



# *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?*

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Front cover: *A gargoyle with much to tell us. Tilton on the Hill, Leicestershire. Photographed for Project Gargoyle by David Morley.*

All the photographs used in this document have been taken by Project Gargoyle volunteers. However in some case I have cropped and slightly adjusted tonal range and colour balance to achieve more consistency.

# Project Gargoyle



This document is published as part of Project Gargoyle. The published description and objectives of Project Gargoyle are:

Leicestershire and Rutland churches are home to a wealth of surviving medieval sculpture, predominately of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. However this has hitherto not been systematically recorded or studied. Project Gargoyle was set up in Spring 2009 to photograph, document and study such carvings in Leicestershire and Rutland.

Photographs and associated descriptions will be stored electronically in the Leicestershire and Rutland Historic Environment Record (HER) maintained by Leicestershire County Council, the successor to the former Sites and Monument Records (SMR). In the future some or all of this information will be accessible online through English Heritage's 'Heritage Gateway' and other web sites.

(Trubshaw 2010: 3)

Please note that both 'Project Gargoyle' and '*What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?*' are misnomers. In both instances the scope extends beyond gargoyles *sensu stricto*. However, the word 'gargoyle' is a convenient way of referring to *all* medieval carvings of humans, animals and monsters, whether in stone or wood.

Project Gargoyle was set up in 2009 with an initial committee comprising Richard Clark, Kathy Elkin, Mike Hawkes, Peter Liddle, Alan McWhirr, Kay Snowden, Graham Walley and Helen Wells. Soon after Liz Blood, was appointed as the Project Co-ordinator.

In 2009 the majority of the committee members were employed by Leicestershire County Council and the formation of Project Gargoyle was formally endorsed by the Council. Kathy Elkin, Peter Liddle and Kay Snowden have since left the County Council but Kathy and Peter remain on the committee as representatives of the Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Fieldwork Group. Jill Bourn has replaced the late Alan McWhirr as the representative of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society. Mike Hawkes has liaised with the Dioceses of Leicester and Peterborough, who both support the aims of the project. Without the ever-increasing number of volunteers who are steadily photographing and documenting the churches of Leicestershire and Rutland, this study would not have come about.

More information about Project Gargoyle is on the website:

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

Note that the projects's web page hosted at leics.gov.uk was last updated in 2010 and should be ignored.

# Introduction

In a separate and much longer document, *Mawming and Mooning: Towards an understanding of medieval carvings and their carvers* (available as a free-to-download PDF<sup>1</sup>). I have attempted to provide an overview of scholarly interest in medieval carvings. In *Mawming and Mooning* I indicated a number of specific topics where further research seems possible. However such specific studies are somewhat hampered by the paucity of broader studies of these carvings in the Gothic period (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries), certainly in comparison to the comparatively well-studied Romanesque (tenth to twelfth century) carvings of northern France.

I am all too aware that I do not approach medieval carvings from the perspective of art historians. As discussed in the opening chapter of *Mawming and Mooning*, I consider my main expertise to be in areas that I regard as 'cultural studies' and others may wish to call 'folklore' and 'mythology'. So clearly I am not the right person to identify the full scope of possible questions for future research. Indeed, I believe that no one individual could identify the full scope, as different disciplinary perspectives will interrogate the evidence – and seek further clues – in different ways. After all, as E.H. Carr famously observed in 1964, 'history is a construct consequent upon the questions asked by the historian'. Predictably enough, social historians tend to ask rather different questions than art historians, while architectural historians at times take an approach more akin to archaeologists.

As my main active involvement with medieval carvings is currently as the Volunteer Co-ordinator for Project Gargoyle, I have opted instead to make what was planned as the final chapter of *Mawming and Mooning* into this self-contained document, *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* At the risk of

1: [www.hoap.co.uk/mawming\\_and\\_mooning.pdf](http://www.hoap.co.uk/mawming_and_mooning.pdf)



*Two of the corbels at Lyddington. Photographs by Mike Walter.*

stating the obvious, by asking as many people as possible the question *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* I hope to receive a wide range of suggestions. At some future date – and I hope not too far in the future – I will compile these suggestions into a further discussion document.

This is not simply an exercise in scheming up rhetorical questions. At current rates of progress within a few years every one of the medieval carvings inside and outside Leicestershire and Rutland churches (i.e. not just gargoyles) will have been photographed and added to a preliminary database. So I am *also* (but not only) interested in what questions can be asked of the first survey which offers a complete corpus in two counties with a wealth Gothic sculpture.

Just as *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* should be considered as Part Four of *Mawming and Mooning*, then so too *Mawming and Mooning* can be thought of as a vastly distended 'preface' to this more concise document. It is not essential to have read *Mawming and Mooning* but if you have the time then please familiarise yourself with the scope. Where there are direct links to *Mawming and Mooning* in this document I have provided relevant page references.

I am not an academic and do not move in the circles where competing for research funds and other grants is part of everyday life. However it takes little imagination to recognise that the dearth of prior interest in carvings

from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries means that any number of these could be proposed. Furthermore, and there is already at least once precedent, these carvings can take their place as part of a broader investigations of medieval social history.

Only in the summer of 2013 was I made fully aware of the work of an independent researcher, Lionel Wall, who has made an extensive study of the carvings of Rutland and east Leicestershire. He has written a substantial document, *Demon Carvers and Mooning Men*, which also draws attention to the 'mooning' corbels. However he identifies them as the 'trademark' of a 'school' or lodge of masons presumably operating out of Oakham at the end of the fourteenth century or the very early fifteenth. Within this group he also identifies three of the individual masons, based on clear stylistic preferences.

Lionel's research was undertaken quite independently of Project Gargoyle. However in a number of ways (some of which will be mentioned later in this document) he reveals just how informative the answers can be when the right sort of questions are asked of a whole collection of carvings in a specific geographical area.

Lionel has very kindly allowed me to make *Demon Carvers and Mooning Men* available as a free-to-download PDF.<sup>1</sup> Again, this is not essential to read this to understand the present document, but a brief encounter will reveal just how much understanding can be gleaned from careful and thoughtful 'interrogation' of seemingly mute stones.

While the possibilities for fairly specific research projects seem all-but limitless, there are some bigger issues which also deserve funding. Firstly, while the bringing together of photographs of all the Leicestershire and Rutland medieval sculptures is itself important, it is only the first stage in the development of the database. As discussed in chapter two, both the software and the descriptive metadata need to be 'developed' but – and this is the reason for these present remarks – such essential 'development' requires considerably more funding than is available from any of the organisations and individuals who currently support Project Gargoyle. This

1: [www.hoap.co.uk/demon\\_carvers\\_and\\_mooning\\_men\\_v4.pdf](http://www.hoap.co.uk/demon_carvers_and_mooning_men_v4.pdf)

*A medieval 'beastie' on  
Theddingworth tower.  
Photograph by David  
Morley.*



means that more specific projects can only sensibly progress once funding at the broader level is in place.

But I risk getting ahead of myself. The following chapters outline what seem to me the possible questions and next steps. I suspect other people will say, 'Hang on, Bob! What about such-and-such?' And it is exactly all those sort of questions that might usefully be asked of gargoyles and their kin that I want people to share with me.



# Chapter One

## Where next for Project Gargoyle?

At present rates of progress (and the rate increased significantly in both 2012 and again in 2013) every medieval carving inside and outside the churches of Leicestershire and Rutland will have been photographed within a few years. So far as I am aware this will be the first time that a complete record has been achieved for any British county.

Most of the carvings are photographed twice – once ‘square on’ and once from the side. There are also general views which help locate individual carvings within the structure of the building. A brief description of each photograph is included in an Excel spreadsheet (one spreadsheet per church). At the time of writing a complete set of images and spreadsheets is retained by myself, with a copy given to Leicestershire County Council for inclusion in the Leicestershire and Rutland Historic Environment Record (HER). At the time of writing some of these images in the HER are accessible online through English Heritage’s ‘Heritage Gateway’.

The individual spreadsheets with their metadata need to be amalgamated into one database. The whole collection of images and metadata needs to be accessible via a searchable online website. And this website also needs to allow authorised users to edit and add to the metadata (see the next chapter).

While the costs of developing such a web-based interface are not great, they are beyond the resources of the current organisations and individuals which make up the committee of Project Gargoyle. Yet, without such ‘investment’ then access to the whole collection will be difficult, and updating the information will be almost impossible if more than one person is involved at any one time.



*'Green man' roof boss, Cossington. Photograph by Steve Harris.*

### **Where next for technology?**

In the 1980s and 1990s, when I began taking an interest in the medieval carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland, the prospect of a complete photographic record seemed all-but-fantastical. The cost of film would have been prohibitive. Then, by ten years ago, the quality of affordable digital cameras raised the question 'Could it be done?'. By 2007–8 I asked this question of members of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society and the Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Fieldwork Group. The following year Project Gargoyle was formed (see preliminary remarks above) and the committee wished me well in finding enough volunteer photographers to make this county-wide survey actually happen. While I think everyone on the committee – myself included – was too polite to quantify the chances of success, there was a certain sense of optimism and a much less certain sense of 'when it will be done'.

And yet, little over four years later, excellent progress has been made and – barring major setbacks – the scope of the photographic recording project looks likely to be completed. On the face of things I should be feeling

quite smug. But, of course, I am not! This document, together with its counterpart *Mawming and Mooning* and Lionel Wall's *Demon Carvers and Mooning Men*, suggests that there is much more to the study of medieval carvings than 'merely' getting a mugshot of each one.

Furthermore, just as developments in digital photography have made this project possible, so too emerging trends in technology raise further questions. For example, would 3D laser scans help to understand these carvings even better? I am not proposing that every carving would need to be scanned in 3D but, based on the photographic catalogue, a selection of carvings could be considered. Crucially, what sort of questions could be asked of a 3D scan that cannot be answered so readily from a photograph? With the exception of the tenth century angel at Breedon on the Hill (see *Mawming and Mooning* chapter ten), where a 3D laser scan enabled a copy to be made and installed in a more accessible part of the building, I am not aware of anyone using 3D laser scanning to assist with the understanding of medieval carvings (although there is a project creating a 3D digital database of Roman portraiture – see Russell and Manley 2013).

As 3-D laser scanning becomes increasingly available to academic researchers (such as the Digital Building Heritage team at De Montfort University in Leicester) no doubt it is only a matter of time before medieval carvings are 'incidentally' acquired as part of the recording of historic buildings. I would be interested to hear from anyone who is aware of any 3-D scanning which includes medieval carvings. I would be equally interested in any suggestions for how such 3-D scans might offer advantages for the understanding of the carvings.

# Chapter Two

## Improving the metadata

The spreadsheet used by Project Gargoyle volunteers for recording the photographs taken at each church has the following columns:

- ❖ photograph filename
- ❖ parish
- ❖ church dedication
- ❖ brief description of the carving  
(including location in/on building)
- ❖ indication of date
- ❖ source of dating information
- ❖ date photographs taken
- ❖ name(s) of photographers
- ❖ name(s) of others assisting

The XLS-format (Microsoft Excel) files are online at

[www.hoap.co.uk/project\\_gargoyle\\_record\\_sheet\\_master.xls](http://www.hoap.co.uk/project_gargoyle_record_sheet_master.xls)

[www.hoap.co.uk/project\\_gargoyle\\_record\\_sheet\\_dummy.xls](http://www.hoap.co.uk/project_gargoyle_record_sheet_dummy.xls)

The 'photograph filename' is the filename automatically generated by the digital camera plus a prefix identifying the administrative district and parish, in a format which conforms to Leicestershire County Council's conventions for its database. This complete filename is unique.

The volunteer photographers are not required to be expert historians but are encouraged to provide notes about dates if these are available in



*One of the many splendid fifteenth century roof bosses (restored in the mid-twentieth century) at Sileby. Photograph by Steve Harris.*

church guide books (either specific to the church or countywide, such as Nikolaus Pevsner's volume for Leicestershire and Rutland). In practice some of the volunteers summarise information taken from English Heritage's online database for all Listed Buildings. I ask for a note of the sources for such dating information, not least as none of these sources are necessarily reliable.

Exceptionally, someone with locally-known but unpublished information will provide an indication of dates for comparatively-recent restorations of carvings. For example, the fifteenth century roof bosses at Sileby were repainted and re-gilded the same year as the current churchwarden was married in the church.

Apart from dealing with any obvious spelling errors and such like I avoid making editorial changes to the photographers' spreadsheets before submitting them to the HER. This is not because the descriptions and dating evidence are 'perfect' or complete – but simply that, at this stage, this information is better than none.

Dating of decorative carvings inside and outside churches is not always straightforward. While there is a reasonable probability that the corbels in a thirteenth century arcade would have been carved when the arcade was

built, there is no guarantee that the corbels associated with a fifteenth century roof, raised above newly-constructed clerestory windows, are fifteenth century. Some are. And some are reused from the earlier, and lower, roof level. When the older corbels have been left in place and new corbels created for the clerestory roof then there is less ambiguity, of course. But caution is still needed.

And, as I will discuss again later, more accurate dating of carvings and building work is needed identify examples that can be more confidently attributed to the period from 1370 to about 1540. Interestingly, Lionel Wall's research has been concerned with what seems to be a prolific period of carving which almost certainly took place between about 1370 and 1410.

All too often one is tempted to use 'stylistic differences' as the basis of dating. And, while most Romanesque corbels do indeed look different from, say, Gothic ones, there is such a wide range of styles within any one generation of masons that we simply cannot assume that differences in style equate simply to differences in time. Indeed, the complete set of photographs of Leicestershire and Rutland carvings should enable an assessment of the range of styles in, say, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

So, at the very least, the dating evidence for the carvings needs to be assessed. Both architectural historians and costume historians have a role to play (for example, corbels depicting women reflect the ever-changing fashions for headgear).

And, alongside the dating, there also needs to be a standard lexicon for describing the carvings. Such a lexicon needs to conform to MIDAS Heritage guidelines (the UK Historic Environment Data Standard; [www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/midas-heritage](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/midas-heritage)). However, note that MIDAS Heritage is not a single 'self-contained' standard but, rather, is a number of closely integrated data standards covering specific types of applications or projects. Although most aspects of architectural history are already well covered by the relevant data standard – including dealing with situations where exact dating is not possible – the specific requirements of Project Gargoyle require further thought.

So, while I am confident that MIDAS Heritage will offer advice on

*A taxonomic conundrum!  
A head (rather than a mask)  
of a unique man-animal  
hybrid on a hood stop (or  
should that be a label  
stop?) at Beeby. Photograph  
by Mike Walter.*



whether ‘hood stops’ is preferred over the alternative name of ‘label stops’ (or vice versa) I am less confident that MIDAS Heritage makes a distinction between ‘green men’ and ‘foliate faces’ (and, as discussed in chapter six of *Mawming and Mooning*, such a distinction can be useful).

At a broader level of categorisation should the descriptions consistently distinguish between ‘heads’ and ‘masks’? That is, between carvings which depict most of the head ‘in the round’ and those carvings – such as roof bosses – where the features are more flattened and mask-like.

And they are the easy distinctions! When is a dragon a wyvern? (Answer: when it only has two legs) And exactly what should we call some of the more fanciful hybrid monsters anyway? The sheer number of medieval carvings that could be deemed to be ‘monsters’ means that any attempt to describe them spans a wide range of real and imaginary animals, man-animal hybrids, and imaginative zoomorphic entities. At the very least there needs to be a ‘nested’ lexicon to describe these – from ‘higher order’

categories such as 'animal', 'human', 'man-animal hybrid' through more specific taxonomies. But clearly such categorisation must not be too specific else we risk each individual carving becoming a category all on its own.

As mentioned in chapter four of *Mawming and Mooning*, to my knowledge there have only been two attempts at lists of imagery to be encountered in churches. One of these, Malcolm Jones' *The Secret Middle Ages* (Jones 2002), has a wider scope than ecclesiastical carvings but nevertheless includes a number of examples from misericords and other church ornamentation. Most of the Jones' examples are comical or downright bawdy.

In contrast, Richard Taylor's *How to Read a Church* concentrates on symbols with a meaning more in keeping with Christian doctrines. He provides a list, organised thematically by 'animals' and 'plants', with each category listed alphabetically from 'Ape' to 'Whale' and 'Acacia' to 'Wheat' (Taylor 2004: 208–43). Most relevant are his entries for dragon, Leviathan, phoenix and unicorn. If nothing else Taylor's compendium is a reminder that, while the grotesque and the monstrous may gain our attention, they are accompanied by a great many mundane and commonplace depictions.

Such a taxonomy by necessity must begin as a tool for the description of carvings otherwise the database is essentially unsearchable. As I discuss below, there is a whole 'cultural history' which spans how animals – real and more-or-less imaginary – form part of allegorical and metaphorical worldviews. So far as I am aware only one researcher, Susan Kilby, has begun to look at medieval carvings as ways of understanding the way medieval people thought about the natural and supernatural world; her work is specific to a set of twelfth century carvings at Castor near Peterborough (Kilby forthcoming).

And it is not simply monsters who need a taxonomy. Any attempt to describe the stylistic differences of, say, naturalistic humans still requires a well-defined nomenclature. While I suspect that art historians have developed such a nomenclature, I am not aware of any well-defined version having been published (but, as ever, I will happily be corrected).



So the seemingly simple act of enhancing the metadata associated with the carvings opens up a whole storehouse of interestingly wriggling worms who disobligingly refute efforts to line them up neatly. Yet if this metadata is not reasonably well-constructed – even if not finalised – then searching the metadata by date, subject matter, broad aspects of style, and such like will produce spurious outcomes, not least missing relevant examples simply because they have not been described according to the lexicon.

This problem is, of course, shared by just about every image database which can be searched by metadata. While MIDAS Heritage will offer advice on some the broader issues – such as difficulties of exact dating – there are some specific problems describing medieval carvings which need to be addressed.

At present I envisage further columns being added the church-by-church spreadsheets, such as:

- ❖ date information in a format conforming to MIDAS Heritage conventions (which deal fairly neatly with situations where dates can only be estimated)
- ❖ specific information on motifs (probably as a hierarchical typology)
- ❖ structured information on location (interior; exterior; nave; chancel; aisle; etc)
- ❖ direction the carving is facing (i.e. north, south, east, west, towards ground)
- ❖ the names of researchers and editors

As ever, I would greatly appreciate comments and suggestions from anyone who has constructed or worked with databases or such like which aim to catalogue carvings.

However any changes to the spreadsheet structure cannot be ‘ad hoc’ and must be planned and executed to allow for the future integration of the XLS-format spreadsheets into a searchable database without any significant manual intervention. In the worst case scenario the spreadsheets might need to be merged into a database via an XML-format intermediate stage, with a suitable XML document definition being created to smooth over any technical ‘wrinkles’ in the spreadsheets.

# Chapter Three

## Some simple questions to ask

Once the complete set of carvings have been described according to a consistent lexicon then this set of data can be interrogated with some fairly basic questions, such as:

- ❖ how many green men are there?
- ❖ how many dragons?
- ❖ how many human-headed animals?
- ❖ how many human heads with asses' ears?
- ❖ how many face-pullers?
- ❖ how many tongue pokers?

This data set can also offer information on spatial aspects of the carvings. Several ideas about carvings which circulate fairly widely can easily be tested:

- ❖ Are 'demons' really more prevalent on external gargoyles than on internal corbels?
- ❖ Are there more 'demons' on the corbels of the north side of naves than on the south side?
- ❖ Are kings and queens equally common on on the corbels of both the north or south sides of naves or is there a gender bias?

The most interesting of such questions also need to look at sets of corbels or gargoyles for possible correlations between motifs. Actually, the



*The twelfth century 'green animal' at Stoke Dry – one of the oldest foliage sprouters in Leicestershire and Rutland. Photograph by Bob Trubshaw.*

questions need to be a little cleverer than that, as they should look not only for positive correlations but also test for the inverse, that is motifs which are never seen together.

As well as focusing on motifs, future researchers need to look for hitherto-unsuspected spatial aspects of the carvings. The two Romanesque foliage sprouters in Rutland (Tickencote and Stoke Dry; see *Mawming and Mooning* chapter six) are both on the chancel arch and facing west (although the Stoke Dry column has presumably been re-installed over the centuries so may not be in its original orientation). Is this a coincidence? Certainly not all early Romanesque foliage sprouters are on chancel arches (the one at Kilpeck is on the capital of the south doorway). The two most exhibitionist males in Leicestershire churches (Claybrooke Parva and Queniborough; see *Mawming and Mooning* chapter eight) are both at the western end of the nave roofs. This is less likely to be coincidence. But what do these males have in common – if anything – with other carvings at the western end of fifteenth century roofs?

Henry Claman has argued that in the Romanesque churches of northern France the location of carvings within the nave conforms to specific narratives (Claman 2000: 134). While his observation seems specific to the

Romanesque, and perhaps applies only to the churches he studied, I am aware than suitably-nuanced questions need to be asked of the carvings of the later Gothic period to assess the importance – or otherwise – of location when trying to establish the original meanings of carvings. If you have any suggestions as to what these ‘suitably-nuanced questions’ might be then please let me know.

And if all this is beginning to sound a bit too clever, then there are still some straightforward questions too:

- ❖ someone with expertise in medieval clothing (especially headgear and hairstyles) can contribute useful suggestions of dates.
- ❖ someone with expertise in the way royalty were depicted at the time may be able to identify portraits of the monarchs and their spouses.
- ❖ those who know the documentary history of the church may be able to suggest a ‘short list’ of patrons who might have been monumentalised.

Among these straightforward questions are some quite basic ones about dates. As might be imagined, being able to place sets of carvings within broad chronological periods with some confidence is fairly fundamental. At present carvings which look more like heraldic animals and besties are assumed to be quite late – but such stylistic tendencies may not actually be accurate indications of chronology.

As discussed in chapter five of *Mawming and Mooning*, common sense tells us that the more naturalistic human heads are portraits. But the art historians’ rule-of-thumb is that there are no portraits in the modern sense before the late thirteenth century. There are a plethora of faces – on paintings, sculptures, coins, seals – but they are deemed ‘schematic’. Yet this rule of thumb needs testing as some of the ‘schematic’ kings and queens encountered on corbels do seem to individual enough to be intended to depict the ruling monarch and his queen. Others presumably perpetuate the appearance of a leading member of the gentry. In the rare instances when we know enough about the patronage of church building, especially who funded the construction of north and south aisles, we



*Plausibly a portrait. A  
springer in the nave at  
Church Langton.  
Photographed by Mike  
Walter.*

might even begin to put names to some of the faces. And, almost inevitably, among these 'mug shots in masonry' there must be a goodly number of parish priests and local bishops. Perhaps a costume historian can confirm that such carvings are all later than the thirteenth-fourteenth century 'watershed' for portraiture.

If there is someone researching the customs of medieval guilds then perhaps they can confirm – or deny – my suggestions in chapter eight of *Mawming and Mooning* about 'prentice pieces' (more pedantically, 'Guild pieces') being the origin of at least some of the more transgressive carvings.

Medieval masons' marks are often concealed and only visible during major restoration. As a result they have only been studied on a somewhat piecemeal basis. Indeed, to my knowledge there is no national database of mason's marks. While the photographs from Project Gargoyle can do little to assist with identifying masons' marks, it is symptomatic of the lack of

*One of the 'piggy back' gargoyles at Tilton on the Hill. Photograph by David Morley.*



interest in Gothic carvings and their makers that so little information has been collected (or, at least, published) which can assist understanding how they operated.

However there is scope for further attempts to understand the extent to which masons operated only in groups ('lodges') or whether journeymen (i.e. craftsmen not closely tied to specific lodges) made up a significant proportion of the workforce.

Evidence suggests that masons operated over a wide area (e.g. the Tickencote chancel masons were working about twenty years later on the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral) but, based on the evidence of nineteenth

century restorations and rebuilds, we might reasonably expect there to be a number of groups of workmen who operated within a more local radius. And this is exactly what Lionel Wall has identified for a group of masons seemingly centred on Oakham.

Furthermore, as already noted, Lionel was able to identify at least three specific masons within that masonic 'school' or lodge. My assumption is that equally careful investigation of other parts of Leicestershire will reveal similar groups and individuals. While a concise summary of his approach is difficult, suffice to say that published architectural histories offered no help in dating the carvings of interest to him, although fortunately *all* the women were depicted wearing square headdresses and these were only fashionable for about thirty years.

The clues which enabled Lionel to understand the masons were most to do with motifs – such as mooning males, gargoyles depicting one figure piggy-backing another (and the logo for Project Garoyle is one of them), a hybrid 'bat-winged lion', hurdy gurdy players, and a strange four-legged insect that Lionel regards as a flea (bearing in mind fleas are too small to see properly with the naked eye). Note that these are not the only motifs they carved – simply that these were distinctive among the more commonly carved ones.

Some of the other clues were more stylistic. One of the masons was nicknamed 'Mr Happy' because his corbels smile, unlike most which grimace. And the members of this group of masons most unusually used small discs of lead (or sometimes slate) to blacken the eyes.

So these are the sort of 'clues' which might reveal another lodge. And, at least in the first instance, this is all information which can be gathered by asking the appropriate questions of the Project Gargoyle database (although I suspect some follow up fieldwork would pay dividends).

I offer this imperfect summary of Lionel's work less to do justice to his meticulous investigation than to provide an insight into one of the ways a countywide database of carvings might be interrogated.

One other area which demands closer investigation is not the work of stone masons but the fruits of the woodcarvers working in the mid-fifteenth century. Their roofs with wonderful decorated bosses survive in



*One of the many portraits decorating the mid-fifteenth century roof at Claybrooke Parva. Photograph by Nicholas Jenkins.*

far more Leicestershire churches than I had realised until the images from Project Gargoyle volunteers began steadily accumulating.

These roof bosses have a special relevance to both the city and county as these seem to have mostly carved a generation or two before the Battle of Bosworth. Bearing in mind that some of the roof bosses depicting people are clearly representations of specific individuals – whether nobility, clergy or artisans – these carvings are portraits of people whose the sons or grandsons may well have fought – or even died – in the conflict which resulted in Richard III's body being hurriedly interred under what became a car park. Medieval history provides few opportunities of portraits apart from the great and the good – yet at Claybrooke Parva and elsewhere we can, to all intents and purposes, look into the eyes of at least some of the people who lived in those tumultuous times.



# Chapter Four

## Future research

At a later stage I hope it will be possible to identify a number of fundamental research approaches based on the examples from Leicestershire and Rutland. I stress the need for thinking in terms of multiple research approaches as the different paradigms of art history, social history and architectural history mean that the carvings take on barely-overlapping meaning and significance when viewed from each of these disciplines. Whether these different approaches can be combined into an overall interdisciplinary 'research strategy' I leave open – for the moment I am happy to think in terms of 'research strategies' rather than attempt to force everything into one way of thinking.

Ideally such future research would be in conjunction with a project which also looks in similar detail at the carvings inside and outside churches somewhere else in England where there is equally good access to oolitic limestones (i.e. along the so-called 'Jurassic spine' from Somerset, through the Cotswolds, north Warwickshire, Northamptonshire and into Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire). My own visits to a small number of such churches suggests that there are no major regional differences, but a much more detailed study is needed.

What is clear is that any research focusing on the Gothic (rather than the Romanesque) carvings will be fairly pioneering and therefore have to deal with some fairly basic issues of collecting, describing and assessing these sculptures. The reasons why the vast majority of medieval carvings – certainly more than ninety percent – in Britain have been ignored by art historians are briefly discussed in the opening chapter of *Mawming and*



*Deemed 'grotesque' and 'marginal' – so not of interest to art historians. The splendid fifteenth century roof boss, Beeby. Photograph by Mike Walters.*

*Mooning.* The provocative – yet accurate – recommendations of the art historian Paul Binski to his professional colleagues back in 1999 regarding the need for greater study of English parish churches brought no greater response than the fairly frequent citing of his paper. Since then the general difficulties that the current economic climate is causing for the arts and humanities in Britain means that we are unlikely to see any great change.

Having deemed the majority of medieval sculpture to be in 'marginal' locations within churches, art historians deem such works to be – at best – marginal to their own interests. Indeed, when attempting to read all the relevant academic literature while preparing *Mawming and Mooning* there is little from the last decade or so devoted to Gothic carvings (although the Romanesque continues to generate a trickle of papers about specific aspects). Having deemed Gothic corbels, gargoyles and their ilk to be 'grotesque' and 'marginal', art historians see no need to engage with them. If they do, they maintain a perspective which – contra to the pioneering work of Michael Camille or Malcolm Jones (see later in this section) – is firmly from within their own discipline.

Even more sadly, there are also instances where professional art historians have failed to fully familiarise themselves with the relevant literature before venturing into print. While the individual instances are minor, a prestigious catalogue devoted to medieval sculpture published as recently

as 2006 contains various instances of such blinkered remarks. Individually such poorly-informed remarks are quite trivial so it would be invidious to list them here (some, but not all, are mentioned in *Mawming and Mooning*). The reason for mentioning the matter at all is simply because it reveals that individuals, often highly respected within the realms of art history, are still able to perpetuate ideas which either never had a place within academe or have long since been superseded. The clear inference is, that despite what might reasonably be expected, whatever possibilities for future research are opened up by Project Gargoyle then this is least likely to be led from departments of art history (although I would, of course, be more than happy if someone sets out to well and truly prove me wrong!).

While the basic framework of typologies and stylistic comparisons which are at the foundations of academic art history remained long overdue, medieval carvings cannot be understood without significant contributions from the approaches and perspectives of other disciplines. Although Michael Camille convincingly demonstrated that an approach straddling art history with social history can offer significant insights (e.g. Camille 1992), when he died, at the age of 44, in 2002 no one with equivalent skills emerged to continue similar investigations.

Malcolm Jones, in a study primarily devoted to medieval pilgrims' badges, also shows that social history can combined with an astute understanding of folklore and more conventional historical sources to shed considerable light on some of the bawdier aspects of medieval life – again ones which academe had largely deemed irrelevant (Jones 2002).

Both Camille and Jones ably demonstrate that carvings are only part of a spectrum which spans three-dimensional objects and various paintings and illustrations. The increasing ease of online access to medieval illuminated manuscripts in major libraries and archives should greatly help relevant research. I find it hard to imagine any study of medieval carvings which does not also seek to draw comparisons with comparable motifs in illuminated manuscripts and the like – if only because such illustrations are typically associated with a specific religious text, or are annotated so the meaning of the symbolism is made clear.



*Corbel depicting a sheep's head at Shepshed.  
Photograph by Ernie Miller.*

As already noted, the sheer number of animals and monsters depicted by medieval sculptors enables a whole range of questions to be asked. Stephen Miles, in his paper outlining the ongoing South Oxfordshire Project (which aims to understand medieval perceptions of landscape, settlement and society) also draws attention to the depiction of animals in medieval art. One of his examples is the frequent use of animals on peasant seals (an aspect of medieval art and culture which has seemingly not been studied in conjunction with church carvings) (Miles 2012: 93).

The 'cultural history of animals' is distinct from their natural history. Instead, it looks at the way animals are regarded in fables and folklore. Medieval European culture was, of course, familiar with Aesop's *Fables* and with the allegorical and metaphorical tales which comprised the various bestiaries. Additional popular lore dealt with what might be collectively termed 'animal prodigies'. However, as anyone familiar with, say, the bestiaries will quickly realise, there are no clear dividing lines between real animals and imaginary creatures. While the allegorical attributes of domesticated species such as cows, horses and dogs are usually plausible, if overly-anthropomorphised, even quite common wild creatures such as owls and snakes are attributed with behaviour which is

entirely fanciful. When the bestiaries are describing animals rarely seen in northern Europe, such as elephants, crocodiles or lions, then these are, less surprisingly, equally fanciful. But the descriptions of creatures which modern zoologists deem to be entirely mythical – unicorns, dragons and the phoenix – are no more fanciful than those of snakes or elephants. Medieval mentalities about these creatures were not clearly divided along the modern conventions of natural *versus* 'supernatural', just as the descriptions do not conform to modern sensibilities of 'natural history' *versus* allegorical fables.

My comments in the chapters making up Part Two of *Mawming and Mooning* provide further information about how medieval 'mentalities' spanning the human, animal and monstrous realms are expressed in medieval carvings. However there remains considerable potential for looking at such carvings as part of the whole spectrum, from the comparatively better-known illustrations in bestiaries, through to the emerging studies of relevant motifs on peasant seals.

As already noted, the purpose of this document is not to establish the limits of such questions but, instead, to seek to identify what sort of questions can be asked of the evidence. As ever, I am keen to hear from anyone who has suggestions for any further ways medieval carvings might help to shed light on medieval thinking.

# Chapter Five

## Where next – possible partners

The initial members of the Project Gargoyle committee were mostly people who worked for Leicestershire County Council (LCC). However, two of them are also members of the committee for the Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Fieldwork Group (LMAFG), which is independent from Leicestershire Museums. Both have now taken early retirement from LCC, while retaining their roles with LMAFG.

The Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society (LAHS) was, until his untimely death, represented on the Project Gargoyle committee by Alan McWhirr and is now represented by Jill Bourn. Members of the LAHS committee include senior members of University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) although, to my knowledge, ULAS has not previously set up research projects to look at medieval 'standing archaeology' (i.e. buildings such as churches).

In recent decades LAHS members have, individually, done excellent work, and the Society has published such work. For example, Geoffrey Brandwood's book *Bringing them to their knees: church-building and restoration in Leicestershire and Rutland 1800–1914* (Brandwood 2002) is an excellent example and a work which provides much valuable information for Project Gargoyle.

Two other organisations are also formally involved in Project Gargoyle. The Diocese of Leicester is represented by their archaeological advisor, Mike Hawkes. Furthermore, because all the Rutland churches are in the Diocese of Peterborough, Mike has made formal contact with that diocese too.



*A double-face from the corbel table at Church Langton. Photograph by Mike Walter.*

While LCC, LMAFG, LAHS and the two dioceses have, in a variety of ways, supported research projects and their publication, there is little precedent for involvement in projects corresponding to those envisaged in the preceding chapters of this document.

The staff and postgraduate students which make up the Centre for English Local History at the University of Leicester are, of course, entirely familiar with research at least as demanding! In 2012 Professor Keith Snell, the head of the centre, included a friendly-looking medieval hood stop on his personal web page. However the Centre's reputation is based on social and economic history.

One reason, among many others, why neither ULAS nor the Centre for English Local History have taken any interest in medieval sculpture is that neither are principally interested in art history. However, as I have outlined in chapter four of this document (and discussed in more detail in the opening chapter of *Mawming and Mooning*), in practice the most useful studies of Gothic carvings have come from social history rather than art history perspectives (although this is less true for Romanesque carvings).

Such research is not limited to British universities. Indeed, given the increasingly poor support and funding for the arts and humanities in British higher education, perhaps any research is least likely to be led by indigenous institutions. In recent years I have entered into email correspondence with students in America and Portugal who are researching aspects of medieval grotesques and other carvings. The late Michael Camille was a highly-regarded member of the faculty at the University of Chicago. One of the foremost Romanesque experts, Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, is Professor Emeritus at Tel Aviv University.

So the scope of people who, at this stage, can offer useful answers to the question 'What can a gargoyle tell us?' is not restricted to people in Leicestershire and Rutland. Indeed, it is not restricted by any geographical boundaries. Similarly, the best questions are likely to come from academic approaches which straddle disciplinary and departmental boundaries.

As the title *What Can a Gargoyle Tell Us?* attempts to convey, the purpose of this document is not to offer any answers, but instead to seek out as many divergent answers as possible. My intention is to gather those suggestions together into a future document, and one which might begin to bring into focus one or more research programmes based on – although not necessarily limited to – the excellent work being done by the Project Gargoyle volunteer photographers. And, once we have a better understanding of the thousands of hitherto-ignored medieval sculptures in Leicestershire and Rutland then hopefully that will lead to an enhanced awareness of the tens of thousands of such carvings elsewhere in the country which have yet to be properly acknowledged.



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