

Tuns & Bears

(St Wilfrid's Church, North Muskham, OS Ref: SK798586)

At the time of writing this piece, I had just heard that thieves had stripped the lead from the roof of the north aisle of North Muskham Parish Church, St Wilfrid's. This, some 6 days after stealing the lead from the nave and porch. It brought to my mind the benefactor of that north aisle, one John Barton of Holme.

For those interested, there is a potential trail of discovery around the church, seeking for the marks and symbols built into the church fabric telling us that it was John Barton, 500 years ago, whose mark was left for all to see.

Enter through the main door and look on the rear wall for a fairly insignificant frame with a typed document within. It is headed '**The Will of John Barton of Holme by Newark**'. This is a transcript by Rev R H Whitworth of Blidworth produced around 1980, the original being in a museum.

The Will begins:

'In the name of God Amen! On the 10th day of the month of December in the year of our Lord 1490', I, John Barton of Holme by Newark, Merchant of the Staple of Calais, being of good and sound memory and perceiving the peril of death imminent, make my testament in this matter: first I leave my Sole to God Almighty and my body to be buried in my new tomb in the Chapel newly constructed by me in Holme.

As probate was granted by June 1491, our hero had died a few months after dictating his will. In historical context, this is some four years after the Battle of Stoke [the final end of the Wars of the Roses] and one year before Christopher Columbus reached The New World.

John Barton was a Merchant of the Staple of Calais. That is, he was one of a small number of men, licensed by the King, to export English wool. These merchants had to sell through designated towns and ports, making it easy for the King to gather taxes and, in return, giving the merchants a monopoly and making them very wealthy men indeed.

Reading the will is not an easy task. Scribes were paid by the line or the word so documents were repetitive and quite lengthy. In it, John Barton leaves bequests to his family and various other people, whether livestock, money or clothing.

In his will, Barton bequeathed the building of the north aisle of North Muskham church. This would have been quite a major work, adding the lean-to side extension (see below). In fact, he left the bulk of his wealth to his oldest son and this seems to be one of the conditions.



As a wool stapler, the bales of wool he traded would be sealed with a unique token, his own logo, the 'Barton Mark'. He also seemed to know the benefit of marketing by splashing his image about inside. One trick was a play-on-words around the name Barton. An old name for a barrel was a 'tun'. You sometimes see pubs call 'The Three Tuns' and their sign depicts three barrels. Put a wooden bar across the end of the barrel and you get to Bar-Tun, or Barton, a useful image for the illiterate populace.



Left: Barton Mark (Holme Church). Centre: Tun with Bar, North Muskham Church north aisle windows. Right: Coat of Arms on external north aisle buttresses.

To ensure everyone knows, the Barton coat of arms is carved on each of the external buttresses of the extension. I wonder what people would say nowadays if a church wanted to build an extension with the idea of commercial branding at every corner?