**The Maid of Kent: Elizabeth Barton**

In the quiet village of Aldington near Ashford Kent, sits an interesting house and one that was on one occasion right in the forefront of English history.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Archiepiscopal estate in Aldington was one of the largest of twenty-five manors that the archbishop held in Kent.[[2]](#footnote-2) Cobb Hall was built for the high servant of the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cobb, he became the steward of the extensive Aldington estates.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thomas Cobb came from a good family from the Romney Marsh area and came to Aldington in the reign of Edward IV, where his son Thomas made a name for himself as a high servant to the Archbishop of Canterbury that had Cobbs Hall built for him.[[4]](#footnote-4)

However it isn’t the house or its master that his article will be about, but a lowly servant called Elizabeth Barton born in Aldington in 1506.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thomas Cobb employed Elizabeth Barton as a servant in the 1520’s.[[6]](#footnote-6) Employed by the Cobbs at a young age and at the age of nineteen her health began to decline so much so that it was believed that she had been stricken with a mortal disease.[[7]](#footnote-7) It was said that she had been in ‘grievous paine, in-so-much as a man woulde have thought that shee had suffered the pangs of death intselfe, until the disease descended and dell down into the bodie againe.’[[8]](#footnote-8) However, it was not the disease that made friends and neighbours look upon her with wide eyes, it was the curios visions which she seemed to be able to see and the predictions she started to make during her illness.[[9]](#footnote-9) People were astonished with Barton’s knowledge of the unseen world and future, she predicted her master’s son would die, and die he did, she could describe what had happened at the church service however she had not left the four walls of her room.[[10]](#footnote-10) She shared with her neighbours and mistress the glories that she had seen of heaven and the agonies of hell. It wasn’t till after Barton reported of a vision, she had where she would visit the chapel of Our Lady of Court-of-Street then she would be healed.[[11]](#footnote-11) William Lambardes states in his Perambulation of Kent that upon visiting the chapel Barton was revived ‘from the very point of death,’ and that her healing ‘should be rong for a miracle.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

Cobbs did not know who to turn too, he knew he needed to seek advice, but from where? He turned to Richard Masters the parish priest who came to see Barton and hear some of her revelations for himself, Masters communicated of the prophetess Elizabeth Barton to his Chief Archbishop Warham.[[13]](#footnote-13) Upon hearing the news Archbishop Warham sent an ecclesiastical commission led by Edward Bocking a monk form the Benedictine house of Christ Church, Canterbury to examine Barton.[[14]](#footnote-14) She was questioned, and the commission found her orthodox on the points of faith. The commission accompanied Barton to the chapel of Our Lady in the village of Court-at-Street in 1526 it was here with the onlook of neighbours, friends, masters and mistresses and the commission that she was miraculously healed.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Under the guidance of the commission Barton entered the convent of St. Sepulchre in Canterbury, she was awarded special permission to be under the spiritual direction of Edward Bocking.[[16]](#footnote-16) Barton’s reputation for sanctity became wide spread she became renowned as a miracle worker and seer and was come to be know as the ‘Holy Maid of Kent.’[[17]](#footnote-17) ‘She was held in some esteem by the nuns at Syon Abbey, monks at the Charterhouses of Sheen and London, and the friars at Canterbury, Greenwich and Richmond, and had audiences with Henry VVI, Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas More, Archbishop Warham and Bishop Fisher.’[[18]](#footnote-18) However, her prophecies became increasingly contentious, leading to the political involvement in a rapidly changing political situation.[[19]](#footnote-19) When Barton’s prophesies attacked the kings credibility and propriety she transgressed the Holy Maid boundaries.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Barton warned Thomas Wolsey and Sir Thomas More of the dreadful consequences that Henry would see if he was divorce Kathrine of Aragon.[[21]](#footnote-21) She was allowed a speak to the king in 1528 and warned him that an angel had appeared to her and told her that if he married Anne Boleyn the vengeance of God would plague him.[[22]](#footnote-22) The king did not care to listen to what the young nun spoke of and brushed her remarks aside. Barton continued to gain followers, a year later she shared with her admirers in Canterbury another vision she had had about the king and that she was going to deliver it in person.[[23]](#footnote-23) The king saw Barton and she bluntly told him that his voluptuousness and carnal appetite were leading him to disgrace God’s law. She continued to advise that if the king divorced Catherine and married Anne he was going to die a miserable death within a month and he would be seen as the shameful king.[[24]](#footnote-24) Henry was not amused and dismissed the nun and he never invited her to the royal presence again.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Barton lost her protection when Thomas Wolsey died in 1530 and Archbishop Warham in 1532, leaving her with only Sir Thomas More as protection and he was still a cautious supporter.[[26]](#footnote-26) Her predictions started to allow doubt to enter the minds of her supporters and allowing rebellion to enter the hearts of others. Anne Boleyn welcomed the king to her bed and almost immediately pregnancy ensued, the king and Anne were secretly wed.[[27]](#footnote-27) Queen Catharine and Sir Thomas More were unaware and continued to used Barton’s prophecies against Henry.[[28]](#footnote-28) After the king didn’t die as Barton had prophesised the king divorced Catharine and his marriage to Anne was made public when she was crowned queen on 1 June 1533.[[29]](#footnote-29) Barton refused to deny papal authority, despite new legislation declaring Henry to be the Supreme Head of the English church.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Barton was accused of treason, and it was believed that she and her associates spread false prophecies concerning the king’s marriage. These prophecies were called by Parliament to be ‘lyes by them unlawfully and traiterously practysed devysed ymagyned and conspired, as well to the blasphemy of Almyghty God.’[[31]](#footnote-31) Parliament believed that Barton’s words concerning the end of Henry’s reign should be punishable by death, however they did not wish to make Barton a Catholic martyr, instead they attempted to discredit her reputation and make her a traitor.[[32]](#footnote-32) Sermons and interrogations were preached across England portraying Barton as a fraud. Barton was attacked by opponents that claimed she was in communication with the devil, claiming that she was having an affair with her confessor Dr. Bocking.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Barton posed a threat to Henry’s reign and the stability of the monarchy, Parliament feared of a potential rebellion.[[34]](#footnote-34) For Barton this was a religious issue, so she placed papal authority above that of the kings. Due Barton’s commitment to the institution, the Reformation she sought to discredit could not be ignored. Barton held influence and almost 3000 people attended one of her miraculous experiences, she did not only have support of the lower society but had support from the wealthy and powerful, transcending social class boundaries.[[35]](#footnote-35) Barton’s life illustrates the chaotic and complicated nature of the Henrician Reformation. Barton was seen as a religious deviant that endangered Henry’s throne with the transgression of gender boundaries and public disapproval of King Henry’s Polices.[[36]](#footnote-36) It believed that Barton denied under interrogation her revelations and prophecies, however this did not stop the fidelity of many of her supporter.[[37]](#footnote-37) Nevertheless, Henry sought out punishment against Barton and her followers, emphasising the fact that she had communicated with the devil and committed treason against him, after being found guilty she was publicly hung for treason and witchcraft on 20 April 1534. The public hanging was intended to be understood as a symbolic act, her body and the bodies of her supporters were left as a show that she was nothing but a venerable, broken and impure person.[[38]](#footnote-38) The date of Barton’s execution holds significance as it was the same day that citizens were required to make the Oath of Succession, bringing the meaning for Barton’s corpse and those of her supporters to become visual statements of the government’s determination to silence those who criticize Henry VIII’s policies and reforms.[[39]](#footnote-39)

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17. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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