



Minster-in-Thamet, Kent

Μίνστερ

Abbey of St Mildred

? Abbey fabric

Relic of St Mildred

Grid ref TR 312 643

Date

Remains of Abbey a few hundred yards NE of parish church. Foundations of a three-cell church on site associated with C8th abbey.

Foundations seem to be those of a Norman church.

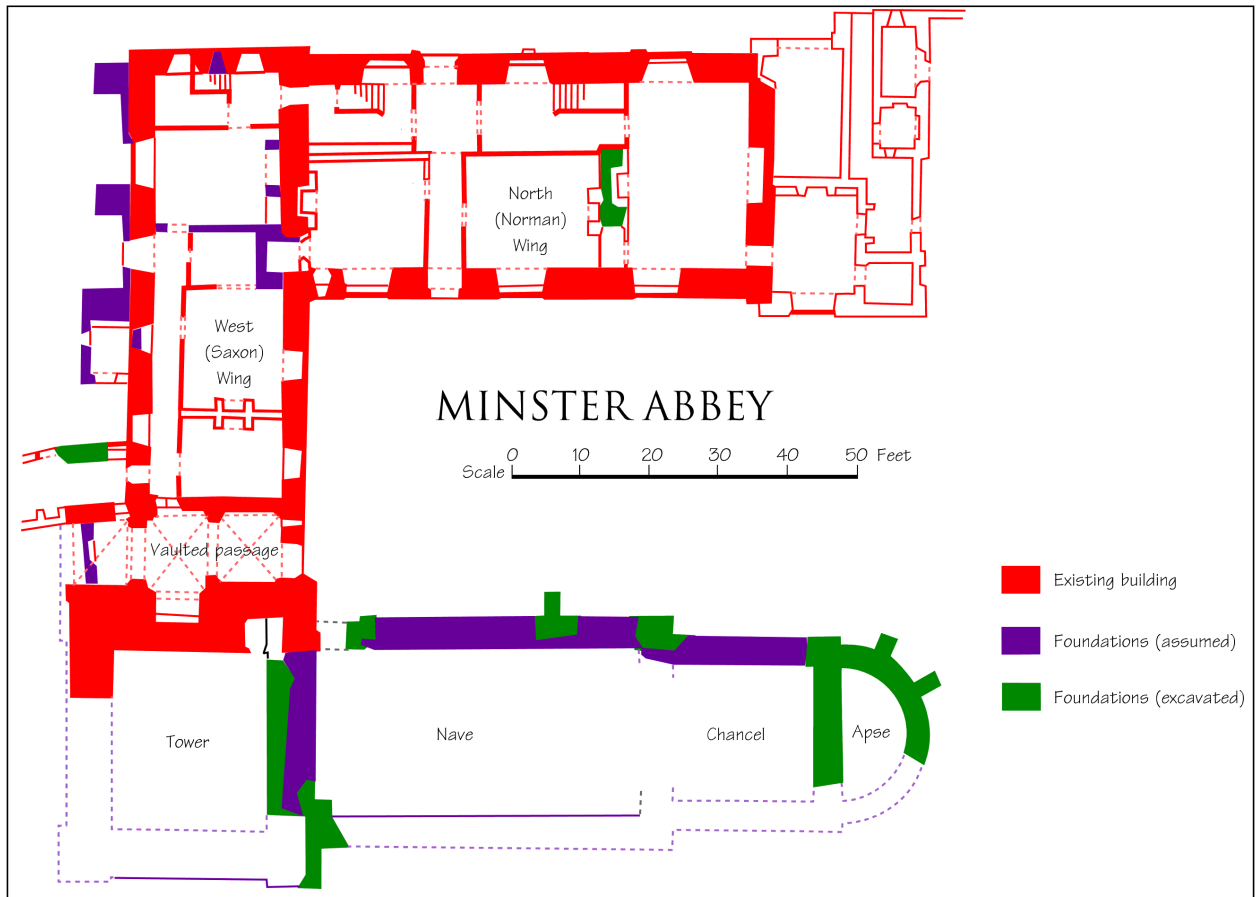
Taylor

Early History

The history of the foundation of Minster Abbey is well documented in the old chronicles, and supported by several charters of the kings of Kent. One of these, King Wihtred's Charter, 699, is the oldest original of its kind in the country.

When St Augustine landed at Ebsfleet in 597 and converted King Ethelbert (*recte* Æpelberht) of Kent,

he brought with him a renewal of Christianity which was eagerly embraced by the Anglo-Saxons. One of its most vigorous flowers was the monastic life in which numbers of men and women, many of noble birth, consecrated themselves to Christ. The women played as prominent and influential part in the spiritual and cultural life of the time as the men, enjoying considerable freedom and independence. Abbesses were invited to the councils of kings and bishops, their advice sought, and convents became centres of learning and the arts. This tremendous vitality overflowed into a steady stream of missionaries to Germany and the continent, led by St Boniface and supported materially and spiritually by their fellow countrymen.



Plan of Minster Abbey, showing existing buildings and plan of former church

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Foundation of the Abbey

It was in this *milieu* that Queen Ermenburga (*recte* Earmenburh) came to Thanet in the middle of the C7th from Mercia, a kingdom near Wales where her husband was ruler. With her came her daughters Mildred and Milgitha (*recte* Mildgyb). Two of her younger brothers had been murdered as a result of a political intrigue at the court of their cousin, Egbert King of Kent, and she had to claim the customary compensation or 'wergild'. As the great grand-daughter of St Ethelbert, she was a direct descendant of Hengist, the warlike Saxon who landed on these shores some 200 years earlier and founded the royal house of Kent. His standard, the rearing white horse, is still the arms of the county. Instead of the 'bloodmoney', Ermenburga asked the repentant King for land on which she could build a house of prayer and the King readily agreed¹.

The first monastery was probably built on the site of the present church of St Mary in Minster, on the southern shores of the Isle of Thanet. It had a natural harbour leading into the Wantsum channel which cut off the island from the mainland. The river Stour is all that remains of this today. It is certain that to the development of this port is due in great measure the importance and prosperity of Minster over the next centuries. Different charters of this time point to the fact that the convent built and owned ships, perhaps to convey the grain from the fertile land to the London corn markets. In 747 Ethelbold (*recte* Æpelbeald) King of Kent, granted the community tax exemption on one of its ships entering the port of London². St Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, consecrated the finished monastery in 670, dedicating it to the Blessed Virgin, and Ermenburga, or Domna Eva as she was now called, who had taken a vow of chastity, became its first Abbess. Meanwhile her daughter Mildred was being educated at the Abbey of Chelles near Paris. Here she would have learned the fine arts, Latin, scripture, poetry, etc in company with other Saxon girls. When she returned to England she joined her mother as a nun of St Mary's in Minster.

St Mildred and her Successors

In about 690 Domna Eva retired and St Theodore consecrated Mildred Abbess. She became widely loved and venerated during her lifetime and we learn from the chronicles that she had a great love for the poor and for about 30 years governed her

community with wisdom and charity. Mildred died about 725. Her reputation for holiness increased after her death and was finally sealed by Pope Urban IV in 1388, when he gave permission for her feast to be kept in Thanet. The sober chronicler Goscelin, writing in 1079, enthusiastically describes her as 'the fairest lily of the English' and 'the jewel of our fathers ...'

The community had now grown to about 70 nuns and the third Abbess St Edburga (*recte* Eadburh), to provide more accommodation for the community, built a new convent in about 741, a short distance away on the site of the present Minster Abbey. This building was probably of wood or wattle like most Saxon ecclesiastical buildings and roofed with reed or lead. The new chapel was dedicated to SS Peter and Paul by Cuthbert (*recte* Cupbert), Archbishop of Canterbury. The convent flourished under St Edburga, and we learn from some of her correspondence with St Boniface that she encouraged his missionary work in Germany and supported him with gifts of manuscripts and vestments. Several authorities think it was from Minster that some of the missionaries set sail for the continent³.

It was in her time that grants of land, made by the Kings of Kent to her predecessors, were confirmed and increased until they included half of Thanet. The dues from the ferry boats crossing the Wantsum were in part already given to the community. St Edburga brought the remains of St Mildred from St Mary's Church and re-interred them in the sanctuary of the convent chapel. In 1414 Thomas of Elham, a monk of Canterbury, writes that St Mildred's stone tomb can still be seen on this spot, now known as Minster Abbey. St Edburga died in 751 and was buried in the monastery she had built.

During the time of the fourth Abbess, Sigeburga (*recte* Sigeburh), who was blessed by Archbishop Cuthbert, the Danes came in their long Viking boats and began to raid and plunder Thanet. Monastic life accordingly suffered. The first recorded invasion was in 753, and they were to continue to plague the country for many hundreds of years. Sigeburga died in 797 and was succeeded by Seldritha (*recte* Sealdfrif) the fifth and last Abbess of Minster.

Seldritha did her utmost to bring the Abbey back again to its former material and spiritual prosperity. However, in about 840 Danish firebrands burnt it to the ground and according to two chronicles, she

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and her community with the servants and clerics perished in the flames. The site and the little that remained of the buildings became the property of the King⁴.

It was not until 1027 that the monks of Canterbury petitioned the Dane, King Canute (*recte* Cnut) (1017–1035) to make the property over to them. This he did without difficulty, but it was only after some hard begging that the much coveted relics of St Mildred were transferred to St Augustine's, Canterbury, in 1031. A colourful account is given in Thorne's chronicle. 'It was in fact only when Canute was about to leave for Rome in 1031 that he was prevailed upon to vow the translation of St Mildred's relics to St Augustine's in the event of a prosperous journey. Canute went to Rome and returned safely the same year, and then Abbot Elfstan (*recte* Ælfstan) (1022–1047) obtained the faculty he had so long desired. The King's letters reached him on Whitsun-eve. On the same day he came to Minster, accompanied by the provost and two trusty monks, and the next day, as it was a high festival, he invited many of his friends and neighbours to a repast so that no one suspected anything. When night came Elfstan with his three brethren went noiselessly to St Mildred's shrine and tried to force it open. Only after much prayer the lid of the tomb was raised and the remaining relics of the saint reverently folded in a white cloth and borne safely away. The people of Thanet, happening to hear of the monks' doings, went in pursuit, arming themselves with swords, staves and weapons of all sorts ... but the monks had a fair start and had already secured the ferry boat at Sarre, which belonged to the Abbey, and were rowing swiftly over the broad waters of the Wantsum.'

Rebuilding 1027–1538

The monks built a small grange or courthouse on the site as a residence for those who were to administer the estate; and the name Minster Court dates from this time. However in 1085 victorious William the Conqueror 'caused the whole of Thanet to be laid waste so that if the Danish army came up they might have no stronghold on which to lay hands.' Devastation followed and Dom Goscelin writes in 1097 that the chapel of SS Peter and Paul was left neglected and desolate, roofless and the floor covered with mud⁵.

... The west, Saxon wing of the present building is the oldest, built by the monks shortly after 1027,

and restored after the devastation of 1085. The original windows are the small rectangular openings in the east wall, and the herringbone style of stonework can be clearly seen.

In the early C12th the Norman wing or Great Hall was built in one storey like the Saxon wing. 'Externally it was of two stages and the walls have a slight set-back above the exterior string course. The north and south fronts were divided into four bays by pilaster buttresses and pierced in the upper stages by round headed windows'⁶.

A vaulted passage, a fine piece of architecture, was driven through the southern end of the Saxon wing about this time, giving access to the west

... The excavations of 1929–1930 uncovered part of the foundations of the Norman Chapel dating from the period 1075–1125. The semi-circular form of the apse is distinct from the stilted form usually found in Saxon apses. 'The nave is about 48' by 25', and the chancel almost 20' square. The nave walls were 5' and the apse walls 3'. The overall length of the chapel was about 125'.

The massive west tower, now in ruins, was probably built for refuge and defence purposes, and was originally higher than is now evident. Excavations show that it was more than 37' square, the corners formed like buttresses. The stone work on the east side shows that the tower was rebuilt over several periods, the earliest part could belong to the first buildings put up in 1027. The small slit window on a level with the first floor would have lighted the circular staircase built into the north wall of the tower. At a later date the blind Norman window was added, similar to the one in the east gable of the Norman hall.

It was probably in about 1413 that both Saxon and Norman wings were made into two storeys by Abbot Thomas Hunden of St Augustine's, Canterbury. He put in the large mullioned windows, two of which are still existing in the lower part of the Saxon wing. The others are of modern restoration. It was about this time that the roof of the Norman wing was reconstructed with an octagonal central king post and half posts at the end. The north door of the Norman wing, which cuts right into one of the buttresses, is engraved with the initials of Abbot Hunden (T. H.) and the arms of St Augustine's. The southern door is modern. The additional building at the east end of the Norman hall, and the large windows on the south face of the hall are also modern.

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At the time of the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538, the church and manor of Minster became the King's property and the chapel and other buildings were either pulled down or allowed to fall into ruins. It is said that the stones were taken to Deal, and Sandown castle built with them. The west and north wings remained intact.

... In 1928 the manor house and 10 acres of land were bought by Mr C. H. Senior.

Nine years later, in June 1937, a group of Benedictine nuns from the Abbey of St Walburga, Eichstätt, Bavaria, took possession of the Abbey and the small piece of land, and quietly resumed that life of prayer and work which had been interrupted here for centuries. They support themselves with farming and art work; and the gate lodge has recently been enlarged to receive guests.

... St Mildred is not forgotten and every year in July pilgrims come to the Abbey to honour her. A small relic of St Mildred was obtained from Deventer in Holland and enshrined in an inset in the new altar on 14 August 1963⁷.

- 1 The deer was a royal animal, and could only be hunted by persons belonging to the King's family. Possibly the deer pictured with Ermenburga was a status symbol, although she may well have owned one. (It is said she sent her tame deer on a free course, the path the animal took determined the boundaries of the convent lands.)
- 2 Originally the Wantsum was 2½ miles wide, but it was gradually silted up with tidal action. According to Bede in 730 it was about ¼ mile wide and by the C11th the entrance at Stoner was closing up.
- 3 St Leoba, who became a co-worker with St Boniface, refers to her 'mistress Edburga'. A glimpse of the full life of the Abbess can be seen in a letter to her from St Boniface. In it he advises her on her desire to go on pilgrimage to Rome to seek a quieter life of solitude and contemplation which she cannot find in the administration of her busy convent.
- 4 Some authorities identify her with the Abbess of Lyminge, near Folkestone, also called Seledriþa. They suggest that she and some of her nuns escaped to here and eventually came to Canterbury. However this must remain a conjecture based on a similarity of names.

- 5 Goscelin states that at a tranquil period some fugitive inhabitants returned to Thanet, rebuilt their own dwelling on the site of St Mildred's monastery, built a small parish church. This church was served by two or three clerics. It was presumably built over the saint's tomb, though this is not expressly stated.
- 6 *Arch. Journal*, Vol LXXXVI. Second series, Vol XXXVI 1929, pp 216, 218.
- 7 The relics may have been taken to Deventer by Abbot Egelsin in 1071, but this is not certain.

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