

Rochester Cathedral by Frank Buzzard

I heard Rochester Cathedral before I saw it. The clock struck the late hours, and on looking from my hotel window could see over the house tops, the blue faced dial on its floodlit spire. It reminded me of its presence regularly throughout the night.

Without doubt the best time to visit Rochester is late May when the city celebrates with a festival for one of its most notable citizens, Charles Dickens. Local inhabitants dress up in Dickensian clothes and parade through the streets...

Just before he died, Dickens wrote these words for one of his characters, Mr Datchery, on his way to the cathedral,

"A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with a lusty ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, songs of birds, scents from gardens, woods and fields - or, rather, from the one great garden of the whole cultivated island in its yielding time - penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthy odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life".

Stand inside the West door on the thin metal semi-circle that marks the Seventh Century Saxon church and look up the North aisle. Past the paired variety of nave pillars to the steps worn flat by Pilgrims knees beside Gundulf's Tower, and further on under flags and low arches to the cross and prayer candles of Saint John's Chapel glowing in the distance. Stand still. Absorb the nuances of angular stone, patterns of light, and mysteries of shade. Then when you feel ready, walk slowly up the aisle, sensing the Spirit of the monks who preceded you centuries ago in their day and night processions.

Not that Rochester has ever been peaceful for long. Across the road is the castle, always full of clattering boots, rattling swords and noisy guns. Frequently military troubles spread into the cathedral. In 1215 King John's soldiers knocked it about a bit and in 1264 Simon de Montfort's 'Lot' had a go.

Soldiers engaged in countless sieges camped outside the castle for weeks on end, would become bored and storm into the cathedral, break up a few things, steal items of value and terrify the monks. There would be brutalities, atrocities and many unrecorded crimes. A serious riot broke out in 1327 and Cromwell's Roundheads played havoc in the mid 1600's.

Below the castle is the wide River Medway full of maritime activity, which must also have provided diversion and excitement for the monastery. I daresay the Abbot had his representatives in attendance whenever a ship arrived from foreign parts with an exotic cargo - spices, unknown foods, building materials, liquor and wines. Few places were more exciting than docks.

It was dark down in the crypt where I searched for the famous graffiti. A clergyman was most helpful, but it took us several minutes of combined operations. When found, these scored lines etched in black on opposite pillars were hardly spectacular. Faces with long Roman noses. Interesting because they are thought to be old with origin unknown. Did a monk with artistic ambitions practise down here? or was it one of the apprentice masons trying his hand at art? We shall never find out now. Strange how we venerate these efforts simply because we think they are ancient. A far more artistic graffiti contribution to the walls today would be greeted with cries of vandalism.

Plenty of paint to look at on these walls. Those monks enjoyed being surrounded by colour as they worshipped. A 13th century Wheel of Fortune mural is more than half lost, but still an interesting curiosity. Saint Christopher carrying Christ through water is unfortunately a smudged cloudy image that requires plenty of imagination. My favourite is Christ in the South choir arcade, where the sinuous quality of the painting stuck a lasting memory in my mind.

Lovely patterns high on the nave arches are attractive. Opposite pillars North and South are alike, but each pair different. My prying eyes and mind were absorbed by one pillar which had four little Saxon stones sculptured like interwoven belts. Rochester is a smallish cathedral, conveying an intimate homely atmosphere. It is easy to imagine sixty monks huddled in the choir with its unusual painted walls, chanting their prayers, kneeling at antique wooden desks (as old as any in England), sealed off from all except the altar - alone with their God.

A bare unwritten grey slab is all that remains to remind us of William of Perth.

Pilgrims on the way to Canterbury passed the monastery walls of Rochester without stopping, and for years they were desperate to have a shrine of their own. William, a baker, did decide to stay when he arrived one night very late. It was the year 1201. Shortly after leaving the monastery early next morning he was murdered. The Abbot brought his body back for burial and in a very short time miracles and legends were attributed to him.

Experts in architecture talk about peculiarities South of the choir. Certainly appears complicated with its different levels and stairways. They are also puzzled and perplexed by carved statues round the Chapter house doorway. Mused on these matters awhile before leaving by the old cloister door.

Not much remains of monastic buildings. It was however, delightful to sit on lush green grass behind the old Chapter house, enjoying scones, jam and cream with our overflowing teapot, surrounded by laughing happy people in Dickensian dress. My wife and I felt transported backwards in 'Dr Who' style to an earlier age.

"Said' Evensong in the Lady Chapel was unusual; in two ways. First slightly odd feature was that we faced Westwards with the altar in its proper place in front of us. Only a handful of us, almost outnumbered by clergy. I say almost because I am not sure. The clergy led the service from behind the congregation, and all but one slid silently out at the end before we realised the proceedings were at an end.

Whatever the reason, it served the purpose of being unique for me, and therefore an Evensong I have not forgotten.