

John Abel, Carpenter

It was a July Saturday morning and there were about thirty of us in the audience. Organ recitals at Dore are a rare pleasure and the beautifully varied programme took us into Charpentier's France and Bach's Germany. But I was distracted briefly by a very English vision. It was the sight of one of the two carved heads at the base of John Abel's screen. Pure whimsy, I know, but looking at this rubicund, authoritative, middle-aged face I almost cried out 'That must be John Abel himself!' Fortunately for the rapt attention of those present, English decorum (or the presence of my wife in the next seat) kept me suitably quiet. But the thought stayed with me. More a question than an answer, 'I wonder what this master-craftsman looked like?' It is just possible that an impudent apprentice was told 'Get the sad man and the happy man finished, before Master Abel gets back from Leominster Market Hall site!' Just possible that he made sure the master got his portrait on this prestigious job for Lord Scudamore - but it's a very long shot.

What we do know is not his face but his name. It was of some importance in his time and since. Perhaps Charles I himself gave him the 'King's Carpenter' accolade, or perhaps that is how his contemporaries spoke of him. His ability to design and build a whole range of buildings – churches, schools, town halls – made him the man all Herefordshire and the Marches recognised as the very best. He commanded big prices for his work - £110 for one job, £240 for another, fabulous sums in the seventeenth century. Clearly by the time he was working on Dore Abbey he must have had a large company of men in his employment. We can imagine the scene. Waggons of felled timbers constantly arriving along the lane from Bacton. A gang of men taking old tiles and timbers off the dilapidated roof. Pulleys and ladders and windlasses being steadied, most of them assembled in the workshop beside the tile heaps. Shouts and screams as the huge hundred foot beams are hauled precariously up aloft. In the workshop several workmen are busy carving ornamentation, fashioning strong dowels, shaping mortices to match exactly. Alongside the sawdust and sweat, the cooking fires heat glue for the timbers and meat for the workers. Not exactly the peace and tranquillity of an ancient holy house, during that busy summer of 1633.

To have made such a reputation was quite an achievement for a man from the modest village of Sarnsfield, two miles from Weobley. Another astonishing factor was that he was a Roman Catholic in the tense days of watchful Elizabeth, three determined Stuart kings, and Cromwell's Puritan reign. When he was twenty-seven the Gunpowder Plot put every Papist under suspicion. Twice he was summoned before a church court: first for marrying secretly (by some smuggled-in priest?), second for not having his four month old child baptised at the parish church. He was labelled a 'recusant.' But still he prospered. How? Bit by bit he proved that he would take on any job, large or small and put his mark on it. The smallest were repair and renewal commissions such as repairs to Madley Church belfry and the mill-house at Dore. But he was no mere jobbing builder. Somehow he got lucrative commissions for prestigious community buildings – notably Brecon Town Hall and the Lady Hawkins Grammar School at Kington. The soundness of his work was undisputable. He could erect classical columns, supply full bosomed figurines and reproduce colourful coats of arms. His special flourish was to superimpose sober Latin inscriptions. He knew how to impress the town burghers into vying to be his customers.

It is a matter of debate which was his most notable achievement. For grandeur, and county-wide reputation, the double-storied Market Hall at Leominster must be considered his masterpiece. Pevsner points out that it was 'quite prodigiously decorated.'

It is regrettable that it no longer occupies a commanding central position in the town. But as a piece of national heritage, it has to be the re-roofing of Dore Abbey and its superb furnishing that makes Abel's craftsmanship unique and historic. Anyone may wonder whether what most engenders an atmosphere of inviting calmness and safe sanctuary is thirteenth century stone or seventeenth century wood. The second mattered greatly. Herefordshire oak has held these loved old buildings intact even in times of neglect and desolation. Whether in pew or pulpit, discreet communion rail or embellished roof braces, everything seems appropriate, harmonious, whispering what this church stands for. No visitor – and they keep coming from far and near – can avoid a long look at the Crossing Screen. Either side of King Charles's Lion and Unicorn are the shields of Scudamore and Laud. Abel was a confirmed royalist – as witness the story of his helpful makeshift weaponries at the siege of Hereford. One of his inscriptions (at Kington) read: *Like columns do up-prop the fabric of a building, so do noble gentry support the honour of a kingdom* - but the screen speaks also of higher loyalties. Instead of a written acknowledgement of gentry, Abel uses his favourite rhyming couplets to confront the pilgrim. 'God is to be acknowledged, sin is to be avoided, this life will give way to the next,' it reminds us. The gap in the bays of full-length balusters is where he placed the reading-desk for the Scriptures to be read publicly. On the east side, high up, are inscribed the five wounds of Christ. And the screen's tracery with its open way-in persuades the eye not to stay there but focus on the altar.

So this Herefordshire carpenter helped to give timber-craft country-wide significance. This stubborn believer in the old religion ensured that the Church of England had sturdy bell towers and a famous parish church of monastic origins. In some ways he represents all the unknown stonemasons and tile-makers, carvers in stone and wood whose lasting epitaphs are the great churches they helped to build. But he is a special individual, rightly singled out. Typically he asked to be buried back in Sarnsfield and designed his own tombstone. This is the inscription:

*This craggy stone a covering is for an architects's bed;
That lofty building raised high, yet now lies low his head;
His line and rule, so death concludes, are locked up in store;
Build those who list or those who wist, for he can build no more.
His house of clay could hold no longer.
May heaven's joys build him a stronger.
Vive ut vivas in vitam aeternam.*

If nothing else, the serious face and the merry face on John Abel's columns say something about the balanced character of the man. I wonder if he guessed that centuries later roof tiles would need massive replacing, but not the sturdy oak beams supporting them. Like his great screen they speak of lasting values holding firm and of human skill and artistry proclaiming 'Vive Deo Gratus!'

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Acknowledgements

1. A well-illustrated small book called *John Abel of Sarnesfield, Carpenter* by D.L.Gregory (1980) is a first-class popular introduction. I am grateful to Pam Wright for the loan of this out-of-print publication.
2. Gwyneth Guy, Historic Building Consultant, is at present researching John Abel for a Ph.D. Her thesis will be an invaluable source. The factual details above are in large part thanks to Gwyneth's careful scrutiny, though the whimsy is not her responsibility! She has found evidence that Abel was the loyal carpenter presented to King Charles after the siege of Hereford. He was not, as sometimes has been conjectured, an office-holder within the Royal Works. She has also discovered that John Abel (or Abell) died in poverty and was given Poor Relief.