

The Medieval Tower



St. Leonard's, Newton Abbot

By Ken Ballamy

THE MEDIEVAL TOWER OF ST. LEONARD'S, **NEWTON ABBOT,** **1220 – 2004. A HISTORY.**

St. Leonard's Tower or as it is known to most locals, "The Clock Tower", has become the best known landmark of the ancient Market town of Newton Abbot, forming a dignified and truly historic centre piece to the town.

This well loved gothic symbol, together with the Wednesday market has become Newton Abbot's two surviving institutions. Yes this Tower of St. Leonard originally part of a larger building, a chapel, signifies to us today the start of our Town in the early 13th Century.

THE ORIGINS

It was King Richard I who first granted Wolborough Manor to the Wm. De Briwere or William Brewer. Then in 1196 Brewer granted the Manor to Torre Abbey which he founded and nurtured. The Abbots of Torre owning Wolborough Manor decide to build a church at their boundary 'outpost'.

It is not known exactly when work started on it, but was probably about 1220 when there is reference of the footings or foundations of a building sited on the meeting place of three roads.

One, known as the Exeter Road, re Bridge Street, now called Bank Street, once called Keyberry Street now East Street and the last was Wolborough Street where the building was taking place.

The spot was well chosen because not only was this a meeting place of three important roads, for, with the church sited in the middle of the road, main door facing up Wolborough Street put the nave and altar facing east. Thus the alter was correctly orientated.

The probable date of 1220 is reinforced as we know the Abbey told the King that they had found this was a good agricultural area and asked for his permission for a weekly market.

In 1220 the Abbots of Torre received from King Henry III a grant to hold a Wednesday market. They also received from the King the right to hold three Fairs.

The Cattle Fair on June 24th a second one, first time held on the 11th September, and then on the first Wednesday in a full week of September, we still call 'The Cheese and Onion Fayre'.

The third and largest three day Fair the 5th /6th and 7th of November, which was the eve, day and morrow of the Feast of Saint Leonard.

This came to be known as 'The Cloth Fair' and apparently became the most popular Fair being the most well attended, especially by the ladies.

The first concrete mention of the church is from Bishop Granisson of Torre writing in his register, dated May 29th 1350 he refers to the building as "Capella Sc; Leonardi apud Nywaton Abbatus".

In English "The Chapel of Saint Leonard upon Newton Abbot", so our overlords at Torre gave the Town its name and thankfully its Wednesday market, which brought prosperity to the new Town.

Indeed the grant for a Wednesday market was the start of the first of Newton Abbot's two growth and expansion periods, the second being the coming of the Railway in 1846.

The chapel of St. Leonard was a small, plain building. The Tower consists of two stages of unbuttressed grey limestone from Dartmoor.

As a Norman Tower it is unique in being only 60 feet tall (most Norman Towers are between 90 to 100 feet) The Nave measured only 55 feet long by 20 foot wide, with a seating capacity for 191 persons. And so we come to the most asked question of visitors to the Tower "who was Saint Leonard?" Well we must thank King Richard I, Coeur de Lion for his sacred vow. 1192 Richard was returning from his most successful third crusade, when his ship was wrecked and he was forced to travel home by land, he was captured by Prince Leopold of Austria.

1193 Richard is handed over to Emperor Henry V of Germany and held for ransom, after 15 months this was paid by England and bankrupted us.

Worse, on its way to Henry the money was 'milked' by all who handled it, so on receipt Henry gave Richard a good thrashing and sent him on his way.

Richard no longer felt he was 'Richard the Lionheart' – now, with no clothes, no money, no weapons or horse, his spirits low he found himself at the spot where Saint Leonard was martyred.

He fell to his knees and prayed that if he got back and sat on his throne once more, he would, to show his thankfulness dedicate Churches throughout England to the name of Saint Leonard.

Both Richard and his successors honoured this vow – St. Leonard is the patron saint of prisoners.

Torre Abbey was created to remember, pray and praise Richard the Lionheart, so it was perfectly natural that they built and named their new church Saint Leonard's, Torre Abbey belonged to the Premonstratensian Order, The Order founded in 1121 by St. Norbert at Premontre near Laon in Northern France.

We know that from the beginnings of our Chapel, the Abbots of Torre had sent a group of four Canons to Newton Abbot, to reside and run St. Leonard's.

The Canons (as the Premonstratensian Monks were known) wore a white habit and cap and were often called 'The White Canons'; unlike ordinary Monks, they did not always stay within the cloisters of the Abbey, but served as village Priests and Missionaries in the local community.

By the 15th Century the St. Leonard's Canons enthusiasm to go forth and preach was one of the things that triggered squabbles between the Abbots of Torre and the Burgesses of the Town.

Every day, all four Canons would set out to crusade, each to a different point of the compass leaving the chapel unmanned.

In their absence the Newton Abbot Burgesses would put a clergyman in St. Leonard's in order to baptise, marry, bury etc. The Abbot was not pleased, this was the last straw.

In 1411 it is recorded that the Abbot William Werton took out a lawsuit against the Burgesses of the town, for their introduction of clergymen into the Chapel against the interests of Mother

Church and for preventing the Abbots Bailiffs from levying a toll on the Market.

The Justices of Exeter Assizes decided that the Abbot's clearly had tenure of the Chapel and the Market but that the townspeople were entitled to free use of the Chapel for worship.

THE REFORMATION

The dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 by Henry VIII was not the end of St. Leonard's, rather one person associated with both Torre Abbey and the Newton Abbot Chapel came to the fore.

John Gaverok had been Steward to the Abbot responsible for the managing of Newton Abbot for the Abbey and resided with his wife and three daughters in Wolborough Street Manor House. Now instead of running the Town for the deposed Abbots he was charged with running the Town for the King, which pleased him because of an increase in salary to three guineas (twice what he was paid by the Abbot).

Six years later John Gaverok at auction purchased the whole of Newton Abbot, lock, stock and barrel for £592.14s.2d. That was Manor House, Town Houses, Market and of course Saint Leonard's Chapel. John Gaverok now Lord of the Borough moved to Forde House – his three daughters now marriageable age were responsible for bringing society to the Town.

THE RALEIGH FAMILY

One of these socially prominent families was the seafaring Raleigh's, Sir Walters half brother lived in a house on the site of the present 'Union Inn' close to St. Leonard's Tower.

The presence of the distinguished Raleigh's warranted their own private door on the South side of St. Leonard's Church, leading to their own 'private pew'. (Newton Abbot Town & GWR Museum, St Paul's Road, has returned the door to the Tower and can be seen on the wall opposite the main door).

Between the front door of the Church and the Market, The Market Cross. This was the customary position of "The Market Cross" it was there to remind all "you are in the presence of God in your dealings".

Throughout manorial times the townspeople would gather at St. Leonard's for the official news to find a noticed pinned to the Church door. It would be read out to the majority who could not read.

In 1588 at the time of the Spanish Armada large crowds are reported to have gathered around the tower to hear of the English victory. The people were jubilant because they knew our ships were manned mainly by Westcountry sailors.

Two years later 1590 till 1591 there was nothing to be joyful about for the plague had struck.

The church register shows us that the previous average of two burials per month in St. Leonard's leapt to an average of over 20.

THE CIVIL WAR

During these terrible times the town of Newton Abbot was for Parliament it hardly had a choice, for in residence at Forde House was the family of Parliamentary General Sir William Waller, who termed the War, was 'one without an enemy'.

He played a big part at the start in the first half of the War being in 1643 appointed Commander of the Armies of the Western Association.

However in 1648 because of his Presbyterian beliefs he was caught in the 'prides purge' which stripped him of command and so he 'retired' to Forde House.

Now came the second half of the Civil War when Cromwell took full control. Cromwell himself was in the Town, this could have been a bad time for our Chapel.

Fortunately St. Leonard's had always been a very low Church and was plain inside just the old worn oak seats.

Indeed it was not until 1754 the Feoffees placed a marble font in St. Leonard's there was no font there previously.

So its plainness saved St. Leonard's from any desecration from the strict Cromwellians. However they had banned prayer-book services and people could no longer be married in the church. The banns were put up in Market and the marriage was witnessed by magistrates. The Court House, Newton Abbot's first being on the site of the old 'Globe Hotel' re-Austin's shop.

KING WILLIAM III

I have found a significant number of overseas visitors make an effort to come to St. Leonard's Tower, specifically to see where Prince William or Orange's declaration was made.

The students are from the Universities of Finland, Holland, Denmark and Switzerland and have learnt about 'The Glorious Revolution' at school because their nation was so involved.

This declaration seems to be the best known event directly affecting St. Leonard's and happened after the landing of William Prince of Orange at Brixham.

The event is recorded on an octagonal, granite stone, originally being the base of the Old Market Cross dating back to the 13th Century.

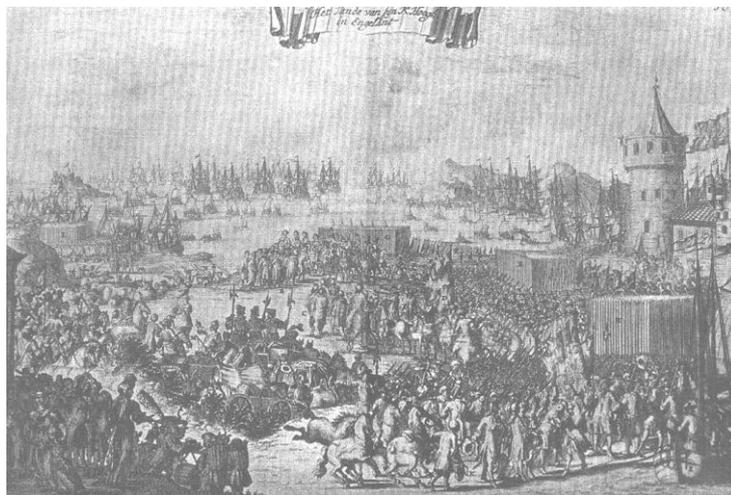
The stone records that on the 5th November 1699 the then Rector of Wolborough, the Rev. John Reynell, read out William's famous declaration "The liberties of England and the Protestant Religion I will maintain"

Historians though sure the event took place here have always doubted that John Reynell read it, as it is thought that should the bloodless Revolution have failed, he would have feared the consequences.

His reading of it would have constituted the Act of Treason, punishable by being hung drawn and quartered.

Historians are now sure it was read out by the appointed Royal Chaplain, Gilbert Burnet who had a principal hand in drawing up the Prince's Declarations.

The recorded date on the Stone should refer to William's official landing at Brixham on the 5th November 1688.



It was Wednesday, the 8th November 1699 a drizzly Market Day – in other words a typical Newton Abbot Market Day.

The bells of St. Leonard's were rung and the people lined what we now call East Street but was then called Keyberry Street. Newtonians must have felt excited, waiting for William, but when the Prince's cavalcade finally came into view it must have been heart stopping. Even today it would make a magnificent spectacle the head of the column came out of Keyberry Street into Wolborough Street at the side of the Church who's bells were ringing a welcome.

Cavalcade was led by the Earl of Macclesfield in body armour and mounted on a black horse, in his helmet was a plume of black ostrich feathers, his sword was drawn and held in the salute position.

Why the Earl of Macclesfield? He had estates at Buckfastleigh, and was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Behind the Earl came 200 horse artillery accoutred and mounted of Flanders steeds with head pieces and armour and attended by 200 negroes wearing plumes of feathers.

This was no everyday run of the mill artillery this was a corps elite!

Equipped with good fine mobile and pounder field cannon they were highly skilled and feared.

William longed for a peaceful revolution but if someone wanted a fight this corps of artillery would be the Prince's right fist so troublemakers look at this deterrent!

Next in the procession came 200 Finlanders clothed in bear and beaver skins, with black armour and broad swords.

Then followed 50 gentlemen and as many pages to attend and support the Prince's Standard which was inscribed 'God and the Protestant Religion'

Then came 50 led War Horses wearing their battle armour with two grooms to each.

Now came Prince William, mounted on his favourite mare, a snow-white charger, dressed in a complete suit of bright armour with a plume of white ostrich feathers in his helmet.

Eyewitnesses have said how impressed they had been with first sight of this Prince from across the water.

He spoke English with a strong Dutch accent, but the he spoke up to six languages fluently.

Short with stooped shoulders, asthmatic with a consumptive cough, he was in constant pain which resulted in a face with deep lines. He was nevertheless a first class soldier. Now as he rode in his cavalcade looking every inch a Prince, there were forty two running footmen by his side.

Close behind William was attended by 200 gentlemen and pages who were mounted. There followed next in the cavalcade a large body of men, 3.000 Swiss, they were mercenaries of course, and to a man were catholic. In the main they were skilled with the deadly crossbow and in effect made the Prince's left fist if you wanted a fight!

They were here paid for and with the Pope's blessing, for although he would prefer a Catholic to sit on the throne of England, the Pope was not pleased with James's behaviour and his plotting with Louis X1V.

The Swiss were followed by 500 Danish Dragoons, all volunteers.

Next came the Prince's highest ranking unit – The Dutch Blue Guards, 600 of them their leader eighty year old General Marshall Schomberg.

There followed the remaining part of the large expeditionary force, supply wagons etc totalling 30,000 persons.

Now while the column was halted the Prince and escort came to the Market Cross.

On Market day 8th November 1688 after the Prince's famous Declaration had been made in what must have been a magnificent and colourful event he with escort joined the column to march back up Keyberry Street.

The future King lodged for the night at Forde House home of the Courtenay family while his large army was camped on Milber Down.

18TH CENTURY

The Market place continued to function to the West of St. Leonard's until mid-eighteenth Century when in 1751 it was sold to one Gilbert Yard, who gave it to his nephew Thomas Lane, he being responsible for the Market being moved to its present situation. The ancient Market Stone Cross remained in its original position.

In 1772 six new bells were fitted in St. Leonard's – these would have replaced the original 'call to prayer bells'

DEMOLITION OF CHAPEL AND REBUILDING NEW ST LEONARD'S CHURCH

By 1827 the Chapel having no money spent on it became neglected, the end East wall containing the Alter began to collapse.

The Feoffees collected enough money from the good people of Newton Abbot to employ a mason who rebuilt part of the East wall. Shortly after this the roof began to leak, to the Vicar the Rev. Robert Bradford this was the last straw! He informed all including the Church authorities he was refusing to take divine service in such a dilapidated Chapel.

A group of people associated with a common aim assured him a new Church was to be built on the site of the old parsonage in Wolborough Street. On June 4th 1834 it was resolved that

the old Chapel should not be taken down before the new one was erected and divine service performed therein, then the old Chapel could be taken down.

A strong petition from Newtonians insisted the Tower be left standing and preserved.

By the 20th September 1834 work started on the 'new' Church – it was finished in two years at a cost of £2,400.

On the 24th November 1836 to a full congregation Dr. Henry Phillpotts, Lord Bishop of Exeter consecrated the 'new' St. Leonard's.

Sadly by 1997 the new St. Leonard's was found by the Church authorities to be surplus to requirements and on the 5th October 1997 found it packed with people for the last service of thanksgiving.

However it is rewarding for one to look inside as the stone pulpit is still in position, this has three figures curved at its front, the centre figure, bearing chains is Saint Leonard Patron Saint of Prisoners.

Prior to the demolition of the old chapel a public auction was held to dispose of unwanted furniture and fittings.

The centre arch piece of the rood screen was bought by George Templer builder of Stover Canal who was now constructing a new small mansion at Sanford Orleigh, having sold the old family home of Stover House to the Duke of Somerset.

The carved wood centre piece of the rood screen was the most ornate thing ever to be seen inside the plain interior of St. Leonard's.

Now in Sanford Orleigh it was to be made a centrepiece, mounted over a large mirror which was over the big fireplace.

In 1836 the old Chapel was removed and stone from its walls being used to make good the resulting hole in the east side of the Tower.

It was about this time when the old wooden 'shambles' (a slaughter house on the ground floor and dwellings on the first) on the old Wolborough Street Market site, caught fire.

It is reported that not one of the watching joyful crowd made any attempt to extinguish the flames and it was completely burnt to the ground.

1837 the Gas Works for Newton Abbot were established in Marsh Road and by the middle of the 19th Century gas mains had been laid in main roads to supply the street lights.

About this time, a magnificent cast iron lamp standard was fitted to it with three vertical gas lamps at the top and must have looked wonderful when lit, like a candelabra!

Unfortunately it was during this time, when the actual Cross was separated from its base and disappeared.

Late 19th Century Mr W.J. Watts J.P., subscribed to a granite drinking fountain, 50 inches in diameter which was placed outside the Tower, roughly where the Chapel's front had been.

He also, good intended but not with much thought planted ivy round the base of the Tower which by 1900 almost strangled it.

Fortunately for us the fabric of the Tower is better protected and presented today.

In 1874 a new clock was placed in St. Leonard's Tower at a cost of £118, thus giving the building a new purpose for its existence. The two hexagonal dials did not last long and the clock was soon fitted with the more conventional round face dials.

By 1874 the Tower had once again fallen into a state of disrepair and neglect, it was decided to remove the old wooden staircase and restore the stone stairs.

It is an indication of the amount of money available to do this restoration when we look at the mix of hard granite with some blocks of soft red sandstone incorporated in the present staircase.

This work of restoration was to be completed by 1887 to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, and as that day approached there was frantic efforts to 'up grade' the Tower to make it a suitable dedication to this grand occasion.

The Feoffees donated £10 to illuminate the Tower and clock dials with gas lamps.

Newtonians collected for two new bells to be ordered from the Whitechapel Foundry.

The existing six bells in St. Leonard's Tower to be re-hung and the two new bells to join them and complete the octave.

Each of the new bells have cast into their rims the lines of Lord Tennyson's poem:-

***“Ring out the old, ring in the new
Ring happy bells across the snow
The year is going let it go,
Ring out the false, ring in the true”***

A Carillon Machine was also installed, at a cost of £375 which five times a day played 21 tunes including “God Save the Queen” and “The Bells of St. Leonard”

The restoration and new works were completed in time for the princely sum of £650, the event remembered on a plaque on the Tower.

The last great event for the Tower before the Duke and Duchess of York visited the area, the Towns children were presented with a medal each. One side bearing a portrait of the Duke and Duchess and on the other a reproduction of St. Leonard's Tower.

THE 20TH CENTURY

By 1904 it was the turn of the beautiful lamp standard on the East side of the Tower to be altered.

The Newton Abbot Urban (Council) Electric Supply Company Electricity Works in Teign Road started to produce D.C. power in 1901 and now the Town had a mains cable at the Bank Street/Courtenay Street junction.

The by now much loved cast three gas lantern pillar was taken out of the Old Stone Market Cross base and a less attractive but nice and modern new cast iron single electric light lantern substituted.

By 1913 the also much loved Carillon Machine was in trouble, it needed to go back to its makers for cleaning and skilled maintenance, so it was dismantled for its journey to London.

Unfortunately this would be the last Newton Abbot saw or heard of it because it disappeared in the troubled years of the First World War.

The last tune it is reported to have played before it was stripped from the Tower was a hymn written by a North Devon Vicar "Now the day is over" a significant omen.

Also with St. Leonard's, right up to the outbreak of War in 1914, one of its bells was used to sound the traditional curfew each night at eight.

This had been purely symbolic of course, but something else of Newton's history was disappearing.

The medieval wood stocks once situated outside the Church Tower are now kept safely locked inside.

During the Second World War all church bells were banned from being rung, thus no ringing of bells continued for some years after the War. There had been very little fabric repair to the Tower, but by the 1960's the Town was growing prosperous and people were taking an interest in 'The Clock Tower' once more.

There had been talk of completely demolishing it as it was a traffic nuisance, but the Tower needed so much attention to the building itself, and to the bells, if they were to ring again.

Came the problem, came the man, a new champion stepped forward to protect the St. Leonard's Tower.



Councillor Arthur Shobbrock J.P., C.A., was this benefactor, his dream had been to restore the Tower so that the bells could be heard once more.

In May 1968 he started an appeal amongst the Townspeople by asking the Trustees of Wolborough to give the Tower to the Town, and by further guaranteeing that the "£2,000 needed for the work should be raised.

The clock had a complete overhaul, new dials and a new electric motor fitted so it no longer needed a man to regularly wind it.

A handpicked team of U.D.C. craftsmen replaced the floors, renewed the roof and restored the fabric of the Tower under the direction of the U.D.C. Surveyor, Mr B.A.C. Mole.

All the necessary timber and cement was generously donated by the late Mr W.J.B. Watts, JP.

The bells were returned by Whitechapel having been cleaned and retuned they were re-hung in the repaired belfry.

Sadly Councillor Shobbrock did not live to hear them ring once more, but thankfully a plaque to this benefactors efforts is displayed on the East side of the Tower for all to see.

The last happy event came for the Tower at 2000, when for the Millennium the clock was 'upgraded' by fitting a 'spring reserve'. So on a failure of the public electricity supply it will still keep time for 5 days, but best of all now St. Leonard's clock will strike and chime.

One thing is very clear to me, studying the 700 years history of Newton Abbot's St. Leonard's Tower, no matter what fate, what bad luck befalls it, the people 'Newtonians' have always made sure it will survive and flourish -

Long Live St. Leonard's Clock Tower.

THE ST. LEONARD'S TOWER'S "CANNON"

These two weapons seem to fascinate many and they ask questions about them, especially children the 'known' history (taken from a brass rubbing on their carriage plates) both were – "captured by the Royal Navy from Chinese Pirates in the River Yangtse on 5th November 1874"

They were reportedly brought back to the Prince William Yard at Devonport where they rested until the yard apprentices put them onto new carriages. Some time at the turn of the Century its thought to be 1901 when Highweek consented to send representatives to the Council making the U.D.C. complete, the two pieces were presented to Newton Abbot. They were fixed onto concrete plinths, one each side of the ornamental Fish Pond at the top of Courtenay Park.

There they remained until after the Second World War, in 1945, when their carriages had rotted. Soon placed on new ones they were then fixed and put on display at St. Leonard's Tower.

For the technically minded – they are not what armourers know as 'cannon', they are 'Carronades of cast iron with conventional Trunnions' made at the Carron Foundry at Falkirk, Stirling, Scotland.

They date from the mid nineteenth Century and are of a pattern produced in large quantities and taken into use by Merchant ships. The Carronade is basically a nautical weapon, a short gun which required a crew of only two men to work the piece.

KEN A. BALLAMY 2003.



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