

St Michael's Church Bench Ends

What is their origin?

Many people will be familiar with the Fox and Geese bench ends in St Michael's church. If you read the leaflet currently available in the church you will find out what must now be described as the "conventional wisdom" relating to their origin. This is because John Page, our local historian, has done some significant research into the history of St Michael's and he suggests an alternative account for their origin that is significantly different? In this article I will contrast these two accounts.

First, here is an extract from the current description of the bench ends in the church:

"There are three bench ends which are unique to Brent Knoll, and these are on the north side of the central aisle, opposite the Somerset Memorial on the south wall. These are believed to have been carved in the 14th century when the feudal system in England was on the decline, as was the respect of the people for the hierarchy of the Church. Although local priests were still popular, many critics began to feel that the Bishops, Abbots and Monks had become covetous, gluttonous and decadent. The fox in Bishop's clothing on these Bench Ends clearly indicates the disrespect of the people of South Brent (as Brent Knoll was then called) for the Abbot of Glastonbury, under whose jurisdiction this Church came, who was trying to lay his hands on the tithes of this then wealthy parish.



The first Bench End shows the Abbot as a fox, dressed in monastic robe and cowl, wearing a mitre, and holding a pastoral crook on which there is a fleece, indicating that he did not guard his 'flock' for nothing. At his feet are three swine heads protruding from cowls, evidently a sarcastic allusion to the low and brutal calibre of the Monks who look to the Abbot with approbation and respect. The Abbot appears to be addressing birds of various kinds – geese, an owl, a cock and hen, a crane and others – all in dutiful subordination to him. In the lower part of the panel, two apes roasting a pig on a spit depict gluttony, the ape on the left holding a plate and spoon and the other fanning the flames with bellows. At the top of the panel between two birds is another ape, chained and holding a moneybag, representing covetousness.



The centre Bench End shows an alteration in the state of affairs. One of the apes causes the geese to rebel and is sitting aloft wielding a baton, with which he enforces his instruction. The fox has been stripped of his robes of office and sits dismally with his legs in irons. In the lower panel the story of degradation is continued; the fox is now in the stocks, looking particularly woeful, and his mitre hanging derisively in front of him. He is guarded by an ape holding a battle-axe. At the top of the panel is a wise old owl.



The third Bench End shows the completion of the vengeance. Here the fox has been hanged by the geese and below him the watchdogs bark in triumph. At the top of the panel is a grinning head.”

John Page's view on the origins of the Fox and Goose bench ends

You can see from the “standard” account that it leans heavily on the antagonism between the local clergy and people of South Brent (as it was known then) and the Abbot of Glastonbury and his monks. Was this antagonism real and could it have explained why such a scurrilous account appears like a “cartoon” in our local church? John Page challenges this notion and tries to fit the story into historical events that occurred around the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries during the time when the benches were thought to have been carved. He also questions the interpretation of the various birds and animals appearing in the three scenes.

So, let us start with the history. Around the time of their carving the Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Beere, was well respected and much loved by the clergy and local people. Furthermore, Bishop Fox, who could also have been the subject of the carvings, was a formidable figure who went on to become a Privy Councillor under Henry VIII. It is highly unlikely that local people would have made such a public statement of discontent about either person. It is far more likely that the story behind the benches originated in a historical dispute that caused one of the protagonists in the argument to commission the design of the benches. But what was this dispute? John reviews some possibilities and decides that the most likely dispute to cause offence between Abbot and Bishop was significantly earlier than the date originally ascribed to their carving.

Bishop Bekyngton paid a visitation to the Abbey in 1445 (rather like an OFSTED inspection) and found some unspecified irregularities at the Abbey, which was being run by Abbot Frome, an elderly man with poor eyesight.



Unfortunately the Bishop was called away on urgent business and did not have time to ensure that penalties were imposed. In his absence the Abbott took matters into his own hands and imposed his own penalties. The Bishop was furious and the dispute escalated, eventually being presented to the Pope. There is no record of the final outcome but the Abbot continued in post until he died a few years later.

John concludes that it is more likely that this story was the basis for the carvings and that they were made earlier than originally thought.

We then have to move on to the carvings themselves and what the various birds and animals represented. The first point to make here is that the quality of the carving is not very good, and John challenges some of the identifications made by previous commentators. For example the image above the fox in the first panel has been variously identified as a young fox and an imp.



Our current description recognised that it is an ape, with which John agrees. It is in the second panel that John suggests a major revision of previous views. The figure in the top panel holding a scroll was thought to be an ape but John has noticed chevrons on his neck and suggests that it is, in fact, a lion, because the chevron was used as a representation of a lion in the medieval period.

Finally we have to consider the historical context and embed the story in contemporary imagery. What did the animals and birds signify? Did the cartoon draw on stories that were then popular? The answer here may be that the “cartoon” is based on the medieval stories about Reynard the Fox. He was considered to be a duplicitous character and, in the stories, often plays tricks on Chantecler the Cock, who appears in the first panel. The lion, known as King Noble, also appeared in the tales of Reynard.



Photo from the Curious Rambler - Where Margo Lestz Brings History to Life

<https://curiousrambler.com/renart-and-chanteer/>

So, taking all these views into account, what could the panels represent? A summary of John's view is as follows:

Panel 1 – the fox is likely to be Abbot Frome and the panel represents his state prior to the visitation by Bishop Bekyngton in 1445. He is posing as a bishop, which is clearly above his station, but the gullible geese have been taken in by this. Other birds and animals have not been taken in, and are predicting his downfall.

Panel 2 – Reynard the fox is in chains and King Noble, the lion, has been brought into the picture to advise the geese. In the lower panel King Noble is conducting the trial of the fox (in chains). The suspended mitre suggests that the trial is about the Abbott usurping the Bishop's powers.

Panel 3 – the trial goes badly and the fox is hung by the geese, suggesting that the Bishop has triumphed. In the lower panel John suggests that, rather than dogs waiting for a meal from the dead fox, the two animals are foxes that represent monks who are now confined to their quarters following the Abbot's defeat.

I have tried to provide a flavour of the research that John Page has done and written up in the book that was published for the millennium. Those who wish to read this will be able to do so when John's account is published on this website.

Ged Keele – April 2015