

Of Mary Magdalene Churches

By John Walker, Chair of the Rennes le Chateau Phoenix Society

The church of Mary Magdalene at Rennes Le Chateau in the Languedoc, served as a chapel to the adjacent Hautpoul Chateau. The dedication to this saint was not the original devotion. That honour was bestowed on the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The choice of St Mary Magdalene enjoys a royalist dedication as we will see. This suited very well the villages very famous Priest Berenger Sauniere appointed there in 1885. For he was well known for his anti-republican and pro-royalist stance.

The change of dedication of the church occurred in 1059 (1), just seven years prior to the Norman Conquest. It is not a unique dedication. There are many churches devoted to this saint. The cathedral at Beziers during the Albigensian Crusade was dedicated to her.

Rene D'Anjou took a very serious interest in St Mary Magdalene and there are various legends concerning the house of Anjou and their origins. These seem to tie in with various Grail stories so it is hard to establish where the myths finish and realities begin.

Is it all about descent? There are positive characteristics to associate with the saint. Compassion, devotion, love, faith, ability to change and sustain the change, strength of character, a woman of importance and with influence at a male dominated time, offering hope for those previously sinning and so on...

If we start with the Norman Conquest are there any key figures we can associate with Mary Magdalene churches in Britain?

Ivo de Taillebois (2) is listed in the Falais Roll and some say was William the Conqueror's standard bearer. Certainly, after the Norman Conquest he enjoyed considerable power and oversaw the siege of "Hereward the Wake". He may have been related to William the Conqueror and to the Anjou's. He was the first Baron of Kendal (Kendale) and Sheriff of Lincoln amongst other titles.

It is interesting that Shap Abbey in today's Cumbria is dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. One of the "Taillebois" granted to the Premonstratensian order around 1190, land near Preston Patrick, but for whatever reason they move to the Shap location about twenty miles further north founding the Abbey around 1200 AD (3).

Lincoln Cathedral was built in 1088 but incorporated an earlier church of Mary Magdalene. It was Ivo's second wife, Lucy that had held estates in Lincolnshire as part of her ancestry.

The parish church of Kendal was granted to St Mary's Abbey York. Lucy and her family were patrons of Spalding Priory which was subject to St Nicholas Church Angers.

If Ivo's father was Reinfrid Taillebois Prior of Whitby, his Benedictine community had split and held St Mary's York too. Is this a demonstration Angevin control?

Should we leap forward in time?

The "Taillebois" become the "Talbot" families and Ivo's line also become the Radclyffe/Radclyffe (and their variant spellings).

Near Keswick in Cumbria lies Crosthwaite. Its ancient church is "Kentigern's Church". The church was rebuilt in 1417 by Richard Radclyffe the advisor to Richard the Third of York. He became Lord of Derwentwater (4).

The South-East corner of the Kentigern's church is known as the "Radclyffe Chapel" or the "Magdalene Chapel".

Today you can still see a fragment of the head of St Mary Magdalene in stained glass from the 15th Century set above in the window.



In medieval times Keswick was granted three fairs. One of these was the "Magdalene Fair".

The Radclyffe/Radclyffe family seat at Dilston near Hexham in Northumberland of course had to have a chapel. That chapel too is dedicated to Mary Magdalene.



Dilston Chapel

There is another church dedicated to Mary Magdalen in Cumbria at Broughton in Furness. This church is very old and may go back to Saxon times. In the church are some interesting windows though not necessarily ancient. One of these is of Raban Maurus with his spade. Raban wrote "The Life of Mary Magdalene", although some suggest the work may have been composed in medieval times.

If the work is attributed to Raban, he studied under Alcuin of York who was possibly of noble birth. Tutor and advisor to Charlemagne who was sympathetic to Guilds. Alcuin was also related to Saint Willibrord who had been granted land at Echternach from the Abbess of Oeren, St Irmina. According to legend, St Irmina was a daughter of Dagobert 2nd from his first marriage to an Anglo-Saxon Princess called Matilda. Were Matilda, St Willibrord and Alcuin therefore all related?

Dagobert had an upbringing in exile at Slane in Ireland. Saint Willibrord spent twelve years in Ireland.

Wilfrid of York was responsible for Dagobert's return from exile in 678. Dagobert was though assassinated in 679.

Are there any other Norman, Magdalene dedications?

Cousins to the Radclyffes, "The Clares" from Norman times, of course gave their name to Clare in Suffolk. Dating to 1190 was a Mary Magdalene church. (5)

Richard de Clare was also founder of the Tonbridge Priory during the 1100's also dedicated to Mary Magdalene (6).

At Hereford Cathedral Robert the “Lotharingian” built chapels to St Catherine and St Mary Magdalene before his death in 1059.

Another interesting Mary Magdalene dedication although later is the church on the battlefield at Shrewsbury. Either way there would be a royal dedication from the House of Lancaster or of York from the Wars of the Roses.

Of course, moving into the more modern era we have the present Royal Church of Sandringham in Norfolk.

Footnotes:

(1) A very big thank you to Anneke Koremans “Official Tour Guide” at Rennes Le Chateau for confirming this.

(2) <https://www.geni.com/people/Ivo-de-Taillebois-Sheriff-of-Lincoln-1st-Baron-of-Kendal/6000000005037530650>

(3) (2) <http://shapabbey.co.uk/>

(4) <http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/richardratcliffe.htm>

(5) The Former Chapel of St. Mary Magdalene, Clare, Suffolk - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_former_chapel_of_St_Mary_Magdalene,_Clare,_Suffolk.-geograph.org.uk-268094.jpg

(6) <http://www.tonbridgehistory.org.uk/places/the-priory.htm>