

THE BANNER
OF
ST. JOHN OF BEVERLEY

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The holy relic known as the Banner of St. John of Beverley, stands (literally) in the forefront of the history of warfare between English and Scottish rulers through many ages. It holds precedence as an English *talisman*: a symbol of English supremacy.

John of Beverley was a Yorkshire lad born on Humberside at *Harpham* (East Riding). He must have shown promise for in the time of *Hadrian* (St Adrian), the abbot of *St Augustine's Abbey*, Canterbury (c.665-709) we find him a student of that famous abbey school. After his education the young John returned to Yorkshire and entered St Hilda's double monastery at *Whitby*. In 687 his life and abilities were sufficiently outstanding that he was consecrated bishop of Hexham in succession to *Eata*, who, whilst abbot of Melrose, had been the teacher of *St Cuthbert* (c.651). John was renowned for his special care of the poor and handicapped. As bishop, he was responsible for ordaining the great historiographer, Venerable Bede, both deacon and priest. In 705, John was translated to the see of York and during his episcopate he founded the minster church of Beverley, retiring there in 717. It was at the minster that he died on 7 May, c.721.

Before long, a cult of pilgrimage to his tomb flourished, and there were many stories of miracles. As a consequence, he became known as a saint (by popular acclaim – this being before the days when the Vatican's mechanisms for canonization were promulgated).

In 934, King Athelstan attacked Scotland by land and sea and it is thought that he carried (as was common practice) various relics with him, including some of St John of Beverley. Athelstan attributed his victory to St John. "The King of Scots never seems to have offered battle, and the English land-force harried his country as far as *Fordun* in Kincardineshire, whilst the fleet ravage the coast up to Caithness."¹ From this time the banner-relic was carried by a succession of English rulers on expeditions against the Scots.

In 937, Athelstan, and his brother Edmund, utterly destroyed an invasion from the north at an as yet unidentified site named as *Brunanburh*. Again, the crushing victory was attributed to St John of Beverley.

With those of St Peter of York and St Wilfrid of Ripon, St John's Banner was carried at the *Battle of the Standard*, two miles north of Northallerton, where the English forces, commanded by Archbishop Thurstan of York, faced those of King David I of Scots, on the

¹ Stenton (1950), p.338

22nd August 1138.² At Durham Priory-Cathedral there was the equally famous and potent Banner of St Cuthbert which was also carried on occasion into Scotland ahead of an English army. Tradition has it that this banner contained St Cuthbert's *corporeal* – a cloth used for covering the Host at mass. In the time of the Protestant Reformation it was taken out of the cathedral and burned with great glee by the wife of Dean Whittingham, the new puritan Dean of Durham.

In 1296, Antony Bek, the Prince-Bishop of Durham, in command of King Edward I's forces, carried the Banner of St John of Beverley in the van as the English king completed the process of subjugation that still echoes round the glens of Scotland. The Bishop, described as:

*Le noble Eveske de Doureaume
Le plus valliant clerk de roiaume.*

joined the royal army at

Norham on the Scottish side of the River Tweed, bringing his own 'congregation' of 1000 foot and 500 horse, plus 26 standard-bearers of his own household and 140 knights of the Palatinate of Durham. The banners of St Cuthbert and St John of Beverley took pride of place at the head of army. That of St John of Beverley was born by *Gilbert de Grymmesby*, a clerk, who was promised, as a reward for his services on this occasion, the first benefice to the value of twenty marks a year which should fall vacant in Scotland.³ On 13 October 1296, a warrant was issued to the Earl of Surrey to give the said Gilbert de Grimmesby, clerk, who brought the banner of St John of Beverley to the king in Scotland, and who carried it in the war, the first benefice of the annual value of 20 marks, or 20 pounds, that should become vacant in Scotland. (This warrant was signed at Kirkham {Priory}).⁴ It is recorded that on 27 November 1300,⁵ King Edward returned the Banner of St John to the Chapter of Beverley and that of St Cuthbert to the Prior and Convent of Durham.⁶

Edward I visited Beverley Minster himself on at least three occasions – in 1296, 1297, and 1300 – and it became a habitual stopping point in his itinerary on every northern expedition against the Scots. But in this he was not alone since the banner was also used in military campaigns by King Edward II, King Edward III, and King Henry IV. Also, King Richard II stopped at Beverley on his Scottish campaign of 1385. But Edward went one step further and, in 1295, he established a Chantry in Beverley Minster in the saint's honour. In 1301 he added

² Gough (1900), Vol 2, p.2

³ Taylor (1858), p.88

⁴ Gough (1900), Vol. 2, p.2

⁵ Bain *Calendar*, Vol II, p.300

⁶ Gough (1900), Vol 2, p.2

to this foundation by giving half of a fine that was owed to him by the town - 50 marks - towards the building of the shrine and ceded the other half, no doubt in the expectation that the town would repay the second half of the debt to the same building-fund.

In 1415, King Henry V ascribed his famous victory over the King of France at *Agincourt* to the Yorkshire saint – the battle took place on the Feast Day of the saint's translation (25 October 1307) which, of course, was famously also St Crispin's Day. It is said that on the day of the battle, blood and oil were seen running from the Saint's shrine in Beverley Minster.

Those readers who have a military background will understand this notion of *the colours* and the talismanic, almost sacred, notions that are associated with them. Indeed, a regiment's colours are, according to military etiquette, sanctified at a service of Dedication and are thus accorded the honour due to a consecrated object and are handled according to strict regulations. The order to 'uncover the colours' has sent a shiver down the spine of countless generations of soldiers – a precursor to the often-ultimate test of a regiment's bravery. One of the most memorable tales told of the famous Battle of Jutland was of the gigantic *battle ensigns* (the largest version of the White Ensign in a ship's possession) streaming defiantly at the mastheads of the warships as they flew at each other through the North Sea spray. It is this very same concept that traces its lineage back to the banner of St John of Beverley as it flew bravely before the English armies – a reminder that God's representatives were on the battlefield standing firm alongside even the humblest soldier.

No accurate description of the appearance of St John's banner has come down to us but it is known that, very often, they were fairly large pieces of brightly coloured cloth, raised so as to hang on a cross-tree at some height above the people or soldiers assembled roundabout. It would have taken someone with significant resources of physical strength to carry it outside, particularly on a windy day or in battle. The banner itself was usually made of two sheets of cloth which had the holy relic sewn between them, this latter very often being a piece of cloth known to have been worn by the Saint or associated with him in some other way. The most holy relic would have been a piece of cloth taken from that within which the body had been wrapped in the coffin. It was common for the coffins of saints to be opened on occasion and for items to be removed that could then be venerated as relics – pieces of bone, shards of cloth, chalices, croziers, pectoral crosses, etc., were all possible targets. We should remember that not only was the banner a good-luck talisman for the army, but it was also designed to strike fear and dread into the enemy since they would recognise it too and know of its holy significance. Those of us who have been lucky enough to spend Holy Week, leading up to

Easter Sunday (*Semana Santa*), in Andalusia, will have lifelong memories of the processions held each day and of the many banners of the confraternities born before the members as they sweat and toil to carry the statues of the saints in the penitential processions through the streets. A real remnant of the medieval world!

If, as I suspect, the banner rested on the High Altar of Urquhart Priory on the night 25-26 July 1296,⁷ as it did on the altar of Elgin Cathedral for the following three nights, then it was a most singular honour for the little priory. Because of its sacred nature, being a most holy relic, it would have found a ready welcome in the priory and one can imagine the excitement of the Benedictine fathers who were thus able to share a night of vigil and prayer in its company. This was no simple piece of cloth!

Over many ages the memory of St John of Beverley was employed in a talismanic way by a succession of English kings as they battled against their country's enemies. On the one side, it was an inspiration, on the other, a menacing portent of doom!

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⁷ This was the evening before King Edward I entered the city of Elgin.