

Is the date “Ryleyble”?

AD1190 should ring bells among most of the Sarratt community. I am of course referring to the traditional date ascribed to the foundation of the Church of the Holy Cross at Sarratt by monks from St Alban's Abbey. This date is based upon the observations of Reverend Edward Ryley (1859-1912) and architectural historians who dated the style to “not earlier than the last decade of the twelfth century”. However, having read up more on the subject, I was somewhat sceptical about the reliability of this dating. After all, previous publications have revealed Reverend Ryley to be wrong in his assertions on his “Roman” material. The “roman cinerary urns” and “true Roman key” he describes, were both dated by the British Museum to AD1200-1400. His ‘cinerary’ pot sherd was nothing more glamorous than medieval domestic cooking fabric. As for his Roman “fibula” - that turned out to be Tudor! So currently there is no evidence for a Roman cemetery under the present church. However, before I rip up the entire text book on its history, I thought it fitting, out of respect for the great man, to see how close I could get to his phenomenal 1190 figure, especially given this year might make the church 825 years old.

Knowing of a church “curia” (court) arriving newly to Sarratt around September 1194, I was determined to find the first definitive reference to a structure. I stumbled across the elegantly titled ‘*Book of Unpublished Anglo-Norman sources*’ that contained a notation for an “ecclesiam de Saret” from the St Albans Abbey pipe rolls for 1204. This is of course an explicit reference to a “church of Sarratt”. The passage documents:

“Bishop Herlewin of Leighlin dedicated on the Wednesday after Palm Sunday on the eleventh calends of May the church of Sarratt.”

So far this is the earliest confirmed date we have for a physical ‘church’ in Sarratt. This offers the date for the consecration of the present building to be Wednesday, 21st April 1204. However for the date to be appreciated in our Gregorian calendar system the ‘birthday’ of the Church would become 28th April. They say Rome wasn’t built in a day and it’s clear neither was our beautiful church (Abbey representatives had already been here a decade). However with this new evidence, it might be time to start recounting the number of candles we put on the cake!

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