

THE GREEN MAN
by Jos Hall, 14th May 1994

The introduction to the talk was the playing of an extract from a Radio Nottingham programme broadcast at the time of a Minster Flower Festival. In it, Leslie Morley spoke about why people visited the Minster, and the effect it had on them through “the magic of age” and “the beauty of music and art”. He also said that visitors should “feel received”, but not overwhelmed by the stewards’ welcome.

We were next told the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. This Arthurian romance is of a knight with green skin, hair, clothing and even a green horse, who offers to have his head struck off if in a year’s time the knight who does the deed submits himself to the same trial. After Gawain has struck off his head, the Green Knight picks it up and carries it away. He is a cephalophore, i.e. a head carrier; like St. Denis, who after his head was cut off at Montmartre (the martyr’s mount), picked it up and carried it to his chosen resting place, now the abbey of St. Denis near Paris. Stories about heads abound in Celtic Mythology, in which head carriers are guardians against evil.

We were then taken on an imaginary journey back to the Middle Ages. To understand these beliefs we have to travel back in time. We have to imagine away radio and T.V., gas, electricity and mains water, central heating and modern plumbing, aeroplanes, trains and cars. In the last decade of the 13th century we find Southwell surrounded by forests teeming with dangers including spectral horsemen like the Erl-King as well as outlaws and robbers. Travel through these forests is on horseback for those who can afford it, on foot for the rest. In the middle of this the Chapter House is in the course of construction, the masons are putting 10 green men among the carvings, and the decorators are painting them green.

Why did they do this? It was an age of new horizons. Edward I was building castles, Marco Polo reaching China, Thomas Aquinas writing and teaching theology and philosophy. Cathedrals were rising in France, Giotto was painting frescoes in Italy: new ideas, new art forms. BUT it was also an age when life was short and brutish and death was everywhere. Long hours of work in the summer contrasted with long hours of idleness in the winter. Famine was a constant threat. Dwellings were full of filth. There was an obsession with the “Four Last Things”, Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, seen on tympana and chancel arches. Especially hell! There were many superstitions and widespread belief in witchcraft and demons. Leaves, and trees, played an important part in these (cf. II Samuel 5.24). People were very close to nature. Ideas of death and rebirth were linked to agriculture and the slaughter of animals. Romanesque decorative motifs on our nave pillars have their origin in megalithic carvings: the Chapter House itself was perhaps seen as a wood or sacred grove.

The Church did not so much meet superstition head on but absorb and sanctify it, e.g. wells became baptisteries (link with Derbyshire well-dressings?).

Therefore, the Green Man, who stood for the cycle of death and rebirth, became a symbol of new life through the resurrection. Found in art, in portrayals of the labours of the months, in the Book of Kells, the portal of St. Denis, at Trier, Poitiers and many other places.

The Green Men in the Minster

10 in the Chapter House – best example to show visitors is the one on the North face with hop and strawberry leaves, i.e. bitter and sweet (see James 3.10)

1 in the Quire

1 on a misericord

+1 other, on the same wall as our only carved head of Christ (find it if you can!)

3 Types

1. A head made of leaves, often acanthus, a symbol of rebirth. The finest is at Bamberg.
2. A head disgorging vegetation from mouth, and sometimes from ears and nose as well.
3. The head as the fruit or flower on a branch – often peering through the leaves.

Green Women: at Ulm and in Botticelli's "Primavera".

The Name 'Green Man' invented by Lady Raglan in 1930s, but the concept is very ancient, going back to Celtic mythology and integrated into the Gothic tradition all over Europe, symbolising God's love for the natural world, and the unity of man with nature.

Some Places where green men can be found:

1. In England: Kilpeck, Ely, Exeter, Winchester, Lichfield, S. Moulton, Crediton, St. Paul's (choir screen), Kew Gardens gate.
2. On the continent: Auxerre, Bamberg, Barcelona, Bourges, Chartres, Freiburg, Laon, Le Puy, Marburg, Naumberg, Poitiers, Rheims, Sees, Trier.