

The Historical Evidence as to the Saxon Church at Glastonbury

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THE recent excavations at the west end of the nave of Glastonbury Abbey have presented us with new problems of exceptional interest. Hitherto excavation has taught us much about the great buildings which arose after the fire of 1184; but of the ancient churches which perished in that overwhelming disaster the traces found have been few and slender. Now however we have uncovered, some eight or nine feet below the smooth lawn which represents the level of the latest church, portions of the floor of a church or churches of the earlier period, with remains of the molten lead which fell upon it from the burning roof. And among these portions are patches of pinkish plaster in which the eye of the expert has at once detected Saxon workmanship.

Accordingly it has been thought desirable that a new and independent examination should be made of such fragmentary evidences as historical records have preserved in regard to the Saxon church or churches traditionally associated with the names of K. Ina (c. 700) and St Dunstan (c. 943).

The researches of Professor Willis left little for future enquirers to bring forward. His brief 'Architectural History of Glastonbury Abbey', published in 1866, still remains indispensable. It is more necessary to recall the able dissertation of Mr. James Parker entitled 'Glastonbury: the Abbey Ruins', published in our *Proceedings* of 1880 (xxvi, ii, 25-106). It is a valuable supplement to Professor Willis's work, and should not be overlooked. Lastly, we have the excellent 'Handbook

to Glastonbury Abbey', in which Mr. Bligh Bond has made good use of the work of both his predecessors, and has brought his own knowledge and experience to bear upon it.

There is not much to add to the little that these diligent writers have been able to gather in the way of documentary evidence relating to the pre-Norman churches.¹ But the various statements of William of Malmesbury can now be more critically sifted, and we are in a better position than hitherto to frame some answer, however provisional, to the question of chief importance; namely, What did that careful historian actually see when he was staying in the abbey at some time between the years 1125 and 1130?

When Bishop Stubbs edited the *Gesta Regum* of William of Malmesbury for the Rolls Series forty years ago, he entered on a minute examination of the sequence and approximate dates of the historian's writings. He reached the conclusion that the *Gesta Pontificum* and the *Gesta Regum* were in course of composition simultaneously, and were both published in 1125. The two other works which concern us here were the fruit of a somewhat prolonged residence at Glastonbury Abbey, where he lived for a while as a brother monk and entered with zeal upon an examination of the traditions and written records of the monastery. As the result of these studies there appeared at some time between 1125 and 1130 *The Life of St Dunstan* in two books and an enquiry into *The Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury*. The former of these works had been edited by Stubbs for the Rolls Series in 1874, in a volume entitled *Memorials of St Dunstan*, which contains also four earlier lives of the saint. The book *De Antiquitate* has unfortunately found no modern editor; but an accurate text of the best surviving manuscript was printed by Hearne in 1727 in his edition of *Adam of Domerham*. No manuscript is known to exist which

¹ The one passage of primary importance which seems strangely to have been overlooked is the description, given by William of Malmesbury in his *Life of St Dunstan*, of the enlargement by that saint of K. Ina's church. It is incidentally mentioned by Plummer (*Bede*, H. E. vol. ii, p. 80) in a note on the word *porticus*; and again in a note on the same word by Baldwin Brown in his 'Arts in Early England' (ii, p. 89 of ed. 1925). My own attention was called to it in a reference to the latter work by Mr. John Morland.

gives the work in its original form : we have only the greatly enlarged edition of it which the monks of Glastonbury had gradually evolved by the middle of the thirteenth century.¹

Before he had made his researches at Glastonbury the historian evidently knew very little about the monastery and its history. In his *Gesta Pontificum* he had even said that K. Ina was the first to build a monastery there.² In the *Gesta Regum* he said that the king chose this marshy site in the hope that the earthly discomforts of the monks would quicken their heavenly desires. But about the year 1140 he brought out a new edition of the *Gesta Regum*, making considerable changes and additions. And here we see the fruit of his Glastonbury enquiries. For at several points in his history he inserts solid blocks from the *De Antiquitate*, which had appeared in the interval between the two editions. It will be understood therefore that, where we quote from the *Gesta Regum* in what follows, we are using the text of the later edition.

II

In his *Gesta Regum* (Rolls Ser. p. 36) William of Malmesbury says of K. Ina :

He also built from the foundations the church of the blessed Apostles, as an appendix to the Old Church of which we are speaking.³

In the *De Antiquitate ecclesiæ Glastoniensis* (ed. Hearne, p. 63) we read that ' K. Ina founded the greater church of the Apostles Peter and Paul ; and, inasmuch as there have been several basilicas there ', it is well to describe them. But these words, and the fanciful descriptions which follow, are not from William of Malmesbury's pen ; they are the insertion of a later writer, and need not detain us here.

¹ I have done what I can to distinguish on critical grounds between the work of William of Malmesbury himself and the subsequent additions in the first essay of *Somerset Historical Essays* (Oxford : 1921).

² ' Ibi primus rex Ina consilio beatissimi Aldelmi monasterium edificavit ' (p. 196).

³ ' Hic etiam beatorum apostolorum ecclesiam huic vetustæ, de qua loquimur, appendicem a fundamentis aedificavit.'

We may note in passing that K. Ina's great church itself is mentioned incidentally in a Saxon royal genealogy of the tenth century: 'He built that fair minster at Glæstingabyrig'.¹

In his *Life of St Dunstan* (Rolls Ser. *Memorials of St Dunstan*, p. 271) William of Malmesbury writes:

There is there, as I have said before, conterminous with the wooden church, a church of stone which trustworthy tradition assigns to K. Ina. This church Dunstan lengthened considerably, adding a tower; and to make its width square with its length he added aisles, or *porticus* as they call them. The result of his labours was that, so far as the design of the ancient structure allowed, a basilica was produced of great extent in both directions; wherein, if ought be lacking of seemliness and beauty, there is at any rate no want of necessary room.²

We may add a further extract from the *De Antiquitate* (p. 29), for the light which it may throw on the relative positions of the Old Church and the church of K. Ina. After speaking of Abbot Tica (754-760) he says:

This same Tica, when he had bidden farewell to life, obtained a notable tomb in the right-hand corner of the greater church, over against the entry to the Old Church. For size and ornament it is by no means to be contemned.³

On p. 63 his epitaph is given, and it is asserted that long afterwards, when an attempt was made to destroy his tomb, the offender was smitten with blindness.

¹ 'He getimbrade that beorhte mynster æt glæstinga byrig' (Cotton MS. *Tib. B. 5*). The MS. itself is of the second half of the eleventh century; but the episcopal and royal lists are of St Dunstan's time or a little later. A marginal note in similar words about K. Ina's church was inserted by a very early hand in A. S. Chron. (A) at the year 688, and seems to have been taken from the royal list quoted above.

² 'Est ibi ecclesiæ lignæ, ut ante dixi, lapidea contermina, cujus auctorem Inam regem non falsa confirmat antiquitas. Hanc ille adjecta turri ad multum spatium prorogavit; et ut latitudo longitudini conquadret, alas vel porticus quas vocant adjecit. Ita vir industrius impendit operam ut, quantum antiquæ structuræ patiebatur schema, utrobique fieret ingens basilica. Ubi, et si aliquid desideratur venustæ pulchritudinis, nihil deest necessariæ capacitatis.'

³ 'Isdem porro Tica, cum valefecisset vitæ, in dextero angulo majoris ecclesiæ, juxta introitum vetustæ, notabilem accepit sepulturam. Ea est et mole structuræ et arte celaturæ non ignobilis.'

We may conclude our quotations by citing three other notable burying-places in the Saxon church.

1. K. Edmund, who was assassinated in 946, was buried on the north side of the tower.¹

2. Brihtwi, bishop of Wells, formerly abbot of Glastonbury († 1034), 'lies in the north *porticus* by (the altar of) St John Baptist' (*De Antiq.* p. 94).² With him lay also Brihtwold, a monk who became bishop of Salisbury (*rectius* Ramsbury) and died in 1045 (*ib.* p. 95).³

3. Abbot Herlewin († 1120) was laid next Abbot Turstin 'by (the altar of) St Andrew (*ib.* p. 118).⁴ These altars of St John Baptist and St Andrew were, we may suppose, at the east end of the N. and S. aisles respectively of Dunstan's extension.

III

Having thus far gathered together and sorted out our evidence,⁵ we pass to the more difficult task of interpreting it. No interpretation can at the present time be other than provisional. Excavation has as yet gone only so far as to offer a few tantalising details. But it is in the interest of excavation itself that these notes are written; and, so long as we keep facts and theories carefully distinct, no harm can come from adventurous suggestions.

Before we enter the region of conjecture let us sum up what William of Malmesbury undoubtedly saw at some time in the period between 1125 and 1130.

First, he saw the Old Church—the *ealdecyrce* or 'vetusta ecclesia'—which had been built of wattles, and afterwards had been covered with wood and with lead (*De Antiq.* p. 28).

¹ 'In aquilonali parte turris magnifice humatum': *Vita Dunstani*, p. 277, and in the same words *Gesta Regum*, p. 169. In the *De Antiq.* we find conflicting statements, which illustrate the unsatisfactory nature of our text: p. 43, 'Edmundi senioris in turri ad dexteram': p. 73 'jacet Glastoniæ ad sinistram in turri majoris ecclesiæ.'

² 'Hic jacet in aquilonari porticu ad Sanctum Johannem Baptistam.'

³ 'Situs est cum Brihtwio in parte aquilonari.'

⁴ 'Sepultus est juxta Turstinum ad Sanctum Andream.'

⁵ The mention of the 'solaria' or upper chambers of the Saxon church will be considered more conveniently at a later point: see note on p. 46, below.

Next, he saw to the east of this what he took to be K. Ina's great stone church, in the altered form—more spacious as he thought than beautiful—to which Dunstan's enlargements had brought it. A tower had been added, and considerable length had been gained; and aisles had been erected which made it as broad as it was long. In the right-hand corner of K. Ina's nave, near the entry to the Old Church, stood the conspicuous tomb of Abbot Tica. Under the tower of Dunstan's time was the grave of K. Edmund the Elder: at the end of the n. aisle was St John Baptist's altar with the tombs of Brihtwi and Brihtwold; at the end of the s. aisle, St Andrew's altar with the tombs of Turstin and Herlewin.

He speaks of the church of K. Ina as an 'appendix' to the Old Church; and again he says that it was 'conterminous' with it. We therefore naturally think of the two churches as standing close together; and the description of the position of Abbot Tica's tomb may allow the suggestion that they were linked by a small passage—if we may so interpret 'introitus' here—which was at the same time a kind of *narthex* or entrance porch of the Saxon church.

What did he see to the east of these two churches? Whatever he may have seen, he has left us no description of it—possibly because it had no special interest for him, as his concern was only with the monuments of the past treasured in the more ancient shrines. Yet at the close of the *De Antiquitate* he makes a passing reference to two essays in rebuilding on the part of the earliest Norman abbots.

After the Conquest the great abbeys as well as the bishoprics of England had with but few exceptions come under the control of Norman ecclesiastics, who despised the Saxon churches and quickly set about the gigantic task of building afresh in the style and on the scale of the new churches of Normandy. In some instances they not only rivalled but excelled the most splendid examples offered by their native land. It was not likely that Glastonbury should be an exception to the general rule. Here however there were peculiar reasons why the past should be treated with a greater respect than was commonly shewn elsewhere. The Old Church was too sacred to be touched; and it was reasonable enough that the Saxon church

of K. Ina and St Dunstan, which was linked on to it, should also be suffered for a time at any rate to survive; seeing that the space available for building to the east of it was practically unlimited.

The first Norman abbot of Glastonbury was Turstin, who had been a monk at Caen, where he must have watched the growth of the great church which Lanfranc had built. Turstin was a passionate reformer, and soon rendered himself infamous by shooting down his recalcitrant monks when they refused to give up their Gregorian chant in favour of the new music attributed to Abbot William of Fecamp.¹ Such being his character and methods, we are not surprised to learn that Turstin began the building of a new church, nor again to be told that he failed to finish it. His successor Herlewin, who also was brought over from Caen, thought it unworthy of the greatness of Glastonbury, pulled it down, and began again on a more ambitious scale. William of Malmesbury writes (*De Antiq.* p. 117):

The church begun by his predecessor he razed to the ground, as not corresponding to the magnitude of their possessions; and he began a new one, on which he expended 480 pounds.²

Did Abbot Herlewin finish the church which we are told he

¹ A point of detail in connexion with this story deserves our attention. Some of the soldiers, we read (*De Antiq.* p. 114), climbed up into the chambers erected between the columns or piers ('Quidam eciam solaria inter columnas erecta scandebant'), and shot at the monks below. The Peterborough form (E) of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, under the year 1083, says that 'the Frenchmen broke into the choir and rushed towards the altar where the monks were; and some of the soldiers went up on the up-floor, and kept shooting down with arrows towards the sanctuary'.

What church is in question here? The *De Antiquitate*, according to our thirteenth century MS., dates the occurrence in 1081; but it has already given 1082 as the date of Turstin's accession. Plainly there is some corruption in the text, and we may prefer to accept the date given in the Chronicle for the incident, namely 1083. It is not possible that Turstin's new church should by this time have been sufficiently advanced to be the scene of the outrage. We must therefore explain the *solaria* or 'up-floor' as a gallery above the aisles of the Saxon church.

² 'Ecclesiam a predecessore incoatam, quia magnitudini possessionum suarum non respondebat, solo tenus eruit, et novam incoavit, in qua cccclxxx libras dispendit.'

began ? The sum said to have been expended by him upon it would suggest that he did not.¹ He ruled from 1101 to 1120 : but his earlier years were taken up with efforts to restore the shattered finances of the abbey ; and his economy at that period was so excessive that it gained him the reputation of meanness and want of hospitality. He was succeeded by Seffrid, a monk of Seez, of whom we are only told that after six years he was made bishop of Chichester. Then came the great and famous Henry of Blois, who ruled the abbey from 1126 to his death in 1171, notwithstanding his promotion to the see of Winchester in 1129. He was a splendid benefactor to Glastonbury ; but though we have a detailed account of his magnificent building operations, not a word is said to suggest that he added a single stone to the fabric of the church.²

It has been generally concluded from this silence that the new Norman church which Herlewin began was completed before the accession of Abbot Henry of Blois. Moreover it has been held that it probably extended westward practically as far as the existing w. wall of the great church which was built after the fire of 1134.

But, if this were so, what are we to say of the position of K. Ina's church and its extensions under St Dunstan, including the tower beneath which K. Edmund was buried—all of which William of Malmesbury saw ? Are they to be crowded into the space of about 50 feet between the chapel of St Mary and the present w. wall—the space which was afterwards filled by the Galilee ?

The problem is not quite fairly stated thus. For we are assuming that the Old Church occupied the exact site of the existing chapel of St Mary. Now Adam of Domerham (p. 335) says that Ralph fitz Stephen,³ to whom the king entrusted the work of rebuilding after the fire,

brought to completion the church of St Mary in the place where the Old Church originally had stood.⁴

¹ It would be equivalent to less than 10,000 in the present day.

² *Adam of Domerham*, p. 316.

³ He was son of Stephen the chamberlain ; not, as has often been said, of K. Stephen.

⁴ 'Ecclesiam Sanctæ Mariæ in loco quo primitus vetusta steterat . . . consummavit.'

This statement leaves us quite free to suppose, as indeed is most natural, that the new building was considerably larger than the ancient chapel of wattles covered with wood. It is true that in the fourteenth century a belief existed that the Old Church came as far east as did the chapel of St Mary which Ralph fitz Stephen built. And when the E. wall of that chapel was taken away, in order to lengthen it by uniting it with the thirteenth-century Galilee,¹ a pillar² was set up, outside on the north, to preserve the remembrance of the exact distance eastward to which the Old Church had extended. But this must have been mere conjecture, and no argument can be based upon it.

Let us for the moment suppose the primitive chapel to have been some 36 feet in length—and this is probably a generous estimate—and to have occupied the western portion of the present chapel of St Mary. We should then have 80 feet left for the enlarged Saxon church of Dunstan's time, before reaching the existing W. wall of the great church built after the fire. If we assign 40 feet to K. Ina's church and allow 10 feet more for its western porch, we still have 30 feet left for Dunstan's tower and an apse or square-ended chancel beyond.

But the excavation of the summer of 1927 suggests that we are not so cramped for room after all. If it shall be decided that the pink plaster flooring, now uncovered to the east of the existing W. wall of the nave, is of Saxon workmanship, we may bring Dunstan's work as far east as may be required, and gain ample room for all that William of Malmesbury has described.

As to Herlewin's church we must remain in the dark until perchance further excavation supplies material to fill the gap which historical evidence has left. In the meantime it may be worth while to make the suggestion that, notwithstanding the silence as to Henry of Blois, its extension was gradual and

¹ An early reference to the Galilee may be noted here, as it seems hitherto to have escaped observation. In the Bath Chartulary II (S.R.S. ii, 101) we read that two chaplains are appointed in 1294 for masses 'at the altar of All Saints built in a place called Galilee, which place is situate between the great monastery and the chapel of the Blessed Mary the Virgin.'

² The base of this pillar was uncovered in 1921. For the inscription which it once bore, see 'Two Glastonbury Legends' (Cambridge: 1926), p. 56.

spread over many years; that the Saxon church remained for a while intact, and that a considerable portion of it still stood in some modified form even at the time of the great fire, serving as a convenient link between the Old Church and the new building, such as was in fact afterwards supplied by the Galilee of the thirteenth century.