

T'Owd Man of Bonsall - a short history

The carving of a lead miner, which may date back to the Saxon period, and now resides in St Mary's Church in Wirksworth, originally came from Bonsall. In the legends of Northern Derbyshire, 'T'Owd Man' is recognised as a spirit figure that inhabits mines and caverns - hence the carving is named 'T'Owd Man of Bonsall'.

For up to 1,000 years, the T'Owd Man remained unrecorded until St James' Church was renovated and extended in 1863. Robert Clay and John Broxup Coates were the Churchwardens responsible for organising the restoration. Coates had taken on the task of managing the works and he resided with Robert Clay (his wife's uncle) at the 'Old Manor House' (now Nethergreen House) on Clatterway. Rev. J.C. Cox visited the house around 1863 and, in his book '*Notes on the Churches of Derbyshire*', published in 1875, he referred to various stones, monuments and memorials that were in the garden. Robert Clay had donated considerable sums to the cost of the restoration works, and the objects in the garden were subsequently returned to the Church - and are still there.

However, Rev. Cox makes no mention of a carving of a miner. The legend is that the T'Owd Man was discovered during the refurbishment of St James' and maybe his significance was unrecognised, or he had been discarded centuries earlier and was incorporated into building material (as were some of the other discoveries, including a coffin lid). If Rev. Cox or others had identified its importance, then undoubtedly the T'Owd Man would have been returned to St James. In 1863, lead mining was still important in Bonsall and the carving may have been attractive to anyone involved in the industry. Or someone may have just taken an understandable liking to him.

St. Mary's, Wirksworth, underwent a major restoration from 1870-1874, under the supervision of the renowned architect Sir Gilbert Scott. From Rev. Cox's notes, we know that William Marsh, the High Bailiff of Wirksworth, who was born in Bonsall, took the carving to George Marsden, the Secretary of St. Mary's Restoration Committee. We do not know when this happened. The two men were both members of St Mary's congregation, and would have known each other well. Marsden or others then arranged for T'Owd Man of Bonsall to be cemented into the fabric of St Mary's, along with other Saxon carvings that had been rediscovered during the refurbishment. Quoting from Cox's notes, which also include a sketch of the carving: "*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 is unclear why Cox had been told that it needed 'preserving from destruction'. The question also remains as to where did the T'Owd Man reside from 1863 to 1870-74.

We can speculate on who discovered the T'Owd Man of Bonsall, who saved him, and who decided that he should reside in Wirksworth rather than in Bonsall. Until this information is discovered, we can at least rest assured that he will not be covered over again.

Further reading: Adrian Henstock, *T'Owd Mon Wor Frum Bonsor*, Peak District Mines Historical Society, Mining History Vol. 14 (2), 1999.