

DISCOVERY AND MYSTERY

John of Sheppey's tomb

*In a further dip into the Cathedral's past, **Derek Barnard** relates the tale of the discovery of John of Sheppey 's hidden tomb and the questions that remain unanswered.*

The Dean's notebook (see November 1996 Newsletter), gives the true account of the finding and colouring of the effigy of John of Sheppey, protégé, of Hamo de Hythe, Prior of St. Andrews Priory, Bishop of Rochester and Treasurer of England, who died in 1360.

Mr Cottingham came to Rochester on 10 January 1825 to survey the fabric of the cathedral and five days later had the workman remove the walls which had been built within the arch in the north-west of the presbytery. This was no doubt to ascertain if there was any structural reason for them being there. As the blocks were removed, the bishop's effigy was discovered under a badly damaged canopy. It rested on two cross-iron bars in a rather slanting position among a large amount of stone, chalk and mortar which had further damaged it. Parts of his mitre and hands were found above the canopy.

When the rubble was removed from one end of the tomb a coffin was found. The Dean, fearing that curiosity would intrude upon the sanctuary of the dead, ordered that the rubble be replaced and from his own pocket paid œ50 to have a new cover slab laid on the tomb and a canopy of stone built above.

The mystery remains however for the date of the effigy and the tomb do not match. The figure had been removed from somewhere else in the cathedral. How had it lasted long enough to be hidden? Why was care not taken in building it in? Why trouble at all? Theories but no facts.

The account of the colouring incident I quote directly from the notebook. I have heard differing stories but this is the one I shall tell from now on when conducting cathedral tours. 'As the colouring of the effigy (which in most parts was quite perfect, tho' at the most prominent parts entirely rubbed off by the rubble) was likely, now that it was exposed to the action of light and air, to fade and peel off, it was judged advisable by the architect to prevent this effect if possible by means of a little varnish, or by some process that might be recommended by a person well skilled in these matters.

Unfortunately an artist was sent down from London, who, either not understanding or disobeying his instructions, proceeded to recolour the effigy. Neither the architect or myself was at Rochester at the time. A day or two, however, after the mischief was done I came to Rochester; and perceiving it I immediately wrote to the architect and told him what was done. He instantly came down, and fortunately succeeded in almost entirely removing the mischief, so that the whole of the colouring which was visible when the effigy was discovered, appears to my eye nearly the same as it was before it was touched. The only difference is it appears a little more vivid; and those prominent parts of the effigy, from which the colouring was rubbed off entirely, are repainted.'



The tomb uncovered (Illustrated London News)

Derek Barnard February 1997