

St. Mary's through the Ages

BY ELSIE M. SANDELL

THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE gives the date of A.D. 519 as the founding of the Kingdom of Wessex and it is said that about this time, Cerdic and Cynric, two Saxon kings, made the settlement of Hamwic, later to be known as Hamtun and then Southampton. On the west bank of the Itchen, with its harbour in the sheltered water near the present Chapel Wharf, Hamtun grew and prospered as the years went by.

Then, a great turning point in our country's history came in A.D. 634. That year it is recorded that St. Birinus, desirous of the re-conversion of England to its former Christianity, landed at Southampton on his evangelistic mission. Probably, he began his work in the port of his arrival and we believe that about this time, on the site of the mother-church of Southampton, the first small church of St. Mary was built. St. Birinus passed on his way to Dorchester in Oxfordshire, where he converted to Christianity King Cynegils. In Dorchester St. Birinus set up his 'bishop-stool' which was moved to Winchester in A.D. 686.

Saxon Southampton grew in stature. The church lands were extensive, St. Mary's glebe stretching north of the church approximately to the line of the present Northam Road and Derby Road to the Manor Farm of Northam. The present building of mid sixteenth century date is now known as 'The Old Farm House Inn'. Southwards the lands extended alongside the river Itchen beyond Chapel. Then in the time of their prosperity, the Saxons had to face a strong relentless foe. In A.D. 837 thirty-five of the dreaded Viking longships came sweeping up Southampton Water and the crews landed on the Itchen shore near Chapel. This first attack of the Danes was repulsed by the Saxons under Wulfherd, Alderman of Hampshire. Three years later, in A.D. 840, King Ethelwulf was in our town, probably, in the circumstances, looking to its defences and he dated a charter from 'The Royal town called Hamtun'. After a short interval of peace, the Danes returned, looting and burning our town not once nor twice, 'lighting their war beacons as they went' and passing deep into the heart of Wessex.

After Alfred's victories, quieter days came to Hamtun and it is said that he was here on many occasions looking to the building of his ships. We can well surmise that he entered the church of St. Mary. It is during the ensuing years of comparative peace that the name Suthampton [sic] is found apparently for the first time on a document, in a charter of King Edgar, dated A.D. 962.

A terrible era for church and town was, however, impending towards the close of the tenth century. In the reign of Ethelred the Unready, the allied armies of Sweyn, King of Denmark and Olaf, King of Norway, began their attempts to conquer England. In A.D. 994, their fleets were riding at anchor in Southampton Water and their victorious armies took up winter quarters in and around the town. It is believed that Olaf and his men were on the east of the Itchen and that the name of Woolston derives from 'Olafs-tun'.

Yet even in this winter of bitter darkness there was a glimmer of light. Ethelred the Unready was with his court at Andover with Alphege, Bishop of Winchester. In mid-winter messengers came and went between Andover and Southampton. Then a strange procession left Andover, travelling across the bleak countryside; Alphege the Bishop was on his way to visit King Olaf at Southampton. In the preceding spring when he was in the Scilly Isles, Olaf had been baptised as a Christian. Now he had been persuaded to accompany Alphege to the King's court at Andover. There, Olaf accepted the rite of Confirmation and made a vow never to come again to England as a foe. There can be little doubt that on his return to his camp he worshipped in the Saxon church here. Would that we had documentary evidence of an occasion fraught with such immense possibilities for church and country. We do know,

however, that Olaf kept his vow, sailing away with his army in the spring, never to return. Sweyn, on the other hand, had no such restraining influence. The land was harried again and again by the Danes under his command. At long last, Canute, his son, overcame all opposition and was chosen King by the Witan, which met in Southampton in 1016-17.

It is generally accepted that during his reign and in the years intervening between it and the Norman conquest, the town of Hampton was moved from its Saxon site to the area on the east bank of the Test, now known as the Norman-medieval town 'within the walls'. The Saxon town thus deserted fell into ruin. Within ten years after the Norman conquest the church of St. Michael, dedicated to the patron saint of Normandy, was erected in the new town. Yet the Saxons still clung to their mother-church, though only a small part of it remained.

In Domesday Book, although there is no record of any church or chapel within the borough, there is reference to the ecclesiastical position of Southampton. In the account of the extensive manor of South Stoneham it is noted that the manorial church is 'held by Richerius thd Clerk, with two other churches near Southampton, dependent on it as the mother-church, and Richerius owns in right of his benefice all the tithes of the town of Southampton and also of Kingsland'. Richerius is therefore considered to be the earliest recorded priest of St Mary's and although sometimes it has been thought that the, manorial church might have been at the village of South Stoneham itself, this can hardly be so, as the Rectors of St. Mary's have always possessed the right of presentation to the vicarage there and have their own rectorial seat in the chancel.

Leland the chronicler, writing in 1546, quotes the traditional story of the rebuilding in the twelfth century of the ancient church of St. Mary: 'There is a chapel of St. Nicholas, a poor and small thing, yet standing at the east end of St. Marychurch in the great cemetery, where, constant fame is, the old parish church of Old Hampton stood. One told me there that the littleness of this church was the cause of the erection of the great church of Our Lady there now standing, by this occasion: One Matilda, Queen of England (the wife of King Henry 1), asked what it meant that a great number of people walked about the church of St. Nicholas? and one answered, It is for lack of room in the church. Then she, ex-yoto, promised to make there a new, and this was the original St Marychurch. This Queen Matilda or some other good persons following had thought to have made this a collegiate church but this purpose succeeded not fully. Yet nevertheless, St Marychurch at this day in token of the ancientness of Old Hampton, is mother-church to all the churches in New Hampton. And in testimony of this, the common sepulture of New Hampton: is in the cemetery of St Marychurch. And there be many fair tombs of marble of merchants of New Hampton buried in the church of St. Mary as in their mother and principal church.'

This 'great church of Our Lady Blessed Mary' as it was often termed, served for some four hundred years and was the principal church of Southampton although outside the walled medieval town.

Nevertheless, there were sometimes questions about its status as the principal church. In a document of 1281, we read of the dispute between the Precentor or Rector of St. Mary's and the priests of the churches or dependent chapels in the new town. There were several points of controversy to be discussed, chief amongst them was the question of tithes due to St. Mary's; of the right of interment in that churchyard, of the acknowledgement of various other rights of the mother-church. A conclave was called on the Eve of the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, in the year of Our Lord, 1280. Under Adam de Hales: a representative of the Bishop of Winchester, many witnesses were examined and the final result of the enquiry was that the chaplains of St. Michael, St. Lawrence, St. John, All Saints, Holy Trinity and St Andrew were to take an path of fidelity to St Mary's as their mother church. Moreover, they were to visit in procession on Ascension Day, with banners and crosses, and on the Feast of the Assumption

of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Leodegarius, in procession but without banners and crosses. The vexed question of tithes both within and without the Walls of the town was also decided. The Precentor or Rector of St. Mary's was to remain in peaceful possession of them all except the tithes of 'sucking pigs, within the Walls' which latter tithes were to go to the chaplains. It was also confirmed that the inhabitants of the town were to be buried in the great cemetery of St. Mary.

From this same document also comes the confirmation that St. Mary's was a collegiate church and had a chantry or college attached to it. One of the witnesses at the conclave was 'Simon, the perpetual Vicar of Shirley who had stood in the house of St. Mary for fifteen years'. Then Sir Robert, the guardian of God's House also deposed that he knew of the tithes due to St. Mary for he 'was reared in the house of St. Mary forty years or more and there he had always seen it this way'. Further evidence that St. Mary's was not only the mother-church but also a collegiate church was discovered by the late Bishop Lovett when he was rector. He had noted in church records references to a certain seal. He made enquiries at the British Museum and there found a perfect impression in green wax of this seal on a document of 1258. On the obverse of the seal is depicted the Virgin Mary and Child on a throne with three priests in adoration and an inscription 'The seal of the principal church of St. Mary, Southampton'. On the reverse is a head, no doubt of the Virgin Mary and above it a church with an Early English spire flanked by two pinnacled gables and with the inscription 'the seal of the Warden of the Society of Mary', thus indicating a college or collegiate church.

Through the centuries after the Norman conquest, Southampton flourished, becoming the third port in England which rank it retained for over three hundred years. Though the church was then outside the town and in rural surroundings, the townsfolk did not forget St. Mary's and many always worshipped there. Moreover, they would often pass the great church as they walked from the town down East Street, along the Causeway of Our Lady of Grace (now Chapel Road) eastwards to the Itchen. Set in fields were the chapels of St. Andrew and of Holy Trinity. The latter was actually on the river-side itself and in that chapel was the shrine of Our Lady of Grace. Here the pilgrims would come to worship and to pay their customary dues to the hermit who lived there. In 1510 there is a glimpse of the then young King Henry VIII, swinging along on foot from the town, down the causeway, entering the chapel, making his devotions, and then paying his votive offering of 6s. 8d.

At the Reformation the chapel of Holy Trinity passed into the hands of the Corporation and fell into disuse. Its existence is recalled in the story of the Trinity Fair which until 1875 was held in the fields about the chapel at Trinity-tide. The chapel itself was turned into a mill-house in the seventeenth century but all that remains today after the bombing of the War of 1939-45 is some strong medieval masonry incorporated in the storehouse of a commercial firm on Chapel Wharf (The Southampton, Isle of Wight and South of England Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, Limited. The very small portion of the chapel which remains is in a dangerous condition, and arrangements are being made for its demolition).

Of St. Andrew's chapel, practically nothing is known, but the term 'St. Andrew's Croft' was still used for some land on the south side of Chapel Road until comparatively recent times when it was all built over.

When Leland wrote in 1546, 'the great church of St. Mary' still held its honoured place in Southampton, yet by 1550, it had disappeared. What sombre fate befell it is even today unknown. The church registers which should have told us were destroyed by fire in later years, the ecclesiastical and town records are silent. Only in the Southampton Court Leet records of 1550 do we glean any indication of its fate. There it is recorded that 'so much of the rubbidge [sic] of St. Mary's church be carted away to make the highway from Bargate and all East Street down to the turning to the Chantry'. Some say that it was pulled down because

the tower gave direction to the French raiders who at that time were continually threatening the port, but nothing is certain ... nothing except the fact that St. Mary's disappeared tragically into rubble in the middle of the sixteenth century. Only the damaged chancel remained in witness of its former glory. All that we know of the story of the chancel is through the history of the Chantry House.

There is even here an unsolved mystery surrounding the story of the Chantry, the Chanter's House, or the Chantry House, all of which names it carried at one time or another. It would appear that from early days it was the residence of the Rector or Precentor of St. Mary's. At the time of King Edward VI, the commissioners sent out by him were unable to determine its origin and recorded that the house belonging to the Rector had always been called the Chantry House and that the lands belonging to it which brought in a rent of £13 6s. 8d. were always known as the Chantry Lands.

Under the terms of an Act of 1547, the rectory of St. Mary's had escaped confiscation and a decision of the Court of Augmentations in 1549 confirmed the perpetual advowson of the living in the hands of the Bishop of Winchester. .

At this time Doctor William Capon was the Rector. When he died in 1550 he left one hundred pounds to found a Grammar School. This is now King Edward VI School, Southampton, for the foundation of which that King granted Letters Patent and a Royal Charter. (This Royal Charter with its seal is in an excellent state of preservation, and is now in an honoured place in the library of King Edward VI School. Application to inspect it may be made to the Head Master at the school.) It is thought probable that there was a college still attached to St. Mary's and that the Rector wished after the destruction of the church and some, at least, of its property, that the boys of the town should continue to have some educational advantages.

Indeed, the time of the Reformation saw the church of St. Mary in a parlous state. In 1551, the church, chantry, glebe lands and tithes were all leased out to a merchant, Robert Reniger, at one time Sheriff of Southampton. One condition of the lease, which later passed to the Lambert family, was that the Rector of St. Mary's should receive eighteen pounds a year from the income of the lands.

From time to time the Lambert family paid towards the repair of the chancel, where services were still held. However, after the Civil War, during which all the tithes and properties of St. Mary's had been sequestrated and handed over to the Corporation, it is recorded that the 'chapel' or church of St. Mary's was 'much in decay'. The town authorised the under-tenant at that time, a certain Mr. Barber, to get the 'chapel' - no doubt the little church - repaired, and he would be reimbursed from the rent he paid for the lands 'provided always he does not disburse above forty [sic] shillings'. It is not surprising that the little church continued to be in a sad state. After the Restoration the leases were returned to the church of St. Mary, and by 1662, Doctor Clutterbuck, the Rector, was in possession of the church and its lands.

As to the Chantry House itself, by 1550 the original one was in a state of decay and soon after the destruction of the church a new house was built. In due course, it became the residence of the Lambert family and their successors. There is an interesting note in Duthie's 'Sketches of Hampshire' (1839). He refers to a diary written 'by a traveller in 1635, being a lieutenant of the military company of Norwich'. In this there is a short description of Southampton and a reference to 'a chapel outside the walls, formerly the chief church' . . . 'A fair house is built thereunto with the ruins of that fair church, wherein the inhabitants cannot rest quiet a' nights, so the report goes. . . the razing down of churches to rear up mansions with that stuff, they say, is not right. Hereupon I heard many pretty, old tales, which I have neither time nor list to insert.'

We can but regret his omission, otherwise we might know more of the solution of the mystery of both church and chantry. That 'fair house' was unfortunately burnt down in 1706 and, no

doubt, with it perished many of the records we should so gladly have perused.

The Chanfry House was rebuilt and Sir Henry Englefield, in his 'Walk through Southampton' (1805 edition) describes it thus: 'The very large Parsonage House has the air of a melancholy manor house of the era of King William, with long sash windows and narrow piers.' Then, in a footnote, he adds: 'In Feb. 1802, this Parsonage House was entirely destroyed by fire and a smaller edifice of very neat architecture supplies its place'.

This house, one is happy to say, survived the general destruction of the area in the War of 1939-45 and makes a wonderful centre for the ecclesiastical activities of parish and town. It gained the name of The Deanery from the fact that Dean Ogle, who was already Dean of Winchester, held St. Mary's in plurality from 1776 until 1797 and called his rectory here The Deanery, and so the old name of The Rectory or the Chantry House fell into disuse. It is, however, preserved in the modern Chantry Hall which was opened in 1925 on the site of the first Chantry House, in the present Deanery grounds. When digging the foundations of the Hall, many remains of the old building were discovered, including large blocks of masonry and many fragments of pottery and glass.

Chantry Hall, which serves as a meeting place for the many parish organisations, is a pleasing structure in Tudor style, designed by Herbert Bryant, F.R.I.B.A. The tree-shaded courtyard entrance to the whole range of the buildings brings a sense of restful beauty.

In spite of its sad state, St. Mary's still held precedence as the principal church of Southampton. In 1620, when it was decided to build a chapel-of-ease at Pear Tree Green on the east bank of the Itchen, the status of St. Mary's was made very clear. It was said that the people of 'St. Mary's over the water' as that part of the parish was often called, sometimes were prevented from attending their mother-church in Southampton, by reason of the danger of crossing the estuary of the Itchen when the weather was stormy. 'Therefore,' to quote from the preamble to the consecration service, 'unhappy negligence and contempt for divine service have conquered the minds of the profane multitude, and even excellent and virtuous men have been delayed in crossing and this has been impossible to avoid without mortal peril ... the zealous Richard Smith Esquire who was inspired by Heaven and endued with a mind almost Heroic ... wiped out this disgrace to religion by expending five hundred pounds or more of his own money and on the other side of the river he erected a noble chapel which he vowed to dedicate to God and His divine service.'

This chapel, named Jesus Chapel, was consecrated On September 17th, 1620, by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, the Bishop of Winchester. It is of interest to note that this was the first church to be built in England after the Reformation. The form of service and the prayers then used still constitute the basis of services at the consecration of churches and burial grounds. One of the chaplains attending the Bishop was Christopher Wren, the father of the famous architect of St. Paul's Cathedral. At this service it was expressly stipulated that all the dues for solemn rites there celebrated must be handed on to the mother-church of St. Mary. Captain Richard Smith, his heirs and neighbours must also go to the Holy Communion at St. Mary's on the first Sunday of each season 'when the estuary is passable'. No one from the west side of the Itchen, however, was to go to service at Jesus Chapel. The 'noble chapel' has since been enlarged and is now known locally as Pear Tree Church. It stands on the highest part of Pear Tree Green, and commands a wonderful view of Southampton and its waterways.

All this time St. Mary's itself remained in a somewhat dilapidated state though partial repairs were occasionally carried out. Rectors were appointed, many of them non-resident, and for a time the rectory of St. Mary's was held with the vicarage of South Stoneham church (St. Mary's, South Stoneham). Doctor Clutterbuck, Rector between 1662-1700 made considerable efforts to have the chancel properly repaired but met with little success. To Archdeacon Brideoake, his successor, fell the privilege of building a new church by adding a nave to the

old chancel, in 1711, at a cost of £920. In 1723, the chancel was rebuilt for the sum of £400. It must be remembered that St. Mary's was still in the 'suburbs' of the walled town of Southampton and even in 1779 only had fifty-seven rateable houses in its parish. Times were changing, however. Southampton itself from 1750 onwards was becoming a fashionable spa and watering place. By the end of the eighteenth century the town was spreading beyond the Walls and St. Mary's benefited in some measure. Francis North, Earl of Guildford, became Rector in 1797 and during his incumbency the church was much enlarged. Aisles were thrown out and galleries erected. In 1833 this church was opened and reconsecrated by Bishop Sumner and it served its generation well.

The commencement of the Docks at Southampton in 1838 caused an influx of people and St. Mary's parish being near the work in hand was brought closely into contact with it all. People sought houses near their work and soon, buildings began to rise on the fields in the parish and to cluster round their church even as they had done in far-off Saxon times. Orchard Lane, Cramp Lane (Marsh Lane), Nightingale Lane (Threefield Lane), Love Lane (St. Mary's Street and Road), Kingsland - all were soon built-up areas but most of them retained their rural names.

The St. Mary's of 1833 took its full share in this recrudescence of life in the parish but by 1871 it became apparent that the alterations had caused weakness to the fabric and it was decided that complete rebuilding was necessary. Bishop Wilberforce, whose son was then Rector, strongly desired that this work should be done. His sudden death in 1873 only strengthened the determination to rebuild and the new church became 'a distinct memorial to the Bishop'.

In 1878, on August 12th, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales (afterwards King Edward VII), the Princess of Wales and their sons Prince Albert and Prince George, were present at an all-important ceremony, the laying of the dedication stone. The Royal Party was received by the Bishop of Winchester, the Archdeacon of Winchester, the Rector (the Rev. Basil Wilberforce) and the churchwardens. They were conducted to a dais erected on the site of the future north chancel aisle and during the special service, the Prince of Wales laid the memorial stone, saying, 'In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, I place this dedication stone in memory of Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Winchester'. After the ceremony, their Royal Highnesses visited the Deanery and embarked again for Osborne in the Isle of Wight at six o'clock in the evening. On June 21st, 1879, the consecration ceremony was performed by the Bishop of Winchester. The sermon was preached by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the sermon at evensong by the Archbishop of York. It is believed that this is the only occasion in the history of the Church of England when both Archbishops have preached in the same church on the same day.

The church, with the exception of the tower and spire, was completed in 1884. When Canon Lovett became Rector in 1912, a movement was already on foot to complete these as a memorial to the devoted work of Canon Durst, the retiring Rector. With this all in view, Canon Lovett worked unceasingly and on January 5th, 1914, he personally placed the cross on top of the spire. The bells, a fine octave, were given by Mary Wingrove in memory of her husband and were first rung in 1914. Two more bells were added in 1934 through the kindness of the Baron Bell Trust. The bells of St. Mary's are world famous, certainly throughout the English-speaking world. They inspired the song, 'The Bells of Saint Mary's' written by Douglas Furber and the Australian composer A. Emmett Adams, during the Great War of 1914-18, when they heard them sounding across the water of the Docks. This song is now the college song of the New York State Maritime College.

And so, through the years, the fifth church of St. Mary was fully rebuilt in Early English style with its stately beauty. It was a much loved spiritual home serving parish and town in full measure not only through its clergy but also through its group of selfless workers in Sunday

Schools, Mission Halls and in the homes of the parishioners.

Then, during the War of 1939-45, came the greatest disaster of all in the long story of St. Mary's church. In the summer of 1940 the bombing of the town began and one of the first victims was the daughter church of St. Barnabas which was destroyed by the direct hit of a high explosive bomb in August. Further raids followed, culminating in the terrible Sunday night of November 30th - December 1st, 1940, when the old town was almost completely obliterated by high explosive and incendiary bombs. That night, nine churches and chapels were laid in ruins. St. Mary's was set on fire by incendiary bombs. The church plate and the registers were saved through the efforts of the then Rector, Canon R. B. Jolly and his helpers. They fought the flames all night but when morning broke the grey light was reddened by the fires of the still-burning town. St. Mary's was a burnt-out shell, the damaged tower and baptistry alone remaining. A great part of the parish too had been bombed to the ground. When the days of peace returned, the aim of the reconstruction of the church was continually held in mind. Amidst the confusion and the problems of rebuilding the whole town, the then Rector, Canon Spencer Leeson, and the Church Council decided to restore the tower and to re-hang the bells, thus giving encouragement and visible witness of the decision to rebuild the church.

During the night of terror and flame and bomb of November, 1940, the bells of St. Mary's, sounding their own knell, had crashed to the ground in the ruins of the church. They were eventually salvaged, one was damaged beyond repair, but the nine others, although split, cracked and twisted, were placed underground at Loughborough, at the famous bell foundry of John Taylor & Co., there awaiting the distant day when they could again swing proudly aloft over a new St. Mary's. Months passed into years and then in the spring of 1948, the ten bells of St. Mary's came home again, re-cast from their former broken selves. On June 20th, 1948, a Sunday afternoon ever to be remembered, a vast concourse of people streamed towards the ruins of the church where the tower and spire had been restored and the bells were aloft once more. The Mayor and Corporation entered, and walked slowly up the nave, followed by choir and clergy. The service of re-dedication of the bells commenced, and the great congregation sang, as perhaps only Southampton people can sing, their own hymn, 'O God, our Help in Ages Past'. The red robes of the two bishops made a vivid touch of colour in front of the ruined altar with its broken reredos and the ferns growing through cracks in the stone floor of the chancel. Canon Spencer Leeson, who had done so much to help with the restoration of the tower and bells, welcomed the congregation. Bishop Lovett, the Bishop of Salisbury, who was Rector when the first eight bells were rung in 1914, came forward and in his still-resonant voice read the prayers. Then Bishop Lang, the Assistant Bishop of Winchester, gave a moving address about the bells and the meaning of their restoration in the life of the town, ending with the prayer for 'all who should be called by the sound of the bells and that they who go down to the sea in ships or returning homewards from the deep, may hear the sound of these bells and acknowledge Thy presence. In the faith of Jesus Christ; we dedicate these bells anew to the glory of God'. After the closing words of the blessing, he raised his hand towards the tower, Suddenly, over the hushed expectant congregation gathered there, the bells of St. Mary's once again rang out in wonderful cadence, sending forth their message of hope.

Again the years passed by, though not unfruitfully. Plans were continued for the rebuilding of the whole church. Many were the difficulties to be overcome, but at long last, during the rectorship of the Rev. George Hales, the work was actually begun in 1954. It has been energetically continued by the present Rector, the Rev. H. C. N. Williams. It was a revelation to enter the new church in the autumn of 1955 through a forest of scaffolding to watch the skill of the craftsmen working on the stone of the windows, others hauling up the rafters for the roof over the chancel, one and all working with a will and a purpose. The church is in Early

English style, even as its predecessor, and it has been a source of true happiness to both parish and town to watch St. Mary's rising again in all its beauty. The burnt, fire-blackened rubble, the weeds, the broken timbers, have all become things of the past. The unceasing prayers and the labours of clergy and people have, under God, built up again that which was thrown down, and brought again the beauty of holiness from the ashes and ruin of war. The sixth church of St. Mary has indeed come to life.

The fabric may change, yet the spiritual church remains, and the ancient site is fraught with the prayers of a host of innumerable worshippers throughout some thirteen hundred years. St. Mary's is indeed a church of devotion, of faith, of tragedy and triumph. As the bells ring out over church, town and port, their sound proclaims in one great pæan of praise and thanksgiving:

'We are risen again,
Gloria in Excelsis!'