Not just Battle Abbey – Other religious houses in eastern Sussex to 1538

The term 'other religious houses' encompasses amongst other institutions the over seven hundred hospitals, some run by religious orders, others by secular monks and nuns, founded in England between the Norman Conquest and 1538. Their name was derived from the Latin 'hospitalis', meaning being concerned with guests who needed shelter, for one reason or another. Some were only for pilgrims, some alms-houses for the aged poor, some provided care and primitive treatments for sickness, and some were for lepers. All would have served to support their communities, in sickness, health and old age. Illness was seen in those times as linked to the sins of those who were sick, and those in hospitals run by monks and nuns were given regular access to mass and prayer, both by listening and taking part. Religious beliefs also covered issues involved in 'miraculous' healing, holy wells and springs, relics of saints etc. Illness then, as for many still today, might have involved travel on pilgrimage in the hope of healing. This in turn could be a source of income for abbeys in possession of saintly relics or holy wells etc., hence the need to provide hospitals to accommodate pilgrims. This should not ignore the fact that monks and nuns could be experts in healing with a deep knowledge of effective medicinal herbs.

Without the charity of religious houses the poverty of the people would have been even worse than it was, and the hospitals that provided shelter and care for the elderly and alms for the poorest section of society would have provided a rudimentary social support system.

Battle Abbey was associated with two external hospitals. One, run by the almoner, just outside and in front of the abbey gate, was undoubtedly for pilgrims or perhaps at first for those visiting the new abbey which was a building site and was first mentioned in 1076. It was replaced by a new hospital or house for pilgrims, outside the abbey gate under abbot Odo (1175-1200) and then was completely re-built again in 1443-5 with its design based on a Wealden hall house. In about 1538 an upper floor, hearth and chimney were added. This building with even later modifications is what can still be seen today across the road from the abbey gatehouse. Its recent owners have sometimes called it the 'Pilgrims Rest'.

The second Battle hospital, run by the abbey infirmarer, was beyond the watch croft which marked the south-eastern town boundary at the top of what is now Battle Hill at 'Spitalfields'. This is the Starrs Green area and two cottages there are still called Spittle Cottages. This hospital was dedicated to the blessed Thomas the Martyr, which we know as in 1345 Alan Payn was accused of breaking into 'the buildings of the hospital of the blessed Thomas the Martyr in the vill of Battle,' and stealing a silver chalice and other goods. This hospital was undoubtedly for infectious diseases and leprosy. The two hospitals are confusingly dealt with as one in the Victoria County History of

Sussex Volume 2. The infirmarer also ran the abbey's own infirmary to the east of the cloisters for sick monks within the abbey precinct, but this was part of the abbey itself.

But clearly Battle Abbey, a Benedictine monastery, was not the only local religious house associated with external influences and which influenced the affairs of eastern Sussex. These other houses, which include minsters, more hospitals, friaries, priories, a collegiate church and two other local abbeys and the influence of the abbey of Fécamp cannot be ignored in a book which covers this period in eastern Sussex.

Two of these religious houses go back to Anglo-Saxon times when in 772 a minster was set up at Bexhill and there may have been a contemporaneous minster at Peasmarsh. In pre-Conquest times the Benedictine abbey of Fécamp had influence within the manor of Rameslie from 1017, and in the post-Conquest era Fécamp must have been involved in founding a hospital at Playden, just outside of Rye. Before that they almost certainly would have established the very first church at Rye and churches at Old Winchelsea, and probably the original churches of All Saints and St Clement in what is now Hastings Old Town, which area was at the time within their manor of Rameslie. These may have been wooden churches, replaced post-Norman Conquest with stone buildings.

Following the Conquest and the establishment of Battle Abbey later houses developed in Hastings including the Augustinian Hastings Priory and what was probably a secular order of the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene. The Augustinian order was founded in 1254 by the merger of several smaller orders in Tuscany who were following the Rule of St. Augustine, written by St. Augustine of Hippo in the 5th Century.

The Hastings Collegiate Church of St Mary in the Castle, a secular body which provided monks to take services in local churches as well as observing their own devotions and which also probably took over the minster roles of Bexhill and Peasmarsh, was founded by Robert, Count of Eu and Lord of the Rape of Hastings in about 1090.

The Cistercians founded another abbey at Robertsbridge. At first it was near Salehurst but then they moved nearer Robertsbridge. The Cistercian order, also known as white monks, were founded in 1098 and named after the original establishment at Saint-Nicolas-lès-Cîteaux, south of Dijon, France. They were a stricter breakaway group from the Benedictine order.

Franciscans friars (also known as grey friars), from a relatively new order, came over the English Channel sometime in or after 1224 and established a friary at Old Winchelsea (possibly as part of the first group sent directly by St Francis in 1224; Pratt says that they 'came from' Fécamp Abbey – a Benedictine abbey – although it is possible that this was a splinter group). The Franciscan order was founded in 1209 by Saint Francis of Assisi. Greyfriars priory was well established in Old Winchelsea by 1245 when it was recorded as benefitting from a will. When Old Winchelsea was

inundated by the sea after the great storms in the late 13th century, with its final destruction in 1287, they moved up the hill to a new priory in New Winchelsea, which town had been founded under the sponsorship of Edward I to replace the lost township and to serve its harbour, which at that time remained an important strategic naval base. It is believed that after Old Winchelsea's loss of its churches to the sea that it was Edward I, rather than Fécamp abbey, who soon sponsored the building of the new churches of St Thomas and St Giles at New Winchelsea. Much later to the Franciscan's dismay the Dominican black friars were also allowed establish a friary at New Winchelsea by Edward I's son, Edward II.

At Rye in about 1263 a 'Friary of the Sack' was established at Rye, but it was short lived. An Augustinian friary followed sometime before 1350, but its original building stood below the eastern cliff and became unsafe due to flooding, so in 1378 they moved within the walls of Rye town.

Pevensey was not to be left out of the equation as a Hospital was developed at Westham and a small Premonstratensian abbey at Otham about 3 miles (5km) west of Pevensey, situated just north of the A27 Pevensey to Polegate road was started up in 1180 but just after 1200 moved to Bayham, just within Sussex near Lamberhurst, there it merged on this site with another small group of white monks from Brockley (now in Lewisham, south London). The Premonstratensian Order combines the contemplative with the active religious life and was been founded in the valley of Prémontré, near Laon, France, in 1120 by St Norbert, later Archbishop of Magdeburg in Germany.

An alphabetical overview of houses not under the control of Battle Abbey: information is mainly from Knowles and Hadcock's 'Medieval Religious Houses' and 'VCH Sussex Vol.2'				
House name	*Order or Dedication*	*Founded*	*Closed or Dissolved*	
Bayham Abbey	Premonstratensian (Whitefriars)	1199-1208	1525	A small Premonstratensian house from Brockley was moved here in about 1207, with the canons moving before that in abt.1199 to build the new abbey. They were joined by the canons from Otham near Pevensey in 1208-11. There were 20 canons by 1315, but in 1500 there were only ten plus the abbot.
Bexhill Minster	St Peter	772	After 1066 a new church was developed	Founded by King Offa. The minster was possibly not on the site of the present St Peters. But the Saxon

			on the same site	Church of St Peter was about 40 feet (12m) long by 20 feet (9m) wide and the first Norman additions were made in 1086. One prebend later attached to Hastings College of St Mary in the Castle received support from the churches associated with Bexhill and the chapel of Bulverhythe.
Hastings Hospital	St Mary Magdalene	bef.1293	After 1600. Became merged into a charity	For a master and poor or infirm brothers and sisters.
Hastings College of St Mary in the Castle	Secular	1090	1546	Founded by Robert d'Eu, earl of the Rape of Hastings. Became a Royal college. It has a complicated history tied into Royal and Rape events. There were between 8 and 10 priests, with the same number of prebends.
Hastings Priory	Augustinian	1189-99	1536. Sea damaged and moved after 1413	A small priory for about five canons. Eventually damaged by the sea and moved to Warbleton. Dissolved 1536.
Michelham Priory	Augustinian	1229	1536	For 13 canons. Only five survived the Black Death. There were nine in 1536 including a novice.
Otham, Hotteham, or Oldham Abbey	Premonstratensian ?St. Lawrence	1180-7	1208-11	This tiny abbey was moved to Bayham. After that it became a grange with a small chapel, probably served by a canon from Bayham.
Peasmarsh Minster	?	8th century	About 1066. New church on same site	A prebend attached to Hastings College of St Mary in the Castle seems to have been partly endowed from

			after 1070	the churches and endowments of the old Peasmarsh minster. The present church of St Peter and St Paul stands on the same site and dates back to 1070.
Playden Hospital	Benedictine	Before 1249	1521	For a priest master and poor or infirm brothers and sisters. By 1442 the building was in ruins. The 'building' passed from Fécamp Abbey to Syon Abbey in 1461 and to Westminster Abbey in 1502. It was so derelict by 1521 that it was appropriated.
Robertsbridge Abbey (1)	Cistercian	1176	13c.	The first abbey was moved from Salehurst to a new site in Robertsbridge.
Robertsbridge Abbey (2)	Cistercian	13c.	1538	There were nine monks in 1418, and the abbot and nine monks in 1538
Rye Friary (1)	Augustinian	Before 1350	1378	This early friary was threatened by flooding on the east side of Rye and was moved.
Rye Friary (2)	Augustinian	1378	1538	What persists of this building is off Conduit Street within the old town walls of Rye.
Rye Friary of the Sack	of the Sack or De Penitentia	About 1263	1307	This order was disbanded at the 2nd General Council of Lyons in 1275. Surviving brothers were obliged to join one of the four major orders by 1317. The building stood near the south-west corner of the town churchyard and only small parts of it persist in the structure of the much rebuilt house that stands there today.

Westham Hospital	Hospital House of St. John the Baptist	Probably considerably before 1302	Not suppressed evolved into a charity	Possibly founded by Lords of Pevensey castle. For the poor, aged and sick. Endowed with 30 acres of land. The surviving charity 'Hospital of St John The Baptist' objectives remain: 'for the benefit of almspeople of the ancient parishes of Westham, Pevensey and ancient liberty of Pevensey in the parish of Hailsham who shall be poor persons not less than 60 years of age.'
Winchelsea Friary (Old)	Franciscan	Before 1245 but after1224	Destroyed by the sea	Founded by the new order of Franciscan monks.
Winchelsea Friary (New)	Franciscan	Relocated abt. 1285	1538	The Franciscans built a new priory.
Winchelsea Friary	Dominican	1318, moved 1339 and again 1342	Bef. 1538 when it was found in ruins	Allowed by Edward II. Original site distant from town centre, near New Gate. Moved to a site possibly near the harbour and then again, nearer the town centre. Always small.
Winchelsea	Hospital of St Bartholomew	Before 1292	Combined with St John about 1500	Sited in quarter 39, near New Gate. An alms-house. Patrons became the town of Winchelsea.
Winchelsea (Old)	Hospital of the Holy Cross	Before 1209	Destroyed by the sea	Possibly founded by Fécamp, probably for lepers.
Winchelsea (New)	Hospital of the Holy Cross	Relocated after 1287	? after 1501, about 1520	Near the New Gate in quarter 39.
Winchelsea (Old)	Hospital of St. John	?	Destroyed by the sea	An alms-house. Thought to be the oldest hospital at Winchelsea.
Winchelsea (New)	Hospital of St. John	Relocated after 1287	Before 1586	In quarter 34. Patrons became the town of Winchelsea.

The above descriptions are short. This is in part because little data are available or more extensive reviews are readily available. Where more detailed descriptions or researches are available pointers to these are given in the text.

ANGLO-SAXON MINSTER CHURCHES

There can be little doubt that the 'planting' of one, probably two minster churches in the 8th century, to act as nuclei for other Anglo-Saxon churches around them, was a large step in the re-Christianisation of eastern Sussex, which had significantly lagged Kent. These small monasteries, to be known as minsters, were worldly institutions whose priests were known as 'clerks' or 'canons' who were in modern parlance developing 'outreach' into their local hamlets and villages. These clerks are sometimes mentioned by name in Domesday, holding small parcels of land off which they will have lived. Other times a church is mentioned in the areas covered by the minsters or within the lands of Fécamp abbey e.g. at Guestling. But the recording of churches and priests in Domesday is very erratic.

Peasmarsh

With respect to Peasmarsh it is known that the prebend of Canon Theobald of Hastings College of St Mary in the Castle (a stipend which was usually obtained from specific sources, in this case a share of each nominated parish's income) was later known as the prebend of Peasmarsh because the lands of Peasmarsh minster made up the bulk of the endowments – these included the lands belonging to four other churches at Iden, Beckley, Northiam, and Playden.

Bexhill

Much more is known about Bexhill. King Offa in a charter dated 772 provided the assets to support a new minster church to Bishop Oswald (Osa) of Selsey. We only have a later copy of this which may have been somewhat altered when transcribed in the 13th century and an inversion corrected version of this is provided by Porter. This provides some interesting details of the location of the eight hides (or cassati) of land (in modern terms up to about 1000 acres or 4 square kilometres, so not insignificant) provided in Bexhill as well as assets in other nearby locations to provide financial support. The location is interesting as the charter reads '*These are eight hides relating to the inland of the land of the Bexware* (Bæxwarena land i.e. the land of the people of Bexhill) *first to the servants tree, from the servants tree eastwards and up to the old marsh dyke, then south to the treacherous place, along the beach* (strand) *over against Cooden* (Coden) *cliff, north to Kayworth or Kewhurst* (Kæia weorð) *and to the bending stream, north through Shortwood to the landmark beacon, from the beacon to the haunted ford, from the ford along the water to the street bridge, from the bridge up along the drainage ditch to the bedan pool, from the pool along the boundary thus to the servants tree….'* This locates the land as being a large parcel north of the Cooden cliffs, not at all the location of St Peters church in Bexhill old town, which was the nucleus of old Bexhill and sited further east. The description is also wrong for the old church of Northeye, where there was a flint chapel dedicated to St James. The other supporting lands were '*gavel-land appurtenant*

to Bexhill, namely, Barnhorne, Worsham, on Ibbanhyrste, Crowhurst, on Hricge (Ridge), on Gyllingan, Foxham (somewhere in Crowhurst), on Blacanbrocan (? Black Brooks in Westfield) and Icklesham, all in Sussex.'

In Domesday two churches are noted at Bexhill, so the known Saxon features at St Peters (the stonework uncovered in 1878 works, in the form of flint-rubble laid in herringbone courses, and an intricately carved slab of local fine grained sandstone) can be explained in that it may have been the second church, not the minster and the slab may even have been moved from the minster when it demised. But as we have no archaeological location of the minster it may indeed have been on the site of St Peters and the large piece of land reported above may have solely been used for its support.

The Saxon slab from St Peters church

Similar arrangements to those of Peasmarsh may have also once applied to a second canon's prebend at Hastings Collegiate Church – the Bexhill minster 'parishes' which may have involved pre-Conquest churches in Hooe, Ninfield, Bulverhythe, Bullington (near Worsham/Pebsham) and Bexhill. Because of these linkages it has been presumed that small Anglo-Saxon churches (maybe wooden) had been created in these locations pre-Conquest and that these and the minsters were further developed or replaced by early Norman stone churches in the early post-Conquest period.

…and Pevensey too?

A small two celled church, with ruins dated 1100-6, found within the inner ward of Pevensey castle may have been the start of a collegiate church, as at Hastings, within the castle. The size of its endowments which included another probable minster church and lands at Arlington, the church of St Nicolas, Pevensey and salt and money from the burgesses of Pevensey support this theory. If so this was never completed as William de Mortain was deprived of his lands after being captured at the Battle of Tinchebrai, having been against Henry I. Rushton had suggested that the church was a pre-Conquest minster and Gardiner that the parish of Pevensey fell within the extensive territory of the minster at Bexhill, so there is some confusion.

There had been ecclesiastical holdings at Pevensey created by one or both of Fécamp and Tréport abbeys pre-Domesday and the Bishop of Chichester (previously Selsey) had five burgesses providing income within the borough at Domesday. Also three priests, Edmer (15), Ordmer (5) and Doda(3) were mentioned at Pevensey in Domesday, also receiving rentals from burgesses – considerably more than anywhere else in eastern Sussex. At another place called Horsey (not the Pevensey Bay islet called Horse Eye) in nearby Eastbourne hundred one hide was held of 'St Martin's church' by a clerk of Fécamp called Roger, but this church name does not correspond to the names of the later churches of either Pevensey or Eastbourne.

As we can see from the map below eastern Sussex appeared to have been well churched in late Anglo-Saxon times. Many of the churches seen today were rebuilt, usually on the same site, post-Conquest and it is rare to find any Anglo-Saxon component.
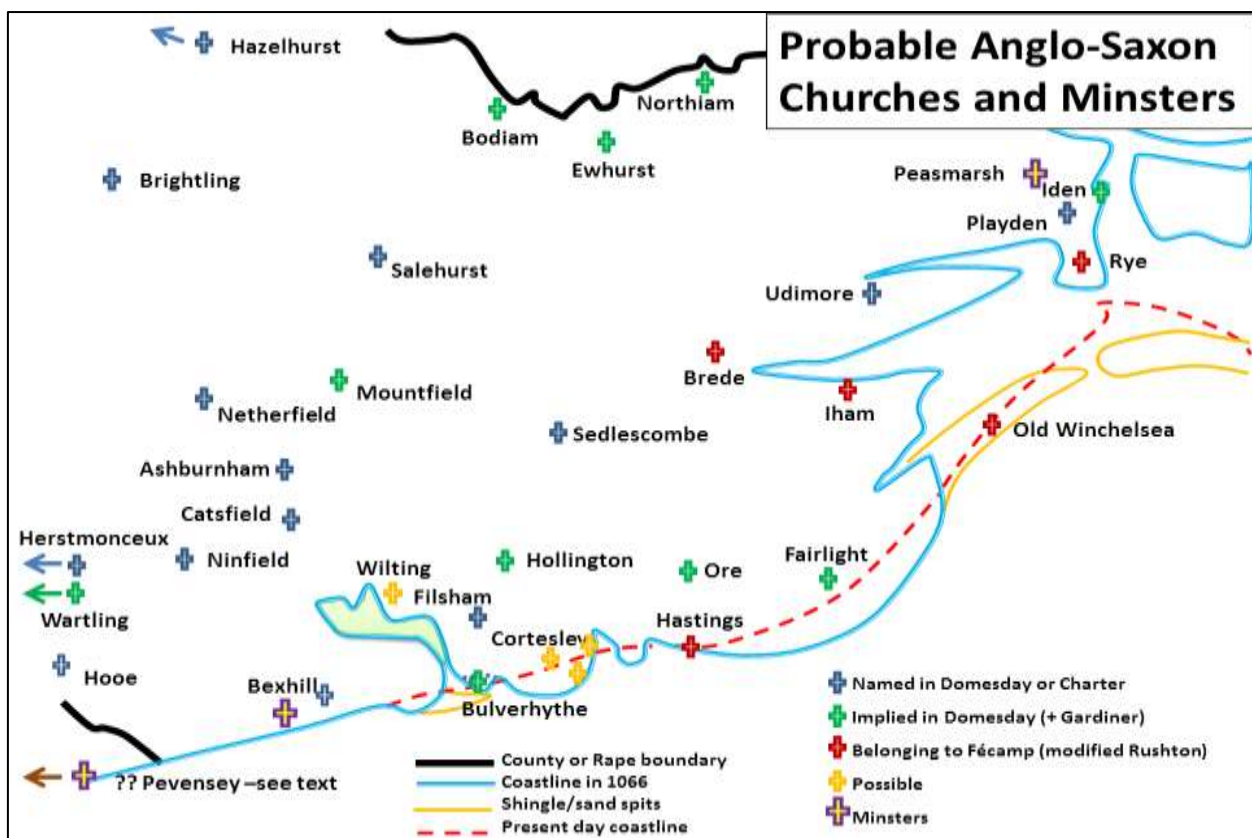
Map © Keith Foord

HOSPITALS

The hospitals at Battle have been described above but there were six more named hospitals, run by friars and nuns, at Playden (only just outside and to the north of Rye), Hastings, Westham near Pevensey, and no fewer than three at Winchelsea.

Playden

There had been a hospital of St Bartholomew in the parish of Playden from the 12th century with a first mention before 1219, seemingly founded with at least the involvement of Fécamp abbey. This

mention was in the form of a notification from abbot Ralf (1189-1219) of Fécamp that the chapel, buildings and lands were to be transferred to the care of the brothers and sisters of the hospital. They were to appoint any future warden as nominated by the mayor and jurats of Rye, who were to submit his name to the abbot of Fécamp in time of peace, or to the lord chancellor of England if there was war with France, and they in turn should present him to the bishop of Chichester. Part of the funding was to come from a fair, authorised by the king, from which the abbey expected a share of the profits. The mayor and jurats of Rye held the hospital seal to prevent fraud and issued a charter to that effect in 1249. From this charter we find that there were then twelve inmates, of whom some were lepers. In 1290 King Edward I granted a charter for a fair which was held on St. Bartholomew's Day in the immediate neighbourhood of the hospital. Unfortunately the hospital had a rather chequered history and by 1442 no master or inmates were there and the building was in ruins. The building passed from Fécamp Abbey to Syon Abbey in 1461 and to Westminster Abbey in 1502, but it was so derelict by 1521 that it was sold for a few shillings, used for a new chapel at Westminster. The present modern community hospital at Rye is on the same site and when it was re-developed in 1994 excavations found among many items of coins and pottery dating from the 13th and 14th centuries.

Hastings

In Hastings the date and founder of the hospital remain unknown, although the old ruins are said to have 12th century features. In 1294 the hospital of St Mary Magdalene was gifted land by Petronilla de Cham, widow, of over five acres (two hectares) between what is now Warrior Square and Bohemia Road. '*22 Edward I., Sunday the Feast of St. Benedict the Abbot.—Grant by Petronilla de Cham of Hastyng, widow, to the Brothers and Sisters of the Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene of Hastyng, of five acres of land in the parish of St. Margaret in Hasting for the healthful estate of her soul and of the souls of Godard, Matilda, Robert, Robert, Robert, William, Richard, and Henry, and of her heirs, parents and friends*.' At least part of this hospital still existed as a wall of an old barn when drawn in 1815, and these sketches show 12th century Norman window features. It was partially excavated in 1862, when the mayor reported that 'the centre of the building was found full of bones'.

Protection was granted by Edward III to the master and brethren in 1320, and in 1381 the proctors of the hospital obtained letters of commendation to the clergy of the diocese of Canterbury. The Hastings custumal says: '*The bailiff shall have the visitation of the hospital of St. Mary Magdalen of Hastings once a year; and there shall be in the said hospital brethren and sisters, sometimes more and sometimes less; but no brother or sister shall be received into the aforesaid hospital except by the assent of the bailiff and the commonalty. And the rules of the aforesaid hospital shall be read before the bailiff at the time of the visitation, at which he shall demand and enquire whether they be well kept or not; and . . . the bailiff shall enquire into the life of all the brethren and sisters examined, and if any of them be attainted the bailiff may remove him if he will. And the bailiff by the assent of his fellows if he shall find a man in the said commonalty infirm, and who has conducted himself in accordance with the usages of the ports for all time, and who shall be*

impoverished . . . may put such into the said hospital to partake of the sustenance of the brethren and sisters without paying anything to the said hospital. An inventory of the stores *'in the hospital and chappell there'* was made in both 1525 and 1536 and the hospital survived the Reformation, and was still in existence at the beginning of Elizabeth I's reign, but by 1600 had closed. Its assets, a small estate of a house, a barn and farm lands were occupied by several tenants and the Hastings Corporation decided that the rents would be donated to the churchwardens of St Clements and All Saints parishes to help with the poor rates. In time this benefit passed to the Magdalen and Lasher Charity, which still exists providing relief from poverty and assistance to those in need who are residents of the Borough of Hastings. Its later history is told in Baine's 'Historic Hastings'.

Ruins of Hospital of St Mary Magdalene - Chapel Barn, Bohemia, Hastings in 1820. From a watercolour by Miss M Johnson

Pevensey/Westham

A hospital at Westham probably existed before the 13th century, possibly founded by one of the lords of Pevensey castle and endowed with 30 acres of land, but little is known of it. A Pevensey rental of 1292 mentions 'the master of the hospital of the Holy Cross', but the hospital was named after St John the Baptist, of which 'the brethren' are mentioned in a later rental of 1354. King John authorised a fair at Pevensey, probably to help fund the hospital as it was held around the date of birth of John the Baptist – '*and furthermore, we have granted to our aforesaid Barons of Pevensey, that they may there have every year, a fair of seven days duration: to wit, three days before the nativity of St. John the Baptist, that day, and the three days following.*'

About the middle of the fifteenth century William Slyhand left 40s. and in 1489 Henry Dawson left 6s. 8d to the hospital of St John in Westham. There is little doubt that it was an alms-house as the town custumal says '*The Men of the Burgage of the Towne of Pevensey have an Hospital of Saynte John Baptiste, in the whiche been brothers or sisters, havynge londes and possessions within the Leege aforesaide, and the same Receyvour and the Men of the saide Burgage have the disposicion of the saide Hospitall, to graunte Corodye, as well to men as to women, as they may consente. And they have to visit and chaste after the quantitie. And one of the Men of the Burgage alway shalbe Overseer and Superior of that Hospitall, to oversee the expense, and the accompte of the Master of*

the saide Hospitall. Also the saide Receyvour and the Men may, yf there be to be hadde a Man or Woman of the saide Burgage, the whiche is come into povertie and have not whereof to lyve, and have borne him or her well by all his or her lyffe, that same Man or Woman in the forsaide Hospitall ther sustenances in the same shall take, nothing paying for the same.' The alms-houses that succeeded the medieval hospital of St John the Baptist continued to make provision for the needy of the Liberty of Pevensey and the charity of the 'Hospital of St John The Baptist' remains in existence today, with alms-house bungalows for people in need who are 60 years of age or over and are (or have been) resident in the ancient parishes of Westham and Pevensey including Westham, Pevensey, Pevensey Bay, Stone Cross and Hankham.

Winchelsea

The three hospitals at Winchelsea were those of Holy Cross, of St Bartholomew and of St John. The Holy Cross was clearly founded at Old Winchelsea before 1209, almost certainly under the auspices of Fécamp abbey within whose manor it lay. Following the inundation of Old Winchelsea the hospital moved to the 39th quarter of New Winchelsea, near the New Gate. This position was well away from the town centre and it was likely a leper hospital. Its original endowment was of one acre of land, but this was subsequently increased to 6½ acres. The last master of Holy Cross, Robert Wrothe, was appointed in 1501 and it disappeared soon afterwards, the mayor and jurats saying in 1570 that it had not existed for 50 years.

St John's was probably even older than Holy Cross: *'rents were assigned to it from time immemorial'.* Rentals were received from houses at Great Yarmouth via the Cinque Ports, and John de Romeney, as attorney of the brethren and sisters of the hospital of St. John of Winchelsea, in the time of Edward I received 31s. 6d. (£1.58) from this source. This hospital was nearer the town in the 34th quarter and its lands which passed to the corporation in 1586 amounted to ten acres. It was under the control of the mayor, who had to visit it once a year and had power to remove any objectionable inmate, and, with the consent of the jurats, might admit any poor man or woman who had been 'in good love and fame all their time.' So in functional terms it was the alms-house rather than an infirmary.

St Bartholomew's was a founded when New Winchelsea was built and stood near Holy Cross in the 39th quarter. It was for brethren and sisters, was endowed with two acres of land worth 6s. (30p), was under the control of the mayor and commonalty and was another almonry as the corporation were able to admit suitable inmates. It and St Johns were probably combined in about 1500 at the St John buildings – a gable end of St John's hospital stands to this day by the roadside out of Winchelsea.

Decline of the hospitals

By 1414 the House of Commons had become as concerned as anyone could be in those days that the hospitals were in decline. We can see this from some of the descriptions above. In a way this

had been an increasing problem since the Black Death of 1347-50 when the population had been significantly reduced with the resultant economic problems causing a lack of funds, but also the institutions had been proportionately reduced with numbers of carers, monks and nuns dying in the same proportions as the general population. At the same time some hospitals had become sinecures for those who ran them and they were caring for fewer people. MPs petitioned King Henry V, who agreed that they should be inspected and properly governed, but left the Church to do it. Nothing was done.

By 1540 many of the hospitals had disappeared with their abbeys. Some few survived as charities such as at Hastings and Pevensey above, or their running was passed to local corporations who had little experience and not much money. The dissolution had profoundly changed English society and the poor suffered, with the sick, beggars and vagrants becoming more numerous and obvious. It would take some time under Elizabeth I before new poor laws were evolved to develop parish based strategies, but the new Protestant elite lacked the sympathetic approach of the previous religious institutions and workhouses started to develop. Medicine was taken over by laymen, who had little idea of the causes of illness, and in those early years it was still based on old beliefs and doctrines which had actually somewhat regressed from Greco-Roman days and involved supernatural ideas including astrology. Life expectancy remained low with deaths at average ages of 32-35 years.

PRIORIES AND FRIARIES

Michelham

Michelham Priory is included here because of its founding family linkages with the Battle of Hastings and that family's additional sponsorship of Hastings Priory of which Michelham appears to be a daughter priory. Engenulf de Laigle, accepted as a definite companion of William at the Battle of Hastings, was killed at the Battle of Hastings, where he '*with shield slung at his neck, and gallantly handling his spear, struck down many of the English'*. His Norman descendants became in time lords of Pevensey Castle and its Rape until 1235 when the links with England came to an end. Gilbert de Laigle, the fourth Laigle lord of Pevensey rape, founded the Augustinian Michelham Priory at a bend in the river Cuckmere at Arlington parish. The first prior was called Roger. After receiving approval from Henry III in letters patent of May 1229, after arranging in March that Hastings Priory would receive 80 acres (32Ha) of land at Michelham, a wood at Pevensey, 80 acres of marshland in Hailsham, 20 acres (8Ha) of meadow at Willingdon and numbers of other grants to found the new priory. Links seemed to persist between Michelham and Hastings Priory which were both of the Augustinian order, as later in 1300 John, prior at Hastings, was ordered to return to Michelham as a simple canon because of various misdemeanours and in 1402 Richard Weston, a canon of Michelham, became prior of Hastings. The situation of Michelham on a route across Sussex meant that it received many visitors on progresses through Sussex over the years before its dissolution, including Edward I in 1302 on one of his itineraries. A good history of Michelham Priory can be found on the Sussex Archaeological Society's website.

Hastings

Hastings Priory of the Holy Trinity, which was only ever small, was established in the reign of Richard I (1189–1199) by either Sir Walter Bricet or Walter de Scotney who gave the priory the churches of Crowhurst and Ticehurst. The priory later also obtained more churches at Dallington, Ashburnham and St Michaels in Hastings, the last from from Ralph Neville in 1237, and as noted above lands at Michelham in 1229 from Gilbert de Laigle, lord of Pevensey. It was just above where old Hastings Post Office was on Cambridge Road. Sometime later 192 acres (78 Ha) of land were transferred to it from St Michael's parish.

This land was all on the west side of the Priory valley, a very small tidal port at the time, and some of it would have been a typical water meadow so beloved of monastic institutions. As the protecting cliffs eroded, the sea encroached until the priory was in danger of being inundated, and in 1413 Sir John Pelham gave a site at Warbleton, and Henry IV licensed the priory to remove there. A small farm persisted on the residual Priory land for many years and was still shown on the Boundary Commission map of 1832 and the OS map from the 1873 survey. The priory had a rocky history and at times it must be wondered what its function was.

The Boundary Commission map of 1832 still shows St Michael's and St Andrew's parishes, the Priory farm on the site of the old Holy Trinity Priory and the site of St Mary Magdalene Hospital.

A small article which seems to be about excavations at the Hastings priory site has been found in the Sussex Archaeological Society newsletter of May 1973. 'The Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group carried out excavations at a small Augustinian Priory site, in advance of building works. The late C12 chapter house had a blank arcade along its north, south and east walls, consisting of a series of interlaced semi-circular arches supported on foliated capitals. The vault had moulded ribs with dog-tooth ornamentation. The tiled floor of the chapter house had been robbed out but the remains of a crude dais or seat were retained in the centre of the east wall. The walls of the C13 dormitory, to the north, stood to a height of 4-5 feet (1.5m) above floor level and retained

the remains of two doorways and a lancet window. The north range was taken up by the C13 refectory, which had been extensively rebuilt during C14. Work of the latter period, which included the wall staircase giving access to the pulpit, was of high quality, having double plinths and being faced with small, square, ashlar blocks and courses of squared and knapped flints. The roofs were of west country slate throughout. The buildings were abandoned in c. 1417'.

Rye

There was a short lived Friary of the Sack at Rye established circa. 1257. The order was forbidden to receive novices and new sites after the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and died out in the early 14th century. Old Stone House, in Rye on the south side of the parish churchyard, which has traditionally been identified as the site of the Friary of the Sack, survives as a private dwelling. But very little of any original stone building survives. The surviving stone window has a 19th-century replacement with a Decorated style head which might be of 13th or early 14th century date; internally Martin and Martin say that the original stonework of this window is more reminiscent of 14th century than 13th century work.

Rye Augustinian friary was the first successful house permitted following new papal licences of spring 1364 which allowed foundations in towns where 'many faithful' desired them. A community of friars was certainly established quite quickly in 1364 on two acres of land held from the king for a payment of 2s. 10d. (14p) yearly. It possessed both a common and prior's seals by 1368. What was very important for the success of such a friary was local support, which was it seems readily given from the burghers of the town. The first build was to the east of the town centre but this soon became non-viable. There had been five messuages on the land on which the friary was first built but they and the friary had been 'submerged', possibly after erosion and slippage of a cliff and were unusable. The friary was therefore relocated within the town walls to 'le Haltone', on the corner of Conduit Hill and High Street, where their former chapel, but not the whole friary, survives. It is largely lacking medieval detail, and although east, south and west windows of the late 14th-century chapel remain they are blocked. The Victoria County History of Sussex says the house at Rye has mid-fourteenth-century details, chiefly windows with tracery of French or Flemish character. A plan of the chapel, which is about 65 feet long, is also given in the Sussex VCH. There was a fairly small quadrangular cloister-type building on the north side of the chapel which does not survive. It is shown in a view of Rye by Van Dyck dated 1633. There is quite a bit of detail about both of the Rye friaries in Draper's book 'Rye: A History of a Sussex Cinque Port to 1660'.

Winchelsea

Greyfriars at Winchelsea has some rather beautiful surviving ruins of its choir, not often available for public viewing, which are taken to indicate the early size and wealth of this friary. Heritage England in its listing says that it is one of the most impressive examples of Franciscan architecture in England. This was perhaps aided by the fact that the forced relocation coincided with a phase of Franciscan re-building in Britain, which often entailed an 'aggrandisement' of their sites, particularly the churches. Although the friars were poor the local friary was well supported by donations and legacies. In 1413, for example, the Finch family of Winchelsea made a grant so that

'a mass [be] said for Vincent Finch and his wife Isabella on their death and their names [to] be written in the gift book of the covenant among the chief benefactors.' Following devastating French raids, the Black Death and the economic decline resulting from the silting of its harbour, Winchelsea became significantly poorer as time went by and support from the Winchelsea community became reduced up until the dissolution of Greyfriars in 1538.

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The Chancel of Greyfriars (Franciscan) Priory, Winchelsea (Photo © Keith Foord)

The bishop of Dover was sent to accept the surrender of the friary, and 'sold the stuff' – that is the ornaments and furniture. 'The house is at the king's command and yours,' he reported to Thomas Cromwell. VCH Sussex Volume 2, Pratt's books and the studies by Martin and others contain much information about this friary, its history and relationship with the town. Following the dissolution the site was leased to the Captain of Camber Castle, Philip Chowte, who was only interested in making what he could out of the buildings. As he was also tenant of the also dissolved Blackfriars' site near the Pipewell Gate it was more convenient to take stone from there to Camber Castle than to rob stone from Greyfriars. This probably accounts for there being no significant residue of Blackfriars and the survival of so much of Greyfriars.

When New Winchelsea was founded it had been agreed that there should only be a single friary – the Franciscan one. However in 1318 Edward II granted 12 acres (5Ha) in quarter 39 of Winchelsea, not far from the New Gate, and next to the hospitals of the Holy Cross and St Bartholomew to build a house of Black Friars. Apparently few worshipped there and in 1339 licence was given for William Batan of South Iham to grant the friars six acres of land nearer the town. This site appears to have been by the harbour, and less satisfactory than the first! In 1342 they obtained permission to move to yet another part of the town, possibly quarter 6 as they were in danger of being swept away by the sea, but what happened exactly is obscure as in 1358 the king granted them an acre of land near the church of St Giles and allowed them to take over five messuages adjoining this land. In 1372 the king released them from payment of the rent of 5s. 8¾d. (29p) due for the messuages. In

1398 Henry Sucton was appointed for a term of three years as a teacher of philosophy and theology, and had permission to make a pilgrimage to Rome. The prior a few years later may have supported Richard II, as in 1402 Henry IV issued orders to arrest him for high treason. His end was probably very unpleasant, although we have no details. Little more information has been found after this until its final dissolution in July 1538, when the bishop of Dover reported that the house was in ruins and although its furniture had fetched £10, and there was 20s. (£1) rental income, that the property would not bring in 10s. (50p) a year. Overall it seems as if the Dominicans had little effect on the life of the town.

HASTINGS COLLEGIATE CHURCH OF ST MARY IN THE CASTLE

Collegiate Churches were secular and not associated with any particular order. As well as their own devotions they served churches in their neighbourhoods. This collegiate church had a chequered history and many more downs than ups in this history. It was founded in 1090 by Robert, Count of Eu and lord of the Rape of Hastings, and was built within the walls of Hastings castle on a windy sandstone promontory, now called the West Hill, between what is now Hastings old town and the centre of modern Hastings. The somewhat restored ruins of the church can be seen today, but it is difficult to envisage the total setting at its active phase as about 2/3rds of the castle has fallen into the sea secondary to cliff erosion. Its absolute peak was very early when King William II (Rufus) held court there in 1094 as he waited with an army to cross to Normandy. Archbishop Anselm of Canterbury consecrated Robert to be bishop of Lincoln whilst there, and the assembled throng took a day outing to Battle to consecrate the first part of the abbey church at Battle.

Some have claimed that there may have been an earlier collegiate establishment at Hastings, as in trying to prevent a visitation by Bishop of Chichester in 1299 the canons claimed a foundation of Edward the Confessor, and said that William the Conqueror gave 'the castle and chapel with the prebends' directly to the count of Eu. This foundation from the Confessor was not supported. But the king still stopped the bishop from visiting as after Countess Alix of Eu had opted to retain her lands in France over those in England in 1243 and after her death in 1267 the church had passed to the crown and became a royal free chapel, independent and outside of the See of Chichester. This status remained until 1446 when it was granted by Henry VI, along with the Rape of Hastings, to Sir Thomas Hoo. After this it was decreed that the church should be exempt from visitation by the king or any other person except the bishop of Chichester and his official. This arrangement was confirmed, in 1460, by an agreement between Sir William Hastings, then lord of the honour of Hastings, and the bishop, by which the college was declared to be entirely subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop.

Following its foundation ten prebends were established to fund overall functioning and the cannons of the college, and it probably took over the roles of the local minster churches. From about the beginning of the thirteenth century the prebends seem to have been as follows: Bulverhythe, Brightling, Crowhurst (sometimes with Ticehurst); Hollington (with Ewhurst and Bodiam), Marlepast, Peasmarsh, Stone, Thurrock; and the combined prebend of Wartling, Hooe,

and Ninfield which was divided into three separate prebends; finally, there was the prebend of Salehurst, which from 1333 onward was held by the abbot of Robertsbridge. Later these prebends gradually diminished in number.

The overall history of the college is one of inexorable decline as the college fabric and canons' houses deteriorated within a derelict castle. The castle was slighted by King John to prevent it falling into his enemies hands, was raided by the French and robbed by the people of Hastings. It had little function as a redoubt and was under constant attack by nature as the southern face of its cliff fell away. Eventually the canons were the only inhabitants. It survived the dissolution, but was suppressed in the last year of Henry VIII, and was given to Sir Anthony Browne, who already held the Battle abbey and Syon abbey lands. Some collegiate churches evolved into renowned schools or universities, but that was not the case at Hastings. The whole rather sad story is well covered in the VCH Sussex, Volume 2.

THE OTHER ABBEYS

Although eastern Sussex contains the famous Benedictine Battle abbey which had great local influence it cannot be ignored that there were other abbeys in the area. These were Otham abbey, which later moved and merged with another small abbey to become the Premonstratensian Bayham abbey and the Cistercian Robertsbridge abbey.

Otham and Bayham

Otham abbey was tiny and was situated at Otham (also previously known as Hotteham or Oldham), about three miles (five km) west of Pevensey. It was founded by Ralph de Dene (of West Dean) on his own land in about 1180, which he gave to the canons of the Premonstratensian order at St Mary and St Lawrence, the grant suggesting that there was already a small chapel there. The geographic position of Otham was not very good and even now difficult to access after heavy rainfall. After about twenty years proposals were made to the abbey to move. The first site offered was Hellingly, but in about 1205 Sir Robert de Turnham, said to be a favourite of Richard I, decided to found an abbey at Bayham (then called Begham) on the borders of Sussex and Kent, and arranged for a small group of Premonstratensian monks who had settled at Brockley in Kent to move there. To swell the numbers of monks he also obtained the consent of Ela de Sackville, daughter of Ralph de Dene, the patron of Otham, to move the Otham monks as well. After that Otham remained as only a small grange of Bayham Abbey, served by perhaps a couple of monks. In the 'Taxatio Eccesiastica' of 1291 the abbot of Bayham (aka Begenham) is shown as having income of £2 10s 2d (£2.51) for 'Oteham' and Heritage England list a small chapel, built in about 1350 and dedicated to St Lawrence, which originally formed part of Otham Abbey situated on flat ground south of Otham Court Lane, near Polegate. Built of flint and greensand with greensand dressings and repairs patched in red brick it is a small building, aisle less in plan and 10m long by 7m wide with a slate roof on old oak timbers.

So Jordan, the abbot of Otham, actually became the first abbot of Bayham, and building started after 1199 or more likely sometime 1207-1210 when king John was finally bribed with 'two horses of price' to confirm all the various grants involved. Apparently building progress was slow and was still ongoing in 1234, but was probably nearly finished. The abbey is built of local sandstone. Over the next years considerable numbers of further grants were made to Bayham, so it was financially well provided for, but monastically it did not receive many enthusiastic visitations (inspections from the local diocese) and seemed to have more than its share of naughty monks. There also seemed to be a rapid turnover of monks in residence, but there is some suggestion that it may have been normal in the Premonstratensian order to move monks around between establishments. The abbey church was extended in the late 13th century, and a gatehouse was added in the 14th. Bayham had royal visits on at least two occasions: in 1299 by Edward I and in 1322 when Edward II stayed overnight on his way to Battle Abbey.

Bayham did not last to the dissolution of the monasteries. It was dissolved in 1524 by Cardinal Wolsey along with 39 other 'minor' houses, to provide funds for Wolsey to found new colleges at Oxford (Cardinal, to become Kings then later Christ Church college) and in his home town of Ipswich. At that time the abbey income was reckoned to be £152 9s. 4½d. (£152.47). The monks and local people resisted and there were protests before Wolsey prevailed. This suggests that the abbey was well regarded locally and would of course been a source of employment. When Wolsey fell from power in 1529 the abbey reverted to the crown, but the little chapel at Otham may have continued for another 20 years or so as a parish church.

The buildings were largely destroyed after 1547. Today the abbey ruins are enclosed by a moat on three sides, with on the west side a bank and ditch. Only parts of the monastic buildings survive. The best-preserved feature is the south wall of the church nave, with three large arched windows, braced by thick buttresses. Also parts of numerous outbuildings survive, including the bakehouse, mill, brewhouse, stables, stores, and barns. There is a detailed history of the abbey by G M Cooper published in 1857.

Robertsbridge

John, Count of Eu, and lord of the Rape of Hastings retired to the abbey of Foucarmont and died there in 1170. He had married Alix d'Aubigny who was daughter of William d'Aubigny, Earl of Arundel and Alix de Louvain, Dowager Queen of England, the widow of Henry I. After John's death she married Alured de St. Martin, and he and Alix are jointly credited with founding Robertsbridge Abbey of St. Mary of the Cistercian order in 1176. To support the abbey Alured also gave some estates in Ewhurst, Sedlescombe and Pett Level and others all previously held of Geoffrey de St Martin and his heirs. There is some indication that the St Martin family may have been planning this move and accumulating the assets to do so since 1161. A relative, possibly also involved with the foundation of the abbey, Robert de St Martin, may have built the first bridge over the Rother, which Mawer and Stenton accept probably led to the future settlement of Robertsbridge's name.

Alured de St Martin had been one of John of Eu's knights, but by 1176 he was also sheriff of Sussex and a steward (dapifer) to Richard I. Alured had witnessed the Treaty of Falaise made at Falaise castle between the captive King William I of Scotland and Henry II in December 1174. William I had been captured at the Battle of Alnwick during an invasion of Northumbria and was being held at Falaise whilst Henry sent an army north and took several Scottish castles, including Berwick and Edinburgh.

The original location of the abbey was in the vill of Salehurst, and the first abbot recorded was called Denis. A later charter of 1314 describes a chapel (dedicated to the Trinity, Holy Cross, St. Mary and St John the Evangelist) in Salehurst as being 'on the spot where the Abbey was originally founded'. The community was able to increase its land-holdings, but just as now there was periodic flooding in the Rother valley which has been put forward as the reason for moving to a new site. So some time during the thirteenth century, about 1250, the abbey did move to a new site on the south side of the River Rother, 1.4 km from the centre of Robertsbridge. Harris has pointed out that the new site was only 10m above mean sea level, whereas the old was 20m above mean sea level and which suggests that flooding was not the issue and suggests that the re-siting was more likely to be to obtain a better water supply and/or that it was a better site for enlargement due to generous bequests. Indeed the abbey expanded and later purchased more land at Playden and Bexhill from the Abbey of Tréport and also obtained the advowsons of Salehurst, Udimore and Mountfield. They were often at odds with their neighbours about land ownership as evidenced by a large trail of charters.

In 1192 abbot Denis of Robertsbridge was sent together with the abbot of Boxley to search for King Richard who had been captured and was being held for ransom on his way back from the Holy Land. It may have been the connection with the royal family by the abbey's founder that led to the choice of the abbot for this task. Having found him, the abbots were sent back to England with the details of a deal which had been done with Richard's 'keeper', which was for a huge ransom of

150,000 marks (£100,000). In modern terms this may equate to 30 billion pounds! After Richard initially returned to England he crossed to France and never returned and when besieging the castle of Châlus in central France he was fatally wounded by a crossbow bolt, dying of gangrene on 6 April 1199, at Chinon, close to his burial place at Fontevrauld abbey.

Richard I's tomb at Fontevrault Abbey (photo © Keith Foord

In 1212 the abbot of Robertsbridge was again sent abroad, this time by king John as the king's messenger, and then in late 1222 he was once more sent as a messenger for the young Henry III, possibly to the pope, with a letter of protection, and then once again in 1225. Henry III's letters may have been related to the king's struggles with Magna Carta which was being revised between 1217 and 1225. The last letter may or may not have been transmitted to the abbot when Henry visited as below.

Early in 1225 Henry III visited the Cinque Ports, as a threat had been received that the dauphin Louis of France was thinking of invading again. Henry's visit was to organise the naval defences, get the Cinque Ports 'onside', and to ask for advice to be given to a great council which was convened for February. On the Patent Rolls are documents issued by Henry III to all the Cinque Ports when at Romney on 13 January 1225, and some more specific entries were made at Winchelsea on 19 January, at Rye on 20 January, at Battle on 24 January, at Robertsbridge on 25 January and another was issued to the abbot of Battle just after this, from Westminster, dated 7 February 1225. The Robertsbridge entry was a grant to the abbot of Robertsbridge of a weekly Friday market and an annual three-day fair in August. Within three weeks the grant was cancelled, apparently due to the commercial threat to existing markets in the area. In 1253, after waiting 28 years, the abbot of Robertsbridge was once again granted a weekly Monday market and an annual fair on September 14th. William of Etchingham had been granted a Wednesday market at Salehurst five months earlier.

Robertsbridge did not exist when the abbey was founded but was developed after 1220 possibly as a new settlement encouraged by the abbot, who in around 1250-60 developed his own hundred of Robertsbridge and created the posts of constable, ale-conner and street-driver. A rental probably of the late 13th or early 14th century includes several tenants, and Robertsbridge market became a significant centre for trading and manufacturing by about 1300, possibly at the expense of Salehurst market.

By 1264 Henry III was en route to Lewes to fight his barons Henry. He had decided to focus his forces where they would have the support of the local lords, and for this purpose Sussex appeared (to him) a good choice. Lewes castle was in the hands of the king's brother-in-law John de Warenne, Pevensey and Hastings were held by his uncle Peter of Savoy, and William de Braose of Bramber and John Fitz-Alan of Arundel had both proved their loyalty in the defence of Rochester Castle. In early May Henry's army moved southwards from Tonbridge, having taken Tonbridge castle from the earl of Gloucester on 30 April with the aim of securing the Cinque Ports and the south coast. En route they encountered an affray at Combwell on 2 May and one of the king's cooks, 'Master Thomas' is reported to have been murdered. The reprisal was an unusually severe act of terror even for its time. Carpenter says, '*315 archers were beheaded in the Weald in the parish of St Mary, Ticehurst, in the place called Flimwell in the presence of the king, all of whom had been called deceitfully to the king's peace only to then incur that death through the counsel of Richard king of Germany.* 'Moving on to Robertsbridge abbey, Henry, his son the Lord Edward and company were entertained, but obliged the monks to pay a heavy ransom of 500 marks (£333) to prince Edward to spare their lives. The next day they moved on to Battle where abbot Reginald of Brecknock and the brothers of Battle abbey went out in procession to meet the king and give him a loyal welcome, but Henry was still angry and demanded 100 marks (£66.67) from the abbey as he said that some of its tenants had been at Combwell, near Ticehurst. Prince Edward demanded another 40 marks (£26.67). In addition some damage was inflicted on the abbey's goods.

Compared to Robertsbridge they got off relatively lightly. Henry III went on to defeat at Lewes but was briefly incarcerated at Battle abbey by the barons before being moved on.

After he became King Edward I undertook a visit to his fleet late in 1295 and stayed at Udimore and Winchelsea. After 22 November he left Winchelsea and then travelled on to Robertsbridge the same day, after which he returned to London. We can only wonder what the monks thought of this visit, given the forced extortion of his last!

Of interest is the Robertsbridge Codex (abt.1360) which is a 14th century musical manuscript. It contains the earliest surviving music written specifically for keyboard. It was discovered in a bundle with an old register from the Robertsbridge abbey at Penshurst Place in Tonbridge in the mid-19th century. Originally it was thought to be from about 1325, but later about 1360 was thought more likely. It contains six pieces, three of them in the form of the 'estampie', an Italian dance form from the Italian 14th century, as well as three arrangements of motets. Two of the motets are from the Roman de Fauvel. This is a musical form of a French poem by Gervais du Bus that is important in musical history. This poem satirizes social corruption in political and religious life. Its hero is a fawn-(French: fauve) coloured ass called 'Fauvel', the letters of whose name were taken from the first letters of the French words 'Flatérie, Avarice, Vilanie (depravity), Variété (fickleness), Envie, and Lascheté (cowardice)'. In Parrish we are told that all of the music is anonymous, and is written in

tablature. Most of the music for the 'estampies' is for two voices, often in parallel fifths, and also using hocket technique The source is probably English.

Folio 44r from the Robertsbridge Codex
from BL Add. Ms.28550: See –
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Robertsbridgecodex_fol44r.jpg

Robertsbridge abbey seems to have faded towards the end of the fourteenth century. In the 15th century a general Royal Charter dated 14 July 1437 was received: *'granted at the request of the communities of the kingdom made in the last Parliament, and with the assent of the lords spiritual and temporal in the same Parliament assembled, pardoning the Abbat and convent for all kinds of transgressions and offences committed before 2 Sep: 10 H. 6; and for all alienations, donations, and purchases made - by them of lands and tenements held of him or any of his progenitors. Kings of*

England, in capite, and all alienations and purchases in mortmain made without license ; remitting all fines and amerciaments, reliefs and scutages, and all demands he had against them before the day of his coronation, and all securities for peace ; pardoning offences against the statute in receiving papal bulls, and releasing to them all jewels which had been deposited with them as security for war-loans, and for the expenses of the passage of the late King to the vill of Harfleure and parts of France and Normandy, unless the same be redeemed within a year of the 7th of March last ; but upon this condition that the Abbat shall not put forward any further demands in respect of the late King's wars and journeys over and above what may be due to him for custody of the castle and vill of Calais, and the marches there in the late King's time. Tested at Westminster 17 July, 15 H,6'. In 1437 Henry VI became 16 and assumed the reins of government from a king's council. This charter may be related this this fact and the costs of the ongoing war with France.

It is notable that Robertsbridge Abbey did not support the Cade Rebellion and that the abbey fair had been the subject of an attack by Cade's supporters in 1449. This suggests that the abbey was not very supportive of its community at that time. Battle's abbot and his abbey did support Cade as did Lewes priory, and afterwards both received Royal pardons.

At its Dissolution in April 1538 the net annual income of the abbey was £248 and there were twelve monks. The site was acquired by Sir William Sidney of Penshurst, Kent and the remains of the abbey were later incorporated into Abbey Farm. The remains include a rectangular stone south range, incorporating the Refectory or Frater. This features a pointed recess and three round-headed windows. At the east end of the range is what is thought to be the calefactory or warm room and a 14th century vaulted passage. To the west is the abbot's house with a medieval undercroft dating from about 1250, incorporated into a Grade I listed residence. A good general history of Robertsbridge Abbey is given in VCH Sussex Vol.2. There is no modern definitive history about Robertsbridge although there are several websites which give very useful information, mostly focussed on the abbey. The most comprehensive article about Robertsbridge abbey is probably G M Cooper's 'Notices of Robertsbridge Abbey' in the Sussex Archæological Collections. A small more general history of Robertsbridge and Salehurst parish was written by J J Piper and published in 1906.

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