

A History of Ash and its Churches

The present parish of Ash, more than 7,000 acres in extent and one of the largest in Kent, was once only a part of the great manor of Wingham. Originally a royal manor, Wingham was given by King Athelstan of Kent to the See of Canterbury about 850 : it covered the present parishes of Ash, Goodnestone, Nonington, Wingham and parts of Staple and Womenswold.

In a list of churches probably made in 1071, in which 'Aesce' is said to belong to Wingham, mention is also made of an apparently more important church 'de Raette', as well as one at 'Fleota' belonging to the manor of Folkestone. If, as seems likely, 'de Raette' refers to Richborough, this is the only record of that church; but the chapel of Fleet, actually within the 3rd century Roman walls of Richborough Castle, continued in use until the 16th century. Leland in the time of Henry VIII wrote that 'withyn the castel is a lytle parochie Chirch of S. Augustine'.

It was believed that when St. Augustine first stepped ashore in England in 597 the impression of his foot was miraculously left upon a stone. This relic was afterwards kept in this chapel dedicated to him, and pilgrims flocked there upon the anniversary of the landing to pray and to recover their health. Excavations have uncovered the ground plan of the chapel, and confirm that it was pre-Norman in origin. Excavations in the northwest corner of the Roman fort have also, revealed the foundations and font of an even earlier church of c.400, one of the earliest Christian structures known in Britain.

By the 13th century there was another chapel in the northwest of the parish, at Overland, where complaint was made in 1294 that 'there used to be a baptistery and seven years ago it was taken away and is at Esse'. Edward Hasted, writing about 1790, said that the chapel had been 'for some time in ruins ... having been desecrated about the beginning of this century'. Its exact site has now been lost : some carved stonework which may come from it is at Knell; a few more pieces are in the church.

In 1282 Ash became a separate parish. In the deed founding a College of Canons at Wingham and dividing that parish into four, Archbishop Peckham explained, '*We have turned our eyes to the church of Wingham as it were to a fruitful vineyard..... which cannot be easily cultivated by the labours of one husbandman... from the great extent of the parish as well as its numerous population*'. He assigned to Wingham parish church the chapel of Overland; to Ash he gave the chapel of Fleet. It was the duty of the canons of Wingham College, to whom the tithes of Ash were paid, to provide a vicar. In 1535 the parishioners

of Ash complained: 'There has always been a vicar here to serve the cure till for the last 22 years the said Canons have usurped the vicarage to their own use ... within a quarter of a year we have had seven curates, which has caused much strife as we are 500 residents.'

In 1547 Wingham College was suppressed by Henry VIII, and its possessions forfeited to the Crown. In 1549, "the late chapel called Richborough Chapel in Ash Parish with its burial ground, buildings, lead, glass, iron, stones and tiles except the bells and leaden roof", and "the late Chapel of Overland in Ash parish next Sandwich in width 22 feet in length 34 feet, with its burial ground of half a rod, buildings, etc.", were both sold to William Hyde and Hugh Cartwright.

The right of presentation to the benefice of Ash was granted by Queen Mary to the Archbishop in 1558, and three years later Queen Elizabeth I gave the rectory - the right to the great tithes - to the See of Canterbury. The Archbishop is still the patron of the living today.

In the 19th century the need again arose for chapels in the more distant parts of the parish. In 1842 Holy Trinity Church at Ware was built, and Westmarsh was formed into a separate ecclesiastical parish in 1849. The corrugated-iron mission room of St. Augustine's, Richborough, was opened in 1888. It was followed in 1892 by a similar room at Goldstone, rebuilt in 1904. But by the 1960s the motor car had made these separate buildings less necessary. In 1967 the parish of Westmarsh was re-united with Ash; St. Augustine's, Richborough, was closed in 1969, and Holy Trinity Church in 1970.

An unusual feature of the church is the south chancel, whose axis is out of alignment with the nave. It was once supposed that this architectural oddity represented the inclined head of Christ on the Cross, but a structural fault caused by rebuilding and restoration is a more likely explanation. (Bygone Kent, 1985, Michael David Mirams.)

In recent years the Parish of Ash with Westmarsh has been linked to the parish churches at Goodnestone and Chillenden through a united benefice. Further pastoral reorganisation in the East Bridge Deanery began in 2012; a new canonry benefice was formed of the parishes of Ash, Chillenden, Elmstone, Goodnestone, Preston and Wingham.