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Saint Blaise ©Roy Helmore

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St Blaise. Drawing ©Roy Helmore.

The connection of Saint Blaise with Saffron Walden's history is a very tenuous one and I have to acknowledge that it hangs by a thread, albeit one of the best quality wool. St Blaise was one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, of whom more later. Like so many of the early saints who gave rise to colourful legends and beautiful works of art, the life of St Blaise, as now reported, probably owes more to legend than fact. His intercessionary roles display great versatility. In addition to being the patron saint of wool-combers (the Saffron Walden connection), his assistance may be invoked for maladies, especially sore throats, and protection against storms and gales. This last may cause a revival in his fortunes as the world seems to be facing increasingly severe weather cycles.

Originally a doctor, he became bishop of Sebaste in Asia Minor and some legends say that he actually took up ecclesiastical residence in a cave, from which he cured sick people and animals by benediction. When the Imperial governor of Capadocia was out hunting for wild beasts, to be used in devouring Christians in the circus, he came across the saint's cave, which was revealed by the fact that lions, tigers and bears were queuing patiently to consult him. After being thrown into prison, the St Blaise continued to work miracles, saving a child from choking on a fish bone (hence his connection with maladies of the throat)



and restoring to an old woman her sole possession, a pig, which had been stolen by a wolf. As a result he is the patron saint of pork butchers.

When the Governor ordered St Blaise to be drowned in a pond, the saint simply walked upon the water while pagans who attempted to imitate this feat all drowned. On being ordered to face his martyrdom, the saint was hung from a post, lacerated by carding combs, and beheaded in about 316AD. The carding combs gave rise to his veneration by wool-combers and the comb features in representations of the saint (figure 1). Because his name resembles the German verb *blasen*, to blow, another of his attributes is a horn and hence also his association with storms and gales. Some accounts describe him as a patron saint of physicians and during the middle ages, stumps of the candles offered to him on his feast day were believed to cure toothache.

His feast is celebrated on 3 February. Parson Woodforde described a solemn procession in honour of the saint in Norwich in 1783. Celebrations of St Blaise lasted in Bradford, a major wool town, until the 19th century. More locally, because of the importance of wool to the local economy, celebrations of his day regularly took place in Saffron Walden. John Player, in his *Sketches of Saffron Walden* published in 1844, reported that the last procession took place in 1778. The wool-staplers were accompanied by the mayor and corporation of the town and formed a great procession, with a band, which went as far as Newport, Audley End and Littlebury. Speeches were made at various stopping points and a large party dined at a local inn at its conclusion. The Woolstaplers Hall was an important building in the Market Square, situated on the site of the present Corn Exchange.

Although originally an Eastern saint, he became very popular in the West and his relics were to be found in many places, although only three English churches were dedicated to him, none in East Anglia despite the importance of the wool trade. St Blaise was one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers to whom a magnificent pilgrimage church was constructed, replacing an earlier church, in Vierzehnheiligen (Fourteen Holy Helpers) near Bamberg in Bavaria. Built in 1741-2 to the design of Balthazar Neumann, it is one of the most famous masterpieces of South German Baroque, with Rococo interior altars and furnishings. How the vision of a shepherd led to the construction of this beautiful church is another story.

Notes

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