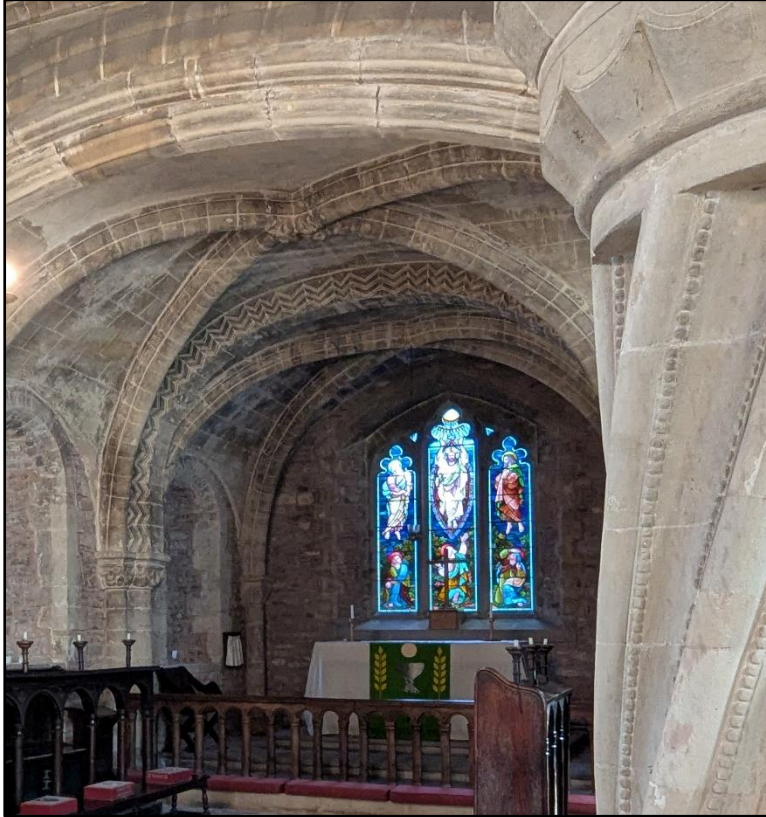


The Harptreenian

The Journal of The Harptrees History Society



Number 26



September 2025

St Wulfric and the Foundation of the Church of St. Michael The Archangel, Compton Martin (c.1080 to 1154)

Jonathan Reynolds



In the north-west corner of Compton Martin church are three stained-glass windows, each depicting a saint. These are modern windows from the 1940s, possibly installed as replicas of originals from the Middle Ages. They portray St George, St Andrew and, in the middle, St Wulfric, who was born in the village of Compton Martin (in “*the coombe*”) around the time of the Domesday Book and shortly after the Norman Conquest. He died on 20th February 1154 and this day is still celebrated as his feast-day.

The window shows St Wulfric wearing vestments and offering the Eucharist as a sign that he was dedicated to Jesus Christ and the instruction of “remembrance” at the Last Supper. Remembrance is translated from the Greek, meaning making real in the present an event of the past. It is recorded that he would always celebrate the mass on the feast-day of St Michael on 29th September every year.

The reality of the impact of his life is captured in incredible detail by a contemporary of his, John of Forde Abbey, who wrote about the “blessed Wulfric’s” life some thirty or so years later. This text called “*The Life of Wulfric of Haselbury, Anchorite*” survives today. It is written in Latin and offers a unique archive of the social, political, and ecclesiastical period in the 12th century. The text and stories were partly captured from people who lived alongside or knew Wulfric directly, such as Henry, Abbot of Waverly.

Parts of this work may contain inaccuracies or errors, however. It was written after Wulfric’s life from stories and evidence that may have been second or third hand. An example of this is contained in the story of how Wulfric

became the first priest in Compton Martin. Here it is recorded that the Lord of the Manor, William Fitzwalter, appointed Wulfric after funding his religious education and his return to live with the family as priest and chaplain (1120-1125). William Fitzwalter only became the landowner in the wider baronetcy of Blagdon for a brief period during The Anarchy of 1138-50, the dispute between two grandchildren of William the Conqueror, The Empress Matilda and Stephen of Blois, who each claimed the throne. Fitzwalter did, however, own land at Haselbury (SW of Yeovil) where Wulfric became an anchorite in 1125 after leaving Compton Martin as priest. This followed the successful siege of Richmond Castle at East Harptree in 1138 by King Stephen.

Compton Martin had previously been known as “Cortone” (Compton) in the Domesday Book. Local supporters of Empress Matilda (daughter of Henry I) included the Fitzmartin family who were Lords of Blagdon, and it is likely that it was Robert Fitzmartin (1084-1159) who gave the village its full name. He was descended from the de Burci and Falaise families who owned Blagdon along with large estates in Devon and Pembrokeshire. His mother was Geva de Burci, the daughter of Serlo de Burci who was appointed to the baronetcy of Blagdon by William the Conqueror by the time of The Domesday Book. Following the death of her first husband, Martin de Turribus in 1086 (the same year as the death of her father), she had re-married William de Falaise of Stoke Courcy. One of the children from his own first marriage was William de Courcy, a senior administrator of Henry I, meaning Robert had a very influential half-brother.

Robert was re-instated to these lands at Blagdon with the ascent of Henry II in 1155. Robert Fitzmartin is therefore the likely benefactor of Wulfric and the church of St Michael the Archangel at Compton Martin in c.1120, along with his wife, Maude Peverell. In this respect Robert would have been the person to welcome Wulfric back to Compton Martin as the first priest. There is also a charter with the Cluniac monks at Montacute, dated 1121, which mentions Robert’s parents as Geva and Martin, thereby creating a connection with Wulfric who would move near there to Haselbury in c.1125 as an anchorite.

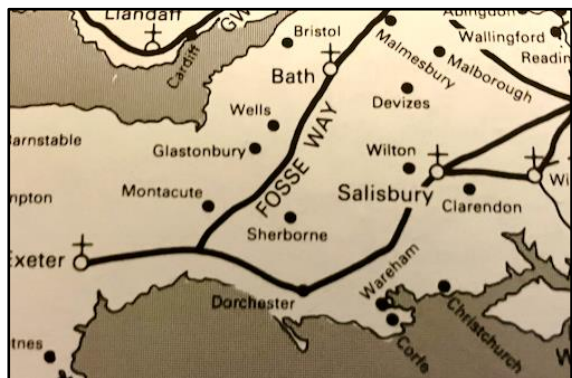
A wedding gift from Henry I to Robert and Maude added lands in Pembrokeshire to their estate. They had already founded a castle at Nevern

in Pembrokeshire in 1108 and an ecclesiastical and military base at St Dogmael's in Pembrokeshire from 1115-18. The lands in South Wales had been inherited from the Falaise family. These fortifications and communities in South Wales led to growing influence and military campaigns and ultimately the subjugation of Wales by Edward I in 1283.

The prolific building during the early 12th century of castles and abbeys in South Wales and Devon (including Carswell Priory from 1119-29) by Robert Fitzmartin and Maude Peverell suggests that Compton Martin Church was probably initiated and completed by them and their stonemasons. It also suggests that Robert may have built a manor house in Compton Martin, which is why he may have required a church there in the first place.

The baronetcy of Blagdon, as defined in the Domesday Book, included Chew Stoke and many local villages. Compton Martin seems to be the oldest surviving church, one of only three Norman churches across the county of Somerset. There is no evidence of a manor house of that age in the village, although there is a later building on the site of an original manor, the date of which is unknown other than land-owning families residing there by the 1400s. The Old Rectory was also known as Rectory Manor before 1841 and was a substantial farming concern with glebe records evidencing the scale of this by 1606, including the use of a columbarium located above the chancel of the church. This house, or one on this site, is another possibility for the original home of the Fitzmartins in Compton Martin.

The location of the village of Cortone (Compton Martin), at the easterly edge of the baronetcy of Blagdon, offered ready access to the Fosse Way, the principal means of travelling from north to south in the region and the link between the



main centres of Bath, Wells, Glastonbury, Montacute and Exeter. Salisbury and the nation's capital at that time, Winchester, were a relatively short distance further east. This may explain the choice of Cortone for a church and manor house within the baronetcy.

It remains another possibility that Compton Martin church was finished sometime between 1138 and 1159 through the temporary ownership of William Fitzwalter (between 1138 and 1155) and the re-establishment of Robert Fitzmartin in 1155 and his death in 1159. This could have created the potential misunderstandings and consequential inaccuracies in the work of John of Forde. There is some evidence that the church building could have been finished after Robert Fitzmartin's return in 1155 and after the death of Wulfric in 1154. The modern replica window of St Wulfric in the church has a reference to Henry II (b. 1133, d. 1189) and the dates of 1126 and 1159 illustrated in the image of a coin. This may suggest, as one possibility, that completion of the church continued between these dates, recognising St Wulfric who had departed to Haselbury in 1125 and who died in 1154, and completed in the reign of Henry II.

The architecture at St Michael's follows many of the same features as other ecclesiastical buildings such as Durham Cathedral (1093-1133) and the Fitzmartin's sites in South Wales, though on a much smaller scale. The skill of the stonemasons in creating the vaulting, pillars and clerestory is exceptional and typical of the period, and the columbarium (dovecote) above the chancel, which is unique in Somerset, would have been a source of food in the same way as in the Norman castles in Pembrokeshire.

Originally, the Norman church would have consisted only of a chancel and nave with access via a west door; the south and north aisles and tower were added later between 1440 and 1520. Given the small scale of the church, one would imagine that it could have been completed within a few short years from c. 1120. However, given the political unrest caused by the loss of Henry I's White Ship and the death of his heir in 1120 and consequential and immediate unrest in Normandy and Wales, and then The Anarchy from 1135, it is possible that the full completion of the building could have been delayed until the 1150s. The Fitzmartin's interests in Wales and the geographic

location of Blagdon and the Harptrees on the front line of territory between the supporters and forces of King Stephen and Empress Matilda, could well have led to distractions and delays in completing the building.

The church in Compton Martin is dedicated to St Michael the Archangel, with whom Wulfric had great affinity and connection. St Michael is referenced in the Bible, notably in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, as a guardian and protector and a principal defence against the devil. He is often depicted with a sword and dragon, including in Compton Martin church in a nave window above the chancel. St Michael had been used in dedication of major religious sites in both England and Normandy, for example in the 8th century St Michael's Mount in Cornwall and Mont Saint Michel in the 10th century. Locally, Montacute was a regional centre where the influential Cluniac Monks were based from 1102 below St Michael's Hill, St Michael's Chapel, and Haselbury, where Wulfric became an anchorite in 1125, were all dedicated to St Michael. Wulfric was connected to the Cluniac monastery at Montacute throughout his ministry and it is recorded that he would always celebrate communion on St Michael's feast-day, including when he was an anchorite (not priest) at Haselbury.

In stark contrast to the Wulfric depicted in ecclesiastical vestments, he was, in fact, a hermit or anchorite and would have dressed in hair shirt and chainmail, leading an austere existence with fasting and vigils often at night. His impact as a representative of Christ, however, was entirely accurate. It is said that before becoming a priest he had been previously addicted to hunting and hawking but a chance meeting with a beggar had prompted him to lead a more austere and holy life.

In John of Forde's work there are chapters dedicated to Wulfric's healing, miracles, prophecies and manifestations of God's power and presence. The most significant and dramatic interventions are detailed as consultations in his cell in Haselbury church with two Kings of England. He advised Henry I and then prophesied his death in 1135 and, separately, acknowledged that King Stephen would be King before his actual accession. This places him right at the heart of the period called The Anarchy which is described as such for good reason, caused much earlier by the death of Henry I's sole legitimate

heir on board his flagship vessel, the White Ship, in 1120. What followed was nearly twenty years of uncertainty and violence, when Stephen seized the throne with the support of the Church and Henry's daughter Matilda challenged him throughout his reign. On more than one occasion he reproached Stephen, preaching truth to power for misgovernment.

His wider reputation and influence were with people from all backgrounds and walks of life and he inspired not only the parish priest Brihtric and his son Osbern at Haselbury, but also influential men and women in the church and state, and regular pilgrims throughout this period and well into the Middle Ages. He famously inspired an anchoress called Matilda of Wareham, cured a knight called Drogo of paralysis, would copy and bind books for the use of all and, touchingly, would offer small rings from his chainmail to grateful recipients. The miracles at Haselbury were said to continue well into the next century.

Wulfric would have conversed in English and French. We know this because he communicated with many leaders in authority from church and state who gave preference to French following the Norman invasion. It is also documented that he helped a man who was dumb to suddenly speak in both English and French, much to the annoyance of the parish priest Brihtric who was desperate to converse in French with the aforesaid leaders in authority.

The Oxford Dictionary of Saints contains about 1500 entries. Of these, Wulfric, who was born in obscurity in Compton Martin at such a significant point in English history, leaves a remarkably significant legacy to posterity. It is through his relationship with the local landowner, the Norman Lord Robert Fitzmartin, and his wife Maude Peverell, that we can appreciate their spiritual legacy to us today, through a remarkable building dedicated to St Michael, which has endured and been cherished in village life for over 900 years.

Sources

Barlow, Frank (1999) *The Feudal Kingdom of England 1042-1216*, Routledge
Bell N (1932) *Wulfric of Hazelbury*, Somerset Record Society
Bligh Bond F (1909) *Compton Martin Church*, Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological Society
Farmer DH (1992) *The Oxford Book of Saints 3rd ed.*, Oxford University Press

Freeman EA (1873). *Compton Martin Church*, Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological Society

Hamilton Thompson A (1939) *Compton Martin Church*, Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological Society

Harptrees History Society (2009) *Before the Lake*, ed. Lesley Ross

Maxwell-Lyte, Sir Henry C (1920) *Burci, Falaise and Martin*, Somerset Archaeological Society

Matarasso, Pauline (2011) *The Life of Wulfric of Haslebury Anchorite* by John of Forde, Liturgical Press

McCann, McDermott, Pexton (1999) *A Columbarium at Compton Martin Church*, Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society

McGarvie M (ed) (1994) *Sir Stephen Glynne's Church Notes for Somerset. Publication No 82*. Taunton, Somerset Record Society. These were made by Sir Stephen Glynne in 1845.

Morris, John (1980) *Domesday Book - Somerset*, Phillimore & Co

Mackenzie, Sir James D. (1897) *Castles of England - Their Stories and Structure*, Nobu Press

Pevsner, Nikolaus (1958). *The buildings of England: North Somerset and Bristol*, London, Penguin Books

Spencer, Charles (2020) *The White Ship*, William Collins

Stenton, Doris Mary (1965) *English Society in the Early Middle Ages*, Pelican

Wickham AK (1965) *Churches of Somerset*, David and Charles.