

## ALVELEY REVISITED: A NOTE ON PATRONAGE

By JOHN HUNT

**Abstract:** This paper revisits arguments presented in 1997 associating the Romanesque sculpture preserved in the former 'Bell Inn' in Alveley with the nearby Church of St. Mary and the patronage of the Lestrangle family. This has subsequently been challenged in favour of le Poer patronage and Romsley chapel for the origin of the sculptures. These propositions are reviewed, discussing Romsley, the le Poer tenure, and the basis of the alternative proposals. It is argued that contrary to the proposition that the 'Alveley sculptures' originated at Romsley, they, or some, were more probably taken to Romsley from the church of Alveley. It is concluded therefore that the arguments published in 1997 remain the most credible interpretation.

In 1997 Hunt and Stokes published an account of a group of sculptures preserved within the former Bell Inn in Alveley (Hunt and Stokes 1997). In this article the authors argued that the sculptures belonged to the Herefordshire School of Sculpture and that they were most probably originally produced for the nearby church of St. Mary, known to have been present during the 12th century. Stylistic comparisons suggested that these sculptures might be dated between the early 1150s and the early 1160s. The probable patronage context was also reviewed, arguing that the most likely patron for such work in Alveley was Guy Lestrangle whose tenure of the manor was consistent with the stylistic dating and also offered a meaningful context. Furthermore, such an association also permitted a further refinement in the dating of these sculptures to the period c.1155 to the early 1160s. While they were to some extent informed by each other, it is also the case that this assemblage of sculptures was dated by two different approaches, one based on stylistic analysis, and the other on the probable patronage context.

A few years after this publication James Lawson raised some concerns regarding the conclusions of Hunt and Stokes, questioning in particular the suggested provenance of the sculptures from Alveley Church and their attribution to the patronage of Guy Lestrangle. Although Lawson's arguments have not, so far as this writer is aware, been formally published, they have nonetheless gained some currency locally.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in 2006 the new edition of the Shropshire volume in the 'Buildings of England' series felt able to state in its discussion of the sculptures at Alveley that 'James Lawson has convincing evidence that they came from a chapel at Romsley... demolished some time before 1780' (Newman and Pevsner 2006, 114). Recent conservation work on the former Bell Inn, now a private residence,<sup>2</sup> together with a current local society research project on Romsley has again brought Lawson's arguments to the fore. It therefore seems appropriate to review Lawson's thesis and its implications for the conclusions previously offered by Hunt and Stokes.

The essence of Lawson's case rests on the following points –

1. That the Bell Inn sculptures should not be associated with the church of St. Mary in Alveley; rather it is claimed that they came to the Bell Inn site as part of a demolition clearance from elsewhere, that alternative site being a known medieval chapel at Romsley, a couple of miles to the south of Alveley.
2. If the above point can be established, then it follows that the arguments advanced in 1997 as to the patronage of the work cannot be sustained; consequently the patronage context would require further investigation.

This review will therefore consider each of these points in turn and their implications for our interpretation of the sculptural assemblage from Alveley.

### The Question of Provenance

Mr. Lawson observes that 'The Bell' is a multi-period building, dating back to the early 15th century in its timber-framed core, but whose construction continued until 1826. In noting this lengthy period of development, Lawson seems to suppose that the incorporation of the sculptures in the building was unlikely before the 17th century, but that, if it were to have occurred at an earlier point, he argues that the sculptures would have needed to have been available as an assemblage for incorporation, and that this would have required that they were available a long time after their removal from the church. The tone of his observation suggests that he thinks this to be unlikely.

Lawson goes on to argue that for the sculptures to have been available from the church of St. Mary, they must have formed part of the chancel arch and of the north or south nave doors of the church. If the 12th century church were an aisleless building, then we may suppose that the north and south doors were removed in the 13th century at the time of wider alterations to the church's fabric; the present south door is dated to the early 13th century. The chancel dates to the 13th century and is entered through a chancel arch of early 14th century date. From this sequence of changes to the fabric at different periods, but affecting those places in the church where Lawson supposes that the sculptures must have been located, he deduces that 'the possibility of a coherent dump of Romanesque rubble surviving for incorporation in the Bell and surrounding boundary wall in the seventeenth, let alone the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, seems a trifle problematic'.<sup>3</sup> This 'problem' is, of course, accentuated by Lawson's suppositions on both the original dispositions of the sculptures, and his requirement for a 'coherent dump'. Thus Lawson concludes that it is more likely that the sculptures were part of demolition clearance from a site elsewhere, implicitly requiring a site whose demolition was chronologically closer to the building dates of the Bell.

Such a candidate seemingly presents itself at the nearby settlement of Romsley where there was a chapel by the mid-13th century, a chapel that was attached to Alveley Church (Eyton 1854, 121; 1856, 203–4). Lawson notes that the chapel had been demolished by the 1780s, but that when Eyton referred to the site in the 1860s he commented that the location of the chapel was still discernible through its foundations and the ceramic tiles of the floor. Built into the wall of an adjacent stable were two carved stones, carrying the Zodiacal signs of Leo and Sagittarius; Eyton, and Lawson after him, supposed that these stones came from the chapel site and that they might have originally been part of a series of twelve such stones. Lawson then takes this further to suggest that this chapel represents the more probable provenance of the sculptures subsequently found in the Bell, having been taken there as part of a demolition clearance of the disused chapel site. The site of the chapel may well have been confirmed in July 1975.<sup>4</sup> The earliest reference which we have to the chapel dates to 1255, at which time it was acknowledged as belonging to the prebend of Alveley (Eyton 1854, 121; 1856, 204). Lawson has traced a handful of subsequent references, which included mention in the will of William de la Hulle in 1349 and in the register of Bishop Charles Bothe of Hereford in 1524, on the basis of which a dedication to St. Giles may be determined. From a Chancery case of 1653, which made reference to the ancient church or chapel of Romsley, it may be deduced that the chapel had most probably been abandoned sometime in the first half of the 17th century.<sup>5</sup>

While the case put forward by Mr Lawson has evidently been considered by some as 'convincing evidence' (Newman and Pevsner 2006, 114), it is in fact highly speculative and rests on assumptions at several turns. The first part of the thesis revolves around the point at which the sculptures might have become available for use as building stone and a perception that they must have all come together at the same time, and moreover must have been used fairly soon after their removal from the building of their origin. This leads to further speculation on where in the church the sculptures were originally utilised, before the rebuilding which led to their removal.

In reality, it is not possible to determine precisely when the sculptures became available for use as building material, and whether they became available as an assemblage or piecemeal over time. Nor do we know anything of any use that they may have been put to, if any, between their removal from the church and their incorporation in 'The Bell'. It is certainly clear that 'The Bell' sculptures are only fragments from an extensive Herefordshire School scheme, to which the recent restoration and conservation work on the building have added some further pieces.<sup>6</sup> These comprise fragments of a capital decorated with interlace, and a square stone displaying a large bird standing on and pecking a small bird, similar to those found on a corbel at Kilpeck and a capital of the west window of Leominster Priory Church, although the detailed treatment of the body owes more to techniques applied to bird sculptures at Rowlestone and on the Castle Frome font. The general iconography is a familiar one within the wider repertoire of the Romanesque.

Lawson's suppositions regarding the disposition of the sculptures in the church, associated with north or south nave doors and the chancel arch, are not unreasonable, but they are assumptions. Nave windows and use within the chancel cannot be entirely disregarded, particularly when we have only fragmentary remains available for study. Of course, Lawson's point is that he is attempting to establish their likely date of removal from Alveley Church based upon the dating of the building phases of the present church. He assumes a period of 300 to 400 years between the removal of the sculptures and their incorporation in 'The Bell', supposing that such a

chronological gap was too great to allow for this to have been the source of the sculptures used in 'The Bell'. This is all predicated on Lawson's assumptions that the sculptures were all removed together, were not reused elsewhere at any point before their incorporation in 'The Bell', and that they must have been brought together as a 'coherent dump' of demolition material before being used in the building work. This in turn overlooks the fact that the building work in 'The Bell' itself was undertaken over a lengthy period of time, and one might suppose that the very fact that we have only fragments of the original sculptural scheme suggests that there was no 'coherent dump' from the outset.

Furthermore, Rachel Morley has recently suggested that 'The Bell', as a building, may have much earlier origins than was previously supposed, not surprisingly since previous dating has largely been related to the timber phases of the building and dendrochronology. She has argued that the building may well have its origins in the 13th century as a single-ended hall, which she associates with a possible priest's house (Morley 2012, 4.15). Leaving aside the identification of this building as a priest's house, which is not improbable, although the possibility of a seigneurial hall might also be entertained, these observations offer a scenario in which stone removed from the church from the 13th century and later might be incorporated into contemporary construction work on an adjacent site.

Therefore, not only does the basis of Lawson's thesis, in any case, have weak foundations, but there is also good reason to believe that there may not have been any significant chronological gaps between the removal of the sculptures from the church and their re-use as building material in 'The Bell'. Under these circumstances we might suppose that there is no reason to proceed further to a discussion of Romsley chapel and James Lawson's identification of an alternative patron. However, the observations of Eyton and others on the site do warrant some further discussion.

### **The Romsley Chapel Carvings**

Mr. Lawson's attraction to Romsley Chapel is based on the fact that in the 1860s Eyton had observed a chapel that was by then in ruin and that built into the wall of an adjacent stable were two carved stones, carrying the Zodiactal signs of Leo and Sagittarius. These sculptures, Lawson assumes, should be linked with those known from Alveley, which he implicitly supposes to be a part of the same original assemblage.

Fragments of 12th century sculptures remain in private possession in Romsley, and are supposed to be part of what Eyton saw. Two stones now set into a boundary wall appear to be those to which Eyton referred. Although the outlines of the figures are quite clear, they are heavily weathered and lacking in detail. They lack the diagnostic details of the Herefordshire School, but given their condition this is not too surprising; however, the presentation of the head of the lion does recall the approach used on the lions of both the Castle Frome and the Eardisley fonts (although, like the Herefordshire School birds, the 'ghost' of Anglo-Saxon forms may be discerned). However, there are in addition at least three other pieces of 12th century sculpture from Romsley. In another boundary wall there is an inset fragment of two-stranded interlace. This has a striking resemblance to the central section of the serpent interlace currently situated to the left of the 'Samson and Lion' sculpture in 'The Bell'; although only a fragment, it lends weight to the possibility that there is a shared hand and iconography between the sculptures in Alveley and Romsley.

In addition there are also two damaged capitals preserved at Romsley. One of these comprises the capital and attached impost; the base of the capital is defined by a cable moulding, above which there is a band of interlace and, at the angle of the capital, two affronted birds, whose heads and feet touch each other, although the bulk of the former has been lost; some strands of the interlace run over the rear of the bird's body. The figures are well modelled and, although detail has been lost, they appear comparable in approach with the bird sculpture recently uncovered at 'The Bell'. The weathering makes it too difficult to determine clearly if these birds are drinking from a central stoup or chalice, but it does appear so, and this is a familiar Romanesque iconography, although not one previously demonstrated in the surviving corpus of the School. There is no doubt that this is work of the Herefordshire School of sculpture. The other side of this capital has been lost.

The second capital is less well preserved and might not have been produced by the same hand as that which carved the other piece. There is again a cable carved base (although less well preserved and defined) and a band of rather disordered interlace above this. However, like its partner the design is again one of affronted birds with heads touching over what may be a drinking vessel.

James Lawson is therefore right to suspect that there might be links between the carved stones of Alveley and Romsley. They are both sites which hosted Herefordshire School work, and they may include pieces that were carved by the same hand. This is, however, a long way short of demonstrating the kind of relationship between the two sites that Lawson supposes, namely that Romsley Chapel was the provenance of 'The Bell' sculptures; this will be discussed further below.

### The attribution of the Alveley patronage

Mr. Lawson argues that if the hypothesis he proposes for the provenance of the Alveley sculptures is correct, then 'the historical arguments advanced by Stokes and Hunt as regards the patron of the supposed sculptures from Alveley church must be regarded as unsafe'. Lawson proposes that the patronage should be attributed to the le Poers, lords of Romsley, whom he suggests were equal in status to the Lestrangle family.<sup>7</sup> This alternative suggestion therefore must be reviewed.

As J. H. Round long ago noted, the name of le Poer (Poher, and other variants) is one which is commonly met in England and Ireland during the 12th and 13th centuries (Round 1896, 215–16). Several branches of the family occurred in the west midlands, their appearance being represented by Walter Pontherius in the folios of Domesday Book. Walter was a tenant of the church of Worcester and of Westminster Abbey in Worcestershire, where he also held a virgate of the Church of Pershore. These tenancies taken together amounted to a little over 28 hides and were valued at £16 6s 4d, suggesting a man of some standing (Keats-Rohan 1999, 457; Morris 1982 a, 2.5, 2.49, 2.58, 2.59, 2.60, 2.77; 8.8, 8.10d, 8.19, 8.20, 8.22; 9.6c). In addition he was a tenant in Gloucestershire, where he held four hides of the Church of St. Peter, Westminster (Morris 1982 b, 19.2). By 1108–18 Hugh Puiher had succeeded Walter in Worcestershire (Round 1964, 141–5), and in 1135 held 2½ knight's fees of the Bishop of Worcester (Hall 1896, 300). The *Carta* of the Bishop of Hereford also shows a Roger le Poher holding one knight's fee by 1135, and both Drogo Puher and Stephen de Puher appear in the mid-12th century among the witnesses to the charters of the earls of Hereford, Drogo serving as Earl Miles' 'dapifer' (Hall 1896, 278; Walker 1964, Nos 3 (September 1144); 11 (1143–55); 23 (1148–55)).

By the middle of the 12th century kin of the family had established themselves widely across the Midlands. In addition to members of the family in Worcestershire and Herefordshire, in 1166 there was a Robert Poer holding 5½ knights' fees in Leicestershire of William de Albenni (Hall 1896, 328); in Warwickshire, by about 1135, a Stephen le Poer was a subinfeudated sub-tenant (of Margery de Bohun, who held of the Bishop of Worcester) holding 2½ hides in Clifford Minor near Stratford-upon-Avon. The name of Stephen Poer appears as tenant here in 1182 and again in 1208, this span of some seventy years suggesting father and son in succession (Clifford 1817, 108–9; Styles 1945, 263).<sup>(8)</sup>

In the case of Shropshire, the le Poer family were certainly present at Romsley by the early 13th century, but demonstrating their presence here earlier than this is difficult. Eyton observed that when in 1167 Alan de Nevill held an 'Assize of the Forest' in Staffordshire, he imposed a fine of a half-mark on the vill of Romsley, entered on the record as '*Rameslea Hugonis*'; he suggested that this place-name may incorporate a reference to the Hugh Puher who held in Worcestershire of the Bishop of Worcester, holding Romsley of Osbern fitz Hugh, baron of Richard's Castle. This is possible but by no means certain; the 1166 *Carta* of Osbern fitz Hugh and its later interpolations make no reference to le Poer, and there are no subsequent indications of any direct links between the lords of Romsley and the Worcestershire le Poers, beyond their obvious kinship. By 1211–12 a Roger Poer does appear as lord of Romsley (Eyton 1856, 197; Anon 1889, 56; Hall 1896, 287, 335, 605; Redmond 1891; Baugh 1998, 215). Together with Badger, the overlordship of the manor of Romsley had passed to the barons of Richard's Castle following Henry I's tenurial reorganisation of the Welsh March in the wake of Robert de Bellême's failed rebellion, and by the mid-1170s Badger was held of Osbern fitz Hugh by Guy Lestrangle. Given that Romsley and Badger are sometimes associated in later documents (Morris 1986, Notes EW2), the possibility that Guy at this time held Romsley cannot be entirely discounted, but equally nor can this possibility be raised beyond the level of speculation, particularly given the possibility that Romsley was at about the same time associated with a man named Hugh. To assume that this Hugh should be equated with Hugh le Poer does represent something of a leap of faith, in this case projecting backwards from the known to the unknown in a rather tenuous manner.

However, in 1211–12, and certainly by 1274, Badger and Romsley were held as one knight's fee by the le Poer family of the honor of Richard's Castle (Baugh 1998, 215). Roger Poer occurs as lord of Romsley in 1212; William Poer occurs in 1255 as mesne lord, with Roger Poher occurring similarly in 1287. John Poer is noted in 1291, and in 1307 Leo Poer was styling himself as Leo de Romsley; Roger Poer held the manor in 1315 (Redmond 1891, 7).

Other members of the le Poer kin have also been associated with Wollascott (Woolascott), or Willescote, in this case Alan le Poer by 1235 (Rees 1975, 371, No 401; Rees 1985, Nos 327 (1242–50), 515 (1235–43), 772 (1243–48), 773 (c.1240)),<sup>9</sup> who was succeeded by his son, John (Rees 1985, No 996);<sup>10</sup> and Baldwin Poer with Neen-Baldwin (later Neen-Sollars) sometime before 1185 (Redmond 1891, 7).

The le Poer family do figure among the witnesses of 12th-century charters to religious houses in the west midlands. Particularly associated with grants relating to lands in Worcestershire in the cartulary of Worcester Priory were Hugh Poer, John Puiher, William Puiher of Pirton, Henry Puiher and Simon Puiher (Darlington 1968, Nos 214 (early Henry II); 100 (1184–88); 164 (1178); 165, 183, 184 (1175); 185 (1189–96); 392 (*tempore* Henry II); 397 (late 12th century); 449 (1196–1203)), men who seem on this basis to have been associated with the Worcestershire branches of the family. However, Worcestershire lands also found their way as grants to the

Shropshire Augustinian house of Haughmond Abbey. Around 1172 Hugh Poer confirmed the donation by Richard Mustel of a messuage in Worcester to Haughmond, while before 1186 Roger le Puher appears among the witnesses to a grant of Osbert fitz Hugh concerning land in Little Cotheridge (Worcestershire) held of the Bishop of Worcester (Rees 1985, Nos 1312 (c.1172); 252 (before 1186); 253 (1186–90)).

The Haughmond Cartulary does also associate members of the le Poer family with some Shropshire grants. Around 1155–59 William fitz Alan confirmed Gilbert of Hadnall's grant of the churches of Hardwick, Aldeton and Ham to the Abbey. The witnesses to this grant included Roger Puher, in the company of John Lestrangle and his two brothers, Guy and Hamon (Rees 1985, No 529 (1155–59)). The grant relates to Hadnall, a near neighbour north-east of Woolascott (to the north of Shrewsbury); it might be expected that a neighbouring lord would witness local grants, and if so, this Roger Poer might well have been lord of the manor of Wollascott in the mid-12th century, but this cannot be confirmed. A Robert le Poer appears among the witnesses c.1195–1201 regarding the grant of land in Shawbury, which again suggests a focus in north Shropshire in the vicinity of Wollascott (Rees 1985, No 304 (1195–1201)), particularly as Robert also appears as a witness to a grant made by Leticia, the daughter of Gilbert of Hadnall, together with his son Henry and Guy de Shawbury (Rees 1985, No 507 (1182–1201)). While this review of some key local cartularies is not conclusive, it does tend to reinforce the impression that the le Poer lordship of Romsley cannot be clearly demonstrated before the 13th century.

The manor of Romsley in 1086 was valued at forty shillings; assessed at one hide, the seven villeins and seven bordars may well reflect a population in the order of seventy people. By 1255 Romsley, then in the possession of John le Poer, but held of William le Poer, was assessed at 1½ hides and held by service of one-fifth of a knight's fee and suit of court to the Hundred of Bridgnorth (Morris 1986, 12.9; Illingworth 1818, 59a). By the 13th and 14th centuries, at least, the manor does not seem to have been a particularly wealthy one. In 1294 John le Poer was said to hold here 74 acres of land which rendered 2 shillings yearly; in 1315–16 the manor, comprising a messuage and a virgate of land, was held by Roger le Power (i.e. le Poer) by the service of 2 shillings yearly, who headed the list of four taxpayers a few years later, when the lay subsidy was collected in 1327. This suggests a population by this date of around fifty, hinting at a declining manor, since the normal trend between the late 11th and early 14th centuries was one of expansion, even allowing for the difficult decades at the beginning of the latter century. While we must continue to be cautious on how the 1327 data is interpreted, Roger's payment of 1*s.* 6*d.* suggests an assessment based on a valuation of his 'moveables' at 7*s.* 6*d.*, reinforcing the impression of a very modestly placed family. By 1354, following the death of Roger le Power, the manor was said to comprise a messuage, forty acres of land, one acre of meadow and one acre of wood, all held by knight's service; no other lands were held by Roger in the county (Fletcher 1907, 371; CIPM, iii, No 194 at 121; v, No 611 at 392; x, No 207). While many misfortunes might befall both a family and a manor over time, there is little to suggest that Romsley was, for the manorial lords at least, a particularly prosperous possession. However, it is difficult to judge when any decline, if such there was, might have set in, and even more difficult to determine if the manor could have offered either the resources or the 'raison d'être' to commission an extensive sculptural programme.

Therefore, the le Poers were well established as mesne tenants across the Midlands, with branches of the family holding estates in Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Herefordshire and Shropshire, and further afield. In the case of Shropshire there were seemingly members of the family established by the 12th century at Neen-Baldwin, held of the barons of Richard's Castle, and possibly, but not certainly, also at Wollascott. In the case of Romsley, however, also held of the honor of Richard's Castle, the case for their tenure before the 13th century is rather more tenuous. The possibility that they did not enter into this tenure until the 13th century cannot be discounted.

An implicit aspect of Lawson's thesis is that the le Poers of Romsley were a family of significant standing, sufficiently well-placed to engage with the patronage of a significant project such as that represented by the sculptures. While the resources of the le Poer kin as a whole were undoubtedly considerable, there is no evidence that the le Poers of Romsley were distinguished in this regard. Such kinship groups were effectively a collection of independent branches of the family, rather than elements of a larger whole, the resources of each to be accounted for individually and independently. So, while the standing of the le Poer family in Worcestershire appears to have been fairly substantial, as was that of Robert le Poer in Leicestershire in the mid-12th century, a similar standing cannot simply be assumed for the cadet branch of the family holding Romsley. The Hugh le Poer holding knight's fees in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire in 1166 was not necessarily the Hugh whose name was attached to Romsley in 1167, particularly since the Shropshire le Poers of the late 12th and early 13th century, Robert and Roger, seem not to appear in Worcestershire, or in Herefordshire. This tends to reinforce the impression that the Romsley le Poers were a cadet branch of the family, and, while their attachments to the barons of Richard's Castle might have facilitated contact with their kin who shared similar associations, there seems no reason to imagine that they were a family of particular standing.

In short, the undoubted standing of the le Poers in mid-12th century Worcestershire was not necessarily directly translated also to other branches, such as the le Poers of Romsley, whether in the 12th or the 13th centuries. This is equally true of other contemporary families, such as the Bassets. The resources of the whole should not

be conflated to their individual components. Thus it is unwise to assume a status and standing for the le Poers of Romsley, and with it their capacity or motivations towards patronage which cannot be demonstrated. If the mid-12th century 'Hugh of Romsley' were to be equated with the Hugh le Poer holding in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire in 1166, then Lawson's attribution to him of a patronage role might be tenable from the point of view of a personal resource base, and therefore his capacity to undertake it, but there would remain the very real question of why he should want to do so in a tenurially isolated and relatively unimportant manor.

## Discussion

Therefore, in summary, the supposition that the le Poers were the patrons of these sculptures is difficult to sustain, as are the arguments challenging an Alveley provenance for them. However, the Romsley sculptures may be directly compared, in style and date, with those found in Alveley and therefore the possible nature of these links needs to be considered further.

There are three possible scenarios that might explain these neighbouring sculptures –

Firstly, concurrence with the thesis advanced by James Lawson, namely that the Alveley sculptures originated at Romsley. The weaknesses inherent in this argument have already been examined above.

Secondly, that the Romsley sculptures and the Alveley sculptures originated contemporaneously but independently.

Thirdly, that the Romsley sculptures originated in Alveley but were brought subsequently to the chapel.

Therefore, it is the second and third of these possible explanations which require closer examination, but in the case of the former it is the absence of a demonstrable context which causes disquiet.

It is certainly not, of itself, problematic that neighbouring churches might attract the services of the same masons and sculptors; the Herefordshire School masons who worked in Alveley might well have been persuaded to work in Romsley as well, or indeed, vice versa. It is not possible to determine how extensive any scheme in Romsley might have been, but such patterns of activity are readily recognised regionally in medieval churches. More problematic is the question of who might have commissioned such building work and why. Even if the le Poer tenure of Romsley were traced back to Hugh in the mid-12th century, itself a debatable contention, it is difficult to imagine why a lord, whose interests so clearly lay in Worcestershire, would want to undertake such a scheme in a small and modest manor which was relatively isolated from his tenurial 'centre of gravity'. Unlike the case with the neighbouring church at Alveley, there is the lack of a meaningful context in the case of Romsley, and this remains the case even if the Lestrangle family were influential in and holding Romsley at the time.

Therefore, we must consider the possibility that the sculptures originated in Alveley, but were brought subsequently to the chapel in Romsley. A central aspect of this is the dating of the chapel itself, on which our information is relatively limited. However, the information which we do have, the sculptures apart, all points to the 13th century and later. While not necessarily reflecting the date of foundation, the earliest documentary reference which we have to the chapel in Romsley occurs in 1255, when the jurors of Bridgnorth reported that Henry de Wingham held the prebend of Alveley, with its member, Romsley, together worth forty marks (Illingworth 1818, 59b; Eyton 1854, 121; 1856, 203–4). It appears not to have warranted any mention in the 1292 *Taxatio* of Pope Nicholas.

The physical remains of the chapel are equally scanty. In 1975 E. W. Tipler investigated a site in a small paddock known locally as 'Chapel Yard', situated some 300 metres to the west of Old Hall Farm. He found a heavy stone spread and pieces of worked stone, some fairly sizeable and of 'good workmanship' and pottery of medieval to 19th century date. The site appeared to have been robbed out, but roof tiles and two broken decorated tiles were found, of identical design in yellow on brown tile depicting an animal's head with leaf and stem, dated between the 13th and 15th centuries. Other types were recovered in plain yellow face on black. It seems likely that Tipler had located fragments of the 13th century or later chapel floor, as had Eyton before him. An aerial survey followed in 1976 during which the foundation outline was defined together with a nearby moated site. The presumed chapel site is recorded as being orientated NE/SW, then visible as a roughly level platform measuring approximately 30m.x14m.x0.5m. high. The Historic Environment Record notes that the building 'stands out as a patch of light coloured stony soil, with a few dressed blocks, surrounded by a ring of dark soil in a ploughed field which is otherwise of a reddish colour'. A visitor to the site around 1854, R. C. Warde, observed the 'impression' of the building, commenting that it 'appeared to have consisted of a simple nave some forty feet in length built of roughly hewn sandstone. Numbers of fragments of encaustic tiles lay scattered within its limits the exact types of those now existing in the Abbey Church of Malvern'. No record of these tiles, apart from a sketch and photograph of one tile, have been seen by this writer, but if Warde's observations are borne out then at least a part of the floor in Romsley Chapel seems likely to have been re-laid or patched in the second half of the 15th century (Tipler 1975, 71; 1976, 59; Warde 1854, 464).<sup>11</sup>

Various worked stones have been found at the neighbouring farms, probably from the chapel site, among them in 1979 a large stone bearing an incised cross motif which it has been suggested may have formed the keystone of an arch (Tipler 1976, 59; 1979, 76–7) (12). Apart from the Herefordshire School sculptures, there is nothing to suggest that these stones were all fashioned at the same date.

Taken together, there seems no reason on the basis of the documentary and archaeological evidence to suppose that the chapel must have been in existence in Romsley before the 13th century unless one supposes that the Herefordshire School sculptures can be used to date the building. This observation is lent further weight when account is taken of wider patterns of activity in post-Conquest south-east Shropshire.

Jane Croom's study of the minster parochiae of south-east Shropshire has drawn attention to a conspicuous characteristic of the parochial geography of the area in the 11th and 12th centuries, that is the large number of surviving minster churches which were still active at this date (Croom 1988, 79), which, she suggested, might partly be the result of a relatively late development of separate lordships in Shropshire.

The parish of Alveley was most probably part of a middle Saxon land unit which originally encompassed the parishes of Worfield, Claverley, Quatt, Quatford and St. Mary Magdalene, Bridgnorth. Croom suggests that Worfield might have been the original minster church within this territory, to be eclipsed in the 10th century when Quatford emerged as the chapel of the royal burh, the forerunner of St. Mary Magdalene, Bridgnorth (Croom 1989, 156, 163).

The survival of these minster communities into the early post-Conquest period may well have influenced the chronology of local church foundation and the development of the parochial system in the area, in essence slowing down the pace at which private chapels might have been established. It was not until c.1100 that the minster system broke down in south-east Shropshire, with perhaps some further 200 years before the replacement pattern of numerous local churches and small parishes was finally established. Croom further suggests that the continued subordination of many small churches in south-east Shropshire during the later medieval period might well have been a consequence of their relatively late arrival on the scene (Croom 1988, 80). While the details of Romsley Chapel's foundation are unknown, the prevailing context which Croom has established for this part of Shropshire seems to suggest that a later rather than an early foundation date is likely. Romsley, attached to the Church of Alveley which was in turn a prebend of the Royal Free Chapel of St Mary Magdalene in Bridgnorth (originally in Quatford; Croom 1989, 157–9), seems to be consistent with this proposed pattern. Therefore, the foundation of Romsley Chapel in the 13th century rather than the 12th century seems entirely probable, and is not inconsistent with what has been observed of the known documentary and archaeological evidence.

The implication of these conclusions is that the Herefordshire School sculptures probably found their way into the chapel of Romsley during the 13th century, and that they were probably taken there from Alveley, the church to which the chapel was attached; of course the very converse of what Mr. Lawson's thesis supposed. Such a reconstruction of possible events also has the advantage of offering a meaningful context. It has been observed that, whatever the truth of Hugh le Poer's links with Romsley, this family's associations with the manor are most clearly seen from the early 13th century onwards, with Roger le Poer in 1212. It does not seem improbable that the arrival of the cadet branch of the le Poers in this manor might have occasioned the building of a chapel sometime between c.1211 and c.1255, both as a matter of convenience and an affirmation and celebration of their tenure.<sup>13</sup> Although it is only a matter of speculation, one wonders about the relationship of the nearby moated site to both this chapel and the le Poer family. However, if the decision to build a chapel had been taken in the first half of the 13th century, at a time when the church in Alveley was itself being refashioned in part, it seems not improbable that some of the available decorated stones might have been gifted or purchased to adorn the new chapel.<sup>14</sup> When R. C. Warde visited Romsley around 1854 he remarked on two bas relief carvings which 'evidently represented the zodiacal signs Leo and Sagittarius: the former appearing as a well-executed lion, standing; the other as a Centaur, drawing a bow'. Warde was informed that these carvings had 'surmounted the lintel of the principal doorway' (Warde 1854, No 267, 464). While the reliability of such testimony may be open to doubt at several points, if taken at face value it would suggest that the sculptures were incorporated into the building where they might be fitted, rather than in accordance with any conventional planned sculptural scheme, an approach which would be consistent with the acquisition of sculpture from another building to adorn the new one. Such a scenario seems far more sensible than attempting to understand the alternative context of commissioning a remarkable and extensive set of sculptures in the mid-12th century for a small chapel without any parochial rights or any clear tenurial attachments.

Therefore, while acknowledging that the evidence available is often inconclusive or open to challenge, the strong impression which nonetheless emerges from this review is that there are no grounds for confidence in the revisions proposed by Mr. Lawson for the provenance and patronage of the Herefordshire School sculptures from Alveley; rather, that for the present the arguments presented by Hunt and Stokes in 1997 remain the most credible explanation of the context of these sculptures.

## Notes

- 1 This writer's understanding of Mr. James Lawson's thesis is based on personal communication and a typescript note kindly sent to me around November 2005.
- 2 Rachel Morley, *A Study of the Twelfth Century Stone Sculptures at The Bell Inn, Alveley*, unpublished manuscript, April 2012.
- 3 This argument is advanced in the manuscript noted at 2, above.
- 4 SO 786.829; *West Midlands Archaeological News Sheet*, 18 (1975), 71.
- 5 In a Chancery case regarding the demolition of a pew in the chancel of Alveley Church it was recorded 'that there was anciently a church or chapel in Romsley which the inhabitants of Romsley did usually resort to divine service, but when the said church or chapel grew into decay and fall into ruin few of the inhabitants of Romsley had any seats within the parish church of Alveley until of latter years. The said inhabitants of Romsley consented to pay such payments and duties as others and they gained and obtained to themselves seats in the chancel of the parish church and other parts thereof as they could conveniently get and many of these inhabitants of Romsley did sit in the Alleys and in the great chancel belonging to the impropriator of the tythes of the said parish'; Alan Nicholls, 'Alveley Chancery Cases', *Transactions of the Alveley Historical Society* (2003), 25–7 (accessed on-line, 12.01.2013).
- 6 Morley 2012, 3.5, 4.10; Morley describes the scene as depicting a pelican, following the Bestiary account, but the bird represented is much more akin to a bird of prey.
- 7 Lawson typescript note, and *pers comm.* (e-mail 16 November 2005).
- 8 At different times both the bishops of Worcester and the barons of Stafford appear as the overlords. That the bishops may be shown granting lands in Clifford in the 10th century suggests that this manor may have been among those where their tenure was disrupted. However, the establishment of Stephen le Poer on this land may owe something to Hugh le Poer's relationship with the bishop at this time. In 1252 Humphrey de Bohun was recorded as holding  $\frac{1}{2}$  a knight's fee here, presumably held of him by the Hugh le Poer who whose widow, Julian, still held of the earl in 1299.
- 9 An agreement between Abbot Henry of Shrewsbury and Alan le Poer of Wollascott. Alan le Poer also appears witnessing charters in favour of Haughmond Abbey.
- 10 Referring to John, son of Alan le Poer of Wollascott.
- 11 See also Shropshire Historic Environment Record, HER No. 01358 (accessed on-line, 18.01.2013); with regard to the floor tile recorded by Tipler, he suggests comparisons with tiles from Holt Church. It is not improbable that the building may have contained several phases of floor tiles put in place over several centuries.
- 12 HER No 01358; Mr. Tipler (Tipler 1976, 59) reported worked stone material from two adjoining farms; a part wall corner base in two parts from Cross Farm Cottage, and four carved works in wall stones at Low Farm, which he identified as a lion and a centaur, and 'a possible pillar head...depicting a bird, possibly a dove based by complicated tracery'. The Low Farm stones have been viewed by the present writer, the latter item clearly being the affronted birds and interlace described above. The stone marked with a cross has also been examined by this writer and while tapered it does not convince as a keystone, although this may be a reflection of the quality of the work. In any case the relatively poor quality of the work on this stone cannot be associated with the Herefordshire School stones. See Tipler 1979, 76–7.
- 13 Even if Hugh le Poer held this manor in the mid-12th century, this does not necessarily imply a close or residential association with the manor and nor would it undermine the possible implications of the arrival in the 13th century of a cadet branch of the family who wanted to make 'their mark' on the place; nor would it contradict the suggestion that Romsley Chapel was built in the first half of the 13th century.
- 14 While to be approached with caution, such an explanation for the 'recycling' of the sculptures from Alveley might therefore suggest that the affronted bird capitals now in Romsley originated from the south doorway of the 12th century church of Alveley as this appears to have been replaced early in the 13th century. Although not precisely the same, the south door of Ribbesford Church is called to mind. However, this can be no more than speculation as the original disposition of the Alveley scheme is unknown, as is the sequence by which the sculptures were 'decommissioned' and removed.

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