



Talk for St Peter's Church, 15 October 2017

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To celebrate the completion of the restoration work to the John Greenway Chapel

One hundred years before Shakespeare was born and when Tiverton was just a village in feudal dependence on the Courtenay family, John Greenway was a local boy growing up in poverty. The year was 1460 and Henry VII was on the throne.

It may have been a matter of being in the right place at the right time or it may have been entrepreneurial endeavour (or both) but John Greenway had a rags-to-riches life story. During the late 1400s and early 1500s, Tiverton grew into a thriving industrial town due to the growth of the woollen cloth market and John Greenway was at the centre. When he died in 1529 he was reputed to be the richest man in Tiverton with a property portfolio valued at £150. His stock in trade was West of England kersey which, at the time, was replacing traditional English broad-cloth as a cheaper light-weight material and became popular not just on these shores but abroad too. Tiverton became a centre for kersey making and whole families were employed in its manufacture. Wool would have been purchased directly from the farmer by Greenway and he would have supervised the combing, spinning and weaving as well as the finishing process at his own fulling mills. He would affix his staple mark to the bales which would then be carried by pack horse to Exeter or London. A major milestone in Greenway's rise as a merchant would have been in 1497 when he was admitted to the Worshipful Company of the Drapers in London allowing him to sell his cloth in Blackwell Hall. In 1501 he was admitted to the Livery and became a member of the governing body. He now belonged to a powerful group of city merchants.

It would have been at this time in his career, a little after the turn of the century, that John Greenway would have started to plan the rebuilding of the south aisle of St Peter's church and the addition of a richly carved porch and chantry chapel. The result has been described by English Heritage as "a tour de force of late Perpendicular decoration" and, as a result, St Peter's is widely regarded as one of the most decorated parish churches in the country. You will no doubt be familiar with the carvings on the outside of the chapel representing Greenway's life but for those of you who have not been closely involved on the scaffold of late there are some worth mentioning. The numerous carvings of ships, all different, depict Greenway's merchant life - one ship shows the anchor being taken up in readiness for a voyage, another shows a ship in port with cargo being unloaded, another in full sail as well as rowboat or galley ships. An interesting note, in passing, is that Sir Frances Drake had yet to voyage around the world when John Greenway had his own fleet regularly sailing across to Spain, Portugal, France and the Low Countries. There are also carvings showing religious scenes including the story of the Passion, the Resurrection and the Ascension. Amongst these are Greenway's coat of arms and those of the Draper's Company, as well as the Merchant Venturers (to which Greenway also belonged) and the Royal Arms. Over the door leading into the church is a carving of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary with John Greenway, and his wife Joan, kneeling at either side.

It is also of note that John and his wife Joan are buried in the chapel – it is understood that they did not have children so it is just the two of them who rest here.

Many of you will know that John Greenway built two chapels in Tiverton, the other being a much smaller and more humble chapel adjacent to Greenway's almshouses in Gold Street (opposite Homefayre). A similarity exists, however, in the materials used and Greenway's fondness for inscription. The prayer instructing almspeople living in Greenway's Gold Street almshouses next door was to pray for the souls of John and Joan Greenway every day - words which are repeated here in this chapel.

In the fascinating account of John Greenway written by A. E. Welsford there is reference to this chapel here at St Peter's as a monument to a self-made man's pride but also recognition that the merchant wanted his soul and his wife's, to be prayed for. He endowed it as a chantry where masses should be sung for his soul and on judgement day, it would be considered as one of his good deeds.

Welsford also made the interesting point that there are a surprising amount of inscriptions within the chapel at a time when most people could not read. Did Greenway have a vision that literacy would spread to all one day.

In 1517, the very year that Greenway's chapel was completed, Martin Luther attacked the widespread belief at that time that a place in heaven and forgiveness of sin could be secured through purchasing an indulgence. The years of unrest that followed saw a new chapter in John Greenway's chapel with the dissolution of all chantries. While the chapel survived, the services that he had endowed stopped. The seats were turned to face into the main church and charity children and the men from the almshouses were seated there. I understand that it was restored as a chapel in the 1950's and rededicated by the bishop of Exeter at the time, Dr Mortimer.

There is another strand of John Greenway's legacy that is still very much alive today. In about 1520, Greenway built almshouses in Gold Street (with the adjoining chapel I mentioned earlier) to house five poor men who could no longer work. The almshouses still exist and other benefactors along the way have contributed to what is currently one of the largest almshouse charities in England known as Tiverton Almshouse Trust. Thanks to John Greenway's extensive property portfolio (which included a farm in South Devon) together with endowments from our other benefactors we have the strong foundation upon which we still operate half a millennium later.

It is a privilege and a joy to lead Tiverton Almshouse Trust. What could be better – to look after buildings with such rich and varied history and yet they still have a purpose today. We have eighty-three almshouses in the town and welcome applications from local people, over 60 years of age and in need of our housing. We have very few vacancies and pride ourselves on supporting our residents to live with us for as long as possible, adjusting to accommodate care and assistance for those who need it when they need it.

Over the years since the 1500's there have been additions and extensions to our housing stock most notably in the Victorian era and in 2004 when HRH Prince Charles opened our new development of thirty-two almshouses between Gold Street and the River Lowman in the shadow of the original almshouses. To add to his visit he presented us with the Patron's Award for design excellence.

The future, too, is bright. We are currently involved with the national Abbeyfield Society which plans to redevelop land at Old Road in Tiverton for a 45 bed extra-care unit, so there is much to do.

I'll leave you with an interesting fact that returns us to the beginning of this talk and to John Greenway. In 1910, when the Charity Commissioners carried out an inquiry into the nation's charities, John Greenway was the oldest recorded benefactor in the town pre-dating Peter Blundell, who was nine years old when John Greenway died in 1529.