

MACCLESFIELD and the FEAST of ST. BARNABAS.



Barnaby holidays have been part of Macclesfield life 'time out of mind'; it commemorates the Feast of St. Barnabas, whose saint day is 11th June. Few facts remain, yet strong indications point to a very early origin.

In the mid-13th century, the Black Prince, as Lord of the Manor, visited Macclesfield and decided to re-establish a stud and also a cattle farm in the Park belonging to his manor. Within 10 years the herd numbered over 700, and cattle are recorded as being

sold at the Barnaby Fair, so it is apparent that the fair was well established by then.

Ranulf de Blunderville (1172-1232), 6th Earl of Chester, traditionally created a Macclesfield guild about 1220, and there is little doubt that he holds the key to the mystery.

He was a strong administrator, much involved in the Barons' Wars with King John, and supported the latter. As an elder statesman with great power as Earl of Chester, he granted land near Leek in Staffordshire on 22nd April 1214 to the Cistercian Abbey at Poulton on the Dee, 5 miles south of Chester.

With the re-founding near Leek, he also gave lands in Chelford and Withington as income, and the friars built a chapel to the Blessed Virgin Mary. From Macclesfield, a thriving market town, he also gave rents on a Chestergate property to Dieulacre, to support the chapel. Such was his love for the abbey, when he died in 1232 his heart was buried there.

Having no chapel, the people of Macclesfield worshipped at St. Peter's, Prestbury, which, through tythes etc., supplied part of the income of the Abbot of St. Werburgh's abbey in Chester. When Queen Eleanor was able to provide a chapel for the town in 1278 it was dedicated the All Saints and All Hallows, not St. Barnabas.

The Charter

So why should Barnabas, patron saint of Cyprus, come to hold such an important role in Macclesfield's long history?

In 1218 Ranulf left with a large contingent to join the 4th Crusade, gathering archers and bowmen from the Cheshire forests, and would have particularly included those skilled men from Macclesfield. In later centuries their successors would prove so crucial to the victories at Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt. Ranulf had given his commitment by oath some three years earlier, having heard the Archbishop of Canterbury preach from the High Cross in Chester for support.

His great successes in Egypt made him a popular hero, and his adventures inspired many ballads. He left Egypt late in September 1220, disappointed at the failure of political negotiations with regard to Jerusalem. On his return, as a gesture of goodwill to the Macclesfield men, he granted the charter, with the guild more than likely established in 1221; the guild, being a Christian establishment, would have had a saint, and there is little doubt that Barnabas was chosen.

Payment for the charter, would have allowed privileges in Chester. Members looked after their widows and orphans, trained apprentices usually for 7 years in the 'Art and Mystery' of their trade, until the position of journeyman was achieved. This demanded utmost loyalty and absolute secrecy of the knowledge gained to learn their skills.

The trade of the Macclesfield guild is unknown, no records remain; the logical answer, however, seems to be one for the foresters i.e. archers and bowmen; those skilled in making the long bows etc. and other associate trades. Whether or not those in the wool and leather trades were included, is contentious; but they were vital to the 'production line'.

Guild members and their Grand Master would walk in procession each year, carrying an effigy of their saint to Prestbury church on the designated feast day, and celebrate from the previous evening with feasting and a fair.

This privileged guild would create jealousies amongst the other artisans in the town, and is probable reason why, 40 years later, Prince Edward as Earl of Chester, granted a corporation charter, creating the 'Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of Macclesfield', as the council would be known for many centuries. This allowed for greater privileges amongst all who held burgage plots in the town, and was a fairer distribution of authority.

With the guild eclipsed, it would quietly fade away as members jostled for power in the Corporation.

St. Barnabas

As the St. Barnabas holiday had been enjoyed for 40 years, the corporation would have been ill advised not to continue the festival. Barnaby was here to stay, but why choose St. Barnabas? He was a Jewish Cypriot who, with others, sold his land and possessions in Jerusalem, and gave the money to the original apostles of Jesus to send out missionaries for spreading Christianity. In partnership with St. Paul, who in some ways was initially the weaker of the two, a church was founded at Antioch; Cyprus was converted to Christianity, and the impetus to spread the Faith had begun.

After many years he and Paul separated. Paul continued to Ephesus, and Barnabas returned with his nephew to Cyprus, where he was martyred at Salamis in 61 A.D., having made enemies in the hierarchy of the Jewish church.

Cyprus was vital to the English and other Crusaders. Captured by Richard 1 in 1191, he sold it to the Templars the following year, and it was a haven for supplies both to and from the Holy Land, and for those returning injured. Earl Ranulf and his men would have visited the island. This suggests and that a local knight, who possibly became Grand Master of the guild, in remembrance of their safe return and convalescence on the island, chose Barnabas as their patron saint.

His surname 'Barnabas', given to Jesus by the apostles, means 'son of consolation'.

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