

The Devil in the Details : Being A Potted & Personal Overview of the Foliate Grotesque Otherwise Known as the Green Man in Words & Images by Sean Breadin



Cloisters, Norwich Cathedral

Should ever my face have been twisted during my South-East Northumbrian childhood, one elderly aunt or another would invariably point out that I had a "*fyece like the Durham Doorknocker*" ; thus summoning into my mind a sinister hooded figure who prowled the nocturnal streets of that as-yet unvisited city, rousing the inhabitants from their slumbers by rapping bony knuckles upon backdoors, revealing his *face* to anyone foolish enough to answer.

Needless to say when we finally did make it to Durham I went with considerable trepidation, for an elder sibling had reliably informed me that we would indeed see the Durham Doorknocker - and see him we certainly did. In those days it was the real thing

too, the famous medieval Sanctuary Knocker on the north door of the cathedral, now residing in the treasury, its place taken by a faultless facsimile.



**Sanctuary Knocker (in situ facsimile),
Durham**

You might imagine my relief (and disappointment) to discover the Durham Doorknocker was *hoary-artefact* as oppose to *sinister-spectre-vocationally-inclined*; and that it was also the public face of the cathedral didn't hurt either -

its image reproduced on the countless souvenirs in the gift shop, including, naturally, domestic brass doorknockers, one of which we bought as a memento, thereafter fixed upon my grandmother's wooden front door, proudly polished against the gloss-green paintwork.



Durham Cathedral; cloisters, south walk

I made two other life-long friends in Durham Cathedral that day, both of them in the cloisters. The first was a bat-winged skull upon an 18th-century memorial tablet on the wall of the south walk; immaculately carved in alabaster, its gapped-tooth visage put a chill up my spine as I imagined it flitting widdershins with the creatures that I'd first took for swallows but were in fact pipistrelle bats, roused by the heat. The second was in the north walk, where we sat in the sun with our picnic, watching the pipistrelles flying their weary rounds, and there, looking down on me

from the roof, was a carved wooden face that made me laugh out loud. Absurd it was, grinning its goofy grin as stylised roses sprouted from the corners of his mouth in a design, though however so crude in its execution, I found as sublime as it was ingenious.

Back in 1966 of course no one could tell me who he was, nor what he meant, or if indeed he meant anything at all. Certainly no mention of it was made in the cathedral guide book, although if you look in the Jarrold Guide to Durham Cathedral of forty years on, there you'll see him, named and shamed, as a *Green Man*.



Durham Cathedral; cloisters, north walk.

There can be few reading this unfamiliar with this pagan god of the greenwood whom certain mischievous medieval masons took great delight in including in ecclesiastical architecture in open rebellion against the moral,

social and spiritual repressions of Roman Catholic Church of the time. Words to this effect are cited in ever increasing conviction that his millennia-old secrets have been revealed as a timely reminder of our natural origins, giving rise to a lucrative market in any number of oracle-cards, garden ornaments, gew-gaws, jewellery, key-rings, fridge-magnets, posters, post-cards and picture books, most of which tell much the same thing in spite of the simple fact that, if the truth be told, no one really knows what he is.



Norwich Cathedral, cloister

The term *Green Man* was first coined as recently as 1939 by the aristocratic antiquarian Lady Raglan to account for an hitherto unnamed class of European medieval ecclesiastical grotesque in which human faces are combined with foliage in a diversity of stylistic ways. Not only has the name stuck fast, but

also the reasoning behind it - i.e. that he represents something decidedly non-Christian that has somehow survived the otherwise corrosive millennia embedded as an *archetype* in the *collective-subconscious* through the medium of folklore and seasonal ceremony.



Burry Man, South Queensferry

The assumption that any of the so-called *Green Men* of folk tradition (such as the *Jack-in-the-Green* of Rochester, or the *Burry Man* of South Queensferry, and the *Garland King* of Castleton, to name but three) have a pagan origin is entirely unfounded; just as the quaintly Victorian notion that the original *significance* of such customs has invariably been *lost* over the centuries is today looked upon with no little distain by a new generation of folklorists for whom the provenance of custom and

usage isn't so much *historical* as it is *psychological*.

Think, for example, of the wayside floral tributes to those who have lost their lives in road accidents. Unseen a decade ago, they are now as common a feature of the British highway as the speed camera. And talking of speed cameras, why is this ultra-modern hi-tech surveillance device represented on road signs by a highly stylised though recognisably anachronistic Pocket Kodak Junior, c1929? Has this too, I wonder, become embedded in the *collective subconscious* as an *archetype*?



Witton Gilbert, County Durham

Jungian fiddle-faddle aside; as a child I naturally assumed that any headstone displaying the motif of the Skull-and-Crossbones had to mark the grave of a pirate. In later life I came to understand the Skull-and-Crossbones in terms of its

sepulchral association, hence the *Jolly Roger*: once hoisted, its meaning would have been pretty unambiguous to those hapless mariners of yore.

However, what I didn't learn until comparatively recently is that its origins lie in an actual decree issued by the Vatican in the middle-ages regarding the minimum skeletal requirements for full bodily resurrection (i.e. the skull and two thighbones), thus the Skull-and-Crossbones represents not death per-se, but *resurrection*. So much for symbolism.



Carlisle Cathedral, column capital

The belief in the pagan origin for the Green Man persists not just amongst latter day Pagans, Goths, Morris Dancers, Storytellers, Environmentalists and devotees of Wicca and the New Age; even in these otherwise most cynical of times it is cited as received wisdom (and in many cases

scholarship) in almost every publication where one is likely to find him; from the growing number of specialist books on the subject, to the innumerable photocopied pamphlets in parish churches the length and breadth of our green and pleasant land.

And yet if we go back to such guide books of but a few decades ago, we find no mention of *Green Men* or of *Pagan Emblems of Fertility* - in their stead there is a more a pragmatic appreciation of the subject, with such picturesque terms as *Head-with-Leaves* (Exeter, 1950) or *Foliage-and-Faces* (Norwich, 1945); and if we go even further back, there is no reference to him at all - even in the celebrated complaints written by certain medieval clergy on the proliferation of such grotesque imagery in their churches, there is nothing described that we might recognise as a *Green Man*.



Misericord, Norwich Cathedral

That there is no pre-Christian prototype for the Green Man is a fact completely overlooked in the headlong rush towards embracing him as a pagan archetype. A fellow storyteller recently asked me if I'd found a secure Christian context for the Green Man - my answer was that Christianity is his context, which is to say we find him only in, on and around medieval churches and cathedrals.



Wells Cathedral

It is here he evolves from the stylised cat-heads of the Romanesque (such as found in Wells Cathedral, and not forgetting the leonine Durham Doorknocker itself) to the highly figurative roof-bosses of the Gothic (such as those to be seen in the cloisters of Norwich Cathedral augmenting scenes from the Passion and the Apocalypse). In the later middle-ages

he features in more crude representations, such as one can see in the cloisters of Durham Cathedral and upon innumerable misericords, corbels and capitals in churches and cathedrals throughout the country.



Lincoln Cathedral

It is in the high Middle Ages that the Green Man as we understand him best comes into being; the figurative human face disgorging vigorous foliage from mouth, eyes, nostrils and ears; in many the foliage grows from the face itself. These faces are invariably tortured, often unquestionably dead; *possessed* by nature rather than in any way embodying it. No jolly *Jacks-in-the-Green* these, rather visages of an profound and elemental horror.

"Well he certainly doesn't look very Christian to me," quoth one of the guides in Tewkesbury Abbey in answer to an enquiry from an American Tourist

concerning one of the superb examples in the ambulatory. But at very heart of the Christian mythos is the ongoing struggle between Good and Evil; not least the evil consequent upon what in Christian terminology might be called *sin*. Certainly as an embodiment of Human Nature his *meaning* becomes as unambiguous as the Jolly Roger; as a 13th century anonymous English poem (quoted by Kathleen Basford in her seminal work on the subject) puts it:

*Long life o man, you hope to gain, till
flattened by a cunning wench,
Your temperate weather turns to rain,
your sun is strangely made to blench;
So here's a thought your teeth should
clench: 'All greenness comes to
withering.' Alas! There is no queen nor
king whom draught of Death shall fail
to drench: Before you tumble off your
bench, all sinning quench.*



Ambulatory Boss, Tewkesbury Abbey

In the present secular age where nature has been subsumed by the relentless onslaught of humanity, then it is perhaps understandable for the more eco-conscious amongst us to desire that the Green Man is *of* nature rather than *against* it. We have destroyed the wilderness; the wild-wood is all but felled and the fens are drained; our response to increasing traffic congestion is to build more roads whilst the green belts strain to contain the bloated paunch of the cities; and for all the well-intentioned fortnightly green-box recycling schemes in the world, one can't help but feel that it's too little, too late.

Things were, of course, very different in Medieval times; the wild-wood was vast, dark, and full of unspeakable dangers; likewise the fens, populated by all manner of bogles and boggarts all too ready to lure even the most wary traveller from the straight and narrow. To Gnostics such as the Cathars of 13th century Languedoc the natural world was seen as Hell, the work of the wrathful creator-God of the Old Testament whom they equated with Lucifer, whilst Christ was The Word - *Logos* - the divine spark of human

spirituality entirely at odds with material creation, including that of our physical bodies. We read in the medieval hagiographies of saints retiring to the wilderness to confront both inner and outer demons by way of *extracting the thorns of the flesh*.

Today we find the core of this Medieval Dualism in the psycho-babble of the Nature-Nurture debate and Material Dialectics. It's there in the ongoing struggle between what *is* and what *ought to be*; between impulse and reason, greed and charity; of what is unquestionably good and what is unquestionably evil.



Norwich Cathedral, cloister

It has been said that the essential difference between Eastern and Western spirituality is that whilst the East is concerned with complementariness, harmony and conciliation, the West celebrates contrariness, struggle and

opposition: The Buddha attains enlightenment by sitting peaceably beneath a tree; Jesus Christ through the tortured agonies of being nailed to one.



Norwich Cathedral, cloister

Those for whom the Green Man calls must follow their own path, perhaps in the hope that he might bring us back to the same elemental wilderness with which Medieval man was in constant struggle, both actual and metaphorical.

That said, I find it sad that the writers of parish church guide books are forced to concede that their precious Green Men are somehow *pagan* - brow-beaten by the terminal dogmas of the New Age in which there can only ever be the one way of looking at things.

Can something so stylistically diverse have but a single meaning? Do we perceive the same qualities in the beautiful gold masked youth of Norwich Cathedral as we do the in the

rude and rustic caricatures of Durham? Can the leonine disgorgers of the Romanesque really be considered as *men* at all, green or otherwise?

For sure, it's a vast and fascinating subject, certainly too vast and fascinating to be reduced to one entirely misleading, erroneous and unfounded orthodoxy - no matter how prevalent that orthodoxy might have become in recent years.



Exterior corbel, York, St. Mary's (Heritage Centre & Art Gallery)

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Of the various books on the subject the perhaps the best place to start is Kathleen Basford's seminal work **The Green Man** (1978) though Mercia MacDermot's excellent **Explore Green Men** (Heart of Albion, 2003) is a more than worthy successor, being perhaps the first *serious* study of the subject

since Basford. Recommended as an aperitif: **The Green man - the Pitkin Guide** which can be found in most cathedral gift shops; lavishly illustrated and a mere £3.50 besides.

William Anderson's **The Green Man - The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth** (1990) is an extensive and beautifully written study, and, although somewhat marred by the entirely subjective subtext, it is entirely redeemed by the spectacular photography of Clive Hicks, whose own **The Green Man - A Field Guide** (2000) is an invaluable reference book for those seeking to come face to face with the subject.

Mike Harding's **Little Book of Green Men** (1998) is as charming as it is personal, whilst Thirlie Grundy's **The Oaken Myths of Post-conquest Britain** (2003) is as exhaustive as it is idiosyncratic. Both Ronald Millar's **The Green Man - Companion and Gazetteer** (1997) and Fran and Geoff Doel's **The Green man in Britain** (2001) are similarly inclined with much of the content belying the actual subject matter by being given over to entirely

hypothetical analogues in folklore, but no less fascinating because of that; after all, diverse theoretical perspectives are the stuff of life.

That said, neither John Matthews' **Quest for the Green Man** (2001) or Mary Neasham's **The Spirit of the Green Man** (2004) concern the Green Man per-se, rather a somewhat fanciful and entirely modern new-age construct derived from a certain *alternative zeitgeist* - which is to say as zealously stated as it is terribly dated. Interesting reads both if only for a tidy demonstration of how deeply entrenched such soulless rhetoric has become in so comparatively short a time.



Glastonbury, Saint John's