

SERIOUSLY, WHY THE CURIOUS MOUSTACHE?

by Joanne Johnson October 2018



An intriguing question indeed and one that is often met with more than a wry smile! However, throughout the last 6 months of my search for an answer, I have heard many possible and plausible suggestions and theories as to why the 'Master Mason' carving in the Chapter House sports such an impossible moustache! The medieval masons were known to be masters of their art and so, I think, we can safely assume that this particular 'style' was not accidental, as has been suggested, but was carved in this unusual way for a purpose or to express a message to a population, many of whom could not read. Some of my findings are presented below, with no particular bias as to veracity, but to invite readers to form their own view.



1) *Architectural fashion*: John David, Master Mason at York Minster, suggests that this style of moustache was fashionable during the decorated periods of architecture, an idea possibly supported by the existence of another 'almost' curious moustache on a crowned head in Southwell's South Aisle. John kindly sent some pictures of similar carvings although none seems to portray the face of a real person as does the Southwell carving.



2) *Green Man Symbolism*: While no examples of 'real' men with the curious moustache could be found on the internet, there are numerous examples of Green Men with nasal sprigs as seen, close to home, in the Millenium Stone (Maggot's Cross) at Bleasby. As the Chapter House is so focused on the natural world, could this moustache be a medieval reflection of the Green Man symbolism?



3) *Influence of Lincoln Cathedral:* Stone Carver, Paul Ellis, who has worked at Lincoln Cathedral for 16 years, showed me seven carved examples of the Mason he affectionately refers to as “Tash Man”. Paul Ellis is firmly convinced that these carvings (which bear a resemblance to our ‘Southwell Master’) represent a particular Master Mason at Lincoln. He bases this on the gradually aging faces alongside the known dates of the areas of construction. Paul believes that the Lincoln Mason carvings are the same man at different stages of his life – starting in the Chapter House as a young man between 1220 – 1235AD on through to the end of his conceivable career. While it is highly unlikely that this same Mason began work at Southwell’s Chapter House c1290AD, he might possibly have trained a younger family member or apprentice who went on to work at Southwell. The similarity of these carvings, all of whom exhibit the same unusual facial hair, contributes to growing evidence linking the Lincoln and Southwell masons.

Interestingly, having made enquiries at the Stone Masons’ Workshops in Durham, Winchester and Canterbury, none were aware of similar examples, suggesting that ‘Tash man’ may well have represented a local man.

Without any written documentation, the potential explanations presented here remain highly speculative so it is up to you, the reader, to make of it what you will! It is however important to stress that none of these explanations are mutually exclusive, and the ‘truth’ may well reside in a combination of all three (or more) possibilities!

“Many thanks to all the helpful, learned and charming individuals from numerous Cathedrals I have visited in my quest but mostly to Paul Ellis for sharing with me his own research and photographs. Thanks also to Janet Stocks for her encouragement and invaluable guidance throughout also to Peter Aldrick for his wonderful photography.”

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