

# Medieval tragedy that led to legacy of persecution

As two books concerning 'Saint' William of Norwich are launched in the coming fortnight, **KEIRON PIM** looks at an infamous story from medieval England that resonates to this day.

On a damp grey day in mid-November it looks like any other patch of woodland around Norwich: ground covered by ferns, mud and leaf mulch, pathways worn between twisted oaks by footsteps and bicycle-tyres, fungi jutting from rotting fallen branches, a few empty beer cans discarded in the brambles. But by the wood's edge, yards from a football pitch and with droning traffic on Mousehold Lane visible between the tree-trunks, there stands an anonymous stone marker that hints at the place's significance – in fact one of four, the rest presently obscured by foliage, at the corners of a vanished building that stood here for 400 years.

On the Easter Saturday of 1144 a widow named Lady Legarda, who often helped at the St Mary Magdalen leper chapel that stands today by Sprowston Road, walked through here to find the body of a 12-year-old boy lying by an oak tree. That much is almost certainly true. From here the story becomes just that, a story, and as fictions go there can be few that have caused such real misery for so many centuries. According to a monk from the Cathedral Priory known as Thomas of Monmouth she had been "led by divine mercy through the thickest bushes" after witnessing a ladder of light shining from heaven down to this spot, one ray reaching the child's head, the other to his feet, thus indicating his "ascent to glory". He bore the wounds of a crucifixion, his shaven head bleeding from the scratches caused by a crown of thorns.

Later that day a forester known as Henry of Sprowston rode by on horseback and found himself drawn into the woods. On seeing the maimed body Henry noticed also a torture instrument in the boy's mouth. In the monk's words he soon realised that "no Christian but

only a Jew would have taken it upon himself to kill the innocent in this way with such rash daring".

The essential facts of the story of 'Saint' William of Norwich are known to anyone with a passing interest in the city's history. It was the wake of the Norman Conquest, a time when the turbulent town (as it was then) contained an uneasy mingling of Saxons, Normans and Jews. As a tanner's apprentice the young William, born in Haverlingland to parents named Elviva and Wenstan, had occasional cause to mix with the Jewish population.

Though they had no supporting evidence his family claimed that his Jewish acquaintances had entrapped and murdered him, though the local authorities dismissed this for lack of proof.

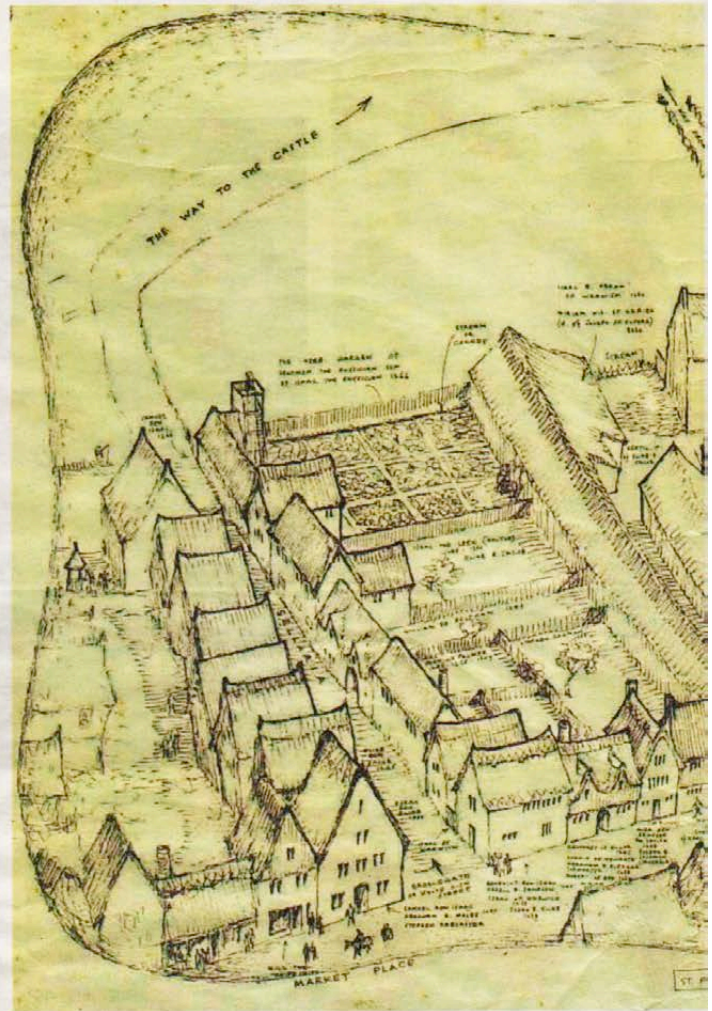
His curiously fragrant body was moved from a temporary woodland burial to the priory's monks' cemetery, where his gravediggers struck upon wood: an unused coffin placed by divine providence awaiting the boy's interment. A saintly

association lent cachet to a religious centre, with pilgrimage sites bringing a lucrative kind of religious tourism, so it did Norwich Cathedral's reputation and finances no harm when further miracles attached themselves to the tomb. A rose at the head of the grave bloomed in the depths of winter, to name but one of several such stories; in another a dying man had a Heavenly vision in which a radiant William sat on a golden stool at God's feet, an angel declaring him 'one to whom perpetual honour is due, whom the Jews of Norwich killed in derision and scorn of the Lord's Passion', whereupon the man regained his health and spread word of their guilt.

Five years after William's death Thomas of Monmouth arrived in Norwich and resolved to investigate the case. His interviewees included a



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converted Jew named Theobald of Cambridge, who gave a purported insight into his former co-religionists' practices. It was said that to return to Israel they believed it necessary to sacrifice a Christian child every year, and Jewish elders met annually in Narbonne in France to allot the duty. In 1144 it fell to Norwich's Jews; and in recording this accusation in his book describing William's life and death, Thomas created the first example of the 'blood libel' that has fuelled hatred ever since.

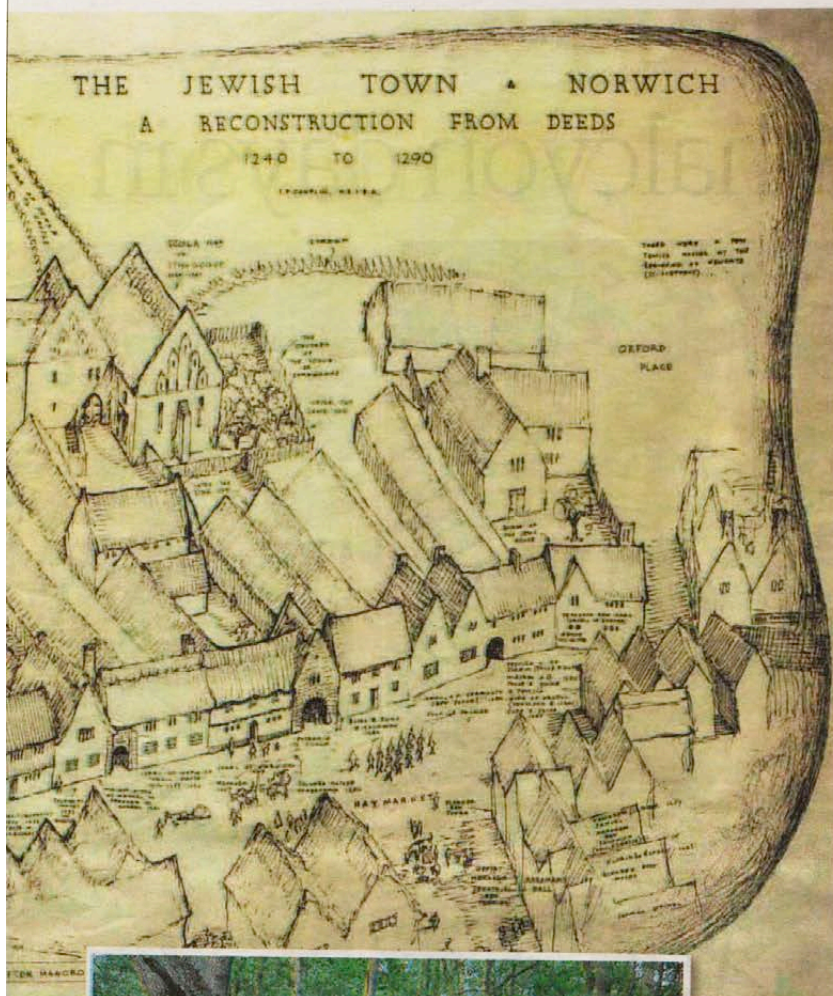
It was claimed the Norwich Jews mocked Jesus's crucifixion in a ritual murder; the accusation later mutated to claim that Jews drink gentile blood or mix it into the unleavened matzo bread they bake at Passover, which falls near Easter. This lie spread across Europe from the Middle Ages through to the 19th century despite being often condemned by Christian authorities; it was revived by the Nazis who in May 1934 dedicated an issue of *Der Sturmer* to the subject, and thrives today in the Middle East.

This poisonous fantasy that continues to swirl around the world today funnels down to a single place and time: Norwich in the middle of the 12th century. While the charge may be familiar, not so many know the details of the sole document that gave rise to William's cult and the ideas it spawned. Thomas of Monmouth's Latin

manuscript was discovered in the late 19th century and published in 1896 in a translation by Augustus Jessopp and M R James, who noted that the credulous author belonged to the type of people who are "deceivers and being deceived". However the quotations cited earlier are Thomas' words as translated by Miri Rubin, for they come from a superb new Penguin Classics edition of this infamous text, the first published since James' and Jessopp's.

"Jessopp and James were very good Latinists and both men of the cloth who understood Christian traditions, but strangely they didn't provide annotations – well, perhaps it wasn't strange because they just thought it would be read by an informed readership," said Prof Rubin, a medieval historian at the University of London who has spent the last five years working on the book, which includes a substantial introduction and explanatory notes throughout.

"Like all aspects of anti-Judaism it tells us far more about the accusers than the accused. Its power wasn't just the accusation of murder, but the thought that it plants somewhere in people's minds, the 'other-ing', the sense that the Jew is somehow different from other people: an inchoate fear and suspicion which is part of what Jews contended with and still do contend with. And just as the idea has disappeared from the Christian world it has now become



■ Above, an illustration of Norwich's medieval Jewish quarter in the 13th century. The blaming of a young apprentice's death on local Jews led to the notorious 'blood libel', the influence of which has created misery down the centuries.  
Picture: ARCHANT

■ Left: A marker stone marking the edge of the site of St William's Chapel at Mousehold Heath.  
Picture: DENISE BRADLEY

prevalent in parts of the Muslim world." Physical reminders of the cult remain scattered around Europe, such as the rood screen at Loddon Church that depicts William being crucified (see [www.mouseholdheathdefenders.webeden.co.uk](http://www.mouseholdheathdefenders.webeden.co.uk)).

His remains were interred for a time in what is now the Cathedral's Jesus Chapel, and then in the Chapel of the Holy Innocents. In 1168 the Priory built the Chapel of St William in the Woods, which was demolished in the Reformation. All that remains are those stone markers and earthworks that trace some of the walls. The Mousehold Heath Defenders plan to cut back the overgrown foliage soon and try to keep the Scheduled Ancient Monument tidy, which should become easier next year

when they erect an information board that will explain its importance.

Similarly the Cathedral's Chapel of Holy Innocents is now devoted to tolerance and understanding. Visitors today see a small sign quoting a prayer written at Ravensbruck concentration camp and offering a few respectful explanatory lines that conclude with the chapel's present purpose: as a place of prayer for "dialogue and reconciliation between different faiths and traditions".

■ **The Life and Passion of William of Norwich, by Thomas of Monmouth, translated and introduced by Miri Rubin, is published by Penguin Classics at £10.99. It will be launched at the Cathedral Hostry on Wednesday December 3 beginning at 6.30pm.**

## Sympathetic portrait of a community in fear

In 1968 Bill Albert travelled to Israel on honeymoon. In a 16th-century synagogue by the Sea of Galilee an elderly rabbi asked him and his then wife where they lived and on hearing the reply affected to spit three times over his shoulder.

"I hadn't thought then that anyone outside of England would have heard of Norwich," said Bill, who was born in New York, grew up in California but has remained in Norfolk since then. The rabbi told them how the story of William of Norwich had echoed through the history of Jewish persecution, and though Bill returned to his new home city and found it a tolerant and welcoming place, the ancient tale continued to haunt him.

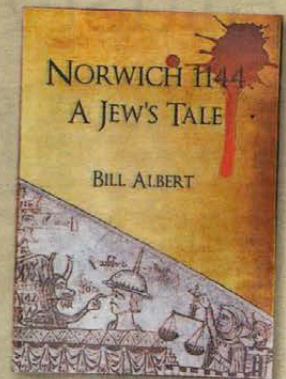
For years he wanted to write a novel about the affair and studied it in great depth – before taking early retirement he was a historian at UEA, though not a medievalist – but while he penned several books after taking early retirement, it was only recently that he realised how to tackle this one. As the founder of the Norfolk Coalition for Disabled People, Bill has for decades campaigned for disability awareness and he became increasingly interested in how disabled people lived in the Middle Ages.

So into the fraught conditions of post-Conquest Norwich he places young Joseph, who cannot walk without crutches and whose speech is unintelligible to all but his closest friends. Among them is a boy named William, who exudes a compassion that Joseph has rarely experienced from his fellow Jews, several of whom treat him with callous contempt. The novel is narrated by an elderly Joseph in the 1230s, as he looks back with fondness at his friendship with William and regret at his part in establishing his posthumous cult.

Having been raised in part by a monk in the woods, Joseph too becomes a monk in the aftermath of his friend's death, initially feeling it possible that the Jews might have been guilty as charged. After Thomas of Monmouth joins the Priory Joseph finds himself acting as Thomas' scribe, a role comparable to the real-life convert Theobald of Cambridge; but when Thomas' dubious side emerges Joseph loses his illusions.

It is a thoroughly researched book that humanises and illuminates one of Norwich's darkest moments, depicting the squalid medieval city teeming with all shades of human life, from blind beggars and bawdy prostitutes to an itinerant Spanish Hebrew

■ Bill Albert with his book Norwich 1144: A Jew's Tale.  
Picture: SIMON FINLAY



poet and ascetic monks. It is also notable for its even-handed depiction of Jews and Christians: there are no simplistic good and bad guys, only a variety of ambiguous characters trying to cope in uncertain times.

"In lots of things I had read there was the assumption that you had these people who were subservient and gentle and put upon by the violent Christians, the archetype of victimhood," said Bill. "I thought 'What would it really be like to be in this small group of aliens in a country that had recently been conquered by the Normans?' They came across with the Normans, were part of that occupation. They're not going to be happy, fun-loving people. I think they were probably fearful people worried about taking the wrong step and resenting having to feel that way."

"I just wanted to imagine them as human beings, with a whole range of emotions and feelings rather than a passive group of victims."

■ **Norwich 1144: A Jew's Tale, by Bill Albert, is published by Mousehold Press priced £10 in paperback and as a Kindle e-book. It is available only at the launch, which is on December 10 from 1pm-2.30pm at the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich, and in local bookshops.**

