

Robert de Stiveton – a case of mistaken identity



Many local people will have seen the monument to Robert de Stiveton (Robert of Steeton) in the north-west corner of St. Andrew's Church, Kildwick. Some may even have deciphered the Latin inscription:

Robertus de Styveton obiit A.D. Mcccvii

(Robert de Stiveton, died 1307)

But what if the inscription is wrong and the person depicted on the monument isn't Robert de Stiveton who died in 1307? What if the monument was intended to commemorate someone else?

Who was Robert de Stiveton (d. 1307)?

Robert was the son of Elias de Stiveton, Lord of Steeton. The "de Stivetons" were mesne lords under the Percy family.

According to Brereton¹ he was contemporary with Edward I, and probably accompanied him to the Holy Land, when Edward was Prince of Wales. Robert was thought to have been knighted and made a member of the Knights Templar when Edward I was engaged in wars against the Scots, possibly at a time when the king was supposedly staying at Bolton Abbey.

Sir Robert died in 1307.

Why might it be someone else ?

First published in 1822, T.D. Whitaker's famous History of Craven² – still a valuable resource for local historians – provides the first description of the monument, and the stylised sketch below.



It is this edition that gives the date 1307 for the death of Robert de Stiveton.

However by the time of the 3rd edition, published in 1878^{2a}, the editor was rather more circumspect about who was being depicted. By this time the monument was:

"... an effigy said to be that of Sir Robert de Steverson, who died in 1307. It is well preserved and interesting, as showing very distinctly the armour of a knight of about that period, though rather later than the date given."

More recently, the late Michael Baumber in his "History of Kildwick Parish"³ expressed serious doubts about the attribution. Some of these doubts and other evidence are considered below.

Evidence from the Bolton Abbey account book

Whitaker derived his date for the death of Robert de Stiveton from the account book of Bolton Abbey⁴. Two entries for 1307 read:

"Salmon, fish and fish pickle for the funeral of Sir Robert de Styveton £2-0s-7d."

and later, this:

"For bread provided for the funeral of Sir Robert de Styveton 1¹/₂ quarters."

So that's clear, the funeral of Robert de Stiverton took place in 1307.

But it makes no sense for a body to have been taken from Steeton to Bolton Abbey for its funeral and then brought back to Kildwick for interment. The entry clearly refers to a man called Robert de Stiveton who was buried at Bolton Abbey.

Why someone from Steeton might choose to be buried at Bolton is not difficult to explain. It's simply a case of "nearer my God to thee". Bolton Abbey was simply regarded a more holy place than Kildwick – being the "mother church" of St Andrew's prior to the reformation, so a local person with enough money might quite reasonably want to have been buried there.

Evidence from the armour

It's already been pointed out that the editor of the 3rd edition of Whitaker's History expressed concern that the style of the armour on the monument suggested a date later than 1307.

Baumber researched the matter further and referenced work done by William l'Anson in 1929 for the Yorkshire Archaeological Society⁵, who suggested that the monument dated from towards the end of the period 1335 to 48 and is a remarkably good example of what a local knight would have worn if he had taken part in either the battle of Crecy (in northern France) or the battle of Neville's Cross (near Durham), both fought in 1346, during the reign of Edward III.

More recent work^{6,7} has confirmed this and dates the style to the 1340s. Staff at the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds, contacted recently, are in agreement⁸.

Evidence from the stonework

Whitaker also noted that the de Stiveton monument was very similar to that of Adam de Middleton in Ilkley, and used the entry for the latter's funeral expenses in 1315, again in the account book of Bolton Abbey, to point out that they were near contemporaries.

But this is either wrong or yet another case of mistaken identity. Precisely when Adam de Middleton died is not known; however, what is certain is that he was still very much alive in 1316 – a year after his supposed funeral⁹.

But what about the inscription ?

But even after all this, if the inscription on monument says who it depicts and when that person died then surely this must be correct ? Unfortunately, although the stonework showing a knight in armour is original, the inscription is from a much later date – in fact from when the monument was moved from its original location in the church in the nineteenth century.

Brereton writes:

Until 1854 the effigy used to lie upon the floor of the north aisle under the fourth arch from the west end, but in that year it was removed to its present position at the west end of the north aisle, and placed upon an altar tomb erected by subscription.

He even suggests why the move might have been necessary:

It may be noticed that the effigy is defaced in the nose, for which the following story is told, and which, we believe, at all events in its main outlines is quite correct. There lived in a thatched cottage, only recently demolished at Brunthwaite, one "Jack Barker."

His father Joe, better known as "Dode" Barker, went one day to be married at Kildwick Church. When the ceremony was about to begin, he told the bride he had no money, whereupon she gave him a £1 note, a rare treasure in those days. The man ran down the chancel in his joy, jumped over the effigy of the Knight, at that time lying on the floor, and in so doing knocked off the nose with his clog and shot out of the north door. Some time after however, he paid a second visit to Kildwick Church, when he married the bride.

Basically the monument, set into the floor of the north aisle, was being damaged.

The person responsible for the move, and the new inscription, was the vicar: Rev. J.T.C. Fawcett – possibly relying just a little too much on his copy of the 1st edition of Whitaker.

So who does the monument depict ?

It seems fitting to allow Michael Baumber, who did so much work on the history of St. Andrew's and the local area, to answer this.

So who is the statue in Kildwick church? He is obviously a de Stiverton because he is wearing the family coat-of-arms but which one ? The Sir Robert de Stiverton who died in 1307 had two sons called John and Robert. Both fought at Bannockburn [1314] and took part in the siege of Berwick.

It cannot be John because [...] he died at Berwick in 1319. It could be [his brother] Robert who is usually referred to as Robert de Warter but John himself had a son called Robert, who succeeded him as lord of Steeton.

He fits exactly because he appears to have died in or a little before 1353 leaving only a daughter.

So there we have it. The monument in Kildwick church is not that of Robert de Stiverton who died in 1307, but that of his grandson, also called Robert de Stiveton, who died in 1353.

Acknowledgements

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