

Did Edward II pass by?

Many of you will be familiar with the village folklore about the three old oak trees on the north side of Mount Lane (SO 805 109), which states that these are part of a line of trees planted to mark the route taken by the funeral cortege carrying Edward II's body from Berkeley Castle to Gloucester Abbey. True or false?

In the hope of finding an answer to that question, last September I went to a talk by David Smith - former county archivist and now archivist at Berkeley Castle - entitled 'Edward II – a King in our midst'. I also bought a copy of George Marchant's booklet *Edward II in Gloucestershire* (Gloucester, 2007, available from the cathedral shop and wonderful value at £2.00). What follows has been inspired by that booklet.

Background and Evidence

Edward II arrived at Berkeley Castle on April 5 1327. By now he was an ex-king, having been persuaded to renounce the throne. On September 21 he was murdered, probably on the orders of Roger Mortimer of Wigmore (Queen Isabelle's lover) and on December 20 at Gloucester Abbey was given what amounted to a royal funeral, the chief mourners were his widow the Queen, his son the future Edward III and Roger Mortimer.

So when and how did his body get from Berkeley to Gloucester? George Marchant (p.14) writes:

'Most authors give 21st October as the day that Edward's corpse left Berkeley for Gloucester. The (abbey's) *Historia* states that it was carried in Abbot Toky's (or Thoky's) personal carriage, which bore the arms of the abbey. Lord Berkeley evidently provided suitable black trappings for the inside of the carriage, the harnesses of the horses etc. The carriage was accompanied by the abbot and monks, and also by Lord Berkeley, John Maltravers and their men-at-arms. There is a strong tradition at Standish that the body rested overnight in the village church, which belonged to Gloucester abbey, and had probably been recently rebuilt by Abbot Toky.⁶⁶ Another tradition maintains that the villagers of Standish planted an avenue of oak trees to mark the route of the carriage from the main road to the church. Five surviving trees were reported in 1909, and three in 1953-54⁶⁷ Reginald Perry records a further tradition (without citing sources), that the procession stopped briefly for prayer, every mile between Berkeley and Gloucester, and that oaks trees were later planted at these points.'

(Reginald Perry *Edward the Second Suddenly at Berkeley* Wotton-Under-Edge: Ivy House Books, 1988)

Marchant's sources (note 66) are HT Lilley, 'History of Standish' (1932) pp43 & 52 (Glos Archives ROL F5), Standish PCC, 'Standish Church: A Description & History' (1963) p4 (Glos Archives PA305/3). The 1963 'History' is confident that the present church housed Edward's body, and makes the point that the East window was completed 'around 1310'. David Verey and Alan Brooks 'The Buildings of England – Gloucestershire 2' (London : Penguin Books/Yale University Press, 1976 & 2002) has concerns over the East window 'c1340 rather than earlier' having stated earlier 'St Nicholas. Almost entirely of the first half of the C14', and casts doubts on whether the present church could have been used in 1327. The 2nd edition (1976) gives the present church the benefit of doubt while the 3rd edition (2002) opts for a re-build after 1327.

Marchant also refers (note 67) to the Report of Annual Spring Meeting, June 1909 Trans of Bristol & Glos Arch Soc(TBGAS) vol.xxxii(1909)p.9 and Manuscript by GM Davies, 'Royal Avenue at Standish' (2 pages,1953-54) Glos Archive RF 281.

The 1909 reference is available online:

'... an interesting legend, which the present vicar (The Reverend Alexander Nash) found floating in the memory of one or two old parishioners when he came in 1889. In some fields just north of the lane leading from Standish to Moreton Valence there are still standing five very ancient oak trees, venerable hollow trunks... these trees are the remnants of an avenue planted to commemorate and mark the road by which the body of Edward II... the trees still standing do form part of an avenue is an undoubted fact, four on one side and one on the other; and a person standing in this avenue will discover the spire of the church almost exactly in the centre.'

The Rev Nash's comments allow us to assume that this memory dates back to the 1830-40's but that is still along way from the C14. *The Victoria County History: Gloucestershire* Vol. 10(1972) p.233 states there is no earlier record of Edward's body resting at Standish than this reference.

The 1953-54 reference is an unsigned photocopy: when and by whom it was deposited in the archives is not recorded, at the bottom of the second page are the words '4 photographs', these are not with this document.

G M Davies describes:

'In October 1953 I researched the fields on the north side of the Standish-Moreton Valence lane,...and found three old oak trees with dead tops, in a field directly behind the(Arle) brook, between Standish Moreton Farm and another farm.... called Devonian. Two of these trees are in an open field, the third is in an orchard. During the winter of 1953-54 the farmer of Devonian grubbed up and burnt the stumps of two more trees which were quite dead. The two trees in the field are alive...though one is hollow. They are about 50 or 60 yards apart. The tree in the orchard does not appear to be alive...'

On the 7 November 2007 I walked the footpath from Standish Church to Standish Moreton Farm and found, at SO 794 088, what I believe to be the trees mention above. The eastern one is a large hollow oak, at about 80 paces to the west is another oak with a very large trunk. The footpath runs through what is now a derelict orchard where the third oak is: it is still alive. The church spire is just visible over the untrimmed hedges. I could find no trace of a trackway/sunken lane. The real problem with both the above sources is the location of the trees. Unless the Standish Moreton Lane has moved south during the intervening years why is the cortege in the middle of a field? There was an Iron Age farm in the field north of the church, and the field pattern, originally Romano-British, runs at right angles to the present A38 (*Time Team: Standish* TX 13 Feb 2005).

The Route

At the end of David Smith's talk he was asked if the route of the funeral cortege was known, he replied emphatically 'No'. The network of roads in South Gloucestershire have changed little

since the C14 except for the addition of the M5 and various urban bypasses. So on leaving Berkeley Castle the cortege would have probably used the present B4066 to the A38. This is the old Roman road between Gloucester and Sea Mills, 900 years after the Romans departed it was probably only slightly better than most other medieval roads but it gave a direct route to Gloucester. Standish offered a safe and secure place for the night, with the Abbot's lodgings next to the church. The next morning it would seem logical to resume the journey on the road that runs passed the church, the present day B4008; coming to Mount Lane and in sight of the A38 it seems perverse to turn right and get involved with small, muddy and possibly unsafe lanes. One of the important functions of this journey was to show the populace at large that Edward II was dead and thereby strengthen Edward III's legitimacy as future monarch. The image of royalty had been badly tarnished by Edward's enforced abdication, and a sense of royal normality needed to be restored.

The Mount Lane oaks

I have gathered the following information. The Reverend J Melland Hall 'Haresfield: Manors and Church' TBGAS vol.xix(1895)p.355: 'On the North side of this lane(referring to Black Cross Lane an earlier name for Mount Lane) stands a row of oaks of great age, probably the remains of an old land boundary.' Melland Hall records these trees but apparently did not hear or see fit to mention any reference to Edward II.

What is popularly known as the WI History of Haresfield (an account of *Our Village within Living Memory* 1956 typescript Glos Archive SR642/3371GS) p.1 states, after a reference to the Domesday Book, 'There is a general belief, in the village, that the old oak trees, which border the North of Black Cross Lane were mentioned too, but we cannot confirm this.' This is a really curious comment, considering this account was compiled by 20 villagers of whom about half were members of the 'old' village families who were just the sort of people one would expect to know of the Edward II connection.

Oliver Rackman in his *The History of the Countryside* (London, Dent 1986, p.229) writes: 'Trees, still extant.... The Fairy Oak (Haresfield) supposed to commemorate the foul murder of Edward II nearby in 1327.' No source or OS grid reference is given.

The trees were inspected in 1993 by the Research Office at Westonbirt Arboretum. Using the breast height measurement system an estimated planting date of 1370 is given. A note on the report form states 'date is latest planting date (ie 620 – 700yrs old)'. This gives a planting window between 1293 and 1370. The original of this form is held by Mark Heywood, Haresfield Farms Ltd. As the eastern most tree is now dead, using dendrochronology it would be possible to arrive at an exact year of planting. The middle tree has a magnificent trunk which is rather obscured on the road side by elderflower scrub and ivy. The westernmost shows signs of rot starting where large branches have been removed. The trees gained official status in 2001 when they were entered on the Gloucestershire County Council's *Sites & Monuments Record*(SMR21091) as '3 ancient oaks trees at Haresfield'.

Conclusion

So where does all this get us to? There are two major problems. First, the 3 trees in Mount Lane are in an unlikely location, while the Standish trees are in a very problematic place, and secondly oral tradition is a source that always needs to be handled with great care.

It is very interesting that two adjacent parishes have what amounts to the same oral tradition. History only allows us glimpses into the past; as we cannot prove Edward's body even came to Standish, we must also accept that the dating of the Mount Lane oaks is just a happy co-

incidence. So returning to my original question the answer is probably 'Yes, Edward's body did pass by, but not along Mount Lane'.

The South Gloucestershire landscape has many magnificent oaks. Why certain ones should be associated with certain historical events is a mystery and will probably remain so. I would be very interested to hear from anyone who can add anything i.e. when did you first hear the story about the Mount Lane oaks and from whom? Are there any other old trees in the parish that have stories attached to them? Do any of the parishes between Standish and Berkeley have old oaks that are believed to mark the cortege route? Please get in touch 01452 883403.

Coda

Put aside all the above and next time you are on Mount Lane, look at those trees. They may be past their best but they still have grandeur. They have been silent witnesses to 700 years of Haresfield's history. When they were starting out the church was being re-built; they were there during the villages' good and bad times; they must have seen thousands of people pass by: beggars on foot, men off to war and the survivors returning, farmers driving stock to market, oxen, horses, wagons & carts, steam traction engines, petrol & diesel tractors, the Enclosures disposed leaving the village forever, the rich in their carriages, RAF men on their bicycles and now days, people in their own cars rushing by with hardly a glance. Treasure them for they are part of our heritage and will probably still be there long after we have left this place.