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Bronze closing ring from St Nicholas Church, Gloucester

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One of the most interesting features of the survey is the occurrence of four Minchinhampton tenants surnamed 'fuller', probably the earliest evidence of the cloth industry in a region of which it was to be the shaping force. A number of mills are mentioned, among which can be identified Stoneford Mill at Chalford and the mill by the ancient river-crossing at Dudbridge, but there is no evidence that any were yet fulling-mills; none of the fullers occupies a mill and presumably they were still carrying on their trade by the primitive walking process, although conceivably using the ponds or sluices of the corn-mills. A few other trade surnames occur, including that of a merchant, and a smith and a carpenter held from Avening manor by their service. Other tenants, surnamed from their place of abode, provide evidence that the slopes of the Frome valley were already fairly well populated, with settlements established at Chalford, Cowcombe, Hyde, Besbury, Burleigh, and Brimscombe. Among the tenants' forenames, the Saxon ones, such as Edric, Gudmund, and Ailward, still predominate over the Norman Roberts and Williams.

One of the most characteristic features of the region, the extensive beechwoods, figure in the survey in the tenants' complaint that whereas they once drove herds of some 3,000 swine to mast in Gatcombe, Cowcombe, Hazel wood, Windsorage, and the other woods of the manors, the felling of timber for sale and for charcoal-burning had reduced by about half the numbers that could be pastured. The tenants also mentioned the woods on the high ground in the west part of Minchinhampton and in Rodborough, which in later centuries came to be distinguished as 'custom woods' where the inhabitants could take timber, and which were gradually cleared to produce the open commons that survive today. One large assart had already been made in the woodland on the boundary of Minchinhampton and Rodborough and was called in the survey *magna roda* (which Professor R. E. Latham suggests is a Latinization of O.E. *rod*, a clearing), and the word apparently supplied the origin of the local place-name, the Road, and possibly also the first element of Rodborough.

N. M. HERBERT

BRONZE CLOSING RING FROM ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, GLOUCESTER

After many years of dwindling congregations, St Nicholas church in Westgate Street was finally closed for worship in 1967. On 7 May 1971, it was declared redundant under the Pastoral Measure 1968, and at the time of writing its future still remains in doubt.

The church, which still retains Norman features, was well-known as having a 'sanctuary knocker' on its south door (see PLATE). This object is not a knocker in the accepted sense of the word since it lacks a beating plate, but is more properly an elaborate form of closing ring, and is an outstanding example of English medieval metalwork. It is in superb condition having been protected from the weather by the church porch which was first built in 1347, not long after the date of the closing ring itself.¹ In October 1969 the ring was lent to Gloucester City Museum by the vicar and churchwardens, and two years later it was bought outright by the Museum for £5,000. The National Art-Collections Fund made a generous gift of £2,000 towards the purchase and the Department of Education and Science, through the Victoria and Albert Museum, contributed a further £1,500.

The closing ring consists of a hexagonal escutcheon measuring approximately 239 mm by 261 mm. The plate varies between 5 and 6 mm in thickness, and has been pierced to take ten square-taper headed iron spikes with which it was fixed to the church door.

The principal motif, cast in high relief, is that of a grotesque with a human head, flowing locks, long pointed ears, short stumpy wings and hairy forelegs each ending in a paw with four digits with sharp claws. The ring passes round the attenuated neck of the grotesque.

The secondary motif, back to back with the grotesque, is a human face with open mouth and protruding tongue. This figure is wearing a close-fitting 'balaclava'-like head-dress which covers

1. *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, xxiii, 113, 117, 124.

the hair and ears and reaches to the point of the chin. Indeed, were it not for the position of the ring this secondary figure might well have formed the principal motif, for the grotesque appears to be an embellishment to the head-dress.

At the top of the escutcheon is a group of stylized foliage raised on a stem. A similar, and perhaps originally smaller, group of foliage is placed at the bottom of the escutcheon, but this has been much battered and broken by the action of the ring.

The bronze was cast as a single piece by the *cire perdue* method—a very considerable technical achievement. Its design is curious and would repay further study, but it is probably a purely fanciful creation of the medieval craftsman, comparable with those half-human, half-animal creatures to be found in illuminated MSS of the 13th and 14th centuries.

The naturalistic foliage at the top and bottom of the escutcheon has been compared with that on the Warwick gittern, now in the British Museum, which has in turn been dated from the foliage on the capitals in the chapter-house of Southwell Minster, built *c.* 1290–5. On this evidence the date of the closing ring is considered to be either very late 13th or more probably first quarter of the 14th century.

Considering its importance this piece has received singularly little attention. The earliest illustration so far traced appears to be a rather crude engraving in *Specimens of the Ancient Sculpture and Painting now remaining in England . . .* by Dawson Turner (1780–7). It is described, not particularly accurately, and illustrated in the *Journal* of the British Archaeological Association, XVIII (1912), 161, and there are passing references to it in the *Transactions* of our Society (XIV, 131, and XXIII, 119–20).

I am indebted to Mr M. R. Taylor, formerly Assistant Keeper in the British Museum Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities, for information regarding the dating of this piece.

J. N. TAYLOR

'THE DYMOCK CURSE'

On display in the Folk Museum at Gloucester is a small lead tablet, measuring $3\frac{1}{4}$ by $3\frac{1}{8}$ ins, engraved with symbols of the occult, an imprecation 'to Banish away from this place and country' and the name, written backwards, of Sarah Ellis. The Museum has dated the tablet to the second half of the 17th century, after the publication in 1651 of a popular English translation by J. Freake of a well-known 16th-century work, Henry Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. The tablet was discovered by Canon R. Horton at Wilton Place, Dymock, in 1892, and acquired by the Museum at the Wilton Place sale in 1947. It is briefly described and illustrated as 'The Dymock Curse' in J. E. Gethyn-Jones, *Dymock down the ages* (2nd edn, 1966), 104–5.¹

Canon Horton carried out 'a great deal of investigation' in attempts to identify Sarah Ellis without success, but there is a local legend that the curse so affected the woman that she committed suicide and was buried at the cross roads still called Ellis's Cross near Four Oaks.² One would not expect Sarah's burial to be recorded in a parish register, but no other member of the Ellis family occurs in the Dymock parish registers.³

Ellis's Cross is actually situated on the parish boundary between Dymock and Oxenhall, and an adjoining field in Oxenhall is named Elliss Close on an estate map of 1775.⁴ The Oxenhall parish registers were destroyed in a fire at the vicarage in 1664, but the earliest surviving volume contains two entries relating to an Ellis family.⁵ Jane, daughter of Anthony Ellis was baptized on 7 September

1. A longer description of the tablet and its discovery is given in E. S. Hartland, 'On an inscribed leaden tablet found at Dymock, in Gloucestershire', *The Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist*, III, no. 3 (July 1897), 140–50.

2. Gloucester City Museum, letter from H. Trubshaw to Mrs Thackwell, 9 Nov. 1929.

3. I. Gray and J. E. Gethyn-Jones, *The registers of the church of St. Mary, Dymock, 1538–1790* (B.G.A.S., 1960).

4. Gloucestershire Records Office, Photocopy 5.

5. Glos. R.O., P241/IN 1/1.

ST NICHOLAS CHURCH, GLOUCESTER



Photo: Carl Ainley