

DOVER PRIORY

* * * *by Maureen Morris* * * *

Dover Priory, not the railway station but the Priory founded in Dover nearly nine hundred years ago and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Martin. There is very little of the Priory to see now but glimpses of flint walls and a few remaining structures amongst the school buildings are enough to make you wonder about its history, what it was like originally, how it came into being and eventually became the Dover College it is today?

Martin was born early in the 4th century in that part of Europe which is now Hungary. He was brought up in the Christian faith and as a young man he joined the Roman army. One day whilst on duty in France he saw a beggar by the roadside who was freezing and starving. Martin had little money himself but was moved by the man's plight so tore his own cloak in two and gave half to the beggar. That night in a dream Martin saw Christ clothed as the beggar in the torn cloak. This he took as a sign to follow the Christian way of life more purposefully. He spent his next years preaching in Italy and Gaul and was so favoured by his superiors that he was given land near Tours in France to found a hermitage. For his exemplary way of life here he was eventually created a bishop in 372. Honoured throughout France and known as St Martin of Tours he became one of the country's Patron Saints. His fame spread around Europe and into England and by the 7th century the Canons of the Saxon church in Dover Castle transferred its dedication to Saint Martin of Tours. In about 696 Wihtred, a king of Kent, saw

that the small settlement of Dover was growing in importance through its strategic position close to the continent, and decided to fulfil a vow he had made to St Martin and build a church in the centre of the town. The Castle canons were established in the new building. This became known as St Martin the Less when at the time of the Conquest, more than three hundred years later, it was replaced by a much larger building then called St Martin le Grand. This served as a monastic foundation until in 1130 Archbishop Corbeil of Canterbury, using the unseemly behaviour of the canons of Dover as an excuse, persuaded Henry I to allow him a charter to build a Priory in Dover by using the assets, including its lands, of the existing church of St Martin. Pope Innocent II confirmed the grant and the site chosen was just outside the centre of the town. In 1131 the new Priory building began. It was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Martin. By 1136 the work under Corbeil's leadership was so well advanced that some of the buildings were ready for occupation. But King Henry had died in 1135 and in December of that year Archbishop Corbeil also died. All did not go well. The Canterbury monks were anxious to take the new Priory under their jurisdiction while the Dover Priory monks argued that they were answerable only to the Archbishop. However now that Corbeil was no longer there to take their side and there was currently no incumbent Archbishop, the Prior at Canterbury took control and the Dover canons were cast adrift and replaced by twelve newly selected monks. This was completely

against Henry's original Charter but the new King Stephen was so preoccupied with the many problems of his succession and his battle with Matilda, the other contender for the throne, that when his consent was sought it was easily given. The main buildings of the Priory were completed by about 1140 under the new Archbishop Theobald's leadership and eventually dedicated in 1160 with Canterbury Prior Richard at its head. Richard later succeeded Theobald as Archbishop. In 1154 King Stephen had died suddenly in the Priory whilst visiting overnight. He was buried in Faversham Abbey.

The old Church of St Martin le Grand remained the parish church of Dover but was under the control of the new St Martin's Priory, by now known as the 'Newark'. But still things did not go easily. Some of the buildings were damaged by a fire in 1201 but repaired and some new domestic buildings added later in 1231. In 1295 it was pillaged and partly burnt by French invaders. At this time a story was told of a monk, Thomas de la Hale, who was tortured to reveal where the Priory treasure was hidden. He refused to give the information and was hacked to death by his captors. Afterwards some attempted to make him a saint for his bravery but in spite of his being martyred and miracle cures happening to those worshipping at his graveside in the Priory church, it was not thought appropriate as there was already a Saint Thomas (Becket) who had been canonised in 1173.

By the late 12th century all of the main buildings of the Priory were in

existence. The church, the most important building, was an imposing edifice some 300 feet in length. It could perhaps be compared in size to the present day Rochester Cathedral and some eight times larger than the still existing Refectory. Still standing in the sixteenth century the church was described in a letter to Cromwell as 'the fairest one in that quarter of Kent'. Through excavations carried out in 19th and 20th centuries it is possible to describe how the site was laid out. There were cloisters, a Chapter House, all the usual buildings for storage including the large twelfth century barn and the important Refectory, Guestern House and Gatehouse. To this day all these three latter buildings remain much as they were built. The Refectory is still used as the dining room for the School, the Guest house has been converted into the Chapel and rooms in the Gatehouse are used as classrooms.

The area occupied by the Priory, with its grounds including fishponds and buildings occupied some 15 acres. The northern boundary extended to what is now Priory Hill, the western boundary overlapped the current Priory Gate Road and up to the car park area of Dover railway station. The southern boundary was edged by the



Priory Meadows Pond 1858

Folkestone Road which was earlier known as St Martin's Hill. The eastern side of the site corresponded to present day Priory Road. The apse of the great Priory Church, the Chapter House, the infirmary and the convent garden extended into the land now occupied by Effingham Street, Norman Street and Saxon Street. Some of the flint walls and the end wall of the Refectory can be seen on one side of Effingham Street. One of the important features of the Refectory was its large depiction of the Last Supper on the east wall. It was painted there when the building was first completed. It portrayed fourteen characters. Christ is in the centre surrounded by his twelve disciples and one other who has not been identified. The fresco in its day must have been highly decorated with bright colours and gold leaf. After years of abuse of the building as a barn even in recent years shadowy forms of Christ and his disciples with their golden haloes could still be seen. Some restoration work was poorly carried out and now the whole scene is almost impossible to see but indentations, where perhaps jewels were inserted, and tiny traces of colour still show some evidence of the Saints' haloes.

Throughout the years there were continual disputes between the Dover Priory Canons and the Canterbury monks who were only too keen to have control of the Dover Priory itself and get their hands on the quite considerable income from the lands belonging to St Martin's. The battle continued with interferences from archbishops, kings and even the Pope. And in July 1356 Walter de Chartham was the last Prior of Dover to be appointed by the Dover canons themselves, "by special grace of the Archbishop". Canterbury had won the day and in January 1366 James de

Stone from Oxeney was appointed the new Prior of Dover by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Nearly two hundred years had then elapsed since the foundation of the Priory of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Martin in Dover but from then on and for nearly two hundred years more it was completely subjugated, suffered financially and became increasingly obscure. But through the centuries kings and other important people of their day stopped to worship at the Priory or stay at the Maison Dieu nearby as they travelled from France en route for Becket's shrine in Canterbury. In the beginning, however, under the new Priors, literary, historical and other academic pursuits flourished and there were other achievements. The Priory had built up what must have been an extensive library. Using a new method of specially constructed shelving some thousands of books were stored. The books were kept in a methodical way that meant that they could be retrieved more easily when required. The musical activities of the Priory were also of some account. Thomas Tallis, who later became the most important composer of the Tudor period, at the age of twenty six was appointed organ master in St Martin's Priory. He stayed from 1531 until religious life there came to an end.



St. James' Old Church

In 1538 Henry VIII dissolved all the monasteries. At this time the Priory's books were dispersed and mostly lost but about forty of the volumes are known to have survived and a few found their way into other libraries. One, the tenth century Irish Psalter, has come to rest in St John's College in Cambridge. After the Dissolution the Priory had become for the town's people a source of building materials, stone and lead, and other useful household goods. They took away those things which were most easily transported and left little worthwhile behind. For the most part the site was devastated.

First of all most of the ground occupied by the Priory and together with about 350 acres of land belonging to the Priory were leased to a local merchant. At the same time another 100 acres were leased to a William Woodrow but it is difficult to trace the lessees of the Priory lands during the remainder of the sixteenth century as the records were not well kept and the leasing passed through many hands throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1840 the south-eastern parts of the enclosed site were let to a builder, Mr Parker Ayres, and in 1868 the western portion was leased to Mr Striker Finnis. He drained the one time fish ponds and about this time the fine medieval barn in the south-west corner of the site was

demolished. This area was used to make Priory Gate Road and the railway station yard. At the beginning of the nineteenth century John Coleman became the tenant of the Priory grounds and the Coleman family continued to rent the property until in 1869 they leased part of the grounds with some of their remaining medieval and damaged buildings to Robert Chignell. He had already established a private school at 'Westmount' in the Folkestone Road and needed larger premises. Mr Chignell made use of the remaining monastic structures to build his new public school. Dover College opened in 1870. The old Guestern house was not acquired until 1879 and was then modified a little to form the fine new College Chapel. The Refectory, which in the previous farming tenants' hands had been used as a storage barn, was thoroughly renovated and once again served its original purpose as the dining hall. The modified Gatehouse came into use as classrooms.

Subsequently the whole property of the Priory at Dover was made over by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to the College Trustees. Many buildings for educational and recreational use have been added during the intervening years.

But the grandeur of the Refectory, the Guestern house, now the impressive College Chapel, the Gate house and together with some still standing strong flint walls are evidence of what must have been for many centuries a most imposing structure in Dover. The Dover Society in recent times has been privileged to be able to use the Refectory in which to celebrate its Christmas feasting as others have done before throughout nearly nine hundred years.



St. James' Old Church