



Glastonbury, Somerset

Γλαστίνγκαμπα

Abbey church of St Peter and St Paul

Foundations

Cross-shaft fragment

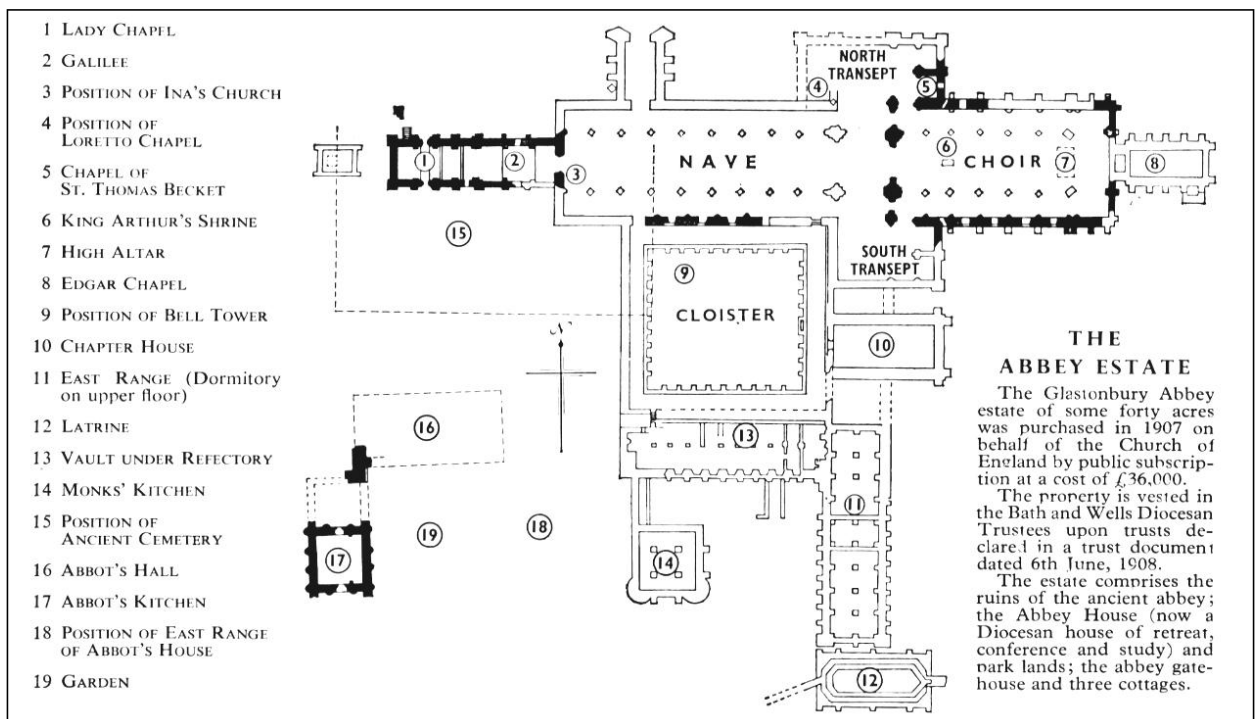
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Our chief guide in any enquiry about the origins of Glastonbury must be William of Malmesbury. He was both a local man and one of the leading historians of his age. About 1120, at the invitation of the monks, he composed a book on the antiquities of the Church of Glastonbury. This has survived only in a later and much interpolated edition, but William's text can be largely recovered from parallel passages in his work on the Deeds of the Kings. When assessing these works it is necessary to remember that the author had enjoyed the hospitality of the abbey and would be loath to deal too drastically with cherished legends, which attracted pilgrims to the site. In more than one place we can sense the critical outlook of the historian overshadowed by the guest anxious not to displease his hosts.

William of Malmesbury opens his account of Glastonbury with the story of King Lucius, a legendary British ruler of the C2, who went to Rome. Pope Eleutherius provided him with missionaries, who converted the people and established the Old Church of St. Mary at

Glastonbury. The story of King Lucius had long received the authority of Bede, but it was at variance with another Glastonbury tradition, also recorded by William. This ascribed the foundation of the Old Church to the actual disciples of Christ. It is clear that the historian attached little credence to these stories, which he dismissed as fanciful opinions, going on to state that he would "leave disputable matters and gird himself for the narration of solid fact".

The next paragraphs record the connections of Glastonbury with a number of the greatest saints of the Celtic world, including St. Patrick, "with whom the story of our records begins to come clear". St. Patrick, the apostle of Ireland, worked in the second quarter of the fifth century and his death is normally placed in AD 461. This is the age to which William ascribes the real beginnings of Glastonbury as he had disentangled them from the records of the abbey, most of which perished in the fire of 1184. In passing it may be noted that he apparently knows of no connection with Joseph of



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Arimathea, who figures so largely in the latest mediæval traditions.

The excavations on the site of the abbey have so far failed to yield any remains dating before the age to which the examination of historical sources has led us. The numerous fragments of Romano-British pottery recovered on the site have been found in layers of clay brought in in the C12 and C13 to level up the floors of the Church and of other buildings. But the very existence of a great British monastery on this isolated island – the “Island of Avalon” – calls for some further explanation.

Glastonbury consists of a series of small hills projecting into the marshes of central Somerset and linked to the main uplands by a narrow tongue of land running SE and now carrying the road to Shepton Mallet. At its lowest point, some 1½ miles from the Abbey, this tongue is barred by a massive bank and ditch known as Pinter’s Ball. This runs from marsh edge to marsh edge, barring the only landward approach to the “island”. Early excavations show that this barrier was thrown up during the pre-Roman Iron Age, probably C3bc. As a military obstacle the earthwork does not make sense; it could be too easily turned at either end.

It is most easily explicable as the temenos of enclosure of a great pagan Celtic sanctuary. Analogy suggests that the focus of this sanctuary, the sacred grove or high place, must be sought near a hill beside a spring. Chalice Well, the principal spring on the island, lies immediately below the highest summit, Glastonbury Tor, which is crowned by the chapel of St Michael. The present building dates from C14 and C15, but we know that a chapel stood on the hill before 1275, when it was thrown down in an earthquake. We may suspect that this was the successor of many shrines, Christian and pre-Christian.

The existence of a great pagan sanctuary on the “island” would explain the coming of the earliest missionaries. The old high place once sanctified by the erection of a Christian chapel, the newcomers might well choose to settle in the more sheltered and convenient site where the abbey later arose. The core and centre of the new Christian monastery was the ancient cemetery lying around the Lady Chapel, which itself occupied the site of the Old Church of St Mary. Set within and alongside this cemetery were a number of small chapels or oratories. Traditionally these were built of wattles, plastered with clay and remains of buildings of this type have been disclosed by

excavation within the cemetery. A few survived in a rebuilt form until the Reformation and even later. The most conspicuous is St Patrick’s Chapel, commemorating a connection with the saint of that name, identified at an early date as the apostle of Ireland. The present stone building dates from c. 1500.

The cemetery itself bears ample evidence of long and intensive use. Slab-lined graves of the earliest period are packed together in an endeavour to obtain burial as near as possible to the oratories and tombs of the saints, which studded the area. Such burial was an eagerly-sought privilege, which the great men of the neighbourhood would wish to acquire for themselves. Among those interred in the cemetery at Glastonbury was “King” Arthur, the heroic British general of the early sixth century, who for a generation and more halted the pagan Saxon advance across the island. His grave, which has recently been identified in the cemetery south of the Lady Chapel, was opened in 1191 and his remains, together with those of his consort, were translated into a shrine in the choir of the church. The site of this shrine was located in earlier excavations and is now marked in the grass, just east of the crossing of the Great Church.

Outside the cemetery the early monastery would have included cells for the monks, and a number of other buildings such as a refectory, a guesthouse and a school. The eastern side of which was located under the site of the later transept and chapter house.

In the course of the seventh century Somerset was conquered by the Saxons, who were now Christians. They took over the monastery and gave it fresh endowments. Their great king, Ina of Wessex, also created a stone church, the foundations of which were discovered 6’ down below the floor at the west end of the later nave. Ina’s church lay east of the Old Church of wattle and illustrates the tendency in Saxon monasteries to erect a series of churches set along an axis running E and W. It became the principal church of Glastonbury and was enlarged in the eighth century and again by St Dunstan, who was Abbot of Glastonbury before his election. In 960, as Archbishop of Canterbury. But the principal interest of the work carried out by Dunstan lies in the monastic buildings erected to the south of the church. Their erection is foreshadowed in a passage in the earliest life of the saint. When yet a young man he saw in a vision an angel measuring

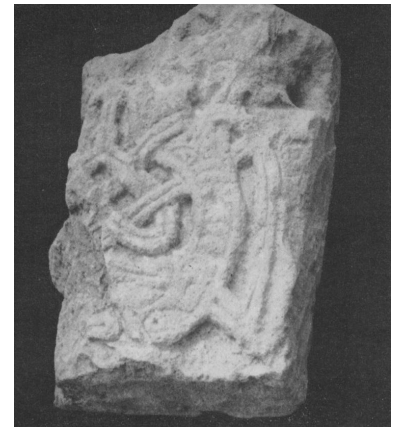
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out the houses and courts of a noble monastery and was told that he would later become abbot and build these.

Excavation S of the ancient cemetery has disclosed a long range running N and S with a return westward near the centre of the block. The latest excavations have also disclosed a further range enclosing the same court on the W side. Here we have an arrangement resembling the later cloister, an arrangement in sharp distinction to the scattered buildings of the British monastery. Glastonbury is

the earliest example of this layout in England and we may suspect the idea was learnt by St Dunstan during his exile on the Continent. At Glastonbury the remains of these buildings are much disturbed by later work, but the lias walls, the hard mortar and the stone-slabbed pavements have been picked up at many points.

*C. A. Raleigh Radford, D Litt, F.B.A., F.S.A.:
from The Pictorial History of Glastonbury Abbey:
Pitkin Pictorials Ltd., 11 Wyfold Road,
London SW6.*



Above:

*Fragment of a cross from
St Dunstons Abbey*

Left:

*A wall and pavement
belonging to the Abbey
buildings erected by
St Dunstan*

*Photographs from a Guide to
Glastonbury Abbey: published
by Pitkin Pictorial, 1969*