



## St. Boniface Old Church - Bonchurch

The old church of St. Boniface in Bonchurch, regarded as of Saxon origin, remains one of the most complete Norman buildings on the Isle of Wight.

The story of this old church (as we know it today) begins in France, in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in a small village (now) called *La Vieille-Lyre*, about 30 miles from the Channel coast of Normandy. One of many monasteries to spring up in this part of France was **L'Abbaye Notre-Dame de Lyre** (The Abbey of our Lady of Lyre) and was completed in 1046.

The founder of Lyre Abbey was William FitzObern who was a relative, a close councillor and one of the proven companions of William the Conqueror. He was known to have fought in the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and after the Norman Conquest, settled in southern England and was made Earl of Wessex and later, Earl of Hereford. FitzObern became one of the great magnates of early Norman England, acquiring extensive lands there, the income from which enabled him to make generous donations to the Lyre Abbey, which was described in the *Domesday Book* as among the Norman abbeys with the greatest land-holdings in England.



Shortly after the Norman Conquest a party of monks from Lyre Abbey crossed the Channel and landed on the beach at Bonchurch. Moving inland, the first thing they came across was the site of an old Saxon church a few hundred yards from the beach. They restored the church in the Norman style, with completion and consecration taking place in 1070.

The earlier Saxon church on the site was one of several in England dedicated to Winfrid Boniface, who was born in the Devon town of Crediton, near Exeter in 675 AD, and later moved to a monastery in Nursling, near Southampton. He was a leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon mission to the Germanic parts of the Frankish Empire in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. He founded many churches in Germany and was made archbishop of Mainz by Pope Gregory III. He was martyred on his death in 754 AD to become Saint Boniface, and is venerated in the Christian church as well as being strongly venerated today by German Catholics. In 2019, Devon County Council, with the support of the Anglican and Catholic churches in Exeter and Plymouth, officially recognised St. Boniface as the Patron Saint of Devon.

Although this tiny church remains fundamentally Norman, various alterations and additions have been made over the centuries. The chancel is essentially 13<sup>th</sup> century but some windows are Medieval or late Tudor and the studded south door is probably 17<sup>th</sup> century, as is the Flemish wooden cross behind the altar. The bellcote and the bell itself, date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the south porch being



added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. High up on the north wall of the nave are the remains of a wall painting that is the only surviving example of Romanesque paintings on the Island. In 1848 a new parish church was opened further up the hill and the demolition of the old church was discussed, but thankfully this did not happen. Substantial restoration work was done in 1923 and 1931 and regular maintenance is required to ensure that St. Boniface Old Church remains open to this day.

The two photographs date from the 1870s and are from my personal collection. The top one is a view of the church looking north-east, taken from a neighbouring field. The lower one is of a small coastal barge, possibly delivering coal, anchored in Monks Bay – so named because it was where the monks from Lyre first landed! Note the Victorian bathing machines – they weren't just on Ventnor beach.