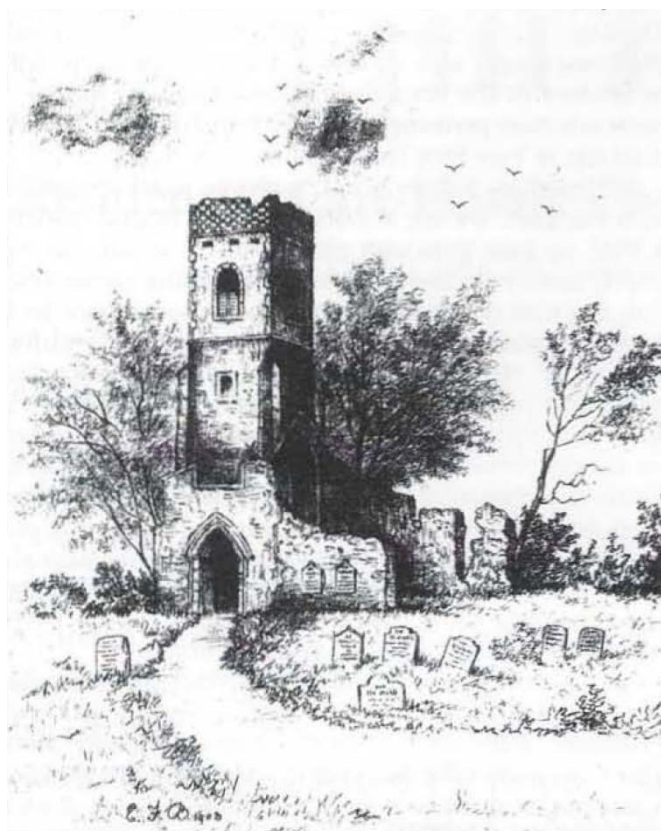


Why Reepham?

Wesley Piercy

One of the older and better known Reepham residents is Wesley Piercy. Now in his eighties, he has lived all his life in Reepham and has always taken an intense interest in the history of the town. He completed the local history course run here by Chris Barringer in the 1970s and, later, went on to receive an Open University degree. While completing his history course he wrote this speculation on the origins of Reepham. Why does Reepham stand where it does? Why is it so different from the surrounding parishes? Perhaps most puzzling of all, why did its churchyard contain three churches, now reduced by fire to two. Read on if you want to know some very believable theories of the origins of this town.

“Reepham is a small market town which extends into four parishes.” So says the White’s Norfolk Directory of 1845. Why these four parishes, Reepham St Mary, Kerdiston, Hackford and Whitwell, should collectively be known as Reepham when Reepham St Mary is the smallest and least important is a puzzle. People are puzzled, too, by the fact that three of these parishes had churches in the same churchyard, which is said to be unique. This paper is an attempt to give possible answers to some of these questions.



Reproduction drawing of All Saints Church, Hackford, made in 1784 before most of the ruins were pulled down. All that now remains is a fragment of one wall.

If one looks at the district, either on a map or on the ground, the four parishes, with the addition of Salle, form a compact whole with boundaries following streams for most of the way. Salle has to be included as the boundary with Reepham is so complicated that it seems that they must originally have been one. It seems possible that these parishes formed one large pre-Conquest estate. This, I suggest, would have been called Reepham. The Anglo-Saxon "ham" ending is generally thought to be earlier than "ton" and other suffixes.

The question then arises as to where the original settlement was likely to have been. This, I suggest, was somewhere in the vicinity of the market place and churches. If we try to put ourselves in the minds of a party of immigrant farmers looking for a place to settle, this area seems to be the one they would be most likely to pick for the following reasons:

1. It is high enough and far enough from the River Eyn (Booton Beck) to be in no danger of flooding and yet is not so exposed to the wind as other parts of the parish.
2. With an underground stream running through, it is easy to sink wells to give an adequate water supply, wells being the only water supply until very recently.
3. The soil in this area is a good medium loam, easily worked and well drained, with a sandy subsoil under much of it, whereas much of the outer area is stiff clay. A good deal of this land was grazing land and was not ploughed until very recent times.

It can only be surmised where these early settlers came from. Had they come directly from the continent or from a previously settled part of Norfolk? If the former is correct, it is possible that they landed at Caister-by-Yarmouth and followed the Roman road that led inland from Caister and crossed the Eyn at some point in the Reepham area before continuing on towards Bawdeswell. If this were so, they would have passed through many miles of heath and woodland with very poor soil. The same applies if they came from the Norwich direction where much of the ground between Norwich and Reepham grew nothing but bracken until a few years ago. For people approaching from either of these directions, the fertile valley of the River Eyn would have appeared very attractive.

If, as we suppose, Reepham was an early Anglo-Saxon settlement, the original inhabitants would have been pagans. Though no pagan cemetery has been found, it

seems possible that the present churches stand on what was originally a site of pagan worship.¹

This we can only surmise but the site does appear to be very old if the height of the churchyard, several feet above the roadway, is anything to go by. It is a fact that when sewer pipes were laid in Church Street a great many human bones, apparently very old and crumbling, were dug up. This seems to indicate that the original churchyard was much larger than now and that the churchyard was originally on the level of the street.

If this is so, it may be supposed that the early burial ground must have been associated with a church. That would mean that there was a church on the site at a very early period, any remains of which would be many feet below the present churches. Who knows what might be found if they could be excavated. The floor levels of the existing churches, being only a little below the level of the churchyard, seem to indicate that the churchyard was a considerable height above the street level even in the fourteenth century. These must be indicators of a very ancient site.²

This was the opinion of the late Rev. H.G.B. Follard, Rector of Bawdeswell and Foxley, who had studied Norfolk churches for many years. A similar situation was discovered at Bawdeswell during the building of the present church there. The previous church was destroyed during the last war when an aeroplane crashed onto it. Under the foundations of the old church were found the base of a Norman tower of flint and the foundations of the body of the church which was apparently built of timber or wattle and daub. There would have been plenty of timber available which, being less durable than flint, may explain why so few Saxon churches remain in Norfolk. The first church in Reepham, then, was probably also of timber and not replaced until, perhaps, the thirteenth century.

This does not, however, explain why there came to be three medieval churches in one churchyard. If, as was suggested above, Reepham was a large Anglo-Saxon estate consisting of the four parishes of present-day Reepham and Salle, and the original settlement was in the present church and market area, it is possible that the other parishes were off-shoots of Reepham. This may explain why four or five

¹ With the development of metal detectors and increasing interest in historical research, further evidence is slowly emerging of early settlements in and around the Reepham area. [Ed.]

² It is interesting to note also that instead of stepping up into the chancel of St Mary's there is a step down to a lower level. Was this the original site of a church?

parishes are still collectively known as Reepham. Reepham itself was known as Reepham St Mary with Kerdiston. If these names came into general use for the separate manors, as in similar cases elsewhere in the county, it would be simpler to explain why they are still, and apparently always have been, called Reepham.

Salle, of course, is not called Reepham. If, as suggested, it was part of an original large estate, it may have become a separate parish with its own church at an early date. Hackford and Whitwell, which could have become Reepham All Saints and Reepham St Michael's, but did not, evidently take their names from topographical features.

In the case of Hackford (the ford at the bend), it must be from the ford in Hackford Vale where the bridge now is. This is also the only ford in Hackford. It may seem logical to suppose, then, that this was the original settlement in Hackford. There is another small hamlet in Hackford which is known as Pettywell, another name from a physical feature. This is probably a later date than Hackford, otherwise this could have been the name for the parish.³ However, Hackford extends into the town itself and includes the whole of the Market Place which must have been part of the original settlement of Reepham. There do seem to be some good grounds for assuming that these settlements were extensions of Reepham by people seeking new land as the population grew.⁴

For Whitwell, the details are rather similar to Hackford. It joins Reepham and Hackford near the churches. The parish boundaries have been arranged so that they meet at a point in the churchyard with each church standing in its own parish. The former Duke of York public house is said to stand in all three parishes. Bar Lane, the former Gracious Street, leads from the church into Whitwell parish. Whitwell Street could be the original Whitwell settlement but a more likely spot seems to be near Whitwell Hall where excavations have revealed traces of an ancient settlement. There is another group of houses on Whitwell Common and the White House, though now showing a Georgian façade, has been identified as on the site of an older manor house. Another small settlement on the outskirts of the parish, Jordan's Green, was probably fairly late as it has grown up on very stiff clay.

³ Apparently, the original name was Petter's Well which seems to include a name, perhaps of the owner.

⁴ We should not forget, however, that there is also a suggestion that Reepham Moor was the site of the original settlement which could offer another explanation for the development of the town.

Kerdiston appears to have had two centres, one connected with the “Giant’s Moat” near the Old Hall and one with Kerdiston House, a farmhouse now demolished at the other end of the parish. The population was, apparently, never very large and there was never a public house or shop, though there was a blacksmith within the last 50 years and, formerly, a brick and tile works. Much of the parish, it seems was wooded until fairly late. The last remnant of ancient forest, the 26 acres of Haw Wood, was only cleared and ploughed after the Second World War. Much of Kerdiston is also heavy clay and a good proportion of the present arable was grazing ground until the 1940s.

The question remains, why three churches? And stranger, why are they all in the same churchyard? The old story of three warring sisters is nothing but a legend though it may contain a grain of truth. It is natural, when the original manor split, that each lord should wish to have a church on his manor or estate. Unless some pre-Conquest documentary evidence turns up, we shall never know the truth. If, as seems likely, there was already a church on what may have been an ancient sacred site, what can be more likely than that all the daughter settlements should wish to worship on the same site as their forefathers, and be buried there, leaving us with the puzzle of our three churches.



View across the moat into the Kerdiston moated site known locally as the Giant’s Moat. The moat itself is now surrounded by trees, but the remains of an old well can be seen inside the moat.

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