

## Our Pilgrim

At the top of the north aisle, set into a wall alcove, lies the oldest monument in the church, the recumbent effigy of a pilgrim. This was in the original north aisle of the Church and was moved to its present position when the church was extended in 1878-80. Above the effigy, within the alcove, a Victorian mason has carved a Hastings 'maunch', or sleeve, from the Heraldic Arms of the Hastings family.



The pilgrim is bare headed, his head resting on cushions. His broad brimmed hat with cockle shell at the front lies on the cushion by his head. He wears a pilgrim's cloak, reaching almost to the ankle, an 'SS' collar and short boots with pointed toes, laced at the front. His feet rest on a dog or small lion – it is unclear as the head is badly damaged. Over his right shoulder he wears a narrow belt carrying his scrip (pilgrim's knapsack), decorated with scallop shells. In front of his left shoulder is his string of beads and under his left wrist is his pilgrim's staff.

Leicestershire archives at Wigston hold a booklet by Matthew Holbeche Bloxham and the Rev John Morewood Gresley<sup>1</sup>. With permission from the churchwardens, he was removed from his recess on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1850 and those examining him were able to see some of his original colours. His sclavine (cloak) was originally a dark purple or chocolate colour. His inner vest or tunic was bright red. The strap suspending his scrip, or bag, was green and there were remnants of red on his scrip and stockings and on his hat and collar. His boots and beads were originally dark blue.

Some St Helen's histories, including that by Bloxham and Gresley, suggest that he is Thomas, the third brother of William, Lord Hastings but it is possible that he pre-dates the Hastings family association with the church and town, which first began in 1461, when Edward Duke

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<sup>1</sup> Leicestershire Records Office. G36 Ref DE1347, Box 24.

of York (later Edward IV) granted the manor of Ashby to Sir William Hastings. He could be older than the present church building.

Ashby Museum hold a photocopy of a letter written to the 'Loughborough Monitor and News,' signed *Peregrinus* (pilgrim).<sup>2</sup> The letter is undated but a reference in it to the enlarging of the church places it after 1880. *Peregrinus* writes indignantly about the Hastings Maunch, which Victorian enlargers of the church placed in the wall above the re-sited pilgrim memorial. He believes there to be no connection between the Hastings family and the monument and continues, '*I trust that when the error has been pointed out it will speedily be made to disappear, for many will fail to see much difference between the ragamuffin who cards his name upon a tomb and the custodians of a church who allow armorial bearing to be sculptured upon stones that are sacred to the memory of another line of men*'.

*Peregrinus* has clearly read widely on Leicestershire history; referring in his letter to William Burton, who produced his 'Description of Leicestershire' around 1622<sup>3</sup>; Richard Gough, who wrote the wonderfully named 'Sepulchral Monuments, volume 2' in 1796<sup>4</sup> and John Nichols, who published his 'History of Leicestershire Volume 3' in 1800, all of which mention St Helen's Church and the pilgrim memorial.<sup>5</sup> Gough speculates that our pilgrim was '*a keeper of the castle or bailiff of the town*'; Burton suggests that it could be a member of the la Zouche family.

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<sup>2</sup> Ashby de la Zouch Museum archive

<sup>3</sup> Description of Leicestershire: containing matters of antiquity, history, armoury and genealogy by William Burton. Printed and sold by W Whittingham. Available to view online via University of Leicester Special Collections.

<sup>4</sup> Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain: applied to illustrate the history of families, manners, habits and arts, at the different periods from the Norman Conquest to the seventeenth century. With introductory observations. By Richard Gough, 1735-1809. Available to view online via Internet Archive.

<sup>5</sup> The history and antiquities of the county of Leicester: Vol 3 by John Nichols. Available to view online via University of Leicester Special Collections.

*Peregrinus* cites the 'SS' collar as double proof that the pilgrim both pre-dates the Hastings family association with Ashby *and* that he cannot possibly be a Hastings. The reason for this is that the collar is Lancastrian in origin, and was first assumed by Henry IV (1367-1413), whereas the Hastings family were Yorkists. There is also speculation as to the meaning of the 'SS' collar – perhaps it represents Henry IV's favourite motto 'Soveraygne' or it could represent the words '*sanctissimum sacramentum*', in honour of the holy sacrament. Sir Bernard Burke, who wrote on heraldry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, writes, '*The earliest example of this collar that I have observed occurs in the brass to Sir Thomas Burton, AD 1382.*'<sup>6</sup>

This aside, it's interesting to think about the man represented by our pilgrim effigy. We know nothing about him other than supposing that he would have been a wealthy man to be able to commission a monument such as this. Why did he make his pilgrimage? Was it a holiday, such as that enjoyed by some of those described so graphically in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' or was it as an act of penance? Travel in medieval times was a dangerous business. A pilgrim would be susceptible to the elements, to rough seas on small boats, to poor roads, to robbers along the route and to disease. He would almost certainly have written his will before setting off, in the knowledge that he might never return.

The Patent Rolls of 1216-1225 record that on 6 August 1220, the king gave Roger la Zouche licence to go on a pilgrimage to St James.<sup>7</sup> The Rolls go on to list the provisions he made for his wife in his will, should he fail to return. The hair and clothing of our pilgrim are in the style of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, so it's unlikely to be Roger la Zouche, but he would be one of many wealthy men to make a pilgrimage. In 1434 alone, 2,310 licensed pilgrims sailed from English ports, making their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella.



*Carved wooden pilgrim in All Hallows by the Tower, London. Believed to be by Arnt, c.1484.*

We may speculate further about our pilgrim as we examine his clothing and look at the medieval interest in pilgrimages. The scallop shell later came to signify pilgrimage in general but it initially referred to one pilgrimage in particular – to the Church of St James the Greater in Santiago de Compostella in north west Spain. Is that where our pilgrim travelled to?

The earliest recorded pilgrimage to the shrine of St James was in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, whilst the earliest recorded pilgrims from beyond the Pyrenees visited the shrine in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> Century. By the mid-12<sup>th</sup> Century, large numbers of pilgrims from abroad were making the journey. The earliest records of English pilgrims to the shrine of St James were between 1092-1105. Many pilgrims went there in the middle ages, though pilgrimages declined in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century due to the combined force of the black death, the protestant reformation and political unrest.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Bernard Burke (1814-1892). British genealogist.

<sup>7</sup> Patent Rolls p.246. 6 August 1220.



*Waymarker from  
the Way of St James*

In French, scallop is '*Coquille St Jacques*,' which translates as the 'shell of St James'. The scallop shell is a metaphor, whose converging lines represent the many routes pilgrims travel from all over the world to reach the one shrine. The shell also doubles as a bowl or drinking vessel. Pilgrims carrying the scallop shell would present it at churches, castles, abbeys, etc along their route, where they could expect to be given as much sustenance as could be picked up by it in one scoop. Finally, the scallop was used to ward off thieves, who feared divine retribution for attacking devoted pilgrims.

Whatever the origin of our pilgrim memorial, we have serious reason to question its attribution to the Hastings family. What we do know is that pilgrim memorials of this type are very rare and that we are fortunate indeed to have this one. We will probably never know anything about the man behind the effigy which has quietly lain in St Helen's for so many centuries. However, people still, for many different reasons, make pilgrimages to sacred sites all over the world and the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella is more popular than ever, with both religious and secular pilgrims carrying their shell badges along the Way of St James. I'd like to imagine our pilgrim in life, walking his own quiet Way and hope he enjoyed a 'bon Camino'.

*Julie Starkey  
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