

WILLIAM SOMNER

KENTISH SCHOLAR

By David Wright

William Somner (1606–1669) was one of the great English scholars of the seventeenth century. Somewhat forgotten today, his reputation is in need of restoration as we approach his 350th anniversary.

He spent his entire life in Canterbury, initially at the family home in Castle Street, and then in the Cathedral precincts. His father, William Somner senior, came from Boxley near Maidstone and initially drew his more famous son into the practice of a notary public after arrival in Canterbury in the 1590s. However, William junior was destined for greater things after an education at the King's School, although a university did not follow this. As a born antiquarian he had prodigious natural energy and love for researching, recording and writing and soon knew the records, monuments and architecture of his beloved Canterbury and its cathedral better than any of his predecessors. His first masterpiece, *The Antiquities of Canterbury*, was published in 1640 at the young age of 34, and still stands as perhaps the best of the early borough histories, based on extensive reading and supplemented by transcripts of many post-conquest charters and other historical documents. For many years afterwards Somner gathered fresh material for a proposed second edition, but nothing would come of this until well after his death in 1703, at which time posthumous works on the Kentish Roman forts and ports, and the departure point of Caesar's Kentish invasion would be shown to the world. Another on the Saxon Shore remains in manuscript.

One of seven children, his eldest brother, Major George Somner, distinguished himself but was killed in a skirmish at Wye in 1648. Another brother, John Somner,

a constable, juryman and freeman of the City, was a noted benefactor to the cathedral and paid for the erection of the Bullstake market house in the Buttermarket outside Christ Church gateway. William himself married twice and produced eight children, none scholarly, but including a clergyman and a surgeon, both died young. The Somner surname seems to have died out around the 1760s when the father of the future Archbishop John Bird Sumner arrogated the Somner coat of arms which had been granted in 1663 jointly to William and his brother John.

As a close confidant in the employment of Archbishop Laud where he practised as a registrar of the consistory court and cathedral auditor, Somner was well placed to assist the prelate with ecclesiastical and other enquiries, book and record-keeping, and played no small part in saving many registers and books from loss or destruction during the 1642 sacking of the cathedral and subsequent dislocations of the civil war.

Despite many demands upon his time, Somner devoted enormous energy to his next masterpiece, the *Anglo-Saxon/Latin/English Dictionary* of 1659, the working manuscripts for which may still be seen in the Cathedral archives. A two-volume work of profound and staggering scholarship, the Dictionary set Anglo-Saxon studies on a new path for the next three generations and laid the basis for future research and publications into



the language. The genesis of the work arose from Somner's study or transcription of many of the most important Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (held in the famous Cottonian library and the libraries of other noted scholars), and also of contemporary English and continental printed works on philology.

For several decades Somner maintained a correspondence with noted scholars, many of whom united in a close circle existing to share information about discoveries and encourage mutual research. Numerous dedications and references in their printed works are ample evidence of such relationships. Relatively little has survived following a disastrous fire in the cathedral library a year after his death when many of his deposited books and papers were destroyed. However, known connections with other scholars and their works are well established and include Somner's great and personal local friend Meric Casaubon who offered constant help and encouragement, Sir Roger Twysden for whose *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptores Decem* Somner contributed the glossary, and William Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* and *Warwickshire* on which Somner commented and contributed. Moreover, indeed, by the 1650s Somner's name was the one above all others

which scholars would consult on all matters relating to Anglo-Saxon philology and linguistics.

Somner's last major work was his *A Treatise of Gavelkind* of 1660 in which he described in great detail the origins, practicalities and problems of this quintessentially Kentish custom. Busy until the very end he died on his sixty-third birthday and was buried in the family parish at St Margaret's church. His widow, now remarried as Barbara Hannington, later caused a monument to be erected in his memory and chose to be buried alongside him in preference to her two other previous husbands.

A one-day William Somner colloquium will be held at the Old Sessions House, Christ Church University, Canterbury, on Saturday 23 March 2019, just one week before

the exact anniversary. Proceedings will open with an exhibition of Somner manuscripts and books in the Cathedral Archives, and then be followed by five speakers, including Professors Jackie Eales and Kenneth Fincham, who will set Somner's life into its seventeenth-century context and examine his literary legacy.

A full life (in two parts) of William Somner by Dr David Wright will appear in the 2019 and 2020 volumes of *Archaeologia Cantiana*.

All enquiries about the colloquium (and any other Somner matters) are featured in the Notices Section of this issue. For any further information, please contact Dr David Wright at davideastkent@gmail.com or visit www.drdauidwright.co.uk

Images courtesy of www.drdauidwright.co.uk



Above
Dr David Wright

THE FINDS CORNER

In our second piece highlighting finds from Kent reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) the Kent Finds Liaison Officer, Jo Ahmet, looks at non-metallic objects reported to the PAS in Kent. Anywhere you see a number preceded by 'KENT-' you can use it to find the record on the PAS public database.

It can often seem that FLOs are obsessed with coins, buckles, brooches and the metallic finds familiar to metal detectorists. In reality Kent, like most counties, frequently sees ceramics and lithics, from keen-eyed detectorists as well as many other finders such as mudlarks (foreshore fieldwalkers) and fossil hunters.

Ceramic objects and fragments are perhaps the most common finds to most European archaeologists, and indeed they are a significant minority of finds we deal with at PAS Kent (roughly 2–3% of total finds recorded from Kent). Most such finds are scatters of ceramic fragments, oft-recorded in bulk in a similar way to site finds. About once or twice a year, however, we see complete, or near complete pots. Usually from coastal or waterlogged areas, though hoard containers or cremations are known.



Fig 1