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THE HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE  
OF MEDIEVAL BENCH END CARVINGS IN SOME PARISH CHURCHES  
IN SUFFOLK, ENGLAND

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In a region of East Anglia in southeastern England, there are approximately thirty-two Church of England stone churches that were built in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, unique because of their bench end carvings. Because literacy was low in many rural areas of the country in those days, other means besides literature were needed to instruct the "common man" in religious matters. Wood, especially oak, was in abundance and was used to construct and embellish the interior walls, pews, and roofs of the churches. Carving the wood was an art as well as an occupation for certain men, known as carvers, who traveled by foot in a restricted area to perform their work.

In addition to religious instruction, bench end carvings also represented (1) pure decoration; (2) the conveying of messages or warnings to the populace; (3) commentaries on the life and morals of the times; (4) capital sins as well as virtues; (5) church sacraments such as baptism and marriage; (6) animals of various sorts, both real and imagined; (7) devils, saints, and angels; and (8) occupations of the times. These carvings are now considered to be of such archaeological and historical importance that the National Trust of Great Britain has taken steps to preserve them for the enjoyment of future generations.

† † †

In Suffolk County of East Anglia, England, there are approximately thirty-two parish churches that were erected in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They are noted for their bench end carvings as well as for other wood carvings both on the inside and the outside of these churches (Evans, 1980). A description of one of these churches serves as an example.

**THE BARNINGHAM CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

The Barningham church, like most of the others, was built of grey stone. On the outside carvings are noted high up under the eaves. These are called "hammer beam" figures.

A note on the bulletin board near the iron gate directs visitors across the road to obtain the key to the church. (Churches like this one always used to be kept open, but in recent years vandals have begun to break some of the carvings and remove others for personal use or for sale.) A well kept vegetable garden and a flower garden are passed on the way to a thatched-roofed home of the church's caretaker, called a verger, to obtain a huge lead key. (Perhaps this is a fifteenth-century key!)

The church is entered by a side entrance-way leading to the rear of the sanctuary. Just inside is a nicely carved, large, wooden, oblong chest with two locks. Such chests were formerly used to hold church treasures, mostly gold and silver chalices, communion plates, etc. During the Reformation, a great deal of church plate was destroyed; and much was sold in later years to cover church expenses. Because the contents of the chests were so valuable, the key to one lock was held by the church pastor, and the other by a warden who represented the congregation. The chest could not be opened unless both were present, protecting it from "internal theft." There is also a baptismal font with much space around it. To the rear there is more empty space and a room for storage of various items. In this room a framed scroll reveals that the carvings in this church were done by Thomas Vyal whose will was proved in 1472. His will stated that he bequeathed his carving tools to his son. The floor of the entire sanctuary is of stone, as are the walls, giving the whole interior a rather cold appearance, except for the carvings.

A walk up the center aisle to the front of the church

reveals, on the ends of the pews, unique carvings constructed from the ends of the oak benches.

## THE CARVINGS

### Poppyhead

The poppyhead is not named for the poppy flower, but is apparently derived from the French word “poupée,” meaning doll or puppet (Agate, 1980). In most cases the poppyhead is *not* a head or a doll’s head, but usually, in the churches of East Anglia, it is in the shape of a fleur-de-lys or trefoil, consisting of foliage or leaves. Some are “erect in appearance with three limbs pointing upward. Others are broad-shouldered and horizontal-looking” (Agate, 1980). The poppyhead is placed at the top of each bench end. Below and in front of it are seen one or two carved figures. “No truly medieval bench ends in Suffolk are quite the same, not even when it comes to their little figures” (Agate, 1980).

The wood used for both benches and carvings was usually oak. It was a light color at the time of installation, but through the centuries the wood has darkened, and the poppyheads and carved figures have not only darkened, but have a polished appearance due to being touched and rubbed by the hands of 25 or so generations of parishioners. Although other carvings in the church have been painted, the bench ends were left in their natural colors, the grain of the wood enhancing the character of each carving.

### The bench end carvers in Suffolk

In most cases the carvers are not known. No record was kept of their work and there were no definite “carvers’ marks.” Some investigators hoped that bills might be found in the churches’ archives, or amounts paid to carvers for their work, but so far, no such record has been found. It has been noted, however, that there are similarities among the carvings of several churches that are geographically close together. These carvings are quite different from those in another area (Evans, 1980). Therefore, it is thought that one carver might have done the work in one area, a second in another area, etc. There may only have been a few carvers in all.

### Meanings of the carvings

(1) Some of the carvings are purely decorative; (2) some convey messages or warnings; (3) some are commentaries on the life and morals of those times; (4) some were used for biblical education because literacy was low in medieval times; (5) some depicted capital sins as well as virtues; (6) some showed groups of parishioners involved in sacraments (such as baptism and marriage); (7) some were what were called “grotesque” figures (described later); (8) some were fanciful “untamed” beasts; (9) some were devils, representing warnings

to people whose life expectancy was not long in those times; (10) some were carvings of saints and angels; and finally (11) some were of animals from hearsay (such as elephants and lions), from mythology (from bestiary books—a type of illustrated religious natural history book with animals symbolizing human characteristics, and giving a moral or religious lesson), and combinations of different animals and birds.

### Categories of carvings

1. The saints were shown with their special associations, such as St. Peter holding a key, St. Andrew holding a diagonal cross, St. Paul with a sword, St. John with a poison cup from which he drank without fatal results, St. Simon holding a fish, St. Jude with a boat, Ste. Catherine with a wheel, Ste. Margaret with a dragon, and Ste. Barbara in a prison tower (Figs. 1 and



FIGURE 1. Poppyhead finial and bench end figures of Ste. Catherine and Ste. Margaret.

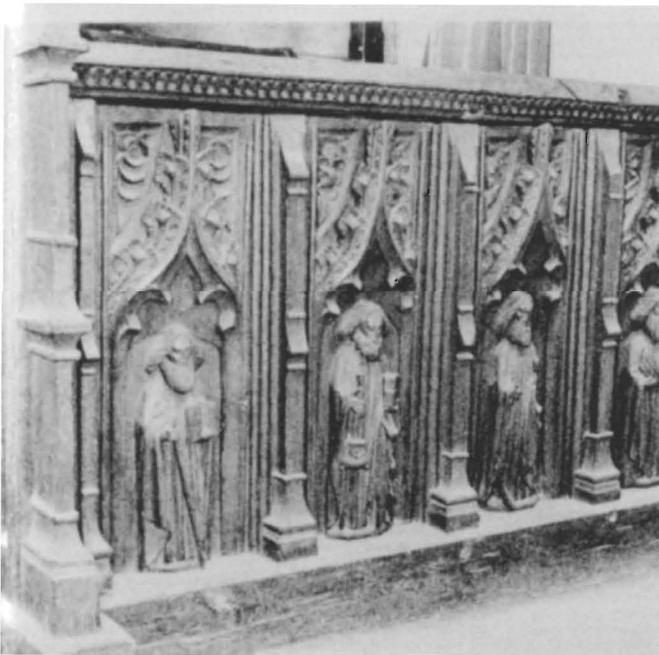


FIGURE 2. Front of a choir stall with carvings of saints.

2). Other saints depicted were: St. Edmund—a wolf holds or guards a crowned head (when he was killed by the viking enemy, a wolf held his head and kept the enemy away) (Evans, 1980); St. George and a dragon (Fig. 3); and St. Michael with scales (for weighing souls!).

2. Devils were often carved with leering or menacing expressions and sometimes had horns and tails. Angels had folded wings and looked peaceful.

3. Virtues and vices were often depicted, such as an intemperate drinker, a man raking in money greedily, slothful persons lying in bed, a man pridefully parading in a “fine hat and mantle” (Agate, 1980), or a “vicious protagonist standing in the open jaws of a great beast,” which represented the jaws of Hell (Agate, 1980).

4. Activities of parishioners included such actions as (a) a sower; (b) a woman binding a sheaf of corn (wheat in the United States); (c) a thatcher with a rake (Fig. 4). It is interesting



FIGURE 3. St. George and the dragon.



FIGURE 4. The thatcher with his rake.

to surmise that the forebears of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher (or her husband) may have been thatchers, workers in an ancient craft. The reeds or thatch were cut with a knife; and the rake was used to collect the reeds into a pile to be bundled. The rake was also used to arrange the bundles on the roof. Other actions depicted were (d) a woman walking her dog; and (e) musicians playing pipes, recorders, stringed instruments, and even bagpipes. Also depicted were (f) animals, like a pig playing a harp; (g) tumblers and contortionists; (h) a lady kneeling and praying (Fig. 5); and (i) a woman spanking her child (Fig. 6).

5. Animals and birds without any symbolic meaning were often carved, some from observation, others from illustrations in bestiary books. These were dogs, rabbits, horses, mules, camels, elephants, squirrels (Fig. 7), fish, whales, seals, birds—from eagles to doves to a cockerel (young male domestic fowl). Birds predominate, probably because of the large numbers of different kinds of birds to be seen in East Anglia.



FIGURE 5. Kneeling woman, praying, and looking toward the poppyhead.

6. Grotesques were carved and given moral and theological significance. They were to bring to mind a person or a legend. Examples are: (a) A pelican (Fig. 8), in its piety a pelican wounded its breast with its bill in order to feed its young that are clustered below it. This conveyed the act of self-sacrificing devotion and therefore symbolized Jesus Christ (Agate, 1980). (b) The unicorn, with the body of a horse, feet of an elephant, tail of a stag, and one central long curved horn (Fig. 9). The horn is usually turned to the rear so that it will not be easily cut off. It was said that the unicorn could be captured only if a virgin sat in a forest. The unicorn would then place its head on her lap and could then be captured. This meant that it could be easily captured by hunters, devils, or evil persons. (c) The cockatrice (legendary serpent with a



FIGURE 6. A woman spanking her son.



FIGURE 7. A poppyhead and a squirrel on a bench end at the Barningham church.



FIGURE 9. A unicorn.



FIGURE 8. The pelican in its piety injuring itself to feed its young.

deadly glance hatched by a reptile from a cock's egg) had the head and wings of a cock, and the body of a serpent. If a man were seen by a cockatrice before he saw the cockatrice, he died, and vice versa. One was therefore advised to go forth with a mirror and if the cockatrice saw itself in the mirror, it would die and the man would live. (d) The mermaid represented a siren or wily woman. If she is depicted holding a fish, this symbolized an evil person holding a soul. (e) The owl symbolized perverse foolishness, or a person living wilfully in outer darkness. (This seems odd, because in present day, an owl represents wisdom!) (f) The frog represented heretics wallowing in sensuality. (g) A skiapod (Fig. 10) is manlike with one enormous foot under which he rests as he would under an umbrella or parasol. The symbolism for this creature is not yet understood. (h) The elephant was depicted leaning against a tree because it had no joints in its legs. When the tree was chopped down by devils, the elephant fell. Finally, a young elephant (representing Christ) raises up the fallen elephant with his trunk (representing the resurrection). (i) The squirrel, believed to have crossed water on a piece of wood, symbolized man crossing the sea of life on a wooden cross (Fig. 7). (j) The fox is shown playing dead in order to pounce



FIGURE 10. A skiapod.

on unsuspecting birds. When it steals chickens, this symbolized the devil capturing souls. It is also shown, as are apes and other humorous animals, acting as a preacher. (k) Finally, there are combinations of the various parts of animals scrambled together, such as: two-headed animals and birds, dragons, animals or fish swallowing fish, quadrupeds (for humans), mild

beasts, and ferocious beasts. Again, some of these were carved humorously, others to frighten or subdue the parishioners.

### PRESERVATION OF THE CHURCHES

Years of neglect brought many of the Suffolk churches to a sad state of disrepair; but people realize now, especially the archaeologists, what treasures they have in the medieval carvings. Therefore, many of the churches are being restored and will be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations. Some of the churches are still used for worship services; others are in underpopulated areas so that it is financially impossible to keep them in good repair. The National Trust of England has taken over many places, such as these churches, that are of historical value to restore them and ensure that they will be maintained.

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