

Pamela Hopkins on Medieval Beverley

27th September 2017

Pamela Hopkins', author and leading local historian, gave today's talk on Beverley in the Middle Ages. I've summarised some of the main areas of discussion below:

- **The importance of waterways to the town**

Pamela went into prehistory to explain why water has shaped the town. Long before people arrived in Beverley the ice sheets dumped metres of clay on the bowl of chalk beneath the town. Underground streams now flow beneath us but in medieval times they flowed over-ground, leaving much swampy land. Streams coursed along what became the town's curving streets, leading to first the Minster then on to the Beck. As Pamela suggested, despite the changes that history has wrought upon Beverley, a medieval time traveller would be able to recognise it at a glance, because so little of this layout has changed.



We saw this for ourselves on a copy of a **map of Beverley of 1450**, produced by a recent researcher, showing the location of the medieval streets (with their earliest recorded dates), watercourses, town ditch and important buildings. Only one of the five bars remain, but these were for mainly for taxation purposes not defence. There was no need for a ditch on the eastern side of the town as this was marshland. 'Bars' [Old French] were gates and 'gates' [Old Norse] were streets. So, we saw the course of the Alta Via (High Street) running in 1269 just as now, from the Minster through Butcher Row and Toll Gavel to North Bar Within. The Walker Beck, one of the most important streams, probably flowed from Willow Bridge, down the town ditch (now Wylies Road), along Walkergate (first recorded 1327), under what was Cross Bridge on Toll Gavel, around both sides of the Minster into Mill Dam Beck to join Beverley Beck. It's interesting too that Flemingate was one of the earliest recorded streets, mentioned in 1235, reflecting its importance as a route to and from the waterway linking

Beverley to the River Hull. It is thought that Archbishop Thurstan ordered the Beck to be widened and deepened in 1115, with the result that the town gained access to most of the north of England through the river systems of the Trent and Ouse, and to the continent, especially Flanders. Without these watery links, we would not have had the stones for the Minster, the woollen trade for the town's great wealth, or materials and water supplies for the town's great industries like tanning and dyeing. As Pamela pointed out, until the railways came in the 19th century it was quicker to get to Amsterdam by boat, than to London by road.

- **Medieval markets and the Archbishop's Palace**

The size of the medieval markets was a clue to the town's great wealth. The Fishmarket (1239), now Wednesday market, was much larger than now, stretching to the West door of the Minster, while the Cornmarket (1329), now Saturday Market, came later and stretched to what's now North Bar. The Archbishop's residence was originally at 'The Dings' in Cornmarket. After the Archbishop moved

his palace to Hallgarth, The Dings became the 'Hanse' (another link with northern Europe), a meeting hall where a bell would toll the beginning of trading. Pamela suggested the palace move may have given the Archbishop more protection from the rampaging Scots, whose raids were a threat throughout the period. His palace was surrounded by a moat, and a bridge was found in the Garth's north-east corner by archaeologists in the 1970s. We know that there was a lake at Eastgate (1239), from a story of one of St John's miracles. A prisoner at Cottingham Castle dreamt a visitation by St John, upon which his chains were broken and he walked to the Minster, asking to stay 'by the lake next to the church.' It's good for us that Hallgarth was bequeathed by the widow of Canon Nolloth to the vicar who succeeded him. This vicar handed it over to the diocese on condition that the vicar and two churchwardens administered it. This has secured its preservation from house building.

- **Commons and streets**

Another area preserved for the town was the Westwood, known in medieval times as 'The Moor'. Hence the street names of Minster Moorgate (1299), Fishmarket Moorgate (1344), now Well Lane, and Wood Lane (1416). The Westwood was given to the freemen of Beverley in 1381 by the Archbishop of York for £5 per year. It was wooded then, but use by townspeople for building houses, ships and increased pasture led to tree loss. Only Burton Bushes, kept aside for the Archbishop's pigs at Bishop Burton, has survived. The Westwood has prevented building to the west of the town, thus also contributing to Beverley's longitudinal shape.



We learned that Newbegin meant 'new building' and that Lairgate was a 'street leading to a barn'. Pamela suggested that this may have been where the nine canons of the Minster kept their corn taken in taxes, contributing to their immense wealth. Each canon held land and was responsible for maintaining altars in

the Minster for different saints. The Canon of Saint Martin's, for example, owned much of the town, hence the St Martin's Chapel which was once attached to the corner of the Minster, demolished after the Reformation.

- **Friars, Knights and Hospitals**

The Dominican Friary was once much larger than now and included a large church. On the site of the present railway station was a moated site belonging to the Knights Hospitallers of St John, one of

the Crusading orders. The order was disbanded in the 14th century and this area, probably because of its moat, was used as a plague burial ground in the 17th century. The Franciscan Friars occupied the site behind what is now St Mary's Terrace, before moving to near Keldgate Bar. There were ten hospitals in Beverley, most founded by rich people who believed this would save their souls from purgatory.

- **The population of Beverley**

There was no building outside the town ditch until the 18th century. The population of Beverley at Domesday was estimated at around 3000. In the Middle Ages it rose to around 5000, with a dip during the plague years. Beverley was the 10th largest town in England after London in 1388. It didn't expand again significantly until the 18th century.

- **A timeline of key events in the medieval growth of Beverley**

Pamela drew our attention to some of the pivotal moments which led to Beverley's wealth and status during the Middle Ages. 300 years after Saint John's death in 721 he was canonised, and his shrine carried to the high altar of the church (on the site of the current Minster in **1037**). In **1115** Archbishop Thurstan gave the town several boosts which included abolishing taxes for merchants trading outside Beverley, extending the fairs from two to five days, and maybe suggesting the building of Saint Mary's. By **1163** Beverley was known across northern Europe for the quality of its cloth, especially 'scarlet cloth'.

In **1188** fire destroyed the Minster and much of Beverley. As we know from our Minster visit, John Phillips has discovered that the rebuilding of the Minster began immediately after the fire, not in the 13th century as had been previously thought. However, it was nine years before the lost bones of St John were found and reburied. These remains were rediscovered, in a lead-lined coffin, in the 17th century. In **1201** Lady Sybil of Beverley, a wealthy Percy widow, gave the Knights Hospitallers their manor in the east of Beverley. The Percy family were based largely in their Leconfield Castle as it was thought safer from the Scots than their more vulnerable ancestral lands in Northumberland. There was a setback to the building of the Minster in **1213** when the tower collapsed, and in the same year the St Giles Hospital was built.

At this point Pamela told us about the strange tradition of the ' anchoresses', women who chose to be walled up in buildings adjacent to hospitals and churches, where they would be kept alive only by the charity of passers-by. There are records of anchoresses at St Giles and St Nicholas.

Saint Mary's was begun in **1120**, so was earlier than our current Minster. Paid for by the Guilds, it demonstrates the wealth of the townspeople. By **1240** the Dominican Friars were in the town.

Several notables came to Beverley to pray at the shrine of St John, but one of the most useful was Edward 1. Like others before him, Edward came to Beverley to pray for victory against the Scots and won. "A useful accolade for Beverley", said Pamela. He contributed towards the cost of a



The Minster from Hallgarth

magnificent gold and silver pinnacled shrine to St John, and exempted Beverley from sending soldiers to war, as the banner of St John was enough. He gave Wednesday and Saturday Market their charters in the same year that he gave Hull its charter, but Hull then was half the size of Beverley. In **1328** the Percy tomb and Saint Mary's sacristy were built, both "exquisite work of really skilled masons".

The Black Death hit Beverley hard, with possibly half the population lost, but by **1377** it's thought that the population had

risen again to around 5000.

- **Fairs and festivals**

There were two principle festivals in Beverley, the Cross Fair in May, commemorating the death of St John, and the Festival of Corpus Christi, when the mystery plays were performed. Before the Cross Fair, John's shrine was paraded around the town for two days. Each guild had its own 'castle', which had to be 'handsomely covered' and if the masters of the guilds were not out in their best kit they could be fined. The mystery plays ('mystery' comes from 'mastery') were also largely performed by the guilds in seven areas of the town including North Bar, the bull ring in Saturday Market, Cross Bridge, Walkergate, Highgate and the Beck. The stage that trundled through town was a double-decker affair, with a trapdoor to the lower area (where the cast could get changed and the devil leap out) and a raised area behind, where God would appear. Ahead marched the twelve Keepers of the Town. Again, fines could be administered if plays were poorly performed as this was considered 'an insult to the town'. They took tourism seriously in those days.

- **Important buildings of the medieval time**

Through a series of photographs, mainly taken by Pat Deans, Pamela showed us some of the key medieval buildings of the town.

At the **Minster** we saw the two remaining life-sized statues of St John and Athelstan, another 10th century king who prayed at the shrine and gave the town taxation privileges, sanctuary rights and land after his victory. "An extremely useful saint to have," commented Pamela. We saw the East Window (courtesy of Canon Waltham), the West End Towers of 1380, the North Door and the tomb of an anonymous medieval merchant hidden away by the shop.

Porches were built around 1410, and were used for wheeling and dealing as well as ceremonies such as 'churching' women after childbirth. This explains why the porch of **St Mary's** is so large compared to that of the Minster: it fronted the bustling Saturday Market. Pamela also explained why Saint Mary's is below the level of the streets: the centre of the town has been artificially raised by 4 feet since the church was built. We saw the white rabbit of St Mary's, with its staff and satchel and the

pilgrim's shell of Compostello. Pamela suggested that pilgrims may well have set off from here, via Bruges, towards Santiago de Compostello which was one of the main medieval pilgrimage sites, as it remains today. Pamela said that today we still have pilgrims coming to Saint Mary's, "though they don't put as much in the offertory box as medieval pilgrims did."

At the North Bar end of town, we saw **St Mary's Arcade**, which is one of Beverley's oldest buildings along with the **Sun Inn** and the **Lord Nelson**. At **North Bar** stood a mansion house where it is believed Charles 1 stayed before the Civil War when he failed to claim the arsenal in Hull. Some **shopfronts** along North Bar Within show just how narrow the medieval frontage could be (usually nine to eleven feet) as there was fierce competition for space fronting the market. Entrances were often at the side, living space upstairs and land at the back for pigs. The steep roofs would have been thatched, and most of the pantile roofs we see today date from the 18th century. The long, narrow shop spaces surviving today are the same **burgage plots** as in medieval times, and these can be seen all over town. There are medieval woodwork remnants in the **Guildhall** too, which was originally 14th century, although extensively refurbished in the 18th century and its portico added in the 19th. We saw its old stone entrance now in the grounds of the **Friary**, with its cross keys of Saint Peter, symbol of the Archbishop of York, formerly Lord of the Manor of Beverley. Much of the Friary was demolished when it was bought by the Waltham family after the Reformation, but Pamela commented, "It's nice that it's still used for travellers", referencing its modern use as a youth hostel.



"Beverley must have been an exciting place to live in the 14th century," said Pamela, "like a building site with constant activity: stone masons, travellers, kings and great households".

Thanks to Pamela for sharing so much of her knowledge and we do hope she'll be back next year.

A copy of Pamela's book '**The History of Beverley**' has been bought by our group and is available for loan.

Report and photos by HK