

## The Reluctant Bishop

*In this article, **Derek Barnard** tells us about a Bishop of Rochester, unwillingly enthroned, who nevertheless did great things for the Cathedral and earned the respect of the monks of St Andrews Priory.*

During the early period of the Norman occupation of England, the sees of Canterbury and Rochester had a very close relationship, bishops and archbishops having served as monks at Bec Fleloun Abbey in Normandy and at Christchurch, Canterbury before being elevated to higher rank. There was also an exchange of men between the two Kentish Benedictine religious houses.

When Gundulf died in 1108, Ralf d'Escures, who had been Abbot of S6es but had been forced to flee and seek sanctuary in England, was appointed as Rochester's new bishop. He was able to achieve little in the diocese because, after just one year of tenure, Anselm died and Henry I's relationship with his deceased archbishop had not been such as to encourage an early replacement. For five years Henry collected the Primate's dues and Rochester's bishop had to carry out the duties of archbishop in addition to his own. Eventually the King was forced into making a decision which was not to the liking of the bishops present at the Windsor Council of 1114 but after much argument, a compromise was reached with the creation of Ralph as Archbishop of Canterbury and to carry on with the work he was already doing but now to have also the status and rewards he deserved.

The King now needed to find a Bishop of Rochester. Whilst waiting at the coast for the weather to improve enough for him to cross over to Normandy, the King sent for Ernulf, the Abbot of Peterborough, commanding him to come speedily as he wished to speak to him 'privately'. According to the Anglo Saxon Chronicle 'He pressed the bishopric at Rochester upon him and the archbishops and bishops and the nobility that was in England went along with the King. And he long resisted but it was to no avail; and the King ordered the Archbishop that he should lead him to Canterbury and bless him as bishop whether he wanted or not'.

Ernulf, a Frenchman, had been a monk at Bec before going to Canterbury to become the Prior of Christchurch. He had great architectural skills and it was he who took down the eastern end of Lanfranc's cathedral and began the rebuilding of it. At Peterborough, he had almost rebuilt the abbey. The Peterborough monks, on hearing of his appointment to the see of Rochester were as sorry as they had ever been before because he was a very good and gentle man and did much good inside and outside while he lived there\*.'

At Rochester, where he was enthroned on 10 October 1114, he soon brought his building skills into play. Gundulph's cloisters against the south wall of the nave needed rebuilding in stone and obviously it was easier to build beside the existing structure, and when the building was complete, demolish the old. This meant erecting them in the unusual position against and beyond the south side of the presbytery and choir. He erected the Frater, that is the dining hall; the Dorter or dormitory, the monks' sleeping quarters and the Chapter House where they met to transact business. He also carried out works to the cathedral though most of that has been lost in later alterations. It is also believed that he began the encasement of Gundulf's very plain nave to give us the ornamentation we so enjoy today.

Ernulf was not only generous with the building at Rochester for he gave the monks incomes from various privileges for the upkeep of their cloisters and also the tithes of the Rectory at Hadenham in Buckinghamshire to pay for the lighting of the cathedral church. He also donated 'most precious ornaments'. He was an expert on Canon Law and was associated with the Textus Roffensis, Rochester's most famous book.

To the last he enjoyed the confidence of the monks of Canterbury and was revered by the monks of Rochester as a benefactor worthy to be classed with Lanfranc and Gundulph. Ernulf died on 15 March 1124 at the age of 84, we are told. Unfortunately, his cloisters were badly damaged by the great fire of 1179 but enough remains to show what a skilful architect he was. The good relationship between Canterbury and Rochester did not long survive his death; but that is another story waiting to be told.

\*Anglosaxon Chronicle: Peterborough Manuscript (E)

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