

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT
OF THE DIOCESE OF GLOUCESTER

RE.: ST EDWARD'S CHURCH, KEMPLEY
(CONCERNING A MEMORIAL TO THE LATE ROY STIRZAKER)

JUDGMENT

1. On 3 June 2023, a Petition was lodged by Dr Polly Stirzaker, the wife of the late Roy Stirzaker, for a memorial for her husband that included the carving of a green man on the headstone. The original design proposal was subsequently modified by the Petitioner and appears below¹:



¹ © Paul Andrew Jones, 2025

2. The Petitioner wanted the memorial to commemorate something that was important to her deceased husband, namely his longstanding association with Morris dancing. She provided photographs that showed his involvement, which included one of him dancing outside of Gloucester Cathedral on a Boxing Day.
3. The Petitioner, in the usual way, had discussed the matter with the Priest-in-charge who had indicated that the proposed design relating to the green man may fall outside the Chancellor's guidelines. Following consultation with the Archdeacon and the Registrar, the Priest-in-charge stated in the Petition '*under advisement from Archdeacon and Registrar, I can not give permission as the green man symbol is not considered a Christian symbol.*'
4. The advice given by the Archdeacon and Registrar accorded with my own understanding of the green man. Indeed, I gave directions in February 2023, prior to the Petition being lodged that stated '*that the Court is aware that the Green Man image is linked to modern paganism as well as being a character in folklore. The fact that the image (or one similar) has occasionally occurred in church architecture, is unlikely to be persuasive upon the Court that it should be carved on a memorial in a Christian churchyard.*' I encouraged further research into the history of the symbol.
5. Upon researching the matter, it was apparent that the history of the green man as a symbol that appeared in churches was complicated. There were green men symbols apparently carved in Gloucester Cathedral and Exeter Cathedral. In the Spring of 2023, the invitation to the Coronation of Their

Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla was issued and it contained the image of a green man²:



6. The Coronation invitation confirmed what was becoming abundantly clear, that the symbol, whatever its origins, was not regarded universally with the same suspicion that I had originally supposed. Indeed, I soon became aware that there was a body of opinion that suggested that those in the last century who had tried to link its appearance in medieval architecture to some pre-Christian pagan activity had been discredited.

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7. Accordingly, I sought expert opinion on the history of the green man. I am indebted to the assistance of Professor Norman Doe KC, who put me in touch with the Reverend Dr Helen Hall at Nottingham Trent University. She made available to me a short paper that she had co-authored with Professor Javier Garcia Oliva at Manchester University, entitled: *'The Green Man/Foliate Head as a Symbol in the Context of Christian Memorialisation.'* The short paper sought to examine the origins and interpretation of the Green Man image in English architecture, particularly in ecclesiastical settings. It looked at the associations with the image and paganism in some parts of contemporary culture, and whether a green man is permissible on a memorial headstone.
8. The paper considered that in medieval architecture, the green man appeared in an explicitly Christian context and was generally construed in a positive light. It had links to Christian legends that spoke of Adam and the Garden of Eden and the Quest of Seth. In medieval Christian culture, trees were often linked to the crucifixion, and hence a deciduous tree has the 'symmetry' of being a *'vehicle for the fall and redemption of humankind'*. *'The people who gazed at Green Men in churches would not only have thought of winter and spring, but also made the connection between this seasonal death and rebirth, and the cosmic journey from death brought by the Fall to the life flowing from the crucifixion and resurrection.'*
9. The paper considered that many people today may still be influenced by the mistaken reasoning of those in the last century who sought to establish that there was an unbroken tradition of ancient pagan religion in this country. This included the work of the folklorist Lady Raglan in 1939. The paper considered that this reasoning had been widely discredited. The

paper concluded that the green man was a Christian symbol as it had been used in church architecture to convey Christian truths.

10. I have considered and found helpful the recent decision of Chancellor Samuel in Re All Saints, Stretton-on-Dunsmore [2023] ECC Cov 2, where he carefully set out the overarching principles when considering a petition for three lions to be placed on a memorial. I have also had regard to Re St Oswald, Dean [2016] ECC Car 5 and Re St Mary, Canwell [2020] ECC Lic 2, where the Chancellors had to consider Petitions for masonic symbols to be added to memorials. In Re St Oswald, Dean [2016] ECC Car 5, the Court declined permission for the inclusion of a masonic symbol stating in clear terms that it did *'not accept that what is proposed is an accepted Christian symbol'* and that it was *'satisfied that the Masonic symbol of a set square and compass is considered to be un-Christian by some Christians'*. The Court concluded that it was not appropriate that an inscription or a symbol on a memorial in a churchyard should be a source of controversy or contention. In Re St Mary, Canwell, Chancellor Eyre KC concluded that: *'Those visiting the churchyard en route to the relevant church or attending to mourn their loved ones are entitled to find the churchyard a place of solace and comfort. That important purpose will be jeopardised by memorials which are potentially offensive or controversial. It does not mean that a memorial will not be permitted just because of the possibility that a person of unusual sensitivity or idiosyncratic views would find it offensive or upsetting. However, it does mean that wording or symbols which give rise to a real risk of offence or upset to a significant body of those visiting the churchyard will not be permitted.'*

11. I have concluded that there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that the green man is a Christian symbol. Whilst there is evidence that some have

tried to link the green man to past traditions, I am not convinced that this linking is historically accurate. It is possible that the symbol may cause some discussion amongst those visiting a churchyard or indeed a church, but the widening body of research and the use of the symbol for the Coronation invitation mean that it is highly unlikely that it would cause offence or upset to persons seeing it. I accept that the symbol of the green man can be seen as a representation of Christ as the new Adam surrounded by the abundant life that He brings.

12. Accordingly, I grant the Petition and a Faculty shall be issued permitting the memorial in the terms applied for. I am grateful for the Petitioner's patience in resolving this matter. There were delays caused in obtaining the necessary permissions to use the drawings that are part of this Judgment.

MARK B. RUFFELL BD, AKC

CHANCELLOR OF THE DIOCESE OF GLOUCESTER

Wednesday 15 October, 2025