Great St Mary's

Cambridge's University Church

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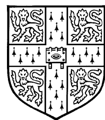

GREAT ST MARY'S
THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH

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1 Urban church and university church: Great St Mary's from its origin to 1523

CHRISTOPHER BROOKE

Great St Mary's lay, and lies, in the very heart of medieval Cambrdge. For it is there that the University of Cambridge began – and there was a church on the site long before the university was thought of; it may even be that the oldest truly urban church of Cambridge lay there.

Let me start with two contrasts. Within the grim Victorian shell of St Giles on Castle Hill lies the remnant of the first church on the site, a charming eleventh-century chancel arch in a church whose foundation can be dated with some precision to 1092 or thereabouts. The early history of Great St Mary's cannot be documented, nor its foundation dated – not within six hundred years, to put it at its most extreme.

The other contrast can best be observed by walking in imagination on the path by the north-west corner of King's Chapel. There one can contemplate two noble churches, one built, the other rebuilt, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, two of the central buildings of the University of Cambridge, the nave of Great St Mary's and the chapel of King's College; both probably completed under the direction and to the design of the same architect, John Wastell. The church is splendid – but dwarfed by the chapel; and there one can see in the mind's eye an almost incredible contrast between what a succession of megalomaniac kings thought appropriate for the chapel of one college and what the university authorities and their allies among the citizens thought a fitting home for the place where the whole university and the town were to meet. For that is the significance of the nave of Great St Mary's. We hear much of the squabbles of town and gown, and of the friction which marked their relations on many occasions. But in a very real sense city and university created each other – and of this the nave of Great St Mary's is the symbol. The two communities met and mingled here, as town and gown met in St Michael's and Little St Mary's and elsewhere.

The city of Cambridge is the mother of us all: before there were colleges there was a university, and before the university – a relatively parvenu institution no older than 1209 at the earliest – there was a town,

with market place and churches and streets and houses. If we want to search out its footprints we cannot do better than walk along the Roman road into Cambridge, the Huntingdon Road, past the castle – past the site of All Saints by the Castle, long since demolished – past St Peter and St Giles, across Magdalene Bridge, which gave its name to our shire, past St Clement and Holy Sepulchre (and its neighbour St George, which was lost perhaps by 1200), then right down the old High Street – St John's Street, Trinity Street, King's Parade, Trumpington Street, call it what you will: but the High Street I shall call it as it was till the nineteenth century. We pass the ghost of the other All Saints beside the Divinity School, and St Michael's and Great St Mary's; and as we go south along the High Street we pass near St Edward, the Saxon king, and St Benet, the Italian monk with his Saxon tower, past St Botolph and (in imagination) out through the Trumpington Gate to the church of St Peter commonly known, since it was rebuilt in the middle of the fourteenth century, as the church of Little St Mary's. These are the true footprints of the first Cambridge, the late Saxon town; and the saints clustered so thick on the ground are an astonishing reminder of the shape and pattern of early English towns, with a church every hundred yards or so.

As we marched down Castle Hill and along the High Street we passed twelve churches – not a bad score for a modest market town. But we have not seen them all. If we had gone along the Roman road till it becomes St Andrew's Street we should have passed Holy Trinity and St Andrew the Great, now happily restored.

If we were to dig in the ample lawns of King's to the west of the chapel we should find the lost church of St John the Baptist – St John Zachary. There were fifteen parish churches in medieval Cambridge, sixteen if we include St Andrew the Less, alias Barnwell Priory – and though they have been altered many times, they are the principal monuments of its early days, most of them first built, we may reckon, between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, though some may be older. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they were joined by a group of churches of monks and nuns and regular canons and friars – conventual churches, most of which have come and gone; and in the late Middle Ages by college chapels – sometimes united to parish churches, sometimes separate and apart. By the 1530s, when the axe fell on the conventual churches, and the 1540s, when the colleges came near to following them into oblivion, Cambridge was teeming with churches. But the most remarkable feature in this proliferation of places of worship is the growth of the parish churches in the early Middle Ages.

Cambridge sits where the old Roman road crossed the river. Beside it on Castle Hill there had been the Roman fort and some settlement may have survived in this region; and it was clearly populous in Norman times when part of it was built up into the Norman castle. But Cambridge as a town lay south and east of the river and is evidently a new creation of mid- or late Saxon times. The shape and pattern of the town makes this abundantly clear. We know the shape of early Cambridge by three major tokens. First of all, the great open fields to east and west – which formed the fields of Cambridge till the enclosures of the early nineteenth century – impinge upon a town whose centre lies about the Roman road, the High Street and the river. We do not know when the fields were so defined; but they identify the town that lies between. North Cambridge, the suburb on Castle Hill, has no fields impinging on it but those of Chesterton, the royal manor to the north-east.

The second token of the shape of Cambridge is its streets: the Roman road and the High Street are familiar enough today — the former still remarkably straight except where it evaded the castle and where it dodged, by Christ's, to go through the Barnwell Gate; the High Street a characteristic medieval meander. But there was a third street now largely hidden by the growth of the academic quarter in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The great beauty of Cambridge today lies in this academic quarter, in the group of college and university buildings which runs from St John's in the north, between the High Street and the river – with the Backs beyond, south to Queens', with Peterhouse lying out to the south. It is this above all which gives Cambridge its incomparable beauty as a modern city. But all this obscures and obliterates a third of the medieval town. For the third main street of Cambridge, Mill Street, ran from the south of Trinity along Trinity Lane and through King's to Queens' Lane, and about it were houses and lanes, forming a little grid of streets near the river. It seems likely that this was the region which felt first the contraction which came to many English towns in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and that it was in part the falling rents and poverty of the region which attracted the attention of King Henry VI. Whatever the grounds, King Henry had the whole centre of this region swept clear; but he never enjoyed the resources to build the college of his dreams: he was soon bereft of money, senses and throne; and although Henry VII and Henry VIII finished his chapel a generation later, and much later generations built stately buildings here and there, the greater part of this region of Cambridge is now grass. And the whole quarter has lost its civic aspect and become a line of colleges. Thus the grid of streets

with its three main roads marks the core of Saxon Cambridge, with the Market Place at its heart.

The third token of its early shape are the churches, which point so eloquently to a time when the High Street was its most flourishing artery and groups of tiny, prosperous communities could afford each to enjoy their own place of worship.

If we ask how it all began we enter a world of mystery and guesswork. Many English towns owed their foundation or revival to King Alfred at the end of the ninth century; but not Cambridge. It is a reasonable presumption that it was already forming, however modestly, before his day. A few years ago Jeremy Haslam wrote an interesting paper in the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, arguing that it was a Mercian town founded by King Offa in the mid-eighth century, and that is likely enough; but it remains a guess. It is rather more than a guess that the recovery of Cambridge from the Danes in 917 by Edward the Elder marks the beginning of a major development – that the heart of Cambridge, south of the river, is of the tenth century. Haslam also conjectured that the original mother church of Cambridge, under whose wings the others grew up, was St Giles on the edge of Castle Hill; and that is extremely unlikely. He had the misfortune to light on the one church which is closely dated – and there is no good ground for doubting that St Giles was built for a small house of canons founded in or about 1092. If I had to look for a mother church of Cambridge, I should look rather in the centre of the Saxon town and the region of the market place; I would look at the church which lies between the High Street and the Market Place overlooking the Market, much as the greatest of all the churches of medieval Germany, Mainz Cathedral, still looks over its ancient market place. My choice would be Great St Mary's. But this is only a conjecture: there seems nothing but the site to identify it firmly as such.

In our search for the meaning of these tiny parishes and their place in the life of early Cambridge, let us look first at the saints themselves – who they were, and why they should have been honoured. It used to be said that when a church was dedicated to a saint some relics of that saint – preferably large or small pieces of the saint's bones – were an essential part of the dedication; and that they were planted in the altars at the service. This simply cannot be true, since many churches were dedicated to archangels like St Michael who had no bones, or to the deity, or to Mary, whose body (as was universally assumed in the Middle Ages) went up to heaven whole and entire; and if it had been so, local saints whose relics might be readily

provided would have enjoyed an immense advantage. In the seventh and eighth centuries St Peter came first with a handsome lead – though most commonly accompanied by the other great apostle whose shrine was in Rome, St Paul. Second came the blessed Virgin, with Paul a close third; then Andrew, Martin, Michael and Lawrence. Little bits of Peter and Paul (or bits alleged to be theirs) undoubtedly strayed into English relic collections, and perhaps of Andrew and Lawrence too. Even Mary is represented in the more bizarre collections of relics, which might contain fragments of her veil, even drops of her milk – and on the continent, here and there, cults gathered round statues of her. Peterborough Abbey, which had one of the most esoteric collections, reckoned among them pieces of Jesus' manger, swaddling clothes, cross and sepulchre – and of the loaves with which he fed the five thousand; elsewhere some of his milk teeth were alleged. The cult of relics was powerful, but not in Cambridge: relics were above all for pilgrims, that is, for those who wanted to travel in search of their saints, whether by boat to Ely to call on St Etheldreda or by horse to Peterborough (well stocked with Anglo-Saxon saints) or Bury (for St Edmund) – where were the nearest notable shrines. By the twelfth century the Blessed Virgin had swept Peter off his feet – she outnumbers him fivefold or so. In all discussion of dedications we have to recall that churches can change their dedications – as St Peter without Trumpington Gate became Little St Mary's; but such evidence as has been sifted (and a great deal has not) suggests that this – though it may have been common in country churches – was relatively unusual in urban churches, in the mid- or late Middle Ages.

Every church is and was God's home, and it seems a little strange to have churches specifically dedicated to the Holy Trinity. It prompts the question, what was the meaning of dedication to a saint? To this, strangely, there is no easy answer. Broadly speaking, some special association with a saint or with the Holy Trinity or with Christ – as in Christ Church, Canterbury Cathedral – seems to be particularly attached to the high altar of a church; in some cases multiple dedications relate to a group of altars. But in the dedication rituals of the early and central Middle Ages in this country there is no special place for the invocation of a patron saint – though in some parts of the service his or her presence seems taken for granted. The dedication service, however, is specially designed to emphasise that the church is God's church. None the less, these dedications were very real; and the saint – or the Trinity – were regarded as the proprietors of their church.

Let us retrace our steps and revisit a few among the Cambridge

churches. St Peter had five churches in London and remained exceedingly popular. St Peter on Castle Hill may well be on the site of the first church in the modest early settlement in north Cambridge – St Peter outside Trumpington Gate shows that he had not lost his popularity in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. So one might expect of the prince of the apostles; but most of the apostles in truth will not appear on any of our lists.

After the Blessed Virgin Mary and the apostles come a noble array of English, French and universal saints who can be most clearly viewed in a rough chronological sequence. St Michael flourished at all times, never more than in the ninth and tenth centuries, which was the first heyday of his shrine on Monte Gargano in Italy and which also saw the rise of the Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy and the Sagra di San Michele near Turin. If we deduce from these examples that he was a saint who liked hilly places we shall learn little of the reason why he had a church in Cambridge – or a church with a Saxon tower in Oxford or seven churches wthin the walls of the city of London. Clearly he had many adherents who were prepared to foster his cult in flat places. When the Vikings became Christian in the tenth and eleventh centuries they adopted Clement, the early pope and Roman martyr, as one of their chief patrons. St Clement's in Cambridge lies near the wharves on the river to which Viking traders might have come. The link is conjectural, but is a very likely conjecture.

Whatever else the proliferation of tiny parishes and small churches reflects, it represents the outward and visible sign of a popular religious movement, recorded in every part of Europe in the tenth, and especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Behind it, and in some relation to it not easily defined, lay the monastic revivals of the tenth century. From the tenth century onwards every monastic community (with a few partial exceptions) was subjected to the Rule of St Benedict. It seems fairly clear that the height of his fame among builders of parish churches lay in the tenth and eleventh centuries; and we may attribute our own St Benet's to the tenth century – for its tower, even if it cannot be closely dated, is not likely to be much later than about the year 1000.

St Edward and St Botolph are native English saints, a reminder that English cults flourished in the century before the Conquest and – especially in the towns, where well-to-do English survived after the Norman Conquest more successfully than in the countryside – in the century after the Conquest. Edward, king and so-called martyr, was King Edgar's eldest son, who was murdered in 978 at Corfe while still little more than

a boy, and succeeded by his younger brother Aethelred II. In later years Aethelred was to foster the cult of his murdered brother; but the cult had little staying power, so far as we know, and churches dedicated to the martyr are not numerous; we may suppose that ours represents the age of Aethelred or soon after, that is to say the first half of the eleventh century or thereabouts. St Botolph was a seventh-century East Anglian abbot of whom little is known but who was much admired. His cult among the ordinary folk of parishes came later. Botolph seems sometimes to have appeared in new suburbs by town gates when these were forming in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries – London is a very striking example, with three of his churches by three gates. It seems likely to be significant that St Botolph in Cambridge lies just within the Trumpington Gate. In the present state of knowledge the date of the gate, and indeed of the King's Ditch or dyke or rampart which formed the main defensive system round Cambridge, is a matter of guesswork; the guess currently favoured places it in the eleventh century and it was surely not later. We may think that St Botolph represents the community around the Trumpington Gate of the late eleventh century, asserting its devotion to a native English, East Anglian saint. Of St Peter without Trumpington Gate we have an early record of 1207. Throughout its early years St Peter seems to have been served (as were many parish churches in the twelfth century) by a dynasty of hereditary parsons, the first of whom must have flourished about 1100.

St Giles and the Holy Sepulchre begin to shift our attention from parish churches to conventual churches at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A little later the nuns of St Radegund – an eminent Gallic abbess from Poitiers whose order is rarely to be found in England – were settled about 1150 in their magnificent urban park (as we would regard it today), which is now the precinct of Jesus College. At much the same time the leper hospital of St Mary Magdalene was built – as leper hospitals were wont to be – outside the city boundaries, along the Newmarket Road. Its church is an enchanting survival from the mid-twelfth century. About 1200 the hospital of St John the Evangelist was founded where the college now stands. In the thirteenth century we move into the world of the friars, and later of the colleges – and also to a new roll-call of saints.

The parish boundaries of Cambridge are first fully recorded in a map of the early nineteenth century, though we have many indications of their shape from medieval documents. In Cambridge, as in London, the earliest parishes in the centre look like pieces of a very intricate jigsaw puzzle;

roads and crossroads and above all markets lie in their heart, not at their boundaries; the jagged edges strongly suggest ancient property boundaries rather haphazardly gathered together. On the map the tiny ancient parish of Great St Mary's looks like a dagger embedded in the heart of Cambridge. Shifting property boundaries could modify the details of the picture; but the basic story in London is of almost unbelievable conservatism over the centuries – so that the parishes there survived the disappearance of most of the churches in the Great Fire of 1666 by nearly 250 years. We cannot assume anything quite so dramatic in Cambridge; but it is reasonable to think that the parishes, here as in London, were originally formed by groups of neighbours who built and worshipped in the church at the centre of their community. But the churches were constantly being altered and rebuilt, so that none of those in the centre of Cambridge now looks the least like its twelfth-century predecessor, save only the Round Church, which was largely rebuilt by the Cambridge Camden Society in the 1840s precisely to represent once again the church of the early twelfth century – of which indeed it incorporates large genuine fragments. If one wants to know what they originally looked like, one can visit St Giles and contemplate its original chancel arch, and in imagination build round it a small church of two cells – a nave and chancel, joined by the arch. Better still one can go along the Newmarket Road and over the railway bridge, and there, on the left, is the mid-twelfth century leper chapel, perfectly preserved. In form it is just such a two-celled church as I have described, and identical with innumerable twelfth-century parish churches elsewhere, and we may suppose that many of our churches much resembled it. But just as it had been the natural aspiration of citizens who had any means, and any hope of entering a heavenly city hereafter, to share in building the original church, so every generation reckoned to leave its mark by adding a porch or an aisle, or by rebuilding this or that part of it. This aspiration lasted right through the Middle Ages, and though it flagged somewhat after the Reformation, it survived more than is commonly allowed – to be substantially revived in the nineteenth century.

Three of the churches of Cambridge were entirely rebuilt each in a single campaign as part of the growth of academic Cambridge in the late Middle Ages. St Michael's was rebuilt by the wealthy civil servant Hervey de Stanton so as to form, as to one third, a parish church as before, and as to two-thirds, a college chapel for his new foundation of Michaelhouse, a hundred yards away along what is now Trinity Lane. Little St Mary's was rebuilt in the mid-fourteenth century to be

Peterhouse Chapel and a parish church combined. The third is Great St Mary's.

To understand the cooperation between citizens and academics to which these churches so visibly bear witness, we need to go back to the origin of the university itself, in the thirteenth century. No one now doubts that academic Cambridge was a child of Oxford; but it is curious that the most specific link between the two has never been fully explored. Both universities were founded under the shadow of a St Mary's Church. In Oxford, the meeting place of the university in the late Middle Ages was St Mary the Virgin, and although the link cannot be documented before the late thirteenth century, everything points to its antiquity; not least the growth of the earliest schools in the streets running away from the High Street, by its side. Similarly, in Cambridge: the earliest grace (or proposal for legislation) known to have been passed by the Regent Masters within Great St Mary's Church is of 1275; but there is copious evidence by the late thirteenth century of the link between church and university – and it is abundantly clear in the fourteenth century, when the university began to build the Old Schools, that this site, so near Great St Mary's, was already well established. It seems probable indeed that the first masters, fleeing from Oxford in or about 1209, abandoning the protection of the Blessed Virgin in Oxford, sought out her church in Cambridge as their first refuge. By the late thirteenth century – and probably long before – the old nave of the old church was the Senate House and meeting place of the university, as it remained till the present Senate House was built early in the eighteenth century. It was here in 1381 that the insurgent townsfolk in the so-called Peasants' Revolt (so-called, because in Cambridge it was essentially the citizens' revolt) found and looted the principal university chest. The church itself was the first home of the university archives – not, as Catherine Hall has pointed out to me (and has sometimes been said) – the tower. It was here, a hundred years later, that their successors joined the leading figures of the university in rebuilding the nave.

Riot is perhaps the more familiar feature of the legend of Cambridge's past; and it is all the more worth exploring the other side of the coin, of coexistence and collaboration, a little further. Like the university itself, the idea of bringing town and gown together in church was inspired by Oxford. The pattern and model of Oxford colleges was Merton. Even if one or two others had an earlier prehistory, Merton set the pattern in combining fine buildings, endowment for poor (or moderately poor) students with prayers and masses for the dead. But Walter de Merton, when

choosing his site in Oxford, had deliberately laid his hand on the parish church of St John the Baptist: and his fellows, carrying out his intentions after his death, rebuilt the chancel of the church in the 1290s on a grand scale to provide a college chapel. The parishioners had to make do with the rest – that is, with the crossing of a cruciform church; they were promised a nave by and by – and in the fifteenth century they were given that splendid tower which is one of the beauties of the Oxford skyline; a nave would follow in due course, the parishioners' very own. Then in the early sixteenth century a rascally warden of Merton (the phrase came to me from Merton's own historian, Dr Roger Highfield) allowed the site of the nave to pass to Bishop Fox for a negligible rent as part of the site for Corpus Christi College, Oxford – and the parishioners never had their nave; in the nineteenth century they even lost their church. There are striking parallels and differences in the story of Little St Mary's. The old church of St Peter outside Trumpington Gate, which gave its name to Peterhouse in 1284, was rebuilt in the 1340s or so by the fellows of Peterhouse – though we do not know how they got the money. They built a stately chancel, very closely modelled on Merton's, though flowing curvilinear tracery has replaced the geometry of the 1290s. They left stray bits of the old church for the parishioners – and, once again, the hope of a nave was never realised. But in the case of Little St Mary's the parishioners won in the end: first, they left St Peter to the fellows and did homage to Our Lady, thus becoming the parishioners of Little St Mary's; and later, when the seventeenth-century fellows sought peace and seclusion of a kind more common in college chapels, the parishioners were left in possession of the whole church.

The moral of this story is perhaps that the fine ideal of collaboration between town and gown in regular worship lay in the world of dreams – or anyway was never realised as the early benefactors had intended. Put another way, it became a marriage of convenience, which in due course became in some ways a marriage of great inconvenience to one or other party. That is probably too pessimistic a view: it is more likely that in these instances college and parish found there were both benefits and disadvantages in their coexistence. It is certain that Great St Mary's – as well as giving hospitality to university ceremonies and commencements and sermons – housed flourishing chapels and guilds, and that the children of the parish were baptised – and wedded and buried – under its wing. For me, Great St Mary's is first and foremost a baptismal church, in which three of my grandchildren have been christened in recent years. To its medieval parishioners it was even more than that: it was the centre of their

community life – where they met to be baptised, to marry and to be mourned – and for many other occasions, religious and not so religious, in between. They continued to support it by offerings voluntary and involuntary – especially by paying the tithe, originally an income tax amounting to a tenth of every kind of income, intended to support the poor and all who needed help; but later converted into a tax on agrarian income, mainly for the support of one kind of poor only, namely the clergy.

It seems clear meanwhile that in St Michael's, Little St Mary's and Merton Chapel the colleges were the dominant partners; and that is hardly surprising, given the tiny areas and the modest populations which formed the parishes. In due course Michaelhouse was to be absorbed in Trinity; but long before that, in the late fourteenth century, a close link had been forged between Trinity's principal precursor, the King's Hall, and Great St Mary's. The King's Hall was a much older foundation than King's College and for most of its history entirely distinct. It had been founded in 1317 by King Edward II, and greatly enlarged by his son, Edward III, to provide higher education for the members of the chapel royal. The chapel royal was (and partly still is) a curious institution dedicated to the Holy Trinity and providing a great panoply of services to the royal court – services indeed in more senses than one, since its younger members often grew up to be civil servants. Since it was part of the chapel royal it was wholly under royal control – in token of which the Master of Trinity is still appointed by the crown – though since it was enlarged and refounded by Henry VIII it has achieved a certain measure of independence in other respects. As part of his process of endowment of the King's Hall, Edward III arranged for the appropriation of Great St Mary's to his college – that is to say, he arranged for the major tithes, roughly two-thirds of its tithe income, to be transferred to the college – a common process in medieval church finance, and one very satisfactory to Edward, since he could not benefit from the tithes himself. The corollary in this custom of the English church is that the rector – the person or body who receives the major tithes – was also responsible for the upkeep of the chancel; and it quite often happens therefore that the chancel of a medieval English parish church was last rebuilt shortly before it was appropriated – and that the rectors have only kept it in repair since then. The lien with the King's Hall explains why the chancel of Great St Mary's – though often restored – is in essence older than the nave. The tithes have long since disappeared, but in the singularly untidy clearing up in the Tithe Act of 1935 the Cambridge colleges remained (in the odd phrase of the church lawyers) lay rectors, responsible for the

upkeep of the chancels. This is a very obscure branch of ecclesiastical law; but no matter – so long as the college pays.

With the grant of tithes Edward III also granted the advowson, the right to present or choose the vicar; and this double gift has brought a close link between church and college ever since – a link which is wholly independent of the older and closer link of church and university. Needless to say the two have often intertwined – as in the person of the Reverend Henry Richards Luard, Fellow of Trinity and University Registrary in the late nineteenth century, who was also Vicar of Great St Mary's and was the moving spirit behind the late nineteenth-century restoration which has given so much of the church its present character.

Equally decisive was an earlier link; for it was a former fellow of the King's Hall, Dr Thomas Barowe, whose gift to the building fund in 1495 was the decisive event in the fund-raising for a new nave. Concerning the rebuilding of this church we have some contemporary sources – proctors' accounts, fund-raising accounts, churchwardens' accounts, and the great indenture between Thomas Barowe and the university – and notes made by or for two eminent sixteenth-century antiquaries who were close friends and accomplices in quack history, Matthew Parker, Master of Corpus and Archbishop of Canterbury, and John Caius, third founder and Master of Gonville and Caius College. Most modern narratives have started from the antiquaries, and fitted the contemporary sources in as best they could – not always realising that it was an antiquarian reconstruction they were using, nor compensating for the biases the antiquaries allowed themselves. Parker and Caius were zealous historians according to their lights, but their lights were dim – and they were good subjects of Tudor sovereigns, not inclined to put the works of King Richard III on a pedestal, and devoted to the university, which they wished to have all the credit for rebuilding the nave: 'at the University's cost and by its efforts, and so truly to be called the University's Church', as Dr Caius tendentiously observed.

What the indenture of 21 January 1495 tells us is that Thomas Barowe, Archdeacon of Colchester, eminent Doctor of Laws (that is, both of canon and civil or Roman law) of the University of Cambridge, and onetime Fellow of the King's Hall – 'for the honour of God almighty and of the most blessed Mary, mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ and glorious virgin, and his protector and most special patron' – has given £240 (a mighty sum in coin of the fifteenth century) 'for the restoration of the university chest and the building of the church of the blessed Virgin of our university aforesaid'. Part of the gift was for an elaborate obit –

masses and prayers and ceremonies in honour of King Richard III and Dr Thomas Barowe – who were to be enrolled in the list of the university's benefactors. It is interesting to observe that Richard modestly disappeared from the university's benefactors' services for a considerable period, but in recent generations has been restored, evidently by a modern antiquary who had read the indenture.

What the proctors' accounts tell us is that Richard Duke of Gloucester (the future Richard III) gave twenty marks – £13. 6s. 8d. – in 1475–6 for no specified purpose: and they record other occasional collections and disbursements which more clearly relate to Great St Mary's. In 1478–9 £20 was handed over towards the new work at Great St Mary's; then silence falls. In the 1490s a major effort at fund-raising, only scantily noted in the proctors' accounts, evidently set the work going effectively at last. It is to be noted that the senior proctor in 1478–9 was William Stockdale, Fellow of Peterhouse; and Stockdale was vice-chancellor between 1493 and 1498, when the major fund-raising was undertaken – from bishops, abbots, priors and doctors and masters of the university. Modern fund-raisers may complain that bishops are now impoverished and abbots few and far between; but the truth is that this splendid nave was built in a land infinitely poorer than modern Britain – and that the university sources only tell us half the story: I am sure the parishioners and the people of Cambridge paid handsomely too. That said, William Stockdale may be regarded as the prime agent in the rebuilding of this nave, and the 1490s rather than the 1470s the era when it truly got under way.

Apart from William Stockdale as vice-chancellor the proctors have been the chief fund-raisers, the development officers as we should call them, in the university's affairs. Now the senior proctor in 1494–5 was John Fisher, Fellow of Michaelhouse and future vice-chancellor, chancellor and martyr. In his own hand he made the famous entry, 'I had lunch with the lady mother of the king' – an event which opened the collaboration between Fisher and the Lady Margaret Beaufort from which sprang Christ's and St John's and very much else besides, and entitles Fisher to the highest rank among Cambridge fund-raisers and benefactors. It is interesting, and very likely significant, that the great benefaction of January 1495 fell within Fisher's term of office as Senior Proctor too – as well as in the vice-chancellorship of Stockdale – but any link between them and Dr Barowe, and Dr Barowe's patron King Richard, was hardly likely to be mentioned over the lunch table of the lady mother of the king.

Dr Caius tells us that the first stone of the new nave was laid in 1478, and on the authority of William Gage, a Fellow of Peterhouse who died in 1500 (ten years before Caius was born), the first stone of the tower in 1491, on 16 May at 6.45 p.m.; that King Henry VII gave some fine oak trees in Great Chesterford which did not belong to him, and this is confirmed by the draft of a tear-stained letter of apology to the Abbot of Westminster (who apparently did own them), and the fine oak timbers over our heads; that the nave was finished in 1519 and the tower very much later – outside my period altogether. Now this general scheme of dates cannot be far wrong, though it would be rash to assert it is exactly right. Behind it lies another scheme of chronology, strongly suggested by the bold – even rash – way that Thomas Barowe associated King Richard III with his own benefaction ten years after the battle of Bosworth Field. It is interesting to observe the contrast between the antechapel of King's, filled to bursting with Beaufort–Tudor emblems, and the nave of Great St Mary's which Barowe turned (in intention at least) into a monument to Richard III.

Some years before the start of the present nave, in 1470, King Henry VI had been momentarily hoisted back on to the throne and Edward IV sent into exile. When Edward returned in 1471 and resumed the throne, the principal beneficiary from the ensuing forfeitures was Edward's brother, Richard Duke of Gloucester; and among many other improvements to his lot he became a principal landowner in Cambridgeshire. The fund-raisers and beggars of Cambridge took due note: the founder of Queens', Andrew Doket – equally at home with royalty of every faction – won Richard's ear and a mighty benefaction which melted away on Bosworth Field – but Doket, lucky man, had died the year before. Meanwhile Thomas Barowe had flourished exceedingly in the service of Richard as duke and king: he had become a mighty pluralist, canon (at the height) of seven cathedrals and collegiate churches, and rector here and there besides. He was Richard's chancellor as duke, Master of the Rolls in 1483, Keeper of the Great Seal on the eve of Bosworth Field. There he doubtless lost the mitre which must have been his had Richard survived; but he lost nothing else; he was a survivor, as Great St Mary's bears witness to this day. He lived to make his princely benefaction in 1495 and to die in peace in 1499. He was a devout Cambridge man who no doubt had a hand, with the university authorities, in interesting Richard III in Great St Mary's – and Barowe's gift replaces whatever the university and the church had lost in 1485. It is indeed possible that the

twenty marks of 1475–6 were a first token of support, lubricating an appeal which took many years to mature.

The churchwardens' accounts only start in 1504 and so they tell us the end of our story: of stalls for the chancel in 1518–19, of the roodloft in 1521–2 and a tiny payment for some mysterious process which seems to pertain to the figures of Mary and John on either side of the great rood or crucifix above the rood loft in 1522–3.

The most certain fact is the church itself. By whatever means, vice-chancellors, proctors and churchwardens succeeded in raising the money and organising a great building enterprise – starting perhaps in the late 1470s, rising to a climax in the 1490s. It was a bold stroke to invoke the memory of Richard III in this enterprise; but entirely successful – for in spite of it (or perhaps even because of it) Henry VII and his lady mother joined more modestly among the donors.

The Blessed Virgin has never been so honoured in Cambridge as in the generations which preceded the Reformation. For the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw John Wastell and his colleagues at work here, shaping this nave, and in the chapel of St Mary and St Nicholas, King's College chapel over the road, he completed what his predecessors had begun. The great fan vault, the decoration of the stonework in the antechapel especially, are his. The lofty nave of Great St Mary's, and the celestial geometry of the stonework are very characteristic of this notable architect. It is difficult for us today, as we contemplate grey stonework on a grey Cambridge day, to appreciate the effect he intended. But modern electricity recreates something of the play of light and the deep shadows he created – and can give us a sense of the excitement his geometry would originally have conveyed. Imagine stonework and roof adorned with the colours of the rainbow and lit by a thousand candles, and you will gain some impression of the offering Wastell and his fellow masons – and Barowe and all the benefactors rounded up by the vice-chancellor and the proctors – laid before God and his Mother.

Meanwhile, in King's Chapel, the vault was going up, the windows were given their tracery – and then their glass. The glazing of King's Chapel went on long after the rood beam and the rood were in place in Great St Mary's – long after Wastell was dead. Right into the late 1540s the glaziers paid by King Henry VIII were completing the glass of King's Chapel. They form in sum the most dramatic late medieval biography of Our Lady – a life cycle in whose central scenes, naturally enough, are enacted the birth, life and death of her Son. But it is strange to reflect

that Henry was completing a supreme work of medieval devotion with one hand while ordering the Henrician Reformation with the other. Very soon after the carpenters' hammers had set the rood in place it was to be taken down – to the profit of the carpenters no doubt – but to the bewilderment of those of us who view this dramatic change from afar.

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