

## Cartmel – A Village History – Cartmel Priory.

This Village History is part of the CPLHS Village Histories Project. It is a history of Cartmel and the Priory written by B.E. Perry for inclusion in the visitors guide for the Priory - Cartmel Priory Ancient Jewel, Living Church. It is an historical overview of the Priory and village. The visitors guide with the full transcript, accompanying time line and photographs can be obtained from the Priory Shop.

### 1. In the Beginning

The earliest mention of Cartmel in historical records occurs almost 500 years before the foundations of Cartmel Priory were laid, and tells us that in about 680 AD the Saxon King Egfrith of Northumbria granted to St. Cuthbert, later to become Bishop of Lindisfarne, “the land which is called Cartmel and all the Britons in it”.

So began the Christian era in this wild and isolated part of the country. The living conditions of the sparse, mainly farming communities in the area were difficult and within a few years they had to endure the hardship of the Viking invasions and settlement, which naturally had an effect on the nature and genealogy of the population. Under the civilizing influence of the church, however, things gradually improved and by the end of the Norman period it was a fairly peaceable community. In 1189, William Marshal founded an Augustinian Priory in Cartmel.



### 2. Who was William Marshal?

William Marshal was the fourth son of a relatively minor landowner, who was also a hereditary marshal (a royal official, originally in charge of the king’s horses). He was taken as a hostage at the age of five by King Stephen in 1152 as surety for his father’s good behaviour following John Marshal’s defection to the Empress Matilda during the civil war. He spent some time in Stephen’s Angevin court, becoming a great favourite.

After his return to his family, he was put in the care of a powerful Norman nobleman, William de Tancarville, to be taught the knightly arts, at which he excelled, becoming well-known for his success at tournaments. He was knighted in 1167 and shortly afterwards was taken into the household of Queen Eleanor, who was clearly impressed by his charm and knightly skills.

In 1170 he joined the household of King Henry II's eldest son, known as The Young Henry, or The Young King, as his tutor in arms, and actually knighted him in 1173. Young Henry died in 1183, his dying wish being that William should take his Crusader's cloak to the Holy Land in fulfilment of his own earlier pledge. This William did and spent at least the next two years in Jerusalem. There is no record of exactly what he did in the Holy Land, but there is no doubt that his experiences there had a marked effect on him spiritually, including a firm desire to eventually become a Templar.

On his return home he entered the service of King Henry II, and in 1187 was rewarded with the royal estate of Cartmel, roughly corresponding to what is now called the Cartmel Peninsula. For the first time in his life he was a landowner!

In 1189 Henry II died, and his son Richard became king. One of his first acts was to grant to William the hand in marriage of Isabel de Clare, daughter and heiress of the late Earl of Striguil (Chepstow), known as Strongbow. Through that marriage William Marshal became a very wealthy man, later Earl of Pembroke, and eventually Regent of England after King John died, leaving in William's charge his nine-year-old son who became King Henry III.

### 3. Why an Augustinian Monastery in Cartmel?

It is always unwise to speculate as to why any person chooses to follow a particular course of action, but it is reasonable to assume that gratitude to God for his recent good fortune was at least one of the reasons why William Marshal founded a monastery in his newly acquired land of Cartmel.

He decided that the monks should come from Bradenstoke Priory in Wiltshire, where his father was buried, which meant that they would be Canons Regular of the Order of St. Augustine. Amongst other instructions in his foundation charter, he stated that prayers and a mass be said on a daily basis in perpetuity for the souls of himself, his family and his heirs, and also for the souls of King Henry II, the Young Henry, and King Richard. The charter also stipulated that an altar and a priest should be provided for worship by the local people, in effect their own parish church within the monastic site. This condition later saved the Priory church from destruction at the dissolution of the monasteries in 1537.

It was also stated in the foundation charter that the Priory should never be raised to the status of an abbey. This was so that he, as the original benefactor, would retain certain privileges which would otherwise pass to the crown. History suggests that he was very protective of his first endowment, as is witnessed at the end of the foundation charter where it states:

"This house I have founded for the increase of Holy Religion, giving to it every kind of liberty that the mouth can utter or the heart of man conceive; whosoever therefore shall cause loss or injury to the said house or it's inmates may he incur the curse of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the other saints of God, beside my particular malediction."

#### 4. A Place in History.

We know that a small chapel existed in the Cartmel area before the new Prior and his canons arrived from Bradenstoke and they probably found it in the centre of the valley on a slightly raised piece of land, almost completely surrounded by a shallow lake, one of many which then existed in the well-wooded, marshy valley bottom. Nearby ran the river Eea, with a ford which was the only place in the valley where the river could be crossed.

The chapel was built on an outcrop of solid rock, and the canons decided that this would provide a good foundation for their own new church. Starting with the Chancel, which would be their place of worship, they soon set to work, using stone from a quarry just over two miles away, near the coast. The stone from this site is Carboniferous sandstone and occurs in several distinct layers, which vary considerably in their properties. It is clear that the master mason in charge of the work chose exactly the right type of stone for each part of the building - light-coloured for the inside walls, good weathering properties for the exterior etc., and to him we probably owe the fact that the church still stands proudly today after more than 800 years.

In its original form the church would have consisted of the Chancel, two side chapels, the two transepts, the Crossing with a single squat lantern tower above, and probably a very short Nave without side aisles. The east wall of the Chancel, where the great east window sits today, would have had upper and lower sets of three lancet windows, with the triforium continuing round between them. The side chapel to the north, now called the Piper Choir, was much as it is today, but the one to the south, the Town Choir, where the local people worshipped, was originally of matching size, i.e. was shorter and narrower than at present. As both side chapels were shorter than the Chancel, there was room for a lancet window on each side wall of the Chancel to throw light on the altar.

The other buildings necessary for a monastic establishment were placed, as was customary, on the south side of the church, the chapter house opposite the Chancel, dormitory and refectory adjoining the South Transept, and cloister next to the Nave. Other buildings such as the infirmary, Prior's lodgings, guest accommodation, bakery, cellars, etc. would be nearby, as would a mill and fishponds. All this would have taken many years to complete and was probably not finished much before the mid-1200s.

There were not many visitors to this rather remote region in those days but some very unwelcome ones appeared in 1316; Scottish raiders who ravaged the countryside. They came again in 1322, this time led by the scottish king Robert the Bruce. The Priory itself was left intact but they caused so much damage that the value of its property was reduced to less than a fifth of what it had been.

## 5. Expansion and Growth

During the early to mid-1300s, the Town Choir was enlarged to its present size to accommodate the chantry tomb of the first Lord Harrington, who died in 1347, and his wife Joan. The tomb would have contained two sections for the effigies of the lord and his lady, which can be seen today, and two more sections beyond their feet for an altar and space in front of it for a priest to say masses for their souls. It would have been free-standing, probably at the western end of the Town Choir. At this time also the magnificent stained glass Jesse window in the Decorated style was installed in the new east wall, and the lancet window in the Chancel wall blocked up. The enlargement of the Town Choir would have made it necessary to raise the roof; two beautifully decorated corbels which can be seen high up on the north wall show where the original roof line would have been.

In 1390 a Papal Bull stated that the Priory was in “a ruinous condition”. This cannot have applied to the church itself, of course, but rather to the rest of the monastic buildings. These, being to the south of the church, were not built on the same solid foundations, but on much softer alluvial deposits, which had probably become waterlogged over the years, so that the buildings on them were beginning to collapse. Because of this, the early 1400s saw the start of an extremely extensive (and expensive!) rebuilding programme, involving replacing all these buildings on the north side of the church, a feature almost unique among monastic establishments.

Also, at about this time, the quaintly carved misericords, the canons' tip-up seats, were put in at either side of the Chancel, the great east window was installed, possibly paid for by a Harrington bequest, and the second stage of the tower was built.

This, set diagonally on the lower stage, is unique in this country, and is thought to have been added because the main arches of the Crossing were starting to “spring”, i.e. crack apart at the apex.

This could be counteracted by adding a heavy weight over the top of each arch, which is exactly what adding the second stage of the tower in this way would do. Finally the Nave was rebuilt in its present form. In the mid-1400s it is clear that money was getting very short and this is reflected by the rather poor quality of the masonry in the Nave.

At the end of this century, in 1487, Cartmel was in the national news for the only time in its history. The pretender Lambert Simnel and an army of German mercenaries and Irishmen, having landed from Ireland at Piel and been joined by a few of the disaffected local gentry, marched through Furness and Cartmel on their way to a disastrous defeat by King Henry VII at Stoke-on Trent.

## 6. The Priory Closes and is Saved.

In the early 1530s, King Henry VIII began the process which was to end in the dissolution of all the monasteries in England. The first step was to carry out a survey of all the property which they

owned, and this was completed by 1535. Cartmel Priory was assessed at the very low figure of £91.6s.3d., placing it firmly in the company of the smaller monasteries, which were to be the first to be taken over. The Priory protested against this and a further, fuller survey increased the figure to £212.12s.10d. In spite of this, at some time in 1537, the Priory was closed down and the canons dismissed.

The closure of the monasteries caused a great deal of anger among the people, especially in the North of England, and resulted in an armed rising, beginning in Yorkshire, known as The Pilgrimage of Grace. Because of this, the canons were permitted to return for a while, but things soon went wrong, a fight taking place when Thomas Holcroft, who had been given the Priory by the King, ordered his men to remove the grain from the Priory barn.

Some of the canons and local people naturally tried to stop this, but were overpowered, and six of the canons and sixteen local men were taken off to Lancaster to stand trial for treason against the King. It seems unthinkable to us today, but an Act had been passed which made it treasonable even to “wish, will or desire” harm to the king, and four of the canons and ten of the laymen were found guilty of treason and executed.

Before long the leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace were arrested and dealt with appropriately, and the king regained control over the country. The royal officials who came to Cartmel to take over the Priory and its possessions faced a problem however, because the local people claimed, quite rightly, that the Priory church was in fact their parish church, and should not be taken down with the rest of the monastic buildings. The officials therefore asked for guidance from the authorities: “Item for the parish church of Cartmel whether it stand unplucked down or no?” to which the reply came: “Ordered by Mr. Chancellor of the Duchy that it stand still”. So the church was saved in its entirety for future generations, one of only a very few monastic churches in the country to survive complete and in regular use to this day.

The only other building remaining from the original Priory complex is the gatehouse. Many of the stones from the domestic buildings and walls were obviously used by the villagers for housing, and can be identified by the carved stones in some of the older properties.

None of the records of the Priory up to the time of the Dissolution have survived, so all we know about this part of its history has had to be gleaned from outside sources, which are not all that plentiful. From then on, however, parish registers were kept by the parish priest and since 1597 we also have the churchwardens’ records of the work carried out on the church.

At the Dissolution, the lead had probably been stripped off the roof of the Chancel, the part of the church used only by the monks, and it remained in this condition for about the next eighty years. However, starting in 1618, George Preston, the owner of Holker Hall and Lord of the Manor of Cartmel, with some help from the parishioners, had a new roof put on the Chancel. He also had fine new moulded plaster ceilings installed and provided a magnificent carved screen, new carved canopies over the choir stalls, and “a paire of organes of great valewe” (actually a single

instrument, but with separate keyboards for the two sets of pipes). All this work brought the whole church back into very good condition.

Also at some time between 1537 and 1597, the Harrington tomb was removed from its former position, and the two sections which contained the effigies were placed in a specially prepared opening in the north wall of the Town Choir, incidentally destroying in the process part of the sedilia on the Chancel side of the wall. This may have been done as a result of an Act of King Edward VI in 1547, which forbade the use of chantry chapels.

The old church registers show that the number of burials in the parish increased dramatically in certain years, notably 1597, 1623 and 1670. No mention is made of the causes of this, but it is known that there were outbreaks of the plague in various places over the whole area at about these times, and this was almost certainly the case in Cartmel. It is also known that there had been very bad harvests in the years leading up to 1623 and some of the poorest people had actually died of starvation, so this, together with the fact that malnutrition would have made many people more susceptible to infection, may well have been a contributory factor.

In 1643, during the Civil War, a troop of Cromwell's men were in the area, and they quartered their horses in the Priory overnight, angering the local people. While they were in the church they also caused quite a lot of damage, including the destruction of the organ donated by George Preston. Ten years later, in 1653, the famous Quaker, George Fox, visited the Priory, intending to have discourse with the vicar, but the latter declined to meet him, clearly realising that he would almost certainly be bested in any argument with this redoubtable preacher.

The porch outside the main south door into the Nave had been rebuilt in 1626, and a new Vestry was built in 1678 over the old sacristy at the east end of the Piper Choir, bringing the east wall of this part of the church into line with that of the Chancel and the Town Choir. These were the last structural alterations to the fabric of the church.

During the latter half of the next century the church became neglected, most of the incumbents being non-resident in the parish, and by 1810 it was reported that "a new Preston begins to be required" as it had "the appearance of something between a cathedral and a ruin", with "damp floors, green walls and rotting beams". The floors were also extremely uneven, having been used for many years for burials, which were covered with memorial stones of different sizes and thicknesses. By this time also there were wooden balconies in the North Transept and north Nave aisle, a three-decker pulpit against the SW pillar of the Crossing, and an organ on top of the screen.

## 7. The Restoration Begins

Fortunately a new vicar, The Reverend Thomas Remington, was appointed in 1827, and he soon set about a complete restoration of the church, starting with reflagging the floors and cleaning off the thick coats of whitewash which covered all the walls. He died in 1855, but the work was continued by his successor and by the time it was finished, all the roofs had been

repaired or replaced, the old plaster ceilings had been removed and a fine new timber ceiling put up in the Town Choir, which now housed a new organ. The old balconies, box pews and three-decker pulpit were also removed and new oak pews provided in the Nave and transepts, where most of the old glazing was replaced by beautiful new stained glass. A new carved stone pulpit and font were also installed.

In 1932, a fine new reredos designed by the Warham guild was placed in the Chancel behind the altar, so that by this time the church interior looked very much as it does today. The 1900s also saw minor improvements such as the installation of electric lighting, a sound system and a new heating system. In 1988/9, to mark the 800th anniversary of the Priory, the old timber bell frame was replaced by a larger cast-iron frame to accommodate four new bells and the two existing trebles, as well as the four older bells, two of which dated from 1661, the others from 1723 and 1729.

Due to its remote and rather secluded position, the Priory has been comparatively unaffected by many of the great historic events which caused disruption in many other parts of the country and its own history of over 800 years of daily worship has, we believe, given it that air of peace and tranquility which is so often remarked upon by our visitors.

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note 1: This paper was written to provide the source for several chapters in the 2011 publication of the Cartmel Priory *Ancient Jewel, Living Church* guide for visitors and published here with permission from Rev Nick Devenish.