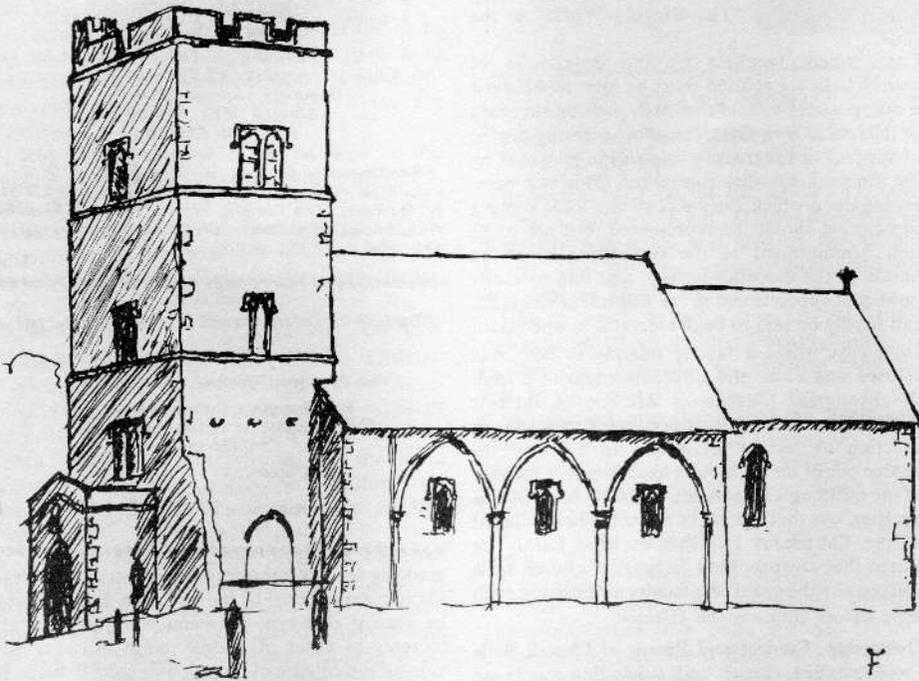


# THE RINGING WORLD

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S MARY'S, CHALK, KENT

Understanding country churches in these parts is relatively easy if you remember one simple rule: they are mostly pre-Norman, and were thereafter altered, repaired, and enlarged interminably, but hardly ever bull-dozed, so that having begun by looking much the same, they now look entirely different, and mostly retain, wholly or partly, their Saxon walls. For which reason this church stands in a conspicuous position by the road to Rochester, and from its tower-top you may see a panorama of the lower Thames, as far as Shoeburyness.

A visitor may wonder why one small downland village should be called "Chalk," but local knowledge shows it to be a matter of the soil, the village also comprising Clayne (Clay), and Filborough (Fieldborough) ie, the neighbouring marsh.

The first known alteration is commonly thought to have been, in the 1100s, cutting three holes in the north wall and adding an aisle. The short pieces of wall left between the openings formed square piers, which were edged with narrow pieces of squared stone, worked above into the

semblance of blunt-pointed arches. Since there are two more openings in the chancel wall, the whole arcade might not be quite so old as is thought. This may have been done on the south side too, but was certainly done at Graine, and possibly by the same masons . . . all woodwork and fittings are modern.

In the 13th century the east wall was removed and the chancel built, with triple lancet windows, almost identical with those of Graine. It looks as if two groups of masons unusually did the same thing in both churches. There was no chancel arch. Into the south side were inserted three arches with proper circular pillars. These still remain in the wall, but the aisle was demolished in 1759.

#### Square Tower

The square tower looks wider as you approach because the turret stair is on the north-west face and is continuous with the front of the tower. The west door, unusually, has a porch, over which is a niche for a statue of the Virgin, and below it a curious and jovial figure holding a tub or bowl,

which has never been explained. It has been criticised as irreverent, (but it might have been the ringer!). The whole porch may just possibly have been removed from the aisle.

In the tower there are three bells, with pits for six. These, the guide-book says, were "disgracefully melted down" in 1922 but the marks were preserved in the re-casting.

The middle one, probably contemporary with the tower, has a quatrefoil cross and XPE PIE FLOS MARIE, and is considered to have been made by Thomas de Woston, Canterbury in 1348. If the date is correct its first job was tolling for the victims of the Black Death of 1349.

The treble is dated 1624, and the tenor IOHN WILNAR MADE MEE. 1626. Both bells were probably Wilnar's.

The fact of there being pits for six bells possibly shows a desire to add three, but it was never done, perhaps because the tower is built of chalk, like the rest of the church, with only a stone facing. It may be that those responsible considered that more bells would ruin it, which, as the stonework was given a good overhaul in the 50s might be likely.

Chalk, if poor in bells, however, has a band of handbell ringers, who have given performances elsewhere.

In pre-conquest times the church was used on several occasions for meetings of higher clergy, including a synod held under Archbishop Wilfred in 816. In those days there was a ferry to the Essex side.

After the Conquest William gave it to Odo of Bayeaux, but took it back after that gentleman's revolt, and the land was divided into East and West Chalk. These names survive as Eastcourt and Westcourt. Between them and Milton-next-Gravesend was the small village of Denton, whose church is mentioned in the Ingoldsby Legends.

Eastcourt was given to Bermondsey Abbey by John de Burgh, and was owned by them till the Dissolution. Westcourt, which had been in the possession of the Nevilles, was given by Henry VIII to the lords of Cobham. The church was given by Bishop Hamo of Hythe to the Priory of Norwich, but was exchanged and came into the possession of Cobham College. In 1935 patronage was transferred from the Bishop of Rochester to the Rector of Milton.

F A Cluett

**NB** It is known locally as "The church Dickens loved." He spent his honeymoon here in the village and there are several mementos of things mentioned in his novels. The old forge, and not many miles off, the Church of Cooling with its 13 little gravestones, mentioned in 'Great Expectations' and of course it is only a matter of four miles from Gadshill, where he died.