

## TOWER-NAVES AND *BURH-GEATS*: ST MARY'S CHURCH, GUILDFORD, REVISITED

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### *Introduction*

'It all depends on what you mean by...'

*C E M Joad, BBC Brains Trust 1940–48*

Dennis Turner's essay<sup>1</sup> has led me to review my suggestion that St Mary's church tower in Guildford was a *burh-geat*.<sup>2</sup> We had a very brief exchange on this before his untimely death. Dennis had intended to contact Michael Shapland, whose thesis on tower-naves included a detailed survey of St Mary's.<sup>3</sup> Might it have been both? Here is a fresh structured review of the evidence, particularly the terminology, following Turner's questions.

### *Six Questions*

I keep six honest serving-men  
(They taught me all I knew);  
Their names are What and Why and When  
and How and Where and Who.

Rudyard Kipling, *Just So stories for little children: The Elephant's Child*

### **Where?**

National Grid Reference SU 997493. Guildford is the county town of Surrey, midway between London and Portsmouth. St Mary's church stands just east of and above the river Wey, 100 metres south of the High Street. Immediately to the east of the church is Quarry Street. Dennis Turner suggested [§35] that Quarry Street may once have passed west of the church, but was re-routed because of cliff falls. However, there was ample space for a road passing east of St Mary's tower before the present chancel was added.

### **What?**

The almost-square tower of St Mary's church is now central, enmeshed between nave, chancel and transepts. Its top has been altered; a photograph of about 1860<sup>4</sup> shows coursed rubble and some ashlar with marked erosion of the angle quoins above the tops of the pilaster buttresses, also seen on a photograph of about 1920 taken from the opposite direction [§2]. The bells were silent between 1901 and 1951, as the tower was considered unsafe.<sup>5</sup> The double-splayed openings would have let daylight directly into the ground floor of a free-standing tower. One such opening perches on top of a large round-headed arch into the north transept, but the south one is off-centre, perhaps because of an earlier doorway (and door) here. Plaster coating of the walls inside the church covers the details of the masonry there. An early religious function is indicated by the painted lettering *ABRAHAM* on an inner splay of the south opening.<sup>6</sup> Fifty people might have squeezed into St Mary's tower, but certainly not Guildford's 175+ adult men (let alone their families) in 1086 [§§15. 34].<sup>7</sup>

Moving from *form* to *function* [§7], we go from fact towards hypothesis. Was St Mary's originally a tower-nave church, a building whose major interior space was the ground floor of a tower with only a small

eastern annexe, the 'nave' and 'chancel' of a 'lordly' private chapel, not those of a 'congregational' public church [§10]? The abutments of the present chancel suggest an earlier, smaller, one: the south wall of the chancel is not aligned with that of the tower: they meet almost corner to corner, while the north-western rib of the chancel vault springs from a corbel above a cut-back pilaster. Tower-naves could have functioned as watch-towers and muster-points also, and may have been residential from the outset [§§14, 16].

*Pace* Dennis Turner [§31], Domesday Book called Guildford a *villa*, not a *burh* or *burgus*; the latter term is first used about Guildford in an *auxilio burgi* payment entered in the first surviving Exchequer Pipe Roll (1129–30) and the 'king's burgesses of Guildford' were addressed in a writ of about the same year.<sup>8</sup> *Burh* is an Old English word, which may have different meanings according to context, but always of some sort of ditched enclosure.<sup>9</sup> (*Editor's note: by the second quarter of the twelfth century, however, the above-mentioned documentary sources show this sense of enclosure and/or fortification was overshadowed by its primarily urban connotation, whence Modern English borough.*)

Two sorts of *burh* can be identified at Guildford [§§20, 32]:<sup>10</sup>

- the large 'public/commercial' late Saxon rectangular planned town, extending about 100m to either side of the High Street (North Street/Sydenham Road), from the river bridge to just beyond Holy Trinity churchyard.
- the small 'private/high-status/thegny' enclosure occupying the south-west corner around St Mary's church, interrupting the grid-plan and so suggesting a different origin. The *Victoria County History of Surrey* recorded 'a very ancient thick clunch wall, with a well on the south side, running about 30 yards south of the High Street and nearly parallel to it' and had independently suggested an enclosure around St Mary's church.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike 'tower-nave', the expression *burh-geat* is not descriptive. (*Editor's note: a literal translation of the Old English would be "stronghold-gate".*) The 'Promotion Law' [§§12, 13, 18–20] and other texts suggest that it could mean a fortified residence, not just a gateway.<sup>12</sup> *Burh-geat* and *bellhus* have the same root meaning of security/protection.<sup>13</sup> A belfry could be just one dual-function (warning/summoning) of a *burh-geat* tower and not be a separate structure. The idea of surviving *burh-geatas* stemmed from Courtenay Raleigh Radford's short note on the tower of Earls Barton church.<sup>14</sup> Speaking of the same tower, Gerard Baldwin Brown had previously referred to 'those enigmatical doorways apparently leading no whither',<sup>15</sup> and Dennis Turner pointed to the largest upper opening in the south wall as a possible 'appearance door' [§§22, 23, 25 last paragraph]. I prefer to call them 'large upper openings' (LUO for short) since they are not doors, many could not have been doorways and uses other than appearance are likely.

Discussing a four-storey tower shown in the Bayeux Tapestry, I had suggested that LUO were **the** diagnostic feature of a *burh-geat* [§22].<sup>16</sup> By 'large' I meant 'in which an adult could stand upright'. Such openings have been interpreted as *entrances*, reached by (very long) external ladders or stairs, but they could have been used far more conveniently as *exits*, either on to an external gallery or as a frame, to display relics or persons. The classic example in England is St Leonard's Tower at West Malling (Kent), where each face of the second storey has at least one opening 2.4m x 1.2m, and there are traces of others above.<sup>17</sup> The *geat*/gate archway at ground level might be either *through* or *adjacent to* the tower.

I admit that the evidence for St Mary, Guildford's tower being a *burh-geat* (on my definition) is slight. Dr Shapland's detailed drawings of the tower mark blocked openings high up on the exterior of each wall. These were quite narrow, like others in the tower, but true LUO may be evidenced by:

- a crude capital, parts of a jamb and of a wide blocked arch showing through the plaster in the west wall of the ringing chamber. There is disturbed masonry on the exterior of the wall here and only two pilasters (rather than the four on the other sides).
- at the level of the bell-frame above, four of the openings (facing east, north or south) each have a large round-headed rear-arch. Dr Shapland suggests that they were Norman adaptations of the tower as a belfry, but they are large enough to have been originally 'appearance openings'.<sup>18</sup>

By '*burh-geats* in towns', Dennis Turner meant those with a municipal function, such as gatehouses in a town wall, Oxford being the only certain example then recognised [§§22, 24]. He rejected the idea that the tower of St Michael at the Northgate there might have once belonged to a 'private' *burh* [§§21, 29]. The archaeological and documentary evidence for the 'public' *burh* and later defences at Oxford have been reviewed by Dodd *et al.*<sup>19</sup> St Michael's tower certainly served *for a time* as part of a town gatehouse; a foot-passage ran *against* its west wall, but did not pass *through* it. That it was intended as a belfry is obvious from the tiers of twin openings near the top. It may have been a tower-nave, but a large arch has removed any evidence for a tiny chancel. There is a LUO (2.4m x 0.8m) facing north, with traces of an even larger one (2.8m x 1.2m) facing south and another above the west door. Externally it is the same size as St Mary's Guildford, but the thinner walls of the latter enclose one-third more space.

St George's Tower in Oxford castle can be seen either as an early belfry or a *burh-geat*, with LUO at the very top. Building the castle *motte* there screened that tower visually from the town, while adding an early Norman church restricted the tower's function to that of a belfry or look-out post.<sup>20</sup> Something similar may have taken place at Guildford.

In his study of the tower-nave church of St Mary Bishophill Junior (York),<sup>21</sup> Michael Shapland drew attention to the large high-level opening in the tower overlooking the chancel. He argued that a secular tower had been intruded into a monastic precinct, and surrendered to the archbishop after the rebellion in 1069 (after which the adjoining castle had had to be rebuilt). Like St Michael le Belfry, adjoining the Minster, the church of St Mary Bishophill Junior was never incorporated into the defences of the city or castle of York. However, the entrance to St Mary's abbey, just outside the walls, occupies the site of that of a pre-Conquest enclosure called *Earlsburgh*.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that St Mary Bishophill Junior may be regarded as both a *burh-geat* and a tower-nave. All other urban tower-naves identified by Dr Shapland stood in monastic precincts (Bury St Edmunds, Canterbury, Hereford, Hexham, Winchester, Worcester).<sup>23</sup> Some mysterious towers in medieval London may have been either secular or ecclesiastical.<sup>24</sup>

## How?

The flint rubble walling must have been supported by timber shuttering until the mortar set; the shapes of the primary openings and of the pilasters required skilful carpentry. The pilasters would not have much strengthened the walling, but did provide a decorative element. They may be a skeuomorph of earlier buttressed timber halls like those at Yeavering (Northumberland) or Bishopstone (Sussex).<sup>28</sup> If the tower was ever a *burh-geat*, it may have once had more storeys inside, like those recently identified in

the strange buried 'foundation tower' of Farnham castle, whose height and internal measurements approximate to those of St Mary's church tower.<sup>29</sup>

### Why?

We can only guess the patron's intentions for the functions and meaning of the tower. Were these purposes achieved, and how did they alter subsequently? Was St Mary's enlarged from a private 'lordly' chapel into a public 'congregational' church because of ecclesiastical reform (removing church ownership from lay hands, or as an urban replacement for a rural *minster*)? Or was it secular physical and psychological over-shadowing of the ecclesiastical, building a Norman royal castle immediately above Anglo-Saxon St Mary's (with a *donjon* having a floor area four times that of St Mary's tower), and redirecting the approach route?

### When?

Although Dennis Turner said [§3] that 'a date before 1000 is difficult to justify', he also [§32] cited arguments for a 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century occupation of the enclosure around St Mary's church. The exact date ranges of the diagnostic architectural features of the tower are uncertain. Harold Taylor, the foremost analyst of Anglo-Saxon architecture in England, stated 'So many other examples [of double-played openings] widely spread over the south and east of the country suggest the style had a fairly long currency before it disappeared from use very soon after the Norman Conquest'.<sup>25</sup> (*Editor's note: their presence in the 12th-century, Templar-built church of Shipley in Sussex shows there are exceptions to this rule.*) Taylor also wrote that flint rubble pilaster buttresses 'all belong to churches in the latest part of the Anglo-Saxon period'.<sup>26</sup> Such pilasters only occur elsewhere in England in rather different contexts: on the upper part of one face of another square tower (Holy Trinity, Colchester), and on eight round towers (and inside one nave) in Norfolk. Of these, only Kirby Cane has multiple pilasters, and these now rise only a metre or so.

Mary Alexander has suggested that the castle's Great Tower was either built entirely in Stephen's reign (1135–54) or that the lower part had been built during the reign of Henry I.<sup>27</sup> The first enlargement of St Mary's church may well have taken place at the same time. St Mary's tower and the castle's Great Tower and gatehouse are still prominent features seen by travellers either along the Wey valley or from the Hog's Back ridge. The whole 'private' *burh* was within bowshot of the tower of St Mary's, and yet was large enough to contain a moot or county muster. There are good views except eastward, where even the castle's Great Tower on its *motte* is overlooked by Pewley Hill.

### Who?

King Alfred bequeathed a property (*ham*) at Guildford to his nephew Æthelbald in his will, and Earl Godwine had an *hospicia* here in 1035/36<sup>30</sup>. (*Editor's note: the reference in King Alfred's will occurs in its second part, interpreted by Sean Miller as an addition of 896x899 to an original text composed in the period 873x888.*) Neither property need have been on the site of the present town, as Rob Briggs has pointed out,<sup>31</sup> but we already have three possible suspects (and two dates).

Despite mentioning neither a church nor a castle at Guildford, Domesday Book provides us with two more possible patrons for the tower, as well as the king.<sup>32</sup> After saying that king William had 75 *hagae* 'whereon dwell 175 men', it gives the recent ownership changes of some *hagae*, starting with the three held by *Rannulf cleric*, 'who has full jurisdiction therein, except for *geld*', which had been held previously by archbishop Stigand. Now Stigand (d.1072) was notorious (in Norman eyes) for having crowned earl

Harold in 1066. He had a long and colourful career: already a royal priest in 1020, he was consecrated bishop of Elmham in 1043, then bishop of Winchester in 1047, which he continued to hold despite being elevated to Canterbury in 1052.<sup>33</sup> Deposed in 1070, his secular property passed to William the Conqueror. Despite the proximity of the large episcopal manor of Farnham, Stigand (or a previous bishop of Winchester; interestingly, Æthelwold I, bishop 963–84, is recorded as having had a private tower-nave chapel [§13]) would have seen advantages in having a *piéd à terre* in the royal manor and town of Guildford, half-way to London.

The *hagae* are described as if they had been Stigand's personal property, not that of Canterbury or Winchester cathedrals, hence their passing (*via* the king) to an individual, rather than to the ecclesiastical authorities on Stigand's downfall. The mention of jurisdiction also suggests a private estate. Were the three *hagae* adjacent to one another? It may be only coincidence, but the 'private' *burh* area described above is split into three parts by narrow roads (Mill Lane and Quarry Street), the central part being almost wholly St Mary's churchyard but perhaps extending south to Rosemary Alley. The 'private' *burh* would have had great economic value, commanding the mill and the quarry. Dr Shapland has, however, suggested that the three *hagae* were separate, becoming the sites of Holy Trinity, St Mary's and St Nicolas's churches. (*Editor's note: this suggestion is not contained in Dr Shapland's PhD thesis, so must have been made in his presentation to the March 2015 meeting of the Medieval Studies Forum.*)

*Rannulf cleric'* was almost certainly Ranulf Flambard,<sup>34</sup> a royal clerk who subsequently became bishop of Durham. Perhaps the now-redundant private tower was then (re)turned to religious use? Or was it on his death in 1128 that it was given with the advowson of St Mary's to Merton priory?

The next Guildford item in Domesday Book offers an alternative; the *haga* of *Rannulf uicecom'* [sheriff], previously of *Tovi p'posito uillae* [town reeve], not belonging to any manor. These officials would have needed successively a secure base from which to carry out their duties. But whether this required a tower is debatable.

### *Some more questions*

The topography of the 'private' *burh* at Guildford resembles that of the Eashing 'fortress' *burh*: each overlooks a ford of the river Wey, on a slope ending at a cliff edge. Was either an Anglo-Saxon 'hanging promontory' assembly site?<sup>35</sup>

In what order were the three town churches in Guildford (and the one at Stoke) founded?

Why are the present upper openings in the north and south walls of the tower at different levels?

## Notes

1. Turner 2015. References to paragraphs in that essay are shown thus: [§X]
2. Renn 1994, 180–82
3. Shapland 2012, 202–207, 480–509
4. Matthew Alexander 1982, 8; see also Turner 2015 [§2]
5. Mary Alexander 2009, 46
6. Johnston 1911, 191–92; blocking removed in 1866
7. Great Domesday Book, f.30
8. Green 2012, 40; BL Add. Chart. 19572 [=Johnson and Cronne 1956, 240–41, no 1614]
9. Parsons and Styles 2000, 70, 76–86; Draper 2008
10. O'Connell & Poulton 1984, 43–46
11. Sprules D W, in Malden (ed) 1911, **3**, 547
12. Williams 1992, 226–7, 233–34; Shapland 2012, 30ff
13. Morris 1989, 255; Williams 1992, 233
14. Radford 1953
15. Brown 1925, 287; examples listed in Taylor 1978, 826–29, 834–35, Table 25
16. Renn 1994, 193 [the 4-storey tower in the scene depicting earl Harold's return from Normandy]
17. *Ibid*, Fig. 8, better drawn in North 2001, 270–71
18. Shapland 2012, 495–98, Figs. 1.13. 15–18
19. Dodd *et al* 2003, 21–29, 155–63
20. Norton 2015, 200–204 and forthcoming
21. Shapland 2010
22. RCHME 1972, 9
23. Shapland 2012
24. Renn 2014
25. Taylor 1978, 861; cp. 841 Fig. 673; 866–68 Tables 18–20
26. *Ibid*, 927; 872 Fig. 688; 916 Table 2; 920 Fig.
27. Mary Alexander 2006, 36–37
28. Hope-Taylor 1977, hall AiB: Fernie, 1983 53 Fig. 28; Thomas 2008, 352–55; 2010, 204–206
29. Graham 2010, 3
30. Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 177; Campbell 1949, 42–43
31. Briggs 2009
32. As note 7
33. Smith 1994; Douglas 1969, 174
34. *Rannulf* [fla]mbard is named as holding two Godalming churches and Tuesley manor later in the same folio
35. Baker & Brookes 2013

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