

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 6: SIR RICHARD de SOUTHCHURCH III

Sir Richard de Southchurch III was the most famous - and certainly the most notorious - member of the family. During his lifetime, he added considerably to the family possessions, often unlawfully, and at the time of his death in 1294 held the tenancy not only of Southchurch manor but also of lands in the adjoining manors of North Thorp, Prittlewell, Leigh, Shopland, North Shoebury, Sutton and Rayleigh - in all nearly 900 acres.

Some of his wealth was acquired by the abuse of his position as Sheriff of Essex and Hertfordshire from 1265 to 1267. His office enabled him to make wholesale extortions in the name of the king without ever worrying to hand over to the king the wealth and goods he collected.

In April 1267, during the Barons' Wars against King Henry III, the baronial forces under Gilbert de Clare entered London, which rose in their support. The king's army, abandoning the siege of Ely, marched south and lay at Stratford, then just outside London in Essex, for seven weeks. During this period provisions ran short, and the sheriffs of both Kent and Essex scoured the countryside for military stores. Richard de Southchurch, according to the villagers of Chafford hundred, took 'for the sustenance of the king's host' wheat, oats, cheese, bacon, pease, and beef, as well as ropes for making cords for the arbalests and catapults; picks, calthrops and spades to lay low the walls of London; tow and eggs for dressings, linen for bandages, chickens to feed the wounded, and finally cocks, forty of them. He sent them to his manor at Southchurch and charged the Exchequer 200 marks for their supply. This was naughty - you are not supposed to sympathise!

The forty cocks he proposed to use as incendiary bombs, by tying fire to their feet and sending them flying into London to burn it down. Stories of using birds in this way are found in many sagas and poems of the early Middle Ages. Success would depend upon the homing instincts of birds that nested in the town and ventured out by day; they could be caught, loaded with flammable material, and then released to return home as incendiaries. Cirencester was supposed to have been captured in this way in 879. It is less likely that Richard de Southchurch's cocks would have chosen to fly into London, which was not their home, and it seems that the sheriff was having a laugh at the expense at the good folk of Chafford hundred.



The siege of Kenilworth, 1266

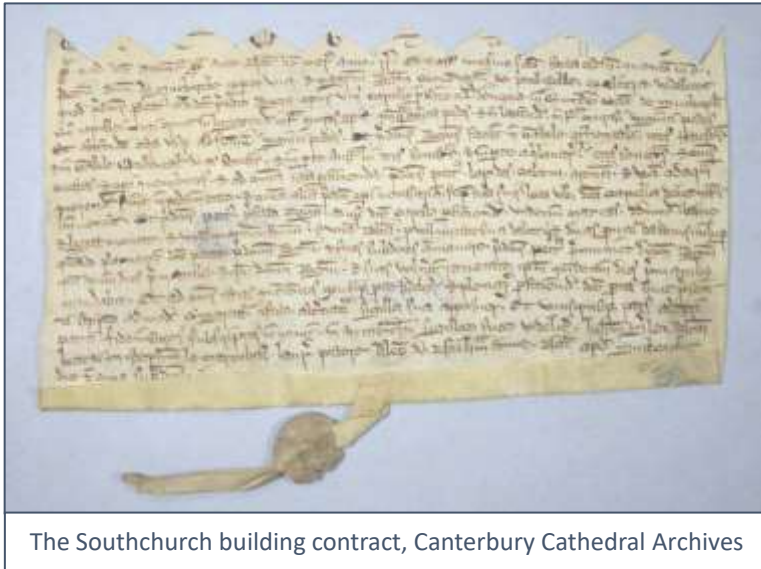
Richard de Southchurch's later misdemeanours, which included being present at the theft of a hart at the king's forest of Chelmsford (fined 100 shillings, but pardoned) and perjury (fined 1000 pounds, but acquitted in return for surrendering the manor of Hatfield Peverel), support the suggestion that his exploit with the forty cocks was an act of deliberate dishonesty.

So, he was a bit of a rascal, but he had a softer side too, at least in his own parish. About the year 1275 he set aside the rent from a holding of five acres for an annual gift of bread to the poor eight days before the feast of St Katherine the Virgin. The gift - of "one quarter of goodly wheat of eight bushels as it falls from the sheaves, neither better nor worse" - was to be distributed in the chapel of the Blessed Katherine the Virgin within Southchurch Hall.

He also appears to have had a religious side, at least in contemplation of those great Advent themes, death, judgement, heaven and hell. In his will, dated 1293, reference is made to a chapel of the

Blessed Virgin at Southchurch, which he intended should be built in the cemetery at Southchurch and in which he wished to be buried in a great marble tomb. The chapel was to be 50 feet long, 20 feet wide, 25 feet high, with three windows in the eastern end and two at the west end. To pay for all this, Sir Richard left a silver cup, all his pigs, and, if this was insufficient, an ox and fat boar. His son, Peter, also had to set aside one hundred shillings yearly until the chapel was completed.

A copy of the contract for the building of the chapel made between Peter, and one Roger, a master mason of Prittlewell, is preserved at Canterbury. A paper by Gabriel Byng, a leading historian of



The Southchurch building contract, Canterbury Cathedral Archives

medieval church building and society, “The Southchurch Chapel and the Earliest Building Contract in England’ (2015), argues that: ‘The contract for the construction of the chapel of the Blessed Virgin in the cemetery of Holy Trinity, Southchurch, Essex, is an exceptional document. It is probably the earliest surviving contract for building work in Britain by some fifteen years and predates any other known contract for work on a parish church by half a century.’”

No trace of the chapel of the Blessed Virgin has been found, but Mr Alfred Goodale offered the following thoughts in his history of the parish.

“Where was Sir Richard’s chapel? It is interesting that from the west wall to the chancel steps of the old parish church the distance is 50 feet and the width 25 feet - the same measurements as mentioned in Sir Richard’s will. The writer is inclined to think that the chapel was meant to adjoin the church. Perhaps it was not built, and it is quite possible that Sir Richard lies under the chancel of the old church, possibly near the Easter Sepulchre, and perhaps Lifstan lies near the same spot.”

That was not all the saintly Richard sought to do from his deathbed. Among many bequests, he left a horse and armour to the church of Southchurch (we love bequests, but probably best not to follow his example too exactly); 40 shillings to the church at Prittlewell; and to its vicar, Sir Thomas, a gown of persec (probably peach colour).

Sir Richard’s life brings us into the mainstream of Holy Trinity’s life in the sense that, from 1287, we have a complete list of rectors. The rector who died in 1287 was Lambert de Moneto. This parish has clearly long had cosmopolitan flair!

Come back in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 7 “The Medieval Church”.

- What did a Medieval church look like?
- Why do we have a set of stone steps leading nowhere?

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