

A FOOL'S LIFE

by Joanne Johnson

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Among the fascinating stone characters adorning the upper level of the pulpitum is a human head with ass's ears. Not surprisingly, there has been much speculation as to whom the carving might represent and why it is in such an exalted position on a facade reflecting the social order.



It has been suggested that the carving might be a lawyer associated with the words made popular by Dickens' odious character, Mr Bumble, in *Oliver Twist*, "the law is an ass ... an idiot" originally taken from an earlier work, by dramatist George Chapman's "Revenge for Honour". Both suggestions seem to lose credibility, however, when considering the relevant dates. The serial of *Oliver Twist* first appeared in 1837 some 15 years after the Bernasconi restoration of the pulpitum and Chapman's play was published in 1654, long after the original construction in the mid 14thC.

A medieval court jester or the more serious Lord of Misrule might, on the other hand, present more plausible possibilities. Jesters were entertainers mostly associated with the Middle Ages though they are known to have existed long before. They typically wore brightly coloured clothing, bells and three-pointed hats which came to represent earlier times when jesters wore hooded costumes with ass's ears and a tail. Although donkeys have long been synonymous with foolishness, many court jesters were far from frivolous. In fact, in medieval Europe they were often heavily involved in affairs of state and were no stranger to the machinations of the Court. The court jester was well paid and usually allowed to speak freely whilst all others at Court needed royal permission. They, also had the unique freedom to criticise the monarch openly. Traditionally, on 1st January, during the Feast of Fools, a servant was elected as the Lord of Misrule, assuming the role of monarch and entitled to make decisions of State. This might explain the position of this carving on the pulpitum alongside a King, Queen and Archbishop. Granted, he is on the opposite end of the screen but nevertheless he is on the 'top deck'.



A further indication in support of the court jester is that Beverley Minster, built around the same time as Southwell, hosts numerous carvings of jesters. The replica on the left is found within the choir stalls at Beverley. The righthand character, found at Lancaster Priory, seems to bear a slight resemblance to Southwell's carving, though more jocular.



The tradition of the medieval jester came to an end as a result of the Civil War (1642-1651). Oliver Cromwell, having risen to power, had no tolerance for the comedy of the jester nor did Charles II and the tradition of the court jester in England was never re-established.