

Malmesbury History Society
January 2024

THE STORY OF THE MALMESBURY CHASSE



Art Gallery of Ontario

What is the Malmesbury Chasse?

Where did it come from?

Role in Malmesbury Abbey's
history

How has it survived



What is the Malmesbury Chasse?

Chasse is French for casket

The Malmesbury Chasse is a reliquary casket

An image of it is in the cupboard of Malmesbury Abbey “treasures”

The caption says that this image is life size

Today it is in the Art Gallery of Ontario

How I got interested in the Chasse



Reliquary statue of Sainte-Foy (Saint Faith), late 10th to early 11th century with later additions, gold, silver gilt, jewels, and cameos over a wooden core, 33 1/2 inches

What is the Malmesbury Chasse?

Reliquary caskets came in all shapes and sizes

These two unusual ones are not from the UK

There was a hierarchy of relics ranging from actual bones to pieces of garments to matter that a saint may have touched

Pilgrims travelled and still travel vast distances to view holy relics

They brought income to abbeys and towns so there was competition



Altar-reliquary of St. Andrew's sandal, Trier, 977-993, Trier, Cathedral Treasury

Let's have a closer look



It is made of

gilded copper
champlevé enamel
rock crystal
wood and paint

In shape it resembles a small
house with a leg at each corner

It dates from c. 1190 to 1200 and
was made in Limoges

Let's have a closer look



Upper panel:

Christ in Majesty in a mandorla with alpha and omega by his head

In the spandrels are the symbols of St. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Pairs of apostles flank the centre under curved arches

Lower panel:

Crucified Christ with the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist

Also flanked by pairs of apostles under curved arches

Figures garments are predominantly blue a holy colour reflecting spirituality



Lowden and Cherry

Let's have a closer look

On the gables are St. Peter and St. Paul

St Peter holds his keys and guards the door used to enter the Chasse
The door is worn showing it was well used

The back is pale blue and green enamelled design of interlocking and encircled quatrefoils, Was it seen from the back?

Background of the whole Chasse is a tight scroll pattern from Islamic art called "a fonds vermicule"



Let's have a closer look

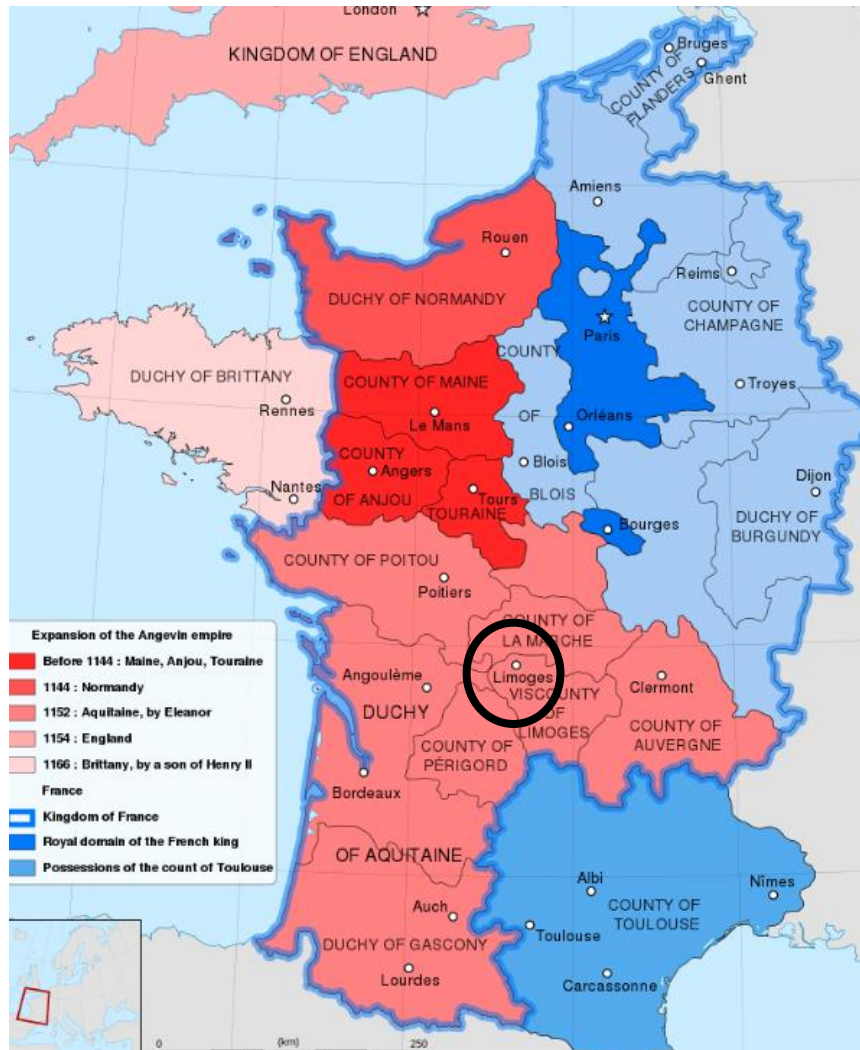
The apex has 3 rock crystals or pure quartz

Seen as providing protection and divine favour

Used extensively in medieval reliquaries

Facetted to reflect and amplify light





Wikipedia

Where did it come from?

Limoges was in Aquitaine, the Chasse was made during reign of Henry II, son of Eleanor of Aquitaine

It was a centre for the arts with strong royal and papal patronage

In 12th century it was Europe's main centre for enamelling

Limoges was on a main pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostella

This period of production was brought to an end in 1370 by none other than the Black Prince.

Limoges medieval enamel ware – it was big business



Over 700 medieval reliquary caskets still exist along with a huge range of countless other objects.



Limoges enamelling in
one slide

Pattern on copper plate
is etched out



Enamel is made from
ground glass

Colour is applied to the
pattern using a quill



The plate is then fired
and more layers of
colour can be applied.

Was the Malmesbury Chasse made to order?



Chasse on the left is in the Metropolitan Museum New York. It once belonged to William Beckford of Fonthill and Beckford Tower fame.

May be there was a sort of catalogue of reliquary design?

And there are more



The Malmesbury Chasse dates from c. 1190 to 1200

On 29th December 1170 Thomas Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered in front of the high altar of Canterbury Cathedral

Canonised in 1173, his relics became a source of veneration. 53 enamel reliquary caskets showing his death survive, here are 3 that are close by.

Did it come from Malmesbury Abbey?

There is no documented evidence to prove that it did.

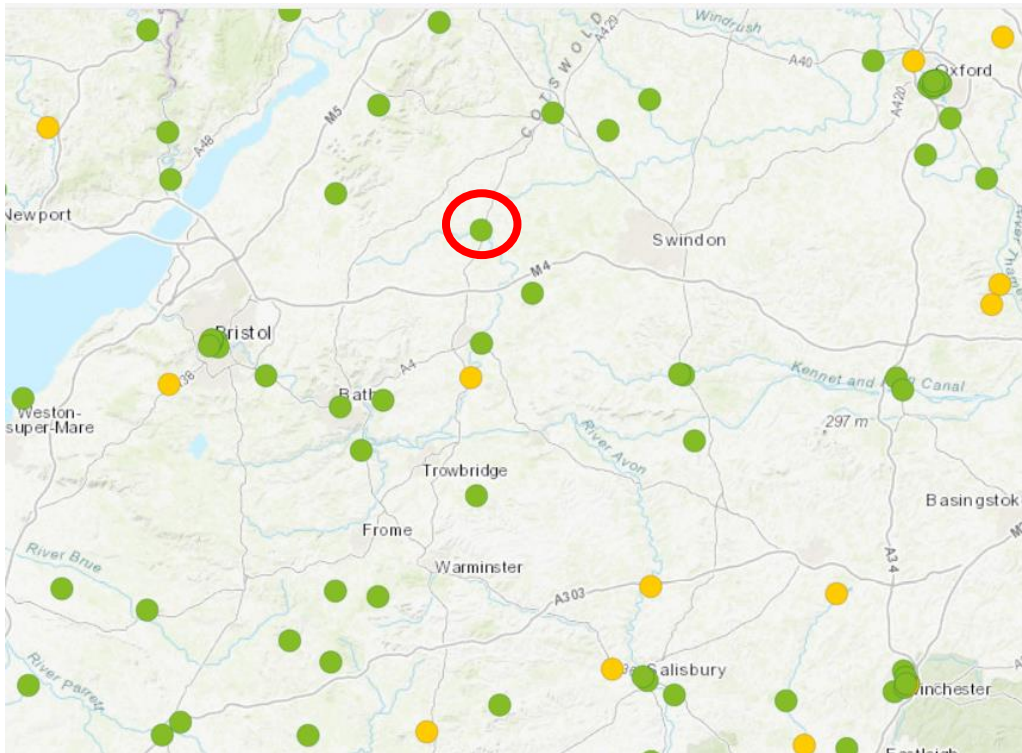
We will hear later that its provenance rests on a verbal claim in the 18th century by persons unknown.

But it came from somewhere and most likely a wealthy dissolved abbey

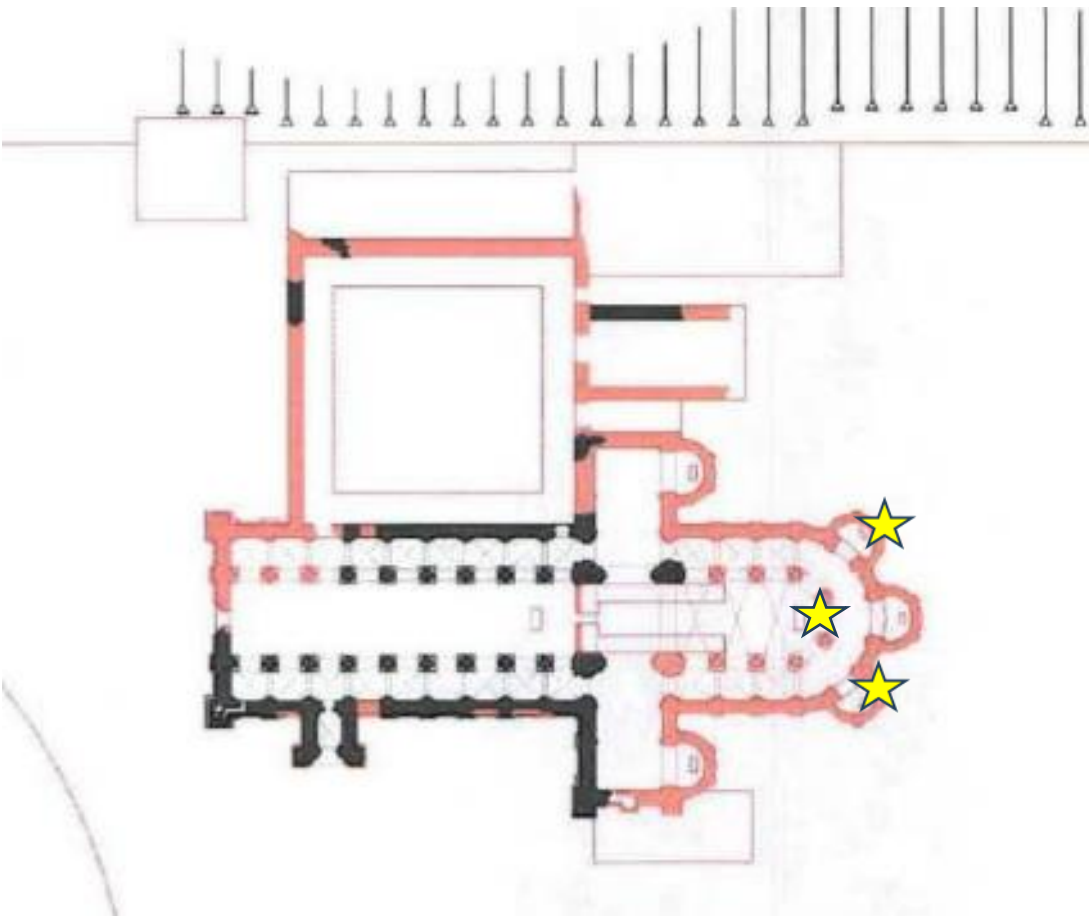
Map shows dissolved monastic houses of all sizes

How many were centres for pilgrimage with high status relics?

Glastonbury, Bath, Salisbury or Abingdon, Cirencester, Gloucester



National Archives



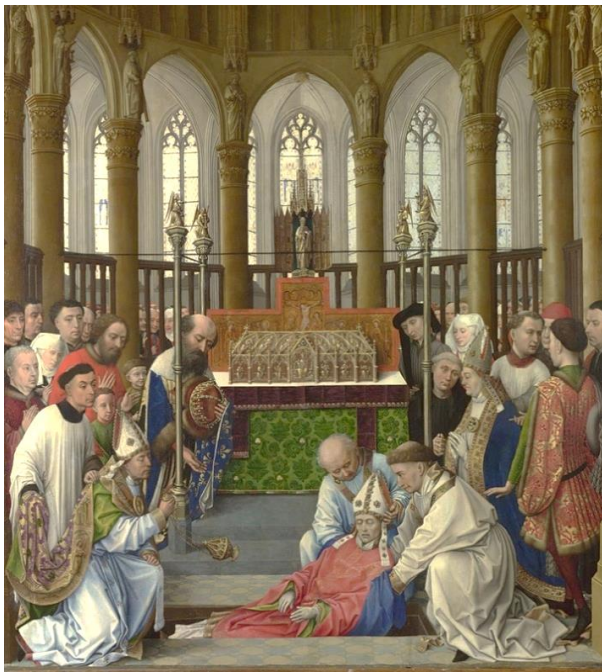
The Chaise and Malmesbury Abbey

Diagram of the re-imagined Norman Abbey, existing footprint in black

Pilgrims would have entered by the South Porch and processed round the Abbey

The chaise would have been part of the shrine either at the High Altar or in adjacent side chapels

After Brakspear



Some examples to compare

Top picture shows a reliquary on a High Altar with an ambulatory behind.

This would be a similar scale to the Malmesbury Chasse

Of a different scale altogether the reliquary in Cologne Cathedral containing the relics of the Magi





That looks familiar

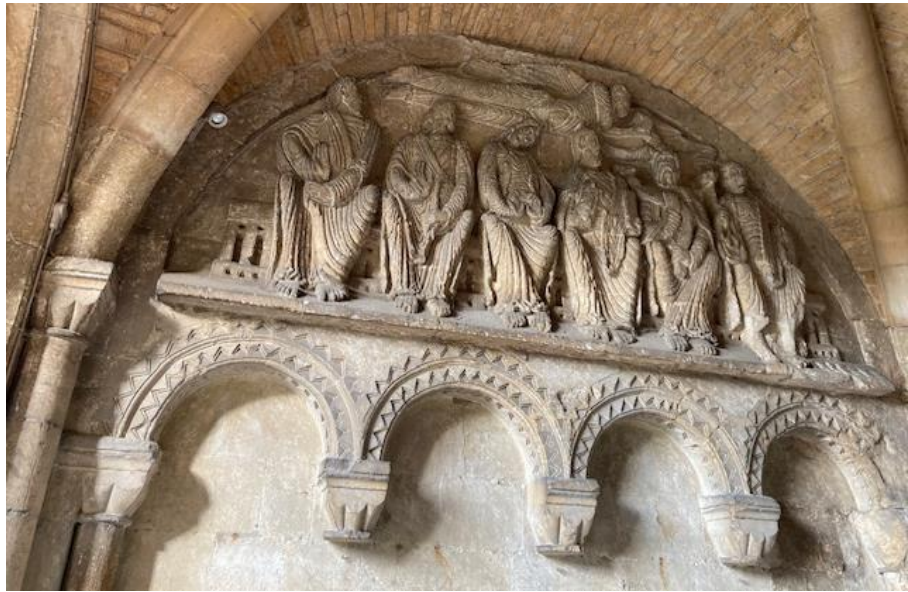
The image of Christ in Majesty on the chasse matches that in the Abbey south porch tympanum

The tympanum may once have been coloured

Both are likely French design from the same period

The image is reinforced for visiting pilgrims





So does this

The same saints are found in the south porch

Even the arches are similar.







Centre de la Culture du Limousin Médiéval

Small enough to carry

On saint's days the chasse would have been carried in procession round Malmesbury

William of Malmesbury tells of such a procession of the relics of St. Aldhelm

This was before the Malmesbury Chasse but the ritual would have continued.

What relics might it have contained?

Tony's book reveals the following:

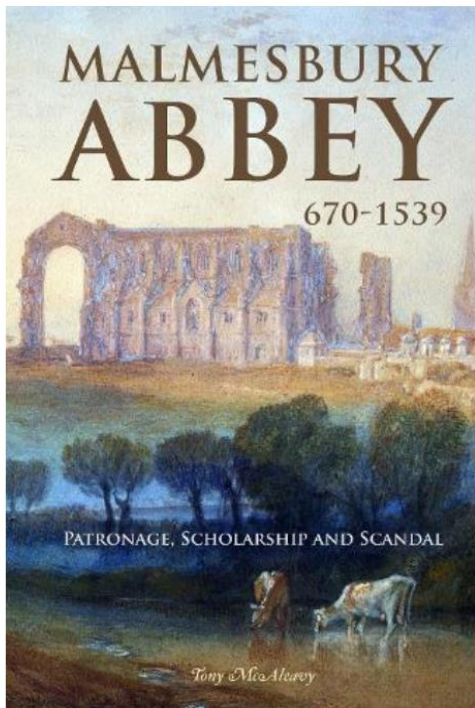
Mid 10th century there was a silver shrine dedicated to Aldhelm and decorated with gilded plates

980s Aldhelm was reburied to protect the sacred relics. Post the Conquest income increased from pilgrims visiting Aldhelm's shrine.

In William of Malmesbury's lifetime he recalls the shrine of the saint being carried in procession.

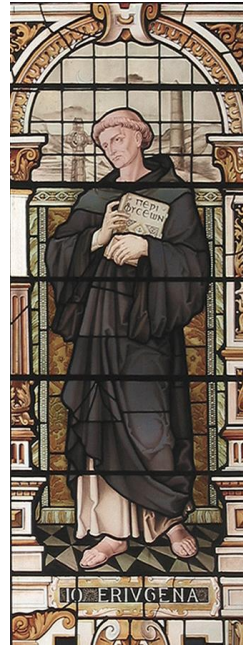
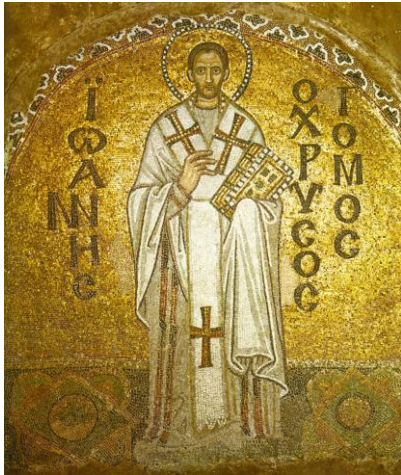
12TH century pieces of the skeleton of Aldhelm were swapped with Abingdon for part of the arm of St John Chrysostom

1521 3rd Duke of Buckingham visited the shrine of St Aldhelm



McAleavy





What relics might it have contained?

18th century sources claim Maeldub's bones were in the chasse

Part of the arm of St John Chrysostom was definitely held by the abbey

History has it that Athelstan gave the Abbey a portion of the true cross enclosed in rock crystal, a piece of the Crown of Thorns and relics of St. Paternus

Potentially John Scotus Eriugena although this is much disputed.

How many caskets might Malmesbury have had?





Wikipedia

A tale of survival

Through the Middle Ages Malmesbury thrived as a pilgrim centre with visitors drawn to the Abbey's holy relics

Then came Henry VIII and the King's "Great Matter"

Numerous reports of the Abbey's belongings exist, including from John Leland who we know had an eye for antiques of value. None mention the Chasse

15th December 1539 Malmesbury Abbey was surrendered to the Crown.

It would be another 231 years before the Malmesbury Chasse emerged into semi-public (but documented) view



Then came the Civil War

Just over 100 years later the Chasse faced the iconoclasm of the English Civil War

Where ever it was the Chasse must have been well hidden as private homes as well as religious houses were targeted.





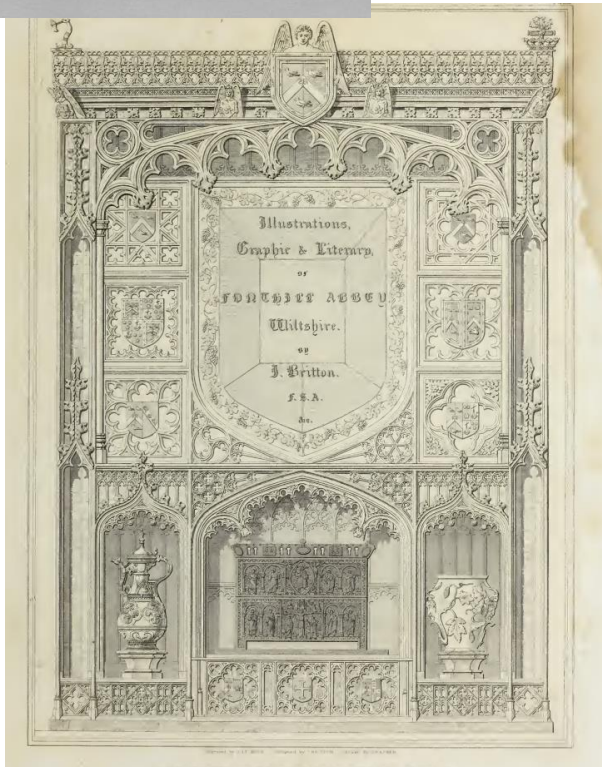
Where did it spend 231 years?

It wasn't made from precious materials so the King couldn't melt it down

It could have been spirited away by a local Catholic family as is the case of the Becket Casket from Croyland Abbey now in the V&A. Owned for centuries by the Nye family, an old catholic family. In the 18th century it then passed to a number of famous English Antiquarians

Records show some reliquary caskets were bought and used as dining room ornaments as shown left.

We may never know.



Highlighted in Vetusta Monumenta – published by the Society of Antiquarians of London

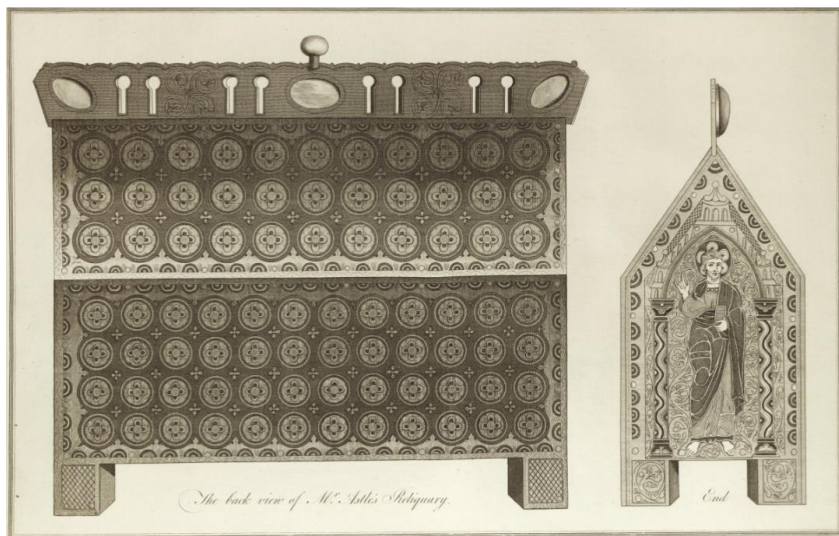


In April 1789 the Vetusta Monumenta published a paper on a “Reliquary in the possession of Tho:s Astle Esq:r.”. It was our Chasse!

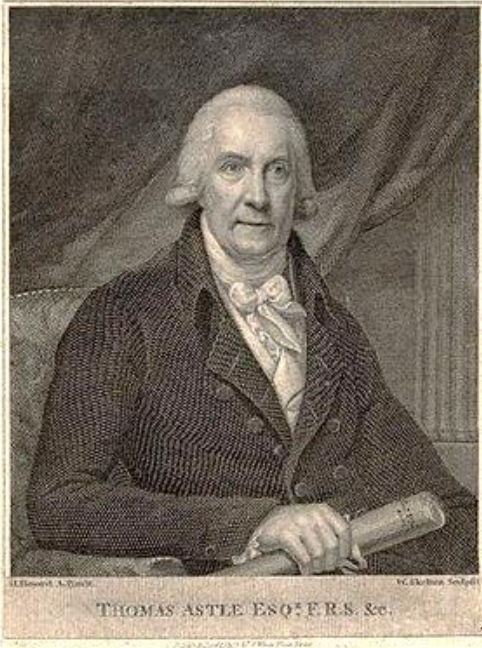
The Society of Antiquarians was founded in 1707 when it was agreed that the business of the Society should be the subject of antiquities, particularly as they related to the history of Great Britain. The period of study was that which pre-dated the reign of James I.

The Malmesbury Chasse had made it to the Enlightenment and was now valued for its antiquity

There is no record of what happened to the relics themselves



18th century owners



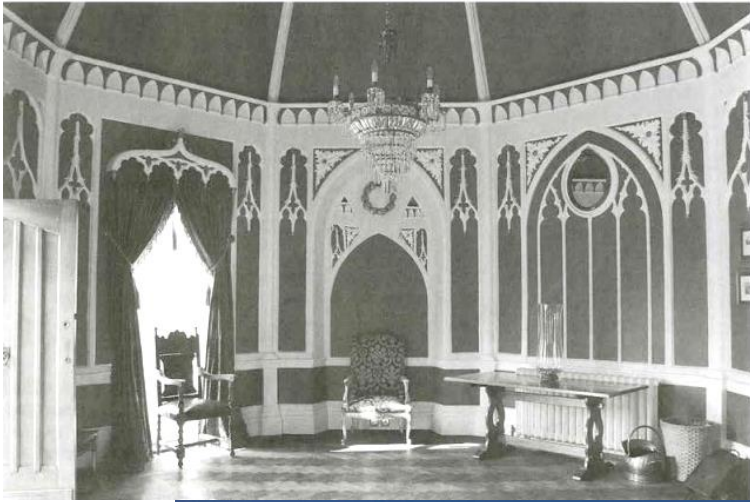
Thomas Astle, an English antiquary and fellow of both the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society. His reputation and collection remain highly regarded.

Astle apparently purchased the reliquary from Richard (Dickie) Bateman's sale in 1774 for £2. 7. 6d, worth about £700 today.

Dickie Bateman of Old Windsor was a prolific collector, Gothic Revivalist and close friend of Horace Walpole.

All that is known is that Bateman bought it from someone in Wiltshire who verbally claimed that the Chasse reputedly came from Malmesbury Abbey.





The Malmesbury Chasse finds itself in an unusual setting

The Chasse would have been part of the complex antiquarian decorative scheme of Bateman's home.

It was likely in Bateman's "chapel," a "centrally planned space set within a bedchamber". (The ban on Catholic worship lasted until 1791)

Clearly in the context of the growing interest in the Gothic that emerged at this time.

Best examples of Gothic Revivalist are Horace Walpole, English writer, art historian, antiquarian, and Whig politician and owner of Strawberry Hill.

Also William Beckford English novelist, art critic, politician and at one stage England's richest commoner. Builder of the ill-fated Fonthill Abbey.

Both owned similar reliquary caskets.





It disappears again

After 1789 it is next seen at a Sotheby's sale in 1930 of the collection of Major H. Chase Meredith along with a second chasse

Sold for £9,000 to Battersby Antiques acting for a Paris merchant Daguerre

It was sold on to another Paris dealer, Brimo de Laroussilhe

Then wasn't seen again until 1988



Are they still traded today?

Sotheby's January 2023 Lot 510

Yours for c.£80,000



Sothebys

A new owner

It was bought in 1988 by Kenneth R. Thomson, Lord Thomson of Fleet a Canadian/British businessman and art collector.

On his father's death in August 1976, Ken Thomson became chairman of the Thomson Corporation, this included The Times and Thomson Travel.

In the latter half of the 20th century, Thomson was one of North America's leading art collectors

2,000 works of art, including the Malmesbury Chasse were loaned to the Art Gallery of Ontario



Wikipedia



Where is the chasse today?

Ken Thomson dies in 2006 and his son David donated the Thomson collection to the Art Gallery of Ontario along with a significant donation.

This lured Toronto-native “starchitect” Frank Gehry to design a major expansion and renovation of the AGO. Thomson is quoted as saying: “It might make people see and enjoy objects previously unfamiliar to them”

The Chasse is now back in a custom-built space for all to see and marvel at, hopefully safe from more adventures





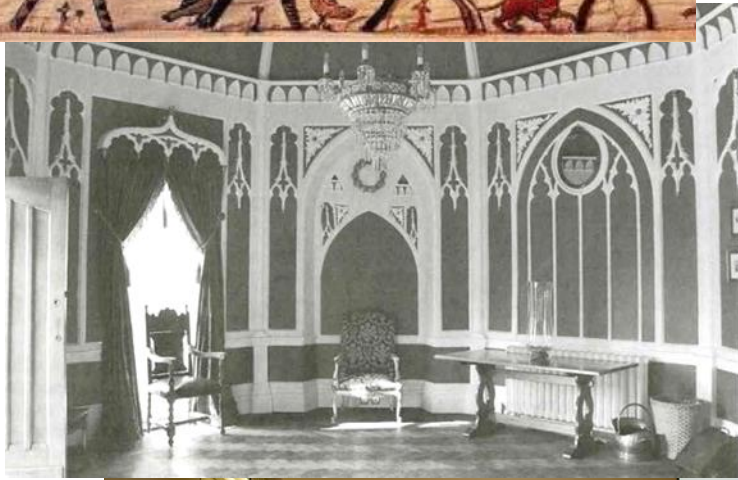
The story of the Malmesbury Chasse

From sacred object to

Rich antiquarians' "plaything" to

Its place in a state-of-the-art public Art Gallery

But many mysteries remain



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