

# **“The Impact of Magna Carta on Cartmel since 1215”**

**Stuart Harling**

## **Transcript of a talk given as part of the Magna Carta 800<sup>th</sup> Celebrations at Cartmel Priory on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2015**

My wish is to spend 20 minutes (or so) with you outlining the impact of Magna Carta in Cartmel since 1215 and then my colleagues from the Society will show you round the village, pointing out buildings of historical interest.

I shall divide my brief talk into **three parts**:

**firstly**, indicating why we celebrate Magna Carta here in Cartmel and giving a glimpse of the village in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century

**then**, giving a brief idea of the enduring concepts of Magna Carta

and,

**finally**, showing the influence of those concepts on Cartmel by briefly indicating some buildings and sites which you will see as you go round the village.

### **PART ONE: Why we celebrate Magna Carta in Cartmel and an introduction to the village**

#### **1. What do we know of early Cartmel ?**

It is recorded by **The Reverend John Dickinson** (a scholarly historian who lived in Cartmel and wrote extensively on the village and the area, researching and writing in the second half of the twentieth century) that the Roman army, led by Agricola, drove the Brigantes over Morecambe Bay and entered Cartmel in the same year that Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii and Herculaneum: that was 79 AD.

Egfrith, King of the Northumbrian Angles, granted to St Cuthbert in about 673 (677) AD “the whole of the lands of Cartmell with all the Britons in it” and it is likely that a church, therefore, existed here in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, possibly at Kirkhead, Kents Bank. That would have been only small & made of wood. We have no trace of it now.

The derivation of the village name is Scandinavian and means “sand bank by rocky ground”. The village has also been known as “Churchtown” and “Kirkby in Cartmell”.

#### **2. Let us now come to the time of Magna Carta.**

**Sir William Marshal** was one of the most significant knights of the time and was given “the land of Cartmel” in 1185 when Richard I was on the throne.

He married Isabel de Clare in about 1188 (she was an enormously wealthy lady) and he was made **Earl of Pembroke** in the following year. In 1189 (some say 1190) (possibly as a gesture of thanks to The Almighty for his good fortune) he founded **The Priory in Cartmel**.

**King John** reigned from 1199 and, following his accession, confirmed by Royal Charter the grant “to the Prior of Cartmel of the lands, the Church and the liberties of Cartmel”.

**The Priory** was built on flat land between two streams, one flowing north and one flowing south. The requirement for water was paramount - both for drinking and for maintaining a plentiful supply of fish: proximity to Morecambe Bay was also important. The building was constructed from local stone (from Quarry Flat near Holker) and would have been undertaken by a travelling guild of stonemasons assisted by local labour.

**William Marshall** was closely involved with the negotiations prior to the sealing of Magna Carta in 1215 and took a major role in subsequent years, being appointed Regent for the young Henry III when King John died in 1216.

**William Marshal is therefore the link between Cartmel and Magna Carta.**

The extent of Cartmel in 1215 would be little more than the extent of the Priory grounds at that time and it is likely that all houses would be made of wood. Again, we now have no evidence.

Very briefly, the building of the Priory Church and the monastic buildings would have been gradual: there was no nave to the Priory Church at first. The monastic buildings were built to the south of the Priory Church but, following severe subsidence, they were reconstructed to the north side about 1400.

The Priory Church was substantially reconstructed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and building work continued right up to the Dissolution.

During the Scottish Reivers’ raids, including one by Robert the Bruce in 1322, Cartmel was laid waste and “nothing but the Priory was spared”.

On the **Dissolution** of the Monasteries, in the time of Henry VIII, in 1536 the Priory Church again survived as the Parish Church for the villagers was within the Priory Church itself (the Town Choir).

Unfortunately, most early records are lost forever (unlike those of our neighbouring Furness Abbey).

The restoration of the Priory Church began in 1618.

### **3. Life in Cartmel.**

It is almost certain that **homes** at the time of Magna Carta would be very simple wooden buildings (or even, possibly, turf ?). Stone was tremendously expensive. Not until “the great re-building” in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (here in the North West from about 1670 to 1720) did stone replace wood as a building material. We therefore have no evidence of what was here and know nothing definite of domestic buildings in this period: we can only surmise.

Most local people would **work** in or for the Priory in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Most would be in agriculture (3 out of 4 would be what we would now call tenant farmers): land quality was poor: the area was remote. People would live in small hamlets.

In 1215 the **route** from the south was over the sands of Morecambe\_Bay, with hazardous tides & quick-sands. The surrounding land was forested, making any land journey difficult. Roads or tracks would be in deplorable condition with a lack of bridges. There would have been few inns along the inland route and fords were the only means of crossing rivers and streams.

**Transport** in the 13<sup>th</sup> century would be slow and on foot, with horses only available for a privileged few. There would have been little wheeled transport, either by carts or coaches - which would certainly be beyond the means of other than a favoured minority until well into the 1700s

#### **A few more facts as to life at that time in England:**

- Education would be within monasteries - and seldom for girls.
- Marriages were often arranged.
- The Church had vast wealth. Ordinary people were incredibly poor.
- The King & his Court were always on the move (for example at 16 places in the month of March, 1207 alone).
- Punishments were harsh (trial by ordeal still existed as did torture).
- Life revolved around the Church for all, rich or poor.

#### **PART TWO: What were the main enduring concepts of Magna Carta**

*“The rebellion against King John was not in the name of a person but in the name of an idea - and against corruption”.*            **David Starkey**

- Law was to be supreme, not the King.
- There was to be freedom of elections for the Church.

- Justice was to be fair (and in a fixed place) and punishments were to be fair (or at least fairer).
- Magna Carta is seen as the pathway to emancipation of the people;
- the freedom & equality to all peoples ... and
- the giving of democratic choice to the people.
- Magna Carta also set up fairer inheritance rules and dues.

**PART THREE: Finally, a few examples of the influence of the concepts of Magna Carta on Cartmel (with brief mention of the buildings and sites you can see as you walk through the village).**

The existence of the Priory impacted on the village as it is today in so far as it created a community with a **communication** and **transport** hub which drew people to and through the village for **trade** (including **agriculture**), a little **industry**, **education** and **learning**, **justice** and **leisure**.

- **The Priory Church** itself and its associated buildings would alone justify a long talk which I have no time to give today. The Priory was set up as an autonomous establishment, free from Royal influence (in accordance with Magna Carta). Its oldest part is the chancel and transepts but there were many later additions. There are traces of the **original boundary wall** at Park Road. In **Priest Lane** there was likely to have been monks' accommodation and in **Priory Close** (where the buildings show medieval origins), being closer to the Priory Church, perhaps further accommodation would have been provided for more senior monks.
- **The Gatehouse** was rebuilt in 1330 / 40 (not, it is thought, where the original Gatehouse would have been) and survived Scottish raids and the Reformation.
- (A gratuitous fact which may be of interest: **William Wordsworth's teacher** (The Reverend William Taylor) is buried in "The Old Graveyard".)
- **The Causeway** is thought to have originally been a raised timber causeway over the Priory fish pond.
- **Communication and transport** problems have already been mentioned. The **two old route markers** near the playground and near **Headless Cross** direct travellers across the treacherous sands of Morecambe Bay. There was a **ford adjacent to The Royal Oak**, the position of which can be seen from near the Methodist Chapel. The sea was an important route. Furness Abbey traded with the Isle of Man: the Priory had estates in Ireland. There were the packhorse routes and Cartmel sent wool to Kendal. The cross-bay route was most important and the monks provided a shelter at Kents Bank at what is now

Abbot Hall. A large barn or “grange” was built on the coast at what is now Grange-over-Sands. The cross-bay route may have linked up Cockerham Abbey, Lancaster Priory, Cartmel Priory, Furness Abbey and St. Bees Abbey. Cartmel was not as isolated as we might imagine: we just do not have any information about travellers.

- **Trade** gradually established itself in the village as communication became easier. The wool trade was significant locally. The fish slabs, shops and ale houses in The Square would be busy. A Market Cross can be seen in The Square the shaft of which was destroyed by the Roundheads. There were up to 18 pubs in the village in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Remember that water would be undrinkable. Now buildings in the village, including the present five licensed premises, are mainly 18<sup>th</sup> century but The Cavendish Arms is on the site of a 13<sup>th</sup> century building providing hospitality for travellers. The magistrates met in the Cavendish Arms in the 1800s.
- Contact with Furness Abbey (which had more land and much greater wealth than Cartmel Priory but which suffered more in the Dissolution) would be regular.
- A Market Charter was granted to the Prior of Cartmel in 1278 to hold a market at Flookburgh (which was more accessible and on the route from Morecambe Bay to Furness Abbey). Further Charters followed in, it is thought, 1292, and then in 1730/31 and 1820.
- There were two blacksmiths, one where “L’Enclume” is now and one in Priest Lane.
- Parkside House on Park Road bears the earliest date stone in the village of 1658 “B.I.E.”. It may at one time also have been a pub.
- **Agriculture** was the main occupation in this area from early times. People needed to be self-sufficient as travel was so difficult. At Wheelhouse Bridge there would have been a wheelwright’s and, possibly, a small mill before the larger mill at Aynsome was built. The Priory’s Fish Pond was in low land between Barngarth and the Priory and would have been crossed by The Causeway. Fish was eaten on two and often three days per week and therefore a plentiful fish supply was vital. The proximity of the Priory to Morecambe Bay was no accident, fish from the Bay being caught for food locally. Although not certain, there is a suggestion that a Pinfold was just off The Causeway and perhaps this structure was also at one time a dairy. It is now being converted for residential use. In Barn Garth the Tithe Barn was situated: indeed in 1900 there were 27 barns in the village, most now gone or converted for other purposes.

- **Industry** was not significant but there was iron ore in the peninsula that has been mined. I think pits were found at Hesketh Wood by Pitt Farm in Cartmel. There is also evidence of mining at Humphrey Head. It is impossible to say when the ore was mined but an archaeological dig in the centre of Cartmel (the market garden near the Priory) revealed iron smelting activity which was dated as medieval or earlier.
- **Education** expanded over the centuries. A Grammar School was set up prior to 1600 and was in the Gatehouse from 1624 to 1791 when it moved a little way from the village centre. The Institute and Reading Room dates from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and gives evidence of the increase in literacy.
- **Learning - books and literature** are featured in the Flower Pageant. News sheets, drama and poetry would develop as people became more literate and had a little more leisure time. The Institute was set up to encourage this.
- **Law making and justice** were significant features of Magna Carta. The old Manorial Courts were followed by the magistrate's court at The Gatehouse. The principles of freedom, equality and democratic choice gradually developed with fairer justice and less severe punishments. The village lock-up (which is of uncertain date) is on Park Road, the bars on the window being easily seen.
- **Leisure activities** developed as people have more time to themselves. Many people now associate Cartmel with its **Racecourse** which has been used from an early date. There is evidence of a washing slab by the stream near the racecourse entrance.

**I hope** I have given you an insight into our beautiful village, the part it played in the time of King John and Magna Carta, the significance of Sir William Marshal, First Earl of Pembroke and the development of the concepts embodied in Magna Carta.

**You are welcome** now to join others from our Local History Society for a walk around the village to see some of the buildings I have mentioned – and more besides.