

HORNSEA MERE, FISH, MONKS & BATTLES

During your stay at the Centre you will probably hear quite a lot about the geology of Hornsea Mere and the other large lakes which were once a feature of the Holderness landscape. The Mere was also a valuable asset to people in the Middle Ages and the subject of one of the last recorded "trials by battle" and the disputing parties were two monasteries.

A very important element in the medieval economy was fish. Church laws were strict about the number of fast days and seasons when abstinence from meat was total, also fresh meat was hard to come by in wintertime so fish was a vital food source.

William the Conqueror had given Holderness to his brother in law, Odo the Count of Champagne, and he in his turn gave the manor of Hornsea to the Benedictine ¹ monks of St Mary's Abbey in York, which had been founded by William II in 1088. The Abbey eventually owned St Nicholas' church in Hornsea and appointed a priest to look after the spiritual needs of the local people. In the north aisle of the church is a tomb effigy of someone who might have been a monk.

The dispute arose when a Cistercian ² Abbey was founded at Meaux near Beverley by William le Gros, Count of Aumale and Lord of Holderness in 1150. This William persuaded other people to be generous to his new abbey. Amongst these benefactors was John de Lascelles who gave the Meaux monks land at Seaton and rights to fish the Mere.

This was the cause of the legal wrangle between the two monasteries. The matter came to a conclusion in the second half of the 13th Century when William de Driffield was Abbot of Meaux and Simon de Warwick was Abbot of St Mary's. No less than two trials by battle were held in York and were fought not by monks but by hired champions. These champions did not fight to the death but until one side was judged to be stronger than the other after a fixed period of time. Poulson, the 19th Century historian of Holderness, described what happened at one of these trials;

'William the Abbot of Meaux, provided champions for the combat, the same number being found by the Abbot of St .Mary's; a horse was first swum across the Mere, and stakes were fixed to mark the boundary of the claim. On the day appointed for the combat, the parties and their champion appearing properly accoutred, ³ the fight commenced and lasted, according to the narrator, 'from morning until the evening, when the champions of the plaintiff were beaten to the ground, and the fishery ultimately relinquished by the Abbot of Meaux'.

Today we might think it strange that monks, who were dedicated to the service of God should get involved in this sort of dispute, but they felt it to be their duty to preserve all the lands and rights their benefactors had given to them and pass them on undiminished to the monks who were to come after them.

An Abbot of St Mary's also features in one of the stories of Robin Hood, who if he did exist probably came from Wakefield rather than Nottingham - but that is another story!

¹ Benedictine monks follow the 'Rule' (way of life). Written down by St. Benedict (died 547).

² Cistercian monks follow a revised version of St. Benedict's Rule, their mother house was at Citeaux (Cistercianum in Latin) in Bergundy.

³ Accoutred means dressed in armour