

St Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

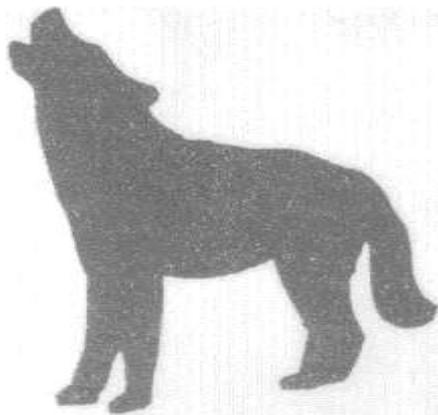
A contribution from "a frequent visitor to Northam and an occasional reader of Grapevine". All offerings from 'up-country' are received with interest. I wonder how far our readership extends...?-Ed.

Visitors to St. Margaret's often *admire* this little statuary group *prominently displayed near* the West door of the church. But what are the mediaeval Italian *Saint and the repentant predator from the sunny hills of Umbria doing on the cooler climate of North Devon?* Various theories about its *origin* were *considered, including* shipwreck from Hart-land point, *but the truth lies closer to home.*

The statue is cast from an original *created by a member of the Community of St Mary the Virgin based at St Mary's Convent, Wantage,*

Oxfordshire. Sister Maribel was a graduate of the *Slade School of Art* in 1907, and was *Professed as a Sister of the Community* in 1917.

Trained as a portrait painter, she became interested in sculpture and produced *many fine pieces, both in stone and wood, including an acclaimed Stations of the Cross. However, the St. Francis group* proved to be one of her most popular works and in 1927 St. Peter's Church, Plymouth, where members of the Community worked, acquired a copy of it. From then on statues were ordered not only from UK sources but from religious establishments *worldwide. No doubt it was in this way that St. Margaret's obtained its copy.*



St Maribel *progressed* in the Community and was Reverend Mother *from* 1940 to 1953. She died in 1970 and her original St. Francis group, now *somewhat weather-beaten, stands* in the Convent garden, *much respected.*

Although St. Francis never visited Britain, wolves were *certainly present* in Devon at the start of the *last Millennium. So common were they* that King John, when Earl of Morton, designated them "beasts of venery" and *gave inhabitants of the county the right to hunt them - probably to protect the deer.*

In mountainous *parts of Italy,* wolves still survive, although in very small numbers, and are now *protected by law and cherished by Lupo Italiano,* the national wolf conservation society. And in Gubbio, the delightful Umbrian hill-town where the encounter took place, there *stands in the Piazza 40 Martiri* a modern statue depicting the *legendary meeting.* From time to time special events are arranged *to commemorate it including, a few years ago, a- festival* for domestic wolf-breeders and their animals, which *attracted a lot of attention from the national media.*

One would like to think that St. *Francis* would have approved.

MICHAEL PRYCE JONES