

An architectural mystery: the 'Vampire Rabbit'



The 'Vampire Rabbit' in earlier colours. The mystery beast is now painted a fetching black.

Tucked away in the close behind Newcastle's St Nicholas' Cathedral hides one of the city's weirdest architectural features. Facing the back of the cathedral is an incongruously grand doorway at the rear of 27 Dean Street. The structure is very bulky and ornate: a mass of pink and cream Jacobean styling resembling a huge ormolu clock. Set above the doorway, surmounting the architrave, sits a large black-painted sculpture of a rabbit. The beast has unfeasibly large canine teeth, erect ears, and a manic expression on its face, which has led to it being

nicknamed the 'Vampire Rabbit'.

Notwithstanding the inappropriately baroque grandeur of such a doorway in a back alley, the presence of the rabbit – a bizarre and alien presence in the cloistered tranquillity of a churchyard – has perplexed architectural historians for years. Why on earth is it there?

A closer look at the beast suggests it could well be a hare and this may provide a clue. In pre-Christian Europe, 'mad' March hares were associated with the advent of Spring. As Christianity became established, the hares were adopted as a representation of Easter in church iconography and architecture. They also gave rise to the 'Easter bunny' along the way. Throughout Britain's medieval churches, there are examples of carved hares playing bagpipes; hares chasing Green men; and trios of hares in side-relief, running in circles, and sharing three ears arranged in such a way that each hare appears to have its own two ears – a so-called 'trinity of hares'. So sticking a hare, suitably enhanced in the grotesque tradition of gargoyles, above a back doorway may have been an aesthetic joke on the part of architects Oliver, Leeson and Wood, who designed the exuberant Cathedral Buildings office block for the Church Commissioners in 1901. Other buildings they designed

in the city incorporate similar eye-catching features, such as the golden sunshine face that gazes up Neville Street from the Sun Insurance building.

The site suggests two other connections. The Cathedral Close was formerly the site of the workshop of engraver Thomas Bewick, whose work included many representations of wide-eyed hares. Moreover, the cathedral's patron saint, St. Nicholas of Myra, is closely associated in some East European Christmas stories with woodland animals such as hares and deer.

So no vampire rabbit after all? Maybe not, but it's certainly one of the finest pieces of post-medieval architectural detail on Tyneside.

✦ Christopher Goulding

Stained glass

Both TY



Glass from St Nicholas' Cathedral.

Newcastle has some fine examples of stained glass. Perhaps the oldest is in St John's Church, Westgate Road where some medieval fragments are roughly assembled in the north Chancel window. They include what is probably the earliest representation of the City Coat of Arms – the three castles.

Another piece of early pre-reformation glass is a beautiful roundel in St Nicholas' Cathedral depicting the Madonna feeding the Christ child; it is sometimes known as the 'First Supper'. While in St Nicholas' Cathedral, look out for a window memorial on the east wall in St George's Chapel. It commemorates Viscount Grey of Falloden who was foreign Secretary between 1905 and 1916 and was also founder of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The window shows St Oswald holding a raven carrying a gold ring and attended by a dove with a halo, while St Cuthbert feeds finches from his hand and is attended by an eider duck. Another stained glass window in St George's

