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FIFTEENTH-CENTURY WOOD-CARVINGS IN ST. MARY'S CHURCH, BURY ST. EDMUNDS

THE church of St. Mary, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, was first constructed about 1110–20 by Godfrey the sacrist.¹ It was dedicated in 1142 by John, Bishop of Rochester, and the *Gesta* says that it was completed, with its tower, under Anselm. About 1425–30 it was much reconstructed and was then adorned with some of the finest woodwork to have survived the vandalism of Cromwell. As Whittingham says: 'On the richly-carved nave roof whose E. truss is painted, hammer-beams with angels in a procession alternate with arch-braced trusses formed with a concealed hammer-beam. There are saints on the wall-posts. . . . The panelled wagon roof of the rather earlier chancel has figures carved in the cusps, while its cornice is painted with angels carrying the *Te Deum*.'

Mary Tudor, Queen of France, buried in the abbey in 1533, now lies in the sanctuary and Queen Victoria erected an excellent window to her.

In spite of the magnificence of the wood-carvings, almost all of which are very well preserved, they had never been closely studied until the spring of 1964, when Mr. Hallam Ashley made a photographic record of a large number of them. That this was possible is due to the enthusiastic co-operation of Canon R. C. R. Godfrey, the present incumbent.

One of the most interesting features about these wood-carvings is that a number of them appear to have some relationship to disease or medicine—in view of their ambiguity it would be injudicious to express it more strongly. Even those that have no direct medical link may perhaps have been indirectly influenced by the proximity of several hospitals and much sickness. Bury St. Edmunds had long been an important medieval centre for infirmaries.² It catered not only for the medical needs of its own monastic and secular population but also for the vast numbers of pilgrims who visited the shrine of the martyred king and those, too, who thronged through the town on their way to the even holier shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk.

The six carvings illustrated here barely hint at the standard and richness to be found in the whole series. As far as their subjects are concerned little need be said about them.

Fig. 1 shows a doctor with his uroscopy flask. In the church the position of the figure is such that the flask is tilted forwards as though debouching its contents over

Historical Anecdotes of
Dr William Harvey

By Wm. Hunter, collected from family papers &c. communicated to me by the Councillor Eliab Harvey of Lincoln's Inn-filds, from the College books from his own writings and from writers, from the Records in St. Bartholomew.

His father, Thomas Harvey of Frothy tone in Kent, near Dover, was born 1549, died June 12. 1622. aet. 74. The date on his picture by Cornel. Jansen which is preserved among the family pictures at Mr Harvey's of Oriswell in Essex is 1614, being then 65 years old. An. 1576 he married Joanna Holke, and by her had seven sons viz Wm Esq. &c. and two Daughters Dr William Harvey was the eldest. He was born on either Tuesday

Fig. 1

William Hunter on William Harvey.
 First page of MS., in handwriting of William Hunter.
 (see p. 280)

Eliab Harvey Merchant of London.
 The other three pages contain the particular Legacies.

The third page concludes thus
 Thus I have finished my last will
 in three pages, two of them writings
 wth mine hand and my name sub.
 "revised to every one, wth my hand
 & seal to the last

Wth Wth Harvey

I signed sealed
 & published
 in the last
 will & testa-
 ment of me
 & William Harvey
 & in the presence
 of us
 Edward Deering Henrage Finch
 Richard Flood. Francis Finch.

The will or last page contains the
 only date in the whole will: to wit
 that none before it was not expeditory
 executed by him till after the death
 of my dear wife viz till 20 Dec^r 1656

Fig. 2

William Hunter on William Harvey.
 P. 4 of Hunter's MS., as copied from Harvey's will.
 Note possible attempt to copy Harvey's signature.
 (see p. 281)



Fig. 1

Doctor with his uroscopy flask (See p. 286)



Fig. 2

Angel holding pestle and mortar (See p. 287)

the congregation, but it is doubtful whether the wood-carver really intended this as a derisory gesture. It is interesting to see that, apart from his hat, the doctor appears naked—an unusual finding in art of this period.

Fig. 2 shows an angel holding a pestle and mortar. Many other angels are similarly shown in this series, several of them with plants and fruits that figure prominently in the herbals and leech-lore of the Middle Ages.

Fig. 3 shows two figures who are probably SS. Cosmas and Damian. It is unfortunate that the hands of their raised arms have been damaged and we cannot know if they held any object between them.

Fig. 4 consists of two demons flanking a spear around which a ribbon is entwined. Clearly this is not the caduceus with snakes but at a first glance it could easily be mistaken for one. It at least raises the interesting question, in view of its context, whether it might be a debased version of the original symbol which at this period was becoming well known in Western Europe under Renaissance influence. In Fig. 1 something which appears to be a single snake climbing around a staff can be seen in front of the dog. It is uncertain what the exact nature of this object is; no snake's head is visible but one end is masked by the dog's paw, the other by the doctor's hand. Is it mere chance that these two animals are associated here or are we in the presence of a lingering memory from the Anglo-Saxon leech books which contain many charms against poisoning from the bite of a rabid dog and in which the drawing of a snake is a sure indication that a remedy against poison is to follow? And is it too fanciful to suggest that there may be some relationship between this single snake in Fig. 1 and the double looping of the ribbon in Fig. 4?

Fig. 5 is a unicorn. The horn of this mythical creature (often materialized in the narwhal's tusk) was an important ingredient of ancient *materia medica*.

Fig. 6 shows a monkey with collar and chain holding a urine flask. It is probably a disrespectful gibe caricaturing the physician as an ape—a motif that is found elsewhere in medieval carvings (e.g. on misericords at Boston, Bristol, Cartmel, Faversham, and Manchester).

These six examples are hardly enough by themselves to prove that a deliberate medical emphasis is intended here. There are, however, a number of other figures which add to the likelihood that some more or less direct interest in disease may have influenced these carvings. Among these other works the following may be mentioned.

1. A standing figure, apparently intended to represent the Madonna. The interest of the carving lies in the skill and precision with which an advanced state of pregnancy is faithfully revealed and emphasized by the clinging gown which she wears.

2. A figure in a simple close-fitting gown, perhaps a shroud. It has oedematous eyelids and their puffiness is such that the palpebral fissure is reduced to a barely perceptible slit—a feature which is unique in this whole series of many dozens of figures. The hands clasp the belly and lower part of the chest as though clutching in pain whilst the face has a curiously 'ill' expression. Whether this is intended to portray someone *in extremis* or recently dead is uncertain.

3. A male figure in which the gown has been drawn aside to reveal the chest and belly. The intercostal spaces are deeply sunken, the abdomen scaphoid, and the effect of this is to suggest death from starvation or some wasting disease. It is probable that this figure is meant to represent Christ, but the efficiency of the carving suggests that the craftsman may well have been inspired by an actual patient in a terminal illness at one of the adjacent hospitals.

4. A winged dragon and a 'worm' fighting together. The worm is a scaly long-eared creature with vicious teeth and claws. The carving is done with great vigour

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and may well reflect 'the doctrine of the worm' which throughout Saxon and later times was one of the most characteristic elements in the alleged causation of disease.

5. An angel holding a trefoil.

6. Another angel holding a heart surmounted by a four-leaved trefoil.

Trefoil was an important ingredient of the ancient herbals, some of which distinguish 'heart trefoil' as an especially potent remedy. Culpeper speaks of its use 'as a great strengthener of the heart' and says that it fortifies the body 'against poison and pestilence'. Astrologically heart trefoil was under the dominion of the Sun, pearl trefoil under that of the Moon, and it is curious that one of the angels in this series holds a rayed sun, another holds a moon. Again we can only wonder whether this is coincidence or not.

7. An angel holding what is probably an artichoke or possibly the stalk and head of a thistle. Both these were popular remedies in medieval practice.

8. A human leg held in the claws of an eagle or cockatrice. The limb has been amputated through the proximal part of the thigh and is carved with great delicacy and anatomical precision. It is especially interesting to see this carving of a detached leg in view of the presence of Cosmas and Damian near by, though, once more, it is impossible to assert beyond question the relationship of these two groups of carvings.

9. A cat chasing a rat.

10. An owl with a mouse in its beak.

Both these are, of course, common events and their representation here may be nothing more than a wood-carver's *jeu d'esprit*. But by the period in which this work was done the notion that there was some sort of connection between rats and plague seems to have been established, whilst the use of mice in the treatment of whooping cough and other ailments was normal practice. Is it within the bounds of possibility that these figures are portrayed here as a result, albeit obliquely, of their connection with disease?

There seems little doubt that it is impossible to make a final assessment of the significance of all these figures. That some are of medical interest is indisputable, but I do not believe that the primary intention of the wood-carver was to portray a methodical group of medical subjects. There are probably too few of them and an element of ambiguity enters into most of those mentioned here. It seems more likely that, owing to the proximity of several hospitals and his familiarity with their occupants, the craftsman was psychologically impelled—perhaps largely subconsciously—to carve figures loosely and unmethodically related to medicine and its fringe topics. Whatever the truth may be it is certain that wide differences of interpretation are open to anyone who cares to study at first hand the hundreds of separate figure groups which adorn this magnificent church.

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CALVIN WELLS



Fig. 3

Probably SS. Cosmas and Damian (See p. 287)



Fig. 4

Perhaps a debased version of the caduceus (See p. 287)



Fig. 5

A unicorn (See p. 287)



Fig. 6

Monkey holding urine flask (See p. 287)