

## The Enigma of the Green Man

You have probably seen him in a church, peering down at you unexpectedly through a mask of leaves or maybe for sales in a garden centre as a ceramic decoration or you may be having a drink in a Green Man pub. Either way, once you start looking for him, you will start to see the Green Man everywhere. He is carved inside churches, on the eaves of buildings and on hostelry signs. And he's not just confined to Britain but can be found in other parts of Europe and, in different disguises, all over the world.

### What is the Green Man?

The term Green Man is used to describe a figure usually carved in stone, of a man's face surrounded by leaves. The name has been in use since Tudor times to describe the wild man figure that led processions, also known as the Jack in the Green, although there is no evidence that the Green Man found in churches is related to this wild man figure. The name 'Green Man' was first used by Lady Raglan, a member of the Folklore Society, in 1939. The description caught on and is now used to describe foliate figures found in churches and other buildings.



Carving outside St Mary Redcliff Church Bristol

There are a number of types of Green Men. Sometimes they are faces with foliage coming out of their mouths, ears or occasionally eyes. Others have leaves growing from their beards and hair. Alternatively you can see their faces peering out from behind a mask of leaves. These figures aren't just confined to men, although they are rarely of women, but you can also find animals particularly lions, dogs and cats and occasionally skulls or demon figures.



Cat 'Green Man' Iffley Church Oxfordshire

They tend to be found in churches, both inside and outside, carved into the stone as decoration around doors and up high on the walls, on a roof-boss. They can also be carved in wood on pews and panelling or in the design of stained glass windows or metal railings as shown below.



Door design St Mary Redcliff Church Bristol

## The origins of the Green Man

The Green Man is undoubtedly of pre-Christian origin, but the traditions associated with him are of Christian origin.

He was first discovered in the form we know it today carved on pagan funeral monuments. The first Christian figure was found in France on a 5<sup>th</sup> century tomb lid, although Celtic, Syrian and Coptic churches have depictions of animals with foliage coming out of their mouths that date from around this time. The original meaning of the Green Man is long lost and we will probably never know what they represented to the people who saw them.



Pew carving in Bakewell Church Derbyshire

The Green Man first appeared in Britain in the 11<sup>th</sup> century on the walls of abbeys mostly of the type with foliage coming out of their mouths. They were popular themes in churches until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when they fell out of favour when the Puritans came to power. There was a revival in the Victorian times and many depictions of the Green Man are found in architecture such as banks and public buildings built from around that period. Many church carvings also date from this time such as the panels in New College Oxford.



Panel carving New College Oxford

### **The meaning behind the mask**

It is not known exactly what these figures represent but the combination of human heads and leaves have obvious links with nature and the ideas of resurrection and life after death. It may also have a spiritual meaning such as the flowering of spiritual development.

In order to begin understanding the symbolism of the Green Man we need to realise that our ancestors saw the world very differently to the way we see it now. They would have been much more in tune with the seasons and aware of the part nature and especially plants, played in their lives as their very survival depended on it. Flowers and plants have always had symbolic references as they were very important practically to people for the provision of food, shelter and medicine.



Pew carving in Bakewell Church Derbyshire

Some Christian scholars believed that as the heads were in churches they represented the sins of the flesh and were therefore used as a warning. This seems doubtful as they many are out of sight or used on memorials. It seems unlikely that anyone would put negative imagery on the tombstones of loved ones. The Green Man figure is more likely to be associated with fertility and renewal. Part of this cycle of renewal is played out in the Celtic legend of the battle between the Oak and Holly Kings for control of the land every winter and summer solstice. At midsummer the Oak king is killed and every winter it is the turn of the Holly king to die. The idea that the gods of vegetation must die to be reborn, is mirrored in Greek and Roman mythology with the stories of Dionysus and Actaeon who were both torn to pieces and their bodies scattered on the land.

Other features of these fertility deities connect them with the green woods, especially oak trees and vines. As a god of the forest the Green Man has links to horned gods such as Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos and Pan. He may well represent the masculine side of the divine as guardian and protector of the forest.

### **Green Man traditions**

Arthurian mythology also includes aspects of the Green Man in the stories of Gawain and the Green Knight, involving the ritual beheading of a Green Knight and in the character of Percival who grows up in the woods. Lancelot's fight to save Guinevere can be seen to represent the battle between summer and winter. This is reflected in mummer plays where St George is killed by the Black Knight and then resurrected. A more extreme version of this is the story of John Barleycorn. This English folksong has the character John Barleycorn as the personification of barley. The song describes in

detail the suffering, indignities, death and finally the consuming of his body as bread and his blood as beer in relation to the planting, reaping and processing of barley.

Later traditions associated the Green Man with the wild man or woodwose folk figures that appeared in medieval artwork and literature. In Victorian times he led processions, sometimes as a Jack in the Green figure, and took part in festivals and celebrations.



### **The Green Man today**

Today the Green Man is seen by some as a symbol of environmental concern and is enjoying a New Age renaissance as his face is reproduced commercially in pottery and sculptures. He can also be spotted accompanying Morris dancers and musicians as a Jack in the Green figure, especially around May Day celebrations.

Even though we still don't know exactly what the Green Man represented in the past we can still make our own interpretations and ponder the question, "Who is the Green Man?" with a pint of Greene Man beer at the Greenman festival.

