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BILLESLEY
WARWICKSHIRE



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ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

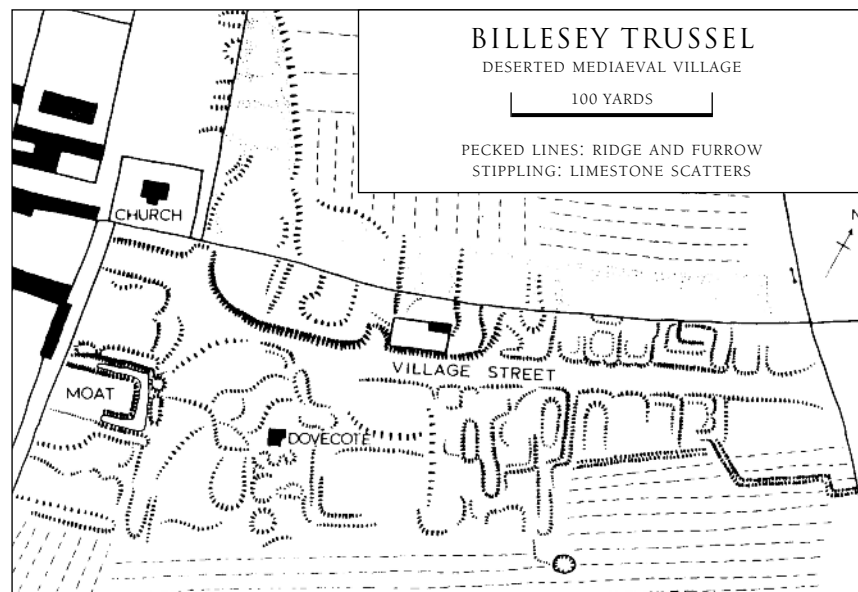
BILLESLEY, WARWICKSHIRE

by DR RICHARD K. MORRIS

BILLESLEY IS A SMALL HAMLET to the west of Stratford-upon-Avon, just off the main A422 road to Alcester. The place name means simply the 'leah' (wood, or more likely open place within a wood) belonging to a person called Bil or Bill. The first impression of All Saints' is a Georgian-looking country church of considerable rustic charm, with its rubble walls of local lias stone and mellow red-tiled roofs. However the classical features mask an interesting mediaeval church about which much more is known as a result of recording and excavation undertaken since 1980. The church is also the most tangible reminder of the deserted mediaeval village of Billesley Trussell, of which traces may still be discerned in the earthworks in the field south of the churchyard.

HISTORY

There was an Anglo-Saxon settlement at Billesley and the Domesday Book indicates a substantial population here by 1086. One of the carvings in the church is late Anglo-Saxon in style, and some of the lower parts of the walls may go back to the 11th century. The fabric of the church provides evidence for a substantial remodelling towards the middle of the 12th century, including a new north aisle and a portal with a fine carved tympanum. The village continued to flourish until at least the mid-1330s, and this prosperity was reflected in further improvements to the church such as new Gothic windows. However the visitations of the Black Death (especially in 1361) and subsequent emparking for sheep



farming had caused a dramatic change of fortune by 1428, when only four persons were recorded still living in the village. As a result the north aisle was eventually demolished, and this is presumably what Dugdale referred to when he stated, 'there is no more left than scarce half the church that anciently stood there'. No parish registers for Billesley are known to survive before 1816, but one tradition has it that William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway here; and his grand-daughter, Elizabeth Nash, married John Barnard at Billesley in the 1640s. Later in the same century the fabric apparently had decayed to such an extent that Bernard Whalley, the new lord-of-the-manor, is reputed to have rebuilt the church in 1692. Many prominent features of the present structure belong to his work, such as the classical round-headed windows and the large south transept. No major changes have occurred since and the church retains a pre-Victorian character. In 1865 the rector of Billesley became also vicar of Haselor, and in 1955 the two parishes were united with Wilmcote. In 1976 All Saints' was declared redundant

and subsequently vested in The Churches Conservation Trust, though the churchyard remains in the care of the parish of Wilmcote with Billesley.

EXTERIOR

The churchyard is dominated by large horse-chestnut and lime trees and the tomb-stones date from the 18th to the 20th centuries, including several of the Mills family who lived at the Manor in the 19th century. The path to the church is lined with lime trees and this new approach from the west was created in the 17th century after the manor house, now much altered and extended and in use as an hotel, had been moved to its present location from the moated site in the former mediaeval village.

The west porch is an addition of the 18th or early 19th century and has a primitive Gothic arch as its entrance, All other features of the west façade should be attributed to Bernard Whalley's remodelling and were intended to create a fashionable classical display towards the Manor. These comprise the square-headed door to the church and the rusticated quoins to the main façade, both executed predominantly in lias stone, and the fine window with eared architrave, the oval panel above and the gable decorated with urns (one missing), all carved in Cotswold limestone. The remade wooden bell-turret houses a small bell of 1721 by Richard Sanders of Bromsgrove.

The south transept also belongs to c.1692. In its south wall is a classical bulls-eye window in Cotswold limestone, and the prominent finial on the gable above conceals the chimney for the fireplace inside. The transept probably served as the lord-of-the-manor's pew and was originally entered by the square-headed door of soft grey sandstone still visible in the west wall; subsequently this was blocked, perhaps when the use changed to a vestry.

On both sides of the transept, the south wall of the nave contains important evidence relating to the mediaeval church. Below each of the classical windows survive areas of masonry laid in herringbone fashion dating from the 11th or early 12th century. Comparable examples are found locally in other early mediaeval churches like Wootton Wawen and Loxley. To the sides of the windows may be seen traces of the sandstone jambs of the former Gothic windows, probably late 13th- or 14th-century in date. This is especially clear to the left of the easterly window, and in the same section of wall the form of a Romanesque circular window is visible above the roof the transept.



The east end of the church has the relatively rare survival of a Romanesque apse, albeit substantially rebuilt in 1692. The east window belongs to the latter date, and much of the south-east wall is built of larger blocks of hammer-dressed lias. On the less rebuilt north-east side there appears to be the trace of an earlier window.

In the north wall, the two classical windows have replaced Gothic ones as on the south side of the nave, and between them is a blocked Gothic doorway of later 13th- or 14th-century character. Trial excavations undertaken in 1981 revealed the former existence of a north aisle the same length as the nave, with rubble walls about 0.90m (3ft) thick at foundation level. The final interior width of the aisle was about 2.75m (9ft) but there was some evidence that when first built it was about one metre narrower. The mediaeval floor level was at least 0.45m (1ft 6in) below the present churchyard level. The excavation provided no firm dates for the aisle, but the survival inside the church of evidence for a Romanesque north arcade indicates that the aisle was in existence about the mid-12th century.

The present north wall of the nave was built when the aisle and arcade were demolished. This might have occurred in the mid- to late 14th century when the village population declined, in which case the Gothic windows and doorway could have been built at this date. A more likely explanation is that the demolition and reconstruction of the north wall took place much later, perhaps in the first half of the 16th century which is the likely date of the new nave roof, in which case the Gothic doorway and windows are re-used from the aisle. The doorway was eventually blocked when pews were introduced into the church in or before 1692. One mystery is what happened to the worked stones of the Romanesque arcade: presumably they were taken away for use in another building.



INTERIOR

The church is entered at the west under a low wooden gallery which belongs to the remodelling by Bernard Whalley. A brass heraldic plaque commemorating his wife Lucy (*d.*1700) is attached to the front of the balcony. Perhaps originally designed for musicians, the gallery became the place where the manorial staff sat, with the boxed-off seat at the north end for the steward or butler. Visible through the open treads of the modern staircase to the gallery is the west respond of the former Romanesque arcade discovered in 1980–81. It is semi-circular in plan, 0.61m (2ft) in diameter, with five courses surviving plus an attic-style base, and is likely to date from the mid- to late 12th century. The later wall in which it is embedded was found to be of very simple workmanship, its rubble bonded mainly with clay and having negligible foundations. One must imagine the north side of the nave in the Middle Ages as a round-arched arcade of two or three bays, such as still exists in the same position at Berkswell church near Coventry.

The nave retains a strong pre-Victorian character. The windows all contain old clear glass in rectangular panes. The box pews may belong in part to 1692 though modified later. The ceiling is of the same date and has been attached to an earlier roof by the addition of a spine beam. The roof construction (not visible from the church) is of four trusses of the clasped purlin type, common in 16th-century building in the west Midlands. Along the nave walls are memorial tablets in various classical styles dating from the first half of the 19th century and commemorating mainly the Mills family of Billesley Manor. Most of the tablets are signed by Hollins of Birmingham or Taylor of Stratford. The royal arms of Queen Anne, recently cleaned, are mounted over the arch to the vestry, with a severe lion and a rakish unicorn as supporters. The slender octagonal font may be 18th century. In the space opposite there used to be a stove, and the curious circular hole to the left of the sanctuary arch was also for a stove-pipe. The pews and other furniture in the eastern half of the nave all apparently belong to the late 19th century, the date of the tongued-and-grooved dado boarding.



The sanctuary arch is of red sandstone and should be attributed to Bernard Whalley, though at its base it appears to incorporate the stubs of a double-chamfered mediaeval arch, perhaps 14th-century. The mouldings of the arch are not obviously mediaeval or classical, but they are repeated in plaster on the entrance arch to the vestry of c.1692. The moulded and twisted balusters of the sanctuary rails and communion table may date back to c.1700; whereas the carved wooden triptych altarpiece (now in the vestry) was carved by Mary, Marchioness of Hertford, in 1907. In a sealed vault beneath the sanctuary floor lie the coffins of the rebuilders of the church, Bernard Whalley (*d.*1713) and his wife Lucy.

In the vestry off the nave is an elegant classical fireplace in Cotswold stone to warm what was the lord-of-the-manor's pew (as at Shobdon church in Hertfordshire). A tablet on the west wall commemorates the Reverend Fortescue Knottesford (*d.*1852), rector of Billesley and owner of Alveston Manor near Stratford. An entertaining glimpse of rural church life in the mid-19th century is provided by an account of how he and his family would board their coach to drive the six miles to Billesley for 11 o'clock matins, The curate took the service and the rector preached. After the service the family had dinner in one of the pews which had a fire-grate. (The pew was either in this vestry or where the stove once stood in the nave). After dinner the children played in the churchyard while the rector rested in the pew. At 3 o'clock there was evensong, followed by the drive home.

SCULPTURES

Recently mounted against the east wall of the vestry are two fine early mediaeval carvings in north Cotswold limestone, the upper one a tympanum and the lower probably a cross-base. In 1692 the tympanum had been re-used on end to form the right jamb of the entrance into the vestry, where it was rediscovered in 1980 during repair work to the panelling

which hid it. It was subsequently removed, cleaned and conserved, and displayed at the exhibition of English Romanesque Art at the Hayward Gallery in 1984. The other stone is more mutilated and has been re-used several times, once as part of a door-frame. The first record of it is as part of the exterior filling of the vestry west doorway, with only the side with the Christ figure exposed. When it was removed in 1981 for its better preservation, the carving on the other two sides was discovered.

The tympanum is 565mm (22¼ in) in radius and fitted over a doorway about 840mm (33 in) wide, probably the south door of the church facing the former manor house and village. The carving is still remarkably sharp, and only the left edge and the apex are damaged. Represented on it are a bird (top left), a military figure apparently in a kilt and wearing a helmet (centre), a large biped with a scaly body and thick tail (top right, head missing), and a scaly serpent (bottom right), all set in a dense interlace of acanthus foliage. The general allegorical meaning has been interpreted by Professor Zarnecki as a man pursued by evil forces personified by a snake and a dragon, striving to escape towards a dove, the symbol of purity. However a specific iconography is elusive. During conservation, Professor Robert Baker noted patches of a coating of white lime apparently as a ground for paint, and tiny traces of red pigment were found in the mouth of the serpent and on the biped. An area of the coating on the outer edge of the stone suggested that it had been applied before the tympanum was placed in position, or before the voussoir stones of the arch had been erected over it.



The tympanum

The other block of stone is thought originally to have been the base of a free-standing cross because of its tapering shape and the large dowel hole in its top surface, 32mm (1¼ in) in diameter and about 125mm (5 in) deep. This would have helped to secure the cross-shaft. A comparable construction method may be seen in a surviving Anglo-Saxon cross-head at nearby Cropthorne church in Worcestershire. Another possibility is that the stone may have served at some stage as the carved base of the jamb of an arch, perhaps the sanctuary arch.

The front surface (as one looks at the stone) depicts a tree pattern arranged more or less symmetrically. Its foliage is unusual in style and Dr Jeffrey West has suggested that the closest parallels lie in 10th-century art, such as a carved slab excavated recently at the former priory church of St Oswald, Gloucester. On the right side of the stone is a pattern of lozenges, perhaps representing Roman *opus reticulatum* work and carved at the same date as the tree pattern. On the left side is an extremely interesting though weathered carving depicting the standing figure of Christ with a cruciform halo and a cross-staff, holding the hand of another haloed figure (mutilated). The most likely interpretation is the Harrowing of Hell, though Doubting Thomas has also been suggested. As this carving belongs to the 12th century it appears that this side of the 10th-century stone was recut at this period.

The style of the Christ figure is similar to that of the man on the tympanum (compare particularly the folds of the sleeves) and both are likely to be by the same sculptor. More remarkably he can be identified as one of the leading artists of the Herefordshire school of sculpture, whose other works survive at Leominster Priory, Kilpeck, Eardisley and Fownhope, all in Herefordshire and dated by Professor Zarnecki to c.1140–50. So close is the comparison that the same scenes of the Harrowing and a military figure fighting through foliage are repeated on the font at Eardisley.

The Harrowing stone



As both the tympanum and the Harrowing stone are of an oolitic limestone from the north Cotswolds or possibly from Bredon Hill, there can be no doubt that the sculptor travelled to the Stratford district to do the work, rather than the carved stones being transported from the Herefordshire sandstone area. Thus the recent discovery of the Billesley stones has considerable significance in expanding the known works and geographical extent of this important regional school of Romanesque sculpture. The connexion may also explain why such elaborate carvings appeared at such a small church. Kilpeck and Eardisley churches lie next to former castle sites and the opulence and content of their sculptures are likely to reflect the seignorial interest of their secular lords. The same situation may be imagined at Billesley, where the church was in close proximity to the mediaeval moated manor house site.

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