

## The Fraternity Of St. John The Baptist

The Fraternity of St. John the Baptist was founded in 1442 by a number of local wealthy families. Its object was to provide funds to employ a chaplain who would say masses and prayers for their souls and those of their friends, to run a school and to look after the poor. The Fraternity was governed by a President and two Warders. They were elected annually, as was the Treasurer. The leading families were the Pygots, Pedders, Bluntes, Pynfolds, Fayreys and Purveys. All were wealthy wool merchants. The Register of members, though it is incomplete, still exists and is in Luton Museum. In the illuminated border for each year, the Officers are illustrated in miniature. They are all wearing a cloak or livery. The Fraternity owned a funeral pall, given by the Fayrey family. Many of the Fraternity families left their brasses in the floor. Some also left their images on the roof. The Fraternity was dissolved in 1547 and its resources confiscated by the Crown. This was the fate of most medieval fraternities.

From the early days of the Priory, the people of Dunstable had used the north aisle as their church. The canons had celebrated mass here for the people. There is currently a wall in between the clergy and choir vestries. Mass was celebrated at the east facing altar which was set against this wall. This altar was dedicated to St. John The Baptist in 1220. The population of the town grew over the years until the north aisle could not hold all who wanted to come. In 1392 the prior, Thomas Marshall, reluctantly allowed the townspeople to overflow into the monastic nave for their services. This was permitted on the understanding that they did not interfere with monastic processional services and, more importantly, that they undertook to maintain the structure of that part of the building. From this time, the nave and the side aisles gradually came to be regarded as the Parish church. The chancel screen, in its present situation was erected to mark the limit of the people's access, their financial responsibility went as far at the rood screen, the current east wall.

Towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the nave roof was in a very sorry state. The Fraternity took on the responsibility of restoring it but realised that it was too high and would be much easier to maintain if it was lowered. The roof and the top level of 20 feet, which contained the windows, was removed. The windows were placed into the triforium openings that were above the Norman arches and a new, flatter pitched roof installed. The roof has subsequently been renewed on several occasions but the same design has been used each time.

### The Roof Figures

High in the roof, where the rafters meet the stone of the north and south walls, there are fourteen carved wooden figures, seven on each side. The figures are about 70 cm high and 30cm wide. They are all men, clean-shaven, and none has either headdress or tonsure. Each holds a shield of varying shape, with one exception plain, with no sign of paintwork. The exception shows the earliest representation of the Dunstable arms yet found, carved in relief and set diagonally across the shield. All but two of the figures wear ankle length tunics with down turned collars, fastened at the neck. The other two have voluminous collars and one has a long-sleeved garment, instead of a cloak. He may have been the chaplain, a secular priest. The figure with the Dunstable coat of arms may be the schoolmaster. The cloaks are similar to those in the members' Register. The figures stand on bases with wave-like carving on their edges – the medieval way of representing clouds. Most of the carving is fairly rough but the faces are well finished and have been given individual features. These figures are thought to be members of the Fraternity who restored the roof, although it is impossible to match images to names in the Register. The style of carving is not uniform, suggesting that several craftsmen were involved. Several Dunstable wills around 1520 leave money for the church roof. At the Dissolution, the standard practice was to remove the roof from ecclesiastical buildings so that they could not be used for religious purposes. When Henry VIII's men came to Dunstable to carry out this work, the townspeople said that they could not touch the

roof which the Fraternity had renewed as this did not belong to the Prior. It is thanks to the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist that we still have our beautiful church.

### The Fayrey Pall

The pall was given to the Fraternity by Henry and Agnes Fayrey in about 1500. It measures about 2.5m by 1.5m. The top is made of rich crimson cut Florentine brocade velvet on cloth of gold. The sides are purple velvet, edged with a deep silk fringe, and worked with appliqué embroidery in coloured silks. It is Flemish in style but was worked in England. The ends depict John and Mary Fayrey, parents of Henry, kneeling one on either side of St. John the Baptist as he preaches. Below the figures are their names and on woolpacks are the family's merchant marks. St John is depicted again in the centre of each side. He is shown preaching, dressed in a rough coat of camel's hair. The background shows the wilderness of barren trees and rocks. To the left, Henry Fayrey is leading twelve men towards the Baptist. They represent the male members of the Fraternity. On the right, his wife presents twelve women to St. John. They are presumed to be female members of the Fraternity. At the extreme ends are the arms of the Mercers' Company and at the other end the Fayrey arms and those of the Haberdashers' Company. Henry, who died in 1516, was a member of both Companies. The pall was put on the coffin of members of the fraternity, and their families, during the night of vigil before the funeral. In Georgian and Victoria times the church verger, for a fee of 6d, would put the pall over a coffin, which was due for burial the next day. The pall used to be housed in a glass case in the north aisle of the church. It is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, as are the Fayrey monumental brasses. There is a photograph of the Pall on the south wall of the Priory, by the brasses. Many descendants of the Fayreys emigrated to America where their surname evolved into Farr.

### The Brasses

Many of the church's brasses commemorate members of the Fraternity. The brasses were originally embedded in different parts of the nave floor. In the post-war period, the Victoria and Albert Museum expressed an interest in having some of the brasses. An arrangement was made whereby they took up all the brasses they could lift, made duplicates of the ones they wanted and mounted the copies and the rest of the originals on boards in the south aisle. The 1960s and 70s saw a vogue for brass rubbing. Our brasses are still rubbed occasionally, but not as often as previously. The Pynfold brasses are in their original position by the entrance to the Lady Chapel. Richard Pynfold died in 1516 and is shown with his wife Margaret, their shields and four sons. The image of the seven daughters is missing. To the left is the original site of the Fynche brasses, which are now on display in the V & A museum. The copies are now mounted on the south wall. Richard Fynche, a citizen and Merchant Taylor of London, died 1640 aged about 81. His father, Thomas, died 1586 and his mother, Elizabeth, died 1607, also shown are the arms of Merchant Taylors' Company. To the right are the Pygot brasses showing Laurence Pygot, his wife Alice, their shields, Laurence Cantelow – possibly a son-in-law and six daughters. Laurence Pygot was a wool merchant and died in 1450. To the right and above are the Blunte brasses showing John Blunte and his wife Elizabeth with 8 sons and 7 daughters. John died in 1502. Below is the Pedder brass showing John Pedder with 3 wives Margaret, Matilda and Agnes. To the right and above are the Purvey brasses showing Nicholas Purvey with 2 wives Elizabeth and Alice, also 3 sons and 2 daughters. Nicholas died in 1521.

Below is the Alee brass showing Robert Alee and 2 wives, Elizabeth, with 1 son and 3 daughters and Agnes with 2 sons and 4 daughters. Robert died in 1518. To the right and above is the Fayrey brass showing.... Below it is the photograph of the Fayrey Pall.

The Monumental Brasses of Bedfordshire, Lack Stuchfield and Whittemore.