

# EARLY ECCLESIASTICAL SITES IN SOMERSET: THREE CASE STUDIES

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## INTRODUCTION

We know that the emergence of the 'English' church can largely be attributed to Augustine who came to Britain in 597 to re-establish Christianity along 'Roman' lines, and it is generally accepted that the Anglo-Saxon kings of Wessex had been converted to this Roman form of Christianity by the time that they started to exercise significant influence over Somerset in the late 7th century. However there has been considerable discussion as to what extent a 'British' church existed before this time, and if it did what its origins were, given that the Romans are credited with bringing Christianity to Britain, but also given the potential significance of other evangelising activities such as those by western missionaries from Wales and Ireland. Significantly in Somerset there were nearly three centuries between the end of Roman period and when the Anglo-Saxons started to take control.

In the past Radford (1963, 31–6) has stressed the importance of western missionaries in the conversion of Somerset, pointing to the evidence from dedications to Celtic saints and associated hagiographical material. However, in the 1970s and 80s this was brought into question when Pearce (1973, 95–120) suggested that a large number of dedications in North Devon and Somerset were the result of a later resurgence of interest in these Celtic saints in the 11th century. Although this view has been widely accepted it is still argued that some of the dedications may indeed be genuine (Burrow 1981, 59) and that they indicate a 'major revitalisation of Christianity' at this time (Hase 1994, 49).

The following case studies of Street, Kewstoke, and St Decumans (Watchet) look specifically at the evidence for Christianity in this post-Roman and pre-English period by focusing on a number of church sites in Somerset which have associations with 'Celtic' saints that have been suggested as possibly being of a genuinely early date (Fig. 1). To start with consideration will be given to how sites may be identified.

## IDENTIFYING EARLY ECCLESIASTICAL SITES

The problem with identifying early ecclesiastical sites in the pre-English period is that even where they did possibly exist there are no administrative records. Later in the early-medieval period there are Anglo-Saxon charters, which can be a source of information especially for land grants to early Anglo-Saxon monasteries. Most documentary material however dates to

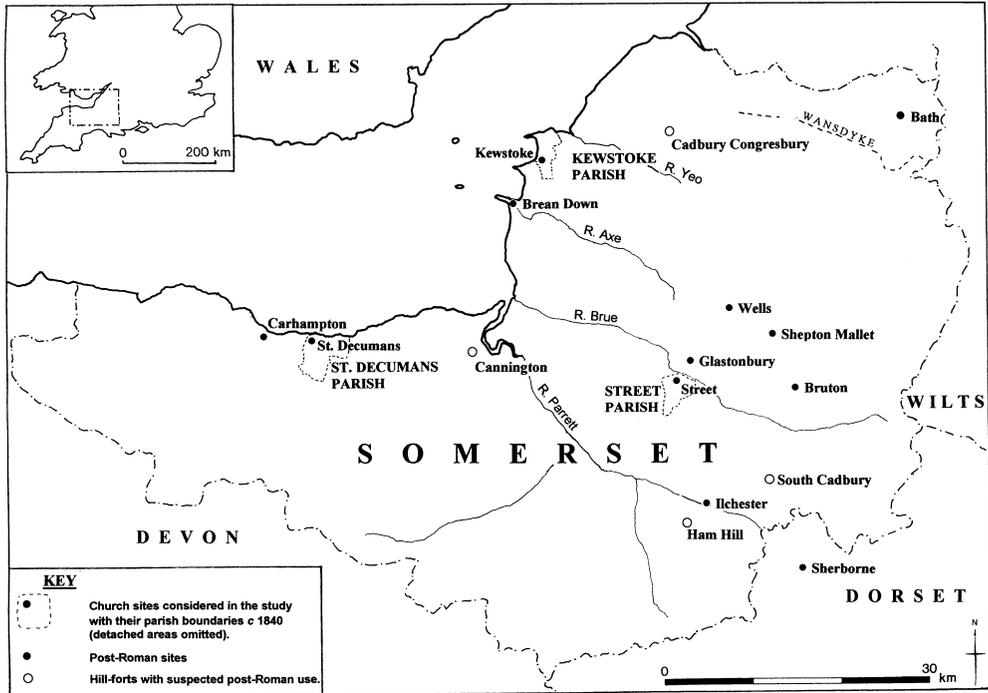


Fig. 1 Location maps with sites discussed in the text

after the Norman Conquest, and even the Domesday Book, which is one of the earliest sources, does not contain all the churches that existed at the time (Betley 1987, 23). However these later records can, in certain cases, provide information on the continuation of early medieval foundations and their estates (Pearce 1981, 189; Blair 1985, 115). Olson (1989) has had some success in using this later material to work back to identify early monasteries in Cornwall, however it clearly needs to be used in conjunction with other evidence in order for there to be any degree of certainty about the origins of a site. It is therefore necessary to consider what other evidence is available.

Church buildings themselves generally do not date from earlier than the Norman period and in most cases their continued use provides little scope for archaeological inquiry into any earlier history. Recent research in Wales and the West Country, though, has considered a broad range of indicators for early ecclesiastical sites of pre-English origin (Edwards and Lane 1992b; Brook 1992; Preston-Jones 1992; Silvester 1997), and it has been suggested that the following may be useful pointers to a site of some antiquity:

*Evidence of an ecclesiastical enclosure displaying curvilinear characteristics*

Traditionally a curvilinear enclosure has been put forward as an important indicator for ecclesiastical sites in early medieval north-western Europe (Thomas 1971; Blair 1992; Brook 1992), and in particular has been seen as a characteristic of early 'Celtic' Christian sites (Preston-Jones 1987, 155). However there has been considerable debate in this country about such enclosures, as to how far they can be distinguished from secular sites and as to how reliable they are in indicating sites of pre-English origin as such enclosures appear to have been used at a later date as well (Blair 1992, 233; Dark 1994, 38–44; Petts 2002, 27–30). In particular there has been much discussion about curvilinear churchyards. The traditional view has been

that curvilinear churchyards are indicators of early enclosed graveyards dating back to the post-Roman period (Thomas, 1971; Pearce 1978, 67–75; Yorke, 1995). The model Thomas (1971) put forward for their development is of a ‘developed cemetery’ sequence which suggests that enclosed cemeteries were in existence as far back as the 5th and 6th centuries, before they were combined with the first small churches or chapels. It has been said that this sequence:

‘lies behind those hundreds of parish churches, often dedicated in honour of obscure local saints, which stand within their raised circular or oval graveyards to this day’ (Thomas 1971, 68).

However it has been pointed out for some time that few sites are demonstrably of 5th or 6th-century origin (Pearce 1978, 68; Calder 2002, 76–7). Moreover Petts (2002, 42–4) has recently challenged the view that Christian curvilinear burial enclosures were in use this early, arguing that there is no convincing evidence for such enclosures earlier than the 8th century, when open cemeteries started to be replaced by those with clearly defined boundaries as part of wider changes in funerary behaviour brought about by the church having an increased interest in controlling burial in the community. Nevertheless even if enclosed burial grounds cannot be said to be a characteristic feature of western British mortuary practice in the 5th and 6th centuries, this still leaves open the possibility that some curvilinear churchyards are of an early origin but that they may have not originally been burial grounds. It has long been recognised that sites of possible monastic foundation are difficult to differentiate from enclosed graveyards as they share similar features, principally a curvilinear enclosure (Pearce 1978, 76; Thomas, 1971), and some curvilinear churchyards are believed to have been 6th-century monasteries, such as St Kew, Cornwall, and Llandinabo, Herefordshire (Thomas 1971; Pearce 1978, 83–4; Brook 1992, 87). However despite this it must be concluded that, when taken on its own, a curvilinear enclosure is not a reliable indicator for the early Christian, pre-English, origin of a site.

#### *Place-names, dedications and hagiography*

Onomastic or place-name evidence has long been identified as important in identifying early ecclesiastical sites (Bowen 1956; Padel 1976–7; Pearce 1978; Thomas 1981; Roberts 1992; Edwards 1996). Some of the better known place-name elements which relate to ecclesiastical sites are *merther* (*merthyr*), *eglos* (*eglwys* or *eccles*), *lann* (*Llan*) and *stow*. The most common of these in Wales, and in Cornwall is *lann* (*Llan*) which was used early on in an ecclesiastical context to mean an ‘enclosure’, but could refer to either a ‘monastery’ or an enclosed cemetery (Bowen 1956, 1; Padel 1976–7, 15–27; Davies 1982, 145; Roberts 1992, 43; Thomas 1994, 311).

Hagiography, that is the accounts of saints’ ‘Lives’, is a potential source of information for the post-Roman period and the so called ‘Age of the Saints’, although these *Lives* are seen as highly unreliable and are generally written from a 11th or 12th-century perspective (Pearce 1973, 95–120; Davies 1982; Dark 2000, 42). The subject of dedications to ‘Celtic’ saints and the possibility that these also only date to the 11th century, when there was a resurgence of interest in these saints, has already been mentioned. Churches are known to have frequently changed their dedicatory names in the medieval period as a result of the acquisition of relics, changes in proprietorship and/or the importation of hagiographical traditions, or other political events, but this was usually to the more popular or well-known saints (Pearce 1978, 137; Bettey 1987, 23). It is equally possible though that genuine early dedications which arose from local cults have been lost as a result of this process (Silvester 1997, 117). It may sometimes be possible to establish the earlier dedication from place-name evidence, charters, monastic cartularies or bishop’s registers (Bettey 1987, 23).

#### *Topographical location*

Early church sites in the west seem to have had an intimate association with water, whether they are in close proximity to the sea, set on river terraces, in valleys or on spurs above

streams (Bowen 1956, 116; Hurley 1982, 310; Silvester 1997, 117). However this does not appear to be a characteristic that is limited to 'Celtic' church sites as it has been found that the Anglo-Saxons sited their early churches close to water, often in the bends or at the confluence of rivers (Blair 1992; Hase 1994, 58). Another topographical factor that has also been suggested to be significant is the low-lying nature of many early church sites (Bowen 1956, 116). Whilst this may also not establish the pre-English origins of a site it may be a useful indicator when used with other evidence in helping to distinguish ecclesiastical from high-status secular sites in the post-Roman period (Dark 1994, 41).

#### *Other archaeological evidence*

Other archaeological evidence such as early burials, early sculpture (including early-medieval inscribed stones), the presence of a well in a churchyard or its environs, or artefactual evidence, such as early-medieval metalwork or manuscripts can be evidence for the antiquity of a site (Pearce 1978, 68; Hurley 1982, 314; Edwards and Lane 1992b, 8). Dark (1994, 44) has commented that 'contemporary adult formal burial, although a feature common to all textually attested excavated ecclesiastical sites, is absent from all textually attested fifth- to seventh-century 'Celtic' secular sites'. Also where burials are found with domestic evidence this may suggest a monastic use (Dark 1994, 44–51).

Rodwell (1981, 142) has highlighted the importance of wells to the siting of churches, and churches or chapels built at or near holy wells is well documented (Morris 1989; Jones 1992). This may have been part of a process of absorption of traditional ritual practice although it may equally have been for more practical reasons, with churches needing water for baptisms amongst other things (Morris 1989, 87; Quinn 1999, 17). Although little evidence has been found for the early origins of holy wells it has been suggested that they may have been one of the main foci of activity of early missionaries and that these sites have been neglected by archaeologists and academics in England (Blair 1996, 10; Rodwell 1981, 142).

It is clear from this review of the subject that there are significant difficulties in identifying early ecclesiastical sites. Nevertheless consideration will now be given to the evidence available from the three case studies.

## HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, STREET

### **Site location and background**

Holy Trinity Church, Street (Fig. 2), is located in a low-lying inland position within the central Somerset Levels (Figs 1 and 3). The church actually lies on a small low hillock, which rises to just above 10m above sea level, on the southern edge of the flood plain of the river Brue, with Glastonbury just to the north. Until the last half of the 20th century the church was somewhat isolated, being divorced from the town of Street, which lay on the higher ground to the south where the land starts to rise to the Polden ridge. The church is located on the very northern edge of the ancient parish of Street (Fig. 4)

The present parish church of Street, which is dedicated to the Holy Trinity, dates back to the 14th, or late 13th century. The site itself has early connections with Glastonbury Abbey, and Street church was anciently claimed as one of its seven churches (McGarvie 1987; Abrams 1996, 154). It is certainly clear that at least as far back as the 12th century there was a church on the site which had been under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Abbey for some time (Calder 2001a, 83). By the 13th century, Street church had a dependent chapel at Walton (Watkin 1944, xvi; McGarvie 1987). The site is connected with St Gildas in the medieval

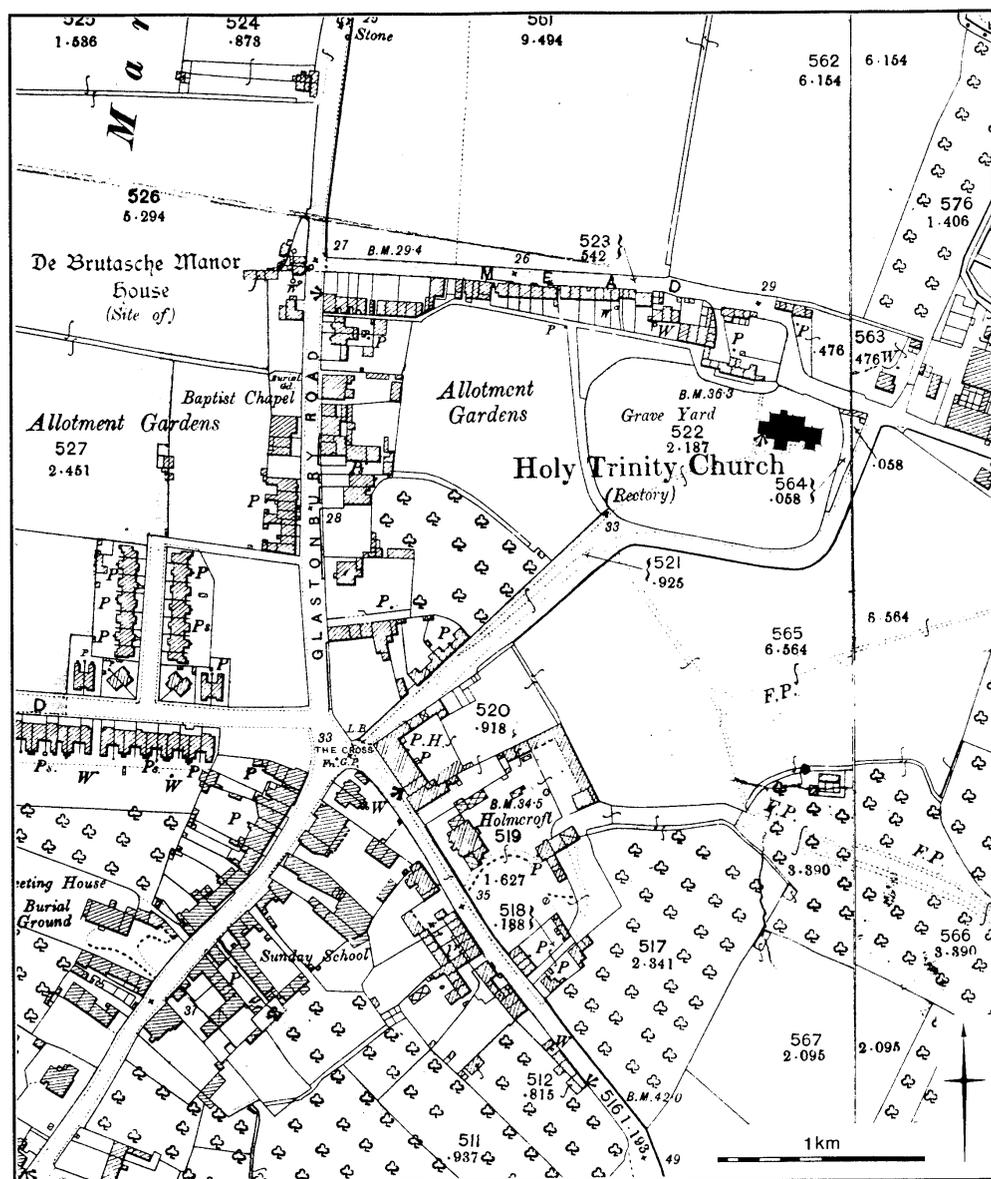


Fig. 2 Holy Trinity, Street, OS 2nd edn (1904)

period and there is evidence that the church was actually dedicated to him between the 13th and 16th centuries (Bates 1906; Burdock 1977; McGarvie 1987, 27).

Also associated with the district is the place-name *Lantokay*, which is given in a grant of land by Bishop Haeddi of Winchester to the abbot of Glastonbury in 677–92 (S1249, Sawyer 1968; Edwards 1988, 19; Abrams 1996, 153), and would appear to be of pre Anglo-Saxon origin. The significance of this place-name will be discussed below but it has been suggested that the name derives from a St Kea (Doble 1929; Turner 1950; Padel 1988; Carley 1996, 96) an obscure saint who according to his *Life* was born in Wales and migrated to Brittany. There

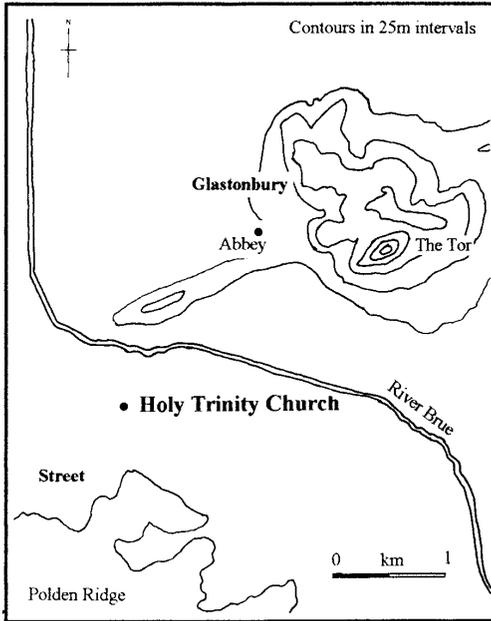


Fig. 3 Street, site topography (after Dunning 1988)

is evidence of Kea's cult in Brittany where his *Life* was written (Orme 2000, 157) and St Kea also appears to have given his name to Landkey (*Landechai*, 1166) in Devon and Old Kea (*Landegea*, 1068) in Cornwall, the site of a possible early monastery (Doble, 1929; Olson, 1989). According to Doble (1929, 8, n 1) in Cornwall 'Old people still pronounce Kea as Kay'.

There is evidence of pre-medieval activity on the site as Roman potsherds, including samian, and an Iron Age coin have been found in the graveyard (Hollinrake 1995, 9–10).

### Discussion

Although there is evidence that St Gildas was venerated at Glastonbury itself as early as the 10th century (Wormald 1988) there appears to have been a clear resurgence of interest in him there in the 12th century when a version of his *Life* was commissioned by the Abbey (Dunning 1988, 44–6) and it is likely that it is only from this time that Street church

became connected to St Gildas and the dedication arose (Pearce 1978; Hollinrake 1995; Calder 2002, 30, 85).

Nevertheless despite this potentially spurious association with St Gildas other indicators point to the site being of early-Christian origin. Central to this assertion is the place-name *Lantokay*, mentioned in the late 7th-century Glastonbury charter, given the significance of such *lann* (*Llan*) names as mentioned earlier. Although it has been said that the location of *Lantokay* is 'lost' (Costen 1992, 77; Orme 1996, 21) one must question exactly what is lost. Since at least the late-medieval period, the estate of three hides at *Lantokay* mentioned in the charter has been identified with *Leghe*, which has been taken as 'Leigh' in Street, a collective name for the district that includes the three hamlets High or Over Leigh, Middle Leigh and Lower Leigh (Robinson 1921; Turner 1951; Finberg 1964). This association is generally accepted and the four hides held by Glastonbury at *Lega* in 1086, for which there is no earlier documentation, probably relates to this estate although the original bounds are not known (Abrams 1996, 154). Besides the estate at *Lantokay*, though, the *Lan* place-name is often taken to mean a 'church' (Finberg 1964; Costen 1992, 77; Orme 1996; Corcos 2002, 102) and it is this which is generally seen as 'lost'. However although the *lann* (*Llan*) prefix has been used to name ecclesiastical sites, a 'church' is a rather narrow interpretation because it may refer to a monastery or an enclosed cemetery, but the important point here is that it implies an 'enclosure'.

It has previously been speculated that the enclosure implied by the place-name relates to the site of the present church at Street (McGarvie 1987, 27; Rahtz and Watts 2003), on what was the edge of the ancient parish (Fig. 4). A study of the churchyard has demonstrated that it bears all the hallmarks of an early religious enclosure (Calder 2001a). Not only does it have the characteristic 'oval' or 'sub-rectangular' shape of *lanns* (Preston-Jones 1992, 115–16; Thomas 1994, 311–20) as shown in Figure 5, but it has the structural remains of a possible early enclosure in the form of a curved earthwork along the curved western boundary (Fig. 6). The topography of the site also supports such a conclusion in that its low-lying position on the

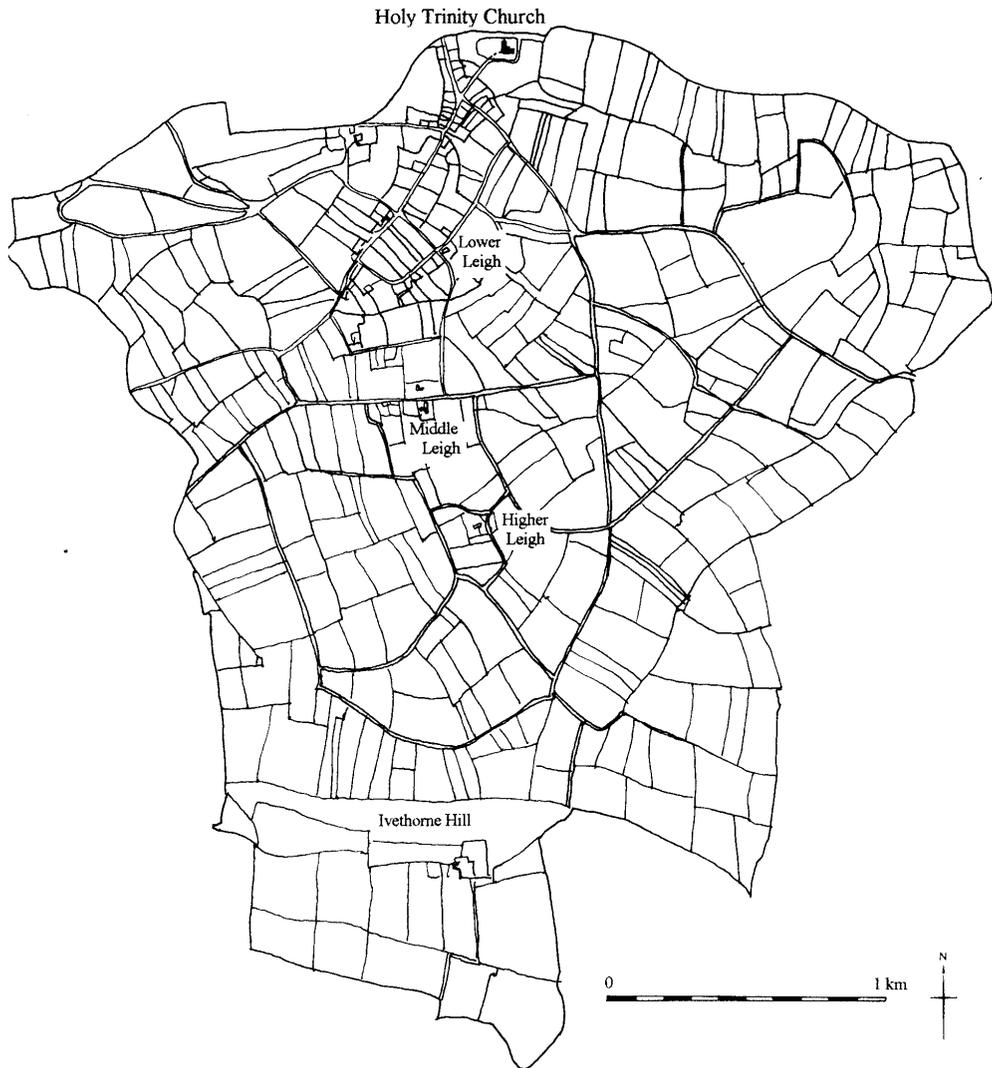


Fig. 4 The ancient parish of Street based on the 1821 plan by Nathaniel Hammet (after McGarvie 1987)

edge of the flood plain of the river Brue accords with the very high proportion of *lann* sites found in valley bottom locations in Cornwall (Preston-Jones, 1992).

Often such *lann* sites have raised churchyards (Pearce 1981, 186), as Street does, but this is not uncommon and is found at many other church sites (Morris 1989, 240). What is particularly unusual about Street is the earthwork remains, as even where these did exist at other churchyards which appear to be early religious enclosures they have often been destroyed due to changes in the original boundary or urban growth, including road widening (Blair 1992; Thomas 1994, 311–17). *Lann* sites in Cornwall where earthworks remain include Lewannick (Pearce 1981, 187; 1985, 259) and Lanivet (Thomas 1994, 311) both of which also have early-Christian inscribed stones. Another good example of what appears to be an early-religious enclosure, where there are four early-Christian inscribed stones, is Beacon Hill on Lundy. Although

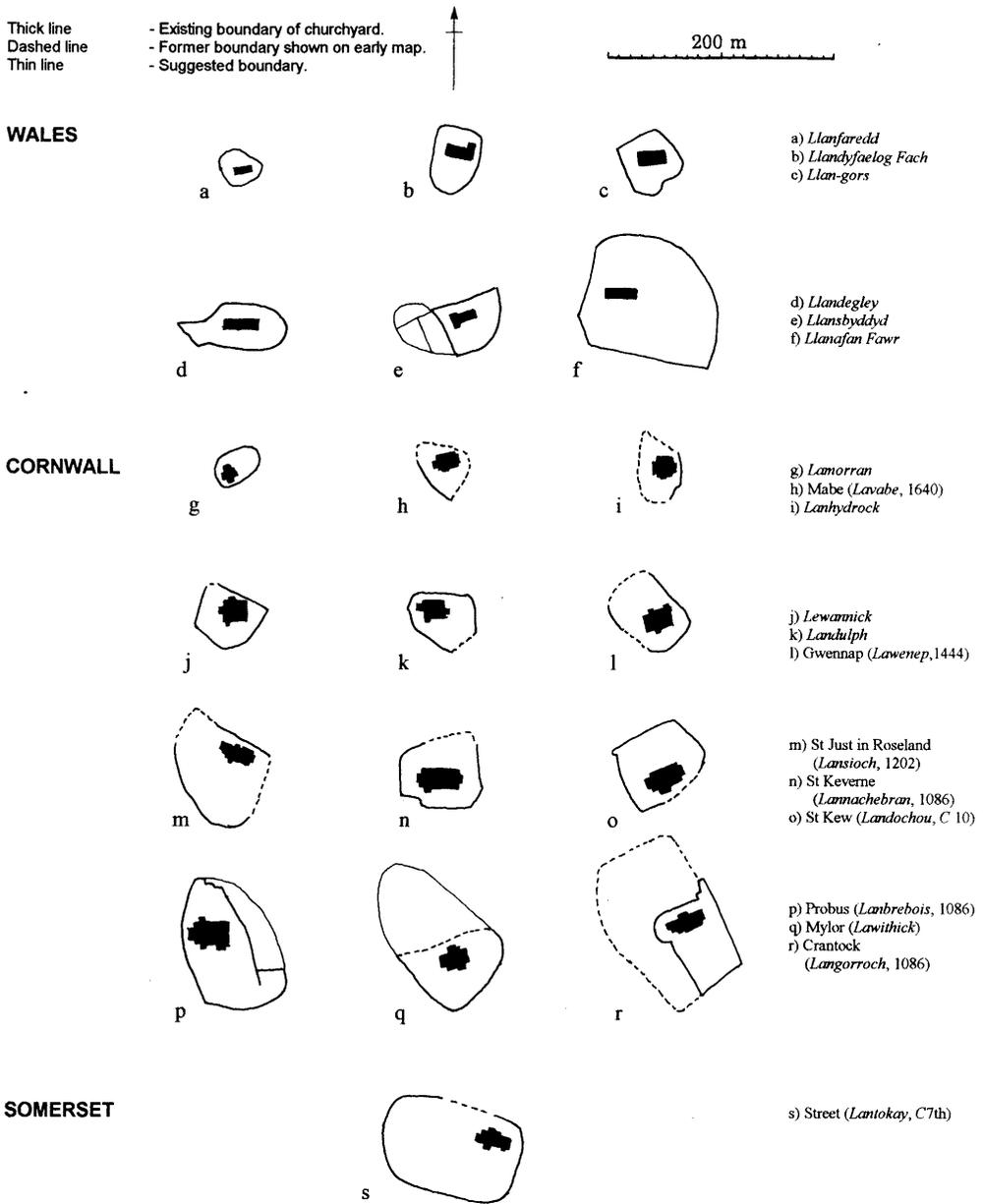


Fig. 5 Comparative analysis of shapes of selected church sites with a name in *lann*; sites a), d) and f) after Silvester 1997; b), c) and e) after Thomas 1994; g) to r) after Preston-Jones 1992

there is no record of a *lann* name ever being attached to this site at Lundy, Thomas (1994, 163–7) has described the earthwork as ‘a characteristic *lann*’ and it compares well with the one at Street. The similarities between these two sites are emphasised by the later boundary walls that have been imposed on them, in both cases on the line of a possible outer ditch.

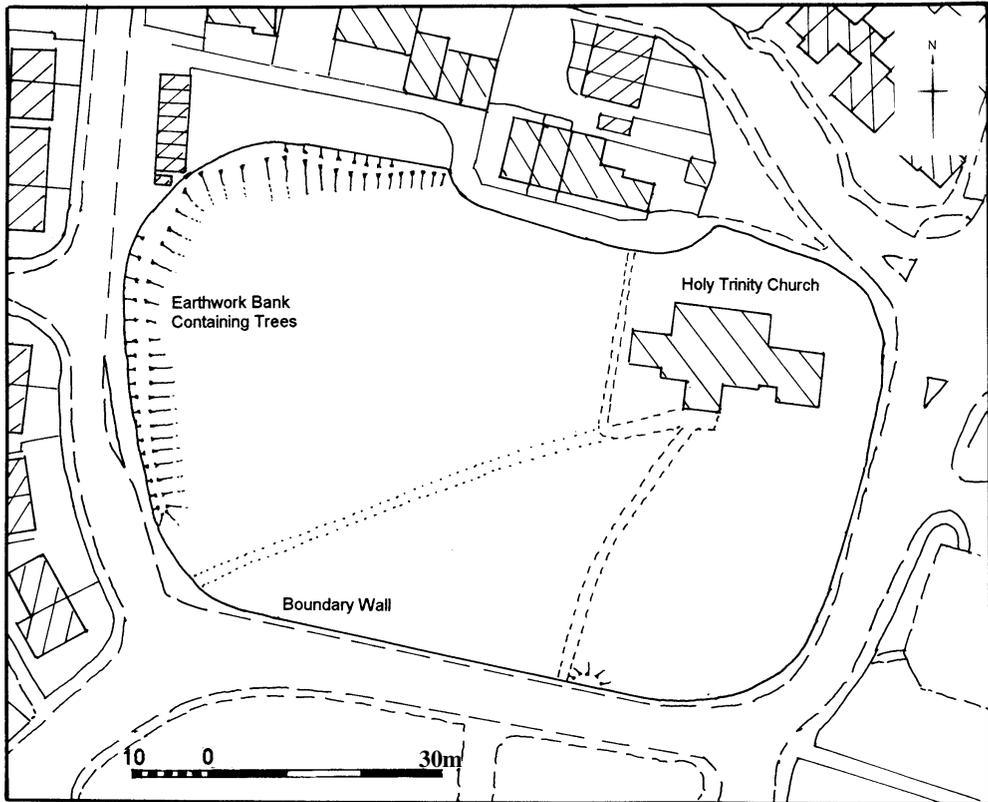


Fig. 6 Holy Trinity, Street, earthwork survey of enclosure

There can be little doubt that the *Lantokay* place-name originally related to this enclosure, and, as elsewhere, the name was later used to refer to the wider estate (Olson 1989, 105). The association of the place-name *Lantokay* with this enclosure is highly significant because, as we have seen earlier, the evidence of an enclosure displaying curvilinear characteristics when taken on its own is not a reliable indicator for the early Christian origin of a site. The very nature of this name, which is undeniably British or 'Brittonic' (O'Donovan 1988; Corcos 2002, 102), together with the fact that it is attested around the end of the 7th century, suggests the site has a pre-English origin. It is now necessary to consider what this means in terms of establishing its early ecclesiastical use.

The traditional view would suggest that such a site started as an enclosed burial ground which then later acquired a church (Hollinrake 1995). However as we have seen it is now being questioned whether enclosed burial grounds existed this early and the topography of the site, which indicates that this may have been an island site in the early medieval period, allows for the possibility that Christian activity on the site may have commenced with an early monastic settlement (Calder 2001a). It will now be argued that the important indicators in this case are the early use of the place-name, the size of the enclosure itself, and the estate, which appears to have become attached to this enclosure.

### 1. The early use of the place-name

The significance of the *Lantokay* place-name should not be understated as it is one of the

earliest attested *lann* place-names in the west of England. In Cornwall there are only a few examples of *lann* names earlier than the 10th century, such as *Landwithan* recorded in a 9th-century charter (Petts 2002, 39–41), and certainly none of the *lann* parish-church names are recorded before the 10th century. Outside Cornwall in North Devon the two known *lann* names, Landcross (*Lanchers*) and Landkey (*Landechai*), are not recorded until the 11th and 12th centuries respectively (Pearce 1985). *Lanprobi* from Sherborne, Dorset, is one other name, which is potentially recorded at such an early date (Barker 1982), and it is possible that *Lantokay* and *Lanprobi* are only recorded earlier than sites in Cornwall because the Anglo-Saxons had taken control over these areas in the late 7th century and so these sites became the subject of a written source due to land grants at that time. Whatever the reason, the importance of the early date is critical. Petts (2002, 42) has argued that there is no evidence to suggest that *lann* (*Llan*) had the meaning of ‘enclosed cemetery’ until the 10th century at least and the monastic meaning is the original one in an ecclesiastical context.

### 2. *The size of the enclosure*

The size of the enclosure at Street supports a monastic interpretation. The size of the churchyard at 0.87ha (2.23 acres) is similar to the largest *lanns* found in Cornwall where the average is only 0.31ha (Preston-Jones 1992). There is some evidence from both Wales and Cornwall that large churchyard enclosures can be an indicator of high-status sites such as monasteries or episcopal churches for which no historical record survives; and that these are among the earliest and most important foundations (Brook 1992, 87; Preston-Jones 1992, 122). Of the *lanns* shown on Figure 5; *o.* St Kew (*Landochou*); *p.* Probus (*Lanbrebois*); and *r.* Crantock (*Langorroch*), which are all large sites, are identified by Olson (1989, xiv) as ‘reasonably certain’ sites of early monasteries. Such a size of enclosure as that at Street would have been able to contain the church, cemetery and domestic buildings of a religious community.

### 3. *The estate*

An indicator that can help distinguish an early ‘monastery’ from other ecclesiastical sites is a landed endowment, which was necessary to support the community (Pearce 1981, 189). The three hides at *Lantokay* may have originally been such an endowment as it is more likely to be the estate of a religious community than one that had become attached to a burial ground. Hollinrake (1995) has suggested the three hides may have been given by a British king. Another *lan* name, already mentioned, which also appears to have been the name of an estate and shares the attribute of an early attested name is *Lanprobi* at Sherborne, given in the reputed grant of Cenwalh of 100 hides. It has been suggested that this may have been the estate of a British monastery (Best 1955; Finberg 1964a, 98; Doble 1997a, 141–5; Hall 2000, 11, 83). Clearly the estate of *Lanprobi* at 100 hides was considerably larger than *Lantokay*, but three hides is not an unreasonable size for a religious community. Anglo-Saxon ‘minsters’ or collegiate churches, served by communities of priests, also appear to have had small estates, generally between one and three hides (Blair 1985, 106; Olson 1989, 86–97; Hase 1994, 61).

To conclude, then, there appears to be a convincing case that this enclosure at Street is not only pre-English in origin but was an early monastic site. Even without this monastic interpretation this is a site of national significance based simply on the uniqueness of the combination of the early *lann* place-name and the structural features which are still extant. However given the context of the site it is perhaps of even more importance. Besides the evidence put forward by Rahtz and Watts (Rahtz 1991, 3–37; Rahtz and Watts 2003) of a potential monastic hermitage on Glastonbury Tor in the late 5th or 6th century, this is the only Christian site associated with Glastonbury to have good evidence for pre Anglo-Saxon origins and at present has the best evidence for a pre-Saxon monastery, as opposed to just a hermitage. Therefore despite what we have been conditioned to think in relation to the early origins of

Glastonbury it is now not too great a step to see the hermitage on the Tor, on the other side of the river Brue, as the satellite of a monastery at Lantokay, similar to other relationships elsewhere (Calder 2002, 38; Aston 2003; Hall 2003, 51).

## ST PAUL'S CHURCH, KEWSTOKE

### Site location and background

St Paul's Church, Kewstoke is located in a coastal position on the lower slopes of Worlebury Hill, an east–west carboniferous limestone ridge which projects into the Bristol Channel to the north of Weston-super-Mare (Figs 7 and 8). The Worlebury ridge forms an important area of raised ground within the 'north' Somerset Levels. The parish of Kewstoke extends across the 'levels' to the north as far as another ridge called Middlehope, where at one time there was an Augustinian Priory known as Woodspring (Fig. 8), and to the south on to the top of Worlebury Hill where it includes the village of Milton.

The parish church of Kewstoke, which is dedicated to St Paul, dates back to the 12th century, and for a time in the medieval period the church was attached to Woodspring Priory (Knight 1902, 57). To the south of the village, located in a gully on the north side of Worlebury Hill, are a series of roughly worked steps of stone, originally known as St Kew's Steps, but now often known as Monk's Steps (Fig. 7, and see frontispiece to this volume of the *Proceedings*). The date of these steps, and their intended purpose remains uncertain but it seems quite possible that they date back to the early medieval period (Calder 2001b).

### Discussion

In the past any discussion on the potential early-Christian origin of this site has centred on the 11th-century form of the place-name, which is given in the Domesday book as *Chiwestoch* (Thorn and Thorn 1980). This is believed to possibly contain the name of a female saint *Cywa* or *Ciwa* (later *Kewa* or *Kew*) (Doble 1930, 13; Ekwall 1960, 274; Pearce 1978, 74). Although the church at Kewstoke has been dedicated to St Paul at least as far back as 1459 (Weaver 1901, 193), and no evidence has been found of a previous dedication, Betty (1987, 23) has highlighted how place-name evidence can indicate the earlier dedication of a church. Therefore it is possible that either this or a previous church here was originally dedicated to St Kew. It is not uncommon for a dedicatory name to change as we have seen at Street, and it is interesting that neither of the two other places in Britain which are said to bear the name of St Kew, St Kew in Cornwall and Llangiwa in Monmouthshire, now have churches dedicated to the saint (Orme 1992, 146; Baring-Gould and Fisher 1907–13, 139). At Kewstoke although no dedication of the church to St Kew can be traced, the name of the saint is given to a flight of stone steps, mentioned above, which go up the side of the hill. The association of these steps with St Kew, and related legends, can be traced back at least as far as the 18th century and were recorded by Collinson in 1791 and Rutter in 1829 (Calder 2001b).

St Kew is one of the more obscure saints who appear to have had a dedication along the north Somerset coast, whose dedication cannot be satisfactorily explained as being the result of later medieval interest and veneration of 'Celtic' saints. Most of the other Celtic saint dedications are to better known saints such as Dubricius, Petrock, Carantoc, Cadoc and Columban whose dedications appear to be no later than the later decades of the 11th century, when hagiographical traditions were imported into Somerset from south-east Wales (Pearce 1973; 1978, 136–7). St Kew, along with St Kea, who as we have seen gave his name to *Lantokay*, and St Decuman, who will be discussed in the next case study, are among the few

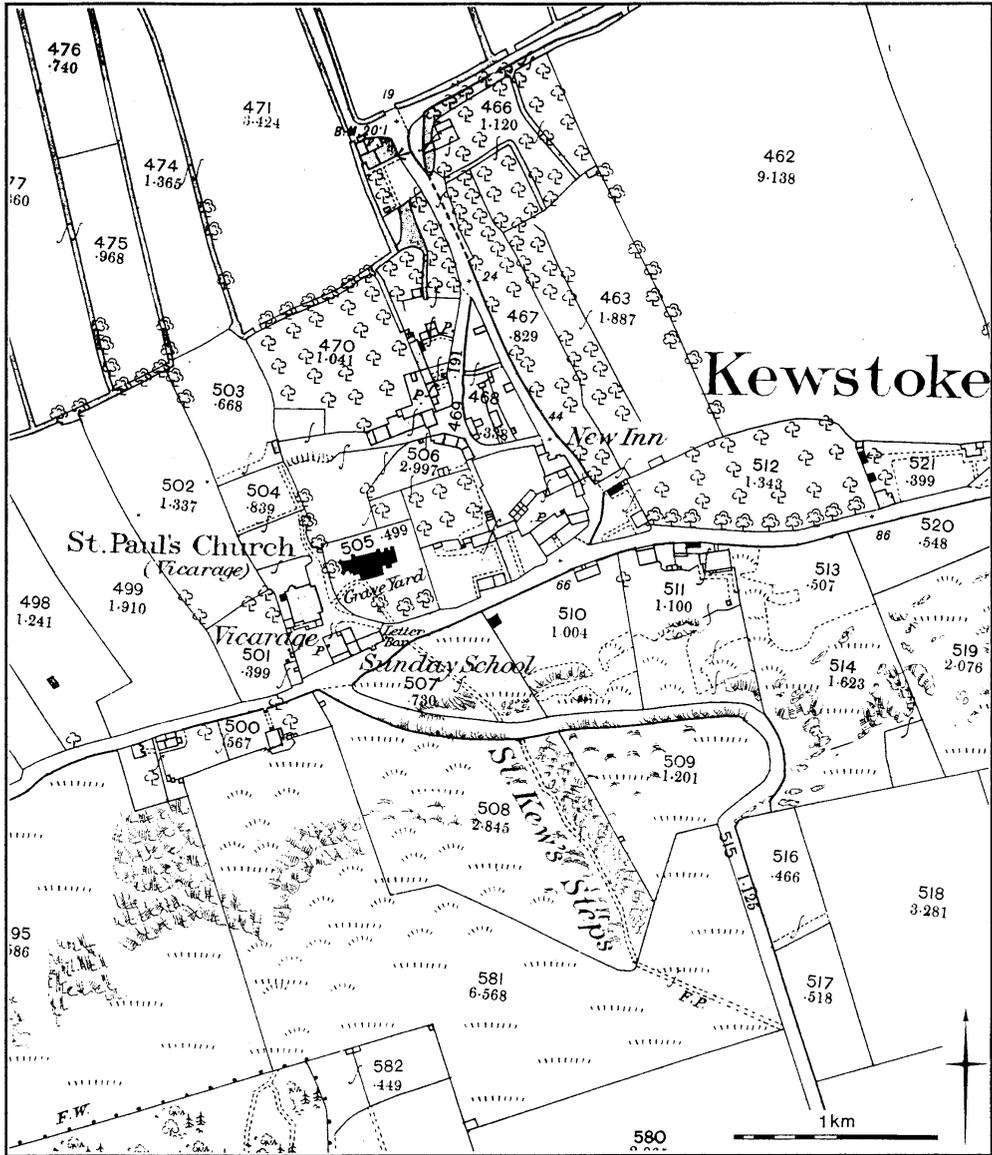


Fig. 7 St Paul's, Kewstoke, OS 1st edn. (1887)

saints who do not appear to have been of interest to the Welsh hagiographers and whose details did not go into the *Book of Llandaff*, MS Cotton Vespasian A XIV and other material produced by the circle of Llancafan around 1100 (Pearce 1978, 137). It has already been mentioned that there are two other places in Britain that bear the name of St Kew, and a similar name also appears in Brittany; St Kew was honoured in the 12th-century martyrology of Exeter Cathedral and is named in a Welsh calendar of the 13th century (Orme 2000, 161). St Kew, like St Kea and St Decuman, therefore differs from the more obscure saints in Cornwall that can be said to be distinctly 'local'. Nonetheless the number of places connected to these saints is very limited and very little is known about them, in particular St Kew for whom no *Life* is

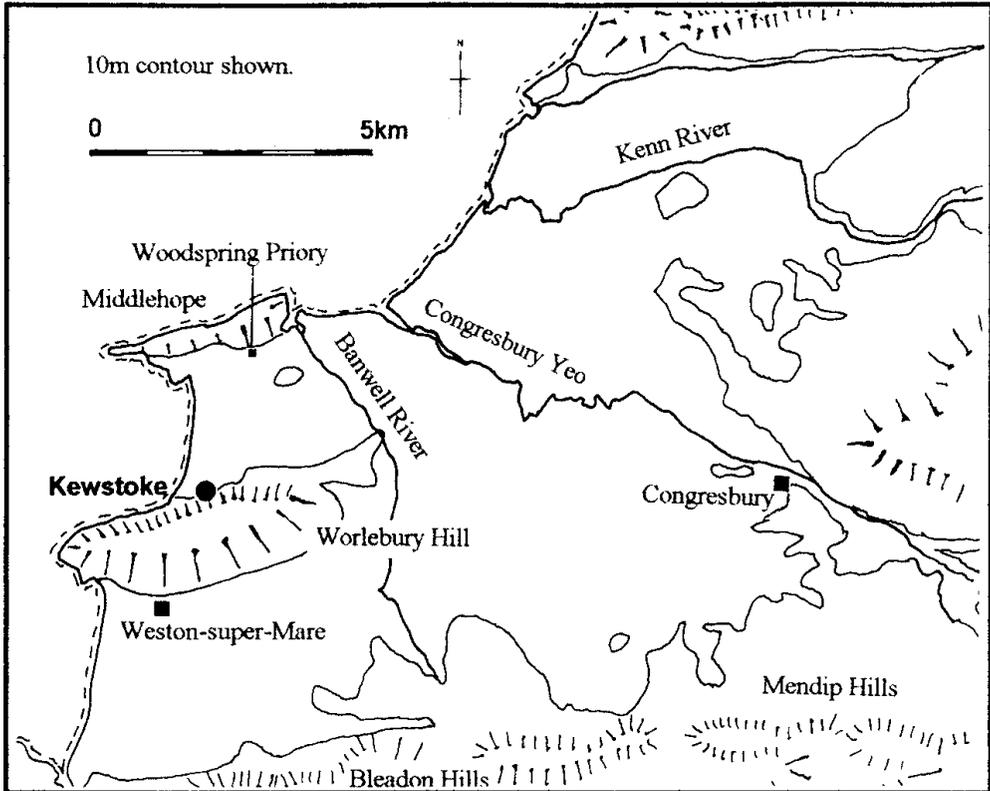


Fig. 8 St Paul's, Kewstoke. Site location and topography within the North Somerset Levels (after Rippon 1997)

known to exist. At St Kew in Cornwall she is connected with saint Docco and 'the monastery of Docco', one of the earliest named Cornish monasteries that can be identified with any certainty, which is believed to have been located at present St Kew (Olson 1989). A charter of Edgar dated to AD 961 refers to the monastery of St Dochou and St Cywa (Orme 1996, 90; Pearce 1978, 190). Nicholas Roscarrock, writing in the second half of the 16th century, records that St Kew and St Docco were supposed to be brother and sister (Doble 1998, 107).

At Kewstoke, in Somerset, there is some architectural evidence in St Paul's church for an Anglo-Saxon origin in that Warwick Rodwell (Ryall nd) believes the present church nave may reflect an earlier Anglo-Saxon plan in terms of its dimensions, floor area and height, and that Saxon light openings may have been enlarged into what are now rather unusual clerestory windows. However the fact that the place-name allows the possibility of a dedication to St Kew, which may potentially suggest the existence of an even earlier church, it is necessary to consider what other indicators there are that may point to a pre-English origin (Pearce 1978, 136).

Pearce (1978, 74) has highlighted that the *stoc* element in the place-name may also be significant. This is an Old English place-name element for 'a place, a religious place, a secondary settlement', but it has been suggested that in a few cases it is used as *stow*, to replace the lost British name of an establishment in existence by the end of the 6th century (Pearce 1978, 74). One possible example of this is Stoke St Nectan (*Nistenestoch*, 1086) in Devon, which Pearce (1985), on the basis of other evidence, believes was a late 6th-century monastery, and will be discussed further in the next case study.

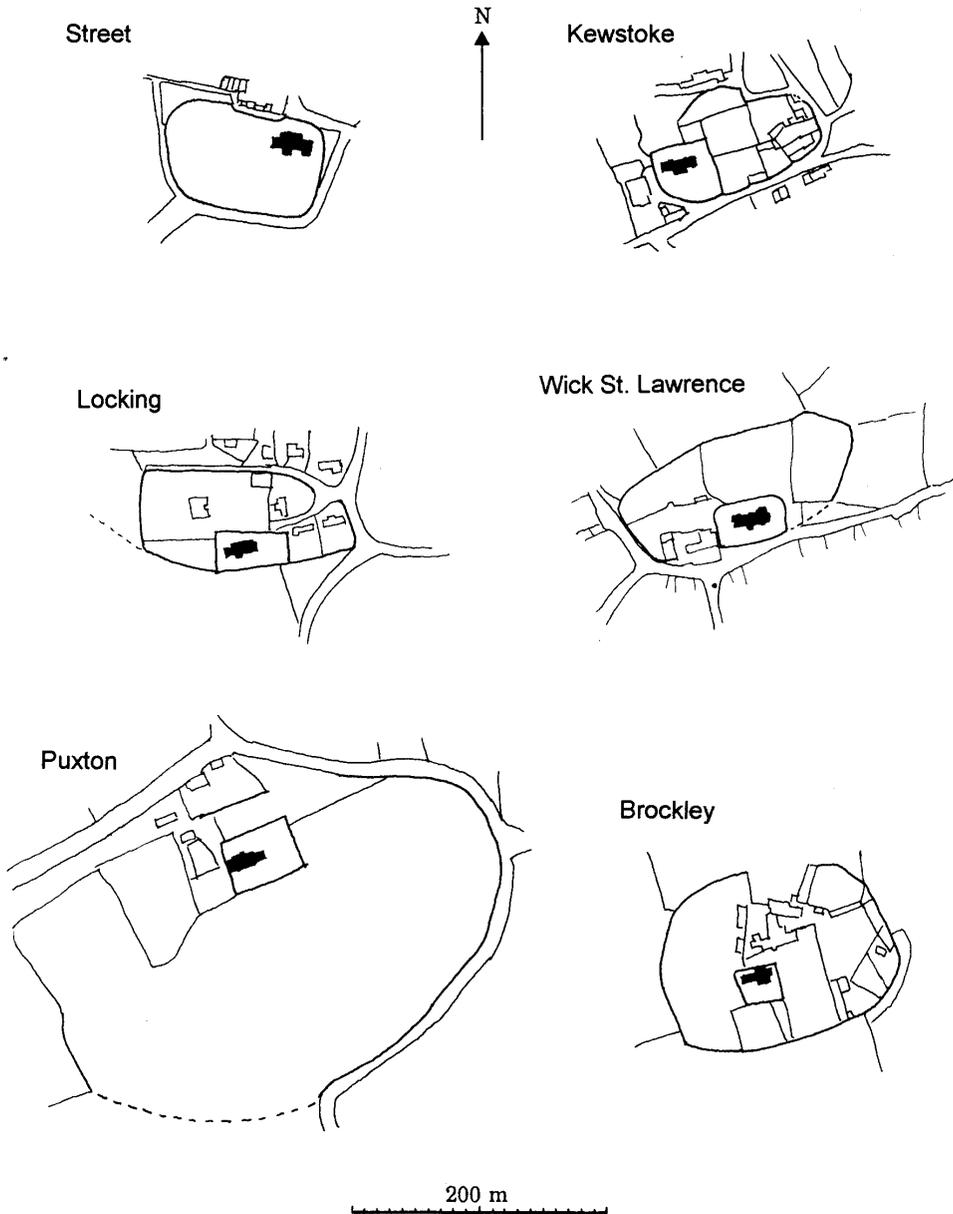


Fig. 9 Comparative analysis of topography of Street churchyard and potential settlement enclosures in North Somerset; land boundaries from early OS plans, enclosure boundaries indicated by heavier line

At Kewstoke there is certainly evidence that the church and graveyard form part of a sub-oval enclosure (Fig. 9), which appears to predate the surrounding landscape (Calder 2002, 92, 93). However the date and purpose of this enclosure is uncertain. It is identified in the North Somerset Sites and Monuments register as a 'possible oval village enclosure' and is assumed to be of late-Saxon date by comparison to a dated example at Puxton which lies out on the

Somerset levels, at only just over 5m above sea level. However the example at Puxton, where there is evidence of a ditch and bank, has been interpreted by Rippon (2000, 89) as a 'ring dike' as it probably relates to the draining of the marsh. The enclosure at Kewstoke on the other hand is located on the side of a hill and must have served an entirely different purpose.

There are other examples of oval elements within village boundaries in North Somerset, for example Wick St Lawrence, Brockley, St Georges, Locking, and Tickenham of which only St Georges and Wick St Lawrence may possibly relate to draining of the marsh, the others may have been planned medieval villages (V. Russett, pers comm, 2002). There are examples from elsewhere of large sub-circular enclosures which may have been private *burhs* occupied by a local lord, and at some stage may have surrounded a manorial complex, for example Barton-upon-Humber (Morris 1989, 75, 253–61). Brockley and Tickenham appear quite possibly to have been manorial enclosures as in both cases the church sits next to the manor house and their development has been closely connected (Betty 1990), or alternatively they may be the result of emparking of the surrounding lands (Aston 2003, 38), either way neither possibility is evident at Kewstoke.

What is noticeable about this enclosure at Kewstoke is that it is strikingly comparable in terms of size and shape with the enclosure at Street discussed in the last case study (Fig. 9); the enclosure at Street has an area of 0.87ha, while the one at Kewstoke has an area of 0.81ha. When this is taken with the form of the 11th-century place-name, from which it is possible to extrapolate that this was the site of an early religious place, then this adds weight to the possibility that this too was some form of early religious enclosure. Topographically these sites differ, Street being in a valley bottom location, where the highest proportion of *lanns* are found in Cornwall, and Kewstoke on the side of a hill. However hill and valley sides, especially the lower slopes, are also a common location for *lanns*, and more generally for early church sites in western Britain and Ireland (Bowen 1956, 116; Hurley 1982, 310; Preston-Jones 1992). The other clear difference between these enclosures is the fact that Kewstoke has internal divisions. However it is not uncommon in Ireland for early church sites to have been divided internally, with the church and cemetery separated from domestic occupation, and for villages to have developed within the enclosure (Swan 1983, 270). Blair (1996, 9) has suggested that there has been a failure to recognise these divisions in England.

This suggestion that Kewstoke was an early Christian site is reinforced by other circumstantial evidence, primarily the existence of the remains of a stone structure on a platform to the side of St Kew's Steps in the gully above the site of St Paul's church, which has tentatively been interpreted as the remains of an early well-chapel (Quinn 1999, 182; Calder 2001b, 22–6; Calder 2002, 89–91). This structure, which measures approximately 6m by 4m, encloses a pit, which although now dry, appears likely to have once been a well. There are a number of comparable examples of potentially early baptisteries or well-chapels in coastal locations, such as St Seiriol's holy well at Penmon in Anglesey, and St Declan's well at Ardmore in County Waterford (Calder 2001b, 25), but when taken with the stone steps, the best parallel to this site at Kewstoke may be at St Levan in Cornwall, where the remains of two stone structures on the cliff edge, reputed to be the chapel and cell of St Levan (Seleven), are connected to a holy well higher up, by a flight of over 60 stone steps, which were uncovered in the early 1930s and form part of a track up from Porth Chapel beach (Thomas 1977). Although there is no direct archaeological evidence for the early date of any of these comparable sites, at Kewstoke there is good evidence to indicate that this pit, or well, was a local cult focus of some antiquity, as when the pit was excavated in the late 19th century it produced evidence which points to use for ritual purposes in the Iron Age but also with activity up to the late-medieval period (Jackson 1877, xxviii; Calder 2002, 91). The significance of wells to the establishment of early ecclesiastical sites has been mentioned earlier, but it should also be noted that it is not uncommon for a well to be a short distance from an ecclesiastical enclosure (Hurley 1982, 314).

The only piece of potential artefactual evidence for activity in the post-Roman period in the immediate area is a penannular silver brooch, a rare piece of British metalwork, found in 1853 just above St Kew's Steps, although the context is unstratified and exact location is unknown (Calder 2002, 91–2).

Given the nature of the evidence that has been put forward in this case study, firm conclusions cannot be drawn, but there do appear good reasons for believing that Christian activity at this site started in the pre-English period. Pearce (1978, 75, 80) does not think that its role at this time was anything other than a local cemetery and church, and there are certainly no indications from the later administrative record that there was an estate attached to this site. However the nature of the traditions associated with St Kew at Kewstoke and the relative obscurity of the saint supports the notion that such a person existed, and, given the limited number of sites that bear her name, was directly associated with this site in some way. The possibility thus exists that there was at one time a small religious community at Kewstoke.

## ST DECUMAN'S CHURCH, WATCHET

### Site location and background

St Decuman's church (Fig. 10), although slightly inland, is in a prominent coastal position on a limestone ridge which falls away sharply to the Washford River valley below (Fig. 12), so that the church tower forms a landmark both from out to sea and from inland. The church is in a relatively isolated location south-west of the town of Watchet. The parish of St Decumans occupies the coastal plain at the mouth of a broad valley between the Quantocks and the Brendons and before it was divided in 1902, its other main settlement, apart from Watchet, was Williton (Dunning 1985).

The present church of St Decuman dates from the late 13th century, but there are records of an earlier church. In *c.* 1175, a church, which was already dedicated to St Decuman, had a dean and a dependent chapel at Williton and in 1190 it was given to Wells Cathedral as a prebend (Dunning 1985, 165).

St Decuman's name is also attached to a nearby holy well, 50m to the north-west of the present church (Fig. 10), and to the parish. He is thought to have been a 6th-century monk, possibly originally from Breconshire in Wales where a chapel in Llanfihangel Cwm Du parish appears once to have been named after him, and who may also have given his name to a monastery at Rhoscrowther (formerly *Llanddegyman*) in Pembrokeshire (Porter 1971, 82–4; Doble 1997a). His *Life* written in the 15th century suggests that he was buried in Somerset. The only other place potentially dedicated to him in the west of England, although not mentioned in his *Life* is a chapel in Cornwall recorded in the late-medieval period (Orme 2000, 105).

On the other side of the river valley to the present parish church is the remains of a cliff top univallate enclosure known as Daw's Castle (Fig. 11), which, following excavations in 1982, is now believed to be the Anglo-Saxon *burh* that is recorded in the Burghal Hidage *c.* AD 914 (Dunning 1985, 146; McAvoy 1986, 57–9). On the east side of this enclosure findless burials were found in the 19th century and nearby is a field which was known in 1801 as 'Old Minster' (Page 1890, 241; McAvoy 1986, 47).

### Discussion

St Decuman is again one of the more obscure saints in Somerset whose church dedication looks unlikely to be the result of the later medieval interest in 'Celtic' saints and the importation

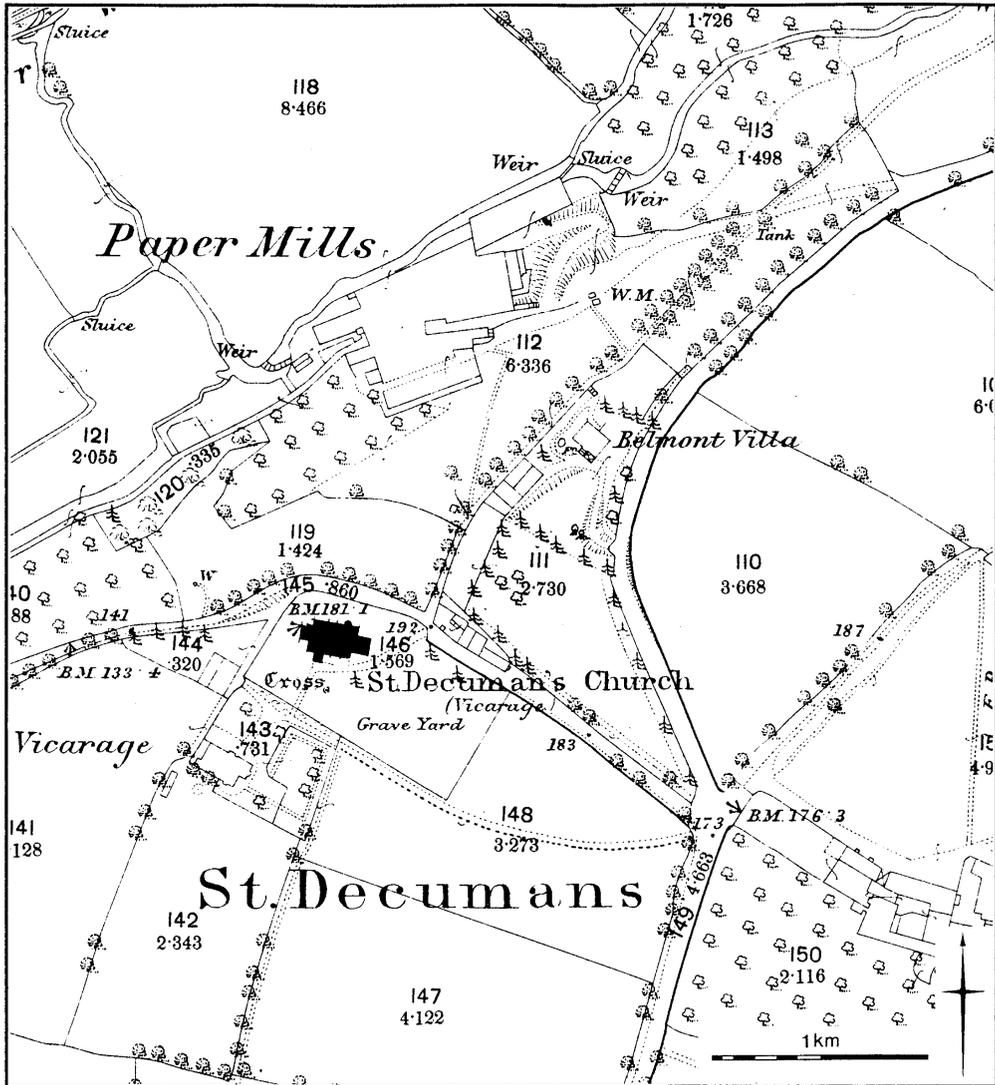


Fig. 10 St Decuman's, Watchet; OS 1st edn. (1888); W= St Decuman's Well

of hagiographical traditions. His *Life* was not written until hundreds of years after his church dedication had been in existence.

The 'Old Minster' field name from the other side of the river valley, and the burials close by, indicates that there may have been another church site at, or next to, Daw's Castle, the conjectured Anglo-Saxon *burh*. If Daw's Castle is the *burh*, then in some respects a church near here is to be expected. It has been suggested that the creation of new ecclesiastical institutions was an integral part of burghal policy adopted by the Anglo-Saxon crown (Haslam 1988, 38). Churches were founded not only both inside new *burhs* and in very close proximity (Hase 1994, 50), but also next to the gates or walls of *burhs* such as at Oxford, Wallingford and Wareham (Morris 1989, 198, 216). However besides the building of new churches existing

churches could also be integrated into a *burh* such as at Lydford, Devon (Pearce 1985, 259), and Wareham (Hall 2000, 56).

In relation to St Decumans one argument is that the site at the *burh* is the original site of the church and that this church probably contained the shrine of St Decuman (Dunning 1985, 165; Bush 1994, 213; Dunning 1996, 3; Aston 2003, 43). It follows that the church was only moved when, due to coastal erosion, the *burh* was abandoned and a settlement established to the east on the site of the present town of Watchet, probably in the 11th century (McAvoy 1986, 59; Bush 1994, 213). This argument is supported by the fact that there is known to have been a medieval feast of the 'translation' of St Decuman and that this is presumed to have arisen from the moving of the church together with the saint's shrine to the new site of St Decumans. However it is in no way evident that the 'translation' relates to this event as it could equally relate to the initial moving of the saint to a place of veneration or some other move of the saint or his relics.

An alternative hypothesis is put forward here that the original focus of Christian activity, and this being pre-English in origin, was the site of the current church and the nearby holy well. The available evidence tends to suggest that the Anglo-Saxons moved the church to the site of the *burh* but that it was then later moved back to its original site either when the *burh* was abandoned or possibly before this. Although it is possible that during the Anglo-Saxon period there may have been two churches, one at the present site and one at the *burh*, there is little to indicate that there has been continuous use on the site of the present church.

The only piece of artefactual evidence that may potentially represent activity in the post-Roman period on or around the present church site is a Byzantine coin find, a *folles* of Justinian I, of AD 540–541, from the mint of Constantinople. Although the whereabouts of the original coin, which was found in 1963/4, is no longer known an electro-plated copy exists in Taunton Museum (Accession no. 3808/1990: see Calder 2002, 97). However, like the penannular brooch found at Kewstoke, the value of this coin as evidence is limited as it does not come from a stratified archaeological context, and serious doubts about such random Byzantine coin finds have been raised elsewhere (Boon 1991). Nevertheless if this was a genuine contemporary loss, and there is no reason in this case to suppose it was not, especially given the finds of Byzantine ceramic imports at nearby Carhampton (McCrone 1994, 177; Calder 2002, 103), which may quite possibly have arrived in the reign of Justinian I (Dark 2000, 163; Harris 2003, 144–52), it is significant not least because of the few available 'diagnostic' artefacts of the 5th and 6th centuries. More specifically due to the rarity of such Byzantine coin finds it does suggest occupation or activity around that time may have been something out of the ordinary and such coins are now believed more likely to have been used as jewellery or items of cultural significance than for monetary exchange (Harris 2003, 153). This find may potentially hint at connections either directly or indirectly with the eastern Mediterranean whether via trade (Thomas 1982; Rahtz and Watts 2003), which was possibly diplomatically motivated (Harris 2003, 152), or ecclesiastical links (Dark 2000, 163). The possibility of a link between insular eremiticism and Byzantium has been suggested elsewhere in Somerset, at Glastonbury Tor (Harris 2003, 160).

It is unfortunate that even the precise find spot of this Byzantine coin is unknown, the location given in the early 1960s has simply been recorded as 'St Decuman's garden'. This is in itself intriguing as today no one in the area seems to know what 'St Decuman's garden' refers to, although the general assumption is that it is the Vicarage Garden to the south of the church. There is however a reference to 'St Decuman's acre' from the early 14th century in a review of the apportionment of tithes to support the vicar, by the Bishop of Bath and Wells (HMC 1907, 1, 388). From the description given, that this was 1 acre of arable land on the north side of the church, this must relate to a curved field, just over an acre in size, immediately to the north of the church which slopes down the hillside with the northern boundary consisting

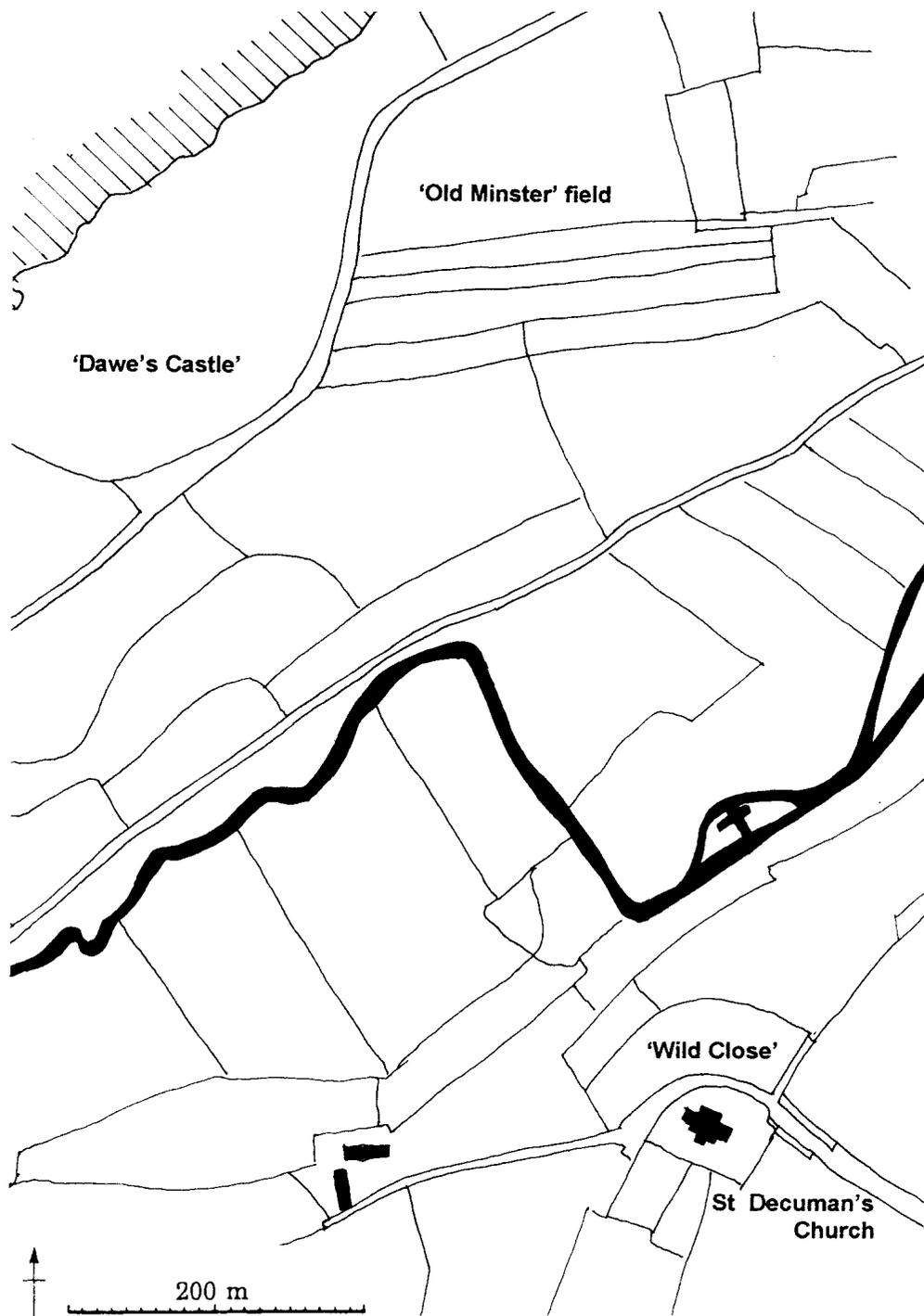


Fig. 11 St Decuman's church and Daw's Castle redrawn from a map of 1801 (SRO DD/WY/C306)

of a sharp scarp on the side of the valley (Figs 10 and 11). By the start of the 19th century this was known as 'Wild Close' (SRO, DD/WY/C306, 1801) but was still Vicarial Glebe.

Whether or not 'St Decuman's acre' was where the Byzantine coin was found this piece of land would appear to be of some importance, and it is interesting to note that there is a record of a 'St Wenn's acre' attached to a chapel of St Wenn at Cheristow in Devon in the 12th century which may be an early Christian site (Doble 1997b, 119; Pearce 1978, 74; Pearce 1985, 268). Although 'St Decuman's acre' was only given to the vicarage in the 14th century, it is likely to have been part of the prebendal estate, and was probably attached to the church before the church was given as a prebend to Wells Cathedral in 1190. Also given the way this field forms a roughly concentric curve with the curved north side of the churchyard, and originally included the holy well, it could conceivably have been part of an early ecclesiastical enclosure around the site defined by the scarp on the northern boundary (Fig.11).

It was mentioned earlier that holy wells may have been foci of activity for early missionaries, and as we have seen this may have been the case at Kewstoke in the last case study. St Decuman's Well is one of the few examples in Somerset of a well with a firm link with an early saint (Scherr 1986, 84). Although it is uncertain how old this link may be the nature of the traditions associated with St Decuman suggests an early Christian origin.

It is accepted that, so far, the archaeological evidence for the early origins of the present site is very limited and somewhat tenuous. However a persuasive argument to support the hypothesis that the current church site was the original focus of Christian activity is simply that this is the best way to explain why this isolated location was chosen following the decline of the site at the *burh*. The expectation would be for the church to be resited at Williton, the royal 'tun' after which the 'hundred' estate was named (Costen 1988, 51), or, if it was moved when the *burh* was abandoned, possibly to the new settlement at Watchet. The failure of the secular administrative centre to attract the church to be built at it, at this time, seems on the face of it rather peculiar, and has resulted in a church and settlement relationship more reminiscent of settlement patterns much further west in Cornwall, where many parish churches are situated on their own in the countryside, away from settlement (Padel 2002, 308–10, 353).

The move of the church to the present site from the *burh* suggests that this was an existing sacred site that continued to be highly regarded. Bettey (1987) has highlighted how parish churches cling to their original site and provide a fixed point in the landscape, regardless of later changes in settlement patterns. Although this does not appear to quite hold here, as the evidence in this case suggests the church was not always on the current site, the point is that it highlights the value or sanctity placed on the original site of a church. No clearer is this evidenced than in Ireland, where even today Catholics still feel a strong identity with sites associated with early saints, so that even when an ancient graveyard now surrounds a Protestant church or an old ruin it may still be used by Catholic families for burial (Hughes and Hamlin 1997, 107). The inference in this case is that although the Anglo-Saxons may have felt a need to relocate the church to the site of the *burh*, there continued to be importance attached to the original site, presumably by the indigenous population. This argument can be backed up by the legends that surround St Decuman.

A legend recorded in 1865 (Veced Perambulator) says that an attempt was made to build a church in memory of St Decuman on another site. Foundations were laid in a neighbouring valley during the day but at night they were removed to the hill where the present church stands, as St Decuman had spent all his lifetime upon that hill and resolved that his name should be perpetuated there. It is said that the conflict was carried on for some time and that eventually the builders gave way and the church was built on its present site. Similar church-siting traditions are established in folklore from other parts of the country and recall churches during construction being knocked down at night by unknown forces, sometimes by the devil or by fairies, and the stones being moved to a different site, which is eventually adopted

(Palmer 1973, 46; Bord and Bord 1978, 122–39; Palmer 1994, 66). Two cases can be cited in Gloucestershire, at Blakeney and Bisley, both of which, like St Decumans, appear to have some basis in reality in terms of resiting, and which again are indicated in part by field-name evidence (Palmer 1994, 66). At Blakeney foundations have been discovered at a site called ‘Churchfields’ from where the devil was supposed to have transported materials to the site of the present church. In the case of the legend connected to St Decumans, although one, possibly later, version of the story has been found, recorded by Eeles (1932), which states that where they were trying to build the church was near Williton, it is possible that the legend originally related to the Anglo-Saxons building a church on the ‘Old Minster’ site on the opposite side of Washford river valley.

A change of site and inherent conflict is also potentially suggested by legends surviving within the hagiography that exists. In his *Life* St Decuman is said to have come from West Wales, crossed the Severn Sea with his cow on a faggot made of twigs, landed near Dunster Castle, and sought the life of a hermit. Putting aside the specific locations, Doble (1997a, 30) suggests this story adopts ‘common form’ found in the *Lives* of numerous Cornish saints. What is more unusual is the story of his death by decapitation by an assassin whilst he was at prayer and how his body carried the head to a spring where he used to wash his face, which is now called the ‘Fountain of Saint Decuman’. At this spring ‘the head, together with the body, were afterwards sought for and found by the faithful, and honourably placed in a tomb’ (translation by Doble 1997a; see also Collinson 1791). A similar incident happens in the *Life* of St Nectan, written at the end of the 12th century for the newly-founded abbey at Hartland, Devon (Doble 1930; Doble 1970; Thomas 1991, 53). According to his *Life* Nectan, who had also come from Wales in search of solitude, after being beheaded by robbers carried his head to a spring by his hut where the church of Stoke St Nectan is now located.

There are other saints, termed ‘cephalophores’, who are described as carrying their heads after they were beheaded, the most famous of which is St Denys (Doble 1970, 60; Pearce 1978, 198), and the place where they carry their heads to often becomes the site of a church. Equally the association of holy wells with severed heads is also not uncommon, especially in folklore with springs emerging from where severed heads fell or came to rest, and the possibility this was a pre-Christian motif has been much discussed (Ross 1992, 140–9; Hutton 1991, 195, 230–4). What is more unusual about the legend of St Decuman’s and that of St Nectan’s is the linking of both these motifs, the carrying of the head after their martyrdom, together with the connection of the severed head and a holy well, so that the head is carried to the well or spring by the saint. It is possible that this legend in relation to St Decuman, which was found by the author of the *Life* may be an allegory representing the returning of the church to its original sacred site and signifying a reconnection at the well.

Towards the end of the 19th century and early in the 20th century various authors give an actual date as to when St Decuman is said to have been martyred, that being AD 706, but no source for this date is ever given (Poole 1877, 123; Baring-Gould and Fisher 1908, 324; Horne 1914–18, 102). Although too much emphasis should not be placed on a stray date it is unusual that St Decuman, someone who is generally believed to have been a 6th-century monk (Farmer 1992, 130; Bush 1994, 213), should be given a date for his death as late as the 8th century by the time the Anglo-Saxons had taken control. However if his martyrdom is not taken literally and the severing the head from the body in the legend is taken as an allegory for moving the church from its original sacred site, then it is just possible that AD 706 could be the date when this event took place as layers sealed by the defences at the postulated *burh* at Daw’s Castle have been radiocarbon dated to AD 730 ± 140 (McAvoy 1986, 57) which allows the possibility that an Anglo-Saxon minster was established nearby early in the 8th century. Aldhelm, who became bishop of the new see based at Sherborne in 705, and King Ine were responsible for major ecclesiastical changes and new foundations around this time (Aston 2003; Hall 2003).

Interestingly Chope (1922–23) speculates that St Nectan's legend of him carrying his head may also have been invented to take account of a change of site. According to Nectan's *Life* he is murdered in a place called *Neweton*, 'half a league away from his hut eastwards' (translation by Doble 1970). There is today a farm called *Newton*, about a mile south-east from the church at Stoke St Nectan, and significantly according to Chope (1922–23) it has two fields called 'Church Parks'. The field name *Church Park* can be taken to mean 'land beside, or land belonging to, a church' (Field 1972, 45). Chope has suggested that the church may have been shifted from an earlier site to *Newton*, and that it was then later moved to its present position at Stoke St Nectan. Although the church at Stoke may have pre-English origins and is St Nectan's primary cult site (Pearce 1978; 1985; Thomas 1994, 177), there is evidence that the cult established here may not have been continuous. A second earlier text attached to the *Life* of St Nectan found in 1937 gives details of the *Inventio*, the rediscovery of the body in the 10th or 11th century (Doble 1970, 63; Pearce 1978, 198; Orme 1992, 158). Doble believes that the finding of the body shows that 'there had been a definite *interruption* of the saint's cult at Hartland' (1970, 63, my emphasis). In a similar way to what is being proposed for St Decumans the Anglo Saxons may have moved the church to their 'new settlement' (*Neweton*), although potentially keeping a chapel on the original site, but later the sanctity of the original site, in this case demonstrated by the rediscovery of the saint's relics, led to a move back to that site. St Nectan, like St Decuman, has a 'translation day', although, as before, we cannot be sure as to what move of the saint or his relics this actually relates (Thomas 1994, 177).

What makes the similarities in the *Lives* of St Decuman and St Nectan even more intriguing is that their churches, St Decuman's in Somerset, and St Nectan's in Devon, have a strikingly similar topography (Fig. 12). What is unusual about them is that compared to other churches along this coast, which are generally in relatively low-lying positions, these are both on high ridges where the ridge drops down sharply to a river below. The current churches on both these sites have tall towers which act as landmarks. In the south-west of Ireland the most favoured location for early church sites appears to have been on the shoulder of a low hill or ridge overlooking a river or stream (Hurley 1982), and such sites also appear to have been popular in Cornwall (Preston-Jones 1992).

To sum up then, the evidence that has been put forward suggests that the present site of St Decuman's church is a site of some sanctity and a case has been made that this was an early-Christian site which preceded the church at the Anglo-Saxon *burh*, at Daw's Castle. It has been conjectured that there would have been a church on this earlier site in the pre-English period; it is, however, important to consider further the possible nature of the original ecclesiastical use.

Given that there is such an affinity between St Decumans and Stoke St Nectan, in Devon, it is of note that Pearce (1985, 266–9) has made a case for a late 6th-century monastery at Stoke primarily on the basis of the existence of an old English minster with a landed endowment, as this may well have continued the monastic estate of a British predecessor, given that the connection with St Nectan appears genuinely early and pre-English in origin. St Decuman's church may also at one time have had an endowment necessary to support a community, even though there is no evidence of this in Domesday Book, as a church of some importance is indicated by the fact that St Decuman's was located on the royal estate of Williton, which was ancient demesne, and it had a dependent chapel at Williton, the royal 'tun'. Moreover a minster Church is implied by the 'Old Minster' field name (Dunning 1985, 165), and the fact that in the 12th century the church still had a dean, which Costen (1992, 145) presumes may be the survivor of a former college of clerks. It is therefore possible, given the nature of the traditions associated with St Decuman, which may well contain some element of truth about him as the founding figure of the first Christian site in the locality, that this 'minster' at Daw's Castle also perpetuated a pre-English 'monastery', which had existed nearby on the site of the present

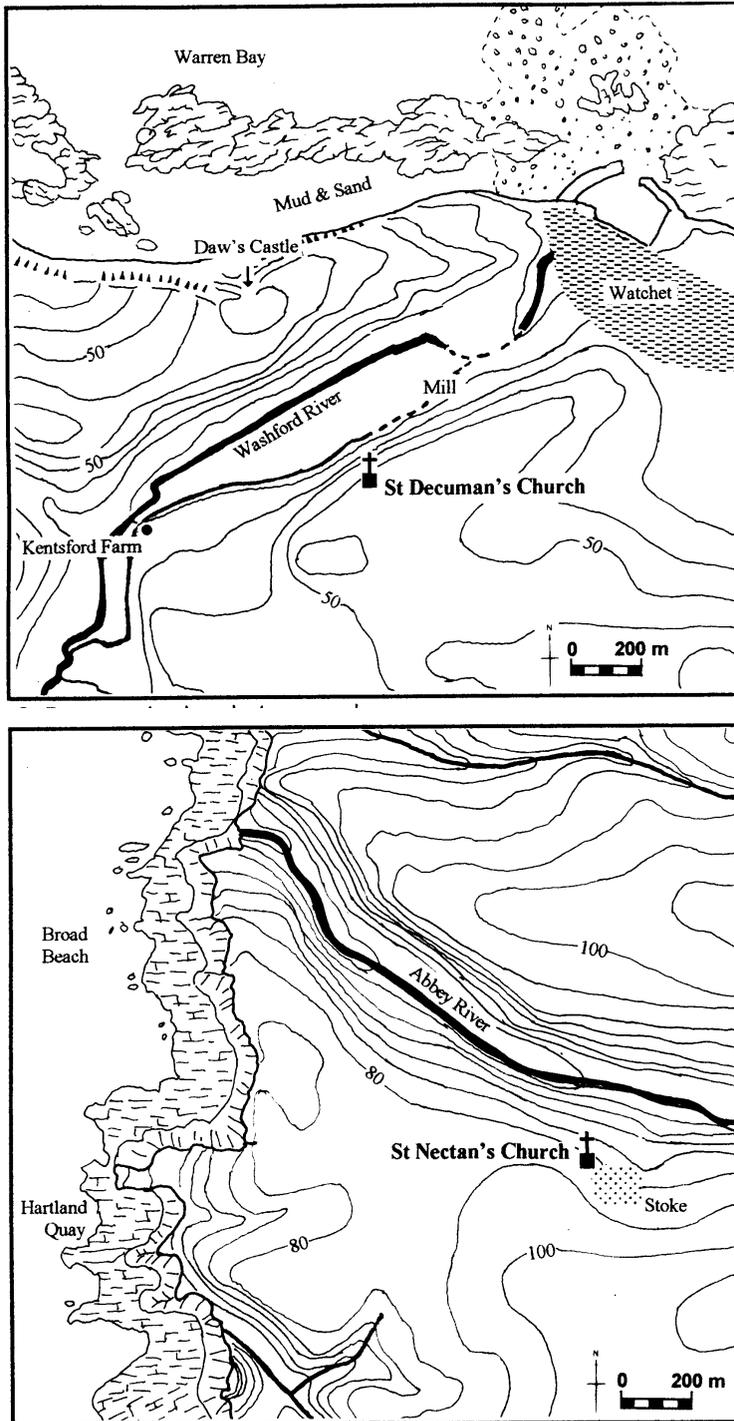


Fig. 12 Comparative topography of St Decumans (top) and Stoke St Nectan, North Devon (bottom)

parish church. Remnants of the original monastic enclosure, may exist down the hillside as the northern boundary of 'St Decuman's acre', in a similar position to the potential remains of an early enclosure around Stoke St Nectan church as identified by Thomas (1994, 175).

## CONCLUSIONS

The difficulties in identifying early ecclesiastical sites should not be understated as generally the only evidence we have available is circumstantial. The review of the literature on this subject and the indicators that have been put forward to suggest an ecclesiastical use of some antiquity has shown that few if any of these indicators, when taken on their own, are reliable in distinguishing sites which are of pre-English origin. However cumulative evidence gathered from the three case studies here suggests likely early Christian pre-English origins at each of these sites.

Although only at Street (*Lantokay*) has a case been put forward that establishes with a reasonable degree of certainty that this was a 'monastic' site, there seems every possibility that the other two sites considered in this study may at one time have also been some sort of early religious settlement similar to how early foundations have been envisaged in Wales and Cornwall (Davies 1982, 143; Preston-Jones 1992, 122; Padel 2002, 310). The evidence from Ireland suggests that early 'monasteries' were little more than communities of ascetics living in seclusion (Hurley 1982, 229), although it is equally possible that the early religious settlements established in the West may have only been occupied by one or two individuals and they may not necessarily have been living an eremitic life (Padel 2002, 310). The impression given by these case studies from Somerset is that Welsh monasticism played an important role, as part of an ascetic movement in the 6th century, in establishing early Christian settlements in Somerset and evangelising ordinary people, particularly in the coastal locations where these early missionaries were most active.

These studies have been particularly revealing with regard to the impact of the Anglo-Saxons, although it is recognised that conclusions must be made cautiously given the limited number of sites considered. Due to the fact that the Anglo-Saxon kings were Christian by the time they took control of Somerset, continuity of sites, and 'integration' between the British and Anglo-Saxon churches is often stressed (Pearce 1981, 192; Hase 1994, 51; Orme 1996, 21). However whilst the pre-existing sites of sanctity may have often been incorporated by the new regime, with there appearing to be continuity of Christian activity at Street and Kewstoke, albeit with some loss of status, the case study of St Decumans appears to show that the Anglo-Saxons did not feel tied by these cult sites, not initially at least, hence the apparent interruption of the cults at St Decumans and Stoke St Nectan when these churches may have been resited due to changes in patterns of settlement at that time. The setting up of new minsters to replace these earlier sites at St Decumans and Stoke can also be seen in the context of a model recently put forward by Hall (2000; 2003), which suggests that when the Anglo-Saxons took control in Dorset and Somerset 'the foundation of monastic and minster sites was sometimes accompanied by a move from and abandonment of earlier sites' which had existed nearby (Aston 2003, 44). Certainly, evidence from Anglo-Saxon charters appears to indicate the transference of 'estates' attached to British churches or monasteries to the Anglo-Saxon church, as evidenced in Dorset, with the estate of *Lanprobi* being given to the new foundation at Sherborne, and here in Somerset the lands of the conjectured British monastery at *Lantokay* being given, via the Bishop of Winchester, to the new foundation at Glastonbury which was set up close by on the other side of the River Brue. Another potentially pre-English monastic site in Somerset at Carhampton seems to have had its estate given to a new religious community at Cheddar at an early date, although in this case a monastic function may have continued on the original site (Calder 2002, 62–71).

However what we may never know is if any of these British religious settlements were abandoned *before* the Anglo-Saxons took control of these areas. In relation to Dorset, Hall (2000; 2003, 49) has argued that the Anglo-Saxons disbanded such sites as part of a deliberate policy to suppress the British church and to express their allegiance to the orthodox church of Rome. If the British church was suppressed in this way then this may help explain why the tradition of the saint has so often been lost and there is so little trace of these religious settlements in the administrative record, although this may also be due to the fact that these sites in Somerset only saw British Christian activity for a relatively short period of time, as compared to sites in Wales and Cornwall. Whatever the reason, and despite the profound nature of the changes introduced by the Anglo-Saxons, there is some evidence that these cult sites continued to be highly regarded by the indigenous population. In the case of St Decumans this influence has been shown to be strong enough to eventually pull the church back to its original site.

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