

The Image of Our Lady of Guisborough?

The market town of Guisborough nestles on the northern edge of the North Yorkshire Moors; between the industrial expanses of Middlesbrough to the west and the ecclesiastically important town of Whitby to the east.

It wasn't very far from Guisborough where I spent my childhood and regular visits to the town were necessary for everything from food shopping to banking; furthermore, it was at the town's Sixth Form College where I studied for my A levels. The town's F.E. college (formerly the Grammar School) is named after Guisborough's last prior, Prior Pursglove, who on leaving the priory founded the school and went on to become Bishop of Hull. The college is still situated to the north of the ruined priory, whose great east end is the only significant remnant.



Despite walking past this great gothic ruin each working day for two years, it wasn't until a number of years later that I first heard tale of a shrine there to "Our Lady of Guisborough" and it was to be another period of time before I discovered this flowering of devotion to the Virgin mentioned on paper. Evidence of the shrine was eventually found in the first volume of *Famous Shrines of Our Lady*, where Gillett (quoting from Edmund Waterton: *Pietas Mariana Britannica*) duly lists Guisborough as being among the shrines, "specially singled out for destruction at the Reformation."¹

I then discovered that a replica of the image now stands in Guisborough's R.C. Church of St. Paulinus. I made a visit to the altar where the image of Our Lady of Guisborough now stands. The R.C. "Guild of Our Lady of Guisborough" is based there and has produced some information on the history of the Shrine.

There appears to be no evidence of a miraculous vision of Our Lady at Guisborough; however, when the Priory was founded there by Robert de Brus in 1119 the charter clearly states that the monastery was founded to the honour of God and the Holy Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the Charter for a market and fair, granted by King Henry III in 1263, directs there to be a weekly market on a Monday and a three day fair on the vigil, day and morrow of the Assumption of Blessed Mary. Primary evidence from wills and from the priory's vast wealth at the dissolution, demonstrates that devotion to Our Lady of Guisborough was strong and that her Church in Guisborough received generous gifts from many benefactors.

¹ Gillett, H. M. *Famous Shrines of Our Lady*, (Samuel Walker Ltd. London: 1949.) Page 44.

Mention is also made of a shrine at Guisborough by Zsolt Aradi, [From Our Lady's Dowry](http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=2997) which can be found at http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=2997

The restored image in St. Paulinus' R.C. Church, is based on the image found on the priory's seal and was erected in 1949 in thanksgiving for the protection of the town from enemy bombing during the Second World War.

After seeing this image it occurred to me that it wouldn't be impossible for me to find a copy of the seal and attempt to recreate the image – possibly in the form of an eastern icon.

The first step was to obtain a photocopy of the priory's seal, which I was able to obtain thanks to the help of staff at the Yorkshire Museum in York.



The seal clearly shows Our Lady seated upon a throne with Our Lord supported on her left knee. Together they hold a circle or an orb. The image is enclosed above within a church building (presumably the priory church) and on one side a figure is seen kneeling in adoration. On the reverse side of the seal it is clear that there are figures kneeling and facing inward on both sides of the central image.

Armed with nothing more than a pencil (and given my limited artistic talent) I traced around the seal and then enlarged the image as best I could, only allowing additions when necessary. Then with a set of felt-tip pens and a prayer I added some colour to this grey image before sending it to Mrs. Valerie Button, a friend who has an artistic eye and who spends her spare time painting pictures and writing icons. Mrs. Button's eye produced this exciting template:



After a further telephone conversation, Mrs. Button got to work, the wood was cut and work began on the icon, which we determined should have an unashamedly English and medieval air about it. The next time I saw was the icon it was outlined and ready for painting and gilding, yet even this couldn't prepare me for the delight of the finished icon:



I acknowledge that a good deal of artistic license has been taken to make the grey figure of Our Lady (on the damaged priory seal) into this bold icon. Nevertheless, I don't think we can ever be absolutely certain as to what the medieval image of "Our Lady of Guisborough" looked like and this attempt may be as close as any reconstruction we might come across.

May Our Lady of Guisborough pray for us.

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