

PADLEY CHAPEL

by Alan Jacques

It's an unusual spot to begin a pilgrimage from, but the café at Grindleford Station is situated in the former ticket office, a starting place for many journeys. If you head over the railway bridge, passing the western portal of Totley Tunnel, go across the little bridge over the Burbage Brook and continue along the rough track past Padley Mill, you will eventually arrive at one of the peak Districts' finest Medieval buildings. Padley Hall, once part of an important manor since the days of Henry III, played a major role in one of the darkest events in Peakland history – that of the Padley Martyrs.

The present chapel at Padley is all that remains of the substantial quadrangular house of the late fourteenth century, possibly built on the site of a much earlier house. The Chapel was originally the gatehouse of the Hall and was divided into four rooms. One upper chamber served as a small chapel, the other as a lady's bower. Access to the upper storey was by way of a flight exterior wooden stairs from the courtyard, the doors being above the existing main door on the northeast side, now filled in with stained glass. The lower rooms were separated by the central gateway passage to the courtyard. On the southeast face are the access holes and stone perches for a former dovecote in the gable apex. The stained-glass windows, depicting the Chapel's history and the hammer-beamed roof, with its' carved angels, resting on moulded corbels are particularly fine.

It is a mystery how the Chapel survived until today, the estate was so impoverished that it had to be sold in 1657, after changing hands several times the Chapel Gateway was used as a hay-store and cowshed for almost 300 years! The complex of ruins seen today was excavated in 1933, during restoration work by the Nottingham Diocese. Among these are the remains of a spiral staircase, a circular hearthstone, steps, a stone sink and a domed oven. The site where the ancient alter stone, hidden since 1588 and now restored to the Chapel, was recovered from is marked. These exposed foundations are only part of the original buildings, as the southern and eastern areas were removed when the railway was built. The six acres of manorial grounds were recorded in 1499 as being surrounded by a substantial stone wall, remnants of which can still be seen; there were also terraced gardens, fishponds and a small reservoir.

The Padley family were Lords of the Manor of Padley until the marriage of Joan Padley to Robert Eyre. From the Eyres it came into the possession of the Fitzherberts of Norbury, after Anne, daughter of Sir Arthur Eyre, married Sir Thomas Fitzherbert, who had also inherited estates at Norbury and Hampsall Ridware in Staffordshire. These were Sir Thomas' principal residences, so his younger brother, John, held the tenancy of Padley. So was the scene set for the terrible events of July 1588.

A statute of 1585 decreed that any priest ordained overseas who was found in the kingdom would be guilty of high treason and that any sympathiser proven guilty of aiding and giving shelter to them should also be punished by the death penalty. Sir Thomas Fitzherbert refused to conform to the English Church and had been imprisoned at Derby in 1559, then in a succession of London gaols, the Fleet, Lambeth and finally the Tower, where he died in 1591.

Whilst Sir Thomas languished in prison, his brother John was himself under suspicion by the Earl of Shrewsbury of secretly harbouring priests at Padley. On Candlemas Day 1588 Padley, along with North Lees Hall, was raided by a force of 20 men led by Richard Columbello of Darley Dale, who searched the manor and grounds but found no priest. The raid had failed because Robert Eyre, a relative who was a magistrate with access to such information, had forewarned John Fitzherbert.

Thomas, the third son of John Fitzherbert, did not share this family loyalty, betraying his own father and uncle by informing Shrewsbury, Bess of Hardwick's husband and Lord Lieutenant of Derbyshire, about the system of espionage. On July 12th 1588, without prior warning, Padley was raided yet again, the raid being masterminded by a notorious priest-hunter, Richard Topcliffe –“That monster of iniquity”, who coveted Padley for himself and stood to gain £3,000 if he gained the death penalty. This time two priests, Nicholas Garlick and Robert Ludlam, who had been celebrating mass in the Chapel, were found hiding there in a chimney.

The two priests, together with John Fitzherbert and members of his household, were taken to the County Gaol Derby, notorious for its’ “foulness and visitations of the plague and gaol fever”. Topcliffe himself referred to it as, “ That foul hole that always stank and bred corruption in the prisoners”. They were incarcerated there with Richard Simpson, another priest facing execution.

Nicholas Garlick came from Dinting, near Glossop, and had been a schoolmaster at Tideswell for seven years. Robert Ludlam was born, according to one source at Whirlow, near Sheffield, by another at Radbourne near Derby. Both men had trained at the English College in Rheims. On 23rd July 1588 they were both tried on the charge of being missionaries to England, found guilty and given the following sentence;

“That you each be carried to the place from which you came and thence be drawn on a hurdle to the place of execution and there severally hanged, but cut down while you are alive: that your privy members be cut off; that your bowels be taken out and burnt before your faces; that your heads be severed from your bodies; that your bodies be divided into four quarters and that your quarters be at the Queens’ disposal; and that the Lord have mercy on your souls.”

Together with Richard Simpson, they spent the night before their execution in the same cell as a convicted murderess, who was to be executed with them. On the morning of July 24th the gallows stood at St. Mary’s Bridge on the river Derwent at Derby, where a huge number of bystanders gathered to witness the barbarous events.

Nicholas Garlick was the first, kissing the ladder before climbing up to take the rope, he scattered a few loose leaves amongst the crowd, on which he had written his profession of faith. Robert Ludlam spoke to the crowd as he awaited his fate with Richard Simpson. All three were cut down before they lost consciousness and were atrociously dissected whilst aware of their pain. Their heads and body parts were set on poles and erected on the bridge and other sites in the town. During the hours of darkness they were removed by sympathisers and given a decent burial in secret. Legend has it that the head of Nicholas Garlick was interred in Tideswell churchyard.

John Fitzherbert spent the rest of his life miserably imprisoned, reprieved from the death sentence upon the payment of £10,000 in alleged bribes by his family, he died in the Fleet Prison of gaol fever in 1590. The traitorous Thomas Fitzherbert inherited what was left of his Uncle's estates, but not Padley. Topcliffe was eventually given the estate by the Queen, after much legal wrangling, but only held it for about ten years, when it was restored to the Fitzherberts.

From the mid seventeenth century Padley frequently changed ownership, gradually becoming derelict over the centuries. In 1931 it was acquired by the Nottingham Diocese from Major Ashton Shuttleworth. The chapel as we know it today was reconsecrated in 1934 and is now part of the Hallam Diocese.

1998 saw the centenary of the very first Padley Pilgrimage, which had included people from Sheffield, Nottingham and Derbyshire, and it has been held annually ever since. The annual Children's' Diocesan Pilgrimage is held on the Thursday prior to 12th July and the Diocesan Pilgrimage the Sunday nearest 12th July. The Chapel Gatehouse is open to visitors from late April to late September each Wednesday and Sunday afternoon between 2-4pm, also during the English Heritage Weekend in September. For confirmation of dates and times, and also to arrange visits at other times, the curator should be contacted. Telephone 01433 651048.

This article was first published as "A Pilgrimage to Padley" in the July 1998 edition of Peak and Pennine Magazine.