

Hereford's Lost Mystery Plays

by Ruth E. Richardson

People enjoyed themselves in Medieval Britain. You worked hard, from sunrise to sunset, relieved only by church attendance on Sundays, and on the many Holy Days, or holidays, when there would also be local festivities. On special occasions you might be able to watch the spectacles provided by the nobility – coronations, weddings, funerals, political processions, and the occasional tournaments. After all, food, drink, even coins, might also be distributed as charitable largesse. In Hereford, in 1306, minstrels were paid to perform at a feast to celebrate the knighting of Edward, Prince of Wales and local people would have at least been able to see the procession of notables. However, the most popular events were the annual Pageants and Mystery Plays. Every town had these though only four cycles have survived.

Drama, especially at Easter and Christmas, was a part of the Church Services. Carved and painted pictures adorned churches, helping people who usually could not read the Latin Bible to understand the stories the priest talked about in his sermons. These included Biblical scenes, depictions of the saints and often the tree of Jesse. The sculpted and painted bosses showed situations readily recognisable to a Medieval audience accustomed to the colourful processions of clergy and nobility. Although we know Dore Abbey was painted, with beautifully sculpted and painted capitals and bosses, the extent to which pictures were used on the walls is not yet clear.

However, Joe Hillaby (Honorary Research Fellow, University of Bristol) considers that the Abbey may have had a Jesse. This was an imaginative way of depicting Christ's descent from Jesse, the father of the Biblical King David. Jesse was placed at the base of the design with a tree springing from his body, all his descendants being fitted in amongst the foliage. The key recognisable feature is the green foliage. It is rare to find a carved example but a few are known in stone, a good example being in Christchurch Priory, Dorset, on the 14th century reredos. It is extremely rare to find wood examples but St. Mary's Priory, Abergavenny, does possess the bottom part of an enormously large Medieval oak Jesse. However, most Jesses that survive are in stained glass, probably the finest and most complete being in Wells Cathedral. Local examples can be seen in St. Mary's Church, Madley, which still has 14th century figures, and in St. Laurence's Church, Ludlow. Stained glass does preserve the brilliant colour now missing from wood and stone survivals. Abbey Dore's fragments are in the Hoskyns' Chapel windows.

In Herefordshire our earliest evidence for drama is from September 1286 when Richard Swinfield, Bishop 1283-1316, excommunicated Christians for attending a Jewish wedding. The festivities included drama. Swinfield's attitude was probably political / religious as he certainly enjoyed minstrels' entertainment, hiring a group to enliven the chore of a diocesan visitation. From the 13th century the Hereford Cathedral Boy Bishop was chosen for Holy Innocents' Day, a piece of ecclesiastical theatre revived in the 20th century.

However, it is the 1348 letter of John Trilleck, Bishop 1344-1361, written to try to prevent plays being staged in the Hereford Diocesan churches that gives the most information – for if something is forbidden it means that it must be a general occurrence!! Bishop Trilleck wrote in Latin:

*'... Because...holiness becomes the Lord's house, it is not suitable to do anything in it which would be foreign to the practice of devotion. Since, therefore, in the **stage plays which take place from time to time in churches offensive humour and rude language** – which are forbidden... not only in the Lord's temple... but everywhere – and other things partaking of mockery – by which the hearts of the faithful who in the same place (i.e. churches) ought to attend to holy solemnities and concentrate upon devout prayers may be dragged away to vain things and their devotion diminished*

– *are known very frequently to occur as an offence to the divine name and a deadly example to those taking part or looking on...*¹

This certainly gives an idea of the type of performance still taking place in churches. They were in English, could be funny, occurred often, and people performed and watched with evident enjoyment. They were not set tableaux but plays. Bishop Trilleck went on to describe them as a '*kind of abuse*' which he wishes to uproot '*lest by this sort of coarseness the honour of the church is besmirched*'. He ordered that anyone refusing to desist would be liable to excommunication (excluded, denied the Sacrament) and that they should appear at his Court in Hereford Cathedral. Incidentally, this letter also indicates the wide range of activities for which churches were used. In particular he cited '*plays or interludes in the church of L....., in which, we understand, such dishonourable things used quite customarily to take place.*' Unfortunately, the place cannot be read – Leominster, Ludlow, Ledbury are all possible.

To be fair, Bishop Trilleck may have had a secondary motive to his invective, though it is unlikely. The Black Death reached England in 1348 and Herefordshire in 1349. It was perhaps sensible to limit the occasions when people would congregate to avoid the spread of infection. However, this did not prevent a brilliantly splendid ceremony in Hereford Cathedral on 25th October 1350 when the body of Saint Thomas Cantilupe, Bishop 1275-1282 and Lord Chancellor of England, was removed from the transept to be enshrined in the Lady Chapel in the presence of King Edward I (who had twice sent his falcons to be cured at the old shrine!!), bishops, nobility and all the officials of the diocese. The shrine was also carried through the city in procession to try to prevent the plague spreading, though records show that those lining the route were too afraid of the plague to be impressed on this occasion. In an interesting sidelight on excommunication St. Thomas Cantilupe had actually died excommunicated - by Archbishop Peckham of Canterbury, the first Archbishop to visit Dore Abbey!!

Another glimpse of public drama comes in 1486 when King Henry VII arrived in Hereford on Monday 15th May staying until the 19th. The entertainment was an elaborate pageant featuring speeches by *St. George*, *King Ethelbert* and *the Virgin Mary*. Playing venues probably included the Booth Hall, bought by the city from Henry Cachepole, a merchant and former mayor, in 1392, for public use. This included being the wool market, Mercers' Guildhall and housing the Court of Pleas. Gloucester's equivalent also housed plays. Hereford Guildhall, first built in 1490, may have had a similar use. Apart from these dramatic episodes there was a strong tradition of travelling entertainers and professional musicians which can be traced from 1306 (when the Earl of Hereford paid two trumpeters and his wife's organist), to the 1500s when they were hired by towns, guilds, and county families such as the Scudamores. Welsh bards regularly visited certain country houses, such as Blanche Parry's home of Newcourt. Many customs involved horn blowing, especially on Shrove Tuesday, and Herefordshire was known for morris-dancing. Indeed, a perhaps apocryphal story noted that John Hoskyns once entertained King James I (of England, VI of Scotland) with a morris-dance performed by ten Herefordians whose ages totalled 1,000 years.

While it is clear that people enjoyed colour, poetry, dancing, processions, pageantry and all ingredients for the theatre, the best direct evidence that Hereford had its own cycle of Mystery Plays comes from the *Mayor's Book*. This volume contains surviving pages from the records of the City Council in 1472, 1487, 1492, and 1495, with fuller records from 1500 to 1530. They continue in the *Great Black Book*, on which Freeman of the City still swear the oath, and which runs from 1543 to 1592. Both these books are the surviving documents from a larger collection stolen by an Esther Garstone, who was subsequently convicted of larceny. She had sold them to a grocer in Eign Street, from whom they were rescued in January 1830. (Apparently, such neglect was quite common then.)

1 Interestingly, Oliver Cromwell and other 17th century Puritans would have agreed.

A third book, called the *Red Book*, and other pages were not recovered – perhaps one day they will turn up, or were they used to wrap the groceries? We are fortunate any sheets survived.

A single sheet, from 1503 in the *Mayor's Book*, gives a list of the Corpus Christi pageants for the City of Hereford:

The paiaints (pageants) for the procession of Corpus Christi

Furst (first), Glovers	Adam, Eve, (Cayne and Abel are erased)
Eldest seriant (sergeant)	Cayne, Abell, and Moysey (Moses), Aron (Aaron)
Carpenters	Noye (Noah) ship
Chaundelers (chandlers)	Abram, Isack, Moysey cum iiiior pueris
Skynners	Jesse
Flacchers (fleshers)	Salutacon (salutation) of our Lady
Vynteners	Nativity of our Lord
Taillours (tailors)	The iii Kings of Colen
The belman (rang the curfew bell)	The purification of our Lady, with Symyon (Simeon)
Drapers	The... deitours (doctors) go yng with the good Lord
Sadlers	Fleme (stream) Jordan
Cardeners (clothmakers)	The castell of Israell
Walkers (clothmakers)	The good Lord rid yng on an asse with xii Appostelles
The tanners	The story of Shore (Shrove) Thursday
Bochours (butchers)	The tak yng of our Lord
The eldest seriant	The torment yng of our Lord with iiiii tormentoures, with lamentacon of our Lady (another name) and Seynt John the evangelist
Cappers	Portacio crucis usque montem Oilverii (Mount of Olives)

All added by someone else - possibly the second day's performances:

Dyers	Jesus pendens in cruce (The second person altered this from Portacio crucis et Johanne evangelists portante Mariam)
Smythes	Longys (Longinus) with his knyghtes
The eldest sariant	Maria and Johannes evangelista
Dyers	Sepultura Christi
Barbours	Joseph Abarmathia (Arimathea)
The eldest seriant	Tres Mariae (the Virgin Mary, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene witnesses of the Crucifixion)
Porters	Milites armati custodes sepuleri (guards at the sepulchre)
Mercers	Pilate, Cayfes (Caiaphas), Anna and Mahoude (though someone tried to erase Mahoude)
Bakers	Knyghtes in harnes
Journey men cappers	Seynt Keterina (Katherine) with tres tormentors

Of these, the first five dealt with Old Testament subjects: Adam and Eve / Cain and Abel with Moses and Aaron / Noah / Abraham and Isaac with a second Moses - obviously a popular character!! / and the tree of Jesse. The next six were concerned with the Annunciation / the Nativity / the Three Kings / the Purification / the boy Jesus with the Temple Doctors / Christ's Baptism in the River Jordan. Most of these would have been familiar as paintings in churches.

The castell of Israell is something of a mystery. It may refer to the Roman garrison camp in Jerusalem, the fort of Antonia, which could mean it is about Pontius Pilate. The next six covered the Entry into Jerusalem / the events of the Thursday before Easter which may mean the Last Supper / Christ's Arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane / the Scourging / carrying of the Cross to the Mount of Olives / and the Crucifixion. Did Hereford have a procession from a symbolic Mount of Olives as mentioned in the previous Article - if so, was this perhaps Aylestone Hill?

Longinus and his *Knyghtes* (soldiers) was probably the story of the centurion by the Cross and the gambling for Christ's seamless outer garment. The next story that followed was probably Christ giving his mother into the care of Saint John. The following ones dealt with Christ's burial in the tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea / events at the tomb / and the laments of the three Marys who came to the tomb. The armed guards at the tomb may be concerned with the Resurrection, especially as this pageant was in the charge of the Porters and the stone had to be moved from the tomb. As the play / interlude of *Pilate, Cayfes, Annas and Mahoude* was performed by the Mercers (merchants), it probably related to the priests worrying about Christ's body being stolen.

Knightes in harnes would be another enigma except that it was performed by the Bakers. It could be concerned with Christ's appearance to the disciples, when he broke bread with them, before the Ascension. As the Biblical accounts describe Christ teaching his disciples they were perhaps viewed as soldiers in training for spreading the Gospel. All of these pageants have general parallels in the surviving Chester, Townley/Wakefield, and York Cycles. The Hereford pageants may have been tableaux but comparison with the other cycles, and with the Henry VII pageant that included speeches, strongly suggests that these really were plays. It is likely that they formed a cycle though some play titles may be missing as there are only 27 compared to York's 48 plays.

The one play that does not really 'fit' in a general sequence is the story of the martyrdom of Saint Katherine of Alexandria and this could indicate that other towns and cities too incorporated local cultic saints in their cycles. Saint Katherine was a very popular saint in Herefordshire. Her martyrdom is depicted on one of the important surviving bosses in Dore Abbey. Although only the 19th century church of Hoarwity is now dedicated to Saint Catherine there may have been more dedications in the Medieval period. Hereford Cathedral itself had two chapels, one dedicated to Saint Katherine and one to Saint Mary Magdalene, whose traces can still be seen on the wall facing the Bishop's garden. Bishop William de Vere (1186-1199) gave these two chapels into the canons' charge. Bishop Hugh Foliot (1219-1234) founded two chantries in these chapels and he also founded the hospital of Saint Katherine in Ledbury (where there is a reputed picture of him). All this suggests that this play, and therefore the Hereford Cycle, dates from at least the 12th century.

An interesting sidelight on the plays is the list of performers, which gives a glimpse of Medieval Hereford. This list, too, can be compared with the guilds who performed, for example, the York plays. The main Hereford guilds were concerned with cloth manufacture, caps, gloves, cattle (butchers, tanners and saddlers), smiths and porters as well as traders such the merchants, vintners, bakers and chandlers. The dyers and cappers were clearly pre-eminent as they each had two plays, the journeymen cappers (who were training and hoping to become masters) being responsible for *Saint Katherine*. Perhaps a part of her local popularity was due to her wheel - did it remind people of a cider wheel? The sergeant was a council official in charge of the city mace and so had an uniform, which could explain why he was involved in the second and third of his allotted plays which both included soldiers. *Cain and Abell*.. involved murder so perhaps that needed soldiers too.

The first record of the production of the plays is in the Mayor's Account Roll of 1533-1534, when Thomas Downe was paid for helping with the procession's many stories. So Hereford people were still enjoying the plays in the year the future Queen Elizabeth I was born and Thomas Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury. The second mention is in a 1548 Hereford Guild Ordinance on

the many pageants in the Corpus Christi procession which '*now ys & Are omytted and Surseassed*' (now is and are omitted and finished). King Henry VIII died in 1547 and so it was the first year of King Edward VI's reign, with the emphasis on a more Protestant regime, that saw the recording of the end of the centuries old tradition. Not that local people gave in too easily and long venerated customs persisted!! In addition, a number of companies are recorded as being paid to perform in Hereford and Leominster between 1596 and 1621, though the staging had become static, echoing the staging of the plays of William Shakespeare and other Elizabethan / Stuart playwrights.

Interestingly, though, successive bishops continued to be upset by the old plays. Enquiries were regularly held from 1586 '*Whether any Lords of misrule, dauncers, **plaiers**, or any other disguised persons do dance, or **play any unseemly parts** in the Church, Churchyarde, or Chappell-yard, or whether are there any **playes** or common drinking kept in church, or Church-yarde, who maintaine & accompany such?*' Herefordshire Consistory Court Records include a continuous stream of prohibitions against parish plays. In 1617, the churchwardens of Kingsland complained about Thomas Waucklen acting a play at prayer time on a Sunday evening in Leominster. In 1640 the Bishop is still enquiring if '*your Church or Chappell-yard*' is '*well-fenced... Hath any person behaved himselfe rudely, and disorderly in either, used any filthy or prophane talk, or any other rude and immodest behaviour in them? Have any **players**, Feasts, Banquets, Suppers, Church-ales, Drinkings, temporall Courts or Leets Lay-juries, Musters, or any other prophane usage been suffered...*' All of which shows clearly how the church was used in the Medieval period when it was the centre of village and town life. Plays were first in this list of so-called disreputable activities in such sanctified places but, evidently, parishioners continued to try to enjoy them.

The Mystery Plays were a familiar and much loved part of everyday life for most people. We are very fortunate that any scripts at all managed to survive in the face of the opposition they encountered. I do wonder if these opponents ever realised the sincere reverence that is shown in the stories. The plays were 'down-to-earth' interpretations so perhaps their real 'crime' in the eyes of ecclesiastical authority was that they made religion too accessible to ordinary people. However, those plays that did survive can also give us a rare glimpse into the fun our ancestors enjoyed in an often harsh world. I am sure you will agree if you have the opportunity to watch any Medieval Plays yourself – enjoy!!

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Further Reading:

- Dore Article 13, Autumn 1999 *Newsletter, Drama and Religion: The Mystery Plays*
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