

Twelfth Century Chicago

An Architectural View of Medieval People

and

The Green Man

By

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Chicago Hidden in Plain Sight Series (CHIPS):

Volume Two of Five

The complete *CHIPS (Chicago Hidden in Plain Sight) Series* in Five Volumes:

Volume One: Chicago Street People

Volume Two: Twelfth Century Chicago

Volume Three: Chicago Street Zoo

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Volume Five: Chicago Bits and Pieces

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Introduction

During the twelfth century there was no Chicago.

During the twelfth century this land's only human inhabitants were the Potawatomi, Menomonee, Winnebago, Sauk, Miami, and Fox.

Once upon a time there was an old city named Chicago. This was a place where, especially in the early part of the twentieth century, many of its citizens seemed enamored with the lore and architectural imagery of twelfth century England, France, and Spain. Medieval Europe was king, and sculptures of kings and other medieval-looking people appeared on the walls of many buildings in the flat, but big-shouldered prairie city.

Twelfth Century Chicago is about the carvings of people—of faces and figures—which can be found on building façades in Chicago. There is one caveat: The individuals selected herein are all interpretations of people fashioned from, based upon, and inspired by medieval precedents. Yes, some may be more indicative of the early Renaissance, but no such exactitudes need apply here. The point is clear: These folks were simply not Chicagoans.

Twelfth century Europe was the era and the acreage most mined for appropriate imagery; more than a few Chicago artists and architects craved Arthurian images for use on this side of the Atlantic. Noted Americans were generally shunned for façade representation in favor of the romantic and fabled folks of merry-old-England.¹ Chicagoans clung tenaciously to the past, to the long-past of castles, knights, and the mystique of royalty. Thoughts of chivalry, dungeons, and drawbridges were simply irresistible.

Real estate men and their chosen architects delighted in the nostalgic. During the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, developer-Anglophiles christened their apartment buildings Prince Edward Manor, Sovereign, Bristol, Shoreham, Kingsbury, Abbott, Sheffield, Avalon, and Regent's Park.² There are more.

Residential buildings were fronted on a variety of Chicago streets with names based upon locations and noted figures that hailed from the British Isles, such as Dorchester, Devon, Chelsea, Winchester, Sheffield, Norwood, Buckingham, Albion, Ardmore, Balmoral, Argyle, Bosworth, Cambridge, Wellington, Bryn Mawr, Stratford, Windsor, Elizabeth, Victoria, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Hampden Court. There are more.

Many of Chicago's officially cited 77 communities have monikers *originating* somewhere in Britain; many are parks or neighborhoods in London: Avalon Park, Avondale, Belmont, Chatham, Clarendon Park, Hyde Park, Gladstone Park, Gresham, Kensington, Kenwood, Longwood Manor, Margate Park, Mayfair, Old Norwood, and Wentworth Gardens. There may be more.

Medieval figures and faraway names notwithstanding, hundreds of building façades were slathered with scrumptious terra cotta carvings of long-forgotten—or recently invented—family crests, decorative escutcheons, and castles. Knights, armored soldiers, and archers sporting their various accoutrements were also often featured. Carvings consisting of helmets, swords, lances, bows and arrows, shields, axes, and fire brands were proudly, if not perversely, displayed; after all, knights especially were efficient killing machines, and these gruesome implements were devices used to murder innocent people—and of course other knights. Nonetheless, there they were—public exhibits of a history Chicago never had.

Twelfth Century Chicago displays a selection of images loosely drawn from the medieval period by artists decades ago, images—actually caricatures—of people from various social strata. These depict European folks from a distance, eight centuries ago and some four thousand miles to the east. Chicagoans did this with both soberness and humor, producing art for those of a century past and for those who now inhabit America's big-shouldered prairie city.

In Chapter Three, *Twelfth Century Chicago* introduces the strange phenomenon of the Green Man. The very idea of a Green Man is curious and somewhat captivating. This imaginary figure has its roots deep in the soil of European mythology, buried beneath layers of long-forgotten fears and pagan beliefs. He appears most often in the architecture of medieval Britain and exists as a strange “fusion between man and the vegetable world.”³ The Green Man has always been considered somewhat fearsome, but he is also viewed as a devout and benign friend of the forest. How appropriate that he appears often in Chicago, a city whose official motto is *Urbs in horto*, Latin for “City in a Garden.”⁴

Of course the supreme irony is that Chicago is also known for its modern—organic or less-is-more—architecture. Chicago is often touted as the birthplace of modern *American* architecture, and it once served as home to some of the most progressive designers—ever. While there are some three dozen *modern* landmarks still standing, these are but a tiny fraction of the half-million buildings within Chicago's borders.⁵ Many of the remaining structures pay homage

to distant histories, long-gone cultures, and fuzzy memories. Chicago, the big-shouldered prairie city, is home to an awful lot of carved kings, queens, knights, fools, and Green Men.

¹With some exceptions, busts of American presidents, great inventors, industrialists, poets and writers, military generals, or other accomplished men and women were *not* included on the *façades* of major or less significant buildings in Chicago. Stand-alone *statues* were favored for these, and they more often appear in parks and on boulevards.

² Each of these carried the prefix “The.” These were “proper” places, and these residences carried a certain formality and grammatical correctness in their titles.

³ Mike Harding, *A Little Book of The Green Man* (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 1998), 13.

⁴ This version of Chicago’s motto is the official version as defined by the Chicago Park District in 2013. Other variations are *Urbus en Horto* and *Urbs in Horto*, among others.

⁵ Research Section, Department of Planning and Development, *Information Project Information Summary for City of Chicago, Mapped Portions* (Chicago: Chicago Property Information Project, 2001), 11. As of this printing there were recorded 483,610 buildings in the city of Chicago. No *exact* number exists as the number constantly fluctuates.