

ARCHITECTURAL FRAGMENTS FROM GLASTONBURY ABBEY AT SOUTHTOWN,
WEST PENNARD

During the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group's survey of South Town Farm, West Pennard, in 1986, a number of carved stones had been observed which were thought to have been brought from Glastonbury Abbey as building material after the Dissolution.¹ Following an invitation from John Dallimore of the Group I visited the site in March 2009.²

The core of the farmhouse, listed Grade II*, is of presumed early 16th-century origin and has substantial later 16th and early 17th-century

additions and alterations which are seemingly built of Glastonbury Abbey stone; the south gable is set with a re-used block which features conventional foliage decoration in relief. A number of carved stone fragments were discovered some years ago during the demolition of a lean-to pigsty which formerly adjoined the house on its southern side. The decorative nature of some of these stones prompted their retention after the demolition and their subsequent incorporation in the farmhouse garden. Most of the architectural fragments consist of

undistinguished mouldings and large 13th-century chevron fragments which confirm a Glastonbury Abbey provenance.

One of the fragments however, is of considerable interest (Fig. 1). Of Douling limestone, it measures approximately 460mm high, 440mm wide and 220mm deep. The stone consists of a damaged right hand spandrel from a small doorway of late-medieval date, *c.* 1490–1520. One spandrel, presumably the inner face, is blank (Fig. 1A), while the outer face is filled with a bold, deeply carved design (Fig. 1B), consisting of a tun or beer barrel from which springs a tree bearing leaves and pendulous fruit. Although the tree cannot be identified with certainty, the shape of its fruit suggests that it represents a pear, or possibly a quince or fig. Despite damage and weathering the high quality of the carving is still evident and one undercut fruit stalk survives intact.

This barrel and tree motif is clearly a rebus (a punning symbol), possibly that used by Abbot Richard Beere (or Bere) of Glastonbury (1493–1524).³ The rebus became particularly popular amongst clerics – both secular and monastic – in the late Middle Ages, particularly in the context of building. While the fruiting plant growing from the barrel could be interpreted as a quince or fig,⁴ the symbolism of which would be appropriate for an abbot such as Beere, the pear seems more convincing.⁵ Often used as a symbol of the incarnation and of Christ's love for man, the pear tree also possessed Marian associations. In this

context however, it may have been intended primarily as a pun, 'bere' (beer) and 'pere' (pear)⁶ being tolerably close to be used as such and any other symbolism a secondary consideration.

A Glastonbury Abbey provenance for the spandrel is confirmed not just by the moulded stones found with it, but by comparison with another Douling limestone fragment on display in the abbey ruins (Fig. 2). This stone is a broken fireplace lintel, which, at the time of writing, stands on the wall bench which runs along the inside face of the nave's south aisle wall. Its decoration consists of a central motif, a barrel from which a fruiting tree springs, flanked on either side by scrolls which in all probability bore a painted inscription, perhaps Beere's personal motto. Unfortunately, the lintel's original context in the precinct is not known, but it presumably came from a conventual building. The carving on the lintel is so similar to the spandrel that it suggests that they may both have been carved for the same building project.

To summarise, it is highly probable that both the West Pennard spandrel and the fireplace lintel at Glastonbury Abbey came from a building or buildings erected in the monastic precinct at Glastonbury during Richard Beere's abbacy. Although impossible at this remove to state with any certainty with which structure or structures they were associated, it seems likely that both came from a domestic rather than religious context. Considering the design, iconography and the type of structure



Fig. 1 Douling stone spandrel from West Pennard: A blank inner face, B carved outer face



Fig. 2 Douling stone fireplace lintel on display at Glastonbury Abbey

from which both fragments originate, it is plausible to suggest that they may constitute the remains of one of Beere's building works recorded in John Leland's *Itinerary*.⁷ It is possible that they were part of the 'King's Lodging' which was erected by Beere in the period prior to Henry VII's visit to Glastonbury in 1497, or, alternatively, they may have come from the lodgings Beere built for the Clerks of Our Lady whose accommodation stood to the north of the *ecclesia major* and to the west of the north porch.

However, as the list of offices drawn up at the Dissolution and later printed by John Collinson in his *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset*⁸ graphically demonstrates, Glastonbury's cloistral complex and ancillary buildings were extensive and no doubt contained many minor improvements and building schemes upon which Beere left his mark aside from those recorded by Leland. Whatever the original location of the two stone fragments which bear Beere's presumed rebus, the South Town Farm spandrel is a valuable addition to the corpus of stonework from Glastonbury Abbey and its discovery highlights the possibility that other important fragments of abbey stone may yet be discovered in Glastonbury's hinterland.

Endnotes

- ¹ See *Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group. Survey: Higher Southtown Farmhouse, West Pennard*. JTD July 1986. Somerset Record Office: DD/V/WLR/14/4.
- ² I am grateful to John Dallimore for bringing the Glastonbury Abbey stones at West Pennard to my attention and to Mr and Mrs P.E. Creed for access to the spandrel and for permission to publish it here.
- ³ For an outline of Beere's abbacy, with particular reference to his building work at Glastonbury, see: Radford, Courtenay A.R., *Abbot Richard Beere (1493-1524)* 10–29, unpub manuscript, National Monuments Record Swindon, NMR GLA PUB/13.
- ⁴ While the quince has little symbolism attributed to it, the fig was associated with Mary and represented sweetness, meekness, chastity and virtue, as its leaf covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve. For a consideration of the fig tree and its symbolism, see De Cleene, M., and Lejeune, M-C (eds), 2003. *Compendium of Symbolic and Ritual Plants in Europe: Vol. 1: Trees and*

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Shrubs, Ghent, 249–66.

⁵ For a consideration of the rich symbolism of the pear, see De Cleene and Lejeune 2003, 529–41.

⁶ The Old English for pear is ‘pere’ and/or ‘peru’. See Brown, L., 1993. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* Vol. 2, Oxford, 2132.

⁷ Toulmin Smith, L. (ed.), 1907. *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543: Parts I to III*, London, 289, ‘Richard Bere abate buildid the new lodging by the great chamber

[cau]llid the kinges lodging [in] the gallery. Bere buildid [the] new lodgings [for] secular pre[stes, and] clerkes of our [Lady].’

⁸ Collinson, J., 1791, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset* Vol. II, Bath, 260–1. Unfortunately the original ‘list of offices’ which Collinson reproduces in his *History* has been lost and its origin is uncertain.

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