

Round About

Somerset

FROM SOURCE TO
SEA—THE YEO

COMPTON MARTIN'S LINK WITH HUNTSMAN WHO BECAME A SAINT

WHILE the source of the River Axe is linked with the legend of the Witch of Wookey, that of the River Yeo at Compton Martin is concerned with a saint! He was Saint Wulfric, and the legend is that he was born in a cave half-way up the combe from which Compton (combe town) probably gets its name.

With its cottages on either side, this combe has much of an old-worldly look to-day, but it is very much twentieth century at the top, where mechanical monsters twist and turn, grab, lift, and drop at the busy limestone quarries.

There seem to be two or three versions of the story of St. Wulfric. The legend that he was born in a cave at Compton Martin has to be set against another version that his parents were fairly well off, although of humble origin.

As a youth Wulfric was apparently a wayward type and abandoned himself to a purely pleasure-seeking existence, in which the thrills of the chase in the royal

sponsibility in the calling, and devoted most of his time to hunting, hawking, and other sports.

One day when he was out hunting he was stopped by a needy-looking old man who asked for alms, especially requesting a "new piece of money." New coinage had been issued about that time, but it had not circulated much.

Wulfric replied that he did not think he had any new coins on

to shorten it with a pair of shears. His patron must have looked at him in amusement for making such an odd request. Shears could not cut through mail. But Wulfric signalled him to try, and when he did so the shears went through the mail as if it had been cloth.

When Wulfric died in 1154 at the age of 90, Robert, Bishop of Bath and Wells was at his side. He was buried in his cell, which for many years remained a place of pilgrimage.

There was a time when the monks of Montacute, jealous of the interest taken in Wulfric's tomb, tried to get it removed to their own monastery. They were prevented by the Bishop who, it is said, had Wulfric's remains re-interred at Haselbury church for

and which looks in danger of falling down. When there was danger of collapse, the builders abandoned their project.

'ONE OF THE SIGHTS OF SOMERSET'

But they did something else that was extremely fascinating. They got to work on the Norman pillar nearest the chancel arch and twisted it.

"It is one of the sights of Somerset and one of the architectural curiosities of England," says Arthur Mee. "It has ropework carved around it spirally with hundreds of beads running through the rope, and the illusion of twisting is complete. It is the unique possession of the church."

Curiously enough it is possible



The delightful church doorway, with its rambler roses, ferns, and flowers.

greater safety. The church still has what is known as Wulfric's aisle.

CHURCH BUILT IN WULFRIC'S TIME

Compton Martin church was built in Wulfric's time, but has no link with him except that it is proud of the village's association with the hermit, and sets out his story for all to read on its literature table, and even includes a picture of Haselbury Plucknett church.

Nikolaus Pevsner in "The Buildings of England" in the Penguin series says that Compton Martin has "perhaps the best Norman parish church in Somerset." This is praise indeed from so noted an authority, and it is justified.

Sometimes motorists passing through Compton Martin stop to watch the ducks sailing on the village pond, but few turn off on to the little stretch of old road to visit the church, which is certainly one of

that generations of people worshipped at Compton church without ever seeing the twisted pillar, since "the twist" was plastered over, and was not revealed until 1851.

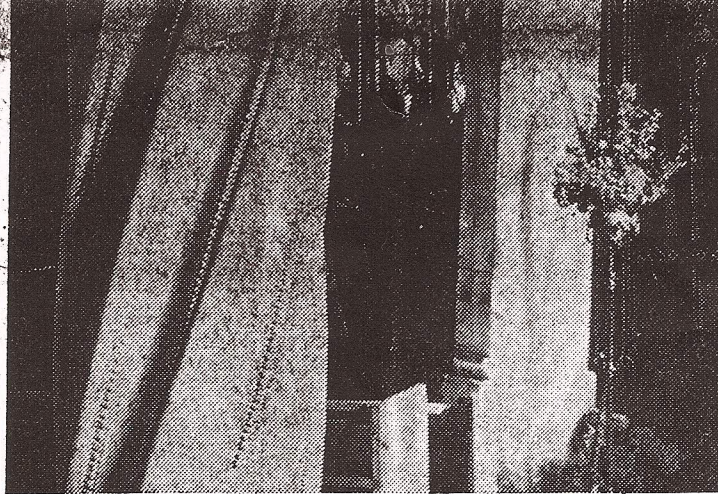
There is the likeness of Durham Cathedral here, and wherever one looks in this church there are engaging points of interest.

BLACK OAK SCREEN

The Bickfield chapel is now used as an organ chamber and vestry. It is enclosed with fine carved, rich, black oak, which information in notes available to visitors says was formerly the church's Jacobean screen of 1639, but which Arthur Mee says came from one of Compton Martin's most interesting old homes, Moat House or Bickfield Farm, which is, in fact, a house surrounded by a former moat, and which Pevsner says is of pre-Reformation date.

In the church's north aisle is a recess that was once an Easter sepulchre, and here too is the





"One of the sights of Somerset" was Arthur Mee's comment on the famous twisted pillar of Compton Martin church.

hunting forest of Mendip took a prominent part.

In early manhood his outlook took a more serious turn. He resolved to become a priest, and settled down as the devout cure of Deverill, near Warminster, in Wiltshire.

ENGLAND'S MIRACLE WORKER

He seems to have become most zealous, for J. R. Green, the eminent historian, says: "Originally a clerical sportsman, he all at once flung aside his hounds and his vicarage and, without waiting for episcopal sanction or priestly benediction, immured himself in his jealously closed cell. He was soon known as England's "one miracle worker and prophet."

It was not at Compton Martin that Wulfric settled and performed his miracles, but at Haselbury Plucknett, near Crewkerne, in Somerset.

Leland, the antiquarian of Henry VIII's reign, recorded of Haselbury: "At this place lyvid the Holy Hermite and Propete Walfrik yn King Heny I Dayes."

Living on the most frugal diet and wearing, by way of further self-imposed hardship, a suit of chain mail next to his skin, he lived out his years, giving his inspiring messages to the crowds who flocked to see him in his holy cell near the church.

So great was his reputation as a seer and counsellor that Henry I went to consult him. One day, the king's nephew, Stephen, was riding by the hermit's cell when Wulfric hailed him "King of England."

PROPHECY

Stephen dismounted from his horse and reproved Wulfric, pointing out that he was no king and that his uncle was secure on the throne.

"It is no error," replied Wulfric, "it is you, Stephen, that I mean, for the Lord hath delivered the realm into your hands. Protect the Church. Defend the poor." And so it proved to be.

Another version of the Wulfric story is that as a youth he read assiduously and entered holy orders and was made a priest. He did not show much sense of re-

him, but the old man told him to look in his pockets. He did so and found some which he gave to the beggar, who thanked him, said that God would reward him, and added, "Thou wilt remove hence and at length find repose, and He will summon thee to join the communion of His saints."

HIS CHANGED LIFE

Wulfric was so affected by this interview that he gave up his pleasures and retired to a cell at Haselbury Plucknett, near the church, where he spent his time "in cold, and want, and tears."

One Easter evening he is said to have been troubled by impure thoughts. He rose and went into the church and made confession before the congregation, and asked them to pray for him.

One of his miracles is said to have been associated with the coat of mail he wore next to his skin. It was too long and he could not kneel in it, so he asked his patron

an authority, and it is justified.

Sometimes motorists passing through Compton Martin stop to watch the ducks sailing on the village pond, but few turn off on to the little stretch of old road to visit the church, which is certainly one of the Norman architectural gems of Somerset.

It is such a welcoming church, too. There is the approach along a path ablaze in the summer with the glory of ranks of standard roses. There are ferns, flowers, and rambler roses around the doorway, and magnificent trees in the churchyard.

GLORIOUS INTERIOR

And then there is that glorious interior. The church is dedicated to St. Michael and was built by the Martin family, whose story I told last week, and who gave their name to the village. Martin de Treves and his son, Robert Fitz-Martin, donated generously to church and monasteries.

Arthur Mee writes most enthusiastically about Compton Martin church in his "Somerset" in the "King's England" series, describing it as "one of the rarest legacies the Normans left to Somerset," and adds, "For 800 years Compton Martin has looked on these walls as we see them, noble inside and out."

Centuries ago there was an attempt, to remove the Norman work from Compton Martin church but happily it was abandoned and those lovely round pillars survive, plus that most fascinating curiosity, the twisted pillar.

In the fifteenth century, a great era for building, there was a bid to replace the Norman architecture with the lighter, pointed arches of the time. The result is a chancel arch very much awry,

Compton Martin's most interesting old homes, Moat House or Bickfield Farm, which is, in fact, a house surrounded by a former moat, and which Pevsner says is of pre-Reformation date.

In the church's north aisle is a recess that was once an Easter sepulchre, and here too is the effigy of former Lord of the Manor, Thomas de Mortone.

Compton Martin church is as beautiful outside as in. While it has rambler roses over the doorway to its north porch, it has Tudor roses carved in stone over the west door. There is the noble tower, too, with its fourteen niches, which were no doubt intended to bear the figures of saints.

DOVE COTE OVER CHANCEL

Of unusual interest, too, is the doorway over the chancel which opens into a dove cote, where priests of former days reared succulent morsels for their table.

An exhibit in the church porch is a beam riddled with death watch beetle, a reminder of the task which Compton Martin has had in recent years in restoring its beautiful place of worship. It was a £7,500 scheme, a huge task for so small a place. But Compton Martin has done magnificently, and the balance left to be paid off is down to £1,367. Give generously for a good cause if, through this introduction, you visit St. Michael's. I note that among the gallant fund-raising efforts, the village handbell ringers have raised £789.

I shall be returning to Compton Martin next week, because there is more to see before we leave the source of the Yeo in the village, and try to find a spot where the stream is wide and deep enough to launch our craft and start our journey to the sea!

JOHN BAILEY.



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