



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

Little Somborne,
Hampshire



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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Little Somborne, Hampshire

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

by Christopher Dalton (Church and architectural historian, writer on buildings and bells, architectural photographer and lay canon of Hereford Cathedral) and Richard Sawyer (Chartered surveyor formerly in charge of repairs at Little Somborne and other nearby churches in the care of the Trust)

HISTORY

Little Somborne is so called to distinguish it from the other two Sombornes – King's and Up – on the same stream (Somborne: 'summer bourne'), a tributary of the River Test. It was a small settlement within the royal manor of Somborne. Over the centuries the population has declined, leaving the parish now with few dwellings.

This small church with its plaster-faced, flint-built walls, tiled roofs, and timbered and tiled bell turret, is half Anglo-Saxon and half Norman, and is undoubtedly the church mentioned in Domesday Book. The original two-cell church was short and tall, like the comparable Saxon churches at Corhampton and Boarhunt, also in Hampshire. About 1170 the Normans removed the chancel, lowered the walls of the nave and extended it eastwards – nearly doubling its original length – and added a new chancel. This chancel was remarkably small but not without parallel in small rural churches at this date. The need to enlarge the nave very possibly had some connection with the popularity of deer hunting here in the royal forest of West Bere.

Reached from the north-east corner of the nave was a small hermit's cell which is believed to have been that of Peter de Rivallis. He was a benefactor of the Augustinian priory at Mottisfont, being the son of Reginald Earl of Cornwall and the stepson of William Briwere who had founded that priory in 1201. When Peter de Rivallis died in 1226 he was buried intramurally at the priory, giving rise to his posthumous nick-name 'The Holy Man in the Wall'. King's Somborne church was given by William Briwere to Mottisfont priory as part of its endowment, and Little Somborne church by his son John in 1207. Later, the hermit's cell is thought to have been used as an Easter Sepulchre.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-west
(Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: Interior looking east
(Christopher Dalton)*

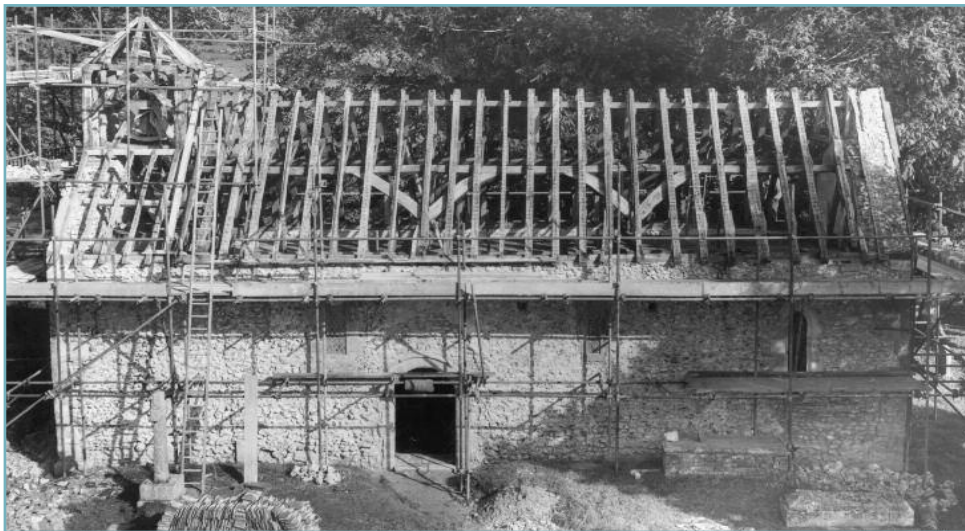
In the 13th century further windows were made at the east end, no doubt to throw more light on the liturgy under the aegis of Mottisfont priory.

In the 14th century the church contracted slightly when the west wall was rebuilt, with a new window and in a new position some 6 ft 6 in. (2 metres) inside the Saxon nave.

No further work of any consequence appears to have been done to the building from the 14th century to the late 20th, beyond the removal of the Norman chancel and hermit's cell and the walling-up of their openings, and the reconstruction of the roof, in the early

17th century. Some restoration work was carried out on the church in 1870.

By the 1960s, use of All Saints' had declined and its condition had deteriorated; and eventually the church was declared formally redundant. In November 1975 it came into the care of what was then known as the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust. A major programme of repairs was carried out, supervised by Richard Sawyer, FRICS, giving the opportunity for full archaeological investigation, under the direction of Professor Martin Biddle. That is when the remarkably complicated building history, for so small a church, was revealed.



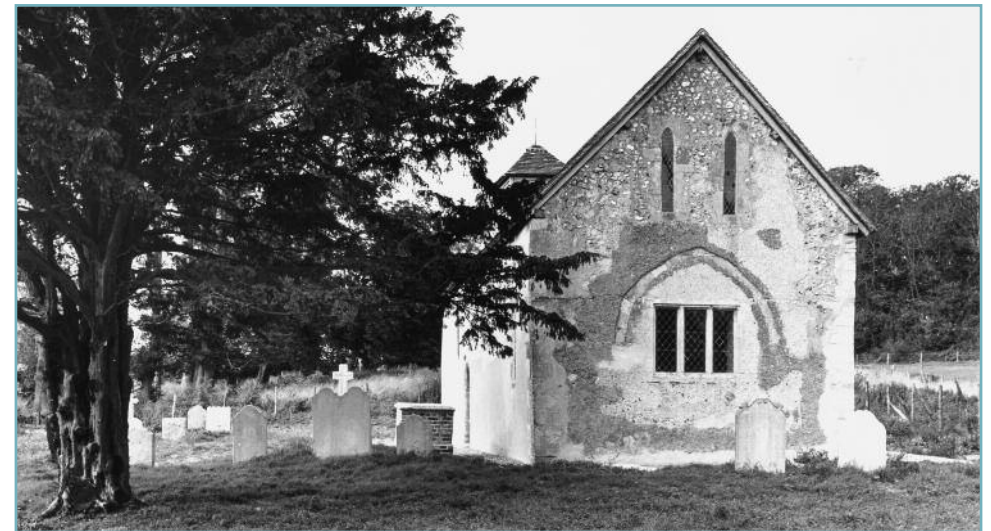
EXTERIOR

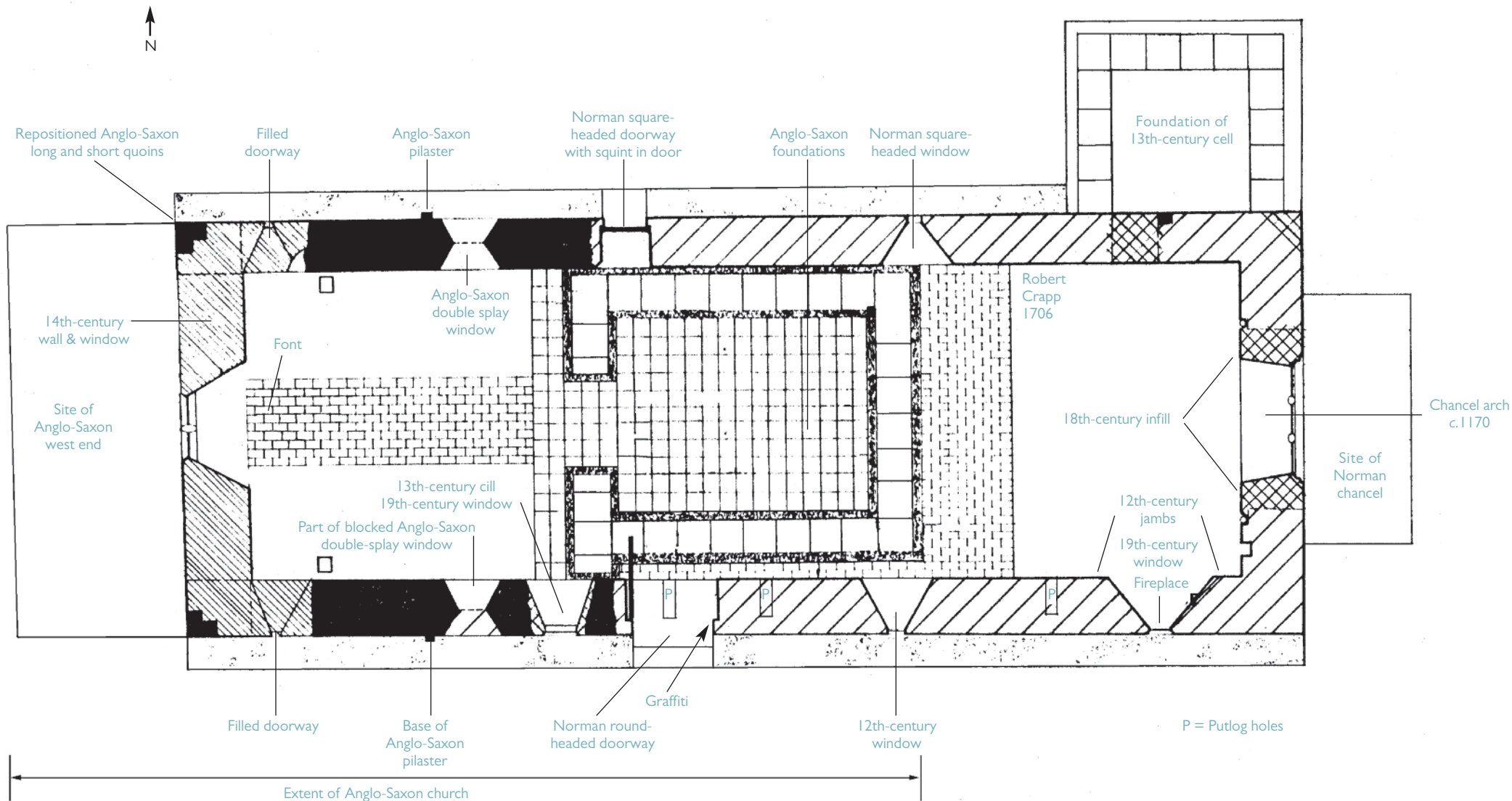
The north and south walls of the western part of the church are Saxon; and on the north side is a fine specimen of a **Saxon pilaster strip** and an equally good example of a **Saxon double-played window**. This still retains its thousand-year-old plastered reveals, showing the imprint of the original wooden frame for a shutter; it is now protected by modern glazing outside. There was a similar window in the south wall opposite, but that has been superseded by a later square-headed window and can now only be seen from inside the church.

Towards the east end is a **pair of Norman windows**, one opposite the other, which show

well the different building techniques of the Normans from those of the Saxons. Here the small, square-headed, openings of dressed stone are set flush with the outside face and, as may be seen by the rebate, were clearly designed to take wooden shutters, while the very wide splays and round-headed inner arches are typically Norman in character.

On the east jamb of the plain round-headed **Norman south doorway** is early graffiti of a cross and, less easily visible, several small crusader crosses; by contrast there is also a modern bench-mark. The **north doorway** is Norman too, but narrower and somewhat





Based on March 1977 plan by The Sawyer Partnership

INTERIOR

domestic-looking with its square head. The **door**, formed of two planks with a peep-hole in the middle, is perhaps original but has needed repair at the bottom.

Marked out on the ground at the east end of the church is the site of the **Norman chancel** and, at the north-east corner, that of the 13th century **hermit's cell**. A feature of the former doorway to the cell, now visible only outside the church, is some Saxon pilaster stone reused to form the eastern jamb.

The position of the **west wall** of the Saxon church has been marked out on the ground. The typical long and short stones at the two corners of the present west wall are not strictly Saxon but the original stones reused by the 14th-century builders of this wall.

The small weatherboarded **bell turret** at the west end has a gilded weathercock. It houses a single bell, of beautiful tone, dated 1590 and cast by John Wallis of Salisbury.

Immediately east of the church are buried Sir Thomas Sopwith, the pioneering aviator and aircraft designer, who died at the age of 101 in 1989, and his second wife Phyllis. Sir Thomas was responsible for the Sopwith Pup and Sopwith Camel aircraft used in the First World War and, as chairman of Hawker Siddeley, for the production of the Hawker Hurricanes used in the Second. There is a memorial window to him in King's Somborne church.

The bowl of the very simple **font** is not old but stands on an earlier stone stem. Set into a slab on the west window sill are three **fragments of carved stone** of Saxon date, discovered during the repairs in the 1970s.

Towards the middle of the church the brown quarry-tiles represent the floor of the original **Saxon chancel** and the large paving slabs show the position of its walls.

The slightly pointed **arch** of about 1170, now blocked, at the east end is of two orders with single attached columns having fine scalloped



capitals. This arch formerly opened into the small Norman chancel. Above the arch is a striking pair of **13th-century lancet windows** and on the right-hand side is a small **image niche**. The blocking-up of the chancel arch, and the insertion of the present square-headed **east window**, are thought to have been part of a general renovation and revival of interest in the church at the beginning of the 17th century.

The **south-east window** is an oddity. It is a 13th-century window set in a splay with an inner arch formed of reused Norman quoin stones. The splay has been taken down to ground level and in the 18th century was made into a fireplace; a part of the iron fireback can still be seen fixed to the wall. It was used to heat a 'parlour pew' or small chapel partitioned off at this east end of the church.

Another part of the early-17th-century work on the church is the attractive roof, with one tier of wind-braces and clearly incorporating timber reused from the previous roof. The **bell turret**, probably of similar date, now opened up to the nave and lit by two small windows recently inserted in the north side, was originally supported just by the nave walls; the pair of wall-posts and curved braces were added in relatively recent times.

No pre-Victorian **furniture** has survived in the church and the present 19th-century pitch-pine seating was brought here recently after it had been discarded from Shipton Bellinger church.

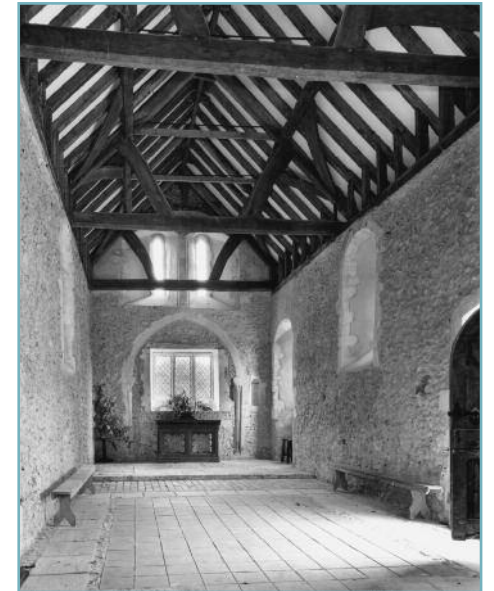
SOURCES

Material on the church, collected by Richard Sawyer, deposited in Hampshire County Record Office, Winchester (Ref. 32 M 94).

Material on the archaeological investigation, collected by Professor Martin Biddle, deposited with Winchester Museum Service.

Victoria County History for Hampshire (especially for Mottisfont priory).

Dictionary of National Biography (for the Briwere family and connections).



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

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6 miles S of Stockbridge off A3057

Itchen Stoke, St Mary
6 miles E of Winchester on B3047

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