

◆ Chronicle ◆

Journal of Yeovil Archæological and Local History Society

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THE ASCENT OF A 13th CENTURY PRIEST

Brian and Moira Gittos

Since 1817 the medieval effigy of a priest has been preserved in the south porch of Holy Trinity Church, Shaftesbury. The church is Victorian (by Gilbert Scott, 1842) and has recently been declared redundant. It was acquired for a community centre and arrangements were made to transport a number of wall monuments to the second floor of the tower, with the object of establishing a small museum. Fortunately it was decided that the mid 13th century priest should be preserved in the same way. However, this was to prove no easy task, as the effigy had been cemented into the porch floor and probably weighs in excess of five hundredweight.

In November 1980, the cement around the figure was loosened by a local archaeologist and the effigy was man-handled into an upright position just outside the porch by a willing band of stout-hearted helpers. After posing for photographs, the priest was wheeled by porters' barrow to the west door and into the base of the tower. The final stage was the most difficult. Parts of the Pubeck marble figure were in a friable condition due to exposure to damp, and because of this it was necessary to swathe it in sacking before roping it to the barrow. Thence, with the aid of a block and tackle, the swaying corpse-like figure inched its way through the trapdoor and up the tower. There was a tense moment as the effigy went into an impromptu spin, but it finally reached its destination after a safe, if not entirely dignified, journey.

The figure is incomplete, the face, hands, and feet are missing, but it is otherwise in good condition with much original surface remaining. It will need care in the future to prevent further deterioration and Mr. J. Larson of the Victoria and Albert Museum has been consulted about its preservation.

It is probable that the effigy originally came from Shaftesbury Abbey and, according to the Rev. J. J. Reynolds, it was for some time 'built into a wayside wall on Toothill' (The Wiltshire Arch. & Nat. Hist. Mag. Vol. VII 1862 p. 261). A tablet in the porch records that it was placed in Holy Trinity Church in 1817. It is illustrated in its former position in R. C. H. M. Dorset Vol. IV North plate 15, and there is a drawing by Dru Drury in the Proceedings of the Dorset Nat. Hist. & Arch. Soc., Vol LIII 1931, plate 6.

RINGING ST JOHN'S CHURCH BELLS FOR DR. SACHEVERELL

Leslie Brooke

St. John's churchwardens paid the astonishingly large sum of £3 in 1709 'for Ringing 2 dayes upon an Extraordinary occasion for Dr. Sacheverell'.

The occasion for such rejoicing was the news that the doctor, who was rector of St Saviour's, Southwark, had just been prohibited for preaching for three years! The reason was that he had preached a sermon in St. Paul's in which he had called for the punishment of 'Dissent and Dissenters', urging all good citizens to rally round the church which he said was 'in the most terrible danger'. Riots resulted and Dr. Sacheverell was put on trial, the Queen herself daily attending the three-week trial to lend support to his cause. He was found guilty but the sentence banning him from preaching for three years was regarded as a triumph, being of such a light nature. Naturally the established church lent their support, and the mob which had welcomed the Queen's support for the doctor by her attending as a private spectator, kept shouting 'God bless the Queen and Dr. Sacheverell! We hope your Majesty is for High Church and Dr. Sacheverell!' No doubt St John's churchwardens considered their £3 expenditure well spent.