

An Early Medieval Floor Tile from Garendon Abbey

Andy Kirkland

Introduction

Since 2012 I have worked as an archaeological volunteer for Leicestershire County Council Museums Service. My role has been to photograph artefacts in the county's archaeological collection. In 2014, I started work on photographing the medieval floor tiles in the collection. One tile in particular caught my attention – a virtually complete medieval floor tile from Garendon Abbey. Not only was it well preserved, but unusually it was housed in a tailor-made wooden box with a tantalising note on its provenance. About the same time, I moved to Loughborough, close to the site of Garendon Abbey, and became very interested in the history and archaeology of the Abbey.

As more of the medieval tile collection was photographed, two fragments of floor tiles almost identical to the Garendon tile came to light - one from Ulverscroft Priory, the other from excavations at Mountsorrel Castle. All three tiles looked as if they might be contemporary. Added to this was the discovery that further tiles of the same design had also been found at Leicester Abbey. (1) The Garendon tile and its counterparts appeared to be amongst the earliest medieval floor tiles found in Leicestershire, and I set out to find out more. My research started by looking in more detail into these Leicestershire examples, and went on to identify parallels from elsewhere in Britain. It also led me to the continent, to the Cistercian order and their approach to art and design, and to finding examples of similar tiles from France. This paper traces these investigations, and concludes by attempting to place the Garendon tile and the similar Leicestershire examples in the context of early medieval tile-making.

Garendon Abbey, Ulverscroft Priory, Leicester Abbey and Mountsorrel Castle

The foundation dates for all four establishments where the Leicestershire tiles were found are twelfth to early thirteenth century, but with a wider range of end dates for their original functions, ranging from 1217 to the Dissolution of the monasteries over 300 years later in the sixteenth century.

Garendon was founded as a Cistercian Abbey in 1133 on land given by Robert “le Bossu” de Beaumont, 2nd Earl of Leicester. (2) The Abbey was an early daughter establishment of Waverley Abbey in Surrey, the first Cistercian establishment in England. Waverley had been founded in 1128, being descended from l'Aumone in France, as were seven others in France. Waverley also gave rise to twelve other establishments in Britain including

those at Forde (1136); Thame (1137); Bruern (1147); Combe (1150); and Grace Dieu (1226). Garendon itself gave rise to Bordesley in 1138 and Biddlesden in 1147. Burton considers that the rapid expansion of Cistercian abbeys blossomed into the greatest, most adventurous monastic movement in Britain (3), and by the end of King Stephen's reign (1154) there were more than fifty Cistercian religious houses in Britain. (4) A further 34 establishments were added by the close of the twelfth century. Thus Cistercian ideas and art spread quickly in Britain, and the approach to art within all the establishments also had similar characteristics.

Like Garendon Abbey, Ulverscroft Priory was also founded by the 2nd Earl of Leicester - as a hermitage in 1139 and as an Augustinian monastery in 1174. Leicester Abbey was founded in 1143, again by the 2nd Earl of Leicester. Its claustral ranges, including the Chapter House, were



The Garendon Abbey floor tile and its wooden tray. (Reproduced by permission of Leicestershire County Council, object ref.: L.A152.1963.)



Close up of the inscription on the Garendon tile tray. (Reproduced by permission of Leicestershire County Council, object ref.: L.A152.1963.)

completed by the end of the twelfth century under the patronage of Petronilla (d.1212), the wife of Robert de Beaumont, 3rd Earl of Leicester. (5) Garendon Abbey was dissolved in 1536, Leicester Abbey surrendered in 1538, and Ulverscroft Priory in 1539. Mountsorrel Castle had been founded by Hugh Lupus, Earl of Chester in c1080. In 1151, Robert "le Bossu", Earl of Leicester acquired its tenancy. It fell to King Henry II's forces in 1174, and was retained by the king when the Earl of Leicester's lands were restored to him in 1177. The tower and other buildings were repaired and refurbished in the 1190s, and again in King John's reign. Mountsorrel became the scene of fighting when the struggle broke out between King John and his barons in 1215. According to Nichols, the castle was considered to be 'a nest of the Devil and a den of thieves and robbers', and was destroyed soon afterwards in 1217 on the orders of Henry III, and was never rebuilt.

The Garendon Abbey Chapter House Floor Tile

The virtually complete floor tile from Garendon Abbey in the Leicestershire Museums Service collection came from the floor in the Abbey's Chapter House. The tile has a bold geometric relief or embossed design consisting of an outer circle, interlaced with four semicircles which also interlace at the centre of the tile. The original design may have been done using a compass. Although the tile is well-worn, there are still traces of dark green glaze remaining in the impressions on the surface of the tile. The dimensions of the tile are: 6 & 7/16" (164mm) square, but the tile is broken and it was almost certainly 6.5" square when complete. It was made with local Leicestershire clay, and laid on top of earlier plain floor tiles, indicating (in the author's opinion) a refurbishment of Garendon Abbey took place sometime after its establishment of the initial building in 1133.

The Garendon Abbey tile has a purpose-made wooden tray. It is expertly made from pine with a stopped chamfer on each side and a single dovetail joint at the corners. A close examination of the joint reveals the craftsman's marking out. The joints would have been very well-fitting when they were cut. The base of the tray is rebated in and held with panel pins. It seems likely that the box would have been made by an estate carpenter. On the top side of the tray is the following inscription written in a calligraphic hand on a narrow strip of paper and attached to the tray, and reads:

Tile, belonging to Garendon Abbey, discovered in the wall during the late alterations at the Hall Garendon Park, 1865.

After the Reformation, Garendon Abbey, later to become Garendon Hall, from 1684 up until May 1964 belonged to the ancestors of the present de Lisle family. By 1865, the date of the alterations referred to on the wooden tray, the hall was in the hands of Ambrose Lisle March Phillipps de Lisle (1809-1878) who had inherited the property from his

father in 1862. Between 1865-6, he invited Edward Welby Pugin, the son of Augustus Welby Pugin, to submit plans to update and alter the hall. Pugin's elaborate designs were for a complete replacement house, which had they been fully implemented would, according to one source, have created 'one of the great Gothic revival houses in England'. (6) For various reasons, the hall was only partially modernised – the most noticeable changes being a substantial re-modelling of the hall's roof, and the addition of a large rear extension with a 100 foot long picture gallery. Given the proximity of the date on the tile box to the date of the modernisation plans, it is likely that the tile was removed from 'the wall' as part of this work. This also suggests the tile had been removed some time previously from its original position in the chapter house floor, and moved either for practical or decorative purposes to a wall of the hall. The de Lisle family finally left Garendon in 1964, moving first to Grace Dieu Manor (where they had previously resided from 1885 to 1907), then to Quenby Hall. The tile came into the Leicestershire Museums collection the year before, in 1963.

The Tiles from Leicester Abbey, Ulverscroft Priory, and Mountsorrel Castle

Whitcomb records two almost complete tiles and five fragments from Leicester Abbey in Leicester [City] Museum collections that are virtually identical in design to the tile from Garendon Abbey. (7) These are described as: Size: 6.5" X 6.5" X 0.9"; Glaze: olive green, possibly mixed with or used over a little white slip. Clay: light brick red with grey core, very coarse and gritty; warped, surface badly cracked.

Tile design from Leicester Abbey, as illustrated in Whitcomb, p.136. (Reproduced with acknowledgement to the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society.)



The tile fragment from Ulverscroft Priory in the Leicestershire Museums Service collection also appears to be similar in design to the Garendon and Leicester Abbey tiles. Both the Ulverscroft and the Mountsorrel Castle tile fragments are recorded in Whitcomb, the Ulverscroft one being '1 small fragment, similar to above [Leicester Abbey]'. This fragment measures approximately 90mm X 80mm at its widest dimensions.

The more substantial and well-preserved piece of floor tile from Mountsorrel Castle in the Leicestershire Museums collection has little, if any, signs of wear, and appears to be the same design as the more complete worn Garendon tile in

the collection. Its longest measurement is comparable in size to both the Garendon or Leicester Abbey tiles. It has more dark green glazing remaining than the Garendon tile, and is described in Whitcomb as: Glaze: trace of brownish green; bubbled and opaque, probably through underfiring. Clay: dirty grey, full of very coarse grit; soft.

Additional similar Tiles found in Leicestershire

Enquiries at the Rectory Museum in Loughborough revealed the existence of several other fragments of tiles from Garendon Abbey with very similar design characteristics, these having been found during the archaeological excavation there by Loughborough Archaeological and Historical Society. Further work is required to discover if any of the more recent archaeological excavations in Leicester and Leicestershire have revealed similar types of tiles.

Discussion

Tile workshops are thought to have been introduced to Britain by the Romans, the craftsmen being from the Roman military. Whilst local civilians may have learnt the craft from the Romans, there is little evidence to suggest tiling was carried on in Britain for some time after the withdrawal of the Roman forces. (7) Glazed tiles in Britain are rare before about 1225. The first examples of decorated floor tiles found in England are from late tenth century monastic sites including Winchester, Bury St Edmunds, St Albans, Polesworth and York. Eames considers the manufacture of decorated and plain glazed floor tiles was probably fully developed on the continent before being introduced into England, and that the first English examples of medieval tiled pavements were most likely made by foreign tilers. (8) She also suggests that tiles decorated in relief, both glazed and unglazed, are known to have been used in the early period especially in the Rhineland, and it is possible the Rhenish tilers introduced their techniques into medieval England, especially in East Anglia. (9)

It is not until the later part of the twelfth century when a more lasting decorated floor tile industry was established in Britain, that floor tiles and pavements start to appear as part of high status and monastic buildings. These would have been specially commissioned from master craftsmen by wealthy patrons and establishments. Commercially organised workshops producing smaller size tiles on a larger production scale are a feature of the period from the later

thirteenth century onwards when demand for paving tiles significantly increased.

The early geometric designs of tiles of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries are very strongly associated with the Cistercians. The Cistercian order developed in France and spread elsewhere including Britain, and the artistic concepts of the order are also to be found in British Cistercian religious houses. The geometric designs used on the tiles were in keeping with Cistercian beliefs. The French Abbot, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) is credited as the founder of Cistercianism after he became dissatisfied

with what he considered to be ostentatious Benedictine monasticism. (10) St Bernard in his *Apologia*, written c1124-5, condemned the representation of saints, angels, sacred images and bright colours in floor tiles where they would be dirtied and worn. He considered these images to be inappropriate in a monastic building where the simple life, poverty and contemplation prevailed. It was considered quite appropriate for Cistercian monks to be involved in the actual tile-making process. Initially there were no decorated tiled pavements in the Cistercian houses, and there are no pavements in France that can be firmly dated before 1190. However, by the last quarter of the twelfth century decorated tiled pavements became more widely adopted. The early thirteenth century French Cistercian decorated tile pavements typically consisted of elements assembled into geometric designs. These tile designs, unlike many later medieval tile designs,

carry no indication of the benefactor of those establishments. This was also in accordance with the Cistercian principles.

Tile-making required specialist skills. The tiles were made from clay, usually dug locally, and left to weather over winter, with the drier summer months being used to make and fire the tiles. Their manufacture required knowledge and skills in design, wood carving, glass, decoration, slips and glazing, kiln construction and firing. Temperatures required to fire tiles were typically 1000 degrees centigrade, and with no scientific means available to measure kiln temperatures, this had to be done by experience, with variations in temperature partly accounting for why medieval tiles of the same design can appear very different.

The earlier English pavements of the twelfth century may have been made by tilers coming over from continental Cistercian abbeys who then passed on their skills in England. It is also possible that some of the early pavement tiles found in England may have been made on the continent



Tile fragment from Mountsorrel Castle. (Reproduced by permission of Leicestershire County Council, object ref.: LA323.1956.)

and imported by boat. English tiles of the early period are heavy and thick, being very different to modern-day tiles, and quite different even to those of a few hundred years later. Relief tiles are thought to be the oldest decorated type. The technique used for these was to carve the design on a wooden block (a very rare example having been found at Barnstaple and now in the British Museum) in either relief or counter relief, and use the block to impress or stamp the design into the clay tile before it was fired. Such stamps continued to be used until they were worn out, when a replacement was made (if the design was still in vogue), copying the original design, with or without extra embellishments. With no copyright, tilers could re-use designs. Colour, where used, was added by the application of a brown, green or black glaze. Firing required ovens capable of withstanding the extremely high firing temperatures, and a good source of fuel to stoke the fire.

As demand increased and the craft of tiling became established in England, it seems likely that whilst some of



Floor tile fragment from Ulverscroft Priory. (Reproduced by permission of Leicestershire County Council, object ref.: 362IL.1977.1.0.)

the monasteries had their own craftsmen monks or lay brothers making tiles, there were independent master craftsmen tilers becoming established who would have travelled around the country from one commission to the next. If it could be proven that a common tile mould was used for different establishments, this could point to travelling tilers taking their moulds with them. Scientific analysis of the tiles could also cast further light on where the materials used came from. Although little is known about the individual tilers, specialist decorative tile-craftsmen could find themselves in considerable demand and could be called upon by the King to leave a site to carry out royal work instead. It is also thought that the person doing the design or carving the wooden stamps, may have been a different person to the actual tile-maker. (11) In the early period of the craft, tiles were usually made close to where they were to be used, and it has also been suggested that early floor tilers may have joined a local roof tiling workshop, either for the whole of their working life, or temporarily until the time came to move on to another customer elsewhere. (12).

Returning to the Garendon tile and the search for parallels in Europe and in Britain, for the period between 1190-1220, geometric embossed designs have been found in France on pavements at Cîteaux and three of its daughter houses. (13)

Tiles with designs closely comparable to the Leicestershire tiles from Garendon Abbey, Leicester Abbey, Ulverscroft Priory, and Mountsorrel Castle have been identified at Cîteaux itself (14), Pontigny (15), Chaalis near to Paris; and also in Switzerland and in Hungary. The Leicestershire tiles clearly show links between the continent and England.

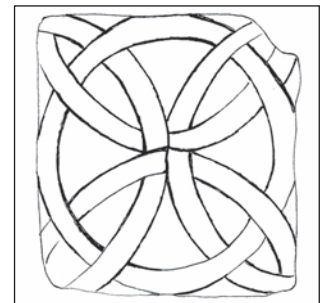
Similar floor tiles have also been found in Britain at Waverley Abbey (founded in 1128 and reconstructed between 1201-08) (16), Warden Abbey, Bedfordshire, (founded 1135); Boxley Abbey, Kent, (founded 1146); and Sawley Abbey, Lancashire, (founded 1148). The tile pavements were possibly not included in the original building work.

Furthermore, a remarkable group of twelfth century tiles and their kiln site have been discovered at North Berwick, East Lothian, Scotland. (17) It was confidently established that the kiln had been the site of tile manufacture for the nearby Cistercian convent which had been established c1150. Among the finds were broken ornamental tiles, wasters and other debris. Richardson concluded that the kiln had been dismantled after the work was complete. The East Lothian floor tile illustrated here is again identical to the Garendon tile. (18) A number of similar designs were also found there.

Writing in 1956, Whitcomb identified eight major groups of medieval floor tiles in Leicestershire over a period of 350 years. The three earliest groups were 'Embossed', 'Wessex' and 'Westminster' which Whitcomb considered 'owed their presence in the county to the importance and accessibility of Leicester'.

Although not precisely dated, the Leicester Abbey, Ulverscroft and Mountsorrel Castle tiles described here were categorised as belonging to the embossed group considered to be the earliest of the medieval floor tile groups in Leicestershire, with parallels elsewhere for which Whitcomb suggested a thirteenth century date. 'These handsome green-glazed tiles may have been ordered for Leicester Abbey when they were the latest fashion, but the skill needed to make them, doubtless resulting in expense, and the discomfort of walking on their bumpy surface may have limited their distribution.' (19) Although not listed in Whitcomb, the Garendon tile clearly belongs to the same embossed type.

Thirty years later, a paper appeared in the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* which was to challenge the dating and development of early medieval tiles



Floor tile from North Berwick convent. (After the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework, 6.1.)

in England. (20) Using the evidence from tiles found during excavations at Orford Castle, the authors demonstrated through the relationship of tiles to building fabric, that tiles found in the oven and fireplace formed part of the original fabric of the castle dating to c1165-67 making the Orford tiles among the earliest glazed floor tiles in the country. With little ceramic building materials surviving for the middle of the twelfth century when the manufacture of ceramics on a significant scale re-started in Britain after the Romans, the Orford tiles are rare datable artefacts from this period. The geometric designs on the Orford tiles were identified as being comparable with Cistercian designs from north-west Europe, especially France, and as 'a type of floor tile which was current there in the later twelfth to early thirteenth centuries'. Whilst it has been thought that the geometric tile designs originated from continental Cistercians, the early dating of tiles with geometric designs at Orford Castle to 1165-7 has raised questions as to whether the original design concept was Cistercian (21), although it is quite possible that the Orford tiles were made elsewhere and shipped into the port of Orford, possibly from the continent.

Firm dates for the Leicestershire examples have not proved possible, but it seems most likely from the foregoing discussion that the tiles discussed here were laid down during the period 1190-1220. Whilst the Orford tiles have some design similarities with the Garendon tile, they are by no means identical and it cannot be said that the Leicestershire embossed / impressed group discussed here are as early as the Orford tiles. (22) However, from the above discussions, it seems likely the Leicestershire tiles may have an earlier start date than originally thought and date to c1190-1220. The major refurbishment work at Mountsorrel Castle between the 1190s and 1217 (23), also suggests an early thirteenth century date or earlier for the Mountsorrel Castle piece of tile, unless it was a later stray from elsewhere, or an unused / unusable tile from elsewhere.

To what extent the common element of the Earls of Leicester and Garendon Abbey, Mountsorrel Castle, Ulverscroft Priory and Leicester Abbey led to a use of common tile designs remains a matter for speculation. All four were high status buildings and the tiles were commensurate with this, being specially commissioned, not commercially produced. What we are seeing in Leicestershire are designs with parallels elsewhere – was the design originally done for the Earl of Leicester and then made use of elsewhere, or were the Leicestershire tiles made by craftsmen who used the design from elsewhere? One notable difference between the three Leicestershire religious foundations is that Garendon Abbey was a Cistercian foundation whilst Leicester Abbey and Ulverscroft Priory were Augustinian. Mountsorrel Castle was not established in a religious context, although it may have had a chapel.

Geometric designs, although extensively used by the Cistercians as a reflection of the order's doctrine, were not exclusive to the order. What the Leicestershire group does also suggest is that not only did the abbeys of one order share designs, but that these were also shared by different orders.

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There is limited evidence for tile-making in medieval Leicestershire, and that which there is belongs to a later period. At St Mary and St Lazarus Hospital, Burton Lazaes - 'the most important Leper Hospital in England' - excavations in 1913 uncovered a large piece of medieval pavement of 100 tiles (now in the British Museum), and a group of round ovens which have been interpreted as kilns. The tiles have been dated to the late fifteenth - early sixteenth century.
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