

WHERE'S WOCCA?

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Somewhere in Old Woking, presumably on or near the site of St Peter's Church, was the original Saxon monastery of Wocchingas.

Last week I wrote about the possible first ever record of the name Woking (or Wocchingas) dating from between 708-715 AD, and the slightly earlier (but some might say slightly more dubious) record of Chertsey Abbey from 673-75 AD. But even if both records were authentic documents and not 11th or 12th century copies or forgeries, they are not necessarily the first time that either Woking or Chertsey were recorded. It is unlikely that any more ancient documents will suddenly show up now, but who can tell how many older documents have been lost and who knows when Certetus gave his name to the island (for anyone cut off by the floods in Chertsey, the clue was in the ancient name) or Woccc or Wocca gave his name to his tribe ('ing' or 'ingas' in old place names roughly translates as 'the tribe or people of').

I certainly do not know who came first and the

question of whether 'ingas' place-names were amongst the earliest of Saxon settlements is still very much up in the air. To the south at some stage were the Godalmingas, with the Basingas to the west, the Sunningas to the north and beyond them the Readingas further up the Thames Valley.

In Surrey the lands of the Godalmingas and Woccingas became in later Saxon times the names of administrative areas known as 'Hundreds' (more of which on later pages), but in our area there was another Hundred, based very roughly on the lands granted in the 8th century (and later) to Chertsey Abbey - known as the Hundred of Godley (God's Land).

Now here is the funny thing - Windlesham (in the Hundred of Woking) is entirely cut off from the rest of the Woking lands by 'Godley' parishes (Frimley and Chobham), suggesting to

some that originally both Godley and Woking Hundred's were one (the land of the Wocchingas tribe perhaps). Just because the possibly oldest surviving record for Chertsey Abbey is about thirty years older than the possibly earliest surviving record of Woking's Monastery, doesn't mean that Chertsey is older than Woking - although that is the way that most historians choose to interpret it!

The problem is that there is also very little archaeological evidence to support or refute the 'ancient' records. I don't know about Farnham, but when they excavated Chertsey Abbey they didn't find anything that they could positively say was from the late 7th century abbey, and the monastery at Woking, said to be founded by monks from what became Peterborough Abbey some time between 708-715 AD, is probably lost well below the present St Peter's Church in Old Woking. You would have to dig down a long

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Woking, Old Woking Church.

way to find anything from the 8th century in Old Woking.

Of course there are some who doubt the authenticity of the 8th century letter from Pope Constantine to Hedda, Abbot of Woking, granting him certain privileges, but as Peterborough Abbey had little to gain from such a document, there seems little reason for them

to waste time making it up either.

There is a second record of the Monastery at 'Wocchingas' in 779 when Offa of Mercia freed the church of Woking from all obligations due to the king, bishop, earl and all men 'so that no one should have any authority there, except St Peter and the abbot'. But after that there is no record of Woking until the Domesday Book -

Unfortunately we will probably never know for sure where the original monastic church was - unless we pull down the present church and completely excavate the site.

the monastery either becoming the Minster Church of St Peter's recorded in the great survey of 1086, or disappearing altogether, possibly after a 'Viking raid' sometime in the late 9th century.

The problem is that so much development has taken place in Old Woking over the centuries that to find Saxon remains you would have to dig down a long way. Perhaps when they redevelop the White Hart site, extra care could be taken to investigate properly that ancient site for evidence of our early medieval past.

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High Street, Old Woking.

From Anglo-Saxon Acorns to Ancient Oak Doors.

At one time it was thought that the old door into St Peter's Church could have come from the original Saxon Monastery, but that theory has been comprehensively disproved by dendrochronology. Apparently the wood probably all comes from the trunk of one tree that was almost three-hundred years old when it was felled sometime between 1106 and 1138. Even the ironwork, which has a distinct 'Anglo-Saxon' look to it, is now thought to be later (based on the research of Dr Jane Geddes, an academic at Aberdeen University).

Even so it is thought to be one of the oldest doors in the country, with the Pyx door in Westminster Abbey being claimed to be the oldest. But whilst it's five planks were evidently cut from the same tree and constructed about 1050, Woking's four-plank door (although over fifty years younger) was cut from a tree that was a sapling many decades before the Westminster one was even an acorn!

If only the wood could talk...



The Pyx door in Westminster Abbey (above) was made from a tree felled in about 1050, whilst Woking's old west door (right) is slightly younger, having been made from a tree felled between 1106 and 1138.



Norman Door, Old Woking Church.

Blomfield's
PhotoSeries.

The Abbey of St. Peter's, Wocchingas - Fact or Forgery?

It should be noted that the document that record's Woking having a monastery in the early 8th century actually dates from the 12th century. It should also be noted that it doesn't describe the founding of the monastery, but records certain privileges that the monastery (and a sister foundation at Bermondsey) enjoyed. It is dated to 708-715 from the fact that the letter from Pope Constantine granting those privileges was addressed to Hedda, Abbot of both monasteries (and of Breedon in Leicestershire). The 12th century copy was made at Peterborough Abbey (which in the 8th century was known as Medehamstede), but it is now in the care of the Society of Antiquaries of London.

Medehamstede was in Mercia and it may be that the reason for the request of the letter from the Pope was because Hedda was concerned for the future of his monasteries in Surrey as at that time this area was in West Saxon hands.

The document protects the monks from outside interference, allowing the local Bishop (of Winchester) only the power to ordain and see that the canons are enforced, whilst giving Abbot Hedda, his successors and the congregation, the day to

day running of the monastery, its staffing and care of their house.

As I say, the document is actually a 12th century copy, but all the people mentioned, the style of the document and the fact that by the 12th century Peterborough Abbey had no claim over Woking and nothing to gain by creating a forgery, seems to point to it being a true copy of an 'original' document.



The Hedda Stone in Peterborough Cathedral - successor to the Abbey of St Peter's, Medehamstead.

The Cloister that never was



Don't get me started on 'The Cloisters'. For a start, the cloisters of any monastery are usually directly south of the Nave of the Monastic Church. Granted at Chertsey Abbey, because the Abbey Stream passed to the north, the layout was different from the norm, but at Woking the River Wey runs to the south of the church, so it stands to reason that if there were any Cloisters they would have been to the south rather than the north. They certainly wouldn't have been a hundred yards or so north-west of the church as the development of The Cloisters is!

Secondly, it is extremely doubtful that the monastery at Woking ever had a cloister! In the 8th century the practice appears to have been for the monks to just have individual 'cells' near the Monastic Church, rather than the full-blown layout of later 'Norman' monasteries.

The Cloisters in Old Woking is just another fancy name dreamed up by the developers. The 'Old Playground' or 'Poor-Houses' could be more appropriate (as we will discover later on in the year), but I guess those names just wouldn't have quite the same selling-power!

Of course the 12th century copy (and no doubt the original) was written in Latin, but fortunately in 1933 the historian Sir Frank Stenton published a translation in his 'Historical Essays in honour of James Tait', from which we are now able to quote.

The second (and final) reference to St Peter's Abbey in Woking comes from later in the 8th century when according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Offa, King of Mercia granted certain privileges to Woking in 779.

'In the time of this same Offa there was an ealdorman called Brorda who petitioned the king for love of him to free a church of his called Woking, because he wished to give it to Medehamstede and to St Peter and the abbot that then was, who was called Pusa. That Pusa succeeded Beonna, and the king loved him well. And the king freed the church of Woking from all obligations due to the king and to bishop and to earl and to all men, so that no one should have any authority there, except St Peter and the abbot.'

After that we know that Bermondsey's Abbey was destroyed by the Danes in 869, Medehamstede in about 870 and Chertsey Abbey in about 872. It is assumed, a similar fate befell Woking about this time.



If the Monastery of Woccingas was on the site of St Peter's Church, any cloisters would have been to the south of the Nave (where the South Aisle was later built), but in the 8th century it is thought that monks lived in simple 'cells' near the monastic church—the remains of which would be very hard to trace.