

Project Gargoyle Newsletter

April 2020



Late medieval bench end, Barkestone-le-Vale.
Photograph by Neil Fortey



Welcome to the latest Project Gargoyle newsletter

It's Spring again so time for another Project Gargoyle Newsletter. But, of course, it's not a normal spring. Nevertheless, after an unforeseen delay, progress is being made with the LARC Project and 'processing' the small backlog of shoots. Plus there a few snippets of information relating to carvings to share.

I'll be in touch again when the restrictions of travel begin to be lifted.

Stay safe. And very best wishes.

Bob Trubshaw



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John Piper's stained glass screen in the foyer of the Wessex Hotel, Winchester, installed in 1964. Photograph by Ruth Wylie. See page 3.



Update on LARC Project from Kathy Elkin

As you will remember from the last newsletter the task of setting up a new LARC/Project Gargoyle website was underway and we were looking ahead to testing cataloguing on the database which had been linked into the website. We were very fortunate (and very grateful) to get a grant for the development of the database and website from the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society and much of this grant has now been utilised by the systems developer to finalise the database and its public access webpages.

Although some work did then start on test cataloguing at the end of last summer we did not get very far as unfortunately medical matters intervened and the project went on hold again. I am sorry about this interruption'

However, since the beginning of 2020 things have picked up again. I have processed additional church images which have been loaded up into the database and the structure and text for the web pages has been written.

Once the pages are checked and finalised it will be ready for public access and we will send round an email to you all with the URL of the site so that you can have a look and send me comments. This public website will replace the page that is currently published on Bob's Heart of Albion website and it will

contain the same links to information, documents and YouTube content plus some additional information.

Test cataloguing of images hosted on the database via the website will also start shortly. At the moment that part of the website can only be accessed by means of a password and it is not, and will not be, publicly accessible.

Once testing has been done and we are happy that cataloguing works as anticipated then we expect the next task of the project is to appeal for a small number of volunteers with an interest in figurative church carvings, who have computers and would like to work from home. Full training in using the catalogue will be given but at the moment we have not decided on the format of that. I hope that our next communication will be able to provide further detail about this process.

If you would like to get ahead of this by reading up and viewing Bob's presentations, and find something to do while confined at home during the current crisis, please go to www.hoap.co.uk/gargoyle.htm

Best wishes to you all.

Kathy Elkin
Chair, LARC Project

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In addition, 'processing' the small backlog of about thirty shoots so they can be submitted to Leicestershire County Council's Historic Environment Record as well as added to the LARC Project database is underway and should be completed in May.

Bob Trubshaw  
Project Co-ordinator for Project Gargoyle

## John Piper got there first – but the Tate needs help

Having developed an interest in most things relating to the artist John Piper (1903–1992) I was aware in the 1950s and 60s he was the first to recognise the importance of Romanesque carvings in England. He also did numerous sketches of medieval 'green men' and included them in various designs for textiles and more commercial illustrations. There is even a stained glass screen designed by Piper in the early 1960s inside the Wessex Hotel, Winchester, which includes such foliate faces (see photograph page 1).

During the Second World War Piper was employed to take photographs of architecturally-significant buildings, such as churches. He diligently travelled the country and clearly was a technically-accomplished photographer. Seemingly he continued to take such photographs after the War, when he was no longer an official photographer. In 1987 he donated the images to the Tate Gallery.

Recently I was made aware that these images are now freely available online. The URL for the Leicestershire images is:

**[www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/tga-8728-1-21/piper-photographs-of-leicestershire](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/tga-8728-1-21/piper-photographs-of-leicestershire)**

(The navigation of the page is initially confusing – just scroll down.) There are six pages in total for Leicestershire.

Clearly the person cataloguing these photographs was unsure about the location of some of the sculptures. I confidently recognised the Anglo-Saxon cross shafts and grave covers. So I emailed the Tate and received a reply back from the relevant curator. He thanked me but said there would be some delay before the online information could be updated because he was already working only from home.

However on the final page are several late medieval carvings which I do not recognise.



*Two of the photographs taken by John Piper which may – or may not – be of Leicestershire churches.*

I'm not even sure all of them are even in Leicestershire!

Please visit this part of the Tate online archive and scroll through Piper's images. If you can **confidently** identify the location of any other carvings which are not already given a location (or for which the location is wrong) then please email me **[bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk](mailto:bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk)** and I will forward to the curator.

## Magicians using gargoyles for magical purposes... ... but don't believe everything you're told

My rather eclectic circle of friends and acquaintances includes Ben Fernee, who has more knowledge of all the occult and esoteric literature ever published than just about anyone else. In a recent exchange of emails he write

I would note that amongst the material that Maddalena supplied to, or created for, Charles Leland was a tradition of magicians using gargoyles for magical purposes. It was believed that occupying a demonic form upon a church was absolutely the best result a demon could hope for, it was a sought after privilege compared to Hell. The grateful demons had knowledge not available to humans and could be conjured to provide it to the magician.

Now this is fascinating. And does at first glance seem like something a medieval 'magician' might believe or even do.

However considerable caution is needed. Charles Godfrey Leland was an American author and folklorist, and spent much of the late 1880s and 1890s in Florence researching Italian folklore. Leland reports meeting 'Maddalena' in 1886, and she became the primary source for his Italian folklore collecting for several years.

Leland describes Maddalena as belonging to a vanishing tradition of sorcery. He writes

that "by long practice [she] has perfectly learned ... just what I want, and how to extract it from those of her kind." He received several hundred pages worth of material from her, which was incorporated into his books *Etruscan Roman Remains in Popular Tradition* [1892], *Legends of Florence Collected From the People* [1895], and eventually *Aradia* [1899].

While Leland's name is the one principally associated with *Aradia*, the manuscript that makes up the bulk of it is attributed to the research of Maddalena.

Leland also wrote that he had 'learned that there was in existence a manuscript setting forth the doctrines of Italian witchcraft' in 1886, and had urged Maddalena to find it. Eleven years later, on 1 January 1897, Leland received the *Vangelo* by post. The manuscript was written in Maddalena's handwriting. Leland understood it to be an authentic document of the 'Old Religion' of the witches, but explains that he did not know if the text came from written or oral sources.

Modern opinions about Maddalena are very mixed. There are some modern pagans who consider that she did indeed pass on information about a 'living tradition' of otherwise unknown Italian witchcraft.

However most historians of witchcraft consider than Maddalena rather cleverly wove Italian folklore and traditional customs into something that fitted well with what Leland was seeking. In a word, Leland was 'duped' by a clever con artist.

Nevertheless *Aradia* and the other books contain interesting information. Which at first glance seem like something an Italian witch might believe or even do.

### principal source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aradia,\\_or\\_the\\_Gospel\\_of\\_the\\_Witches](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aradia,_or_the_Gospel_of_the_Witches)

## The Plague and the wealth of carvings

Anyone who has taken any interest in the age of medieval carvings will be aware that on the exterior of churches are many sets of carvings which include one or more female heads wearing a square headdress. Costume historians confidently state that these were in fashion between about 1380 and sometime around 1410. Though whether stonemasons continued to carve them after their womenfolk had already deemed them unfashionable is difficult to establish.

Inside the churches there may be corbels and roof bosses associated with the 'raising of the roofs' and the insertion of clerestory windows during the mid-fifteenth century. All these cost money. And the exuberance, quantity and quality of many of the sets of carvings suggests that there was an aspect of 'conspicuous consumption'.

I am typing this as the major economies tumble into recession because of coronavirus restrictions. And aware that the wealth which manifested in the medieval carvings came about because of the Black Death of 1347 to 1351 which an estimated 75 to 200 million deaths in Eurasia. The consequent religious, social and economic upheavals profoundly changed European societies.

Before the plague, rising population had kept wages low and rents and prices high, all beneficial to the landowners. However the Black Death created a shortage of labour and gave the peasants much greater independence.

The elite bemoaned a disintegrating social and economic order and evoked nostalgia for peasants who knew their place, worked hard and demanded little while now lazy, disrespectful, grasping peasants needed to be goaded to do a moment's desultory work.

Moralizing exaggeration aside, the rural worker indeed demanded and received higher wages. At the same time rampant

inflation unleashed substantial increases in prices of food and other necessities. As a result the higher earnings often did not offset the reduction in purchasing power.

Some stability of prices was achieved in England by the mid-1370s (although often later on the continent). At this time wealth began to once again flow through rural communities. They 'invested' this excess in restoring churches which would have been neglected for at least three decades. It was something of an 'insurance policy' as, by getting right with God, then the risk of a further plague might be averted.

By adorning the parish church to a high standard – certainly to a standard better than the surrounding churches – then the parishioners might be looked on more favourably. Rather than 'keeping up with the Joneses' it was more a case of outdoing the neighbours.

While the full story is quite nuanced, there is undoubtedly a link between all the downsides of the Black Death and the wealth of late fourteenth and fifteenth century carvings inside and outside Leicestershire and Rutland churches, and indeed over a much wider area.

### principal sources:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death)  
[eh.net/encyclopedia/the-economic-impact-of-the-black-death/](http://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-economic-impact-of-the-black-death/)

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## A cluster of seventeenth century fonts

Way back in the 2017 *Project Gargoyle Newsletter* I drew attention to the unusual font at Muston which was photographed by Neil Fortey, one of the Project's volunteers.

When I got to the shots of the font I mentally stumbled. Here was a seemingly perfectly normal – though rather well-done – Perpendicular style font. So it should have been carved between the late fourteenth century and the middle sixteenth century.

But – and it's the sort of 'but' which made me stop in my tracks – there was a small army of faces and heads with arms. There were far too many for this to be a typical piece of 'Perp' masonry as, by this time, things were a little more restrained than in the previous century or so. And, they looked very little like medieval Gothic carvings. Instead they

reminded me of faces on seventeenth century wooden furniture.

Indeed, this font seems to have been carved in the later 1630s as John Nichols in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* refers to it as being 'new in 1641'. This was during the time William Laud was Archbishop of Canterbury and there was a countrywide spree of church restoration.

Since 2017 I have come across a short list of 'Laudian' fonts (Bond 1908: 265) They are:

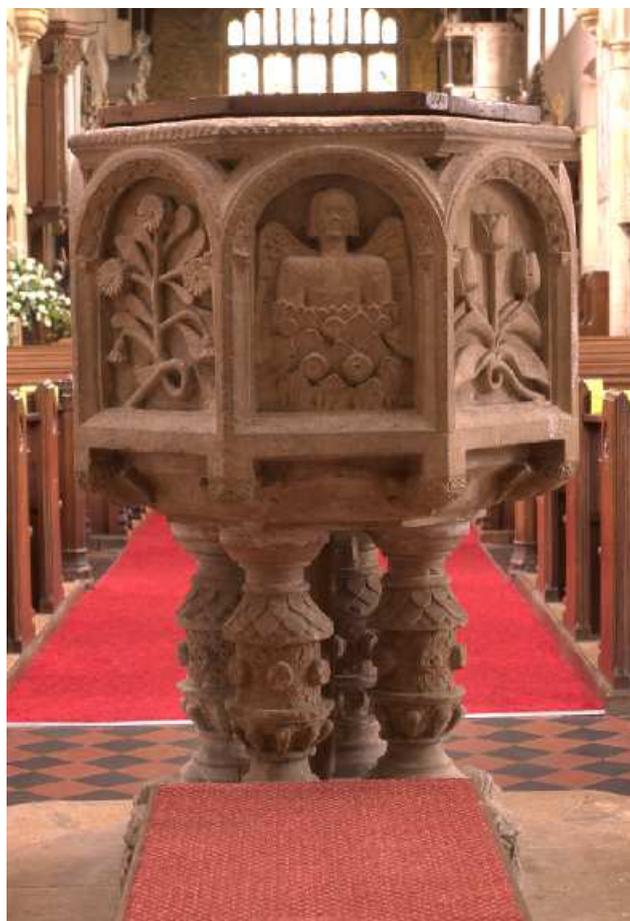
Byford, Herefordshire, 1638

East Ham, Essex [now London], 1639

Great Greenford, Middlesex [now London], 1638

Rackheath Magna, Norfolk, 1639

Byford's font is also octagonal but with almost no decoration except the date (though perhaps originally painted). None of the other three fonts are deemed significant enough for there to be photographs online.



Left: *Muston font*. Right: *Bottesford font*. Photographs by Neil Fortey.

## **Bottesford**

Immediately to the north-west of Muston is the superb church at Bottesford. Neil Fortey and myself had a lengthy discussion while looking at the curious font in the church at Bottesford. Could it be contemporary with Muston?

The presence of tulips on one of the panels would be consistent with about 1637, the peak of 'tulip mania'. The Bottesford font is considerably more elaborate than the one at Muston, reflecting the high status of the Manners family.

However the decoration was not admired by all. In 1908 Francis Bond wrote:

... hanging would not be good enough for those who wrought the fonts of Tuxford and Bottesford.



*Orston font.*

Tuxford is in the north of Nottinghamshire and originally straddled the Great North Road; the A1 now bypasses the centre but still divides the settlement. The only photograph of the font online appears to show a plain octagonal design, although with an exceptionally elaborate wooden font cover. Plans to visit have been postponed by the ongoing travel restrictions.

Bond, although disapproving, implies a 1660s date for both Bottesford and Tuxford. At the time Charles Read, born in Tuxford in 1604 was a wealthy benefactor and may have sponsored the font and cover before his death in 1669.

Despite Bond's tactless linking of these two fonts, the lack of other similarities between Bottesford and Tuxford does nothing to refine the date for the former.

## **Orston**

To the west of Bottesford and still quite close to Muston, but the other side of the border between Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire is Orston. Despite visiting this village nearly every week for the last three years attempts to look inside the church proved fruitless as it was always locked. However I finally ventured within on 15 September last year because preparations were underway to screen the Last Night of the Proms. Shortly afterwards the tower began to lean away from the nave and sadly the church is now always shut.

Once I set eyes up the font I realised that Orston churchwardens were playing 'keeping up with the Jones' with Bottesford. Or was it the other way about? Not because the design of the Orston font has the 'wedding cake confection' design which Bond thought so objectionable. But because one of the panels depicts a vase of tulips (see next page).

And, most helpful of all, there was a dedication. Dated 1662.

If tulips were still in fashion in Orston in 1662 then there is every probability that they were still in fashion in Bottesford at this time too.



*Orston font.*

Which confirms Bond's provisional dating of the latter font.

Anyone come across any more seventeenth century fonts in the vicinity of Bottesford? Or elsewhere?

My thanks to Neil Fortey for instigating this series of discoveries.

#### **sources**

*Fonts and Font Covers*, Francis Bond (Henry Frowde 1908) p265; online at [archive.org/details/fontsandfontcov00chargoog](http://archive.org/details/fontsandfontcov00chargoog)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulip\\_mania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulip_mania)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuxford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuxford)



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

If you're struggling for something to watch then early 2018 I prepared three videos based on the lectures I have 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 all these and several more videos about aspects of Leicestershire and Rutland are here:  
**[www.hoap.co.uk/index.htm#productions](http://www.hoap.co.uk/index.htm#productions)**