

Bartlemas: Chapels and landscape

Graham Jones

Medieval chapels (of all sorts – parochial, domestic, conventual, eremitic, and so on) are seriously under-investigated, not being grand like abbeys or well-loved like parish churches. Only one comprehensive county-wide survey has been done (for Devon, revealing no fewer than 1,500), yet rural chapels were part of the weft and warp of local devotion.

Much the same is true of pilgrimage. Everyone thinks of Jerusalem and Compostella, yet a fair rule of thumb is that every parish community had somewhere outside the village centre where an annual procession would go, mixing ritual with cakes and ale.

Excavation has no meaning without context. So the question, ‘Why is Bartlemas here and not there,’ is crucial. Three interconnected points are worth bearing in mind:

1. Chapels were integral to the landscape. As with pilgrimage destinations, their location was often influenced by, and reflected preoccupations with, a landscape mediated with cultural and spiritual interpretations.
2. The importance of water, both for life and health, and as a metaphorical aid for spiritual wellbeing: baptism, ritual washing, communal bathing, and so on.
3. Things are often older than they seem. Antiquarian or not, without a view of history balanced between change and continuity, context is blurred and we miss a lot of excitement, whether in the longevity of ideas and practice, or the intriguing process of transition.

Before asking to what extent these observations might help in the questioning of the location, origins, and development of Bartlemas, it is useful, from the 240 or so other medieval leper hospitals, to look at a handful of examples.

The site of St Mary Magdalen, a mile outside **Winchester**, lies on Magdalen or Morne Hill, on the line of what is being reconsidered as a Roman road. From here, a traveller from the east gets their first glimpse of the city below. Though the chapel no longer survives, recent excavations have uncovered burials carbon-dated to 960x1030, and pre-Romanesque wall footings showing the hospital was at least as old as the tenth century.¹ Could the one Anglo-Saxon sherd at Bartlemas point in a similar direction?

Another St Mary Magdalen, a mile-and-three-quarters from the centre of **Cambridge**² was located at Barnwell, ‘the warriors’ spring’, and acquired ownership of Stourbridge Fair, one of the great medieval fairs of England, perhaps of Europe. Boats could travel up the river Cam from the Wash. There was a tradition that the fair already existed in the reign of Cnut.³ The Romanesque chapel is 36.5ft long x 20ft wide (nave), 57ft long including the chancel (12.5ft wide). So the dimensions of its nave are very similar to those of the uni-cellular Bartlemas chapel.

St Bartholomew’s Priory, which occupied a hilltop a mile from the centre of **Sudbury**, Suffolk,⁴ had a chapel with the same overall length as the chapel outside Cambridge. It was not a leper hospital but a retirement home for Westminster Abbey, as Bartlemas became for Oriel. However, at the bottom of the lane on the Bury St Edmunds road, close to the river Stour and surrounded on three sides by priory land, is St Leonard’s almshouses, originally a leper hospital. St Bartholomew’s, on the hill, was known for its springs – probably warm, since they gave rise to morning mist.⁵ It is now surrounded by a housing estate. The origins of the priory are intricately linked with those of St Gregory’s, the probable mother church of Sudbury, set in the triple-vallate Iron Age defences which determined the concentric

¹ Simon Roffer and Phil Marter, ‘Excavations at St Mary Magdalen, Winchester, 2009-2010. Summary Report (Magdalen Hill Archaeological Research Project 2010)’, unpublished report, Department of Archaeology, University of Winchester, 2010.

² Chester Henry Jones, *The Chapel of Saint Mary Magdalene at Sturbridge, Cambridge* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1926); L. F. Salzman (ed.), *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely* [Victoria County History], 2 (1948), pp. 307-08.

³ Graham Jones, ‘The market-place: form, location, and antecedents’, in Sylvia Pinches, David Postles, and Margaret Whalley (eds), *The Market Place and the Place of the Market*, Papers of the Friends of the Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester 9 (2004), pp. 1-27, p. 9, and citations at fn. 32.

⁴ Richard Mortimer (ed.), *Charters of St Bartholomew's Priory, Sudbury* (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1996).

⁵ Barry Wall, Chair of Sudbury Historical Society, pers. comm.

town plan. Tradition says that on the Saturday after the Assumption, the priests of St Gregory's took the statue of Our Lady of Sudbury overnight to a small chapel beyond the borough boundaries, most probably the chapel of St Bartholomew. At sundown on the Sunday the image was processed back through the town, accompanied by sheaves of corn and barrels of wine.⁶

An annual procession on the saint's feast also took place at St Bartholomew's, **Sandwich**, Kent, and together with the Sudbury procession calls to mind the annual procession to the Strowell above Bartlemas, recorded from the late sixteenth century.⁷ The Sandwich hospital lay half-a-mile south of the centre of the medieval Cinque Port, and a mile-and-a-half west of Woodnesborough, 'Woden's Hill'. With its chapel it occupied a part-curvilinear site where the Dover Road from the south meets and crosses the Dole Stream and turns north down to Sandwich. It was under the governance of the mayor, jurats and commonality, and it was they who processed to it annually.⁸

St Bartholomew's, half-a-mile from the East Gate of **Rochester**, Kent,⁹ was founded in 1085, proving there was interest in Bartholomew before Rahere's cure in Rome in 1123. Indeed, there is a strange entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which records King Alfred sending money in 883/4 to the shrine of St Bartholomew and St Thomas 'in India' or 'Iudea' – probably meaning Mesopotamia.¹⁰ The Rochester chapel stands in a quarter-slice of an area which intriguingly extended *across* the line of the London to Canterbury road and also includes its almshouses. The chapel stands on a slight rise in the ground, and the almshouses are very close to the river Medway.

And so to London. Though history says St Bartholomew's Priory, **Smithfield**, and its hospital for the poor (not a leprosaria) was founded by Henry I's court jester RATHERE, a strong tradition associated it with Edward the Confessor. Just outside the Roman and medieval walls of London and a third-of-a-mile from St Paul's cathedral, the Smooth Field beside the river Fleet was an execution place (succeeded by Newgate Prison) as well a site occupied by a market from at least the tenth century. The famous Bartholomew Fair was granted to the priory ten years after its foundation – or probably refoundation, for the Augustinian canons who staffed the priory belonged to an order which appears to have specialised in the revival of decayed minsters and other religious entities. Several other religious orders had houses next door or in close proximity – underlying the spiritual sensitivity of the place. St Bartholomew's was one of the starting-points of the great processions which the City's mayor and aldermen held annually at Whitsuntide.¹¹

Bartlemas shares a number of the characteristics of these other medieval foundations. So from the perspective of Trench One, Sector C, where would I cast my eyes for further investigation? If I had a magic wand I would persuade Oriel College and/or the Allotment Association to let me run a trench across the line of the linear water feature shown on the nineteenth-century maps. I would prospect in the wood for the Strowell Spring – also known as the Hickwell (*hick*, 'helpful', 'beneficial'), according to the late nineteenth-century Oxford scholar Charles Boase.¹² And I would continue to look for other instances of east-end appendages which could throw some light on the two parallel masonry features apparently running east from the chapel. Could they preserve something of a treasury for the relics of Ss Bartholomew, Edward the Confessor, James and Philip, known to have been at Bartlemas? Could the structure be part of a well-house?

St Kenelm's Chapel lies on the Clent Hills south of Birmingham. On the north-west horizon is St Bartholomew's, Wednesbury ('Woden's Hill'), to the north-east Arrowfield near Alvechurch (perhaps a *hearg* monument), and to the south-east St Bartholomew's at Tardebigge, its British place-name meaning 'Seven Spouts', or 'Seven Springs'. Under the east-end altar of Kenelmstow Chapel was a

⁶ *Catholic Herald*, August 14, 1942, p. 5.

⁷ Anthony à Wood, *Survey of the Antiquities of the City of Oxford*, ed. Andrew Clark, Oxfordshire Historical Society 15, 17, 37 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1889-99), 17, pp. 504-17.

⁸ 'The Hospital of St Bartholomew, Sandwich', in William Page (ed.), *A History of the County of Kent* [Victoria County History], 2, pp. 226-27.

⁹ About 65ft long, inc. apse, as rebuilt by Gilbert Scott.

¹⁰ MSS. B, C, D (Cotton Tiberius A.vi, C.i, B.iv); and E (Bodleian Laud 636), 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: An Electronic Edition (Vol 2)', at <<http://asc.jebbo.co.uk/b/b-L.html>>, accessed August 24, 2012.

¹¹ E. A. Webb (ed.), *The Records of St. Bartholomew's Priory [and] St. Bartholomew the Great, West Smithfield*, 1 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1921), pp. 1-18.

¹² Charles W. Boase, *Oxford* (London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1893), p. 30.

well-house, for a spring which now bubbles up a little downhill but which once appears to have flowed down the length of the church.

A similar arrangement left traces at St Michael's, **Whitwell**, in Rutland. The bases of the chancel arches allow drainage of water, for the **White Well** – 'white' probably for 'holy' – rose west of the church, flowed through it, and then downhill to what is now Rutland Water.

So finally to St Bartholomew's on the Tiber Island in **Rome** and the well-head in the sanctuary steps. Water has been an important part of the treatment of leprosy at least from Biblical times, and sacred springs were a stock feature of ancient places of healing. The Tiber Island had been occupied by a temple of the physician-god Asclepius. Such healing places were regularly adapted by successive religions. The Bethesda Pool, where Jesus healed a bedridden man waiting for the angel to disturb the waters, as tradition held, also became an Asclepieion. It is not impossible that Bartlemas, in the fullness of time, may reveal just as a complex history, though in a local context. Watch this space!