South-East Somerset and its Churches before the Norman Conquest.

PART TWO

Ilchester/Northover is a rather depressed little place, but stands on a really important and significant site.

Northover at Ilchester has already been introduced last month. It was dedicated to St Andrew in 1066 and was a possession of Glastonbury Abbey. It was probably captured by Glastonbury at a point when its dependencies had been lost and its authority shrunken. If it was a tenth century gift there is no record, but this may have been the result of the rise of Ilchester, which may have crowded the minster out. The dedication probably indicates that it was a foundation of St Aldhelm as part of a campaign which Romanised the existing churches of old Welsh Somerset. However, Glastonbury had alienated it, no doubt for a rent of some sort, to Brihtric before 1066 (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 8,37). There is nothing to suggest that Brihtric was a priest, so he probably worked the estate and employed a priest to serve the church. The church held three hides of land, which probably made up the later parish of Northover. Unlike the other minsters already studied it had no dependent chapels in the post-Conquest period, although it was clearly in being before the town of Ilchester was founded. Ilchester had a number of churches and chapels post-Conquest, and though there is nothing to link them with Northover, they may initially have been its dependents.

However, Somerton, the royal manor to the north, was not a dependency. That place, surprisingly, had only a chapel until the mid-twelfth century which was a dependency of Queen Camel (VCH Som., Vol.3, 129-153). The editors of the Victoria County History also think it possible that Somerton Erleigh had a chapel as early as the tenth century (ibid.). There was also a chapel at Melbury and

another one, dedicated to St James at Hurcott. It looks very much as if the growth of Ilchester overshadowed the minster at Northover and left it bereft of dependencies. That connection between Queen Camel and Somerton is clearly an ancient one and might preserve a vestige of the early jurisdiction of Northover. In 1086 Queen Camel was royal property and as its name suggests was part of the Queen's lands. Queen Camel may be an example of a 'lesser minster' as defined in Edgar's Laws about the status of churches and chapels (Whitelock 1955, 395). If it was a royal estate in the eighth or ninth centuries, an independent church could well have been founded. It was dedicated to St Barnabas. An Anglo-Saxon dedication to him would be rare, but not impossible and it is noteworthy that West Camel, next door belonged to Muchelney Abbey and was in their hands by c. 995 (S. 884). In addition the West Camel church has a rare - for Somerset, and large - piece of Anglo-Saxon sculpture of the early ninth century (Cramp, R., 2006, 178-9).
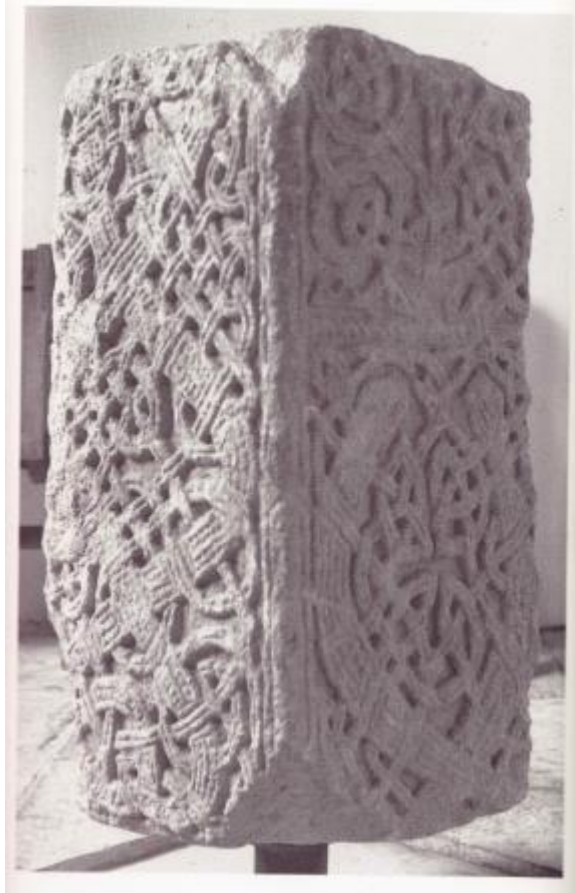
West Camel houses this magnificent piece of Anglo-Saxon sculpture discovered in the fabric.

This is of course, well before Muchelney got the property, unless, as the charter S. 884 claims this really was a confirmation of pre-existing ownership - an unlikely occurrence. Whoever was responsible for the cross shaft may, of course have moved it to West Camel long after it was carved, but before

the Norman Conquest. So a chapel with carved stone decoration, perhaps a cross set up inside the building, since the carving which survives is not heavily weathered, almost certainly existed at West Camel by the tenth century, perhaps earlier. West Camel and Queen Camel were clearly once a single estate, probably with West Camel carved off to provide a gift for Muchelney Abbey.

However, if the sculpture is as old as is claimed and if it originally belonged in West Camel it would suggest that the settlement existed as a separate unit by that time and that someone, perhaps a king or queen, was prepared to construct a substantial church building. Such an idea is intriguing, since the same volume (Cramp 2006) also contains reference to a carved fragment at Maperton which may be early tenth century (ibid. 171),

This tiny piece of Anglo-Saxon at Maperton work is all that remains of something much grander.

while there is also a possibility that a fragment of a baluster shaft found at Frogg Mill, Yeovil is also Anglo-Saxon and of the early eighth century. That would be from a stone building and would suggest that stone built chapels and churches, even in small settlements, did exist from an early date.

Babcary is now a rather ordinary medieval parish church and does not betray anything of its much grander past.

Babcary, to the north-east of Ilchester seems a relatively insignificant place, but its church was dedicated to the Holy Cross and it had a whole host of chapels in the middle ages. There was one inside Babcary itself and others at Stert and Foddington. The Foddington chapel was a 'free' chapel. This is probably a sign that it was a chapel established before the Norman Conquest, perhaps in the tenth century or even earlier, which had no burial rights, but had a priest who was entitled to the tithes of the estate it served. Such a chapel may have represented an estate chapel built by a landowner at the period when his estate became an independent economic unit. The chapel within Babcary may have been at Lytes Cary, where a chapel probably preceded the building of the manor house, or the rebuilding of the manor house engulfed a pre-existing chapel. The foundation of the church at Babcary, with the dedication was probably quite early. Below I discuss the church dedication at Weston Bampfylde and the same comments apply to Babcary. Its dedication may reflect a history of earlier pagan practices, or the existence of Roman remains close by. Both Babcary and Queen Camel may be examples of local churches with burial and baptismal rights founded within the territory of a minster and themselves going on to found chapels of their own. This discussion has carried us some way from Northover, but it remains the case that there are too few clues available to sketch a likely *parochia* for this church. It may well have broken up at a quite early date, leaving little in the way of clues about its composition.

Milborne Port is the last example and it is an odd one.   The church at Milborne probably existed by c.950, since in her will Wynflæld left 'half a pound' for her soul to Milborne; that is money to a church for the good of her soul (Whitelock 1930, no 3). This church had dependent chapels at Charlton Horethorne and at Pulham and Holwell, both now in Dorset, though Holwell was a detached part of Somerset. That would have put Pulham and Holwell in the Dorset diocese, though subject to a church in the Wells diocese. The Thorns suggest that Holwell was part of the manor of Milborne in 1066 (1980, 1, 10, note). Assuming this is correct it is clear that the chapel was pre-Conquest, or it would have never been founded as an attachment to Milborne. The arrangements of hundreds and indeed the existence of detached parts of shires was probably due to the influence of powerful lords who wished for scattered estates to be treated as in a single hundred. After 1066 this seems to have been less common. Holwell may have been an ancient acquisition, but Pulham is probably quite late in the Anglo-Saxon period.   Reinbald, the tenant of the church at Milborne in 1086 had also held it in 1066. He had been a major adminstrator

for Edward the Confessor and retained much of his importance under William the Conqueror (Round 1909, 421-7). As well as Milborne Port, he held the minster at Frome, which had eight carucates of land and he was the holder of a hide at Rode in 1066 (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 16,14). In Gloucestershire he held the church at Cheltenham with one and a half hides and by 1086 he also held several secular estates. His importance as a great functionary is displayed in the writ issued in his favour by Edward the Confessor (S.1097). Reinbald was also Dean of the minster at Cirencester in Gloucestershire and all his possessions, which included 16 churches and lands in five counties, passed to the new Augustinian Abbey of Cirencester founded by Henry Ist in 1133, so that both Milborne Church and Frome became their possessions (Ross 1964, 21-3). In 1086 Reinbald also held Pulham and had done in 1066 (Thorn & Thorn 1983, 24,4). This may explains why the chapel was connected with Milborne. Reinbald probably built the chapel for his tenants and naturally, as one of the most powerful men in the kingdom, attached it to his minster at Milborne. Pulham was a settlement with two manors in 1066 and the later parish church at Pulham, was dedicated to St Thomas Beckett and so was probably a later foundation (ibid. 24,4; 36,4).

Charlton Horethorne did not stay within Milborne's control and had a church dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. This dedication is usually regarded as one favoured by early kings as legitimising royal power, including as it does both the Leader of the Apostles and Patron of the Roman Church and also St Paul, the earliest of the great theologians (Jones 2007, 136-9). These churches were often associated with royal burials, but it may simply be that Charlton church was named to add this prestigious dedication to a collection of dedications on the early royal estate. Milborne itself is dedicated to St John the Evangelist, who was associated with Virginity, which suggests the possibility that Milborne minster may have been intended initially as a house of nuns or a house ruled by a woman (op. cit. 185). The parallel here might be Wimborne, a house of women founded on a royal estate.

What further churches may have been part of the *parochia* of Milborne is difficult to determine. Many of the later Anglo-Saxon estates of the region to the north and to the east of Milborne were in the hands of a variety of mostly secular landowners by 1066. Henstridge seems to have an Anglo-Saxon charter (S.570), which is a grant made by King Eadred between 953 and 955 to Brihtric. However in recent years research has shown that the boundary clause describes Abbas Combe, now

part of Templecombe parish. Brihtric may also be the man who held Rimpton and left the estate to The Old Minster at Winchester in the mid-tenth century (S. 441 & S. 571). North Cheriton in 1066 belonged to a man called Ernwy. The place-name means 'church-tun' and the church is dedicated to St John the Baptist. South Cheriton is clearly a block of land split off North Cheriton and its chapel was a free chapel in the parish of Horsington. The fact that it was a free chapel suggests that it was founded before the eleventh century. One explanation for the area to the east of Milborne might be that it represents a group of estates belonging to the Wessex kings which were regularly granted out to favoured members of the nobility and of which some became permanently alienated in the ninth century, others remained in royal hands to be granted by charter in the tenth century.

Cheriton, with its St John dedication may have been the first of the churches built when the estates began to break away from Milborne, or it may have been an existing chapel which was upgraded to baptismal status because it belonged to someone of importance. Just to the north west of Milborne is Maperton which is dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. This is a grand dedication for a church in a fairly ordinary small Anglo-Saxon estate, a normal five hide unit in 1066 owned by a man called Alfwold who seems to have held several manors in the area (Thorn & Thorn 1980, 36,10). It does however have a fragment of Anglo-Saxon stonework which suggests it had a stone built chapel or church in the later Anglo-Saxon period at least (Cramp 2006, 171).

All this is highly speculative, but the dedications in the area do tend to show that the spread of churches to the villages was not a very regular process, or that the processes may have been tied into changes of landownership about which we know nothing. Thus Weston Bampfylde, along with its sub-manor Little Weston has a church dedicated to the Holy Cross, which was a popular cult in pre-Norman England. Graham Brown points out that Holy Cross as a dedication in southern England often replaces Helen in northern England and that a quarter of Holy Cross dedications are concentrated around the Roman towns of Cirencester and Ilchester (Jones 2007, 118). Having said that, the dedications are mostly around Cirencester. Those near Ilchester are Weston Bampfylde and Babcary. He associates them also with Roman villa sites. Jones also suggests that Holy Cross dedications are associated with springs and wells and that there are examples of trees with votive offerings on them near such churches. This links pagan holy wells with later Christian myths. The Cross was often

referred to as the 'Tree' and the Old English poem 'The Dream of the Rood' (Old English *rōd* means cross or gallows), describes the Cross of Christ as made from the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden. Does Weston Bampfylde, so close to Cadbury Castle, meet any of the criteria?
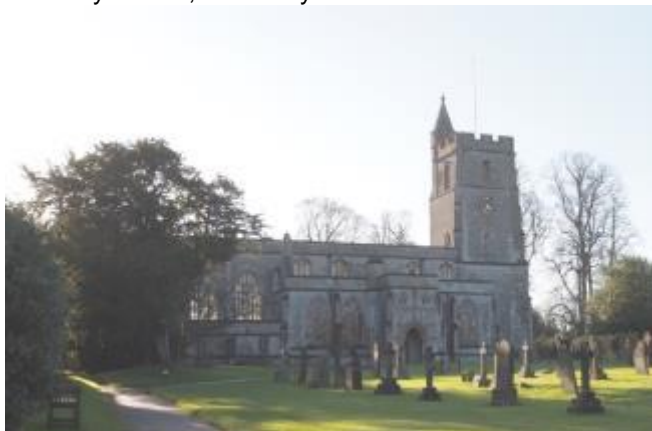
North Cadbury. This fine late medieval church tells us about the wealth of the community in the later medieval period, but nothing about the Anglo-Saxons, apart from the site.

North Cadbury was obviously the centre of a large estate at some time early in the Old English period and it must have included what became South Cadbury and the other smaller Domesday manors. The church at North Cadbury, with its dedication to St Michael, is clearly the earliest church with its patron the Leader of the Heavenly Host against the forces of evil. He was also the guardian of the souls of the dead, so that mortuary chapels are usually dedicated to him. He was also popularly associated with high places and his churches often stand on cliffs or hill-tops - witness St Michaels' Mount and Mont-St-Michel. One wonders if there was ever a church inside Cadbury Castle to transfer its name to a successor. A church of St Michael would certainly also have had early burial rights. South Cadbury, on the other hand is dedicated to St Thomas and so can't have been dedicated before 1173.

Where does all this leave us? Not, I fear with a very coherent picture of the spread of church building or of their relative importance and relationships in the pre-Norman period. Two points stand out. The most important is that there are strong signals that most communities in the region between Milborne Port and Ilchester had a chapel or church before the Norman Conquest, despite the silence of the Domesday Book. The second is that the break-up of the early *parochia* of the mother churches of the later seventh century was probably quite swift and took place well before the tenth century when the relationships between churches was defined in the laws of Edgar (Whitelock 1955, 395).

If one compares the development of the *parochia* of Sherborne with the others dealt with above, it becomes clear that the extensive growth of secular estates, particularly those of non-royal laymen deeply affected the structure of the *parochiae*. Undoubtedly these changes - the tendency for chapels to break away from the mother minster and become independent with their own fonts and graveyards - were driven by the desire of laymen to be seen to control their local churches.

Later evidence also suggests that a desire to capture the tithes of the peasants on their estates may also have been a strong incentive to push for control of a local village church. Secular ownership of churches and their tithes was so common that the movement for the gift of churches and their tithes to monasteries and cathedrals in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries became a flood. This was not a state or a movement in England alone, but is common to the social structure and the politics of the whole of western Europe.

There is clearly much more to be done locally to understand the position of local churches in the countryside of Somerset and indeed elsewhere.

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