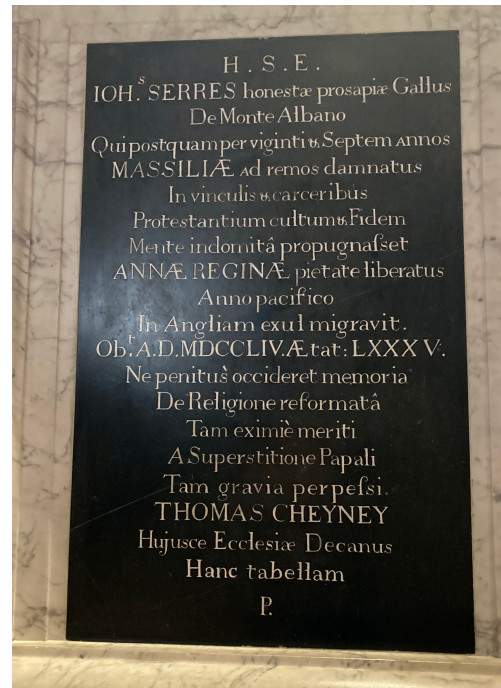


EDITORS' NOTE

Jean Serres – “most interesting memorial in the whole place”

On the northern wall of the Cathedral's Epiphany Chapel, is a marble plaque. It isn't for a past bishop, dean or organist, or for a benefactor or someone intimately connected with building. The plaque commemorates a French Huguenot who lived the second half of his long life in Winchester, after 27 years as a galley-slave in the Mediterranean. Ronald Hamilton, when editor of *Winchester Cathedral Record*, lauded it as “really one of the most interesting memorials in the whole place”.¹ The story behind the plaque is both dramatic and enigmatic.

Erected by Dean Thomas Cheney for Jean Serres of Montauban, the plaque says:



Here lies buried Jean Serres, a Frenchman of good family from Montauban, who, after twenty-seven years condemned to the galleys at Marseilles, in chains and prisons, had fought with indomitable spirit for the protestant way of life and faith, freed by the goodness of Queen Anne, in the year of the peace treaty, came to England as a refugee. He died in 1754 aged 85. So that the memory may not die of a man who deserved so much from the reformed religion and who suffered so much from Popish Superstition, Thomas Cheney, Dean of this Church, set up this tablet.²

Jean Serres was the youngest of three brothers from Montauban who were arrested by French authorities and condemned to life imprisonment as rower-slaves on galleys. Montauban, about 30 miles north of Toulouse in south-west France, was a major centre of reformed Protestantism. During the seventeenth century, worship by these Protestants, known as

¹ Ronald Hamilton, “The Cathedral Day”, *Winchester Cathedral Record*, No. 37, 1968, p. 12.

² Pat Wagstaff, “A Selection of Latin Inscriptions at Winchester Cathedral”, *Record Extra*, June 2015, p. 15.

EDITORS' NOTE

Huguenots,³ was tolerated by France's Catholic rulers. In 1685, however, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes which had granted community toleration.

In Montauban, Pierre Serres, a cloth merchant, gave up his faith but his three sons Pierre (b. 1660), David (b. 1665) and Jean (b. 1668) decided to emigrate to maintain their beliefs. They were arrested in the eastern city of Grenoble and brought before the Court of the Parliament of Grenoble on January 11, 1686 and condemned to the galleys at Marseilles.⁴

Pierre became a pastor to his fellow Huguenot prisoners and all three brothers spent time in the *cachots* (dungeons) at the Convict Hospital at Marseilles as "dangerous" prisoners. Although they were forced to do back-breaking work in the galleys, they appear to have been "fairly well off" as supporters in Montauban helped with clothing and food which was shared with poorer prisoners. They were also able to correspond with each other and with family and friends.⁵

The three brothers doggedly maintained their Protestant faith for more than two-and-a-half decades. They spread the Gospel by distributing portions of the Scriptures from prison. Jean was put in the dungeons in 1698 because he converted an aged Catholic priest, M. L'Abbé Maupeau, to the reformed religion. He and his brothers agitated against their imprisonment and, in December 1700, Jean was a signatory to a document complaining about their conditions.⁶

By the next year he was aboard the galley *Valeur* but, in 1702, Jean was again in *cachot*. His brother David congratulated him for being there and not on the galleys suffering from the filth, vermin, bad food and water, and the blasphemies and obscenities of fellow convict galley slaves.⁷ The dungeons were a holiday compared with life on the galleys.

³ Reformed Protestants in France "gained the nickname, 'Huguenots', a name whose origins have defied all efforts at definitive explanation": Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, London: Penguin, 2010, p. 638.

⁴ *Jean Serres of Montauban*, London: Huguenot Society of London, 20th July 1889, in Winchester Cathedral Chronicle, DC/N1/1/2, p. 131 on CD/316 at DC_N1_2.398.jpg. The leaflet appears to be linked to a Cathedral Service on 20 July, 1889.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

EDITORS' NOTE

The galleys, whose sail plan was supported by banks of oars on each side of the hull, were common in the Mediterranean which often has long periods of light winds. These wooden ships were used for both transport and naval operations. In 1696, a letter from Jean said that his galley had taken part in attacks along the Spanish coast and had landed at Barcelona.⁸ (Picture of the French galley, *La Grande-Reale*)



David and Jean were freed in 1713 after the Peace of Utrecht, it is said by the intervention of Queen Anne. Pierre was freed a year later and all three came to London in 1716. After their arrival, a party of liberated Huguenots went to Windsor to thank the Queen for her support, with Jean as their spokesperson. “Although they could not hear her words, Anne impressed them by her gracious manner. She was already in her last illness”.⁹ Pierre married and remained in London, dying in 1741, aged 81. David left and lived in Zurich and Magdeburg before settling in Amsterdam where he died in 1733, aged 68.¹⁰

Jean settled in Winchester and lived in the city until his passing, aged 85 in early 1754. As the plaque shows, he was buried at the Cathedral but, apart from a letter in 1740 and an entry about his death in the Cathedral’s Register, “1754. MR JOHN SERRES (*a Native of France*), aged 86, was buried Feb. 6th”, there are no records as to why he chose Winchester and where and how he lived in the city. There is no reference to Serres or the memorial tablet in *Winchester Cathedral Chapter Minutes* for 1754 or 1755. Dean Cheyney’s biographer G.H. Blore refers to him as “poor old Jean Serres, the Huguenot refugee” who “had reason to thank the Dean for his kindness”.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ G.H. Blore, “The Monument of Jean Serres, Huguenot”, *Winchester Cathedral Record*, No. 9, 1940, p. 12.

¹⁰ Gaston, Fournier, *Les Trois Frères Serres de Montauban*, Musée du Désert en Cevennes, 1937. In HRO DC/K6/4, Goodman Collection IV.

¹¹ G.H. Blore, *Thomas Cheyney, Wykehamist*, Winchester: Wykeham Press, 1950, p. 8.

EDITORS' NOTE

The sole extant correspondence from Jean's life in Winchester was written in 1740 when he gave a New Testament, in the translation of David Martin,¹² to Dean Cheyney. He had received it while in the galleys. It was accompanied by a personally very important document, the certificate of liberation that he was given in Marseilles on 20th June 1713. At the time Jean was aged 45 and serving on *la Grande-Reale* galley.

The letter to Dean Cheyney¹³ expressed his strong faith and thanks for his welcome in Winchester. The New Testament must have been heavily used on the galleys and in dungeons as Jean wrote that it had been mended:

Translation

SIR

Here is the New Testament note from Mr. Martin, which I had mended, which he presented to me when I was on the galleys of France for the Word of God, under the great persecution of Louis fourteenth, which I received despite the precision with which I was observed to prevent me from enjoying the consolations that my very long and very distressing captivity demanded. The divine book remained many years with months in chains; but the Word of truth which it contains was not bound, made me conquer the falsehood and the error of the papists which assailed me furiously. Now, before God finally broke my heavy chain, I took him with me as the admirable subject of a miracle of his Providence which made me preserve him among a thousand eminent dangers which surrounded me. Hoping, Sir, that what I have just told you will make you accept it with more pleasure, as a very precious present. Wishing, Sir, that you will be able to read there at least for as many years as I have read there, and to be able to draw from it the eternal life of which it is the source.

Praying you, Monsieur, to believe me always filled with gratitude for the Christian affection with which you honor me so agreeably and with profound respect, Monsieur, your very humble and very obedient servant.

Jean SERRES THE YOUNGER

At Winchester, August 1, 1740

¹² David Martin (1639-1721) was a French Protestant pastor, educated in Montauban and Nimes, who moved to Utrecht in the Protestant Netherlands after 1685. He was well known as a theologian and Bible translator.

¹³ Fournier, *Les Trois Frères Serres*, p. 81-82.

EDITORS' NOTE

Other Huguenot-connected memorials in the Cathedral include three members of the Portal family, the writer Melesina Chevenix Trench,¹⁴ Major-General Digges Rigaud, General Sir George Prevost and Thomas Garnier, Dean of Winchester from 1840-72.

TOM WATSON

Photographs

- 1) Jean Serres memorial tablet (Author)
- 2) La Grande Reale galley (Wikimedia Commons)

¹⁴ See Sheila Gray, 'Mrs Melesina Trench 1768-1827', *Winchester Cathedral Record*, 68 (1999), 17-23.