

Gems of Classical Art in the Vale of Glamorgan

By ROY SAUNDERS

"Could you tell me the way to Beaupré Castle, please?"

"To where, sir?"

"To Beaupré Castle."

"Oh, you mean Beaupré; yes. At the bottom of the hill below St. Hilary you will see a path across the fields leading to it, sir."

Once again in the Vale of Glamorgan I found myself searching for this strange Elizabethan ruin somewhere between Cowbridge and Cardiff. Strange it is when you find it for the first time and work your way to the inner courtyard through the backyard and kitchen garden of the adjoining farm.

Over piles of moss-covered stones and beneath crumbling arches, you come to the wide courtyard and turn to view a gorgeous piece of classic architecture rising from the squat Tudor arch, bearing the arms of the Basset family ornately decorated with finely worked examples of the Grecian orders that rise from Doric, Ionic, to Corinthian. In amazement you wonder how on earth such a magnificent thing ever came into being in such a lonely corner of old Wales, with French name meaning Fair Meadow. Well, here is the story:—

Somewhere about the year 1554 there lived at Bridgend two brothers, William and Richard Twrch. They were stonemasons by trade and worked in Sutton quarries. They shared everything and lived a peaceful state of mutual harmony until they both fell in love with the same girl. Each kept the fact from the other, but at last the secret was revealed. It was a sad day for the brothers, as neither, so it is reported, spoke to the other again.

Richard's Travels

Richard Twrch left the district and went to London, where he worked for years. He afterwards went to Italy and Greece, where he studied the great classic forms of architecture, masonry, and sculpture.

At last he returned to the Sutton quarries and made a name for himself as a classic designer, for little Italian work had filtered into Britain at that early date.

In 1586 Richard Twrch was employed by William Basset to build a chapel to Beaupré. The date 1586 can still be read above the entrance, and in 1600 the beautiful porch, still the admiration of the countryside, was chiselled into being. It is an astonishing piece of work for a man who at one time was only a working mason.

The porch represents the three Greek orders, Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian, all of which are very fine specimens and considered to be the earliest examples in England. The chapel, too, has a fine combination of the orders, together with

some pointed Gothic work, but only part is now standing. The rest of the decorated parts of the building are in the composite Grecian style.

Magna Carta

Not only is this place interesting for its architectural remains, but also for the remarkable event supposed to have taken place in this secluded corner of the Vale.

the nearby village, was Lord Chief Justice of England in the reign of King John. It is said that he himself drew up the first draft of Magna Carta at Beaupré.

It is a strange thing how so many Welsh signatures can be seen on the document. The first name on the list is that of the Earl of Salisbury. The old name for Beaupré was "Maes Essyllt,"

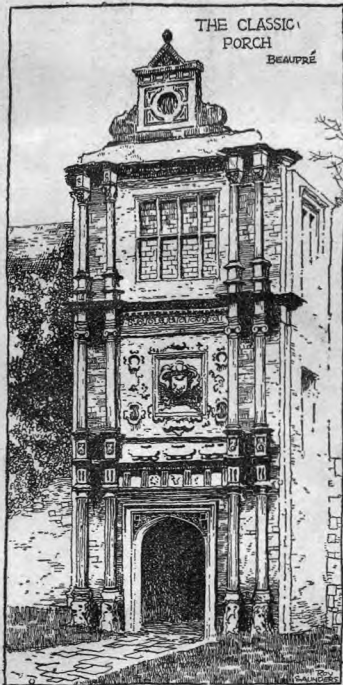
the favourite abode of the Sissyllt family, from whom are descended the noble family Cecil, Marquises of Exeter and Salisbury. There are many other Welsh names, including the Lord of Glamorgan, who was appointed to enforce the observance of the Charter.

So the thanks of the people for liberty and freedom gained by this covenant were due to Sir Philip Basset and the barons of South Wales for their efforts in this historic "Fair Meadow" so near to Cardiff.

Beaupré is of great importance as a landmark in the architecture of South Wales, as a work of great skill in craftsmanship and sculpture, as a memorial to an important Welsh family, and the cradle of one of the most outstanding features of English history.

Evening

The short spring evening was closing in rapidly; a mist had crept up from the sea, casting a clammy greyness about the ivy-rimmed courtyard. A tiny bat flitted tirelessly to and fro, and my little sheepdog, bored by her eerie surroundings, showed a desire to be off again.



Here, according to tradition, Magna Carta was first drawn up; here the barons and lords first met to consider the preliminaries of England's famous Charter of Liberties. Where—

"The Torch of Liberty was set aflame,
And handed on from man to man."
Sir Philip Basset, Lord of St. Hilary,

Out on the meadows the spring song of the blackbirds had been displaced by the intermittent drone of a siren from some distant lightship in the Channel. The old grey walls of Beaupré Castle faded away behind the silencing whisps of fog that were stealing over those historic "fair meadows" of St. Hilary.