Early Christianity at Amesbury

THE FIRST RECORDED RELIGIOUS house at Amesbury was the Benedictine abbey founded c.979. A Christian presence existed in southern England well before that, with first indications in the 3rd century during the period of Roman occupation.

The fact that Amesbury was a royal estate during the Saxon period suggests that there may well have been a Christian community and church here significantly before the abbey.
IN 2002 AN ARCHÆOLOGICAL evaluation at Boscombe Down, at the south-east edge of Amesbury, discovered possible evidence of Christian presence in a Roman village. A cemetery dated to around 350 AD contained graves mostly aligned in an east-west orientation. One of these contained a coin depicting the 'Chi-Rho' symbol used by early Christian communities. The area was near to a pagan cemetery of similar date that had been found earlier. This suggests that pagans and Christians may have been living side by side; perhaps even that a transitional situation existed. The Chi Rho coin was one of three found in the grave of a 30 to 40 year old woman. She must have been of some social standing since the iron nails in the grave suggested she had been buried in a coffin. It cannot be said for certain that she was a Christian. Analysts believe the coin may have been struck in Trier between September 352 and August 353 during the reign of emperor Decentius who ruled from 351 – 353 AD.

Legends

Legends, bound inextricably with fact, colour the early history of the town and abbey.

Vortigern was the weak 5th century British ruler who came to power when his future enemies Ambrosius Aurelianus and Uther Pendragon were young men. He engaged the help of the Saxon mercenaries Hengist and Horsa in warring off brutal raids from northern tribes. Eventually he married Hengist's daughter Rowena. By trickery, the two Saxons gradually claimed more and more rewards in return for their actions, and rampaged across the land. Vortigern's son Vortimer, sickened by his father's betrayal of his country, raised an army and temporarily held back the Saxons. But, wounded in battle, he was poisoned by his stepmother.

Hengist eventually called a peace conference on Salisbury Plain, supposedly at Stonehenge. When the British arrived, they were caught in a well-prepared ambush and slaughtered.

Vortigern escaped to Wales but, following revelations by the mystic Merlin, could no longer command the respect of his followers. His place was taken by Ambrosius who pursued Vortigern until the fallen ruler was killed by lightning. Ambrosius then set about halting the Saxon advance but achieved only limited success.

Traditionally, the name Amesbury is derived from Ambrosius, and it is possible that the settlement was the stronghold of this 6th century resistance leader and his followers. It is about this time that the Breton Melior appears on the scene. In the face of advancing Saxons in Britain and, later, of Norsemen in northern France, there was much interchange between southern Britain and what we now call Brittany.

Melior's father Meliavus ruled Cornubia, part of Brittany, well. Rüdus, brother of Meliavus and jealous of his good fortune, killed Meliavus, and arranged for Melior's left foot and right hand to be amputated so he could not succeed his father. Melior received a silver hand and a bronze foot and, miraculously, learned how to use the hand as if it were his own.

Rüdus, hearing of this, had Melior beheaded. But, the severed head continued to speak, and other miraculous events ensued. The whole legend and cult can be identified with pre-Christian Celtic religious practices. It is possible that the Melior cult existed at Llanmeur around 500AD.

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The relics may have been here in 979AD when Aelthryth founded her abbey in atonement for the murder of St Edward the Martyr in the previous year. One possibility is that Melor and Edward were both boy princes, hence the reason for dedicating the abbey church to Saint Melor. Alternatively, if the relics were already here, they may have inspired the construction of a worthy monument.

And last, but by no means least, there is the Arthurian legend. Arthur, a figure set in the 6th century, has been identified with Ambrosius Aurelianus as a leader against the Saxons. His legend is revived and embellished during the medieval period, with his Queen Guinevere withdrawing to and dying in an abbey identified as Amesbury in some sources.

The Abbey

The first recorded abbey at Amesbury was founded as a Benedictine house by Queen Aelthryth (Elfride) in 979 as an act of penance following the murder of her stepson Edward at Corfe Castle in Dorset. The abbey lasted until 1177 when it ended as an act of penance for another crime; this time for Henry II's complicity in the murder of Thomas Becket.

The Order of St Benedict

The Order follow the Rule of St Benedict of Nursia (c 480 – 547). The rule became the norm for monastic living throughout Europe. By the 7th century it had been applied to nuns, whose patroness was Scholastica, sister of St Benedict.

By the beginning of the 9th century the Benedictine Rule had supplemented most other observances in northern and western Europe, with monasteries multiplying in size and wealth. They were the chief repositories of learning and literature, and were the principal educators.

The great age of Benedictine predominance ended around the mid-12th century when decline set in.

In the 15th century a radical new Benedictine institution arose, breathing new life into Benedictine monasticism. Decline was again evident in the 18th century but was reversed in the 19th century, with the movement gaining new strength worldwide.
THE SAXON CROSS
The cross was recovered from under the chancel floor during restoration work in 1907. Its site when found has been taken to suggest that it was one of the many items discarded by Butterfield during his 19th century restoration of the church, but there are at least two alternatives. It is possible from the siting that the cross was destroyed during work on the chancel in the 15th century, or, it could have been destroyed earlier if the present chancel is a rebuilding of a post-Saxon one contemporary with the remains of the 12th century nave. In considering its origin, it has been suggested that the cross could be from a 'minster' on the site of the present church, or that this could even be the site of the abbey founded in c.979. Its weathered condition suggests that it was an external feature, but it does not appear on any pre-restoration illustrations of the church, leading one still further to think that it may have been associated with an earlier structure. The fact that does remain is that the crosshead was associated with a Saxon church. It has been dated from the 9th to the 11th centuries but a more recent study of its characteristics suggests a date in the second half of the 10th century, a period contemporary with the first recorded founding of the abbey.

The wheelhead cross evolved in the Irish Sea cultural region and became the dominant form of cross there during the 10th and 11th centuries. In England its spread is initially associated with the Norse penetration of the north-west from Ireland and from there it spread across the Pennines into the Danish area. Its appearance in south and south-east England is rare. The wheelhead form of cross could have reached Amesbury overland from the north-west or, as is more likely, direct by sea via the Bristol Channel. There is, then, a suggestion at Amesbury of cultural links with Ireland during the mid or latter part of the 10th century.

The shape of the cross is a later form of the Anglian cross evolved in Northumbria at the turn of the 8th century. Elements of the design in the termination of the arms suggest an influence by a tradition exclusive to Ireland. The only two extant crosses with the identical pattern of linked triquetras are at Cardynham in Cornwall and Coychurch in Mid-Glamorgan.

The interlace pattern around the edge of the head originated in northern Italy in the 9th century and is similar to that found on stones at nearby Ramsbury and at Wherwell. This fixes the earliest possible date for the Amesbury cross in the mid-9th century. The design and execution of the Amesbury cross are of a high quality, suggesting a competent sculptor, worthy to be employed by a rich patron with possible royal connections. An abbey was founded at Wherwell in 986 by Queen Aelfthryth, the foundress of Amesbury. It is interesting to note that all the sculptures in this group have been assigned dates prior to the known foundation of churches at each of the sites. Ties with the Celtic west could have survived here until the 10th century and perhaps this is reflected in the later dedication of Amesbury's church to Saint Melor. The cross may well represent Amesbury's earliest visible link with Christianity.
The Priory

The nuns at Amesbury’s abbey were accused of irregular living, and expelled. In 1177 they were succeeded by Henry II’s favoured and more rigorous order from Fontevrault in France. This new, fashionable and well-endowed priory attracted, over the years, grants of land or churches in more than 20 parishes, and extensive building operations. It lasted until the dissolution of monasteries began in the 1530s.

Initially Amesbury’s Priory prospered. Extensions and improvements to the fabric were made in the early 13th century; royal patronage continued. In 1265 Mary (Edward I’s daughter) and Eleanor of Provence (Edward’s mother) entered the community. On Ascension Day, 1327, 36 nuns were consecrated, including the noble Isobel of Lancaster. Gradually the priory accumulated lands that eventually formed the manor of Amesbury Priors to the west of the town.

This early prosperity gradually waned. Tensions between Amesbury and its mother house during times of war, and between prior and prioress, took their toll. After 1400 there is no mention of the male religious other than a chaplain to conduct religious services. It is likely that, in effect, the priory reverted to a Benedictine house in the 15th century.
What did the priory consist of....?

The *precinct*, with its paled park (containing the graveyard), gardens, orchards, and fishponds, covered 12 acres. The buildings lay athwart the site on which the present mansion stands and therefore some 220 yards from the parish church and street. The ground plan cannot be reconstructed, but we know a little of the individual buildings.

**The great church of the monastery** consisted of a nave (120ft.), choir (51ft.), north and south transepts (39 and 40ft.), all with pitched leaden roofs, and a vestry (22ft.), with a flat leaden roof.

There were chapels, similarly roofed, dedicated to Our Lady (32ft.) and St. John, as befitted a church of the Fontevraudine Order. The choir roof was celled; the transept and vestry roofs were timbered. The choir, south transept, and vestry, or parts of them at least, were tiled.

An octagonal steeple, timber-framed and coated with lead, measured 61ft. Each side of the octagon was 10 ft. at the base and tapered to 6 in. at the top.

Four bells (weighing 14 cwt.) hung in the steeple.

Before the high altar and in the north transept there were tombstones. There was a door in the south transept and possibly another on 'the coventysye'.

**The main conventual buildings**, consisted of:

- a *cloister*, with a flat timber-framed roof covered with lead, each tiled walk measuring 104 by 12 ft. and flanked by low stone seats;
- a *frater* (100 by 15 ft.),
- a *tiled dorter* (200 by 18 ft.), with 'partitions' below, each with a flat leaden roof;
- a *tiled chapter-house*;
- a *j esse* (110 by 16 ft.), with flat leaden roof,

*Mistress Darrell’s celled chamber* and, at the lower end,

*Mistress Warder’s chamber*;

*a convent kitchen*, probably stone-roofed,

and a hall (70 by 14 ft.), similarly roofed, which was connected to the kitchen by a 'little entry' with a leaded spiral staircase.

There were perhaps two convent kitchens, for a 'new' one was eventually re-roofed with lead from other parts of the buildings. The hall is perhaps the same as the 'leaden hall' with a wooden floor upon which the garden side two chambers abutted. There are, however, also references to a little chamber called 'the leaden chambers'.

The convent kitchen formed one side of a quadrangle around which the prioress’s lodging, consisting of hall, buttery, pantry, kitchen, and gatehouse, was ranged.

An *abbess’s chamber* (24 by 14 ft.) with flat leaden roof is mentioned, but its relationship to this range is not clear, and Prioress Joan Darrell seems to have lived in the ‘jesse’.

There were also *lodgings* for steward, receiver, and priests.

*Kent’s chamber* (65 by 10 ft.), with flat leaden roof,

*Joan Horner’s chamber*, with a roof crested with lead, the *celled White Chambers*.

*Jane Hildesley’s* and *Maurice Halcombe’s chambers*, all the last three having wooden floors, and

*Christine Hildesley’s parlour chamber*, with a partition and a little buttery in it, occur.

There are also references to:

- a *tiled parlour* (22 ft. square), sometimes called the ‘old’ parlour, with a leaden ‘bastard’ roof and an inner chamber in it;
- a *sacristy* with lodgings adjacent;
- the ‘old’ *infirmary*, with

chapel, cloister, and adjacent lodgings and outhouses. The infirmary cloister is perhaps the same as the 'little cloisters', beside which were two chambers, one tiled and the other measuring 17 by 15ft. Finally there are references to

the *chapels chamber*,


the high hall chamber,
the 'long stake' with a haybarn adjoining, and
the 'old' stables of 4 rooms, built of stone with a tiled 'cutting' at one
end;
a wheat barn,
the 'great barn',
a gatehouse and houses in the base court,
a bakehouse,
a laundry,
Master Horner's house and chambers with leaden roof, and the
Middle House by the Park. This was built of stone, roofed with slates,
and was of two floors with a staircase.

Caption for picture below