

ST MARGARET'S CHURCH



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The parish church of St. Margaret stands at the centre of the Roman walled city Durovernum Cantiacorum. Recent excavations in advance of the construction of the Marlowe Arcade by the Canterbury Archaeological Trust revealed part of a large Roman public bath building which extended northwards under St Margaret's Street. Current excavations inside the church have uncovered two principal rooms of this building, one with an opus signinum floor and evidence for a tessellated pavement, the other with a remarkable stone paved floor. A Roman street west of the bath building has also been located.

By the mid Anglo-Saxon period a major new route from Worthgate to the Cathedral was established, the central part of which, later called St Maroaret's Street, was very wide and probably the site of a street market. It is possible that St Margaret's originated as a new church in the centre of the market, but the Anglo-Saxon levels inside the church have still to be studied. The ruins of the large Roman theatre at the south-west end of the street, visible until the eleventh century, were possibly used as a meeting place (folk moot?) during the mid Saxon period.

By the early Norman period there were twenty-two churches in Canterbury, including St Margaret's. Their surrounding areas were probably defined as parishes in the early twelfth century. St Margaret's church had been appropriated by St Augustine's Abbey, possibly before the Norman Conquest, but certainly by the mid-twelfth century. The first documentary reference to the church is in a Christ Church rental of 1153–67, in which land held by William, Priest of Bourne, is described as being 'opposite St Margaret's Church on a corner near the garden of Benedict the Priest'. Benedict may have been the nominee of St Augustine's who was vicar of St Margaret's. It is also possible that he was the man buried in St Pancras' Church, where an excavation in 1901 uncovered a lead plate and a lead cross, inscribed respectively:

+ HIC IACET BENEDICT SACERDOS SCE MARGARETE and + BENEDICTUS SACERDOS

The church was probably rebuilt during the mid-twelfth century, with the addition of north and south aisles and possibly a south-west tower. This church may have been gutted by fire and extensively repaired in the late twelfth century. A fine but restored Romanesque doorway survives at the west end of the nave, which was called the 'Procession Door' in the fifteenth century. J Brent, in 1879, recorded that the tympanum of the west door was originally filled with sculptures 'alternating human heads, three on each side'.

By the thirteenth century much land in the parish belonged to the Cathedral priory whose rentals give the names of many inhabitants. For example, a rental of c1206 tells us that Agatha de Sarnais lived in a 'stone house opposite the door of St Margaret's Church', an indication that by 1206 there was a south, as well as a west, door. Thorne's Chronicle tells us that in 1271 St Augustine's Abbey alienated the patronage of St Margaret's to the Hospital of St Mary for Poor Priests which was founded c1220, in the north-western Dart of the parish. It was stipulated that the syndic (master), or priest, of the hospital should not be allowed:

'to buy any lands, rents or tenements in the said Parish of St Margaret from any of our tenants, or on any pretext to appropriate them without special licence of the Abbot and Convent. Moreover, the syndic of the said Hospital, who shall be so for the time, in recognition of our aforesaid right, shall take an oath of loyalty to us in the chapter when required to do so. Moreover, the bells shall be rung in the same church to greet the lord Abbot when it happen that he pass through that church'.

In the later medieval period, perhaps in the late fourteenth century when the Poor Priests' Hospital was rebuilt, the church was extensively altered in the Perpendicular style. The west wall of the original building was retained and the north and south walls rebuilt further out. Despite restoration in 1850, typical late medieval details survive in the arcades, which were reconstructed at this time. The aisles originally had sloping roofs and a blocked doorway survives in the first stage of the tower

which leads onto the roof of the south aisle. Richard Nash, in his will of 1472, made provision for 40 shillings for 'the work of leading in the aisle called St. Johns' aisle'. Only four bays of the fifteenth century crown post nave roof survive, this originally extended beyond the existing chancel arch. Most windows have been heavily restored but perhaps based on Perpendicular originals. There were chanels at the east end of each aisle: the altar of Our Lady in the north, and St. John the Baptist in the south. A fine, but mutilated, early fourteenth century Piscina with an unusual carved face in the bowl, survives in the south wall of the Chapel of Our Lady.

We can learn some details about the interior fabric of the church prior to the Reformation from the large number of fifteenth and sixteenth century wills which have survived. There was a rood loft and Holy Cross as well as lights and images to the Trinity, St Anne, St Anthony, St Christopher, St Erasmus, St George, St James, St Katharine, St Lawrence, St Nicholas and the patron Saint Margaret. Repairs to the 'Chapel of St Mary on the north side' were recorded in 1471, a new silver cross and new vestments for the priest in 1502. A Jesus Mass was said and a Brotherhood of St Mary met in the north aisle. Pews had been installed by 1505 when William Gotley asked to be buried 'in the Chapel of Our Lady afore my pew that I sit therein'. The Aas family also had a pew and were buried in the south aisle. There is also a brass inscribed:

Here lies Jonn Wynter, twice Mayor, who died on 10th November 1470

He bequeathed to the church the rent from two tenements at 'Yren Cross', i.e. Iron or Tierne Cross in the south-west of the parish, to pay for a lamp to burn continuously before the High Altar. He also gave money to acquit the Parish from paying to the Prior and Convent of Christ Church, Canterbury, the yearly rent of 3 shillings for the churchyard. The position of the churchyard, west of the 'Procession Door', is first mentioned in 1477, when Richard Virle was buried there.

Although the exterior of the tower was rebuilt after bomb damage in 1942, late medieval or sixteenth century timber floors and part of a bell-frame survive in the upper 2½ storeys, the rere-arches of the windows and the internal plastering may also date from this period. The three bells are no longer in place, but it is known that the first was dated 1599, the others were made by Joseph Hatch in 1625. In 1599 the parishioners had 'presented' that:

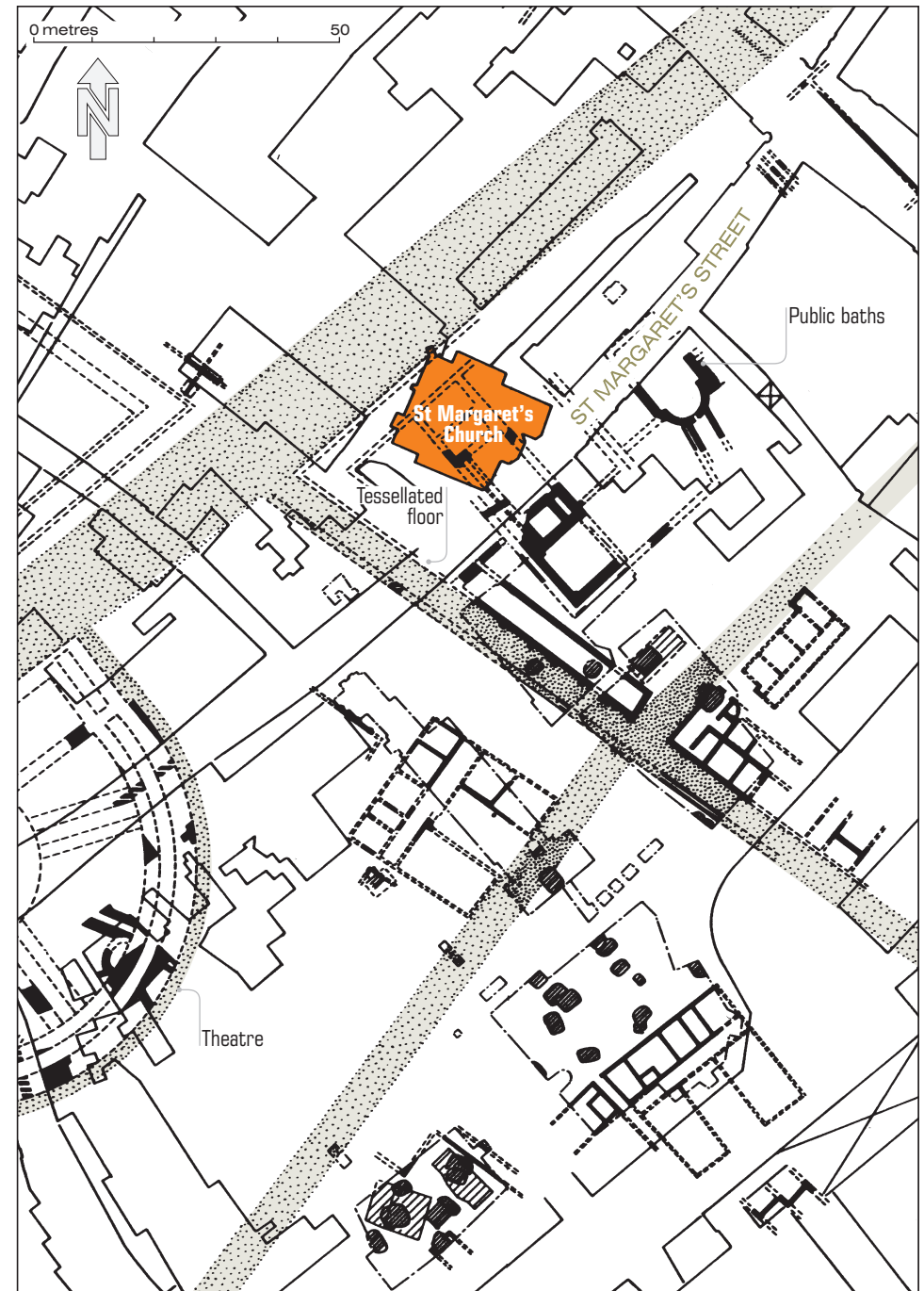
'our bells are broken and cannot conveniently be rung, also our bells do want ropes. The Belfrie lofts are at reparacions, and also there wanteth a ladder to goe into the rooms where the bells do hange as heretofore there hath been'.

Originally the bells rung from the ground floor below the tower, with access to the upper floors by internal ladders. In 1850 a brick stair turret was added on the west, with an external door for ringers. The upper levels and the tower roof are still accessible by internal ladders.

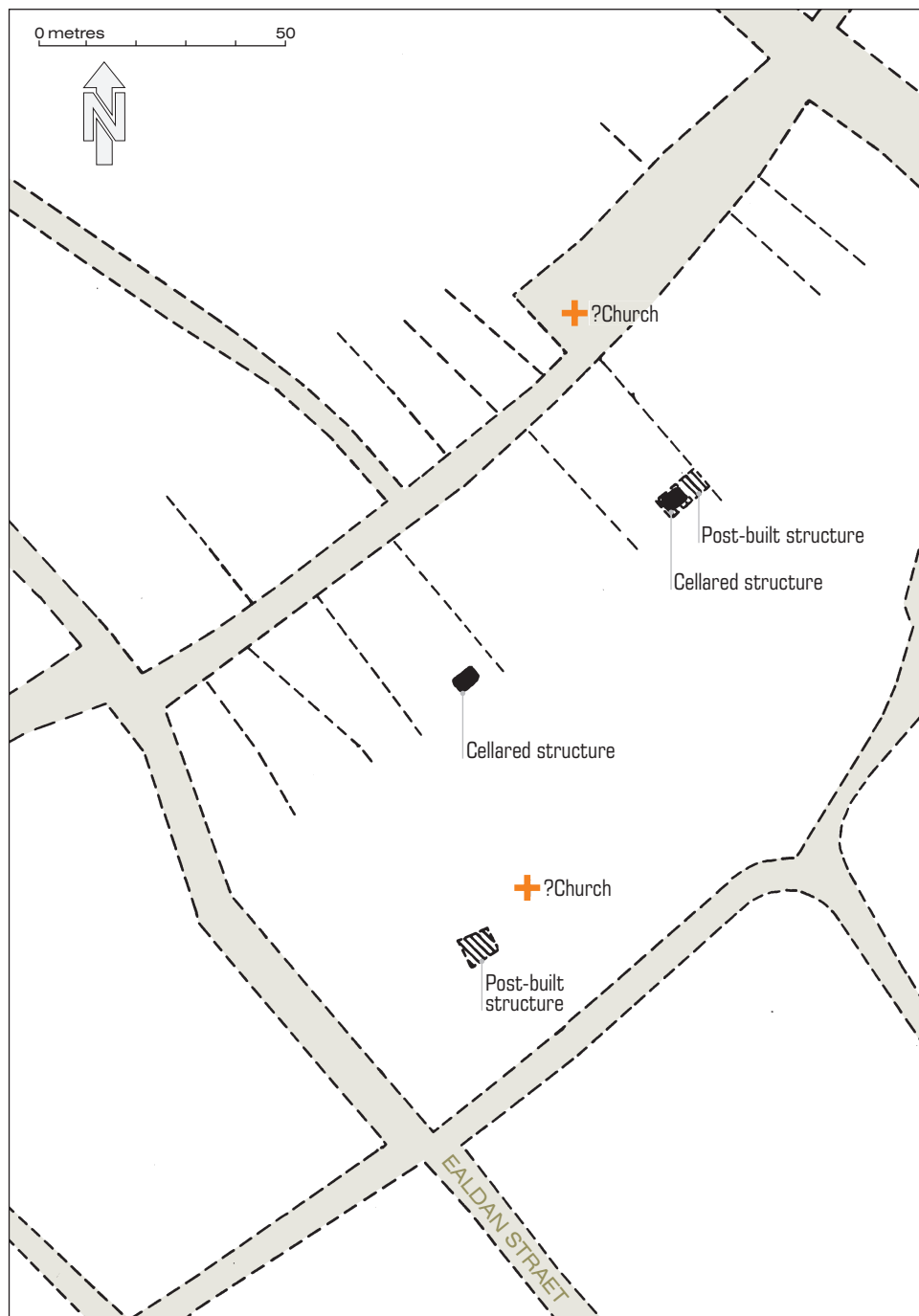
The Reformation must have brought many changes to the church, including the removal of shrines, images and the rood loft, although most are not recorded. The 1519 Commissioners' Survey of chantries etc. in Canterbury recorded the 'lamp landes' of John Wynter and 'obite lances' of the Ase (Aas) family (see above) which soon passed to the 'Court of Augmentations' and were forfeit to the Crown because 'given to superstitious uses', i.e. the upkeep of an altar light. In 1560 the altar of Our Lady in the north aisle was replaced by the 'Tribunal Seat', used by the official presiding over the Prerogative Court of the Archbishop for the Archdeaconry of Canterbury. Here cases of 'fornication, defamation and other ecclesiastical matters' were tried, such as that in 1591 of James Bennet, parishioner, who was presented:

'for that he is an unquiet man and exceeding scandalous to his neighbours by an outrageous manner of convitious and railing speeche which he ordinarilie useth against our minister. As also for open brawlings in the open street in most impatient and unseemlie manner uppon St. Jeames day last, beinge the Sabbath daie, to the great offense of others that heard it. And for the matter last specified we espeticially present his wife'.

Visitations were also held here: the Archbishop's quadrennial visitation of the clergy in the eastern part of the diocese



St Margaret's Street area in the Roman period.



St Margaret's Street area in the Late Saxon period.

and the Archdeacon's annual visitations to the clergy and churchwardens. After the suppression of the Poor Priests' Hospital in 1575 the patronage of the church passed to the Archdeacon of Canterbury.

Some fine mural monuments survive from the early seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, though many were moved from their original positions during the restoration in 1850. Those commemorated include:

Francis Aldrich: Fellow (1599) then Master (1608) of Sidney Sussex College, died 1609.

(On the north wall of the north aisle).

Alderman John Watson: Mayor 1615, died 1633. (On the south wall of the south aisle).

On the same monument is:

Leonard Cotton: Sheriff 1563, Mayor 1579, responsible for refounding the twelfth century Hospital of Mayner the Rich before his death in 1605.

Joseph Colfe: Mayor 1611, died 1620.

Sir George Newman: Commissary to Archbishops Whitgift, Bancroft and Abbot from 1598, M.P. for Dover 1603, Freeman of the City 1608, for thirty years Judge of Admiralty of the Cinque Ports, knighted 1617, died 1627. (On the window ledge at the east end of the south aisle).

William Somner: Born 1606, famous Canterbury historian and compiler of the first Anglo-Saxon dictionary, lived in Castle Street, died 1669. (On the east end of the north wall of the north aisle).

George Barrett: Died 1709. (In the south aisle).

Paul Lukin: Notary & Proctor to the ecclesiastical courts of the Archbishop and Archdeacon, Auditor to the Dean & Chapter of Canterbury, died 1716.

Anthony Oughton: Mayor 1702 & 1730, Sheriff, Chamberlain and Alderman, died 1750.

Leger Stones in the floor record the burials of members of several Canterbury families, such as the Lovelaces, Lukins, Barretts, Primroses, Oughtons, Carters and Halfords.

In the late eighteenth century efforts were made to open the city to new traffic and in 1771 a faculty was obtained to pull down the east end of the church to widen the street and improve access to the Fountain Inn. In 1780 a gallery was built in the south aisle to increase seating in the shortened church. The graveyard was probably extended in 1824 and an organ installed in the church in 1829.

In 1850, when Mr Woodall was Rector, Sir G G Scott undertook a great rebuilding of the church: the 'deformed' east end was 'masked', the aisle walls were heightened and given pitched roofs with gabled ends, the external spiral stair was added to the tower and the exterior was refaced with new, uncoursed, knapped flints, giving the church a wholly Victorian look. A vestry was added, which was extended early in the twentieth century. Inside, new pews and chancel fittings were inserted and many monuments etc. were re-arranged. The chancel windows have since had new glass.

In 1942 the church and surrounding area was extensively bomb-damaged and after the war the parochial use of the church ceased. In 1958 it was reopened as the church and Institute for the Deaf and Dumb of Canterbury and East Kent. The Institute moved in 1983, when the church was closed.

The present excavation represents the first stage of the setting up of a new and exciting Pilgrim Centre for Canterbury. The Canterbury Archaeological Trust, in conjunction with Heritage Projects Ltd, who are best known for the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, are currently formulating plans for the establishment of a walk through 'time tunnel' in the church which will take the visitor on a medieval pilgrimage from London to Canterbury in the early fifteenth century. The Canterbury Pilgrim Centre, due to open in Easter 1988, will not only attract thousands of tourists to the area but should also help to finance much of the Trust's future archaeological work in the City.

