

A touch of South America in the South Hams

Visitors to Harberton Church, just outside Totnes, will find some architectural surprises there. The church is worth seeing for its exceptionally fine late medieval architecture and fittings, but it is the monuments to the Harvey family that are really extraordinary. These include the most striking 19th-century child effigy in the county, a late 19th-century mausoleum and three stained glass windows to the family. One of these shows a viaduct curving through a brilliantly-coloured South American landscape, complete with an erupting volcano and a Condor.

Robert Harvey, was a mining and civil engineer, born in Truro in 1847 and educated in Cornwall. He spent his early career in South America, beginning in Bolivia but moving to Peru, where he became an engineer of nitrate works. From 1875 he was engineer-in-chief and Inspector General of the nitrate fields in Tarapacá for the Peruvian government. The Tarapacá nitrates fields were based on the volcanic geology of the area. Harvey's office survived the transfer of the nitrate fields from Peru to Chile after the war between those countries in 1879. He resigned his Chilean government post in 1881 and went into private practice with a partner, facilitating a number of nitrate-extraction businesses in Tarapacá. The demand for nitrates, used as an agricultural fertilizer to sustain increasingly intensive farming in England, boomed in the 1880s. Harvey became a rich man (his estate was valued at £276, 874 in 1930), Chairman of the Anglo-South American Bank and a director of the Antofagasta and Chilean Railway Company.

The same demand for nitrates made an architectural patron out of another west-country entrepreneur, William Gibbs. Gibbs's business was initially based on importing guano, nitrate-rich bird droppings, from Peru. On this unlovely foundation, his wealth paid for major architectural projects. These included the chapel at Keble College, Oxford, designed by William Butterfield; Tyntesfield, his own vast Victorian house near Bristol, now owned by the National Trust and the splendid St Michael's, Dinham Road, Exeter, with its landmark spire. Harvey's architectural legacy is more modest, but at Harberton retains more of a sense of his own exotic well-travelled past than Gibbs's projects.

On Harvey's return to south-west England, he divided his time between estates in Cornwall and in Devon, at Harberton. He was an active member and benefactor to the Institutes of Mechanical and Civil Engineers and President of the Royal Institution in 1901. He was appointed High Sheriff of Devon in 1895 and of Cornwall in 1901, when he was knighted. In both counties he showed an interest in developing agriculture on his estates and supported local hospitals. In Cornwall, he became involved in the project to market that county and its Celtic past as a tourist venue and develop a string of hotels on the north coast. This was the brainchild of the Cornish architect and local politician, Silvanus Trevail. By 1930 Harvey owned King Arthur's Castle Hotel (designed by Trevail) and lands at Tintagel. In Devon he was a churchwarden at Harberton for many years and personally funded the new

Constitutional Hall in the village, described as 'one of the first in the West to be fitted with wireless receiving apparatus'.

Lady Harvey was the daughter of Emile Godefroy of Bordeaux and Lima. She was born in Iquique, Peru. She was a Roman Catholic and had a private chapel at Dundridge, the Harvey's Harberton House, dedicated to St Rose of Lima and served by the monks of Buckfast Abbey. The Harvey's eldest son, Robert Godefroy, nicknamed 'Tito', was born in Lima. He died in 1895, aged ten, while at boarding school in East Grinstead, in Kent. This blow to the family was expressed both in print and architecture. A year after his death, his father wrote and published a private memoir of his son, *The Story of the short and joyous life of Robert Godefroy ("Tito") Harvey*. The Harveys also commissioned a mausoleum for Tito in the parish churchyard.

The mausoleum was erected south of the chancel. It was designed by the prolific ecclesiastical craftsmen, Harry Hems of Exeter, and erected under the supervision of Harvey's estate architect, W M Tollit. It looks very un-English, and is in exotic contrast to the restrained grey Perpendicular architecture of the church and undulating green Devon landscape. It is a brilliant white Italian marble structure with granite steps down to a marble-lined, which is protected by gun-metal gates. Originally it contained a figure of Tito asleep. This was carved by Hems. We can speculate that Hems and Harvey had much in common. Hems was also interested in new technology and could boast the first telephone in Exeter and a tramline system for moving stone installed in his Longbrook Street workshop, which survives, converted into a restaurant. In 1895 the Harvey family visited Longbrook Street workshop to see the work in progress.

Hems's effigy of Tito exploits the corpse-like translucence of alabaster and combines portraiture (presumably based on photographs) with familiar symbols of innocence and death. The boy is represented asleep in his nightgown, his head on a flower-strewn pillow with a lily lying diagonally across the figure. A wreath of flowers lies across one of his bare feet and a Spanish inscription is carved along the edge of the slab.

The figure of Tito is theatrical, pathetic and very affecting. Personal grief for the death of children is one thing we can be glad not to share as a commonplace with the Victorians. However, Hems's sculpture is a remarkably emotional piece and a reminder that childhood death was a part of Victorian family life.

The sculpture excited admiration in the local, national and international trade press. Hems was an obsessive self-advertiser, collecting any newspaper cuttings that referred to his own work, and is quite likely to have been behind some of the publicity. One local paper, the *Western Daily Mail* was hoaxed into sending a reporter down to Harberton after a tip-off that the mausoleum 'had been opened and dedicated with Romish ceremonials and services at midnight'. A photograph of the figure appeared in the *Builder*. The mausoleum received a mention in the *Undertakers' and Funeral Directors'*

Journal and appeared on the cover of the *American Granite and Marble Journal*.

Alabaster is a delicate material and not frost-proof. At some point the effigy of Tito in the mausoleum cracked and was moved inside the church to avoid further damage. It is now sited against the north wall in a simple niche, the un-repaired crack across the block adding to its sentimental eloquence. It lies below a stained glass window dedicated to Tito. The scene of 'Suffer Little Children' includes a portrait figure of Tito, the face no doubt based on a photograph. It is not clear when Hems's figure was replaced in the mausoleum by a second figure of Tito, this time in Italian marble. The new figure was probably installed before the death of Lady Harvey, in 1901, which was marked by a Requiem Mass in the private chapel at Dunderidge. Lord Harvey donated bells to Buckfast Abbey in her memory. A stained glass window, probably by Clayton and Bell on stylistic grounds, dedicated to Lady Harvey was installed in the north aisle next to the window and monument to her eldest son. The window includes a figure of St Rose of Lima. The treatment of the head of the saint is noticeably different to the other figures in the window and may be a portrait of Lady Harvey.

The second figure of Tito lies in the mausoleum on a chest, between figures of his parents. He and his mother are shown bare-footed, in nightgowns. Lady Harvey's hair is in a long, snaking plait. The figure of Lord Harvey, who died in 1930, is presented quite differently, as a public rather than private figure, dressed in a full-length ceremonial cloak. All three figures are very fine. The second Tito is more accomplished than Hems's original (*pace* Chris Brooks, who would have nothing said against Hems) but given a remote, ghostly quality by the more opaque quality of the marble. The architectural experience of going down the granite steps of the mausoleum and receiving the foreshortened view of the three white figures in the dim light through the bars of the vault door is an extraordinary one in the setting of a Devon churchyard. The view today is more restricted than it was the 1970s, as plastic screening has been installed behind the gates, presumably to keep out leaves and other debris. All three mausoleum figures are attributed to Albert A Toft, a London-based sculptor and regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy of Arts. The *Devon* volume of Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series notes that they are of Italian workmanship and 'would be entirely at home in Milan or Genoa'.

In the early 1980s a man mowing the churchyard related an incident to Chris Brooks. He had been in the churchyard on a very hot summer day about 30 years previously and was startled to see an elderly gentleman, immaculately over-dressed for the place and weather, with overcoat, hat, waistcoat and watch chain, looking at the mausoleum. He was Italian and said that he was visiting Harberton for the first time to see figures he had carved in Italy as a young man. Presumably Toft had an Italian workshop within striking distance of the quarries and employed local craftsmen to undertake some of the firm's work.

The window commemorating Lord Harvey in the south aisle of the church, which represents the volcanic landscape of Tarapacá was erected in 1931 by Messrs Maile, of London.

This article was prompted by a communication from Teresa Sladen, a Trustee of the Mausoleum and Monuments Trust. The Trust's website, www.mausolea-monuments.org.uk with gazetteer is recommended to DBG members for its clarity and user-friendliness. The entry for the Harvey mausoleum reminded me that the Devon 19th-century Churches Project researched this memorial in the early 1980s, although I did little more than transcribe material under the direction of Chris Brooks, who is a major contributor (appropriately posthumously) to this piece. Thanks to John Thorp for suggesting improvements.

Jo Cox
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