

St. Richard of Chichester

Derek Leach

When visiting Dover Town Hall have you noticed, standing unobtrusively in a far corner of the Stone Hall, a wonderful wooden carving of a religious figure? Do you know whom it depicts and why it stands in the ancient Maison Dieu? Until recently there was no plaque to enlighten you, but now there is, provided by the family of the local man who carved it. Bob Forsyth was a sergeant in the Dover police force who carved in wood for a hobby. In 1955 he presented this beautiful piece to the Borough for the Town Hall. It is of St. Richard, Bishop of Chichester.

Who was he and is there a link with Dover and the Maison Dieu? Born Richard de la Wych in Droitwich in 1197, he was a farmer's son but studious. Unfortunately, both parents died and their young children were left in the care of guardians. The farm was badly mismanaged and run down by the time the two brothers came of age. The elder brother owned the

farm whilst Richard laboured for him. After a few years, mainly due to Richard's efforts the farm was a going concern, allowing Richard to follow his thirst for knowledge.

Despite being very poor he went to Oxford and was tutored by Edmund Rich (St. Edmund of Abingdon) and later journeyed to Paris and Bologna studying canon law. Upon his return to Oxford in 1235 he was appointed Chancellor of the university and then Chancellor to the Archbishop of Canterbury who was his old tutor, Edmund Rich.

At this time clergy were often illiterate, livings were sometimes obtained by fraud and sacraments sold. Sons even tried to make livings hereditary. Parish priests were generally simple folk but their standards were as good as their superiors and better than society generally! The king was entitled to the income from any vacant abbey which



Carving of St Richard of Chichester by Bob Forsyth - Dover Maison Dieu

led to abuse and long delays in filling appointments! This state of affairs caused friction between the King and the Archbishop, which resulted in Edmund retiring to the Cistercian Abbey at Pontigny accompanied by faithful Richard. Upon Edmund's death in 1240, Richard dedicated his life to God and trained for the priesthood at the Dominican convent in Orleans.

After ordination Richard became a parish priest in Kent – probably Vicar of Charing and Rector of Deal. After some years as a man of great influence, he was now a humble priest, but this was short-lived.

The new archbishop, Boniface of Savoy, who probably owed his appointment to the influence of his niece, the Queen, recruited Richard as his adviser in 1245 and appointed him Bishop of Chichester, despite fierce opposition from the King who stripped the new bishop of his lands and mansions and banned everybody from helping Richard. Homeless in his own diocese and dependent upon the hospitality of his clergy, he went about on foot preaching and administering the sacraments. After two years the Pope ordered the restoration of the Bishop's possessions on pain of excommunication. The King gave way. Richard now lived in the Bishop's Palace, but he preferred a simple life style, giving generously to the poor and always seeking out the vulnerable when visiting towns and villages. He founded an almshouse for priests unable to work.

A true reformer, Richard issued instructions to his priests on how to conduct baptisms, confessions, burials and marriages and who could be

ordained. Priests were also to warn mothers not to let their infants sleep with them in the same bed! He told priests how they should dress and only allowed one living per priest. There was no love for married clergy - clergy 'who refuse to put away their wives' were to be deprived of their living. He also came down hard on lazy or immoral priests.

Still no connection with Dover? In 1253, at the Pope's behest, Richard journeyed from Chichester along the south coast urging a crusade to rescue the Holy Places from the Turk. Eventually, he reached Dover exhausted and ill from his travels and stayed at the Maison Dieu which, of course, offered free board and lodging to pilgrims. Despite his poor state of health, he insisted upon consecrating a new cemetery chapel in memory of his old friend, tutor and archbishop, Edmund Rich – St. Edmund. This was on 30 March 1253. The next morning, during Mass in the Maison Dieu, he collapsed and died later, on 3 April.

According to custom, his internal organs were removed and buried in the altar of St. Edmund's Chapel. His body was transported to Chichester and, before burial in the cathedral, his head was removed and placed in a reliquary in a cathedral chapel. Richard was canonized in 1262 and in 1276 his body was moved to an impressive tomb behind the high altar in the presence of King Edward I, the Queen and the Archbishop. It became a place of pilgrimage for the next 250 years until destroyed on the orders of Henry VIII.

Source: St. Richard of Chichester by Carole M. Duncan-Jones, the Faith Press 1953.