



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

Burham, Kent



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Burham, Kent

CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

*by John E Vigar (Historian and Development Manager for
The Churches Conservation Trust)*

HISTORY

Burham takes its name from its proximity to the burgh – or borough – of Rochester. The original settlement would have been near a crossing of the River Medway, but in the 19th century the centre of population shifted to the main valley road on higher ground. All that remains of the original settlement are the church, court and a few cottages.

This part of the Medway Valley was important during medieval times as the ferry that plied across the great horseshoe bend of river here carried many pilgrims to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Those travelling from London would have travelled via Rochester, whilst those on the prehistoric track now known as the Pilgrim's Way would have crossed here, or at nearby Wouldham where there was also a ferry. It is fascinating to look at this church not in isolation, but in tandem with its 'sister' church at Snodland across the river, and its companions at Wouldham and Halling. All these structures show that cross-river transport made them wealthy and the local tradition that travellers sheltered in these churches whilst waiting for the tides is probably based on reality.

*Front cover: The exterior from the south
(Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: The interior from the base of the
tower (© Crown copyright. NMR.)*

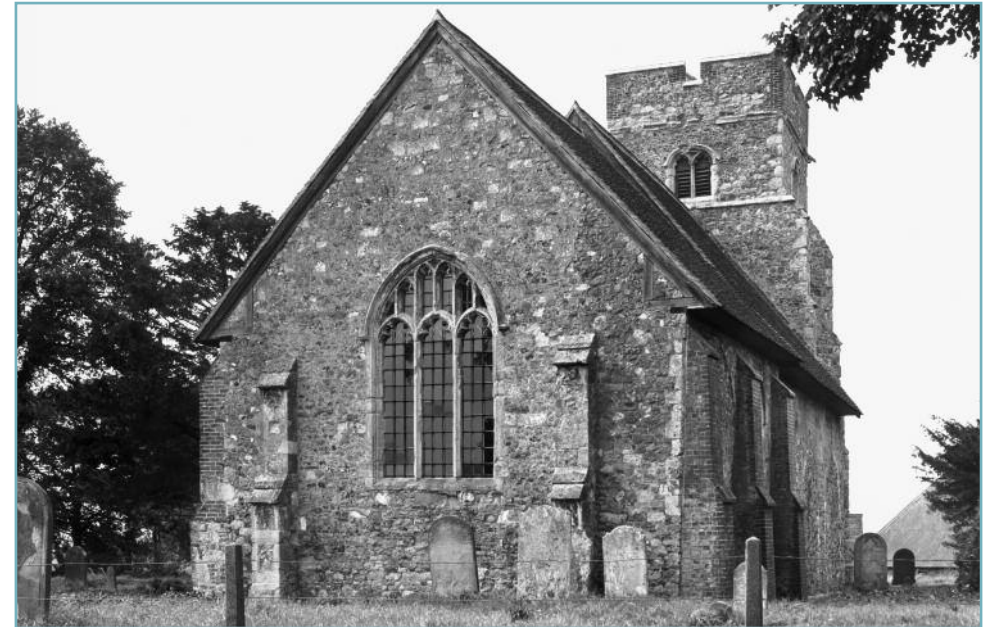
Evidence of earlier occupation of this area has been discovered; not two miles (3.2km) away are the remains of several Stone Age burial chambers, the most famous of which is known as Kit's Coty; a Roman underground temple to Mithras was discovered near the church in 1892 (although this was subsequently destroyed), whilst a large Roman villa at Eccles, a mile to the south of the church, testifies to the fertility of the soil in this part of Kent.

In the early 19th century what must have then been a rural community bisected by a cross-valley road was altered beyond all recognition by the cement industry. The discovery of a way of making 'Portland cement' (so called from its similarity in appearance to Portland stone), led to rapid expansion of the chalk quarrying industry in this narrow part of the valley, and both sides of the river show the scars that testify to the continuance of the industry well



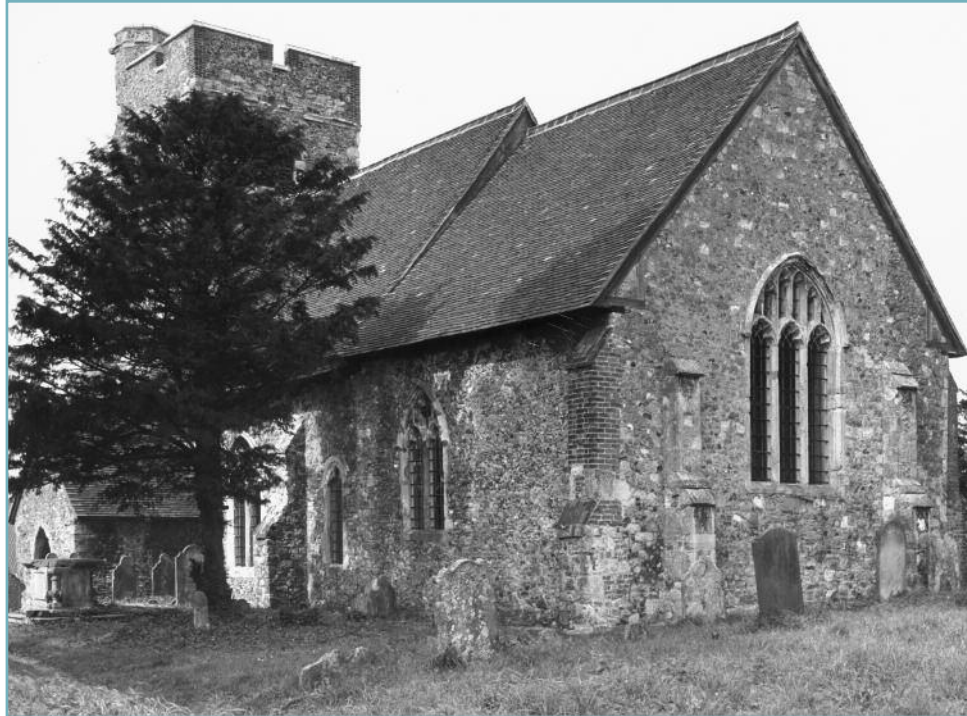
into the 20th century. Indeed at one time there were a dozen cement works hereabouts. It was the workers from this industry who moved the village to the higher slopes, and built a school and a magnificent church that better suited their requirements. This was designed in the Gothic style by Maidstone architect EW Stephens and opened in 1881. Almost at once, the medieval church was abandoned (although its churchyard remained open for burials).

By the 1920s the 'old church' as it was now known, was described in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* as 'now devoid of fittings', and it is certain that it would have been lost forever had it not been rescued by a national charity, The Friends of Friendless Churches. They carried out sensitive repairs to make the building secure and watertight and the church was reopened for occasional services in 1956. Even so the financial drain was so great



that the parish could not afford to maintain two churches and in 1973 the old church was declared redundant. It was then vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust), since when repairs have been carried out under the direction of Anthony Swaine, Jonathan Carey and Edward Sargeant.

In a totally unexpected twist of fate the Victorian church subsequently suffered major structural deterioration and had to be demolished in 1981. The Anglican congregation now shares a place of worship with the Methodist Church, whilst the old church remains in splendid isolation in the valley below.



EXTERIOR

The church now consists of a west tower, nave and chancel and south porch, although evidence can be clearly seen that it was once much larger. The tower is the most prominent feature and the low-lying land makes it seem taller than its sixty or so feet (18.3m). It is typical of Kent churches, having a so-called 'beacon turret' rising up one corner, to give easy access to the roof. At one time it was thought that beacons could be lit on the tower top in cases of emergency, but we now know that only a few church towers were ever used in this way. That the tower was a later addition may be seen from the way in which the west wall of the church has been used as the lower course of the two eastern buttresses. The tower probably dates from about 1450 and the size of the west doorway, with its deeply moulded arches, shows that a wealthy benefactor must have made a donation to this noble structure. The tower is of three stages and originally contained three bells. The two 18th-century bells now hang in other Kent churches whilst sadly the earliest bell, which dated from the early 14th century, was stolen in 1982.

The building materials to be seen in the fabric of the church include flint, ragstone, chalk, tufa (a sure indication of a Norman church here) and firestone from Reigate in Surrey. There are also extensive instances of reused Roman brick. The roof is covered in handmade tiles.

INTERIOR

The church is entered through a 15th-century porch. The step down into the church is an indication of how the churchyard level has risen on the south side, necessitating the construction of huge drains on that side of the building to try to keep dampness at bay. Even so, in the winter, there is sometimes standing water on the floor which is very close to the level of the River Medway a few yards to the west.

Near the door are two fonts, both of Norman date. The square one has always been here. Typical of its period it has four round-headed



arches on each side and stands on a later round pillar. The circular font, which has a Norman bowl but 19th-century base, is not original to this church. It was given to the Victorian church when it opened and was brought here for safe keeping when that church was demolished in 1981.

The body of the church dates from the 11th century and blocked round-headed windows of this period are clearly visible high in the north and south walls. There is no chancel arch, but the nicely-proportioned arch to the tower dates from the 15th century. Also of this date is the wooden door to the tower spiral staircase.



Early in the 13th century, when it was about a hundred years old, the church was enlarged by the addition of aisles on both north and south sides. These were built to allow elaborate processions to take place and to create spaces for side altars – possibly to be used by the many travellers crossing the river. The ‘twin’ church at Snodland, over the river was also enlarged at this date. Here at Burham the north aisle was built first, followed within about 25 years by the south aisle. However, for reasons that are still unclear, both aisles were demolished after only about 200 years. It is possible that the wet ground caused the aisles to become unstable, or perhaps the population suffered as a result of the Black Death which it is known was particularly hard-felt in this part of Kent in 1348.

The windows which now occupy the blocked arches that originally led to the aisles would formerly have been in the aisle outer walls. Dressed stonework like this was expensive and could only be made by a professional stonemason, so when the aisles were destroyed the windows were retained and set in the infill helping to indicate (by their design) that the aisles were built one after the other.

Low down in the north wall of the nave can be seen the start of the stone spiral staircase that would have led to the rood loft. This loft was used to light candles in front of the rood beam which, together with a wooden screen, would have marked the division of nave and chancel

during the medieval period. There are many churches in Kent that did not have a stone chancel arch, and in these the screen would have been an essential structural division between the parts of the church used by the parishioners and the clergy. On the south side of the church is a small piscina, showing that an altar would have stood in this position, immediately in front of the screen. If the light is right the blocked upper doorway to the rood loft on the north wall, can be picked out high up and just to the right of the blocked half-arch of the arcade.

The east end of the church has been much altered. It is likely that in the 14th century the chancel was rebuilt, with aisles, to match those then existing in the nave. However, like the nave aisles, these were subsequently demolished, after just over a hundred years, and the chancel was shortened. It can be seen that on the north side the easternmost arch is cut off by the east wall. Like the windows in the nave aisles, the east window (which dates from the 14th century) was moved to its present position when the chancel was shortened. Similarly, the windows in the blocked arcades are those that would originally have lit the aisles. In the north-eastern arch (although only visible from the outside) is a blocked doorway which probably dates from the time of these alterations, and which would have provided access to the chancel for the priests when the screen doors were locked.

The altar is a fine example of what is commonly known as an 'English altar', popular in the years after the First World War and introduced by the architect Sir Ninian Comper. This example originally stood in the Southwark Diocesan Retreat House in Carshalton as a memorial to Bishop William Woodcock Hough. When the retreat house moved to Warlingham the altar was transferred there but when the house

moved a third time – to Blackheath – the altar was no longer required and it was presented to this church.

St Mary's church has stood here next to the Medway for nearly a thousand years whilst its surroundings have changed beyond recognition. Still much loved by its local community and used for occasional services, it remains a place of peace and quiet for all to enjoy.



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource. In 2009 the Trust celebrates 40 years of saving historic churches at risk.

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We strongly recommend checking our website www.visitchurches.org.uk for the most up to date opening and access details and directions.

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Historic churches, due to their age and previous use, often have uneven and worn floors. Please take care, especially in wet weather when floors and steps can also be slippery.

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