

At War with Saltwood

We have actual documented evidence that in the 13th Century St Leonard's Church had '*a certain Cross with holy Relics enclosed in it*'. Traditionally it has been supposed the relics related to St Leonard himself. I have discovered no actual evidence for this: if it were so I suppose it is possible they were there from the first, from the time around 1080 very soon after the Conquest, when a Norman Church replaced the Saxon, so the new Church could have been named for this 6th Century Norman Saint because a bit of him was on offer. A relic was a valuable possession, for it encouraged both the congregation in general and also passing pilgrims (of whom there were many at that time en route from the mainland via Hythe Harbour to St Thomas Becket's shrine) to give generously, for everyone knew of course that every prayer said in the very presence of a Saint, every candle lit, would ascend to God more speedily and receive quicker and surer attention.

The relics (a bone, a hank of hair?) were a legacy, and left to Hythe on condition (stated we are told in the donor's Will) that the income it generated '*should in no wise come into the hands of the Rector...but instead should be disposed of by the men of the Village as they thought fit*'. By this was meant the Rector of Saltwood (for Hythe's Church at that time was a daughter church to Saltwood) and the Village meant Hythe. Given his position of authority, the aforesaid Rector was distinctly unhappy with this financial arrangement, and in 1252, he complained to the Pope that the citizens of Hythe were doing exactly what the Will said: spending the cash '*according to their wishes and as lavishly as possible*'. Hythe's imposing Church was visible to the arriving pilgrims from the Harbour, and the first English Church they passed, so had become the natural place for them to pause to thank God for their safe crossing of the Channel, *and to drop a groat or two into the collection box*. The Relic was a bonus, and the Rector's Church of St Peter and St Paul tucked away over the hill was left at a disadvantage. Not surprisingly he wanted to exercise his right of control, and claim a share.

It must have been particularly galling to him to see the recently completed Chancel extension, a direct imitation of the Cathedral's in its design, magnificence, and the quality of its carvings and fittings, and the 'fair vault' below, possibly already furnished with chancel and inviting further donations. It was the last straw: it was all too obvious that the 'men of the Village' were spending the easy income to raise the status of St Leonard's as a shrine in its own right, even as Becket's Tomb in Canterbury Cathedral had been glorified in the years since his murder in 1170. One wonders why Robert Anketil, a mere village Rector barely two years in post (but quite long enough for the grievance to fester), chose to write direct to the Pope and not to his Archbishop (his neighbour actually, for Saltwood Castle was a residence used by the Archbishop). Perhaps he felt the latter's predecessor had taken too close an interest in St Leonard's and had facilitated the works? Whatever the background and local politics, the Pope ordered the Archbishop to investigate the Rector's complaint.

Sadly the outcome of the dispute is not known. It would not have been beyond a Pope's powers to overturn a long-standing Will but perhaps that was not necessary. Respect for authority may have caused the spenders in Hythe to give way to the mother-church in Saltwood; the relic would not have been moved from its own church, but an arrangement to share the income could have been made. Is it significant that Saltwood Church's Tower and North Nave were suddenly added around this time? Moreover, very curiously, in 1400 Pope Boniface granted an Indulgence to pilgrims who gave alms to Saltwood Church and Hythe Chapel: does this suggest they were running one account? And if, through sharing, Hythe's income were reduced, does this explain why work stopped suddenly when the chancel ceiling, the clerestory and the North triforium were yet unfinished? The completion of St Leonard's to its present glory had to wait another six hundred years.

