

The Statue of St Margaret of Antioch, Leicester



To commemorate the unveiling by the Lord Mayor of Leicester, Councillor Gary Hunt, of Pamela Beresford's statue of St Margaret, formerly on the facade of the Corah Works, in its new position at the ancient prebendal church of St Margaret, facing St Margaret's Way and Sanvey Gate, and the dedication of the statue by Canon Barry Naylor

Sunday, July 22, 2007

The setting was designed by Tom Errington and realised by Gary Dickman

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The Corah Works and Leicester's Prosperity

During Europe's industrial heyday of the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth century, British towns became famous for their specialist trades and manufactures. In Leicester's case, the most important was hosiery and knitwear. The best-known factory was that of Nicholas Corah and Sons, and the brand which ensured Leicester's international reputation was 'St Margaret', which in turn inspired the retailer Marks and Spencer to introduce its own 'St Michael' trademark, one of the best-known world-wide guarantees of British quality.

When the Corah factory closed at the end of the twentieth century, its statue of St Margaret, a much-loved Leicester landmark since the 1950s, was taken down and tucked away in a corner of the factory courtyard. Its relocation on the frontage of St Margaret's Church next door, a place of worship for generations of Corah workers and the family itself, ensures that the history of the industry lives on, marking Leicester enterprise and labour, and symbolising its revival as part of the city's process of regeneration.

The Corah knitwear business was begun by Nathaniel Corah, born in 1777, whose family had farmed at Bagworth since about 1600 and by 1800 had added framework knitting to their activities. He was apprenticed to a framesmith and went to work on his own account in Barlestone, but later moved to Birmingham and got a job in a gun foundry after a downturn in the national economic found him in debt. There he spotted a market for the stockings made in Leicester by small family workshops. He moved back to Leicestershire, and made enough money buying knitted goods at the Globe Inn, Silver Street, and carting them to a warehouse in Birmingham for sale that he was able in 1824 to buy a row of properties in Union Street, Leicester, adding more in 1827. Here he established the town's first factory.

The first wave of the business's enlargement took it in 1830 to a new factory in Granby Street, and then to the St Margaret's Works, whose foundation stone was laid in July 1865 by Nicholas' grandson Edwin. Within ten years the company had responded to the new Trade Marks legislation by adopting the 'St Margaret's' brand for its products. This it proudly continued into the twentieth century, in the course of which Corah became a major supplier to the department store chain, Marks and Spencer. 'M&S' decided to have its own house brand and introduced its 'St Michael' range in order to build on the reputation and popularity of the 'St Margaret' products.

St Margaret: Works and church

From the start, both the Corah family and their workforce at St Margaret's Works had a close relationship with St Margaret's church. Many of the workers lived in the parish – particularly in the earlier decades – were married there, had their children baptised at its font, and were buried in the churchyard. They sang in the choir and belonged to the various societies.

The Corah family's connection continues to be commemorated at several points in the building. The stained glass in the West Window, for example, was fitted in 1880 in memory of Edwin Corah and a close friend. The recently refurbished organ – another sign of the church's new growth – was previously restored in the 1950s by the generosity of the Corah family as a memorial to a loved relative. So many Corah workers were killed or wounded in the two World Wars, including Lieutenant Leslie Corah, that a Corah branch of the British Legion (now the Royal British Legion) was formed. Its members still parade at the church on Remembrance Sunday.

St Margaret's and the knitwear industry

When the St Margaret's Works was established, that part of the parish closest to the town centre had already filled up with housing, most of it very poor dwellings grouped round courts. Probably the majority of families were employed in framework knitting, an industry which took root in Leicester in the seventeenth century. Usually their frames were rented from middle-men who bought in wool and paid by the dozen for finished products, predominantly stockings. They were the successors of the home-working stockingers of the late medieval period and inherited their independence and conservatism. They stubbornly clung to conditions and customs which left them at the mercy of market swings. This was one reason for the slowness of Leicester to adopt the factory system.

Behind the industry stood the staple economic unit of the county, the thick-coated Leicestershire sheep. Wool gave Leicester its prosperity from very early times, and foreign merchants spread its reputation abroad during the Middle Ages. It is for that reason that the statue shows St Margaret as a shepherdess, holding a shepherd's crook and dressed in a shepherd's hooded woollen cloak. Her legend describes her as the daughter of a rich man, turned from home after converting to Christianity, and taking work shepherding the flock of sheep belonging to her nurse.

The statue and its sculptor

Sadly, little has come to light in the course of the statue's relocation about the career of its sculptor, Pamela Beresford. Furthermore, the statue has not received the critical attention which it deserves. Carved from Portland stone, whose fossil content gives its fabric a rough and therefore organic character, it faithfully represents the minimalist style of its period. At the same time, Pamela Beresford resisted the fashionable urge towards abstraction and gave Margaret's face compassion and sensitivity. The artist herself had not long before shared the experience of so many of losing a close relative in the war. Her brother Hugh was a fighter pilot shot down over Kent in the Battle of Britain. They were the children of the Rev. Hans Aden Beresford, the last of several generations of his family from the first half of the eighteenth century to hold both the advowson and living of Hoby in Leicestershire. Pamela Beresford remained single and died at Hoby in 1984, aged 68.

She was assisted in the statue's design and completion by another Leicestershire artist, Peter Bunney. The block was lifted into its original place by Mr John Townsend and colleagues of Empire Stone, Narborough.

The statue was commissioned by the Corah company as the finishing touch to its post-war refurbishment of the office block at the corner of Burley's Way and the work was finally completed in 1955.

The statue's relocation

The statue was generously given to the church by the present owners of the factory, represented by the managing director, Mr Don Kotak, who is well known from another of his business interests, Sabras Radio. It comes to the church, therefore, through the goodwill of one of the many members of Leicester's South Asian community whose arrival in Leicester after the mass expulsions from Uganda under Idi Amin proved the salvation of the city's hosiery industry, which at the time was facing great difficulties.

The transfer to the church was enthusiastically supported by the Corah family, represented by Mr Nicholas Corah. Thanks to the Widdowson Trust and a Conservation grant from the City Council, the church was able to commission the artist Tom Errington to draw up the scheme which was then carried out by the stonemason, Mr Gary Dickman of Capitol Stone. The supporting wall is in Derbyshire stone to match the fabric of the church.

St Margaret's legend

Margaret of Antioch's ancient English churches number about 250, more than a quarter in East Anglia, 50 in Norfolk, 22 in Suffolk, plus 15 in Essex, and 17 each in Lindsey and Kent. Margaret's story presents her as a convert to Christianity *circa* 270, who took work as a shepherdess, guarding her nurse's flock after driven from her father's house. Margaret was therefore a natural patron of sheep farmers and shepherds. It is tempting to explain her popularity in eastern England as reflecting prosperity from the wool trade. The later parts of her legend made her a practical patron, too, for after being seen with her sheep by the region's governor, Olybrius, she spurns his offer of marriage and in her subsequent torture is swallowed by a sea-monster, from whose belly she bursts free. As well as offering protection to pregnant ewes, Margaret's escape made her beloved of midwives and women faced with difficult labour. Indeed, protection in childbirth was among a list of specific promises made at the end of her life, according to a late medieval breviary used in the Salisbury diocese. The reader of her story would be crowned in heaven, and the dying who invoked her would be protected from fiends. In a clause reminiscent of similar promises contained in texts accompanying wall paintings of the martyrdom of Erasmus, and implicit in those showing Christopher carrying the Christ child across a river, that supplicants would meet no unreasonable death that day, a further promise was offered in the breviary, that those dedicating churches or burning lights in her honour would obtain anything useful they prayed for.

Margaret's popularity among ordinary believers is reflected in the seven *Lives* written in English, the first before the Norman Conquest. Yet already in 494, Pope Gelasius had declared her legend apocryphal. Such prohibitions often betray deep-seated attachments difficult to eradicate – especially beliefs with which the church felt uncomfortable. Certainly there was no early attempt to include Margaret in the liturgy. Yet Margaret found her place in the *Martyrology* compiled by Rhabanus Maurus in the ninth century. A little later, in 908, some relics advertised as belonging to Margaret were transferred from the East to the church of San Pietro della Valle near Lake Bolsena. These were taken in 1145 to Montefalcone cathedral, and from there to Venice in 1213, shortly after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 produced a stream of relics for the Venetians together with renewed interest in the saints of Asia Minor.

Margaret's background is complicated and some scholars, calling in aid its early rejection, dismiss her story as a late concoction with little if any

reference to historical facts. However, historical truths may be more metaphorical than literal, and Margaret's popularity demands inquiry. Her home was not the famous Antioch on the Syrian coast but the city of the same name in Pisidia, a province of Asia Minor in today's southern Turkey. Until called Margaret by mistake in several copies of the *Martyrology* of Usuard (*circa* 870), she was known (and still is in the East) as Marina, literally 'She of the Sea'. Her Western name comes from the Greek for 'pearl' and through it she became associated with St Pelagia ('She of the Island') of Antioch in Syria. All this has supported the idea that she represents a Christian substitute for a deity associated with the Mediterranean Sea, perhaps the seafaring Phoenicians' Aphrodite, with whom St Arethusa of Seleucia has also been identified – another saint with much in common with Margaret. At the same time, the name Marina was not uncommon in Late Antiquity. Two other saints Marina were respectively an aristocratic convert of the 360s and the youngest daughter of the emperor Arcadius, born 403 and the builder of a palace in Constantinople called after her. Their name, and that of several male saints Marinus, may have been thought reminiscent of Mary. The name Marina was adopted by, or given to, Pelagia, who was a popular actress and courtesan nicknamed Margarita for the number of pearls she wore. Her biography was written *circa* 450 at Edessa on the modern Turkish/Syrian border under the title 'The Repentance of Pelagia', by a deacon, James, whose master, Bishop Nonnus of Edessa, had publicly converted her. Pelagia had entered the church where a synod was taking place, scandalising those present except for Nonnus, who was preaching. He dealt with her sternly but kindly and she confessed herself a sinner. The circumstantial account, as with James's detailed report of his visit to her on the Mount of Olives, where she retired to be an anchorite, has the ring of truth. The contrast is stark with the Margaret legend in its simplest version: the saint kills a dragon by the sign of the cross, is baptised by a dove when thrown into a lake, and finally beheaded. Whatever the extent of historicity in the Margaret legend, the geographic concentrations of her English churches points to her popularity during a critical period of settlement formation in perhaps the tenth century, just the time when interest in the saint was spreading in the West. At the same time wool production, it has been argued, was on the increase, and trade in wool with the Continent was already being regulated – a sign of its growing importance, in which Leicester was to share so abundantly.

The description of the veneration and legend of St Margaret is abstracted from Graham Jones, *Saints in the Landscape*, to be published in September by Tempus