

THE GREEN MAN

By Michael Colebrook

When on holiday or on my travels, I like to visit churches, to have a look round, to appreciate the architecture and the decorations. In recent years these visits have been given an extra dimension in the form of a search among the decorative elements, particularly the roof bosses and relief carvings, for Green Men.

The very name 'Green Man' conjures up the possibility that here there is something to do with nature and the environment – something to do with human relationships with the rest of the natural world. And that, in the context of the Church is enough to arouse my interest.

There are two main types of Green Man. Firstly a man's head with the hair and beard in the form of leaves, all the way to the whole head formed out of leaves. The second type is of a man's head with leaves or shoots or branches growing out of his mouth or nose or ears or eyes or any combination of these. Both types are usually full face but they can be in profile. Both types are illustrated above. There are many, many variations on these two themes. There is obviously no Green Man pattern book that is consulted by craftsmen to create these images. Clearly, individual craftsmen have used their imaginations in the context of the space they have to work in and the materials they work with to create an amazingly varied array of images. But this begs the question as to what sparked their imaginations in the first place. Herein lies the enigma of the Green Man.

It is not easy to understand how and why this particular image found its way into Christian buildings. The Green Man does not appear in the bible, nor is he mentioned by any of the Church Fathers. Apart from pure abstract patterns, most of the decorative images found in churches have some fairly obvious didactic function. They relate to a bible story or to the life of a saint or they serve to reinforce some moral precept. The Green Man does not seem to fit into any of these categories within the mainstream of Christianity, and yet he appears and reappears throughout Western Europe over a time span of nearly two thousand years.

It is remarkable how many churches have one or more Green Men, and the south-west is a particularly fruitful area. I believe that there are 35 of them inside and outside of Exeter Cathedral. These include two fairly massive corbels with what must be about the most elaborate Green Men you will find anywhere. I have had the luck to be shown round the cathedral by one of the experts on the Green Man but even so we didn't manage to see them all.

He is found in churches from the Romanesque and Norman periods through Gothic and Baroque to Victorian times and later, and not only in church buildings but also in private houses and public buildings. It is certainly appropriate that a Green Man can be found in the ironwork of the main gate to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, which dates from 1843.

It came as a great surprise to me to learn that name of Green Man for these particular images was first used in an article on folklore by Lady Raglan as recently as 1939. While the name may have no great antiquity, the image certainly does. The first recorded instance of Green Men in a church is from the sixth century at Trier in Germany where the capitals of some columns were looted from a ruined Roman temple and reused in a new building.

Kathleen Basford, a leading authority on the Green Man emphasises the particular significance of this event, She claims that, 'In Trier the leaf mask began its new life in the service of the church in particularly auspicious and favourable circumstances. Sanctioned by long use in this venerable church in one of the earliest and most important strongholds of Christianity in the West it could pass easily into medieval ornament.' Or would it be too fanciful to suggest that archetypal symbols such as the Green Man seem to have the knack of taking care of their own persistence.

Clearly the origins of the Green Man have to be sought in pre-Christian cultures. Green Men decorated temples devoted to many of the Roman pantheon. There are also some on secular buildings. Green Men are scattered throughout the Roman Empire but apparently none of them date from earlier than the first century of the Common Era. For anything earlier we step into unknown territory. In spite of the lack of firm evidence, scholars seem fairly confident that the Green Man has his origins in one or other of the nature deities that flourished in the cultures of the ancient world of the eastern Mediterranean. One possible candidate is Dionysos, but my preference is for Adonis even if only because it lets me quote from Percy Shelley's poem about him. Originally a Semitic deity, Adonis was assimilated into the classical Greek pantheon and connected with the passing of the seasons, the annual cycle of life and death. The story of the annual death and rebirth of Adonis inspired Shelly to write these lines which could well apply to the Green Man:

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan.
Of thunder, to the song of night's sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known.
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
Spreading itself where'er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
Which wields the world with never-wearied love,
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

The story goes that Adonis was born from a tree and it is perhaps not too fanciful to see how the image of a boy being born from a tree might be formalised or stylised as a leafy head emerging from the capital of a stone column. Whether by this means or some other it seems very probable that a classical nature deity has been assimilated into the Christian culture in the form of the Green Man.

Here I think that we have to differentiate between the formal religion of Christianity, with its theology expressed in the form of creeds and catechisms, and contrast this with what one can call the folk religion of Christianity. The Christian church has assimilated many folk elements from local and indigenous beliefs and customs. An obvious example is the dates of the main Christian festivals that have come to coincide more or less with those of pagan or pre-Christian celebrations of the passing of the seasons.

Also, folk religion tends to focus on the experiences and concerns of ordinary people. And, over the centuries, an absolutely fundamental concern has been whether there will be a good harvest. Will there be enough to eat to see us through the winter? In the ancient world it was the nature deities, such as Adonis and Demeter, who were involved with this. Formal Christianity suppressed them, so folk Christianity assimilated the Green Man as one of the ways in which such concerns, embedded deep in the folk memory, or the collective unconscious, call it what you will, could be expressed within the new cultural frame of Christianity.

This to me is the only plausible explanation for the persistence, the variety and the sheer numbers of images of the Green Man.

Even now, some church authorities are somewhat ambivalent in their attitude to images of the Green Man. I remember visiting an abbey church, which had some beautifully, carved and coloured roof bosses. Postcard reproductions were available of all of them except for the one showing a Green Man. I sense a certain unease at the presence of this rather obviously pagan image that has somehow found its way into our holy places.

Some authors have tried to dismiss the Green Man as simply a form of decorative motif that lends itself to be expressed in a wide variety of shapes and forms and materials and that has been handed down from generation to generation within the crafts of stone masonry and wood carving. This is perfectly true, as far

as it goes, but I am convinced there is more to it than this. I am sure that the Green Man is an image that emerges from our collective unconscious and can speak to us in the depths of our being. I think Shelley was justified in claiming:

He is a presence to be felt and known
in darkness and in light, from herb and stone.

All such archetypal symbols have a life of their own. They speak to us in varied tones and have meanings and significance that can vary from age to age.

In today's world I believe we need the Green Man more than ever before as a symbol of our interdependence with the natural world.

William Anderson in his book about the Green Man puts it very well:

"Our remote ancestors said to their mother earth: 'We are yours.'

"Modern humanity has said to Nature: 'You are mine.'

"The Green Man has returned as the living face of the whole earth so that through his mouth we may say to the universe: 'We are one.'"

No longer can we regard the Green Man as simply a decorative feature and the slightly odd survivor of a by-gone age that has no relevance to the world of today.

We have to honour and acknowledge the Green Man as an age-old symbol of humanities relationship with the rest of the natural world. "The Green Man has returned as the living face of the whole earth so that through his mouth we may say to the universe: 'We are one.'"

Green Men in different materials



Supporting a Coat-of-Arms. Mallorca, Spain



Contemporary Ceramic



Centre of the rood screen, Sparkwell Parish Church, Devon



Logo on homemade shopping bag

Photos: Michael Colebrook



Ceiling Boss, Rochester Cathedral

Photo: Nigel Rushbrook



Contemporary stained glass by John Piper

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