

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 5: THE de SOUTHCHURCH FAMILY

1066 and all that makes the memorable point that Henry VIII splitting from Rome was a good thing because England was bound to be C of E. In the same way the local lords of the manor in Southchurch were clearly bound to be members of the de Southchurch family - and so, for 200 years, they were. From the Saxon period until the mid-sixteenth century, the manor of Southchurch was owned by the monks of Holy Trinity Canterbury, but the monks needed a tenant to work the manor. Step forward the de Southchurch family.

The link with Canterbury was vitally important. One of the distinguishing features of Southchurch, manor and church, in the medieval period was that it was not connected to the Cluniac Priory at Prittlewell. To put this in context, Prittlewell Priory at various times held the parish churches of Prittlewell, North Shoebury, South Shoebury, Canewdon, Clavering, and Langley in Essex alone, as well as the advowsons of Rayleigh, Rawreth, Thundersley, Wickford, Great Horkesley and East Mersea; but its immediate neighbour at Southchurch remained resolutely attached to Canterbury.



Southchurch Hall – parts date back to the 12th century.

The local histories generally say that the de Southchurch family were the tenants of Southchurch Hall by the mid twelfth century. If so, they may have played a leading role (not least financially) in a very significant chapter in the history of our church - the building of the Old Church nave. The Old Church was built in stone in the Norman, or Romanesque, style. Centuries of “improvements” have obscured what was probably a simple but beautiful building, but we still have two fine doorways with their distinctive chevron ornamentation and scalloped

capitals. The Norman north door - together with its grotesque carved face - was moved to the west of the New Church in 1906.

The first recorded de Southchurch is Richard de Southchurch, who is known only because he attempted in 1191 to usurp ownership of the estate to himself (boo, hiss). (In the medieval period, silence was usually golden.) To settle the dispute, Richard “the Lionheart”, then on his way to the Third Crusade, authorised the Prior and Convent of Christ Church, Canterbury, to hold an enquiry. The complaint was heard at Milton, the manor to the immediate West of Southchurch, before a jury of twelve men chosen from the district. It was found that Richard de Southchurch had no rights other than tenant at will of the monks.



The tomb of Richard the Lionheart

In 1198, a further dispute arose between the Prior and Convent and William de Southchurch “concerning all the town of Sutchirch”. This resulted in William being allowed to hold the manor hereditarily of the Prior and Convent at “fee-ferme” - on a lease of land and stock - for a payment of £20 yearly, to be paid in four quarterly instalments. The monks were not a soft touch when it came to bargaining: the tenant was, for example, not to sell, give away or waste any timber taken from the wood at Southchurch - this extended from what is now Bournes Green, westwards beyond the church - except to take such as was necessary and reasonable for his hearth and the repairs of his houses and hedges.



Central fireplace in The Great Hall at Southchurch Hall

The manor was next held by Richard de Southchurch II, on whose death his widow, Lady Joan, was given wardship of the heir. The indenture recording this and dated 1235, still preserved at Canterbury, gave her the right to arrange the marriage of the heir without interference from Canterbury - subject to her paying the Prior ten marks at the time of the marriage. The indenture bears the seal of Lady Joan with its inscription Tego secretum Johanne - “I guard Joan’s secret” - and a reproduction of this can be seen on the heraldic panels on the modern shutters at Southchurch Hall.

The first rector of Southchurch of whom we have any record was Gilbert FitzWilliam, who held the office from 1193 to 1205. Those to whom these things matter (in a spirit of Christian brotherliness, of course) may wish to note that this is about 100 years earlier than the first known reference to a vicar of Prittlewell (and he is mentioned in the will of a de Southchurch). Gilbert FitzWilliam himself sounds rather more Anglo-Norman than Saxon, in which case the living may

already have been considered quite valuable.

Come back in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 6 “The de Southchurch Family, Part 2”.

- Hear about the rascally Richard de Southchurch III
- A proposal to attack London using incendiary birds.
- The mystery of the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin in the cemetery at Southchurch.

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