

The Forgotten Woman of Southwell Minster

For the modest sum of twenty pence, visitors to the Minster may purchase a leaflet titled 'Women in the Minster' which takes you on a tour of the building, inside and out, noting the windows, carvings and memorials to women who have featured in the life of our church. Well worth the money, this leaflet provides a subtle change of focus, allowing the visitor to glimpse the people and stories of life in Southwell throughout the ages that sit quietly in the shadows of this beautiful building. With one exception. There is an important carving, quite rare and obscure in its origin and meaning, that seems to have been forgotten.

I have not been a steward with the Minster for very long, only a couple of years, but in that short time I have been asked many questions on odd aspects of the church's history and architecture. As stewards we try to learn as much about our church as we can to pre-empt unexpected questions, with varying degrees of success. One such question that I could never have anticipated was put to me several months ago by a gentleman who had come to see the Minster librarian. As I escorted him down the nave he asked me if I knew where our 'Sheela na gig' was. Far from knowing where she was, I didn't even know what she was.

Our visitor quickly filled me in on the details, describing Sheela na gig as a fertility-style carving, pagan in origin, an example of which was supposed to exist in Southwell Minster. He was sure she would be high up in the roof space of the quire, so high you would

need binoculars to see her properly, although he warned me, she is not pretty to look at.

As it turned out this visitor was wrong about Sheela na gig on almost all counts except two. We do have a Sheela na gig at Southwell Minster, and she is not pretty. I spent some time searching for our Sheela, read through the notes in the Stewards' files, asked around, and trawled through the library's books on local myths and legends. All I could discover was that we were supposed to have one, but



Photograph © Adam Phillips

nobody seemed to know where she was. I certainly could not find her in the roof of the quire, nave or crossing, with or without binoculars.

In the end I found her, as we seem to find everything these days, on the internet via Google. If you visit www.sheelanagig.org you will find a fascinating website devoted to these medieval carvings with a page on the image at Southwell Minster. Our Sheela was discovered by an Art Historian from Norway, Kjartan Hauglid, whose excellent photographs can be viewed on this site. She sits on

the outside of the Minster, on the right hand tower, the second carving on the right in the line of carved heads just below the pepperpot.

Sheela na gig is not a pagan fertility symbol. She is an established aspect of medieval iconography, usually though not always found in Romanesque churches, and takes her place alongside that other, equally fascinating example of medieval iconography which abounds in the Minster, the Green Man. The most convincing theory on the meaning of the Sheela na gig figure that I have found so far is that she was an apotropaic symbol used to ward off evil. We should not dismiss her as an example of pagan beliefs being absorbed by the church, and included by the stonemasons in a surreptitious

and subversive act of sculpture. The fact that she appears so often in churches of importance like Southwell, (Ely Cathedral has two Sheela na gigs), and that she is not hidden away in obscure corners – one has now been found on a Norman baptismal font at the church in Cleckheaton in Yorkshire – indicates that she was part of the mainstream of the church's architectural and artistic lexicon. Her role as a deflector of evil is supported by the fact that she is usually

to be found at points of entrance such as windows and doorways, and as we can now show, in the liturgical entrance of a person into the life of the church at Baptism.

Southwell Minster has a rare treasure in her Sheela na gig. She speaks to us of the life, imagination and faith of the medieval world. We may find her distasteful and primitive, but she remains an important part of our heritage and should be valued as such.

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