



St Mildred's Church, Tenterden

I wonder how many of you have considered, when looking up at the fine "wagon" ceiling of the church, exactly what is above it. Or, whether any of you know that you can go "downstairs" at one point in the building. Do you know who built our splendid church tower? I thought comments about less familiar aspects of the building might interest readers.

Although a Rector of St Mildred's is first recorded in 1180 (roughly the date of the oldest visible masonry, though older work may well be buried within walls), it is virtually certain that a church existed in Tenterden for a long time before. The White Book of St Augustine's Abbey (probably compiled c.1080-1100) records a church already in Tenterden. That our current building is at the very summit of the hill (look and see if you don't believe me) reinforces the thought that the current site is likely to be the original one. St Mildred died in 725AD. She was the daughter of Ermenburga, a princess of the Kentish royal house, and a descendant of Ethelbert I and Bertha. Mildred's father was Merwald, king of a tribe from near Hereford. This is not the place for an examination of the history of the Kentish kingdom, but it suffices to say that the use of this "den" by the men of Thanet, the fact that Mildred became Abbess in Thanet, and that she was the most prominent Kentish saint of the Jutish period, makes it likely that the dedication of the church is pre-Conquest, perhaps considerably so. It is also unlikely that a church would have been dedicated to St Mildred after the early 11th century when Minster-in-Thamet Abbey became subsidiary to St Augustine's, Canterbury. The origins of St Mildred's, Tenterden lie in the Jutish/Saxon period.

Switching my theme completely, many of you will be familiar with the Whitfield Tomb in St. Mildred's, the elaborate monument north of the Lady Chapel altar, with figures of Herbert and Martha Whitfield, memorial inscriptions and armorial bearings (including the magnificent helmet surmounting the whole). Like me you have probably met Martha's eye as she kneels in prayer. A rather penetrating eye you may find it. She was not indeed a lady to be meddled with, and if you stand where you can see her face, you are standing more or less on the site of one or two of her more stimulating encounters, both verbal and physical! The North chancel door (the small door in the Lady Chapel) was (and is) the "Vicar's door" being close to the Vicarage. The Whitfields had their own pew near this door, and, by some means unknown, Martha acquired a key to the door around 1595-9. The Archdeacon was obliged in 1599 to enquire into complaints that the door was always opening and shutting during services, with noise and draughts. It is recorded that "Touchinge Mrs Whitfilde shee never had a key till w'thin these four years, and then shee p'cured it be a sinister & indirecte meanes". The Archdeacon extracted an undertaking about fit use of the door, and settled an annual gratuity to be paid for its use. More spectacularly, in 1610, Martha was involved in a brawl in the church "to the offence of the congregation", but since 1623, Martha has knelt in prayer on the monument, contemplating with beady eye the scene of her headline-making encounters.

It seems reasonably certain that the man who built the splendid tower of St Mildred's was Thomas Stanley, a Canterbury-trained mason. He certainly built the tower of All Saints, Lydd (also with twin west doors) – a church whose oldest fabric pre-dates the mission of St Augustine! Thomas studied at Canterbury under Thomas Mapilton who built the south west tower of the cathedral. As in many medieval churches, the axes of the nave and chancel of St Mildred's are not in line, but if you stand in the centre line of the splendid tower arch, you will see that the mason sited the tower squarely back on the axis of the chancel at the other end of the building. The significance which such misalignments held for those responsible is far from clear, though possible explanations abound.

Above the spectacular ceiling of St Mildred's, the space below the ridge of the roof is high enough to stand in (I am six feet tall) and you can easily walk the length of the nave, to the "Sanctus bell" in the east wall of the nave gable. You can see that bell from the far side of the High Street. It is by far the oldest bell in our church, dating from about the reign of Richard II, and was positioned so that it could be rung from the chancel arch, signifying to the town the elevation of the bread and wine at Mass. These days it is rung by a long rope running the length of the church to the Ringing Chamber in the tower, and is said to be the longest horizontal bell pull in the world. Also between ceiling and roof can be seen the frames of the dormer windows which

penetrated the ceiling until the 1860s, when the interior of the church was entirely “re-ordered”, the old pews removed, and the galleries which ran along each aisle taken down. It was at that time that the lovely west window was installed, one consequence being the need to move the organ (which was originally in the tower arch). The only possible alternative site for the organ was the south chapel, further necessitating the mutilation of the south chancel wall to make one huge arch instead of the older medieval arches (presumably similar to those on the north of the chancel). Even so, much of the splendour of the church’s fine organ is lost by its position in a remote corner.

One of the old vaults within the building was never used for burials, and is now storage space – so there is a “downstairs” in St Mildred’s! Speaking of burials, it is a myth that Horatia Nelson (daughter of Viscount Nelson and Emma Hamilton) is buried in our churchyard. She died and was buried at Pinner, in Middlesex. She was the wife of Philip Ward, Vicar here 1830-59, and he, together with others of Horatia’s family, lies in the Ward vault beside the path between church and “The Woolpack”. It was after his death while incumbent here that Horatia moved to Pinner.

In a county where small churches abound, St Mildred’s is a striking example of a great town church, dominating its surrounds. The building of our tower (at what must have been enormous expense for the times), the incorporation of Tenterden as a borough, and association with the Cinque Ports as a corporate member of Rye, all occurred within a few years in the 15th century, and are unquestionably an indicator of the prosperity gained from the textile industry, associated wool trade, and shipbuilding. The den of the folk of Thanet is a jewel indeed, and its heart remains, as ever, the church of St Mildred.

Sources I have been wholly reliant for the Whitfield information on the book “Tenterden: The First Thousand Years” by our late President, Hugh Roberts (1995). Readers may wish to explore the story of Horatia Nelson in the 1970 biography by Winifred Gerin (there is a copy in the History Society Library in the Local Studies Room of Tenterden Public Library). For material in “Archaeologia Cantiana” I am indebted to the DVD recently-published by Kent Archaeological Society, containing the entire text of that series since 1857. Most of the rest is available in a variety of Kentish sources, and I think that my personal observations and inferences are clear in the text.

Dr Nick Hudd

TENTERDEN

O Tenterden, O Tenterden,
Home of fair maids and stalwart men;
Where'er we roam o'er land and sea,
Our loving thoughts still turn to thee;
O Tenterden, the beautiful.

When haughty Spain, with lordly pride,
Launched her Armada on the tide,
Then England's need was valiant men,
She turned to ancient Tenterden
For loyal hearts and dutiful.

Long line of mayors from then till now,
Has added lustre to thy brow;
'Tis but to know thee, there to dwell.
Soon all will learn to love thee well,
For Tenterden is beautiful.

By silent pools, lone dark and deep,
Primroses grow and willows weep;
And nightingales in sylvan glade,
Invite the young man and the maid
To Tenterden the beautiful.

Thy avenue of stately trees,
When fanned by summer's gentle breeze,
Beneath their shade the livelong day
Thy children sing and romp and play,
So fair, so free, so beautiful.

Thy far-framed orchards white as snow,
Showers their fair petals all below;
Thy vine-filled gardens, fruits and flowers,
Baffles my poor descriptive powers;
I hail thee, lovely Tenterden.

O, that were granted me by turns
The muse of Wordsworth, Cowper, Burns;
Then worthier tributes would I bring,
But to the hope I fondly cling
That future poets yet will sing
Of Tenterden, the beautiful.

Robert Pearson
Tenterden, March 12th 1910.