

# Beakhead Decoration on Romanesque Arches in the Upper Thames Valley

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## SUMMARY

*Beakhead decoration first appeared in England around 1130 carved on Romanesque arches over portals and chancel arches. The earliest known examples are those from Reading Abbey and Old Sarum Cathedral. Most surviving examples are found near Oxford and York. Beakhead arches in the upper Thames valley around Oxford were examined in terms of their imagery and architectural structure to see whether they constitute a distinct regional entity and, if so, from where they might have originated. The upper Thames beakheads differ most from the Yorkshire group in their association with continuous orders. They thus appear to be characterised as much by the architectural form of the arch as by their sculptural style. No surviving building provides a model for beakhead arches, but the most likely candidate would have been Reading Abbey.*

Sir Alfred Clapham first defined the beakhead as ‘an ornament taking the form of a head of a bird, beast or monster, the beak or jaw of which appears to grip the moulding across which it is carved.’<sup>1</sup> Romanesque arches with radial voussoirs bearing human and animal heads first appeared in western France early in the twelfth century.<sup>2</sup> The earliest evidence of beakheads in England, c.1130, is from excavated material from Reading Abbey and Old Sarum Cathedral. The main concentrations are around Oxford and York, with a thinner scatter in between and few at the extremities of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond these basic outlines, much remains to be discovered. Henry and Zarnecki’s work of the 1950s is the only extended analysis,<sup>4</sup> while a shorter article by Baxter summarises recent work.<sup>5</sup> Descriptive online reports are becoming available for many churches, but no comparative studies have yet been published.<sup>6</sup> As a result, both the origins and development of the beakhead in England are only partially understood. The French connection seems clear, and yet in France the heads are usually human, whereas in England they are mainly bird-like or animal-like. In any case, biting beak imagery was already familiar in Britain and Ireland long before the Norman Conquest. It was in common use here in both religious and secular contexts since the seventh century, appearing in Gospel Books and on decorative metalwork. Irish beakhead decoration took slightly different forms and probably had different origins.<sup>7</sup>

This article seeks to advance our understanding of English beakhead arches through a close

<sup>1</sup> A.W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture after the Conquest* (1934), p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> F. Henry and G. Zarnecki, ‘Romanesque Arches Decorated with Human and Animal Heads’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 20-1 (1957-8), pp. 1-34.

<sup>3</sup> J. Salmon, ‘Beakhead Ornament in Norman Architecture’, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 36 (1946), pp. 349-57.

<sup>4</sup> Henry and Zarnecki, ‘Romanesque Arches’.

<sup>5</sup> R. Baxter, ‘Beakhead Ornament and the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture’, <http://www.buildingconservation.com/article/beakhead/beakhead.htm> (2004)

<sup>6</sup> Site reports from the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland: [www.crsbi.ac.uk](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk).

<sup>7</sup> R. Stalley, ‘Diffusion, Imitation and Evolution: The Uncertain Origins of ‘Beakhead’ Ornament’, in J.A. Franklin et al. (eds.), *Architecture and Interpretation: Essays for Eric Fernie* (2012), pp. 111-27.

analysis of those surviving in the upper Thames valley around Oxford. The aim is to determine whether beakhead arches in this area, one of England's two main clusters, were distinctive in stylistic or structural terms and, if so, whether they had a common origin. The material that survives is overwhelmingly concentrated in parish churches, as the major Romanesque abbeys of this area, such as Abingdon and Osney, were dismantled shortly after their dissolution. However, there is no doubt that Reading Abbey, founded by Henry I in 1121, and intended from the outset as his mausoleum, was the largest and most richly decorated building in the area, and one that may have been emulated. Further away, Old Sarum Cathedral was being enlarged and elaborated at roughly the same date by Roger, bishop of Salisbury, Henry I's justiciar.

## THE UPPER THAMES VALLEY

Within a 40-km radius of Oxford are fourteen buildings with well-preserved beakhead arches, plus three abbey sites where excavated beakheads have been found. These constitute the study material, and the area itself is referred to as the upper Thames valley.<sup>8</sup> Site distribution is shown in Fig. 1 and church dedications are listed below. In the twelfth century, Oxfordshire churches belonged to the diocese of Lincoln. Those south of the Thames, in pre-1974 Berkshire, were in the diocese of Salisbury.

### *Oxfordshire*

Asthall, St Nicholas, voussoirs on chancel arch, some restored.  
 Barford St Michael, St Michael, north doorway, in situ.  
 Bloxham, St Mary, reset voussoirs over rear arches of south chancel windows.  
 Burford, St John the Baptist, west doorway, in situ.  
 Charney Bassett, St Peter, reset voussoirs over south doorway.  
 Dorchester Abbey, St Peter and St Paul, lapidary material in the cloister gallery.  
 Great Rollright, St Andrew, south doorway, in situ.  
 Iffley, St Mary, west doorway, in situ.  
 Oxford, St Ebbe, reset voussoir replicas over west doorway.<sup>9</sup>  
 Oxford, St Peter-in-the-East, reset south doorway (now St Edmund Hall library).  
 Shellingford, St Faith, north doorway (now from nave into vestry).<sup>10</sup>  
 St Frideswide's Priory, lapidary material in the Oxfordshire Museums Resource Centre, Standlake.<sup>11</sup>  
 Wantage, now Register Office doorway, restored voussoirs.<sup>12</sup>

### *Berkshire*

Reading Abbey, lapidary material in Reading Museum and Art Gallery.<sup>13</sup>

### *Buckinghamshire*

Twyford, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, south doorway, in situ.

<sup>8</sup> This area is smaller than Salmon's 40-mile radius of Oxford and therefore reduces the sample size, but the upper Thames valley seems a more natural unit, especially for the twelfth century.

<sup>9</sup> *VCH Oxon.* 4, pp. 378–80. Present voussoirs supposedly replicate the originals, but each bears two beakheads instead of one. Originals in the Oxfordshire Museums Resource Centre, and photographs at OHC.

<sup>10</sup> R. Baxter, 'Shellingford, Berkshire': [www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be-shell.html](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be-shell.html) (2008).

<sup>11</sup> R. Halsey, 'The 12th-Century Church of St Frideswide's Priory', *Oxoniensia*, 53 (1988), pp. 165–7.

<sup>12</sup> R. Baxter, 'Wantage, Berkshire': [www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be-wanta.html](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be-wanta.html) (2008). This was originally the Romanesque doorway of the Latin School, re-used as the doorway of the chapel to St Alfred's School.

<sup>13</sup> Idem, 'Reading Museum and Art Gallery, Berkshire': [www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be-ramus.html](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be-ramus.html).

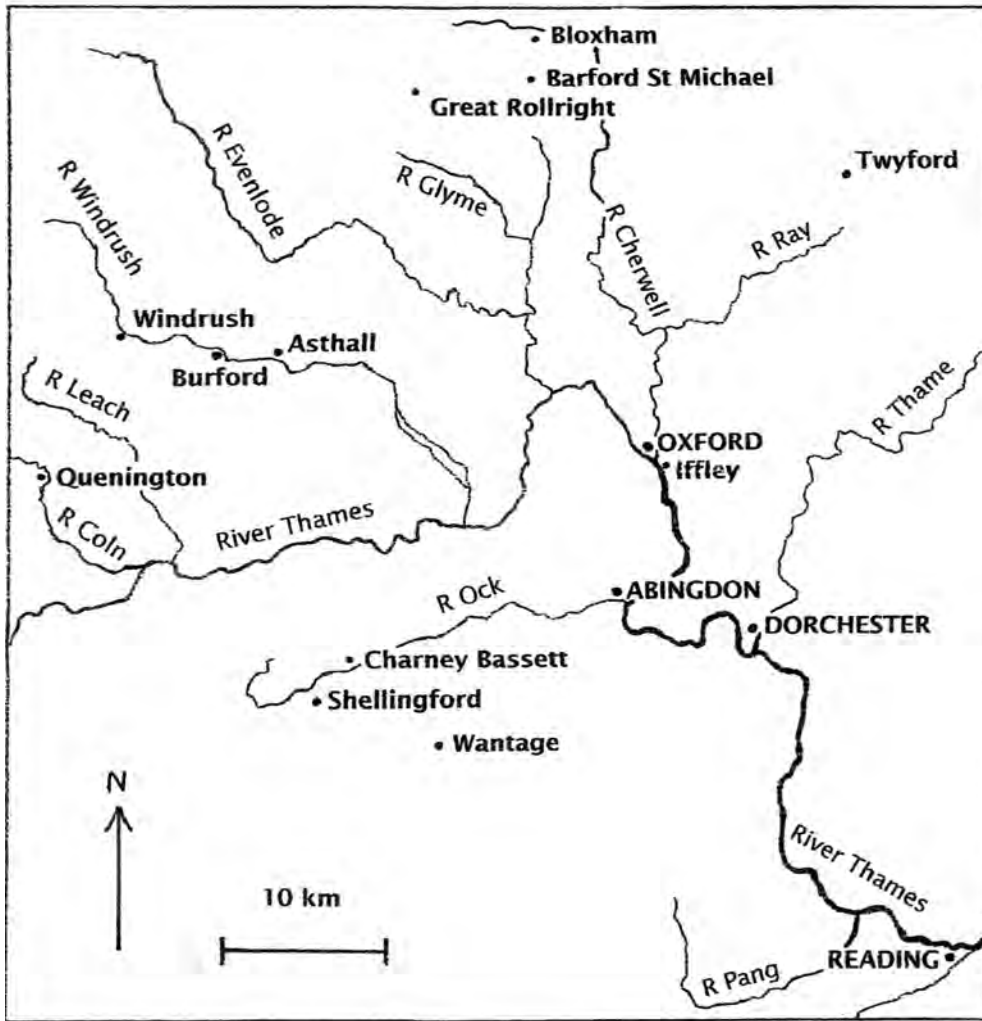


Fig. 1. Locations of buildings with beakhead arches, and abbeys with excavated beakhead voussoirs.

#### *Gloucestershire*

Quenington, St Swithin, south doorway, in situ.

Windrush, St Peter, south doorway, possibly in situ.

#### STYLISTIC CHARACTERISATION OF BEAKHEADS

Beakheads are inventions of the medieval mind. Many are grotesques or hybrids. As such they are impossible to classify objectively, and so for comparative purposes they are here grouped simply into 'birds' and 'others', as described below. Stylistic characteristics might help differentiate between workshops, or between itinerant rural masons working on upper Thames valley churches.

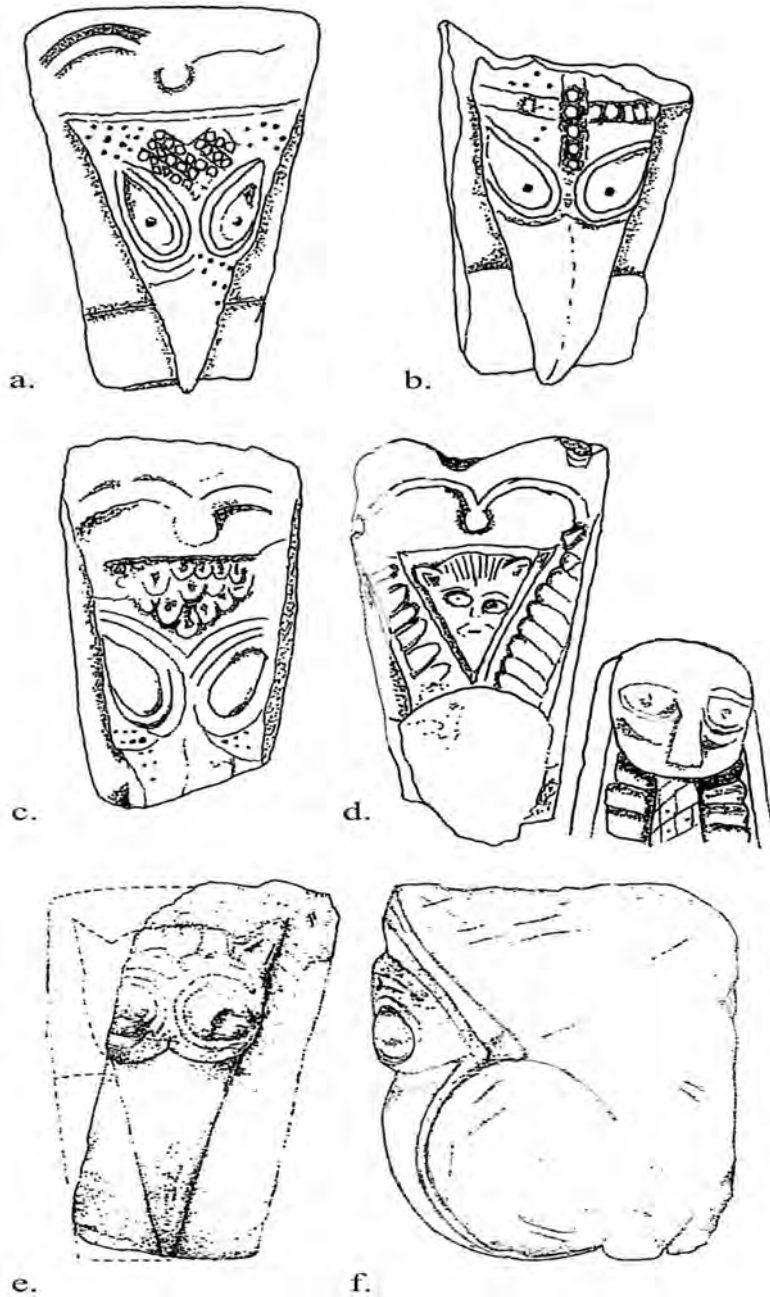


Fig. 2. Excavated beakhead voussoirs: a), b) and c) Reading Abbey, three bird heads, and d) one with human heads; e) and f) St Frideswide's Priory, bird head, frontal and lateral views.

### *Bird Beakheads*

The bird beakhead voussoirs from Reading Abbey, being the earliest, are the likely model for others in this area. Voussoirs originating from the cloister arcades at Reading were found in various locations around the city, and more were later recovered from the River Thames. All are now gathered at Reading Museum and Art Gallery. They have been described in detail and a suggested reconstruction of the cloister has been proposed.<sup>14</sup> The beakheads fall into two groups: ten bird heads (illustrated by Fig. 2a–c) and a larger group of grotesque forms with human-like heads at opposite ends of the voussoir (Fig. 2d).<sup>15</sup> These particular grotesque forms do not commonly occur elsewhere. The three Reading bird heads show the typical features and variations. Firstly, the beak, keeled, sharp and often with drilled holes, grasps the roll moulding over which it lies; and secondly, the eyes, large, slanting and almond-shaped, indicating their Anglo-Saxon origins.<sup>16</sup> Brow decoration varies considerably, with beading, beaded straps, grooved vees and fluting.

Beakhead voussoirs have also been recovered from St Frideswide's Priory, Oxford.<sup>17</sup> The chapter house doorway is the only element to survive from earlier, pre-1150, phases of building at St Frideswide's. The two excavated voussoirs are comparable to each other but differ in size, indicating they probably came from different arches in the priory. The illustrated example shows a typical bird with the characteristic long biting beak, and emphasises its profile gripping the roll (Figs. 2e, f).<sup>18</sup> Large round eyes have encircling grooves. The head has little pointed ears at the top corners, resembling those of a domestic cat. Such ears are common on bird heads, though scarcely visible on the Reading heads. At Dorchester Abbey, the seven excavated voussoirs bear beakhead or chevron from several different arches.<sup>19</sup> The heads are worn but are recognisable birds with small eyes and hardly visible ears.

Of the fourteen churches and chapels in the upper Thames valley, six have beakhead arches carrying bird heads essentially of the Reading pattern: Asthall, Barford St Michael, Iffley, Shellingford, Wantage and Windrush. Almond eyes resembling the Reading ones recur only at Windrush (Fig. 3a); other bird heads have smaller, oval eyes (Barford St Michael, Fig. 3b), or round or oval eyes (Iffley, Fig. 3c). Most show varied brow decoration, especially those at Iffley, but this is less so at Barford St Michael and Windrush. Those at Asthall, Shellingford and Wantage are simpler, showing no brow decoration. Decoration presumably depended on factors such as the skill of the mason, the number of voussoirs to be decorated, the size of the workforce and the money available. The arches at Wantage and Windrush include 'other' forms hidden among the birds. Wantage has two beast heads, one with foliage issuing from its mouth and the other with a bifurcated tongue, while Windrush has nine lion-like heads, with a ruff-like mane surrounding them, as portrayed in twelfth-century bestiaries.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; R. Baxter and S. Harrison, 'The Decoration of the Cloister at Reading Abbey', in L. Keen and E. Scarff (eds.), *Windsor: Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture of the Thames Valley*, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions, 25 (2002), pp. 302–12.

<sup>15</sup> Images drawn from photographs in Baxter 'Reading Museum', nos. 4739 (Fig. 2a), 4688 (Fig. 2b), 4651 (Fig. 2c), 4669, 4657 (Fig. 2d), by courtesy of the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture of Britain and Ireland.

<sup>16</sup> Henry and Zarnecki, 'Romanesque Arches', p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Halsey, 'St Frideswide's Priory', p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> Images of a bird head voussoir (Fig. 2e, f) are copied from drawings by Sarah Blair, with kind permission, in Halsey, 'St Frideswide's Priory', p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> G.D. Keevil, 'Archaeological Investigations in 2001 at the Abbey Church of St Peter and St Paul, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, 68 (2003), p. 345–6. The cathedral site had been converted to an Augustinian abbey in 1140 by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln (Bishop Roger's nephew): G. Zarnecki, *Romanesque Lincoln: The Sculpture of the Cathedral* (1988), p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> T.H. White (ed.), *The Book of Beasts* (1984), p. 13.



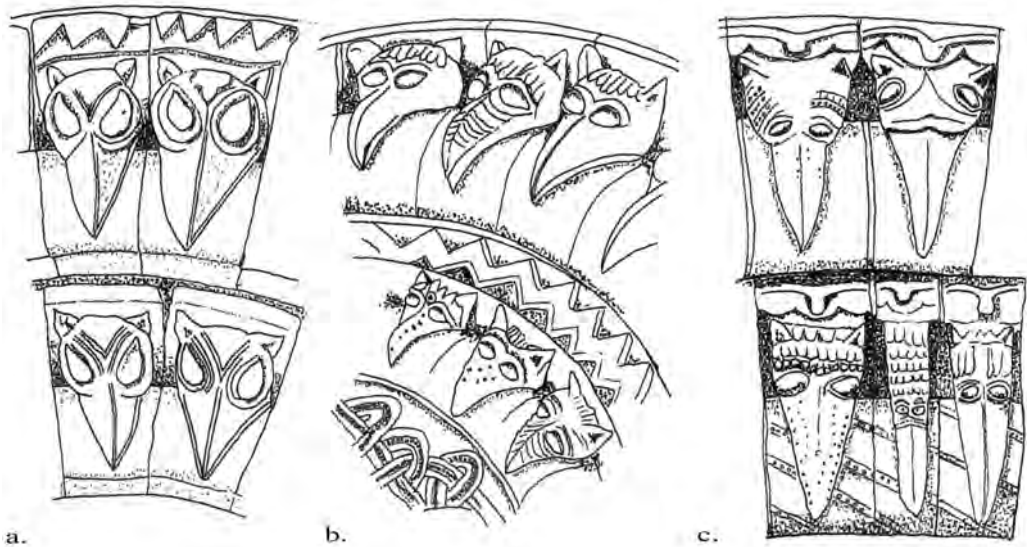


Fig. 3. Bird head voussoirs from parish church portals: a) Windrush, b) Barford St Michael, c) Iffley.

#### Other Beakheads

*Truncated beakheads.* The bird heads described above show an almost smooth profile from brow to beak tip. Truncated heads, however, have a chiselled edge at the root of the beak or at mouth level that is surmounted by a bird, human or grotesque head. In Oxford, St Ebbe's and St Peter-in-the-East show this type of carving, and at St Peter-in-the-East truncated heads (as in Fig. 4a and c) occur together with traditional bird heads (Fig. 4b). Some beakheads from the two churches are very similar, exemplified by the bear-like head with a nose strap or muzzle surmounting a beak (Fig. 4d). Truncated heads seem to have been a later development, but they supplemented rather than replaced traditional bird heads. Nevertheless at Iffley, where the west portal bears bird heads only of the Reading type, the later south tower arch bears only truncated heads.

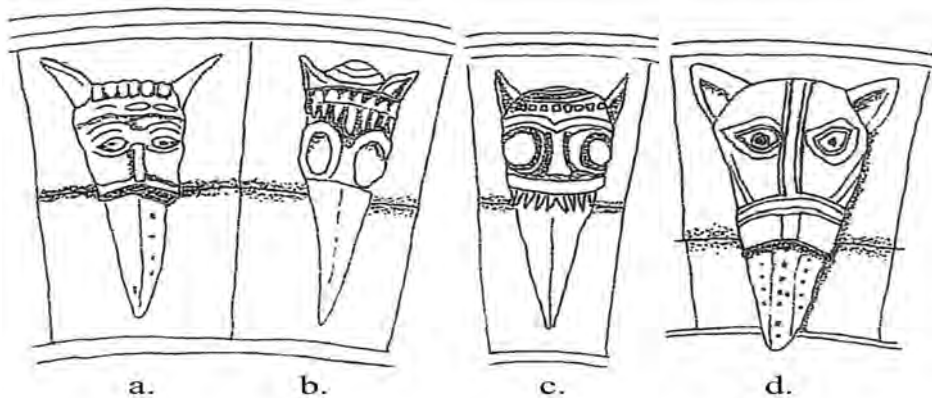


Fig. 4. Truncated and bird beakhead voussoirs: St Peter-in-the-East, a) truncated, b) bird, c) truncated, and St Ebbe's d) truncated beakhead.

*Grotesque and hybrid beakheads.* Most of these examples are unique. For example, on the arch at Great Rollright, the beakheads break the usual rules, being on a concave moulding and not grasping a roll. The shapeless ‘heads’ bear horizontal grooves with a thin beak-like projection hanging below. At the end of the arch, a single voussoir bears two human-like heads (Fig. 5a).<sup>21</sup>

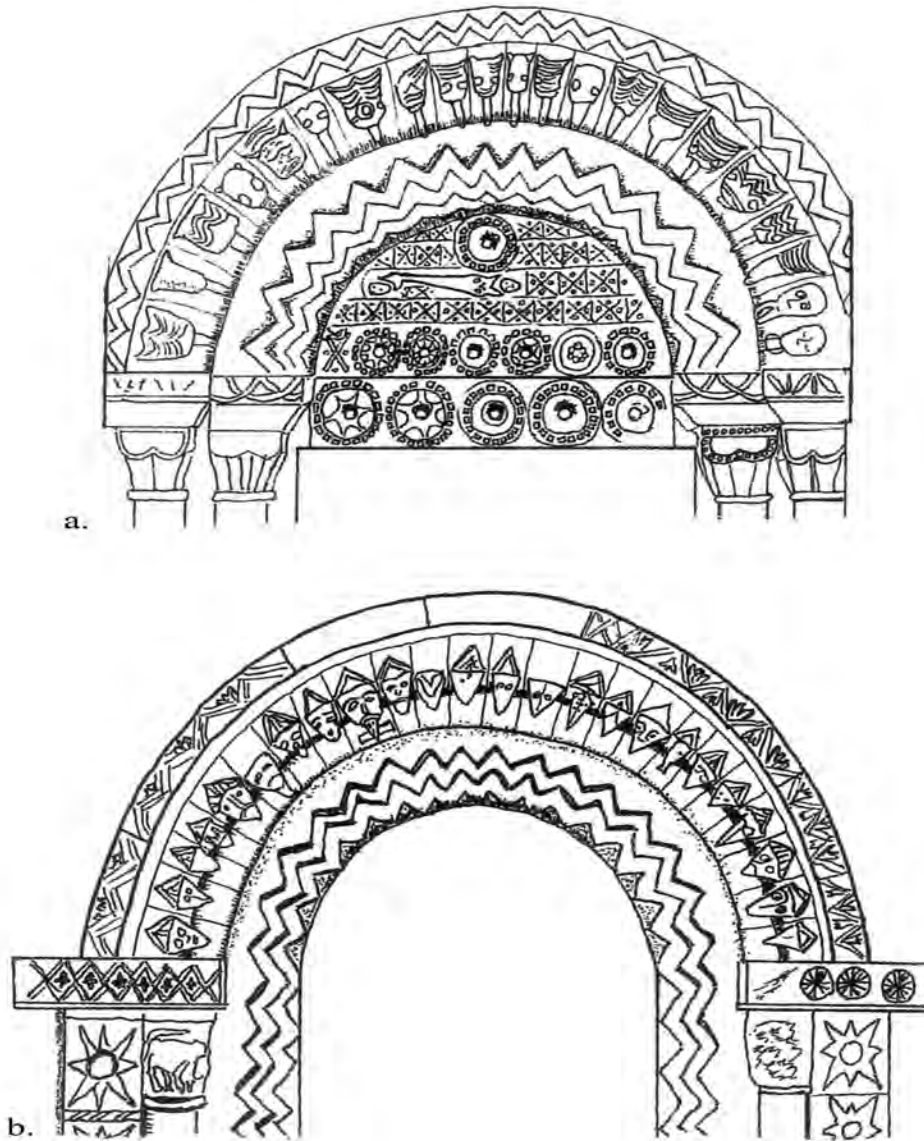


Fig. 5. Grotesque beakhead voussoirs on arches: a) Great Rollright, also showing a decorated tympanum and lintel, b) Twyford, also showing a continuous order of chevron.

<sup>21</sup> The lintel and tympanum bear roundels, a motif found at Reading Abbey, as well as at Old Sarum Cathedral, Malmesbury Abbey and All Saints, Lullington (Som.), all of which were associated with Bishop Roger.

Twyford's doorway is also highly distinctive. The heads, merely etched in the stone and mostly triangular in shape, reflect the shape of the voussoir (Fig. 5b). Most appear to be sketchily human, some have only a beak, and few are birds. But they grip the convex moulding in the traditional manner, one human head even spitting out a tiny bird head, also grasping a section of roll moulding.

At Burford, the beakheads on the west doorway have weathered and lost their detail. Several occur in pairs on the voussoirs. They seem to be a mix of bird, animal (a recognisable hare, for instance) and human, but many are unidentifiable in low relief. Even familiar beasts are scored as 'other' because their identity is rarely certain. The south portal at Charney Bassett is clearly the work of a skilled mason. Uniquely in the upper Thames valley, the arch is surrounded by similar human heads with foliage spewing out of their mouths.<sup>22</sup>

At Quenington, some of the voussoirs and jambstones on the south portal demonstrate simplified beakheads or clasps. They resemble open pea pods, and they mimic the beakhead function by extending to clasp the roll moulding. On the jambs there are only clasps, but over the arch these alternate with conventional beakheads representing beasts and birds (with a possible hare, horse and wolf).<sup>23</sup> The carved tympanum on this portal depicts the Coronation of the Virgin, first known in England on a capital from Reading Abbey,<sup>24</sup> suggesting the presence of sculptors aware of the carving of the Reading Abbey workshop.

The beakhead voussoirs reset in the rear arches of two fourteenth-century chancel windows at Bloxham are all large, extending on to the soffit, and of similar dimensions. It seems likely that they originated from a previous chancel arch. The carving is of high quality and individualistic, as befitted 'a lavish royal church'.<sup>25</sup> Voussoirs in Fig. 6 include beast, bird and human heads, two spitting out a small bird or human, a human head with its chin gripped by a double-headed serpent, another with a horse in the same position, and one showing two opposing human heads, as at Reading. This work is much more typical of chancel arches in general than the simple birds at Asthall.

#### *Other Motifs on Beakhead Voussoirs*

Since intact voussoirs from Reading Abbey are notable for a double cusp on their outer edge, the presence of this motif was sought elsewhere. It is replicated on all the beakhead voussoirs of the Iffley west portal. Significantly, double cusps also decorate the hoodmould of the chapter house portal at St Frideswide's. They are found, too, on doorway arches at Stanford-in-the-Vale and West Hanney and at Wargrave (Berks.). Other motifs sometimes appear in the same position as the cusps, such as saw-tooth on the outer order voussoirs at Windrush, and low-relief chevrons on the inner order at Barford St Michael (see Fig. 3). At Twyford an inverted 'V' of incised zigzag sits like a hat over each beakhead, and at Bloxham a raised zigzag gives a similar effect.

Halsey recognised that the chapter house doorway of St Frideswide's Priory was decorated with motifs found elsewhere in the upper Thames valley, probably derived from Reading Abbey.<sup>26</sup> These included certain variants of scallop capitals, superimposed rows of chevron, double cusps and beakheads. He postulated that an Oxford-based workshop existed c.1140–70, whose primary works were the St Frideswide's chapter house portal, decoration at St Peter-in-

<sup>22</sup> The tympanum that they formerly surrounded, now moved into the chancel, is thought to depict The Ascent of Alexander.

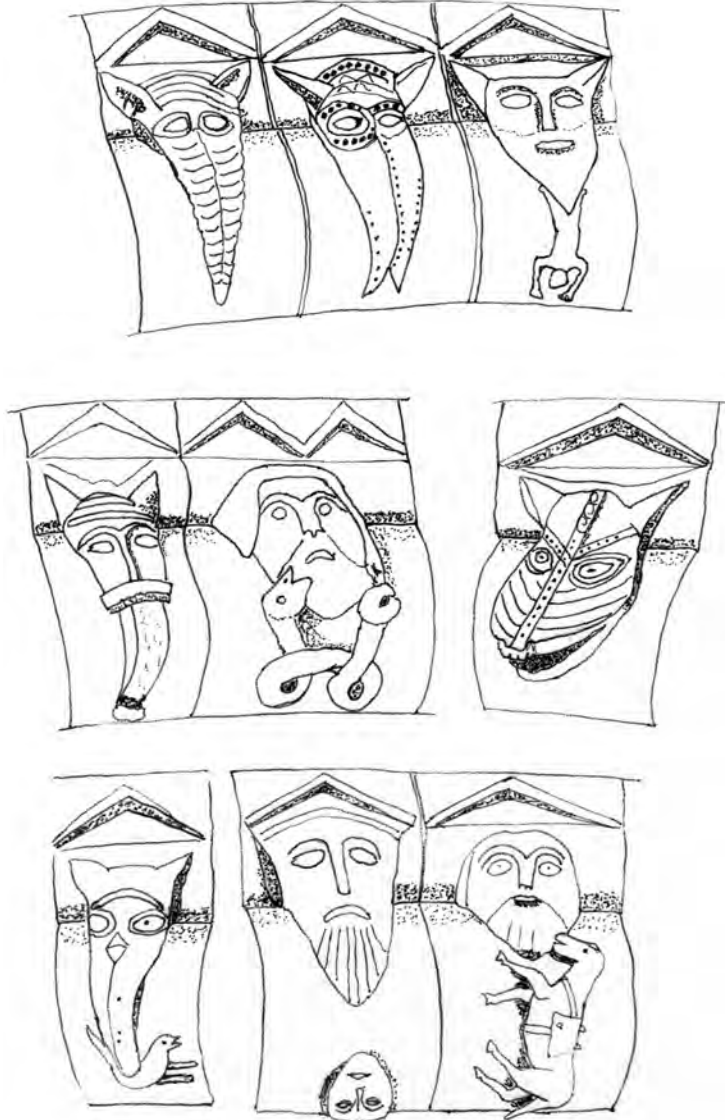
<sup>23</sup> A continuous order of striated clasps, rather like the fingers of a hand, decorates the south transept door at St Mary's, Bampton. At Iffley, the north chancel door shows plain triangular clasps.

<sup>24</sup> G. Zarnecki, 'Sculpture', in G. Zarnecki et al. (eds.) *English Romanesque Art 1066–1200* (1984), p. 159; T.A. Heslop, 'The English Origins of the Coronation of the Virgin', *Burlington Magazine*, 147 (2005), pp. 790–7.

<sup>25</sup> *VCH Oxon.* 9, p. 72. In 1067 William I granted the church to Westminster Abbey, and c.1180 Henry II granted it to Godstow Abbey.

<sup>26</sup> Halsey, 'St Frideswide's Priory', p. 164.





*Fig. 6. Diverse beakhead voussoirs at Bloxham, in the chancel.*

the-East, and the portals at St Ebbe's, Barford St Michael and Iffley. Although the workshop's existence remains speculative, masons from Reading certainly influenced work in and around Oxford, in person or by example.

#### *Additional Stylistic Variables*

There are other features that might distinguish the work of one mason or workshop. The first of these is the number of voussoirs. Numbers varied considerably, but there was a strong tendency for the number to be even. The roll moulding, a significant part of the voussoir, differs widely in diameter, occupying from 20 to 66 per cent of the height. No consistent patterns were found, even in churches where the same masons might have operated (St Ebbe's, St Peter-in-the-East).

*Summary*

Nearly half of the buildings with beakhead decoration exhibit bird heads that follow the Reading model. Iffley is the finest example, emulating not only the bird heads, but also the double cusps that accompany them. Significantly, finds from both Dorchester Abbey and St Frideswide's Priory reveal Reading-style beakheads too. The other churches show a greater diversity of forms.

## ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTERISATION

*Continuous Orders of Beakhead Decoration*

A continuous order extends from the apex of the arch down to ground level. Of the fourteen buildings with beakhead arches in the upper Thames valley, six have continuous beakhead orders: Barford St Michael, Iffley, Oxford St Peter-in-the-East, Quenington, Wantage and

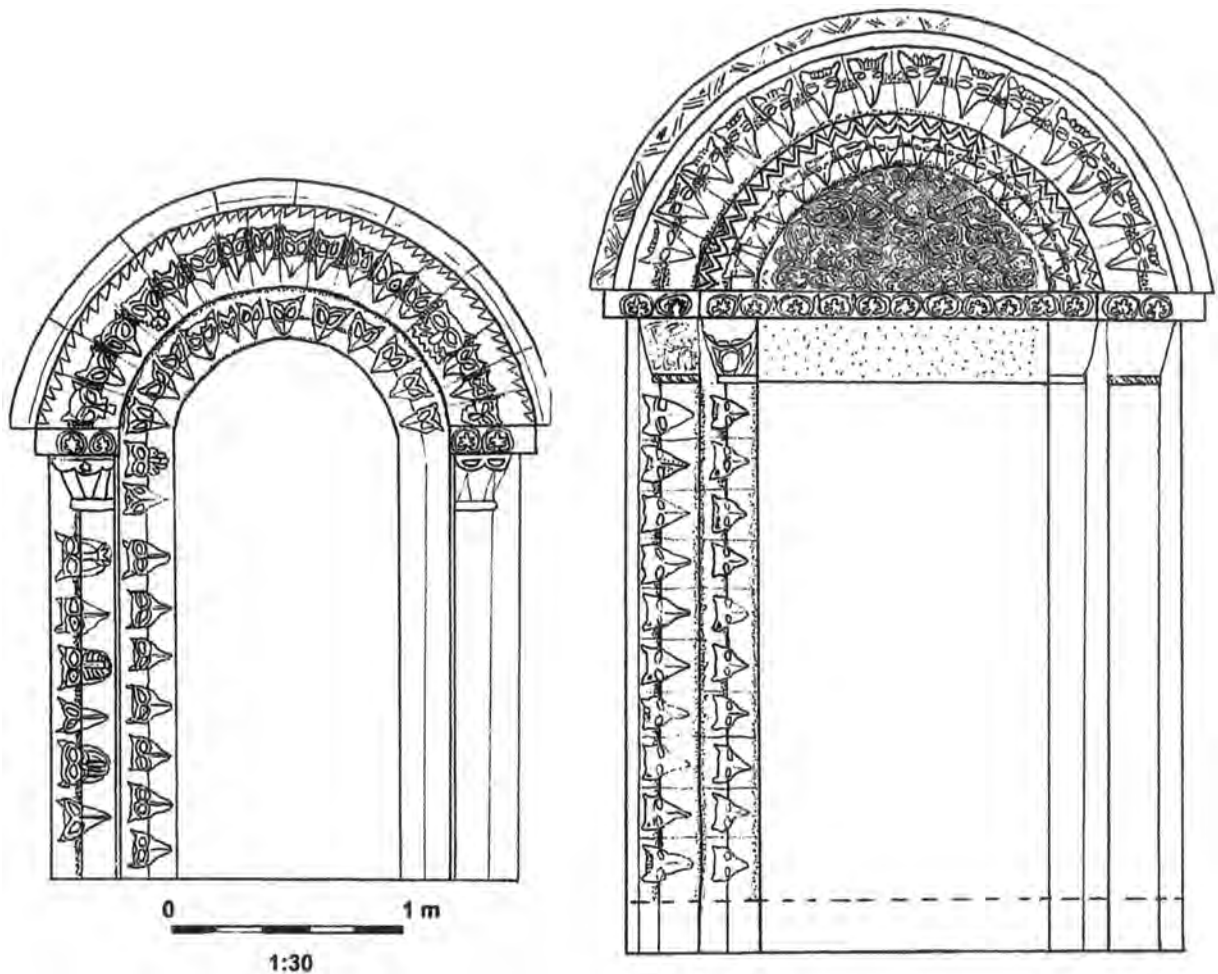
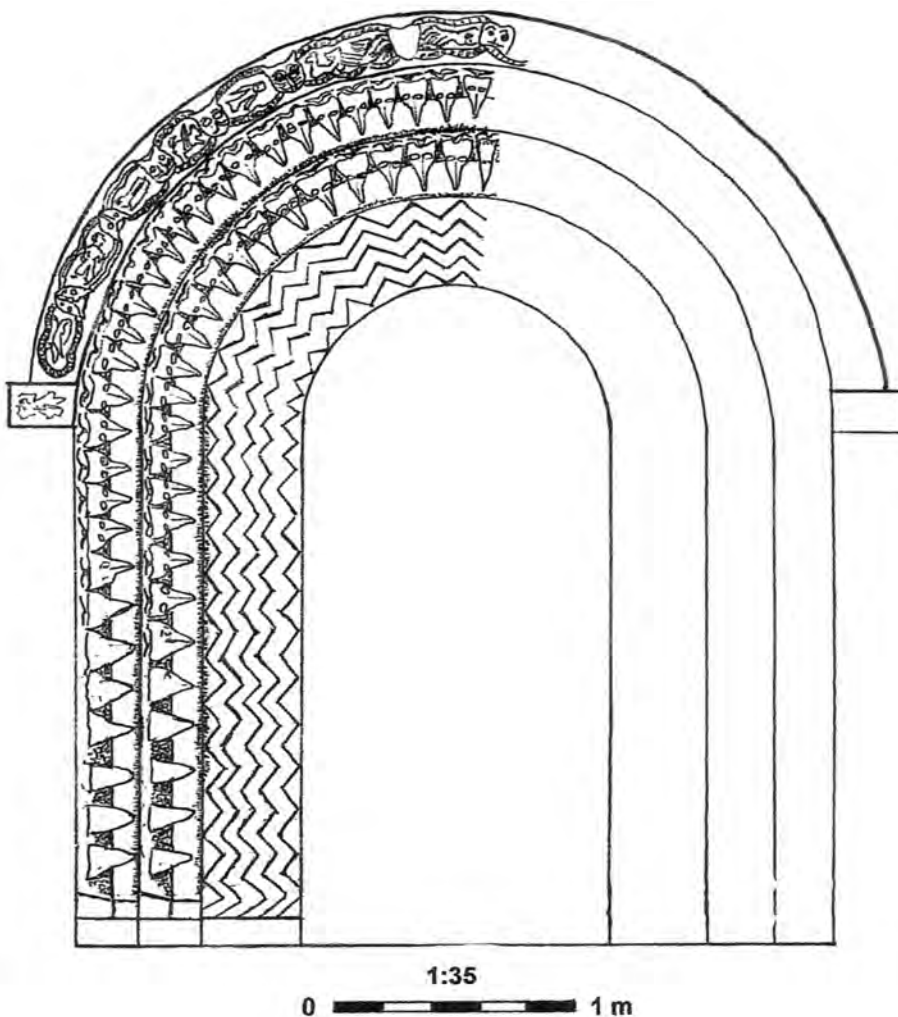


Fig. 7. Portals with two continuous orders of beakhead. Left, Windrush, with the outer order interrupted by imposts. Right, Barford St Michael, with two orders interrupted by capitals and imposts. The dotted line shows the later increase in portal height.

Windrush. Moreover, three of these churches bear double continuous orders of beakhead (Barford St Michael, Iffley and Windrush). This results in numerous beakheads (104 on the west portal at Iffley), and the latter three churches show a preponderance of bird heads (Table 1, Figs. 7, 8).

Beakheads are unique in being able to grip shafts or colonettes with their beaks, in the same way that they grip a roll moulding. They can therefore occur on portals that have jambshafts and capitals, as well as those with a continuous roll. With both methods of construction the beakheads are continuous, but in the former there is an interruption for the capital and impost at the top of the shaft. Both types appear to be used indiscriminately. Thus Windrush deploys continuous beakheads on the inner first order, and interrupted ones on the second outer order, whilst Barford St Michael uses two orders of interrupted beakhead (Fig. 7). This contrasts with the arrangement at Iffley, where all orders, of beakhead or chevron, are strictly continuous (Fig. 8).



*Fig. 8. Portal at Iffley with three continuous orders, the first of chevron, and the second and third of beakhead.*

Table 1. Upper Thames valley beakhead churches. Frequency of doorways and arches with continuous orders, and of beakheads showing the bird head motif

Church	Number of orders	No. of motifs			% bird
		birds	others	total	
<b>Doorways with continuous beakhead orders</b>					
Barford St Michael	2	34, 34	0, 0	68	100
Iffley	2	48, 56	0, 0	104	100
Windrush	2	29, 21	1, 8	59	85
Oxford St Peter	1	6	19	25(+15)	24
Quenington	1	2	32*	34	6
Wantage	1	30	2	32	94
<b>Doorways with beakheads only over the arch</b>					
Burford	1	0	24	24	0
Charney Bassett	1	0	12	12	0
Great Rollright	1	0	21	21	0
Oxford St Ebbe	1	0	12	12	0
Shellingford	1	12	0	12	100
Twyford	1	0	14	14 (+10)	0
<b>Chancel arches with beakheads only over the arch</b>					
Asthall	1	30	0	30	100
Bloxham	1	18	23	41 (+2)	44

\* At Quenington this number includes 24 clasps.

+ no. This number refers to damaged or unreadable beakheads, not included in the total.  
At St Peter-in-the-East, unreadable heads are on the lower jambstones.

#### *Orders of Beakhead Decoration on the Arch only*

Where beakheads occur on the arch but not the jambs, in the upper Thames valley they always decorate only a single order, and are fewer in number (Table 1). Moreover, the imagery seems to be more diverse, possibly because masons had more time to be inventive with fewer to execute.

#### *Prevalence of Continuous Orders*

*Upper Thames valley.* Of the six churches with continuous orders of beakhead, four also had other continuous orders on the same portal: of chevron at Iffley, Quenington and Wantage, and of star-in-square and of chevron at St Peter-in-the-East. At Twyford, with beakheads only over the arch, an order of continuous chevron was also present. Moreover, several beakhead churches also had continuous orders of chevron on other doorways, as at Barford St Michael, Iffley and Quenington.

The question arises as to whether continuous orders were particularly common in the upper Thames valley? If so, then it would not be unusual for them to be associated with beakheads. To check on this, all churches in Oxfordshire and Berkshire with decorated Romanesque



doorways were counted and continuous orders were noted.<sup>27</sup> Chancel doorways were omitted. One hundred and thirty-three churches were identified, but only four more with continuous orders (all of chevron) could be added to the list of those already recorded with beakheads. The additions were the chapter house portal at St Frideswide's, and the south portal at St Mary's, Woodstock, each with two continuous orders, the south doorway at Tidmarsh (Berks.), with three, and that at Caversham (Berks.), with one.<sup>28</sup> The latter two churches are close to Reading.

Thus, in 133 churches in Oxfordshire and Berkshire lacking beakheads, continuous orders occur in only four. This means continuous orders are indeed rare overall, and so it is particularly noteworthy that most of the few surviving doorways with continuous orders are associated with beakheads.

The surviving Romanesque doorways may themselves be a biased sample. Obviously many portals were lost when churches were expanded by adding side aisles in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Those portals that were taken down and reassembled, despite changing fashion, were cherished. To be worth reassembly, certain conditions had to be met: the masonry, and the sculpture itself, had to be worthy and, moreover, made of high quality stone with good weather resistance. These doorways would have been costly. However, it is not known which particular designs were favoured.

*Yorkshire.* It is important to know whether the Yorkshire beakheads share the same characteristics, and perhaps origins, as the Oxford group, and whether they too are associated with continuous orders. Using Henry and Zarnecki's list of beakhead churches, and the Pevsner volumes for the Yorkshire Ridings,<sup>29</sup> Yorkshire churches known to have intact beakhead arches were screened for continuous orders. Thirty-two could be assessed. Of these, only Adel and Edlington (West Riding) were recorded as having continuous orders of beakhead, and also of chevron. In the remaining thirty churches, beakheads were recorded as occurring specifically on the arch alone, and there were no continuous orders of chevron either. This strongly suggests that in Yorkshire, in contrast to the Oxford area, beakheads were rarely associated with continuous orders.

*Elsewhere.* In addition, twenty-nine beakhead churches from eighteen other counties, from Sussex to Lincolnshire, were similarly assessed (see Appendix). Six churches carried beakheads on continuous orders: Lincoln Cathedral (on the main west portal) and Middle Rasen in Lincolnshire, Balderton and Winkburn in Nottinghamshire, and Tutbury Priory and St Chad, Stafford (on the chancel arch) in Staffordshire. In these three adjacent north Midlands counties, all eight of the known beakhead churches were assessed. In only two, Southwell Minster (Notts.) and Swynnerton (Staffs.), the beakheads occurred only over the arch, yet even at Southwell there was a continuous order of chevron on the same portal. Of the twenty-one churches further south, none exhibited continuous beakhead orders. At three, however, continuous chevron was used somewhere in the church, in other words at Avington (Berks.), Stewkley (Bucks.) and Earl's Barton (Northants.), all not far from the upper Thames valley.

In summary, a group of beakhead churches in the north Midlands resembles those of the upper Thames valley in its association of beakheads with continuous orders. This group deserves

<sup>27</sup> J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Oxfordshire* (1974), pp. 413–869; N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Berkshire* (2002), pp. 51–315; R. Baxter, 'Berkshire Sites in the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland': [www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be.html](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site/ed-be.html) (2008).

<sup>28</sup> In Oxford, St Andrew's, Headington, has two continuous orders of chevron over the chancel arch.

<sup>29</sup> Henry and Zarnecki, *Romanesque Arches*, pp. 31–3 (of fifty churches on their list, many were inadequate for screening because the few surviving beakheads are no longer borne on arches); N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Yorkshire: The North Riding* (1966); N. Pevsner and D. Neave, *The Buildings of England. York and the East Riding*, 2nd edn (1995); N. Pevsner and E. Radcliffe, *The Buildings of England. Yorkshire: The West Riding*, (1967).

further study. It may have been influenced by Bishop Alexander of Lincoln, who was familiar with Reading Abbey. In the 1140s he had organised the remodelling of the west front of Lincoln cathedral that displays three great portals, all with continuous orders of beakhead or chevron.<sup>30</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The most significant observation is that beakhead arches in the upper Thames valley seem to be characterised as much by their architectural form as by strictly sculptural style. The sample size is small, but almost half the buildings with beakheads carry them on continuous orders, and in half of these, two continuous orders are present. The corollary of beakheads being borne on continuous orders, and especially on double ones – as at Barford St Michael, Iffley and Windrush – is that there are large numbers of voussoirs, and bird heads are usually the decoration of choice (Table 1). Where other continuous orders are present, without beakheads, then the motif is usually chevron, the repetitive decoration par excellence of the Romanesque.

The earliest known surviving English beakheads come from Reading Abbey and Old Sarum and date from c.1130. Although the beakhead concept originated in France, there may already have been a structural prototype for it in England, namely in the Romanesque architecture at Norwich Castle. The west doorway of the keep and the window arches of the south façade, probably built in the 1120s, are decorated with ‘beaker clasps’.<sup>31</sup> Upstanding faceted wedge shapes are borne on large stones over the arch and down the jamb shafts, with geometric designs in low relief reaching across to the roll much as beakhead does. Similar clasps occur at Barton Bendish, Norfolk,<sup>32</sup> while other examples resembling them occur later at Bampton, Iffley and Quenington, as already mentioned. The latter probably represent secondary simplifications. Clasps were purely geometric, but had the potential to become the vehicle for figurative sculpture.

Continuous orders had their origin in Anglo-Norman architecture, and can be found by the late eleventh century at Gloucester and Tewkesbury, as well as at St John’s Chapel in the Tower of London, Jarrow and Durham.<sup>33</sup> Cutting up a roll moulding and reassembling it as a zigzag was a simple decorative solution, and the chevron applied to the triforium windows of Durham Cathedral, dating from before 1128, is an early example. Thereafter, continuous orders passed into general use, though sparingly and with a general regional bias, being appreciably more popular in the West Country, west Midlands and Severn Valley than in eastern or northern England.

In the upper Thames valley, besides the fourteen churches or chapels that display beakhead arches, there is also evidence from three abbeys that beakhead was used in their decoration. Yet no portal or arch survives that might have provided a model. The finest existing Romanesque doorway in southern England with multiple continuous orders is at Malmesbury Abbey, boasting seven, but this has no beakhead decoration, and is neither early enough nor near enough to provide a suitable model. Old Sarum Cathedral has a famed bird beakhead but it decorates a corbel, not a voussoir.<sup>34</sup> The only beakhead voussoirs recovered from there bear grotesque upside-down heads that appear to be experimental.<sup>35</sup> Bishop Roger’s patronage of buildings displaying bird heads is, however, demonstrated at Sherborne Castle (Dorset) where

<sup>30</sup> Zarnecki, *Lincoln*, pp. 16–19.

<sup>31</sup> T.A. Heslop, *Norwich Castle Keep: Romanesque Architecture and Social Context* (1994), pp. 33–7.

<sup>32</sup> N. Batcock, ‘The Parish Church in Norfolk in the 11th and 12th Centuries’, in J. Blair (ed.), *Minsters and Parish Churches: The Local Church in Transition 950–1200* (1988), p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> E. Fernie, *The Architecture of Norman England* (2000), p. 273.

<sup>34</sup> W.H. St John Hope, ‘Report on the Excavation of the Cathedral Church of Old Sarum in 1913’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, 2nd series, 26 (1913), pp. 114–15. Beakhead displayed in the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum.

<sup>35</sup> R.A. Stalley, ‘A Twelfth-Century Patron of Architecture: The Buildings of Bishop Roger of Sarum, 1102–1139’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3rd series, 34 (1971), p. 76.

all surviving heads are bird, and at Avington (Berks.) where double-sided voussoirs over the chancel arch feature bird heads facing west and animal heads facing east.

The West Country is thus important in providing examples of beakheads and continuous orders, but no buildings survive where they occur together. It seems necessary to postulate the presence of a great portal nearer to Oxford, with continuous orders, beakhead, and probably chevron too, in a prestigious building that no longer survives. The royal abbey at Reading is the obvious candidate, as already suggested.<sup>36</sup> It would undoubtedly have boasted an impressive west portal, but although the choir was completed by 1139 when Henry I was buried there, the nave might not have been completed until the 1160s which would rule it out.<sup>37</sup> However, the chapter house was known to be huge,<sup>38</sup> and would surely have had a large portal. This would have been finished with the rest of the claustral complex, probably in the 1140s. Alternatively, there might have been a suitable model in Abingdon Abbey or Osney Abbey. Little is known about either of them, though they were clearly closer to hand.

The beakhead was short-lived. Sometime between c.1150 and c.1160, Geoffrey de Clinton, the probable patron of St Mary's, Iffley, may have been the last to employ it in the upper Thames valley.<sup>39</sup> At All Saints, Cuddesdon, by contrast, one of the most complete surviving late Romanesque churches in Oxfordshire, there are no continuous orders and no beakhead. Instead both the round arches of the doorways and the Transitional pointed tower arches continue to be embellished with a flamboyant display of chevron.

## CONCLUSION

Buildings in the upper Thames valley tend to combine beakheads and continuous orders, with a marked preference for embellishing the numerous voussoirs with repetitive bird heads. There is often an accompanying order of continuous chevron. Doorways with beakheads only over the arch show greater diversity of imagery. In Yorkshire, the other centre of churches with beakhead decoration, beakhead was rarely associated with continuous orders. In the upper Thames valley it seems likely that there was a local model for these arches, a prestigious great portal, boasting continuous orders with bird beakheads, and probably chevron too. Nothing suitable survives, but the most likely model would have been the royal abbey at Reading, either its chapter house doorway or its west portal.

## APPENDIX

Other churches with beakhead arches that were assessed for continuous orders, excluding the upper Thames valley and Yorkshire:

Bedfordshire: \*Flitwick  
 Berkshire: Avington (chancel arch)  
 Buckinghamshire: Stewkley (chancel arch)  
 Cambridgeshire: \*Little Downham  
 Derbyshire: Bakewell, Bradbourne  
 Gloucestershire: Elkstone, Siddington, South Cerney  
 Hampshire: Bishops Sutton

<sup>36</sup> Halsey, 'St Frideswide's Priory', p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> M. Thurlby and R. Baxter, 'The Romanesque Abbey Church at Reading', in Keen and Scarff (eds.), *Windsor: Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture of the Thames Valley*, pp. 282, 309–10.

<sup>38</sup> H. Englefield, 'Observations on Reading Abbey', *Archaeologia*, 6 (1782), p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> Recent dating and reassignment of patronage by M. Pythian Adams, 'The Patronage of Iffley Church, a New Line of Enquiry', *Ecclesiologia Today*, 36 (2006), pp. 7–25. Geoffrey de Clinton was Henry II's chancellor.

Herefordshire: Kilpeck

Lincolnshire: Lincoln Cathedral, \*\*Middle Rasen

Northamptonshire: Earl's Barton, \*Pitsford, \*Roade

Nottinghamshire: \*Balderton, Southwell Minster, Winkburn

Rutland: Tickencote (chancel arch)

Shropshire: Holdgate

Somerset: Lullington

Staffordshire: \*St Chad (Stafford, chancel arch), \*Swynnerton, Tutbury

Suffolk: \*Westhall, \*Wissett

Sussex: \*Tortington

Warwickshire: Kenilworth

\* Churches not seen by the author. Site data from [www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site.html](http://www.crsbi.ac.uk/search/county/site.html) (2008)

\*\* Personal communication from T. Russo.

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