by Pamela Combes

Bishopstone, generally assumed to be a minster church, was not identified as such in a recent survey of parochial development in 11th-century Sussex. Despite that omission, the church incorporates some Anglo-Saxon architectural features, and manuscript evidence of the status of its chapelry at South Heighton has now come to light. This article considers the date and circumstances of its foundation, the extent of its parochia and its place in the historical topography of the hundred of Flexborough.

MINSTER CHURCHES

The particular significance of minster churches within the administrative structure of the early church has been recognized only in recent years. A minster, often situated at the centre of a royal or ecclesiastical estate, would have had within its precincts a college of clergy living a communal life, but serving a group of dependent chapels within its jurisdiction; many of these chapels eventually became independent parish churches. The term *parochia* is now used to describe the extensive jurisdiction of minster churches, in order to distinguish them from the smaller and better-documented parishes that emerged from them. The dependent chapels enjoyed no right of burial (*mortuary*) or of baptism (*chrism*); if burials or christenings were performed, payments had to be made to the mother church. Such obligations often remained in force long after the decay of the minster system, and are considered to be a secure indicator of the former status of the church receiving the payments.

THE ORIGINS OF BISHOPSTONE

An estate at *Deantone* was granted to the Bishop of Selsey sometime before 801. The estate had been detached from the endowment of the royal minster of Beddingham, which King Offa had probably seized following his annexation of Sussex early in the 770s. Earlier the *Deantone* estate had been given to an Abbot named Plegheard who, in turn, gave the land to Selsey. The initial refusal of Offa’s successor Coenwulf to recognize this grant lead to a dispute which was resolved in favour of the bishop and recorded at the synod of Chelsea in 801. Following Coenwulf’s death the dispute re-emerged and at the synod at Clofesho in 825 it was decided that the earlier judgement should stand. This land is assumed to be the estate that emerges in Domesday Book as Bishopstone. Indeed, the interpolation of the Roman numerals XXV in the text of the confirmation of 825 in the episcopal chartulary implies that the clerks who made the alteration were establishing just that point, since the Domesday valuation of Bishopstone was 25 hides.

The record of the latter synod refers to a church: ‘...episcopus Australium Saxonom Coenredus fuerat spoliatus de aliqua parte terre illius ecclesie quod vocitatur Deantone...’ [...Coenred bishop of the South Saxons, had been robbed of some of the land of that church which is called Deantone...]. Unfortunately, the wording of the whole text is ambiguous: a combination of defective Latin and the later interpolation of the numeral clouds the meaning. It is probable that the church referred to in the charter was part of the *Deanitone* (sic.) estate, but the possibility that the reference is to the episcopal see at Selsey, although unlikely, cannot be dismissed. King Coenwulf of Mercia attested a charter at Deantone so he must, on occasion, have resided there; if that was the case the establishment would have been substantial and may already have been long-established. But, if it was not, it would accord with developments within the church in the late 8th century for the bishop to establish his own minster church within his estate since episcopal influence over the administration of the royal minster of Beddingham was probably slight.

The full extent of the Bishopstone *parochia* is difficult to assess. Only the chapel at Heighton can certainly be associated with Bishopstone. It has been authoritatively stated and often assumed that there was a dependent chapel of Bishopstone at Norton,
a hamlet lying within the parish, but the evidence for it is elusive and its existence open to question. However, the Bishopstone estate and the associated minster parochia would almost certainly have been more extensive and the possibility that it extended not only to Heighton but also to Sutton in Seaford, as the place-name suggests, has to be considered.

**THE CHURCH BUILDING**

Bishopstone is a fine survival of a small Anglo-Saxon church. Although the date of the original structure has been much debated, the broad consensus of opinion is that it is of pre-Viking date. The sundial inscribed with the name Eadric, surviving probably in situ in the south porch, is considered from its fretted decoration to date from the 9th century or earlier (Fig. 1). The church retains part of its Anglo-Saxon nave, the extent of which can be deduced from quoins surviving within the southern wall of the present nave. The south porch with the sundial is the sole survivor of possibly as many as four flanking porticus. The outer door, with its Romanesque arch, was probably punched through the wall of the porticus when the church was enlarged (Fig. 2). The inner door, the position of which is presumably original, is offset towards the west suggesting that there may have been a small altar or shrine on the east wall of the porticus, its position perhaps reflected by the existing 14th-century shrine in the interior of its east wall. The coincidence of the stylistic dating of the fabric and the probable late-8th-century date for the acquisition of the estate by the Bishop of Selsey suggests that the surviving Anglo-Saxon church was built by the bishop. But, since no archaeological excavation has taken place on the site, the possibility that there had been an earlier church cannot be dismissed.

**TOPOGRAPHY**

Minster churches were characteristically situated on spurs of land lying adjacent to significant waterways or roadways; Bishopstone is in just such an advantageous position. The village lies on a spur of land at the top of a tidal inlet extending north from the mouth of the river Ouse. The river itself provided access inland to Lewes and beyond, as well as to the sea at Seaford. In addition, to the north, the tidal inlet extends into a further series of dry valleys which allow access to the Cuckmere at Alfriston, to the settlements lying below the northern scarp of the Downs and up into the Wealden pastures beyond (see map, Fig. 3).

It is tempting to suggest that the Deantone (valley settlement) of the original grant was named from this denu and did not consist of modern Denton alone. The valley in which the modern parish and former tenanted episcopal manor of Denton is situated is notably insignificant when compared with that in which the demesne manor of Bishopstone lies. In the 8th century and earlier the name may have applied to a wider area than the parish which emerges later as Denton. That interpretation of the evidence would accord with the view that the church described in the bishop’s estate of Deantone in 825 was at Bishopstone.

**MINSTERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOWNS**

Many minster churches were influential in the development of towns. Bishopstone itself remained small and undeveloped, but if its parochia extended as far as Sutton, it may also have had an interest in...
the development of the port of Seaford. Certainly, the bounds of Sutton manor extended to the town precincts. Situated as it was at the mouth of the river Ouse, the town of Seaford was in a position to control access to Lewes, the principal pre-Conquest town of Sussex. The importance of Seaford as a control point for shipping coming into the river and trading within Lewes was such that William of Warenne retained an interest there, despite the fact that the town was situated within the rape of Robert of Mortain. Part of his interest in Seaford was granted to Lewes Priory as early as 1089, which suggests that the link between Lewes and Seaford either pre-dated the Conquest or was specifically constituted when the new Norman lordships of the rapes were created.16

The links between the prebends of Sutton and Seaford, which are discussed below, and the close association of the two settlements imply that the estate name Sutton, like Deantone, originally described a wide area within which the town of Seaford developed, eventually eclipsing the original manor in importance. The possibility that the chapel of Sutton, which appears by 1624 to have been the nucleus of the manor, may have been created by Robertsbridge Abbey after they had acquired the estate and thus not represent the original settlement centre is worth consideration.17 Topographically, an earlier nucleus for the ‘south settlement’ of Bishopstone in the vicinity of what eventually became known as Seaford would accord well with the compass direction implied by the name. Clearly the latter name originally described a specific topographical feature the ‘sea-ford’, possibly contained within the Sutton estate. It is notable that well into the 19th century the parish was frequently identified as Sutton cum Seaford, a form of naming that implies the dominant status of both the settlement and the name Sutton.18

**DOMESDAY BOOK**

The record of churches in Domesday Book is particularly variable; omission from the text does not necessarily imply that no church existed. In Sussex the record within what was to become the Rape of Pevensey was lamentably deficient. Only one church was recorded, at Selmeston; the commissioners recorded no church at Bishopstone. In addition, the overall record of Flexborough Hundred, the area surrounding Bishopstone, is particularly baffling and the identification of the Domesday estates with the named settlements that emerge later is problematical.

Bishopstone itself, recorded in the section describing the land of the Bishop, was at 25 hides clearly the most valuable of the manors in the hundred. Count Robert of Mortain, the overlord of the Rape, held Tarring (eight hides) in demesne. Heighton, or possibly part of Heighton, held by William and valued at only two hides was recorded as Estone. The Abbot of Grestain held Firle (five hides) and that entry is followed by two other unnamed manors, both located by the term ‘there’ (ibidem). The Abbot held the first of these manors, valued at one hide, and the Saxon thegn, Heming, retained the other, valued at two hides. Another
manor also called Firle (four hides) was held of the count by Alan, and another unnamed holding held by Durand valued at one hide was also located in the hundred. At least part of the Grestain interest has been identified as Frog Firle in Alfriston, but the locations of the unnamed manors and the other Firle have yet to be established (Fig. 3). Of the parishes immediately adjoining Bishopstone neither Denton nor Blatchington were named, suggesting that the land was subsumed within other greater manors. Later evidence demonstrates that Bishopstone, Denton and

Fig. 3. Topography and settlement between the rivers Ouse and Cuckmere.
possibly Heighton were linked manorially (see below) and a small area of Blatchington lay within the Battle Abbey manor of Alciston.  

**THE EXTENT OF THE MINSTER PAROCHIA**

Despite the paucity of the evidence for other ecclesiastical links, the one that can be made is, nevertheless, compelling: the church or chapel of (South) Heighton was dependent upon Bishopstone. Mortuary payments, one of the most characteristic rights claimed by a minster church, were due from the parishioners of Heighton to Bishopstone. The obligation was recorded in the 17th-century glebe terriers and still recalled in 1769, when the churchwardens petitioned that the church at Heighton, which had been virtually destroyed in a storm, should not be rebuilt because the few parishioners could not ‘afford the expense of taking down and rebuilding’.  

Why Heighton’s subordinate status should alone be recorded is difficult to understand. But Heighton was exceptional among the early estates lying in the vicinity of Bishopstone. It had been acquired in 988 from Ealdorman Aelfric as part of an exchange made by Bishop Aethelgar of Selsey. Aethelgar was also abbot of the New Minster at Winchester and it appears that he transferred the estate to that house. The evidence suggests that while Aethelgar was prepared to transfer the temporal jurisdiction to the New Minster, he remained reluctant to alienate the ecclesiastical rights, which he retained with his diocese. This separation seems to have resulted in tension between Chichester and the New Minster and its successor Hyde Abbey, which is probably revealed by a dispute over the church between the bishop and the Abbot of Hyde at the end of the 12th century. The eventual agreement, made in c. 1197–1204, shows that a pension of 7s. was already being paid by South Heighton to the church at Bishopstone and the balance of the new pension of 20s. was to be paid by the parson of Heighton to the episcopal prebend of Bishopstone. This, the earliest surviving record of a prebendal interest in Bishopstone, is discussed more fully below.

William Figg stated unequivocally that there was a chapel at Norton ‘anciently an appendage to the church (of Bishopstone)’ in a paper read to our Society in 1849, but presented no evidence to uphold his claim. The suggestion has been perpetuated by later writers and misled the Lewes Archaeological Group when they prepared to excavate ruined flint walls discovered at Norton in 1978. Initially they believed they had located the chapel, but the site eventually proved to be a medieval farmstead. Lying, as Norton does, less than 1 kilometre from the mother church, there appears to be little reason to establish a chapel there and a search of the episcopal records and the later Bishopstone manor archive has produced no evidence for its existence.

It is possible that this persistent story may have arisen from an early cartographic error. Christopher Saxton, in his map of 1565, used the symbol that identifies a village with a church for Norton — no other cartographer identifies Norton as a village. Indeed only 20 years later John Norden used the symbol for a hamlet to identify the settlement there. Saxton’s map is notoriously inaccurate — Litlington and Lullington, for example, are both placed on the west instead of the east bank of the river Cuckmere — so his depiction of a church at Norton may well have been an error. It may be significant that William Figg, the first person to suggest the existence of a chapel, was a cartographer himself and therefore probably familiar with the early maps of the county; his claim regarding the chapel should therefore be treated with caution.

The bishop’s temporal jurisdiction certainly extended into Denton. Before 1163, in what may have been a transaction with a third party, but was more likely an internal reorganization of property, Bishop Seffrid had exchanged land in Denton for the church of Seaford. In the 13th century the manor was still in the hands of the Bishop. The link survived the Dissolution; still in 1612 the lord of the manor of Denton owed fealty and 3s. rent to the manor of Bishopstone. Conversely, Bishopstone’s manorial jurisdiction extended across the parish boundary into Denton. In the early 17th century just over 139 acres of Bishopstone tenant land lay in Denton. But by 1777, as a result of the active purchase of freehold and copyhold tenements by the Pelham lords of Bishopstone, only about 31 acres of that land remained in the hands of tenants. Land of the manor of Denton may have extended into Heighton parish. Certainly in the 17th century tenements of the manor lay in Heighton, but unfortunately these cannot be located in the custumal of c. 1274. Several of the tenements were said to lie in Denton; whether any of the other unlocated tenements were in Heighton is impossible.
to determine and the possibility that the Heighton land was a later acquisition cannot be ruled out. Nonetheless, the combination of both secular and ecclesiastical associations strongly suggest that the three parishes were originally linked.

To the east of Bishopstone the associations are more tenuous. There is only sparse evidence to suggest that Blatchington and Seaford were linked with Bishopstone and the episcopal see. Nonetheless, the place-names suggest that both the hamlet of Norton (north settlement) in Bishopstone and Sutton (south settlement), which lies in Seaford parish, may relate to the original estate of Bishopstone. The association of Bishopstone with Norton, which lies close by within the parish is obvious but, other than the place-name, no specific evidence has yet been found to link Sutton with Bishopstone. Neither, however, can it be associated with any manorial centre lying more directly to the north, Alfriston or Alciston for example.

There is, however, some evidence for an episcopal interest in Sutton. In 1304 Robertsbridge Abbey paid a substantial rent of 100s. to the Bishop for Sandore in the manor of Sutton, which had been granted to the abbey sometime after the Barons’ revolt at the end of the reign of King John (c. 1216). In addition, the existence of a valuable prebend of Sutton, first recorded in 1279, suggests that the link with Chichester may have been of long standing; it is discussed below.

In the context of establishing a connection between the Bishopric of Chichester and Sutton, Domesday Book’s multiple use of the name Firle in Flexborough hundred may also be significant. Firolalandes, an estate valued at three hides, was granted to the Bishop of Selsey by King Offa (757–796). The name Firolalandes may be related to a group of medieval settlements all identified by the name Firle: West Firle, East Firle, Frog Firle and a lost Pig Firle, probably in Berwick, as well as the other settlement named Firle recorded in Flexborough Hundred in Domesday Book.

Apart from Denton and Blatchington, Sutton, Seaford and Chinting are the other names that emerge on record in Flexborough hundred in the later medieval period. It is tempting to suggest that at least one of them should be associated with the ‘missing’ Domesday settlements of Firle and possibly, by extension, with the earlier Firolalandes. King Offa granted both Deantone and Firolalandes to Selsey and no certain date of acquisition can be assigned to either. Once the episcopal see had acquired both estates, Firolalandes may have been subsumed within or administered alongside the greater estate.

Finally, the ‘onion skin’ alignment of the original boundaries of the smaller parishes that encompass the central parish of Bishopstone suggests that they once formed a single entity that may represent the extent of the minster parochia (see Fig. 3).

**CATHEDRAL PREBENDS AND MINSTER ESTATES**

At Chichester, from about the middle of the 12th century, each cathedral canon had his own property or prebenda that he managed for himself. The income for the prebends was largely derived from the episcopal estates of which many had formerly been the endowments of minster churches. At a later date, other prebendal endowments were created from churches given to the cathedral for that specific purpose, while others were formed from smaller land grants to the cathedral. Some, if not all, of these later endowments are recorded in the chartulary, but the origins of the earliest prebends are obscure, since no record of their creation, endowment and administration survives.

The prebendal associations of Bishopstone were more complex than the single late-12th-century reference implies and they have not hitherto been discussed in full. By the middle of the 19th century six Chichester prebends — Highleigh, Sidlesham, Henfield, Sutton, Seaford and Bargham — derived all or part of their income from Bishopstone and adjoining parishes in Flexborough hundred.

The Prebend of Bishopstone continued to be named into the 15th century, but was eventually styled the Prebend of Bishopstone and Sidlesham; but, problematically, Sidlesham Prebend was first recorded by that name alone in 1279. The Prebend of Bishopstone was not recorded in the Taxation of Pope Nicholas in 1291, an omission that implies either that the name of the prebend had been changed to Sidlesham or that the two prebends had been combined. In view of the continued, though occasional, use of the joint name the latter appears the more likely option.

By 1844 Sidlesham Prebend received the residue and greatest portion of the tithe from within the whole parish of Bishopstone, producing a rent-charge valued at £185; as the rectorial prebend
Sidlesham was the source of the vicar’s stipend of £3 6s. 8d. recorded in the 17th-century glebe terriers.36

But two other prebends also had an interest in tithes from the parish. Highleigh received all the tithes of corn, pulses, lamb and wool from Shingle Barn Farm in Norton, valued at £65. The origin of this prebendal interest in Bishopstone is more difficult to determine. Highleigh, which lies in Sidlesham, was an early prebend associated with the Selsey heartland of the episcopal see. It may be significant that the first known Prebendar of Highleigh was Guy of Bishopstone, recorded between c. 1147–1169, who perhaps enhanced the original endowment of his prebend with an additional grant from his home parish.37 However, the possibility that the prebends of Bishopstone and Sidlesham were created from part of the original endowment of Highleigh should not be lightly dismissed.

The bishop, in the right of Henfield Prebend, another early prebend endowed from the land of an episcopal estate, which he had taken into his own hands before 1520, enjoyed a substantial portion of the tithes not from the whole parish but from within the manor.38 His interest consisted of nine thirteenths of the tithes of corn and pulses from the manor of Bishopstone together with portions of tithes from one copyhold tenement and a moiety of the tithes of lambs and fleeces, together producing a rent-charge of £140.

Already by c. 1274 Henfield enjoyed rights to tithe in Bishopstone very similar to those still surviving in 1844. It is probable that the Henfield prebend had succeeded to the original endowment of Bishopstone minster.39 Significantly, the portion of tithe accorded to the Henfield prebend, relates closely to the two thirds of demesne tithe that would have been the customary endowment given by the lord of a proprietary minster church.

Over time three prebends had an interest in Sutton and Seaford. Bargham endowed with the glebeland of the hospital of St James, was not created until the reign of Henry VII and is therefore of no significance to this discussion of the early development of Sutton40. The two other earlier prebends were named from the settlements themselves, Sutton and Seaford. The minor prebend of Seaford is well documented. Valued at £4 13s 4d. it was created c. 1190–1194, probably for Peter of Bloxham, one of Bishop Seffrid II’s household. The prebendal endowment was the church of Seaford which had been acquired by the Bishop by 1163.41

Valued at £26 6s. 8d. in 1291 Sutton prebend, first recorded in 1279, a more significant endowment than Seaford.42 Despite its late appearance in the archive sources, the lack of a record of its creation suggests that it may in fact have been an early formation. In 1404, notices of a sequestration of goods relating to the prebend were served in the churches of Blatchington and Seaford as well as Sutton, implying that the prebendal interest was extensive within the hundred. Both prebendaries shared the gift of the living of Seaford, one turn to Seaford and two to Sutton. This evidence affords some further support to the view that Sutton was originally the dominant settlement.43

CONCLUSION

The research undertaken so far has established beyond doubt that Bishopstone was an Anglo-Saxon Minster church. The manorial links and the interest of several cathedral prebends suggest that the early episcopal jurisdiction may have been more extensive than the later parish of Bishopstone; that in turn implies that the former minster parochia was of a similar extent. This note is intended as a preliminary assessment of the evidence, and as such is highly speculative. Further work on the settlement pattern and the manorial and ecclesiastical structure within the hundred of Flexborough should identify the Domesday manors and might determine both when the minster was first established and the full extent of its parochia and its influence, not only ecclesiastical but also temporal and economic. Within Bishopstone itself, fieldwork could establish the date and extent of both the former minster enclosure, which may be reflected in the curve of the road lying to the east of the church, and the collegiate buildings. Bishopstone Church, a small but beautiful surviving Anglo-Saxon architectural gem, deserves no less.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Sue Berry, Richard Coates and Paul Cullen for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper and Sue Rowland for preparing the map and illustrations for publication. In particular my thanks are due to Christopher Whittick who has given generously both of his time and his expertise to improving the final draft. Any errors that may remain are, however, entirely the responsibility of the author.

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NOTES


3 Blair, Minsters and Parish Churches, 13.


7 Kelly, Charters of Selsey, 61.

8 Blair, Minsters and Parish Churches, 2.

9 W. Figg, 'On Bishopstone Church', SAC 2 (1849), 276.


11 Dominic Tweddle & John Higgitt, 'Bishopstone Sussex (St Andrew), in D. Tweddle, M. Biddle, B. Kjolbye-Biddle (eds.), Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture IV South-east England (Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1995). Quartermaine's print, dating from shortly after the church restoration in 1848, is the earliest surviving depiction of the sundial. Regrettably we cannot be certain that the artist depicted the depth of stone cutting accurately. If he did, that implies the recut of the inscription took place later than Higgitt suggests. Clearly the decoration is now significantly more weathered than the inscription.

12 My thanks to John Blair for communicating to me his most recent views on the architectural features in Bishopstone Church.


14 Kelly, Charters of Selsey, 65.

15 Blair, 'The Minsters of the Thames', 8.


17 ESRO SEA 688.


20 J. Brent, 'Alciston Manor in the later Middle Ages', SAC 106 (1968), 89.

21 WSRO EpII/17/162&163; WSRO EpII/25/2.


24 H. Margary, Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Map-making in the County of Sussex (Chichester: Phillimore 1970), Maps 3a Saxton, 3b Norden.

25 Peckham, SRS 46, no. 62, a papal confirmation which seems to deal with the cathedral offices and their endowment; W. D. Peckham, 'The custumals of the Sussex Manors of the Bishop of Chichester', SRS 31 (1925), 93.


34 ESRO TD/E 92, ESRO TD/E 37.

35 Greenway, Fasti Chichester, 31.


37 Greenway, Fasti Chichester, 34.


39 Peckham, SRS 31, 93, ESRO TD/E 92; Blair, From Minster to Parish Church, 12.


41 Peckham, SRS 46, no. 62.

42 Peckham, SRS 46, no. 954.

43 C. Deedes, 'Bishop Robert Rede's Register', SRS 8 (1908), 61; Peckham SRS 46, no. 954.