

Change and New Growth in Anglo-Saxon Canterbury

Sources of evidence for the Anglo-Saxons

Archaeology

Looking at their buildings and everyday objects. Comparing their pottery, jewellery, glass and weapons with similar finds on the continent helps us to discover where they came from.

Kent place names

Modern place names ending in 'ing' and 'ham' have been shown to have Anglo-Saxon roots (compare 'ingen' and 'heim'). Some of the names tie in with the location of known Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. Most of the town, river and village names in Kent are at least 1000 years old. The names we know today are a mixture of Latin, Anglo-Saxon, French and Danish.

Documentary sources

The work of the ancient historian Bede and the collective records of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle are two of the most widely used sources. Documentary works may also be referred to as 'historical' or 'written' sources.

Legend

For example 'Beowulf', the epic Anglo-Saxon poem tells us much about Anglo-Saxon tradition and belief. The story of the brothers Hengist and Horsa who are said to have been largely responsible for the success of the first Anglo-Saxon invasions is a mix of historical account and legend.

We will be concentrating on the archaeological and documentary evidence here. The intention is to convey an impression of the dramatic changes which began at the end of the 6th century with the arrival of Augustine.

Augustine and the Revival of Christianity: a Time of Change

Backtracking slightly...

It is appropriate here to briefly go back to Roman times and say something about the adoption of Christianity. Towards the end of the Roman period Christianity had

become the official religion in Britain and archaeologists have found clues that there was a Christian community living in Canterbury.

What evidence have we found?

In 1962 an early 5th century silver hoard was found in West Gate Gardens (just outside the town wall in Roman times). It was probably buried in trouble times, for safekeeping, but alas was never recovered. The Roman Christian symbol () known as the Chi Rho (first two letters of Christ's name in Greek) is inscribed on pieces of the silver.

In the 1920's workmen at St Martin's Hill (just outside the town on the Sandwich road) found a Roman ceramic bowl again with the Chi Rho symbol, inscribed on its base. Bede also records that two churches from Roman times survived in Canterbury. We shall come back to these later.

However, the first Anglo-Saxons who followed in the 5th and 6th centuries were pagan peoples with their own traditions. As they became the dominant culture, any Christian worship in Canterbury was subdued. However the face of the town was to begin changing yet again at the end of the 6th century. At this point the arrival of Augustine and Christianity wakened the town from its long period of dormancy, eventually to thrive again as an urban centre.

The work of ancient writers tells us that in AD 596 Pope Gregory of Rome sent Augustine to England with the purpose of converting its people to Christianity. By this time the Anglo-Saxons had consolidated their position and the country had been divided up into seven kingdoms.

Pope Gregory very wisely directed Augustine to begin his work in the kingdom of Kent, for two very good reasons. At this time, Ethelbert was the king of Kent and was considered by neighbouring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as the most powerful ruler of the land. He was therefore very influential. The second advantage was that his wife, Bertha, was already a practising Christian.

When Augustine arrived at Thanet to begin his work it would have been natural for Bertha in particular to support him in his mission. Although a pagan at this time, Ethelbert himself was prepared to listen to Augustine. He allowed him to preach the new faith, providing a base for him and his monks. With such influential support, Augustine's mission was clearly off to a good start! Thereafter certainly many of the local Anglo-Saxon people would have witnessed the works and teachings of the monks. Bede says that, after his own conversion, Ethelbert looked favourably upon other converts. No doubt this was also a good incentive to adopt the new religion.

Christianity v. Paganism

However, the conversion to Christianity was not an overnight affair. Bede records a letter from Pope Gregory which shows his patience and tolerance with the Anglo-Saxon peoples. He instructs his missionaries not to physically destroy their

pagan temples but to leave them standing and consecrate them to Christ. There is evidence that for a while, some continued to selectively worship pagan gods alongside the new faith and take personal possessions to the grave with them (a pagan practice). They probably saw this as covering all eventualities, like taking out a comprehensive life assurance package. It is also likely that some adopted the new faith in name alone, while privately retaining their own culture.

In fact, events following King Ethelbert's death (c. AD 616) show us that the dominance of the Christian way over paganism was really quite fragile and still had a way to go before becoming a permanent institution. Ethelbert's son, Eadbald, had not adopted the faith and was a pagan when he inherited his father's kingdom. He later did convert but for a time there was a reversion to the old ways. This was the case in several of the kingdoms in the early decades of the 7th century, with the balance shifting between the two cultures. In the long term however, it eventually swung in favour of Christianity.

Locally, the general picture is that Kent prospered as a result of the re-newed links with Rome through the Augustine mission. This was the impetus needed to allow Canterbury to rise again. Wealth and influence followed and by c. AD 630 Canterbury had its own mint. Despite intermittent setbacks, it was now on the path to becoming a prosperous city and centre of learning.

What evidence do we have?

Ancient Documents

Our knowledge of the Augustine mission comes from documentary sources. We have learned much about the transformation and development of England under the Anglo-Saxons from the work of ancient writers, often members of the Church as these had the literacy skills. Written sources without doubt give us very valuable information. These are two of the most useful sources when looking at the Anglo-Saxon period:

- Ecclesiastical History of the English People by the Venerable Bede, a monk writing in the early 8th century. His History begins with a background account of the history and geography of Roman Britain.
- The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle compiled from many sources and writers from around the middle of the 5th century to the 12th.

However, ancient accounts have often been translated and copied over the centuries and historians know that it is dangerous to take the written word as fact simply because it has been written down. Here are some of the things we should bear in mind:

- The author may be writing about events that happened several hundred years before his time.
- The author may be translating from older documents written in a different language, leading to differences in interpretation.

- It may be in the author's interest to give a certain bias to an account of the past, or a contemporary event.

Historians are searching for an accurate account of what happened in the past. To try and do this they gather together all the available sources concerning an event and compare them, trying to get as near to the 'truth' as possible.

Discovering the past often means a mix of written sources and archaeological remains. The story of St Martin's Church, Canterbury is an example where these work together. The evidence suggests that this small church was the birthplace for a regeneration in Christianity, having an unbroken history of worship for virtually 1,400 years. St Martin's is found just east of the walled town, at the junction of North Holmes Road and St Martin's Avenue. It can be reached easily on foot, approaching either from North Holmes Road or from Longport (Fig. 3).

The Origins of St Martin's Church

Using different types of historical evidence

Documentary evidence

Bede, writing in the early 8th century tells us that Augustine landed in Thanet and that Ethelbert went there and invited him to discuss the Christian mission. In due course, Augustine and his monks were given a base in Canterbury to work from. Bede describes Canterbury as being the most important place in the king's domain.

Bede also says: ' On the east side of the city stood an old church, built in honour of Saint Martin during the Roman occupation of Britain, where the Christian queen of whom I have spoken (ie. Bertha) went to pray. Here they first assembled to sing the psalms, to pray, to say Mass, to preach and to baptise, until the king's (ie. Ethelbert) own conversion to the Faith gave them greater freedom to preach and to build and restore churches everywhere.'

For many years historians and archaeologists have tried to establish whether the church Bede spoke of and the St Martin's we know today are essentially one and the same. There is a good deal of evidence to indicate that this is indeed the place (though a smaller building at that time) where Bertha worshipped and the first church in England where Augustine preached.

Archaeological evidence: Buildings and artefacts

Historians as far back as the 16th century have discussed the origins of the church but it was not until the 19th century that people seriously looked at the building itself. A detailed survey was carried out and some small-scale excavation.

The building style and materials used give us the clues. The chancel and nave are the oldest parts. Roman style red bricks and pink mortar can be seen in the wall interiors. Either both were built in Late Roman times (4th century) or in early Anglo-

Saxon times when materials from abandoned Roman properties may have been re-used.

There are other examples of typical Roman style building visible inside the church. There is a round headed doorway in the south wall of the chancel (now blocked) and round headed windows in the west wall of the nave (also blocked). We can see that the Roman bricks in this wall are laid in horizontal lines between bands of stone blocks. In this way they acted as 'string courses', a levelling technique. If you visit Richborough Castle you will see that this technique was used there in late Roman times, by the builders of the 'shore fort' constructed to protect the coast from invasion.

From the archaeological evidence we can suggest that there were two stages in the early development of the church:

First stage building

There was probably a small building built at the end of the Roman period on the site of St Martin's church, in the chancel area. A few similar structures have been found elsewhere in the country. Locally, there is one at Stone-by-Faversham which has been dated to the 4th century. We know from discoveries over the years that the general area of St Martin's Hill was used for cremation burials in Roman times and the small building may have been a Roman cemetery church or mausoleum.

Second stage building

It is likely that this then continued in use in early Anglo-Saxon times when the monks of Augustine went on to extend the church. As they had come directly from Rome it would be natural for them to use Roman style building techniques. Archaeologists have excavated examples of their work nearby in the early churches of St Pancras, SS Peter and Paul and St Mary at the first Abbey site in Canterbury, later to become St Augustine's Abbey.

Artefacts

Archaeologists have also found early Anglo-Saxon artefacts in the area of St Martin's. The type of objects found together suggest that they were grave goods. In the mid-19th century six gold coins, a Roman gold ring and a brooch set with garnets or glass were found in the grave yard of St Martin's church. Artefacts like these found together usually indicate a burial and one of a high ranking individual. The identifiable coins were dated to the 6th century. One of them had an inscription which was interpreted as the name of Bertha's chaplain. However it has also been interpreted as being the name of a bishop of the time.

It is very tempting to think that these possessions belonged to either Queen Bertha herself or her chaplain, who was her close companion. The ancient historical

accounts of William Thorne and Thomas Elmham, who were both monks at nearby St Augustine's in Medieval times, also suggest that Bertha was buried at St Martin's.

Expansion of the Church: A Building Programme Begins

A summary is given here of the development of the church building programme which was most probably under way by the early 7th century.

We have seen that there was probably a local Christian community in the latter decades of Roman Canterbury (pp. 32, 35) and it is possible that it managed to survive through the 'abandonment' years that followed. There is archaeological evidence suggesting that Augustine may have chosen the sites for the first Anglo-Saxon churches particularly because he knew them to be places of religious activity. We have the evidence of St Martin's Church and we know that the first churches at the St Augustine's site were built in the vicinity of a former Roman inhumation cemetery.

All of the ecclesiastical buildings of this period lie outside the area of the reconstruction images. All of them were built using durable stone and brick, much of which was probably re-cycled from redundant Roman buildings nearby. The use of these building materials reflects Augustine's Roman cultural background. By contrast you will see how the Anglo-Saxon immigrants built in their own tradition, using wood and thatch.

St Martin's Church

We have seen how positive the relationship was between Augustine and the King and Queen of Kent and the special role that the early church of St Martin's played.

Evidence shows us that the area east of the walled town (where St Martin's is located) was the favoured site to extend the building programme.

The site of St Augustine's Abbey (Fig. 3)

Only a brief summary of the early developments of the Abbey is given here. References in the bibliography will help those who want to learn more of the history of the site.

Over the centuries, several histories have been written about the Abbey by resident monks and other members of the clergy. Two that modern historians often refer to are William Thorne (writing in the 14th century) and Thomas Elmham (in the 15th century). They themselves built upon the works of earlier writers, including Bede.

In such works, we are told that around AD 598 Augustine and King Ethelbert founded an abbey in the form of the churches of St Pancras, SS Peter and Paul and St Mary along with monastic quarters for the monks. This first abbey was not far from St Martin's church (Fig. 3). At this stage the Abbey was dedicated to SS

Peter and Paul. Later on in Norman times a major programme of redevelopment was begun and the it was re-dedicated as St Augustine's Abbey. We know the site by this name today. Although most of the Anglo-Saxon buildings have been demolished, distinctive Roman bricks recycled by the Anglo-Saxon builders can still be seen at St Pancras church where walls still stand above ground. There is a striking visual contrast between these red Roman bricks and the grey stone work of the later Abbey.

We also know from written sources that the first Abbey was supported by the early kings of Kent who made grants of many estates in the surrounding area. With the accumulated wealth and influence came education, for the privileged. Under Abbot Adrian (AD 669–708) the Abbey had become the most important centre of learning in the country.

However, its fortunes were to change somewhat. We know that for about the first 150 years the Abbey had a royal cemetery where kings of Kent were buried together with the early archbishops and other notable people. It is recorded that Augustine himself was buried there in AD 605. So for some time the Abbey profited from the burial fees and generous offerings from its visitors. But a new tradition was established in the middle of the 8th century when the eleventh archbishop (Cuthbert) was buried in the Cathedral. A certain rivalry had developed between the two ecclesiastical houses and it is thought that the Cathedral had become jealous of the Abbey's acquired wealth and prestige. This would be another story...

An Anglo-Saxon Cathedral

Bede writes: 'Having been granted his episcopal see in the royal capital...Augustine proceeded with the king's help to repair a church which he was informed had been built long ago by Roman Christians. This he hallowed in the name of our Saviour, God and Lord Jesus Christ, and established there a dwelling for himself and his successors.'

Bede seems to be referring here to the building of Canterbury's first Cathedral church. Excavations in the nave of Canterbury Cathedral (in 1993) showed that the first church on the site was indeed built in early Anglo-Saxon times. But we do not think this was a Roman building which had been 'repaired'. We found that the foundations of the Anglo-Saxon church lay on top of soils which had built up after Roman occupation of the town, during its abandonment period.

Also the ground plan and size of this early church are similar to those of SS Peter and Paul suggesting that it was built around the same time (at the turn of the 6th century).

It is possible that the intended meaning in Bede's account has been lost in its translation from the Latin. It is true that the foundations of the Anglo-Saxon church were laid using Roman stone and brick. Bede may have meant that the remains of a nearby Roman church were recycled in the building of Augustine's cathedral.

Other evidence for population growth: Cemeteries

What evidence have we found?

Through excavation we also find more burials now, indicating an increase in local population.

We know from documentary evidence that a cemetery was established in the area of St Augustine's Abbey for the first kings of Kent and the first archbishops of Canterbury.

We have archaeological evidence that there was also an Anglo-Saxon lay cemetery in the area. Archaeologists have identified skeletons of males, females, juveniles and infants, all in unmarked graves.

Then in 1982 archaeologists found evidence of what was possibly another lay cemetery in the vicinity of Canterbury. While digging a Roman cremation cemetery outside the town walls in London Road they found an Anglo-Saxon cremation burial with two glass 'palm' cups (so-called because their rounded bases allow them to nestle in the palm of a hand) which could be dated to the 7th century. Nearby were the remains of an inhumation burial (a young woman (?)) and close to this a beautiful gold pendant (a bracteate) set with garnets, also of the 7th century. Both burials were on an extreme edge of the excavation trench and we could dig no further. But this evidence suggests that an Anglo-Saxon cemetery was added onto an earlier, Roman one. The pendant is a fine example of Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship. It can be seen in Canterbury's Heritage Museum in Stour Street (Fig. 3).