

THE FOX AND GEESE BENCHENDS

The three best-known benchends at St. Michael's church are those depicting the misadventures of a mitred fox. Over the centuries there has been much discussion regarding the significance of the story, or parable, portrayed in this medieval strip cartoon. Pevsner felt they were, "*The most interesting piece of furnishing in the church, for iconographical reasons. They have the usual tracery and poppy-heads of lozenge shape, but in addition to the usual representations of the Pelican, Lamb and Flag, and Signs of the Evangelists, they show a bit of animal fable with a polemical meaning which must have been patent at the time to everyone who saw it.*"

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the earliest extant descriptions of them were recorded, each benchend was treated as a separate entity, though related in overall theme. It was not until a hundred years later that the story began to take a shape which is more familiar to us today. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that nobody appeared to ask, or listen to, the locals, who did seem to have a coherent story to tell, though its provenance may have more to do with ecclesiastical politics than actual fact.

There have been many interpretations offered over the years for the figures as well as the story. Some have imagined them as generalised symbols, others presumed that almost every one is a unique species delineated by specific features. There is still a major controversy as to whether the central figure really does represent an abbot, as local legend has always suggested, or whether it is really a bishop, with Bishop Fox being a prime candidate.

When Collinson published his "History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset" in 1789, he referred to "*a variety of curious antique Carvings which seems to have been intended as a satire on Monks superstition.*" Similar views were expressed by the Revd. Richard Warner in his "Walk Through Some of the Western Counties of England," published in 1800. He notes that the benchends are "*curiously and variously carved with subjects most grotesque and ludicrous.*" He refers to them as "*Caricature carvings,*" and supposes them to be "*instances of practical satire by the parochial clergy against the mendicant orders; for it is well known that the most inveterate antipathy subsisted between the parish-priests and the friars, in consequence of that considerable influence which the latter had obtained by their absurd vow and itinerant preaching.*"

Noticeably, Collinson/Rack relates the contents in reverse order to that with which we have become accustomed. He starts by describing, "*First a Fox, hang'd by geese, with two young ones yelping at the bottom.*" His description of the next carving we would consider, perhaps, rather less than adequate. "*Secondly,*

a monkey at prayers, with an owl perched on a branch over his Head. Below is another Monkey in an erect posture holding a Halberd,” does not seem to do justice to the two panels portrayed there, though his third effort is rather better, and rather longer. *“Third a Fox, erect, in Canonicals holding a Crossier with a Mitre on his Head. Above a young Fox chain’d, with a bag of Money in his right paw. On each side are Geese, Cranes, & other fowls, chattering at him, and below is a Young Fox turning a Spit on which is a Boar, and on the right is another Monkey with a pair of bellows in his hands, blowing the fire.”*

In 1818, the Revd. Mr. Nightingale published his book entitled, “Somersetshire; or Original Delineations, Topographical, Historical and Descriptive of that County. He states it is the result of a personal survey, in spite of which he describes these benchends in a very similar fashion to Collinson/Rack. However, he then continues by stating, *“The explanation of these pieces we leave to the reader. The prototypes of them are not too difficult of discovery.”* Exactly what he meant by that is difficult to surmise, though he may be referring to the Reynard the Fox stories, which were very popular. However, it does sound like one of the best cop-outs I have ever come across!

In 1829 Rutter published his “Delineations of the Western Division of the County of Somersetshire and of the Mendip Caverns,” and his description of these benchends seems to have a lot in common with Collinson/Rack, though with some variations. He starts with some general comments on the benches. *“The arrangement of the massive oak settings bespeak their construction at a period in which the services at the high altar were more regarded than the ministrations from the pulpit; and the ludicrous subjects elaborately carved on the ends fronting the latter refer the observer to the thirteenth century. The first of these remarkable specimens of ancient taste exhibits a fox hung by a goose, with two cubs yelping at the bottom of the gallows; the next, a monkey at prayers, with an owl perched on a branch over his head; and beneath this device, is another monkey holding a halbert [sic]. The following seat in the series is decorated with a fox robed in canonicals with a mitre on his head and a crosier in his paw and chattering geese and cranes on each side, representing the crime and the evidence on which he had been detected and arrested. These caricature carvings were intended by the parochial clergy for a satire on the prevailing orders, whose interference with their flocks gave rise to mutual antipathy and revilings.”*

In the middle of the nineteenth century Glynne notes, *“In the nave, the original bench ends remain very perfect on the north side, having poppy heads and excellent wood sculpture, both figures and tracery, in some instances grotesque figures as a fox drawn up by a rope; monkeys roasting a pig; a bishop with a mitre and the face of an ass or a fox, etc.”* Which suggests he was still not seeing them as a coherent whole, rather as individual carvings, like Collinson/Rack and Rutter, and in a sequence starting with the first benchend that he would have seen on entering the church.

Slightly later that century Morris & Co’s Directory and Gazetteer of Somersetshire with Bristol, published in 1872, relates the local explanation for the events depicted. After describing the benchends, in the same order as Collinson/Rack, it continues, *“The origin of these caricatures is said to arise from the following circumstances, some preaching friars were sent from Glastonbury to preach at the Village Cross, and on their return used to be laden with poultry, pigs, and other articles of provision, for their use at Glastonbury, greatly to the annoyance of the vicar for the time being, who considered they had no right within his cure, consequently he had these figures engraved as a standing caricature of their interference.”* More recently, the produce they took back with them to Glastonbury has been claimed to be *“their stringent demand for tithes.”* There does seem to be some misunderstanding here.

Contrast those with the Weston-super-Mare Gazette edition of the 4th August 1894, whose comments about the other benchends were mentioned “The Benchends” chapter. Referring to the Fox and Geese benchends it continued, *“...exceeding all, are those which depict the tragic end of Reynard the Fox. It is supposed that some one of the Glastonbury Abbots made up his mind to get hold of the emoluments of South Brent, and that the incumbent successfully resisted and, in retaliation, caused to be set up in this church a triumphant and enduring satire on his would-be despoiler. The story is told in three panels, and in these the abbot is unmistakably held up to ridicule as the greedy fox.”* Here it is at last recognised that the three panels do tell a story, though the comments about the relationship between the vicar and the abbot do not fit well with the

facts. By the time these benchends were carved the abbot of Glastonbury had lost his right of independence from the bishop. As we saw when discussing the Norman south entrance door, Brent Knoll church was originally owned by the abbot, but then came under the control of the Bishop of Bath, later the Bishop of Bath and Wells. However, the estate of South Brent remained in the hands of Glastonbury, so the locals still paid their rents, either in cash or, more often at that time, in kind, to the abbot. Though the villagers would normally go to Glastonbury to pay their rent, there may well be occasions when monks came to South Brent for specific events and collected rents at the same time. Consequently, any discussions about monks coming to South Brent and returning "*laden with poultry, pigs, and other articles of provision,*" is unlikely to be about tithes, but much more likely about rents, which would mean there was no cause for conflict with the local vicar.

Shortly after this the Rt. Revd. Bishop Hobhouse, in the "Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries" for 1902 accepted there was a story and explained it in rather more detail. Now the sequence is correct and the two benchends, scantily dealt with by Collinson/Rack, are described more extensively, with a closer approximation to current understanding of the context. "*Plate I. Reynard preaching in a mitred Abbot's robes to the delighted Birds and Rabbits. Above is an Imp and money-bag, imputing covetousness to the preacher. Below are two turnspits roasting a goose, imputing gluttony.*" Now, the fox has been specifically identified as Reynard, the hero (or should that be anti-hero?) of a series of popular medieval stories. He is specifically referred to as an Abbot, though the birds are not itemised (in this case being more particularly itemised by Collinson/Rack) and the creatures peeping from burrows in the ground are presumed to be rabbits. Whereas Collinson/Rack described the creature in the neck as a fox, Hobhouse suggests it is an imp and he is rather more cursory in his description of the turnspits.

Plate II is undoubtedly handled by Hobhouse in a rather improved fashion. "*The trial and imprisonment. In the upper spandrel, an owl presides as judge over the Reynard detected, stript, and manacled. The birds (probably Herons which the Abbot's Heronries made familiar) as a jury are listening to the arraignment read out by counsel.*" No monkey at prayers here, although the owl still presides. Curiously there is no mention of the two-level composition, with the fox in the stocks below, being guarded by an animal holding a halberd.

Plate III describes, "*The execution. The gallows are extemporised by a cross-beam thrown over two growing trees. The rope is worked by the birds who formed the jury. Below two dogs are expressing their jubilation. The hideous mask in the upper spandrel is probably an emblem of the Evil one witnessing the proceedings.*" A little more than Collinson/Rack here. Hobhouse has noticed that it is "*the birds who formed the jury,*" who are working the rope at the execution. He also notes that there is an "*Evil one*" in the neck of the benchend.

J C D Smith "Church Woodcarvings: A West Country Study," published in 1969, which has one of the St. Michael's benchends pictured on its front cover, recognises the animal preaching to the birds as Reynard the Fox and believes the birds to be "*a cock, a hen, two ducks, a stork, an owl and others.*" Notably, he recognises the animals at Reynard's feet as "*foxes wearing cowls and, if this is so, they presumably represent the fox abbot's monks.*"

Pevsner's original (first published 1958) and updated versions (2014) have much in common, so any differences will be shown as comments in brackets for the original and in braces for Orbach's modifications. "*{Three} [benchends] show (a bit of animal fable) / {the fable of Reynard the Fox} with a polemical meaning which must have been patent at the time to everybody who saw it. On the first (Reynard the Fox) / {the fox} is seen disguised as a mitred Abbot. He is paid respect to by three monks in cowls who have the heads of swine, At the foot two monkeys roast a pig on a spit. On the second the fox is {stripped and} foot-cuffed and below {he is} put into the stocks, (and a monkey guards him) / {guarded by a monkey}. His mitre hangs on the wall. On the third he is hung by the triumphant geese. What does this imply? A general hatred (of the parishioners or some wealthy donor) for monasteries and Glastonbury in particular {to which the parish belonged}. Or a topical reference which escapes us? (There is no evidence to prove that at that time Glastonbury tried to recover South Brent which had gone to the Bishop of Wells in the c12.) Whatever the immediate meaning, the outspokenness of the statement remains memorable.*"

In between those editions, in 1989, Robin Bush in "Somerset: A Portrait in Colour" refers to "*Three famous but enigmatic bench ends in Brent Knoll church. It is generally thought that the fox represents the abbot of Glastonbury, lord of the manor of Brent Knoll, but the significance of the carvings remains a mystery. Could they refer to the execution of Abbot Whiting on Glastonbury Tor in 1539 or do they concern an earlier and more parochial dispute with Brent Knoll's landlord.*" He then continues by describing the pictures of the benchends (by Julian Comrie). Five years after that book appeared Robin Bush published "Somerset: The Complete Guide," in which he modifies his previous comments by suggesting "*This is usually interpreted as a propaganda attack on the abbot of Glastonbury although it might represent Richard Fox, bishop of Bath and Wells 1492-94, who bought land here in 1519.*" That comment will be discussed again later in more depth., to acknowledge that their influence became fairly widespread.

Before discussing any other parts of these intriguing carvings, it may be useful to focus on the first panel in some detail, as that does have many details of special significance. Although it is obvious that the central figure is undoubtedly a fox, and that he almost certainly depicts the character from the old and very popular story concerning Reynard the Fox, there is obviously some doubt as to whether he is representing a bishop or an abbot. It is generally considered that bishops hold their crozier pointing outwards, to show their influence extends throughout the totality of their see. Abbots, when entitled to a mitre and crozier, as did the Abbot of Glastonbury, held the latter pointing inwards, to acknowledge that their influence was confined to the abbey precincts. Here it is obvious that the crozier is pointing outwards, away from the fox. As this point has some special significance in the interpretation offered here, I shall return to it later.

Another reason, mentioned above, for supposing the fox could be a bishop is that there was indeed a Bishop Fox, who was Bishop of Bath and Wells. He only remained bishop for a short period (1491-1494), after which he was translated to Durham and then to Winchester. Later in 1519, he was recorded as buying some land in South and East Brent. Was this land purchase the subject of a dispute with the abbot, who owned much land in the vicinity? In his book "The Rural Benchends of Somerset," published in 1983, Peter Poyntz Wright proposed such an explanation: "*The more feasible interpretation is that these figures represent either the parochial or monastic dislike of Bishop Richard Fox, Bishop of Bath and Wells for 1492 to 1495, and who later bought land in both South and East Brent in 1519, to the concern of one John Fitzjames and the then Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Bere. By this time Richard Fox had moved on to higher things and would no longer have had direct authority over the diocese that included South Brent.*"

The dates of these particular benchends now become important, because if they are known precisely, a more accurate conclusion may be drawn. The Abbots of Glastonbury and the Bishops of Bath and Wells were often at odds with each other, and these three scenes might be the result of differences during Fox's episcopate of Bath and Wells. However, his purchase of land in 1519 might have disturbed both the Abbot as Lord of the Manor, and the parishioners, and the benchends could belong to that period. It could be suggested that the latter might be more likely as without direct authority the bishop was less likely to object successfully to what are clearly insulting pictures. Attacks directed against the clergy were not unknown at this time and there are other examples of just this sort of abuse."

As far as I know, this appears to be the origin of the Bishop Fox theory, but there are a number of very good reasons why he is extremely unlikely to be the inspiration for these benchends. Firstly, it is unlikely that a series of satirical benchends would have been created by the Abbot in St. Michael's Church, in South Brent, for the very good reason that the Abbot did not have the patronage of the church at this time. Though he was still the major landowner locally, it has already been shown that Abbot Robert, during the twelfth century relinquished a canonry at Wells and with it his prebendary churches at South Brent and Pilton. At the end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century it would have been the Archdeacon of Wells who had the jurisdiction and it seems very unlikely that he would have promoted the interests of the Abbot in this way.

Secondly, another fact militating against such an argument is that the Abbot in 1519 was Abbot Richard Beere (1494-1524). He was highly regarded by his monks and deeply mourned when he died. He was also held in high esteem by those outside the community, who remembered him with affection for a long time after his

death. He was once described as “*good, honest, virtuous, wise and discreet, as well as a grave man, and for those virtues esteemed in as great reputation as few in England at that time of his coat and calling were better accounted of.*” (“Glastonbury Abbey” by James P Carley). Not the sort of man you would suppose could have held a grudge against the Bishop, particularly as Bishop Fox was the person who appointed him to his role as Abbot in the first place, and that in opposition to the monks own chose of successor to Abbot Selwood.

Thirdly, it may well have been a very perilous thing to actively ridicule a man of the calibre of Richard Fox in such an obvious way. During the reign of Henry VII, he was in great favour with the King and became a Privy Councillor, Keeper of the Privy Seal, Ambassador to the Court of King James III of Scotland, principal Secretary of State, and Master of Saint Cross, near Winchester. Not a man to be trifled with, one suspects. Indeed, if he did have any influence on the benchends in South Brent it may well have been in connection with the two pious pelicans appearing there, as he adopted this figure as his emblem. Of course, any influence would, as Poyntz Wright suggests, depend on when the benchends were installed. That is a matter to be discussed in more detail later.

Fourthly, there is the question as to whether there is any evidence for “*the concern of one John Fitzjames and the then Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Bere,*” regarding the sale of land at South and East Brent. Looking a little more deeply into the transactions it transpires that it was merely a concern on behalf of Bishop Fox regarding a proper title to the properties. Apparently, agreements regarding the land had been reached between the Abbot and John Fitzjames, but they had not been written down. Bishop Fox, unsurprisingly, wished to get both parties to acknowledge their legal rights and enter into a conveyance which would be legally watertight. John Fitzjames wrote to him on the 12th January 1519 stating, “*Rigyt reverent Fader in God, my syngeler good lord. After moste humble recommendation had to your good lordship, please it the same to knowe that ther was never any wretyng made bitwene my lord of Glastonbury and me for this landis that I purchesid yn Est Brent and Southe Brent; but at request of my saide lord I was content he shoulde have theym at his pleasure...and for your ferther suertie I have made indentures of sale and bargeyn of the said lande between your good lordship and me...for discharge of suche use as my lord of Glastonbury had yn the saide lande, he will seale a confirmacion to your feoffees, whiche Master Portman and I thynke sufficient for this mater; whiche confirmacion and other wretyngis suche as my saide lord of Glastonbury and I had, or now be made, concerning the saide lande, youre servaunt this berer shall delyver your good lordship.*” (Letters of Richard Fox, 1929)

Hardly an issue likely to raise any great animosity between the parties. In fact, the Abbot and John Fitzjames appear to have been happy to comply. So, unless anyone can come up with any additional reason why Bishop Fox should be lampooned in such a way, it seems most unlikely that he was the butt of the joke and also that the actual dates of the benchends seem irrelevant in this case.

Investigating this panel a little closer, I did believe I had found a solution to the bishop versus abbot question. One item rarely commented upon is the object hanging from the staff of the crozier. It hangs from a ring above his hand, but opens out somewhat below. In Arthur Mee’s “Somerset” it is suggested that it is “*a fleece sticking from [the crook in his hand] to show that his flock was not shepherded for nothing,*” but the only other references I have found to it is in Poyntz Wright, where it is described as a “*large leaf hanging below the lower paw.*” Rather than a fleece or leaf, it is more likely to be a sudarium, Brewer states that “*when walking with a bishop, an abbot covers his crook with a veil [the sudarium] hanging from the knob, to show that his authority is veiled in the presence of his superior.*” So, does this establish the true identity as that of an abbot? Unfortunately, not, as it turns out that bishops also carried a sudarium with which to wipe their hands and face when things got a bit tacky in lengthy processions or services. They did not use it for hiding the crook, of course, but that is not explicitly shown here.

So, back to square one? Well, not quite. My misinformation led me to an interesting conclusion, which, in turn, led to the discovery of an incident which does seem to fit with the story related in all three panels remarkably well. It was the crozier which provided the key. If this was an abbot, as all the early records state,

but he was pointing his crozier outwards, this could only mean that he was an abbot who was either getting a bit above his station, or who felt that he was the equal of a bishop and had a wider power and influence than a normal abbot.

Before we explore that idea further, a word about the layout of all three of the benchends (in the following discussions the first benchend is the most easterly and the third is the one nearest the south door). Each of the benchends has two panels, one above the other, although the third benchend has the lower space divided into two. In the central benchend the upper and lower panels have equal prominence. In the two others the upper panel is more prominent. The main story appears to follow from the upper panel in the first benchend, through the upper to the lower panel in the second benchend and, finally, to the upper panel of the third benchend. In both the first and third benchend the lower panels appear to add comments to the major panels above them and, although most commentators have viewed the figures in the neck of each benchend as a mere adornment (except, perhaps, for that on the first one), it appears more likely that they offer a comment on, or précis of, the action below.

Starting at the first benchend, there is a fox preaching to a number of birds, who are either sitting on the branches of a tree or flying towards him. Some are clearly recognisable. An owl is seen at top left, looking over his shoulder. Below and to the right of him is a cockerel, easily identifiable by his cockcomb and tail. Next to the crook, on the right-hand side, is a bird with a long neck, which could be a stork or similar bird. None of the other birds have any readily distinctive features. Some have argued that there are those which have webbed feet and those which do not, though it is more likely that this shows a certain lack of sophistication by the carver than a distinction between bird types. Given that the third panel is normally quoted as demonstrating a group of geese hanging the fox, it would seem reasonable to deduce that they have been involved with the action in the previous panels prior to that, and therefore, as there is a considerable degree of similarity between them all, that all birds, not clearly identifiable as alternative species, represent geese across all three panels.

Looking at some of these birds in a little more detail we have the three who are easily identifiable in the first panel and then the remainder:

The cockerel

A well-known character in the romances of Reynard the Fox is Chantecler, who is frequently shown being tricked by the cunning fox, but does sometimes return the compliment. Here the cockerel is presumably intended to show the more common aspect and suggest that a considerable amount of duplicity is involved in the preaching of the fox. There is, however, another interpretation, which may not exclude the former. Jesus predicted that Peter would betray him three times before the cock crowed. Ever since, the cock has been associated with betrayal. Could that mean that he is shown here to promote the idea that the fox is betraying an established principle, or an ecclesiastical ritual, or even the Christian faith?



The owl

This bird does not have the same profile today as it did in medieval times. It was not considered a wise bird then; rather it was blind, stupid and an omen of doom. In this panel it is turned away from the fox, but looks over its shoulder with foreboding. It is obvious that this does not signify blindness, nor, presumably, stupidity; which can only mean that he represents an omen of doom, boding ill for the object of his gaze, Reynard.

The stork

Although there have been various suggestions made as to exactly what this bird is, it is probable that it represents a stork. In medieval iconography a stork represented goodness or virtue. In this particular case the bird is the only one which looks away from the fox, which implies that virtue turns away from the duplicity of the fox, scorning the one who is shortly to meet his doom.

There are, of course, numerous other birds depicted, with some small differences, but mostly of a type. It is likely that the differences are more a problem of the carver's precision, rather than of any specific design implication. Which means they can almost certainly be grouped as:

The geese

Only the geese seem taken in by the fox, some flying in, some listening enraptured. They almost certainly represent the common people, the target of the mitred fox's devious plans.

Altogether, the symbolism, expressed here in a graphic format, is very powerful. Gullible geese, duplicity and betrayal, proscription by the virtuous, gathering omens of doom, all centred around the cunning Reynard. Yet they are not the only figures in the panel; a number of fox cubs watch from their burrows below. Their presence is probably based upon similar figures in a medieval bestiary. In "The Book of Beasts," translated by T. H. White from an original medieval bestiary, there is a picture showing Vulpis the fox playing possum, when he is hungry, to attract birds. The accompanying story relates how, as they come to feast off his carcass, thinking him dead, he suddenly springs to life and captures his next meal. Notably, whilst he lies on his back a number of fox cubs peep from holes in the ground beneath him, to learn the tricks of the trade. Their appearance is so similar to that of the cubs watching their master here that it strongly leads one to believe the carver must have seen the Bestiary and copied them. So, presumably they are also learning the tricks of the trade and, if the fox does represent an abbot, they are likely to represent his monks.

Reynard is a "*fraudulent and ingenious animal*," the Bestiary asserts and this panel certainly represents a mitred figure up to no good. That view is strengthened by the appearance of the ape in the neck, who is seated and watched attentively by two geese and holds what has been described as a money bag in his hand. Round his neck is a collar, from which a large chain secures him to the ground. An ape was one of the few allies of Reynard and, as he was also seen as mischievous, he was a natural companion to the scoundrel fox. Apes, however, were also used as medieval icons for those in the medical profession. Doctors were not greatly respected by the populace, largely because their remedies were few and often ineffective. They also demanded money for their endeavours, which normally greatly exceeded that charged by local purveyors of alternative medicine, such as witches, herbalists and others.

Many people have interpreted the object held by the ape as a money bag, but it was normal to show a doctor, or ape representing a doctor, holding the symbol of their trade. As there were few diagnostic tools available to medieval doctors, the one thing they almost invariably did was to take a sample from the patient, and books were published explaining in detail exactly what the colour, smell and even taste of the urine was supposed to reveal about the patient's condition. So here the ape is shown holding the normal medieval symbol of a doctor's trade, a urinal, or sample bottle. Less comment is made about the chain around his neck, though some do mention it. Why would a doctor be shown in this fashion? In fact, this chain is more likely to be an adjunct

of the only real apes that people would ever see, that is, at markets and fairs, where they would be performing apes, who had a chain round their neck to ensure they did not escape.

Besides having an ape as an ally in some stories, there is another link to Reynard suggested by this ape, as Reynard appears in some stories pretending to be a physician. He adopts that role in one story when the king falls ill and, though initially absent, he arrives to pronounce that he has sought far and wide for a cure for the king's ailment, which no other doctor has been able to discover. This medicine, it turns out, has to be derived from the skin of a freshly killed animal, which invariably turns out to be identical to that of the fox's main adversary in that particular rendering of the tale. As the Reynard stories were very popular at that time the duplicity involved in this would have been understood by most of the local population, as would the lampooning of a doctor for demanding too much money and giving little in return. So, the ape appears to be intended as a summary of the action shown below.

At the foot of the benchend is a scene demonstrating the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the beneficiaries of the fox's duplicity. A boar is roasted on a spit, which is being cooked by two apes, one turns the spit, whilst the other encourages the flame with bellows. Below them is a feature which is unique amongst the benchends in this church, but could well be a significant factor in defining what is happening in the story enacted in these three benchends. It is a dentillation, or castellation, which is presumably intended to represent some form of defensive wall existing, or being built, around the mitred figure's dwelling. Interestingly, Bishop Bekyngton added an embattled wall around his close in Wells and, shortly after Abbot Frome added a similar wall around the abbey precincts, though the bishop was none too happy about him doing so.

Unlike the other two benchends, the middle one is divided into two more or less equal parts, one above the other. In the top panel a number of birds sit upon a branch, which is bent over to capture the now naked fox. He is seated and foot-cuffed. Two additional birds are located to the left of the fox, keeping watch over him and listening to the proceedings enacted before them. In these panels the birds are presumably all geese, for they appear remarkably similar to those in the first benchend, though the two on the left do not seem to have been completed.

In front of the geese is another figure holding something in his hand. A careful look at this figure reveals chevroned markings on his neck; a traditional medieval way of denoting a lion. He may not look much like a lion, but the carver is extremely unlikely to have seen a lion, so gives it just any animal form with the neck markings, which reveal it as a lion's mane. In the stories of Reynard the Fox, King Noble is a lion and the creatures frequently resort to him in an attempt to check the excesses of Reynard. Given his role as mediator, it is probable that what he holds may well be a scroll, presented by the geese, either petitioning King Noble, or listing the misdeeds of the prisoner.

Beneath this panel the next logical step takes place; a trial is in progress. King Noble, whose mane is not quite as prominent, but is there, sits holding a halberd, the traditional token of a guard. In front of him, the naked Reynard is secured in the stocks, though his legs are a little contorted to enable him to



sit facing King Noble, whilst the stocks are positioned on the far side of him. Reynard may well be protesting about something, possibly his arrest. Between the two animals is a suspended mitre, whose significance may well be important, but that will be considered later. Prior to doing that it would be expedient to assess the owl staring at us from the neck of the benchend.

It has already been mentioned that an owl at that time depicted blindness and stupidity, as well as being an omen of doom. When discussing the previous benchend it was suggested that the detail in the neck epitomised the action being enacted beneath.

So, what can the owl tell us about the two panels below? There was a well-known letter, forwarded by Bishop Bekyngton to Abbot Frome, in the mid-fifteenth century, which states that the Bishop hopes the Abbot's physical blindness has not spread to his mind. This was the culmination of a series of incidents, in what turned out to be a rather acrimonious dispute concerning the relative power and influence of the two men, and followed centuries of power play between the two major religious leaders in Somerset. As they claimed to be the oldest Christian establishment not only in England, but in all of Europe, the Abbots of Glastonbury had asserted the right of the Abbey to independence from the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Bath and Wells. At one time this had been agreed by the Pope, though things had changed somewhat by this time, and the Bishops, who had always been strongly convinced that all religious foundations within their See should come directly under their supervision, had now achieved a degree of success.

In 1445 Bishop Bekyngton paid a visitation to the Abbey (visitations were somewhat similar to OFSTED reports today). After some investigations, the Bishop noted some unspecified misdemeanours and irregularities, which, he decided, warranted certain penalties, though he was called away on urgent national business before he had time to legislate on what they should be. As such absences on official State business were often rather extensive, the Abbot decided to impose his own penalties. This infuriated the Bishop, who saw it as a usurpation of his prerogative, He issued an edict annulling the Abbot's initiatives, but still refused to return and complete his Visitation. After two more excuses for delaying his return, the Abbot began to suspect that this was intended to be the Bishop's way of chastising him, so decided he could wait no longer and re-instated his own penalties. That led directly to the Bishop's remarks concerning the elderly Abbot's blindness.

If it is true that the owl presiding over the trials of the fox, shown on these panels, does represent the inspiration for the cartoon series, then the birds in the top panel may well be those who informed the Bishop of the Abbot's actions and also offers an explanation for the mitre suspended between the adversaries in the lower panel. "Who wears the mitre?" it seems to be saying, with Bishop Bekyngton adopting the role of King Noble and Abbot Frome becoming Reynard the Fox. This could also explain the fact that the crozier is pointing outwards in the first benchend: a clear indication that the Abbot is intending to usurp the powers claimed by the Bishop.

In the third panel the fox is being hung by the geese, suggesting the Bishop has not only achieved victory in the dispute, but has effectively "hung" the Abbot. This can be explained by the fact that the Bishop considered this incident to be of sufficient importance for him to make a presentation of his case to the Pope, who ordered an inquiry to be set up to investigate the actions of the Abbot. In fact, the Bishop went further and included other allegations, which included one stating that the Abbot had been hostile to his Holiness whilst representing this country at a major ecclesiastical conference held in Basel. So, was it the resulting enquiry which represents the metaphorical hanging of the Abbot?

But what about the "*dogs expressing their jubilation,*" as Hobhouse referred to the animals in the lower panel? Most interpretations of this benchend have assumed that the two dogs below are snapping at the heels of the hung Abbot, ready to make a meal of his dead body. There are a number of reasons why this does not seem credible. Firstly, there is a partition between the dogs and the hung fox, which seems a little odd if they are snapping at his heels, awaiting the moment when they can leap into action. Surely it would have been better to show all of them within a single panel. Secondly, the dog on the left has his tail between his legs; not a

feature one would expect from an animal excited about the imminent prospect of a succulent meal. Thirdly, they both appear to be panting to get out of their confinement, which suggests that either they are being tortured by the prospect of an unattainable prize or that it is the confinement which is the problem and they are unaware of the potential feast.

So, what is the neck of this panel saying about this? This clearly shows a figure representing the Green Man, with the normal foliage sprouting from his mouth. “Now the fox has been hung,” he seems to be saying, “everything in the garden is lovely.” On his head he appears to be wearing a mitre, though it is not as explicit as the mitre on another benchend. If it is intended as such, this panel could well be interpreted as the Bishop considering that everything has turned out well for him, with the Pope considering his case strong enough to establish an inquiry.

Presumably the resulting inquiry represents the metaphorical hanging on this third panel, though it does not seem to have been quite as successful as the Bishop would have hoped. Although the specific outcome of the inquiry is not recorded, the Abbot was not removed from his post, despite his advanced years (he was probably in his nineties when these incidents occurred), and he remained as Abbot until he died a year or two later. It is also recorded that the Pope became far more conciliatory towards the Abbot. Of course, it is true that Reynard the Fox always appears to get away with his knavery, but can we assume that is what happened here?

At the rear of the church is a benchend which could well throw some additional insight on the incident. It consists of a stag standing in front of a tree, from behind which the cheeky face of a fox appears. This benchend is rarely mentioned by those who describe the benchends at the front of the church and many may overlook it. Arthur Mee is the only reference known to me and he considered it to be a hunting scene, celebrating the country pursuits of the day. This must surely be incorrect, as it is only in the last couple of hundred years that fox hunting has been practised. Prior to that fox hunting would not have been considered a respectable pursuit, country gentlemen hunted stags or boars. Stags were proud and swift; boar were fast and pugnacious; both were worthy prey. Foxes, on the other hand, were lowly, cunning and uneatable.

A stag was often used as a symbol for Christ, as stags were supposed to flood the serpent’s hole with their breath, or water from their mouths, to draw serpents from their holes and then, when they came out, to trample them to death beneath their feet. As the Devil was frequently depicted in the guise of a serpent, the association becomes obvious. But there is a slight problem, as no serpent can be seen in this benchend. It may not be an accident, however, that almost the whole of the base of this particular benchend has its lower section replaced with an almost totally blank, and not very elegant, panel. All that has been roughly carved into it is the lower part of the stag’s tail. Oddly, it is the only benchend in the church which has any obvious damage to it, which suggests that this defacement was deliberate. It is conceivable that this was due to natural causes, though one may have expected that at least some others would have been affected, and that there would be an attempt



made to copy the original. Or, of course, it could equally be ascribed to its portrayal of imagery unacceptable to someone in this context. Why would that be? If the original did show a serpent, with the stag stamping on it, then it would be obvious that the stag was intended to represent Christ, and that Christ was protecting the cheeky fox, peering from behind the tree, as though to say, "I got away with it, didn't I!"

At this time the church was in the hands of the Archdeacon of Wells, Thomas Bubbewith, but the Abbot of Glastonbury was still Lord of the Manor, so the congregation would pay tithes to Wells, but rents to

Glastonbury. That may well have divided loyalties locally, or, perhaps, could have seen local villagers siding with one or other side in the frequently fractious divisions between the two centres. Could local people have held rather more beneficent views regarding the actions of the Abbot, and expressed their views in a benchend hidden at the rear of the church and consequently unlikely to be seen by the wealthier members of the congregation? Or did the Archdeacon insist on the main Reynard the Fox benchends, whilst the incumbent, Ludovic Joly, or some of the local gentry, arranged for one expressing more lenient views? We are unlikely to know, but it does seem that this benchend does provide a different end to the story and one which not only resembled the truth, but also aligned more closely to the original Reynard stories.



If this interpretation is correct, either the benchends were carved around the time of the events depicted, or they were used later in some allegorical sense to illustrate a then current controversy. Carved benchends are normally dated to the first half of the fifteenth century in East Anglia and the second half of that century in the West. If they were roughly coeval with actual events, that would place them around the end of the 1440s or early 1450s, making them amongst the earliest examples in the West. If they were later, there are at least a couple of events in the next half century which could have triggered their erection.

On July 26th, 1472 Bishop Stillington had cause to order a commission to visit Glastonbury Abbey, "*to correct whatever they find amiss, in view of the common report that the abbot has been careless and negligent in matters both spiritual and temporal, and that other persons there*

have been guilty of various crimes." (Registers of Bishop Stillington and Fox, Somerset Record Society). John, Bishop of Rochester led two archdeacons and a canon, as the Bishop Stillington was "*otherwise occupied.*" At that time the Abbot was John Selwood, who had a large manor house built at East Brent, so it may well have been seen that a salutary warning in the neighbouring parish of South Brent may have been considered pertinent.

Just over twenty years later, in November 1493, John Selwood, who may well have become senile at some point, finally passed away. Naturally enough, the monks wished to have someone to take over the reins as quickly as possible, so they petitioned the king, Henry VII, and were granted permission to appoint one of their number, Thomas Wason, or Wasyn, to the post. Unfortunately, they omitted to warn the bishop, who, at

that time, happened to be Bishop Fox, and he was extremely miffed, so also appealed to the king, who accepted that he could nullify the election. His register (as above) contains an entry, "*Notification by the bishop to brother Richard Beere, monk of Glastonbury a priest, that the right of appointing an abbot, in place of brother John Selwode, dead and buried, has, on this occasion, passed to him, by reason of the annulment of the election of brother Thomas Wasyn, and that he has accordingly 'provided' him to that office.*" This is followed by information concerning the confirmation of Richard Beere and the promise of the brethren to obey him.

Either of these events could be the inspiration for these benchends, demonstrating that the bishop had pre-eminence over the abbot even in mid-century. Either would fall within accepted periods for the provision of benches within local churches. Yet, whatever the occasion of their creation, whether contemporary or retrospective, these benchends do seem to relate closely to the story surrounding the incidents relating to Bishop Bekyngton and Abbot Frome. St. Michael's Church in South Brent does seem to have been a centre for propaganda on behalf of Bath and Wells for some centuries.

In the chapter on the early history of this church the legend of St. Michael and the Devil was mentioned. Both were hurling mud at each other, with that thrown by the Devil forming Brent Knoll, whilst that thrown by St. Michael was, surprisingly, the origin of the Tor at Glastonbury. This story has always been a very local story, but could well have originated through the centuries old feuding between bishops at Wells and abbots at Glastonbury. Were such stories devised to discredit Glastonbury in an area where Wells had the tithes and Glastonbury the rentals? Notably, St. Andrew is the patron saint of Wells and the diocese, whereas St. Michael has a strong affinity to Glastonbury and, in particular, the Tor. Turning the tables by having Glastonbury's own saint turn against them and their devilish ways, would appear to have a true late medieval artistic touch about it. As Glastonbury has always prospered through its legion of myths and legends, there was perceived to be, perhaps, a poetic justice in turning a myth against them. That would almost certainly have given a lot of satisfaction to the hierarchy at Wells.

It is interesting that, even two hundred and fifty years after Glastonbury Abbey was destroyed at the Dissolution, it, rather than, say, Wells or even Canterbury, was still being considered as the source of many problems. When Hannah More came to Cheddar in 1789, she and her sister, Martha, complained that "*the chief despot of the village*" had assured them that "*religion would be the ruin of agriculture; that it was a very dangerous thing, and had produced much mischief ever since it was introduced by the monks down at Glastonbury*" (Martha More, "Mendip Annals," edited by Arthur Roberts, 1859). That sounds like an echo of the feuds between the bishops and abbots still resonating through the Somerset moors and marshes. Today, however, it has become mere background noise in the myths of time.