

St Catherine and The Rouen Connection

Peter Laurie

One of the best things we have at Abbotsbury is St Catherine's Chapel, perched on its hill above the village:



The chapel on its ancient mound

Catherine, the saint, comes from the ancient monastery on Mount Sinai, across the Red Sea from Egypt. Founded by the Emperor Justinian, from AD 527, it preserved Moses' burning bush. The holy plant is, apparently, still alive and well in the monastery courtyard.

Round about 800 AD, after the teachings of Muhammed had galvanised the Arabs, they erupted over the middle east and engulfed the monastery. Moses' bush is important to Muslims as well as Jews, and the Prophet took the monastery under his protection; so effectively that it stands today, relatively unharmed. It is one of the few sites that combines a Christian church with a Muslim mosque and a Jewish synagogue.

At about this time the monks seem to have felt the need to relaunch their product by discovering the body of St Catherine, miraculously buried at the top of the mountain. She is said to have been the Christian daughter of an Alexandrian magnate who refused to sacrifice to the last pagan roman emperor Maximinus. When the emperor sent his priests to convince her of her errors, her eloquence and logic converted them to christianity. When the emperor sent his army commanders the same thing happened. He had her subjected to the spiked catherine wheel – which broke and immolated many pagan spectators – and then beheaded. For the story to make sense, this must all have happened before AD 313, when the empire became christian, but there is no contemporary mention of a Catherine, either saint or sinner.

There is a theory that the story of St Catherine is a reversed playback of the story of a real Alexandrian, Hypatia, a mathematician who lectured on diophantine equations – the algebra of integer variables, which plays some part today in cryptography and quantum mechanics. She was done to death by a christian mob

armed with oyster shells. When I asked the Jesuit librarian of Downside School about this, he said: 'A christian mob? I suppose you could call a bunch of Millwall supporters a christian mob.'

Saints are the creation of the common people who, by venerating them, force their views on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Ancient Saints are interesting today because they embody qualities which people then found admirable. It is almost irrelevant whether they existed in real life. St Catherine is one of the very few saints who earned her honour by being intelligent. She is the patron of wheelrights and by extension, engineers. And also of defenceless spinsters.

A St Catherine's Monastery was founded in Rouen in 1030 by Simon de Treves who came to Britain with William the Conqueror in 1066. A monk, Simeon Pentaglosus, brought the finger bones of St Catherine from Mount Sinai which were then kept next to the high altar in Rouen Cathedral. Through the middle ages she was one of the most potent saints in the calendar and indeed, for a while, the bride of the infant Christ. She was one of Joan of Arc's voices and the patron saint of the University of Paris. There are many portraits of her in the Louvre. At the influx of literacy and logic into christianity at the reformation she lost ground. In 1967 the Roman Catholic Church overhauled its staff of saints and declared Catherine's death to be 'omnina fabulosa est' – completely imaginary - and made her redundant. But she still flourishes in the Greek Orthodox Church, where she is the second most important saint and can be seen in many churches as 'Ai Katerina'. See www.st-catherine.org.uk/legend1.htm for a fuller account.

Christianity in Britain seems to have arrived in three different waves.

1. Early Christians, proscribed in Rome and the empire before AD 313, seem to have made their way in ships trading up the Atlantic coast to Ireland and the Scottish isles. Tertullian, an early christian historian writing in 200AD, says that there were 'places in Britain inaccessible to the Romans, but which have submitted to Christ' and this would be an apt description of communities in extreme Cornwall, Ireland, the west coast of Scotland. After 400 AD this wave evolved into the Celtic Church, whose enemies said it had more than a whiff of the Druid about it. There is a possibility that the first church at Glastonbury was Celtic. Since there is a faint rumour that Abbotsbury had a church at about the same time, it may too have been Celtic.

2. The whole Roman Empire became Christian in AD 313 by the edict of Constantine (who did not himself join in). Presumably the romans and upper class britons in Dorset then became (if only nominally) christian. But the legions left in AD 410 and the roman survivors – together with their christianity - soon went under.

3. St Augustine sent missionaries from Rome to reconvert the British from AD 600 He told his missionaries to take over any substantial pagan temples (he did not want any crumbling ruins), to chuck out the idols and to install some reasonably congruent christian saint.

Abbotsbury and St Catherine. St Catherine's Chapel in Abbotsbury is a substantial stone building put up around the fourteenth century, at about the same time as the Tithe Barn. It is one of only two buildings in Britain to have a vaulted roof built completely in stone. It is hard to imagine anyone investing so much effort in such a project after the Black Death (AD 1347 - 52) so it is presumably the fruit of the warm, heavy cropping years at the turn of the thirteenth century.



Francesca Radcliffe

One imagines that the stone structure we see today replaced a less substantial building that may have been the remnant of a druidical temple. There is only indirect evidence for this idea:

- The chapel is built on an evidently artificial mound (see the photograph at the head of this article), two thirds of which has been reduced in height by a couple of feet to form today's platform (the darker green area in the photo above). The rest of the mound may conceal traces of an earlier temple. AHRP hopes to investigate it.
- Although the swannery has records going back over 600 years, there is no reason why the birds would not have lived here long before that since the Fleet provides a perfect environment for them.



The 'Fleet' – the stretch of brackish, slightly tidal water which runs down to Portland harbour - is separated from the sea by the Chesil (saxon for 'flint') Bank. 'Swan lake' is the bay above the chapel in this picture. Above that again is Chesters Hill which suggests there might have been a Roman fort –

*perhaps to guard ships loading corn and or iron. Photo by
Francesca Radcliffe*

- There is a Celtic goddess 'Rhiannon of the silver wheel', to whom swans and geese are sacred.
- A temple on a hill is often called in Gaelic/Celtic 'cader rhyn' – 'the hill throne'. If you were a latin speaker, you might well hear this phrase as 'catherine' – or 'katerin' – the 'pure one' (John Hodgeson's suggestion).

However the transition from Celtic times happened, we now have a chapel firmly dedicated to St Catherine.

The Rouen connection.

There is a tantalising connection between Rouen, the European home of the St Catherine cult, and Orc, to whom Canute gave Portesham in 1024 (see XXX), by way of Orc's wife Tola. Tola came from Rouen, presumably before the Conquest and perhaps represents, with Orc, part of the Norman pre-conquest. One can imagine that as a young bride going into a foreign land, she might have brought her favourite saint along for comfort. There can hardly still have been a Celtic temple on the chapel hill by the time she arrived in 1024 or so, but she may have had the christian rededication changed again.

Tola later gave her name to a number of places in Dorset – for example Tolpuddle and Toller Porcorum.

The history of the Chapel, with its connection to Rouen, might look something like this:

- BC 1,000 - 500? – A temple on a hill by the sea in Abbotsbury is built and dedicated to some Celtic goddess – Rhiannon of the silver wheel?
- AD 43 - 47 Vespasian, in command of the II Augusta Legion, is tasked with clearing the south coast of Celtic opposition. He comes to a halt at Exeter, but since a large part of the reason for the Roman invasion of Britain was to prevent Celtic terrorists crossing the channel to Gallia, it is likely that the south coast was thoroughly settled under Roman supervision. Since the Roman army, whose main bases were Colchester, Exeter, Chester and York with a big supply depot at Hamworthy near Poole, had to be fed by sea for the first decades of their occupation, it is likely that Abbotsbury may have been a military farm (see XXX), and perhaps a supplier of iron ore or worked iron. It is possible that the Roman managers of the villa left the temple in its Celtic dedication for the use of the estate workers; perhaps they rededicated it, as often happened, to an equivalent goddess in their own pantheon – Venus? Athena? Aphrodite?
- AD 6-700: Christian missionaries arrive from Canterbury and set up a small church in the village. Presumably they re-re-dedicate the chapel on the hill. There is some suggestion that Abbotsbury may have been a summer capital for Wessex.
- The Danish raids of 700 – 900 AD presumably fell here as elsewhere.
- 800 AD onwards – St Catherine 'exists' in legend if not reality, and is available for re-re-re-dedication. But perhaps this does not happen until:
- 1024 AD Canute grants Portesham and presumably Abbotsbury (though the deed has been lost) to his thane Orc and his wife Tola of Rouen in order that they might found a monastery. The dedication is not specified. Some documents suggest that the church or minster (if there had been one) founded by Augustine's missionaries, had by then fallen into desuetude.

- 1030 AD: St Catherine had become popular enough in Rouen that a monastery was founded and dedicated to her. It is not unreasonable to think that at this period Tola had the Abbotsbury chapel re-dedicated for the last time - to St Catherine.
- 1084-5 AD: data is collected for Domesday Book. Orc and Tola have disappeared. Abbotsbury Abbey holds: Abbotsbury, Tolpuddle, Hilton, Portesham, Shilvinghampton, (Abbotts)Wootton, Poorton, Atrim.
- 1200 – 1340 AD were fruitful years in northern Europe and the great period of cathedral building. This seems to be a good time to suppose that the solid, peaceful building we see today was put up. It is hard to imagine that the resources could have been found for it after the Black Death in 1347.
- Mid 1500s – the Reformation and sale of the Abbey to Strangways: the altar and carvings of saints are removed but the Chapel is not demolished as most of the rest of the Abbey was.
- 1730? The Chapel, then rather ruined, is restored by the incumbent Lady Ilchester