

THE *Early History*
OF *Bolsover Church*



The Beginning

For many Bolsover is best known for The Beast of Bolsover, as Dennis Skinner, Labour MP is often known. But he is not the original Beast of Bolsover. Over 300 million years before Dennis Skinner was born there was another "Beast of Bolsover". The modern story of this beast begins in 1978 when miner Malcolm Spencer was working on coal seam D4 at Bolsover Colliery.

Among the coal he found what looked to him like a fossil. His deputy, Terry Judge was a keen fossil hunter and had infected some of his enthusiasm to his co-workers, so Malcolm wrapped the stone in a bag and took it to Terry. Terry showed it to the Mine Geologist, who thought it was a dragonfly, but wanted a second opinion so passed it to the regional geologist. It was then sent, via the Institute for Geological Sciences to the British Museum Natural History section where Dr Paul Whalley examined it. Two years later it was announced that it was a new species of dragonfly and was named *Erasipteron bolsoveri* (Graceful-winged of Bolsover). It had a wingspan of 20cm, making it the largest specimen to be found in the British Isles, though a similar fossil had been found in Czechoslovakia in 1933.

Amazingly Graham Bell found another fossil of a dragonfly in the same seam later in 1978. This one had a wingspan of around 50cm and was named *Typus ailuculum* (Giant dragonfly of the dawn). This fossil never received the fame of the first one.



Iron Age and onwards

There is evidence for Mesolithic and Early Neolithic human occupation in and around Bolsover in the form of a site at Sherwood Lodge and flint tools at Wesley Manse, Hilltop.

The Reverend Edward Andrews Downman wrote a *History of Bolsover* in which he suggests that the first settlers in Bolsover were Iron Age people and that they built a pagan temple on the current site of either the church of castle. Evidence has been found for Iron Age buildings, but not for a temple.

The name Bolsover has Iron Age links. The end of the name "sover" most likely comes from the word "sovre" meaning settlement of high place, so Bol-sover literally means "settlement of Bol". But in *Domesday Book* (1086) the town is called Belesovre, or "settlement of Bel". Bel was a Babylonian God or was used to describe a Lord or Master. Downman suggests Bel could have been a British god of fire, which would link with the tin and lead smelting in the area. There is some evidence of small-scale Roman occupation in Bolsover.

Early Medieval

Domesday Book (1086) mentions the town of Belesovre but does not mention the castle. We know that a wooden castle existed in Bolsover in the 12th century. In the early medieval period the current grid system layout of Bolsover was set up, and it is one of the few surviving examples to survive in Britain.

Clive Hart in 1988 suggested that Medieval Bolsover was developed in three clear stages. Phase one – the Domesday Phase consisted of the castle and the defensive earthworks and a small town. Phase two involved further earthworks and the expansion of the town, including the Norman church of St Mary and St Laurence. Phase three, the "burgage plot" saw additional field systems included and defences added to.

The defensive earthworks, unlike others from the period, do not surround the town, but take advantage of the natural Magnesian Limestone ridge.



The Church of St Mary and St Laurence

The church of St Mary and St Laurence in Bolsover itself may hold its origins in Saxon times, although it may have been built on top of an earlier, Iron Age pagan religious site. The earliest stonework of the existing building is 12th and 13th century: 12th century artefacts remain, namely the tympanum, animals heads and grave markers (see inside spread).

The visible stonework of the tower is 13th century: There is a double chamfered west doorway with a single order of colonettes, all early to mid-13th century. A lancet window sits above the door. The belfry has 2-light openings comprising a pair of plain lancets, all typically Early English in style and form. The broach spire with its lancet lucarnes is also probably 13th century - or could just be early 14th century. The fabric bond is all rough coursed rubble typical of the 13th century, as is the north-west buttress.

The Remains of the Old Building

The Animal Heads (5)

Norman; mid-12th century

Set into the south wall of the choir are six carved stone corbels which were discovered beneath the buttress of the chancel in 1961 when foundations for the new vestries were being dug.

These stones would have originally supported the roof of the Norman church building.

The one at the top is a Janus head - a symbol of beginnings and transitions. He has two faces - one looking to the future and one to the past. It is probable that this corbel was originally positioned near the door of the Norman church.

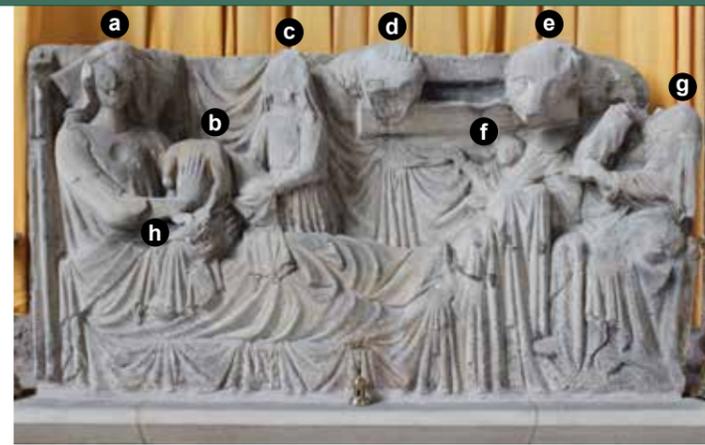
Apart from the Janus head, the rest are not identifiable as anything other than creatures.

The Nativity Carving (6)

Late 13th / early 14th century;
c.1300

This intriguing object originates from the late 13th to early 14th century, the size and shape of the stone panel suggest it was originally an altarpiece.

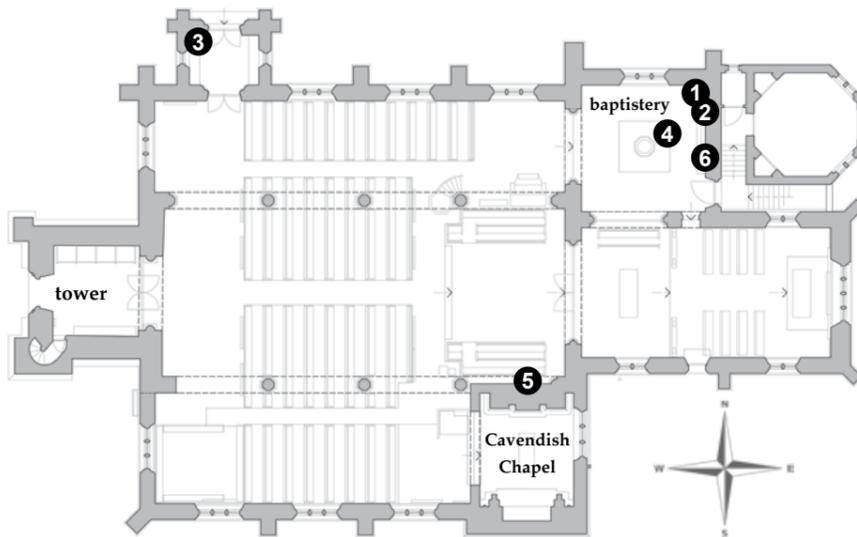
The identity of the figures is no longer fully obvious, however the reclining figure **a** is clearly the Virgin Mary (also known as Our Lady) with Christ **b** (unfortunately now missing his head) upon her lap. Our Lady appears to have once had a jewel in her breast. Christ is holding a dove **h**. The figure standing at Our Lady's feet **g** is most likely to be St Joseph, but the other figures are harder to identify; it is possible that the figure at



Mary's left shoulder **c** is a midwife or could instead be St Anne or St Joseph. The small figure **f** is probably an angel, but it has been suggested that it could be St John the Baptist. The ox and ass **d** & **e** can be seen leaning over the barn door at the back. It has been proposed that one or more of the figures surrounding the bed are the Magi, however, given the clothing and the context of the carving, this seems unlikely. The scene is best described as "Our Lady in Geysn", where "geysn" refers to the reclining, post-natal pose of Our Lady. This distinguishes the carving from other similar Nativity and Adoration of the Magi scenes from this period.

The carving has an interesting history. During the iconoclasm brought about by the Civil War in the 17th century the carving was buried face down near the priest's doorway and used as a step, until it was remembered some 60 years later and uncovered in 1704. Most sources agree that the burial of the stone took place in the 17th century and was a way of preserving the object from attack. However John Charles Cox in his *Notes on the Churches of Derbyshire* in 1875 says, "Does it not seem much more reasonable to conjecture that this sculpture, once highly revered and doubtless superstitiously worshipped, was dragged down, disfigured, and placed in the most contemptible position - a place where the foot of the former worshipper must perforce tread upon it - at the time when the Reformation spread through the land? This may have been done, as it was in very numerous instances throughout England, by the free will of a suddenly awakened people, or it may have been enforced by the edicts against superstitious images issued by Henry VIII's minister, Cromwell, in 1538, and by Edward VI some ten years later. Even if it escaped all this, it could not fail to come under the sweeping order of the Parliament in August, 1643, repeated in May, 1644, by which it was enacted that: 'All Crucifixes, Crosses, and all other Images and Pictures of Saints in any Churches, Chappells, or other place of Publick Prayer, shall be taken away and defaced.'"

So was it rescued or rejected? We can't be sure but it is certainly intriguing.



Fabric of the church that survived the fires remains in the baptistery (the north-east corner), the tower and the Cavendish Chapel.

Cross Slab 1

probably 12th century

This interesting and unusual carved stone stands in the north-east corner of the baptistery. It is a fine-grained buff sandstone, carved in relief and bearing puzzling emblems that defy easy interpretation. There is a broad central shaft, flanked at the top by broken circles obviously intended to simulate a cross head. Below these the shaft is expanded into a disc with a small carved wavy-sided panel on it.

The lower section of the slab has emblems on each side of the shaft; on the right are two rings, with a spoon-like object with a cross on its handle inbetween them. It has been suggested this may represent a baptismal ladle. On the left of the shaft are an axe, shown upside-down, and a pair of shears.

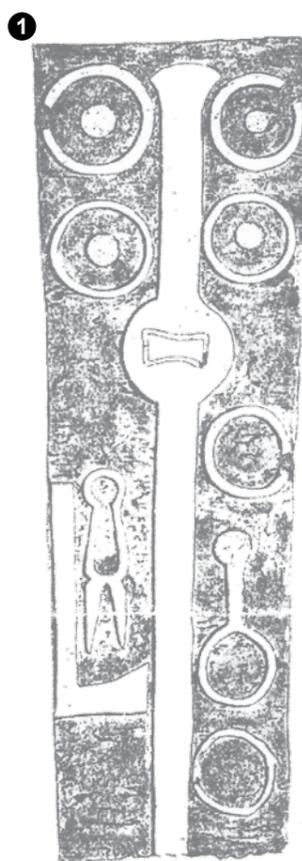
The shaft has no conventional base, but simply continues to the base of the stone.

The conventional reading of such emblems are that shears are a female symbol, an axe represents a woodsman and a baptismal ladle represents a priest. However archaeologist and cross slab expert Peter Ryder states that such conventional reading, "raises some problems here" and that it is, "a fascinating and puzzling stone." Archaeologist Matthew Beresford suggests that the two rings, "could be horse-shoes, which may suggest the grave slab was that of a farrier or blacksmith."

Cross Slab 4

probably 12th century

Lying near to the font this last stone is a simple design in soft, yellowish sandstone. Each face is identical, with four diagonal grooves, continued round the edge of the stone, delineating splayed arms. Each side has a drilled hole set in the groove between the upper and right-hand arms, which must have had some significance. Might it once have contained some sort of relic?



Cross Slabs 2 & 3

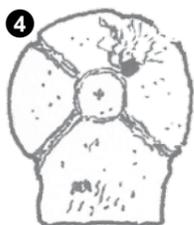
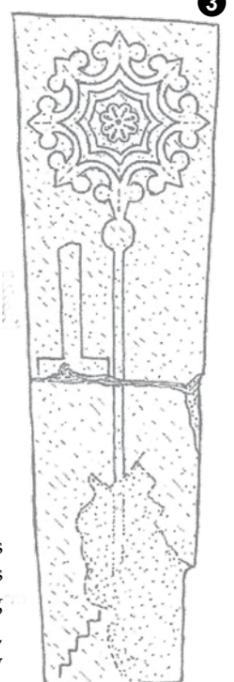
probably 13th century

Slab 2 is in the baptistery and 3 is inside the porch (set against the west wall).

Number 2 is the upper part of a slab bearing an carved design on dark sandstone. It has an attractive six-terminal ring cross, with a central petalled rosette and a disc set high on the shaft, on the left of which are faint remains of a pair of shears.

Number 3 is a complete slab (although broken into two pieces) that is probably of Magnesian Limestone, and has a cross head very similar to that of number 2 except that it has eight terminals and rises from a stepped base. On the left of the shaft is an emblem that might be either an inverted hammer or a T-square, both of which could indicate the memorial of a mason.

The lower part in particular is flaking quite badly.



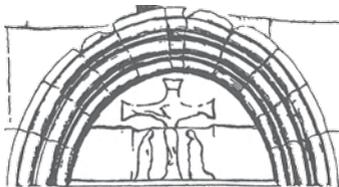
Thanks to Peter Ryder for this information about cross slabs
www.broomlee.org

Thanks also to Dr Jennifer Alexander, Dr Chris Brooke and Bella Gaffney for their help with this leaflet.



The Crucifixion Tympanum 12th century

Above the priest's doorway on the outside of the south side of the church is a stone tympanum with the scene of the Crucifixion carved onto it. This is 12th century, although the semi-circular surround may be later and leads to some dispute over the dating. It is badly eroded but a source from 1895 tells us that the figures either side of Christ are that of Mary and St John.



The metalwork on the door is a Victorian copy of a basic medieval design called a "C-hinge".



For more information please see www.bolsoverparishchurch.org

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