

## ST. MICHAEL'S, BRENT TOR.

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BRENT TOR, four miles north of Tavistock, "a high rocky place," says Risdon, in his *Survey of Devon*,—written two centuries and a-half ago—"on the top whereof stands a church, full bleak and weather beaten, all alone, as it were forsaken, whose churchyard doth hardly afford depth of earth to bury the dead; yet, doubtless, they rest there as secure as in sumptuous St. Peter's until the day of doom.

"This tor serveth as a mark to sailors who bear with Plymouth haven, which, with Tavistock, whereunto it belongeth, and Milton, maketh a hundred. All which lands, at the suppression of the abbies, were given to the Lord Russell, Lord Privy Seal, and afterwards Earl of Bedford, ancestor of the present Earl of Bedford and Lord Lieutenant of this county, who was sent down into Devonshire as Lord President."

There are numerous instances of towers serving the purposes of beacons and watch towers, as well as belfries. The late Dr. Petrie, and other antiquaries, have clearly proved that the Round Towers of Ireland were intended for these as well as other uses. In that part of Warwickshire known as the Forest of Arden, the ancient spire of Astley Church was the guide of the district, and called the "Lantern of Arden." In the octagonal lantern built over the tower of All Saints' Pavement, York, a large lamp was formerly suspended, which served at night as a beacon to travellers over the extensive forest around. But more commonly the beacon fires were lighted in an iron framework set on the top of an angle turret. There is a turret of this description on St. Michael's Mount, in Cornwall, and at Hadleigh, in Essex, where not only the turret remains, but the iron grate in which the fires were lighted. To mention only one other distant example—Dundry Tower, in Somersetshire, one of the loftiest and best proportioned in that county of noble towers, though attached to a very insignificant church, is built on the crown of a steep

hill, and is visible far down the Bristol channel. It was erected by the merchant adventurers of Bristol, in the 15th century, as a landmark for seamen, and is remarkable not only as a beacon, but for the beauty of its design and the boldness of its proportions.

One of the most ancient edifices of this class in England is the subject of this short paper, the little beacon church on Brent Tor, which, whether we regard its antiquity, use, or situation, is altogether a curious structure.

Brent Tor, or *Bren*, as it is still sometimes called in the locality (from the Saxon word *Brennen*, to burn), in the British period was no doubt a beacon on which wood turf and other fuel was burnt by way of signal. There was probably a line of beacons on the Dartmoor tors, and the intelligence of invasion or distress would be communicated by a rapid succession of beacon fires. The present edifice, erected in the 13th century, but perpetuated and emphasised the purpose to which the hill had been devoted from a remote time. It was the church's consecration of the Tor as a "famous sea mark," and not unlikely (though opposed to the common tradition) the building was erected by the abbots of Tavistock, to whom the lands belonged, who, in this, as in other ways, would be likely to turn their piety to practical account.

Most of the church is contemporaneous with the earliest existing remains of the abbey, with those very beautiful portions of an Early English arcade and arch in the Tavistock churchyard. Tradition says, but the story is not very ingenious, that the foundations of the little church were at first laid at the foot of the mount in a position more convenient for church goers; but that the devil, of whose personality and active interference in ecclesiastical matters there were so many ocular proofs in the middle ages, removed the stones by night from the base to the top, from no preference, it is presumed, to the loftier site, but with the intention of frustrating the project altogether. In this he was disappointed; for the builders continued their labours at the summit, though often harassed by furious winds and the visits of the arch enemy. On its completion, however, and immediately after its dedication to St. Michael, the patron saint hurled upon the devil such a tremendous mass of rock, that he beat a hasty retreat, and never again ventured near the sacred building; so that the beacon lights which were afterwards set up on the top of the tower were never once extinguished by the prince of darkness.

An inscription on the south wall, which is referred to in

most notices of the church (but now I believe concealed by plaster), has probably served to keep alive a tradition not yet altogether discredited, it is said, by some natives of the moor:—“*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*”

But as there is no smoke without some fire, so probably there are few traditions which have not a show of verity on which to rest, especially of an age when all truth was expressed by symbols and legends, when all ideas of good were centred in the guardian angel, and of evil in the devil; when the spirit divine was diffused

“Through forms of human art,”

and when, as Coleridge expresses it, the material church itself became the petrification of religion.

The real incidents connected with the erection of a church on this rugged and desolate peak—the opposition not only of the elements, but of the wild and heathenish inhabitants of the neighbourhood, would afford sufficient material for the imaginative, though not necessarily superstitious, monk of Tavistock—the novelist of the age—out of which to weave this romantic story, with a moral at its close.

Fuller, in his *English Worthies*, describes the inhabitants of an adjoining village, called the Gubbins, as a “lawless Scythian sort of people,” a wild and well nigh savage race in *his* time. It may be presumed that they were in a still more barbarous state three centuries previously; and I venture to suggest that the Gubbins were the evil disposed and evil possessed spirits who, from a strong aversion to the inroads of civilization, endeavoured to pull down this church (probably the first erected on the moor) as fast as it was being built up, and who, on the day of consecration, when the priest first said mass, and the psalm of praise was first chanted on the tor, became alarmed at the moral force arrayed against them, and *fled*. There is also another tradition which ascribes the erection of the church to a merchant who, overtaken by a great storm at sea, vowed that if he escaped in safety he would build a church upon the first point of land which should appear in sight. This happened to be Brent Tor, and here accordingly he fulfilled his vow, in a manner, it must be admitted, consistent with the utmost economy, the church being exceedingly plain, and as small as it well could be. In extenuation, however of the merchant’s apparent niggardliness, it may be said that an ornate structure would have been out of place in such a position (except that the gods see

everywhere—an æsthetic consideration, not much regarded, I fear, by those who have to count the cost), and the present edifice has always been found sufficiently commodious for those who have been anxious to attend service therein.

The building consists of a nave 37 ft. 6 in. long, and 14 ft. 9 in. in width, with a tower open to it about 8 ft. square, and a porch on the north side. There is no developed chancel, but the floor at the eastern portion of the church is raised one step, and at a distance of between 10 and 11 feet from the east wall there was probably in the middle ages a low stone screen.

There is a narrow doorway on the south as well as on the north side, and the church is lighted by two small Early English lancet windows, only 7 inches wide, and a modern window at the east end, of an altogether incongruous description.

Most writers, in speaking of this church, and referring to old records, state that there was a church on this tor as early as 1283, and suggest that a second edifice was afterwards erected. From a careful examination of the building, I am satisfied that the present, with some few later insertions, is the original church, and that it even dates back probably half a century earlier than the year alluded to as of the first church. The general character of the masonry, as I have said before, is Early English. The small lights, the doorways, and the battlemented parapet which surrounds the church, undoubtedly belong to that era of church architecture. The walls of the church, it is hardly necessary to say (as they have stood so long), are sufficiently substantial, being generally 3 feet in thickness. The masonry is of dark brown stone, apparently ironstone, what are technically called the dressings being of the green slate stone from the neighbourhood of this town: and it is interesting to see in this latter stonework how the beautiful though simple lines and curves of the Early English style have been adopted even in this lonely and unfrequented little church. If, in this 19th century, we built a church on a tor (an unlikely thing, I admit), we should probably employ our roughest hands, thinking that anything would do in such a situation, begrudging a moulding or a leaf; but the monks of Tavistock, whilst no doubt they employed the moor men for the plain masonry, yet reserved some *few* portions for the tender and delicate handling of the skilled workmen, and thus shewed as well their piety as their taste.

Granite has not been used in the building, nor, I believe,

does the tor contain it. Polwhele, in his *Devon*, says, "Brent Tor, and several other tors on the west side of the river, are undoubtedly volcanic. Brent Tor is very curious; it being one mass of hill, rising to a great height from a perfect plane, and entirely divested of every thing of the kind besides itself, and differing from all other tors which we visited. We found it covered, between the rocks, with a fine verdure, and every indication of a very rich soil, far different from the heath which surrounds it. We brought away some bits of the rock, which in general is a deep rusty blue, inclining to black, hard and heavy, with pores here and there as if worm-eaten; some of the pores contain a little of a brownish red earth, but whether of the ochre kind we could not determine. Near the top of the tor some pieces were found more porous, even resembling a cinder, or piece of burnt bread, and very light. Another observation was very striking, that this tor does not contain a single particle of granite that we could discover. In this it differs from most of the other tors we visited, though we found some on the west side of the river Lid, which contained stones of a similar porosity. From the above observations, we were led to believe that this remarkable tor was the effect or remains of some long-ago extinguished volcano; as, in its appearance, situation, soil, strata, &c., it argues strongly for it."

An idea has been very generally entertained, that in digging burial places at this spot the rock is found to be so saturated with moisture that the excavation is in a short time filled with water. The fact is, however, the ground is as dry here as in other churchyards; and the notion doubtless originated in an incident which is said to have occurred after a heavy fall of rain, when, a coffin having been brought for interment, the grave was found partly filled with water, which had been directed into it by the shute from the roof of the church. There is, however, no lack of water on the hill; as on its eastern side a spring gushes forth which has never been known to fail.

The little church is only between 10 and 11 feet high from the floor to the ridge, and has a massive and moulded oak roof covered with heavy lead, the inclination of the timbers from the walls to the ridge being about 12 inches. The tower is about 40 feet high, and, like the rest of the building, very plain, and has three small lights, one of which was an insertion of the 15th century. Suspended from the side, or on the top, it is more than probable that a fire grill was formerly placed.

There is a single bell which I was unable to get at, but on it is said to be the inscription "*Gallus vocor ego, solus per omne sono.*"

There are no monuments, and indeed scarcely any epitaphs, so that the old English proverb, "He lies like an epitaph," is not verified here. There is, however, one rude inscription, which may be deemed worthy of notice; "Heare under this stone lieth the bodie of John Cole, jun., of Litton, who departed this life the 23rd of November, 1694, æta: 22. Also Johan, his sister, who was buried the 1st of February, 1694, æta: 11!

"If thou be serious (friend) peruse this stone;  
If thou be not soe, pray, let it alone.  
Against death's poison, vertue's the best art;  
When good men seem to die, they but depart.  
Live well: then at the last with us thou 'lt feele  
Bare dying makes not death, but dying ill!"

At the western end of the church, in its original position near the north porch, is an ancient octagonal font, without carving and very plain, but in a good state of preservation.

This, then, concludes my brief account of the little church of St. Michael's, Brent Tor, which for 600 years has stood on this singular peak, "all alone, as if forsaken," but which has fulfilled for this long period its office of mercy as a landmark for sailors.

It is interesting to know that England, in her earliest, as in her latest history, has had her beacon towers and light-houses for the tempest-tossed mariners of all nations; that

. . . . . "That pale and white faced shore  
Whose foot spurns back the ocean's roaring tides,  
And coops from other lands her islanders;  
. . . . . that England, hedged in with the main,  
That water-walled bulwark, still secure  
And confident from foreign purposes,"

has presented on the highest peaks, and on the most desolate parts of her coast, these proofs of her civilization, these unerring symbols of her people's humanity.