



ABOVE: Dancing in the streets.
LEFT: Troupe of Morris dancers

Prescot: an award winning town!

Prescot has bright plans for the future but this Merseyside town with its links to Shakespeare, royalty and Cambridge University is determined to never forget its proud past. Mairead Mahon went along to find out more.

Prescot is historically part of Lancashire but since 1974, it is within the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley. It lies about eight miles east from the centre of Liverpool and in 2017, it scooped the National Award for Masterplanning. Winning this award, which was presented in London, was no mean feat but before we look at its bright future, it might be worthwhile to explore its past, as it is one of the oldest towns in Merseyside!

The name of the town is based upon two words-priest and cottage-which has reasonably led historians to assume that a

priest lived here in a small house, although any further details are now lost in the mists of time. We do know that it must have been quite an important place and in 1333, the Lord of the Manor, William D'Acre, was granted the right to hold a weekly market. This was quite a prestigious thing to be granted and, as in 1350, Prescot was deemed significant enough to be included in the Bodleian Map of Great Britain, we can be sure that it wasn't a medieval backwater.

Of course, you can't get much more prestigious than a royal connection and Prescot can certainly lay a strong claim

in this area. John of Gaunt bought the manor in 1391 and it eventually passed to his son, King Henry VI. King Henry used Prescot to fund what is now known as King's College, Cambridge and he also exempted the local people from paying some tolls. As Cambridge is a fair distance away from Prescot, a local town council ran the town. It was called The Court Leet and it was based in the market place. Interestingly, if you have a look at Prescot's Coat of Arms, you will see that it is the same one used by King's College. It does have white roses on it but, as we all know, Lancashire is symbolised by a red rose

and Yorkshire by a white one, so unsurprisingly these roses are a bit of a puzzle. Lancashire Magazine can throw some light on it though and we're pleased to tell you that they have nothing to do with Yorkshire! It is because they are symbolic of the Virgin Mary's purity and she is a patron saint of King's College: Prescot Parish Church is also dedicated to her. It's worth popping in to the church, as it is the only Grade 1 listed building in the borough.

Over the centuries, Prescot added many commercial strings to its bow. It became known as a centre for pottery, mining and as an important coaching centre. Watchmaking later joined the skills that the town had to offer and for many years, Prescot was associated with this specialist trade. Sadly, in 1911, this trade ended but you can still find out lots about it, as well as other industries in Prescot Museum.

This fabulous museum prides itself on maintaining a strong focus on local people and places and there is much to enjoy here-14,000 objects in fact! They include: photographs, coins, badges, tools and costumes. In fact, if you have anything tucked away in the attic that relates to Prescot history, then the museum is always interested in receiving donations. So, if you're thinking about a spring clean, keep that thought in mind! If you're quick, you might just have time to experience The Sounds of Time project which runs until the 1st of March and which will allow you to hear the individual sounds associated with clockwork. It will include sounds of clocks through the ages from hour glasses and pocket watches right through to modern quartz.

As it is nearly April, the month in which we celebrate Shakespeare's birthday, it seems appropriate to share Prescot's exciting news: the building of an iconic Shakespeare North Playhouse! Full planning permission was granted last November and it has sent ripples of excitement throughout the UK. Plans for this theatre have been ten years in the making: work will begin this February and it will be completed



RIGHT: Elizabethan Fayre. ABOVE: Prescott. TOP: Shakespeare North Artist Impression.

by April 2020. It will include a 350 seat theatre, education and exhibition facilities, studios, coffee shops and an outdoor performance area. It will also run its own Masters' programme in Shakespearian Performance Practice, which will be validated by Liverpool John Moores University.

The exterior of the building will be very modern, in order to make it accessible to all users and to make it as energy efficient as possible but once inside, it will look very different indeed. The main theatre will be an authentic Jacobean design and will be based on Inigo Jones' 1629 Cockpit-at Court. Watching a Shakespearean play here will really allow the audience to feel just what it must have been like to be amongst the first Shakespearean audiences: we're sure that modern audiences will be better behaved!

But why was Prescott chosen for this great honour? Well, first and foremost in a surprising fact-Prescot was home to the only purpose built free standing playhouse outside London in Elizabethan times and the new theatre will stand very close to the original site. There is certainly some strong evidence that some of Shakespeare's early plays were performed here and, although we don't know for sure if he ever came here, common sense can't discount it. After all, it is more or less accepted that he did spend time in the North West as a young man and it isn't beyond the realms of possibility that he might have wanted to supervise the staging of his work at Prescott. It also had links to Lord Strange's Men, which in turn had close links to Shakespeare. Maybe one day, some documentary evidence will turn up but until then it can't be proved; mind

you, it can't be discounted either! If you want to know more about the project, either contact Knowsley Council or Shakespeare North Trust.

Prescot has always been aware of its Elizabethan roots and celebrates them every year with an Elizabethan Fayre in June. In the 1590's, crowds used to come to Prescott's Fayre from as far away as York and even London, so the modern one is certainly following in a great tradition and the 2017 event attracted over 2000 visitors. Short pop up productions of Romeo and Juliet took place and there were lots of traditional craft demonstrations including candle making, basket making and pottery. There was also the chance to try out some archery and to experience a realistic living Tudor village, complete with apothecary and blacksmith, to name just two essential trades of yesteryear. Morris dancers added to the fun, as did a scrumptious hog roast.

The award winning Prescott Festival also takes place in June and it always has heaps going on. This year, it will take place between the 15th and the 24th June and it is worth checking out the website for the full programme. In the meantime, we can give you a flavour but it is just that! Music plays a large part in the festival with a wide range of events on offer from jazz quintets to choral pieces. Young people play an active role with poetry and instrumentalist showcases and, of course, there is also the carnival. This has stalls, fairground rides, games, live entertainment and a parade. It is all run by volunteer members of the community and is worth supporting.

There are several vibrant community groups in Prescott and one might be slightly unusual, although it always garners interest. It is the Friends of Prescott cemetery and if you go along at this time of year, you're bound to see lots of gorgeous daffodils in bloom, as they are planted each year by the group. As this year commemorates the ending of World War One, we feel that we should mention that there are several war graves here and, for those who would like to know more, a meticulously researched booklet to the graves of these soldiers has been produced. There is also a Prescott Role of Honour website, which can provide a great deal of information.

Plans afoot for Prescott include a project to re-design Market Place, as part of the Prescott Townscape Heritage Initiative. It is going to be transformed into a flexible and engaging space which will be a hive of activity. It will be well lit in the evening, so that people will be able to enjoy it after dusk. It is going to be the single biggest project to be delivered by Prescott Townscape Heritage Initiative; an initiative which, over the past four years, has invested £1.6 million in the conservation of the town's historic buildings and spaces. In addition, A Shakespeare North Rail Interchange will provide greater accessibility between the new theatre, the railway and the town centre. It will also include a shared use walking and cycling path complete with artwork.

It's not really a surprise then to learn that Prescott Town Centre Masterplan won the national Award for Masterplanning last year. The award recognises outstanding work and Cllr Graham Morgan was clearly delighted when he said,

'This is a fantastic achievement...it's great to receive national recognition for the work that we are doing.'

There are exciting times ahead for Prescott and everyone is looking forward to them. It is a town that takes its past as seriously as its present and that can only be a recipe for success.





TOP RIGHT: Elizabethan juggling.
RIGHT: Music in Prescot. ABOVE: Potter in Prescot.



Famous Faces

- Sue Johnson. The actress was born here in 1943 and attended Prescot Grammar School for Girls. She has since become known for appearing in a variety of TV roles such as Brookside, The Royle Family and Waking the Dead.
- John Kemble. Keeping with the Shakespearian connection, John was a Shakespearian actor who was born in Prescot in 1757. There is a life sized statue of him-about six feet-in the chapel of St Andrew's at Westminster Abbey.
- Daniel Craig, well known for playing James Bond. He was not born in Prescot but did spend some time here as a child.
- Paul Lewis. The classical pianist, is a son of the town.
- Gill Burns MBE. The England Women's Rugby Union International was educated in the town.
- Lady Emma Hamilton. The mistress of Lord Nelson once had a house in the town and it is said that Nelson visited her here.
- Edward Lear. The Victorian poet and artist came to Prescot in order to draw pictures of Lord Derby's collection of animals. In fact, he wrote his most famous poem, The Owl and the Pussy Cat, especially for the Earl's children.

The Lancashire Watch Company

It opened in 1889 and closed in 1911 but it is an important part of the town's history. Prescot had been an important centre for watch and clock making for centuries but in 1889, it faced fierce competition from places such as America and Switzerland. The Lancashire Watch Company was formed in order to prevent the trade from collapsing and to fight back. It bought up many of the old Prescot workshops, including tools and workers and it became one of the first English factories to combine all the different manufacturing processes under one roof. It's estimated that over 400,000 watches were produced here from the most expensive gold ones to mass produced examples. Our lady readers might be interested to know that only unmarried women could work there. It was a strict policy and as soon as a woman married, she had to leave immediately! It really is a fascinating story and, if you are interested in finding out more about this aspect of our region's history, then do pop along to Prescot Museum which is stuffed full of interesting facts about it.

Please do check all facts before making a special trip by visiting: www.knowsley.gov.uk