Haccombe St. Blaise

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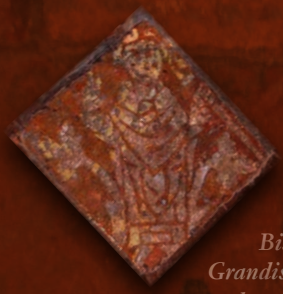
Excerpt from the Domesday Book

The Devonshire magazine

The Royal Arms of England Richard 1



Bishop Grandisson - said to be represented in this tile.

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Devon has some of the finest churches in England and you really are missing out in a big way if you fail to discover these treasures. I always liken church visits to time travel, there are literally no other places where you can get such an uninterrupted view of tangible history, in some cases reaching back a thousand years.

Haccombe St. Blaise is an absolute gem, the effigies are particularly unique in the quality and amount of remaining paintwork - most of them would have been brightly painted and gilded when they were originaly created.

Set in an enclosed valley, the name Haccombe derives from the Saxon coombe (vale) and hoege (hedge), also the Anglo-Saxon oec (oak) so the translation would *'enclosed valley of oaks'*.

When you finally reach the church, you certainly feel like you've arrived at a place hidden from the outside world, the church is really well worth the trouble taken to find it and the drive down is idyllic.

Sir Stephen de Haccombe built the church when he returned from the Holy Land in 1233, although the current building incorporates additions made by his grandson and was dedicated by Bishop Grandisson.

St. Blaise

Certainly a church dedicated to St. Blaise is rare, there being only 3 other dedications to him at Sussex, Cornwall and Oxfordshire. St. Blaise, Bishop of Sebaste in Armenia was martyred in 316AD. His flesh was torn with wool combs and then he was finally beheaded. He became

Above - Alabaster Effigy to Edward, eldest child and only son to Sir Hugh and Lady Philippa Courtenay. This was a controversial Heart Burial which was forbidden by Pope Boniface VIII (read further in main editorial).

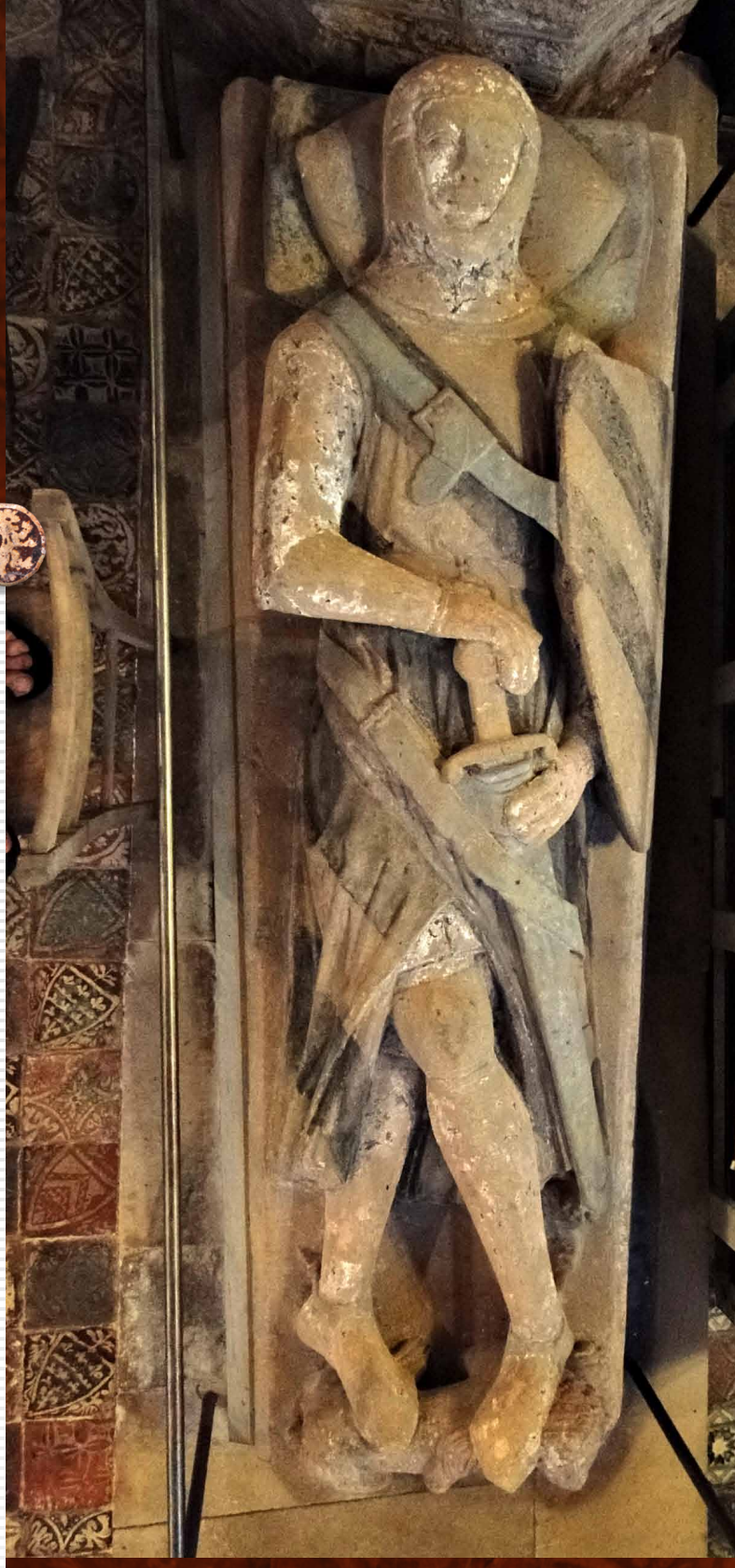
Below - beautiful mediaeval tiles are on show, including one (centre) said to represent Bishop Grandisson.

Remarkable effigy showing original painting which was common practice, many effigies have lost their paint over the centuries. It's thought to be Isabella, wife of Jordan de Haccombe. Imagine the shock of colour and opulence most parishioners would have experienced each time they attended Mass. She holds a 'missal' - a book containing all the instructions and text necessary for the celebration of Mass throughout the year.

Probably a distortion of the Arms of Beaumont of Gittisham

Right - effigy thought to be the church's founder, Stephen de Haccombe. It's fantastic to be able to see some of the original paint still in place. He built the church on his return from the Holy Land.

It's staggering to think what an intrepid venture it would have been to embark on the Crusade and travel to the Holy Land, you can't have anything but admiration for his nerve!



the patron saint of cloth workers and woolcombers. Apparently, on the way to prison, he miraculously drew a fish bone from a child's throat. He is also the patron saint for disorders of the throat. The church was dedicated to St. Blaise after Stephen de Haccombe had visited his shrine at Ragusa (now Dubrovnik).

Heart Burial

This is a type of burial where the heart is interred apart from the body, which was an ancient practice showing special reverence towards the heart for its association with the soul, affections, courage and conscience. This practice was banned by Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1315). Considered one of the finest effigies in England (see photo far left), Stephen de Haccombe's son, Edward, is exquisitely modelled from alabaster - probably from a school of alabaster carving in London because there's striking similarity between this effigy and similarly styled and clothed ones in Westminster Abbey.

Mediaeval Tiles

In Exeter in 1973, a mediaeval tile kiln was excavated in Holloway Street. It is thought to have made tiles for the Cathedral and for churches and houses locally, tiles found at Exeter and Haccombe share similar designs. Haccombe also has about a dozen designs unique to itself. Haccombe has an exceptional collection of tiles. - Editor

Sources: The Church of St. Blaise guidebook - if you're a history buff, buy one when you visit, it's well written and packed with fascinating historical facts.

Inside St. Blaise, effigies in the foreground to Sir Hugh Courtenay and his second wife, Philippa. St Blaise is a fascinating church, well worth a visit (if you do, don't forget to leave a donation towards the upkeep).

This cross is made from the timbers of the Mary Rose which sank in 1545. The Mary Rose trust gave two small pieces of timber to Haccombe church in memory of Sir George Carew who was lost on board. Sir George's wife witnessed the disaster alongside Henry VIII and the Duke of Suffolk at Southsea Castle. Apparently, netting over the deck to prevent French boarding parties trapped many as the ship went down.