

MEDIEVAL CHURCHES IN THE SURREY LANDSCAPE

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The topic of medieval churches in the landscape has many dimensions, taking into account both responses to the physical landscape by the founders of churches and the place of churches within the organisation of the human landscape. This note examines some aspects of the theme – notably the location of the churches in the physical and human landscape and the way they express their presence – but there are numerous other landscape aspects of churches that are also worthy of attention, including orientations, distribution of dedications, shape and size of churchyards, and location of glebe lands.

While it is the case that the majority of Surrey's parish churches and chapels-of-ease from the middle ages still exist, the extent of changes both to the church buildings and to the landscape since the medieval period, in addition to the usual limitations of documentary and archaeological sources, present considerable challenges of interpretation.

A tentative estimate of the **number of churches** that were parish churches or chapels-of-ease in the historic county of Surrey at the end of the middle ages, which for these purposes might be considered as the 1530s, immediately before the dissolution of monasteries and not long before the dissolution of the chantries, would be 147. This figure assumes that the chapels of Waddington (in Coulsdon) and West Humble (in Mickleham) were still in use at this time, only to cease very soon after. Perhaps one or two more of known lost churches also persisted into the mid-sixteenth century and would need to be added to the total. At least 120 churches were formally parish churches, and the status of a few more is unclear, e.g. St Martha's, Wanborough and Woldingham, even though they had territories that were in effect parishes. Not every church that was parochial by the twelfth century necessarily retained that status throughout the middle ages, such as Waddington and those of Burgh and Preston (both in Banstead), which appear to have ceased functioning in the fifteenth century, having fallen to the status of chapels before that.

Camden in 1586 says that there were 140 parish churches. This figure would exclude chapels-of-ease without parishes, notably Oakwood and Ripley, but include those chapels that had parochial territories and certain parochial rights, of which there were 18. By the later sixteenth century, the parish churches of Cuddington and St Margaret Southwark had also disappeared, as had various chapels such as Bagshot (a chantry chapel that had come to be used as a chapel-of-ease). Other churches or chapels that existed at an earlier date also appear to have been lost before the sixteenth century (chapels in Godalming parish known in 1220 – Catteshall, Hurtmore (where the vignette provided by the 1220 visitation shows that it was built of timber), Tuesley (the "Old Minster"); the Leatherhead church referred to in Domesday; Felbridge chapel; Kingswood chapel; Sutton chapel (in Woking parish); Old Haslemere chapel; possibly a chapel at Henley (near Ash)). There may have been others, as some of these are only known, or suspected, from a single source. The status of a chapel at Croham (in Croydon parish) that appears in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 is unclear.

Only St Olave Southwark has been entirely lost since the mid-sixteenth century (unless one includes the former parochial chapel of St Mary Magdalene Southwark, attached to the south transept of St Mary Overy Priory and, like St Margaret, absorbed into the new combined parish of St Saviour after the Dissolution). In addition, the rebuilt St Thomas Southwark is no longer a church.

But all churches underwent major changes in the centuries after the Reformation, and many have been rebuilt, sometimes several times and sometimes on a different site (e.g. Newington, Titsey). New churches have been built on sites adjacent to the old, sometimes leaving the old church standing (Caterham on an adjacent site, Albury and Esher a little distance away), sometimes leaving part of the

old church (Cheam, Ewell), and sometimes demolishing the old church entirely (Tooting). Others have been wholly reconstructed, so that 34 of the churches of medieval origin have no fabric left from the middle ages. A further 21 have very little medieval fabric (if one includes the six where only the old tower survives – Barnes, Chertsey, Mortlake, Putney, Richmond, West Molesey; and of these Mortlake's tower is from the 1540s). Altogether about 40% of the medieval total have either disappeared or been effectively rebuilt. Many others have, of course, been extended and/or heavily restored.

Among the ways that the landscape has changed since the middle ages is how these churches now fit into the overall pattern of ecclesiastical provision. For nearly three hundred years after the Reformation, few new Anglican churches were built in Surrey. There were over 20 eighteenth century rebuildings, mainly near London (e.g. Battersea, Rotherhithe, St George Southwark, Wandsworth) but sometimes elsewhere (e.g. Holy Trinity Guildford, Pirbright), with some church building of the period removed in its turn (e.g. at Carshalton, Shalford, and Wimbledon). But there were only three wholly new churches that were not successors to earlier churches: Christchurch Southwark, St John Horsleydown Southwark, and Kew. Then in the period between 1822 and 1914 over 300 Anglican churches were built in the historic county, nearly half in what are now inner London boroughs. About half those in inner London have now gone, but the vast majority of the 160+ in the remainder of the county survive, outnumbering those with medieval origins. There are also some 50 Victorian and Edwardian Catholic churches, with a majority in the London part of the county. Nonconformist churches of various dates are often but not always less conspicuous in the landscape. New churches of the last hundred or so years are fewer, but include some of nearly all denominations.

The landscape has also, of course, often changed dramatically, so that the immediate environs of medieval churches may be wholly different from those experienced by their builders. The causes are familiar – urbanisation and suburbanisation, railways, roads and traffic, mineral extraction to name but a few.

Churches in the physical landscape

It is still possible, however, to gain some understanding of the older churches by considering their place in the physical landscape. The oldest surface rocks in Surrey are the Tunbridge Wells Sands of the **High Weald** in the far south-east of the county, but the only church here is Lingfield, at a point where the High Weald is not very high. The next in the sequence is the Weald Clay formation, the **Low Weald**, which covers about a fifth of the county's area but has only about a tenth of its churches. Well wooded, the area has two of the county's most distinctive timber belfries at Burstow and Newdigate (although belfries supported on massive timbers occur in other parts of the county as well). In fact, the Weald Clay is far from all clay, and there are bands of sandstone within the formation, usually slightly elevated, especially in the western part of the Weald, on which a number of churches are located – Alfold, Chiddingfold, Ewhurst. Crowhurst church is on similarly on sandstone where it is less common in the east. The phenomenon also occurs in the West Sussex Weald, with the churches of Billingshurst, Fernhurst, Lurgashall, Northchapel, Plaistow, and West Grinstead on sandstone. Elsewhere in the Low Weald, church sites raised above streams are sometimes favoured, e.g. at Dunsfold or Ockley. The Lower Greensand, with the Hythe Beds forming the hills of the centre and south-west of the county, the Sandgate and Bargate Beds, and the Folkestone Beds forming sandy heaths around Frensham and Blackheath have comparatively few churches, which often tend to be on raised ground close to streams.

The area along **the foot of the North Downs scarp**, forming a spring line but also partly occupied by the Tillingbourne valley, is quite varied, partly because the strata are dipping quite steeply. The Gault Clay and the Upper Greensand mostly only form narrow bands, except north of Reigate, where Gatton and Merstham churches are on Upper Greensand. Although some churches appear close to the foot of

the Downs, Wotton and Shere are on the Hythe Beds and Puttenham and Seale on the Folkestone Beds. This is in contrast to the foot of the South Downs in Sussex, where in the west, and into Hampshire, the Upper Greensand forms quite a wide plateau with fertile soils and a clearly visible scarp. Several churches are in this area, including Harting, Elsted, Bepton, Cocking. Further east the Upper Greensand becomes discontinuous at the surface; several churches are located on the “islands”, at Washington, Wiston, Steyning and Edburton. West Sussex also has one church on the poorly fertile Gault Clay, at Heyshott, which appears to be a comparatively late foundation and was a chapel of Stedham in the Rother valley.

Those areas of the **North Downs** in Surrey and the South Downs in Sussex that are wide enough to have villages and churches and churches within the chalk area (rather than just having peripheral parishes extending on to the chalk) also show a marked contrast. The 14 surviving churches in the North Downs in Surrey (all east of the Mole) are all on the plateau, not in the dry valleys. Their average elevation is 179 metres above sea level. Furthermore, they are all situated on strata that overlay the chalk, mostly on the Clay-with-Flints (of disputed origin, but probably the residue of eroded strata, subjected to periglacial action) but also on outliers of the Thanet Sands. West of about Chipstead, the Clay-with-Flints can produce poor soils – Ranmore Common, Headley Heath – but further east, where drainage and acidity were probably improved by marling, it appears to have been a good area for cultivation. Of the four known lost churches and chapels of the Surrey Downs, all were also on the plateau, and only one (Preston, partly excavated by Brian Hope-Taylor in the 1950s, at the same time as the Preston Howe manorial complex) was directly on the chalk. A rather similar pattern with churches on the Downs plateau exists in western and central Kent, where there are also extensive areas of Clay-with-Flints, and in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns, again with similar surface geology. By contrast, the churches of the South Downs in West Sussex (between the Lavant valley and the Hampshire border) tend to be on dry valley sides, such as at Compton or East Marden. Their average elevation is 78 metres, a full 100 metres lower than the average for the North Downs churches in Surrey. There is very little Clay-with-Flints on the South Downs, and only Up Marden church stands on the edge of an area of it. North Marden church is on the chalk plateau. Only the lost chapel of West Marden appears to have stood on the valley floor. The chalk hills in south Dorset, again an area with little Clay-with-Flints, have comparable church locations to the Sussex Downs.

On **the north edge of the Surrey Downs** there is a row of churches – 20 between Guildford and the Kent border, including the lost church of Cuddington – along the spring line. Some, such as Carshalton, are very close to springs. Others, such as West Horsley, are on the chalk above the springs. North of the Downs, although some churches are located on the London Clay and some on the various sands that overlay the clay in many areas, the distribution is greatly influenced by the river valleys. The rivers have all deposited alluvium, but flow at a lower level than the gravel terraces either side of them, which were deposited in periglacial or post-glacial conditions and cover extensive areas (more in south Middlesex than Surrey), sometimes forming islands which are now disguised by later drainage, particularly around Chertsey and Southwark.

Along the Thames, for much of its course between Chertsey and Battersea there is only a narrow band of alluvium, so that the terraces are close to the river bank, which may have influenced the choice of both settlement and church sites. The churches of Thames Ditton, Kingston, Petersham (a little further from the river, but still on terrace gravels), Mortlake, Putney, Battersea, Lambeth, and the lost Southwark St Olave are all very close to the river, with the last four being immediately on its bank. Rotherhithe church is on the wide area of alluvium below Southwark where the terraces do not come close to the river. It is in an area that has been subject to frequent flooding in consequence and the (rebuilt) church is now well below the level of the modern Thames wall. Building a church a little above

the river, at for example Lambeth, has not always been a guarantee of avoiding flooding, although it reduces the frequency. Richmond church is raised a little more above the river on bedrock (London Clay). The number of churches immediately on the river bank is even more noticeable on the Middlesex side: Chelsea, Fulham, Chiswick, Isleworth, Twickenham, Hampton, Sunbury, Shepperton, Staines, with Teddington and Laleham set only a little way back.

The largest tributary of the Thames in Surrey is **the Wey**, where the area of alluvium along the lower course is often wider than it is along the Thames. Here the churches are on terrace gravels (only Pyrford is on bedrock (Bagshot Beds)), with some very close to the river where its course is close to the edge of the flood plain (Woking, Send). It is notable that all the churches are on the side of their settlements closest to the river (even though this is disguised by suburbanisation at Byfleet). In fact, the pattern continues going upstream – Stoke (in a very much altered modern landscape), St Mary Guildford (raised above the river on chalk bedrock), St Nicholas Guildford (at least partly on alluvium and with a long history of flooding), Shalford, Godalming, Elstead (near the confluence of the Westbrook stream), Farnham (on the North Wey), and Frensham (on Folkestone Beds immediately above the South Wey, where it was moved in 1239 because the original church was subject to frequent inundation).

To the west, Chobham church is on terrace gravels between two streams. Moving east, on the lower Mole, East Molesey, Cobham, and Stoke d'Abernon churches are all on terraces, and Leatherhead is on the chalk bedrock above the river. Along the Hogsmill, Malden church is on London Clay above the river. Barnes church is on terrace gravels on the Beverley Brook. Wandsworth church is on alluvium by the River Wandle.

Many of the churches in the area north of the Downs are accounted for by the spring line and those along the rivers. Of the remainder, a number are on gravels, albeit at a distance from present rivers (Bermondsey, Newington, Camberwell, Mitcham, West Molesey, Ripley). Seven (except along the rivers) are on London Clay (or a superficial overlay), mainly in the north-east of the county, and ten are on the predominantly sandy beds on top of the London Clay, mainly to the west.

Churches in the human landscape

There are many potential themes that might come under the heading of the human landscape, but this section concentrates on three: churches in relation to other churches: churches in relation to centres of power; and churches in relation to settlement, principally nucleated villages and towns.

The starting point for a discussion of **the relationship between churches** is that between those of the first generation and those that were founded later. For Surrey, John Blair in *Early Medieval Surrey* identified twelve churches that documentary sources refer to as “minsters” or the context implies that they had this status. The evidence is spread over a period of some four hundred years, and Blair’s nuanced discussion takes into account a number of unresolved questions. Some churches are of uncertain category, which may have had a status similar to or approaching the documented minsters (Wimbledon, Walton-on Thames). Some churches may have been important pre-Conquest churches belonging to royal estates (Reigate, Shalford, Shere) or other important estates (Wotton). Churches serving the Wealden area may have resembled minsters in some ways (possibly including Dorking as well as the estate centres already noted). In any event, it is clear that while a number of the minster churches retained daughter churches as subordinate chapels later into the middle ages (Chertsey, Woking, Farnham, Kingston, Godalming), other with daughters were not among the documented minsters (Shalford, Shere).

Among the outstanding questions are: whether the term “minster” was used consistently over time in medieval sources and whether its meaning was ever precise; whether there was complete and uniform coverage of minster *parochiae*; whether these had fixed boundaries; and whether we can realistically expect to identify all the early mother churches from documentary sources.

Probably the majority of lesser churches were founded by secular lords, although some may have originated as ecclesiastical foundations from minsters or other mother churches, to which they usually remained subordinate chapels. Where the origins were secular, the process by which the Church gained authority is not well understood, and Surrey cases have left no clear documentary evidence except where a secular lord specifically gifted a church to a monastery (where the exact meaning of what has been given is not always clear).

Parish boundaries before they were tidied up in the later nineteenth century provide suggestive evidence of earlier relationships. In the south of the county there are numerous parishes that had detached areas, probably reflecting detached parts of manorial holdings. Manors were not uniform, either in size or jurisdiction, and not every lord chose to build a church. Parish boundaries were not imposed by authority within the Church, and some perhaps initially even overlapped, but they became fixed and jealously guarded because of their relationship to church income by the later twelfth century. Despite these factors influencing their development, patterns of parish boundaries can often suggest the subdivision of larger units, which in some cases reflect the mother-daughter relationship.

The manorial origin of many churches is often suggested by their location close to manor or court houses, whether these were residential or not, although in some cases it is likely that lords chose to build nearer to population centres as most churches appear to have been intended for communal rather than private use from the outset. Where a church is close to **a centre of power** there is always the question of which came first. Surrey has two major residences of the Archbishops of Canterbury, at Croydon and Lambeth, both next to two of Surrey’s grander churches, but the relationship between church and palace in these cases is rather different and warns against the risk of equifinality in interpreting the landscape. Croydon was the Archbishop’s manor, with a church from an early date, whereas Lambeth was only obtained in the late twelfth century, when the church there had already long existed (in Domesday Book, Lambeth church appears, unusually for a church that was not a monastery or a major collegiate establishment, as a tenant-in-chief, albeit one that had only acquired its land post-Conquest). For the majority of lesser churches, it is likely that the existence of the manorial centre predated the foundation of the church.

Where churches appear in the **urban landscape** may indicate the historical development of the relationship between the church and the town. In general, towns with multiple churches are of earlier origin than those with a single parish, and indeed Surrey’s only two Domesday towns, Guildford and Southwark, are the only ones with more than one parish. The route by which they acquired multiple parishes is not, however, straightforward in either case. Surrey has no equivalent of Winchester with its 50+ churches in the period before c.1300, which can only have been mostly private foundations. Neither does it have a town such as Chichester or Lewes where the number of parishes was at some point in or close to double figures. The churches in towns with large numbers of parishes were mostly small, as can be seen from those surviving in Chichester or Exeter, although in some towns that were rich in the late middle ages, such as Norwich, some of the churches were rebuilt on a grander scale.

In several Surrey towns, the church is some distance away from the market place, or even outside the extent of the medieval town altogether. Examples of the former are Croydon and Farnham, of the latter Haslemere and Reigate. In all these cases, the existence of the church is earlier than the foundation of the town. Bletchingley’s market place was laid out rather closer to the church. At

Kingston, the market place was created next to the important church. The present situation of a churchyard enclosed by commercial buildings is one more often encountered in places where the town and church are both of later origin; Ashford (Kent), Ludlow, Newport (IoW), Petersfield, St Thomas at Salisbury are examples, although the present landscape has often been modernised, such as by the removal of buildings in Petersfield in the nineteenth century to open up the view of the church. Newark in Nottinghamshire is a case like Kingston where the church, an early major foundation, is screened from the later market place. Surrey has no instance of where a church is immediately on the market place when it was located there as part of the town foundation, such as occurs at Midhurst in Sussex. In this instance, the church remained a chapel of its mother church of Easebourne throughout the middle ages, a phenomenon that was quite common among town foundations of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, most famously at Holy Trinity in Hull, which remained a chapel despite being one of the largest town churches in England. Surrey's nearest equivalent to Midhurst's church on the market place is probably Chertsey, but it is questionable how urban Chertsey was (John Blair treats it as a planned village), and the church can probably best be seen as a case of a monastery building a separate church to remove the parochial function from the abbey church (of which there are numerous examples, perhaps most famously at St Margaret Westminster).

Chertsey Abbey's planned villages form one group of **nucleated rural settlements**. Surrey is predominantly a county of small villages and scattered hamlets, so these stand out. The church was always built in central and dominant position, as is still evident at Great Bookham and Chobham, while Egham is an instance where both church and landscape have greatly changed. Another type of nucleated settlement was the market village. It is difficult to generalise in this case about the relationship of church and settlement; in fact it is difficult to be categorical about which places might come under this heading. Charters might have been issued to regularise an existing market. Others might have been just aspirations. Some places that are now towns may have been little more than market villages in the middle ages. Sometimes the morphology of a settlement may suggest it had a market place in the middle ages in the absence of clear documentary evidence. One fairly definite example is Shere, with a market charter of 1309 where there is a triangular market place next to the early important church. Another category of nucleated villages is those with a number of inns, of which Oxted is an example, with the inns along an important route and the earlier church some distance away.

The prominence of churches in the landscape

Churches located conspicuously on the side of the Thames, on terraces in river valleys, and on sandstone ridges in the Weald have already been referred to. All these would have been highly visible in the landscape, at least from certain directions, but Surrey's medieval churches rarely sought to emphasise this prominence with their architecture in the way that, for example, some of the spires of the East Midlands or the late medieval towers of the West Country do.

In fact, quite a number of Surrey churches have locally prominent sites in addition to those mentioned above. St Martha's has a hill top site, away from settlement. In the Lower Greensand area of south-west Surrey, a number of churches, such as Witley, Haslemere and Puttenham, are on slightly raised sites and consequently stand out in their immediate environs. Thursley church is located immediately above the fault line where the sandstone of the Bargate Beds is elevated above the more variable Sandgate Beds. In the rather fragmented Greensand country in the east of the county, Nutfield, Bletchingley and Limpsfield churches occupy sites on the north facing shoulder of the ridge, while Godstone faces south and Tandridge is on the ridge top. Several of the Downs plateau churches enjoy prominence by virtue of their elevation, with Tatsfield at the top of the scarp (at 237 metres above sea level, but despite this slightly less high than Woldingham old church on a ridge between two dry valleys) and

Sanderstead and Banstead, both facing north, although now somewhat hidden by more recent building, potentially the most visible historically.

North of the Downs, a few sites stand out. Wimbledon is at the summit of a ridge. Esher church is at the top of an east facing slope. Clapham old church was on a shoulder overlooking Battersea marshes. Horsell church is on a ridge with land dropping away on the north and on the south. Worplesdon church is on a distinct elevation.

The grandest architectural gestures among those churches that stand out in the landscape are undoubtedly the late medieval towers at Lambeth and Putney. Horsell and Worplesdon also have towers of some architectural pretension, as does Leatherhead, elevated above the Mole. By contrast, Surrey's tallest spire, at Godalming, is very much in a valley, although it is highly visible from certain directions.

Conclusions

The intentions of the founders of churches in choosing their locations and of those who later provided funds to elaborate the buildings are hard to read. It would seem that many founders wanted their churches to be visible, and at a time when the landscape was much less densely occupied than today and where there were few stone buildings, churches built of stone, as a majority would have been well before the Norman Conquest, would have generally been conspicuous. The link to water, possibly with sacred significance, provides an additional theme in church siting. Some place-names (e.g. Thursley, Tuesley) suggest a link to pre-Christian sacred sites, but how many churches are located with specific reference to what went before cannot be known. The siting of churches with respect to geology would, to a large extent, have followed knowledge of good ground and avoided areas subject to frequent flooding, although riverside locations inevitably flood on occasions. The good ground, generally being the most fertile, will have influenced settlement patterns, and despite manor houses being the most common immediate factor in choosing a church site, churches were intended to serve people and so were inevitably affected by settlement patterns. The decision of the creators of medieval new towns at Haslemere and Reigate not to provide their towns with new churches probably reflects the relatively small size of the towns. Croydon and Farnham were more significant town foundations, but their existing churches were closer to the new markets.