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The Old Church of Chelsea

RICHARD O'SULLIVAN

THE OLD CHURCH OF CHELSEA, with which the name of St. Thomas More is associated, was in his day already venerable. There is said to have been a church upon this site even from Saxon times. In the *Calendar of Papal Registers* there is a record of a dispensation granted by Pope Nicholas IV, who died in 1292:

[R]elaxation of one year and forty days of enjoined penance to penitents who visit the Church of Thelchuche on the Feast of All Saints, to whom it is dedicated, and on the anniversary of the dedication.

The Church is mentioned also in Papal Letters of the late 13th century as the Church of "Thelchurche" and "Chelchuthe." It consisted originally only of Chancel and Nave, the Chapels to north and south being in private hands. The freehold of the north Chapel belonged in succession to the Lord of the Manor of Chelsea, Gervase, Abbot of Westminster; to Sir Reginald Bray; to King Henry VIII and his Queens, Anne of Cleves and Catherine Parr; to John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, father-in-law of Lady Jane Grey, the unhappy young "Nine-Days Queen." In this Church, in May, 1536, Henry VIII was secretly married to his third wife, Jane Seymour; and during her childhood, Queen Elizabeth I attended service here.

When the new Parish Church of St. Luke was built in 1819, the Old Church became a Chapel of Ease. On April 17th, 1941, a land mine exploded on the Old Church, killing five fire-watchers, and destroyed the whole building except the More Chapel, which survived almost



All Saints Church (The Old Church), Chelsea, photographed before it was damaged in World War II.

intact. This Chapel, More had remodelled in 1528, reserving it for private worship. Stapleton, More's biographer, in the *Tres Thomae*, tells us that More "furnished the Chapel abundantly with all things necessary for divine worship, and with all suitable ornament and decoration" and that he was liberal in his gifts of gold and silver plate. The Chapel has two remarkable capitals in Renaissance style, probably designed by Holbein during one of his visits to the household of Sir Thomas More in Chelsea. The eastern of the two capitals is carved with the date 1528, and bears emblems of civil life, a crossed sword and sceptre, and what seems to be a representation of the mace of the Lord Chan-

cellor. The emblems on the western capital bear an ecclesiastical character: tapers, crossed candlesticks, holy water stoup, and a missal with clasps.

In the Old Church, More was accustomed to put on a surplice and make the responses, even during the time when he was Lord Chancellor. It was here that the Duke of Norfolk found him, and warned him that the King would be displeased at such a proceeding as unbecoming the high position he held. According to Roper, Norfolk greeted More with the words: "God's body, God's body, my Lord Chancellor, a parish clerk, a parish clerk! You dishonour the King and his office." To which

More replied: "It cannot be displeasing to my Lord the King that I pay homage to my King's Lord."

It was here while More was Lord Chancellor that one of his gentlemen used to come to Lady More's pew and say to her: "Madam, my Lord is gone"; and here, on the next holy day after the surrender of his office of Lord Chancellor, and the departure of his gentlemen, Sir Thomas More came himself to his wife's pew, and making a low curtsey said to her: "Madam, my Lord is gone."

The priest John Larke, whom More nominated as parish priest of the Old Church, followed the example of his parishioner and was martyred at Tyburn on March 7th, 1544. With him, was martyred John Ireland, who was private chaplain to Sir Thomas More and afterwards to the Roper family. They had been charged together with attempting "to deprive our said King Henry VIII of his royal dignity, title, and name of Supreme Head of the English and Irish Church."

In the sanctuary of the Old Church, against the south wall, is a plain altar tomb of grey stone, recessed in the wall, and supporting a canopy with three shields of arms on the moulded cornice: the arms of More, and of Jane Colt, his first wife, and of Alice Middleton, his second wife. On the slab of black marble at the back of the tomb is inscribed the Latin epitaph, and some verses which More wrote:

Here lies my Jane, dear wife of
Thomas More,
And here my Alice and myself would lie;
Three girls, a boy, my Jane her
partner bore,
With rarest stepdames may my Alice vie.
Religion's laws had they allowed, or Fate

Here braced in triple concord could we live;
Grant Grave, grant Heaven, that blest
united state,

And death afford what life could never give.

The bones of Jane Colt (who died in 1511) were evidently transferred to the Old Church at Chelsea; and though it is clear that More intended his second wife Alice Middleton to be buried there also, it did not happen so. She was in fact buried at Northaw in Hertfordshire. Nor, despite a certain (or uncertain) tradition derived from an unverified statement in a Latin *Life of St. John Fisher* (1555) (which found its way into the *Church History* of Thomas Fuller, and the *Eminent Lives* of Aubrey), does it seem that the headless body of St. Thomas More ever lay in the Old Church at Chelsea.

After the execution of the Saint, we are told that his daughter Margaret Roper hastened to the Tower to bury the body of her beloved father; which the Lieutenant had promised to allow, with the permission of the King which was readily given. In her hurry Margaret forgot to refill her purse which had been emptied in almsgiving, and she now found that she lacked a winding-sheet. Dorothy Colley, her maid (who married John Harris, sometime clerk to Thomas More), suggested they might get some linen from a near-by shop. "How can I do that?" asked Margaret, "seeing that I have no money left?" "They will give you credit," answered her maid. "I am far from home," said Margaret, "and no one knows me here. Do you go and try." The maid went into a shop and asked for the linen. She agreed the price, and putting her hand into her purse, as if to look for the money (intending to say that unexpectedly she found

herself without it) she discovered there the exact price of the linen. The details of this story were told more than once by Dorothy Harris, who lived in exile at Douai until 1588, to Thomas Stapleton, who includes them in his *Life of More*.

The headless body of Thomas More was accordingly buried by Margaret Roper in the west end of the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula in the Tower. To this Chapel also was brought the body of St. John Fisher which had been buried nearby in the Churchyard of All Hallows, Barking; and after the execution of More, according to the Grey Friars Chronicle, "was taken up the Bishop again and both of them buried in the Chapel Royal within the Tower." "In truth," says Macaulay (writing of the Chapel Royal), "there is no sadder spot on the earth." Here were buried not only St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More but also Anne Boleyn, Lady Jane Grey, Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex, and, at the turn of the century, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.

After his execution, the head of St. Thomas More remained for some time upon a stake on London Bridge. It was the practice in those days to exhibit the heads of traitors on the Bridge for some weeks and then to throw them into the river below. There is a strong tradition that Margaret Roper persuaded (perhaps by a bribe) the man whose duty it was to throw the head into the river, to drop it into her lap as she sat in a boat beneath the Bridge. She had the head carefully preserved in spices and kept it most reverently. Stapleton affirms that she was summoned before the Council for keeping her father's head as a relic, as well as some of his books and writings. She answered that she had

procured her father's head for burial that it might not be the food of fishes; and that she had, with the exception of his printed books, few of his writing save familiar letters which she begged to be allowed to keep for her solace. Her friends at Court helped her, and she was allowed to go free. She had her father's head placed in the Roper vault in the Church of St. Dunstan's in Canterbury where it still lies. This Church of St. Dunstan's was consecrated by Lanfranc soon after the Conquest. Henry II came here in July 1174 on the pilgrimage he made to Canterbury to seek forgiveness for his share in the murder of Thomas Beckett. It was here that he took off his shoes and donned the linen garb of a penitent, to walk barefoot and weeping along the streets of the City to the martyr's shrine. In the reign of Henry IV, the Roper family had founded a chapel in St. Dunstan's; and below this chapel in the Roper vault the head of St. Thomas More was placed "with great devotion" by Margaret Roper. In the year 1835, the Roper vault was opened and several persons saw there a head which had evidently been severed from the body. It was in a niche in the wall with an iron grating in front of it. The *Gentleman's Magazine* of May, 1837 contains a description of the events which took place in St. Dunstan's in 1835, and gives a drawing of what is believed to be the skull of St. Thomas More. In the Preface by Lewis to Roper's *Life of More* there is a reference to a tradition that Margaret Roper was buried at St. Dunstan's with her father's head in her arms. But this is inconsistent with the fact that the head is in a separate niche; though the tradition

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