

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES IN SOMERSET

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I hope you will forgive me if I give you a very informal address today. When our Society did me the great honour of choosing me as its President for the year, I felt that in the address which it is my task to make I should try to talk quite simply of some archaeological and ecclesiastical experiences which have come my way since first I came to Somerset in 1936. What I would wish to do is quite informally to share with you some of my own experiences in this county.

I would like to start off by saying that I do not think there is any county where the stranger who is interested in archaeology or history is so warmly welcomed or so effectively helped. Our own Society put itself out to assist me at the very start, the Record Society (of which I wish to speak later) welcomed me to its Council when I was still in my early twenties, the Dean and Chapter of Wells and the Registrar made every effort to aid my researches. This list could well be lengthened. But I would like to take this opportunity of expressing publicly my gratitude.

Some of you will remember Abbot Ethelbert Horne who was for many years a member of our Council and was at one time our President. He retained his full faculties and his interest in archaeology until well into his nineties. I was fortunate in coming under his guidance at the very beginning of my life at Downside. As a newcomer I was given part of a religious habit that had belonged to Abbot Horne and on the very day of my arrival I discovered in the pocket a flint scraper. I took it to Abbot Horne at the first opportunity. 'I regard this as an omen', he said, and then went on to describe to me the field near Downside where he had picked it up. This was the start of many pleasant hours spent in looking for such flints, both in that field and in fields between Mellis and Whatley and in one field particularly rich in such things near the head of Burrington Combe.

I hope I shall not be indiscreet if, after about thirty years, I recount a small episode in which I played a minor part. At a church, which had better be nameless though I expect some of you will easily be able to identify it, there is a very interesting inscription on the outside wall going back to the consecration of an earlier church in the twelfth century. Unfortunately, at that time, it was largely covered by ivy which was damaging the stone. Abbot Horne wrote to the incumbent suggesting the removal of the ivy, but received back a letter which told him with great courtesy to mind his own business. 'It is my business' said Abbot Horne who was then over eighty years of age. On the following afternoon I was instructed to accompany him to the church. When we got there he told me to stand by the churchyard gate and to warn him if anyone approached. The Abbot then produced a can of some noxious liquid which he applied to the ivy-roots. A month or two later I was told to set off on my bicycle to see what had happened. When I reported to Abbot Horne that the ivy had withered he was very gleeful, and I do not think I have seen him so pleased since the day when he rescued a medieval orphrey in a Somerset church from the hands of a woman who was using it to clean the oil-lamps!

I suppose some of the happiest and most interesting days of my life have been spent

in looking round old churches. Many hours were spent before the war in making notes for Christopher Woodforde for his book on Somerset medieval glass and I think I visited almost every church within cycling distance of Downside. It was on one of these journeys that I made a minor discovery which I do not think has been recorded in any book.

Looking round the outside of Englishcombe church I noticed a very small cut cross on a buttress, quite close to the ground. Further inspection revealed another. After this I found these small incised crosses on a great number of churches, even including Wells cathedral church. But what were they? They could not be external consecration crosses like the well-known ones at Moorlinch for, not only were they too small, some even minute, but often they were only a foot or two from the ground. Sometimes a number was discovered, all at regular intervals round the church. It was indeed a puzzle and I am not sure if even yet I have the answer; I simply put forward a suggestion. They are certainly not masons' marks nor the largely fictitious pilgrims' crosses, but they were inscribed to indicate the position of consecration crosses. Exterior consecration crosses were most frequently painted on squares of plaster placed at intervals round the church at some feet from the ground. On the walls of many churches careful inspection will reveal the faint traces of this plaster. The fact that the crosses were only painted on plaster explains their absence today. I suggest that these minute carved crosses were placed to indicate the particular part of the walls or buttresses where the plaster cross was, so that there should be no mistake about the position. This is but a suggestion but I cannot think of any other explanation and, as I say, I do not think these small crosses have up to the present been studied.

Another feature of our old Somerset churches, which has not, as far as I know, received the attention it deserves, is the presence in so many porches on the stone seats of holes and patterns which were made for various games of marbles. We are all familiar with these in some cloisters like those of Gloucester or Norwich, but it is not always realised how frequently they occur in our parish churches. There were two main games: one with nine holes for use in a game which resembled closely Nine Men's Morris and another with one large hole into which marbles had to be flicked according to various complex laws. At Stratton-on-the-Fosse church both kinds are found. But there are other games as well: one played with three holes in a line and this is to be found in several churches.

It is interesting to speculate about these games and who played them. In the days before clocks became universal people went to church when they heard the sound of the bell and entered the building when the bell stopped. I have seen this habit still in vogue in Normandy. Whether these games were played by the younger members of the congregation before the bells ceased to toll we do not know. But, here again, there is material for study for, to my knowledge, no lists has been drawn up showing where these games are to be found and it would be interesting to make a collection of rubbings of them.

One could say a good deal about the Somerset churches and minor puzzles that still await solution. For many years I have wrestled with an inscription in Holcombe old church. Only part of it remains and that was turned upside down and used by the Normans for a carved capital. It must therefore be pre-Conquest. I think that I have now deciphered almost all of it and that there can be little doubt that it was an inscription

recording the consecration of the church by one "Wrotrard". Only one person of his name is given in Searle's great list of Saxon names¹ and he was an Archbishop of York who was present at the Exeter Council of Easter 928. Possibly he was asked to consecrate the church at Holcombe on his journey to or from the north. So we may perhaps, without being too bold, put the date of the consecration of Holcombe church in the spring months of 928.

Moving away, then, from old churches to turn to other subjects, it was early on that I became interested in the story of Wells cathedral and many a peaceful hour was spent in the cathedral library through the kindness of the Dean and Chapter. It was a delightful place to work; the only sounds to be heard were the splash of the water falling from the great spring into the palace moat and the endless pacing of a friendly ghost who seemed to do a sort of invisible sentry-duty up and down the library but was undoubtedly benevolent! It was there that I made the acquaintance of the manuscript of Dean Cosyn which was edited for the Record Society (Vol. 56). There was a large cupboard in the inner room which contained, among other things, all sorts of miscellaneous fragments of accounts and old pages of manuscript salvaged from bindings. There was always something to be found there: a leaf with the signature of Dr. Sugar whose chantry lies in the nave of the cathedral church, portions of early sixteenth-century polyphonic music and many other fragments, some of which were recorded by the Historical Manuscripts Commission and some not.

An almost more fascinating store-house was the Bishop's Registry in the marketplace where the Registrar, the late Mr. Granville Harris, used with great kindness and trust to allow me to work at will in the dark fifteenth century tower over the gateway. Literally hundreds of volumes of the proceedings of the Consistory Court and that of the Archdeacon of Wells were preserved there. Nothing was more difficult to decipher, for the books were all on paper which flaked at a touch, but they made fascinating reading. I remember being enthralled by an accusation of witchcraft at Castle Cary in 1513 which recounted, among other sinister features which led to the accusation of the unfortunate woman, the fact that a child spied a toad crawling beneath the stool upon which she was sitting. The witchcraft cases were many. There was a man in Shepton Mallet who used to go up to Mendip on Midsummer Eve to consult demons and there was the simple woman in Moorlinch who alleged she was talked to by the fairies with whom 'she was merry in green fields'.

These books also record with great vividness the various changes of religion in the sixteenth century and show the bewildering rapidity of such changes. Thus in Edward VI's reign the unfortunate Agnes Bull of Yeovilton got into trouble for 'she doth use to wear beads', that is, she said her rosary, and, not far away, John Raye the curate 'usith commonly his crown shaven'; he was still wearing a tonsure. At Worle the churchwardens report to the Archdeacon that 'the making clear of the choir is not done' and at Farrington Gurney 'there is the altar yet standing in the church . . . and the rood loft standeth'.

Once we get into Mary's reign there is a different story. At Worle they are now in trouble because 'they lack a Rood, Mary and John'; at Blagdon 'the scriptures painted on the walls is not put out'. At Buckland Dinham Thomas Grigge has a New Testament in translation and also a book called *Jacob's Ladder*. At Roade Thomas Dovet said that

¹ Searle, W. G., *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (Cambridge, 1897).

the back of his house 'was as well hallowed as the church' and at Mudford John Gervase 'will not lift up his hands to the Sacrament nor give any external adoration'.

One never knew what one would find next in those fascinating records in that dark tower and perhaps the most thrilling moment of all was turning up the visitations of Glastonbury and Athelney in 1538. They are in fact the very last recorded episcopal visitations of any monasteries in England. These visitations give an extremely clear account of Glastonbury during its last year or so, and I think we may turn for a moment to air once again some of Bro. Joseph's grievances: 'The convent doth lack an instructor to teach them their grammar and over against any visitation then they have an instructor, and when the visitation is over then he is taken away . . . Betwix Easter and Whitsunday there was no lection of any scripture in this house and for lack of lectures and other teaching the brethren doth divers times play at dice and cards . . . the convent ale is for the most part naught *culpa fratris Edmundi Cooker* . . . The brethren doth carry their relics in procession week with small devotion . . . The meat and drink is not indifferently distributed among the brethren, for the seniors hath the great cut of meat and the juniors the least. The Sexton and the Almoner have £16 yearly to distribute among poor men which they do deliver to the Abbot, and what cometh afterward of it no man can tell. The Convent is much grieved with many processions and other ceremonies.' No doubt Bro. Joseph was a great complainer, but the picture is a vivid one with its divisions between the old and the new learning, between the elders and their juniors.

Another interesting book among these manuscripts was a list of clergy deprived in Queen Mary's reign for being married. They included quite a large number of monks and friars, a very few clergy ordained according to the new Ordinal which was considered invalid and a very large number of secular clergy. The reasons they give for their marriages were very varied: some attributed it to the persuasions of preachers in the cathedral church, others to the encouragement of Bishops Barlow of Wells, Hooper of Gloucester and Shaxton of Salisbury, and one, an ex-monk named Webbe, who was Rector of Curry Mallet, triumphantly produced a dispensation issued by Archbishop Cranmer sixteen years before.

All these fascinating records are now in the County Record Office at Taunton, though their repair will be a very long business. In passing, I would like to add that I hope you will not forget the Somerset Record Society whose very miscellaneous volumes contain so much that is of interest to almost anyone. I understand that there is an exhibition of its works on view today, and I do hope that you will see it and that more persons will join the Record Society.

The Glastonbury visitations bring me to the abbey itself. It was at the insistence of Abbot Horne and of Prebendary Palmer that I undertook the task of editing the Great Chartulary. It was wartime when the work started and the W.V.S. undertook through a friend the task of bringing the manuscript from Longleat to Downside. Rumours of its unique character must have clearly been spread, for the chartulary nearly arrived accompanied by a guard of motor-cyclists in crash-helmets! I will never forget how my heart sank at the size of the enormous volume written in a hand which got smaller and smaller as the work proceeded. Had it not been for the kindly encouragement and at times the courteous bullying of various officers of the Record Society I do not think it would ever have been done.

The excavations, too, at Glastonbury produced fascinating and unexpected results before the series came to a close. Under the direction of Dr. Raleigh Radford, St. Dunstan's Cloister, the great early earthwork, the glass-works, the sites of primitive wooden buildings and the hole where the body of Arthur was dug up in the twelfth century all came to light and each year produced its fresh and unexpected discovery. And I take the opportunity today of stating that, as Chairman of the Excavation Committee, I do not consider that the Committee is defunct but is merely dormant. I much hope that some day the excavations at the abbey itself may begin again. I am convinced that there is something of interest to be found in almost any spot in those ruins.

Pleasure in working on the Glastonbury records has always been enhanced by those vivid little points — in themselves of no great importance — which make past history live. It is pleasing to see the Oaks of Avalon mentioned in 1539, to find that the fountain in Glastonbury High Street called 'Fabian's Put' mentioned in the thirteenth century was still there in the sixteenth, to read of the duties of the Glastonbury doctor in the fourteenth century, who came from the far west of Cornwall, to know that there were salt-works in the town in the eleventh century — the catalogue is endless and I will not weary you with more examples.

Collections of documents are always enthralling. The one good fortune of the war was the evacuation of literally tons of medieval manuscripts from the Public Record Office to Shepton Mallet Gaol. Through the kindness of its guardian, now the Keeper of the Public Records, I was over there frequently and I think I can claim to be one of the few persons who have ever sat with Domesday Book on my knees. Even in our own library at Downside there was the unexpected discovery of a large number of thirteenth and fourteenth century obedientary rolls from Winchester which were returned to join their separated brethren in the archives there. On another occasion a fifteenth century cover of a Salisbury Chapter-Act book turned up, and was able to be reunited with its book once again. These are perhaps small excitements, but they are satisfying nevertheless. Even very recently an unexpected discovery of a number of early thirteenth century charters connected with Cumberland turned up in the archives of a Somerset country house.

I fear I have said very little of archaeology as such for I cannot claim to have done anything of much interest in this field. But, here again, there have been satisfying moments of minor discovery. The *Victoria County History of Somerset* quotes a passage from the diaries of Parson Skinner of Camerton which refers to a Roman site between Midsomer Norton and that place. Skinner describes the site by talking of the views to be seen from it and the *County History* states that the exact place has now been lost. Yet, with the help of a member of our Society, who was younger then than he is now, we went over on bicycles and found it immediately and without difficulty, and the site, which was full of Roman pottery, rewarded a lucky member of our party with an enamelled fibula which is now I think in our museum.

On another occasion walking in the fields between Doulting and Shepton Mallet we came across what was clearly the site of a Roman Villa or habitation, the most interesting feature of which was a complete circular stone trough in perfect condition. Unfortunately, though the attention of the responsible authorities was called, it was not possible to conduct further explorations.

I remember too, a fascinating walk round the boundaries of Mells manor. Our party had a note of the boundaries as set out in a Saxon charter of the tenth century and also those of 1515 preserved in a manuscript at Mells. It was an amazing experience to identify quite easily most of the marks mentioned in the old records and to discover a named stone still there in a hedge, though almost covered by grass and vegetation. We never completed the circle of the whole boundary of the manor, and I often wonder if a thorn-tree mentioned in the tenth century and still there in 1515 yet remains. One day I hope to find out.

Taking it all in all, if one asks in simple terms what is the value of archaeology and history I think one can say, without going deeper, that it makes life more interesting. We all of us owe a huge debt to the professionals who have elucidated the past for us, but those of us who are amateurs get as much pleasure and satisfaction in our own way by our more limited studies. Inanimate objects are still able to speak to us in a way they could not have done had we not done some study in these subjects. A carved stone, a mound of earth, the crabbed page of an old manuscript, all have their secrets to reveal and their message to give.

One can think of so many happy hours spent in such a variety of interesting occupations. It might be trying to decipher an early inscribed stone in the parapet of a tower near Bath; it might be trying to piece out the meaning of the twelfth century inscription round the rim of the font at Lullington; it might be tracing and measuring the path followed by a blocked stairway in the ruins of Glastonbury Lady Chapel, the end of which no one has yet explored; it might be examining the patterns of the metal studs in the drawers of the medieval filing cabinet in the Vicars Choral building at Wells and trying out the theory that each pattern corresponded to a number in the dot symbols used in the Exchequer for quick calculation; it might be time spent digging out a small cave in College Wood in the Nettlebridge Valley and finding traces of its use by a Roman shepherd or goatherd; it might be striving to puzzle out whether a certain early 16th century bench-end in North Cadbury church is or is not a picture of medieval Glastonbury; it might be uncovering the course of the Fosse Way as it comes through the edge of our own school grounds . . . and so it has gone on. It has been a record of happy hours with always the possibility that one day some really important discovery might be made, even if it never was.

I fear I have said nothing at all about the Natural History side of our Society. It is one which deals with a particularly important and enjoyable side of human experience and with the history and preservation of so much that is important, and I must apologise for not talking about it. Among my memories there stand out two very fascinating days with the Natural History section on the Shapwick Moors, but I am in no position to do more than remember with gratitude that side of our activities.

Education does not stop with school or at the university and the work of our Society in all its branches is part of that deeper educational work which should continue to the end of our lives. It is one of our protections against boredom and against being bores. It gives heightened interest to so much that we see around us. And, though I fear that I myself have said this afternoon little of interest and nothing of importance, I am pleased, as your President, to be able publicly to thank our Society and its members very deeply for so much.