

THE LOST VILLAGE OF MERSTON

By A. F. ALLEN

ON 10th July, 1956, a piece of fourteenth-century coffin slab was ploughed out of a field belonging to Green Farm, Shorne, at Map reference 704723, approximately 45 feet west of the parish boundary of Shorne. It was known that a similar find had been made nearby some twenty years before, and further examination of the field (which showed no surface indications of any sort except a few flints and tiles) seemed desirable. With the kind permission of Mr. Frank Hollands, the owner of the farm, excavation was carried on during the summers of 1956 and 1957, with the result that the site of the church of the lost village of Merston, the existence and whereabouts of which have been the subject of much speculation among local archæologists (and many misleading stories) has now been precisely ascertained.

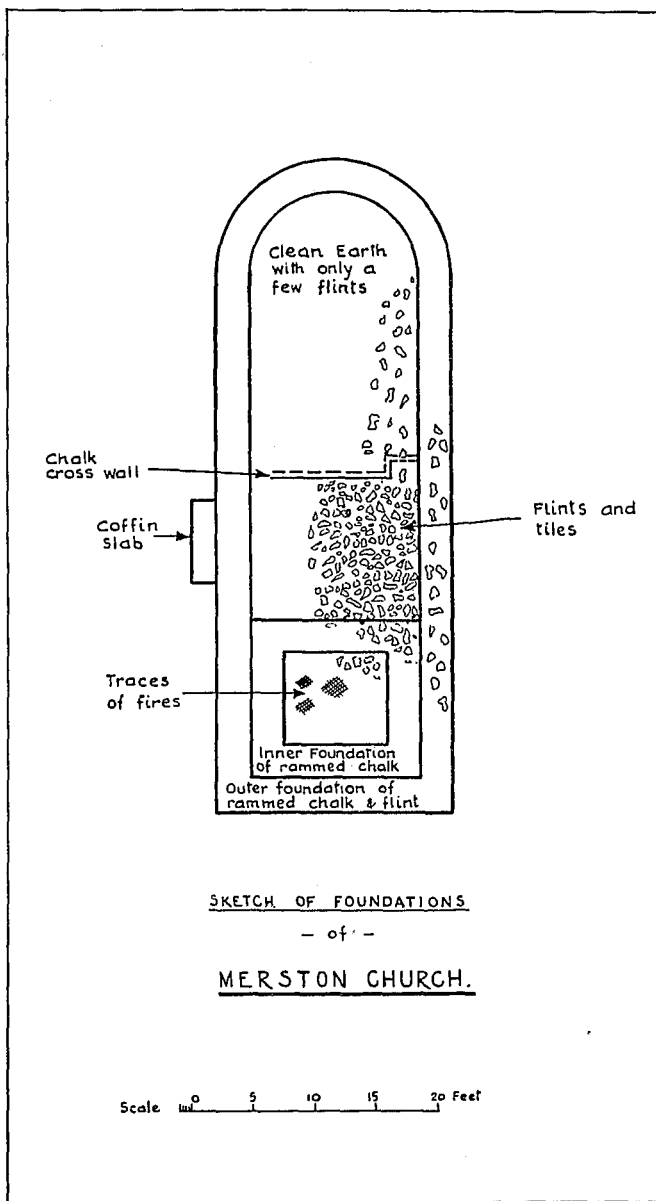
At a depth of nine inches from the surface of the field the rammed chalk foundations of an aisleless apsidal building were found, having an extreme length of 53 feet 9 inches to the crown of the apse, and a width of 20 feet, both measurements being taken to the outside edge of the foundations (see sketch). The walls of this building had been entirely removed, being represented only by a few flints still embedded in a sandy mortar on the southern side of the foundations, a thick layer of sandy mortar (which when first uncovered was a bright clean yellow) on the foundations themselves, and a mass of fallen flints and tiles embedded in the ground between the foundations.

The remaining fragments of the coffin slab were found outside the foundations on the north side of the church, and from the fact that no trace of a grave could be detected beneath the slab (no deep excavation was made) and that the edge of the slab projected a matter of two inches over the chalk foundations at one point, it was inferred that the slab had been moved from its original position, probably inside the church, but no trace of this original position was found inside the line of the foundations, nor were any other similar stones found inside the church.¹

The site yielded little information about the construction or appearance of the church. Flint was obviously the material of the walls, which were plastered inside, small fragments of smooth plaster being

¹ It should be observed that to avoid disturbing any possible burials, the interior of the church was not dug to a greater depth than six inches below the upper edge of the foundations.

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found among the debris, one even having two thin red lines painted on it, but no pattern could be discerned. The position of the door could not be identified, and although many small fragments of stone, some with a worked face, were found, no stonework could be identified as part of the frame of door or window, or of corner quoins. Masses of roof tiles with square peg holes were found in the area of the main wall fall inside the foundations, and amongst them square iron nails, apparently roof nails, were found. The tiles themselves were well baked yellow or red tiles, with a few showing a curious marbled red and yellow appearance.

Because of the scarcity of finds, the purpose of the excavation became restricted to determining the shape of the foundations, and any floor level that might remain. The shape, as will be seen from the sketch, is a simple one. The eastern end forms a semicircle, whilst at the western end there is a curious doubling of the width of the foundations. At about the middle of the building it was crossed by a chalk wall or foundation. This was worked to a smooth face on the western side, but the top of the chalk and its eastern side were too broken to determine its exact shape or purpose. It was probably the support of a stone step lifting the floor level at the chancel end of the church, but, if so, the stone of the step has been removed. To the east of this wall or step few flints and tiles were found, but to the west the flints and tiles were packed closely against the step. This suggests that after the collapse of the southern wall, represented by the flints and tiles in the middle of the church, when the rest of the building was cleared away, whoever demolished it removed a stone floor from the chancel end of the church.

The foundations were composed of rammed chalk and flints. Their average width was three feet, but their depth was not determined; a trial cut disturbed some small bones, and was not proceeded with. Probably the foundations were set on the underlying natural chalk. The extra width of the foundations and the cross wall at the western end was found to be constructed of rammed chalk without flints and was approximately 2 feet 9 inches wide. Although flush against the outer foundations it was quite distinct, being in some places about an inch higher. The true purpose of this double thickness of foundation at the western end can only be conjectured, though it may have been connected in some way with a western bell tower.

No floor surface could be detected amongst the debris inside the foundations. A little to the east of the middle cross wall or step, a level of lime mortar was found in a very broken and scattered condition. It is thought, however, that this may well be a trace of the mixing of mortar during the building of the church rather than a true floor, particularly if the cross wall was in fact the bearer of a step, since the

level of this mortar surface is approximately four inches below the top of the chalk of the cross wall. At the western end of the church within the rectangle formed by the inner foundations were traces of three fires, one of which had burned so long and so fiercely as to bake the underlying earth into brick. These fires all appeared to be small camp fires, presumably lit by wayfarers sheltering within the walls of the ruined church. A ruined church, well off the main road, in a wood (according to authorities referred to later) does not seem an attractive shelter, unless, perhaps, to desperate characters, such as the highwaymen who infested Gads Hill near by. These fires do give some indication that there was a clay floor at the western end of the church which has disintegrated.

To summarize the general conclusions to be formed from the excavation: it would appear that the church was probably an early Norman structure—the apsidal form and the width of the foundations generally supporting this conjecture. The south wall and roof collapsed first, and probably some time passed with the building in this ruined condition, until at last the site was carefully cleared, all the flints and useful building material being carted away, leaving only the mortar of the walls and the flints and tiles of the first collapse, which may well by then have been covered with earth and not considered worth digging out. No finds were made which would indicate any date for either the collapse of the walls or the subsequent removal of the ruin, the only small find being some small pieces of medieval pottery with a slip pattern found in the mortar on the foundation of the southern wall. The roof tiles found, however, suggest that the building was re-roofed in late medieval times.

It may be of some interest to append a few notes on what is known of Merston, the cause of its disappearance, and what may perhaps be called the “myth” of its ruins.

The earliest mention of the village appears to be the reference to “Mersc tunes” in a charter of King Offa dated 774.¹ The name is said to mean “Marsh Town” or “Town by the marsh,” though its situation some mile or so from Shorne Marshes makes it far less of a marsh village than, say, Higham or Cooling with their churches on the marsh edge. The reference establishes the place as a Saxon village.

It is usually considered that “Melestun” in the Hundred of Shamwell mentioned in Domesday refers to Merston. The description of the village there is²

“Helto holds of the Bishop, MELESTUN. It answers for half a suling. There is arable land of one team. And it is there. With five

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, LV (1942), 12.

² *The Domesday Book of Kent*, Rev. L. B. Larking (1869), p. 34, 11, 47-50, p. 124, 11, 10-12. Quoted in *Victoria County History of Kent*, III, 232.

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villans. And one acre of meadow. In the time of king Edward, and afterwards, it was worth ten shillings. Now, thirty shillings. Ulward Wit held it of king Edward.”

The *Textus Roffensis* list of Chrism fees includes Merston Chapel as paying 6d. chrism fee to the Diocese.¹

In the thirteenth century there are a number of references to the village among the public records. In these we find that the village was then always included as one of the villages of the Hundred of Shamwell, as compared with such places as Bickley near by, which, though a manor and included in Domesday, was never one of the villis of the Hundred. The manor was then held as a knight's fee by the family of de Sancto Claro, a family which held other lands near by, notably the manor of Oakley in Higham. Besides the lord of the manor the village also seems to have had inhabitants rather above the status of the simple villein. For instance, when the King's officers held an inquest into the holdings of Jollan de Nevill, Lord of Shorne, in the year 1246, one Philip de Merstan was a jurymen, and in the Hundred Rolls of 1279 it is recorded that Bartholemew de Merston (probably the constable of the hundred) sequestrated the goods of one Thomas de Higham, who had supported Simon de Montfort at the seige of Rochester—and suffered the usual penalty for being on the wrong side.

In the fourteenth century Hugo Fitz Simon was the Lord of the Manor, and in 1347 there is a record in the Close Rolls that Robert de Welleford, “parson of Merston,” owed John of Martin the sum of £200. The Black Death seems to have been fatal to the then Rectors of Merston, for there were four Rectors in the years 1348/50.² A little later, although I cannot trace a date, the county historians all agree in saying that the manor passed into the hands of the Smyths, a family of some small note in Shorne.

Up to this point all the records which survive suggest that the village, though small, was a simple medieval village, with a church, little distinguishable from other villages in the district. In 1455, however, the Bishop of Rochester when appointing as Rector of Merston one John Hedon, carefully recites that as the parish had no inhabitants and an income of only 30s. which was not sufficient for a chaplain, and no parsonage house or manor house, the new Rector should be excused residence. As the church was still standing, John Hedon was ordered to celebrate mass in the church on 1st September (St. Giles's Day) each year, and to keep the church in repair.³

Thus it is clear that by 1455 the parish was depopulated but the church still in existence. After this we have only a few stray records,

¹ *Textus Roffensis* (Hearn, 1720), p. 230. “Mersctuna.”

² *Records of Rochester Diocese* (1910), Rev. C. H. Fielding, p. 190.

³ *Hasted*, Vol. III, p. 480. The church was dedicated to St. Giles.

and the observations of the old county historians to guide us as to the final destruction of the church and the disappearance of all trace of the village.

By the sixteenth century the manor had become merged with Green Farm nearby, for it was known as the manor of Merston and Green when it passed into the all-embracing arms of the de Cobham family, whilst during the same century the civil administration of the parish passed to the Shorne parish officers. In 1601 the poor rate accounts of Shorne record that rates were levied on fields in Merston for Shorne's poor, and in 1648 and 1649 even a church rate was raised on Merston fields for the maintenance of Shorne church itself. The 1648 assessment was on two ratepayers for a total of 12s. 1d. or (at 1d. an acre) 145 acres, whilst the 1649 assessment names six ratepayers for a total of 18s. 4d. or an area of 216 acres. Both assessments were raised in the days of confusion during the Civil War, and so perhaps neither figure is reliable. On the other hand the ecclesiastical authorities kept the living of Merston quite distinct from Shorne as a small sinecure, for there is a list of Rectors, none of whom were vicars of Shorne.

The first mention of the ruins of Merston church is in Philipot. Writing in the 1640's, he says that he visited the site and found only the ruins of the church, though he adds that these "represent themselves to the smallest gaze." Then at some time about the end of the seventeenth century the Diocese of Rochester seems to have caused a survey to be made of the parish, and this records that the place where the church once stood was then in a wood called Chapel Wood belonging to Green Farm, situated almost in a direct line between the churches of Shorne and Higham and not far westward of Shorne Green. Within this wood, the report says, was a deep ditch or entrenchment which seems to have been a fortification. It was square, containing about three acres, its sides being according to the cardinal points of the compass. Within this ditch, the report goes on to say, were many risings and inequalities which might have been the foundations of buildings. In the eastern part of the area, about 15 paces from the ditch, seems to have been the site of the church, some ruins of which were then still remaining, by which it appeared that it was 15 paces long and 7 broad. Ten rods to the southward was a deep draw well.¹

It will be noticed that the width compares well with the foundations excavated, but the length is different, suggesting that by the time the survey was made the apse had disappeared. Whilst the excavations were proceeding a crop of wheat was grown in the surrounding field, which showed several interesting crop marks. At a distance of some 25 yards south of the church a rectangular mark indicated a building,

¹ See *Rochester Diocese* by Rev. A. Pearman (1897), for a better report of this survey than that given in Hasted.

perhaps the manor or parsonage house, whilst some 45 feet to the east of the church a lush growth of wheat running north and south seemed to be the trace of the eastern side of the earthworks, whose south and west line could also be traced. The northern part of the rectangle could not be traced, being apparently outside the area of wheat cultivation.

When Thorpe compiled the *Customale Roffensis* some seventy years later he states that he visited the site in 1776 and found the church totally demolished and it was only with great difficulty that he could trace the site. Referring to the trenches he says there were in fact two, the smaller of which was square and near the spot where the church stood, and was probably the foundations of the church or the parsonage or some other house, as there was a draw well beside it, over which grew an ash tree. This reference to the well, it will be noticed, does not agree with the Diocese survey, and suggests that Thorpe really could not find the church at all. He does, however, say that he considered the trenches were the result of the neighbouring inhabitants digging out the stones of the church wall and the churchyard walls for flints to make gun flints, as "was then much practiced in the neighbourhood." He adds that a small pile of knapped and chipped flints remained to confirm his supposition. This is an interesting suggestion, though the clean mortar suggests that the whole of the walls were removed in one operation, leaving the mortar. If the removal had been piecemeal it is thought the mortar would have been more dispersed and dirtier.

Hasted throws little light on the matter. He simply repeats the older survey by the diocese, saying, "it continues much the same" which, having regard to Thorpe's eyewitness report only fifteen years or so before, can hardly have been true. In any case he does not show either the church or the wood on his map of the Hundred.

An estate map among the Darnley Papers (now deposited at the County Archives Office) dated 1756 shows the wood called Chapel wood quite clearly, but in the map of Kent compiled by Drury and Herbert, published January, 1769, although said to show "all woods and other interesting features," no wood or ruined church is shown. An Ordnance Survey Map of 1801 in the possession of the Kent County Archives shows the church, but no wood. There is a map in Gravesend Library, apparently drawn about 1800, which shows a wood and a building which is not shown as a church. The early large-scale Ordnance surveys show neither church nor wood. There appears to be no tithe map of the parish.

In Shorne village there are vague traditions that ploughmen used to turn up gravestones and have broken into vaults whilst ploughing on this field, but although nearly a dozen broken plough points were found embedded in the foundations, no real importance can be attached to the tales. Likewise there is a tradition in Shorne that a small flint

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cottage in Shorne Street (now demolished), apparently built in the early nineteenth century, was built of flints from Merston church, but again this is only tradition.

All the indications of these old reports suggest that the village became depopulated at about the beginning of the fifteenth century. The high mortality of Rectors during the Black Death indicates that the plague raged in the village, but investigation does not support the Black Death as the main cause of village disappearances.¹ The true reason may well be that after its population had been reduced by the plague, the Smyths (who were London Merchants) acquired the Manor and put it down to grass as a sheepwalk—the recognized “good business” of those days—evicting such tenants as remained.² The church, neglected and decaying, disappeared completely in the eighteenth century, and probably during the Napoleonic wars the farmer of Green Farm found it worth while to grub what remained of Chapel Wood and plough it, thus obliterating any trenches and ruins which might then have remained.

I should like to take this opportunity of expressing my thanks to Messrs. G. Dockrill and R. Ford for their willing help in the excavation and to Mr. Frank Hollands for his great kindness in permitting his farming to be disturbed for two years whilst the work proceeded.

¹ *The Lost Villages of England*. Maurice Beresford (1954).

² It may be noted that although Lords of Merston, the Smyths were all buried in Shorne Church.