

A Brief Outline of the Origins and History of Middleton

Part

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The township of Middleton has its origins in the remote past, for the high ground of the Cheapside and Hollin area was occupied around 1000 bc by people of the Bronze Age whose burial ground is recorded on an early map of Middleton. Looking further back in time, traces of human activity on nearby Blackstone Edge have been radio-carbon dated to 7400 bc.

In his book 'Roman Roads in Britain' Thomas Cordington traces a Roman road across Manchester, through Blackley, Alkington, Middleton, Castleton, east of Rochdale to Lydgate and over Blackstone Edge. (Traces of another Roman road on Blackstone Edge have recently been discovered). The Romans were active in north west Britain at an early date; for in 48 ad Ostorius Scapula, the Military Governor, agreed a treaty with Cartimandua, the Queen of the Brigantes, the largest tribe in Britain. Her headquarters are believed to have been at Almondbury, near Huddersfield.

The origins of Middleton Parish Church are to be found in the year 653, when Christianity was established at Repton in the pagan Saxon kingdom of Mercia which, at that time, extended from the river Ribble to the outskirts of Gloucester. Records show that Middleton belonged to the early diocese of Lichfield, formed in 664 by Archbishop Deusdedit. A Saxon Church, of wooden construction, undoubtedly existed at Middleton long before the Norman conquest.

In 789 the Vikings made the first of many violent raids on England, which were to continue for almost two hundred years. In 875 the Vikings landed at Tynemouth, forcing the monks of Lindisfarne to flee with the remains of St Cuthbert, taking with them the Lindisfarne Gospels and travelling about the north of England for seven years. There is evidence to believe that Cuthbert's remains briefly rested at Middleton around the year 880.

In the year 1000, what is now south Lancashire was ruled by a prominent Saxon thegn named Wolfric Spot whose sons were assassinated. They were followed by one Gamel, who also held vast lands and manors near Leeds, on behalf of King Edward the Confessor.

In Saxon times the ruling family at Middleton were the 'de Myddeltons', who appear to have been left undisturbed by the Norman conquest.

In 1075 King William and Archbishop Lanfranc re-organised the English Church, demolishing Saxon wooden Churches and erecting stone structures in their place. Around the year 1100 Roger Montbegon, the Norman overlord of Middleton, erected a small two-cell church dedicated to St Leonard. Remains of the entrance are now installed in

the east wall of the Tower. Over the years, extensions and alterations would have been made to accommodate the increasing local population. The present Tower would have been erected some time between 1250 and 1325. Known as Early English style, it is quite different from Thomas Langley's porch, of the later Perpendicular style.

The fourteenth century was punctuated by a series of national disasters, with 1315 marking the beginning of three consecutive years of famine, when thousands of people died of starvation, for torrential rain had destroyed the harvests.

The population had hardly recovered when bubonic plague, which was sweeping Europe, appeared in England. Later known as the Black Death, it first appeared in the Dorset port of Melcombe Regis in the summer of 1348 and within two years almost half the population of England had died, affecting the social and economic structure for almost a hundred years. Middleton would not have escaped, as the list of Rectors appears to confirm. Isolated pockets of the plague existed into 1351, the year in which two Rectors were appointed.

In 1360 the plague returned, when it became known as the 'Plague of the Innocents', carrying off an appalling number of young children and adolescents. A further addition to the national misfortunes was the ill-fated Peasant's Revolt of 1381, which was ruthlessly crushed, enabling the ruling class to regain the upper hand. By the year 1400 the Church of Middleton was in a state of neglect and disrepair, prompting Thomas Langley, a Middleton man, to erect a new and larger Nave at his own expense. Langley was the Prince Bishop of Durham and a former Lord Chancellor of England. Amid great pomp and ceremony his church was re-dedicated to St Leonard on the 22nd August 1412. Only the south arcade and the porch of his church now remain.

In August 1513 a large Scottish army, led by King James IV, invaded England and captured several Northumbrian border strongholds. On the 9th September the Scots were defeated by a smaller force of hastily-summoned northern archers and billmen. Amongst the English defenders were Richard Assheton and his Middleton archers. Assheton, along with thirty others, was knighted for valour on the battlefield and in 1515 a stained glass window, commemorating the battle, was installed in the church. Sadly, it was neglected in later centuries. Around 1520 the north arcade of Langley's Church collapsed, bringing down the richly decorated roof in the process. Pressed for time, and short of funds, Sir Richard Assheton set about re-building and enlarging the Church with the voluntary help of the inhabitants of Middleton. The Nave was widened and lengthened and the clerestory added. Completed in 1524, this was the last major alteration to the Nave, which is virtually intact from Assheton's time.