

EASTBOURNE CHURCH: ITS DEDICATION AND GILDS.

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MR. J. H. ROUND, in his valuable paper on "Some Early Sussex Charters," quotes a passage of the greatest interest from the MS. Chronicle of Fécamp (1054 A.D.) with reference to the endowment of the Church of Eastbourne,¹ and in connection with the entry in Domesday, evidently referring to the same land, where it is stated that "the same Roger (a clerk) holds 1 hide at Horselie in alms of St. Michael," asks the pertinent question, "Is it possible that St. Mary's, Eastbourne, was originally dedicated to St. Michael?" This suggestion might appear to be supported by Eastbourne Fair (the survival of the parish feast or dedication day) being held on Old Michaelmas Day.

As is well known the church is now dedicated to St. Mary, but changes sometimes occurred in the original dedication. Dr. Cox writes thus:

"Dedications to All Saints and to the Blessed Virgin should be viewed with some suspicion until firmly established, for in the time of Hen. VIII. the dedication festivals or 'wakes' were often transferred to All Saints Day or Lady Day, in order to avoid a multiplicity of holidays, and hence by degrees the real dedication became forgotten."

Reconsecration also was often resorted to when the church was rebuilt, and in these cases it sometimes happened that the name of the patron saint was changed.

The surest way to clear up a doubtful dedication is to examine some pre-Reformation wills of the principal inhabitants of the parish, which generally contain directions for their burial within the church of St. Michael or St. Peter, as the case might be. In order, therefore, to

¹ "S.A.C.," Vol. XLII., p. 76.

endeavour to settle the point I had some pre-Reformation wills at the District Probate Registry, Lewes, consulted, and I am indebted to Mr. Garraway Rice, F.S.A., for making a similar search at Somerset House, and the following wills throw light on the subject:

William Jamy's will, dated 17th March, 1494, directs, "My body to be buried in the Church of the blessed Mary the Virgin of Estborne." He bequeaths to the high altar for tithes forgotten 3^s. 4^d. (this is a very usual bequest), and he gives to—

"The brotherhood of St. Richard 12^d.

"The brotherhood of St. Mary of the same, a quarter of malt.

"The brotherhood of St. George, half a quarter of barley.

"The brotherhood of St. Michael, half a quarter of malt, & to

"The brotherhood of St. Sithe (Osyth), D^o of barley."

The will of John Taillour, husbandman, dated 24th March, 1498, directs his body "to be buried in the Churchyard of the Parish of the blessed Mary of Estborn." He gives to the high altar for tithes forgotten ten shillings.

"To the Brotherhood of St. Richard 12^d.

"To the Brotherhood of Jesus in the Church aforesaid 20^d.

"And to the edifice of the same brotherhood, half a quarter of barley.

"To the repair of the Church of Estborne 20^d.

"And to the repair of the Chapel of the blessed Gregory of Eastborn aforesaid, half a quarter of barley, to be paid when the repairs are made."

Robert Story, by his will dated 21st March, 1494, directs his body "to be buried within the Chapel of Saints Margaret and Bartholomew of the Church of Estborne."

Robert Burton, in his will dated 3rd November, 1525, gives "to the high altar for tithes forgotten 10^s also to St. Gregory's Chapel toward the reparacion a seeme² of wheat or else 6^s. 8^d."

Again, in 1542, James Sayge directs that his body be "buried in the Chrych yard of our Lady in Estborne." In 1544 J. Stapultin, amongst other bequests, gives to "the church 'beyme' 12 shillings and to the Brotherhood of Jesus 12 pence," and in the same year J.

² A seme was eight bushels.

Lynenge directs his body to be "buried within the Chrych of our blessed Lady of Estborne."

These wills are of the utmost value for the information they afford. They state known facts at the time they refer to; and it is therefore indisputable that for the last 400 years the church has been dedicated to St. Mary and that no change took place at the Reformation.

But there is the other reason for a change of the patron saint to consider and that is the rebuilding of the church in question. Eastbourne Church is singular in one respect, that it has not grown from successive developments from the aisleless cruciform church, as so many of our parish churches have—and Westham is a good example—but with some additions the plan remains the same as when first erected.

The church is of the transitional period, between Norman and Early English, and was built in the latter half of the twelfth century, probably about 1175 A.D. This certainly then was not the Church of "Burhna" mentioned in the Chronicle of Fécamp as existing in 1054 A.D. (120 years before), and whose endowment is mentioned in Domesday, 1085-6; and the identification by Mr. Round of the lands of the later entry gives us the first known priest of Eastbourne Church, "Roger." It also proves conclusively that there was a Saxon church here, probably a wooden one, which stood on the same site, as I can trace no fragments of a prior stone building. It is, therefore, possible that the former church might have been dedicated to St. Michael and that when it was rebuilt the patron saint was changed to St. Mary, who at that period was held in high esteem. Mr. Round deserves our best thanks for his very valuable contribution to Eastbourne history.

But as well as clearing up the pre-Reformation dedication, these wills give much interesting and at present unknown information as to Eastbourne Church. We have here evidently the dedication of one of the two chancel chapels. The south is known as the Burton (now Devonshire) Chapel; the north, the Gildridge (now Gilbert) Chapel. But one of these must have probably

been the Chapel of SS. Margaret and Bartholomew, a search for the tombstone of Robert Storey might reveal which; but, unfortunately, the original floor is so much covered over as to be inaccessible. Most probably the altar in the remaining one was dedicated to St. Mary, there being generally one to her honour in every mediæval church.

The wills also give the names of numerous guilds or brotherhoods which then existed in the church in pre-Reformation times, as follows:

“The brotherhood of St. Richard (Richard de la Wyke, Bp. of Chichester 1245-53 A.D., the great saint of Sussex).

“The brotherhood of Jesus.

“The brotherhood of St. Michael.

“The brotherhood of St. George.

“The brotherhood of St. Mary, and

“The brotherhood of St. Sith (Osyth).”

We thus see that the church was rich in religious guilds, there being no less than six, a large number for a parish church. These guilds were of two orders, religious and secular.

“The early English guild was an institution of local self help which before poor laws were invented took the place in old times of the modern friendly or benefit society, but with a higher aim. Whilst it joined all classes together in a care for the needy, and for objects of common welfare it did not neglect the forms and the practice of religious justice and morality.”³

The members contributed certain fixed payments; on a member being admitted, he or she promised to be faithful to the brotherhood and pay all due respect to the superiors. The name was then registered on a tablet at the altar of the gild chapel, that the member might be prayed for by the priest.

Every gild possessed its gild priest to say daily mass for the welfare of the living and for the souls of the dead.

Further, the members had a distinctive dress, which they wore on great festivals, with a badge of the gild, generally the figure or symbol of their patron saint.

³ “English Guilds,” Toulmin Smith.

Attached to each brotherhood was an altar in the parish church with an image of their saint, before which lights were constantly burning; and it was one of the duties of the gilds to maintain their altars and lights.

Beside the high altar there were two minor altars in the chancel chapels — one probably dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the other to SS. Margaret and Bartholomew, as previously mentioned. In the responds north and south of the chancel arch are two niches for images, probably indicating the stations of two of the gilds; but the positions of any other gild altars are not distinguishable.

It is probable, however, that some of the gild chapels may have been separated from the other portions of the church by a parclose or carved screen of woodwork. No traces of any such now remain as far as I can ascertain; but "restoration" might very probably account for this.

With regard to the gilds themselves the brotherhood of Jesus was the most important, and the only one of which any return was made at the time of the dissolution.

Sir Baldwyn Hammet was the gild priest, who had been non-resident for the space of eighteen months so that, as the return states, "there be six houselynge people (that is people of an age to receive the sacrament) and hath no more priest to serve the same than the vicar."

Gilds that could afford it often had a house for poor members, who were also provided with food and clothing; and it is clear that this gild possessed one, as is seen by the will of John Taillour, already mentioned.

All gilds provided for the sick and aged members as far as their funds would permit.

The gild of St. George, as patron saint of England, was always a popular one. No doubt, in Eastbourne church, as in many others (such as our cathedral, where there was a gild of St. George also), was a large figure of St. George on horseback, trampling under foot the dragon, or transfixing it with his spear. This image was borne in the processions of the gild. In the churchwardens' accounts for Stratton for 1547 occurs the entry,

“paide for taking downe the image of S George and his horse iiiij^d.”

It seems singular that there should be a gild of St. Osyth in Eastbourne church, for St. Osyth was an Essex saint and was comparatively little known. There was a brotherhood of St. Sithe also in the church of St. Petrock, Exeter, as shown by the wardens' accounts.

Aubrey, recording early seventeenth century customs around Malmesbury, writes:

“In those dayes when they went to bed they did rake up the fire and make a cross in the ashes, and pray to God and S Sythe to deliver them from fire and water and from all misadventure.”⁴

A suggestion has been therefore made that, as many gilds had some public purpose beyond their religious ones, it is possible that these brotherhoods of St. Sithe discharged the duties which are now undertaken by local fire brigades.

Passing from the gilds we find in the will of John Taillour (1498) a bequest towards the repair of “the chapel of the blessed Gregory of Estborn;” and 27 years after Robert Burton gave a similar gift for the same purpose. This chapel probably was St. Gregory's chapel, which formerly stood in the chapel piece at Holywell, near the gap in the cliff leading down to the undercliff.

One other bequest deserves notice, and it is that of J. Stapultin, in 1544, who gives twelve shillings to the church “beyme.” This was a bequest towards the maintenance of lights in the church, which was a heavy item of expenditure.

“The ‘beam,’ which is frequently mentioned in old church accounts, stretched across the chancel, above but just behind the eastern side of the high altar, and ‘had given to it as much ornament as carving, gilding, and colours could lend’ . . . ‘this beam led in time to the formation of the reredos, which was formed by merely filling up, with stonework or wooden panel, the space between the ground and the beam. . . . When the reredos became general, that piece of timber, going between the jambs of the great arch parting the chancel from the nave, and upon which the rood-loft stood was often called the rood beam sometimes the candle beam from the tapers being stuck there upon their laten branches to burn at the foot of the Crucifix or rood.’”⁵

⁴ Camden Society, 1839, p. 87.

⁵ “Rock's Church of Our Fathers,” III., 470.

The employment of lights had invariably a mystic signification. The "beam light" was a lamp which hung from the roof before the high altar and burned night and day; and another light burned before the great rood over the rood screen at the entrance to the chancel.

Numerous bequests such as that of J. Stapultin are found in mediæval Sussex wills. Thus, Thomas Sandon, of Colworth, by his will, dated 1542, bequeathed "to the maintaining of the two standing lights in Oving Church—the rood-light and the beam light in the choir; to each two bushels of barley."

In addition to these lights other lights burned on the altars and before images, and to meet the cost the wardens often levied a tax called waxsilver on the inhabitants.

The following entry is found on the last page of the churchwardens' accounts for the church of Ashburton, Devon, and gives the rating and manner of collecting the money; the date is unknown:

"Ordinans made by the viii men ffor getheryn to the wexe sylver kep to ye lighte beffor the hight crosse; whyche saye is, thatt every man and hys wyffe to the wexe shall paye yerly one peny and every hire serunt thatt taketh waygs a halfe peny and every other persons at Estr takyn no wage a fferthing, and also they saye thatt every man and hys wyffe and every other person takeyng wage shall paye erely to the hye crosse a halfpeny and suche serv̄nts as takyth no wage to paye after ther devocyon as schall plesse them and ther masters."

There appears little doubt but that some similar mode of collecting money was in force at Eastbourne in mediæval times.
