



Newcastle-under-Lyme at 850

'Rewriting History'

By Glenn Martin James

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On behalf of everyone involved in the Lost Charter Project of 2023, & the Councillors and Burgesses of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the author respectfully dedicates this article to his Majesty King Charles III.

Introduction

In 2023, author and illustrator Glenn Martin James had the honour of creating a representation of Newcastle's founding charter for the 850th anniversary celebrations. This was an incredibly exciting project to working on in partnership with the Brampton Museum, and GROW North Staffs. In the following article, the author shares some of his memories of the project, and shares a personal look into the origins of Newcastle and its founding charter, and great King Henry II.

'The Lost Charter Project'

Writing this introduction in the early golden light of February 2024, it seems incredible that the Lost Charter Project is now itself becoming part of the Borough's history. The 850th Anniversary celebrations were held throughout the year, and the Charter Project was a very significant part of the celebrations. Funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, it was extremely successful, and quite a triumph for everyone involved.

For the Brampton Museum, it meant that the great surviving historic charters could all be exhibited together for the public, for the very first time, and also that they could be fully conserved (with modern techniques) for posterity. The exhibition was opened by his worshipfulness the Mayor of



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Newcastle-under-Lyme, Councillor Simon White, and was hugely popular, with a massive footfall of visitors to the museum during the summer months.

And for me, it was no less dramatic! I was researching the contents and the structure of a medieval charter, to create something suitably special for the anniversary, and I was also manager of the school's arm of the project.



This meant working with 60 children at St. Mary's Catholic Primary School on Silverdale Road, in Newcastle, and their teachers Miss Josie Heath and Mr Joey Vazquez. This was delightful, and several



times I visited the children in monastic robes, as Brother James who went to collect the Charter from King Henry II, telling them stories of the journey there and back, and an explanation of how the charter may have been lost; all stories written especially for the project by myself.



The children went on to produce 60 charters, (one each), for the project, all of which were on show at Newcastle Guildhall throughout the summer of 2023 for the public. It was wonderful work, and the children gave their charters a great deal of thought. They drew



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illuminated pictures of King Henry, wrote with quill pens and ink, and included not only the Kings greeting in Latin but their own names, too! We visited the Museum, and Tutbury Castle (with Elise Turner of Brampton Museum in costume as Constance the peasant, and I as Brother James, performing a comedy piece about the charters disappearance) and had a stunning audience with the legendary historical actress Leslie Smith of Tutbury Castle as Mary, Queen of Scots. She was absolutely awe-inspiring.

Deputy Mayor Barry Panter visited the Guildhall in summer 2023, and was very impressed about the children's work, and it's lovely to know that their efforts attracted such widespread compliments.

I also worked on producing a research guide along with volunteers Paul Bailey, Dominique and Rory Cairns, and Daniel Brammeld, which is to go on the Council website, and which we hope will be of help to future researchers following in our footsteps.



Working on creating the charter (two copies of each document, one in English, and one in Latin, which was translated by Professor Andrew Fear), was quite a job! Written in Iron Gall Ink on exhibition quality paper, they are a little over A3 in length, and have illuminated images of King Henry II at the top, surrounded by golden-yellow Lyme leaves in their autumn splendour. The image of the castle used is directly taken from the Borough's common seal, and the mosaic floor of the Guildhall in Newcastle town centre. It also features sketches of St Giles and the Guildhall, and the seal

of King Henry II. At times, I was working on it at home, sometimes in public at the Brampton Museum, and sometimes at the Guildhall where I was surrounded by cheerful people – especially Niel Baldwin, the legendary Nello himself, on Fridays!



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It has to be said then that the charter had a very public birth, and it was signed on completion by the mayor and by the Leader of the N-U-L Council, Councillor Simon Tagg, for which I am very grateful.

It was presented to the Deputy Lord-Lieutenant of Staffordshire, Mr Ian Dudson, on behalf of King Charles III by the mayor, and myself, at the



inauguration of the Celebrate Castle event that summer. Copies now reside at Newcastle Guildhall, and in the mayor's Parlour at Castle House.

It was quite a year. And there is also rather a lovely significance over

why St. Marys Catholic Primary School was chosen as the school to be involved in the project – as their school is on the exact site of the founding fortress of Newcastle-under-Lyme, where it all started...

'In the Beginning'

Newcastle-under-Lyme was born because a castle was built here, and the famous charter issued by King Henry II was obtained because the town was thriving before its walls. So, we ought to begin with the castle itself, whose absence is sadly to be noted by anyone interested in the borough's history.

So first of all, as we begin our journey into the past, please don't be under the impression that our castle has 'gone'. It's still very much here. It's just not in one piece anymore.



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The building itself might have been dismantled over the centuries, (a tale which can be told of many a famous structure, like Henry VIII's Nonesuch House), but the stone was taken to be used elsewhere in the town. That well dressed solid red sandstone is still here, part of the foundations of this house, or the foundations of another, maybe even having been used here and there to help repair the structure of St. Giles Church, another venerable survivor, and now in its fifth incarnation. The great surrounding pool is commemorated in the very rich soil of the gardens, in houses all around the area of Pool Damn and Rotterdam, excellent for gardeners, and infused with the silt and deposits which once made their way into the waters defending the castle.

The lost fortress of Newcastle-under-Lyme, from which the town takes its name, is only visible to us now from two remaining clues above ground. If any one of us were to cross over John O'Gaunt Road (close to St Marys Catholic Primary School on Silverdale Road), we would pass a small display on the corner of the street, neatly cordoned off by a rail. Inside this little corralled area some of the foundations of the gatehouse of our castle, left exposed to the modern world after their discovery in the 1930s, when the houses and road were being built. And if you look over your shoulder towards Elizabeth Park, on the other side of the road, there stands the remains of the castle mound.

These are the visible reminders of what was once the most notable and formidable structure in the Borough. But bear in mind that I say visible reminders – these are only the representations left on the surface. The castle itself would have covered a huge site, spreading out right across the grounds of the area where St. Mary's Catholic Primary School stands today, and the builders and navy's who were putting through Silverdale Road and the houses along the route in 1935 found huge foundations and structures all over the area from the castle and its buildings. There are even indications that a wooden bridge on posts came down across the area of John O'Gaunt Road to the gatehouse.

So, in having been dismantled, and used for building stone elsewhere, or retreating below the ground, the Castle of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the building which caused the town to be created and given its name, has physically joined its foundations.



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And this is only right, because the castle is the root of Newcastle-under-Lyme, the reason for its birth, and the name by which it became known.

A hundred other towns can trace a similar inception, and at its simplest, it happens like this. During a conflict across the land, the king becomes aware of the strategic importance of a road, or possibly a junction between two roads. This is obviously an area which needs to be guarded, and so a simple fortress would have been built – originally a wooden stockade, with a mound at the centre, on top of which they would have then built a secure tower of some kind. This would all then have been surrounded by a moat to give added protection.

This fortress having been built, sometime soon afterwards, it would have been realised that the sergeants manning the castle have horses which need to be shod, or weapons which would need maintaining – so a blacksmith would have set up a forge, whether inside the castle walls, or just outside, close to the fortress for protection. The forge would have attracted travellers passing by to stop, and have their horses watered, and their shoes repaired, and local farmers would have made use of the smith as well, for any number of reasons.

Naturally, shoeing horses takes time, and people get hungry and thirsty, and look for somewhere to obtain refreshments while they are waiting, so a tavern would have grown up where people could dine, or even, as the trade began to grow and its reputation to spread, stay at the inn overnight. There would have been a call for religious services and the ministrations of a priest, and so a chapel would have been established which grew into a church, and as other trades began to gather around those already established, this would have led to the beginnings of a market.

And so, with an embryo market growing up in the area, trade building all the time, and the settlement spreading out around the castle, you have the birth of a town and the requirement for a charter for it to be officially recognised, and hold a market...

This is exactly what happened with Newcastle-under-Lyme. A primitive fortress had been built by Earl Ranulf of Chester in this area, by a junction in the road, and moated by excavating a pool and damming the Lyme Brook to fill it. This was officially granted to him by King Stephen during the



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period of the Anarchy, for his support in the ongoing struggle against Empress Matilda and her Husband Geoffrey of Anjou, during the civil war which racked the country for several decades. When King Henry II came to the throne, the son of Geoffrey and Matilda, he confiscated the castle, as he had little trust in Ranulf, and the area was of strategic importance. It was eventually returned to Ranulf, (who died shortly afterwards) and for many years it was the property of the crown. The wooden stockade was gradually transformed into a solid stone fortress, fit for a king. Sadly, Henry II never stayed here, but his son King John did, and so did Henry III, and Edward I. The castle eventually became the property of The Earl of Lancaster, the famous John of Gaunt, and it stayed the property of the Duchy of Lancaster throughout its existence. Sadly, with the invention of firearms, our castle lost its strategic advantages, as it lay in an area overlooked by high hills, with all the obvious problems this would create defensively, and it gradually went into decline.

The first church of Newcastle-under-Lyme was St. Marys-Over-The-Water, established for the castle inhabitants, and eventually St. Giles was built and consecrated, when the congregation outgrew its modest facilities. When the town was established as a borough, the traders who applied for the charter became Burgesses: They were awarded burgages, strips of land all around the area which became the market, to set out their stalls and ply their trades, and these strips of land eventually became the shops which line the market today.

So, the castle caused a town to grow up at its gates, and the traders who congregated applied for a charter from the king to establish their town officially.

A charter from the King, paid for by the men of the town, would have been a fantastically new idea: A genuinely radical innovation. When the King granted the town a charter and borough status, it freed the town from control by local lords or the church – so Newcastle peasants and burgesses could not be press-ganged into fighting local wars for robber barons and were not obliged to farm the land for Trentham Abbey. They could use the money they made commercially to establish their own community and were granted explicit rights by the King in the charter.



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This was absolutely revolutionary, and the man who granted the charter for Newcastle was a fascinating King.



'Curtmantle' – King Henry II

The man known to history as King Henry II (a direct ancestor of King Charles III) was a force of nature with an extremely restless temperament. He was a Frenchman by birth, having been born in Le Mans in 1133. As a young man, he was heir to the vast empire of his Grandfather Henry I, and he became Count of Anjou on the death of his father.

Henry was about medium height, extremely strong, and quite stocky, characteristics accompanied by fierce auburn hair and a beard, freckles, and a violently explosive temper when he lost it, (as is evidenced by his famous fateful words which led to the murder of St Thomas Becket.) Deeply restless and a terrific horseman, he was seldom out of the saddle, and he even acquired the nickname 'curtmantle' for the short Angevin riding cloak he favoured. With a natural ability for hard riding, he could cover incredible distances in what seemed then miraculously short times – and given the sheer size of his empire, (encompassing over half of France, all of England, and Scotland, Ireland and Wales), he had to be able to move, and move fast around his enormous realm.

The king often changed his plans on the spur of the moment, riding off in a whirl of dust from his horses' hooves, and the whole court, struggling to



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keep up with him anyway, had to change direction yet again and head off desperately after him. This caused a terrific confusion of baggage wagons, soldiers, ladies of the court, servants and clerks, all muddled up and trying to change direction. The King is suspected of doing this on purpose, and thoroughly enjoying the chaos he caused.

It was said that he had supernatural aid in covering these terrific distances, being descended from the famous demoness Melusine who married Geoffrey Greygown, one of his ancestors. The Plantagenets are said to have joked about this ethereal inheritance amongst themselves. The ruthlessness and violent temper characteristic of the Counts of Anjou, people said, could only have come from the devil.

Henry was a mass of contradictions. From his mother, the formidable Empress Matilda, he inherited a ferocious Norman pride and ruthlessness, and it was said, very unsavoury advice on how to handle his advisers and nobles at court. From his father, Geoffrey Plantagenet, he inherited the Counts of Anjou's passion for learning and the law; Henry had a genuine, and very real love of the law, and all new learning, and it was said of him that, 'With the King, it is school every day.'

And this is the man to whom we owe our gratitude for the Newcastle-under-Lyme charter.

As King, Henry bought a whole fresh approach to reforming the law. The Counts of Anjou had developed a system whereby the laws of the land were laid down physically, with ink on parchment or velum – a standardisation of the laws of the land, so that the same system of rules and regulations could be applied throughout the king's empire, as in the ancient days of Rome. Previously, these charters and laws had been recorded in the British Isles by word-of-mouth and tradition, but King Henry caused them to be *written down formally*...

There was considerable suspicion and resistance towards such a revolutionary approach. This was unheard of, and half the reason Thomas Beckett found himself in opposition to the King originally was that the king tried to have religious procedures written down formally in his favour.



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However, despite the storms of his reign, (like his explosive relationship with his fiery wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the rebellions of his formidable sons Young Henry, Richard the Lionheart, King John, and sly Geoffrey), the old King persisted in his reforms, and he succeeded in laying down a system of laws which founded the basis of our legal system today.

Newcastle-under-Lymes Charter of 1173

The Newcastle-under-Lyme charter was granted in 1173 by the King, and the Burgesses of the town paid the King for their freedom. There is cause to believe that the town obtained one of the very first Borough Charters ever granted and this was the Birth Certificate of Newcastle-under-Lyme. And it's because of King Henry's desire to have these charters written down that we can almost reach out and touch the King on the shoulder.

Following the king's decrees on the subject, the charters he envisioned became law, and being actually written, they were recorded and archived. They were kept safe, consulted when required, and then later updated, occasionally revised by the monks, and then later still by clerks and lawyers. In later centuries, these ancient documents were sought out and recorded by the students of history who became historians, and compiled in book form. And this is where I come in, recreating the lost Newcastle-under-Lyme Charter.

I owe a great debt to a late-Victorian academic called Adolphus Ballard, who published a book on Borough Charters in the fading-light just before the First World War. This work must have taken him years of painstaking research and travelling around the country, to consult archives and ancient manuscripts, and his book was published in 1913.

When I was seeking information to begin tracking down the contents of charters of this period, I contacted the Parliamentary Archives to ask if they could recommend an authority who has treated on the subject. They cheerfully told me that they would have no records themselves, (as the Borough predates the creation of Parliament, but they recommended Ballard's Book, and gave me the details. They also recommended that I check with Staffordshire Archives – who, very helpfully, recommended the same authority. I am indebted to them both.



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I had more than one (very enjoyable) meeting with Jim Worgan, our own walking font-of-all knowledge on the history of the Borough to make sure I had identified the Burgess rights, and checked this with Jim Dowler, Chairman of the Burgesses of Newcastle-under-Lyme. After referring to the books of Thomas Pape, I then delved into the work of Adolphus Ballard. To my delight, this is a wonderfully accessible book, and although it required a lot of patience and detective work looking through the text, I was able to piece together our recreated Charter for the 850th anniversary.

Ballard's Book came down to me with all this excellent information because he was able to compile it himself, directly because King Henry has decided all those years ago that charters should be recorded and written down. That's a direct link, and as I say, we can almost touch the King on the shoulder. Not only did he issue our original charter of 1173, but his legacy means I was able to reconstruct a representation for the original, in celebration. Thank you, King Henry, and happy 850th Birthday Newcastle-under-Lyme.

With affectionate thanks to Elise Turner and everyone at Brampton Museum, Jayne Fair of GROW North Staffs, his worshipfulness the Mayor Councillor Simon White, Councillor Simon Tagg, Jim Worgan, the staff and children of St. Mary's Catholic Primary School, the gallant volunteers who created the research guide, Dominique, Rory, Paul and Daniel, and especially the National Lottery Heritage Fund, who made it all possible.

Glenn Martin James, (at May Bank), 20th February 2024.

N.B. The author recommends that anyone interested in the life of King Henry and his family watch the film 'The Lion in Winter', (1968) starring Peter O'Toole as the King, Katherine Hepburn as his Queen Eleanor, Anthony Hopkins as Richard the Lionheart, and Timothy Dalton as the King of France. Watching this film at the age of 14, during a snow day when school was closed, has led to a lifelong interest in the Plantagenets for him, and the author highly recommends others to track it down.