

## THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES OF THE CUCKMERE VALLEY

by *Helen Clarke and Peter E. Leach*

### INTRODUCTION

This survey of the medieval churches of the Cuckmere valley (Fig. 1) was undertaken as part of the Cuckmere Valley Project initiated by Peter Drewett of the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, in 1982. The present article records part of work in progress by the authors on the development of medieval settlement in this area of East Sussex, and illustrates the basic information from which the development of the parish churches in the region can be deduced.

It must be emphasized that with the exception of Alciston, Exceat and Lullington churches (below) the survey has been confined to recording the above-ground fabric of the churches. The results of a small excavation by P.E.L. at the east end of Alciston church in 1984 show that even such small and unpretentious churches as are dealt with here probably evolved through many more stages than can be estimated from their standing remains alone. As the present work relies largely on the evidence of the standing structure of the churches it inevitably presents a partial picture of church development. Nevertheless, the complexity of many of the buildings suggests that the communities of which the parish churches formed an intrinsic part must have undergone considerable changes throughout the medieval period. These changes are reflected, at least in part, by the rebuildings and modifications which we can see in the churches. They must also be manifested in other ways, such as village expansion or contraction and the construction or demolition of vernacular buildings, but these aspects of settlement development in the Cuckmere valley must await further fieldwork.

Each of the churches in the valley is discussed with reference to location, parish and settlement pattern. Their plans are reproduced in Figs. 2–5 and their development described on the basis of structural analysis alone. Written sources have not been consulted, but it is interesting to note that although all the settlements except Hellingly, Litlington and Lullington are recorded in Domesday Book not one church is mentioned there. Building materials have generally not been described. Flint, usually with sandstone dressings, is common everywhere except Hellingly (coursed sandstone only) and Wilmington (some dressings in Caen stone).

### ALCISTON, DEDICATION UNKNOWN, TQ 506056 (Fig. 2)

Alciston parish lies on the far western edge of the valley and is bounded on the north by Selmeston.<sup>1</sup> The church stands on the 50-metre contour in the north-east section of the parish, more than half of which comprises chalk downland. It is adjacent to an old turnpike which ran along the foot of the downs, and today its associated settlement lies along the minor road leading northwards from the church to the present A 27. Alciston is mentioned several times in Domesday Book, when it seems to have been a settlement of some wealth, but its main medieval importance was as a grange of Battle Abbey. Some of the remains of the grange are preserved today in Alciston Court, immediately south of the church, and in the great barn and dovecote to the south-west.

The church lies on the south-western edge of a quadrilateral churchyard whose original dimensions were 40 x 47 metres. A pronounced

# CUCKMERE VALLEY PARISHES

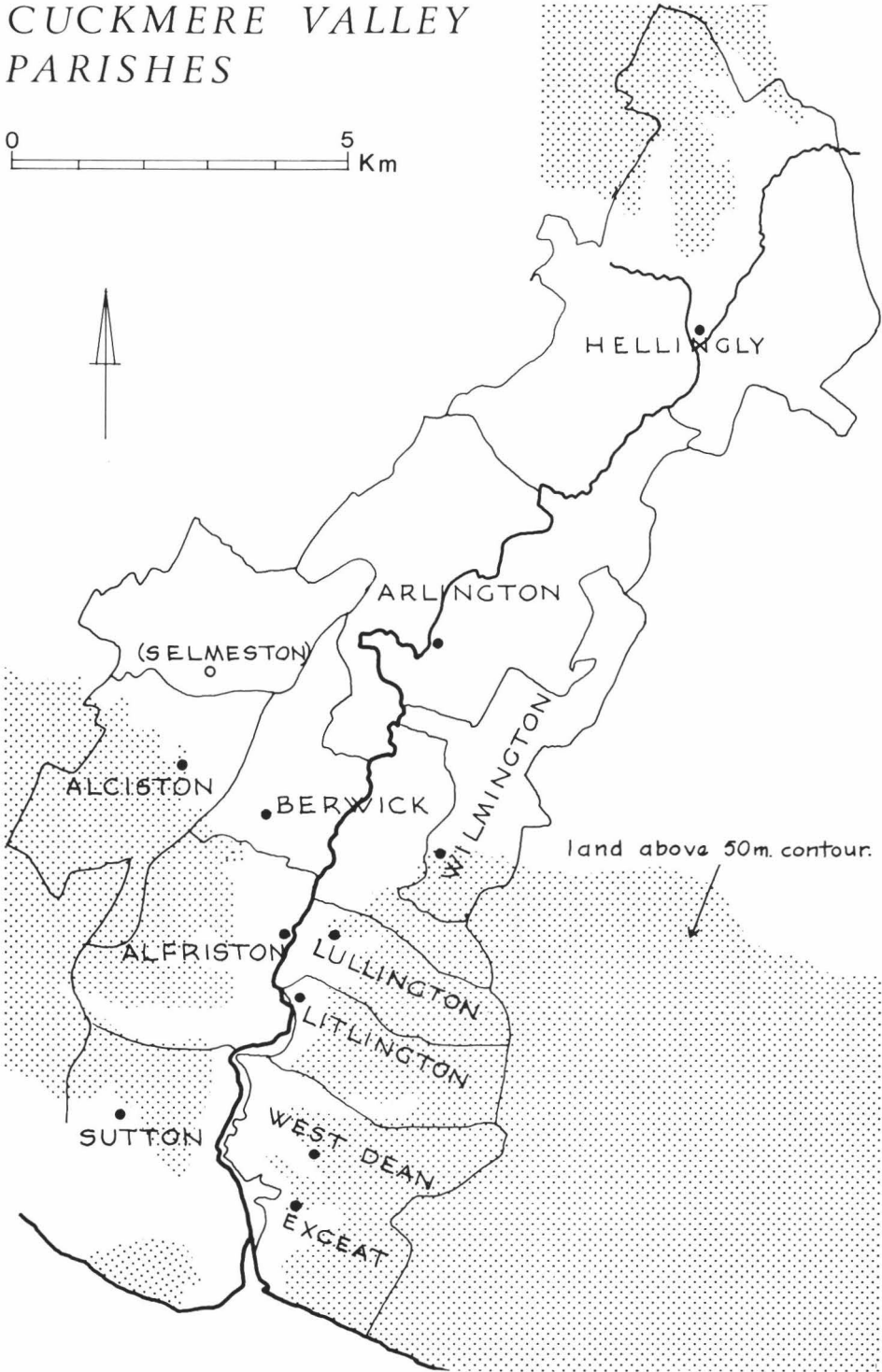


Fig. 1. Cuckmere valley parishes.

bank marks the eastern edge of the original churchyard, and a triangular extension, maximum 37 metres, runs eastwards from it. The field immediately north of the churchyard contains earthworks, and there are fishponds further north. It is likely that the whole area surrounding the church contains the remains of the medieval grange only little disturbed by later development.

The church today consists of nave (with north porch) and chancel, both narrow in relation to their length, and excavation has shown that the chancel was once even longer. As mentioned above this is the only church to have been investigated archaeologically during the course of the Cuckmere Valley Project.

#### *Church Development*

The earliest part of the church is the eastern apse, known only from excavation. It was built of chalk blocks and after demolition was replaced by a straight-ended chancel (whose east end is also only known from excavation). A small, round-headed, single-splay window at the west end of the north wall of the chancel gives a 12th-century date, and the nave is probably of the same date although the awkward junction of nave and chancel walls throws some doubt on their contemporaneity. The present nave may have been built in masonry around an earlier, perhaps wooden, structure possibly associated with the apse. The 12th-century west window in the chancel seems to be excessively close to the junction between chancel and nave and may give substance to the view that it was originally part of a church which consisted of masonry chancel and timber nave.

The south wall of the chancel was rebuilt in the 13th century with a doorway and another arched opening, both now blocked. Three windows were inserted in the north wall; two survive intact but that at the east end is only evident as the western half of a blocked opening. A plain string course runs beneath the windows at sill level. The porch may also have

been added at this time for, although rebuilt in 1951, it contains a reset 13th-century doorway.

The final phase of medieval building is represented by the east wall of the chancel with diagonal buttresses and a 15th-century window.

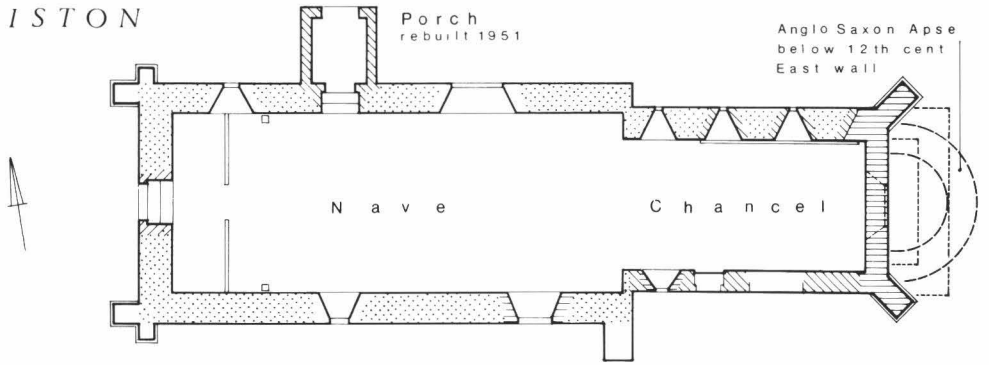
#### ALFRISTON, ST. ANDREW, TQ 522030 (Fig. 3)

The church stands beside the west bank of the river Cuckmere, on the south-east edge of the village. The parish consists of roughly equal areas of land above and below the 50-metre contour and is thus of both downland and river valley character.

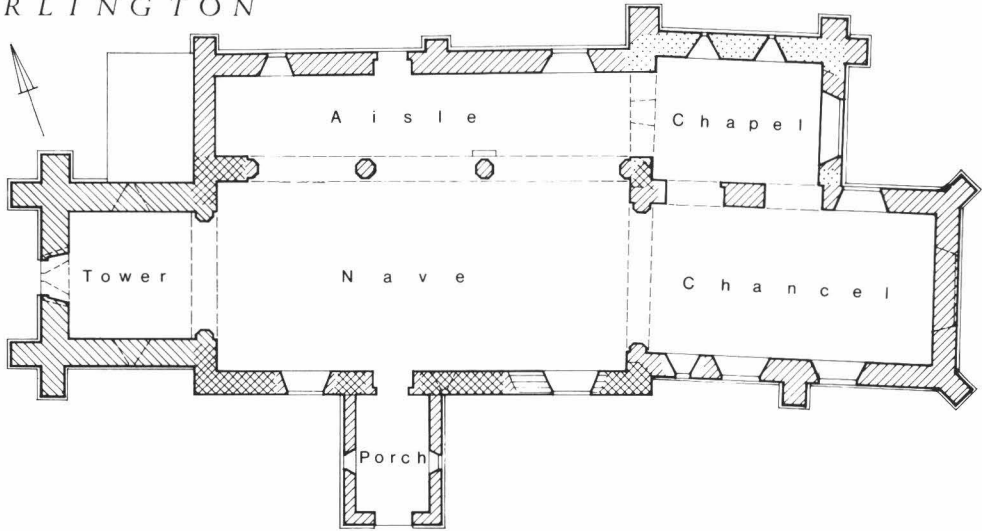
Today the village is by far the largest of those in the Cuckmere valley and, although much of its modern size is due to recent housing development, it may always have been the dominant settlement in the valley. Its church is certainly the largest, and in some ways the most spectacular, of all those discussed here and the village also contains several splendid timber-framed buildings of late medieval date (for example, the Clergy House and the Star Inn). The rest of Alfriston parish is virtually unpopulated and the pattern of scattered farmsteads seen elsewhere in the valley (Arlington, for instance) is not present here. The uplands of the parish were chosen for occupation as early as the 6th or 7th centuries, for two Pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries lie on the downs overlooking the present village and the village itself may have originated in the Middle Saxon period (8th or 9th century) when Pagan Saxon upland settlements were being replaced by sites further down the slopes.

The church is in the centre of a roughly circular churchyard, c. 65 metres in diameter, distinctly higher than the surrounding ground level. The churchyard is revetted with a flint wall on all sides and its eastern edge must once have been skirted by the river which now flows some 100 metres further east. The 14th-century Clergy House stands south-west of the church and both are bounded to the west by a large

ALCISTON

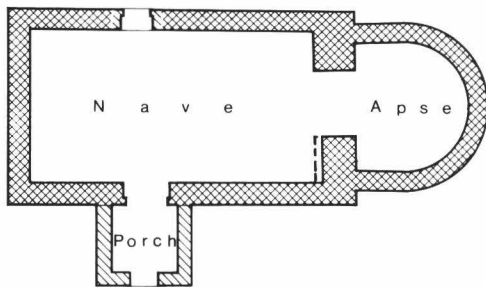


ARLINGTON



EXCEAT

After Budgen 1916



KEY to phasing of all plans

Pre-Conquest	
12 th. Century	
13 th. C	
14 th. C	
15 th. C	
Later	



Fig. 2. Cuckmere valley churches. Plans.

green, open to the river at the south. The green may well have been the market place of medieval Alfriston where goods brought up-river by small craft could have been off-loaded. The presence of the green and the probable navigability of the Cuckmere up to this point are pointers to the reason for Alfriston's wealth in the Middle Ages, wealth which in the 14th century manifested itself in its church.

The church is a cruciform structure with unaisled nave, chancel and transepts entirely of late 14th-century date. The south porch may have been added slightly later but it is still in the same style. The composition of the church and the standard of the masonry suggest that it was a building which reflected a community of exceptional wealth, in Cuckmere valley terms, in the late Middle Ages.

#### ARLINGTON, ST. PANCRAS, TQ 543075 (Fig. 2)

The church lies about 100 metres east of the river Cuckmere, in the southern half of a large, irregular parish which takes in low-lying land on both sides of the river. The topography of the parish has been modified in recent years by the construction of Arlington reservoir which involved the regulation of the river south of the church. The present settlement consists of a small nucleated village around the church and isolated farmsteads dispersed throughout the parish. Some well-defined but enigmatic earthworks in the field between church and river may represent the remains of an earlier village, and a map of 1600 indicates the existence of a vicarage and several other buildings there at that date, but it is uncertain whether the populated area around the church was ever very much more extensive than it is today. Two moated sites are preserved in the north-west of the parish and Michelham Priory lies less than 3 km. to the north-east. Arlington may always have been a parish whose wealth lay in the dispersed farmsteads of the outlying areas, for the size of the church and churchyard argues for a population

of some size and wealth in the Middle Ages.

The church consists today of nave and north aisle, chancel and north chapel, west tower and south porch. At least four major periods of construction are visible within the standing fabric, and reports of the discovery of burnt material including daub beneath the present nave suggest earlier phases which could only be established through excavation.

#### *Church Development*

The standing remains suggest that in the pre-Conquest period Arlington was a church of some substance. The nave preserves long-and-short quoins at its south-east, south-west and north-west corners and there is a small round-headed window in the south wall. Its much mutilated tiled head suggests that it may have originally had a double splay, and the height and relative thinness of the walls are consistent with a pre-Conquest date.

In the 12th century the opening between nave and chancel probably consisted of a central arch flanked by blank arcading, the remains of which can be seen on each side of the present chancel arch. The chancel today is of 14th-century date but its minimum length in the 12th century can be estimated from the position of the east wall of the north chapel with its traces of a triple-arched east window. The north wall of the north chapel contains two widely splayed round-headed windows and there is also a circular opening high in the west wall. The archway between chapel and north aisle rests on imposts with dog-tooth decoration and suggests that there must have been a 12th-century structure on the site of the present (14th-century) north aisle. The plinths underlying the 14th-century arcade between nave and north aisle may be the remains of such a structure.

The west tower of two stages separated by a string course has lancet windows in its north, south and west faces and must have been added to the nave in the 13th century when the tower arch was cut through the west wall. The final period of medieval building took place in the

ALFRISTON

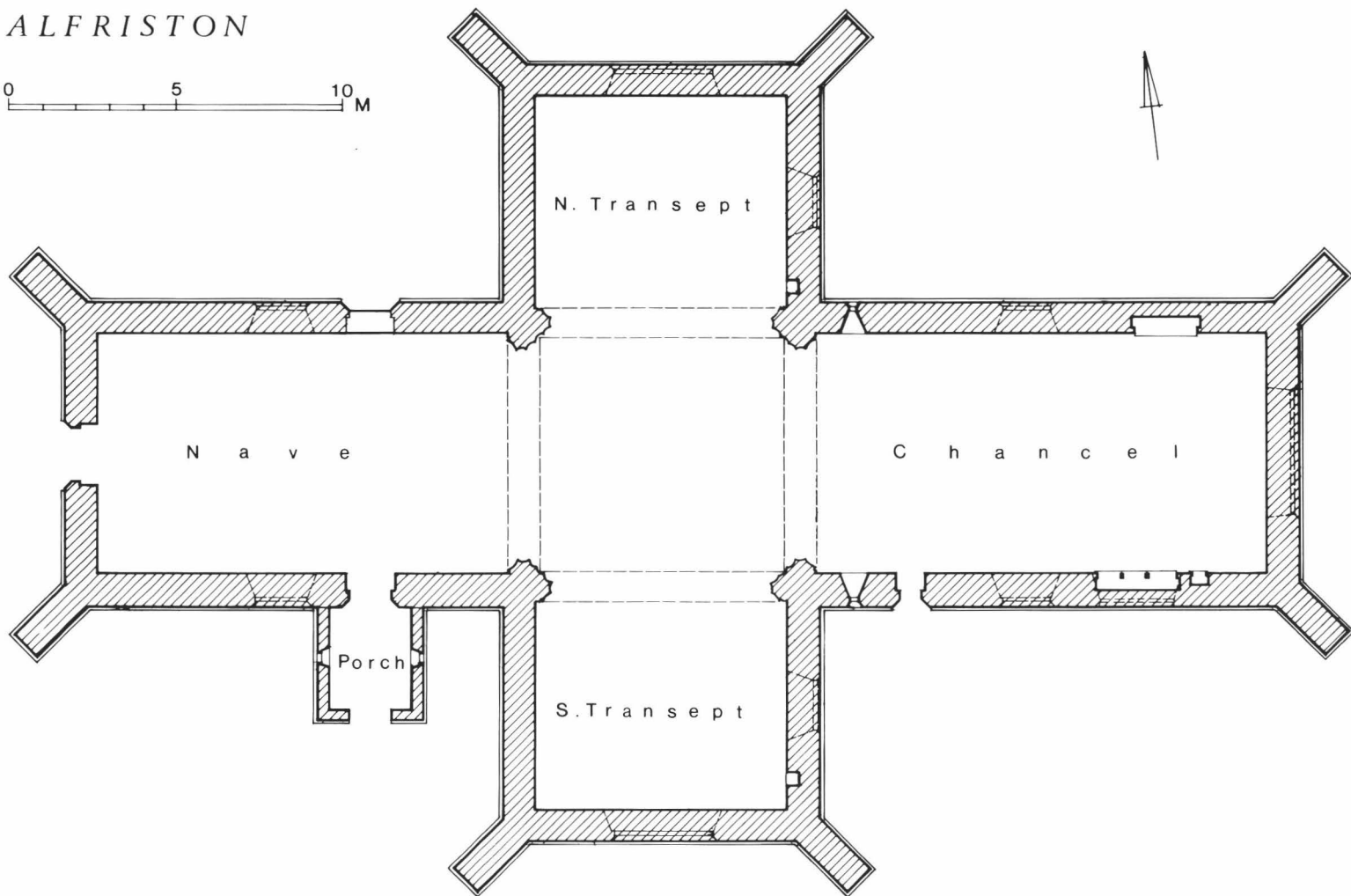


Fig. 3. Cuckmere valley churches. Plans (see Fig. 2 for key).

14th century with the reconstruction and probable expansion of the chancel and the addition of the north aisle and south porch.

**BERWICK, ST. MICHAEL AND  
ALL ANGELS, TQ 519049 (Fig. 5)**

The church lies in the south-west corner of a large parish straddling the river Cuckmere. All but the south-east arm of the parish is below the 50-metre contour. A small nucleated settlement with village green and pond lies to the north of the church, and earthworks in a field between the green and the A 27 road suggest the presence of an area of deserted settlement, indicating that the nucleated centre of Berwick may once have been more densely populated. The remainder of the parish is very sparsely settled with little sign of a scattered farmstead settlement pattern. The concentration of settlement in the south-east of Berwick parish may be the result of the flat, low-lying, valley-bottom nature of the land in the north.

The churchyard is quadrilateral in shape with a terrace across the north side defining the original northern edge of the burial ground, an area of 60 x 50 metres. A modern extension to the cemetery lies north of the terrace. The church and its churchyard lie on a natural hillock further raised above the surrounding land by its use as a burial ground. A mound, ovoid in shape with maximum diameters of 14 x 10 metres and a height of 3 metres above the level of the churchyard, stands to the south-west of the church. It has been variously interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon (or Danish) burial mound, or a motte. Either interpretation is feasible although, despite no visible signs of a ditch around its base or earthworks of a bailey, the authors feel that it is more probably a motte. Although the view to the north is now obscured by the church, the mound commands extensive views in all directions and could have acted as a look-out site over the valley or a control point for traffic along the Cuckmere river. Whatever its function, it is obviously a man-made feature

which, on the grounds of its position, was erected before the construction of the church.

The church today consists of nave and chancel, north and south aisles, south porch and west tower. It was almost entirely rebuilt in the 19th century and little of its medieval fabric remains. Its most distinguished features now are the paintings executed by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant during the Second World War.

*Church Development*

It is impossible to be sure of the development of the medieval church. The west end of the present chancel has single-light windows with engaged columns and a hollow-moulded string course beneath, which are probably of 13th-century date. The south arcade with central octagonal column and the lower courses of the south wall of the south aisle appear to be 14th-century and there is a suggestion of 15th-century work to east and west of the north arcade. The medieval church may, therefore, have consisted of chancel, nave and south aisle.

**EXCEAT, DEDICATION UNKNOWN,  
TV 523985 (Fig. 2)**

Nothing of this church remains above ground although its outline may still be seen in the form of an earthwork. The site was excavated in 1914 by W. Budgen.<sup>2</sup> Fig. 2 is a redrawing of the plan reproduced there and follows Budgen's dating. It appears to have been a two-cell structure with nave and apsidal chancel, and south porch added in the 13th century. If it is of pre-Conquest date its plan suggests an early date in the Anglo-Saxon period, certainly one earlier than any of the other churches in the valley.

The boundaries of its parish cannot be traced with certainty but most of it must have lain above the 50-metre contour and it was therefore a predominantly downland parish. The site of the church itself is on the 50-metre contour, in a very exposed and windswept pos-



ition. The church was abandoned during the Middle Ages and no traces of its associated settlement, if any, remain.

#### HELLINGLY, ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL, TQ 581123 (Fig. 4)

The church lies roughly in the centre of a large and irregular parish straddling the headwaters of the Cuckmere and only in the extreme north-west does the land reach above the 50-metre contour. The present parish of Upper Dicker was carved out of that of Hellingly in the 19th century.

Hellingly's churchyard is distinctive in being circular, c. 85 metres in diameter, with the houses of the small nucleated settlement abutting it. It is raised c. 2 metres above the surrounding land on all but the eastern side where it is bounded by a sunken way. The settlement pattern in the rest of the parish is one of scattered farmsteads, and the moated site of Horselunges lies to the south-east.

The church consists of nave with north and south aisles, chancel, north transept and west tower, all built of sandstone blocks. The chancel cants noticeably to the south.

#### *Church Development*

There is no evidence of a pre-Conquest church on this site but by the 12th century a building of some size and elaboration must have stood here. The north and south walls of the chancel are of this date, the north wall with two widely splayed round-headed windows, whose inner faces are embellished with attached shafts with median bobbin-rings and foliate capitals. A palmette frieze runs at sill level along each wall, stopping c. 3 metres east of the chancel arch. The outer face of the south wall of the chancel shows traces of a blocked round-headed doorway and there are several pieces of moulded stone built into the much patched fabric. The east respond of the north aisle consists of clustered columns with keeling and capitals similar to those of the north windows of

the chancel. Three fragments of the bowl of a font decorated with cable moulding, arcades and foliage are set into the west wall of the north transept. All these features are of 12th-century date and suggest that the church was a highly decorated building at this time.

The north-east respond is a puzzling feature. It may indicate that the church had an aisled nave in the 12th century or it may be compared with Arlington where it has been suggested (above) there may have been a north chapel with western adjunct. The present north transept at Hellingly is entirely of 13th-century date but it may have replaced a 12th-century structure to which the respond could relate.

The east end of the chancel was rebuilt in the 13th century with triple lancet windows, and in the 14th century the north and south aisles were added. There is no other medieval fabric in the church but a blocked round-headed doorway at the west end of the north aisle must have been reset there from some unidentified part of the church sometime before the west tower and west walls were built in the 19th century.

#### LITLINGTON, ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL, TQ 523019 (Fig. 4)

The church stands near the east bank of the Cuckmere at the eastern extremity of a long narrow parish, virtually all of which lies above the 50-metre contour. The present settlement near the church consists of a small group of farmsteads and dwellings and there is no occupation in the upland areas. The 13th-century Charleston Manor stands on the parish boundary between Litlington and West Dean but there is otherwise no sign of medieval settlement.

The quadrilateral churchyard, c. 32 x 36 metres in extent, is on the crest of a slight rise overlooking the river valley. Its eastern side is skirted by a sunken way in which the modern road runs and which is probably the original medieval route.

The church consists of nave, chancel, south



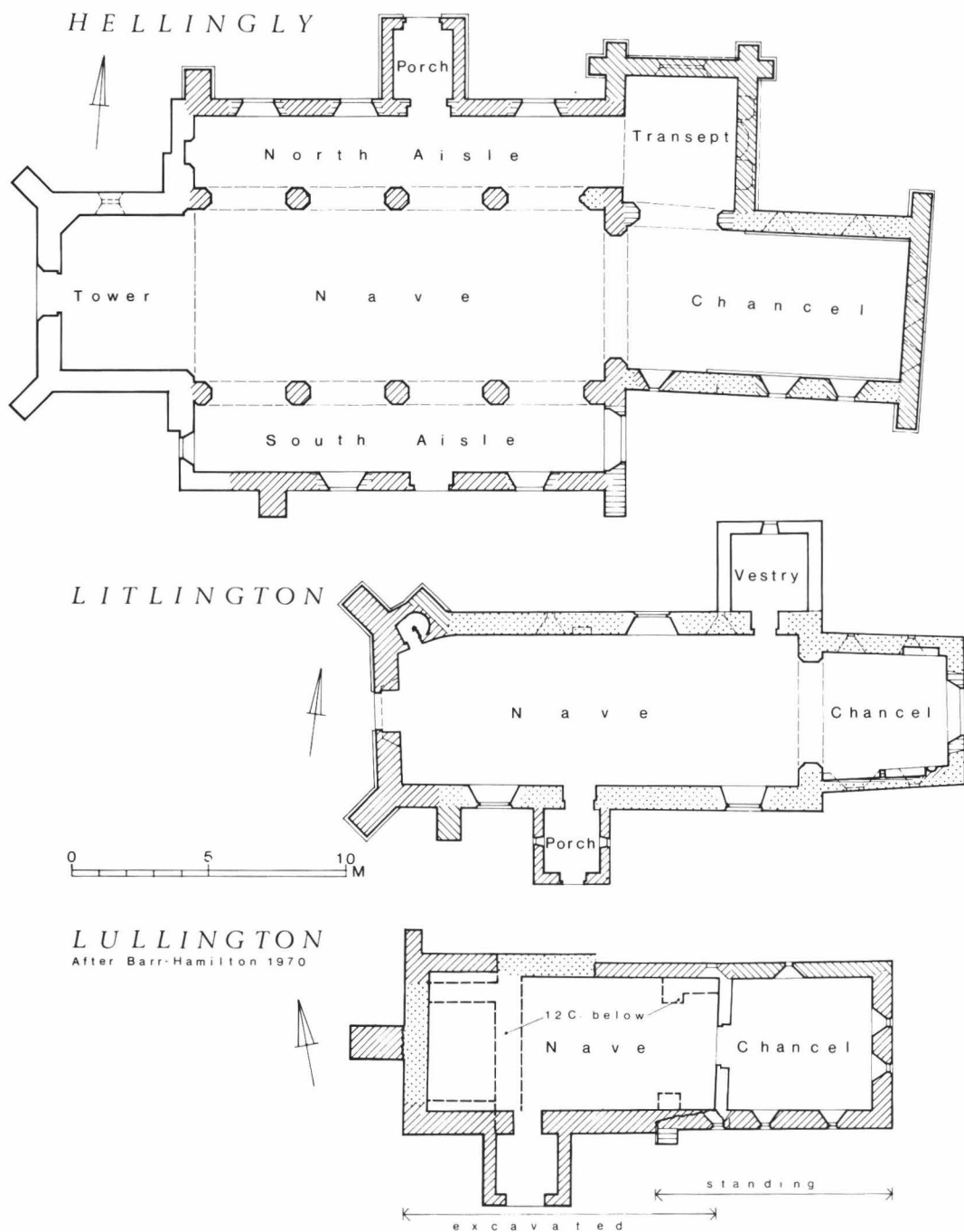


Fig. 4. Cuckmere valley churches. Plans (see Fig. 2 for key).

porch and north vestry. The chancel narrows distinctly to the east.

#### *Church Development*

The church was built in the 12th century as a two-cell structure with aisleless nave and tapering chancel. The north walls of nave and chancel each contain two round-headed windows, those in the nave being blocked. The nave was probably shorter than it is today and the buttresses towards the west end may have been put up in the 13th century to support the corners of the 12th-century nave. In the 14th century the 12th-century west wall was demolished and replaced by a wall further west to support the bell turret. At the same time the south porch was added to the original, 12th-century, south door. There were few further modifications and apart from the 15th-century east window and modern vestry the church remains today much as it was after its 14th-century alterations.

#### LULLINGTON, DEDICATION UNKNOWN, TQ 528030 (Fig. 4)

All that remains of the church today is the chancel and a few blocks of masonry to the west. The west end was excavated by A. Barr-Hamilton in 1965–6.<sup>3</sup>

The church stands in a churchyard c. 50 metres square on the 50-metre contour overlooking the Cuckmere valley to the west and a dry valley to the east. The long narrow parish mostly comprises downland and is comparable in size, shape and geology to its southern neighbour, Litlington. Aerial photography has revealed the remains of a deserted settlement in the field south-west of the church, but the parish today is virtually devoid of population.

The standing fabric of the chancel is of 13th- and 14th-century date but excavation suggested that the church originally consisted of a 12th-century nave and west tower (and, presumably, chancel). A new chancel was built in the 13th century and in the 14th century the original 12th-century nave was demolished and

a totally new structure erected. The masonry of the 12th-century walls was used in the construction of the new building.

It is not known when the nave was destroyed and the church achieved its modern form, but an early post-medieval date may be postulated.

#### SUTTON, DEDICATION UNKNOWN, TV 495995

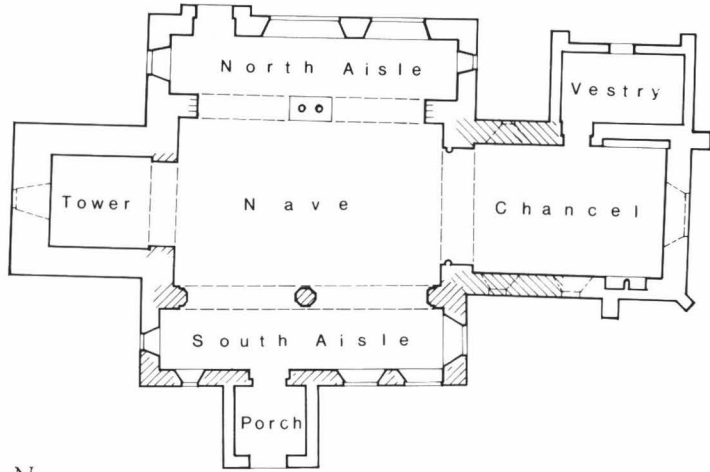
Nothing now remains of this church apart from a fragmentary flint wall in the grounds of Sutton Place, Seaford. It was reported as 'desolate', and the parish uninhabited, by the beginning of the 16th century when it was annexed by the parish of St. Leonard's, Seaford. There is no record of its subsequent demolition and its history could only be recovered through excavation. Unfortunately the area has been subjected to intensive redevelopment in modern times and the archaeological remains of the church may have been totally obliterated. Neither its churchyard nor the boundaries of its parish can be traced today.

#### WEST DEAN, ALL SAINTS, TV 525997 (Fig. 5)

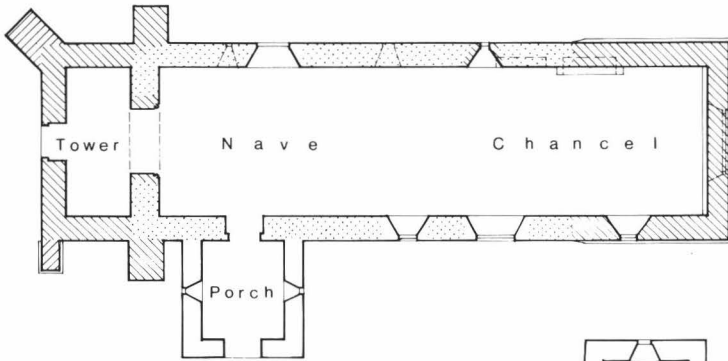
The church stands on the 50-metre contour roughly in the centre of its parish (although the southern boundary where it adjoined Exceat is now lost). The parish consists of roughly equal parts of valley bottom and chalk downland which is today heavily wooded. Apart from the small nucleated settlement around the church, including the medieval rectory and the ruins of medieval manor and dovecote, there is no other settlement in the parish.

The churchyard, c. 40 x 60 metres in extent, lies on a natural slope on the north side of the village and is bounded by a sunken way to the south. The church, consisting of undivided nave and chancel very long for their width and a west tower of the same width, stands in its centre.

BERWICK



WEST DEAN



WILMINGTON

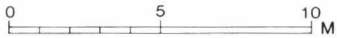
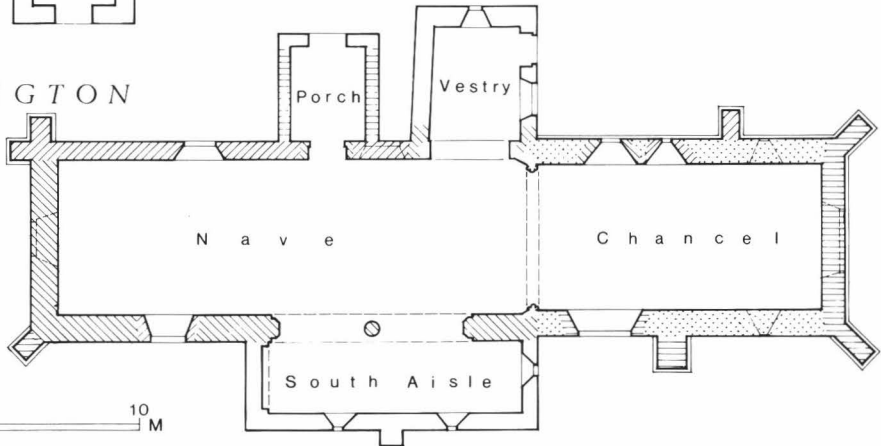


Fig. 5. Cuckmere valley churches. Plans (see Fig. 2 for key).

### *Church Development*

When first built the church probably consisted of a simple rectangle enclosing nave and chancel. A small, single-splay window in the north wall dates the nave to the 12th century. At first sight the chancel seems to be of the same build but a slight thickening at the base of the walls is indicative of a simple plinth and this, taken together with the presence of several put-log holes on the external north wall suggests that the chancel was rebuilt, probably in the 13th century when lancets were inserted in the north and south nave walls. The west tower may have been added at the same time; the exceptionally wide buttresses at the junction of tower and nave may mask a join between the two.

No major modifications seem to have taken place after the 13th century, although windows were inserted throughout in the 14th century and the round-headed tower arch may have been embellished by an archway with attached half-columns. The upper stage of the tower may also have been completed in the 14th century, perhaps originally with a helm spire as indicated by a fossilized roof line particularly visible on its east face. Apart from the modern porch the church still preserves its medieval form.

### WILMINGTON, ST. MARY AND ST. PETER, TQ 544043 (Fig. 5)

The church stands on the 50-metre contour at the south end of a long narrow parish which runs parallel to the east bank of the Cuckmere river apart from a narrow strip which extends westwards to join the river itself. Except for a small sector in the south, the parish lies entirely within the low-lying valley bottom. Its churchyard was originally *c.* 50 x 70 metres in extent but has recently been extended to north and west. On the south it is bounded by the remains of Wilmington Priory whose church it was. The present settlement is concentrated along the road joining Wilmington to the A 27 and there is very little other occupation in the parish.

The church consists of nave, chancel, south

aisle, north porch and north chapel (now a vestry). Some topographical drawings which hang in the church show that the south aisle had originally given access to the priory with a flight of steps (night stairs) in roughly the position of the present west window of the south aisle.

### *Church Development*

The earliest standing fabric is the 12th-century chancel with windows at the east end of the north and south walls and an external decorated string course at sill level. The string course can be traced along the entire length of the north wall but it stops abruptly before the north-east corner. This may mark the corner of the 12th-century chancel, which was extended slightly with the addition of the east wall in the 15th century.

The nave seems to have been added in the 13th century, with a reconstruction of its north wall a century later. But the thickness of the south and west walls accords well with that of the chancel and they may be of 12th-century build although there are no other features to support this. They could, equally, have been rebuilt directly on the foundations of an earlier wall and therefore have preserved the original width. The north wall of the nave, however, does appear to be of completely different construction, probably of 14th-century date although it incorporates earlier features.

Later modifications include the east wall of the chancel in the 15th century and modern work on the south aisle which obliterated signs of the church's junction with the priory. The north chapel was also converted into a vestry and the chancel arch rebuilt in the 19th century although following a 13th-century pattern.

The association of the church with the priory probably led to the use of Caen stone for some of the dressings and probably also to the decoration of the exterior of the church with the string course ornamented with triangles.

### CONCLUSIONS

Although the Cuckmere valley seems to

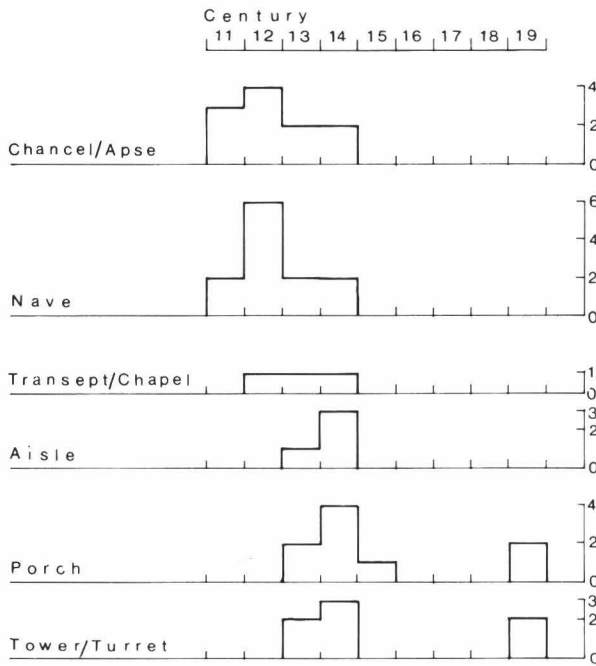


Fig. 6. Cuckmere valley churches. Table showing the periods of building of main elements.

form a discrete area of East Sussex it displays many differences in settlement pattern, land use, and so on. For example, the parishes at the north end of the valley which occupy the valley bottom are large and irregular and extend on both sides of the river. Further south the river forms a barrier between east and west and the parishes are strictly contained. They are also much smaller than those further north and their settlement pattern is one of small nucleated centres around the churches with little occupation elsewhere. The northern parishes are settled with scattered farmsteads as well as very small nucleations beside the churches.

The churches themselves reflect some of these differences. Hellingly and Arlington were large and highly decorated structures by the 12th century and continued to expand for several centuries more. They are rivalled in size only by the much later Alfriston church, the other churches in the south tending to be small with aisleless naves and few late extensions.

Even Wilmington and Alciston with their monastic connections failed to expand to any great extent. Fig. 6 shows the main phases of construction in all the churches in diagrammatic form. The 11th and 12th centuries saw the building of most of the main bodies of the churches and there was a flourishing period of additions in the 14th century. The 15th century saw very little in the way of major modifications; perhaps by that time the Cuckmere valley was suffering a decline in population and wealth such as was common elsewhere in England during the late Middle Ages.

This paper has been devoted to a summary of the standing fabric of the churches and their setting. It is offered as a first step towards the better understanding of church and settlement in medieval Sussex. The logical next step is to take the area parish by parish and use all available sources of evidence to build up a picture of medieval rural development. The parish churches are an important part of that

picture but also a starting point for a better understanding of medieval life.

#### *Acknowledgements*

We wish to express our appreciation for

permission, always readily given by the incumbent, to survey these churches, and to the Margary Research Fund of the Sussex Archaeological Society for a grant towards the cost of the work.

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#### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>See *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **123** (1985), 1-25.

<sup>2</sup>*Suss. Arch. Coll.* **58** (1916), 138-70.

<sup>3</sup>*Suss. Arch. Coll.* **108** (1970), 1-22.