History of Corhampton Church

Early history and background

The church is remarkable in having no known dedication. It has just been Corhampton Church as far as we know for the whole of its long life.

There is a reference to Quedementune in the Domesday Book, but there is no mention of the church and this is strange, for not only is it unquestionably Saxon, but it is a wonderful example of a small village pre-Conquest church that has remained almost unaltered from the time that it was built, and which is one of the most important Saxon churches in Southern England.

So what is the origin of the name? In mediaeval days it is said to have borne the name Cornhamptone. However, about two hundred years ago it seems that the people of Corhampton called it Carmenton, which properly should be Carmeonton ('ton' is Saxon for an enclosure and 'car' means fortress but is of Welsh derivation). Certainly the church is built on a mound but whether this was ever fortified must be questionable. Writing in Volume II of *Hampshire Notes and Queries* published in 1884, A V Walters, B.A, suggests that Carmeonton "would indicate a town on the Meon at the Carrs". Carr means an association of trees and shrubs developing at edges of swamps or fens, and there has always been a mill at Corhampton (to the north of the church). A thousand years ago the River Meon was both navigable and much wider, so this latter interpretation makes sense.

The church looks as if it was built on an artificial mound. This may have been the 'car' or fort mentioned above, but it was rare for a Christian church to be so built and the interesting suggestion has been made that it may stand on the site of a heathen temple of Roman or even earlier times. Such temples were sometimes built on man-made mounds. There is no documentary evidence for this, but important Roman remains (now to be seen in the British Museum) have been discovered nearby. There is in the churchyard a Roman sarcophagus currently used for horticultural purposes. However, if the mound was as old as this we would have expected to find some early objects when graves were being dug, but none has been found.

So we can do no more than record the suggestion as being a possibility without proof. The northern part of the churchyard is partly circular, which is a Saxon characteristic and this is clearly visible in the

drawing of the church that appears in an article on Corhampton Church in the *Builders Journal* of February 11th, 1903. Christianity arrived late in this part of Hampshire, inhabited before the Conquest by a Jutish tribe called the Meonwara. We learn from the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England* that St. Wilfred, a Northumbrian and Bishop of York, spent five years among the South and West Saxons between 681 & 686. Wilfred had disagreed with Archbishop Theodore in 678 and had appealed to the Pope in Rome who had found in Wilfred's favour. However on his return he was flung into prison by Theodore. He escaped to Sussex from whence he travelled to the Isle of Wight, where it is known that he preached, and to the province of the Meonwara. Although Bede was writing in Jarrow, he was well-informed about affairs in the South through his friend Nothelm, Bishop of London, and he was interested in the career of Wilfred as a fellow Northumbrian. So there is no reason to doubt Bede's History.

Warnford, a mile up the valley to the North, claims to have been Wilfred's headquarters. (The church there and its park, designed by one of Capability Brown's clerks, is well worth a visit.) Although many of the churches in this area have Saxon work in them, there is little—except possibly the sundial (see below)—that can be dated back to Wilfred's time. He probably built a number of mud and wattle churches that were later replaced by stone structures, around 1000, by which time Christianity was firmly established, parish boundaries had been laid out, and the building of permanent churches was possible.

It was at this time, during the reign of Canute, that the present church at Corhampton was built. Arthur R. & Phyllis M. Green in *Saxon Architecture & Sculpture in Hampshire* (1951) date the church to the first quarter of the eleventh century and probably before 1020**.** For economic reasons, the church was constructed of whole flints, locally available and cheap, plastered over, and consisted of nave and chancel. The walls are remarkably thin—only 2' 6" thick (about 76cm)—as Saxon walls often were, and they are strengthened by stone quoins in typical Saxon **long-and-short** work as well as by vertical pilaster strips or **lesenes**, which are surmounted by a horizontal string course of wrought stone. All of this is typically Saxon. The stone came from the Isle of Wight, either from Binstead or Quarr, and was shipped up the Meon. This Saxon church has survived substantially unaltered up to today except for the porch, a couple of buttresses, and the vestry-cum-boiler room all of which were added late in the 19th century. The other major structural change is at the east end.

The original east end, which used to have a large round window (as can be seen in an early water colour drawing and also in the picture hanging on the gallery in the church), collapsed in 1842 as a result of road widening when the mound was dug into and the foundations weakened. This cannot have been the turnpike road, the present A 32, which is well back from the church and crosses the river, and was almost certainly not in existence then. It must have been the earlier road, which keeps west of the river and comes out in Exton at Exton Farm and is still a footpath today. A pen-and-ink drawing of 1908 in *Highways and Byways of Hampshire* shows a wide muddy track passing close to the north and west side of the church. Ancient buildings have suffered much from traffic and road widening in recent decades, but rarely as long ago as 1842! This collapse necessitated the rebuilding of the east end on the old foundations and this was rather poorly and clumsily done in red brick.

Peter des Roches, Bishop of Winchester in the reign of King John gave Corhampton to the Premonstratension abbey at Titchfield, whose canons served it up to the time of the Dissolution of the monasteries. In 1545, the village of Lomer (now part of the Preshaw estate), was deserted, the church there fell into ruins and its parish was joined to Corhampton. From the Reformation it had its own priest, who was a perpetual curate, up until 1926 when it became part of Meonstoke whose church is less than ¼ mile across the river. It was at this time, too, that Corhampton and Meonstoke became part of the diocese of Portsmouth, which was created, together with Guildford, out of the over-large diocese of Winchester.

Across the main road stands the Old Vicarage and attached to it (now demolished) used to be a Free School. Sir Nicholas Hyde, the celebrated Chief Justice of the Kings Bench who died in 1631, received part of his education at this school. In 1669, William Collins vested it in trust for the use of a master (the intention being that this should be the incumbent) on condition that he taught eight free scholars, three from Corhampton, two each from Meonstoke and Droxford and one from Exton. These scholars used trays of sand in lieu of slates or paper as writing materials. In 1816 it became a National School and closed at the beginning of the last century.

The exterior

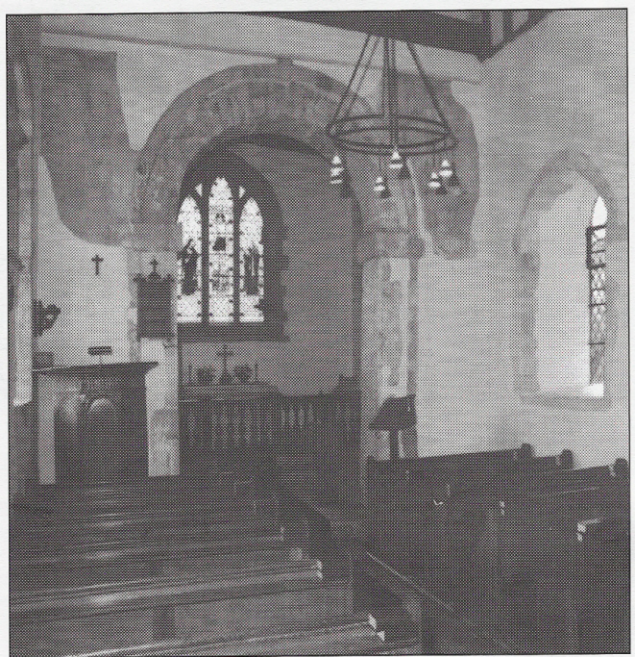
The most notable feature of the exterior of the church is the gigantic yew tree, one of the finest for miles around. There is no way of dating a tree except by cutting it down and counting its rings, and it would be a pity to do that! It is still full of life and its branches spread at about a ½ inch per annum. Williams Freeman in *Field Archaeology as Illustrated in Hampshire* measured two yews that dated back to 1200 and had a girth of 5'9". Another at Merdon Castle, 5 miles southwest of Winchester, had a girth of 22'9" and was growing on a pre-Conquest bank. The girth of the Corhampton Yew is 23' so we can say with some confidence that it was planted about 1000 years ago. and may even pre-date the church.

Turning back to face the church you will see to the left of the porch perhaps the best preserved of the pilaster strips or Iesenes surmounted by the stone string course. Of particular interest is the treatment to the base—a stone carved as a group of three scrolled leaves or brackets. Continuing to the left and passing the Victorian buttress you will see the original west wall of the church, complete with the long-and-short quoins on both the south-west and north-west corners, the central pilaster strip, and the string course above. High up you might be able to discern two Saxon windows later filled in and then unblocked in the 1905 restoration. Above that is a little belfry added in the last century and completely rebuilt 1999 to house the two church bells. One, the treble, is inscribed "1619 I.H. in God is my hope." and the second, by Thomas Mears, is dated 1829. Continuing on to the north side of the church you will see the complete Saxon nave wall without any later additions except of course for windows inserted in later medieval times and the Victorian vestry. Of particular interest is the blocked north doorway**.** It has a semicircular head and is cut straight through the wall without any projections, just a plain rib all round it on the outside. Where the arch springs from the uprights the capitals are stones carved rather unusually in horizontal rolls. Above the arch a pilaster runs up to the roof. There is a lancet window of the thirteenth century inserted into the masonry, so the doorway must have been blocked then if not earlier. The bases of the uprights are interesting; they "are of the same shape as the ends of a gold altar cross, being presented by King Canute to the New Minster in Winchester as shown by the New Minster Registry of about 1020 A.D. and on the capitals and bases of the arcade at the foot of the same

illumination." (A.R. & P.M. Green). Below that you will see the original stone plinth on which the church was built, and this is very rare.

Retracing your steps, return to the entrance but continue past the porch, being careful not to bang your head on the gutter. Here you will see the long-and-short quoins of the south-east corner of the nave and beyond it yet another pilaster strip on the chancel wall. Immediately beyond that you will see the red brickwork necessitated by the collapse of the east end referred to above. Immediately to the right of the porch you will see an extremely interesting carved stone set into the wall. This is a Saxon sundial and you will see that it is divided into 8 "tides" rather than 12 hours as in a modem sundial. There are curious bulbous objects at the end of each tide, and the hole in the centre for the gnomon can be seen. The dial is a reddish brown stone quite different from any other stone in the church, so it certainly pre-dates the present building and may even date back to Wilfred's time. It is one of the best preserved Saxon sundials in the country.

The interior



On going inside, the dominant feature is the perfect and complete **Saxon chancel arch,** seen here in this photograph**.** It is very simple with only the keystone projecting, and all the stones that form the arch run right through from side to side. Notice also the pilaster strips up the side and the very plain capitals (that on the north side has been repaired).

There was a very sensitive restoration of the church in 1905/6 and from this period date the pews. The fine nave roof**,** probably dating back to around 1600, was uncovered and restored at this time. The pulpit is Jacobean, though on a modern base, and some panelling on the right hand side of the entrance as you go in, forming the back of a pew, and the lectern, either date from this time, too, or are good copies executed at the time of the 1906 restoration. All the woodwork in this restoration was carved by local craftsmen and was probably paid for by a member of the Campbell-Wyndham family, whose memorials are on the south wall. They lived in Corhampton House and were almost certainly responsible for this restoration. The other main family were the Longs of Preshaw (now in the parish of Exton) whose memorials are on the north wall.

Almost all the windows were inserted in the thirteenth century. This was necessary to provide more light in the church but of course they also damaged what was previously in existence. This is particularly noticeable in the chancel. In the nave there are traces of wall-paintings but they are in very poor condition compared with those in the chancel. In 1968, a Mrs. Eve Baker uncovered the paintings and identified an Agony in the Garden on the north wall, and on the south side of the chancel arch was probably an Expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Turning to the west end there is a gallery**.** The church was repaired in 1837 and it was probably erected then to house the singers and musicians. The story goes that one of their number always selected the hymns and psalms, the numbers of which were exhibited on a slate hung over the front of the gallery. One fateful Sunday morning no slate was hung out. The parish clerk, not noticing the omission, said "Let us sing the - - - - -"; after a pause he repeated "Let us sing the - - - -" until, grasping the situation, he shouted in sonorous tones "Where be th' slaat?" In 1857, the charming little **chamber organ** was presented by Mrs. Campbell-Wyndham. This organ is still in use and was hand pumped until 1976. Originally installed in the parish church of Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, it was found to be too small and sold to Mrs. Campbell-Wyndham. Apart from the blower, its specification is as it was built. Below the gallery is the font, which is difficult to date. Some of the details are Norman, but others, such as the roll-moulding, are Saxon. So this is probably an example of Saxo-Norman overlap.

Hanging on the gallery are two interesting pictures. The right hand one is a plan of the church drawn in 1917 by the architect S. C. Horseman

which shows the different architectural periods of the church very clearly, and the other is a delightful watercolour of the outside of the church before the East end fell down, and was painted by the Rev. Charles Waters who was Rector from 1834 - 1848.

Moving into the chancel we see the fine 17th century altar rails and beyond, in the sanctuary on the left, an altar stone. This is almost certainly the original Saxon one which was thrown out when the east end was reconstructed in 1842 and languished under the yew tree until reinstated in its present position in the restoration of 1905/6. However, this altar stone is particularly interesting as, in addition to the usual five consecration crosses on the top, it has an extra one in the middle of the long side. Opposite this altar stone is a large stone chair. It is difficult to be certain about the age of this, but it could be Saxon though it is more likely to be early medieval. It is a **sanctuary chair,** or, in Saxon terms a Fridstol or Freed Stool -- i.e. a chair of peace denoting that here the refugee might have peace. It is probably in its original position. Sanctuary Chairs were very important in early medieval England because if someone was sitting in one that person could not be arrested and thus he had found sanctuary or safety in the church. These chairs serve a similar purpose as the iron rings or sanctuary knockers that you may have seen on church doors.

However, the great glory of the chancel is the set of wall paintings**.** It is a great pity that subsequent generations inserted windows into them and of course much was destroyed when the east end collapsed in 1842, by which time they had in fact been covered up. They were uncovered by Mrs. Baker and her assistants in 1968 when they were repaired following a generous grant from the Pilgrim Trust.

The principal theme on the top layer is the legend of St. Swithun, the famous Bishop of Winchester in the 9th century, and this is indeed a very rare subject in religious wall paintings, which makes them even more important. Sadly not all the subjects can be identified, but at the eastern end of the south wall the story of the old woman with the basket of eggs can be easily discerned. The saint had gone to inspect the building of the bridge over the Itchen at the bottom of the High Street in Winchester (on the site of the present bridge outside City Mill, near King Alfred's statue). There was a big crowd and the old woman, bringing her eggs to sell in the market, was jostled and the basket knocked out of her hand; whereupon St. Swithun restored the eggs to her unbroken. The eggs can clearly be seen in the picture falling to the

ground. Next to this are two men, the head of one of whom is cut off by newer plaster, who are carrying something that looks like a stretcher. This is a more doubtful identification but there is a story of a young man who was frightened by two wild women and fell into River Itchen. Taken out as dead he was placed beside the tomb of St. Swithun, where after three days, he was restored to life. Next to this a rearing horse can be made out, but to what this refers we have no idea. The scenes on the north side are indecipherable.

Underneath these scenes of the life of St. Swithun are some unusual features. Notice the beautiful border with its lozenge riband pattern and its red and green colours. Below this are elaborately painted representations of loose hangings and drapes, very rare indeed for so early a period, with further patterning framing two large square medallions. These are heraldic and the one on the north, which is hard to make out, represents lions couchant, while the one on the south two addorsed (back to back) doves with their heads turned round to look at each other.

So what is the date of these extremely interesting paintings? It is just possible, but very unlikely, that they could be Saxon. They could be as late as 1225. However most experts believe now that they date from the middle of the 12th century, probably between 1125 and 1175. Professor Wormald has said of them: "The real importance of the chancel scheme is that it is the most elaborate decorative scheme that survives in English Romanesque painting." They are true fresco with a smooth finish. Inside the chancel on the north side there is a time switch that will turn on the lights to aid viewing.

The churchyard

Apart from the yew tree already referred to, there are some interesting arched brick graves. Towards the road there is also the Roman sarcophagus, mentioned earlier, which now contains flowers. In the spring there is a splendid show of daffodils on the bank overlooking the road.

The present and the future

Since 1905/6 very little has been done to this church except the installation of electricity and the restoration of the chancel wall

paintings. So in 1999 a major restoration was carried out, funded by the generosity of local people and significant grants from English Heritage, Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council, the Historic Churches Preservation Trust, the Hampshire and Islands Historic Churches Trust, and many other grant-making bodies. All roofs were re-tiled and the bells refurbished and re-hung in the re-built bell cote. All rainwater goods were replaced, and new drains dug; the external stonework was repaired and re-pointed, and all the encroaching vegetation cleared. Inside, damaged plaster was repaired; the gallery was strengthened; windows were remade to improve ventilation and the church redecorated throughout. In the churchyard the surrounding wall was extensively repaired. We hope that as this wonderful little Saxon church, which is still in regular use, approaches its second millennium it is now in good condition to continue its long life.

Originally written by The Rev. John Hurst, this guide has been updated and revised (2000) by Chris Maxse B.A., with photographs bv Innes Marlow.