

THE STORY OF WELDBANK

When the name Weld Bank was given to that portion of Chorley lying to the South of the town we may never know but certainly it must have been after the Weld family came into possession of the land, when Mary Shireburne¹, the last of that great Catholic family of Stonyhurst, married into the Weld family of Lulworth, Dorset. It would then be a little hamlet, cut off from Chorley by fields, consisting of farms and cottages, inhabited by tenants of the Burgh, Gillibrand and Duxbury estates. Now Chorley has expanded and taken in the fields so that it is hardly possible to say where Weld Bank starts and finishes though, even with the further expansion of the town envisaged², it is likely that the name will survive as long as the old church on top of the hill survives - may that day still be in the dim and distant future. But let us start at the beginning of Christianity in our district and gradually lead up to the formation of Weld Bank.

1. FROM THE ROMANS TO THE NORMANS AND THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY TO THE NORTH-WEST OF ENGLAND

The first Christians in this area

The early history of Lancashire from the coming of the Romans down to the Norman conquest is very obscure. In fact, the Romans never really conquered our part of the country as its approach from the south was difficult in the extreme; much of the land was almost impassable because of the erosion of the sea with vast stretches of marsh and bog. The few Roman settlements, like Ribchester and Blackrod, were mostly military stations established to protect their armies from the fierce tribes as they journeyed to more hospitable parts of the country.

¹ Mary Shireburne did not, in fact, marry into the Weld family. She married the Duke of Norfolk in 1709 but they separated in about 1729. She married a second time – the Catholic and Jacobite, Peregrine Widdrington, in about 1732. It was at the time of her death in 1754 that the Stonyhurst estates passed to her cousin, Edward Weld of Lulworth, the grandson of her father's sister, Elizabeth.

² At the time Gillett was writing there were plans to combine Chorley, Preston and Leyland into a new town. These plans were implemented between 1970 and 1985 by the Lancashire New Town Development Corporation.

It would probably be true to say that Mass was first celebrated in these parts at Blackrod which is believed to have been one of the eight Roman forts established in Lancashire and which was connected with the principal settlement at Ribchester by a road skirting our district. It would be here that the first early Christians practised their religion and gradually converted their comrades in the Roman armies.

They would have had little success with the fierce tribes of natives inhabiting these parts, where the influence of the Druids was particularly strong. But further north and up to the Scottish borders the forts became large settlements. The more settled conditions there led to many conversions and much intermarrying between the Roman soldiers and the native women.

Saint Patrick³ and his influence on Christianity in the north of England

Undoubtedly the conversion of the north of England to Christianity was due in great measure to the influence of Saint Patrick, who, though he would have done little in Britain, paved the way by his great work in Ireland. Many prominent men have left Britain's shores to journey to Ireland since Saint Patrick's day, but it has usually been with armies at their back to conquer and massacre whereas his visit had the very best of intentions.

There has been much controversy as to the exact location in this country where Saint Patrick was born but modern research has given the area around the Solway Firth as the most likely. The son of Calpurnius, a Roman deacon and magistrate, his mother was a native of the district. His capture by Irish raiders at 15 years of age along with his sister and some companions and his subsequent slavery in Ireland is well known.

That he was ever in this part of Lancashire is very unlikely but there is a strong tradition that, with some companions, he escaped his slave master in Ireland after six years and, after crossing the Irish Sea, he was shipwrecked off Heysham Head on a shoal still called "Saint Patrick's Skeer" where he

³ Saint Patrick is believed to have been born in the late 300s and died in Saul, Downpatrick, Northern Ireland in 461 AD.

swam ashore. Experts believe that the ruins of the little chapel still standing on that lovely spot known as Heysham Head date from near Saint Patrick's time and it is still known as Saint Patrick's Chapel. It could be that the stone coffins (which are unique in this country) were for the bodies of friends drowned in the shipwreck and the chapel erected as a mark of thanksgiving for his escape. Certainly it was a place of pilgrimage for centuries. From Heysham his way home can be traced by the place names still existing, such as Saint Patrick's Well at Hest Bank, Patrickdale⁴, Aspatria, and Preston Patrick in Cumberland. From home he later journeyed to the Continent.

After ordination he became a Bishop and again crossed to Ireland in 432. He then began his long and fruitful ministry. He built many churches, baptised thousands and ordained priests and bishops.

The Celtic church

Largely due to the work of Saint Patrick, Ireland was to become a land of many abbeys and monasteries from where learned men set out for other countries - particularly Scotland, Britain, the Lowlands and Germany - where they successfully established Christianity. These bishops and priests established the Celtic Church, which was responsible for the Christianization of the north of Britain before the coming of Saint Augustine.

The coming of Saint Augustine in 597AD and the unification of the Celtic and Roman Churches

The story of Saint Gregory the Great, of how he saw the early English children being sold as slaves in the market place in Rome, may or may not be true but it is a fact that he expressed his intention of trying to convert England which, at that time, meant the southern kingdoms. But his elevation to the Papacy put a stop to that and he had to send others in his place. He chose the monk, Augustine, to be the leader of some 40 others and this monk and his

⁴ Patrickdale is better known as Patterdale, meaning St. Patrick's Dale, situated near the southern end of Ullswater.

companions quickly gained a foothold among the small southern kingdoms⁵. As they advanced northwards, they met up with Celtic priests and bishops. Although obedience to the Papacy had always been the central rule of the northern Celtic clergy, certain interpretations of doctrine had gradually drifted somewhat from those of the rest of the church.⁶ However, the great St Hilda of Whitby did much to resolve the differences by calling the parties together at the Synod of Whitby in the year 664⁷. At this the Celtic clergy agreed to conform with the rest of Christendom.

Lancashire finally embraces Christianity

But what of our own district of Lancashire? It appears to have been one of the most backward in embracing Christianity, though Saint Ninian⁸, towards the close of the Roman occupation, is believed to have made some converts among the various tribes. The Diocese of Glasgow, established towards the end of the 6th century, came down as far as the Mersey but it would have had little influence south of the Ribble. According to the great Saint Bede, there was a religious settlement at Whalley in 664 and also the Cartmel district “with all Britons in it” was under the rule of St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne. Later the great work of the Irish missionaries like Saint Columba⁹ and his companions, Saint Aiden¹⁰, Saint Wilfred¹¹ of York and others, all helped in furthering the church in the north.

However, it is to Saint Chad¹² and his monks that the conversion of Lancashire was eventually due and he placed the whole of the county in the Diocese of York where it remained for 270 years. In 793AD came the Viking invasions of this country and thus began about 200 years of cruel warfare in

⁵ Augustine became the first Archbishop of Canterbury in 597 AD/

⁶ In particular, the Celtic and Roman Churches disagreed about the date of Easter

⁷ It is generally accepted that it was King Oswiu who called the Synod of Whitby but it was held at the Abbey where Abbess Hilda was in-charge.

⁸ St Ninian born circa 360 AD, died circa 432 AD

⁹ St Columba born 521 AD, died 597 AD

¹⁰ St Aiden born circa 590 AD, died 651AD

¹¹ St Wilfred born 633 AD, died 709/10 AD

¹² St Chad born circa 634 AD, died 672 AD

England which ended with the great victory of King Athelstan and his Saxon army over the combined Danes, Scots and Irish at the battle of Brunanburgh in 937. The site of this battle is thought by many to have been at Brindle in our district.

After this great battle, the land between the Ribble and the Mersey was placed in the hands of the kings, including Edward the Confessor, and it remained so until the coming of William the Conqueror. Also the county was taken away from the Archbishopric of York and attached to the See of Lichfield where it continued until after the Reformation. We only know of three churches in the Leyland Hundred at this period: at Croston, Eccleston and Leyland, though there must have been many more, including one at Chorley but it is significant that not one monastery or religious house was founded in Lancashire before the coming of the Normans in 1066.

The Norman Conquest

By the time the Normans arrived in the 11th century, England was more or less wholly Christian and most towns and villages would have their small chapels, some built of wood, others of stone. Whatever one might think of the Conqueror, the fact remains that the Normans were great church builders, and would demolish and rebuild the more rude attempts of the defeated Saxons. This would be almost certainly the case at Chorley.

The Conqueror divided the country up amongst his nobles and that great stretch of land between the Ribble and the Mersey was handed to one of his friends, Count Roger of Poiteau. It is doubtful whether this man ever visited his possessions, for Lancashire was still very inaccessible and, provided he received his rents from the previous Saxon landowners, he would leave many of them in peace. This seems to have been the case at Chorley, Burgh and Duxbury, the three places with which we are most concerned.