

## COBB'S HALL, ALDINGTON, AND THE HOLY MAID OF KENT

By E. W. PARKIN

COBB'S HALL, in the quiet village of Aldington near Ashford in Kent, is not only a very interesting house in itself, but it was once right in the forefront of English history, for it was hereabouts that an obscure serving maid, Elizabeth Barton, became famous for her prophecies, which eventually aroused a storm of such proportions, that it shook the entire nation.

### THOMAS COBB

Thomas Cobb, for whom this fine house was built, was a high servant of the Archbishop of Canterbury, being the steward of his extensive Aldington estates. He came of a good family from the Romney Marsh area, there being a Cobbe recorded at Romney temp. Edward II,<sup>1</sup> and another at Newchurch, from whence one Thomas Cobbe, the youngest son of John Cobbe, came to Aldington in the reign of Edward IV,<sup>2</sup> and settled in a place called Goldwell, which house though greatly altered still exists,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile north-west of Aldington church. It was Thomas's son, also Thomas, who employed Elizabeth Barton as a servant in the 1520s and for whom the fine house, known as Cobb's Hall, was built shortly before his premature death. In fact, he may not have lived in it, for he became ill and died in the bosom of his family at Goldwell in 1528.

The Cobbs bore as their coat of arms: argent, a chevron between three cocks gules, combed and gilled or.

### THE ARCHIEPISCOPAL ESTATE

Aldington was one of the largest of some twenty-five manors which the Archbishop held in Kent. Aldington Court Farmhouse next to the church still contains fragments of the manor house, or archiepiscopal palace, such as moulded and crenellated wall-plates, and blocked stone windows with tracery of c. 1380—but these are little enough remains of buildings which once contained a chapel, five kitchens, six stables, eight dovecotes, a large hall, as well as over a thousand acres of park land. This last is now represented on the map<sup>3</sup> by Upper Park Farm, Middle Park Farm, and Lower Park Farm.

<sup>1</sup> *Burke's Armory*, publ. Edw. Churton, 1842.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Hasted, *History of the County of Kent*, 2nd Edn., viii, 317.

<sup>3</sup> O.S., 1-in. map, 173.

Aldington Frith was formerly a 'chace', or hunting ground stocked with deer and other animals. It is still marked on the O.S. map, and occupied the western part of the parish.

Aldington Forehead, at the bottom of the lane leading northwards from the church, was an embankment which once contained a stream, to form a small fishing lake.

#### ELIZABETH BARTON

Returning to Elizabeth Barton, she was born in Aldington in 1506, according to her own account,<sup>4</sup> and appears to have been first employed as a serving maid by an innkeeper named Thompson;<sup>5</sup> this must have been in the medieval village near the church, where a number of old timbered houses still survive, and possibly the inn was one of them. What is certain is that Elizabeth suffered from fits, and from Lambarde's detailed description<sup>6</sup> there can be little doubt that this was epilepsy. Among the more credulous she became famous on account of her utterances following these attacks—as one said, 'she told wondrous things done in other places while she herself was neither present, nor yet heard any report thereof.'

All this began, as Lambarde states, ' . . . about the time of Easter in the seventeenth yeere of the Reigne of King Henrie the Eight. . . .' (1525), after which time the fits and trances continued more or less severely for some months. The Rector of Aldington, Richard Masters, A.M.,<sup>7</sup> had encouraged Elizabeth in her deep religious beliefs and people flocked to witness her devotions and trances in Aldington parish church. She had by now entered the employment of Thomas Cobb, and after a short spell in the kitchen had been treated as one of the family.

The fame of her sayings spread wider still. In November 1525 she foretold the death of a child of her master who had fallen seriously ill, also it is said that she ' . . . could say what meate the heremite of the chapell of Our Lady at Court of Street had to his supper, and many other things whereat they marvailed greatly.'<sup>8</sup> She declared that the Blessed Virgin had appeared to her and directed her to go to the chapel, and that there she would be cured. This chapel, in the hamlet of Court at Street lies about a mile eastwards from Aldington church, and its roofless ruin may still be seen on the hillside behind Manor Farm. Here the crowds continued to grow, and people journeyed thither from far and wide.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, iii (1885), 343.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. A. Winnifrith, *The Fair Maids of Kent*, Folkestone, 1921, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*, 1970 reprint of the 1826 Chatham edition. First published 1576, 171-4.

<sup>7</sup> Now M.A. He was recognized as a learned man, and kept a considerable library. *Calendar of State Papers*, vi, no. 521.

<sup>8</sup> Lambarde, *op. cit.*, 172-3.

Meanwhile the rector, Richard Masters had reported these happenings to Archbishop Warham, and he appointed a commission under Dr. Edward Bocking, a monk of Christ Church, Canterbury, and several others including Richard Masters. These examined Elizabeth, and seemingly were very impressed by her beliefs, ' . . . and finding her sounde therin gave favourable countenance, and joined her in setting forth the of the same, so that at her next voyage to Our Lady of Court up Street she entered the chapell with *Ave Regina Caelorum* in prick-song, accompanied with these commissioners and many Ladies and Gentlemen of the best degree, and three thousand people beside of the common sort in the countrie. There she fell eftsoones into a marvellous passione before the image of Our Lady.'<sup>9</sup>

#### THE HOLY MAID OF KENT

In 1526, Elizabeth was, on the recommendation of the Archbishop, admitted to the small priory, or convent of St. Sepulchre at Canterbury. This had at that time only a prioress and five nuns, and was situated outside the old Riding Gate on what is now the Old Dover Road. It was demolished shortly after the Dissolution, but some of its stones may still be seen in a wall bordering the road.

Elizabeth was placed under the instruction of three monks, Bocking, Barnes and Hadley, while another monk of the distinguished Kent family named Dering recorded her visions and prophecies.<sup>10</sup> Her fame now became nation wide, and she was known to many as the 'Holy Maid of Kent'. Many people believed in her, including the Archbishop, and most passionately of all, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester.

One collection of her sayings was brought to the notice of the King by Archbishop Warham, but Henry refused to attach any weight to them. He passed the matter on to Sir Thomas More who described them as: ' . . . such as any simple woman might speak of her own wit.'

All might have gone well for Elizabeth had not her advisers drawn her into the realm of high politics. The Church at that time was falling into controversy and decline, and the great wealth which had hitherto been brought to the coffers of Canterbury by countless pilgrims had by now sadly diminished. Moreover the question of the King's divorce threatened to split the nation, and the Church with it. So, Bocking and his colleagues exploited the popularity of Elizabeth, and she was presented as the champion of Queen Catherine and of the Roman Church. Catherine herself was approached, but declined to take any part. A pamphlet was published entitled: 'A miraculous Work of late done at Court of Street in Kent, published to the devoute people of this

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Winnifrith, *op. cit.*, 35.

tyme for thier (*sic*) spiritual consolation, by Edward Thwaytes, Gent. 1527.'

Later, when the question of the King's divorce became an international issue, Elizabeth, through her sponsors, issued a 'divine prohibition', which declared that: '. . . the King should not continue King a month after he were married again, and within six months afterwards God would strike the realm with such a plague as was never seen, and that the King would be destroyed . . .'<sup>11</sup>

It was not long after this that the aged Archbishop Warham withdrew his promise to marry the King to Anne Boleyn.

Henry, meanwhile married Anne privately in November 1532, the marriage being legalized by Church and State some months later. This, and the fact that Henry flourished despite such dire predictions, made the advisers of Elizabeth lose face, and a further declaration was published saying that Henry, like Saul, was no longer King in the sight of God. This was spread by the Mendicant Friars amongst the ordinary folk, and by the Marchioness of Exeter, the Countess of Salisbury and others who represented the old Yorkist stock, amongst the nobility.

It is known that the Marchioness of Exeter had on several occasions consulted Elizabeth, and that the latter had travelled to her seat at Horseley in Surrey.

Archbishop Warham, who had always lent a kindly ear to the Holy Maid of Kent, died on 23rd August, 1532, and Cranmer was appointed Primate of all England.

Meanwhile, the latest declarations against the Throne had come to the ears of Thomas Cromwell, and he viewed these as a serious incitement to rebellion, putting urgent pressure on the new archbishop to take action. So, on 19th July, 1533 a letter was received by the prioress of St. Sepulchre at Canterbury, directing her to '. . . repair unto me to the manor of Otteforde, and bring with you your nun which was some time at Court up Street against Wednesday next, and that ye fail not herein in anywise'.<sup>12</sup>

On 11th August, Dr. Richard Gwent, the dean of Arches<sup>13</sup> wrote to Cromwell an account of this examination, saying '. . . my lord archbishop doth yet but dally with her . . .'

In September, Christopher Hales, another of Cromwell's agents, arrested several of Elizabeth's associates in Canterbury, and on 25th September he wrote: 'I send up Bocking and Dudley. These things have been handled as secretly as possible. Tomorrow I will ride for the parson of Aldington, whom I will also send.'<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> J. E. Cox, *Works of Cranmer*, P.S. ii, 272.

<sup>12</sup> *Cranmer's Remains*, letter xxx.

<sup>13</sup> Arches, the ecclesiastical Court of Appeal for the province of Canterbury.

<sup>14</sup> *Calendar of State Papers*, vi, no. 1149.

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Others including Elizabeth herself were arrested,<sup>15</sup> and put through a much more rigorous examination, after which they appeared before the Star Chamber, where they were ordered to make public confession at St. Paul's.

A raised platform was erected by St. Paul's cross, and after a sermon of denunciation by Dr. Capon, Bishop-elect of Bangor,<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth was required to hand to Dr. Capon a form of confession, which he then read publicly.<sup>17</sup>

This ceremony was repeated a few days later, ' . . . on a scaffold erected in the churchyard of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity at Canterbury.'<sup>18</sup>

The prisoners were then committed to the Tower of London, while a large gathering of learned judges, and many nobility were called to examine witnesses and to deal with evidence. After 'much disputation', a bill of attainder<sup>19</sup> was presented to the House of Lords, and passed finally through both houses.<sup>20</sup>

As Elizabeth and the others had 'confessed', there was no formal trial, and the bill received royal assent on 21st March, 1534. Six of the prisoners were found guilty of high treason, and several others of misprision.<sup>21</sup>

The name of Sir Thomas More had been on this second list, as he had met Elizabeth several times at ' . . . the house of the monks of Sion', where it is said that he treated her with 'suspicious reverence'.<sup>22</sup> However, he was able to show that he had written to Elizabeth, warning her to avoid politics, and as he had great popular support in the House of Lords, Cromwell advised the King to withdraw More's name.

Edward Thwaites, who had written the booklet on the miracles and sayings of Elizabeth Barton, was allowed to purchase his freedom for a thousand marks. He subsequently bought the manor of Court at Street, close to the chapel, which is marked today by the name Manor Farm.

On 20th April, 1534, Elizabeth and her associates were drawn on hurdles to Tyburn,<sup>23</sup> where on the scaffold she was asked whether she wished to address the crowd. She said: 'Hither am I come to die, and

<sup>15</sup> *Dict. of Nat. Biog., op. cit.*, iii, 345.

<sup>16</sup> *The sermon against the Holy Maid of Kent, delivered at St. Paul's Cross, 23rd November, 1533, and at Canterbury 7th December*, E.H.R., lviii, 463-75.

<sup>17</sup> *Lollardy and the Reformation*, i, 445, note. Confession in full.

<sup>18</sup> *Narratives of the Reformation*, Camden Soc., 280.

<sup>19</sup> A full history of the 'conspiracy' appears in the published Act of Attainder, 25 Henry VIII, chap. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, new series, xviii (1904), 113.

<sup>21</sup> Misprision, the concealment of treason. For a most accurate list of condemned, see *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, xviii (1904), 114.

<sup>22</sup> *Dict. of Nat. Biog., op. cit.*, 334.

<sup>23</sup> Tyburn, a circular tablet on a modern traffic roundabout at the southern end of Edgware Road marks the site. Executions ceased there in 1783.

have not only been the cause of my own death, but also the cause of the death of all these persons which at this time here suffer; and yet to say the truth I am not so much to be blamed considering that it was known unto these learned men that I was a poor wench without learning. . . . but because the things which fell from me were profitable to them, therefore they praised me and bare me in hand, that it was the Holy Ghost and not I that did them; and I, being puffed up with their praises fell into certain pride and foolish fantasy, which hath brought me to this. . . .<sup>24</sup>

After hanging, and following the custom of the time, the heads of the victims were displayed above the main gates of the city, that of Elizabeth being set up on London Bridge.<sup>25</sup> Her body was taken by friends, and with two others was buried in the churchyard of the Grey Friars in Newgate Street, but even here she was not left long in peace, for when on 12th November, 1538, the Grey Friars surrendered their property to the King, their church was demolished and the churchyard built over not long afterwards.<sup>26</sup> Buildings of the General Post Office now stand on the site.

Despite all this, it is said that Aldington did not forget Elizabeth, and that pilgrimages continued to the little chapel at Court at Street for that century at least.

The church on the hill with its tall and magnificent tower,<sup>27</sup> the walls of the chapel, and a number of old timbered houses which witnessed these events, still stand today.

Several discrepancies appear in the various accounts. Hugh Riche, the Franciscan monk who was convicted of high treason, was not hanged with the others at Tyburn, but is thought to have died in prison a day or two before. Richard Masters the rector of Aldington was not executed, as Stow, Hasted and others relate. He was imprisoned and interrogated for some months, during which time his health broke down. He received a free pardon in July 1534,<sup>28</sup> and was restored to his rectory at Aldington, which still stands to the west of the church. He continued in the office of parish priest there until his death about 1558.<sup>29</sup>

#### COBB'S HALL, THE TUDOR HOUSE

Cobb's Hall is of unusual interest; it stands half hidden by trees, with a fine front of close-studded timbers and a continuous jetty, or overhang.

<sup>24</sup> *Hall's Chronicle*, fol. 218, 1548.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Knight, *London*, i (1841), 47.

<sup>26</sup> John Stow, *Survey of London*, 1890 edn., 301.

<sup>27</sup> *Arch. Cant.*, xli (1929), 143. Full description of the church of St. Martin, Aldington, and the chapel at Court at Street, sometimes called the chapel of Bellerica.

<sup>28</sup> *Cal. of State Papers*, grant, July 1534, vii, no. 10.

<sup>29</sup> *J.B.A.A.*, x (1904), pt. i.

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A closer examination shows that the front has been much restored, and the main doorway which once opened against the main chimney has been blocked (Fig. 1). Inside the house, there were originally three rooms on each floor, two of the ground-floor rooms and two upstairs having wide fireplaces of two-inch brickwork, each with a massive oak beam carved into shallow Tudor arches. The decorative spandrels have a flower and fern pattern (Plate IIB).

All three rooms on the ground floor have finely moulded beams and joists with fancy stops, while the old oak floorboards above, where these can be seen, lie parallel to the joists, and are rebated into them.

The owner's parlour was the largest room at the east end, and from this the original stairs led up on the south side of the chimney, as a trimmer in the joists shows.

The central room was presumably the kitchen, with smaller rooms at the west end, possibly for stores.

The parlour fireplace measures 8 ft. 6 in. (2.60 m.), while that in the kitchen is 12 ft. (3.66 m.). The bedroom ones are smaller. The present wooden floor in the old kitchen rests on an older floor, and is 6 in. (150 mm.) above the level of the present hearth. It is above this fireplace that some original wall decoration survives which has a pattern similar to fish scales (Plate IIA). This has since been papered over.

In the central room above, is a unique plaster overmantel depicting the Garden of Eden (Plate IIB). It has three panels, separated by pillars in bold relief, each panel showing the figures of Adam and Eve, the Tree and the Serpent. Eve is holding an apple in her hand, while a face, presumably that of God appears above.

The ceilings in this and the adjoining rooms once decorated with plaster designs of which only several bosses and one fleur de lis still show through many layers of whitewash. The west room on the first floor is now divided into two smaller rooms, and here some years ago was discovered a fine Tudor doorway beneath plaster. The doorway is of oak, and has an arch and carved spandrels which match the fireplaces, with the same emblems. The dexter spandrel has a single rose, square in shape, while the sinister spandrel has a similar flower but round in shape. This is common to all surviving arches, though the reason is not understood. This Tudor doorway is in the western outside wall of the house, seemingly leading to nowhere, and is thought to have been originally for a garderobe or privy, which was usually in this position, though very few survive.

One curious feature is that the shaft of the great chimney, as it appears above the ridge, is surmounted by four pots set in line longitudinally. The pots and the three courses of brickwork of the cap are modern, but below these the shaft and chimney breast are of two-inch (150 mm.) Tudor brickwork. As in other houses of this period, all fire-

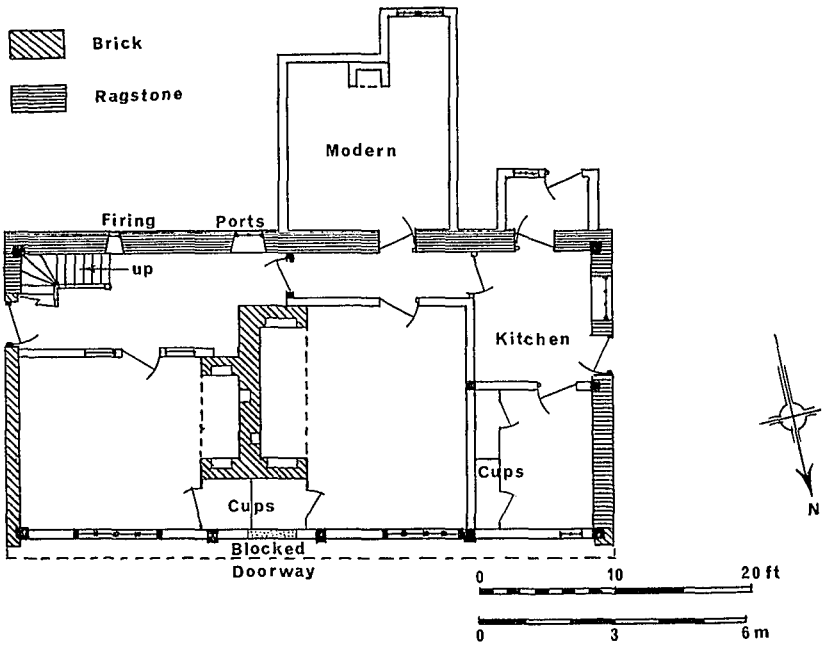


FIG. 1. Modern Plan

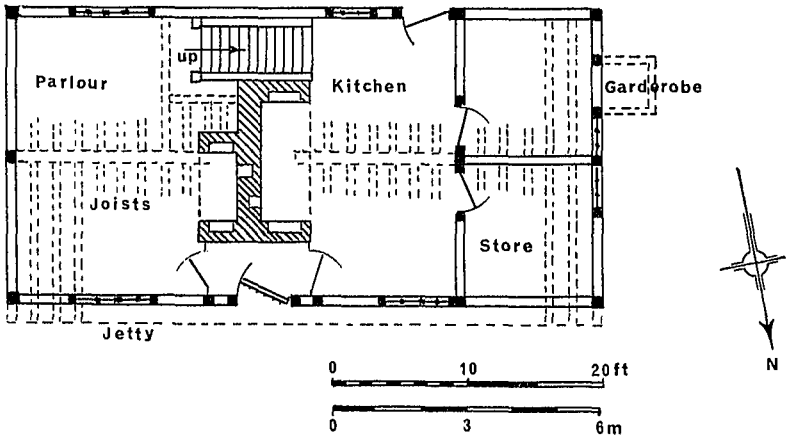


FIG. 2. Original Plan





A. Cobb's Hall, the North Front.



B. The South Side, fortified against Napoleon.



A. The great Fireplace with Wall-Painting.



B. The Overmantel of the central Bedroom.

places fed smoke into one large flue, and it was the practice to cap this one flue with two or more twisted brick chimneys. Here there is room for two such chimneys, and with them the house must have looked even more attractive from the road.

A careful examination was made to determine whether the house was built as we see it, or whether it was an earlier 'Wealden' house converted to take fireplaces and a floor in the old hall, as so many are. The answer is that it is purely sixteenth-century in style; the joists are even throughout and protrude to form the long jetty. There are no dragon beams nor side jetties, while on the first floor it was observed that the front posts are all original and single—there would have been double posts on each side of the cove had the house been a Wealden.

The house was therefore of a very new design, for no doubt Cobb could command the services of the Archbishop's own master carpenters and other craftsmen, and, as Thomas Cobb died in 1528, the date of building must have been before that. The Wealden house, with its open hall and central hearth was still being built in the early sixteenth century,<sup>30</sup> but with a greatly increased manufacture of bricks and of glass, there took place a spate of inserting chimneys, and of glazing windows, which was most evident in the mid-sixteenth century, and which went on into the seventeenth century.<sup>31</sup>

The roof also was of a new design, for it was built to fit the chimney. Instead of the central crown post and collar purlin, it had side purlins and wind braces, a practice which was new in Kent. The present roof has been much rebuilt, but enough remains to show all this, and also that there was no smoke blackening of the rafters.

#### THE NAPOLEONIC ALTERATIONS

In walking round to the back of the house, one has the biggest surprise of all. Instead of the expected timber framing, here is a great stone wall, 18 in. thick (430 mm.) in which are minute windows no more than 9 in. wide by 12 in. high (228 mm. by 304 mm.) and splaying out to 18 in. sq. inside (430 mm.) (Plate IB).

These are in fact embrasures, or firing ports, as the house stands on high ground with commanding views over the Romney Marsh, and it was fortified during the threat of invasion from Napoleon. The embrasures on the first floor are 4 ft. above inside floor level (122 cm.) and were obviously for the use of muskets. On the ground floor, there is one opening similar to those above, and one larger aperture near the centre for a cannon. A sixth opening has been lost by a later doorway cutting through it.

<sup>30</sup> Headcorn Manor, a fine Wealden house, close to Headcorn church, was built about this time.

<sup>31</sup> Inserted fireplace dated 1578, Kite Manor, Monk's Horton. Durlook Grange, Minster-in-Thames, 1620.

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Inside, all rooms are partitioned off to give a wide passage inside the rear stone wall, presumably to provide the garrison with enough space there.

The Tudor stairway which ran up behind the great chimney was removed at this time, and the present stairs built in the south-east corner of the house.

The small firing-port towards the east side of the ground floor has the following initials and date carved outside, on the stone lintel: TWA, AB, WA, WCB, 1817. Are these some of the men who manned the embrasures, and the date when they left here?

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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