



Sherston Magna

Sir Rattlebones or Saint Aldhelm

Sherston, between Malmesbury and Badminton is a very ancient place with a curious legend. The village was first built in a strong position within great earthworks in a steep escarpment between two streams.

Here in 1016, according to a medieval chronicler, was fought a battle between King Edmund Ironside and the Danes under Canute. The fine church was built in Norman times, with later additions.

Legend has grown around a worn carved figure built into a corner of the 15th century porch and locally known as Sir Rattlebones. Even the local Inn is named after him. On its sign he is depicted holding to his side a stone roofing tile with which to staunch a wound while still fighting. And a suit of ancient armour, long kept in the church chest was said to have been his.

Aubrey, the 17th century antiquary, a Wiltshire man, describes the little figure “which they call Rattle Bone” and verses sung about it by old women and children.

“Fight well Rattlebone
Thou shalt have Sherstone
What shall I with Sherstone doe
Without I have all belongs thereto?”

But Aubrey was scholar enough to see that “the figure resembles more a priest than a soldier: ...his Robe is a kind of cape”. It seems most probable that the figure came from the original Norman Church; it certainly represents a vested ecclesiastic; and passed by Sherston on its way to burial at Malmesbury and he was one of the greatest men of his day. What he is holding is not a tile but a book!

Aldhelm, a nephew of King Ine of the West Saxons, was trained in the monastery, becoming a classical scholar with an European reputation, as well as a poet. He was the first Anglo-Saxon to write in Latin.

After completing his studies at Canterbury, he came back to become Abbot of Malmesbury. When in 705 the vast diocese of Winchester was divided, all west of Selwood became the diocese of Sherborne, with Aldhelm as its first bishop. Slight traces remain of his church in Sherborne Abbey. But in 709 he died and was buried at Malmesbury. In 837 King Ethelwulf made him a wonderful shrine of gold and precious stones; but this was despoiled by the Danes, though his body was rescued by the monks.

Later a new shrine was erected by canons of Malmesbury and even William the Conqueror was moved to order a four days feast in honour of St. Aldhelm, which drew crowds to Malmesbury up to the Dissolution.

His name survives in St. Aldhelm's Head in the Isle of Purbeck, with a chapel dedicated in his name. His Life by William of Malmesbury contains many of his letters. As Abbot, Bishop, Scholar and Poet his is honoured all over the west country; perhaps even as Sir Rattlebones!

(Original source not recorded)

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