



NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2021

Letter from the Editor

Hello everyone! This month is short and sweet. 😊

I'm very much looking forward to Georgina's talk on *'Trees in History'* on the 11th – I've noted a few trees down and will have a game of 'tree bingo'!

Enclosed is another great article by Claire and Lee on *'Church Doors and Porches in Essex'*. I'm going to keep the map in my car for when I'm out and about (and if fuel supplies allow).

Don't forget to check out (at the back of the newsletter) a full list of books and DVDs that will be available for purchase at special member prices at our Christmas Social.

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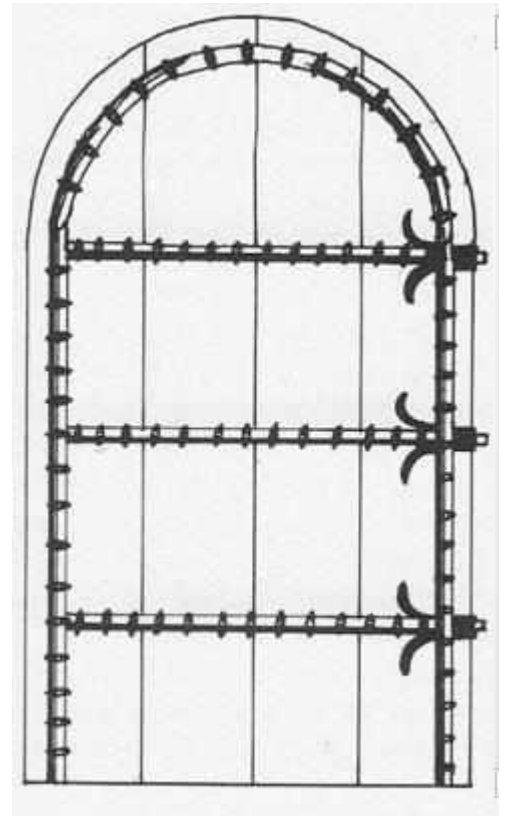
Medieval church doors.

In this article we will be looking at the construction of medieval church doors using local examples.

Our focus will be on the doors of medieval churches, as they tend to survive into the present day, but we should always bear in mind that the same techniques would have been used in the domestic architecture of substantial medieval buildings such as early iterations of Copt Hall.

At its simplest a medieval door is a wooden thing in a hole in a wall. Essex was a county covered in forests and it is surprising to find that most of the medieval doors sampled in Essex were made from wood from the Baltic. (*Bridge, M.C. (2012) Locating the origins of wood resources: a review of dendroprovenancing. Journal of Archaeological Science*). Although this is not the case for much of England, we were in a Saxon kingdom (part of greater Europe!) Most doors are made of four or more oak boards arranged vertically, and a similar number of boards arranged horizontally on the inside. This gave the door added strength and helped to reduce distortion and splitting. Many doors were simply butt jointed with some having chamfered mouldings over the joins. Large wrought iron nails were used to join the doors, driven from the vertical front panels, through to the horizontal back panels, and clenched.

The earliest door that survives in Essex is the north door at St Botolphs Hadstock (interior view right, detail below) and this is likely to be the only remaining piece of Saxon carpentry in an Essex church. You might now be thinking of the famous church at Greenstead, isn't that Saxon? But modern science has conclusively proved to be early Norman work (about 1060 – 1100) (*Tree-ring analysis of timbers from the stave church at Greensted, Essex. Ian Tyers 1996*) rather than Saxon! Hadstock dates to around 1034. The presence of the church at Hadstock has been explained as a minister built by Canute to celebrate his victory at the battle of Assandun in 1016, but work by Warwick Rodwell in the 1970's (*The Archaeological Investigation of*



Hadstock Church, Essex. An original article from the Antiquaries Journal, 1976) has proved the site has a much older history dating back to at least the early 9thC although the present church is likely to be of the later date. The door is made of 4 oak boards, dendrochronology (*by Dan Miles and Dr Martin Bridge, of Oxford University 2004*) has shown that they came from the same tree which was felled around 1034. The tree was over 400 years old at the time of its felling. The long butted joints between the sections of the four planks are sectionally splayed rebates. (i.e. they overlap) and iron straps and rivets. The 'ledges' are the bars fixed to the back of the door and form $\frac{3}{4}$ of a circle, the top ledge follows the semi-circular shape of the door and must have been either steamed or dry heated to shape it. Iron nails pass through the iron bars on the front of the door, the planks, the ledge, a lozenge shaped iron clenching rove, which is folded over around the ledge, and

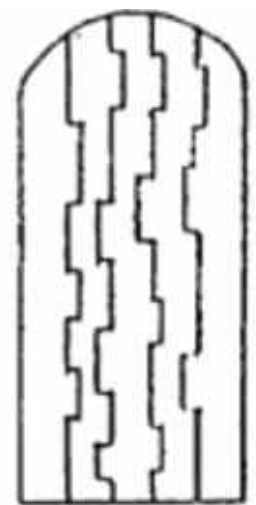
finally the nail is clenched (flattened). This technique resembles the garboard stakes of the longships of



the period. A strake is a long thin piece of wood and the garboard strake is the name of the strake next to the keel. The roves are a good dating system in themselves as typologically they predate the simpler flat type which has essentially become a washer. This change has taken place by 1250 and the later type are used throughout the medieval period.

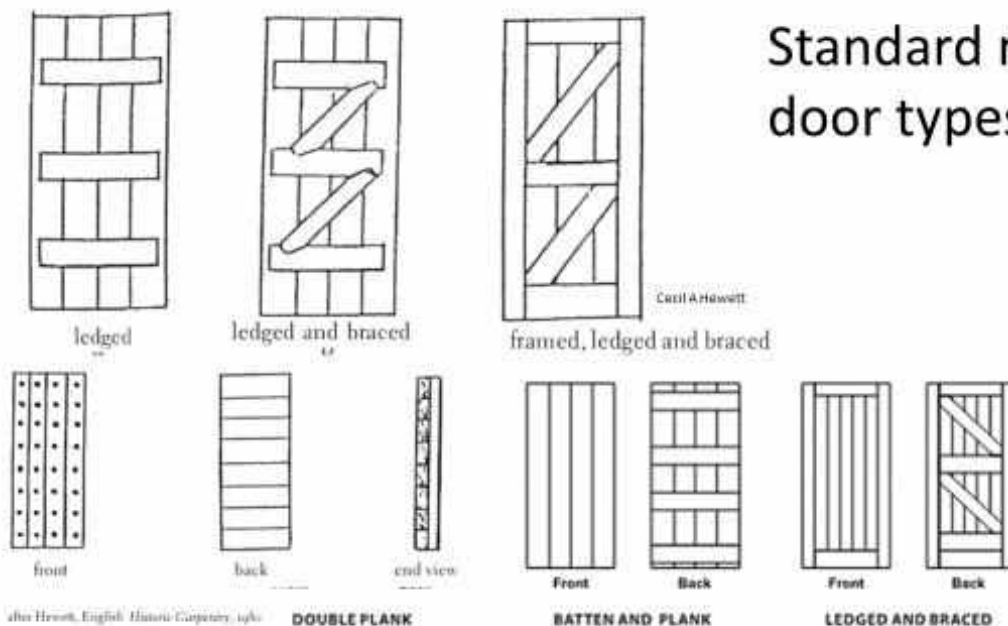
The north nave door at Buttsbury has long been an object of interest, particularly in relation to its date. Hewett wrote in 1982 in his book *Church Carpentry* that it must be from the beginning of the eleventh century. The rounded ledges to which the outside boards are attached using nails and roves is similar in construction to the north door at Hadstock. In 2010 all five boards of the door were sampled using dendrochronology and the results were published (*Dr M. C. Bridge FSA and Dr D. H. Miles FSA Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory Report 2010/04*). The summary concluded that "all five boards probably originated from a single tree... the earliest possible likely felling date for these boards is 1156. ... that the boards are likely to have been trimmed without losing many heartwood rings, and therefore the actual felling date is likely to have been not long after this date.... door is likely to have been constructed in the period from 1156 to, perhaps the 1180s."

The south door at Castle Hedingham is interesting in that it has counter-rebated plank-edges, (right) which combined with the long joints give the door an embattled appearance. This counter rebating would have made the door strong enough so that it did not need ledging, the iron strapwork being enough to hold the door together. Another example of this can be seen at Mashbury in this case the door has been seriously reduced in size and inserted into a much later entrance on the north side of the church. The only other known example of this technique is at Westminster Abbey.



As time went on door construction settled into a more standardized form and these are the typical variants used throughout the medieval period. Ledges were used on almost every door often with diagonal bracing for extra support. Later this developed into the ledge braced and framed door. The earliest lattice braced portcullis type door is at Ripon and dates from 1154-81. Early example are almost exclusively used in

Standard medieval door types



The three principal types of early door (Drawing: Donald Insall Associates)

cathedrals but the dense type rectangular portcullis found in Essex with its flat washers and roves, is not fully developed until the 14thc.

It is interesting to note that domestic doors of this period were constructed in a remarkably similar fashion, as can be seen in this example from the Sun Inn, in Saffron Walden.

Development of iron work.

This map shows the remaining significant medieval ironwork on church doors in Essex. (Heybridge is shown in Ingatestone rather than Heybridge in Maldon that the text refers to). It is interesting to note that the locations appear to follow the course of the navigable rivers from the North Sea. Although much of Britain was rich in iron ore during the medieval period much high quality iron was imported from the continent. This is all the more likely to be so in a county like Essex where iron is rare.

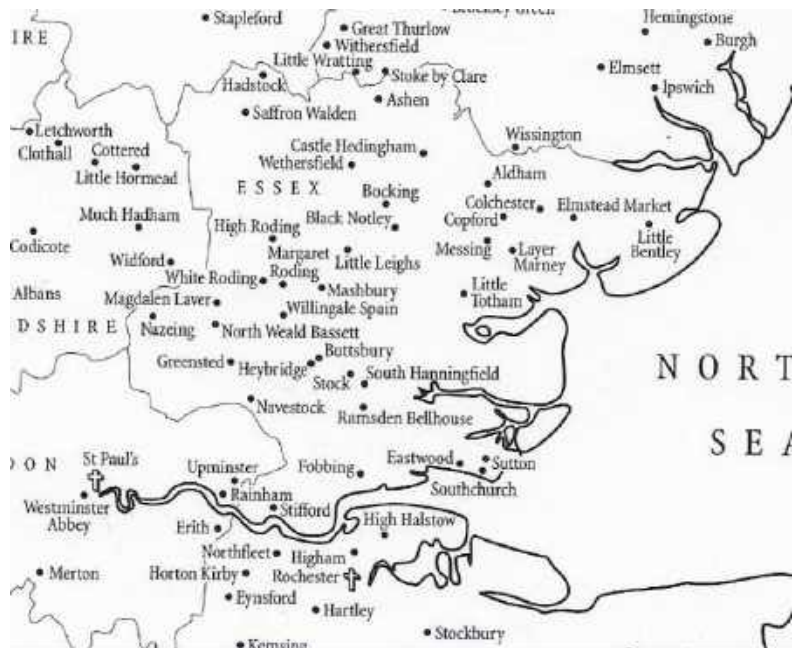
In its simplest form the iron work on a church door is there to stop the planks from sagging and dropping. Although no iron work survives from Saxon church doors, there are early depictions in manuscripts such as the Aelfric Hexateuch (below) which shows two carpenters nailing iron work on to a door.



The earliest pictorial representation of the C hinge with a central strap is on the Utrecht Psalter which was made in Reims between 816-823 & on the Draco sacrament made in Metz circa 844-55.

The C hinge as the name suggests was used for the suspension of the door. Only the central strap is needed for this purpose & the large c's are largely decorative & in some cases they are not even welded to the strap. There are no surviving C hinges in Normandy & it is argued that they came from another part of the Holy Roman Empire. Their first appearance in English art is on one of the Chichester reliefs in

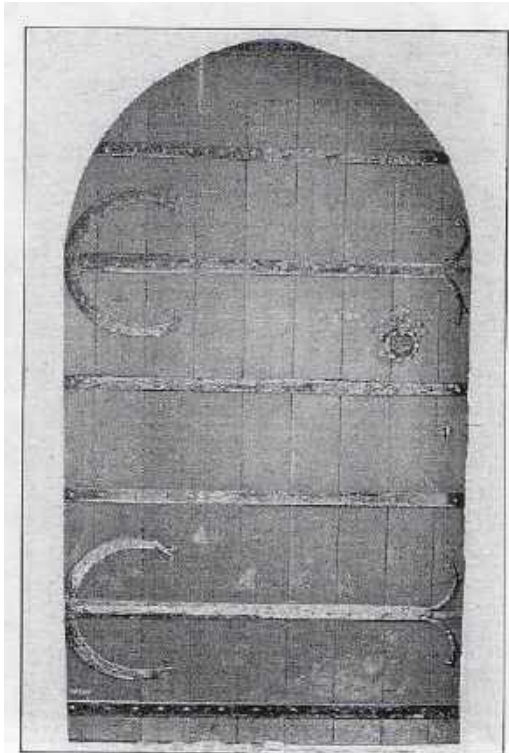
Chichester Cathedral dated 1120. The earliest & simplest form is the split curl where the terminal ends were cleft in two and folded back to make a simple curl. Although the style is used sporadically into the 15thC the vast majority are datable to the 12C such as White Roding, the north door at Navestock and in Herts at Anstey. 13thC examples can be found at Upminster, High Roding, and Navestock and over the border in Herts at Codicote. The latest local example are the fourteenth century doors



at North Weald and the very unusual example at Fobbing, where the c's are as much decorative as structural.

C hinges with barbed straps

A barbed strap can be made in one of two ways either by whittling the edge if an iron strap or by placing the barbs adjacent to them. In either case barbs may be shaped like a C or a comma or even a horseshoe. The barbed strap was an established motif long before the twelfth century and was used on a 7thC Lombardic coffin at Civizzano Austria. On English doors almost all barbed straps are



4.57 Navestock, south.



accompanied by C hinges which can be barbed themselves. The Heybridge example is thought to be the oldest in an English parish church. It sits in a doorway that although having a chip decorated tympanum and segmental arch, common 12thc features in Essex, these features are also seen at Chepstow Castle c1070, this with the unusually tall and the narrow doorway and chamfered column capital, would suggest a similar rather than later date here.

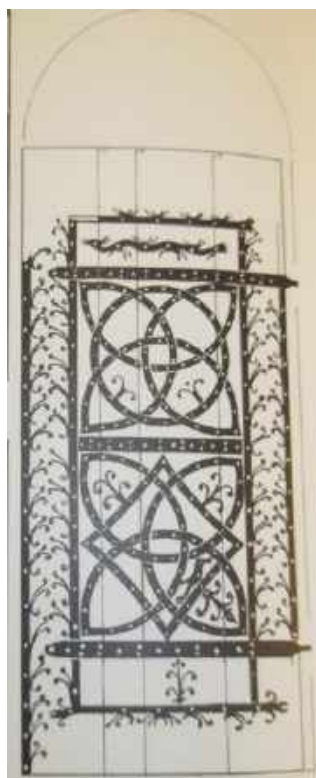
Probably the finest local(ish)



example is the North door of Little Hornead over the border in

Hertfordshire (3 miles east of Buntingford) at present under restoration and dated 1125 – 1150. The central area of the door is divided into two square panels round the edges is a double row of double barred scrolls and above the squares is a wavy bar with double scrolls. Some say its resemblance to a swimming dragon is fortuitous but given the frequent use of this symbol on church iron work this is debatable. The two squares are filled with flat iron straps in geometric designs based on arcs of a circle. A cross is missing from the centre of the upper square and in the lower only one of the four original dragons remains (many argue this is a bird not a dragon).

Eastwood, Essex



Ironwork was the principal decoration of church doors throughout the 12th – 14 c, after which carpentry became more prevalent. Symbolic meaning can be read into the iconography of the ironwork decoration. Many doors show a lattice representing the separation of heaven and earth, foliage can be read to represent the tree of life, specific attribute of certain saints can be seen (such as fleur-de-lis and fish), knots can be used to confuse the devil, crosses and animals including mythological creatures such as dragons can be used as a way of evil deflecting evil. It is important to remember that these meanings may have become lost in time and after a few generations had lost a specific symbolic meaning.



Door detail—old & new nails, barbed scroll & bird.

Closing Rings and ring plates

Closing rings are found on most medieval church doors often with a decorative ring plate behind (Fingringhoe example illustrated). They are essentially latch lifters for opening and closing the door and are not to be confused with the more famous and robust sanctuary knocker found on larger churches and cathedrals. The door ring of the church did however have a specific symbolic meaning – as a place to swear oaths and this is recorded in many documents.



Several Essex churches have the story of a Danes' skin. Usually the story goes that a Danish pirate decided to sack the church and was caught red-handed. An outraged mob then turned on the Dane and flayed him, skinning him and nailing the skin to the church door as a warning to anyone with the temerity to consider such a wicked act ever again. There were certainly harsh

punishments for such an act. By the laws of Alfred the robbing of a church was punishable not only by fine, but the guilty hand.



On St Brice's Day (13 November) 1002 there was a mass killing of Danes, ordered by the English King Ethelred. In this case, it was not in revenge for pillage, but a reaction to the news that there was a Danish conspiracy to assassinate him.

The legend of the Danes skin is an old one, and applies to several churches and cathedrals in the South East. The first time we see it is in Pepys Diary, "Then to Rochester, and there saw the Cathedral, which is now fitting for use, and the organ then a-tuning. Then away thence, observing the great doors of the church, which, they say, was covered with the skins of the Danes." In 1789 Sir Harry Englefield, wrote to the Society of Antiquaries about the curious popular tale preserved in the village of Hadstock, Essex, that the door of the church had been covered with the skin of a Danish pirate, who had plundered the church. A similar legend was recorded at East Thurrock and at Copford was recorded by Richard Newcourt in 1710.

When the story of the Danes' skin became popular, souvenir hunters soon picked off the remaining pieces of leather from the church doors. The skins had stayed intact for hundreds of years until their possible genesis became a subject of horrid fascination in the public. This meant that only a few fragments remained under the ironwork.

Small surviving pieces of skin were retrieved from under the ironwork at both Copford and Hadstock. In recent years the piece from Hadstock has been DNA tested by Alan Cooper of Oxford University (he removed a cm square piece and extracted identifiable DNA). The skin was found to be that of a cow. This puts pay to the romantic legend of the Danes Skin on the door (at least in Essex) as while other examples have not yet been scientifically examined as we have seen this is the only Saxon church door surviving in the county. The use of leather on doors however was the norm and most of the nail holes that can still be seen on old doors come from the constant recovering of the door. Pieces of stained leather have been found and it is likely that most doors were stained, red and green being the most common colours. As well as being brightly coloured many doors were also gilded – the bright colours of the medieval church started outside the door.



Ironwork was superseded by carpentry as the main form of decoration in the second quarter of the 14thC. This is due to multiple factors. Over the centuries many English forests had been depleted leading to a reliance on imported charcoal, so that charcoal needed by the smiths accounted for over 50% of the cost of iron production. The need for iron to make weapons for foreign wars was also put a strain on resources, made worse by the rise in artillery weapons. The English cannons first appeared in 1327 when it is recorded as being used against the Scots and later saw more general use during The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). The Black Death meant a shortage of skilled labour and rising labour bills which led to ever poorer returns. The price of iron rose & in fact more than doubled in price from 1s 8d in 1330 to 3s 9d per bloom by 1354. This made an always expensive & sparsely used material financially impractical.

Decorative woodwork on doors started as simple chamfered mouldings to prevent drafts, on butt jointed doors. As iron work became more expensive and fashions changed the carpentry on door started to mirror the stone work window tracery. The carving seen on these doors is usually the addition of a third layer of wood intricately cut and nailed to the surface of the door as an applied framework dividing the surface of the door into tall vertical panels (interestingly the iron nail is still used here when wooden dowels would normally be used to perform this function in other woodwork).



In Essex the Trefoil, Quatrefoil & cinquefoil are particularly popular. Over time carpentry become more elaborate as the tree of Jesse at Stoke-by-Nayland shows (see above). The surface of the door is carved as a highly imaginary family tree of Christ, with figures representing saints outlined within decorative wooden arches. The edges of the door are carved with amazingly detailed figures of insects, birds, and grotesque figures. At the top is Mary and below her ancestors ranging back to the beginnings of the Old Testament.

Lee Joyce and Claire Hooper

Selected bibliography not in text

- Geddes, J 1999. Medieval Decorative Ironwork in England: English ironwork from 1050 1550
- Hewett, Cecil Alec 1980. English Historic Carpentry
- Hewett, Cecil Alec 1982. Church Carpentry: A Study Based on Essex Examples
- Rodwell, Warwick 2012. The Archaeology of Churches
- The Danes' Skin: An unusual Ornament for Essex Church doors. The Foxearth and District Local History Society. <https://www.foxearth.org.uk/DanesSkin.html> Accessed 28.9.2021

WEAG CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Lecture Program

2021 Lectures are accessible via Zoom at 7:15pm – All except for the Christmas Social which will be in the committee room at Woodford County High School, High Road, Woodford Green, IG8 9LA from 7:30pm.

Non-members are welcome to attend Lectures.

A voluntary contribution of £2 would be appreciated from guests.

Monday 11 October 2021 @ 19:15

'Trees in History'. *Speaker: Georgina Green.*

Monday 8 November 2021 @ 19:15

'Verulamium'. *Speaker: Tony O'Connor.*

Monday 6 December 2021 @ 19:30

Christmas Social (book sales and refreshments) and roundup of member activities at Woodford County High. See next page for list of books available and their special member prices.

Monday 1 January 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 14 February 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 14 March 2022 @ 19:15

Annual General Meeting. *Speaker: Harvey Sheldon, Birkbeck College, WEAG President.*

Monday 11 April 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 9 May 2022 @ 19:15

The Rudge Lecture – 'to be announced'.

Monday 13 June 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 12 September 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 10 October 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 14 November 2022 @ 19:15

Details to be confirmed

Monday 5 December 2022 @ 19:30

Christmas Social (book sales and refreshments) and roundup of member activities at Woodford County High.

CHRISTMAS SOCIAL BOOK SALE

	RRP	Special Offer Price
The Romano-British Temple at Harlow	£ 7.00	£ 3.50
Exploration and Discovery in South West Essex	£ 7.00	£ 3.50
Archaeology – what it is and how to do it	£ 9.50	£ 8.50
Copped Hall Report 2003	£ 4.00	£ 2.50
Copped Hall Report 2004 / 5	£ 7.00	£ 2.50
Copped Hall – A Short History (Cassidy)	£ 2.50	£ 2.50
Annual Review 2008/2009	£ 0.50	£ 0.50
Annual Review 2009/2010	£ 0.50	£ 0.50
Annual Review 2010/2011	£ 0.50	£ 0.50
Annual Review 2011/2012	£ 0.50	£ 0.50
Wanstead Park – Revealed (DVD)	£ 3.00	£ 1.50
Wanstead Park – Living Park (DVD)	£ 3.00	£ 1.50
The Wanstead Archive (DVD)	£ 3.00	£ 1.50

