

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 4: WHAT THE NORMANS DID FOR US

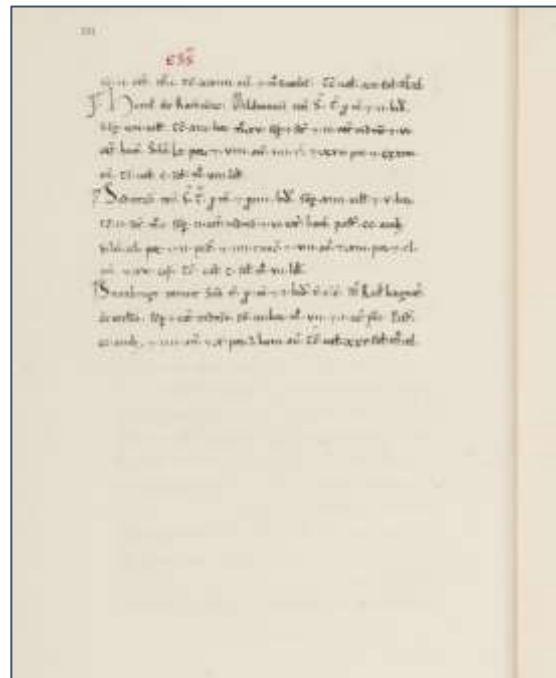
“I have persecuted the natives of England beyond all reason. Whether gentle or simple I have cruelly oppressed them; many I unjustly disinherited; innumerable multitudes perished through me by famine or the sword.” William the Conqueror’s deathbed confession according to Ordericus Vitalis, c1130

The Norman Conquest of England was undoubtedly brutal and nasty. We do however have two things to thank the Normans for: the first detailed description of Southchurch (in the Domesday Book, completed in 1086) and, half a century on, the building of the oldest part of our current church.

Domesday mentions 440 separate places of settlement in Essex, and there was probably a total population of about 70,000. The most densely populated areas appear to have been north and west of the Roman road from London to Colchester. Much of the county was heavily wooded (although it is difficult to tell too much from Domesday because woodland is merely recorded for the number of pigs it could support). The coastal areas - not least in the south-east of the county - were often marshland and (according to one of the histories of Essex) “continued for centuries to be unhealthy, ague-ridden areas”. (Things had clearly improved by the time Princess Charlotte came sea-bathing in 1801.)

Southchurch itself is notable in Domesday for three things:

- It was one of 28 places in Essex with a recorded fishery (indeed, unusually, it had two). The fisheries probably consisted of nets fixed more or less permanently on the foreshore between low and high water marks.
- Like most of Essex’s coastal marshland, the land was mainly used for the pasture of sheep, then valued not only for mutton and wool but also for ewes’ milk cheese. The manor also had woodland for 40 swine.
- The manor was held by Holy Trinity (that is Christ Church, Canterbury). This was significant for two reasons: firstly, it meant that - unusually - the ownership of the manor did not change with the Norman Conquest; secondly, the wealth and power of Canterbury would have provided protection against the manor’s formidable neighbour, Suene, who held 53 lordships in Essex alone, including Prittlewell and North Thorp.



Entry for Southchurch in the Domesday Book:
“Southchurch, 20 households”
From opendomesday.org

In short, Southchurch was probably a swamp-infested rural backwater - and none the worse for that given what was happening elsewhere in England.

So, what of the church?

Domesday does not record that Southchurch had a church, and it is indeed not certain that it did until what was almost certainly the first stone church was built in the mid twelfth century. (The church at Prittlewell is the only one in Rochford Hundred mentioned in Domesday.) One mystery is why the church was built so far from Southchurch Hall. Domesday records three manors at Southchurch - Southchurch itself, North Thorp and South Thorp - leading the local historian William Pollitt to suggest that the church may have been erected to serve all three manors. If so, the original Norman church would have served an area of around 930 acres; the manor of Prittlewell, by comparison, comprised some 900 acres, its lands extending to the shore and adjoining those of Southchurch manor.

The original stone church would have been simple but dignified. Kenneth Neale, in his

history of Essex, describes the main features of the Norman church as being “the rounded arch, the zig-zag dog-tooth and chevron decoration, the massive cylindrical columns and the deep-splayed simple window forms”. Our church was clearly a somewhat smaller building project than that at Durham, but the two Norman doorways have survived, complete with their distinctive chevron



Norman West door at Holy Trinity Southchurch



Detail of mascarón above West door

ornamentation and scalloped capitals. A Norman round headed window was also incorporated in the north wall of the New Church. However, for the Saxon villeins and serfs who toiled away at Southchurch manor - twenty are recorded by Domesday – the most appropriate reminder of Norman rule might be the grotesque face carved into the stone above what is now the west door.

Come back in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 5 “The de Southchurch Family”.

- One family holds sway over Southchurch for 200 years!
- On his way to the crusades, Richard the Lionheart settles a dispute over ownership of Southchurch.

See all Episodes of ‘A Little History of Southchurch’ [here](#)