

# ‘A Pelican in her Piety’

The legend of the pelican piercing its own breast to draw blood to feed its offspring appears in a second century Christian book called *The Physiologus*, which describes a collection of both real and imaginary animals.



But this is a re-telling of an even earlier pre-Christian story. In the days (before binoculars!) when observation of nature was rather haphazard, it is easy to see how the misconception about pelicans may have occurred.

The adult bird feeds its chicks with small fish it has stored in a pouch under the bill, and during the feeding process it presses this pouch against its neck. Since a pelican's breast plumage has a reddish tinge, and its beak a red tip, in ancient times it was wrongly assumed that the pelican was attacking and opening its chest with its bill, and proffering its own blood.

Early Christians, familiar with the legend of the pelican's apparent self-sacrifice, saw this as an appropriate symbol to represent Christ the Redeemer.

By the Middle Ages, the allegorical use of the pelican was widespread in Christian art and literature. A medieval pilgrim might wear a pelican badge, with the blood represented by red gemstones. Pelican imagery appears in the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, in Dante, and even as late as Shakespeare.

Pelican designs were used decoratively on altars, chalices, and tabernacle doors, also for seals, and in tapestry, needlework and heraldry. The heraldic term for a pelican depicted with young is '*a Pelican in her piety*'.



Here at Edgbaston Old Church, the beautifully decorated wooden altar (dating from the 1930s) in our Lady Chapel has an exquisitely carved roundel that bears an astonishing resemblance to a '*Pelican in her piety*' design in a Venetian needle-work pattern book that was produced four hundred years earlier, in 1530.