

'T'OWD MON WOR FRUM BONSER' : THE ORIGINS OF THE MEDIEVAL MINER'S EFFIGY IN WIRKSWORTH CHURCH.

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Abstract : The well-known incised stone figure of a medieval miner in Wirksworth church is shown to have been moved there from Bonsall church in Victorian times. Speculation is made as to its original function.

The earliest known illustration of a Derbyshire miner is the crude stone carving of a walking figure carrying a pick and wisket (wooden basket) which has been adopted as the logo of the Peak District Mines Historical Society. Of indeterminate age, it has variously been ascribed on stylistic grounds to the Anglo-Saxon, Norman, and 'medieval' periods. It is located inside Wirksworth church and is naturally assumed to have originated there. However, according to the Victorian antiquary, the Rev. J. Charles Cox, the figure actually came from Bonsall church, having been removed for safety during a restoration of 1862-63; it was subsequently built into the masonry of Wirksworth church on that building's restoration by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in 1870-76.

In his Notes on the *Churches of Derbyshire* published in 1877 Cox wrote of Wirksworth that 'the small quaint figure of a miner with his pick and 'kibble' that is etched on Plate XXIII came originally from Bonsall church, but was built into the wall at the east end of the south chancel aisle to preserve it from destruction. It was brought to Wirksworth from Bonsall by the late Mr Marsh, the high bailiff, who was a native of the latter place'. He also added a footnote explaining that 'the preservation of this curious piece of sculpture is due to Mr George Marsden of Wirksworth, the indefatigable Hon. Secretary of the Restoration Committee. To him we desire to express our great obligations for the information and

assistance he has given us in preparing this account of Wirksworth church' (Cox, 1887, p. 563). William Marsh high bailiff of Wirksworth, is listed in a directory of 1862 (White 1862 p. 840).

Cox also records elsewhere in the same volume that during the restoration of Bonsall church 'certain very interesting memorials of early sepulture were discovered amongst the masonry', as 'our ancestors of the fourteenth century showed but little reverence for their predecessors, by utilizing their memorials as building materials'. These objects included stone corbels, incised coffin lids and cross fragments, mainly of 13th century date, most of which, to Cox's evident consternation, had ended up as ornaments in the garden of the 'fine old manor house' occupied by John Broxup Coates, the churchwarden at the time of the alterations! (Cox 1877 pp.423-24). Coates is recorded in 1888 as occupying Nether Green House, Bonsall (Kelly 1888 p.45).

Reading between the lines of these two statements it seems highly probable that the figure of the miner was one of these relics and had been rescued by Marsh from Coates' clutches! If so the figure may well antedate the rebuilding of Bonsall church in the 14th century and thus be evidence of early medieval mining in the parish. In Domesday Book (1086) Bonsall was listed as one of the six *berewicks* of the manor of *Mestesforde* (Matlock Bridge), which collectively possessed a *plumbarium* or lead mine/works of some type. (Morgan 1978 1.13),

The figure is incised into a roughly rectangular stone which from its shape does not appear to be either a corbel, coffin fragment or a similar funerary monument. Most Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Norman sculpture depicts religious subjects eg. the Wirksworth 'slab' or the *tympana* of Hognaston and Parwich churches, all in Derbyshire, or else comprises interlace patterns, animal heads and grotesques; apart from occasional illustrations of stonemasons at work, depictions of secular working scenes are rare. The nearest medieval parallel to the mining figure would be a scene from the popular 'labours of the months' calendar cycle, depicting twelve seasonal farming and domestic activities such as peasants sowing, harvesting and cutting winter fuel, etc. These illustrations usually followed a standard pattern but several variations are known, although none which show an industrial activity (Anderson 1971 pp.243, 86, 233). Lead mining in the Peak was to an extent a seasonal occupation, as it was so frequently combined with small-scale farming (Kiernan 1989 pp.29-35), and it is tempting to speculate that this figure of a miner *walking to*



work could have been chosen as one scene in such a series to illustrate say, April, the month when mining was generally recommenced? However this is perhaps unlikely in the absence of any other monthly scenes from the cycle, and the figure may have been just a one-off, possibly commemorating the contribution of local miners towards the construction of an earlier, Norman or 13th century church. No church was recorded in Bonsall in Domesday, but it is unlikely that there was no predecessor to the present largely 13th to 14th century building.

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