

A Short History of St Stephen's Church and its neighbourhood

Origins of the Church

The small village outside Canterbury clustered around St Stephen's church was originally known by the Old English name of Hackington, which means "settlement amongst the hacks" or thorn bushes. The area (still formally known as Hackington) became known as St Stephen's in the Middle Ages because it had a statue of St Stephen with the reputation of working miracles, which was therefore a popular place of pilgrimage. The village became linked to Canterbury by development in the 1930's.

How the church developed into the building we now see is not clear, and authorities differ in how they interpret the evidence. The first record of a stone church dedicated to St Stephen is in 1100 when St Anselm was Archbishop, and traces of that building remain at the west end of the present church; however some scholars think there may have been a church on this site before then.

Balwin's row with the monks of Christchurch

In 1185 Archbishop successor Baldwin fell out with the monks of Christchurch (the monastery in what is now Canterbury Cathedral Precincts, then as now the formal seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury) and Baldwin decided to build a new Cathedral at Hackington, staffed by a college of priests who were not monks and therefore easier for him to control. Building began but it not clear whether any work was done at this time on the present church, although there are features of the building in the style of that period. The monks of Christchurch protested to the Pope, and after a few years he ruled in their favour and the work was stopped.

Loretta and the Langtons

In the 1220's Archbishop Stephen Langton (1207-1228) installed his brother Simon who was Archdeacon of Canterbury at Hackington; a house was built near the church which remained the residence of the Archdeacon until the Reformation. Further building work was done at this time, and some think that some of the stone intended for Baldwin's College and Cathedral was reused in this remodelling.

In 1221. Lady Loretta de Braose, the wealthy and influential widowed Countess of Leicester and friend of the Langton brothers, was enclosed here as an anchoress (a hermit who lived an enclosed life of prayer in a small room usually attached to a church). It is possible that her cell was in the area which is now the south transept. Some believe that her servants lived in a house where Glebe Cottage now stands.

Despite her enclosure Loretta is reported to have ministered to pilgrims visiting Canterbury and the statue of St Stephen and to have championed the then newly formed Franciscan order in England through her network of contacts with influential individuals. In 1265 she received a letter asking for information regarding the rights and liberties of the stewardship of England, customarily held by the earls of Leicester, which 60 years previously had been her husband. In 1265 the Earl of

Leicester was Simon de Montfort, Loretta's great-nephew by marriage who was at the time in rebellion against the King, Henry III, (Three months later his rebellion failed when he was killed at the Battle of Evesham). Lady Loretta died on 4th March 1267 and is buried somewhere in the chancel of the existing church.

Hackington up to the Reformation

Its proximity to Canterbury and the presence of the Archdeacon gave Hackington more importance than the average village; for example Edward III (1322-1377) held a tournament here on his return from war in France, and Henry VI had a house and park here. Archbishops Wareham and Arundel both died here. There is a record that the play "King John" by John Bale was performed here in 1538 – possibly for Thomas Cromwell on his visit to destroy the Shrine of St Thomas Becket in Canterbury and the statue of St Stephen in Hackington.

The Manwood era

At the Reformation the suppression of pilgrimage impoverished the village and its clergy, and the church fell into disrepair. Some 30 years later Queen Elizabeth I gave the manor to Sir Roger Manwood, Lord Chief Barton of the Exchequer. He rebuilt the Archdeacon's house in the Elizabethan style, repaired the church and built and endowed the row of six alms houses which are still an attractive feature of St Stephen's Green.

A seventh larger house at the end of the row was the residence of the parish clerk, also Prior of the Almshouses. Traditionally such persons brewed and sold ale, and this house (now the Old Beverlie) has been a public house since the 17th century. The Landlord was also the parish clerk up to 1954. This pub has a very early association with the game of cricket, said by some to be derived from bat and trap (a game still played in the garden of the pub in summer) and was the home to the original Beverley Cricket Club before it transferred to the St. Lawrence Cricket Ground. The earliest games were played on Beverley Meadow and Canterbury Cricket Week originated here.

Sir Roger Manwood also rebuilt the south transept of the church where his memorial now stands and did some work on the north transept. His son Peter and his wife and then their son John lived in the house and continued to endow the church until financial difficulties forced them to sell it to the Colepepper family.

The Hales period

The Colepeppers in turn sold the Manwood house to the Hales family in 1675. In the eighteenth century this house was demolished and the Hales moved to the top of the hill, built a new house known as Hales Place, and planted the avenue of trees which still lines Manwood Avenue. Although they were a Catholic family in 1730 they gave the clock which is still to be seen on the church tower.

In 1848 Revd John White provided the village with a fine Victorian building just below the Old Beverlie for a school. It became a Board school in 1870. The building is now a private house and the school is in more modern buildings on Hales Drive.

The Hales family stayed in Hales Place until 1880 when the house was enlarged to become a seminary, St Mary's College, for the training of French Jesuits, then exiled from their homeland by an anti-clerical government. Amongst their students was Teilhard de Chardin, who became a famous paleontologist and theologian, integrating evolutionary insights into Christian thinking. Although his work was condemned by the Vatican during his life, recent Popes have quoted him with approval.

Hackington becomes part of Canterbury

When it became possible for the Jesuits to return to France in 1928 the house was sold to a developer and demolished. All that remains is the small Belvedere Chapel, (converted from a dove cote) on the corner of Tenterden Drive which contains the graves of some members of the Hales family. The large detached houses which now dominate the Terrace and surrounding roads were built on the site and in the grounds. Around the same time development gradually transformed St Stephen's from a separate village into a suburb of Canterbury, a process which was completed after the Second World War when the Hales Place estate and the University of Kent was built.

St Stephen's is now very much part of the city of Canterbury but the church, the almshouses and old Beverlie pub together with Glebe House (formerly the Rectory) Glebe Cottage and other 18th and 19th century houses clustered around St Stephen's Green with its Millennium Cross still makes it feel somewhat like a country village.

Further information

If you want to know more you may find these sites useful:

St Stephen's Residents Association

<http://www.ststephensra.org/history.html>

Historic Canterbury: Hales Place and the Hales family

<http://www.machadoink.com/Hales%20Place.htm>

British History Online: St Stephen's alias Hackington.

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol9/pp42-55>