



Minster-in-Sheppey, Kent

Μίνστερ

Church of St. Mary and St. Sexburgha

Church fabric

Coffin

Grid ref TQ 956 730

Date

Nave North and South walls – possibly period A2.

Taylor

Notes

The village of Minster is situated on high ground in the northern part of the Isle of Sheppey, the most elevated site being occupied by the church, from the neighbourhood of which one may look across sheep pastures to the crowded estuary of the Thames. The parish is the chief parish of the Island, and formerly included the important town of Sheerness. Village and parish derive their name from a nunnery founded here in the C7 by a widowed Queen of Kent, the word minster being a corruption of the Latin *monasterium*.

Earcombert (*sic, recte* Earconberht), one of the Saxon kings of Kent under the Heptarchy, married Sexburgha (*sic, recte* Seaxburh), one of the four daughters of Annas, (*sic, recte* Anna) King of the East Anglians, who is praised by the Venerable Bede for his great piety. Ercombert himself was the grandson of Ethelbert (*recte* Æþelberht) and Bertha (*recte* Berþe), who by their example and persuasion had converted their Kentish subjects to Christianity, and whose strong support had facilitated St. Augustine's mission. Ercombert died in the plague of 664 and was succeeded by his son Egbert, who was then a minor. Sexburgha acted as regent until her son was grown. The new King was a devout Christian, and after his succession he bestowed Reculver on his mass-priest, Bassa, bidding him build a monastery there. When his widowed mother asked him to give her lands for the site and endowment of a nunnery, he readily handed over to her certain lands in Sheppey. This enabled her to build a nunnery on and about the site of the present church of Minster; and here, in c. 674, she established 77 nuns under the Benedictine rule, herself becoming the first Abbess. 1974 therefore marks the 13th Centenary of the Foundation of the Abbey. Minster Abbey is thus one of the oldest conventual foundations in England. It is believed that in Roman times there was formerly a pagan temple on this site dedicated to the god Apollo and that some of the Roman tiles

from the temple were used in the building of the Christian abbey, and are still to be seen in the walls of the nuns' chapel. One of Sexburgha's sisters, St. Etheldreda, was at this time Abbess of the nunnery of Ely which she founded. Sexburgha, as Abbess of Minster, desired the life of a simple nun, and in due course she handed over the reins of government at Minster to her daughter, Ermenilda (*recte* Earmenhild), the widowed Queen of the Mercians, and herself retired to the monastery of Ely. Yet here also, when her sister died in 680, she was elected as second Abbess. Sexburgha herself died in AD 699 and was Canonised as a Saint ten years later. It is remarkable that in one family there should have been three Saints, Sexburgha, Etheldreda and Werburgha (*sic*) (their niece), who is patron Saint of Chester.

For nearly two centuries the Minster nunnery flourished and spread the light of religion. But Sheppey lay near the path of the Danish raiders, and on the first occasion (AD 835) on which the Danish forces spent the winter on this side, it was Sheppey that they chose for occupation. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that "In this year the heathen devastated Sheppey", and thus one of the earliest Kentish minsters was looted. The nunnery was stripped of its valuables and destroyed by fire, the helpless inmates driven forth destitute. When peace returned once more the convent rose anew from the ashes, but again was subjected to violence in 1052 at the hands of the outlawed followers of Earl Godwin. After this it remained more or less derelict until the reign of Henry I, when about 1130 William de Corbeuil, Archbishop of Canterbury – builder of the great keep of Rochester Castle – re-established the old foundation ...

Daly, in his *History of the Isle of Sheppey* says, "The nuns were bound by solemn vows to devote their lives for the benefit of the sick, the needy and the distressed. In those days there were neither hospitals, nor care for the poor nor charitable institutions, and in time of need the distressed found at the Abbey relief, guardianship and consolation at the hands of these self-sacrificing women. The life of the nuns in Minster Abbey in

Minster-in-Sheppey, Kent

those days was not, as some might suppose, one of indolence and luxury, but rather one of continuous activity and self-denial on behalf of their less-favoured fellow-creatures." Above all of course there was the daily round of prayer and worship, and being of the Benedictine Order they would no doubt have tilled their lands in accordance with the saying of St. Benedict that "To work is to pray."

...

The arch dividing the nave of the north church from the chancel – which is known as the Nun's Chapel – is wide and lofty, being uninterrupted except by a pair of horizontal strips – the upper one projecting abacus-fashion – inserted at impost level on either side. ...High up also in this south wall is a Saxon window with a round head turned in Roman tiles, left partly unfilled, and there are traces of others here and in the north wall. Those in the south wall – originally the external wall – were not, as has been stated, clerestorey windows, since there was never a lean-to aisle, and the conventional (sic) buildings were on the north side of the church. ...

The remains of a Saxon Window are to be seen high up on the wall of the Monastic Church between it and the Parish Church. Originally this was the exterior wall ...The Parish Church portion of the present building was built against the south wall of the Nun's Church in the thirteenth century and arcades pierced through the common wall ...

A rude stone coffin, possibly Saxon (sometimes claimed as King O ffa's coffin) and two very ancient stone coffin lids, are preserved in the same chapel. Possibly they came from graves of abbesses.

From P. T. Jones, B.A.:

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