The Rev John MacQueen

Priest of St Mary the Virgin, 1698-1729 .....by Ivan Green

'Old John', or 'Old Rev.' as he was popularly known in Dover, was parish priest of St. Mary's at a most interesting period of Dover's history, a time of complete change, and considerable progress, in many fields.

During the reigns of Charles the Second and James the Second the town suffered greatly from royal displeasure. Except for a few rich people and a priest or two, the townsfolk had been solidly behind Parliament during the time of the Commonwealth, when we had no king. With the return of the monarchy in 1660 they had to suffer severely for it.

Charles abrogated Dover's prized charter which had been granted by Queen Elizabeth, and forced his own charter on the town, which cost them more money than was available, and in consequence the town had to sell land and the chamber above the Biggin Gate to make ends meet.

Charles had hoped that his new charter would eliminate the anti-royalist, and the nonconformist, factions from all the branches of civic life, and also ensure the return to Parliament of MPs who would be subservient to the court and to his demands.

Anyone not conforming to the Church of England was disqualified from holding any office in the town, and the groups of nonconformists were persecuted. Some of their members were driven from the town, deprived of their livings or imprisoned, and their places of worship, often private houses or workshops, destroyed.

Man was set against man, and any co-operation between the various groups was impossible. This deplorable state of affairs continued into the brief reign of James the Second, and in particular royal interference in the town's internal organisation was a continuing problem. In fact, only months before James fled to the continent, Robert Jacob, elected Dover's mayor in 1688, was removed from office, he being considered untrustworthy by the Privy Council. He was not the first, but he was the last, Dover mayor to be so illegally treated. When James the Second fled abroad, and was deposed in 1689, all this interference and persecution came to a sudden end, but it left an unfortunate vacuum, both in public life and in personal relationships, a situation which threatened chaos. Enter old Captain William Stokes, one of Dover's great citizens, of whom we shall say more later, who steadied the helm for several years. One of his first acts was to call a 'Horn Blowing', a gathering of the townsfolk, in the Market Square and to declare, to a cheering population, the end of James the Second's reign. They tore down the royal arms of Charles the Second, which he had directed should be placed prominently in St. Mary's Church, and made a bonfire of it, together with a copy of his hated charter, in the Market Square.

The years of stress and dissension had however left behind them many social and, especially, religious problems, and there were many old scores to be settled. The Baptists, the Society of Friends, and the Presbytarians began to prosper, at last no longer persecuted by the civil power, but the Church of England, previously the favoured church, fell upon difficult times for several years, and it was fortunate that, eventually, "Old John" was appointed in 1698.

He was very much a man of the people, short, stout, unkempt and quite careless of his personal appearance and hygiene, a lovable man with a great weakness for alcohol which he consumed in large quantities, mixing with the people, and sharing their lives. His easy going nature soon prompted the churchwardens to take advantage of him by depriving him of church fees and other emoluments in order to lessen the cess then levied for church

St Mary the Virgin, Dover, from the south-east, as it was when the Rev John Macqueen (Old John) was the priest at the beginning of the 18th century

purposes, but he seemed not to have protested.

He liked his drink increasingly as time went on and night after night, with the parish clerk, he went the rounds of the alehouses. The parish clerk was a great talker and teller of tales, and the pair of them were "back room boys" and in company with others of their kind, they consumed vast quantities of liquor. Of course, few people in Dover would have dreamed of drinking liquor which had paid the new fangled and to them iniquitous excise duty. Supplies came into the town, and were distributed, by night, and nobody questioned from where, or indeed how, they had come. Indeed, it would have been very dangerous to have done so.

John and his clerk got into all kinds of escapades when they were well past the sober stage. On many occasions the pair of them were discovered next morning fast asleep in the churchyard, having quite failed to cover the last few yards home, and sometimes they slept off their drink on a bench in one of the old alehouses. On more than one occasion, having imbibed too freely in one of their favourite haunts, the "Light of the Son" on the Crosswall at the harbour, both were fished out of the muddy water by boathooks, having failed to negotiate the wooden bridge by which it was connected to terra firma.

Of course, people were a little scandalised at times, but Dovorians got on well, and often affectionately, with old Rev. John. After all, he was usually sober enough to baptise, marry and bury, and on Sundays he turned out a good sermon, a most important part of Sunday at that time. Above all, he was very human, and he lived with his flock and shared fully in their life, which was certainly more than could have been said for some of those supporters of a decadent royalty who went before him, or many of those chilling inhuman pillars of Victorian rectitude who came after him.

After thirty years however he could not carry on unaided and in 1728 he asked for an assistant, but insisted on choosing his own man. The people were however equally insistent that the choice must be theirs. Perhaps they wished to make sure that he would not be merely another drinking pal of old Rev. John. In the end they had their way, but the old priest did not like the sober, staid, rather strait-laced new man and refused to have anything to do with him. The dispute dragged on for months and at last the people were exasperated with Old Rev, and they decided that he should preach at St. Mary's no more.

On the next Sunday, when he entered the pulpit the congregation started to sing the 119th. Psalm, which contains 176 verses. He sat patiently until they had finished and then moved once more to the pulpit, whereupon they started the Psalm again. After a third attempt, he asked to speak. 'My friends', he said, 'I think we are now about even. I have, in this place, often told you a very pretty story; and today you have

entertained me with a very pretty song: So now, farewell', and he left the church.

Things were finally settled, however. It was agreed that the young man should do most of the work and that Old Rev should be paid £15 a quarter and allowed to officiate from time to time, because everybody was fond of him and did not want to hurt him. He was content. He had countless friends and few enemies. He spent nothing on clothes and little on food, and many a family always had, and still would, give him a meal at any time. Moreover, in those days £15 a quarter would buy a great deal of uncustomed liquor and convivial company in the snug little "Light of the Son", or at the busy "Flying Horse Inn" in Flying Horse Lane, or for special occasions there was always the "York Hotel", and the "Ship Inn", or "Wrights", down at the harbour.

Old Rev. continued to enjoy life among his people, sharing their joy and their grief, until he died, to be buried in St. Mary's churchyard on 13th January 1733, mourned by the whole town. When he was appointed, it was to a community divided into many hostile warring factions, bitterly at odds with each other, and when he died he was mourned by everybody. The social crisis of the town had been resolved, and the many old, deep wounds inflicted in the Stuart reigns had been healed.

GLIMPSES OF THE PAST

Some snippets of Dover History

SEA PIRATES

contributed by Margaret Robson with material from an article by David Grant

YOU may recall a reference in the Dover Society Newsletter of April 2000 by Peter Pascall to the skill of the Cinque Port pilots, of whom it was said that they knew the Channel and the waters up to the Port of London that they could tell where they were in the deepest of fogs by dropping a greased lead down to the sea floor, drawing it up and observing and tasting a sample. Was it fanciful? Who knows? - but by one of those extraordinary coincidences an old 'Daily Telegraph' supplement of October 1969, saved originally for an article by Bertrand Russell, came to light. Thumbing through its yellowing pages I discovered a far more interesting one, 'Pirates by Charter', by David Grant.

Here it is in paraphrase:

One March day in 1293 a Norman ship came bounding along the Kent coast flaunting an obscene signal to her enemies in the Cinque Ports. From Sandwich she rounded the Dover cliffs and on to the heights of Hastings. Twelve dead dogs and twelve murdered English mariners swung from her yard arm. King Edward I, occupied more in wars with Scotland and Wales, made a strong protest to King Philip of France and then let the matter drop. Not so the men of the Cinque Ports. In days the Channel coasts were ablaze. Still neither French nor English king acted and so the pirate admirals of England and Normandy declared their own war. The English fleet disguised as traders assembled at Portsmouth to deflect suspicion from the Cinque Ports. The French massed 200 towering warships, each flying a red streamer signifying 'Death without Quarter'. An empty marker ship had already been placed outside St. Mahe off Brittany where battle was to commence.

The English set sail and, in the teeth of a gale, reached the marker ship first and dropped anchor. As soon as the French appeared they weighed anchor and scattered. The French sailed on. As they sailed past the English ships closed in.