



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

THE CHURCH OF ST. HELEN IN CANTERBURY.

A FORGOTTEN SANCTUARY.

BY C. EVELEIGH WOODRUFF, M.A.

THE former existence, within the walls of the city of Canterbury, of a Church dedicated in honour of St. Helen seems hitherto to have escaped the notice of the numerous historians and topographers who have described the antiquities of the ancient city. Even Somner, who enumerates no less than seventeen churches, as existing within the city in his day, or known to have formerly existed, makes no mention of a Church of St. Helen; neither do the Registers of the See of Canterbury contain any reference to such a church.

It was, therefore, with much surprise, that the present writer when transcribing an early rental of property belonging to the prior and convent of Christ Church, Canterbury, found certain lands and houses within the city described as lying *In Parochia Ste Elene*.¹ The rental from internal evidence must have been compiled within the first decade of the thirteenth century, and since neither later rentals nor the Register of the See contains any reference to the church or parish of St. Helen, it may be inferred that it had ceased to exist before the said century was far advanced.² Where then was this long-forgotten Church situated? Since the boundaries of the property described in the rental give no assistance in this connection, the only clue seemed to be the fact that in the rental, the parish of St. Helen occurs between the parishes of St. Mary Bredman and All Saints, thus suggesting a site in the neighbourhood of the High Street,

¹ Ch. Ch. MS. Register H.

² The Registers of the See, preserved at Lambeth, do not antedate Pecham's primacy (1279).

which, in Canterbury, is the designation of that part of the main thoroughfare which extends from St. Margaret's Street and Mercery Lane to Eastbridge. Subsequent research confirmed the reliability of this clue, and has enabled me to identify with certainty the site of the vanished church.

Of primary importance in this connection was the fortuitous discovery in the Public Record Office of a Charter in which the Church of St. Helen is mentioned. This occurs in an *Inspevimus* of King Edward III., confirming certain charters granted many years earlier to the Prior and Canons of Leeds, in Kent. The fifth charter inscribed on the roll records the grant of William de Einesford to the said Priory of lands in Canterbury, including the site of the Church of St. Helen, and is of so much importance for our present purpose that I give here a full translation of its contents.

“ We have seen also ” (the King says), “ the charter which William de Einesford granted to the aforesaid canons of Ledes in these words : “ To all sons of holy mother church to whom these letters shall come, William de Einesford sendeth greeting. Be it known to you all that for the love of God, and for the health of my soul and the souls of all my kinsfolk, I have given and granted and in this my charter have confirmed to God and the Church of St. Mary and St. Nicholas of Ledes, in free and perpetual alms, the Church of St. Elen with its appurtenances, which Church was founded (*fundata*) on the land which I hold in burgage tenure in Canterbury, and a rent of two shillings from the land which Edward, son of Odbold held of me, next to Estbrege, where the same Edward built (*construxit*) the hospital of St. Thomas the Martyr.’ These are the witnesses : Bartholomew my brother, Robert de Sipburn, Peter de Buteilles, Robert his brother, Richard de Westgate, Roger Brade, Walter de Dennitone, and William Chillingham.”¹

This charter, apart from the reference that it contains to the Church of St. Helen, is interesting for the information it gives concerning Eastbridge Hospital, which

¹ P.R.O. Charter Rolls 41 Edw. III. (1367) memb. 10.

we now learn was founded by a private citizen, one Edward FitzOdbold, and not by the martyred Thomas, as both Somner and Archbishop Stratford, three hundred years earlier, stated.

With regard to the Church of St. Helen, it will be noticed that no boundaries of the property conveyed are mentioned in the charter, but its position can be identified by the aid of later grants of the same land. Thus, from a deed amongst the *Chartae Antiquae* in the Cathedral Library (C.765), we learn that in 1278 Richard, Prior of Leeds and the canons of the same, granted to one Stephen Blakloque (or Blacklock), their stone-built house in the parish of All Saints, late in the occupation of Mayner, the rich dyer,¹ and "lying between the hospital of St. Thomas of Eastbridge and the house of Aaron the Jew". From an entry in Register A. fo. 129, we learn that Blacklock got into the hands of the Jews, and had to pledge (*invadiavit*) the house to Moses of Doggestret for 27 marks. A lady, however, came to his assistance, one Agnes, daughter of Adam de Gore, who paid the debt, and received from Blacklock a grant of the property which, later, she conveyed by deed poll to the Prior and Convent of Christ Church. In this deed, the house is described as bounded "towards the west by the chapel of the hospital of the blessed Thomas of Eastbridge, towards the north by the King's highway, and towards the east by the house of Moses the Jew. (Regr. E. fo. 80.) From later rentals we learn that the Jew's house was situated at the north-west corner of what is now Stour Street, but which was called in medieval times, *Heathenman Lane*. After the expulsion of the Jews from Canterbury (in 1290) the house became the property of the Christ Church monks, who, in subsequent rentals, added the note "this land was the gift of William de Einesford", whence we reach the conclusion that the lost Church of St. Helen stood on the plot of ground now occupied by the Kent Fire Office, the Post Office, and a Tobacconist's shop.

How or when the Eynsford, a West Kent family, came to possess lands in Canterbury, I have been unable to

¹ The founder of the still existing Maynard's Hospital.

discover, but the Cathedral archives show that in the twelfth century and later, they were often involved in the affairs of the Prior and Convent of Christ Church. Thus, from a memorandum inscribed on a flyleaf of the volume called "The Monastic Domesday",¹ we learn that when Archbishop Richard, the successor of the murdered Thomas, was still living the life of an ordinary monk (*adhuc claustralis monachi vitam ageremus*), that is to say before 1140, in which year Richard became Prior of Dover, William Fitz Ralph, lord of the manor of Eynsford, took the monastic habit in Christ Church, Canterbury, and at the same time granted to the said Prior and Convent the Church of St. Martin in Eynsford.

Later, however, a nephew of the above (also named William) challenged the right of the monks to present to the benefice, and even went so far as to forcibly expel the rector they had appointed, for which action he was promptly excommunicated by Archbishop Thomas (Becket). But since William was a tenant in chief of the Crown, the King claimed that the Archbishop could not legally excommunicate him without giving notice of his intention to his overlord. Ultimately Becket consented to remove the ban, but the incident was the primary cause of the quarrel between the King and the Archbishop. It is remarkable, however, that this same William de Einesford became later one of sureties for the payment of the vast sums of money that the King claimed were due from the Archbishop. William's personal share was 500 marks, and, after Becket's murder, he was shrewd enough to obtain from the Pope a lien on the offerings made at the Saint's tomb. The debt was discharged during the rule of Prior Alan (1179-1186), and at the same time, William confirmed to the monks the rectory of the Church of St. Martin in Eynesford, together with the patronage of its chapels, Farningham and Stone, and in return for the concession was received into confraternity by the Prior and Convent of Christ Church, who also undertook to present to him and his heirs for ever a monk's cloak, a pair of shoes and a sheath-knife. It was this second William de Einesford

¹ Chart, Ant. E. 28.

probably who gave the site of the Church of St. Helen to the prior and canons of Leeds.¹

Dedications in honour of St. Helen are far more common in the north than in the south of England. In Kent the sole Church which bears her name is that of Cliffe-at-Hoo.

¹ One of the witnesses to the charter quoted above was Peter de Buteilles, who, in 1197, acted as proctor for W. de Einesford in a suit at Westminster, see *Arch. Cant.*, I, p. 237.