

Chapter 6

Heads and tales:

Archaic heads and the oral tradition



“...the image of the human head appears to stand for a kind of gatekeeper of the threshold, or even a guide to, the otherworld regions. The motif therefore also offers a clue to the pagan and superstitious conception of where the otherworld may be contacted. At such points we may also expect to encounter, as we do, folklore relating to witches, fairies and other cross-boundary beings, hauntings or paranormal phenomena...”

John Billingsley.¹

6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses and attempts to categorise the many stories and traditions associated with carved stone heads recorded by the fieldwork for the present research, primarily in northern England. Some of these stories have been sampled from secondary sources such as the Sidney Jackson collection and other published materials, but the majority are current oral tradition and personal experience narratives collected during fieldwork. It will become immediately obvious that there is a bias towards stories from the Peak District, as this was the primary area for fieldwork as part of the case study for this research presented in Chapter 5. In the collection which follows, oral traditions are placed in the context of evidence from further afield in the British Isles and elsewhere which is necessary to show the universality of the belief in the apotropaic and guardian functions of the head in architectural and other folklore contexts. This collection forms a representative sample of the extant oral traditions surrounding stone heads in Britain, which are remarkably consistent in their distribution, context and construction of story type.

This and the subsequent chapters contain the majority of the fieldwork evidence collected during the course of this study, and both are presented in the form of a structured gazetteer of stories. When collating head traditions a rough framework was constructed to categorise them in order to find common threads and themes running through the material. Following this framework, the material used in this chapter has been broken into three categories or classes of story type, each containing a number of sub-classes or sub-categories. Within the categories and sub-categories stories are listed alphabetically by geographical location. Each category has its own explanatory preamble to place the stories in context.

6.2. Context and background

Archaeological and ethnological evidence suggests the human head was a sacred symbol in the religion of many human societies since the earliest times. Rather than being confined to one geographical area, or culture, the veneration of the head as the source of supernatural power, oracular wisdom and fertility can be found among societies across the world at different levels of development, discussed in Chapter 8. In Western Europe, magical heads with oracular

powers which preside at Otherworld feasts, bring luck or provide protection against evil appear in the earliest written stories of Ireland. Parallel traditions can be found in northern Europe, and in the Greek and wider Indo-European tradition discussed by Joseph Nagy.² Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature* lists a number of universal motifs describing magical and oracular heads, demonstrating how this type of story is not confined to Western Europe, as the emphasis on the "Celtic cult of the head" might suggest.³ Thompson's list of motifs include folk traditions describing heads of slain enemies displayed or placed on stakes, piled up after battle or brandished to intimidate enemies. He also lists more than seventy supernatural motifs associated with heads, many of which can be found in Britain, including stories about severed heads continuing to speak or prophesy after death, avenging wrong from the world of the dead, returning home after they moved and moving from place to place. The archaic themes which connect these stories are the belief that the head contains the soul and is the boundary or mode of communication between this world and the Otherworld.

Stories about heads or skulls with magical powers have been traced and documented both in historical and contemporary contexts from within the head-hunting tribes of Africa, Asia and elsewhere and through the archaeological and mythological evidence from civilisations such as those of the Maya and Aztec of Central and South America.⁴ Examined in the light of this worldwide context, the examples of contemporary oral tradition and personal experience narrative I have collected in the field demonstrate how representations of heads in a number of mediums, whether "Celtic," early medieval or modern, continue to retain an aura of mystery in the present day and generate stories and tradition from generation to generation. Nagy, paraphrasing Levi-Strauss has used the term *bricolage* to define the process whereby the contemporary past "continually fuses with the cultural forces encountered in the relative present."⁵ This process produces a new synthesis "that represents a society's choices of terms with which to express itself to itself."⁶ Moreover, the stories and narratives I have collected form a distinct contrast to the motifs listed by Thompson, as he was looking specifically at folk tales or "once upon a time" stories, rather than the personal experiences and folklore I have collected. In particular, my fieldwork has discovered how two particular manifestations of heads, either in the form of preserved human skulls or carved representations of human heads carved in stone, form a specific collection around which a rich collection of belief and tradition has appeared and continues to evolve.

Surveys like those of Jackson and Billingsley in West Yorkshire⁷ and Petch in northwest England⁸ have revealed how hundreds of examples of carved heads exist today performing a traditional role in the architecture of Pennine farmhouses and barns, where they are positioned in protective positions above doorways and entrances, beside window mouldings and guarding gable ends. In local tradition they are magical charms, performing a parallel function to the rowan sprigs and horseshoes in similar contexts elsewhere, intentionally placed to protect the household from malevolent supernatural forces. In North Yorkshire and Ireland tradition associates some of them directly with protective ancestral spirits, “aud man’s face” being a descriptive phrase for heads used in one Yorkshire dale.⁹ In other areas, for example in the High Peak region of Derbyshire, local belief directly identifies the archaic faces with “the Old Ones” another name for the shadowy Celtic deities and spirits themselves.¹⁰ The carvings which depict two, three and four-faces or are associated with pillars or phallic images provide another example of protective or apotropaic function, and invite comparisons to the Graeco-Roman *herms* which also guarded boundaries and roadways.

John Billingsley listed ten specific locations where heads are found, both natural or artificial, in the landscape, and defined these as places which can be understood “as boundaries, either in relation to space or human life.”¹¹ The list includes: caves and pits; wells, springs, lakes and rivers; boundary and perimeter sites; bridges; gateways; doorways; windows; roof edges; weaponry; vessels, urns, cauldrons, pots, etc. In addition to these major categories, heads are also associated with chimneys, fireplaces, furniture, church pillar capitals, ancient sites, emblems of power and quarries. Billingsley’s categories nine and ten have been discussed in the context of archaeology in Chapter 3. His categories one to eight appear in my own classification presented in this chapter in a slightly modified form.

In the North British upland pastoral tradition heads had a number of practical functions. Primarily it seems they had a role as guardians of gateways or thresholds whether these may be physical or non-physical (as in my category 1). Secondly they were used as a charm to protect against evil, witchcraft or cattle disease (category 2). Heads performing this function are found above doorways, entrances and windows, in gable ends¹² or inside the house positioned in areas such as the hearth or fireplace which were regarded as “weakspots” requiring magical protection.¹³ This apotropaic function is further developed in examples where a head has been created and positioned specifically to exorcise a haunting, in a ritual which draws upon some

archaic but unwritten local tradition. A good example of this category was recorded in the West Yorkshire village of Haworth as recently as 1971.¹⁴ Heads carved and placed in this fashion provide evidence of the association of the symbol with the world of ghosts, spirits and witchcraft. As objects of power they could work both in this world and the next.

Other examples had a prophylactic function and were used to promote fertility amongst livestock, to keep witches or goblins away from farm animals, and prevent foot and mouth disease from afflicting the flock. Stone heads positioned above the traditional cattle shippons or mistals in the Yorkshire Dales are suspected as further examples of this tradition, and there is supporting testimony from local folklore. Examples of this category of heads are found in Category 6.6.1. in the following section. A number of heads discovered in fieldwalls in the Peak District noted in Chapter 5 may have performed a similar function as charms, guarding and protecting livestock in the field. Still more are recorded standing sentinel in the masonry of bridges, or are found in or near liminal locations such as those associated with holy wells and springs, a placing which maintains their function as guardians of boundaries both physical and spiritual. This type of head is listed in Categories 6.5.3-6.5.5.

6.3. Heads baleful and benign in folk traditions

When we move into the province of belief and tradition, we leave the empirical certainties of archaeology behind and move into the realms of religion, superstition and psychology. Throughout history heads have been fashioned in stone, wood, pot and other materials for a variety of different purposes, all of which had a significance to their creators. The evidence collected from tradition and ethnology by fieldworkers such as Ralph Merrifield¹⁵ suggests that stone heads in particular were carved and used primarily for ritual and superstitious purposes, even if those motives appear obscure to us today. The way people react or relate to an sculpture such as a carved archaic stone head is of crucial importance to the understanding of how beliefs have grown up about their power as supernatural symbols. The stories collected in this chapter can help to provide clues towards understanding the original purpose for which some examples at least were created. Reactions to heads vary from individual to individual, and this is underlined by the wide variety of stories and folklore which surround these artefacts today. The varied human response has led to the growth of supernatural traditions surrounding heads and

skulls which has resulted in the substantial collection of material which survives in the oral tradition.

Most importantly, it appears to be the physical appearance of the heads themselves which plays the leading role in the development of the strange stories which grow up around them. Even natural boulders which through accident bear a striking resemblance to a human face have in some cases become the focus of belief and tradition.¹⁶ The case of the carved stone dubbed “the Druid’s head” which was unearthed in Bingley, West Yorkshire, in 1985, is one good example of how a variety of unrelated happenings can become associated with an object like a stone head once the imagination of a finder begins to work.¹⁷ Grotesque heads with open mouths, ugly expressions or with an “evil countenance” often result in reactions of fear or loathing on the part of those viewing them. Personal experience testimony of this kind is plentiful in the oral traditions collected for this survey listed in category 3 of the fieldwork survey which follows. It is only a short step from these individual reactions to the evolution of stories concerning ghosts, poltergeists, “bad luck” and alleged curses associated with the carvings which have been moved or disturbed from their places of residence.

Fieldworker Alice Smith recorded some typical reactions of residents in the village of Copster Green, Lancashire, to a “very fine stone head” which was kept in a garden rockery. The owner told her:

“My husband will not have it in the house; it evokes very strong feelings in people - they either love or hate it. It reflects the character of the person looking at it.”¹⁸

The features of the carving may explain some of these reactions. The protruding, slit-like eyes appear to look at you from every angle, and the expression on the deeply carved mouth appears to alter, depending on the way the light falls upon it. All stone heads were carved by a human hand, and it appears possible that some were created to represent warnings or danger as in the modern symbol of the “skull and crossbones.” Others may have acted as markers to indicate boundaries or territories, perhaps as skeuomorphic representations of real severed trophy heads after this practice became outlawed during the Roman occupation. When their usefulness came to an end, they could have to be buried for fear of the power they might be thought to have absorbed, a tradition discussed in Chapter 5. For these reasons, it has been suggested that some heads were buried face-down and upside-down in subsoil to neutralise any baleful influence

with which they were imbued, only to be dug up years later by unsuspecting gardeners. This kind of tradition was collected from a number of informants in the Peak District of Derbyshire, and is described in Chapter 5. Anne Ross believes heads may have been buried in rural Ireland and other areas during the early Christian era and also within comparatively recent times precisely because of their inherent pagan connotations.¹⁹ The age of a head has no obvious relationship to the reactions it can engender among finders or owners. Heads do not need to have been carved by imagined bloodthirsty Druids or Celtic warriors to cause fear and loathing among finders in the present day. Jackson recorded a tradition about a head from Todmorden, West Yorkshire, which was carved by a local youth in the 1960s and placed on the front lawn of a local teacher; “this lady was so disturbed by the sight of it that she asked her husband to bury it.”²⁰ This might also be the reason behind the burial of a head carved in grotesque style, christened as “Old Harry” by its owner, who unearthed it at a depth of four feet when a new tennis court was being made in the 1950s at a school in Pickering, North Yorkshire (see Fig. 23).²¹ This fourteen inch high foul-looking carving cut from local limestone, has huge bulging eyes and an ugly, open mouth revealing four widely-spaced teeth. It is easy to imagine this image as an object of local terror, buried for superstitious reasons.

The deliberate use of images of heads and faces carved with a frightening or scowling visage as a means of projection against the evil eye or as a method of cursing an enemy is known in the folk tradition of the north of England, which suggests there may be ancient precedents for this kind of belief. McCullough describes similar traditions in ancient Greece, and noted how hideous faces and heads:

“...probably connected with grotesque masks...have everywhere been regarded as an effective amulet against demoniac powers, or more particularly, the evil eye.”²²

In ancient Greece, hideous masks were sometimes worn for apotropaic purposes, and the Gorgoneion or “Gorgons Face” was a tradition which developed from the myth of Gorgon’s head cut off by Perseus, which was believed to have enormous powers of destruction.²³

Alan Smith notes how as well as being a source of wisdom, in English folk tradition the head could be used as “a source of destructive power.”²⁴ There is also a parallel tradition from northwest Europe, known as the *Nith-stang*, or stake of scorn, which was still in use in Scandinavia as late as the mid-sixteenth century.²⁵ This was a pole surmounted by a the skull of

a horse or another ritually dedicated animal. Runes were carved upon the stake and the whole device was set up and turned upon the victims, a ritual illustrated in a German chapbook published in 1555.²⁶ This shows a hag or witch pouring water in her left hand and brandishing a sword in her right as an assistant bears a head on a pole. An Icelandic saga describes how a man took a pole, carved a human head at the top, then killed a mare, slit up the body, inserted the post and set it up with the head looking towards the home of an enemy.²⁷ In *Egil's Saga* the words of a curse uttered are as follows:

*"Here I set up the stake of scorn and I turn the scorn against King Erik and Queen Gunhild...I turn this scorn against the spirits of the land..until they drive King Erik and Queen Gunhild from the land."*²⁸

It is not known if the *Nith-stang* was known in England, but there are instances from the middle ages which suggest that animal heads and skulls were sometimes used to effect a curse or insult against an enemy. Frank Stenton cites one instance from 1255 where poachers cut off the head of a buck,

*"...and put it on a stake in a certain clearing...placing in the mouth ...a certain spindle and they made the mouth gape at the sun in great contempt of the lord king and his foresters."*²⁹

Although these examples are sparse in time and space, they demonstrate to some extent how the power inherent in the head could be utilised for malevolent and destructive purposes.

In areas where there was a native British or Celtic element among the population, it is quite possible that human heads, both real and carved in stone or other material, could have been used for broadly similar purposes. In Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Emily Bronte, there is an interesting nineteenth century example of a group of malevolent heads set in the walls of a dwelling house, not in order to protect the inhabitants, but to cause distress to an enemy. Gaskell noted how the West Yorkshire village of Gomersall:

"...contained a strange-looking cottage built of rough unhewn stones, many of them projecting considerably, with uncouth heads and grinning faces carved on them; and a stone above the door was cut in large letters, Spite Hall. It was erected by a man in the village, opposite to the house of his enemy, who had just finished for himself a good house, commanding a beautiful

view down the valley, which this hideous building quite shut out."³⁰

A similar tradition relates to a cottage known as the Image House on the Whitchurch Road at Bunbury in Cheshire. Here there were until recently a number of grotesque carved heads built into the walls of this nineteenth century stone building to function as a curse. These were said to be images of a squire, sheriff and others who had played a part in sentencing a poacher to transportation to Tasmania in 1830.³¹ He had been convicted of the murder of a gamekeeper. Cheshire tradition tells how the poacher managed to escape from a penal colony and returned home to Bunbury, where he built a house overnight, carving into the walls vengeful images of the men who had sentenced him. A description of the surviving carvings in the 1960s suggested those of the judge and squire were "in excellent preservation" in private ownership in Chester. Two heads, built into wooden pillars in the porch of the house, were said "to look more like the Celtic stone heads of the Iron Age..[and] may have become attached to the house at a later date."³²

These traditions suggest that the power of heads to act in both the human world and the world of the spirits could be utilised for a variety of purposes. Heads which in some contexts were carved and placed within the structure of buildings in a ritual to deflect evil away from a building, could also be used as potent and destructive devices when turned against an enemy. Examples of both kinds of traditions can be found in the stories drawn from my fieldwork primarily in the North of England.

6.4. Fieldwork and stone head traditions

The oral traditions which form the bulk of this chapter were recorded during fieldwork for this study, mainly between 1988 and 1997. They were gathered from a variety of sources, but the stories included are mainly those for which there is primary testimony in that the evidence of the major participants has been recorded either in tape transcript or shorthand note. Additional secondary material, for example in the form of newspaper cuttings or archives such as the Sidney Jackson survey of stone heads, have been drawn upon where necessary to supplement and augment the testimony collected in the field.

The method by which material was gathered during the ten years of this study, how it was gathered and then organised have been described in detail in the Methodology which forms

Chapter 2, and sources are listed as Appendix 2. Of relevance here is the reasoning behind the method chosen to organise the material in this chapter. From the outset it became obvious that the traditions concerning stone heads fell into a relatively small number of broad classes or categories. It became clear there would be a need to create sub-classes or sub-categories, within at least three larger groups of stories and traditions.

The three broad categories can be summarised in the following fashion:

Category 1. These traditions emphasise the guardian tradition and include stories which span the whole range of protective contexts in which heads are found in the British Isles. Sub-categories within this grouping include heads as house, land and field guardians and those which appear in watery contexts protecting bridges and fords, or as part of native shrines at wells and springs. All the locations discussed within this grouping have highly relevant ancient parallels from archaeology described in Chapter 3.

Category 2. Includes stories where a head has been fashioned specifically to protect a house or other building against evil in folk tradition. Evil is primarily defined as a malevolent supernatural power usually taking the form of spirits, ghosts, fairies or witchcraft. This category contains sub-categories including both heads used as portable charmstones, and those which have been specifically positioned within the architecture of a building to "lay" a ghost as part of a continuing tradition.

Category 3. This is a distinct group of stories which contain a completely different theme which has more in common with modern urban legends than inherited tradition. The role of the mass media in the transmission of these tales and duplication of them in new and evolving forms during the present day is a process which has so far not been the subject of a detailed study. The majority of these narratives date from the last thirty years, and take the form of direct personal experiences. As such they form a remarkably consistent group of stories. Here heads are seen as malevolent to their owners or custodians, seemingly as a result of the chance disturbance or discovery of their "secret" resting places, a trait which they share to a remarkable degree with the guardian skull traditions described in Chapter 7. These "cursed heads," as they have become known in the popular literature, are significant in that they do not follow the standard tradition

of protecting against evil. Instead they bring the opposite; bad luck and misfortune to their finders. These heads are accompanied by unpleasant supernatural manifestations and are generally destructive until they are removed, buried or otherwise exorcised. This body of stories represents the duality of tradition surrounding heads and the powers they were believed to represent.

Reducing the gazetteer to its basic constituents, the relevant categories and sub-categories are listed below:

6.5. CATEGORY 1: *Luck-bringing/guardian heads*

- 6.5.1. Stone head as a house guardian.
- 6.5.2. Stone head as a guardian of a land boundary.
- 6.5.3. Stone head protects a bridge or ford.
- 6.5.4. Stone head protects a bridge keystone.
- 6.5.5. Stone head at a well or spring.

6.6. CATEGORY 2: *Apotropaic heads*

- 6.6.1. Stone head as a charm against evil.
- 6.6.2. Stone head deflects evil from a building.
- 6.6.3. Stone head protects building from haunting.

6.7. CATEGORY 3: *Cursed heads.*

- 6.7.1. Stone head associated with "a presence."
- 6.7.2. Stone head brings "a curse."

These three categories incorporate all the major motifs associated with heads and skulls in the British folk tradition. The two most important of these are the luck-bringing and evil-averting properties of heads, which are well attested from a number of contexts. The stories in Category 6.7.2 are unique in my contention, in that they form a new category of direct personal experience with the paranormal. These are influenced by their transmission via the popular media, allowing others to replicate the stories in their own locality for different purposes. There are numerous precedents for the use of baleful or evil heads to summon death and destruction

upon enemies, but the stories in 6.7.2 are interesting in that they are personal experience narratives which appear to follow a very traditional style in their construction. Stories involving “cursed heads” have not hitherto been recorded from the British ghost tradition in earlier surveys, including those by Briggs, in her *Dictionary of British Folk Tales*.³³ Unlike “traditional” ghost traditions defined by Gillian Bennett,³⁴ which have no ultimate solid basis and are products of their form and transmission, the artefacts at the centre of these traditions do exist and can be examined and photographed even if we cannot use scientific methods to scrutinise the beliefs or “influences” which are claimed to animate them. Neither do the motifs which emerge from the data appear to compare directly with any of the folktale motifs listed by Thompson worldwide or by Baughman in Europe and North America.³⁵ Only Baughman’s motif type E235.4.5 (b), which relates to the guardian skulls described in Chapter 7 is of a broadly parallel nature.³⁶ From the data assembled by this research it becomes clear that the stone head traditions neatly parallel those associated with the skulls, and in some instances it is impossible to separate the two. Both are centred upon the physical artefacts of belief themselves, which are discovered, whether dug out of gardens, found in rivers or springs, or uncovered in walls, and cause a psychological reaction among their human finders. These reactions in turn lead to the development of beliefs which become part of an oral tradition, following patterns which are highly traditional in their construction. Questions as to why the form of the object, in respect of the symbol of the head, is so significant can be accounted for by reference to the universal belief in the cranium as housing the soul, the seat of reason, and by its position in British tradition as a means of contact with the world of the dead.

A case could be argued for the geographical clustering of stories in parts of Northern England, particularly Hadrian’s Wall and the Peak District, but here a collecting bias should be taken into account as these areas were the focus of my field collection activities. My survey has suggested that there could be many similar stories from other parts of the British Isles which have never been recorded outside current oral tradition circulating within local communities, and which may prove a fruitful line of inquiry for a future fieldwork study. Each of the categories and sub-categories of stories listed in the gazetteer which follows are preceded by a preamble setting them in general context. These preambles draw comparisons with the use of human heads in other locations, often widely scattered geographically from northern France to the Channel Islands, Scotland and the western coast of Ireland, and their distribution is illustrated where

necessary by reference to the distribution map (Fig. 25 and Fig. 26) contained in Appendix 4. Within the sub-categories individual testimony is ordered alphabetically, by place of origin. Where individual details are sparse, as in the case of stone heads used as charms against evil, cases are treated as one single discussion. During the creation of the sub-categories listed below the most general category was chosen within which the largest grouping of stories could be fitted. Inevitably this resulted in some stories overlapping into other categories. For instance, in Category 6.7.1, those stories concerning heads which are associated with an undefinable "presence" have been placed in a single category when alternatively it could be argued that all the stories are prototypes of Category 6.7.2. As these carvings are continually being sold, moved and discovered by new owners and visitors and written about by researchers such as myself, the folklore surrounding them is in a continual state of development. Therefore during the course of the next half century, all these "prototype" cursed heads could develop their own haunted or cursed traditions, or stories which warn how they should never be removed from their place of residence. As proof of this continuity, new stories and tales about heads continued to filter through from informants until the completion of this study during the autumn of 1998.

6.5. Category 1: Luck-bringing/guardian heads

"It appears to be far more than mere coincidence that the carvers working in northern England during the past three hundred years should have placed their stone heads almost solely in situations which have such a long and well-established ritual significance."

Peter Brears, *North Country Folk Art*.³⁷

The guardian functions inherent in many stone head traditions have their roots in the foundation deposits and other ritual offerings which are well attested from the archaeological record and have been discussed in Chapter 3. Ralph Merrifield collected numerous examples from both the prehistoric and proto-historic periods for both human and animal sacrifices, as ritual deposits both in ditches, ritual shafts, wells and temples.³⁸ These can take the form of rites of commencement, as in offerings in the foundation of a new building or temple, or a rite of termination, which could mark the abandonment of the use of a site. They appear to relate to the belief that sacrifice would provide a spirit guardian for a structure or boundary.³⁹ The best

known examples of foundation deposits date from the pre-Roman Iron Age and relate to the construction and reconstruction of hillforts such as Maiden Castle in Dorset and Danebury in Hampshire, discussed in Chapter 3. Others relate to isolated skulls found in ritual shafts and wells. In this context, Merrifield notes that human skulls are the most convincing evidence:

*"...as they are unlikely to be dropped into wells by accident or to be disposed of as rubbish in the ordinary sense of the word."*⁴⁰

The motives which lie behind ritual acts such as foundation deposits have connections with both the Indo-European legends surrounding the heads of heroes and kings which guard fortresses, castles and temples and the guardian or protective functions associated with stone heads in surviving tradition in Britain. The stories surrounding guardian skulls discussed in Chapter 7 are just one manifestation of this kind of belief. The single most important example of a guardian head in the vernacular tradition is that of Bran the Blessed discussed in Chapter 3. The head of Bran, buried in London to protect the islands from attack, is a British version of the motif whereby the head of a king or hero is buried as a city guardian, a practice known among the ancient Greeks and suggested by a number of early Irish references. A number of ancient cities, including Lerna and Rome, had magical talismans, usually the heads of kings, buried in their foundations or upon boundaries to act as talismans or guardians. Robert Graves describes how:

*"...it was a widespread custom to bury the sacred king's head at the approaches of a city, and thus protect it against invasion."*⁴¹

Alan Smith and Leslie Jones connect these traditions with the Jewish legend which describes how Adam's head was buried at Golgotha, the place of skulls, "to protect Jerusalem from the North."⁴² This kind of legend appears to be universal, as the ethnologist Meslin notes how decapitation was linked with temple foundation among many African tribes, including the Kotoko of Chad.⁴³ Here we have a collection of archaic practices which provide the roots for the stories concerning guardian stone heads which are described in the following sub-categories.

6.5.1. (Sub-category) *Stone head as a house guardian*

This is a category which has direct parallels with a number of other aspects of head traditions, the most striking of which are the guardian skulls described in Chapter 7. Basically, these are stories which suggest that a carved head has become identified so strongly with a building with which it has become associated that a tradition has grown up suggesting it must not under any circumstances be removed from the threshold. Often these skulls, or stone heads, as the motif appears to be interchangeable in many cases, are kept in specially made niches or bricked into walls to ensure they cannot be removed or disturbed. If this taboo is broken, oral tradition suggests those responsible will suffer misfortune, bad luck or some other form of supernatural retribution. Here there are parallels to be drawn with the stories of unexplained phenomena attached to the stone heads associated with a curse in Category 3b.

The identification of heads with a building can also shade into the interpretation of skulls or heads as representing a physical embodiment of an ancestor of the family or clan, who provides what is in effect a guardian spirit of the house and family hearth. This kind of belief can be found most clearly in the story from Carnac in Brittany where the head represents the *animus loci* of the deceased owner of the building it protects. Here again there are direct analogies with the tradition of foundation deposits and the stories concerning guardian talismans found in British folk tradition.

Carnac, Brittany

A former Derbyshire resident, John Taylor Broadbent, describes a head he noticed while on holiday in northwest France in 1996:

"I was staying at the campsite at Le Pan, which is about four hundred metres from the megalithic stone rows at Carnac, in Brittany. We had gone for a walk out of the entrance down the road which leads to the alignments and we happened to pass a small cottage. There we saw a carved stone head standing on a garden wall looking out onto the streets. We saw it and were fascinated by it because it was very like one of the Brigantian heads but obviously was not an ancient one. The face was carved in high relief, with an oval face and deep set slot eyes, a stylised Celtic moustache and a slightly gaping mouth. I was so curious I went and knocked on the door and the owner, an old lady aged 84, came out. I asked about the head in French and she said "Oh, it's my husband." She then said when they got married and got the cottage together, he made (carved) this head about sixty years ago and put it on the wall to protect the

house. He had died around twenty or thirty years ago... "but he's there... he's in the head, looking after the house." There are a lot of similar stone heads in Brittany, the one I found was set on a wall and I was able to find how old it was and what its purpose was. From what the old lady told me it acted as the god of the house, a spirit or head of the family, an ancestor. She talked about the head and the standing stones as if they were living things. It reminded me of the heads built into the yeoman houses of West Yorkshire, some of which have seventeenth century dates carved below them." ⁴⁴

Chinley, Derbyshire

A stone head is kept on a stone pedestal in a garden at The Nook, Maynestone Road, in Chinley. There are traces of pink and blue paint on the reverse of the carved face, which has hair in Roman style similar to the head from Hathersage now in Weston Park Museum, Sheffield.⁴⁵ The features are basic and the eyes are large, oval and without pupils. The owner, Marjorie Broadhurst, inherited the head from a friend who in turn was given it by an old man who kept it for many years on a wall at Red Mires nearby. At each location the head has been near streams or springs of water, as it is at present. The current owners like the head, called Charlie, which they say "brings good luck and keeps evil spirits away from the house."⁴⁶

Chisworth, Derbyshire.

A freestanding stone head with clearly cut features, eyes, straight nose, moustache, cheek "striations" and hair streaked back from the forehead, has been kept with this house for as long as the owners remember.⁴⁷ The house is known as Bench Wells, on Glossop Road, at Chisworth, near Broadbottom. Nine inches high and carved from local sandstone, it was inherited by the present owner Ken Whiting when his uncle, the former owner of the house, died in the late 1960s. Mr Whiting said:

*"The only thing I know about it is that it is, supposedly, not to be moved [from the house] or ill tidings will come to pass."*⁴⁸

Clay Cross, Derbyshire

A nine inch high freestanding stone head carved in local gritstone was found in 1961 in the rubble remains from an enclosure fieldwall, between a house on Mill Lane and an open farmer's field. The head, carved in archaic style, is flat at the front as if carved for insertion in a wall and

has a protruding neck which forms a base. The owner, Moira Jean, keeps the head in the rockery and sees it as a symbol of good luck, or “a guardian of the house.”⁴⁹

Old Glossop, Derbyshire

John Taylor Broadbent writes of his childhood memories in Derbyshire from the 1950s:

“The churchyard at Old Glossop was the haunt of the Grey Lady which was widely believed in by Old Glossopians and communicated enthusiastically to kids. The ultimate childhood macho test was to explore the attics of the Vicarage at night without a light, or go into the cave in the Vicarage grounds. The Grey Lady was particularly associated with the Vicarage itself and the path from the Vicarage to the church. Also in the vicarage grounds were two stone heads which used to stand on the terrace above the cave...one of these had a “presence” and had a mouth hole which you could stick a cigarette in. That’s what we did when we were kids when we were messing about one day. But the gardener went beserk and was absolutely beside himself...he was very very angry. He called them with some reverence, they were Th’owd uns and called one of them old Charlie, and he said: “you leave old Charlie alone, he’s a reet old Glossopian is Old Charlie, he’s been here a long time, longer than we have.” He was very upset about it and saw it as sacrilege. Years later when I went back to look for the heads after the Vicarage had been renovated I noticed they no longer stood on the terrace and I asked the vicar’s wife what had become of them. She said, ‘they’re here’ pointing to the wall behind the vicarage where they had been built and said: ‘they’re rather nice aren’t they’ in a tone which meant they were quite evil-looking. She said the builders had insisted they should go in the vicarage wall and were “very insistent” about the point. I had to smile when I found out the contractors used were a local firm from Hayfield, nearby.”⁵⁰

Whalley, Lancashire

A grotesque stone head was found in the dividing wall between numbers 15 and 16, Church Street in Whalley village when two old cottages were made into one house in 1973.⁵¹ About one foot in height, and made from granite, the head appears to have suffered damage when it was inserted into the wall space. The owner, Mr Bloomfield, said the head was among infilling between two walls. The houses were built in the early nineteenth century, and the head may date from that time. Subsequently, the owner built a bar in his cottage and made a niche for the head to stand in. When the property is sold it is in the deeds that George, as the head is called, has to be left inside the house.⁵²

6.5.2. (Sub-category) *Stone head as a guardian of a land boundary*

According to a number of informants, heads are commonly found in parts of the Peak District and Ireland in bogs, fields and bases of walls where it appears that they have been buried at some point in the past for unknown reasons. Where these heads differ from the examples in the previous category is the fact that there appears to be no existing tradition attached to their function. In fact the reasons for their placement are lost to us, and conclusions can only be reached through inference and reference to parallel traditions recorded elsewhere. The West Yorkshire survey of stone heads initiated by Sidney Jackson recorded a number of examples of carved heads which originated in dry moorland fieldwalls. This suggested an ancient origin in some case as a number of walls in the Yorkshire Pennines had been tentatively dated to the late Iron Age or Romano-British period.⁵³ Field surveys of the same early walls uncovered numerous examples of Iron Age and Romano-British quernstones which Jackson claimed could be used to date the carved stone heads found in a similar context. The best known example of a head in a boundary wall context from West Yorkshire comes from Heaton Woods, Bradford, and was presented to the Cartwright Hall Museum at the beginning of the survey in 1965 and has been discussed in Chapter 4. In 1966 and 1967 a number of stone heads came to the attention of the survey from moorland fieldwalls in the Todmorden region of West Yorkshire. The first recorded was carved in coarse millstone grit and featured a pair of stylised ram's horns carved on the side of the head which were compared to those on an example from Netherby, Cumbria, dated to the third century AD.⁵⁴ This head was found partially buried on farmland at Walsden, a village on the edge of the Pennine moors on the Lancashire-Yorkshire border. Following this discovery two volunteers from the museum carried out a "stone wall survey" of surrounding farmland, walking on each side of the drystone walls, carefully examining each side as they moved along. As a result the team were rewarded with the discovery of two more stone heads, each built into a field wall with the surrounding stonework carefully shaped to form recesses for them. Jackson notes "they were not just used as building stones, but were placed upright "(see Fig. 11).⁵⁵ One of the heads was flat, with features on one side of the stone, as if it had been carved in order to be viewed from the front only. This is a feature associated with several heads of Romano-British date, discussed in Chapter 4. The finds received publicity in *The Farmer's Weekly* in 1966 which brought a further collection of

examples, from Braunton in Devon to Edmundbyers on the Northumbrian border with County Durham.⁵⁶ Several local traditions were noted by Jackson's fieldworkers about the function of the heads. One suggested they were "field deities" and had been placed in the walls "to ensure the fertility of the adjacent land."⁵⁷

A similar tradition was recorded during fieldwork for this study in the Derbyshire Peak District in 1994. This concerned a stone head carved in the archaic style which is built, features facing outwards, into a low garden wall of a house near the parish church in Old Glossop. The face is carved on one end of an elongated stone which is built into the wall. The owner of the head was adamant it should not be removed from the wall to allow the head to be measured and said it was there to "help his beans grow."⁵⁸ The fertility connotations of heads in fieldwalls is one explanation for their presence. Other explanations could relate to a guardian function for those examples placed looking towards gates or entrances in walls. Others appear to have been deliberately hidden in fields or walls to neutralise their powers, or as offerings to underworld spirits. Oral tradition in the High Peak of Derbyshire suggests heads were buried as charms beneath newly-built roads, presumably to keep permanent watch over them.⁵⁹ Others may have been buried for more prosaic reasons. In Ireland Anne Ross suggests many heads associated with pagan cult sites were buried as a direct result of the influence of the Christian church, which regarded the stones as devilish idols in the early medieval period.⁶⁰ Irish traditions suggest destruction of idols continued to take place during the early Christian period. Many of these may have been cult heads, but others survived and appear to have been the centre of surreptitious worship or propitiation within living memory. What is clear from surviving tradition is the continuing belief in the power of pagan deities which could be used to work for good or evil. A number of crude stone and wooden idols have been recovered from peat bogs in Ireland and Scotland, and occasionally these have become associated with strange or uncanny happenings. For example, in her book on Ulster folklore *A Prospect of Erne*, Mary Rogers writes of one "stone figure" which was hastily reburied in a bog in County Cavan after "several accidents" occurred on the farm where it had been kept.⁶¹ An archaeologist, Kathleen Dickie, wrote to Sidney Jackson in a similar vein:

"These heads had hereditary keepers as the relics of the Celtic saints had. They are still being buried in Ireland and I know of one in County Cavan which was buried between two searching visits of mine in the 1960s. The family had particularly bad luck and decided that the head was

the cause. At one place in County Cork where there are two extraordinary heads but I was allowed to see only one, although I went with the priest and asked about the second. I was only allowed to see the other head on the second and third visits. It is built into a wall just above a ditch, but that was only done a few years ago, and the owners are frightened about their powers and would never throw them out.”⁶²

Similar examples of heads built face inwards to field walls are known from Derbyshire, Yorkshire and other regions of northern Britain. A stone head found by two men working on Denton Moor near Bradford in 1950s was “built into a fieldwall, face inwards.”⁶³ It was described by Ross as “definitely Celtic” and was subsequently rebuilt into the interior of Moorfield Cottage, Denton. At Carleton in North Yorkshire a stone head, trimmed to make it serviceable as a building stone, was found when a garden wall was demolished. “It was found built face inwards in the drystone wall, with features not showing.”⁶⁴

6.5.3. (Sub-category) *Stone head protects a bridge or ford*

Places where two rivers meet, or where a bridge crosses a stream or watercourse are traditionally regarded as magical boundaries where contact with the Otherworld was possible. Rivers themselves can be seen as both natural and supernatural boundaries, and bridges and fords which cross them can be interpreted as boundaries within a boundary, as evidenced by the tradition which asserts how the Devil, witches and evil spirits are unable to cross running water.⁶⁵ In northern England, Wales and Scotland there are numerous instances of supernatural place names associated with the threshold between land and water, and in other contexts with the boundaries between inhabited land in valleys and the wild moorlands. Goblins, ghosts and evil spirits frequent these liminal locations, a motif which can be seen to have grown from the fact that a ghost was often interpreted as a spirit trapped between this world and the world of the dead, and would therefore be expected to inhabit places such as a bridge over water or marginal land between a valley and a wild moor would represent. In one upland valley in the Peak District, featured in Chapter 5, “Devil” names are associated with a bridge crossing a moorland stream, a spur of land above a clough marking the boundary of the moor, and a Roman road cutting through a bleak area of peat bog. In the latter case there is a well known local tradition concerning a race between a doctor and the Devil across the moors drawing directly from the poem

“Tam O’Shanter,” a folk tradition recorded by Burns in Ayrshire, southern Scotland, during the eighteenth century.⁶⁶ In that case, the doctor escapes the Devil when his horse leaps across a watercourse which the evil one cannot cross. The names Doctors Gate and Devil’s Dyke on the Bleaklow Moors above Glossop were named as a result of this pursuit, according to local tradition.⁶⁷ Numerous similar examples could be cited from other regions, both from traditional “Celtic” regions and from the English lowlands.

However, whereas charms such as horseshoes, witchposts and lucky stones were apparently used as protective talismans at bridges and fords in southern and eastern England, the use of heads appears to be confined to the north and west of the British Isles. Carved stone heads and in some instances human and animal skulls can be found in a variety of contexts in the Pennines, as protective or apotropaic charms. In the Peak District and Yorkshire stone heads were used for a variety of magical purposes in local tradition; marking boundaries, guarding and protecting entrances or crossroads. Parallels can be drawn between the use of heads and the Graeco-Roman *herms*, which marked the boundaries of property and were carved in the form of pillars featuring twin symbols of heads and phallus. Heads carved on simple shafts are known from a variety of locations and contexts in north Britain and Wales, and have been discussed in Chapter 4. Two examples of carved stone heads with highly developed protective functions at river fords have been recorded during the fieldwork for this research in northern England. These examples illustrate the use of the head as a magical device at an important boundary or liminal position within the landscape, and deserve individual discussion.

6.5.3.1. Melandra Castle, Derbyshire, springhead carving

This tricephalic carving has been described in detail in the Peak District case study, Chapter 5. A number of interesting traditions are associated with the sculpture (see Fig. 1). Anne Ross writes of it:

“..within living memory, a well-head decorated by a tricephalos composed of two profile heads, probably horned...looking in towards the central head with which they are cojoined, was kept buried together with several other Celtic-type stone heads near a spring on the moor. These were annually unearthed and a lamb was sacrificed to them. The stones are now in Manchester Museum, but lamb sacrifice still surreptitiously continues.”⁶⁸

The association of the stone with animal sacrifice is interesting as Tony Ward collected some anecdotes which suggested the Etherow received offerings similar to those documented for a number of other British rivers.⁶⁹ The family of John Taylor Broadbent from Old Glossop have a tradition which suggests these may have taken the form of offerings. He has a story of a child who fell into the river and, like Ophelia, floated downstream singing before he was drowned. John heard this story from a number of separate sources, one of whom was his own grandmother who put his family name on the child, saying it had happened "in our Queen's day."⁷⁰ However, it was an incident he has been unable to find any verification of in his family history. And the mystery was increased when John heard the same story connected with the Glossop Brook at another location in the valley, at Mossey Lea, at Old Glossop, where an identical tradition was noted by someone who used a different name for the child. He said:

*"Now there can't have been a string of children falling in the Etherow floating down and singing in Queen Victoria's time so it seems we have a tradition which has been pinned to a time which is conveniently out of memory. "back then" in the Queen's day."*⁷¹

It may be significant that one of these traditions relates to the same spot below the Roman fort at Woolley Bridge where the tricephalic springhead carving described above was located. This position is also the scene of a dangerous junction between the westward flowing River Etherow and the Glossop Brook. When the brook is in spate, it temporarily holds back the flow of the larger river, creating a dangerous whirlpool. The point of this junction lies between an existing ford across the river, and one further downstream which has since vanished. This area of water was the haunt of a water nymph who was fading from memory in the 1950s, according to the traditions current in the Broadbent family.⁷² Describing the juxtaposition of the carving with the river crossing, Tony Ward writes:

*"If the tricephalos was where John remembered it, it must have been either a casual find during work on the river banks or a piece from the fort (there have been many landslips on that side as well as large scale quarrying for gravel)...it would be pleasing if one could assume that the tricephalos was in its original position, such a conjunction of circumstances would have demanded a 'lares flumensis' to make the river behave!"*⁷³

Here we have a complex collection of stories surrounding one numinous location in the local

tradition. A carving which may depict a trio of native deities, possibly a water goddess or nymph and two male consorts, associated with a bridge or ford crossing water near a place where there is a dangerous meeting between a river and a brook. There are also additional associations with offerings both animal and human to a river deity in the oral tradition. If we can associate the provenance of this carving with the water crossing, as the evidence appears to indicate, this provides a number of clues concerning the age and function of the sculpture. Manchester Museum suggests the carving is of Romano-Celtic origin.⁷⁴ The survival of a local tradition connected with it as late as the mid-twentieth century demonstrates the long continuity of belief in the powers associated with stone heads in this area of the high Pennines.

6.5.3.2. Hebden Bridge river guardian

A tradition which has direct parallels with that surrounding the Peak District tricephalos was recorded by John Billingsley.⁷⁵ This concerns a location in Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, where an archaic stone head is built into the wall of a four arched aqueduct above the location where the Rochdale Canal crosses the River Calder near Holme Street. The head stares westwards towards Todmorden from the central buttress of the aqueduct and is difficult to identify from the road. The oral tradition of the locality describes how this head was carved to commemorate a teacher from a nearby school who tragically lost his life as he dived into the River Calder to rescue a child who was drowning in the Black Pool, a deadly whirlpool below the bridge.⁷⁶ A problem implicit in this story is the fact that the head is contemporary with the building of the aqueduct, in 1797, more than a century before a school was built in the vicinity. Describing the context, Billingsley draws attention to its location directly above the spot where the canal crosses the river at the Black Pit, the most dangerous part of the watercourse where the Hebden Water flows into the River Calder.⁷⁷ The whirlpool here represents destructive force, a boundary between life and death, a threshold where the normal rules are turned upside down. In tradition this would be a place where special, indeed magical precautions could be required to protect the bridge against malevolent natural forces. Billingsley writes of this example:

“Not only is the head on this bridge, it is also a place where something unnatural occurs; water is crossing water without mingling, and to cap it all the head is not placed in a visible location. It’s very hard to see from the school, and you can’t see it from the canal towpath unless you

dangle from the parapet over this whirlpool. It has no good vantage point except the river and is obviously not for decoration, therefore the intended audience is the river itself.”⁷⁸

6.5.4. (Sub-category) *Stone head protects a bridge keystone*

*But there is sum unlucky lads
That wants correctin' be ther dads,
They might be in sum better pleeace
Than thrawin' steans at 'aud man's face.⁷⁹*

This rhyme was recorded by a North Riding Methodist preacher, stonemason and poet, John Castillo, in 1828, in his account of the building of a bridge at Glaisdale to replace an earlier one dated to 1668. There is a carved stone head built into the third course above the arch on the north side of the bridge, and this is evidently the “aud man’s face” referred to in the poem. In another verse Castillo expresses his displeasure that the face had been “damisht wi’t lads thrawin’ steans at it” and mentions a risk that this desecration could attract bad luck.⁸⁰ Underneath the bridge is an 1828 datestone containing the names of the masons who built it, including that of Castillo. Historians attribute a number of similar carved heads in North Yorkshire and Cleveland to Castillo’s hand, including one in the gable of Post Gate Farm at Glaisdale, which dates from 1784.⁸¹ Castillo’s reference provides some evidence for the existence of a tradition associating heads with luck or otherwise, and suggests disrespect could attract unwanted attention from the spirit world. This is a broadly similar tradition to that associated with the guardian skulls discussed in Chapter 7. This reference to the “aud man’s face” in Castillo’s poem led Peter Brears to suggest this title was in fact “the traditional name for the numerous carved stone heads..found in most of the stone-bearing areas of northern England.”⁸² Fieldwork for this study revealed a further reference to the name, once again in the context of a carved head on the keystone of a bridge. A bearded carving of a male face, again dating to the early nineteenth century, is carved on a single arched bridge across the Chesterfield Canal at a hamlet called Drakeholes, near the North Nottinghamshire village of Wiseton. The bridge is known locally as “Old Man’s Face Bridge” as a direct result of the carving, according to local tradition.⁸³ There is surviving folklore relating to this name, which appears to refer to a protective spirit or *genius loci*. In Peak District tradition the phrase T’Owd Man or T’Owd ‘Un

is used in the context of the tutelary protective spirits of both the high moors and the old lead workings, and is a term which has become synonymous with the Devil in the High Peak.⁸⁴ The phrase was used in the context of a guardian sculpture in Old Glossop vicarage by a gardener earlier this century, described earlier. It is possible to see the Old Man who protects bridges and mines as another manifestation of this *genius loci*, perhaps invoked as an apotropaic symbol at an important crossing point which a bridge could be seen to represent. Carved stone heads also appear on other bridges in a number of locations across the north of England, particularly in the Pennine foothills of Yorkshire and Lancashire, and the upland areas between North Yorkshire and Cleveland and Derbyshire (see Chapter 5). The majority were built into the masonry of bridges, looking along the streams or rivers from the topmost part of the arch.

Peter Brears describes two stone heads built into the wall on each side of the sixteenth century Rawthey Bridge at Cautley, near Sedbergh, on the border between the old counties of Westmorland and North Riding of Yorkshire.⁸⁵ He suggests these may be the oldest of their kind *in situ*. However, the heads themselves may be older than the bridge itself as a record from 1584 mentions the setting up of a commission to inquire into “the late fall of Rothay bridge” and rebuild the same.⁸⁶ A local resident writing in 1966 concerning the heads said:

“...they were put there to scare away the evil spirits of death, disease and disaster which were thought to follow the water courses and these ugly heads were expected to scare them to such an extent that the evil spirits dared neither go up nor down the river.”⁸⁷

An example of a Romano-British head in the context of a river crossing comes from close to the site of the Roman fort at Ribchester in Lancashire. It was found in the 1870s in water near the present bridge above the River Ribble, and the carefully dressed pedestal suggests it was originally mounted in a position where it could guard the ancient crossing.⁸⁸ The head has plaited hair, “spectacle” eyelids and a fine moustache in the archaic style, and its owners the British Museum classify the sculpture as dating possibly from the late Iron Age.⁸⁹ If dating is correct in this example, we have evidence of heads used in a similar fashion to protect river crossings over a period of nearly two thousand years, a remarkable example of the continuity of tradition. Their use as a lucky charm in bridge masonry appears to have undergone a revival during the great period of canal building which began in the late eighteenth century. A number of examples date from this period, which also saw the appearance of heads on mill chimneys in

West Yorkshire.

Although few extant traditions have been recorded which relate stone heads directly to water spirits, a Scottish tradition associates one grotesque carving directly with a kelpie, or water horse. This carving is found in the outer wall of the parapet of the old Shielhill Bridge over the South Esk, near Kirriemuir, again dating to the eighteenth century.⁹⁰ The elegant single-arched bridge itself, now replaced by a modern successor built from concrete, was said to have been built by a conceited kelpie who was so proud of his work that he "set a grotesque horse's head, pilfered from the ruins of Shielhill Castle, as a memorial."⁹¹ The story relates to the harnessing of a supernatural guardian whose presence is reflected in the stone image of a kelpie defending the bridge against malevolent spirits. The rhyme connected with the story runs:

*And weel they kent quhat help I lent,
For thai yon image fram't,
Aboon the pend quhilk I defined;
And it thai kelpie nam't.*⁹²

6.5.5. (Sub-category) *Stone heads at a well or spring*

Wells, springs, pools, rivers and lakes all feature prominently in British folk tradition as places where the Otherworld could be accessed. As the symbol of the human head is also prominent in folklore as a channel for contact with the world of the spirit, it is to be expected that the two symbols would occur together as a method of increasing the potency in the context of a watery shrine. Representations of heads occur frequently in association with springs and wells, often acting as a personification of the divine force of the waters themselves. In this fashion they formed a highly important element in the beliefs of the British tribes, a factor which continued into the Christian period when springs and wells remained as focal points of worship (see Chapter 3). In archaeology heads occur frequently in the context of springs and watery sites in a variety of different contexts, but most frequently in the form of offerings or dedications of skulls to deities dwelling in wells, pools and rivers like those associated with Coventina's Well in Northumberland, described in Chapter 3. Others have been unearthed near the sources of underground springs or streams, for example at Boston Spa near Wetherby, North Yorkshire⁹³ and the Russett Well which emerges from beneath Peak Cavern at Castleton, Derbyshire,

described in Chapter 5.

Stories and place names from the insular tradition of the Celtic lands continue this association with the frequent occurrence of springs called the "Well of the Head" which are known by their Gaelic equivalent in local tradition. The examples, discussed in Chapter 3, are found in Ireland, northwest Scotland, the Isle of Skye and in north Britain, suggesting a common source. Those with surviving lore are invariably associated with decapitation either in battle or as part of rituals associated with prophecy, fertility and sacrifice. In the early medieval period this tradition is continued by the stories surrounding well shrines like that of St Winifred at Holywell in North Wales, where a spring is said to have appeared after the saint's decapitated head fell to the ground (see Chapter 3).

Heads are also found submerged beneath water in natural shrines, providing the channel for the water itself, or acting as guardians of springs at grottos. At White Wells on the edge of Ilkley Moor, West Yorkshire, curative water from the original pool is channelled into the baths through the mouth of a carved head on a rectangular stone block, on top of which two shallow round holes have been cut. The waters have enjoyed a reputation for their curative qualities since the late seventeenth century and the stone baths were added to an early building here around 1756.⁹⁴ The stone head and another which is stored at the well house may be associated with an earlier Romano-Celtic shrine at Ilkley, which was the site of the marching fort called *Olicana*. Also in Yorkshire are heads known as the "Slavering Baby" on Adel Moor, Leeds, and Diana's Well on the slopes of Witton Fell, which both date from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and act as channels for springwater.⁹⁵

The most remarkable example of this kind is found in upper Airedale near Eshton, North Yorkshire, where three stone heads are submerged beneath the waters in an elaborate masonry weir at St Helen's Well.⁹⁶ Little is known concerning the history of this site, other than a record of a chapel dedicated to St Helen which stood here in 1429, and was dedicated to the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great who was said to be from a native British family.⁹⁷ The heads are found in the outfall pool for the crystal clear water of the spring, equally spaced out along a low stone basin twenty feet in diameter, where they are carved on three large semi circular projections which extend into the water. The submerged faces gaze directly towards the source of the waters, but remain virtually invisible to visitors who do not know of their presence. Local tradition suggest the heads and masonry came to the spring from the ruins of a

church or abbey, but this does not lessen the significance of their association with the waters. A tradition of leaving rags as offerings at trees near the water in hope of a cure for eye troubles continues today, alongside stories which describe a presence or haunting on the night of Midsummer Day, collected in 1992.⁹⁸

In some cases heads appear to have been carved at watery sites as a way of giving form to the nebulous spirit of place or *genius loci* themselves. Hence in these contexts, the deity represented by the head could often take female form as a representation of a water nymph or goddess. This could be the case in the example of the tricephalic head from the River Etherow near the Melandra Roman fort, at Glossop in Derbyshire, described earlier. Here the central face is surrounded by faint “water weeds” which may symbolise the female deity of the river. Two more tricephalic carvings of an archaic style are associated with the masonry surrounding a natural spring at Green Springs in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, recorded by John Billingsley.⁹⁹ In the churchyard at Rostherne in Cheshire is a large block of sandstone which features a face carved in relief, on either side of which hang “bangs” of hair or horns. Christopher Crowe suggests the face may be connected with the legend of the “mermaid” said in folk tradition to live beneath the waters of adjacent Rostherne Mere.¹⁰⁰ The shape of the stone suggests it may once have formed a keystone in the arch of a shrine overlooking the water. A similar function is possible at St Anne’s Well near the church at Whitstone in north Cornwall. The well entrance here features a crude carved stone head which is said to be that of the saint in local tradition, but may have been intended to represent the female spirit believed to dwell in the waters themselves.¹⁰¹ Water deities may be represented on a tricephalic carving unearthed in close proximity to the River Clyde at Netherton, Lanarkshire in 1967.¹⁰² Carved in local grey sandstone, the sculpture features three individual heads mounted on a flattened base. Two are complete three dimensional carvings of similar appearance which protrude from one side of the stone, while the third is a face carved flat upon the base of the stone and of completely different appearance and style, which gazes upwards. One of the pair of heads has a “wispy” beard which suggested to Anne Ross the image of rippling reeds and she claims the three elements represent different aspects of a deity which “gaze out fiercely towards the sacred waters while the face peers upwards towards the sun from which the powers of healing were believed to emanate in conjunction with the waters.”¹⁰³ Ross identifies the carving with a powerful god of the Damnonii tribe who inhabited this area of southern Scotland in the area of the Antonine

Wall, or alternatively with the goddess Clota ("the Washer"), the tutelary deity of the river itself.¹⁰⁴

The Christian church often made natural features such as springs and wells the centre of the cult of a local saint, and heads found in these locations are often said to be images of that saint. At Oswestry in Shropshire a stone head was stored at St Oswald's Well, a spring which was believed to have miraculously appeared when the Anglo-Saxon king was decapitated at the battle of Maserfield. It remained there until 1842 when it was removed because of damage caused by a ritual which consisted of the following:

*"...the coming of the wisher to the well at midnight; some water was raised in the hand and a little drunk; the remainder was thrown at the head at the back of the well. If the water struck the head the wish, it was believed, would be granted."*¹⁰⁵

An alternative ritual recorded at the well is associated with divination. The pilgrim had to search among the beech trees near the well for an empty beechnut husk,

*"...which can be imagined to bear some sort of likeness to the human face, and to throw this into the water with the face uppermost."*¹⁰⁶

If the husk swam while the diviner counted up to twenty, the wish would be granted, but not otherwise. St Oswald's head is said to have ended up in the tomb of St Cuthbert, where it was described by Reginald of Durham in the twelfth century.¹⁰⁷

Stone heads also appear in connection with a water motif inside the structure of medieval parish churches. Examples of this category, from the Peak District of England, were discussed in Chapter 5. Elsewhere, five archaic faces are carved upon the ancient stone font in St Gwrthwl's Church at Llanwrthwl in Powys, which dates from the twelfth century or earlier. The font is said to be one of a number of similar examples featuring crude heads associated with early churches in the same area, which suggests they are all the products of a single mason or carving school.¹⁰⁸ Another font believed to be of eleventh century origin is found in St Germoe's church in the parish Germoe in Cornwall. It is decorated with four crude carved heads which feature circular eyes and tiny mouths without noses.¹⁰⁹ The early medieval church here is associated with an Irish missionary saint Germochus or Germoe who travelled to Cornwall during the

Dark Ages. A stone arched structure known as St Germoe's Chair in the parish churchyard has a Celtic-style stone head positioned in the gable.¹¹⁰ All these examples, drawn from a variety of different contexts in space and time, continue the tradition of belief which credit water with life-giving properties, properties which are multiplied when juxtaposed with the human head. Heads at wells and springs appear to function as the guardians of boundaries between this world and the Otherworld represented by the source of the waters. The heads provided the means by which that world could be accessed or manipulated within the living tradition.

6.6. Category 2. Apotropaic heads

apotropaic adj. supposedly having the power to avert an evil influence or bad luck [Greek *apotropaios* ('turn')]

Concise Oxford Dictionary¹¹¹

A variety of magical artefacts and methods have been employed across the British Isles to protect the home and hearth from witches, fairies and the Evil Eye. Numerous examples have been recorded from architectural contexts both in Britain and across the world from the very earliest times. Numerous British examples are discussed by Merrifield in his work on ritual and magical practices in the proto-historical period.¹¹² The prominence of the head symbol in belief as the centre of the soul and the seat of wisdom, either in human or animal form, is widespread as an evil-averting image and this can be traced back to the Greek and Roman legends of the Gorgon's head and the heads of kings buried to protect city boundaries, referred to earlier. The pagan Celtic and German tribes of northern Europe appear to have developed the use of the head in their own individual way as the evidence from archaeology in Chapter 3 suggests. The head appears as an evil-averting image in a variety of contexts in medieval England, as a result I believe of its re-emergence within the context in folk magic. Rather than providing evidence of direct continuity from Celtic times, it appears to have re-entered popular culture at the level of superstition, rather than religion. As Billingsley notes in his study of gable heads in West Yorkshire farm buildings from the seventeenth century onwards:

*"...the relative closeness of a Celtic milieu in this region may account for its enhanced vitality in recent centuries."*¹¹³

Indeed, the human head may well have recurred as an apotropaic symbol specifically in those areas which maintained links, however indirect, with the pastoral way of life associated with the upland areas of Brigantia. Parallels can be found with other areas of Britain which maintained a pastoral economy based upon livestock until recent times, including the area of central County Cavan in Ireland studied by Helen Hickey.¹¹⁴

William notes the use of carved phallic and other sexual symbols as protective or apotropaic devices upon entrances and guarding the fireplaces and hearths of a number of early Welsh farmhouses, some of which are associated with heads.¹¹⁵ For example, at the tenth century Feathers Inn at Ludlow, Shropshire, the feet of a hermaphrodite figure surmount two severed heads supporting a capital. Another house in Caernarfonshire has an original entrance of sixteenth century date, featuring a carved head, above which is a moulded stone label having stops at both ends carved in the form of grinning faces. William sees these devices as representing "one manifestation of the wide range of protective devices used to keep the house and home safe from evil."¹¹⁶ In his survey of apotropaic charms associated with the timber framed houses of rural East Anglia, George Ewart Evans lists a number of devices used as apotropaic charms at thresholds including doorways, foundations, entrances and hearths.¹¹⁷ These include iron horseshoes, horse skulls and carved images of horse heads on the roofs of houses. All these objects appear to be primarily focussed upon the horse, an animal which was of great importance to the economy of the lowlands of Eastern England. Witch bottles or bellarmines, decorated with bearded faces said to represent a witch, are also known in this region, but there is a complete absence of carved stone heads in the context they are found in the north and west of Britain. This suggests although widespread across Europe, Asia and elsewhere the head as an apotropaic device occurs more frequently in some areas of Britain than others, and this may well be related to the economic, religious and social background of the people who carved and used them.

As noted earlier, the examples of evil-averting heads referred to in this category are widely scattered geographically. They range from symbols on Roman roof tiles in Wales, tiny carved charms in late medieval English houses and archaic stone carvings found in the walls of farm buildings across northern England, Scotland and the Channel Isles. This wide and varied distribution is typical of a symbol which recurs at so many times in different contexts within the archaeological and folklore record. Fieldworker Sidney Jackson realised how widespread the

evil-averting function of the head was when he noted in the introduction to his 1973 sample of West Riding heads how:

*"...native huts in New Guinea have a large and fierce-looking human face affixed to their gables.."*¹¹⁸

As Brewer notes in his discussion of stone heads in Wales, the Roman terracotta antefixa used in the gables of barracks at Caerleon fulfill the same evil-averting function as the crude stone heads built into the gables and walls of medieval and later buildings because "the concept [is] virtually timeless."¹¹⁹

6.6.1. (Sub-category) *Stone head as a charm against evil*

Representations of the human head carved in stone, wood, pot and other materials appear in a variety of different contexts in British folklore as a charm against evil. Although their distribution is not as widespread as that noted for the "dobbie" or "witch" stone, they are nevertheless found across a wide area of Britain, and the Continent. This kind of folk tradition has ancient parallels as there are tiny stylised faces pecked on chalk cylinders and pebbles in burials dating from the late Bronze Age in Britain, as noted in Chapter 3. From the folk tradition, human heads are featured on charms known as witch bottles or bellarmines which originate from the German Rhineland around the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹²⁰ Production spread to England, where they are found mainly in protective contexts in East Anglia. The bottles are jugs, usually between five and nine inches in height, and contain items of folk medicine such as nails, hair, urine and bent nails or pins. They have been unearched in houses beneath the hearth, and found in fields and under hedgerows where they appear to have been buried as charms. Merrifield notes how witch bottles have been recovered from the city ditch of London, and under the threshold and hearths of buildings. Evans notes how the distinctive feature of East Anglian witch bottles is "the mask of a bearded man in relief on the neck's top."¹²¹ He suggests the face was meant to represent the witch, or a Celtic god such as the Gaulish Esus. The prominence of the face on the bottles, and their method of deposition, suggests links with traditions surrounding the use of the human head as a protective device in folk magic.

Carved heads which functioned as protective amulets were sometimes paired with a phallus for additional potency, and a number of examples of this kind were noted in Chapter 4.

Pebbles decorated with grotesque human faces were found by builders during the demolition of an old house at Dedham in Essex in the 1930s. All the tiny pebbles had individual faces, marked in black and white paint. A tradition recorded at the time said:

*"It is believed that they were placed in the backs of ovens, and that their purpose was a twofold one of testing the oven for heat and of keeping away evil spirits from the contents."*¹²²

Other examples may have performed similar functions, protecting the hearth and fireplace. William notes archaic-looking faces carved upon the lower columns of a fireplace at Dodington Hall, Somerset, dated to 1581.¹²³ A number of tiny heads or "dollies" were found on the base and upright stones of an old stone fireplace in a building at Nansladron, Cornwall, visited by one of Sidney Jackson's informants. The mother of one of the builders, who baked bread in a "cloam oven" said she had seen similar examples previously and said: "Dollies were to ward off evil."¹²⁴ Jackson notes one fist-sized sandstone head from Yorkshire, which exhibited signs of "stove blacking...as if it had been kept beside the hearth."¹²⁵ Two more heads from a cottage at Sevenhampton, near Cheltenham, were carved on a piece of stone which once formed the lintel of a fireplace. One was in the form of an old man with a beard, the other was a woman or child.¹²⁶ A plaster effigy of a human head, used as a charm or talisman against evil has been recorded in the tradition from the Isle of Wight. T. Rowland Powel, writing in *Country Life* in 1967, described how the head was unearthed when the floorboards in an old house called Thornton Manor, near Ryde, built in the early nineteenth century, were taken up.¹²⁷ The object, made out of hard plaster, was three inches in height. According to the owner of the house,

*"...at one time it was believed that small figures placed under the floors of houses were effective in warding off evil spirits."*¹²⁸

Jackson noted another form of head charm found when a shippon or cowhouse was enlarged at Jacques Farm, Clapham in West Yorkshire, during the 1960s. This was a crudely-carved face carved on the underside of a socket stone used to support a wooden pillar in the shippon, which dated from the seventeenth century. Several other supports were removed during the renovations,

but none were found to contain a carved head or face. Jackson asked: "Was it carved to avert evil, like the Somerset god dolly?"¹²⁹ These examples relate to a wide range of apotropaic devices and charms used across a wide range of contexts and are widely spaced in both geography and time. What is common to them all is the use of an image of the human head or face as the focus of their power, a fact which becomes even more explicit in the form of the examples discussed in the following sub-category.

6.6.2. (Sub-category) *Stone head deflects evil from a building*

Antecedents for the positioning of heads in gable ends of buildings are widespread across time and space. In tradition these heads are rarely found on the summit of the gable itself, but are frequently in a central position in the wall a few feet below. Earlier examples of this form of positioning can be drawn with the carved heads and skulls on entrance arches at the Celto-Ligurian shrines in Provence described in Chapter 3. In Romano-British times antefixa, or tiles containing apotropaic symbols, were used to decorate the eaves of buildings in a broadly similar tradition. A large proportion of antefixa featured human heads, and a number have survived from Romano-British contexts such as Caerleon and at York. The portrayal of a head for apotropaic purposes on buildings dating from the Roman occupation are also known in the form of the Gorgon heads. These bear a resemblance to Gorgon heads which have a long history among Indo-European peoples as solar symbols, reappearing as a serpent-wreathed charm against evil during the Roman period. Ross notes how:

*"...placed on temple porticos, eaves of buildings, and shields, in the same contexts as those in which the Celtic 'tete coupee' was exhibited, the symbol of the Gorgon head shared with the Celtic heads in apotropaic powers, but had lost the divine association of the Celtic heads."*¹³⁰

The best known example is the Gorgoneion associated with the pediment of the Romano-British temple at Bath, displaying a subtle blend of classical and native imagery, described in Chapter 3. Carvings such as these could have been used originally to provide protective or apotropaic functions above entrances or doorways in buildings or temples of Romano-British date, and possibly re-used in a secondary context during the medieval period. Excavations in the remains of the Sewingshields Milecastle on the Roman wall near Steel Rigg, Northumberland,

uncovered a square-faced building stone with a representation of a human face carved in relief and set in a recessed circle, as if it was only intended to be viewed from below. This head was “subtle and well planned” with prominent eyebrows carved as one with the nose. The excavators say it is strange “that a military installation built by legionaries should include a Celtic religious motif” and suggest it is more probable the face was carved on to the wall sometime after the milecastle was completed.¹³¹ Whatever its origins, the appearance of such a carving on a Roman building stone provides early evidence for the use of heads for apotropaic purposes which are reflected in the later in folk traditions. The fact that a number of heads were carved in a way to suggest they should only be viewed from the front, or below, suggests they were produced specifically for insertion in walls, and above gateways and entrances.

The use of the head as a protective device above the entrance, or positioned in the gable or eaves of a building, appears to have continued as a recurrent motif in folk tradition throughout the early historic period in Britain. In twelfth century, when masons were building the church of St John at Adel, near Leeds, they incorporated a group of nine archaic and grotesque faces into an elaborate triangular feature on the church wall. During the same century, the builders of the Norman church of St Edmund at Edmundbyers in County Durham carved five heads on the eaves of the new building. As Peter Brears writes of the Adel heads:

“Since they have no place in Christian custom and belief, the builders were presumably using them to summon the aid and protection of some older, but still currently effective power.”¹³²

Other similar striking examples are found in a Romanesque context at the churches at Dysert O’Dea and Clonfert Cathedral in County Galway, Ireland. At Clonfert the entrance to the church is framed by an elaborate Romanesque doorway made up of six arches in a triangular tympanum which appears to mimic the entrance or portico to a temple, all the arches being richly carved with human heads. Laing writes how “one cannot look at [this feature] without thinking of the skulls in their niches at Roquepertuse.”¹³³ The Clonfert sculpture dates from the latter part of the twelfth century, but the church occupies the site of a monastery founded by St Brendan in the six centuries earlier. However, as the majority of domestic buildings in England before the seventeenth century were built of wood and have largely decayed or been demolished, there is no way of knowing if similar heads were once used in their construction. Of the freestanding heads which have survived, many appear to have been carved as if they were intended to be

inserted within niches, or carved only as if they were to be viewed from the front, suggesting they once adorned gables or keystones of earlier buildings. When wood and wattle buildings were replaced by permanent stone structures from the sixteenth century onwards, stone heads appear frequently in the gables of surviving examples, particularly in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, where the yeoman houses are associated with the growth of the wool trade. Billingsley's list of locations associated with the severed head image in folk tradition includes a number of boundary and perimeter regions in native architecture, including gateways, doorways, roof edges, chimneys and fireplaces, all places deemed vulnerable to attack by evil spirits, witches and other malevolent supernatural forces and thus singled out for protective treatment.¹³⁴

Sidney Jackson recorded more than thirty gable-end heads on houses and barns in North and West Yorkshire during his survey in the 1960s, all dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. His book *Celtic and Other Stone heads* featured three examples of heads in the gables of barns in the Keighley area of Airedale, and a fourth crude example from a roadside barn in Coniston Cold near Skipton, a building which dates from the seventeenth century.¹³⁵ Heads performing this function are widespread in the north of England, but are concentrated particularly in upland pastoral areas. In one zone which includes Keighley, Haworth and Skipton, almost every small hamlet contains a house or barn which features at least one example. The age of these buildings varies, but most appear to date from between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. However, many heads appear to be older than the buildings into which they have become incorporated. The confusion over dating has partly developed because of the existence of a number of heads carved by three groups of active stonemasons during the nineteenth century. Although a number such as those carved by the mason John Castillo in Cleveland and North Yorkshire appear to be of recent date, these cannot be separated stylistically from others which appear to be older. The most that can be said is that each carving appears to be unique in itself, although they all follow a continuing tradition in their placement. As well as being widespread through the Pennine region stretching from the Peak District northwards through Yorkshire and Lancashire into Cumbria, gable end heads are known from Scotland, Ireland, South Wales, the Channel Islands and Brittany. In north Cornwall there is a human face with archaic features carved in relief upon a flat block of stone which is now positioned in the gable of the south facing porch of St Piran's church at Perranzabuloe. Local

tradition says the face came from the second church now buried on Penhale Sands. Before then it had adorned St Pirans oratory, which dates from the ninth century AD.¹³⁶ The re-use of carvings in this fashion is evident from both documentary sources and folk tradition. In the Peak District, a collection of Romano-Celtic carved stones from a hilltop site were incorporated into the gable end of a house near Glossop in the middle of the nineteenth century, following a local tradition that they would ward off evil spirits.¹³⁷

Surviving folklore and oral tradition in some cases suggests these heads were deliberately placed for apotropaic reasons. For example, a carved stone head forms the keystone above a barn door of a farm owned by Sam Throup at Far Fold Farm, High Bradley, near Keighley in West Yorkshire. Asked how it came to be there he told Sidney Jackson:

“...they say like, they used to put them in like, for witch-jobbing and such like and to bring you good luck; whether it's done owt for me or not I don't know. I haven't had above me share as I know like.”¹³⁸

A freestanding archaic head is set in a niche in the gable wall of a house known as “Victoria” in Pinnar Lane, Southowram, West Yorkshire, which dates to 1721.¹³⁹ The head has slit-like eyes, a prominent nose and a square chin, long neck and a low brow. It could be contemporary with the building, and features in a continuing tradition by the owners recorded by Andy Roberts in 1991.¹⁴⁰ They told him how the head was used to “ward off evil spirits” from entering the house. The tradition of keeping the head in the niche had been followed by several generations of tenants up to the present day, “who have carefully replaced it in its accustomed position even after renovation and rebuilding has taken place.”¹⁴¹ Similar traditions concerning evil-averting powers of stone heads were recorded by Jackson from cottages and farms at Forfar in Scotland,¹⁴² the island of Guernsey¹⁴³ and Vaulry in France.¹⁴⁴

A story recorded in the *Keighley News* regarding heads carved and placed on mill chimneys and gable ends of buildings in Airedale, contains a traditions surrounding the use of heads as foundation deposits as a means of protecting a building within surviving memory. Fred Petty, the owner of a house on West Lane, Howarth, which contains a stone head, said:

“Such heads were usually placed in the gable end of houses whenever a builder, who had been working on the house, had been killed.”¹⁴⁵

In a later article describing heads on mill chimneys in the textile areas of West Yorkshire, a local writer notes:

*“A popular belief is that when a fatality occurred during the building, a small effigy of the steeplejack would be placed on a chimney as a memorial. It has been suggested that a representation of the architect would sometimes be added...or again the carvings might be due to the whimsical fancy of a stonemason.”*¹⁴⁶

Mills featuring heads include five carved on a chimney adjoining Whalley's timber merchants at Low Bridge Mill, on Coney Lane, Keighley.¹⁴⁷ The mill dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century when it was producing cotton; in 1821 it was destroyed by fire and rebuilt. Historian Ian Dewhirst has suggested the heads could date from this period. The centrally placed heads face in three directions and are of two types. Four of them, according to one writer, may be the products of “whimsical fancy,” but the fifth, a grim-faced carving,

*“...may have been placed there for an entirely different reason, that of superstition...it may well be that they are associated with the superstition that disaster, disease and death were attributed to evil spirits and the ugly heads were added to buildings to scare them away. Judging by their fearsome appearance, this seems likely.”*¹⁴⁸

Interviewed by the *Yorkshire Post*, Mr Dewhirst said a local tradition suggested the heads could have been carved and placed on the chimney by workmen in memory of comrades who died while working to build it. Another theory suggested that they all represent members of the Blakey family, the owners of the mill. Examination of the heads shows they have little in common with character portraits, which suggests this theory came later to explain their existence.¹⁴⁹ A similar story surrounds the carved head of an old man wearing a “billycock hat” which adorns a wall over the main door of The Old Corn Mill in Ingrow Lane, Keighley.¹⁵⁰ Local tradition said the head came from an old mill chimney demolished in 1918. In 1898 one of the workers told the owner how he had rescued the head from the rubble of the chimney, “let some iron in the back and fixed it above the door.”¹⁵¹ This worker said the head was a portrait of an old man called Feather who watched the masons building the chimney back in 1841, and he told a reporter how:

“...one of the masons took a liking to old man Feather and carved his head in stone and set it in the face of the chimney.”¹⁵²

A number of other mill chimneys dating from the cotton revolution of the mid-nineteenth century feature carved stone heads. One blank stone face adorns an 1825 date stone on Smithies Mill at Birstall, near Leeds.¹⁵³ In the Keighley area there is one on the chimney of John Haggas Mill at Ingrow, and a third at Oakworth Mills.¹⁵⁴ Another is placed centrally on a wide chimney which dominates the early Victorian building which once housed T. Harrison and Sons, printers, on Queen Street, Bingley. When Sidney Jackson tried to photograph this head, he found he had to climb to the top floor window of the Ferrands Arms to obtain a suitable viewpoint. Writer Cathy Wilkinson, in an article printed in the *Bingley Guardian*, said:

“It was once a custom that if ever a workman died or was killed during the erection of a building, that his likeness was immortalised in stone somewhere on the exterior of the premises.”¹⁵⁵

Evidence collected by Jackson’s many correspondents suggested that the use of protective heads in house gables was not confined to north and western parts of Britain but was known in other parts of the world too. A correspondent writing in *The Dalesman* in 1951 noted how carved heads on West Riding house gables reminded him of similar evil-averting images he had seen in villages near Touggourt in the Sahara Desert. Here, rows of mud houses had at the corner of their flat roofs the skull of an animal. He was told by local residents that the skulls were used “to keep off evil spirits.”¹⁵⁶

6.6.3 (Sub-category) *Stone head protects building against haunting*

It is apparent from the previous two sub-categories that heads were used if not specifically carved for a small range of guardian and protective reasons in British folk tradition. Although in some cases there is some form of surviving oral tradition which provides information about the reason why a head was so placed, and where, it is often more difficult to reach those directly involved in the process itself. In the few cases where the direct origins of a head are known, it is sometimes possible to discover the original reasons for the carving and placement of a head

charm. In this sub-category we begin to leave the more vague or legendary traditions discussed previously, and move towards the direct personal experience narratives featured in the final category in this classification of traditions. Here I have included stories relating to heads which have been used in their standard apotropaic role in architecture, with the additional detail that the head has been placed specifically to “lay” or exorcise a ghost. In all the following instances it appears a head has been placed for this specific reason following an already well-established local tradition, which suggests many other “mute” stone heads may have similar origins. It is the connection with an active ghost or supernatural phenomena which connects this sub-category directly with the stories of heads associated with evil in sub-category 6.7.2, and the guardian skull traditions featured in Chapter 7.

Germany

A correspondent of Sidney Jackson describes heads he saw during a visit to the Castle of Heidelberg in Germany:

“...while being guided, the guide said, pointing to two heads in a part of the wall, “these heads were put in the wall to frighten away the ghosts so that the ladies could sleep at night..in the year 1530 the ladies were being frightened by ghosts in their quarters and the heads were put in the wall to get rid of the ghosts.” I questioned the guide later and after I tipped him, he drew himself up to his full height and said he was no liar.”¹⁵⁷

In reply Jackson notes how a student in his Bradford archaeology evening class in 1967 produced a colour slide of a stone head, which he said was:

“...built into the outer wall of a fourteenth century tower at Rothenburg, South Bavaria. According to the guide book, this is called The Pestilence Head.”¹⁵⁸

Haworth, West Yorkshire

In the West Yorkshire village of Haworth is the eighteenth century Sun Inn on Main Street, positioned upon the edge of the moors made famous by the Bronte sisters. It appears to be a typical example of a coaching inn until visitors look more closely and see that, just above the door, is a strangely-carved stone head. It was placed there in 1971 by the landlord Rennie Hollings to “lay a ghost.” The apparition was of an old pack-horse carrier who, dressed in a

long leather cape, had silently haunted the pub for years (see Fig. 20).¹⁵⁹ Mr Hollings had learnt about the ghost from local people and decided to deal with it in time-honoured Haworth tradition. Interviewed by the *Yorkshire Post* after renovation work was completed he said:

*“I didn’t want to put any of my customers off, because eventually I hope to become residential. I think it’s nonsense anyway. We’ve never seen one, but you know how these local yarns start. Anyway I’ve found a way to deal with any supposed ghost. I have had a carved stone head erected over the entrance porch. There is a local tradition that these were put on buildings when a workman had been killed on the site before the work was completed, and they are supposed to ward off evil spirits. I feel now that I have squashed any ideas of ghosts for good.”*¹⁶⁰

Andy Roberts mentions another carving above the main doorway at Lumb Hall, a seventeenth century building at Drighlington, between Leeds and Bradford, where a head may have been carved to deflect another restless spirit. He notes:

*“It is not known whether the head was put there to lay the ghost which has been seen and heard at the hall, but Charlie, as the apparition is known, is fond of trying to attract attention by making a shuffling noise at the front door. Previous owners of the hall soon tired of finding no one there when they went to answer the door and soon grew tired of the attention-seeking ghost.”*¹⁶¹

Hothersall, Lancashire

Hothersall Hall, near Ribchester in Lancashire, dates from the thirteenth century. The present hall dates from 1856, having been rebuilt on the site of the old house, of which nothing remains except a 1695 datestone. Jammed in the fork of a tree on the lane above the hall can be found a carved stone head. In a local pamphlet, *Historic Walks around Ribchester*, it is said:

*“A stone head of horrific and grotesque appearance was dug up by a farmer at Hothersall and placed in its present position. Some say that the head is that of the petrified Hothersall Boggart.”*¹⁶²

The head appears to have a “crown” of the type usually associated with medieval corbel heads and probably came from the ruins of a church. Enquiries with the present occupants of the hall, in November 1990, found they knew nothing of this local legend. They said the head had been

in its position in the fork of the tree for around fifteen years, and that it had arrived at the house from Preston as a gift from an elderly relative.¹⁶³

The legend of the Hothersall Boggart tells how the Devil had undertaken to oblige a local farmer with three wishes for the surrender of his soul. The farmer's first two wishes were for wealth and great fortune but his third was a crafty move to avoid damnation. He wished the Devil to spin a rope from the sands of the Ribble and in case of failure he must consent to be laid under a laurel tree there to turn to stone. Each time the Devil spun a rope the farmer poured water over the rope and it disintegrated. Eventually he gave up his efforts and accepted defeat, whereby the man of Hothersall escaped the Devil's clutches and saved his soul.¹⁶⁴ Terence Whittaker, in *Lancashire's Ghosts and Legends* writes of what he calls the "boggart haunting" at the hall without mentioning the head. His account reads:

*"The Hothersall Hall boggart is understood to have been 'laid' under the roots of a large laurel tree at the end of the house. It is said that so long as the tree remains, the ghost will not be able to trouble the household."*¹⁶⁵

Winchester, Hampshire

Anne Ross has a record of a stone head built into the wall of "a very old baker's shop" in the city of Winchester. This came to her attention when an antique dealer bought the shop and became interested in the head, which had a tradition "that it should never be moved."¹⁶⁶ He wanted to know if it was possible for the head to be dated, and asked Anne Ross, who was then based at Southampton University, to examine it. She said the only way to attempt a date was to take it out of the wall and this he did, allowing Dr Ross to examine the head for a number of days at her office. She said:

*"I had it for a number of days and the first thing that happened was the house became haunted...and there were these terrible footsteps about and everything went wrong...things were moved in the antiques shop and in the end we gave it back...and I felt terrible as I was instrumental in having the thing taken out of the wall. The local tradition was that the head mustn't be taken out and that it was connected with a ghost."*¹⁶⁷

6.7. Category 3. Cursed heads.

These stories feature supernatural traditions directly associated with stone heads; in category 3a this relates specifically to stories concerning heads which have a "presence" which may or may not be interpreted as malevolent. The collection of stories relating to "cursed" stone heads found in 3b form a cohesive sub-group characterised by eyewitness accounts which contain much detail specific to times, places and events involved in a haunting tradition. Here we move from the realms of folklore and legend into the area of direct personal experience narrative, where the boundary between legend and personal belief systems becomes increasingly thin. All the accounts from this intriguing sub-group relate to events which are alleged to have occurred during the last forty years, and have been extensively documented in some cases. However, only the famous account of the hauntings associated with the Hexham Heads has become well known in the popular accounts. The existence of other stories of a similar nature has hitherto remained unremarked in the extensive literature surrounding ghosts and hauntings, but in the more recent past the role of the mass media in the transmission of these stories further afield has played an important role in the creation of new variations of an older theme. A similar process appears to have been at work in the nineteenth century when the first "screaming skull" stories were documented in the antiquarian literature, described in Chapter 7.

In presenting the material, no attempt is made to define objective truth within any of these stories. I am merely presenting the testimony as it was collected during the course of my fieldwork. The psychological and sociological motivations which lie behind the creation and transmission of these beliefs lie outside the scope of this study, but it is helpful to discuss how the modern concept of stone heads as centres of evil or supernatural phenomena originated. Sidney Jackson was one of the first writers to note a connection between carved heads he catalogued and the supernatural. One of the heads he recorded for his survey in 1969 had been found by a schoolgirl in a rubble wall of a house called Braeside at Fairy Dell, Cottingley in Bradford, West Yorkshire.¹⁶⁸ Although there was nothing unusual about this particular head, Jackson noted how a girl had reported seeing fairies in the same locality during the 1920s and asked: "Is it possible that she had been influenced by the presence of Celtic relics?"¹⁶⁹ He then notes how both Anne Ross and Kathleen Dickie were inclined to the belief that some heads "exercise an influence at the present time, even though they were made centuries ago."¹⁷⁰

Jackson's suspicions were further influenced when in 1970 he travelled to County Durham to photograph a Sheela-na-gig carving set in a wall near the entrance door of the parish church at Croft-on-Tees. He wrote:

*"It was in a dark position. Yet, try as I might I could not get a picture. First the flash refused to work, even though the indicator showed the battery was fully charged. Then I came to the end of the film, but when I put in a new one matters were just the same. After wasting eight exposures I just gave up."*¹⁷¹

Later Jackson learned how the Danish researcher, Jorgen Andersen, had independently visited the same church, and had experienced problems when he tried to photograph the carving. After several attempts he left without obtaining a satisfactory result.¹⁷² Subsequently, Jackson collected more stories relating to carvings in Bridlington Priory and from Kilfenora Church in Ireland where visitors had experienced "difficulties" when they tried to take photographs of Celtic carvings.¹⁷³ One of the correspondents cited by Jackson is Jean O'Melia, an antiquarian from Bingley, West Yorkshire. Commenting on her experiences for this research, she writes:

*"I did have extraordinary conditions in Ireland at Kilfenora when I tried to photograph the carving over a ruined church there. As for the Croft Sheela, I went knowing of what had happened to others, and I went and 'placated' the carving by touching it and made supplications that I be able to take photographic slides of it. I managed two, one was out of focus, the other I gave to Sidney Jackson. At a lecture on Friday 13 December he opened with that slide. Fifteen minutes later he succumbed to illness and was unable to continue. When a short time later I requested the return of the slide, it was nowhere to be found...You can make what you wish of this, but I have always been very wary of what is contained in ancient stones."*¹⁷⁴

It was experiences of this kind which led Jackson to conclude in 1974, towards the end of the survey, how "many Celtic heads are thought to have an aura of evil."¹⁷⁵ By this time Jackson was aware of the outbreak of paranormal phenomena at the home of Anne Ross who was at that time studying two stone heads from Hexham in Northumberland which appeared to emit an "evil presence." Indeed, one story heard on a number of occasions during fieldwork in West Yorkshire linked Jackson's sudden death directly to his "obsession" with Celtic stone heads, the implication being that he died as a result of "a curse" of some description. This type of story

was perhaps influenced by popular horror fiction and legends surrounding other famous curses such as that surrounding the opening of the tomb of Tutankamen, featured in books and newspaper articles since the 1920s.¹⁷⁶ All these stories suggest an underlying theme that certain types of stone heads are linked with malevolent evil spirits, a motif which is directly opposite to those in Category 2, whose purpose seems to have been to deflect evil and bring luck to a house. Both traditions, however relate to the function of a stone head to influence or interact with the world of the spirits, as a gateway or magical tool which can be utilised via specific rituals. This kind of belief does have archaic roots in the legends concerning the Gorgon's head and the Norse *Nith-stang*, discussed earlier. The stories concerning evil heads, sometimes described by their owners as carrying a "curse," can take a number of forms. These include their implied connection with a haunting which may allude to the head having been produced or carved to "lay" a ghost, or as a result of belief in the existence of bad luck or misfortune if the head is moved or tampered with. This kind of motif has many parallels in folklore, and can be compared to the widespread belief suggesting that misfortune will follow disturbance of circles of standing stones, monoliths and tumuli. Stories of this kind have been recorded from many regions of the British Isles by Grinsell¹⁷⁷ and the Bords.¹⁷⁸ What these traditions have in common is the underlying belief that stones are animated by ancestral spirits which require a certain measure of respect and in some cases active propitiation. Within this tradition of belief interference or disrespect could bring about all manner of disasters, from harvest failure to violent thunderstorms. Spirits which inhabit carved stone heads run the full gamut in the stories recorded in this sub-section. The most bizarre must be the werewolf-like creature encountered by two families in the tale of the Hexham Heads, which have parallels with the anthropomorphic creatures described in Celtic mythology, iconography and folklore.

In documenting the stories, as many of the original participants and eye-witnesses to these alleged phenomena have been interviewed as was possible. Separating the objective from the subjective in accounts of this nature is difficult and so much time has elapsed in these instances between the original happenings and their documentation that it would be impossible in most cases to reconstruct the original circumstances. The stories are transcribed here as accurately as possible, and from the point of view of the present survey it is the appearance of the head as a motif connected with the supernatural which is of primary interest, not the ultimate truth.

6.7.1. (Sub-category) *Stone head associated with a “presence”*

This sub-category features a number of prototype stories associating stone heads with what can only be described as “a presence.” This can range from a non-threatening, non-specific feeling such as that connected with the heads at the holy well in Clonmacnois, Ireland, to the “evil” presence sensed by some visitors to the head at Chesters Roman fort in Northumberland described in this sub-category. This latter experience begins to shade into the next sub-category where heads are directly associated with bad luck or evil curses, a connotation which often appears to begin as a psychological reaction on behalf of the finder to the appearance of the carving itself. These kind of impressions and feelings are often difficult to document, as it was discovered during this fieldwork that people are often reluctant to discuss feelings or beliefs which they believe could lead to ridicule, or damage their reputation if published in association with their names. Here we are moving into areas of human belief and psychology which cannot be scrutinised by scientific methods, and illustrate the difficulties archaeologists face when dealing with artefacts which may have been used for prehistoric or proto-historical ritual purposes.

Castleton, Derbyshire

This carving was first recorded in the late 1960s by a Manchester Museum fieldworker, Shelagh Lewis, while visiting Castleton (see Fig. 5).¹⁷⁹ The sandstone head was at that time cemented into a low stone wall at Waterside Cottage, low down in the wall overlooking the stream Russett Well which flows from the mouth of Peak Cavern. The elderly couple who owned the head told Shelagh the head had “always been there” and the husband was reluctant to have it moved. However, his wife or daughter was unhappy about the face, which was carved so that one eye appeared to be closed. “She did not like it one bit because she said it winked at her, and she said it was creepy,” Shelagh recalled.¹⁸⁰ The head was removed from the wall in 1976 and taken to Sheffield’s Weston Park Museum where it is now on permanent display in the archaeology section.¹⁸¹ Carvings depicting severed heads with one eye, or with one eye purposefully closed, are discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

Chesters Roman Fort, Corbridge, Northumberland

A crudely carved head of Romano-British date is preserved as part of a collection at Chesters Roman Fort in Northumberland, alongside a number of other carvings depicting Romano-Celtic gods and goddesses, horned heads and altars. However, this particular head has developed a reputation among staff and visitors to the Roman Museum because of its fearsome appearance. The head, found in the late nineteenth century in the ruins of the fort, is carved in the round from local buff sandstone, with eyes set close to a gash-like mouth and protruding chin. Coulston and Phillips classify it as "Celtic work of second or third century AD."¹⁸² The head is visible in the entrance hall of the site museum, and has been blamed for having caused a number of strange reactions amongst visitors. In March 1993 the visitor centre receptionist described how one visitor once had experienced "a strong reaction" to the crude head, saying he felt an evil presence radiating from the stone. He left shortly after paying the admission fee, talking of "ghosts and spooks." Another visitor left in a hurry in similar circumstances after viewing the head.¹⁸³

Clonmacnois, County Offaly, Ireland

John Taylor Broadbent describes a visit to Ireland:

"...at Clonmacnois, a lady at the guest house where we were staying spoke of 'the presence' on the road to the holy well; when we arrived at the cottage it was dark, a wonderful starlit night alongside a peat fire. We stayed in a turf-roofed, turf-fire traditional cottage...When we walked down to the monastery at night, she said "perhaps you will notice the presence as you walk down the road." There [we found] St Cieran's Well, not a stones-throw from the abbey ruins. There it was, in a field by the river meadows of the Shannon, a real Celtic holy well, with retaining drystone wall, thorn tree and, set in a ring around it, a single stone head, a triple head,¹⁸⁴ and an outstretched figure of Christ crucified. These figures could have been of almost any date, to my eyes, from the sixth century to the nineteenth, but I wasn't able to find out how old they really are. There were rags tied to the thorn tree and a still living tradition of pilgrimage to the well. Our host, Mrs Rafferty, hinted at the presence of this well shrine, and indeed the Presence that animates it, when we first arrived, but it was dark then, we didn't pick up the hints, and although it was a beautiful clear night and I went out for a walk with one of my sons, we did not see it in the dark. There it was though, next day, and I hastened to find out more about it. Mrs Rafferty was more apologetic at not being more precise about it the previous night - but she offered the explanation that she (and the locals, in general) did not speak of it to strangers, especially English ones, "because they're not usually interested in that

*kind of thing." I think she was as fascinated as I was to discover the similarity of tradition from my background and hers - especially the connection between heads, wells and thorn bushes - and that "Celtic" tradition survives in England."*¹⁸⁵

Cullingworth, West Yorkshire.

Nellie Hutchinson, writing to Sidney Jackson, described a tradition relating to:

*"...a face carved on a stone in a flagged path near the Doe Park Reservoir, Cullingworth... Local children, regarding it as magical, used to dance around it."*¹⁸⁶

Hathersage, Derbyshire

Two stone heads are built into garden walls surrounding Moorseats Hall on the hillside above the parish church.¹⁸⁷ Parts of the building date from the fourteenth century, and the house was used by Charlotte Bronte as a setting for a scene in her novel *Jayne Eyre*. The grounds are haunted by a white lady ghost who is said to walk a route through yew trees to a small walled garden, the site of an old orchard.¹⁸⁸ During a visit I made to the hall in 1994 the current owner claimed a sighting of the ghost just six weeks before. He said it was that of a little girl aged five or six years old with long hair. She flitted across the grass near a pond and he mistook her for his young daughter. Previous owners, including two sisters who lived at the house in the 1950s, are recorded as having seen the ghost.¹⁸⁹ Of the stone heads, one in the carport wall is of grotesque appearance and could have been brought here from the medieval church nearby where there are a number of gargoyles. The second is carved in weathered gritstone on a plinth base and has features of the archaic style. The carving is positioned one hundred yards from where a natural spring exits from the hillside into a stone trough.

Mold, Clwyd

Author and journalist Richard Holland describes a collection of carved stone heads preserved in the walls of a row of four Victorian houses at Hill Grove, below the Norman motte and bailey castle in the oldest part of the town of Mold.¹⁹⁰ Set in the wall of no 4, the house closest to the earthworks known as Bailey Hill, is a chunk of Gothic masonry containing four "Celtic-style" stone heads. Local tradition suggests the heads are what remains of a church dating from the thirteenth century which was demolished to make way for the present St Mary's Church in the

1500s. Further heads are found in the wall overlooking the street where Hill Grove abuts which once again appears to be early medieval in date. They include Celtic-style faces, a king-style head, a ram, a two-faced Janus head and one carved in the form of a lion which the owner of the house described as “a werewolf.” Holland notes that all the houses in the little grove containing the heads are “undeniably and alarmingly haunted.”¹⁹¹ The hauntings include poltergeist activity and vague half-formed white shapes, a maid in a mob cap who flickers in monochrome like an old television set, and a giggling girl with frizzy hair.

Mow Cop, Cheshire

Writer Alan Garner discovered a small round head carved from local sandstone whilst walking on the slopes of Mow Cop castle, a folly constructed in 1751 by Cheshire stonemasons for a local landowner. Garner said the stone was lying face down in a gap between two stone walls on the hillside below the castle. He said the tiny face had “nasty-looking” features and appeared to be of great age, possibly fifth century AD. Both Garner, his wife Grizelda and others who have handled the stone say they have picked up “bad vibes” from it.¹⁹² The stone has now been donated to the Manchester University Museum for safekeeping. Fieldworker Martin Petch believes the head dates from the Dark Age period and “is within the Celtic tradition.”¹⁹³

Summerbridge, North Yorkshire

An informant wrote to Sidney Jackson in 1972 describing a head formerly built into the masonry of a well near the bottom of Dobson Bank in Summerbridge, near Harrogate.

“He has a particularly vivid memory because as a schoolboy in the late 1920s he and others were afraid of it and used to cross the road to pass it when leaving school on dark winter afternoons.”¹⁹⁴

Walcot, Lincolnshire

Ethel Rudkin describes this carving as “the stone image” and connects it with a haunting tradition:

“On the Digby side of Walcot village stood a stone house which was built from material taken from the ruins of Catley Abbey, and brought across to Walcot by boat when the fens were under water. Many of the stones were large and well carved. A stone head was built into the

corner of the house, and it was said that this image moved when the clock struck twelve. The house was haunted, and no wonder.”¹⁹⁵

Rudkin adds that the image was taken to Mareham-le-Fen when a new owner bought the land and the house was pulled down.

6.7.2. (Sub-category) *Stone head brings “a curse”*

All the stories in this sub-category are personal experience narratives collected either directly by myself or by colleagues during the fieldwork for this research. They form a cohesive group in themselves, and make up a collection which closely mirror the narratives I have collected as part of my interest in supernatural traditions concerning ghosts and other unexplained phenomena, but particularly in the case of the guardian skulls examined in Chapter 7. In some cases the stories have been recorded by tape transcripts which are listed in the Bibliography, while letters and other supplementary source material relating to individual stories are listed in Appendix 2. It may appear odd that stone heads which have been universally used as lucky or protective devices could also be associated with the stories of death and disaster described in the following stories. However, there appears to exist a duality of belief which reflects the role of the head as a gate or boundary between the human and the supernatural world. This is reflected in the universal motifs found in the folk traditions recorded by Thompson, in that heads can be both helpful and destructive depending upon the context in which they are used or manipulated as part of a living tradition of belief.

Bashall Eaves, Lancashire

The stone head of a goat, carved in a cube of sandstone twelve inches square, complete with “ears of corn” hanging from one side, was unearthed by the landlord of the Red Pump pub in the village in 1989.¹⁹⁶ The finder, Jim Fenton, took an instant dislike to the carving and placed it in an outbuilding. However, word of the find soon spread and the head was moved into the bar, and then the kitchen. This coincided with a number of strange happenings and mysterious illnesses among staff which generated a story suggesting the head was “cursed.” This continued to grow until in 1991 Mr Fenton reburied the head at the place it was found, wrapped inside a plastic bag, shortly before he and his wife left the pub. In the meantime a local newspaper, *The*

Clitheroe Advertiser, had heard the story and local people suggested a number of theories about the stone's origin.¹⁹⁷ These included a suggestion that it was a "witchstone" set close to stables as a charm to prevent witches riding horses in the dead of night, or a decoration once set in the fireplace following the Celtic tradition of the area. When a new landlord arrived he visited Mr Fenton and asked for the location of the head which was again unearthed. However, Mr Fenton told researcher Liz Linahan how the new landlord was forced to leave after eighteen months because of "financial trouble." During their tenancy, the Fentons experienced a series of hauntings which they did not connect with the discovery of the stone head. The landlord who left the pub after eighteen months would not comment when asked if he associated the "cursed" head with his problems.¹⁹⁸

Bingley, West Yorkshire

An ovoid sandstone boulder with a crude human face carved upon one side of its surface was unearthed in the grounds of a sixteenth century house, Ryshworth Hall, at Crossflats near Bingley, in 1985.¹⁹⁹ The boulder appeared to be worn as if to suggest it had been subject to erosion for a number of years, possibly as a boulder in the river Aire which flows just a quarter of a mile from the house. Both the form of the stone used to carve the face and the features themselves are not of the typical style found in West Yorkshire. The pupils are formed by shallow drilled holes framed by prominent eyebrows. The nose is triangular and complete with tiny nostrils, while the mouth is very pronounced, with the upper lip divided into two arcs which give the face the impression it is smiling. Two shallow holes on either side of the head appear to form rudimentary earlobes. The house's owner, Michael White, found the carved head lying face down in the roots of a giant sycamore tree in the grounds which he had dug up with a mechanical digger in 1984 or 1985. The stone was cleaned and the features of the face soon became apparent. In a taped interview Mr White said:

"There was a guy from the local historic society visiting at the time who took the head away for verification and he said "the word is, don't have anything to do with it...I'm not going to go into details but have as little to do with it as possible"...my wife, who is more susceptible to these things than I am would not have it in the house and it's been in the garage for the biggest part of the time we have had it. However, one of our friends had it and bad luck befell him and he moved away. Back it went into the garage again, and my wife who has a tendency to believe there is something with this head, said "it must go."²⁰⁰

Describing the nature of the “bad luck” experienced by his friend, Mr White said:

“Although he was a professional person he had bad luck in his business and with his health and he went bankrupt. His health deteriorated and he moved away. I’m glad to say both situations have now been resolved and he is fine again.”²⁰¹

When asked to describe the nature of the advice given by the man from the historical society he said:

“He would not elaborate on it, he said a guy who was the curator of a museum where he had been to verify this head had himself had bad health which he had put down to these heads, and he had said tell the gentleman concerned that really he is better off not having anything to do with this head. Well, I don’t believe in ghosts and bad luck like that, and I wanted to keep it. It’s an artefact I found at the house and I wanted it to stay with the house. However, the guy who had the head verified for us died shortly afterwards so we didn’t get any more information from him.”²⁰²

It was at this stage, while the head remained in the garage of the house, that Mrs Alison White began to link its presence with a series of mishaps and misfortune both in health and finance which began to beset his family. Mr White said:

“We moved into this house and everything looked quite well businesswise and health. My wife had very poor health, but nothing happened to me. We have had a run of bad luck which is very unusual for us, shall we say, we’ve been moving forward with the times and things have been good but this last five years things have not been as rosy as we would have expected. This we didn’t attribute to the head until it was brought to our attention...and of course, when someone pointed it out, we started tallying it up and thought yes we have had a lot of bad luck in the last five years.”²⁰³

It was the suggested connection between the discovery of the head and the bad luck which allegedly dogged the family which produced the idea of a “curse” which caught the attention of the press, and early in November 1990 the story made both local and national newspaper headlines. Freelance journalist Ian Macgill heard about the story when the Whites took the head to an auctioneer in Nottinghamshire and put it up for sale in a bid to break their perceived run of bad luck. Macgill produced a story about the head turning the “bad luck” into a “curse” and this

was carried by the *Yorkshire Evening Post*.²⁰⁴ The story told how Mr White, aged 43, and his 34-year-old wife Alison were putting their eight-bedroomed home at Ryshworth Hall up for sale because of persistent bad luck which had bedevilled the family since the discovery of a “ancient stone head” in the garden behind the building. In the story, subsequently followed up by the London tabloids,²⁰⁵ Mr White was quoted as saying:

*“I found it stuck in the roots of a giant sycamore tree I had upended with a mechanical digger. That was five years ago. Since then, nothing has gone right.”*²⁰⁶

The Celtic connection with the head was supplied in the story by the proximity to a nearby hill called the Druid’s Altar where it was said “Mr White suspects human sacrifices were made,” and it added: “He is convinced the head originated with the Druids and carries a curse.”²⁰⁷ Further details were provided by the local newspapers about the illness suffered by Alison White, and the hauntings which had been witnessed both by Mrs White and the couple’s two young daughters, Samantha, aged seven, and Victoria, aged five. Mrs White was suffering from myalgic encephalomyelitis or ME, which forced her to give up her public relations job. She connected the onset of the illness with the discovery of the head, along with a series of subsequent mishaps including a car crash and the burst in the central heating system which flooded the kitchen. She said:

*“I am not superstitious but I am now and I blame the head. It is one of those things you know instantly you don’t like.”*²⁰⁸

On the subject of the hauntings, Mrs White claimed she had encountered a ghostly disembodied hand at the top of the staircase in the house one night, which suddenly disappeared when she turned on a light. In a subsequent interview Mr White said:

*“We don’t talk too much to the children about it, we don’t want to frighten the kids. But they do come into our room and say there is someone in their room. They say it has been a dog, a man, a boy and a woman. And they say these people come and talk to them. And we say “it’s only a bad dream...don’t worry...off you go back to bed.”*²⁰⁹

However, not wanting to take any chances, the Whites subsequently moved their two children

out of the “haunted” room and away from the adjacent landing, two places which they connected with a “queer feeling.” Meanwhile, the head which was blamed for the troubles went for auction at Henry Spencer in Retford, Nottinghamshire. The owners expected it would fetch upwards of £300, but were disappointed to find there was only one bidder. The head was in fact sold to Andy Roberts and David Clarke for £180. The catalogue entry number 177 read:

*“A primitive carved stone head, of ovoid form. Probably Celtic period, found in the West Yorkshire region, 24cm long.”*²¹⁰

Shortly afterwards, the Whites put Ryshworth Hall up for sale at an asking price of £210,000. The following entry appeared in the Homefinder section of the *Yorkshire Post* :

*“There has been tremendous interest in Ryshworth Hall, Crossflats, since the T&A revealed that its owners were being forced to put it on the market - because of a cursed stone head. Whitegates Bingley office are selling the Old hall, a grade II listed building which dates back to the sixteenth century and is said to “ooze character.” Mike and Alison White say the ancient carved head has brought misery to their family in the five years since they dug it up in the grounds.”*²¹¹

Not surprisingly, and despite the claimed interest, the hall remained unsold. Then came an unexpected twist in the tail of this story. Following the appearance of the press stories a Halifax woman, Jean Jones, contacted a local newspaper and claimed the “Celtic” head was not the work of the ancient Druids but was actually carved by her father, the late William Hodgson, to amuse his grandchildren in 1978. Hodgson was a carpenter who lived in part of Ryshworth Hall seven years before the Whites moved into the premises. She said:

*“He buried it for a joke to amuse his grandchildren, telling them it would be dug up in hundreds of years. He’ll be sitting on his cloud rocking with laughter.”*²¹²

The newspaper then tried without success to contact both the Whites and Nigel Smith, the auctioneer at Henry Spencer and Sons’ Harrogate office who had arranged the auction at which the head was sold. The reporter did speak to another member of the firm’s staff who reportedly said: “Carved in 1978? How awful!”²¹³

This revelation appeared to end the press's interest in the story, but one year later the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* resurrected the tale and made contact with the White family. The subsequent story suggested their fortunes had changed dramatically for the better since "the 1,500 year old head was auctioned at a knock-down price twelve months ago."²¹⁴ Mr White himself had found a new well-paid job and his wife had conquered the debilitating effects of ME and had enrolled on a teacher-training course. He said: "We have had a tremendous year and are very happy to have put the stone head behind us." However, most significant of all were the comments which followed, suggesting that the misfortune he believed lay with the head:

*"...had switched to the head's new owner who bought it dismissing talk of a curse...he said the anonymous man who bought the Iron Age artefact had contacted him and said he had been laid low by an unknown illness."*²¹⁵

The current owner and custodian of the head, Andy Roberts, was most surprised to hear of his impending misfortune. Far from being anonymous he had been named and quoted in a story on the head published by the same paper just twelve months before, where he had been reported as saying heads were traditionally used as lucky charms.²¹⁶ And he continues to enjoy good health! In the same article, Mr White said:

*"If it is supposed to have brought good luck, goodness knows what would have happened to us if it was supposed to bring bad luck. The mouth of the head is carved in the shape of a smile, but I always thought it was an evil sneer."*²¹⁷

Bron-y-Garth, Shropshire

Archaeologist Anne Ross described a series of misfortunes connected with two small heads carved from quartz sandstone which were found near a spring at Bron-y-Garth near Offa's Dyke on the Welsh border with Shropshire. They were unearthed in a garden in 1964 when a new owner bought two cottages for conversion into one dwelling, but were known to local people who remembered them positioned upon a wall earlier this century.²¹⁸ Both heads were small and ball-shaped; one was janiform, with opposing faces, the other had one skull-like face with deep natural holes like eye-sockets. The owner had agreed to allow experts at the British Museum to examine and photograph the heads, and Dr Ross and her husband, archaeologist Richard

Feacham, agreed to transport them from the house to London by car. Dr Ross said:

“...it was a beautiful day, sunshine and clear sky, and as we carried them down the garden path from the house to go to the car there was a most almighty clap of thunder and a terrible thunderstorm. Before we reached London we were involved in three near-smashes in the car where we were nearly killed. The brakes actually failed on one occasion.”²¹⁹

Both Dr Ross and Sidney Jackson expressed the opinion that one of the Bron-y-Garth heads had an “evil expression” which they linked to its apparent malevolent influence. The heads are now among the archaeological collection at the British Museum.

Corbridge, Northumberland

The seventeenth century Angel pub, an old coaching inn on the main road through the Roman town of Corbridge, in Northumberland, contains a head carved in coarse millstone grit. The head sits inside a glass case on the windowsill of the front dining room, now used as a restaurant bar. It consists of a grim-looking face carved on the flat end of an elongated rectangular block of stone, which tapers towards the back and gives the impression of great age. The oval eyes are carved in low relief, with a classic Celtic-style straight triangular nose and a slit for a mouth. In March 1993 the current proprietor, June McIntosh, said the head was in its current position when she took over the pub six or seven years ago, and according to local information she was told it had been there “since the 1940s at least” although its ultimate origin was a mystery.²²⁰ She said the story told by staff about the head had been handed down from previous owners, and stated that “it is supposed to be very unlucky to move the head and none of the staff would touch it.”²²¹ One specific instance was mentioned of someone who had scoffed at the “curse” and touched the head, only to drown in the waters of the River Tyne subsequently. The intimation was that others had met a similar fate, suggesting a connection between the head and the river, which flows near the Roman town. Mrs McIntosh was quick to point out that since her move to the pub, she had nothing but good luck, presumably because she had not interfered with the head. She added:

“At one time there were many old stone heads in and around Corbridge before the new buildings came along...they were put there to keep away evil spirits.”²²²

The story of the Corbridge head has subsequently become something of a local legend, with the idea that it has a supernatural connection with the building reaching an advanced stage of development. This is reflected in the taboo against moving or touching the carving, which is firmly established in the oral tradition. The story is interesting because inquiries with experts at the Corbridge-Chesters Museum discovered the head had been resident at the Angel Inn for as little as twenty years! Curator Georgina Plowright summarised its history in a short note which reads:

“As I remember the case was that shortly after I arrived at the Bowes Museum [County Durham] in 1971, somebody reported to me that the stone head, that had always been on display at the Unicorn Pub in Bowes, was to be transferred to the Angel Inn at Corbridge. At the time, on the assumption that the head must have been found in the Bowes area I wrote to the brewery (Scottish and Newcastle) to suggest that it wasn't removed from the area. As I recall, they replied that Corbridge was very historic, and an appropriate location for the head.”²²³

Unfortunately, paperwork relating to the head has been misplaced, so the exact circumstances surrounding its move and any salient facts about its origin have since been lost.

Hexham, Northumberland

Probably the best known story concerning a “cursed” or “haunted” carved stone head comes from the region of Hadrian's Wall. It concerns a “werewolf” creature associated with two tiny stone heads found in the garden of a semi-detached council house in Hexham, Northumberland, during the 1970s. This tale has subsequently become a classic in the supernatural field, and versions have appeared in dozens of newspapers, magazine articles and books. A sixteen page pamphlet on the story, *Tales of the Hexham Heads*, produced by Hartlepool-based journalist Paul Screeton, appeared in 1980.²²⁴ In 1988 Dr Don Robins, a geological chemist and writer on archaeology and the paranormal, produced a book called *The Secret Language of Stone*, using the Hexham story as a basis for a speculative theory linking stones and crystals with psychic phenomena.²²⁵ Robins' involvement with the heads is interesting as he was one of the last people to handle the stones before they “disappeared.” To this date the origin and ultimate fate of the stones remains an unsolved mystery, and the following is summary of the main points of interest from both the perspectives of archaeology and folklore.

The first of the two heads was unearthed in the back garden of a council house on Rede Avenue,

Hexham, in 1972 by an eleven-year-old boy, Colin Robson, who called out his younger brother Les to make a search which soon uncovered a second. Both heads were smaller than tennis balls and were very heavy for their size; one was skull-like and became known as “the boy,” the other was female and was called “the witch.” The boy was of a greenish-grey colour, and its surface glistened with crystals of quartz. It appeared to have stripes running from the front to the back of the head, as a crude attempt to depict hair. The second female head or “witch” had wild bulging eyes, and hair combed backwards to form a “bun.” Traces of a yellow or red pigment or paint were visible in her hair.²²⁶ The discovery of the two heads was in itself curious as Paul Screeton learned how, two months before Colin found the pair, he had produced a small model head in clay at his junior school which was similar in style to the two “Celtic heads” discovered in the garden. “It was for a competition,” he told Mr Screeton. “I’d never made anything like it before. The master said it was ugly and commented that it should have had a proper neck.” His mother Jenny later added:

“It is remarkable in its likeness to the heads found in the garden. Colin said the idea of making the head “just came to him.”²²⁷

While the two newly-discovered heads were stored inside the Robson household a series of poltergeist phenomena apparently began. The family claimed the heads began turning around by themselves while they were out of the room and various household objects shattered for no apparent reason. One night the household was woken by a scream and crash coming from the house next door, where lived Mrs Ellen Dodd, her husband and their six children. Mrs Dodd told reporters later how she had gone into a bedroom to sleep with her ten-year-old son Brian, who was ill. She said: “He kept telling me something was touching him but I told him not to be silly.” But as she began to climb into bed with the child she felt something trip over her foot. She looked up.

“Then I saw this shape, a creature very big and black - half sheep, but with a man’s head. It came towards me and I definitely felt it touch me on the legs. Then, on all fours, it moved out of the room.”²²⁸

As Mrs Dodd screamed in terror, her husband rushed into the room and appeared to cross paths

with the creature, but he did not see it. As it disappeared, she heard it going down the stairs "with its hoofs clicking." An exorcism put at rest the strange presence in the semi-detached council house home, but by this time the terrified Dodd family had already been rehoused because they could not longer live there. The stone heads which appeared to have marked the onset of their problems were duly sent for examination at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne by a geologist, Roger Miket. At this point the story becomes all the more peculiar because of the independent testimony of Dr Anne Ross, the Celtic expert to whom the heads were initially sent for analysis. At the time they arrived at her Southampton home inside a cardboard box in 1972, Dr Ross had no idea about their background or about the strange experience of Ellen Dodd. Ross's original account of the haunting associated with the stone heads was published in the foreword to a popular book on the folklore and legends of Britain in 1973.²²⁹ It described how Dr Ross took "an instant dislike" to them, and planned to return them to Newcastle as soon as they had been analysed by a geologist at Southampton University. The account by Ross continued:

"A night or two after they arrived - I didn't connect this experience with the heads until later - I woke up suddenly at about 2am deeply frightened and very cold. I looked towards the door and by the corridor light glimpsed a tall figure slipping out of the room. My impression was that the figure was dark like a shadow, and that it was part animal and part man. I felt compelled to follow it, as if by some irresistible force. I heard it, whatever it was, going down the stairs and then I saw it again, moving along the corridor that leads to the kitchen; but now I was too terrified to go on. I went back upstairs to the bedroom and woke Dick, my husband. He searched the house, but found nothing - no sign of any disturbance. We thought that I must have had a nightmare (though I could hardly believe that a nightmare could seem so real) and decided to say nothing about it. A few days later when the house was empty, my teenage daughter Berenice came home from school at about four pm, two hours before Dick and I returned from London. When we arrived home, she was deathly pale and clearly in a state of shock. She said that something horrible had happened, but at first would not tell us what. But eventually the story came out. When she had come home from school, the first thing she had seen was something huge, dark and inhuman on the stairs. It had rushed down towards her, vaulted over the bannisters and landed in the corridor with a soft thud that made her think its feet were padded like those of an animal. It had run towards her room and though terrified, she had felt she had to follow it. At the door it had vanished, leaving her in the state in which we found her.

"We calmed her down as best we could, and feeling puzzled and disturbed ourselves, searched the house. Again, there was no sign of any intruder - nor in fact did we expect to find any.

Since then, I have often felt a cold presence in the house, and more than once have heard the same soft thud of an animal's pads near the staircase. Several times my study door has burst open, and there has been no one there and no wind to account for it. And on one other occasion, when Berenice and I were coming downstairs together, we both thought that we saw a dark figure ahead of us - and heard it land in the corridor after vaulting over the banisters. The reason why I associate the heads with this haunting, if that's what it is, is this. Later, I learnt that on the night when the heads had first been discovered, the north-country woman who lived next door to the garden where they had been unearthed was putting her child to bed when a horrifying creature - she described it as half-man and half-animal - came into the room. She began screaming, and only stopped when the neighbours arrived. She was convinced that the creature had touched her, but what happened to it, she did not know. There was no sign that anyone had broken into the house and the incident, like the incidents which have taken place in our house, are quite without any rational explanation. The strange thing is the heads are gone now, back to the museum. But this thing doesn't seem to have gone with them."²³⁰

Interviewed for this research in 1994, Anne Ross recalled her first reaction on seeing the heads. She said:

"As soon as I opened the box and touched them I was filled with horror which is very odd because although I have inherited a lot of psychic tendencies I am very objective when I'm working, These two heads were horrible - there was something about them staring balefully out of that box and they were so small, I couldn't bear them so I just covered them up quickly. It was obvious from an early stage that there was something attached to them, that they hadn't come alone as it were..."²³¹

The Ross family's initial experiences were just the first of a long series of claimed encounters with the half-wolf, half-man creature which disrupted the household for a number of months. During the time the "werewolf" was resident, many visitors commented on the "evil presence" and Dr Ross's archaeologist husband, Dick Feacham, who was not normally sensitive to psychic phenomena, became distinctly aware that something was dreadfully wrong. In an interview for this research Dr Ross said:

"Dick was very level headed and not given to seeing ghosts but we all saw and heard it including the two children. The most awful moment was when the cats became terrified, because they would see it on the stairs and their hackles would rise and they would back off absolutely rigid. There was no doubt the haunting was that of a werewolf but where it came from and why I just don't know. This thing took form very gradually and when it actually became not just audible and hinted at but tangible and visible something had to be done,

because it was definitely growing."²³²

By this time Dr Ross had been warned by a number of visitors that the only way she could rid the house of the unwelcome visitor was by disposing of the two "evil" heads. If not, she was told there would be terrible consequences, a tragedy which she said nearly occurred on the day after the heads finally departed from the house.²³³ Subsequently the Ross home was exorcised, but the strange presence was not completely erased until seven other archaic heads from her collection, which appeared to have been "triggered" by the influence of the Hexham pair, were themselves removed. Attempts to solve the mystery took a strange turn when Dr Ross's account of her experiences appeared in the 1973 book and were later featured on a TV news broadcast. It was then that a Hexham truck driver, Desmond Craigie, came forward and announced that the two heads were not gruesome Celtic idols, but merely toys he made for his daughter Nancy in 1956 when he lived at the house on Rede Avenue where they had been later found.²³⁴ At that time he worked at a firm casting artificial stone, and when his little girl asked what he did he made the two heads in his lunch break for her to play with. Eventually one got broken and he surmised they must have ended up in the garden where they were eventually found by the Robson children. Rather than providing a solution to the mystery, Desmond Craigie's claim failed to answer the crucial questions posed by the Hexham heads saga. If the heads were only twenty years old, how could they have independently triggered "paranormal" phenomena in three households? Or were the connections which had been made between the hauntings and the presence of the two heads completely coincidental? Even so, if this was the case then why was the haunting associated with a hybrid creature which was so similar to those described in the early Irish and Welsh stories describing shape-shifting anthropomorphic monsters?

According to Dr Ross's testimony, there is little doubt that the appearance of the apparition was directly connected in time and place with the arrival of the two heads at her home. And she has no doubt the form the haunting took was that of a werewolf.²³⁵ The description of the creature which haunted the Dodd and Ross households has parallels with that of the boggart of northern folklore, which often had a symbiotic relationship with a particular house or family. Anne Ross notes the appearance of werewolves in some of the old Irish tales, and Peter Tremayne has recently demonstrated how Irish traditions of this kind provided much of the inspiration behind Bram Stoker's fictional epic titled the *Un-dead*, subsequently retitled *Dracula*.²³⁶ Other parallels

can be drawn between these stories and iconography from the pagan Celtic period. In Europe, there are traditions of a monstrous wolf-like creature called the Tarasque associated with the river Rhone.²³⁷ A well-known carving which may depict the Tarasque or a similar monster, dates from the fourth century BC, and depicts the creature devouring human limbs and grasping severed human heads in its claws.²³⁸

Dr Anne Ross, who has considerable experience recording claims of "paranormal" phenomena at ancient sites, continues to believe that the location where the heads were buried in Hexham may have transferred some form of baleful guardian to the carvings. In 1994 she repeated her belief that the two heads from Hexham were not made by the lorry driver Mr Craigie,²³⁹ a claim echoed by Mrs Jenny Robson who was interviewed by phone during the same year.²⁴⁰ In addition, Ross said when she met Mr Craigie following a lecture in Newcastle-upon-Tyne he brought along two other heads "saying that he had made other ones, but they were nothing like the original two."²⁴¹ Dr Ross's involvement in the saga is interesting, as she makes no secret of the supernatural traditions and beliefs which she inherited during her upbringing in the Scottish Highlands. She maintains that these beliefs are always kept separate from the empirical study she continues in the fields of Celtic archaeology and tradition. However, in the case of the Hexham heads she was forced to admit she could not explain the phenomena which plagued her home, and which appeared to be linked with the arrival of the two puzzling heads.

In 1974 the two heads were examined by a geologist from Southampton University, Professor Frank Hodson, and were then subjected to a petrological analysis by Dr D.A. Robson of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Professor Hodson said both heads were made of apparently the same "very coarse sandstone with rounded quartz grains up to two millimetres diameter in a calcite cement."²⁴² The conclusion that the heads were formed from "an artificial cement" was supported by both Professor Hodson and Dr Robson's analysis using thin sections taken from the tenons below the heads.²⁴³ However, the two scientific analyses of the stones did nothing to end the controversy surrounding their origins. The conclusion that they were made a sandstone mixed with quartz grains in an artificial cement gave credence to Desmond Craigie's claims, but the lack of dating evidence added fuel to Dr Ross and the Hexham witnesses' assertions that these two particular heads were not the ones which Des Craigie remembered making. With the mystery still unsolved the heads were passed for examination to the inorganic chemist, Dr Don Robins, who wanted to test his theory that mineral structures

have the ability to store an electrical charge and therefore possibly imagery too. Although his experiments ended in failure, Dr Robins said he also found the presence of the two heads in his home "disquieting" and blamed the unpleasant "presence" upon the "witch" or female head.²⁴⁴ When last heard of in 1978 the Hexham heads were in the custody of a dowser and astrologer who was reportedly involved in a serious car accident.²⁴⁵ What happened to the boy, the witch, and their werewolf companion after this last incident remains a baffling mystery. Attempts by a number of paranormal researchers to contact the last custodian of the heads have consistently failed and their current whereabouts remain unknown.

Hollingworth, Greater Manchester

Although not a carving of a stone head of the Celtic tradition, a sculpture from the Glossop area of the Peak District has been included in this category because the stories and lore which have grown up around it have so many parallels with those surrounding heads in the local tradition. The carving, dubbed a "god dolly" by Sidney Jackson,²⁴⁶ is a strange figurine which an account of 1991 claims "was apparently the focus for offerings within living memory."²⁴⁷ The five-inch high stone carving was unearthed during the 1960s in the cellar of the Conservative Club at Hollingworth, north of Glossop, a building which dates from the seventeenth century.²⁴⁸ Although not a stone head in the traditional sense of the term, it must be interpreted in the context of the shared background of belief in the High Peak and has been associated with a range of alleged "phenomena." Opinions about the age of the figurine have varied. Anne Ross has suggested it is of "considerable antiquity," and of possible Celtic origin.²⁴⁹ Sidney Jackson compared it with the tiny hermaphrodite "god dolly" excavated from beneath a Bronze Age trackway in the Somerset fens in 1966,²⁵⁰ while Petch notes it appears Celtic "with its horns focus and lentoid eyes."²⁵¹ The most recent opinion suggests the carving is not Celtic in date but is more likely a fetish object from Sierra Leone, imported as a traveller's curiosity within the last three centuries.²⁵² According to local historians it has been "known for many years."²⁵³ The vile-looking figurine, nicknamed "Little Mannie" by its keepers, has large lentoid eyes and prominent horns which curl around the sides of the sheep-like head to give the little carving an eerie, malevolent appearance. A story concerning its discovery tells how it was found along with another broken statue depicting a female deity. Both were surrounded by candleholders and chicken bones; traditional symbols of witchcraft.²⁵⁴ Today, the figurine has joined a group of

other puzzling Celtic-style carvings in the reserve store of Manchester Museum. Despite the level-headed nature of its new custodians, Little Mannie has been blamed for a catalogue of unusual mishaps and other “mischief.” Several staff at the museum have refused to handle or touch the figurine, which has unnerved the most seasoned of archaeologists.²⁵⁵ Even historian and self-confessed sceptic Tony Ward, who obtained the figurine for the museum’s collection, was forced to admit:

“The stories of its ‘influence’ amuse me - I carried it in my jacket pocket for a couple of weeks but I have seen people react to it.”²⁵⁶

However, perhaps the most important clue to the subsequent use, if not the origin, of the figurine were the words used as its finder handed it to Tony Ward, saying “this is just the sort of thing grandfather used to make.”²⁵⁷ Martin Petch, describing the background and context of the carving, wrote:

“...The Glossop figurine has been regarded as capable of ‘mischief’ and of course was discovered under interesting circumstances; much of this is also modern folklore as well. I have found that on occasions witchcraft is practised using these artefacts as the focus for ‘rituals,’ these need not necessarily have any bearing on the sculptures themselves or have anything to do with their raison d’etre. Also applicable I think is that people either like or hate these stone heads, if they hate them they may offer bad luck stories to justify their dislike.”²⁵⁸

Marple, Cheshire

In the mid 1960s businessman Robert Woodward was living with his wife in a lock cottage at the village of Marple on the western edge of the Peak District hills. The cottage itself was built at the end of the 1790s, during the construction of the Peak Forest Canal, and according to an old man he once met whilst walking along the towpath it has been built upon the site of one of the “seven ancient wells” of the parish.²⁵⁹ Besides this one piece of uncorroborated evidence, there was nothing remarkable about this old cottage. However, one day in 1965, as Mr Woodward hacked away at weeds in the overgrown garden behind the building he struck an unusual stone with his spade (see Fig. 15). Carefully, he removed the heavy object from the surface topsoil, which he was clearing to grow vegetables. He explained:

*"I looked at it and thought it was funny because it looked like it had been carved into something and when I cleaned it up a bit this great grinning mouth began to appear."*²⁶⁰

When fully cleaned the stone was found to be a representation of a human head carved in sandstone, approximately one foot in height. It was grossly rendered and quite deliberately contorted. Slightly smaller than life size, the head was very precisely carved at the front, but flat and uncarved at the rear, and side. The semi-spherical eyes with their deep pupils bulged massively, the nose was long and twisted and the mouth was depicted as open, with prominent teeth visible. There were inscribed lines on the face, like tattoo marks which enhanced the malevolent appearance of the carving. On the top of the head was hair or what could be described as a crown of foliage, and there was some evidence that horns had been attached to the head at one stage because there was evidence of antler pedicles like those of a deer. Mr Woodward described subsequent events in an interview for the purposes of the current research:

"My wife took an instant and violent dislike to it from the moment she first saw it, and refused to allow it inside the house. For a year or two therefore it became a garden ornament. Not long after finding it we first heard the 'footsteps' inside the house. In the middle of the night we heard heavy, deliberate footsteps walking across the bedroom floor. We were terrified. There was absolutely no possibility of confusing the sound with the normal sounds of shrinking or expanding wood, and there were no water pipes in the house anywhere near the bedroom. It was the unmistakable sound of someone walking across a bare, boarded floor (we had a carpet in the room). In later years we heard the footsteps on several occasions and became quite used to our "phantom visitor." It was only after we left the Lock Cottage that we discovered that the previous occupant had committed suicide, not of course that this or any other of those strange events can be in any way "connected" with the head beyond the very real feeling that somehow they all were. On moving from the Lock Cottage the head was given to my father who lived in North Wales. He was a very keen amateur archaeologist and had read something of the Brigantes and the head cult. He was naturally delighted to be given the head but my mother's reaction was again one of violent opposition to having it in their house (despite her being the most mild-mannered of persons imaginable). From the moment my father put the head into their garden as a garden ornament my mother and father began to experience a long succession of what they called progressive "bad luck" culminating in the premature death of my father some years later and the passionate pleading of my mother to "please get rid of that terrible head." By now we were no longer living in Marple but my wife's attitude had not changed. She still refused to have the head in the house, and when a female friend of hers was consulted to see whether my wife might have been acting with hysterical unreasonableness, the latter experienced such a profound sense of shock and loathing on first seeing the head that I decided

I had better find a new home for it. I took it therefore to my office where it was on display for several years during which time several members of staff suffered sudden premature death or narrow escapes from death (several non-fatal heart attacks for instance). The numbers of such death, and near-death experiences was out of all statistical normality for the size of the office concerned. Finally the office was closed down completely and the head once again returned to me. By now even I was becoming a little nervous about the head. It really did seem to drag a wake of disaster in its tail. By now it was the mid-1980s and I wondered what to do with the head. An "ideal" solution seemed to present itself when some friends of mine in Scotland started to look for a new house. These friends were, and still are, rather unusual. They belong to a coven of witches spread in the border region of North Cumbria and Eastern Dumfriesshire. They spent many months deciding where they wanted to live. They wanted a remote site and a house preferably out of sight of any other. Also, they spent ages using "pendulum power," ley-lines, psychic trances, "automatic writing" etc before they were finally convinced that a particular house in a very remote valley was the one for them. As a "moving-in" gift I gave them the head. They were delighted with it. Very rapidly they used it in their sessions (whatever they were, I'm not a witch I hasten to add!) and declared that it was very "powerful" indeed. However they immediately began to experience an extraordinary succession of 'bad luck'. The head was very soon blamed and became once again a garden ornament. They suffered financial catastrophe, two miscarriages of much-wanted fetuses, partial failure of the house (necessitating living in a caravan in the garden for a long time), business collapse, family split-ups, etc. Finally they pleaded with me to take the head away, attributing all their problems to its aura of menace and "undoubted evil". But before they would let me put it in the boot of my car for the journey back to Northwich they absolutely insisted on wrapping it around with a number of talismans and symbols of Hebrew, Christian and non-Christian origin. They then wrapped it up completely to prevent any of their spells being moved during the car journey. Not very long after this incident the Pan-Am aircraft exploded over Southern Dumfriesshire and scattered huge pieces of wreckage over a very wide area. Some large pieces fell directly into the garden of my friend's house which was completely surrounded by pieces of personal property and pieces of shattered human beings. Their house, when the pattern of wreckage was finally plotted, was found to lie exactly on the "centre of gravity" of the site. They suffered appalling trauma as a result of the Lockerbie crash and they are still far from being recovered from the shock of what happened that night. They were convinced that this head was Roman in origin. They said they had a message from spirits to say that this object was a representation of a Roman soldier who had died a horrible death. They had obviously used it in some way in their rituals, but how I don't know. When I got it back I just did not know what to do with it so it hung around in the house for a couple of years before I decided to take it to a museum to see what they made of it. They said it was rather unusual and didn't fit the standard model for Celtic heads. If it was a Celtic head it was very different, and if it was not it could possibly be medieval or ecclesiastical in origin. The general opinion was that it was pretty ancient rather than recent, probably the first few centuries after

*the Romans rather than the eighteenth century. On receipt of their report I was asked if I would like to collect it as they did not wish to keep it, but to this date I have been most unwilling to retrieve it! Presumably it still lies somewhere in their basement archives. As far as I'm concerned it was a mysterious object that I dug up and everybody who has been involved with it since that time seem to tell some pretty horrendous tales about it. This was without prompting too, because I didn't actually tell any of these people the stories related by others. People's reactions to it seem to have always been spontaneous. All the above sounds so unbelievable when written down in this form that you might be excused from thinking that I had made it all up, but it is all absolutely true and exactly as I have described."*²⁶¹

Norwich, Norfolk

In *Prediction* magazine writer Nerys Dee described a bizarre series of experiences which she claimed had happened to an uncle after he unearthed a carved stone head in the spring of 1966. She told how the man, whom she calls Captain Pearson, had retired from the navy after 40 years of seafaring to live in "a dream cottage" on the outskirts of Norwich. After settling in he turned his attention to clearing the garden of weeds and one morning his fork hit a piece of stone buried a few inches below the surface soil. She continued:

*"Believing this to be a large stone, he set about its extraction. The Captain was right, it was a stone, but one with a difference. It was a crudely-carved, stone head. The day following this discovery, my uncle had a very strange experience. While looking into the garden from his kitchen window, he saw what he believed was "the devil." A more detailed description of this apparition revealed that whatever it was, it had the torso of a man and the legs of a cloven-footed animal. Over the next four years, until his death in 1970, this creature appeared in my uncle's garden at least ten times. The only association he ever noticed between this weird visitor and the stone head was that they both arrived at much the same time, which fact he viewed as purely coincidental."*²⁶²

Later, she described how she paid a return visit to the cottage in May, 1977, and found it was empty and up for sale for the third time since her uncle's death seven years before.

*"Although there was no sign of the head, the feeling persisted that it was there, somewhere in the undergrowth. If the previous occupants left because of the stranger in the garden, it can only be hoped that the next one, if he finds it, will rebury it as quickly as possible."*²⁶³

In 1991, Nerys Dee added the following notes on the story for the purposes of this research:

*"I remember my uncle and the stone head well because finding it was such a dramatic event, and of course, the aftermath. What I did not say in that article was that he told my mother, who used to visit him a lot, that when the devil came into his kitchen he would die. He was actually found dead in his kitchen, but we shall never know if the devil came in! I do not think it was the devil he saw, but more a satyr, a goat-hoofed nature spirit. Unfortunately I don't know what happened to the head but I presume it was left in the garden. The actual place was on the outskirts of Norwich but I cannot remember its name."*²⁶⁴

The connection between the discovery of the head and the appearance of the apparition have intriguing parallels with the stories from Winchester, and those surrounding the heads from Marple and Hexham, the latter being known to Nerys Dee at the time she wrote the article. The Winchester and Norwich examples suggest the heads may have been produced and deliberately buried as a traditional way of "laying" a ghost, with the implicit suggestion that movement or displacement of the stone could trigger the haunting in some fashion.

Old Glossop, Derbyshire

A collection of strange stones with Celtic influence in their style were discovered at Little Hadfield, near Glossop, in 1846 by the vicar, Reverend John Marsden.²⁶⁵ The collection includes two stone faces, one a classic "Celtic-style" head and another an incised "horned figure" on a block of stone, described in Chapter 5. They were built into the gable end of a house in the village where they remained until the house was demolished earlier this century. Then they were taken out by Lord Howard and donated to the Glossop Antiquarian Society and finally to Buxton Museum. They have returned to Glossop twice, the second occasion coinciding with publicity which surrounded an excavation in 1985-1986 on Mouselow Hill, where there is a Bronze Age barrow.²⁶⁶ A local woman, Glynis Reeve, was in charge of the excavation on the hill, and during the summer of 1985 she decided to display the stones at the team's field centre in Glossop's Heritage Centre. In an account provided for the purposes of this research Mrs Reeve said:

"I decided to bring the stones back to our field centre in Glossop and put them on exhibition because I thought we would perhaps arouse some local interest and we would perhaps find out some more about them, but I was totally unprepared for the reaction. It was quite hostile. People did come in, looked at them, and walked straight out without a word. Then one day just before Christmas in 1984 a man came in and he stood and looked at them for what seemed like

a long time. And he turned and he said to me: "I don't know what you have got those in there for, they're quite evil, you should have them under glass. Just looking at them makes me shudder." And he was shaking from head to foot. He was unwilling to elaborate further, he simply said they reminded him of something he had once been involved in and wished he hadn't. And that was all he was going to tell us...Then something very curious happened while we were moving the stones. It was necessary to store them overnight in a room in someone's house before we moved them where there were several computers. And suddenly without reason all the computers stopped working. We assumed there had been a power cut and phoned the electricity board who who said there's no power cut at all. Nothing but nothing would persuade those computers to work again. We told some friends about this who scoffed and they came round to see us and they brought some of their own electrical equipment including an electric typewriter and they set the typewriter up in that room, and that wouldn't work either. By then I think everyone was beginning to stop being quite so sceptical and the first thing the following morning the stones were moved back to Buxton with the utmost alacrity. Afterwards the typewriter and the computers worked without any problem. Try as they may the local technicians couldn't find any reason why they should have failed. When I got them back to Buxton museum I told the curator and he said: "That's curious because I have been told those stones have very powerful magnetic properties." I just dismissed it as a piece of folklore, but perhaps there is something more to it than that."²⁶⁷

6.8. Time out of mind: the illusion of antiquity

The oral traditions and personal experiences recorded in this chapter underline an important factor which runs through much of the tradition surrounding heads and skulls, namely that the assumed antiquity of these artefacts is not sufficient evidence to date them "to time out of mind." The stories concerning the heads from Hexham, Northumberland and Bingley, West Yorkshire, demonstrate how easily experts can be fooled by the apparent age of heads, and how quickly traditions can grow up attributing antiquity to objects which are of comparatively recent origin. This has created a modern myth of "the Celtic head" which always has to be of Iron Age date and is associated with Druid sacrifice and weird pagan rituals, which is often very far from the truth. This is a myth which is transmitted by the mass media and in turn influences the production and growth of other stories which evolve and create new "experiences" of their own. This in turn creates a traditional template into which others can use to replicate their own beliefs in a new form.

A certain amount of ambiguity will always surround the true sequence of events which lay

behind the tales of "cursed stone heads," but they share a number of intriguing parallels with those surrounding the "guardian skull" traditions which are examined in Chapter 7. Most significant among these are the tendency for elaborate stories to grow up around puzzling artefacts within a short period of time which suggest they are ancient, even in those instances where a recent origin is known. This was certainly the case in the story of the skull at Wardley Hall in Greater Manchester, associated from an early period with the execution of a persecuted Catholic priest.²⁶⁸ However, within a period of three decades in the late eighteenth century traditions were growing about the supernatural powers of the Wardley skull, described in Chapter 7, and alternative stories were developing about its owner and origins, some of which have since been proved to be false. Similar processes seem to be working in the cases of stone head traditions recorded in this section. In some cases, there may be very good political, sociological and psychological reasons why owners might wish to distort or even fabricate traditions surrounding stone heads or skulls.

In the case of the so-called "Druid's Head" from Bingley it was possible to record all the lore surrounding the object from its discovery to its brief moment of fame in the national press. This example was carved seemingly as a joke by a man in 1978, to fool finders at some distance in the future. It took only seven years for a subsequent owner to unearth the stone and set in train a series of coincidences which led to it being blamed for a string of unrelated mishaps and bad luck. Hence it quickly became a "cursed head" in popular tradition, inspiring comparisons with other curses like those of fictional horror movies. It is strongly suspected by the current owners of the head that the story and its subsequent publicity were used by its former owners as a novel way of selling the house they could not afford to keep at a time when the property market was at an all-time low.

Another good example of the development of a modern tradition surrounding a head in comparatively recent years concerns a unique wooden carving kept in a house in North Yorkshire. This head is described as "a crude limewood carving" in the Sites and Monuments Record of County Durham stored at Bowes Museum.²⁶⁹ Recording officer John Pickin says the head was found hidden in a wall of Wycliffe Hall which dates from the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries and "has all the hallmarks of a "Celtic stone head" and must belong to the same carving tradition."²⁷⁰ The carving is actually a bust incorporating both a head and part of the shoulders, with the typical "Celtic-style" features of spectacle eyes, triangular nose without

lobes and a slit mouth. It is fashioned from very dark limewood which resembles the black bog oak found in Ireland, and its overall appearance has invited comparisons to the famous "Black Madonna" carvings from continental Europe, a style which may originate in the Romano-Celtic period.²⁷¹

Wycliffe Hall is of post-medieval date but incorporates the remains of the earlier house. The head was found in a niche in an inside wall of the oldest part of the building when plaster was removed during renovation work and it was subsequently brought to the attention of the museum by the owner at that time. He left the object to Bowes Museum in a bequest during the 1970s, but since that was made a tradition grew up within the family claiming "the head should not leave the hall." According to Mr Pickin:

*"A myth grew up within the space of a few years saying if the head left the house disaster would dog the family. Although the man who owned it had left it to the Museum when he died, his family would not let it go because of the curse. They were genuinely scared about what would happen. We don't know where this story originated, it just appeared from nowhere."*²⁷²

Traditions like this apparently emerge when there is some pressing requirement for artefacts to act as focusses for continuity, both within a family or a community. An artefact like a head or a skull which has been found or has become attached to a certain building helps to forge the identity of that group or place, in the same way communities become identified with folk customs and traditions. In this way they fulfil a number of different psychological and sociological functions. The power of an artefact like a stone head or skull as a material expression of continuity should not be underestimated. Paired with the inherent symbolism of luck-bringing and evil-aversion which the head represents in British tradition, and its connotations of ancestor worship, this is sufficient to imbue artefacts like these with tremendous power and contributes to their survival through generations of human occupation. Whether consciously or unconsciously, families and communities have ensured that their power lives on by inventing or embroidering the traditions which surround them, adding new lore to the great pool of stories which grow up over the years.

These factors provide a direct link between the stone head traditions presented in this chapter and the guardian skull traditions assembled in Chapter 7, which follow. Links are also apparent between heads and skulls in the form of the stories describing supernatural phenomena which

are claimed to surround them. As stated at the outset of this chapter, the head symbol is inextricably linked with the world of the supernatural in British folklore. Therefore it should be no surprise to find stories concerning evil-averting power, curses, ghosts and poltergeists associated with them in folk beliefs and traditions. The following chapter will develop these themes further in the context of the guardian skull traditions which are associated with many houses and farms across Britain.

- ¹ John Billingsley, 'Carved heads in the Calder Valley,' p.18.
- ² Nagy, 214-19.
- ³ Thompson, pp. 368-69.
- ⁴ See Meslin, pp. 221-24 and James McCullough, 'The Head,' *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed.) James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1913), pp. 532-40.
- ⁵ Nagy, 204.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ See Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire.'
- ⁸ See Petch, 'Celtic Stone Heads.'
- ⁹ Brears, p. 32.
- ¹⁰ Oral tradition collected from Pat Ellison, Hollingworth, 12 November 1993; see also Keys, 'Heads of stone cast new light on Celtic cult.'
- ¹¹ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 80.
- ¹² See Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, pp. 25-26 for four examples from West and North Yorkshire.
- ¹³ For examples of heads or faces carved upon fireplaces in Wales and the West Country, see Eurwyn William, 'The Protection of the House: Some Iconographic Evidence from Wales,' *Folklore*, 89 (1978), 148-53.
- ¹⁴ Andy Roberts, *Ghosts and Legends of Yorkshire* (Norwich: Jarrold Publishing, 1992), pp. 25-27.
- ¹⁵ Merrifield, pp. 22-58.
- ¹⁶ A recent example concerns a "the face of Jesus" which was seen in a three inch long skull-like stone discovered by a schoolboy in Bridlington, East Yorkshire. The natural stone was displayed in the bar of the Cricketer's Arms public house until it was removed in November 1997 "because of all the attention it was getting." See Michael Brown, 'Now 'face of Jesus' found on stone,' *Yorkshire Post*, 6 November 1997.
- ¹⁷ Clarke with Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*, pp.133-34.
- ¹⁸ Smith, 'Celtic Heads,' 15-16.
- ¹⁹ Personal communication from Anne Ross, 12 April 1995.
- ²⁰ Sidney Jackson card index number 85, from Todmorden, West Yorkshire.
- ²¹ Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, p. 24; Sidney Jackson card index number 3, from Pickering, North Yorkshire; Cartwright Hall Museum, Bradford.
- ²² McCullough, p. 536.
- ²³ See Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp. 64-65, 146-47 for further discussion of the Gorgon tradition.
- ²⁴ Smith, 'The Luck in the head,' 21.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 22-23.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 22.
- ²⁷ Baring-Gould, p. 46.
- ²⁸ Quoted in Smith, 'The Luck in the Head,' 22.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Ross and Feacham, 342-43.
- ³¹ Doug Pickford, *Cheshire: Its Magic and Mystery* (Wilmslow: Sigma Press, 1994), pp.63-68.
- ³² Ibid., p. 68; see also John La Page, 'Stone head curse in Cheshire,' *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, Vol. 5, 9 (September 1960), 6.
- ³³ Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folktales, Part B (Folk Legends)*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).
- ³⁴ Gillian Bennett, *Traditions of Belief* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), pp. 11-19.
- ³⁵ Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif Index of Folktales of England and North America* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1966).
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 139.
- ³⁷ Brears, p. 43.

- ³⁸ See Merrifield, pp. 117-21.
- ³⁹ See Nigel Pennick, *Skulls, cats and witch bottles* (Cambridge: Nigel Pennick Editions, 1986) for numerous examples of human and animal body parts utilised in proto-historic foundation lore.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 45.
- ⁴¹ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* Vol 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 204.
- ⁴² Smith, 'The Luck in the Head,' 20; Jones, 'Heads or Grails?' 33.
- ⁴³ Meslin, p. 224.
- ⁴⁴ Personal communication from John Taylor Broadbent, 2 June 1996.
- ⁴⁵ See Chapter 5.
- ⁴⁶ See Appendix 1, P2. Oral tradition collected from Marjorie Broadhurst, Chinley, Derbyshire, 26 February 1993.
- ⁴⁷ See Appendix 1, P21. Sidney Jackson card index number 600.
- ⁴⁸ Personal communication from Ken Whiting, Chisworth, Derbyshire, 6 February 1993.
- ⁴⁹ See Appendix 1, P23. Oral tradition collected from Moira Jean, Clay Cross, Derbyshire, 6 January 1997.
- ⁵⁰ See Appendix 1, P53. Personal communication from John Taylor Broadbent, 20 February 1994.
- ⁵¹ Smith, 'Celtic Heads,' 25.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ See Jackson, 'Tricephalic Heads from Greetland,' 314-15.
- ⁵⁴ Jackson, 'Astonishing head finds at Todmorden,' 14.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 15-16.
- ⁵⁶ See Sidney Jackson, 'Were these heads fertility gods?' *Archaeology Group Bulletin*, Vol. 12, 3 (March 1967), 21-22.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ See Appendix 1, P51. Oral tradition collected in Old Glossop, Derbyshire, 10 April 1993.
- ⁵⁹ Personal communication from Anne Ross, 2 July 1994.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Mary Rogers, *A Prospect of Erne* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1967), p. 81.
- ⁶² Letter dated 1 November 1965 in Sidney Jackson correspondence file.
- ⁶³ Sidney Jackson card index number 90.
- ⁶⁴ Sidney Jackson card index number 418.
- ⁶⁵ See John Billingsley, 'Archaic Heads: Guardians of the boundaries,' *Mercian Mysteries*, 24 (1995), 1-4.
- ⁶⁶ See *Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain* (London: Reader's Digest Association, 1973), pp. 412-13.
- ⁶⁷ Oral tradition collected in Old Glossop, Derbyshire, 21 August 1997.
- ⁶⁸ Ross, 'A pagan Celtic shrine at Wall, Staffordshire,' 4-5.
- ⁶⁹ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 16 April 1994.
- ⁷⁰ Oral tradition recorded in Old Glossop, Derbyshire, 29 October 1993.
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- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Personal communication from Anthony Myers Ward, 16 April 1994.
- ⁷⁴ Lindow Man exhibition guide, Manchester Museum, 1993.
- ⁷⁵ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp. 61, 67-68.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 61-62; see also Billingsley, 'Archaic head carvings in West Yorkshire,' p. 104.
- ⁷⁷ Lecture on Celtic heads delivered by John Billingsley at the Northern Earth Mysteries Moot, Bradford, 22 October 1994.
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- ⁷⁹ Quoted in Brears, p.32.

- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Mary Nattrass, 'Carved heads in Cleveland,' 435-36.
- ⁶² Brears, p. 32.
- ⁶³ Oral tradition collected in Wiseton, Nottinghamshire, 14 May 1995.
- ⁶⁴ Oral tradition collected in Old Glossop, Derbyshire, 29 October 1993.
- ⁶⁵ Brears, pp. 34-35; Sidney Jackson card index numbers 348 and 349.
- ⁶⁶ Letter from Freda Scott dated 20 January 1966 in Sidney Jackson correspondence file.
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- ⁶⁸ Sidney Jackson card index number 198; British Museum collection; displayed at the Lindow Man exhibition, Manchester Museum, 1993.
- ⁶⁹ Personal communication from Valery Rigby, British Museum, 1 July 1994.
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- ⁷¹ Ibid., 405-406.
- ⁷² Ibid., 406.
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- ⁷⁷ Whelan, 'Yorkshire's Holy Wells,' 18..
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- ¹⁰¹ Cheryl Traffon, *The Earth Goddess* (London: Blandford Press, 1997), pp. 86-87.
- ¹⁰² Anne Ross, 'A pagan Celtic tricephalos from Netherton, Lanarkshire,' *Glasgow Archaeological Journal*, 3 (1974), 26-33.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 32.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 32-33.
- ¹⁰⁵ Robert Charles Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England* (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), pp. 144-45.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 145.
- ¹⁰⁷ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 146.
- ¹⁰⁸ Illustrated in Homer Sykes, *Mysterious Britain* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1993), p. 122.
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- ¹¹⁰ Homer Sykes, *Celtic Britain* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1997), p. 126.
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- ¹¹³ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' p. 91.
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- ¹¹⁵ William, 'The protection of the house,' 148-53.
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- ¹²⁷ Sidney Jackson card index number 319; T. Rowland Powel, 'A talisman against evil?' *Country Life*, 24 August 1967, 14.
- ¹²⁸ Sidney Jackson card index number 299.
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- ¹³¹ Lindsay Allason-Jones, 'Sewingshields,' 97.
- ¹³² Brears, p. 38.
- ¹³³ Laing and Laing, p. 194.
- ¹³⁴ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p. 50.
- ¹³⁵ See Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone heads*, pp. 25-26, 28.
- ¹³⁶ Sykes, *Mysterious Britain*, p. 69.
- ¹³⁷ Personal communication from Glynis Reeve, 24 August 1991.
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- ¹³⁹ Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' p. 105.
- ¹⁴⁰ Oral tradition recorded by Andy Roberts, Southowram, West Yorkshire, 16 July 1991.
- ¹⁴¹ Personal communication from Andy Roberts, 21 August 1991.
- ¹⁴² Sidney Jackson card index number 251.
- ¹⁴³ Sidney Jackson card index number 657.
- ¹⁴⁴ Letter from Sidney Jackson to Etienne Rynne in Sidney Jackson correspondence file, dated 2 July 1965.
- ¹⁴⁵ Quoted in *Keighley News*, 2 July 1971.
- ¹⁴⁶ Undated newscutting from Keighley newspaper in Sidney Jackson correspondence file, titled 'Mill chimney carvings are relics of days when superstition was rife.'
- ¹⁴⁷ Sidney Jackson Card index numbers 455, 456 and 457.
- ¹⁴⁸ Quoted in *Yorkshire Post*, 2 February 1974.
- ¹⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁰ Sidney Jackson card index number 205.
- ¹⁵¹ Quoted in *Keighley News*, 12 August 1967.
- ¹⁵² Ibid.
- ¹⁵³ Brears, p. 41.
- ¹⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁵ Cathy Wilkinson, 'The face that looks down on the town,' *Bingley Guardian*, 8 June 1973; Sidney Jackson card index number 48.
- ¹⁵⁶ Letter from C. Crampton, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, published in *The Dalesman*, April 1950, 8.
- ¹⁵⁷ Letter from Richard Himsworth, Hull, to Sidney Jackson dated September 1967 in Sidney Jackson correspondence file.
- ¹⁵⁸ Copy of letter from Sidney Jackson to Richard Himsworth, 10 November 1967, Sidney Jackson correspondence file.
- ¹⁵⁹ See Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire,' p. 79, and Roberts, *Ghosts and Legends of Yorkshire*, pp. 26-27.
- ¹⁶⁰ Quoted in 'Heading off a ghost,' *Yorkshire Post*, 21 October 1971.
- ¹⁶¹ Roberts, pp. 41-42.
- ¹⁶² *Historic Walks around Ribchester*, undated pamphlet published by Lancashire County Council Tourist Information Office, 1990, p. 60.

- ¹⁶³ Oral tradition collected 1 November 1990, Hothersall, Lancashire.
- ¹⁶⁴ Smith, 'Celtic heads,' 26.
- ¹⁶⁵ Terence Whitaker, *North Country Ghosts and Legends* (London: Grafton, 1988), p. 317.
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- ¹⁷⁰ Sidney Jackson, 'These Sheilas cast an evil spell,' undated newscutting in Sidney Jackson correspondence file.
- ¹⁷¹ Sidney Jackson, 'The curse of the Croft sheelagh?' *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, 18 July 1974; Sidney Jackson card index number 409.
- ¹⁷² Letters in Sidney Jackson correspondence file from Jorgen Anderson, dated 16 July and 12 September 1974.
- ¹⁷³ Sidney Jackson card index file number 409.
- ¹⁷⁴ Personal communication from Jean O'Melia, 14 February 1998.
- ¹⁷⁵ Jackson, 'The curse of the Croft sheelagh?'
- ¹⁷⁶ For a summary of the Tutankhamen curse story see John Michell and Robert Rickard, *Phenomena: a book of wonders* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 84.
- ¹⁷⁷ Leslie Grinsell, 'Some aspects of the Folklore of Prehistoric Monuments,' *Folklore*, 48 (1937), 245-59.
- ¹⁷⁸ Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *The Secret Country*, pp. 191-217.
- ¹⁷⁹ See Appendix 1, P1. Personal communication from Shelagh Lewis, 10 June 1998.
- ¹⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁸¹ See Chapter 5 and Appendix 1.
- ¹⁸² Coulston and Phillips, p. 123.
- ¹⁸³ Collected during visit to Chesters Roman Fort Visitor Centre, Northumberland, 21 March 1993.
- ¹⁸⁴ Patrick Logan, in *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980), p. 23, describes the pattern day at St Ciaran's Well which involves a circuit of the well, followed by the hanging of votive offerings upon the whitethorn and the kissing of a face carved on a stone nearby. This ritual is repeated three times by the pilgrim as part of the procession around the well and adjacent churchyard on the saint's pattern day, 9 September.
- ¹⁸⁵ Personal communication from John Taylor Broadbent, 14 May 1995.
- ¹⁸⁶ Sidney Jackson card index number 472.
- ¹⁸⁷ Appendix 1, P37. Information supplied by Weston Park Museum, Sheffield. A lantern slide in the museum's files depicts a stone head in a garden wall at Moorseats, dated "circa 1930."
- ¹⁸⁸ Alasdair Alpin MacGregor, *The Ghost Book* (London: Robert Hale, 1955), pp. 157-60.
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- ¹⁹⁵ Ethel Rudkin, *Lincolnshire Folklore* (Gainsborough: Beltons, 1936), p. 66.
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- ²¹⁰ Spencer's Auctioneers Catalogue, 14 November 1990, Retford, Nottinghamshire, lot number 177.
- ²¹¹ *Yorkshire Post* , Property section, 29 December 1991.
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- ²¹³ Ibid.
- ²¹⁴ Steven Teale, 'Change of fortune for cursed couple,' *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* , 28 December 1991.
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- ²⁴⁰ Personal communication from Sadie Holland, 22 February 1994.
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- ²⁴³ Screeton, *Tales of the Hexham Heads*, p. 9.
- ²⁴⁴ Robins, pp. 16-22.
- ²⁴⁵ Ibid.
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- ²⁴⁷ Lindow Man exhibition catalogue, Manchester Museum, 1991.
- ²⁴⁸ Personal communication from Martin Petch, 9 September 1991.
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- ²⁵⁷ Sidney Jackson card index number 605.
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- ²⁶⁴ Personal communication from Nerys Dee, 18 February 1991.
- ²⁶⁵ See Chapter 5.
- ²⁶⁶ See Clarke with Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*, pp.53-60.
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Chapter 7

British “guardian skull” traditions



“...the part that skulls play in the English folk-legends is very marked, and is not sufficiently noted in the Type-motif Index...”

Katharine Briggs¹

7.1. Introduction

Throughout the British Isles there are a number of manor houses, farms, halls and other buildings in which singular objects have been retained, preserved as magical guardians or “lucks.” These artefacts include animal bones, carved stone heads, crystal goblets, semi-precious stones, “witch stones” and even a fairy flag. However, the strangest and most enigmatic of these residential talismans are the mysterious human skulls, which have formed the basis of the folktale or folk motif known as the guardian skull or, in the popular literature, “the screaming skull.”

This chapter is concerned specifically with the folk legend of the guardian or “screaming” skull which occurs frequently in local traditions but has been infrequently discussed in the folk literature. The chapter begins with a contextual discussion of the motif, and concludes with a structured gazetteer of thirty two local legends which can be categorised as belonging to this genre of story. A detailed discussion and analysis of the common themes which emerge from the material follows in Chapter 8 which seeks to place the material in context. Protective or guardian skulls appear in Thompson’s *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, suggesting the motif is not a story type unique to Britain or indeed to “Celtic” peoples.² Thompson’s list of international motifs includes stories describing severed heads which move from place to place, and heads of slain men which must not be removed or disturbed. In Britain, it appears this motif has spawned highly developed stories and legends which may have fed upon extant folk traditions concerning the human head. The skull stories appear in Baughman’s index of English and North American folktales under a category which includes ghosts and the dead. The entry reads: “Return from dead to force return of skull removed from proper place.”³ Briggs’ category, drawing directly from some of the better known English stories such as that from Calgarth Hall, Cumbria, is defined in the following way: “Skulls of former owners of hall return to hall every time they are moved.”⁴ Elsewhere, as the quotation which opened this chapter indicates, skull stories have been treated as highly individual local legends, and little effort has been expended to collate them in any meaningful way.

Furthermore, little work has been done to draw parallels between the guardian skull folklore and other traditions concerning the human head in archaeology, folk tradition and literature. The aim of this research is to present all the available material in the form of a structured gazetteer of

British guardian skull traditions. As a result of the often obscure and elusive nature of this material I cannot claim the gazetteer offers comprehensive coverage of the occurrence of this motif in British folk tales, but this is certainly the first time it has been attempted in a systematic way. Chapter 8 will break down the material into its constituent elements, which will then be compared and contrasted with the traditions surrounding carved stone heads discussed in earlier chapters, and compared with relevant ethnographic evidence from outside the British Isles.

In the case of the British guardian skulls, it is their connection with the spirit world and paranormal phenomena which singles them out for special attention and has provided their unique appeal to popular writers in recent years. The most significant factor is the continued insistence in the living tradition, which remains extremely strong today, that skulls must not, under any circumstances, be removed from the threshold of the buildings which have become their homes. Although the ultimate origin of this taboo in some cases appears to have been long forgotten, the skulls have become the focus of strange phenomena whenever they have been disturbed or moved from their favourite positions in halls, manor houses and farms.

To break the screaming skull accounts down into their component parts is straightforward. Each and every one is typified by the following, to a greater or lesser degree:

- 1) A dwelling place has a human skull which has been kept for hundreds of years in an important part of the house, in a specially-made wall niche, on a prominent windowsill, or beside the hearth;
- 2) The origin of the skull is unclear, but in oral tradition the date when it took up residence is often placed outside living memory, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, usually as the result of violence, for example a murder or execution;
- 3) Under no circumstances must the skull be removed from its resting place in the building, this being emphasised in all the stories as the most important theme;
- 4) If the skull is disturbed then outbreaks of paranormal, poltergeist-like phenomena will plague the residents of the house until the skull is replaced in its favourite place.

These are the bare bones of the traditional narratives concerning guardian skulls, as effectively summarised in the folk motifs quoted at the beginning of this chapter. However, to elaborate upon the motif of the "screaming skull" legend one needs to slip beneath the surface of this

summary into a murky underworld where fact and fiction fuse together with claims of paranormal activity. This often includes contemporary eyewitness accounts and personal narratives which demonstrate the continuing vitality of these stories within a continuum of evolving tradition in the present day. The research which I have undertaken has revealed the tenacity and power of human belief in the bizarre and the seemingly impossible, a belief which has transmitted itself via real artefacts, the skulls themselves, certainly for up to four hundred years and possibly for more than one thousand years. First and foremost, and unlike other folklore, which often deals with ultimately fictional or semi-fictional characters and events, fickle documentation and transient locations, many of the skulls which are the subject of this chapter really do exist in the present day. For the most part, they are still found at the locations where the stories place them and they can be seen and examined, and continue to produce stories and bizarre claims to this day.

7.2. Skulls, local identity and popular literature

Historians who refer to skull legends often presume they are unique to their locality, where there exists a story fixed just outside living memory to account for their presence and continuing mystique. As Briggs suggests in the quotation which opens this chapter,⁵ guardian skulls are a little-known aspect of British folklore, but there are a significant number of stories which suggest they once played a major role in the traditions of many communities. Often the skull legends have given villages a special identity, focussed around the local talisman, and some of the more famous stories appear to have produced imitations in neighbouring communities. This can be compared with a number of parallel folk traditions and calendar customs, such as the Castleton Garland in Derbyshire, which have produced a desire by rival neighbours to create their own symbol or rallying point of local identity or continuity with the past.⁶

However, there are a number of remarkable similarities between the skull stories from widely separated locations in Britain which cannot be explained by this theory alone. There is also evidence to suggest that there has been significant copying of sources by antiquarians and historians who first recorded these stories in print. A closer examination also reveals a consistent thread running through the earliest accounts which can be traced in the extant oral tradition, before the accretions and distortion which have followed the popularisation of the

stories developed. This suggests an ancient source for the beliefs which have grown up around the skulls themselves, whatever their ultimate origin may be. One of the few popular writers to suggest a connection between the "screaming skull" stories and archaic beliefs in a modern survey of the stories is Jennifer Westwood, who suggests the tales "ultimately belong...to the Celtic cult of the head."⁷

Accounts of guardian skull traditions first began to appear in print during the late seventeenth century. A particularly interesting early account of the skull known as Dickie, from the Derbyshire Peak District, was recorded by the traveller John Hutchinson in 1809, illustrating the strength of local identity focussed upon a skull, and the continuing belief in the artefact acting as a "guardian" of both farm and family.⁸ It was not until the 1870s when antiquarian writer William Andrews produced an essay on "Skull Superstitions" that a number of similar stories from other parts of England were first collected together.⁹ Andrews had been inspired to produce the collection after reading an entry in *Notes and Queries* in 1872 describing the Bettiscombe skull in Dorset, written by Judge J.S. Udal,¹⁰ a note which was followed by a lively exchange on the subject which uncovered a number of similar traditions. Around the same time James Ingram added more tales to the literature in a collection he included in a book on haunted ancestral homes of Britain.¹¹ One of the few objective collections which appeared during this era was Lockhart's volume on *Curses, Lucks and Talismans* which included a chapter on skulls.¹²

These early collections set the scene for the twentieth century, when popular writers of ghost literature reinterpreted the skull stories recorded in the antiquarian literature of previous centuries. The later accounts were copied and recopied with little checking of original sources, resulting in the production of sensationalised accounts which repeated gross errors of fact. This process has helped to produce the form and content of the classic "screaming skull" story found in popular collections of ghost legends. Gillian Bennett has commented upon the "continuous repetition" in popular literature of a small canon of ghost stories at the expense of the oral tradition which is continually changing and redefining itself. She writes:

*"Whereas a story in oral tradition gets adapted by each successive person who tells it, a written story is quoted more or less verbatim...so the more a written story is repeated, the more it stays the same, and the result is the growth of an "official" or "writer's" version of supernatural folklore."*¹³

As a result the better known stories such as Dickie, Burton Agnes Hall and Bettiscombe Manor are now regularly presented as “classic” screaming skull accounts. One effect of this process has been the transmission into popular literature of the link between the skulls and the themes of supernatural vengeance following unnatural or violent death which is found in many of the nineteenth century accounts. This was an idea which originated in the eighteenth century when writers began to look for a causal or purposeful framework for ghost stories. Restless spirits avenging wrongdoing and murder is a frequent theme found in these romanticised versions of the skull legends. However, the oral tradition and the earliest written accounts of skulls tend to emphasise the more archaic features of the stories, including guardianship, fertility and luck-bringing.

7.3. Distribution of skull traditions

Significantly, the majority of stories about magical skulls have been collected from areas of the British Isles where there is evidence of the survival of native British or Celtic place names, alongside a collection of archaic beliefs and traditions. Of the thirty two stories in the gazetteer, the greatest concentration occurs in the upland Pennine regions of Lancashire and Cumbria (see Fig.28). The Derbyshire Peak District follows, while the remainder are scattered through Yorkshire, the West Country (Dorset, Somerset, Cornwall and Wiltshire), with outliers in Wales and southeast England. This type of skull legend also appears to have parallels across the Atlantic in North America, where similar traditions have been recorded in Rhode Island, Ohio, Louisiana and other places where they appear to have been carried by European settlers.¹⁴

Curiously, areas where archaic Celtic heads are found in abundance, such as the Aire and Calder valleys of West Yorkshire, are lacking in guardian skull traditions. This may be because their role as protective charms in folk tradition is performed by carved stone heads, demonstrating how closely related the two types of artefacts are in terms of function. The same anomaly is true of the traditional “Celtic fringe” areas of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, where if the motif was truly “Celtic” one would expect to find skulls in abundance. However, this does not appear to be the case, as extensive searches of the literature have failed to locate stories which could be compared with those recorded in England, despite the undoubted prominence and importance of the head in the living tradition of those communities.

Sheila Livingstone, in her survey of Scottish folk customs, describes skulls preserved by Dewars or guardians for use in magic, and others preserved as ancestral relics in niches on family staircases, but gives no specific examples.¹⁵ It is suspected that many similar skull customs and superstitions continued in Ireland, Wales and other areas where documentary evidence is lacking, hence the requirement to gather material directly from the oral tradition.

The tradition of preserving heads and skulls as oracles or protective charms appears to be widespread and overlaps both pagan and Christian tradition in western Europe. In the regions with British or Celtic influence, archaic traditions about skulls and other ancestral bones appear to have evolved directly into the medieval cult surrounding saints' relics, resulting in a vibrant mixture of pagan and Christian belief and tradition in a new form. Nigel Pennick notes:

*"...because saints are ancestors, both literally and in the spiritual sense, it was natural to continue the preservation of ancestral beings. Head shrines in Catholic churches in Celtic and former Celtic lands perpetuate the practice of preserving and venerating the heads of ancestors and heroes."*¹⁶

Numerous examples of celebrated head-shrines existed in medieval England before they were dispersed at the Reformation. An early record relates to the Irish saint St Piran whose body was buried beneath the altar of his oratory in Perranzabuloe, Cornwall, on his death in the sixth century AD. The grave was opened in the tenth century when the oratory was covered by wind-blown sands, and his skull was moved to a new chapel to be exhibited as a holy relic.¹⁷ Other well known head-shrines were those of St Chad at Lichfield Cathedral, St William of York in the Minster and the skulls of St Teilo and St Elios in Llandaff Cathedral. The custom of keeping saints' skulls is known on the European continent, and Ross notes how the skulls of churchmen of comparatively recent date have been preserved in the Cathedral of St Pol de Leon in Brittany, and can be viewed by visitors today.¹⁸ During the middle ages the Innes clan of Aberchirder in Banffshire adopted the head of St Marnock, which was paraded through the village whenever good weather was required. Lights were placed around the head every Sunday and the relic was regularly washed and the water caught in a dish and bottled for healing purposes.¹⁹

Heads of heroes and kings were also preserved for a variety of purposes. At Scone, the head of St Fergus was treasured and kept in a silver casket made especially for it by King James IV,²⁰ while a cast of the skull of Robert the Bruce was made in 1819 when his tomb at Dunfermline

Abbey was opened, and is now preserved as a national icon at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.²¹ A similar cult surrounded the Arthurian relics in medieval England, as Mallory mentions the skull of Sir Gawain, which was said to have been displayed as a protective charm at Dover Castle.²² Here the practice of preserving the skulls of kings and heroes merge into the stories of heads buried as city guardians, a practice known to the Greeks and Romans, and described more fully in Chapter 6.

O'Sullivan's *Handbook of Irish Folklore* defines the head as "the seat of wisdom" and mentions human skulls kept in hollows or ledges of churchyards and used for swearing oaths.²³ However, there is no reference to the head or skull as a lucky or apotropaic charm, and no entry in his index has direct parallels with the British skull traditions. However, there are frequent references both in Irish and Welsh tradition to skulls acting as guardians of holy wells and springs where they are used primarily for healing, rather than for guardianship or apotropaic purposes, some of which were described in Chapter 3. For example, Patrick Logan refers to a skull kept in a ruined church at Kilbarry, County Roscommon, which was used in a ritual as a cure for toothache.²⁴ Another with an identical function is known from the churchyard at Drumcondra, near Dublin.²⁵ Wood-Martin, in his survey of Irish folklore, refers to a skull kept in an old church at Faughart on the shore of Lough Neagh, from which visitors drank the waters of a holy well.²⁶ Francis Jones mentions a number of similar skulls associated with holy wells, some of them with their own guardians, in Welsh tradition.²⁷ In Scotland, skulls of suicides were preserved and used for a variety of magical purposes including a traditional cure for epilepsy. The link between human heads in the form of skulls and Celtic water shrines has been demonstrated at a number of archaeological sites both in Britain and the continent and examples were discussed in Chapter 3. The association is continued in tradition of carved stone heads at well and spring sites which form a category of fieldwork evidence reviewed Chapter 6. Despite the intriguing connections which have been drawn with the tradition of preserving ancestral skulls which is widespread across western Europe, there remains the problem that the distinctive English guardian skull stories appear to have no direct parallels with recorded traditions of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This suggests a number of explanations:

- 1) There are skull guardian stories in the oral tradition of Ireland and elsewhere, but they have never been recorded outside their immediate locations or communities. This is difficult to

substantiate given the amount of fieldwork undertaken in Scotland and Ireland.

2) Human skulls are undoubtedly prominent in the local traditions of these areas, but they perform a different function: for example, skulls appear as guardians and healing charms at holy wells and springs, as ancestral relics treasured by families, and as charms inherited by guardians for use in community magic.

3) The functions performed by skulls in English tradition, such as the protection of house and clan, fertility and evil-aversion, are performed by alternative charms in Ireland and Scotland, for example in the form of lucky charm stones and cups, saints' relics and other magical objects. Their function in other areas, like the Yorkshire Pennines, is the same as that provided by the ubiquitous carved stone heads.

4) Guardian skulls have not been recorded in the tradition of Ireland, for example, because they are so commonplace and therefore are not regarded as outstanding or worthy of record, as they have been in England. This could be because of a difference in perception whereby Irish communities feel closer to the mythological world and the past, and where the use of the head as a talisman remains strong in popular tradition.

The balance of evidence appears to suggest that elements from all four of these hypotheses have contributed to the development of the two separate traditions of England and the British Isles in general. More importantly, the popular accounts of "screaming skulls" have clearly played a role in the transmission of the guardian skull legends into the folk literature, and the evolving oral tradition. A small group of legends, namely those from Bettiscombe, Tunstead, Burton Agnes and Wardley, have been copied and borrowed again and again at the expense of lesser-known oral traditions which shed more light upon their origin.

The "guardian skull" stories discussed in this chapter made their way from oral tradition into the writings of local antiquarians towards the end of the seventeenth century. From there, the motif was adopted from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards, into the popular collections of ghost stories which began with Christina Hole's *Haunted England*²⁸ and evolved into R. Thurston-Hopkin's *Ghosts over England*,²⁹ culminating in the 1960s with Peter Haining's

book *The Screaming Skulls and other Ghost Stories*.³⁰ More recently, the better known tales have been transmitted to millions of readers through the popular gazetteers of ghost stories produced by writers such as Peter Underwood and Terence Whitaker.³¹

Aside from these popular references there has been no attempt to collect the available accounts of screaming skull legends in order to make a definitive statement about the subject, apart from my preliminary listing and analysis of stories with Andy Roberts in 1996.³² To this end a database of skull and associated legends was carefully assembled during the collection of material for this study. As a beginning material was collected from secondary sources which included both recent books and magazine articles describing "screaming skulls." References culled from these sources were used to locate the extensive literature produced earlier this century which recorded some of the legends for the first time. These included antiquarian writings, notes made by local historians and historical societies, entries in the journal *Notes and Queries*, and newspaper cuttings. Visits were made to local history libraries in areas where skulls traditions were known, and letters placed in newspapers appealing for information concerning skull legends. Fieldwork included visits to locations of known skull legends and the gathering of oral traditions from their owners and custodians, local historians and others who had expressed an interest or who knew of references to the skull concerned or to other skulls in the vicinity. The attribution of paranormal qualities to skulls does not end with this catalogue. During the course of the fieldwork a number of other related stories were documented concerning skulls attached to specific locations which have paranormal phenomena attributed to them, but could not be classified as "guardian skulls" under the strict definition of the motif index noted earlier. The most significant of these stories have been included in the catalogue for contextual purposes to illustrate that skull stories do not exist in isolation but rather form a continuum of belief and practice. Some of these stories, such as the "apparitions" of the severed heads of King Charles I at Billingham Manor, Isle of Wight, and that of the Catholic martyr George Haydock at Mawdesley in Lancashire, do not involve existing skulls but follow the familiar motif of a building haunted by a resident skull, or in this case a ghostly severed head. In the case of the Calgarth Hall skulls in Cumbria, the physical exorcism of two "real" skulls was replaced by the periodical appearance of two substitute "supernatural" skulls. Parallels between these stories and the numerous stories surrounding headless ghosts in British folklore are explored more fully in Chapter 8.

This research has resulted in the conclusion that many hitherto unrecorded skull stories exist in popular tradition, which have hitherto escaped the attention of popular accounts such as those of Underwood and Whitaker. A long account of "screaming skull" legends published in a Derbyshire newspaper in 1927 mentions "an almost identical tale" to that concerning Dickie in Derbyshire "at a homestead in Staffordshire."³³ A search of the literature has found no further references to this skull, but it may serve to indicate how many other examples must remain hidden to this day, walled up in farm buildings, houses and other buildings across the country. The chances that an oral tradition concerning them could survive long enough to come to the attention of writers or researchers in another part of the country are very slim. The preservation of documentary evidence of these skull traditions outside their original context often hangs upon a thin thread of tradition which is easily broken. For example, one brief written reference exists pertaining to the skull tradition from Woodnesborough, Kent, recorded in the gazetteer, which has never been included in any of the popular listings of "screaming skull" legends.³⁴ However, my fieldwork uncovered a hitherto unrecorded collection of extant oral traditions surrounding this story, none of which had ever been committed to print.

In addition to the guardian skulls, screaming skulls and "supernatural" skulls, there are a number of examples which, like that of George Whowell at the Pack Horse Inn, near Bury in Lancashire, are preserved behind public bars simply as "curiosities." Few of these seem to have developed legends which could lead to them being classified as "screaming" or "guardian" skulls, but a number are associated with a range of evolving ghost stories and personal narratives. It is only a short step from a skull receiving a "haunted" reputation to the appearance of a story which suggests it must not be removed from the bar for fear of supernatural retribution, a tradition which already exists at the Pack Horse Inn. Among these pub skulls is one said to be that of a Viking warrior kept behind the bar of The George Inn on Irongate in Derby city centre. This was found during historical excavations in the pub's foundations and popular belief associates the skull with the Battle of Derby which took place near the site in AD 917.³⁵ In recent years the bar has developed a reputation for being "haunted" and regulars now associate this tradition with the skull kept in the public house. Similar stories surround skulls kept in the bar of the The White Hart hotel in Alfred Gelder Street, Hull,³⁶ and in the Saracen's Head on Gallowgate in Glasgow city centre. The latter, discovered in the pub cellar, is currently on display in the gantry of the pub and is called "Maggie" by bar staff. In local tradition it is said

to be that of a witch, but more probably it was found among human remains unearthed from a medieval cemetery on the site when the building was first constructed early in the nineteenth century.³⁷

7.4. Gazetteer of British guardian skull traditions

The source material used in the formulation of this catalogue has been diverse, ranging from obscure newspaper cuttings to popular books on ghosts and haunted houses, direct interviews and letters received following appeals for information placed in newspapers and magazines. This resulted in a compilation of material which was collated into a catalogue containing a database of thirty two skull stories. Fieldwork revealed how ten of these skulls were still currently on display in context, three were "missing," seven were "walled up" or otherwise out of sight, and little or no information was available on the current whereabouts of the remaining examples, which exist purely as legends. In the course of the fieldwork all the current custodians of the skulls were interviewed and their traditions recorded by shorthand note. It was soon discovered that many popular accounts of skull traditions had been copied from earlier sources, sometimes incorrectly and at other times with substantial embellishment. Accounts therefore have not only been copied but appear to have been added to at the writers' whim and fancy according to their own beliefs and motives. During the process of collecting the material used in this research I have been as comprehensive as possible, tracing the history of each skull where known from the earliest written references through to its present status and location. Entries in the following catalogue of British skull traditions are listed alphabetically by county, with individual stories listed within each county by alphabetical order.

The four figure map references used are those of the Ordnance Survey Landranger series, one and a quarter inch to one mile scale.

7.4.1. CLWYD

Ffagnallt Hall (OS: 117; GR 1870)

Ffagnallt Hall, originally a fifteenth century manor house and now a farm, lies beneath Halkyn

Mountain, some six miles from Mold, in North Wales. Significantly, the hall lies on a boundary between two parishes. In the living room atop the mantelpiece in a small glass fronted box is kept the Ffagnallt Hall skull.³⁸ It is actually only part of a skull, with just a piece of the cranium and the bridges of the eye sockets remaining. It is undated other than by an associated tradition which tells how it was the skull of a Welsh prince called Dafydd. On the run from the English, he took refuge in the hall where he was hidden by his sister, but was betrayed by her husband who murdered him and took his severed head to Chester where it was displayed above the city gates. During his death struggle Dafydd laid a curse on the house, saying that his head must be displayed there in a prominent place as a reminder of the dreadful deed which had taken place. If this demand was not followed then the house would “know no peace.” Local traditions describe how initially this death curse was ignored and as a consequence the lord of the manor who had betrayed Dafydd died in poverty, while suffering from the effects of insanity. His son then retrieved the decaying head from the Chester gates and brought it to Ffagnallt where it has stayed ever since, its position in the household a testament to the belief invested in the relic.³⁹

A former vicar of Mold, M.B. Clough, in an ~~account~~ of the legend dated 1861, describes how the skull's powers were tested by a servant girl who threw it into the duck pond. The following night the hall was rent by screams and ghostly noises and the girl was found sleepwalking around the duck pond trying to fish out the skull, in an attempt to return it to its rightful place as guardian of the house. She told how she had been tormented during the night by “fingers dripping wet” and “shadowy forms” which urged her to retrieve the skull.⁴⁰ The remains of the skull are preserved to this day in the farmhouse and can be viewed by asking permission of the owners.

7.4.2. CORNWALL

Tresmarrow Farm (OS: 201; GR 3183)

In 1895 the Reverend Baring-Gould described the following Cornish tradition concerning a farm at Tresmarrow, near Launceston:

“...in the farmhouse, in a niche, is preserved a human skull. Why it is there, no one knows. It has been several times buried, but, whenever buried, noises ensue which disturb the

household, and the skull is disinterred and replaced in its niche. Formerly it occupied the gable head.”⁴¹

Tresmarrow was the ancient seat of the Pipers, an old Cornish family, who were staunch Royalists during the Civil War. Hugh Piper, who fought in many battles, built the first Tresmarrow in 1578 and this building was razed to the ground by Roundheads marching from Launceston to Bodmin in 1646. With the Restoration, Piper received his estates back and local tradition suggests he placed a Roundhead skull in a niche of one of the walls in the new building. Otto Peter, writing in 1904 supplies a list of theories for the skull tradition, one of which suggests it was put there as a grisly heirloom: “...so that his family might remember the head of his injured master King Charles, which had been struck off on the scaffold.”⁴² Alternatively, he said the skull could have been that of Oliver Cromwell himself, a theory which can safely be discounted, or one of the thirteen regicides who were executed by King Charles II. Peter also notes that a skull symbol is carved on a memorial to Sir Hugh in Launceston Parish Church. It is understood that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the skull was still kept in a niche in the wall close to the stairs in the farmhouse, near Launceston on the edge of Bodmin Moor. Arthur Venning, who describes it as “the screaming skull,” says it was removed from Tresmarrow in 1908, when the estate was sold and the old house was torn down, and notes a tradition that it was subsequently exhibited in London as that of Cromwell and later sold to a doctor in Peckham.⁴³ Another stories suggest the property was sold to a farmer named Richard Daw at the turn of the century who took ownership of the skull. One writer tells how one of his relatives who inherited the farm decided to dispose of the skull by burying it in the grounds, but this was followed by so many horrifying screams that it was considered wiser to dig it up again and bring it inside. The same reference describes how the family had since emigrated to Canada, taking the skull with them.⁴⁴

Field investigations have failed to produce any extant stories concerning this skull, but there remains a tradition in Cornish folklore relating to skulls preserved as house guardians. In the Witchcraft Museum at Boscastle, Cornwall, is a exhibit describing a skull which had been kept in “a rocky shrine” on Bodmin Moor, not far from Tresmarrow. This skull had a hereditary keeper, a woman guardian, who died only recently, according to the caption.⁴⁵ However, the photo of the skull in the display actually shows one of the skull niches from the Celtic shrine at Roquerperture in Provence, southern France, discussed in Chapter 3.

Looe Island (OS: 203; GR 2552)

A newspaper cutting from 1921 mentions a skull “at Looe Island, Cornwall...preserved behind glass in a cupboard of the sitting room.”⁴⁶

7.4.3. CUMBRIA*Brigham* (OS: 85; GR 0930)

The village of Brigham near Cockermouth in West Cumbria was the birthplace of the Carlisle hangman, John Wilson, who was buried in the churchyard there in November, 1757. Tradition has it that Wilson threw himself from the Cocker Bridge into the cold waters, apparently tired of his gruesome job. Wilson’s headstone was embellished with a carving depicting a hangman’s rope by the sculptor, but souvenir hunters slowly chipped this away. Findler claims that the hangman’s ghost haunted Brigham churchyard until 1860, when the sexton unearthed Wilson’s skull, “packed it up secretly and delivered it to the house where the hangman used to live.”⁴⁷ The cottage was then occupied by two cloggers named Watson and it was said the movement of the skull from the churchyard to the house ended the haunting. Findler writes that the skull was found in a wooden box hidden inside a cupboard in the old cottage after the clogger’s death, but it is not known if the skull is still kept in the house.⁴⁸

Brougham Hall (OS: 90, GR 5327)

Once known as “the Windsor of the North,” Brougham (pronounced “Broom”) Hall was built in the late eighteenth century as the family seat of the Brougham family. The hall itself, which incorporated Roman stones from an earlier building, was demolished in the 1930s. This was built on the site of an earlier Celtic christian community which was itself positioned upon an earlier Romano-Celtic village and fort. known as *Brocauvm* . Part of a tombstone of Roman date decorated with a human head carved in native style was found in a cemetery nearby, and an altar to the native war god Belatucadros is also known from the Brougham site.⁴⁹ In recent years the substantial remains have been slowly restored by English Heritage, and a collection of

small buildings housing craft workshops have been built around the walls. An on-site museum provides a history of the site. A local tradition tells how Brougham was long believed to house the skull of a warrior killed at a long-forgotten period in history and which was kept inside the building to ensure good luck and prosperity for the household.⁵⁰ Little is known about this legend, other than it followed the standard pattern of the skull having to be kept in the hall at all times or ghostly disturbances would automatically follow. Gerald Findler writes:

“Whatever was done with it, whether buried on land or in the sea, it had to be restored. Unless it was kept in the hall, the inmates were never allowed to rest by reason of diabolical disturbances and unearthly noises throughout the night.”⁵¹

Eventually the skull was bricked up into a wall of the building and the disturbances ceased. The whereabouts of the skull remained unknown until the 1980s when archaeologist Christopher Terry, who has been in charge of the rebuilding work at Brougham, discovered a human cranium hidden in the ruins of a tower wall during the restoration work.⁵² Mr Terry believes it to be the one described in the legend, of which he was familiar before the discovery, and was particularly careful to follow local tradition by secretly concealing the skull once again. He writes:

“...I made absolutely sure that it was reinterred in a ceramic casket, with lid, around which we poured mortar and set large blocks of stone so that, barring the demolition of the Hall, the skull would rest undisturbed according to the legend. When the skull was in my hands, I noticed that it had three equidistant holes in the top of its head. They were about half an inch to three quarters of an inch in width and they were about two inches from each other. It was almost certainly the cause of the unfortunate fellow’s death. He had an excellent set of teeth so he can’t have been very old. Perhaps he was aged somewhere between twenty and thirty because his skull was fully formed and that of an adult rather than a child. The skull was situated at the corner of a massive tower. I know, having been an archaeologist, that it was a Roman habit to place infants on the corners of buildings. I remember finding four decapitated infants at the corners of a building at the Springhead Roman Villa in Kent. Some of the Roman superstition may have survived into medieval times and may account for our skull which is only just above ground level at the corner of a massive building.”⁵³

Today a stone plaque containing a verse about the legend is set into a wall at the Brougham Museum. It was found by a relative of Mr Terry in an undated Victorian account of the skull

legend kept by the family, and reads:

*“Unknown Soldier from a sunlit shore
Who paid the price in an unknown war
For an unknown God in an unknown time
May peace eternal now be thine.
Pray lie within this ancient wall
And guard that it should never fall.”⁵⁴*

Calgarth Hall (OS: 97, GR 3999)

The present building called Calgarth, which sits on the shores of beautiful Lake Windermere, dates from the sixteenth century, and contains remarkable plaster decorations dating from this period. The house itself is earlier, and incorporates the remains of a fourteenth or fifteenth century doorway in the side wall of the porch. For centuries the mansion has had the reputation of being haunted by two human skulls whose persistent residence in the building is explained in local tradition as an act of supernatural vengeance. In 1858 the poet and writer Alex Craig Gibson in his *Folk Speech of Cumberland*, immortalised the version of the story he heard from the lips of John Long, ferryman for the Ferry House on the lake.⁵⁵ The tradition goes back to a time when the land around the hall was farmed by an old couple, Kraster and Dorothy Cook. Their land was bordered by the estate of a wealthy JP, Myles Phillipson, who with his wife coveted the few acres owned by the Cooks for they wished to demolish their farmhouse and build a new mansion there. The Cooks refused to sell, and in order to gain possession of the property Phillipson invited the couple to a Christmas feast at his home. Afterwards he accused them of stealing a silver cup which he claimed was missing from the house. Later the cup was found in the clothing of one of the couple, or in another version in their house, where it had been planted by Phillipson. Kraster and Dorothy were subsequently tried by Phillipson, found guilty and sentenced to death. But before they were hanged at Appleby, Dorothy is said to have laid ‘seven curses’ upon the Phillipsons and Calgarth:

*‘An’ while Co’garth’s strang wa’s sall stand,
We’ll ha’nt it neet an’ day,
Ye s’ never mair git shot on us,
Whatever way ye tak’.*

*Wativer plan or geeat ye' try
 Ut banish us away
 Afoer ye see us back.⁵⁶*

While the bodies of the couple were still hanging on the scaffold, Phillipson set about the demolition of their farm and ordered work to begin on Calgarth Hall. It was completed by the following Christmas, and guests were invited to a banquet to celebrate. During the feast, Phillipson's wife went upstairs to a bedroom and discovered two leering skulls perched in a niche on the staircase. Many attempts were made to remove and destroy the skulls, but according to the story they always returned by supernatural means to their staircase niche.⁵⁷ In 1891 William Armistead described the skulls as "indestructible" and wrote:

"...for it is said to what place soever they were taken, or however used, they were still presently seen again in their old dormitory, the window. As the report goes, they have been buried, burned, powdered, and dispersed in the winds, and upon the lake, several times, to no purpose..."⁵⁸

The haunting of the mansion is associated by tradition with the ruination of the Phillipson clan, for it is said that from that time onwards Myles suffered misfortune after misfortune, with each setback accompanied by "wild laughter from the skulls." Eventually the JP lost both his lands and title, and the building passed into other hands, leaving only the Phillipson coat of arms above a fireplace as evidence of their presence in the hall. Here oral tradition and historical evidence clash, for local stories suggest the skulls were more phantom than real, returning to haunt the mansion only at Christmas time on the anniversary of the execution. An account by visitor to the hall, writing in 1788, described seeing:

"...two human skulls...said to belong to persons whom Robin (Philipson) had murdered and that they could not be removed from the place where they then were...[and] how... when they were removed they always returned even though they had been thrown into the Lake, with many other ridiculous falsehoods of the same stamp."⁵⁹

This account describes how one of the skulls had been recently carried to London by a visitor, but despite the curse this had failed to return to its home of its own accord. This story is given foundation by William Green who, in his *Tourist's New Guide to the Lakes* published in 1819,

stated there was only one skull at Calgarth, and this had “nearly mouldered away.”⁶⁰ However, John Long told Gibson that “scooers o’ foak ha’ seen ‘em” in a small niche at the top of the staircase, and in a note to the poem Gibson himself says he heard several old people declare they too had seen two skulls.⁶¹ This must have been before Bishop Watson of Llandaff, who bought the Calgarth Estate, had them walled up in their niche. Christina Hole suggests the Bishop, who died in 1820, exorcised the skulls and brought an end to their hauntings “for they have not been seen or heard of since.”⁶² All subsequent sources of the story copy each other and previous accounts by repeating the statement that the skulls have not been seen since this time. Ghosthunter Peter Underwood states, without reference, that the two skulls:

“...are buried somewhere in the the walls resulting, it is said, in a weird atmosphere, odd noises and movement of windows, doors and electrical switches; similar incidents having been reported by many people over many years.”⁶³

Calgarth was bought by a Major Hedley in the middle of this century and spent some time as a guest house and then a riding stables. In 1992 a worker at the stables attached to the hall said an upstairs room in the building always remained locked, but it was not known if this was the room where the skulls were walled up.⁶⁴ Some writers have pointed to the place name as evidence for the origin of the skull legend. Collingwood, in his *Lake Counties* claims that “le Calvegartrige,” recorded at the end of the fourteenth century, so resembles the biblical Calvary, or the place of the skulls, that the name itself may have contributed to the origin of the legend.⁶⁵ White, writing in 1873, notes that a burial ground was “anciently attached to Old Calgarth and human bones have frequently been turned up there,” which suggests an alternative source for the origin of the two skulls.⁶⁶ On the historical accuracy of the tradition concerning the skulls, Gerald Findler writes that a number of attempts had been made to ascertain the facts about the story without success.⁶⁷ He said the old house once owned by the Cooks had long since disappeared and had been replaced by a new building, but there was no evidence from local records that a Myles Phillipson had ever owned or built the mansion which became Calgarth Hall. There was, however, during the seventeenth century a JP named Myles Phillipson who lived in the village of Crook nearby. He was a landowner and supporter of the Royalist cause during the Civil Wars. Perhaps because of this factor, Findler suggests the story of supernatural vengeance was concocted as a piece of Roundhead propoganda to discredit him. After the death

of Christopher Phillipson in 1634 the family as a result suffered and their estates became impoverished because of their support for the Royalists. The legend of the skulls of Calgarth lives on in folklore, and features strongly in popular books, guides and newspaper articles about Lakeland ghosts and legends. Briggs notes how in local tales the two ghost skulls were said to attend banquets at Armboth Hall on the shores of Thirlmere, joining in the midnight revels there.⁶⁸ In Gibson's poem the two headless skeletons would approach the Hall, unbar the door, climb the stairs and each lift one skull from its niche, then return by way of Calgarth Woods, by Rydal and Dunmaile, to the shores of Thirlmere.⁶⁹

Hayfell (OS: 97, GR 5390)

The resident skull here was kept in a niche at the foot of a staircase in a house in the village of Hayfell, in the Eden Valley. According to Dr Thomas Gibson, writing in 1887, "no efforts were successful in displacing it altogether. As often as it was removed, so often did it appear."⁷⁰

Threlkeld Place (OS: 90, GR 3225)

Lakeland writer Gerald Findler tells the story of a skull at Threlkeld Place, a farmhouse near Keswick in Cumbria, which was drawn directly from an oral tradition. It was discovered by a new tenant of the farm in a small dark room that had not been used by his predecessor. Findler writes:

"...It was promptly buried with reverence, but the wife of the tenant, going to the small room immediately after the burial to clean it out, was frightened and surprised when she saw the skull in the same niche in the wall where it was first discovered. The farmer, alarmed and no doubt afraid, carried it to St Bees Head and cast it into the sea, only to find on his return home that the skull had travelled quicker than he had, for it was there in its usual niche. Friends came to assist the farmer in his dilemma, and the menfolk made several attempts to dispose of the skull, but it was always back again in that small room. Finally it was bricked up in the wall, and the farmer and his wife quickly found another farm to work without any eerie companion."⁷¹

7.4.4. DERBYSHIRE

Dunscar Farm (OS: 119, GR 1483)

There is one source for this skull tradition although, it has been repeated as fact in a number of recent publications and heard as a continuing tradition in the area today. In a monograph on Derbyshire folklore by Sheffield antiquarian Sidney Addy, published in the 1890s, an entry describing stories about protective skulls reads:

*“I was told that at Dunscar, a farmhouse in the parish of Castleton, there is a human skull on the outside of a window sill. If it is removed, the crops fare badly. I went to the farmhouse myself and found no skull there, and the tenant who had lived there many years had never heard of such a thing.”*⁷²

Dunscar Farm, at the head of the Hope Valley, was donated to the National Trust’s High Peak estate in 1994 and inquiries with the last owners and the Peak Estate have failed to discover any evidence or traditions concerning a preserved skull.⁷³

Stoke Hall (OS: 119, GR 2476)

There is one source for this tradition. R. Murray-Gilchrist, in his 1941 guidebook *The Peak District*, mentions a story he had heard whilst visiting Stoke Hall, the former Peakland home of the Earls of Bradford, which is built alongside the banks of the River Derwent. He wrote: “The neighbouring folk used to tell a weird story of a skull that haunted the upper storey [of the hall].”⁷⁴ Stoke Hall has a number of haunting traditions, including the classic white lady, which are still current in local tradition, but inquiries at the hall, now a country hotel, failed to uncover any stories about a supernatural skull.⁷⁵

Flagg Hall (OS: 119, GR 1368)

At Flagg Hall near Buxton a human skull has been kept beneath a glass case on the stairs for many years, and local tradition tells of misfortune and uncanny happenings in the event of its

removal or abuse. A writer in 1921 described how: “a Peakland farmer once told me that at Flagg Hall there was skull on the windowsill of the stairs and that when a farmlad there he was afraid to sleep in the house alone.”⁷⁶ This suggests the tradition dates back at least to the latter part of the nineteenth century. One tradition concerning the skull was recorded by a family historian, Patricia Salisbury, who heard it from her second cousin.⁷⁷ She said it concerned an uncle, William Burdekin, who lived in Derbyshire around the turn of the century:

“He lived at Flagg Hall, near Chelmorton. They found an old skull in the house and were going to bury it in Chelmorton churchyard. They all piled into the trap and set off, or rather they didn’t, as the horse refused to move, no matter how it was coaxed or shouted at. So they all got down and went back into the house, then the horse walked calmly back to the stable. The skull was taken up to the attic and peace reigned for a time. Then a new servant arrived and was given the attic bedroom. She took against the skull and flung it through the window. It landed on top of a cartload of manure just going to the field. The horse stopped in its tracks, then kicked and reared and made such a fuss that the skull fell off onto the road. It was left outside for a time, but such ill-luck and misfortune befell the family that it was taken back inside and bricked up in the wall somewhere.”⁷⁸

This oral tradition contains so many elements from other guardian skull stories, such as those from Burton Agnes and Wardley Hall, that it strongly suggests there has been some borrowing of tradition, or accretion of lore upon a pre-existing story. In particular the story concerning the horse refusing to move when the skull is thrown into the cart is identical to that from Burton Agnes Hall in East Yorkshire. The Flagg Hall version appears to have been recorded soon after the informant had seen a play called “Things so Strange” at a theatre in nearby Hucklow earlier this century. This was written by L. Du Garde Peach and was based on the story of “Dickie,” the Tunstead Farm skull, which may have influenced the growth of a similar tradition at nearby Flagg.⁷⁹ The hall itself was the residence of a family called the Fynneys for many generations, but there does not appear to be any direct connection between the skull and the family. In the Women’s Institute Guidebook to Derbyshire villages it is said the skull:

“...is reputed to be that of one of the Fynney doctors; it is said the skull cannot be removed from the house without weird and unexpected things happening.”⁸⁰

Furthermore, a former resident of the hall called Mrs Lomas told Clarence Daniel that in her

opinion the skull was part of a human skeleton which was the professional property of a surgeon who once lived at the hall.⁸¹ When a visit was made to Flagg Hall to examine the skull during the summer of 1990 for the purposes of this research I came to the conclusion that it was not of very great age. The skull, complete with mandible, is still kept on a cheeseboard on a staircase windowsill, but its current owners knew little about it other than the fact it was in the house when they bought it.⁸² This seems to suggest the skull currently at Flagg Hall is of comparatively recent date. Its appearance fits the theory that it could have once been the property of a doctor or surgeon, and its presence in the house may well have attracted tradition in a region where stories about Dickie were legion.

According to John Taylor Broadbent of Old Glossop, whose father worked as a welfare officer travelling the Peak District earlier this century, all the large houses in parts of the High Peak had preserved, somewhere in its walls or structure, a human skull or a carved stone head.⁸³ Mr Broadbent said the word "head" was used to describe these skulls, but the word was actually interchangeable when applied to human skulls and carved heads, as they were kept in identical architectural locations and had similar traditions attached to them. Often, he said, special wall niches or compartments were fashioned to house them. Mr Broadbent's father had his own traditions both concerning Dickie's skull and about the skull at Flagg Hall. He was also familiar with several other tales concerning human skulls preserved in houses, in particular one in a farmhouse in the area between Rowarth and Chapel-en-le-Frith. However, no surviving record of this story has been located by this research.

Tunstead Farm (OS: 119, GR 0279)

The most famous Peak District skull is "Dickie" or "Dick" of Tunstead.⁸⁴ Dickie, as he or she will be referred to here, has probably generated more stories and folklore than any of the other skull apart from the example from Bettiscombe in Dorset. Dickie's skull was for more than three centuries preserved within the walls of an isolated hill farm on the slopes of Combs Edge, between Chapel-en-le-Frith and Whaley Bridge in the High Peak district. The late Clarence Daniel, author of two volumes of Derbyshire ghost stories, stated there were enough tales told about Dickie to fill a book, and that he (or she) should be called "the Eighth Wonder of the Peak."⁸⁵ Dickie has been the subject of two ballads by local poets and a stage play by a third,

and at one time tourists passing through the region were able to buy postcards complete with a photograph of the skull and a short account of its history.⁸⁶

There are actually two farms at Tunstead hamlet, which lies on the border of the parish of Combs and Whaley Bridge. The farm where the skull made its home is of ancient foundation, the earliest recorded date for habitation being 1216, and in 1593, Francis Tunstead the King's Gamekeeper, lived there.⁸⁷ There are signs of ancient habitation on the moor behind the farm, where there are cairns and a stone circle of possible Bronze Age date at Cadster.⁸⁸ Clarence Daniel notes that an Iron Age beehive quern has been found in the farmyard.⁸⁹ John Mellor de Tunstead appears in the Derbyshire records as owner in 1470, and his family, who were suspected Recusants, were in possession of the farm until the end of the seventeenth century. In 1709 the farm was owned by one John Brocklehurst, whose descendants eventually sold the farm to John Dixon at the end of the eighteenth century.⁹⁰ The Dixons remained the owners until just after the Second World War. According to historian Margaret Bellhouse, Sam Dixon, the last male of the line, "would not talk about Dickie for whom he had a great respect, and a real fear."⁹¹ The earliest and possibly most important description of the skull was recorded by John Hutchinson of Chapel-en-le-Frith, author of *A Tour through the High Peak*, published in 1809, and dedicated to the Duke of Devonshire. In his account Hutchinson wrote:

"Early in the present century, having heard a singular account of a human skull being preserved in a house at Tunstead, and which was said to be haunted, curiosity induced me to deviate a little, for the purpose of making some inquiries respecting these natural or supernatural appearances. That there are three parts of a human skull in the house is certain, and which I traced to have remained on the premises for near two centuries past, during all the revolutions of owners and tenants in that time."⁹²

The current tenant, Adam Fox, who had been brought up in the house, told Hutchinson:

"...[he] has not only heard singular noises, and observed very singular circumstances, but can produce fifty persons within the parish who have seen an apparition at this place. He has often found the doors opening to his hand, the servants have been repeatedly called up of a morning, many good offices have been done by the apparition at different times, and, in fact, it is looked upon more as a guardian spirit than a terror to the family, never disturbing them but in case of an approaching death of a relation or neighbour, and showing its resentment only when spoken of with disrespect or when its own awful memorial of mortality is removed. Twice within the

*memory of man the skull has been taken from the premises, once on building the present house on the site of the old one, and another time when it was buried in Chapel churchyard - but there was no peace! no rest! it must be replaced!"*⁹³

Hutchinson adds:

*"The skull has always been said to be that of a female; but why it should have been baptised with a name belonging to the male sex seems somewhat anomalous; still not more wonderful than many, if not all, of its very singular pranks and services. To enumerate all the particulars of the incalculably serviceable acts and deeds done by "Dickie" would form a wonder; but not a wonder past belief, for hundreds of the inhabitants of the locality for miles around have full and firm faith in its mystical performances. How long it has been located at the present house is not known; to whose body in the flesh it was a member is equally as mysterious, save that it is said (but what has not been said about it that is not pure fiction?) that one of the two co-heiresses residing here was murdered, and who declared in her dying moments that her bones should remain in the place forever."*⁹⁴

The chronology of the occasions when Dickie reacted with fury at his disturbance or removal from the house is difficult to establish, but they certainly span a period of two hundred years during which time the farm has been owned and tenanted by a number of different occupants. Clarence Daniel follows Hutchinson in claiming that Dickie was twice buried in the churchyard at nearby Chapel without success, and adds that the skull was once thrown into Combs Reservoir, but had to be retrieved when all the fish died.⁹⁵ The most recent disturbances, dating to the early nineteenth century after Hutchinson's visit, relate to a time when the Dickie was put out of the house while it was rebuilt a second time.⁹⁶ Local tradition says the skull's greatest achievement was to force the London and Northwestern railway company to alter the route of a planned new line between Whaley Bridge and Buxton to Manchester in 1863 because it threatened to cut through part of Dickie's farm! According to the story, the foundations for the bridge carrying the road to Tunstead Farm over the new track kept sinking into a marsh. After several attempts a new bridge and road had to be made at a different location away from Dickie's land or territory, and this was done successfully.⁹⁷ Bellhouse writes of this episode:

*"The company could not get solid foundations for their bridges, and several collapsed. One bridge collapsed overnight, burying the workmen's tools. This was Dane Hey Bridge, and a new road to Chapel with bridge had to be built further up the line."*⁹⁸

Subsequently, this new bridge became known as "Dickie's Bridge." The engineering failures were attributed to the malevolent influence of Dickie, and provided the inspiration for a song "An Address to Dickie" by Lancashire poet Samuel Laycock, first printed in the *Buxton Advertiser* on July 25, 1863.⁹⁹ At the turn of this century G. Le Blanc Smith visited the farm and described the skull's traditional position in the house, which the owner Edward Dixon said was on a ledge in a downstairs window sill overlooking the farmland.¹⁰⁰ Prior to that it had been nailed to a rafter in the house-place, and two earlier accounts by William Wood in 1852¹⁰¹ and Addy in 1895¹⁰² maintain it was kept in "an old cheese vat in a window bottom in the staircase," but these appear to have been drawn from popular stories rather than first hand accounts of the owners. A description of 1905 gives the window sill as the correct position, the writer adding: "...I have Mrs Dixon's word that it is the original position, and the family certainly ought to know."¹⁰³ In addition, one of the panes in this window had a reputation for being continually displaced "as though the skull required ventilation," and every time it was reglazed the pane would be found the next morning lying undamaged on the grass outside.

The general theme underlying Dickie's presence on the farm seems to be one of guardianship, as the skull seems to have acted as the physical representation of a *genius loci* of the farm and surrounding land. During the coming and going of tenants, many considered its presence beneficial and received help and prosperity on the farm when they treated the skull with respect. Servants were summoned at an early hour, horses were harnessed in preparation for journeys, warning was given in the event of burglary or illness and attention was drawn to calving cows. One farmer was even roused from his sleep in time to prevent a cow from being accidentally strangled by its chain.¹⁰⁴ Those who insulted Dickie or treated him with disrespect could expect no mercy. One man in charge of a corn-laden wagon swore on Dickie's name as he was passing down a lane near the farm and "instantly the wagon was overturned and, crestfallen and much discomfitted, the fellow had to go in search for helpers to right his capsized vehicle."¹⁰⁵ The many stories emphasise how those who did not believe in Dickie, or tried to evict him from his position in the farmhouse, were eventually forced to change their opinion and accept the skull as a permanent addition to the family.

There are several conflicting local traditions which seek to identify the skull's owner. The best known says it was that of an ancestor of the Dixon family, and concerns the familiar motif of a skull haunting as a symbol of supernatural retribution for a murder or wrongdoing. According

to this version¹⁰⁶ Ned Dixon was a soldier who left his farm in Derbyshire to fight as a soldier in France during the Huguenot wars of the late sixteenth century. Ned distinguished himself at the battle of Ivry by rescuing Lord Willoughby, but was himself severely wounded. He eventually recovered and returned home to take possession of Tunstead Farm. However, on arrival he found his cousin Jack Johnson and his wife had claimed the property, assuming he was dead. They greeted Ned in a cool fashion, and invited him to spend the night at the farm and during the night he was murdered by the couple and his body buried in secret. After the foul murder all kinds of misfortunes and ill luck fell upon the guilty couple, including weird and unaccountable noises, illness and death of livestock, and crop failure. An oral tradition, recorded in 1930, describe the couple as the older brother and sister of the soldier. In this version, they are forced to take advice from a local wise woman, who advised them to dig up the skull of the murdered man, bring it in and set it up in the house; adding "he will then feel he has got his fair share... This they did, with the result that things prospered again."¹⁰⁷

The Ned Dixon murder tradition was immortalised in a ballad of twenty five stanzas written by William Bennett during the nineteenth century. It incorporates all the "facts" from the romanticised version of the tradition which appeared in the mid nineteenth century. This ballad lists Ned's fictional adventures in France and his eventual murder in Derbyshire.¹⁰⁸ Historical records suggest the Dixons did not own Tunstead farm during the late sixteenth century when this story was set; their sporadic occupation of the farm spans a three hundred year period which ended in the 1940s. The Ned Dixon legend is not mentioned in Hutchinson's account of 1809 which should have noted such a supposedly well known local legend. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the story of Ned's death was invented, possibly as late as the nineteenth century, as a device to draw tourists to the farm, and perhaps to provide a convenient historical explanation for why the skull had been venerated for so long. Despite its nebulous origins, popular accounts of Dickie's skull continue to feature the Ned Dickson story as fact.¹⁰⁹

Writing in 1940, historian William Brailsford Bunting said an examination of the skull bones earlier this century by "an eminent surgeon" concluded they actually belonged to a woman about eighteen years of age. He suggested the skull came to the farm from one of the prehistoric barrows at nearby Cadster.¹¹⁰ Several early sources, including Hutchinson in 1809, and Wood in 1852, note local traditions which suggest the skull belonged to a woman. Sidney Addy said the skull belonged to one of two sisters who quarrelled over the love of a man. One murdered

the other at the farm, but the dying woman vowed her bones would never rest and her skull must be kept in the staircase window.¹¹¹ Another version of this tradition was recorded by J. Castle Hall, quoted by Daniel, who wrote:

“Many years ago there lived here two sisters who were legatees of considerable property in the neighbourhood, including Tunstead Farm. For several years they lived very unhappily together; indeed, they quarrelled almost daily on who should be the final heiress of the house in which they lived. However, it is said that on her deathbed one of the sisters muttered continuously the words, “My bones shall remain here forever.” Tradition has it that for many years after her death the cottage was haunted, and owing to strange sounds became untenable until someone, remembering the dying words of the deceased owner, dug up her remains and brought the skull and placed it on a window sill of the room in which the woman had died. According to the evidence of many local inhabitants, the house is peaceful and quiet while the skull remains there, but if it be removed the voices recur, and a voice is heard in the wind as the latter, with strange moanings, comes through the keyholes of every door in the house, saying “Fetch poor Dickie back...Fetch poor Dickie back...” and to this day the weird skull rests in the quiet corner of the window, and in the room a peculiar silence reigns.”¹¹²

The stories told by Addy and Hall display close parallels with the guardian skull tradition from Burton Agnes Hall, East Yorkshire, which concerns three sisters and has connotations of foundation sacrifice. A third tradition concerning the origin of Dickie, recorded in 1901, perhaps drawing upon the story involving a wise woman, suggests the skull belonged to a witch who once lived at the farm.¹¹³ When Bunting visited the Tunstead at the turn of this century the wife of the current owner, Edward Dixon, told him she believed the tradition about the skull being that of a murdered girl, who she said had declared that her skull remained at the farm “while holly’s green.” Bunting added: “Mrs Dixon tells us that she has recently refused an offer of £100 for the skull, which proves in what regard it is held.”¹¹⁴ When G. Le Blanc Smith visited Tunstead Farm in 1905 he described the skull as:

“...an uninviting looking object, consisting of three fragments, two parietal and one clavical, in colour a rich shade of olive green, shaded at the edges with brown and white spots; he looks so very innocent that all the tales they tell of him seem as though they must be gross libels.”¹¹⁵

He collected a similar story to that heard by Bunting, namely that Dickie was immune to decay and no dust ever accumulated on the skull. Writing in the *Derbyshire Reliquary*, Smith said he

believed this was only the second time the skull had ever been photographed, and permission was only granted after a long discussion had taken place between the tenant and his wife who were worried about the possible reactions of the skull if it was removed from the house.¹¹⁶ Edward Dixon said the skull had been “forcibly ejected” only once, during the rebuilding of the farmhouse, which was followed by the appearance of a spectre accompanied by a low moaning noise until it was replaced. This was possibly the occasion noted by Addy in the 1890s, who wrote:

“When the house was being rebuilt and new windows put in, they set Dickie on a couple beam in the barn, and thought they had done with him; but at the rearing supper he made such a disturbance that they had to bring him back into the house.”¹¹⁷

Of the supernatural phenomena associated with Dickie, the recorded material can be divided into disturbances attributed to the influence of the skull itself, and the appearance of apparitions in and around the farm and its land. Antiquarian writer Llewellyn Jewitt mentions tempests arising, cows dying and crops failing whenever the skull has been “put out of sight.”¹¹⁸ Christina Hole tells of another occasion when the skull was stolen and taken to Disley, near Manchester:

“...where it manifested its disapproval by creating so frightful an uproar that the thieves were very glad to restore it...while pandemonium was reigning at Disley, the same fearful noises were deafening the family at Tunstead farm, several miles away.”¹¹⁹

Le Blanc Smith was told the farm had been owned by the Dixons for three hundred years, and only once had it left the family to become the home of a Mr J. Bramwell. He had become a firm believer in “Dickie” and once said he would far rather lose his best cow than see misfortune come to the skull. He recorded one strange story about Dickie’s childlike sense of mischief which concerned one of three labourers who were anxious to gain casual work at the farm during the hay harvest. He was supplied with a scythe and whetstone by Mr Dixon and told to mow a swath through a large meadow of ripening grass. He set about the work with enthusiasm, cutting a lane deftly through the meadow without looking behind him. When he did so he was amazed to see the grass had returned to the vertical, without any sign of it being cut or bruised! When he complained to the farmer, Dixon told him Dickie had either been upset over

some trivial matter or thought the grass was not ready for cutting. The labourer declined further employment and left.¹²⁰ Le Blanc Smith concluded:

“Everyone to whom I have spoken with regard to Dickie has told me the same thing. He is held in the greatest veneration, and that on his removal deaths to cattle, and even in the family, have always occurred. Restoration to his accustomed perch causes perfect bliss all around.”¹²¹

Clarence Daniel reached a similar conclusion when he wrote:

“Tenants of the farm who treated the skull with proper respect found it a talisman against evil and misfortune; while those who handled it with abuse inevitably suffered ill effects...Dickie was never malicious or vindictive...he could even appreciate a joke, for one man told me that as a youth, he and several friends used the shallow cranium for the purpose of drinking water...the risk of retribution was great, but I was assured that none of them suffered any ill effects!”¹²²

The traditions surrounding Dickie's skull were still strong in 1938 when folklorist Christina Hole visited Tunstead Farm and interviewed the owner, one of the last of the Dixon line. She was told the family still carefully preserved the skull, which “continues to warn the family whenever anything goes wrong in farmstead or field.”¹²³ Forty years later the tradition had died with the sale of the farm, which passed out of the hands of the Dixon family during the Second World War. Subsequent tenants inherited the crumbling remains of the skull, which survived in the farm until the 1970s. Ghost-hunter Kenneth Poole wrote in the 1980s how rumours were spreading in the Whaley Bridge area, suggesting Dickie had been thrown out “though no one knows where.”¹²⁴ In 1984 writer Clifford Rathbone was told by the then owners, Mr and Mrs Vickers, that they had “seen nothing of the skull...it was not here when we came, and we have no idea of where it is.”¹²⁵

Today, one of the few local people who have preserved stories about Dickie's skull speaks of the tradition very much in the past tense. Historian Margaret Bellhouse, who has lived in the hamlet of Combs all her life, has clear memories of the stories she heard concerning Dickie during her childhood. She confirmed to the writer in 1993 that the wife of the new owner had secretly buried the crumbling skull in the garden in a bid to bring an end to the story and the ceaseless stream of visitors who asked to see the decaying bones. During an interview for the purposes of this research, she said:

"...It was very difficult to get to know much about it firsthand, as the old country people would not open their mouths on the subject, because they believed it was bad luck to talk about Dickie...I think I must be the only one left of the old people who really did think there was something in it, that there was a curse on the skull. I have known about it from being a child, and my mother used to be very afraid of it...I know of the animals dying, the farm roof falling in and different accidents to the men if it was disturbed. I myself have known of happenings when the skull was moved and which righted when it was replaced. Some of these things happened in my childhood, but many of them have not been written about. One of the last farmers here, he did something wrong and got his hand caught in the turnip chopper, and they all said it was Dickie. I don't know what he did, but it was something he shouldn't do. The Dixon who lived there when I was young was very superstitious. He used to say if you were good to Dickie, believed in him and didn't say stupid things about him, he was good to you. He used to find that when he was going up the drive with a horse and trap which meant him having to stop and open every gate, he would often find them swinging open themselves!"¹²⁶

The windowsill where the skull was kept in the house "just seemed to be in the right place" said Mrs Bellhouse for the skull to gaze out upon the farmland, "Dickie's land," as the locals called it.

"People were very superstitious in those days and the main superstition was Dickie...People wouldn't dare walk across Dicky's land after dark, and there was a strange black dog which used to follow people down from the main road and then vanish into the hill. The tradition was this was Dickie's spirit seeing them off his land. I've seen that too."¹²⁷

One of the earlier accounts which mentions both a female ghost and a phantom dog associated with the skull was that of Sidney Addy, written in the 1890s. He noted:

"Dickie appears in all kinds of shapes, sometimes as a dog, and sometimes as a young lady in a silk dress. In whatever form he appears, he will point to something amiss if you will follow him."¹²⁸

The female ghost which apparently haunts the farm was seen by a Mr Lomas who occupied the farm in the 1880s. He told writer Alfred Fryer how he was sitting in the kitchen when he heard someone coming downstairs and saw a female figure pass between his chair and the fireplace to bend over the cradle where his baby daughter was sleeping. Thinking it was servant, he warned her not to disturb the baby which he was just about to take to bed. However, as he was

speaking the figure vanished. Shortly afterwards the baby girl died, and the appearance of the ghost was interpreted as Dickie warning of her death.¹²⁹

Possibly the most detailed surviving supernatural tradition connected with the skull was recorded in 1990 by Neville Slack, whose family were Peak District hill farmers for many generations. He produced a written account for this study of the tradition as he remembered it from childhood. His great-grandfather, who died in 1945, aged 93, often spoke of the legend of the skull. Mr Slack, in a written account prepared for this research, said:

“Legend has it that it was uncovered during renovations to the ancient farmhouse. It was encased in the thick rubble wall directly beneath a window ledge. The skull was placed on a windowsill and, if it remained there all was apparently quite peaceful. If, however, it was moved from this location there was apparently considerable noise and disturbance in and around the house, including moving furniture and ornaments. At these times the skull was also said to weep and moan loudly. My grandfather, who was a very tough level-headed hillfarmer, not given to wild imaginings, claimed to have witnessed such occurrences. According to the old gentleman one resident of the house actually threw the skull out onto the midden, at which all hell is supposed to have broken out. The skull was said to have screamed out whilst pandemonium reigned all around through one night. The skull is said to have rolled itself back to the house door where it tapped to be let in.”¹³⁰

Ellen Salisbury, writing from New Mills, Stockport, has described traditions about the skull passed to her by her late grandmother, whose maiden name was Esther Jane Lomas for use in this research. She was brought up on the farm containing Dickie's skull in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and died in 1951. The Lomas family were tenants of the Dixons. Her written account reads:

“She used to tell us stories of her life there and as she was a very quiet and gentle lady, I'm sure her stories were true and in no way figments of an over-active imagination. My great grandfather used to greet the skull every morning and again at bedtime when he used to carry it upstairs and place it on a windowsill there. I remember granny saying that she and her mother carried the skull in a butter basket to Chapel-en-le-Frith Church to be buried there, but the basket got heavier and heavier and after a while the skull had to be brought back home to rest. She also said that in times of trouble or illness in any of the family or animals on the farm there would be a noise like wagonwheels over the roof of the farmhouse, whereupon her father would call “I'm coming Dickie old lad, rest quiet.” She also talked of a black dog that would walk part of the way home with them if they had been to Combs (a nearby hamlet) and she

*always associated it with "Dickie" watching over them. The Lomas family were very well known in the district at that time and certainly granny believed, as did all the family, that Dickie was kind and only wanted to protect them."*¹³¹

Mr and Mrs Foster of Buxton, Derbyshire, who lived in Cedars Farm, adjacent to Tunstead, in the 1940s, heard similar traditions and were able to provide an account of the fate of Dickie's skull for this research. Mrs Edith Foster said her husband Jack heard a number of traditions regarding the skull while working on the farmland. She wrote:

*"He said Dickie came from abroad after his parents' death, and his brother and sister didn't want to share their inheritance with him so they killed him and buried him under a flagstone in the hearth. But the skull pushed its way up and pushed the flagstone away; they tried burying it several times but the same thing happened, things went wrong on the farm so eventually they buried him in the churchyard but the same thing happened their [sic], he kept rising to the top again. So they had to take him back to the farm and the only place he would rest was in the landing window."*¹³²

Mrs Foster recalled how around 1977, after they moved away from the Tunstead hamlet, they went to a Pentecostal Church meeting in nearby Whaley Bridge. There they met a lady called Rita Bishop who had recently bought Tunstead Farm with her husband. She told the pastor of the church she was worried about having the skull on the windowsill of the farm..

*"...she asked the pastor what she should do with the skull, so he told her to take it out into a field and bury it and tell no one where she had put it, and this she did. Shortly after that they went to live in Macclesfield."*¹³³

7.4.5. DORSET

Bettiscombe Manor (OS: 193, GR 4000)

The guardian skull of Bettiscombe is probably the best known tradition of its kind in the British Isles. It is the one most often categorised as being a typical example of the "screaming skull" motif. As Kingsley Palmer says of it, the story "presents a unique mixture of folklore, research and oral transmutation of material."¹³⁴ At the time of the Domesday Survey, the village of

Bettiscombe was a small settlement within the great forests of Marshwood Vale, land which then belonged to the Benedictine monks of St Stephen's from Caen in Normandy. A thousand years before, the Romans had built a camp on Waddon Hill near Broadwindsor in an attempt to control the tribes who dwelled in "Haucombe" the great oak wood which contained Bettiscombe.¹³⁵ Bettiscombe Manor, six miles northwest of Bridport in Dorset, lies at the foot of Sliding Hill, which is topped by an earthwork dated to the Iron Age, known as Pilsdon Pen.¹³⁶ The Pen was a former beacon site and acted as a guide for mariners.

Bettiscombe Manor House itself was owned with Racedown by generations of the Pinney family, and is built on a very ancient site. Until recently the house was the home of Michael Pinney, an archaeologist and historian whose son Charlie breeds shire horses for use in film and television productions. The present mellow brick and white stone structure is the result of a rebuilding in 1694, and Mr Pinney suggests the skull may have been "discovered" at that time inside the old Elizabethan structure which was being taken down.¹³⁷

An account of a visit to the house by a party of antiquarians in 1897 notes how Bettiscombe had been "uninhabited for many years" until about 1760 or 1770 when a farmer had taken over the property and found the skull, which was referred to as "the Screaming Skull." He had declared with an oath he would not have the skull in the house, and cast it into a pool of water. The account continues:

*"During that night and the next the farmer heard some uncanny noises, and on the morning of the third day he said he would have the skull back. He did so, and then, as the story went, all the noises ceased."*¹³⁸

Some accounts of the legend say the skull was first recorded in print during the eighteenth century, but the first known description of it comes from 1847 when Anna Maria, the wife of William Pinney, the Whig member of Parliament for Lyme Regis, found it was mentioned in family papers now stored in the library at Bristol University. She described a visit to the house and wrote:

"...Mrs Groves of the farm, politely took us over the whole, and on opening a long dark cupboard upstairs, said, not very mysteriously! 'as you know Ma'am all about Bettiscombe, of course you have heard of the "Skull of Bettiscombe House", [and] from the depths of the closet she produced a white and perfect human skull!--While this skull is kept here no ghost

*will ever infest Bettiscombe House”, said Mrs G to which I added, ‘I thought it very probable, though I was beginning to feel myself rather like a being of another century in that dwelling...’*¹³⁹

Unfortunately, Anna Maria does not make it clear if her father-in-law John Pinney, who died in 1762, or her grandfather, who lived until the end of the century, were aware of the skull legend. Neither do papers in the collection written by John Pinney who lived at the end of the seventeenth century mention the skull. The Pinneys bought the freehold of the house in 1934, and came back to live there. At some point the beam where the skull sat was removed to allow easier access to the attic, after which the skull was kept in a niche under the roof in the attic. Today it is kept in a cardboard box, not far from the chimney. Folklorist Kingsley Palmer notes that the chimney or hearth was one exit from a house which required protection by means of special charms. Furthermore, the Bettiscombe skull is associated with the west end of the house for some unknown reason.¹⁴⁰

In 1874, an antiquarian writer from Dorset, Judge J.S. Udal, writing in *Notes and Queries*, described the skull in the following terms:

*“At a farmhouse in Dorsetshire at the present time is carefully preserved a human skull, which has been there for a time long antecedent to the present tenancy. The peculiar superstition attaching to it is, that if it be brought out of the house, the house itself would rock to its foundation, while the person by whom such an act of desecration was committed would certainly die within the year. It is strangely suggestive of the power of this superstition, that through many changes of tenancy and furniture, this skull still holds its ‘accustomed place’ unmoved and unremoved.”*¹⁴¹

Judge Udal later wrote at some length about the tradition in his book *Dorsetshire Folklore*¹⁴² and contributed a lengthy paper concerning the same subject to the *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society*.¹⁴³ In both accounts, Udal put forward his theory which claimed the skull was that of a negro slave who travelled to England from the Caribbean island of Nevis in the service of John Pinney. John was the son of Azariah Pinney, a seventeenth century squire of Bettiscombe, who was transported abroad as punishment for taking part in the failed Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. He soon won freedom and made his fortune in the sugar plantations. Pinney is said to have returned to his ancestral home in the late eighteenth century, bringing with him a slave who had been given the name “old

Bettiscombe.” The story of the slave, published by Judge Udal, seems to have been immediately incorporated into the oral tradition of the region. It does not appear to have been known before the 1870s, but since that time several versions of the story have become firmly established in the popular literature which describes the Bettiscombe legend. Information provided by G.R.Smith of Bridport for this research describes how he heard traditions about the skull as a boy. This version depicts the slave as being of noble birth and says he had travelled to England very much against his will. Mr Smith’s story reads:

“The negro slave became more and more unhappy with his lot and before long his health began to decline, and with a sense of foreboding he made a plea that on his death his body should be returned to his native land for burial. He added a warning, if his wish were to be ignored, then the house would have no peace. Not long after this he died and was buried in the parish churchyard. Straight away the residents of the manor became aware of a strange presence, with unaccountable ghostly happenings and terrible screams putting fear into the hearts of the boldest among them. Desperate to find a reason for their troubles, someone remembered the dead servant’s last request. Arrangements were made to have his body exhumed and brought back into the manor house, whereupon the disturbance ceased and things returned to normal once more. In the end it was found that if the dead man’s skull remained in a safe resting place in the house the latter remained in peace.”¹⁴⁴

The slave story became so popular that when Michael Pinney first came to live in the house in the 1930s, according to Palmer:

“...the old farmer pointed out a grille at the back of the cupboard by the fireplace at the west end of the house...he said that was where they used to keep the “black man,” and he was fed by having food pushed to him through the bars of the grille.”¹⁴⁵

Over the years, the Pinneys have entertained dozens of people who wished to see the skull or impart theories or stories concerning it. One visitor surprised the owners when he asked “if the skull had sweated blood in 1939 before the outbreak of the war, as it had in 1914.”¹⁴⁶ The Pinney family have always treated the skull with the greatest of respect, and in recent years it has been stored inside a shoe box in Michael Pinney’s study. He told writer Frank Smyth in 1982 that:

“...it is said to scream and cause agricultural disaster if taken out of the house and also causes

the death, within a year, of the person who commits the deed. A photographer once carried it as far as the open doorway to take pictures of it, but my wife snatched it back indoors again without anything untoward occurring."¹⁴⁷

Mr Pinney believes the story which claims the skull is that of a negro slave to be largely an invention of Judge Udal. The judge went as Chief Justice to the Leeward Islands and visited Nevis in 1903, and happened to pass through a plantation called "Pinneys." In a church nearby he found a memorial slab to the memory of John Pinney, born 1686, and his theory developed from there.¹⁴⁸ After the skull story was published in *Notes and Queries*, a party from Charmouth led by a Dr and Miss Garnett of the British Museum visited Bettiscombe to see the skull and "a somewhat fantastic account" of their adventure was later printed in Ingram's *Haunted Homes* in 1884.¹⁴⁹ It was around this time that the skull appears to have become known as "the screaming skull of Bettiscombe." Udal wrote shortly afterwards how:

"...the legend has [now] gained both in volume and romance. It has now, I understand, and this without any justification from local sources, gained the reputation of being a 'Screaming Skull.'"¹⁵⁰

The tradition used by Udal was drawn from the account of an eighty year old woman from West Dorset who in her youth had often visited and stayed at Bettiscombe. When the judge visited the house in 1891, he replaced the skull in its customary niche by a huge chimney breast in the attic from where it had been moved because of the ruinous condition of the timbers. Surprisingly, in his account Udal and his party examine the skull and conclude "that it was not that of a negro, but rather that of a woman."¹⁵¹ He also mentions an alternative theory which suggest it belonged to a woman who had been murdered or who had died after confinement in part of the attic which had been partitioned off. Although throwing scorn on supernatural happenings connected with movement of the skull, Udal recorded one story concerning a former tenant of the farm, who had thrown the skull into a duckpond opposite the house.

*"A few mornings afterwards he was observed stealthily raking out the pond until he had fished up the skull, when it was restored to its old place in the house. It was said he had a bad time of it during the interval, and had been much disturbed by all kinds of noises."*¹⁵²

Michael Pinney heard another version of this tale in 1934, which suggested that anyone who

removed the skull from the house would die within a year. He said that five Australian brothers arrived at the house saying a relative of theirs was a former tenant of Bettiscombe, and they had been brought up on the story that he was the one who had cast the skull into the duckpond. They said the incident had followed a boisterous Christmas party just before the tenant emigrated to Australia, during which the skull had been ejected from the house. The following morning the skull reappeared - on the doorstep!

“...one of them said that he was the son of the former tenant, his father had indeed died suddenly in Australia within a year of the incident, and his mother had always told him that the skull had brought a curse on them.”¹⁵³

Others appear to have tested the curse and come to no harm. Michael Pinney said one story concerns a Mr and Mrs Forsey who were tenants of the farm from 1880-1898.

“One of their sons told the present owner, sometime between 1934-1939, that as a boy he and another boy had taken the skull and hidden it in a hay-rick. They were then frightened that it would burn down the rick, so they removed it to the stables. After dark they heard a noise as though all the china in the house were being broken, and they fetched in the skull.”¹⁵⁴

A more prosaic version of this story was supplied by Marjorie Dowle of Bridport, for the purposes of this research. She said her father had visited the manor earlier this century as a youngster and heard a story that if the skull was removed from the attic there:

“...would be such screaming that no one would be able to stay in the manor. Daring to test the legend, along with a friend he secreted the skull outside and hid it in a haystack, but he said: “all was well, and no screaming at all. After a day or two they replaced it and nobody else knew.”¹⁵⁵

Ghosthunter Peter Underwood describes a visit he made to Bettiscombe to examine the skull during which he says he “hoped to test the properties and efficacy” of the artefact, but adds “the occupants, Mr and Mrs Pinney, would not allow me to take the skull out of the house under any circumstances.”¹⁵⁶ He speculated that their reluctance may have had something to do with the tradition that if the skull was removed from the house the occupant would die within a year.

Stories about the skull “screaming” appear to be largely anecdotal. Marc Alexander noted that

the last time it was heard to scream was earlier this century:

“...then the cries were so loud that apart from the occupants of the house, they were heard by farmworkers in the fields outside.”¹⁵⁷

Other stories were collected by Eric Maple who visited the area in the 1960s. During his stay he interviewed an old farm worker who said he remembered “hearing the skull screaming like a trapped rat in the attic.”¹⁵⁸ Maple told colleague Peter Underwood he once spent a night in the Manor House but said afterwards “never again,” claiming he spent most of the night listening to “strange slithering noises” outside his room. During the early hours his door creaked open and he saw what he described as “a grinning skull.” Next morning he left the house as soon as he could.¹⁵⁹ The Pinneys themselves have heard rattlings rather than screaming noises in the upper rooms and attic, caused by phantom “skittle players.”¹⁶⁰ Many other pieces of lore have been added to the skull legend over the years since the story was featured in the ghost-hunting literature. The skull has influenced other ghost stories in the vicinity, including one about a phantom coach and horses, which has now become a funeral procession for the skull.¹⁶¹

In 1963 Michael Pinner arranged for the skull to be examined by Gilbert Causey, a Professor of Human and Comparative Anatomy of the Royal College of Surgeons. His report to the *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* contained the following passage:

“The skull is complete except for the mandible and a break in the left zygomatic arch. The whole bone structure is rather lightly made and the muscle markings are not prominent. It is probably a female skull aged between twenty five and thirty years, probably nearer thirty...I think all these quantitative data lead to just one conclusion; that this is a normal European skull, a bit small in its overall dimensions, but certainly not negroid.”¹⁶²

Although no conclusions could be reached about the age of skull, signs of “impregnation” were found in the bone which suggested it had been buried for some time before it was exhibited in the house. The conclusion that the skull is that of a woman agrees with Judge Udal’s reported examination of it one hundred years ago, and may support the theory that connects the artefact with the story concerning a woman murdered or imprisoned in the house. Today, accounts of the Bettiscombe skull usually conclude by claiming it is that of a prehistoric or Celtic woman

who could have died as long as two thousand years ago. Some writers have suggested the woman was buried in a building or temple on the site of the house as a "foundation sacrifice." Michael Pinner and Dr Anne Ross believe it is possible the skull was brought to the site of Bettiscombe Manor from a natural spring on the hillside below Pilsdon Pen, as the skull has a brown, glassy texture which is consistent with minerals absorbed through immersion in spring water.¹⁶³ The Pen is situated on the end of a long hill and has three entrances, one of which has a trackway leading to a square enclosure, built from wood, which was situated in the centre of the earthworks. There is some evidence to suggest the site was a ritual enclosure, as there was a hole for a giant wooden post or totem pole, similar to those found at the ritual sites at Navan Fort in Northern Ireland, and Crickley Hill in Gloucestershire.¹⁶⁴ If the skull came from the earthwork or the petrifying spring, it may well have been included in the building of the earlier Elizabethan house, or in the rebuilding in 1694, as a piece of "house luck." In a booklet on the history of Bettiscombe, Mr Pinney writes:

"It is probably prehistoric. We believe the skull was found in a Celtic shrine behind the manor and brought into the house as a good-luck charm around 1690 [when the house was rebuilt]. ...it is the luck, not the curse, of Bettiscombe, going back to very ancient sacrifice."¹⁶⁵

As Pinney concludes, there are many additions and embroideries to the story often encountered, but the only certain facts are that since 30 January 1847 it has been part of the Manor, and if taken away has always been brought back.

Waddon House, near Portesham (OS:193; GR 6285)

A writer in *Derbyshire Notes and Queries* in 1921 mentions a tradition connected with a skull which was kept "in a recess on the stairs" at Waddon Farm, in Dorset. This was said to be "too noisy for the house" and as a result was moved to Dorchester Museum, where it was now "quiet." The writer adds that the Waddon skull "is said to be of a black servant murdered, in mistake, by his master."¹⁶⁶ The same source describes the skull as being that of "a black man" which had been preserved and displayed at the farm "for generations" until it was handed over to the museum for safekeeping. Eric Maple writes of it:

“He had died accidentally, having been killed by his master who mistook him for a burglar when he entered a bedroom at night...Clearly defined on the skull was the cut made by the sword.”¹⁶⁷

The striking similarities between this story and that from Bettiscombe Manor, ten miles away, may suggest at first glance that the story of the Waddon skull is a distortion or a muddled version of the former. In addition, it appears the Waddon skull has been completely overlooked by all the popular accounts of that from Bettiscombe. However, in 1991 Dorchester Museum curator Peter Woodward “rediscovered” the skull in the basement where it had reposed since the mid-nineteenth century, precisely as described in the sources quoted above. The skull was inside a cardboard box and was accompanied by a card written in the hand of a former museum curator which read simply: “The Waddon skull.”¹⁶⁸ Inquiries with the present occupants of Waddon House, formerly known as Waddon Farm, failed to discover any history of the skull, other than a vague tradition that it was once preserved there. The present house dates from the early eighteenth century, when part of the west wing was destroyed by fire and rebuilt by Henry Chaffyn (1670-1726), who inherited the property from the Bullen Reymes family. Colonel Bullen Reymes was one of the four Commissioners for sick and wounded seamen and spent much time in London, before his death in 1672.¹⁶⁹

In 1996 the skull was subjected to an osteopathological study by researchers Mary Ross and Linda O’Connell, based at Southampton University, who were writing a paper on the Bettiscombe skull. This concluded that the skull from Waddon was not that of a negro servant but “a male caucasoid [European].”¹⁷⁰ Without the use of carbon dating, it was impossible to reach a conclusion concerning its age, but the development of the teeth suggested the owner had reached the second decade of his life. However, the examination was able to conclude the owner of the skull had died as a result of a “a very violent onslaught” by a sharp instrument, possibly a sword blade. The position of the wounds suggested the blows had continued after the victim had fallen forward and was incapacitated, indicating they were sustained on a battlefield rather than being the result of an individual defending himself against an intruder as folk tradition suggested.

Ross and O’Connell concluded it was “surely more than coincidence” that a tradition concerning the preservation of a skull, supposedly of a negro slave, had developed contemporaneously at two manor houses a short distance apart, at a similar time.¹⁷¹ The Reymes family, who owned

Waddon during the seventeenth century, had the opportunity to employ black servants and an eighteenth century ancestor, Bullen Reymes, worked with sick and wounded seamen (of whom many were slaves) in his travels abroad. It is known the skull was once displayed at Waddon, and Woodward suggests it may have originated from the battlefield of a nearby Civil War skirmish, which would explain the wounds.¹⁷² Ross and O'Connell conclude:

“It is fascinating to speculate that initially the skulls [Waddon and Bettiscombe] may have been the result of a pagan superstition, still surviving in Celtic areas of Britain, France and elsewhere today, but had evolved gradually in other areas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into the bizarre legends described, juxtaposed between superstition and scientific fact.”¹⁷³

In 1997 the skull was donated by Dorset County Museum and the current owner of Waddon House to the Department of Conservation Sciences, University of Bournemouth, on extended loan. The skull is to be used for the teaching of forensic science to students in the department:

“...as the pathology is very extensive and interesting and provides definitive evidence for traumatic head injury...[and] as an artefact within the collections of the Dorset County Museum, it will also illustrate the changing social attitudes in our common past.”¹⁷⁴

7.4.6. ISLE OF WIGHT

Billingham Manor, near Chillerton. (OS: 196; GR 4881)

A tradition attached to this manor house describes how “a ghastly vision” of the severed head of King Charles I appears in a niche whenever an execution takes place on the Isle of Wight. Wendy Boase writes how in 1928 Sir Shane and Lady Leslie both witnessed the ghostly apparition when they rented the manor house.¹⁷⁵ The estate agent told them of the legend that Charles had once escaped from his dungeon in Carisbrook Castle and had reached the Manor in safety. There he was concealed in a specially constructed hiding place, a narrow aperture behind a sliding panel in the drawing room. According to the tale, the king could not tolerate this confinement and returned on his own accord to Carisbrook rather than await his rescue by a French ship. The Leslies were never able to substantiate the story, but did discover a secret

coffin-shaped space during their stay at the house. Boase writes:

“...at night they heard the tread of feet and the clank of swords on the stairs, and the maidservants saw a man walk through the walls of their room. Finally, when the sounds awakened Sir Shane early one morning, he took the entire household to the drawing room to investigate. There they discovered light oozing through the cracks around the sliding panel. When the panel was lifted the phosphorescent glow stung their eyes, but after the smarting had ceased every single person in the room beheld the same vision. The severed head of Charles I stared out at them from the recess. No one could mistake the soft ringlets, the pointed beard and the pitiful expression on the face. Gradually, as they watched, the spectre faded back into the niche and the faint glow subsided with it.”¹⁷⁶

Shortly afterwards, Sir Shane acquired the diary of a former owner of Billingham which described the same phenomenon that he had witnessed and “remarked that, on the two occasions when it had occurred, an execution had taken place on the island.” On checking records he then learned how, on the day the apparition appeared in 1928, a prisoner had been executed at Newport:

“...apparently, aware of the distress suffered by these prisoners, the King who had endured the same cruel fate was drawn irresistibly back into the twilight world between reality and oblivion.”¹⁷⁷

7.4.7. KENT

Parsonage Farm, near Woodnesborough (OS: 179; GR 2956)

Charles Igglesden, a former editor of the *Kentish Express*, and the author of a volume on the folklore and topography of Kent, briefly mentions a skull preserved in a manor house near Woodnesborough in an account dated 1925. The house concerned is Parsonage Manor, now Parsonage Farm, a moated building which dates from the seventeenth century. Igglesden writes:

“...years ago a young girl was murdered in the vicinity and her skull evidently found a resting place in a cupboard at the top of the attic stairs. Discovered there by a new tenant of the farm some years ago it was reverently buried in the ground, but the interment was followed by the sound of groans within the house. Someone who understood the ways of distressed spirits

suggested that the skull be returned to its old sanctuary, the cupboard of the attic stairs, and the result brought happiness to everyone. So there the skull still lies, no groans disturb the stillness of the night, and all is well.”¹⁷⁸

Inquiries in the Woodnesborough area in 1998 revealed a rich collection of oral tradition surrounding the skull tradition. Natalie Ford, the local correspondent of the *East Kent Mercury*, said local stories associated the skull with a nun who had arrived in the area from France and had died or had been murdered as a result of “unrequited love” at the time of the English Civil War. Mrs Ford said:

“She had subsequently been buried inside the house, and the bones had been removed at some point and reburied in the grounds, but the head reappeared in the house. For as long as we know the skull has been bricked up in the cellar wall but no one knows whether deliberately or by accident. About ten years ago some new people came to live in the house and the old couple who used to live there told them not to move the skull, for if they did it would bring bad luck. However, they did move it, taking it up to an upper cupboard from the cellar. They had problems when they moved it; the business they were running went bankrupt and everything went wrong. They ended up moving away. The rumour is that it is bad luck if it is moved.”¹⁷⁹

Parsonage Farm changed hands again recently, and it is not known if the current occupants of the farm have followed the local advice. Mrs Ford said no one had seen the skull for around eight years, but she was once offered a chance to see it but turned down this opportunity as she was “too frightened.” The farm has a number of ghosts, including a phantom stagecoach which can be heard coming down the drive, but not seen, and a old man told Mrs Ford he had seen the ghost of a woman when he lived there.¹⁸⁰

7.4.8. LANCASHIRE

The Pack Horse Inn (OS: 109; GR 7513)

The Pack Horse at Affetside stands on the high moorland road to the north of Bury which has served as a prehistoric trackway, a Roman road, medieval pack horse route and now exists as a modern minor road. Above the optics and the glasses in the bar is a deeply discoloured, human skull, almost mahogany in hue. Whether this discolouration is due to age or the effects of

tobacco is not entirely clear, but the skull has a tradition attached to it that if it is removed, as it was once, “the pub immediately became haunted by unearthly screams.”¹⁸¹ The pub’s nickname in the locality is the “Screaming Skull” and the relic may be easily admired while enjoying a pie and a pint. The owners, perhaps understandably, are loath to remove it from its lofty perch for closer inspection. The story of how the skull came to be there is, as usual, somewhat confusing, and rooted in the social and religious upheaval of the English Civil War. It is said to be that of George Whowell, a local farmer, who returned home one day to find his entire family massacred by the Royalists. He vowed to avenge the slaying and, following the capture of the Earl of Derby, the Royalist leader in the north, Whowell volunteered his services as executioner and duly beheaded the Earl. Both the Earl and his severed head are interred in Ormskirk Church.¹⁸² One theory which accounts for how Whowell’s skull came to be the guardian of the moorland pub suggests that after the Restoration his skull was exhumed and placed in the bar for public ridicule. When licensee J. Adams retired as licensee from the pub in 1949, he declined to take the skull with him or to accept the offer made to him by Bolton Museum, saying, “Ill luck is supposed to dog the footsteps of those who interfere with it.”¹⁸³ The story about the skull being that of George Whowell has become part of the oral tradition of the Whowell family for a number of generations. However, besides this story there is no supporting evidence which ultimately accounts for why the skull resides at the pub, and an alternative theory suggests it is one of a group of three which were originally discovered in the Bradshaw Brook in 1751. The other two skulls are kept in the Turton Towers Museum, near Bolton, and are discussed elsewhere.¹⁸⁴

The “Skull House,” Appley Bridge (OS: 108; GR 5210)

Skull House at Appley Bridge near Wigan, a building four hundred years old, has a skull said to be more than four centuries old. This would date it to the time of religious persecution in Lancashire, and the quaint old building is full of walls riddled with low ceilings, nooks and crannies, boarded up cellars and a priest’s hole. Indeed, one legend accounting for its presence in the house, near appropriately named Skull Lane, states that it belonged to a Catholic monk who was smoked out of a priest hole by the Cromwellian troops and beheaded on the spot. The severed head was placed on a roof beam in the living room where it remains to this day.¹⁸⁵ This

story appears not to have been current until 1937, when a local historian “discovered” the legend of the monk. Subsequently, the story concerning the monk was repeated to visitors by the owner at that time, Mrs E.A. Unsworth:

*“...who kept it behind the old fashioned fireplace and brought it out of its cardboard box and showed it to anyone who was interested.”*¹⁸⁶

Another more fanciful tradition repeated by a later resident has it that the skull is that of one of King Arthur’s knights, beheaded during a fierce battle on the banks of the River Douglas nearby. The knight was known as the Knight of the Skull after the symbol he wore on his helmet, and it is claimed he is the character known from Tennyson’s “Sir Gareth and Lynette” who had to be slain before Gareth could take Castle Dangerous.¹⁸⁷ Although this tale appears unlikely to be based upon fact, it should be noted that there is a long tradition placing King Arthur’s exploits in northwest Britain, and the original Arthurian legends feature numerous instances of ritual beheading. All this speculation could amount to nothing though, if the hints of one commentator are to be believed when he mentions, alas unreferenced, medical evidence that the skull is really that of a woman.¹⁸⁸

Whatever its origin, in line with the other skulls, local tradition insists it must not be removed from the house, and that if it is, the skull will return by itself. When it was removed and thrown into the river it reappeared on its beam within hours. Folklorist Jessica Lofthouse noted that the skull is referred to by the present owner as “Charlie.” She said the owners told her that if the house was ever put up for sale a condition would be attached that the skull must remain there or “no sale!”¹⁸⁹ Another local tradition collected in the village during fieldwork for this research asserted that: “the house will fall down if the skull were ever removed.”¹⁹⁰ The current owner, Martin Smith, has lived in the house in 1970 but not experienced any strange happenings. He is of the opinion that the skull “was dug up in the grounds sometime in the 1600s when the house was built as a yeoman farmer’s residence.”¹⁹¹

Browsholme Hall (OS: 103; GR 6845)

The skull here is reputed to be that of a member of the Catholic Parker family, executed for his religious beliefs at some time during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. The severed head

was allowed to return to the hall, in the Forest of Bowland, where it was initially kept in the top storey of the house. Following renovations to the building it was transferred to the family chapel and treated with due respect.¹⁹² The first recorded supernatural phenomena surrounding it dates back to the 1850s when a young Edward Parker secretly buried it in the garden as a practical joke. Subsequently, fires broke out, the Tudor facade crumbled and there were mysterious family deaths until the boy confessed.¹⁹³ The skull was disinterred and replaced in the house, and the phenomena abated. Browsholme Hall is open to the public and the skull still resides there, but the owners refuse to display it to visitors. Responding to an enquiry in 1993, Diane Parker was most emphatic about this point. In response to a direct inquiry during the fieldwork for this research she replied:

*“We do not allow the skull to be seen or photographed. This is a family tradition that it is not seen by the public.”*¹⁹⁴

Curiously, the gatehouse of Browsholme Hall has two Celtic-style stone heads carved upon its corbels.

Chaigley (OS: 103; GR 6941)

Chapel House Farm at Chaigley near Clitheroe was once host to another skull which, tradition stated, must never be moved or bad luck would swiftly follow. The skull is said to be that of a priest, slaughtered by Cromwell’s troops whilst secretly celebrating mass at the farm. To avoid further repercussions, the lady of the house immediately stored the head in a chest and the matter was hushed up. However, locals soon discovered its existence and began to visit it, begging for teeth or shreds of flesh as lucky charms.¹⁹⁵ The current owners of the farm are unaware of the legend and have no knowledge of the skull’s whereabouts.¹⁹⁶

Fox Hall, Blackpool (OS: 102; GR 3238)

This account features many of the motifs found in the popular accounts of screaming skull stories. It was reported by the *Blackpool Evening Gazette* newspaper in a series of articles between 1978 and 1980 dealing with the experiences of an antiques dealer from North Shore

called Peter Boardman. He connected a series of paranormal happenings with his ownership of a skull which he believed was that of a Blackpool girl who died during the sixteenth century. Boardman told reporter Marie Drury:

“The worst thing that’s happened since I bought the skull is the death of my grandmother in 1975. She told me one evening it was about time I got rid of the skull which I bought in a London Oxfam shop for £25. She thought it might bring us bad luck. That night my grandmother and a friend went out to play bingo and they were both knocked down by a car. The friend died immediately and my grandmother died two days later in hospital.”¹⁹⁷

The shopkeeper who sold Mr Boardman the skull in 1968 said she had been given it by a doctor, and that it came from the site of the Fox Hall Hotel on Blackpool Promenade. She refused to part with it unless Mr Boardman, who was on holiday at the time, could prove he did not live in the area. The lady even turned down a bid from a local Hell’s Angel who wanted to use it on the headlamp of his motorbike! Mr Boardman bought the skull to add to his collection of old Blackpool souvenirs, but during the two years it had been on display at Ripley’s Odditorium on Blackpool Promende, it was claimed that a strange black shadowy figure of woman was seen at its side by a number of people. It was said that Mr Boardman’s own niece had been taken screaming from her bedroom one night when she saw the figure of a woman clad in black coming towards her and then disappearing through a wall in the direction where the skull was kept.¹⁹⁸ When the Odditorium closed the skull was given back to Mr Boardman, who by this time was beginning to believe it was cursed. He tried to sell it at an auction but withdrew the skull because the price did not reach the £100 he wanted. In May 1978 the skull once again made the headlines when it was stolen after Mr Boardman accidentally left it in a telephone booth. The skull was in a wooden box with antique handles, and Boardman warned that whoever had taken it must return it or face dire consequences. He said:

“If anyone is holding onto the skull with the intention of keeping or selling it they will die. I’m sure of it. The skull will wreak terrible vengeance upon anyone who is thinking of not returning it. Whoever has it is in great danger.”¹⁹⁹

The skull turned up two months later in a nearby street where it was found, wrapped in a black plastic bag, by two bemused men returning from a night out. By March 1980 David Boardman

had become desperate to dispose of the cursed skull, and said he had been hounded by taunts of witchcraft because of his ownership of the object. He told a reporter how friends had advised him to throw it into the sea, but he thought this was “unthinkable” and instead gave it to Father C.B. Hughes, of the Sacred Heart Church in Blackpool for “safe and proper disposal.” One week later, Boardman’s body was found in bed at his bedsitter in Dickson Road. By the side of the bed lay two empty bottles. The Reverend Hughes told the paper how Mr Boardman had seemed “troubled by the whole matter.”²⁰⁰ He said he had agreed to take the skull from Mr Boardman, but was not prepared to say what he had done with it. The whereabouts of the skull today are unknown. Historian Melanie Warren’s account of the story notes how the present Fox Hall Hotel is on the site of the original Fox Hall, built by Edward Tyldesley in the sixteenth century.²⁰¹ The Tydesleys were Catholics whose family connections with the area can be traced back to the fourteenth century. The three-gabled thatched structure was sold when Edward Tyldesley died in 1736, and became a public house before it was demolished and replaced by the existing hotel. There are no surviving records which help to elucidate when or how the skull first became associated with the building.

Mawdsley (OS: 108; GR 4914)

Lancashire’s curious history of screaming skulls entwined with Catholicism continues with the skull known as the monk’s or priest’s skull. Tradition has it that, following the Pilgrimage of Grace, William Haydock, a monk at Whalley Abbey, was hanged, beheaded and his remains hidden at the family seat at Cottam. Later, another skull, that of George Haydock, executed at Tyburn following his return from Douai, came into the possession of the family. These were then transferred to Cottam Hall where they were kept in a private chapel. Locals were so terrified of the grisly relics that they refused to pass by the house at night, and visiting priests claimed that they often witnessed an apparition of a freshly severed head hovering above the altar inside the building.²⁰² Details are unclear, but it seems that following the Haydock family’s subsequent impoverishment they moved to Lane End Farm, Mawdsley, taking one skull with them. Cuthbert Haydock set up a chapel in the attic of the farm for secret Catholic worship and his family treasures and relics, including the skull, were kept in an adjoining room. It is not known which of the two skulls came with him to the farm, but the skull attracted considerable

local attention, eventually becoming part of local folklore. Jessica Lofthouse describes a conversation she had with a former servant at the chapel whose job, among others, was to dust the skull. He told her that it was common practice for people to remove loose teeth in the belief that they could cure ailments. Local tradition, recorded by Jessica Lofthouse, relates how “if they are removed they come back and harm of some sort follows.”²⁰³

Turton Towers (OS: 109; GR 7315)

The pair of skulls kept at Turton Towers were said to have been found originally in the Bradshaw Brook in the year 1751.²⁰⁴ Following their discovery, they were first kept at Timberbottom Farm, before being moved to Bradshaw Hall and then Turton Towers. Sources of information are confused concerning precise dates, and rely upon the surviving oral tradition, with little factual information about the skulls committed to print until the early years of the twentieth century. Initially it seems the skulls were placed on the mantelpiece of Timberbottom Farm, following which a range of strange and frightening phenomena began to occur. Pots and pans were hurled around the kitchen and sounds of fighting and argument were heard. One legend relates how the farmer and his wife, returning home one evening, opened the kitchen door to see a ghostly re-enactment of a battle, with two men dressed in “strange old costume” fighting and a young woman looking on in horror. This event replayed itself on a monthly basis, and in an effort to stop it the family had the skulls buried in the churchyard at Bradshaw nearby. This did not stop the haunting so they were unearthed again. By this time Timberbottom Farm had become so notorious as a result of its resident skulls that it became known simply as “Skull House.”²⁰⁵

In 1880 yet another account surfaced detailing how the skulls were those of two robbers who had raided the farm in 1680 and, during the process, had been beheaded by a servant.²⁰⁶ Following this period the skulls were kept at the farm until another servant threw them back into the Bradshaw Brook, whereupon loud and uncanny noises were heard inside the house and no one was able to sleep until the skulls were retrieved and returned to the farm. At the suggestion of Colonel Hardcastle, then owner of Bradshaw Hall, they were placed on the family bible and the disturbances ceased. When it was claimed, although never satisfactorily proven, that one of the skulls was female, the story changed subtly. The skulls were now claimed to be those of a

farmer and his wife. The farmer was said to have murdered his wife and then taken his own life in remorse.²⁰⁷

Writer Jessica Lofthouse spoke to one farmer who claimed that the power of the skulls continued long after Timberbottom Farm had been demolished. He told how “milking went haywire when the skulls were at it again, the cows gave little milk.”²⁰⁸ Lofthouse also recorded yet another version of their origin, this time involving unrequited love between a farm servant and the high born daughter of the Bradshaw family. The suitor was apparently slaughtered for his impudence by her brother, and the two skulls were reunited at her death, never to be parted again, lest the wrath of the spirit world be invoked. All these tales are highly fanciful and in no way can be said to account for the ultimate source of the skulls. That the skulls exist is a fact, and it appears that poltergeist phenomena have attended them on at least one well-documented occasion. In 1939 the *Journal and Guardian* newspaper in Bolton reported an outbreak of ghostly phenomena at Timberbottom Farm, claiming, “after eleven years comparative quiet, the ghost of Timberbottom Farm, Bradshaw has risen to activity again,” continuing to outline the experiences which took place on the night of 20 October 1939 to the Heywood family, the farm’s tenants.²⁰⁹ According to the newspaper account, after retiring to bed the Heywoods were awoken by bangings, rattlings and footsteps which continued all night, despite a thorough search of the building by John Heywood and their lodger Tom Lomas. Shortly afterwards the Lomases left the farm, saying they were too frightened to lodge there any longer. The Heywoods were more taciturn, the family having lived there for more than one hundred years and were quite familiar with the phenomena. John Heywood was quoted as saying: “It’s been there since my grandfather’s day and will remain when this place has been knocked down.”²¹⁰ The 1939 disturbances at Timberbottom Farm are unusual insofar as they were taking place at a time when the skulls had been transferred to Bradshaw Hall as by then the farm was earmarked for demolition. The newspaper made a special point of checking at Bradshaw Hall to see if the skulls had been moved or damaged and thus precipitated this ghostly outbreak, but they were all present and accounted for.

Similar disturbances took place shortly afterwards, when the “female” skull was taken away from the building to have its silver stand replaced. In 1949 the skulls were gifted to nearby Turton Towers, a fifteenth century manor house. There they became prize exhibits, prominently displayed in a glass case and featured in a glossy guidebook produced by Lancashire County

Council, who turned the building into a folk museum during the 1960s. In 1964 such was the skulls' fame that a Manchester student of psychic phenomena made an official request to "call the ghost out of retirement." This request was taken seriously enough to be put before the Turton Council Finance and General Purposes Committee. There the request was politely, but firmly, turned down but quotations from local worthies involved in the committee's decision, reproduced in a newspaper account of the proceedings, demonstrate the levels of belief locally invested in the skull. Clerk to the council, Mr H. Lewis, commented: "I don't believe in this twaddle, but assuming that people do believe it, I don't think that we should risk terrifying the people who live in the houses on the site." The Chairman of the Finance Committee agreed, saying she "thought it wrong to mess about with such things."²¹¹

The skulls, once on prominent display in the museum and featured in the guidebook, are still resident at Turton Towers, but are now kept hidden away from prying eyes. In response to a letter requesting access to the skulls, the custodian, Malcolm Dowling, responded: "Because of their sensitive nature, access to them is limited."²¹² For the purposes of the current fieldwork, special arrangements were made to visit Turton Towers to view the skulls in 1993. However, despite having made an appointment to inspect the skulls, I was subjected to the third degree by the custodian who seemed to be of the opinion that anyone who had any interest whatsoever in the skulls was in some way disturbed. Mr Dowling professed no interest or belief in them himself, belying what he wrote and compounding his position by saying he would have been happier if they were no longer there. As it is, they are now kept locked away in a small upstairs storeroom, still on the bible though, just in case.

Wardley Hall (OS: 109, GR 7502)

Just to the north of Manchester and now surrounded by an industrial estate, Wardley is a classic example of a sixteenth century manor house. The plaque above the door to the main hall carries the following commemorative inscription:

*"The Holy Virgin's offspring and master of the house adorned with the martyr's head, after an exile of three hundred years, when the sacrifice was offered on his birthday 1930, Thomas, bishop, with joy was able to make return unto his own."*²¹³

This seemingly baffling inscription refers to the mysterious human skull kept inside Wardley Hall, and specifically to an incident in 1930 when it was returned, following an earlier theft of the relic. The skull is kept in a niche on the outside facing wall of the main staircase. The niche is constructed so as to allow the skull to be seen from all sides. Over the years it has featured widely in popular ghost literature as a “screaming skull,” which must not under any circumstances be removed from its location or ghostly mayhem would ensue. An examination of the story and its sources, however, reveals major discrepancies and throws up other ideas about the provenance of the skull and about how the stories arose.

One popular theory as to whom the skull belongs concerns one Roger Downes who is described as: “one of the wildest blades at court and an undoubtedly vicious character.” Downes met his death one night in 1676 during a scuffle on London Bridge, and his head, having been severed during the affray, was packed and sent back to his sister who was living at Wardley Hall. Only once did she attempt to have it buried, as the poltergeist manifestations which followed were so powerful that the head was immediately exhumed and placed in a niche on the stairs.²¹⁴ This was an interesting and perfectly plausible theory of origin for the skull, but is seriously flawed. Downes certainly existed, but when his coffin in Wigan churchyard was opened in 1799 it was found that the head was still firmly attached to the body.²¹⁵ The Wardley skull had to have another source of origin. Why Downes’ body was exhumed is unclear. At least one writer states that it was done because the then owners of Wardley Hall were so tormented by the skull’s presence, and the hauntings which followed if it were ever moved, that they had to know if it really was Roger Downes’ skull.²¹⁶ A more likely reason lies in the fact that the Downes family vault had just been opened and his coffin discovered. Local knowledge of the skull already extant at Wardley, and its alleged origins, combined with curiosity, may have led to the exhumation and subsequent discovery. However, the former tale seems to have been more exciting and romantic for the chroniclers of the period, and despite its conclusion, the association of the skull with Roger Downes has persisted into the twentieth century alongside other theories.

The current resident of Wardley Hall, the Catholic bishop of Salford and his predecessors, are equally certain as to the origin of the skull, all agreeing that it is the skull of the Catholic martyr, Father Ambrose Barlow.²¹⁷ Barlow was a Catholic priest, well known in Lancashire during the seventeenth century, and his ministry was tolerated to a certain extent, despite the repression of

Catholicism during the Reformation. Wardley Hall, whilst not his residence, was one of the main centres at which he conducted Mass. Barlow had his enemies, however, and in due course he was arrested, tried and executed by decapitation on 10 September 1641.²¹⁸ His head was subsequently impaled on the tower of Manchester's old Parish Church as a warning to other religious dissidents. Tradition relates how it was later rescued by a follower and smuggled into Wardley Hall where it was revered in the chapel as a Catholic relic.²¹⁹ Further evidence arguing against the skull being that of Downes is to be found in a letter written about the event which clearly states how Downes died.²²⁰ It is entirely possible that the Roger Downes story was intentionally spread to disguise the real origin of the skull and so not to arouse further suspicions amongst religious zealots in the area.

According to the popular stories, all written in the nineteenth century and based upon oral tradition and supposition, the skull was hidden in the fabric of the hall at some later date and effectively lost. It was eventually rediscovered in 1745 when a Matthew Moreton found it during the demolition of what was the old chapel. The skull at that time appeared "furnished with a goodly set of teeth and having on it a good deal of auburn hair."²²¹ This is the first contemporary record of the skull, and whilst this does not prove it was Barlow's head, the location of the discovery and the fact that he was reputed to have had auburn hair certainly suggests it. The presence of the hair also suggests that the skull was of relatively recent origin. The writers of this account also claimed that Moreton was aware of the tradition that the skull was that of "an executed Papist, to which faith the former owners belonged." Religious persecution having died away, the skull could now be treated as a genuine Catholic relic, and it seems it was at this point that it was given its own niche on the staircase in the hall.

In local tradition the story of the discovery of the skull took a different turn. Shortly after the skull's reinstatement in the hall, the Manchester antiquary Thomas Barritt, writing in 1782, became the first writer to mention the "screaming skull" legend. He wrote:

*"From time out of mind the occupiers of Wardley Hall have had a superstitious veneration for the skull, not permitting it to be removed from its place on the topmost step of the staircase. There is a tradition that if removed or ill-used, some uncommon screaming and lamenting is heard, and disturbances take place in many parts of the house..."*²²²

It is difficult to know whether Barritt was embellishing an already common legend or whether

he had firsthand experience of the skull's powers when he continues:

“One of us...removed it from its place into a dark part of the room and then left and returned home; but the night but one following such a storm arose about the house, of wind and lightning...”

However, a storm is not an uncommon event, and coming two days after the skull's removal is barely even coincidental. Sensibly Barritt concludes:

“Yet all this might have happened had the skull never been removed; but withal, it keeps alive the credibility of its believers.”²²³

Whether or not Barritt's attribution of paranormal powers to the skull is spurious it at least confirms that legends of skulls which could not be removed from their placements were current in the eighteenth century. It is also a testament to Barritt's inventiveness with time if we accept that the skull had only been rediscovered in 1745. A mere thirty years later Barritt is already using the phrase “from time out of mind” to describe its residence in the building. How quickly traditions spring up! Many other writers took up the story of the Wardley skull where Barritt left off. Some took an objective view, but others gave it a more romantic interpretation. John Roby effectively set the tone for all subsequent writers on the subject when he said:

“It hath been riven to pieces, burnt, and otherwise destroyed; but on the subsequent day it was seen filling its wonted place. This wilful piece of mortality will not allow the little aperture in which it rests to be walled up, it remains there, whitened and bleached by the weather, looking forth from those rayless sockets upon the scenes which, when living, they had once beheld.”²²⁴

Roby's descriptions of what are ostensibly paranormal phenomena are not referenced and draw upon and expand Barritt's earlier account. It also seems to incorporate other motifs found in the popular “screaming skull” corpus of stories which were common in oral tradition of the north at that time, begging the question about where their origins ultimately lie. Returning to Wardley Hall, among the traditions which grew up around the skull was one which described it as having the power to manifest itself as a hare which haunted the moat around the building. It was said that the skull transformed into the hare by means of the following chant:

*I shall turn into a hare.
With sorrow and trouble and mickle care,
And I shall go forth in the devil's name,
I'll change to a skull at my home again.*²²⁵

In 1930 the skull was stolen from its niche and the subsequent headlines captured the imagination of the media, with both local and national newspapers playing up the story of its tormented history. It is possible that further embellishments were added to the skull legend at this time. One of these was the claim that the skull was “written into the deeds” of the hall, expressly forbidding its removal if the building should be sold.²²⁶ The lurid press coverage, whether fact or fiction, had the desired effect upon the thieves, and the skull was secretly handed back to Wardley Hall several months later. In 1931, following the theft and return of the relic it was submitted for scientific examination at Manchester University. We are not told whether this forced absence brought about any strange phenomena, but it seems unlikely. There it was ascertained that it most likely belonged to a man between the ages fifty five and sixty years, and experts commented on the unusual shape of the skull which, they said, was of a type to be found, “especially in parts of the country which, under medieval and earlier conditions, were remote and therefore likely to harbour survivals of old elements of the population.”²²⁷ Professors Fleure and Stopford could not date the skull, but their statement was curious in that it seemed to hint at a greater age than the Catholics claimed for it. When shown a portrait of Ambrose Barlow they could only comment: “there is nothing in the skull which seems to be definitely against it being the skull of the man portrayed.”²²⁸ The Catholic fraternity accepted this as proof that it was Barlow’s skull. One problem remained: the two professors were unable to find any evidence for the skull having been impaled on a spike, a crucial point if the Catholics wanted to claim the relic for their own, as Barlow’s head had certainly been spiked and displayed. In 1959 the skull was again removed from its niche for further tests. This time it was sent to St Bartholemews Hospital in London where the earlier findings were ratified, but this time the skull was more clearly dated to “post-medieval but earlier than the nineteenth century” with many features being “fully consistent with an attribution to the seventeenth century.”²²⁹ This examination also revealed that the skull had never been buried and that some form of intrusion had taken place through the base of the skull, these two statements squaring with the idea that the skull was removed from the spike and subsequently kept in a shrine or box.

Equally it could, perhaps, suggest that the head was severed and impaled at any other time in history. So although there is no incontrovertible proof that the Wardley Hall skull is that of Ambrose Barlow, equally there is nothing to suggest otherwise. The root story, the chronology of its subsequent discovery, the religious background of the area and the independent examinations of the head all point towards it being that of the seventeenth century priest. Of course none of this evidence has any bearing on the stories of poltergeist phenomena if the skull is removed, but it at least has satisfied the Catholics that they have a bona fide relic on their hands and not a Celtic trophy head or talisman. They may even be right in this instance!

The skull is still kept at Wardley Hall, in its favourite niche on the stairs. The Bishop of Salford's secretary confirmed during the fieldwork for this research in 1995 that the keeping of the skull is not written into the deeds of the building, as a number of popular accounts have erroneously claimed.²³⁰ As the hall is still a Catholic residence, its owners are keen to stress at every opportunity that the skull is a religious relic and not a pagan object of superstition. To this end the history of the hall is gathered in a pamphlet in which the skull takes pride of place, the pamphlet itself being subtitled "The House of the Skull."²³¹ The "riotous skull of Wardley Hall" may indeed be a Catholic relic, but the accretion of the "screaming skull" folklore which has come to surround and distort the story begs questions as to the source and persistence of these motifs in this region.

7.4.9. SOMERSET

Chilton Cantelo (OS: 183; GR 5722)

The skull at this location is first mentioned in John Collinson's *History and Antiquities of Somerset*, published in 1791. He describes a stone at the north end of the transept of St James' parish church in the village of Chilton Cantelo, near Yeovil, which bears the description:

*"Here lieth the body of Theophilus Broome of the Broomes of the house of Woodlowes near Warwick town in the county of Warwick...who deceased the 18th of August 1670, aged 69. A man just in the actions of his life; true to his friends; forgave those that wronged him; and dyed in peace..."*²³²

Collinson appended a note to his description which reads:

*“There is a tradition in this parish that the person here interred requested that his head might be taken off before his burial and be preserved at the farmhouse near the church where a head, chop-fallen enough, is still shown, which the tenants of the house have often endeavoured to commit to the bowels of the earth, but have as often been deterred by horrid noises portentative of sad displeasure; and about twenty years since (which was perhaps the last attempt) the sexton, in digging a place for the skull’s repository, broke the spade into two pieces, and uttered a solemn asseveration never more to attempt an act so evidently repugnant to the quiet of Brome’s head.”*²³³

The connection between the inscription in the churchyard and the skull tradition recorded by Collinson is the ownership of Higher Farm, Chilton Cantelo, which according to local tradition belonged to Broom or Brome’s sister at the time of the English Civil War. Brome is said to have been a soldier fighting for the Royalist cause, who retired to live with his sister in Somerset at the end of the war, perhaps to escape some wrongdoing in his own county. His Royalist sympathies are evident from the arms on his tomb in the church, but one tradition says he had defected to the Parliamentarian side after witnessing atrocities committed by the King’s troops, particularly the hanging, drawing and quartering of prisoners whose severed heads were skewered on spikes and railings.²³⁴

This fear is pointed out as the reason why Brome asked his sister to separate his head from his body and preserve it in the house, so that if ever the Royalists came looking for his body they would not find it intact to desecrate. His wishes were on this occasion followed by his sister, and disturbances only occurred when the ownership of the farm passed to new tenants who disturbed its residence there. The connection of the head with the Civil War is supported by a parallel tradition recorded by historian J.M. Holland from Yeovil. Her father worked for the father of the present farmer and owner of the skull, and heard a tradition which associated it with the journey of Charles II through the region during the Civil War. The King was said to have stayed at nearby Trent Manor and:

*“...it was either one of his men or the opposition who was buried in the churchyard, with his skull kept in a box above the farm door.”*²³⁵

Higher Farm is owned today by Mr and Mrs "Nobby" Kerton, who keep the polished brown skull in a special cabinet built close to the ceiling in the hall, directly opposite the front door. The head is preserved alongside a visitor's book which contains the signatures of people from all over the world who have called to view the skull since the Second World War. The Kertons also keep a manuscript dating from 1829 which contains statements from a number of parishioners confirming the tradition and recording supernatural disturbances when the skull was moved from the house. One, Ann Dunman, writing at a time when the farm was owned by a Mr Clarke, writes:

*"Farmer Priddle and Edward Flooks remembered when the Scull [sic] was brought down stairs, and put in the Cupboard. Edward Flooks went to Yeovil and bought a new Spade, and went to his Relation Mr Clarke who said 'now Uncle Doctor, let us go and bury the Scull, when we have had a crust of bread and cheese' he said he would not; but after some time he went, but with an ill will, to bury it in the Churchyard. The Spade broke off at the first spit, and so they took it back again, he thought it presumptuous to attempt it, as the Man had begged that some part might be buried there and the rest in some other places."*²³⁶

Dunman mentions a tradition that Brome was a great warrior who asked that after his death his body should be divided "and laid in three counties." The Kerton family have a tradition which describes how in 1826, when workmen were renovating the farm, they celebrated the completion by drinking beer from the skull. This was followed by strange noises "portentive of sad displeasure" and the skull was duly returned to its cabinet where it has remained undisturbed ever since. The story has been featured widely in ghostbooks as a classic example of a "screaming skull" tradition but Mr Kerton maintains this description is wrong. In a letter he writes:

*"I would be interested to hear where the 'screaming skull' information came from; my family have lived here for 75 years and he has always been a quiet and respected gentleman."*²³⁷

In the 1980s the Kertons told ghost-hunter Keith Poole of a number of events which they interpreted as examples of the skull's goodwill and guardian properties which came from the respectful treatment they give it. Mrs Kerton's initial worry about living in the skull house before her marriage has now given way to acceptance. She told a writer in 1975:

*“People expect me to be frightened but I know that, provided he is not taken outside the house, he would never do me any harm. He doesn’t like being handled too much. If he objects he’d soon let us know, but as long as he is treated with respect he never causes trouble.”*²³⁸

The skull, as far is known, has never been examined by a pathologist or subjected to modern dating techniques in order to establish if it really is that of a man who died in the late seventeenth century. However, the story that it is the skull of Theophilus Brome is an unquestioned fact among the villagers and the Kerton family who own it.

7.4.10. SUFFOLK

Melton Grove, Woodbridge (OS: 178; GR 2749)

The Lord Protector of England, Oliver Cromwell, died on 3 September 1658 and his body was buried privately in the chapel of Henry VII at Westminster Abbey in London. It remained there for three years until the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II, when the bodies of Cromwell and two other Republicans were dug up and dragged to the gallows at Tyburn. Here Cromwell’s head was severed from his body and spiked on the south end of Westminster Hall, alongside those of his son-in-law Henry Ireton and lieutenant John Bradshaw. There it remained for a number of years until it was stolen and, in the late eighteenth century, offered to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where Cromwell was once resident.²³⁹ This offer was declined, and after passing through the hands of a number of different owners, the skull was put on exhibition in a shop in Bond Street, and was then bought by the son of a doctor, Josiah Henry Wilkinson. From this point the skull remained in the possession of a single family for two hundred years until Canon Horace Ricardo Wilkinson again offered it to the college, an offer that was accepted following his death in 1960. During its later history, the skull was preserved in a wooden box at the home of Canon Wilkinson in Melton Grove, Woodbridge, who appears to have encouraged the growth of stories suggesting it had strange and uncanny powers. Among those who saw the skull was ghosthunter Robert Thurston Hopkins, who left an account in his papers describing how an American visitor had fled when a “sudden flash of lightning” shook the house after the Canon removed the head from its box.²⁴⁰ Locally, the skull became known as “the Devil’s Head” and stories grew of a “ghostly presence” haunting Melton

Grove which one writer likened to a person "searching for something they had lost."²⁴¹

These stories were encouraged by the existence of a popular tradition which suggested that Cromwell had made a pact with the Devil before his victory in the English Civil War and that anyone who came into possession of his skull would meet an untimely end. The claim is "proved" by a seventeenth century letter said to have been copied from an original, preserved in a library in East Anglia. In it Cromwell claims that he met "Old Nick" in Hyde Park, and on the promise that his soul and body would be his following Cromwell's death, the Devil duly granted him worldly success.²⁴² This kind of belief reflects a popular tradition which accounted for Cromwell's rise from country squire to Lord Protector as being the result of a diabolical pact, a theory which was supported by a number of signs and portents in the year of his death. Presumably the phenomena connected with his skull's subsequent travels were interpreted as being a direct result of the Devil attempting to claim his due. Haining, in his book *The Supernatural Coast*, gathers together a number of stories surrounding Cromwell's corpse, and records several instances of paranormal phenomena recorded by the owner of the skull at that time, Canon Wilkinson of Woodbridge.²⁴³ In 1960, following the Canon's death, the college accepted his bequest of Cromwell's head, and following a private service it was buried in a special zinc box inside the college chapel. The exact spot is said to be known to only a few college officers, however, on an oval plaque to the left hand side of the college entrance, is inscribed:

*"Near to this place was buried on 25 March 1960 the head of OLIVER CROMWELL, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. Fellow Commoner of this College, 1616-17."*²⁴⁴

The remains of the Lord Protector's body lie in a brick chamber at Newburgh Priory at Coxwold, near York, the home of his daughter Mary, Lady Fauconburg. She recovered the remains from Tyburn and interred them inside a sarcophagus at the top of the house, where they have remained in the custody of her descendents, the Wombwell family. The sarcophagus is kept by tradition alongside a room which is only partially built because legend says disaster will befall the house if it was ever finished. The body has not been disturbed since it arrived at Newburgh in the seventeenth century, and the Wombwells have steadfastly refused to open the tomb even when Edward VII, while Prince of Wales, visited the Priory and asked to see the

remains earlier this century. As recently as 1996, the current owners Sir George and Lady Wombwell, have refused to break with tradition, and turned down a request to disinter the body and reunite it with the buried skull in Cambridge. The most recent request came from former members of a dining club at Sidney Sussex College called The Protectors, who had organised a campaign to bring the body and the head together following the publication of a book of essays to mark the four hundred year history of the college in 1996.²⁴⁵

7.4.11. SUSSEX

Warbleton Priory, near Hailsham (OS: 99; GR 6418)

Warbleton Priory was at one time host to two skulls. Veteran ghosthunter R. Thurston Hopkins was alerted to their presence by his friend Rudyard Kipling who did considerable research on their history.²⁴⁶ Warbleton Priory was originally constructed from the remains of a priory built during the reign of Henry IV for the canons of the Order of St Augustine. It later became known simply as Warbleton Priory Farm and the remains of the original priory can still be seen in its grounds. As with all the screaming skull stories, the origins of this example are somewhat ambiguous. Tradition has it that one skull had been found in mysterious circumstances, uncovered by a workman who was demolishing a wall at the old priory in 1820. His pick caught in a hole out of which emerged an enormous toad. Behind the toad was the perfectly preserved head of a man, and a doctor who examined the head said the skin and hair were firm and in almost original condition. Local belief had it that the toad had somehow worked symbiotically with the head and kept it fresh.²⁴⁷ The head was subsequently buried in consecrated ground near the grave of an abbot, but by the next morning had exhumed itself and was found on the doorstep of Warbleton Priory Farm. The farmer placed the head in a basket and onto one of the crossbeams of the farm where it remained for many years until reduced to a skull by the action of rodents and insects. From there it was taken down and placed on a bible in the farmer's living room. The "screaming skull" legend developed when a later tenant of the property attempted to take the skull with him when he moved, causing "strange noises and inexplicable happenings" both at Warbleton Priory Farm and the skull's new home. Windows rattled, doors banged, even farm horses became unsettled in their stables and whilst at work in

the fields. Eventually the connection was made between the skull and disturbances and it was swiftly returned to the farm whereupon the problems ceased.²⁴⁸ The skull was again moved when the landlord of a nearby public house came into possession of it in an attempt to boost custom. This marketing ploy failed as he began to slowly lose many regular customers who claimed that since the arrival of the skull the beer had gone mouldy! The skull was duly returned to the farm and the beer became wholesome again.²⁴⁹ However, this account of the skull's provenance and early history seems flawed when set against an 1835 history of antiquities in Sussex in which the author, referring to the Priory Farm, claims that:

*"...a few years ago Mr Thomas Lade disposed of the property to George Darby of Markly. It now exists as a substantial farmhouse. In one of the upstairs apartments a human skull is preserved very carefully in consequence of the tradition connected with it."*²⁵⁰

The second skull associated with the building has no date or recorded provenance, but the Sussex Archaeological Society notes that:

*"...the tradition of the neighbourhood is that the skull belonged to a man who murdered an owner of the house, and marks of blood are pointed out on the floor of the adjoining room, where the murder is supposed to have been committed."*²⁵¹

However, other stories accounting for the existence of the skull abound. Major Oliver Batten claimed that:

*"...there was a legend that if they were taken out of the priory a terrible screaming would come from them; they were supposed to have been the skulls of two monks who quarrelled and killed each other."*²⁵²

When traveller and antiquarian Louis Jennings visited the Warbleton skulls in the late nineteenth century he was highly impressed by the story, and in his subsequent account repeated the standard tradition, noting how besides the usual poltergeist phenomena other problems resulted if the skulls were removed, noting how:

*"...at the same time the cattle sicken and die, and thus the skull is sure to win the day. It is brought back again with a more ghastly grin than ever on its fleshless mouth."*²⁵³

When ghost-hunter R. Thurston Hopkins visited the Priory in 1905 with the express intention of visiting the skulls, they had disappeared. One of them (the “murderer’s”) subsequently turned up in a Brighton antique shop in 1923. Hopkins declined to buy the skull, believing it to possess “such malevolence that whoever bought it probably soon parted with it again,” but came across the same object again in a second Brighton antique shop in 1945.²⁵⁴ The shop owner informed him she had heard many loud stamping and banging noises coming from the room which housed the skull. Hopkins tracked the second skull down to a farmhouse in Dallington. It is unclear how this skull came to leave the priory, but the farmer at Dallington told Hopkins it was sometimes “troublesome and noisy.” On one occasion he had attempted to bury it in his garden but this act had resulted in a tremendous wind which blew him about so much he returned the skull to the farmhouse and refused to tamper with it again.²⁵⁵ This rather begs the question of whether the Dallington skull was in fact one of the Warbleton pair or whether this was part of a separate skull tradition which has been confused with the Warbleton accounts. In 1930 Hopkins returned to the Priory and spoke with its inhabitants at that time who claimed no knowledge of either skulls or hauntings. However, as he was departing he met an old farm labourer who remembered the story. He took Hopkins to the rear of the building and pointed out two stone heads. These, the workman claimed, had been taken from the ruins of the old priory and built into the wall, with the haunted skulls being safely sealed behind them, thus preventing any further problems.²⁵⁶

Subsequently, in 1947 a writer in *Sussex County Magazine* said he found traditions concerning the two skulls were very much alive in the area. He describes having spoken to an old lady who held both skulls in her lap for twenty minutes when she was a little girl without any calamities or ill effects, and relates another story describing how the skulls were once taken out and put in an apple tree. The only result of this action was that a bluetit built its nest in one of the skulls, using the eye socket as an entrance.²⁵⁷ One of the skulls reappeared in 1963, when it was offered for sale in the personal column of *The Times* by another antique dealer. The advert read:

*“Warbleton Priory Skull: This gruesome and well-documented relic for sale. 10 guineas. Write to P.O. Box X 1698. The Times, London W1.”*²⁵⁸

The advert was spotted by a reporter who interviewed the man who had brought the skull to London in a biscuit tin, and he allowed it to be photographed. He told the paper how the skull

had been purchased one year earlier from another dealer in Brighton, presumably the same one visited by Hopkins, but was not aware of its supernatural reputation. On the first night it was in his shop a woman living in an adjoining flat was “disturbed by loud bangings” in the middle of the night. Another lady living above also heard the noises, but an inspection of the house failed to identify the causes. This set the dealer, who until then merely thought he had bought “a skull with a history,” in search of further evidence which uncovered earlier accounts of the Warbleton tradition. Having read accounts from the *Sussex Archaeological Collections* and R. Thurston Hopkin’s *Ghosts over England*, he decided to remove the skull to a shed out of earshot of the shop and found “the noises immediately ceased.”²⁵⁹ Searches of *The Times* index for subsequent dates have failed to locate any subsequent description of the fate of this skull.

7.4.12. WILTSHIRE

Pinkney Park (OS: 173; GR 8686)

Kathleen Wiltshire describes a medieval legend concerning a human skull attached to Pinkney Park, about a mile from the village of Sherston, and ten miles from Chippenham.²⁶⁰ The name of the ancient deer park is derived from that of Ralph de Pinkney, an historical owner. According to local tradition in 1407 the park became the subject of a legal dispute between two noble families, the Esturmeys and Giffords and before this it was owned by the the Estcourts and the Cresswells in 1303. To which family the skull belonged appears to have been forgotten, but one story says the dispute involved two sisters. Although the purpose and outcome of this dispute has been lost, it was said that it ended when one killed the other. Since that time, local stories have told how the ghost of the dead sister has appeared in the house connected with the park, carrying her head under her arm in the classic manner. Its appearances coincide with those of a phantom handprint and bloodstains in a house on the estate which cannot be removed. The only tangible evidence of the story about the quarrel is a human skull which is preserved in the house, “kept in a special niche under the window above the stairs.” Wiltshire writes of it:

*“According to legend it is indestructible. It has been hammered to pieces and burnt and always returns, whole, to its accustomed perch.”*²⁶¹

The skull is small, "and said to be female." Another legend asserts the skull will crumble to dust when the Pinkney family become extinct or the property passes to strangers, but Whitlock points out this must be a recent addition because the Pinkneys did not own the park at the time of the fifteenth century dispute.²⁶²

Pythouse (OS: 184; GR 9029)

An oral tradition collected by folklorist Kingsley Palmer is classed as a skull tradition because of its similarity to others in Wessex. It concerns supernatural vengeance through the medium of human remains haunting a building but, says Palmer, "has little or nothing written about it."²⁶³ At the house, once the home of Colonel Benet Stanford, at Pythouse near Semley, is a skeleton known as "Molly." She is said to be the remains of a female servant hanged at Oxford for the murder of her baby girl by scalding. The father of the girl was said locally to be a member of the Benet Stanford family. The baby was killed in "the Pink Room" at the house which is haunted by Molly, who walks the surrounding corridors. She is associated with a curse which stipulates that should her bones be taken away from Pythouse "misfortune will fall upon the family." A verse concerning the legend reads:

*"Three times Molly has been removed.
The first time a wing of the house caught on fire.
The second time the son and heir died.
The third time the daughter died."*²⁶⁴

7.4.13. YORKSHIRE

Burton Agnes Hall (OS: 101; GR 1063)

A fine example of a skull guardian tradition is connected with the fine Elizabethan hall at Burton Agnes, near Driffield, which was built between 1598 and 1610. This story demonstrates an interesting dichotomy between the evidence of history and oral tradition regarding the origin of the skull, which today is hidden behind a wall in a secret hiding place. The village of Burton Agnes contains a fine Norman manor house and the parish church which contains the tombs of

the Boynton, Griffiths and Somerville families. The original Manor House, built by the Norman Walter de Stuteville, is dated 1170 and, like the adjoining hall, is today managed by English Heritage as a tourist attraction.²⁶⁵ As the guide to the hall states, the ownership of the manor itself has never changed hands by sale, but has passed from family to family on occasions when the male line has ended, as it did when Sir Marcus Wickham-Boynton, the last direct Boynton owner, died recently. The ownership has now passed to distant cousins who retain it as a "lived-in" family home which is open to the public. The human skull at Burton Agnes Hall is associated with a female ancestor of the Griffith family, who moved to Staffordshire from Wales during the thirteenth century. When in 1355 Sir Philip de Somerville died without a male heir, he left the manor to his eldest daughter Joan, the wife of Sir Rhys ap Griffith, whose family was to own Burton Agnes for the next three hundred years. The Griffiths moved their base from Wicknor, Staffordshire to Yorkshire during the sixteenth century. In 1599 Sir Henry Griffith was appointed to the council of the North at York, and it seems he chose Burton Agnes to develop as a power base. The red-brick hall was built by Robert Smithson, the architect of Hardwick Hall, for Sir Henry, whose initials are carved above the entrance alongside the date 1601.²⁶⁶ He died around 1620 and the property passed to his son Henry, who died in 1654 without a male heir. Then the property passed to the Boynton family through Henry's only surviving child Frances Griffith, who married Sir Matthew Boynton, the Governor of Scarborough Castle during the Civil War.²⁶⁷

This much is clear, but oral tradition tells a strikingly different story. Local stories associate the building of the hall not directly with Sir Henry, but with his three daughters Frances, Margaret and Catherine. The latter, said to be the youngest of the three, was known by her baptismal name Anne. It is Anne who is specified in tradition as being "passionately involved" in the construction of the hall, so much so that she left a strange decree that her head should remain there after death.²⁶⁸

The date at which the skull story was first recorded is unclear, but a long and romanticised account appeared in *Yorkshire Notes and Queries*, published by the *Leeds Mercury* towards the end of the nineteenth century.²⁶⁹ A version of this is quoted by Mrs Gutch, who concludes:

"...It used to be a belief that so long as the skull was left undisturbed nothing serious would happen to any of the Boyntons, but woe betide the moving of it. To avoid calamity it has now been placed in a niche of the wall, especially prepared for it, and hidden from view. Implicit

belief in the story is a second religion with the Boyntons, and the skull is regarded by them as being almost sacred property."²⁷⁰

These accounts describe how tragedy struck Anne only a short time after the the hall was completed. She was attacked and robbed by two beggars as she visited the St Quentin family in the nearby village of Harpham and left for dead. She lived for several days, and on her deathbed told her sisters she could never sleep peacefully in her grave "unless I, or a part of me at least, remain here in our beautiful home as long as it lasts."²⁷¹ According to the story, Anne specifically asked her sisters to remove her head and place it on a table in the Hall "and on no account be removed." The promise was made, but the sisters had no intention of keeping it, and laid her body to rest whole in the village churchyard. A week passed until one night a sudden loud crash was heard in one of the upstairs rooms, followed by a series of other alarming noises and supernatural disturbances around the hall which alarmed the sisters and kept the household awake and trembling every night. After a time, Frances and Margaret went to their neighbour, Sir William St Quentin, and to the vicar of the parish for help. They heard of the broken promise, and suggested the trouble might be associated with Anne's dying wish. Arrangements were made to open the coffin, and on doing so a strange discovery was made. Anne's body was uncorrupted, but the head had become a fleshless skull and was separated from the body. Following the priest's advice, the two sisters removed the head from the grave, took it to the hall and placed it on a table. Thereupon, the noises and disturbances in the house ceased. Since that time, according to local tradition, many attempts have been made to rid the hall of the skull without success, "as whenever it has been removed the ghostly knockings have been resumed, and no rest or peace enjoyed until it has been restored."²⁷²

Two specific incidents are mentioned: once, a maidservant who had moved into the house took a dislike to the skull and threw it from an upstairs window onto a passing load of manure. Immediately, the horses froze and would not move despite vigorous whipping. Eventually, the servant confessed to what she had done, the skull was returned to its place in the house and the horses immediately resumed pulling the wagon without difficulty. On the second occasion, one of the Boyntons who had inherited the property banished the skull from the house and buried it in the garden, "but the most dismal wailings and cries kept the house in a state of disquietude and alarm until it was dug up and restored to its place in the Hall, when they ceased."²⁷³ The skull remained on a table in the main hall until the latter part of the nineteenth century and its

presence no doubt led to the growth of a large body of lore surrounding the ghost which is said to haunt part of the building. The skull's visual presence was ended when Sir Henry Boynton, the grandfather of the last Boynton owner, arranged for it to be bricked up away from sight in a specially prepared niche behind panelling, to ensure no further supernatural manifestations could disturb the house. The location of the skull was a closely guarded secret within the family, but in 1950 a local historian, in a letter to Thurston Hopkins, said a tradition encouraged by the Boyntons suggests it was built into the wall behind or near the fireplace in the Queen's State Bedroom on the north wing, a room now said to be haunted by Anne's ghost, known locally as "Owd Nance."²⁷⁴ However, he also notes the testimony of a labourer or carpenter, then aged ninety, who remembered the bricking up of the skull and "feels certain that the skull is not there, in the "haunted bedroom," but over a doorway in an upper passage."²⁷⁵

In 1949 Sir Marcus Wickham-Boynton opened the hall and its grounds to the public and in 1977 it was donated to the nation. The story of the skull, the haunted bedroom and the famous portrait of the three sisters are today attractions which draw visitors to the village. However, how accurate is the story of Anne's life, death and the origin of the skull? It seems the chief evidence for her existence as a real historical Griffith ancestor is the presence of a famous painting by Marc Gheeraerts depicting the three sisters which hangs in the inner hall. Known as "The Three Miss Griffiths," it is dated 1620, said to be the date of Anne's death.²⁷⁶ In the painting, Anne is on the right and is the only figure wearing black as if in mourning, suggesting the portrait was made posthumously, a factor which may have led to its association with the ghost. Indeed, similarities have even been drawn between the woman in the painting and the ghost of Anne, known as "Owd Nance," which has been seen by several people in the hall, including a female member of the Boynton family in 1915. According to Lockhart:

"...she still appears occasionally and generally in the month of October, which is supposed to have been the month of her death. She is short, slight and dressed in fawn colour, and is easily recognisable from her portrait which hangs in the hall."²⁷⁷

In Burton Agnes village, belief in the power of the skull and Owd Nance is a continuing tradition. When in the late 1940s an American newspaper was researching an article on how British family ghosts had survived German air-raids, a reporter interviewed a villager who said:

*"It would take an atom bomb to disturb Owd Nance. If you want to find out how alert she is just go and stare at her portrait in the hall. I bet she'll stare you out and make you feel quite uncomfortable."*²⁷⁸

However, research by English Heritage guide Margaret Imrie into the history of the Griffith family has found no record of the existence of an ancestor called Catherine or Anne Griffiths. No one knows where the bodies of Sir Henry and his offspring lie, but it is presumed they were buried in the parish church. Here there is a memorial tablet, seemingly a copy of an earlier stone, which names three sons and two daughters of Sir Henry, but no Anne. No record of her appears in the parish registers, but a number of these are missing around the time of her suggested birth. More conclusively, however, in an early seventeenth century record, when Anne should have been noticed, only two Griffith children are noted, these being Frances aged fourteen and Henry aged nine, the only two known to have reached childhood.²⁷⁹ This seems to throw doubt on the evidence of the painting dated 1620 as only Frances appears to have survived until this date, and Mrs Imrie suggests as a result of this discrepancy that the dates on the painting may be false. A further example of how unreliable the paintings are is provided by another Gheeraerts portrait in the house labelled Frances Griffith, which shows a woman in her late forties, when records show Frances died aged thirty five years. The mystery surrounding the Burton Agnes skull remains. What is clear is its association with a female guardian spirit of a house of ancient foundation. That the Griffith family were of Welsh origin may be of significance in view of the "Celtic" predilection for skull guardians. Was a magical talisman required to protect the newly constructed hall when the family moved to Yorkshire? And if this speculation is correct, who provided the skull?

Hickleton, South Yorkshire (OS: 111; GR 4805)

The village of Hickleton lies on a main road near Goldthorpe in South Yorkshire's former coalfield. The medieval church of St Wilfrid is believed to occupy the site of a Saxon chapel, and there is some evidence of a twelfth century structure inside the building.²⁸⁰ The churchyard is unusual in that the original south porch of the church has been relocated to play the role of a lychgate leading onto the main road. Even more unusual, and certainly unique in Britain, is the presence inside the wall of the lych-gate, behind a barred window, of three human skulls. These

gruesome relics were incased inside an ageing glass cabinet deliberately placed so that everyone passing to and from the churchyard could see them. Adding to their impact, inscribed below the skulls are the words, in Gothic lettering: "Today For Me, Tomorrow for Thee." The skulls have been in this position since the late nineteenth century, when the ghost-hunter Lord Halifax, who had a penchant for collecting human crania, according to one account:

*"...acquired a number [of skulls] from a medical friend in London and placed three in a niche at the lych-gate opening onto the road through Hickleton, so that the inhabitants and passers-by might be reminded of the bourne to which they were travelling."*²⁸¹

This prosaic, if curious, origin of the skulls was forgotten, however, in just one generation Duncan and Trevor Smith in their catalogue of architectural curiosities of South Yorkshire, compiled in 1992 say the identity of the skull's owners:

*"...is completely unknown although it was said in 1934 that the then Lord Halifax alone knew who they were. He never revealed the information, however, not even to his son, Lord Irwin."*²⁸²

In 1996 inquiries in the village uncovered no current memory of Lord Halifax's connection with the skulls. In its place I found a number of current traditions including one in which the three skulls had become associated with a story about the ghost of a highwayman who haunted the road near the lych-gate and a nearby crossroads. A second said they were the actual skulls of three executed highwaymen, and a third suggested they were the subject of a curse and would bring dire consequences upon anyone who moved them from their position in the lych-gate.²⁸³

In the summer of 1996, an unknown person smashed the glass display panel which had protected the skulls for more than a century, and stole one of them. The remaining two skulls were taken inside the church for safekeeping by the vicar, the Reverend Dr Tony Delves. He issued a public warning that: "...the skulls were never buried because they were cursed," adding that the inscription was a warning that "the curse will be transferred to anyone who interfered with them" and advised the guilty party to return the skull to the safekeeping of the church without delay.²⁸⁴ By April 1997 the missing skull had not returned, and when interviewed for this research, the Reverend Delves said he knew nothing about the origins of the artefacts and how they had come to be placed in the lych-gate.

“All I know is they have been there a long time and there was a legend which connects them with Dick Turpin who is supposed to have passed through here. There was also a story in the village that if they were interfered with they would bring a curse upon the people who took them until they were returned to the lych-gate. People also used to run past them on their way in or out of the churchyard, such was the fear they instilled in people, but because most of the old folks in the village have now passed away it's difficult to find out why. But so far no one has been found dead clutching the skull in his or her hands!”²⁸⁵

A visit to the church at Hickleton during the fieldwork noted the presence of a single carved stone head on the tower facing north. The sandstone carving was highly weathered and it was not possible to draw conclusions about its age.

Lund Manor (OS: 105; GR 6532)

There is just one reference to the skull at this location, which was made by Nicholson, writing early in this century. He described a guardian skull similar to the famous Burton Agnes Hall example, kept at the Manor House in Lund in the East Riding.²⁸⁶ There it was said the skull had been walled up into the attic to prevent its removal. This action must have been successful, for the present owners have no knowledge of the legend.²⁸⁷

7.5. Summary of skull traditions

This gazetteer of skull traditions includes thirty two stories gathered during fieldwork in Britain between 1990 and 1998. It should not be regarded as a comprehensive listing of the extant traditions, as new information continued to come to light as this research was nearing completion. The chapter which follows will use the information presented in the gazetteer to discuss more closely the common themes which emerge from the stories, and the analogies which can be drawn between them and the lore which surrounds carved stone heads in Britain and elsewhere.

- ¹ Briggs, p. 475.
- ² Thompson, p. 368.
- ³ Baughman, p. 139. Motif type E235.4.5(b).
- ⁴ Briggs, motif type E419.8(f).
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Sidney Oldall Addy, 'Garland Day at Castleton,' *Folklore*, 12 (1901), 394-428.
- ⁷ Westwood, p. 161.
- ⁸ John Hutchinson, *A Tour through the High Peak of Derbyshire* (Macclesfield: J. Wilson, 1809), pp. 9-10.
- ⁹ William Andrews, *An Essay on Skull Superstitions* (London: William Andrews, 1877).
- ¹⁰ J.S. Udal, 'Skull Superstition,' *Notes and Queries*, 7 September 1872, 183.
- ¹¹ James Ingram, *Haunted Homes and Family Traditions in Great Britain*, 2nd series (London: Gibbings, 1897), pp. 45-65.
- ¹² J.G. Lockhart, *Curses, Lucks and Talismans* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1938), pp. 143-59.
- ¹³ Gillian Bennett, *Traditions of Belief* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p.201.
- ¹⁴ Baughman, p. 139.
- ¹⁵ Livingstone, pp. 87-90.
- ¹⁶ Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 175.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 154.
- ¹⁹ Livingstone, p. 87.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 89.
- ²¹ Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes*, p. 179.
- ²² Personal communication from Alan W. Smith, 12 January 1998.
- ²³ Sean O'Sullivan, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970), pp. 12, 186, 408.
- ²⁴ Logan, p. 44.
- ²⁵ C. Hoey, 'Cure for Toothache,' *Notes and Queries*, 27 September 1851, 227-28.
- ²⁶ W.G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths in Ireland* Vol. 2 (New York: Longmans and Green, 1902), p.99.
- ²⁷ Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales*, pp. 115-16.
- ²⁸ Christina Hole, *Haunted England* (London: Fitzhouse Books, 1940), pp. 42-56.
- ²⁹ R. Thurston-Hopkins, *Ghosts over England* (London: Meridian, 1953), pp. 90-99, 167-72.
- ³⁰ Peter Haining, *The Screaming Skull and other Ghost Stories* (London: Fontana, 1979).
- ³¹ For popular treatments of the "Screaming Skull" legends in ghost hunting literature see Peter Underwood, *The Ghost Hunter's Guide* (London: Javelin, 1986), pp. 19-20; Terence Whitaker, *Ghosts of Old England* (London: Robert Hale, 1987), pp. 97-115; Marc Alexander, *Phantom Britain* (London: Muller, 1975), pp. 29-46.
- ³² Roberts and Clarke, 'Heads and Tales,' pp. 126-59.
- ³³ Chas S. Wigfull, 'Dickey o'Tunstead,' *Derbyshire Notes and Queries, Derbyshire Advertiser*, 24 June 1927, 13.
- ³⁴ Charles Igglesden, *A Saunter through Kent with pen and pencil*, Vol 13 (Ashford: Kentish Express, 1925), pp. 82-83.
- ³⁵ Linahan, *The North of England Ghost Trail*, p. 38.
- ³⁶ Personal communication from Liz Linahan, 13 October 1996.
- ³⁷ Personal communication from R.A.Woods, Glasgow Local History Library, 24 November, 1994.
- ³⁸ Illustrated in Chris Barber, *Mysterious Wales* (London: Granada, 1983), p. 188.
- ³⁹ For a summary of the legend, see Richard Holland, *Supernatural Clwyd* (Capel Garmon: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 1989), pp. 188-90.

- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Holland, p. 190.
- ⁴¹ Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals* , p. 82.
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Chapter 8

Head and skull motifs in ethnology and folk tradition



“As a source of power, the skull naturally became an object of worship: its magical value came from the fact that it was supposed to be the centre of life. Among the Celts...the head was the container of the sacred force, whereas in other ancient and traditional cultures, the head was conceived of as the seat of vital energy, the active principle of the whole individual. From such beliefs come headhunting rituals, the offerings of skulls in sacrifice, the veneration for ancestors’ skulls, as well as the apotropaic talismanic value attributed to the head...”

Michael Meslin, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* ¹

8.1. Analysis of guardian skull traditions

This chapter aims to pull together the strands of folk tradition which emerged from the detailed analysis of stone head and guardian skull traditions presented in Chapters 6 and 7. The first part of the chapter is a detailed analysis of the strands of belief which emerge from the data presented in the gazetteer of skull traditions in the previous chapter. In the second part of the chapter the themes which emerged from the fieldwork data will be considered in the context of ethnographic and archaeological evidence for the veneration of the head Britain, Europe and non-European cultures across the globe both in the past and the present.

The lore and legend of human skulls, both “screaming” and silent, is a much tangled tale, in which fragments of folk belief concerning powers thought to be inherent in the relics themselves jostle for position with half-remembered hints of house and land guardianship, pagan religions, ancestor worship and the more modern obsessions with poltergeists and haunted houses. Stories which fall into the guardian skull motif category have been subjected to so little detailed research that what extant evidence does survive is bound to have serious shortcomings. On the surface the evidence seems to suggest that a significant number of the skulls are Catholic relics which have survived from the Middle Ages. The cluster which exist in Lancashire, where the faith was strong, and the two examples from Warbleton Priory, all have Christian connotations, either in the lore of the skull or skulls themselves or within the hall or the family to which they have become attached. Even some of the skulls associated with holy wells are associated with the cultus of relics which surrounded early Christian saints, as in the case of St Teilo’s skull in Pembrokeshire, described in Chapter 3. These traditions often involve the surreptitious movement, burial or preservation of skulls as sacred relics. In Ireland, the skull of St Oliver Plunkett, martyred in London in 1681, is preserved in a temperature-controlled capsule in the church at Drogheda, near Dublin.² In Derbyshire, an oral tradition suggests that the head of the Catholic priest Nicholas Garlick, one of the Padley Martyrs executed in 1588, was recovered by his friends from the scaffold at Derby and buried secretly later in the churchyard near his home in Tideswell.³

Is this connection with saints’ relics a reflected accretion upon an older pagan tradition, or the simple truth upon which the stories have been founded? Extending this theory, and notwithstanding the suggestion that the Bettiscombe skull appears to be of prehistoric origin,

only the Catholic church, in the case of the Wardley Skull, has undertaken any serious research into the origin of these artefacts. The conclusion arrived at in the case of the skull from Wardley Hall suggests that it is exactly what they claimed it was, namely that of a martyred Catholic saint. It has also been mooted that the skulls are nothing more than *memento mori*, examples of the Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean obsession with all things reminding us of our mortal end, a symbol of the ever present boundary between life and death. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the human skull became a popular image for use in art and literature as a *momento mori*, emphasising the vanity of life and the inevitability of death.⁴ This interest coincided with the resurgence of head carving traditions in areas such as West Yorkshire, where the symbol of the head was carved enthusiastically on the first substantial stone-built yeoman houses, as well as upon furniture and weaponry during the English Civil War. A number of the guardian skulls are dated by local tradition to this period of social and psychological upheaval, when the head appears to resurface once again within popular consciousness. However, these explanations do not account for the consistency of the stories which have grown up around these skulls, their seeming geographical regionalisation, or the resonances these stories have with skull and head traditions recorded elsewhere and with the evidence provided by archaeology.

Given the disparate contexts noted above, it appears that the origin of the skulls themselves is of less relevance than what they symbolise. Despite their modern "screaming" epithet, the skulls themselves remain silent about their ultimate origin. However, parallels can be drawn between the British legends and those which have grown up around the mysterious "crystal skulls," claimed to be of Aztec origin, which suggest that all these stories have their ultimate origins in universal motifs common to all cultures. The two better known examples of crystal skulls include one example in the British Museum, which was found in the great Mayan city of Lubaantum in 1927, and a smaller example on display in the Museum of Mankind, Paris. As with the "screaming skulls," many stories and accounts of paranormal happenings have grown up around these artefacts, and people continue to believe they were used in ancient pagan ceremonies, and that it is possible to use them as a channel to communicate with spirits, and receive messages through them. Attempts to date the skulls have been inconclusive, but the most recent findings suggest the majority were fakes created in the nineteenth century by craftsmen working in Germany and elsewhere.⁵ In the same fashion as the Celtic and other Northern European tribes, the Aztecs appear to have had a similar complex of rituals

surrounding the symbol of the human head and skull as a means of divining the future, protecting buildings and communicating with the world of the dead. Other cultures across the world, from Mexico to Thailand and Easter Island in the Pacific, used human skulls and stylised stone carvings of human heads for similar magico-religious purposes throughout prehistory and in relatively recent times.

My own tentative theory is based upon the idea that the head has remained an important magical or religious symbol among human populations across the world from the earliest times, and that the placement of and reverence for these skulls, whatever their ultimate provenance and age, is just one manifestation of this tradition echoing down through time. Belief and tradition surrounding the symbol appear to be constantly shifting and changing, yet the central object, that of the head or skull, remains as a constant focus for the growth of stories and legends and the accretion of belief and tradition. To expand this line of thinking we need to consider certain facts and analyse the threads which run through the skull traditions themselves.

8.1.1. The age of the skulls

Despite all the many and varied accounts of origin and provenance presented by the guardian skull stories themselves, few facts can be established for certain, and there remains in each case a marked dichotomy between stories and traditions, and the object itself. Often skulls can have up to three or four contradictory stories, all set at different periods of history, all with their promoters and detractors. The majority of the skulls are dated by folk tradition alone to a period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, some of them could be older: the Bettiscombe skull, for example, is claimed to be of prehistoric origin, and by inference the skull from Tunstead Farm, Derbyshire, and Turton Towers skulls from Lancashire could be of similar early date. The Appley Bridge skull was believed to have been unearched when the first house was built on that site in the fifteenth century. The Annat skull, used for a traditional cure for epilepsy in northwest Scotland, was precisely dated by the oral tradition to the suicide of a woman in the late eighteenth century (see Chapter 3). From the time of the English Civil War, the era of Catholic persecution, murdered servants and suicides are all preserved in the oral tradition as explanations for the presence of a skull and the activity of the restless spirit if they are disturbed. In the cases of Tunstead and Calgarth, poems and prose have translated these

tales directly into an evolving oral tradition (see Appendix 5 for two examples). However, none of these stories, apart from those connected with the Catholic martyr's skull at Wardley Hall, have been proved to be based upon fact beyond a shadow of a doubt. Some we know are false, and most have had their origins reattributed as the skulls and their legends have been re-examined by successive "experts." On the few occasions where skulls have been examined by modern scientific methods, the results have proved surprising. Only the skulls from Bettiscombe and Waddon have been subjected to any kind of scientific analysis, and this was of an anatomical nature and did not allow the certainty which carbon dating would provide. In the case of Bettiscombe an examination by a pathologist debunked a learned tradition which had grown up since the late seventeenth century, namely that the skull belonged to a negro slave from the West Indies.⁶ It was in fact a female skull of European origin, and is believed to be several thousand years in age. A similar tradition grew up suggesting the skull from Waddon House, Portesham, was that of another negro, but scientific examination revealed it belonged to an adult caucasoid male. M.S. Ross, in her study of the two skulls, suggests an ingenious solution to the puzzle of why separate traditions surrounding human remains said to be of negroes had developed contemporaneously. She writes:

*"It may be that to refer to skulls as negroes had originally been an attempt to mask the continuation of pagan practice, of which the church would certainly have disapproved."*⁷

A number of other skulls discussed in the present study have been scrutinised by "experts" at various points in their history, and it is curious how many have concluded that the skulls were in fact female, when the oral tradition suggested they were male. In the case of the skull called Dickie from Tunstead Farm in Derbyshire, the skull's popular nickname implies a male gender, despite the "ghost" manifesting in some instances in the form of a woman. Here there are two rival traditions, one suggesting that the skull belongs to a male soldier, the other a female heiress. An examination of the skull by a doctor from Chapel-en-le-Frith, mentioned by historian William Bunting, concluded that the skull did in fact belong to a young woman.⁸

These stories overlap into the mysterious realms of the Celtic spirits, the nebulous gender of *genius loci*, and the possibility of foundation sacrifice as the original function for the positioning of skulls in new structures, a tradition which has been discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. This suggestion has been made by local experts in respect of both the Bettiscombe and Dickie o'

Tunstead skulls. Ralph Merrifield describes many examples of foundation sacrifice from the Iron Age, Romano-British, and early medieval eras where both human and animal skulls have been the centre of votive deposits used in the foundations of buildings, for example at the Roman temple in Springhead, Kent, which contained the bodies of decapitated infants at the four corners of a temple.⁹ This practice appears to have continued at the level of folk tradition after the decline of paganism, with the presumed aim of providing a spirit guardian for the new structure. Decapitation would provide one method of anchoring the spirit to its home, drawing upon a folk tradition which is thousands of years old.

New “certainties” about the origin of the skulls rise and fall as the centuries pass. Is it reasonable to suggest that this was as much the case in, for example, the sixteenth century as it is now? Even if any of the stories of provenance and origin are indeed true, we are still faced with the mystery of exactly why these relics should have become such strong focusses of belief and tradition over an extended period of time. The evidence appears to suggest that their keeping represents a continuance or renewal of an extant tradition. If any of the skulls are indeed older than tradition suggests, the stories attributed to them could be explained by the fact that it was not until the seventeenth century that most permanent buildings were first erected which have survived to the present day, and consequently when their guardian talismans would have first taken up a residence. Here we have a direct parallel with the dating of the carved heads found in the early yeoman houses of Calderdale recorded by John Billingsley’s survey of West Yorkshire carving traditions.¹⁰

If the skulls do not belong to the Catholic priests, medieval knights and early modern murders as claimed by more recent traditions, then the archaeological context and written sources we have already mentioned may provide alternative explanations. We know from these and other sources that in the prehistoric and the early historic period, ancestors were revered, and also that sacrifices to the gods were made by beheading. Some of the stories seem to hint at more ancient and mysterious origins for skulls, attributing their origin to Iron Age sacrifices or protective ancestors of the family or tribe. Should any skulls eventually be proved to have origins as stated in the later stories, they still represent an active, primitive, form of ancestor veneration, the belief persistent at the level of folk tradition until very recent times. Alternatively, stories like those from Wardley Hall in Lancashire and Hickleton in South Yorkshire provide a note of caution because they demonstrate how quickly the prosaic origins of a skull can be forgotten. In

the case of the three skulls from Hickleton, local tradition was describing them as having been in the church lychgate for an unknown length of time less than one hundred years after they were placed there by Lord Halifax (see Chapter 7). By the middle of the twentieth century they had already acquired three separate traditions of hauntings; including a prototype “screaming skull” legend. A series of skulls currently serving time in the bars of public houses in Derby, Hull and Glasgow appear to be in the early stages of developing similar traditions associating them with supernatural guardianship of the threshold. At Wardley Hall, within a decade of the discovery of the skull in the Catholic chapel at the end of the eighteenth century, an antiquarian writer had produced a romantic account of its powers, describing its veneration by the inhabitants from “time out of mind” (see Chapter 7). How many of the other skulls could have equally prosaic origins if only sufficient firsthand evidence was available to us?

Stories concerning guardian skulls and the “cursed” stone heads discussed in Chapter 6 appear to dovetail in respect of the evolving nature of the traditions which have grown up around them, one of a number of points of similarity common to the motifs. Once popular accounts of both types of stories are published, the written accounts and oral traditions begin to feed upon one another, creating inter-relationships between them and providing a template for further testimony, a process which is fuelled by the mass media in the present day.

8.1.2. Positioning

The majority of the skulls have traditionally occupied a specific location within the building in which they are housed. These positions are typically on rafters or roof beams, facing doors, on prominent windowsills, in chests, bricked up in walls or cellars, kept by the hearth, or in specially-created wall niches. Skulls like those at Waddon House and Tunstead occupied positions in windowsills where they functioned as supernatural guardians of the threshold, keeping watch over their land. These are directly analogous to the positions where guardian heads and skulls have been frequently found in both archaeological and folklore contexts. These positions have ancient pedigrees and all equate with geomantic weak spots where evil spirits and witches could enter the house and which therefore required a protective talisman. Specific examples of this kind have been recorded in the oral traditions of Yorkshire and Peakland discussed in Chapter 6. This specific positioning reinforces the magical, guardian aspect of the

skulls. Other house “lucks” are found in parallel positions, such as holed or ‘Dobby’ stones and witch-posts.

8.1.3. Paranormal phenomena

Despite the attribution of the epithet “screaming” to the skulls, there is very little evidence that they produced any noises at all, let alone screaming! Similarly, all the other paranormal phenomena attributed to them are largely historical in nature or of dubious provenance. There are some interesting secondhand accounts of paranormal phenomena, for instance particularly in the case of Dickie’s skull at Tunstead in Derbyshire, but few if any documented firsthand accounts. It seems obvious therefore that most accounts of paranormal phenomena attached to the skulls are characterised by hyperbole and metaphor: hyperbole in that they represent the worst excesses of the nineteenth and twentieth century popularisation of folklore by writers who have seized upon the stories and amplified them to suit either the times or their publisher’s requirements for a good story; metaphor in the sense that these accounts are reinforcements of the fact that the skulls are charms, or magical guardians, and must not in any circumstances be removed from the threshold of the house and land which they occupy and protect.

8.1.4. Guardianship and fertility

The central theme of the taboo surrounding the disturbance or movement of a skull is qualified by the reasoning in some of the stories that the object is there to provide guardianship for the house and by extension the land and the family who live there. Some of the earliest accounts, such as that of Hutchinson’s visit to Dickie’s skull in the early nineteenth century, emphasise the fundamental importance of this guardianship function before the later accretion of romantic tradition distorted the story. Themes in individual accounts illustrating the guardian motif include the belief that if the skull was removed the building housing it would collapse (Appley Bridge, Lancashire), livestock would take ill and milk would curdle (Dickie’s skull, Derbyshire), crops would fail (Bettiscombe, Dorset and Dunscar, Derbyshire) and beer would turn sour (Warbleton, Sussex). It is even suggested that removal could affect the weather by causing storms (Wardley Hall, Lancashire), a belief found elsewhere in folklore, for example in

the taboos which surround the disturbance of “fairy hills,” ancient standing stones and tumuli where desecrators have suffered mishaps and bad luck when they have deliberately or unwittingly broken a local tradition.¹¹ That the skulls’ sphere of influence extended beyond the house is suggested in a number of accounts, where their function as *genius loci* of the building, land and family are implicit. At Wardley Hall the spirit could manifest as a hare, at Tunstead as a woman in white or a black dog, at Burton Agnes as a spinning top or grey lady. Here there are analogies with the supernatural creatures associated with a number of carved stone heads described in Chapter 6. If these skulls are Catholic relics this is a powerful accretion to have attached itself to them over such a short period of time, a tradition which must have originated from an extant pool of popular lore concerning skulls and the human head. In that case, Catholic relics or not, the skulls were fulfilling a function far removed from that intended by the people who originally enshrined them in their farms and homes.

8.1.5. Attempts at disposal

A closer reading of the attempts to dispose of guardian skulls reveals themes of a distinctly non-Christian nature. Note for instance how attempts have allegedly been made to dispose of some skulls by throwing them into water, grinding them to dust or burying them in consecrated ground. In all these instances, the skulls resist these attempts and immediately resume their guardianship duties. These stories raise a number of questions. Why would anyone want to remove them in the first place, knowing of their reputed protective powers, if it were not an established part of the tradition that they represented belief in something which did not sit happily alongside Christian teachings? Why also would this desire to dispose of them arise if the skulls were originally those of revered saints or religious martyrs? The chosen methods of disposal suggest the continuance of more ancient and ultimately pagan belief and tradition, perhaps now reduced to the level of folk superstition, a belief in protective household and landscape spirits rather than in the pagan deities themselves. Churches have always been used as repositories for powerful objects from their immediate locality, and it was noted in Chapter 5 how they play an important role in the developing traditions surrounding stone heads. However, the power of belief in the skulls is such that they could actively resist Christian burial, either by causing outbreaks of poltergeist fury in the household, or through the physical

halting of the carts in which they were being carried to the place of disposal. This identical story is found in the stories from Burton Agnes and Flagg Hall, and the details are so similar it can only be concluded that both are drawn from the same source or one has been “borrowed” from the other, a process which can be traced to the popularisation of the skull legends during the late nineteenth century.

Attempts to dispose of the skulls in water also throw up other interesting lines of inquiry. Why, for instance, would it have been believed that water would prove an effective means of disposal? In the case of the Timberbottoms skulls, tradition suggests they were originally found in a local brook and were then placed inside a house. In the cases of the skulls from Tunstead and Chilton Cantelo, the shallow craniums were utilised as drinking vessels by visitors, seemingly without ill effects! Indeed, in the Scottish Highland traditions described in Chapter 3, skulls of suicides were actively sought out and used by people as part of a complex ritual to cure epilepsy. Both archaeological and documentary evidence reviewed in previous chapters strongly connects skulls and heads with water, either as cult objects for healing, or as sacrificial offerings to water deities. Many of the skulls are reputed to have been found in or near water. Could it be suggested that the belief in water as an appropriate place of disposal is a distorted memory of their origin as ritual objects associated with an equally archaic belief in the power of springs and healing waters?

8.2. Skull traditions in ethnological context

Taken together the major themes contained within these stories could be said to indicate the origin of the skulls as being older than those attributed to them in the recent documentary sources which refer to them from the seventeenth century onwards. If the actual artefacts themselves cannot be proved to be of ancient origin, then certainly the beliefs surrounding them can be said to have been passed down through a strong and continuously evolving body of oral tradition, with further accretion of lore being added at the time when the skulls were first built into permanent family buildings. Further layers of lore were added when the stories about the skulls resurfaced in the romantic collections of stories published during the late nineteenth century, and finally in their present form in the popular collections of tales about ghosts and haunted houses during and since the 1960s. In a sense this is no different from any other

“revival” of tradition at any other time in history. Obviously, I am at pains to stress that this is not meant to be an ultimate explanation of the reason and purpose behind all or any of the skull traditions, and in itself could be seen as an artefact in whole or in part of my own belief system which has been influenced by current arguments in folklore, archaeology and earth mysteries.

The guardian skull and stone head traditions powerfully demonstrate how the symbol of the “severed human head” continues to have an influential effect upon popular consciousness, as the stories of guardian skulls in British tradition demonstrate particularly well. One of the strongest motifs running like a thread through the stories is the belief that the object itself must not be removed from the threshold of the building it protects. Running alongside this is the implication that the skull must be treated with respect, and must not be spoken ill of, for fear of upsetting the spirit which lies within the bones. In effect, the skulls acted as physical representatives of ancestral spirits who guarded the hearth and the family land, providing luck and good fortune for the owners. In this tradition of belief, movement or disruption of the established order would bring bad luck and supernatural disturbances upon the household.

Parallel traditions, with their origins in belief surrounding the head as the seat of the human soul have been documented by anthropologists who have collected the beliefs of tribes in Africa, Southeast Asia, South America and Australia. Among traditional societies across the world, the head or skull is believed to be a magical part of the body, the seat of the soul or the soul substance. Practitioners of magic have always believed that parts of the human body, specifically the head or the skull, were potent objects which could be used as a channel for contact with the supernatural. In his analysis of primitive belief surrounding the head, McCullough draws a distinction between the preservation of heads as trophies in head-hunting cultures and the keeping of the heads of ancestors.¹² Of these customs he writes:

“...the preservation of the head or skull of dead relatives out of affection, or in order to obtain communion with them, or gain their good offices because of their pleasure at the respect shown to them, or for actual cult purposes, was probably an early custom, and is found in many parts of the world.”¹³

Among a number of African tribes, chiefs were buried with their heads above the ground and when the flesh had decayed the skull was either buried or used for magical purposes, and was kept out of sight. Roscoe describes how the Baganda tribe had a custom of preserving part of

the head of a king,

“...because the ghost clung to it, and hence could be worshipped or its help obtained through the jaw-bone as long as that was honoured.”¹⁴

He writes how the skulls were preserved in temples, and claimed some jaw bones were more than one thousand years old. This kind of tradition was highly developed among the tribes of the Pacific Islands. In parts of Melanesia it was believed that a dead man's *mana* or spirit could be contacted through his skull for the benefit of the tribe. Certain honoured skulls were carefully preserved in special sanctuaries, and food offerings made to them. In Tahiti and Netherland Island, skulls were preserved separately from the body and those of relatives were suspended from the roof of the house. It was believed that the soul, when called upon, came back to the place where the skull was kept to drive away disease and restore fertility.¹⁵

To tribes of head-hunters the keeping of heads and skulls, both of ancestors and of vanquished enemies, is bound up with shamans and practices involving contact with the world of the dead or the ancestors, harnessing their power and using it for the benefit of the tribe.¹⁶ In areas such as Nagaland, on the mountainous border between Burma and Assam, and certain parts of Africa, head-hunting became a highly developed part of the tribal culture, and the motives for taking heads were highly complex and different from region to region.¹⁷ At a basic level head-hunting is based upon the belief that the head contained magical powers of great potency, which could be transferred to those who possessed a head or skull severed from a body. Many head-hunting cultures practise agriculture, and there appears to have been a connection between the capture of heads, the growth of crops and the fertility of the tribe. Head-hunting also played a significant role in tribal politics, and in many areas was the primary driving force behind endemic village feuds. Additional incentives for the taking of heads were the prestige gained by successful warriors and the desire to avenge the losses of one's own clan by killing enemies and bringing heads home as trophies.

The taking of enemy heads was always surrounded by ritual, and the early Irish tales discussed in Chapter 3 are replete with stories of warriors feasting after a successful raid or battle where enemy heads are taken. Possession of heads was regarded as beneficial to the community, bringing good luck to the owner and fertility to the tribe and its lands. In another context, belief in the healing power of springwater dispensed from the skull of an ancestor survived in the

tradition of communities in Scotland, Wales and Ireland into the twentieth century, and may still continue today. Once again these traditions feature the motif of head or skull as a repository of power which could be magically transferred from the dead to the living and therefore utilised for the benefit of the present generation.

The guardian skull motif is distinctive within the context of British folk belief because of the perception that its roots lie in the survival during the recent past of disturbing primitive practices involving the preservation and manipulation of human bones for magical purposes. In modern Western society, the use of human body parts after death is strictly taboo and governed by statute law. Elsewhere in the world, traditional societies have continued to revere the bones of dead ancestors or heroes within a formal system of belief which retains its power today. Two recent stories featured in the national press amply illustrate the continuing strength of belief in ancestral skulls in parts of Africa and Australasia and their power to influence social and political systems in the present day. Although the beliefs involved in the following two examples originate in traditions which have developed outside Europe, they are directly relevant to this study because they demonstrate the universal nature of belief in the head as the seat of the soul, and the centre of magical powers which can be utilised in the present. Both stories involve shaman-type characters making a spiritual pilgrimage to Britain in order to reunite the revered head of an ancestor with his tribe thousands of miles away. This action, it was claimed, would bring peace and prosperity to the tribe and would put to rest disruption in the world of the spirits brought about as a direct result of the displacement of the head. This kind of belief is analogous to that surrounding the supernatural skulls of British tradition, with their connotations of ancestor worship. In effect, this is a version of the skull traditions on a grander scale, with a whole tribe of people playing the role of the house or family.

8.2.1. *The quest for King Hintsa's skull*

In February, 1996, Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcalecka flew into Britain from his homeland of South Africa on a quest to find the skull of an ancestor which he claimed was hidden in a British regimental museum. Chief Gcalecka, a businessman turned *sangoma* ("a traditional healer" or witch doctor) claimed that the spirits of his homeland had told him in a dream that the head of King Hintsa of the Xhosa tribe, his great great uncle, had been taken to Scotland, having been

severed as a trophy by a soldier from a Highland regiment at the beginning of the Sixth Frontier War in 1835. He said:

*“I was submerged in a river for 40 days and during that time I was told by the great snake [an ancestral spirit] that the head was in Scotland.”*¹⁸

Military records from the long-disbanded regiment based at Fort George determined that the king's corpse had been mutilated; they did not say how or by whom. According to Xhosa tradition, the body was left for the king's own people, but when discovered it was found to be headless, and the tribe assumed the head had been taken away as a military trophy by the British troops. The Chief claimed Hintsá had been betrayed to the British by the spirits of two ancestors, *Gcalecka* (a human) and *Nambo* (a snake), who were angry that Hintsá's brother Kawuta had usurped a throne that rightly belonged to *Gcalecka*'s eldest daughter Nomoukela. The chief maintained that if he could find the skull and return it to his ancestral lands in the Eastern Cape it would help bring harmony to his troubled homeland. He believed that Chief Hintsá's headless spirit “is wandering South Africa, causing crime and violence [and] only its union with Hintsá's body can end the cycle.”¹⁹ And more to the point, locating the skull would help his bid to inherit the king's title and estates. The Xhosa tribe, like many others in Africa and elsewhere, believe that the head contains the essence of the family, the tribe and its land, and so important was the quest that it was rumoured that President Nelson Mandela had helped to finance Chief *Gcalecka*'s trip to Britain. The British press made great play of the chief's traditional costume, but it seemed unlikely that the skull would be found after a number of regimental museums in Scotland denied knowledge of its existence. Captain Frank Ward of Army HQ Scotland doubted there was any truth behind the story of King Hintsá's decapitation, as records suggested that William Southey, the soldier who shot the chief as he tried to escape the battlefield, had “only cut off his ears.” Chief *Gcalecka* remained undeterred as he claimed “the spirit of the hurricane” had given him a clue about the location of the skull through a vision which came to him during a dream during his stay in the Highlands. This suggested the skull lay buried in a field beside a forest and a river, in which lived a white pony.

At this point, staff at Dingwall Museum remembered a local story about a skull which had been found on an estate at Mid Fearn, Ardgay, overlooking the Dornoch Firth. Farm estate owner Charles Brooke then produced a skull which had been kept on a shelf in an estate cottage for

sixty years. It had been dug up, he said, in a field next to the Dornoch Firth in which the family used to keep two white ponies. The skull even appeared to display a bullet hole in one side of the cranium. Mr Brook said:

“I had forgotten all about it until Dingwall Museum phoned me to tell me there was this African chief in the Highlands looking for a skull. The chief believes it is the correct skull and I am very pleased that he should have it.”²⁰

After examining the skull and meditating with the spirits of his tribe, the Chief declared it was the correct one.

“I have never been so happy in all my life...This is the moment I have been waiting for. I woke today singing and jumping with joy because I knew this was going to be the day the dream brought by the spirits came true.”²¹

Shortly after the triumphant return of the chief to his South African homeland with the skull, the Xhosa King Xoliliswe Sigcau declared the head was not that of his ancestor and refused to allow it be buried. It was given to tribal elders, who asked the University of Western Cape to run DNA tests on the bones, while the chief tried to obtain a court order to secure its return. Meanwhile, a newspaper in Scotland printed a letter from David McDonald, of Ardgay, who had examined the skull before it was taken to South Africa. He said the skull was found earlier this century buried in peaty soil near the remains of a monastic building believed to date from the time of the Pictish King Brude of Inverness, who was a Christian convert. He said the wound in the side of the skull did not exhibit the usual radial fracture that results from bone penetration by a bullet. Mr McDonald suggested that the skull was that of a monk who had been trepanned.²² When the DNA results were announced in August, Mr McDonald's conclusions were partially vindicated. It transpired that the skull was that of a middle-aged female of European extraction, and the hole was not the result of a bullet wound but had been made after death.²³

The quest for King Hintsu's skull illustrates the problem inherent in all the stories concerning magical and guardian skulls, namely the dichotomy between the traditions themselves, and the actual provenance of the object which they surround. It also has analogies with the British traditions which suggest that heirloom skulls are those of negro slaves and murdered soldiers.

In the small number of cases where the skulls have been examined by pathologists or archaeologists, it has been shown the gender and age of the specimen do not support these claims. In the case of the Bettiscombe legend, the “negro” skull belonged to a European female, and its condition suggested it was of prehistoric date. An important factor in the growth of the stories is often the use of the skulls as objects of continuity which can be utilised by individual families or individuals for their own socio-political ends, as the story of the King Hintsá’s skull demonstrates very clearly. Similar machinations may lie behind the invention of romantic histories to explain the origins of skulls like that of Dickie in Derbyshire and the skull at Wardley Hall in Lancashire, discussed in Chapter 7. Here elaborate legends of murders appear to have been invented both to draw visitors to the home of the skull, and in the Wardley case to provide an acceptable story to distract attention away from its true origin as the relic of a Catholic martyr.

8.2.2. *The quest for Yagan’s head*

In this example, there was no doubt about the provenance of the head which was the subject of a spiritual quest. One year after Chief Gcalecka returned to his African homeland, a second tribal leader arrived in Britain on a mission to retrieve the head of an ancestor which had been lost in a colonial war, this time in Australia.²⁴ The leader of this quest, Ken Colbung, claims direct descent from Yagan Kaat, a shaman and warrior of the Bibulum people who inhabit land near the Swan River near Perth in Western Australia. Yagan led resistance to the British colonial settlers and mediated in several disputes before 1833 when he was killed in battle with Imperial troops. According to Aboriginal tradition, he was decapitated and the severed head was smoked and brought back to England as a “souvenir” by Lieutenant Robert Dale in 1834. He attempted to sell the trophy head but when a buyer failed to materialise he presented it to the Liverpool Royal Institution, who later donated the curio to Liverpool City Museum.²⁵ In 1964 the decaying head was packed in a wooden box and buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave in Everton Cemetery. Four years later the remains of twenty stillborn children, including two who lived for less than twenty hours, were buried in a mass grave above the box containing Yagan’s head. In subsequent years it seems a tradition had grown up among the Bibulum which suggested the head must be recovered and reburied with the body. Colbung claimed that in the

1950s tribe had given him the task of finding the head, with the express intention of its being brought back to his homeland for a ceremonial burial with full Aboriginal ritual. He said:

“This is a spiritual matter. We believe in reincarnation, and it is necessary for us to have the remains of a great leader reunited, so all of us can share the strength of our departed elders.”²⁶

Aboriginal tradition holds that if the head is not buried with the torso, the body will continue to walk the earth, and cannot return to the spirit world or be reincarnated. As a result, Aboriginal elders believed that Yagan’s spirit continued to wander his homeland, and the return of the head was necessary for the tribe to become spiritually whole. Colbung managed to locate the buried head and in December 1993 he began the process of applying to the British authorities for permission to exhume it. A year later the Home Office said Mr Colbung’s application had been refused because unconditional consent for disturbance of children’s remains was required before the unmarked grave could be opened, and this had been received from just one of many relatives.²⁷ Undeterred, Colbung arrived in Britain in May, 1997, at the British Government’s expense after Australian politicians kept up pressure for the return of the head, and appealed directly to the relatives. He said:

“I would suggest to them that their children have made an uninterrupted voyage to their spiritual abode, but because the head is separate from the torso, Yagan cannot enter the spirit world.”²⁸

Finally in August that year, bowing to pressure from the Australian authorities, the Home Office agreed to the request for Yagan’s head to be exhumed, just days before the Australian Government withdrew funding for Colbung’s quest. By this time the skull had been located by sonar scan and disinterred from the cemetery on August 14 without disturbing the other remains which lay above it. However, a delay between the removal of the skull and its presentation to the Aborigine delegation had led one of the elders, Robert Bropho, to claim this had brought sickness on his people and a heart attack scare he suffered while in Britain. He was quoted as saying:

“The head has got to be buried straight away and buried properly or there will be more and

more sickness.”²⁹

The skull, wrapped in a kangaroo cloak or *booka*, returned to Australia by air on September 1 in the custody of Ken Colbung, in the midst of further controversy. Another rival tribal elder, who claimed to be Yagan’s oldest living relative, had by this stage taken out an injunction to prevent the head from returning to Australia, claiming Colbung’s delegation had turned the whole affair into a “circus” and that the tradition about the head having to be reunited with the body had been made up.³⁰ Further controversy was caused when Colbung claimed the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, which happened on the same day the skull returned to Australian soil, was spiritually linked to Yagan’s decapitation. Within a day of this claim appearing in the Australian Press, a life-size bronze statue of Yagan in Perth was decapitated and the head stolen, and Bropho was forced to issue an appeal to the Aboriginal population for calm, fearing a retaliation against European statues like that of Queen Victoria in the same city.³¹

As a direct development from the saga of Yagan’s head, it was noted that the preserved head of a Maori man had also been exhumed from the grave in Everton Cemetery during the search. As a result, Tau Henare, New Zealand’s Maori Affairs Minister, and four other Maoris planned a visit to Britain to retrieve around two hundred tattooed heads of Maori warriors acquired by museums across the country during the nineteenth century.³² Once again, this trip was set to be supported by Government funds. One of the Maori heads set to be returned to New Zealand was formerly displayed in the ethnography section at Weston Park Museum in Sheffield, South Yorkshire.³³ At some point in the 1980s it was removed following a complaint from a member of the public, who was “disturbed” at seeing the “highly sacred” object on open display. Thereafter, it was kept in a storeroom until 1996 when museum staff asked the City Council’s Leisure Services Committee for approval for it to be returned to New Zealand. Little is known about the exhibit other than it came to the city before 1870 as part of a collection of the Sheffield Literary and Philosophical Society. But in Maori tradition, tattooed heads were either trophies from head-hunting expeditions, or the sacred remains of ancestors preserved by families.³⁴ Such heads were highly sacred and were never intended for public viewing. Trophy heads of enemies were dried and preserved so that tattoo marks and facial features remained recognisable. In the nineteenth century this led to a revival of head-hunting in New Zealand, when tattooed heads became desirable curios, and demand in Europe for Maori trophies led “pickled heads”

becoming a regular article of ships' manifests. Weston Park Museum's keeper of archaeology, Julian Parsons, said the return of the head was desirable because of the change in museum ideology in recent years. He said that museums in Britain had now come to terms with the often sensitive nature of their collections, particularly those containing human remains from other cultures. The drafting of recent codes of ethics from the Museums Association has emphasised the rights of indigenous peoples in respect of ownership of human remains. And he argued that:

*"...while public display may be acceptable in our culture, the remains may be restricted to the close family according to Maori tradition and the fact the head is over one hundred years old makes no difference."*³⁵

Subsequently, the museum made contact with the New Zealand High Commission who agreed to transport the head back to a repository in the islands:

"...where items of this nature are stored in a culturally appropriate manner and where the correct ceremonies can be carried out."

Newspaper reports observed how the cultural sensitivity surrounding the head was so great that museum staff would not allow a photograph of the object, and access to it was being restricted to people "observing the appropriate customs and agreements." In a report to the Committee it is emphasised:

*"The head is of a highly sensitive nature and therefore it is required that certain ceremonies are carried out."*³⁶

8.3. Ancestral skulls and the restless dead

There are intriguing parallels to be drawn between the traditions and practices surrounding the guardian skulls of British folklore and those concerning sacred heads from African and Australian contexts discussed above. Both emphasise the beneficial influence of heads when treated with respect and preserved within the boundaries of their specific threshold, whether that be the house or the tribe. They also illustrate how so many of these stories grow up around the skulls of famous or powerful people, be they notorious murderers, priests or tribal leaders,

even when the myth is exploded by scientific analysis. It seems that folk traditions like these appear as a result of people's desire to believe, a similar background or set of circumstances which surround the British guardian skull legends.

These kinds of beliefs seem to be related to the universal fear of the restless dead and the existence of traditional techniques to manipulate the world of the spirits for the benefit of the living. Disturbances created by the separation of the head from the body are an established motif in the traditions of peoples across the globe. The existence of this kind of belief during the prehistoric period could explain the evidence for the separate burial of the head known from the Iron Age and Romano-British era in Britain, known as cephalotaphy (see Chapter 3).³⁷ In some cases, such as the discovery of the head of Worsley Man in northwest Britain, elaborate methods involving a gruesome triple death had been used to despatch the victim before his head was buried in a remote area, possibly to neutralise any harm which his ghost could inflict upon the living. In this and other instances it is possible the heads are those of sacrificial victims, with the most important part of the body, the head, offered to the underworld gods. Archaeologists who have examined the remains of decapitated skeletons from a Romano-British context in Wessex have suggested the beheading process was part of a very specific ritual connected with witchcraft. Bodies from the Lankhills Cemetery at Winchester dating from the fourth century AD had been decapitated very carefully from the front with a knife, with care taken where the vertebra were severed, and the heads placed between the legs in the grave. Most of the bodies were of elderly women, but later groups from Alcester and Springhead in Kent were those of infants and a ten year old girl. Miranda Green suggests that ritual decapitation was utilised in this context because of:

"...an increased anxiety that the dead might not reach the Otherworld unless helped by certain ritual practices."³⁸

In the case of the elderly women, a number were buried without the lower jaw, and bodies were accompanied by spindle-whorls, suggesting the existence of a method to prevent the women talking or casting spells after death. Here ritual decapitation could have been used either to speed the victim's journey to the Otherworld and ensure they did not linger to make mischief on earth, or was a method of anchoring the spirit of dead witches to a boundary position away from the town or village where their spirits could roam and cause mischief. The "bog bodies" recovered

from parts of northern Europe, and Lindow in north Britain, may be good examples of this practice. In traditions from Europe listed by McCullough, the removal of the head of a corpse was done specifically to prevent the ghosts from returning, “but possibly only in the case of dangerous persons or enemies.”³⁹ There are a number of early medieval references to this practice from Albania, Lithuania and West Prussia where:

“...to prevent a dead member of the family from inflicting disease on the living, his coffin was opened and his head cut off.”⁴⁰

The Reverend J.C. Atkinson recorded a similar tradition from North Yorkshire in the late nineteenth century. In this case the method of dealing with the corpse of a “doer of some atrocious deed” was to sever the head from the body, and place it between the legs or under the arm within the coffin.⁴¹ It is possible this kind of tradition lies at the root of the stories surrounding headless ghosts which haunt certain places looking for their lost heads, or carrying their heads in classic fashion beneath their arms, which are common in Britain, American and Indian folk tradition. In one instance from Gloucestershire, a headless ghost was believed to haunt a field, and in the same location a body with a head lying beside its thigh was found.⁴² Baughman lists fifteen separate versions of the headless ghost story in his index of English and American folktales.⁴³ These stories emphasise the head as being the most important part of the body, and the home of the malignant spirit plaguing the living. This kind of belief may explain traditions like that surrounding Peg O’Neill, the name of a spirit said to inhabit a well in the grounds of Waddow Hall in Lancashire, who was blamed for all evil and mischance which befell the house and was personified in the form of a stone statue of woman. When a man was knocked from his horse crossing the River Ribble near the well, the owner of the house blamed Peg and in a fit of fury decapitated the statue with an axe. Thereafter the head was kept in an attic in the hall.⁴⁴

Separation of head from body in some instances had the effect of preventing the easy passage of the dead from this world into the world of spirits, and anchored the soul in limbo midway in a position between two worlds where it was able to act equally in both. Parallels can be drawn here with the guardian skull traditions where the heads of murder victims, foundation sacrifices and ancestors remain unburied above ground, anchoring their spirits between worlds, as servants and guardians of the family when treated with respect, but as sources of supernatural

fury if ritual and taboo are violated. Additionally, carved representations of heads have been fixed in places of spiritual danger to fulfil a parallel role, watching over boundary positions such as doorways, bridges and wells at gateways where the Otherworld could be accessed or kept at bay.

Evidence from both written and oral tradition in Britain, reviewed in Chapter 6, suggests that elements of archaic beliefs connected with ancestors and the world of the spirit lie behind many head-related customs found in British folklore. Belief in the protective powers of ancestral spirits is personified in the form of a human heads, carved in stone or wood, built into the fabric of a building, or marking a boundary. The heads, with their blank stares, were also the gateway between the family and the Otherworld and the means whereby interaction could take place between the two. These beliefs were highly developed in the stories surrounding the guardian skulls, which are remarkably consistent and survived literally centuries of upheavals in farms and houses where owners and occupiers were frequently on the move. Their presence was never threatened as long as the cultural and social taboos surrounding their power in local belief remained strong. When the oral traditions of the society which produced them began to weaken, the reasons for the skull's presence faded in the memory of later generations. It was then and only then that guardian skulls could be effectively removed, exorcised or generally forgotten. A good example of this process are the traditions surrounding the skull of Dickie o'Tunstead in the Derbyshire Peak District, which are the most thoroughly documented of all the stories recorded in Chapter 7. This skull remained in the ownership of a single family for a period of between three and four hundred years in a region where oral tradition remained a strong influence upon communities in spite of the changes which accompanied the Industrial Revolution. As late as 1938, when folklorist Christina Hole visited Tunstead, she was told that the last of the male line of the Dixons, who owned the farm where the skull had been kept, continued their belief in and respect for their ancestral guardian.⁴⁵ However, between the death of Sam Dixon and the passing of the farm into the hands of tenants and then owners from outside the district during the 1950s, a substantial change occurred in the tradition which sustained the skull in its accustomed place in the farm. In the 1980s, Margaret Bellhouse, who recorded stories about Dickie, observed how the majority of the older generation who believed in Dickie had died or moved away from the area.⁴⁶ My own fieldwork in the region, recorded in Chapter 7 during the 1990s, discovered this was indeed the case.⁴⁷

Interesting parallels can be drawn between the fate of Dickie and the sacred tattooed head of the Maori at Sheffield Museum, which was carefully and respectfully returned to its owners on the other side of the world for disposal by traditional methods. These stories demonstrate how the survival of physical manifestations of belief systems which the skulls represent are reliant upon the existence of the social background, rooted in oral tradition, which created and sustained their socio-psychological context. Traditions like these wax and wane, as the Dickie story amply illustrates, and the reasons for the presence of the skull on that Derbyshire farmyard windowsill were almost completely forgotten within one generation of the death of the family whose ancestral guardian it had become.

8.4. Summary

Written accounts of guardian skulls date from no earlier than the seventeenth century, a time which John Billingsley has associated with a revival in the use of the head motif in folk art and tradition in the north of England.⁴⁸ Additionally, there is a large body of evidence from archaeology, insular tradition and folklore concerning the use of human skulls as magical or protective talismans in the British Isles and Europe which can be traced back as far as the Palaeolithic era, which were discussed in Chapter 3. Many of the later legends refer to heads as well as skulls and it is accepted that the two are often interchangeable and continuous, a head being a prerequisite, necessary before a skull can be obtained either through natural or ritual processes.

In view of the evidence of tradition presented in previous chapters, it is clear that the tradition of carving heads in stone and placing them in the structure of a building developed directly out of the custom of preserving human skulls as talismans within the fabric of the homestead. This changeover appears to have happened during the Romano-British period when, as Peter Salway suggests, in Britain the taking of head was outlawed by the Roman authorities.⁴⁹ At the same time the presence of artisans, coupled with new stone carving skills imported by the Romans into Britain during the first and second centuries AD, gave renewed vigour and stimulus to the native tradition, resulting in the production of stone heads, possibly as skeuomorphic substitutes for real trophy skulls. This changeover is depicted in its most arresting fashion in the pre-Roman Celto-Ligurian temples of southern Gaul, particularly at Entremont and

Roquerpertuse, where both trophy skulls and carved stone heads, perhaps representing both severed heads and tribal gods, were found side by side.⁵⁰

The positioning of skulls in archaeological contexts is also relevant to the later discussion of guardian and “screaming skulls” in the oral tradition. In Iron Age and Romano-British contexts there is evidence that skulls played a part in both secular and religious practices; for instance, trophy skulls were placed on poles above the entrances to the hillforts at Bredon Hill, Worcestershire, Stanwick in North Yorkshire and possibly at Glastonbury in Somerset (see Chapter 3). While the position of these skulls could be seen to represent a purely martial display, the same cannot be said for the single skulls buried in pits and the boundary ditches of hillforts like Danebury, which would seem to have been placed as foundation deposits or symbolic guardians of vulnerable spatial and spiritual boundaries. At the Celto-Ligurian temple of Roquepertuse in Provence entrance pillars had specially carved niches, each of which contained a human skull.⁵¹ The positioning of heads on doorways, entrances and boundaries is continued into the Roman period with the production of Gorgon heads and roof tile antefixa, and again in the middle ages with the use of heads, grotesques and gargoyles in a protective fashion within the structure of churches and cathedrals. Here the head symbol is employed in a native context for protective or apotropaic reasons. The archaeological evidence for the use of heads and skulls in this fashion is persuasive and prolific and has been fully explored in Chapters 3 and 6.

Similarly there are links between the positioning and use of guardian skulls and the functions performed by stone heads in the Brigantian tradition of north Britain, described in Chapters 4-6. They are placed in similar positions in architecture, for example by the hearth, in the gable, over doorways and above entrances to watch over and protect the structures from evil. Questions of age and provenance aside, what they both have in common is the guardianship of the luck of the house. This is emphasised by the surviving evidence of oral tradition concerning skulls gathered during the fieldwork for this study. One fragment of oral tradition collected during my fieldwork concerns the use of human skulls in the High Peak district of Derbyshire. One informant described how her grandfather and a friend, around the turn of the present century, had been asked to level an ancient mound at a hamlet near Glossop, in preparation for the construction of a new building with a large greenhouse. This particular piece of land had “a reputation” in the local tradition and was avoided. During the work, the pair found a flat copper sword and human

bones, including two complete skulls. Disturbed by the discovery, they consulted local people who advised them to cast the sword back into the River Etherow “because you mustn’t take from the Old Ones.” Their advice on the disposal of the skulls was to build them into a significant part of the new house, with the words “put it up in the eaves of the house, that’s the place for skulls.” The owner of the new cottage subsequently built a twenty foot long greenhouse on the site of the mound, and hung the skulls below the projecting roof at either end of the building “for luck.”⁵²

The theme underlying the majority of these traditions is the beneficial, or at least neutralising, effects if the skull is not disturbed but treated respectfully, and used within the strict prohibitions which surround them. It has been demonstrated how similar guardian or “lucky” functions, like those associated with the skulls documented in this chapter, are equally associated with carved stone heads, particularly from north Britain. In the case of the stone heads, it appears that many of these have been deliberately carved or acquired specifically for use in the same manner as the skulls in the story from Glossop, Derbyshire, were put.

Arguments have raged in academic circles as to whether or not this body of evidence and narrative constitutes proof of a “head cult” in the British Isles. Even those archaeologists who have expressed an interest in the subject of ritual, magic and folklore have kept their distance. Ralph Merrifield, for instance, whose book, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, is a classic text on the interrelationship between the two subjects, fails to mention guardian human skulls kept in dwellings.⁵³ Despite this apparent ignorance by professionals of both the skull stories themselves and their possible archaeological context, the evidence collected during the current research argues for long continuity in the magical and ritual use of the human skull within British folk tradition. Whether this constitutes “a cult” or not is immaterial. Belief has been invested in the iconography and powers of heads and skulls and this has been transmitted over two thousand years of religious and cultural change. The British skull traditions and the international stories we have examined demonstrate the long continuation and universal nature of this kind of belief among human societies at many levels of cultural development.

The final chapter will draw together the themes from the preceding chapters to present a series of conclusions about the role played by the symbol of the human head in British folklore.

- ¹ Meslin, p. 220.
- ² Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* , p. 175.
- ³ Barbara Smith, *Padley Chapel* (Doncaster: Bessacarr Publications, 1990), p. 15.
- ⁴ Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death* (London: Reaktion Books/Victoria and Albert Museum , 1986), p. 9.
- ⁵ Chris Moreton and Ceri-Louise Thomas, *The Mystery of the Crystal Skulls* (London: Thorsons, 1997), pp.227-37.
- ⁶ Ross and O'Connell, 55.
- ⁷ Ibid., 57.
- ⁸ Bunting, p.6.
- ⁹ Merrifield, p.50.
- ¹⁰ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* , pp.50-82.
- ¹¹ Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *The Secret Country* , pp.191-217.
- ¹² McCullough, pp. 534-35.
- ¹³ Ibid., p.536.
- ¹⁴ James Roscoe, *The Baganda : an account of their native customs and beliefs* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p.282.
- ¹⁵ McCullough, p.536.
- ¹⁶ Meslin, pp. 221-25.
- ¹⁷ T.C. Hodson, 'Head-hunting among the hill tribes of Assam', *Folklore*, 20 (1909), 131-41.
- ¹⁸ Andy Roberts and David Clarke, 'They lost their heads but now they've found them', *Fortean Times* , 87 (1996),16.
- ¹⁹ ' Witch doctor on head-hunt trip,' *Yorkshire Post* , 15 February 1996.
- ²⁰ Erlend Clouston, 'Xhosa chief loses head but finds the spirits willing,' *Guardian* , 22 February 1996.
- ²¹ Ausian Cramb, 'African witchdoctor finds head of his tribe,' *Daily Telegraph* , 24 February 1996.
- ²² *Fortean Times* , 93 (1996),15.
- ²³ *Aberdeen Press and Journal* , 1 March 1996.
- ²⁴ *Fortean Times* , 101 (1997),15.
- ²⁵ ' Aborigines plead for return of ancestor's head,' *Yorkshire Post* , 12 May 1997.
- ²⁶ ' Mission to regain head of Aborigine ancestor,' *Yorkshire Post* , 21 May, 1997.
- ²⁷ Maev Kennedy, 'Tribal plea for leader's head,' *Guardian*, 21 May, 1997.
- ²⁸ *Fortean Times* , 105 (1997), 20.
- ²⁹ *Yorkshire Post* , 6 October 1997.
- ³⁰ *Fortean Times*, 105 (1997), 20.
- ³¹ *Guardian*, 8 September 1997.
- ³² *Fortean Times*, 105 (1997), 20.
- ³³ Personal communication from Julian Parsons, 21 October 1996.
- ³⁴ Meslin, p.223.
- ³⁵ 'Museum to return human remains,' *Yorkshire Post*, 23 October 1996.
- ³⁶ Peter Kay, 'Sacred head goes home,' *Sheffield Telegraph* , 25 October 1996.
- ³⁷ See also recently discovered Iron Age burial of an elaborately bound female body wearing an elaborate lead torc found in a burial pit at Brackmills, Northampton. Andy Chapman, 'Brackmill, Northampton: An early Iron Age torc,' *Current Archaeology*, 159 (September 1998), 92-95.
- ³⁸ Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* , p.78.
- ³⁹ McCullough, p.537.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Atkinson, *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish* , p.217.
- ⁴² McCullough, p. 536.

⁴³ Baughman, pp. 171-72.

⁴⁴ Mark McCann and Gareth J. Medway, 'The Mount of Vision', in *Fortean Studies*, Vol. 4, (ed.) Mike Dash (London: John Brown Publishing, 1998), p.115.

⁴⁵ Hole, *Haunted England*, p.47.

⁴⁶ Oral tradition, collected from Margaret Bellhouse, Combs, Derbyshire, 12 April 1993.

⁴⁷ Personal communication from Edith Foster, 30 June 1996.

⁴⁸ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, pp.3-16.

⁴⁹ Salway, p. 691.

⁵⁰ Benoit, pp. 226-59.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.228.

⁵² Oral tradition collected from Pat Ellison, Hollingworth, Glossop, 2 November 1993.

⁵³ Merrifield, p.50-52.

Chapter 9:

Conclusions



“...the continuity of a cultural tradition is unconscious; those who live in it need not be explicitly aware of its existence. The continuity of tradition is the continuity of the force by which past experiences affect the future; and this force does not depend on the conscious memory of those experiences.”

Collingwood and Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* .¹

9.1. Introduction

This study began as a project to collect and analyse tradition and folklore surrounding the symbol of the human head in British folklore. The aim was to use the findings of fieldwork and research to draw conclusions about the age and origins of belief in the human head as a sacred symbol in the British Isles. The material drawn upon to reach these conclusions was gathered from a variety of sources, including archaeological evidence, surviving documentary material, folk tradition and personal narrative. The research began with the intention of using an existing data base, the Sidney Jackson card index, as a foundation from which to explore traditions associated with one aspect of the material, namely carved stone heads. However, the shortcomings of this source soon became evident. As a result the Jackson material was utilised as a secondary source, alongside other supplementary material during the course of research to produce an original database of new material in the form of case studies. These original studies used both secondary and primary material collected in the field to examine two aspects of folk tradition associated with the head in British folklore: 1) traditions associated with carved stone heads, specifically in one particular regional zone, and 2) guardian skull traditions. Related carving traditions such as the Green Man, the use of animal heads and skulls for ritual or apotropaic purposes, and the use of human and animal masks in British folklore, require their own in-depth studies and have been mentioned only in a most general fashion here.

It became abundantly clear from the outset that the subject of the head was a vast one and could not be studied from the viewpoint of one discipline alone. The subject encompassed a large volume of evidence, ranging from skulls excavated from archaeological sites, to carved stone heads of a variety of different dates in a variety of different contexts. Included with this overview are the appearance of head symbolism in vernacular architecture, and diverse symbolism within church architecture spanning more than one thousand years which includes such disparate but parallel imagery as the Green Man, Sheela-na-gigs, grotesques and gargoyles. This research collected a range of material from many sources and achieved an insight into the origin and overall social context of traditions associated with the head as symbol within an evolving folk tradition, which previous studies had hitherto overlooked. Earlier studies had examined the subject from the confined perspectives of archaeology, Celtic studies and art history, whereas this research approached the material in a multi-disciplinary manner.

The results were then analysed within the context of claims which have been made for the existence of a "Celtic" head cult, and the claims for continuity of head veneration from paganism to Christianity, which were discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapters 3 and 4 collated the evidence for the veneration of the head from the very earliest times to the dawn of recorded history, both from the material remains of archaeology to documentary records and the surviving folk tradition. This survey demonstrated the earliest evidence for ritual surrounding the human head or skull dates from the Paleolithic era more than 30,000 years ago when modern humans migrated from the Continent into the British Isles. By the Neolithic period, almost five thousand years ago, the use of skulls in organised rituals or ceremonies is well documented in the archaeological record. It is to the first five hundred years BC in Europe that we must then look for the origins of the "Celtic" style of carved head which has dominated so much of the discussion about this subject in recent years. From the Bronze Age and the subsequent Iron Age appear the original "cult heads," both carved in stone and depicted in the beautiful emerging art-style in metalwork which was primarily of a religious nature. Here the head can be seen in a variety of religious contexts as representative of the supernatural, and as a symbol of communication with the world of the dead, either in the form of a deity itself or in the form of a messenger or medium of communication with the Otherworld. As the Iron Age moves into the period of Roman occupation in Britain, there is plentiful evidence for the depiction of the head in "ritual" or magical contexts, including trophy skulls, the votive offering of heads in springs, wells and ritual shafts, and cephalotaphy, the individual burial of the head. This period coincides with the appearance of the early written evidence in the form of the writings of the Graeco-Roman authors and the early Irish sagas, the latter *underlying* the role of the head as the seat of the soul, a symbol of the supernatural, possessing protective power and everything that was good and worthy in an individual warrior or divine being.

Folk traditions surrounding the use and veneration of the head in a variety of contexts were collected both from secondary sources and directly from the living oral tradition of areas including Yorkshire and the Peak District where the fieldwork was focussed, and these were discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Initially the research drew upon the material collected by Jackson in West Yorkshire and Petch in northwest England, but these listings of sculpture were of marginal use in the discussion of these artefacts within the context of folklore. It also became clear that conclusions about the date and origins of these traditions could not be presented

without reference to the archaeological evidence and the ethnographic background which have given rise to these beliefs. In a field where certainties about dating and provenance are few, the archaeological and historical evidence relating to the use of heads in ritual contexts proved to be important in the construction of an empirical base. Archaeology is important in helping to provide clues towards the age and context of the material evidence but it cannot explain how and why people held, and continue to hold, exotic beliefs about the supernatural power of the head. Even during the present century, when technology has developed to a level where it has become possible for scientists to explain the origin of the universe in mathematical equations, people continue to hold strange, and some would argue, irrational superstitious beliefs. The growth of scientific reason in the West has coincided with the decay of organised religion, which in turn has been accompanied by an equivalent rise of interest in the occult and belief in a wide range of phenomena from ghosts to reincarnation. In an increasingly secular society, belief in the existence of aliens, spirits of the dead, gods and goddesses or other supernatural powers provides a means by which the latent human requirement for a greater power "out there" can be realised. Belief in the supernatural world and life after death can be used to provide comfort and security for both individuals and whole societies and legitimise social systems in this world. These influences can be seen at work in the Neolithic cult of ancestors, the medieval cult of relics, and the desire to communicate and receive protection from ancestral spirits which remains as strong today as it was in the past.

The evidence collected in Chapter 6 demonstrated how belief systems continue to grow up around carved stone heads which can be shown to have been carved within the present century. These beliefs are influenced by the present culture and are often defined by the media and society, where these kind of artefacts are habitually associated with Celtic cults or ancient curses. The psychological factors which have influenced this process lie outside the remit of the present research, but would undoubtedly be productive for further study. I have approached the material from the viewpoint of a historian and an archaeologist, collecting evidence for a multi-disciplinary investigation of the beliefs which surround the human head in British folk tradition. Sociologists, psychologists or anthropologists could approach the material from their own disciplines but none would be able to explain the central question of why people believe there is spiritual or supernatural power associated with the severed human head.

The multitude and continually evolving nature of the head traditions were emphasised by the

guardian skull material collected during fieldwork for Chapter 7. This research is the first to study and categorise the skulls as an important and overlooked motif which runs like a thread through British folk tradition and has direct parallels with the stone head material. The use of both groups of artefacts can be viewed as a folk tradition which has developed from the archaeological context discussed earlier, and continues to grow as the relationships between both written and oral traditions evolve in the present day. The skull traditions have connotations of ancestor worship, and their use as apotropaic talismans or guardians of the threshold is analogous to the function of stone heads and other manifestations of the head found in archaeological contexts. The actual age and origin of the skulls themselves, as in the case of the stone heads, appear to be incidental to their role in an evolving and active tradition.

By adopting the multidisciplinary approach discussed in Chapter 2, the study has investigated how skulls and heads have been used both in original and secondary contexts for a wide range of ritual and superstitious reasons. Additionally, the current research has demonstrated how these have become intertwined in rumour and legend to produce a continuum of evolving belief in strange and supernatural powers associated with heads and skulls which permeates British folk tradition. A comprehensive delineation of purpose and meaning behind the human usage of artefacts, even when they are only a few hundred years old, is a difficult exercise. It involves attempting to enter another culture or mindset which has no direct parallel in the present day. Therefore we can attempt only a partial understanding of the significance and meaning which lies behind the use of these skulls and stone heads, drawing upon ethnographic parallels from peoples in other parts of the world where broadly similar traditions continue to flourish. The truth, if any ultimate truth can be said to reside within this collection of stories and beliefs, probably lies in a concatenation of all the factors mentioned above. The surface had barely been scratched before the current research began, and many other heads, skulls and connected beliefs and traditions associated with them are certain to come to light in years to come. However, the existing body of knowledge about these artefacts is unlikely to be increased significantly until the surviving examples are studied more closely, and perhaps subjected to the ultimate test of carbon dating, in the case of the skulls. In addition, a more comprehensive study is required to thoroughly investigate the themes and motifs related to these artefacts, the history of the residences to which they are attached and the oral traditions which surround them. Until this time the ultimate purpose of the mysterious skulls will continue to remain as enigmatic as their

presence.

9.2. "Celtic" heads: fact or fiction?

It is more than a quarter of a century since Bradford Museum's curator Sidney Jackson published the first in a planned series of booklets illustrating the many carved Celtic-style stone heads he had recorded in West Yorkshire during the 1960s. Unfortunately Jackson died shortly after his booklet appeared in 1973,² and the study of these enigmatic, and hitherto unnoticed, artefacts appeared likely to fade into obscurity once again. Despite the general disinterest displayed by academia since Jackson's time hundreds, if not thousands, of similar examples have been recorded not only in Yorkshire, but in the Peak District and other areas of northern England as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Although few can be dated accurately they were quickly labelled "Celtic heads" by popular writers because of their similarity to other artefacts of unquestionable Celtic provenance from continental Europe. Initially Jackson believed he had stumbled upon direct evidence for the survival of Celtic culture in the Pennines, leading to the growth of a system of classification which was popularised mainly by Anne Ross in her influential writings during the 1960s. During the course of his survey Jackson criticised the attitude of archaeologists whom he claimed had failed to recognise the importance and antiquity of the many carvings hidden in fieldwalls and farmhouses across the north of England and further afield. Archaeologists have to work from empirical evidence and, as the crudely carved stone heads could rarely be dated securely they were never likely to be taken seriously. Furthermore, the study of "Celtic heads" was further tainted by the twin connotations of the lack of a secure context and the existence of many unscientific fringe beliefs surrounding them, factors which largely deterred archaeological interest in the subject until very recently. Furthermore, the study of stone heads suffered during the subsequent reaction against the Celtic interpretation of British prehistory, which viewed the subject of "Celtic heads" as one example of the use of ambiguous evidence to support one particular viewpoint of the past constructed in the present. This in turn led some writers to go so far as to claim there was no evidence for a "Celtic head cult" outside southern France.³ Subsequently, the study of the carved heads languished in borderland territory touching, but never exclusively occupying, a range of social sciences and disciplines ranging from folklore and ethnology to archaeology and art history.

The writings of Brears and Billingsley were the first to firmly categorise and define the large number of stone heads recorded in the British Isles not as former pagan Celtic cult objects, but as works of folk art. This is not the same as saying that the instinctive urge which produced them did not ultimately have its roots in pre-Christian belief, only that the more recent products of the tradition cannot be regarded as evidence of direct continuity from a pagan Celtic cult in one specific period of prehistory. Rather, the head persists as a powerful symbol in European folk culture, cutting across space and time, phasing in and out of ritual behaviour over thousands of years. Even when divorced from its earlier pagan religious context, the head remained a repetitive theme of the magical and religious traditions of northwest Europe, with a long and chequered history stretching from the Palaeolithic era to the present. In this respect it certainly qualifies for Billingsley's claim that the head is: "...possibly the oldest and most potent symbol in human consciousness."⁴

The current research has demonstrated how a large number of the carved heads found in the region defined by the former British kingdom Brigantia and claimed to be "Celtic" were probably carved in the last three centuries, especially during the sixteenth century when the symbol underwent one of a series of revivals or resurgences in popular consciousness. Similar revivals can be discerned at other significant periods in proto-history, including the Romano-British era, the early middle ages and even the late twentieth century. All of these eras have seen a revival in the popularity of the head motif within the folk tradition as a symbol of continuity with the past at times of great religious and social stress, and change within society. Sociologist Paul Connerton has postulated the existence of a "social memory," based upon a collective recollection of the past:

*"...thus we may say that our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past...and our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order."*⁵

Connerton argued that cultural perceptions of the past are conveyed and sustained by a variety of non-inscribed ritual performances transmitted both in and as part of a tradition. The head symbol therefore continues as a powerful motif within the human mind, an image which appears to lie dormant within the popular consciousness until triggered by some social or psychological stimulus. It is this revival or resurgence of the symbol which has led Billingsley to suggest the term "archaic head" as a more appropriate and accurate description of the ongoing

carving tradition, although Martin Petch of Manchester Museum has put forward an alternative term: “heads of the Celtic tradition,” as many do indeed follow a tradition which has direct roots in Celtic art.

Traditions surrounding the head as a sacred or venerated object have their ultimate origin in beliefs about the cranium being both the seat of the soul and as such having the potential to act as a channel for communication with the Otherworld, the world of spirits and of the dead. Archaeology and the earliest written evidence suggest these beliefs were an important feature of the ritual life of the British tribes in the late Iron Age and the first thousand years AD, a tradition whose roots can be traced back to the Neolithic period of European prehistory (see Chapter 3). As this research has demonstrated, there is plentiful evidence to suggest that the indigenous peoples of the British Isles regarded the head as the most important bodily member over and above its more recent Celtic connotations, and within this general context it became a religious symbol whose significance can be compared with the use of the cross in a Christian context. Despite its symbolic position within pan-Celtic religion, claims for the existence of a specific “Celtic head cult” within the terms of the strict definition of a cult as “a system of religious worship”⁶ cannot be supported by archaeology. Riddel contended that the definition of the word *cult* was inappropriate within the study of stone heads from north Britain, arguing that words such as *cult* and *ritual* are terms which have been used to categorise material culture before we explain its meaning. She maintained that while heads were clearly an important feature of Romano-Celtic beliefs, they should not be used as evidence for “bizarre religious rites” but more as:

*“...part of the fabric of Romano-Celtic ritual behaviour, which in turn was part of the fabric of social existence.”*⁷

On this basis, claims for the existence of a Celtic cult of the head are an artefact of the narrow confines of “Celtic studies” to which the subject has been unfairly confined in the past, and which have been justifiably criticised by archaeologists in the backlash against the Celtic interpretation of prehistory. Significantly, any examination of the beliefs and mythology of other cultures reveals how the veneration of the head was and is certainly not exclusive to the “Celtic” tribes, as the symbol also appears in other Indo-European traditions, and in many related ethnographic contexts in other parts of the world, which were summarised in Chapter 8.

9.3. The head and the Otherworld

The study of the head symbol in a religious context requires a multidisciplinary approach such as that employed by this study which, given the organisation of academia with its strictly defined territories, students of folklore and ethnology are perhaps most likely to bring to this unique and multi-faceted subject area. Viewed from this standpoint, the head as a sacred symbol can be seen to have appeared in a wide range and variety of religious and cultic contexts since the stone age in Western Europe. Carved stone heads are clearly just one manifestation of this phenomenon, if not the most difficult to interpret. At other times and places the symbol is found in the form of the venerated skulls of ancestors to the stylised faces of Celtic art, from the grotesques and gargoyles of Romanesque and Gothic Christian architecture to the rustic folk art context in which the Pennine stone heads appear, and most recently in the evolving stories concerning “cursed” stone heads and supernatural traditions like that of the “screaming skull.” These disparate contexts suggest that Billingsley is correct in his conclusion that the head had a cultic role, “...within (and also, independently, beyond) a cult rather than being the cult itself.”⁸ However, there is evidence that at least some heads were indeed regarded as images of native deities, including pagan gods, goddesses, and *genius loci* which were worshipped, propitiated and venerated in their own right. The small but significant number of inscriptions carved on surviving cult heads directly associate them with some identifiable deities and there is even clearer archaeological evidence such as that provided by the carving from Caerwent, Wales, excavated at the centre of a unmistakable native shrine of the late Roman period.⁹ These clues suggest that heads may have performed a multitude of functions in different ritual contexts, sometimes overtly cultic and at other times merely functional, at the level of folk tradition or superstition, as a potent amulet or protection against evil. The most fruitful avenue for study of the manifestation of the head in a folklore context is the close association of the symbol with the world of the supernatural, both in terms of its recurring location in liminal or borderline positions within the landscape (for instance, entrances, bridges and doorways) and in its role in the many stories and legends which associate heads with spirits and the supernatural.

What has become clear from the analysis of the material from the British folk tradition is the continuation of belief in the power of the head as a protective and lucky symbol. As a result of its magical associations, surviving artefacts of this belief have attracted a rich and evolving body

of lore relating to supernatural phenomena. This kind of belief has survived and remains a living tradition among a number of communities during a time of scientific enlightenment, a phenomenon which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6. Although this study does not approach the subject from the point of view of psychology, there is clearly much of interest for this discipline among the beliefs and traditions which the fieldwork has revealed. This may offer possibilities for future investigation and specific lines of inquiry noted below. Summarising this important association Billingsley writes:

“...The human head and a rough all-encompassing rendition of it are one of the most powerful symbols of our link with the divine, and its longevity is a mark of its efficacy. Like any true and worthwhile symbol, in a simple image it holds a complex of meanings, and all of those seem to involve human contact with that dimension known variously as the unknown, the supernatural, the divine, the Otherworld or by any of a host of other names...”¹⁰

The evidence from the oral tradition collected during fieldwork for this research makes this fundamental association abundantly clear. The symbol of the severed head is inherently bound up with the human perception of the Otherworld, and in fact the head itself serves as a point of contact between the human and the supernatural world in the many stories and traditions collected throughout the British Isles. Ultimate questions about why the head was singled out above any other part of the body as a focus of these kind of beliefs must remain speculative, and fall within the realms of psychology and anthropology, but the evidence suggests that the head was perceived as the home of the human spirit or soul from the dawn of human evolution. As the most distinctive part of the human body, the head and face are a minimal denomination of humanity, the part of the physical body which most clearly singles us out as individuals, and is most likely to survive in memory or art after death. Furthermore, the head is the centre of our perception of the outside world, and the means by which we interpret our experience of that world, both through the five senses and through our encounters with the divine and the magical. As a result, the head itself can be seen as a symbol for our communication with both this world and the uncharted Otherworld.

It is in this respect that the present research in particular has achieved more than any previous study of the symbol of the human head. For the first time, the function and purpose which lie behind the production of carved stone heads have been discussed in a context which utilises all

relevant information, from archaeology, and from written and oral tradition. In addition, prior to this research, no attempt had been made to collect together the skull guardian traditions from British folklore outside the popular writings which have touched upon the subject. The skull traditions in particular provide a focus for many beliefs and superstitions which have accrued around the head in folk tradition, and provided the most fruitful area of investigation for this research.

9.4. Suggestions for further study

This study has concentrated upon a small number of major themes in order to reach the roots of the symbol within British folk tradition. However, it has thrown up a number of related topics which would justify further research. These include the use of animal heads and skulls in ritual contexts both from archaeology and folk tradition and their links with the symbol of the human head. In addition, the role played by masks within the context of folk traditions and customs is another avenue which requires in-depth research and fieldwork. A comprehensive catalogue and survey of the vast number of head-related symbols within church architecture, including the great variety of grotesques, Green Man and related symbols is also required as a parallel study which would complement the findings of the present research into the variety and vitality of the head symbol within vernacular art.

Within the context of the human head itself, a thorough and comprehensive listing and discussion of carved stone heads and related sculpture in Britain still awaits completion before a further in-depth appraisal of the role which the symbol played in the first two millennia AD can be produced. So far there exist two extensive but little used card catalogues listing stone heads and related material. However, apart from the present study little effort has been made to synthesise and update the material, which exists without context or publication. A comprehensive catalogue of all extant material in Britain and Europe would be required before definitive conclusions about the different art styles and date of carvings could even begin to be formulated. Much could also be learnt from fieldwork in areas such as Scotland, Wales and Ireland where the existence of undocumented skull traditions is implied by the findings of the current research. This had led me to suspect that the tradition of keeping skulls and heads as guardians of the threshold may have been more widespread than the surviving stories at first

suggested. Further fieldwork will undoubtedly uncover other stories and traditions.

New archaeological excavations and techniques may provide further empirical evidence for head ritual in unambiguous contexts which will add to the understanding of prehistoric religious belief and ritual. For instance, although stone cannot be dated by methods currently available to archaeologists, microscopic analysis of the marks left by the tools used to carve stone heads may prove productive for dating purposes in the future. Close study of carvings may also reveal evidence such as traces of paint used to decorate sculptures, and traces of differential weathering which can provide clues concerning the use and positioning of the artefacts within an architectural context. In addition, osteological and carbon-dating techniques could be utilised as an empirical tool to date the surviving skulls which are associated with folk traditions, a process which has begun with two specimens from Dorset and has yielded surprising results.¹¹

9.5. Summary

Before the current research was undertaken, a comprehensive study of the human head as religious symbol within British folk tradition was not available. While plentiful material relating to different aspects of the subject can be found within literature, this is spread across a wide range of subject areas and disciplines and is not easily accessible to students of folklore.

Those who have investigated the veneration of the head from the disciplines of archaeology, ethnology or folklore studies have often failed to recognise its overall significance and use as religious symbol outside the confines of one particular cultural context or geographical region. The current research has for the first time collated and integrated information from archaeological, historical and traditional sources, and examined the many relationships apparent among all these different but often complementary pieces of information. This was achieved through the use of case studies to discuss the different manifestations of the symbol within British folk tradition and material culture, where heads appear in a variety of contexts and media, both carved in stone and depicted in pottery, metalwork and other materials.

This approach proved to be a particularly useful method of analysing the material, in view of the shortcomings of earlier studies. These based their approach upon outdated interpretations such as the concept of "Celtic religion" and "pagan survivals" as a means of explaining the appearance and distribution of head material within the archaeological and folklore record. The

approach adopted in the present study has avoided these pitfalls and allowed the material to be discussed on its own merits outside of any rigid classification such as those adopted by "Celtic studies." In particular, the gazetteer of guardian skull traditions in Britain, and the regional studies of stone head traditions, are unique as a result of the case study approach. This method has been utilised in the recent past, most notably by John Billingsley in his recent study of the head motif in West Yorkshire,¹² but this and previous analyses have been limited in scope and lacked the extensive overview provided by the current research.

The approach adopted here has demonstrated the importance of integrating evidence from both archaeological and folkloric contexts as a means of understanding and interpreting evidence of ritual and religion from the past. In the process, this system has highlighted the problems exposed by multidisciplinary studies of this kind. The most important of these are the limitations of the evidence itself, and difficulties faced when attempts are made in the present day to determine the meaning and significance of artefacts produced for ritual purposes in the past. While a number of general conclusions can be drawn concerning the use of the head in a variety of contexts and belief systems, many questions about the ultimate source, origin and nature of those beliefs will continue to remain unanswered until more evidence is available.

- ¹ R.G. Collingwood and J.N.L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.252.
- ² Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*.
- ³ Wait, p. 234.
- ⁴ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p.190.
- ⁵ Connerton, p.3.
- ⁶ *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 327.
- ⁷ Riddel, p.45.
- ⁸ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p.177.
- ⁹ Green, *Gods of the Celts*, p.218.
- ¹⁰ Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, p.189.
- ¹¹ Ross and O'Connell, 52-56.
- ¹² Billingsley, 'Archaic head carving in West Yorkshire.'

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Appendix 1

**Catalogue of archaic carved stone heads and related sculpture
in the Peak District.**

Introduction

This appendix contains details of 107 stone heads recorded during fieldwork between 1987 and 1998 in the Peak District. Heads and related carvings are listed in four general categories by date and context. These are: 1. Celtic or Romano-British; 2. Medieval secular; 3. Heads in the structure of churches; 4. Miscellaneous. This final category includes missing heads and those which fall outside the boundary of the Peak District.

Entries carry a prefix P for Peak District following a classification which can be cross-referenced to the footnotes in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 where heads are discussed in further detail. Where more than one head is recorded at the same location within a similar context, these examples are listed as one entry.

Entries are listed alphabetically within each category under the name of the nearest hamlet, village or town when *in situ*. Those currently housed in museums or heritage centres are listed under the parish understood to be their original provenance. Where no exact original location is known, an approximate location is given or it is stated that no exact provenance is known. Where the sculpture is *in situ*, or the original provenance is known, direct six-figure Ordnance Survey grid references are provided where possible. Where there is doubt a map reference is prefixed by the symbols ??

The Peak District is defined by the zone covered by the modern National Park, but a number of examples from areas bordering the Peak are included due to their affinities with the sample under analysis. Carvings listed are from the county of Derbyshire, unless otherwise indicated in parenthesis. Measurements are given in Imperial figures where obtained. The majority of carvings, particularly those *in situ* inside or outside buildings, remain inaccessible for accurate measurement and are entered in the gazetteer in the form of a general description.

CATEGORY 1. *Stone heads of Celtic and Romano-British dating*

P 1.

CASTLETON. Waterside Cottage. SK 148 827.

Found by Peter Harrison in garden rockery of Rose Cottage, Waterside, Castleton, in 1976. Built into garden wall overlooking Russett Well. Formerly loose in Peveril Castle? Face cut in light relief upon flat piece of fine-grained local sandstone. Features well-spaced, with prominent wedge-shaped nose, two large oval eyes, the left deliberately carved so as to depict a closed or “winking” eye. Simple slit mouth with lips. Iron Age or Roman??

On display, Weston Park Museum, Sheffield. On extended loan from Peter Harrison.

Derbyshire SMR 3350: Recorder Ken Smith, 1983; Petch, 1989.

On display, Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number Z 392. See Fig. 5.

P 2.

CHINLEY. Maynestone Road. SK 832 030.

Stone head with Roman influenced hair-style, originally from Red Mires, Chinley. Large oval eyes without pupils, double “spectacle” lids. Long, straight sided triangular nose from brow. Long slit mouth, elaborately carved ears with defined lobes. Traces of pink and blue paint on reverse. Features carved in Celtic style with later influence in hair and ears. Stands on a pedestal in garden of cottage at The Nook. Owner Marjorie Broadhurst. Possibly Roman, from fort at Brough, or later Victorian copy. Associated with water and is believed to bring good luck.

Manchester Museum card index; field visit February 1993. See Chapter 5, p. 280. In private ownership.

P 3.

DINTING. near Melandra Roman fort. SK 010 950 [approx].

Crudely-carved face two inches long upon a small rectangular whetstone. Local millstone grit. One end rounded the other broadens to form forehead of face. Eyes are almond-shaped, nose triangular and mouth a long straight slit in Celtic style. No history known.

Glynis Reeve, ‘A Celtic Whetstone?’ *Current Archaeology*, 124 (1991), 191.

On display, Glossop Heritage Centre, High Street, Glossop.

P 4.**HATHERSAGE.** Ranmoor Hill. SK 223 819

Freestanding head with elongated, bottle-shaped neck. Gritstone. Features in sharp relief, including hair and facial lines. Highly stylised eyes with double “spectacle” frames and drilled pupils. Elongated rectangular nose and deep slit mouth. Elaborate hairstyle drawn back behind skull dated to third century AD. Possibly originally from site of Roman fort at Brough in Hope Valley?? Found in garden soil by Mr Mountfield in 1960s.

Stephen Fliegel, ‘A little known Celtic Stone Head,’ *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum* vol 77, 3 (1990), 93. On display, Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1986.301. See Fig. 4.

P 5.**LITTLE HADFIELD.** Glossop. SK 025 957 [approx].

Originally from site of Romano-British settlement at Little Hadfield-Mouselow Hill, above Old Glossop, moved to Hadfield in 1846. Sandstone block eleven inches high, eight inches wide and nine inches deep, featuring incised figure with “horns” or puck-shaped springing from the brow of the triangular-shaped head, which is disproportionate in size to the figure itself. Deep circular eyes carved in relief, small triangular nose, deep incised gash forming mouth. Compare with horned likeness of Mercury from Roman fort at Maryport, Cumbria, and medieval puck-eared heads at Hope Church P79, and Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire. Romano-British, late second or third century AD.

Glynis Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones* (unpublished MS, 1985); Clarke with Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods*, p.39. On display at apex of ornamental arch, Buxton Museum. See Fig. 17.

P 6.**MELANDRA CASTLE.** Woolley, near Glossop. SK 008 951.

Crude head “supposed to represent the horned god of the Brigantes.” Kinderscout grit twenty two inches high, fifteen inches deep, eight inches wide. Pebbles possibly in eye sockets. From second Roman fort collapsed wall of second century AD date, discovered during Manchester University excavation in 1973.

Derbyshire SMR 6159: Recorder D. Barrett; Petch, 1989. Buxton Museum collection.

P 7.

MELANDRA CASTLE. Woolley, near Glossop. SK 008 952.

Originally used as edging for a spring at Woolley Bridge, at the junction between the River Etherow and the Glossop Brook, below Melandra Roman fort. Dimensions, six inches high, twenty eight inches wide, seven inches deep. Used as a garden ornament for many years in the Glossop area. Three faces carved on the outer surface of sandstone block, with a frontal face and two profile faces, one on each side facing it. Central face is triangular, with a lipped slit mouth, triangular nose and bulbous eyes. Slightly incised pupils. Powerfully executed with toolmarks visible on front. Subject of a continuing living tradition involving offerings. Suggestions of rams' horns on profile faces, and "water weeds" on the central face. Probably Iron Age (before first century AD) date suggested by Manchester Museum.

Ross and Feacham, 'Heads Baleful and Benign,' 340, fig. 20.2; Ross, *The Pagan Celts* , p. 122, fig. 48.1; Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures* , pp. 7,33; Chapter 6, pp. 285-87; Sidney Jackson card index number 563.

Manchester Museum, accession number 1974.45.

P 8.

MOTTRAM MOOR. [Longdendale, Cheshire]. SJ 995 955 [approx]

Half-life size squatting figure of a man, carved in one piece on a square plinth on local sandstone. Right knee raised. Dressed in a tunic and according to tradition once holding a bow, from a spring on a farmyard behind the Robin Hood public house, Mottram Moor. Individual locks or curls, in Graceo-Roman style carved on top of head. Well modelled features with small lentoid "spectacle" eyes in Celtic style. Nose without lobes. Possibility of later reworking to remove horns, or hood. Of Romano-British date, comparable with other "hunting deities" in Britain and Gaul.

Ross, *The Pagan Celts* , p. 144-45, fig, 80; Petch, *Celtic Stone Sculptures* , pp. 14, 33-34; Sidney Jackson card index number 586; see Chapter 5, p. 229.

Manchester Museum collection, accession number 1974.46.

P 9.

STRINES. [Bradfield, South Yorkshire] Thornseat Lodge. SK 243 919.

Found in the rockery of Thornseat Lodge. Face carved in relief upon the flat apex of a large rectangular gritstone boulder. Powerfully executed. Twenty two inches high. Prominent brow framing deep-set oval eyes without pupils. Straight-side elongated nose running from brow, merging with a prominent moustache and neatly carved wavy beard on chin which extends along jawline. No history or original context recorded. Romano-British?

On display, Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1967.444. See Fig. 10.

P 10.

WOODHEAD TUNNEL. SK 058 980.

From rear entrance to Woodhead Tunnel. Damaged throned figure minus head, hands or legs but with large male organ carved on square sandstone block. Flat reverse side features three small pear-shaped "Celtic" heads in triangular formation. Discovered by workmen last century? Possibly Romano-British, or product of Irish workmen employed at the tunnel in the nineteenth century.

Manchester Museum collection; information from Shelagh Lewis, 1998.

CATEGORY 2. *Stone heads of medieval secular dating*

P 11 .

BARLBOROUGH. Hall Stables, Church Street. SK 477 772.

Freestanding fifteen inches high concave oval boulder, carved in the form of a human face, standing upon plinth at apex of an arch above entrance to seventeenth century stable block at Barlborough Hall. Features carved in relief, with "spectacle-framed" oval eyes, long straight-sided nose, signs of ears??. Carved in Celtic style. The hall has a haunting tradition. No history known.

Information on location from David Bostwick. Fieldwork visits 1992 and 1997. In situ.

P 12.

BAKEWELL. Lady Manners' Wood. SK 230 690.

Crude carving on sandstone boulder in wood near Chatsworth, depicting head and shoulders of a man with profile heads cojoined. Unfinished?? Several hundred yards away there is another carving of a figure known locally as "Robin Hood." Features obscured by heather. Both damaged. Local information suggests carvings were present in the wood earlier this century.

Information from Gerry Smith, Bakewell; fieldwork visits 1994. In situ.

P 13.

BAKEWELL. Aldern Way. SK 217 691.

Corbel style stone head built over window extension of a new house. Crowned male head with all features marked. Came from cottage in grounds of Bakewell parish church in 1960, and incorporated into extension eight years later.

Information from owner Mr King; fieldwork visit 1994. In situ.

P 14.

BASLOW. SK 250 725 [approx]

Human head carved on a roughly diamond-shaped block of sandstone, owned by a lady whose father rescued it from a wall at Baslow. Prominent oval shaped eyes with double lids, slit mouth and indications of hair. Recently moved to Devon as part of a bequest by the owner. Carved in

Celtic tradition.

Peter Naylor, *Celtic Derbyshire* (Derby: J. H. Hall, 1983), p. 13; Sidney Jackson card index number 141. In private ownership. See Fig. 12.

P 15.

BASLOW BAR. White Edge Moor?? SK 28 75 [approx].

Stone head on grass roadside verge near Ramsley Lodge. Disappeared earlier this century when a metalled footpath was laid. Described by Edward Wrench in a letter in Sidney Jackson correspondence file (see Chapter 5, p.236).

Sidney Jackson card index number 433. Missing.

P 16.

BOLLINGTON [Cheshire]. SJ 782 931.

Crudely carved rectangular head built into masonry of stone bridge above Bridgewater Canal, on Woolstencroft Road, north of Bollington. Alongside modern graffiti. Eighteenth century date??

Manchester Museum card index. In situ.

P 17.

BOLSTERSTONE. Porters Lodge. SK 271 968.

Archaic-style carved sandstone head incorporated into gable end of building associated with the site of medieval Bolsterstone Castle, a thirteenth century fortified manor house. Facing east. Prominent brow. Large deep-set oval eyes, straight sided triangular nose, deep gash forming open mouth.

Sidney Jackson card index number 401. In situ. See Fig. 19.

P 18.

BRADFIELD. Featherbed Moss. SK 192 941

Rounded gritstone boulder with large human face carved in deep relief upon surface. Ten inches high by seven inches deep with the numbers "75" carved in a rectangular field to the left of face. Face carved so chin touches stream directly below, and is submerged when water rises. Large

oval eyes with double framed "spectacle" lids. Ten yards away to the west a small boulder below an eroded area has carved in relief a creature resembling a squirrel. In high moorland channel cut by tributary of the Abbey Brook directly below the carving.

Recorded on transparencies by Terry Howard for Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, 1989. In situ.

P 19.

BRADFIELD. Undertofts. SK 305 877.

Stone head unearthed in pieces in garden of a cottage at Goodyfield, Rivelin Valley in 1980s. Seventeen inches high after reconstruction, with a bowl-shaped depression in the top which may or may not be original. The features and "helmet" are more reminiscent of a medieval knight than a "Celtic-style" head. Possibly late medieval.

Recorded by South Yorkshire SMR, 1983. In private ownership.

P 20.

BUXTON. Provenance unknown.

Four-faced stone head, with a hollow in the top for attaching a finial. Two faces are carved in Celtic style, with grim, archaic features: jutting, furrowed brow, deepset double-framed oval eyes, long straight-sided nose and deep, straight gash forming mouth. Possibly from the Buxton area. Medieval?

Manchester Museum collection, card index file. Personal communication from Martin Petch, 1989. See Fig. 2.

P 21.

CHISWORTH. Bench Wells. SJ 995 922.

Freestanding sandstone head, nine inches high, six inches wide. Finely carved with all features marked, including elaborate hairstyle, striae and clipped moustache. Oval eyes, wedge-shaped nose and slit mouth. Owners have recently incorporated head into an archway.

Sidney Jackson card index number 600; information supplied by owner Ken Whiting during fieldwork visit, 1991. In situ.

P22.

CHINLEY. Whitehough. SK 041 817.

Stone head built into the interior wall of third-floor attic room of a cottage known as Cherry Walden, Whitehough. No details or history. Information from owner, Mrs Coulson. In situ.

P23.

CLAY CROSS. Mill Lane. SK 386 635.

Sandstone head, nine inches high, seven inches wide, found 1961 in rubble remains of an eighteenth century enclosure field. Well carved features in relief on flat stone with protruding neck which acts as a plinth. Chiselled hair, bulbous eyes, no visible ears, wedge shaped flat nose. Used as a garden ornament by owner Moira Jean.

Reported to Derbyshire SMR, 1997. Fieldwork visit 1997. In private ownership.

P24.

DANEBRIDGE. [Cheshire] Ship Inn. SJ 963 653.

Crudely-carved stone head built into gable end of public house in Danebridge village. Carved in high relief on rectangular block, with deep circular eyes, prominent nose with lobes, open mouth. Building dates from eighteenth century??. No history known. Another modern head inside pub above fireplace.

Manchester Museum card index; recorded by Martin Petch; fieldwork visit, 1994. In situ.

P25.

DARLEY BRIDGE. Carnubia, Warren Carr. SK 269 629 [approx]

Panel head carved in high relief at the end of building stone behind farmhouse near River Derwent. Large eye cavities. Medieval?

Sidney Jackson card index number 336; *Archaeology Group Bulletin* Vol 10 (December 1965), 112. Fieldwork visit, 1992. In private ownership.

P26.

DERBY [?] Provenance unknown

Sandstone block, roughly dressed on top, sides and base, with distinct marks from a quarter

inch blade arranged in V and W patterns [depicting hair?], along with more random pecking on the sides. Rough shaping evident around chin. Nose badly damaged. Face polished to a flat surface with lightly incised "Celtic" style features including oval eyes in relief, wedge-shaped nose and deep gash serving as mouth. No history known.

Derby Museum and Art Gallery collection, The Strand, Derby.

P 27.

ECCLESFIELD. [South Yorkshire] Wallet End. SK 357 936.

Stone head found in rubble from an old cottage on High Street, demolished in the 1960s. Carved in round from oval-shaped sandstone boulder in Celtic tradition. Oval eyes with double "spectacle" lids. Damaged triangular nose. Curved mouth with lips. Faint signs of ears and moustache.

Sidney Jackson card index number 41. On display, Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1966.963. See Fig. 8.

P 28.

GLOSSOP. Fitzalan Street. SK 035 945.

Two small stone heads reported to Manchester Museum, both eight inches in height. Built into rear garden wall of house. Possibly of medieval date, originally from site of parish church, Old Glossop??

Derbyshire SMR 6152; Petch, 1989. In situ.

P 29.

GLOSSOP. St Mary's Road. SK 035 945.

Found by Mr Needham when digging up a lawn at 50 Duke Street?? A stone head with a flat back, base and profile, with all features marked. Powerfully carved oval eyes with double "spectacle" lids. Straight-sided slit mouth. Carved in Celtic style upon rectangular block of sandstone, height eight inches. Traces of paint. Of Roman/Medieval date?

Derbyshire SMR 6105: Recorder Ken Smith, 1983; Petch, 1989; Sidney Jackson card index number 599.

Manchester Museum collection.

P30.

GLOSSOP. Slatelands Road, Whitfield. SK 035 935.

Stone head unearthed in garden of Slatelands House in 1970s and now cemented in the perimeter wall facing main road. Eight inches high, drilled pupils, moustache and "smiling" mouth. Dated by hairstyle to fourteenth century AD. Owned by Mrs Betty Carnell.

Derbyshire SMR 6110: Recorder Ken Smith, 1983. Petch, 1989. In situ; private ownership.

P31.

GLOSSOP. Manor Park Road. SK 035 945.

Crude corbel-style stone head found in 1969 in builders rubble. Ten inches high, on a pillar-like body with round shoulders, wide nostrils. Double "spectacle" eyelids. Elaborate hairstyle with "bangs" of hair covering ears. The top of the head is drilled as if for a headdress.

Roman/Medieval date?

Derbyshire SMR 6106: Recorder, Ken Smith, 1983; Petch, 1989; Sidney Jackson card index number 625.

Manchester Museum collection.

P32.

GLOSSOP. Pikes Lane. SK 025 935.

Stone head found by R. Taylor while gardening at 99 Pikes Lane, Glossop. Flat base and top, triangular face with all features marked. Roman/Medieval date?

Derbyshire SMR 6109: Recorder, Ken Smith, 1983; Petch, 1989.

Manchester Museum collection.

P33.

GREAT ROWSLEY. Yew Tree Cottage. SK 258 660.

Free standing gritstone head six inches high set in rectangular stone slab on specially-made plinth above main door of end cottage, framed by ornamental antlers. Tiny oval deep-set eyes, slit mouth, pecked nostrils. Cottage dates from mid-eighteenth century. No history known but current owners recorded it in position at turn of century.

Sidney Jackson card index number 488. Information from Mr and Mrs Eye, fieldwork visit

1997. In situ.

P34.

GRINDLEFORD. Padley Mill. SK 252 789.

Crudely-carved face on square-shaped block, protruding from gable apex of large house known as Padley Mill. Wide almost circular eyes, triangular nose and mouth with signs of serrated teeth. Face framed by rectangular panel. Part of eighteenth century mill complex above stream between Padley Chapel and Totley Tunnel.

Recorded during fieldwork in 1994. In situ.

P35.

HADDON HALL. Stables. SK 234 664.

Elaborate Sheela-na-gig female exhibitionist carving in relief upon a rectangular sandstone block above entrance arch to stables. Of late seventeenth century origin. Weir and Jerman describe it as: "a 'learned' piece of carving by a mason with knowledge of such objects, who believed that they had apotropaic power." In the Hall courtyard high on the right is a Celtic-style head, while there is a more simply-carved head upon the font in the Chapel. The Sheela can be compared with another more crudely carved example at Darley Dale parish church.

Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust* (London: Batsford, 1986), p. 148. In situ.

P36.

HATHERSAGE. Vicarage. SK 233 818.

Sandstone head with elaborate "helmet," bulbous eyes, slit mouth and "necklace." Head protrudes from stone block above entrance to vicarage from churchyard. No history known. Medieval?

Fieldwork visit 1990. In situ.

P37.

HATHERSAGE. Moorseats Hall. SK 237 823.

Two heads built into garden walls of house which dates back to fourteenth century. One of Celtic-type appearance set in garden wall looking north near natural spring. Oval in shape,

weathered sandstone, ten inches high by eight inches wide, set upon a plinth base as head height in wall. Elongated nose with drilled nostrils, round sunken eyes, left higher than right. Recorded in situ on a lantern slide of 1930. Second head set into carport wall facing east towards building. Grotesque in style, ten inches high by nine inches wide, hairstyle or cap, pronounced ridge above bulbous eyes, triangular nose, protruding lips and slit mouth, giving malevolent appearance. No history known. The building has a haunting tradition.

Recorded by Weston Park Museum, Sheffield; fieldwork visit, 1995. In situ.

P38.

HOPE. Mill Farm. SK 172 837.

Pear-shaped face carved in relief upon keystone arch above entrance to eighteenth century barn in a farm complex off Edale Road, Hope. Simple oval eyes with tiny pupils, small triangular nose and deeply carved smiling mouth. No history known.

Recorded by Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, 1982.

Fieldwork visit, 1994. In situ.

P39.

HOPTON. Townend House. SK 255 534.

Two crudely carved heads incorporated into building dated 1646, possibly from earlier structure. One head forms part of a stone incorporated into wall above main window facing road, above a heavily eroded sculpture which appears to depict an multi-legged horse, perhaps the Norse Sleipnir. Rodgers interprets the carvings as a dragon. The second head is positioned above a window in an upper storey of the house.

Sidney Jackson card index number 335; Frank Rodgers, *Curiosities of the Peak* (Ashbourne: Moorland Publishing, 1979, p. 55. In situ.

P40.

LEA BRIDGE. Holt Lane. SK 319 564.

Elongated human face carved upon flat pear-shaped stone incorporated into rear wall of a cottage of eighteenth century date. No history known by owner. Recent work by stonemason?? Information from Peter Naylor, 1989. In private ownership.

P41.

MARPLE. [Cheshire]. Lock Cottage. SJ 965 898.

Grotesque stone head unearthed 1965 in back garden of cottage dating from late eighteenth century, on reputed site of an old well, by Robert Woodward. Carved in local sandstone or gritstone, with deep spheroid eyes with pupils, incised lines on face and protrusions (stag antlers??) on forehead. Medieval or post-medieval? Associated with bad luck and witchcraft.

Information from Robert Woodward, 1993; Manchester Museum card index. In private ownership. See Fig. 15.

P42.

MARPLE BRIDGE. [Cheshire]. Hollywood End, Mill Brow. SJ 978 896.

Carved stone head incorporated into arch keystone forming part of a building. No details.

Sidney Jackson card index number 598.

P43.

MARPLE LOCKS. [Cheshire]. SJ 962 894.

Three weathered stone heads carved in relief upon arch keystones above Peak Forest Canal, facing upstream. Late eighteenth or early nineteenth century AD.

Manchester Museum card index, fieldwork visit 1995.

P44.

MOTTRAM-IN-LONGDENDALE. [Cheshire]. Exact provenance unknown.

Crude freestanding "death's head" oval sandstone boulder, from site of Roman fort?? Eyes formed by deep circular holes. Owned by Pat Ellison, of Moorfield Terrace, Hollingworth.

Manchester Museum card index; fieldwork visit 1994.

P45.

MOTTRAM-IN-LONGDENDALE [Cheshire]. Mile End House. SJ 991 953.

Crudely-carved head in deep relief upon a massive oval boulder, with bulbous eyes with signs of original double lids, bulbous fleshy cheeks, triangular nose and a "cigarette hole" in one corner of open mouth. Powerfully carved in Celtic style. Unearthed in garden of house. No

history known.

Manchester Museum card index; fieldwork visit 1992.

P46.

MOTTRAM-IN-LONGDENDALE. [Cheshire]. Mile End House. SJ 991 953.

Flat panel head, face carved in high relief, possibly to be set into a wall. Possibly nineteenth century origin. No history known.

Manchester Museum card index; fieldwork visit 1992.

P47.

MOUSELOW HILL. Old Glossop. SK 025 955 [approx]

Sandstone head carved in Celtic tradition, from Mouselow collection of stones found at Little Hadfield in 1846?? Nine inches high, seven inches wide, twelve inches deep. Prominent lentoid eyes with pupils, set in double "spectacle" frame, long well-defined rectangular nose. Straight-sided mouth with serrated "teeth." Reverse of stone displays evidence of carving for insertion into a niche, possibly in original wall or structure. Dated by style to fourteenth century AD by Glynis Reeve. Compare with head from Hallmeadow Close P51.

Glynis Reeve, *The Mouselow Stones*, (Unpublished manuscript). On display set in decorative feature, Buxton Museum.

P48.

MOW COP. [Cheshire]. Folly castle. SJ 855 578.

Crude head forming a gargoyle in entrance arch to folly castle dating from 1751, carved by stonemasons. Features carved in relief, deeply carved oval eyes and mouth.

Fieldwork visit 1994.

P49.

MOW COP. [Cheshire]. SJ 855 577 [approx]

Small round head found lying face down in gap between two stone walls on slopes below Mow Cop folly castle in early 1990. Archaic features within the Celtic tradition and "nasty looking" expression. Found by Alan Garner, who believes it dates from fifth century AD.

Manchester Museum collection; information from Alan Garner, 1996.

P 50.

NETHER EDGE. [South Yorkshire]. Edgebrook Road. SK 338 844 [approx].

Face carved on old packhorse bridge leading to Sheffield in garden of Lynwood House, 7 Edgebrook Road. House and garden laid out in 1853. Victorian?

Sidney Jackson card index number 243. Peter Brears, *North Country Folk Art*, p. 39. In situ.

P 51.

OLD GLOSSOP. Hallmeadow Close. SK 041 948.

Sandstone head carved in high relief on end of an elongated boulder incorporated into low garden boundary wall of house. Found "many years ago in a river bed" in Old Glossop with three other similar heads, since lost. Large oval spectacle eyes with joined upper and lower eyelids, with pupils, flat straight-sided trapeze-shaped nose with prominent arch-shaped brow. Slit mouth without lips. Forehead has a horizontal indistinct indentation and signs of a raised band of hair. Owned by Mr and Mrs Dearnley.

Recorded by Jack Wrigley for Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, 1987; Fieldwork visit, 1993.

P 52.

OLD GLOSSOP. Old Post Office. SK 041 948.

Head from the Old Post Office "of typical church work" shown to Tony Ward. A second head, from Mouselow, shown but no pictures allowed, reburied. Medieval??

Information from Tony Ward, 1994.

P 53.

OLD GLOSSOP. The Vicarage. SK 041 948.

Two half-size human figures carved on blocks of stone cemented into rear wall of vicarage on Manor Park Road, Old Glossop, during 1950s. Formerly acted as guardians at the entrance to a stone ice-house overlooking Glossop Brook. Male figures with raised forearms, triangular faces, straight-sided triangular noses, and oval shaped, "spectacle" eyes with double lids. One figure has stylised moustache. Crown of head flat as if carved deliberately for incorporation into

structure. Possibly as part of a feature in the original medieval church dating from fourteenth century. Rustic medieval in style, within "Celtic" tradition.

Derbyshire SMR 6154; Petch, 1989; information from Tony Ward, 1994; John Taylor Broadbent, 1996.

P54.

REPTON. Ridgeway Farm. SK 346 251.

Three stone heads once stood on a wall at Knowle Hills, a house in the wooded hills near Ticknall, before they were moved to Ridgeway Farm, nearby. One head is missing. Of the remaining two freestanding heads, one is a crowned corbel head from a church, of medieval date. The second is more Celtic in style, crudely carved with large oval eyes, a long triangular nose, and a prominent elongated chin. In local tradition the heads commemorated a tragic legend of the Burdetts of Foremark which dates from the twelfth century. Associated with a haunting tradition.

Clarence Daniel, *Derbyshire Traditions* (Clapham: Dalesman Publications, 1975), pp. 22-26. In private ownership.

P55.

SALTERSFORD. Woodhead Pass. SE 136 003.

At a layby at the top of the Woodhead Pass, just before the road swings over a bridge, is a large gritstone boulder with a crude human face carved upon it, facing east across the moor. The features have been badly damaged by collisions from road vehicles in recent years. Similar to head carved on boulder at Todmorden in West Yorkshire. Local tradition suggests the head is a warning of a dangerous corner in the road.

Derbyshire SMR 3652; Petch, 1989. In situ.

P56.

STAVELEY. Haggerstone Farm. SK 447 765.

Carved stone head of probable fourteenth century AD date found in the garden of the farm. No details.

Derbyshire SMR 13036: Recorder, D. Barrett. In private ownership.

P57.

STRINES.[Bradfield, South Yorkshire] Agden Bridge. SK 243 940.

Crudely-carved head carved in high relief upon a square keystone built into the keystone of an arch forming a packhorse bridge across the Agden Brook, on the road from Strines Inn to Low Bradfield. Circular in shape, cut in high relief with deep eyes. Features obscured by tar running from channel above bridge parapet. Eighteenth or nineteenth century in date?

Recorded by Andy Roberts in 1993; fieldwork visit, 1996. In situ.

P58.

TIDESWELL. Ivy Cottage. SK 152 759.

Elaborate stone head carved on a panel above a window of a terraced house on Alma Road, formerly above a garage. Rectangular block of sandstone, twenty inches high by eighteen inches broad. Deep sunken eyes with traces of double "spectacle" frames, damaged flat triangular nose, elaborate hairstyle similar to "judge's wig" covering ears. Open mouth with two lobes, framed by thick lips. Prominent jaw. Local information suggests head was brought to Tideswell from Stoney Middleton, more than twenty years ago, and had been originally found in a stream. A local tradition suggests the head was found in the garden of a house at Stoney Middleton early this century by a man who placed it on a wall facing the main road where it stood from 1910 until 1947, when the owner Robert Robinson moved, leaving it behind. A relative of the new owner took it to Tideswell where it was built into the wall of a building in the 1950s. In situ.

Information from J.E. Robinson. Calver, 1990; fieldwork visits, 1993.

P59.

TIDESWELL. Weaver's Cottage. SK 152 759.

Panel head carved in relief upon triangular block in gable end of cottage on Lower Terrace Road. Striking features, hair and oval-eyes. Appears to be modern in date. In situ.

Information from Eric Heaf, 1991; fieldwork visit, 1993. In situ.

P 60.

UPPER HULME (Staffordshire). Paddock Farm. SK 007 613.

Two grotesque style faces carved on stones which have been cemented into stone structure of gateposts framing the entrance to the farm. One has a protruding tongue with a single baleful open eye. The second is carved to depict both eyes closed. Both have noses carved realistically, showing lobes. Long slit mouth with lips. No history known. Recent??

Northern Earth Mysteries, 47 (1991), 28; fieldwork visit, 1993.

In situ.

P 61.

WHALEY BRIDGE. Canal Street. SK 010 813 [approx].

Two heads were originally positioned on a plinth over the porch of No. 10, Canal Street, at the termination of the Shropshire Canal. Original information implied there were three, but only two found on visit by Petch. One has a pedestal base and lentoid eyes but could be as late as Victorian period in date. The other appears to be older and has a "slit" mouth. The latter may have come from the Canal Terminus building close to the above address. Both heads were sold in 1987 and are in private ownership.

Derbyshire SMR 14932; Petch, 1989; Sidney Jackson card index numbers 466, 467.

P 62.

WHARNCLIFFE/WINCOBANK [South Yorkshire]. Exact provenance unknown.

Stone head found in a factory foundation trench between 1910 and 1920 by a builder, Mr Nicholson. Donated to Sheffield Museum in 1984. No description.

Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1984.511.

P 63.

WINSTER. Dower House. SK 239 606.

Two stylised "Green Man" faces, carved upon two high gateposts framing entrance to hall of mid eighteenth century date, on High Street. Faces are carved in high relief with highly stylised foliage/serpents springing from the open mouths. Elaborate carved decoration framing datestone.

Fieldwork visit, 1997. In situ.

P 64.

WITHINGTON [Cheshire]. Exact provenance unknown.

Panel head carved in relief on a rectangular block of sandstone, ten inches high by seven inches wide. Originated as a casual find unearthed in a garden near Macclesfield. Face framed by deep relief in block. Elaborate carved hair springing from crown of head. Oval eyes with double lids and marked pupils. Long rectangular nose, deep gash depicting moustache?? and tapering chin. Possibly carved to act as a keystone for an arch of a building or barn entrance. Known as "the Guizer Stone" by its owner, author Alan Garner, who describes it as "[a] Celtic stone head, circa first century AD."

Illustrated on the dust jacket of Alan Garner, *The Guizer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975). In private ownership. See Fig. 22.

P 65.

WOOLLEY [South Yorkshire]. SE 324 125

Two grotesque-style heads positioned low in wall bordering farmer's fields and main road south of Woolley village, near Barnsley. Carvings have traces of (recent?) blue paint. Position half way between base and apex of wall, facing bend in road. No history known. Modern carved heads noted in garden of Woolley Post Office by Sidney Jackson.

Reported by R. Watson, 1997. Fieldwork visit, 1997. In situ.

P 66.

WORTLEY [South Yorkshire]. Exact provenance unknown.

Stone head from Wortley, found built into fireplace and "was obviously always intended to be set into a building." Now at Chorlton in Greater Manchester, in private ownership.

Manchester Museum card index.

CATEGORY 3. Stone heads associated with churches and chapels

P 67.

ALDERWASLEY. St Margaret's Chapel. SK 315 535.

Corbel heads, grotesques and crude Sheela-na-gig from an early medieval chapel incorporated into the south wall of private chapel. Early medieval?

Recorded by Tony Ward; fieldwork visit, 1990.

P 68.

BAKEWELL. All Saints parish church. SK 215 685.

Crudely carved Celtic-style head, acting as a gargoyle, incorporated in roof of south wall of church porch, possibly of mid-fifteenth century date. Two heads carved in wooden roof beams in the interior of the early medieval church. A stone head unconnected with the fabric of the building is among a collection of sculptural fragments of medieval date in the porch.

Recorded by Christopher Crowe, 'Stone Heads: a survival of Celtic beliefs?' *Popular Archaeology* Vol. 2, 2 (1981), 31-33; fieldwork visit, 1990.

P 69.

BIRCHOVER. St Michaels Church. SK 240 622.

Three stone heads associated with remains of early medieval church which was recorded in a document dating from the early fourteenth century. One Celtic-style head from this source can be seen incorporated into the porch wall of Rowtor Church alongside fragments of stones from the earlier chapel found in fieldwalls near the village.

Sidney Jackson card index numbers 212, 213 and 214; fieldwork visit, 1990.

P 70.

BRASSINGTON. St James parish church. SK 230 543.

Four individually carved stone heads incorporated into tower buttresses of Norman church, dating from the twelfth century. Two are crudely carved, a third is grotesque in style. The fourth is finely carved with oval eyes, drilled pupils and slit mouth.

Recorded by Shelagh Lewis; Fieldwork visits, 1993 and 1998.

P71.

BRASSINGTON. St James parish church. SK 230 543.

Built into interior wall of porch. Badly weathered stone head of Celtic style, with wide oval eyes carved in relief, prominent and prominent brow. A second grotesque style head with wide circular eyes is built into wall above entrance doorway to church inside the porch.

Recorded by Shelagh Lewis; Fieldwork visits, 1993 and 1998.

P72.

BUXTON. The Old Courthouse. SK 059 736.

A series of Victorian ?? carved human and animal heads incorporated into the roof and eaves of modern court building.

Derbyshire SMR 2897: Recorder, D. Barrett; Petch, 1989.

P73.

BUXTON. Torr Street. SK 055 735 [approx]

Crowned corbel head from medieval church. In Buxton Museum collection.

P74.

GREAT BARLOW. St Lawrence parish church. SK 344 747.

Stone head carved on sandstone block forming keystone above central doorway in entrance porch of parish church. Face carved in high relief, long and thin features. Badly weathered, Oval eyes, no obvious nose or ears. Medieval?

Fieldwork visit 1998.

P75.

HARTINGTON. St Giles parish church. SK 129 604.

Carved stone head incorporated into wall of church porch. Celtic-style features with oval eyes and slit mouth. A second crude carved head is incorporated into interior wall of church.

Fieldwork visit, 1998.

P76.

HATHERSAGE. St Michael parish church. SK 234 819

A series of grotesque human heads and gargoyles built into the exterior roof aisles of church, which dates from fourteenth century. A number appear to have been moved during mid-nineteenth century restoration of church into churchyard boundary walls. A medieval carving on the interior north wall of the church, wearing a hat, is said to be a portrait of a friend of Nicholas Eyre who was killed following a drunken spree in Chesterfield.

Fieldwork visits 1990, 1993.

P77.

HIGH BRADFIELD. St Nicholas parish church. SK 267 925.

A series of grotesque human heads and gargoyles on the west tower and exterior aisles of fifteenth century structure, with Norman foundation. Interior of church contains a series of six carved heads of archaic style carved at the apex of arches forming the Sanctuary Chapel.

P78.

HOPE. All Saints parish church. SK 172 834.

Tiny carved stone in high relief upon building stone incorporated into exterior face on north side of church tower, ten feet from ground level. Coarse gritstone. Badly eroded. Dated by age of tower to early fifteenth century.

Sidney Jackson card index number 429.

P79.

HOPE. All Saints parish church. SK 172 834.

Small stone face carved upon exterior west wall of church porch. Badly weathered, with horns or puck-shaped ears protruding from crown. Fifteenth century AD.

Fieldwork visit 1991, 1994. In situ.

P80.

HOPE. All Saints parish church. SK 172 834.

Grotesque stone head built into arch above entrance door to parish church inside porch.

Repositioned above doorway in last twenty years after long history as freestanding head inside church. Baleful appearance with large bulbous eyes and open mouth.

Fieldwork visit 1991, 1994. In situ.

P81.

MOTTRAM-IN-LONGDENDALE. St Michael parish church. SJ 994 953.

A series of carved heads are associated with the church fabric and can be dated in two periods, including early medieval examples from the original mid thirteenth century church. These are found on the south face of the tower, where three large stone heads are depicted on an engraving of 1794, and grotesque faces decorating window dripstones on the exterior north walls of the aisles. Victorian copies appear to have been made and added to the tower during the mid nineteenth century restoration of the church. A number of medieval stone heads were removed from the aisles and resold into private hands. These were dispersed among the antiques trade and built into walls and houses in the area.

Manchester Museum card index; information from Tony Ward, 198, 1994; fieldwork visit 1990, 1993.

P82.

OLD GLOSSOP. All Saints parish church. SK 041 949.

Two Celtic-style faces carved as decorative features upon a gravestone in the parish churchyard. Badly eroded and damaged. Pear shaped faces with oval eyes framed by wings to represent the soul ascending to heaven? Stone dates from year 1721 and marks grave of William Wagstaff who died aged 56.

Fieldwork visit 1993. In situ 1998.

P83.

OLD GLOSSOP. St Catherine's Chapel. SK 041 949.

Two Celtic-influenced carved heads acting as springers on either side of an arch forming chapel of St Catherine, the oldest part of the church structure which dates to the Norman period. Local tradition suggests the chapel was built above a blind spring which rises beneath the church foundations.

P 84.

TAXAL. St James parish church. SK 008 798.

Two carved stone heads built into church tower above the clock, framed by herringbone masonry. The tower dates from the thirteenth century. The two faces are crudely-carved with bulbous eyes, slit mouth, prominent nose, and headdress or cap covering the forehead. Early medieval?

Manchester Museum card index; fieldwork visit 1991.

P 85.

WHALEY BRIDGE. All Saints. SK 012 813

Two stone heads built into tower of church. No details.

Sidney Jackson card index numbers, 468 and 469.

P 86.

WIRKSWORTH. St Mary the Virgin parish church. SK 288 539

Stone head set into west wall alongside assorted fragments from earlier church found beneath pavement during latest restoration in late nineteenth century. Double "spectacle" eyelids, prominent nose springing from brow formed by eyebrows. Slit mouth, with neatly trimmed goat-tee-type beard forming chin. Carved in Celtic tradition. Early medieval?

Recorded by Shelagh Lewis; fieldwork visit, 1998.

P 87.

WIRKSWORTH. St Mary the Virgin parish church. SK 288 539.

Janus head fixed to exterior northeast corner of north choir aisle. Two grotesque faces, cojoined on block of stone positioned upon corner joist of church. One faces north, the second east.

Recorded by Shelagh Lewis; fieldwork visit, 1998.

CATEGORY 4. *Miscellaneous heads and sculpture*

P88.

ALDERLEY EDGE. [Cheshire]. SJ 858 778 [approx].

Face carved on sandstone rock outcrop, with prominent brow framing oval eyes with large pupils. Triangular nose, elliptical mouth with lips, long chin. Carved by stonemason Robert Garner, great-great-grandfather of author Alan Garner, circa 1840. One of at least three heads in an around Alderley Edge carved by Robert Garner, "all in strange or odd places."

Information from Alan Garner, fieldwork visit 1995 and 1996. Cover illustration, Alan Garner, *The Voice that Thunders* (London: Harvill Press, 1997).

P89.

ALDERLEY EDGE.[Cheshire]. Wizard's Well. SJ 858 778.

Stylised face carved on rock outcrop above a crude inscription, which reads: "...drink of this/and take thy fill/for the water falls/by the Wizhards will..." Face has long hair, beard and moustache. Carved by Robert Garner, mid nineteenth century.

Information from Alan Garner, 1996. See Garner, 1997, p.77.

P90.

BAKEWELL. Exact provenance unknown.

Found "near Bakewell" by a quarryman. Has lentoid eyes with pupils, nose and nostrils slightly damaged. Pointed face, full lips, ears and hair depicted. Date unknown and probably relatively recent work by quarrymen.

Derbyshire SMR 896; Recorder: D. Barrett, 1989. Petch, 1989.

Vernon Park Museum, Stockport, Cheshire.

P91.

BIRCHOVER. Main Street. SK 240 622.

Portrait style stone head carved and placed above main doorway entrance to Birchover Post Office in 1969 by a stonemason, Bernard Wragg. According to information, carved and placed following local tradition of head carving, "for luck." Jackson was told head was carved "for no

reason except that it was something to carve.”

Sidney Jackson card index number 424; Fieldwork visit, 1991.

P92.

BOSLEY CLOUD. [Staffordshire]. SJ 903 637.

Crudely carved face on rock escarpment north of Leek. Defined by large bulbous eyes and wide mouth. Recent?

Recorded by Derek Seddon/Doug Pickford; Fieldwork visit 1994.

P93.

CHAPEL-EN-LE-FRITH. Forge Bleach Works. SK 053 809 [approx].

Two or more gritstone heads recorded from this site. Modern? No details.

Derbyshire SMR 3573. Petch, 1989.

P94.

CHUNAL. Monks Road. SK 028 904.

Crude carved face on roughly rectangular block of stone from a fieldwall beside main road leading to Charlesworth. Deep set oval eyes with pupils. Realistic nose with prominent lobes. Mouth unfinished. Found in rubble from a fieldwall by a couple picnicking, and now taken out of area. Recent??

Information from Jack Wrigley, fieldwork visit, 1993.

P95.

GAMESLEY. Marple Road, Glossop. SK 009 940.

Stone head in end wall of house in terraced row just before bridge on A626 road from Glossop to Marple, in Cheshire. Head had disappeared when visit made during fieldwork in 1993.

Derbyshire SMR 3655; Petch, 1989.

P96.

HOLLINGWORTH. [Greater Manchester]. Conservative Club. SK 002 960 [approx].

Five inch high figurine unearthed in the cellar of a house of seventeenth century date during the

1960s. Has large lentoid eyes and prominent horns with a pronounced "focus." Discovered with a second broken "goddess" figure. Local tradition suggests the figurine was the centre of recent offerings.

Manchester Museum collection; Clarke with Roberts, *Twilight of the Celtic Gods* (London: Blandford, 1996), pp. 51-52; see Chapter 6, p. 328.

Sidney Jackson card index number 603.

P97.

HOLLINGWORTH. [Greater Manchester]. Devil's Bridge. SK 017 989 [approx].

Stone head in a deep cutting off the Stalybridge to Mottram Road, beyond and past Hollingworth Hall. Fieldwork visits failed to locate head in 1996 and 1997.

Manchester Museum card index.

P98.

HYDE. [Greater Manchester]. Joel Lane. SJ 955 945 [approx].

Three stone heads near natural spring in the garden of a house called Half Acre which dates from the seventeenth century. Two smaller heads appear to be medieval corbel heads. A third larger head is larger with crudely carved features, possibly older.

Sidney Jackson card index numbers 596, 597, 603; Manchester Museum card index.

P99.

LANGWITH. Whaley Farm. Exact provenance unknown.

Stone head on gable apex of barn wall, recorded by Jackson in 1971. Fieldwork visit failed to locate head in 1994.

Sidney Jackson card index number 326.

P100.

LITTLE HUCKLOW. Exact provenance unknown.

Stone head or face carved on panel gable of an old farmhouse above two windows alongside the date 1661 and initials AP for Adam Poynton, a former owner.

Illustrated in undated offprint on history of Hucklow, by S.O. Addy, Local Pamphlets,

Sheffield City Library Local History Library.

P 101.

MATLOCK. Heights of Abraham. SK 293 583 [approx].

Stone face above a 1820 datestone on a stone tower folly.

Recorded by Andy Roberts, 1994.

P 102.

MOUSELOW. Old Glossop. SK 028 957 [approx].

“Romano folk-head” found in the Mouselow hill area. In private ownership in Whaley Bridge.

Understood to have been sold for £2,500 through the antique trade in the mid-1980s. No description on record.

Manchester Museum card index; Martin Petch.

P 103.

RAMSHAW ROCKS.[Staffordshire]. SK 016 622 [approx].

Two human faces cut into rockface facing A53 Buxton to Leek Road, alongside graffiti dating from 1953 when heads were “cleaned up.” One is clear with all features marked, and “helmet” or hairstyle. Second is badly damaged.

Information from Derek Seddon; fieldwork visit 1993.

P 104.

TAMESIDE. Exact provenance unknown.

Stone head with crown, beard and bulbous eyes unearthed from soil “between Glossop and Stockport.” Gritstone. On sale for £30 at an auction in 1974. Not Celtic.

Sidney Jackson card index number 750.

P 105.

THORPE SALVIN.[South Yorkshire]. SK 521 811.

Four archaic faces carved on block of stone incorporated into a sundial in the parish churchyard, below a weathered ‘memento mori’ inscription. Carved by the village stonemason Robert

Rogers in 1838.

Fieldwork visit, 1995.

P 106.

THRYBERGH. [South Yorkshire] SK 458 952.

Crude face carved upon a rectangular block of gritstone found in a field by the River Don at Thrybergh, near Rotherham, in the 1960s. Twenty two inches high, four inches deep. Dr Anne Ross considers this was "...a portable Celtic head shrine."

Sidney Jackson card index number 396.

On display, Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, accession number 1973.455.

P 107.

TIDESWELL. SK 153 758.

Large stone head on wall facing parish church of All Saints. According to local information it was carved by a local antiquarian, Eddy Megson, around twenty years ago. Not Celtic.

Information from Eric Heaf; fieldwork visit 1993.

P 108.

TINTWISTLE. SK 02 97 [approx].

Stone head in wall behind cottages, also two very old stone structures. Exact provenance unknown. Information from informant of Manchester Museum. Not located during two fieldwork visits in 1993 and 1995.

Derbyshire SMR 14241: Recorder: D. Barrett; Petch, 1989.

P 109.

WOODHEAD. Birchen Bank Wood. SK 116 995.

Sandstone boulder facing west above stream running into River Etherow, marked with crudely face consisting of mouth, nose and eyes, with a "domino" pattern to the right of features. Known as "the valley pattern stone." The domino arrangement of holes is a pattern associated with other stones from Longdendale, and is associated with "earth magic" in local lore.

Information from Pat Ellision, 1994; fieldwork visit, 1994. Clarke with Roberts, *Twilight of*

the Celtic Gods , pp. 59-60.

Appendix 2**Index of Fieldwork Source Materials.****SIDNEY JACKSON CARD INDEX FILE [JC]**

JC1 Shorthand notes 54 pages;

JC2 Manuscript gazetteer containing two hundred examples, including photographs;

JC3 Miscellaneous correspondence and offprints from Jackson index.

JC4 Photographs

PEAK DISTRICT FIELDWORK FILE [PD]

PD1 Shorthand notebooks covering period 1986 to 1998;

PD2 Correspondence File

PD3 Miscellaneous sources, including offprints, press cuttings, pamphlets, etc.

PD4 Taped Interview Transcripts

PD5 Photographs

YORKSHIRE AND LANCASHIRE FILE [YL]

YL1 Shorthand notebooks covering period 1986 to 1998

YL2 Correspondence File

YL3 Miscellaneous sources, including offprints, pamphlets, etc.

YL4 Photographs and transparencies

SKULL TRADITIONS FILE [ST]

ST1 Shorthand notebooks covering period 1990 to 1998

ST2 Correspondence file

ST3 Secondary source material, including offprints, pamphlets, articles, press cuttings.

ST4 Photographs and drawings

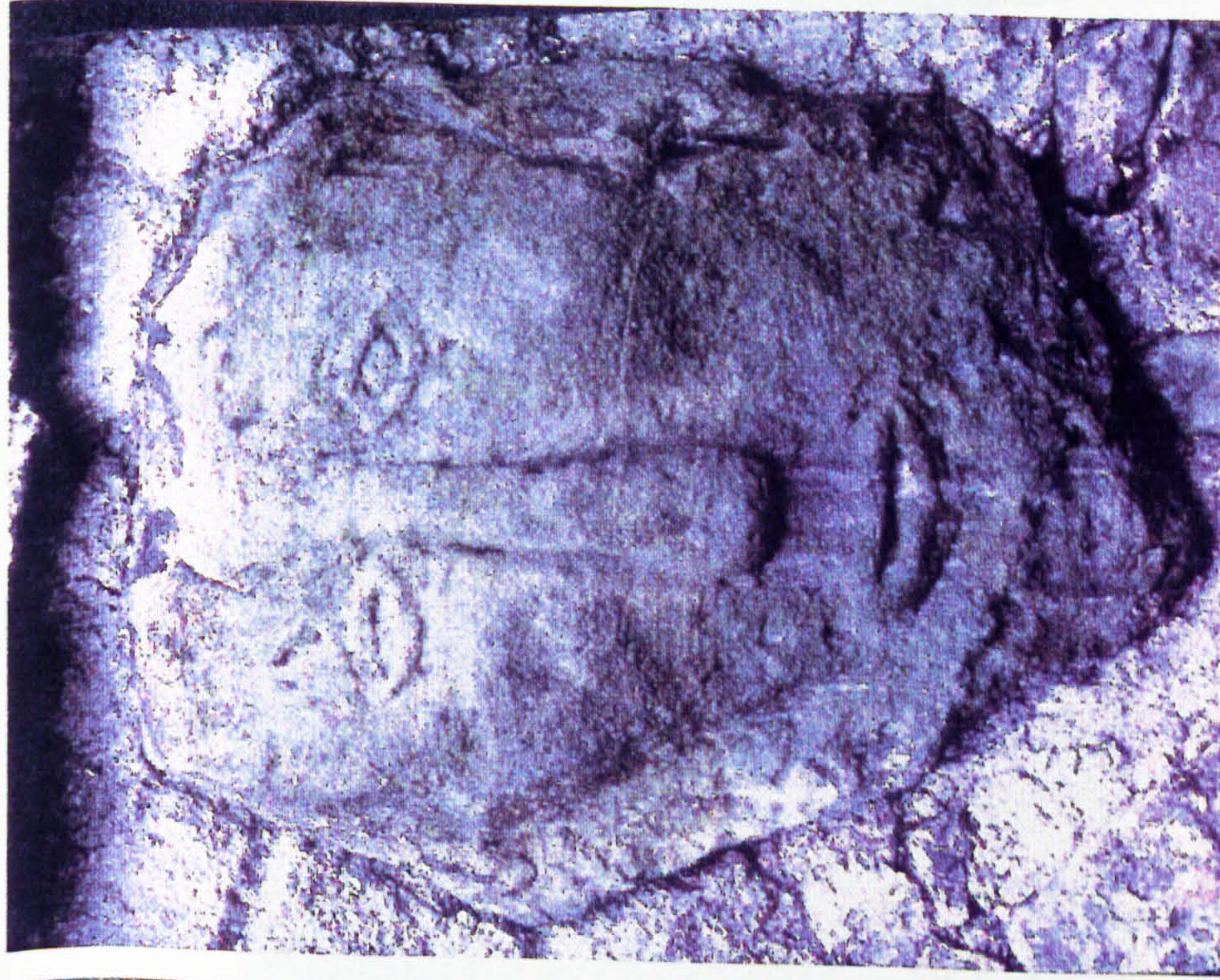
A note on tapes and transcripts.

Transcripts of taped interviews form a small part of the primary source material collected during fieldwork, and are listed in the Bibliography. This was due to the fact that the majority of testimony and narrative was recorded in the field by shorthand notes, these being collected in thirty notebooks itemised in fieldwork files labelled JC, PD, YL and ST listed in Appendix 2. A significant proportion of the supplementary material collected during the fieldwork between 1990 and 1998 is contained within the correspondence files which are itemised under the fieldwork files.

Appendix 3.**PHOTOGRAPHS**



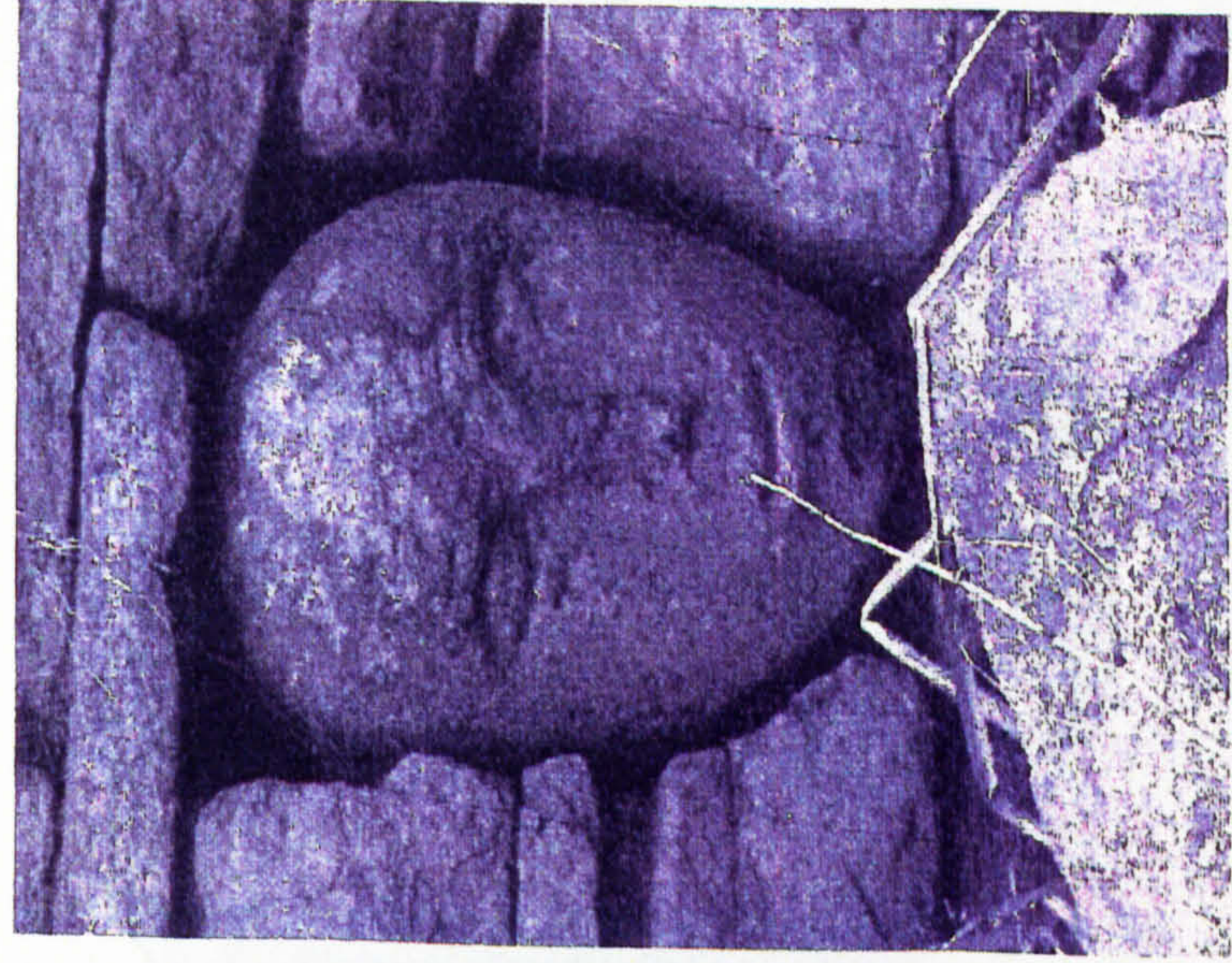
- Fig 1 (top): Tricephalos from Melandra Castle, Glossop, Derbyshire. See pages 288-90
- Fig 2 (above): Four-headed finial from Buxton, Derbyshire. See page 248
- Fig 3 (right): Tricephalos from Greetland, West Yorkshire. See page 215



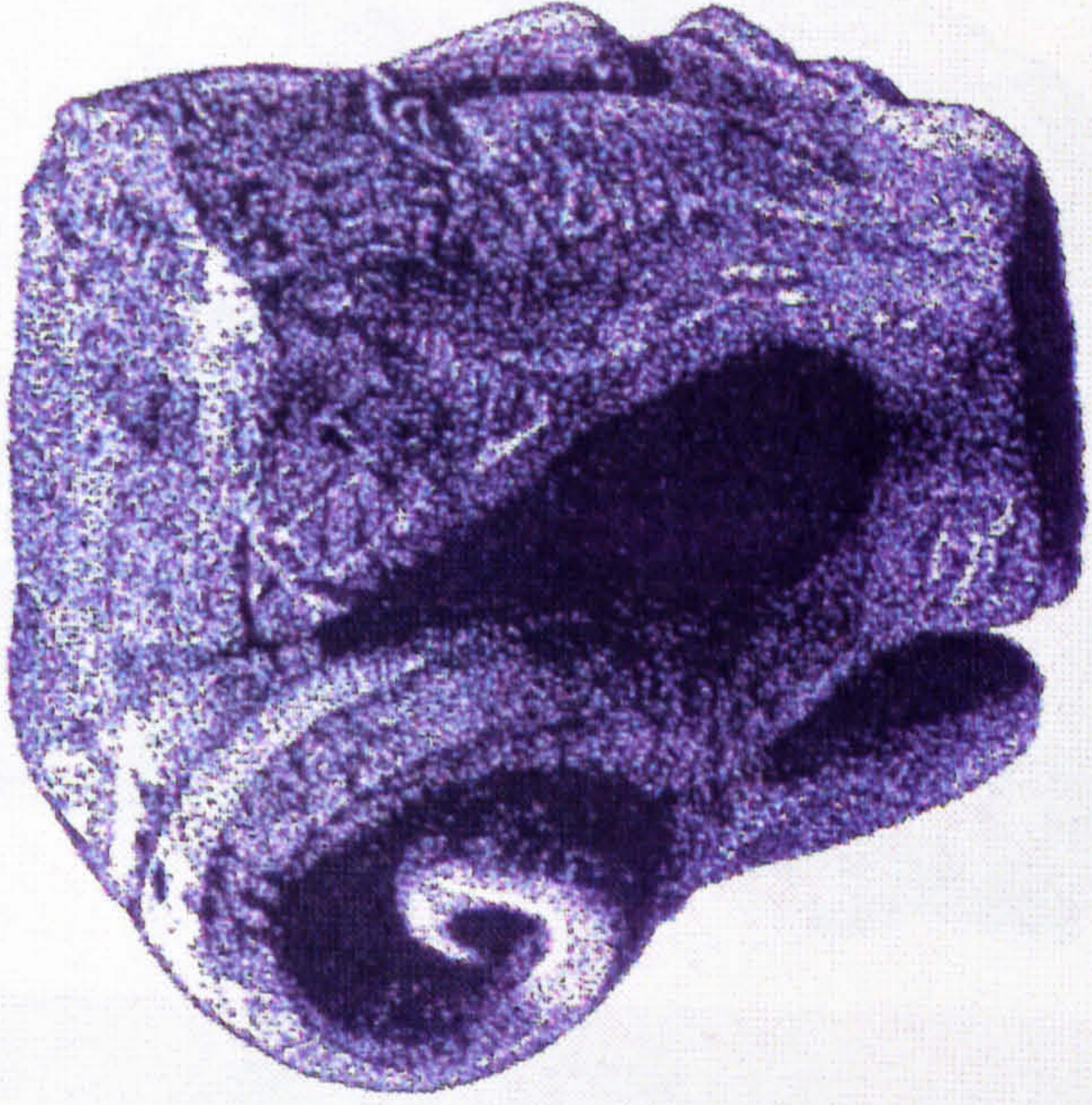
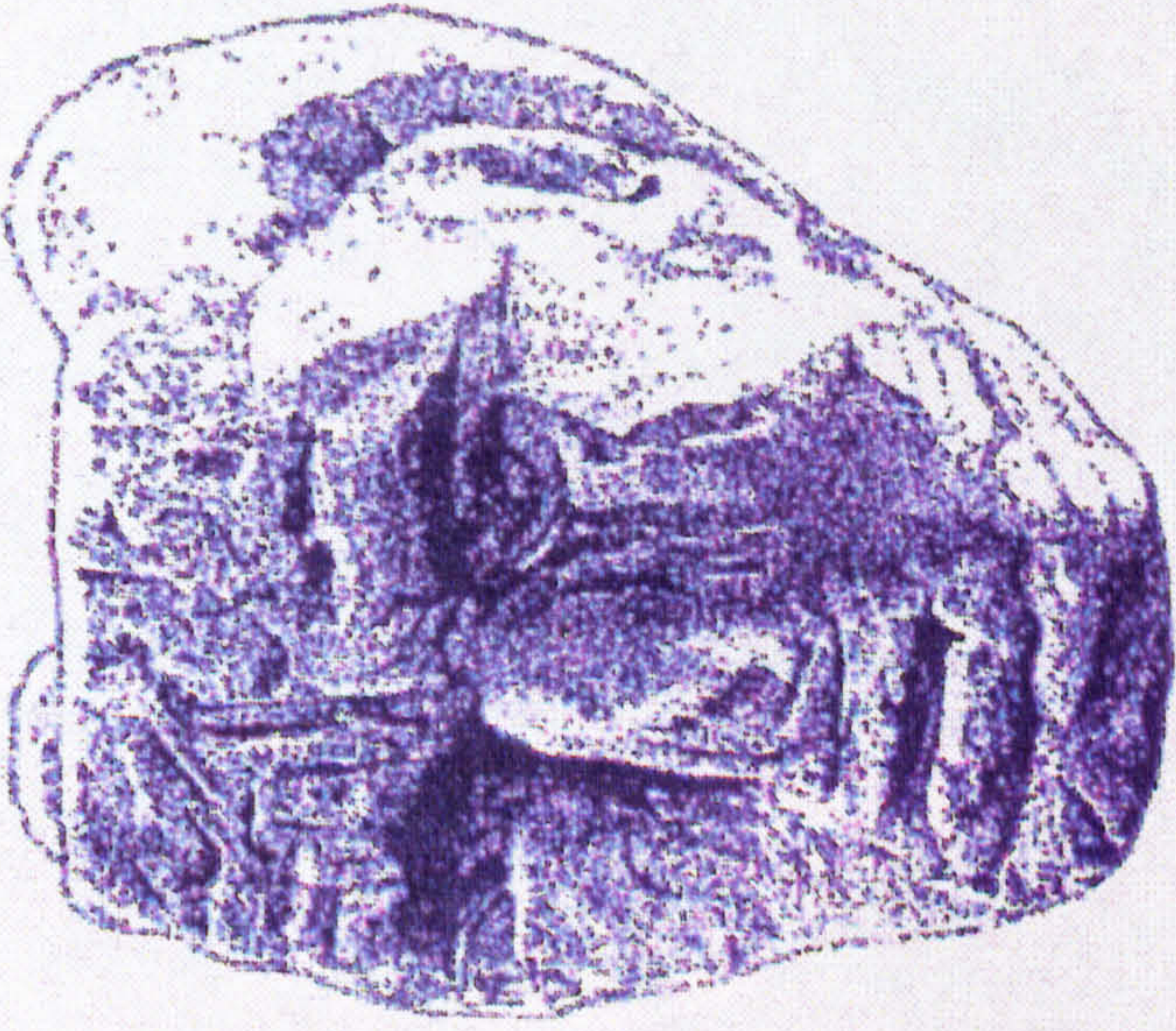
- Fig 4 (left): Stone head from Beltany Ring, County Donegal, Ireland (Iron Age?). See page 93
- Fig 5 (centre): Stone head from Castleton, Derbyshire (Romano-British?). See page 235
- Fig 6 (right): Romano-British stone head from Caerwent, Wales. See page 96-97



- Fig 7 (left): Romano-British stone head from Streetley, West Midlands. See page 234
- Fig 8 (centre): Stone head from cottage rubble, Ecclesfield, South Yorkshire. See page 238
- Fig 9 (right): Stone head of third century AD date from Hathersage, Derbyshire. See page 234.



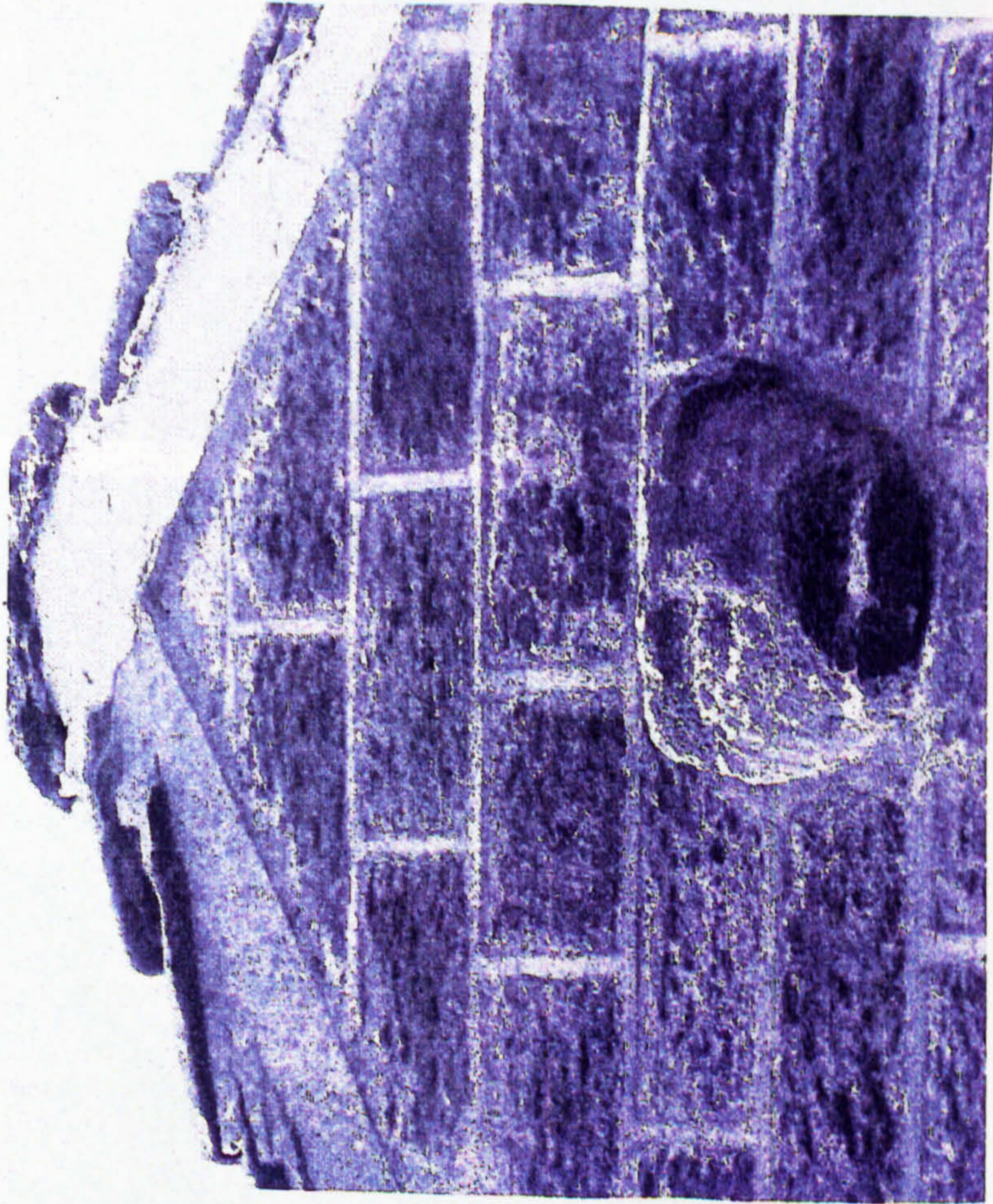
- Fig 10 (left): Stone head from rockery, Strines, Bradfield, South Yorkshire. See page 235
- Fig 11 (centre): Stone head in field wall, Walsden, Todmorden, West Yorkshire. See page 285
- Fig 12 (right): Stone head from field wall, Baslow, Derbyshire. See page 235



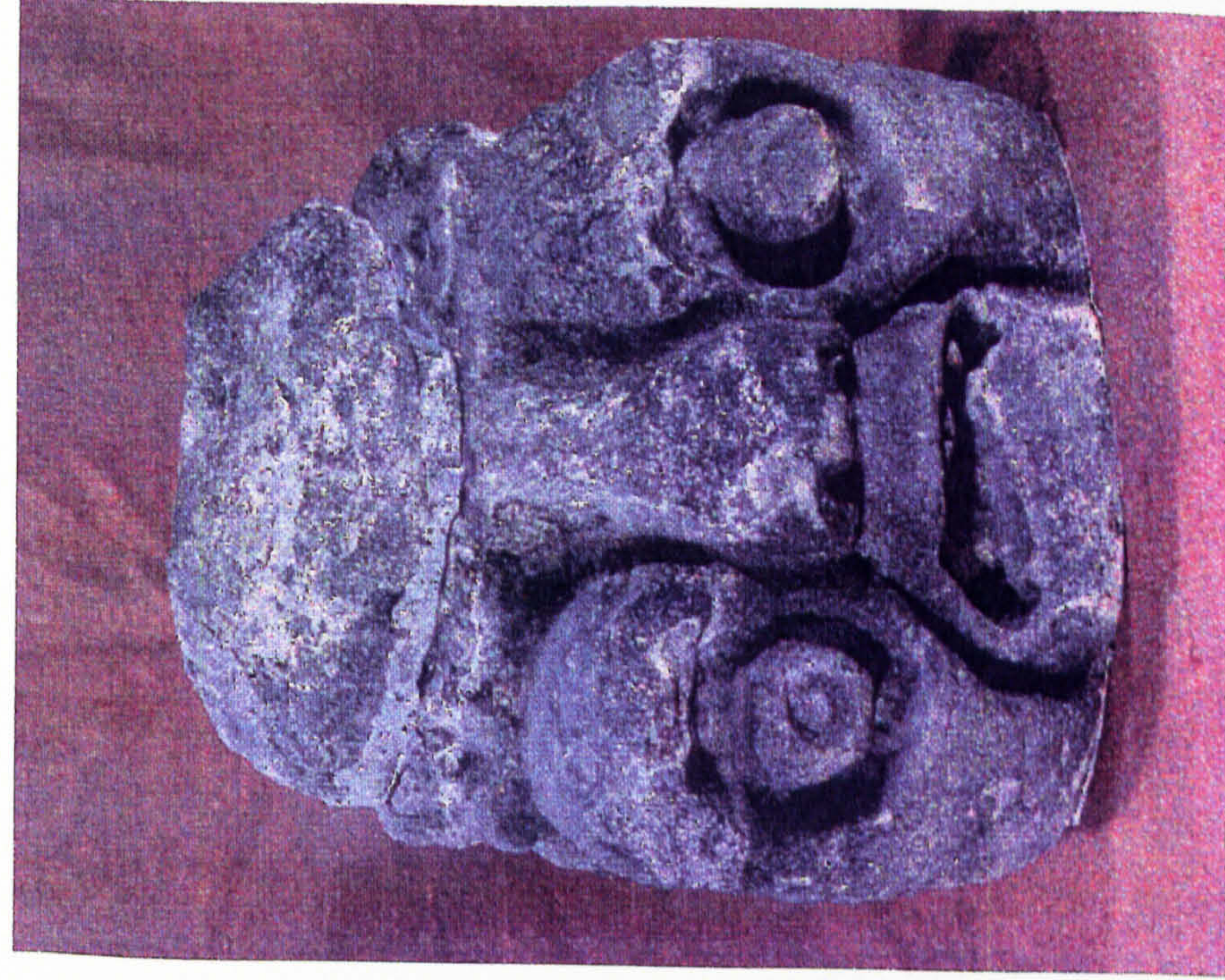
- Fig 13 (left): Horned head from Netherby, Cumbria, second or third century AD. See pages 97, 177
- Fig 14 (centre): Janiform head from Mirfield, West Yorkshire. See page 211
- Fig 15 (right): Stone head (with antlers?), from Marple, Cheshire. See page 331



- Fig 16 (left): Romano-British stone head from Maryport, Cumbria. See page 209
- Fig 17 (centre): Horned figure from Mouselow Hill, Glossop, Derbyshire, late second to fifth century AD. See page 230
- Fig 18 (right): Romano-British stone head (with libation hollow?), from Corbridge, Northumberland. See pages 164, 181



- Fig 19 (left): Gable head from Bolsterstone, South Yorkshire (Medieval?). See page 239
- Fig 20 (centre right): Stone head above doorway, Sun Inn, Haworth, West Yorkshire, carved AD 1971. See page 308
- Fig 21 (right): Green Man head, window apex, Chapel of the Nine Altars, Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire, twelfth century AD. See page 257



- Fig 22 (left): Panel head from Withington, Cheshire (Medieval?). See page 238
- Fig 23 (centre): Grotesque style head from Pickering, North Yorkshire (Medieval?). See page 274
- Fig 24 (right): Stone head, carved circa AD 1987 by Anthony Myers Ward, Hadfield, Derbyshire. See page 158

Appendix 4

MAPS



Fig 25: Map showing distribution of British tribes and tribal territories at the time of the Roman invasion

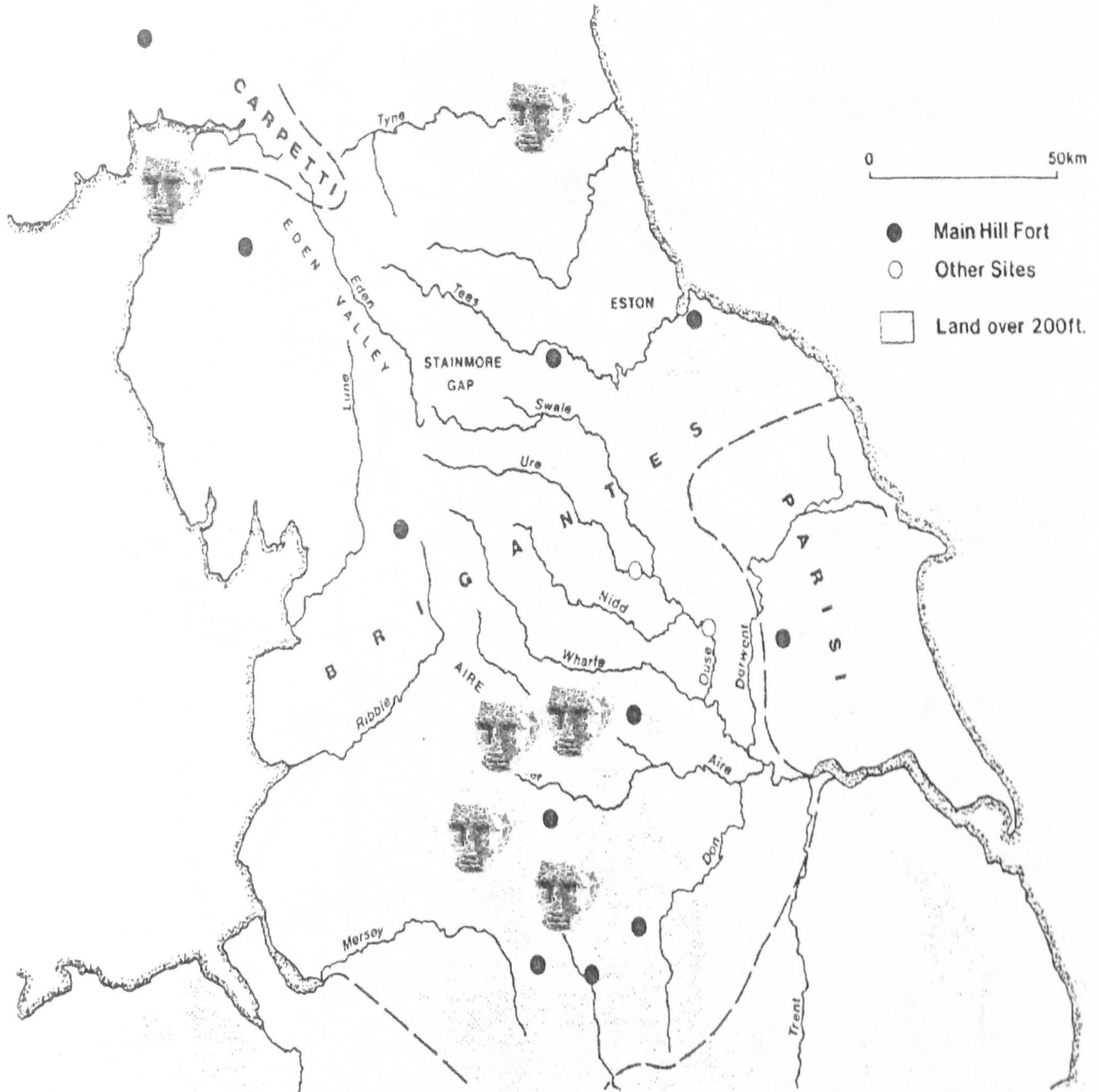


Fig 26: Map showing tribal territory in north Britain at the time of the Roman invasion



Represents areas where concentrations of stone head carvings have been recorded

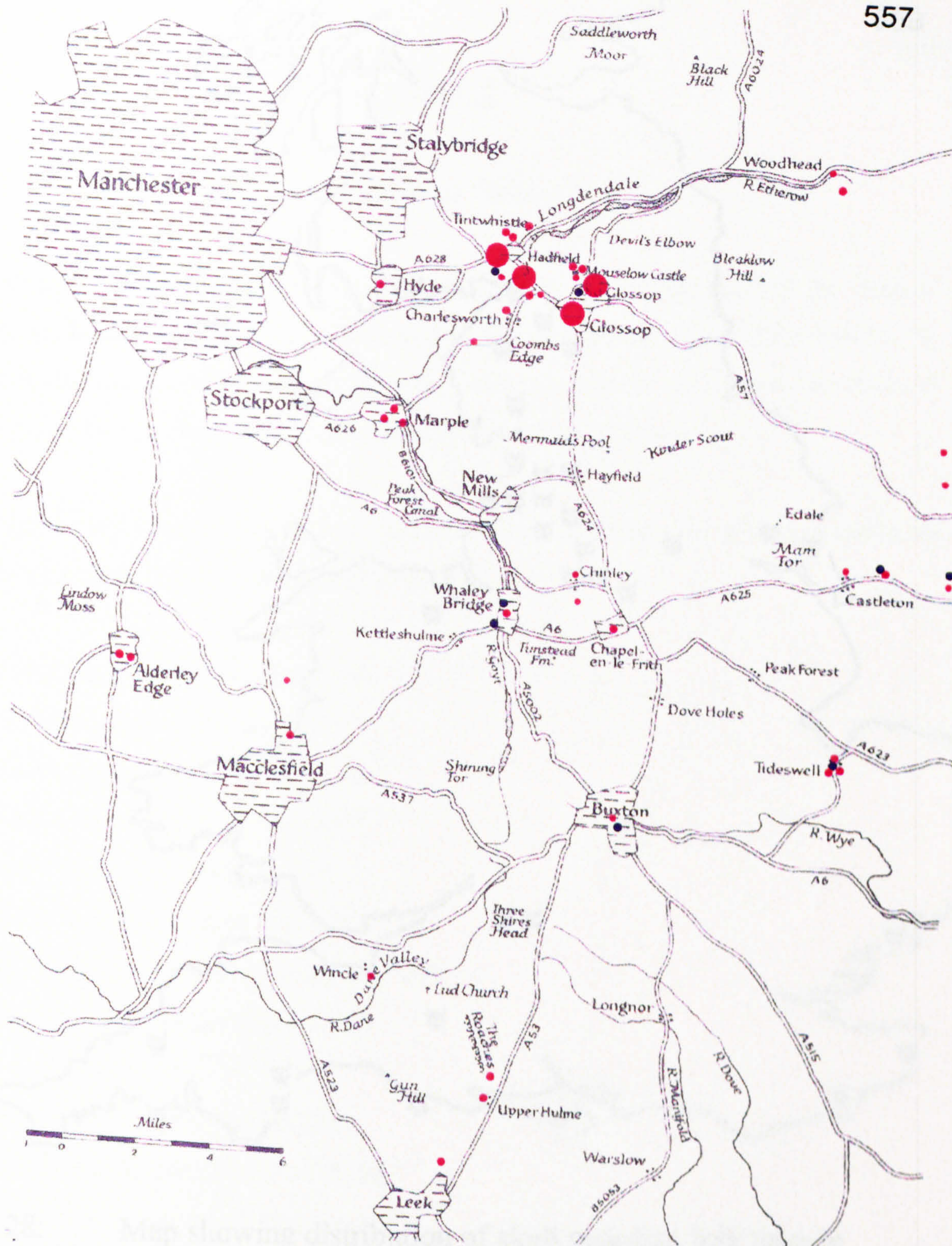


Fig 27: Map showing distribution of carved stone heads in the High Peak region of northern England

- Individual stone heads
- Clusters of more than three stone heads
- Stone heads associated with churches and chapels



Fig 28: Map showing distribution of skull guardian folk tales in Britain

☠ Represents locations of specific skulls discussed in chapter 7

Appendix 5

i. An address to “Dickie”

This dialect poem by the Lancashire writer Samuel Laycock first appeared in the *Buxton Advertiser* on July 25, 1863, and was reproduced in *The Ballads and Songs of Derbyshire* by Llewellyn Jewitt (London: Bemrose and Lothian, 1867), pp. 228-30. J.C. Bates, the editor of the *Buxton Advertiser*, added the following note in reference to “Dickie”:

“The name given to an unburied skull, in a window at Tunstead Farm, said to be opposed to the new line of the railway from Whaley Bridge to Buxton.”

*Neaw, Dickie, be quiet wi' thee, lad,
 An' let navvies and railways a be;
 Mon, tha shouldn't do soa--its to' bad,
 What harm are they doin' to thee?
 Deod folk shouldn't meddle at o',
 But leov o'these matters to th'wick;
 They'll see they're done gradeley, aw know--
 Dos't'yer what aw say to thee Dick?*

*Neaw dunna go spoil 'em i'th'dark
 What'e cost so mich labber an'thowt;
 Iv tha'il let 'em go on wi' their wark,
 Tha shall ride deawn to Buxton for nowt;
 An' be a “director” too, mon;
 Get thi beef an' thi bottles o'wine,
 An'mak' as much brass as tha con
 Eawt o'th' London an' North Western line,*

Awm surpraised, Dick, at thee bein' here;

*How is it tha'rt noan i'th grave?
 Ar't' come eawt o'gettin' thy beer?--
 Or havin' a bit of a shave?
 But that's noan thi business, aw deawt,
 For tha hasn't a hair o'thi yed;
 Hast a woife an' some childer abeawt?
 When tha'rn living up here wurt wed?*

*Neaw, spake, or else let a be,
 An'dunna be lookin' soa shy;
 That needn't be fretten'd o'me,
 Aw shall say nowt abeawt it, not I
 It'll noan matter much iv aw do,
 I can do thee no harm if aw tell.
 Mon there' moor folk nor thee bin a foo'
 Aw've a woife an' some chiulder mysel'*

*Heaw's business below--is it slack?
 Dos't'yer? aw'm noan chaffin' thee, mon;
 But aw reckon 'at when tha goes back
 Tha'll do me o'th'hurt as tha con.
 Neaw dunna do, that's a good lad,
 For aw'm fretten'd to death very nee,
 An' ewar Betty, poor lass, hoo'd go mad
 Iv aw wur to happen to dee!*

*When aw'n ceawer'd upo' th'hearston'awhoam,
 Aw'm inclined, very often, to boast;
 An' aw'm noan hawve as feart as some,
 But aw don't loike to talk to a ghost.
 So, Dickie, aw've written this song,*

*An'aw trust it'll find thee o'reet;
Look it o'er when tha'rt noan very throng,
An' tha'll greatly obleege me-Good Neet!*

*P.S.-----Iv tha'rt wantin' to send a reply,
Aw can gi'e thee mi place ov abode.
It's reet under Dukinfilt sky,
At thirty-nine Cheetham Hill-road.
Aw'm awfully freeten'd, dost t'see,
Or else aw'd invite thee to come,
An' ewar Betty, hoo's softer nor me,
So aw'd rayther tha'd tarry awwhoam.*

ii. The Skull of Ned Dickson

A ballad by William Bennett, published in *The History of Chapel-en-le-Frith* by Henry Kirke (London: Bemrose and Lothiann, 1867). Full versions have been published in James Wentworth Day's *A Ghost Hunter's Game Book* (London: Batsford: 1958) and by Margaret bellhouse in her unpublished manuscript *Our Valley of Combs* (Buxton public library).

*Ned Dickson's a yeoman, right Derbyshire bred,
That's strong in the arm and weak in the head;
He's gone for a soldier across the salt sea,
To serve Henry quatre, with Lord Willoughbie.*

*And now a bold trooper Ned Dickson doth ride,
With pistol in holster, and sword by his side
With black plate and breast plate of glittering steel,
With a plume in his morion, and a spur on his heel.*

*At Ivry he fought in the Huguenot war,
And followed the white plume of him of Navarre;
Of Henry le Roi, when he burst like a flood
Through the ranks of the Leaguers in glory and blood.*

*Hurrah now for Henry, and Lord Willoughbie.
Hurrah for old England, the pride of the sea.
Her pikemen, her bowmen, her cavalry too,
Show the Leaguers what Englishmen's prowess can do.*

*Where the battle was hottest, Ned Dickson was there
And spurred hard in his charger the honour to share
Three times did he rescue Lord Willoughbie
When struck from his horse in that famous melee.*

*At length the bold trooper was wounded so sore
That he fell from his charger, all covered with gore;
All night on the field in his blood did he lie,
And thought of his home and the summons to die.*

*But death did not come, he was found yet alive;
Though his comrades believed he could never survive.
His wounds were examined, the surgeon's best art
Was exerted to save such a valorous heart.*

*And his life was preserved; but his strength was all gone,
He rode not, he walked not, he stood not alone;
His battles were finished, his glory was o'er;
All ended war's pageant, he must see it no more.*

*Then homeward he wended across the blue sea,
And stood on the shores of his native countree;
But so wasted in body, so ghastly and wan,
No friend would have known Ned, the winsome young man.*

*He got to his homestead at Tunstead Milton,
Where the Derbyshire hills on the valleys look down.
Old Kinder he saw in the distance appear.
And Chinley, and South Head, and Coburn draw near.*

*Eccles Pike too, and Combs, on whose bold rocky head
The Roman his rampart in old time had spread,
Now lay all around him; his eyes glistened bright,
As he slowly surveyed each familiar sight.*

*Then he entered his house, and his cousin was there,
Who, if Ned should die, would become his sole heir.
He stood, but no word of kind welcome had he;
And at last said, 'It seems, Jack, thou knowest not me.'*

*'Who art thou? I know thee not,' answered the man.
While his dark eye the soldier did hastily scan.
'Why, I am Ned Dickson, your kinsman, I trow,
Come back from the wars to the flail and the plough.'*

*'My cousin, Ned Dickson. Thou liest,' he cried.
'He's killed in the wars, as is well certified;
Moreover Ned Dickson was comely to view,
And thou'rt but a lath that the wind could blow through.'*

*'Natheless, I'm Ned Dickson, Jack Johnson,' he said.
'Though wounded full sorely, thou'll find I'm not dead;
And this is my homestead, and thou art my man,
And these are my lands, deny it who can.'*

*'Sayst thou so, Cousin Ned, well I think it be thee,
After all that we've heard that tho'rt dead over sea;
But mass, thou art changed man, nay prithee don't stand,
But take thine own couch-chair, and give us thin hand.'*

*Then Johnson and his wife were right fain of their coz;
He shook Dickson's hand and she gave him a buss [embrace],
And soon came good eating and drinking to boot,
Till at length they had compassed the length of Ned's foot.*

Night drew on apace, and they got him to bed.

*John carried his feet and his wife held his head;
He had the best chamber, with rushes all strewn,
And through the closed casement he gazed at the moon.*

*Not long did he lay ere he fell fast asleep,
While his kinsfolk outside close vigils did keep;
They heard his long snores as they entered the room
In silence and darkness and death was his doom.*

*They strangled the soldier, as helpless he lay,
And carried him outward before it was day;
In the paddock hard by, they buried him deep,
And thought how securely their cousin would sleep.*

*And their cousin did sleep for awhile and no word
Of his death or his absence the murderers heard.
All people believed he was killed in the fight;
And Jack Johnson is heir to the land in his right.*

*But a year had not passed when one winterly night,
That the storm-wrack was hiding the moon from their sight,
Honest Jack and his helpmate cowered over the lumb [chimney place]
His visage was sad and her clacker was dumb.*

*'What's that i'the nook, John?' she suddenly cried,
And shaking with terror, they clearly espied
The head of Ned Dickson upright on the stone
As wan and as ghastly as when he was done.*

Many years passed away and the murderers fell,

*By just retribution, as ancient folks tell;
By a blow from her husband, the woman was killed,
By the fall of an oak Jack Johnson's blood spilled.*

*But the head of Ned Dickson still stood in the nook,
Though they tried to remove it by bell and by book,
Though wasted of skin and of flesh, still his skull
Will remain at its post till its weird be at full.*