

Saving The Baron's Bench

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For several hundred years Old St. James' Church also served as the Court House of the Barons of the Cinque Ports. The last Lord Warden to hold such a court was the Duke of Wellington in October 1851 when he sat on the special seat called the Barons' Bench. One hundred years later in January 1951 the bench was placed and dedicated in St. Mary's Church.

The Reverend A. Stanley Cooper became Vicar of St. Mary's and in charge of the St. James' parish in 1943. He and local solicitor, John Mowll, visited the old church, which had been hit by shells, and noticed some war damaged oak panelling, part of the Barons' bench. Before they could arrange removal, the church was hit again and the panelling covered in debris. Later, in 1944, the church tower was hit and the entire vestry containing the panelling collapsed, completely covering everything.

After the war it was decided not to demolish the church remains, but to retain them as a permanent symbol of the suffering endured by the people of Dover throughout the conflict. In 1950 contractors moved in to 'tidy up' the ruined church and Revd. Cooper saved almost all the panelling, but the bench was decayed beyond repair. Dover Harbour Board, however, was able to clean and restore the panelling above the seat. He also discovered that a table that had stood in front of the seat had been moved to New St.

James' Church, which, following the church's demolition after the war, had been moved again to the original Civic Restaurant, housed in St. Mary's Parish Hall, where it was used as a cash desk!

The Vicar was keen to find the missing centre seat of the bench, which had no legs but was usually on the bench. This seat and a plaque about the bench that had been put in the vestry in 1935 were eventually found boarded up in the attic of solicitors Mowll and Mowll. On the back of the seat was a label in John Mowll's handwriting stating that it was the Duke of Wellington's seat. Both seat and plaque were severely damaged by shell splinters, but once again Dover Harbour Board restored them.

No longer in St. Mary's, the items are on display in Dover Museum.

*Source: Dover Express and East Kent News
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Wellington Seat © Dover Museum