

Saint Simon of Evesham

We have seen more than our fair share of canonisations in recent years, and a whole host of new saints entering heaven. But not all such applications get passed; one particularly promising one – all of nine centuries ago - got lost in the post.

Last week I described how Simon de Montfort's rebellion against Henry III came to a bloody end at the Battle of Evesham in August 1265. Not only was the rebel leader defeated and killed, his hands, feet and private parts were hacked off by his vengeful assailants. What remained of the good earl after all of that was quietly interred by the monks in Evesham, Abbey.

The speed with which the rebel leader was disposed of suggests that Simon's royal opponents had no wish to let the burial place of the errant earl become a rallying point for other disaffected subjects. Given that the man had in question had a reputation for high religious principles, the potential for martyrdom was clear. But breaking up the earl's body only served to spread the problem, rather than contain it, and the gruesome catalogue of dispersal (a kind of grisly mail order catalogue) illustrates just how far the once revered leader could reach. Setting to one side the parts that had been sent to Simon's enemies (namely the head, testicles and a hand), the other hand was taken in by the Evesham monks, a foot went to one of Simon's Welsh allies, while the other foot found its way to the abbey in Alnwick, Northumberland.

Even these mere appendages to the main show were treated as relics, and reverentially encased in silver.

Yet in spite of this cloak of secrecy, it did not take long for miracles to begin. The monks duly recorded them in the order they were reported, to the tune of 135 of them in less than eighteen months. Up and down the country, people prayed to Simon, and were magically cured of their ills. In one case the miraculous revival was of a chicken, and in another case a peacock. Pilgrims brought their marvellous tales and thankful gifts came back to the Abbey.

Such was the flow of bequests and offerings into Evesham that the Abbot could contemplate a building programme to channel them. A new lady chapel was commenced in 1275, partly financed, at least, by the cult.

Nor was this cult confined to the church. The supposed site of Simon de Montfort's death itself became associated with miracles. Soil carried away from Green Hill was reported to have had wonderful medicinal powers. Take one mouthful of Worcestershire earth, mixed with a small quantity of water, and swallow. Repeat twice a day until cured.

A spring of water on the hill became equally hallowed and a place of pilgrimage. Nor was it necessary to attend Earl Simon's well in person. The water could be bottled and carried forth, as far as London and Kent, where it revived and cured in equal measure.

All of this was not good news for the Crown. The more sanctified Simon became, the more unpalatable appeared his summary butchering at the battle. Steps had to be taken to suppress the cult before it became unstoppable.

In 1266 guards were placed on the roads leading into Evesham to prevent pilgrims making their way to Simon's tomb. Then the papal legate, no doubt at the King's request, dismissed the unruly abbot and appointed an outsider in his stead. And in

October of that year, a royal command was issued, threatening corporal punishment to anyone who referred to Simon as a saint, or made reference to his "vain and foolish miracles".

No doubt it was in this atmosphere that the monks made the decision to remove the body of Simon from its burial-place in front of the chancel to somewhere quiet, obscure and unconsecrated. Their excuse was that the earl had been excommunicated, prior to the Battle of Evesham, for raising his sword against the King. But there were, of course, more pressing reasons for its removal too. They did such a good job that the exact place of the earl's burial has never been verified.

And thus, remarkably successfully, the Crown succeeded in laying the ghost of its saintly opponent. Within a year or two the miraculous tales dwindled and then ceased altogether, and the monks closed their case-book. It was simply not politic to continue it; there was to be no Saint Simon.

Only in more recent times has the cult of Simon de Montfort revived, no longer as a saint and martyr, but as a milestone on England's bloody journey to parliamentary democracy.

Not long after after the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832, a tall octagonal tower – Leicester's Tower - was erected near to the battlefield by a local landowner. And in 1965 the then Speaker of the House of Commons officially unveiled a stone memorial in the earl's memory in the park where the abbey church had once stood. And with that Simon de Montfort completed the transition from religious martyr to political hero. Pray to him next time you go to vote.