The 'Gargoyle Revival' at Old Dalby

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The heyday of gargoyles is between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. During the seventeenth century Neo-Classicism became all the rage and the term 'Gothic' was invented as an insult for the preceding medieval style. Apart from the Oxford colleges the skills needed to design and sculpt all the wonderful Gothic gargoyles, corbels and other figural decoration were lost.

By the mid-eighteenth century a romanticised form of medieval led to a few buildings being built in the Gothic style. The best known exampleof this 'Rococo Gothick' architecture was built for Horace Walpole at Twickenham and gives the style its more commonly-used name: 'Strawberry Hill Gothic'.

But only after the Palace of Westminster was engulfed in flames in 1834 and the contract for its rebuilding was awarded in 1840 to the Gothic Revivalist architects Charles Barry and A.W.N. Pugin did Gothic decoration once again become popular. Putting it a little too simply,

Left, from top to bottom:

A gargoyle form the thirteenth or fourteenth century at Buckminster (photograph by David Jarram).

A late fourteenth or early fifteenth century gargoyle at Plungar (photograph by Neil Fortey).

A more heraldic-looking gargoyle from the mid- to late-fifteenth century at Melton Mowbray (photograph by Steve Harris).

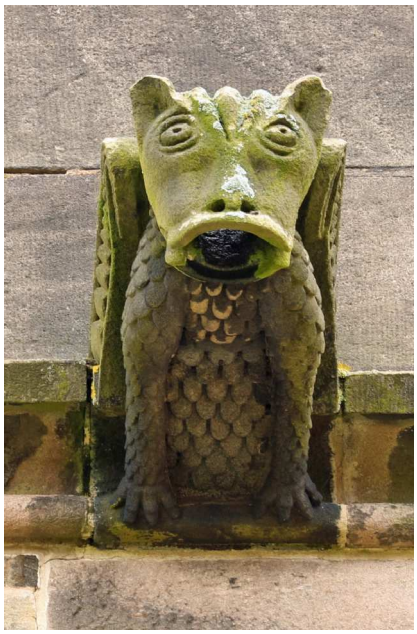
Thanks to all three volunteers for Project Garogyle for the use of their images.

Old Dalby's pioneering Gothic Revival gargoyle of 1835. Photograph by Steve Harris.

the view was that 'If Gothic is good enough for the Houses of Parliament then it's good enough for our town hall, parish church, whatever.'

Nevertheless several Leicestershire churches were restored or even rebuilt in the 1830s by architects pioneering the Gothic Revival. Weathered medieval carvings on the exterior needed to be replaced. These included gargoyles as their exposed position near the roof made them prone to weathering and also hoodstops either side of doorways and windows as they life-size or less so even moderate amounts of weather damage would cause significant loss. But who had the know-how to design such restorations?

Put yourself in the mind of an 1830s stonemason. He would have heard the architect speak of the Gothic Revival. He could look at surviving medieval carving and get some idea of what might be needed. But there were no 'style guides', no instruction manuals, still less training courses. It was a case of 'Just get on with it, and do your best.'



Two additional views of the Old Dalby carving.
Photographs by Steve Harris.

And indeed that it is just what the 1830s masons did. So when the church at Old Dalby was entirely rebuilt by the architect Thomas Winter in 1835 there was little in the budget for decorative carving. But one gargoyle was added to the tower. Frankly the only things in common with medieval gargoyles is the roof-top location, the fact it was carved from stone and has a head. It has a certain presence or gravitas but little of the medieval menace and monstrosity. The decorative pattern on the wings and body was seemingly carved by someone with experience of filling in the panels of the sort of 'Celtic' crosses which by then were fashionable as the more up-market grave markers.

The masons learned fast. Just ten years later, 1844–6, Pugin's restoration of Wymeswold church was underway with a pair of much more awsome gargoyles on the tower.

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Project Gargoyle volunteer photographs have also recorded some early examples of Gothic Revival in the south-west of Leicestershire. The next two pages are taken from the *Project Gargoyle Newsletter* of February 2017 (p11 and 12).

The 1840s gargoyles on the tower of Wymeswold church.
Photographs by David Jarram.
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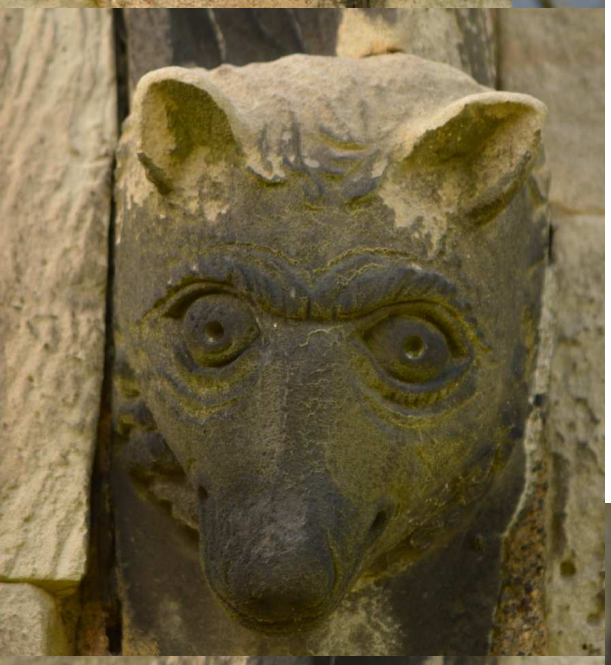

Norton's 'halfway house' hood stops

The Gothic Revival came into fashion in the late 1830s, just as Queen Victoria came to the throne, and took a couple of decades to really get underway. So most Gothic Revival carvings can be dated to the 1860s and 1870s. But there are some earlier ones too.

The earliest Gothic Revival churches in Leicestershire include Appleby Magna, Anstey, Countesthorpe, Shackerstone and Wymeswold. Understandably they are often hybrids of the new fashion and old way of doing things.

Another example is the restoration of Norton juxta Twycross in about 1841. In his comprehensive study of the nineteenth century restoration of Leicestershire and Rutland churches, *Bringing Them to Their Knees*, Geoffrey Brandwood refers to Norton as 'an extremely interesting scheme, being a halfway house between traditional ways of doing things and the new ecclesiological approach.'

This 'betwixt and between' approach is clearly revealed by the hood stops either side of the windows which mostly depict a mixture of naturalist animals and stylised human heads. No hint here of the ubiquitous kings and queens who would soon take over the hoodstops in droves.

Photographs by Iain Loveridge.

Shackerstone's mid-1840s carvings

Just four miles to the east of Norton juxta Twycross is the village of Shackerstone. Most of the church was rebuilt in 1845–6. On the south side of the nave are wonderfully carved 'gargoyles', although they are purely decorative and not functional. They are more human and less monstrous than is typical for medieval gargoyles.

Of special note is the figure with two smaller figures, one at each shoulder. This is plausibly inspired by a medieval gargoyle of similar configuration.

Inside, the chancel arch is decorated with two well-sculpted heads. In many respects they are good examples of the generic kings and queens typical of the 1860s onwards, but these also have elaborately-carved crowns which have been gilded.

Photographs by Iain Loveridge.