

THE GREEN MAN OF St MARTIN'S

by Mary Pache

What is a Green Man? It could be the little character who helps us cross the road, or even a local pub, but the one I'm thinking of is in St Martin's Church, Ruislip. Turn left as you go in the door, then look up at the spandrel between the first arches of the north aisle. He is only a head, you might argue, and he is not green. However, Green Men rarely show full bodies and they are usually carved in grey stone. The green background of our Man, the glint in his eyes and the profusion of foliage that appears to be growing from his mouth and forehead qualify him as a member of the species and a link with the 'continuity and life-cycle of the natural world and rebirth'. His origins can be tracked back to Egyptian Osiris, borrowed as Bacchus by the Romans and foreshortened by the Celtic emphasis on the head as 'the seat of wisdom and prophecy'.

There are examples which suggest the sinister side of the Green Man. In Exeter Cathedral the figure of the Virgin Mary is treading him beneath her feet as if crushing the Serpent; one of the Worcester Cathedral Men is goat-like resembling the licentious god Pan; Cartmel Priory in Cumbria has the Devil as a crowned Green Man and three connected heads representing a Satanic trinity. He is usually sited in obscure corners suggesting that he is not entirely welcome in holy places. Sometimes he is concealed by an abundance of foliage as in Rosslyn Chapel and Gloucester Cathedral, although modern Gloucester sees its Green team as an asset and has a leaflet which encourages a 'Spot the Green Man' activity.

There are manifestations of Green Men outside the ecclesiastical fold. In *The Golden Bough* Sir James Frazer records Green George and Jack-in-the-Green, two of many spring festival figures. Both were given thick covers of greenery and paraded through the villages on May Day; George's foliage was mounted on a surrounding framework disturbingly like the Wicker Man's. The St Martin's Guide

Book tells us that the Man is a fertility symbol, and this is upheld in Romsey Abbey where he is in company with the explicit Sheeia-na-gig. Other sources call him the 'wild man of the woods', the 'untamed spirit which lives within us all' and the icon of 'irrepressible life'. His connection with frolics on Midsummer night raises the questions of what he is doing in our parish church and who put him there. It is curious that such a subversive figure gained entry to churches, and it could be that there is some basis of truth in the tale of a 6th century French bishop. He unwittingly used stone from the ruins of a pagan temple to top four pillars in his cathedral with Green Man capitals and so started a trend.

The misrule of the Wild Man on Midsummer night culminated the next morning in bringing a tall straight tree down into the village to be set up as a maypole. The motivation for this is interpreted either as worship of the phallic symbol of fertility or as a legacy of tree worship from the Druids. The wild Green Man became 'a representation, in semi-human guise, of the abiding life force of the trees'.

Frazer describes tree worship as having pagan origins. In Britain the Druids worshipped in sacred oak groves, and in Rome the withering of the fig tree of Romulus 'caused consternation through the city'. However, the Fall of Man is documented in Genesis as beginning with a significant tree, and a popular myth tells that the True Cross was fashioned from a tree which grew out of Adam's grave. Trees were respected as vital to human wellbeing and their strength and endurance inspired reverence. In medieval times it was believed that trees sheltered powerful spirits that it was best to appease. They might be benign, or evil if tainted by tales of gruesome Druidical sacrificial practices. Thomas Hardy used ancient orally transmitted stories of Wessex folklore in his poems and novels. A sick woodsman in *The Woodlanders* had a delusion that his illness was caused by his affinity with the elm tree which grew beside

his cottage. He believed that it had 'human sense and sprouted up when he was born... to rule him and keep him as its slave.' An obliging fellow woodsman felled it but as it crashed the afflicted man died.

The early Christian fathers were anxious to transfer this concentration on trees to reverence for the Tree of Calvary. It appears, from the evidence of Gospel Oaks and churchyard yews that compromise was reached on this matter. The Gospel Oak of Ickenham stood on the boundary of three parishes, and was an ideal place for itinerant preachers to address people of three communities. With the experiences of successful assimilation in the cases of Christmas with Saturnalia and Spring with Easter, this way was usually chosen in preference to banning, except by Saint Martin.

He was a fierce opponent of tree worship and ordered the felling of a pine tree that was attracting inappropriate devotion. The rebellious woodcutters refused to obey unless he stood in the trajectory of the fall. He agreed and prepared to be a martyr. As the tree began to descend towards him he made the sign of the Cross, whereupon it changed course and fell on the opposite side.

The presence of a Green Man in St Martin's Church seems tactless in view of the link with tree worship. It has been suggested that such images, half hidden amongst the meanderings of foliage, were a mild rebellion in favour of the old ways. Stonemasons who created caricatures of their masters in inaccessible high places might also have taken the opportunity to express other secret wishes.

Research into the origins of the archetypal Green Man links the significance of the colour green in the everyday life of our forebears, and the modern cult of greenness which arises from it. In agricultural communities through the ages the green of spring shoots of garden vegetables and crop fields heralded a time of plenty after the rigours of winter, and they celebrated the transformation of the

forests from winter gloom to luxuriant green. Spring festivities with plenty of foliage are re-enacted today in some villages, notably Clun in Shropshire. Green stories abound from Sir Gawain who was challenged by a knight green in skin as well as accoutrements to Robin Hood's outfit coloured with the unique dye made in Lincoln. The latter's tricky skill in outwitting the Sheriff of Nottingham is thought to be inherited by Robin Goodfellow, the mischievous Puck of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

This brings the Green Man out of antiquity to the nineteenth century Gothic revival, the begetter of the modern ecological movement with Green the catchword of our times. William Blake's hatred of the city and regret for the decline of the village, Wordsworth's preoccupation with the unspoiled fells, Henry Thoreau's experiment in self-sufficient rustic living, William Morris's promotion of hand-crafted artefacts - all support Jung's observation that mankind turns its attention to natural features when bewildered by the speed of technical progress.

So who put the Green Man in Ruislip church? It could be the Saxon founder, Ulward Wit, as a nod to the woodlands that supported the village and, with the potential havoc of Midsummer night in mind, to keep him safely corralled in the church. The 15th century rebuilders of the North Aisle might have had a hand in it, especially if there were secret tree worshippers amongst them. The spotlight falls on Sir George Gilbert Scott who came along in 1860 to tidy up the church after the caustic comment of Rev J.H. Sperling in his *Church Walks in Middlesex* that St Martin's was in 'a disgraceful state of neglect and dilapidation'. Sir George was in the vanguard of the Gothic revival and his restoration work around the country left a trail of Green Men notably in the cathedrals of Rochester and St David's.

However, the gloss on the Green Man suggests ongoing care, and the brightness of the green background ensures that he will always be noticed.

References

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The Golden Bough, Sir James Frazer
The Woodlanders, Thomas Hardy
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Postscript to Article 06/7

I wrote an article in the 2006 *Journal* about the Eastcote House walled garden in which I reported on the neglected state of the herb beds and the garden generally.

Since then the Eastcote House volunteers have worked in this green space and it is now tidy and pleasant. Lesley Crowcroft, the chairwoman of the Eastcote Village Conservation Area Advisory Panel, is applying for a grant to replant the garden.

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