

Cathedrals, Cottages, and Cars: A Lincoln Imp's Journey

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Never having lived in, or even visited, Lincolnshire, I came to the county's folklore purely by accident – and in Dorset, of all places. Researching the archaeology of objects hidden within the fabric of post-medieval homes, I was shown an artefact found by a woman inside the fireplace of her seventeenth-century Dorset cottage. It was a small, heavily worn metallic figure. Standing on its left leg, its right leg crossed casually in front of it, it was anthropoid in form. But its facial features were not human. Wide round eyes, large protruding ears, and a pair of curved horns identified it as some sort of folkloric creature or character. The woman who had found it in her home had no idea what it was, thinking it some kind of devil. I assumed the same. But sharing an image of it on social media almost immediately gave us an identification. This was a representation of the Lincoln Imp (Figure 1).



As far as we know, the Lincoln Imp began its life as a grotesque – a fantastical figure carved from stone and attached to the wall or roof of a building. This particular grotesque is situated high on the north side of the Angel Choir in Lincoln Cathedral. Like the small figurine found in the Dorset fireplace, this grotesque stands on its left leg, its right leg crossed in front of it, and has nearly identical protruding ears and curved horns. The Angel Choir was built between 1250 and 1280, so the carving is probably thirteenth century in date. We do not know what it was originally meant to represent, whether it was pointing to a specific folkloric character or a generic fantastical figure. By the nineteenth century at least, its meaning seems to have been forgotten. In 1869, Richard John King's *Handbook to the Cathedrals of England* described the grotesque vaguely: 'The grotesque below the second corbel on the north side... represents an elf with large ears, and may perhaps be regarded as illustrating the mediaeval folk-lore' (King 1869: 361). It is interesting to note here that the more folkloric term 'elf' is used instead of 'imp'. 'Imp' is a term related, rather, to the devil and witch's familiars (Davies 2023: 210–211). However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Lincoln Cathedral grotesque's diabolic association was becoming firmer.

By 1897, poet Arnold Frost (his real name was G. T. Hemsley) attached an 'old Lincolnshire legend' that had 'not hitherto appeared in print' to the grotesque (Frost 1898). Apparently, he had been told the legend 'some five or six years ago by a North Lincolnshire man, sixty years of age, who, as a boy, had heard his father relate it'. In summary, the devil was not happy that Bishop Remigius had built a cathedral in Lincoln and so attempted to kill him, but the Blessed Virgin Mary intervened. She sent such a mighty wind at the devil that he slipped inside the cathedral to hide, and remains there still. Frost appended the legend with his own poem:

The bishop we know died long ago.
The wind still waits, nor will he go
Till he has a chance of beating his foe;
But the devil hopp'd up without a limp.
And at once took shape as the "Lincoln Imp."
And there he sits a'top of the column,
And grins at the people who gaze so solemn;
Moreover, he mocks at the wind below.
And says, "you may wait till doomsday, O!"

We do not know how accurately Frost was telling an 'old Lincolnshire legend', but it was certainly adapting an earlier tradition linking the devil to Lincoln Cathedral. The proverbial expression, 'looking as the devil over Lincoln', which meant to regard something or someone with malicious envy, can be dated as far back as the sixteenth century (Heywood 1967: 75). In 1748, Daniel Defoe printed a legend explaining the origin of the proverb: 'The Middle or Rood Tower [of Lincoln Cathedral] is the highest in the whole Kingdom... The Monks were so proud of this Structure, that they would have it, that the Devil looked upon it with an envious Eye; whence the Proverb of a Man who looks invidious and malignant, *He looks as the Devil over Lincoln*' (Defoe 1748: 6). Over time, other folktales developed around the Lincoln Imp. The most widely circulated today tells of the devil sending two imps to Lincoln to cause chaos. They headed to the tallest building – the Cathedral – to spread mayhem. When an angel commanded them to stop, one of the imps hid but the other threw stones at the angel, who proceeded to turn him into stone.

Whatever the origin and age of these folktales, by the twentieth century, the Lincoln Imp had become what Joe Laycock has referred to as a community's 'monstrous patron' (Laycock

2008). This term applies to folkloric characters who have become so entwined in their physical environments that they become symbols of that physical environment: the Loch Ness Monster, Dracula at Whitby, and Mothman at Point Pleasant are three classic examples. The Lincoln Imp has likewise become a well-known and well-loved symbol of Lincoln, its people, and their wider county. In 1912, a Lincoln newspaper featured a cartoon of the Lincoln Imp waving off Lincoln City Football Club at the train station as they embarked on their first match of the season. The caption reads that the Imp is

wishing them luck. In his enthusiasm he has donned the club rig-out, he has tied the old boot behind for luck, and is curling up his right leg in the fashion which he adopts when he has something important on... Perhaps he will exert his well-known influences on the gods of chance to bring us a bit better luck this season.



Figure 2. Newspaper cartoon featuring the Lincoln Imp waving off a train

By 1914, a nickname for the Lincoln City Football Club was ‘the Imps’, and they are still known today as the ‘Lincoln Imps’ or the ‘Red Imps’. Their mascot is a large red imp known as Poacher.

The shift from the Imp as a servant of the devil to a figure of luck and patronage appears to have occurred quite naturally. No symbol is static, and a figure that has negative connotations in one historical context can be interpreted positively in another. Black cats are one example of this. Cats went from being associated with witches in the 16th century to being considered lucky by the First World War, with soldiers carrying charms and badges in the shape of cats (we shall return to war charms below) (Davies 2018: 158–159). Certainly, we see the patronage of the Imp in more than football. When the 61st Squadron of the RAF was reformed in Lincolnshire in 1937, they employed the Lincoln Imp as their badge. The Lincoln Imp pub in Scunthorpe was so called in 1957, fronted by its own imp grotesque in the familiar pose. And in the 1970s, when Lincolnshire County Council required a logo, the corporate committee decided on an illustration of the Lincoln Imp, recognizable with its horns and balancing stance. So, from 1974 onwards, the image of the Lincoln Imp was splashed on countywide Council vehicles, stationery, advertising, and notice boards.

Thus, the Lincoln Imp became a prevalent symbol of Lincolnshire. But how did it end up, in figurine form, in Dorset, a county lying on the other side of the country? The function of the figurine provides a clue – and the function is evident in its materiality. At the base of the figurine is a large, metal bolt, indicating it was once attached to something else. A little research revealed what it had once been attached to: the radiator grille of a car. In the 1890s, the ‘Lincoln Imp’ had been a model of bicycle produced by Coventry House Cycle, Lincoln, promoted for its competition-winning speed. It was a natural progression, therefore, for it to be later adopted by the Lincolnshire automobile industry. In 1898, Rose Brothers of Gainsborough expanded beyond packaging machinery to begin designing automobiles, selling 37 cars before ceasing manufacturing in 1908. They produced a mascot to sit on the radiator grille: a 9.5cm-tall, nickel-plated Lincoln Imp. Other Lincolnshire based automobile

manufacturers adopted this symbol. By 1919, Ruston & Hornsby were selling their exclusive automobiles (only 1,500 were made) with Lincoln Imp bonnet ornaments.

Bonnet or hood ornaments, akin to figureheads on sailing ships, presented an ideal opportunity for car manufacturer branding ('Art Movement' 2005: S1). From animals to mythological figures, they were designed or commissioned by automakers as a way of differentiating their cars from their competitors and denoting prestige. These expressive sculptures of metal or glass could be used to visually communicate the grace, power, or speed of their respective automobiles. As Julie Fenster described, 'A flying lady, "The Spirit of Ecstasy," meant that a Rolls-Royce was coming. A cormorant had a Packard in tow. The Lincoln, a big, heavy car, relied on a greyhound to lead the way. The more humble cars had their mascots too: Pontiac used a chieftain, while Plymouth had a little boat' (Fenster 2002: 22). However, bonnet ornaments were not regulated, and a market developed supplying removable and swappable car accessories. Prior to the 1960s, when safety concerns had automakers largely dispense of their bonnet ornaments, there was such a variety that owners could individually customize their automobiles.

These small sculptures became a form of folk art, and artists created limited-edition bonnet ornaments. Some of the most exclusive were produced by Italian sculptor Rembrandt Bugatti; the elephant ornament that sits on the radiator of the Bugatti Royale automobile was cast from one of his original sculptures. And a particularly famous producer of bonnet ornaments was French artist Rene Lalique, who worked primarily with crystal glass. Lalique designed bonnet ornaments of falcons, archers, dragonflies, eagle heads, and female nudes. Displayed in the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels, these ornaments have been described as 'the ultimate in Haute Deco' (Russell 2010: 12). The Lincoln Imp bonnet ornament may not have been exhibited in a Parisian Art Deco exposition, but it is still an

example of art, of the desire to differentiate one car from another, of the marketing strategy to distinguish an automaker from its competitors. And why the Lincoln Imp? Because of its role as ‘monstrous patron’ of the city and people of Lincoln.

In its role as a symbol of the city, the Lincoln Imp became a marketable commodity. In 1971, folklorist Priscilla Denby examined the function of folklore as ‘folklore’, where folkloric characters are drawn on for selling purposes. And throughout the twentieth century, the Lincoln Imp has been widely employed in *folklore*. We see its recognizable form on tobacco pipes, doorstops, doorknockers, weathervanes, horse brasses, sportswear, tea brands, and keyrings sold in the Lincoln Cathedral giftshop. The Lincoln Imp has become a souvenir, a reminder of place. More specifically, it has become a ‘folk souvenir’, representing the folklore and, by extension, the folk identity of Lincoln. This type of souvenir is, to use anthropologist Ewa Klekot’s words, ‘a particular form of portable identity for sale’ (2021: 550).

In the role of souvenir, the Lincoln Imp developed associations with luck. In the 1880s, an antique dealer by the name of George Ball created the ‘Lincoln Imp mascot’, persuading the then Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral to allow him to take a cast of the imp grotesque. He made his first set from stone and, according to a newspaper article reporting Ball’s death in 1939, they sold ‘like hot cakes’. He then shifted to creating brass imps, which proved even more popular. The description of these ornaments as ‘mascots’ is interesting; the French term, which entered the English language in the nineteenth century, denotes a thing or person that brings good luck. ‘Ah! blest their lot whom fate shall send A true Mascotte, a fairy friend!...Luck’s his for ever!’ declared a line in the French opéra comique *Mascotte*, which was adapted for stage in London in 1881, introducing the term to an English audience. In the early 1900s, folklorist Edward Lovett collected a wide range of examples of English mascots

– ‘The use of such Mascots,’ he wrote, ‘is avowedly to assist in bringing about the desires of the wearer, or to ward off all that may be hurtful or unfortunate’ (Lovett 1910: 1). Amongst his examples of ‘modern Mascots’ being carried in London during the 1920s, he included an ‘old carved amber bead’, a ‘little gold Oriental figure’, a ‘very old metal button’, a ‘small pendant of Carnelian’, and a domino (Lovett 1924). As Lovett was conducting his fieldwork in London, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Lincoln Imp does not feature in his work, but it was certainly becoming well known.

In the nineteenth century, Lincoln jeweller James Ward Usher incorporated the image of the imp into his designs, producing what advertisements in local newspapers described as ‘Souvenirs of Lincoln – James Usher and Son’s “Lincoln Imp” Spoons, Sugar Tongs, and “Lincoln Imp” Gold and Silver Jewellery, are the prettiest Souvenirs of Lincoln. Every design bears James Usher and Son’s *registered mark*, and they cannot be obtained elsewhere’. There were “Lincoln Imp” gipsy brooches, “Lincoln Imp” charms, “Lincoln Imp” pins, pencil cases, bangles, fruit spoons, salt spoons, cayenne bottles, and marmalade spoons. By the twentieth century, some of these souvenirs were considered lucky, as we read in *Examples of Printed Folk-lore Concerning Lincolnshire* from 1908: ‘A friend of mine informs me that, according to a ladies’ fashion paper which she was reading not long ago, a trinket in the form of ‘the Lincoln Imp’ will prevent its wearer losing things’ (Gutch & Peacock 1908: 60). A 1908 newspaper ‘Ladies’ Column’ on ‘The Cult of the Mascot’ confirms this: ‘Many women believe in the magic power of the Lincoln imp’. In 1912, the Lincoln Imp was being described as the ‘most popular mascot of the present day’.

Returning to the Lincoln Imp figurine found in the Dorset fireplace, it is significant that automobile bonnet ornaments also became ‘mascots’ in popular parlance, and developed associations with luck. Lovett observed in 1910 that there had been a recent ‘strong revival

that has taken place in the use of Mascots...for motor-cars and other up-to-date locomotive appliances' (1910: 1). These 'motor mascots' could be purchased at the London department store Gamage's, Lovett and Wright noted in 1908. Of these they include a figure of a policeman holding out his hand to stop traffic, the advertisements reading 'Propitiate the fates!!'; St Christophers screwed to the front of radiators; a stork – 'a well-known amulet'; gilt four-leaved clovers; and the 'lucky horse shoe'. In 1907, when the British racing driver Selwyn Edge broke the 24-hour distance record at the Brooklands track, he was apparently carrying a horse shoe in his motorcar (Wright & Lovett 1908: 292–293). Of the horse shoe, Lovett noted facetiously that he was 'quite expecting to see horses wearing sun brasses representing a motor car...Thus do grand old legends get "mixed up" in these days of prosaic materialism' (Lovett 1924: 94). Interestingly, relics from motoring disasters, such as the Handcross motorbus crash in 1906, were apparently sought by motorists 'as mascots against similar accidents' (Wright & Lovett 1908: 293) – the concept of inoculation being a long-held belief in apotropaic (protective) charms.

We see the Lincoln Imp specifically as a lucky and protective motor mascot in 1911, when a newspaper article describes the commercialisation of the various mascots 'which nearly every motorist carries to protect his car from ill-luck and to ensure that he only runs into something soft.' The article quotes an advertisement for 'The Lucky Lincoln Imp Mascot', sold for 'ten-and-six': 'One of the smartest and most fashionable mascots. It has become known to fame as a potent charm against danger and police-traps'. In 1912, an article detailed the 'ultra-smart' lucky Lincoln Imp mascot 'Made in solid brass, fitted with a plate to screw on the top of the radiator or other prominent part of the car'. This could easily describe the Lincoln Imp figurine found in the Dorset fireplace.

The luck of the Lincoln Imp persisted. In 1925, a newspaper article listed the Lincoln Imp amongst Buddhist prayer-wheels, horseshoes, four-leafed clovers, and pigs as mascots worn by pilots or fixed onto the front of cars. By 1936, the *Lincolnshire Chronicle* was reporting on the Lincoln Imp as a lucky mascot carried in the pockets of jockeys – the Lincoln shopkeeper who sold such mascots, interviewed by the journalist, ‘was firmly convinced that the astonishing luck that often followed these purchases was brought about in some mystic way by the brazen Imp’. They were also carried by soldiers: ‘In another shop I spoke to a dealer who had recently sold a Lincoln Imp mascot to an Army officer who had heard such tales about them that he swore he would never go abroad without one’. The daughter of George Ball, the antiques dealer who purportedly patented the first brass Lincoln Imp mascot, claimed to be a firm believer in the luck of the Imp: ‘Her brother always carried one with him and he went through the Great War without a scratch. You cannot argue against that’. When the journalist recalled a newspaper letter from somebody complaining he had had nothing but bad luck since coming into possession of a Lincoln Imp, the shopkeeper said simply the mascot must have been made in Birmingham.

So, the Lincoln Imp found in the fireplace of a 17th-century cottage in Dorset was probably a removable motor mascot, once added to a car to either (or both) personalize and magically protect it. Many such motor mascots have found themselves disconnected from the cars they once adorned, and there are several detached Lincoln Imp mascots still circulating on the motoring antiques market. But the question remains: why was this particular mascot hidden in a fireplace? There are several potential answers. Firstly, as a concealed lucky charm. The Lincoln Imp’s status as a lucky mascot had travelled beyond Lincolnshire – indeed, several of the newspaper articles, not limited to Lincolnshire publications, refer to American purchasers of the Lincoln Imp mascot. It would not be unrealistic to expect a person in Dorset to be aware of the purported magical properties of the Lincoln Imp. Was it therefore hidden in the

fireplace to bring luck to the household and inhabitants, where it had once brought luck to automobile and driver?

The hiding of lucky and apotropaic charms within the fireplace has rich and varied precedents. Concealed shoes, for example, are commonly found in fireplaces, up chimneybreasts, and under hearthstones, believed to bring luck to the household (Davies & Houlbrook 2021: 131). Returning to Edward Lovett, in his 1925 *Magic in Modern London*, he observed that ‘the old belief as to the fireplace being the sacred place of the house is well known’. One example he gives is of pieces of flint bearing uncanny resemblances to people or animals displayed over the fireplace, which he described as ‘for luck!’ (Lovett 1925: 27–28). And there are many early twentieth-century references to ‘mascots’ being placed around fireplaces. For instance, a 1937 article describing the home of a Member of Parliament noted that ‘On one of the mantelpieces is ... the family mascot in the form of an Egyptian god’ (Wilson 1937: 8). Also in 1937, the survey team on the Mass Observation project – a large-scale investigation into the customs of the people of Britain – issued a directive to researchers to record the objects on their mantelpieces and those of their friends and neighbours. The 158 mantelpiece reports this generated included religious items, such as a fourteenth-century ivory Madonna and a wooden figure of St. Margaret, along with objects of everyday British folklore: ‘A horse-shoe, picked up at least three years ago’ and ‘a “Good Luck” mascot consisting of a black cat framed in a silvered (cardboard) horse-shoe’. Could the Lincoln Imp mascot have similarly been placed by/in the fireplace for luck?

A second potential motivation behind the hiding of this Lincoln Imp was the concealment of a crime. From stolen sheep to hoards of coins, the secret voids of homes have long been resorted to for the hiding of evidence. We know from newspaper reports that in 1904, three Burnley boys hid a stolen pair of trousers up a chimney; in 1906, a sweep in Finchley

dislodged a chimney brick and found three watches and four silver rings; and in 1918, three youths from Stapleford concealed some stolen packs of cigarettes up a chimney. Weapons were also commonly hidden in and around the fireplace. In 1860, police found the hammer purportedly used as a murder weapon by James Mullins hidden under the hearthstone of his lodgings. A criminal reason has been suggested for the 1940 find of several Boer War era rifles hidden in the disused fireplace of Dalston Methodist Mission Chapel, London (Davies & Houlbrook 2021: 17–18). Had the Lincoln Imp mascot been vandalised; criminally detached from a car and then hidden to conceal the evidence?

The third suggestion is that this Lincoln Imp mascot was squirreled away by a child. Historically, children have a tendency to repurpose all manner of objects as toys. Sticks become wands; broom handles become swords; pieces of paper become airplanes and fortune-telling devices (Davies & Houlbrook 2025: 180–187). Could a detached car mascot become a plaything? Its anthropomorphic nature would undoubtedly have appealed to children, perhaps also its supernatural, even monstrous aspect. Had it become a child's toy, though, why would it find itself in a fireplace? As has been suggested by Davies and Houlbrook, children's toys secreted within the fabric of a building could speak to game-playing, pathological hoarding – or even the cruelty of a sibling (Davies & Houlbrook 2021: 162).

We cannot know why the Lincoln Imp mascot found itself within the fireplace of a seventeenth-century Dorset cottage. But we can presume it had an interesting biography. The processual notion of an object's 'biography' goes back to anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's assertion that an object's life-cycle should be viewed, like a human's, as a series of 'ages' (Kopytoff 1986: 66–67). An object shifts mutably from one context to another, through processes of adaptation, reutilization, and redefinition. In each stage of an object's life, it

bears a different meaning, each one significant. This is why exploring the different ‘ages’ of such objects is so important to our understanding of them. However, it is important to remember that the transitions through ages are largely brought about by human activities. It is often the people who encounter objects who adapt, reutilise, and redefine them. As archaeologist Chris Fowler observes, ‘Artefacts, like people, are multiply-authored’ (2004: 65).

Considering the biography of the Lincoln Imp mascot reveals a wealth of authors. As the fireplace mascot came into existence already with cultural weight, it was first authored long before it was physically made. It was authored by the person(s) who originally designed and crafted the ‘grotesque below the second corbel on the north side’ of Lincoln Cathedral’s Angel Choir. It was authored by the first people to name it the ‘Lincoln Imp’ and attach a folktale to it. It was authored by George Ball when he created the first Lincoln Imp mascots. It was authored by the person who designed and crafted it as a bonnet ornament; by the person who attached it to their car, to either personalize or magically protect it; the person who removed it from the car’s bonnet; and the person who placed it in the fireplace – whether luck-seeker, crime concealer, or playful child. And now we too author it, as we ponder its mystery.

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