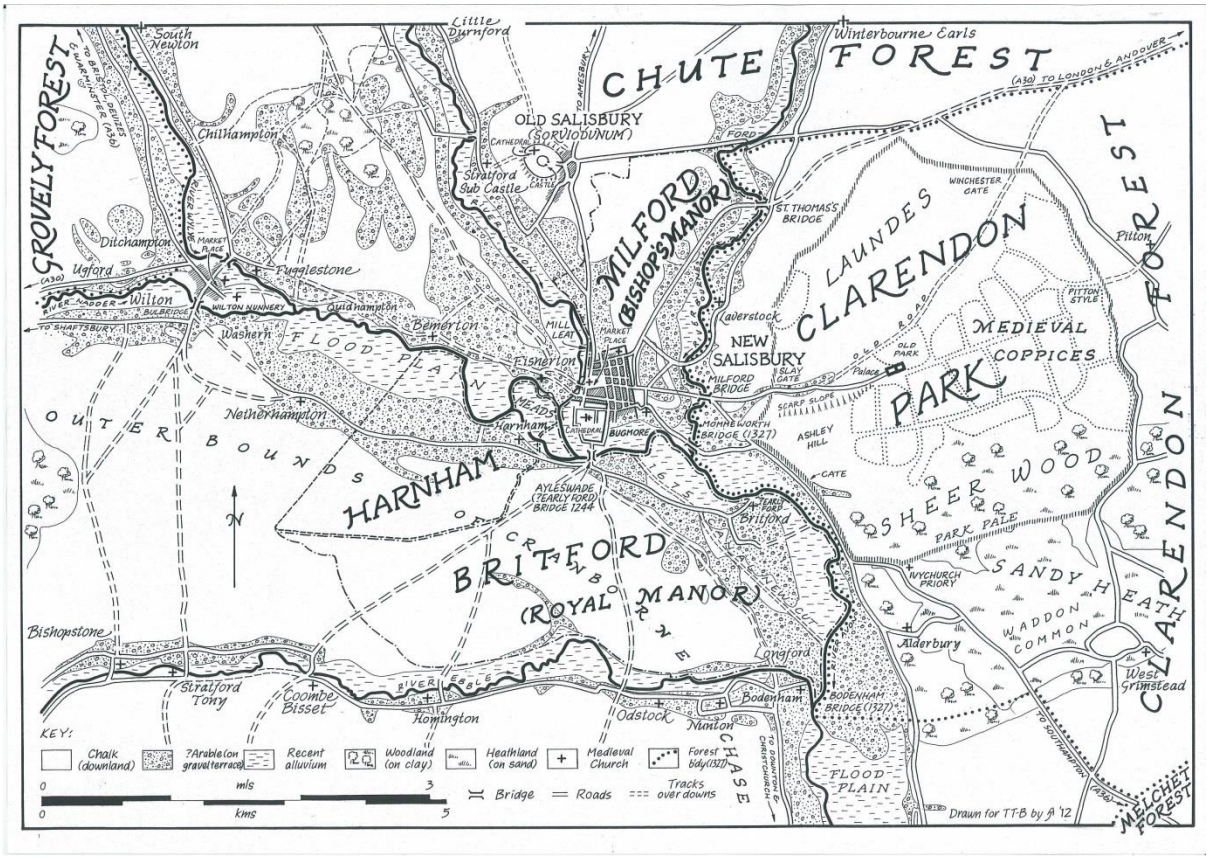
Britford, Wiltshire: archaeology and history (summary for visitors prepared by the Royal Archaeological Institute, 2017)

Although so close to modern suburbs of Salisbury, Britford seems extremely remote. It may have been on a major route to Southampton before New Salisbury diverted the Exeter road in the thirteenth century, however (see Salisbury on-line entry). It is on the River Avon, much affected by new channels for water-meadows (see Salisbury: Harnham on-line entry) and a proposed seventeenth-century canal. Its name was written down as *Brutford* in one Anglo-Saxon document, *Bredford* in Domesday Book, neither of which points to a favoured interpretation as 'ford of the British' and seems to preclude 'bright' as well, so it may refer to a lost stream name. King Edward the Confessor stayed here in 1065, so presumably it was an Anglo-Saxon royal residence, which would give a context for the church, the large parish of which indicates that it was a 'minster'. Hunting on Cranborne Chase and in what was to become Clarendon Park and Forest was available locally.

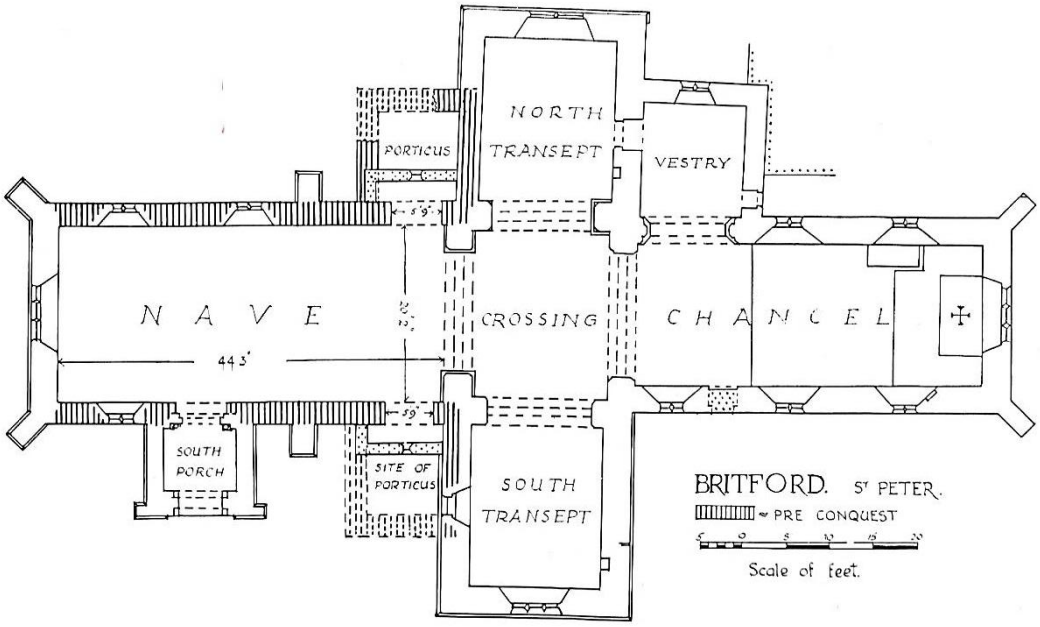


(Plan by Tim Tatton-Brown drawn by Jill Atherton)

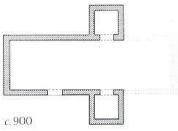
The church has a nave, low crossing tower, chancel, porch and transepts. Outside, on the south side there is a small projection in the angle of the nave and transept, which becomes explicable inside, as there survive two round-arched openings that were the entries into Anglo-Saxon side porticuses; the north one was excavated in about 1956 (Chambers 1959 – see plan; Taylor and Taylor 1965, 105-8; Cocke, ed. 1987, 113-5;

photographs by Trish Steel reproduced under common licence CC-By-SA 2.0, accessed from Wikimedia). Parts of the nave and transept walls are Anglo-Saxon, as is one side of the round-arched south door, though rebuilt. As a west entrance is more usual, it has been suggested that this was actually an opening into another porticus, but the nave wall does not suggest a third opening, necessary for a row of such chambers. The church was enlarged in the fourteenth century, its chancel on a slightly different alignment.

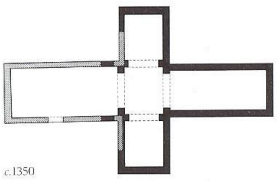
The Anglo-Saxon work is of rough flint rubble with dressed stone details, the later work partly of flint and partly of dressed stone. It was all modified in the Georgian era, and again in the Victorian.



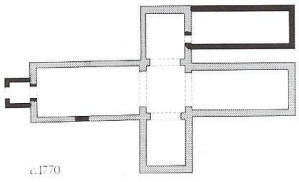
(Plan from Chambers 1959, 217, above, and phase diagram from Cocke (ed.) 1987, 115, below)

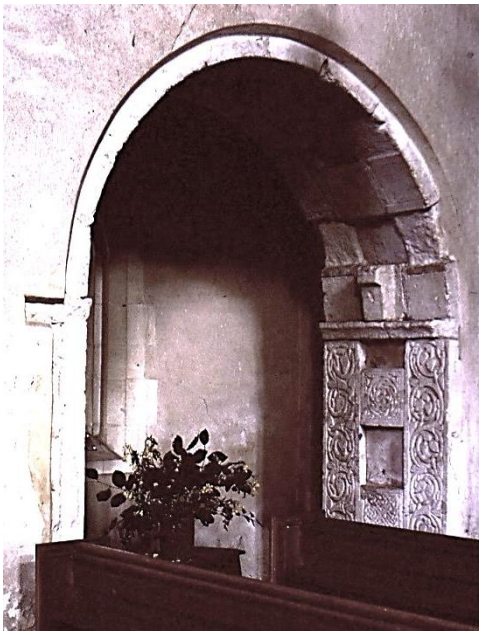


Plan as of *c.* 900, showing the two Anglo-Saxon porticuses and the nave. The plan of the east end at this stage is unknown, but was probably narrower and shorter than the nave, square-ended or apsidal.



Any Norman or earlier thirteenth-century changes were swept away in the fourteenth by a much larger east end, and transepts much wider than the old porticuses. Doctrinal change and provision for a high altar at the east end led to the enlargement of many chancels, but what happened at Britford is exceptional and suggests special patronage, indicated perhaps by the tombs still inside the church.





The arrangement of carved stone slabs and panels in the entrance to the Anglo-Saxon north porticus is unique. Its east jamb has a vertical slab on each side, carved with a running vinescroll plant, with square panels of knotwork set into the recessed central area. The west jamb also has vertical panels, now plain but perhaps originally painted if not cut back, removing any sculpture. It has one panel carved with knotwork, and one plain one. Above the slabs is a horizontal impost, plain on the west and carved on the east, above which are corbels implying that a horizontal timber beam spanned the arch; presumably it was not surmounted by a solid tympanum, as that would have obscured the underside of the arch above, which is of stone and has a recessed centre and panels, like the jambs.

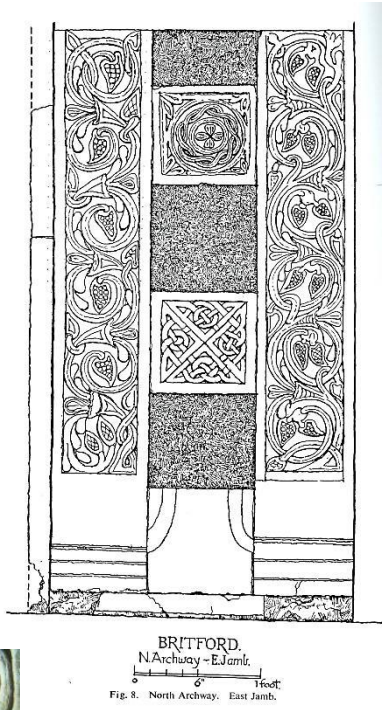
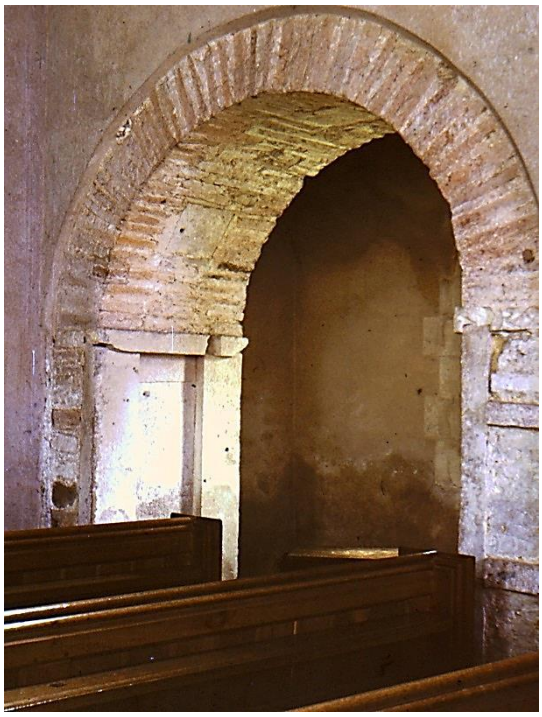


Fig. 8. North Archway. East Jamb.



The arch into the south porticus (right) has similar jambs but without any sculpture or panels, no corbels, and a different arch, built out of reused Roman brick – a technique used at Brixworth, Northants., in a phase now attributed to the eighth or ninth century, with the second half of the eighth as likely (Parsons and Sutherland 2010, 232). Both the arches were hidden behind plaster until 1873, so it is likely that some features are missing.

The carvings are of a very high standard; the effect is comparable to eighth-century Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, particularly the Vespasian Psalter, but some details are found in ninth-century Italy. Knowledge of the latter could have come from travellers to Rome, such as King Aethelwulf in the 850s, but the earlier Carolingian contacts of King Ecgberht (802-39) are also possible (Cramp 2006, 206-8). The porticuses may have contained shrines, or tombs for the royal family.

The church was remodelled in the late thirteenth-/early fourteenth century, with a heightened nave with new windows, transepts, tower and chancel; the effigy of a priest holding a chalice belongs to the same period. The south transept wall has a squint in its west wall, probably to allow an anchorite to see inside – there is no trace of the cell (Roffey 2006). Much work was done at the expense of the local aristocracy in the eighteenth century, including reroofing and heightening of the tower, but the medieval appearance was re-created in the 1870s (Cocke (ed.) 1987, 26-8, 113-5). Outside, to the north of the chancel is a large mausoleum, used by the Pleydell-Bouverie family of Longford Castle, and has their coat of arms at the east end. Originally higher than the chancel, it was cut down to size in the 1870s.

*

The church now has a few houses near it, but the settlement has clearly changed its focus. King Edward's house might have been under the buildings north and west of the church, or further away. The most eye-catching today is the moated house on the south side of the lane leading to the church, with its nineteenth-century 'Gothic' windows. The moat is likely to be much earlier than that, probably late medieval. The other notable feature of the village is the large green – common grazing not seen in many Wiltshire villages, but a feature of those that are low-lying, with the likelihood of the greens sometimes flooding and often being very wet and unsuitable for cultivation. It may have attracted settlement away from the church, so that villagers could take full advantage of a valuable resource.

References and further reading

CHAMBERS, G. E. 1959. The pre-Conquest church of St Peter, Britford, *Wiltshire Natural History and Archaeological Society Magazine*, 207/57, 212-6
COCKE, T. (ed.) 1987. *Churches of South-East Wiltshire*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office for Royal Commission on Historical Monuments
CRAMP, R. 2006. *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture Volume 7. South-West England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
PARSONS, D. AND SUTHERLAND, D. S. 2010. *The Anglo-Saxon Church of All Saints, Brixworth, Northamptonshire. Survey, Excavations and Analysis 1972-2010*, Oxford: Oxbow Books
ROFFEY, S. 2006. Constructing a vision of salvation, *Archaeological Journal*, 163, 122-46
TAYLOR, H. M. AND TAYLOR, J. 1965. *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

These notes were originally prepared for the annual summer meeting of the Royal Archaeological institute held in July 2016; see www.royalarchinst.org for further information. RAI members have access to the printed Report which contains syntheses of the significance of recent research to archaeological understanding of the county. The notes on Britford were prepared by David A. Hinton. Other on-line entries can be accessed through the RAI web-site.