

The Gold Medallions - (1) Saint Helen

You will all have noticed the gold medallions behind the altar. I have studied them closely after the Youth Group quiz when there was a question as to how many there were. I got it wrong of course. The answer for those not sure is 19.



These striking medallions around the sanctuary walls probably date from 1893 when the church was redecorated. At the centre of course is Our Lady, the Patroness of the Church (in the guise of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, a way of depicting

Our Lady that only came over to England in 1860), and around her are various saints associated with the medieval churches of Warwick and the local community. They are joined by our 3 Warwick martyrs, mentioned elsewhere in this magazine, and other saints of local interest.

I have started with Saint Helen as I have a pretty blonde cousin with that name! But there is actually not a lot of information about her church in Warwick. We know that, in 1123, the main church in Warwick was All Saints which was situated in the precincts of Warwick castle.

There is a record that it was linked up with St. Mary's College and that 7 churches paid dues to the college. These included St. Helen's. As far as can be seen, St. Helen's was built on the site of the old priory in Priory Park but little is known about it after 1123. It is thought that it was taken over by Saint Sepulchre's priory on the same site.

Whatever the situation there is quite a connection with Saint Helen in the Warwickshire area. The Parish of Stratford upon Avon has 3 churches, one of which is Saint Helen's in Clifford Chambers. There is a St. Helen's Road of course in Leamington Spa which is connected with the Saint Helen's glassworks which were once in the area.

This possibly arises because Saint Helen was at one time thought to be English. Some historical sites still maintain that she was born in Colchester in 250 A.D. the daughter of King Cole of Colchester (Old King Cole?) And they claim that she herself founded the St. Helen's Orthodox Church in the town. Other towns in England have their connections, notably St Helen's in Lancashire, although that is thought more likely to be connected to Saint Elyn, a Welsh saint who lived much later. Even G K Chesterton in his book, 'A short history of England', mentioned her as a Briton. The painter of the medallions and the parishioners therefore probably regarded her as English in 1893. Sadly though there is little reason to suspect that she was actually English.

It is more likely that she was born in Asia Minor. What is known though is that she met Constantius who was a Roman emperor and they had a son Constantine. Somewhat romantically the story is that when Helen and Constantius met they were wearing identical silver

bracelets and it was this that got them together. She was though known to be of lowly birth (Saint Ambrose calls her a stable maid - although he does use the phrase *bona stabularia* - a good stable maid) and eventually Constantius divorced her and took a wife more in keeping with his status.

Saint Helen though stayed close to her son, Constantine, and it was he who took on the role of Emperor after the death of his father. Helen had converted to Christianity and her son played a huge role in converting the Roman Empire to Christianity, being the first Christian emperor. At last Christians in the empire were free to practise their religion for the first time in 300 years. When Constantine became emperor, his mother returned to the court and was given the title 'Augusta Imperatrix' and took on the job of finding Judeo-Christian relics in the Holy Places of Palestine.

Her greatest discovery though came when she must have been nearly 80. She had been looking for the site of Jesus's tomb and Calvary. She eventually discovered that it was probably underneath a temple dedicated to Venus. She gave orders for this to be demolished and excavations to take place. Amazingly the workmen uncovered a cross, but not just one cross, they uncovered 3



crosses. The other two of course belonged to the thieves who were crucified with Jesus. Unfortunately, after the long time underground, the name plate on Jesus' cross (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) had come off and there was no way of distinguishing which belonged to Jesus.

Helen wanted to be absolutely sure. She brought a woman who was near death to the crosses. When the woman touched the first and second crosses, nothing happened. But when she touched the third cross, she was miraculously cured. Helen knew that that was the true cross. The moment has been recorded by several famous artists. Here we have Peter Paul Rubens' version. Typically Helen shown by Rubens is definitely not size zero!

Naturally every country wanted a piece of the true cross, and it was divided up. I could write pages telling you where the fragments have ended up. Importantly though one piece was to be found in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which was built by Constantine on the site where his mother had found the true cross. On 14th September we celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross - and this is the anniversary of the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Saint Helen also took part of the cross back with her to Constantinople (which is now known as Istanbul), a city named after her son. The number of relics has led to some critics saying that the supposed remains are so great, they would, if put together, fill a big ship. However, a major study done in 1870 found that there are actually 6 cubic feet missing! - lost, destroyed or unaccounted for.

Saint Helen also found 4 large nails near the crosses and these became venerated relics too. Her son was still engaged in many battles after she got home, so she is said to have put one under his helmet and one under his horse's bridle. Whether it worked or not I don't know, but I do know that Constantine lived another 20 years or so and died a natural death.

This account helps us to understand more about the medallion. Saint Helen in the medallion is dominated by the Cross, highlighting part of her importance to Christianity. She is also shown to be with a small boy, also adorned with a halo. This must be her son Constantine who is also a saint in the Catholic Church, although he doesn't have a medallion of his own. Interesting his halo is rather different to the others (which are plain gold); there must be a reason why!

Saint Helen's feast day is on 18th August.

The Gold Medallions (2) - Saint Anne



Readers of the last magazine will know that the gold medallions around the altar of Saint Mary Immaculate Church were probably painted when the church was redecorated in 1893. They show saints who were in some way connected with

Warwick - names of churches in Warwick or those that were once in the town and names of the Warwick martyrs.

There are at least a couple of local connections with Saint Anne, but I'm not sure which one triggered the painting. Firstly, there was an altar to Saint Anne in Saint Mary's church, probably in the north transept. At the side of the medieval reredos at Saint Mary's there were a couple of niches with statues of Saint Anne and Saint George. These were destroyed in 1642, perhaps connected with the then Earl of Warwick's support for the Puritan Oliver Cromwell in the Civil War.

Alternatively, there is the little church of Saint Anne at Wappenbury. This was built in 1849, some 44 years previously. Records of the parish though go back to 1744 so there was almost certainly another church there before. Wappenbury is an interesting village, worthy of

its own article. 200 of its inhabitants died of the plague in the 13th century and it has never got back to its original size since.

For the story of Saint Anne though you have to dig deep. She was of course the mother of Mary, and therefore the grandmother of Jesus. But she doesn't get a mention in the New Testament. Not a word. There is a lot written about her though in other documents written at that time - and she appears in many religious paintings.

The early church had a considerable task in deciding which of the books around should be included in the Bible and regarded as being inspired by the Holy Spirit. Books that were rejected were generally unlikely to be 100% true but then again they probably weren't 100% untrue either so it's reasonable to have a look at them to see what they say. Some are easily dismissed. The Gospel of Saint Thomas (probably not the apostle) for example has Jesus making birds out of clay and then bringing them to life (a story which also appears in the Koran). Jesus is also said to have struck his neighbours blind when they complained about Joseph and Mary.

Saint Anne though is featured in the Infancy Gospel of Saint James (again probably not written by either of the apostles of that name). This gospel was obviously much more widely regarded as over 130 Greek manuscripts of it survive and it has been translated into many languages. The gospel covers the birth of Mary to Anne, Mary's early life and marriage to Joseph and the birth of Jesus.

Joachim and Anne are fairly well off by all accounts but are getting on in years and have no children. The theme is rather familiar in biblical terms reminding us of

Abraham and Sarah, Zachary and Elizabeth and Hannah, the mother of Samuel. The fact that he had no children led the priests at the temple to think that Joachim was a sinner, so much so that one year they refused to accept his gifts at the temple.

He felt ashamed and didn't go back to Anne, spending over a year in fields with his sheep. Anne in her turn began to get worried that he may have died, and even got mocked by her servant. At this time an angel appears to both Joachim and Anne to tell them that their prayer is answered and they will have a daughter. They are to meet at the Golden Gate to Jerusalem. They meet and are reunited and soon after Anne gives birth to Mary. Some manuscripts maintain that Saint Anne (like Mary in turn) had an immaculate conception but this is not generally accepted. After all would this mean that Saint Anne herself had to be immaculately conceived?

Anne is a very popular saint. There are thousands of churches named after her, many schools and hundreds of thousands of people. She is a very popular subject in paintings

too. I particularly like this one of her with Joachim and Mary. The reason why I guess is the look on Joachim's face. It says so much.





There are also many paintings showing the 3 generations - grandmother Anne, mother Mary and baby Jesus. Here is an example from Quentin Matsys (1456-1530), a

French artist. He shows Joachim and Joseph in the background. Others have John the Baptist in the family group, a few months older than Jesus of course.

I have just returned from Warsaw where there is a huge church dedicated to Saint Anne. The National Museum there includes this 8th century Coptic painting of Saint Anne with her finger to her lips - thought to indicate the Immaculate Conception. (I don't see why either!)



Saint James' 'Gospel' talks a lot about Mary's early life. She was walking at 6 months (just after me!) and Saint Anne taught her to read. She was taken to the temple aged 3 to be a 'temple virgin' until a husband was chosen for her. The Gospel tells us she had baby Jesus when she was 16 years old.

How long Joachim and Anne lived is not exactly known. We know they were elderly when Mary was born and we know they were both alive when Mary was taken to the temple aged 3. Joachim may have died soon after this and is unlikely to have seen his grandson, Jesus.

Some manuscripts tell us that Anne was married twice again after Joachim died and had 2 more daughters called Mary. So Jesus may well have seen Saint Anne and would surely be confused with his 2 Aunty Marys!! She died aged 72 in Jerusalem and her grave is near the Sheep's Gate.

Saint Anne is the patron saint of many places and also of widows, pregnant women, childless women, plague victims, male servants and many others. There are reputed to be relics of her in over 20 churches worldwide, many of them fake I suspect, but may be some are true relics. Some people shy away from any discussion about relics, but veneration of relics is only natural if we believe that saints have special powers of intercession because they are so close to Jesus. Saint Anne is surely among the closest.

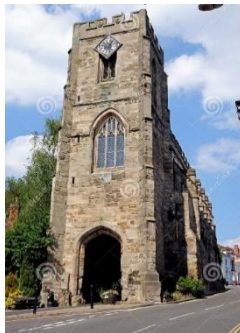
The Gold Medallions (3) - Saint James



When I was at school, I can remember learning about the 2 Saint James - Saint James the Great and Saint James the Less. We used to tell my brother (James) that he was named after Saint James the Less knowing that it would provoke a cry to my parents - "I'm

not am I?" And the predictable response - "Of course you're not"! 2 of the 12 apostles were called James and the less and great were probably no more than indications of their respective heights or ages.

To discover which Saint James is shown on our medallion, we need to go back to first principles. You will remember that the medallions show saints who are connected with Warwick, usually because there is (or was) a church there of that name. There is a church dedicated to Saint James the Great - and it is located in the Lord Leicester Hospital above the West gate to the town. Saint James Chapel (as it is called) was originally built in 1146 but substantially rebuilt in the 14th century. Or of course we could look closely at the wording (St



James Maj) - the 'Maj' is short for 'Major', the great in Latin.

James the Great is, with Saint John, one of the sons of Zebedee. He was on the seashore after fishing when Jesus called him to be one of his first apostles. His mother is thought to be Salome who was present at the crucifixion and went to Jesus' tomb on the morning of the resurrection. One interpretation is that Salome is the sister of Jesus' mother and therefore his aunt. This would make James the Great (and John) Jesus' cousin. The apocryphal gospels also suggest Salome is closely related - perhaps her mother is Saint Anne's sister, making her Jesus' 2nd cousin. Either way she and therefore James are closely related to Jesus.

Jesus didn't have favourites of course, but there were 3 apostles who shared some important occasions with him. Only Peter, James and John were present at the Transfiguration and the raising back to life of Jairus' daughter. The same 3 apostles were with him during his Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was betrayed. We know that they were probably well connected. John knew the High Priest and Jesus thought he was capable of looking after his mother. Note incidentally that they always appear in that order - James and John (like Ant and Dec) probably because James was the elder. I wonder if they always sat the same way round like Ant and Dec do - James on the left as they face you!

James is the only apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles record that Herod had James executed by sword. He is

therefore thought to be the first of the 12 apostles to be martyred for his faith. He died in Jerusalem, probably in 44 AD. There is a tradition that the man who arrested James was himself converted to Christianity after hearing James speak at his trial. And he too was executed with James.

There is a widely held legend that Saint James went to Spain to spread the gospel before he died. He is said to have had a vision of the Virgin Mary when she appeared on a pillar in Zaragoza. There is some doubt about this though as there were no contemporary records of his visiting Spain. The first mention is in the 700s. Also, Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans (written after 44



AD), said he was going to avoid “building on someone else’s foundation” by visiting Spain. This suggests he didn’t know James had been there.

Whatever the truth though, there is a much stronger tradition that his relics were taken to Spain - to Santiago de Compostela. This became one of the main pilgrimage routes in the Middle Ages and the tradition has been revived in recent years. The Way of Saint James, as it is called, has been followed by over 200000 pilgrims per year in recent years. The main route involves finishing with a 100 km walk or 200 km by bike or horseback. Pope Benedict was one of the pilgrims in 2010 but I don’t think he managed the horse ride (or walk)!

Saint James is of course the Patron Saint of Spain - and also of labourers, rheumatoid sufferers and hat makers. James becomes Iago in Iberia so places like Santiago and San Diego are all named after Saint James. He is important in the Church of Latter Day Saints too, being one of the saints that appeared to Joseph Smith who handed down the Book of Mormon. His feast day is on July 25th.

He is often shown in paintings with a scallop shell. This results from another tradition that his body fell overboard on its journey to Spain and was washed up covered with scallop shells. He is also shown with a staff, representing his long journey to Spain. You can just about see both in this painting by Rembrandt. I'm not sure if my eyesight is good enough but I think he is holding a scallop shell in his left hand in our own medallion. His staff is very evident as he sets out on his journey to Spain.



Saint James has been involved in many miracles. That has encouraged the thousands to take the road to Compostela. More of this another time!

The Gold Medallions (4) - Saint Francis of Assisi



For our 4th medallion we move on to a saint who is more familiar to many of us. In an age of 'rags to riches' stories, he brings us a 'riches to rags' story.

As usual, we start by looking for Saint Francis' connection with

Warwick. We know that the saints in the medallions (probably painted in 1893) generally had some connection with our town. There are churches dedicated to Saint Francis in Kineton and Kenilworth but these weren't there in 1893. Kineton church was built in 1971 and Kenilworth in the 1950s when parishioners decided they needed something more than the Green Man public house!

Our connection is probably with Baddesley Clinton. The Franciscans moved there in the mid-17th century and used it as their headquarters for their ministry throughout Warwickshire and Staffordshire. Eventually they built a chapel in Warwick (believed to be in Saltisford) in 1686 but this was destroyed by a mob in 1688 when James II was deposed from the throne. Like

all the Stuart kings he had a Catholic wife, but he actually converted to Catholicism himself. We have a further connection with Baddesley Clinton in that Rebecca Ferrers from Baddesley Clinton House painted our lovely Stations of the Cross.

Saint Francis was born in 1182 and enjoyed a very easy and rich life as he grew up. His father was very wealthy and a cloth merchant, so Francis had all the best clothes. It was as if he owned Bicester Village! He was popular and became the leader of a crowd of young people who enjoyed wild parties.

He wanted to win further glory and prestige in war and got the chance when Assisi went to war with their long time enemy, the nearby town of Perugia. Most of the troops from Assisi were killed but the Perugians kept a few prisoners - those wealthy enough to fetch a ransom. Francis was freed after almost a year but wasn't outwardly changed much. He next wanted to join the crusades and his father made him a magnificent suit of armour and gave him a horse. But he only got one day into his journey.

He turned back, much to the annoyance of his father and the derision of his friends. He had had a dream in which God had told him he had got it all wrong. He started to pray more and went off to a cave where he wept for his sins. Gradually he changed and one day, when visiting the nearby church of San Damiano, he heard Christ on the crucifix speaking to him. "Francis, repair my church". He assumed at first that he was being asked to repair the crumbling building, and took some of his father's fabrics and sold them to raise money for the work.

His father disinherited him as a result, but, by then, Francis had decided to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. He began to wear the cloak, girdle and staff of a pilgrim. He also began to preach - about returning to God and obedience to the Church. Gradually companions started to join him, people who wanted to follow his life of sleeping in the open, begging for something to eat...and loving God.



He hadn't really wanted to start a religious order but slowly the Franciscans began. He established the Rule of Saint Francis based on poverty, chastity and obedience. His friars went all over Europe, establishing communities of friars and monasteries. One of his followers was Saint Clare of Assisi; he helped her to establish an order for women and the Poor Clares began. Strangely enough, this brings another link with Baddesley Clinton as there was a community of Poor Clare nuns there until recently. There are still 6 Franciscan houses in the UK offering retreats and accommodation.

Saint Francis is perhaps best known for his love of animals and nature. A film about his life was called 'Brother Sun, Sister Moon'. There is a story that he saw a large gathering of crows, jackdaws and pigeons. To his surprise they didn't fly off as he went over to look at



them, so he started talking to them quietly, urging them as fellow creatures to praise God. The birds watched him intently, opening their beaks and stretching their wings. When he left they even allowed his habit to brush over them.

A well-known story concerns a wolf which was terrorising a small town, killing most of their wildlife and even a few inhabitants. Francis was told to avoid it at all costs, but he went to seek it out. When he found it, he made the sign of the cross and it is said to have laid down in front of him. He made an agreement with the wolf that, if the wolf left all the inhabitants alone, then he would make sure that they left the wolf enough food to live on. The inhabitants were happy to keep their side of the bargain - and the wolf kept his.





Saint Francis is also famous for building the first crib, but his crib wasn't quite like ours. He wanted to bring Christmas to life and built a model of the

stable showing Jesus' birth scene, using live animals. There was a live donkey (which would have carried Mary to the stable), live oxen and live sheep brought along by the shepherds. Now there's an idea for midnight Mass!

As Francis neared the end of his life (in 1224), he contemplated more and more on the symbols associated with Jesus - the crib, the crucifix in the church at San Damiano that spoke to him and the precious blood in the chalice. He was certain that the bread and wine at Mass do not represent but actually become the body and blood of Christ - and the term 'transubstantiation' was formally adopted by the pope at the time.



There have been many healings associated with Saint Francis, both before and after his death. After one period of intense prayer, he found he had received the stigmata. For those who don't know, these are physical signs of the wounds Jesus received on the cross. Saint Francis is the first person reported to have had these signs. In his case there were wounds in his hands that resembled the nails used. His skin in some way resembled the black round head of the nail on one side and the sharp point on the other (this is shown on the medallion). He had to wear bandages as the wounds were open and bled, but many of the friars saw them and soon everyone knew about them.

Saint Francis died in 1226. We have heard a lot about Pope John Paul II being canonised 'just' 8 years after his death. With Francis it was 2 years. He is the patron saint of Italy, the environment, and of course animals. Millions of people are named after him all over the world; they include my son and of course the Holy Father!



The Gold Medallions (5) - Saint Peter

This time we are on familiar ground! Saint Peter is well known to most of us. We start though by looking for his connection with Warwick. We suspect that the medallions were painted when the church was redecorated in 1893 and the saints included had a link with Warwick.



It might be thought at first that the link is St. Peter's church in Leamington, built some 30 years before, but that is not the case. The link is St. Peter's Chapel in Eastgate which stands over the old gateway to the town.

This hasn't been a chapel for many years and was, for a long time, let to the adjoining King's High School and used as a classroom. Indeed, my daughter enjoyed many lessons there, especially enjoyable as there are windows in all 4 walls! More recently though it has become a 2 bedroom holiday let, available all year round. This week you could have snapped it up for £1200.



Peter's original name was Simon and he was introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew who, we are told, was a follower of John the Baptist. Andrew had told him "We have found the Messiah". Jesus said to him -"You are Simon, the son of Jona; you shall be called Cephas". This indicated his future destiny and acceptance by Jesus from the start.

We know that Peter was married because Jesus cured his mother in law when she had a violent fever. I must have a wicked sense of humour because I always like the fact that she set about making them a meal as soon as she was better! Early writings suggest that Peter's wife may have been martyred too - and some writers think he had children.

Simon Peter's actual calling is believed to have come a few months later. He was a fisherman by trade and had had a bad night, catching nothing. Jesus told him to put his net in for a catch. Peter thought it would be a waste of time but did it and the net was so full that both he and Andrew (in one boat) and their friends, James and John, sons of Zebedee (in the other) filled their boats with fish. Simon Peter was overcome and fell to his knees, telling Jesus to leave him alone because he was a sinner. But Jesus asked the four of them to follow Him and he would make them fishers of men. Of course they did and became the first 4 disciples.

The thing I like most about Peter was the fact that he was so impetuous, jumping in with both feet! Consider a few events in his life-



- There was the time that the apostles saw Jesus walking towards them on the water. They thought it was a ghost and Peter asked if he could do it too. Jesus

said "Come" and naturally Peter panicked and began to sink, so Jesus had to rescue him!

- Before Jesus' trial and death, Jesus had predicted that, before the cock crew, Peter would 'deny' him 3 times. Peter naturally said he wouldn't but of course, when he came to it, he told various bystanders that he had nothing to do with Jesus. And the cock crew. Showing how human Peter was, we are told that he went outside and wept bitterly.
- As Judas led the guard to find Jesus to arrest him, Peter was quick on the draw. He cut off the high priest servant's ear with his sword. But Jesus healed the servant and mildly told Peter off.

And yet, Jesus had clearly singled Peter out. There were 3 special occasions where we are told that Jesus was only accompanied by Peter, James and John - the Transfiguration (where Jesus' body was dazzlingly white, flanked by Elias and Moses), the time Jesus raised Jairus's daughter back to life, and at Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemene before his trial and death.

But of those three, Peter was clearly most special of all. Note that he was the first name down in the listing of the apostles. When some of his disciples left him, Jesus turned to the 12 apostles and asked them if they were leaving too. It was Peter who said "Lord to whom shall we go?" When Jesus asked the disciples who people said he was, it was Peter who stepped in and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."



At this point Jesus made it clear. "Peter, you are a rock, and on this rock I will build my church - and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven".

In Aramaic the word 'Kipha' means both 'rock' and 'Peter'. There is really only one possible interpretation of this exchange and that is that Jesus is making Peter the head of the whole community of disciples who believe in him. The spiritual guidance of the faithful is put into the hands of Peter as the special representative of Christ.

It is also clear that the position of Peter among the other Apostles and in the Christian community was the basis for the Kingdom of God on earth. Peter was personally installed as Head of the Apostles by Christ

Himself. This foundation created for the Church by its Founder could not disappear with the person of Peter, but was intended to continue and did continue (as actual history shows).

Peter became the first Pope and, one of the beautiful features of the Catholic Church is that we can trace our history all the way back from Pope Francis to Pope Peter. Apostolic succession involves all bishops too tracing back their succession to biblical times. We know that Jesus' apostles appointed Matthias to take the place of Judas (Peter taking the lead) and Paul (after his conversion). In a similar way all our bishops are descendants of the apostles.

After Jesus' resurrection, he was to single Peter out one more time to emphasize his special place among the apostles. In Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we are told Jesus appeared to Peter, then to the rest of the 12. When He met them on the beach He asked Peter three times if he loved Him and told him to feed his sheep and lambs. It is thought that the 3 times was to compensate for Peter's 3 denials.

Peter became the head of the apostles, working miracles and bringing thousands to the church with his preaching. We know that Saint Paul regarded Peter as the head of the church as he tells us that, after his conversion and 3 years residence in Arabia, he went to Jerusalem "to see Peter".

The Acts of the Apostles tells us how he was arrested by Herod after James had been executed. But God had other ideas. We hear how an angel came to Peter in prison, unlocked his chains, guided him past the guards

and led him to freedom. God had further work for Peter to do. Eventually though Peter was martyred in Rome, probably about A.D. 67 in the reign of Emperor Nero. He didn't think he was worthy to die the same death as Jesus, so he was crucified upside down.

One of my favourite stories about Saint Peter comes late in his life and is included in the Acts of Peter (a book not actually included in the bible). Peter is fleeing from Rome and possible crucifixion and meets Jesus going the other way. In the Latin translation, he asks "Quo Vadis?" (Where are you going?). And Jesus says he is off to Rome to be crucified again. Peter of course turns round in shame. This is a picture from Annibale Carracci from 1602. Quo Vadis has inspired a book of the same name by the Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz, which in turn has been the basis of 5 films.



Saint Peter's main feast day is 29th June (shared with Saint Paul). Naturally he is the patron saint of fishermen - and of popes. He is often shown with a bunch of keys, as in our medallion. In 2013 Pope Francis revealed 9 bone fragments found when excavating Saint Peter's tomb and believed to belong to our first Holy Father. Wow!

The Gold Medallions (6) - Saint Thomas of Canterbury

We suspect that the medallions were painted in 1893 when the church was redecorated. As ever, we begin by working out the connection Saint Thomas had with Warwick. Before you start walking around Warwick to find a St. Thomas Street, I'll have to tell you. This time the connection is simple.



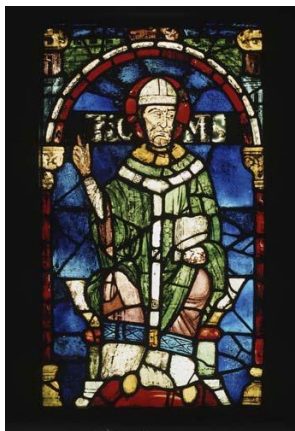
Thomas is the name of the priest at Saint Charles Borromeo who planned the building of Saint Mary Immaculate Church.

Saint Thomas was born in 1117 (ish) appropriately on the feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle (21st December). His family name was Becket and his parents were French. His father had earned a lot of money as a merchant and settled in London where he bought several properties with a view to living off the rents. He was obviously successful as Thomas was well educated and, when he was 24, he got a job in the household of Theobald, then the Archbishop of Canterbury.

He progressed up the 'church ladder' starting with minor orders, studying canon law in France, and becoming provost, canon and then archdeacon. His talents were noticed by King Henry II and he promoted Thomas to the post of Lord Chancellor. The two became good friends

and Thomas even raised an army to fight beside the king in a battle on French territory in 1159. Some were unsure about an archdeacon dressed in armour but Thomas helped his friend.

When Theobald died in 1161, King Henry wanted to promote Thomas to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas was unsure. He knew that the King had plans to take more money from the Church (and other landowners) and reduce some of the powers of the Church. The job would bring him into conflict with his friend the King. At first he refused but the King put pressure on others to persuade him. In the end he relented when a Cardinal from the Holy See asked him. So in 1162 he became Archbishop of Canterbury.



It was soon apparent that Thomas' premonition of trouble had been absolutely right. One thing followed another. The attempt to take more money brought conflict as expected, but further trouble followed when a cleric was accused of killing a soldier. The King was furious that the current system allowed the church courts to come to a decision and

overruled them. The King also stopped clergymen leaving the country without his permission to stop them appealing to the Pope. Thomas fled to France and stayed there for many years. (The photo shows a stained glass window from Canterbury Cathedral).

When he returned in 1170 there was a triumphant procession to Canterbury Cathedral, reminiscent of Palm Sunday. The streets were lined with cheering people and all the church bells were ringing along the way.

But, as with Palm Sunday, the euphoria didn't last. On 29th December 1170, 4 Barons stormed into Canterbury Cathedral, thinking that the King wanted Thomas dead, and struck him down at the altar. Whether the King did want him dead, we are not sure (there is a story that he said "who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?"),



but we are told that the King repented and fasted for 40 days. He made public penance at the cathedral 2 years later and received absolution from delegates of the Pope.

News of Thomas' martyrdom spread like wildfire throughout Europe and there was a clamour for him to be declared a Saint. Only 3 years later the Pope did indeed declare him to be a Saint of the Catholic Church. Canterbury Cathedral became a major place of pilgrimage and Saint Thomas' relics were venerated there for over 300 years until they were destroyed by King Henry's namesake, King Henry VIII.

Saint Thomas of course has also established a place for himself in English Literature. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is a collection of 24 stories told by pilgrims on their

journey from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket of Canterbury. They are presented as a contest as to which group could tell the best tale on their way. I'm not sure if anyone actually won. We weren't allowed to read them all at school as I believe at least one was deemed unsuitable!

In more recent times T.S. Eliot wrote a play called "Murder in the Cathedral" (first performed in 1935) about the last few days of Saint Thomas' life.

His feast day is on December 29th, the day of his murder, and he is the patron saint of all Catholic secular clergy and London (with Saint Paul).

The Gold Medallions (8) - Blessed William Freeman

Here's a change in direction! So far, our 7 medallions have shown saints whose connection with Warwick is the fact that there are churches here named after them.

This time we have one of our 3 very own martyrs. William Freeman was martyred here in Warwick on Gallows Hill in 1595.



He was actually born in Yorkshire in Menthorp about 1558. He was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford. His parents were recusant Catholics (that means they refused to go to Anglican services) but it seems William at least pretended to be an Anglican.

A change came when he was a witness at the martyrdom of Edward Stransham at Tyburn in 1586. He decided then to become a priest and went to Rheims to study (you couldn't study to be a priest in England at that time). He was ordained in 1587 and came back to England 2 years later with 4 other priests.

The journey over was more of an adventure than they expected. The crew of the boat decided to kill them, either for their money or because they were priests. The priests had to draw their swords (well, St. Peter had one we are told!) and kept them at bay, forcing a landing in Kent. Father Freeman made his way to Warwickshire and Worcestershire to help Catholics there.

They had to keep their identity secret so priests often had aliases. Father Freeman became Father Mason - a mason because he was laying stones to build God's church! Warwickshire was safer than many counties for priests but, even so, they would have to travel from 'safe' house to 'safe' house to avoid being caught. Many of these houses had priest hiding holes where priests could hide if needed. Good examples are found at Baddesley Clinton and Coughton Court, both easily reached from Warwick. The hiding holes weren't always very comfortable; indeed, in one of the Baddesley Clinton ones, priests sometimes had to stand knee deep in water from the moat for hours on end.

An alternative approach was for the priest to take on another role in the household - and that is what Father Freeman did. A lady called Dorothy Heath of Alvechurch took him as a tutor for her 2 sons (and perhaps her 2 daughters too). Her husband, William Heath, had been an M.P. and rented the manor at Alvechurch from his brother who was Bishop of Worcester. William Heath had died by this time and Dorothy had inherited the manor. We are told that the elder son went as a Catholic to Spain and the younger one was recorded as a recusant, so perhaps Father Freeman did a good job!

After 6 years of narrow escapes William Freeman's luck ran out. He hid his breviary under his hat (possession of a breviary was treason) but it didn't work. He was imprisoned in Warwick and eventually condemned and martyred on Gallows Hill on 16th August 1595. Being a priest was high treason so it was not simply a matter of hanging. Priests at that time were hung, drawn and quartered. I don't think we need to dwell on what that involves.



The priest's remains would often be placed on the gates to the entrance of the town "pour encourager les autres" as Voltaire puts it - but actually of course to discourage them. That is why it is thought that William Freeman's body isn't actually to be found on Gallows Hill. But it is the site of his martyrdom. The map reference is SP298637 and it is almost opposite the entrance to Heathcote Hill Farm. Both Heathcote Hill Farm and the field opposite where the gallows was have planning permission for housing. It is hoped that a small memorial to the martyrs can be incorporated into the scheme.



In the painting on the medallion you can see clearly that there is a crucifix in one of William's hands and a sash in the other. It is less clear that the words on the sash are 'Te Deum

Laudamus', a Latin hymn which was still commonly sung until recently. William Freeman is said to have sung this when his sentence was announced. He was beatified in 1929 and his feast day is on 13th August.

It is easy for us Catholics in England to feel somewhat comfortable in our faith now - no real chance of martyrdom - but we shouldn't forget that our Holy Father, Pope Francis, told us at Christmas that there are more Christian martyrs now than ever before. We pray for the 127 Christians murdered in a church in Peshawar, Pakistan, last year. And then there were 47 Coptic Christians killed by Islamist extremists on Palm Sunday in Egypt. And the thousands killed by Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Aid to the Church in Need tells us that, for the first time in 1600 years, there was no Mass at Easter this year in Mosul (Iraq). And here in Western Europe, Father Jacques Hamal was murdered by 2 Islamic State militants when saying Mass in France.

Blessed William Freeman, and all you Holy Martyrs of God, pray for us.

The Gold Medallions (9) - Saint Michael, the Archangel

Regular readers will know that the saints that appear in our medallions all have some connection with Warwick. That is exactly the case with Saint Michael.

Saint Michael's chapel stands (just about!) in the grounds of the leper hospital in Saltisford. We can't imagine these days that there were ever lepers in Warwick (they are more

associated with biblical times going around with their bell shouting 'Unclean unclean') but there were, probably until the 16th century. You will notice that the site is just outside the main town, reflecting the highly contagious nature of the disease.





It is believed that the hospital was endowed by the then Earl of Warwick in about 1135 and was run by a warden who was usually a priest who could take services at the adjoining chapel. The original hospital and chapel are no longer there; the 2 buildings you can see today are the Master's House to the rear and the 15th century rebuild of the chapel in the foreground.

I feel very upset every time I pass these buildings as I had a minor role when the Council sold them to the present owner some 40 years ago. There were promises of restoration and improvements (as there have been many times since) but only a little work has been undertaken. Both buildings are Grade 2 listed, as of course is our own church.



Saint Michael has a strong local presence, being the patron saint of Coventry Cathedral and also the name of a local hospital in the aptly named St. Michael's Road. We saw in our look at 'Guardian Angels' that angels have something of a low profile in the church. And yet you will remember in the

Litany of the Saints that Saint Michael comes immediately after Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pretty important then.

If we go back to the bible, Saint Michael only gets 5 mentions - 3 in the book of Daniel, one in the letter of Saint Jude the apostle and a lengthier mention in the Apocalypse, widely attributed to Saint John the apostle. In Catholic tradition then Saint Michael has 4 roles -

1. He is the enemy of Satan and the fallen angels. He led his fellow angels to defeat and threw them out of heaven and will defeat them again in the final battle. The name 'Michael' means "who is like God?" (a rhetorical question). This warrior role means he is often shown carrying a sword - as he is in our medallion.



2. He is also believed to be the angel of death. He comes down to those dying and gives each one a chance to redeem himself. Traditionally he helps them and acts as an advocate for them.
3. His third role is weighing souls on Judgement Day, considering their deeds during their life on earth. Again he is often shown carrying scales, probably in his left hand in the medallion, but more famously painted so on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo. (I think we can guess what that name means).
4. Lastly, his fourth role is as the guardian of the church. Older readers will remember how Saint Michael appeared in the Confiteor ("I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary, ever virgin, to blessed



Michael the Archangel.....”) and also in the prayer which was said at the end of every Mass (“Holy Michael Archangel, defend us in the day of battle; be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil”)

Currently he doesn't usually get mentioned during Mass, but we saw last year how important angels are in the church. In the Creed every week we say we “believe in one God.....maker of all things visible and invisible”. The invisible of course are the angels. Angels make many appearances in the bible and it may be that many of those not named are actually Saint Michael. Somehow I'm pretty sure that Saint Michael would have been up there in the sky singing 'Glory to God in the highest' to the shepherds on the day that Jesus was born!

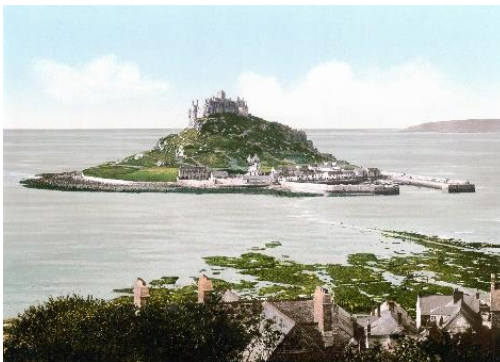
Sometimes it is argued that Saint Michael isn't a saint ('he's an archangel isn't he, not a saint?) but this is not really worth worrying about. The word 'saint' comes from the Latin Sancta meaning holy. Once you are in heaven you are automatically holy, angels and saints alike. We call Michael 'Saint Michael' therefore as a sign of respect and honour.

Because he has been regarded as a guardian, there are many places named after Saint Michael, looking for his protection. There are 3 islands off the coast of Europe - Mont St Michel in France, St Michael's Mount in Cornwall and Skellig Michael off the south west coast of Ireland. I've been lucky enough to visit all three, but the one that sticks in my memory is Skellig Michael. We were taken on a boat from a nearby port and it was



obvious that there were no Board of Trade or such like inspections at the time. We got there to find that the main site of interest was some 600 feet above sea

level and approached by a path with a sheer drop either side. This was long before it became a World Heritage site and was presumably made safer. On the trip back the boat broke down as we had rather feared it might. The Irish



'captain' was only slightly put out and proceeded to give the engine a massive kick! It spluttered back to life and the other passengers put away their rosaries!

The interesting thing is that Skellig Michael, St. Michael's Mount and Mont St. Michel are all in a straight line. And, if you continue that line across Europe, it goes through several other places dedicated to Saint Michael and arrives at Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. Coincidence? Or another sign of God's presence in our world? I think you know which I think! Praise the Lord!

There are numerous miracles associated with Saint Michael. One I particularly enjoy occurred at the Mühlberg convent near Meissen. The number of nuns was declining and the singing was becoming rather weak. The wooden Michael painting on the wall started to help out and join in the singing. There's an idea for Saint Mary Immaculate!

Saint Michael's feast day is on 29th September. In England this is one of the quarter days (25th March, 24th June, 29th September and 25th December) on which traditionally servants were hired, rents were due and leases began. He is the patron saint of soldiers, police officers, pharmacists, grocers and many more. Several countries have him as one of their patron saints, including France and Germany. And he is the saint to invoke in times of thunder and lightning.



St. Michael the Archangel, pray for us!

MICHAELMAS

The Gold Medallions (10) - Saint George

I know you all have visions of Saint George riding through the English countryside on his white horse slaying dragons. The truth, I'm afraid is not quite like this!



Saint George's father was a Roman officer and his mother was a native Greek. His early life was spent at Lydda in Palestine and he was brought up a Christian. He inherited some property there when his parents died while he was young.

In time he himself joined the Roman army and rose through the ranks to become an imperial guard to the Emperor. The Emperor though had a purge on Christians in the army to the extent that any he found would be put to death. Because he was closely connected to George, he tried to persuade him to accept the Roman Gods, but George refused. And so he was tortured (lacerated on a wheel of swords) and beheaded. In the year 303 AD.

There is a story about him coming to England with the future Roman Emperor Constantine and visiting Glastonbury, but there aren't many sources that confirm this.

A little more has come down to us about the dragon. We don't know if it was the Norwegian Ridgeback shown, but legends place it in modern day Libya. The dragon was allegedly preventing villagers getting to their source of water. To 'buy it off' the villagers



offered it a sheep every day. But in the end, they ran out of sheep, and moved on to children. When George arrived, he found it was the turn of the princess to be handed over to the dragon. George sprung into action and slayed the dragon. The king, needless to say, was delighted and the whole town was converted to Christianity. You can still find 'Saint George Bay' on today's maps, close to where this took place.

Of course there are those who don't accept the dragon legend. They see the dragon as representing the dragon in the Apocalypse. That in turn is representative of the devil.. Saint George wounded the devil when he was martyred for his belief in God.

The lance with which he killed the dragon (seen in the medallion) was called Ascalon by George after a city in Israel. Winston Churchill noted the power of this weapon and used the same name for his personal aircraft in World War Two.

George became a popular saint across the world and is mentioned as a martyr by the 8th century monk Bede. He grew in popularity when he appeared in a vision to the crusaders before the successful siege of Antioch in 1098. There was an English connection too as King

Richard I (the lionheart) also had a vision of him before a battle on the 3rd Crusade. King Richard is best known today for his pardoning of Robin Hood!



The importance of Saint George grew among the kings of England. In 1348 Edward III chose George as the patron saint of the Order of the Garter, members of which are, to this day, chosen purely by the Queen herself.



You can see the familiar red cross on the Order's coat of arms.

There were many saints in England at that time and perhaps the traditional patron was Edward the Confessor, himself a previous King of England up to 1066. In 1552 though, during the Reformation, most of the saints were 'abolished' and George was pretty well the only one left! He has been the undisputed patron saint of England ever since. He is also the patron saint of agricultural workers, Catalonia, Georgia, Malta, Bulgaria and many more.

Students of Shakespeare will remember that he recognised the importance of Saint George for English troops. He has Henry V giving his rousing speech before the Battle of Agincourt on St. Crispin's Day in 1415 -
Cry "God for Harry, England and Saint George!"



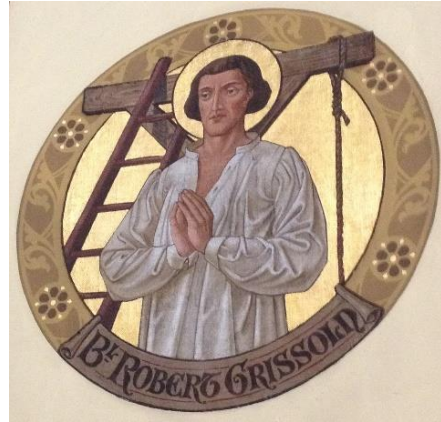
Saint George is also the subject of many famous paintings, usually slaying a dragon. On the left there is one by Peter Paul Rubens which is currently in Madrid. Notice the princess in the background and the dragon looking more like a serpent and representing the devil in the Garden of Eden. And on the right a painting by Gustave Moreau which hangs in the National Gallery.

And finally, what is the link that Saint George has with Warwick? Well, there was a Guild of Saint George at the Lord Leycester hospital (until Henry VIII came on the scene).



The Gold Medallions (11)

Blessed John Sugar and Blessed Robert Grissold



We have usually looked at our medallions one at a time, but these two are so closely linked together that I felt they should stay that way.

John Sugar was born in Staffordshire in 1558. His father was a priest and he studied at Oriel College, Oxford. It seems he left without taking a degree as he refused to take the 'Oath of Supremacy' (this was to accept that the king was the head of the Church of England). This is slightly odd as he is said to have worked as a Church of England minister afterwards - in Cannock. Interestingly, it wasn't until 1854 that you could get a degree at Oxford without taking the Oath.

His doubts won the day though and he became a convert to the Catholic faith and was ordained a priest in 1601 at the English College in Douai. Like many priests at that time life involved travelling on foot from house to house meeting and attending to the spiritual needs of the Catholics living in them. Blessed John Sugar returned to England and was to be found all over Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire carrying out God's work.

Blessed Robert Grissold, on the other hand, had a very different background. He was one of 7 sons (and 1 daughter) born to John Grissold who was a weaver in Rowington. Robert was a servant to Mr Sheldon who owned the Manor House in Broadway. The Sheldon family were secret Catholics (the land on which the house was built was purchased from Benedictine monks) and it seems likely that that is how John Sugar and Robert Grissold met.

The family seemingly allowed Robert Grissold to accompany the priest on his travels and probably to show him the way. Anyway, it was close to Robert's old house in Rowington that the pair were stopped. Possibly they had been to Baddesley Clinton House (a hotbed of Catholic activity about 2 miles away!) or may be to some of Robert's own relatives who were also Catholics.

On 8th July 1603 though a warrant was issued to search a Catholic dwelling in Rowington for the arrest of a Catholic priest who was rumoured to be there. Nothing was found so the search moved on to the house of Robert Grissold's 3 uncles (also known to be Catholics) but nothing again.



It was actually purely by chance that the search party bumped into John Sugar and Robert Grissold. One of the searchers was Clement Grissold, Robert's cousin, who told Robert that he was free to go. Robert Grissold however told him that he wouldn't go without his friend. So both were arrested and spent the next year in Warwick Gaol.

12 months later John Sugar was found guilty of being a Catholic priest and was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. Robert Grissold was found guilty of being in the company and assisting a Catholic priest and was sentenced to be hanged. Both were taken to Gallows Hill (the site of execution and familiar to readers of this magazine). Father Sugar

was executed first and it is said that Robert Grissold took the halter with which he was to be hanged and dipped it in the priest's blood before going up the ladder. Similarly to Jesus, he forgave his accusers and the hangman. He made an Act of Contrition and placed himself at the mercy of Almighty God.



Robert Grissold was buried beneath the gallows but the head and quarters of John Sugar were hung up on the gates of Warwick to show what happens to Catholic priests. The scene was recorded by Rebecca Dering of Baddesley Clinton and her painting hangs in the Martyrs' Room at St. Mary Immaculate Church.

Rebecca Dering also painted the beautiful Stations of the Cross around the walls of St. Mary Immaculate Church.

John Sugar was 42 years old when he died and Robert Grissold about 29. They were beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1987 and became Warwick's second and third martyrs.