

THE STONE INSETS OF SOMERSET CHURCHES

BY

D. T. DONOVAN, B.SC., PH.D.,
Professor of Geology, Hull University

AND

R. D. REID, B.SC., D.PHIL.

After the Norman period church builders in this country often sought to add interest to their work by the use of polychromatic stone. The process however seems to have gone out of fashion from about 1330 until the Gothic Revival many centuries later. In Somerset we have a good opportunity of studying this decorative use of stone. On to the plain ashlar base of Doulling or some similar limestone, insets were made of Blue Lias or Purbeck Marble. Such work was nearly always confined to shafting. Either the shaft itself or the capital was made of this different coloured stone to provide contrast and interest. Moreover this use, and particularly the change from Lias to Purbeck, can provide evidence for dating purposes.

Examination of the examples in the later part of this paper shows that in Somerset and indeed in the west country generally insets of Lias began in the 9th decade of the 12th century and ceased about 1300. Thereafter Purbeck Marble from the south coast was used until about 1330, when the whole process was given up except for tombs. These dates are, of course, subject to local variations, and since the introduction of the marble was almost certainly due to improved transport facilities we may expect to find it somewhat delayed in remoter districts far from the sea. This factor however is not quite so apparent as might be expected. Dr. Alfred Fryer has made a detailed study of stone effigies in the county as reported in these *Proceedings*.¹ He finds only two of Blue Lias — at Compton Martin and Paulton. He adds that there are “few” of Purbeck, and quotes only two — at East Coker, and a double monument now in the churchyard of Charlton Mackrell. He suggests that the effigies made from Purbeck were conveyed by barge as far as possible up the River Stour and thence by waggon. Another possible but less likely way would have been up the River Axe to the Port of Rackley near Axbridge. This latter route may well have been used for alabaster from Nottinghamshire, which, however, is never found as an inset. Purbeck Marble is very restricted in its occurrence, the workable beds being confined to an outcrop extending a few miles

¹ Vol. 64, p. 33.

westward from Swanage in Dorset. An almost identical stone is found in the Weald of Kent and Sussex in rocks of slightly younger geological age, and is known as Bethersden, Petworth, or Sussex Marble. This was used in the home counties in medieval times, but is unlikely to have been transported to the west country. All the marble that we record is doubtless true Purbeck.

The Blue Lias Limestones have a more extensive outcrop. They stretch from the south coast, west of Lyme Regis, into South Somerset, then eastwards to Somerton and north-west again into the Polden Hills and out to the coast at Watchet. They are absent across the Mendips, but reappear at Keynsham, in the Bristol Avon valley, and continue northwards at the foot of the Cotswolds into the Vale of Evesham and thence to Warwickshire.

Purbeck Marble and Blue Lias Limestone are fairly easy to distinguish, although the writers themselves have on occasion had difficulty in the poor light and dusty conditions which prevail in some of our churches. It is helpful to wet the stone, and it will then be seen that the marble contains closely-packed fossil shells about half an inch long, which show up white against a darker background. The shells are those of a freshwater snail *Viviparus*. There are two varieties of marble, one greenish-grey and the other reddish-grey in colour. In Somerset the green variety is more common than the red. Blue Lias Limestone has a neutral or slightly blue-grey colour, never reddish or greenish, and does not contain the fossil snails. It usually has darker granules with an occasional fossil shell.

Both Blue Lias Limestone and Purbeck Marble are hard limestones. In contrast to the softer freestones, which can be sawn and chiselled with iron tools with relative ease, they could not be sawn, and must have been slow to work with medieval tools. The final smooth finish was presumably got by abrasion and polishing. Purbeck Marble working was carried out by a special guild of "Marblers"² centred on Corfe Castle of which some details are known. So far as we are aware, no comparable information has been published on the Blue Lias workers, although there must have been a specialised trade in producing architectural details in this material from about 1175 to 1300. The great extent of the Lias outcrop, as compared with the Purbeck, may have prevented the trade becoming centralised and organised in the same way as it was at Corfe Castle.

² *S.D.N.Q.* 9, 329; 10, 173, 249; 19, 207.

It would seem that the Lias and Purbeck workers must have used some sort of lathe machine since they could produce long and accurate pieces of circular shafting.

Also, there was an extensive production of plain circular but multi-moulded capitals, rings and "water-holding" bases so popular in the 13th century, together with string courses and horizontal moulding. On the other hand free carving of foliage and figures, in which the stone might easily fracture, is not found except in the Chapter House at Wells. Although some consideration of the introduction of these stones for making tombs may be useful for dating purposes in the earlier medieval period, they were so extensively adopted later on that confusion results. There is hardly a church in the county without its ledger stones of Blue Lias.

The Elder Lady Chapel at Bristol Cathedral shows extensive use of detached shafts, which with their bases and capitals, are of Blue Lias. The capitals have the usual plain circular moulding, supporting blank arcading with trefoil arches. According to some authorities this chapel is attributed to Abbot David (1215-34), although Godwin assigned it to Abbot John (1186-1215). A detailed description of the masonry in the chapel is given by Pevsner,³ but it is necessary to read "Blue Lias" for "Purbeck" throughout. The vaulting shafts on the walls of the choir aisles (6 on each side) were originally of Blue Lias; four remain, namely the three eastern ones in the north aisle and the westernmost in the south. The others are replacements. These inset shafts all go up to window cill level only, and are continued in freestone. This work may have been designed "as early as 1298" and completed by about 1330 (Pevsner). If the outer walls were built as late as this, the use of Blue Lias is rather exceptional. The Eastern Lady Chapel at Bristol has vaulting shafts of Purbeck Marble so that the work was probably done well on in the 14th century. The glass is dated at 1320. At St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, the inner part of the North Porch (c. 1180) has blank arcading along the inside east and west walls with detached monolithic shafts and stiff-leaf capitals. The original outer archway, which now leads into the later porch of 1290, has a cluster of six (originally seven) detached similar shafts on either side. Some of these shafts are of Blue Lias and

³ *The Buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol*. (Penguin Books, 1958) pp. 317-4.

others of a dark grey rock, probably Carboniferous Limestone, and are presumably 19th century replacements.

A few instances of the use of Blue Lias outside Somerset and Bristol may be noted. Exeter Cathedral presents important evidence. In the Chapter House, built in the time of Bishop Bruere (1224-44), the shafts of the blank wall arcading are of Blue Lias, as are their bases, stiff-leaf capitals and abaci. Blue Lias carved capitals are exceptional, although they are also found in the Chapter House at Wells.

For the rebuilding of the nave at Exeter, *c.* 1275, Purbeck Marble was used, in this case structurally for the main piers. This was thirty years earlier than the use at Wells which is perhaps explained by the good water transport available at Exeter. Several occurrences of Lias have been noted in Early English work in South Gloucestershire and North-West Wiltshire. They are: Almondsbury (Glos.) where the detached shafts in the chancel, now painted pale grey, are almost certainly of Lias; Westerleigh (Glos.) has Blue Lias shafts flanking the North door; Luckington (Wilts.) has Lias shafts to the inner arches of two and three light Early English windows; Sherston (Wilts.) has Blue Lias shafts to the east window of the chancel and north window of the north transept. At Gloucester Cathedral the nave-vault, completed by 1242, is supported by rather puny shafts in the spandrels between the Norman arches. From the ground these shafts appear to be of Blue Lias, with freestone capitals, and abaci again of a darker stone. We have not been close enough to make positive identifications. At Pershore (Worcs.) the arch which formerly led to the Lady Chapel and now leads to the Sanctuary, which was built in 1846, is flanked by monolithic detached shafts which are of Blue Lias except for the westernmost on the north side. The arch is *c.* 1200. There are also detached Lias shafts in the Sanctuary itself, but it is not clear whether these are medieval; more probably they were inserted during the work of 1846 to match those of the main arch.

These instances show that along a tract extending from Exeter to Pershore it was common practice in the earlier part of the 13th century to employ Blue Lias limestone for insets, especially for detached shafts and their bases and abaci.

An early use of Purbeck Marble in England would appear to be for the building of a chapel at Windsor for Henry III in 1242. The Close Rolls have *Copium marmoris . . . ad claustrum regis*.⁴

It may well be that the following list of insets found in Somerset is incomplete since it involves the investigation of some 400 churches; but the writers would be glad to hear of others, so that if necessary a supplementary list may be published. As explained, it is not possible to investigate tombstones of the post-Reformation period.

BECKINGTON. Font 13c. octagonal on circular pedestal surrounded by 8 shafts. The whole of Purbeck.

BUCKLAND DINHAM. Shafts to windows in Lady Chapel south of chancel *c.* 1250, and two demi figures on floor of north transept. All of Blue Lias.

CHARLTON MACKRELL. Two figures, carved in low relief under a tree in east part of churchyard, are in a very bad state but seem to be of Purbeck Marble. They are attributed to William Lyte the first Lyte of Lyte's Cary, late 13c., and were formerly in the church. Fryer says they are of Purbeck and speculates that they may have been brought to Bridgwater, thence by canal to Ilminster, and afterwards by road.

CHELVEY. There is an incised memorial slab to a knight in the south chapel, which can be dated from the armour at 1260-80. It competes as regards an early date, therefore, with the better known incised slab to Bishop Bytton II at Wells. Pevsner says the Chelvey stone is Purbeck Marble. Although the stone may be difficult to identify, we cannot agree with this classification. It is dark crystalline limestone and has not so far been identified with any local stone.

CLAPTON-IN-GORDANO. There is a remarkable reredos at the High Altar which has been variously designated (i) Victorian Gothic. (ii) Genuine Perpendicular. (iii) Laudian Revival. The first attribution is unlikely since it is described when the Somerset Archaeological Society visited the church in 1861 with no mention of recent erection. We are more concerned however with some mid-13th c. stones which have been re-used in the structure. These consist of a pair of Lias shafts standing on inverted freestone capitals of the same date. The old capital thus does duty as a base and has a circular abacus. New capitals of late perpendicular date have been provided and on the

⁴ *S.D.N.Q.* 15, 94.

tops of these there now stand a pair of old candlesticks. Otherwise it might have appeared that the shafts were erected to hold statues. The difficulty of dating is increased by the fact that some experts say that the candlesticks are medieval and others Laudian.

CLEEVE ABBEY. This Cistercian house was founded in 1186.⁵ Building proceeded for the next century at the same time as the great churches were rising at Wells and Glastonbury. We may therefore expect to find evidence of the use of Blue Lias even though the church itself was almost entirely destroyed. The Fraternity or Day Room of the monks still retains two fine windows at the east end. These consist of two lancets each with quatrefoil above, a very plain form of plate tracery which must belong to the middle decades of the 13th century. Inside there are shafts with abaci and bases of Blue Lias. More or less the same arrangement is found at the entrance to the Chapter House from the east cloister walk (Pl. III). There are also numerous pieces of broken material of this kind, together with the bowl of the lavabo in the near-by sacristy. After this, building work seems to have ceased, at least outside the church, until the early 16th century, by which time the use of insets had gone right out of fashion. The Lias was probably quarried locally (hence the name of nearby Blue Anchor) and in spite of easy transport, Purbeck Marble was never used.

COMPTON BISHOP. At the south inner doorway the shafts and abaci are of Blue Lias and the same holds for the outer doorway, with the addition of bases. The centre shaft to the piscina in the chancel is Lias. All this work would appear to be about 1250.

COMPTON MARTIN. There is a Blue Lias effigy in the north aisle described by Fryer and dated about 1290.⁵

CONGRESBURY. There is a Victorian restoration of shafts to the columns of the south nave arcade. This seems to be a variety of Lias and is certainly not Purbeck as usually described. Medieval bases to the shafts remain. They are similar to the rather doubtful stone found at Chelvey not far away. The font is circular with cable moulding and presumably Norman.⁶ It is supported by a freestone column and four Lias shafts.

⁵ *Proc. S.A.S.* Vol. 64, p. 40.

⁶ F. Bond, *Fonts and Font Covers*, p. 147.

CREWKERNE. Font. This is massive and square with six semi-circular blank arches on each face. As with so many early plain fonts it is difficult to date accurately, but would probably be described as Norman. The whole is of Purbeck, and, if the date is correct, is a remarkably early example, even in the south of the county, of this stone.

CURRY RIVEL. In the north wall of the north choir chapel of this church is a remarkable arcade of six arches, apparently made for tombs. Prebendary Saunders⁷ has dealt with their story in detail, but does not mention the stone. The first four of the recesses counting from the west he considers to be tombs of the 13th century, the remaining two on the east, of the 14th century, being "altar furniture", one probably an Easter Sepulchre. In the largest recess of the four, he found a coffin of Ham Hill stone containing the bones of a female. Here, he considers, was buried the foundress of this interesting chapel, the last of the Revel family, Sabina, wife of Henry de Urtiaco. She died in 1254. Each of this series of four recesses, which differ in size, is surmounted by a moulded trifoliated arch below the straight gable so often found in the mid-13th century work especially on the West Front of Wells Cathedral. These gables are built of Blue Lias, and the plain surface between arch and straight edge is covered with a fine incised foliated design. The work may be compared in date with that on the tomb of Bishop Bytton II at Wells who died in 1274. The Blue Lias lends itself to this type of low relief work as witness the innumerable ledger stones of the 18th and 19th centuries. The stone is found close at hand, and the date is well before the time (about 1300) when Marble was imported into the district. Curiously, the shafts of these tombs are of Blue Lias but the pinnacles inserted between them are of White Lias.

DOULTING. This church has suffered cruelly from wholesale Victorian restoration, otherwise the nave would have provided us with interesting Early English work. Outside, at the south-western corner is a large pile of remains of the original work. These contain a long shaft of Blue Lias supporting a capital in Doulting Stone very similar to those in the older part of the nave of Wells Cathedral. This shows an early use of the stone, perhaps about 1200.

⁷ *Proc. S.A.S.* Vol. 61, p. 33 ff.



WELLS CATHEDRAL CHAPTER HOUSE
Capitals and Shafts of Blue Lias.



ENTRANCE TO CHAPTER HOUSE, CLEEVE ABBEY
Shafts of Blue Lias.

DUNSTER. The shafts of the double piscina and of the sedilia of the 13th century are of Blue Lias. They may be new, but if so, are accurate replacements of the original Blue Lias. All too frequently these insets were "improved" by the insertion of marble during restorations.

EAST COKER. There is an "Effigy of a Lady" in the north aisle of the nave. Fryer dates this at 1290-1300,⁸ and says rightly that it is of Purbeck Marble.

GLASTONBURY ABBEY. After Wells Cathedral, the ruins of Glastonbury provide the most considerable example of Early English building in Somerset.

An examination of the inset stone used there was on the whole disappointing and puzzling. The earliest building now standing is St. Joseph's Chapel, erected on the site of the ancient church after the great fire of 1184. It is clear that every effort was made to build as sumptuous a chapel as possible in this important position. In many respects it would *appear* to date from well before 1186, but this may be due to a striving after the antique. Be that as it may, copious use had been made, inside and out, of insets in the form of ringed shafts along the blank arcades of the lower portion.

All the shafts have been torn away but much of coloured stone remains where it was bonded into the walls. It is all Blue Lias, and this seems to show that the importation of Purbeck Marble had not begun by 1186; otherwise it would have been used for this very sacred building.

In the Kitchen at the Abbey and to a lesser extent in the Museum at the Abbey gate there are preserved numerous specimens of "inset" stone. The places where some of these were found have been recorded and others not. All these specimens were of Blue Lias with the exception of two: (i) A piece of Purbeck Marble, one foot high, standing on a base of an irregular octagon. This is impossible to date and may be part of a late monument. (ii) An Early English capital apparently *c.* 1200 carved in the marble. If this specimen is genuine it is much earlier than any other found in Somerset. There is no record as to where it was found and it may be a copy of earlier work. From pieces found during the excavations of 1962, it is evident that the Abbot's Hall was ornamented with shafts and rings

⁸ *Proc. S.A.S.* Vol. 64, p. 34.

of Blue Lias, and this would indicate a date not later than 1300 for that building, or a predecessor.

Preserved in the Abbot's Kitchen on the east wall, is the life-size sepulchral slab to an abbot. This, found in the 18th century, is generally assigned to Abbot Vigor, d. 1223.⁹ Such a date is indicated by the canopy, but hardly by the remarkable fact that the vestments include both dalmatic and tunicle. The whole block is of Blue Lias, which may confirm the early date.

HEMINGTON. There is a beautiful Early English aisle to this remote church. The shafts to the windows and those to the pier between south aisle and chancel are of 13th century Blue Lias.

PAULTON. There is a much mutilated effigy of a knight at the west end of the church dating *c.* 1290, and apparently of Blue Lias, possibly, like that at Compton Martin, of stone from the northern part of the county not far away.

PORTBURY. There are two fine sedilia complexes in this church, in the chancel and in the south aisle chapel. Both consist of the three seats and a single piscina. They seem to be of the same date, with trefoiled arches of the 13th century although that in the chancel is rather more elaborate with a filleted roll. The shafts are all of Blue Lias on freestone bases which seem to be a transition between the water-holding type and that adopted later in the century. An interesting exercise in dating is possible. The single piscina indicates some time after 1310 or before 1250. After 1310 we would expect to find Purbeck Marble shafting. Also the style is otherwise well developed Early English and we must put the date as late as the piscina allows, *i.e.* about 1250. It should be added that the shafts in the chancel are in a strangely good condition which may indicate an intelligent restoration. Those in the aisle seem to be original.

SOUTH BARROW. The font stem and the square slab on which it stands are of one piece of Purbeck Marble, probably of the 13th century. This and the early font at Crewkerne seem to show that Purbeck was imported into the southern parts of the county for use in fonts long before it was adopted for more general building purposes. We also examined a slab of Purbeck 2 ft. 3 ins. \times 5 ft. 3 ins. let into the tiled floor beneath the High Altar. It is devoid of marks, crosses or other indications that it was the *mensa* of an altar.

⁹ By Fryer in *Proc. S.A.S.* Vol. 66, p. 35.

TICKENHAM. There are Blue Lias shafts to the outer doorway of the south porch which appears to be well developed work of the 13th century. The four shafts to the font *c.* 1300 are also of this stone.

WEDMORE. There are Blue Lias shafts to the inner south door, which all authorities agree is contemporary with the central portion of the nave of Wells Cathedral. Such shafting was not used at Wells in order to conform with the earlier building of 1180.

WELLS CATHEDRAL. In this great Early English building we have ample scope for a study of the use of insets in Somerset. The writers have already published a fairly detailed account¹⁰ of which the following is a brief summary. No insets at all are found in the building of the earliest existing cruciform church of *c.* 1180, since at that date they had not become fashionable. A few years later at Glastonbury they were adopted, and this fact may be taken as strong evidence that the church at Wells is the older. The building of the nave however proceeded from east to west and was not completed by Bishop Jocelin at the west end until 1239. It would not have been possible to use Lias insets for one portion of the nave and not the other without giving it a very patchy appearance. At the west end, however, insets of Blue Lias were copiously used for the interior and exterior of the front, as well as in the tower chapels. Subsequent restoration has substituted Kilkenny Marble and Draycott Conglomerate for much of this stone. The next work to be undertaken, later in the century, was the Chapter House Staircase and entrance to the Undercroft. Here again we find Blue Lias. In the Chapter House itself, generally attributed to Bishop Marcia who died in 1302, we have a most interesting state of affairs. There is a riotous use of the Lias at the entrance and all round the interior walls (Pl. II). As well as the shafts and abaci, the capitals themselves are carved in the stone with the upright fern-like design of the period. This is found at Exeter, but only here in Somerset. At the entrance, the jambs of the doorways are nearly monoliths of Lias with attached shafting.

For the central column of the House, presumably built later, we find an abrupt change. It rests on four slabs of Purbeck Marble. The seat is of this material and so is the solid base which really springs from bench level. This is in perfect condition; it is of one

¹⁰ *Report of the Friends of Wells Cathedral, 1961.*

piece and so cannot have been inserted. The shafts are of marble also. Clearly here is the "transition", *c.* 1300.

The dating of the east end of the cathedral presents a very complex problem. We cannot pretend that our findings have solved it, although we hope they may have added some evidence. It is usually assumed that the Lady Chapel was next built, at some distance from the old choir. There has been controversy as to whether the date was 1326 for which there is documentary evidence, or *c.* 1300. There are here no insets at all, and we can only assume that they had gone out of fashion since the building of the Chapter House. We should have preferred a date considerably later than 1326, but feel that 1300 is quite impossible.

The prolongation of the choir to meet the new Lady Chapel, if that indeed was the order of building, together with the completion of the ancillary chapels must have followed almost at once, if we are to accept the evidence of a document recording the completion of Corpus Christi Chapel (north choir transept) in 1330. Again supposing this to have been the order of events, we find a reversion in the Choir and Retro-Choir to the use of Purbeck insets. We can only record the findings, leaving the conclusions to await further evidence. That of the insets alone points strongly to normal building from west to east, i.e., from the joint of the 12th century work of the choir to the end of the Lady Chapel. Starting from this joint we find vaulting shafts of Purbeck Marble in the choir itself but not in the aisles. The two piers behind the High Altar are of particular interest. They are of solid Blue Lias built in the usual horizontal courses, but the shafting is of Purbeck Marble. Again the first pair of columns going eastwards in the Retro-Choir are of Blue Lias set on a Purbeck Base with Purbeck shafts. The second pair, with their shafts are of solid Purbeck Marble. These are so arranged that they take the weight above the roof of the great flying buttresses supporting the High Vault from the east. It is an excellent testimonial to the quality of this stone. The next pair of columns, really forming the entrance to the Lady Chapel, are of Douling freestone with detached Purbeck shafting. Apart from tombs, no more of this stone was used in the Cathedral. It had a short life, from about 1300 to 1330.

Light may be thrown upon the dating of other tombs in the north Transept of the Cathedral. That of Bishop Marcia is no doubt of 1302, but next to it is a large erection, now admittedly wrongly

labelled in the last century to Lady de Lisle. Sir William St. John Hope suggested that this was really the displaced canopy to an altar for Bishop Marcia. Strong objections to this conclusion have since arisen on grounds which space forbids us to discuss here. As reinforcing these objections, we find that the base of Marcia's tomb is of Blue Lias, whereas the 'canopy' is of Purbeck Marble — a fact which suggests a later date for the latter.

WRAXALL. The outer doorway of the south porch has shafting of Blue Lias and there seem to be fragments of a former building in the same stone in the churchyard wall north east of the chancel, *c.* 1300.