

## ÉCULLEVILLE'S CHURCH IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The little church of St. Martin in the small village of Éculleville, to the west of Cherbourg, seems on the outside quite unremarkable. But within, as well as a particularly fine alabaster set into the north wall of the nave and a thirteenth-century double piscina in the chancel, it possesses a most unusual roof. For its pointed vaulting has none of the delicate ribs of Gothic work radiating from such centres as the Île de France, but rises without any differentiation from the side walls, and has just one massive arc doubleau about midway along its length, resting on double-convex corbels and looking like aerial buttresses.

Why should this church be so different from those in all the surrounding parishes, and to what, if anything, does it relate? Did it appear, *sui generis*, as an experiment by some local medieval genius? And how can it be dated? Certainly, when I was researching a book on the ecclesiastical buildings of the English Channel Islands<sup>1</sup>, I could find nothing like it in the present diocese. There may indeed be other examples in Cotentin churches I did not visit, but the nearest comparable vaulting I could find was in the Avranchin, in parts of the church at Pontorson.

However, if one widens one's horizons to include the rest of France, this vaulting is far from unique. It is to be found throughout Provence, and, in steadily-decreasing density, westwards and northwards through Gascony and into the Saintonge. But another region where it is used in almost all church buildings but not in secular work is throughout the bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey. Here, parts of every parish church are, or were, roofed in this way, and moreover it appears in the huge manorial chapel at Rozel in Jersey, in the tiny chapel of Ste. Appoline in Guernsey, in the castle chapel at Mont Orgueil and even in the priories on the Ecréhous and Lihou. Such a concentration demands explanation, especially when one considers that until 1568 the Channel Islands were officially within the diocese of Coutances.

At Éculleville, it is noticeable that the south wall of the church is clearly extremely ancient, built mostly of tiny stones probably gathered locally, and probably earlier than the thirteenth-century piscina that is the only dateable feature set into it. The vaulting, in contrast, seems to be far better built. The same phenomenon occurs in many Channel Island churches, where also the spacing of buttresses outside does not align with arcs doubleaux on the inside, strongly suggesting more than one phase, a suspicion confirmed at the Vale Church in Guernsey, where the shape of a previous wooden-roofed gable can easily be seen below the stone vaulting of the nave. Similarly, during recent work on Herm Chapel, a wooden roof was found to have predated the present vaulting. At the Vale, nave walling is from the end of the twelfth century, the change to stone vaulting being unlikely, therefore, to predate 1200; and in fact, wherever any sort of stylistic dating is possible in other churches, such vaulting seems to belong to the thirteenth century at the earliest.

It has been suggested that the predominance of this roof type in the Channel Islands was a deliberate and organised response to devastation from French raids during the thirteenth century, but the only raid where considerable damage is recorded was that of 1294, where repairs undertaken soon afterwards at the Town Church in St. Peter Port and at St. Sampson's can still be identified. Certainly the repairs did provide stone vaulting. But scarcely fifty years later, and at a time when the islands were very much in the front line at the beginning of the Hundred Years' War, St. Sampson's added a south aisle with a timber roof. And the nave of Grouville in Jersey, in spite of being one of the parishes closest to France, has never achieved a stone vault. So it is unlikely that this roofing, either primary or replacing earlier wooden coverings, was ever the result of a concerted campaign.

All the same, the dating of this vaulting in Guernsey and Jersey strongly suggests that it did come about as a result of the political division between the islands and the rest of the diocese in the years after 1204. At the Ecréhous, although there is a document of 1203 recording the establishment of a priory providing two monks responsible for keeping a beacon lit, excavations undertaken by Warwick Rodwell twenty years ago found more than one phase of earlier buildings below the ruins still standing, and there is thus no guarantee that the priory church was actually rebuilt in that year, or indeed that monks were sent out by Val Richer until a degree of normality had been achieved by 1217.

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<sup>1</sup> *Channel Island Churches*, Phillimore's, Chichester, 1986

A more likely candidate for the first appearance of solid stone vaulting in the islands is the Chapel of St. Mary at Rozel Manor in Jersey, almost certainly attributable to Drogo de Barentin, a knight entrusted by Henry III of England with the safety of the islands, and indeed with his own personal safety when, in 1243, he was ordered to 'meet the King's ship from Bordeaux off the coast of Brittany, and escort it with galleys and other good vessels, fully manned and equipped, till it reach England safely'. Drogo was three times Warden of the Isles, his first appointment being from 1235 until 1239. In 1240 lands that he had previously held in Jersey were returned to him, and in the same year he once more became Warden, this time until 1252. In 1246 he again received land at Rozel almost certainly additional to that which he already held, and one might thus assume that both Manor and Chapel had been built by then. Drogo's links with Gascony, where he had already been on the King's service, were further strengthened when he became Seneschal there for the first of three times in that important office. He was also in Provence in January, 1257, took a prominent part in the Baron's War a couple of years later and remained in the King's service until his death in or around 1265<sup>2</sup>.

Rozel Chapel has buttresses and arcs doubleaux aligned with each other and clearly designed together, so that in this case we can be quite sure that the vaulting was part of an original design of c. 1240. And the very late Romanesque form of the west doorway, though greatly restored in the nineteenth century, is another indication that its architect hailed from the conservative south of France. Whether Rozel was responsible for the introduction of this vaulting into our area cannot be conclusively proved, but that it was certainly employed there by de Barentan, with his many links to English territories in Gascony and surrounding areas, demonstrates that the masons he used must have come from that part of France – only to be expected in times when political rivalry between England and France made it difficult to bring men from the adjacent parts of the diocese of Coutances.

One might ask why it was that vaulting in the south of France was so different from that of the north, and here, the answer is even more intriguing: for, as can be demonstrated from the great work *Les Monuments des Croisés dans le Royaume de Jérusalem*, published in Paris by Camille Enlart in 1925, the form had been introduced into the twelfth-century churches of the Levant by the crusaders, most of whom were French. This vaulting was already ubiquitous throughout the Caucasus region, as can be seen in the early Christian churches of Armenia and Georgia, verified recently by the present author. It was, indeed, just the usual form of Roman roofing but given a pointed profile, and the French crusaders brought it home with them. It can be seen in innumerable churches in Provence, for instance, at St. Trophime in Arles.

But there is another complication. For the vaulting at Éculleville is not quite like that of most churches in the Caucasus, of work at Arles, in Rozel Chapel, or at the Vale in Guernsey. In those places the distinctive arc doubleaux consist of vertical sections, like broad pilasters, rising from the ground to imposts where the vaulting springs away from the wall and then continuing up to the apex of the roof. Éculleville has only the top part, rising from corbels at the springing of the vault. Have the bottom sections on either side then been cut away? No. For in the Channel Islands, as also in the south-west of Pembrokeshire, in Wales, where there is a similar cluster of churches with solid vaulting, arcs doubleaux underwent considerable evolution during the three centuries after 1240. Whereas they had been employed as though internal buttresses in primary builds, they soon became merely aesthetic features, used to create visual emphasis or to provide internal subdivision along the length of a church. Thus by the time that the vaulting was added to the Vale Church's nave, only two arcs doubleaux were employed internally, though there were three buttresses outside. Elsewhere, a single arc doubleau in a chancel might or might not be directly opposite an external buttress. And by the time of the c.1300 repairs carried out at St. Peter Port and St. Sampson's, only the top part was present in the naves, because the bays of older aisles did not match the width of the strange arches now inserted, resembling those around the central market places of bastide towns in Gascony or Périgord, pointed, but with extraordinarily low imposts. And a hundred years later, the long aisles or chapels added at the Forest and St. Andrew's churches in Guernsey again retained only the upper part of a single arc doubleau, just as at Éculleville.

Bearing all this in mind, it seems likely, not that this example at Éculleville is a lone outpost transported somehow from Provence, but that it is work carried out under English or Channel Island supervision during the Hundred Years' War. I must leave it to French researchers to decide during which of the two main phases of 'occupation' this was most likely to belong, but perhaps we should be thinking of the period between 1415 and 1440, considering that the examples at the Forest and St. Andrew's also lie within this time. All this is, of course, only a beginning in understanding what has happened here: one still needs to discover exactly why and how work was done in this way at that time,

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<sup>2</sup> G.R. Balleine, *A Biographical Dictionary of Jersey*, pp. 104-108.

especially since the walling below this vaulting show no signs of any fire that might have damaged an earlier wooden roof. Perhaps it was just a matter of decay that caused replacement in stone by a patron at present unknown.

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