# Gargoyle Hunting

# Guide

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Cover illustration by Ian Brown

# Gargoyles and grotesques:
# an insight into the minds of medieval minds

We may not know the names of medieval stonemasons but their vast output of work, in all its variety, does more than simply decorate churches. Their stylised and grotesque foliage and figures offers clues to the attitudes of whole generations of people whose thinking has otherwise been lost from the written records.

Fabulous, hideous and even incongruously bawdy figurative carvings sit alongside characterful human and animal heads, not to mention forests of decorative foliage. Indeed sometimes the foliage and the faces become one and the same, as with the so-called 'Green Men'.

The craftsmanship varies from quaint, clearly local efforts, to sophisticated displays of stonemasons' skills, with faces and creatures in wonderfully animated postures. The best examples – and there are many of them – are clever caricatures or imaginatively hideous.

What were these masons thinking about when they were carving? One of the most frequent motifs is a face – usually human but sometimes animal – with one or both hands pulling the mouth. About twenty years ago they were dubbed 'gurning' faces, a name which derives from Cumbrian 'gurning' (or 'girning') competitions for pulling faces. However in the 1881 dictionary of *Leicestershire Words, Phrases and Proverbs* by Arthur Benoni Evans and Sebastian Evans there is an entry which reads:

> to make *mawms*; to 'make faces' in derision.

So perhaps Leicestershire's face-pulling grotesques should be referred to as 'mawming' gargoyles rather than gurning ones.

Among the mawmers, tongue pokers also abound; indeed some may be both tongue poking and mawming. Also very common are foliate faces and so-called 'Green Men', with foliage sprouting from their mouth, nose,

*A curious caricature – one of many figurative carvings on the outside of Cold Overton church, Leicestershire.*

ears or even eyes. More unusual motifs include naked male contortionists (medieval precursors to modern day 'mooners'), female exhibitionists (referred to coyly as 'sheela-na-gigs') and women wearing a scold's bridle.

*A human face with ass's ears. Foxton church, Leicestershire.*

Later in the medieval period carvings tend to borrow more from heraldic devices so dragons and wyverns (two-legged winged beasts) become more popular. Angels and Biblical subject matter also begin to appear more frequently, although still does not predominate.

As most rural churches were restored in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Gothic Revival was in full flower, original medieval carvings were retained and, if necessary, restored. Noticeably the churches restored in the eighteenth century were often radically transformed by Classically-inspired architects who found the 'Gothic' medieval decoration abhorrent (indeed, the term 'Gothic' was originally derogatory, meaning 'barbarous and uncouth'); presumably the rubble walls of their rebuilt churches incorporate fragments of the despised and broken-up medieval embellishments.

*'Piggy-back' gargoyle – a variation on the 'mawming' or face-pulling motif. Loddington, Leicestershire.*

The Victorian craze for the Gothic may have saved the large majority of the medieval masons' decorative work, but they were not perfect conservators. The vogue for bare stone meant that all traces of paint were almost invariably removed from interior carvings. So, although the carvings are now bare stone or wood, we should try to image them in garish colours, perhaps with gilding. This is not as speculative as it seems – medieval records survive revealing that the craftsmen painting sculptures were paid as much as the carvers.

There is a vast wealth of decorative medieval carvings in churches, vastly exceeding all other surviving medieval art. Often dozens of examples can be found in a single church and in all there are several thousand in Leicestershire and Rutland.

*A face-pulling or 'mawming' animal. One of many superb carvings in Sproxton church, Leicestershire.*

Frustratingly, even though such carvings are often among the best features of churches, most guidebooks ignore them. It seems that they fall between the cracks of professional interests. They 'merely' decorate the functional parts of the structure, so are of secondary interest to most architects. Historians have nothing to offer because there are rarely any documentary references. And the subject matter and designs are too far removed from the 'high art' of medieval times to fall within the interests of art historians. There is a small number of specialists in medieval folklore but their interests have, so far, been restricted to other aspects – the closest has been a study of 'bawdy' pilgrims' badges.

The medieval stonemasons who produced decorative carvings for churches were among the elite of fellow craftsmen, but they were not part of a 'high art' tradition. Indeed, even painters and sculptors who are now undeniably regarded as 'artists', such as Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, were merely 'artisans' within their own societies. To understand the motifs and imagery, we need to be knowledgeable about the popular culture of the middle ages. The clues are in drinking songs, bawdy ballads and such literature as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.*

*A splendid 'green lion' on a corbel inside Long Clawson church, Leicestershire.*

Popular folklore says that grotesque gargoyles are to frighten away the Devil. But this does not explain why similar grotesques and a whole range of images with no Biblical references are found *inside* the churches. Some have speculated that Green Men and female exhibitionists are evidence for pre-Christian beliefs surviving during the Middle Ages. This suggestion simply does not fit the facts; these grotesques are the product of a deeply Christian culture, albeit part of the 'popular' culture that was clearly different from that of the clerical hierarchy, and which existed alongside more pious statues of saints (mostly destroyed in the Reformation) and wall paintings (mostly destroyed during restorations).

However to be able to draw together the clues as to the meaning of these medieval carvings we need to know what the clues are. And, so far, this great wealth of carving is largely unknown and unrecorded. To begin to understand these carvings we need to know more about the distribution of motifs (both their location and estimates of date). Most importantly, specific motifs – such as Green Men or exhibitionists – need to be

*Green man decorating the corbel table at Ryhall, Rutland.*

recorded not on their own but in the context of associated decorative motifs. For example, if a Green Man decorates a nave roof corbel then the other images in the set of corbels in a nave also need to be known.

I have written a book and 'companion' CD-ROM about some of the Leicestershire and Rutland examples. However these cover only a small proportion of the counties' medieval carvings. Now that digital cameras enable large quantities of photographs to be taken without incurring the cost of film (although cameras with telephoto lenses are essential) and publication on Web sites or CD-ROM is relatively straightforward, there is little excuse for these treasures of medieval art to remain unknown. If only a small number of people record and publish the carvings in their area then a better understanding of what is out there will quickly be available.

Next time you see a curious carving or especially gruesome gargoyle, think about the mason who made it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could begin to understand his decidedly curious thinking! If everyone who was curious about medieval masons took photographs and built up a collection of local examples then we would be taking long-overdue first steps towards understanding and appreciating the vast wealth of medieval art in Leicestershire. I will of course be pleased to hear from anyone who shares my enthusiasm for this overlooked aspect of the county's heritage.

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# Recommended reading

*Explore Green Men* by Mercia MacDermott with photographs by Ruth Wylie. Explore Books 2003. ISBN 1 872883 66 4

*Good Gargoyle Guide: Medieval Carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland* by Bob Trubshaw. Heart of Albion 2004. ISBN 1872883 70 2

*Interactive Gargoyles and Grotesque Carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland.* CD-ROM with over 280 colour photographs. Heart of Albion 2002. ISBN 1 872883 54 0.

Details of these books and the CD-ROM
can be found online at
**www.hoap.co.uk**

**How to hunt gargoyles**

1 Pack binoculars, camera, sketch pad and pens, map, *Good Gargoyle Guide*, water, sandwiches, umbrella, suncream, mobile phone ...

2 Find a church where gargoyles are likely to lurk.

3 LOOK UP!

Repeat steps 1 to 3 until successful.


**What to do in the event of a successful gargoyle hunt**

1 Trying saying 'Hello' to the gargoyle.  This takes them by surprise as few people speak to them.  If they do start a conversation then *write down* what they say.

2 Ask them if it's OK to draw their portrait or take a photo. They very rarely so 'No' but they do like being asked first.

3 If they are looking a bit tatty, do another drawing showing how you think they looked when the stonemason had just finished.

4 Do a drawing showing how they may have looked when brightly painted.  When finished turn the drawing round so the gargoyle can see - it makes them happy to think back to when they were young (although they may even shed a tear or two if their youth seems a very long time ago).

5 What would happen if one of the gargoyles escaped and wandered off to the nearest shop for a paper and a packet of crisps?  Write down what you think people might say to it.

6 What sort of songs do gargoyles sing when they think no one is around to listen?  Write down a gargoyle song or two.