

THE MYSTERY OF CHARLES STOTHARD, FSA, AND THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY FRAGMENT

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In 1816 the Society of Antiquaries of London sent Charles Stothard to Bayeux to produce a full-size colour reproduction of the Bayeux Tapestry. During this time, plaster casts of the tapestry were made and a small fragment of the famous textile was removed. Stothard's wife, Eliza, was accused of looting the fragment, but was later absolved. So who was the thief? This paper examines the mystery of Charles Stothard and the Bayeux Tapestry fragment.

On Monday 8 July 1816, the Council of the Society of Antiquaries ‘ordered’ that its historical draughtsman,¹ Charles Stothard, ‘be directed to make drawings of the Bayeux Tapestry during the summer ... for the use of the Society’;² perhaps it was no coincidence that four days earlier Hudson Gurney, FSA, a former member of Council, ‘communicated to the Society some remarks concerning the Bayeux Tapestry’,³ subsequently published in *Archaeologia*.⁴ By this time English antiquarians had become increasingly interested in the famous embroidery, convinced – to the indignation of French scholars – that it was originally worked in England and that French drawings of it, most notably those of 1729–30 commissioned by Bernard de Monfaucon,⁵ were ‘insufficient’ for the purpose of academic study.

In September 1816 Charles Stothard left for the Hôtel de Ville, Bayeux, to illustrate the tapestry.⁶ Stothard visited Bayeux on a further two occasions, once returning with his wife, Eliza, to make a full-size colour reproduction. His work was completed by March 1819, at a cost to the Society of £559 19s 6d.⁷ Thereafter, he oversaw the engraving of a one-third size facsimile, reproduced as seventeen plates in the sixth volume of *Vetusta Monumenta*, published by the Society (fig 1).⁸ Five hundred hand-coloured prints of the first plate were produced,⁹ which Fellows could purchase at 10s each.¹⁰ Sadly, Stothard never saw the end of the project: on 28 May 1821 he was killed after falling from a ladder whilst tracing a stained-glass window at St Andrew’s Church, Beer Ferrers, Devon.

While in Bayeux, Stothard also made plaster casts of certain details of the tapestry; three of these casts, now on one piece of plaster, are in the British Museum (fig 2), and another is housed in the collections of the Society of Antiquaries (fig 3).¹¹ Stothard’s methods, by modern standards, were primitive: he pressed wax into areas of the linen and then peeled them off. These produced moulds from which he made the plaster casts. They were then painted to resemble the colours of the original.

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Fig 1. Engraving of the Bayeux Tapestry by Charles Stothard, published in *Vetusta Monumenta*, VI, 1885, pl XVII. Photograph: © Society of Antiquaries of London.

Also at this time at least one fragment of the tapestry was removed (fig 4). By 1864 this had found its way to the South Kensington Museum.¹² Stothard's wife, Eliza, was accused of the crime. An 1870 catalogue of that museum's 'textile fabrics' states that 'in the *Vetusta Monumenta* ... plate 17, shows ... a portion of this embroidery where the piece before us [the tapestry fragment] is figured ... From the writing under it, we learn that it was brought away from Bayeux by Mrs Stothard, when her husband was occupied in making drawings of that interesting record'.¹³ However, the accusation against Eliza seems to be false: neither does plate XVII show the portion of the tapestry from which the fragment was taken, nor does the published version have any 'writing' about Eliza's theft.¹⁴

In 1881, in a bizarre twist of events, Eliza was absolved of any part in the crime. A review of *La Tapisserie de Bayeux* by Jules Comte, published in *The Times* on 31 August 1881, called for Eliza to be forgiven: the reviewer stated that 'we are sorry that this lady should still be gibbeted in reputation ... for an offence which, however inexcusable, should now be forgotten'. The reason was clear: 'impelled by a feminine instinct, she cut a small piece of the border and took it away with her'.¹⁵

At the time this was written, it was assumed Eliza was dead; in fact she was in relatively good health, aged ninety-one. On 24 September 1881, *The Times* published a letter from Mrs Stothard's nephew, Charles Kempe, who considered it his 'duty to endeavour to vindicate' his aunt's 'character from an unmerited shame'. He reported



Fig 2. Plaster casts of details of the Bayeux Tapestry. *Photograph:* © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig 3. Plaster cast of detail of the Bayeux Tapestry. *Photograph:* © Society of Antiquaries of London.



Fig 4. The fragment of the Bayeux Tapestry removed in about 1816. *Photograph:* Vincent Cazin, Bibliothèque Municipale de Bayeux.



Fig 5. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry showing the part from where the tapestry fragment was removed. *Photograph:* by special permission of the City of Bayeux.

that Eliza ‘well recollects’ that prior to her visit to Bayeux (in 1818) Charles Stothard ‘was in possession of one or two small fragments of the tapestry, which he may have taken from the ragged portion and kept as a souvenir of his work’. Kempe went on to say: ‘you may easily imagine the mingled feelings of indignation and amusement with which she [Eliza] has recently heard that the custodian of the tapestry at Bayeux informs visitors that “Madame confessed the theft upon her death bed”. Thank God, she is still alive to tell the tale.’¹⁶

It therefore seems that Charles Stothard removed the tapestry fragment. This is implied in the ‘Catalogue of the Doucean Museum’, published in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of 1836, which records that the fragment was ‘cut off the end’ (though it does not state by whom) and ‘brought by’ Charles Stothard ‘to England in December 1816’.¹⁷ However, Eliza’s story reminds us to be cautious when accepting recounted versions of events!

The history of the tapestry fragment thereafter is better known. Sometime between 1816 and 1821 the antiquarian Francis Douce ‘acquired’ it, together with casts of the tapestry, from Charles Stothard. Upon Douce’s death, on 30 March 1834, these artefacts were left to Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick,¹⁸ who exhibited them in the ‘Doucean Museum’ at his home at Goodrich Court, Hereford. Following Meyrick’s death, the fragment was bought by John Bowyer Nicholls;¹⁹ thereafter, on about 29 June 1864, it was acquired by the South Kensington Museum for the princely sum of 1s.²⁰ Nothing is known of the ‘other’ fragment referred to in Kempe’s letter to *The Times*, but we do know that, soon after Charles Stothard’s death, Eliza sold off his collection of antiquaries to Sir Gregory Page Turner, and this may have included part of the Bayeux Tapestry.

By August 1871 South Kensington Museum planned to photograph the Bayeux Tapestry and sought the necessary permission to do so,²¹ but the municipal authorities in Bayeux objected, on the grounds that this might damage the hanging. A year later Henry Cole, the Director of the Museum, wrote to the Mayor of Bayeux – in French – again requesting permission to photograph the tapestry, but this time offering the tapestry fragment as evidence of the museum’s good intentions, and in the hope that it might be restored to its original position.²² The Mayor of Bayeux accepted this offer and the fragment was returned to Bayeux on 14 August 1872.²³ By this time the part of the tapestry from which the fragment had been cut had been restored (fig 5),²⁴ and it was therefore displayed on its own.²⁵

In recent times the fragment has rarely been displayed; instead it is archived at the Tapestry Museum in Bayeux. However, the authorities there are happy for the fragment to travel; in 2006 it was displayed as part of an exhibition on the Bayeux Tapestry at the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen,²⁶ and it is hoped to exhibit it during a conference on the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum in July 2008.

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NOTES

1. Seemingly made so posthumously, on 10 July 1821: SAL, Council Minutes, IV, 382.
2. The motion was proposed by Joseph Jeekyll, and seconded by Sir Charles Blagden; Samuel Lysons was in the Chair: SAL, Council Minutes, IV, 311, 8 July 1816.
3. SAL, Minutes, XXXIII, 751, 4 July 1816.
4. Gurney 1817. Gurney's obituary in *Proc Soc Antiq London*, 2nd ser, 3 (1864–7), 112 (24 Apr 1865), states that 'his visit to the Bayeux Tapestry, in 1814, gave rise to our Society's mission of the younger Stothard to Bayeux in that year, to make the elaborate copy [of the tapestry]'.
 5. Montfaucon 1729; Montfaucon 1730.
 6. The Bayeux Tapestry had been housed here since 1804.
 7. Monies paid to Charles Stothard: £115 on 18 Feb 1817 (SAL, Council Minutes, IV, 323), £33 1s 6d on 11 June 1817 (ibid, 328), though it is not certain this was for work drawing the Bayeux Tapestry; £226 11s 6d on 24 Feb 1818 (ibid, 333), which also included the drawing of five seals; £185 6s 6d on 2 March 1819 (ibid, 347), although again it is not certain this was for work drawing the Bayeux Tapestry.
 8. Stothard 1885.
 9. SAL, Council Minutes, IV, 349, 4 May 1819.
 10. Ibid, 371, 21 June 1820.
 11. British Museum casts: BM 1873–8, acquisition no. 1878, 1101.379 (donated by Augustus W H Meyrick in 1878); Society of Antiquaries of London cast: cat. no. 109.
 12. Now the Victoria and Albert Museum.
 13. Rock 1870, 6–7, no. 675.
 14. Stothard 1885, pl XVII. Possibly the edition of *Vetusta Monumenta* from which Rock worked had this information scribbled on to it, but this no longer seems to be in the V&A's collection.
 15. *The Times*, 31 Aug 1881, 10.
 16. *The Times*, 24 Sept 1881, 10. On the same date Charles Kempe also wrote to the South Kensington Museum (V&A ED84/167, 5041), requesting its help to correct 'the placard at Bayeux', which it did. Frank R Fowke had to explain (to his superiors) how it came to be that Eliza Stothard was accused of cutting off a portion of the tapestry; the information on the placard at Bayeux had been based upon information provided by South Kensington Museum. Fowke wrote, in a now unhelpfully fragmented document, that 'the letter written to the authorities at Bayeux was based on the "Textile Fabrics in the South Kensington Museum"'; he added: 'Father Rock probably intended to mar[...] inscriptions on the frame of the fragment [...] museum his authority' (V&A ED84/167, 5041).
 17. *Gent's Mag* 1836, 381, cat. no. 3.
 18. Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick died on 2 Apr 1848.
 19. John Bowyer Nicholls died on 19 Oct 1863.
 20. V&A ED84/36, 210 lists, under purchases for 12 July 1864, 'a piece of the Bayeux tapestry, framed. Two coloured plaster casts from Bayeux tapestry ... purchased at Mr Bowyer-Nicholl's sale'. V&A 1863–77, 101, describes the tapestry fragment (object no. 675-1864) as a 'fragment of linen embroidery in frame, with inscription stating it to be a portion of the Bayeux Tapestry'. Its 'date of receipt from [the Museum's] stores' was 29 June 1864. It was 'received' from 'Bowyer Nicholl's Sale' at a cost of 's1/-'. Its 'date of minute for purchase' was 12 July 1864.
 21. V&A ED84/167, 30841/71 (letters from Joseph Cundall, dated 2 Aug 1871, and Lord G J Duncombe, dated 10 Aug 1871).
 22. V&A ED84/167 (letter from Henry Cole, dated 10 Aug 1872) states: 'Désireuses de montrer combien Elles sont sensibles à la sympathie courtoise dont les autorités auxquelles la garde de ces Tapisseries a été confiée ont donné des preuves si nombreuses aux agents chargés par la direction du Musée de faire des réproductions photographiques de ces chefs-d'oeuvre, Leurs Seigneuries viennent prier la Municipalité de la Ville de Bayeux de vouloir bien accepter le morceau de Tapisserie en question comme un témoignage de leur reconnaissance, dans l'espoir qu'il sera possible de le remettre dans la place qu'il occupait lorsqu'il a été enlevé. Si vous voulez avoir

- la bonté, Monsieur, de soumettre cetter offer à la Municipalité de Bayeux, et me faire connaitre le plus tôt possible, leur décision à ce sujet, Monsieur Fowke, attaché à l'administration du Musée, qui doit quitter Londres 14 courant, sera chargé spécialement d'apporter à Bayeux ce précieux spécimen artistique, et de le présenter personnellement à la personne que vous voudrez bien désigner'.
23. V&A 1863–77, 101, states that the tapestry fragment was 'returned to Bayeux' on '14 August 1872'.
24. This restoration work seems to have taken place between 1838 and 1842: Hicks 2006, 138.
25. This was to have the caption (in French): 'a piece of the Tapestry was removed by Mme Stothard while her husband was busy copying it in 1816. This fragment, acquired by the Kensington Museum, has been returned'.
26. 'Bayeux tapetet – en broderet krønike fra vikingetiden', 21 Jan to 30 Apr 2006.

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Abbreviations

BM	British Museum, London
SAL	Society of Antiquaries of London
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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