

What was Lee's Pillar

From a compilation of sources referenced below – June 2018

Mary Trebeck¹ posed the question as to what and where it was with her reference to it, on the plan of the Minster in her guide.

Next it was found that G M Livett² says: “This inscription until quite lately adorned one of the great piers which supports the lantern tower. It tells us that Religious Antiquity founded this collegiate and parish church, that Henry VIII renewed the foundation, and that Elizabeth and James I ratified and confirmed it. He shows the text read:

Lee's Pillar.

Reges et Reginae erunt nutrices tuae.
Hanc
Collegiatam et Parochialem Ecclesiam
Religiosa Antiquitas
Fundavit

Rex Henricus 8 Illustrissimus	{ restauravit 1543 }	Edwardo Lee Archiepiscopo Ebor. Piossimo	} Petente
Reg. Elizabetha Religiosissima	{ sancivit 1584 }	Edwino Sandys Archiepiscopo Ebor. Dignissimo	} Intercede
Monarcha Jacobus Præpotentissimus	{ stabilivit 1604 }	Henrico Howard Comite Northamptoniensi Prænobilissimo	} Mediante.

A Domino factum est istud :
Da gloriam Deo
Honorem Regi.
Sint sicut Oreb et Zeb, Zebe et Salmana,
Qui dicunt possideamus Sanctuarium Dei.
Psal. 83. 11.
Det Deus hoc sanctum sanctis ; sit semper Asylum
Exulis, Idolatris Sacrilegosque ruat.
Gervas Lee
In piam gratamque Mæcenatum memoriam
Posuit.
1608.

Which was then³ kindly translated, to read in English:

LEE'S PILLAR

Kings and Queens will be your nurturers.
Religious Antiquity founded this Collegiate
And Parochial Church.

The most illustrious King Henry VIII renewed it in 1543,
At the request of Edward Lee, most pious Archbishop of York.

The most devout Queen Elizabeth ratified it in 1584,
With Edwin Sandys, the most worthy Archbishop of York interceding.

The most powerful Monarch, James, confirmed it in 1604,
With the most noble Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton mediating.

That was done by the Lord:

Give glory to God,
Honour to the King.

May there be men, just as Oreb and Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna,
Who say, “Let us take possession of the Sanctuary of God.”

Psalm. 83.11.

May God give this holy foundation to the holy;
 May it always be a Place of Refuge for Exiles,
 May it cast down Idolaters and the Profane.

Gervase Lee

Set up this pillar in pious and grateful memory of his Benefactors.

1608

So who was Gervas Lee⁴ :

Born in Southwell to Reginald Lee and Dorothy Thurland. The date of his birth has not been clearly established but would have been around 1555 as the date of his marriage to Bridget Sotherby is given as 1581 or 1582 and they had 9 children. Again the date of his death is uncertain, 1621 or 1622, still in Southwell. His eldest son also Gervase had the prebend of Norwell Overhall and lived at Norwell Hall. The significance of this will become clear later.

Lee sat as a member of parliament for Ripon in 1584, through his friendship with the Archbishop of York, Edwin Sandys, who was especially fond of his residence at Southwell, where Lee also had his seat. Sandys made Lee a justice, and Lee named Sandys a benefactor of Southwell Minster on the pillar in the church in 1608. Later Lee acquired the keepership of Norwood Park from the archbishop's son, Sir Miles Sandys. His post as Justice, however, led him to start a number of Star Chamber cases against people who had illegally hunted deer in the park. Then he complained, in 1617, of slanderous statements made against him after serving as a justice in the archbishop's liberties in Nottinghamshire for more than 34 years, 'never in all that time hath any ways been impeached or touched in his carriage, credit or reputation'. Now attempts were being made 'by all base means practised to deprave your said subject and to bring infamy and disgrace upon him, not only in the county where he dwelleth, but also to draw your highness's favour from him'.

In 1623 Lee [or was it now his son] brought another case concerning poaching in Norwood park, accusing a servant of Lord Stanhope. But the archbishop, Toby Matthew, asked for the case to be withdrawn and reprimanded Lee for acting beyond his authority, asking 'what authority, claim or title you have to the keepership of that my park, which now I expect at your hands without delay for my better satisfaction and your indemnity'.

[A bit of inconsistency here as the first paragraph says he passed away in 1621/2 and the second paragraph refers to his actions in 1623!]

For certain, however, Edwin Sandys⁵ was well regarded by his Queen, because he had worked so hard, alongside Parker and Grindall, to ensure that the Reformation took root and was a friend of Gervase Lee.

Extract from John Ottey⁶ in his book the Story of Southwell gives the background to the verse on Lee's 'Pillar' and then the subsequent fall from grace, in these extracts:

In 1585 Queen Elizabeth gave new statutes to Southwell Minster (these are actually dated 2nd April in the 27th year of her reign).

Near the end of Elizabeth's reign, an attack was again made on the Minster. This maintained that the college had been legally dissolved by the act of I Edward VI, therefore the Minster's property was 'concealed', and fraudulently withheld from the crown. At a chapter meeting

held on 14th November 1601, it was agreed that Lancelot Andrewes, Dean of Westminster, Prebendary of North Muskham, and Gervase Lee Esq. be authorized to take all measures for the church's defence. The accession of James I to the throne in 1603 inspired the enemies of the church with fresh hope, but a petition was made to the king by the chapter and it found a powerful advocate in the person of Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton. King James instructed his Attorney-General to take all necessary steps to make Southwell Minster secure, and in the second year of his reign, King James confirmed all of its ancient possessions to the church.

By his letters patent King James I had confirmed the position of Southwell Minster but he could not place it above criticism.

In September 1620 a resident of Southwell named Gervase Lee (presumably the same Gervase Lee who in 1601 had been authorized to act on behalf of the church) made a series of complaints against the chapter. He said that the services were neglected, the divinity lecture not read regularly, and the catechism not taught every Sunday afternoon. He maintained that the office of receiver should be held by one single person, and that the post of registrar was being shared between father and son leading to confusion. Lee complained that the church was not fully exercising its responsibilities to the Peculiar (what did he mean by that?), that the prebendaries were not keeping residence as they should, and that there was a shortage of vicars-choral. He said that the parish vicarage, although now filled, had been left vacant for three years. Lee maintained that the schoolmaster showed favouritism in the admission of scholars. He claimed that some lands belonging to the Minster had been lost and ought to be sued for, and said that houses owned by the church should not be demolished. He complained that yearly audits were not being made of the accounts, that money owed to the king (from taxation) was in arrears, and that income from fabric lands and from new leases ought to be used to repair the church 'in lead and glass'. Most importantly, Lee said, the prebendaries had appropriated the funds of the vicars-choral and were in arrears with the vicars' pay. He claimed that the wages of the choir were not being paid.

Whether there was any substance in these charges or whether Lee was simply someone who liked making trouble for the Church (a type of person unfortunately all too familiar to many clergy men and women) we cannot now tell. If, as seems likely, he was the same man who had previously been chosen to act for the Minster, there were probably solid grounds for his complaints. At any rate, the charges were serious enough for the chapter to make a point by point rebuttal of them, and these replies shed a good deal of light on the workings of the Minster at that time.

The chapter replied. It simply denied that services were being neglected and said that divinity lectures were being delivered at the same time as at York, but the catechism class was the responsibility of the parish vicar not of the chapter.

Gervase Lee pursued his attack upon the chapter. He published a poem about Southwell Minster which included the lines:

That the canons of Southwell are much to be shentes, (*put to shame*)
In seeing their church windows so pitifully rentes,
By not glazing of which they be greatly offendentes.'

This time Lee had gone too far. The poem was adjudged to be libellous, the chapter sued, Lee was found guilty and fined £500 (the equivalent of over £50,000 today). This poem is

interesting. Although found to be libellous it probably had some basis of truth and suggests that some of the damage to the fabric which has commonly been said to have been caused during the Civil Wars or the Commonwealth, had already occurred earlier as the result of neglect.

Dickinson⁷, gives the full ballad as:

Gervas Lee's Ballad.

<p>NOVERINT universi per presentes That the Canons of Southwell are much to be shentes, In seeing their church windows pitifully rentes, By not glazing of which they be greatly offendentes. Well said Christmas.</p>	<p>Again, at the spring-time when they want blooding, That the cuckow is come, and the bushes are budding, They send them with surplice bags to God to a gooding, And all but to get them a Sunday poke-pudding. Well, &c.</p>
<p>Again they hold of their Virgin Mary, Ecce quam bonum est cohabitare! And neither keep bakehouse, brewhouse, nor dairy, Nor any residence, nor tell us quare. Well, &c.</p>	<p>Again, they do keep them in so great glavery, And do acquaint them in their sharp slavery, Not a day in a year to shew us their bravery, Sixteen, and but one cloak to cover their knavery. Well, &c.</p>
<p>Again, they preach unto their Uxoribus, And say, it was written in Aristotle de moribus, That the right summum bonum to cozen the pooribus, Is to say that the butler is gone out of dooribus. Well, &c.</p>	<p>Again, they have got us a witty Sir Francis, Not very rich, however it chances, Yet above Eton lustily prances, Contrary quite to the church ordinances. Well, &c.</p>
<p>Again, the cathedral when they do enter, To which they should move as to their chief center, Their Chorals come in, as by indenture, And instead of provender, read peradventure. Well, &c.</p>	<p>Again, they have popped us in an ancient Briton, Who bought up ten sermons very fair written, But now lies mute as a mouse in a mitten; I wish all such pedagogues foully besh - - n. Well, &c.</p>
<p>Again, they have taken up three or four song men, Some of them little, and some of them long men, All at the black pot wondrous strong men, But the worst voices that e'er came among men. Well, &c.</p>	<p>Again, they have a Sir Reverend Judgibus, At whose good gifts I do not much grudgibus, To whom the capon, pig, and goose do trudgibus, Yet to conclude, he is but a snudgibus. Well, &c.</p>
<p>Again, their fine organist, whom they do brag on, Blue points at his breeches, with never a tag on, That once in a year puts not a whole rag on, Plays Sallenger's round to us for a small flaggon. Well, &c.</p>	<p>And now to put all these together, Coach them, or cart them, it sills not whether, More sordid sycophants are not lapt in leather, Till which geese be flown, we shall have no fair weather. Well said Christmas.</p>

This does not really answer the question what was Lee's Pillar. Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that it was an inscription on the south-east Norman pillar of the crossing, scraped off during the C19th Restoration. But why call it a pillar? There are no signs of an inscription on the column now but it is well recorded that the early C19th restoration was poorly done with plaster repairs to the stonework and many surfaces had to be refaced with stone in the Ewan Christian era. Also was it Gervase Lee the elder or his son who was libellous to his great cost?

References/Bibliography

- 1 Mary Trebeck Guide to the Cathedral of St Mary's, Southwell of 1900 [Fact Sheet No 291]
- 2 Greville Mairis Livett Southwell Minster; An Account of the Collegiate and Cathedral Church of Southwell, Architectural, Archaeological and Historical of 1883
- 3 Christine Bowering, our colleague and Chief Guide, and Gwendy Roe, to whom we are very grateful for the translation.
- 4 The web was searched and Diana Pitchford has done her usual rigorous searches at the County Archives to provide these leads to Gervase Lee.
- 5 Archbishop Edwin Sandys, whose history was extensively researched by David Turner [FSeet 173].
- 6 John L Ottey – The Story of Southwell, A History – published and copyright 2005 [Note the above contains some direct extracts]. The Guild have a copy as well as in the local public libraries.
- 7 William Dickinson – The History & Antiquities of the Town of Southwell, first published 1819 [although some of his writings are thought now to be questionable]. The Guild have a copy as well as in the local public libraries.