

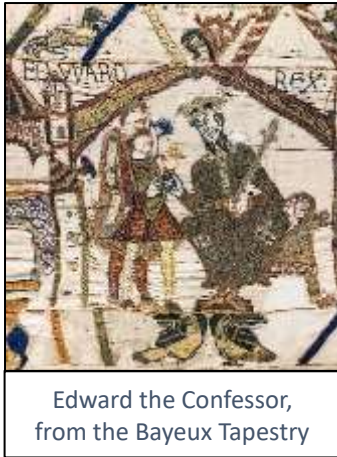
A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 2: DONATION TO CANTERBURY

By far the most important event in the medieval history of Southchurch was its donation to the cathedral church at Canterbury. I will begin with the classic account of this from Alfred Goodale's History of Southchurch.

The earliest printed description of this Norman church is given by Salmon in his "History and Antiquities of Essex" published in 1740. Ten years later, Holman, in a similar work, used some of



Salmon's information and wrote, "This parish or the greater part of it did, long before the Conquest, belong to the Archiepiscopal See of Canterbury, being given to it by one Lifstanus, a noble Saxon, and confirmed by Celulfry, King of the Mercians. This was about AD 823 or 824" – the latter is now the accepted year. Holman continued, "This is the first place in Essex that was given to that church" and he also records that Edward the Confessor confirmed the gift of Lifstanus "unto Christ Church in Canterbury by the name of Southcyrca". At the "Grand Survey" for the Domesday Book, Holman says the church and manors were held by "The Holy Trinity of Canterbury for the monks there, by the name of Sudcerca". He also records that the spiritual jurisdiction of Southchurch was under the Dean of Bocking.

We now call Lifstanus, Lifstan, and in the 1,200 years which have passed since he made his gift to the monks, Southchurch has had an unbroken link with Canterbury. The archives of Canterbury Cathedral and Lambeth Palace provide a great deal of fascinating documentary evidence of our church's antiquity and of the manors which were part of Lifstan's gift. One document, translated from the Latin, reads "Lifstanus gave Southcherche to the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, and later Henry II confirmed it by his charter". That royal charter is also preserved at Canterbury with the king's seal attached but it gives the older Saxon name of "Sudchercha".

We know little more about Lifstan apart from the fact that his death was celebrated at Canterbury on August 25th. Other land at Southchurch was given to the monks by Ealdhirt and his sister Salethryt.

The written "evidence" for Lifstan's donation of Southchurch to Canterbury in 824 comes from charters from the reign of the Henry II in the twelfth century. Not surprisingly, some historians are a little slow to believe that clerks in twelfth-century Canterbury had a clear understanding of events in the early ninth century (although rather more willing to believe that the clerks might wish us to believe that they did).

In fact, charters constitute one of our main forms of evidence about life in Anglo-Saxon England. Almost all early charters record grants of land and/or privilege by the king to the Church, but nearly everything about them is controversial. Who, for example, actually wrote them, the king's own clerks or the grant's recipient? From 798 (when the city was burnt down), Canterbury has a superb series of early charters, frequently extant in their original form. If there had been a grant of land at Southchurch, there might therefore have been an original record. There isn't.

A study by Nicholas Brooks, a leading historian of the early history of the church of Canterbury, concluded that all acquisitions by Wulfred, the Archbishop between 805 and 832, lay entirely in Kent and in Middlesex (and, until the year 825, were confined to Kent). Moreover, he believes that - with the single exception of an archiepiscopal estate at Vange - Canterbury acquired no estates in Essex

before the end of the tenth century. Southchurch - like other holdings in Essex - is not mentioned until near the end of his history. He concludes:

“We also have some very brief notes in post-Conquest obituaries and cartularies of grants of land to Christ Church [Canterbury] that were made by laymen on unspecified occasions in the last 30 years of the Anglo-Saxon state: in Essex at Southchurch, Thurrock, Coggeshall and St Osyth and in Surrey at Walworth. There is no reason to think that any of these notes were based upon authentic written documents; rather they seem to have been compiled from the memory of the English monks in the post-Conquest community at Christ Church.”

The nearest we have to an original early record is a charter from the reign of Edward the Confessor which records that “Ic Eadwerd cyng 7 Englalandes wealdend under Criste þan heofenlican cyninge geann þæs landes æt Certham into Cristes cyrcean” (which roughly translates as “King Edward to Christ Church, Canterbury; grant of land at Chartham” for those who don’t understand English in its purest form). The charter goes on to record confirmation of a grant of land at Southchurch; unfortunately, historians tend to make comments along the lines of “Chartham probably authentic, the remainder a post-Conquest addition”.

So where does this leave us? My very personal summary of the early history of Southchurch runs as follows:

- The location of the church at Southchurch - proudly commanding all it surveys - strongly suggests an early foundation.
- The name “Southchurch” also suggests that there may have been a church here in the early Saxon period (possibly seventh/eighth centuries), and that it was the first (Anglo-Saxon) church to be built close to the northern Thames estuary.
- The church to which Southchurch was south was the early Anglo-Saxon “minster” at Wakering. Southchurch probably began its life as an ecclesiastical dependency of Wakering, and the economic rationale for the settlement was probably the grazing of sheep on the estuarine salt pastures.
- Southchurch was given to Christ Church Canterbury (not to the Archbishop, who had separate estates) in the late Anglo-Saxon period, probably in the reign of Edward the Confessor in the mid-eleventh century. As such, it became part of an exceedingly wealthy estate. Canterbury was by far the richest English bishopric at this time and the Christ Church community was outstripped only by the monasteries of Glastonbury and Ely.
- Importantly, the donation was of Southchurch as a whole - church and manor - and, in truth, Canterbury probably cared rather more about the manor.
- I am inclined to believe that the donation was made by a man called Leofstan. Certainly, the clerks in twelfth century Canterbury appear to have believed this and that part of the collective memory may have been correct.

None of this is at all certain - that’s the delight to some of us of early medieval history. We are free to celebrate the anniversary of the donation of Southchurch to Canterbury from the traditional date of 824. And we can be very confident that both the foundation of the church at Southchurch and its donation to Canterbury were in the Anglo-Saxon period and predate the Norman Conquest.

Join us again in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 3:

- Christianity arrives at an island near you
- How Canterbury out-manoevred London

Read Episode 3 [here](#)