

Bidford History Society meeting, 15th of September 2017

Pilgrimage to Mediaeval Gloucestershire

Tim Porter presented a lavishly illustrated talk on pilgrimages in medieval Gloucestershire. He started by indicating that Christian pilgrimages followed both the routes and styles of Roman pilgrimages in Britain.

Romans established two important pilgrimage centres in second century Britain; Bath dedicated to the god Sulis Minerva (Based on the original Sul god of the British), and Lydney on the edge of the forest of Dean which was dedicated to Mars Nodeus. Pilgrimage sites were laid out with a shrine and also accommodation for priests and pilgrims. En route to the centres were wayside temples. Offerings were made into shrines. At Bath these were metal objects with a supplication text while at Lydney they were pins, with supplications possibly written

By the early fourth century Christianity was well established in the Roman Empire and it is possible that both pagan and Christian pilgrims used similar routes.

These ancient Roman ways, such as Fosse way and various Salt ways, while deteriorated since the end of the Roman occupation, were still principal route used in the pre-mediaeval period to visit shrines such as Winchcombe.

Winchelcombe means "valley in the corner" and is today modern Winchcombe. It was on a main route to Corinium, today known as Cirencester, which was the second largest Roman town in Britain. From earliest days it was a crossroads and also had a market so that it was an important town. The town had significant defences of earth banks constructed first in 822, increased under Ethelred in 900 and finally enhanced around 1010AD. Some of these massive defences to the eastern aspect, while eroded are still visible, although they have not been used for over 800 years.

Winchcombe was the home of King Kenulph, a local ruler who had a son called Kenelm. It appears that following his father's death young Kenelm ruled as king for a short period of time but he was murdered on the instruction of his sister Cynfuth in an area called Romsley near Droitwich, where he was buried. That was in 819AD.

It was normal in these days to have different categories of saints and child saints were the group to whom parents would pray when they had lost children, which affected almost every family. Child saints were an important category of saint. The local Christian community needed a child saint in the west of the country, to rival St Pancras who was a child Saint in the London area. Because he had been murdered as a young person it was decided that Kenelm should be sanctified.

The people and Benedictine Abbey at Winchcombe decided to return his remains and did so by sending monks to Romsley to exhume Kenelm. Carrying the body, they were pursued back to their abbey, crossing the Avon at Fladbury. There are a number of myths concerning their journey including the "miraculous spring" known as Kenelm's Well which overlooks Suddley Castle. One rigorous pilgrimage was to visit both places, Romsley and Winchcombe associated with Kenelm. For 600 years the Kenelm pilgrimage was locally important ,

Although the original shrine has been lost, a similar shrine at Repton from the same period suggests that the shrine was in the crypt of a church. The Winchcombe shrine may have been attached to the parish church and accessible by being on a main travel route. It was destroyed at the reformation

It seems to have been important for the church in Mercia to have control of the remains of saints. Remains of St Oswald were held in Ramsey Abbey in Lincolnshire, inside the Danelaw area. Shortly

after his death an expeditionary Force went inside the Danelaw area, seized the remains of Oswald and brought them back to a shrine established in Gloucester.

Hailes Abbey was established in the early 13th century as a contemplative Cistercian abbey, again in a valley with a corner, within sight of Winchcombe. The son of the sponsor of the abbey presented the monks with another Holy Relic which was stated to be the true blood of Christ. Apparently this came with documented attestations reaching back into the mists of time. There is a field on the footpath connecting Winchcombe and Hailes where monks from the two abbeys are said to have prostrated themselves before the relic. Although the Cistercian monks were a contemplative order it was necessary to make this abbey a place of pilgrimage. By this era relics were placed in an elevated position and substantial changes were made to the recently constructed Abbey in order to create a good setting.

Close to the ruins of Hailes Abbey is a small church, with some Mediaeval decorations still visible. The little parish church at Hailes predates the abbey by 200 years and was not affected by the dissolution of monasteries. It could have provided services to pilgrims. In Hailes Church is a stained-glass window, thought to be mediaeval. It illustrates pilgrim in the standard garments for a pilgrim, barefooted and an empty purse. Many pilgrims chose to make a pilgrimage which arrived at the shrine on the annual feast day. however others may have staggered arrival times. It seems that the process of making the pilgrimage, the journey, was as important as the shrine visitation.

For over 300 years and only 2 miles apart were two important places of Christian pilgrimage, readily accessible on the routes of the time. Because there was a toll to enter Winchcombe the routes divided with some pedestrians choosing to go through Hailes.

Both centres of pilgrimage were deliberately destroyed during the Reformation with stones recycled for other purposes. However one window from Hailes Abbey is now installed in Tedington church.