

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH OF ST. MARY, EBONY, AND ITS SUCCESSORS

SIR JOHN WINNIFRITH

If you approach Ebony from Tenterden, you will go down the long hill which overlooks, and drops steadily into, the levels of the drained marshes. From the high ground you may pick out the small church which lies by the roadside further down. Beyond it, you will see rising from the marshes an isolated hill looking rather like a gigantic, stranded whale, except for a group of windswept trees on its crown. Today it goes by the name of Chapel Bank. No road now climbs its slopes; yet for centuries it was the spiritual and agricultural hub of the parish and was ruled by priories from east Kent. The graveyard, still there on its summit, is where the parish church once stood. It is reached through the hamlet of Reading Street and over the narrow, bridged dyke at the bottom of the Street where there used to be a wide tideway forming a barrier. In 1353, the Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, made a grant of 'the use and charge of our ferry – *passagium nostrum* – at the river of Redyngg.'¹

The first mention of Ebony in the records is in a charter of Aethelwulf of Wessex, then ruler of Kent. His charter, dated 832, gave the land of Ebony to the Priory of Christ Church, Canterbury. The priory could well have built the earliest church, but the first for which there is proof is that included in Domesday Monachorum. Although not completed until about 1100, this record partially discloses the pre-Norman organisation of minsters, each being a missionary centre sponsoring a group of tributary churches which were not yet fully fledged parish churches. The church at Ebony is listed among those centred at Charing. It could have been built well before that date by as much as two and a half centuries, but any

¹ *Letters of Christ Church Canterbury*, II, 317 Transcript by Arthur Hussey in the National Trust's collection of Dr. William Cock's papers.

church built as a result of Aethelwulf's charter, if in existence before 892, would most probably have been destroyed in the Danish invasion in that year when the Danish fleet was based on Appledore. We surmise, but do not know for certain, that the original church was built on the same site as its immediate successors. Building materials, such as stone and timber, could easily be brought by water to the foot of the hill. The earliest stone church, whether Norman or pre-Conquest, may indeed have some remains among foundations of nave and chancel which have been exposed in excavation. Whatever the date of the first church at Ebony, its patronage was, by 1210, at the latest, transferred to Dover Priory which, in that year, appointed a priest to serve Appledore and the chapel (*cum capella*) of Ebony. The patronage of the two churches was to remain with Dover till its dissolution in November 1535. The monks of Canterbury kept the land given by Aethelwulf till they, in turn, were suppressed in 1540 and the manors passed to laymen.

For the later Middle Ages and beyond, records provide a wealth of evidence for the 'changes and chances' which struck Ebony's church fabric. Many facts are known about the structure of the church as it was in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: its contents, its despoliation in the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I, and its devastation by fire about 1560. We also know that out of its ruins was built a much smaller building which served the parish till 1858 when it was taken down, stone by stone, and re-built with minor alterations at Reading Street, a mile away. Here it still stands and continues the record of a place of worship at Ebony for some one thousand years.

Information about these events, though recorded in documents, has not up to now been set out in a narrative. Even the salient facts about the old church on the island had been forgotten and transmitted only in rare and out-of-print books. The tasks of assembling the written records and of excavating the foundations of the old church began only a few years ago. The excavation, under the leadership of Mr. A. Miles, was started in 1979 by a group of K.A.S. members and others, now allied to Tenterden Museum Association. I had already studied some of the ancient records collected and copied by the late Dr. William Cock of Appledore, and I have since made further searches. That there were in his time surviving remains of a medieval church had been clearly stated by Richard Kilburne of Hawkhurst (1605-78) whose *Topographie; or Survey of the County of Kent* was published in 1659. Some of these remains were removed in the Victorian demolition, and for this reason, or in consideration of the long lapse of time, Kilburne's testimony was ignored or discounted by those who investigated the site in the early 1900s. The recent excavations have proved how right he was and how much still remains

confirming his report. For it is becoming apparent that on top of the island there was an aisled church of dimensions and construction comparable with those of its sister church of Appledore and other neighbouring churches.

The most dramatic discovery has been the massive foundations. Although a tower has yet to be found, the main outlines of the old church are plain. Measurements must, till the excavations have been completed, be preliminary; but already enough has been done to suggest, however provisionally, that the outside length of the building was some 75 ft. It would be longer if the foundations of a tower at the west end are found. At the east end the chancel and its side chapel spanned some 49 ft. The breadth of the nave is wider, including north and south aisles already found and measuring some $7\frac{1}{2}$ and, more tentatively, 10 ft. in width, respectively.

The dig uncovered some well-worked stone, including the base of a doorway and other shaped pieces of stone, besides numerous floor-tiles which had been set in mortar on a bed of rammed chalk. Other useful finds included coins dated from Edward I to Henry VI, medieval and Tudor potsherds, many fragments of painted window glass, beads, possibly from a rosary – and other artifacts. Specimens have been deposited in Tenterden Museum.

The written records fill in the picture of what the church looked like from the outside. Its height can only be deduced. It was high enough to take the arched window of Perpendicular style still preserved as the east window in the surviving chapel at Reading Street. It was high enough to hold the rood screen on which were mounted the figures of Christ crucified and of St. Mary the Virgin and St. John. There was room to mount the structure of a rood loft. It must have had a bell tower to hold the four 'grett' bells listed in the inventory taken in Edward VI's reign.² The records also confirm the existence of a side chapel standing in all probability on the foundations revealed in the dig at the south side of the east end. Archdeacon Harpsfield's visitation³ in the penultimate year of Queen Mary's reign ordered the parish not only to provide an altar of stone (a High Altar is referred to in a will of 1469) but also to make up a side altar. Joan Reynold in her will⁴ of 1528 asked that she should be buried 'in the new chapel lately builded by the cost of my husband'. This new

² *Arch. Cant.*, viii (1872), 145.

³ Quotations from the archdeacon's visitations here and elsewhere in this article are mostly from transcripts made by Dr. Cock, Arthur Hussey and A.H. Taylor of Tenterden. It was possible to check only a few of these in the Cathedral Library. Some may have been lost in the bombing.

⁴ Extracts from wills also taken from sources mentioned above.

chapel was not the Reading Street chapel (see pp. 162–3) which was in existence in 1466, and it is probable that it was in this chapel that the second altar stood. Wills of 1523 and 1533 make bequests to the rodelight and the rood. The rood loft had been recently erected when a benefaction was made to it in 1485. Finally, the records show that, if effect was given to Richard Lawless' will of 1533, the churchyard was railed with two tons of timber he had bequeathed.

This church standing on a site 100 ft. above sea level would have been a landmark visible from miles away to the shipping coming up the sea creek. Its interior was also impressive. As the parishioners came into church they saw a blaze of lights and colour. There was a shrine to the patron saint, St. Mary the Virgin. Wills of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries refer to the shrine of St. Mary, to its light and its image. They mention the brotherhood of St. Mary which would have been charged with keeping the light burning. John Siller left a legacy in 1502 for the reparation of the Tabernacle of St. Mary. A tabernacle could be anything from a simple niche to an elaborate enclosure with a canopy carved in wood or stone. Other saints had their images and lights burning before them, provided by bequests of the faithful. St. Katherine, who also had a Brotherhood, St. Stephen, St. Peter, St. Thomas (who had a shrine) and St. James are mentioned in wills. One parishioner recorded his wish to be buried before the altar of St. Stephen, so that the side chapel mentioned above may have been dedicated to St. Stephen. There was an altar of St. Michael in the fifteenth century. Two legacies went to the 'Hogwell Light'. This is variously interpreted as a corruption of the Anglo-Saxon *halig* i.e. the holy well, or *hoch* i.e. the high or deep well. The fact that this light is included in a whole list of lights in honour of saints is some support for the former view. There are numerous springs on the island, but none has yet been identified with the Hogwell.

Following the Dissolution of the monasteries, Henry VIII had the land and the advowson of Ebony in his gift. Both went to Sir Walter Hendley, attorney of the Court of Augmentations, who feathered his nest by securing many monastic properties confiscated by his court.⁵ He settled his property at Ebony on his daughter Anne's future husband, Richard Covert, a member of a baronet's family settled in Slaugham in Sussex. So Ebony now had a lay rector, who took the major tithes and was responsible for the upkeep of the chancel and

⁵ The record of Sir Walter Hendley's activities is in the printed *Calendar of Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of Henry VIII – passim*, but see especially the volume for 1540–1541.

churchyard, and was the owner of the two Ebony manors hitherto held by the Priory of Christ Church, Canterbury. Difficulties and, as it turned out, disasters were in store for the church.

Like all churches, it suffered the pain and confusion caused by the iconoclasm of Cranmer in Edward VI's reign, the attempts by Mary to restore the old rite, and then the Protestant backlash, when Elizabeth I succeeded her. An inventory taken in the last year of Edward VI shows, however, that there had been comparatively little spoliation of movable property. Vestments, silver vessels and the four 'grett bells' as well as the Sanctus bell were therefore probably in use throughout Mary's reign. Presumably, very few of the old ornaments survived when Queen Elizabeth and Archbishop Parker took over. In the long term, however, the worst misfortune of the church was the progressive decay of the fabric already suffering from neglect for many years before Elizabeth I came to the throne.

As early as 1511, long before the Reformation, Archbishop Warham found that 'the chancel was not sufficiently repaired, neither above nor below nor in the glass windows'. His decision was to require the vicar of Appledore and Ebony to repair the chancel and its windows under pain of sequestration. The repair of the chancel was the duty of the recipient of the major tithes, at this time Dover Priory or the priory's farmer of the Ebony tithes. Possibly William Marshall, then vicar of Appledore and Ebony, had agreed to farm the tithes for Dover Priory. He was a pluralist and a very rich man. In such custody country churches were all too apt to deteriorate.

In 1557, Archdeacon Harpsfield, trying to restore the stone altars and to make good the deficiencies in vestments, etc., found that Henry VIII's gift of Ebony to Sir Walter Hendley was resulting in serious damage. Sir Walter had died in 1550, leaving apparently a life interest in the Ebony manors to his widow, who promptly married one Thomas Roberts of Ticehurst, Sussex. The archdeacon made a note 'to speak to Mr. Roberts who had pulled away the lead of the chancel and covered it with shingles, to repair the same and the church and the house for the priest.' Although part of the church had been shingled by 1485, when Thomas Herryys left 20s. for shingling, shingles were a far greater fire risk and not so effective as lead. Mr. Roberts, as the sequel shows, played out time, and did nothing. In 1560, the parish reported 'the north door of the chancel is all to broke, the fault of Mr. Roberts who married my lady Hendley'.

Six years later, worse still had happened. The ruinous state of the fabric by then moved a parishioner to leave £20 towards rebuilding the church 'if it should be built again in the form and manner of a church.' A further report noted that the vicarage house was in decay and used as a cattle shed. In 1574, the vicarage was in ruins and the

parish was ordered to shingle the church – to no avail because in 1590 the church ‘was fentred with extreme winds’. Thereafter there is no recorded complaint.

What happened to the medieval building, and when, can only be a matter of conjecture. Yet one trustworthy account comes from Kilburne (*op. cit.*) who wrote that the church of St. Mary, Ebony, ‘was anciently far larger than it now is, the foundation whereof is yet discernible. But, about 100 years since, it was burned by Lightning, and instead thereof, a little church now standing was built upon part of the former foundations’. A fire spreading to the shingled roof would have caused extensive damage, especially if the tie-beams fell in dragging down walls and pillars. In neighbouring Kenardington the church was, according to Hasted, burnt by lightning in 1559 but was restored in part by Roger Horne, the Lord of the Manor. Although there was a presentment to the archdeacon by the churchwarden in 1560, there was no mention of the fire. In 1565, there was a happy report that ‘our church is in hand to be builded again.’ Both in Kenardington and Ebony the absence of any reference, at the time, to the lightning strikes is puzzling. The same storm could well have been responsible for the lightning at both churches. Evelyn Woodruff in his *Extracts from original documents illustrating the progress of the Reformation in Kent* gives a possible explanation of the lack of contemporary references. He says that there are considerable gaps in the Canterbury records for the opening year of Queen Elizabeth’s reign, caused in part by fire. So, records about Ebony and Kenardington may have been destroyed. It is also possible that as a result of the administrative confusion in the first years of the transition from a Catholic to a Protestant regime, no visitation took place.

During the next thirty years while the church, and particularly the chancel, remained in a decayed state, the congregation and the priest must have endured considerable discomfort, huddling in what shelter remained in the old house of prayer. Somehow they hung on. The transcripts of the parish register show that the sacraments of christening, marriage and burial continued throughout this period.

THE READING STREET CHAPEL

Before leaving the medieval church on the island, mention should be made of an appendage to it – the medieval Reading Street chapel. It is clear from the wills quoted below that not only was there the church on the island but, from at least the early fifteenth century, there was also a chapel at Reading Street. What size it was and where it stood has not been established nor has any trace of it been found.



Map of Ebony Court Lodge Lands by Francis Hill, 1710. (Kent County Archives Office)

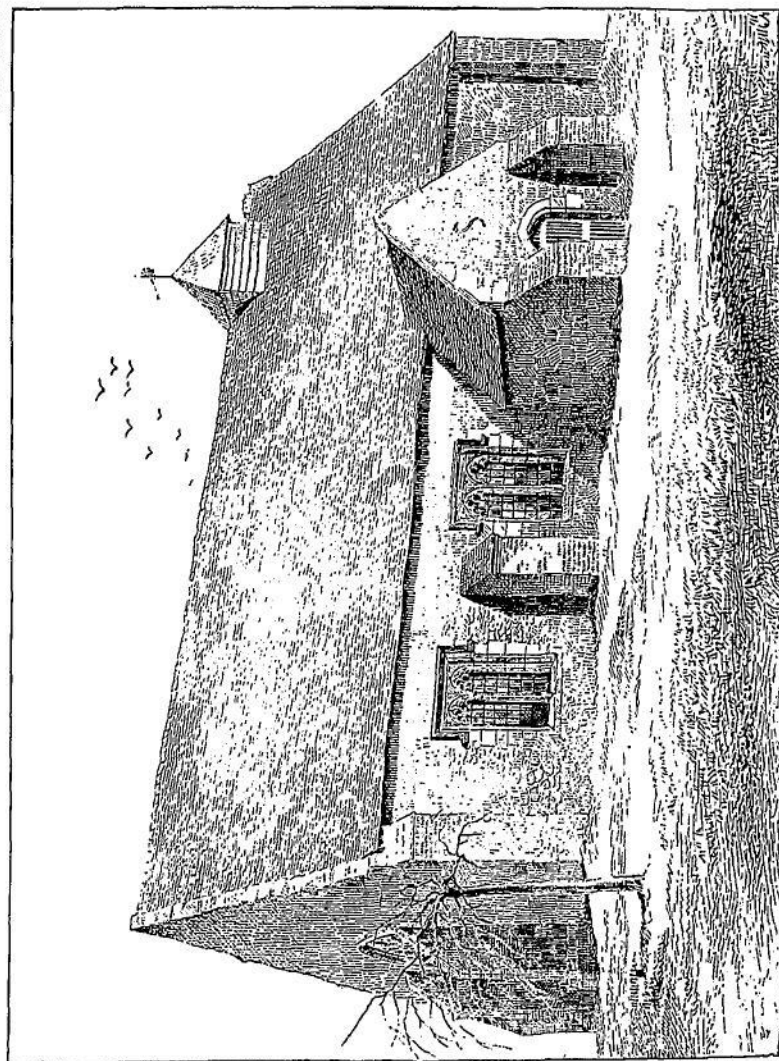
Wills referring to the Reading Street chapel span the period 1466 to 1533. John Blakebourne of Appledore, in 1466, left 20*d.* to the light of St. Anthony in the chapel of Redyng; Robert Golding of Ebony in 1502 gave 4*d.* to the Light of Redyng. Thomas Herryys of Ebbone in 1485 left 10*s.* a year for twenty years towards finding a priest to sing in the chapel of Reddyng. In two further wills in 1502 and 1533 the testators divide their bequests between the church on the island and the chapel standing in Reading Street. Joan Reynold, one of these testators, has already been mentioned as having asked for burial in the side chapel in the main church on the island. She also made other provision – for the repair of the common causeway on either side of the channel and for ‘an honest priest to celebrate divine service in the church of Ebbeny at all times convenient for two years. If foule weather or other occasions prevent, the same priest to sing in the Chapell of Redyng’.

After 1533 there are no further references to the Reading Street chapel. The experience of neighbouring Smallhythe⁶ shows that there were many predators anxious to snap up any chapels condemned to be suppressed under Edward VI's Act of 1547, for forfeiting to the Crown all free chapels and chantries. Even the presence of Sir Walter Hendley on the board of enquiry, under Sir John Baker of Sissinghurst, did not prevent the congregation at Smallhythe getting a verdict that their chapel was a chapel of ease and therefore outside the scope of the statute. At Reading Street this claim, despite the intention expressed in Joan Reynold's will, was not made. In all probability the chapel was in consequence sold and pulled down, or else converted to a dwelling-house.

THE LITTLE CHAPEL ON THE ISLAND

The year when Kilburne's ‘little chapel’ was built ‘on part of the foundations’ of the old church has not been found in records. However, it is clear that round about 1600 what seems likely to have been a process of cannibalising the surviving masonry took place. We know what the new building looked like from the sketch in the centre of Hill's map of 1710 and from Gaye's drawing in 1858. (Plates I, II and III). It stood in a well fenced churchyard, reached by footpaths from Stone, from High House Farm on the road to Wittersham, and from Reading Street. Hill shows a lychgate and a wicket, where the path from Reading Street reached the churchyard. He shows a large

⁶ See A.H. Taylor's monumental account in *Arch. Cant.*, xxx (1914) 133–91.



Ebony Chapel in 1858 from the South-east before its Removal. (*Kent Archaeological Society*)

porch on the north wall. Hill's map is a lovely example of the surveyor's art and contains a mass of information about land ownership and field names. Two of the latter provoke enquiry. Was the Booth field the site of a fair and what were the Crock Wells?

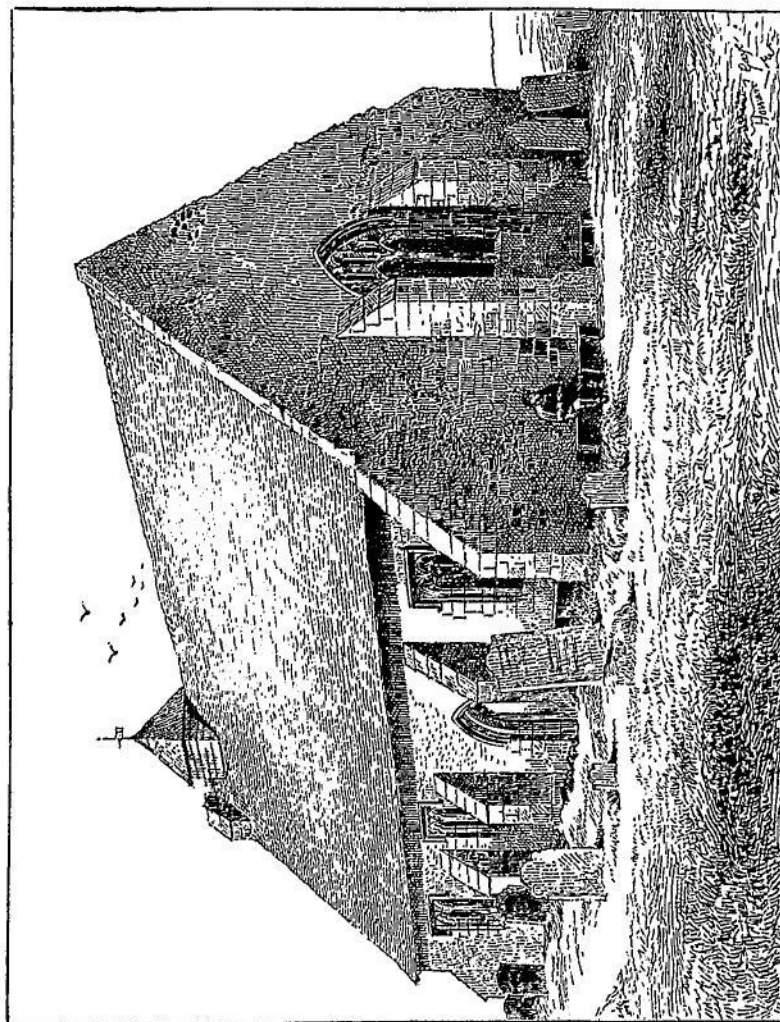
Another example of cannibalising a much larger medieval church in order to build a far smaller chapel is to be found at Covehithe in Suffolk. There much of the outer wall and the tower of the vast church, mainly Perpendicular, still survive. Within its roofless walls is the chapel built in 1672. It is clear from the fabric that its builders used masonry taken from the massive buttresses and the main structure of the old church.

The little chapel on the hill at Ebony lacked the grace and splendour of the old church, but it served the parish well for over 250 years. It was during this period that most of the headstones still standing in the old churchyard were put up. Thirty-four still survive from before 1858, the earliest still legible is of 1699. Another is the tombstone of Stephen Ramsden buried in 1712, a notable churchwarden, his first term in 1684. Ten mark burials since the chapel was rebuilt at Reading Street. One of the headstones commemorates Isaac Cloke who died on 27th June, 1820. A local newspaper describes his eccentric funeral. His coffin was, it says, followed to the grave by 72 old men, all in white frocks and stockings and each was to be the father of six children. This may have been Isaac Cloke's wish. It seems doubtful whether it was fully carried out.

The position of the headstones gives some clue to the site of the chapel within the area covered by the medieval church. Several of the stones sketched in Plate II can be individually identified very close to the line of buttresses which supported the south wall, subsequently removed entirely. This wall, like the chapel's east end, appears to have had late medieval features in its three windows and doorway, suggesting re-use in the post-medieval chapel of a former south aisle wall. The east window, too, was probably a reconstruction and was again re-used in the present parish church at Reading Street.

THE MOVE TO READING STREET

The last phase in the history of the church began in 1858. In that year the vicar of Appledore cum Ebony, the Rev. W.W. Kirby, with the support of the churchwardens and parishioners, decided that it was no longer fair to ask the congregation to trudge the long, muddy footpaths to Chapel Bank. Bagshaw's *Guide* of 1847 describes the parish of Ebony, extending over some 2400 acres as 'low and unhealthy, the vapours rising from the swampy marshes subject it to



Ebony Chapel in 1858 from the North-east before its Removal. (*Kent Archaeological Society*)

continual fog'. This was a fair description. The re-opening of the Rother channel south of Oxney in the seventeenth century left the Reading channel still, to some extent, draining water into the Appledore channel, although less forcefully. Its outfall was effectively severed in 1805 by the Royal Military Canal; and thereafter the old Reading channel became a noisome, blind gut through the marshes. The militia stationed at Reading Street, as part of the garrison stationed along the canal for defence against Napoleon's threatened invasion, suffered terribly from Ebony's unhealthy climate. Between 1804 and 1809, no less than 43 soldiers were buried in the old churchyard on Chapel Bank, as many as 18 in one year. No headstone, no memorial, commemorates their death on active service. In this unhappy period for the parish, its social activities were confined to what had long ago become the centre of population at Reading Street. Here there was a school, still standing but now otherwise used, a pub, The White Hart and Lamb, also recognisable though now converted to a private dwelling, and a group of houses. Opposite the school, the old chapel from Chapel Bank was re-erected. It was a great feat. Empty horse-drawn carts could just about get up the bank. Laden with stone, they could only make their way down in dry spells and with considerable difficulty. Farmers supplied the transport and the services of their labourers. This remarkable transfer of its fabric and the new era which opened for Ebony church were reported in his current church register by the Rev. W.W. Kirby. His entry in the back of the book is quoted in full:

'August 1858. The Chapel which stood in the centre of the Churchyard of Ebony on the hill was during this month pulled down in consequence of its inaccessible position - there being no path to the Chapel wh. was $\frac{3}{4}$ [three quarters of a mile from the nearest building]. The exterior was also in a state of rapid decay - the interior was most rude - the Pulpit and desk being at the East window, between it and the Communion rails - The building pulled down could not have been ancient - but contained in its walls much good Caen stone - well worked and evidently the remains of an original handsome building - The stone cross now at the East end of the New Chapel was found in the walls and evidently very old - All the windows - except the Vestry and West Windows are [from] the old - The foundation stone of the New was laid on the 24th of August 1858 by the Vicar, Rev. W.W. Kirby - the Churchwarden, Mr. J. Boon - Seaman Beale Esq. Tenterden and Mrs. Kirby - the Consecration was performed by the Archbishop of Canterbury [Abp. Sumner] on the 18th November 1858 - when a large number of clergy and people assembled - his Grace preached from Ps. 122. v. 1 - The church was scarcely three months in building (old material used as far as possible) - cost £270 without fence, wall or Painted Window (presented by E.D. Saunders Esq.). Money raised by late subscriptions and £100 from the Church Building Society.

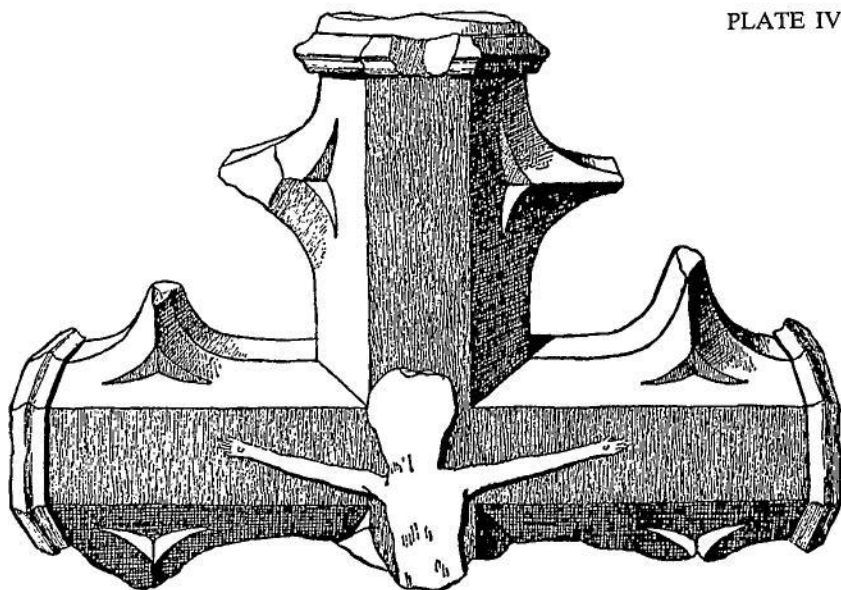
May God bless this effort of his servant – undertaken for the honor of His Name
in the Furtherance of His Kingdom! Nov. 21. 1858 –

Wm. Walter Kirby
Incumbent

Architect. S.S. Teulon, Esq. London⁷

Builders. Messrs Bourne & Chambers, Woodchurch, Kent

PLATE IV



Ancient Crucifix discovered during Demolition of the Chapel in 1858. (Original engraving in K.A.S. Library).

The church on the new site differed in only a few points from its appearance in the sketches showing it in 1710 and 1858. (Plates I, II and III.) Similar in dimensions, apart from the sensible omission of the large porch which had stood on the north side, it has the addition of a vestry on the north side; and it lacks the many heavy buttresses of the old chapel on the bank. Otherwise the builders stuck to the old model. We are never likely to know whether they put the medieval scratch dial on the north side because that was where they found it. It would, of course, in the medieval church have been on the south. What is known is that in demolishing the old chapel the builders found an ancient stone crucifix (Plate IV) and mounted this on the

⁷ S.S. Teulon was a well-known London architect.

new east gable – alas, only for it to be destroyed by a German flying bomb brought down in a field nearby. The replacement cross follows the design of its ancient predecessor, though it does not reproduce the figure of Christ.

The rebuilding was a magnificent proof of the devotion of the parishioners to their parish church, lavished on it for so many centuries. Their successors faithfully maintain that tradition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to record my thanks for all the help I have been given by Mrs. M.C. Lebon, a member of the Tenterden Museum group, and by Miss A.M. Oakley of Canterbury Cathedral Library, the Hon. Librarian of the Kent Archaeological Society, the staff of the Kent Archives Office, and the Rev. Christopher Duncan, the Vicar of Ebony.

APPENDIX

Hill's Estate Map of 1710 – a transcript of Hill's marginal notes, with comments in square brackets, by J.W.

(Upper left, within a carved gilded frame) Note the upland fences show from the Marsh land fence by a Green stroke a long by the Black line round each several feild, which green stroke signifies the hedge. And the Black line the dike so that on the side the Green stroke is of the Black line on that side the fence belongs. The Marsh land fence is distinguished from the Upland fence by a double line coloured blew which signifies the Dike etc. [Several words are obscured by the frame on the right side and the sense is not always clear. Some of the coloured strokes have also faded.]

(Left, in a carved golden frame, between the compass and the Table) The course of the River Rother riseth at Argos Hill, Sussex near to Waterdowne Forest and falleth to Hitchingham. And so to Roberts-bridge from whence it descendeth to Bodyam Castle Newenden [the next place is illegible] Appledore. And so far of Old Winchelsea where was the mouth of this River Into which the Danes in the time of King Alfred After they had spoiled England and France, Hasten who then commanded went away to his ships Laden with Rich Spoil, which came hither again entering into the river Rother (then Limen, as Leland saith, at the mouth whereon Old Winchelsea sometime

stood) And by sudden surprise took a small castle that was 4 or 5 miles within the land at Appledore, as some think, which because it was not of sufficient strength they levelled it with the ground and raised a new etc. etc. [The whole of this note is based on Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent*, written in 1570, pp. 184-5 and 187. Much of it is copied *verbatim*. The missing place-name in the course of the Rother in Lambarde is Oxney. The last sentence in Hill's note ends with 'etc' because he was running out of space.]

(Upper right, within a blue, red and gold wreath) A map and description of all the lands belonging to Ebony Court Lodge, in the Isle of Oxney, in the County of Kent, belonging to John Blackmore, Gent, showing the contents of each several feild, as also what upland. And what Marsh land as may be found in the table. Also showing the trees, Gates, stiles, bare places, ponds, footpaths and horse Roads, leading thorow or by the said land and with the names of those Places leading to, likewise showing the Upland fence from the Marsh land, with the names of those Persons whose land bounders Round the said land. Measured and Mapped and herein described by me, Fra. Hill, An^o 1710.

(In the margin below the above) (a) Footpath from Chapel to High House (b) Note The Court Lodge Wood lyes In the parish of Stone beyond Mr Stephen Ramsden's house which is better than half a mile from Little Ferry Marsh. The Map would not omit of lying it in its right situation. Therefore I give this Remark. [Half a mile from Little Ferry Marsh puts the true position of Court Lodge Wood just beyond the north-west boundary of Ebony Court Lodge lands.]