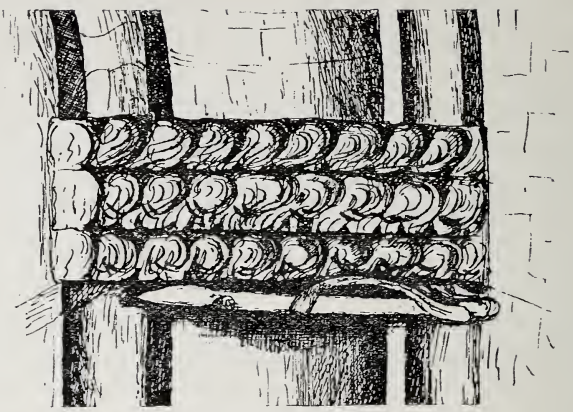

On the Needle and Thread at Langford Budville.

BY F. T. ELWORTHY, F.S.A.

ON the capital of the eastern column of the southern arcade of the Church of Langford Budville is carved an object which has long excited the curiosity of the public, and has remained an unsolved puzzle to Antiquaries. The device, which is made to form part of the conventional foliation, although quite distinct from it, is so far as can be represented in stone an unmistakable needle and thread, a most unusual ornament for such a place. In 1892, when this Society visited Langford,[1] the subject of this paper caused a good deal of attention and discussion on the spot; in which Professor Boyd Dawkins, Dr. Murray and others took part. Since that time much speculation has been hazarded as to the meaning of this needle and thread, for that it has a meaning seems to be admitted on all hands. Above is a rough sketch

1. See Proceedings of Somerset Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc., vol. xxxviii, 1892, pt. 1, p. 49.

which serves to shew its position on the column. By some it has been confidently asserted to denote a lady as the builder or contributor to the building of the present fabric.

The church is dedicated to St. James, but that dedication has of late years, and without the slightest authority been changed to St. Peter's. It is surmised that inasmuch as certain Midsummer customs have long been kept up, though now forgotten, both at Langford and at Wellington (as in the change to John the Baptist) by which the village "revel" was held on the Sunday nearest to June 24th: that anniversary came to be considered as marking the day of the patron saint as in many other places. Hence it is easy to see how the original dedication to St. James was made to give way to a more important and more popular saint, St. Peter. That St. James is the true patron is abundantly proved by *Ecton's* "Thesaurus Ecclesiasticarum," *Collinson III*, p. 20, *Lewis's* "Topographical Dictionary of England," Ed. 1840, *Ellacombe's* "Church Bells," and many other authorities.

There is no clue or tradition as to the lady's name who is said to have built the church, so that theory of the meaning of the needle and thread may be also passed over, like the new dedication, as pure invention. By others the device is said to be a *memento mori*, and to be intended to preach a sermon in stone upon the uncertainty of life, etc.

Putting aside mere speculation, and seeing that there is no ornament upon any of the other columns, that by the most fertile imagination can be supposed to represent a graven image, in the likeness of anything in heaven above or the earth beneath, it must be assumed that this needle and thread really has a distinct and definite meaning; moreover we must assume that it is put there to record some fact relating to the fabric of the church. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to endeavour to throw some light upon it, and, if possible, to discover what it means and who caused it to be carved.

The style of the arcade, in which there are no true capitals,

shows pretty clearly the date at which the present structure was erected. At the springing of each of the arches we find a mere band or wreath of very rude foliation, scarcely breaking the line of moulding, seemingly laid on and much under cut. At Langford this band is of the crudest and most meaningless kind.

In this neighbourhood, at Burlescombe, for instance, and in other churches, similar though better work is quite common, and while differing in pattern the kind of ornamentation referred to, is well known as the "Devonshire Capital." Sometimes, as at Holcombe Rogus, the band is quite thin and cut through, almost having the appearance of lace. It marks the very late perpendicular of the latter half of the fifteenth century, when, as the great bulk of Somersetshire churches testify, there had been a wonderful wave, a perfect mania, of church-building or "restoration" throughout the county. Thus we are able to fix the date of the column to within a few years, and we therefore, with some confidence, venture to put it between the years 1470 and 1500. Starting then from the date, which is the only piece of direct evidence we possess, we have to produce and to consider the bearings of a number of concurrent facts, and to build them up into such a circumstantial chain as to bring conviction to any candid and unbiassed person.

From abundant examples elsewhere, we know that it was long a wide-spread custom for liberal benefactors to cause or to permit their arms, motto, or some other device by which they were distinguished, to be placed upon the church or edifice they had benefited by their gifts. The heraldic blazonry so prevalent in our old churches does not represent mere family pride, but may be taken generally, except perhaps on sepulchral monuments, to be the attestation of the owner's substantial benefaction to the edifice in or upon which it appears. One familiar example, bringing the custom down to nearly a century later than Langford, is that of St. Carlo

Borromeo, who died in 1594. He was a great church builder in Lombardy, and in very many places the memory of his work is kept alive by the simple carving or painting of his well-known motto "Umilitas."

Here then we have at least a possible reason for our needle and thread, and at any rate a fresh starting point for further investigation. For this purpose we assume that the needle and thread are the sign or record of some benefaction. So uncommon a device naturally suggests that it must be something in the way of canting arms or a rebus—and its singularity, of course, made the search for such a device comparatively easy.

Here is the result;—In 1340, Queen's College, Oxford, was founded by Robert of Eglesfield, Chaplain and Confessor to Philippa, Queen of Edward III, who, as a loyal courtier, named his foundation "the Hall of the Scholars of the Queen." Thus we get the reason for the naming of that college, but what has a place at Oxford to do with Langford Budville? This latter was a chapelry and part of the advowson of the parish of Milverton,[1] which was presented by William Brewer in 1226 to Bishop Jocelin, and by him presented in 1251 to the Archdeaconry of Taunton. It is a remarkable fact that the livings of Langford and Milverton, together with Thorne St. Margaret, an adjoining parish, have remained in the same patronage all through the Reformation down to this day.[2] This is but a small link in the chain, but should be kept in view.

Returning to our investigation, the name and memory of the founder of Queen's College are annually kept alive on New Year's Day[3] by what is called a "canting" custom, when after dinner the Bursar presents to each guest a

1. "Langford Budvill *(S. Jacobi)* capella ab ecclesia de Milverton dependens." *Weaver's* Somerset Incumbents, p. 399.

2. *See* Proc. Som. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Society, 1892, vol. xxxviii, p. 53.

3. *Clark's* "Colleges of Oxford," p. 125.

needle threaded with silk of a colour suitable to his faculty (*aiguille et fil*), and prays for his prosperity in the words, "Take this and be thrifty." Here, then, we have an apparent analogy, if not a direct, connection between the Langford needle and thread and Queen's College. The *aiguille et fil* was evidently and is well known to be the mediæval rebus for the Cumberland family name Eglesfield, which latter is manifestly a corrupt English form of the French words. If our evidence stopped here at the identification of the needle and thread with the name of Eglesfield, we should not have made much progress, but feeling certain that we were on the right track, much enquiry has been made at Oxford as to whether the accounts of Queen's College contain any mention of gifts either to the churches of Langford or Milverton, or to the Archdeaconry of Taunton. The colleges in those days were rich and often generous, but no such gifts can be traced. Nevertheless, by the kindness of Dr. Magrath, the Provost of Queen's, whose assistance I desire gratefully to acknowledge, we are able to say that the *computi* (books of account) for the years 1468, 1476, 1477, 1480, 1483, 1484, 1485, 1486, 1490, 1492, 1495 to 1516 are lost. These unfortunately relate to the very period when we are certain the Langford column was carved, and so we are unable to produce any direct or decisive entry of a contribution by the college to the work, and yet, by an inductive negative process of reasoning, we are morally certain that the needle and thread are the silent record of a very important contribution. We believe this can be established by other means.

All Freemasons would understand that any such memorial would have its own special and particular situation. They would naturally look for it, in a partly completed building (as this was when the column was carved) at the south-east corner, where considerable progress would have been made. It is well known that the present fabric is a rebuilding or restoration, therefore it would be useless to look near the foundation posi-

tion in the north-east corner. Accordingly, we find the needle and thread carved where it was to be expected, upon the south-east column, and finding it there we accept it as proved that the device is intended to record that the person or corporation to whom it related had been an important benefactor. In accepting evidence of this kind, we must bear in mind that in the days when mottoes, rebuses, and canting arms were fashionable they were more carefully thought out, and considered of far more importance than they are at present.

Queen's College, however, with its Cumberland connection, cannot be shown to have ever been patron of, or otherwise directly interested with Langford Budville in Somerset, or with the Archdeaconry of Taunton. There are no entries in the college books showing that any payments were made to either of the Archdeacons during the latter half of the fifteenth century. Moreover we have found, through the kindness of the Provost (Dr. Magrath), that neither of the patrons of Milverton or Langford was ever a member of Queen's College. From 1450 to 1500 the Archdeacons of Taunton were :—Robert Stillington (All Souls), Archdeacon 1450, became Bishop of Bath and Wells 1466; Richard Langport, 1487; Oliver King, 1490, became Bishop of Exeter 1492; William Worseley, 1492; Robert Sherburn, 1496. In the neighbouring parish of Wellington, however, we find what will fill the hiatus and make what happened pretty evident.

We have shown elsewhere[1] that during some part, if not all, of the time between 1465 and his death in 1498 there was a vicar of Wellington named Dr. John Caldebek, and the period of his incumbency tallies exactly with the assured date of Langford Church. This Dr. Caldebek seems to have retired to Wellington when advanced in years, and in his day to have been a man of very considerable eminence. He had been a great Don at Oxford; for so early as 1449, and probably earlier, he was

1. Som. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc., vol. xxxviii, p. 241.

fellow of Queen's College, and from that date up to his death he evidently maintained a close connection with, as well as affection for his Alma Mater. In some of the Queen's College documents that have been preserved, he is shown to have been Treasurer or Bursar there several times, during a long period of years; and his name appears in many important transactions connected with the College. Moreover, he was Commissary, "equal to our present Vice-Chancellor," of the University for two years, from 1464 to 1466; but the date when he became Vicar of Wellington is uncertain. It was, however, some time before 1492; and it was perhaps about 1468, the date when he resigned his fellowship at Queen's, that he entered into residence at his new living. At that time the Bishop of Bath and Wells, the patron of Wellington, was no other than Robert Stillington, who, as we have already shown, had been Archdeacon of Taunton from 1450 to 1466, when he was appointed to the Bishopric. All these dates are of great importance. Stillington had been a fellow of All Souls when Caldebek was fellow of Queen's, and it is but reasonable to suppose, that as fellows of adjoining colleges they were personal friends at Oxford. Consequently, we find that it was Bishop Stillington who soon after his accession to the see, presented Dr. John Caldebek to the important living of Wellington. Previously the latter seems to have had no connection with this Diocese by birth or otherwise, while Stillington had become a Canon of Wells so early as 1445, while Caldebek was still fellow and bursar of Queen's at Oxford.[1]

Now, although he had retired from Oxford, the continued interest of Dr. Caldebek in his old college, and his intimate connection with it, are proved not only by entries still to be seen in the college books, but also by his will, dated April 25th, 1498 (*see* Op. Cit., pp. 243-252) and proved July 12th in the same year. We find in the former, under date 1492, "*pro*

1. *See* "Historical Notices of Robert Stillington," by the Dean of Wells, in Proc. Som. Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc., vol. xxxix (1893), p. 3.

legatura libri ex dono doctoris Cawdebeke viija," and in the latter "*aule regine Oxon duos libros notates vocat. Radulphi Cartam de vita Ihu Xti impress. et Epistolas Jeronimi presbiteri impress. et pro nota certiori secundo folio significatas.*"

That there is no record in the college books, showing the receipt of this legacy proves nothing, and is accounted for by the number of years during which the accounts are missing; but there is little doubt that the books bequeathed were regularly delivered, and were doubtless valuable. The bequest itself, however, is incontestible evidence that Dr. Caldebek kept in full touch with Queen's College up to the day of his death. It is true that he left nothing towards the building of Langford, but that was doubtless completed before 1498 (the date of his will), and we cannot say what a (probably) generous Oxford Don, the vicar of so valuable a parish as Wellington, might have given to a work in which he felt much interest, but we know that during his incumbency he took a prominent part in matters outside his own living; for he was visitor (and perhaps confessor) of the Abbey of Canonsleigh, to which also he bequeathed a legacy in his will.[2]

His official position as regards the Abbey necessarily brought him into intimate relationship with other closely adjoining parishes in the neighbourhood of Wellington. The advowson and glebe of Thorne St. Margaret, which had been annexed to the Archdeaconry of Taunton, had once belonged to Canonsleigh, while that of Sampford Arundel, also adjoining Wellington, still belonged to the Abbey in Caldebek's time, and so continued down to the suppression of the Monasteries. Thus we see there was a close relationship through the Abbey and the Archdeaconry with the parishes contiguous to that of Dr. Caldebek, so that it is but reasonable to suppose that a man of his position and influence would take an active part in the business going on around him in a district where he had so long resided, and where he must have acquired much influence.

2. *See* Op. Cit., pp. 243, 252.

During his incumbency of Wellington, Langford Church, as it now stands, was built; a great church-building boom was in full swing, and it is not only reasonable but most probable that he would take part and lend his assistance in providing or raising funds for that purpose. He had been for many years treasurer of a rich college, and of course was well acquainted with its resources. His orders would enforce celibacy, and he spent all his income, for his will proves that he had no incumbrances beyond nephews, and his will proves that he died a poor man even for those days. We have seen how intimately he kept up his connection with the college, and though we have no proof, yet it seems more than probable that he would use as bursar his knowledge of its wealth, and his great influence there, to procure substantial aid towards the work in hand.

If we could but find the accounts of Queen's College for the years that are missing, we have scarcely a doubt but it would be found that through Dr. Caldebek a considerable sum was given towards Langford Church, either directly or through the Archdeacon; and thereby we should not only clear up finally the mystery of the needle and thread, but we should at the same time be able to show decisively, one at least of the sources whence the vast sums were obtained, that were needed for, and were so evidently spent in the marvellous church-building in Somerset during the fifteenth century. There cannot be a doubt but that the celibacy of the Clergy enabled them mainly to devote their incomes to church work or church building; and that they did do this is abundantly demonstrated by tradition, and by the substantial evidence they have left, but perhaps even still more by the habit of unostentatious giving of their substance for church work, which has come down to their successors, as a sort of unnoted, unrecorded legacy, and which seems to be still a part of the *esprit de corps* of the older fashioned clergy of the present day.

Another strong link in the chain of evidence connecting Langford with Queen's College is to be noted in the fact, that as already shown, it is still the custom there for the bursar (as the successor of the old *Thesaurius* is now called), to present to each guest the needle and thread on New Year's day. We may confidently assume this custom to have begun with the foundation of the college, or immediately after the death of the founder, and to have been attached to the office of treasurer from the same time so as to keep in mind a pious memory. This would be entirely in harmony with all the traditions of Oxford, where the memory of the various founders is still regularly kept alive by the 'bidding' prayers. Consequently during the many years that Dr. Caldebek held the office, he must necessarily have become so familiar with the symbol and its purport, as to make it the most probable one for him, an old bursar, to adopt, when he wished to perpetuate a reminder of his beloved college, and thus we see a distinct motive for carving that particular rebus on the south-east column.

Moreover, we have seen that Bishop Stillington had been Archdeacon of Taunton from 1450, and we know he was patron of Milverton and Langford Budville, for he presented Thomas Overay to the vicarage of Milverton in 1459.

Now this Thomas Overay was evidently an old friend of the Bishop, for he had also been fellow of All Souls, and dates show that he was contemporary there with Stillington, by whom in 1465 he was promoted from Milverton to the more valuable vicarage of Wellington[1]; but Overay does not appear to have held it long; for he vacated it in a few years in favour of Dr. Caldebek. This is presumed to have occurred in 1471 when Overay received further preferment, and was made Chancellor of Wells by his friend the Bishop of Bath and Wells, an office he retained up to his death in 1487. Thus we note a very close connection, collegiate and personal, between Bishop

1. See *Weaver's* Somerset Incumbents.

Stillington, Thomas Overay, vicar of Milverton with Langford, and John Caldebek, vicar of Wellington. Stillington himself was a great church builder, then of Wellington. He built the magnificent Lady Chapel by the cloister in Wells Cathedral, so fully described by The Dean, Canon Church, and Mr. Buckle, in three several papers published in this Society's *Proceedings*, vol. xl (1894), and it is but reasonable to suppose that the Bishop, consummate architect as he was, must have had his own hands full with that work; moreover, though we know not, we may surmise how much he obtained for it from his college of All Souls. Yet, as an enthusiastic builder, he would not be entirely engrossed with his work at Wells, but he would certainly take much interest in a church of which he had been patron while archdeacon, and to which he had presented an old college friend as vicar. It is then most likely that his other old Oxford contemporary and friend, Dr. Caldebek, whom also he had presented to Wellington, would be stimulated and strongly encouraged by him to help the work; perhaps to take the leading part in the rebuilding of Langford.

Again, it is very likely that Caldebek himself was a generous donor, and that he added his own gifts to those of his evidently beloved college. It is clear that he gave away nearly all he had, for he left very little. Like many another noble benefactor, whose name is forgotten but whose works survive, he would not care to bring himself prominently forward in evidence, but would let the needle and thread, with which he had been for so many years familiar through his office, stand for both the college and himself. Finally, that he was the man who caused or permitted that device to be carved as a memorial of assistance in the work, we feel no manner of doubt, though unfortunately decisive proof is wanting to demonstrate that contention.