

## **Margery Kempe – Mystic or Mad?**

When my first son was born, I had thought that my life would be complete, but it was not to be so. I had made a good marriage to John Kempe, even though he was nothing like the man my father was. The record of the deeds of John Brunham can be found in the archives of our town of Bishop's Lynn. If you read the record you will see that he was a Burgess of the town; was five times Mayor; was five times a Member of Parliament for the town, as well as being an Alderman of the Trinity Guild, Coroner for the town, a Justice of the Peace and Chamberlain. John Kempe came from a good Lynn family, but he never lived up to his family's reputation, and was most unsuccessful as a business man. But enough about him for the moment.

I was born in Bishop's Lynn around the year 1373. I have never learnt to read or write, so I could not read any record of my birth even if I thought that there was one. I was married to



John Kempe when I was about 20 years of age. When I was about 40 years of age, in 1413, I became free of the duty of providing my husband with children, and following the death of my father, I was able to embark on a series of journeys I had long wanted to undertake. My first journey was a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Many of my friends counselled me not to make such a dangerous journey, but I knew that I must make it or die in the attempt. As is the custom, I announced my intention in St Margaret's Church. Those who claimed debts of me, had them settled. I made my will, and on the day I departed I went into church garbed as a pilgrim with a cloak, hat, staff and a scrip to carry my knife to eat with. I sailed first from Yarmouth to Holland, there I joined a band of pilgrims and travelled with them to Constance. From there we travelled to Venice where we stayed 13 weeks. From there we took a galley to the Holy Land, and at last after many trials and tribulations I came to Jerusalem where I visited many holy sites. I travelled much in the Holy land before taking a galley back to Venice. I then travelled with a group of pilgrims to Assisi, which I reached on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1414. There I worshipped at the shrine of St Francis. Then I went on to Rome, which I reached in October of the same year. I spent many months in Rome worshipping in many of the churches, and waiting for favourable weather and a suitable boat to carry me over the seas back to England. I arrived back in Norwich around 21<sup>st</sup> May 1415. I had been away from home nearly two years.

My family were glad to see me again, and the towns people were astonished by the tales I had to tell of my travels. After I had rested for a few weeks, I would have liked

to have gone on my travels again, for life is too short to fit in all Our Lord wants me to do, but just four months after my return to England, news of a great battle between the English and the French fought at a place called Agincourt, in France, became the talk of the town. Sailors and merchants brought back so many tales of the difficulties they were having trading with France, that I agreed to wait for a while. In the end it was nearly 2 years before I set off to travel to Bristol and from there to take a ship to travel to the shrine of St James at Compostella. I had to wait in Bristol six weeks until a ship could be found that would take me and the group of pilgrims I had joined, as all the ships had been requisitioned by the king for his war in France.

While I was in Bristol, the Bishop of Worcester, the Bishop of the Diocese, heard about me, and commanded me to attend him and eat a meal with him. When I arrived, I was so shocked to see his attendants wearing such fashionably cut clothes, that after they had rebuked me for crossing myself at the sight of them, they listened to me meekly as I spoke to them seriously about sin and misconduct. At the end of the meal with the Bishop I was shriven by him. Soon after I was able to find a ship to take me to Compostella. After seven days at sea we finally reached the place and spent fourteen days there before returning to Bristol, and journeying back to Lynn after visiting Hailes Abbey on the way.

In that same year of 1417, I went on a visit to Leicester, and was there detained by the Mayor who handed me over to the Steward of the city, who treated me in a most lewd manner, and wanted me to forget my vows to my husband. When he did not succeed, he handed me back to the Mayor to hold me in prison. The Mayor then convened a council of Abbots and Priests from the city, and they questioned me as to my faith. I answered their questions as my Lord gave me strength and wit. At the end of my questioning the Mayor, who would much rather have had me burnt for heresy, was told by the Abbot that I spoke the truth about Our Lord, and I was not going to lead the citizens of the city into lewd behaviour. The Mayor then charged me to go to the Bishop of Lincoln, and get a letter from him to discharge the Mayor of all responsibility for me.

This I set off to do most willingly, but even with the letter, the Mayor detained me for a further three weeks before he allowed me to set off to York, to visit an anchoress there, whom I had known before going to the Holy Land. In York I was arrested again and brought before the Archbishop who examined me on the Articles of our faith, which I answered with Our Lord's help, but some of the Priests and Monks did not want me to go free, for fear that I would corrupt the people of the city. In the end the Archbishop paid one of his servants to escort me from the city. I had many occasions, like St Paul, when I was arrested and accused of heresy, but always my Lord gave me the words and the actions to prove my faith and belief. In the end I had to go to London and get a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury, which I could show every time I am arrested.

In 1431 my husband and last remaining son died. My son had returned from his travels with a child, and a wife whom he had met and married in Germany. After a period of mourning, she told me that she wished to return to her own land to live. I

agreed to escort her there. We sailed from Lynn, and made a stop in Norway when the winds carried us there. Soon afterwards we landed in Germany, and then travelled to my daughter-in-law's home town of Danzig. I remained there with her for five or six weeks, then began my journey back to Lynn. I was offered the chance to make a pilgrimage to Wilsnack, and then Aachen. In Aachen I joined company with a widow of London, and travelled with her and a number of other pilgrims, back to England. At Calais I found a ship back to Dover, from there I travelled to Canterbury, then London, before returning to Lynn.

But these are only the facts of my life, the ephemeral things. It is the things eternal which matter to me most, the things of Our Lord by which my immortal soul will be saved. It is because of these things that I found a scribe to write down my story, so that Our Lord might be glorified through his mercy to me, a sinner, in giving me such glorious visions of his work, that I might share with all mankind. So back to the beginning again. After the birth of my first child I fell into a deep depression, and for many weeks could do nothing, not even look after my child. Eventually I prayed to Our Lord to rescue me. I promised that would dedicate my life to him if he healed me, which he in his mercy did. But I forgot my promise, until a business venture which I had, failed, and nearly left my family destitute. I remembered then my promise to Our Lord, and I was resolved to do what I had vowed, live my life for him. This proved to be really difficult. I wanted to take a vow of chastity, as the church teaches that the only good woman is a virgin. I was no longer a virgin, and so could not offer that to Our Lord, but I would have ceased relations with my husband, but he would not agree. It was only after a further 13 children, over the next 20 years of married life, that I managed to wear him down with my arguments. I straight way took him before the Priest where we made our vows to live as brother and sister. At last I was able to wear the white robes of the chaste woman. I did not want to put temptation in his way, so we lived in separate houses, until he became ill unto death, when I returned to nurse him until he passed into Our Lord's hands.

I needed to know more about Our Lord, so I sought out Confessors who not only would shrive me, but would also teach me. Over the years they read to me, not only from the Bible, but also from the writings of various mystics. I remember hearing 'The Scale of Perfection', by Walter Hilton, 'The Incendium Amoris' by Richard Rolle of Hampole, the 'Stimulus Amoris', which I believe is by St Bonaventura and the 'Revelations' of St Bridget of Sweden. These books, which my Confessors helped me to memorise, were sources of great inspiration and solace. Many things which I felt and did, were similar to the experiences that these writers had been through, and they helped me to understand the path which Our Lord wished me to take. One of my Confessors also arranged with the Bishop for me to be able to receive the Sacrament daily, as I found that receiving just on Holy days was not enough for me.

I spent as much time as I could in meditation on the life of Our Lord. I would enter into the stories in my mind, and see for myself what Our Lord went through for me a poor sinner. At times I would be so overcome by the emotion of it all that I would have great weepings and roarings. Sometimes even the reading of the Gospel in

Church would cause me to weep and roar. Some people thought I was a very holy woman to be so overcome by the words of the gospel, but others just got really annoyed and asked the Priest to have me removed. They changed their minds on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1431 when there was a great fire in Lynn, which burnt down the Guildhall of the Holy Trinity, right near to St Margaret's Church. Then they asked me to pray that the church be saved. I asked the priest to take the Sacrament to the door of the church, and he held it there as long as he could. I had a great vision sent to me from Our Lord in which the church was saved by a fall of snow. The people scoffed at the vision, as the sky was clear and blue, but it came to pass as I had foreseen and the church was saved.

I so wanted to share what I came to know of Our Lord, through the books and through my meditations, that I was very zealous in talking about Our Lord. When I was on Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, all I wanted to do was talk about the life of Our Lord, and what it would mean for us to be able to see the places where he himself had lived and walked. I could not understand why others in my group did not want to talk similarly. Surely that is what we were on Pilgrimage for. Some asked me to cease my talking, but for the love of Our Lord I could not be silenced. On more than one occasion they got up early in the morning and left me behind. I often had great difficulty in finding them again. Sometimes, when I was in a new place, and had spoken of Our Lord to the local Priest, he would find the group and rebuke them for leaving behind such a holy woman as I. Back at home in England I also would talk about Our Lord to anyone who would listen, and I found myself arrested for this on numerous occasions. I was told that as a woman I should not speak of Our Lord, that was for the clergy to do. I was even accused of being a Lollard, an heretical preacher. I was distraught that anyone could think I was an heretic. In my lifetime I have spoken to many Priests, Abbots and Bishops. I have even spoken to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and after he had heard me speak about Our Lord, I even rebuked him for the lewdness and language of his household staff. All of them confirmed that my faith is genuine and orthodox, even if I am very un-orthodox in wanting to speak about it and share it with others.

I have never been able to understand why some in the church want to stop me talking. Many of the holy women I learnt about in books or by stories or on my pilgrimages were women who had not been afraid to speak about Our Lord. I heard about St Mechthild of Hackeborn, and Elizabeth of Shonau; of Mary of Oignes and St Catherine of Sienna. There was Blessed Angela of Foligno and Blessed Dorothea of Montau and of course Dame Julian of Norwich whom I went to visit, and had much holy conversation with.

Today on the 13<sup>th</sup> April 1438 I was admitted to the Guild of the Trinity in Lynn, as my father had been before me. This is in thanks for saving St Margaret's church all those years ago. The book of my life, which I caused to be written some years ago has now been translated into English from what I am told was neither good English nor good German – the scribe who wrote it for me deceived me terribly. The man I eventually

found to translate it for me has also added a few more chapters at my dictation, continuing my story after the death of my husband and son. In my books I also remember and give thanks for those men and women who have supported me, and given me money so that I could undertake the pilgrimages, and pray for myself and them as I did so. I also have recorded where I was reviled and horribly treated, where people have not believed in my stories of Our Lord, or have not recognised that in my woopings and roarings, I was engaged in the work of Our Lord, and not just being a nuisance in their eyes.

In an age when the average life span was round about 30 years, the last record of Margery Kempe is in the records of the Guild for 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1439, when she would have been about 65 years old.