

A TALE OF TWO TOWERS

THERE has been doubt, even confusion, in various writings on Dover, about the location, the name and the purpose of the substantial tower which stood in Bench Street and was demolished in 1836, when the road was widened. Now, it seems, the truth can be revealed. In 1992 the investigations of the Canterbury Archaeological Society, under Keith Parfitt's direction, uncovered the base of the tower in Bench Street, confirming the exact location. The notion that the Bench Street Tower was called St. Nicholas Tower and was associated with St. Nicholas Church is totally refuted in an article by Mark Frost of Dover Museum, who has painstakingly researched the background of this rumour, apparently originated by two historians, given to unsubstantiated speculations. Mark's article deals with the location and function of the Bench Street tower and the tower of St. Nicholas Church. (EDITOR)]

“St. Nicholas’ Tower” in Bench Street — MARK FROST

THE BENCH STREET TOWER and Crypt stood until 1836 when they were destroyed to widen Bench Street. Mistakenly identified as a remnant of the ‘lost church’ of St. Nicholas, the tower has long been an object of debate amongst local historians.

THE FUNCTION OF THE TOWER

The name, St. Nicholas’ Tower is an epithet that seems to be entirely due to Hasted’s erroneous identification of it as the remains of St. Nicholas’ Church. Previously, it had various names, including Prison Tower, Marshes Tower and Garrett’s Tower. Only Hasted and Lyon identify the tower as part of the long ‘lost church’ of St. Nicholas. They had no proof of this, but, like many historians, made wild assumptions. They were writing before the discovery of the three apsidal chapels of St. Martin, in 1896, and without access to ecclesiastical documents in Lambeth Palace and Canterbury Cathedral which prove St. Nicholas’ church was under the roof of St. Martin from at least 1190. At the time they were writing it was only known that there had been two parish churches, St. Nicholas and St. John, the sites of which were completely unknown, apart from being in or about the Market Square.

The existence of a quasi-religious mediæval tower and a large crypt within the old parish of St. Nicholas presented an obvious interpretation to Hasted and to Lyon. There is no evidence at all which suggests St. Nicholas was ever independent from St. Martin-Le-Grand, yet there is irrefutable proof that the Altar of St. Nicholas was contained within St. Martin's from as early as the twelfth century.

Contemporary historians and reporters pinpoint quite clearly the *site* of the Bench Street tower. Thomas Pattenden in 1802 describes it as on the north-east side of Bench Street. Rigden, in his historical sketch of Dover 1844, describes it as a very solid tower which eventually had to be demolished with gunpowder. It was 22ft square and stood 86ft from the corner of Townwall Street, in advance of the line of houses built after street widening. This puts it roughly where the old Geering's shop now is. The crypt or undercroft discovered beneath had a central pillar 5ft high, the groins of the arches being 6.5ft high in their centres and 13ft long from spring to spring. All of it, including the crypt, was removed for the foundation of the new shops. William Batcheller also observed the demolition work and describes the tower as 22ft each side, with 4ft thick walls and foundations 8ft below the pavement. It stood about 46ft high and a portcullis had guarded the single entrance on the western side. The arched undercroft extended 102ft from the tower northwards and about 50ft southwards, and was laid on a bed of light coloured sand.

M. Horsley, in his 'More Memories of Old Dover' recalls that the tower had two rooms in it, one above the other, and a grooved gate to the west, for a portcullis. It stood opposite the Shakespeare Hotel on Bench Street, then only 18ft wide. In 1608 it was part of the residence of the Mayor, Robert Garret. The vault, he claims, dated from Edward II (1307-27).

On the numerous maps and plans of the 16th and 17th centuries held by Dover Museum, the County Archive, the British Museum and Canterbury Cathedral, the only one in which a tower ever appears in the Bench Street area is the Cottonian Manuscript Map BL MS COTT Ang I(i) f26 of c.1500-1540. This map does show a free-standing tower in exactly the location described by Jones, Rigden *et al.* It is a short, squat tower with a pitched roof and a large entrance way facing west.

After Hasted's and Lyon's time there is much evidence to distinguish St. Nicholas Tower and the Bench Street tower as two quite separate buildings. The Revnd. Canon Scott Robertson proved conclusively that St. Nicholas's Church and St. John's Church were rectories and altars under the roof of St. Martin-Le-Grand. This was shortly after the discovery of the three apsidal chapels in the Market Square. The inclusion of parish churches within a single building is fairly common. The third church in Le-Grand was for St. Martin himself.

Statham, in 'History of Dover' (1899), is adamant that there was no independent church of St. Nicholas and says that the Bench Street tower was one of the old town towers. He states categorically that St. Martin, St. Nicholas and John the Baptist were all altars within St. Martin-Le-Grand, and quotes a reference of 1180 to the three parishes of St. Martin-Le-Grand and in the early 1500's Leland mentions the "three parishes *under the one roof of St. Martin-Le-Grand*".



In the White Book of St. Augustine the eight churches subordinate to St. Martin-Le-Grand are listed. They include 'St. Nicholas in St. Martins'. A list of 'Curators of the Altar of St. Nicholas *in the old church of St. Martin*' is given in the Priory Regular, commencing with Stephen de Polton in 1302 and continuing up to John Gynor in 1516. Other ecclesiastical documents include confirmation of appointments to 'the rectory of the Altar of St. Nicholas *in the church of St. Martins*' for 1350, 1400, 1445 and 1447, and reports of 1511 and 1535 on how the services in St. Nicholas' church are suffering because of the poor condition of the fabric of St. Martin-Le-Grand.

There is mention of St. Nicholas Tower being purchased by the Corporation in 1729. This is correct but the Corporation records quite clearly state that this was the *Round Tower* situated in the Market Square on the north side of the remains of St. Martin-Le-Grand. Lease 180 of the Corporation records, dated 1642, show that the town previously leased land partly in St. Martin's churchyard and containing "the Round Tower, and the northern chapel of St. Martins chancel containing the Altar of St. Nicholas".

In conclusion, therefore, it is evident that the church of St. Nicholas never existed as a separate entity from St. Martin-Le-Grand and if it did it was gone by 1200. There is no proof that the Bench Street Tower was an ecclesiastical building of any kind. To Canon Robertson it seemed likely it was a mediæval house with tower, connected with "one of those vaulted basements so common in mediæval houses". Bavington-Jones suggests the tower might have been the ancient "Gilhalla" of the burgesses or, more likely, the remains of a merchant's fortified house.

References:

Batcheller, William	1828	<i>History of Dover</i>
	1836	<i>The New Dover Guide</i>
Haines, Charles	1930	<i>Dover Priory</i>
Hasted, Edward	1797 - 1801	<i>History of Kent</i>
Horsley, M.	1892	<i>More Memories of Old Dover</i>
Lyon, John	1813	<i>History of Dover</i>
Pattenden, Thomas	1802	<i>History of Dover</i>
Rigden, Thomas	1844	<i>Historical Sketch of Dover</i>
Scott-Robinson, Canon	1843	<i>Article in Canterbury Archives vol XX</i>

A Later Note

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DIG, 1992

Work associated with the A20 improvements gave Keith Parfitt and his team from the Canterbury Archaeological Trust a chance to find the Tower again. Using Rigden's descriptions they first looked outside Geering's and immediately discovered some large foundations. Unfortunately Victorian cellars had cut away much of these but there remained three walls of a structure about 22ft square and with walls about 4ft thick. This was obviously the Tower but it was also equally obvious that there had never been a crypt or cellar beneath the tower.

Some months later the CAT team had a second opportunity to dig and this time the crypt was discovered on the south side of the tower. Still visible were the steps to the street, light wells, and the beginnings of arch strings, as well as a small cupboard set in one wall. All these features could be seen in an 1836 sketch of the crypt. 35

Initial indications seem to show that the crypt was nothing more than the cellar or vault of a Norman merchant's house, similar to the Shakespeare Crypt opposite. It has no connection to the Tower next door which in all probability was a merchant's fortified house. Bench Street was, after all, the commercial centre of Mediæval Dover.

It will be interesting to see CAT's final report. Tentative dating puts the Tower in the early 14th century. As it is only yards from the Town Wall, begun in 1307, it would seem logical to say it pre-dates the wall – it seems excessive to build a fortified house inside the fortified town. It is perhaps also logical to assume that the tower, like the walls, was built as a result of the devastating French raid of 1295. If this is so then the Tower, despite standing for half a millennium, only had a practical life of 12 years or less.

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SHEILA COPE, *Membership Secretary*