



# The Hundred Parishes

## An introductory article about POPPYHEADS

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Before the 15th century, people attending a church service would stand or kneel. When benches or pews were introduced, they were often decorated by skilled craftsmen. In particular, the top of the ends of some pews were carved with figures called finials or poppyheads.

The word poppyhead comes from Latin via Old French meaning the poop or figurehead of a ship. Poppyheads can be found in churches across the country and they are particularly prevalent in East Anglia. The Hundred Parishes has some fascinating examples.



The photo above is of pews in Hatfield Broad Oak parish church, each with a poppyhead.

The carved figures can represent almost anything. Some are of flowers or fruit or animals. Mythical creatures or demons were introduced to remind parishioners that if they led a sinful life they would go to hell. Saints and angels however meant that if

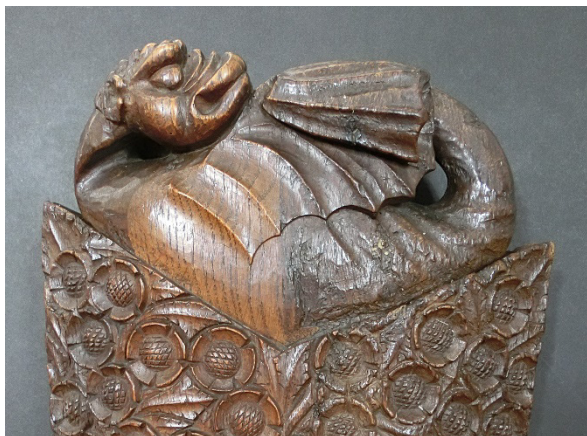
you lived a good life you would go to heaven.



You will also find carved creatures representing saints. In St. Mary's, Hatfield Broad Oak, the 300-year-old poppyheads include a lion for St Mark, an eagle for St John and a bull representing St Luke, shown on the left.

Ickleton's parish church, dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, has some fine examples of medieval carved poppyheads.

One, shown on the right, depicts St. Michael weighing souls of the dead and another features the dragon-like creature pictured below.



In Wendens Ambo parish church you will find this fearsome-looking beast which you may meet if your soul goes to hell!

Less alarming are the floral themes in Barley church. The one pictured on the right features oak leaves and acorns.



Linton's church has a wide range of subjects including scribes resting their books, one on the back of an angel and another on a dragon. The charming angel book rest is shown on the right.

The curious poppyhead below can be found in Bartlow church – perhaps an elephant?



The lion's head is in Much Hadham church and the floral design in Widford.



Below are further examples. From the left, the top row comes from Newport, Thorley and Linton. The lower row is from Much Hadham, Bartlow and Clavering



When you are out and about, we encourage you to seek out these wonderful examples of ancient craftsmanship. Please let us know of others on either the feedback page on our website, [www.hundredparishes.org.uk](http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk) or share a photo with the Hundred Parishes Group on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/groups/562396892237665](https://www.facebook.com/groups/562396892237665)

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