

WEATHERVANES IN AND AROUND CANTERBURY

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The origins of weathervanes are lost in distant pre-history. Our hunting forefathers, keen to stay down wind of their quarry, no doubt had an abiding interest in wind direction, possibly watching the direction in which smoke from the fire rose, maybe updated through a handful of grass or seeds thrown into the air¹.

What follows is a summary of some weathervanes that stand (or stood) in and around Canterbury.

1. Christ Church Cathedral (about 1160)



The earliest examples for Canterbury survive in a plan² of the cathedral water pipes in Christ Church Cathedral, dated to the late 1150s. The tops of the two west towers show two crowing cocks - these must surely be (long lost) wind vanes.

By tradition, a Papal Bull of the 9th century stipulated that a weathervane in the style of a cockerel should be placed on every church steeple³. For more cockerel examples see items 10 (Mary Bredin) and 16 (Thanington) below.

2. Christ Church Cathedral (about 1077)

Lanfranc's new cathedral was completed in 1077. Gervaise, the 12th century chronicler, refers to a 'gilded seraph' set on top of the cathedral central tower⁴. It seems plausible that this refers to a weathervane 'which the traveller would see glinting in the sun as he came down the hill into Canterbury'⁵.

¹ see A Needham's *English Weathervanes etc*, (Pryor Publications, 2000) p12

² the plan, dateable to around 1158, is bound in the 'Eadwine Psalter' (Trinity College Cambridge, MS R.17.1, fols 284v and 285r) - for details see Peter Fergusson's *Canterbury Cathedral Priory* (Yale UP, 22011); a copy appears on the wall of Canterbury Cathedral Library

³ see Needham *op cit* p24

⁴ see C Eveleigh Woodruff and William Danks *Memorials of the Cathedral and Priory of Christ in Canterbury*, (Chapman and Hall, 1912) p32

⁵ see Patrick Collinson et al *A History of Canterbury Cathedral*, (OUP, 1995) p41

3. Conduit House (1620s)



This elaborate water storage tank stood for over 100 years behind St Andrew's church in the main street (by what is now NatWest Bank). It was funded by Archbishop Abbot who had it erected in the 1620s.

The drawing appeared on local maps in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The storage tank was removed together with the church in 1754.

The arrow and pennant shown above the cupola must surely represent a weather vane?

4. St Peter's church, Canterbury



St Peter's C of E church stands at the end of St Peter's Lane - confusingly within a stone's throw of St Peter's Methodist church. It's hard to decide whether its vane shows three or four keys - the one on top seems to be double-headed. Traditionally St Peter held the keys to the gates that guard the kingdom of heaven.

5. St Martin's church near Canterbury



St Martin's church stands less than half a mile south east of Canterbury cathedral. It can reasonably claim to have enjoyed the longest continuous Christian worship in England.

The weathervane is not easy to interpret. The cross depicted in the forward end is clearly a 'Canterbury cross', and the first (and only) example of this particular shape was dug up near St George's tower in 1867. It was recognised as a 9th century Saxon brooch, but was not presented to the Beane Museum until 1950. The overall shape of the vane looks very much to my eye like a comet. There was a brief period after the 'Great Comet' of 1744 when comet shape vanes became very popular⁶.

What to conclude? That the vane was erected sometime after 1867 by someone who liked the comet design?

⁶ Needham *op cit* p33

6. St Dunstan's church, Canterbury



Image of ciborium on St Dunstan's church



detail

At St Dunstan's, the choice of image is a bit surprising. St Dunstan is associated with pincers (to capture the devil), metal work, goldsmiths (he is their patron saint), and more. Here on the weathervane we find a ciborium⁷ - you need good eyesight, decent binoculars or a fancy camera lens to see it. I conclude that this metal object is intended as a product of Dunstan's handiwork.

7. Marlowe Arcade



On the roof of the entrance to the Marlowe Arcade in St Margaret's Street we find the theatrical masks of comedy and tragedy, reminding us of the Marlowe Theatre⁸ that operated here from 1914 to 1981.

⁷ a ciborium is used to store communion wafers - the lid with bobble suggests this rather than a chalice

⁸ image from *Country Life* 15 November 1973

8. The Beaney



This example can be seen high above the main entrance to the Beaney. This part of the building supposedly survived unchanged throughout the recent refurbishment, so the origin of the weathervane could be over a century old. The vane, which looks modern (or recently restored) seems to be a stylised butterfly, or possibly a fan or insect. None of these seems to have much by way of connection to Beaney or the Library or Museum. So who chose it and when and why?

9. Westgate



Recently refurbished vane on the Westgate



Mayor Henry Cooper
Canterbury City Council Museums and Galleries

The weathervane on the Westgate prove a bit of a puzzle: 'HC 18 M 46'. My first guess was that the HC stood for the church Holy Cross (the nearby church which at one time formed part of the Westgate), and my second that it stood for House of Correction (the Westgate had been used as a prison) but neither of these explained the remainder of the code. Now my best guess is that HC is Mayor Henry Cooper, 1846 is the year of his office (appointed in 1845), and M stands simply for Mayor. Just what he did to merit the vane in the first place remains unclear.

10. St Mary Bredin (corner of Nunnery Fields and Old Dover Rd, Canterbury)



St Mary Bredin church Canterbury (with starling)



detail

There is a strong link between weathervanes and cockerels - witness the alternative term of weathercock, the related Papal Bull mentioned above (entry 1), and the fact that on churches the cock appears more often any other motif. In biblical terms, the bird is associated with St Peter's denial of Christ⁹, and also symbolises vigilance and watchfulness. This particular cock is very much a rounded sculpture in three dimensions.

11. Holy Cross



Holy Cross church (declared redundant in 1973 and converted for use as the Guildhall in 1978) stands close to Westgate towers. It has a weathervane depicting a gate and a pennant. Use of the gate motif reminds us that the original Holy Cross church was incorporated into the Westgate itself.

The carrion crow is a visitor and not part of the vane design.

⁹ St Matthew ch. 26, v. 33 to 35 and 70 to 75

12. St Stephens church



This unpretentious vane, here providing a viewpoint for a young herring gull, can be seen above St Stephen's church Hackington, less than a mile north of Canterbury cathedral.

The simple pennant (also known as a pennon) is very common in weathervanes. It has recognisable antecedents from earliest times in small flags on ships and on lances carried into battle.

They often appear combined with other motifs - see entries 11, 13, 14, 15 and 17.

13 and 14. Canterbury Cathedral (modern)



Cathedral south tower



Cathedral north tower

Earlier cathedral weathervanes have been described above (entries 1 and 2).

Several early drawings of the cathedral¹⁰ suggest the use of weathervanes on various turrets and steeples, but details are typically unclear and may be unreliable.

Two modern vanes appear on the spires above the Anselm chapel (south side of the choir) and St Andrew's chapel (north side). Both show a long streaming pennant and a stylised version of the archbishop's mitre. The north side vane shows a three dimensional mitre, and is entirely gilded.

¹⁰ for examples see *William Sumner The Antiquities of Canterbury* (1640); Robert Garland *Cathedral Churches of England and Wales* (1836)

15. Whitefriars



Many vanes show dates, typically of construction, rebuilding or refurbishment.

Only one local example has come to light - a weathervane visible from the city bus station which marks the completion of the Whitefriars shopping centre in 2005.

16. Thanington St Nicholas church



See comments above on St Mary Bredin (entry 10) regarding choice of the cock motif for churches

The Thanington example is striking for all the wrong reasons - the original image looks very little like the bird it represents, and the upright seems to spear the cock through its middle. An early exposition of spit roasting perhaps?

17. St Michael's Harbledown



An attractive example of a pennant vane. The pennant is apparently pierced by a sun motif (unfortunately visible to very few on the ground!)

18. Fordwich



vane on Fordwich church of St Mary the Virgin



Arms of the Cinque ports
(inside Fordwich church)

Fordwich church lies just over 2 miles NE of Canterbury cathedral. The medieval borough of Fordwich was a 'limb' of Sandwich, and therefore one of the Cinque ports. The arms of the Cinque ports showed three elements, each with the front half of a lion joined to the back of a ship. One such element can be seen on the weather vane above Fordwich church. The full arms of the Cinque ports can be seen on a wall plaque inside the church.

19. Nackington



Nackington parish lies just over 2 miles south of Canterbury.

The pointer on this smart gilded vane takes some explaining. Options include a bent arrow, an axe head, tail of the devil, and chicken pecking. Take your pick!

20. Bridge church



Bridge church weathervane with flock of starlings



St Peter's church Bridge has a vane consisting of an elaborate fixed iron frame, surmounted by a small arrow that turns to face the origin of the wind. Orientation pointers for north/south/east/west are missing.

It is hard to believe that the vane was originally designed with these features. Quite how it came to its present configuration - wind damage, storm damage, lightening, etc, remains unclear¹¹.

¹¹ local enquiries (via Alan Barber) are ongoing - these have uncovered the fact that a predecessor was in the shape of a rook, and that the tower was affected by lightening in the 1980s

21. Lambeth Palace



Lambeth Palace, London¹²



detail



Juxon arms on cathedral gate (Buttermarket)



on Eastbridge Hospital

Lambeth Palace, just south of the River Thames in London, is the London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It clearly lies outside the remit of a note on 'Weathervanes in and around Canterbury' but it has been included partly because its vane is so spectacular, and partly through its close links to Canterbury. The vane incorporates the arms of Archbishop Juxon (Archbishop 1660-1663) with their odd (so far unexplained) representation of 'four blackamoors heads'. The same arms can be seen in Canterbury on the cathedral gates and on the outside of Eastbridge Hospital.

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¹² viewed from Lambeth Palace Road