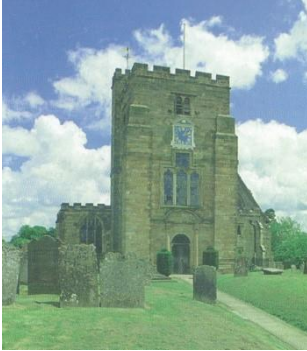


Village Echoes

Rebuilding the Church Tower



A traveller arriving in Goudhurst today cannot fail to notice the Church of St Mary the Virgin, at the top of the High Street, with its imposing tower. However, a traveller arriving in the early 17th century would, no doubt, have found the tower even more imposing, as it was surmounted by a tall spire. Unfortunately, on the night of August 23rd 1637 it was set on fire by a dreadful storm of thunder and lightning. The storm broke and a lightning strike melted the five great bells in the tower. We are told that it burnt all the timber and woodwork of the spire and shook and rent the stone of the tower so much that it was thought right to take down the steeple (the tower plus the spire) entirely.

Having completed the demolition works, it was then necessary to decide what to put in its place and who would carry out the rebuilding. In 1638, the churchwardens, John Stringer and James Bunce, and various, prominent parishioners, including Sir William Campion, Thomas Bathurst and John Horsmonden, signed an agreement with Edmund Kinsman, James Holmes and John Young of the City of London for the rebuilding at a cost of £730. The Goudhurst & Kildown Millennium Book gives the total cost of the building works as £2,745. The difference in cost is because a significant part of the work was to be undertaken by the Church and parishioners, i.e., the churchwardens and parishioners were to do the demolition works; to dig up the foundation and make it ready to lay; to provide all materials, stones, lime, sand, and water into the churchyard; and to fetch scaffolding from Maidstone. The agreement stipulated that all the work had to be completed by Michaelmas 1640.

It is interesting to compare the specification for the work to how the tower looks today. The requirements were for:

- *The height of the tower from the ground to be three score and ten feet to the top of the battlement, which battlements to be four feet high;*
- *Four pinnacles twenty feet high from the battlements;*
- *A "faire door-case at the west end with a faire arch window over it in the first storie and in the second storie 2 windows and in the third storie, where the bells are to hang, fower windowes";*
- *The steeple to be 17 square feet internally at ground level.*

In his book “England’s Thousand Best Churches”, Simon Jenkins describes the tower as having been rebuilt in the Gothic style with a classical surround to the doorway. He calls the west window ‘curious’ and a transition from Gothic to classical. According to Simon Jenkins, the west window is identical to one at St Katharine Cree in London (built 1628-30). The architect of that church is not known but it is possible that the builders of our church tower had also worked on St Katharine Cree and drew inspiration from there.

Whatever one’s feelings about the architecture of the tower, there is no doubt that it is a structure of immense power and would be even more imposing had a spire been added when it was rebuilt. Nevertheless, the tower dominates the western approach to the village and is a daily reminder of our ancestors’ faith and the importance of the church in the community both now and in the past.

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