

THE CHAPEL OF ST JAMES AT SOUTH ASH MANOR

It is through the kindness of my good friend Paul Lee that the next three instalments for the Church News will deal with St. James' Chapel at South Ash Manor. This was part of his lengthy essay entitled "Monastic and Secular Religion and Devotional Readings in Mediaeval Dartford and West Kent" which gained him the degree of PhD at the University of Kent at Canterbury and as Dr. Lee knew that I was writing a series of articles for the benefit of the parishioners, he has given me permission to quote verbatim from this thesis. At the outset I must tender him my sincerest thanks in this regard.

The Chapel itself was later converted into a dove-cote and which I believe is - or was - situated at the South Ash Road end of the estate in close proximity to South Ash Manor. Regretfully new electronically operated gates have now been installed and I am therefore, unable to say whether this historic building has been demolished; though it was certainly in existence in 1986 when photographs were taken by Cluttons, Estate Agents when the property was offered for sale.

"The Chapel of St. James in the manor of South Ash"

Rosser finds that the lack of coincidence of parish with manorial borders, gave some parishioners freedom of manoeuvre, whilst the Lords promoted their own religious initiatives to recruit the support of their inhabitants (Gervase Rosser "Parochial conformity and voluntary religion in late mediaeval England" Transactions of The Royal Historical Society 6th series 1 (1991) page 181). Such a state of affairs may have resulted in the provision of extra facilities for worship of the parish boundary of Ash near Dartford and Kemsing. The manorial chapel of St James was not mentioned in wills, most of the inhabitants on the manor perhaps being too poor to make them, and its existence is only recorded in a case heard in the Rochester consistory court in 1564.

Inhabitants of the manor were asked to cast their minds back to before the, Reformation to produce evidence as to whether the mansion of South Ash, then owned by William Hodsoll, was in Kemsing or Ash parish. The confusion had, in the past, brought about conflicts of parochial loyalty and obligation for some of the inhabitants' of the manor. Dependents agreed that half of the manor was in Kemsing parish and half in Ash and that the mansion straddled this border, the kitchen and hall being in Kemsing. It was remembered that Burrowe, the former farmer, annually received the sacrament at Easter in Kemsing church.

John Fremling a sixty year old yeoman of Kemsing, recalled that the parson of Ash had on one occasion refused to marry a man and a maid from the mansion house and sent them to Kemsing. Fremling also recalled an occasion forty seven years earlier c 1517, when he was thirteen, when the clerk of Ash hired him to be the St. Nicholas Bishop for the parish of Ash. It is not explained why no boy in Ash was considered appropriate. The clerk collected him from his father's house in Kemsing and took him to the mansion of South Ash. There Markeley, then farmer, sat him (Fremling) down on the high bench in the hall and told him "remember another day that thou sittest nowe in the parish of Kemsing".

Amongst the other evidences turned up was the matter of the manorial chapel, its staffing and use. Thomas Ketyll, a sixty-two year old husbandman (a farmer) of the parish of Ash testified that a dove-house in the manor used to be a chapel of St. James and it was the vicar and clerk of Kemsing who celebrated mass and service there on St. James' Day (25th July). Ketyll himself had been used to assist the priest on a number of occasions. Thomas Burrowe, a husbandman of Ash aged forty years, remembered that his father annually paid 8d to the clerk of Kemsing during matins and mass on St. James' Day and he continued to pay 4d to the clerk of Kemsing after services ceased in the chapel (Rochester consistory court dispositions CKS DRb/Jdl ff142-143r, 149v-151r). It appears from this that the chapel was staffed by Kemsing parish. In this case manorial influence confused their sense of parochial loyalty to the extent that some did not even know which parish they lived in. These details of festival masses in the chapel and the continuing tradition of the boy bishop however, suggest a picture of flourishing traditional religion before the Reformation, in this rural area, finding expression in parish churches and manorial chapel, depending on where one lived."

Next month we will give a full transcript of the Rochester consistory court dispositions at folio 142-143r.

This article is by Leslie Morgan - with grateful thanks to Dr. Paul Lee.