

THE CHERTSEY TILES.

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DURING the earlier period of the existence of the Surrey Archæological Society, attention happened to be drawn to the remains of the famous Abbey of Chertsey, and the Society contributed towards considerable excavations which were then made; the plan of the building as thus ascertained formed the subject of an interesting Paper by Mr. Pocock,¹ on the occasion of a visit by this Society on the 27th April, 1855. The utter destruction—not merely demolition but disappearance—of the once celebrated monastery (the origin of which dates from the Saxon period,² and whose Abbot was one of those privileged to wear a mitre), the absolute destruction of its noble church and attendant

¹ *Surrey Archæological Collections*, I., p. 97.

² See Charter by Æthelwulf, to which St. Swithun is one of the witnesses (*Kemble's Codex Diplomaticus ævi Saxonici*, I. p. 286) : a confirmation of certain lands was granted by King Alfred (*Ibid.* II. p. 122).

cloisters and chapter-house, and the various buildings, comprising residences, halls, refectory, kitchens, stables, probably great granaries, stores and workshops, cannot but strike one as a remarkable though not an unusual fact. In the course of little more than a century all but the boundary walls had vanished,¹ so that not another vestige remained above ground; and when the excavations which I have referred to were made, very little of the erection was discovered more than the bare foundations of its walls. When we contrast this fact with the wonderful discoveries at Troy, Cyprus, Ephesus and Nineveh, of remains belonging to an incomparably earlier period, but one conclusion arises in the mind—that the destruction has been effected at Chertsey not by the operation of time's defacing fingers in a mere hundred and fifty years,² but by the wilful destruction for the sake of building material—a miserable act of barbarism, in fact such as we read of where the Arabs destroy a temple of vast antiquity and invaluable as a work of art, for the sake of a few ounces of lead or iron by which the stones are bonded together. But that a wanton and wilful, and one may almost say brutal, Vandalism did prevail, is shown by the tiles discovered during the excavations. They had not been carried away piecemeal to decorate the floor of some noble mansion, or the hall of a farmhouse, or even to cover the hard-trodden floor of a humble cottage: they were not neglected and left *in situ*—like the Roman tessellated pavements, which almost every year, chance excavations reveal to us, hitherto covered over and lost sight of under the accumulation of rubbish arising from the destruction of the buildings they served and enriched—but all torn up and mutilated.

The general locality of the Abbey Church was of course known, and from time to time bones and fragments of

¹ Aubrey's *Surrey*, written in 1673.

² The Abbey was surrendered in 1537, and in 1673 Aubrey writes that scarcely anything but the boundary walls remained; but by whom, or at what particular date, the destruction was effected, is unrecorded—happily for the fame of the sacrilegious barbarians.

tiles were turned up, some of which found their way to exhibition to the Society of Antiquaries a century ago—in 1787—and two small circular tiles will be found figured in the “*Archæologia*”;¹ and in the Museum left by Sir John Soane, together with his house in Lincoln’s Inn, for the benefit of the public, a few others have been preserved, including one similar to that represented at the head of the present Paper.² But in 1853 a Mr. Grumbridge, a farmer, then tenant of the property, had occasion to excavate a site for the walls of a new building, and with the soil were dug up a large quantity of ancient tiles, which were preserved and placed in an outhouse, whence most of them were stolen, and as, moreover, it happened that the thief stole the best, one can only suppose that he must have possessed some archæological knowledge. He, or the person to whom he sold them, can have little pleasure in their possession, for if the treasure were shown to others it would almost certainly be identified. However, after the robbery, there still remained a heap equal to about a cartload which were picked out and arranged by Mr. Shurlock, a member of this Society; and they led to further excavations, towards which this Society contributed, and in consequence of this contribution it became the owner of the extremely valuable collection which it possesses.

Mr. Shurlock, to whom so much credit is due for his persevering researches, found, at various times, the greater part of the tiles on the site of the Abbey, and chiefly in the south transept. They had been torn up and thrown into utter confusion, some reversed, and the larger and most important ones almost all broken; and generally, in the case of more than one of the same pattern, broken in the same part. Some of the most

¹ *Archæologia*, VIII. pl. xxxi.

² In default of any Catalogue or any but ponderous folio lists of objects as locally situated in the Museum, this valuable collection of antiquities still remains at a minimum of practical benefit, although a modification of the restrictions against admission renders it less inaccessible than it used to be.

perfect were in the coffins, but others he discovered in various places, as in Mrs. Fox's summer-house at St. Anne's Hill, in walls of old houses, in dredgings of the Thames, and in the pavement of a pigsty. The task of arranging the fragments so as to obtain an idea of any definite order must have been as difficult as a Chinese puzzle.

The tiles are not all of the same date, though all are early. The oldest may fairly be stated as the manufacture of a period near the middle of the 13th century—say from 1250 to 1275¹—and the remainder somewhere about the beginning of the next century. These early dates alone would render them an important discovery, if they did not also possess a specific interest from the singularly artistic style of design which many of them exhibit. It is the opinion of the late Mr. Shaw (who gave splendid representations of them in his noble work on “*Tile Pavements*”)² that they exhibit an artistic merit of which it is impossible to speak too highly, as well in respect to grouping, energy, expression, and drapery, as in the singular elegance of the ornamental portions and their accuracy of drawing, surpassing any that he had met with. He believed them to be of English workmanship.

The tiles of this nature ordinarily found were manufactured for the purpose of pavement of a more or less rich nature. Most usually each tile was independent, and the patterns were of a simple design, such as a fleur-de-lis, or cross in a circle, or some similarly unpretending device; but where art had its way the pattern was one which, though each tile looked well alone, required, in order to make a complete design, four or more squares, set diamond-wise, and generally connected by circles a part of which appeared on each tile;³ in case of greater elaboration many smaller tiles, sometimes very

¹ The illustration at the commencement of these notes will serve as an example.

² *Tile Pavements*, by Henry Shaw, 4to, London, 1857. No less than ten plates of this magnificent work are devoted to the Chertsey tiles.

³ The tailpiece to this Paper will serve as an example.

small, of varying colours and shapes, formed a kind of enriched mosaic work. In a few instances, somewhat larger tiles were inlaid with a different coloured clay, in the same manner as the ordinary paving tiles, but designed so as to furnish a monumental effigy. At Lingfield, in this county, there is a very good specimen, dating near the year 1500, and representing a civilian beneath a canopy, the whole occupying three large tiles; another in the same church is now deficient in one-third; both of these Mr. Haines considered to be foreign.¹ In the Priory Church of Elstow, Bedfordshire, and some neighbouring churches are remains of others, not so good, though a little earlier.² At Fontenay, near Caen, there is a large and early example.³ Another use of such tiles may be found in the Priory Church of Great Malvern, where they are set in the wall surrounding the choir, against which they back. I do not happen to be aware of any instance on the Continent in which such tiles have been used for either of these purposes, except paving, and of the numerous instances given in Cahier and Martin's magnificent publications,⁴ none appear to have been designed for any other position. The tiles for which Spain is famous, and which were used as a facing for walls, were of an entirely different nature—as different indeed, though quite as distinct in character, as the painted blue and brown Dutch tiles with which during about two centuries our farmhouses and cottages were so often decorated. Mr. Shaw was inclined to believe that some of the most elaborate of the Chertsey tiles were intended to be set vertically, as at Malvern, for the purpose of a reredos; and though this is necessarily only conjecture, the singularly artistic skill in their design and unusual delicacy of

¹ Haines' *Monumental Brasses*, p. 1; and their date he considered to be c. 1480. There is an engraving of the complete effigy in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. VI. p. 177.

² Rather rude representations of the latter are given in Fisher's *Bedfordshire*.

³ Caumont's *Abécédairé*.

⁴ Cahier and Martin, *Mélanges archéologiques*, and *Suite aux Mélanges*.



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execution might tend to the supposition; and especially may be instanced three large figures, each with a canopy, occupying $3\frac{1}{2}$ large tiles, and representing respectively an archbishop, a king, and a queen. Amongst this Society's Collection is a copy of the archbishop; and in the Architectural Museum, Westminster, a specimen of each. The archbishop is probably St. Thomas of Canterbury, represented in eucharistic vestments, with mitre and pall; his feet rest apparently on a crouching wild man—possibly symbolic of the man of sin, but the meaning of which device has never been very satisfactorily explained, though examples are not uncommon—some brasses of bishops at Paderborn, near the same date, may be cited in illustration. But the feet exist at the Architectural Museum only, and in our example have been replaced by a duplicate of those of the king, who, also, is trampling on a figure of the same nature. The queen (of which we do not possess an example) carries a sceptre in one hand, while on the other arm rests a pet squirrel. The canopies are ogre-headed and cinque-foiled within, with a crocketed pediment above, surmounted by roofed tabernacle work with pinnacles. The style in which these figures are designed and executed is admirable, and there can be no question of their early date in the 14th century.

The remainder of the designs are formed of a number of shaped tiles with foliage of a very early type and of very diverse design, which surround and border larger discs, each of the latter having its own individual subject; and in some cases was a legend surrounding the disc formed by a narrow band of small voussoirs, each bearing a single letter. The general nature of these central discs would appear to be subjects of Love and War; and in a Paper upon the Tiles, read by Mr. Shurlock before the Society of Antiquaries in 1868, in sequel to one in 1862, he gave strong proofs that many of them illustrated at least two of the early romances, viz., those of Tristram and Richard Cœur de Lion; and he showed that the scenes in two large circular tiles respectively represent knights bringing Tristram and Ysoud from the

forest to Court, and in bringing the children demanded by the King of England as tribute of King Mark; and on another King Richard is springing on the lion and seizing the jaws before tearing out its heart.¹ In other examples a king is represented as seated in state, on a couch, holding converse with damsels or harpers; there are ships crossing the sea; castles with figures; an encounter with a lion; knights engaged in combat; on one tile is a trial by battle; on another is a figure in a ship, to which a second is mounting by a ladder; and a minstrel, reclining in a boat, is playing upon the harp whilst the boat drifts with the current; while one of our illustrations represents a jester on a hobby-horse.

Of minor tiles may be mentioned, an angel, censing; and dragons and fanciful reptiles, and quaint foliage, compose the remainder.

The collection of ancient tiles which thus came into the possession of the Society by the gift of Mr. Shurlock, possesses a high archæological value to which the attention of the members may advantageously be drawn; and it is to be hoped that while carefully preserved, they may, at some future time, be more generally seen than has hitherto been the case, and so their merits and value will become still better known.

¹ I have to acknowledge, with best thanks, my obligation to Mr. Shurlock for this information.





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