

# ST. BARTHOLOMEW THE GREAT - THE OLDEST CHURCH IN THE CITY OF LONDON *by Alan Fleming*

For any visitor who comes to London to see the sights of historical interest they should not pass up the opportunity to visit St Bartholomew's in the heart of the City of London. Set in the old Smithfield meat market, it is tucked away on the eastern side of the market. The church was established in 1123 by a Norman called Rahere, who was a favourite courtier of the last Norman King, Henry 1st. It is said that he was a man of humble birth but managed to gain the confidence of the king gaining a position of trust and importance. Rahere tired of life at court and decided to renounce his position and play a useful role in society. To do this he went on a pilgrimage to Rome to cleanse his soul, this was customary of many people in those early days. Unfortunately like many of the pilgrims he became very ill and lay in a delirious state for several days.

Whilst he was ill he prayed that if he was spared he would build a hospital for the poor of London. His prayer was answered and he survived and made the return journey home to England. When traveling back to his homeland he was visited by a vision of hell, followed by one of St. Bartholomew who spoke to him. He said 'I am St Bartholomew and I have chosen a place in Smithfield in the City of London. There you will in my name found a church'. Rahere was true to his word and built a hospital and a church and a monastery for Augustinian Canons.

The priory was established in 1133 and was granted a royal charter. The charter granted the priory various privileges and exemptions, most probably being taxes. Rahere was the first Prior and was for many years until his death in 1143. The tomb of Rahere lies just to the left of the high altar, under the triforium gallery. Inscribed on his tomb are the words, "Hic Jacet Raheus Primus Canonicus et Primus Prior hujus Ecclesi" Which translated from



Latin reads: "Hear Lies Raheus the first Cannon and first Prior of this church."

The church is entered through the Tudor gatehouse which is above the original west door of the nave. From there you will pass through a courtyard surrounded by gardens on both sides. Entering the church you will then see the magnificent Romanesque columns on the south and north sides of the nave. These columns support the splendid triforium gallery on both sides. Above that is the clerestory under the flat wooden roof.

This church and the history that surrounds it has an atmosphere that pervades every corner of this gem. You cannot fail to feel the past as you observe every feature of this magnificent building. Standing inside or walking around the north and south aisle leads you to believe you have found a way of traveling back in time. The history of Smithfield goes back over 1000 years and has witnessed many events. One of the most notable events to take place there happened outside the doors of St. Bartholomew's in 1381 when the poll tax rebels lead by their leader Wat Tyler confronted the young Richard II. The rebels had already murdered the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Prior of the Order of St John of Jerusalem at nearby Clerkenwell Priory. Wat Tyler drew his dagger and for his action he was struck down by the Mayor of London, William Walworth that, single act ended the Peasant's Revolt and peace returned to Smithfield.

*(Editor's note: This church has close connections with several City Livery Companies, including The Worshipful Company of Hackney Carriage Drivers. Masters, Freemen and Liverymen will attend a Christmas Carol Service there once again this year. It is also the church where Liverymen were clothed during a service when the Company was granted Livery status back in 2004.)*



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