

Keystones of Britain's history



The Hedda Stone

by James Stevens Curl

Throughout the ages, religious architecture has often been the most distinguished any society can produce. I would include the tomb within that category: funerary and ecclesiastical architecture are often closely connected, although the detached mausoleum can often be very fine, standing alone as a great work untroubled by considerations of changes of use or the need to be “updated.”

Today, it is evident that religion is hugely important in geo-political terms (contrary to received opinion in the West which, in its catatonic state of liberal delusion, has ignored obvious signals for the last 50 years) and it is likely to become a dominant issue as we move uncertainly through the 21st century.

For many decades I have been involved in higher education, and I have been appalled by how disconnected are the products of our schools from even a rudimentary knowledge of religion and its manifestations in artefacts and buildings. Study visits to cathedrals and churches usually meant explanations of basic liturgical requirements, definitions of terms (including the distinctions between symbols and allegories) and much else as well.

It was obvious that a great many, probably a majority, of youngsters had never set foot in a church before and had not a clue what it signified, what it was for, or what any part of the building or its furnishings meant. Several were overawed,

even terrified by the buildings, not ever having experienced anything like the powerful manipulation of volumes and solids to be found in great architecture stuffed with meanings.

Further probings revealed something even more worrying: most youngsters had no sense of connection whatsoever with the history or culture of these islands. They were adrift, completely unaware of the immense riches that can still speak to us of our past – a past which far too many “educationalists” wish to see obliterated.

I recall taking a group to a sequence of churches, to show them Anglo-Saxon remains, Romanesque grandeur, then the evolution of the Pointed style (aka Gothic) and the flowering of the most original architecture England ever produced in its so-called Perpendicular Gothic, which emerged in the 14th century and continued well into the early 17th century.

I explained how such buildings were integral to society, how chantries worked, and how important it was at one time to care for the dead. Two students came to me in tears, asking why they knew nothing of any of this and questioning the disgraceful gaps in their education that left them so bereft.

Ever since (at an early age) I became conscious of the importance of the past, I have had a very strong sense of belonging to places and landscapes with family connections, not least the Kentish Weald, where my paternal roots were. So even when quite young, I immersed myself in Anglo-Saxon history, especially in studies of what survived above ground, and always felt very deeply moved when I encountered obvious pre-Conquest architectural features in places as far apart as Barton-Upon-Humber in Lincolnshire (late tenth-century work at St Peter's, Beck Hill), Deerhurst in Gloucestershire (ninth- or tenth-century details in St Mary's from the great Saxon Minster that served as an important religious centre from the ninth century), and Sompting in West Sussex (eleventh century masonry at St Mary's church). I imparted something of my deep

love of such remains to my students, who asked for a two-day study-visit to inspect exemplars in the East Midlands.

I took a small group on a tour, starting with the eighth- and ninth-century royal mausoleum under the chancel of the church of St Wystan, Repton, Derbyshire, one of the most precious survivals of Anglo-Saxon England, the place of entombment of Mercian kings. With columns decorated with spiral fillets (alluding to the Tomb of the Apostle St Peter in Rome and the spiral columns supposedly brought from the Temple in Jerusalem sacked by the Romans under Titus and Vespasian), it is an astonishing and very poignant ensemble. The students were hushed and respectful as I explained the structure and its significance to them.



The crypt of St Wystan's, Repton, mausoleum of the Mercian kings

Later, we visited the church of St John the Baptist, Barnack, near Stamford, where the lower stages of the tenth century western tower display all the main characteristics of Anglo-Saxon architecture, including long-and-short quoins, lesenes (strips of stone suggesting either a timber-framed allusion or a hesitant nod to pilasters) and chunky details.



South face of the Anglo-Saxon tower of St John the Baptist Church, Barnack, Peterborough, Cambridgeshire

Inside the building there is a tremendous western arch leading

into the tower, but by far the most moving and beautiful object is the Christ in Majesty sculptured relief set into the north wall. Discovered face-down in 1930 in the north aisle, it is an exquisite and highly sophisticated work in the Saxon tradition, but as fine as anything of its early eleventh century date on the Continent.



Early eleventh-century figure of Christ in Majesty in St John the Baptist Church, Barnack

The so-called Hedda Stone, in the cathedral church of Sts Peter, Paul and Andrew at Peterborough (formerly the monastery of Medehamstede and later a great Benedictine abbey), is a very important piece of late eighth century Anglo-Saxon funerary sculpture in the form of a reliquary, with figures set in close-fitting arcades, and a pitched roof decorated with inhabited scrolls and interlacing work. Holes drilled into the stone were used to hold relics.

This and other remarkable Anglo-Saxon survivals from Medehamstede are now housed within one of the most spectacular Romanesque churches in England, that great Norman abbey-church which became a cathedral at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, whose first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was entombed there.

At Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire, a monastery was founded from Medehamstede sometime between 675 and 691 on the site of what had been an Iron Age hill fort, and there, in what from the outside appears to be the somewhat unprepossessing church of St Mary and St Hardulph, is a breathtaking collection of Saxon sculpture cut in high relief, including two friezes and related panels, all of the early ninth century and a magnificent depiction of the Archangel Gabriel in the act of giving a benediction in a style influenced by the art of Byzantium, with drapery, plants and staff all suggesting a date of c.800, although influenced by Early Christian precedents. This extraordinarily fine figure probably once formed part of a larger Annunciation scene.



Early 9th century Saxon relief of the Archangel Gabriel giving a benediction in the priory church of St Mary and St Hardulph, Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire

Our tour ended in the village of Egleton, Rutland, where I wanted to show the party the spectacular south door of St Edmund's Church, with its decorated shafts, capitals and abaci (the blocks from which the arch springs), the arch having a bobbin motif and chevrons, and the tympanum (contained within the semicircular arch and the carved lintel over the doorway) with a wheel of six petal-like spokes flanked by a lion and a winged beast. The hood-mould over the arch rises from animal and human heads. Oversized abaci and some of the decoration suggests a strong Saxon input, although the whole ensemble indicates it is post-Conquest, so represents a merging of Anglo-Saxon and Norman styles.



Saxo-Norman south door of St Edmund's Church, Egleton, Rutland
Afterwards, we went to a hostelry to discuss what we had seen. The mood of the party was partly subdued and partly excited, but the dominant feeling was of resentment that knowledge of our own homeland and its history is continually being devalued or ignored.

"Education" in schools is failing youngsters very badly. A vacuum of identity and knowledge has been created, and where you have a vacuum something else will enter the vacant space. It is clear that is happening, when trivia, vulgarity, greed and falsehoods are valued above depth, beauty, generosity and truth – and even failure is generously rewarded. The evidence of what was vibrant creativity is all around us on these islands, if we can only be bothered to seek it out. If we ignore it, we do so in peril, for we will betray and lose our very souls.

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