

2. MEDIEVAL TIMES IN THE CHORLEY AREA

Burgh – a fortress- one of its owners might have been a crusader

Chor comes from the Anglo-Saxon words *ceorl*, a countryman, and *ley*, a meadow or pasture. Burgh is a Scottish and Scandinavian word denoting a fortified settlement. It is known that the Vikings, coming into Lancashire from the western seaboard, established a few settlements before being driven out by the Saxons and it is probable that Burgh was one of these and retained its northern name. That Burgh was at one time a place of some importance is certain, for some old maps refer to it as a village (which would probably include Birkacre). Like most manor houses of old times, the original Burgh Hall would almost certainly have had a moat as a protection against marauders and the large lake once existing there was probably the remains of this, just as the old fish pond still remembered off Park Road in Chorley would be all that was left of a moat around Chorley Hall.

We do not know who were the owners of Burgh before and after the coming of the Normans; the lack of surnames for families in those days is an insurmountable obstacle to their identification. However, the late John Wilson painstakingly searched out the pedigree of the Chorleys of Chorley Hall as far back as the middle of the 14th century. Of the owners of Burgh there is little trace but another local historian, the late John Rawlinson of Horwich, whose researches deserve to be better known, once assured me that he had discovered that there was a Burgh from this district who fought in one of the Crusades and returned home to find his estate confiscated in his absence - a not uncommon occurrence in those turbulent days - though he eventually regained his rights.

Early records of the Chorley, Burgh and Duxbury families and other landed gentry of this area

However, the first mention of the Burgh family of which we are certain is in the year 1310 when Henry of Burgh was a witness to a deed by which William of Chorley regained part of his estates after being attainted (ie. condemned

either to death or to outlawry) for taking part in the ill-fated rebellion of Simon de Montfort against King Henry II.¹ As bailiff of the Leyland Hundred at that time, it would be his duty to assist Robert de Ferrers, Earl of Derby, who by then owned the lands between the Ribble and the Mersey. The Earl commanded part of the forces under De Montfort and there would be many men from this district fighting for him

It thus took William of Chorley over 40 years before he regained some of his land and rights after suffering their confiscation for aiding his liege lord in the rebellion. In this deed we also have the first mention of other local names such as Adam of Duxbury, Henry of Charnock, Alan of Clayton and John of Coppull.² Another deed of the same period granted to William of Chorley the whole of the southern half of the chapel below the step of the high altar in the Church of Chorley with the right of seat sepulchre.³ This grant was only returning to the Chorley family the rights they had held before William Chorley's high treason. This proves that before 1266 there was a church in Chorley, probably replacing a Saxon one, but when it was built we shall never know.

The many incursions into Scotland of King Edward I and the cruel way he ravaged that northern Kingdom earned him the title of “the Hammer of the Scots” and brought about the rebellions of William Wallace and Robert Bruce, the latter a former favourite of Edward I but one who held good title to the throne of Scotland. At first the Scots suffered many setbacks but after the death of Edward I, Bruce gradually gained the upper hand in his own country and was crowned King. This roused the lethargic Edward II and he raised a large army estimated to number 100,000 men, including the flower of the English and Norman nobility and he marched into Scotland where, at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, he was totally defeated by Bruce with an army of some 30,000. Thomas Plantagenet, Earl of Lancaster, who could

¹ I have not traced this deed

² Deed held at Wigan Archives ref. D/D Ma/A/6, date 1306 not checked

³ I have not traced this deed

command a large army, including many from our district, did not take part with his King in this campaign and he was accused of treating with the Scots.

The Banastre Rebellion of 1315– the landed gentry of this area rebel against the Earl of Lancaster and lose the fight

This led to what has been called the Banastre Rebellion when, only twelve months after Bannockburn, Sir Adam Banastre of Bank Hall at Bretherton and a large landowner in Charnock, Welch Whittle and Shevington, rebelled against the Earl of Lancaster.⁴ He was assisted in this by other Lancashire nobles including Sir Henry of Lea and Charnock Richard and Sir William Bradshaigh of Haigh and Blackrod. After initial success they were routed by the Earl's forces at Deepdale, Preston. Some of the rebels, including Henry of Duxbury, were imprisoned in Lancaster Castle but the leader, Sir Adam Bannastre, and Henry of Lea fled to the woods and moors of central Lancashire. Then, driven by hunger, they sheltered in a barn at Charnock Richard where they were betrayed. In the ensuing fight Sir Henry of Lea was killed and Sir Adam was taken prisoner, tried and beheaded at Leyland. Another of the party, Sir Ralph of Bickerstaff, sought sanctuary in Croston Church where he died of his wounds.

Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, did not enjoy his triumph for long for King Edward II sent an army to seize him and he was defeated at the battle of Boroughbridge in Yorkshire and hanged, drawn and quartered outside his own castle of Pontefract “for having made league with Scotland against his lawful sovereign”.

Henry of Duxbury lost his lands in that Township for he granted part of them to Hugh of Standish who undertook to aid his deliverance from prison. This led to further grants of land and when Henry was freed he was unable to buy

⁴ The true cause of the rebellion was the feud between the Banastres and the Holland and Radcliffe families to whom the Earl of Lancaster was showing favour and thereby creating a disadvantage to the Banastres and their supporters, the Bradshaighs of Haigh Hall and the Leas of Charnock Richard.

back his former holdings which led to the formation of the Standish family at Duxbury.

Scottish Raiders, the Black Death of the 1300s and the abduction of the women of Rivington

To add to the sufferings of Lancashire people in that period, a great pestilence and famine ravaged the country. Food rose to impossible prices and the common people were driven to poaching and theft. As if this were not enough, King Robert the Bruce, seeking vengeance for the harrowing of his country by Edward I and to replenish his lands, sent his brother, Lord Edward Bruce and Lord James Douglas with strong forces into England where they laid waste much of the north in the years 1316 and 1322. They spared only churches and religious houses, burning and pillaging and carrying off many women and children. Preston and Chorley were visited and many cattle were taken from Healey Park. Salmesbury Hall was burned down and Hornby Castle pillaged.

For the next 200 years or so we have little information of either the Burgh or the Chorley families though the Chorley family continued to increase its estates and, later in the 14th century, another William Chorley held the office of Excheater for the King in the County of Lancashire under John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. He died in 1397. This was a very unsettled time when, in addition to internal strife, the 'Black Death' or plague stalked the land, reaching its highest peak about 1350 and following it came the inevitable famines. We know little as to its effect on the Chorley district but in the neighbouring hundred of Amounderness, Preston and Lancaster each had 3000 victims and Garstang lost 2000.

According to the late . John Rawlinson, most of the men of the village of Rivington were victims of the plague, leaving a large surplus of women. At Whittle-le-Woods the plague had the opposite effect; most of the men remained immune to the disease but it carried off a large proportion of the

women. After a time, the men of Whittle, tired of their enforced single life and faced with a scarcity of women and children to help work in the fields, took part in a raid on Rivington. They cooped up the men in one of the barns then took their pick of the more young and desirable of the opposite sex and carried them off back to Whittle.

Complaint was made to the Sheriff of the county and he investigated the affair with the result that he ordered the women to be returned. But due to the poor communications and bad roads this took some months by which time some of the ladies had settled down comfortably with their new partners and a number of them flatly refused to go back to Rivington.

Chorley church dedicated in the 1360s

In 1366 the Bishop of Lichfield granted a licence to another William Chorley to have an oratory in his manor house at Chorley and in 1370 he allowed him to choose a confessor for his family who would no doubt also act as tutor for his children. We have here evidence that the Chorleys of Chorley Hall would have had the sacrifice of the Mass at their home, despite its nearness to Chorley Church.

In common with the rest of the population at this time, the clergy suffered greatly and throughout the country many churches and chapels were without resident priests; many were neglected and closed for long periods. This seems to have been the case here at Chorley for, in the year 1362, we know that its inhabitants, then numbering about 1200 persons, petitioned the Bishop of Lichfield and the Rector of Croston (in which Chorley Church was then a chapel-of-ease⁵) that their church might be dedicated. The Bishop allowed this and gave authority for all sacraments and sacramentals to be administered and the Rector agreed to find a chaplain. This indicates

⁵ A 'chapel-of-ease' is a church building within a parish but not the parish church itself. It is a kind of secondary church usually built to facilitate church attendance in parishes where the main church was at some distance from many of the parishioners.

that the church had been closed for some time and no doubt it had been falling into ruin and a fresh dedication was deemed necessary.

Changes in the landed gentry of this area

The family name of Burgh appears to have died out early in the 15th century when Robert Burgh died evidently without children and his heir was named as James Standish of Arley, a branch of the Standishes of Standish. The last of the Burghs had sold half of Birkacre mill - probably a cornmill - to John of Coppull in 1402.⁶ This led to disputes in 1443 between William Coppull, son and heir of John, and James Standish, and fines were levied on the Burgh inheritance in 1447 and 1449. About this time also, the old Catholic families of Crosse, of Crosse Hall, and the Gillibrands, of Lower Chorley Hall, (afterwards Gillibrand Hall) come on the scene with both families holding land in Chorley.

Bell, Book and Candle – how the Church dealt with common criminals in the 1400s

It must be remembered that in these centuries the whole of England was Catholic and the sacrifice of the Mass took place in all churches and chapels. The Church had a much greater influence on the lives of the ordinary people than in these days of unbelief and it exercised much of the power now in the hands of the civil authority. The problem of evil done secretly and anonymously was often followed by a solemn curse pronounced on the evil-doer, followed by solemn excommunication “by bell, book and candle”. Such was the influence of the Church on all aspects of everyday life that this was often successful in bringing the criminal to justice and to confess his crime.

There is in existence a curious document showing a medieval attempt to bring justice to an unknown malefactor in Chorley. In the year 1480, when

⁶ Original document at Lancashire Archives 1402 ref. DDSH 1/94 – not checked

Edward IV was king, James Parker of Bagganley, Chorley, had some enemies who stole his goods and killed his cattle. He appealed to the rural Dean of Leyland who wrote to the clergy of Chorley church as follows:

“To the curates of the parochial Chapel of Chorley- Greetings. I hereby command you to admonish those who have inflicted injuries on James Parker that within 40 days they should repent and make reparation. I denounce for accursed all who have struck a cow of James Parker’s with axe or bill or any manner of edged weapon, by which stroke the cow is dead. Also, those who took a horse of his out of Healey Wood and loaded it and rode it and clipped its mane. Also those who hurt a swine in a field in the holding of Alexander Lawthroppe, by which the swine is dead. Also, those who stole any fish or hogs and hens of Hugh Parker’s or his son James...”⁷

The document goes on to say that unless amends be made within 40 days, the clergy are to excommunicate the unknown offenders. Bells are to be rung, candles lighted and extinguished, the book to be closed, and the cross held erect. No doubt such a sentence would have little effect today but, in those Catholic days, excommunication was an awful punishment and it would be interesting to know what happened in this case at Chorley.

The bones of Saint Lawrence come to Chorley church in 1442

Much has been said and written about the presentation in 1442 of a portion of Saint Laurence’s skull to Chorley Church. This would be a great event in the district and would be fittingly celebrated. In fact, it is highly probable that the church would by this time have become somewhat dilapidated and rebuilding would be undertaken to house such a great relic and the Standishes of Duxbury, who then owned the most sacred portion of the building, the whole of the chancel above the altar steps, would pay for the rebuilding together with other local leading families.

⁷ The spelling in this account has been modernised. The original is in Lancashire Archives ref. DDX 1111/1/1 - not checked

Witness to the presentation of the relic is provided by a certificate still to be seen in the British Museum which, in modernised spelling, says:

“Be it known to all men that I, Thomas Tarleton, vicar of the Church of Croston, bear witness and certify that James Standish of Duxbury hath delivered a relic of Saint Laurence's head into the Church of Chorley, the which Sir Rowland Standish, Knight, brother of the said James, and Dame Jane, his wife, brought out of Normandy, to the worship of God and Saint Laurence, for the profit and avail of the said church, to the intent that the aforesaid Sir Roland Standish, and Dame Jane, his wife, with the said James and his wife, with their predecessors and successors may be in the said church perpetually prayed for, and in witness of which to this my present writing I have set my seal. Written at Croston aforesaid the 2nd day of March in the year of Our Lord God 1442.”

Now it has always been assumed that this relic was a portion of the skull of Saint Laurence, the Martyr-Deacon of Rome, one of the principal martyrs of the early Christian Church - but was it? Let us examine the evidence. Saint Laurence of Rome was put to death, according to the writings of some of the fathers of the early Church, in the year 258. He was one of the seven deacons of Rome at the time, under Pope Sixtus II, and such was his popularity that he was looked upon as a possible successor to that Pope. But Pope Sixtus was martyred and three days afterwards Saint Laurence was condemned by the pagan Roman Emperor to be roasted on a gridiron. The Latin Christian poet, Prudentius, says that the death of Saint Laurence was the death of idolatry in Rome which from that time began very definitely to decline. He is certainly one of the most famous of the ancient martyrs and his name occurs in the Canon of the Mass. He was buried on the Via Tibertina, the Roman Road from Rome to Tivoli, where now stands, and has stood for centuries, one of the famous basilicas of Rome, Saint-Laurence-outside-the-Walls.

The body of Saint Laurence was jealously guarded by the early Christians and since he was buried in Rome, there seems no likelihood that any part of

it should turn up in Normandy twelve hundred years later. In the Catholic calendar of saints there are at least eight Saint Laurences, some of whom would be little known outside their own districts. It is very likely that one of these would be a Norman. It is quite possible that Sir Rowland Standish himself was under the impression that he was bringing out a relic of the Saint Laurence of Rome, probably the only saint of that name with which he was familiar and the same goes for his brother, James, who presented it to Chorley Church and indeed also for the vicar of Croston

We must remember that this was the period of the senseless One Hundred Years' War when the armies of France and England were locked in conflict for a century, a period which contains perhaps the most shameful deed in our island story: the English army's revenge for their defeats by killing the peasant girl, Joan of Arc, the maid of Orleans. After she had been successful in seeing the Dauphin crowned King of France, she was captured and burnt at the stake in Rouen's market place. The Church had a share of the blame but made amends afterwards by placing her in the calendar of Saints.

The purpose of war in those days seems not to have been so much the capture of land as the looting, pillage and massacre of the defeated population and no doubt part of Sir Rowland Standish's booty would be the relic which he believed to be that of Saint Lawrence and so the phrase "brought out of Normandy" should really have read "stolen from a Norman church".

This relic would almost certainly be destroyed at the Reformation or else be taken back by the Standish family to escape destruction and was later lost. With it would go the statues standing in the niches now empty but still to be seen on the outside of the church. Should the relic have been left by the Reformers, then the Cromwellian soldiers, quartered for some time in the town years later, or the Puritan Rectors, would no doubt have made short work of removing it. There is no mention of the relic in any historical notes on

the church for the next three hundred years, and the bones still preserved in the reliquary there are certainly not a portion of a skull.

John Wilson, in his history of the church, says that early last century these bones were examined by a Manchester expert and declared to be the bones of some quadruped. It is not certain when the parish church was dedicated to Saint Laurence. Wilson was of the opinion that the original dedication was to the Blessed Virgin and that of Saint Laurence added later. The former dedication would be dropped after the Reformation.

However, since the ancient church was dedicated to him, it can be said that Saint Laurence is the patron saint of Chorley. When the great Christ the King window was put in Chorley St. Mary's to commemorate the centenary of the parish some years ago, Saint Laurence was included along with St Alban at Christ's feet. He is wearing the green vestments of a Deacon and holds in his hands a model of Chorley Parish church to affirm our claim to be the ancient faith of Chorley.