

THE FLAT BOSSES IN THE NAVE ROOF OF ST MARTIN'S CHURCH, RUISLIP

by Valery Cowley

The 15th century nave roof of St Martin's Church was renovated at the restoration of the church by Sir Gilbert Scott in 1869-71. Where necessary the oak was renewed but it has hitherto been difficult to see details such as the flat bosses (paterae) at the intersection of the wooden ribs. In strong light you might make out carved shields, some of which bear the instruments of Christ's Passion (cf top lights of North Aisle east window and of Sanctuary east window). The nave shields have oak leaves at their four corners, some of which have become detached. This foliage seems the most common medieval woodwork, possibly because of the powers attributed to the oak since druidic times. It symbolises endurance and strength. The leaves also make attractive decoration. Some authorities held that it was the wood of the cross.

The shield symbolises faith, part of the spiritual armour which St Paul exhorts us to put on. Some of the carved images on the nave flat bosses are simple: a Greek equal-armed cross, symbol of redemptive sacrifice; the ladder, a basic component of the Instruments of the Passion, giving access to the cross and the Crucified; an anchor, (Fig. 1) by itself a symbol of Hope, because God's promise to the faithful is 'as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast' (Heb. 6:18-19) and because it has the shape of a cross.

Ripon Cathedral's series of 14th century wooden bosses in the choir are probably from the old roof but they were repaired and gilded in Gilbert Scott's restoration of 1862-70, just after he restored St Martin's. C.J.P. Cave judged that the considerable repairs there were not badly done, and the same might be said of Ruislip.

Brian Tinsey has taken some digital photographs which reveal fascinating

symbolic details, notably a tower (Fig. 2) with a conical roof with pendentives, suggesting a temple, with steps leading to a closed door, a feminine symbol. The tower may stand for the stronghold of faith to which we aspire. It may also represent the Virgin Mary as receptacle of that faith.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The 'porta clausa' (closed door) is one of her attributes, symbolising her supposed perpetual virginity and derived from Ezekiel's vision of the gate 'which looketh towards the east; and it was shut'. He was told by God, "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in it; because the Lord God of Israel hath entered by it". Traditionally Mary has been described as 'a tower of ivory' (Song of Songs 7:4) because, as a 12th century commentator said, 'she was as bright, pure and exquisite'. Another of his titles for her was 'tower of David', protection of Christ from the dragon/Satan, just as David defended himself in a tower from his enemies. In Song of Songs 4:4 the tower and the fortress are the bridegroom's descriptions of his lover's neck!

In the Middle Ages, material height implied spiritual elevation so, like the ladder, the tower linked heaven and earth, as did Christ's Incarnation.

Other shields bear a simpler motif; apparently a rosette is a popular decoration for centuries. However, here it may allude to Mary as 'mystic rose', though the preferred form this takes is heraldic, like a Tudor rose. In one version (Fig. 3), nine daisy-like petals surround the central circle and this may be a clue to its alternative meaning.



Fig. 3

The daisy's name means 'eye of the say', signifying the sun or Son, i.e. Christ. There are daisies in the verdure of the Sanctuary north east stained glass window of Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene, which may well bear the same symbolism. (See the illustrated booklet on St Martin's windows on sale at the back of the north aisle). Nine petals may be a deliberate choice of triple triple. For the Hebrews it was symbol of truth because, when multiplied, it reproduces itself. In medicinal rites, it represents the disposition on each plane of the corporal, intellectual and spiritual.

Such bosses, as in St Martin's and Bristol Cathedral's chapter-house eight-petalled rosettes (Fig. 4), may be merely decorative, but the number eight can represent Christ's rising from the tomb on the eighth day after his entry into Jerusalem; he would have been circumcised and named on the eighth day after his birth; there are eight canonical Hours of the daily office of prayer; eight persons were saved in Noah's ark (thus some fonts are octagonal in shape).



Fig. 4

Ruislip also has a stylised Tudor rose (Fig. 5), a frequent motif in wood and stone. The rose is also sacred to St Mary, who is identified with Rose of Sharon of Song of Songs 2:1.

She is also called the Rose without a Thorn, because she was believed to be untainted by original sin, as was the rose when it grew in Paradise. It only produced thorns when on sinful earth.



Fig. 5

An initially puzzling image emerged from the photographs: a two-handled squat baluster jug with a whisk or sprinkler protruding from its neck (Fig. 6). These appear to be the utensils for mixing the wine and vinegar or the hyssop offered to Christ on the cross; this latter was a symbol of spiritual cleansing (Ps 51:7).



Fig. 6

C.J.P. Cave wrote that the greatest series of armorial Passion emblems is in the choir of Winchester Cathedral, where there are a pestle and mortar at the east end; this motif is similar to the jug and whisk.

There is also a seamless robe or holy coat (Fig. 7), Christ's pre-crucifixion garment for which the Roman soldiers cast lots. Said to have been woven by his mother when he was a child, it grew with him and was discovered in the Holy Land by St Helena and sent to Trier in Germany, commemorated by a 6th century tablet. Such a tunic is also attested in 1156 in Argenteuil, France.



Fig. 7

The eminent art historian Emile Mâle said of medieval artists who 'took everything in a literal sense' that they 'loved to clothe the most abstract thought in concrete form'. Much has been written about the myths and symbolism of the Green Man, so I mention only William Anderson's study, beautifully illustrated by Clive Hicks's photographs and Mary Pache's summary inspired by the roof spandrel at the back of the north aisle of St Martin's (*RNELHS Journal*, 2008). A north aisle spandrel contains one of three Green Men in the church; a second is in the roof at the front of the Lady Chapel and a third is on a wooden nave roof boss (Fig. 8).

Anderson notes that Gothic sculptors transformed both leaf and head, of which the Green Man is composite. In the unpainted roof patera the two extant stylised oak leaves at the top corners of the wooden shield are attached to horns protruding from the head like those of the Celtic god Cernunnos.



Fig. 8

The horns signify fertility and the elegantly curling double beard probably denotes virility. The circular sun-like face with semicircular eyebrows and eyes, forehead wrinkles and upturned mouth has a jester-like smile, unlike the disinterested expressions of Romanesque carved faces. This Green Man of the oak is a forest rather than a vine-clad agricultural figure and may symbolise Spring and rebirth.

Northwood contains remnants of the Great Forest of Middlesex, and Ruislip was a hunting-park, so a survival of ancient beliefs is credible, as well as evidence of the parish's prosperity: fifteenth and sixteenth century rebuilding with rich carving often included Green Men; they were part of the craftsmen's repertory of images. It is also interesting that Ruislip, with three Green Men and yews in the churchyard, is dedicated to that inveterate campaigner against tree worship, St Martin of Tours.

- References:** J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* 1971 (1962)
J.C. Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend* 1983
C.J.P. Cave, *Roof Bosses in Medieval Churches*, 1948