Some Huttoft Church Carvings

Betty Kirkham

It may be of interest to those people studying exhibitionist figures, to know of the carvings on the church at Huttoft in Lincolnshire.

On the north-west buttress of the thirteenth century tower, 2.45m from the ground is a laughing female figure 60cms high (Figs. 1 & 2). It is not complete, the forearms have been broken away and a small indentation in the genital area shows some signs of stone having been removed. The legs too have sustained some damage and appear to go in an upward direction. Possibly they were bent at the knee and held open by the hands. The general outline of the figure is very much like the figure from Clonmel, Ireland,¹ except that the hands do not touch the genital area. The large round head has an enormous mouth with the lips parted so that the impression from a distance is of a laughing female exposing herself. The wide hunched up shoulders have the head sitting closely on the top without any neck.

break in the stonework, from which one would assume a penis has protruded. The head of this figure too rises from hunched up shoulders without a neck. The chin is more clearly defined than that of the female. The mouth is open and smiling but not laughing as the female is. Though somewhat eroded it appears to have had the teeth individually carved.

On the south-west buttress, at the same height as the previous figure is another figure of a similar size (Fig. 3). This figure is a male seated with the legs apart, bent at the knee and the feet hanging down. The left hand is holding the left leg at the knee. The right arm is broken off at the elbow but gives the impression of having held the right leg at the knee. The scrotum is visible, with a
Both figures have rounded bodies with clearly defined waists. The female is so rounded that one wonders if the stone mason was depicting a pregnant woman. These figures do not radiate eroticism, but rather an impish joy of life.

These carvings first came to my notice while searching for nose-banded corbel heads. So far as can be determined no local folklore is attached to them. They appear to have gone un-noticed both by inhabitants and persons interested in church architecture except for a brief mention in the Shell guide to Lincolnshire which refers to them as 'worn figures looking like dolphins'. Many other writers mention Huttoft and the church. The church is mostly remarked upon for the extremely beautiful carved font. The very fine carved wooden chest also merits discussion. If other writers have noticed the crude exhibitionist figures on the tower they have either thought them unworthy of being classed alongside the font or modesty has overweighed historical recording.

The stonemasons who carved the five gargoyles on the fifteenth century south aisle showed no such modesty. Of the three gargoyles they carved to the east of the porch, two are beasts, one squatting, one crouched, then follows the upper part of a human torso. Water from the roof of the aisle issued from the mouths of all three of these carvings. To the west of the south porch and nearest to the exhibitionist figures they chose to carve for the function of discharging the rainwater two human sex organs.

The first is the male sex organ (Fig. 4). It is much damaged, the penis having been chipped off leaving visible the hole through which the water from the roof entered the gargoyle. The scrotum is undamaged. Breaks in the stonework either side appear to be part of rudimentary feet or legs. The whole carving is 38cms across the base and approximately 26cms in depth and has protruded from the wall 38cms.

![Fig. 4 Huttoft church, south aisle gargoyle, phallic carving (D. Fenton).](image)

The next gargoyle along is a representation of the female vulva held open by a pair of hands which appear from beneath what can only be a cape (Fig. 5). The stone is carved in a series of folds to represent material. The vulva from which rainwater would have dripped is facing downward. Breaks occur in the stone above and to the front either side and it would appear this gargoyle too would have had feet or legs. The dimensions of this carving would have been similar to those of the male sex organ.

![Fig. 5 Huttoft church, south aisle gargoyle, female genitalia (D. Fenton).](image)

One wonders if the medieval masons were influenced by the figures on the tower or if at that time some meaningful folklore was attached to the carvings which today we class as indecent.

Exhibitionist carvings, formerly called Sheila-na-gigs, are known to exist widely in Ireland, western France, Normandy and Spain as well as in England. Referring to sheelas (variously spelt Sheilaas) Anderson says, 'They were moral frightening subjects whose exposure and postures of display are most unlikely to have had anything to do with fertility, or with inherited pagan traditions. An apotropoeic purpose has been suggested for such figures. The Huttoft carvings are well placed to serve such a purpose. The church sits high on a mound of boulder clay laid down at the time of the last ice age and the figures on the tower overlook many miles of flat marshland.

Phallic carvings are said to have protected the colonia wall at Lincoln, the fort at Maryport on Hadrian’s Wall, and, further east along the Wall, the principia and the bath-house at Chester, and the bridge abutments of the Tyne. A phallic carving measuring 34 x 35cms was found some years ago at Long Bennington in Lincolnshire.

What do we know of Huttoft church? It is dedicated to St. Margaret. The tower is thirteenth century. The oldest parts of the tower being the first two stages which bear the exhibitionist figures. Contemporary with these there remains the chancel arch and its wall. Sometime in the fourteenth century it was decided to make the building bigger and to add the aisles. The next alteration came in the fifteenth century. It was probably then that the roof was brought to its present level and the tower top took its present form. The original roof line of the nave is visible on the outside of the tower. It was then that the south aisle was rebuilt and slightly widened and the fine south porch was added. The gargoyles on the eaves of the south aisle and the hood moulds round the windows, and the mouldings of the south door are all of this time. Nothing much seems to have been done to the church for the next three hundred years, at least in major works. The chancel was rebuilt in 1780, and, in 1869, the church was fully restored at a cost of nearly £1,000. Only the tower and the belfry were left untouched during this last restoration. None of this information gives us any clue to the meaning of the carvings on the tower. It merely
gives a date for the very explicit gargoyles of the south aisle separating them from the tower carvings by at least two hundred years. It was probably during the 1869 restoration that they were rendered less obvious.

Only thirty four exhibitionist carvings in England, Wales and Scotland are catalogued in Jørgen Anderson's *The Witch on the Wall*. There must be many more, which, like Huttoft, have hitherto gone unrecorded. Can they be dated? Do they display regional patterns of distribution? Do any have vestiges of folklore attached to them which may provide further clues to their iconography and to the beliefs of our ancestors? Clearly our churches merit much closer inspection, especially as a number of redundant churches are being sold off for private dwellings. This means in some cases vast alterations and thus we are losing for ever the chance to examine them carefully. We are failing in our duty as historians if because we think such carvings as those on Huttoft church are 'not quite nice' we neglect to search for them, record them and attempt to interpret them.

NOTES
4. e.g. *Lincolnshire Notes and Queries*, III (1893), pp. 225-227.