CHURCH BUILDING ON ROMNEY MARSH IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

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INTRODUCTION

At the time of the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, there were at least twenty-two parish churches standing on Romney and Walland marshes. The most recent of these was at East Guldeford (just over the border in East Sussex), which was of brick, and had been consecrated only in 1505. The oldest was almost certainly represented by the north-western corner of Lydd church, which must date from the later Anglo-Saxon period at the latest. From the eleventh until the earlier sixteenth century the fabric of these churches not only reflects the general trends in church building in Kent but also, to a certain extent, the population needs of the individual parishes within the marsh, and the cash available to their patrons and parishioners. Since there was activity in the marsh by way of land improvement during this period, it is perhaps worth surveying the churches of the marsh in relation to changes on the marshland manors. The documentary records for the marsh are also exceptionally good because very large areas were owned by the great ecclesiastical landlords: the archbishop of Canterbury and his monks (of Christ Church Priory) in particular, but also St. Augustine's Abbey, Battle Abbey, Boxley Abbey, Roberstsbridge Abbey and Bilsington Priory. For a time several French religious houses had interests in some of the marsh churches and from the fifteenth century two Oxford colleges, All Souls and Magdalen, had extensive estates on the marsh of which the records survive. Individual churches and their historical records have been studied by Canon Scott-Robertson, F.C. Elliston Erwood and more recently by the late Miss Anne Roper (who has written some fine church guides), but no overall synthesis has been produced. The present survey is a provisional attempt to bring together evidence from all the churches (Fig. 1).

THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

Only one surviving church, Lydd, has any material remains, which must date from before the Norman Conquest. This church has been the subject of much study and some excavation (Scott Robertson 1880b, 427–50; Elliston Erwood 1925, 177–90; Livett 1930; Jackson and Fletcher 1959 and 1968; Taylor and Taylor 1965, 405–8; and Fernie 1983, 72). The surviving remains, which are of a small basilican church, have been dated variously to the Roman period, the eighth century and the late Anglo-Saxon period; an Anglo-Saxon rather than Roman date (despite Jackson and Fletcher 1968 and Fernie 1983) seems the most likely, though there can now be little doubt that some of the Lydd area was dry land in the Roman period (Jones 1953 and Philp and Willson 1984). Dr Gordon Ward (1931) and more recently Professor Nicholas Brooks (1988) have shown clearly that much of Lydd parish was dry land in the eighth century (only the marshes around Belgar on the north and east have been reclaimed later). In 774 or just possibly the later tenth century (Brooks 1988) the large manor of Lydd, which is called Langport in *Domesday Book*, was given to the archbishop. On the south-west side of this manor there was a place called *bishopes wic* in 741 (Sawyer no. 24), which may well have originated as an important trading settlement like other settlements on the sea called *wic* in the middle of the Anglo-Saxon period (Dunwich, Sandwich, Hamwic, etc.). This was probably replaced by a new trading settlement to the north-west, which may account for the Langport (Long Market) name in the late Saxon period. A new church in the later eighth or tenth century, as suggested by both Elliston Erwood (1925) and Canon Livett (1930, 73), could well have been constructed here when the estate was acquired by the archbishop. One other possibility should, however, be considered: if one looks at the plan of the present Lydd parish church (Livett 1930, 61), it is noticeable that the eastern part of the church is on a slightly different alignment from the early church discussed above. Livett (1930, 82) suggests that this may be due to the presence of an early Norman church under the east end of the nave. It is, however, possible that there was another, late Saxon church here which is reflected in the cruciform plan of the eastern end of the church. This would mean that in the eleventh century there were two churches standing together at Lydd. Of all the surviving churches in the marsh, only the second church at Lydd and possibly Newchurch (see below) have any traces suggesting that they were once cruciform in shape.

The only documented early church in the area was the oratory of St. Martin, which is also mentioned in the charter of 741 (Sawyer no. 24). This church may be St. Martin's in the later town of New

The Churches of Romney & Walland Marshes

feet 0 10 100
metres 0 10 30

1. St Peter & St Paul Newchurch
2. St Augustine Snave
3. St Dunstan Snargate
4. St George Ivychurch
5. St Eanswith Brenzett
6. St Thomas Becket Fairfield
7. St Augustine Brookland
8. Eastbridge
9. All Saints Burmarsh
10. St Peter & St Paul Dymchurch
11. St Mary-in-the-Marsh
12. All Saints Hope
13. St Clement Old Romney
14. St Nicholas New Romney
15. Midley
16. All Saints Lydd
17. Orgarswick — Plan unknown
18. Blackmanstone — Plan unknown

Key
- Anglo Saxon
- Late C11th-mid C12th
- Later C12th-later C13th
- Late C13th-late C14th
- Late C14th-early C15th
- Early C15th-early C16th
- R Reticulated tracery window

Parish Boundaries

5 miles

Medieval Innings

mostly reclaimed by the mid 11th century

Key
- C12th-mid C13th innings
- line of sea walls rebuilt after 1287 storms
- late C13th-early C14th innings
- late C14th-early C15th innings (Rhee filled from Snargate to New Romney)
- later C15th innings
- later C16th innings
- Dunes

5 miles

del John Atherton Bowen 1989

Fig. 1. The Churches of Romney and Walland Marshes.

Romney, as Robertson long ago suggested (1880a, 238). By the thirteenth century St. Martin's (as well as St. Lawrence in New Romney) was only a chapel attached to the great new church of St. Nicholas (see below) and in *c.* 1550 it was pulled down (Robertson 1880a, 240). It was, however, by the thirteenth century at the latest, the meeting place of the hundred and liberty of New Romney and the letter of Archbishop Cranmer in 1549 from the bailiff jurats and parishioners of New Romney (Waler 1893, 155) suggests that just before its demolition it was as large a church as St. Nicholas. They could not decide whether St. Nicholas or St. Martin should be pulled down (see below).

Today nothing is visible above ground of St. Martin's church, but the site of the church in the centre of New Romney is well-known and still remains a large open space. Excavation here may one day reveal an early Anglo-Saxon oratory chapel, succeeded perhaps in the tenth century by a large cruciform church (see below), which in turn was replaced or enlarged in the twelfth or thirteenth century.

There is good evidence to suggest that Old Romney is the site of the 'burh' founded in *c.* 1000 (there was a mint here from this time) which had at least 156 burgesses by the time of *Domesday*. The surviving parish church of Old Romney, which is dedicated to St. Clement, may well be early eleventh century in origin (Clithio 1968), but nothing is visible in the present church of pre-conquest date. The church of St. Lawrence in Old Romney, which was still standing in 1278 (Woodruff 1934) may also be late Anglo-Saxon in date. By the twelfth century it had been replaced by a new church at New Romney. Professor Nicholas Brooks in his important survey of Romney Marsh in the early Middle Ages (1988) has pointed out that Newchurch, which is mentioned in *Domesday Book* as a hundredal name, was almost certainly in existence by the mid-tenth century when the hundredal system was probably introduced to Kent from Wessex. It is possible, therefore, that a large church was built here at about this time when almost all of the calcareous (new) marshland in Romney Marsh proper had been reclaimed (Green 1968). The large medieval church of Saints Peter and Paul at Newchurch has no sign in it of any Anglo-Saxon fabric, but it is striking that, apart from the eastern part of Lydd, this is the only surviving church within the marsh to have vestigial traces of an earlier cruciform plan. This may reflect the plan of the late Anglo-Saxon church, and it is just possible that excavations at St. Martin's church in New Romney, the other ecclesiastical hundredal centre in the Marsh, would also reveal a late Anglo-Saxon cruciform plan (with later medieval additions and enlargements) as suggested above.

Most of the parish churches in Romney Marsh to the east of

Newchurch (the Domesday hundred of Worth) are almost certainly mid-eleventh century in origin and still, in many cases, retain the name of their original founders as Professor Brooks has reminded us (1988). Two of these churches, Orgarswick and Blackmanstone, were abandoned at the Reformation and no longer survive above ground. The plans of the others, Eastbridge, Burmarsh and Dymchurch, are known (Eastbridge from a 1933 excavation, Elliston Erwood 1946) and all have clear traces of their small and simple early Norman nave and square chancel. It seems very likely that all these churches, as well as Orgarswick and Blackmanstone, were built of timber in the mid-eleventh century and rebuilt in stone in the early Norman period. It is possible, however, that St. Augustine's Abbey's original church at Burmarsh may have been built earlier, since the Abbey seems to have acquired the manor of Burmarsh ('Burwara Mersce' – the marsh of the men of the burh) in the ninth century (Ward 1933). But there is no definite evidence for this, nor is there evidence that any other churches than those mentioned above had been built in the marsh before 1066. The group of churches in the western part of Romney Marsh: Ivychurch, Snave, Brenzett, and Hope and St. Mary may also be mid-eleventh century private foundations, and Ivychurch and possibly Brenzett were listed in *Domesday Monachorum* (Douglas 1944). There is no certain evidence for an Anglo-Saxon (i.e. pre-1070) date for them, however, and they are just as likely to be early Norman foundations.

In summary, the following groups of possible Anglo-Saxon churches can be proposed for the Marsh:

Eight-Tenth century churches	*Mid-eleventh century private churches*	*Possible pre-conquest private churches*
Lydd	Orgarswick	Snave
'St. Martin's'	Blackmanstone	Ivychurch
Newchurch	Eastbridge	Brenzett
	Burmarsh	Hope All Saints
Early eleventh century church	Dymchurch	St. Mary-in-the-Marsh
St. Clement (Old) Romney		

Before looking at the early Norman re-organisation of the churches and parishes in the marsh, one other church, Midley, should be discussed here. This is the only one that is specifically named in *Domesday Book*. There is, however, immediately a problem as Midley is said to be in the east Kent hundred of Eastry and that the manor, which was held by Odo of Bayeux's knight Alured (and in

King Edward the Confessor's time by Godric) had woodland for ten pigs as well as three ploughlands of arable and ten acres of meadow. The church of 'Middlea' is also mentioned in the first list in *Domesday Monachorum* (Douglas 1944) as paying 28*d*. and together these suggest a late Anglo-Saxon date for the church of Midley. The remains of the parish church at Midley, which is known to have been ruined in the mid-seventeenth century, are, however, only of a fifteenth-century west wall of a very small church and one wonders if one is dealing with two quite separate Midleys, and that the *Domesday* and *Domesday Monachorum* Midley was in east Kent, near Eastry, where woodland could also be found. This is by no means certain, however, as there is no trace whatsoever of a later medieval manor or church of Midley in the Eastry area. Another possibility (and perhaps more likely) is that the eleventh-century Midley church and much of the manor (including perhaps some woodland towards the Holmestone area of Lydd) were destroyed by the great storms of the thirteenth century. The pattern of later sea walls in relation to the 'middle island' (between creek ridges 1 and 2 of Green's (1968) soil survey) certainly suggests that the sea took its toll and that only later in the Middle Ages did the parish of Midley in its two halves acquire much more land in innings to the south-west. Again, only excavation on the site of the ruined Midley church will resolve this.

THE GREAT AGE OF CHURCHBUILDING: c. 1080–1250

With the arrival in Kent in 1070 of Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury, a large-scale re-organisation of the Diocese took place as well as the start of a massive re-building programme (Tatton-Brown 1988a). This re-organisation is exceptionally well documented in the first folio of the late eleventh-century manuscript now known as *Domesday Monachorum* (Douglas 1944), and here we find a list of 22 churches pertaining to the 'head minister' of Limen, about half of which are churches in the marsh. These are:

LAURENTIUSCIRCE
St. Lawrence, Old Romney)
MARTIN ECCLESIA
(St. Martin?New Romney)
IUECIRCE(Ivychurch)
BENNEDECIRC(E) (Brenzett)
HLIDE (Lydd)
NIWANCIRC(E) (Newchurch)
AELSIESCIRC(E) (Eastbridge)
BLACEMANNESC(IRCE)
(Blackmanstone)
DEMANC(IRCE) (Dymchurch)
ORDGARESC(IRCE)
(Orgarswick)
MERTUMNESC(IRCE) (possibly
Hope-all-Saints)

MIDDELEA (Midley) is also mentioned elsewhere in the list as an independent church.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that by the beginning of the twelfth century, all of Romney Marsh proper had acquired its churches as well as perhaps its parochial organisation and boundaries, and it is from this time that we have the first substantial surviving evidence of the fabric of these churches. In each case the early Norman church is a simple two-celled affair (nave and chancel) with a square east end (there is no evidence at this time for any apses in the Marsh). There is usually a door on one side of the nave (and some evidence for an opposing door or a west door) as well as a little surviving evidence for the characteristic early Norman small round-headed windows, with a single splay. There are also examples of herringbone flint-work (Brenzett and Old Romney); quoins of Caen stone and the re-use of Roman bricks. The best surviving churches of this period are Burmarsh and Dymchurch; the former with only a later west tower, and the latter retaining its simple early Norman plan until the 1821 enlargements. Both these churches also have fine surviving decorated doorways, which can be dated stylistically to *c.* 1130–60.

By the later twelfth century there is some evidence to suggest that great topographical alterations had taken place in Walland Marsh and that the main outlet to the sea of the 'Water of Newenden' was no longer flowing past the borough of Old Romney (Tatton-Brown 1988b). At the same time the population of England was rising rapidly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Both of these changes are reflected in the Marsh area by the building of new churches and by the enlargement of some of the existing churches during the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The churches at Brookland and Fairfield were almost certainly brand new churches of the later twelfth century in newly reclaimed (and populated) land, and the great church of St. Nicholas in New Romney is clearly a large new urban church in the newly created mid twelfth-century borough on the shingle bank. Even though the western tower is structurally secondary to the mid twelfth-century nave (which had aisles from the beginning) it must have been started only a decade or so after the nave was built. The cult of St. Nicholas only became popular in England after 1087 when the body of St. Nicholas was brought from Myra (in southern Turkey) 'for safety from the infidel'. His shrine was set up in a large church in the southern Italian town of Bari.

At Fairield only the late medieval timber-frame survives, but documentary evidence (Woodruff 1917, 162) suggests that the parish church of St. Thomas was always a very small two-celled structure and built only of timber and daub. At Brookland, on the other hand, the surviving church shows us that a probable late twelfth-century timber church was being replaced by a stone church from at least the

early thirteenth century. Remarkably, the late twelfth-century detached timber belfry still survives (Gravett 1974). This and the extremely irregular form of the church show that there were many subsidence problems during the building of the new stone church. From the architectural evidence it is likely that work on this church started at the east end in *c.* 1200 and then continued slowly throughout the earlier part of the century. The plan just evolved as the work carried on, and the builders must soon have realised that the soft ground would never take a stone tower. The large floor area of the church shows, however, that there was an expansion of population throughout the first half of the thirteenth century. At the same time the church plans of Snargate and particularly Lydd also indicate rapidly rising populations in the parish. Lydd is exceptionally large, but this was probably because Lydd was virtually a borough by this time. In the mid-twelfth century Henry II extended the privileges of the Cinque Ports to the 'Archbishop's men of Lydd and Dengemarsh' (Ballard 1913, 184). By contrast, the populations in the north-east corner of Romney Marsh must have remained quite small and static. Even at St. Mary-in-the-Marsh where north and south aisles were added, they were by comparison very small. At Newchurch, the chancel was rebuilt at this time, but the aisles do not appear to have been built until the early fourteenth century.

One can, therefore, perhaps tentatively suggest that by the mid-thirteenth century the greatest population densities (apart from those in the towns of New Romney and Lydd) were in the 'central' area of the marsh on either side of the Rhee channel. This was probably the area in which there was the greatest amount of arable farming. To the north-east the marsh was presumably much less easily drained and hence was still largely in use as pasture. To the south-west the area beyond the 'Great wall of Appledore' and the later St. Thomas' Innings and Midley Walls was still mostly salt marsh, but attempts to drain large parts of the area were beginning (Tatton-Brown 1988b).

FLOODS FOLLOWED BY DEPOPULATION: c. 1250–1400

As is well-known, the second half of the thirteenth century was a time of great storms and flooding, though also a time when the population was still perhaps expanding and, therefore, able to make good, to a certain extent, the destruction caused by the sea. This is particularly the case in the early fourteenth century when the weather improved. The fourteenth century, however, was the period when disease (and to a certain extent famine) took hold of England and the Black Death in 1349–50 was the low point. By the end of the century the population of the Marsh generally had perhaps fallen to about half of

what it was a century before. As a result the arable land in the Marsh reverted to pasture, and it is from the fifteenth century onwards that the famous Romney Marsh sheep took over the area. The arable areas are also likely to have been affected by the rising sea level and the rapid silting up of the Rhee channel which had acted as a major drain.

The churches in the Marsh have their last major period of building work (except for the largely symbolic building of towers) in the earlier fourteenth century, and this can best be seen in the churches at Snave and Newchurch and most remarkably at Ivychurch and in the rebuilt eastern half of St. Nicholas, New Romney.

The advowson of Snave church was given to St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, in 1219 (they also owned the manor), and the abbey seems to have completely rebuilt their church around 1300 incorporating a new (Lady) chapel. The church was situated beside a large green, perhaps a gathering point for sheep. Despite heavy restoration work in 1873, much of the *c.* 1300 work is still visible, though the embattling all round the church, except on the tower (Hasted vii, 397–9), has gone. All the windows are the same and have fine internal and external hood-moulds as well as the very characteristic reticulated tracery. The fine church at Newchurch was also rebuilt at about the same time, with new north and south chapels and aisles being added to the early thirteenth-century chancel. There are two reticulated windows on the north side but the two windows in the chapel of St. Michael and St. Thomas of Canterbury on the south-east are particularly fine. Unfortunately, restoration work in 1845 has damaged the fourteenth-century work.

Several other churches in the Marsh also had reticulated tracery windows inserted in the early fourteenth century (Lydd, Brenzett and Old Romney) but quite the finest use of this type of work is to be found in St. Nicholas, New Romney, where the eastern part of the church was totally rebuilt in the early fourteenth century. The rebuilding work is of particular interest because when it was carried out the ground level outside the church had risen by about one metre since the mid-twelfth century and there can be little doubt that this was caused by the build-up of sand and shingle in one of the great storms of the later thirteenth century. It is, in fact, more than likely that this storm also badly damaged the eastern part of the church, and hence necessitated the early fourteenth-century work (Tatton-Brown 1987). At this time the port and Rhee Channel were fully in use and the population of the town was at its greatest. The Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny in France (where Archbishops Thomas Becket, Stephen Langton and Edmund Rich had spent their times of exile) had been given the advowson of the church in 1264, and it is likely that the

monks partly financed the work, helped no doubt by the citizens of New Romney. Pontigny Abbey had a grange at New Romney, later called St. John's Priory, but the buildings of this house (which had a large graveyard in the fifteenth to sixteenth century) have disappeared.

The largest programme of building work on the Marsh in the fourteenth century was, however, at the archbishop of Canterbury's large church of St. George at Ivychurch. The manor (part of the archbishop's ancient large manor of Aldington) and parish are most unusual because they were continually being enlarged between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries due to the reclamation of the salt marsh. The population of the parish was also increasing and, despite the great set-back of the Black Death, much more land was inned and drained (and presumably populated from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century, with the completely new manor of New Cheney being created in the south-western part of the parish in the later fifteenth century). The rectors of Ivychurch during this period were mostly non-resident clerks working for the archbishop (Scott-Robertson 1880b, 456–8), but despite this much money was spent on rebuilding the church. The earliest visible fabric, which is at the eastern end of the church, is of the late thirteenth century, but it is clear that by the middle of the fourteenth century there was a plan to rebuild completely the church as a large uniform church with no architectural differentiation between the nave and chancel. Later in the fourteenth century, it was decided to have a full-length clerestory and the square windows containing quatrefoils used here are very reminiscent of the windows of *c.* 1380 used above the aisle vaults in the nave of Canterbury cathedral. There was also much use of Perpendicular windows although many of the earlier 'Decorated' windows were kept. The building of the large new western tower, no doubt, followed on soon after in the early fifteenth century. The church is also notable for still retaining its late medieval returnstalls and screens in the western part of the choir as well as a vaulted porch with a chamber over it.

TOWER BUILDING AND ABANDONMENT OF CHURCHES: c. 1400–1600

As in many parish churches (and greater churches) in England, the major architectural achievements of the fifteenth century were often the building of great towers. The greatest of all these towers in Kent was 'Bell Harry' Tower at Canterbury Cathedral where work started in *c.* 1430, but was not finished until the last decade of the century. Romney Marsh, too, boasts some notable fifteenth-century towers, including one of the finest in the whole county, Lydd. This splendid

structure, which is 132 feet high, was built between 1442 and 1446 by Thomas Stanley, who had worked under Thomas Mapilton on the south-west tower of Canterbury cathedral (1423–24), and perhaps went on to construct the nearby towers of Tenterden and Ashford (Harvey, 1954, 250–1). The tower cost £280 and contains many notable features, including twin west doorways and a very fine lierne vault. The other fifteenth-century towers in the Marsh are neither as fine nor as well documented as that at Lydd, but the 100 ft. tower at Ivychurch is also a fine piece of work, as are the towers at Newchurch and Snargate, which both perhaps date from the early fifteenth century, though subsidence problems at Newchurch may have held up the work for a time. The small western towers at Snave and Burmarsh are, by contrast, not very striking. At the other churches new towers were not attempted, though the timber belfry in the western part of Brenzett may have been rebuilt at this time, as well as the early timber tower at Brookland, which probably now acquired its 'candle-snuffer' shape.

Very little other building work took place on the Marsh at this period, and the only places where fifteenth-century work can be seen are St. Mary-in-the-Marsh (where the north aisle was apparently totally rebuilt early in the century), Midley, and the new church at East Guldeford (from 1499). At Midley only the ruined west gable end of a small church survives. This is made largely of pale yellow bricks, and suggests that a presumably much larger church was totally rebuilt in the late fifteenth century. A few miles away to the south-west at the extreme end of the newly reclaimed Guldeford Marsh is East Guldeford church. The Marsh, which is entirely beyond the Kent ditch in East Sussex, was reclaimed by Sir Richard Guldeford in the 1470s and 1480s, and in 1499 a faculty was obtained to build a new parish church. The 'mean' little brick church with two small parallel aisles separated by a row of timber posts was put up soon afterwards and consecrated in 1505.

With the completion of this edifice, church building on the Marsh came to an end until the nineteenth century. On the other side of the Marsh, on the north-east, the parish churches of Orgarswick, Blackmanstone and Eastbridge had probably been abandoned well before 1500, though they are still shown as standing buildings on the earliest maps of the Marsh of *c.* 1589. This mirrors the large-scale depopulation which had taken place in the neighbouring town of Hythe after *c.* 1400 where the Black Death, a devastating fire and the silting of the harbour had virtually destroyed the town. At New Romney things were not much better. Early in the fifteenth century the Rhee Channel had finally silted up, and by the early sixteenth century the three large parish churches were in poor condition and

surplus to requirements. St. Lawrence came down first, probably in the late 1530s (Scott-Robertson 1880a, 244) and in 1549 the bailiff, jurats and vicar of New Romney petitioned Archbishop Cranmer for permission to pull down one of the two remaining churches as they were 'either of them able and meat to receive all the people and more' of New Romney (Walker 1893, 155). Soon afterwards St. Martin's church was pulled down and all the materials were sold. Less than a century later the nearby churches of Hope All Saints and Midley were abandoned and allowed to fall into a ruined state, and by the seventeenth century the population of the whole Marsh area was probably lower than it had been at any time since the eleventh century.

This is only an initial attempt to examine the documentary history and architectural remains of all the churches in the marsh. To understand the changes outlined above in much more detail, measured architectural drawings and, above all, archaeological excavation need to take place both in the remaining churches and on the sites of those which have ceased to be used. An important start has been made at Broomhill Church, but a careful research programme involving many of the other churches now needs to be drawn up.

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