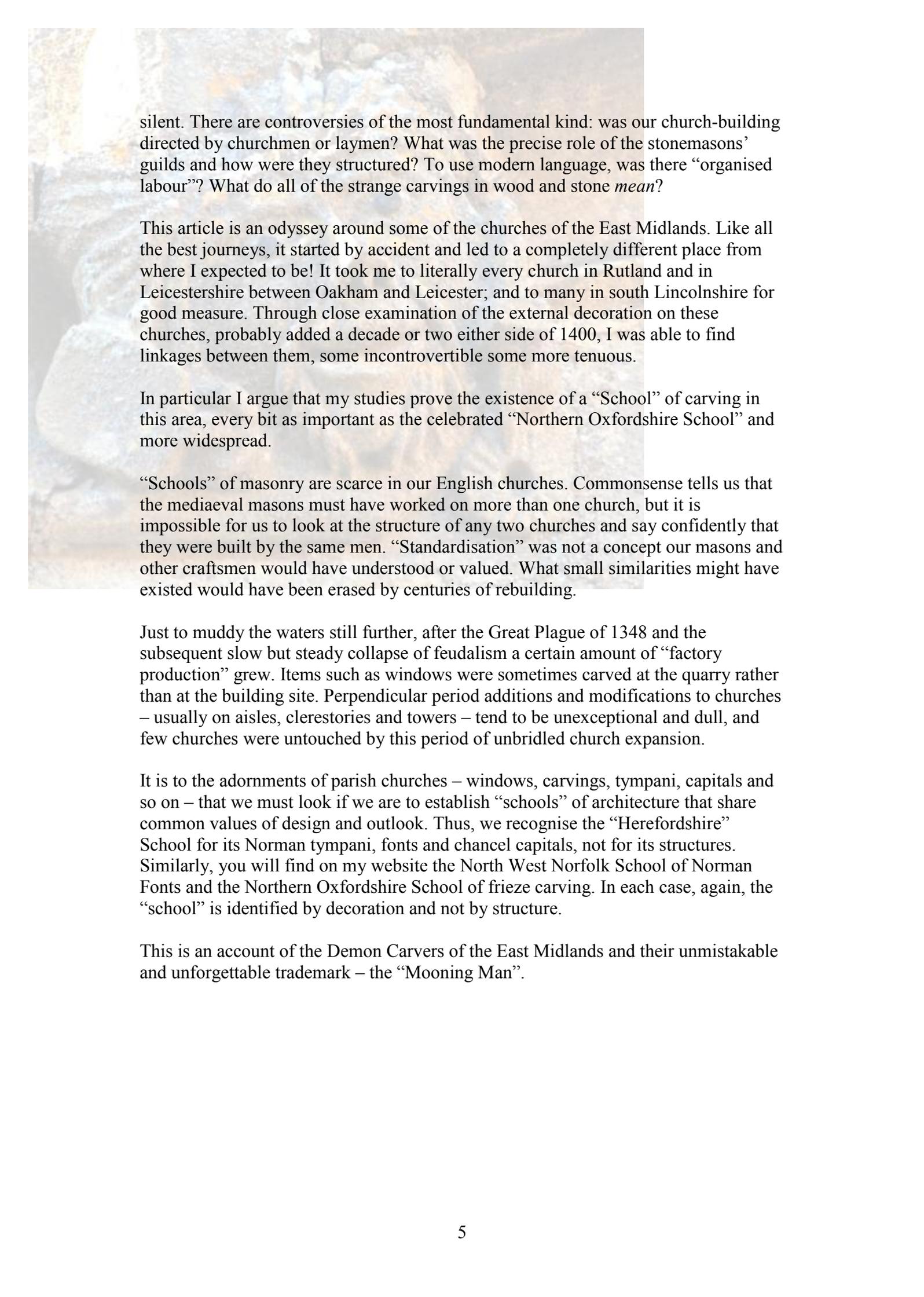
Let's not be too idealistic about this: from the sixteenth century men and women, ordained or not, would perish on points of abstruse religious principle. In the period covered by this study, however, the ability to read was the preserve of the fortunate few and the doctrinal convulsions of the Reformation were still over a century away.

It seems that the mediaeval churchmen, perhaps more secure in their unchallenged position in society, had a robust attitude to the world. Compare that with today where many people of all religious persuasions feel they have an inalienable right never to be "offended" and put the threshold of what is offensive so low as to make intelligent debate on religion a minefield, and humour into a matter sometimes of life and death! To be a mediaeval carver, it seems, was to be granted artistic licence that is astonishing to our modern eyes.

I have, however, always been frustrated at having no real insight into the lives of the men who built and decorated our churches. What manner of men were these? How did they live? How did they find work? History has not been kind to them. We cannot name the men who built a parish church any more than we can name the men who built our own houses.

For some of our great abbeys and cathedrals, the oases of mediaeval literacy and learning, we have some records but for the parish churches we have but meagre glimpses and insights.

There has been much great writing on the architecture of the English parish church, but on the issues of the human elements of church-building most are conspicuously



silent. There are controversies of the most fundamental kind: was our church-building directed by churchmen or laymen? What was the precise role of the stonemasons' guilds and how were they structured? To use modern language, was there "organised labour"? What do all of the strange carvings in wood and stone *mean*?

This article is an odyssey around some of the churches of the East Midlands. Like all the best journeys, it started by accident and led to a completely different place from where I expected to be! It took me to literally every church in Rutland and in Leicestershire between Oakham and Leicester; and to many in south Lincolnshire for good measure. Through close examination of the external decoration on these churches, probably added a decade or two either side of 1400, I was able to find linkages between them, some incontrovertible some more tenuous.

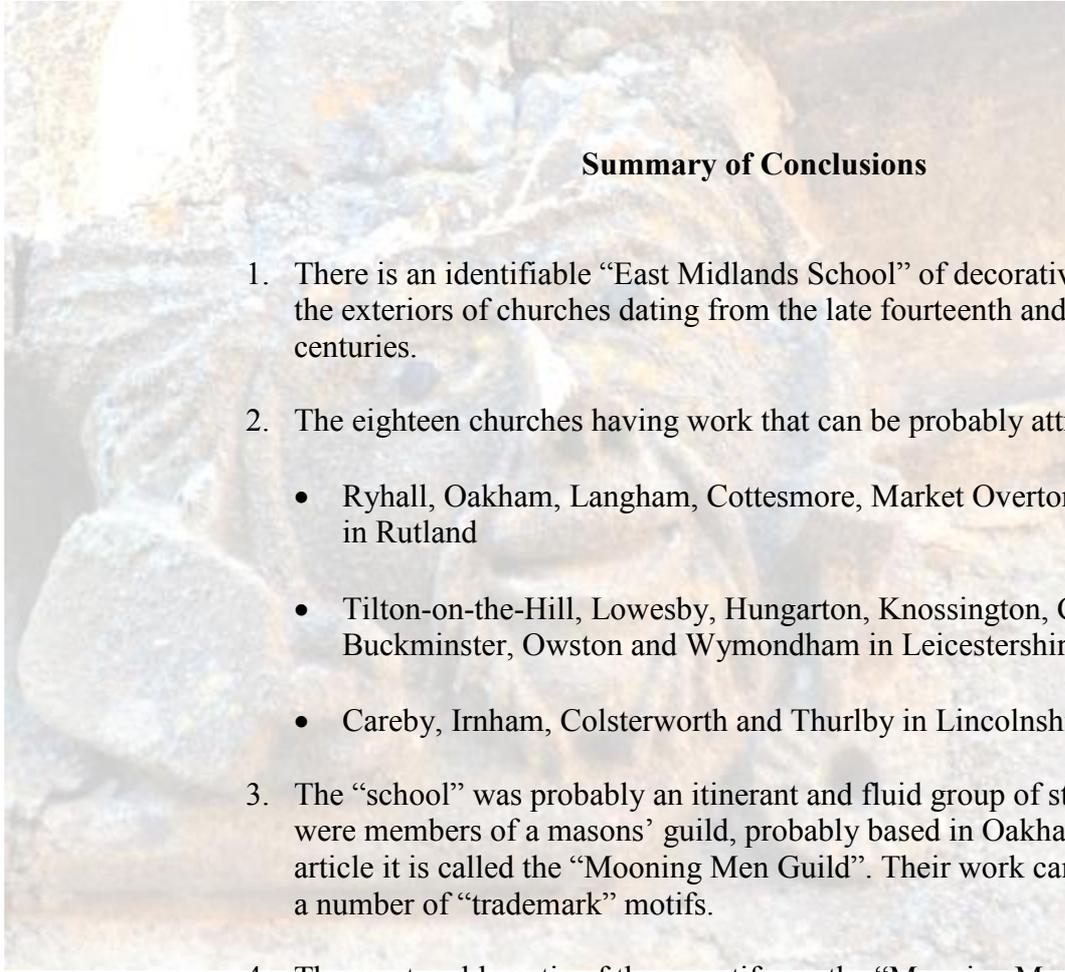
In particular I argue that my studies prove the existence of a "School" of carving in this area, every bit as important as the celebrated "Northern Oxfordshire School" and more widespread.

"Schools" of masonry are scarce in our English churches. Commonsense tells us that the mediaeval masons must have worked on more than one church, but it is impossible for us to look at the structure of any two churches and say confidently that they were built by the same men. "Standardisation" was not a concept our masons and other craftsmen would have understood or valued. What small similarities might have existed would have been erased by centuries of rebuilding.

Just to muddy the waters still further, after the Great Plague of 1348 and the subsequent slow but steady collapse of feudalism a certain amount of "factory production" grew. Items such as windows were sometimes carved at the quarry rather than at the building site. Perpendicular period additions and modifications to churches – usually on aisles, clerestories and towers – tend to be unexceptional and dull, and few churches were untouched by this period of unbridled church expansion.

It is to the adornments of parish churches – windows, carvings, tympani, capitals and so on – that we must look if we are to establish "schools" of architecture that share common values of design and outlook. Thus, we recognise the "Herefordshire" School for its Norman tympani, fonts and chancel capitals, not for its structures. Similarly, you will find on my website the North West Norfolk School of Norman Fonts and the Northern Oxfordshire School of frieze carving. In each case, again, the "school" is identified by decoration and not by structure.

This is an account of the Demon Carvers of the East Midlands and their unmistakable and unforgettable trademark – the "Mooning Man".



Summary of Conclusions

1. There is an identifiable “East Midlands School” of decorative stone carving on the exteriors of churches dating from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.
2. The eighteen churches having work that can be probably attributed to it are:
 - Ryhall, Oakham, Langham, Cottesmore, Market Overton and Whissendine in Rutland
 - Tilton-on-the-Hill, Lowesby, Hungarton, Knossington, Cold Overton, Buckminster, Owston and Wymondham in Leicestershire
 - Careby, Irnham, Colsterworth and Thurlby in Lincolnshire
3. The “school” was probably an itinerant and fluid group of stonemasons who were members of a masons’ guild, probably based in Oakham, Rutland. In this article it is called the “Mooning Men Guild”. Their work can be recognised by a number of “trademark” motifs.
4. The most emblematic of these motifs are the “Mooning Man” and the use of lead and other minerals to make black eyes.
5. The work of five individual masons can be identified. The most significant of these were:
 - The “Demon Carver” who probably carved at Ryhall, Oakham, Cold Overton, Lowesby, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Langham and Whissendine.
 - “The Gargoyle Master” who carved gargoyles at Oakham, Lowesby, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Langham, Whissendine, Irnham, Market Overton, Knossington, Wymondham. Owston and Buckminster

1. Ryhall and Oakham – the Quest Begins

This story begins at Ryhall in Rutland on the outskirts of Stamford. It is not well-known on the church architecture “trail”. I moved very close to it in October 2009, wondering if there would be anything to justify its inclusion on my own church website.

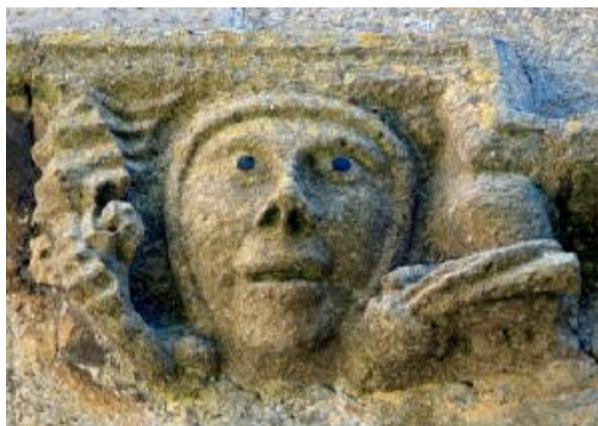
I found that the church had an extraordinarily rich fifteenth century frieze of carvings in the cornicing between its roofs and the walls of its chancel and aisles. This delightful, and almost intact, riot of mediaeval life and symbolism is known to the area’s church cognoscenti but has little recognition beyond. Don’t bother looking for it (or indeed most of the churches in this article) in Simon Jenkins’s famous book “England’s Thousand Best Churches”!

Although I now realise that it is debatable, at the time I believed the frieze to be the work of one man. I called him the “The Demon Carver”, a play on words recognising his extraordinary abilities and some of his subject matter!

One group of carvings around the south west of the building particularly took my eye. This is a cluster of grotesque creatures distinguished by black eyes (possibly made of lead), richly-carved “manes” and the most mischievous of faces. Just to put the icing on the cake, clearly in the same style of carving, we have two unusually life-like faces that are surely portraits of individuals known to the carver. These are rare and precious treasures from an era when common people were rarely thought worthy of a portrait of any kind. Many believe one of these images to be a self-portrait of the stonemason himself but sadly, as I will reveal, I no longer believe this to be the case. True, he clutches a mason’s hammer, but he also holds what seem to be a tiny millstone and some other unidentifiable artefact so I suspect he is some sort of composite figure of various trades. The other figure seems to be clutching cloth and a mallet or a flaming torch. He may be the village fuller since part of the process involved pounding the cloth.



The Tradesman, Ryhall Church



The Fuller (?), Ryhall Church

The story continues at Oakham Church (14 miles away and also in Rutland) which I visited shortly afterwards mainly to see the splendid Decorated period arcade capitals. I found that the frieze there is much bigger and less varied than that at Ryhall. On the west end of the north aisle, however, was a cluster of grotesque figures

incontrovertibly by the man who carved the maned figures at Ryhall and also with black eyes.



Grotesque Carvings, Ryhall Church



Grotesque Carvings, Oakham Church

My telephoto lens at Oakham Church, however, also revealed a cheeky little secret: there are three separate images of a man bending over, head between his legs with a strategically-placed little hole, “mooning” at the world! The sex of the figures is not left to the imagination! I called these the “Mooning Men”!



Oakham South Clerestory



Oakham South Porch



Oakham North Clerestory

Students of church architecture take naughty delight in the rude images that are sometimes seen on the outsides of our mediaeval churches. Our forefathers had a surprisingly robust attitude to such things. There are whole websites devoted to “exhibitionist” carvings with a wide variety of gaping pudenda, tumescent willies and cheeky bottoms on show! It is known that the masons were given a pretty free hand on the outsides of churches and they sometimes gave rein to a robust sense of humour. So at the time the Mooning Men at Oakham were no more to me than an amusing aside and my focus was firmly on the man who had carved the grotesque figures with the black eyes – the “Demon Carver”.

I searched the whole area for cornice friezes. Some proved to be a disappointment, often of the earlier Decorated period where uninteresting “ballflower” friezes were all the rage. Many others, however, seemed to be of the same artistic school that I saw at Ryhall and Oakham.

Oakham quickly became the geographical “centre of gravity” for the churches in this study. Ryhall, on the other hand, remains by some considerable margin the finest frieze both artistically and for its variety of content.

2. The Mooning Men

It is human nature – and the very essence of the role of historians – to try to “connect” what we see in our world, the better to make sense of it. Wishful thinking, however, is a seductive danger in studying church carvings; it is easy to see what you want to see. I fell into this trap initially, believing several whole friezes to be the work of a single man. Doubts set in as the number of friezes grew and commonality of style became more tenuous.

There is, however, a common thread, and it is an extraordinary one: the Mooning Man carving I had spotted at Oakham is present on *twelve* church friezes in three counties – see them all at Appendix A. Other churches in the area had mooning *gargoyles* – that is, they were for the practical purpose of diverting rainwater from the roof rather than purely for decorative purposes. Colsterworth Church even had a mooner as a label stop.

Cottesmore and Oakham have *three* mooning men each on their friezes. Tilton-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire manages two. Ironically Ryhall, where my quest began, has none - much to my disappointment.



Hungarton Mooner



Whissendine Mooner



Wymondham Mooner

There are Mooners in three counties: Rutland, South Lincolnshire and East Leicestershire. The longest distance between any two mooner frieze carvings is only 14 miles as the crow flies. Friezes beyond this area, such as those at Grantham and Sleaford have no Mooners and are stylistically diff

This group of churches will be henceforth referred to in this narrative as the “*Mooning Men Group*” – or “MMG”.

3. Terminology

Before we continue we need to make a distinction between gargoyles, frieze carvings and corbels. The word “gargoyle” has come to be misused as a generic term for grotesque carvings on churches. A true gargoyle, however, is a carving that surrounds a water pipe that directs rainwater from the roof of the church, away from the walls to the ground below. By definition they are clustered along the parapets of churches on aisles, clerestories and towers and generally there are no more than are needed –

although they gained such popularity that some “blind” gargoyles were sometimes carved for purely decorative effect. Irnham in Lincolnshire is a prime example of this.

Traditionally, gargoyles are grotesque human or “monster” figures. Gaping mouths usually form the water spouts, but of course mooning gargoyles use a rather different orifice!



Glington, Cambs



Lyndon, Rutland

Corbels also are functional. They are carved blocks of stone that are used to help support a roof either internally or externally. In Norman architecture they were often carved with grotesque figures, human heads and very often with religious symbols. A long run of them is known as a “corbel table” and is often one of the church’s most fascinating features. In English Gothic architecture, however, the external corbel is much less common and rarely decorated. Inside a church the corbels often support a roof beam and, in true Norman style, are also often richly carved with human heads – sometimes caricatures of real people – or grotesques.



Part of the celebrated corbel table, Kilpeck Church, Herefordshire. Kilpeck, a near-complete Norman church, is recognised as one of the most important historical churches in Great Britain.

What is odd about the Demon Carver churches is that they have *friezes* which perform no apparent function and are purely decorative. The only limit on the number of carvings is the physical length of the roof parapet and the size and density of the carvings themselves.



Decorative Frieze, Oakham Church, South Porch

Finally, we will be referring to “label stops”. Most gothic windows are surrounded by raised mouldings – variously called “drip moulds” or “hood moulds” - that are designed to stop water damaging the window itself. At each end of the moulding there is often a decorative carving of some sort, and this is known as a label stop.

4. Dating the Work

Dating the friezes accurately is well-nigh impossible. I have trawled sources such as Pevsner’s celebrated architectural gazetteers and the British Listed Buildings database. It is abundantly clear that dating of church building is no more than intelligent guesswork. The style of window and (ironically) decoration are seen as the key to dating the structure rather than the other way round! Most “dates”, at best, are no more than estimates of which half of which century; and even many of those are debatable or downright speculation.

Complicating the dating still further is the fact that friezes did not have to accompany major structural changes. All of the churches in this study had clerestories built, aisles added, new windows inserted and/or roofs raised at various times during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Any of these events might have provoked the addition of a frieze. Even the addition of parapets to roofs (especially the ubiquitous “battlements”) might be an opportunity to add decoration.

We do have, however, an invaluable clue in the women’s headdresses that appear on the friezes. Women are not much in evidence on the church friezes - although inside the churches women often appear on corbels. Where they do appear outside it is almost invariably the head only and framed by a distinctive box-like headdress. There are many of these images on both friezes and label stops. At Tilton-on-the-Hill and Langham we also see them inside the church.



Ryhall



Oakham



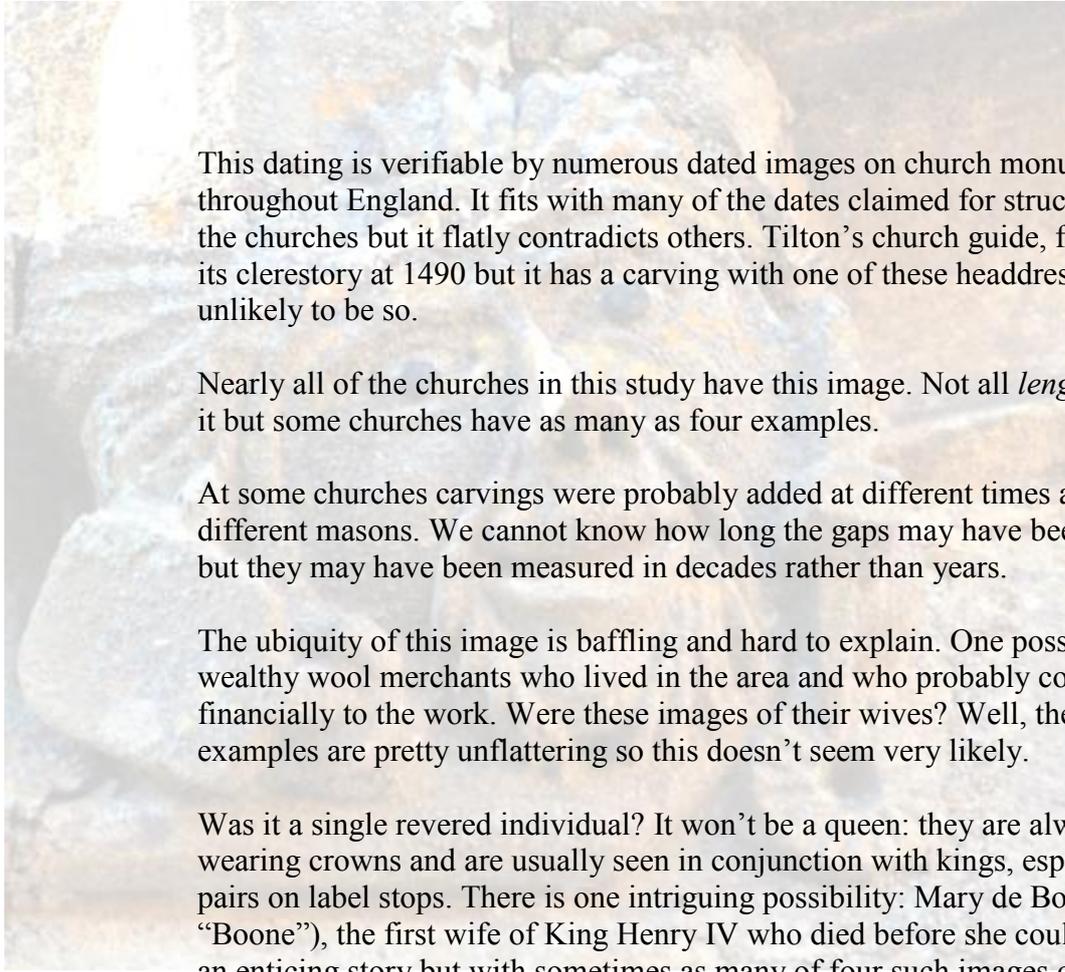
Langham



Langham

Katrina Wood of <http://www.kats-hats.co.uk/> (a website I thoroughly recommend) provided this information:

“I do know of this style of headdress. It is a form of reticulated headwear from approx c1380 (not before c1350/60 and definitely not after 1410)...It is an early form of 'Hood' though not what we know today as a hood and not classed as a gable headdress either. It does look a solid structure, as this period loved squareness in headdresses. Even hair was plaited to frame the face in a square style but by the time of Richard II (1367-1400) Gold “Fret” (old word for net) styles like this were worn... With all the detail on these small carvings, I would say it would be a headdress worn only by those with means.”



This dating is verifiable by numerous dated images on church monuments and brasses throughout England. It fits with many of the dates claimed for structural changes on the churches but it flatly contradicts others. Tilton's church guide, for example, puts its clerestory at 1490 but it has a carving with one of these headdresses so it is unlikely to be so.

Nearly all of the churches in this study have this image. Not all *lengths* of frieze have it but some churches have as many as four examples.

At some churches carvings were probably added at different times and certainly by different masons. We cannot know how long the gaps may have been between phases but they may have been measured in decades rather than years.

The ubiquity of this image is baffling and hard to explain. One possibility lies with the wealthy wool merchants who lived in the area and who probably contributed financially to the work. Were these images of their wives? Well, the external examples are pretty unflattering so this doesn't seem very likely.

Was it a single revered individual? It won't be a queen: they are always depicted wearing crowns and are usually seen in conjunction with kings, especially as matched pairs on label stops. There is one intriguing possibility: Mary de Bohun (pronounced "Boone"), the first wife of King Henry IV who died before she could be crowned. It's an enticing story but with sometimes as many of four such images on a single church it doesn't seem plausible that this is about an individual. For more about this go to Appendix G.

As with so many things, the most plausible option is the simplest one: that the carvers were paying tribute to their own wives and lovers. That explains why so many masons carved them on so many friezes. They didn't take a lot of time over them, it seems, so perhaps they were meant to be more symbolic than real portraits.

One supporting nugget of information comes from the preserved will of Roger de Flore, Speaker of the English Parliament and grandee of Oakham who died in 1427. In it he leaves a legacy to the mason responsible for the building of the "vault of the steeple" in the event that de Flore died before its completion. This tells us that work was in train on the tower in the early part of the fifteenth century.

Despite the headdress conundrum we can safely say, then, that much of the work discussed here probably occurred in 1380-1410. That period is covered by Kings Richard II and his nemesis Henry Bolingbroke who became King Henry IV in 1397. Because dating the work is so difficult, we might also stray into the reign of Henry V starting in 1413.

5. Subject Matter

It is important thing to emphasise that the frieze carvings are determinedly secular. It would be stretching things to say that there is *no* religious symbolism, but not by much! Grotesque faces and fleurons (decorative flowers) are the stock-in-trade. Many churches have a stylised rose which could be representative of the Virgin Mary, but

they are surrounded by so many other floral images that even this is debatable. You will look in vain for an “Agnus Dei” (Lamb of God) or an angel on any of these friezes. Yet you will find many examples of the pagan “Green Man” motif.

Indeed, there are few repetitive images that are not downright insulting! Apart from the mooning men, the unwary passer-by is habitually treated to men pulling faces, sticking out their tongues and scratching their backsides!



Images of Ryhall Frieze: A bottom scratcher (south aisle), a face puller (south porch) and a tongue-poker (north aisle)

Animals too, have their place on the friezes. Dogs and, especially, wild cats (sometimes lions) are particularly popular. Just as the ladies in their square headdresses may be the masons’ wives, perhaps these dogs were their own pets?



Oakham Dog



Whissendine Dog or Lion



Langham Dog



Lion, Thurlby Tower



Lion (?), Buckminster South Aisle

There are those that relentlessly pursue the notion that each of these images is in some way symbolic; but that simply doesn’t stand up to any scrutiny. There are grotesque faces and fleurons in super-abundance. What symbolic significance could these possibly have?

This is in contrast to Norman carving (such as the corbels at Kilpeck) where subtlety of subject matter, if not of carving, is everywhere. There are few corbels on Kilpeck Church that have no known religious, pagan or mythological significance.

It is a peculiarity that the Mooning Men Group friezes exist at all. When Romanesque architecture gave way to the first wave of Gothic (“Early English”) at the end of the c13 external carving became very unfashionable in line with the elegant simplicity

and sparseness of that style. The Decorated period (roughly 1280-1377) brought a revival of external carving and also of decorative carving on aisle capitals. This external carving, however, was quite restrained. There were plenty of friezes, but they were narrow and dominated by very small “ballflowers” and very repetitious human heads. Indeed, Nikolaus Pevsner regarded the ballflower frieze as an infallible pointer to work of the Decorated period.

From the late fourteenth century, the Perpendicular style took hold and although it produced some of England’s most magnificent church buildings it was in many ways quite formulaic. Yet it also saw a return to more flamboyant external decoration with, as we have seen, distinctly secular themes. During the Anglo-Saxon and Norman periods Christian imagery vied with pagan and Norse themes in a vibrant mix that can be a visual delight today. Although it is surely true that pagan beliefs were not extinct in fifteenth century, Christianity was no longer the “new kid on the block”. So why, when Christianity had such a great hold, were some of our church exteriors now being decorated with irreverent images? Try to imagine a modern church being decorated in this way and the bewilderment and outrage that would ensue!

We can’t *know* the answer, but later I will discuss some theories and possibilities.

6. The Significance of the Mooning Men

Let’s be clear from the start that “Mooning Man” images are not unique to the East Midlands, but they are very unusual. They are a subset of “exhibitionist” carvings that also includes women with gaping pudenda and men with exposed genitals. All of them can be seen in church architecture in England and elsewhere in Europe.



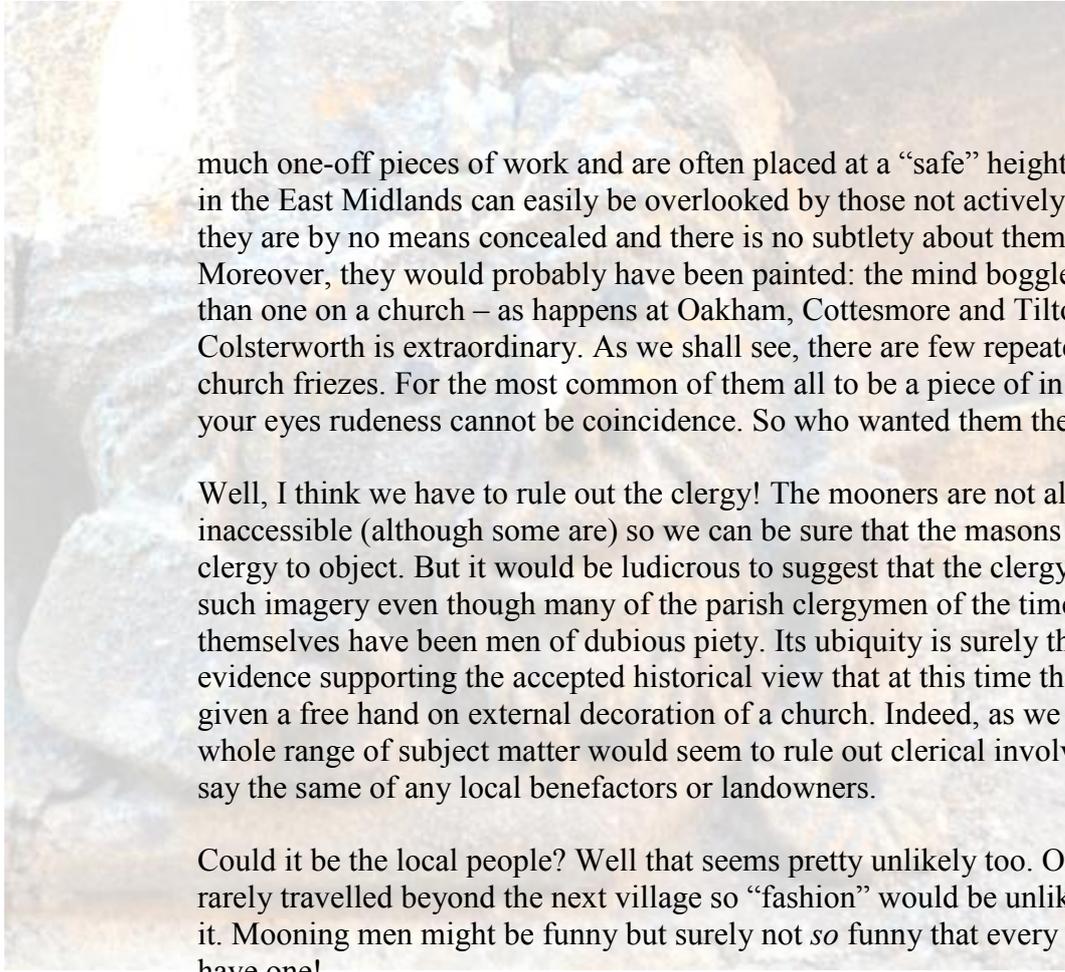
Colsterworth Tower



Sheela-na-Gig, Kilpeck, Herefords

The female figures, known euphemistically as “sheela-na-gigs” are perhaps the rarest of the three and have obvious fertility connotations, although some observers prefer to interpret them as deliberately insulting or overtly sexual. The mooning men, however, have no obvious explanation in either paganism or Christianity (although, doubtless there are some wild theories around!). They are unequivocally human. They do not exhibit rampant willies (although testicles are, of artistic necessity, much in evidence!) so we can rule out the fertility symbolism.

What also sets the East Midlands mooners apart is that they are all of a common style and they are comparatively ubiquitous. “Rude” carvings elsewhere tend to be very



much one-off pieces of work and are often placed at a “safe” height. Although those in the East Midlands can easily be overlooked by those not actively looking for them, they are by no means concealed and there is no subtlety about them whatsoever! Moreover, they would probably have been painted: the mind boggles! To have more than one on a church – as happens at Oakham, Cottesmore and Tilton-on-the-Hill and Colsterworth is extraordinary. As we shall see, there are few repeated motifs on the church friezes. For the most common of them all to be a piece of in your face, damn your eyes rudeness cannot be coincidence. So who wanted them there?

Well, I think we have to rule out the clergy! The mooners are not always hidden and inaccessible (although some are) so we can be sure that the masons did not expect the clergy to object. But it would be ludicrous to suggest that the clergy would *promote* such imagery even though many of the parish clergymen of the time would themselves have been men of dubious piety. Its ubiquity is surely the clearest possible evidence supporting the accepted historical view that at this time the masons were given a free hand on external decoration of a church. Indeed, as we have seen, the whole range of subject matter would seem to rule out clerical involvement. We can say the same of any local benefactors or landowners.

Could it be the local people? Well that seems pretty unlikely too. Ordinary people rarely travelled beyond the next village so “fashion” would be unlikely to come into it. Mooning men might be funny but surely not *so* funny that every community had to have one!

Really, that leaves us with the masons themselves. This is surely where the answer lies.

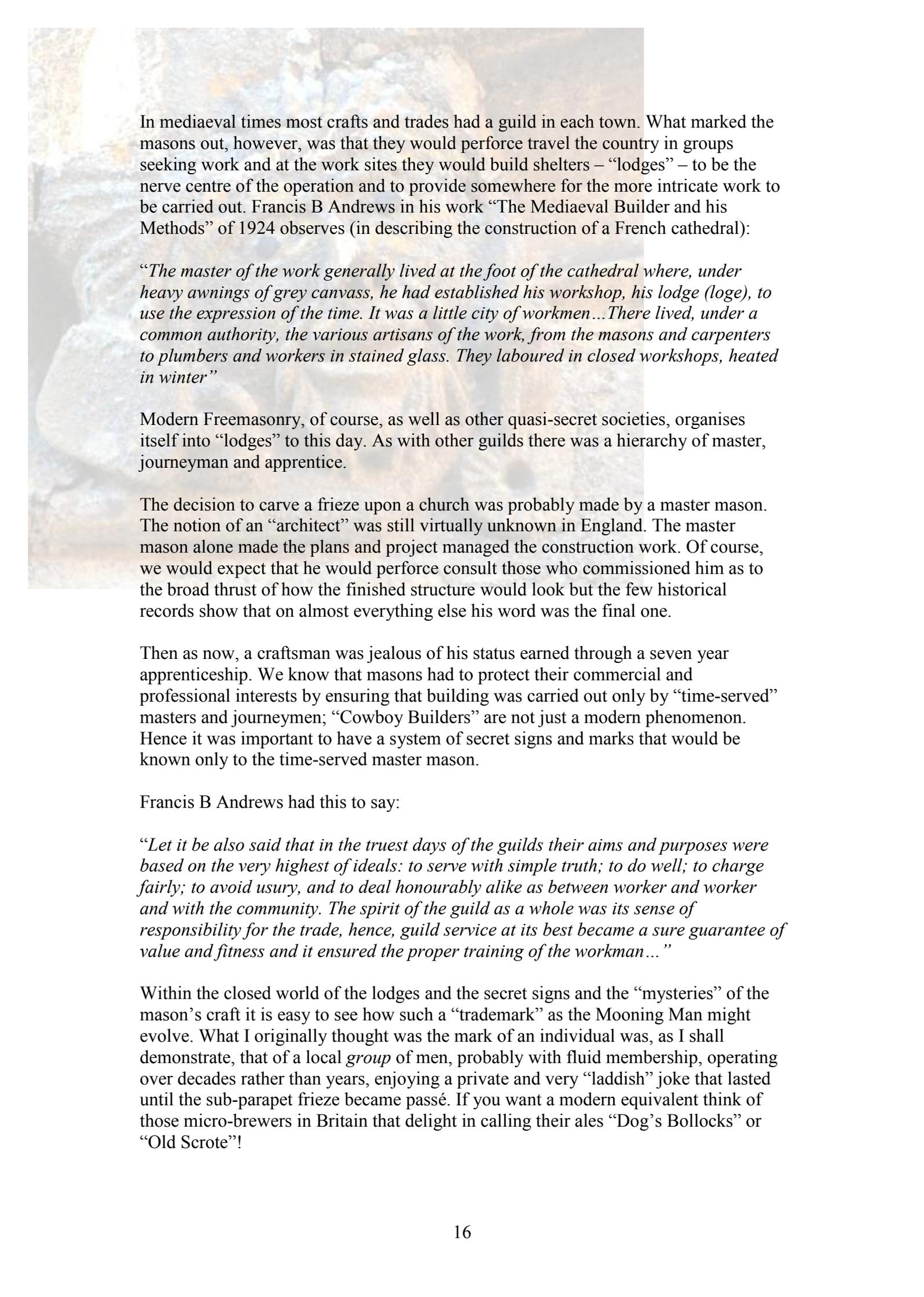
7. Those Naughty Stonemasons

If the masons were the ones who chose to carve mooning men we are still left wondering why they did so.

At Easton-on-the-Hill, just outside Stamford, where there is a “mooning gargoyle” it is local legend that the mason was protesting at being underpaid and so its bottom was pointed towards Peterborough Cathedral! That’s an engaging theory. Rather suspiciously, the same story is retailed in Glinton near Peterborough which also has such a gargoyle. Moreover, the other mooners I have spotted point in all directions and three churches have mooners pointing both north and south. Perhaps they were aimed at insulting the clergy or congregation? It is true that some were put in relatively inaccessible places, but many were placed conspicuously at aisle level so the “insult” theory seems unlikely.

Were they the work of one mischievous man? Later I will be identifying at least three different masons that carved them. No, it wasn’t an individual.

When you look at a period of probably a couple of decades the only rational explanation is that the mooners were put there by a group of like-minded masons. In effect the mooner was their trademark. And when we talk about an organised group of craftsmen in the fifteenth century we must talk about the guilds.



In mediaeval times most crafts and trades had a guild in each town. What marked the masons out, however, was that they would perforce travel the country in groups seeking work and at the work sites they would build shelters – “lodges” – to be the nerve centre of the operation and to provide somewhere for the more intricate work to be carried out. Francis B Andrews in his work “The Mediaeval Builder and his Methods” of 1924 observes (in describing the construction of a French cathedral):

“The master of the work generally lived at the foot of the cathedral where, under heavy awnings of grey canvass, he had established his workshop, his lodge (loge), to use the expression of the time. It was a little city of workmen... There lived, under a common authority, the various artisans of the work, from the masons and carpenters to plumbers and workers in stained glass. They laboured in closed workshops, heated in winter”

Modern Freemasonry, of course, as well as other quasi-secret societies, organises itself into “lodges” to this day. As with other guilds there was a hierarchy of master, journeyman and apprentice.

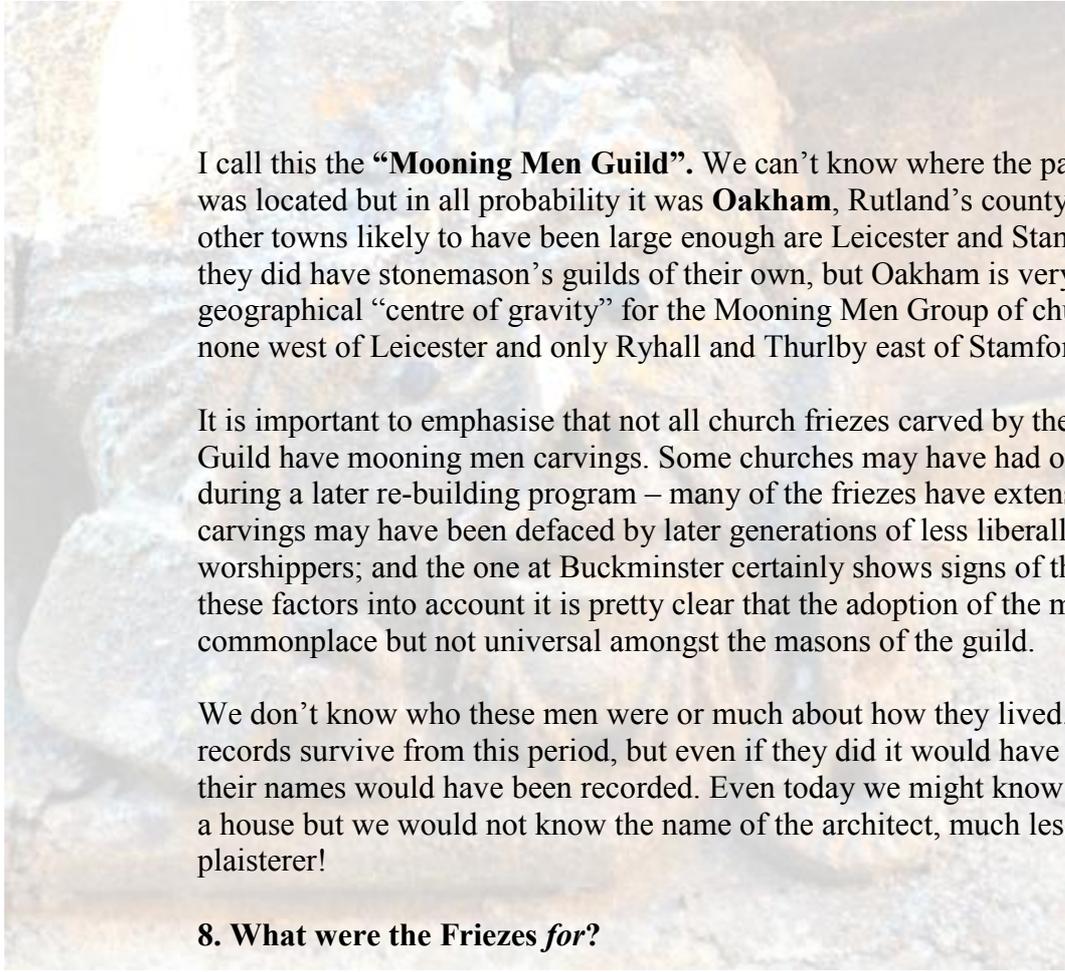
The decision to carve a frieze upon a church was probably made by a master mason. The notion of an “architect” was still virtually unknown in England. The master mason alone made the plans and project managed the construction work. Of course, we would expect that he would perforce consult those who commissioned him as to the broad thrust of how the finished structure would look but the few historical records show that on almost everything else his word was the final one.

Then as now, a craftsman was jealous of his status earned through a seven year apprenticeship. We know that masons had to protect their commercial and professional interests by ensuring that building was carried out only by “time-served” masters and journeymen; “Cowboy Builders” are not just a modern phenomenon. Hence it was important to have a system of secret signs and marks that would be known only to the time-served master mason.

Francis B Andrews had this to say:

“Let it be also said that in the truest days of the guilds their aims and purposes were based on the very highest of ideals: to serve with simple truth; to do well; to charge fairly; to avoid usury, and to deal honourably alike as between worker and worker and with the community. The spirit of the guild as a whole was its sense of responsibility for the trade, hence, guild service at its best became a sure guarantee of value and fitness and it ensured the proper training of the workman...”

Within the closed world of the lodges and the secret signs and the “mysteries” of the mason’s craft it is easy to see how such a “trademark” as the Mooning Man might evolve. What I originally thought was the mark of an individual was, as I shall demonstrate, that of a local *group* of men, probably with fluid membership, operating over decades rather than years, enjoying a private and very “laddish” joke that lasted until the sub-parapet frieze became passé. If you want a modern equivalent think of those micro-brewers in Britain that delight in calling their ales “Dog’s Bollocks” or “Old Scrote”!



I call this the “**Mooning Men Guild**”. We can’t know where the parent guild house was located but in all probability it was **Oakham**, Rutland’s county town. The only other towns likely to have been large enough are Leicester and Stamford. Doubtless they did have stonemason’s guilds of their own, but Oakham is very much the geographical “centre of gravity” for the Mooning Men Group of churches. There are none west of Leicester and only Ryhall and Thurlby east of Stamford.

It is important to emphasise that not all church friezes carved by the Mooning Men Guild have mooning men carvings. Some churches may have had one and lost it during a later re-building program – many of the friezes have extensive gaps. Other carvings may have been defaced by later generations of less liberally-minded worshippers; and the one at Buckminster certainly shows signs of this. Taking all these factors into account it is pretty clear that the adoption of the mooning man was commonplace but not universal amongst the masons of the guild.

We don’t know who these men were or much about how they lived. Not many church records survive from this period, but even if they did it would have been unlikely that their names would have been recorded. Even today we might know that Wimpey built a house but we would not know the name of the architect, much less the carpenter and plaisterer!

8. What were the Friezes for?

In this area the immediate answer is “because the masons could do it”. Facetious it might sound, but in fact these churches are in the limestone and ironstone belts and the stone is conducive to complex carving where in many areas the local stone is not. In Kent, for example, considerable quantities of Caen stone were imported during the Norman period for that very reason.

We’ve already established that there was precious little religious symbolism on the frieze carvings. That goes for friezes outside the Mooning Men Group as well, including those of the Northern Oxfordshire School. Friezes are not very common at all when you look at the nine thousand or so churches in the country, although perhaps more so at the “great” churches in our large towns.

So there is no obvious answer to why churches should pay for them! Yet we know that they did. In his splendid “Gargoyles and Grotesques” (Shire Libraries) the author Alex Woodcock notes:

“The churchwardens’ accounts for Yatton in Somerset reveal that the entire parish raised money for the church, which was spent on the purchase of images for the rood screen, on stone and lime, on the payment of masons and carvers, *and on the building of a parapet around the roof of the church with numerous figures carved upon it.*”

From what I can see, the carvings at Yatton were actually not very numerous at all compared with the Demon Carver churches, but this information is thought-provoking in that it reminds us that the upkeep of the nave was the responsibility of the parish in most churches and that it would have been the parish and not the clergy that would have been paying for many of the friezes discussed here. It also cautions us against projecting modern obsession with cost control onto our mediaeval forefathers. There

is no evidence that either client or mason regarded church decoration as some kind of optional frippery.

We also know that master masons were often paid for a whole project. Only the most basic itemisation of cost was made. Whether or not a frieze should be carved and its extent and quality were probably decisions made by the master mason weighing up financial and aesthetic considerations and the wishes of the client.

The popular assumption is that the fiercer and ruder images were intended to frighten off the Devil so he did not enter the church. God and godliness inside, devil and sin outside, so the argument goes. What nobody seems to be able to explain, however, is why this compulsion should emerge in the fifteenth century. Saxon and Norman carving was generally religious, pagan or allegorical. The Early English period saw a virtual moratorium on external carving altogether. Carving revived during the Decorated period between 1280-1370 and friezes emerged as a fashionable decoration for churches. Most, however, were rather repetitious courses of heads and “ballflowers”. Look at the example in the picture below.



Decorated Period Ballflower Frieze, Tower of Empingham Church, Rutland

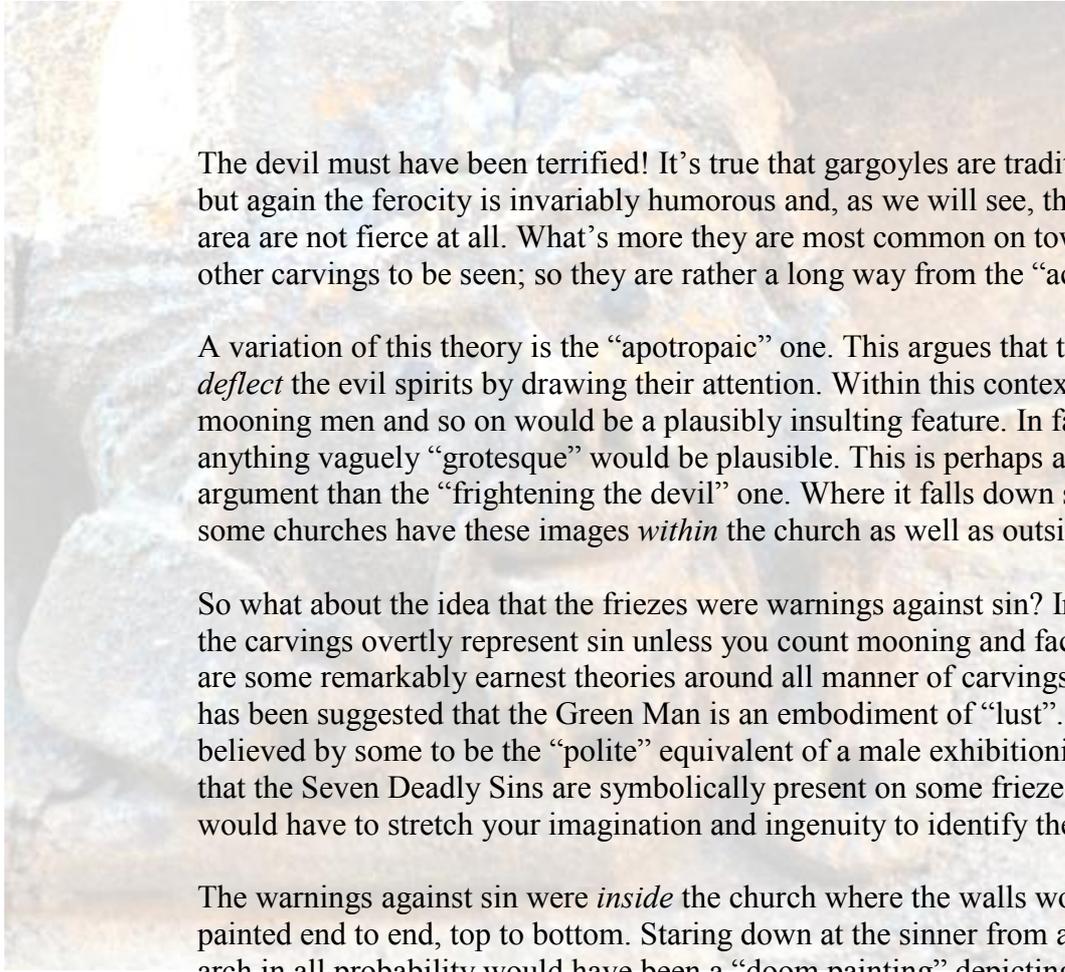
Nobody could claim that the Empingham frieze was there for any purpose other than decoration. Indeed, the upper course of simple ballflowers is representative of what is probably the most tedious motif in English church architecture!

Historical accounts do emphasise that to mediaeval people demons, spirits and the devil himself were very real fears. If you favour the “frightening the devil” theory, however, you have to believe that our ancestors suddenly devised this “protection” *after* the Empingham frieze and its like: that eight hundred years after St Augustine arrived in England churches were suddenly seen to need protection from the devil; that superstition had strengthened rather than weakened its grip on the minds of our ancestors. It just doesn’t ring true.

Furthermore, there is nothing remotely frightening about the vast majority of the imagery! Facetiousness and good humour are the prevailing mood of the frieze carvings, not ferocity. See the picture below.



Frieze Carvings, South Aisle and Clerestory, Cottesmore Church



The devil must have been terrified! It's true that gargoyles are traditionally "fierce", but again the ferocity is invariably humorous and, as we will see, the majority in this area are not fierce at all. What's more they are most common on towers often with no other carvings to be seen; so they are rather a long way from the "action", aren't they?

A variation of this theory is the "apotropaic" one. This argues that the idea was to *deflect* the evil spirits by drawing their attention. Within this context, face pullers, mooning men and so on would be a plausibly insulting feature. In fact, just about anything vaguely "grotesque" would be plausible. This is perhaps a more coherent argument than the "frightening the devil" one. Where it falls down somewhat is that some churches have these images *within* the church as well as outside!

So what about the idea that the friezes were warnings against sin? In fact few if any of the carvings overtly represent sin unless you count mooning and face pulling! There are some remarkably earnest theories around all manner of carvings. For example, it has been suggested that the Green Man is an embodiment of "lust". A tongue-poker is believed by some to be the "polite" equivalent of a male exhibitionist. It is possible that the Seven Deadly Sins are symbolically present on some friezes but, frankly, you would have to stretch your imagination and ingenuity to identify them!

The warnings against sin were *inside* the church where the walls would have been painted end to end, top to bottom. Staring down at the sinner from above the chancel arch in all probability would have been a "doom painting" depicting sinners being prodded into the flames of hell at toasting-fork point by luridly-drawn devils!

So many of these theories contradict each other and it is always easy to identify counter-arguments. Of them all, the "apotropaic" one perhaps is the hardest to refute – which isn't saying much – although it doesn't explain why most churches seemed to have no need of grotesques, whilst others needed a veritable battalion! If the church was in need of some kind of external defensive line would its design be left to the whim of the stonemason?

Taking all of this together, the most plausible – and simple - conclusion is that these friezes were purely decorative; that they were a flamboyant development of the restrained ballflower decoration of the previous century. Our masons developed and refined their art just as our artists do today. They grew bolder and gave free range to their imaginations until this form of art simply went out of fashion.

Hugh Braun in his superb "Parish Churches – Their Architectural Development in England" (1970) observed: "...there was a great deal of copying of major elements (of a church) *and all individuality was left to the detailing introduced by the mason after his own special taste. One can imagine the mediaeval "client" pointing out some feature which too his fancy and asking for something like it.* Contracts are in existence to indicate that the copying of the towers of parish churches, for example, was not an uncommon practice..." (my italics).

This theory would not completely exclude the "apotropaic" explanation; that a few of the carvings were designed to protect whilst the majority were frivolous. I can't help thinking, however, that even the apotropaic theory is really a desperate attempt to explain the inexplicable. Take a look, for example, at the frieze at Thurlby. I seriously

doubt whether any impartial spectator would believe that this frieze was carved with any apotropaic purpose.

None of this, of course, explains why the friezes were not *religious* in nature. Why are there no angels or saints? For that matter, one might have supposed these to be the perfect images to guard against the devil! I believe that the answer lies in the fact that the church building then would have been what today we would call “multifunctional”. The church would have been the only substantial building in which the poor people of the village could gather. In our terms, it was both church and village hall.

To quote from G.H.Cook’s “The English Mediaeval Parish Church” (1954):

“Primarily built for the purposes of religious worship, the parish church became in the Middle Ages the very focus of the social life of the community; it was associated with every event in the yearly round of parochial life. It was a hall, often a place of business resembling a corn exchange and was sometimes used as a store house. At Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and other festivals parish feasts known as church-ales were held in the nave of the church... A church-ale was the occasion of festival and merry-making and was followed by dancing in the church... at Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, ten church-ales were held in 1497-8 in order to raise money for the new tenor bell...”

The nave was usually the financial responsibility of the parish. Furthermore, many parishes had “parish gilds” which were rather like the mediaeval equivalent of the Rotary Club (or so it seems to me). As well as operating a kind of mutual help group, these gilds were responsible for many church improvements and enlargements. Not all chantry chapels were paid for by the aristocracy and the wealthy merchant: the parish gilds sometimes ensured that the common people were in on the act. The few historical records we have do indicate that parishioners could be extraordinarily generous in funding their churches.

I believe that the masons made a deliberate distinction between the hurly-burly of fun and sin of the everyday life on the outside of the church and the religious life within; and that this was very much encouraged by the parishioners themselves who would often be paying for the work. The interior walls would have been covered in paintings depicting the fates of sinners so there was no need for propaganda outside. This was the place for portraying village life and its preoccupations. Consider, for example, the occurrence of musicians. There is whole village orchestra on the frieze of Adderbury Church of the North Oxfordshire School and it is a repeated theme at the Mooning Men group.



Fiddle Player, Adderbury, Oxon



Drummer, Cottesmore



Shawm Player, Ryhall

This is surely the essence of the “village hall” function. Compare these images with the picture below!



Fragment of Doom Painting Wenaston Church, Suffolk: A Cautionary Tale!

If the masons were given a free hand with external carving it is surely no surprise that they exercised it by carving what they believed to be “fun” images.

9. Common Themes

The churches within this study collectively have literally hundreds of carvings. The vast majority are fairly undistinguished: human heads, fleurons (flower designs); crude grotesque faces and so on. The carvers rarely if ever re-used exactly the same design – something that in fact makes identification of individual carvers a wretchedly difficult task! The Mooning Man, of course, is the most conspicuous antidote to uniformity but there are a few others.

a. The “Flea”

Firstly, there is a recurrence of a small, square creature with a leg at each corner; I don’t know what he is. I had thought some species of imaginary lizard as he seems to have scales. I have found no evidence that a lizard-like motif had any significance in medieval Christianity or even within the mediaeval “Bestiaries”. Nor, given the secular nature of the friezes and the inaccessibility of books to common people (Caxton did not introduce printing to England until 1476) should we expect any.

This design appears at *seven* churches: **Cottesmore, Buckminster, Whissendine, Langham, Oakham and Hungarton and Brant Broughton.**



Langham



Cottesmore



Buckminster



Oakham



Hungarton



Whissendine



Brant Broughton

My best guess that they were meant to be fleas! Fleas were a menace in mediaeval life as well as, in 1348, spreading the Plague throughout Europe. Look at that nasty little face on the Buckminster “flea”. Look at those rear legs poised for jumping! Our masons did not have the benefit of microscope images so this was their “artist’s impression”! The mediaeval French manuscript “The Goodman of Paris” (written, coincidentally, in the 1390s) has this advice from the man to his wife:

“In summer, scatter the chamber with alder leaves and the fleas will get caught therein. Item, I have heard tell that if at night you set one or two trenchers of bread covered with birdlime and put them about the chamber with a lighted candle set in the midst of each, the fleas will come and get stuck thereto. As for furs and garments in which there be fleas, fold and shut them up straitly in a chest or press bound with straps so the said fleas are without light and air and kept imprisoned, then they will perish and die at once.”

Cottesmore manages to have three fleas to accompany its three mooning men. Again there has been no attempt to reproduce, only to re-use ideas. Brant Broughton (Lincs) is the finest example.

Seven churches with “flea carvings” surely cannot be coincidence. If we look at Cottesmore and Whissendine we can go even further. On both the Cottesmore south clerestory and on the Whissendine south clerestory the flea carving is adjacent to a mooning man! You would have to be very sceptical indeed not to believe that there is some sort of trademark of one or more masons here.



Cottesmore



Whissendine

b. The “Black Lead” Eyes

On some churches there are carvings where separate eyes have been added to human and animal carvings. They also show up on many gargoyles, about which more anon.

Some of the black eyes are known to have been made from molten lead but this is by no means certain in every case – see Appendix F. I have never seen the addition of discrete eyes in a church any in other area (which is not to say that there are none, of course).



Ryhall



Oakham



Lowesby



Whissendine



Ryhall



Tilton

The curious thing about these black eyes is that it is generally supposed that frieze carvings, in common with the interior of a church, were originally *painted* – until our friends the Victorians decided that this was not in keeping with their visions of what a church should be! Why then one wonders, did the masons in these churches take such pains to make lead eyes in this way?

The distribution of the black eyes is baffling. Several churches have them on their gargoyles. Ryhall and Lowesby each have many on their friezes and both even have them on window label stops. Oakham has its short run of demon carvings similar to those at Ryhall but has no more on its very extensive friezes. Beyond these we see one pair surviving at each of Cold Overton, Whissendine, Langham and Tilton-on-the-Hill. We have to assume that each had other examples that have been lost.

Langham's example is on a frieze that seems to have been carved by several hands and where most of the frieze comprises unexciting fleurons. Tilton's sits bafflingly alone on a frieze where no other black eyes seem to have existed. Whissendine's is a corner carving of a human head that seems to post-date most of the frieze carvings and to have coincided with remedial work.

c. Dogs, Cats and Lions

Animal figures are less common on the MMG friezes than might be expected, given the huge number of fantastical figures and the importance of domestic animals to the subsistence economy. Dogs (especially hounds) and pigs appear fairly regularly. Sheep are surprisingly rare, considering that wool was the wealth of England in the c15. Lions and wild cats appear quite regularly, however. Unlike many other wild non-native animals, masons sometimes seemed able to make a decent fist of carving a lion – this after all is the animal that had been part of the English coat of arms since the c11.



Thurlby Lion



Langham Cat(?)



Tilton-on-the-Hill Dog(?)

d. Green Men

Many seasoned church visitors might shrug and say “so what?” when I mention the recurrence of the green man theme – the man with tendrils and leaves sprouting from his mouth. It is true that it is amongst the most recognisable of our church imagery. All sorts of theories are proposed for their existence – some of them, I have to say, barking mad! So I will stick with the traditional view that they are pagan fertility symbols.

They are certainly not rare, and in Romanesque architecture they are ubiquitous. They are not, however, so common on the *outsides* of our churches during the Gothic period. To quote Alex Woodcock in his “Gargoyles and Grotesques” (Shire Libraries): “...although it (the green man motif) is commonly found carved on roof bosses, capitals, tombs and other interior locations, it is rare to find the image as a gargoyle or grotesque, which suggests that there was an established repertoire of imagery appropriate to the roofline”.

This is a repertoire, it seems, that the MMG was happy to ignore. There are two green men at Ryhall alone. Cottesmore, Buckminster, Thurlby (3) and probably Careby all had them.

10. Four Carvers

Given such a large body of work to look at, if we were unable to spot work by individual masons at multiple churches then the whole concept of a coherent and organised group of peripatetic masons would fall by the wayside. Carvers did not just serve their apprenticeships, carve at the nearest church and then retire to do a bit of farming! Fortunately, at least four masons can be identified with reasonable certainty.

Similarly, we shall see that at most churches stylistic differences tell us that more than one mason was responsible. This is hardly surprising, not least because the structures bearing the decorations – aisles, clerestories and so on – were often built or altered decades apart.

In the picture of Cottesmore (see section 8) it is certain that a single individual carved both south clerestory and south aisle friezes. Look, however, at the south clerestory and aisle of Whissendine (below). The clerestory is all flamboyance with animals and the all-important mooning man. The aisle is much more mannered with restrained heads and fleurons, although Pevsner considers both to be of the perpendicular period.



Whissendine South Clerestory



Whissendine South Aisle

In the absence of more precise information we don't know if the friezes at Whissendine were carved at around the same time but by different men, at different times by the same man (which seems unlikely); or by different men at different times!

This is a recurring problem at the MMG churches. We are able, however, to identify some "clusters" of carvings that allow us to start drawing a few conclusions.

a) "The Cotminster Mason"

As already noted, most if not all of Cottesmore's frieze is clearly by a single mason. The style is distinctive and quite primitive compared with most others. This style reappears at Buckminster – six miles from Cottesmore. There is no doubt whatsoever that almost all of the friezes at these churches were by the same man. I call him the "Cotminster Mason".

Even so, the Mooning Man at Buckminster is nothing like any of the three at Cottesmore. This is very important. The Mooning Man is one of the few recurring themes (apart from heads!) on the Demon Carver friezes and no two are exactly the same. If these two Mooning Men are by the same man and yet quite different then we can conclude that reproduction of previous work, as opposed to re-use of ideas, played little part in the mindsets of the carvers: they carved what they liked how they liked. This, of course, also poses us some identification problems: we can't rely on the mason's style to be wholly consistent between one site and another.

Nor, of course, should we be surprised at this. It's a poor craftsman that simply reproduces the same work wherever he goes. We also have to consider that the time and budget available to the Master Mason was likely to vary between sites.



Green Man, Buckminster



Green Man, Cottesmore



Portion of Frieze, Buckminster. Note the similarity between Oak Leaf motifs here and at Cottesmore.

So we can safely regard Cottesmore in Rutland and Buckminster in Lincolnshire as a “cluster” that shared a mason. Less obviously, however, this man also carved around half of the church tower frieze (its *only* one) at **Hungarton** in Leicestershire.



Batwinged Lions at (L-R) Buckminster, Cottesmore and Hungarton

Evidence of this comes from the existence at all three of a distinctive lion-like figure with bats’ wings at the end or corner of a frieze.

It is possible that we know what this man looked like! The key to this is at Hungarton. Hungarton, along with many other Leicestershire churches, including Wymondham and Knossington and Irnham in Lincolnshire, has only a tower frieze. Many of these tower friezes are only of passing interest; in the main they are masses of undistinguished heads and fleurons that cannot compare with the fun to be seen on clerestories and aisles. These four churches are exceptions to this rule and it does seem that this is simply because none of the four has other friezes; for whatever reason these particular tower friezes were the stonemasons’ only canvasses and so they were anxious to exploit them fully.

Hungarton’s frieze has just one overtly “human” face. These are surprisingly uncommon on clerestory and aisle friezes, with two glorious exceptions to be seen at Ryhall. The Hungarton head is quite distinctive with deeply defined cheekbones, upturned mouth and prominent nose. I always feel he looks a little haughty. Well this haughty face can be seen on three other tower friezes: at Cottesmore, Whissendine and at Oakham.



Whissendine

Cottesmore

Hungarton

Oakham

Is this the face of the mason himself? As with so much in this study, we can never know but it seems a strong possibility. It is intriguing to find evidence that he carved on the Oakham tower, because there is no evidence that he carved elsewhere at this church.

The Cotminster Mason was a devotee of the Mooning Man motif. He left them at Cottesmore, Buckminster and Hungarton. He was also responsible for more than half of the “flea carvings”. His use of the “square headdress” motif at Cottesmore and Whissendine places him firmly in the period of 1390-1410.

So this is **Cluster 1**. I call this man the “Cotminster Mason” and the cluster includes **Cottesmore, Buckminster, Hungarton, Whissendine and Oakham**.

b) “Mr Happy”

At **Wymondham** and **Knossington** (8 miles apart) in Leicestershire we can also be assured of a common hand at work. With Hungarton, they share the distinction of having only tower friezes, so the carvings are not very extensive. Both have an eagle-winged creature at one corner. Of course, they are again, reused ideas rather than reproduced images, but as these are the only two churches with this motif (and a mooning man apiece!) we can be pretty sure of our ground.



Knossington



Wymondham

The rest of the friezes are these two churches, although less flamboyant, also share a distinctive style. The predominant motif is human heads with tiny round holes for eyes. It is a simple style and I can find no other description than “The Happy Faces” because most of them have broad smiles! This style, however, is not confined to these two churches: it is also found at **Lowesby, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Whissendine and Langham**.

Wymondham’s and Knossington’s are small friezes with little that is spectacular and it is almost certain that Mr Happy carved them both in their entirety. It is equally certain that he did not carve the whole frieze at any of the other four churches at each of which where is a variety of styles to be seen.



Wymondham



Knossington



Lowesby



Tilton-on-the-Hill



Langham South Transept



Whissendine North West Aisle

This, then, is **Cluster 2** – the “**Mr Happy Cluster**”.

Lions, or wild cats, were quite popular with the carvers. At Knossington and Wymondham we see another common theme: a dog-like figure at one corner of the tower. But we also see it at two other churches: Lowesby and Tilton-on-the-Hill (which has two).



Knossington



Wymondham



Tilton-on-the-Hill



Whissendine



Tilton-on-the-Hill



Langham

Notice the exaggerated haunches and the trident-like tails on most of these. They only appear on friezes where there are happy faces. So it is clear that they are a Mr happy trademark.

Like the Cotminster Mason, Mr Happy liked to put mooning men on his friezes. Only his work at Whissendine lacks one (Whissendine’s mooner was by the Cotminster Mason) but this is probably because he seemed to have carved only a short length on the south west aisle. He was also responsible for the flea carving at Langham and was a devotee of the ladies in square headdresses (see “Dating the Work”). This places him in the period of 1390-1410.

c. The “Demon Carver”

We have already established that **Oakham** and **Ryhall** had a carver in common: the man who carved the wonderful demons with the black eyes. We can also, however, link him to a third church: **Cold Overton**. The frieze there is only around the tower and it is badly battered. Its carvings are certainly different from the other two but they have the same extravagant and deeply incised representations of “fur”, whiskers and claws and the same sense of sheer fun.

At both Ryhall and Oakham some of the figures have smaller faces also with black eyes. This is easy to see. At Cold Overton there is a similar figure that is impossible to see without a high definition camera and a very long lens. Only at an oblique angle can a tiny rodent-like face be discerned with the minutest of black eyes. There were probably others on the frieze, but this is the most damaged of all the MMG churches. They are the most spectacular and distinctive on any of the friezes I call the mason that carved these “**The Demon Carver**”. This is **Cluster 3**.



Ryhall



Oakham



Cold Overton

Apart from the Mooning Men, no other feature defines the MMG group of churches as much. It is easier to say where they do *not* occur: Cottesmore, Buckminster, Hungarton (the Cotminster Cluster), Knossington and Thurlby. It is a very striking and unusual trademark. Unlike the trademark motifs such as the mooning man and the flea carving, however, this is a trademark *technique* which is much less easy to explain amongst a group of men that seemed to jealously cultivate their individual styles. We know, for example, that Mr Happy and the Cotminster Mason did not use this device although we know that they were Mooning Men Guild members. Is it possible that one man – the Demon Carver – was responsible for all of the black-eyed carvings?

Apart from Ryhall, Oakham and Cold Overton we know of four other churches that have frieze carvings with black eyes: Lowesby, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Langham and Whissendine. Those last three have just one example each. Lowesby, on the other hand, has a large number. It is then to Lowesby we must look if we are to prove a link to the Demon Carver. When one visits the church there is no *glaring* similarity between the frieze and those in the Demon Carver cluster.

One of the many remarkable things about the carvings at Ryhall, however, is that it has black lead eyes on many of its *label stops*. As with its friezes, so Ryhall has the finest collection of label stops in the area, many of them very hard to see on its lofty

clerestory. Here's the rub: only one other church has label stops with black eyes: Lowesby in Leicestershire!



Lowesby



Lowesby



Ryhall



Ryhall

Look in particular at the two centre pictures – these are closer to being identical than any other pair of carvings in the MMG. Note the simple hats – typical of the period - the cleft chins, the prominent brows and similar mouth lines. This was surely the same carver – perhaps even his self-portrait. So it now looks a racing certainty that the Demon Carver executed those frieze carvings at Lowesby that have black lead eyes as well; Mr Happy having carved the rest.

Could these be images of Richard II or Henry IV? That seems unlikely. They would have been wearing their crowns and accompanied by images of their queens. Besides, all known images of both kings show them both to have been bearded.

There are none of the superb demons of Oakham and Ryhall at Lowesby, but look at the pictures below.



We see here the same love of the black lead eyes, the same exaggerated sweeping “fur” and some of sense of fun that the Demon Carver shows at the other churches. In the corner carving of a man’s head (lower right) do we see the same face and mouth structure we have seen on the label stops at the Demon Carver churches?

If this is the signature carving of the Demon Carver then we would expect to see similar label stops at Oakham and Cold Overton.



Cold Overton



Cold Overton



Oakham

Unfortunately, all of these examples are too weathered to be conclusive but there is certainly a case to be answered.

Now let's look at the other three churches with the black eyes, remembering there is only one example at each.



Langham North Clerestory



Tilton-on-the-Hill North Aisle



*Whissendine North West
Corner*

Looking at each in turn, Langham's is on a piece of frieze that has suffered grievously from weathering. It does, however, have some animal figures interesting enough to be the Demon Carver's work. The carving at Tilton shows the Demon Carver's familiar love of deeply-carved furry faces – and is very reminiscent of the carvings at Lowesby that is a couple of minutes drive away. The Whissendine head also appears on a frieze that has suffered very badly but it is a distinctly human head such as were carved by the Demon Carver at Ryhall.

There are no signature label stops at these three churches. Tilton, in fact, has only one label stop on the entire church. So we can find no supporting evidence there.

Were the black lead eyed frieze carvings all by the same man - the Demon Carver? Once you accept that Lowesby appears to be so then it looks fairly certain. It is hard to be definite about Tilton, Langham and Whissendine where there are single carvings, but there is nothing to discount the theory either. This would mean that my **Cluster 3** now includes **Ryhall, Oakham, Cold Overton, Langham, Whissendine, Lowesby and Tilton-on-the-Hill.**

The Demon Carver did not seem to be interested in carving mooning men nor flea carvings. He did, however, carve a woman with a square headdress at Ryhall and this makes him a contemporary of both Mr Happy and the Cotminster Mason either side of 1400.

The biggest mystery with the Demon Carver is whether he carved elsewhere. In Appendix E I discuss the apparently different ways in which the black eyes were made and that in some cases the eyes disappear without trace, not least at Ryhall. It is quite feasible that whole friezes may have lost.

Nor do we know whether he *invariably* used the black eyes. At Langham, in particular, the clerestory frieze has but one pair of black eyes. The clerestory was usually one piece of work for the carvers yet none of the south side carvings look as if they would have had or *needed* black eyes: they were mainly fleurons and sideways-on animals. Did he carve these? If so, might he also have carved the tower frieze at Thurlby that is bedecked with similar animal carvings?

d) The “Cowboy Carver”

Oakham has very extensive friezes and we have already seen that the Demon Carver and the Cotminster mason were there. They, however, account for only a tiny proportion. The clerestory and aisles are a mass of carvings of grotesque faces that are not by any of the three masons previously identified. There are two styles: one is of a rather grim faces with sunken eyes, deep nostrils and a trademark of ears that look to me like those of cows – if they resemble anything at all! The other example is of squarer faces with almond-shaped eyes, with or without holes for the irises.

On the whole, I believe it likely that these are two similar styles by the same man, simply because the second is not to be seen anywhere else within or without the MMG area. As usual, we can't know for sure. The cow-like faces, however, do recur on the north clerestory at nearby Whissendine. Confusingly, those at Whissendine look rather jolly contrasting with their grim Oakham counterparts but the stylistic similarities are obvious.



Three Images of Oakham's "Cow Faces"



Whissendine



One mason or two? Three more images from Oakham.

Cows or not, I call this the “Cowboy Mason” and the name owes nothing to its modern pejorative connotation!

If the Cowboy Mason carved all of the aisles and clerestories at Oakham then he also left three mooning men and a flea carving. Similarly, if he carved the entire Whissendine clerestory then he left one of each there too. So he was something of a stickler for the trademarks. It seems he also carved – and left more trademarks – at distant Brant Broughton. See Section 14 for more about that.

So now we have four clusters:

Cluster 1 (Cotminster Man): Buckminster*, Cottesmore*, Hungarton, Oakham

Cluster 2 (Mr Happy): Knossington*, Wymondham*, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Langham, Lowesby

Cluster 3 (Demon Carver): Ryhall, Oakham, Cold Overton, Lowesby, Tilton-on-the-Hill, Langham, Whissendine.*

Cluster 4 (Cowboy Carver): Oakham, Whissendine

* Entire frieze by the mason in this cluster.

11. The King of the Gargoyles

When my research began my focus was very much on church friezes. Ryhall Church where this quest began does not have a single gargoyle! I did not expect the Demon Carver to have carved gargoyles so that was that. How short sighted this was!

The first thing to pique my interest was what I call the “Piggy Back Gargoyle”. These are truly unique and unmistakable. We see a woman (we know it’s a woman because of her head-dress) clinging to the back of a monstrous gargoyle. As if that’s not enough, there is a second woman stretched between the monster’s legs! There are *five* instances of this unforgettable image: **Oakham, Lowesby, Tilton-on-the-Hill and Wymondham and Owston**. Owston, sadly, has lost its passenger but is otherwise intact and has two intact black lead eyes.



Lowesby



Oakham



Tilton-on-the-Hill



Owston



Wymondham

These gargoyles are surely the work of a single individual. Note also that all of the “hitchhiking” figures and those between the legs have the characteristic square headdress that places them either side of 1400 (see “Dating the Work”).

Wymondham shares another gargoyle design with Knossington. The beasts seem to be holding apart sets of jaws with their hands and they were indisputably carved by the same man. In slightly smaller form, we see the same imagery at Tilton-on-the-Hill and Buckminster.



Knossington



Wymondham



Tilton-on-the-Hill



Buckminster

As well as its gaping jaw gargoyle, Knossington also gives us a gargoyle that has what appear to be folded (and wholly inadequate!) bat-like wings on its shoulders. Again, this is a frequent image in the MMG ar



Knossington



Oakham



Wymondham



Tilton



Langham

Tilton, which has the most spectacular collection of gargoyles within the MMG, has all three of these designs. Knossington and Wymondham have two each. It is pretty obvious that all of these are carved by the same hand.

The device of inseting a head and/or body underneath the gargoyle is not confined to the Piggy Back Gargoyles. The bat-winged gargoyles at Knossington and Wymondham also have them and there are three more examples shown below.



Tilton-on-the-Hill

Oakham

Lowesby

Two artistic devices tie these firmly in with the Mooning Men Guild. Many of the gargoyles have black lead eyes and it's a safe assumption that they all had them originally. Where the figures are female they have, yet again, the characteristic square headdresses.

In fact, this man's work is all over the MMG estate; at *ten* different churches and thus the biggest of my "clusters" of churches. Of the MMG churches in this study that have gargoyles only two – Hungarton and Thurlby – do not obviously have gargoyles by this man. Cottesmore, Ryhall, Carey and Cold Overton have no gargoyles at all.



Whissendine



Market Overton



Irnham



Buckminster



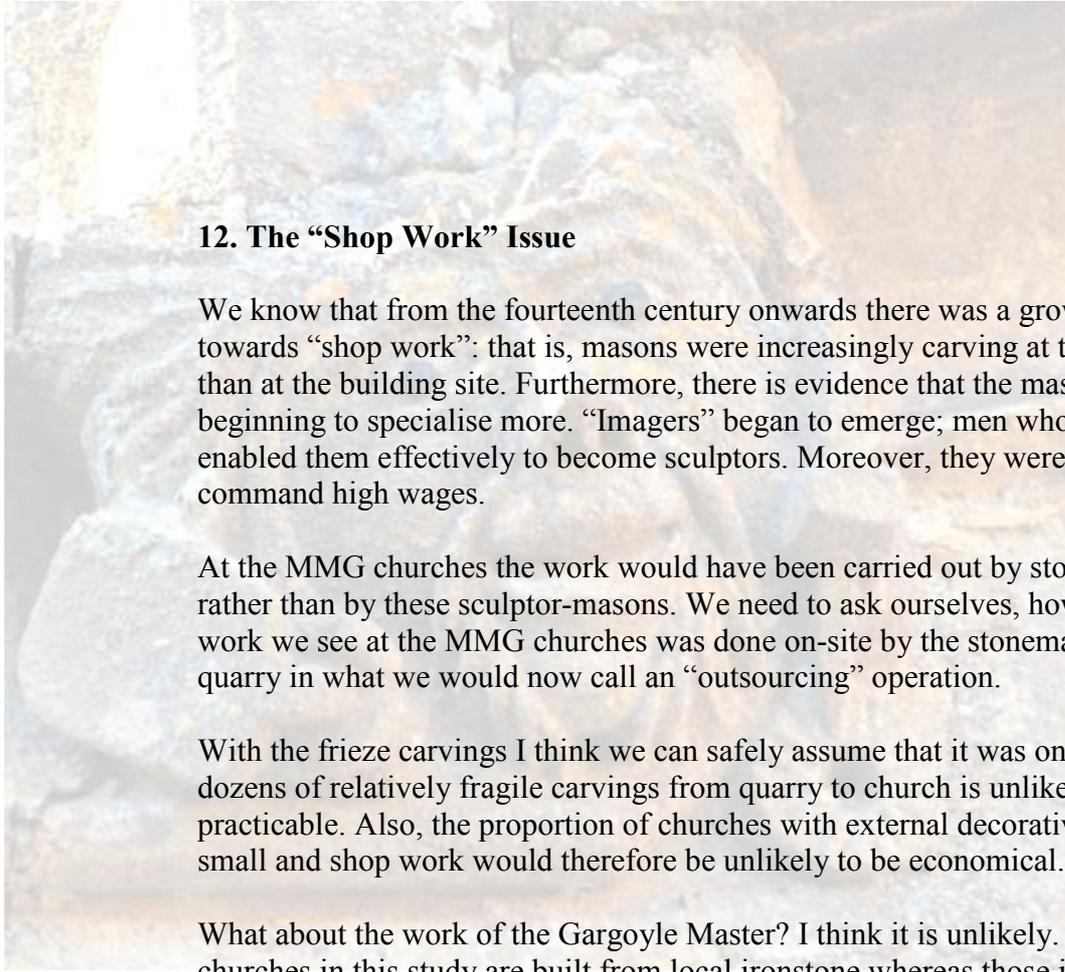
Oakham



Oakham

This is not to say that none of the MMG churches have gargoyles carved by any other man; but that all those that do have gargoyles have at least some by this man. This is an overwhelming endorsement of the concept that these churches were worked upon by an organised group of craftsmen, creating a discrete and identifiable school of carving.

So we have identified a fifth mason, a King of the Gargoyles. Let's call him the "**Gargoyle Master**".



12. The “Shop Work” Issue

We know that from the fourteenth century onwards there was a growing movement towards “shop work”: that is, masons were increasingly carving at the quarry rather than at the building site. Furthermore, there is evidence that the masons were beginning to specialise more. “Imagers” began to emerge; men whose technical skills enabled them effectively to become sculptors. Moreover, they were men that command high wages.

At the MMG churches the work would have been carried out by stonemason-carvers rather than by these sculptor-masons. We need to ask ourselves, however, whether the work we see at the MMG churches was done on-site by the stonemason or at the quarry in what we would now call an “outsourcing” operation.

With the frieze carvings I think we can safely assume that it was onsite. Transporting dozens of relatively fragile carvings from quarry to church is unlikely to have been practicable. Also, the proportion of churches with external decorative carvings is very small and shop work would therefore be unlikely to be economical.

What about the work of the Gargoyle Master? I think it is unlikely. The Leicestershire churches in this study are built from local ironstone whereas those in Rutland and Lincolnshire are of limestone. Most churches do not know which quarries supplied their stone but in the Stamford area alone there were quarries at (most famously) Barnack, Clipsham, Ketton and Holywell. If The Gargoyle Master carried out his work at a quarry which was it?

Finally, there is the issue of the black lead eyes. It seems that many, if not all, of the gargoyles had these. If they were carved off site then the quarry would have needed the metal, the production facility and the plumber to add the eyes. Would they have been bothered? Whereas all of those things would have been readily available at any church building site where lead was being used for roofs or pipe-work.

13. Demons and Gargoyles

Thus far, then, we have identified five masons by their work: four on friezes and one on gargoyles. We know that they are all more or less contemporaries because they all use the “square headdress” motif. Furthermore, they appear in various combinations on the same churches. The four frieze carvers here produced work sufficiently diverse for us to be sure that they are indeed separate men. Given that the Demon Carver and the Gargoyle Master both employed the black eyes device, however, it does beg the question:

- *Were The Gargoyle Master and The Demon Carver the same man?*

The most obvious argument in favour of this proposition is that it ties together the entire collection of carvings and gargoyles that have black eyes. After all, I have already argued that a trademark *style* of carving is much less likely than a trademark

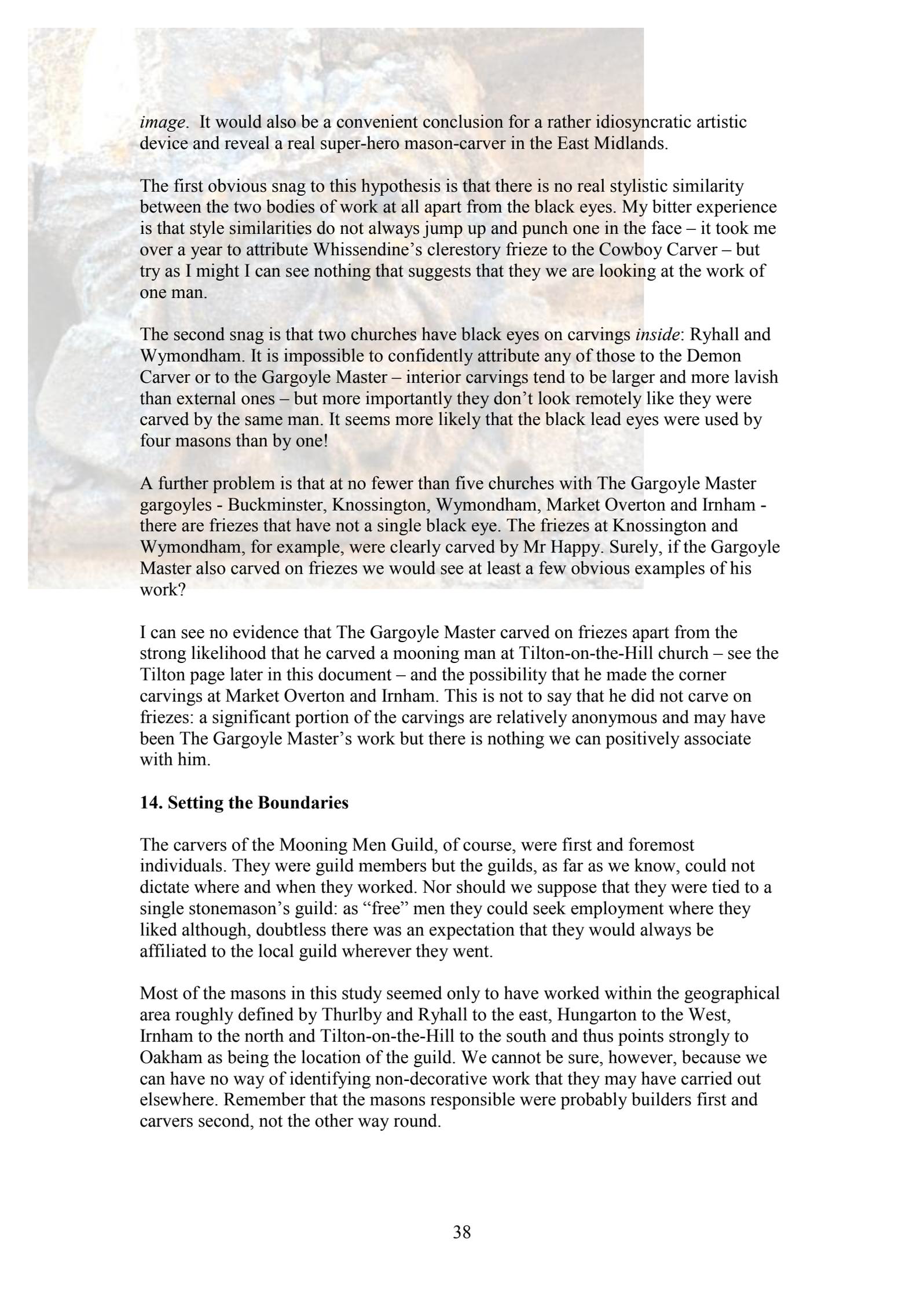


image. It would also be a convenient conclusion for a rather idiosyncratic artistic device and reveal a real super-hero mason-carver in the East Midlands.

The first obvious snag to this hypothesis is that there is no real stylistic similarity between the two bodies of work at all apart from the black eyes. My bitter experience is that style similarities do not always jump up and punch one in the face – it took me over a year to attribute Whissendine’s clerestory frieze to the Cowboy Carver – but try as I might I can see nothing that suggests that they we are looking at the work of one man.

The second snag is that two churches have black eyes on carvings *inside*: Ryhall and Wymondham. It is impossible to confidently attribute any of those to the Demon Carver or to the Gargoyle Master – interior carvings tend to be larger and more lavish than external ones – but more importantly they don’t look remotely like they were carved by the same man. It seems more likely that the black lead eyes were used by four masons than by one!

A further problem is that at no fewer than five churches with The Gargoyle Master gargoyles - Buckminster, Knossington, Wymondham, Market Overton and Irnham - there are friezes that have not a single black eye. The friezes at Knossington and Wymondham, for example, were clearly carved by Mr Happy. Surely, if the Gargoyle Master also carved on friezes we would see at least a few obvious examples of his work?

I can see no evidence that The Gargoyle Master carved on friezes apart from the strong likelihood that he carved a mooning man at Tilton-on-the-Hill church – see the Tilton page later in this document – and the possibility that he made the corner carvings at Market Overton and Irnham. This is not to say that he did not carve on friezes: a significant portion of the carvings are relatively anonymous and may have been The Gargoyle Master’s work but there is nothing we can positively associate with him.

14. Setting the Boundaries

The carvers of the Mooning Men Guild, of course, were first and foremost individuals. They were guild members but the guilds, as far as we know, could not dictate where and when they worked. Nor should we suppose that they were tied to a single stonemason’s guild: as “free” men they could seek employment where they liked although, doubtless there was an expectation that they would always be affiliated to the local guild wherever they went.

Most of the masons in this study seemed only to have worked within the geographical area roughly defined by Thurlby and Ryhall to the east, Hungarton to the West, Irnham to the north and Tilton-on-the-Hill to the south and thus points strongly to Oakham as being the location of the guild. We cannot be sure, however, because we can have no way of identifying non-decorative work that they may have carried out elsewhere. Remember that the masons responsible were probably builders first and carvers second, not the other way round.

So, in defining the Mooning Men Guild area we are defining an area where a group of men seemed to work to a set of common decorative values and to employ a distinctive set of trademarks. Two masons who worked within the MMG area, however, can be proven to have worked outside it.

The first is the man who carved a rather naïve nexus of work on the chancel and on both aisles of Tilton-on-the-Hill. Apart from the ubiquitous square headdress carving that enables us to prove that he was a contemporary of the Mooning Men Guild, he employs no trademarks and we can be unequivocal that he produced no other carvings within the geographical area I have defined.

Yet he obviously did carve the tower frieze (its only frieze) at Beeby Church only six miles to the west and a mere two miles to the west of Hungarton.



Beeby Tower Frieze



Tilton-on-the-Hill Chancel Frieze

Despite a shared mason and its geographical proximity, however, I do not regard Beeby as being a Mooning Men Guild church: it rather seems as if he simply strayed into its territory briefly to work at Tilton.

A more significant example of labour migration occurs between Oakham and Brant Broughton – some *fifty* miles apart. Oakham’s friezes are the most extensive of any within the MMG area. We can identify the Demon Carver, the Gargoyle Master and the Cotminster Mason all at work here. The vast majority, however, seems to have been carved by the “Cowboy Mason” who also carved at Whissendine. He left a total of four mooning men and a two flea carvings at those two locations.

Astonishingly, the Cowboy Mason reappears on the extensive and beautiful friezes at Brant Broughton. There really is no room for doubt. The cow-like ears, the deeply sunk eyes and the exaggerated nostrils are all there, albeit the carvings at Brant seem to have been executed with a little more care and to have better withstood the weathering of the centuries.



Three Images of Brant Broughton



Three Images of Oakham

Better still, Brant Broughton also has a mooning man and a flea carving! The mooner is of a different style to those in the MMG. The flea is more elaborate and better-defined than those within the MMG but its provenance is undeniable. Brant Broughton’s all-round magnificence is a testament to the availability of time and much money. It is hardly surprising that the Cowboy Carver produced his best work here.

If there were any lingering doubts, they are surely trumped by the appearance at both Brant Broughton and on Whissendine’s south clerestory of a “hurdy gurdy” player carving.



Whissendine



Brant Broughton

We don’t know how much of the Brant frieze can be attributed to the Cowboy Mason – I believe it is a considerable proportion – but he was certainly there. Which of Oakham and Brant did he work on first? I believe it is undoubtedly Oakham. It is much more plausible that he took MMG’s trademarks with him to Brant rather than exporting them to Oakham where others eagerly adopted them.

Again, though, I cannot regard Brant Broughton as being within the Mooning Men Guild area. What is indisputable, however, is that it is part of the East Midlands School of Carving. The Oakham mason exported the MMG’s style to Brant.

15. The Mooning Gargoyles

I have found Mooning Gargoyles at Easton-on-the-Hill and Lyndon (Rutland); at Colsterworth, Aswarby and Sleaford (Lincs); and at Glington (Cambs). Mooning gargoyles are certainly not confined to the Mooning Men Guild area and the style of

each is pretty well unique in style and design. Are these carvings the work of the Mooning Men Guild?

With the possible exception of Colsterworth I think the answer must be no. None of them has a single frieze carving, or any evidence of being of the “right” period. Colsterworth, however, uniquely has a mooning man *label stop**. It is in a rather different style to any of the mooners on church friezes but that is perhaps to be expected. Colsterworth is only a couple miles from the MMG church at Buckminster so we might speculate that whoever installed that north west window was anxious to leave the Guild’s trademark even if no frieze was required. To add weight to the argument, there is a square headdress on a tower label stop so it likely that the work was within the prescribed period of the MMG.

Of the other churches, Lyndon and Easton are also within the rough geographical area of the MMG. They are unlikely be the work of the guild but it is a reasonable hypothesis that their carvers followed what they perceived to be a local tradition.



Colsterworth Gargoyle



Colsterworth Mooner



Easton-on-the-Hill Gargoyle

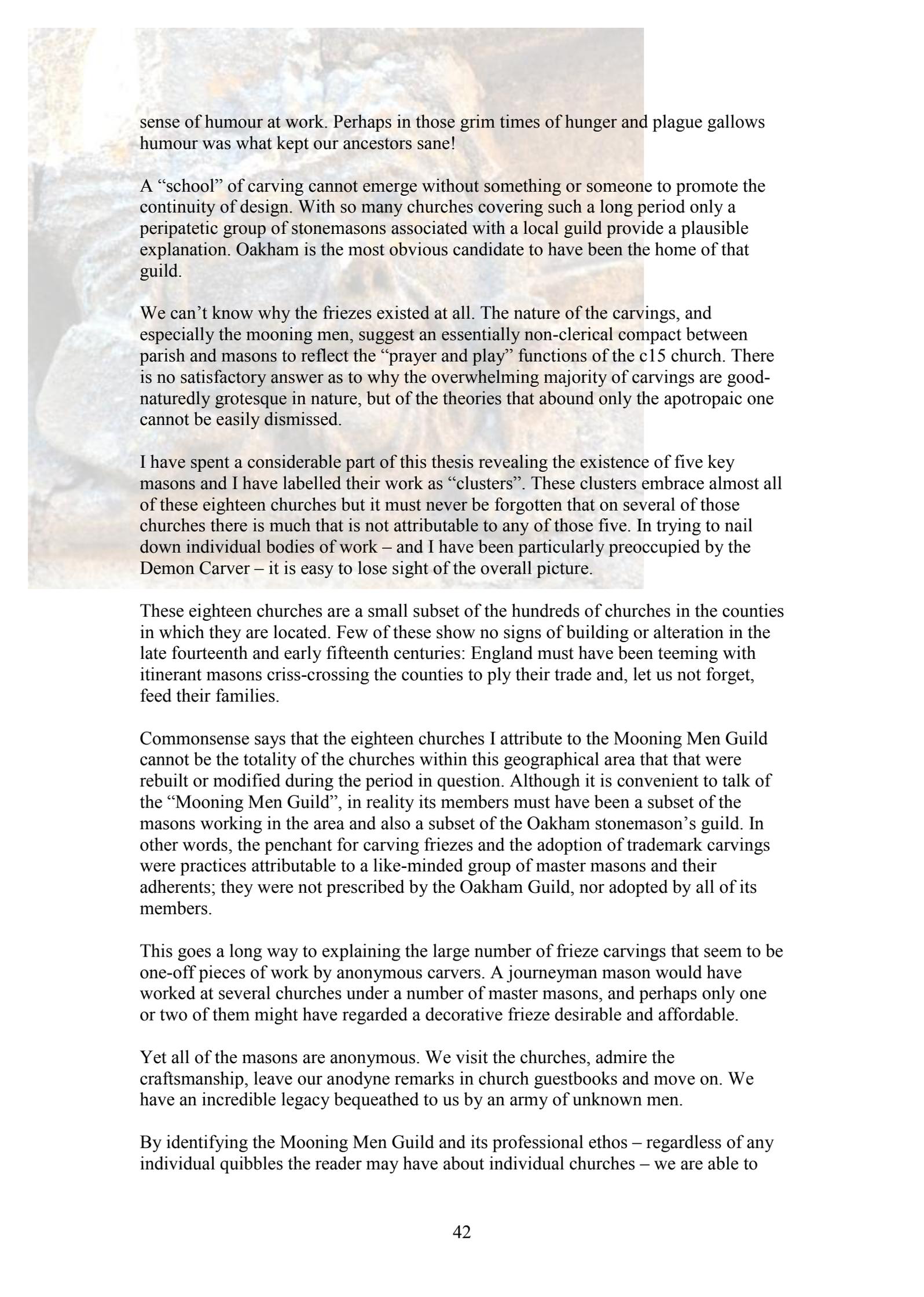
17. Summary

There are eighteen churches that have characteristics in their carvings that suggest that they were hosts to what I call the Mooning Men Guild. Each of these, through the style of women’s headdresses shows evidence that their carvings were executed within, at the most, a decade or two of each other.

Eleven of the eighteen churches have mooning men on their exteriors, leaving seven that have none. Of these, Ryhall and Cold Overton are indelibly linked via the Demon Carver’s work; Irnham, Owston and Market Overton are linked via The Gargoyle Master’s gargoyles. Careby and Thurlby present less compelling evidence.

The churches within this group stretch from Thurlby in the east to Hungarton in the west - 27 miles as the crow flies; and from Colsterworth in the north to Tilton-on-the-Hill in the south – 12 miles. Even for mediaeval craftsmen these are not great distances.

The existence of the Mooning Man frieze carvings, especially combined with the “flea carving” motif and the stone eyes, within such a limited area cannot be dismissed as coincidence. There was *design* here: corporate pride, laddish humour, “two fingers” up to the world – pick your favourite. Throughout we can see a robust



sense of humour at work. Perhaps in those grim times of hunger and plague gallows humour was what kept our ancestors sane!

A “school” of carving cannot emerge without something or someone to promote the continuity of design. With so many churches covering such a long period only a peripatetic group of stonemasons associated with a local guild provide a plausible explanation. Oakham is the most obvious candidate to have been the home of that guild.

We can’t know why the friezes existed at all. The nature of the carvings, and especially the mooning men, suggest an essentially non-clerical compact between parish and masons to reflect the “prayer and play” functions of the c15 church. There is no satisfactory answer as to why the overwhelming majority of carvings are good-naturedly grotesque in nature, but of the theories that abound only the apotropaic one cannot be easily dismissed.

I have spent a considerable part of this thesis revealing the existence of five key masons and I have labelled their work as “clusters”. These clusters embrace almost all of these eighteen churches but it must never be forgotten that on several of those churches there is much that is not attributable to any of those five. In trying to nail down individual bodies of work – and I have been particularly preoccupied by the Demon Carver – it is easy to lose sight of the overall picture.

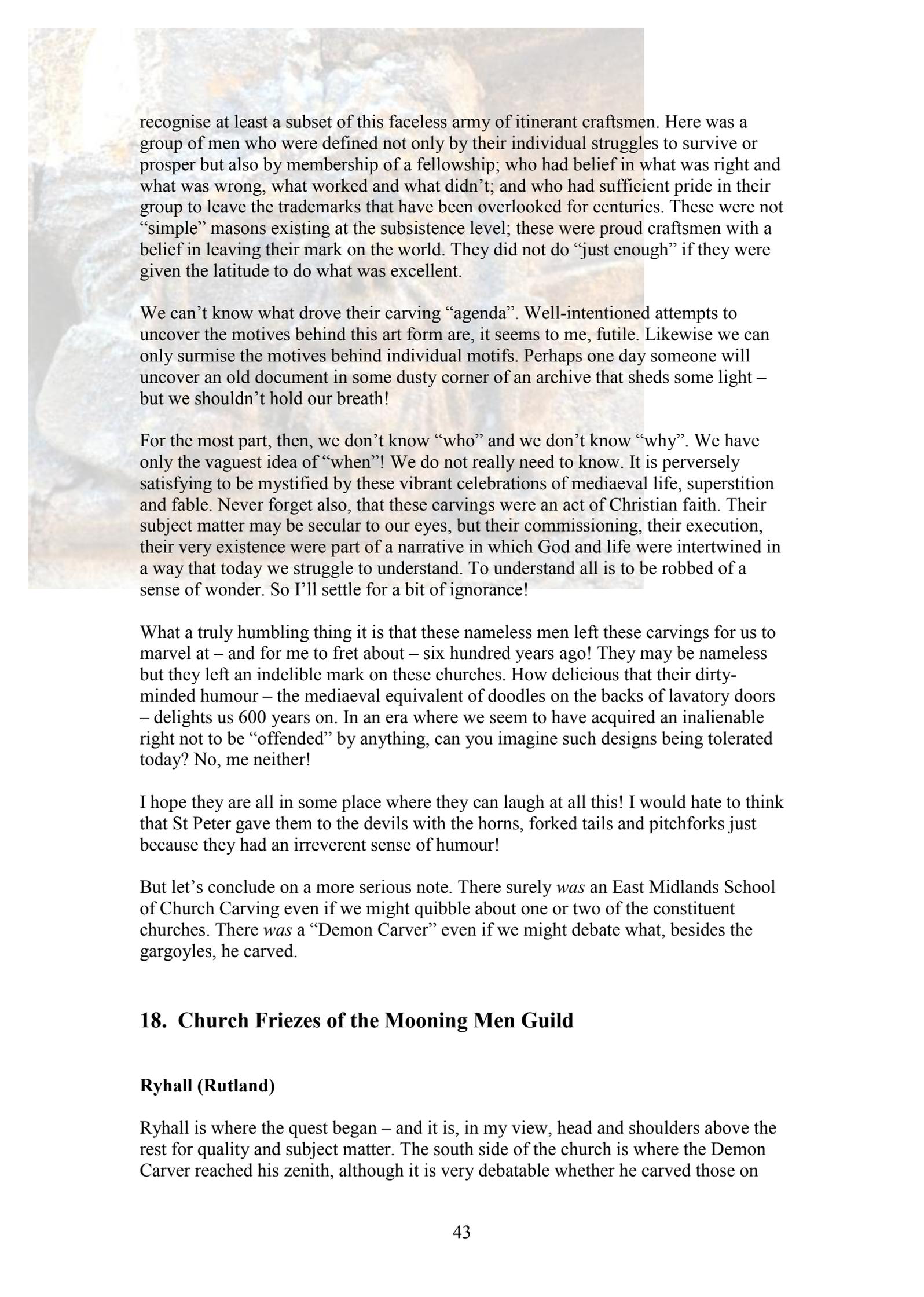
These eighteen churches are a small subset of the hundreds of churches in the counties in which they are located. Few of these show no signs of building or alteration in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries: England must have been teeming with itinerant masons criss-crossing the counties to ply their trade and, let us not forget, feed their families.

Commonsense says that the eighteen churches I attribute to the Mooning Men Guild cannot be the totality of the churches within this geographical area that that were rebuilt or modified during the period in question. Although it is convenient to talk of the “Mooning Men Guild”, in reality its members must have been a subset of the masons working in the area and also a subset of the Oakham stonemason’s guild. In other words, the penchant for carving friezes and the adoption of trademark carvings were practices attributable to a like-minded group of master masons and their adherents; they were not prescribed by the Oakham Guild, nor adopted by all of its members.

This goes a long way to explaining the large number of frieze carvings that seem to be one-off pieces of work by anonymous carvers. A journeyman mason would have worked at several churches under a number of master masons, and perhaps only one or two of them might have regarded a decorative frieze desirable and affordable.

Yet all of the masons are anonymous. We visit the churches, admire the craftsmanship, leave our anodyne remarks in church guestbooks and move on. We have an incredible legacy bequeathed to us by an army of unknown men.

By identifying the Mooning Men Guild and its professional ethos – regardless of any individual quibbles the reader may have about individual churches – we are able to



recognise at least a subset of this faceless army of itinerant craftsmen. Here was a group of men who were defined not only by their individual struggles to survive or prosper but also by membership of a fellowship; who had belief in what was right and what was wrong, what worked and what didn't; and who had sufficient pride in their group to leave the trademarks that have been overlooked for centuries. These were not "simple" masons existing at the subsistence level; these were proud craftsmen with a belief in leaving their mark on the world. They did not do "just enough" if they were given the latitude to do what was excellent.

We can't know what drove their carving "agenda". Well-intentioned attempts to uncover the motives behind this art form are, it seems to me, futile. Likewise we can only surmise the motives behind individual motifs. Perhaps one day someone will uncover an old document in some dusty corner of an archive that sheds some light – but we shouldn't hold our breath!

For the most part, then, we don't know "who" and we don't know "why". We have only the vaguest idea of "when"! We do not really need to know. It is perversely satisfying to be mystified by these vibrant celebrations of mediaeval life, superstition and fable. Never forget also, that these carvings were an act of Christian faith. Their subject matter may be secular to our eyes, but their commissioning, their execution, their very existence were part of a narrative in which God and life were intertwined in a way that today we struggle to understand. To understand all is to be robbed of a sense of wonder. So I'll settle for a bit of ignorance!

What a truly humbling thing it is that these nameless men left these carvings for us to marvel at – and for me to fret about – six hundred years ago! They may be nameless but they left an indelible mark on these churches. How delicious that their dirty-minded humour – the mediaeval equivalent of doodles on the backs of lavatory doors – delights us 600 years on. In an era where we seem to have acquired an inalienable right not to be "offended" by anything, can you imagine such designs being tolerated today? No, me neither!

I hope they are all in some place where they can laugh at all this! I would hate to think that St Peter gave them to the devils with the horns, forked tails and pitchforks just because they had an irreverent sense of humour!

But let's conclude on a more serious note. There surely *was* an East Midlands School of Church Carving even if we might quibble about one or two of the constituent churches. There *was* a "Demon Carver" even if we might debate what, besides the gargoyles, he carved.

18. Church Friezes of the Mooning Men Guild

Ryhall (Rutland)

Ryhall is where the quest began – and it is, in my view, head and shoulders above the rest for quality and subject matter. The south side of the church is where the Demon Carver reached his zenith, although it is very debatable whether he carved those on

the chancel and north aisle. There are many images of Ryhall elsewhere in this account but it's worth looking at some others. Let's start with the south side where we know the Demon Carver was the mason.



Demon Carvings, South West Aisle



Unknown



The Jester



Owl with a mouse in its beak



The Lioness



The Bull



Dog(?) framed by leaves



Another Ram-like Head



Face in a Goffered Headdress



Unknown



The Bat



The Happy Grotesque



Head surrounded by Leaves

Note the numerous “black eyes”. Ryhall’s frieze adorns both of its aisles and its chancel almost uninterruptedly. Unlike many Mooning Men Group, Ryhall is not

battlemented and there are no gargoyles. The aisles were widened and the clerestory raised at around the turn of the c15 according to Pevsner.

The two-storey porch has a frieze carved around it at first floor level but has none under its parapet. Moreover, on the east side of the porch is a frieze carving that has been carefully cut in half where it joins the aisle. It is fairly obvious when you think about it (and Pevsner, for one, clearly hadn't!) that the second floor parvise room was added some time after the porch was built. The first floor porch frieze would have been underneath the *original* roofline and the south aisle frieze would have extended along the whole of the cornice until the higher roofline caused some carvings to be lost. This theory is confirmed by the distinctly Tudor period rectangular window of the parvise room itself. There may have been a mooning man or flea carving amongst the "casualties" but the Demon Carver himself did not seem to bother with carving these images so we cannot know.

The extraordinary quality of Ryhall's frieze carvings is echoed in its label stop carvings. Label stop carvings (with the honourable exception of Colsterworth which has a mooning man) tend to be rather tedious images of human heads, kings and queens and so on. On Ryhall's south side, however, are the four examples below and their provenance is established by the survival of some black lead eyes! The carving second left is the archetypal Demon Carver label stop image and is the strongest evidence that this one man carved all of the black lead eyed frieze carvings (but not the gargoyles) in the Mooning Men Group of churches.



Label Stop Carvings, South Aisle

Ryhall has no frieze on its clerestory which is surprising. Remarkably, however, each of its clerestory windows has two highly ornate label stops. Each has or has had black eyes and are, again, clearly the work of the Demon Carver. Ryhall, it seems, was his magnum opus. He had a ball!



Label Stop Carvings, Ryhall Clerestory

Whilst the Demon Carver certainly carved all of the south aisle frieze and the label stops on it and the clerestory, it is much less clear whether he carved anything on the

chancel and north aisle friezes. The quality of the carving and the sheer variety argue strongly that he did. There is not one black eye, however.

Let's look at the north side.



The Temptress

Green Man

Corner Carving

I believe that the "Temptress" carving would not be at all out of place on the south west aisle with the other demon carvings.



The Drummer

Animal with Bird

Man Supporting the Parapet



A Green...Dog?

Two Face Pullers



More North Side carvings including (third left) symbol of Virgin Mary and (right) the Shawm Player

The rose surrounded by an eight-pointed star symbol (above right) is an exception to the rule that there is no religious iconography on the friezes, and it is surely no accident that it is on the east end of the chancel. The central rose depicts the Virgin Mary who is often shown in Eastern Orthodox Christianity wearing a veil with three eight-pointed stars. As with so many religious images there are many interpretations but the one which makes most sense to me is the concept that the eighth point is the "eighth day of creation" – the birth, death and resurrection of Christ and the life to come after death. This argument is reinforced by the adoption of an octagonal plan for

many church fonts. The mason has not just overlaid on rectangle with another; he has carved an illusion of interlaced shapes.

It is not plausible that purely by chance no eyes survived anywhere on the north and east sides. We have to conclude that in all probability these two friezes never did have any. There is nothing comparable in quality within the rest of the MMG, however, so if the Demon Carver was not responsible then it must have been the work of another gifted man who simply carved no other friezes; which is perfectly feasible if he was a general stonemason. The big question – which we can never answer - is whether the Demon Carver employed the black eyes invariably. If he did not then all of Ryhall's frieze could be his and I speculate elsewhere that he might also have carved at Langham and Thurlby. All of those styles are different from Ryhall's south aisle, but when in a later section we look at the Demon Carver's work at Lowesby, for example, its friezes too are quite different.

Finally, even the fleurons at Ryhall are generally of a higher quality than anywhere else in the MMG area. They have a three-dimensional quality that is lacking on most MMG friezes and note the particular attention to reproducing the veins of the leaves.



Ryhall Fleurons



Oakham (Rutland)

Oakham is the largest of the churches in the Mooning Men Group and has a multitude of carvings and gargoyles. This is the town which probably hosted the Mooning Men Guild. By far the best carvings here are those done by the Demon Carver on the north west aisle.





Work by the Demon Carver of Ryhall on the North West Aisle, Oakham. Note the number of missing black lead eyes and the recurrence of “wavy fur”.

Most of the rest of the friezes are strangely one-dimensional: a mass of grotesque faces and fleurons that look to be the work of a single man – the “Cowboy Mason”. Lest we be in any doubt of this, the rather odd four pointed device (second motif from the left in the picture below) recurs all over the frieze.



Two sections of Oakham South Clerestory



Oakham Chancel Frieze, East End



Oakham North Aisle



Oakham North Clerestory



Oakham South Aisle

There are some puzzles, however. There are three mooning men on the Oakham friezes – a record shared only with Cottesmore). None of them look particularly like the other although they appear amongst friezes that are stylistically similar.



The other surprise is the south porch frieze. Most of this has the usual grotesque faces.



Three Images of Oakham's South Porch Frieze

Goffered Head, North Aisle

One or two the carvings, however, do not look quite like those we see the rest of the churches.



Compare the face and its goffered headdress with the picture above it from the north aisle. They are quite different. The dog carving next to it is totally at odds – and much more interesting – than anything else at Oakham. This short frieze, interestingly, has a gargoyle at each end, one definitely carved by The Gargoyle Master – it has black eyes - and the other badly weathered one probably so.



South Porch.

South Chapel

South Porch

This porch in turn is close to the south chapel where the *only* adornments are gargoyles by The Gargoyle Master – another beast with winged shoulders and the piggy back gargoyle. This raises the intriguing possibility that the goffered head and the dog carving were also by this man. One might speculate that the dog and the lady's head were personal tributes. Was the lady his goodwife?

The north transept has a frieze on all three sides but is curiously narrow. The carvings are in a style compatible with the MMG – and there is the mandatory woman with goffered headdress - but it clearly wasn't carved by any of the MMG's star masons.



Oakham North Transept, East Face

The small north chapel has no frieze but sports two the Gargoyle Master's creations, including Oakham's piggy-back gargoyle.

It is not clear how many of the gargoyles here were by the Gargoyle Master. Some clearly are, but such is the quantity and diversity of design here that some must be open to question.

An interesting example is that on the left. There is a horseshoe design around the torso. Those who have visited Oakham Castle (a Norman hall in reality) will know that its walls are covered with horseshoes presented by peers visiting the town. The first was presented by King Edward IV in 1470 after the Battle of Losecoat Field nearby. The tradition supposedly refers to the de Ferrers family who built the castle and whose name derives from the French "ferrier" or, in English, "farrier".

Whether or not this is true, it does seem that the tradition long pre-dated Edward's own donation. Indeed, the de Ferrers family relinquished Oakham Castle in the mid-13c. Possibly Edward simply turned custom into ceremonial – I would like to think with facetious intent – and others followed. It is hard not to conclude that this gargoyle was part of the "joke" in some way. And is that a bosom being supported by the horseshoe. Is this a rare *gargoyle-ess*?



A rare female gargoyle?



Gargoyle with Inset Male Head



Finally, it seems that the Cotminster Mason was here on the tower frieze. Like his work on those at Cottesmore and Whissendine it is a simple sequence of face-pulling human heads.

Oakham is a bit of an oddity. A rich church, only Mr Happy of our five identifiable master masons did not clearly work here. Its friezes are of a high quality, but conspicuously lacking in variety with the exceptions of the south porch and the Demon Carver's work on the north west aisle. Why did the Demon Carver do so little here? Was he working on the structures?

Cottesmore (Rutland)

Cottesmore frieze – all undoubtedly by the “Cotminster Mason” - has some interesting imagery but there is none of the flamboyance that one associates with Ryhall or Thurlby, for example. The figures here and at Buckminster are relatively small, crude and naïve and in places, dare one say it, rather dull! There is, however, a pervading sense of fun. Both aisles and both sides of the clerestory have friezes.



South Aisle Boneshaker



South Aisle Flea carving



North Clerestory



South Clerestory with Mooner and Flea



North Aisle Flea



North Aisle Unidentified Animal



South Aisle



Section of South Clerestory



Section of North Clerestory

Cottesmore has an extraordinary three mooning men and three flea carvings. Only the north clerestory lacks these images. Oakham also has three mooning men but none on the north clerestory. It does seem that the clerestory was often regarded as a single piece of work and this would explain both these omissions.

Cottesmore also created the biggest headache in terms of dating. All authorities seem agreed that the aisles and clerestory are *early fourteenth* century! Pevsner, in

particular, insists on calling the frieze a “ballflower” frieze despite a peculiar shortage of ballflowers, and this is taken (especially by Pevsner) as an infallible indication of Decorated work.

Here Buckminster comes to the rescue. That its frieze is by the same man as Cottesmore is indisputable. Yet *its* clerestory is dated as *fifteenth* century. Its south aisle and, in particular, its west end where the frieze is found are believed to have been remodelled at the same time.

Buckminster’s porch is very definitely Perpendicular in style so this seems to be right. The only rational explanation for the apparent discrepancy is that the Cottesmore frieze was added when re-fenestration was carried out on the aisles in the Perpendicular period.

Cottesmore has a tower frieze that is a rather uninteresting sequence of human heads. It does, however, serve to prove links between Cottesmore, Whissendine, Hungarton and Oakham – see the section on Whissendine.



Cottesmore Tower Frieze

Buckminster (Leicestershire)

Buckminster’s frieze is on a small scale compared with most discussed in this document – leaving aside the group in Leicestershire that have friezes only on their towers. I have no doubt whatsoever that the south aisle frieze – which has both a mooning man and a “flea carving” motif - was carved by the same man who carved all or most of the frieze at Cottesmore – the “Cotminster Mason”.

The frieze on the south porch is another matter. The carvings there are rather larger and more elaborate. They still lack the sophistication shown by some of the other MMG masons but there is a fierce exuberance that matches that on the frieze’s corner carvings. On the whole, I think they were by the same mason.

What is interesting is that anybody should commission a frieze to cover such a small fragment of what is quite a substantial church. The clerestory has no frieze despite itself being c15 and the north side is totally undecorated. Probably the changes to porch, aisle and clerestory were carried out at different times, albeit in the same century.



Buckminster Frieze



Images from Buckminster Frieze. Note the similarities with Cottesmore except the Green Man, lower centre, which is from the south porch



More from Buckminster Frieze and Porch

Buckminster as but a single gargoyle located on the south aisle – but it is by the Gargoyle Master. Quite why this church should have just one is another mystery – just as it is a mystery to why there is such a short section of frieze. The gargoyle is holding open what seems to be a jaw full of teeth, but doubtless there are those that might put a more earthy construction on it. Anyway, this is an image reproduced by The Gargoyle Master at Knossington, Wymondham and Tilton-on-the-Hill.



Two images of the gargoyle

The mutilated Mooner



Buckminster South Porch

For more historical information see Cottesmore.

Whissendine (Rutland)

Whissendine, like Cottesmore only four miles distant, has friezes to both aisles and to both sides of its clerestory. Rebuilding has, sadly, deprived the church of much of its friezes on the north side. Along with Langham, Whissendine has the greatest variety of styles in the MMG and asks a lot of questions.

The clerestory here is c15. So far so good. Both aisles were re-fenestrated in the c15, even though the actual construction of the south aisle dates from the early fourteenth century. This is interesting because the carvings on the south aisle stand out as different from the rest, comprising simple human heads and quatrefoil fleurons. Interestingly, it has a rare example of a female head without the usual square headdress. It's a simplistic carving but it looks like it may be a "headdress with templers" dating from about 1420.



The simple, well-ordered frieze of Whissendine's south aisle.

The clerestory frieze, as is usual, appears to be the work of a single mason. It is not of a style readily recognisable anywhere else in the MMG, especially on the very attractive and exuberant south side where both the mooning man and a flea carving are located. The clue is on the north side where the "cow-like" carvings by the Cowboy Carver and reminiscent of Oakham and Brant Broughton can be seen: although at Whissendine his monsters sport grins rather than his usual grimaces!



South Clerestory Carvings, Whissendine



Above and Below: South Clerestory Carvings, Whissendine





Above and Below: The "Cowboy Carver" on the North Clerestory



There are many lost carvings on the north side. This can almost certainly be attributed to what the Church Guide calls the near collapse of the north aisle due to the additional weight of the c15 clerestory.

The north aisle frieze has suffered grievously. Only its north west section is intact and this frieze seems to have been carved by the inimitable "Mr Happy". It is likely that he carved the entire north aisle but so little remains that is hard to be sure.



North West Aisle



North Aisle with Fleurons and simple Green Man

What we also have on the north aisle are buttress carvings that are out of character with the rest. The only explanation is that when the masons carried out the remedial work they built buttresses and that one of them added a couple of carvings of his own.

On the north west corner buttress there is a human head with black lead eyes surmounted by a rather villainous-looking lion or cat. Neither of these is at all in keeping with the work of Mr Happy, and the human head with black lead eyes at least is almost certainly by the Demon Carver. It seems pretty certain that the other two are also by him although weathering robs us of any evidence of black lead eyes.



Black-eyed man and fierce beast south west buttress

Dog, south side buttress

All in all, the damage to the north side makes the Whissendine friezes rather hard to “read”.

This thesis largely ignores tower friezes unless they are of particular interest. Some are simply endless rows of heads, presumably because they are too high up to be appreciated. Whissendine’s is one such. Its style, however, is reminiscent of those at Cottesmore, Hungarton and Oakham. It look as if they were all carved by the Cotminster mason.



Whissendine Tower Frieze

Whissendine’s gargoyles are more interesting. One or two are unmistakably the work of the Gargoyle Master. On the north side there is a gargoyle that been all but destroyed but which still shows the remains of an “inset head”. Another was possibly a variation on the piggy back gargoyle theme. They might all be by the Gargoyle Master, but Whissendine’s gargoyles seem to have suffered more than most from the installation of modern drainpipe systems so it is difficult to be definite.

One gargoyle that categorically does *not* seem to be by the Gargoyle Master is the hurdy-gurdy player on the north clerestory. This design is repeated at Brant Broughton and the Whissendine gargoyle is therefore certainly by the “Cowboy Carver” who carved the clerestory frieze.



Gargoyle Clutching a lamb



Gargoyle Master’s work, South Clerestory



Piggy Back Gargoyle(?), South Clerestory



Broken inset gargoyle, north aisle



Weathered Gargoyle on South West corner



Hurdy-Gurdy playing Gargoyle

Langham (Rutland)

Langham is the largest of these churches with the exception of Oakham. It is bedecked with cornice friezes, has a mooning man and a flea carving placing it firmly within the Mooning Men Guild group – and it is even more of a mystery than Whissendine! As at Thurlby in Lincolnshire there is a strong hunting influence here, to judge from the number of carvings of dogs and hounds.

Langham has two aisles and a clerestory. It also has a south transept where we can most firmly place the Mooning Men Guild because it is here that we find both a mooning man and a flea carving. The north transept was demolished in 1802, and there are large gaps in the friezes on that side.

The clerestory is firmly dated by all authorities as being fifteenth century. Most of the north side has been lost and what is left has been wretchedly treated by the weather. The south and east have fared a little better. What is otherwise a dull frieze was illuminated by a menagerie of animals such as a hare and, on the east end, what looks like a troop of monkeys! The clerestory frieze, however, was in most places very narrow, allowing little scope for real flamboyance.

The west end of the north clerestory, however, has a man with black lead eyes. Badly weathered, it is something of a miracle that the eyes survived. Here too is a lady with a square headdress. Could the clerestory have been carved by the Demon Carver? Clerestories tended to be single pieces of work so it must be very possible.

If the Demon Carver did carve the entire clerestory here it has some intriguing implications. Firstly, it would mean that the Demon Carver did not regard black eyes as compulsory and we might look for him elsewhere. Much of the clerestory frieze is of profile views of animals, often in hunting scenes, where you would not expect to see black stone eyes anyway. The second implication is that if this was indeed the Demon Carver's work then so too might be the tower frieze at Thurlby which has similar hunting scenes and is of a quality that is worthy of him.



Two Unidentifiable Animals, Clerestory Gable



Unidentified beast with Bone (?)



Hound Hunting a Rabbit around the corner of the frieze



Hound Hunting his quarry



A Monkey and Two Unidentifiable Animals, Clerestory Frieze



Hound, South Clerestory

Horse with Foal, North Clerestory

Man with Black lead eyes



Langham North Clerestory



Langham North Clerestory (note Black lead eyes on the head, left)

The north aisle here is a very uninspiring and conservative blend of fleurons and heads. It is impossible to connect it to any work elsewhere.



Langham North Aisle

The south aisle frieze, a mass of Decorated period ballflowers, provides a useful reference point for the very different Perpendicular clerestory frieze above it.



Langham South Aisle (Decorated Period) Ballflower Frieze

So far, Langham has been somewhat frustrating. Langham, however, has a south transept and its carvings are clearly by Mr Happy.



The South Transept, south face.

Like the rest of Langham's friezes, this one is too narrow to have allowed too much flamboyance – and Mr Happy was anyway a rather conservative carver. He did not let us down, however, and he left a mooning man and a flea carving here as well as two ladies with square headdresses.



The Mooner



The Flea carving



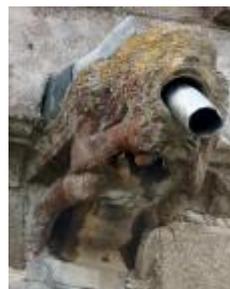
Two Hounds fighting (over prey?), South Transept

The south transept is as early as 1280-90, but the key here is the perpendicular windows and battlements. To quote "A History of the County of Rutland: Volume 2 (1935)": "*In the fifteenth century the roofs of the chancel, nave and aisles were taken down and new ones erected, a clerestory being added...and battlemented parapets...*"



More "Mr Happy" images from the South Transept

Also on the south transept is what appears to be a gargoyle by the Gargoyle Master. It has been broken but the batwinged shoulders so typical of the man are clearly visible. Gargoyles on the north clerestory seem to be his work also, but not those on the south.



Gargoyle, South Transept

Two Gargoyles, North Clerestory. Note the red paint residue on the left hand figure

In general, Langham is a conundrum, not least because of the very large gaps on the north clerestory frieze. It is very hard to establish who did what here and when. This is a church that has been well-funded over the centuries and, indeed, this village gave the world the Cardinal Simon of Langham who was consecrated in 1362 at Ely Cathedral and who was also at one point Chancellor of England for King Edward III.

One final note: in around 1373 the manor of Langham was granted by Richard II to the widowed Joan de Bohun, mother of Mary de Bohun. See Appendix G for the significance of this.

Tilton-on-the-Hill (Leicestershire)

Tilton has friezes on both its aisles, both sides of its clerestory and on its chancel so this is a church rich with decoration. There are two mooning men here, both in completely different styles. More of this anon.



North Clerestory



South Aisle

Mr Happy was the dominant carver here. He carved the whole of the clerestory frieze, including the mooning man (which is very similar to his mooner at nearby Lowesby) on the north side. He left two of his trademark lion carvings at the east and west ends of the south clerestory. He carved the frieze at the west end of the south aisle into the bargain.



Clerestory, South West Corner



Clerestory, South East Corner

The chancel frieze, the north aisle and the south west aisle frieze were clearly carved in their entirety by a different man. The carvings are narrow and feature simple grotesques with holes for eyes and the recurrence of a distinctive style of fleuron. There are no distinguishing Mooning Man Guild carvings on these friezes and his work is not found on any other of the MMG churches. I have, however, identified the same carver at Beeby Church (see Appendix D) about five miles away. Perhaps we are seeing here an overlap between two different stonemason guilds. We should not

suppose that the membership of the guilds was preserved in aspic: men could surely move between them.



Section of North Chancel Frieze with characteristic fleuron extreme right

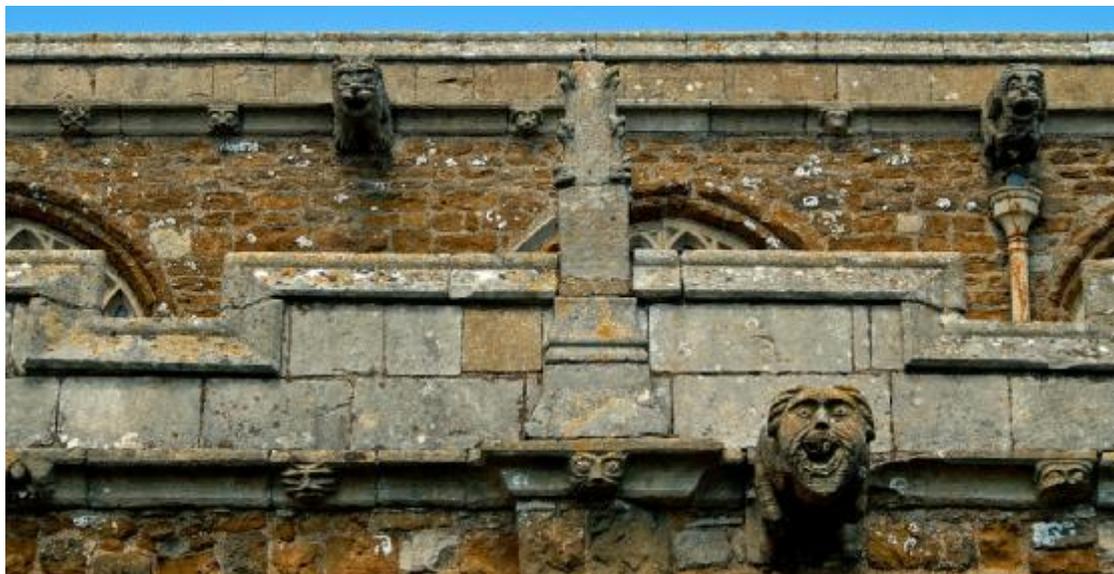


Section of the North Aisle Frieze



South aisle, west end

So we have two carvers at work on the south aisle, which is unusual enough. Things get very difficult, however, when we look at the *south* side of the south aisle – that is, the longest section. In the centre of this frieze there are two trademarks: a mooning man and, to its right, Tilton's only frieze carving with black lead eyes. Carvings to the west of these are quite basic and severe. Those to the east are somewhat damaged, and are probably the work of Mr Happy - but it is hard to be definite.



Sections of South Aisle and Clerestory, Tilton-on-the-Hill. Note the mooning man on the extreme left of the aisle and the black-eyed figure to its right.



Three Carvings west of the South Aisle Mooner...

...and three to the east.

In the pictures above, note the different mouth lines of the two sets of carvings. Surprisingly, those to the west *are* rather like “quick and dirty” carvings by the Demon Carver, and the eyes of the right hand cat-like face look as if they may have once had black lead inserts.

What, though, do we make of that mooning man? It is totally different from Mr Happy’s example on the north clerestory, or any of his other mooners for that matter. If it’s not his work then whose is it? Surely not the chancel carver? And there are no known examples of mooners by the Demon Carver. Is this the exception? I do not think so. As we shall see, Tilton was the spiritual home of the Gargoyle Master. Only a few feet from the south aisle mooner is a gargoyle with one of those lovely inset heads – only this time it is a man and his head is upside down. When you compare the head of the mooner (also, of course inverted) with that of the gargoyle they are quite similar. It seems then that we have not identified the only mooning man carved by the Demon Carver; but the only one – and possible the only frieze carving - by the Gargoyle Master!



Inset Head of the Gargoyle



Mooning Man Head, South aisle



Carving with Black Eyes

The friezes are unspectacular. Mr Happy left his usual array of fleurons and good humoured faces; the chancel carver contributed his child-like charm. The clerestory has an east face and Mr Happy’s work here is grievously weathered. As usual, the corner carvings are a little more flamboyant and Mr Happy left us three of his beloved lions.



Clerestory, North East Corner (Mr Happy)



Chancel, North East Corner



Various Carvings, Tilton-on-the-Hill

The most important feature of Tilton-on-the-Hill, however, is its gargoyles. They are certainly contemporary with the friezes. Here we see a “piggy back” gargoyle and also *three* others that have concealed faces. Not only that, but the black lead eye phenomenon is also much in evidence. All the gargoyles here are surely by the Gargoyle Master. The stylistic similarities with the gargoyles at Oakham, Lowesby, Wymondham and Knossington are unmistakable.

Tilton, then, was something of a gathering place for the Mooning Men Guild. Mr Happy, the Demon Carver and the Gargoyle Master were all here and it looks as if they were working in collaboration with each other. The Demon Carver’s contribution to the exterior, however, is minimal. He was surely involved also in structural and/or interior carving.



The Piggy Back Gargoyle



Two views of a Gargoyle with inset head between the legs



Front and Side Views of a second gargoyle with (right) close-up of the Inset Head



A third gargoyle with inset head and also black lead eyes



Two more gargoyles – but without insets. Note the black lead eyes of the right hand figure.



Some more gargoyles – without insets. Note the black lead eyes of the right hand figure and the near certainty that the others with their staring round eyes also originally had black leads.



More of the Tilton Collection of gargoyles. Apart from yet more black lead eyes, note the jolly demeanour of these and most of the other gargoyles here.



The tower gargoyles at Tilton are not by the Gargoyle Master and are reckoned to be of an earlier period – although note the square headdress again. Intriguingly, one of them has a large graffito on its side! Presumably this was the work of a later generation of scallywag stonemasons during restoration work!



Within the Mooning Men Guild group of churches Tilton is amongst the most important. As mentioned elsewhere, a date of 1490 is claimed for the clerestory, which I believe to be unsupportable. Mr Happy was the carver on the clerestory and the 1490 date would, of course, put all of his work at five other churches into the same period, and that does not seem to fit the facts, particularly given his love of the square headdress style - a motif that is repeated on friezes carved by other men at this church.

Tilton-on-the-Hill and Lowesby are not only close geographically; they also clearly employed the same group of carvers and together they lead us to some important conclusions.

Lowesby (Leicestershire)

Lowesby and Tilton are only two miles apart, so it is natural to look for similarities, and in this we are not disappointed.

Tilton has friezes covering both aisles, all of its clerestory and its entire chancel. Lowesby, however, is rather curious: it has a frieze all around its chancel and on its north aisle but none on its clerestory or its south aisle. Possibly the south aisle frieze was removed during a later period of rebuilding.

The friezes are very different. Lowesby's frieze is much more exuberant and, with black eyes in profusion, was almost certainly carved by the Demon Carver. Yet Lowesby cannot match Tilton's dazzling array of gargoyles. Lowesby does, however, have a piggy back gargoyle to match Tilton's. Ironically, it is in splendid isolation on the otherwise undecorated south aisle.

With Ryhall, Lowesby is the home of the black eyes and the Demon Carver. We also see the tell-tale label stop that may be his self-portrait. The chancel frieze is his work in its entirety, and it is an exuberant feast for our eyes to devour. The north aisle, however, is the domain of Mr Happy with his good-natured human faces and a corner lion to boot. Mr Happy was, therefore, at both churches. These churches, then, share three masons: Mr Happy, the Demon Carver and the Gargoyle Master. Only the carver of the chancel and the north aisle at Tilton is not shared by both churches. They are so close together, it is hard not to believe that these churches did not acquire their friezes at the same time, or even in parallel. If the two churches were effectively a single project it would explain why the Demon Carver was so little in evidence at Tilton yet so prolific at Lowesby. It is a delicious hypothesis.

The gargoyles at Lowesby have the staring black lead eyes so familiar at Tilton-on-the-Hill. As well as its piggy back gargoyle (on the south aisle, very conveniently sited for photography) it has another with an inset head. The Gargoyle Master was in his pomp at these two churches.

None of the historical sources point to any specific dates but the overall appearance of this church is overwhelmingly Perpendicular. Only the chancel is battlemented and it was carved in its entirety by the Demon Carver.



The South Chancel Frieze



Dog



Grotesque Face with Black. Compare with Tilton.



Damaged Green Man



North East Chancel Frieze – with prolific Black Stone Eyes...



...and a profusion of piggies!



Part of the North Chancel Frieze – More Black lead Eyes and an Important Gargoyle (see later)



Two Grotesques and a Fox (?) with black lead eyes on the north side

Mr Happy was responsible for the north aisle frieze. As ever, with the exception of his trademark corner lion, his work is good natured but restrained. The frieze carvings here, however, are noticeably larger than those at Lowesby, better defined and better preserved. As always, there is a lady in a goffered headdress and a mooning man. At neither of these two churches, however, is there a surviving flea carving.





This lion on the corner of the north aisle is very similar to the one at Tilton-on-the-Hill- note the long limbs and claws and bared teeth



A typically cheerful face

Lowesby does not have the same profusion of gargoyles as its neighbour. Its piggy back gargoyle, however, is a splendid one, complete with the usual square headdresses on the two “passengers”.



Another view of Lowesby's Piggy Back Gargoyle



This extraordinary gargoyle is obviously a tradesman. He has an axe in his right hand, but what is in the left? See below.



The Piggy Back Gargoyle's "passenger" in close-up.



The Tradesman gargoyle – east side.



Gargoyle with inset head, Lowesby



Almost identical gargoyle at Tilton without inset head.



High on the tower this gargoyle has her hand in an "interesting" place...and another goffered hat.

The Lowesby mooner – there is only one – is almost identical to the one he left on Tilton’s clerestory.



Lowesby North Aisle Mooner



Tilton North Clerestory

With Ryhall, Lowesby is of only two churches that has label stops with black eyes. As explained earlier, this is the best evidence we have that Lowesby (and indeed other churches with black-eyed frieze carvings are attributable to the Demon Carver.



Wymondham (Leicestershire)

At Wymondham there is a frieze only on the tower. Many tower friezes in the MMG are of little interest but at Wymondham gargoyles and frieze appear *only* on the Perpendicular top section of the tower – and it is probably no coincidence that this is also the only battlemented part of the church.



Wymondham Church Tower, West Side. Note the mooning man, second right.

Wymondham’s is a small frieze but it is very important in this narrative. The only trademark carving is a mooning man. The remainder of the frieze comprises fleurons, “happy faces” and a pride of three “corner lions”. This frieze is the work of Mr Happy. As always, he left a mooning man but not, on this occasion, a flea carving.



Corner Lions. Note the same exaggerated limbs and paws seen on lion carvings at Lowesby and Tilton.



Three Happy Face Images from Wymondham and... ...one from Lowesby

These faces have characteristic cheerful faces with bold carved lines for wrinkles, moustaches and hair. Similar designs can be seen at Lowesby, Tilton, Oakham (south porch) and Langham.

There is nothing else on the frieze to detain us except one image of a winged figure surrounding one of the corners, which has a very similar counterpart at nearby Knossington.



Winged Corner Carving



Mooning Man

Thus far we have the mooning man, the happy faces and the corner lions to link us to other Mooning Men Guild churches. It is, however, the gargoyles at each cardinal point that complete the picture for us. They are a remarkable group.



Piggy Back Gargoyle



A mysterious image of a gargoyle holding open a mouth!



Gargoyle with Inset Head



Gargoyle with Chain inset below the figure

On two of these gargoyles we can see black lead eyes and on the others we can see where they have been. Here we have an example of each of the most iconic designs by the Gargoyle Master: a piggy back gargoyle, one with batwinged shoulders and one holding open gaping jaws.

Knossington (Leicestershire)

We have already established a link between Tilton, Lowesby and Wymondham. Knossington is considerably closer to Tilton and Lowesby – less than 10 square miles covers the three – so we might expect to see it joining these there to form a group of four. In this we are not disappointed!

Knossington, like Wymondham (and also Hungarton) has only a tower frieze. Like Wymondham, its frieze is by Mr Happy and its gargoyles by the Gargoyle Master. Its frieze, sadly, is no more exciting than Wymondham’s. It has the same mixture of fleurons and grinning faces. It has corner carvings of a lion or dog (a device beloved of this mason) and of a winged figure. Both have nearly identical counterparts at Wymondham.



Lion Corner Carving



Double Winged Corner Carving



“Happy Face” Carvings – so like Wymondham’s



The Mooning Man



Two Grotesque Corner Carvings

Knossington's gargoyles include one with an inset head and another holding open a gaping mouth, both nearly identical to gargoyles at Wymondham. So we have The Gargoyle Master at work here again.



Batwinged Gargoyle with inset head



Gargoyle with what seems to be a row of Buttons!



Gaping Mouth Gargoyle



Flying Gargoyle with Black Lead Eyes

For their exterior carvings, Knossington and Wymondham are like “twin” churches with just two carvers: Mr Happy and the Gargoyle Master. We see both masons also at Tilton-on-the-Hill and Lowesby. At those two churches they are supplemented by one or two others, including the Demon Carver (see their respective pages) but Mr Happy and the Gargoyle Master seemed to see a lot of each other in Leicestershire! Covering just a few square miles, these four churches comprise a discrete little cluster of their own.

Hungarton (Leicestershire)

Hungarton sits only two miles from Lowesby and five miles from Tilton. than Knossington and, like Knossington and Wymondham, it has a frieze only on its tower. You would expect it to have had the same set of carvers – but you would be wrong! Both frieze and gargoyles are quite different from the other four – indeed from all of the other churches in this study - although still in the style of the Mooning Men Guild and with both a mooning man and a flea carving.



Tower Frieze West



Tower Frieze South

The carvings here are more densely packed and rather more flamboyant than Mr Happy's efforts at Knossington and Wymondham. Surprisingly there are also two discrete styles on this frieze, distinguishable by quite different treatment of eyes.



Some are "almond shaped"; others have are round and pitted eyes. There are also two styles of fleuron.



South Side Fleurons

North Side Fleurons

Those on the left are sophisticated and finely undercut whilst those on the right – including a very utilitarian ballflower – are rather flat and lifeless.

The big giveaway on the identity of one of these masons is the "batwinged lion" on one of the corners. This is a signature dish of the "Cotminster Mason"!



Hungarton

Cottesmore

Buckminster

Those almond eyes are very much his style too. The identity of the other mason, though, is a mystery. The style does not appear elsewhere. The carvings are quite flamboyant. It seems odd that such a small frieze had two carvers. It's not impossible that they were all by the Cotminster Mason but it seems unlikely.



Boneshaker

Bird pecking a Man

Face-Puller

Mooning Man

The Cotminster Mason always leaves a mooning man and a flea carving and Hungarton is no exception.

The four gargoyles here do not seem to match styles at any of the other churches. It seems unlikely that yet a third mason would have been at work on such a small church.



Note again the oval eyes, very different from the black lead eye gargoyles at the churches nearby. It seems likely that they are the only identifiable examples of gargoyle carving by the Cotminster Mason. The gargoyle on the left is a very fine one and there is a form of inset carving. What, however is the chap supposed to be *doing*?

Cold Overton (Leicestershire)

Cold Overton has only a tower frieze plus, bizarrely, hefty carvings at ground floor level at the west end of the tower. There are no trademark carvings but Cold Overton is bang in the middle of Demon Carver territory within spitting distance of Knossington which also has only a tower frieze.

The first thing to note here is that every single carving is a grotesque – which is unique within the Mooning Men Guild churches. There are no fleurons or human heads here. The carvings are also uncommonly wide and, in some case, appear to *drape* themselves along the cornice. The corner carvings glare balefully down on the passer-by, daring them to “make my day”! They are all certainly unique. To my eyes, however, many are reminiscent of the Ryhall/Oakham grotesques (see “The Quest Begins” above) with the same flowing manes and long claws.

One of the grotesques at the base of the tower also clearly has a black lead eye. For a long time I thought that was the extent of them here whilst always believing that the frieze carvings would once have had them also. Fortunately, after the minutest examinations of the carvings here I was able to find a pair of tiny stone eyes to prove the point – see paragraph 13 of this narrative. Cold Overton’s frieze has suffered more than any other so it is no surprise that no other black eyes have survived. So this all means that this is, after all, a Demon Carver frieze



Two of the four tower friezes



Above and Below: Four Ryhall-like grotesque carvings, Cold Overton Tower.



Frieze carving with black lead eyes arrowed



Two less Ryhall-like Carvings

Each of the four corner carvings is also a “grizzled grotesque”.



Corner Carvings, Cold Overton Tower

The badly weathered ground carvings are not easy to definitively attribute to a single man.



Ground carving with Black Stone eye.



Harp-carrying grotesque, tower base.

Cold Overton has no trademark carvings and no mooning man. In that it is not alone: neither Ryhall nor Thurlby have one. These were MMG trademarks but it seems that the Demon Carver did not favour them personally. There is no obvious place where one might have been at Cold Overton and it must be said that this frieze is altogether different from the other churches in the way it has been put together. Indeed, close examination reveals a rather irregular cornice and it is very possible that the whole thing has been re-constructed at some stage in its history.

Finally, at a Demon Carver church we should also be looking for his trademark label stop carvings. Here again Cold Overton frustrates us with its degree of weathering. There are, however, two label stops here that might have fitted the bill originally.



Thurlby (Lincolnshire)

Thurlby is a great frustration to me. It is the easternmost of the churches in this study but only four miles from Ryhall. It has one of the best sets of friezes, is relatively well preserved and is “right” for style. Yet it has no Mooning Man or any other distinguishing feature to indelibly tie it in with the rest of the Mooning Man Guild churches, although there are one or two gaps. No carver here can be definitely associated with any other MMG churches. To add to the confusion the clerestory friezes look as if more than one mason has pitched in.

Then there is the issue of dating. Most of the dates for the churches within the MMG are vague but dating Thurlby is a nightmare. The clerestory is dated at 1440 in the Church Guide, and that looks consistent with its rectangular windows that are normally a later Perpendicular feature. Yet Pevsner suggests that it is “Dec or Perp”. The British Listed Building register says: “The nave clerestory has 4 paired *C14* cusped lights”. Both those last two earlier datings are supported by a square headdress

figure on one of the label stops. If so then the rectangular windows are unusually early examples. I don't know how to square that circle!

The top stage of the tower is put at 1320 by the Church Guide, but the louvered bell openings are in an early Perpendicular style so I think it's rather later. It has perhaps the finest example of the square goffered headdress on one of its label stops.

Also unique to Thurlby is that it has friezes on its clerestory but on neither of its aisles. It also defies what seemed to be a convention that a tower frieze should only be flamboyant if it is the only one (such as at Wymondham and Knossington). Thurlby's tower frieze is its best.

So mystery piles upon mystery! Let's start with the tower frieze. There are thirty carvings. Of those there are: 6 hounds, 3 rabbits or hares, 3 lions, 6 tongue pokers; 1 green man; 11 fleurons. So the subject matter is limited, but beautifully carved.



Two Hounds, Tower Frieze



Green Man



Another of the Thurlby "Pack"



Rabbit or Hare



Two Lions, Tower Frieze



Interestingly, this preoccupation with hunting is also seen at Langham on its clerestory frieze. The animals there are in a slightly different style, but we know that the masons did not rate consistency as a virtue! One or two of the simple fleurons are also very similar. There isn't enough evidence to say that there was a common hand at work, but it is a distinct possibility. The most daring suggestion would be that the common hand was that of the Demon Carver – see Langham for more about this.



Two Hounds and a Rabbit, Langham Clerestory

We can be sure that the tower frieze is the work of one man, and we can be sure that *most* of the clerestory was also carved by one man. The clue to this is the fleurons which are both large and elaborate throughout. It's an eclectic body of work. Fleurons alternate with other images throughout this frieze. On the south side we see mainly animals; on the north it is human heads and scenes from village life.



A Harpy, a Cow and a Boar, South Clerestory



Two Wild Cats and a Fleuron, South Clerestory



Possibly holding up the frieze, South

Face Puller, South

"The Scream", North

I said that *most* of the clerestory frieze seems to have been by one carver. There are, however, some oddities. The three north clerestory images below seem to be stylistically different: more elaborate and less deliberately humorous.



Horn-Blower, Bell Ringer (?) and "Bashful Monster", North Clerestory

Here are two more that look different.



Green Man, South East Corner

Grottesque Face, North West Corner

It looks as if we have two carvers on the clerestory, not one. Neither can be positively associated with friezes elsewhere. I do, however, see some similarities between those

“aberration” carvings with the also unidentifiable carvings on Ryhall’s north sides. The same can be said for the wide fleurons throughout the clerestory frieze. The rest of the carvings – the animals, the heads and so on – remain an even bigger mystery.

As at nearby Ryhall there are no trademark carvings such as a mooner or a flea carving, and no black eyes. We cannot positively attribute any of the work to any masons elsewhere identified within this study, but the possibility that the Demon Carver worked here is tantalising.

The proximity to Ryhall is very telling. If we were seeing other big cornice friezes like this just outside the MMG area then we might question Thurlby’s provenance. As matters stand, to disqualify Thurlby would be to believe that a totally separate guild of masons decided to carve friezes here and nowhere else in the locality. It just doesn’t ring true. There are lots of unattributable lengths of frieze on churches indisputably within the MMG. We have to accept that some masons worked with the guild, left their mark and went off somewhere else to do something else or to concentrate on other aspects of the mason’s craft.

Indeed, the whole of this eastern part of the MMG is one big mystery: much of Ryhall’s frieze is unattributable to any of the “identified” masons. So is what little is left of Careby and all of Thurlby. Only Ryhall’s black lead eyes allow us to positively associate this group of churches with the Guild. It seems very much as if the Guild was active hereabouts but that some of the Guild’s masons saw this as too far east from their normal stamping grounds.

The stylistic influence is indisputable. We can’t know for certain that Mooning Men Guild carved here; but the very existence of the guild is speculation. We only *know* that a group of masons seemed to travel around carving stylistically similar friezes. This frieze is surely not here by some odd coincidence?

Careby (Lincolnshire)

Careby is only four miles from Ryhall. The village and the church are tucked away down a side road that is a cul de sac. The church, a fine one that still shows some of its Norman origins, is little-used.

It does, however, have the remnants of a frieze. It has six badly weathered carvings on its south aisle and four rather better preserved ones on its south porch. All those on the porch are utilised as rainwater gargoyles and all of those on the south aisle show signs of having been thus used in the past, although that is no longer the case.





The Six South Aisle Frieze Carvings



The Four South Porch Gargoyle Carvings

There is nothing in these carvings that is particularly interesting at first site. Such is the degree of weathering that it is difficult to see any similarity to carvings elsewhere.

There is also a tower frieze of somewhat different style to other within the MMG, although the monotonous pattern of heads is quite usual.



Intrigue is added, however, by a couple of the label stops on the bell openings on the tower. They are badly weathered but they bear more than a passing resemblance to those seen at Ryhall and Lowesby that appear to portray the Demon Carver. The characteristic mouth outline is still discernible. So too is the characteristic triangular cross section of the nose. Was this another example of the Demon Carvers self-portrait label stops? Well if he had carved the friezes here we should expect to see his trademark black lead eyed carvings. At Careby, unfortunately, very little has survived of the carvings let alone black eyes. Tantalisingly, there are just the barest hints of empty eye sockets but that is as much as we can say.



Label Stops, Careby Tower

There are no gargoyles at this church, but it has a little surprise for us on the north chancel wall

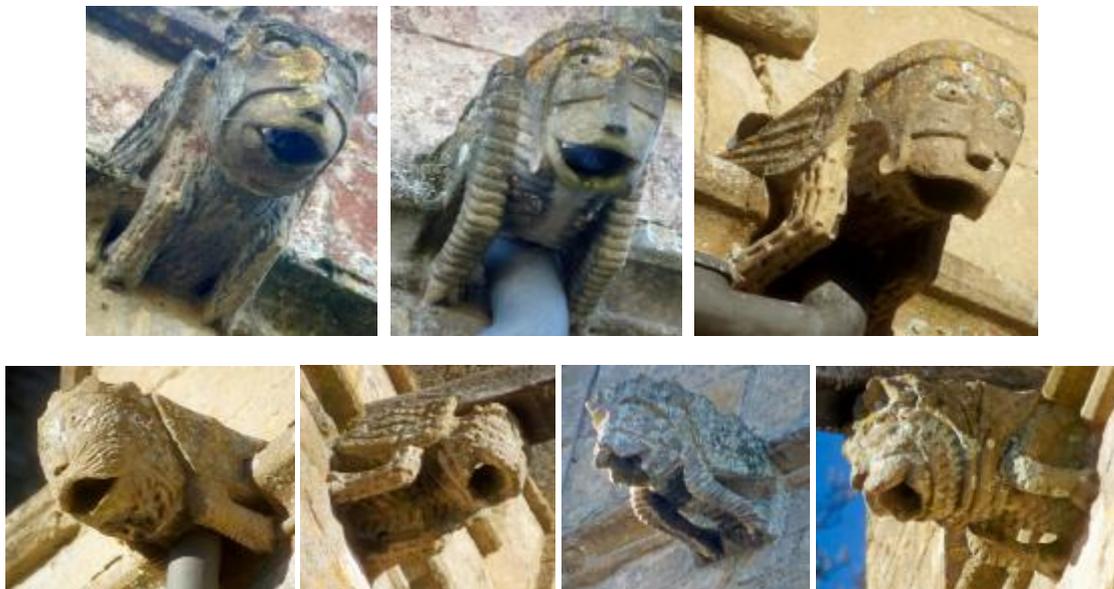


Who on earth, one wonders, is this man? Surely it is one of the masons that worked here?

Irnham (Lincolnshire)

Irnham is an oddity in that it included in this study more for its collection of gargoyles, which covers every roofline, than for its frieze which is confined to the tower. The gargoyles are a curious lot. They are extremely numerous and are seemingly somewhat mass-produced items by The Gargoyle Master. They are strangely wooden in their composition compared with the beauties he carved elsewhere. Perhaps constraints of time or budget were the issue. Either way, there seems to be far more of them here than were justified on the grounds of utility alone. These look as if they were here primarily for decorative reasons.

The tower frieze is a sparse one of grotesque heads fleurons. It is impossible to identify the work of the carver anywhere else; although we have to consider the possibility that they were also carved by The Gargoyle Master.



The gargoyles on the tower are a little more like his usual style. There are two things to note in the pictures above. In the picture centre top one can see the only remaining black lead eye – one of the signature dishes of the Gargoyle Master menu. That only one remains emphasises the fragility of this decoration: one wonders if there are Demon Carver friezes, for example, that have lost all their black eyes. Secondly, the photograph lower right shows dragon-like wings, another recurring theme of The

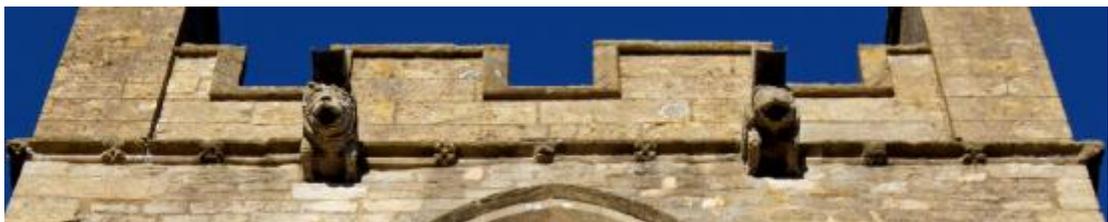
Gargoyle Master. On many of the gargoyles there is rather uninspiring geometric repetition in the designs – as shown in the top row.

There are no frieze carvings apart from on the tower. We do, however, have two completely one-off carvings on the north side.



The first is a total mystery. It's a creature of some kind clutching something unidentifiable. Perhaps the creature is a turtle but that's as far as I can get. It is just below the north aisle parapet but above the gargoyle line. The second is obviously a human head and it is on the western end of the north aisle, and partly obscured. To have just two carvings like this must mean that they are of some significance, but we can't know what they are. I would also love to know if they are by The Gargoyle Master!

The frieze is rather sparse and is mainly of grotesque heads, with more human looking heads at each of the four corners. It is not lavish in size or extent. There are no MMG trademark carvings.



The frieze is fairly obviously all by the same individual but he is not traceable to any other MMG church.



Four Grotesque Heads



Corner Carvings



Tower Frieze Carvings

Irnham perhaps is a reminder of two things that even the best of carvers (in this case The Gargoyle Master) can be forced into relative mediocrity if the circumstances so dictate.

The obvious question is whether the Gargoyle Master carved the frieze as well as the gargoyles. Well just take a look at those corner carvings and then move on to the next chapter on Market Overton.

Market Overton (Rutland)

Market Overton was one of the first churches I visited on my quest for the Demon Carver. It has a quite extensive frieze. Much of it, however, is of Decorated period ballflower and the rest is a mediocre mixture of very small and uninteresting grotesque heads and simple fleurons. I dismissed it as irrelevant to my search for the man who had carved the splendid demons at Ryhall and Oakham.

It was two years, hundreds of miles and many thousands of photographs later that I returned now aware of the significance of gargoyles in my quest. Market Overton has four on its tower and these are undoubtedly the work of The Gargoyle Master, and one has managed to keep just one of its black eyes. Moreover, on my first visit I had not noticed that there was a grotesque head at each corner of the tower.



Three Market Overton Gargoyles. Note the “root” of a black lead eyes in the right hand picture.



Three of the corner carvings. Note the way the right hand carving is draped along the cornice.



Sections of the South Chancel Frieze

So there are potentially three masons here – or there may be just one. Looking at the tower first, it is pretty difficult to reconcile the bold grotesque heads or the gargoyles with the timid frieze carvings. I think we have to say that at least two masons – one for the tower and one for the frieze – is very much more likely. That leaves the question of whether the corner carvings are the work of The Gargoyle Master. I would observe that if the two sets of work were contemporary you would not expect such a comparatively small job to need two masons. Look also at the corner carvings at Irnham where a small tower frieze accompanies a mass of Gargoyle Mater gargoyles. Both these churches have a very human face looking down – something not seen on any other MMG churches. Both have craggy grotesque faces at the other three corners. Weathering at Irnham makes it impossible to make a positive match, but there is a distinct possibility – no more than that – that the carvings at both churches were the Gargoyle Master’s work

Owston (Leicestershire)

Owston is a most forgotten-looking church in a very out of the way village. Its only qualification for being in this group of churches is its only surviving carving: a piggy back gargoyle. There are the remains of one other gargoyle, presumably by the Gargoyle Master, but that’s the extent of the carvings at this rather ugly-looking and much-abused church. The piggy back gargoyle has had his “passenger” hacked away, but her arms are still there, and so is the usual inset head.



You might reasonably ask why I regard Owston with its single gargoyle as being part of the MMG whereas Brant Broughton has dozens of carvings by the Cowboy Carver. It's simply a question of geography. Owston is within a stone's throw of Tilton, Lowesby and Oakham all of which have piggy back gargoyles. Owston was within the Guild's stamping ground whereas the Cowboy Carver went to far-off Brant Broughton to "fly solo".

Colsterworth (Leicestershire)

Again, Colsterworth's inclusion could be questioned. Discounting, as we must, the mooning gargoyle, it is only the mooning man on a label stop that merits its inclusion. In fact, Colsterworth is a bit of a naughty place all round: I mention in chapter 1 that it has a very priapic gargoyle to add to its two mooners!

Colsterworth has the mandatory lady in square headdress on one of its tower label stops putting it in the "right" period. It also has a rather damaged but unusual tower frieze, consisting of severe rectangular-shaped faces that also seem to serve as corbels to the cornice. Unusual as it is, the faces look to me to be vaguely reminiscent of the tower friezes carved by the Cotminster Mason at Whissendine, Cottesmore and Oakham. We can add just a little weight to that possibility when we remember that he carved the friezes at Buckminster, literally a couple of miles down the road. On top of that, we have to remember that the Cotminster Mason loved the Mooning Man motif and left them at every site he carved. There's a thought!



Tower Frieze Head



Pair of Label Stop, Tower

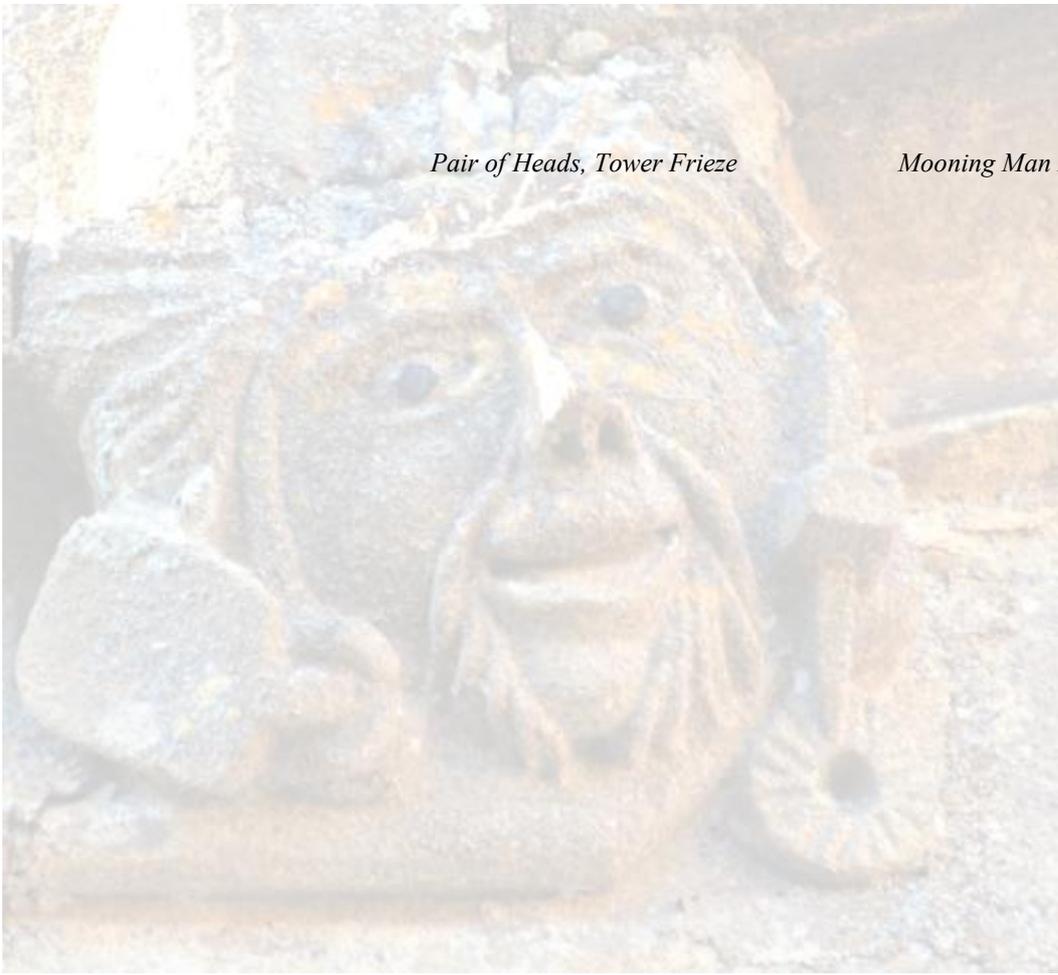


Label Stop (Opposite Mooner)



Pair of Heads, Tower Frieze

Mooning Man Label Stop



Appendix A The Mooning Man Guild - Tabulating the Evidence

| Church | County | Mooning Man | Square Flea | Square Head-Dress | Inset Gargoyle | Black Eyes on Frieze | The Gargoyle Master | Mr Happy | Demon Carver | Cotminster | Cowboy Carver | Mooning Gargoyle |
|----------------|--------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------|--------------|------------|---------------|------------------|
| Ryhall | R | | | * * ~ | | * | | | * | | | |
| Oakham | R | * (3) | * | * | * (p/b) | * | * | | * | * | * | |
| Langham | R | * | * | * | | * | * | * | * | | | |
| Whissendine | R | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | | * | |
| Cottesmore | R | * (3) | * (x3) | * | | | | | | * | | |
| Buckminster | Li | * | * | | | | * | | | * | | |
| Cold Overton | Le | | | * # | | * | | | * | | | |
| Lowesby | Le | * | | * | * (p/b) | * | * | * | * | | | |
| Tilton | Le | * (2) | | * ~ | * (p/b) | * | * | * | * | | | |
| Wymondham | Le | * | | * | * (p/b) | | * | * | | | | |
| Knossington | Le | * | | | * | | * | * | | | | |
| Hungarton | Le | * | * | | | | | | | * | | |
| Market Overton | R | | | | | | * | | | | | |
| Owston | Le | | | | * (p/b) | | * | | | | | |
| Irnham | Li | | | | | | * | | | | | |
| Careby | Li | | | | | | | | ? | | | |
| Thurlby | Li | | | * + | | | | | | | | |
| Colsterworth | Li | * | | | | | | | | | | * |

+ Only on label stops
 # On ground carving
 ~ Inside and outside church

R = Rutland; Li = Lincolnshire; Le = Leicestershire
 (p/b) = Piggy Back
 # = gargoyles only

Appendix B

All of the Mooning Men



Tilton



Tilton



Lowesby



Whissendine



Wymondham



Hungarton



Langham



Buckminster



Cottesmore South Clerestory



Cottesmore South Aisle



Cottesmore North Aisle



Colsterworth Label Stop



Oakham South Clerestory



Oakham South Porch



Oakham North Aisle



Knossington



Easton-on-the-Hill



Colsterworth



Lyndon



Brant Broughton

Appendix C

The Historical Context

1. Historical Timeline 1327-1455

The Kings

The Great Events

1327 Edward III

- 1338 Start of 100 Years War
- 1348 Black Death kills at least 1/3 of Population
- 1356 Battle of Poitiers
- 1361 Second Great Plague kills 1/5 of remaining population

1377 Richard II

- 1377 *Perpendicular Period of Architecture becomes vogue **
- 1381 The Peasant's Revolt
- 1387 Chaucer's Canterbury Tales published

1399 Henry IV

c.1400 Ryhall Clerestory added; aisles widened

1413 Henry V

- 1415 Battle of Agincourt

1422 Henry VI (under regents)

- 1431 Henry VI crowned King of France

1437 Henry VI (as adult king)

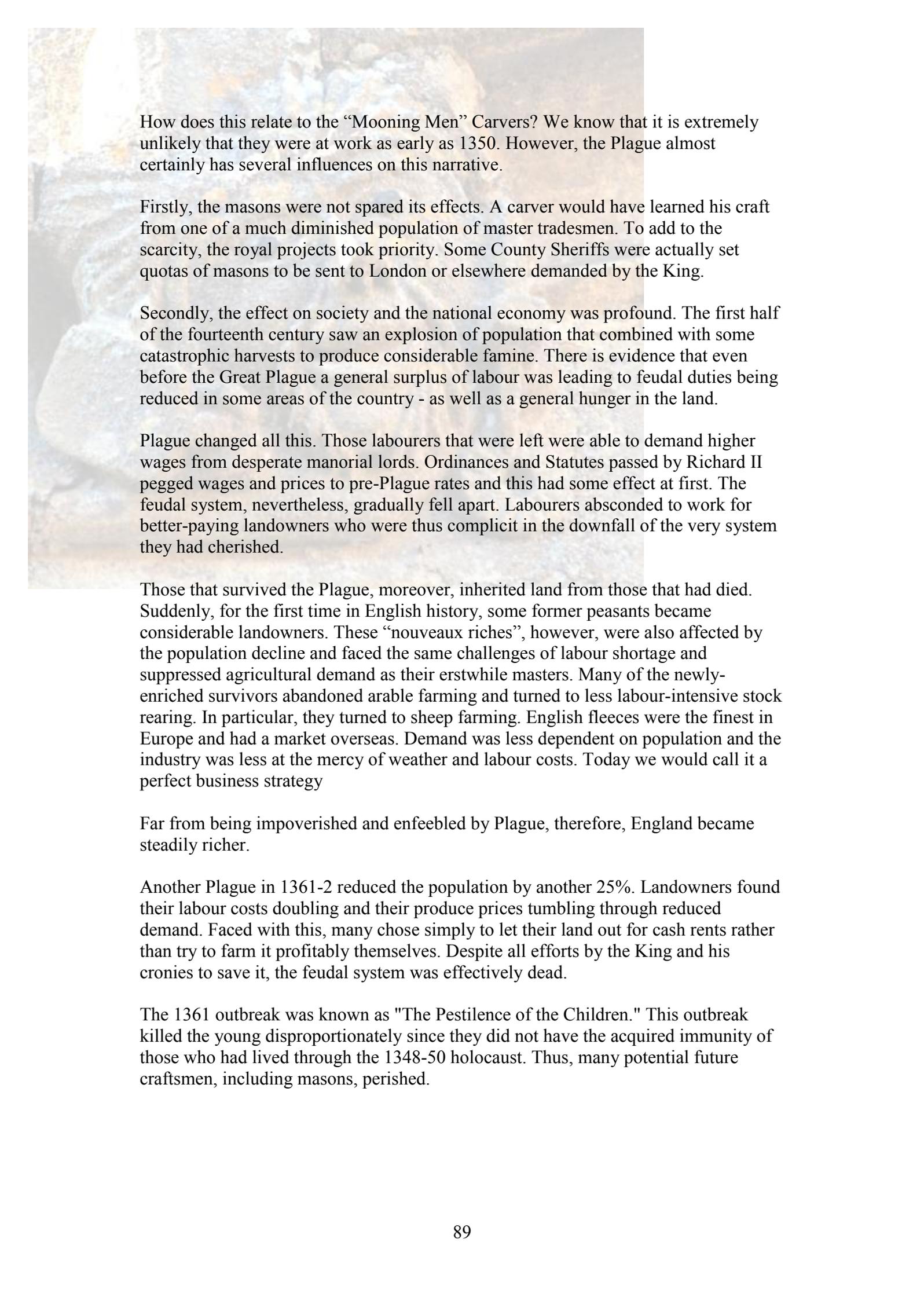
- 1440 *Thurlby Clerestory supposedly added*
- 1450 Jack Cade's Rebellion
- 1453 100 Years War ends with England's defeat at Castillon
- 1455 Wars of the Roses begin

* Of course, this is simplistic but offers some architectural context.

2. The Economic Effects of the Great Plague

The heyday of the Mooning Men Guild seems to have been between about 1380 and 1410, although there is little real proof.

It is impossible to overstate the effect of the Black Death that ravaged Europe between 1348 and 1350. 30-60% of Europe's population died, depending upon which figures you believe. The best estimates in England seem to be around 40%. That wasn't the end of it, however: Plague returned at intervals for the next 60 years. It is estimated that the population of England peaked at around four million in the late c13, fell to around 2.5 million and did not recover until a staggering 1601.



How does this relate to the “Mooning Men” Carvers? We know that it is extremely unlikely that they were at work as early as 1350. However, the Plague almost certainly has several influences on this narrative.

Firstly, the masons were not spared its effects. A carver would have learned his craft from one of a much diminished population of master tradesmen. To add to the scarcity, the royal projects took priority. Some County Sheriffs were actually set quotas of masons to be sent to London or elsewhere demanded by the King.

Secondly, the effect on society and the national economy was profound. The first half of the fourteenth century saw an explosion of population that combined with some catastrophic harvests to produce considerable famine. There is evidence that even before the Great Plague a general surplus of labour was leading to feudal duties being reduced in some areas of the country - as well as a general hunger in the land.

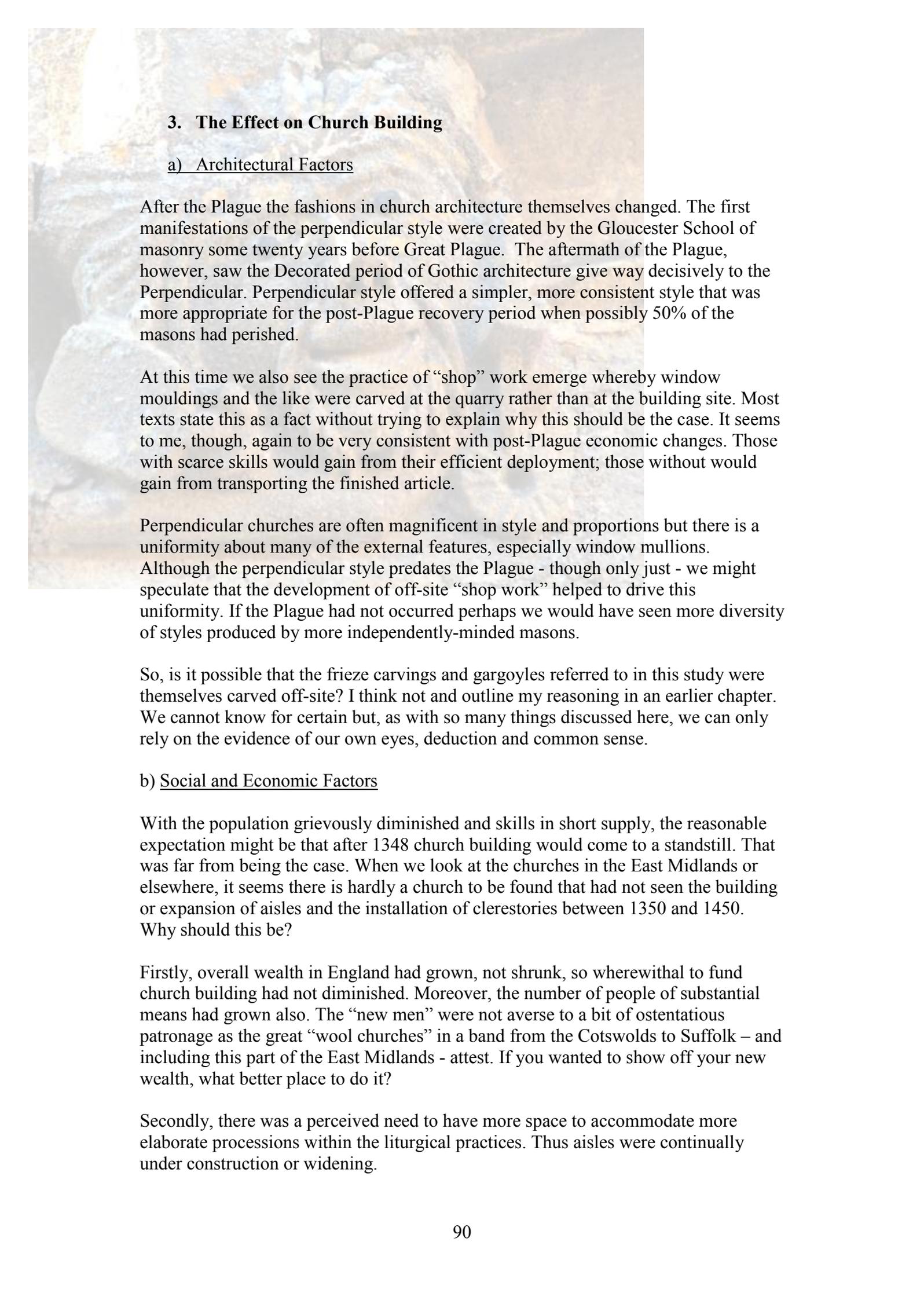
Plague changed all this. Those labourers that were left were able to demand higher wages from desperate manorial lords. Ordinances and Statutes passed by Richard II pegged wages and prices to pre-Plague rates and this had some effect at first. The feudal system, nevertheless, gradually fell apart. Labourers absconded to work for better-paying landowners who were thus complicit in the downfall of the very system they had cherished.

Those that survived the Plague, moreover, inherited land from those that had died. Suddenly, for the first time in English history, some former peasants became considerable landowners. These “nouveaux riches”, however, were also affected by the population decline and faced the same challenges of labour shortage and suppressed agricultural demand as their erstwhile masters. Many of the newly-enriched survivors abandoned arable farming and turned to less labour-intensive stock rearing. In particular, they turned to sheep farming. English fleeces were the finest in Europe and had a market overseas. Demand was less dependent on population and the industry was less at the mercy of weather and labour costs. Today we would call it a perfect business strategy

Far from being impoverished and enfeebled by Plague, therefore, England became steadily richer.

Another Plague in 1361-2 reduced the population by another 25%. Landowners found their labour costs doubling and their produce prices tumbling through reduced demand. Faced with this, many chose simply to let their land out for cash rents rather than try to farm it profitably themselves. Despite all efforts by the King and his cronies to save it, the feudal system was effectively dead.

The 1361 outbreak was known as "The Pestilence of the Children." This outbreak killed the young disproportionately since they did not have the acquired immunity of those who had lived through the 1348-50 holocaust. Thus, many potential future craftsmen, including masons, perished.



3. The Effect on Church Building

a) Architectural Factors

After the Plague the fashions in church architecture themselves changed. The first manifestations of the perpendicular style were created by the Gloucester School of masonry some twenty years before Great Plague. The aftermath of the Plague, however, saw the Decorated period of Gothic architecture give way decisively to the Perpendicular. Perpendicular style offered a simpler, more consistent style that was more appropriate for the post-Plague recovery period when possibly 50% of the masons had perished.

At this time we also see the practice of “shop” work emerge whereby window mouldings and the like were carved at the quarry rather than at the building site. Most texts state this as a fact without trying to explain why this should be the case. It seems to me, though, again to be very consistent with post-Plague economic changes. Those with scarce skills would gain from their efficient deployment; those without would gain from transporting the finished article.

Perpendicular churches are often magnificent in style and proportions but there is a uniformity about many of the external features, especially window mullions. Although the perpendicular style predates the Plague - though only just - we might speculate that the development of off-site “shop work” helped to drive this uniformity. If the Plague had not occurred perhaps we would have seen more diversity of styles produced by more independently-minded masons.

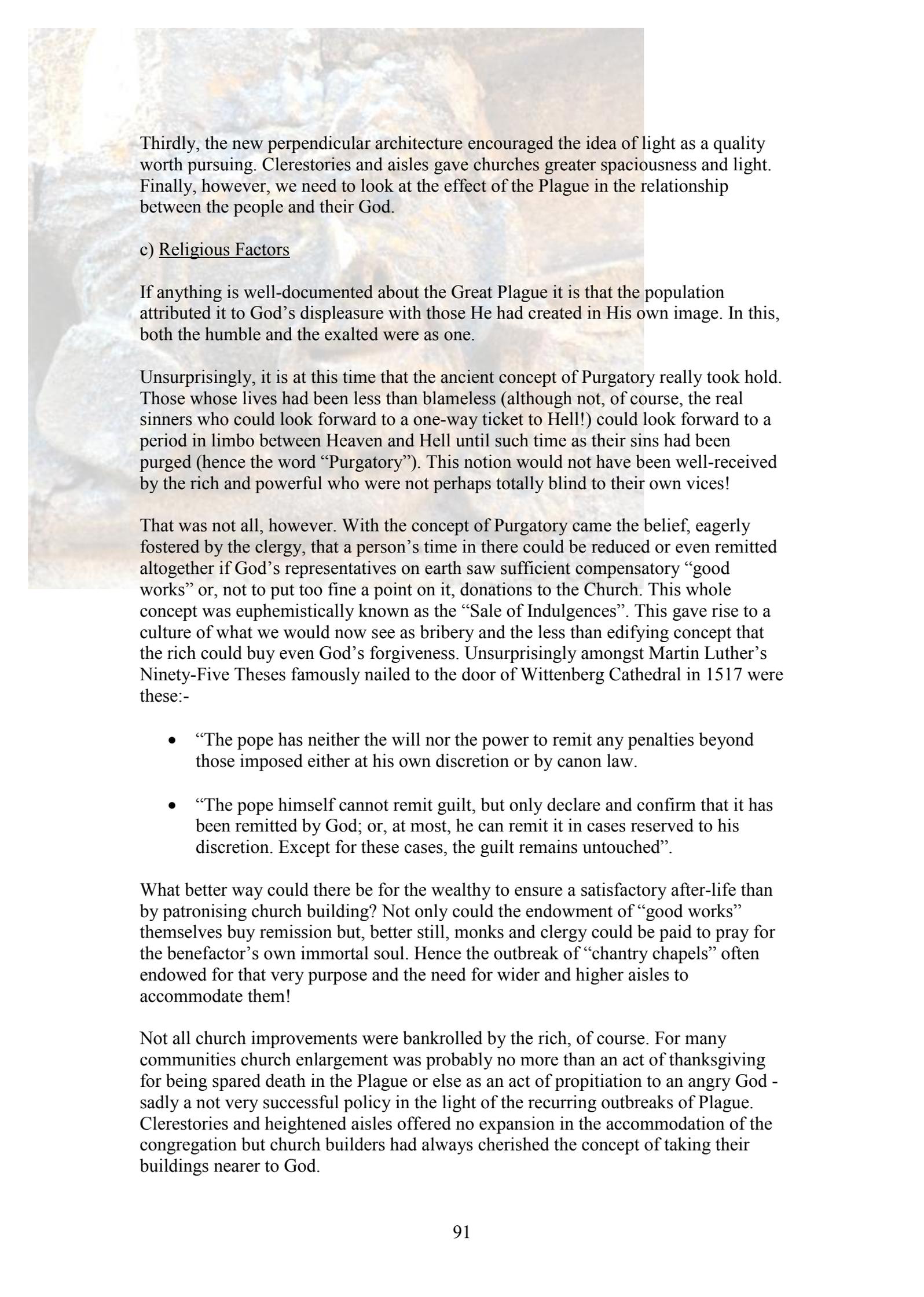
So, is it possible that the frieze carvings and gargoyles referred to in this study were themselves carved off-site? I think not and outline my reasoning in an earlier chapter. We cannot know for certain but, as with so many things discussed here, we can only rely on the evidence of our own eyes, deduction and common sense.

b) Social and Economic Factors

With the population grievously diminished and skills in short supply, the reasonable expectation might be that after 1348 church building would come to a standstill. That was far from being the case. When we look at the churches in the East Midlands or elsewhere, it seems there is hardly a church to be found that had not seen the building or expansion of aisles and the installation of clerestories between 1350 and 1450. Why should this be?

Firstly, overall wealth in England had grown, not shrunk, so wherewithal to fund church building had not diminished. Moreover, the number of people of substantial means had grown also. The “new men” were not averse to a bit of ostentatious patronage as the great “wool churches” in a band from the Cotswolds to Suffolk – and including this part of the East Midlands - attest. If you wanted to show off your new wealth, what better place to do it?

Secondly, there was a perceived need to have more space to accommodate more elaborate processions within the liturgical practices. Thus aisles were continually under construction or widening.



Thirdly, the new perpendicular architecture encouraged the idea of light as a quality worth pursuing. Clerestories and aisles gave churches greater spaciousness and light. Finally, however, we need to look at the effect of the Plague in the relationship between the people and their God.

c) Religious Factors

If anything is well-documented about the Great Plague it is that the population attributed it to God's displeasure with those He had created in His own image. In this, both the humble and the exalted were as one.

Unsurprisingly, it is at this time that the ancient concept of Purgatory really took hold. Those whose lives had been less than blameless (although not, of course, the real sinners who could look forward to a one-way ticket to Hell!) could look forward to a period in limbo between Heaven and Hell until such time as their sins had been purged (hence the word "Purgatory"). This notion would not have been well-received by the rich and powerful who were not perhaps totally blind to their own vices!

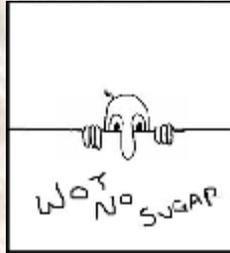
That was not all, however. With the concept of Purgatory came the belief, eagerly fostered by the clergy, that a person's time in there could be reduced or even remitted altogether if God's representatives on earth saw sufficient compensatory "good works" or, not to put too fine a point on it, donations to the Church. This whole concept was euphemistically known as the "Sale of Indulgences". This gave rise to a culture of what we would now see as bribery and the less than edifying concept that the rich could buy even God's forgiveness. Unsurprisingly amongst Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses famously nailed to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 were these:-

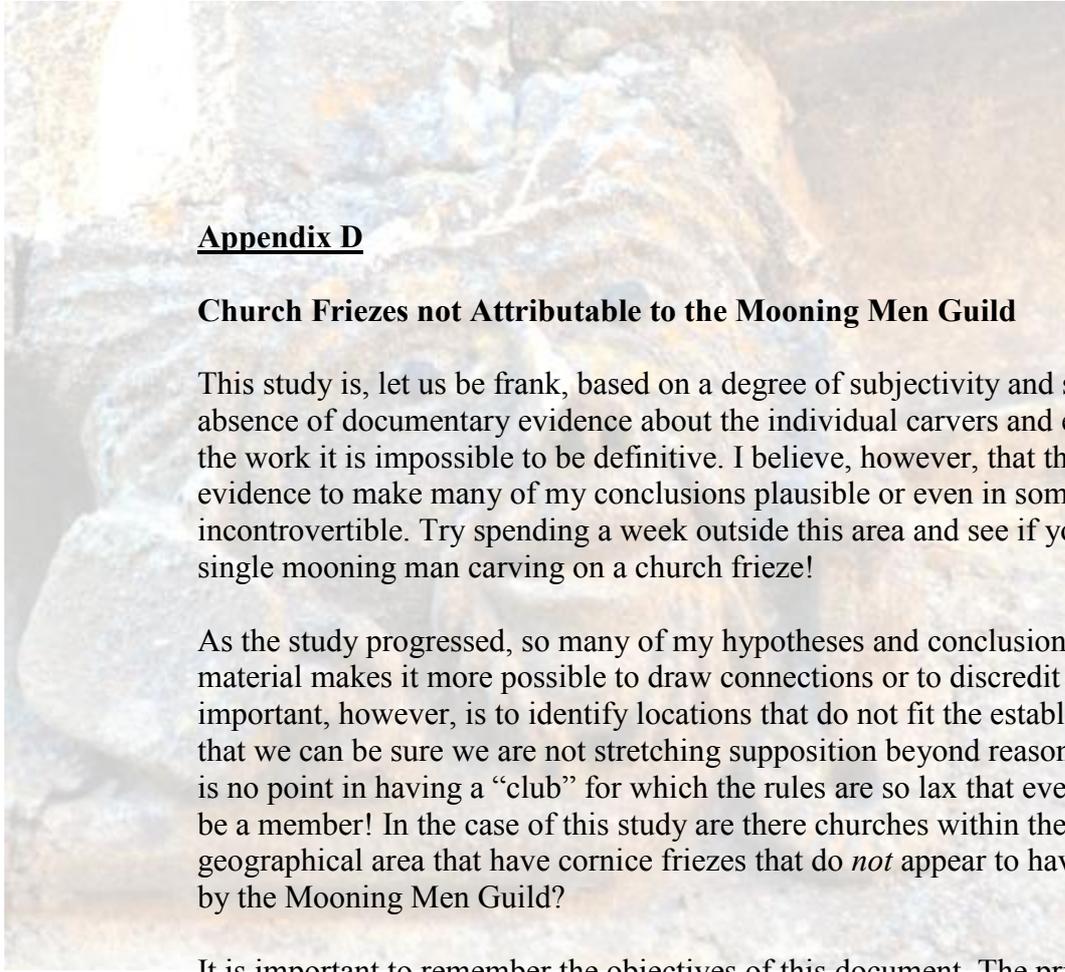
- "The pope has neither the will nor the power to remit any penalties beyond those imposed either at his own discretion or by canon law.
- "The pope himself cannot remit guilt, but only declare and confirm that it has been remitted by God; or, at most, he can remit it in cases reserved to his discretion. Except for these cases, the guilt remains untouched".

What better way could there be for the wealthy to ensure a satisfactory after-life than by patronising church building? Not only could the endowment of "good works" themselves buy remission but, better still, monks and clergy could be paid to pray for the benefactor's own immortal soul. Hence the outbreak of "chantry chapels" often endowed for that very purpose and the need for wider and higher aisles to accommodate them!

Not all church improvements were bankrolled by the rich, of course. For many communities church enlargement was probably no more than an act of thanksgiving for being spared death in the Plague or else as an act of propitiation to an angry God - sadly a not very successful policy in the light of the recurring outbreaks of Plague. Clerestories and heightened aisles offered no expansion in the accommodation of the congregation but church builders had always cherished the concept of taking their buildings nearer to God.

So, our masons were working in an age of expansion, not contraction, in church building. It is to these new or rebuilt aisles, to freshly-raised clerestories and to heightened towers that they applied their in-your-face carvings. It was a time of vigour and expansion; a time for humour perhaps after the grimness of famine and Plague. Then as now, after austerity comes flamboyance.





Appendix D

Church Friezes not Attributable to the Mooning Men Guild

This study is, let us be frank, based on a degree of subjectivity and supposition. In the absence of documentary evidence about the individual carvers and even the dates of the work it is impossible to be definitive. I believe, however, that there is sufficient evidence to make many of my conclusions plausible or even in some cases incontrovertible. Try spending a week outside this area and see if you can spot a single mooning man carving on a church frieze!

As the study progressed, so many of my hypotheses and conclusions changed. More material makes it more possible to draw connections or to discredit others. Also important, however, is to identify locations that do not fit the established criteria so that we can be sure we are not stretching supposition beyond reasonable limits. There is no point in having a “club” for which the rules are so lax that everyone is deemed to be a member! In the case of this study are there churches within the relevant geographical area that have cornice friezes that do *not* appear to have been executed by the Mooning Men Guild?

It is important to remember the objectives of this document. The primary one is to establish the existence of an East Midlands “School” of carving in this area, identified from the church friezes and the trademark motifs, but not necessarily *defined* by them. Had we simply found a consistent style of carving that showed evidence of common purpose and artistic consistency that would have been suffi

The trade mark carvings, the ability to track individual masons around the relevant area, and the probability of a single peripatetic guild (or even loose association of individuals) are collectively just a massive bonus. When we look at the much smaller North Oxfordshire School of Carving we see no evidence of any of those things.

Just as we should not tear our hair out at being unable to understand the motives behind these carvings, nor should we lose sleep over the inclusion or exclusion of churches.

So let’s look at four churches which I consider to be representative of the East Midlands School, but which for various reasons I do not consider to be the work of the Mooning Men Guild.

a) Lenton (Lincolnshire)

Lenton is the most northerly “candidate” for the Mooning Men Guild geographically. It is 10 miles north of Thurlby, and ten miles north east of Buckminster. Its frieze is only around the tower and has none of the trademark motifs. Some of the carvings would be quite at home in the MMG nexus, especially a mermaid and a nice maned lion. The rest is a little more formal. The corner carvings are exquisite and unlike any other Demon Carver work. In the picture below right, marvel at the delicacy of the saucepan and ladle! Of course, they may date from a different time. On the whole, I

believe that whoever carved at Lenton was perhaps influenced by the work of the Mooning Men Guild but was unlikely to have been within it at that time.



Maned Lion



Mermaid



Man with Saucepan and Ladle

b) All Saints Church, Stamford (Lincolnshire)

Stamford is the largest and most historically important of the churches in this study. All Saints is just one of four parish churches within 10 minutes walk of each other in Stamford town centre – and at one time the number of churches was in double figures.

All Saints was endowed by the fabulously wealthy Browne family of wool merchants and we know that they funded much of the Perpendicular period rebuilding of this church, including its tower. On that tower there is an extensive frieze. It is exclusively a head and fleuron frieze, high on quality and low on variety. The style does not much resemble any of those employed by the MMG carvers and there are no trademark carvings. There are two very plausible explanations for this (apart from the usual difficulties in dating work). One is that the town might very well have had its own stonemasons' guild. The other is that the Browne family were well able to afford masons from wheresoever they pleased.



c) Beeby (Leicestershire)

Should inclusion within the MMG group of churches imply any kind of prestige or reward then Beeby would have the best case for an appeal against exclusion. This is because it has a tower frieze that was definitely carved by the man responsible for the chancel frieze at Tilton-on-the-Hill, some five miles away as the crow flies.

The style is distinctively naïve – even child-like – with small round holes for eyes. At Beeby this mason also carved gargoyles in similar style and in every way was able to express a flamboyance that was missing in his work at Tilton.



Two Sections of Beeby Tower Frieze. Note the Green Man in the picture left.



Water-carrying Gargoyle Beeby Tower



Gargoyle, South Clerestory

Naïve it might be, but one could also argue that it is one of the more distinctive styles and shows a deliberate sense of fun lacking on some of the MMG friezes. Once again it is something of an antidote to all those po-faced theories about carvings being there to frighten off the Devil or as warnings against sin.

The clerestory here is credited to the fifteenth century and so the aisle gargoyle must be of that period too. This carver, then, is of the period relevant to this study. We know he was attached to the MMG at Tilton so there is an argument for including Beeby within the main section of this study. He leaves none of the trademark MMG carvings at either church, however, unless you count the delightfully naïve green man!

Appendix E

The Architectural Periods and Styles

I refer to the Early English, Decorated and – particularly - the Perpendicular periods throughout this study. Together these three constitute the “Gothic” period. Along with the earlier Anglo-Saxon, Norman and Transitional Periods they cover English church architecture from around AD 650 to around 1547.

Architectural styles did not change overnight. This is why no two “authorities” will quote the same dates for these styles. The Transitional period denotes one where features of late Norman and very early Gothic styles merged into one definable mongrel style. Many experts argue that there were transitional periods between the various Gothic periods too, although I would argue that these transitions did not create distinctive styles of their own; rather they mixed and matched elements of two.

What is “Gothic” for that matter? Well, it can be most simply (indeed, *simplistically!*) be described as the era of the “pointed arch”. Anglo-Saxon and Norman styles used only round-headed arches because in Western Europe nobody had understood the potential of a pointed arch, or how to use one. If you want to know in depth what this meant then I refer to you proper architectural or engineering sources. In brief, however, the structural strength of the pointed arch made it possible to cut much larger windows into walls without weakening them; and masonry did not need to be so massive. Even the earliest Gothic churches were vastly better lit and more delicate in style than their forerunners.

As time went on, windows became bigger and the arches became flatter, culminating in the widespread use of rectangular windows during the “Tudor” period.

There is very much more to the subject than just the shapes of windows and arches, of course, but nevertheless window design is the most obvious distinction between the different Gothic periods.

The Architectural Periods

| | | | |
|---------------|-------------|---|------------|
| Anglo-Saxon | c7 to 1066 | | |
| Norman | 1066 - 1189 | } | Romanesque |
| Transitional | 1175 - 1200 | } | |
| Early English | 1189 - 1280 | } | Gothic |
| Decorated | 1280 - 1377 | } | |
| Perpendicular | 1377 - 1547 | } | |
| Tudor | 1547 - 1603 | | |

Appendix F

Black Eyes

Nothing about the carvings in the Mooning Men Group is ever straightforward. The black eyes are no exception. Originally I believed them to be slate. Then I was told (I am sure accurately) that those *inside* Ryhall Church are made of lead.

Having dismissed elsewhere that idea that the Demon Carver and the Gargoyle Carver were the same man, we know that at least two masons (and almost certainly *only* two) used this device. We are left, however, wondering *how* these eyes were made. What is enlightening is that it is pretty clear that the masons did not always use the same method.

Let's start with Ryhall. Because it has label stops with black eyes I was able to get close to some.



On the left is an eye that has been “lost”, leaving behind an untidy mastic-like extrusion to which the eye must have been secured. In the centre is a close up of a surviving eye. It is a dense, totally opaque and quite roughly shaped; but under the top surface it has the blue/grey appearance of the “mastic”.

Look at the picture on the right, also from Ryhall. The right eye has been lost; but there is no sign that anything was anything behind it but stone. It looks as if the eyes were simply “glued” to the surface in some way. Look too at the surviving eye; it seems to have a greyer, less dense and slightly less opaque look to it. In fact, Ryhall has many missing black eyes on its frieze but nowhere do we see any residue. So there looks to be too different technologies in use here. Before we leave Ryhall, however, let's look at one more picture.



Notice how the right eye is broken quite cleanly. Would lead get broken in such a way? So the Demon Carver might have used two different technologies *and* two

different materials at Ryhall. Perhaps my thinking that many were slate was not so wide of the mark.

When we talk of the use of molten lead, we are into the realm not of the mason, but of the plumber. Until quite recently in our history a plumber was a man who worked in lead. Our early pipe-work was made of lead, hence the modern use of the word. It could be that this is how we can explain two different technologies in making the black eyes: if no plumber was available then other methods must be used.

Francis B Andrews had this to say about the plumber's craft in mediaeval England:

"The most ancient regulations of the craft show that in the fourteenth century lead roofings...were becoming more common, and the quality of materials and expense necessitated careful safeguarding against dishonesty...The ordinances and By-Laws of the (London Livery Company) go back to c1365 and they refer to lawful weights, rates of labour...."

Thus we can be sure that in the absence of a plumber our masons would not have the wherewithal or the right to use lead themselves. It seems that if no lead-work was being carried out the masons would have to find other methods and other materials.

Now let's turn to Oakham. Here we have a Gargoyle Master gargoyle on the south porch gable. Look at the picture below.



The eyes have survived the erosion of the surrounding stonework. We can see clearly that the eyes were stalks – presumably of lead – widening out either to support a now-disappeared eye or, less likely, to form the eye itself. It is all very deeply-seated and quite neatly executed. Geometric shapes and a “pin hole” can be seen on the surface. So here we have a *third* technology. What's more we don't how many of it was done!

This all means, also, that we can never be absolutely sure which carvings have “lost” their eyes. As we can see in one of the Ryhall carvings, some were simply on the surface leaving no evidence they ever existed.

Appendix G

Mary de Bohun and her Family

In “Dating the work” I suggested that if the many images of ladies in square headdresses were of an individual then the best “fit” would be Mary de Bohun.

King Henry IV (family name Henry Bolingbroke) reigned from 1399-1413. Henry - Richard II's cousin and son of John of Gaunt - was not the heir apparent to the childless Richard. Richard's capricious behaviour towards England's barons, however, led to his overthrow by forces led by Bolingbroke. With the succession far from clear, it was easy and pragmatic for the nobility to acclaim Henry as king. To quote Peter Ackroyd in his “History of England” (2011): “Henry Bolingbroke...had obtained the throne by violence and perhaps by fraudulence...He himself had proved that kings can be removed at will and gain legitimacy by popular proclamation”.

Henry married the 12 year old Mary de Bohun at Arundel in 1380. Such marriages were always dynastic, and in marrying Mary he gained the earldom of Northamptonshire through the de Bohun line. He also inherited the earldoms of Lincoln and Leicester via his father's line. Indeed, Henry was born in Bolingbroke Castle near Spilsby in Lincolnshire. Thus, Mary was the wife of the man who held *three* earldoms in the East Midlands. Moreover, her grandfather, William de Bohun was Sheriff of Rutland as well as Earl of Northampton.

On William's death in 1373, his widow Joan de Bohun was granted the manor of Langham in Rutland (a church with Mooning Men Guild carvings) by Edward III. Joan was a huge landowner in Essex so we should not over-egg her link to Rutland but this is yet another connection between the family and the East Midlands.

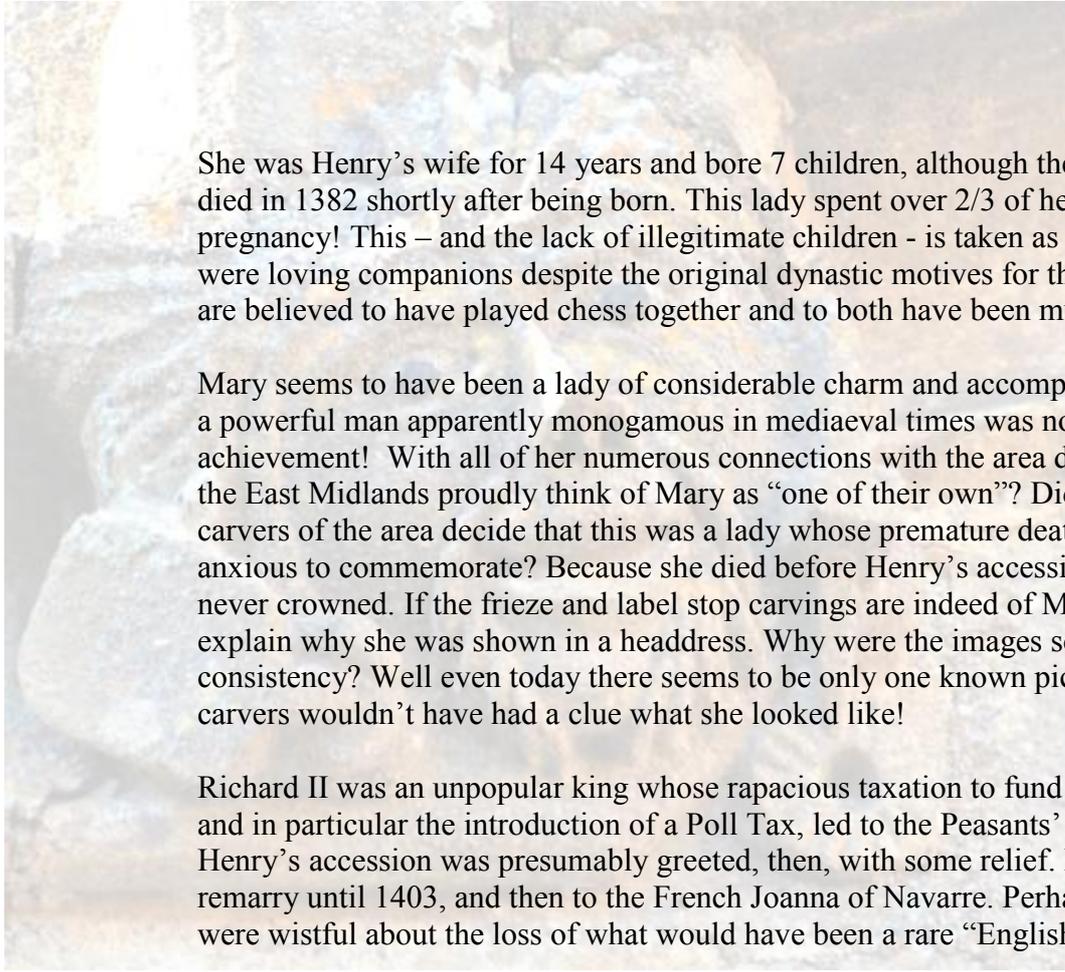
Mary died in childbirth in 1394 at the now-disappeared Peterborough Castle aged only 25 and was buried in Leicester. One might wonder why this was so when the castle was cheek by jowl with Peterborough Cathedral! She was also the grandmother of King Henry V, having born her husband six living children before her death.



Mary de Bohun



Two images of Henry Bolingbroke's psalter (housed in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) commissioned by the de Bohun family to celebrate his marriage to Mary.



She was Henry's wife for 14 years and bore 7 children, although the first, Edward, died in 1382 shortly after being born. This lady spent over 2/3 of her "adult" life in pregnancy! This – and the lack of illegitimate children - is taken as evidence that they were loving companions despite the original dynastic motives for the marriage. They are believed to have played chess together and to both have been musicians.

Mary seems to have been a lady of considerable charm and accomplishment. Keeping a powerful man apparently monogamous in mediaeval times was no small achievement! With all of her numerous connections with the area did the people of the East Midlands proudly think of Mary as "one of their own"? Did the church carvers of the area decide that this was a lady whose premature death they were anxious to commemorate? Because she died before Henry's accession Mary was never crowned. If the frieze and label stop carvings are indeed of Mary, it might explain why she was shown in a headdress. Why were the images so lacking in consistency? Well even today there seems to be only one known picture of Mary. Our carvers wouldn't have had a clue what she looked like!

Richard II was an unpopular king whose rapacious taxation to fund wars in France, and in particular the introduction of a Poll Tax, led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Henry's accession was presumably greeted, then, with some relief. Henry did not remarry until 1403, and then to the French Joanna of Navarre. Perhaps our carvers were wistful about the loss of what would have been a rare "English" queen?

Possibly!