Troubled Times

Welcome to my third blog, if you are interested in my earlier blogs please see the link on my home page to earlier blogs.

Time, it’s time to talk about time.

I have stood here since about 1200 so there is no getting away from it; I am old. I like to think wisdom has come with my great age. My age does allow me to reflect on a lot of the history of this country and county, after all I can say I was there!

The American theatre critic Justin Brooks Atkinson said of the past:-

In every age “the good old days” were a myth. No one ever thought they were good at the time. For every age has consisted of crises that seemed intolerable to the people who lived through them.

I think I agree with Mr Brooks Atkinson up to a point, history, especially medieval and early Renaissance history, is often concerned with the periods of great upheaval; the wars; the changes of monarch and the revolutions. The good times and the lives of the ordinary people are often overlooked.

I was young when the Magna Carta was signed in June 1215 and while it does not affect me directly it does give me the opportunity to tell you one of my favourite puns.

Where was the Magna Carta signed?

Answer at the end of this blog.

Of course King John has a link with Worcester as his tomb is in Worcester Cathedral and he visited Worcester many times in his lifetime.

One of the most troubling times was the Dissolution of the Monasteries during the English Reformation. To start with let me give you some historical background.

When historians talk about the English Reformation it is easy to think that the main cause was the wish of King Henry VIII to be able to divorce Katherine of Aragon. Katherine had failed to give the King a male heir and the king wished to marry Anne Boleyn. However the reality is the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries is a lot more complicated than a single cause.

Katherine of Aragon had been married to Henry’s older brother Prince Arthur, they have a connection with Worcestershire as Arthur died in Ludlow and his funeral was held in Worcester Cathedral.

To really be able to understand the Reformation in England you have to look to the start of the Reformation in Europe.

When Martin Luther nailed his paper of Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg he began a debate that split the church. In the days before blogs and the internet church doors were the place to put such documents. Even today it is not uncommon to see a notice board at the entrances to a church.

If this debate, which challenged the authority of the Pope, had not been started it may not have been possible for the English reformation to have taken place.

As a church I am part of the community so what did the Dissolution of the Monasteries mean for me. I was originally built to be part of the monastery at Worcester. While I have always been a church it was the manor of Stoke Prior that saw the biggest change. The manor was owned by the priory of Worcester until the dissolution of the house in 1540. In 1542 the manor was granted to the Dean and Chapter of Worcester. Then in March 1650 it was sold by Parliamentary Commissioners to John Fownes for £685. John Fownes remained the owner until the Restoration when in 1692 it was returned to the ownership of the Dean and Chapter of Worcester.

When a house was dissolved the whole process only took about 6 -7 weeks from the Chief Commissioners arriving to announce that the house was going to be dissolved to the last day when the monks had to leave. One of the reasons for the Dissolution was King Henry VIII need for money; so the process of dissolution was designed to make as much money for the King as possible. The best plate from the churches was taken and sold, as were the best vestments. The lead from the roof was removed and melted down. Church bells were taken down and broken up for scrap metal and even the stone from building was removed. There were even auctions of the window frames, shutters, door and furniture. It is believed that the King was able to double his wealth from this process.

So what happened to the people, well this is harder to tell. We do not have accounts of what happened to the lay brothers although it is possible that many just stayed on and worked for the new owner. Nuns would have fared the worst as they were not allowed to marry and so many were left destitute. The poor were also affected by the loss of the monasteries. At the time there was no state social service so the poor looked to the church for aid. With the loss of the monasteries the aid was also lost. Some historians have argued that the dissolution lead to an increase in poverty but it is more likely that poverty got worse rather than an actual increase in the number of poor seeking help.

This period of history was definitely a troubling one for me and many community churches like me. However I like to think I was here as a place of refuge for my community and people definitely did not stop getting married or baptised during this time.

Looking forward it is about the time of year for my annual bat survey. Old buildings like me provide great places for all sorts of species of bats to live and it is important that any work does not disturb their nesting. We have also been able to appoint an architect to help with my restoration. So hopefully it will not be too long before I don’t have a big blue patch at the top of my tower.

Below are two pictures of me; one of my “good” side without the blue showing and the other showing why I am so in need of restoration.

Where was the Magna Carta signed? If you said Runnymede you would be right but all “good” historians know the Magna Carta was signed at the bottom.