

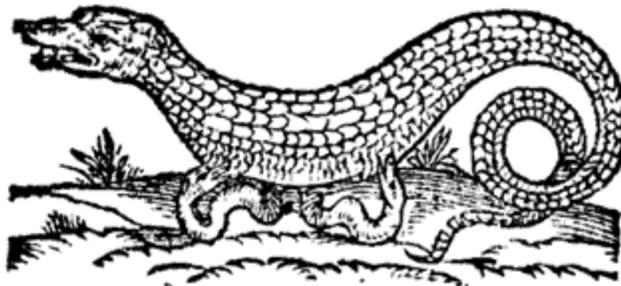
## DRAGONS AND 'HUNKY PUNKS' IN AND AROUND SOMERSET CHURCHES

### TYPES OF DRAGONS



**THE TRUE DRAGON:** Also known as the heraldic dragon, or firedrake, this is the dragon par-excellence; the most well known of all dragon types, the most widespread, and the most powerful. The true dragon is a gigantic reptilian beast with four legs. It sports two leather, bat-like wings and is covered with armored scales. Its head is usually depicted with horns or a crest. It has a spined tail and savage teeth and claws. The true dragons main weapon, however, is its breath; its most famous attribute being the jets of flame that it spat from its jaws.

This was the ultimate challenge for a folk hero or knight. The true dragon was almost impossible to kill. It had only one vulnerable spot on its whole body, and this was usually well hidden. In many (although not all, legends these creatures protected a horde of treasure. They are also attributed magical powers such as invisibility and self healing. In Somerset, dragons such as these traditionally "laid waste to vast areas" and put whole communities under siege. The true dragon occurs more often than any other type in British legend.



**THE WORM:** Sometimes rendered wyrm (from the Norse orm and the Germanic vurm) the worm runs a close second in its number of appearances in British legends. It is, in essence, a titanic snake. These limbless giants often grew from tiny innocuous looking serpents, a motif also found in the folklore of China and Scandinavia. Worms did not breathe fire but spat venom or blew blasts of poisonous gas. A worm would often poison whole areas, withering crops. As well as its deadly bite and breath, the worm crushed its prey in monstrous coils like an outsized python or anaconda.

Worms also had some odd attributes. They seemed fond of milk (an odd diet for a reptile) and would often suckle from cows. Some were placated by being given troughs of milk. They were also known for being able to rejoin severed sections of their bodies, making them exceedingly hard to kill.

**DECORATIVE DRAGONS:** Somerset is especially blessed with churches adorned with handsome, beautifully proportioned towers in the Perpendicular style. One design that stands out is that known as the Taunton or Quantock tower: tall, square towers crowned with pinnacles, built in three distinct stages and adorned with

buttresses, statues, and the local speciality, carved figures known as hunky punks. A profusion of these stone hunky punks can usually be spotted clambering up the corners of church towers and clinging to the string course below parapets. The name is derived, according to some, from “hunkers” (as in “on one’s hunkers”, i.e. squatting) and “punch” meaning short and thick (as in the Suffolk Punch). These carved stone figures often resemble goggle-eyed dragons or other fierce beasts, and unlike gargoyles they serve no function such as carrying off water, but seem purely decorative. Practically, they do serve to break up the rather severe vertical lines of these towers, but one wonders if they were not put there by the masons simply for fun (not considered an irreligious activity in medieval times). Usually described as looking fiercely down, their effect can equally be seen as quite comical.

Three of the best examples are at Huish Episcopi, Isle Abbots and Kingsbury Episcopi, towns about ten miles apart in south Somerset. The tower at Isle Abbots has eight hunky punks depicting a person playing the bagpipes, an oriental lion dog, a goat, a dragon, a Chinese dragon, a primitive dragon, a winged lion and a lion. Slightly further west is Kingston St Mary, where the tower of the parish church is decorated with a profusion of very interesting, and fairly decidedly non-Christian hunky punks.



fragment at Church of All Saints, Martock



Fallen hunky punk from Coombe St. Nicholas

Hunky punk

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Next Page: Various hunky punks decorating the tower of St. Peter’s Church, Evercreech. Photographs by Jacqueline Ross.



## DRAGON LEGENDS

**Wells:** Bishop Jocelyn supposedly drove out a dragon that had been terrorizing locals around the seven holy springs. A cathedral was built next to the springs. Known as Bishop Jocelyn's Wyrm, this dragon is depicted in a mosaic floor laid into the ground to the east of the Bishop's Palace moat.

**Norton Fitzwarren:** A sixteenth-century rood screen in the Church of All Saints depicts the story of the local dragon. Here the Roman general Ostorius was said to have killed hundreds of ancient Britons, their bodies left to pile up at Norton Camp. Over the centuries a dragon is said to have grown from the corruption of the rotting bodies (this spontaneous growth of creatures from rotting matter was a common belief in Medieval times). The dragon took up residence in an Iron Age hill fort and preyed on the populace, devouring children and destroying crops. Finally, Fulk Fitzwarine, a 13th century knight, slew the creature by piercing its heart and cutting off its head. Despite his brave deed, Fulk fell foul of King John and was exiled. He continued his adventures abroad when he saved the Duke of Iberia's daughter from a dragon near Carthage.

### **Crowcombe**



A carved bench end from 1534 in the Church of the Holy Ghost in Crowcombe depicts two men battling a fierce two-headed dragon known as the Crowcombe Worm. The legend goes: In Shervage wood near Crowcombe there dwelt a worm thicker about the middle than an oak tree. It fed on local livestock and then expanded its diet to humans, eating two gypsies and a shepherd. The locals became too afraid to enter the wood to pick the bilberries with which they made pies. One old woman asked a woodcutter from the village of Stogumber, a few miles from Crowcombe, to pick some berries for her. The kind hearted man agreed. After picking an abundance of the fruit he sat down to eat bread and cheese, and to drink cider. The man thought he was sitting on a dead tree but when it began to writhe about he realised, to his horror, that the "log" was in fact the worm. He hoisted his axe and cleaved the monster in two. Lucky for the woodcutter that the worm was disorientated. One half slithered off toward Minehead, the other half toward Taunton. So, rather than recombining, the segments both perished.

There is a very good online children's educational unit about this dragon called **Quantock Dragon Quest**, prepared by Judith Fursland and Rachel Shaw in 2006:

[http://www.thequantockhills.co.uk/education/packs/Dragon\\_pack.pdf](http://www.thequantockhills.co.uk/education/packs/Dragon_pack.pdf)

**Kingston St Mary:** A savage fire-breathing dragon terrorized this area until a champion came forth to tackle it. The hero rolled a boulder up a hill opposite to the dragon's lair and shouted out to the monster. As the dragon emerged, jaws agape, the champion rolled the boulder down into its open maw, choking it before it could roast him with a jet of flame.

**Aller:** The great dragon of Aller, near Langport, was a flying serpent with vast leathery wings which breathed flames and poisonous fumes - yet, curiously, was a milk addict. It lived in a hillside cave at Athelney Fens and attacked milkmaids, but was more interested in their buckets of milk than their bodies. It was even known to suck cows completely dry. It was finally slain by John of Aller (in one version of the story a knight, in the other a lowly peasant) who smeared his body with pitch and put on a thick mask to protect himself from the fire and

fumes. After a terrible battle, John was able to thrust a long spear down the dragon's throat and kill the beast. Again, in one version of the story he is burnt to death by the dragon's breath at the moment his spear hits home; in the other he survives to find a brood of dragon hatchlings in the cave, which is subsequently blocked up. The nine-foot long Spear of Aller is still preserved in Low Ham church, although recent study by Michael Sackett suggests that this spear is actually a Victorian cavalry practice lance.

**Wevliscombe:** In 1827, when the church of St. Andrew here was being rebuilt, the devil manifested riding a green dragon and began hurling rocks at the church. Saint Andrew then materialized and drove them off with a cross.

**Klive:** A fire-breathing dragon called Old Ben (or Blue Ben) lived on Putsham Hil near Kilve and was supposedly the steed of the devil, called upon to pull Satan's chariot around Hell. Unusually, he wasn't killed by a hero, but died accidentally. After going to cool down in the sea, he fell from a causeway of rocks and drowned in the mudflats. His skull (actually a fossil ichthyosaur) was uncovered and is on display in the Taunton museum.

**Carhampton:** In Arthurian legend Saint Carantoc visited this part of Somerset whilst looking for his altar. He met with King Arthur who was worried about a dragon terrorizing the county. Arthur knew the whereabouts of the Saint's altar and said he would reveal its location if Carantoc could rid him of the dragon. Carantoc tamed the dragon by putting his stole around its neck and leading it to Dunster Castle. An angry mob wanted to attack the now placid beast, but the Saint would not let them. He released the dragon telling it never to harm anyone ever again.

**Churchstanton:** A dragon once resided in the place where Stapley Farm now stands. After causing the usual havoc it was slain by an anonymous knight. The lashing of the dragons tail is said to have carved out a hollow in a field known as Wormstall.

**Trull:** A dragon was supposedly slain on Castleman's hill near Trull, but no details remain of it. The local church has a stained glass window showing Saints George, Michael and Margaret killing dragons.

**Clevedon:** Among a number of Guardian Dragons who protect various secret treasures, this dragon was said to patrol the area between Dolebury Hill and Cadbury Camp, guarding ancient treasures said to be buried at both sites.



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By Ken Forsyth

Research pulled from various online sources, including Wikipedia and articles by Richard Freeman. Also the book *Somerset Dragons* by Brian Wright.