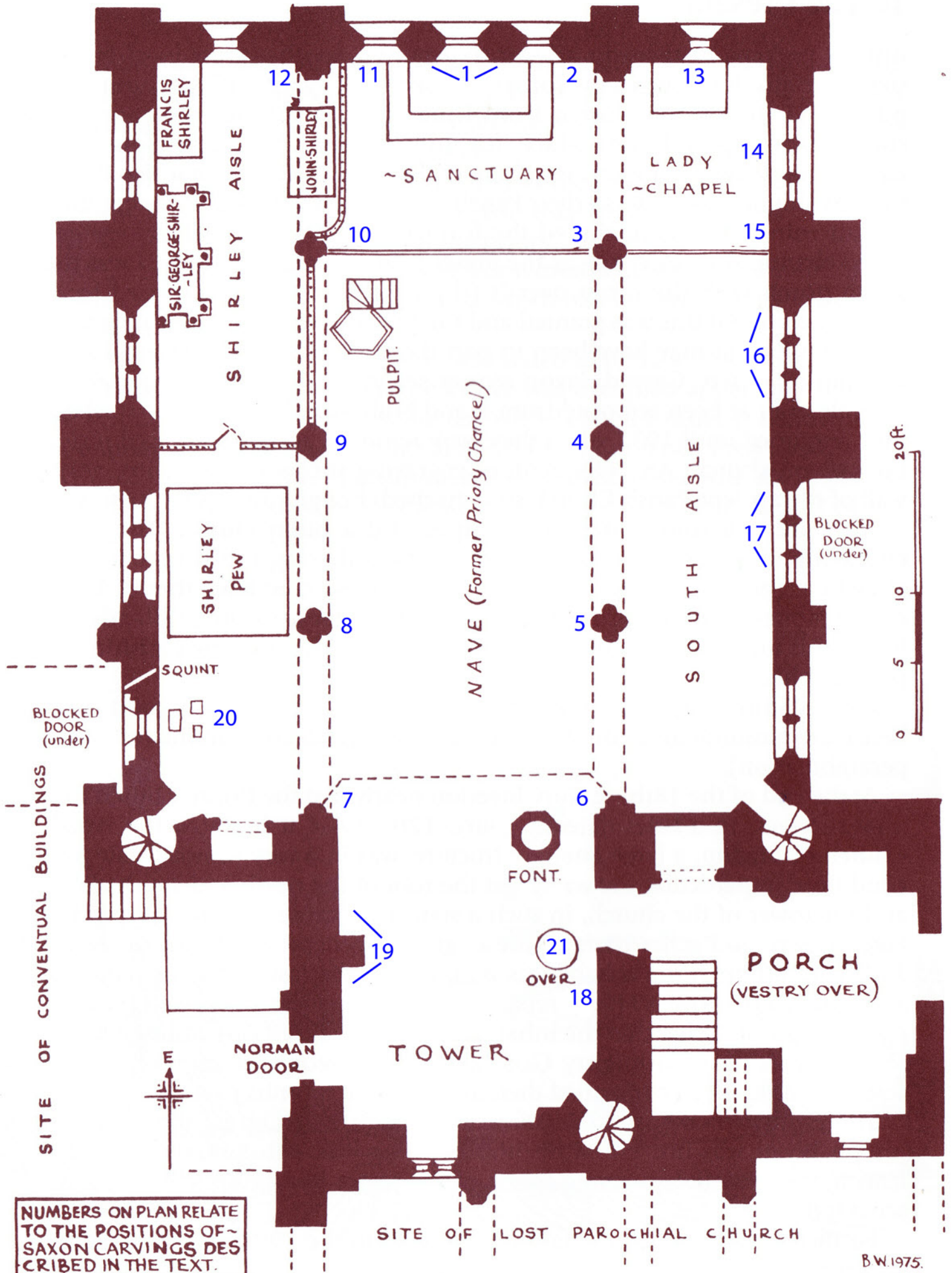


Breedon Priory Church



A guided walk around the Anglo Saxon Carvings

An extract from the History Guide
available to purchase in the church porch.



Use the plan of the church to follow the tour

1. The visitor might start to examine by standing before the altar rails. Behind the altar running the width of the sanctuary is a continuous strip of narrow vine scroll, its central spirals alternating between bunches of grapes, three lobed leaves and a single hollowed cup-like leaf. It rests on rough masonry and one is tempted to the possibility that it is the nearest thing we have to being in an ancient situation, either placed there by the later priory monks, or dare we think it is the old Saxon minster east end? Archeological proof is wanting here.
2. Set between the arches high on the walls of the main body of the church are blocks of the deeper frieze. The first on the south side at the east end is a vine scroll type enclosing a little human figure bracing his arms against the vine stems followed by two opposite facing cock-like birds. The blank end of this block suggests it was the beginning of the frieze.
3. The next panel is inhabited vine scroll again enclosing two winged griffin-like beasts and two birds very similar to those in panel 2.
4. Another inhabited vine panel in which the usual circular tendrils of the vine have been made more elliptical to enclose five charming animals stepping between the stems with curious nob-like heads and Celtic spiral coils terminating their main body joints.
5. Inhabited vine scroll in two disjointed blocks depicting winged headed centaurs sitting, standing and prancing through the vines.
6. An end frieze piece depicting a bird in vine scroll behind which a kneeling warrior in short sleeved tunic and knee length kilt kneels to defend himself with a spear.



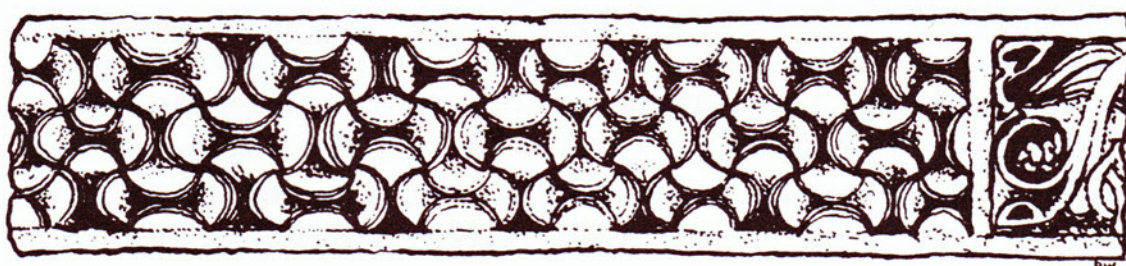
A



B

TWO FRIEZE PANELS (A) INTERLACE AND MOUNTED SPEARMAN
(B) BIRD AND KNEELING WARRIOR BOTH IN THE INHABITED VINE SCROLL.
SERIES No. 6 & 11 ON PLAN

7. Returning along the north wall we start by the organ chamber with a worn fragment of two Byzantine - like displayed eagle - like birds with traces of vines at their feet.
8. Inhabited vine scroll panel enclosing griffins and birds similar to panel 3.
9. This panel is in two sections, the first showing inhabited vine scroll in which three mounted warrior horsemen attack with lance like spears curious unmounted human or unidentifiable figures between the vines. The second section of this panel is a piece of Celtic style trumpet spiral pattern work.
10. A fine section of pattern panel depicting the classic Mediterranean style pelta ornament like a mass of interlocking shells. This design occurs in Roman mosaic pavement work in this country but only one other carved fragment similar to this is known of Saxon date, that at Fletton near Peterborough. A painted wall plaster fragment bearing the same design was found in excavations of the Saxon Minster of Winchester a few years ago. It occurs in illuminated manuscript of the period, notable in the panel of St. John of the Codex Aureus now in Stockholm. At the end of this panel can be seen the vine scroll fragment starting another frieze. Also a birds wings can be picked out whose position suggests this block was re-set in the church wall upside down.
11. This fragment depicts a fine section of interlace followed by a mounted warrior armed with a spear forever now charging into the east wall.
12. This beautiful section on the east wall of the north aisle was only rediscovered in renewing the plaster work here a few years ago. It depicts three birds set in a vine scroll with backturned heads pecking at the grapes and relates to another such bird in the tower, no. 19.



PELTA
ORNAMENT
OVER THE
SOUTH
ARCADE
(10)

The south aisle

Turn now to the east end of the south aisle.

- 13.** Here is the largest collection of individual human figure sculpture set in architectural decorative frames. The largest behind the altar is a half figure holding a book in the left hand and giving a Byzantine blessing with the other. This helps to date the sculptures to the circa 8th./9th. century. The figure's hair is covered, which lends itself to the suggestion of being female. The drilled hole staring eyes and stiff formal robes are typical of the formal figurework found in illuminated manuscripts of the period. Flanking the central figure are two sets of three saints in their arcades with a further two immediately to the right on the south wall. Their haloed heads have the same drilled eyes and stiff drapery. They carry books, scrolls that probably once bore their unknown names and another, doll - like small figure at waist level. Identity is very open to speculation now.



THE FIGURE SOUTH AISLE EAST END
HOLDING A BOOK AND GIVING A BYZANTINE BLESSING
ALL FRAMED IN AN ARCH WITH SIDE PILLARS (13)

- 14.** Further along the south wall a pair of figures one bearded, almost dance with vine tendrils in a small panel.
- 15.** This is followed by a large grey sandstone slab bearing the largest beast carving in the collection, a lion - like creature with a staring owl - like face known as the Anglian beast, a possibly Midland created produce amid the Celtic and Mediterranean influences.

16. Next to this are a further series of the deep frieze fragments, showing twin faced panels that strongly suggest the terminal ends of the pattern work on the outside corners of the Minister Church around which they once ran.

The frieze itself comprises a section of circular interlace followed by a lively group of Anglian beasts biting and interlocking with one another. Then comes a short fragment of Mediterranean Style Greek Key pattern concluding with a lively though worn group of cock like birds with drilled hole body decoration strutting and displaying across the panel.

17. There follows a series of bits and pieces some of later Norman date and a miniature coffin slab but include a vertical set stone with a quaint miniature beast in vines peeping at you, a vine scroll fragment and a curious foot on a step against wine jars (speculation suggests Christ turning the water into wine but more pieces would be needed to conclude this). Finally another fragment of a Saint with a hand raised in blessing, obviously part of another series.

Under the tower

18. Returning to the baptistry under the tower a final series of frieze carving survive. On the south wall near the ceiling another good length of narrow vine scroll patterns runs. Beneath this, three designs badly worn in the deeper frieze series depict a section of Greek Key pattern, followed by two dog - like creatures in striding postures turning their heads back to snap at grape bunches. The third fragment shows gnome like figures in vine scrolls but is unfortunately almost obliterated.

19. On the north wall is a length of ring chain interlace frieze followed by a lozenge like Key panel much used in Celtic Art. and illuminated manuscripts like book of Kells, Lindisfarne and St. Chads Gospels. the panel ends with a bird pecking grapes in a vine scroll as in no. 12



B.W.

SOUTH AISLE. ANGLIAN BEASTS PRANCE AND FIGHT AMONG VINE FRONDS FOLLOWED BY A SHORT SECTION OF DIAGONAL FRET OR GREEK KEY PATTERN. THERE FOLLOWS A FRIEZE OF STRUTTING COCKS AND DISPLAYING BIRDS PECKING GRAPES AND VINE FRONDS. THIS PANEL TERMINATES IN TWIN PROJECTING HEADS PROBABLY AS GABLE END DECORATION WHEN THE CARVING WERE IN SITU (16)

The crosses

Before leaving the main body of the church return to the west end of the north aisle. Here stand three separate sections of decorative free standing crosses (20). The tallest at the rear was re-used as a staircase step before being rescued in restoration a few years ago. It largely comprises of rather clumsy late style interlace and degenerate vine scroll.

The small square section in front is a much livelier piece. One face has bold interlace cables while the remaining three depict various dragon-like beasts so beloved in Saxon/Danish art. One with his head nearly missing dances on four three-toed feet with crescent shaped body joints is referred to by Sir Alfred Clapham as a Merovingian Beast. The next with a large tongue and having no hind legs but hind quarters winding into sea serpent-like interlace is similar to the Jellinge Style of Beasts. (A style named after Jellinge in Denmark). The third beast is rather worn.

The third smaller cross fragments depicts an obliterated Saint, just a halo survives on one face. The frontal panel has two scenes. The lower depicts Adam and Eve with Central tree and serpent. Eve reaches for the forbidden fruit. Above it is a curious primitive carving of a warrior being offered a drinking horn from a hooded figure probably meant to be seated on a bench to the left. The warrior may be handing over a scroll of credentials. It is very like the pagan entry into Valhalla. The carving is rather late, possibly Danish period and cruder in style than the frieze carving. It may be that it is a cross set up by a newly converted Dane depicting pagans and Christian themes, perhaps trying to make sure of entry into at least one afterworld.



CROSS FRAGMENTS WITH TWO PANELS BELOW IS ADAM, EVE, SERPENT & THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE (SEE TEXT FOR TOP PANEL)



BEASTS FROM A CROSS SHAFT FRAGMENT ON THE LEFT OF A THREE TOED CRESCENT JOINTED MEROVINGIAN OR GREAT BEAST. ON THE RIGHT A 'JELLINGE' STYLE LIKE BEAST WITH NO HIND LEGS BUT A SEA-SERPENT - LIKE INTERLACING TAIL (20)

The Angel

21. Set in the bell ringing chamber of the tower is perhaps the most famous piece of Breedon sculpture of all and often missed or denied the casual visitor. Repositioned between two later 12th. century Norman windows is the Breedon Angel, one of the finest surviving examples of Saxon figure sculpture and perhaps the earliest known carved angel in England. The figure is set within an arched opening with crescent like capitals supported on pillars resting on stepped bases. In one hand is held a cross headed staff while the other is raised to arched level giving the Byzantine style blessing. The body is covered in broad sweeps of formal robes while at the figures feet two formal flowering plants thrust up from the base.



THE BREEDON ANGEL circa 800 A.D. (21)



BIRDS TURNING BACK TO PECK GRAPES IN VINESCROLL. NORTH AISLE (12)