

The Holy Thorn of Glastonbury.

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G LASTONBURY stood in the summer of the year 1535, among the splendid Abbeys of England, in unrivalled magnificence. The successive labours of Abbots Selwood and Bere had raised piles of palatial buildings round the Abbey Church, and Whiting, who had shared in the pride of Wolsey's life, then reigned over the House with a princely liberality.

But the plague had begun; all Europe was aghast at the execution of Sir Thomas More and Bishop Fisher, and Cromwell had just issued his ominous commission to visit the religious houses of England.

Dr. Layton was the visitor sent into Somersetshire. The Abbot of Muchelney (Thomas Yve) had prepared for the visitation by sending¹ £100 to Cromwell; and the Visitors somehow did not reach Muchelney. Layton went to Bruton and by Maiden Bradley to Glastonbury,² where he was on the 23rd August, 1535. On the next day (St. Bartholomew's Day), he writes from St. Augustine's at Bristol to Cromwell. "By this bringer, my servant," he writes, "I send you Relicks: First, two flowers wrapped in white and black sarsnet, that on Christen Mass Even, *horâ ipsâ quâ Christus natus fuerat*, will spring and burgen and bare blossoms. *Quod expertum est*, saith the Prior of Mayden Bradley."

These must have been the flowers of the Holy Thorn at Glastonbury: and among the ruins of every thing else of that age, still flourish at Glastonbury, descendants of the Holy

(1). Letter, 15th June, 1535. Ellis' Orig. Letters, 3rd ser., vol. ii., p. 334.

(2). Abbot Whiting was not so quick as his brother Abbot of Muchelney, and only on the 26th August, three days *after* Layton's visitation, he sends to Cromwell a grant of the presentation to the living of West Monkton, near Taunton.

Thorn, whose two flowers seemed such a marvel to the Visitor, and which now, as then,

“Blossoms at Christmas, mindful of our Lord.”¹

In this letter of Layton is contained the first mention of the flowering of the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury at Christmas tide. The earliest notice of its coming into leaf at Christmas is in a *Life of Joseph of Arimathæa*, printed in 1520, by Richard Pyerson, a pupil of Caxton.

“The Hawthornes also, that groweth in *Werall*
 Do burge and bere grene leaves at Christmas
 As fresh as other yn May, when ye Nightingale
 Wrestes not her notes musycall as pure as glas ;
 Of al Wodes and Forestes she is ye chefe chauntress,
 In wynter to syngre if it were her nature,
 In *Werall* she might have a playne place
 On those Hawthornes to shewe her notes clere.”

The fact of the blossoming of the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury on Christmas Day is recorded again and again by successive writers. Gerald in his *Herball*, first published in 1596, says, “of the White Thorne, or Hawthorne tree, we have in the West of England one growing at a place called Glastonbury, which bringeth forth his flowers about Christmas by the report of divers of good credit who have seen the same ; but myself have not seen it, and therefore leave it to be better examined ;” and in dividing the classes of Hawthorne, he says, “The last [of the classes] groweth at Glastonbury Abbey, as it is credibly reported unto me.”

Camden, writing in Elizabeth’s reign (4th Ed. 1594) says, “I should be esteemed credulous in our age were I to mention the Cornel or Hawthorne [at Glastonbury], which buds on Christmas Day, as if it was May. Yet many credible persons, if we may believe their testimony, vouch these things for truth.”

In the first edition of Dugdale’s *Monasticon* there is a view of Glastonbury from Compton, in which is a representation of

(1). Tennyson, *The Holy Grail*, p. 36.

a tree on the slope of Wearyall Hill, with a note marking this tree as *Sacra Spina*. This was not published until 1655, but the engraving is by Hollar, and the drawing was probably made before 1652, if the engraving were after his return to England.

Bishop Goodman, of Gloucester, saw the Holy Thorn at Glastonbury, and writing in 1653 says, "The White Thorn at Glastonbury which did usually blossome on Christmas Day, was cut down: yet I did not heare that the party was punished."

This refers to the fact that just before he wrote during the Civil Wars, some fanatic cut down the old Thorn that grew at Wearyall Hill. The people of Glastonbury delighted to tell that the wretch was miserably wounded in carrying on the work of destruction by an avenging splint or chip from the Holy Tree. The Bishop goes on to say, and he is addressing the Lord General, Oliver Cromwell, "Certainly the Thorne was very extraordinary: for at my being there, I did consider the place, how it was sheltered: I did consider the soile, and all other circumstances, and yet I could find no natural cause."

Dr. Montague, Bishop of Bath and Wells from 1608 to 1618, presented the Christmas blossoms of the Holy Thorn to Queen Anne, wife of James the First.

Sir Charles Sedley, among the beaux and wits of Charles the Second's Court, had heard of the wondrous Thorn, and sings—

Cornelia's charms inspire my lays,
Who, fair in nature's scorn,
Blooms in the winter of her days,
Like Glastonbury Thorn.

Dr. Plot, who wrote in 1677, after the institution of the Royal Society, says, "And hither, I think, may be referred the Glastonbury Thorn, in the Park and Gardens of the Right Honourable the Lord Norreys, that certainly buds, and sometimes blossoms at or near Christmas. Whether this be a plant originally from Oxfordshire, or brought hither from beyond

seas, or a graft of the old stock of Glastonbury, is not easy to determine. But this much may be said on behalf of Oxfordshire, that there is one of them here so old, that it is now dying, and that if ever it were transplanted hither, it is far beyond the memory of men. As for the excellent and peculiar quality that it hath, some take it as a miraculous remembrance of the birth of Christ, first planted by Joseph of Arimathæa; others only esteem it as an earlier sort of Thorn peculiar to England; and others again are of opinion that it is originally a forreigner of some of the southern countries, and so hardy a plant, that it still keeps its time of blossoming (which in its own country might be about the end of December), though removed hither into a much colder climate. Whether of these is most probable, I shall not determine, but leave every reader best to please himself; and whatever more can be said of it, I shall reserve till I come into Somersetshire, where it is in greatest reputation and has been most observed."

Ashmole, writing about the same time, says, "I never heard nor read that any ancient author did mention this Thorne, which certainly they had not omitted, if there had been any such thing; and by the growthe of the Thorne, surely I do judge the age thereof to be much about the time of the Dissolution." Ashmole must be speaking of the stump of the Sacred Tree at Wearyall Hill, or perhaps only of some other of the plants which then flourished at Glastonbury.

A few years later, Aubrey, the Antiquarian, in his *Notes on Wiltshire*, says, "In Parham Parke, in Suffolke (Mr. Bontele's), is a pretty antient Thorne that blows like that at Glastonbury: the people flock thither to see it on Christmas Day.

"Dr. Ezreel Tony sayd that about Rummy Marsh (Romney) in Kent, are Thornes, naturally like that at Glastonbury. The soldiers did cut down that neer Glastonbury: the stump remains."

Ashmole tells us that "upon St. Stephen's Day, 1672,

Mr. Stainsby, an ingenious enquirer after things worthy of memorial, brought me a branch of Hawthorne, having greene leaves, fair buds and full flowers, all thick and very beautiful, and (which is more notable) many of the hawes or berries on it red and plump, some of which branch is yet preserved in the plant box of my collection [the origin of his Ashmolean Museum]. This he had from a Hawthorne tree, now growing at Sir Lancelot Lake's House, near Edgware, in Middlesex: concerning which, falling after into the company of the said Knight (7th July, 1673), he told me that the tree from which this branch was plucked, grew from a slip taken from the Glastonbury Thorn, about 60 years since, which is now a big tree, and flowers every winter about Christmas."

Down to this time, the only suggestion we find in any author, as to the supernatural character of the plant, is its flowering at Christmas tide; but the real tradition, dear to Somerset men, went far beyond this. What they delighted to say was that Joseph of Arimathæa stuck his walking staff¹ into the ground, when he rested after his ascent of Wearyall Hill, and that it grew. A Somersetshire ballad has the verse—

The staff het budded and het grew,
And at Christmas bloom'd the whole da droo,
And still het blooms at Christmas bright,
But best tha say at dork midnight.

Eyston, who wrote the *Little Monument of Glastonbury* in 1715, and was an enthusiastic Catholic and devoted Jacobite, records the legend: "I was told by the Innkeeper [at Glastonbury], where I set up my Horses, who rents a considerable part of the enclosure of the late dissolved abbey, that St. Joseph of Arimathæa stuck on Wearyall Hill his staff, being

(1). In the *Acta Sanctorum*, March 17, the day of St. Joseph of Arimathæa, there is a careful account of the traditions concerning him, but no allusion to the legend of the budding staff, nor is there in Watson, or Arnold or Catgrove. In the list of Saints with emblems, published by Husenbeth, are the emblems given to St. Joseph—

"A box of ointment and a budding staff,"

but no authority is referred to for these emblems.

a Dry Hawthorn Stick, which grew and continually budded and blew upon Christmas Day."

"Whether," adds Mr. Eyston, in a glow of credulity, "it sprung from St. Joseph of Arimathæa's Dry Staff, stuck by him in the ground, when he rested there, I cannot find, but beyond all question, it sprung miraculously."

Eyston says there were then divers trees taken from the old tree by grafting and inoculation. He specifies the localities in the town of Glastonbury, and adding that there was a person about Glastonbury who had a nursery of them, and sold them for a crown a piece, or as he could get.

On the introduction of the new style in 1753, the Somerset people seem to have expected another miracle, the *London Evening Post* records as follows: "Glastonbury. A vast concourse of people attended the noted Thorne on Christmas Day, new style, but to their great disappointment, there was no appearance of its blowing, which made them watch it narrowly the 5th of January, the Christmas Day, old style, when it blew as usual."

Botanists began now to look into the specific peculiarity of the plant. Ray had said that he thought it differed but accidentally from the common Hawthorn. Martyn said that it was a distinct variety, flowering usually in January or February, sometimes earlier; so that it may happen to be in flower on Christmas Day. Withering first gave it a distinct name, and distinguishes it as *Cratægus Oxyacantha Præcox*. He wrote about the beginning of the present century. He says, "It blossoms twice a year. The winter blossoms, which are about the size of a sixpence, appear about Christmas, but sometimes sooner. These produce no fruit. The berries contain only one seed, and there seemed only to have been one pistil; but it was late in the season when I examined it (Oct., 1792). I was informed that the berries, when sown, produce plants, no-wise differing from the common Hawthorn."

The industrious and accurate Loudon dwells with particular

pleasure upon the Holy Thorn. "The most remarkable legend," he says, "connected with the Hawthorn, is that of the Glastonbury Thorn;" and his version makes it Christmas Day when S. Joseph arrived at the spot where he had been commanded to build a church in honour of the Virgin Mary; and finding that the natives did not appear inclined to believe in his mission, he prayed to God to perform a miracle to convince them. His prayer was at once answered; and on striking his staff into the ground, it immediately shot forth into leaves and blossoms.

There are now specimens of the Thorn in numerous places, both in Glastonbury and the neighbourhood, as they have during the last fifty years been propagated freely, and sold by the Glastonbury nurserymen.

The blossoms of the Christmas shoots are for the most part much smaller than the May ones, and do not produce any haws. The haws are of a very deep red colour, almost black; but plants grown from the haws do not retain the characteristics of the parent stem, and the Glastonbury gardeners propagate the Glastonbury Thorn by budding and grafting.

In an old number of the *Gardeners' Weekly Magazine*, it is stated that "the flowers of the venerable tree were long a favourite sign for hostelry, particularly in the vicinity of Glastonbury. Boson's Inn in St. Lawrence's Lane, London, is a corruption of "Blossoms' Inn." "Blossoms' Inn," it would seem, means an Inn having the sign of the holy blossoms of the Glastonbury Thorn.

The question arises, what is the origin of this plant? Is it a variety of the Hawthorn, or is it only an individual with peculiarities.

Miller, in his *Gardeners' Dictionary*, published in 1759, says the Glastonbury Thorn is a variety of the Hawthorn, and that it can be no other way propagated than by grafting or budding upon the other roots; and recommends it being budded on the White Beam.

Boswell's *Antiquities of England and Wales*, as quoted in the *Every Day Book* for 1826, says: "There are several of this species of Thorn in England, raised from haws sent from the East, where it is common. One of our countrymen, the ingenious Mr. Millar, raised many plants from haws brought from Aleppo, and all proved to be what are called Glastonbury Thorns. This exotic, or Eastern Thorn, differs from our common Hawthorn in putting out its leaves very early in spring, and flowering twice a year; for in mild seasons it often flowers in November or December, and again at the usual time of the common sort."

It must be remembered that the position of the Holy Thorn on the slope of the south side of Wearyall Hill, was just adjoining the fields called the Vineyards, which are noted in Abbot Bere's terrier.

Gough, in his additions to Camden's *Britannia*, in 1759, says: "It is common in the Holy Land, and flowers at the same time."

The Morocco Thorn, a native of Morocco, was introduced into England in 1812. It produces its leaves very early in the season; in mild seasons even in January; and there is a Siberian Thorn, introduced about the same year, that begins to put forth its leaves in January: but neither of these has the peculiarity of the Glastonbury Thorn—that of flowering twice; once early, and producing flowers which form no fruit, and then again at the same time as other thorns, and which later flowers produce fruit.

The habit of the plant would induce the belief that it is a variety, and comes from some region where the transition from winter to summer was more abrupt than in Palestine.

The Siberian Crab affords an illustration. The winters of Siberia are intensely cold, the change to summer is sudden, and the heat equally violent. Our own change of temperature is much slower, and more irregular. Thus, when our native Crab scarcely shows signs of life, the Siberian variety puts

forth it leaves, blossoms, and bears fruit, early, even in an unfavourable season.

The circumstance of the early flowers of the Glastonbury Thorn not coming to maturity by producing seed is easily explained by the want of that heat which would in its own climate follow the first warmth of the opening year.

A writer in *Notes and Queries* quotes a botanical writer as saying that the Glastonbury Thorn is a native of Siberia, a variety of the *Oxyacantha Strathyphylus*.

Other authorities say that the Glastonbury Thorn differs only from the ordinary Hawthorn in its early flowering; and that this is a peculiarity of the individual—but not of this individual alone, for early flowering Hawthorns are not unknown—just as early flowering chestnuts and other plants are known; and that consequently there is no native country for the Glastonbury Thorn, except where it now grows.

It is remarkable if it is only an individual, and not a variety, that for three hundred and fifty years the peculiarity of the tree has been preserved in its progeny.

I own my opinion would incline to the belief that it is a variety belonging to a far different climate from ours, and that some pilgrim from the Holy Land brought from thence a plant, which, even in Palestine, was distinguished by its early bloom, and there acquired a character of sanctity from its flowering

Even in winter wild,
While the Heaven-born Child,
All meanly wrapped, in the rude manger lay.
