
OPENING OF THE ROPER VAULT
in St. Dunstan's Canterbury
and thoughts on the burial of William and Margaret Roper.
by Hugh O. Albin

From Saturday 15 July until Wednesday 26 July 1978, the vault of the Roper family remained open in St. Dunstan's Church, Canterbury, for the purpose of making a complete record of its contents. This first archaeological survey ever made was arranged by me to mark the 500th anniversary of the birth of Sir Thomas More. The work was carried out by members of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust under their director Tim Tatton-Brown in conjunction with the church architect Peter Marsh, whose Dutch assistant, Henk Strik made detailed drawings of the Chapel and vault, as well as a complete photographic record.

The archaeological report tells us that the present Roper chantry chapel attached to the south-east side of St. Dunstan's Church is almost entirely the building that was erected circa 1524. Of the first chapel, built in 1402, there probably remain only the three arches, one on the west and two on the north, which join the chapel to the main church building.

The pilgrim looking at the outside of the Roper Chapel should notice that it is made of fine red bricks with Caen stone quoins and window surrounds. The windows are all typical of the early 16th century. The bricks are large (6.5 x 12 x 25 cms) and each laid entirely in an English bond. Red brickwork of this type does not occur commonly in Canterbury until the late 15th century. As well as the three windows in the Roper Chapel, a small door (presumably for the use of the two chantry priests) is set into the extreme western end of the south wall, and this also dates from the early 16th century.

The Chapel's overall external dimensions are 8.3 metres (East-West) by 5.5 metres. Its single almost flat wooden roof covered in lead is also early 16th century. Within the south wall towards its eastern end are two Bethersden marble tomb-chests and a decorated slab which are thought to be roughly contemporary with the chapel. The brasses once fixed to these tomb-chests were robbed (probably in the 18th or early 19th century), which makes it impossible to be certain which refer to members of the Roper family.

However, William Somner, in *The Antiquities of Canterbury* of 1640 (page 342), records three monumental inscriptions to the Ropers in St. Dunstan's Church. According to Tim Tatton-Brown, the earliest of these inscriptions (to Edmund Roper, d. 1433) cannot relate to the tomb-chests, and was probably on a larger stone set into

the floor. Such a large ledger stone was discovered lying roughly over what the archaeologists took to be the entrance to the vault. This ledger stone had on it in the middle a brass indent, and round the edges indents for shields. The form of the indents would indicate a date in the 15th century, and it is suggested that this ledger stone is the grave slab of Edmund Roper (d. 1433), whose brief inscription, recorded by Sommer, could easily fit into the space below the figures on the stone. Writes Mr. Tatton-Brown :

It is quite clear from the position of the slab that it had only covered the entrance to the vault since the 19th century and before then it must have lain somewhere else in the chapel covering a grave where it would have been seen by Somner in the 17th century. Another 15th century indent now in the floor just to the west of the Roper chapel could also possibly be a Roper.

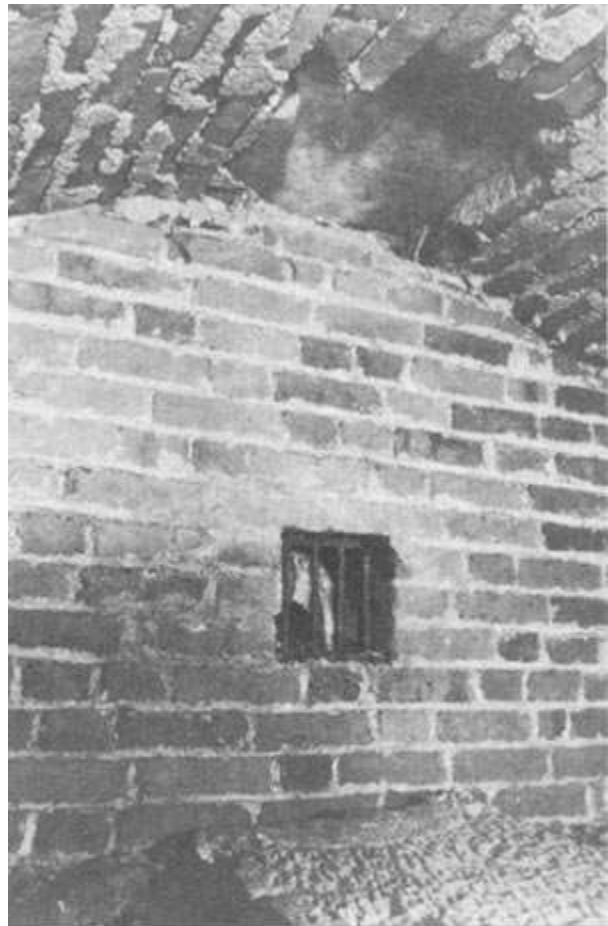
The other two inscriptions, which are fairly long, almost certainly adorned the tomb-chests. One is a memorial in English to John Roper and his wife Jane in 1524 ; the other to William Roper and his wife Margaret, in Latin, was set up in 1578 when William Roper died or sometime after this date. The phrase *Hic iacet ... Gulielmus Roper et Margareta uxor* (<< here lie William Roper and Margaret his wife >>) can only mean that their bodies lie *here*, in St. Dunstan's, Canterbury. ¹

Before the discovery of the large ledger stone, it had been thought that the eastern tomb-chest was that of Edmund Roper and the western one that of John Roper. There was no site given for the tomb of William and Margaret Roper. The recent excavation has made archaeologists come to the conclusion that the eastern tomb is that not of Edmund Roper but of John Roper, who probably had the whole chapel rebuilt in 1524. The indent for two figures, two shields and the inscription can just be made out on the back wall of the tomb. However, what is new information is the archaeological statement that the larger tomb to the west is probably therefore that of William and Margaret Roper. The surviving rivets may suggest two kneeling figures. This tomb could have been constructed well before William's death in 1578, indeed as early as the 1540's. This could be very important in determining the original burial site of Margaret Roper, who died in 1544. The archaeological report suggests a threefold process in the evolution of the Roper vault from 1524 to the 1540's, and the larger vault built later in the century, probably by Thomas Roper, the grandson of Sir Thomas, who died in 1597/8. It is perhaps about this time that the special niche was made in the vault, and the head of the martyr removed from Margaret's tomb to be put in the niche. Thomas Roper was probably responsible for this being done.

The removal of the ledger stone to one side in July 1978 revealed brick steps leading down into the vault. The northern wall of the vault contains the much spoken-of iron grating behind which is a fragmentary skull in a lead box. Unfortunately the

vault was more than half full of earth and rubble, and the archaeologists had to spend a week clearing all this out by hand. However, when the bottom of the vault was reached, they found five lead coffins. The floor is of unmortared bricks sitting on a bedding of sand. Coffins I to 4 can almost certainly be identified as those of Charles (Edward) Henshaw, Edward Henshaw (son of Charles Edward), Elizabeth Henshaw (née Roper and wife of Charles Henshaw) and Catherine Strickland (née Henshaw) ². The fifth coffin, in a different style, is difficult to attribute with certainty. The skeleton suggests an oldish woman, maybe Anne Roper (d. 1720/1) or Lady Katherine Roper (d. 1715). This coffin had sunk down into a small inner brick vault or 'charnel' pit (1.5 metres long and 60 cms wide) full of the mixed up remains of human bones. The other skeletons in the pit or cist cannot be identified but must be the earlier members of the Roper family who were buried in wooden coffins. When these coffins (and corpses) had rotted the bones were put into the brick pit to make room for more coffins. The report continues :

Apart from the vault itself, a small area just outside the vault was excavated. This was the area between the steps leading down into the vault and the second tomb-chest. We found that in this area there was another rectangular vault, which had been built of brick and must be associated with the second tomb-chest. It also appears to precede the building of the steps into the large vault but not the early vault associated with the first tomb-chest. Unfortunately we were not able to determine the full size nor to excavate this second vault and so we do not know its contents. The top of the vault had been a small barrel vault running east-west, but this had been destroyed when the floor (i.e. the outer external floor) was relaid and it was totally filled with a similar rubble to that found in the large vault. We were, however, able to work out a sequence of the building of the various vaults and to come to some possible conclusions.



This shows the interior of the Roper vault. The niche is right underneath the memorial slab placed on the floor of the chapel in 1932. Below the niche one can see the mound of rubble which the diggers had to clear before reaching the floor of the vault, thus exposing the coffins.

Commenting on the grandiose wall memorial now on the north wall of the chancel but previously in the Roper chapel, the report suggests that the fulsome inscription to Thomas Roper << could well have been put up to mark the completion of the building of the new enlarged vault and Thomas Roper's burial in it in 1597/8 >>. Later members of the family would have been buried in this enlarged vault.

For the sake of future records, I ought to list the witnesses of this historic opening : Professor Hubertus Schulte Herbruggen of Dusseldorf ; J.B. Trapp, Director of the Warburg Institute ; Nicholas Barker, Director of Conservation at the British Library ; the Revd. Gordon Rupp, formerly Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge ; P. Collinson, Professor of History at the University of Kent ; A. F. Butcher, lecturer in History at the University of Kent ; Canon Alfonso De Zulueta, Rector of the Church of Our Most Holy Redeemer and Saint Thomas More at Chelsea ; Mrs Margaret Pawley, deputising for the Archdeacon of Canterbury, Canon B.C. Pawley, who was indisposed at the time ; Miss Anne Roper of Littlestone, New Romney, Kent ; Bishop Anthony Tremlett of Dover ; Bishop Morris St. J. Maddocks of Selby ; Archbishop George Otto Simms of Armagh (the latter two persons being in Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference). Of course I also, with my wife Betty and our children, John and Christina, can bear witness to the findings in the Roper vault, as can the Church-wardens Terence Wright and Harold Drage.

My readers would no doubt like to be informed of the medical assessment of the << skull >> attributed to the martyr. Dr. P.H. Garrard was only allowed an external examination of the lead container set in a niche in the north wall of the Roper vault. The contents are visible at about one foot distance from an iron grille set in the wall. The container is about one foot cube : a hole cut in it gives a partial view (see the

photos on the facing page). Dr. Garrard recognizes the fragments as being bone from a human skull, namely :



A close-up of the grille and the niche with the hole in the casing.

- (1) A small fragment of the vault of the skull about an inch across.
- (2) The hard palate.
- (3) Part of the maxilla next to it but separated, with one empty tooth socket.
- (4) What appeared to be part of the thin boned structures in the posterior part of the nasal

cavity.

Most of the skull has degenerated into a number of dark brown crumbling pieces and the floor of the container is covered with powdery and granular material. Some of the pieces are whitened by a deposit which is probably a salt of lead. The empty tooth

socket , showing no signs of healing, implies loss of a tooth after death due to natural processes. The advanced degree of decomposition is due, Dr. Garrard suggests, to exposure to air, while the other bones in the vault were covered in earth ³.

Enigma of Margaret Roper and Canterbury

Where was Margaret Roper buried? There are two claimants for her body - Chelsea and Canterbury, the latter too often forgotten or ignored. So far as I know, the two traditions have been kept apart and no reconciliation of them has been attempted. Of course convincing evidence is not easy to come by, so that at the moment one is only able to put forward a reasonable conjecture which may or may not be corroborated in the future.

A close-up of the grille and the niche with the hole in the casket. bury, written in 1640 (page 342). The essential sentence reads : << Hic jacet venerabilis vir Gulielmus Roper et Margareta uxor ejusdam Gul >>. E.E. Reynolds has always maintained that, though Margaret Roper was buried in Chelsea, William was buried in St. Dunstan's, Canterbury. His recent article on << Butclose >> in *Moreana* No. 59-60 (December 1978) sets out his reasons justifying his statement. The Council in 1544, he argues, gave permission for Margaret Roper's body to be buried in Chelsea, whereas in 1578 the Dacre family, now owners of the vault, were not so obliging so far as William Roper was concerned : hence his burial in St. Dunstan's and not Chelsea.

Whilst being prepared to say that the above explanation is probably the correct one, I would tend to accept it with some reservation on the score that the words of William Roper's will need not be taken literally and could be interpreted in another way. The case for a Margaret Roper burial in Chelsea would be stronger if we had some specific evidence that William Roper did make such representations to the Council.

In support of an early Canterbury tradition it might be argued that Margaret must have known that the chances were greater for her husband being buried in St. Dunstan's, and also that her father's 'head', for political reasons, would more likely have its final resting place in Canterbury than Chelsea. On the other hand there seems to have been a strong desire both on the part of Thomas More and therefore perhaps also of his daughter Margaret to be buried in Chelsea, and this deep underlying wish may have overcome << reason >>. Perhaps even William Roper was a party to this wish, and that was why in his will he too sought to be buried in Chelsea, thus overriding strong family ties in Canterbury.

However, if in 1544 Margaret Roper was not buried in Chelsea but in Canterbury, then we would have to re-interpret her husband's will. If we introduce a new factor, viz. that of re-interment, it is possible to solve the seeming contradiction as to their

burial place. The words in William Roper's will could be interpreted as expressing a strong desire or wish to be buried in Chelsea, and his mind construed somewhat as follows : << Since it was always the intention of my father-in-law and of Margaret and myself to be buried in Chelsea, it is my express wish to be buried there along with the re-interred body of my wife>>. ⁴ If, following Reynolds, we take the words in Roper's will as implying that Margaret Roper was buried in Chelsea in 1544, then we have still to reconcile this not only with the early inscription transcribed by Somner, but also with a considerable weight of other evidence pointing to the conclusion that Margaret Roper now lies in St. Dunstan's. In his preface to Roper's Life of Sir Thomas More, Lewis states that << she was buried in the family burying place at St. Dunstan's with her father's head in her arms as she had desired >>. And Antony a Wood in his *Athenae Oxonienses* confirms the same tradition.

As far as I know, the Canterbury tradition never stated an exact date for this burial. The assumption that it was at her death (1544) seems to have been accepted without question. How then are the two traditions of Chelsea and Canterbury to be reconciled? Why not by applying the factor of re-interment to the situation? Without being so dogmatic as Reynolds, I would say that Margaret was probably buried in Chelsea in 1544 and re-interred in St. Dunstan's some time after 1578, when William Roper died and the Roper family was refused permission for his burial in Chelsea. The 1978 excavation suggests that William Roper may have been building a new vault in the 1540's. Perhaps at the time of Margaret Roper's death in 1544 there was no immediate vault available, or not sufficient room ; this fact, coupled with Margaret's wish to be buried in Chelsea, may have forced William to apply to the Council to get permission for her burial in Chelsea.

Whatever view we take, the re-interment factor has the merit of reconciling such evidence as we have. The weight of evidence for me points to William and Margaret Roper now resting in St. Dunstan's and what could be more appropriate, logical and indeed providential than that she who used to nurse that same head of the martyred saint in life should in death still not be parted from it or from her beloved William as well.

Vicar of St.Dunstan's
With Holy Cross, Canterbury.

HUGH O. ALBIN

NOTES

1. Somner in 1640 gives the full text, as do Biran G. Godfrey Faussett (1720-76) in his *Collecta Parochalia*, and E.V. Hitchcock in her preface (1935) to the E.E.T.S. *Life of More* by Roper (using Lewis' edition of the same life), p. xliii.

2. Several coffin plates for Charles, Elizabeth and Edward Henshaw were found on the coffins (not in situ except number 3 -- Elizabeth Henshaw) ; the outline of an iron plate corroded away may point to coffin number 4 being Catherine Strickland's.

3. Scholars of More will be interested in the empty tooth socket as a possible identification with Thomas More who was known to have a << missing tooth >> in life. It is indeed strange that this empty tooth socket should be so prominent but in view of the medical comment we should not read perhaps too much into it. Even without this evidence of identification the historical evidence of identification with Thomas More is still, in my judgment, very strong.

The tooth is mentioned in Cresacre More's Life of his great-grandfather ; it may be the same as a portion of it listed among the relies in the Benedictine abbey of Lampspring -- see T.E. Bridgett, *Life of Blessed Thomas More*, 2nd edition (London 1892), p. 459.

4. This interpretation presupposes the burial of Margaret Roper in St.Dunstan's and not in Chelsea. In recent conversation with Professor Hubertus Schulte Herbrüggen I was interested to note that he tends to favour this interpretation.

Source of above article: Albin, H. O. "Opening of the Roper Vault in St. Dunstan's Canterbury and Thoughts on the Burial of William and Margaret Roper." *Moreana* 63 (1979): 29--35.