

## ... Tripping across some deep hospital clown roots in Old London Town



A 19th century impression of Rahere, Jester to King Henry 1 of England (from "Bring on the Clowns" by Beryl Huggill).

One of the fun things about writing The Hospital Clown Newsletter is what the Universe puts in front of me. Along the road of life there are cornflowers and daisies amongst the weeds and roses. We only have to keep ourselves open to recognize them. Who says roses are prettier than daisies anyway!

One night during a stay in London, *Doctor Mattie*, (Mattie Faint of Children's Theodora Trust) gave me a tour on his motor scooter. What fun, breezing down the narrow Old London streets of history! And with my own tour guide too! Mattie is quite the history buff. There was one story new to me – a court jester who had an epiphany - a "change of heart" and started a hospital for the poor. Rahere was not unlike many contemporary caring clowns who find compassionate service through trauma, despair, or grief. Only he had his on the "well" of civilization. Along with Mattie's story, a site visit, a picture from Clown Bluey and a few hours on the amazing Internet here is Rahere's story.

In the royal court of King Henry I, (1100 - 1140 AD) was a man named Rahere. He was a jester although the nature of his

position is uncertain. It is known that he had friends amongst the noblemen and must have held a religious order, as he appears on the list of the Canons of St. Paul's cathedral. He was obviously a man of many facets, not all particularly good, for either of his own free will or by suggestion he set off to Rome to pay penance for his sins – not an uncommon practice in the days of the Crusades.

In Rome he became ill with malaria. Despairing that he might never see his home again, he prayed on the banks of the river Tiber on the island of St. Bartholomew near Rome.

### *The Wellspring of Medicine*

This was a spot known to Romans for its healing nature. Rahere prayed on the site of a temple to Aesculapius the Greek God of Medicine and the relics of St. Bartholomew (Patrons of Surgeons) (See sidebar for Aesculapius' story).

Inside the church is a carved wellhead, which, some say, marks the spot of the spring of Aesculapius and the snake. The Holy Roman Emperor Otto III is said to have enshrined the relics of St. Bartholomew the Apostle in the church (circa 900 A.D.)

Was it was here upon the layers of sacred relics that Rahere, had his epiphany? His change of heart? His life changing experience? Or was it on his voyage home or was it in the streets of London. Stories vary, but somewhere he had a vision and vowed that if he recovered from malaria he would build a hospital dedicated to the poor.

History relates that a vision appeared to him in which St. Bartholomew stated, "*I am Bartholomew the apostle of Jesus Christ, that come to succor thee in thine anguish, to open to thee the secret mysteries of heaven — know me truly to have chosen a place in the suburbs of London at Smoothfield, where in my name thou shalt found a church and hospital* [This comes from "The Book of Foundation of St. Bartholomew's Church in London," written by an unknown hand about the year 1180.]

In 1123 he began the building of the priory church and the hospital, at a place which lay just without the city walls. He chose a spot known as Smoothfield (Smithfield), "a dank and muddy piece of

land which ran down to the tidal Fleet River, where the citizens would hold their markets, organize their fairs, and allow their children to prance along the banks of the river."

### **Do you know the origin of the Hippocratic Oath that all doctors take?**

Aesculapius "God of Medicine"

Aesculapius despite the mythical story of his birth, was mentioned in the writings of Homer as a mortal physician-hero who performed miraculous acts of healing on the battlefield. The symbol of Aesculapius is a serpent entwined around a knotted staff. Tradition states that while Aesculapius was visiting the house of his patient, Claucus, a serpent coiled itself around his staff. Aesculapius killed it. Shortly thereafter, another serpent appeared with an herb leaf in its mouth and restored the dead serpent to life.



Later, Aesculapius was awarded a divine rank as the God of Medicine. The followers of his teachings formed the cult of Asklepios which spread throughout the Mediterranean and by the fourth century B.C. over three hundred Aesculapian temples served as medical centers devoted to healing and worship.

Hippocrates himself, the embodiment of the ideal physician, was educated as a member of the 20th generation of the cult of Aesculapius. [The Hippocratic Oath, which is sworn by all doctors, begins with the invocation: "I swear by Apollo the Physician. By Aesculapius, Hygeia and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods and goddesses ..." The World Medical Association's logo features a serpent wrapped around a staff.

The Aesculapius legend associated with the Roman island came about when a plague was raging through Rome in the middle 290's BC. The Roman Republican government sent a delegation to the Aesculapian in Epidaurus, Greece, to retrieve an image of the healing god. The ship returned to Rome in 291 not only with the desired image but also with a huge snake that had come aboard and nestled in the cabin of the head of the delegation.

The question of where to house the newly arrived idol, which had been avidly discussed both on board and ashore, was decided by the serpent, which slipped over the side and swam to the island. A new temple to Aesculapius was built on the spot where the snake made its new abode next to a spring, and the spring, being thus sanctified by Aesculapius, was said to have healing powers.

It was a place outside the main gates of the hospital where the chivalrous knights would practice the art of jousting at the tournaments, their chargers cloaked in the fine cloths from Florence, probably purchased from Cloth Fair, which runs beside the great church of St. Bartholomew. They would ride from the Tower of London down Knighttrider Street along Giltspur Street beside the hospital to the smoothfield. [Both these streets are still in existence and are the streets Mattie and I drove down during my tour.]

From the start, just as the Saint had said, some miraculous power seemed to take a hand. "A marvelous light was seen to shine on the roof of the church as it arose; the blind who visited it received their sight and cripples went away healed."

By this stage, Rahere had taken the cloth and he became the first Prior of St. Bartholomew the Great. When he died in 1144, he was buried in the church where his tomb, complete with an effigy added in 1405, can still be seen.

The church and hospital of St. Bartholomew have remained on the same site and have never closed its door to the sick, the poor or the destitute. It survived the Great Fire of 1666 and the bombs dropped in Zeppelin raids in World War I and the Blitz in World War II.

Rahere has inspired many to myth including Rudyard Kipling. In his poem "Rahere" he wrote of Rahere's experience which led to his opening of a hospital for the poor.

"King Henry's jester, feared by all the Norman Lords . . . " who became ill and ". . . Suddenly, his days before him and behind him seemed to stand Stripped and barren . . . came to reeking Smithfield where the crowded gallows are," there "Sat a leper and his woman, very merry, breaking bread . . . He was cloaked from chin to ankle—faceless, fingerless, . . . but the woman whole and clean; and she waited on him crooning, and Rahere beheld the twain, Each delighting in the other . . . " Such love touched Rahere and inspired him to build the hospital for the poor.

<http://www.thenoodlebowl.com/jesters/pages/rahere.html>

St. Bart's as it is affectionately known to Londoners is close to the site where in the past people were burned at the stake and hanged and beheaded. This has given rise to the belief that St. Bartholomew's is the most haunted church in the world. The BBC History channel did a re-enactment of Rahere's story. It related that in the 1820s when the church was being renovated, Rahere's tomb was disturbed and the lid came off. The story goes that someone stole one of Rahere's shoes and thus the ghost of Rahere haunts the area around his tomb. He has also been reported standing by the altar. He quickly disappears if seen. All witnesses to the Rahere haunts say that the cowed monk is a peaceful ghost, and is not in the least bit frightening.

A caring hospital clown ghost? Well, Shobi sat in the church and the graveyard and thought "Wouldn't it be nice way to end this article if Rahere's ghost were to visit the editor of the Hospital Clown Newsletter?"

But alas, no ghost was witnessed; however, the spirit of the Jester/Healer again shows its trail all the way down the well of civilization and is part of our Caring Clown heritage and our wellspring of compassion. Rahere's transformation is not unlike some of the epiphanies of contemporary clowns who have found depth, healing and meaning in service as hospital clowns.