

The Anglo-Saxon See and Cathedral of Dorchester-on-Thames: the Evidence Reconsidered

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SUMMARY

Situated on the northern frontier of the West Saxon kingdom, Dorchester was given in 635 to the missionary saint, Birinus, as the site of his cathedral and see. It is suggested that the choice was partly dictated by political motives, but a discussion of the course of the Roman defences and their relationship to the later abbey church, under which the cathedral is thought to lie, raises the possibility that the cathedral may have originated as a 'capella memoriae' on the site of a Roman cemetery.

The final part of the paper is concerned with the evidence for work of the late Anglo-Saxon or immediately post-Conquest period surviving in the present church, and with the question of Dorchester's three former parish churches.

INTRODUCTION

The area around Dorchester, which is situated on a gravel terrace at the confluence of the River Thames and River Thame some eight miles south of Oxford, has been densely and almost continuously occupied since the Neolithic period. A Neolithic/Bronze Age ceremonial complex lay north of the present village, while south of the Thames is the well-known Iron Age hillfort of Wittenham Clumps. The land enclosed by the Dyke Hills earthworks was occupied in the late Iron Age and seems to have been the precursor of the Roman town. This probably originated as a fort, but by the late 1st or 2nd century settlement had stretched beyond the area of the later defences towards Dyke Hills.

The town, situated on the main Alchester to Silchester road, quickly grew into an important administrative and trading centre, and the first earthen ramparts were constructed c. 175 A.D. The bank was extended and a stone wall built in the later 3rd century, and bastions were probably added in the mid 4th century. Although no public buildings have yet been identified, excavations have helped to reveal a little of the internal lay-out of the town, parts of a grid-system of gravel-metalled roads having been found in the north-west and south-west of the town. Despite the evidence for a deterioration of living standards in the later Roman period, the discovery of a small rectangular structure and the exceptionally high percentage of the rare Theodosian coins recovered suggest that urban life continued into the early 5th century.

The earliest signs of an Anglo-Saxon presence around Dorchester come from the burials of the *foederati* and their womenfolk at Dyke Hills and the Minchin Recreation Ground cemetery site c. 400 A.D., but it is not until well into the 6th century that Anglo-Saxon occupation is found within the town itself. Stray finds of the period include

two gold coins, one of Runic issue (640–50) and the other a *solidus* of Mauricius Tiberius (582–602), along with the now-lost gold and garnet pyramidal stud, possibly made by the Sutton Hoo workshop.¹ It is against this background that we should view the establishment of the see and cathedral.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ANGLO-SAXON SEE

It is recorded by Bede that Birinus, a missionary from Italy, baptised Cynegils, king of the West Saxons, at Dorchester in 635. Oswald, king of Northumbria, and soon to be the husband of Cynegils's daughter, Cyneburga, stood as sponsor to him. In the same year Cynegils and Oswald gave Dorchester to Birinus to be his episcopal see. 'After he had built and dedicated several churches' Birinus died c. 650.² He was replaced as bishop by Agilbert, a bishop of Gaul, who had been trained in Ireland.

After many years, Bede records, the then king, Cenwalh, tired of the bishop's outlandish language and divided the province into two, establishing a new see at Winchester c. 660. This was done without consulting Agilbert, who took offence and retired to Gaul, the bishopric of Dorchester thereby coming to an end. There are some indications that it may have been revived about fifteen years later when Bede mentions Aetla, a bishop of Dorchester, of whom nothing more is known. He may in fact have been bishop when, the area coming under Mercian domination, a Mercian bishopric was possibly established here c. 679. This, however, came to an end when Caedwalh reconquered the district in 686.

There seems nothing to substantiate the idea that Offa established a see here in the 770s, for after the battle of Benson in 777 the area finally passed into the Mercian kingdom and became part of the bishopric of Leicester. However, following the Danish invasions, the see was moved back to Dorchester for safety reasons in the late 9th century. As the diocese of Lindsey (which had become part of Leicester in 873) no longer existed, Dorchester's jurisdiction thus extended to the Humber. This control, however, did not become effective until the episcopate of Leofwine (953–65), after the English reconquest of the Danelaw. In 1072 the decision was taken to move the see to Lincoln. It is not known at what date this actually occurred, but the new cathedral at Lincoln was consecrated in 1092 and the bishopric of Dorchester finally ceased to exist.

These then are the basic historical facts of Dorchester's history as a bishopric. Archaeology has nothing further to offer at present, as there are no traces of the early cathedral above ground.

Why, though, did Birinus choose to establish his see at Dorchester? It may simply have been that he had no choice. In the 7th century the missionary Church worked closely with royal authority. Religious communities were seen as sources of spiritual power, and the king looked to them for support in the conduct of secular affairs, government and war. In return the Church could hope to gain ground through strong royal protection and help. The spread and consolidation of Christianity in the 7th century were basically political.³

It seems likely, then, that Birinus's and Cynegils's choice of Dorchester as the first see of Wessex was largely dictated by political reasons. The presence of Oswald at

¹ A useful summary of the archaeological and historical background is given in Jean Cook and Trevor Rowley (eds.), *Dorchester Through the Ages* (Oxford, 1985).

² Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, eds. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (1969), iii, 7, 233

³ Richard Morris, *The Church in British Archaeology* (C.B.A. Research Rep. 47, 1983), 46.

Cynegils's baptism is significant. Overlords often stood as sponsors to under-kings: for example Wulfhere of Mercia to Aethelwulf of the South Saxons, while Adomnan in his 7th-century *Life of St. Columba* refers to Oswald as *totius Britanniae imperator*.⁴ Although there is probably a degree of Northumbrian propaganda in this statement, Oswald's power must have extended far for him to be present at Cynegils's baptism and their pact should perhaps be seen as the symbol of an alliance against Mercia. Dorchester would indeed have been ideally placed as a 'spiritual centre' on the northern frontier of the West Saxon kingdom to act as a political counterbalance against Mercia and as a possible springboard for its conversion. Furthermore, the removal of the see from Dorchester to Winchester less than a generation later is probably a reflection of the threat of Mercian expansion,⁵ whatever Bede's comments about the strangeness of Bishop Agilbert's language.

It is more difficult to ascertain why Dorchester rather than any other place in the northern part of Wessex was chosen to be Birinus's seat, even if, as has been suggested and as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle implies, Cynegils was king of only the northern part.⁶ It may have been felt that its former status as a Roman *civitas* gave it a certain dignity, and this would be in accordance with Pope Gregory's instructions to the early missionaries to establish themselves in former Roman towns.

Indeed, the very name *Dorcic* or *Dorcicaestrae*, first recorded by Bede, suggests something of the kind. Although it has been suggested that the first element is British and derived from the root *derk* meaning 'bright' or 'splendid' place, this is not certain. The second element was commonly used by the Saxons to denote a place of Roman origin, generally with fortifications, and it has recently been argued by Richard Morris that it also signified some contemporary attribute, such as administrative status, which would have made these places suitable for the site of an early church.⁷ This does not, of course, mean that Dorchester was functioning in any sense as an 'urban place' by this date, although the discovery of the elaborately decorated early 7th-century pyramidal stud referred to earlier and the dense concentration of settlement in the area makes it possible that it was already a royal centre.

Alternatively, it might be suggested that the royal centre was not at Dorchester itself but at nearby Cuddesdon, where princely burials have also been recorded,⁸ or at Bensington (Benson). Curiously, it is Bensington rather than Dorchester which is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 571 as being taken by the West Saxons along with Limbury, Aylesbury and Eynsham after the battle of *Biedcanford*.⁹ Perhaps, then, it was Benson which was the centre of political/royal power at this time, and Dorchester had some other function. Certainly Benson is recorded as a *villa regalis* by 887.¹⁰

This poses the interesting question of what had happened in Dorchester between the end of Romano-British town life in the 5th century and the creation of the see in 635. Again archaeological evidence is not very helpful, the main evidence for continuity

⁴ Adomnan, *Life of St. Columba*, (eds. A.O. and M.O. Anderson, 1961), i.i.

⁵ H.P.R. Finberg, *The Charters of Wessex* (1964), 215. It could be, however, that the removal of the see from Dorchester to Winchester is a reflection of the fluctuating fortunes of the north and south parts of the kingdom. See Martin Biddle, 'Archaeology and the Beginnings of English Society', in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (eds.), *England Before the Conquest* (1971), 396.

⁶ Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1961), 17. See also *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 2.

⁷ Richard Morris and Julia Roxan, 'Churches on Roman Buildings' in W.J. Rodwell (ed.) *Temples, Churches and Religion in Roman Britain* (BAR 77(i), 1980), 185.

⁸ Tania Dickinson, *Cuddesdon and Dorchester-on-Thames* (BAR 1 (i), 1974).

⁹ Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 13.

¹⁰ Dickinson *op.cit.* note 8, 31.

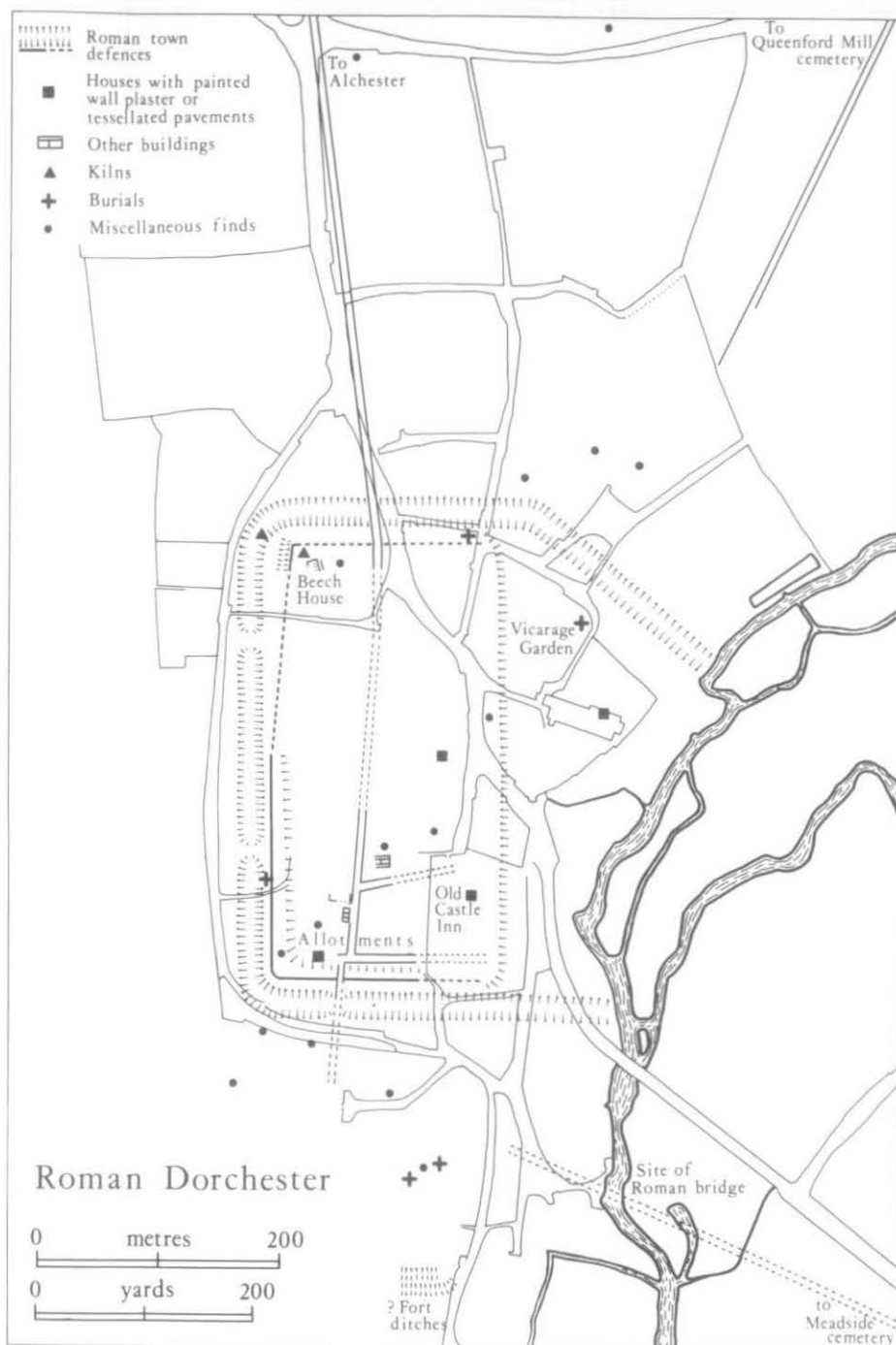


Fig. 1. Roman Dorchester (Reproduced by permission of C.J. Bond.)

coming from a sunken hut (now thought to date from the 6th century), apparently aligned on a Roman street, discovered in Frere's 1962 excavation.¹¹ There does indeed on present evidence appear to be 'a hiatus between the Romans and the Saxons'.¹²

It may simply be that we should not expect to find physical traces of continuity within or immediately outside the walled area of Dorchester. If we apply what may be termed the 'Winchester model' to Dorchester, the town would have remained of importance only for the ruling (?royal) element (possibly the descendants of the *foederati* whose burials have been found at Dyke Hills and the Minchin Recreation Ground site) and would have been ringed by surrounding agricultural settlements and cemeteries. Certainly the distribution of pagan Saxon cemeteries around Dorchester suggests just such a picture. To compare the situation still further with Winchester, the Saxon settlement at nearby Kings' Worthy had developed by c. 500 and there may have been a similar arrangement at Canterbury. Perhaps at Dorchester (particularly if the concept of a political power-base at Cuddesdon or Benson is accepted) we should be thinking of a more dispersed settlement pattern in the sub-Roman period.

THE ROMAN DEFENCES AND THE LOCATION OF THE ANGLO-SAXON CATHEDRAL

The first attempt to reconstruct the course of the defences was made by Gough in the late 18th century, who mistakenly believed that the line taken by Watling Lane in the south-west of the village marked the position of the *vallum*. In 1882 the Revd. Thomas Barns, in a letter to James Parker published in the latter's *History of Dorchester*, reconstructed the course of the defences and speculated on the internal lay-out of the town's streets. Although many of his ideas have subsequently been disproved, he was the first to suggest that the River Thame formed the eastern boundary of the town,¹³ a view that has again recently found favour. His ideas were, however, largely dismissed by A.H.A. Hogg and C.E. Stephens in 1935, who on the basis of changes in breaks of slope and ground level, along with the presence of a 3rd-century cremation burial (which according to Roman law should be outside the town walls) in the vicarage garden, reconstructed the defensive circuit as enclosing an area of rectangular playing-card shape, approximately 13½ acres (5.2 hectares) in extent and excluding the present abbey church.¹⁴

Although Hogg's and Stephens's dating of the defences has since been revised, most notably by Frere in his 1962 excavations,¹⁵ their reconstruction of the eastern line of the ramparts was apparently proven in 1961 by the discovery, in a sewer-trench laid in High Street, of a wall 2.5 m. thick on almost exactly the course they had proposed. However, excavations in 1972 by Richard Bradley at the rear of the Old Castle Inn provided no traces of the wall, although they covered the area in which it was thought to continue.¹⁶

In 1974 Mick Aston published a reassessment of the defences, based again on breaks of slope and changes in ground level, which suggested that the ditch on the northern side of the town ran across to join the River Thame, which would then form the

¹¹ S.S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames, 1962', *Arch. Jnl.* cxix (1962), 114-49.

¹² Trevor Rowley, 'Early Saxon Settlements in Dorchester-on-Thames' in Trevor Rowley (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Landscape* (BAR 6(i), 1974), 48.

¹³ Barns's letter published in J.H. Parker, *The History of Dorchester* (1882), p. xxxix.

¹⁴ A.H.A. Hogg and C.E. Stephens, 'The Defences of Roman Dorchester', *Oxoniensia*, ii (1937), 41-73.

¹⁵ Frere, *op.cit.* note 11, 129-30.

¹⁶ R. Bradley, 'Rescue Excavation in Dorchester-in-Thames', *Oxoniensia*, xliii (1978), 17-39.

eastern boundary of the defences.¹⁷ There is indeed no sign of an eastern ditch within the village area. Meanwhile a contour survey undertaken by Trevor Rowley in 1973 had suggested that the defences may have taken in an even larger area, including a formerly open part of the village to the north of the school and manor-house. Rowley also suggested that the Thame formed the eastern boundary of the town, but that its course might have been diverted since the Roman period.¹⁸

Much of the reason for thinking that the defences covered a larger area than that put forward by Hogg and Stephens is that it has been considered unlikely that the 7th-century church, normally thought to lie under the present abbey church, would have been outside the circuit, there being both archaeological and written evidence that the walls survived, at least in part, until the 12th century. The siting of the church would of course largely depend on its origins and earliest functions, but it would have been odd if Birinus had not established his church within the Roman *enceinte*, unless there were compelling reasons for doing otherwise. There are many other parallels for Anglo-Saxon cathedrals within the walls of Roman towns (York, Canterbury, Winchester and Gloucester for example), and of churches too, such as St. Mary, Horncastle (Lincs.), SS. Peter and Paul, Great Casterton (Rutland) and St. Martin, Ancaster (Lincs.), the latter two, like Dorchester, being sited near the perimeter of the Roman defences.

Apart from Bradley's excavation, no work has yet been undertaken to test the various hypotheses on the course the defences took on the east side of the town. Although the line proposed by Aston gives the town rather an irregular plan, he has cited several other small Roman towns with irregular layouts: Brough-on-Humber, East Bridgford and Godmanchester to name but three.¹⁹ At face value, it does indeed seem feasible that the Thame formed the eastern boundary (although one would perhaps expect some form of rampart to have lined its bank), and ignoring for the moment the siting of the abbey church, it is unlikely that the Romans would have excluded this ground, the highest point in the village, from the defended area. There is also the persistent, if unproven, tradition that a Roman building lies under the church.

How, though, can this be reconciled with the discovery of the 2.5 m. thick wall in the 1961 sewer-trench, and the cremation burial in the vicarage garden? First, it is possible that the wall (whose precise nature it was not possible to establish) was not associated with the defensive circuit but was part of some large public building not yet identified. In the 19th century a tessellated Roman pavement was found to the west of High Street. Secondly, even if the wall was part of the defensive circuit, the possibility that the defences were later extended to include the area east of High Street cannot be ruled out. As for the cremation burial, there is no concrete evidence that it was part of a cemetery, not simply an isolated burial.

As we have seen, it is usually considered that the early cathedral lies directly under, or adjacent to, the present church, a belief which can only be strengthened by the discovery of Anglo-Saxon cathedrals under later churches at Sherborne, Wells, Winchester and possibly York. Before looking in more detail at this idea, however, it is worth considering the other suggestions for the location of Birinus's church. One, that it was represented by crop-marks near Bishop's Court, has been disproved by excav-

¹⁷ Mick Aston, 'The Roman Town Defences of Dorchester, An Interim Assessment', *CBA Group 9 Newsletter*, No. 4 (1974), 3-4.

¹⁸ Trevor Rowley, 'The Roman Towns of Oxfordshire - Dorchester-on-Thames', in Trevor Rowley and W.J. Rodwell (eds.), *The Small Towns of Roman Britain*, (BAR 15(i), 1975), 115.

¹⁹ Aston, *op.cit* note 17, 4.

ation;²⁰ another, that it lay on the east side of the Thame, is inherently unlikely and has also been disproved by excavation.²¹ The third, made by the Ordnance Survey, that it lay north-east of the manor-house is very doubtful:²² the buildings referred to here on the record card as part of the 'ancient monastery' sound more likely to be agricultural buildings of the medieval abbey.

With these ideas dismissed, we can turn again to the abbey church as the most likely location for the site of the Anglo-Saxon cathedral. It is noticeable that the medieval cloister was north of the church, a plan most unusual in Augustinian houses but shared by St. Osyth's Priory (Essex), itself originally an Anglo-Saxon nunnery.²³ Although it is possible that the gently sloping ground to the south meant that the conventual buildings could not be constructed on this side, this could have been avoided by extending the artificial platform on which the church itself stands, to the south, and the plan is perhaps more likely to reflect the lay-out of the original ancillary buildings of the cathedral. If the abbey had been built on a fresh site in the 12th century, the church would surely have been placed a little further to the north in order to allow the cloister to be laid out in the usual Norman position. It may be relevant that the conventual buildings of Sherborne Abbey (originally founded as a cathedral c. 705) also lie to the north, again for no apparent reason. Alternatively it could be that some obstacle lay to the south, possibly even the ruins of Birinus's or a later cathedral.²⁴

Although we have seen that a large number of early churches sit within the walls of Roman towns, several others are situated just outside, on the sites of Roman cemeteries. The church of St. Pancras and the abbey of St. Augustine (originally dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul) in Canterbury lie on Christian inhumation cemeteries, the latter of which seems to have been pagan in origin,²⁵ while the excavated Anglo-Saxon church in the monastic graveyard of St. John's abbey, Colchester, incorporated part of a Roman mausoleum in its fabric.²⁶ Further examples are given by Richard Morris in *The Church in British Archaeology*.²⁷ It becomes tempting then to speculate on a similar origin for the church at Dorchester, particularly in view of the proximity of the cremation burial in the vicarage garden and the tradition of a Roman building underlying the abbey church. It is possible, therefore, that the large amount of Roman material, accounting for well over half of the 3 m. of stratigraphy recorded by Cunningham and Banks in Trench I of their 1962 excavation on the north side of the church, is not a reflection of the site lying within the walls of Dorchester, but of its being on top of a cemetery. Significantly, 'Saxon' burials were recovered in the excavation.²⁸ The vicarage garden cremation was found 1.2 m. below the ground-surface,²⁹ also indicating a considerable build-up of soil. The possibility remains that the cemetery (if cemetery it was) became Christian in the late Roman period.

²⁰ J. May, 'Romano-British and Saxon sites near Dorchester-on-Thames', *Oxoniensia*, xlii (1977), 61.

²¹ J.K. St. Joseph, *The Uses of Air Photography* (1964), 122; Mary Harman et al., 'Roman Burials around Dorchester-on-Thames', *Oxoniensia*, xliii (1978), 6. I am grateful to Tom Hassall for the latter reference.

²² Oxfordshire County Sites and Monuments Record; P.R.N. 1,954.

²³ David Knowles and J.K. St Joseph, *Monastic Sites from the Air* (1952), 226.

²⁴ Cook and Rowley (eds.), *Dorchester Through the Ages*, 37.

²⁵ Nicholas Brooks, 'The Ecclesiastical Topography of Early Medieval Canterbury' in M.W. Barley (ed.), *European Towns: Their Archaeology and Early History* (1977), 492-3.

²⁶ W.J. and K. Rodwell, *Historic Churches, a Wasting Asset* (CBA Research Report 19, 1977), 38-9.

²⁷ Morris, *Church in Brit. Arch.*, 26.

²⁸ C.J.K. Cunningham and J.W. Banks, 'Excavations at Dorchester Abbey', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 158-64.

²⁹ *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 293.

The idea that a Roman building lies under the abbey church is strengthened by its incorrect orientation east-south-east to west-north-west, and also by the reference to the discovery of a Roman pavement, underneath which were burnt corn and bones, under the north-east chapel of the abbey.³⁰ However, another reference, apparently to the same find, says it was under the south-east chapel, makes no mention of a pavement, and refers only to 'charred corn'.³¹ In any case, Dorchester is just the kind of place where one would expect to find a *capella memoriae*, commemorating some now forgotten Romano-British martyr, of the sort recently discovered by Rodwell east of the Anglo-Saxon cathedral at Wells,³² where incidentally no Roman origin was previously suspected. Taking the statement in the 571 entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle at face value, that is that the area remained in British control until the battle of *Biedcanford*,³³ it is quite possible that some memory, or even practice, of Christianity survived at Dorchester well into the 6th century.

Until the primacy of Archbishop Cuthbert (740–60) it was forbidden by Canon Law for Christians to be buried within the walls of a town,³⁴ as it had also formerly been prohibited under Roman law. The same ruling also applied to burials within the body of a church (except in side chapels or *porticus*). This may well account for the founding, in the early 7th century, of St. Augustine's, Canterbury as a royal and pontifical burial-place outside the city walls, and for the origins of the other churches referred to above as well. Could not similar circumstances have applied at Dorchester? At St. Albans it was probably the continuing cult of the saint, rather than simply the availability of building material, which caused the church, mentioned by Bede, to be built;³⁵ Martin Biddle (basing his hypothesis on the evidence from Xanten and Bonn) has argued persuasively for a progression there from *locus sanctus*, through *capella memoriae* to medieval church.³⁶ Such a model would be particularly attractive for the Church's early origins at Dorchester, especially when one considers the town's relative unimportance on the national scale in the Roman period. Most Anglo-Saxon cathedrals, for example Canterbury, Winchester and York, were established in former Roman towns of major importance. This was not the case at Dorchester and leads one to suspect other reasons, like those outlined above, for the siting of the early church.

One drawback to the idea that the church lay outside the walls is the evidence from Hogg's and Stephens's excavations,³⁷ and those carried out by Frere,³⁸ that the walls were still standing in the 11th or 12th century. The walls are also mentioned in a papal bull for the Augustinian abbey in 1146.³⁹ This charter, however, specifically mentions that parts only of the west wall were still standing, and the evidence from excavations by Rowley in 1972⁴⁰ and by Chambers in 1982⁴¹ is that they had been robbed out during

³⁰ *Oxford Times*, 4th June 1886; *V.C.H. Oxon.* i, 293.

³¹ *Berks, Bucks and Oxon Arch. Jnl.* iv (1898), 80.

³² W.J. Rodwell, 'Wells: The Cathedral and City', *Current Archaeology*, vii, No. 73 (1980), 38–44.

³³ See F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn. 1971), 27–8, for a discussion of the evidence.

³⁴ Brooks *op.cit.* note 25, 493.

³⁵ Morris and Roxan *op.cit.* note 7, 181.

³⁶ Martin Biddle, 'Archaeology, Architecture and the Cult of Saints in Anglo-Saxon England', in L.A.S. Butler and R.K. Morris (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Church: Papers . . . in Honour of Dr. H.M. Taylor* (C.B.A. Research Rep. 60, 1986), 13–16.

³⁷ Hogg and Stephens, *op.cit.* note 14, 46.

³⁸ Frere, *op.cit.* note 11, 131.

³⁹ Quoted in Hogg and Stephens, *op.cit.* note 14, 73.

⁴⁰ Trevor Rowley and Lisa Brown, 'Excavations at Beech House Hotel, Dorchester-on-Thames, 1972', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1981), 24.

⁴¹ R.A. Chambers, *pers. comm.*

the Anglo-Saxon period in the north-western part of the town. It is therefore quite possible that the walls had already been demolished in the north-east quarter of the town when Birinus established his church, or that an entrance was knocked through them to provide convenient access to the cathedral precinct.

Obviously much of the above is speculative, but perhaps there are at least grounds to suggest that the siting of the 7th-century church was not dictated entirely by political motives. It is not sufficient to say that the town's former status as a *civitas* gave it 'dignity' without looking for ways in which that 'dignity' survived into the 6th and possibly 7th centuries. It may be then that when Birinus established his church under royal authority, based either here or at nearby Cuddesdon or Benson, he was reviving an older Christian shrine. Recent attempts to include the church within the Roman defences may then prove to be misleading, although only excavation can provide a final answer.

THE ANGLO-SAXON CATHEDRAL: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL EVIDENCE

Even if the concept of Dorchester's cathedral originating as a *capella memoriae* on the site of a Roman cemetery is accepted, its precise location and actual physical appearance remain problematic. Recent excavations at Anglo-Saxon cathedrals have revealed such varied arrangements as the 'cluster of churches' at Wells⁴² and the apparent timber cathedral at North Elmham.⁴³ The possibility that the original cathedral at Dorchester was of timber construction cannot be ruled out, although the ready source of building material from the Roman town makes it just as likely to have been of stone or brick.

The area on the north side of the present church between the buried north, east and west walls of the medieval cloister would perhaps be the most likely to repay investigation. At Wells the Anglo-Saxon cathedral lies under the medieval cloister, while at Sherborne the Anglo-Saxon north cloister was found to be on a different alignment to the post-Conquest one.⁴⁴ There are very slight indications from the 1962 excavations by Banks and Cunningham that this may also have been the case at Dorchester.⁴⁵

The area within the cloister has apparently never been excavated. In 1657 Anthony Wood saw and sketched the cloister buildings, but his plan is not particularly helpful.⁴⁶ Excavations in 1882, which showed the cloister court to be 24.3 m. (81 ft.) square – a figure which accords remarkably well with the plan drawn by Cunningham and Banks – were concerned merely with tracing the outlines of the cloister walls, and the garth itself was not investigated.⁴⁷ This was also the case with the 1962 excavations. The area should, however, be large enough to identify any building traces if they exist, and a Buckler watercolour of 1803 shows it clear of gravestones with a path running parallel to the north wall of the church.⁴⁸

Although it is suggested above that the conventual buildings of the early cathedral lay to the north, the discovery of 'Saxon' burials in the 1962 excavations to the north of

⁴² W.J. Rodwell, 'Wells', *Current Arch.* vii, No. 73, 38–44; also see idem, 'The Lady Chapel by the Cloister at Wells and the Site of the Anglo-Saxon Cathedral', *Brit. Arch. Assoc. Conference Trans.* 1978 (1981).

⁴³ Stephen Heywood, 'The Ruined Church at North Elmham', *Jnl. Brit. Arch. Assoc.* cxxxv (1982), 1–10; S.E. Rigold, 'The Anglian Cathedral of North Elmham', *Med. Arch.* vi/vii (1962/3), 67–108.

⁴⁴ J.H. Gibb and R.D.H. Gem, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cathedral at Sherborne', *Arch. Jnl.* cxxxii (1975), 71–110.

⁴⁵ Cunningham and Banks, *op.cit.* note 28, 161.

⁴⁶ Anthony Wood, *Wood's Life and Times*, i, 1632–1633, ed. A. Clark (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xix, 1891), opp. 225.

⁴⁷ *Proc. Oxf. Arch. and Hist. Soc.* n.s. iv (for 1882), 78.

⁴⁸ Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. a 64, no. 10.

the present church does pose the possibility that they in fact lay to the south. While various engravings by artists like Orlando Jewitt⁴⁹ and Alfred Cobb⁵⁰ do show buildings on the south side of the church, these are presumably post-medieval. The ground drops on this side, and the cramped nature of the site means that, although primary deposits may be fossilized under later levels introduced for the creation of the platform on which the present church stands, the area is likely to be greatly disturbed by the medieval and post-medieval graves which cover the area.

The fabric of the standing building and its architectural development is far from properly understood: no true analytical work has been published since Francis Bond's study in 1913.⁵¹ However, from a study of 19th-century accounts,⁵² a comparison with other buildings and an inspection of the church itself, it does appear that there may be considerable portions of late-Saxon or immediately post-Conquest work in the present structure. This is not recognised by the *V.C.H.*, which in the latest comprehensive account of the church published says there is no work earlier than c. 1180.⁵³

First, the masonry in the north wall of the nave below the 12th-century string course is different from that above. The Revd. Thomas Barns, who was the first to make this observation, during the restoration in the 1870s, writes of this and the masonry in the wall under the south-west window of the south choir aisle, that it is of the '... peculiar wide jointed [sort] ... characteristic of 11th-century work'.⁵⁴ He also noted that the same kind of stonework appears on the 'east pier of the rude round arch on the south side'.⁵⁵ Unfortunately the walls in question have now been repointed externally and are covered with plaster inside, but there appears no good reason to doubt Barns's statements (also taken up by W.C. MacFarlane) that these walls do belong to an earlier church. Indeed, although the changes in masonry visible outside are not in their original state, they cannot have been entirely caused by repointing. Barns also claimed that the absence of buttresses on the north wall of the nave – present in the 12th-century north choir wall, and now visible in the angle between that wall (the south wall of the 13th-century north choir aisle) and the chancel – is proof of its 11th-century date.

This evidence led Barns to make the following reconstruction of the 11th-century church: an aisleless nave of the same length as the present with a choir in the crossing under a lantern tower. A transeptal chapel stood on either side of the crossing, and a shallow apsidal sanctuary to the east. This indeed would seem to be a reasonable proposition. It is unlikely that the squat crossing arches would have been strong enough to support a proper tower, but they would have been strong enough to allow the erection of a lantern like those at Breamore (Hants.) and Checkendon (Oxon). The high altar would have been under the crossing, as in the late 10th-century arrangement at the Old Minster, Winchester.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Reproduced in W.J. Rodwell, *The Archaeology of the English Church* (1981), 76.

⁵⁰ Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon. c.52.

⁵¹ Francis Bond, *An Introduction to English Church Architecture*, 2 vols (1913), 254–69; summarized in Rodwell op.cit. note 49, 76–8.

⁵² The chief of these are H. Addington, *Some Account of the Abbey Church, Dorchester* (2nd edn. by W.C. MacFarlane, 1860); E.A. Freeman, 'Of the Architecture of the Abbey Church of Dorchester', *Arch. Jnl.* ix (1852), 58 ff.; W.C. MacFarlane, *A Short Account of Dorchester, Past and Present* (1881); and the second part of Barns's letter to J.H. Parker published in the latter's *History of Dorchester* (1882), esp. p. xliii.

⁵³ *V.C.H. Oxon.* vii, 58. This view is also taken by Jennifer Sherwood in Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, Oxon.* (1974), 576–7.

⁵⁴ Barns in Parker's *History of Dorchester*, p. xliii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Martin Biddle, 'Winchester: The Old Minster', in M. Biddle (ed.) *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages; Winchester Studies I* (1976), 307. See also H.M. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, iii (1978), 1066.

Possibly the best evidence for the remains of an earlier church surviving in the present building is in the form of the curious ledges low down on the east faces of the round-headed lateral arches to the crossing. The arches themselves, although they might at cursory glance appear early, cut through the 12th-century string course referred to above and are in fact 17th-century.⁵⁷ As Barns pointed out, the ledges are far too low to form the abaci of even the low arches, below the level of the string course, which must have led to the transeptal chapels in the postulated 11th-century church. Although it is possible that the ledges are a result of the arches having been cut back at a later date, the plinths are very regular and, as Barns suggested, may have served as altars flanking the entrance to the apsidal sanctuary. If this is the case we must accept that the lateral arches have been entirely rebuilt, and were once much narrower to allow them to fit beneath the level of the later string course, which may have been the eaves-line of the 11th-century building. This would also be the case even if the ledges did not form altars and merely result from the arches being cut back.

Although there might appear to be little evidence for the existence of altars in this position, there are in fact quite good parallels for just such an arrangement at other churches of this period. At the 11th-century cathedral church of Sherborne the R.C.H.M. suggests that there may have been altars flanking the entrance to the choir on the 'deep eastern responds' of the central crossing arches,⁵⁸ an arrangement which is also found at St. Riquier in Picardy, the Carolingian church on which the Commission based its Sherborne reconstruction. A similar grouping of altars is also known to have existed at the 12th-century churches of St. Martin, Wareham and Bere Regis (both Dorset) and at St. Benet, Cambridge.⁵⁹

If we accept that these features are part of an 11th-century church, we may then ask who built it. Barns favoured Remigius (the first and only Norman bishop of Dorchester), who according to William of Malmesbury⁶⁰ had plans for the rebuilding of the cathedral before its removal to Lincoln. It is not known if this work was ever started but Remigius's reputation as a builder is well known from Lincoln. It seems possible then that he did intend to rebuild the church at Dorchester, but when the work was left undone it was completed as a parish church (as which the church appears to have served until the foundation of the Augustinian abbey c. 1140). There is also an unsubstantiated statement by Anthony Wood that Remigius built the first abbey (*sic*) at Dorchester.⁶¹ Certainly too little is known of what happened at Dorchester between the decision to move the see in the 1070s and the consecration of the cathedral at Lincoln in 1092.

An alternative builder of the 11th-century church is one of the two Bishops Eadnoth, who held the see in the first half of the century, 1004–16 and 1034–49 respectively. It is thought that one of these two men rebuilt the minster church at Stow (Lincs.) to serve the northern part of the diocese,⁶² and as MacFarlane argued,⁶³ it seems unlikely that, this being so, he would have ignored his episcopal church. Indeed the masonry in the upper parts of the transepts at Stow, thought to be the work of one of the two bishops, is of the 'peculiar wide jointed sort' noted by Barns in the nave at

⁵⁷ Because of their somewhat crude form, it has sometimes been suggested that the arches are late Anglo-Saxon and were retained when the 12th-century church was built. This idea is rejected both by the V.C.H. and Jennifer Sherwood (note 53) and is also considered unlikely by the present writer.

⁵⁸ R.C.H.M. *The Early Church at Sherborne* (addendum to *Dorset*, i, 1974), p.lv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N.E.S.A. Hamilton, Rolls Series, lii (1870), 312.

⁶¹ Wood, *op.cit.* note 46, i, 223–4.

⁶² H.M. and Joan Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, ii (1965), 585.

⁶³ W.C. MacFarlane, *Dorchester, Past and Present*, 9.

Dorchester. Remigius too was active at Stow, where he installed Benedictine monks from Eynsham c. 1091. The community was short-lived, but the nave is thought to be the work of Remigius.⁶⁴ Perhaps significantly, it does not exhibit the 'peculiar wide jointed masonry' of the one at Dorchester and also has broad pilaster buttresses. These and the doorways in the north, south and west walls are probably mid 12th-century, but if we accept the fabric of the nave as Remigius's work, one of the two Bishops Eadnoth emerges as the most likely candidate for the 11th-century work at Dorchester.

Before leaving the 11th-century church one final speculation may be permitted. In 1657 Anthony Wood wrote that '... in digging at the west end of the church there was discovered a small vault that would hold 3 or 4 men or more, and at the top was a tonnell, like unto a chymney but something larger (which) when the abbey was standing ... did go to the uppermost rooms'.⁶⁵ What this structure was, it is difficult to say; but did the late Saxon cathedral at Dorchester, like those at Sherborne and the Old Minster, Winchester, have a storied west end?

DORCHESTER'S PARISH CHURCHES

In 1542 Dorchester was visited by the antiquary, John Leland, who wrote that 'of old tyme it was much larger in building than it is now toward the south and the Tamise side. There was a paroch chirch at litle by south from the abbay chirch. And another paroch chirch more south above it. There was the third paroch chirch by south west'.⁶⁶ There is no earlier reference to these churches except William of Malmesbury's remarks on their magnificence,⁶⁷ but it must be remembered that all the abbey's records were destroyed by fire in the 16th century.

Gough, in the early 19th century, remarked that the foundations of one of these churches could be seen 'as you turn up to the bridge in the garden of the clerk's house'.⁶⁸ A few years later Brewer wrote that he could see no such foundations but observed what he considered to be those of another church in Farm Field.⁶⁹ Neither of these sites can now be identified, but the medieval skeletons recorded by R.A. Chambers to the north of the Old Castle Inn may be associated with one of them.⁷⁰

There is no real reason to doubt the existence of these churches; but Leland's statements on the status of churches may not always be completely trustworthy, as has been revealed by the present writer's unpublished study of the parish churches of medieval Wallingford. Here Leland says there were 14 parish churches – in fact there were 15 churches of which only 11 were parochial – which helps strengthen the suspicion that his 'paroch chirches' at Dorchester, while real enough as buildings, may not actually have been parochial.

Indeed, it is known that before the Dissolution the parishioners of Dorchester worshipped in the nave and the south aisle of the abbey church, making, one would suspect, the use of other churches unnecessary. Were these churches, already vanished by Leland's day, parish churches before the removal of the see to Lincoln (when the former cathedral was first used chiefly for parochial worship), and did they become

⁶⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner and John Harris, *The Buildings of England, Lincs.* (1964), 382.

⁶⁵ Wood, *op.cit.* note 46, i, 224.

⁶⁶ Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland, 1535–43* (revd. edn. 1964), 117.

⁶⁷ *Gesta Pontificum*, 311; quoted in *V.C.H. Oxon.* vii, 41.

⁶⁸ William Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Richard Gough (1808), ii, 28.

⁶⁹ J.N. Brewer, *A Topographical and Historical Description of the County of Oxford* (1819), 371 note.

⁷⁰ R.A. Chambers, personal communication.

redundant after this date? Were they private chapels built in the late Saxon period? Whatever their origins, only through the positive identification and excavation of their sites would it be possible to ascertain their function and possible relationship to the Saxon cathedral.

APPENDIX

In Richard Gough's edition of Camden's *Britannia* is the following reference:⁷¹ 'In a garden behind the church was dug up in 1736 a small ring of the purest gold, inscribed within with the year of Birinus's consecration 636; in it was set a cornelian . . . It was supposed a mitre on an altar or pillar, by the late Mr. Bilson, a Proctor of the University Court and Rector of St. Clement's, Oxford to whome the ring was given, and who after refusing 20 guineas for it left it to Mr. Applegarth, schoolmaster, next door to the White Hart, and he to Mr. Day, whose brother a wheeler now possesses it (1781)'.⁷² No mention is made of the ring in Tania Dickinson's *Cuddesdon and Dorchester-on-Thames*,⁷³ nor apparently in any recent archaeological literature. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally written in 1983 as a research design for proposed excavations at Dorchester. Since then some of the writer's ideas have appeared in *Dorchester Through the Ages* (eds. Jean Cook and Trevor Rowley, 1985). I am grateful to R.A. Chambers, of the Oxford Archaeological Unit, for much of the information on the Roman defences and especially to C.J. Bond, formerly of Oxfordshire Museums Service, for Fig. 1 and his other help and advice.

⁷¹ W. Camden, *Britannia*, ed. R. Gough (1806), ii, 28.

⁷² The ring is illustrated *Ibid.*, i, pl. xviii op. p. 395

⁷³ See note 8.