

## *Welsh Saints in Westminster Abbey* \*

by Madeleine Gray, PhD

With its magnificent fan vault and its huge collection of statues of saints, Henry VII's Lady Chapel is one of the glories of Westminster Abbey. In his religious beliefs, Henry was a devout and entirely conventional late medieval monarch. He and his mother, the devout and strong-minded Lady Margaret Beaufort, were making plans for the Lady Chapel and its associated chantry foundations as early as 1498. Building work on the chapel began in 1503, in the aftermath of the death of Henry's wife Elizabeth of York: it was largely finished by the time of his own death in 1509. He clearly intended it as the burial place for his family, though his eldest son Arthur was buried in a separate chantry chapel in Worcester Cathedral.

As Welsh people (and particularly Welsh people of the diaspora) we tend to regard Henry as one of our own. Although strictly speaking he was only a quarter Welsh, he bore a Welsh surname; he was born in Wales and spent most of his childhood there (much of it in the cultured environment of William Herbert's castle at Raglan). His main power base was in Wales and it was from there that he began his bid for the throne in 1485. Though he never visited Wales again, he did a great deal for his native land. One might have expected him to reflect this sense of identity in his memorial chapel. In fact, there are remarkably few Welsh saints there. It is possible that one or more of the unidentified episcopal saints could be St David or another of the Welsh bishop-saints. However, of over 80 saints (some appearing twice or even three times, some unidentifiable) only two are clearly Welsh. St Winifred appears on the north side of the apse (fig 1) and the obscure Welsh/Breton saint Armel appears twice, at the east end of the north aisle (fig 2) and in the south triforium of the nave (fig 3).

At first sight, this is surprising. However, it is clear that by the early sixteenth century Henry had moved away from his early focus on his Welsh origins. In 1486 he gave his first son a name resonant with legends of Welsh greatness. The boy was created prince of Wales and given a household and council at Ludlow. But when Arthur died in 1502 he was buried at Worcester and his tomb and chantry chapel have no references at all to Welsh traditions.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Based on a lecture delivered to the Society at the British Academy, London, on 27 April 2006, with Cecil Roberts, Honorary Treasurer, in the chair.

<sup>1</sup> The Worcester chantry chapel has however marked similarities with the design and decoration of the Westminster Lady Chapel. Dr Linda Monckton is currently editing the proceedings of a conference on Prince Arthur's chantry, to be published by Boydell & Brewer, which will among other things clarify the relationship between the two structures.

The Welsh mythological tradition was part of the language of politics in fifteenth-century England, and was used by both sides in the Wars of the Roses. Edward IV was able to claim Welsh ancestry through his grandmother Anne Mortimer, who was descended from Gwladus Ddu, daughter of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth. He and his father Richard, duke of York, used their descent from the Welsh princes and the traditions of the *mab darogan* as well as their Mortimer inheritance as part of their claim to the throne of England. Texts supporting Edward's claim made specific (if rather ambiguous) use of the prophecies of Cadwaladr, predicting the loss of British unity as the result of a devout but weak king and its recovery under a king who could unite in his person the divergent strands of English and Welsh royal genealogy.<sup>2</sup>

Henry was therefore working within an established tradition of political discourse when he made use of these legends in his bid for power. Descended from an Anglesey family, he made explicit use of references to Anglesey's royal saint Cadwaladr, adopting Cadwaladr's red dragon as his standard at Bosworth. The red dragon of Cadwaladr also guards the vestibule of the Westminster Lady Chapel. Within a few years of Bosworth, Cadwaladr was depicted in the Parliamentary robes of a fifteenth-century monarch in the east window of Llangadwaladr church. The window was installed in about 1490 by members of the Presaddfed family, Meurig ap Llywelyn ap Hwlcyn, his son Owain, and their wives, who appear as donors flanking Cadwaladr at the base of the window. The Presaddfed family were Tudor supporters: Meurig's brother Rhys is known to have fought at Bosworth, and Meurig and Owain may also have done so. According to local tradition, the window was a thank-offering for victory. The family went on to strengthen their Tudor connections: Owain's second wife was Elen, daughter of the wealthy and loyally Lancastrian William Bulkeley of Beaumaris.<sup>3</sup>

By the time he was planning his chapel at Westminster, however, Henry had another explicit agenda. Edward had tried to present Henry's half-uncle, the Lancastrian king Henry VI, as a weakling; Henry VII wanted to present Henry VI as a saint and campaigned to have him canonised. The chapel at Westminster was originally intended as a chapel to St Henry and is full of imagery of holy kings – Edward the Confessor, Edmund King and Martyr, the boy-king and martyr Kenelm, Henry VII's own sainted ancestor Louis of France (possibly there as a reminder that the Tudor family had French as well as English royal blood).

---

<sup>2</sup> For a contentious but fascinating discussion of these issues see Jonathan Hughes, *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy: the kingship of Edward IV* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002), esp ch 5, 116-61.

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. White, *The Llangadwaladr Glass* (Criccieth/Bodorgan: Gwasg Dinas, 2004, reprinted from the *Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society* 1970).

There was also a political charge behind the planned removal of Henry VI's body from Windsor. Henry VI had originally been buried at Chertsey Abbey but his remains were removed to Windsor by Richard III in 1485 – not to honour them but to prevent them from becoming the focus for a politically subversive cult. Edward IV had placed great emphasis on the cult of the warrior knight St George and the Garter chapel at Windsor.<sup>4</sup> Henry planned to counter this with a lady chapel at Windsor to house Henry VI's remains and to provide a funeral chapel for himself and his own family. In 1498, however, the monks of Westminster succeeded in laying claim to the potentially lucrative cult and relics by proving that Henry VI had wanted to be buried at Westminster. Henry VII abruptly changed his plans and he and his mother Lady Margaret Beaufort began the complex series of foundations and endowments which resulted not only in the construction of the Lady Chapel at Westminster but also in the establishment of almshouses and chantries geared to providing a perpetual round of intercessory prayer there.<sup>5</sup> This had the additional advantage for Henry that his grandmother Katherine de Valois was buried under the old Lady Chapel which his new foundation was planned to replace.

In the end, the main focus of this great scheme came to nothing. Henry VI was never canonised, and his body remained at Windsor. However, the plan for a chapel commemorating the sanctity of kingship and the Lancastrian dynasty bore magnificent fruit: and as a royal chapel it has survived successive waves of iconoclasm relatively unscathed. The iconography of the chapel is thus a remarkable compendium of late medieval devotion. Here are the traditional saints of the international church, evangelists, apostles, virgin martyrs, learned doctors. Here also are the saints of the English tradition: royal saints and martyrs like Edmund and Edward, ecclesiastical saints like Thomas of Canterbury, St Cuthbert and St Dunstan. Charles Phythian-Adams has pointed out<sup>6</sup> that the kings and bishops provide a pretty comprehensive regional coverage of England – a nation-building strategy as well as an assertion of royal power and piety.

Some of the saints are depicted twice. The virgin martyrs Katherine and Margaret appear on the east wall of the south aisle and towards the east end of the north triforium. St Peter appears in the east chapel and the east triforium. Other saints depicted twice include Barbara, Dorothy, Stephen, Laurence, Roche (the plague saint), and possibly Edward the Confessor and Thomas of

---

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Bengtson, 'Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27:2, Spring 1997, 317-40, 327-8.

<sup>5</sup> For details of the legal dispute and Henry and Lady Margaret's foundations see Phillip Lindley, 'Sculptural Functions and Forms in the Chapel' in Tim Tatton-Brown and Richard Mortimer, eds., *Westminster Abbey: The Lady Chapel of Henry VII* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 260-2.

<sup>6</sup> Lindley, 'Sculptural Functions and Forms', 282



**Fig. 1** St. Winifred: north side of the apse of the Lady Chapel in Westminster Abbey (Note the decapitated head on the plinth to the left of her feet) (Copyright: Dean and Chapter of Westminster)

Canterbury. In general, the saints who appear more than once are the more important saints, or those for whom Henry and his family had a particular reverence. Margaret was the name saint of his formidable mother. Margaret Beaufort was also particularly devoted to the cult of St Katherine: according to her confessor John Fisher, she fasted on St Katherine's day and had depictions of the saint in her private chapel. Like her son, she was involved in the early years of the sixteenth century in a complex package of endowments for a chantry at Westminster, in Margaret's case linked to her endowment of lectureships in theology at Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>7</sup> However, the emphasis on St Katherine may also have been intended to draw attention to Henry's royal grandmother Katherine de Valois and his ultimate aim to provide her with a new tomb in his new dynastic chapel.

The decoration of Henry's chapel was thus designed to point not to his origins but to his ultimate objectives – legitimacy, unity, and of course salvation. For this, it was perhaps more important that he should emphasise saints from his English dominions as well as the traditionally powerful saints of western Christendom. Nevertheless there are at least two Welsh saints in the chapel. The better-known of these is Winifred, who appears in the apse in a very strange carving: her own decapitated head rests on a pillar or stool by her right foot. Virtually the second patron saint of Wales, her cult was based in the north-east but spread all over Wales, and she was with St David one of only two Welsh saints to be formally canonised by Rome.

Winifred's story has much in common with the virgin saints of the international tradition. The daughter of a north-east Wales landowner, she vowed her life to God from an early age. She was educated by the wandering saint Beuno, for whom her parents built a church. The son of the local king, Caradog, fell in love with her and tried to seduce her. When she repulsed his advances, he cut her head off: but Beuno healed her and cursed Caradog so that he melted into the ground. A well sprang up where her head fell and its healing waters are still venerated as the shrine of Holywell. In later life she moved to Gwytherin, just south of Conwy, where she founded a religious house. Her relics were taken from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury by the Benedictine community there, an episode which provided the plot for Ellis Peters' novel *A Morbid Taste for Bones*.

Earlier versions of the story depict Winifred as a woman of power and authority as well as learning.<sup>8</sup> She studies theology with Beuno; her responsibility for the fire, water and salt for the Mass in Beuno's church gives her the status of an acolyte. She treats Caradoc's propositioning with resourcefulness and intelligence. After her resurrection she and Beuno part

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm G. Jones, and Michael K. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 207-10.

<sup>8</sup> For the Latin text and a translation of the anonymous *Vita Prima*, dating probably from the early 1130s, see A. W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae sanctorum Britanniae et genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1944).

with the mutual blessing of equals. She goes on to make a pilgrimage to Rome and summon a synod of the whole British church for the reform of religious orders. She then founds and leads a religious community of her own. Later versions of the story (notably the one by Robert Pennant, prior of Shrewsbury, who masterminded the removal of Winifred's relics from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury) downplayed Winifred's intelligence and forcefulness and placed her firmly under male control.<sup>9</sup> In the visual tradition, though, she was still treated as a woman of power. She appears in stained glass at Llandyrnog in the Vale of Clwyd with a book as well as the sword of her near-martyrdom<sup>10</sup> and on the tomb of Sir William Bulkeley in Beaumaris dressed as an abbess with crown and sword as well as the crozier of authority. On the diocesan seal of St Asaph she is again depicted with wimple and crozier as a woman of power and authority, and (in another bizarre touch) she is carrying her own reliquary.<sup>11</sup>

Henry may have chosen Winifred for his chapel because of her eminence as a Welsh saint, but he may also have been influenced by his mother. It may be more than coincidence that Caxton chose to publish an English version of the Life of St Winifred in 1485.<sup>12</sup> Like so many other saints' cults, both those of local scope and those from the international tradition, the cult of St Winifred had acquired political overtones by the fifteenth century. Henry V and Edward IV both went on pilgrimage to Holywell. Caxton had been an active Yorkist supporter and needed to demonstrate his loyalty to the new dynasty. He had already had dealings with Margaret Beaufort in 1483, and it was partly through her that he re-established his credibility. Margaret Beaufort has traditionally been credited with rebuilding Winifred's well and well chapel at Holywell. In fact the new building was more probably initiated by her brother-in-law William Stanley, initially a partisan of Henry's but executed in 1495 for his involvement with the Perkin Warbeck conspiracy. Nevertheless, Holywell was definitely on the territory of Margaret's husband Thomas Stanley, Earl of Derby, and she had a well-known predilection for large-scale pious charitable activities and powerful female saints. Building at Holywell clearly continued into the sixteenth century, as witness the carving of Katherine of Aragon's crown-and-pomegranate device on the ceiling. Could Margaret have taken over the project – or did she just allow her name to be associated with it?

---

<sup>9</sup> Text and translation of Robert Pennant's *vita* (and another version of the *Vita Prima*) in Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, eds., *Two mediaeval lives of Saint Winifride* (Toronto: Peregrina, 2000). For later versions see e.g. William Caxton, *The lyfe of the holy blessid vyrgyn saynt Wenefride* ... (Westminster: W. Caxton, 1485).

<sup>10</sup> <http://cistercian-way.newport.ac.uk/place.asp?PlaceID=257> (accessed 20.7.06)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.gtj.org.uk/item.php?lang=en&id=14464&t=1> (accessed 20.7.06)

<sup>12</sup> For what follows see M. J. C. Lowry, 'Caxton, St Winifred and the Lady Margaret Beaufort', *The Library* 6<sup>th</sup> ser., vol. 5 no. 2 (June 1983), 101–17..



**Fig. 2** St Armel: east end of north aisle of the Lady Chapel in Westminster Abbey (Copyright: Dean and Chapter of Westminster)



**Fig. 3** St Armel: south triforium of nave of the Lady Chapel in Westminster Abbey (Copyright: Dean and Chapter of Westminster)

Winifred was thus a fairly obvious choice for commemoration in Henry's chapel. Less straightforward is his choice of Armel, a little-known saint who appears there twice, a privilege generally reserved for the leading saints of the international tradition. According to legend, Armel was a cousin of the better-known saints Samson and Cadfan. With them, he left Wales in the middle of the sixth century, possibly as a result of the yellow plague. He travelled to Brittany and settled there, founding monasteries at Ploërmel (where his relics were venerated, and the sixteenth-century stained glass told the story of his life) and at St. Armel-les-Boscheaux. It was here that he performed his most famous miracle, defeating a dragon which was terrorising the area. Having captured it, he tied it up with his stole, took it to the top of the nearest hill (since called Mont St. Armel) and commanded it to throw itself into the river Sèche. As a result he is always depicted iconographically with a dragon on a leash. From being a huge and terrifying monster, though, the dragon has almost always dwindled to the size of a pet dog.

Henry presumably encountered the cult of St Armel during his period as a political refugee in Brittany.<sup>13</sup> Henry's uncle Jasper spent some times as a virtual prisoner at Josselin, a castle near Ploërmel. In the sequence of statues in the Lady Chapel, Henry displayed his devotion to another Breton saint, St Vincent of Vannes, who appears no less than three times in the Lady Chapel. We may suspect Margaret Beaufort's influence here. Like St Roche and St Anthony, St Vincent was considered a particularly efficacious protector against the plague. As the distinguished art historian Phillip Lindley points out,<sup>14</sup> both Henry's will and the iconography of the chapel stress saints who were connected with plague. Henry's father Edmund Tudor had died of the plague in 1456, leaving his child bride pregnant and isolated in south-west Wales. This may explain Margaret's enduring fear of plague. She owned a book of tracts on the disease, and left money in her will to convert one of her manors into a plague refuge.<sup>15</sup>

According to one tradition, Henry appealed to Armel for help when he was in danger of shipwreck during his abortive first invasion attempt in 1483.<sup>16</sup> Though the invasion failed, he escaped, and thereafter he regarded Armel as his protector. Why he chose Armel for help instead of one of the better-known patron saints of seafarers (such as St Erasmus or St Nicholas of Myra) we do not know, though there may be a clue in one of the surviving depictions of the saint (fig 4). An alabaster plaque from the home of the Edwards family of Plas-y-pentre, near Chirk, it made its way to St Mary's Brookfield (near

---

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of Breton influences on Henry's early years see Michael Jones, 'Brittany and Wales in the Middle Ages: contacts and comparisons', *Trans. Hon. Soc. Cymmrodorion* ns 11 (2004), 19-49, esp. 47-48.

<sup>14</sup> 'Sculptural Functions and Forms', 286

<sup>15</sup> Jones & Underwood, *The King's Mother*, 147.

<sup>16</sup> D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993 ed), 29.





**Fig. 4** Alabaster plaque of St. Armel found at Plas-y-pentre near Chirk in Westminster Abbey

Tufnell Park) in the nineteenth century. A son of the Plas-y-pentre family became incumbent of the London parish; being of a High Church cast of mind and feeling that the alabaster plaque was not properly appreciated in his home, he brought it to London.<sup>17</sup> An almost identical plaque is in the museum at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, but its provenance is completely unknown.<sup>18</sup>

These plaques show Armel praying before a crucifix (or possibly a vision of the crucified Christ). He holds the dragon tethered with his left hand; in his right hand is a long purse, or possibly a book-bag. In the background, behind the crucifix, is a small, stubby ship, and behind Armel himself is a castle or fortified town. It is tempting to conjecture that these plaques tell a story from the life of the saint which is missing from the surviving written sources – possibly a vision of the crucified Christ and a shipwreck or other seafaring episode which would have made Armel a suitable saint to intercede against shipwreck. The stained glass panels telling his story at Ploërmel include a scene in which the saint takes leave of his companions: it is a harbour-side scene with part of a ship in the background. Again, this might be a pointer to a lost episode involving Armel's journey from Wales to Brittany which might make him a suitable saint to ask for help at sea, particularly on Henry's return journey from Brittany to Wales.<sup>19</sup>

Henry is also said to have asked Armel for help on the eve of the battle of Bosworth, and to have regarded the saint as partly responsible for his victory. This presumably provides the context for the depiction of Armel in the stained glass at Merevale Abbey in Warwickshire. Henry probably stayed at or near Merevale on the night before Bosworth: he subsequently paid compensation to the abbey for damage caused to the fabric by his men who were lodged there and for damage to crops caused by his army as it marched across the abbey's fields to battle.<sup>20</sup> The Crowland chronicle actually describes the crucial battle as the battle of Merevale. Henry returned to the abbey in 1503, and this provides the most likely occasion for the installation there of an elaborate stained glass window commemorating the battle. In the upper tracery of the window, Armel is depicted mitred and in full armour under a chasuble. In his right hand he holds a book closed by a clasp and a long stole. The dragon peeps out from the folds of the stole.

---

<sup>17</sup> For a colour photograph see Peter Lord, *The Visual Culture of Wales: Medieval Vision* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 274.

<sup>18</sup> Christine Buckley and I are grateful to Janet Graffius, curator of the museum at Stonyhurst, for a discussion of this plaque.

<sup>19</sup> A sketch of the stained glass panel is in S. Baring-Gould and J. Fisher, *Lives of the British Saints* (London: Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1907) vol 1, facing p 172.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Bosworth*, 149-53.

Armel was always depicted with armour under a chasuble. The Merevale stained glass emphasises the armour, making the saint particularly appropriate for a king who, like Henry, tried to combine military leadership with piety. Further evidence that the glass commemorates the battle comes from fragments of glass found at the abbey depicting a formation of pikemen: it was Swiss-trained pikemen from France whose push gave Henry the victory.<sup>21</sup>

The statue in Westminster Abbey was not the only commemoration of St Armel in late fifteenth-century London. There are several tantalising references to a chapel of St Armel in the area to the west of the abbey. In their monumental study *The Lives of the British Saints*, published by the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in 1907, Sabine Baring-Gould and John Fisher say that St Ermyrn's Hill was called 'St Armilles' in 1496 – but as usual they give no source for their information.<sup>22</sup> The earliest datable references are unfortunately rather later. A document of about 1530 in the Westminster Abbey archives refers to 'the hyee way goyng in to Totehyll by Saynt Armyll's chapel', though the description of the road – 'so fowle of doung and caryen ... it stoppyth the comon sewer' – might suggest it was rather neglected by that date.<sup>23</sup> Another reference in the Westminster Abbey archives, an undated account from the reign of Henry VIII, mentions 'offering at St Armells and Edward's shrine'.<sup>24</sup> This would imply that the chapel actually belonged to the abbey, but no other reference to it has been found in the abbey muniments. Later in the century, in 1577, Cornelius Van Dun, who had been a Yeoman of the Guard to all the Tudor monarchs from Henry VIII to Elizabeth, left money in his will to build almshouses on a site 'leading up to St Armill'.<sup>25</sup> The name was subsequently corrupted to St Hermit (in the antiquarian John Stow's *Survey of London* of 1598) and eventually to St Ermyrn.

St Ermyrn's Hill runs up to the west from Broadway as a continuation of Dacre Street to the east. The chapel was presumably on or about the site of the present St James's Park underground station and the headquarters of the London Underground at 55 Broadway. There is unfortunately no archaeological evidence to identify its precise location or form. According to the London historian Michael Robbins, nothing came to light during the building of the District Line or the Underground headquarters – and as Michael Robbins was in charge of the London Underground for many years

---

<sup>21</sup> Information from the Worcestershire branch of the Richard III Society: see <http://www.richardiiiwores.co.uk/atherstonethumbnails.html> (consulted 16.7.06)

<sup>22</sup> Baring-Gould and Fisher, *Lives of the British Saints* vol 1, 173

<sup>23</sup> Gervase Rosser, *Medieval Westminster 1200-1540* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 241, quoting Westminster Abbey Muniments 50769.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Robbins, 'A Site in Westminster, or Whoever was St Ermyrn?', *London Topographical Record* 24 (1980), 116.

<sup>25</sup> Robbins, 'A Site in Westminster', 116-7.

and collaborated on the official history of London Transport he is a reliable witness.<sup>26</sup> Baring-Gould and Fisher go on to say ‘There was a chapel there [St Ermyrn’s Hill] in the seventeenth century, which is now represented by the modern parish church of Christchurch, Westminster’;<sup>27</sup> again, there are no references for this, and Christchurch was actually a little to the south, on the corner of Victoria Street and Broadway.

In order to understand these tantalising references to a chapel of St Armel, we may need to know more about Henry VII’s building schemes in the area west of the Abbey. Henry was clearly trying to establish Westminster as an important cult centre, as part of his strategies for strengthening his own position and emphasising the sanctity as well as the legitimacy of his lineage. The Lady Chapel was the most spectacular feature of Henry’s package of endowments, but it was certainly not the only one. He and his mother established a series of intercessory foundations under the supervision of the abbot of Westminster, including an almshouse for thirteen poor men outside the west front of the abbey.<sup>28</sup> In his *Survey of London*, first written in 1598, John Stow describes the almshouses as being on the south side of the west gatehouse of the Abbey precincts.<sup>29</sup> Eighteenth-century plans in the Abbey muniments locate the buildings outside the abbey precinct wall, stretching along most of the frontage between the gatehouse and the inner gate to Dean’s Yard, in what is now Dean Street.<sup>30</sup> They were demolished in 1777 to improve the access from the Sanctuary into Dean’s Yard.<sup>31</sup>

The almshouses had their own chapel as well as being connected with the Lady Chapel in the abbey. There is nothing which can be identified as a chapel on the eighteenth-century plans and it is just possible (though unlikely) that the chapel of St Armel was in some way connected with the almshouse foundation. Armel would be an appropriate saint for a hospice and almshouse: he was invoked to cure headaches, fever, gout, colic and rheumatism and he appears elsewhere as a patron of hospitals.<sup>32</sup>

From the building accounts quoted by the architectural historian Howard Colvin in *The King’s Works*, it seems as though the chapel was part of the same structure as the rest of the almshouse complex, but the surprisingly small amount accounted for carpentry work (£5, as compared with £51 for the

<sup>26</sup> John Clark, pers. comm..

<sup>27</sup> *Lives of the British Saints* vol 1, 173

<sup>28</sup> *Calendar of Close Rolls 1500-09* nos 389-90.

<sup>29</sup> John Stow, *A Survey of London...* (1912 edition: London, Routledge, facsimile published 1994: Stroud, Sutton Publishing), 424.

<sup>30</sup> redrawn in H. M. Colvin, ed., *The History of the King’s Works volume III: 1485-1660 (part 1)* (London: HMSO, 1975), 208. For a detailed description of the almshouses and their history see pp 206-10.

<sup>31</sup> Colvin, *King’s Works III*, 210.

<sup>32</sup> Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (1992 ed), 29.

stable) might suggest reuse of an existing structure.<sup>33</sup> The foundation statutes of the charity laid on the inmates the obligation to attend a regular round of services in Henry's Lady Chapel, unless they were too ill or infirm to do so, in which case they were to pray for the king's welfare (or for his soul after his death) in their own chapel.<sup>34</sup> This would imply that the chapel was near the accommodation, and St Armel's chapel is if anything a little further from the almshouses than the Lady Chapel. On the other hand, the instruction that they should pray for the king 'in the chapel *or* in the precincts of the almshouse' [my italics] might imply that the chapel was separate from the rest of the complex. Certainly, the chapel was sold off with the hall and kitchen of the almshouses in 1548 and the implication of later descriptions of the site is that the chapel along with the other buildings was converted to a dwelling-house.<sup>35</sup>

Part of Margaret Beaufort's share in the package of endowments was the establishment of a parallel almshouse for women. According to Stowe,

Near unto [Henry's almshouses] westward was an old chapel of St Anne: over against the which the Lady Margaret, mother to King Henry VII, erected an almshouse for poor women, which is now turned into lodgings for the singing-men of the College. The place wherein this chapel and almshouse standeth was called the Eleemosynary, or Almonry, now corruptly the Ambry, for that the alms of the abbey were there distributed to the poor ....<sup>36</sup>

The most likely location for Lady Margaret's almshouses is in the area of St Anne's Street and St Anne's Lane, south of Victoria Street. This is south-west rather than west of the abbey. Due west from Henry's almshouses would take us to Dacre Street and its continuation St Ermy'n's Hill. It is possible that St Armel's chapel was associated not with Henry's foundation but with his mother's, but perhaps more likely that Lady Margaret chose the site for her almshouses so that they could be associated with St Anne's Chapel. Lady Margaret's devotion to St Anne is suggested by the detailed depiction of the saint's life in two north Wales churches under Stanley influence, Gresford and Hope.

Stow goes on to describe the site near St Anne's Chapel as the location of Caxton's first printing press. Caxton was well established there by the 1480s. Lady Margaret first met him in 1483 when he sold her a copy of a French romance, *Blanchardin and Eglantyne*. Like so much that she did, this was essentially a political act. She was in Westminster to negotiate with Edward IV's widow Elizabeth Woodville, who had taken refuge there, for a marriage between Elizabeth's daughter Elizabeth of York and Margaret's exiled son

<sup>33</sup> Colvin, *King's Works*, 207.

<sup>34</sup> *Calendar of Close Rolls 1500-09* 390 (iii).

<sup>35</sup> Colvin, 209-10.

<sup>36</sup> 1912 edn., 424

Henry; and the romance story mirrored the harsh context of her negotiations. Like Eglantyne, Elizabeth of York was besieged by enemies; like Blanchardin, Henry was in exile. The romanticisation of the story, with Elizabeth promising to be constant to the lover who would risk his life for her, is an ironic counterpoint to the *realpolitik* of the marriage negotiations. But in 1489 Lady Margaret returned to the book, commissioning Caxton to translate and print it for her.<sup>37</sup>

Lady Margaret was conventional in her piety but a pioneer in her use of the 'new media' of her day, the printing press. Having tested Caxton with the translation of *Blanchardin and Eglantyne*, she went on to commission him to publish a book which was perhaps nearer to her heart, the *Fifteen Oes* of St Brigid of Sweden. She worked closely with Caxton's assistant and eventual successor Wynkyn de Worde, translating texts from French for him to publish (and regretting that she had not paid more attention to her Latin when she was young). She took a serious interest in her almshouses, personally inspecting the building work: it was undoubtedly convenient for her to be able to combine charity and communication.<sup>38</sup>

If the chapel of St Armel had nothing to do with the almshouses, could it have been connected with another Westminster site? Stow describes Cornelius van Dunn's almshouses as being on 'St Hermit's Hill' – 'and near hereunto was a chapel of Mary Magdalene, now wholly ruined'.<sup>39</sup> The medieval art historian Gervase Rosser suggested that St Armel's chapel might have been a rededication of the chapel of Mary Magdalene.<sup>40</sup> However, Mary Magdalene was one of Margaret Beaufort's personal saints: she had a statue of her in her chapel at Collyweston, and the saint was also embroidered on the altar cloths and copes of the chapel. Since Henry worked so closely with his mother in establishing the complex of endowments in and around Westminster, it seems unlikely that he would have replaced a dedication to one of his mother's favourite saints with one of his own.

The relationship of St Armel's chapel to Henry's planned sacred landscape at Westminster thus remains unclear. It is unlikely (though not impossible – absence of evidence is never evidence of absence) that a building for which he was himself responsible should have left no documentary record. The passing reference in the Abbey accounts to 'offering at St Armells and Edward's shrine'<sup>41</sup> suggests that the chapel (or perhaps just the offerings there) belonged to the abbey, but no other mention of it has been found in the Abbey muniments.

---

<sup>37</sup> Jones & Underwood, *The King's Mother*, 181-2

<sup>38</sup> Jones & Underwood, 181-5, 233.

<sup>39</sup> 1912 edn., 425

<sup>40</sup> *Medieval Westminster*, 241n

<sup>41</sup> Robbins, 'A Site in Westminster?', 116.

To judge from monastic estate records, the community which had grown up around the abbey at Westminster was experiencing a revival in the late fifteenth century after a period of contraction in the earlier part of the century.<sup>42</sup> Part of this revival was reflected in increased enthusiasm for church building. By that date, the focus of local piety had shifted from the abbey to the parish church of St Margaret, its chantries, and other local institutions such as chapels and almshouses. The parish church was completely rebuilt between 1487 and 1523, mainly funded by the local community themselves.<sup>43</sup> The church had a relic of its dedicatory saint, and a statue of her smiting the devil (in the form of a dragon) with a cross-stave. In 1528, money was raised for an elaborate wooden tabernacle to house the statue, decorated with scenes from her life. The celebrations at her patronal festival included a play with a dramatic depiction of the episode in which she exploded out of the belly of the dragon (an episode which, bizarrely, has made her the patron saint of childbirth). Not surprisingly, the churchwardens' accounts suggest that repairs to the dragon were regularly needed.<sup>44</sup>

The townspeople of Westminster had associations with another dragon-slaying saint, St George, long before Henry VII's installation of a relic of the saint in Westminster abbey (below, p 24). There was a guild of St George associated with the parish church by the mid-fifteenth century, when an aisle of the old church of St Margaret is known to have been called the St George's Aisle, and the church also had a relic of the saint. George and Margaret were clearly linked in the popular mind. The Norwich guild of St George performed an annual play about the life of its saint which included a rôle for St Margaret, apparently assisting St George in his valiant deeds.<sup>45</sup> It is possible, therefore, that it was the townspeople of Westminster who chose another dragon-slaying saint for the dedication of one of the many short-lived private chapels of the period. As we have seen, Armel was always depicted leading his dragon on a leash made from his stole. The *motif* of a dragon being led by a stole or girdle also appears in some versions of the legend of St George. Once he has rescued the princess, she fastens her girdle round the dragon's neck and leads it back to her native city.<sup>46</sup>

Gervase Rosser notes 'the abrupt appearance in [Westminster], in the early Tudor decades, of unprecedented numbers of Welshmen'.<sup>47</sup> Some of these could politely be described as lower class – the slum landlord Lewis Griffith of King Street, and Jane Apryce, who actually kept a brothel within the Palace of Westminster – but there were also wealthy Welsh tradespeople and senior

---

<sup>42</sup> Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, 77-8, 89-90.

<sup>43</sup> Rosser, 256-60, 263-71.

<sup>44</sup> Rosser, 272-3.

<sup>45</sup> Samantha Riches, *St George: hero, martyr and myth* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), 131

<sup>46</sup> Riches, *St George*, 3-4, and illustrations on 5, 6, 91, 147.

<sup>47</sup> Rosser, 190.

royal officials.<sup>48</sup> The chapel of St Armel could have been founded by one of these, but it could equally well have been the result of English loyalism. There were numbers of competent masons working in Westminster in the late fifteenth century, on the major building works at the Abbey and the rebuilding of St Margaret's Church as well as the royal palaces: the building of a small chapel could easily have been fitted in. The willingness of the parishioners of St Margaret's, Westminster to ally themselves with royal cults is suggested by their adoption of the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus (of which Margaret Beaufort was an official patron). This involved a substantial financial investment for the parish: the churchwardens' accounts mention several new liturgical books for the feasts including antiphoners, grails, mass books and processionaries.<sup>49</sup>

Further evidence for the cult of St Armel at Westminster (whatever the exact location and history of the chapel dedicated to him) comes from items in the remarkable assemblage of medieval pilgrim badges found in the city of London. Most of these badges came to light during building work in the 1980s, sometimes in dramatic circumstances – 'members of the Society of London Mudlarks working in shifts, round the clock, using floodlights through the night ... many weeks of resolute, spare-time searching by Thames Mudlarks and, on two of the sites, by developers' management and surveying staff'.<sup>50</sup> They were subsequently catalogued and studied by Brian Spencer of the Museum of London, though many of them remained in private hands. Among them are two badges which he tentatively described as St George but which have now been conclusively identified as St Armel.

The larger of the two badges in Spencer's catalogue, measuring 45x38 mm (fig 5) is similar to known alabaster plaques of St Armel (see above, fig 4), though without the background detail.<sup>51</sup> This badge was found on the Thames foreshore at Southwark Bridge, and so has no secure archaeological context. The private collection of pilgrim badges belonging to the numismatist Michael Mitchiner included a badge virtually identical to the smaller one in

<sup>48</sup> Rosser, 144, 182, 190.

<sup>49</sup> Rosser, 274; Jones and Underwood, *The King's Mother*, 176-7, 182-3.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Spencer, *Medieval finds from Excavations in London: 7. Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (London: Stationery Office, 1998), 29-30

<sup>51</sup> Spencer, 186-7 and nos. 206g and 206h on p 188; Hanneke van Asperen, 'Saint Armel of Brittany: The identification of four badges from London'. *Peregrinations* 2(1), online journal archived on the web at <http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/vol2-1/welcome.html>. Chris Buckley and I are immensely grateful to Geoff Evans of Cardiff for bringing this reference to our notice.





**Fig. 5** Badge depicting St. Armel found on the Thames foreshore at Southwark Bridge (photograph copyright Museum of London)



**Fig. 6** Badge depicting St. Armel found at the southern end of the Vintry House in Vintners' Place, 68 Upper Thames Street (photograph copyright Museum of London)

Spencer, and the lower part of another badge which is very similar in design to the larger of Spencer's badges, though with some differences in detail.<sup>52</sup> The two badges in Mitchiner's collection also came from the foreshore, one of them at Billingsgate and the other at the north end of London Bridge. Spencer suggests that some of these foreshore finds may have been the result of deliberate deposition, possibly as a propitiatory or commemorative gesture at a river crossing, on the return from one journey or before embarking on another.<sup>53</sup> There are parallels at a number of other pilgrimage sites: the remarkable range of badges found at Salisbury and now in the Salisbury Museum,<sup>54</sup> for example, and the badges found by metal detectorists on the beach at Solva on the sea route to St David's.<sup>55</sup> Some of the badges listed by Spencer (though not the Armel ones) had been deliberately folded up: a practice paralleled in Iron Age deposits but also in the ritual folding of a coin at the beginning of a pilgrimage, thereby dedicating that coin as an offering to the pilgrimage shrine.<sup>56</sup>

However, the other badge in Spencer's catalogue (fig 6) was found in the deposits in a coffer-dam at the southern end of the Vintry House in Vintners' Place, 68 Upper Thames Street. Many of the badges in Spencer's book came from similar contexts. Between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, huge dumps of city rubbish were used to make up reclaimed land behind new wharves on the south side of Thames Street. The rubbish included woodwork and pottery, but there is still the possibility that pilgrim badges were deliberately included in the fabric of the new wharves. There are plenty of parallels in the placing of pilgrim tokens in the foundations of buildings: some were even buried in gardens and fields to deter pests and weeds.<sup>57</sup> Many (though not all) of the saints commemorated by these pilgrim badges had seafaring connections. As well as Armel himself, there were badges from the shrines of the pilgrim saints Joos and James, and a combined badge of St John of Bridlington and St John of Beverley, both of whom were credited with delivering ships from storms at sea.<sup>58</sup> (The cult of St John of Bridlington had its own political significance for both York and Lancaster. Henry V went on a pilgrimage to the saint's shrine, but some spurious prophecies attributed to the

<sup>52</sup> Michael Mitchiner, *Medieval Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (Sanderstead: Hawkins Publications, 1986), 232 no 869 and 233 no 874. It seems possible that the smaller badges were cast from a common design but that the larger badges were more of a craftsman-made product from more individualised molds. There are similar minor differences in detail in the surviving alabaster plaques of St Armel but they do not affect the overall iconography of the design.

<sup>53</sup> Spencer, 18

<sup>54</sup> *The Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum Medieval Catalogue. Part 2: Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (Salisbury: Salisbury Museum Service, 1990)

<sup>55</sup> Terry John and Nona Rees, *Pilgrimage: a Welsh perspective* (Llandysul: Gomer, 2002), ix-x, 33; John Etherington, pers. comm.

<sup>56</sup> Spencer, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Spencer, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Spencer, 195, 216-7, 244-8.

saint were later appropriated by Edward IV and his supporters as part of the propaganda campaign to bolster his claims to the throne. Henry VII also laid claim to St John of Bridlington's authenticating power: a deluxe volume of the prophecies was made for him, and other copies survive from his reign.)<sup>59</sup> Numerous badges came from different shrines to the Virgin Mary, who as *Maris Stella*, the Star of the Sea, was said to have a particular care for mariners. Even Thomas of Canterbury, who seems from the surviving badges to have been the Londoners' most popular saint, was depicted on some of his badges on board ship, returning from exile in 1170.<sup>60</sup>

These Armel badges were almost certainly made in one of the workshops at Westminster and sold on stalls near the abbey gates. The walk from the city of London to Westminster, past the great palaces on the Strand and the gardens around Charing Cross, was just far enough to make a meaningful pilgrimage but near enough to be accomplished easily in a day. Westminster had a number of other shrines to attract pilgrims by the beginning of the sixteenth century. As well as the new cult of Henry VI, there was the shrine of Edward the Confessor and the miracle-working statue of the Virgin Mary in the chapel of Our Lady of the Pew in St. Stephen's Chapel, Westminster. Few badges of Edward the Confessor survive, and it is impossible to distinguish badges commemorating Henry VI's more famous shrine at Windsor from badges which may have been produced in anticipation of attracting pilgrims to the planned shrine in Westminster: but it is quite possible that some of the badges of the Virgin Mary found in London may have commemorated the image at St Stephen's. The abbey had a relic of the Virgin's girdle which may have been the origin of some of the miniature strap-end buckles in the London collection of pilgrim badges.<sup>61</sup> As well as his campaign to secure the canonisation of Henry VI, Henry VII attempted to appropriate and relocate the focus of the cult of St George from Windsor to London. Immediately after his victory at Bosworth he processed through London to St Paul's where he offered the standard of St George as well as the red dragon of Cadwaladr and the Dun Cow (possibly a reference to Neville support).<sup>62</sup> In 1505, as part of some tricky diplomatic manoeuvrings, Louis of France sent him a relic of St George's leg, set in a gilded silver reliquary, part of the spoils of Louis's conquest of Milan. The relic was taken from St. Paul's to Westminster on St George's Day, 1505, in a procession headed by Henry and the knights of the Garter. Badges of miniature legs in armour have been found on a number of London sites and may be mementoes of this relic.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Hughes, *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy*, 117, 147, 235.

<sup>60</sup> Spencer, 79-82.

<sup>61</sup> Spencer, 149, 151.

<sup>62</sup> A. H. Thomas & I. D. Thornley, eds., *The Great Chronicle of London* (London: Printed by G.W. Jones at the sign of the Dolphin, 1938), 238-9; on the significance of the Dun Cow, see DeLloyd J. Guth, 'Richard III, Henry VII and the City: London Politics and the "Dun Cow"' in Ralph Griffiths, ed., *Kings and Nobles in the Later Middle Ages* (Gloucester: Allan Sutton, 1986).

<sup>63</sup> *The Great Chronicle of London*, 328-9; Mitchener, 186 no 110

The fraternity of St George in St Margaret's Westminster predated this development (see above p19) and seems to have produced its own badges: Gilbert Atkinson, a member of the fraternity, bequeathed a 'mowlde of the crosse of Saint George' to a fellow member of the fraternity.<sup>64</sup> Other badges, though, were probably produced by local craftsmen of varying levels of skill. Some of the badges found in London – like the larger Armel badge – are of reasonable aesthetic quality, and a few are excellent examples of the metalworker's art. Moulds for these badges could be commissioned from seal engravers and even goldsmiths. The cheaper badges, though, were cast in large numbers by back-street artisans from crudely-carved moulds. A typical trader was William Pemberton, pewterer and chapman, who in about 1470 rented a stall near the north door of the abbey, an ideal position to catch pilgrims going between the abbey church and the other shrines in Westminster.<sup>65</sup>

The stalls at Westminster catered for all tastes and pockets – as witness the names of two traders there in the 1490s, Henry Knycknack and the goldsmith Henry Hundredpound.<sup>66</sup> It is even possible that the truly magnificent jewelled badge of St Armel in the inventory of Matthew Cradoc's wife's jewels in 1531 - 'a ruby and a noche of gold with Armgill and a saffur a garnet and iij perlis hanging by hym' – was commissioned from a Westminster goldsmith to commemorate a visit to the chapel there.<sup>67</sup> However, purchasers did not always discriminate on aesthetic quality or the value of the metal. There are plenty of examples of cheap badges lovingly preserved in the jewel collections of the wealthy. Spencer quotes the example of Charlotte of Savoy, wife of King Louis XI of France, whose fabulous collection of jewellery included several of the cheapest pilgrim mementoes, made of lead – though she did keep them in a satin bag.<sup>68</sup>

Brian Spencer's unpublished notes refer to a total of 7 possible badges depicting St Armel, six of them found in London and one in Canterbury.<sup>69</sup> The Canterbury badge is particularly interesting as a possible example of a memento acquired at one shrine and deliberately left at another. It is one of the little ironies of sixteenth-century religious history that this emblem of the devotion of one Tudor monarch should have been left at a shrine which his son was so determined to destroy. The scope of the cults even of minor saints like Armel is suggested by references to another Westminster shrine, that of St Cornelius. In 1521-2 the churchwardens of Westminster accounted for a gift

<sup>64</sup> Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, 284.

<sup>65</sup> Rosser, 150.

<sup>66</sup> Rosser, 148, 150.

<sup>67</sup> TNA PCC 7 Thrower, calendared in Philip Riden, ed., *Glamorgan wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury 1392-1571: An Interim Calendar* (Cardiff: Department of Extra-mural Studies, University College, Cardiff, 1985), 4-6.

<sup>68</sup> Spencer, 20.

<sup>69</sup> John Clark, pers. comm..

from Joan Thurscrosse, a pious widow who had travelled from Hull on a pilgrimage to 'St Cornelius of Westminster'.<sup>70</sup> This raises the intriguing possibility that there may be other Armel badges, unrecognised or even misidentified, in collections elsewhere in the British Isles or even in Brittany and northern France. Mitchiner's catalogue includes badges from the shrines of St Servatius of Maastricht and St Olaf of Trondheim and badges of an unidentified French episcopal saint, all found in London.<sup>71</sup>

Several other depictions of St Armel survive from late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England. He appears in the company of other saints on the rood screens of Torbryan (Devon) and Litcham (Norfolk) and on a reredos at Romsey Abbey.<sup>72</sup> Depictions of St Armel can sometimes be connected with Tudor loyalism. John Morton was one of Henry Tudor's earliest supporters and served as his Lord Chancellor for thirteen years until his death in 1500. He was buried in the crypt of his cathedral at Canterbury: his own explicit wish was for a plain tomb but within a few years of his death an elaborate cenotaph was constructed as near as possible to his grave. The cenotaph is covered with Tudor emblems and its architectural style is deliberately modelled on Henry's chapel at Westminster.<sup>73</sup> Among the mutilated figures of saints on the arch over the tomb is a figure wearing armour under a chasuble. In its right hand it holds a dragon tethered by a stole. Here again we have a clear depiction of Henry VII's chosen saint.<sup>74</sup>

The Romsey reredos may also owe something to Tudor loyalism. From its style, it is unlikely to have been painted before the 1520s, but the cult of Armel may have been introduced to the abbey by Richard Fox, who was bishop of Winchester from 1501 until his death in 1528. Like Morton, Fox had been in Henry's service in France; he returned with him in 1485 and was actually present at the battle of Bosworth. He became the king's secretary in 1485 and was promoted to the keepership of the Privy Seal in 1487. In spite of heavy duties as a government advisor and diplomat he was actively involved in the spiritual affairs of his diocese and was particularly known for his pastoral care of the women's houses in his charge. He may have introduced the cult of St Armel to the abbey in the earlier part of his episcopate, during Henry VII's reign. Unfortunately, this must remain as speculation, as no calendar of saints commemorated at Romsey survives for this period. It is even possible that the

---

<sup>70</sup> Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, 285.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchiner, *Medieval Pilgrim and Secular Badges* nos 1030-1, 1039, 1045.

<sup>72</sup> Arthur R. Green, 'The Romsey painted wooden reredos: with a short account of St Armel', *Archaeological Journal* 90 (1933), 306-14, esp. 311, 312.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick, Collinson, Nigel Ramsay and Margaret Sparks, eds., *A History of Canterbury Cathedral* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 485-6..

<sup>74</sup> Chris Buckley's photo of Armel on the Torbryan rood screen is at <http://timezone.newport.ac.uk/mg/Armel-Torbryan.html> (accessed 28.7.06) and the carving from Morton's tomb is at <http://timezone.newport.ac.uk/mg/Armel-Canterbury.html> (accessed 28.7.06).

decoration of the reredos was done under his guidance and connected with Henry VIII's planned visit to the abbey in 1526: a visit which, in the event, he never made because of an outbreak of plague in the town. Instead, the king stayed with Fox in Winchester – where, according to FitzWilliam, he 'had great cheer'.<sup>75</sup> Alternatively, Christine Buckley suggests that Armel's presence at Romsey may be connected with Margaret Beaufort, whose family had connections in the area: her parents were buried at nearby Wimborne. The Romsey reredos also includes one of Margaret's 'personal' saints, St. Roche. Richard Fox may also have had something to do with Armel's presence on the rood screen at Torbryan. Before his promotion to Winchester, he was bishop of Exeter (from 1487 to 1492, when he moved to Bath and Wells). Torbryan was actually a royal advowson but Fox is known to have provided at least one incumbent during his episcopate.<sup>76</sup>

If veneration of St Armel could be construed as a statement of loyalty to the Tudors, it was a particularly useful statement for people whose loyalty was under question. The 'Plas-y-Pentre' panel has traditionally been associated with the Cistercian abbey of Valle Crucis. In fact, it probably came from a private altar at the Edwards family's earlier home at Plas Newydd, also near Chirk. The Edwards family were supporters of the Lancastrian and Tudor cause; John ap Edward of Plas Newydd fought for Henry at Bosworth. However, he was also one of the leading tenants and servants of Sir William Stanley, lord of Chirk: and in 1493, Sir William Stanley became one of Perkin Warbeck's supporters. His execution for treason in 1495 could well have cast doubt on the loyalty of his followers..

Other evidence of the popularity of St Armel in early Tudor England comes from clusters of personal names. In his study of late medieval society in an Exmoor parish, Eamon Duffy has demonstrated how the Exeter cult of St Sidwell was imported into Morebath by a determined vicar, so that Sidwell became an increasingly popular baptismal name in the 1530s and 1540s.<sup>77</sup> Chris Buckley has found clusters of children named after St Armel in several English parishes. The most marked of these is at Upton Snodsbury, a church not far from Worcester and dedicated to St. Kenelm. From the number of children named after the saint it looks as though this was a minor cult centre, possibly with a side chapel briefly dedicated to the saint.

---

<sup>75</sup> H. G. D. Liveing, *Records of Romsey Abbey ... A.D. 907-1558* (Winchester: Warren & Son, 1912), 244-5.

<sup>76</sup> Devon Record Office, Exeter: Chanter XII (ii). Register of Bishop Fox, fo. 122v., 15 July 1491.

<sup>77</sup> *The Voices of Morebath* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 76, 171.

Henry VII gave Upton Snodsbury to John Mortimer in 1485. He was a Tudor loyalist but had been a servant of Richard III. His mother's second husband was Sir Richard Croft of Croft Castle. These were the Crofts who looked after Edward IV's sons when the boys were given Wales to play with and a council based at Ludlow; and John Mortimer's wife was a Neville, the niece of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, 'the Kingmaker'. In the fraught political climate of the 1490s, was this another supporter whose loyalty had begun to look vulnerable, and who chose to demonstrate his continuing devotion by encouraging veneration of one of the king's favourite saints?

We have already considered the Armel brooch belonging to Sir Mathew Cradoc's wife. In his will (dated 1531) Cradoc listed jewels which belonged to his wife, Lady Katherine, before their marriage, and which were to be kept by her: the list includes gold chains and rosaries, gold crosses set with diamonds and pearls, jewelled hearts and a brooch depicting the Virgin Mary, 'a ruby and a noche of gold with Armgill and a saffur a garnet and iij perlis hanging by hym'. Cradoc's loyalist credentials were unimpeachable. He was the south Wales deputy of Henry's old friend Charles Somerset, Earl of Worcester, the virtual uncrowned king of south Wales. Cradoc's wife, though, was a different matter. She was none other than Lady Katherine Gordon, cousin of James IV of Scotland and widow of the pretender Perkin Warbeck, the man who had come nearer than anyone else to shaking Henry's grip on the throne. Henry had defeated and killed Katherine's husband, and had made her a prisoner. Surely she was the most unlikely person to have had a jewel of the king's patron saint and to have cherished it for so many years after Henry's death?

In fact, Henry had treated Katherine well. Her marriage to Perkin Warbeck was a political arrangement to give him Scottish support. His humiliation and her own sufferings she could well have blamed on his ineptitude. After her capture, Katherine became an important member of Elizabeth of York's household. With her Scottish background, she was the one who helped and advised Henry's daughter Margaret on her marriage to James IV of Scotland. The royal accounts are full of records of gifts of rich clothes and presents to her, and Henry also gave her a substantial landed estate. That she could afford such expensive jewellery testifies to her personal wealth.<sup>78</sup>

Some contemporary rumours suggested that she had an even closer relationship with the king in his last years.<sup>79</sup> The accounts of the king's chamber record the delivery to Lady Katherine of several items for the king's use in his final months, including hangings for his chamber.<sup>80</sup> And it was not until after Henry's death that she married again. However, it is probably

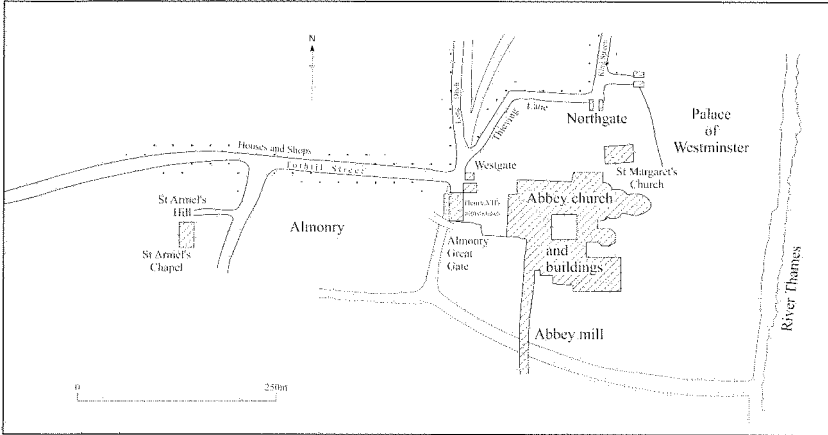
---

<sup>78</sup> Most of the evidence for Katherine Gordon's life is assembled and discussed in Wendy E. A. Moorhen, 'Four Weddings and a Conspiracy: the Life, Times and Loves of Lady Katherine Gordon', *The Ricardian* vols 156 (March 2002), 394-424, 157 (June 2002), 446-478, and 158 (Sept 2002), 494-525

<sup>79</sup> Moorhen vol 157, 455-6.

<sup>80</sup> TNA E 36/214





**Fig. 6** Map of the area west of Westminster Abbey c1500

pushing speculation too far to suggest that they were ever lovers. Generosity to defeated opponents was part of the magnanimity traditionally expected of a medieval ruler: Henry had obviously been prepared to deal mercifully with Perkin until the latter's foolish involvement in conspiracy with Warwick. More to the point, perhaps, was the fact that Katherine was closely related to the Scottish royal family, with whom Henry was obviously anxious to keep on good terms.

We have no way of knowing how Katherine acquired her Armel brooch, or even what it looked like: though if she commissioned it from a Westminster jeweller it may have been based on the same design as the more elaborate Armel badge in fig 5. Buying and wearing such a jewel could have been the act of an insecure woman desperate to prove her credentials, but it could equally well have been a gesture of affection and loyalty to a man who had been kind to her. The brooch could even have been a gift from Henry. There is no record of such a gift in his meticulously-kept accounts, but it is possible that it was given to him and that he passed it on to her. Nor is it likely that we will ever know what became of it. There is no reference to it in Katherine's own will. Her fourth husband Christopher Ashton (who was much younger than her) had Protestant inclinations and a fiery temper. Katherine was entirely conventional in her ideas – her will left money to 500 poor people of her parish in return for their prayers – but in the complicated religio-political context of the 1530s she may have found it advisable to have some of her jewellery broken-up and recast.

What Katherine Gordon's story illuminates, though – as do Cardinal Morton's tomb, the Plas-y-Pentre alabaster and the children called Armel in villages like Upton Snodsbury – is the very different relationship between religion and public life in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries compared with our own era. In times of uncertainty and tension the cult of a very obscure saint could become a crucial part of the language of late medieval politics. Both sides in the Wars of the Roses tried to appropriate major saints like St Anne and St George; even the cults of minor saints like St John of Bridlington could be appropriated by both sides. St Armel is perhaps unusual in his close links with one dynasty. So the Welsh saints chosen by Henry for his chapel – few though they are – tell us a lot about his sense of identity, where he came from, how he came to power, his aspirations, and also about Wales's position as part of the new Renaissance state he was creating.