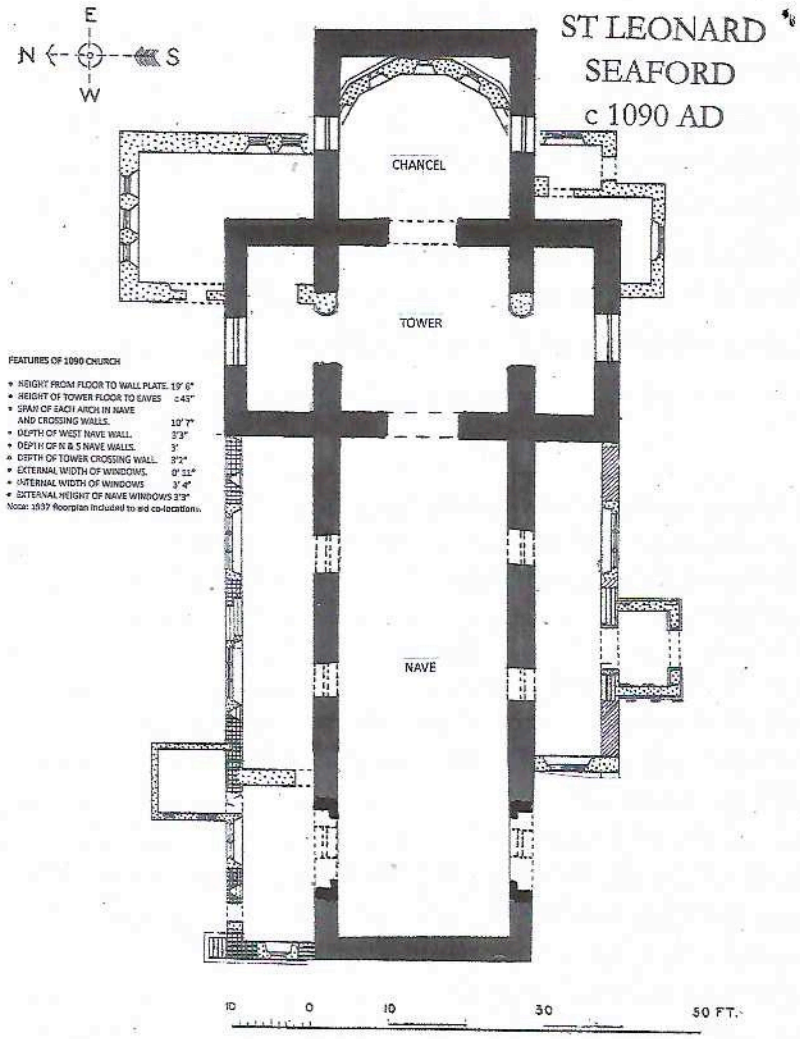
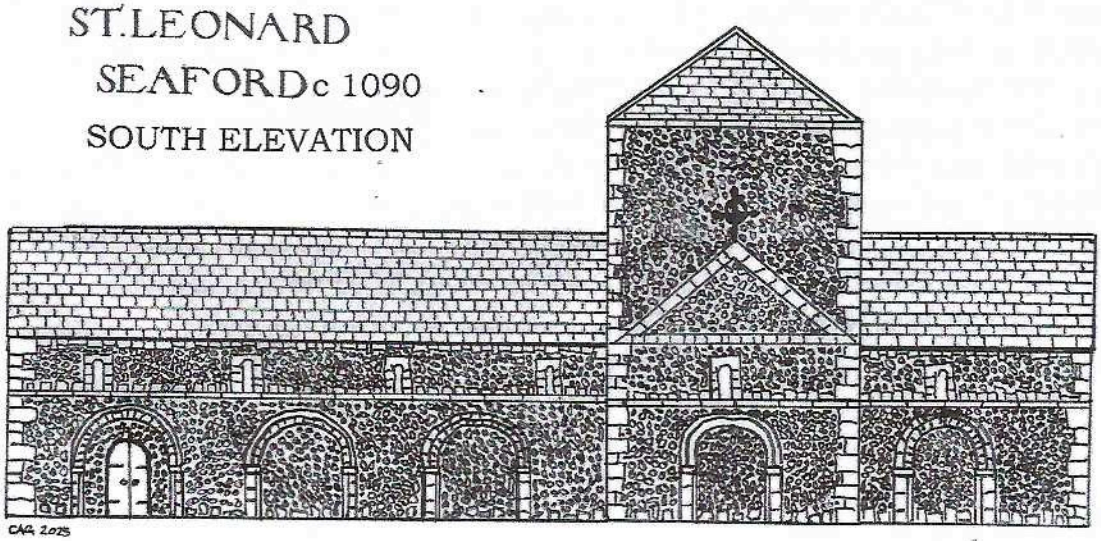
1066 ONWARDS - THE STORY OF SEAFORD PARISH CHURCH

By Charles A Grimble BSc FCIoH retd

27 February 2026





Seaford Occasional Research Paper No 22

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1066 ONWARDS - THE STORY OF SEAFORD PARISH CHURCH

Background.

As set out in my Seaford Occasional Paper No 21 **1086-1539 CONJECTURAL MAP OF SEAFORD,** I base this paper on the assumption that prior to 1066, Seaford as a settlement either did not exist, or was a small hamlet of no significance based on fishing, and that the parish of Sutton covered the spiritual and pastoral needs of the area between the Cuckmere River and what I call the Dane Valley (the river that flowed alongside Vale Road, Blatchington Road, and out to the sea at the Salts. I use the current names for clarity).

In the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Sutton was answerable to Bishopstone, which in turn was answerable to the Bishop of Selsey (now replaced by Chichester). The principal work done in the area centred upon agriculture sustaining the manors and the community. The principal port was Pevensey, with a much lesser one at Lewes, as that was hampered by the increasing silting up of the river, and the choking influx of shingle brought eastwards along the coast, loosened from the chalk cliffs by marine erosion.

How the Norman Conquest changed the area.

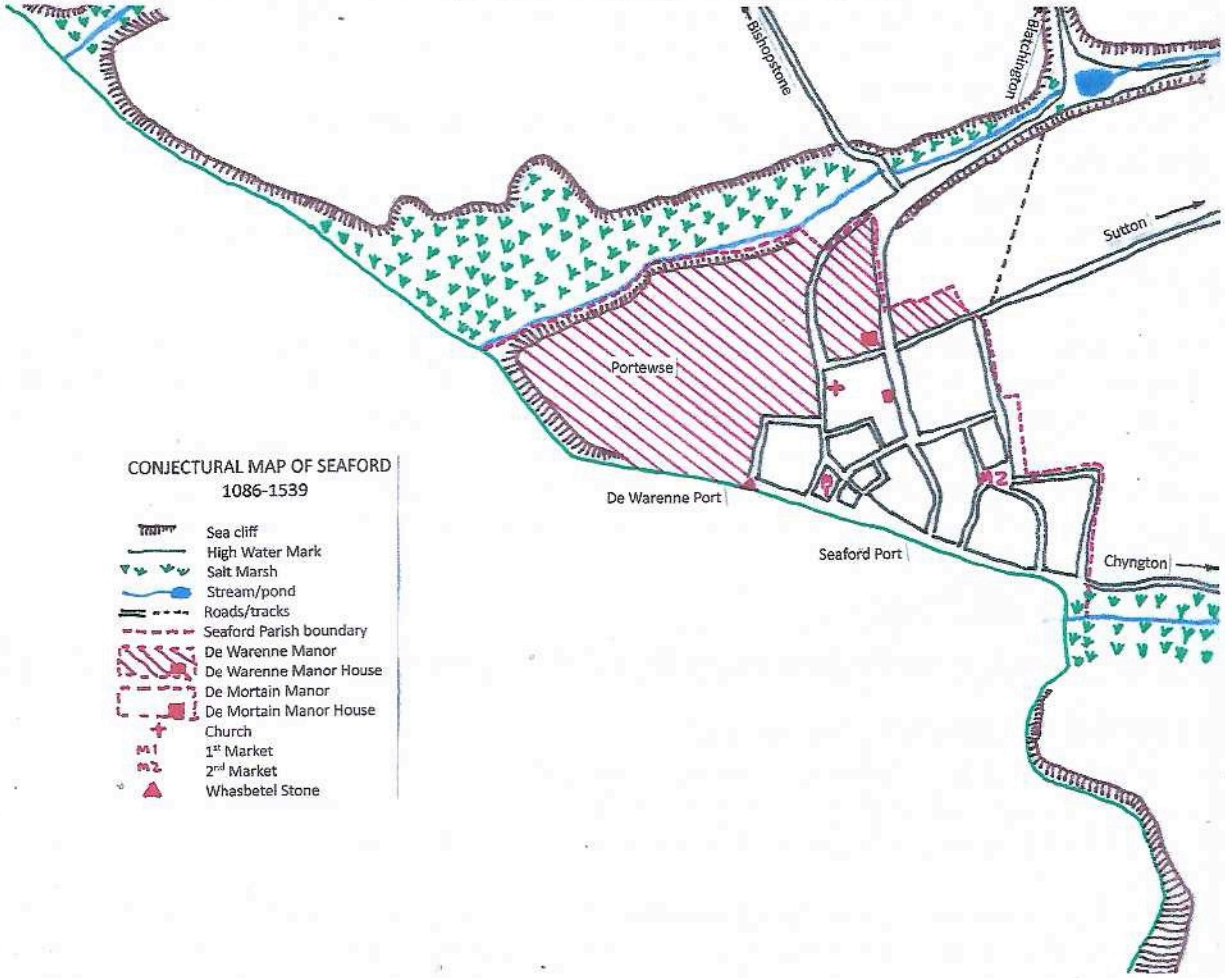


Fig 1 Conjectural map of early Seaford showing the 2 manors, relative to the church

Sussex was singled out by William, Duke of Normandy, as being both his beach head for invasion and also the key to maintaining future control not only of his Norman lands, but also his newly-conquered territory. Building on existing administrative structures called Rapes, he gave Lewes Rape to William de Warenne, who fought alongside him at Senlac Field, and he gave Pevensey Rape to his half-brother and fighter at Senlac, Robert de Mortain. Robert also commanded 120 invasion ships, more than any other of William's magnates. Kent was administered by Robert's brother (and therefore William's half-brother), Odo of Bayeux. King William 1 needed his key administrators to have secure supply chains between Normandy and England, and Sussex was his front line. De Mortain had a good base with a castle and port at Pevensey. William de Warenne, did not, and so Seaford Bay became strategically important for both King William 1 and de Warenne. De Warenne and De Mortain are recorded as doing 'land swaps' (Salzman 1931 pp25-6) with De Mortain receiving East Grinstead. So it is entirely plausible

for the King to allow De Mortain to grant De Warenne sufficient land within the parish of Sutton, to establish Port Ouse before 1088. De Warenne died in that year on the battlefield at Pevensey during the struggle for William 1's successor, emphasising the need for security for the de Warenne line in turbulent times.

The site of a new town and church therefore had to serve 2 masters, De Warenne and De Mortain. This was resolved by laying out a small town on a grid-iron pattern, largely on De Mortain land, but with the church on De Mortain's boundary with De Warenne, on a 1-acre plot of land adjoining Church Street (**see Fig 1**). That it was not a true grid-iron on the shoreline could reflect earlier fishing dwellings and plots. The area covered by the combined manors comprised the new parish of Seaford, carved out of Sutton parish. **Fig 1** is my own conjectural solution to how the early town was laid out. I am not aware of any other attempts to try this, and so it is put down to stimulate debate.

With the site established, De Mortain and de Warenne then commissioned the building of a new church to sustain the new settlement. It needed to meet the future needs of the town and therefore be capable of expansion. Many authorities agree with Dr J G Taylor in his drawing parallels for his analysis of the architecture of St Leonard's Church Seaford with St Nicholas Bramber, and St Mary the Virgin Westham. St Nicholas was founded in 1073, and St Mary around 1070. This paper relies on Taylor's detailed analysis which has stood the test of time, and supports the construction of *'an aisleless cruciform church with nave transepts chancel and central tower'* (p18). He then describes 5 phases of work to the building as follows:

- 1090 AD Phase 1 Norman aisleless cruciform church with a central tower at the crossing
- 1120 AD Phase 2 side aisles added
- 1200 AD Phase 3 new gothic arches built in the nave walls, with raised clerestory
- 1485 AD Phase 4 reduced footprint with loss of tower and chancel and new west end tower.
- 1861 AD Phase 5 new transept and chancel and restoration of clerestory.

Using his evidence I diverge slightly from him only in two respects. Firstly in that I consider the side aisles were added in 1200 AD and Phase 2 did not exist. I argue this in this paper with some trepidation because I hold Taylor's scholarship in high regard, but having experience from 1978 for adapting existing buildings and ensuring they do not fall down in the process has made me consider how the masons and builders of those times could achieve what they did at reasonable expense in a small Sussex port! Secondly, I also add in a further phase between 1786-1812 for reasons I explain later.

Phase 1. 1090 AD

An aisleless cruciform church with nave transepts chancel and central tower.(see cover images)

To argue this conclusion, Taylor rightly focusses on 2 elements:

a) The evidence at the foot of the existing tower and

b) wall thicknesses and heights, particularly the east end of the chancel.

a) His first object is the structure of the exposed early Norman arch in the south west corner of the church, at the base of the tower, up to a height of 19 feet 6 inches (5.95m) to the course of stones which form the roof plate (p10). It is mirrored on the north side by an identical sequence. This creates for him a nave of 22 feet width (6.7m). The walls consist of *'undressed flints, beach boulders, blocks of Caen stone and lumps of local ferruginous conglomerate'* containing an arch with a span of 10 feet 7 inches (3,23m) sitting on dressed stone pier of Caen stone with slender shafts topped with a small capital from which springs the Norman arch proper (**Fig 3, Figs 5a and 5b**). Above this capital however, the arch is only a façade of dressed stone voussoirs on both sides rising to a keystone on outer and inner faces of the arch. In between these arches is the same mixture of unstructured material infill indistinguishable from the majority of this wall. He proposes that the main doors to the church were within these north and south arches. This is instead of a door in the west end (p22). The decorative arch both sides would have offered some support to the wall above. On the south wall the voussoirs we see today are replacements, on the north wall, the originals.

He then projects the structure of this bay and proposes by 1120 AD, a sequence of 5 identical arches on both sides, 3 comprising the nave section, 1 the transept, and 1 the chancel, and justifies this on the

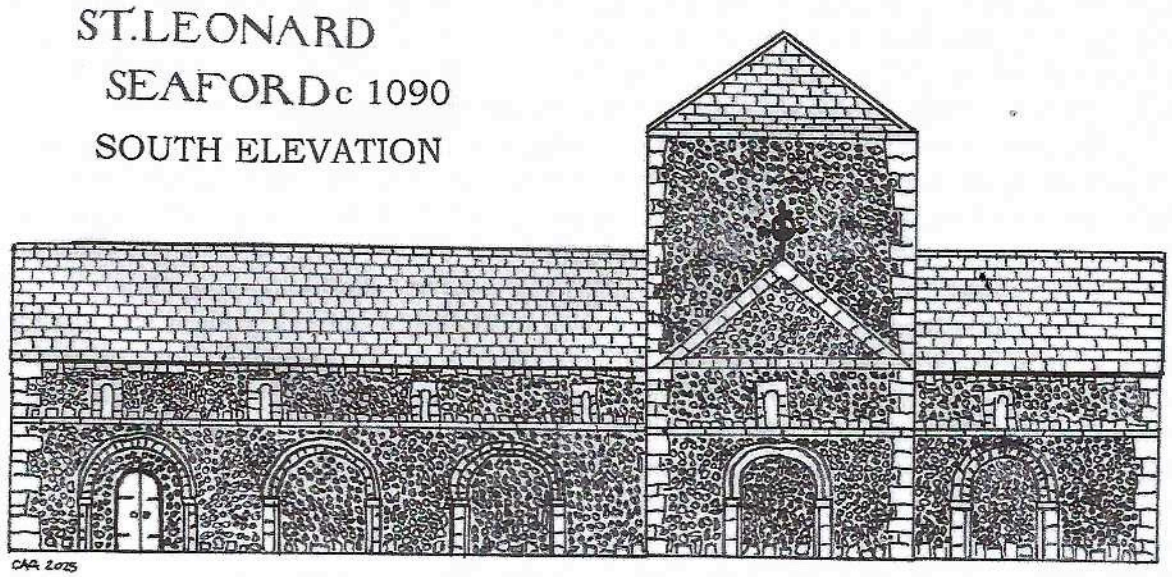


Fig 2 c1090 AD S Elevation of conjectural Norman Church at Seaford

measurements (p24). His Plate 11-p24 extrapolates the development of the south nave wall between 1090 and 1861 showing the symmetry of this Norman arcade. He has an issue with the high level windows under the roof eaves, because the sole remaining one is not aligned with the keystone of the Norman arch below, but is slightly left of the keystone. However, his Plate 11 provides the symmetry required, as the 4 lights he proposes are equidistant from each other and relate to themselves and not the 3 arches below. These 4 windows on each side of the nave sit on a single string course of stone blocks, chamfered downwards and slightly projecting, to form a drip and a visual feature separating the 2 architectural elements of arch and window. Indeed, the chamfer continues as a sloping cill for the window opening itself (**see Fig 3**). These high level windows light the church inside at daytime.

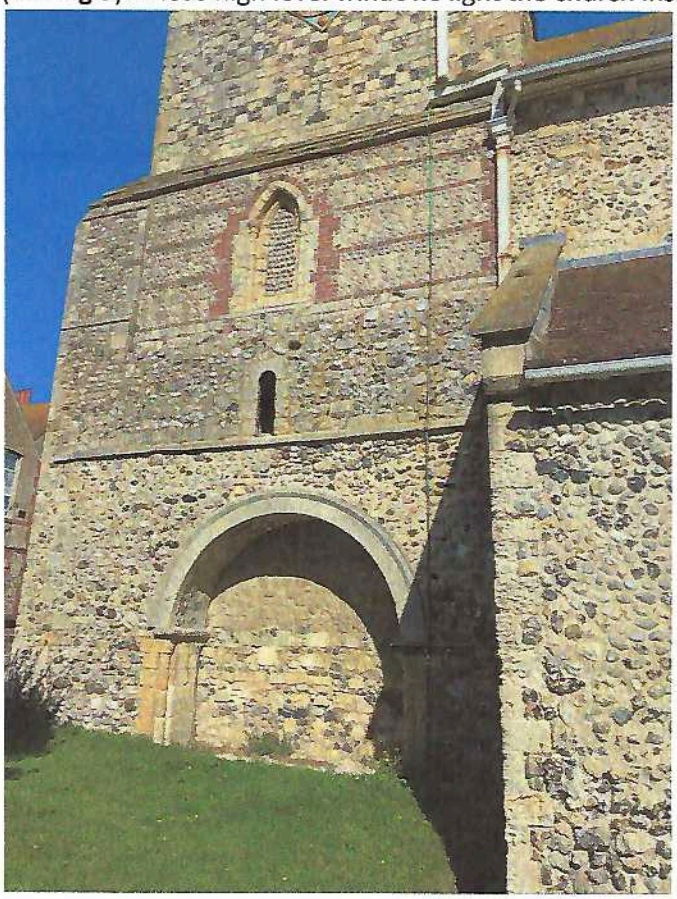


Fig 3 South arch of church showing the original 2 lower levels

b) Taylor then looks at the structural hierarchy of the walls of the church. He and I conclude that to support the load of the main roof structure requires walls 3 feet thick (0.91m), whereas to support shorter walls (aisle and clerestory) only requires walls 2 feet thick (0.61m). This is because they bear quite different loadings, as the main roof structure requires more, much heavier timbers, more roofing material, lead etc. Thus, where the walls are 3 feet thick, there is a full height structure above, and where it is 2 feet thick, it either supports the side aisles, or forms the clerestory extension of 1200 AD.

For me therefore, the wall at the east end of the Norman nave which appears in all drawings up to 1861 and also Wynter's magnificent photo (**Fig 4**), is a complete, structural wall extended at the same thickness (3 feet 2 inches) used to enclose the eastern ends of the later north and south aisles (Taylor p14). It can only be either the end wall of the early church, or a transept wall. I conclude it is the latter, because the remnants of the original building going east are the 2 thick buttresses in Mark Wynter's photo. Given the buttress remnant and the east nave wall height, I conclude a this is part of a tower cell or 4th module, not a chancel. Therefore, although there is no remaining archaeological evidence for it, the chancel is the final 5th 'module' of the original building to complete the cruciform shape. Wynter's photo also shows the gable end of the nave as being of a consistent material for its entire height. Compare, for example in Wynter's photo, the consistency of the flint gable east end with the sloping discontinuity of the flintwork in the south aisle end wall. This photo also shows the line where the monopitch roof of the south aisle was removed and the wall extended upwards to create the gallery level in 1485. I first noticed this discontinuity in the south aisle, in Lambert's drawing of 1780 (**Fig 13**), so it is not a trick of the light.

Given that this gable end extends much higher than the ridge of the original church roof, I conclude we are seeing the remnants of a tower structure of the simplest nature, open, with no floors, to the underside of the tower roof. The 4 corners of the tower are sufficiently robust to support extra weight of the higher tower walls and the tetrahedonal roof structure, by their buttress effect, to contain the spreading forces that roof structure creates.

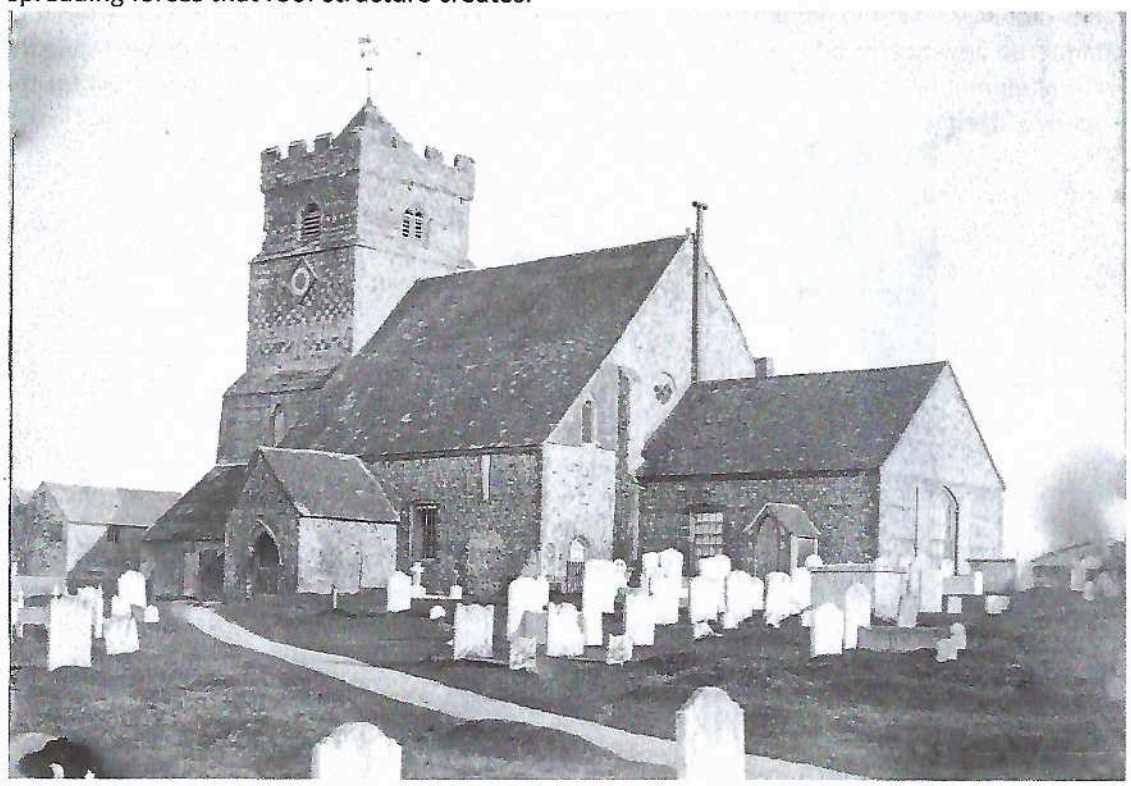


Fig 4 1861 St Leonard's Church from SE Photo Mark Wynter courtesy of Seaford Museum

Taylor argues that the eastern wall of the nave opens into a tower structure, beyond which a chancel was built, giving the cruciform structure. His evidence is set out on Taylor pp15 &16 referring to Lambert and to Horsefield. It should be noted that at the time of Lambert writing (1780) there was no chancel, as it was destroyed in 1377 and not replaced until my Phase 4. I would go further and suggest that the arch in the east wall of the Lambert church (**Fig 13**) shows the arch between the nave and transepts of the original church, as it would be a massive structural engineering feat to insert it later, given the unstructured constitution of the crossing wall.

It is at this point that I diverge from Taylor in 2 respects;

1) regarding when side aisles were added and
2) the nature and purpose of the arches themselves.

1. On the side aisles, he says they were created in 1120AD, and the nave arches rebuilt in 1200AD. I say they were all done at the same time in a single phase in 1200 AD. This is because the single projecting string course he takes for a wall plate (see **Fig 3**) is wholly inadequate i) in depth for supporting a wall-plate, and ii) because of the chamfer. It can only be a decorative feature, probably a drip course.
   The thickness of both aisle roof structures would comprise i) wall plate, ii) the rafter supporting the roof covering, iii) battens on which the roof covering would be hung iv) the roof covering itself, and e) then the lead flashing to seal the junction of the wall and roof surface. If the stone string carried the wall plate then the lead flashing at the top edge of the roof abutting the nave wall would be at least about 10 inches if not more, above the chamfered cill of the window as shown in the photo. This would be impractical as rain would blow into the window, pond, then drain straight through the roof structure, unless, for each slit window, the roof structure was locally cut to create a drainage channel the width of the window, and the roof structure dressed with lead. This is a totally unnecessary piece of surgery which would be required so that rainwater could safely flow from the window opening onto the aisle roof below. I accept the stone string course on the north nave wall within the tower vestry projects slightly more, but it is still inadequate as a bearing for the wall plate, and also would require the complex waterproofing solution suggested above , similar to its southern twin.
   Having considered this, I conclude the stone string is a decorative feature separating the section below it with the blind arcades, from the window section above it. This is an elegant solution to the 3 blind arches below (in my theory) with the 4 slit windows above. Each is symmetrical within its section.
2. My second divergence from Taylor is he concludes that the aisles had to be a later addition (1120 AD) to the 1090 building (p13). I conclude that as the nave arches are decorative, not structural and are 1090 AD constructs, they are therefore blind arches creating an arcade effect. They had all but gone by 1200 hence my making them a feature of the original building. Taylor cogently argues that the length of the nave is composed of identical 'cells' -multiples of the exposed tower 'cell'. However, rather than constructed of dressed stone, the church walls are 'undressed flints etc', The regularity of the masonry in the western, tower 'cell' points to it all being constructed at the same time, up to the 19'6" wall plate. This consistency and the cell structure, in my opinion, point to the nave walls being made with blind arches on both sides with daylight being provided by the 4 windows above the decorative stone string. This means that in 1090 during the construction of the arches, the temporary formwork timber semi-circular arch support structures could be re-used for constructing each cell. This includes the open arches in the crossing and the blind arches on the north and south transept external walls as shown in my drawing. The combination on the external walls of the new church, of regular blind arcades, the stone string, and the narrow slit windows above show a good combination of economy and restrained decorative flair. It also provides niches for small side altars. To my mind the elegant simplicity of seeing the first church as a series of 5 repeated modules or cells keeps the requirement for skilled masons to a minimum and maximises the use of lower skilled wall builders.

3.

Fig 5a Underside of decorative arch south bay.

Fig 5b North bay decorative arch and window

My additional conclusions regarding Phase 1 features

- TRANSEPTS ARE THE SAME WIDTHS AS THE LATER AISLES. I conclude this because the aisles are narrow and given the masons at that time (1200 AD) had freedom to make them as wide as they liked, they would appear to be constrained by an external influence- I take this as the building line of the transept north and south walls.
- THE EAST AND WEST END WALLS WERE PIERCED WITH WINDOWS. I conclude this as the only natural lighting in this long, wide church without such windows comes from the high level windows in the nave and tower. Glass was expensive and so I assume a minimal presence, and only in small key areas. I therefore conclude that Phase 1 showed a 5-bay church with entrances on north and south sides piercing the westernmost north and south arches, and that the remaining arches formed a decorative blind arcade, even in the south and north wall of the transepts. High level windows would pierce the transepts and chancel walls at the same height above the stone string feature. This would give sufficient light during the day and ventilation for candle smoke for any auxiliary lighting requirements.

Phase 2. C1200 AD

A larger church with aisles, a raised roof and nave walls (Fig 6).

Why a larger church?

The town of Seaford had grown since its foundation, with the interests of the De Warenne family being served well by the town, through the establishment of the Cluniac Priory of St Pancras in 1076, and work starting on site around the time of William De Warenne's untimely death in battle in 1088, and continuing apace thereafter through the 12th century. Thus the port function of Seaford as an entrepot for building materials from Normandy not only assured a continuity of work, but also a supply of suitable materials with which to build Seaford's church! In contrast, the De Mortain family had a very rocky time due to bad alliance decisions. Despite being the half-brother of William the Conqueror, Robert De Mortain appears to have been his own man and he sided with his brother Bishop Odo of Bayeux against William I's selected successor, William II (Rufus) but was pardoned. He had significant land holdings in England including Cornwall, and died in Normandy in 1095. His son, William was even more rash, in that he backed Robert Curthose, William Rufus' older brother, (who had been given Normandy), rather than Henry 1 who was William Rufus' younger brother, and potential heir to the English throne when William Rufus was killed in a hunting accident. Henry I took direct action and seized the English throne, causing Robert Curthose to invade England in 1101. After a negotiated settlement, Henry I was confirmed King, but Robert accepted the treaty clearly with his fingers crossed, as he rebelled again and was defeated in 1106 at the Battle of Tinchebray. William De Mortain's problem was he backed Robert Curthose, and so was stripped of the Rape of Pevensey, and disappeared into the Tower of London for most of his remaining life. Pevensey Rape was gifted by Henry I in 1106 to Gilbert De L'Aigle I (Aquila) and his descendants. However, Henry I held onto Pevensey port, and so Gilbert became more interested in Seaford as a source of taxation income and an outlet for his produce. In 1160 the first chaplain of the Seaford church Peter, is mentioned in a document recording the consecration of the Leper Hospital just outside the town of Seaford (beside what is now St James' Trust in Blatchington Road). In 1181 Seaford had already moved its market, probably from near the Old Town Hall to The Crouch, because it was too close to the port facilities and there may have been competition for the space, which the market lost.

So, we are seeing signs of the town of Seaford beginning to prosper, and that would have encouraged a movement to the town from the agricultural feudal system in the surrounding countryside, which also was showing signs of prosperity, as Sutton still paid more tax than Seaford! That prosperity and increase in numbers demanded a place of worship that could cope with the numbers (and give a positive signal of success to visitors). In enlarging the church, this was done with the full support of Bishop of Chichester, Seffrid II (Bishop 1180-

1204) despite the Bishop having to deal with the aftermath of his own cathedral burning down in 1187! The significant event for me that has not been considered before, is the marriage in 1196 of Isabel de Warenne (daughter of Hamelin and Isabel) to Gilbert de L'Aigle III thus bringing together for the first time 2 of the 3 manors that controlled Seaford, and therefore investment in the town. I believe this was the trigger for Phase 2.

Aisles and Clerestory

Taylor proposes that this was done in 1120 AD by opening up the Norman arches to link the nave with its 2 aisles. I disagree. Because the 3 feet thick (0.9m) early Norman nave wall was built largely of unstructured material, supporting it while it is taking the full load of the main roof structure and cutting out the opening of a pre-existing decorative arch that does not have continuous voussoir blocks making up the load-bearing element is asking for trouble. Even now the exposed south western arch in the tower bay only supports its own weight, and does not have a roof structure to support. The photos above (**Fig 3 and Fig 5a)** show it has been

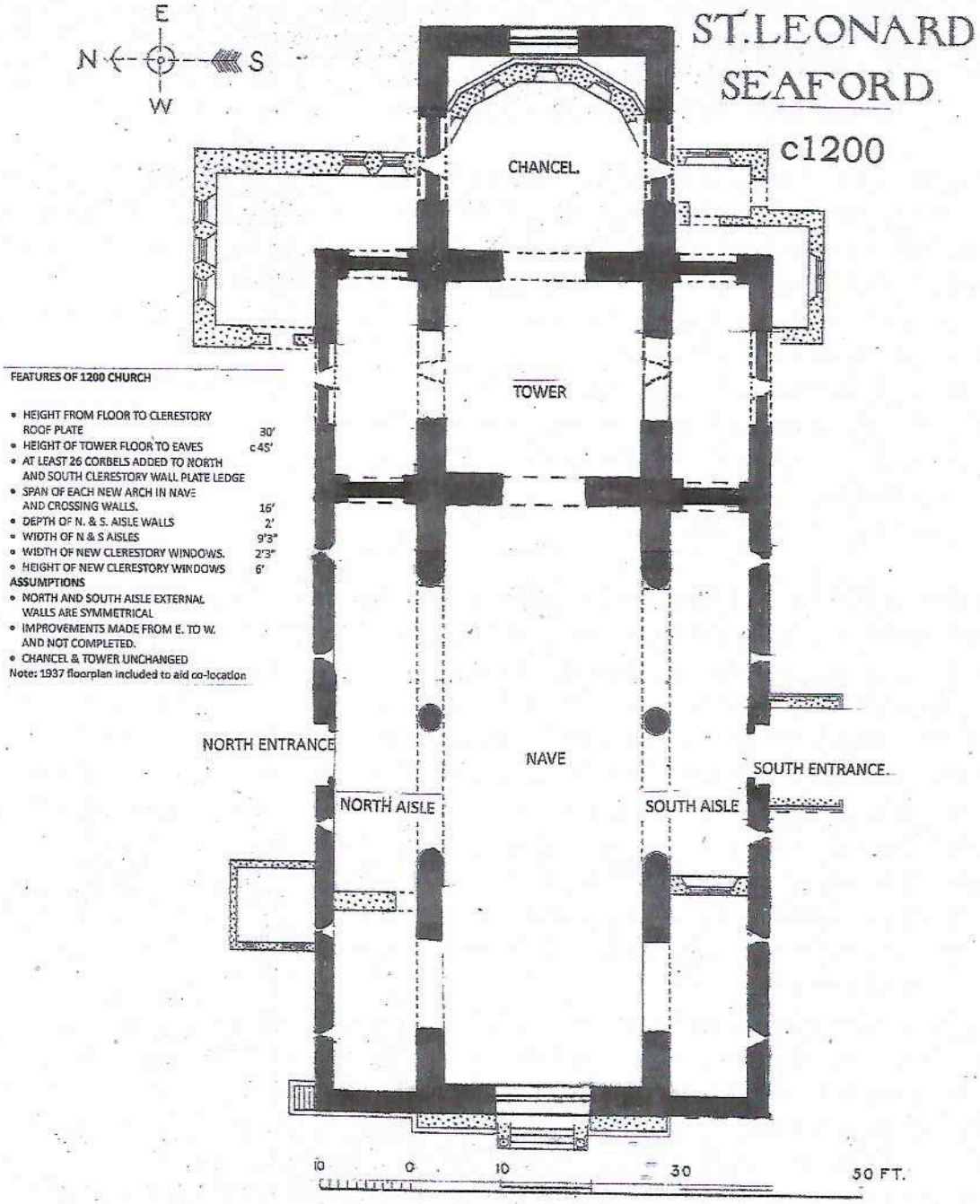


Fig 6 1200 AD The next phase, creating more area for worshippers

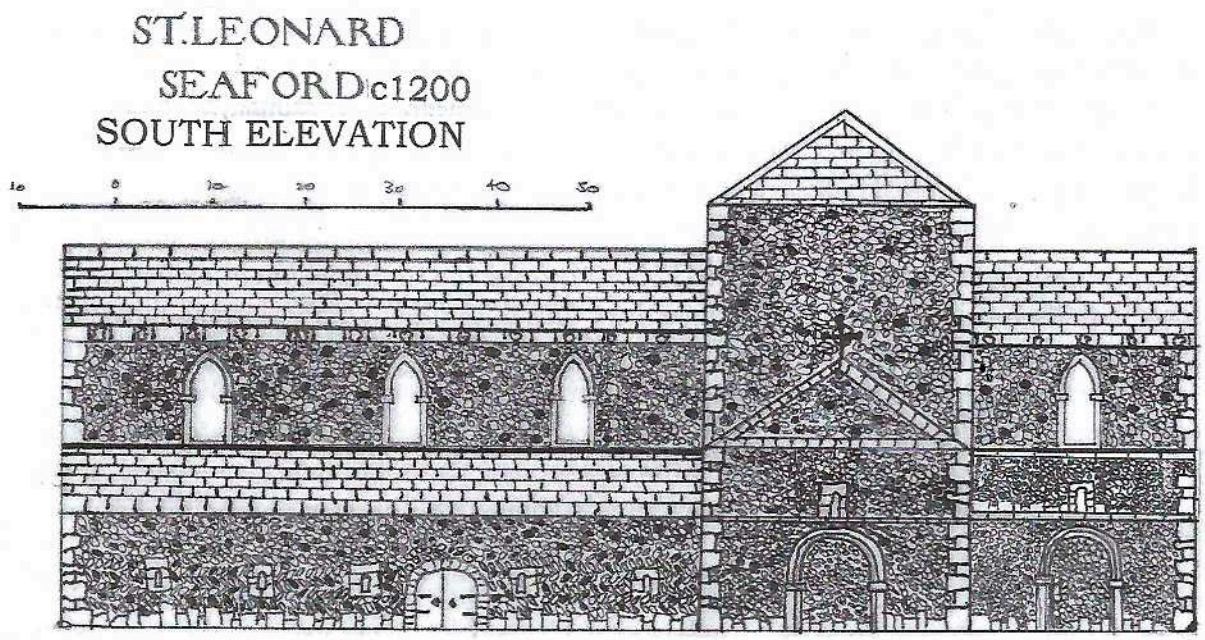


Fig 7 c1200 AD S Elevation of conjectural Norman Church at Seaford

repaired significantly with all sorts of odd materials over the centuries. The remaining question is how it did support the roof between 1200 and 1485, after which the tower replaced this part of the roof? I suspect the 2 bands of stone, and the arch of the new clerestory window have assisted in spreading the load, as would the retention of the original north and south entrance arches. Corbels inserted into the new upper band took the weight of the timber wall plate for the north and south aisle roofs.

I therefore conclude that there was no Taylor second phase, because this could only be achieved by demolishing the entire wall in the locations where the new arches were inserted. This is because there was no means of supporting the upper levels above the arches during the reconstruction phase- Acrow props and needles came centuries later as a solution for supporting existing upper masonry!

In my opinion, to achieve the creation of the aisles required the roof to be lifted off, the vertical cutting of the nave walls to build the new Gothic arches and the new clerestory with its windows above from the ground upwards. This new clerestory level with Gothic window openings coinciding with the new arches below, allowed the inserting of a proper ledge of 12 inches (0.3m) at the junction of the old 3' thick nave wall with the new 2' wide clerestory walls which formed a wall plate-bearing course for the upper timbers of a new north and south aisle. To reduce the dislocation of the congregation, this could be achieved, bay by bay working from the eastern nave bay to the western one thus keeping the nave, transept and chancel going during the works phase. To my mind, this is the only economic way of constructing the next phase. It is also a significant undertaking and demonstrates the commitment and financial support of the de Warenne and de L'Aigle families, now united in 1196. The Norman tower and chancel remained untouched.

Taylor points to a remaining Caen stone corbel (**Fig 8a**) '*at the extreme east end of the present south aisle (p23 and Fig 3 Plate 10)*' as evidence of the sole surviving bearing arrangement given to the upper timber wall plate of the south aisle roof. However this corbel now supports a strut bracing the south aisle roof, and there are no other corbels left in either north or south aisle walls so this is a piece of speculative work by Taylor. It is lower than the keystone of the tower Norman arch, and so could not have supported a wall-plate for the aisle roof if the aisle was created as Taylor suggests at 1120AD. Taylor says that its design points to an early date, but it could be equally argued that it's position indicates it is a recycled corbel of that date.

The corbel is so close to a part of the 1090 AD wall that was reconstructed when the new arch was created that it is unlikely in my view, to have been left is situ, without a purpose at the time of reconstruction. The other 3 aisle roof bracing struts are just sunk into the pier structure. I therefore suggest this solitary corbel was a recycled one, inserted in 1939 when the 2 aisle roof braces were inserted to support north and south aisle roofs.

New entrances and aisle windows

As the new aisles ran from the west end of the nave to the transepts, they covered the original entrance doorways and the blind arcading and original line of high level windows, as seen in the north tower vestry photo. So new façades needed to be presented to the visitor. This is best seen in **Fig 9** below. You need to imagine the original tower is still on the left of the picture, as the current tower does not exist yet, nor do the rectangular windows or the boiler/toilet extension. The new clerestory windows would have given more daylight inside, but not a lot. The floorplan above (**Fig 6**) shows new north and south entrances dressed in Caen stone.
The south entrance remains open to this day, but significantly altered in height, so the north wall blocked up entrance helps us envisage what it looked like. I have assumed both north and south facades were identical, as there is no reason not to. The spacing of the low-level narrow slit windows can also be extrapolated, as the remaining ones (a third was removed in 1929, but recorded before removal) show a spacing interval of 12 feet (3.66m) in most locations. These were unlikely to be glazed as they were narrow enough (5 inches 0.13m) wide by 14 inches (0.36m) high to keep out most of the rain and prevent unlawful ingress. The clerestory windows were likely glazed.

Fig 8a Stone corbel in south aisle

Fig 8b relocated corbels from roof

Corbels

This brings me to a lovely feature of the church that is often overlooked- the stone corbels on the north external wall(**Figs 8a, 8b & 9**). This shows the mischievous element amongst medieval masons, and when freshly carved, would have provided amusement for Seafordians before entering God's house! Given the west tower did not exist at this time, there would have been even more, and the same number on the south side too!

Fig 9a North façade of the church with 1200 doorway and slit windows (2 in view)

Fig 9b 26 new and old corbels along the north clerestory wall plate

Interlude – The French and Black Death arrive

A key strategic requirement for any English King at that time was to be able to ship troops over to France almost at a moment's notice. Because there was no English navy, the king depended

upon commercial trading ships to achieve this end. Seaford became a Limb of Hastings as a Cinque Port, being first mentioned in this role in a charter of Henry III in 1229. Shortly after, in 1241, the De L'Aigle line died out and the land passed to the Crown via various instruments, ending up with the Duchy of Lancaster. Seaford became more prominent in the national political scene by returning MP's to Parliament in 1298, by being granted an annual fair by King Edward I in 1301.

Tensions between France and England have already been referred to and these continued to simmer after 1200 AD, basically because the English King held land in France as a vassal of the French King (as seen in French eyes). These came to a head in 1337, generally recognised as the start of the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). From that point on, the Sussex coast was affected, first in 1340 by fear of attack by the French in 1340, then actual damage caused in the next year. The English victory at Crecy in 1346 gave a short respite, followed by a more deadly invasion of the bubonic plague (the Black Death) in 1348, which halved the population in the space of 2-3 years. This was followed in 1357, when it was reported that Seaford was 'for the most part burnt down'. It is believed that this took out the tower and chancel, and most of the south aisle of the church. To add insult to injury, Sutton's prebendal house was burnt down in 1377, as part of the wider French assault and landing at Saltdean which involved marching on Lewes and taking captives. This combination of war and plague was responsible for halting economic growth in the town, for a period after, until the Hundred Years War came to an end in 1453.

Seaford down but not out 1357-1485 AD

Although the people and economy of Seaford suffered significantly, such that between 1380 and 1384 the people of Seaford petitioned the King for postponement or remission of their tax burden, life continued in the town. The low economic conditions meant that the church received little attention until 1485, but that does not imply that it remained a burnt building. I conclude this for a number of reasons

a) There were 13 vicars during the period 1334 and 1478, and Seaford was under the oversight of the Diocese, through occasional Bishop Visitations, through control of tithes.

b) There were superior landlords who had a financial stake in the continued existence of the town i.e. i) Prior of St Pancras, ii) the De Warenne family until Joan's death in 1361 and thereafter the Pelhams, iii) the Duchy of Lancaster, iv) Michelham Priory (for Chinting), v) Robertsbridge Priory (for Sutton).

c) Court Rolls for the period continue to write to the administrators of Seaford giving instructions. There are 25 references to Seaford during the period 1351 and 1476 including references regarding the control of the port of Seaford. Thus, Seaford did have a commercial element to its economy, not just an agricultural one.

I therefore consider it unlikely that Seaford Church would be allowed to remain a burnt structure for this period, given the above interests in keeping the town going.

Accordingly, I suggest that the people of Seaford worshipped in a repaired structure with a floorplan similar to the one adopted in 1485, i.e. combined nave/chancel and 2 aisles only. This is based on the assumption that the destruction of the transept, tower and chancel provided more than enough building materials on site to carry out this work of repair which could be done by local builders not skilled masons. It is likely that after the fire, the north aisle and nave roofs were intact, so all than needed to be rebuilt was the south nave for a smaller congregation. This held the line of a viable place of worship until the next important step around 1485. This repair work could have been done as early as 1386/7 under vicar Roger Ridere.

Phase 3 c1485 AD Regeneration of a sort (Figs 10a & 10b)

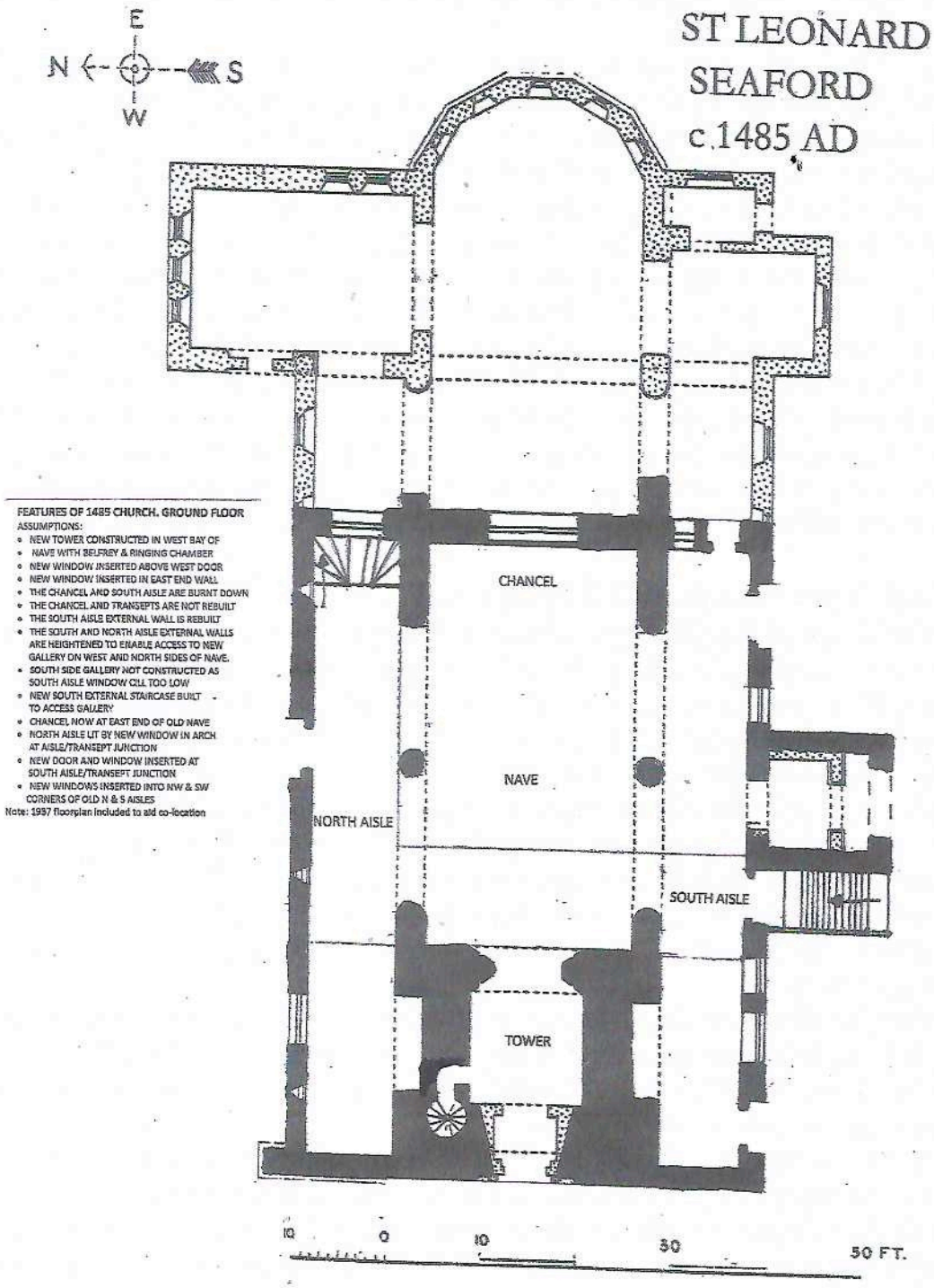


Fig 10a 1485 Ground Floor plan of renovated church

Background for this Phase

Taylor gives good arguments for a date of 1485 (Taylor p 43) and I am happy to accept this. It is clear by the work that was done in this phase that there was some restoration of civic pride, and hope for the port also. I conclude this as the needs addressed by this Phase were many.

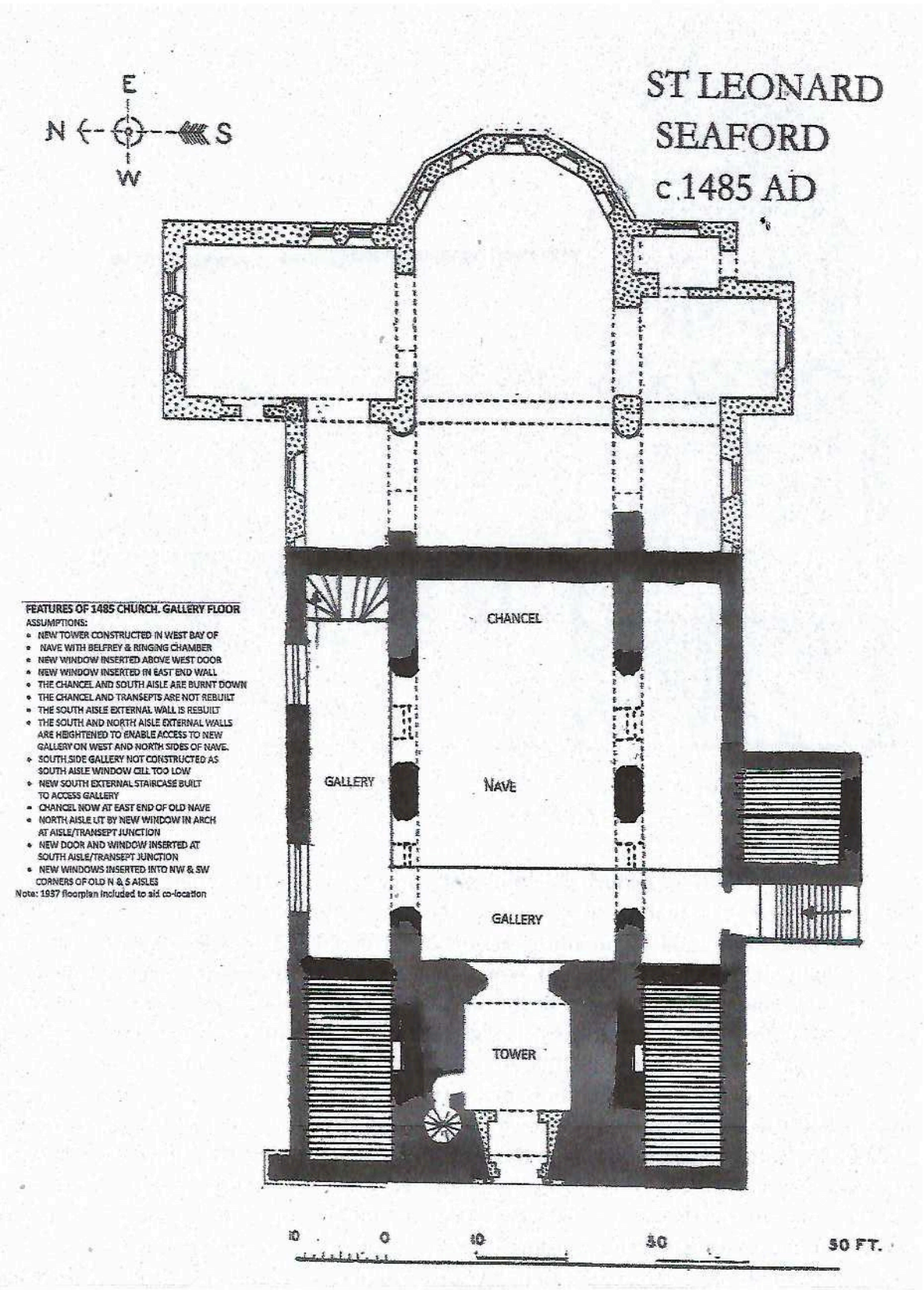


Fig 10b 1485 Gallery Floor Plan of Church

I can think of

a) The liturgical need to create a better chancel arrangement, which had the effect of removing floorspace for worshippers
b) The need to carry out essential repairs (always an ongoing duty!)

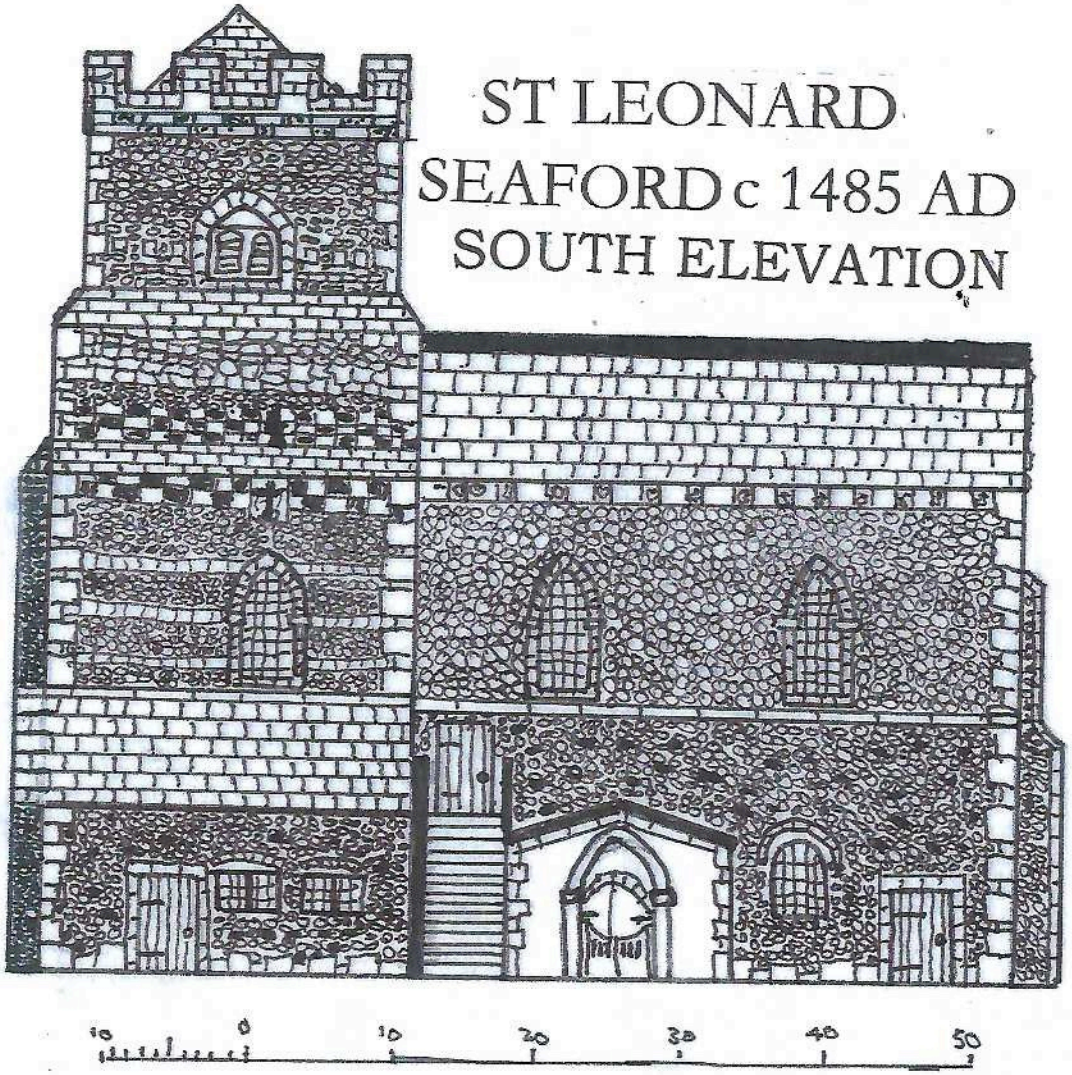


Fig 10 c C1485 The south elevation with new tower and no separate chancel

c) The desire to create a feature that could be seen from the sea -Taylor mentions the will of Richard Dumbrill in 1504 bequeathing a sum of £3 6s 8d (£3.33p) for wax for the 'Saynt Erasmus light' in Seaford Church (p48). A new tower would be just the place for this, given the height of the new tower compared to the surrounding settlement. The tower may also have been required for structural purposes also, given it was built entirely within the westernmost nave 'cell' but independent of the 1090 AD walls it enclosed. A great deal of thought was put into this tower's design and decoration, demonstrating clearly its importance in this phase of work. It had the adverse consequence of taking up floorspace that worshippers previously used. To my mind therefore it appears this project was a statement of confidence in Seaford's future, given that there is no record of generous wealthy benefactors despite the Duchy of Lancaster and the Fitzalan family being the major landlords of the town. (I discount the Prior!)

d) The loss of floorspace is a major consideration in my mind for the arguing the insertion of the gallery at this date. The choice was to build out or build up, and the response is a no-brainer given the cost of inserting a timber gallery structure in the clerestoried nave compared to the cost of building walls, roofs etc. The gallery would harmonise with the east side of the nave tower, and the lifting of the north and south aisle external walls and the insertion of an external flight of access stairs beside the existing south entrance would be easy. The position of the clerestory windows required a flat or low-pitched roof draining to a valley gutter inside the new parapets of the 2 aisles. This feature may be a reason why much later on it was removed,

and the main roof brought down to parapet level, but that Is for a later discussion in this paper, as low-pitched roofs can cause real maintenance problems during periods of heavy rainfall. The gallery compensated for the loss of floorspace caused by the tower and chancel requirement.

e) The opportunity to rebuild the north and south aisle walls (rather poorly with recycled materials!) enabled bigger windows to be inserted without the use of skilled masons. The north aisle door was blocked up at this stage.

f) A door was inserted in the west end at this stage as argued by Taylor (p46).

g) I have shown the east end of the church without a window. Clearly the arch between the earlier nave and transept had been blocked, and I have assumed that economies needed to be made. I am happy if a window was inserted in this option as a viable alternative!

h) The 1780 Lambert drawing (**Fig 13**) and the 1861 Wynter photo (**Fig 4**) show a sloping joint line in the east end of the south aisle demonstrating the raising of the south aisle external wall predated Phase 4, confirming the common-sense conclusion that more space for worshippers was needed in 1485.

The above points reflect a degree of civic pride illustrated by the care in the design of the tower, with economy (recycled materials), and insertion of a gallery rather than enlargement of the church's footprint. It is not recorded if a bell or bells were installed in the tower at this time. 1724 is the first date when a peal of 'five bells new cast' is recorded.

It is possible that the churchyard was extended south by this time to its present boundaries. This event took place sometime during this period, given that the population of the town fell after this phase according to Taylor (p92). The differing heights of parts of the churchyard is accounted for by the number of burials that had taken place during the 800 years that it received burials.

The appearance of the church is confirmed in the first image I can find depicting the church, not as a symbol, but as a building with a tower at the west end and a high nave and no chancel. It is in the drawing produced in the *'Survey made by Sir Thomas Palmere Knight and Mister Waltar Couerte esquire Deputie Lieutenants of her Majesties Countie of Sussex of all the places of descente alongste the sea coaste of the said Shire'*. An extract of it showing Seaford Bay is produced here as **Fig 11.**

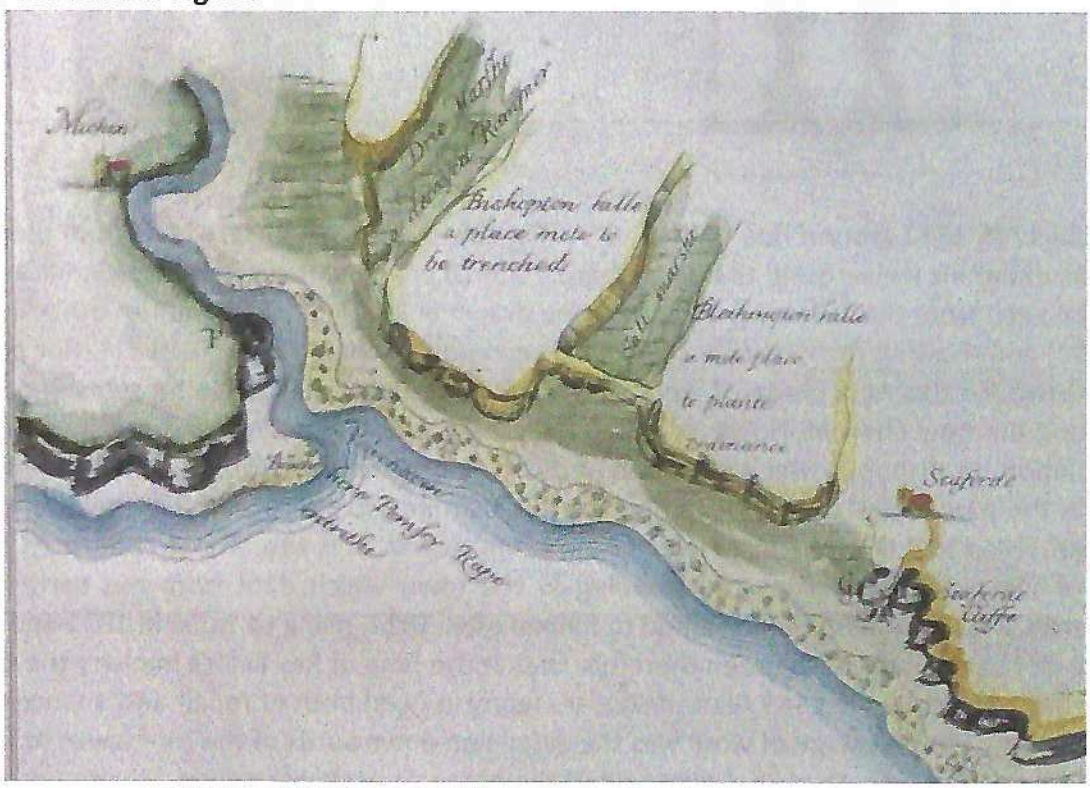
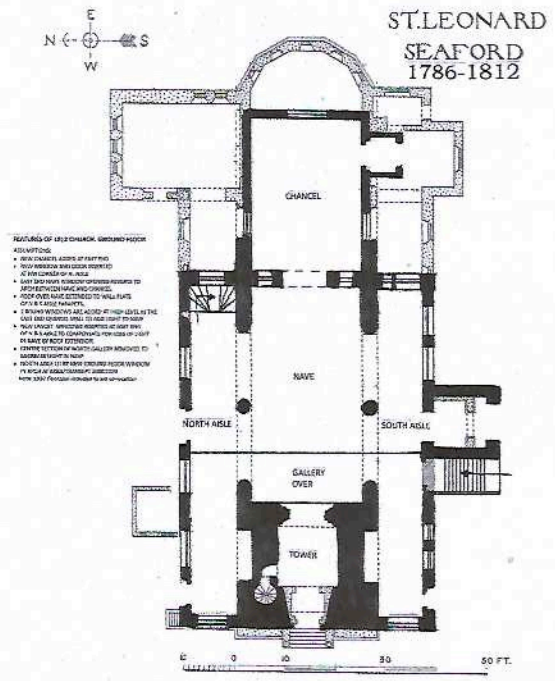


Fig 11. 1587 Survey of Sussex coast -detail Courtesy of The Keep

Phase 4 1785-1812 The resurgence of civic pride

Despite Taylor's meticulous research, the Clergy of the Church of England Database https://theclergydatabase.org.uk/ states Seaford vicar Rev. Thomas Evans was appointed on 12 May 1785, having been curate at Cuckfield, Sussex since his appointment there on 25 December 1771, His tenure at Cuckfield showed him to be a diligent pastoral curate to an often-absent vicar, who left all registrations to his curate. He also oversaw the rebuilding of the new vicarage. He therefore demonstrated an unusual practical skillset! His 2 predecessor vicars at Seaford, Rev. Thomas Hurdis and Rev. Jonathan Morgan were also largely absentee vicars, with Seaford's registrations falling on the shoulders of the curates at the time. Rev. Thomas Evans took a very different view of his calling. He got involved in the murky politics of Parliamentary elections and in 1795 appeared in his pulpit with a black eye and his arm in a sling- the result of a fist fight with Thomas Harben! However, he was committed to the town and was elected Bailiff twice in 1808 and 1810. His contribution to the work of the church in the parish was significant and lasting. He was also a magistrate, and on 2 April 1812 was presented with a very elegant silver vase as a thank you for his 'exemplary conduct as a Magistrate of that port'.



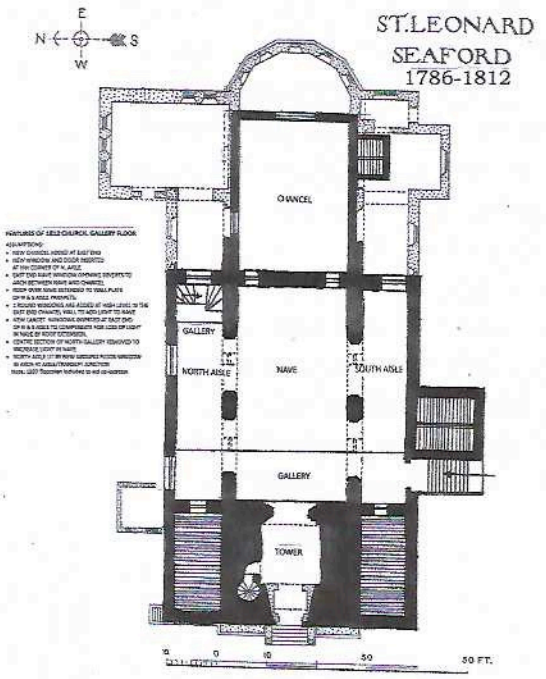


Fig 12a 1786-1812 ground floor plan **Fig 12b 1786-1812 gallery level floor plan**

It was under his stewardship that St Leonard's church changed its appearance significantly as can be seen from the following 2 images, one drawn in 1780 (**Fig 13**), and the other in 1850 (**Fig 14**) and showing the new chancel which was reported completed by 1812 (Taylor p. 56). The driver for this new phase of work was the freeing up of floorspace for worshippers, by creating the new chancel. However this was in the context of a slow and steady growth in population. In Bishop Bower's visitation in 1724, it was recorded that 70 households lived within the parish, and by 1801 the Church's Baptism Register recorded a population of 847 people, rising to 1,001 ten years later in the same record. This situation is confirmed by the age of the oldest properties still standing in the town which date from the early 1700's onwards. The population then seemed to flatline after 1811, rising to 1,098 in 1831 and 1,055 in the 1841 census. It can be seen therefore that at the time of Rev Evan's ministry the church had changed little since 1485 AD and so was clearly in need both of repair and an increase in its capacity. The first stage of work was the extension downwards of the roof eaves to the external north and south aisle. Getting rid of the parapets probably solved a major persistent

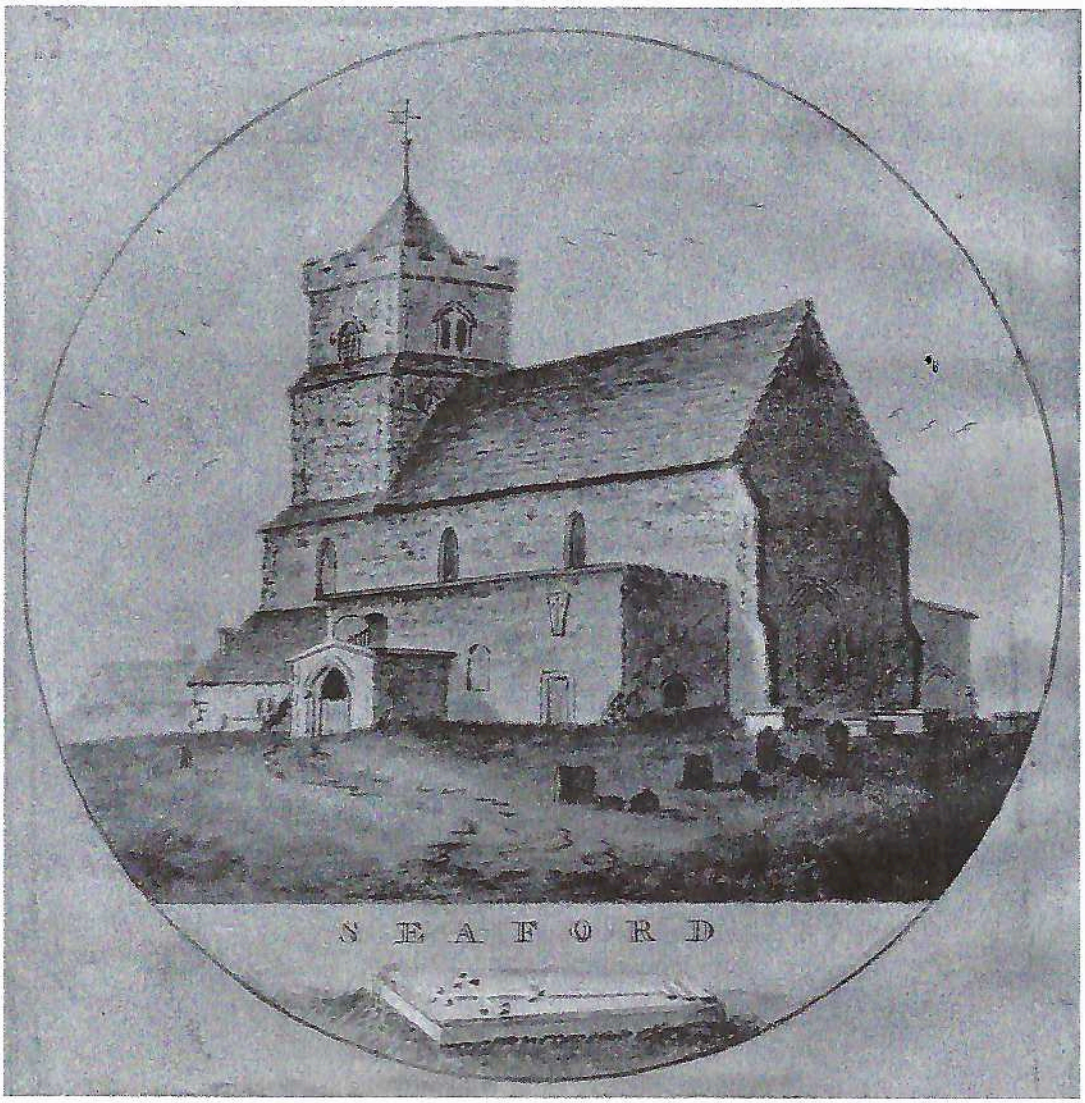


Fig 13 1780 St Leonard's from SE by James Lambert Courtesy of Taylor

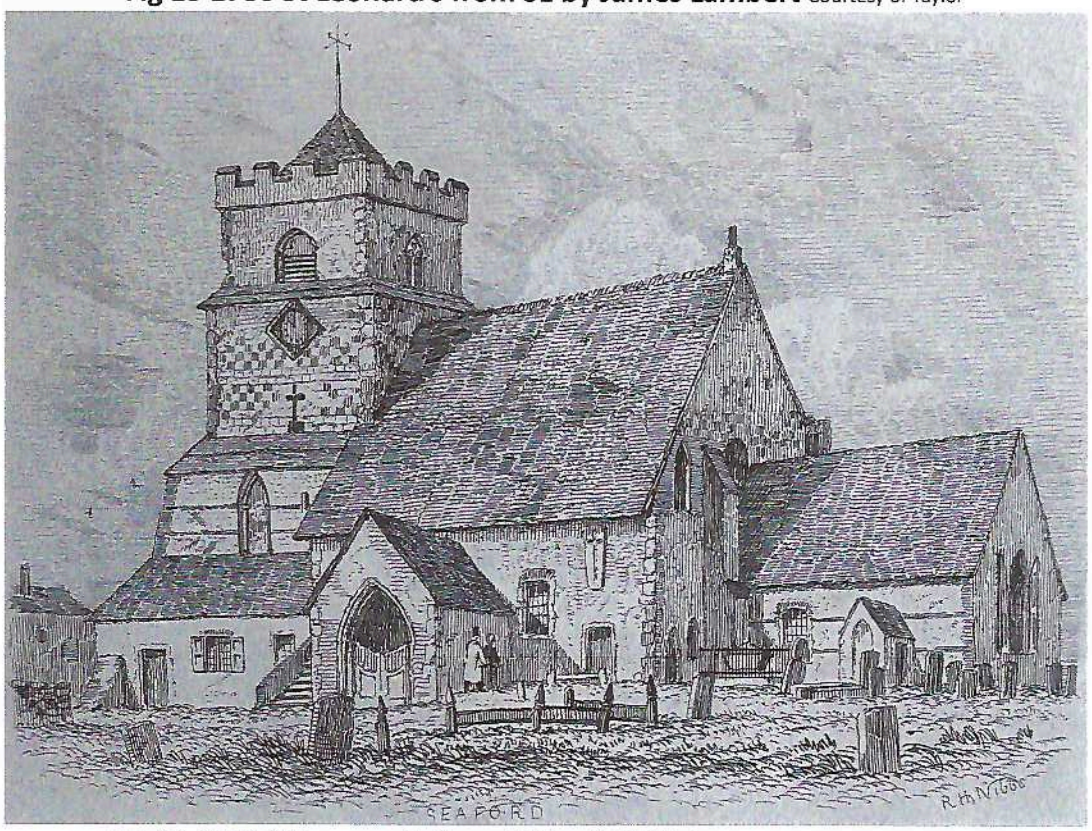


Fig 14 1850 St Leonard's from SE by R H Nibbs Courtesy of Seaford Museum

roof leak problem! New replacement clerestory level windows were inserted in the east wall of the nave, and we know from an 1802 drawing by Henry Petrie (**Fig 15**), that windows were inserted at the same level in the western end of the 2 aisles. Two circular windows were inserted in the east end nave wall above the roof line, to increase natural lighting in the nave.

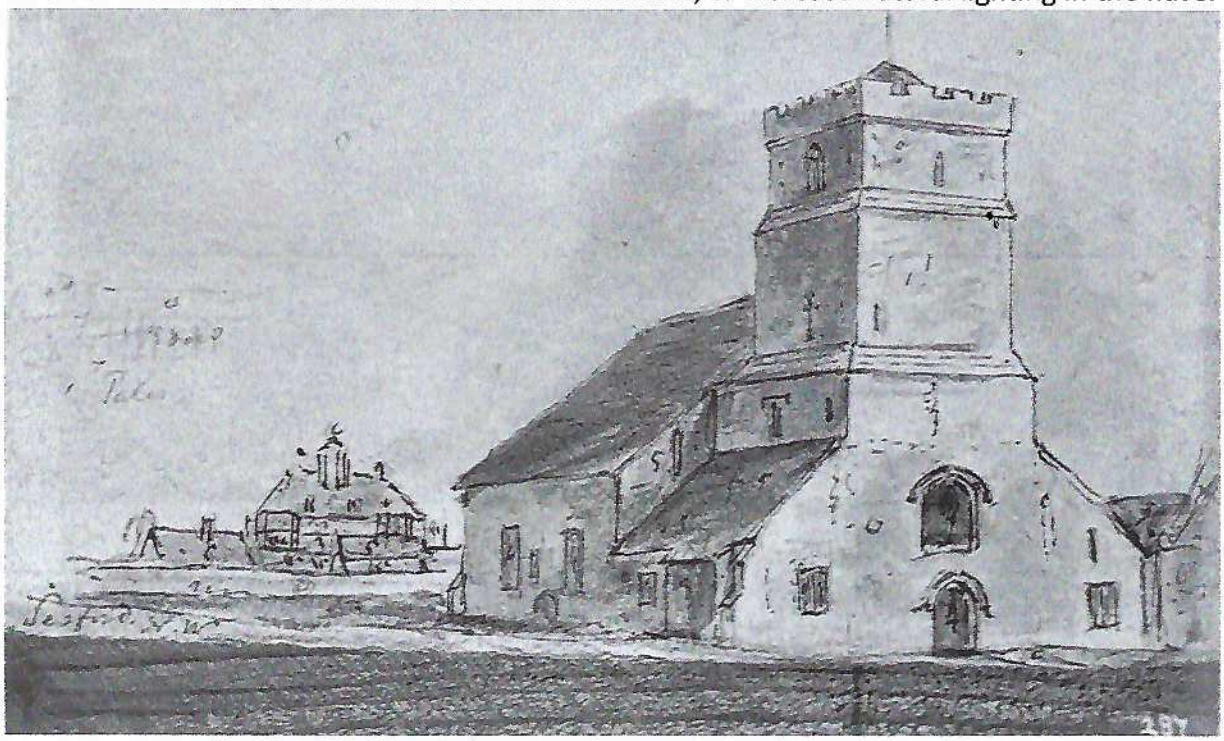


Fig 15 1802 Church from NW by Henry Petrie Courtesy of Sussex Past

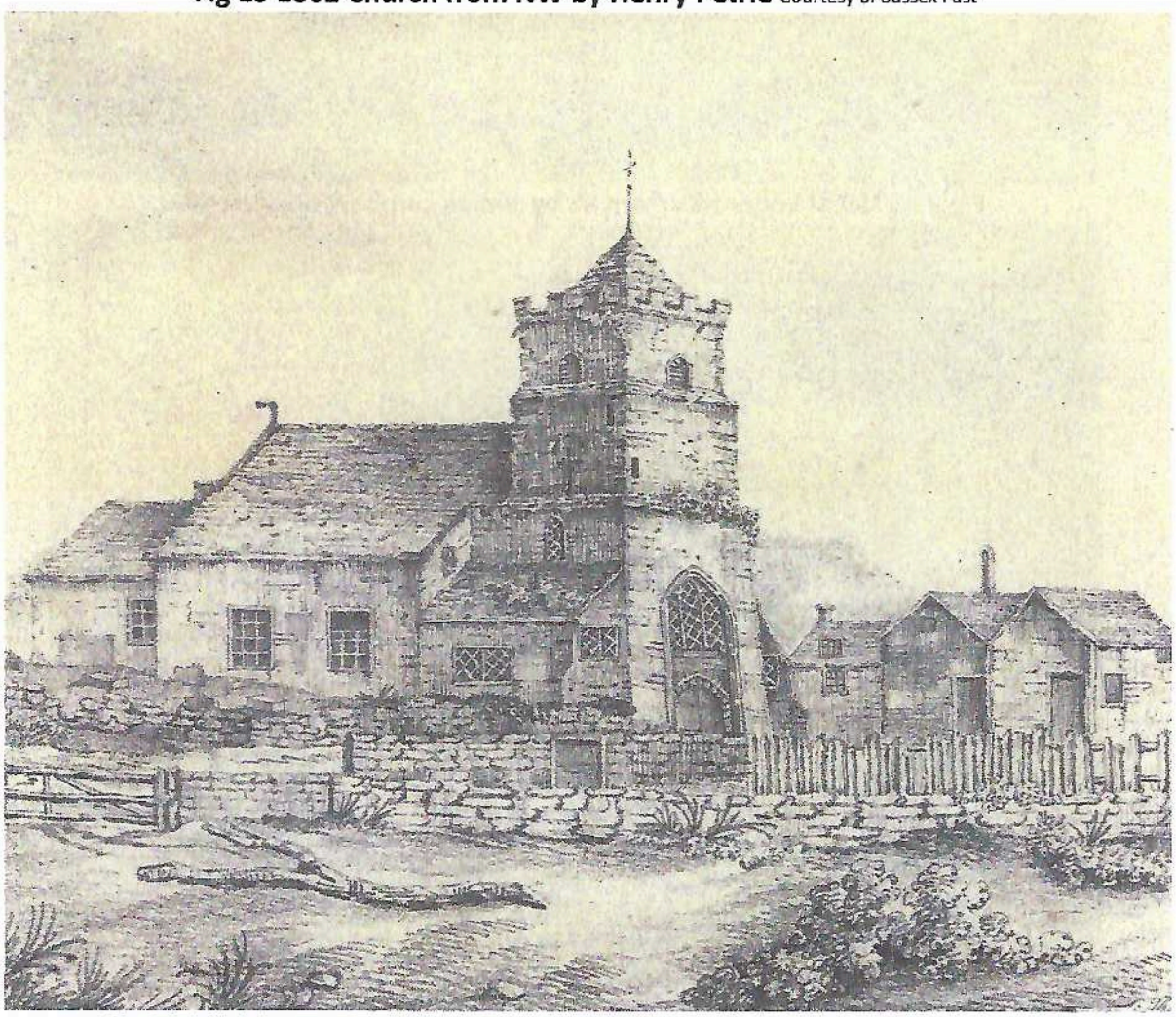


Fig 16 1832 St Leonard's from the NW artist not known Courtesy of Seaford Museum

The triangular infill panel above the south aisle in the RH Nibbs image (**Fig 14**) shows the infill was timber studding and vertical tile hung- signs of economic restraint!! The gallery was still in place, but a plan by Billings the 1861 architect (**Fig 17**) shows that most of the north aisle section had gone by 1861 (Taylor Plate 7). The addition of a chancel was done after 1802 as it does not appear in the 1802 Petrie drawings. It included a boiler for the first time as a vertical metal flue appears in the 1832 drawing by an unknown artist (**Fig 16**). Rev. Evans was clearly a practical man too!

The drawings include surrounding properties and they give the town of Seaford a very bucolic air, rather than an urban one, with 5-barred gates in the 1832 one (**Fig 16**), the old slaughterhouse (**Fig 15**) where now is the Old School Surgery. Most of the windows of the church would not look out of place in a domestic setting rather than adopting an ecclesiastical architectural language. Indeed, when it was demolished in 1861 it was described in *The Builder* as 'a square brick apartment with its flat, lathed and plastered ceiling and sash windows!'. The writer clearly hated it!

Fig 15 is of particular interest as it shows both Hurdis House, the Seaford home of Rev. James Hurdis, the previous absentee vicar, which was to burn down in 1823, and the church in his care which was improved by Rev. Thomas Evans, his successor. It is the only known image of this first Hurdis House identifiable by the distinctive cupola on the roof.

Phase 5 1858-62 AD A church fit for a town by the sea

By this time, Seaford had a vicar, Rev. James Carnegie, who had served the parish for 36 years, despite not having a specific vicarage. Born in Chichester in 1793, after leaving Emmanuel, Cambridge, he was ordained in 1819, having been licenced as curate at Waldron, Sussex (west of Heathfield), in October 1818, and then vicar at Littlehampton in March 1823, he was swiftly appointed as vicar of Seaford on 21 January 1824. He was therefore fast-tracked to his second and final parish in Sussex where he stayed until his death in 1864. His first recorded baptism took place on 11 April 1824 and his last one on 21 September 1862 when his curate took over. Rev. Carnegie died on 13 February 1864 aged 69, so he was able to see the re-opening and consecration of the church on 4 July 1862. He clearly followed the example of Rev. Thomas Evans in carrying out his sacramental duties in person. He is reported to have introduced the organ into St Leonard's in 1840 according to an article in the Brighton Gazette of 16 July 1840. Located in the gallery, it was moved to the chancel in the 1861 works.

Supported by local benefactor John Purcell Fitzgerald, Rev. Carnegie was involved in a number of ventures to assist those under his care. These included the National School in Steyne Road, the support of the first convalescent home in England designed to relieve bed-blocking in London hospitals. This was housed in Augusta House (later known as Talland House) in Seaford High Street. He was also an original trustee of the newly-created Fitzgerald Charity, established in 1858. With the coming of the railway, the gasworks, and the influence of a small group of entrepreneurs, Seaford was beginning to emerge from being a large fishing village run by a long-established Town Corporation, to becoming a town with aspirations to be a resort to complement Eastbourne and Brighton. For the first time, the town could attract external investment to complement the wealth of local landowners and influential families.

The process involved in producing the result shown in **Fig 17** is well covered by Taylor's book, involving significant work including the demolition of the east wall of the nave, together with the chancel, restoring the clerestory windows, and building a full height transept, and entirely new chancel and vestry and finally building a new south door and porch where the old opening was. The western end of the south aisle with its staircase to the gallery was removed, and the old 1090AD decorative arch at the external base of the tower was exposed for the first time since 1200 AD. The interior was furnished with central heating, and pews

filled the nave and

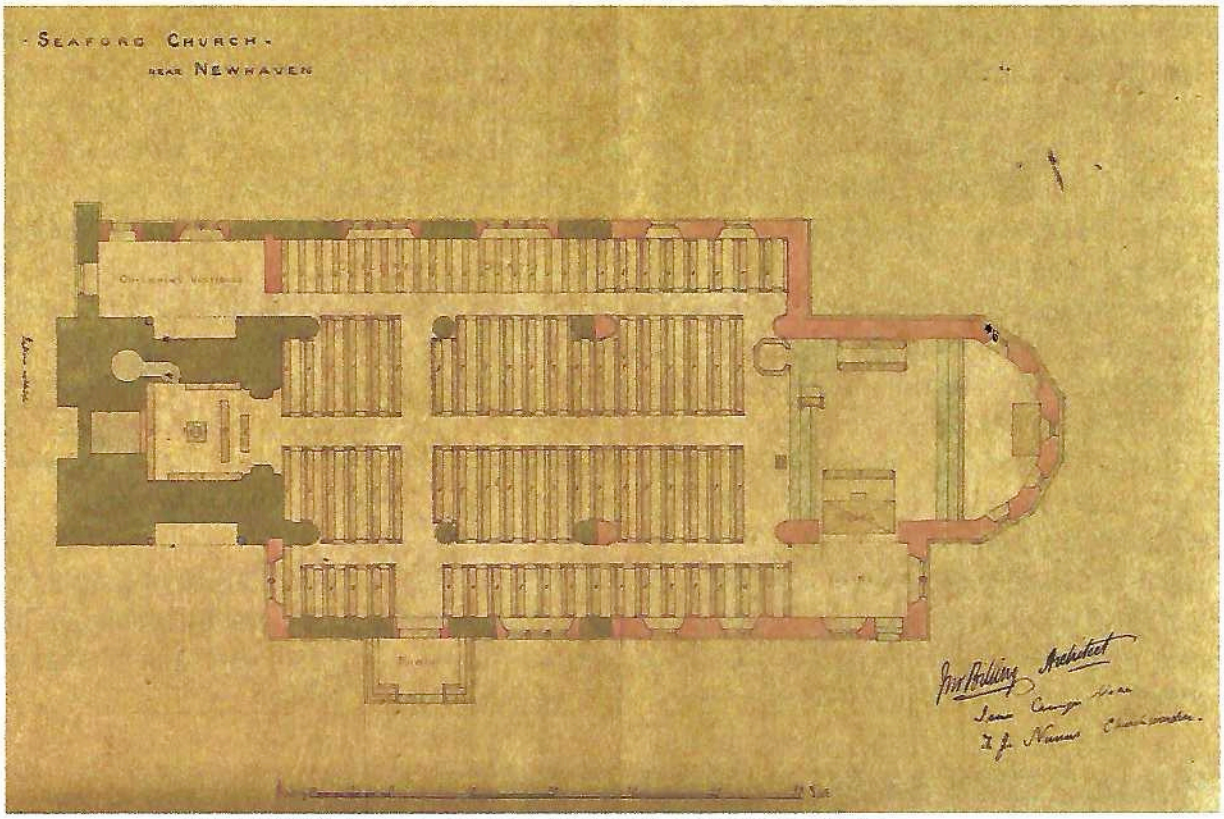


Fig 17 1861 Approved plan of the church renovations Courtesy of PCC

transepts, creating space for 600 people. Although Billing's drawing does not show it, it is likely that, in the children's vestibule, was the free-standing coal-fired boiler that heated the church through large section cast-iron pipes, the flue being embedded in the north aisle wall beside the junction with the wall that enclosed the vestibule. The tower was left untouched. The full list of works is given by Taylor (pp 63-5). All this work was achieved in nine months, which is amazing. The neglect of investment in the tower came back to bite the church team, as in 1882 a report on its condition was published and some works were commissioned to put it right by local builder C. Morling Ltd. Not all the work advised by the architect was done, due to shortage of funds.

During this last period, other denominations entered the town, giving choice of churchmanship to Christians. In December 1877 the foundation stone of the Congregational Church was laid in Clinton Place. In 1894, permission was given to build a Wesleyan Chapel in Steyne Road, and in 1900 a tin-roofed Baptist Church was erected in the front garden of Lawn House, Church Street. This divided the generosity of the Christian community because there were more objects requiring investment or maintenance.

Phase 6 1902 onwards-Bits and pieces added

1902 has been chosen, as it was the date when the additional floorspace was added to the north-east corner of the church. Variously described as 'an annexe' (Taylor) 'the north transept' (Usherwood) and a 'chapel of Remembrance', it is now known as the 'Holy Spirit Chapel'. This space fits rather awkwardly when used to provide seating for major events when the church is filled to capacity, and so has had a variety of uses since 1902. It is regularly used for prayer during Holy Communion and has even been known to be used as a changing room for the participants of the annual Nativity play, hosting shepherds, wise men, sheep and the occasional camel!

In 1909 a new organ was fitted, taking up the clergy vestry space with its pipes and blower equipment. But this proved inadequate for the purpose, and so in 1927 the south aisle was

extended, to create a small curate's vestry, and a new clergy vestry added, (**Fig 18**). This projected into the churchyard, but was integrated in its architectural detailing with the flint

Fig 18 1927 new clergy vestry and organ chamber room, SE corner Courtesy of Seaford Museum

and varied brick courses used on that façade. In 1965 the curate's vestry was taken over by further organ blower equipment creating the arrangement that exists to this day.

In 1927, at the same time as the organ re-arrangements required extra floorspace, so the toilet and heating arrangements entered the 20th century when the NW corner of the church had a new basement boiler room added, accessed by steep steps from a new landing outside the choir vestry external door. This removed the old boiler from the choir vestry, the existing boiler flue was built from the basement to join the ground floor flue, and a narrow door inserted in a new opening in the north aisle wall to give access to a new cloakroom with wash hand basin, and a new WC.

In 2006, a major investment was made to remove the pews in the body of the church and replace them with stackable chairs. A somewhat controversial move, but fully supported financially by the congregation. This involved stripping the timber flooring which had decayed in parts, on which the pews sat, exposing the earth floor and several graves and family crypts, for the first time since 1861. A detailed photographic record was made of the building progress, and an archaeological study made of the exposed surfaces (J. Sygrave). **Fig 19** is taken from this report. It was a rather cursory report, and contains some assumptions that were wrong at the time (the contents of Crypt 1 for example) and corrected by a detailed study by SEAMIG https://www.seamig.org.uk/ which is available online.

Crypt 1 contained 5 coffins, containing the remains of James Hurdis (died 8 October 1816) and Ann Hurdis (died 3 January 1795), Captain George Clarke Hurdis (died 1858) and his wife Sarah (died 11 February 1851) and Sarah Hurdis(1778-1851). All are commemorated on 2 tablets in the church. All were therefore in place by the time of the rebuilding of 1861. It can therefore be assumed from the dates, that the vault was created in the old church in the Phase 4 period, when Ann was reinterred with her husband in a new crypt built for the family in 1816 in the nave after the chancel was built.

Crypt 2 contained a lead and timber coffin broken in antiquity, containing a child/adolescent's remains whose identity cannot be established from church records. Its location is in the tower

crossing area of the Phase 1 scheme, and it could have been buried there at any time up to the Phase 4 works. It would have been an external vault enclosed within the new Phase 5 church. It remains a puzzle.

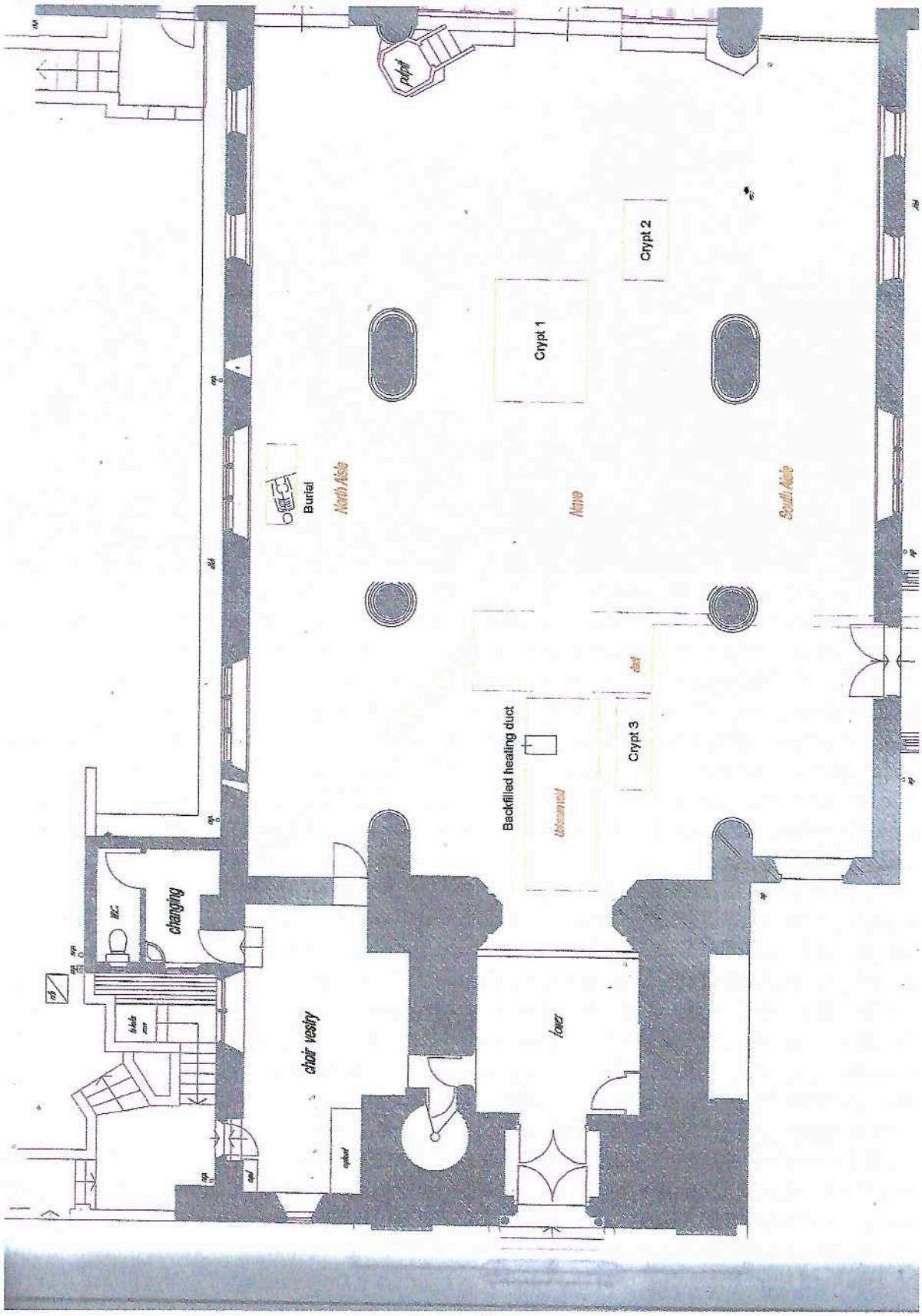


Fig 19 2006 Survey of nave floor by ASE Courtesy of ASE

Crypt 3 contained a lead and wooden coffin broken in antiquity, and appeared to contain no human remains, or identification on the coffin. It is in the oldest part of the church and so undatable as a consequence.

Burial in the north aisle 450mm below the original floor surface just north of the north door of the time. This aisle was built as part of Phase 2 and so the body is likely to have been buried within the church walls after 1200AD.
30 individual bones were found in a line that is on the centreline of the original 1090 transepts and crossing. They were mapped and left in situ under the new floor structure as were all 3 crypts and the burial remains. Their origin and dating is a mystery and their present location gives us no clues about the various parts of the building where they were located.
The removal of the pews in 2006 has made the nave of the church much more versatile in its use, and highlights the need for more adequate and flexible facilities. So, in 2022, the PCC resolved to seek to enclose the Holy Spirit chapel by a screen separating it from the chancel, and close the north aisle access by inserting a glazed screen and wall and providing a ramp to deal with the change of levels and provide barrier-free access. The toilet facilities are to be improved by providing separate male and female WC's and a disabled WC and a basic kitchen in the tower atrium. It can be seen that this is a continuation of the history of St Leonard's seeking to meet the needs of the town century by century.
2026.02.27 CAG

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