

## Reculver, Kent

Reculpe

Church of St Mary

Church fabric

Grid ref ..... TR 227 694

## Date

Foundations excavated - C7

*Fisher*

Foundations of complete church, nave, apsidal chancel and flanking porticus - period A2. Later parts enclosing nave & forming West porch - period A3.

*Taylor*

## Church

The Roman fort of Reculver (*Regulbium*) occupied a headland at the northern end of the Wantsum channel that then separated Thanet from the mainland and formed the main sea-road to the Thames. Richborough occupied the corresponding position at the southern entrance. There is some evidence that Reculver may, like Richborough, have been a landing-base during the Roman invasion, but the fort is of later origin. It is one of the group now commonly called 'Saxon-shore Forts' because, in the C4, most of them were under an officer, the Count of the Saxon Shore, whose duty was to protect both coasts against Saxon raiders. At Reculver the late Roman establishment known as *Notitia Dignitatum* shows him as having a cohort of *Baetasian* troops, from Belgium, under his command there, but there is evidence that they were here earlier. In fact all typical 'Saxon-shore Forts' are older than this, and Reculver is the oldest of all: evidence from excavation, confirmed by an inscription, shows that it was built early in the C3, perhaps as early as the 210s.

Nearly two centuries after the Roman troops had been withdrawn Roman missionaries began the spiritual conquest of the Anglo-Saxons, and in the first century of their activity Reculver, like some other forts of the series, was chosen as a stronghold of the Faith. In 669 Egbert, king of Kent, made a grant of Reculver for the foundation of a minster, or monastery with wide quasi-parochial jurisdiction. The remains now visible are those of the Roman fort and of the Saxon monastic church, with later accretions ...

## The Minster

Nothing is known of the living quarters of the monks, but what has been generally accepted as their original church, which would have followed closely on the grant of 669, formed the nucleus of Reculver church as long as it remained; some fragments still stand to a height of several feet and the complete plan was traced by excavation in 1927. It is essentially the plan used by St Augustine and his immediate disciples for their own church of St Peter and St Paul at CANTERBURY and at the adjacent churches of St Pancras and, to a less degree, St Martin. It is also found in another Kentish minster, at LYMINGE, and in Essex, which was closely allied to the kingdom of Kent, at St Peter-on-the-Wall in the Saxon shore fort of BRADWELL. This plan, though not usual in Rome itself when St Augustine set out on his mission in 596, has parallels in Gaul and in certain provincial Roman churches dating from before the fall of the Western Empire; one of them is in Britain, discovered by excavation at Silchester. The primary building at Reculver is shown in a different coloured marking on the ground and in solid black on the printed plan. As in other churches of this kind, the walls are remarkably thin, but built largely of Roman materials and with a mortar of Roman hardness. The floor of these early Kentish churches was generally in Roman fashion, of *opus signinum* (mortar coloured pink with brick-dust). The ancient flooring at Reculver, though it does not belong to the original build, has a thin pinkish surface of this type.

The church consisted of a broad, aisleless nave, 37' long internally, an apsidal chancel or presbytery of the same breadth and, on either side, a rectangular chamber or porticus overlapping both nave and chancel but with access only from the latter. Between the nave and the chancel was an arcade of three arches turned in Roman brick and carried on two tall stone columns which are now preserved in Canterbury Cathedral. The apse was polygonal externally but round its semi-circular inner face ran a *synthronon*, or continuous seat, where the abbot took his chair in the centre of his monks, and all sat behind the altar. In the north porticus the sills of the original windows remain.

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Early in the life of the minster, at latest in the C8, the church was enlarged. The side walls of the two porticus were carried westward and returned across the west end of the nave: this produced another pair of porticus approached from the existing north and south doors, L-shaped rooms at the angles, and between them a west porch which would have been at least two storeys high. This enlargement did not turn the church into a basilica with arcades and aisles: the nave remained with its walls intact, like a covered courtyard surrounded by cells – an arrangement not unparalleled in other English churches of the C7 and C8. The detail is very similar to that in the primary build, with slight differences in the use of Roman brick, and again, the form of the windows is preserved on the north side, where yet another early modification is seen in a window of, perhaps, the C10, which has been un-picked to show its double splay and the seating for its wooden frame, now under glass to protect it from erosion.

The minster was under the special protection of the Archbishops: the formidable Wulfred struggled unsuccessfully to prevent the Mercian king getting his hands on it. But it was vulnerable to the Danish raids, and conventual life seems to have ceased by the C10. Henceforth the church served as a parish church under the archbishop's patronage and the lands, though not without further dispute, became one of his demesne manors. Late in the twelfth century the church was further enlarged by the addition of the great twin western towers. ...It was then still a rich and important church, and even towards 1680, when Battely wrote his pioneer archaeological account, the church was some 200 yards from the sea and the village still a sizeable one.

By 1805 the sea had encroached almost to its present line. Prompted by this and by the Philistine pressures of his mother, the young rector in that year bullied the parishioners into abandoning the old church and robbing its materials to build a new one at Hillsborough, a mile inland. Archæologists were outraged, but the compliant archbishop was the antithesis of Wulfred, a thousand years before. It was not necessary: almost at once groynes were erected and racing erosion ceased, while the Brethren of Trinity House took the towers over and preserved them as a seamark, replacing the old leaded wooden spires with wind-vanes, now removed. In 1925 the church (but not yet the fort) was handed over in guardianship to what is now

the Department of the Environment and excavated under Sir Charles Peers, then Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments.

### Cross shaft

When the great C16 antiquary John Leland visited Reculver at the end of Henry VIII's reign he noticed two splendid relics of the ancient monastery – a great gospel-book in uncial letters, now long vanished, and one of the fairest ancient crosses he had ever seen, standing in front of the arcade dividing the nave from the chancel, where the altar probably originally stood. It was a round column, carved with figures of Christ and the Apostles, on a massive base and surmounted by a cross. Soon afterwards it was broken up by the Reformers, but what are almost certainly fragments of it have been found on the site and are now exhibited in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral. There is some disagreement about their exact date, but the style and indeed the whole concept of a column-cross, which is different from that of the usual Anglo-Saxon crosses, seem to point to the early ninth century and the example of the Carolingian Rhineland.

*From S. E. Rigold, M.A., F.S.A., Inspector of Ancient Monuments: Reculver Kent. Produced by The Department of the Environment 1971, Printed for HMSO by the Crown Press, Plaistow, E. 13.*

A decree of Archbishop Winchelsey, dated from Reculver in 1296, refers to the oblations and alms in a certain chest near the great stone cross between the church and the chancel at Reculver. '*juxta magnam crucem lapideam inter ecelesiam et cancellum*'.

Yn the enteryng of the Quyer ys one of the fayrest, and most auncyent Crosse that ever I saw a ix Footes, as I gesse, yn highte. It standeth lyke a fayr Columne. The base greate stone ys not wrought. The second stone being rownd hath curiously wrought and payntid the images of Christ, Peter, Paule, John and James, as I remember. Christ sayeth 'Ego sum Alpha et Omega'. Peter sayith, 'Tu es Christus filius Dei vivi'. The saying of the other iii were painted *majusculis literis Ro*. But now obliterated. The second stone is of the Passion. The iii conteinith the xii apostles. The iiiii hath the image of Christ hanging and fastened with iiiii nayles and *sub pedibus sustentaculum*. The hiest part of the pyllar hath the figure of a crosse.

*J Leland; Itinerum Curiosum: c. 1540 (3rd edition, 1770) Vol. VII, folio 136.*

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I have long been at a loss to understand why E H and JS Johnson, as Principal Inspector, have produced this drawing, and rehashed the idea of the position of the cross, with a stated form view of its date, in the booklet on Richborough and Reculver. On the enclosed pages I have transcribed the only two contemporary references to the crosses *in situ* ...

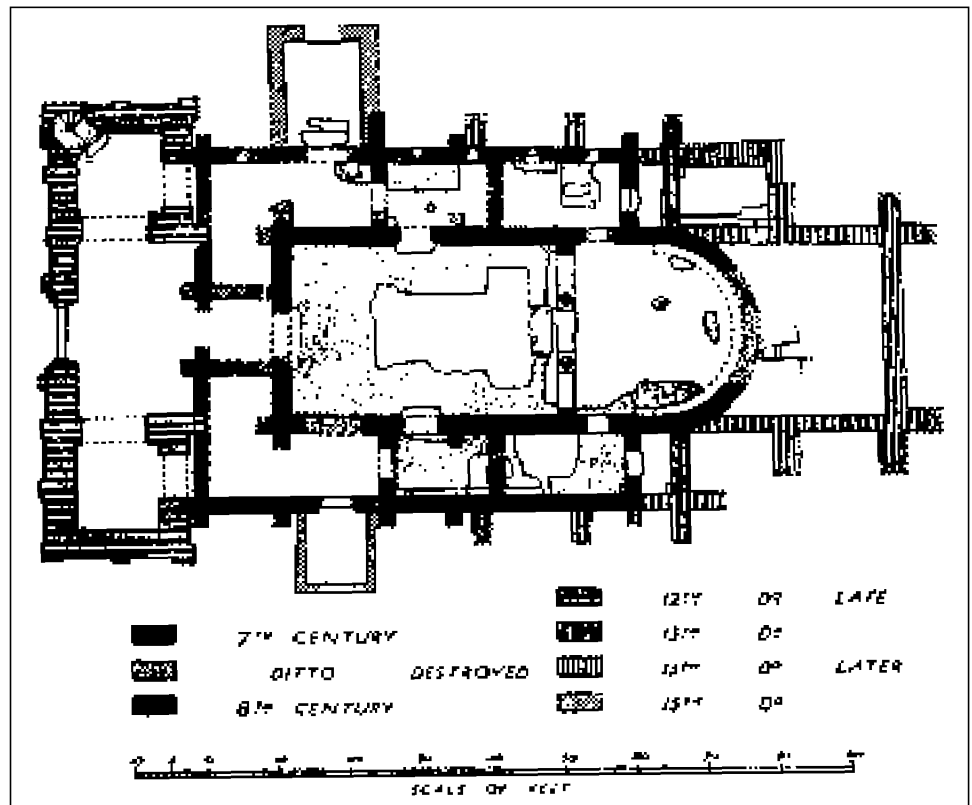
The main point is that Peers and Clapham assumed that the cross had stood on the 'base' they uncovered; as Taylor points out, a rectangular base, 7' by 3', is unlikely for a column 18" in diameter. If the column antedated the church, this seems even more improbable. The enclosed guide plan, of 1928, soon after the excavations, and used for many years, clearly shows the rectangle, west of the sleeper wall which carried the two 14 foot pillars of the chancel arches (now in the Cathedral crypt at Canterbury). Stephen Johnson puts in a plan of the church, p 30, facing that of the arcade on the next page, but omits to show the 'base'. What the reconstruction drawing does not acknowledge is Leland's definite statement 'the base great stone is not wrought' - *ie*, the lower drum of the column was not carved; great here presumably can mean tall. Thus it is hard to see why Johnson's drawing shows carving at the base

and a clear band above. So Harold Taylor's interpretation that the 'base' is that of a nave altar, and the implication that the cross stood behind it on the sleeper wall between the pillars, fit the known facts. A cross carved to stand behind an altar would not need the lower section to be decorated with the figures of Christ and the Apostles, for obvious reasons, while the *in situ* references do not suggest that the cross stood in the nave, but between it and the chancel - *ie*, under the arch which separated them; note that the 1296 reference is evidently after the apse was removed and the chancel extended eastward in the C13, by which date the altar would have been moved east anyway. The actual date of the carvings evidently is not one to be easily determined, and I wonder why Johnson plumps for 'an early seventh century' one without mentioning the controversy.

As a footnote, I would add, that excavation of the relevant part of the church in 1969 showed that the 1925-26 Office of Works excavation was fairly cursory, and did not go below the top of the sleeper wall of the chancel arch. The T-shirt shaped area in the floor of the nave, by the way, is where the cement floor had been opened for burials.

Harold Gough

Plan of St Mary's church, Reculver



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*St Mary's church, Reculver.  
This photograph is taken from  
the twin west towers, looking  
east. The outline of the English  
apse and the position of the  
two re-used Roman columns  
now in the crypt at  
Christchurch, Canterbury show  
up well. Also to be seen is the  
closeness of the shore-line and  
some of the defence works  
against the encroaching sea.*

