



# The Hundred Parishes

## An introductory article about DRAGONS

One of the aims of the Hundred Parishes Society is to raise awareness of the rich and diverse local heritage. It is exceptionally preserved in the rural and town landscapes handed down by past generations and there is also a rich vein of local history, culture, customs and legends. Amongst the local legends, some relate to dragons.

Henham's dragon is commemorated on the village sign and in the name of its parish magazine, *The Henham Dragon*. The appearance of this "flying serpent" was reported in 1669. The creature was described as eight or nine feet long, having been seen by several men.

In Henham's church, on the screen between nave and chancel - low down on the nave side on the left and very difficult to see - are two tiny carvings whose date of origin is unknown. They are believed to be dragons and are pictured below.



The appearance of the Henham dragon was recorded in a pamphlet published in 1669 by Quendon author William Winstanley.





His pamphlet included this likeness of the ferocious beast. In recent times, the legend has been dismissed by some as a hoax by Winstanley rather than a true story. Local Saffron Brewery produces a Flying Serpent beer to celebrate the legend.

Where there were dragons there were also dragon slayers. We all know of St George, whose slaying of the beast has been painted and sculpted many times. There seems to be only one such painting within the Hundred Parishes: in Bartlow church where conservation of a 15th-century wall painting revealed the dragon but not St George.



A local dragon slayer, Piers Shonks, died in 1086 AD and lies at peace in an ancient tomb within the wall of Brent Pelham parish church. The black marble top of his tomb is shown here.

There is a brief account of his story, and why Piers is buried in the wall, on

[www.hundredparishes.org.uk](http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk) within the parish introduction for Brent Pelham and Meesden. There you will also find a link to a Hertfordshire Archives account and audio recording of the legend of Piers Shonks.



The photo below is of a stone or plaster corbel in St John's Church, Duxford. The subject appears to be a dragon.



In Great Bardfield's parish church, a stained-glass window includes a little green dragon in a goblet. Dragons are usually pictured as a representation of evil. They are not only depicted in battle with St George but also with other saints and archangels. The image at Great Bardfield is of St John; his dragon is said to symbolize Satan, sin and pestilence. Dragons generally do not get a good press!

St George is not always depicted slaying a dragon – a dragonless George appears in High Easter church and is shown on the right.

When you are out and about, please keep an eye open for dragons or St George. We would be interested to learn of other images of dragons or St George within the Hundred Parishes. Please use the Feedback facility on the website [www.hundredparishes.org.uk](http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk)



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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.