

You are being watched! – Some sculptural curiosities in Milton-under-Wychwood

John A Bennett – (first compiled in 2020, revised July 2025)



An unusual feature of Milton is the scattering of small pieces of sculpture which adorn a number of properties throughout the village. We are never going to rival Florence in our sculptural decoration, but these little sculptural fragments illustrate a sometimes-overlooked theme in the history of the village. This article is firstly intended to provide a record of these items as interesting artefacts within the village and secondly is an attempt to put these sculptures into their historical context and to suggest what their origins might have been, because almost all have been relocated from unknown original settings. If any of our readers have any information on the further history or origins of these sculptures the History Society would be delighted to hear from you. Thanks are due to the owners of buildings who have provided information about their sculptures and allowed access to their properties to take photographs.

Usually, sculptures in small rural villages in the Cotswolds and elsewhere are to be found on and within the local parish church in the form of architectural ornament or funerary monuments. However, almost all the ones described here are scattered among the domestic buildings of Milton. That is unusual. Most of these survivors are a legacy of the presence of Alfred Groves and Sons in the village. Many are probably salvaged features from the demolition or restoration of other buildings in the region by Groves, or sample pieces undertaken by apprentices. There are other pieces of sculpture and ad hoc bits of carving inside a few properties within the village which are not on public view but are also a part of the legacy of Groves' presence (figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). These are often quite primitive in execution, and mostly date from the 19th Century. They might be described as the carved doodles of masons living locally.



Figure 1 - relief carving of a lion (?) inside property on Milton High Street.



Figure 2 - Standing man carved into a quoin now inside a property on Milton High Street.



Figure 3 - Carved head of a man on rear of a house on Jubilee Lane, probably mid-19th Century.

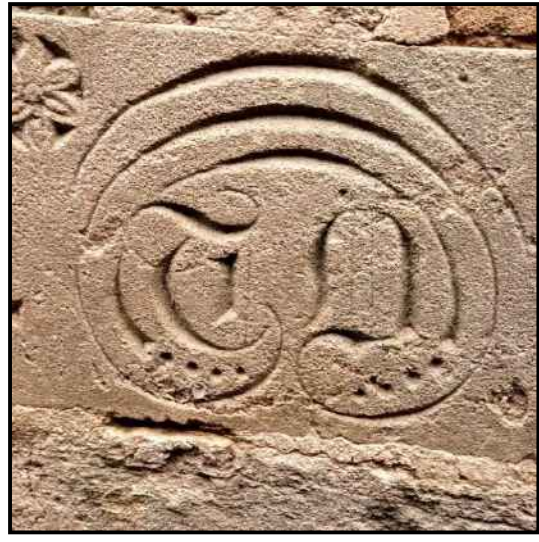


Figure 4 - Initials carved into a stone on the rear of a house on Jubilee Lane, probably mid-19th Century.

Groves was once a significant enterprise in the centre of Milton. The company provided masonry, timber and building skills to many projects throughout Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire including Oxford Colleges and many churches. Their heyday was in the second half of the 19th Century, and early 20th Century. An account of their history by Norman Frost appears in volumes 7, 8 and 9 (1992/93/94) of the *Wychwoods History Society Journal*.

Wooden figure of angel playing a woodwind instrument

The oldest surviving figure sculpture in Milton is the wooden, probably oak, carving of a figure playing some sort of woodwind instrument. This instrument is sometimes identified as a shawm (figures 5 and 6). He has what appear to be wings and is therefore an angel¹. Unfortunately, he is no longer on public view, but for a long time he occupied a niche on the front of the former Wesleyan Mission Room on Milton High Street (figure 9). He is thought to date from the 15th Century.



Figure 5 - Angel Musician front view, former Wesleyan Mission Room, High Street, Milton.



Figure 6 - Angel Musician side view, former Wesleyan Mission Room, High Street, Milton.

He might have been a fixture in Milton for many years before he was given his own niche in this prominent location on the High Street sometime in the later 19th Century (figure 9). His time outdoors has taken its toll, and he was taken down in 2006 and is now housed indoors. Whilst his origin is unknown, he almost certainly formed part of a decorative scheme of such figures in a religious setting, and it has been speculated that he may once have formed part of the decorations of nearby Bruern Abbey before it was dissolved by Henry VIII.

There is a particularly strong tradition of such musical angels in churches in East Anglia and figure 7 shows one such from St Wendredas in March, Cambridgeshire. This is one of 118 figures of angels in this church. Similar figures can be found in the St Mary's, Cilcain (originally reputed to come from Basingwerk Abbey, which, like Bruern, became a Cistercian foundation in 1147). There is another set in the refectory at Cleeve Abbey, another Cistercian foundation, which are not dissimilar to the Milton figure. Closer to home a similar set of angels decorate the roof of St Mary the Virgin in Ewelme, Oxfordshire.

¹ The arched forms behind the figure's shoulders carry a stylised feather pattern, a similarly stylised wing form can be seen in the angel figures in the roof of Cleeve Abbey, in Somerset.

The type of figure is common in medieval sculpture and another 15th Century example of the type can be found on a misericord in St Lawrence in Ludlow (figure 8). The Ludlow figure has a feathered body, and sits on similar decorative base, a stylised representation of clouds, a motif common to these angel figures.



Figure 7 - Wooden figure of musician angel forming a corbel to the roof of St Wendredas, March, Cambridgeshire, early 16th Century.



Figure 8 - Carved musician angel on a misericord in the Church of St Lawrence, Ludlow.

There is of course a long tradition of musical angels in European painting and sculpture from the Middle Ages and they also sometimes appear in secular settings.



Figure 9 - Photomontage of the Milton Angel within the niche he once occupied for over 100 years.

Two stone heads on St Michael's, a house on Milton High Street

These two heads were not originally made for this location but were probably added to the façade of this house when it was upgraded sometime in the late 19th Century. The uppermost grinning figure forms a corbel that supports the timber strut-work that now decorates this gable (figure 10). Strut-work of this type was becoming a popular architectural feature in the area towards the end of the 19th Century. He is much weathered and has the appearance of a gargoyle. Again, this figure may also have been salvaged from some church restoration undertaken by Groves. He is difficult to date, possibly 18th or early 19th Century. Such grotesque heads frequently decorate local churches, and many Oxford Colleges (figure 11) and one or the other may have been his original function.



Figure 10 - Uppermost head on gable end of St Michael's, High Street.



Figure 11 - Gargoyle from New College Oxford.

The lower figure is a different sort of character (figure 12) and has the appearance of a portrait. There is evidence of a moustache extending to bushy sideburns, and his shoulders appear to be adorned with toga-like drapery. These details date him to the early to mid-19th Century. The toga draped busts of British worthies of the Georgian and Victorian era decorate many a provincial town hall or art gallery, not to mention the Houses of Parliament. Such portrait busts were also used to decorate the façade of public buildings. The heads of Shakespeare and Garrick feature on many a theatre façade, and famous artists feature on municipal galleries. There are quite a few for example on the National Portrait Gallery. Figure 13 shows one such figure that decorates a building in Bath. It would be nice to know who our character is, but his rather eroded and decrepit state makes this a difficult task.

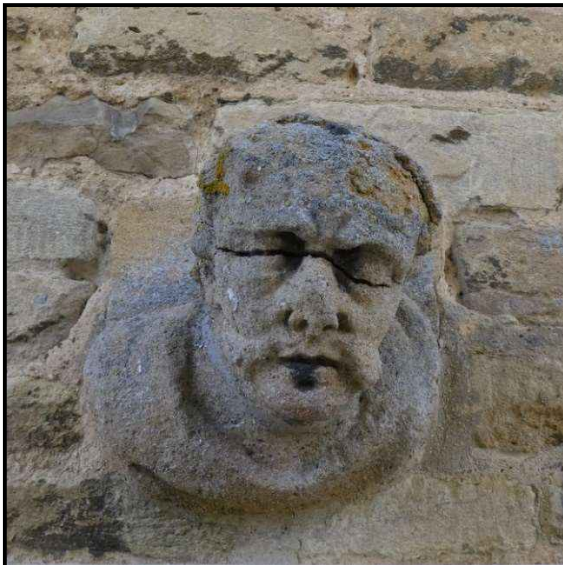


Figure 12 - Lower head on gable end of St Michael's, High Street.



Figure 13 - Head of a bearded figure on the facade of former premises of S F Andrews, Provision Merchant, Union Street, Bath, 1885.

Female head on Dashwood House

The head of a young woman projects from the wall above the doorway to Dashwood House on Shipton Road (figure 14). The building dates from the late 19th Century, but the stone head of the young lady is from elsewhere, possibly 18th or early 19th Century. She was probably carved as either a supportive corbel or as a carved termination of a drip hood such as are frequently seen on English parish churches. Rather weathered examples can be seen on the nearby Church of St Mary in Shipton, but a close relation of our girl can be found as a decorative termination to a drip hood to a window on St Edwards in Stow-on-the-Wold (figure 15), this was probably the original intended function of our young lady.



Figure 14 - Stone head of young woman on Dashwood House, Shipton Road.



Figure 15 - Female head terminating a drip hood on St Edward's Stow on the Wold.

Bull's Head, Milton High Street

A prominent piece of sculpture on the High Street is the carved bull's head topped by a ball finial atop the gable of what is now the High Street entrance to the small development of Harman's Court (figure 16). The single-story building is modern rebuild of a similar structure on the site that once served as a butcher's shop by the name of Harman. The back of the premises once housed an abattoir. The bull's head was in situ on the original building and was saved and re-mounted on the replacement building which is now a private residence. The building opposite was once a pub called The Butcher's Arms, which closed around 1970. Our bull now serves as an important reminder of this now hidden past. Nonetheless, he is also a refugee from some other location, as it is highly unlikely that a small village butchery would have commissioned such a statement piece of sculpture. Again, the hand of Groves is seen in the re-homing of the bull's head here. He probably dates from the mid-19th Century and may have once adorned some Victorian Market Hall. Similar examples can be seen on Victorian Market Halls in many larger British cities. Figure 17 shows an example from the former Smithfield Market in Manchester.



Figure 16 - Bull's Head, Milton High Street.

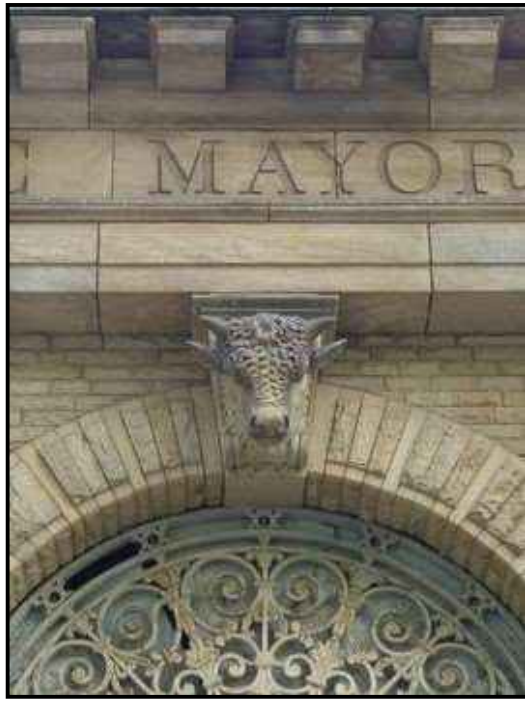


Figure 17 - Bull's Head, Former Smithfield Market Hall, Manchester, 1858.

Boar's Head, Groves Industrial Estate

A companion to the head of the bull can be found atop a gable on one of the buildings just behind Groves' hardware store. It is the head of a boar, perched high on this gable, he is difficult to see. However, he is also a rehomed piece of stone carving from a now unknown location, but possibly also from a former market hall.



Figure 18 - Carved stone head of a boar, Groves' Industrial Estate.

Kneeling, Praying Figure, Brasenose, Shipton Road

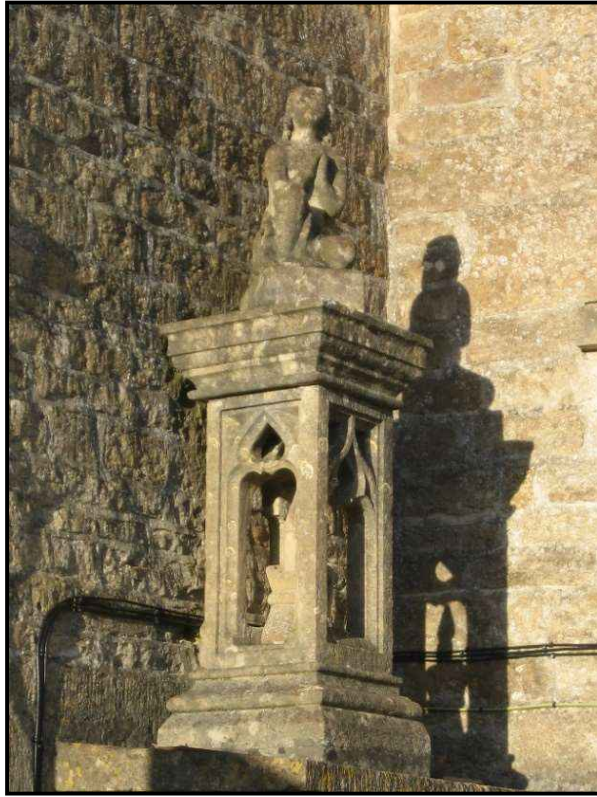


Figure 19 - Figure of kneeling child praying, Brasenose, Shipton Road.

This surprising figure sits on a pierced gothic plinth sited above a door canopy on Brasenose, a cottage on Shipton Road. It shows a kneeling praying figure with face raised heavenwards. It turns out to be a simplified copy of a figure by the Florentine sculptor Luigi Pampaloni (1791-1847) (figure 20). It was first conceived and carved in marble by Pampaloni in 1826, and a plaster copy known as Praying Boy (Putto Orante) was exhibited at the Accademia dell'Arte's annual exhibition where it won a prize².

It was soon noticed by collectors throughout Europe and numerous copies were commissioned, often to decorate the tombs of young children. One such patron even provided the sculptor with a death mask of their deceased daughter to copy for the face of the child.

The figure became an enormous success and subsequently Pampaloni and his assistants made many copies in marble that can be found in museums

and graveyards across Europe. There are at least five versions in the cemetery attached to San Miniato al Monte, a church in Florence (figure 21).

Whilst the original praying boy was conceived as a naked figure the concept was taken up by many other sculptors throughout the 19th century. In many of these variants his modesty was often preserved by the addition of a discreet piece of cloth draped over his right leg (figure 22). This is the version copied in the Milton figure.

There are now thousands of versions of this figure throughout the world, often featuring as funerary monuments to young children. Another version in Britain can be found in the churchyard of St John the Baptist in Tibshelf, Derbyshire where it marks the grave of a 4-year-old girl who died in 1920 (figure 23). The modest figure on Brasenose from the late 19th or early 20th Century is a much-simplified copy of the original (probably a copy of a copy etc.) and was probably also originally intended to decorate a child's grave. This is reinforced by the addition of the gothic base containing a candle, a symbol of the brevity and fragility of life. However, whose memorial this was intended to be and how it ended up as a decoration to this door canopy we might never know.

² For a full account of the origins of this sculpture and its subsequent reproduction see Elisabeth L. Roark, "Mobility, Meaning, and the Monumental Body: The Italian Origin of Two North American Cemetery Motifs," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.1.4>, accessed 13/08/2025.



Figure 20 - Luigi Pampaloni, *Kneeling Child Praying* about 1830, sold at Sotheby's 10th July 2019.



Figure 21 – Funeral monument to a young boy in the cemetery of San Miniato, Florence, 1907.



Figure 22 - *Figure of Praying Child*, attributed to Vincenzo Vela (1820-1891) Biblioteca de Nava, Reggio Calabria, late 19th Century, now with added loin cloth.



Figure 23 - *Figure of praying child* as part of child's gravestone, St John the Baptist, Tibshelf, Derbyshire, 1920.

Sculptural collages on Holmleigh, Jubilee Lane.

The next item is what might be described as a sculptural collage of various carved fragments inserted into each gable end of Holmleigh on Jubilee Lane. The house bears the date 1869 and was almost certainly built by Groves. The fragments are obviously from different sources, and from different types of stone. Many of the fragments seem to have funerary associations and were perhaps intended to form parts of gravestones. The composition on the right-hand gable contains the head of a cherub. Similar cherub heads can be seen on gravestones in Ascott and Shipton Churchyards, and a rather faded one appears carved above the doorway to Stone Porch, a house on the High Street. Beneath the cherub is a carving of a weeping willow arching over a cross and some tombstones. The weeping willow is another common motif on Victorian gravestones for obvious reasons, though I have not been able to find any on local gravestones. The assemblage includes some gothic panels, placed horizontally, and vertically in a rather whimsical composition. These fragments are again almost certainly salvaged pieces from demolition jobs or renovation jobs, or even perhaps apprentice pieces done by younger masons working for Groves.



Figure 24 - Assembly of carved fragments in North-west gable of Holmleigh, Jubilee Lane.



Figure 25 - Assembly of carved fragments in the south-east gable of Holmleigh, Jubilee Lane.

Terracotta figure on Forest Gate (formerly Frogmore House)

Our next sculpture comes from a grand late Victorian villa on Frog Lane (figure 26), formerly known as *Frogmore House* but now known as *Forest Gate*. The house dates from about 1879 and is quite a statement property with handsome front bays, and large mullioned and transomed windows with fine leadwork to the main façade. Topping the pyramidal roof to one of the front bays is a curious cowed figure made from terracotta. Figural terminations to roof lines were common on some of the grander houses of the later Victorian era, dragons being a particular favourite. This figure, half man half beast – note the claw like feet – is a re-imagining of the many hybrid-creatures that decorate medieval churches and cathedrals, a good example can be found in York Minster (figure 29). He also has a tail which curls through one of the holes in the ridge tile and curves round to the front of the tile to terminate in a shamrock – a clue to his identity!



Figure 26 - Terracotta sculpture with portrait face of William Gladstone, Forest Gate, Frog Lane.



Figure 27 - figurative capital from York Minster, 14th Century.

Whilst the form of this “gargoyle” might be derived from fantastical medieval imagery, the portrait features of the face make it something else. The features are in fact those of William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898), the reforming liberal MP who was Prime Minister on four occasions and served in Westminster for over 62 years. The identity is confirmed by the shamrock which is a reference to Gladstone’s involvement with Irish politics. Every year, on St Patrick’s day, Irish well-wishers would present Gladstone with a sprig of shamrock.

The *Forest Gate* figure is not unique, a number of other versions of this sculpture can be traced (figures 28 and 29), and there were undoubtedly others.



Figure 28 - Terracotta "Gladstone gargoyle" on the roof of The Limes in Penn, Buckinghamshire. Originally sited on the roof of 'Rayners'.



Figure 29 - Terracotta "Gladstone gargoyle" on Wardown House, Luton.

So, why is he presented in this form and what is he doing on the roof of *Forest Gate*? The answer is to do with politics of course. There was a fierce rivalry between the Liberal Gladstone and his great political adversary the Conservative politician, Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield) (1804-1881) in the later 19th Century. This rivalry extended to their supporters at a national and a local level, including the Wychwoods. The Shipton Conservative Association had organised the building of the Beaconsfield Hall in 1885 in honour of the recently deceased Disraeli, but the local Liberals were equally active in the Wychwoods. The *Forest Gate* caricature of Gladstone can be seen as a jibe by the local Conservatives against the Liberals.

This interpretation of the significance of the figure is supported by the fact that the version that was formerly on the roof of “Rayners” in Buckinghamshire (figure 28) had a similar origination. “Rayners” was built by Sir Philip Rose, who was a great friend and supporter of Disraeli, hence the desire to mock Gladstone with this sculpture.

The Gladstone “gargoyle” atop *Forest Gate* is therefore an interesting survivor, a souvenir of the strong political rivalries in the Wychwoods in the late 19th Century.

(For a fuller account of the history of Forest Gate see: <https://wychwoodshistory.uk/forestgate/>)

Mother and Child by Constantine A Smith, Broadstone, Green Lane

The carving of a Mother and Child sitting in front of a house on Green Lane is something apart from most of the other sculptures in this article: it is freestanding, rather than attached to a building, and it is the first piece of “modern” sculpture to appear in the village (figure 30). It was commissioned by a former owner of Broadstone, and executed by the sculptor Constantine A Smith, about whom little is known other than that he was Cheshire based and active in the 1960s and 1970s. This sculpture dates from circa 1970. It shows a naked woman sitting cross legged on the ground cradling a young child who clings to her, burying its face in her body in a naturalistic way, though in other ways this carving might be described as expressionistic rather than naturalistic. The sculptor has exaggerated the size of hands and feet and generally simplified the swollen forms of the figure and stylised the facial features of the woman, perhaps in an attempt to express the fecundity of motherhood. The image of the mother and child has long and daunting history in Western art, including the many images of the Madonna and Child, and even with the decline of the Church as a patron of such works, sculptors have continued to tackle this iconic subject. This figure is a secular version of the subject, a kind of Earth Mother, naked and seated almost directly on the ground. The style can be described as broadly modernist, owing much to the revival of the technique of direct carving (working directly in stone rather than preparing a model in clay or plaster to translate to stone) as promoted by British sculptors such as Eric Gill and Jacob Epstein in the early decades of the 20th Century. The sculptor has left the texture of his toothed chisel very evident in the carved surfaces. If we want a very direct precursor for this mother and child we need look no further than the figure of Genesis by Jacob Epstein from 1931 (figure 31), a sculpture that was hugely controversial in its day.



Figure 30 - Mother and Child by Constantine Smith, about 1970, Green Lane.



Figure 31 - Jacob Epstein, Genesis 1929-31, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.

Carved Head of Patrick Troughton, façade of Groves Hardware Store, Shipton Road.

Our final head appears after a gap of over a hundred years since the last head was added to the village (*Forest Gate*), so represents a renewal of this Milton tradition. He projects from the upper story of Groves new hardware store which was re-built after a fire in 2014. He is also a sculpture that was originally intended for another location and was one of a number of heads commissioned as part of a Groves' maintenance project on the medieval church of Holy Trinity in Bledlow, however, for reasons unknown, this head was not used. The other heads for this church included the four members of the Beatles and the local lord of the manor Lord Carrington. The head featured on Groves hardware store is intended to be the actor Patrick Troughton as Doctor Who. He was again to be a figure terminating a drip hood. And so, the tradition continues.



Figure 32 - Carved head depicting Patrick Troughton as Dr Who, Groves Hardware Store, 2014

Further Reading:

- Michael Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia: Unseen Masterpieces of the Middle Ages*, 2015.
- The volumes in the *Public Sculpture of Britain* series published by Liverpool University Press since 1997
- Benedict Read, *Victorian Sculpture*, Yale University Press, 1982
- A Carved Wooden Figure at Haddon Hall, Jeremy Montagu *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 33 (Mar., 1980), pp. 128-130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/841835> accessed 15.08.2025.