

Saxon or Norman?

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IT IS NOT UNUSUAL to find that the residents of a town or parish aver that their local church was built in the Saxon period. Sometimes there is documentary evidence to support this and some parts of the structure may help to support this theory. The rounded arch is common to both the Norman and Saxon periods. There are some churches which have some very distinctive Saxon features such as the long and short work at the corners of the building. The windows are high up and usually have splays on the outer and inner sides. The doorways are narrower and taller and more solid in construction. Those which have historical evidence can be compared with those that are doubtful. The Domesday Survey is helpful in indicating whether or not there was a church on a site before the Conquest. However, it may have been of wooden construction and may have been destroyed by fire due to strife or natural disasters.

Claims have been made that St. Mary the Virgin in Dover originated in the Saxon period. This claim was to some extent based on the entries in the Domesday Monachorum which names three churches. They were St. Martin's, St. Peter's and St. Mary's, with the latter two being subordinate to the first. The Victoria County History in Volume III states that St. Mary's is the one in the Castle and not the one in Dover. The origins of the church in the Castle are shrouded in mystery and legend, but there seem to be grounds for believing that King Eadbald set up a college of six canons with connections with Colton's Tower near the church. King Withred moved these secular canons down into the present Market Square where he set up for them the church of St. Martin. Most of the town of Dover was razed to the ground by William's soldiers after the Battle of Hastings. It was re-built soon after, as William realised the strategic importance of the link with the Continent.

The secular canons re-built their church and it was known as St. Martin-le-Grand. It has been suggested that the Canons built the building we know as St. Mary-the-Virgin and it may have been a hospice for travellers and by the Norman style it could have been built some time in the twelfth century. It had links with the Maison Dieu until it became the parish church after the Dissolution of the monasteries. Prior to this St. Peter's, which stood in the Market Square on the site of the present Lloyd's Bank, hosted civic functions such as the election of the Mayor and were transferred to St. Mary's. If we consult a history of St. Martin's Priory we find a mention of St. Mary's Hospital and the Maison Dieu, which may indicate that St. Mary's was there first and later attached in 1203. In the "Perambulation of Kent" by William Lambarde is mentioned the Hospital of St. Mary and the Domus Dei (or Maison Dieu).

To come back to St. Mary's in the town, it seems that the original building included the first two stages of the tower, which may have been a narthex or porch, and the first three arcades up to the double pillars with, possibly, an apse.

The lists of incumbents are not always reliable as often we do not know the sources. According to some records, in the case of St. Mary-the-Virgin in Dover, the ones listed are the Masters of the Maison Dieu who were expected to provide a priest for St. Mary's when required.

If this stipulation goes back to the building of the Maison Dieu it might indicate that the Hospital of St. Mary was already in existence before 1200.

All this does not prove that there was not a Saxon building on the site, but there is no evidence in the present fabric. It may be that a wooden structure was built on top of the Roman debris, but this could have been when the Norman soldiery exacted retribution in 1066.