

## Willelmus Barbæ Aprilis.

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**R**ECENT researches have yielded some important facts concerning Willelmus Barbæ Aprilis, the venerable magister under whose name occurs the earliest mention of Derby School that has been handed down to us from the Middle Ages. Beside the charter of Bishop Walter Durdent, confirming the transfer of the School from W. Barbæ Aprilis to the Abbot and Canons of Darley, about a dozen similar documents of the twelfth century have been discovered, in which he appears either as a party or as a witness, and from them we are able to piece his biography together as follows:—

Willelmus was the son of Radulph Barbe de Averil, chaplain to the Earl of Chester. Whether he founded Derby School or continued it, does not appear; but it would seem that the date, in the reign of King Stephen, during which the charter intimates that he transferred, or rather “gave” the School to the Abbey, must have been before the year 1149, for in a charter of Bishop Roger de Clinton, 1129-1148, Willelmus is described as a *Chaplain*, probably of the Earl of Chester, in whose service he was, like his father, engaged the best part of his life. After his departure from Derby we meet him near Horncastle, in Lincolnshire, where he “possessed” the church of Belchford up to the time when it was granted by Hugh, Earl of Chester and Lincoln, to the Prior of Trentham. All through Willelmus acted as

the earl's clerk and chaplain, and wrote most of his charters, some being dated from Belchford (Beltesfordia, Bettesfort), others from various places in Cheshire, Derbyshire, etc. These documents are written in a very fine hand, and their wording, in which the dry legal phraseology is occasionally relieved by elegant figures of rhetoric, reveals the man of culture. The last charter in which we find him as a witness dates from about 1172, so that we may assume that he predeceased his patron, who died at Leek in 1180.

It will have been noticed that Willelmus was not the first bearer of his quaint appellation. His father Radulph (see hereafter Charter X.) had not yet Latinized it, and still kept it in its Norman garb: Barbe de Averil. So did Godfrey de Barbe Avrill (Charter I.), who belonged to an earlier generation, and whom it is tempting to consider as Willelmus' grandfather. That the name was of Norman origin is almost certain, for such an expression is found nowhere else but in the Norman dialect of that period, and its meaning is explained by a line of the famous "Roman de Roncevaux," in which the author, a Norman trouvère, describing Charlemagne's beard, says:

"Blanche a la *barbe* comme flors en *avril*."

(Str. cccxv.)

Thus *Barbe d'avril* was the rather poetical metaphor by which, in Normandy, they expressed a *white beard*. We do not know whether it was Godfrey or an earlier ancestor who had, by his venerable appearance, earned this agnomen, which certainly looks like one of those sobriquets for the invention of which his countrymen have at all times enjoyed a not altogether enviable reputation. It is from such sobriquets that many family names have originated, and this has especially been the case with the Conqueror's followers and the Norman settlers after the Conquest. In the majority of cases these nicknames have shared the good fortune of those who rejoiced in them, and have left their marks in the history and romance of England, such as Dure-dent (Durdent),

Court-nez (Courtenay), Front-de-Bœuf, Grosse-teste, and so many others. In Willelmus' case the agnomen had already become a patronymic, for we find other members of the family bearing it (Charter VIII.). As the Barbe d'Avrils were in the personal service of the Earls of Chester, it is not improbable that the first who came over to England accompanied Hugh Lupus, or had been afterwards invited to join him or one of his descendants in the management of his new dominion, and, as they both hailed from Normandy, they may have come from the same district.

The Earls of Chester originated from Avranches, in Low Normandy. Hugh Lupus, Earl of Avranches ("Hugo de Abrincis"), companion and kinsman of William the Conqueror, was by the latter made Earl of the Palatine County, being considered the safest and staunchest bulwark against the hostile Welsh neighbours. The charter conferring on him this princely appanage said that he was to hold his country as freely by the sword as the King held England by his crown, and that sword (Curtein) was proudly borne by his descendants at the subsequent coronations of kings; it also figured very prominently on the large equestrian seals affixed to their various charters.

These Norman Earls of Chester and Lincoln soon became the most powerful lords in the kingdom, owing partly to their valour and partly to their close relationship to the kings. Hugh Lupus and William I. had had the same grandmother; Richard, the second earl (1101-1119), married the daughter of King Stephen. This Richard shared the fate of King Henry's sons, with whom he was returning to England in the *Blanche Nef*. The third, Ranulph I. (1119-1128), was made Earl of Cumberland; the fourth, Ranulph (Randle) II. (1128-1152), founded Trentham Priory, in Staffordshire. This Ranulph, surnamed Gernons (*i.e.*, the bearded), was a gallant man of arms, and took Stephen prisoner in 1142. He possessed himself of a third of England, ruling over the north of the kingdom from sea to sea as far as Scotland.

The fifth, Hugh (1152-1180), surnamed Cyveliok, from the place of his birth in Montgomeryshire, was the one to whom W. Barbæ Aprilis acted as clerk; and to all the distinctions of his predecessors the sixth and last earl of this lineage, Ranulph III. (1180-1232), added the titles of Duke of Brittany and Prince of Wales.

Among his extensive possessions Earl Ranulph I. had the fee farm of Derby granted him by Henry I. This would necessitate supervision by a responsible steward or provost in the district, and may to a certain extent account for the presence of Willelmus, the son of the earl's chaplain, in Derby. In the year 1137 Robert de Ferrers was made Earl of Derby, but he died the year after, and his successor was only entitled to a "third penny" of the revenue many years later. However, the change in the management of the revenue which must have taken place at that time may have caused the removal of the aforesaid steward from the town, though the Earl of Chester still retained large estates in the county, such as Weston, Aston, Smalley, Morley, and Shardlow. Now it is a significant fact that this date coincides with the epoch at which W. Barbæ Aprilis appears to have parted with his interest in Derby School.

The exact dates at which he began and relinquished his clerical duties at "his" church of Belchford are not known, nor is it ascertained whether he attended personally or regularly to those duties, for his presence was often required in various and distant parts of his lord's domains. There were, however, times when his dual profession of clergyman and secretary to the Earl ran smoothly, and that was when the latter came to reside at Belchford (Charters VI. and VII.). Most probably the quiet country manor in the Wolds of Lincolnshire afforded a more pleasant stay to the over-lord of the county than its capital, which, about that time, was frequently disturbed by its turbulent burghers. There may have been other and more intimate reasons for the Earl's predilection for this rural district, for we read that to his

kinswoman, Adelize de Condé, King Henry had restored Horncastle when the castle was demolished, and Horncastle was not far distant.

Belchford was one of the numerous manors Lucy, daughter and heiress of Algar, Earl of Mercia, brought as a dowry to her husband, Earl Ranulph I. of Chester. It had formerly belonged to her ancestor, Thorold, Lady Godiva's brother, who had granted its tithe to the Priory of Spalding, a grant which Countess Lucy did not renew after Ranulph's death, although she was very munificent to that priory. Belchford church could therefore be owned by Willelmus before it passed into the hands of the Prior of Trentham. Whatever the value of Belchford manor may have been in the twelfth century, its church was not of much value in the days of Henry VIII., for the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of his reign puts it down at 5s. 6d.!

Willelmus must have stood in high favour with the Earl, for his name is constantly to be found among the witnesses to the latter's charters, occasionally heading the list; but what best proves the consideration he enjoyed with his lord is the fact that he had the privilege of counter-sealing several of these documents. The best impression of his seal is found as *secretum* at the back of the large equestrian seal of Earl Hugh affixed to a charter granting some land in Gransden, co. Hunt., to the Canons of Repton, now kept at the British Museum. By the courteous permission of the custodian of the charters, a cast was made of this seal, and is here reproduced on a larger scale.

It is an antique gem intaglio, representing a *gryllus* formed of the conjoined heads of Silenus and Bacchus (?), the latter being partly covered by a goat's skin with its horns.<sup>1</sup> The legend, "✠ SIGILLUM WILELMI BARBE ARILL," is in bold Lombardic type. These grylli were very fashionable amulets or talismans in the palmy days of Athens and Rome. Pliny

<sup>1</sup> He-goats were sacrificed to Bacchus. Pan and the Fauni (satyrs), who had goat's horns, were frequently found in the merry god's company.

and other writers speak of them as being extensively used as charms to ward off (averruncate) mischief. The more fanciful or startling they were, the surer they were to attract the attention of evil-minded persons and to counteract (as *fascina*) the baneful influence of the evil-eye. The innumerable designs (originated by the artist Antiphilos) used for these grylli, the nature and colour of the gem on which they were cut, all had their varied significance. Naturally the deities were the greatest favourites, and one sought to combine several



together so as to increase the power of the amulet. Silenus was considered a specially powerful charm, though it is not clear against what; Bacchus was the symbol of youth and mirth.

Where Willelmus had got this gem from is difficult to say. Probably it had been brought back from Constantinople by one of his countrymen who had followed Godfrey of Bouillon to the first crusade. We may be allowed to doubt whether the worthy magister knew the meaning of his gryllus. At

any rate he treasured it as a relic of classical times, for which, in his capacity of schoolmaster, he must have felt a certain veneration, and had it mounted in what appears to be a silver setting, on which a clumsy contemporary engraved and misspelt his name. It is to be hoped that he did not give it an ecclesiastical interpretation, like Giffard, Archbishop of York, who also owned an antique gem, representing Marcus Aurelius and Plato, which he believed to be contemporary portraits of the Apostles Peter and Paul! The size of the seal is  $1\frac{1}{16}$  by  $1\frac{7}{16}$  inch.

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*Extracts from Charters in which occurs the name of*

### **W. Barbæ Aprilis**

*or of some of his kinsmen.*

I.—GIFT from PIGOT, Son of COLWANUS, to the Prior of Spalding of the tithes of Sutton, etc., in Lincolnshire.<sup>1</sup>

“His presentibus monachis, Gaufrido Naucensi, priore.  
 . . . Et his non-monachis, ipso Pichoto. . . .  
 Hodone capellano, Godfrido de Barbab'ill. . . . Anno  
 incarnationis MCXI, Maii X quarta die mensis, die Dominica,  
 hora tertia, regnante Henrico glorioso Anglorum rege.”

(A.D. 1111.)

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II.—CHARTER OF BISHOP ROGER DE CLINTON, appointing his chaplain John to Trentham Church, Staffs.<sup>2</sup>

“Testibus Roberto Archidiacono Staff., Willielmo de Vilers, Arch. Cestrie, G. Arch. Derb. . . . Willielmo Capellano barba Apl. . . . et multis aliis.”

(A.D. 1129-1148.)

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<sup>1</sup> *MSS. Col.*, vol. 53, p. 450. Dugdale, *Monasticon Angl.*, iii., p. 18. The document says that, to make the gift more binding, Pigot placed his knife on the altar.

<sup>2</sup> *Harl. MSS.* 3868—B.M., and *Salt Arch. Soc.*, vol. xi., p. 322.

III.—CHARTER OF BISHOP WALTER DURDENT to the Abbot and Canons of Darley, confirming various gifts made in former years to their Abbey.<sup>1</sup>

“Intimamus vobis . . . ex dono Willelmi Barbe Aprilis et meo Scholam de Herbie. (A.D. 1149-1159.)

IV.—CHARTER OF HUGH, EARL OF CHESTER, to the Prior of Trentham.<sup>2</sup>

“Omnibus Sancte Matris Ecclesie filiis Hugo comes Cestrie salutem. Universitati vestre declaro me hanc libertatem concessisse Priori et Canonicis de Trentham quod Willelmo Barba Apl. qui modo possidet ecclesiam Bettlesfordie p. annu' pecuniam ab eadem ecclesiâ remoto sive defuncto ecclesiam habeant et teneant . . . .”

(Given at Chester, circa 1155.)

V.—CHARTER OF EARL HUGH, giving his body and the church of Prestbury to the clergy of St. Werburgh's, Chester.<sup>3</sup>

“Deo teste et omnibus sanctis, Joh' priore de Trentham, Radulfo Barba Apl. et multis aliis.” (A.D. 1152-1180.)

VI.—CHARTER OF EARL HUGH to the monks of Bollington, giving them a pond at Donington, Lincs.<sup>4</sup>

“Teste . . . Willelmo clerico comitis, qui chartam scripsit, apud Beltesfort.” (A.D. 1152-1180.)

<sup>1</sup> *Cotton MS. Titus, C. ix.*, fol. 154a. Dugdale, *Monasticon*, vol. vi., p. 596. According to the Chronicle of Robert de Torigni, Abbot of Mont St. Michel, Bishop Durdent died in the month of September, 1159. Most probably the above charter was solicited as soon as he was appointed to his See.

<sup>2</sup> *Harl. MSS.* 2044—B.M., and *Salt Arch. Soc.*, vol. xi., p. 316. Sir Simon d'Ewes, who first transcribed this charter (1649), is responsible for rendering “W. barba Apl.” by “W. barba appellato,” which is grammatically and orthographically impossible. Sir Peter Leycester, Ormerod and others have blindly copied him. There must be in the text an abbreviation sign which passed unnoticed.

<sup>3</sup> Ormerod's *Cheshire*, vol. i., p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ormerod's *Cheshire*, vol. i., p. 27.



VII.—CHARTER OF THE SAME EARL to the monks of "Grenefeld," during the episcopate of Robert of Lincoln.<sup>1</sup>

"Testibus Matildâ, comitissâ, matre meâ, Simone filio Willielmi, Rogero capellano . . . et multis aliis. Apud Beltesford." (A.D. 1147-1173.)

VIII.—GRANT from MATILDA, COUNTESS OF CHESTER, of the tithe of the manor of Rapindon (Repton) to the Church of St. Wistan of Repton.<sup>2</sup>

"His testibus Willielmo capellano . . . Rogero Barbe d'Aberil . . . et multis aliis." (Circa 1160.)

IX.—NOTIFICATION OF HUGH, EARL OF CHESTER, to Richard, Bishop of Chester, of Countess Matilda's grant to Rapindon.<sup>3</sup>

"Testibus . . . Radulfo comitis capellano Willielmo comitis clerico . . ." (Circa 1160.)

X.—CHARTER OF EARL HUGH, giving permission to his mother, Countess Matilda (widow of Ranulf Gernons, Earl of Chester), to give in soul-aims ten librates of land in Grantendene (Gransden, co. Hunt.) to the Canons of Repton.

"Teste me ipso . . . Radulfo Barbe de Aueril, capellano meo, et Willielmo, filio suo, et pluribus aliis." (Circa 1160.)

<sup>1</sup> Ormerod's *Cheshire*, vol. i., p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Jeayes' *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 1940.

<sup>3</sup> Jeayes' *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 535.

<sup>4</sup> *Harl. Ch.* 83, F. 32. Stowe, *Ch.* 158, B.M. Also *Facsimiles of Royal and other Charters* at the British Museum, by Dr. G. F. Warner, No. 51. Jeayes' *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 1942.

XI.—CONFIRMATION BY HUGH, EARL OF CHESTER, of all possessions and liberties of the Church of St. Giles of Calke and the Canons there, in soul-alms for his father, mother, etc., as the charters of his father witness.<sup>1</sup>

“Testibus . . . Willielmo, clerico, Barba Aprilis.  
Apud Barvam.” (Circa 1162.)

XII.—GRANT in soul-alms from MATILDA, COUNTESS OF CHESTER, to the Canons of Repton of all her land of Grantenden.<sup>2</sup> (See Ch. X.)

“His testibus . . . Rogero Barbe de Aueril . . .”  
(Circa 1162.)

XIII.—LETTER FROM HUGH, EARL OF CHESTER, to G(ilbert Foliot), Bishop of London, sending him copy of his grant to the Prior of Repton of the advowson of the Church of Badewen (Great Baddow, co. Essex).<sup>3</sup>

“Huic concessioni hii testes affuerunt: Radulfus barba aprilis . . . Willielmus barba aprilis. . . .”  
(A.D. 1172-1181.)

<sup>1</sup> Glover, *Derby*, ii., 183. Dugdale's *Monasticon*, vi., 598. Bigsby, *Repton*. Jeayes' *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 536.

<sup>2</sup> Stowe, *Ch.* 159, B.M. *Facsimiles*, by Dr. Warner, No. 52. Jeayes' *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Jeayes' *Derbyshire Charters*, No. 1945.