

# Fortunes and Misfortunes up to the Norman Conquest

The aim of this pack has been to show you how archaeological evidence in particular has been interpreted to build images of two contrasting cultures from our past.

The focus of the Anglo-Saxon notes has been on the years following the decline of the Roman town, and then its re-emergence with a renewed sense of stability which was largely as a result of the influence of Augustine's mission.

We know from documentary evidence that by the end of the 7th century, Canterbury had become a great centre of learning with the Abbey school attracting scholars from all over the country. This was to continue throughout the 8th century. The town prospered and trade increased. Early in the 8th century silver pennies were struck by archbishops and kings of Mercia at Canterbury mint and urban administration had begun.

There seems to have been a trading area to the north-east of the town, called the 'wic'. Business no doubt was carried out between this and other sites along the North Sea and English Channel coasts and historians think that these traders and merchants were called 'wic-ings' or Vikings. However, bit by bit, healthy trade turned to piracy. From the 9th century onward persistent Viking attacks and raids were to have a detrimental impact on Canterbury and Kent.

Archaeological evidence for occupation within the town walls in the 8th century is rare. This is because of a lack of dateable finds. However in recent years excavations on the campus of Christ Church College (to the north-east in North Holmes Road, Fig. 3) have revealed evidence for industrial activity outside the old Roman town. It is clear that metal working (mostly iron on present evidence) was being carried out here around the mid-8th to mid-9th centuries. Pottery has given us this dating but as yet we cannot be more precise. We think the college area may have been purely industrial as no structures or domestic waste have been discovered.

## Later Anglo-Saxon Cantwaraburh – up to the Norman Conquest

Our knowledge about Canterbury from the 9th century onward comes mostly from documentary evidence which is considered to be some of the best in the country. In many areas of the town the archaeological layers of this period have unfortunately been destroyed by the construction of Medieval and more modern cellared buildings. The archaeological evidence is therefore rather sparse.

Viking attacks on the town must have had a traumatic effect. If we relied solely on archaeological evidence for a Viking presence we would have extremely little to go on (Fig. 15). But we know from written sources that from the middle of the 8th century Viking raids caused spasmodic but persistent disruption in Kent with attacks becoming more frequent.

The History of Thomas of Elmham (a Medieval monk at St Augustine's Abbey) records that the first attack was by Danes at Thanet in 753. Several other references in his accounts also point to this date. Around 825 the nunnery at Minster was destroyed. In 835 the Isle of Sheppey was attacked and in 850 Vikings set up camp on the Isle of Thanet. Soon after, Canterbury was sacked. We have no details of this but documentary evidence indicates that the literacy standards of the educated people (mostly the clergy) had severely deteriorated. During 892 and 893 large parts of Kent were in Danish control and the Canterbury mint was closed.

The attacks had destroyed many monasteries in the country. St Augustine's Abbey survived though presumably not without losses. It seems that during the 10th century things became more settled and books and manuscripts made by monks at St Augustine's and the Cathedral at the end of 10th century show that Canterbury had recovered its status as a prominent centre for the Church and education. Still, between 991 and 1016 Viking armies appeared on the Thames almost every year in order to raid Kent and south-east England. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the vast sums of money that they regularly demanded – and got. This would obviously have had a dire effect on the local economy.

Throughout these harrowing times however, Canterbury managed to survive and, it seems, even to progress. For clarity, the documentary and archaeological evidence for the development of the town from the 9th century to around the time of the Norman Conquest is given here.

## **Roman walls and gateways**

The boundary walls still played a major role in the plan of the town. Documentary evidence tells us that the walls helped to defend the town during Viking raids in 1011. As you now know (from the Roman Notes here) some of the gates were to survive for many centuries to come.

## **Streets in the town**

New streets were laid by Anglo-Saxon builders from the 7th century onward. Our knowledge about them comes mostly from documentary evidence. By 1066 much of the street plan that we see today in modern Canterbury was in place. A charter of 868 records Wistraet (the street from Wye) leading through Worth Gate onto modern Castle Street. It then went down to the crossroads at the centre of the old Roman theatre (then still standing in ruins), on to what we now know as St Margaret's Street and then Mercery Lane to the Cathedral (Fig. 3). Burh Street (modern Burgate) is also recorded and a major street leading from the West Gate through the town centre was built by the end of the 10th century. Few Anglo-Saxon streets have been found through archaeological excavation.

## The River Stour

We don't know when the river first flowed through the town but a 9th century charter refers to two branches (that is, one outside the wall at West Gate and one cutting across the town, Fig. 3) which formed the island of 'Binnewith' or 'Binnanea' in between. Recent excavation next to the branch flowing through the town showed flood silts from Anglo-Saxon times which probably made this area unsuitable for building.

## Buildings

Again documentary evidence gives us a clue about developments within the walls. A charter of 868 is a good indicator of more buildings going up. It states that there had to be at least 2ft of space between buildings to serve as an 'eavesdrip'. This increase in building work may have been because more people were wanting to move into the town for protection against Viking attack. Remains of a number of timber-framed buildings were found at the Longmarket excavations in 1990. Two could be dated by the 9th to 10th century pottery found with them. One had burnt down and chunks of burnt clay from the walls and several clay weaving loom weights were found nearby. Other evidence of habitation nearby included cess pits, rubbish pits, wells, bone combs, beads, keys, pins and in all 29 loom weights. This amount of evidence in one place is quite exceptional for late Anglo-Saxon times in Canterbury. We do have other more patchy evidence from sites within the town (usually pits with pottery, one of them with a coin of Alfred) but in general, remains are sparse.

## Markets and Trade

Place-names and charters of the 10th and early 11th centuries tell us about markets at Longport (which belonged to the Abbey, Fig. 3), Wincheap (to the south) and Rithercheap (Dover Street area, to the south-east). We know there was a cattle market at Rithercheap in 923. During our own century a cattle market was held regularly in the same area, just outside the town walls. It finally closed down in 1958. Perhaps there had been a market there then for over 1000 years. Modern Wincheap is still a very wide street, a good clue that it was once used for a market space.

## The Church

The 1993 excavations in the Cathedral revealed several phases of building work during later Anglo-Saxon times underneath the Norman building. By the end of the 10th century the Cathedral had its own monastic foundation which led to its owning more property in that part of the town. Viking raids of 1011 drove both the Cathedral and the Abbey into temporary decline but they were re-building sometime after 1030. Other parish churches were built around the beginning of the 11th century

and St Dunstan's (to the north-west) and St Alphege (central Canterbury) are probably of this date. You can still see Anglo-Saxon stone work in the walls of St Mildred's church to the south of the town, near the Norman Castle keep.

Domesday Book is a valuable source of evidence for the status of the town in the final years of Anglo-Saxon rule. Canterbury was still the largest and most important town in Kent with a population of around 6,000. St Augustine's Abbey and the Cathedral had both continued to be influential and powerful bodies.

The most effective urban developer of the early Norman years was Archbishop Lanfranc. He came to England in 1070 and was responsible for much building work in the Church and town. St Gregory's Priory, St John's Hospital (both in the Northgate area), St Nicholas Hospital, Harbledown and expansion of the Cathedral are all examples of work carried out under Lanfranc's direction. Over 900 years later the site of St John's is still in use, with almshouses for local people set among the ruins of the original Norman Hospital. The site can be visited by arrangement with the warden.