The First Church In Lyminge

- what did Canon Jenkins find in the churchyard and what is still there to re-discover?

by Robert Baldwin

The background to this article is the launch of the project that goes under the name of Pathways to the Past: Exploring the legacy of Ethelburga. This is a project sponsored by the Parochial Church Council in Lyminge that was initiated early in 2018. At the time of writing, we still have to secure funding for the project to go ahead. However, the centrepiece of the project involves re-excavating what is believed to be a very early Anglo-Saxon church to the south of the current Parish Church, which may be the church founded by Queen Æthelburh, (the latinised form of her name is Ethelburga) or a church built soon after her death around AD 647. This is a good time to re-examine why we are planning an archaeological dig in the churchyard during 2019 and what we hope to find.

On 23 November 1853, George Thomas Jenkins, Barrister in the Middle Temple in London, acquired the advowson of Lyminge from Ralph Price, the Rector at that time. This made George Jenkins the patron of the parish, allowing him to appoint the next Rector. Ralph Price seems to have resigned the rectorship because the position became vacant early the following year. As a result, Robert Charles Jenkins, formerly minister at Christ Church, Turnham Green in London and George’s elder brother, took up the position of Rector of Lyminge. This was a post that he was to occupy for the rest of his life until his death in 1896, some 42 years later. He later also became a Canon of Canterbury Cathedral, and it is as Canon Jenkins that he is most usually known today.

At that time, the church in Lyminge was dedicated to St Mary and St Edgburg. There were several historical sources that indicated that the church at Lyminge had its origins in the very earliest phase of the conversion of England to Christianity, and these suggested that this could be as early as 633 or 634, less than forty years after the arrival of St Augustine, who was sent by Pope Gregory to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons. All the early accounts indicated that this first church was founded by Æthelburh, formerly a princess of Kent and subsequently the Queen and widow of Edwin, King of Northumbria. Readers of my article in Lyminge a history volume 7 will know that when Canon Jenkins arrived in Lyminge in January 1854, it had long been thought that the name Edgburg was a variation of the name Ethelburga, and this dedication commemorated the foundress of the church.

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The surroundings of the church when Canon Jenkins arrived are well illustrated by the Tithe Map which was surveyed in 1837 and approved in 1840 (Fig. 1). This shows how the churchyard then was solely within the boundary wall that still survives. Burial extended into the field to the west numbered 507, known as Abbot’s Green, only in the second half of the nineteenth century, and this was initially in the northern part of the field closest to the footpath that still runs along the northern boundary of the churchyard from Church Road to Court Lodge Green (the ‘Bumpy Field’ by the Village Hall). The remainder of the field remained as grazing until after the First World War.

Fig. 1: Extract from the Tithe Map of Lyminge showing the area around the church

In one of his later publications that summarised much of his archaeological work in and around the churchyard, Canon Jenkins describes how from the outset he was keen to discover the burial place of Queen Æthelburh. Initially, he dug around the arched buttress and discovered that the south east angle of the chancel rests on what he described as ‘a vast block of Roman concrete’ which extended ‘under that part of the wall of the churchyard corresponding with it’. This would appear to mean that the concrete extended eastwards away from the church. In his field notes, he noted that this boundary wall also contained blocks of Roman concrete.

Subsequently, however, Canon Jenkins turned his attention to the mound of earth near the south porch where he discovered traces of what he thought was either Roman or Saxon masonry. Extending the excavation, he describes how he found:

'a wall running parallel with the south wall of the Church and a few feet from it, formed of a solid mass of concrete of evident Roman or Roman-Saxon origin. Pursuing the line of this wall, I found that it formed part of a circular apos, having three recesses in it, and a small aperture formed of the same concrete filled with dark clay...the most interesting feature of my discovery was the site of the tomb itself, which was formed of two limbs of the same material extending under the wall of the Church...’

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Fig. 2: Extract taken from Canon Jenkins' field notes showing a plan of his excavation south of the Parish Church.

Figure 2 is taken from Canon Jenkins' notes, which seem to be contemporary with his original excavation and probably represents the earliest (and possibly the clearest) illustration of what he actually found. The apsidal structure with the recesses is clearly visible, although it is noteworthy that in this plan he appears to show four recesses rather than three. A later more carefully drawn version of the plan identifies the recess which lies under the line of the path marked by dotted lines, as the aperture filled with dark clay. Visitors to the church today will find a small marble plaque inserted into the south wall of the church just to the east of the porch. This marks the spot where, as described above, the two limbs of concrete wall extended under the south wall of the church, which Canon Jenkins identified as the tomb of Queen Æthelburh. The walls here still bore traces of 'plaster...consisted of the finest lime, mixed with pounded brick'. In another work, he described the construction materials as follows:

There were innumerable fragments of materials taken from a still earlier [building]...portions of Roman roof-tiles, and squared stones, some of them being of an oolite which has never been found in this neighbourhood, except in the Roman work at Dover, and the pillars from Reculver, now at Canterbury.'

The first published illustration of this structure is an engraving, viewed from the east end looking westwards (Fig. 3). This appeared in a periodical published by Charles Roach-Smith in 1861 called *Collectanea Antiqua*, perhaps best described as the *Current Archaeology* of its day. Roach-Smith gathered information through correspondence with the many antiquarians who were conducting excavations around the country and he published reports of their findings with the intention of bringing them to a wider audience. The photograph in Fig. 4 shows much the same view as the engraving. This is taken from a postcard in the author's collection which is post-dated January 1905.

In his description of the progress of his work, Jenkins says that he next turned his attention to the field adjoining the churchyard. This is Abbot's

Fig. 3: The remains found by Canon Jenkins south of the church, (Roach Smith, 1860).

Green, which now of course is part of the churchyard, but in the 1860s and 1870s was a field beyond the boundary wall. It is best to quote his description in detail:

'I was tempted...to pursue the investigation of a remarkable fragment of very ancient building in the field adjoining the churchyard, but since then included in it. This appeared to be the remains of a circular western apse of the most massive form and structure, built with fine concrete as hard as the stones themselves. I found that this building had originally extended through the present churchyard [ie eastwards], and had been unfortunately discovered by my predecessor Mr Ralph Price, who having rather a taste for practical utility than for antiquarian research, turned the venerable remains of the monastery into a quarry for the materials for farm buildings...The ruins of the foundation were spread through the churchyard and the adjacent field. Fortunately, enough was left of them to enable us to conjecture the general plan of the building. The foundations of two walls of the most massive construction, and of very Roman aspect, were disclosed during my later excavations. The northern one was in a line with the south wall of the present church, and clearly formed a continuation of it. Between them several steps and the fragment of an arch of much later date, which persons still living remembered in a perfect state, were disinterred; also a transverse wall of a much later period, and of very perishable materials which it was not possible to preserve...At the north-western corner of the foundations thus disclosed, a very
diminutive two handled jar of bronze was found, of undoubtedly Roman manufacture (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4: The remains found by Canon Jenkins south of the church, c. 1905

Elsewhere, Canon Jenkins described these remains as excavated at a depth of about eight feet from the surface. Some of the stones were 'a yard, and even more, in length, and some of them two and three feet square, bound together by a solid concrete of lime and pebbles'. These are illustrated in Fig. 6. Elsewhere, he says:

'the long stones at the bottom of the foundation...had no mortar or concrete between them; but layers of chalk were interposed to form a bed for the upper ones. The larger squared stones were connected by a concrete of extraordinary readiness and coarseness, which seemed merely intended to fill up the crevices between them. The apse is built of fragments of Kentish rag united by a concrete of the very hardest character, and formed of the purest lime without any of that admixture of Roman brick which characterises [the apsidal structure by the south porch].'

Fig. 5: Bronze vessel found in the churchyard (Jenkins, 1874, 223)

He also notes that when this site was dug around 1862, he found evidence of molten lead, charcoal, charred wood, and stones reddened by fire. Canon Jenkins believed that this structure was Roman in origin. This remains to be proved, since Gabor Thomas has noted that no evidence of Roman occupation has been uncovered in the area of the village. The usual assemblage of pottery associated with domestic settlement is lacking, and the only material found in an archaeological context appears to have been recycled, suggesting that it came from elsewhere. The age of the remains in the churchyard thus is
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marked in solid lines, and his conjectural reconstruction of the building is indicated by lines that are left unshaded. It is possible to identify certain features referred to in his text, such as the steps next to the western apse which he thought were later than the apse itself. However, it is also fair to say that this published plan is quite a long way removed from the plan in his field notes (Fig. 2).

When the plan in Fig. 7 was projected on to a modern surveyed plan of the churchyard, the whole excavated structure was found to fall within the old churchyard east of the boundary wall. This is clearly not correct. It neither fits with the drawing in Fig. 2 nor the multiple descriptions that all place the apse west of the boundary wall in what was then a field. The plan is therefore not entirely reliable even in the dimensions of what are drawn as excavated walls.

The only independent corroboration that we have at present is a geophysical survey undertaken by Gabor Thomas's team in 2013 that confirmed the presence of the apsidal structure by the south porch, corresponding precisely with the plan. Nothing else was visible in the survey, although this does not mean that remains do not survive below ground.

Long-term residents of Lyminge may remember that there used to be masonry visible in the area of what is now the Memorial Garden. Prior to the creation of the garden, this was cleaned and examined by Tim Tatton-Brown and Paul Bennett of Canterbury Archaeological Trust. This work remains to be published so we have little information on what this actually is or how it related to the other structures found by Canon Jenkins. However, it does appear on a plan surveyed in 1915 which is within the church records and it is clearly on a different alignment from the rest of the structures around it (Fig. 8).

The churchyard is thus full of interest. If we succeed in securing the funding for the archaeological excavation to proceed in 2019, we will be able to open up certain areas of the churchyard but not everywhere we might wish to look. We will essentially be re-examining Canon Jenkins' work, following the line of the paths in the churchyard, but not disturbing the ground to either side where we would most likely encounter burials. Nevertheless, the prospect is that there is much to find, and it may be possible to make sense at last of what Canon Jenkins found in the last half of the nineteenth century.

Earlier this year, John Blair, Professor of Medieval History and Archaeology at the University of Oxford described the remains as 'among the most

Nevertheless, the structures found by Canon Jenkins do seem to have had multiple phases. He refers to work up against the western apse:

'built of small flints, green sand-stone and chalk, and... faced with a smooth coating composed, as is the mortar in the wall itself, almost wholly of sand, and hence extremely difficult to preserve from destruction. This fragment of wall is formed with wrought Caen stones, closely and well combined, and chamfered at the corners, as though to preserve them from injury. It would seem as though a cellar, or underground building of some kind, had here been dug out of the rock-chalk, within and beneath the Roman foundation, which is almost undermined. Three rude steps, formed of massive stones, lead down into this vault, and form the present limit of our explorations. Many pieces of squared and carved stone work (both Caen stone and the soft green stone found in the neighbourhood), numerous fragments of encaustic tiles, and an immense quantity of pieces of wall-facing, presenting a hard white surface on a base of almost pure sand, appeared among the earth that was here dug out'.

A further enigmatic structure is mentioned as found in the field beyond the boundary wall:

'a foundation of considerable size, built with a very rude concrete... It was built in the form of a church, and of rude, unhewn stones; but the concrete was so perishable that the whole building, founded only on blocks of chalk and large fragments of the concrete facing of a Roman building (some of it painted red), fell to pieces by degrees, and has now entirely disappeared'.

At a later date, further excavations were carried out by Canon Jenkins in the old churchyard south of the church and apsidal structure he had found previously. He found more masonry that he considered to be of a 'very different form and structure':

'This... was about fifty feet long, having a recessed part on the east resembling a small chancel. Near this, and close to the present garden of the Rectory (i.e. the current Old Rectory), portions of masonry were found built in the same kind of herring-bone work, as that of the chancel, and also many large fragments of smoothed concrete coloured red on the surface, of an undoubted Roman character. Vast numbers of bones of animals including buffalo's horns, and the bones of smaller animals were found in the same place... Within the walls, whose massive foundations still remain... were found... numerous fragments of encaustic tiles of very varied patterns, carved bosses apparently belonging to the stone seats around the hall, corbels for the support of the roof and other objects'.

The results of Canon Jenkins' excavations were summarised in a plan published in 1875 (Fig. 7). The walls he claimed to have excavated are

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important early Anglo-Saxon church remains ever excavated in southern England. Historic England has assessed the remains as being of ‘outstanding significance’. The purpose of this article is to summarise what we already know about the remains in the churchyard. Over the course of the summer of 2019, we hope to discover some more.

Fig. 8: Extract from a survey of Lyminge Parish churchyard in 1915

REFERENCES


Jenkins, R.C., 1890, The Burial-Place of St. Ethelburga the Queen in Lyminge (633-
ENDNOTES

1 Indenture DCG/DC/L15/2 held at Kent History Library Centre.
2 Baldwin, 2016.
3 This illustration is taken from the copy of the Tithe Map held at the Kent Local History Centre. The map needs to be read with a schedule that describes the nature of each plot including field names, the owner and the occupier, the land area and the value of the tithe. This schedule has been transcribed by Kent Archaeological Society and is available on-line at http://www.kentonarchaeology.org.uk/Research/Maps/LYM/02.htm
4 Jenkins, 1890, 5
5 Ibid., 7; Jenkins, 1859, 3.
6 The field notes and various correspondence are in the possession of Duncan Harrington.
7 Jenkins, 1890, 7-8.
8 Ibid., 23.
9 Jenkins, 1888, 7
10 Roach Smith, 1861, Plate XXI.
11 Jenkins, 1890, 15-16.
12 Jenkins, 1874, 208.
13 Jenkins, 1888, 7
14 Thomas, 2017, 103.
15 Jenkins, 1874, 217-218
16 Ibid., 212.
17 Jenkins, 1890, 16-17.