

Bexhill, Sussex

Bexleah

Church of St Peter

Church fabric

Carved stone lid of reliquary

Grid ref .....TQ 74 07

#### Date

Very thin nave walls at West (2' 3") and high (20') - possibly Anglo-Saxon.

#### Guidebook

Even before Augustine came to our shores, the kingdom of the South Saxons, though one of the oldest of the Saxon kingdoms, was the least known and most inaccessible of them all. Enclosed as it was by the dense forests of the Weald in the north and marshes in the east, it was cut off from the more vigorous life of the other kingdoms. For this reason it is not surprising that Sussex was the very last part of our land to be converted to Christianity.

This conversion had its origin in shipwreck. St Wilfrid, a monk of Northumbria and one of the pupils of St Aidan, was returning from Gaul to Britain early in the year AD 666. The vessel in which he crossed was driven ashore on the Sussex coast. Wilfrid and his party were given a rough and hostile reception, one of the priests being slain, and it was only with difficulty that they re-floated the ship and escaped with their lives.

Fifteen years later Wilfrid, now Bishop of York, was exiled from his see and he therefore determined to return to the pagan South Saxons who had once so nearly murdered him. When he reached Sussex he found the rough Saxons much more welcoming. Prolonged drought had caused the crops to fail and there was much famine. Wilfrid not only cared for them throughout this difficult time and so won their friendship, but helped them by teaching them to fish and in other practical ways. But there was only one kind of fishing Wilfrid was really bent upon. He was a born "fisher of men". Speedily he gained converts to the Christian faith and established a Church in Selsey in West Sussex. He became the first bishop in 681 and died in 709.

Gradually the work of the Church spread eastwards through the county. Very few details of this development remain to us. Only very meagre information about Sussex is contained in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Most of the knowledge we have about both the Church life and the political life of Sussex

from the 6th to the 9th centuries comes to us from the fifteen Anglo-Saxon Charters which relate to this county and which have been preserved through the centuries.

From the historical jig-saw puzzle which they provide, one fact emerges clearly. The great King of Mercia, Offa the Mighty, who (as Symeon of Durham tells us) subjugated the forces of the South Saxons, had by the year AD 771 so imposed his will upon the kingdom that it began to acquire a unity which it had never previously possessed and never subsequently lost. King Offa, though cruel in battle, could be kind in conquest. Bexhill has special cause to be grateful to him for, in the following year, AD 772, he made a grant of land for the building and endowing of a church in this place.

As will be seen from the Charter, a translation of which is added here, the lands were extensive in area and for more than a thousand years could only have served for grazing cattle and sheep, bringing in a very small rental. In modern times, towards the end of the C19, when the south coast began to develop and Bexhill ceased to be a small hamlet and became a busy residential town, these lands proved a real asset to the parish. Bit by bit the land has been sold, the last few acres as recently as 1953, the year of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

There have been some who have regarded the Sussex Charters with considerable suspicion because they are not in every case originals but C12 and C13 copies. However, there has most certainly been a church on the hill of Bexhill since Saxon times and the lands so generously granted by King Offa of Mercia have most certainly been sold and the proceeds placed with the Charity Commissioners. There can be little question about the authenticity of a Charter, even though it was signed nearly twelve centuries ago, if the grant it then made to the church now brings in more than £300 every year and will continue to do so for all time. The church people of this ancient parish have real cause to bless the memory of Offa the Mighty and he will be remembered in generations to come.

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The Charter is written in Latin and Anglo-Saxon, all the boundaries defining the limits of the land granted being in the latter language. It reads in translation as follows:-

In the name of our lord God and saviour. What is done for this world barely lasts until death, but what is done for eternal life remains forever after death. Therefore it is for everyone with deep forethought of mind to ponder and consider how with the fleeting possessions of this world he may obtain for his treasure the abodes of heavenly promise. Wherefore I, Offa, king of the English, for the good of my soul and for the love of God, and in accordance with my former promise grant in eternal possession to Almighty God and to the venerable Bishop Oswald (of Selsey, 765-780) a certain piece of land in Sussex for the building there of a church (monasterium) and the endowing of the church (basilicam) so that it may be seen to serve the praise of God and the honour of the saints, that is, 8 hides in the place which is called Bexhill as set forth in the bounds

These are the bounds of the 8 hides of inland of the people of Bexhill. Firstly at the servants' tree, from the servants' tree south to the treacherous place, so along the shore over against Cooden cliff, eastward and so up on to the old boundary dyke, so north to Kewhurst, and so to the Benetings' stream, and so north through Shortwood to the boundary beacon, from the beacon to the bold men's ford from the ford along the marsh to the broad bridge, from the bridge along the ditch to Beda's spring, from the spring south along the boundary thus to the servants' tree.

These are the gavolland of the outland of Bexhill, in these places which are called by these names: at Barnhome 3 hides, at Worhsam 1 hide, at Ibbas wood 1 hide, at Crowhurst 8 hides, at Ridge 1 hide, at Gyllingas 2 hides, at Foxham and Black Brooks 1 hide, at Icklesham 3 hides, with all things pertaining thereto, fields, woods, meadows, fisheries. Let the aforesaid land remain from this day, given as I have said for me in the name of God, free from all royal exactions and bound to the use of those serving God, but on this condition: that after this day, this gift be returned to the episcopal see which is called Selsey. If anyone at any time in great or small degree dares to reduce this gift made by me, let him know that he will incur the penalty for his presumption in the stern judgement of the all-powerful God, and will not escape from a bad hearing.

These are the bounds of Icklesham, to the pool in the hollow at the cliff, out on to the middle of the brook, so to Tatta's corner of land to the moor, to Eadwine's valley as far as the boundary of Kent, then west along the middle of the bathing brook.

This Charter was written in the year 772 from the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the 10th of the indiction, on the 15th day of the month of August

✠ I, Offa, king of the Mercians, as the power was conceded to me by God who reigns, have confirmed this Charter of gift, signing it with my own hand, and placed the sign of the holy cross.

I, Ecgberht, king of Kent, have agreed and signed.

I, Jænberht, archbishop (of Canterbury, 765-792) by the grace of God have signed.

I, Cynewulf, king of the West Saxons, have agreed and signed this gift

I, Eadberht, bishop (of Mercia, 764-781), have agreed and signed.

I, Oswald, bishop (of Selsey, 765-790), have signed the gift made to me.

I, Rigeah, bishop, have agreed.

I, Diora, bishop, have signed.

I, Oswald, alderman of the South Saxons, have agreed.

I, Osmund, alderman, have confirmed.

I, Ælfweald, alderman, have acquiesced.

I, Oslac, alderman, have signed.

And below these witnesses were also present whose names are written below:

Botwine (abbot), Brorda, Hui thyse, Stidberht, Lulling, Æmele, prefect, Eata, Berhtwald, Baldræd, Cyne, Berht, Heahberht, Esne, Bryne, Ealdræd, Bynhere.

All of the shire.

All these agreed, signed and confirmed.

These are the land boundaries of Barnhome, firstly at the mossy spring, from the spring south into the valley, from this valley up on to the little heath, to the goblin's spring, so south and east to the old road, along the road to the old boundary mark which stands on the east side of the road, to the deep valley, to the reed pond. From the pond to the five roads, and south to the red ditch, along the ditch to Picknill and so south by the eastern moor to the angle, so east to the yew enclosure, so north to the wood, and so south to Cylla's hill, from the hill to Cylla's spring, west along the stream to

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Thunor's clearing, and so west along the stream on the outside of the salt marsh, and so north to the black brook, up along the stream to the swine enclosure. North along the boundary to the slaughter rubbish pit (siferthinge steorfa), and so north to the muddy ford, and so up on to the old dyke, eastwards along the dyke, and thus to the mossy spring.

(This translation is made from Charter No. XIV of *Sussex Anglo-Saxon Charters*, based on No. 208 of the Lambeth MS. 1212, folio 387.)

Most Saxon churches built between the C7 and C10 centuries followed a common plan. There was a simple nave and square-ended sanctuary with the nave longer, narrower and more lofty. Only rarely were there side chapels forming transepts. Entrance was generally at the west end through a simple door, although western porches were not unknown. Sometimes a small wooden tower was to be found at the west end. Of the original church built here in accordance with the terms of Offa's grant, very little remains. At the time of the restoration which took place in Queen Victoria's reign, a good deal of Saxon work with the typical irregular rubble and ashlar was found in the walls of the nave over the two most western bays, but this is now concealed by plaster.

Mounted in a case on the south side of the tower will be found one of the most precious and interesting objects our church possesses. This is a remarkably fresh C8 carved stone which was discovered in 1878 about six inches under the nave floor near the first Norman pier on the south side. The Rev. L. S. Clarke, the then Rector, was inclined to think that this formed the lid of a child's stone coffin, but all the evidence is against this. The elaborate interlaced cable ornament cut into the stone, familiar in Saxon work and showing Celtic influence, could never have been intended for burial out of sight. Most modern archaeologists

agree that this splendid piece of work was done by a craftsman from the north, almost certainly about the time of St Wilfrid, and probably was the lid of a reliquary (containing the relics of saints) which was placed within the original church at the time of its consecration.

This Bexhill Stone, as it is called, has aroused very great interest among students all over the country. The freshness and beauty of the craftsmanship have remained through nearly twelve centuries and it is hard to realise that it has so long a history.

... Within twenty years of the Battle of Hastings our little Saxon church had been replaced by a larger and stronger Norman edifice. What did this church look like? It had a strong, massive west tower, lower than at present and doubtless built as a look-out post across the marshes at Pevensey and out to sea. The tower opened with an arch into the nave, part of the original Saxon walls (as we have already seen) being retained and pierced to make arches in the north and south walls for small porches. It would seem that this nave was about 26' in length and 16' in width and had a square chancel of the same width as the nave. There were as yet no aisles, these being added later. A similar instance of a church built on this plan and about this period is found at Bishopstone between Newhaven and Seaford.

Domesday Book, AD 1086, refers to Bexhill Church and it is therefore clear that the change from Saxon to Norman must have come within a very few years of the Conquest. There is also reference to another chapel in association with Bexhill, but whether at Bulverhythe or Northeye cannot be determined. Ruins have been found in both these places. The latter place seems the more likely.

*From Clifford Earwaker, B.A., formerly rector of Bexhill and Rural Dean of Battle: The Story of St Peter's, Bexhill: first published 1959, 3rd edn 1977.*