

The Grace Cup returns to Glastonbury



On display at Glastonbury Abbey 14 December 2011 – 31 January 2012

The rare oak tankard is an heirloom of the Arundell Family of Wardour Castle in Wiltshire. Family tradition holds that it originally belonged to Glastonbury Abbey, but was given for safe-keeping to a Catholic ancestor at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. On the lid is carved the crucifixion with the Virgin Mary and St John on either side. Around the vessel are carved the twelve apostles. Each apostle carries an open book, apart from St Peter with a key, St John with a chalice and Judas with a purse.

Revd John Milner published an account of the "*curious cup*" in *Archaeologia* in 1794 and the fame of the Grace Cup spread through England and America. It was considered to be of such significance that Richard Warner included this "*relic of remote antiquity*" in 'An history of the abbey of Glaston' in 1826. He suggests that "*the tankard in question probably became a grace-cup, poculum charitatis, or wassel bowl, which in the greater monasteries was placed on the abbot's table at the upper end of the refectory and quaffed by himself and the guests.*"

Although it seems a shame to spoil a good story, a post-Dissolution date for the Grace Cup is rather more likely. One theory is that it was brought back from central Europe by Thomas 1st Lord Arundell. During the reign of Elizabeth I Catholic loyalties did not find favour under a Protestant queen and Thomas took to campaigning in Hungary on behalf of the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II. He was created Count of the Holy Roman Empire in 1595 for exceptional feats of bravery, although was later imprisoned by Elizabeth for his effrontery in assuming a foreign title.

The extraordinary fortunes of the Grace Cup continued into the 17th century, when Wardour Castle was massively destroyed during the Civil War. A key figure in its preservation was Lady Blanche Arundell, who nobly defended the castle from a 1,300-strong Parliamentary army, while her husband was away fighting for the King in Oxford. With only 25 fighting men, she was forced to surrender, but managed to save the precious relic and *"kept it in her possession as long as she lived"*.

In 1886 the Grace Cup featured in an exhibition in Glastonbury's museum (in the basement of the Town Hall) arranged to celebrate the inauguration of the Antiquarian Society. 125 years later it now returns to Glastonbury as a star exhibit in the Abbey's museum over the winter.

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