Saint Diana

If Diana, princess of Wales had died in 1497, rather than 500 years later, there's a fair chance that she'd now be a saint.

The wrong she suffered at the hands of an uncaring prince, her loneliness and good works with people spurned by the rest of society, and her tragic early death would have provided the raw material for a hagiographer to write a life which praised her saintly virtues. This would have made no mention of the affairs and divorce, because when spurned and wronged by her prince she would have retired to a convent to pray and undertake good works.

The weeping crowd which gathered outside Kensington Palace in the late summer of 1997, would 500 years earlier, have been reporting miraculous cures after praying for the intercession of Diana. Her grave would have become the focus of pilgrimage and a popular cult, the political utility of which would have been recognised by the monarchy. Charles himself, who would serve a very public penance for the wrong he inflicted on the popular saint, would have made a formal application to Rome for the canonisation of Diana.

Her image would have been carved into stone, and embroidered onto altarpieces and screens in monasteries and parish churches across the country. Hospitals endowed for the care of the afflicted which she had cared for would have been dedicated in her honour.

In common with other saints, St Diana would have had a symbol, or attribute which would have been readily recognised by the faithful. This would have reflected some aspect of her life, good-works, suffering or death. For example, St Andrew, the patron of Scotland has an X-shaped

cross, on which he was martyred and this forms the basis of the Scottish flag. St Barbara, a Syrian beauty imprisoned in a tower by her pagan father and martyred for her refusal to sacrifice to idols is often depicted carrying a tower as her symbol. Or there are the three golden balls of St Nicholas, now the pawnbrokers' symbol. These represent the three bags of gold which St Nicholas gave to a poor man, who unable to afford a dowry for his three daughters to marry, was going to force them into prostitution. So how would St Diana be represented in art? My bet is as a sumptuously dressed princess in the latest fashions of late medieval England, holding a heart with a crown on it, to symbolise her desire to be queen of hearts. Popular devotion and attribution of miraculous powers would have ensured that at least some of her images survived the iconoclasm of the reformation and civil war (and there's a fair bet that long after the popularity of her cult had faded elsewhere, it would be remembered by lonely housewives in Essex, shoppers in Knightsbridge and gay men in Soho).

And who would she be patron of? There's surely a case for daytime TV watchers and tabloid journalists.

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