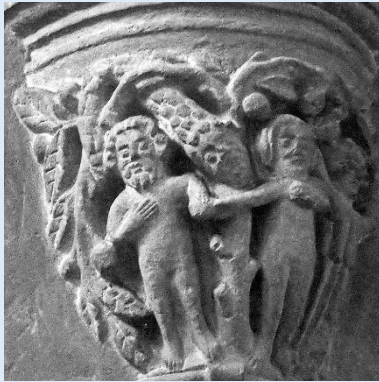


A sermon in stone – the nave arcade capitals of All Saints Oakham



*Adam lay ybounden, Bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter, Thought he not too long.
And all was for an apple, An apple that he took.
As clerkës finden, written In their book.*

*Nor had one apple taken been, The apple taken been,
Then had never Our Lady, A-been heaven's queen.
Blessed be the time, That apple taken was!
Therefore we may singen, Deo gratias!*

This booklet contains images and text from the Exhibition “A sermon in stone – the nave capitals of All Saints Oakham – April to September, 2026”. The photographs are by Richard Adams and the text by Chris Baker. Additional contemporary drawings, mainly from manuscripts, are all public domain.

Introduction



All Saints church in Oakham is very well endowed with stone carvings. For example, externally there is a profusion of pinnacles around the south western corner and elaborate friezes around the south porch and elsewhere (see above). There is also a wide selection of stone carvings internally and externally gargoyles, many of which echo designs on other local churches.



However, perhaps the most important stone carvings in the church are those on the top of the nave arcade capitals within the church, dating from the 13th century. There are in total twelve of these, that, taken together, tell the story of the bible – from the fall, through the incarnation and death of Jesus, to the final vision of heaven. They follow ecclesiastical convention, with the darker images of fall and sin being on the north side of the church, and the more positive images of redemption being on the south side. But it is possible to overinterpret these very fine carvings – and it is quite possible that in places the mason was simply being playful and intended to convey no deep meaning at all.

In what follows, the capitals are referred to as N1...N6 and S1....S6 on the north and south sides of the church, numbered from the west end to the east end (see photographs overleaf). These are indicated on the photos below. N6 and S6 are on the chancel arch, both being badly damaged by the installation of a rood screen.



N1. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden



The carving on the left shows Adam and Eve either side of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. The serpent can be seen between them tempting them to eat the fruit of the tree, in defiance of God's command. Eve's arm is extended to Adam, perhaps offering him the apple from the tree

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3.6)

Having thus "fallen" and given way to temptation, the human pair are expelled from the Garden of Eden. The figure on the

right of the carving shows the pair being expelled from the garden, with an angel with a flaming sword depicted blocking the way back.

God drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3.24).



Adam and Eve and the serpent from a 13th century Hebrew bible

N2. Grotesque heads and hands



The three figures that are most identifiably human are indeed grotesque, with faces showing a range of expressions from aggression to horror, possibly representing the state of fallen humanity. Two are male and one female. The former seem to have greenery growing from their heads. The fourth figure has wings and is somewhat dragon like, perhaps emphasising that sin still binds the unredeemed human figures. Alternatively all these figures could be representations of demons, or even caricatures of those, very human, acquaintances of the mason.

N3. Grotesque heads and a coiled dragon

The dragon is mentioned at several points in the Old Testament, and seems to have been thought of as a sea monster, usually identified as Leviathan. In the New Testament we find a dragon in the book of Revelation, where it is a representation of Satan seeking to destroy the church.

The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Revelation 12.9)



So perhaps we have here another picture of the oppression of humanity by the devil. The three heads have animal like bodies and could also be interpreted as representing demons or evil spirits.



St Michael and the dragon. Spanish early 15th century

N4. The Green Man



The notion that the Green Man, or more properly, a foliated head, represents a survival from pagan worship has been thoroughly debunked by historians in recent years, and, as was so much else in folklore studies, largely the invention of late 19th century scholars.

The motif is however of Indian origin that came, via the Arab world, to be used with a decorative function in European churches. In terms of Christian iconography, some writers suggest that Green Men with foliage springing from their mouths, such as the one here, reflected the Golden Legend from the 13th century, which describes how Seth, the third son of Adam, planted seeds from the Tree of Life in his dead father's mouth as he lay in his grave. The tree that grew from

them became the tree of the true cross of the crucifixion. The figure could thus represent the death mask of Adam, with a foreshadowing of the cross and resurrection. Or it might simply be a favourite of the mason.



From the Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves, 1440 – St. Michael giving a sprig from the Tree of life to Seth; Seth putting the seeds into Adam's mouth; a tree growing from Adam's grave

N5. The Siren



A winged beast with a human head playing an instrument that looks like a lyre, using a bow. This is possibly a Siren of classical legend (specifically in the *Odyssey*), that lured sailors to their death by the beauty of their song. As such it may represent the alluring temptations of sin. Or more specifically, it might represent the danger that women posed to the spiritual state of men.



Siren from an English Bestiary, c. 1235

N6. The Jester



This carving above the pulpit was damaged by the installation of a long-since removed Rood Screen. The front figure shows two figures making faces, and there was presumably a third to the right. These are perhaps appropriate for a location just above the pulpit, where they mirror possible reactions to the preacher's words. Around the back however, on the other side of the rood screen damage, there is a much more serious, although rather worn, person in prayer.



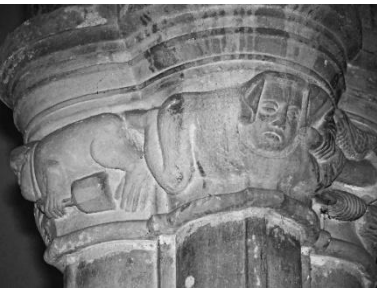
S1. The pelican in her piety



This carving is a symbol of the sacrament of Holy Communion. It is based on the legend that in time of famine and drought, the mother pelican wounds herself, striking her breast with her beak so as to feed her young with her blood, in order to prevent them from dying, but in turn losing her own life.

The pelican thus symbolizes Jesus who gave His life on the cross to save men and women from their sins. The pelican and her chicks are in a nest on a tree – perhaps representing the Tree of Life.

S2. The Fox, the geese and the ape



This is the most difficult of all the capitals to interpret. It shows a fox with a goose in its mouth, pursued by goslings. A man points his staff at the fox. A fettered monkey is also depicted, and two snake-like creatures intertwine, each biting the others tail.

A number of interpretations have been put forward; that it represents the story of Reynard the Fox; an incident in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's tale where the rooster Chauntecleer is captured by a fox; or that the fox represents the Dean of Westminster (the patron of the church) running off with the

great tithe (the goose) leaving only the lesser tithe (the goslings) for the local priest (the tethered monkey). None of these seem wholly plausible. It may simply be that we are here seeing the mason at his most playful and inventive, with the intention of causing amusement rather than conveying meaning.



Fox and goose. Luttrell Psalter, England ca. 1325-1340

S3. The four angels



The four angels are facing in the four cardinal directions. They are all quite similar in form. Symbolically they may simply be an indication of the protection of God's people, or they might refer more explicitly to the four angels of Revelation 7.1. who hold back the winds indicating the judgement of God.

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.

S4. The four evangelists

These figures represent the four gospel writers – Saint Matthew (Man / angel); St Mark (Lion); Saint Luke (Ox); and Saint John (Eagle).



This symbolism comes from the vision of the prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament, of the four-faced angels around the throne-chariot of God, which was very influential in early Christian and Jewish apocalyptic literature.

As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth

continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle.....

This symbolism was used again in Revelation 4.7 to describe four living creatures around the throne of God in heaven

.....the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle..

Pierre le Mangeur et Guyart Des Moulins, Grande Bible historique complétée. (c1150)



S5. The crowning of the Virgin, the Annunciation and the Harrowing of Hell



This is perhaps the most intricately carved of all the capitals in All Saints. There are three scenes. The first shows a king crowning a queen, taken as being the Crowning of the Virgin Mary in heaven by God the Father, also crowned and with an orb – an event only found in medieval literature and not in scripture. The second scene is a representation of the Annunciation – the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary to announce the coming birth of Christ. Between Mary and Gabriel, we can see the Lily – the symbol of Mary. The device above the Lily, linking Gabriel and Mary, may represent a scroll, on which the words of the angel may originally have been painted - perhaps *Ave gratia plena*. Finally the scene on the right shows the Harrowing of Hell, with Christ on the left

holding the pennant or banner of the resurrection, leading Adam and Eve out of Hell, represented by the serpent at their feet.



The three scenes are thus a representation of the Trinity - God the Father crowning Mary, God the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary in the Annunciation, and God the Son leading Adam and Eve out of hell between his death and resurrection.

Christ leading Adam from hell by the hand, Vaux Passional, c. 1504
Wikipedia



S6. Lion and oak leaves

The carving S6 on the chancel arch is badly damaged and, for this reason, was not included in the exhibition. However when photographed at high resolution the form of a lion surrounded by oak leaves could be seen.



In scripture, the symbolism of a lion is nearly always negative, as a creature that attacks and destroys - except in one place in the book of Revelation where Jesus is described as a lion of the tribe of Judah (Revelation 5.5). This would be appropriate in its position as next to the capital that shows the crowning of the Virgin and the Harrowing of Hell, which are also eschatological themes. But, as ever with these carvings, this identification must remain quite speculative.

