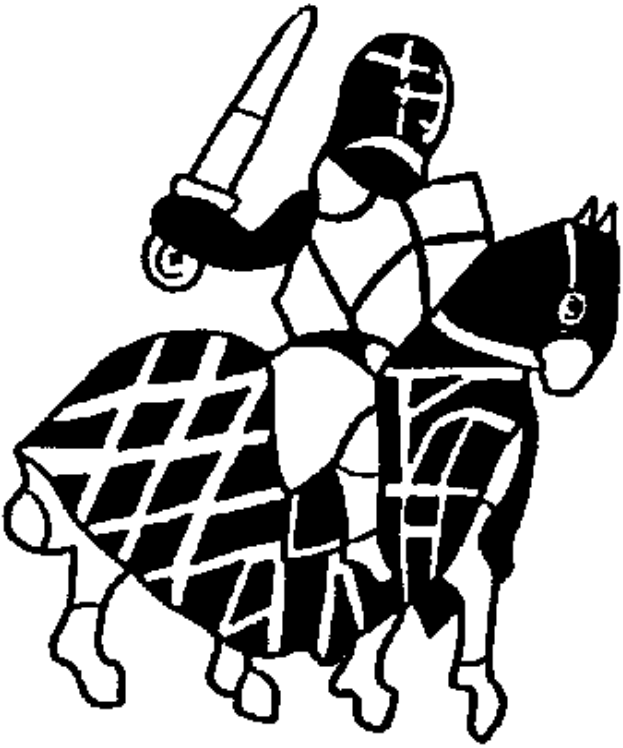
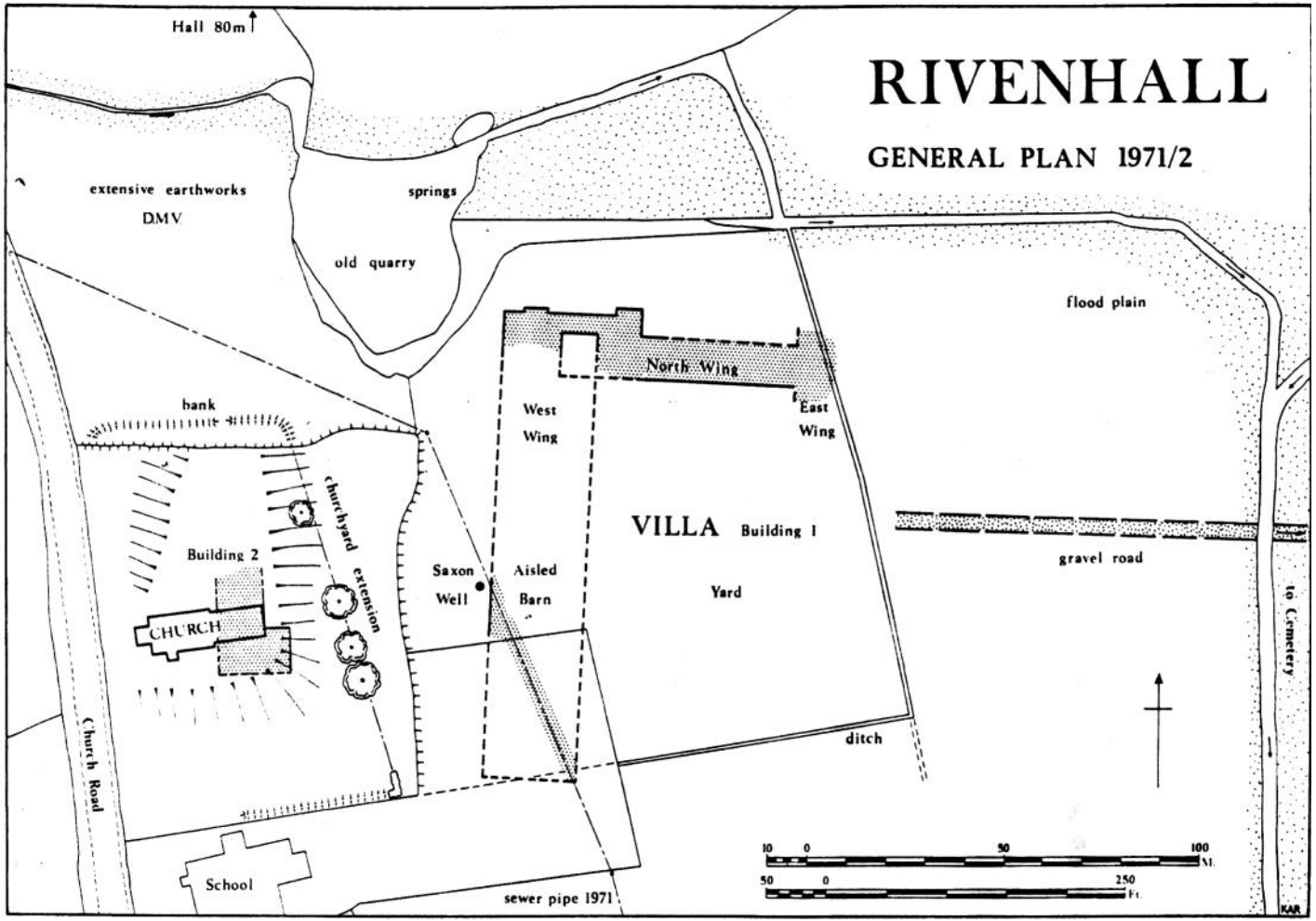
4000 Years of

Rivenhall



K. A & W.J RODWELL


RIVENHALL
GENERAL PLAN 1971/2
Hall 80m
extensive earthworks
DMV
springs
old quarry
flood plain
North Wing
West Wing
East Wing
bank
churchyard extension
Building 2
CHURCH
Saxon Well
Aisled Barn
VILLA Building 1
Yard
gravel road
to Cemetery
ditch
Church Road
School
sewer pipe 1971
10 0 50 100 M.
50 0 250 Ft.
KAR

4000 Years of Rivenhall

Rivenhall is a small village, mainly of recent development, lying ten miles south-west of Colchester and just north of the main Roman road (now Al2) to London. Until the early part of this century the Church and Hall stood in virtual isolation (TL 828178): the former a Victorian rebuild and the latter a late-medieval timber structure. To the casual visitor there might seem little of historic interest.

DISCOVERY

In 1839 the remains of a Roman bronze bowl and jug (a "patera and ewer") were ploughed up in Barrowfield, which lies a little to the east of the church; they are probably from a fairly rich second-century burial. This was followed in *1846,* when labourer's were draining the field adjacent to the church, by the discovery of walls and a long tessellated corridor. Two years later the decorated Celtic bronze mirror turned up. Further digging went on, but no records were kept. Grave digging in the early part of this century located more walls and tessellated floors in the churchyard. Clearly, a substantial villa had been found.

Excavations to relocate the villa (1950-52) uncovered part of the north wing if a large multi-period building, apparently of courtyard type, immediately east of the church.

Cover: 12th. century knight, in stained glass (East window)

DESTRUCTION BEGINS

Unfortunately, thoughtless planning resulted in the construction of a sewer pipeline through the villa in 1971, when "rescue" excavations brought to light the west wing

of the villa, as well as hitherto unknown Iron Age and Pagan Saxon settlements, and a deserted medieval village site which lay in the fields between the church and the hall.

A survey of the church fabric, prepared in 1970, showed the need for various building and drainage works to be under-taken, involving the removal of a great quantity of earth from around the foundations, in order to combat rising dampness. It was immediately clear that such works, together with the building of a proposed vestry, would seriously disturb the archaeological levels around the church. In turn, this would result in the irrecoverable loss of any buried evidence which might shed light upon its early history. Accordingly, with the excellent co-operation of all the authorities concerned, a program of archaeological investigation was formulated. This began with a small trial excavation in 1971 against the south wall of the chancel.

SAXON CHURCH DISCOVERED

Results exceeded all expectation and it was discovered that 1.5m. of stratified archaeological levels, spanning the last 2,000 years, lay beneath the churchyard grass. At the bottom, resting on the natural brickearth, was evidence of prehistoric occupation of the site, dating from the later Iron Age; above this, the remains of a first-century A.D.

Roman masonry building; and crowning that, the church. Its foundations were shown to be of two periods, Saxon and 11$_i$th. century. This extended the known history of the church well back beyond the earliest recorded historical date of 1185. At the same time, no evidence could be discerned for the church having been demolished to ground level for the "re-building" - the Saxon and medieval walls appeared to rise inside the encasement of plaster and cement rendering.

In the following winter, frost-action caused some of the decayed rendering on the north wall of the chancel to fall away, revealing half the arch of a Saxon tile-built window.

1972 TRAINING SCHOOL

Rivenhall thus presented one of the rare opportunities of combining architectural, archaeological and historical studies to their maximum effect in the investigation of a single building and a Training School in Archaeology and Architecture was run by the Essex Archaeological Society in the summer of 1972.

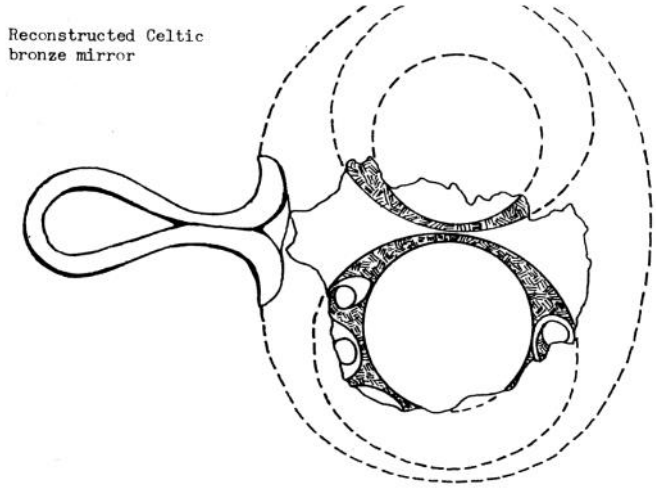
First, the north wall of the chancel was stripped of its decayed rendering, revealing several building phases and the scars where medieval buttresses had once been. The wall of the Saxon church was found to be still standing to a height of more than 6m. At the same time excavation took place a-round the north, east and west sides of the church where, once again, a very long history of human activity on the site was established.

PREHISTORIC ORIGINS

The earliest evidence of occupation is indicated **by** a thin scatter of humanly-worked flints, mainly waste flakes from the making of implements, but a few scrapers and blades have also been found. These are typologically of New Stone Age or Bronze Age date and show that settlement of the **area** had begun by the late second or early first millenium B.C. No other finds specifically relatable to the Bronze Age have yet been found in excavation, but two small hoards of bronze implements have been recorded in the vicinity.

The earliest features so far found are small pits in the churchyard, containing fragmentary pottery of the Early Iron Age: probably 5th.-4th. century B.C. By the latter part of the Iron Age occupation had extended over a large area (now covered by the villa, church and deserted medieval village) and aerial photographs show irregular enclosures, probably of this period, in the fields to the north of the hall.

Pits, gullies and foundation trenches for timber buildings of the first century B.C. or A.D. have been noted and are particularly well-preserved in the churchyard, where large

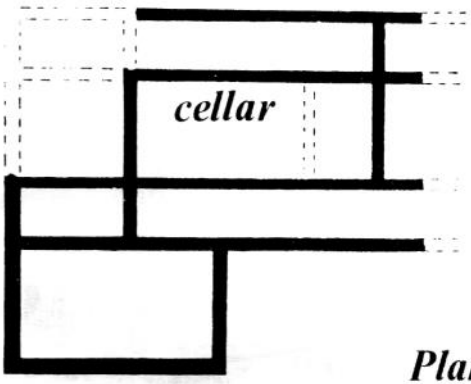


areas of the Iron Age and early Roman ground surface are preserved. By this time Rivenhall would have been a prosperous farmstead and the social prominence of its native owner is attested by the Celtic mirror (and the handle of another, found in 1960).

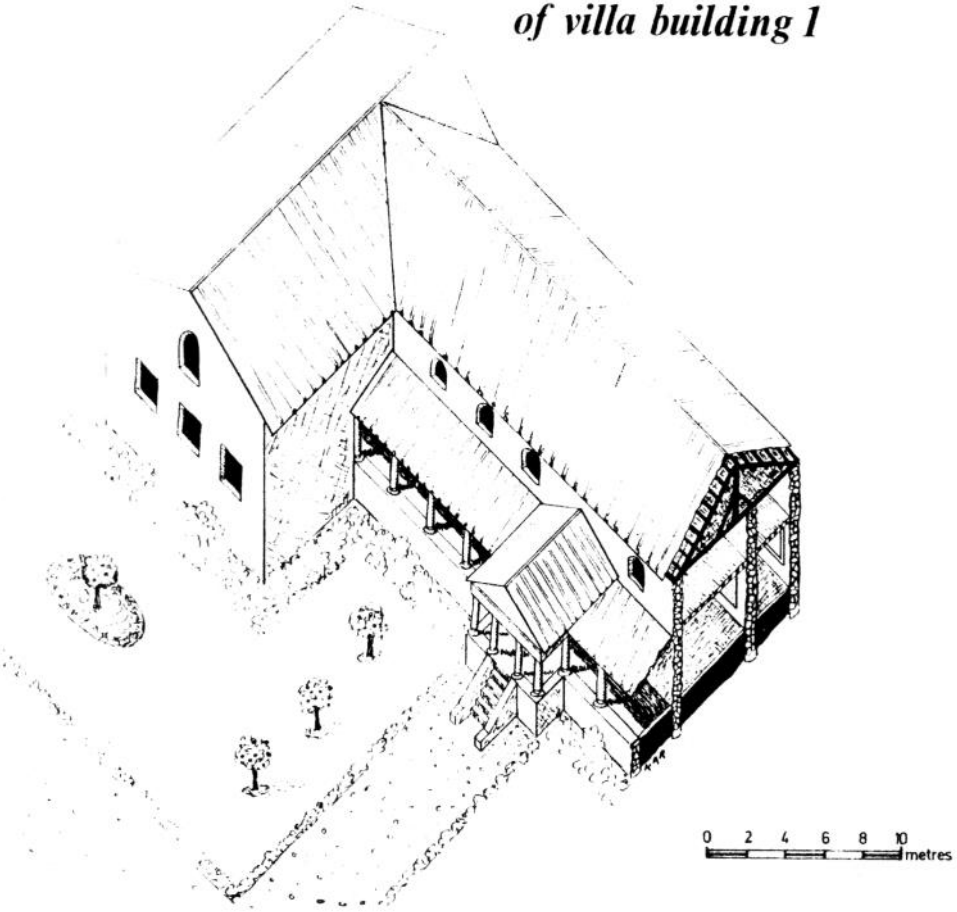
THE ROMAN VILLA

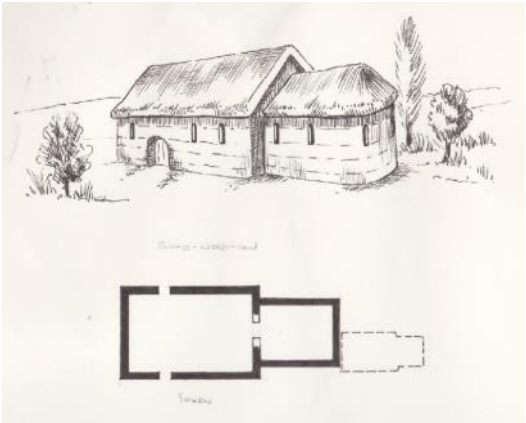
Within about thirty years after the Roman conquest of A.D. 43 an elaborate and costly villa was built, perhaps by the flourishing native farmer, or perhaps by a new owner. Two large masonry buildings are now known: Building 1 lies in the field east of the church, but only a fraction of it has been excavated. Parts of three wings are known, set round a courtyard; and a long corridor running eastwards from this block must have given access to yet more wings. Building 2 lies beneath the church and graveyard, where itssouthern end was excavated in 1972. It comprises an east facing corridor or verandah, backed by main and subsidiary ranges of rooms. The southern end terminates in a projecting wing which was probably matched by a similar wing at the northern end.

Building 2 must have been of special importance as it stands on slightly higher ground than Building 1 and had its floors raised on an earth-filled undercroft, to a height which cannot now be ascertained, but which was at least 1.5m above.



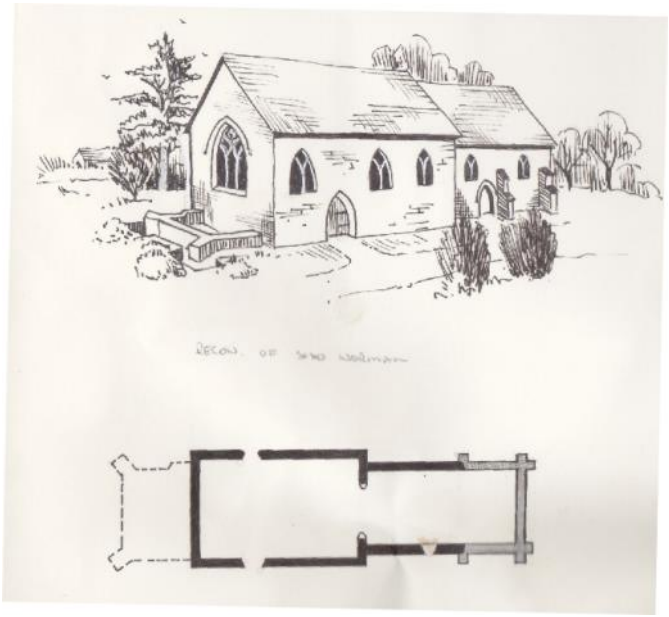
Plan & possible reconstruction of part of villa building 1





C.980

1. C980 AD Previous wooden church abutted the eastern end it would have been similar to Greensted, Ongar-dotted above
2. Radio Carbon Dating of burials which followed the apsidal curve (see top sketch) indicate a strong likelihood the structure pre dates 1066



C.1300

3. This phase was was a fairly accurately dated at between 1300 & 1310 when Almoner Bluntesdone was rector; Robert Burnell d. 1292 Edward 1st's Chancellor was patron. An attempt had been made to build a tower in the previous century but got no further than trenches being dug. This tower was built without proper foundations & it fell in 1710.

Both buildings were decorated with wall paintings and black-and-white mosaic pavements (no longer intact) and Building 2, at least, had a polychrome pavement as well. It has also yielded fragments of Purbeck marble sheeting used as wall-veneer and a single piece of red Egyptian porphyry, which is very rare on sites in this country.

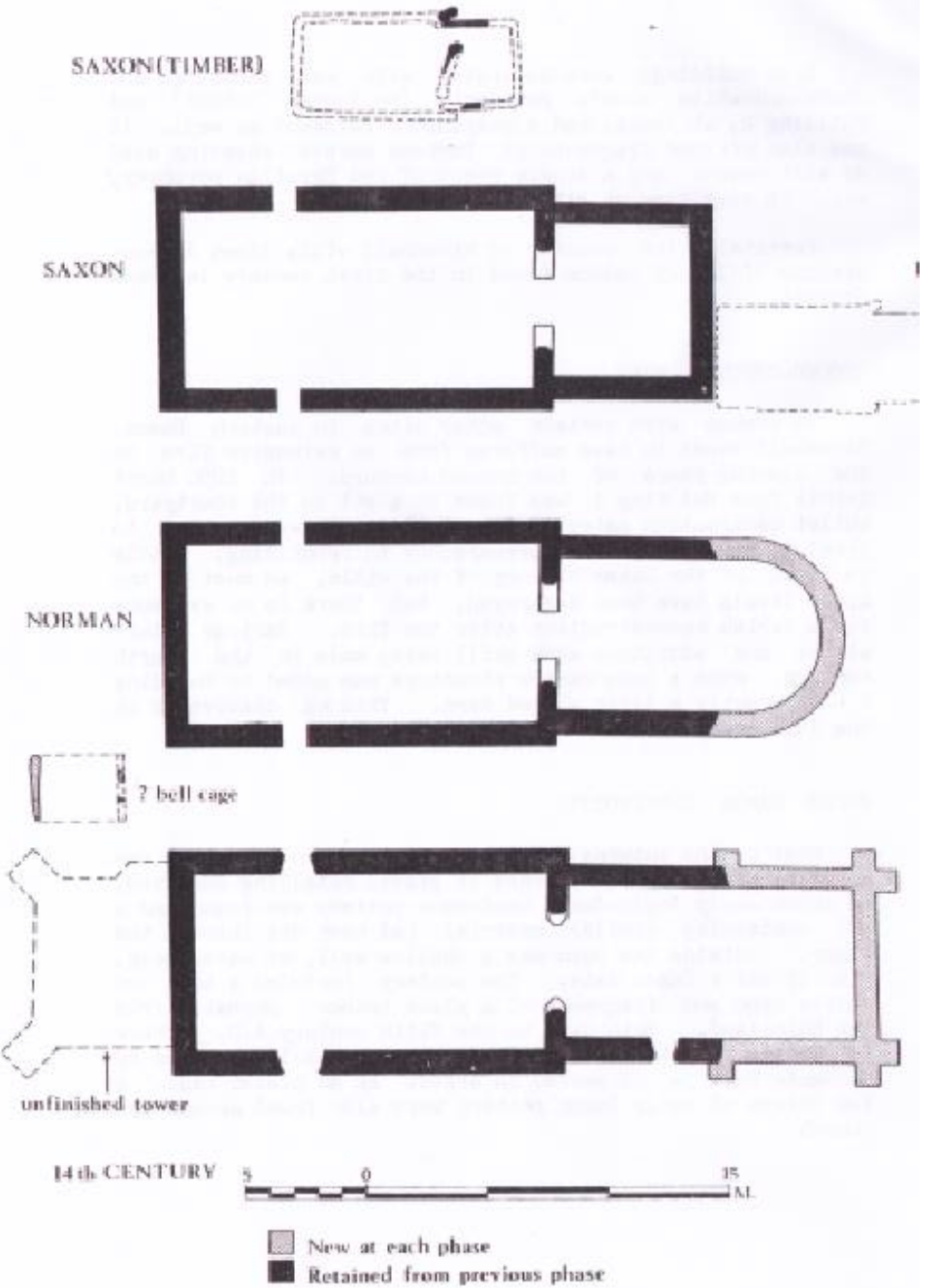
Certainly, the occupier of Rivenhall villa lived in conditions of luxury seldom found in the first century in Roman Britain.

SECOND-CENTURY FIRE

In common with certain other sites in eastern Essex, Rivenhall seems to have suffered from an extensive fire in the closing years of the second century. In 1950 burnt debris from Building 1 was found in a pit in the courtyard, whilst destruction material from Building 2 was used to level-up part of the site preparatory to rebuilding. Little is known of the later history of the villa, as most of the upper levels have been destroyed, but there is no evidence for a lavish reconstruction after the fire. Various alterations and additions were still being made in the fourth century, when a long narrow structure was added to Building 1, apparently a large aisled barn. This was discovered in the 1971 sewer trench.

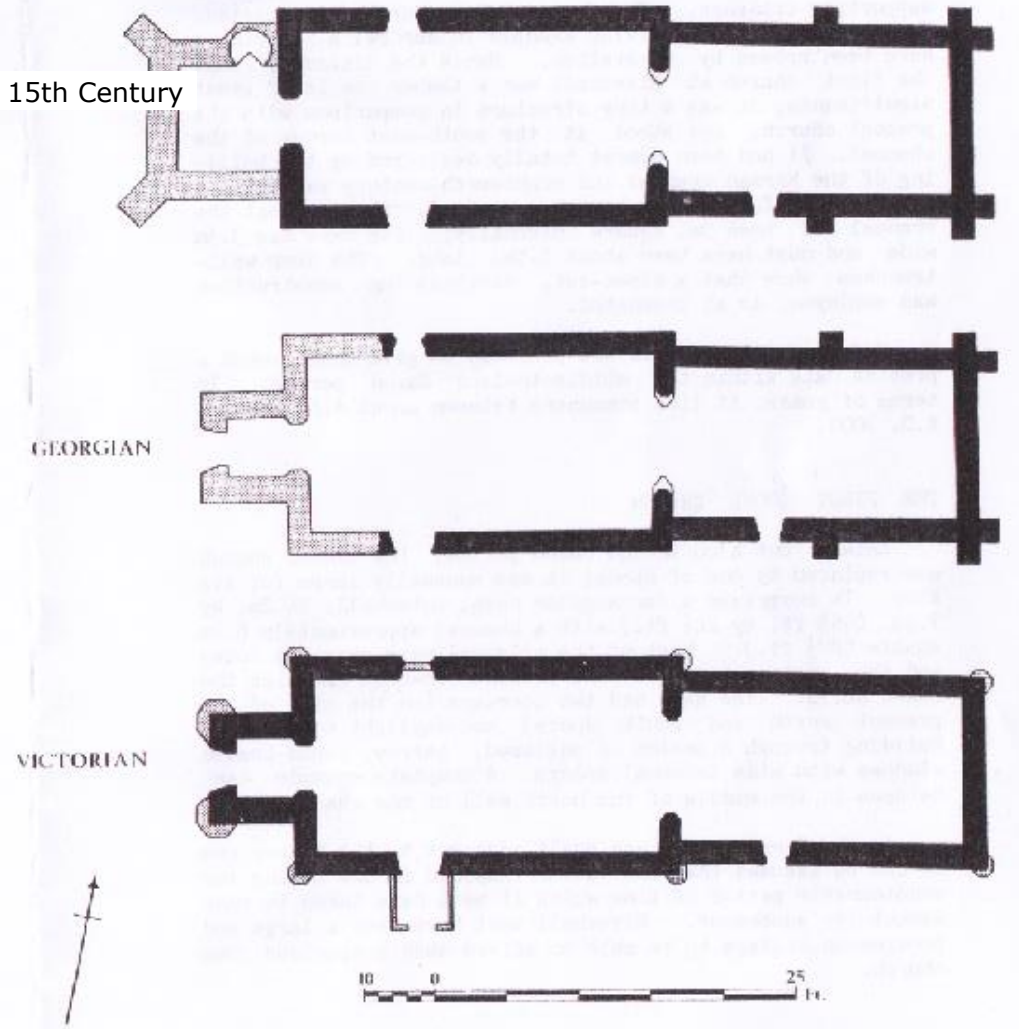
PAGAN SAXON CONTINUITY

Most of the internal flooring of the barn had been removed by ploughing but patches of gravel metaling survived, on which early Anglo-Saxon hand-made pottery was found and a pit containing similar material had been dug through the floor. Outside the barn was a shallow well, or water-hole, also of early Saxon date. The pottery included a bowl of Jutish type and fragments of a glass beaker, probably from the Rhineland. Both date to the fifth century A.D. There is little doubt that the barn was actually occupied by Germanic folk - it served in effect as an aisled hall. A few pieces of early Saxon pottery were also found around the church.


SAXON (TIMBER)
SAXON
NORMAN
? bell cage
unfinished tower
14th CENTURY
5
0
15
M.
New at each phase
Retained from previous phase

RIVENHALL

CHURCH – Constructional phases



THE TIMBER CHURCH

Whilst historians frequently assume that stone churches normally had timber predecessors, there is as yet too little supporting evidence. The Saxon timber church at Greensted, Essex, is the only surviving example in Europe; a few others have been proved by excavation. Hence the discovery that the first church at Rivenhall was a timber one is of great significance.

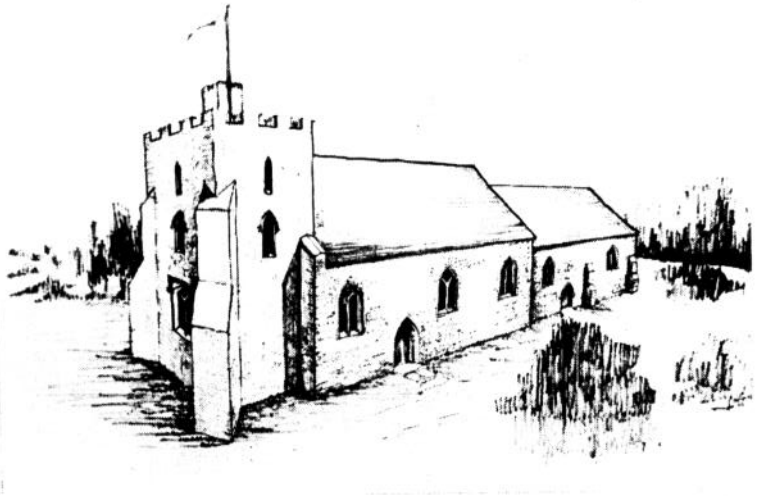
It was a tiny structure in comparison with the present church, and stood at the south-east corner of the chancel. It had been almost totally destroyed by the building of the Norman chancel and eighteenth-century vaults, but parts of its foundation trench survived, showing that the chancel had been 3m. square internally; its nave was *3.5m* wide and must have been about *5.5m.* long. The deep wall-trenches show that a close-set, vertical-log construction was employed, as at Greensted.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to give this church a precise date within the middle-to-late Saxon period. In terms of years, it lies somewhere between about A.D. 650 and A.D. 1000.

THE FIRST STONE CHURCH

Later, but also in the Saxon period, the timber church was replaced by one of stone; it was unusually large for its time. It comprised a rectangular nave, internally 14.2m. by 7.4m. (461 ft. by 24.5 ft.) with a chancel approximately 6.2m. square (201 ft.). Most of the original nave survives today and the western half of the present chancel embodies the Saxon walls. The nave had two doorways (on the site of the present north and south doors) and daylight entered the building through a series of unglazed, narrow, round-headed windows with wide internal splays. A complete example can be seen in the middle of the north wall of the chancel.

As the "new" church was built adjacent to the timber one, it can be assumed that the latter remained in use during the considerable period of time which it must have taken to construct its successor. Rivenhall must have been a large and prosperous village to be able to afford such a spacious new church.



RECONSTRUCTION OF 15th. CENTURY CHURCH



RECONSTRUCTION OF THE 1717 CHURCH

ADDING THE APSE

In the Saxo-Norman period, probably after the Conquest, the east wall of the chancel was demolished and a new apsidal (semi -circular) end added, either to give increased space or to follow the fashion of the times. All that can now be seen of this phase is part of the apse foundation in the north wall of the chancel.

FOURTEENTH CENTURY PROSPERITY

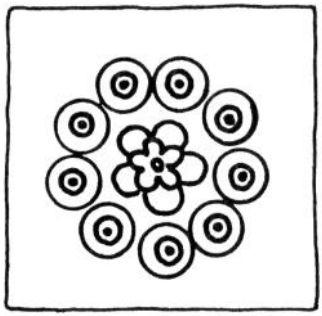
In the early 14th century Rivenhall was still a thriving village and able to afford the complete "modernisation" of its church. The apse, now out-of-date, was demolished, the chancel extended to double its original length and a Priest's door added to its south wall.

All the narrow Saxon windows were replaced by large, glazed ones in the Decorated style, and new doorways designed to match. The chancel now probably received a glazed-tile floor.

The main walls were heightened and a new roof constructed, now probably covered with tiles, instead of thatch or shingles which it would have had in earlier periods.

A further improvement was planned, in the form of a west tower. A massive foundation trench was dug in preparation, but the tower was never built.





Late Medieval glazedfloor tiles, perhaps originally in the chancel

DESERTION OF THE VILLAGE

The failure of the masons to begin work on the tower must surely have resulted from some unexpected event which caused the withdrawal of funds or labour. Here, the evidence for the desertion of the village must be relevant; the only excavation undertaken on the village site was in connection with the pipeline, when it was found that occupation had ceased by the middle of the 14th. century. Although there is no proof, the Black Death is an obvious likely cause.

Eventually, the plan to erect a tower was realised and one was built late in the 15th or early in the 16th century. Its ground plan was so similar to that conceived in the 14th. century that it seems highly probable that the original

paper specification was still extant. However, the new tower was constructed without foundations over the old back-filled trench, into which it subsided dramatically, so that it collapsed in about 1714. It was a square tower with diagonally-buttressed corners and had a turret in the north-eastern angle with the nave, which contained a spiral stair. The tower was built of a curious mixture of materials: brick, rubble and Caen stone. Since this was an expensive imported material it was possibly obtained "secondhand" from an earlier building elsewhere.

It seems likely that the church was already in possession of bells in the 14th. century which, in the absence of a tower, were hung in a bell-cage at ground level (as is still the case at East Bergholt). A brick foundation suitable for such a bell-cage was found by excavation just north of the tower.



Seal impression from 15th. Century signet ring, found 1971

THE GEORGIAN TOWER

When the late-medieval tower fell it brought down the west end of the Saxon nave with it. This necessitated urgent rebuilding, which was undertaken in red brick. The nave was repaired and an elegant new tower with a spire built. This was smaller than its predecessor, so that the foundations of the latter have remained undisturbed in the ground; these have now been excavated, consolidated and exposed to view.

LORD WESTERN'S "RESTORATION"

Thus, at the beginning of the 19th. century, Rivenhall church was still essentially in the Decorated style, but with an early Georgian tower and windows at the west end. However, in 1837-39 Lord Western, of Felix Hall, Kelvedon, gutted the structure, totally re-modelling both its internal and external appearance. Brick, plaster and cement were the only materials he used, and perfect symmetry was the order of the day: blank areas on the exterior walls were disguised by inserting "blind" windows; decayed 11th. century window and door moldings were replaced by a rendered hotchpotch of tile, brick and mortar, and label-moldings were recreated by a cement fillet adhering to a bed of 3-inch nails driven into the walls! Having done all this, Lord Western described the church as "a former rude and unseemly structure".

Later, the Revd.. Hawkins purchased and installed most of the stained glass which can now be seen in the east window. It is 12th. century French work and came originally from the parish church at Chenu, near Tours. It ranks with that at York as the oldest stained glass in England.

Further minor restoration works took place in 1878, when new floors were laid and the south porch built.

RIVENHALL CHURCH TODAY

Once again, repairs are needed and the opportunity is being taken to reveal as many of the church's ancient features as possible. The exterior of the chancel will not be re-rendered and 19th. century fake-moldings will gradually be replaced with stone. The Priest's doorway was renewed in 1972, adhering as closely as possible to the original form of the 14th. century work.

In the process of re-opening the Saxon window in the north wall of the chancel a small area of wall-painting was discovered, sealed behind a plaque where it was inaccessible to the Victorian restorers. It depicts a scrolled frieze painted in red and yellow; above this are parts of two superimposed inscriptions in black. One of these appears to be in Greek. The painted scroll may be of 16th. century date.

RIVENHALL - THE NAME

Past attempts to explain the origin of the name have been unsuccessful, on the whole; however, in the light of the new archaeological evidence, one of the less-favoured explanations appears as a real possibility - that it is derived from a late Saxon word meaning "by the rough hall". The "rough" (i.e. "old") hall would refer to the late Roman aisled barn which was probably used as a hall in the early Saxon period. Undoubtedly, it stood for a long time as a conspicuous ruin and a landmark.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS and PUBLICATION

The successful undertaking of the Rivenhall study has been due to the wholehearted co-operation of very many individuals and bodies, too numerous to list here, but special mention must be made of the facilities and assistance given by the Rector, the Reverend David Nash; Rivenhall P.C.C.; Rivenhall Archaeological Committee; Mr D.K. Coleman, Head-master of Rivenhall C. of E. Primary School; Messrs Laurence King & Partners, the Church Architects; and Mr T. Pearce of Rivenhall Hall, the owner of the villa site.

The project is being conducted under the auspices of the Essex Archaeological Society, with generous support from the Department of the Environment; the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries and the Carnegie U.K. Trust.

This guide is intended as a non-technical, interim note on work which is still in progress. It will be several years before the definitive report can be produced. A brief account of the 1971 excavation appeared in Current Archaeology, No. 30. Technical interim reports are forthcoming in Britannia, vol. 4 (on the villa) and in the Antiquaries Journal, vol. 53 (on the church).

Key to North Wall of Chancel
SAXON
NORMAN
14th CENTURY
VICTORIAN
1
0
5
M.



Glazed Medieval Floor Tile