

## Signs & Symbols: Gargoyles



Looking round church buildings at the various ornaments within them, you could be reminded of the sorts of greeting cards people send: some of them have very obvious meaning, but there are a number that could really be sent for any occasion.

Take gargoyles on the outside of some of our church buildings. These stone carvings are of monstrous beings, carved into shapes of people, animals or fantastic monsters, with the details being terrifying, comic, bawdy, or macabre, but rarely 'Holy'.

So - what are gargoyles all about?

The dictionary definition is a spout usually in the form of a grotesquely carved face or figure, projecting from a roof gutter. It comes from the Old French "gargouille" and the Late Latin "gurgulio", both meaning throat, a root shared with the word 'gargle'.

In the days before pipe-drainage, rainwater needed to be thrown clear of the walls and of the church foundations to prevent damage, and it was done by using a projecting spout. This spout could be decorated, and so came to be carved as the throats of these monstrous beings, spewing the rainwater safely away.

On some buildings you'll find similar figures that are not actually designed for water drainage. In that case they are technically called a 'grotesque'.

It is clear that the Gothic builders and masons clearly relished the opportunity these downspouts provided to indulge their imagination and we can assume that the stone carvers were given a more or less free hand in executing them when we see their impolite gestures such as pulling faces, sticking tongues out, picking noses or worse.

This month:

Have a look at a church with gargoyles, and think about what they might be saying to you. Are they illustrating lessons from the Scriptures? Showing you what life is like on the outside of the church? Frightening away evil spirits and the devil? Examples of free expression by clever workmen? Do you enjoy their humour or do you find them out of place on sacred buildings? If you were replacing one of them, what design would you use?

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**If Christians praised God more,  
the world would doubt Him less.**

C E Jefferson