The Minster Church of SS. Peter and Paul, West Mersea, Essex: Structure, Settlement and Landscape

SS. Peter and Paul, West Mersea: the church from the north

Daniel Secker

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The minster church of SS. Peter and Paul, originally simply St Peter, West Mersea, is documented in two important late 10th and early 11th century wills, but there is circumstantial evidence of an earlier origin in the form of the late 7th century Strood Causeway linking the church on Mersea Island to mainland Essex. It is however apparent that the masonry and construction methods of the lower part of the north wall of the nave of the church are identical to that of the well-known late 7th century church at neighbouring Bradwell-on-Sea, and the two churches have naves of identical internal width. It is suggested the church at West Mersea was founded by the East Saxon king Sebbi (665-95), who was noted by Bede for his piety. Analysis of the 11th century west tower suggests it may have functioned as a lighthouse

Settlement evidence from a recent test-pitting campaign and metal detecting is assessed, the indications being that middle and late Saxon settlement in the vicinity of the church was minimal. There is some evidence that the minster church was part of an early Christian Saxon 'designed landscape' but this is at present very tentative and needs further study

INTRODUCTION

Few people travelling along the the Strood Causeway connecting mainland Essex to Mersea Island (the modern B 1025)are perhaps aware that they are on one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon engineering in the country. Excavations undertaken during the laying of a pipeline across The Strood in 1978 recovered 22 piles which were dated by dendrochronology to AD 684 X 702. It was estimated that 3000-5000 piles must have been used in the construction of the 0.8 km long causeway (Crummy *et al* 1982). The question is why was such a massive work undertaken to

provide access to what was apparently a marginal island? The answer is surely connected with the minster church at West Mersea. Though a church here is only first directly documented in 962 X 991 (Sawyer 1968, No. 1494), a fragment of an 8th century cross is built into the south aisle (Carter 1971) suggests a much earlier foundation.

The earliest obvious structure of the church is the 11th century west tower, the body of the building being apparently 14th century and later (RCHM 1922, 230-1). Given the above background, the possibility was considered that the church may retain much earlier fabric. A brief field visit was made in February 2011 to see whether this was the case. Though time limits prevented a comprehensive survey, A measured plan of the church was conducted using 5m tape and potentially early fabric was photographed.

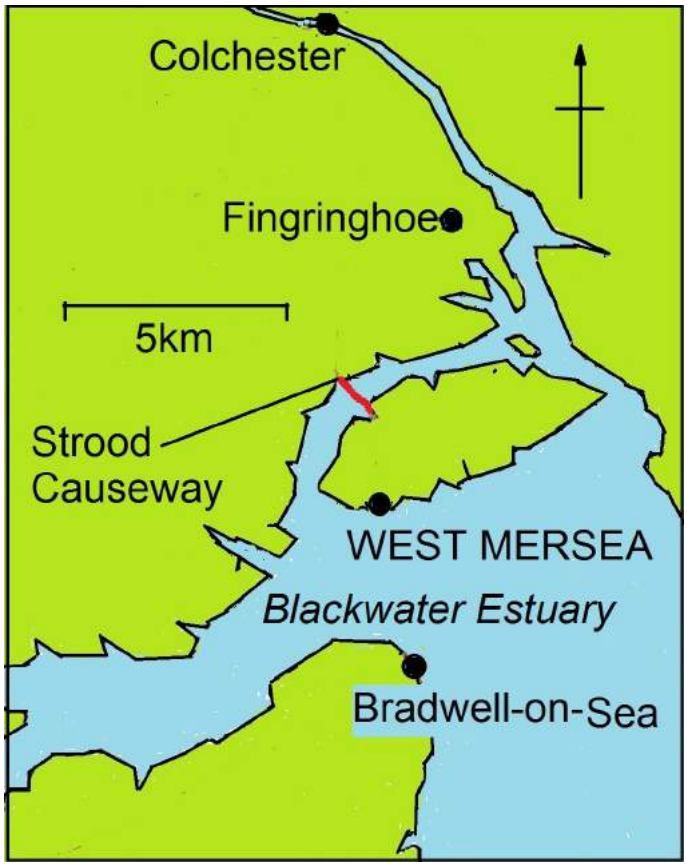

Fig 1. West Mersea: location

Location

The church of SS. Peter and Paul, West Mersea (TM 0089 1252) is situated in north-eastern Essex at the south-western extremity of Mersea Island (Fig 1). The church, 11km south of Colchester and 14km ENE of Maldon, is situated at the mouth of the Blackwater estuary, directly opposite the Roman 'Saxon Shore' Fort of *Othona* (Bradwell on Sea). The latter was the site of the monastery

founded, according to Bede, by St Cedd in 654 (Sherley-Price 1990, 179). The underlying geology is of London Clay overlain by Mersea Island Gravel drift (Anon, undated).

Historical Background

Mersea is first documented in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 894, when it was occupied by the Viking Great Army (Swanton 1996). It is next mentioned in the will of ealdorman Aelfgar of Essex of 946 X 951, when he granted the estate to the family minster of Stoke by Nayland in Suffolk. Aelfgar's elder daughter Aethelflaed was however to have custody of Mersea (Sawyer 1968, No. 1483). Aethelflaed was widow of king Edmund (939-46) and it has been suggested that Aelfgar owed his position as ealdorman to his daughter's marriage (Wareham 2005, 47). It would also appear that Aethelflaed held her Essex estates, including Mersea, in her capacity as dowager queen (Tollerton 2011, 95). This would imply that Mersea had hitherto been royal demesne. In Aethelflaed's will of 962 X 991, St Peter's church at Mersea is first explicitly mentioned (Sawyer 1968, No. 1494). After Aethelflaed's death, the estate of Fingringhoe was to be granted to her younger sister, Aelflaed and the latter's husband, ealdorman Brythnoth (ibid, No. 1494), famous as the martyr-hero of the Battle of Maldon (991). In her will of 1000 X 1002, Aelflaed granted to Mersea the estate at Fingringhoe and six hides where the minster (*mynstaer*) then stood, Mersea in turn being granted to the minster at Stoke by Nayland (ibid, No. 1486). By 1046 at the latest Mersea was in the king's hands since in that year, Edward the Confessor granted it, together with Fingringhoe, to the Norman Benedictine abbey of St Ouen, Rouen (ibid, No. 1015). Cyril Hart has however pointed out that the wording of the charter suggests the grant was made as early as Edward's accession in 1042 and that the gift was in gratitude for Edward's hearing that he had become king while staying at St Ouen (Hart 1980).

In the Domesday Survey, West Mersea, still held by St Ouen, was assessed at 20 hides. There was a population in of 98 households and 11 slaves, the latter reduced to two by 1086. In addition, a priest held half a hide of land (Williams and Martin 2002, 985) . It appears the land on Mersea Island itself still consisted of six hides, while the other 14 hides were on the mainland at Fingringhoe, which was not mentioned in Domesday (Hart 1980). The majority of the population were perhaps too concentrated on the mainland. This would be supported by the archaeological evidence, discussed below, which suggests negligible Saxo-Norman settlement at West Mersea itself. The single priest on half a hide suggests a diminished religious presence even after its re-foundation as an alien priory, but this might be expected. Like many alien priories, the foundation can be considered as an estate office serving the mother house rather than a monastic community..

There was however a prior, Ralph, by 1233 (VCH 1907, 197). The poverty of the priory is indicated by its return for the *Taxatio* of pope Nicholas IV of 1291; the church rendered only £6, 13s, 4d (Denton 2003, 'West Mersea'). By comparison, the unremarkable local church of Little Easton also in Essex had the same value (ibid, 'Little Easton'). As an alien house, West Mersea was taken into the king's hands in 1422. and was granted to Higham Ferrers College, Northamptonshire. The college was in turn dissolved in 1542 (ibid, 196-7).

Previous research

In the eighteenth century the immediate vicinity of the church was subject to a number of antiquarian 'excavations'. These uncovered a number of Roman tesselated pavements including one under the chancel of the church itself (Figs 2-3). A Roman wheel-tomb was dicovered 220m east of the church in 1896 (RCHM 1922, 229-30). This was subject to a further evaluation in 2003 (Holloway 2004). A sketch-plan of the church was made by the RCHM (1922, 230-1). A trench was dug in the southern part of the churchyard in 1971, but only a few pieces of Roman tile were found and no report was published (Rodwell and Rodwell 1977, 22).

Between 2006 and 2010, the settlement at West Mersea was subject to test-pitting campaign as part of the *Access Cambridge Archaeology* project <http://www2.arch.cam.ac.uk>. A total of 62 pits excavated over the five seasons produced significant quantities of Roman, later medieval and post-medieval material but surprisingly, given the known minster at West Mersea, negligible Anglo-Saxon finds. The implications of the test-pit campaign are discussed below. Most recently, the distribution of Anglo-Saxon metal detected finds in Essex has been synthesised by Alexander Mirrington, the results of which formed the basis of his PHD thesis (Mirrington 2013). This latest research has significant implications for both West Mersea and neighbouring Fingringhoe.

Archaeological background

Evidence from test-pits

The test-pitting campaign of 2006-10 indicated some Bronze and Iron Age activity around West Mersea. Only the Roman to medieval evidence (Fig 2) is discussed here. The lower fill of a test-pit on the western boundary of the churchyard (2006 test-pit 1) produced a number of Roman sherds and a fragment of box-flue tile (Blinkhorn 2006). Subsquent test-pits in the vicinity of the churchyard failed to reveal any further significant Roman material, though Roman activity is attested to further afield, including 1km east of the church (2010 test-pit 10; Blinkhorn 2010). There were further Roman finds 300 metres north of the church (2008 test pit 18) Most

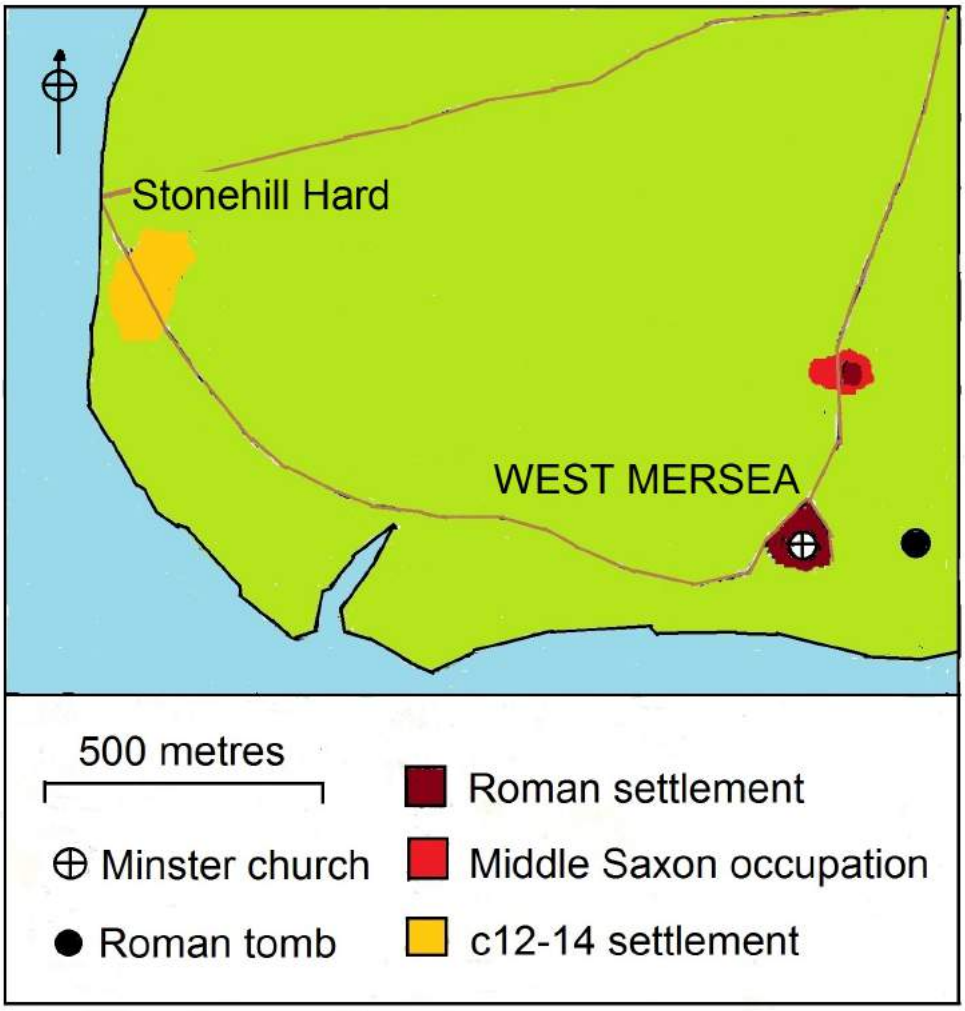

Fig 2, West Mersea: Roman, middle Saxon and medieval settlement

significantly in the context of this paper, the Roman layers from this pit were disturbed by a context producing a sherd of Ipswich Ware, dateable to c. 720-850. Immediately west of the latter, a further pit (2008 test-pit 17) produced a further sherd of Ipswich Ware in an undisturbed context (Blinkhorn 2008).

The evidence is of course very meagre, but combined with the total lack of middle Saxon ceramic around the church, it suggests minster and settlement were dispersed. There is however a complicating factor in the form of the antiquarian activity in the vicinity of the churchyard. In 1730, the churchyard was 'excavated' to a depth of 1.2m (RCHM 1922, 230). Had Ipswich Ware been recovered at this date, it would no doubt have been regarded as Roman. More striking, however, is the fact that the test-pitting campaign failed to reveal a single sherd of late Saxon pottery anywhere in the study area, despite the documentary evidence cited above that West Mersea was an important estate at this time. It can only be concluded that late Saxon settlement, evidenced

by the Domesday population of 98 households (Williams and Martin 2002, 985), was very widely dispersed.

The ceramic record evidenced by test-pitting only re-occurs in c.1100. The clear indicators are that the main high medieval settlement was not centred on the church but 1km west of the latter near the later hamlet of Stonehill Hard (Fig 2). One pit in particular (2008 test-pit 6) showed a ceramic sequence from c 1100-1350 but nothing later, suggesting depopulation at the time of the Black Death (Blinkhorn 2008). It was only in the 15th century that settlement began to cluster around the church, as evidenced by the upper fill of 2006 test-pit 1 (Blinkhorn 2006).

Numismatic evidence

Saxon coin finds from West Mersea are hardly greater than the ceramic ones, consisting of only three examples. Their provenance and date however is highly informative. Firstly, there is a series 'E' *sceatta* (Mirrington 2013, map 26). This would be of Frisian manufacture and dateable to 695-760 (ibid, 206). Secondly, a series J Nothumbrian *styca*, probably minted in York, has a *terminus post quem* of 715 (ibid, 202-4). It appears there was both internal and maritime long-distance exchange at West Mersea shortly after the causeway was constructed. There is then a gap of over two centuries, the final West Mersea coin bring a penny of Edward the Martyr, 973-8 (ibid, map 34). The coin is contemporary with Aethelflaed's tenure of the island.

The evidence from West Mersea is sparse compared to neighbouring centres. Bradwell-on-Sea (Fig 1) has been shown to be a centre of economic as well as religious importance. Here a coin sequence with a date-range of 650-900 peaked in the later 8th century (ibid, 321). More unexpectedly and crucially, Mirrington's synthesis has shown that Fingringhoe was a 'productive site' of some importance, the earliest finds being two coins of Justinian I, 527-65 (ibid, 166-7). A middle Saxon coin sequence spanned the 8th century, but there was also a coin of Aethelred II, 978-1016 (ibid, 324-6). More exotic finds consisted of a Umayyid Dirham of the 730s and an Islamic Dirham of 976-1009 (ibid, 222, 326). The proximity of these two 'productive sites' may have stifled West Mersea economically.

Interestingly, Fingringhoe does not appear in ealdorman Aelfgar's will (Sawyer 1968, No. 1483) but was an integral part of the Mersea estate under his elder daughter Aethelflaed (ibid, No. 1494). This might imply that Fingringhoe was ancient royal demesne which Aethelflaed had inherited through her marriage to king Edmund.

Other archaeological evidence

Two fish-traps of 7th-9th century date have been found on Mersea Island at West and East Mersea respectively. It has been suggested these were a commercial enterprise serving demand from *Lundenwic* (Mirrington 2013, 374-5). The fish could however have been primarily for local consumption by the minster community.

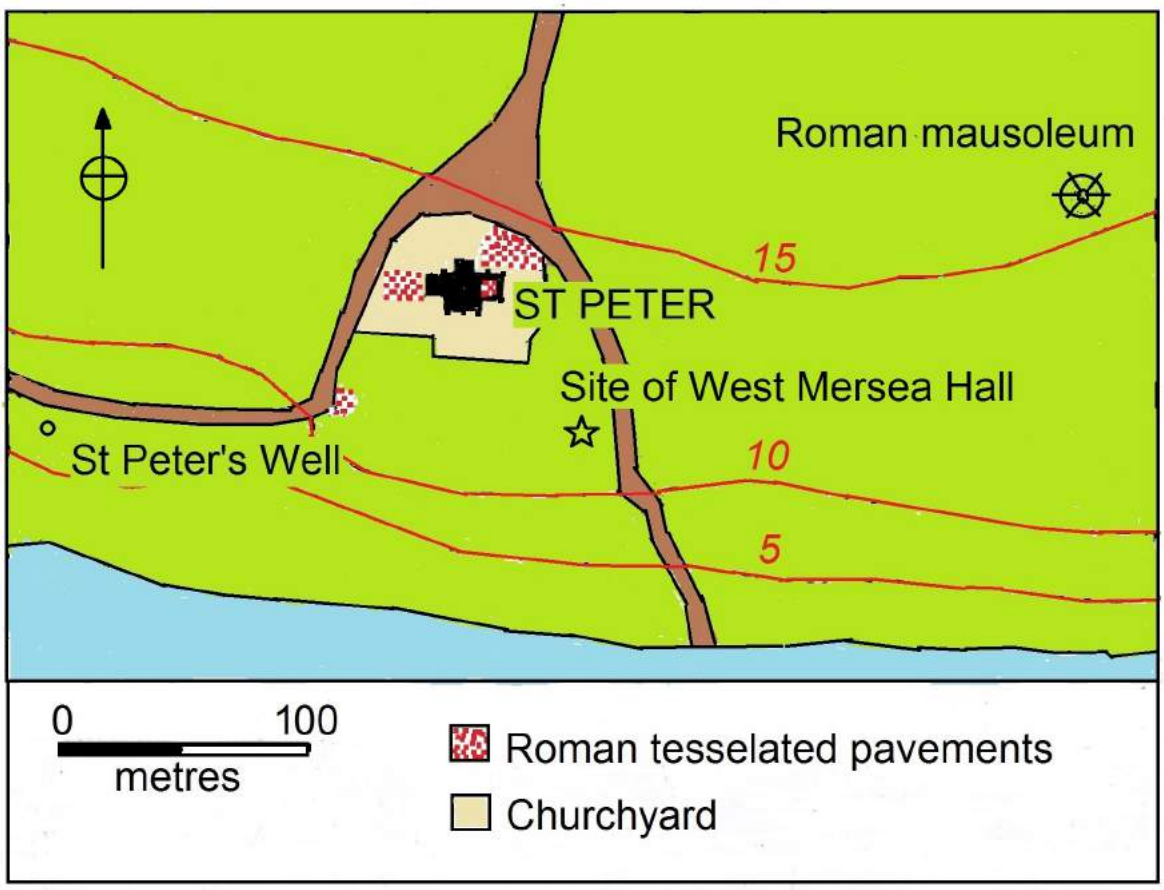

Fig 3. St Peter, West Mersea: church, churchyard and environs

ST PETER'S CHURCH

It is uncertain when the church first acquired the double dedication of SS. Peter and Paul. In the first documentary record, Aethelflaed's will of 963 X 991, it is simply 'St Peter's' (Sawyer 1968, No. 1494). For the purposes of this paper, the church is hereafter described as such.

Churchyard and environs

The churchyard occupies the northern part of a semi-ovoid enclosed area generally 100m across (Fig 3). Given the form of the enclosure and that the church is a documented minster, it is tempting

to interpret this as a former minster enclosure. This, however, is unlikely. 2006 test-pit 1 discussed above was situated on the boundary of any projected enclosure and failed to locate evidence of a ditch. It is perhaps more likely that any early minster precinct would have been bounded by the outer walls of the Roman villa complex.

Nothing now survives of the priory buildings. This was supposedly to the west of the church (Rodwell and Rodwell 1977, 114). There does not however appear to be any evidence for this assertion. As an impoverished alien priory, its buildings are most likely to have resembled those of a modest manor house. A more likely site is that of the later West Mersea Hall, which was south-east of the church.

To the south-west of the church is St Peter's Well. This is indicated on the 1870 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, but is of uncertain antiquity. It, like the Roman mausoleum, is not aligned on the church, which is orientated two degrees south of a west-east axis. The church, at an altitude of 14m OD, occupies the crest of a south-facing slope overlooking the Blackwater estuary. Before modern development, St Peter, West Mersea and its namesake at Bradwell on Sea, 4km distant, would have been intervisible (Fig 1).

Architectural summary

The apparently earliest feature is the 11th century west tower (Fig 4). The south nave arcade is early 14th century work with octagonal piers, moulded bases and capitals and pointed arches of multiple orders. It has, however, clearly been inserted into an earlier wall as discussed below. The south aisle is contemporary with the arcade as evidenced by the segmental-headed south doorway and the Decorated window in the west wall of the aisle; the windows are all 16th century insertions. Almost opposite the eastern pier is a piscina. East of this, the wall of the aisle is slightly skewed to the north, though the whole aisle is of the same build. The chancel is primarily early 14th century, but has been even more drastically altered, the only details of this date being the jambs of the priest's doorway. The upper parts of the walls were rebuilt in brick in the 16th century, while the windows are Victorian pseudo-Perpendicular insertions. The eastern part of the north wall of the chancel is skewed to the south.

Though there is now no structural division between the chancel and nave, one clearly existed since the wall-heads of the nave are some 1m higher than those of the chancel. The wall between nave and chancel must have been demolished before the early 14th century, since the course of the dividing wall is cut by the eastern arcade arch of that date. This also however indicates the western part of the south wall of the chancel pre-dates the early 14th century, a point more fully discussed

below. The north nave doorway is early 14th century. Probably contemporary with the latter is a now blocked segmental-headed niche in the eastern part of the nave wall. The windows in this wall have early 15th century rear-arches, but their exteriors have been renewed in brick and provided with wooden tracery in modern times. Prior to this, there was considerable renovation in the late 18th century when the ceiling and roof were renewed.

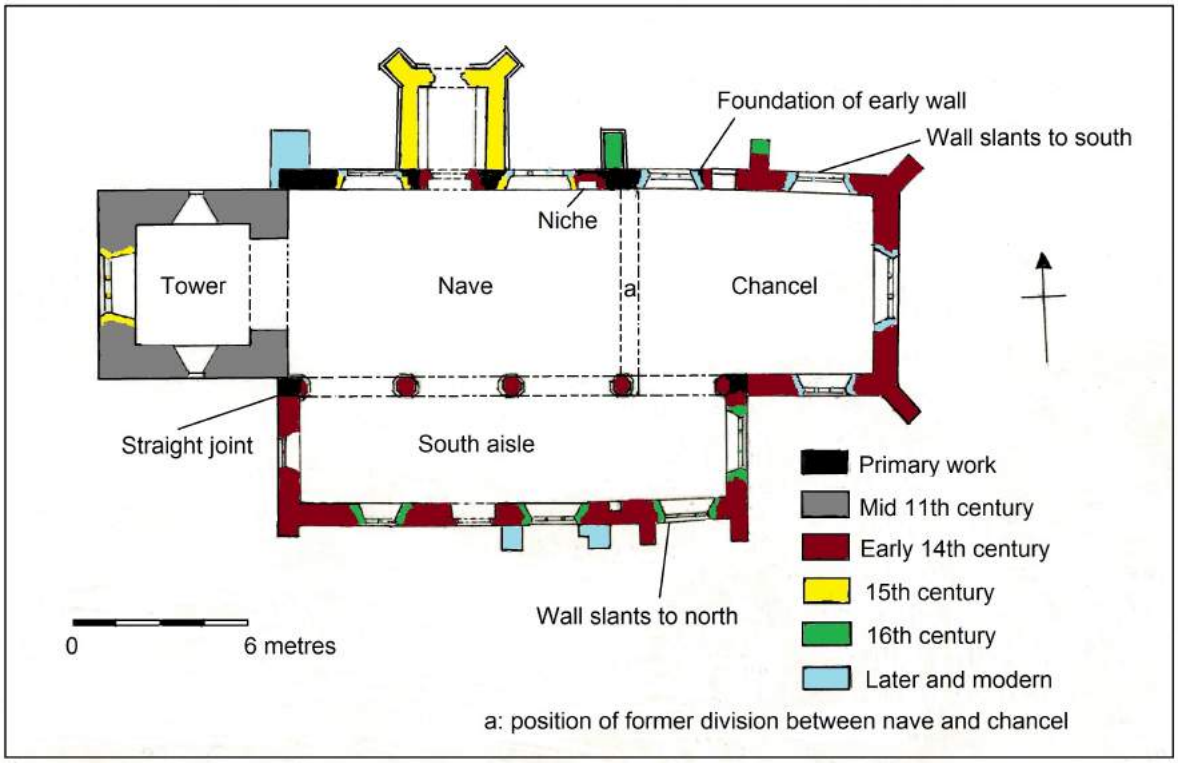

Fig 4. St Peter, West Mersea: plan

The west tower

The west tower (Fig 5) is a massive structure measuring 6.6m square over walls 1.2m thick and about 17m high below the parapet. The fabric of the tower, partly laid in a herringbone pattern, is of flint rubble, septaria and some ferricrete. All the quoins are of re-used Roman brick. The tower is coated with an eroded yellow sandy mortar render which is possibly original.

Certainly original are the windows in the north and south walls of the ground floor (Fig 6). These are single-splayed with broad internal splays 1.5m wide and lights 0.3m wide. They have flint rubble jambs and heads turned in re-used Roman brick. The west window is a 15th century insertion but may have replaced a window of similar form to the north and south ones. The tower arch is

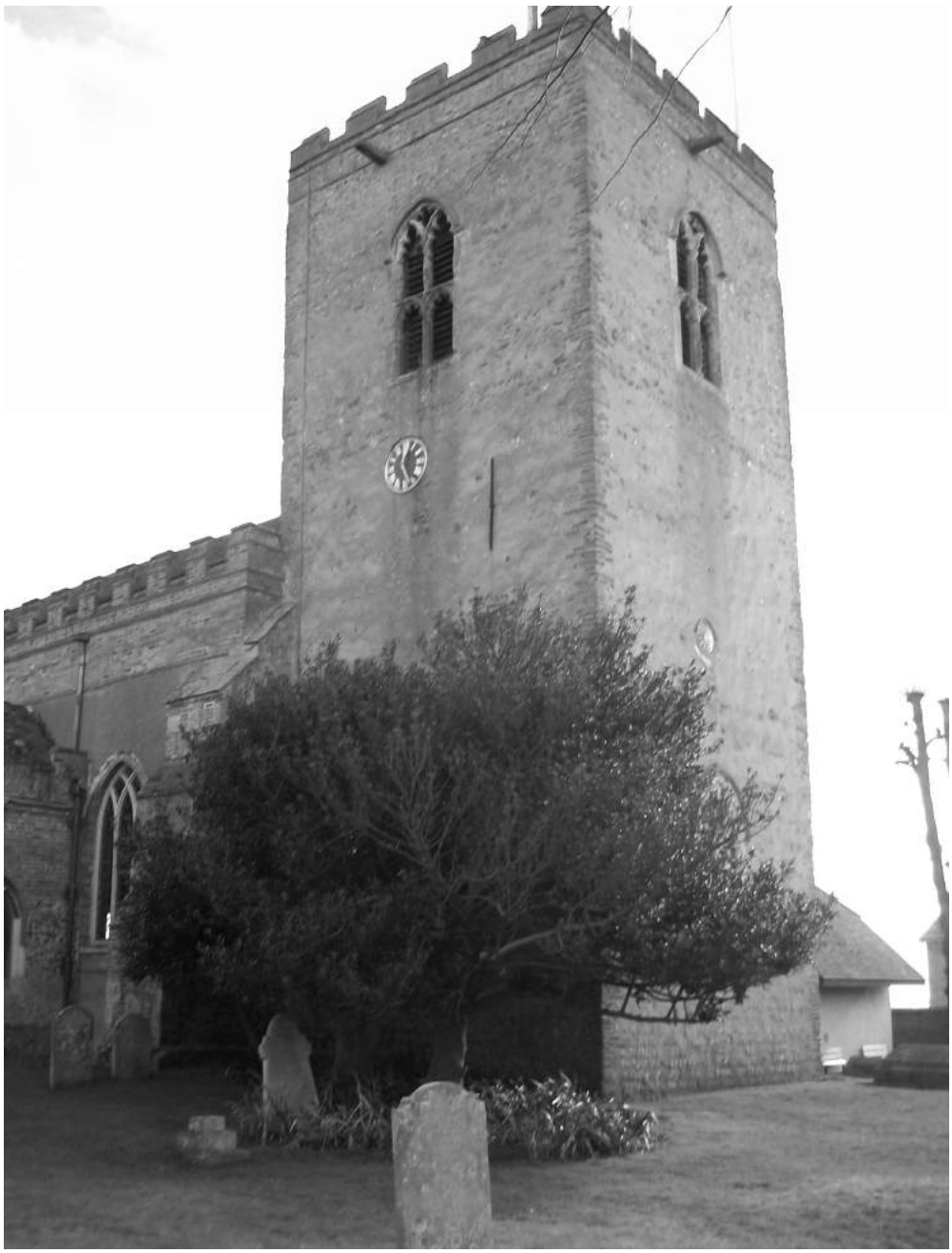

Fig 5. West tower from the north-west

3.0m wide and of a single plain order with triple stepped imposts (Fig 7). It is unfortunate that plastering has obscured the constructional details, but it is most probable that, as with all other primary dressings of the tower, these are of re-used Roman brick. This is evidenced by the imposts. Each step is 0.10m high (Fig 8), suggesting each is formed of two courses of Roman brick. An analogy would be the tower arch of Holy Trinity, Colchester (Taylor and Taylor 1965, Fig 68).

The first floor is now devoid of openings apart from a small oculus in the west wall which is probably an 18th century insertion. There are however signs of a small blocked window in the south

wall with Roman brick jambs.

The second floor now has bell openings of 15th century date (Fig 5). On either side of these, in each face of the wall, the Roman brick jambs of blocked windows survive. The 15th century bell openings are at a lower level than the blocked 11th century lights and show that there were no central primary openings.

Fig 6. West tower: north ground floor window

Dating of the tower

The tower has variously been described as late 11th century (RCHM 1922, 231) and Saxo-Norman (Rodwell and Rodwell 1977, 113-4). In considering the date, a crucial factor is that the church was the possession of a Norman abbey from at least 1046 if not 1042 (Sawyer 1968, No. 1015). Any Romanesque features could thus be potentially this early. The tower however has few diagnostic details. The thick walls might be considered Norman in character. Single, as opposed to double-splayed windows are more usually found in early Romanesque structures than late Saxon ones, but this is not a hard and fast rule. At the late Saxon tower of Holy Trinity, Colchester, for instance, contemporary double and single splayed windows occur together (RCHM 1922, plate opposite 34). The comparison of the imposts on the tower arch at West Mersea to those at Holy Trinity has already been noted. The tower arch of the latter is more complex. There, the arch is flanked by stripwork and the imposts are returned around both the west and east faces of the nave wall (Taylor and Taylor 1965, Fig 68). At West Mersea, by contrast, the faces of the nave walls are plain (Fig 7).

The Taylors dated the tower at Holy Trinity to their period 'C', ie. c.950-1100 (ibid, 162). It has

Fig 7. Tower arch from the east

however been noted that double-splayed windows in do not seem to occur in England before c.1000 (Blair 2005, 412). On the other hand, the advent of fully Romanesque architecture in Colchester is heralded by the construction of the great keep there, almost certainly begun in 1076 (Crummy 1981, 30). After this period, the tower at Holy Trinity would be anachronistic in style.

Another factor to consider is the personnel at West Mersea after Edward the Confessor had granted the church to St Ouen. As a minor alien priory whose main purpose was probably to serve as an estate centre for collecting revenues due to the mother house, Norman staff here may have

Fig 8. North impost of tower arch

been minimal. It is even uncertain whether West Mersea had its own prior in the later 11th century, only a priest being mentioned in Domesday (Williams and Martin 2002, 985). It would thus appear most unlikely that Norman masons would have been imported for the construction of the tower; the most likely source for the workforce was surely Colchester. This might explain why the massive thick walled form of the tower is Norman in character, perhaps as specified by the priory, but the details of the imposts appear to be derived from Holy Trinity: it is possible, given the date range of the former, that the same school of masons worked on both projects. The tower at West Mersea thus probably dates from the 3rd quarter of of the 11th century and construction could well have commenced with St Ouen's acquirement of the church, possibly as early as 1042.

Function of the tower

The size of the tower clearly suggests it was not merely a repository for bells. On the other hand, the ground floor windows and broad tower arch preclude a defensive function. The tower arch may have framed the seat of an important dignitary. At Leeds in Kent, this writer has suggested that the

more elaborate tower arch of the massive early 12th century west tower there emphasised the status of its probable patron, Haimo *dapifer* II, sheriff of Kent (Secker 2014). As suggested above, it is uncertain whether West Mersea even had an independent prior at this time, but the ground floor of the tower may have served to provide a seat of honour for a visiting abbot of St Ouen. Though there is no record of Edward the Confessor having visited West Mersea, and the assumption is he did not, this might have remained a possibility. The staff at West Mersea would be expected to remember who their benefactor was and should he visit, he would have to be accorded a prestigious position during masses.

The first floor of the tower was devoid of openings apart from a small window in the south wall. There would be no problem in interpreting this as a ringing chamber if it was not for some doubt as to whether the second floor was a bell chamber. The doubt arises from the fact that the second floor windows are not centrally placed twin openings as are usually found in late Saxon and Romanesque bell towers, but small, broadly spaced and poorly placed to allow any bell or bells to resonate (Fig 9).

A Saxo-Norman lighthouse?

The function of the tower might be more fully understood by considering its position in the landscape or more pertinently, its seascape, and its mid 11th century tenurial context. West Mersea and its hinterland were the only English possessions of an alien priory and, as has been suggested above, a key purpose of the estate would have been to provision the mother house in Normandy. Produce from West Mersea might be collected by Norman seamen who were unfamiliar with the Essex coast, but the tower would be a very clear guiding landmark. A beacon on the roof of the tower would make it doubly so. If the tower was indeed a Saxo-Norman lighthouse, the upper floors may have been connected with its maintenance. The ill-lit first floor could have served as a store for fuel for the putative beacon, while the second floor was perhaps accomodation for the lighthouse-keeper.

Evidence of early fabric in the walls of the nave and chancel

The nave and chancel of the church, as summarised above, are superficially early 14th century with considerable later alterations. There are however vestiges of earlier, potentially much earlier fabric. It has already been noted that the south nave arcade is an insertion into an earlier nave and western chancel wall. This is further evidenced by a straight joint between the nave and south aisle (Fig 4) The latter is visible both internally and externally, where it is defined by quoins of re-used Roman

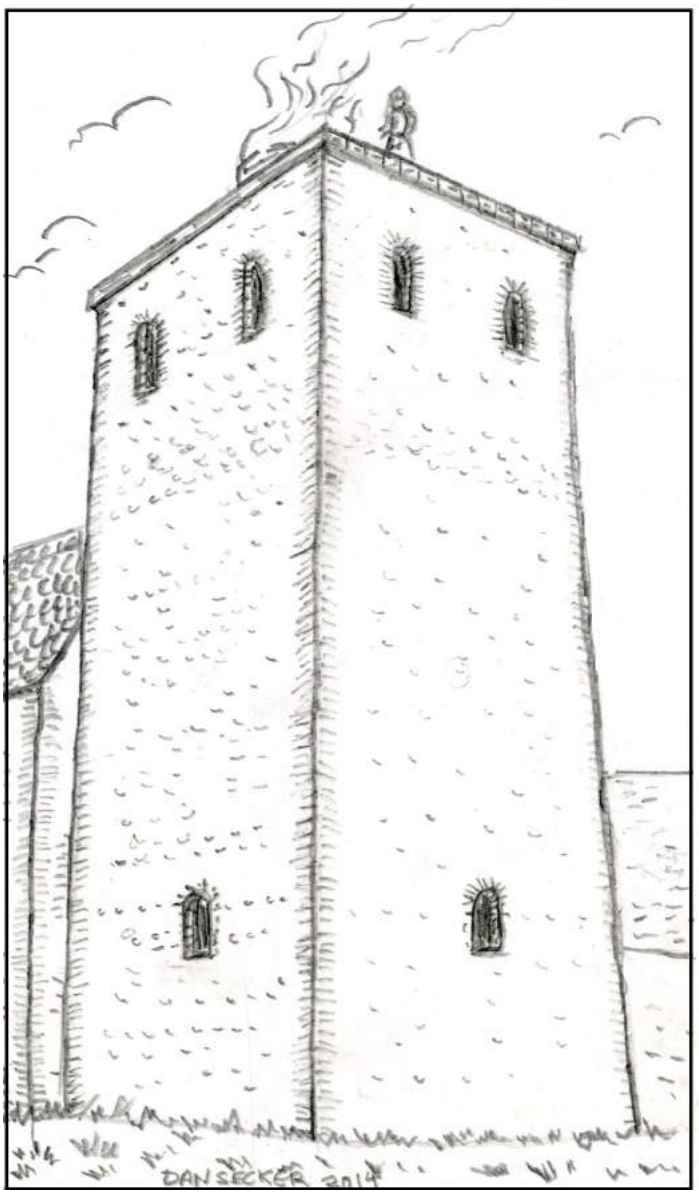

Fig 9. Reconstruction of the tower in the mid-late 11th century; the rooftop has been interpreted as a platform for a beacon

brick, which is also abundant in what is visible of the fabric of the west wall of the nave.

Relationship of the tower to the nave

Where west towers are additions to the nave, the west wall is usually utilised as the east wall of the tower. This was clearly not the case at West Mersea, where the thickness of the west wall where it meets the tower is only 0.2m. This raises three possibilities:

1. The tower was originally free-standing, or a tower-nave with a small chancel which was

subsequently demolished and replaced by the present nave.

2. The tower was contemporary with or an addition to a narrower nave which was subsequently demolished when the present nave was built.
3. The present north and south walls of the nave pre-date the tower, but the west wall was demolished when the tower was built.

Option 1 is implausible: a nave needs an entrance and there was certainly no such feature in the ground floor of the tower. For a free-standing tower, it would have to be argued that the present tower arch replaced a smaller east doorway. As has been seen, there is little doubt that the tower arch is contemporary with the rest of the structure.

Option 2 has more to recommend it. An objection would be that there are no signs of scars on the western wall of the nave, but plastering of the latter would obscure evidence of these

Option 3 might be objected to on the grounds that there are no scars for a former west wall, but the explanation for this is the same as the above. A further objection is why was it necessary to demolish the earlier west wall of the nave? The answer is surely the discrepancy between the wall thicknesses. Any original west wall would presumably, like the north and south walls of the nave, have been 0.70m thick, whereas the tower walls are 1.2m thick. The west wall could have been thickened on one side or another, but there might have been concerns about the stability of the structure and it was perhaps better to demolish the wall and start afresh.

Taken independently, options 2 and 3 are equally plausible, but examination of other parts of the church supports option 3.

North wall of the nave

The north wall of the nave has largely been covered in a modern grey pebbledash rendering which is not only ugly but has obscured important evidence. The lowest 0.6m of the wall is however exposed (Fig 10). This is constructed of small, roughly squared blocks of Kentish ragstone bonded with a relatively friable white mortar. It is immediately notable that the materials and technique are quite unlike those of the tower, described above, or the internally visible fabric of the south aisle , which is of large irregular pieces of random rubble. The fabric of the north nave wall appears to be re-used Roman *petit appareil*, probably obtained from the pre-existing villa. Most significantly, this was the material of choice for the late 7th century minster church of St Peter on the Wall at Bradwell on Sea (Fig 11). The construction techniques of the walls at the two churches are virtually identical, the blocks being carefully coursed in each case.

Fig 10. Lower part of north wall of nave. Top:west of porch. Bottom: east of porch. Note the use of small roughly squared blocks of re-used Roman **petit appareil**

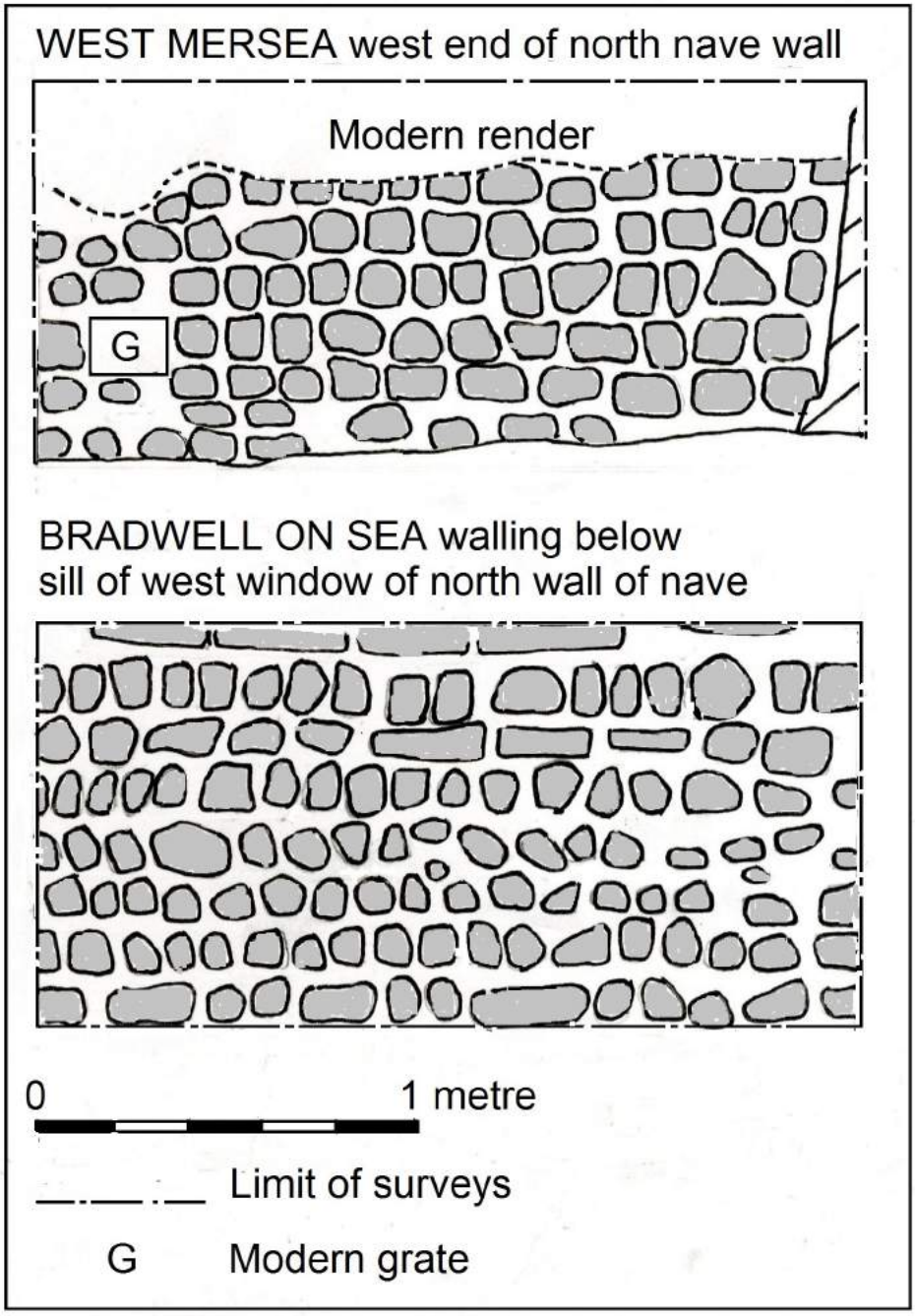

Fig 11. St Peter, West Mersea and St Peter, Bradwell-on-Sea: parallel re-use of Roman* petit appareil *and comparative construction techniques

North wall of the chancel

The fabric of the chancel, as described above, is largely early 14th century (Fig 4). The westernmost part of the wall is however stratigraphically earlier than the rest of the structure (Fig 12). It is of similar construction to the exposed lower parts of the north wall of the nave. The early wall continues as a foundation up to the point of the early 14th century priest's doorway. The southern

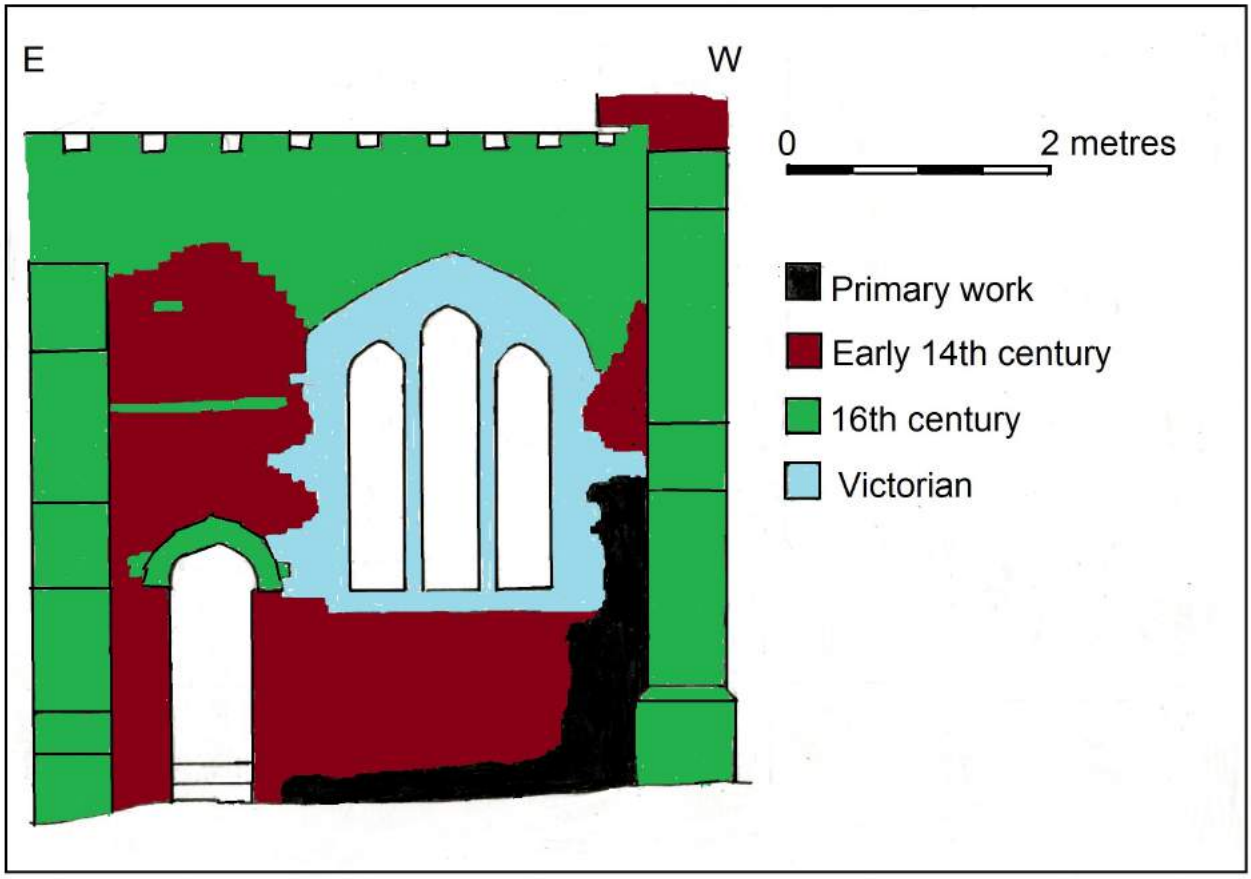

Fig 12. Western part of north wall of chancel: phased elevation

skew of the eastern part of the chancel has already been noted (Fig 4). It is possible the change in alignment is due to the western part of the wall being aligned on the foundation of an earlier apsidal east end.

Southern wall of nave and chancel

The nave arcade as described above is clearly an insertion into an earlier wall which continues into the western part of the chancel up to the east end of the south aisle. There are some indications of a break at that point, but it has largely been obscured by plastering.

Eastern part of south aisle

The northern skew of the eastern part of the south aisle has been described above. The misalignment was first noticed by the Rodwells, who suggested that it might represent the site of a *porticus* overlapping the chancel (Rodwell and Rodwell 1977, 113-4).

Reconstruction of the plan of the early church

The early church, on the structural evidence, comprised of a nave 6.55m wide inside walls 0.7m thick (Fig 13) The drop in height between the nave and present chancel must represent the original east wall of the nave, so a former north-south wall 0.7m thick west of the drop is proposed here. Assuming an early west wall of the nave was demolished when the mid 11th century tower was built, the nave would be 11.1m long. Vestiges of early work in the western part of the north wall of the present chancel show that the original eastern cell was as wide as the present structure, while the southerly skew of the eastern part of the chancel hints at an early apsidal east end. If an arc is projected from the springing of the skew, the eastern cell would have an internal length of about 6.85m. The northerly skew of the eastern part of the south aisle possibly follows the line of an earlier *porticus*, though only excavation can confirm this.

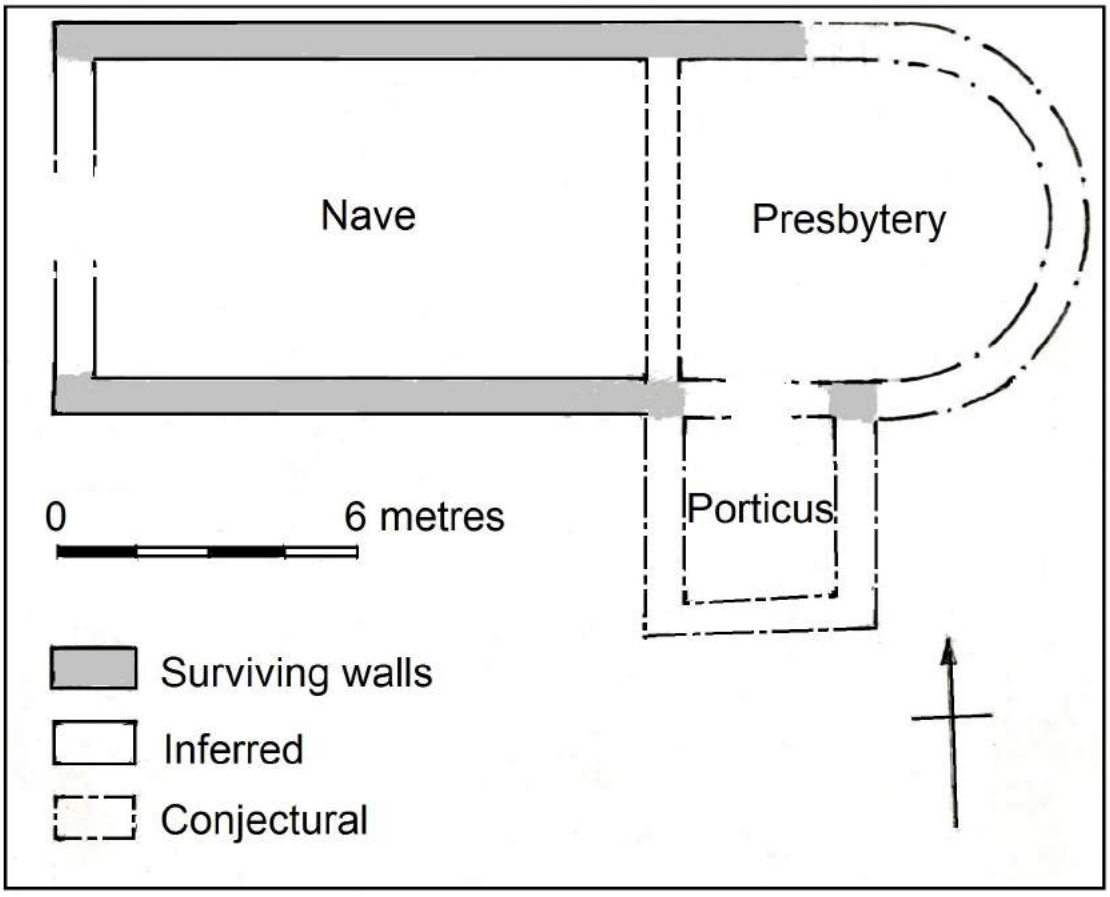

Fig 13. Reconstruction of plan of early church

Comparison of the suggested plan of the early church at West Mersea with Bradwell-on-Sea and the Kentish group of early Saxon churches

The striking similarity of the building materials and construction technique of the lower part of the

north wall of the nave at West Mersea to Bradwell-on-Sea has already been noted. Given that Bradwell is the nearest of the group to West Mersea, this is the best place to begin comparisons (Fig 14). A notable parallel is that the internal widths of the churches are virtually identical, that at Bradwell being 6.60m. There is however a considerable disparity in nave lengths, Bradwell's being

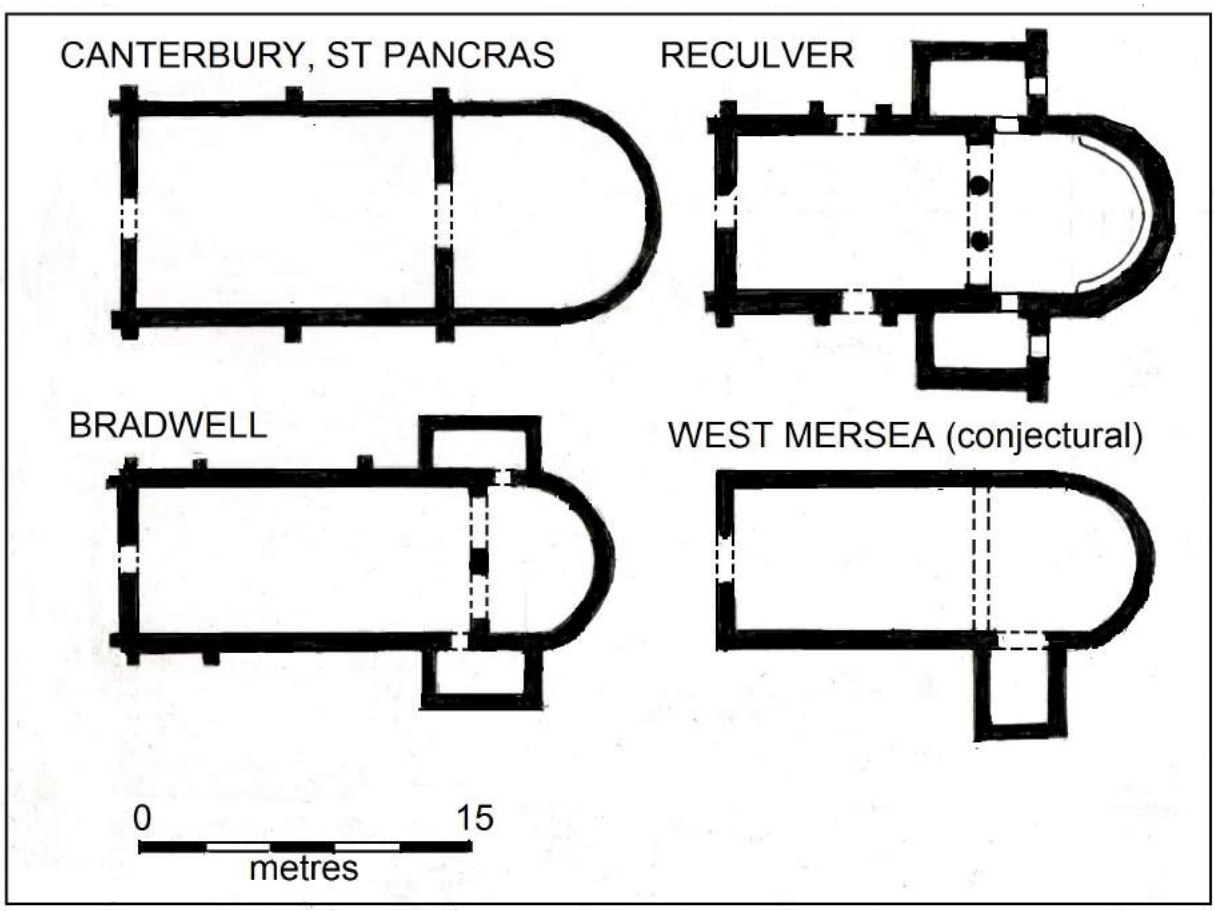

Fig 14. Comparative reconstructed plans of West Mersea and the primary phases of the 7th century churches of St Pancras (Canterbury), Reculver and Bradwell-on-Sea (St Pancras, Reculver and Bradwell adapted from Taylor and Taylor 1965 with modifications)

14.90m long. This can be explained by the fact that the eastern cell at Bradwell was much shorter, being only 4.93m long. The total internal lengths of the churches would be West Mersea (projected): 17.55m and Bradwell: 20.53m. The possible south *porticus* at West Mersea is the most conjectural part of the reconstruction of the plan. It would bear some comparison with the southern poritcus at Bradwell. Even if a southern *porticus* did exist at West Mersea, however, there is no evidence it would have overlapped the nave. A major difference between the suggested early

church at West Mersea and Bradwell as well as all the other 'Kentish' churches is that the first lacks the small square angle and interval buttresses that are a distinctive characteristic of the group. A possible exception is Lyminge (Taylor and Taylor 1965, Fig 187), though the excavated remains were so fragmentary the former existence of buttresses there cannot be discounted.

An ideosyncratic feature of Bradwell is the short length of the apsidal eastern cell compared to the Kentish churches of St Pancras, Canterbury and Reculver, where the maximum length of the apsidal eastern cell is equal to its width. In this respect, the projected former apse at West Mersea is comparable to those of the Kentish churches, though that at West Mersea appears to have been slightly longer than it is broad. All the Kentish churches cited above have naves of 1.5:1 proportions, again differing from Bradwell (2.41:1) and West Mersea (1.69:1).

The *porticus* of the Kentish churches take various forms, but the tenuously postulated single southern *porticus* at West Mersea would be mirrored by the single northern example at Lyminge (Taylor and Taylor 1965, Fig 187).

Structural evidence for an early Saxon church at West Mersea: discussion

Given the extent of later alterations to the church at West Mersea, the interpretation of the structural evidence as an early Saxon church is clearly tentative. Even if the southern skew of the eastern end of the chancel (Fig 4) does represent the springing of a former apse, it might be argued that this represents a former Romanesque feature rather than a Saxon one. The southern *porticus* postulated on account of the northern skew of the eastern part of the south wall of the south aisle is even more speculative. Though the use of *petit appareil* in the lower part of the north wall of the nave is paralleled at Bradwell, a sceptic might argue that Roman material might be recyled at any time. It would however be hard to explain why the construction technique of the walls are so similar (Fig 11). Finally while the reconstructed plan of the church at West Mersea (Fig 13) bears some comparison with the Kentish group of churches (Fig 14), the former lacks the 1.5:1 nave plan-forms associated with the latter. It must however be noted that the same is true of Bradwell, which has a signifcantly longer and narrower nave and shorter apsidal eastern cell than the Kentish group. The greatest disparity between West Mersea and the other churches in this group, however, is that West Mersea was clearly unbuttressed.

It would appear that the Kentish churches were planned on a standard metre, namely a grid based on the short perch of 4.6m identified by John Blair (Blair 2013, esp. Fig 2). This metrication appears to have been abandoned when the 'Kentish' form of church was translated to Essex in the form of Bradwell. The suggested reconstruction of the plan of West Mersea shares this irregularity,

but both churches are identical in width. It may thus be that West Mersea was modelled on Bradwell, but with modifications in the west-east dimensions. Another innovation at West Mersea would have been that buttresses were considered unneccessary.

It would appear that there is fairly substantial though certainly not conclusive evidence that the earliest fabric at West Mersea is that of a late 7th century church partly modelled on Bradwell. While it is usually taken as a given that the surviving church at Bradwell is that of St Cedd's monastery, this has been challenged. Given the suggested influence of Bradwell on West Mersea, it is necessary to enquire as to who the patron of St Peter's , Bradwell as well as that of its namesake at West Mersea was.

The founders of Bradwell-on-Sea and West Mersea

Bradwell-on-Sea

The minster at Bradwell, as Bede informs us, was founded by St Cedd in 654 (Sherley-Price 1990, 179). It is usually assumed that the present standing building is that of St Cedd's church, but doubts have been expressed on this, for instance by Stuart Rigold who suggested that the present church straddling the western well of the former Roman fort was commissioned by Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus after c.669 as a *capella ante portas* to an earlier church established further within the fort by Cedd (Rigold 1977). Rigold also noted the similarity of the plans of Bradwell and Reculver, especially the form of the *porticus* overlapping the junctions between nave and pesbytery. The latter, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, was founded by the priest Bass in 669 on land granted to him by king Ecgbryht of Kent (Swanton 1996). Since this was the year after Theodore was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, it is possible he had a hand in Reculver's construction.

Bede recounts how Cedd abandoned the see of the East Saxons for his foundation of Lastingham in Northumbria in 659, his followers at Bradwell joining him (Sherley-Price 1990, 181-2). It has been suggested that with Cedd's exodus, the monastic community at Bradwell became defunct (Mirrington 2013, 322) but the archaeological evidence outlined in Mirrington's own thesis and cited above suggests a thriving community well into the 9th century. It is also notable that place-name evidence indicates Bradwell founded a daughter-house at nearby Southminster (Blair 2005, 215). The latter, 10km SSW of Bradwell, was an important 30 hide manor of the bishop of London before 1086 (Williams and Martin 2002, 975). It is suggested here that Cedd's community was replaced by one founded by a later Bishop of London, who commissioned the surviving church at Bradwell in the 670s or later. The most likely candidate would be Earconwald, appointed bishop by Theodore of Tarsus in 675 (Sherley-Price 1990, 216). Prior to becoming bishop, Earconwald had

founded the minster at Chertsey in Surrey in 666 (ibid). Significantly, Chertsey, like Bradwell, was dedicated to St Peter (VCH 1967,55). A point not often commented on is that Bede does not tell us who Cedd's foundation at Bradwell was dedicated to.

West Mersea

Unlike Bradwell, St Peter's minster at West Mersea is not documented until 963 X 991 (Sawyer 1968, No. 1494). There is, however, as we have seen, circumstantial evidence for a much earlier foundation. In addition to the probably 8th century sculpture from the church (Carter 1971) and the numismatic evidence (Mirrington 2013, 202-4 and map 26), the evidence in this paper suggests that the earliest structural phase at St Peter, West Mersea is potentially as old as Bradwell. The historical evidence cited above indicates that West Mersea was ancient royal demesne before being granted to Ealdorman Aelfgar probably by king Edmund (924-39). It has furthermore been noted that the Strood Causeway of 684 X 702 is dateable to the later years of the reign of king Sebbi of the East Saxons, c.665-95 (Crummy *et al* 1982). Bede noted that the pious Sebbi preferred a retired monastic life to the kingly one, at Crummy *et al* (ibid) have suggested that Sebbi may have commissioned the causeway. If this was the case, Sebbi may well have founded the minster at West Mersea, the relatively isolated situation allowing him to persue his monastic ideals. The foundation might be dated to sometime between the earliest possible tree-ring date for the causeway of 684 and Sebbi's death in 695. The inspiration for the building, as well as the dedication to St Peter, would have been derived from the minster on the other side of the Blackwater Estuary at Bradwell. The putative plan of West Mersea can be seen as two steps removed from Reculver and one from Bradwell (Fig 14). At the latter, the 1.5:1 plan form of the nave had been abandoned in favour of a longer, narrower nave. At the former, the original 'Kentish' model had become further debased in that the small buttresses associated with other churches of this genre were also dispensed with.

The broader context: church and landscape

We return to the subject of the Strood Causeway: why was such a monumental work undertaken? It would certainly appear to have been primarily a means of access to the minster at West Mersea, but there may have been other considerations. A commercial venture, that Mersea was intended to be a proto-*wic* is unlikely to be one of them. Apart from Sebbi's apparently monk-like disposition, the archaeological evidence suggests that the main middle Saxon trading centre was at Fingringhoe (Mirrington 2013, 324-8). One reason why the causeway could have been construced is that even today, The Strood is cubject to rapidly rising tides and dangerous currents. In 2012, nine people

crossing the causeway by car narrowly avoided being drowned by hgh tides (EADT 2012) . Before the causeway acted as a breakwater, the Strood was proabably even more treacherous, since the outflow from the Colne and Blackwater estuaries (Figs 1, 16) has the potential to cause strong eddies here.

It is certainly plausible that one reason for the construction of the causeway would be to allow an ageing king to visit his minster in safety, but it might serve other purposes apart from practical ones. In the Lower Witham Valley, Lincolnshire, there are a number of causeways, some of them prehistoric, associated with monastic sites. These have been subject to a detailed landscape study by David Stocker and Paul Everson (Stocker and Everson 2003). One causeway led to the important early minster at Bardney, the resting plce of the martyred king Oswald, 634-42 (Sherley-Price 1990, 157-60). The monks of Bardney were permitted to fish on the causeway on the day of the vigil of St Oswald and it is clear that 'the numbers of fish caught on this single day cannot have been important in the monastic diet or economy' (Stocker and Everson 2003, 279-80) suggesting the fishing was an act of commemoration. It has also been noted that apparently ritualistic deposition of weapons and other artefacts in the Witham Valley continued from the prehistoric and Roman periods into medieval times (ibid, 280-1). The authors have suggested that for a pilgrim to St Oswald's relics crossing the causeway near Bardney:

'such a journey to the monastic house, across the causeway, could be invested with.....Christian meaning, replicating both Christ's journey from Galilee to Jerusalem towards his death and the crossing of the Jordan, the symbol of rebirth' (Stocker and Everson 2003, 283)

If the Strood causeway was indeed a commission of King Sebbi, it is most probable that this devout king would have seen his work in similar religious terms. A detailed study of the area is the subject of another paper, but even a cursory look at some sites within the region hints at a landsacpe charged with Christian significance.

Colchester, Mersea Island and the Blackwater Estuary: an early Christian Saxon designed landscape?

Mersea Island is connected to Colchester by the Strood Causeway and to Maldon by the Blackwater Estuary (Fig 15). Myths associating the emperor Constantine and his mother Helena with the town were certainly prolific by the twelfth century (Heslop 2012). There is no evidence of these associations in the middle Saxon period. Though the evidence for early and middle Saxon

occupation of Colchester is sparse, what finds there are tend to be imported and of very high status, such as 6th-9th century Frankish wheel-thrown pottery and imported glass (Crummy 1981, 1-23; Mirrington 2013, 361). A king of Sebbi's time would be peripatetic, but it is possible Colchester was one of his royal *villas*. It is uncertain whether there was a minster there at this date. The suggestion that the later St Botolph's Priory was an early minster (e.g Rodwell and Rodwell 1977,

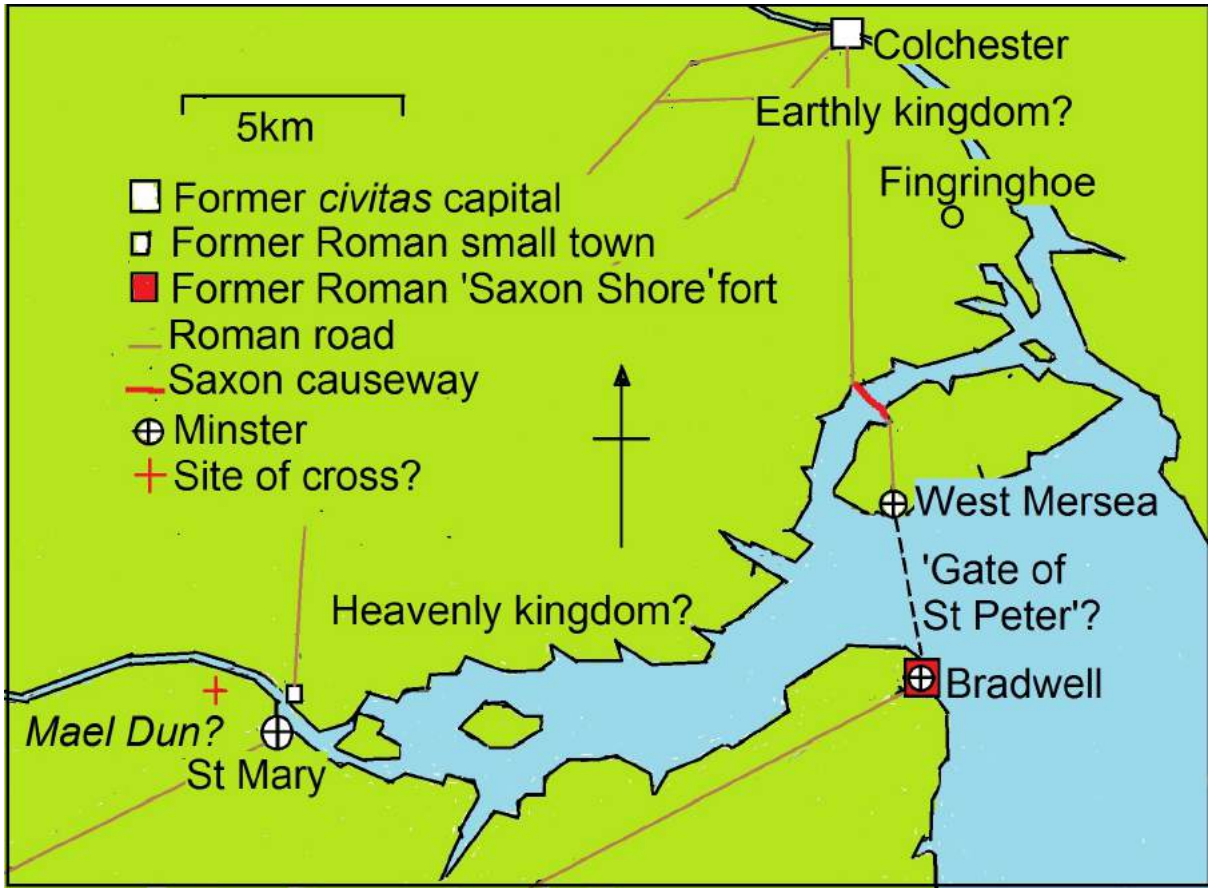

Fig 15. Possible early Christian Saxon designed landscape around Colchester, Mersea Island and the Blackwater Estuary

35) is without supporting evidence. St Peter's, Colchester was much more probably a minster, since two priests there held two hides of land in 1086 (Williams and Martin 2002, 1051). It is uncertain whether this was a pre-Viking establishment or an whether it was founded by Edward the Elder following his recapture of Colchester from the Vikings in 917 (Swanton 1996). The Roman remains at Colchester would no doubt have impressed in the late 7th century, and might have evoked connotations of a Rome or Jerusalem in the early Christian mind.

Turning to West Mersea itself, the two minsters of St Peter at Bradwell-on-Sea and West Mersea

faced each other across the mouth of the Blackwater estuary. St Peter of course was the gatekeeper of Heaven; an invisible line between Bradwell and West Mersea might be regarded as 'gate' between the earthly kingdom to the north and a heavenly one, represented by the Blackwater Estuary to the west.

The *burh* at Maldon founded by Edward the Elder in 916, is first documented in 912 when Edward camped there while an earlier *burh* was constructed at nearby Witham (Swanton 1996) . There is some evidence, however, of middle Saxon settlement. The church of St Mary Hythe at the eastern end of the medieval town apparently contains no fabric earlier than c.1100 (RCHM 1921, 175). It was however in existence by 1056 when it was granted by Edward the Confessor's chaplain, Ingelric, to his foundation of St Martin le Grand, London together with two hides of land, a grant confirmed by William I in 1068 (HTAR 1999, 20; VCH 1909, 555). The two-hide endowment suggests St Mary's was of minster status. Though this in itself would be no evidence of a pre-Viking foundation, '7th century' pottery was reported from a watching brief in the churchyard (HTAR 1999, 20). A further point of interest is the place-name itself, *Mael Dun,* 'hill marked by a cross' (ibid, 6). The hill in question was presumably that at the western end of the town, the site of an Iron Age hillfort (Wickenden 1986, Fig 2) and the postulated site of Edward the Elder's *burh* (HTAR 1999, 19). If this was the case, the putative cross may have been axially aligned west of St Mary's. A cross on a hill would be symbolic of Calvary and also represent the king of Heaven (Christ/God), paired with the queen of Heaven (the Virgin Mary). In the middle Saxon period, travellers sailing up the Blackwater and disembarking at the potentially early minster at the Hythe towards the possible site of the cross would notice the ruins of the Roman town of Heybridge (Wickenden 1986) on their right hand side, a 'heavenly city' contrasting with the 'worldly' city of Colchester from whence they came.

The above landscape interpretation is of course highly speculative. On the other hand, the Strood Causeway and the apparently remote situation of the minster at Mersea can hardly be considered purely functional.

CONCLUSIONS

Assessment of the recent test-pit campaign and numismatic evidence suggests middle and late Saxon settlement around West Mersea was minimal (Fig 2), the place being overshadowed by neighbouring Bradwell and Fingringhoe.

The west tower of St Peter's church (Fig 5) is perhaps the oldest structure in England to be commissioned by Norman patrons, being potentially as old as c.1042. It has however been

suggested that the masons who actually built the tower were Anglo-Saxon and were from Colchester; there is limited evidence they may even have worked on the tower of Holy Trinity there. It is possible the tower functioned as a lighthouse to guide Norman mariners to what was then an unfamiliar place (Fig 9).

Though fieldwork at the church was severely time-limited, an important discovery was that the masonry in the lower part of the north wall of the nave (Fig 10) was virtually identical in its re-use of Roman *petit appareil* and coursed construction technique to the well-known late 7th century church at Bradwell-on-Sea (Fig 11). The reconstruction of the plan of the primary church at West Mersea is more tentative (Fig 13) while a possible interpretaion of its landscape context (Fig 15) is at present speculative.

The last two points underline the need for more fieldwork. West Mersea is potentially the oldest standing church in Essex bar Bradwell and one of the earliest in England. A compehensive survey is needed to test the hypotheses proposed in this paper. The surface of the Anglo-Saxon landscape at its possible religious significance has scarcely been scratched. The environs of the Blackwater Estuary deserve the same scrutiny as the Witham Valley in Lincolnshire (Stocker and Everson 2003). The area has the potential to yield much important information without a spadeful of earth being shifted.

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