

A Ring through History



Hunger is a dull pain in Dafydd's stomach. It's a long time since breakfast and he's keen to get home even though he and his older brother, Owain, haven't yet found any gold. He's standing in the pouring rain on the banks of the Afon Twrch (left), a very small tributary of the River Cothi near the Roman gold mines at Dolaucothi in what today is Carmarthenshire. He's waiting for the wave of water about to be released from the tank built upstream by Owain. Their hope is that this mining method, known as hushing and which dates back to the Romans, will finally reveal gold-bearing veins in the bed of the stream.

The year is 1121 and Henry I is on the English throne and trying to control the uprisings of the feuding Welsh princes Marededd, Madoc and Morgan. What Dafydd can't begin to imagine is that the next few minutes will mark the start a 900 year story of an amazing gold and blue sapphire ring found under a tree in a nursery garden behind an old priory in North Devon in the 19th century. However, more of that later. Let's find out how the story begins.

Dafydd turns at the sound of rushing water and steps back quickly from the edge as the wave surges past him, scouring the river bed and taking with it a muddy load of loose soil and rock. The watercourse returns rapidly to its normal flow and the water quickly clears to reveal clean rock. His brother appears from up the valley and together they wade into the river to see what the wave has uncovered. So far, the two men have found very little gold in any of the tributaries around their home village and they aren't particularly hopeful that this one will be any better.

They worked their way carefully along the river, their eyes fixed on the bed. Imagine their delight when they found that the wave had indeed uncovered a vein of quartz in which there were definite glints of gold. They grinned at each other. Those earlier feelings of hunger had gone and they worked away and dug out as much quartz as they could carry between them in their shoulder bags. Doing their best to hide evidence of the vein from prying eyes, they set off back to their village where they were greeted by Dafydd's wife Angharat.

Releasing the gold from its rocky prison was a complicated process involving careful crushing of the rock to a fine powder and using mercury to extract the precious metal. After collecting more quartz from the river over the next few days, they worked away steadily and secretly for the next six weeks. They managed to produce about 10 pennyweights of gold, equivalent to about 15 grams, worth about 50 pennies then and equivalent to something like £7,000 today; riches indeed.

With the tiny ball of gold carefully hidden, Dafydd walked the 24 miles to Carmarthen on market day and sold it there to the Prior of the Benedictine community. Carmarthen Priory had only been founded as a cell of the Benedictine mother-house at Battle Abbey in Sussex by Henry I a decade earlier but was already well established. With his new-found wealth, Dafydd bought leather and cooking pots at the market and returned to Dolaucothi to continue the search for gold, completely unaware of the story he had set in motion.

What of the gold? Well it stayed hidden in the Prior's secret hiding place until 1125 when the Benedictine prior of Carmarthen and his monks were sent home to Battle Abbey, taking it with them.

The Carmarthen community had just switched allegiance and become Augustinian under Bernard, Bishop of St David's.



For the moment we leave the gold safely secreted in Battle Abbey and pick up the story 650 miles to the north on the Isle of Lewis at a small monastery with a stone church on the Island of Saint Columba in Loch Eireasort. The tiny island was, and indeed still is, connected to the

mainland by a causeway. In 1125, the newly-built stone church had just replaced an earlier one made of wood dedicated to the 6th century Irish monk St Columba. At that time the area was under the rule of the Viking King Sigurd the Crusader and had flourished with the development of settlements and farming.

The monastery had, like Pilton Priory in North Devon 400 years later, only three monks. Like those at Battle Abbey and those who were yet to come in Pilton Priory, they were Benedictine. They lived a simple life supplied with food by a farming community and gathering rents and tithes from the inhabitants.

A few miles away to the north of the island, close to Loch Roag (below), miners had recently re-discovered a seam of sapphire, the rarest of Scotland's gemstones. These Scottish gemstones are of a particularly high quality, so that today the site is the subject of a protection order banning their



removal. They were a favourite choice in the Middle Ages, though so rare that they were reserved solely for royalty, upper nobility and certain high ranking clergymen. They were also thought to be imbued with magical powers such as protecting the wearer from the effects of poison, preserving chastity, keeping the peace and curing snake bites. Their powers were of particular interest to religious foundations like that on the Isle of Saint Columba and at Battle Abbey.

In September 1125, a shepherd called Alexander from Great Bernera, on the opposite side of the Isle of Lewis, sold three large blue sapphire crystals which he had found near Loch Roag to the monks in the island monastery. For several years they were kept there until, in 1128, the monastery was visited by Abbot Roger of the Benedictine Abbey of Malmesbury, now in the County of Wiltshire. Bishop Roger of Salisbury had seized power at Malmesbury Abbey 10 years earlier. He was presented with two sapphires by the monks during a visit to the island on a two year progress he was making on foot around the Benedictine monasteries in the North of England and Scotland, or Alba as it was known in the 12th century. He brought the sapphires back to Malmesbury in 1129.



It was another two years after that, once Roger had finally obtained royal permission for the seizure of Malmesbury (left) and its endowments from the previous Abbot Eadwulf, that he set off on a second progress in 1130, this time around the South of England, taking in the mother-house at Battle Abbey. There he exchanged one of the

Scottish sapphires for Dafydd's ball of gold and took it back to Malmesbury. At this point, two elements of our story – the gold and the sapphire - are in place in Malmesbury Abbey but it is going to be another 160 years before anything much happened to them. Things moved slowly in those days and there are still a few twists to be negotiated first.

We pick up the story nearly 60 years later when Pilton Priory was founded as a daughter-house of Malmesbury Abbey in 1187 AD and a monk named Ralph was recorded as its first Prior. In the 12th and 13th centuries there were lots of Benedictine monasteries and priories in the west of England, Malmesbury Abbey being one of the more significant. Its prosperity varied through the years with a succession of more or less competent abbots appointed by the king. In 1246, Geoffrey, the sacristan of Malmesbury, was appointed Abbot, although he proved not to be a very energetic superior, perhaps because of ill-health, and he died leaving the Abbey in significant debt. However, in 1260 William of Colerne, a monk of Malmesbury, was appointed as Abbot by Henry III. This signalled the start of an era of vigorous rule and forceful administration. William was a financier and agriculturalist who bought churches, manors and land throughout the area and established estates and tithes to provide alms for the poor.



His financial activities brought him into close contact with the merchant community throughout the region and, in 1275, he met Elijah of Chippenham, a well-educated Jewish wool merchant. Elijah loaned the Abbey £100 to pay for the purchase of the manor of Bremhill, 5 miles east of Chippenham (left, St Martin's Church, Bremhill). As a result of their activities William and Elijah became close associates and were involved in several land deals over the next 15 years during which Malmesbury Abbey prospered. In August 1281, Abbot William walked the 10 miles south from

Malmesbury to Chippenham along the Kingsway and presented Dafydd's gold and the blue sapphire from the Isle of Lewis to Elijah as thanks for his assistance in resolving difficulties during the Bremhill purchase.

However, Elijah's comfortable life as a merchant was about to be turned upside down. In 1290, after two centuries of persecution of the Jews in England, King Edward the Confessor passed the Edict of Expulsion. This meant that the three thousand Jews in England were expelled or were given the opportunity to reject Judaism and convert to Christianity. As an apostate Jew, Elijah decided that he would convert to Christianity. As a gesture to demonstrate both his story and his education, he



employed a craftsman jeweller in Cook Street in Chippenham to create a ring. He had the ring inscribed in Latin on the underside of the bezel with *'With us is Jesus the Lord'*, and in Hebrew on the top of the bezel with *'God Elohim Jehovah Jesus may be with us'*. The sapphire was cut as a

cabochon – a rounded dome without facets - and was drilled and the hole filled with gold to hold it in place. In thanks for his successful conversion, Elijah presented the ring to Abbot William.

The ring, which was fine enough to be worthy of an archbishop rather than just an abbot, remained in Malmesbury Abbey for another 150 years. In 1434 Thomas Bristow was appointed as Abbot and then twelve years later, in 1446, John Andover was appointed by him as Prior of Pilton. Thomas presented the ring to the new Pilton Prior as a token of his new status. When Thomas Bristow died in 1456 he was succeeded as Abbot of Malmesbury by the same John Andover who returned from Pilton. Among the four candidates who had put themselves forward for the position of Abbot of Malmesbury in 1434 had been one Robert Upton. Although unsuccessful in Malmesbury in 1434, in 1457 he was appointed as the sixteenth Prior of Pilton and he moved into the Prior's House close to St Mary's Church.

Robert Upton's appointment came two years into the start of the Wars of the Roses, the fight between the House of Lancaster and the House of York for the crown of England. The Wars ended with the defeat of Richard III at Bosworth in 1485 and the victory of Henry Tudor, who became Henry VII.



However, neither the Wars of the Roses nor the transition to the Tudors had much impact on life in Pilton Priory until the arrival on the throne of Henry VII's son, Henry VIII, in 1509. Indeed, all was well and the Priory prospered until Henry's disagreement with Pope Clement VII in Rome over his right to an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. In a fit of pique, Henry decided he didn't need the Pope's permission anyway, and divorced Catherine and married Anne Boleyn in 1533. As a result, the English Protestant Church

was established, in what is known as The Reformation, with Henry VIII as the Supreme Head. All eight hundred monasteries in England were to be closed and Henry appointed commissioners to visit each to assess their value (photo above). Their buildings were to be sold or demolished and their land sold off for Henry's benefit.

The Prior of Pilton at this time was John Rosse who had been appointed in 1527. One day in late December 1535, when there were only three monks in residence, he was visited by Henry's Commissioners who had come to assess the value of Pilton Priory. Since it had arrived in Pilton in 1446 the gold and sapphire ring had been locked away in the Prior's House. The Commissioners assessed the official value of the priory as £56, equivalent to about £50,000 today, although it is now thought to have been significantly in excess of that figure because of several undeclared assets and incomes. Fortunately for our story, the existence of the gold and sapphire ring was also unknown to Henry's Commissioners. To save it from Henry's clutches, in January 1536, Prior John encased the ring in a ball of clay and buried it under an oak sapling in the Priory's nursery gardens on the north side of the church.

At this point the ring literally disappears from view for more than 300 years! The record of where it was buried, which the Prior must have left behind, was quickly lost. The oak tree grew and was felled and was replaced by an ash tree but the ring remained undiscovered. It would have remained buried,



possibly forever, if it hadn't been decided in the 1860s to extend the St Mary's churchyard to the north of the church. The buildings in the area were removed and the trees felled in 1867 and under the ash tree the ball of clay was found. The owner of the land, Dr Forrester, had the ring identified by the British Museum, which judged it to be ecclesiastical and to have been made between 1100 and 1130. Another 109 years then passed until, in 1976, the ring was presented to the North Devon Athenaeum by a member of the Chanter family of Barnstaple, to whom it had descended from Dr Forrester.

The final act in the story came in 2016, 895 years on from the start. In a learned paper by John Cherry of the Devon Archaeological Society, the ring was accurately dated to around 1300, which ties in remarkably well with our story. Today it can be found in the North Devon Athenaeum in Barnstaple. Dafydd and Alexander would surely have been amazed if they could have realised what they had started.

Martin Haddrill

This is a fictional version of how the Prior's Ring of Pilton might have been made and how it might have come to be found in a nursery garden in Pilton. The ring is very real, while the story is based on a mixture of facts, dates, historical people, places and events, with the aim of weaving a credible version of its real story - which we will regrettably never know.

Photograph attributions:

Afon Twrch : Younger 1978; Island of St Columba : Outer Hebrides Tourism; Loch Roag : Caught by the River; Malmesbury Abbey : Rare Old Prints; St Martin's Church, Bremhill, The Underside and Top of the Ring, and the Ring : Martin Haddrill. The Dissolution of the Monasteries : The History Notes