

Late Medieval Tiles at Poundisford Park, Somerset (PLATE XI)

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THE fine sixteenth-century manor-house of Poundisford Park, near Taunton, contains among other treasures an unusual set of medieval tiles. These tiles, which are published through the kindness and with the help of the owner, Mr. A. W. Vivian-Neal, F.S.A., are laid in the floor of the passage which connects the spiral staircase with the chamber believed formerly to have been the muniment room. The house was built by William Hill, c. 1546, according to a MS. note by his descendant, Roger Hill, Baron of the Exchequer, who acquired the Manor of Taunton Deane during the Commonwealth. There was no previous building on the site; but during the restoration carried out in 1929 many fragments of medieval carved work were found in the walls, and it seems probable that, as in other neighbouring buildings of the period, much of the material came from Taunton Priory. It is very likely that the tiles also came from the same source.

The tiles are some 8 inches square, and though much worn they retain in the hollows a uniform, bright yellow glaze. They differ considerably from the ordinary run of medieval paving-tiles. The designs are stamped with a raised wooden mould, but there is no pipeclay filling to the resulting hollows. In this respect they resemble the impressed tiles of the north-west Midlands (*i.e.* Cheshire, Shropshire, etc.) and of parts of East Anglia and the Fenland; but there the resemblance ends. From the technical point of view they are rather inlaid tiles with the pipeclay filling omitted (*cf.* *London Museum Medieval Catalogue*, pl. LXV). Isolated specimens of this type occur

wherever inlaid or printed tiles are found, and occasionally whole batches were so treated, *e.g.* a set of fourteenth-century tiles found in 1937 stacked in the former grounds of the Abbey at Winchester (*Proc. Hants. Field Club*, iv, pt. 1, pp. 41-45). It is interesting to note that, like the Poundisford Park tiles, the Winchester tiles were evidently the work of an inexperienced craftsman.

Another unusual feature is the use of several stamps upon the same tile. The most common lay-out is that the larger designs are applied in the centre and surrounded with the smaller stamps; but the whole arrangement is very haphazard. No. 6 in particular is quite incongruous to its present surroundings. Medieval tiles were normally of approximately the same size as the stamps from which they were made. A certain number of fourteenth-century line-impressed tiles in East Anglia (*e.g.* those in the church of Icklingham Suffolk: *cf.* the celebrated pavement in Prior Crauden's Chapel, Ely, 1321-41, H. Shaw, *Specimens of Tile-Pavements*, pls. xxiii-iv) were similarly ornamented by the repetition, in varying combinations of a number of small stamps. The resemblance is however fortuitous. The stamp of No. 6, for example, was unquestionably designed for the manufacture of ordinary inlaid or printed tiles, $4\frac{1}{2}$ -5 inches square, four tiles making a complete pattern. In confirmation of this there is preserved in Taunton Museum, from the church of Trull, which lies half-way between Poundisford Park and Taunton and was one of the churches in the gift of Taunton Priory, a tile in the ordinary printed technique (No. 7), the design of which partially completes the pattern of No. 6 (the black-letter inscription then reads **AVE MARIA IHC**). There are minor differences of design, notably in the inner corner, but not more than would normally result from the wearing out and replacement of the tiler's stamp. It was without doubt for tiles of this type that the larger Poundisford Park stamps were made.

Another tile from the same series, made apparently from the same stamp as No. 1, is recorded from Westleigh church, near Bideford. The tiles preserved in this church include not only a number of late-medieval printed tiles, which came probably from Frithelstock Priory nearby, but also many embossed

tiles.¹ The latter are found not only in a number of churches in North Devon and Cornwall, but also in the neighbourhood of Bristol and as far afield as Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire. They include many designs of renaissance type and their manufacture continued in the West Country until a very late date. Some however were undoubtedly made before the dissolution of the monasteries, and these early examples were thus contemporary with the latest printed tiles of medieval type.

The art of printing tiles was apparently an invention of the early-fourteenth-century tile-wrights of the middle Thames basin, where it rapidly displaced the more costly process of inlaying.² In parts of the West Country the inlay-technique survived to a very much later date, and the introduction of printing was correspondingly late. Of the whole long series of tiles from Cleeve Abbey, West Somerset, two only appear to have been printed. The larger Poundisford Park stamps belong then at earliest to the fifteenth century, and they may even be as late as the sixteenth. They reveal a striking decay of craftsmanship and of artistic sense in the local tile-industry. The designs themselves are clumsy and they are used without any regard for their suitability to the medium on which they were employed. In at least one instance, No. 6, the stamp was badly damaged by a crack along the grain; and it appears as if the maker either had no access to any supplies of pipeclay or was unprepared to venture on the difficulties involved in its use. The smaller stamps, Nos. 3-5, have no counterpart in the British tile-series. It is by no means impossible that they are, as Mr. Vivian-Neal suggests, ginger-bread or cake-stamps³ pressed into service. The design of No. 4 is probably a garbled

¹ Lord Alwyne Compton records many of the designs of both types in his MS. volumes of tile-tracings preserved in the library of the Society of Antiquaries. Some of those which he records have since become further defaced; other specimens now preserved in the church have been discovered since, on the removal of some pitch-pine seating. I have to thank the Rector, Rev. J. D. Bodger, for this information. For relief-tiles of this type see *Archaeol. Journ.*, xciv (1938), pl. III; also *Reports and Trans. Devon Assoc.*, xxxviii.

² See *London Museum Medieval Catalogue* (1940), pp. 234-237, and especially bibliography, p. 236.

³ See *London Museum Med. Cat.* (1940), p. 293.

version of the Templar's badge, cf. *Proc. Hants. Field Club*, iv, pt. 1, 45, one of the tiles already cited from Winchester.

In south-eastern England the tile-industry was already dead by the sixteenth century. In the West it was more tenacious. To appreciate the craftsmanship of which the late-medieval tiler was capable it is only necessary to recall such mid-fifteenth-century printed tiles as those made in the Great Malvern kiln (some of them dated 1457-8),⁴ or the pavement of Abbot Sebrok's chapel in Gloucester Cathedral (1455);⁵ or, towards the close of the century, the magnificent pavement formerly in William Canynge's house at Bristol.⁶ There is no adequate recent study of this important group of tiles, but it is evident from the occasional incorporation of purely renaissance motifs that they were being manufactured as late as the early years of the sixteenth century. The tiles made for Thornbury Castle⁷ (*temp.* Henry VIII) are perhaps the latest reputable members of the series. Some fine inlaid tiles were indeed made for Sir William Sharington of Lacock as late as *c.* 1550,⁸ but they were probably the work of foreign craftsmen. Like the Flemish printed tiles which found their way into south-eastern England during the first half of the sixteenth century,⁹ they suggest that by then the native tile-industry had little to offer the wealthy patron.

It is suggested above that the Poundisford Park tiles, like many of the building materials of the house, probably came from Taunton Priory. An alternative, not wholly implausible, is that they were made for the house when it was built. The late medieval tilers of West Somerset did not share in the glories of their fellows in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. Nevertheless the industry seems to have survived in a decadent form until the dissolution of the monasteries robbed it of its chief client. It is not impossible that as a result of this catas-

⁴ J. Nichols, *Examples of Decorative Tiles*, nos. 67-71.

⁵ H. Shaw, *Specimens of Tile-Pavements*, pls. xxxix-xli.

⁶ H. Shaw, *Op. cit.*, pls. xlii-xlvi.

⁷ J. Nichols, *Op. cit.*, nos. 84-5.

⁸ F. Stevens, 'The Inlaid Paving Tiles of Wilts', *Wilts. Arch. Mag.*, xlvii, 358-378.

⁹ J. B. Ward Perkins, *Antiq. Journ.*, xvii (1937), 442-3.

trope an odd lot of stamps found its way into the hands of some domestic tiler, and that his inexperience is responsible for the eccentricities of this unusual set. The suggestion may be fanciful. But whatever the explanation, they illustrate clearly the crudity into which local traditional craftsmanship had fallen before it finally gave way to the new fancies of the Renaissance.



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2



3



4



5



6



7



LATE MEDIEVAL PRINTED TILES

Nos. 1-6, at Poundisford Park
No. 7, from Trull Church (in Somerset County Museum)