

ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

Saints and Place Names (6 of 6)

St Helier

On a visit to Jersey and visiting St Helier, I thought about places named after saints. This brought about this series of Reflections on places named after saints in England, Scotland and Wales in addition to Jersey culminating in the one today on St Helier.

Saints have traditionally been revered as exceptional religious figures and canonised in recognition of their close presence to God. The church has concentrated on honouring those Christians who have died for their faith as witnesses or martyrs. The earliest listed saint associated with Britain was the Roman soldier Alban (St Albans), (a later reflection) who died for his Christian beliefs in the 3rd Century.

During the 4th Century, the canonisation of saints expanded throughout the Church to incorporate a number of other categories. Those who suffered, but were not killed for their faith, were known as Confessors (such as Edward the Confessor 1005 – 1066); virgins who were martyrs to chastity; and even theologians.

In Celtic Christianity, sainthood was often conferred on those who founded new missions, churches and monasteries – this can be seen in the names of so many places in Scotland, Cornwall, Ireland and Wales. The medieval western church with its bureaucratic approach to faith, established a formal approach to canonisation by the papacy – especially from the 13th Century.

After the 16th Century reformation, the Protestants were totally against the thought of any human having an assured place in heaven. They could not embrace the notion of sainthood, but found it difficult to expunge the usage of Saints days in England, so they came to an accommodation with the process by reclassifying saints as historical, exemplary models of Christian virtue. .

Anglicanism remained receptive to the concept of the saints, especially under the influence of the 19th Century Oxford Movement – a breakaway religious movement conceived in 1833 by Anglican clergymen at Oxford University, who wanted to re-introduce certain Roman Catholic doctrines and rituals into the Anglican service.

One of these saints is St Helier (Latin: Helerius). Born in Tongres, Belgium, somewhere between 510 and 520 AD, he arrived in Jersey at some point between 535 and 545 AD, but according to Acta Sanctorum (1), he would have been better known then as either Eletus or Helibertus.

Helier's father, Sigebert (or Sigebard) was a Belgian noble from Tongres. He married Lusegard (or Lusigard), from Swabia, a medieval duchy in the lands that now form south-western Germany. But through seven years of marriage, they did not manage to conceive any children.

ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

As pagans, they prayed to their idols, but their prayers were not answered, so they turned to a Christian tutor named Cunibert who agreed to intercede. However, he made them promise that they would dedicate their first-born child to God as a Christian. Cunibert's prayers were successful, and Sigebert and Lusegard had a son.

Miracles



St Helier Parish Church
© Geraint Jennings - La
Societe Jersiaise

This blessing of a child was soon forgotten, and they reverted to their pagan ways, forgetting their promise. When their son was just seven years old, he became paralysed through an illness, so Sigebert and Lusegard handed their son over to Cunibert in a state of desperation, and the boy was miraculously cured. Cunibert took over the educational needs of Helier by taking him into the church and teaching him.

Before long, Helier started performing miracles. Amongst them, as legend goes, were negotiating with the rabbits that overran his garden and urging them to share the vegetables that grew there; curing blindness, and removing a snake from the mouth of a man who became its host whilst he was asleep.

Although Helier was getting a full education, Sigbert became angry and impatient – he wanted his son to return. Suspicious about what effect the miracles would be having on his son, he had Cunibert killed.

Helier was inconsolable and fled from home, and after much roving and performing of miracles, he felt directed by God to go to Nanteuil in Normandy to find a holy man called Marculf. It was Marculf who baptized him and sent him to an island called Gersut, or Agna (Jersey). At that time, there were only about 30 people remaining on the island as regular attacks by Vikings had steadily reduced the population.

If St Helier was to have spread the word of Christianity to Jersey, it is likely that there was little impact whilst he remained a hermit on the rocky outcrop, but the legend of him walking across the water to Jersey may well have been a powerful way of promoting conversion from the islanders' pagan ways to Christianity. Today, St Helier is still a celebrated legend with an annual pilgrimage being held to the Oratory for a short service on 16 July.

Bernard Kellett

1. Acts of the Saints – a 68 volume encyclopaedic collection of texts examining the lives and legends of Christian saints.