

'THE MOUND' AT CHURCH NORTON, SELSEY, AND THE SITE OF ST. WILFRID'S CHURCH

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The mound adjoining St. Wilfrid's Chapel¹ was the subject of excavations in 1911 when several features were revealed including a substantial stone foundation, which may be of a square tower.² Also discovered was evidence of flint-working, Romano-British occupation, a probable tenth-century bronze belt tab, and post-medieval pottery. At the time the earthwork was thought to have been constructed as the result of an order, made in 1587, for the erection of defences between Selsey Bill and the church, at the time of the Spanish Armada. Attention was drawn to the early sixteenth-century painting in Chichester Cathedral which shows two buildings, one of which appears to be a representation of Selsey Church and the other an isolated tower surmounted by a spire. The writer, however, felt that 'it would be unwise to attach much importance to this fanciful sketch.' Further excavations were undertaken in 1965 but these have not been published.

Recent research, by the present writer assisted by Dr. T. Hudson, of the Victoria County History, and Mr. T. J. McCann, of the West Sussex Record Office, has shown that there is evidence to support the idea that the buildings shown in Lambert Barnardi's painting of 1519, now in the south transept of Chichester Cathedral, represent Selsey Parish Church and a tower which probably dates to the eleventh-century—both of which survived at Church Norton in the sixteenth-century.

A churchwarden's presentment of 1662³ states 'That there was never any steeple belonginge to the church (at Selsey), but a tower formerly belonginge to a ruined castle, somewhat remote from the church, where the bells hunge, but it is latelie fallen downe, the bells preserved, and a newe steeple now annexed to the church is allmost the fourth part finished.' It would thus appear that there was once an isolated tower near the church, which had been used to hang the bells. It may be this structure, with its spire, that is referred to as 'the Stepull' in 1541⁴ and again in 1579 when the steeple was 'in great decay'.⁵ On February 12th, 1580, letters patent recite 'that there is in the saide Isle of Selsey, one olde stone Steeple of a great height adioyning neere to the Sea, which of most auncient time out of mind and at present is a notable Sea-marke for all Merchants and Trauailers by Sea vpon the South coast, from East to the West, and from the West to the East, wherby not onlie the said Maisters of Merchant Ships but also the Maisters of our Ships take principall marke for the auoiding the dangers of great Rocks and Shalles lying out tenne miles from the shoare, being one of the most dangerous places upon that Coast called the Shalles'.⁶ Collections for restoration were authorised to be made during that year in the 'Counties of Sussex, Kent, Surrie, and South', with the Isle of Wight, and the Cities of London and suburbs, 'Canterburie, Chichester, Winchester, and Southampton'.

¹ National grid reference SZ 8721 9568.

² Salzmann, L. F. 'Excavations at Selsey 1911' *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 55 (1912). 56-62.

³ W.S.R.O., Ep.I/22/1 and *S.R.S.*, vol. 49 p.146.

⁴ *S.R.S.*, vol. 45 p.102.

⁵ Add.Ms. 39544 fol.15.

⁶ *Church Briefs* 1896 p.80. Wyndham Anstis Bewes.

In 1602 there is a reference to the effect that 'the steeple hath many breches and . . . many places wide open very hurtful to the timber worke and the bells; the weather cocke is blowne downe'.⁷

The replacement bell-tower which was being constructed adjoining the church in 1662 is presumably the feature which is shown in ruins at the west end of the church on a photograph of 1865.⁸ It had evidently been replaced by a bell-turret on the west end of the nave by 1798⁹ and it is probably the top of this turret that is just visible above the mound on Grimm's drawing of about 1780.¹⁰

Bishop Bowers' visitation of 1724¹¹ states 'There are four bells, but not hung up, the tower where they formerly hung is fallen down'. In his travels through England in the 1750s Richard Pococke referred to 'remains near the church (of Selsey) of a large tower, which fell down in the memory of man and a fortified place which was probably the Bishop House'.¹²

Despite the evidence presented in 1911, there can be little doubt that the surviving mound at Church Norton (see figure 1) is the remains of an eleventh-century ringwork which once supported a square tower, the foundations of which appear to have been encountered in 1911. The tower may have functioned as a keep or, since it occurs on one side of the ringwork, as a gatehouse, as at Bramber. A tower in a ringwork at Sulgrave, Northamptonshire, is of pre-Conquest date and in his discussions of the stone-built tower at Portchester, Hampshire, Cunliffe¹³ draws attention to the well-known church tower at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire, which appears to have originated as a free-standing structure of late Saxon date, to which the remainder of the church was added. In this case the church adjoins a ringwork. Whilst the function of the Church Norton tower remains uncertain, it is tempting to recall, as Cunliffe points out, the early eleventh-century compilation which records 'and if a churl prospered so that he owned full five hides of land of his own, a bell and a *castle-gate*, a seat and special office in the king's hall, then he was henceforth entitled to the rights of a thane'.

St. Wilfrid's Chapel, the sole remains of the parish church of Selsey, which was otherwise removed in 1865, lies in close proximity to the ringwork and some relationship between the two must be considered. Since the bishopric was not moved from Selsey to Chichester until 1075 it seems possible that the ringwork was established soon after 1066, if not before, to protect a church which represented the remains of Wilfrid's seventh-century church. There can be little doubt that in 1519 it was considered that Wilfrid's Cathedral stood at Church Norton and in the will of William Reed, bishop of Chichester, which was made on the 1st of August, 1382, he clearly identifies the then parish church with the ancient cathedral—'And my body to be buried in front of the high altar in the chancel of (the church of) the Holy Trinity at Selsey formerly the cathedral church of my diocese'.¹⁴ The surviving remains, however, appear to be of the early thirteenth century although fragments of Anglo-Saxon sculptured stone were built into the present parish church when it was moved to its present position, several miles south of Church Norton, in 1865 and these may have come from Church Norton.

⁷ V.C.H. (Sussex) 4 (1953) p. 208 and Add.Ms. 39368 fol. 1203.

⁸ Heron-Allen, E. *Selsey Bill* (1911), Plate XXXIII.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Plate XXXII.

¹⁰ BM., Add.Ms. 5675, fol. 69.

¹¹ WSRO, Ep.I/26/3, fol. 88.

¹² Cartright J. J. (Ed.) *The travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke during 1750, 1751 and later years*. Camden Society 1888 and 1889, Volume 2 p. 108.

¹³ Cunliffe, B. *Excavations at Portchester Castle Volume II: Saxon*. Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London No. XXXIII (1976) 60 and 303.

¹⁴ *Sussex Record Society*, vol. 45 (1940-41) p. 102.

CHURCH NORTON, SELSEY

THE MOUND & ST. WILFRID'S CHAPEL

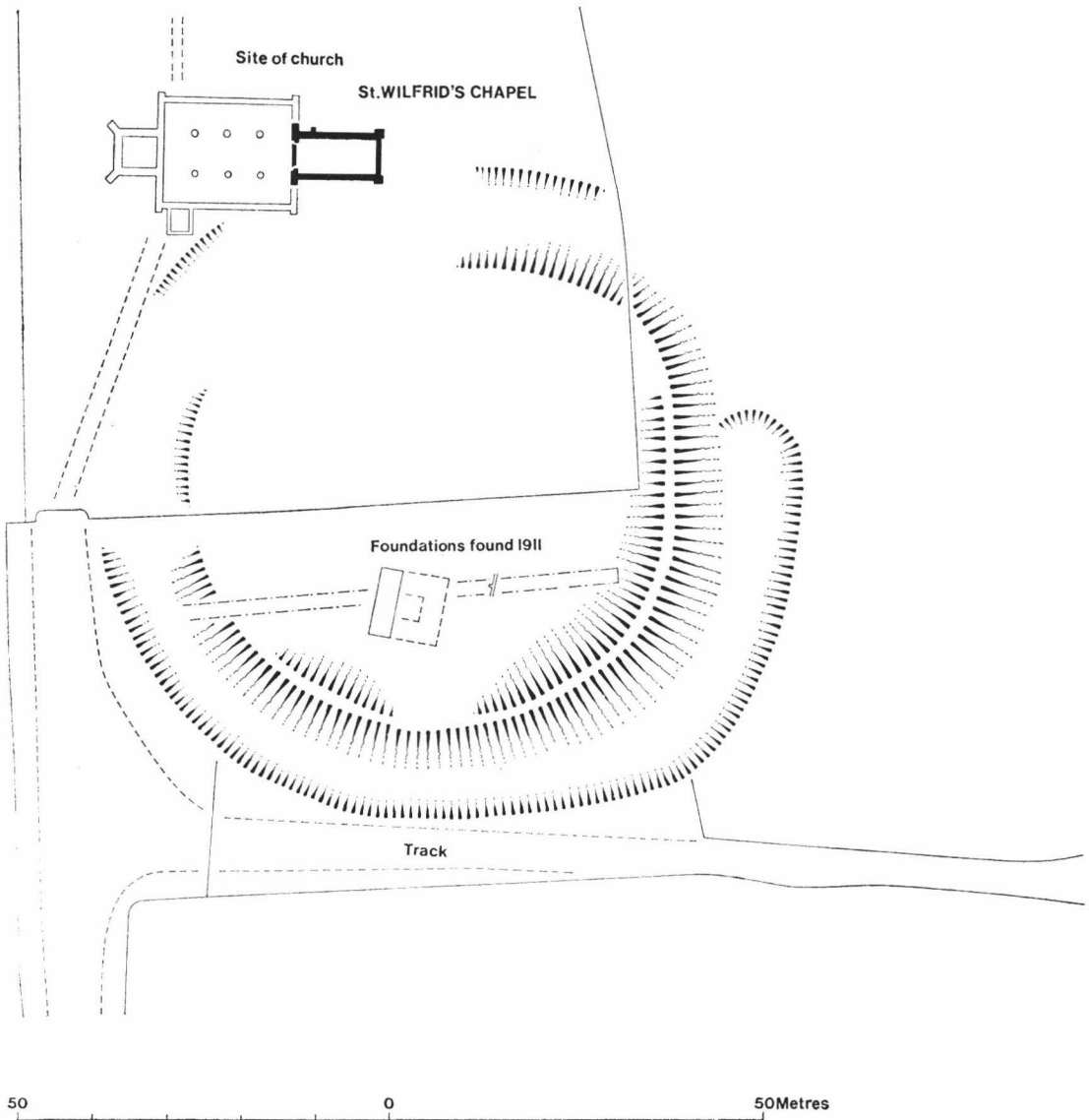


Fig. 1. Plan of site

These four pieces of carved stone have not previously been published in the Collections and it is felt that, since they are now subject to weathering and decay, some form of record is desirable.

Fragment 1 (Fig. 2 No. 1; Plate 2 No. 1) is 31.5 cm by 14.5 cm. It has the remains of a moulding on two sides and is decorated with a double-riband interlace which survives in comparatively good condition. In 1911 it was built into the wall of a summerhouse at Grange Farm, Church Norton¹⁵, but it is now built into the south face of the 1914-18 war memorial near Selsey parish church.

Fragment 2 (Fig. 2 No. 2; Plate 2 No. 2) is 24.5 cm by 16.5 cm. It has the remains of a moulding on one side and is decorated with a poorly surviving and poorly executed interlace. In 1911 it was built into the same building as fragment 1¹⁶, but is now built in the north face of the Selsey war memorial.

Fragment 3 (Fig. 2 No. 3; Plate 2 No. 3) is 28.5 cm by 16.5 cm. It has the remains of a moulding on two sides and is decorated with interlace forming two circles which may be a later version of the Ribbon style animal. In 1911 it was inside the porch of Selsey Church and may have previously been located at Church Norton¹⁷. It is now built into the south end of the west face of the war memorial.

Fragment 4 (Fig. 2 No. 4; Plate 2 No. 4) is 27.5 cm by 27.5 cm. It is partially defaced but has the remains of a moulding on one side and is decorated with interlace with leaves and what may be traces of an animal head in the bottom right-hand corner. In 1911 it was inside the porch of Selsey Church and may have previously been at Church Norton¹⁸. It is now built into the north end of the west face of the war memorial.

The form of decoration of all four pieces is clearly Anglo-Saxon and there are good parallels in the Durham Cathedral Collection of contemporary pieces from Northern England.²⁰ The best parallels in Southern England are the examples from Hampshire. The shaft fragment from Steventon²⁰ is decorated with the rather irregular interlace that exists on Fragment 2 and animal heads of the form which appear to survive on Fragment 4. The base at Priors Barton, Winchester²¹, and the sculptured stone from South Hayling²² are both decorated like fragment 3.

All four pieces are probably best considered as being part of a cross or crosses, made in Southern England in the latter part of the ninth or during the tenth century A.D., which probably stood close to a church at Selsey—then the cathedral.

¹⁵ Heron-Allen op.cit. pp. 102-3. Plate XXI.

¹⁶ Heron-Allen op.cit. pp. 102-3. Plate XXI.

¹⁷ Heron-Allen op.cit. p. 102. Plate XXII.

¹⁸ Heron-Allen op.cit. p. 102. Plate XXII.

¹⁹ Greenwell, W. *A Catalogue of the Sculptured and Inscribed Stones in the Cathedral Library, Durham*, 1899, pp. 51-129.

²⁰ Green, A. R. and Green, P. M. *Saxon Architecture and Sculpture in Hampshire*, 1951, pp. 44-45. Plate XIII.

²¹ Green and Green op.cit. pp. 46-47. Plate XIVc.

²² Green and Green op.cit. pp. 47-50. Plate XV.



Plate 1. Lambert Barnardi's painting in the south transept of Chichester Cathedral, showing Wilfrid receiving the Selsey Charter from Caedwalla, King of the South Saxons, in about 683.



Detail from Lambert Barnardi's painting showing the church and separate tower. Photographs by Fred Aldsworth.