

# The Local Crusader

Ranulf de Blondeville and the  
Saracens of Biddulph Moor



There are few more curious associations in local legend than that of Saracen prisoners being settled on the land that is now known as the Staffordshire Moorlands village of Biddulph Moor. Travelling back to the thirteenth century to discover the untold story behind the legend, we reach a place where the adventures of the crusades meet with the dark realities of the medieval slave trade under the patronage of one of the most powerful figures in all of local history.

## Moorland Markers

The village of Biddulph Moor sits high above the town of Biddulph, straddling a ridgeway that offers panoramic views across Cheshire, Staffordshire and on a clear day, the distant promise of the Welsh Mountains. It is one of those places that, whilst at a glance from the outside world may appear to be historically unimposing, has continually borne witness to the events of history around it. To the north, the land falls away towards the ancient marker of the pre-historic Bridestones tomb whilst the centre of the village itself is within walking distance of at least two plague stones and less than two miles away, the Talbot Inn duck pond acts as a reliquary to the siege of Biddulph Old Hall, from which countless cannon balls have been recovered due to the areas part in the English Civil War.

But these are all very literal pieces of its local history. They are fascinating and intriguing tales in their own right, and as anyone that has ventured into the countryside around the village on a misty morning will attest, far from lacking in their ability to fire the imagination. Yet, Biddulph Moor and its surrounding landscape play host to a lesser known local history and one that has weaved a rabbit warren of folklore around the village. A village that is found more than three thousand miles away from the part of the world to which its central legend is tethered; the story of the Biddulph Moor Saracens.

The primary driver of the historical rumination connecting the area with the figure of the Saracen is focused around the genetics of the village's historical population. Nineteenth century writers noted at some length how the perceived "darker" complexion of the Moor's inhabitants had connections to a time when Saracen prisoners were settled on the moor following a local landowner returning from the crusades. So too, the historical prominence of the local name "Bailey" is often held in reference to the profession of Bailey of the woods as a reminder of the Saracens skillset.

Meanwhile, the curious collection of medieval tomb slabs found at the nearby church of St. Lawrence, decorated as they are with carved images reminiscent of the Knight's Templar, only serves to add a further, confusing, mythological twist to the legends overall narrative. At first, the idea that these crusadic rumours are anything more than Victorian antiquarian fantasy may appear to require a leap that most are unwilling to make; but we should note, in a world where the success of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* has crafted a platform of entertainment from which all manner of Templar based fantasies are imagined and attached to locations and objects across both the UK and the wider world, the Biddulph connection is far, far older.

A quick note of caution. In this piece I am looking not only to unweave the tangled strands of the Biddulph Saracens legend, but to search for the potential connections that maybe found locally which could actually have brought this most unusual and determined piece of folklore into existence. In doing so, I will have cause on occasion to refer to people and events that belong to a time long distant from our own and topics will be discussed that may be considered sensitive to some; particularly around the issue of Christianity, Islam and their connotations within the Medieval period.

I want to state that everything I write here is written purely in a historical context in order to provide the bedding for research into our Biddulph Saracens legend, and is not intended to offend in any way.

## Voices of Legend

Let us start with the overall arc of the crusader infused folklore that is present in Biddulph Moor itself. In a snapshot, the common lore is that an early landowner, shortly after the Norman conquest, traveled on crusade to the Holy Land, from which they “brought back” a number of individuals of eastern origin to work on their local estate. From there, they are said to have married into the local population - and as a result of the settlements relative isolation - over the next 800 years, found their genetic characteristics preserved within the population of Biddulph Moor; particularly in association to the surname Bailey.

A further aside is provided in support of the legend that attests to this crusading landowner potentially being themselves a member of the Knights Templar movement - which is why a number of Templar-esque tombstones can be found at the nearby church of St.Lawrence. Whilst a varied commentary on the issue of the legend is provided by numerous late Victorian leisure writers, the best written record of the legend itself is perhaps that provided by nineteenth century local historian John Sleight, who writes in his A History of The Ancient Parish of Leek, that;

*Biddulph derived from Ormus le Guidon, lord at the time of the Domesday Survey. One of the lords of Biddulph, a knight-crusader, is reputed to have brought over in his train from the Holy-land, a Paynim, whom he made bailiff of his estate and from whom marriage with an English Woman the present race of “Biddle-moor men” are traditionally said to*

*have sprung. Probably this infusion of Saracenic blood may  
account for their Nordic and somewhat bellicose  
propensities.*

Quite what these “bellicose propensities” are we don’t know, but as someone who personally lived in the village for several years in the late 2000’s I can only assure you that the modern day folk of Biddulph Moor are nothing but pleasant and welcoming! I include this extract as the sole descriptor of the legend primarily because Sleigh’s work in general is something that I consider a reliable and earnest reflection of the time it was written, and due to its inclusion in his work of 1862, his account is both the earliest written reference to the legend and also testament to its evident prior establishment.

To search for possibilities pertaining to where the idea of the Biddulph Moor Saracens came from originally though, we first must take a look at the world as it was during the crusading period, from which we can then look to place our local Biddulph Moor settlement, and its associated nobility, within. Because ultimately, there is only one question at the heart of this search; if there is any truth to the legend, someone must have brought the chaps over to England in the first place, but who?

## **Holy Warriors**

To garner an understanding of how our potential local protagonists may have fitted into the crusader and Templar stories, we need to appreciate the context of the period that lived within. It’s hard to think of a more popularly confused historical topic than that of the Knights Templar and the crusades, for whilst their own stories are intrinsically linked, they are both distinct.

*The Crusades* are the name we give to a series of military campaigns undertaken throughout the medieval period in which western Christian powers and those of the Islamic east fought over control over the Holy Land - namely the Kingdom of Jerusalem and various other city states located throughout modern day Syria, Turkey, Palestine and Egypt. Often sponsored by a call to arms from the Pope himself, in response to Islamic incursion in the eastern Mediterranean, the crusades were the province of kings and civilians alike.

The crusader ideology was primarily one of pilgrimage, but of course, in order to make a pilgrimage, it helps if the destination is located within your own sphere of influence and the history of the Templar movement begins as a direct response to the dire

situation pilgrims found themselves in during the years that following the First Crusade. With re-assertion of Christian rule in Jerusalem following the “victory” of 1099, a medieval tourist trade had begun to bloom with tens of thousands of Christian pilgrims from the West keen to make the journey to Jerusalem and the spiritual centre of the Christian world. Conditions of travel however, as we might imagine, were terrible. And for those that made it to the city, the risk to life was high.

Travel diaries of the time are filled with scenes of bodies lining the streets, butchered by bandits and torn apart by animals - and it is against this backdrop that around the year 1120, a small group of French Knights decided to set up what was essentially a Christian pilgrimage security service. Based out of the building that Christians believed to be the Temple of Solomon itself (hence the name), life for the Knights Templar starts with the very specific objective of defending Christian pilgrims within the walls. But their remit - and popularity - quickly grows, and within 20 years of formation they have expanded to cover the approaching roads and surrounding settlements, ultimately finding themselves as the main peacekeeping force of the Kingdom itself.

Their rise was meteoritic. For young fighting men keen to experience the world, the Knights Templar provide a very attractive proposition indeed. An elite military organisation that is dedicated to fundamental Christian values, complete with grants of land from civilians and nobility alike - including several kings and the Pope himself - for the first time, the age old moral conflict of battle combat and religious life is navigated easily by a declaration that sanctioned slaughter in the name of Christ is not homicide but malicide; the destruction of evil.

Free of ties to local kings and bishops - and answerable to only the Pope - within half a century of their formation, the Templars find themselves to be the most powerful independent organisation in the world. Come the Second Crusade of 1148-49, where Christian armies were raised in order to retake the county of Edessa from islamic hands in modern day Turkey, the Templars were so highly regarded that when the going got particularly tough for the crusading armies of Louis VII of France, the King happily handed overfull control of his 10,000 troops to a group of just 50 Templar Knights.

Before long, the crusader kings find that not only is an allegiance with the Templars a good idea, they actually need the organisational and military skills provided by the Templars if they hope to make a success of any plans they have for the region.

Facilitated by their network of property and land that stretched from Dublin to Africa, with access to more ready cash than any lone king could ever hope to muster for holy war, the Templar's had become the primary financiers of the entire crusader movement.

This background gives us a crucial insight into both the timeline and the mechanics of how the events that inspired our Biddulph legend may have come into being. In the search for a suitable local figure that could have easily slotted into the world of crusading and subsequently had the means and cause to settle his captives upon the moor we are faced with a number of possibilities; possibilities which, when considered against the realities of the crusader machine, can be separated into like protagonists. It is a process that results in a lone contender.

## Local Crusaders

The most commonly found figure associated with the scarce settlement theory comes in the form of a man named Ormus Le Guidon (1075-1141) - for whom most online sources will note as a key figure in the early life of Norman Staffordshire. Described as either the Son or Son-in-Law of Richard the Forrester, a key figure in the nobility of the Norman conquest, it is Ormus that is named in both Sleigh's recording of the legend and also in relation to the creation of St.Chads church in Stone, south Staffordshire; whereby an inscription reads *Orm Vocatur Qui Me Condidit* - or he who built me is called Orm. This connection establishes it likely that Orm was indeed a major Staffordshire landowner - or rather, administrator - during the later part of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries; but the other-while suggestions that he was an actual crusader knight struggle for credence.

Although his name "Le Guidon" is said to denote the position of "standard barer" and is often stated to be in connection with his place in the crusade of William II, this is simply impossible. William himself never took part in a crusade, rather it was his brother Robert Curthose who joined the First Crusade, William's key part in which was as financier; exchanging his brother's Duchy of Normandy in return for a payment of 10,000 marks with which to finance the trip to the Holy Land. In fact, while his brother was away, William II spent his time ruling Normandy as guest regent - and died before Robert's return in the autumn of 1100. My own translation of "le Guidon" actually comes out as "handlebars" which I'm assuming, in lieu of Ormus being the owner of a particularly impressive moustache, must be missing something! Nonetheless, Ormus could not have been William II's standard barer in the First Crusade as he was never there. Furthermore, he couldn't have taken part in the Second Crusade either, as it started around 6 years after Ormus had died.

Another figure that is at times mentioned in connection with the Biddulph legend is that of Richard de Rodehyerd, who is said to have accompanied Richard Coeur-de-lion (the Lionheart) on the Third Crusade; the war to recover lands lost to the legendary Islamic ruler, Saladin. This connection primarily comes again from an entry in Sleigh's History of Leek, where it is stated that that de Rodehyerd distinguished himself so much on the campaign that the King allowed "the symbol of a crescent be added to his family coat of arms in perpetuity."

Records regarding de Rodehyerd and the crusades are scant, but where mention is made, they include an unfortunate fact pertaining to their historical validity; stating his return to England as 1235. What makes this problematic against the timelines of both the Third Crusade and de Rodehyerd's date of death (aged 63 in 1288) is that the Third Crusade, in which Lionheart played a crucial role, took place in 1189-92...thirty-five years before Richard de Rodehyerd would have been born. However, from the amount of noise we have from the nineteenth century regarding the connections between local Staffordshire figures and the crusades, it was always safe to assume that links between the two, in some form, do exist. The most relevant of which reveals itself when we take a look at the development of the Staffordshire Moorlands - or more specifically the area of Biddulph - itself.

The period of the religious wars between the Christians of the West and the Islamic kingdoms of the East lasted - for our purposes - is just shy of 190 years, from the First Crusade of 1095 to the fall of Acre 1291. During this time, the Biddulph area was part of a land parcel known as the Pirehill Hundred; the Hundred term originating as a measure of the land required to support 100 peasant families. It is a time long before the present county borders existed, when a patchwork of Earldoms and Dukedoms sat above the hundreds, providing a method of organisation by which the wider kingdom was run. Naturally, you can only make money from the land if you have a system by which to manage it, and from this division of land such systems were facilitated, with minor landowners or "tenants in chief" working the fruits of the land and paying taxes up the ladder that ultimately landed in the Royal coffers.

The decades following the Norman conquest of 1066 saw the establishment of regional power bases, from which the invaders could not only effectively Norman-ize the existing Saxon land structure, but also crucially defend it against uprising. Rarely a days ride apart, castles were seedily thrown up to provide hubs of local protection and administration and Biddulph itself was no exception.

Classed as a ringwork-fortification, the castle at Baileys Wood in Biddulph comprised a

small defended area that included living quarters, surrounded by a large ditch and bank and was surmounted by a timber palisade; today it is preserved in a series of earthworks as a Scheduled Monument just off the main A527 Congleton road on Fold Lane.

Believed to have been built during the early twelfth century, the reality of its location is that it occupies a highly prized strategic spot at the eastern end of a prominent ridge of land, with the ground falling away down to the Biddulph Brook to the north, east and south.

Its original tenants are thought to have been the Norman de Vernon family of Alton, but details of ownership are sketchy. What we do know though, courtesy of archaeology uncovered in the 1960's, is that from its creation in the early 1100's the site was continuously occupied right for around 400 years - right through our crusader period - and in direct correlation to the time in which the area of Biddulph began its agricultural development. This is an important observation as the growth of activity in the area through the crusader period would have undoubtedly created the need for workers to transform the heavily wooded Biddulph Moor area into a state ready for agriculture.

Having established the fact that the area was in need of such development, I researched a number of local tenant-chiefs and noble's with a view to discovering those that had the position, wealth and inspiration to be able to partake in a crusader mission of the time whilst also having the ability and means to transpose any individuals met through that process back to their land in the Staffordshire Moorlands. We have seen that due to the timelines, this individual could not have been Ormus le Guidon nor Richard de Rhodyard and the same too can be said for a number of characters found in the lineage of both the de Vernon and de Rhodyard families at large.

There is one however, who is a perfect fit. With vast estates across both Cheshire and Staffordshire, whose time in the crusades directly corresponds with the period in which he was both High Sheriff of Staffordshire and Earl of Chester, that figure is found in the eternally fascinating, Ranulf De Blondeville.

## **A Medieval Superstar**

Ranulf de Blondeville, 6th Earl of Chester, is an in-escapable character in the medieval histories of Cheshire & Staffordshire. It is virtually impossible to research any element of the period in the region without his name coming up - and yet the sheer breadth of his activities mean that he still has the ability to surprise. Born in 1170 in Powys, he inherited the earldom of Chester aged just eleven upon the death of his father, the 5th



Earl, Hugh de Kevelioc; who himself had died while staying in Leek. A military man and diplomat with titles in France as well as England during a turbulent period of history, he spent considerable time securing ensuring the security of his lands that bordered the Welsh kingdoms in a process which brought him ever closer in favour to the ruling King John.

So close were Ranulf and John, that following his actions in John's Welsh wars of 1209-1212, he would then go on to provide witness for the King at the signing of Magna Carta in 1215.

Appointed High Sheriff of Staffordshire one year later, the continuation of his loyal service to the crown is demonstrated when, following King John's death - Ranulph put his considerable military experience to use in supporting the new 9 year old King Henry III by providing a force to secure the routes through Staffordshire that the rebellious Barons had intended to use prior to the Battle of Lincoln in order to join up with their allies in the south.

It was an action that served to ingratiate Ranulph even further with the Royals and he was subsequently gifted the Earldom of Lincoln in May 1217. Likely motivated - as so many such figures were - by a desire to do "holy work" as a kind of heavenly insurance policy to set against the issue of the killing he had happily undertaken to further his career to date, it is at this point that Ranulf decided to go on crusade.

Leaving in 1218, he travelled first to Genoa, gathering forces, and then on to Egypt. The aim of this Fifth Crusade was to take the lands of Egypt - the economical powerhouse of the Islamic world in the region - before retaking Jerusalem itself once more. So high a position did Ranulf occupy in this crusade that during the battle of Damietta in September 1219 he is noted as being a particularly vocal advocate of a peace deal offered (but ultimately refused) by the Sultan himself. Damietta was ultimately taken by the crusaders regardless, and come September 1220, with the city secured, Ranulf and the other English Earls left for home - leaving the crusading forces to continue their quest in the hands of the Knights Templars, who by this time were enjoying the peak of their military power. This is the crucial point in history for our own story of the Biddulph Saracens.

Ranulf, now 51, returned from the Holy Lands, vow fulfilled, to spend his later years committed to domestic affairs and the securities of his own estates. He would build Beeston Castle in Cheshire and Chartley Castle near Uttoxeter and undertake various endeavours to ensure the institutions to which he was patron received significant boosts to their development; and no more greater benefactor of this can be found than

Dieulacres Abbey in Leek - which Ranulf had personally founded to which, upon his death, he would order his heart be sent for burial.

To frame this against our requirements for the Saracen settlers, not only did Ranulf have deeply personal connections in the area courtesy of the Abbey, but as noted earlier this time on crusade is entirely encompassed by his period of High Sheriff of Staffordshire. As Earl of Chester, his lands across both modern day Cheshire and North Staffordshire were vast - and there should be no doubt that the employment of skilled eastern estate managers would have been advantageous to the maintenance of such lands. This is particularly true in regard to the essential task of forest clearance, which would provide both timber for immediate sale and further that land's use in the prime emerging industry of medieval England; wool.

It was only with the foundation of Dieulacres that the moorlands really came to be developed, the land there being viewed through a new prism of use courtesy of its potential to generate revenue - and no doubt it was Ranulph's earlier grant of land at Wincle Grange to monks of Combermere Abbey that alerted him to the potential of the moorland wilds. From the history of Dieulacres Abbey (the full story of which can be found in my piece *The Phantom Rebel*) there are a number of entries specifically concerning both the moorlands and the Abbey in relation to Ranulph's gift of various land grants made directly to the monks of the Abbey. These include the entire vill's of Byley and Leekfirth, pastoring rights at Chelford and Withington, whole swaths of land from Meerbrook to Hulme, numerous corn mills and - a huge prize in itself - all lands associated with the Church of Edward the Confessor in Leek and the chapel sites at Cheddleton, Horton and Ipstones.

We should therefore give every credence to the land of modern day Biddulph and Biddulph Moor being parcelled along into the Abbey's bounty; particularly as many entries in the Dieulacres chronicle in the wake of Ranulf's death detail the difficulties and pressing need to have many areas of land extensively worked and cleared of forest and waste.

If there is any truth to the legend of the Biddle-Moor men, it is surely the actions and activities of Ranulf that inspired it. To truly cement this hypotheses however, we first need to see if the actual idea of such an endeavour as employing Saracens on English land an established and accepted concept at the time of Ranulf's tenure.

Sadly, it appears so.

## **A Dark Trade**

The term *Saracen* was a one stop shop of Medieval terminology to encompass all of those people which were predominately found in Islamic states of the East. The idea of Islam as a religious identity was not something that hit home in the western world - anything other than Christian, with the exception on certain levels of Judaism, was simply considered to be “heathen.” That our Biddulph moor men were to be called Saracen is not naturally indicative of their prior-position as fighters of the crusades but almost as a forerunner to the term “Gypsies” - that itself being a catch-all term for those people who looked Egyptian, effectively a by word for exotic.

The Fifth Crusade, of which Ranulf was a significant figure, like many other crusader campaigns, was a serious consideration when it came to the time away from home that such a quest would require. We’re talking of a military campaign taking place several thousand miles from England, and as such the time it would take to arrange finance, marshal forces, and then travel to the theatre of war - let alone conducting the war itself - would be measured in years. It is only natural that during such clusters of time away, relationships and networks between the crusading knights and the people within the regions that they found themselves would find a natural cause to develop,

There are numerous islamic writers that commented upon such relationships, with Usama ibn Munqidh’s *Book of Contemplation* proving a particularly illuminating example. A warrior and diplomat, he writes how some crusaders became quickly enamoured with the culture of the East; particularly the food and the “pleasures” associated with downtime. Fine textiles and exotic goods soon formed the basis for a trade network back into Europe, particularly in periods where conquest had been successful and enabled a period of relative stability to follow for the city state in question.

During Ranulph’s time in the East, it is the Siege of Damietta that gives the most likely opportunity for such a personal network to develop. This cosmopolitan port city at the mouth of the Nile was effectively Ranulph’s home away from home from May 1218 to November 1219; an 18 month period which would have presented the crusaders with plenty of opportunity to take an interest in the potential business aids around them, and an event from which Ranulf immediately returned to England.

Where there is trade, in the medieval world at least, there is slavery and estimates of captives sold into slavery across the crusader states during the period run into the tens of thousands. Simply put, there was an awful lot of “work” back home in England for which our Biddulph Saracens would have provided a ready made solution.

Connections between crusader knights and the appearance of Saracen slaves are found throughout the historical record. Saracen “slave-girls” are recorded as being sold in a Marseilles market of 1248 and the details of such instances only become clearer as they stretch back into England itself. One categorical example of attitude towards such occurrences comes straight from the Royal Consul Pipe Roll at Windsor on 21st Jun 1259, where King Henry III himself writes regarding a runaway slave of the crusader, Roger de Lyntin;

*The King to all men greetings. As a certain Ethiopian named Bartholomen, formerly a Saracen slave of our dear and faithful Roger de Lyntin, whom the same brought with him to England has secretly taken himself off from his loss, and Roger has sent his esquire to search for him, we order you, if it happens that the said Ethiopian is found somewhere in your bailinick of area of power, to have him arrested and delivered to the same esquire for the benefit of use of the aforesaid Roger, his lord.*

Furthermore, a burial at Grey Friars monastery in Ipswich of the mid-thirteenth century refers to a future known as Ipswich Man who was reputedly an “Ethiopian” that came to the church via the crusades, by way of the English Knight Thomas de Clara, a close friend of Robert Tiptoft, the benefactor of the Grey Friars monastery.

The term Ethiopian is here used in context of the time, in similar use to the way that the word Saracen was used to denote Islamic eastern people, Ethiopian denotes a person of African origin; an additionally notable point when we think of Ranulph’s own time on crusade - in Egypt. For me, there is sufficient evidence that the practice of individuals being settled in England upon crusading knights returning from the Holy Land to suggest the idea would be perfectly logical in Ranulph’s mind. In many ways, as grim as it is to use today, to not have taken advantage of the crusader slave trade would have been seen as a missed opportunity in relation to the wider concerns of his business.

And as we have seen, Ranulph de Blondville was a man who had built his career upon taking every opportunity available.

## **The Biddulph Templar Connection**

If the idea that Saracen slaves may have settled on the moor as a consequence of de Blondeville's crusading exploits is now perfectly plausible, then the issue of the "Templar" tomb slabs that are found at nearby St. Lawrence church is perhaps more of a worthwhile subject to discuss than it otherwise would be. By the time of the Fifth Crusade and de Blondeville's return to England, the Knights Templar had long since established themselves a major international concern and just thirty years before had consolidated their concerns in England itself with the establishment of their headquarters at Temple Church in London - the apex of an English infrastructure of Templar "houses" that reached across the country.

Evidence of Templar activity in the midlands and north west is found in the founding of a Templar hospital at Newark, Nottinghamshire in 1185 and, more locally, the existence of a Templar Preceptory at Keele; both are locations which Ranulf de Blondeville would have known well. Furthermore, there are two key reasons to think that Ranulf would have been personally connected to the Templar leadership. The most obvious of these is that de Blondeville played a significant part in the Siege of Diammata, a military action that in large part was driven and executed by the order. On a more personal level however, just a few years earlier, when de Blondeville had acted as witness to King John's signing of Magna Carta, so too present on the King's side was a certain Eymeric de St Maur; a man whose formal title was recorded at the time as "Master of the Knights Templar in England."

So, there may well have been a personal connection between the Templars and de Blondeville, and indeed it is highly likely that they worked together during the crusades, if not before. The more contentious issue is around St. Lawrence Church itself, and the question of if it could have at all fitted into the Templar House network. The speculation around this connection rests in the fact that located against the external walls of St. Lawrence church, acting as seating for visitors, are a series of eight stone coffin lids.

The carvings upon them, from which the association with the Templar movement is drawn, are relatively crude in comparison to known Templar carvings elsewhere, but do contain a number of symbols that dominate their surfaces. Some appear to show axes, others swords, and nearly all contain variations of the Christian cross.

But it is in the examples where a large cross is found together with a weapon of war - specifically a battle-axe or sword - that it is hard to miss the clarity of message that is being conveyed; the image of Holy warrior. That one of these includes across, with four equally sized "arms" splaying outwardly at their ends - a direct depiction of the most popularly known symbol of the Templar movement - may serve give us genuine cause

for further inquiry.

The church itself has its roots in the Saxon period, with the present church having likely replaced an earlier Saxon chapel in the late 1100's. Records show that the church had an incumbent from at least 1190, which tells us the church was a genuinely active force during the life of de Blondeville - but as for proving a Templar connection, there is simply not enough conspiring circumstance to say. Here in lies our folly.

We have assumed for the most part that the coffins at Biddulph belong to the area and the church itself - but there is nothing to guarantee that is so. All we really know is that they are present in the grounds of the church today. How they got there, is the ultimate question.

It occurs to me that when we come across tomb slabs or grave stones that have found secondary use as decoration, it is usually because they have been removed from the surrounding burial ground for the purposes of practicality. To this end, we know that St. Lawrence was substantially rebuilt in the nineteenth century - and that the oldest part of the church in existence today is the tower of 1534. We should perhaps assume therefore the most likely origin of the "Templar" graves is that they were discovered during the nineteenth century building work and subsequently re-purposed as decoration. Unlikely as it may seem, we can actually go some way to checking this line of thinking. Courtesy of a collection at Lichfield Cathedral, we are privy to a pair of watercolours of the church that were created in 1857 by a Mrs Rebecca Moore - wife of the then Archdeacon of Stafford - which show both an internal view of the church chancel and the exterior of the church.

If present at the time, the Templar coffins would have surely featured in the external painting of the church, but they do not. This likely rules out the 1833 rebuild by the architect Thomas Trubshaw. However, the Staffordshire industrialist Robert Heath of nearby Biddulph Grange commissioned a private chapel to be built at St Lawrence in 1873; an event providing the most likely date at which the tomb slabs could have been discovered.

However they came to be in their present location, it seems to me there is a limited number of options that could have created the situation in the first place. Firstly is the possibility that they genuinely are the remnants of medieval coffins. They may even have sat below far finer tomb effigies, since destroyed; we know that the church suffered deliberate destruction during the Civil War.

Another option is that they are not funerary apparatus at all, and in fact they constitute a selection of training slabs for local stone masons; something that would account for

their comparatively crude nature of carving. For me though, we cannot rule out that by design they are a literal folly - created by a suitably enabled patron at some point in the past. The discovery of such objects should have caused quite a stir, particularly in Victorian times. That they do not make the antiquarian records of the era - of which we have many - must surely set an alarm bell ringing.

Whatever the ultimate truth of their origin, that they did not appear until 1873, a decade on from Sleigh's recording of the Biddulph legend in his History of Leek, is surely the best explanation as to why comment on their existence was omitted. Much like some of the local figures associated with the crusading legend - they simply were not there.

### **The Likeliest Truth**

The Biddulph Saracen legend is one of a genuine oral tradition that if based in real history, stretches back eight-hundred years. At the beginning of the research on this piece, I really wasn't sure where, if anywhere, the tale would lead me; and yet, thanks to it's subject matter being so peculiarly distinct, I did move into the project with a sense that there could well be something to its origin. That there was to be found a route into the Moorlands from the crusading period at all was a happy find in itself, but that it should have come from such an indelible name as Ranulf de Blondville, brings the weight of the legends balance - for me personally - far closer to the realm of history than I ever imagined possible.

The prevalence of the surname Bailey in the moors may too hold substance as an additional clue as to the overall veracity of the legend. A name with a local presence today that also finds itself within the registers of the previous 400 years may well suggest that it was present in the area during that period of history where surnames were predominately connected to trade and location. It is a name of known Norman origin, variously applied to positions of civil service and wider corruptions in relation to the stewardship of woodland and general agricultural practice. Placing all of this against the practical economical requirements of the local land at the moment de Blondville returns from crusade, and the argument for the legend being "true" starts to look somewhat convincing.

The issue of the Templar coffins at St.Lawrence is far less forthcoming in its clarity. Ultimately, this was always going to be the case, and whilst I would place it a very poor second to the historical evidence for de Blondville's part in our legends provenance, that image of the battle-axe and cross is somehow still too powerful a connotation to

completely ignore. It is also however, not compelling enough to include. Such is the nature of the connective evidence - although at times unavoidably speculative - that it appears entirely likely to me that those Saracens - or Ethiopians - did indeed make their home on the moor.

That we remember them today is the most beautiful demonstration of the power inherent within our local folklore - and is perhaps the best such example we could ever hope to enjoy.

In light of that, let us hope that in some way, those settlers on the moor came to carve out a life which they too could enjoy. For no matter the fascination we may have with this story of legend born of the Holy Land, the reality of how they arrived here - in chains, torn from their families - is likely to be about as far from a heavenly tale as we can possibly imagine.

Eli Lewis-Lycett 2021