VISIT TO SELLING, SHELDWICH AND CHALLOCK

Nearly 50 members visited these three churches south of Faversham on a slightly overcast afternoon on Wednesday 10 September. The visit had been arranged and was led by Amicia Oldfield. Tea was provided at Challock church.

St Mary, Selling is a cruciform church with a crossing tower. Crossing towers in parish churches are unusual in Kent (Ashford, Adisham, Northbourne and Horton Kirby are four others).

The church was built in the late 12th century: the chancel and chapels, crossing tower and transepts, together with the west doorway, are all of this date, though with some later modifications. The nave was rebuilt in about 1300 and remodelled in the following century. The south porch was also built then. The whole church was fiercely restored in the 1840s, like others in north Kent, by R C Hussey.

Selling church seen from the east

The details of the chancel and chapels are worth attention. The north chapel is much narrower than the south. Both arcades are of about 1190 and are very similar to contemporary work at Canterbury. The splendidly carved capital of the column in the

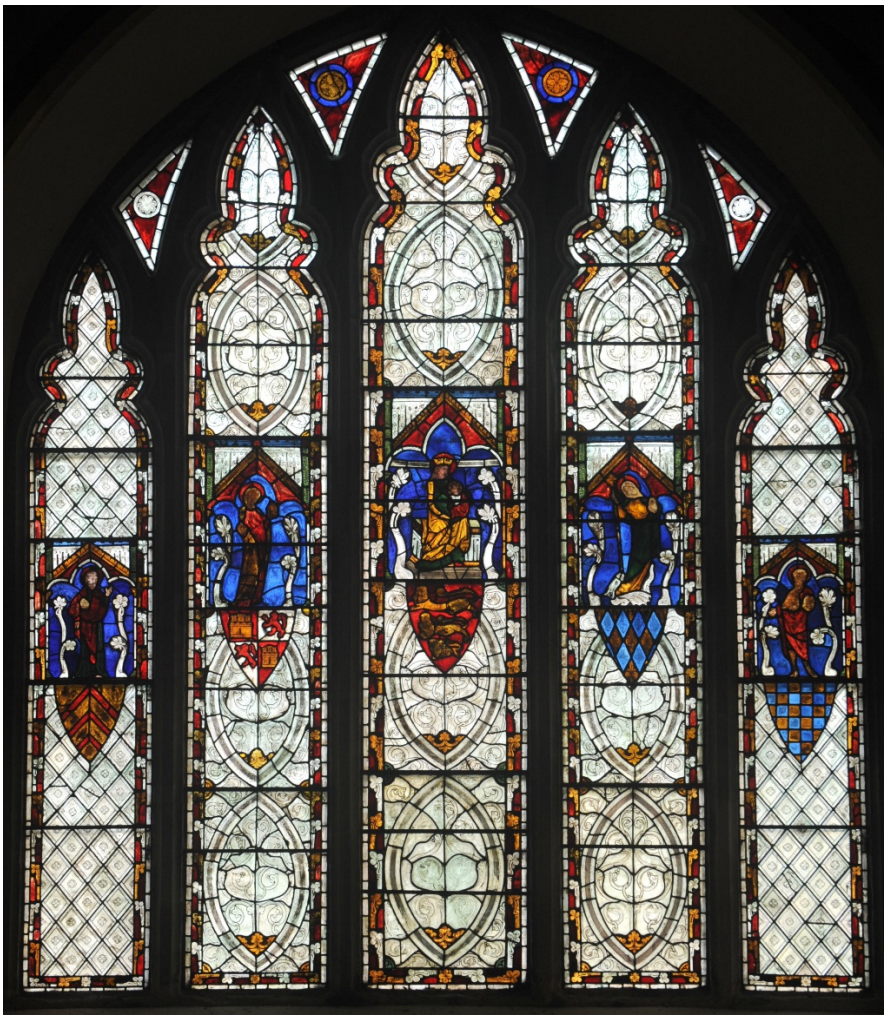
chancel south arcade should be particularly noted. The windows here and in the transepts are all tall lancets.

Selling; Romanesque capital in chancel

Selling: interior of the nave looking east

The nave is a noble space on account of its very lofty arcades with octagonal columns and double chamfered arches. The east and west arches of the crossing were rebuilt at the same time. There is a good crown post roof of standard Kent type in the nave. The nave was modernised in the 15th century with new windows and battlements outside. The tower was probably remodelled at the same time with new bell-openings.

The fittings are mostly Victorian and not specially interesting. But the stained glass and wall paintings are remarkable. A new east window was inserted in about 1320. Its contemporary glazing is complete. It is thought to commemorate Gilbert de Clare, killed at Bannockburn in 1314 and was probably erected by his executor, Bartholomew Badlesmere of Chilham Castle. The de Clares were one of the foremost aristocratic families of early medieval England. Descended from Richard of Tonbridge, they had enormous estates in Kent, Suffolk and south Wales. They held the earldoms of Hertford and Pembroke, built Tonbridge and Caerphilly Castles, the latter one of the largest in the British Isles, and founded Clare College, Cambridge. Gilbert was the last of the male line. His arms are in the left-hand light of the window. The Royal Arms in their early 14th century form (three lions passant gardant) are in the centre light.



Selling: east window

Selling: detail of the east window including the Arms of Clare

The wall-paintings in the reveals of the south transept windows are also worth a close look. They must be contemporary with the east window. Note too the masonry patterns painted above the north chancel arcade: the internal walls of 12th century churches were often painted like this.

As so often in Kent the core of **St James, Sheldwich** is Norman: see the simple, round-headed south doorway, one blocked south window at the nave west end and remains of another in the north nave wall. In the early 14th century a new aisle was added on the north side of the nave and the chancel was rebuilt, with a north chapel. The south chapel was added in the 16th century. The tower is also late medieval, nicely detailed but less impressive than other contemporary Kent towers nearby such as Charing, Egerton and Harrietsham.

The most remarkable feature of the church is the triangular window high in the east gable of the nave. It has flowing tracery of the early 14th century and was blocked and rediscovered in the 19th century. Its shape is unique in Kent and perhaps in England as a whole.

In the nave there is a good crown-post roof, again of the standard Kentish pattern, and in the chancel a roof of low pitch. Both are late medieval.

Sheldwich: the exterior from the south-west

Sheldwich: interior looking east

There was a heavy restoration by St Aubyn in 1888 in which he rebuilt the nave aisle on a larger scale and with a new arcade (but reusing some of the 14th century windows), rebuilt the chancel arch and the south chapel and inserted a new east window. St Aubyn's contributions mostly reflect his own designs and do not reflect what was there before. He was not a sensitive restorer.

There is some good Victorian stained glass by leading makers, the best the east window in that north aisle depicting sowing and reaping, by Heaton, Butler and Bayne. Lastly there are two fine brasses in the north chapel and a most unusual half-figure of a lady, in a shroud and holding her heart, in the chancel floor. Her name was Joan Mareys and she died in 1431.

The dedication of **St Cosmas & St Damian, Challock** is unusual, but not unique. The two saints were martyrs of the early church in Syria. Their legend is that they were doctors who ministered to Christians and were martyred on that account. They are the patron saints of physicians.

The church is a good example of that Kentish phenomenon, a church which is remote from its village. It became the parish church only in 1871, having previously been a chapel of ease (in the parish of Charing, presumably).

The building was badly bombed in 1944. Both nave arcades collapsed in 1947. Restoration began only in 1950 under an architect named Harrison from Ashford and work proceeded slowly, finishing only in 1958. It was extremely well done, so that one would not know that the building had been wrecked.

There is no evidence in the fabric earlier than the 13th century. The chancel must be of that date (see the lancet in the south wall) and the nave arcades also seem to have been of the 13th century to judge from the half-round column at the west end of the south arcade but the evidence is clouded by the post-war reconstruction. To judge from the window tracery, the nave north aisle seems to be 14th century and the south aisle 15th century. The tower must also be 15th or early 16th century. Apparently, it has a medieval fireplace in an upper chamber which may have been used as accommodation for the priest. A bequest was made for the east window of the chancel in 1500.

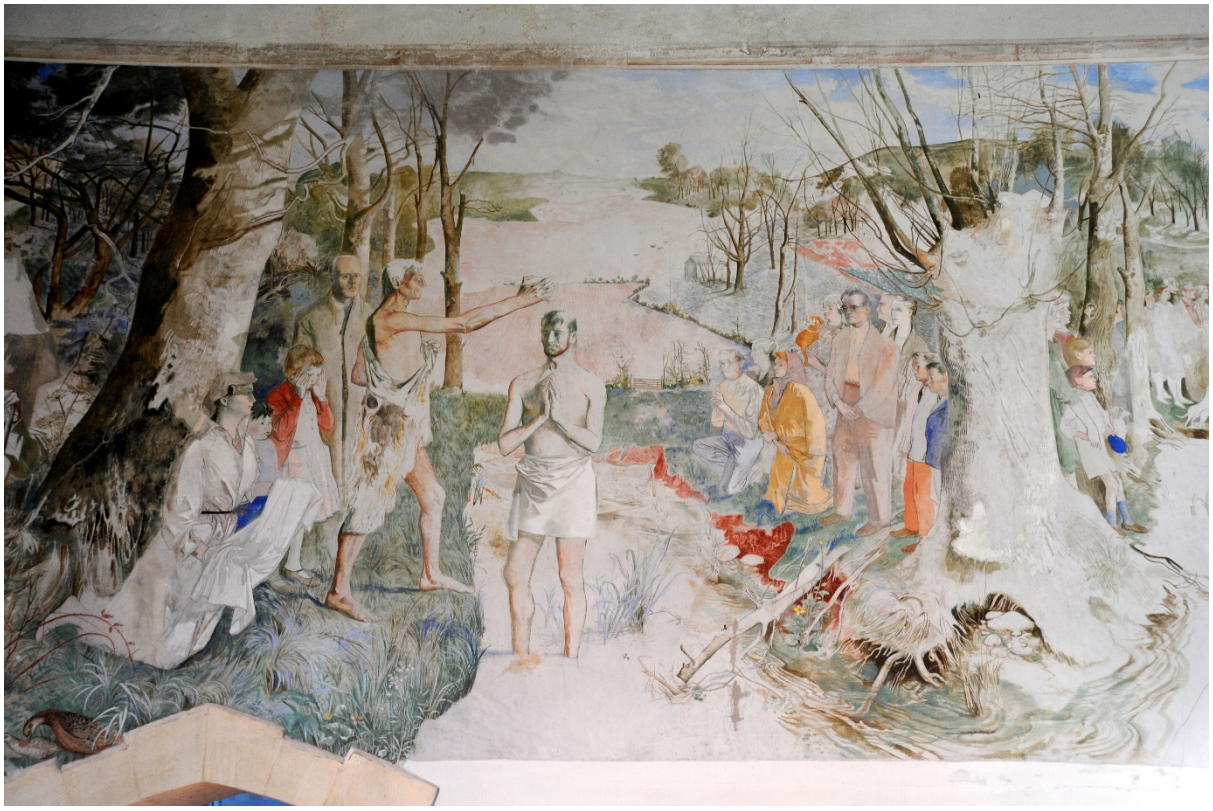
Challock: the west face of the tower

Challock: the interior of the nave looking south-west

As for fittings, the west screen of the north chapel was part of the late medieval rood screen; the tower screen is of the same date, as are the tower doors. The elaborate chancel screen is, of course, 19th century and came from Eastwell church. The font and eagle lectern are also Victorian. The wooden beam across the north chapel is of uncertain purpose. It may have supported candles, or statues related to the dedication of the north chapel altar; or it may have been used to support the Lenten veil. It may, of course, have served all three of these purposes.

Challock: the north chapel, showing the beam which may have supported statues, candles or the Lenten veil (or all three)

The chancel wall paintings are by John Ward RA (1955); those in the north chapel are by Rosemary Aldridge and Doreen Lister (1953); and those in the nave north aisle by John Ward and Gordon Davies (2000). John Newman calls them “Christmas-cardy”!



Challock: wall painting of the Baptism of Christ by John Ward RA