

JULIAN LITTEN looks at ...

Cobham, Kent



The tomb of the 9th Lord Cobham and his wife, Lady Anne Bray

The de Cobham family began its association with the parish in the 13th century and for the next four hundred years they and their heirs, the Brookes, dominated the village and endowed the church of St. Mary Magdalene. As lawyers they were connected with the Court, and as soldiers they fought for the Cross in the Holy Land, and for the Kings in France and Britain. The last of the direct line of the Brookes in 1598 rehabilitated the College, which had lain desolate for fifty years after the Dissolution, and endowed it as an Almshouse, which it still remains. King James I gave Cobham to his cousins the Stuarts and the last Stuart heiress married Sir Joseph Williamson, First Secretary under Charles II. In 1715 the lands passed by marriage to the Blighs, created Earls of Darnley in 1725, and they continue to reside in the parish to the present day.

Early in the 13th century the de Cobhams began to provide money for rebuilding the old church. Of this work only the wide and spacious c.1220 chancel survives, housing the most sumptuous collection of memorial brasses in Great Britain. Between 1360-70 Sir John de Cobham rebuilt the nave with its two aisles, heightened the roof and added the porch and parvis. He also built a College to the south of the church to house priests to say daily Masses for all the members of his family, making use of the chancel of his forebears. Sir John generously endowed the church and gave it many ornaments, vestments, books and communion plate. His last work was the addition of the west tower, lengthening the two aisles to clasp it. It is among the finest of Kentish towers and it seems likely that he was being advised by *Henry Yevele*, the King's master mason. Within the tower is a peal of six bells, four of which are of the 17th century, cast by the Kentish bell-founder Joseph Hatch. The earliest, the fourth of the peal, was cast in 1623 and bears the inscription IOSEPHUS HATCH ME FECIT. The second, fifth and tenor

(13-3-13 in E) were cast in 1632. The third dates from 1790, by "Thos. Mears late Lester Pack and Chapman of London Fecit 1790". The peal of five bells was increased to six by the addition of a new treble bell, cast by Gillett & Johnson of Croydon in 1907.

The unusually broad chancel dates from c.1220 and is a fine example of early English work. In the south east corner is a staircase which led to a loft over the reredos built across the chancel some six feet from the east wall, a feature unknown in England but fairly common in France, which points to the possibility of a French master builder for the 13th century. The High Altar is the original medieval stone *mensa*, though the flanking angels are of 1949 by *Charles Wheeler*. The original piscina, with dogtooth in the trefoil-arched mouldings, was displaced in the late 14th century (probably in c.1370 by Sir John Cobham) by a piscina of outstanding elaborateness, with a panelled back and triple canopy, and an adjoining three-canopied sedilia. The east window is of 1863 and by *Lavers & Barraud* of London and is contemporary with the 1860 restoration programme of *George Gilbert Scott*.

The four-bay aisled nave is rather narrow for such a large chancel and suggests a late 13th century date. The main piers are circular, supporting arches with two hollow chamfers; the aisles of the original width, and the piscina in the south aisle is almost certainly 13th century. Set into the floor at the west end of the nave is a black strip of marble with the inscription: "The Ground between ye two Marbles North & South is ye Burial place of ye Family of Hayes of Oulitt in ye Parish containing Twenty feet in breadth & Fourteen feet in length Weft of this Biorder." Formerly there was a gallery at the west end for the organ and choir, but this was removed in 1860. In the north aisle is a late 16th century alabaster monument to the Hebborne-Eaglestone family, whose names are found on the ledger stones in the centre aisle. The choir vestry, in the north west corner, was created in 1975 from a screen designed by *W. D. Caröe* in 1929 and comes from the Chapel of St. Mary's Convent, Alton, Hampshire.

Nowhere in the country is there such a large and comprehensive group of brasses as at Cobham. The main series is arranged in two rows across the chancel. It commemorates members of the de Cobham and Brooke families, Lords of the Manor. The remainder, scattered in various places, are Master of Cobham College, founded in 1362 by Sir John Cobham. Restorations in 1839 and 1865-66 have left them deceptively pristine, but few details of the figures needed to be renewed. The main series is best described row by row, starting at the right of the east row:

- Joan de Cobham (c.1310-20).
- Thomas de Cobham (d.1367).
- John, 3rd Lord Cobham (d.1408), founder of Cobham College.
- Margaret de Cobham (d.1395), with Virgin & Child at the apex.
- Maude de Cobham (d.1380).
- Margaret de Cobham (d.1375).
- John, 2nd Lord Cobham (d.1354), with modern head.
- John Sprotte (d.1498), priest.

- Rauf de Cobham (d.1402), in armour, holding an inscription plate.
- Sir Thomas Brooke (d.1529).
- Sir Reginald Braybrooke (d.1529).
- Joan, Lady Cobham (d.1433).
- Sir Nicholas Hawberk (d.1407), a husband of Joan, Lady Cobham (d.1433).
- Lady Margaret Brooke (d.1506), the figure of her husband missing.

The other three brasses in the church are:

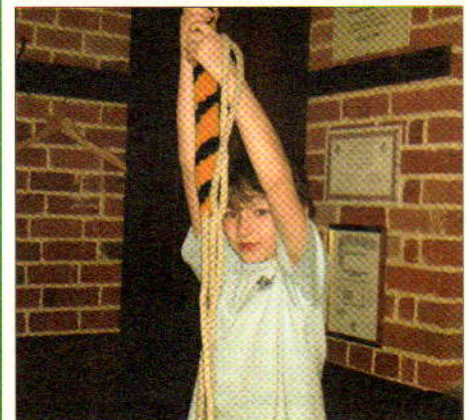
- Reginald de Cobham (d.1402), with replacement head, on north side.
- William Tannere (d.1418), priest, in chancel.
- John Gladwyn (d.1450), priest, in nave.

The large alabaster and touch (black marble) tomb-chest with reclining effigies is to Sir George Brooke, 9th Lord Cobham and Lady Anne Bray, his wife. It was erected in 1558 and placed with profound arrogance in the centre of the chancel, almost within the sanctuary itself. But what gives it special interest is the beauty and purity of the Classical detail at this early date. Around the tomb-chest are kneeling figures of the couple's ten sons and four daughters, in front of shell-headed recesses and between Ionic columns, fluted by means of black inlay. The two main effigies are extremely well-carved. Like the brasses, it is more restored than it looks. A roof beam fell and shattered it in the 18th century and it was only pieced together again in 1840, with further repairs in 1865, paid for by Mr F. C. Brooke.

JULIAN W. S. LITTEN PhD FSA

Practice Night – Wednesday 7.30pm

A Keen Young Recruit



As keen as they come ... young Bradley catches hold

Bradley Allen is nine years old and rings at Lockerley and East Tytherley towers in Hampshire. When he was seven he visited a Lockerley Tower Open Day and having chimed the tenor, asked if he could join. The Tower Captain said that he could, but asked him to 'phone her when he was two years older and a bit taller. She was therefore delighted when he called two years later and said, "It's Bradley, I'm nine, can I join?"

He has been working very hard over the past four months to earn his Bell Club Awards Blue Badge. He has rung for his school carol service and for the Candlemas service at St. John's, Lockerley. When the band arrives on Thursday nights, he has already been practising his raising and lowering, and greets them with a huge friendly grin.

Well done Bradley from all the band for such a wonderful achievement.

J.C.