# DOVER BEFORE WILLIAM

IVAN GREEN BA FCCEd

When William of Normandy (he was never called 'the conqueror' by Kent people) arrived in Dover he found a prosperous and civilised community, which his ghastly ungoverned soldiery did all they could to destroy, leaving most of the buildings in the town mere smoking ruins. This brief article attempts to give at least a limited view of the town in the short period just before William's arrival. A fuller account would require a book.

Dover at that time consisted mainly of three separate districts. One of these was at the west end of the town, centred round the old establishment of the secular canons who held it, and many other holdings, most of them in the surrounding villages. The canons' buildings and no doubt the homes of many Dovorians who would have congregated round them and probably found their livings from the religious institution as so many others had all over the country occupied ground where once the great Roman forts had stood in Roman times.

A second part of the community lived at Warden Down which was at the foot of Castle Hill, from a point a little to the east of the end of Ashen Tree Lane, past old St James's Church to a point somewhere near the eastern end of the present Gateway Flats, though at that point it was simply a tide washed strip of beach.

Just to the seaward end of old St James's Church was Dover's first harbour, fed from the River Dour, called 'the Brook' by the inhabitants. From the end of the 'Brook', later called 'Stembrook' flowed two streams, the first called 'Sconebrook' and later 'Eastbrook', flowed seawards past old St James's, to enter and scour the little harbour, round which were storehouses and the homes of many mariners, fishermen, and their families.

It was to this little original harbour that the ships working the Passage berthed, bringing the great figures of European history who reached these shores, kings and queens and princes, diplomats and high officials of the medieval church, besides traders and, later, pilgrims in their thousands.

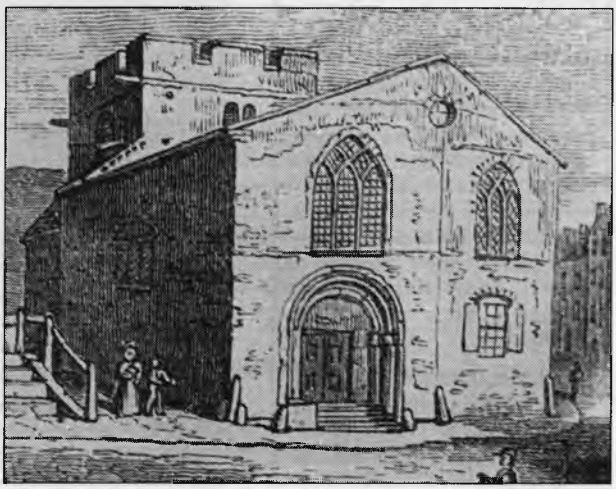
There also Dover's fishermen brought their catches of fish, principally herrings, in large quantities, to be dried, salted and sold in barrels to religious communities all over the county and, indeed, far beyond the county boundary.

Dover in those early times was, as it still remains, both a passenger and a commercial port, handling quantities of wine, corn, hides and wool throughout both Saxon and medieval times.

A second little stream, later called the 'Westbrook' but then little more than a drainage ditch flowed more in a westerly direction over a bed similar to that of the main course of the present river.

Several centuries later the Eastbrook dwindled in volume and despite all the

Old St James's Church as it was at the end of the 18th Century



people could do it gradually ceased to feed the little harbour with sufficient water, and a cliff fall in 1295 or 1296 partly blocked the harbour further, while the Westbrook increased in size and then took most of the water from Stembrook (the stem or source of the two streams) to become the present little river which still discharges into the Western harbour.

The point which arises here is the age of old St James's Church. The remains we now see are without question early medieval, but detailed examination of the base of the tower which was more exposed than it is now exhibits earlier work of pre-Norman date. One has only to compare the masonry of the base of this old tower with work at St Lawrence at Bradford on Avon, at Sompting in Essex or at Wing in Bucks, (photographs of all of which I have) to suggest that the original Old St James was Saxon, but that it probably fell into ruins at the hands of William's soldiery when they murdered and raped the inhabitants, and burnt the town down in their orgy of destruction.

The third part of Dover's community lived round the ancient St Mary in Castro within the boundary walls of Dover Castle surrounded by the earth and timber walls of the Saxon defences on the heights there. William decided to use this area as his particular defensive site and, after cruelly beheading Bertram de Ashburnham, the leader of the community there, together with his two sons, at the entrance gateway, he evicted all the inhabitants who lived there and spent some days in repairing and improving the earthen and timber perimeter defences before he moved on to Canterbury and London. In consequence his wild soldiery were never permitted to lay their hands on it.

But here we are faced with yet another problem. How came it that these local inhabitants, only a part of Dover's population, ever managed to build this impressive church, now generally accepted to be one of the very fine Saxon churches surviving in the whole country? It must remain a mystery. After all, there was the community of the old established secular canons at the west end of the town who must have had their church, and the possibility, indeed the probability, of the existence of an original old St James's church near their early Warden Down harbour.

Much of St Mary in Castro was built of Roman materials, large quantities of which were probably lying about there from Roman buildings which once probably surrounded, or were built near, their fine Pharos, one of their two guide beacons they built straddling the deep water entrance to the haven near their forts below.

One obvious example of re-used Roman work very visible is in the outer arch of the church's blocked south door. There has been a good deal of comment and claim regarding the age of this lovely piece of work, but no authority has ever discovered work prior to the early 11th century. Fortunately we do not need to delve into the writings of somewhat

St Mary in Castro as it appears today

suspect Victorian authors or divines, because other Saxon buildings survive which are either very similar, or which contain work of identifiable date.

In fact, the nave walls of St Mary in Castro have a very strong similarity to those of All Saints church at Wing, and our St Mary in Castro has a very similar twin, both in its construction and in its age, with the church of St Mary at Breamore. At Breamore we have, as at St Mary in Castro, a central tower on a cruciform building, the four corners of the tower rooted firmly on foundations in the ground beneath them. Entrance to the chancel, nave, and side chapels from the tower in both buildings is effected by means of semi-circular arches. In St Mary in Castro the similarity is no longer complete because the east end of the tower and the chancel are of a later date, very possibly because of a collapse in early medieval times.

The date of origin of St Mary in Castro, when combining known information and constructional details with details of other surviving Saxon churches, can be put fairly accurately to about the second decade of the 11th century.

Some of these conclusions concerning St James's and St Mary in Castro, may be questioned, but before doing so, may I suggest that readers pay a visit to the Saxon churches mentioned here and indeed to others. The results will be interesting and, I hope, profitable.*

The social and business areas of the lives of Dovorians of the immediate pre-invasion period are also interesting and in some respects, surprising. In fact, Dover was a well organised and profitable community. Dover was one of the original five Cinque Port towns, created by King Edward the Confessor to guard the south and east coasts of the country (and particularly those of Kent and Sussex), from the constant problem of seaborne raiding parties which were causing so much havoc.

The obligations of the Cinque Ports to the Crown were laid down in charters recorded in Domesday Book where the most complete entry is that for Dover. The translation given in 'Domesday Book, Kent', published by Phillimore of Chichester in 1983, reads: 'The burgesses supplied the King once in the year 20 ships for 15 days and in each ship were 21 men. This they did because he had given over to them full jurisdiction'. When the King's messengers came to Dover, they gave 3d in winter and 2d in summer for horse passage. The burgesses found a steersman and one assistant. If there was more labour, it was hired with his money. From the Feast of St Michael until the Feast of St Andrew the King's truce, that is peace, was in the town. If anyone broke it, the King's reeve received the common fine for it. Whoever lived permanently in the town and paid customary dues to the King was exempt from toll throughout the whole of England. All these customs were there when King William came to England' The last paragraph is important. It indicates that all these matters were of Saxon origin and were therefore in force before 1066.

The ship service was threefold in character: the repelling of sudden incursions by seaborne marauding bands, naval service for the King (when they were often part of a larger force in which ships from other ports sometimes also served), and the transporting of the King, his household officials, and armed forces to and from the continent when needed. This service, combined with the working of the Passage, fishing, and trading with continental ports, certainly constituted a busy undertaking for Dover mariners.

The full list of the privileges is fascinating: 'Exemption from Tax and Tallage, Sac and Soc, Toll and Team, Blodwit, Fledwit, Pillory and Tumbrill, Infrangentheof, Mundbryce, Waifs and Strays, Right to Flotsam, Jetsam, Legan, Privilege of Assembly as a Guild, Rights of Den and Strond, and Honours at Court', So now you know!.

The town was controlled by the burgesses, one of which, William, son of Geoffrey, seems to have owned or controlled 'the Burgesses' guild-hall'. They seem to have made their peace with William, possibly because he had already confirmed their Saxon charters and privileges, and they fought a victorious sea battle for him in the Channel in 1069.

** There is of course much more to the story of St Mary in Castro than this, and this will form the basis of a future article.*