

# Project Gargoyle Newsletter

June 2018



# ***Welcome to the latest Project Gargoyle newsletter***

Hello and welcome to the fourth Project Gargoyle newsletter – somewhat later in the year than usual.

The recording of churches for Project Gargoyle is continuing to progress at a steady pace. In the last week a memory stick with photos from another six churches arrived in the post. In total, 124 churches have been recorded – my thanks to everyone who has contributed. And a member of the Project who is professionally involved with church restoration has helpfully drawn attention to some especially interesting carvings in the north-east of Leicestershire.

The team at County Hall who have the task of adding the photographs to Leicestershire Council Council's Historic Environment Record (HER) now include Susan Ripper who has taken up this part of her role with considerable enthusiasm.

I decided not to organise a Project Gargoyle training day this year, although I am keeping the option open for next year. In the meantime I will happily arrange one-to-one training for anyone interested in photographing and recording carvings inside and outside the churches of Leicestershire and Rutland – or who feels they need a 'refresher'. Just email me and I will set things up.

Bob Trubshaw, Wymeswold, June 2018  
bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk

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*Front cover illustration taken at Empingham  
by Steve Wells.*



*A fragment of an Anglo-Saxon carving now in the wall of the vestry at Ragdale, accompanied by two small heads which may also be Anglo-Saxon. All three were formerly in the now-demolished old Ragdale Hall.*

*It depicts a man with what appears to be a crozier. So this may have been the lid of a bishop's coffin. But why would a bishop be buried at Ragdale? Perhaps he was a 'local lad' buried where he grew up?*

*Photograph and background information by Steve Harris*



*Another of Leicestershire's Anglo-Saxon carvings. Or, more accurately, an Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture as this lion has been carved in a style commonly used in Norway during the tenth and eleventh centuries.*

*Photographed by Steve Harris when recording Birstall church for Project Gargoyle. In this image the contrast has been slightly enhanced.*

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## ***LARC Project progress***

This newsletter started out when the idea of making the photographs available via the Internet was known rather vaguely as 'Phase Three' of Project Gargoyle. However it is now two years since the the Leicestershire and Rutland Carvings Project (LARC Project) was inaugurated.

Although the development of the LARC Project database has taken longer than expected a new 'pot' of funds has kindly been made available. So Catherine Wells of Ischus Engineering is once more working out how to code the complexities of describing and cataloguing the carvings. All being well database trials will commence within a few months.

More work – and funds – are needed to make the database searchable and to improve the appearance of the pages but the LARC Project committee will be applying for a major grant this autumn – please keep your fingers and toes crossed for a successful outcome!

At the recent AGM of the LARC Project Committee Kathy Elkin resigned as Honorary Secretary and was elected Chair. I resigned as Acting Chair and was elected Honorary Secretary while remaining as Project Co-ordinator. Mike Hawkes remains in post as Honorary Treasurer and formal representative



for the Diocese of Leicester, while Anna Giangiordano remains as the committee's art historian.

In addition Susan Ripper was elected as Associate Committee Member, reflecting her active involvement with the photographs at County Hall and also acting as a formal representative on the committee for Leicestershire Council Council.

Since the AGM Steve Harris has also joined the committee. He is one of more active photographers for Project Gargoyle and has been appointed specifically so there is a formal 'representation' for the photographers who are right at the heart of the LARC Project database.

In the next few months we expect the committee to grow in numbers as we have a 'hit list' of folk we would like to co-opt to broaden the range of experience and expertise. Most of these people are academics so have more than enough to keep them busy already – Kathy Elkin and myself may need all our powers of subtle persuasion!

## *Summoning St Michael at Stoke Dry*

Among the more curious of Leicestershire and Rutland's surviving Romanesque carvings are the two columns incorporated into the chancel arch at Stoke Dry. They are decorated with a profusion of humans and animals – and at least one which is a 'bit of both'. There seems to be no rhyme or reason as to why the figures are laid out as they are.

So imagine my surprise when I opened a book devoted to Lincolnshire's eleventh



*Photographs above  
and right by Mike  
Walter for Project  
Gargoyle.*



century church towers and found a rubbing of part of one of the Stoke Dry columns used as the frontispiece. Why? Because five of these motifs are laid out for a reason: to illustrate the latest 'fashion' beliefs and practices of burial.

The authors of the book, David Stocker and Paul Everson, argue that there was a change in burial practice instigated by Lanfranc after he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070, and actively promoted by Remigius de Fécamp who was the Bishop of Dorchester (at that time the Dorchester diocese incorporated Leicester and Lincoln). As an aside, Remigius is still commemorated locally as the patron saint of Long Clawson church.

This new rite involved ringing church bells – which is why towers need to be added to churches – to summon Archangel Michael to accompany the soul of the deceased to meet St Peter at the gates of Heaven.

At Stoke Dry this is illustrated by the stonemason. To the left of the bell ringer –

*Main image from David Stocker and Paul Everson, Summoning St Michael: Early Romanesque towers in Lincolnshire (Oxbow 2006).*

and this is probably the oldest depiction of a bell ringer in the country – ‘Saint’ Michael is supporting a soul, in the shape of a bird, while fending off a cat-like demonic monster beneath him.

In the next century St Michael would gain a reputation for killing ‘demons’ in the shape of dragons. But around the 1070s St Michael was still thought of as a psychopomp rather than a dracocide.

It’s also why churches dedicated to St Michael are often on hilltops – anyone buried there would be that bit nearer to Heaven to start with, making Micheal’s job easier. One does wonder if the Norman landowners of eleventh century England realised they needed every bit of help they could get when it came to making a successful transition into their afterlife.

Although we are now accustomed to churches dedicated to apostles and ‘major saints’, prior to the dedications to Michael (strictly an archangel, so distinct from

canonised priests and Apostles) then churches were dedicated to local saints, presumably the founding priests. But the Normans were keen to suppress this aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture. Nevertheless two churches in Leicestershire – Breedon and Scalford – retain their original dedications, which are to St Hardulph and St Egelwin, respectively.

If you find yourself driving from Oakham to Uppingham do turn off to Stoke Dry. The church is not far from the main road and is interesting in very many ways in addition to the Romanesque columns. It is kept open during the day.

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## ***‘Dismissing’ St Michael at Thorpe Arnold***

It’s a good job I give talks about carvings. Or, more specifically, it’s good that people who come to my talks know more about some aspects than I do! Over the years I have learnt much from feedback from audiences. And it happened again last December when I did my usual introduction to medieval carvings talk for the Wolds Historical Organisation.

Ever since I started talking about Leicestershire’s carvings I included the Romanesque font at Thorpe Arnold, just to the north of Melton Mowbray. In its ‘folksy’ and unsophisticated way it shows St Michael fighting five fire-breathing dragons (or is it two multi-headed ones?) At least that’s what I’ve been telling everyone for decades.

‘Not necessary so’, I was informed when I asked for questions. Ivor Perry, the former Chair of the Wolds Historical Organisation, informed me that the rite of baptism includes a reference to the person being baptized becoming a ‘soldier of Christ’.

Indeed, a quick check online reveals that the relevant section of the liturgy reads:

*The Priest makes the sign of the Cross on the forehead of each of those*



*A sketch of Thorpe Arnold font ‘unwrapped’.*

*baptized, saying: 'You have now been made a member of Christ's flock.*

*Therefore we sign you with the sign of the Cross, in token that you shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto your life's end. Amen.'*

An image of such a 'faithful soldier' fighting an animal already being associated with the Devil is an inspired way of 'illustrating' that liturgy for a congregation who could not read and probably had limited understanding of the Latin version of this text used by twelfth century priests.

So in all probability we should 'dismiss' St Michael as being part of the iconography of this font.

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*The twelfth century tympanum at Hallaton depicting St Michael defeating a dragon. Originally over a doorway, it is now set inside the porch. Sadly shadows cast by the porch make it difficult to discern the two small human figures to the far right.*

## ***A trend-setting St Michael***

However, at the time Thorpe Arnold's font was carved St Michael was most certainly being depicted dealing deadly deeds to dragons. Over at Hallaton a splendid tympanum (now located inside the porch, behind one of the seats) shows just such an event. This is a superb work of art, at quite the opposite end of the craftsmanship spectrum to Thorpe Arnold font. There is nothing 'folksy' about this exceptionally well-executed carving.

Once again Ivor Perry made an interesting observation, to the effect that the costume and shield look nothing like those worn by Norman knights. Any number of such knights are shown on the Bayeux Tapestry (see illustration). The manner in which St Michael is depicted at Hallaton owes nothing to these knights and, instead, is a straight copy of Byzantine art. Exactly the same Byzantine influences are present in a series of tenth century carvings at Breedon on the Hill.

Exactly how tenth and twelfth century sculptors in England were aware of Byzantine art is unclear. But we do know there was



extensive trade between Britain and the eastern Mediterranean at this time. Illuminated manuscripts, embroidered textiles, carved wood, ivory and bone together with assorted decorative metalwork were among the many high value items being brought to Britain. The main trade seems to have been vast amounts of incense used by the churches, along with medicinal herbs.

Among all these items must have been one or more depictions of Archangel Michael fighting a dragon. Although we now think of Michael as primarily as a dragon-slayer, this would not have been the case when the Hallaton tympanum was carved. As noted in the remarks about Stoke Dry, since the 1070s St Michael had been thought of as a psychopomp, the archangel summoned to assist the deceased's soul to get to Heaven. Fending off demons was part of this iconography, so full-on dragon slaying fitted his role as psychopomp.

So Hallaton's tympanum was something of a trend setter, helping to establish the notion of Michael as *principally* a dragon-slayer. With, of course, the dragon being regarded as the Devil in disguise.

In the centuries after the Hallaton tympanum was created then dragon-slaying became attributed to various saints. These days St George is never far from a defunct dragon, although he is merely the Johnny-come-lately of the bunch as he only came to fame in England during the late thirteenth century. In an interesting examples of 'equal opportunities' a female saint, Catherine, was once also regarded as a dragon killer. The font at Stoke Golding includes two portraits of Catherine, one with her wheel (the instrument of her martyrdom) and one standing with a spear thrust into the jaws of a dragon – again note the grateful human offering prayers, presumably in gratitude.

Grateful thanks to Ivor Perry for sharing his thoughts about Thorpe Arnold and Hallaton.

*The font at Stoke Golding, carved about 1330.*



*A Norman knight from the Bayeux Tapestry.*



*An apostle – one of a set of Byzantine-influenced tenth century carvings at Breedon.*





*Harby's stopcock sucker.*

*Photograph by Neil Fortey.*

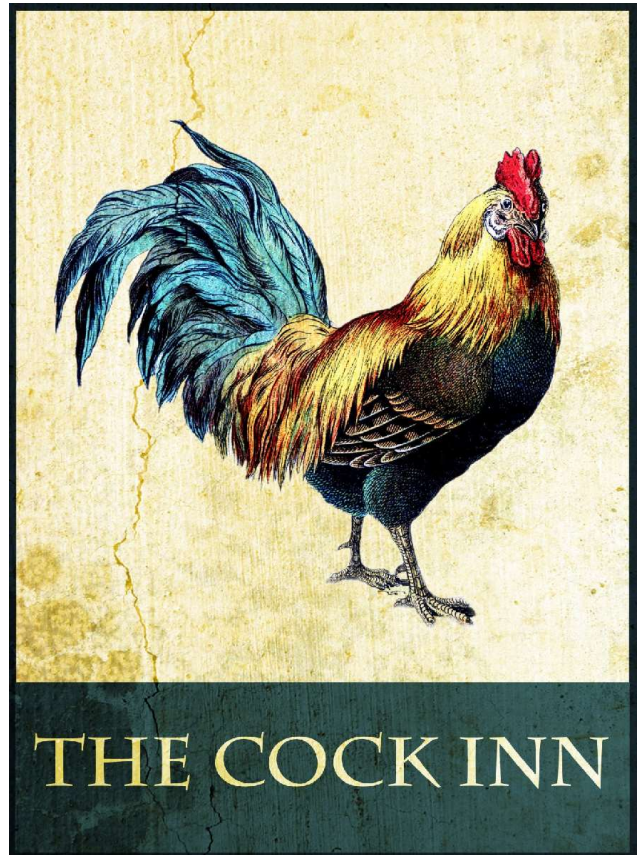
## ***Harby's cock sucker***

The subject matter of medieval carvings on churches encompasses many aspects of human life. And the corbel table around the exterior of Harby church is about as quirky as they come. For example, we can now include the presumably accurate depiction of a late fourteenth or early fifteenth century stopcock.

And yes, they were known as 'cocks' back in the fifteen century as there is a surviving mention of a 'cock of a faucet'. A recent Radio 4 broadcast[\*] reveals that The Cock is an early pub sign known from the 1320s. It a synecdoche (i.e. when a part standing for the whole) of the stop cock on the brewer's barrel – even though the pub's sign would have been painted as a male chicken. And, yes, the medieval sense of metaphor also extended the sense of the word 'cock' to male human anatomy too, although the origins are lost to etymologists.

Somewhat risky puns were nothing new in the high medieval era. They can be found among the surviving Old English literature dating from around the tenth century – Google for the Exeter riddles if you want to think about leeks in a whole new way...

\* Dr Laura Wright 'Word of Mouth: Pub Names' Radio 4, 30th October 2017 *circa* 8 minutes from start; online at [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b099yh88](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b099yh88)



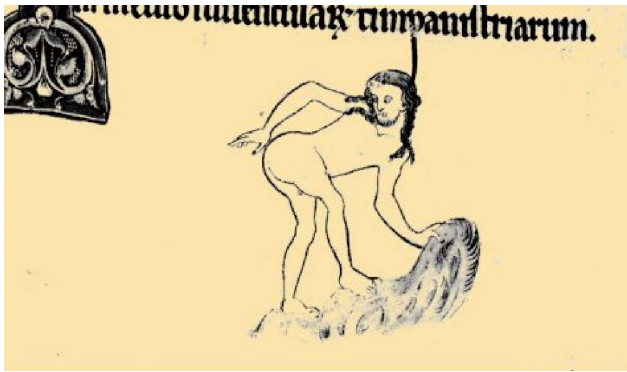
*The 'sinful man' at Ryhall.*

*Photograph by Mike Walter.*

These experts in the origins of words think that the term 'cocksucker' starts in the 1890s – though the carving at Harby suggests that the phrase had been in use for at least five hundred years before the earliest-known written reference.

The pose of cock-sucking man at Harby sheds light on a carving on a corbel table of



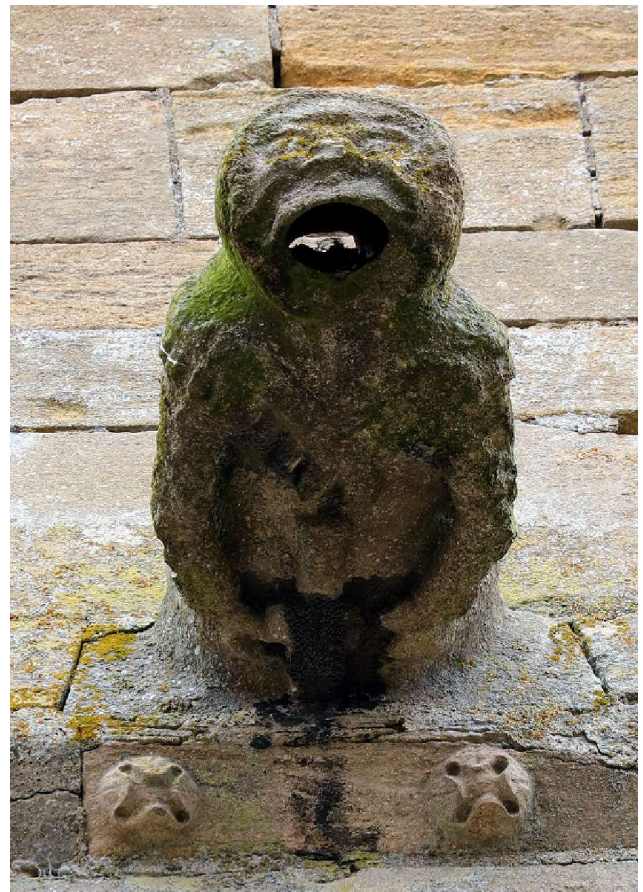


similar age at Ryhall. This *seems* to be inspired by several sketches in the margins of medieval manuscripts. The one illustrated is from the Rutland Psalter (so called because it had been owned by the Dukes of Rutland since at least 1825; it is now in the British Library). This was produced somewhere in England around 1260, with the 'marginalia' added a little later.

The apparent purposes of this marginal sketch is to draw attention to a scribal pun in the text. The Latin for 'sin' is *culpa* but, despite this only having five letters, few scribes managed to fit the whole word on one line. Instead they broke the word between *cul* and *pa*. Clearly this was intentional, as *cul* is Latin for 'bottom' – as in the French expression *cul de sac*.

For a number of years my assumption has been that the Ryhall figure is intended to depict an activity regarded as sinful. The same pose at Harby, together with the 'cock sucking' seemingly confirms that assumption.

Thanks to Neil Fortey and Mike Walter for recording the carvings at Harby and Ryhall, respectively, and to Neil for drawing my attention to the probably symbolism. Grateful thanks also to Anthony Weir for sharing his thoughts on carvings with similar subject matter.



## ***Empingham's exhibitionist***

While we're on the subject of cocks Steve Wells discovered an unusual example of a male exhibitionist high up on the tower at Empingham.

Some years ago Tina Negus spotted a small full-length human figure in a most unusual location under the eaves of the north-west corner of the aisles; see photograph bottom left. The pose is similar to that of many female exhibitionists, although in the case the figure might be either male or female. We will probably never know whether it was originally carved for this obscure location, or it was moved there as part of a more recent restoration.

Thanks to Steve Wells for the photographs of Empingham. And while he was busy recording the more obvious carvings, his wife spotted the face almost hidden by the clock face – see the cover photograph.



### ***Coston's curious cocky corbel***

While at Coston church to assess the repairs needed after the theft of lead from the roof, Keith Hamilton took some quick snapshots of the unusual corbels. Two of them are angels, the third seems to depict a rather thoughtful man (although a stray piece of foliage means we must assume this is male) while the quartet is completed with yet another male exhibitionist.

So far as I am aware, in the whole of Leicestershire and Rutland there are only two male exhibitionists carved in stone *inside* the churches: Coston and Thorpe Arnold (which is more subtle). In addition there is a 'mooning' corbel at Shepshed plus two exhibitionist males carved as roof bosses, at Queniborough and Claybrooke Parva. Most were probably carved around 1420–1460, although the Thorpe Arnold corbels might be fourteenth century.

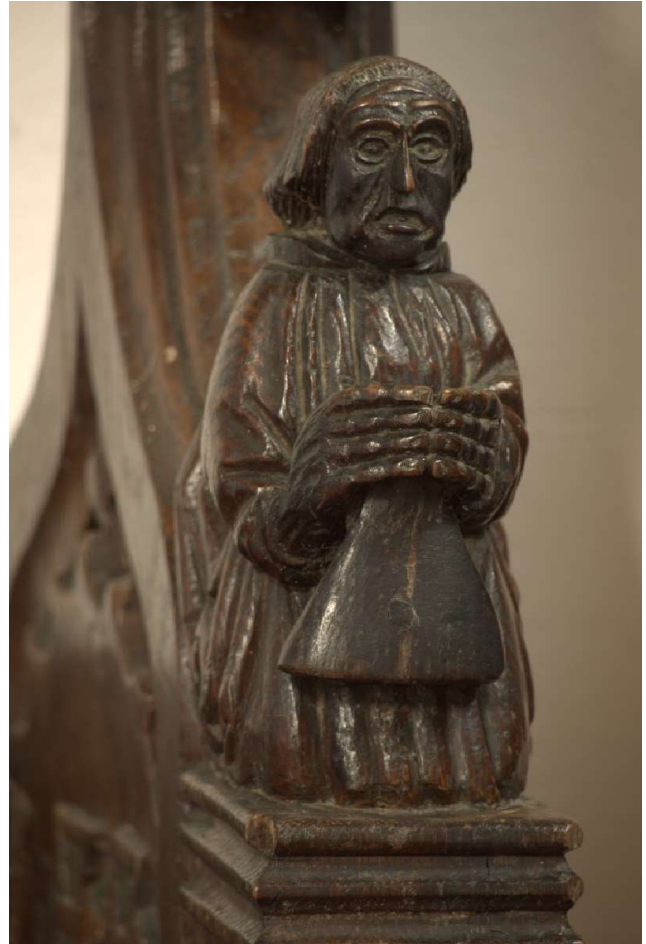


## ***Barkestone-le-Vale***

You may recall from last year's newsletter some curious carvings from the 1840s when the Gothic Revival was just getting underway. And Neil Fortey photographed some examples in wood:



the bench ends at Barkestone in the Vale of Belvoir. At first glance they look like 'weepers' from a medieval alabaster tomb – the somewhat oversized hands is a typical feature. But Geoffrey Brandwood, in his book *Bringing Them to Their Knees*, informs that the church was 're-seated' in 1840; the architect was W. Parsons.



## ***Videos about Leicestershire and Rutland's carvings***

Bob Trubshaw has prepared three videos based on the lectures he has been giving since the early 1990s.

- ❖ Introduction to Project Gargoyle
- ❖ Introduction to the Medieval Carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland
- ❖ Understanding Leicestershire and Rutland's Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque Carvings

Links to these can be found on the Project Gargoyle web page

**[www.hoap.co.uk/gargoyle.htm](http://www.hoap.co.uk/gargoyle.htm)**

Note that the exact links to these videos will change as I intend to upload revised versions with louder sound levels, as it seems some computers are quieter than mine! However when I this YouTube will give a new version a different web address to the current version.

## ***Where needs recording?***

No less than 124 churches have been recorded for the project and several dozen more are allocated to volunteer photographers. In Leicestershire there are plenty of churches with just a few medieval carvings, although I think most of the ones with lots of carvings have been done or are allocated. The exceptions include Croxton Kerrial, Houghton on the Hill, Lubenham and Whetstone (although I've not been able to establish if the Whetstone ones are Victorian or medieval).

In contrast to Leicestershire only a handful of churches in Rutland have been recorded or allocated. If you think you can help – even by doing some 'reconnaissance' – then please email Bob Trubshaw.

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## ***Contact details***

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and LARC Project

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## ***Talks and workshops***

Bob Trubshaw gives various talks about medieval carvings and 'Gargoyle Hunting Workshops'. If you know of a group or event who would like to book such an event then contact Bob.



## ***More information about Project Gargoyle***

is online at

[www.hoap.co.uk/gargoyle](http://www.hoap.co.uk/gargoyle)