

THE HUNDRED PARISHES SOCIETY

www.hundredparishes.org.uk

Before the 15th century, people attending a church service would stand or kneel. When benches or pews were introduced, they were sometimes decorated by skilled craftsmen. In particular, the top of the ends of some pews were carved with figures called finials or poppyheads.

The word poppyhead comes from Latin via Old French meaning the poop or figurehead of a ship. Poppyheads can be found in churches across the country and they are particularly prevalent in East Anglia. The Hundred Parishes has some fascinating examples.

The carved figures can represent almost anything. Some are of flowers or fruit or animals. Mythical creatures or demons were introduced to remind parishioners that if they led a sinful life they would go to hell. Saints and angels however meant that if you lived a good life you would go to heaven.

You will also find carved creatures depicting saints. In St. Mary's, Hatfield Broad Oak, 300-year-old poppyheads symbolize saints, with a lion for Mark, a bull for Luke and an eagle for John, while Matthew is represented by a 'divine man'.

Ickleton's parish church has some fine examples of medieval carved poppyheads. One shows St. Michael weighing souls of the dead and another features a dragon-like creature.

In Wendens Ambo parish church you will find a fearsome-looking beast which you may meet if your soul goes to hell!

Linton's church has a wide range of subjects including scribes resting their books, one on the back of an angel and another on a dragon.

When you are out and about, I encourage you to seek out these wonderful examples of ancient craftsmanship. Please let us know of others on either the feedback page on our website, www.hundredparishes.org.uk or share a photo with the Hundred Parishes Group on Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/562396892237665