

The frieze round the north side of the Church, just below the parapet or 'battlements', is uncommon, though not unique, and was there to impress 15<sup>th</sup> Century travellers on the main road through Toddington. Our ancestors took great pride in the Church and regarded it as a symbol of the community's prosperity and self-esteem. Today the carvings are badly weathered and show much damage done in the past.

In 1814 Thomas Fisher made drawings of the frieze which were much less weathered in his day. Fisher was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and produced many water-colours and prints of the buildings and views of Bedfordshire; he spent most of his life working at India House, London. His drawings have been used as a guide to replace some of the carvings. Unique in themselves all the carvings have a meaning, generally known in their day, and some doubtless refer to local incidents or places – like the Sow and Pigs pub opposite.

\*\*\*\*\*



Starting at the east end of the Church the first carving (1) is of a horse at a smart trot and very appropriately the horse is an emblem of St George, symbolising courage and generosity. However, in the catacombs of Rome it represents the swift passage of life. (The Four Horses of the Apocalypse are War, Death, Famine and Pestilence).

The next two figures, (2) a man and woman, represent marriage; Marriage is a union of opposites, reconciliation, and also the relationship between heaven and earth, - God

The third animal (3) is probably not a chained unicorn of heraldry, because these carvings were done before the union of Scotland and England, when the Scots unicorn would not have been generally known. Anyway the chain signifies that the animal, or what it stands for, is under control or that its symbolism is negated.

Number (4), (and I am describing these from Fisher's drawings which are a bit clearer than the real thing on the Church), is perhaps a Jacob's sheep judging by the disorganised horns, or a medieval breed we no longer have. I like the coat of mini dreadlocks. Sheep represent the apostles and followers of Christ.



The next two (5 & 6) I just can't sort out. Five might be a dog and so might six. A dog stands for fidelity, unswerving devotion, watchfulness, nobility. As a guardian of the flock the dog represents the good shepherd, a Bishop or Priest. The dog is also an emblem of St Roch who was fed by his dog.

Just how to get round a corner is demonstrated by the next (7), a rather bemused looking double bodied lion! The lion was considered the king of beasts, fearless and just, but in Christianity a rather ambivalent creature. A roaring lion is the Devil, but Christ is the Lion of Judah. There is also the story of Daniel in the lion's den on the side of the righteous.

The next figure (8) is a Gryphon or Griffin, a fabulous beast half eagle half lion. The light of dawn and vigilance (eagle) combined with strength and courage (lion). A popular heraldic beast, which was on the Earl Strafford's arms (he was once Lord of the Manor)' - and is mirrored by another Pub next to the Church. In Christianity the Gryphon came to represent the spiritual and temporal power of the Pope.



Number (9) would seem to be two animals playing, though why the spotted one has no hind legs I can't make out. Perhaps what I take to be a tail is the remains of a leg.

Next to them (10) is a cat, representing stealth, liberty and the splendours of the night. A black cat was the witches 'familiar', - evil and bringer of ill luck, though the opposite today! Black cats and dogs as witches' familiars are perhaps bringers of rain? - (it's raining cats and dogs)

The dragon (11) was originally a beneficial creature, a manifestation identified with the sky gods and also earthly ones; bringing fertilizing rain, which was beneficial, - though sometimes leading to the destructive forces of lightning and flood, - hence the destructive, savage and anti-human side of the dragon. However it is still generally regarded as a benign creature in the Far East. In Christianity it is equated with the serpent, the power of evil, the devil and the enemy of God. Subduers of dragons represent the victory of good over evil, light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance – St George.

A Dragon with a knot in its tail (which I think is what is meant here) represents the defeat of the Evil One, since like a scorpion, its power is in its tail.

Of the next two combined figures (12) it is difficult to say much. I think it might be two monkeys playing, representing impudence, inquisitiveness and mischief, which were doubtless also the attributes of many village children.



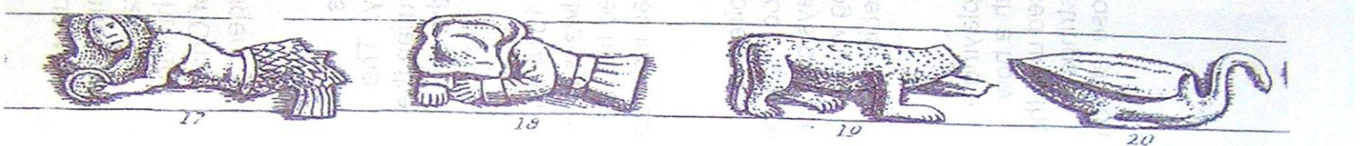
The next carving (13) is probably a chained and muzzled bear. As it was equated with the devil, cruelty, evil and greed, the poor creature had a particularly rotten time.

A leopard with a helmet follows. (14) It probably represents a leopard crest as worn on a helmet. I wonder if it could represent someone locally?

Crests were not as rigidly adhered to as arms. Anyway a leopard symbolises impetuosity and bravery.

15) A long neck and no head, the next creature could be almost any animal.

Number (16) is a cow or perhaps a goat; a cow comes later so I'll take this as a goat. To the Anglo-Saxons the goat was sacred to the Norse god Thor, and they drew his chariot, so I suppose that it was to be expected that the early Christians associated the goat with the devil. It is also equated with the masculine principle and lust



The mermaid with mirror (17) is a creature of chaos, neither one thing nor another, a creature to lure a sailor into disregarding the changeability of the seas – the primordial chaos of the oceans.

I like to think that number (18) depicts one of the builders of the church, the one who is always to be found in a quiet corner having a siesta.

(19) A spotted animal which might be another leopard; and then a goose (20). Wild geese are solar creatures which follow the sun south and return in the spring. Domestic geese are equated with the good housewife, protective of the home, and watchfulness. In fact they make excellent and noisy watchdogs, – geese that is!



I am puzzled by the next carving (21). It looks as though it might be intended as a saddled horse, but the hind leg resembles no animal I can think of. Horses after all were a common everyday sight in the 14th Century and all the other back legs in the frieze are about right, i.e. distorted, but almost right. I think that this could be a wooden horse perhaps associated with one of the many fairs held on The Green in those days; or perhaps even a local incident.

Next is a gap where the carving had totally disappeared even in Fisher's day (1814).

(22)A hawk has brought down a heron or swan. Hawking was a popular sport of the aristocracy not really to obtain food (though they did eat swans, a rather earthy taste I believe) but to watch the thrilling spectacle of a small hawk diving out of the sun at perhaps 70 mile per hour to kill a much larger prey.

Like the eagle the hawk was a creature of the Sun who could gaze at it without harm or flinching, and was also a messenger of the gods. Another corner carving (23) follows. Two sheep I suppose, judging by the right hand animal in plus-fours. Sheep represent the flock of Christ (us) but can also represent “a blind and unintelligent following”. A cynical combination.



(24) is a stag, which in Christianity represents solitude, purity of life, religious aspirations, piety. The stag is the emblem of several Saints including Julian the Hospitaller and the ancient Hospital of St John the Baptist (which was situated only yards away.)



The next drawing of the frieze (25), as it was in 1814 when Fisher drew it, is especially interesting. It has always been accepted as a sow and piglets, and the re-carved figure visible today is clearly that. The new carving was installed in 1991 together with several others. The Pub across the road is thought to have inspired the original carving – or the other way round, as nobody is quite sure, as it is claimed that there has always been a Pub here of that name. In the past a female hog was called a sow and her young, pigs. The term piglet is comparatively modern.

Of the next pair (26) the figure on the right is playing a viol, a family of stringed instruments played with a bow. The violin family is similar but was not introduced until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, - further the violin family has four strings whereas viols have six with a different bow whose tension can be varied whilst playing.

The double bass is the only member of the viol family in general use today. The other more weathered figure of the pair is holding a bagpipe. Common throughout the country in the middle ages bagpipes did not at first have a drone pipe, and the sound was somewhere between an oboe and a clarinet. It was a popular instrument in Church music.

A phoenix (27) is next in the frieze (and was re-carved exactly like the original). It was a mythological bird that lived for four hundred years and then built a nest in which it burned itself to ashes. From the ashes a new bird would arise, thus in Christianity it represents the resurrection of the faithful. All over the



Next the figures of two mermen (28) who are reputed to be exceptionally ugly; one reason no doubt why mermaids always hope to entrap a sailor!

This is where the Church frieze begins to depart from Fisher's drawings of 1814. On the corner are two dogs in a play fight, (29) nicely re-carved and followed by a rabbit (30), turning on a fox. (Only a fox would have a tail like that). Then there are two new additions; a swan or goose (see 20), followed by a dog just before the rainwater down pipe. The rabbit turning on the fox represents the meek (rabbit) turning on craftiness, cunning and hypocrisy (fox) It might also be an actual observation locally. In the corner is a new carving of the Griffin, (as described at 8).

(30) The dog here (and mentioned before 5) has great symbolism as a keeper of boundaries, fidelity, watchfulness, and as guardian of the flock. The dog would accompany or represent the Good Shepherd, Bishop or Parish Priest. It is also the emblem of several saints including St Bernard and St Roch.



(31) The swan, often interchangeable with the goose, has already been mentioned (20) as well as the griffin (8). The swan is like the goose, a solar animal but also the bird of poets. Its dying song tells of the swans whiteness, purity and grace, and represents the Virgin Mary.

From Wentworth Chapel westward, the first figure (32) is definitely an animal and seems to have a tail, but without a head it might be almost anything, - and the object in front of it is not much help either.

The next figure (33) is definitely human, possibly a naked female. In Christian art naked females are said to represent holy renunciation of worldly goods and penitence; or conversely, pagans, satanism or shamelessness. - Take your pick. Representing nakedness seems to have worried our medieval ancestors for in carvings you can often see that Adam and Eve are shown wearing what we would call 'body stocking', - as they would have worn these in the Miracle and Morality Plays of the day. This is especially clear in some of the fine carved corbels in Norwich Cathedral.

I am rather fond of the next figure (34) which represents the Wild Man of the Woods, akin to the Green Man, a guardian spirit of the forest, not to be feared so much as respected. Clothed in greenery he is often found accompanying troupes of Morris Dancers. His rugged staff is to chastise and chase away those who damage trees and woodlands.



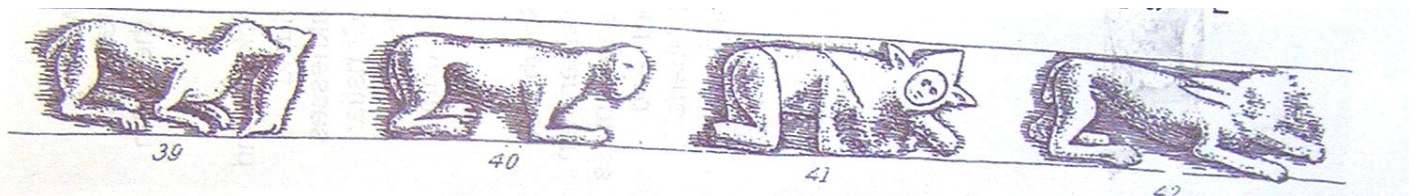
(35) is another human figure, apparently with a shocking headache. Perhaps he has just been walloped by the Wild Man.

I am afraid that the next section of the Church frieze is rather dull. Not Fishers fault I am sure, but due to the weathering of the Totternhoe stone and possibly some vandalism as well. The first figure (36) has lost its head and is either a dog doing something that it really shouldn't on Church property, or it's suckling one of its young.

The next figure (37) obviously has a young suckling, but what is the animal? The head looks like a sheep, but sheep don't have litters and the back end is rather odd too. Could it be a bushy tailed dog?



The next carving (38) has the body of a pig but the head looks wrong, perhaps it was someone's over-fed lap-dog.



Then comes (39) an animal carrying one of its young. Could it be a cat, a dog, or a fox?

I give up on the next one, (40), however - (41) the following figure is clearly a jester or fool. At Court the King was at the top of the social order and the Fool the very bottom, so the King represented order and the Fool chaos. Thus the Fool could do and say what he pleased, usually with impunity. The circus clown is today's fool who makes chaos of the simplest task. The figure of the jester or fool also represents the simple unthinking and ignorant person who "Knows not where he came from nor whence he is going and thus goes on blindly towards the abyss"

The hare or rabbit (42) is associated with the moon, when rabbits are most easily seen. These are both fertility symbols and related to rebirth and resurrection. A hare's foot is a specific against witchcraft although a hare is often seen as a companion of witches. (It seems that symbolism often goes by opposites). In Christian symbolism the hare and/or rabbit represent fecundity and lust; and at the same time their very defencelessness also represents those who put their complete trust in Christ.



The next carving (43) can't be a cow so it must be a bull, very much the male principle an all that this entails. The bull is also associated with the fertilizing

force of the sun and rain, – thunder is its bellow. The Roman worshipers of Mithras sacrificed a bull at the new year to signal the end of Winter and the birth of Spring.

In some societies the sacrifice of a bull represented victory over man's animal nature. (Is this perhaps the origin of Spanish bull fighting?). In Christian iconography the bull represents brute force, and it is also the emblem of St. Eustace, who was martyred in a bronze bull.

A bird with an egg (44). I think that the only bird it could represent is the cuckoo, a dissembler, a parasite. In ordered society, a not very likable character. The bird was thought to lay its egg in grass and then carry it in its beak to a chosen host nest. In fact the egg in her beak would have been stolen from the nest where she has just laid her own egg.

We are now coming to the last of the frieze as drawn by Thomas Fisher. Only in these final drawings does he show the shape of the moulding of the whole entablature.

The first beast (45) seems to be a double-bodied lion similar to the one we had further east, (7) but that one was double-bodied to get round a corner which is not the case here, though of course, it could be two animals with one head in front of the other. I fancy that it, or they, are a lion or two. Pairs of lions were guardians of doors, gates, treasures or the Tree of Life.



I cannot think what the next two birds are (46). They look like Great Crested Grebes to me, who have this amazing ritual mating dance. They inhabit fresh water lakes, so where were they seen locally? – on the Green at one time? That would be before they were nearly wiped out for their feathers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually they were reduced to 42 pairs, but dedicated conservationists have ensured their survival and today there must be about 5000 pairs. I can't find any recorded symbolism in them: They could represent victory of conservation for God's gifts over the mindless dictates of fashion.