



St. Margaret's Church

I P S W I C H

Holy Trinity Priory, Ipswich – the founder Priory of St Margaret's church.

Holy Trinity Priory stood on what is now the site of Christchurch Mansion. The building of St Margaret's church in the very early C14th was the result of the work of the Austin canons of Holy Trinity Priory whose aim was to serve the community in which they lived.

Their communal way of life derived from groups of clerics brought together by the earliest bishops. In fact it pre-dates the most famous bishop said to have done this, St Augustine of Hippo in North Africa. Later canons liked to think of him as their founding father: hence the name Augustinian or Austin canons. He himself copied what he had seen in Milan and turned his episcopal palace in Hippo into a community of men who renounced personal property and sex, shared everything, maintained a daily ritual of services and ministered to the souls and bodies of the surrounding population. Their successors, the Austin canons continued this tradition: they preached, taught, and cared for pilgrims and the sick e.g. at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London which was founded in 1123. This way of life in the community was later clearly differentiated from the enclosed life of monks by Gregory VII in the Lateran Synod of 1059.

One of the first houses of Austin Canons in England was established in Colchester between 093-1100. In 1118 Pope Paschal II sent it a Papal Bull, which makes clear what was expected of the canons. They had, he said, always been devoted to preaching, hearing confessions and baptising, ready to accept the care of such parishes and public chapels as might be entrusted to their charge. Houses of Austin Canons (known as the Black Canons) spread quickly in England in the C12th, and many were particularly founded in the eastern counties. They were a popular Order for their obvious work and connection with their communities and, for pious benefactors, were much cheaper to endow.

Although the Domesday Book shows a church dedicated to the Holy Trinity already existed in 1085, Normanius Gastrode, son of Egnostri built a priory on the site. He was the chief benefactor and a canon. By the beginning of the C13th Holy Trinity Priory owned the churches of St Mary-le-Tower, St Mary at the Elms, St Michael and St Saviour and many more in the area. The destruction of the Priory by fire necessitated a rebuilding in 1194. At the time there were seven canons but this grew to twenty as endowments increased. It seems to have been popular for, in 1392, Roger de Wolferston and others gave the Priory land and meadow in Ipswich and Rushmere in return for burning five tapers daily at the Lady mass in the conventual church, and one lamp to burn continually day and night in the Lady chapel.

When the value of the Priory was assessed in 1535 before its dissolution, its total net income was assessed at £82 6s. 9d (about £68,000 today).

Not all went smoothly as, in 1393, John Bendel of the Priory was given a royal pardon for causing the death of Godfrey Neketon, a cook. Inspections by Bishops were carried out from time to time with gaps of ten or more years. The numbers of canons dropped from the height of twenty to single figures by the C16th. The later inspections record uncouth behaviour by the servants of the Priory and a general slip in standards. The final visitation was in June 1532, when five canons were examined besides Prior Whighte. The report said that the food and cooking were bad, the cook dirty, and no annual account rendered. The bishop issued injunctions to remedy to each of these complaints. It was too late. Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister had organised the inspection of all religious houses gathering in as much evidence as possible of malpractice. Thus Henry was able to justify their suppression by Acts of Parliament (1536-41) and took control of their lands estimated to be a quarter of England. His great land grab is known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries

Holy Trinity was condemned to close with the other smaller religious houses in England in 1536 although the actual closure took place on the 9th February 1536/7. The last Prior was given a pension of £15. The Priory and its lands were granted to Sir Humphrey Wingfield and Sir Thomas Rushe.

At its closure, as with all the others, the commissioners made a careful list of everything it owned. Thus we know that the main church had been handsomely endowed by its parishioners.

The plate included two cruets, a censer with ship, three chalices and a cross, all of silver-gilt or parcel-gilt; the cross was valued at £5. In the quire were; a great and a lesser pair of standards of latten*, 'a deske of latten to rede the Gospell at', and a pair of organs. There was another pair of organs and a small pair of latten standards in the Lady chapel. The supply of vestments in the vestry was ample. In the pantry there was a salt, two standing cups, 'a lytell cruse' and six spoons all of silver. The furniture of the hall, parlour and chambers was simple and of little value. The cattle and corn were jointly valued at £42 8s. 8d.

Thus the parent of St Margaret's church "died" leaving its parish church to continue to serve the people of Ipswich.

* an alloy of copper and zinc resembling brass

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