

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry (Original)

Episode 1: THE VERY BEGINNING

The Go-Between memorably begins “The past is a different country; they do things differently there”. If this is true of the entire medieval period, it is even more true of the time in the mid Saxon period when Southchurch was traditionally handed over to the cathedral church at Canterbury. By the mid twelfth century, rural England looked much as it would for the next 800 years, with market towns, country villages, parish churches and parish priests, but in the mid-Saxon period we are still in the heroic world of Beowulf.

Seventh century Essex was slowly and haphazardly becoming a Christian kingdom. The royal burial mound in Prittlewell, with crosses of gold foil laid on the eyes of the corpse, is now dated to about 580-605, potentially making it earlier than the first Christian mission from Rome of 597. The kingdom of Essex - or at least, its kings - reverted to paganism several times in the 600's but by the end of the century it was more securely Christian. St Cedd, our patron saint, established St Peter's Chapel at Bradwell-on-Sea around 662.



Chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall,
Bradwell-on-Sea

Historians believe that, in the eighth and ninth centuries, kings, great lords and religious communities controlled very large territories. These territories were comprised not of single villages, but rather of a smattering of small hamlets and farmsteads within thousands of acres of fields, woodlands and moors. The outlying hamlets within these territories were organised to provide their lords - who had large, leisured retinues - with food, livestock, and labour.

The Saxon church provided pastoral care for these small hamlets and farmsteads not through parish churches but through “minsters” or monasteries, which served similarly

large territories. This was not the world of Benedictines, with celibate monks chanting solemnly in magnificent abbeys. Historians of this period apply the terms “minster” and “monastery” indiscriminately to any community staffed by a group of clergy, possibly but not necessarily comprising or including monks, without implying adherence to any specific monastic rule or liturgical routine. Most were probably family monasteries, founded by a nobleman on his estate, ruled by his relatives, and staffed by his dependents. It is likely that the Venerable Bede despaired of such places, and he tended not to mention them.

What does this mean for Southchurch? It was certainly not a pretty country village with a parish church, but the name itself and the church's prime location (the Saxons loved building churches at the top of hills, with a clear view all round) suggest that there may have been a church here in the early Saxon period, probably by the eighth century.

It is possible that Southchurch was itself a minster. This is the view put forward in 2011 by Professor Stephen Rippon of the Archaeology Department of the University of Essex:

“By the 8th century, [Rochford hundred] appears to have been broken up into a number of smaller estates, which south of the Roach may have been based at Prittlewell, Great Wakering and Southchurch where there were also early minster churches”.

Alternatively, a leading modern historian of the Saxon church, John Blair, has observed that there appear to be a number of “directional names” containing church or mynster around the Thames estuary (including Upminster, Southminster, Eastchurch, Northminster, and, most famously, Westminster, as well as Southchurch). He believes that settlements with such names were probably ecclesiastical dependencies of minsters. This does not mean that they looked like a cathedral close, but it is likely to mean that they had a small church or hermitage. In the case of Southchurch, the economic rationale for a settlement was probably the grazing of sheep on the estuarine salt pastures. The closest parallel may be the founding of a “grange” of lay brothers in sheep-farming country by the Cistercians in the twelfth century.

If John Blair is right, the Saxon “minster” to the north of “South church” was almost certainly located at Wakering (early minsters along the east coast were heavily concentrated around river estuaries.) While there is no early written or archaeological evidence that Wakering was a “minster”, there is very strong evidence from later saints’ cults and legends.

The saints in Wakering’s case were two princes of Kent, Aethelbert and Aethelred. According to the legend, King Egbert of Kent was deeply anxious about his young and pious cousins, and listened too readily to the evil suggestions of an adviser named Thunnor that he was not safe on his throne while these princes lived. Eventually, around AD 670, Thunnor murdered the two lads and buried them quietly, without prayers or honours, under the hall of the King's Palace at Eastry in Kent. However, a supernatural light shone over the concealed tomb and revealed the crime. The King, filled with horror and remorse, sent for his chief thanes and bishops, and confessed his guilty half-consent to the murder. He had the bodies removed and buried with Royal honours behind the high altar in the church at Wakering, where miracles were soon reported in testimony of their innocence and sanctity.



Depiction of Egbert from the Genealogical Chronicle of the English Kings, a late 13th-century manuscript in the British Library

That is almost, but not quite, the end of the tale. When the tenth century reformation - which introduced “proper” monasteries - got under way, the relics were translated to (i.e. stolen by) Ramsey Abbey. The Passio of the Wakering saints explains this more elegantly:

“They were buried in the church of the village called Wakering, which was lazily served by a few careless priests, on account of whose sloth, and the infrequency of adequate ministrations by those who should have honoured them with due service, [the saints] were exasperated and unwilling to dwell there further”.

But I’m sure that then, as now, the saints were impressed by the Christian devotion of the poor inhabitants of Southchurch!

Join us again in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 2:

- Southchurch is given away!
- Is 824 really the correct date?