

Christmas in Medieval Sawtry Part Three

Christmas at the Church

The importance of the Church in medieval times, especially at Christmas, cannot be overstated and the Churches in Sawtry in Medieval England played their part. The name Christmas, as previously stated was derived from the term “Christ Masses” and was one of two major religious events in the Christian liturgical calendar the other being Easter (Eastertide). The Christmas Season was known as Christmastide. It was also known as Twelvetide.

William the Conqueror’s coronation after the Battle of Hastings, at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066, was really significant. He chose that day for his Coronation as Christmas was the most important time in the religious calendar and an auspicious time to be crowned king. I’m sure he felt that by being crowned on Christmas Day, God would be on his side, in his reign.

The Church in medieval times was the centre of the community and played the most important role in the celebrations of Christmas. There would have been many Church services over the Twelve days of Christmas.

Advent was the time leading up to the start of the festivities on the 1st day of Christmastide which was Christmas Eve. As well as Christmas Day there were other feast days such as St Stephen’s Day on 26th December, the feast of St John the Evangelist on 27th December, the Feast of the Holy Innocents on 28th December and Epiphany on 6th January. There was a break in the festivities for a while until Candlemas on 2nd February where people would take candles to churches to be blessed and feasts were held to celebrate the formal end of winter.

The Feast of Stephen, in the carol “Good King Wenceslas” as with most other feast days in the religious calendar, was to honour a Christian martyr. These feast days were the equivalent of our bank holidays and the overlords would allow their serfs who worked for them to take time off to go to church. The aristocrats who owned the land or the representative of the crown estate, put in by the monarch, was usually the benefactor of the church hence why the churches were usually built next to their Manors as they were primarily for their use but the villagers or serfs, that lived and worked on their land, belonged to them along with the cattle, ploughs and

hovels or dwellings that they lived in and so were permitted by the overlord to attend the Church in the parish where they lived.

At the time of William the Conqueror's coronation, Sawtry had three Parish Churches, Sawtry All Saints, probably sited on or near where it is today, Sawtry St Andrews, which stood next to the site of the old St Andrews Churchyard and Sawtry St Marys which was the church in the Parish of Sawtry Judith. This church stood on land that was owned by King William's niece Countess Judith De lens, given to her by her Uncle. The church of St Marys would probably have been there since Anglo Saxon times, preceding Sawtry Abbey which wasn't built until 1147. The Abbey was built on that same land owned by Judith but given to Cistercian monks by her grandson, Simon de St Liz.

The other two Churches are probably Anglo Saxon in origin as well as all three were established churches, standing at the time the Domesday Book was written in 1089. As time went on, the Church was able to own the land that some of their churches stood on as the landed aristocracy believed that by gifting some of their land to the Church it assured them a safe passage to heaven, and many churches, although remaining on the property of the Lord of the Manor, were opened up as a church for the community for villagers to worship in.

The Sawtry churches would have followed the same pattern of church services at Christmastide and the other Feast Days as the rest of England. Our Sawtry Feast week in June has probably been celebrated in our village since medieval times, when they celebrated the Feast of St John the Baptist

Churches would have been decorated with many herbs, winter greenery, berries, & foliage. The clergy at churches and religious establishments were known to have enjoyed themselves at Christmas too. One abbot of Ramsey Abbey reserved for himself a wild boar each Christmas dinner. Even monks had a treat or two at Christmas. The diet of those in medieval monasteries was quite good anyway but Christmas feasts included more meat and fish than usual.

The Christmas Carol as we know it was not sung in churches at Christmas until after the Reformation however during the 12th century, a Parisian monk Adam of St. Victor derived music from popular songs and introduced something that was close to what was known as the traditional Christmas carol. The medieval equivalents of carol singers were wassailers ('was hail')

meant 'be well' in Old English) who went from house to house, singing and handing out wine or ale in return for food or money.

Christmas in Sawtry has probably not changed much in the way it is celebrated for hundreds of years. The Church remains the focal point in the community for many and the reason we celebrate Christmas should not be forgotten.

Christmas this year may be different but however we celebrate it this year Sawtry History Society wishes everyone a safe, healthy and happy Christmas.

References

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