

Ecclesiastical studies are one of the oldest tranches of archaeology and one of the most wide ranging in the material they encompass. In the Victorian sense, the term basically covered two aspects of investigation: first, the study of architecture, monuments, and furnishings, and secondly, the excavation of monastic sites. In the latter instance the primary, and usually sole, aim was to recover the plans of masonry buildings.

Following half a century of stagnation, the subject has developed in the last decade to comprise the all-embracing study of ecclesiastical precincts, buildings, monuments, furnishings, and fittings. The full potential of the application of stratigraphical investigations, both above and below ground, coupled with detailed topographical and historical studies, is only gradually being appreciated (Addyman & Morris 1976; Rodwell & Rodwell 1977).

### Religious houses (Fig 46)

The principal general account of religious houses in Essex was prepared by the *Victoria County History (VCH 1907)*; this is an historical study of great value but contains scarcely any information on the physical remains of the establishments. These comprised 27 houses of the regular orders, 5 alien houses, 4 friaries, 2 preceptories, 2 colleges, and an uncertain number of hospitals, upwards of 10.

These buildings and their adjuncts have never been studied as groups, and most lack any form of investigation or archaeological recording. Only Waltham Abbey has been the subject of continuing archaeological investigation in recent years (Huggins 1970a; b; 1972; Huggins & Huggins 1973). The results of this well published series of excavations have been important in two aspects: first, in providing details of the lesser buildings within the monastic precinct, and secondly in shedding light on the early history of the site, prior to the foundation of Harold's abbey.

Substantial parts of several other houses are known, such as St Osyth's Priory (RCHM 1922), Colne Priory (Fairweather 1938), Coggeshall Abbey (Gardner 1955), and Little Leighs Priory (RCHM 1921), but these are nevertheless still inadequately understood, and their plans have been largely derived from unscientific excavations. A considerable amount of excavation has taken place in recent years at Prittlewell Priory although, apart from the church (Helliwell 1958), this is unpublished.

Likewise, excavations which are largely unpublished have been conducted in the last decade at Barking Abbey, Colchester Abbey, and Chelmsford Friary (Drury 1974). In all, excavations on Essex monasteries have been very fragmentary and undertaken either unscientifically or on too small a scale, while detailed architectural analyses have yet to begin.

The upstanding remains of monastic houses in the county are mostly limited to parts of their churches which are now in parochial use (eg Hatfield Broad Oak, Hatfield Peverel, Blackmore, Waltham, and Little Dunmow), while in several instances fragments of the claustral ranges have survived owing to their incorporation in later domestic premises (eg Prittlewell, Beeleigh, Coggeshall, and St Osyth). Even where the initial domestic conversion of the monastic building was followed by a 'total reconstruction', it

is likely that much early work remains built into wall cores and concealed behind later facings. This is even true of Audley End (Drury forthcoming a), where a conversion of 1536-44 was followed by the construction of the Jacobean mansion in 1603-16. The inner court of the latter rises from monastic walls, which in many cases survive to a height of almost a metre above medieval ground level. Not the least interesting aspect of Audley End is the influence which the desire to reuse the Abbey foundations (and walls of the first Audley End) had on the layout of a house 'too large for a king though it might do for a Lord Treasurer'.

Very little remains in Essex in the form of abandoned ruins (eg St Botolph's, Colchester, Bicknacre, Thoby, Tilty, and Maldon hospital). At Tilty and Little Coggeshall the *capellae extra portas* are still in use as parish churches, while the only gatehouses to have survived are at St Osyth, Colchester Abbey, and Barking.

Notwithstanding the paucity of extant buildings and the fact that even these are not on the whole of high architectural merit, some houses of considerable historical importance did exist in Essex. These are worthy of notice, and should facilities for proper investigation arise they should command priority.

**Barking Abbey** (now Greater London) Originally a double monastery, founded c 666, it is not only the earliest recorded house in Essex but also became the most important nunnery in England. Nothing is known of its early structures.

**St Botolph's Priory, Colchester** Although the Augustinian Priory was founded in the 1090s it was on the site of an earlier minster church which was served by a small company of priests. This church lay among the Roman and Saxon cemeteries to the south-east of the town and the site offers great potential for religious and funerary continuity from the Roman period onwards. Apart from the ruins of the nave of the Norman church nothing is known of this house. St Botolph's was the earliest and principal house of Augustinian canons in England.

**St John's Abbey, Colchester** Similarly situated to St Botolph's, in the southern cemetery of the Roman town, and with great archaeological potential (Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 24-41), as recent excavations have shown (Crummy 1974). It would be particularly valuable to investigate the claustral buildings which were erected soon after 1096 and destroyed by fire in 1133; they were rebuilt on the opposite (south) side of the church.

**Waltham Abbey** A house of great importance, already mentioned, and the last English abbey to fall at the Dissolution.

**West Mersea Priory** A pre-Conquest alien house founded alongside an existing minster church, all on the site of a large Roman villa. Nothing is known of the structure of the priory.

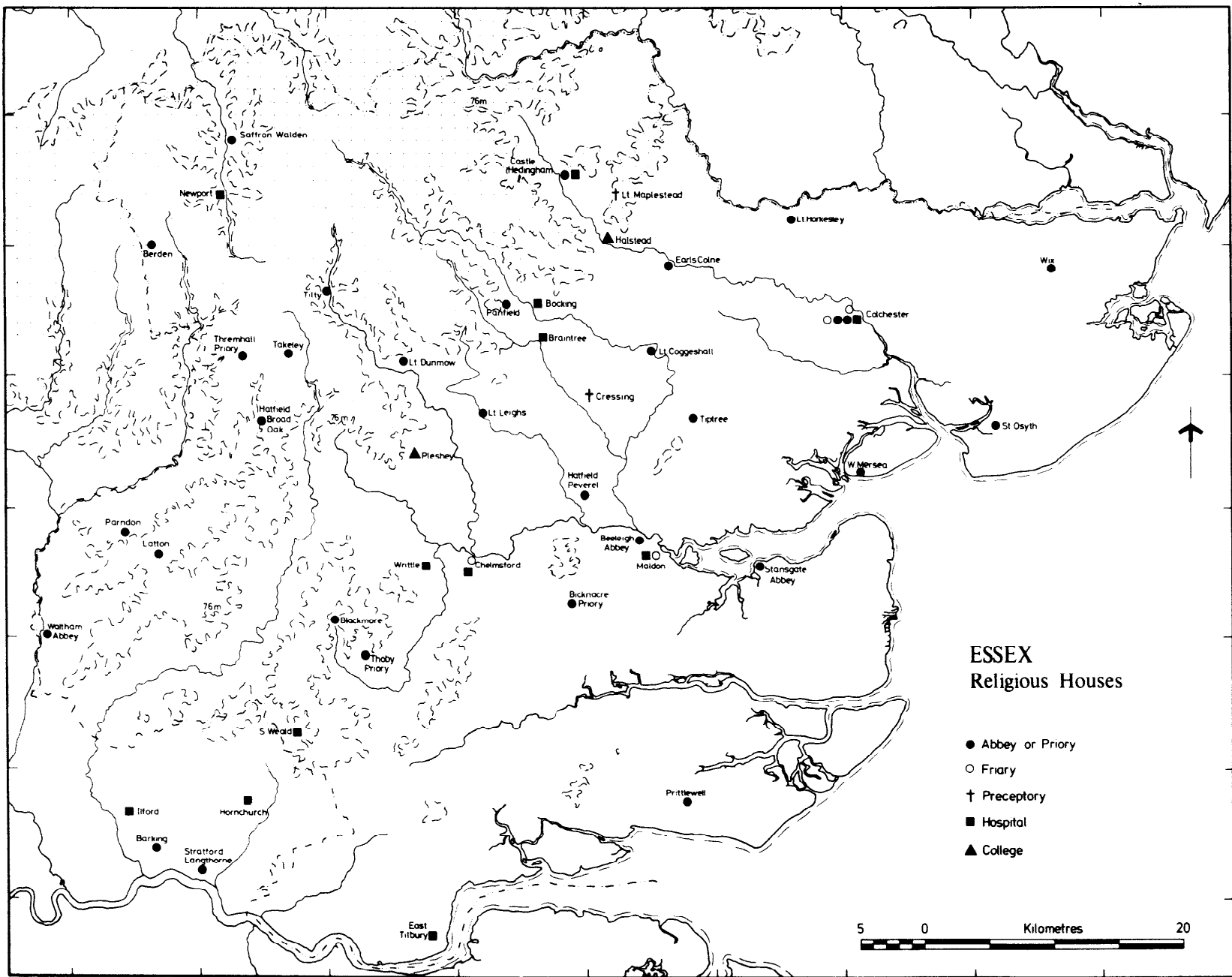


Fig 46 Religious houses in Essex, excluding hermitages, cells, and possible Anglo-Saxon monasteries (Crown copyright reserved)

**Cressing Preceptory** This was the principal preceptory of the Knights Templar in England, of which important remains survive, including two barns.

**Coggeshall Abbey** The significance of this house is for its 12th and 13th century brickwork, which was produced on the estate. A considerable amount of this brickwork survives *in situ*, both at the abbey and at Bradwell-juxta-Coggeshall church (Gardner 1955).

**Parndon** Between about 1172 and 1180 the first house of the Premonstratensian Canons in Essex was at (Great?) Parndon. Neither location nor extent of the buildings is known, but were they to be found their closely dated occupation would be of considerable interest.

### Anglo-Saxon minsters and monasteries

Of the 50 or so monastic and related establishments considered above, only three are known to have been founded before the Norman Conquest (Barking, Waltham, and West Mersea), although some may simply have been refoundations of earlier houses: such was the case according to legend at St Osyth (*VCH* 1907). There is, however, no doubt that monasteries and churches served by secular priests existed in Essex before the Conquest and vague references to several are recorded. A few pre-Conquest minsters are known with certainty, such as Southminster and St Botolph's, Colchester, while others are more equivocal (eg Earls Colne).

Indeed it is often unclear, both from the literary and architectural evidence, whether a church was a minster or a monastery: such is the case with the two foundations associated with St Cedd at *Ythancester* (Bradwell-on-Sea) and *Tileburg* (probably East Tilbury); and at White Notley a religious establishment of unspecified nature is referred to in a will of 998 (Taylor & Taylor 1965, 475). It is by no means impossible for a church to have served, at different times, both as a minster and a monastery, which may have been the case at Hadstock (Rodwell 1976).

The lack of formal planning in pre-Conquest, and in particular pre-Danish, monasteries, coupled with the fact that in Essex the conventual buildings would usually have been of timber, makes the elucidation of these early ecclesiastical complexes difficult. It will, however, only be through large scale excavation that Anglo-Saxon minsters and monasteries will be differentiated and understood. In Essex there has been no progress towards this goal. Nor is there any clue at present as to the distribution of the minster churches in the county; a number may be suspected from the evidence of the cruciform plans of some of the larger buildings in rural areas (eg St Osyth, Great Chesterford, Orsett, and Prittlewell).

Whether simple two- and three-cell churches also served as minsters remains to be elucidated (for a preliminary discussion of arrangements in the Dengie peninsula see Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 55-6; Drury & Rodwell 1978).

### Anglo-Saxon churches

Very few wills and charters which mention Essex churches have survived, and the assessors for the Domesday survey took little notice of churches in the county. This contrasts markedly with Suffolk, for example, where they recorded 345 churches in 1086, and even then some were certainly overlooked. In general, it can be asserted with confidence

that the majority of the c 420 ancient parishes in Essex existed as recognized units, each with a church, by about the middle of the 11th century (Rodwell & Rodwell 1977, 91-2). Furthermore, it is becoming clear that by the Saxo-Norman period stone rubble was the normal medium for church building, and not timber as has often been supposed.

Several distinct methods of church building can be detected in the pre-Conquest period. The most sophisticated is seen in churches of minster or monastery status, such as St Peter's, Bradwell-on-Sea, and Hadstock. Both are likely to be of middle Saxon date and were built in stone *ab initio*, although a case can be argued for Hadstock having had a partly timbered superstructure at first (Rodwell 1976).

The primary walls of these buildings were of carefully selected and coursed flints without, it seems, any use of Roman brick. The formation of quoins, jambs, and splays without the use of brick or dressed stone could not have been easy, but it was clearly deliberate and may imply that the walls were meant to be seen and not plastered externally. Several notable buildings which are usually attributed to the late Saxon period exhibit the same technique (eg Little Bardfield and Chickney).

The use of Roman brick, particularly where it is very fragmentary and used in a haphazard fashion, seems to equate with plastered external surfaces. It is now clear from a recent thorough study of St Peter's, Bradwell-on-Sea (by Miss Jane Wadham) that the Roman brick in this church is a secondary introduction. Equally, it is clear that a considerable number of churches built in the later Saxon or Saxo-Norman period made extensive use of brick in quoins, jambs, and arches. This is exemplified in buildings such as Holy Trinity, Colchester (tower), Great Tey, Great Braxted, White Notley, and Rivenhall (Rodwell & Rodwell 1973; 1977, 90-1). Closer study has shown that many of the simple churches of what may be termed the 'Rivenhall group' show remarkable similarities not only in construction but also in planning and dimensions (Rodwell & Rodwell forthcoming).

A third group comprises those relatively small and simple churches which were constructed entirely in timber. Most notable is that at Greensted-juxta-Ongar (Christie *et al* forthcoming). At Nazeingbury an Anglo-Saxon cemetery and two timber buildings, interpreted as churches, were found and excavated in 1976 (Huggins forthcoming). This important investigation demonstrates the potential for the discovery of early ecclesiastical sites which are entirely unrecorded in history. Less remarkable is the recovery of timber predecessors to stone-built churches, as at Rivenhall (Rodwell & Rodwell 1973) and Asheldham (Drury & Rodwell 1978).

The dating of Anglo-Saxon and Saxo-Norman churches in Essex presents great difficulties on account of the lack of early documentation and distinctive sculpture. Before the beginning of the 12th century the architecture of Essex churches was generally fairly simple in outline and lacked decorative detail of a diagnostic nature. Hadstock is the only church which contains early to mid 11th century sculpture *in situ* (and even that was reset in the medieval period), while only a handful of fragments are known from the remainder of the county (West Mersea, Great Bardfield, Great Canfield, and Barking).

Dating will have to be derived from many series of radio-carbon determinations on separate churches. Meanwhile, typologies of church plans and architectural details are slowly being established and general date brackets assigned. But this work is in its infancy, and Dr H M Taylor's signal contributions in this field provide the impetus for continuing study (Taylor 1972; 1976; 1978).

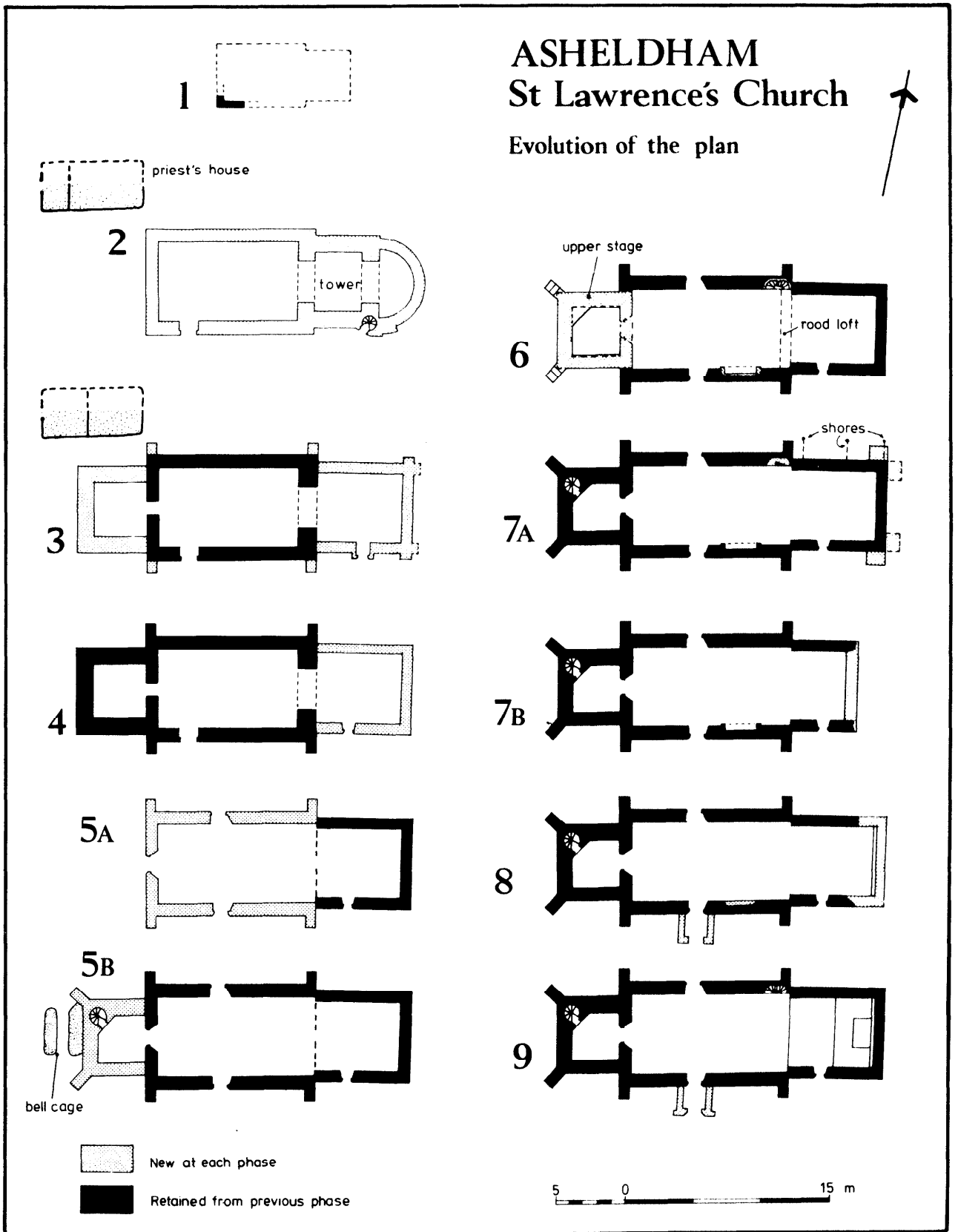


Fig 47 Asheldham: an example of the structural sequence revealed by detailed investigation of an apparently 'simple' church: 1 Anglo-Saxon (timber); 2 Norman; 3 13th century; 4 Early 14th century; 5 Mid 14th century; 6 Late 14th century; 7 15th-16th century; 8 18th century; 9 19th century

## Medieval churches and chapels

It is often assumed, albeit incorrectly, that medieval ecclesiastical archaeology is of less interest than Anglo-Saxon. Certainly a great deal more architecture survives, and dating is less haphazard, but modern study of the subject, far from being exhausted, has hardly begun. First, there is the need for accurate surveys of churches, supported whenever possible by large-scale, meticulous excavation and structural dissection (Rodwell & Rodwell 1976; 1977).

It is probably no exaggeration to say that every historic church has a more complicated and subtle structural history than has been indicated by any published account hitherto. Thus, to take just three of the more extensively investigated examples in Essex: Hadstock was thought to be a single-period Saxon church with some later additions (Rodwell 1976); Asheldham (Fig 47) appeared superficially to be an uninteresting little building of the 14th century (Drury & Rodwell 1978); and Rivenhall had been all but dismissed as a Victorian Gothic rebuild (Rodwell & Rodwell 1973).

The studies undertaken by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments in Essex in the years either side of the First World War were models of their kind but, after 60 or more years, are in need of reconsideration. Explicitly, detailed studies are needed of plan forms, building materials, constructional techniques, decorative treatments, mouldings, and architectural ornament. While the architectural study of cathedrals and great churches has proceeded steadily, the smaller and medium sized churches have been effectively neglected since the 19th century. Pioneer works such as Brandon's *Analysis of Gothick* (1874) and Hadfield's *Architecture of England* (1848, entirely based on Essex examples) remain the standard works for the county.

The only aspect of study in which medieval ecclesiastical architecture in Essex has advanced substantially in recent years has been in the field of carpentry (Hewett 1974). Progress in other directions is, however, being made, for example on medieval floor tiles (Drury forthcoming b) and early medieval brickwork (Rodwell forthcoming). Equally, recent surveys and excavations in and around churches have provided much new archaeological data (for example at Bradwell-on-Sea, West Bergholt, Latchingdon, Little Oakley, and St Giles, Colchester). While investigations such as these need to continue, moves must also be made towards the study of problems which can only be successfully tackled on a large scale, such as the total investigation of cemeteries and monastic complexes, as well as the study of churches in their parochial settings.

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