



## News and events

- While we are unable to arrange our usual programme of talks, many local and national organisations are offering online talks and webinars. Some of these are listed on our website [www.wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk/history-society-events.asp](http://www.wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk/history-society-events.asp)

## Notes and queries

### St. Helen's revealed

A fascinating new paper entitled '*St Helen, Wheathampstead: the Saxo-Norman cruciform church*' by Daniel Secker has thrown new light on the early history of St. Helen's church.

Much of the current fabric of the church dates back to between 1290 and 1340 and replaced an earlier church about which we know very little. Late Saxon burials were found in the graveyard close to the north wall in the 1970s, suggesting the existence of a church dating from the tenth century or even before, probably constructed of wood. Another clue, clearly visible today, is the blocked doorway on the outer wall of the south transept. This doorway is in the Anglo-Saxon 'Romanesque' style and may be part of an earlier stone church. The floor of the chancel was taken up during restoration work in the nineteenth century, revealing the foundations of a half-round apsidal end and suggesting that the chancel of the earlier church was half the length of today's chancel.



St. Helen's church, shortly before the restoration in 1866

Who owned that early church? The transfer document by which Edward the Confessor gave the manor of Wheathampstead to Westminster Abbey in 1060 does not mention it. Secker suggests that this was because it was already in

the possession of Westminster Abbey and that they were given the manor so that they could build a new church. The church they built seems to confirm this because it was a cruciform design with an apsidal east end, an unusual church design in England at the time and a smaller version of Westminster Abbey.

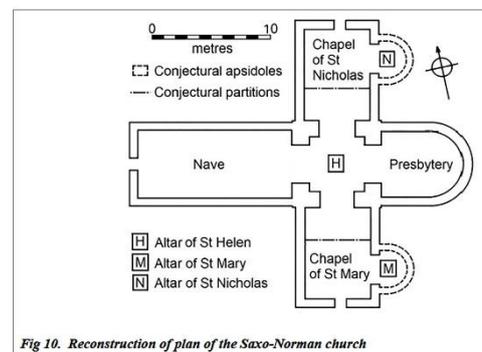


Fig 10. Reconstruction of plan of the Saxo-Norman church

Secker's reconstruction of the floor plan of the eleventh century church

Secker speculates that the reason for having such a splendid building was because St Helen's was a small minster church, providing outreach for the other six manors that Westminster held in Hertfordshire. Later, possibly in the twelfth century, the ownership of St. Helen's transferred to the Diocese of Lincoln who were responsible for rebuilding the church we have today.

Secker suggests that many of the features in today's church, particularly the massive lower section of the tower, support the idea that the new St. Helen's of the late thirteenth century was built around the structure of its eleventh century predecessor. He also suggests that the arch of the blocked-off 'Romanesque' doorway is Reigate stone, an unusual material. The earliest use of Reigate stone was at Westminster Abbey in the 1050s and Secker asks the intriguing question 'Was this material left over from the building of Westminster Abbey?'

Mike Smith

Secker's article is now on the 'Sources' page of our website.