

The Roof Figures

The Roof Figures High in the roof, where the rafters meet the stone of the north and south walls, there are fourteen carved wooden figures, seven on each side. The figures are about 70cm high and 30cm wide. They are all men, clean-shaven, and none has either headdress or tonsure. Each holds a shield of varying shape, with one exception plain, with no sign of paintwork. The exception shows the earliest representation of the Dunstable arms yet found, carved in relief and set diagonally across the shield. All but two of the figures wear ankle length tunics with down turned collars, fastened at the neck. The other two have voluminous collars and one has a long-sleeved garment, instead of a cloak. He may have been the chaplain, a secular priest. The figure with the Dunstable coat of arms may be the schoolmaster. The cloaks are similar to those in the members' Register. The figures stand on bases with wave-like carving on their edges – the medieval way of representing clouds. Most of the carving is fairly rough but the faces are well finished and have been given individual features. These figures are thought to be members of the Fraternity who restored the roof, although it is impossible to match images to names in the Register. The style of carving is not uniform, suggesting that several craftsmen were involved. Several Dunstable wills around 1520 leave money for the church roof. At the Dissolution, the standard practice was to remove the roof from ecclesiastical buildings so that they could not be used for religious purposes. When Henry VIII's men came to Dunstable to carry out this work, the townspeople said that they could not touch the roof which the Fraternity had renewed as this did not belong to the Prior. It is thanks to the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist that we still have our beautiful church.