

## The Kynaston Landslip

One of the hallowed inner sancta of Oxford University has recently opened its doors to all and sundry. Giles Gilbert Scott's vast 1930s' extension to the Bodleian Library, once confined to scholars and members of the university, now has a café and a welcome mat. And amongst its newly hung attractions is Oxford's share of the Sheldon tapestry maps. Woven at Ralph Sheldon's Warwickshire factory at Barcheston, the Sheldon maps of the Midland counties are among the masterpieces of Tudor art. Sadly, the constituent parts are scattered just as widely as the area they covered. The Bodleian Library in Oxford now owns all that remains of Gloucestershire, along with parts of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Oxfordshire. Other sections can be found in the county museum in Warwick and at the Victorian & Albert Museum.

At the heart of the particular map which now adorns the wall of the Bod, is an intriguing little mystery. Just to the north of the tiny Herefordshire hamlet of Kynaston, on the far west of the map, is a spot portentously labelled as "Worlde send". And just to underline the perilous nature of the spot, the rubric comments that "the Worlesende was dryven downe by the removynge of the ground".

What upheaval was it, then, that took place in Herefordshire that so reminded the Barcheston map-maker of the end of the world? We know that the Sheldon maps were woven in the 1590s, so the event in question must have been earlier than this, albeit fresh in the memory.

The Sheldon maps were originally modelled on those issued by John Speed, and it is Speed who gives us an explanation of the mysterious event.

"Year of Christ Jesus 1571, when the Marcle Hill in the East of this shire, rouzed it self out of a dead sleep, with a roaring noise removed from the place where it stood, and for three days together travelled from her first site, to the great amazement and fear of the beholders. It began to journey upon the seventh day of February, being Sunday, at six of the Clock at night, and by seven in the next morning had gone forty paces, carrying with it sheep in their cotes, hedge-rows, and trees; whereof some were overturned, and some that stood upon the plain, are firmly growing upon the hill; those that were East were turned West; and those in the West were set in the East: in which remove, it overthrew Kynaston Chappel, and turned two highways near an hundred yards from their usual paths formerly trod.

Speed goes on...

The ground thus travelling, was about twenty six acres, which opening itself with rocks and all, bare the earth before it for four hundred yards space without any stay, leaving that which was pasturage in place of the tillage and the tillage overspread with pasturage. Lastly, overwhelming her lower parts, mounted to an hill of twelve fathoms high, and there rested herself after three days travel, remaining his mark, that so laid hand upon this rock, whose power hath poised the hills in his ballance."

Another Tudor chronicler adds that the landslide picked up and carried away a yew-tree planted in the churchyard from the west to the east..."

Given the inordinate power of the event, there was no need for the tale to grow in the telling, though grow it did. George Sandys, choosing to record the event – probably wrongly - under 1575, tells of "Marcle Hill shaking and roaring for three days, and lifting itself to a higher place". For a county in which time tended to move sedately, this was pretty cataclysmic stuff: a moving mountain, a disappearing chapel, a giant crater. Herefordshire

historians never quite forgot their mighty earthquake, even if it dips in and out of their journals and correspondence.

What is certainly true is that the impact of so large a natural disaster had not been entirely erased when the antiquarians began searching for it in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century. Locally they dubbed it “the wonder” or “the miracle”, and estimated the total volume of the landslip at 60,000 metres of earth. And even two centuries after the disaster, onlookers visited the spot with some trepidation. Might Herefordshire move again ?

Can anything of the great landslip still be seen today ? None of the farm buildings survive, of course, and Kynaston’s little church has been entirely expunged from the scene too.

Medieval chapels do not take kindly to being picked up and moved sixty feet.

The Kynaston churchyard yew, however, is made of sterner stuff than mere stone and mortar. Despite having been ripped from the ground and carried off, the tree has put down roots in its new location, and continues to grow, albeit at an odd angle in a nearby lane. A contributor to the Gentleman’s Magazine in 1793 was the first to draw attention to this remarkable travelling yew, and keen-eyed visitors have continued to monitor its health ever since.

We hold our ancient yews close to the heart, but this one has seen more action than most. Not quite Burnham Wood on its way to Dunsinane, but a good story nonetheless.