

## A 12<sup>th</sup>- CENTURY CORBEL AT GATCOMBE CHURCH

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### **Summary**

*Examination of original sources and the structure of the church itself has led to revision of its received history, some conclusions from which are presented here. Various elements, notably the carved head over the porch entrance, imply a 12<sup>th</sup> century date for the construction of the church in masonry.*

### **Introduction**

It can be taken as a general rule that any ancient church has a much more complex structural history than is usually appreciated, or represented in the written sources, and that clues to this history may be found in the building itself. I am a professional archaeologist, although with no great experience of church archaeology. However, I do have plenty of experience of how vital it is to search original sources, and some knowledge of how an archaeological approach can illuminate the study of a church. I came to examine Gatcombe Church because it needed a new guidebook. It was soon apparent that even the easily accessible printed sources had not been used for a hundred years, and in the meantime a sort of Chinese Whispers effect had taken over. Each new description was derived, with subtle changes of wording, from a previous one, and the result has become increasingly misleading. The new edition of Pevsner (Lloyd & Pevsner 2006), for instance, says that the carved head over the porch entrance dates to 1910, an unlikely statement immediately disproved by the primary printed work.

### **St Olave's, Gatcombe, 'Dedicated in 1292'**

It must be said straight away that no historical documentation has been found for this statement, which is painted on the board at the churchyard gate (worse, this has sometimes been taken as the date of construction, although dedication does not necessarily date a building). It is likely that the date is a consequence of research carried out for the board listing 'Rectors of Gatcombe since 1294', which hangs in the north-west corner of the nave and was dedicated in 1966. As the CRO has a reference to a Robert, parson of Gatcombe, in a document of about 1280, and the Pontissara Register (Deedes 1924, 597, 600) refers to *ecclesia* [church] *de Gatecumbe* in a document listing churches in the diocese c1286 (but which is thought to be a copy of another document of c1270) the year 1292 is best forgotten.

It has been generally agreed that the standing building is 13<sup>th</sup> century in origin. This is based on Percy Stone's meticulous scale drawings and description published in 1891. 'The church, built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by one of the Esturs, for the use of the Gatcombe tenants, belongs to the category of private or manorial chapels' (Stone 1891, 35). This statement has been quoted many times, but it needs clarification. What he is actually saying is that the earliest datable feature he could discern in the standing building, the lancet window in the south wall of the nave, is 13<sup>th</sup> century. The font is also partly 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Esturs (descendants of William fitzStur, who held Gatcombe in 1086) were then still lords of the manor, and must have been responsible for this work; and when Stone wrote it was still commonly said that churches like Gatcombe, standing next to the manor house, were 'private chapels'. This has led to later misunderstanding, that somehow this was not a parish church. But Gatcombe is plainly a manorial church, built by the lord for his estate and tenants. So in origin are the majority of parish churches, and like so many of them, this one was built next to his house for his own convenience.

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There are two lines of argument to consider here. One is the dating of the standing building, which will be looked at in a moment. The other is that the earliest discernible element cannot be taken as the date of the original foundation of the church. In other words, is it likely that Gatcombe had no church until the 13<sup>th</sup> century?

### **The manor and parish of Gatcombe**

Domesday Book tells us that before 1066 Gatcombe was an estate shared by three brothers; in 1086 it was held by William fitzStur. He owned other manors on the Island, but Gatcombe was worth considerably more than many of them. No priest or church is recorded in the list of its assets, but this tells us nothing. It does not mean that there was no church. The high population recorded in 1086 appears to be due to the fact that the estate included Chillerton (Sewell 2000, 41; Margham 2000, 122, fig 4), and Whitwell (Stone 1912, 202-4). More informative is the shape of the medieval parish, which appears to have been split off from that of Carisbrooke (Hockey 1982). The pattern of the medieval open fields in the two parishes supports this (pers comm Vicky Basford). Although 'there is no historical document stating an *ecclesiastical* link between Carisbrooke and Gatcombe' (Sewell 2000, 41) the emergence of Gatcombe appears to be part of the breaking up of the large later Saxon minster estates into smaller land holdings, whose lords built their own churches. By the late 11<sup>th</sup> century the minsters, such as Carisbrooke, were losing their authority (Blair 2005, 426, 449). The local churches, daughters of the primary minsters, were largely in place by the time the parochial system emerged during the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Margham 1997, 92, 98), and Gatcombe was one of these. There may have been first a timber church, about which we know nothing.

### **A 12<sup>th</sup> century church?**

There are two other factors which make it likely that there was a church at Gatcombe in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. One is the patron saint, St Olave. This is an English spelling of Olaf, king of Norway from 1016 to 1029, 'whose forceful attempts to convert his subjects to Christianity drove them to revolt and murder him' (Anderson 1971, 55). In Norway he is now venerated as the bringer of Christianity to the country, and 'his cult spread quickly after his death in 1030' (Margham 1997, 96). 'The swiftness with which interest in Olave's cult developed is indicated by his appearance as a dedicatee in Exeter and York before 1066' (Morris 1989, 176). But these and almost all the churches dedicated to him are urban foundations. There is another St Olave's on the mainland in the Chichester area (Morris 1989, 53, fig 14), and this is by far the closest; there are no others nearer than London itself. There was a settlement of Scandinavian merchants in Chichester in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (VCH Sussex vol.3 (1935), 164), as there was in London, and these may account for the urban dedications. Why the church at Gatcombe, remote from any urban settlement, should have this dedication is unknown.

But there was a strong cultural affinity between England and Scandinavia in the earlier 11<sup>th</sup> century, a time when England was part of Cnut's empire, many churches were being built, and Englishmen were organizing Christianity in Scandinavia. This is a factor not always appreciated; but 'the many eastern English dedications to St Clement and St Olaf can be located in the early to mid eleventh-century Anglo-Scandinavian context' (Blair 2005, 425). The church at Gatcombe may also have its origin in this context. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, its foundation belongs to the late 11<sup>th</sup>-early 12<sup>th</sup> century, as set out above. The dedication is likely to have been specified by the founding lord himself, and there is no sign that the original dedication has ever changed.

The other, more circumstantial point to consider is the building of St Radegund's chapel at Whitwell. This was *Cantaria manerii de Gatcombe*, the chantry of the manor of Gatcombe (Warner 1795, 122; Stone 1912, 202-4), and the Gatcombe lords were responsible for it. The oldest surviving elements of St Radegund's date to the later 12<sup>th</sup> century, and it is not likely that the

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lords of Gatcombe would have built a chapel for their Whitwell tenants before they had built their church next to their house.

### **Gatcombe's south porch, and a 12<sup>th</sup> century survival**

Most parish churches have their main door on the south side of the nave, and Gatcombe is no exception. While Norman churches did not shelter the door with a porch, from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards they gradually became a standard feature (Friar 2003, 355-6), although 'it was not until around 1300 they began to increase in popularity' (Brown 1998, 112). The south porch then became a place of great functional importance as well as a shelter. Before the Reformation the first parts of baptism and funeral ceremonies took place in the porch, as did marriage contracts and business transactions and later, display of public notices (Brown 1998, 112-13; Anderson 1971, 71, 77-8).

It is as well to remember this, as recent descriptions of the church have engendered some confusion. In 1891 Stone published a drawing of the porch in his impression of the church in 1860 (his Pl. LXXXIV; Fig. 1). It looks remarkably similar to the porch today. In 1910 the porch was apparently 'rebuilt' by Robert Urry of Hill Farm, to mark his 45 years as churchwarden. There is supposed to have been a small plaque to this effect on the porch north wall, although this is not now visible (and if it existed, was certainly inaccurate, as the church rate book records that Robert Urry resigned in 1899 after only 36 years). Lloyd & Pevsner (2006, 148) baldly state that the porch dates from 1910; and Lane (2001, 18) goes so far as to write that 'the porch was not built until 1910'. These are both derivative statements, gleaned from earlier guides (Green 1969, 98; Winter & Winter 1987, 81), which themselves derive from Evans (1965, 11). James Evans was rector of Gatcombe in the years 1965-73, and he is the first to state that 'the porch was erected in 1910' by Robert Urry.

How much work was actually carried out in 1910? The Listed Building description regards Gatcombe's porch as 13<sup>th</sup> century (although see below), only the roof being thought a 1910 replacement. From the appearance of the stonework, and comparison with Stone's 1891 drawings, the lower portion of the stone walls and arched entrance are original medieval work. The upper half of the stonework is a different build, although evidently reusing the original stones (the doorway dressings are medieval work; the gable copings 'are perhaps not medieval but are several centuries old'; Warwick Rodwell pers comm). The roof is of sandstone tiles upon a timber substructure. Presumably these stone roof slabs were also the old ones, reinstated. Such stone slabs occur elsewhere in Island churches. They are 'formidably heavy...; unfortunately the life of these roofs is also dependent on the supporting timber framework, which in time is likely to give way under the weight' (Clifton-Taylor 1974, 75). It is this roof which is (supposedly) Robert Urry's memorial, using timbers said to have come from HMS Thunderer, which had fought at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

### **HMS *Thunderer***

In 1910 this was a famous warship, carrying a name with a long pedigree (Nichol nd). A huge new Thunderer, the last warship to be built on the Thames, was launched in 1911 and served through the First World War. But was the ship from which the south porch timbers were said to have come the Thunderer which fought at Trafalgar? It was this ship which signalled to the Victory that the French fleet had been sighted. Launched at Rotherhithe in 1783, she was a 74-gun two-decker which served right through the French wars until 1814. She was broken up in the same year, and it is unlikely that her timbers were available for reuse in 1910.

But there were other Thunderers (ibid). A new one was built in 1831, an 84-gun Second Rate battleship. She was still a wooden ship, but with certain innovations which made her revolutionary. Her design, by Sir William Symonds, meant that her hull was much longer and stronger, enough to take steam machinery during the 1840s. This Thunderer fought at the battle of Sidon in

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1840, which marked the change from wooden sailing ships to steam fighting vessels. In 1863 she was fitted with iron plating for trials of new armour-piercing guns. In 1872 another innovatory Thunderer was built, an iron battleship. The old one was too useful to scrap. She was renamed *Nettle* and was not decommissioned until 1901, by which time she was 70 years old. If the south porch timbers indeed came from 'HMS Thunderer', they are likely to have been from this ship. This conclusion finds support in the fact that timber from the Nettle was certainly used in Island churches: examples are the seating in the chapel of St Nicholas in Castro at Carisbrooke Castle, rebuilt by Percy Stone in 1905-6 (Stone 1904-6, 253; Young 2003, 12-13), and the reredos in Shalfleet church, constructed to Percy Stone's design in 1908 (Mead 2002, 7).

The lych gate of Christ Church, Totland (a Victorian church built in 1875 and extended by Percy Stone in 1905-10) was built from, according to a plaque, '*the timbers of HMS Thunderer 74 guns which fought on the lee line at Trafalgar*'. The designer of this lych gate was, again, Percy Stone (Lloyd & Pevsner 2006, 145). Dedicated in March 1906, 'the superstructure is the work of an Island craftsman, J H King, of Blackwater' (Wheeler 1976; it is interesting to note in the same source that 'current opinion... supports the view that the timbers came from a later ship of the same name'). James H King of Blackwater was a carpenter who also made the timber ceiling of the chapel in Carisbrooke Castle during its refitting under Stone's direction as the Island War Memorial in the 1920s (*County Press*, 20 March 1920; 24 April 1920). According to the church rate book, King certainly did repairs at Gatcombe and made the porch noticeboards, so he may also have been responsible for the porch ceiling. We might suspect that Percy Stone himself had an active role in the use of the Nettle's timber around the Island.

### **The monster**

The last, and most important, element in the south porch to be considered is the stone 'monster head' surmounted by a cross at the apex of the gable over the porch opening. Stone's perspective impression of the church in 1860 (1891, pl. LXXXIV) shows a cross, but not the monster, and it is presumably for this reason that Lloyd (Lloyd & Pevsner 2006, 148) states outright that the monster dates to 1910. But stylistically it looks primitive, individual, and quite unlike either 1910 work or a consciously medievalising piece. In fact Stone himself shows that the head was not a 1910 addition, as it is plainly present on his south elevation drawing and is used in the text as a decorative initial motif (1891, 35, & pl.LXXXV; Fig. 2).

In stylistic terms the Gatcombe monster is a 12<sup>th</sup> century piece (confirmed by Dr Ron Baxter, Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain & Ireland, Cortauld Institute). It is carved on one end of a rectangular sided block, and was clearly originally a corbel, a projection from a wall supporting a weight, and often decoratively carved. Grotesques are common enough in corbel tables, and string courses (as on Gatcombe's late 15<sup>th</sup> century tower), but heads in this position over a porch entrance or on Norman doorways are not. The surmounting cross is not original to it (inf R Marshall).

### **Description and parallels (Fig. 3)**

The corbel is of weathered greenstone. The face is just over 30cm from top to teeth, and 27cm across at the base. It is a representation of a grotesque head, with lenticular-shaped and drilled eyes deeply set beneath bushy incised eyebrows and furrowed forehead. In the centre of the forehead the furrowing is a nested group of Vs. The rounded cheeks bulge somewhat in the manner of a monkey, on either side of a worn nose, and their outlines run down to a ringed slightly open mouth which contains a row of teeth. The head fills the end face of the block and only the narrow oval mouth projects downwards, onto the block's under side. The block has been tipped slightly backwards in its reset position. This was possibly deliberate, to produce the best angle for seeing the image from the doorway.

Corbels 'came to England from the Continent and soon became one of the foremost features

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of English Romanesque architecture' (Zarnecki 1951, no.33). A search of the many examples on the website of the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain & Ireland* came up with others using similar iconography, grotesque heads with teeth, but nothing closely comparable in style. This is not surprising. The survey has not yet fully covered those counties (such as Hampshire) which might have the closest examples, and these heads are nothing if not individual. It will take much research to explore fully the stylistic parallels for this head, and even then it is unlikely that a more precise date can be given to it than '12<sup>th</sup> century'. However, some conclusions can be drawn. Gatcombe's head is not typical of those which are part of a corbel table, on the outside of a building. These are usually rounded or in deep relief and each projects from its block, in order to be seen from some distance below, and for the same reason they are often comparatively simple in form. Nor does it have the degree of wear which external corbels have usually suffered. It may have been an internal piece, although there is a more elaborate set of corbel heads with some similarities to Gatcombe's (notably their square aspect and furrowed brows) on the outside of the Norman Tower at Bury St Edmunds, built 1120-48 (Whittingham 1971, 7, 24). A bearded head at St Michael's, Cunnor (Berks), one of a set with some similarities to Gatcombe, has the square aspect and V-shaped furrows on the forehead, but is more primitive in execution. Others at Castle Acre Priory (Norfolk) also have lenticular eyes, square shape and open mouths.

### Implications

Stone's drawing of the church as it looked in 1860 shows no head over the porch doorway. This was intended as a view of the church before the rebuilding of the chancel in 1864, and was based on information from the architect. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century church rate book is an entry listing expenditure on 'Gatcombe Church Restorations' over the period 1867-69 (when the nave roof was replaced), which includes smaller sums spent on the tower and the porch. Mr King was paid £4 1s 6d, and Mr Williams, a stonemason, £3 10s, for work on the porch. The resetting of the corbel is likely to have been part of this major overhaul, as there does not seem to be another opportunity before Stone recorded the church in the 1880s; but where did it come from? There are two possible original positions: in the chancel, or the nave.

The first possibility is that the medieval chancel incorporated a 12<sup>th</sup> century corbel which was removed in 1864 when the chancel was demolished and replaced. There is no direct documentation, but we do know that the 17<sup>th</sup> century communion rails and perhaps also the surviving fragments of late medieval glass were resited elsewhere in the church, so other elements considered to have no place in the smart new chancel may also have been kept. It would follow that the demolished chancel was itself 12<sup>th</sup> century. This would either be the first church on the site, or a rebuilding in masonry of an earlier timber church. One would expect the chancel to be rebuilt first, and then the nave, as resources allowed. Gatcombe's nave, in this case, could indeed be 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the lancet windows of which one survives. Alternatively, the corbel was removed from the nave when its roof was replaced in 1867-9. This would give a 12<sup>th</sup> century date to the existing nave walls.

There may have been other corbels at Gatcombe which did not survive the work. As it is, the re-use of this corbel as a saddlestone surmounted by the porch cross is plainly a deliberate image of the triumph of the cross over evil. In the 1860s this may have been seen less as a marker of the threshold between the evils of the outside world and the safety of the holy place within, as it would have appeared to the medieval mind (Bildhauer & Mills 2003), so much as an oblique reference to St Olave, who fought to impose Christianity on his pagan subjects.

### *When was the porch built?*

Although the south porch is undoubtedly medieval, without the saddlestone it is absolutely plain, and similar in form to many others on the Island and elsewhere. The simple arched opening cannot be earlier than the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Brown (1998, 114) notes that 'porches from the Early Eng-

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lish period are rare... [But] by the 14<sup>th</sup> century a porch began to be regarded as a necessity, even for the village church'. So the porch at Gatcombe may not have been built until the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Clifton-Taylor 1974, 121, confirms that 'hardly any parish churches had [porches] before the 14<sup>th</sup> century). Brown also makes the interesting point that steps from the porch into the nave imply that 'the porch was not the original entrance' (op cit, 112-13). What this means is that when a porch was added to an older church, the inevitable rise in ground level in the churchyard since the nave's construction (and the greatest rise would be on the south side of the church, preferred for burial) would mean that the new doorway would have to be higher up, with steps down to the nave floor. At Gatcombe there are three steps down into the church. The nave is, therefore, considerably older than the porch.

### ***When was the nave built?***

As explained above, the nave walls may be 12<sup>th</sup> century, or 13<sup>th</sup>; they are at least as old as the lancet, and older than the porch. Any earlier windows could have completely disappeared, as newer, larger ones were inserted. Pevsner (1967, 745) drew attention to the north door, describing it as 'plain Late Norman'. This is because the doorway is round-headed. It could be 12<sup>th</sup> century, but its original appearance is obscured. Detailed examination of the stonework might provide the answer, but this would only be possible if the plaster were removed. For the present, the date of the nave remains uncertain, but full of possibility.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### Figures

1. 'Gatcombe Church from the SE in 1860': Percy Stone's impression of the church as it looked before the alterations (Stone 1891, pl. LXXXIV)
2. Percy Stone's scale elevation of the south side of the nave: detail showing the south porch (Stone 1891, pl. LXXXV). This drawing must have been done at some time in the later 1880s.
3. The corbel, close-up view.

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FIG. 1



FIG. 2



FIG. 3

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