

OUR PARISH CHURCH

Bob Britton is your Guide

Part 1 - Back to its Roots

Your Editor, knowing that I have an interest in the history of St Michael's, has asked me to contribute a number of articles that we hope will be of general interest. So first, we shall look at the distant past.

Archaeologists have shown that the area that our town now covers was occupied by a series of peoples living from a quarter of a million years ago to the present day. The earliest were wandering hunters using stone implements, and later peoples of the Bronze and Iron Ages were settled farmers on both sides of our river valley. In pagan rituals of worship, high ground was often chosen as a meeting place and it is quite likely that the clearing in the forest where Windhill is now, became such a place. Such sacred spots were often marked by stone circles or earthworks, but here it was more likely to be a wooden palisade.

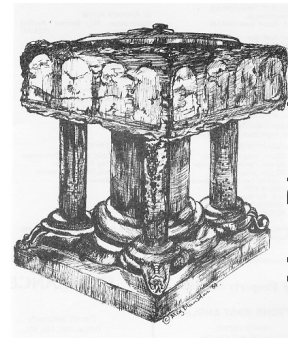
With the coming of the Romans from about 200 AD, Christianity slowly became adopted and although there is evidence in the Cannons Close area of a Christian style burial in an east/west placed stone coffin* there is no evidence of any Christian place of worship. The first Christian martyr in these lands, Alban, died about 287AD and gives his name to our Diocese. A return to pagan worship followed with the coming of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings to these isles, until the influence of Celtic monks and Augustine of Canterbury re-ignited the Christian faith in the 6th and 7th centuries. In this area it was Cedd from the Lindisfarne monastery who came down to the kingdom of Sigebert of the East Saxons in 664 AD. He built a church that stands to this day at Bradwell-on-Sea in Essex and may well have been responsible for restoring the Christian faith to the people of Estarteford. Of their church, (if there was one) on Windhill there is no trace, but churches dedicated to St Michael are frequently built on high ground where pagan rituals had once taken place, so symbolising the Archangel's triumph over the works of darkness. St Peter's at Bradwell was built with stone from the derelict Roman fort of Othona, while nearer to us at Greensted-juxta-Ongar we can see an example of a Saxon church largely constructed from tree trunks. Perhaps our early church was made in similar fashion or had walls made in wattle and daub. Such a church would have had a nave and chancel of similar width and normally a door at the west end. It would probably be thatched with reeds from the river. We can only guess all this, but we know that there was a priest here in the latter days of the Saxon rulers because one

was recorded in the Domesday record of 1086.* Edith the Fair (Eddeva), a mistress of Harold Godwinson sold her Manor lands at Estarteford to the Saxon bishop of London prior to the defeat of the Saxon army in 1066. She is credited with going to the battlefield to identify Harold's remains and returning with them for careful burial. The discovery of a Norman vault in 1850 under the floor of the nave to the west of the cross aisle of our present church containing three stone coffins, two of which contained female bones but the third the bones of an extremely large male, prompted the speculation that Eddeva might have brought the mutilated remains of her king back to Estarteford! However, Waltham Abbey or possibly Bosham, West Sussex, have greater claims to be Harold's resting place.

The Norman vault and the re-discovery of the long-lost Norman font bowl during the 1868/9 restorations indicate the possibility of a Norman church superseding a Saxon one and it is claimed that William I had one built on the present site.* If that is so, there is no further evidence.

In the next article we shall look at the church we have come to know, and yet one more building that has vanished!

* *Bishop's Stortford, a Short History - B/S Local History Society, 1992, p10.*



Meg Blunsdon