St. Bridget's Chapel, Beckery.

BY JOHN MORLAND.

THE rising ground of Beckery lies nearly due west from Glastonbury; it consists of a ridge of no great elevation, stretching from near the site of the present railway station to the river Brue; it is about two-thirds of a mile long and much narrower across. In old documents this ridge is always called the "Island" of Beckery, with sometimes the translation into or "Little Ireland," and in ancient or even mediæval times Beckery must, at least in the winter, have been a true island; but the morasses have long since been drained, and the intervening valley between it and Weary-all is now firm pasture land. At the extreme western end of the island we find a ford over the Brue, connecting it with the level moor beyond, and running in the direction of the manor house of Sharpham. This ford must necessarily be very ancient, as the embanking of the river would at once render it useless. If a road were continued along the island from this ford it would in ancient times have been connected with Glastonbury to the west of St. Benedict's, or rather St. Benignus', Church, either by another ford over the stream coming down from Glastonbury, or by a bridge. At this point on the Beckery side is a curious mound, apparently artificial, which will bear exploration at some future time; and flanking another artificial mound a little further west the remains of a very ancient wall were discovered some years since, as described in the *Proceedings of the Glastonbury Antiquarian Society.*

Beckery, together with the Islands of Martinsey and Godney, was given to the Abbey by Kenwald, about A.D. 640; but there is an older ecclesiastical history connected with it. In the chronicles there are several mentions made of a chapel on Beckery, dedicated to the Irish saint, St. Bridget. In *John of Glastonbury* (Hearne's edition, p. 68) we read that St. Bridget herself came to Glastonbury about A.D. 488, and that she passed some years in a certain island called Beckery, where was earlier still a chapel dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene; and that on her return to Ireland, shortly before her death, she left her wallet, her rosary, and her weaving tools at Beckery, which things, in consequence of the sweetness of her memory, were there preserved as reliques and reverenced. Moreover, the chapel was afterwards known by her name; in which chapel there was in the southern part a hole, through which all who passed would, according to common belief, receive forgiveness of their sins.

That there was really a chapel on the island is undoubted; the sacristan of the Abbey was required to furnish it with a candle of half a pound of wax at Easter. It was, however, in ruins when Collinson wrote at the end of last century, but for many years all ruins had disappeared and the situation of the chapel was doubtful, although the fields around, still called "Brides," kept up the memory of the saint.

Aided by indications of walls on the parched turf, the foundations of this chapel were explored in 1887-8, with the following results. The chapel was situated at the highest point of the island, in a field called Chamberlain's Hill; a beautiful site with a free view across the levels right to the Bristol Channel, and bounded on the other sides by the Polden ridge, the hills of Weary-all and Glastonbury, and the Mendips.

There are apparently the foundations of two chapels, one within the other. The newer chapel was quadrangular, 47½ feet by 22 feet on the outside, and 42½ feet by 17 feet on the

inside. At each corner there was an angular buttress, of which the foundations project four feet. Where complete, the walls were 5 feet deep, below the ground 4 feet being 3 feet thick; reduced then by a set-off to 2 feet 6 inches, and at the ground level again reduced by a freestone capping to 2 feet 3 inches. They were carefully and solidly built of the Lias stone of the district. On the northern sides the walls were complete up to the freestone capping, which was just covered by the turf; but the southern wall had unfortunately been removed almost down to the bottom stones of the foundation, and we were therefore unable to fix the site of the chapel door, which was probably on this side.

Both inside and also just outside the walls were found rather numerous fragments of square decorated tiles, and also plain black and white tiles, probably used as borders for the decorated ones. The tiles with patterns are similar in character to those of Cleeve Abbey, of Wells Cathedral, and to some found on the Tor Hill. Mr. Read of the British Museum informs me that tiles of this type are believed to be of English manufacture and of the 14th century. Within the building were also found fragments of other tiles of a heavier description and undecorated, thin stone used in roofing, ridge tiles and nails; also a few fragments of slate, said to be of Devonshire origin; a little lead and two or three small pieces of glass, a fragment of verd-antique marble, two silver coins of Edward I or II, and a Nuremberg token. (The objects found are deposited in the Glastonbury Museum.)

The bevelled freestone capping was in part formed of material from an earlier building, apparently of early Gothic architecture, and there were also included in the wall a few fragments of plain tile, and at least one fragment of a tile with an arabesque pattern. Both the freestone and the included tiles might be derived from a former building in the neighbourhood, of the 12th century; therefore it does not seem impossible that the quadrangular building now described

may be the erection of Abbot John of Glastonbury (*circa* 1275), who is related by Adam of Domerham to have repaired the chapels of Beckery and of Godney with good building, such as the nature of those places required.

Within these quadrangular walls, and entirely surrounded by them, we found the foundations of a much earlier building, with massive walls 3 feet in thickness. This building was divided apparently into two portions by a transverse wall, which may probably have formed the foundation of the chancel arch. The whole chapel was of very small size—the chancel inside would be 8 feet wide by 9 feet long (or, if we include the depth of the chancel arch, 12 feet long), and the nave would measure 11 feet wide by 14 feet long. Nothing remained to test the age of this tiny church, but the extremely massive walls would be compatible with Saxon work.

In excavating within the outer wall we found remains of skeletons, six in number, but in no case was there any enclosing coffin found, or any ornaments. Two of the skeletons rested on the foundations of the earlier building, so were of comparatively late date; one imperfect skeleton was within the chancel of the earlier building; two had evidently been disturbed in building the later walls, and the bones were mixed up with the loose top stones of the earlier building; whilst another, which lay to the west end of the chapel, within the outer walls, ended abruptly just at the line of the west end of the older building, as if the leg bones had been broken off in making this wall. If so, and this interment is older than the older chapel, it would carry us back to a very early date indeed; and would show us that this was a sacred Christian spot before the older chapel was built; for this and all the more perfect skeletons were carefully oriented with the head to the west.

About 20 feet to the north of the eastern end of the chapel, and at right angles to it, are the foundations of a quadrangular dwelling-house with a hearth at its eastern end.

This building had originally a small porch at the north-east corner, and at a later date a porch had also been built at the south-west corner. Nothing of special interest was found in connection with this building, which appeared, judging from the increased use of slate, to be of later date than the quadrangular chapel. Some blocks of freestone used in its construction had evidently formed part of the cap of an upright buttress to an earlier building.

There is a long and curious legend referring to this chapel in *John of Glastonbury*, relating how the Virgin appeared to King Arthur in the chapel of St. Mary Magdalene on Beckery, so giving it its earlier name. This legend is connected with the arms of the Abbey of Glastonbury, as the King is described as changing his arms at this time, adopting, in memory of the crystal cross presented him by the Blessed Mary, and in lieu of his former arms, a silver cross on a green field; and over the right arm of the cross he placed the likeness of the Virgin herself, holding her son in her arms.

There is much interest attaching to the connnection of Glastonbury with Ireland, and one would be glad to believe that the connection was historical rather than mythical. It is of course certain that the Glastonbury monks claimed St. Patrick as being their Abbot, and that he was buried here; that St. Benignus followed him and had one of the town churches dedicated to him. The chronicles relate how when his bones were brought back for burial they were brought up the river Brue, and before burial in the Abbey rested where his church was afterwards built. In this case the route taken must have been by way of Little Ireland from the ford to the chapel of St. Mary Magdalene, and so forward. Columba is also claimed, and St. Bridget, who seems to have been not only a miracle-working saint and a strong ruler, but also a loveable woman. One would much like to know if any Irish scholar has found any reference in the Irish chronicles to this connection with Glastonbury. Could it be proven, we should

have in this Irish history the earliest ecclesiastical — now legendary—history of Glastonbury; for all the charters are Saxon at earliest.

The legend of King Arthur seems to ignore Glastonbury itself. It was in a convent in Wirrall that he rested; it was to Beckery that he was divinely led. Is it then possible that, not in the Isle of Avalon itself, but on the humble Isle of Beckery, was the earlier Christian shrine, and that the later Saxon foundation but inherited the Irish traditions?

Without, however, pressing this point, it seems certainly probable that the tiny cell of a chapel disinterred for a short time and then covered again, which has been described, is older as a building, if not as a foundation, than any part of the present Abbey ruins.