

Evidence of Ritual and Religion is found throughout human society and the Lincolnshire Wolds is no exception. The landscape and village scenes we see today reflect the diverse and different social, economic and religious aspirations of the communities who built them.

Ritual and Religion have and will continue to influence the life and landscape of the Wolds. Whilst this leaflet touches on some aspects, there is so much more to discover.

**GOD'S ACRE PROJECT**

The God's Acre Project works in the Wolds to raise

awareness of the many varied aspects of churchyards and burial grounds. Members of the project provide advice to local communities and support activities, for example by helping with wildlife surveys, local history research and information leaflets.



**WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE**

Many of the churches and chapels in the Lincolnshire Wolds contain further information, as do museums. Your local

library and heritage experts have a wealth of information about the area, including church history, architecture and archaeology.

Lincolnshire Library Services  
Tel: 01522 782040 [www.lincolnshire.gov.uk](http://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk)

Lincolnshire Historic Environment Record  
Tel: 01522 782070 [www.lincolnshire.gov.uk](http://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk)

Lincolnshire Archives  
Tel: 01522 782070 [www.lincolnshire.gov.uk](http://www.lincolnshire.gov.uk)

Sites and Monuments Record  
North East Lincolnshire Council  
Tel: 01472 323586 [www.nelincs.gov.uk](http://www.nelincs.gov.uk)

Louth Museum - Tel: 01507 601211

Lincolnshire Church Tourism Project  
Tel: 01522 504050

West Lindsey Churches Festival  
Tel: 01427 676666  
[www.churchesfestival.com](http://www.churchesfestival.com)  
[www.visitlincolnshire.com](http://www.visitlincolnshire.com)

Churches Together in All Lincolnshire  
Tel: 01522 504073 [www.ctal.org.uk](http://www.ctal.org.uk)

Churches Together in All Lincolnshire brings together members of mainstream Christian denominations across historic Lincolnshire who have pledged to work together and develop projects in partnership.

THE LINCOLNSHIRE WOLDS

*The Lincolnshire Wolds is a nationally important and cherished landscape. Part of it was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in 1973. Covering an area of 558 square kilometres or 216 square miles, the AONB contains the highest ground in eastern England between Yorkshire and Kent, rising to over 150m along its western edge. Rolling chalk hills and areas of sandstone and clay underlie this attractive landscape.*

*The Lincolnshire Wolds has been inhabited since prehistoric times and the appearance of the countryside today has been greatly influenced by past and present agricultural practices.*

*A Countryside Service helps to protect and enhance the landscape through partnership projects with local landowners, farmers, parish councils, businesses and residents of the Wolds.*



For more information contact: Lincolnshire Wolds Countryside Service, Navigation Warehouse, Riverhead Road, Louth, Lincolnshire LN11 0DA.  
Tel: 01507 609740 Website: [www.lincswolds.org.uk](http://www.lincswolds.org.uk) Email: [aonb@lincswolds.org.uk](mailto:aonb@lincswolds.org.uk)



If you would like this leaflet in an alternative format please contact us

Ritual & Religion  
of the Lincolnshire  
Wolds



One of a series of leaflets to help you get to know the Lincolnshire Wolds. Produced by the Lincolnshire Wolds Countryside Service and the Wolds God's Acre Project

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# Ritual & Religion *of the* Lincolnshire Wolds

## CHURCHYARDS

As you enter a churchyard, you may pass through a lychgate, a small shelter over the entrance gate, often with seats built into it. As the name lychgate originates from *lic*, an old English word for corpse, its purpose may be guessed at! It acted as shelter for coffins and pallbearers as they waited for the priest to meet them before they entered the church.



Lychgate at South Elkington

Churchyards are almost invariably used as graveyards, with the graves usually aligned so the feet point east towards the rising sun, a sign of hope. The preferred location of graves used to be the south side of the church, with the northern side considered, until recently, to be associated with the Devil, being in the shadow of the church. Few Non-conformist places of worship have burial grounds, however, three gravestones remain at the site of a Baptist Chapel and graveyard at the parish boundary of Goulceby and Asterby.

The church and churchyard are not just places for worship and burials - they have always been community spaces. In the past, churchyards have been used for archery practice and recreational activities, such as wrestling, cockfighting and church ale feasting. Today, churchyards often represent the only communal space within villages, where everyone can come together and celebrate life, ancestry and nature.



Wildflower meadow at Mareham on the Hill

Some churchyards are still grazed by sheep and many are managed for the benefit of wildlife, encouraging wildflowers such as harebells, cowslips and ox-eye daisy which are often lost from the surrounding countryside.

## GRAVESTONES AND MEMORIALS

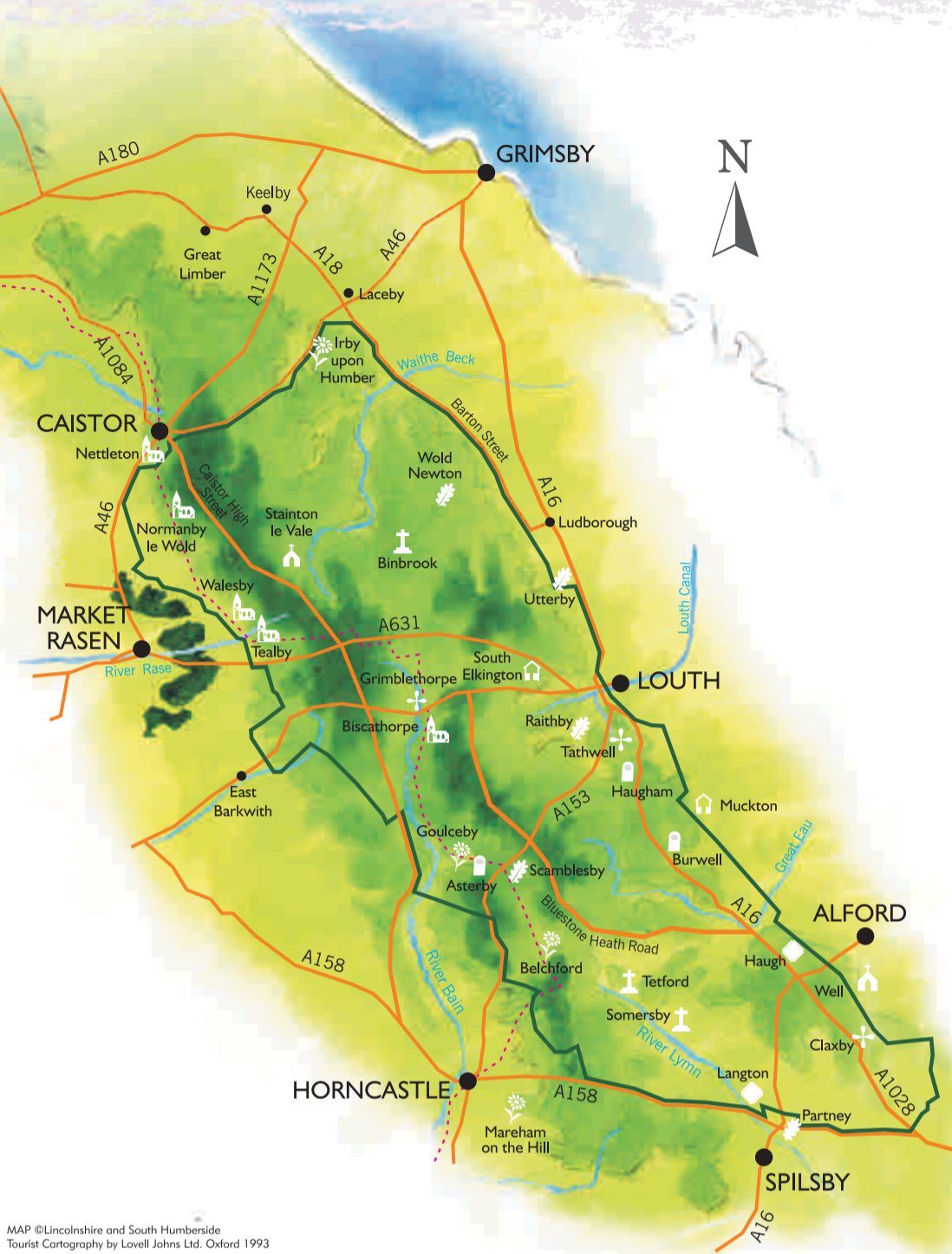
There have been grave markers recorded from the Roman period and gravestones erected since at least the Saxon period, but it was during the Victorian era that they reached the height of fashion. The Wolds contain a number of Saxon artefacts, such as the grave slab at Tathwell St Vedast but few examples of grave markers, either timber or stone, have survived past the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Older memorials and gravestones are generally constructed from local materials, such as Spilsby sandstone and Tealby limestone. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the canal and rail system opened the Wolds to the rest of the country, more exotic materials were imported, such as marble and Welsh slate.

The style of memorials can also provide clues to the social standing of families within the community. The poor often did not have gravestones but when they did, simple designs and imagery reflecting their trade were used whilst affluence was highlighted with a unique family design, creative symbolism or the use of exotic stone. Only the prosperous could afford to commission and install ornate memorials within the church or adorn the exterior of the building as a display of their status.



Family headstones at Burwell

Victorian gravecovers at Haughham



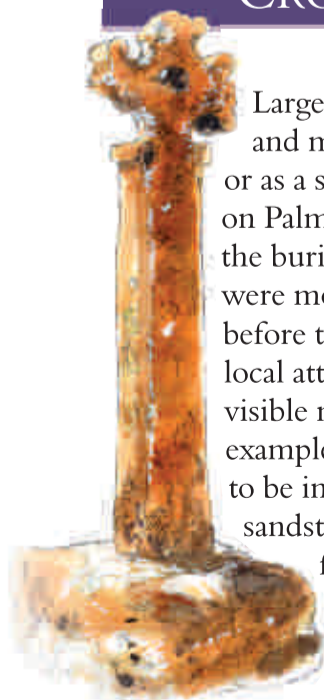
MAP © Lincolnshire and South Humberside Tourist Cartography by Lovell Johns Ltd. Oxford 1993

### Map Key

Long and Round Barrows		Lychgates		Churchyards	
Green Man and Sheela-na-gig motifs		Standing crosses		Viking Way Churches	
Notable Buildings		Gravestones		Viking Way	
		Memorials		AONB boundary	

This map shows just a few of the interesting churches and chapels that you can visit. There are so many, we couldn't fit them all on.

## CROSSES



Medieval standing cross at Binbrook

Large standing crosses can sometimes be found in churchyards and mark the place where a priest would preach in the open air or as a starting point for outdoor processions, such as those held on Palm Sunday. They could also serve as a single memorial for the buried when individual gravestones were less common. There were more than 12,000 standing crosses throughout the country before the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when, depending on local attitude, many were destroyed. Today, fewer than 2,000 are visible nationally, with 12 remaining in the Wolds. One notably example is at Binbrook St Mary and St Gabriel which is believed to be in its original position. From the socket stone base, the sandstone shaft rises two metres to the integrated head in the form of a floriated cross. An early and complete preaching cross can also be seen at Somersby St Margaret whilst only part of the limestone shaft is visible at South Elkington All Saints.

## PLACES OF WORSHIP

Just like ancient cultures, early Christians did not meet in buildings, but rather in the open air or common meeting places. Nowadays a 'church' or 'chapel' means both a congregation of Christian worshippers and the building where they meet.

When churches were constructed, they reflected not only local materials such as stone, chalk and thatch but also local styles. Individual stonemasons left their marks and signatures allowing their movements to be traced around the churches they worked on. The differing ornamental nature of churches reflected the social aspirations of the community. Where a single estate owned all the land within the parish, a small but ornate church reflecting the architecture of the large house and estate cottages can often be found. However, where there were a number of landowners within a parish, Non-conformist chapels often flourished alongside the church.

Chapels were mainly of brick construction and often based on a standardised design so a group of chapels in a particular area may look very much alike. Buildings were less important to Primitive Methodists, as they often used hired rooms, but an interesting example of a Primitive chapel constructed of corrugated iron remains at Stainton le Vale. Chapels served other practical uses such as a venue for education, entertainment and social gatherings alongside their role as preaching places. The location of chapels was often determined by where land was donated, with many situated on the edge of, or outside the village itself and not necessarily within the communities who used them.



Spilsby sandstone and chalk church at Haugh



Tin tabernacle at Stainton le Vale

## THE FUTURE

Ritual and Religion have changed throughout history and they will no doubt continue to evolve and be adapted to suit the needs of the future. Each period of time has contributed to the social development of the Wolds communities and their religious sites: from simple early churches to those built in the ornate Gothic period; from the foundations of Methodism by John and Charles Wesley in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the restoration and rebuilding phase of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by architects such as James Fowler of Louth.

There are many ways that we can all be involved in celebrating the heritage of our places of worship. One example is the West Lindsey Churches Festival which celebrates religious heritage and architecture, when churches throw open their doors for two weekends in May. Attractions range from organ music and bell-ringing through poetry events and tours, to flower displays and art exhibitions. Or why not visit one of the churches within the Cascade Project, aimed at integrating Lincoln Cathedral with the smaller rural churches.



## RITUAL LANDSCAPE

The earliest surviving evidence in the landscape of religious or ritual monuments are long barrows from the Neolithic period some 6,000 years ago. Later in the Bronze Age, 4,000 years ago, round barrows marked communal burial grounds. These sites were probably located in significant places in the landscape and remained sacred to the communities who used them over many generations.

There are nearly 60 Neolithic long barrows in the Wolds, far more than in any other part of Lincolnshire. The human bones found in long barrows are usually disarticulated and do not comprise complete skeletons. The dead bodies were defleshed and the bones placed in different locations within the barrows. These bones appear to have had a special and continued significance to Neolithic communities, with the long barrows a focus for their ritual relationship with their ancestors. They may also have been used for worship, with the barrow being more than a grave, just as a church is more than a tomb.



*Grim's Mound near Grimblethorpe*

Over 350 round barrows from the Bronze Age are recorded in the Wolds but many have been ploughed out and are not visible as mounds today. They were often reused as other members of the community were buried in the same barrow - we can only guess at the funeral rituals and ceremonies that would have taken place at these sites.

*Bully Hill near Tathwell*



## PRE-CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

Ancient and modern cultures worship all manner of figures and symbols, many of which represent earth and nature. The most recognisable is probably the Green Man, often seen carved in wood and stone in churches but also represented in traditions, such as folk dances, and in pub names, such as the Green Man Inn at Scamblesby.



*Green Man at Partney*

The Green Man can be interpreted in many different ways: from the wildness of the ancient forests and woodland via the stories of Robin Hood, Robin Goodfellow and Puck, through to the cycle of the seasons and rebirth of spring, but always returning to symbols of nature.

A similar focus of worship can be seen in a female form, often portrayed as the Earth Goddess, Sheela-na-gig. Serving as a general fertility goddess embodying the earth, nature and the mother of other deities, she is often seen as patroness of motherhood. Rarer than the Green Man, an example of a Sheela-na-gig can be seen at Wold Newton All Saints.

The themes of the Green Man and Earth Goddess appear in many mythologies and can be traced from prehistory to their modern interpretations. From the Celtic Druids and Nordic Cults, through the Greeks and Romans to medieval examples; they all represent rebirth, resurrection and life. Examples of motifs within places of worship can be seen in Utterby St Andrew and Partney St Nicholas where leafy Green Man heads peer down from above.



*Green Man at Raithby cum Maltby*

Evidence for other ancient deities is restricted to small personal objects or charms, such as 'TOT' rings which were worn in honour of Totatis. A Celtic deity linked with Mars the Roman god of war, Totatis seems to have been very popular in Lincolnshire and the Wolds, and lots of these rings have been found in places such as Caistor and Horncastle.

## ADAPTATIONS

Early Christians would often adopt and adapt local beliefs, rituals and deities, as it was found that old beliefs were best incorporated into the new, sometimes even turning local deities into saints.



*Burwell St Michael*

Churches were sometimes built on sites of pre-Christian religious rituals; this encouraged continuity of attendance by people already used to worshipping there. Such sites were often on the highest ground in the local area, interpretation suggests many high places were associated with the early cult following of St Michael; the elevated position and dedication of Burwell St Michael could relate to a pre-Christian site of worship.

The church building is usually orientated east-west, with worship taking place towards the altar at the east end of the church. Looking towards the rising sun in the east and giving thanks for a new day is a practice that predates Christian beliefs but one which encouraged worship in a church. Well St Margaret is a notable exception, with the altar positioned to the west end of the church so that its grand Palladian style entrance could be seen from the newly re-developed Well Vale House. The orientation of chapels was more likely to be dictated by the size and shape of the plot of land than by considerations of ritual east-west alignment.

*Palladian fronted church at Well*

