

Walk Awhile

Briefing Paper 6

Rochester Castle and Cathedral

Introduction

A settlement existed at Rochester pre-dating the Roman occupation; however it is believed that the Romans built the first bridge where Watling Street crosses the River Medway and fortified the town, naming it 'Durobrivae'¹. Aulus Plautius led the Roman army into Kent in AD43 and forced the Belgic inhabitants of Kent across the Medway to the west bank². Christianity was brought to Rochester by St. Augustine's mission and the first Archbishop of Rochester was Justus who was ordained by Augustine in AD 604.

Periods of instability occurred through the dark ages until the Norman Conquest in 1066, Danes frequently sailed up the Medway and attacked the city of Rochester and the city was besieged by the Vikings in 884.

The Castle

Rochester Castle was one of the first castles to be built in Britain by the Normans. The outer walls were built by Bishop Gundulf in 1089. The keep is considered to be one of the best examples of a Norman keep in England surviving today. It was constructed by Archbishop William de Corbeil in 1127. The keep is 113 feet high and the walls are 12 foot thick.

Henry I granted control of the castle to the Archbishops in Canterbury. However in 1215 Archbishop Langton refused to cede control of the castle from Canterbury to the Bishop of Winchester. Rebel Barons took control of the castle in defiance of King John whereupon a two month siege commenced. The Barons were eventually defeated when the foundations of the castle were under-mined and the carcasses of 40 fatted pigs were set on fire in the tunnels that were dug beneath the walls. This resulted with the collapse of the walls and the South east turret. The

¹ **Rochester's Heritage Trail p.16 1993 City of Rochester Society.**

² **The City of Rochester Upon Medway – Pitkin Guide p.2 p.1997**

circular south east turret that can be seen today is the new tower that was built in a stronger circular design following King John's recapture of the castle.

The Cathedral

Rochester is the second oldest diocese in England. It was established by Justus, who became the first Bishop of Rochester in 604. The cathedral suffered as did the rest of Rochester from attacks by the Danes throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Following the Norman Conquest Bishop Gundulf commenced the building of a new cathedral in 1080. Today only the crypt and part of the south isle wall are incorporated in the present cathedral. Gundulf's tower can be reached via the path that runs between the north transept and the south side of St. Nicholas' Church (Looking towards the west entrance to the cathedral this path is to your left and leads off Boley Hill and along the north side of the cathedral). It is believed that Gundulf's tower was built after Gundulf's death. It served as a bell tower

Much of the cathedral that we see today dates back to the Norman re-building work that started in 1227.³ The new building was financed in part by donations to the shrine of St. William of Perth. St. William was a local baker who it was said gave the money from 1 in 10 of his loaves to the poor. Upon leaving Rochester in 1201 to embark on a pilgrimage to the holy land he was murdered by road-side robbers. The monks in Rochester set up a shrine dedicated to St William and it was no doubt hoped that this would attract donations in a similar manner to the offerings that were received by Canterbury following the death of Beckett 31 years earlier.

Standing in Boley Hill with your back towards the castle and the River Medway, facing the west entrance (tourist) of the Cathedral one is looking at what is considered to be one of the best Norman facades in the country.⁴ The great window dates from 1470 and the Norman doorway below is much older and existed when King Henry I entered through this doorway when the Cathedral was consecrated in 1130. On each side of the door are five jamb shafts. On the left side of the door one jamb shaft is carved with a statue depicting Solomon or King Henry I and on the right of the doorway one jamb shaft is carved with a statue depicting either the Queen of Sheba or Queen Matilda (wife of Henry I).

³ **A Guide to the Pilgrims Way and North Downs Way – Christopher John Wright p.1911993.**

⁴ **Ibid p.190**

The offerings to St William of Perth financed a big rebuilding programme starting in 1227. The transepts were enlarged and a second pair of transepts was installed. Apart from the west perpendicular window in the 15th century no further major work was undertaken until Cottingham rebuilt the central tower in 1825 and Gilbert Scott added new stonework and gables in 1870. In 1888, J L Pearson commenced a major restoration of the west front of the Cathedral. This includes the completion of the four pinnacles, which can be seen on the west front of the Cathedral. Standing back and facing the west entrance to the cathedral, if one looks down Boley Hill to the left the College Gate (also known as Chertsey Gate or Cemetery Gate) can be seen. This served as the entrance into the Cathedral precincts from the High Street.

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