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**Report On a Search For the Site of the Chapel of St. Blasius,  
Henbury**

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## REPORT ON A SEARCH FOR THE SITE OF THE CHAPEL OF ST. BLASIUS, HENBURY.

By J. ALLEN BARTLETT.

THERE was traditionally a Chapel dedicated to St. Blasius somewhere on the hill in Henbury Parish, now crowned by the summer house known as Blaise Castle, but no record of its form, date or site has been vouchsafed us, either in writing or in local remembrance. A note exists to the effect that it had long been in ruins, and that the foundations were entirely cleared away in 1707; and this operation was so thoroughly performed that no stone remained, no indications marred the turf with which the summit of the hill is crowned. The late Canon Way was under the impression that some ruins existed near the Castle in his boyhood's day, but the eradication of the very foundations in 1707 seem to preclude the possibility that these ruins were those of the Chapel itself. There are no indications on any of the available maps of the district, and in view of the absence of any details, the existence of the Chapel itself had of recent years been questioned by some antiquaries.

There is documentary evidence of a Chapel dedicated to the Saxon St. Werburgha on Henbury Hill, and this has been the subject of a recent monograph by Dr. H. Wilkins, the Vicar of Westbury. The learned Doctor is at some pains to suggest that the two Chapels, St. Blasius and St. Werburgha, may have been identical, but he quite overlooks the fact that Henbury Hill *in salso marisco*, which is expressly stated to be the site of St. Werburgha's Chapel in the documents he quotes, is in the Parish of Westbury, and separated from the hill of Blaise by the ravine of Haseldene and the River

Hasel, now commonly called the Hen. The two summits are half a mile apart ; and the portion of Henbury Hill which may be considered *in salso marisco*, i.e. the low-lying ground towards Sea Mills and in the valley of the Trym, would be considerably more distant. It is quite possible that some indications of the Henbury Hill chapel, may remain on the south and western slopes of the hill, and that diligent search may eventually recover the site ; but it would appear to be abundantly clear that St. Werburgha's on Henbury Hill and St. Blasius on Blaise Hill were distinct chapels, the former served by the Parish Church of Westbury and the latter very probably by the Church of Henbury. The indications of a paved path running from Blaise in a direct line with Henbury Church tower seem to give strength to this suggestion.

In the summer of 1918 the writer of this report undertook the search for the lost site of St. Blasius, by the kind permission of Major Harford, the owner of the estate.

A preliminary investigation revealed no trace of anything above ground which could suggest an ecclesiastical origin, with the possible exception of one or two pieces of freestone, reddened by fire, which are built into the rockery surrounding the Castle. Some fragments of bastard Gothic—old window-heads and wasters from the Castle—lay hidden in a bed of nettles, and the little building known as Lady Astley's summer house shows some quite good examples of the Queen Anne Gothic of that date, viz. 1708. Soundings with a crowbar were fruitless, for the surface of the virgin rock varies from 8 in. to 3 ft. below the turf. The total area within the Romano-British fortress is perhaps three acres, and the fact that the explorer is no longer young and was single-handed quite precluded any extensive trenching in the hard and stony soil with no implements other than a shovel, a small spade and a moot-axe. He decided, therefore, to economise his energies, and trusting to luck and to what may perhaps be best described as a dowsing instinct for

hidden foundations, he decided to sink a pit, 4 ft. square, some 20 ft. east of the Castle.

At 15 in. from the surface a filling of rough limestone was encountered, to many blocks of which a brown, fine-ground lime mortar, very typical of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, still adhered. On removing this to a depth of 3 ft. 6 in. a surface of rock, levelled and covered with a thick bed of the same brown mortar, came to light. Its eastern edge was marked by a step or face cut to the depth of about 1 in. in the solid rock, and running north and south. This mortar-bed, with its loose stone filling, was then followed for some 20 ft. north and south, where it terminated in the roots of angle buttresses.

Here and there lay a few stones evidently on their original setting, and it became increasingly evident that this was the foundation of the west wall of a mediæval building. True, the indications were all too slight; but the writer has had many years' experience as an excavator at Worspring Priory, and later with his friend, Mr. Bligh Bond, at Glastonbury Abbey, and he has no doubt whatever that a wall existed on this foundation. Unfortunately, the soil being so shallow, there were no clay faces, as at Glastonbury, to preserve the dimensions of the walls themselves. The mortar-bed, however, showed a distinct raised platform, in places some 2 ft. 6 in. in width, from which it may be inferred that the wall-thickness must have been 2 ft. or a trifle over. Excavation followed east and west, with occasional cross-trenching, and eventually revealed the mortar-bed of a rectangular building 28 ft. by 14 ft. internal measurement, and with buttresses mid way along its north and south walls. Very little stone in position is left, but much of the limestone filling is covered with the same brown mortar, and small fissures in the rock below are filled and levelled with rough masonry. At the east end of the building there appears to have been a platform, and in front of this a fissure or trench, some 6 ft. in its greatest depth, extended north and

south across the building, The body of the building was probably flagged with  $1\frac{1}{2}$ .in. lias slabs, fragments of which were turned up, and the altar platform may have been floored with small red tiles, hard-baked, and with black cores, of which a quantity of fragments were unearthed. The presence of a good deal of brown plaster whose surface still bears a wash of red ochre suggests that the interior of the building may have been thus faced and coloured.

Several fragments of lias roofing-tiles, drilled for nails, and a number of nails intended evidently for the purpose, may represent the roofing, for this was a very usual type of roof-covering in mediæval times, especially in exposed situations. Mr. Hudd, however, who kindly went over the site recently with the writer, is of opinion that these tiles are Roman.

Fragments of architectural detail are unfortunately conspicuous by their absence. A small piece of fourteenth to fifteenth-century mullion, a plain chamfer which may have been the corner of a simple plinth, and a doubtful string mould (thirteenth century), constitute the list. The few additional pieces of freestone encountered bear no moulding whatever.

The inference derivable from the data available is : that a buttressed building, fourteenth to fifteenth century, 28 ft. by 14 ft., once occupied this site ; that it was built of uncoursed limestone masonry, paved to the west with lias slabs and at its eastern end with small red tiles ; that it was plastered and coloured with red ochre internally ; and that it may have been roofed with stone tiles, strongly nailed.

During the course of the excavations several skeletons and many incomplete portions were found lying close to the foundations, and buried from 4 ft. to 5 ft. below the surface ; and a brief reference to these interments may be advisable at this point. Bearing in mind the limited nature of the exploration, and the number of skeletons and bones discovered,

it is evident that the building was the centre of a well-filled burial-ground. The graves examined were cut in the solid rock, the bodies were placed with head to the west in the orthodox fashion, and are covered by a layer of stones which are sometimes roughly mortared in place. Above this the grave is filled in with loose stones, and there is about a foot of earth over all.

The skull of the interment marked No. 1 on Plan, was submitted to Professor E. Fawcett, of Bristol University, and he unhesitatingly declared it to be a mediæval skull of a high type. The orientation is in favour of this hypothesis; but the fact that the opposing surfaces of the very perfect set of teeth were ground perfectly flat suggested a far earlier period to the writer of this report.

Lying beneath the metacarpals of the skeleton No. 2 on Plan was the roughly-shaped stag-horn handle of a knife or dagger whose blade had long since vanished, leaving but a trace of oxide along the line that it had once occupied.

No. 3 on Plan was that of a tall man, some 6 ft. 3 in. in height.

Under the altar platform were the remains of a skeleton, including skull-cap, a few lumbar vertebræ, fragments of ribs, one humerus, portions of the pelvis, and the two femurs and tibiæ complete. The head was to the east, and in all probability this was the grave of a presbyter, perhaps the ministering priest of the chapel. A few inches to the south was the femur of a young person.

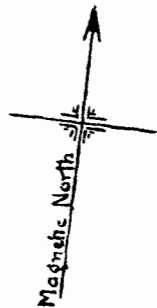
At No. 5 on Plan were three interments superimposed, and the latest of these encroached on the wall foundation. In addition to these graves there are several patches of quicklime, two to three inches in thickness, and covering an area 6 ft. by 3 ft., which may have been post-Reformation burials of plague victims from Henbury or Westbury. These interments are mentioned more especially for their evidential value in support of the theory that the buttressed building in their midst was indeed the lost Chapel of St.

Blaise. Of Roman remains on the site there were considerable traces. In the first place there were a good many fragments of red roofing tile; and the presence of these rather strengthens the writer's opinion that the stone roofing slabs belong rather to the little Christian chapel. The numerous nails of various sizes may be both Roman and mediæval.

Scattered over the entire area, but especially in and in the neighbourhood of the trench in front of the altar were a large quantity of potsherds, Romano-British in character, and evidently portions of cinerary urns. In the trench, where these fragments lay at the bottom of the cavity, upon the solid rock there was a noticeable deposit of black, greasy soot — very probably the remains of the original contents of the vessels. The potsherds were usually formed from a slate-coloured clay in which gleaming white particles of quartz had been incorporated previous to burning. Some, however, were thinner-walled and much lighter in colour, and one fragment was ornamented with a rough lattice pattern incised with a sharp implement. There was also one piece of red Samian ware, with a raised design, apparently a dragon-fly.

Under the altar was a fragment of green sandstone roughly curved, and with a groove following the line of the curve. No stone of a similar type is to be found in the neighbourhood, and it may have been the corner-piece or "horn" of a Roman altar. Mr. Hudd is inclined to think it Roman, and in view of the Roman tiling, the hard grey Roman mortar, Roman plaster lined in Indian Red, and the coins present in the neighbourhood of the altar platform, it is suggested that, as often happens, a Roman shrine or temple may have occupied the site prior to the erection of the first Christian chapel.

Two pieces of bone sharpened to a point, like a stylus, were in the neighbourhood of the trench; but it is difficult to assign a date to them.



— PLAN OF BLAISE CHAPEL FOOTINGS —

J. Allen Southall.

Scale = One sixtieth.

Roughly stepped paving  
HENBURY CH. →  
800 Yds. (1) Grave

Black Soil.  
5. 2"

(2) Grave.

Paving

(5) Bones.

Rock  
or 8"

Bones

Loose stone filling.  
3. 6" to 4."

(4) Graves

Rock  
or 16"

? West Porch.

Pieces of bias paving:

Red tile fragments.

Bones.

Grave

(3) Grave

Grave.

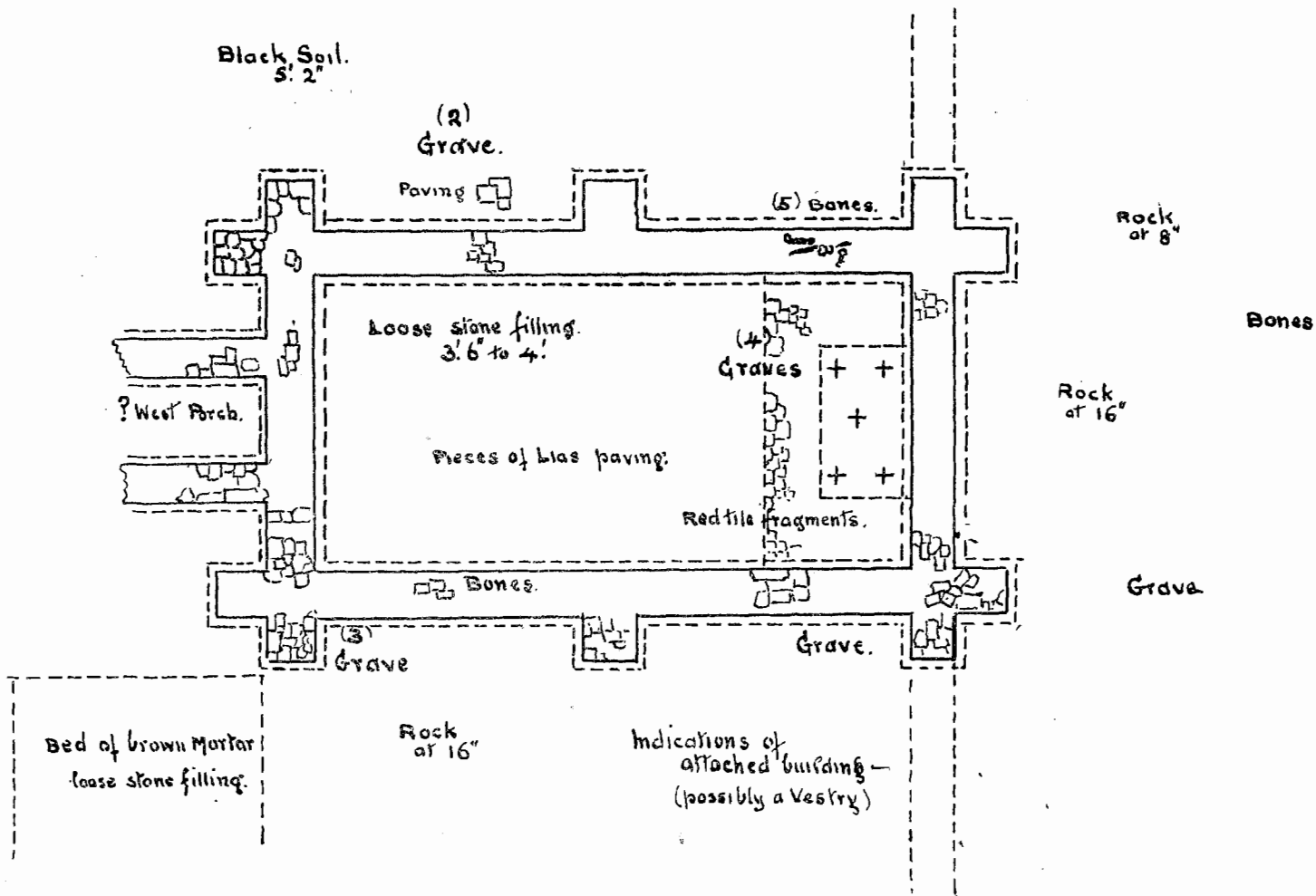
BLAISE CASTLE

BUILT 1768.

Bed of brown mortar  
loose stone filling.

Rock  
or 16"

Indications of  
attached building —  
(possibly a Vestry)



The Roman coins included a very perfect Nerva 2nd brass; coins of the Constantine family; Constantinus; two Constantine the Great; two Magnantius, and coins of Valentinus and Gratian. There are also a number of minims, probably British. These coins were submitted to Mr. Hudd, to whose knowledge of numismatology their identification is due.

Of the earlier settlement nothing was found except a fair number of accredited flint-flakes, and one small arrow-head minus its tip, which may have been used for birds or small game.

Several pits were sunk in various parts of the plateau down to the level of the solid rock, which is everywhere from one to three feet below the turf; and everywhere pottery and hard grey mortar were found, but no trace of the great vault 40 ft. by 20 ft., full of bones, which is supposed to have been discovered in 1718. It may possibly lie north of the Castle, beneath the deep deposit of black soil, or again it may not have been within the area of the camp at all. But the whole area appears to be full of Roman or Romano-British pottery and mortar; and it is possible that a more complete and exhaustive examination of this eastern citadel of Abone might be productive of interesting results.