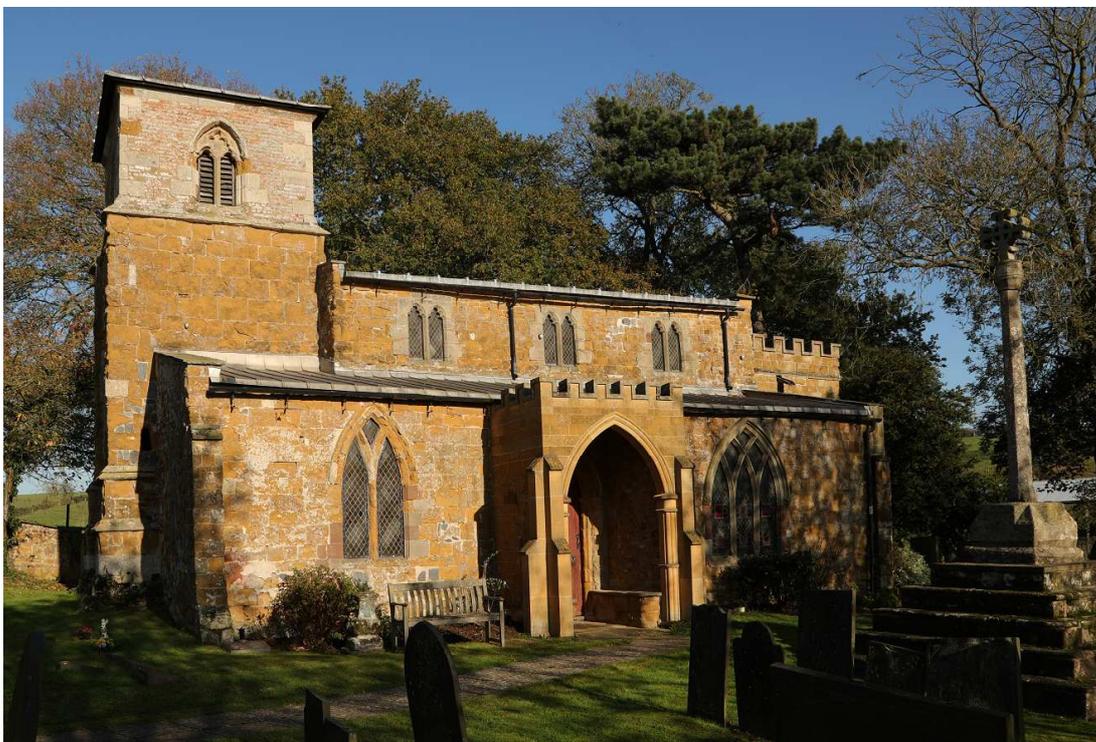


## Eleventh century sculptures inside Ragdale church

### Bob Trubshaw

Those of you who know me personally will be aware that I've been researching the medieval carvings of Leicestershire and Rutland since the 1980s. In 2009 I instigated 'Project Gargoyle' which aims to record every figural carving inside and outside the churches of Leicestershire and Rutland. Most of the work is done by volunteer photographers but I 'process' their shoots prior to submission to Leicestershire County Council's Historic Environment Record.



*The exterior of Ragdale church. Photograph by Steve Harris.*

I was looking at the photographs of Ragdale taken for Project Gargoyle by Steve Harris and was intrigued by an eleventh century carving, now inserted into the inside of the tower. So far as I can tell the church originates quite late, in the thirteenth century, so this carving seemingly doesn't 'belong' here. So I checked out the English Heritage Listing. This has 'Carved stone inside base of tower – a bare-headed bust with vestments and crozier under semi-circular hood mould. Probably Norman but possibly Anglo-Saxon.'



*Not the best eleventh century carving to have survived. But there isn't a better one from the Leicestershire Wolds... Photograph by Steve Harris.*

Very helpfully Steve had noted that the church visitor information states this and two small, damaged carvings of human heads (possibly also eleventh century but difficult to date) were previously outside Ragdale Hall. Presumably this refers to Old Hall adjacent to the church, but just might refer to the newer Ragdale Hall outside the village (now a health spa) built around 1785.

We do not know when the carvings were inserted in Ragdale's church tower but it has to be before *circa* 1950 when the English Heritage Listing was compiled. The best guess is 1874 when there was a 'general restoration'.

#### **If not from Ragdale then where?**

Quite plausibly none of these carvings originated in Ragdale, least of all in close proximity to the church. The nearest candidate for their origin is the ruins of an Anglo-Saxon church near Vernemetum (a Roman small town on the Fosse Way to

the south-east of Willoughby on the Wolds) mentioned by William Stukeley in his *Itinerarium Curiosum* of 1724 as having been recently demolished. (The *Itinerarium Curiosum* is available online but if you look it up please note that Stukeley scrambles the names and locations of Roman towns between Leicester and Newark, but his observations are valid once these errors are corrected.)

The location of this 'lost' church is known because in the 1980s a metal-detector user brought about a dozen Anglo-Saxon strap ends to Leicestershire Museums for identification. These strap ends would have decorated the leather used to bind shrouds to corpses before burial and are indicative of a Christian graveyard.



*Three of the Anglo-Saxon strap ends discovered near Vernemetum in the 1980s. The bigger ones are approximately an inch long. Drawing courtesy of Leicestershire Museums.*

The find spot for these is immediately to the south of the Vernemetum site and fits the topographical information provided by Stukeley.

In all probability this church originated in the seventh or eighth centuries as an early *mynster* or 'mother church' which would have served an area comparable to a modern deanery (about sixty or more parishes). Adjoining *mynsters* were at Breedon on the Hill, Melton Mowbray (or maybe Eye Kettleby) and Leicester. Once what we now think of as 'parish churches' began to be built around the eleventh century then some of these *mynsters* went into decline.

The depiction of a crozier-wielding cleric is consistent with a high-status memorial in a *mynster*. It is certainly not consistent with eleventh century manorial churches that evolved into parish churches as these were all-but rivals to *mynsters* and their bishops.

### **Why would a carving from the ruins at Vernemetum end up in Ragdale?**

Well, why not? The site of the ruins is almost exactly two kilometers as the proverbial crow flies, making Ragdale the nearest village. OK, both Willoughby and Old Dalby are only three kilometers away but I am not aware of any eleventh century carvings in either village, certainly not in or on the churches. By the time the ruins at Vernemetum were demolished in the early eighteenth century there was a growing interest in 'antiquarianism'. If the then-owner of Ragdale Hall was at all interested in following the fashions of his day he would have taken an interest in any 'curious' old carvings which crossed his path.

Quite plausibly the ruins of the Anglo-Saxon church at Vernemetum were demolished and transported specifically to be used in the early eighteenth century (re)construction of what is now named the Old Hall (the newer Hall, built *circa* 1785 still being well in the future). If so this would be the second time the stone had been 'recycled' because the church was most likely constructed from the ruins of Roman buildings once to the immediate north.

### **Some thoughts about the *mynster* in the Wolds**

The somewhat remote location of this *mynster* is consistent with early clerics seeking isolated locations in emulation of the Desert Fathers. Breedon's hill-top location is another example.

This *mynster* in the midst of the Wolds – so, at the time, surrounded by considerable woodland – might possibly be the successor to a late Roman-era Christian *ecclesia* ('church') serving the small town of Vernemetum and travellers along the Fosse Way. Certainly such travellers would have been grateful for spending the night inside a stone-built church – all that surrounding woodland would have been home to any number of wolves.

Presumably early clerics – all on a mission to convert people from pre-Christian religious practices – would want to found a church close to a town bearing the name 'Very Sacred Grove' (*ver nemeton*) with all its connotations of paganism.

A key reason for the location is that it is near a watercourse. Indeed at a water source, as Stukeley refers to the ruins being at a place called The Wells. This would

be consistent with such an *ecclesia* having a baptismal font, perhaps something like the decorated lead cisterns that have been found occasionally elsewhere in Britain. In any event a small community of clerics would need a reliable supply of water for pragmatic reasons.



*One of three Roman lead tanks discovered at a fourth century early church site in Icklingham, Suffolk. Note the chi-rho symbol.*

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I need to stress that there is no way of proving that these carvings in Ragdale church came from the 'lost' church at Vernemetum. But such an origin seems much more probable than there being an improbably-early church at Ragdale.

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Revised 2 February 2022. Thanks to Joan Shaw for drawing my attention to the existence of two Ragdale Halls and providing the date of construction for the newer one.