

Who lies in the Dorchester Knight's Tomb?

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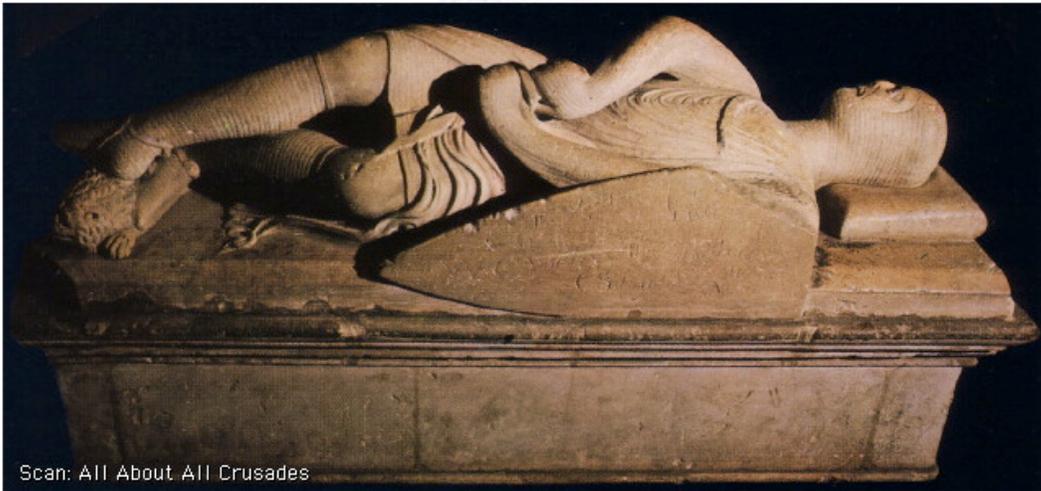
Overview

Holcomb family genealogists have long regarded the Abbey Church at Dorchester-on-Thames as the resting place of an early ancestor, revealed in a remarkable stone effigy. The Abbey recently concluded that this attribution was incorrect, and now believes the effigy to be that of a knight named Valance. This change in the attribution of the effigy surprised me, so I sought the historical documents bearing on the identity of this Knight. After a careful study of those documents, my wife and I travelled to England to visit the Abbey in person. We stayed in Dawlish, walked the bean fields of Holcomb, visited Powderham Castle and Branscombe , and finally Dorchester-on-Thames.

This study reviews the evidence for each attribution and also reports a remarkable find: a missing piece of the effigy may have been buried at the ancestral home of the Holcomb family, before 1601 and unearthed in 1959.

Identifying the Effigy

Construction of the present Abbey Church of St. Peter and St. Paul began in the 12th century, replacing two earlier Saxon cathedrals. The first Christian missionary in the region arrived in 645. The interest in this church by Holcomb family genealogists centers on a remarkable life-sized effigy of a Knight that they identified as Sir John Holcomb,¹ who died around 1270.



¹ Seaver, 1925, McCulloch 1947

The Abbey's brochure now asserts:

“Although he cannot be identified with certainty, it seems most likely that this knight is William de Valance the Younger (died 1282), and *not Sir John de Holcombe (died 1270) as was formerly believed*. His effigy is one of the best pieces of 13th century funerary sculpture in England.“

[Emphasis mine]

Historical Evidence

The most exhaustive study of Dorchester Abbey appears in an 1845 work by Henry Addington.² He quotes two very old sources that appear to contradict one another regarding who is memorialized by the effigy in the Choir.

The older authority cited by Addington is the antiquarian John Leland, who has been described as "the father of English local history and bibliography."³ Leland left this account of his visit to the Abbey on May 4, 1542:

“There be buried in the Quier beside divers Abbates a Knight on the South side with an Image crosse leggid, whos name is there oute of remembrance . . . There lyith a Knight on the North side of Quier, whom

² Addington, Henry B.A. *Some Account of the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Oxfordshire*, Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, 1845.

³ A.L. Clarke, "John Leland and King Henry VIII", *The Library*, 3rd ser. vol. 2, pp. 132-49 (at 145).

the late Abbate tooke to be one of the Segraves. The image was of alabaster. But after the Abbate told me that he heard of late one say that there was one Holcum a Knight buried.”⁴

The “late” [i.e. retired] Abbot mentioned by Leland, John Mershe, [not “March”], had served in that position since 1523. Addington informs us that Mershe had “subscribed to the king’s supremacy, Oct 1, 1534. He was alive in 1553, in enjoyment of a pension of £22 per annum.”⁵ After the Dissolution it was common to award a pension and domicile to clerics too old to serve the new Church of England. We learn the name of the old Abbot’s domicile from a letter of Rev. Thomas Warton to a Mr. Gough dated Sept 30, 1786:

“About two miles from Dorchester is a manor belonging to Trinity College, Oxford. It is called *Holcomb Grange*, and the old manorial home was a very large Gothic mansion, *I believe a retiring place for the Abbot of Dorchester.*”⁶

[emphasis mine]

⁴ Addington, p. 103

⁵ Addington, p. 91, citing MS, Cole, ut supra

⁶ John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, printed at London for the Author, Vol IV, p 1786

A grange is anciently defined as an Abbey's building that provides accommodations to visiting dignitaries. Mershe, deprived of his post, had been associated with the Abbey for twenty or more years when he told Leland about a Knight who bore the Holcomb name.

However, Addington also cites a second, later source on the identity of the effigy. Richard Lee, in his official capacity as a Herald (an expert on Coats of Arms), visited the Abbey in 1574, 32 years after Leland.

Lee wrote:

“A man in armor with a shelde cote in stone lying on a squer tombe with his fote on a lyon, it is to be thought to be Walonce with a baton.”⁷

This statement appears to be the only historical basis for identifying a Valance as the occupant of the Knight's tomb.

In an appendix on the arms belonging to the monuments of Dorchester church, Addington exhibits considerable uncertainty surrounding the Knight's identity:

“With regard to the cross-legged effigy, whose name in Leland's time was out of remembrance, no certainty has hitherto been obtained, the arms being defaced as early as A.D. 1574, but the following are hints which may be useful to those who may have the opportunity of prosecuting the inquiry . . . We may perhaps conclude from this [Lee's Valence observation] that the required [?] arms bear some general resemblance to those of Valence earl of Pembroke.

. . . [text dating the armor of the Knight to about AD 1270]

⁷ Addington, p 126

“Bishop Tanner gives two references⁸ that may perhaps to throw light on the subject.”⁹

Bishop Tanner’s references are described more fully in a second appendix to Addington’s work. They appear to document two grants made to the Abbey about the time the effigy was installed. It would have been normal for the family of the deceased to make a gift in support of perpetual prayers by the Monks.

Here are Addington’s interpretations of these two Latin-language grants:

[1] “This is the final concord between Richard abbot [elected 1225] of Dorchester and Robert of Little Holecumbe with Matilda his wife, respecting a gift by the latter parties of 1 messuage [a dwelling house with its outbuildings, curtilage, and the adjacent land] and 30 acres of land in Little Holecumbe.

[2] “This document, presumed to be the same as that referred to by Bishop Tanner, is a final concord between Walter abbot of Dorchester [elected

⁸ Not. Mon., art. Dorchester.

⁹ Addington, p. 126

1269], and William le Sage with Roesia his wife, respecting the gift by the latter parties of 1 messuage, 13 acres, 3 roods of land, 4 acres of meadow, and pasture of four oxen in Little Milton; 8 messuages, 4 virgates, 2 ½ acres of land, and two shillings of rent in Thomele, together with 3s. 6d. rent in Ewelme.”¹⁰

While the first citation mentions a donor called “Robert of Little Holecumbe,” the second sheds no discernable light on the issue.

Addington’s work includes additional evidence (c. 1279) of a connection between a person identified with Holcomb (in the Dorchester hundred) and the Abbey:

“Nicolas de Brudecote holds in Drayton, in Holcomb, and Clifton one knight’s fee, of which the Abbot holds in Holecumbe 4 virgates of arable land with the appurtenances, and shall give to the said Nicholas scutage, when it occurs, for all services.”¹¹

Scutage is a tax paid by the landholder in lieu of military service owed to his feudal overlord. Here, we see a gentleman passing that tax over to the Abbot,

¹⁰ Addington, p. 129

¹¹ Rot. Hundred, vol 11. pp 747-748

because the Abbot cannot provide the military service bound to land that has been granted to him. The arms of Drayton also appear in the Abbey glass, and they bear an interesting similarity to that of the Holcomb family; both display a crest in the shape of a Turk's head.

The two references to place-names of Holcomb likely refer to the village of that name near the Abbey, not the ancestral hamlet called Holcomb near Dawlish in Devon.

A Modern Review of the Identity of the Knight

The revision of the Abbey's official literature identifying the Knight with the Valence family, instead of the Holcombs, is recent. The change is attributable¹² to a 1987 article¹³ by Philip J. Lankester, a respected art historian and antiquarian with impeccable credentials.¹⁴ His article is exhaustive (27 pages), scholarly (237 footnotes) and deserves the utmost attention of anyone interested in the Knight's effigy and its history.

However, Lancaster's study most definitely does NOT include a definitive identification of the effigy as either a Valence or a Holcomb. His primary concern is proper dating, not the identity, of the Knight's effigy. Lancaster's reasoning is based on the extraordinary quality of the effigy itself, and the period in history to which it belongs. There is no work of similar artistic style and quality known to art historians before the *late* 13th or early 14th century.¹⁵

¹² The Abbey website appears to take much of its material from *Dorchester Abbey Church and People 635-2005*, edited by Kate Tiller and published by the Dorchester Abbey Preservation Trust. The citation of Lancaster's work appears only as footnote 22 on page 34.

¹³ <http://oxoniensia.org/volumes/1987/lankester.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.zoominfo.com/p/Philip-Lankester/706063369>

¹⁵ Lankester, pp 159 and 172

A date based solely on the armor clothing the Knight is consistent with the lifetime of Sir John Holcomb, who died in 1270. By a careful process of elimination, Lankester concludes that the ONLY member of the Valence family who might be identified with the effigy died in 1282.¹⁶ He offers an additional observation on the question of arms:

“It therefore seems most likely that the *arms seen by the heralds* on the Dorchester effigy were those of Valence.”¹⁷ [emphasis mine]

Since any arms seen by Herald Lee were apparently NOT visible during Leland’s visit 32 years earlier, this hardly qualifies as an endorsement of the Valence attribution.

In fact, Lankester acknowledges that a Valence attribution bears an additional burden:

“The Valences are not known to have had any special connection with Dorchester, though their arms were formerly included among glass shields in the windows *which probably date from c. 1300.*”¹⁸ [My emphasis]

¹⁶ Lankester, p 156

¹⁷ *ibid* p. 159.

In his conclusion, Lankester makes no strong case for either the Holcomb or the Valence attribution. He offers only his conclusion about dating within about fifty years, given the prevailing dating of similar works. He frames the matter very clearly:

“... [an earlier author’s] arguments are convincing; they might be wrong in certain details, but would have to be very wrong indeed to permit the dating of the Dorchester knight as early as 1240 – 1260... If the Dorchester effigy is dated late, say c. 1280 – 1310, it has consequences of our understanding of the development of style, especially drapery style, during the 13th century.”¹⁹

A twelve-year difference between the Holcomb and Valence death dates is immaterial to that question. Both dates fall in a no-mans-land between extremes.

Recognizing this dilemma, Lankester concludes his article with a measure of caution reminiscent of Addington:

¹⁸ *ibid* p. 157

¹⁹ Lankester, p. 172

“Having pondered this dilemma for ten years, I still find it difficult to come down on one side or the other but, on balance, I find the points in favour of a *later date* marginally more convincing.”²⁰ [emphasis mine]

The current attribution of the effigy to the Valence family is NOT proven by Lankester’s work, and he did not appear to intend it as such. On the other hand, there is ample evidence (including a very recently described relic) that supports a connection between the Holcombe family of Branscombe and the Dorchester Knight.

²⁰ *ibid*, p 172

Antiquity of the Holcomb Attribution

I respectfully offer only one correction to Mr. Lancaster's exhaustive study. He comments as follows on the antiquity of the Holcomb coat of arms:

“No arms appear to be recorded for Holcombe before 1620. . .²¹

While the Holcomb(e) arms may not have been registered in the 1620 visitation, they are found in existing stone which can be dated with confidence between 1536 and 1585. This span is congruent with the visits of both Leland and Lee. Those arms (Holcomb marshaled with Sydenham) are well in advance of widespread creation and sale of arms, called “compositions for knighthoods” by James I in the early 1630s²². Ellis Holcomb hung them over his front door when he expanded his manor house in Branscombe sometime before he died in 1585.

²¹ Lankester, p155

²² Alymer, *A Short History of the 17th Century England: 1603-1689*; p90



For centuries, the Branscombe Holcombe family has been inaccurately referred to as the “Holcombs of Hull.” The “Hull” epithet has puzzled genealogists for generations, since most of the Holcomb genealogical documents are centered in Devon, far away from the city of Hull. The family actually dwelt for 400 or more years in a manor called “Hole House” which stands to this day in Branscombe, Devon. The confusion arose from a single spelling variation: Vivian [ca. 1630]²³ misspelled Hole as “Hull.” Later genealogists faithfully copied the error.

²³ Vivian, *Vistations of the Country of Devon*, p. 474. Vivian attributes the “Hull” epithet to the *Visitation of Devon* 1564 Harl. Mss 1050. Neither Pole or Westcote used the Hull reference for the Holcomb family.

The Branscombe Project,²⁴ dedicated to the history of that village, mounted in 2013 an exhibit covering the history of Hole House in detail. Material made available by the Branscombe Project helped verify the following historic facts:

1. Sir John Holcomb inherited the Manor of Down Ralph (modern Rousdon) before 1270.
2. Walter Holcomb, Sir John's descendent, acquired Hole House before the 14th century, by inheritance from a family named de la Hole.²⁵
3. Ellis Holcomb (1515-1585) expanded Hole House significantly. He had married Elizabeth Sydenham (?-1590), and mounted a stone coat of arms over the entrance. This stone marshals Holcombe arms with the Sydenham arms.
4. The son of Ellis, named Thomas (m. 1559, d. before 1585) predeceased Ellis. As a consequence, Ellis named his eldest grandson, Gilbert, his "son and heir" and left him "all his manors and lands in Somerset and Devon." This included both Hole House and Down Ralph.

²⁴ <http://www.branscombeproject.org.uk/>

²⁵ The de la Hole surname may be an alternative name within the same family. Both have connections with nearby Holcombe-by-Dawlish, and may have settled there before the conquest and adopted that place name as their surname.

5. Gilbert sold Hole House and Down Ralph in 1601 and removed to Pembrokeshire in Wales. The Bartlett family bought Hole House and installed their own arms over the entry.
6. The Holcombe/Sydenham arms in stone now hang in St. Winifred's, the Norman parish church of Branscombe. It can be attributed accurately to the period between Ellis' marriage (c. 1536) and his death (1585).

While this chronology suggests that the Holcombe family was capable of funding the Dorchester effigy, it does not constitute proof of their connection with it. However, one remarkable coincidence may support the statement of the old Abbot, that "...there was one Holcum a Knight buried" there in Dorchester.

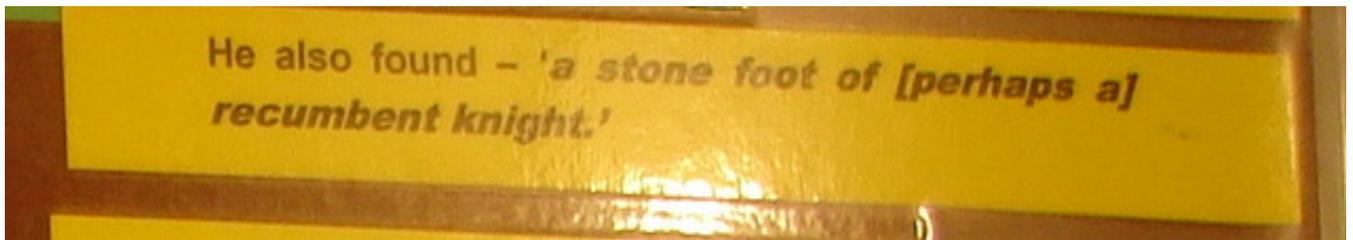
The Missing Piece (One Foot at a Time)



The Dorchester effigy has suffered some mutilation over the centuries and is missing the forward half of his mailed right foot. The lower left corner of his bier has been neatly chiseled off. (This spot frequently records the identity of similar effigies.)

Tom C. Lethbridge owned Hole House, the ancestral home of the Branscombe Holcombs, in the 1950s. He was a tireless amateur archeologist who excavated extensively on his property, including a midden that included possible evidence of a demolished chapel. Lethbridge reported all his findings to a professional curator²⁶, and his collections ended up in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. Photos of his efforts made up a significant portion of the Branscombe Project exhibit.

In a 1959 letter, Lethbridge noted that his finds included “a stone foot of [perhaps a] recumbent knight.” The letter clearly specifies the context in which he found it, which argues for a 16th century stratum at the latest.



Thomas Cadbury, now curator of the Lethbridge collection at RAMM, made a careful search for the missing foot but could find no trace of it.

²⁶ Bushnell, who ran the archeological museum at Cambridge at the time.

I take this odd coincidence as at least circumstantial evidence that the missing foot of the Dorchester Knight may have been a relic in possession of the Branscombe Holcombs before 1601.

Summary and Conclusions

Given the historical and circumstantial evidence, how does one weigh the arguments for a 13th century Knight named Holcomb, versus one named Valance, in the Choir of Dorchester Abbey?

Here are the key observations:

1. Leland, an antiquarian, visited the site in 1542, more than 30 years before Lee. He hears from the retired Abbot that someone local believed a Knight named Holcomb was buried in the Choir.
2. Lee, a Herald, visiting after the Knight's shield was already mutilated, refers vaguely to a "Wolonce" coat of arms. Abbington *conjectures* a "general resemblance to those of Valence Earle of Pembroke." Pembroke arms, however, appear perfectly complete in Lee's own notebook sketch.²⁷

²⁷ Abbington, figure 21, after p. 44

3. There is a parish called Holcomb in the Dorchester hundred that included property donated to the Abbey (belonging in 1844 to Trinity College²⁸).
The donation there coincided with the probable date of the effigy.
4. There is circumstantial evidence that the Holcomb family owned a piece, possibly from the effigy, until 1601. It rested at Hole House, the Holcomb ancestral home for nearly 400 years, until unearthed there in 1959.

Pending discovery of additional historical documents, these observations indicate that the Holcomb attribution was firmly established from at least 1534. The attribution is also well supported by careful review of the historical documents, and possibly with the missing artifact of the Knight's foot. There is scant evidence to identify the effigy with the Valance family.

A Rebuttal in support of the Valance attribution

On January 15, 2014, I received this informal rebuttal to my draft document, from the author of the current Abbey brochure:

“I agree with you that there was some understanding post dissolution that there was a Holcomb buried in the Abbey. It all goes back to the interpretation of what the elderly cleric told Leland.

²⁸ *ibid*, p. 88. See also footnote 8.

“My dowsing rods, and those of another independent dowser, said the effigy was William de Valence, but who knows. I am meeting a very experienced dowser at the Abbey in a couple of months so I will ask him to try to identify the tomb. If your research proves the tomb to be of a Holcomb I'll have to rewrite my guide book. “

-30-