

# The Leper Hospital of St Mary Magdalene at Baldock, Hertfordshire

*John P. Griffin*

Quartermans, Digswell, Hertfordshire, England

## Abstract

The remains of the old Leper Hospital in Baldock have been identified. In the parish church of St Mary's in Clothall, medieval glass roundels show Mary Magdalene with left sided facial palsy. This is the oldest visual art depiction of this condition.

The Hospital of St Mary Magdalene at Baldock was founded about the year 1200 by Sir Hugh de Clothale.<sup>[1-4]</sup> In 1226, Henry III granted 'the Leprous brothers of St Mary Magdalene at Baldock' leave to have a fair at their hospital outside Baldock on the feast of St Bartholomew until his majority, and ordered the Sheriff of Hertfordshire to have the fair proclaimed throughout his bailiwick. However, as Henry III came of age in 1227 and the grant does not appear to have been renewed, the fair was probably only held once. The brothers and those sent by them to preach for the lepers maintenance were also given royal letters of protection to last for a year from Christmas 1226. Pope Innocent IV in 1244 took under the protection of St Peter the master and brothers of their house, and present and future possessions.

## 1. The Hospital Site

The site of the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene appears to have been about one mile from Baldock and lay within the parish of Clothall. Even in the fourteenth century the hospital's original site was of great antiquity, having been occupied centuries before, first by a pre-Norman castle, and afterwards, we may conjecture, by the manor house of Hauvile Manor.

## 2. Hospital Buildings

The hospital buildings were believed by Andrews<sup>[2]</sup> to have been within the outer bailey of what previously had been Clothall Castle. When the meadow to the north was drained prior to use as allotments in the 1860s, many human bones were found there which indicated its use in the past as a burial ground for the hospital.

A charter of the thirteenth century concerning a small grant to the lamp of St Nicholas mentions that the chapel to the hospital was served by two priests. By the year 1274, the Hospital held considerable property both in Clothall and Baldock and was housed in a collection of buildings of some pretensions, with a chapel adjoining. The precincts occupied a frontage of 588 feet on the highway, the chapel being situated on the opposite side of the road, detached from the main buildings. This arrangement was found inconvenient for the brethren and sisters attending the daily services, therefore the master obtained permission to enclose the highway on the condition that another road (17-feet wide) was made through the hospital property of such a character that it would not be detrimental to the town of Baldock.

### 3. Rebuilding the Establishment

The brothers suffered damage from thieves who attacked and set fire to the place. Also, a pre-meditated murder was committed in the road by the hospital between 1284 and 1285. In order to obviate this unpleasant state of affairs, John de Hauvile and his kinsman, John de Poleye, both descendants of the founder, Hugh de Clothale, and Muriel the wife of John de Poleye granted to the Hospital, on the Feast of St. Barnabas the Apostle (1303), land at Brada (Breda) for the rebuilding of the establishment. This was on the condition that Mass was said daily in the chapel for the souls of the founder and his wife, the father and mother of the donor's ancestors, and all the faithful departed.

The Brade was part of Clothall parish adjoining Baldock. The road currently known as Whitehouse Street was the Brade Street because it led to the Brade which was land on both sides of the Royston Road beyond the crossroads with the Great North Road and Clothall Road.

Permission for the removal of the hospital from its original site to its new site was granted four years later by John Dalderby, Bishop of Lincoln. It was expressly stipulated in the licence that the new site was to be in a safe place . . . with plenty of neighbours. It was required that 'a fair chapel or oratory to the same' as there was to the chapel the brothers were leaving was to be built. In this new chapel, the daily offices must be said as in the old one, without prejudice to Clothall Church or other neighbouring churches, and with the assent of the Rector of Clothall. The new hospital was finished in 1308, since leave was then given by the Bishop of Lincoln for the brethren to dwell there. Royal protection was given to the master John de Wooten for a year in December 1325.

Baldock does not appear to have been a peaceable place.<sup>[1]</sup> In 1343, gangs were thieving and creating trouble at fairs and markets. The King's Sergeant at Arms, William de Myners was killed at Baldock. A will of J. Waldegrave dated 1392 bequeathed to the master of the hospital and church at Clothall 40 shillings to buy a bell.

A will of William Druell<sup>[2]</sup> (patron of hospital and chapel) dated 1485 states 'Richard my son to

be found to school until he be made a priest and that he shall have the chapel of St Mary Magdalene when it is void and also the parsonage of Clothall Church . . . an honest man to say for my soul and my ancestors in the Chapel of Saint Mary Magdalene of Clothall for 7 years at a stipend of 8 marks'. Richard Druell's will of 1524 makes no mention of the hospital and he is recorded as a married man – so much for his father's ambitions.

The Hospital was suppressed in 1547. In the Private archives of Hatfield House it is recorded that the Bishop of Lincoln donated the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene to George Burgoyne on 25 August 1558. In 1566, there are records of an inquisition into concealed lands of the hospital. In 1612, there is a record of the sale of the free chapel of Clothall by N. Geffe to C. Prowse and in 1618 by Mr Trott to The Marquis of Salisbury.

### 4. Material Evidence

No sign of the actual building of the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene remains, yet there remains material evidence for its existence in Baldock and Clothall. In Baldock High Street, a pair of very old oak doors leading to the back of 'The Gates' are supposed to have come from the leper hospital when it was destroyed. Another suggestion is that they were saved from the Earl of Salisbury's manor house of Quickswood when it in turn was levelled in the later part of the eighteenth century. These two stories do not necessarily exclude each other.<sup>[1]</sup> The ownership of the hospital is well documented as passing to the Marquis of Salisbury in 1618. Arthur Mee<sup>[5]</sup> in his work *King's England*, Hertfordshire, draws attention to 'a pair of panelled gates 500 years old' attached to a much newer building called 'The Gates'.

Other material evidence of the leper hospital exists in the parish church of St Mary's the Virgin Clothall. A brass in the church floor separated from its superscription which has been inserted into the south wall of the Chantry Chapel commemorates Master Thomas Dalyton, 'parson of this church and master of the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene in Clothall next Baldak who was rector from 1519 to 1541.



**Fig. 1.** Glass roundel of a woman combing her hair, alleged to depict St Mary Magdalene, with left sided facial palsy.

Two other earlier brasses are to John Vynter (rector from 1394 to 1404) and John Wright (rector from 1487 to 1519) but make no reference to the leper hospital or that they occupied the role of master. Perhaps more remarkable are six roundels of fourteenth century medieval glass let into the fifteenth century east window of diamond shaped quarries depicting birds, hawks, partridges, pewits and ducks. These roundels are believed to have come from the Hospital. One of these roundels shows a woman combing her hair, she is alleged to depict St Mary Magdalene, the most striking thing depicted in this stained glass roundel is the dramatic left sided facial palsy (figure 1). Facial palsy as a complication of leprosy is well documented.<sup>[6,7]</sup> It is possible that this medieval stained glass is the earliest clinical record of facial palsy associated with leprosy.

In the 'Extract from The Remains of Thomas Hearne' edited by Philip Bliss<sup>[8]</sup> in 1869, which was reproduced in *The Hertfordshire Mercury* on the 2nd of December 1905, it is recorded that on the 1st of May 1750 the following lands were in possession of the said Thomas Hearne in Baldock:

- 'a capital measuage called the hospital with 3 acres of pasture thereto adjoining'
- 'a close arrable in severall conteinge four acres called Spittel Close'
- 'also one wood conteigne twentie acres called Spittel Wood'

- 'also 14 acres of meadows lienge in several, being in a close called Spittel Meade'
- 'also 8 acres of arable land lienge in Wallington field'.

The names of various plots of land perpetuated the remembrance of the leper hospital of St Mary Magdalene (Spittel being derived from hospital). South Road Baldock was at one time known as Spital Road, and Clothall Road as Pest House Lane, although the latter refers to a later Pest House for victims of Smallpox.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

Amongst the identified remains of the Baldock Leper Hospital, the identification of the glass roundel of St Mary Magdalene with left sided facial palsy, is probably the earliest known description of facial palsy associated with leprosy, and its visual presentation is unique.

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Correspondence and offprints: Professor *John P. Griffin*, Quartermans, Digswell, Digswell Lane, Hertfordshire AL6 OSP, England.