Reconstructing the Development of Somerset's Early Medieval Church

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New Approaches to Understanding the Relationships between Post-Roman Church Sites, Early Medieval Minsters and Royal *Villae* in the South-West of England

Carole Lomas

Front cover: St Michael's church, Clapton in Gordano, Somerset (author). Back cover: St Michael's church, Milverton, Somerset (author).

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Acknowledgements

In memory of my father, Patrick John Jennings 1924-2012,
who taught me how to think laterally in order to find solutions.

Abbreviations for published primary sources

ASC	Swanton, M.J. (trans. and ed.) 1997. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, London.
Bath *Acta*	Ramsey, F. M. R. (ed.) 1995. *English Episcopal Acta: Bath and Wells 1061-1205*, Vol. 10, Oxford.
Bede	Latham, R.E. 1990. *Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, London.
DB	Thorn, C. and Thorn, F. 1980. *Domesday Book 8: Somerset*, Chichester.
Drokensford	Hobhouse, Bishop. (ed.) 1887. *Calendar of the Register of John de Drokensford, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1309-1329*, Somerset Record Society 1.
Gifford	Holmes. T.S. (ed.) 1899. *The registers of Walter Gifford, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1265-6, and of Henry Bowett, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1401-7*, Somerset Record Society 13.
Hereford *Acta*	Barrow, J. (ed.) 1993. *English Episcopal Acta: Hereford 1079-1234*, Vol. 7, Oxford.
Ralph	Holmes. T.S. (ed.) 1896. *The Register of Ralph of Shrewsbury, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1329-1363; from the original in the Registry at Wells*, 2 Vols. Vol. 1 = Somerset Record Society Vol. 9 and Vol. 2 = Somerset Record Society Vol. 10.
Sawyer or S.	Sawyer, P. *The Electronic Sawyer* accessed online (http://www.esawyer.org.uk/about/index.html). Charters are as numbered and described in the *Electronic Sawyer* and any Latin quotations are copied from this database.
Taxatio	Record Commission 1802b. *Taxatio Ecclesastica* accessed online via Humanities Research Institute based at Sheffield University accessed online (https://www.dhi.ac.uk/taxatio/).

Abbreviations in the text

AP	Ancient parish (Youngs 1980)
Bp	Bishop
C as in 19thC	Century
CPAT	Clywd-Powys Archaeological Trust
DB	Domesday Book
Digimap	Maps downloaded from EDINA Historic Digimap Service (EDINA Digimap Ordnance Survey Service, http://digimap.edina.ac.uk/digimap).
Ed. Eds	Editor / Editors
EP	Ecclesiastical parish (Youngs 1980)
fn(s)	Footnote(s)
HER No.	Historic Environment Record number
No. Nos	Number(s)
OE	Old English
OS	Ordnance Survey
PRN	Primary Reference Number
SANHS	Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society
SCC	Somerset County Council
Som. HER No.	Somerset Historic Environment Record
Trans.	Translator
Values for example, £5 10s 2d	Five pounds, ten shillings [20s = £1] and two pennies [12d = 1s]
VCH	Victoria County History of Somerset
Vol.	Volume

Chapter 1

Introduction

Research context

The research discussed below uses Somerset as a case study to consider how the ecclesiastical landscape was transformed across the British Isles between the 6th and 11th centuries. This is not a new question and it is difficult to answer, not just for Somerset but across the British Isles. Previous researchers have shied away from trying to understand how the Church developed, particularly when, how and why churches were established in particular locations. Instead they have concentrated on answering only specific questions such as which churches were minsters. By concentrating on these more tangible and understandable elements, the question of how they fitted into the overall development of the Church has been ignored to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, key questions have not been addressed. The most important of these with regard to Somerset being: what was the geographical framework within which the Church was organised, were early churches sited on pre-existing post-Roman sites and how can the county's early medieval minsters be identified, particularly those which had lost significance by the 11th century? In order to answer these questions it was clear that a new research approach was needed. Therefore a systematic, multi-disciplinary methodology was constructed which facilitated understanding of the multi-factorial relationships between the landscape and churches, and between churches and royal *villae*. Consequently, the questions listed above in relation to Somerset's early medieval Church have been answered and in addressing these questions it became clear that this new research methodology could be used to understand the early development of the Church elsewhere.

How the identification of early medieval churches could be approached was summarized by Charles Thomas in commenting on how to find churches in late Roman Britain, that it is the 'high importance of continuity – of working backwards from the known to the unknown' (Thomas 1980: 135). Initially, a retrogressive approach was used for this research, the starting point for which was the churches and chapels existing in the 19th century but it did not assist in answering the key questions detailed above.

The research discussed below demonstrates the importance of acknowledging when traditional approaches and sources of data are inadequate and the necessity of considering what other methodologies and evidence can be used. In particular, that it is essential to research a specific area solely using evidence relative to that area, however sparse, rather than using a comparative approach based on research models derived from regions with rich early medieval architectural, archaeological and/or textual evidence. To successfully address the objectives of this research would have been impossible if the starting point, as used by other researchers, was those churches which had remained important and were 'known' or presumed minsters. Therefore, an alternative approach was used: to look for the early churches which had lost status using a methodology based on systematic analysis of a broad range of evidence. This enabled the construction of a robust comparative assessment process which facilitated the identification of the various stages or 'layers' by which Somerset's early medieval Church evolved as discussed by Jonathan Pitt (2003: 62) in relation to Wiltshire. He made the crucial point that the anomalies and difficulties in understanding how the ecclesiastical pattern developed 'preserve relics of changes over the entire Anglo-Saxon [early medieval] period' and that they may preserve evidence of successive 'layers' of ecclesiastical organisation.

The key point that must be made is that the term 'developed' in relation to Somerset's early medieval Church is not about stability but about a process involving continuous change. In particular this research demonstrates that within individual *parochiae* that process of change varied considerably; there was no one trajectory by which the Church developed across Somerset. This underlines why using a comparative research approach based on theoretical models of Church development would not have enabled the development of Somerset's Church to be understood. This is the major difference between this and other research into the early Church. The difficulties in attempting to analyse and document how the Church evolved were manifold but it is important to begin by considering the wider historical context.

The formation of Somerset

Establishing a geographical context for this research was key and without doing so it would not have been possible to establish how the Church developed in Somerset. The boundary of the county is largely topographically defined but there is no evidence as to
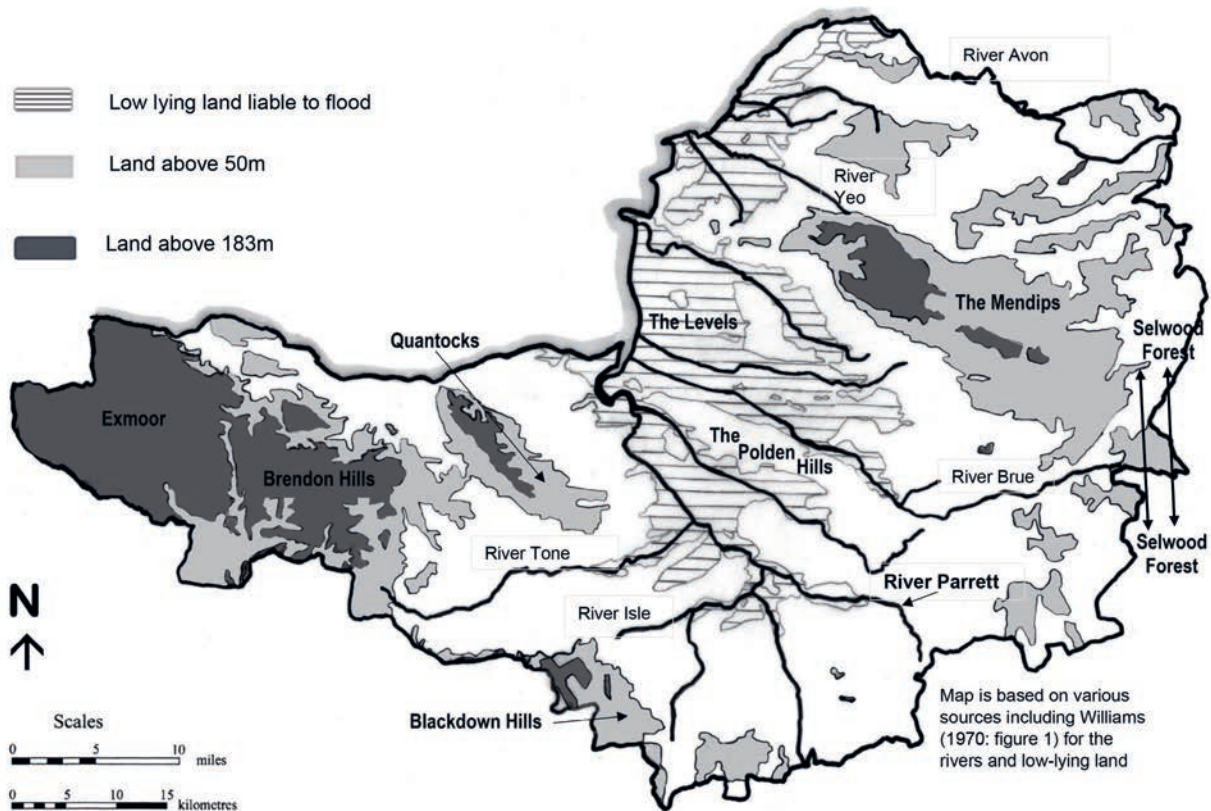
Figure 1.1. Map of Somerset showing its main topographical features.

when the geographical area known as Somerset was first delineated. Somerset contains diverse types of landscape as shown in Figure 1.1 with areas of high ground rising to 518m above sea level to the Somerset Levels in the centre of the county which in many places is below sea level. Understanding the internal topography of the county was key to identifying Somerset's early great estates and its early medieval *parochiae*.

Relatively little is known about the pre-Roman tribal divisions within the South-West. The only evidence indicating how Somerset might have been divided between three Iron Age tribes is the distribution pattern of the *Dumnonii, Durotriges* and *Dubonni* coinage. Reviewing this evidence 30 years ago Michael Costen (1992: 22, figure 1.7, 23) noted that the coinage for each tribe had been found in distinct and separate areas of the county and beyond its current borders. The implication is therefore that during the Iron Age Somerset did not exist as a discrete geographical entity.

Susan Pearce, renowned for her work on the history and archaeology of the early medieval South-West (Pearce 1978; 1981; 1982b; 1985; 2004; 2012), has proposed that during the late 2nd-century Roman reorganisation 'a new administrative area was created, centred on

Ilchester [the only Roman town in central Somerset], giving the divisions which became, broadly, the later shires of Devon, Dorset and Somerset' (Pearce 2004: 23); this view was later endorsed by Costen (2011: 12-3). This implies that Somerset was administered as a separate entity within the post-Roman kingdom of *Dumnonia.*

There is no written evidence which identifies the existence of Somerset as a political entity until Asser wrote his life of King Alfred in AD 893 (Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 83) and it also appears retrospectively in the late-9th century Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year AD 845 (Swanton 1997). The modern name of Somerset is derived from *Sumor sæton* or *Sumortūn-sǣte* meaning the people who are dependent on Somerton which is in the centre of the county close to Ilchester (Watts 2004).

Historical background to the research

The traditional view of British Christianity in the 4th century sees it as being well organised (Collingwood 1937: 271) and in AD 314 three British bishops attended the Council of Arles, France and three the Council of Rimini, Italy in AD 360 (Blair 2005: 11; Collingwood 1937: 271). In the 1930s it was thought that British Christianity was deeply rooted in the population remaining in the 'shrunken and impoverished towns' (Collingwood 1937:

272). Consequently, it was believed that 'Christianity in Late Roman Britain was minimal, entirely urban ... and insufficiently rooted to withstand the disruptions of the post-400 age' (Thomas 1998: 37; see also James 2001: 66). However, the extent to which Roman Christianity should be described as urban has been reconsidered by David Petts (2003: 161-72). He concluded that the development of Christianity in Britain was based on a semi-rural rather than a semi-urban infrastructure. The degree to which the Church establishment remained intact has been demonstrated by Thomas Charles-Edwards (2000). In his study of Christianity in Ireland he established that by the 5th century the politically dominant religion in Britain and Ireland was Christianity and that the Church was unaffected by the withdrawal of the Roman authorities (Charles-Edwards 2000: 185; see also Petts 2009: 158-61; Quensel-von Kalben 1999: 94-5). Susan Oosthuizen (2019: 19-41; see also Higham 2008: 79) in her recent review of post-Roman historical and archaeological evidence reached a similar conclusion. Indeed, John Blair (2005: 11) is quite clear that this 'episcopal hierarchy, with which Germanus and Patrick dealt in the 5th century' was still in existence in the early 6th century when Gildas was exhorting various 'tyrants' to be better Christians.

We know, for example, that the bishop of the West Saxons attended the AD 672 Council of Hertford, along with three other bishops, Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury and representatives from Northumbria (Cubitt 1995: 249-50). No doubt there were also synods and meetings for which there is no surviving written evidence. Bede for example, discusses a meeting between Augustine and the bishops in the early-7th century but apart from his detailed description there are no extant records of the meeting (*Bede*: 104-7; Cubitt 1995: 247). It is therefore quite clear that the prevailing religion in 6th-century Britain was Christianity and that the post-Roman Church had a well-established and functioning administrative structure.

Terminology

Before discussing the development of the early Church in detail it is important to consider the terminology adopted in this publication so there is clarity about how and why certain words, such as royal *villa(e)*, are used. The term 'royal *villa(e)*' refers to a royal landholding or estate with a central '*vill*' or settlement. Several terms are used which relate to how the early Church was organised, the key ones being '*parochia(e)*' and 'minster', these are discussed below in order to understand their usage within this publication compared to how other scholars have interpreted them.

In 1983 Peter Sawyer identified the location and importance of early medieval royal *tuns* or royal palaces and the concept of royal *villae* has been considered by other researchers (Aston 1984; Bassett 1989; Blair 2005; Haslam 1984b: xvi). Across Somerset in the 11th century there were a series of large royal estates. At the heart of each would have been a royal settlement or *villa* from which the estate, and the *regione* around it, would have been administered by the kings reeve. It would also host the king and the royal household as they travelled around the kingdom. For example, in AD 860 the king of Wessex probably held a *witan*, or royal assembly, at the royal *villa* of Somerton (charter S329; Hill 1989: 83) but there is definite evidence that one was held there in AD 949 (charter S549; Roach 2013: 241-2, table 3). Unfortunately, the precise site of the *villa* is unknown and the only physical evidence of a royal *villa* in Somerset is the late 10th-century royal palace at Cheddar (Rahtz 1979). Some royal *villae*, such as Somerton, retained their importance and developed into medieval towns while others, such as Kilton did not and all that remains of the *villa* is a farm in a valley with a church on the hill above it.

There are a number of terms used by scholars in relation to early medieval churches; '*parochiae*', 'minster', 'parochial minster' and 'mother-church' and it is important to understand how they have been used in discussing this research. '*Parochia*' has 'been the standard term for 'parish' ... since the early-9th century' (Blair 2005: 427), although there are no surviving early documents which include the term in this way appearances of the term '*parochia*' or '*parochiae*' in Anglo-Norman documents before 1100 has been deemed sufficient to link the term to minsters and mother-parishes (Blair 2005: 428); see the discussion below about the term 'mother-parish'. However, in this publication, the term '*parochiae*' is only used to refer to the large early *parochiae* into which the early great estates were divided. Each of the delineated Somerset *parochia* discussed below encompass several 19th-century parishes.

There are inherent difficulties in using the terms 'minster' and 'church' during the early medieval period because sometimes these terms refer to different types of establishment (Morris 1989: 128-30). It has been argued that the term 'minster' should be adopted for all types of pre-reform (i.e. those existing before AD 940) monastic religious houses (Foot 1992: 225; 2006: 6). Blair (2005: 3) has discussed the terminology that could be used to describe places of worship and concluded that attempting to construct a classification system is anachronistic and that the generic term 'minsters' should be adopted. Therefore, the term 'initial minster' is used to refer to a church adopted or established to serve, although some distance away, a nearby royal *villa*. The term 'parochial minster' is used in this publication to identify the church which has been identified as pre-eminent within an early *parochia* and at which the clergy serving the *parochia* would be based.

It should be noted that Blair (2005: 4) instead adopts the terms 'mother-church' and 'mother-parish', but stresses that there is a distinction between a mother-church, i.e. a church with dependent chapels identified from post-Conquest sources, and an early pre-Conquest mother-church. Therefore, the term 'mother-church' is only used in this publication when it is known that a Somerset church had post-Conquest dependent chapels.

Researching the early medieval Church

Previously most pre-Conquest ecclesiastical research was primarily undertaken using historical and architectural evidence. For example, Theresa Hall's (2000: 7, 40, 82) main sources of evidence for her important study into Dorset's minster churches were historical, architectural and archaeological. Her starting point was a list of sites that met certain criteria, for example a site had been owned by the royal family or was in ecclesiastical ownership pre-Conquest, and the size of its parish. Each criterion was weighted and it was the total score for each site which determined the list of churches to be researched. Using this approach 37 churches scored more than 10 points (see Hall 2000: 4-8 for details of the system she used). However, it is notable that Hall did not include any criterion which related to where churches were sited.

A number of researchers have used topographical assessments of churches in relation to where they are sited within the landscape and this is increasingly the case (for example, Charles-Edwards 2000; Costen 2011: 177-224; Hase 1988; 1994; Pearce 1982b; 1985; 2012; Petts 2009; 2015; Pickles 2006; 2018; Turner 2006a; 2006c). Some researchers, for example Eric Klingelhöfer (1992), Patrick Hase (1994), and Theresa Hall (2000), also considered topographical evidence in relation to early parochial boundaries and whether these were influenced by physical divisions in the landscape such as ridges of high ground, low-lying wetlands and river valleys.

Religious sites are 'not independent of their surroundings, but generally originated as adjuncts, counterparts or components of places' which already had a significant role within the community (Morris 1989: 57). Their significance might therefore be reflected in continuous use despite changes in religious belief. There is evidence that discrete pre-existing sacred or significant places were adopted for religious, ceremonial and communal activities as, for example at Uley, Gloucestershire and at Lamyatt Beacon, Somerset (Yorke 1995: 152-3). The earliest recorded evidence at Uley is Neolithic and the latest is from a church built between the 6th-8th centuries (Historic England Research Record Hob Uid: 205240) the earliest evidence from Lamyatt Beacon is dated to AD 250 and the latest

to AD 782±90 uncalibrated (Som. HER No. 23728). It is obvious that both Uley and Lamyatt were long-standing sacred fixed points within the landscape and recently it has been acknowledged that social power across Europe was embodied within a wide range of such sacred places, for example, from 4th-century BC altars at Lavinium near Rome, to space dedicated to Egyptian gods in the 2nd century, and indeed to sites such as Uley (Sánchez-Pardo and Shapland 2015b: 9). The concept of sacred places is universal and applies to both pagan and Christian religious sites (Sánchez-Pardo and Shapland 2015b: 10-11; see also Morris 1989: 72; Yorke 1995: 152-3). However, it is important to remember that later use of these sites was not about continuity but rather the elite utilising the 'power of the past' as embodied in the place (Sánchez-Pardo and Shapland 2015b: 11). The key point which has been made is that archaeological and indeed historical studies into religious ritual need to pay attention to where that ritual took place as it equates to a specific focal point within the landscape (Moser and Feldman 2014b: 1-11).

The need to take account of the surrounding sacred landscape, and why particular sites in Yorkshire might have been chosen as religious focal points, has been explored by Thomas Pickles (2018: 137-44). Similarly, Blair (2018: 74-84) has emphasised that Christianity was 'part of a continuum' with minsters and churches being established within the existing sacred landscape. It is however, important to remember that there is the distinct possibility that over time either/or both a church and its associated settlement may have existed on more than one site (Morris 1985: 49).

Much of the detailed historical research into the early medieval Church has been concerned with identifying the minsters and later mother-churches within a specific area, for example, Surrey, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire (Blair 1991; 1994; 2001; Pitt 2003). Other scholars have discussed the development of minsters in relation to settlement patterns. For example, Andrew Davidson (2009) has concluded that in Gwynedd, Wales by the 11th century there was a pattern of regularly spaced pre-eminent churches equating to approximately one per *cantref* or administrative area. There have also been several studies into the inter-relationships between the Church, estates and the landscape. These include Philip Masters' (2001) into the Church in West Sussex, Duncan Probert's (2002) research into social transition in the South-West, Matthew Godfrey's (2007) into early medieval Norfolk, and Thomas Pickles' (2018) into the Yorkshire minsters.

Some of the most well-known and widely respected historical research into how the early English Church was structured was completed by Steven Bassett (1989a; 1991; 1992a; 1992b; 1998). His analysis of how

it developed in and around Shrewsbury provides important insights into how the Church was organised but is reliant on post-Conquest historical evidence and 19th-century parish boundaries (Bassett 1991: 3, 20 end note 11). In discussing the origins of the parishes around the large early medieval church at Deerhurst, Bassett (1998) explicitly addresses the size of Deerhurst's original *parochia* using historical and parish boundary evidence, but in the end is unable to draw any firm conclusions. Recent historical research into the development of parishes, particularly in Ireland, has been summarised by Paul MacCottar (2019). He discusses territorial and parochial relationships and acknowledges that the original *parochiae* of churches were much larger than their later parishes. However, there is no attempt to consider that the origins of these *parochiae* are to be found within the topographical divisions of the landscape. Indeed, most of the research into the structure of the early medieval Church has, in the main, been based on historical evidence.

Blair (1991: 12-4) is quite clear, after discussing what evidence can determine the early territorial divisions in Surrey, that it is apparent they result from the fragmentation of earlier much larger 'defined territories'. In 1996 Sinéad Ní Ghabhláin published an article which looked at the origins of post-Conquest parishes in Gaelic Ireland; she concluded that the parishes had developed to provide localised pastoral care within the large secular territorial division of lordship called *túatha*, or small kingdom. Charles-Edwards (2000: 243) also discusses how the Church in Ireland was organised and concluded that, as in Gaul, it was based on pre-existing secular geographical divisions. In Ireland these were the *túaths* into which the country was divided; it was these that formed the constituent members of larger political units, very much as the Roman province and diocese was based on its cities (Charles-Edwards 2000: 243; see also MacCotter 2019). There is agreement that each *túatha* was divided into a number of 'primary parishes' (Ní Ghabhláin 1996: 59) or 'rural monastic *parochiae*' (Charles-Edwards 2000: 244-5); the latter considers that this happened by the 6th-7th centuries, although he admits that the evidence for this is meagre.

Bassett (1992b: 1, 23), looking at the early *parochiae* in the vicinity of Wroxeter, Shropshire, noted that they tended to be large and 'topographically coherent'; Cound was a 'well-defined land unit' and Tren and Baschurch both included defined river basins. Pickles (2018: 15-6) has recognised that the principal regions of Yorkshire, including that of the Deiran kingdom, are derived from the river system, the underlying bedrock geology and its overlying soil. It was therefore the physical geography or topography of the region which determined the boundary of the Deiran kingdom

(Pickles 2018: 15-6). It is of note that many of the early large *parochiae* which have been identified across the country include river basins. This was, for example, found to be true in in kingdom of the Deirans, Yorkshire (Pickles 2018: 137) and this research demonstrates it is also the case in Somerset (see Chapter 6).

One study which recognises the importance of topography for rectifying shortcomings in the textual evidence is Ní Ghabhláin's (1996: 39-44). In reconstructing the medieval parishes of Kilfenora in Ireland she utilised a number of historical sources, including the 1302-1306 Ecclesiastical Taxation records and a 1574 list of churches, in a comparable way to how historical evidence is used for this research (Ní Ghabhláin 1996: 39). Crucially, as her research progressed, she also took account of the extent to which parish boundaries followed topographical divisions in the landscape, for example watersheds on high ground, areas of low-lying bog and wasteland (Ní Ghabhláin 1996: 43).

The realisation that historical evidence alone was insufficient and that consideration of topographical evidence was essential in order to understand the early Church has been key to evolving the hypothesis discussed in Chapter 9. It is clear from the studies cited above that the prerequisite to interpreting the pattern of Church development is understanding the main early territorial divisions within a county or region. Until the boundaries of the early great estates were established based on topographical analysis it was impossible to identify the boundaries of the early *parochiae* in Somerset.

The most recent assessment of how the early medieval British Church was structured concludes by noting the centrality of the early minsters, with their close relationship to royal centres of power even though from the 9th century they were 'battered and reduced' as a more parochial layer of new churches was established (Blair 2005: 505). In reaching his conclusions Blair did not attempt to establish in detail the early parochial structure within which the minsters were sited. The questions that therefore need to be addressed are: how was the Church geographically and institutionally structured in the 6th century, how did it relate to the pre-existing sacred landscape, and how did it evolve between the 6th and the 11th centuries?

The early medieval Church in the South-West

Pearce (2004: 77-134) has completed an in-depth review of the evidence relating to when Christianity was established in the South-West during the Roman period and concludes that it can only be described as patchy and not easy to interpret. The only significant Christian communities she was able to identify during the 4th

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The early medieval Church in the South-West

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and early-5th century were in, or within the vicinity of, the Roman towns of Exeter in Devon, Dorchester in Dorset, Ilchester in central Somerset and Bath in north Somerset (Pearce 2004: 336).

Historical and archaeological research in Devon, Dorset and Somerset to date has not conclusively identified the sites of any post-Roman churches, although a handful of sites have been inferred (Hall 2000; 2003; 2009: 155; Pearce 2004: 133-4). Hall (2000: 83) reached the view that in Dorset there was little evidence of continuity between the post-Roman [British] Church and the early medieval Church. However, Hase (1994: 51) concluded from his study into the Church in Wessex that its foundations in the South-West were based on those of the post-Roman [sub-Roman] Christian Church. Hase was also quite clear that when the kingdom of Wessex took political control of Somerset the bishops would have taken over a well-established Church 'of some vigour' which included rural churches providing pastoral care (Hase 1994: 51). Furthermore, he concluded that many of the sites would have continued in use into the 8th and 9th centuries; no reconstruction of the Church being thought necessary. Hase used archaeological evidence including burials and cemeteries, historical evidence including the 6th-century writings of Gildas, the 9th-century Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the 11th-century Domesday Survey and 19th-century parish boundaries. Despite this wide range of evidence, it appears that no overall systematic process was adopted to assess it.

Nicholas Orme (1991b: 9) in his brief history of the post-Roman [British or Celtic] Church in Cornwall and Devon was clear that the religious sites established before the 6th century at Braunton and Hartland were included within the structure of the early medieval Church in Devon. The relationship between Church development and post-Roman [British] churches in Devon and Cornwall has also been explored by Robert Higham (2008: 98). He proposed that in Devon some *Dumnonian* churches continued in existence while others, with their presumed early dedication, were either replaced, demoted or disregarded (Higham 2008: 98-9). However, in Cornwall, the *Dumnonian* churches survived in much greater numbers, together with their traditional dedications to Celtic saints, and many became minsters and some local churches (Higham 2008: 98-9). For example, it has been proposed that by the late-7th century a minster was established in Exeter, Devon adjacent to where a possible post-Roman church existed on the site of the Roman basilica (Pearce 2004: 130; see also Higham 2008: 98, 100). This is likely given that graves dating between the 5th-7th centuries have been found in the cathedral cemetery (Orme 1991b: 2). Higham (2008: 98) in effect posed the same question as Richard Morris (1985: 49): is there any reason to suppose that *Dumnonian* Devon, or indeed Somerset,

possessed fewer churches than have been identified in Cornwall? Prior to this research only a handful of *Dumnonian* churches had been identified in Somerset (Costen 2011: 177-85; Hall 2009). Overall, no progress has been made in establishing a set of criteria by which early church sites might be identified.

There is a lack of consensus as to which churches in Devon were minsters and after reviewing the lists of minsters compiled by others the archaeologist Robert Higham (2008: 95) refrained from reaching any conclusions and reflected on the difficulties inherent in 'hunt the minster'. Importantly, Higham noted that identifying Devon's early medieval minsters would not provide a full understanding of the county's ecclesiastical organisation and expressed the view that 'some Devon minsters may have developed from *Dumnonian* [post-Roman] churches' and others may have become parish churches (Higham 2008: 95). In so speculating about the development of Devon's early medieval Church Higham raised the possibility that it was founded on churches established during the post-Roman period. Higham's statement is significant given that it is clear that the Church in Somerset had its roots in the post-Roman period.

After discussing where churches are sited in Wessex, Hase (1994: 54) points out that it is important not to extrapolate a hypothesis, to explain how the Church developed, based on a few disparate examples drawn from across England. Instead, it is important to study the topography of the churches within a defined geographical area so that a view can be reached as to the overall development of the Church. Hase (1994: 54, 58) is quite clear that there are regional differences in how the Church evolved and where important early medieval churches were sited. He concludes that until a 'scientific' topographical study of important Wessex churches has been completed it is impossible to understand how the Church developed (Hase 1994: 58; see also Turner 2006a, 44-8). It is therefore only by establishing a systematic approach to understanding the topography of church sites that the wider pattern of Church development can be understood. A major strand of the evidence discussed below is the systematic topographical categorisation of Somerset's early churches, how they relate to their surrounding landscape and its physical topography. Whether, for example, a church is sited on a high point within the landscape or within a low-lying area close to a royal *villa*; these topographical categories and how they facilitated the development of the hypothesis arising from this research are detailed in Chapter 7.

Parochial boundaries

In order to identify early medieval minsters it is essential to first establish the local area, or *parochia*, served by each minster. It has been widely proposed

that the early minster churches were founded within the secular royal *villae* or centrally within the *regiones* defined as small geographical administrative areas (Croom 1988: 67; Haslam 1984b: xvi; Sawyer 1983; Yorke 2006: 59-60). However, this view has increasingly been challenged as more historical research into the organisation of minsters has been undertaken (Blair 2005: 266-8; Morris 1997: 130-1). It has been argued that it is possible to identify correlations between the early great estates, the early *parochiae* of minsters and the hundredal structure (Rippon 2012: 198-200). In Surrey, Blair (1991: 104) identified a close link between the later hundreds and minsters and in Wiltshire Simon Draper (2006: 66-69) came to the view that the hundreds were related to the core territories of the early estates. However, Klingelhöfer (1992: 74-5, 84, 87-91) concluded that in Hampshire the hundredal system post-dated the ecclesiastical administrative structure which was based on earlier topographically defined land units. Similarly, Pitt (2003: 61-2, 67) found in his study of churches in Wiltshire that the establishment of the hundreds was relatively late and can probably be dated to the mid-10th century, while Probert (2002: 51) has shown that around Exeter many of the hundredal boundaries have a loose geographical coherence and follow topographical features such as ridges of high land. However, this would also be the case if they followed earlier topographically defined ecclesiastical boundaries.

In 1994 Hase used historical and geographic evidence to consider how the pre-Conquest Church was territorially and geographically organised across Dorset, Somerset and neighbouring counties. Consideration has also been given to the administrative boundaries of early estates and parishes, for example by identifying the detached portions of parishes (Blair 1991; Draper 2006; Hase 1988; Silvester and Evans 2009). Turner (2006a) demonstrated the importance of understanding how churches in Cornwall, Devon and Wessex relate to the wider South-Western landscape. Similarly, Stephen Rippon (2008: 254) came to the view that in Somerset the landscape of nucleated villages and open fields had developed within 'the context of estates that were larger than post-Conquest manors and parishes'. These were smaller than the early large estates which were probably in existence long before the 6th century, although there is no dateable evidence for this assumption. Rippon's conclusions are paralleled by research elsewhere. For example, Hase (1988) with regard to Hampshire and Stephen Yeates (2006) with regard to the Severn valley considered the extent to which a minster dominated the territory around it, and whether the minster was the fixed point in the landscape, rather than the territory. In doing so Yeates (2006: 62-3) demonstrated that within certain localities it was possible to identify relationships between a minster church, a nucleated Romano-British site and one or more significant Iron Age settlement sites. Recent archaeological research

by Adam McBride (2018: 439-41) has emphasised how the 'corporate power' exercised by 6th and 7th-century kings was legitimised and embedded in central royal places linked to public assembly sites and the building of large hall complexes such as at Yeavering, Northumbria. This site is important because it was recorded by Bede as being both a royal *villa* and a significant Christian site. Excavations at Yeavering have also shown that it was an important pre-Christian ritual site (Blair 2005: 55, figure 7; Hope-Taylor 1977). The archaeological evidence relating to large hall complexes is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Costen (2011: 92-3) has reviewed how the medieval hundreds were organised in Somerset and concluded that the hundredal boundaries were not fixed in the early medieval period and were frequently moved to suit important landholders such as Glastonbury Abbey. In addition, he does not believe the boundaries 'were particularly old' but implemented for pragmatic administrative reasons (Costen 2011: 92). This implies that in Somerset the hundredal boundaries post-date the boundaries of the early *parochiae*. Overall, the indications from other studies are that the hundredal boundaries were grafted on to the earlier parochial boundaries. Therefore, in order to identify Somerset's early *parochiae* it was essential to define the topographical boundaries of the county and its constituent early great estates.

Pastoral care

In reconstructing and exploring the ecclesiastical structure of the Church in Somerset no consideration has been given to the 'minster model' debate (for discussions on these issues see Bassett 1998: 3-6; Blair 1995; 2005: 4-5, 153-5; Blair and Sharpe 1992; Cambridge and Rollason 1995; Cubitt 1992: 205-6, 208; 1995: 116 - 8; Palliser 1996;). This academic dispute was between a number of historians each of whom developed a standardised model to describe how pastoral care was provided to communities across England. The debate has been analysed in detail by Probert (2002: 8-15) during his research into South-Western Britain from AD 400-800 and he concluded 'that the debate remains unresolved' (see also Bassett 1998: 20). Difficulties elsewhere, for example in Wiltshire (Pitt 2003: 68), in identifying the provision of pastoral care have continued to prompt discussion of the 'minster hypothesis' which underlies the 'minster model'.

In 2005 John Blair, who wrote the article in 1995 which began the debate about pastoral care, reviewed the outcomes from it and concluded that until more research has been completed to the 'point of mapping the parochial geography of all England ... revisiting of the debate is unprofitable' (Blair 2005: 153). Therefore, developing a systematic process to identify Somerset's

parochial minsters is key to understanding how the Church was structured from the mid-7th century and how pastoral care was provided.

An important issue which needs to be considered in relation to the early *parochiae* (Blair 2005: 153-65) is whether it can be demonstrated that they provided pastoral care across the whole of a specific area or county as Blair (1991: 104) has identified in western Surrey. Hase (1994: 46-7) has identified a series of early *parochiae* around Southampton, Hampshire and consequently he concluded that there is a correlation between the 'ancient royal estates' and early medieval churches with 'jurisdictional and religious districts which were essentially coterminous' covering the whole area by about AD 700 (Hase 1988: 47). However, in Dorset, Hall's (2000: 40-1) research indicated that the *parochiae* which she identified did not cover the entire county. Blair (2005: 153) is clear that it is possible to discern a framework of 'obsolete, often near-invisible' larger parishes within which the later pattern of smaller parishes evolved. This has been shown to be the case in Somerset where, within the early great estates, a pattern of large early *parochiae* has been identified which covers the entire county. However, despite a central minster church being identified within each early *parochia* it cannot be assumed that pastoral care was provided across the whole of each *parochia* as there is no contemporary evidence to indicate this.

In researching the early Church in Dorset Hall mapped the boundaries of the early large *parochiae* and critically reached the view that frequently they correlated with major topographical features. She concluded that there is unambiguous evidence in Dorset that the *parochiae* boundaries were topographically defined to a greater extent than those of the parishes into which they later divided (Hall 2000: 40). In addition, she established that many of these early large *parochiae* included river basins. This was also found to be true in Hampshire by Klingelhöfer (1992: 87).

The evidence used by Hall (2000: 31) to reconstruct the early large *parochiae* was mainly that provided by relationships between later mother-churches and their chapelries and by 19th-century detached areas of parishes. She acknowledged that this approach was problematical due to limited understanding of the origins of many churches. This may explain why Hall (2000: 79) was unable to identify the overall pattern of *parochiae* in Dorset. Probert (2002: 320-4), using mainly textual evidence, such as early English land charters and 19th-century Tithe Maps and other evidence for parish boundaries, was also unable to identify the definite survival of early-medieval land units in Devon and Cornwall.

In looking at the early medieval Christian landscape of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, Turner (2006a: 13) adopted the 'long-term perspective afforded by a landscape archaeology approach' to facilitate investigation into how land use shaped the organisation of the Church. In doing so he considered the spatial relationships between rural settlements and ecclesiastical centres. He used an interdisciplinary approach that took account of place-names, historical documents, archaeological evidence and Historic Landscape Characterisation (Turner 2006a: 13, 15-33). The latter is the retrospective deconstruction of the landscape in order to understand how, within a delineated geographical area, the fundamental features of the landscape developed (Rippon 2004). However, the landscape archaeological research completed by Turner (2006a) using this approach contributed little to understanding how the Church was organised. Therefore, in order to recognise the overall pattern of development and to fully understand the transition from the late post-Roman period to the 11th century it is essential that more focussed research is completed.

Case study: Somerset's early medieval Church

Prior to this research there was no definitive understanding of how the early Church developed in Somerset, nor whether an early parochial structure could be identified. In 1975 when Robert Dunning completed his history of Christianity in Somerset, he felt unable to say a great deal about the origins of the Church and noted that the number of churches in existence at the end of the 'Saxon' period was unknown (Dunning 1975: 3-5). Since then several scholars have considered the development of the Church (for example Aston 1986a: 54-8, 74-6; Calder 2004; Corcos 2002; Costen 1992a: 143-57; 2011: 177-224; Hall 2003; 2009; Hase 1994; Hill 1989: 155-7). They have all considered the available evidence in diverse ways, sometimes from a mainly historical perspective, sometimes from an archaeological one and only occasionally from a landscape archaeological point of view.

The paucity of physical evidence in Somerset is striking. Out of hundreds of churches only a handful including Wells Cathedral, Glastonbury Abbey and Muchelney Abbey, contain definite in-situ pre-Conquest fabric. There is also a lack of historical evidence apart from that derived from post-Conquest sources; the Domesday Survey, the *c.*1291 *Taxatio* and the 14th-century bishops' registers. There are many pre-1066 charters but they very rarely refer specifically to a church. This severe lack of pre-Conquest evidence necessitated the development of a research strategy based on the systematic evaluation of all churches in the county which included using topographical evidence, how churches are sited within the landscape.

Previous studies utilising a landscape archaeological approach are restricted to studies of individual

Somerset churches, for example, that into Holy Trinity church, Street by the landscape archaeologist Michal Calder (2004: 4-11) who used archaeological, topographical and textual evidence. Therefore no systematic assessment of church sites in Somerset has been completed and there is no consensus as to which sites had immediate post-Roman origins, nor indeed, which churches should be classified as early medieval minsters. This lack of a consensus has constrained the development of a detailed history of Somerset and its Church, as has the paucity of post-Conquest evidence relating to its churches and chapels since the first complete source of evidence about them dates from 1791 when John Collinson published his history of the county.

Review of previous research in Somerset

Important research into the development and history of Somerset, which included investigating Somerset's early monasteries and churches, has been completed by Mick Aston (1986a; 1988; 1994; 2000a; 2000c; 2003; 2007; 2009) and Michael Costen (1991; 1992a; 1992c; 1994; 2011; 2015a; 2015b). The profound difficulties in relation to identifying Somerset's early monasteries have, for example, been discussed by Aston (2003). Most of the above research was based on archaeological, morphological, historical and place-name evidence.

The historical and archaeological research by Aston (1986a), Corcos (2002), Costen (1992a; 2011), Hall (2003; 2009), Hase (1994) and Hill (1989) into the early medieval churches of Somerset has provided us with much detailed information using retrogressive analysis; working backwards from the known to the unknown. This technique, as proposed by Thomas (1980: 135), has been used elsewhere to beneficial effect, for example by Blair (1991) in Surrey, Hall (2000) in Dorset, and Hoggett (2010a) in East Anglia.

Costen (2011: 223-4, 233-5) listed the Somerset churches in existence in 1066 based on place names and written sources, primarily charters, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Domesday Survey. In addition, he used 11th-century architectural evidence as detailed by Cramp (2006), and the post-Conquest 'free chapels' which were not under the jurisdiction of the bishop. However, although Costen (2011: 234) concluded that the minster system must be seen as 'an integral part of the social and political structure of Somerset' in the 7th-8th centuries, the lack of available evidence meant he was unable to identify all of its minsters or the parochial framework within which they existed. To resolve this issue, it is necessary to ask how the minsters can be distinguished from other churches that were in existence during that period. For example, Costen (2011: 223) lists Ilminster as having a minster in 1066, based on its name, and Kilmersdon as only having a church in 1066, based on

its very meagre reference in the Domesday Survey (*DB* 16,14). The evidence he used to make these distinctions is severely limited and therefore provides no insight into the actual importance of these two churches. However, the comprehensive and systematic assessment process used for this research has meant that it is possible to identify both Ilminster and Kilmersdon as early medieval parochial minsters and also the likely extent of their *parochiae*.

Costen (2011: 177-201) was able to summarise in general terms the broad pattern of Church development in Somerset and raised several key issues. For example, that 'the new Church was perfectly prepared to accommodate the existing post-Roman churches where they were relevant' so that in parts of the county, but not everywhere, it is possible to identify the relationships 'between early settlements and their religious functions' (Costen 2011: 201). Costen (2011: 185) has argued that by about AD 750 there were 'plenty of local churches' in Somerset organised within an episcopal organisation and that there were monastic sites linked with royal *villae*. He believes these churches are lost to view because 'the loose structure was easily adapted and overlain' by the much more comprehensive approach to Church organisation by Wessex. The extent to which these statements, including the use of the term 'loose structure', can be verified is considered in Chapter 9.

In 2004 Calder considered the problems associated with identifying early ecclesiastical sites in Somerset and discussed the paucity of historical evidence for many churches. However, he, like Nick Corcos (2002: 3-24, 192), recognised that the topographical location of churches is a key strand of evidence in relation to the likely origins of a site. This approach had previously been suggested by Steven Bassett in 1991 regarding the topographical settings of churches in the vicinity of Shrewsbury. It has also been used by Turner (2006a: 37-48) in relation to the South-West, by Masters (2001: 1) in relation to West Sussex and by Pickles (2018: 135-43) in relation to Yorkshire. However, Masters' (2001: 26-8, 76) 'topographical' assessment of churches considered how they relate to sources of water and their relationship to 'burial grounds, enclosures and manorial buildings' rather than how they relate to the surrounding topography which is the approach used for this research.

There are inherent problems in identifying and dating early churches in Somerset which have been discussed by Calder (2004). The situation in the county is broadly similar to the lacunae in the historical records for churches across medieval England as identified by Morris (1985: 49). Therefore, according to Morris (1985: 49) a key line of inquiry that should be considered is the 'matter of quantities: how many churches can be reasonably expected to have been in

existence at different times?'. This research does not explicitly address this question, but its implications are considered, particularly in relation to identifying post-Roman sites.

Research objectives

The presumed historical context for this research is that Christianity was the predominant religion in Somerset during the 5th and subsequent centuries, and that churches were in existence across the county. The overall research objective being addressed is to reconstruct a chronology of Church development in Somerset. There are two strands to this objective: to identify Somerset's early medieval minsters and their original *parochiae* and to investigate the trajectories by which the Church evolved from the post-Roman period. How that is defined is open to question because it is dependent on which region of Britain is being discussed and the paucity of reliable written evidence (Harrington and Welch 2018: 1-8; James 2001: 91-9). In Somerset it would have been in the mid-7th century when the kings of Wessex gained jurisdiction over the county thereby ending control of it by the post-Roman kingdom of *Dumnonia* (Costen 2011: 25-9).

Critically, despite an extensive review of existing research into the early medieval Church, no methodology was identified which could, given the paucity of evidence, be used to understand how Somerset's early medieval Church evolved. In addition, there was no consensus as to which churches should be named in the county as medieval minsters. It was therefore not possible, as many studies have done, to start with a list of known minsters. This was viewed as an advantage in planning this research in that it provided the opportunity to rethink how to identify evidence of early churches because there was no obvious starting point. The initial issue to be addressed was deciding what methodology should be adopted in order to identify the minsters which had already lost importance pre-Conquest when there was a lack of early historical evidence about these churches.

Therefore, a systematic, multi-disciplinary assessment process was constructed to enable the origins and roles of early medieval churches to be identified. The intention in doing so was to establish a methodology that could be used in other counties which would overcome any local shortcomings in the available evidence, and in particular, identify which minsters had lost significance. The aim was to construct a classification system, which would reflect both the changing status of churches and how each one fitted into the overall Church hierarchy.

It is essential to review all the available textual evidence, drawn from pre-Conquest English charters to the post-Conquest bishops' registers. However, the relatively few surviving charters which provide the only source of contemporary early medieval evidence include virtually no information about Somerset's churches. The Domesday Survey is a valuable source of information for 1066/1086 but it only contains limited evidence about the churches which were in existence. Therefore, most of the historical evidence about Somerset's churches dates from between the 13th and 19th centuries.

So how can these early churches be identified? A retrogressive analysis of all available historical, architectural and archaeological evidence was the first step so that all the churches across Somerset could be systematically assessed as to their importance in the early medieval period. This is the major difference between the approach adopted here and previous research into the early Church in Somerset where the starting point was a shortlist of possible, or probable, post-Roman religious sites and early medieval minsters. The decision to adopt a retrospective systematic assessment process means that all the available evidence has been collated from each source. Therefore, data was recorded for all the churches and chapels mentioned by Collinson (1791). No distinction was made between them as to which might be deemed more important in the early medieval period. Similarly, all the details and information about churches and chapels mentioned in the early bishops' registers and bishops' *Acta* were recorded. This approach proved to be successful, but the sheer paucity of historical, architectural and archaeological evidence prior to the 11th century made it necessary to adopt a different methodology for the next stage of the research. Therefore, in order to progress the analysis of how the pre-Conquest Church developed, a landscape archaeological approach embracing topography has been used; how a church is sited within the landscape, and morphology, how it relates to nearby settlement.

This is the approach used by Nick Corcos (2002: 192-3) to understand the structure of Somerset's early medieval Church. He stressed the need to look at the relationships between churches, how each one relates to the territory within which it is sited (Corcos 2002: 192), and whether the overall territorial framework was based on earlier divisions in the landscape. Corcos (2002: 192-3; see also Blair 1991) stated that it is important to be aware of the 'persistent and tenacious thread of earlier [territorial] arrangements' and the extent to which they reflected shared access to natural resources. Importantly, Corcos (2002: 192) outlined how a comprehensive analysis of Church development in Somerset might be achieved. He makes two further important points: first, that churches should be looked at in their topographical context; and secondly, that the area around Carhampton, and

possibly elsewhere, contains churches which may have post-Roman origins (Corcos 2002: 192). Corcos (2002: 192) was quite clear that until a topographical survey of large numbers of Somerset churches was completed it would be impossible to understand the 'role of the Church, especially in its wider territorial sense'. This, he considered, should be central to understanding how the Church developed. It was his conclusions that led directly to the research on which this book is based.

Research questions

The initial questions considered were as listed earlier: what was the geographical framework within which Somerset's early medieval Church was organised; were the early churches sited on pre-existing post-Roman sites and how could Somerset's early medieval minsters be identified? It soon became clear that a new approach was required to answer these questions and a methodology was developed which involved the construction of a relational database to enable the evidence to be collated and explored. The database was initially populated with a list of all the 19th-century churches and chapels that could be identified in Somerset to which was added all the historical, architectural and archaeological information relating to them. As the database was populated and it was possible to correlate and compare the evidence between churches, in particular that relating to where churches were sited within the landscape, this resulted in more specific research questions being identified. The final list of research questions was:

- To what extent can the physical characteristics of where a church is sited in the landscape (its topographical setting) be related to when the site was originally adopted as a religious focal point? This question explores issues raised by other researchers, particularly Turner (2006: 44-8) in relation to the siting of churches in Wessex.
- Was Somerset's early medieval Church founded on the pre-existing network of post-Roman Christian sites? In addressing this question the the extent to which these post-Roman sites had a long-standing role as sacred focal points within the landscape is explored and whether they continued as central places of power as proposed by Hase (1994: 51).
- What was the relationship between the royal *villae* and the minster churches? Blair (2005; particularly 275-9) extensively addresses this question and he notes that it is not possible to 'perceive a clear-cut category' of royal *villae* and discusses how they can be identified. Turner (2006: 61-70) considered how royal *villae* can be identified in Wessex but importantly he also considered the spatial relationship between royal *villae* and nearby minsters.

- Is it possible to identify the large early *parochiae* associated with minsters throughout Somerset? This is an important issue given the evidence from elsewhere. For example, in Surrey (Blair 1991: 103-5) and around Southampton, Hampshire (Hase 1988: 46-7) early medieval *parochiae* have been mapped across the whole area, whereas to date in Dorset the evidence shows only partial coverage (Hall 2000: 40-1).
- To what extent did Somerset's minsters develop into proto-urban settlements between the 9th-11th centuries and later into medieval towns? Blair (2005: 246-90 particularly 290) has discussed at length the concept of the 'holy city' and that during the late-8th and 9th centuries the natural role of minsters as central places within the landscape became more evident. Using archaeological evidence Blair (2018) has revisited this issue and specifically considers it in relation to Somerset. His conclusions are that the minster at Glastonbury is the only one associated with significant evidence of settlement dated to AD 600-850 and that none of the defensive *burhs* established by Wessex had developed urban characteristics between AD 870-950 (Blair 2018: 157, figure 49, 162-3, 275, 326, figure 120, 333 figure 122). However, many pre-Conquest settlements should be described as 'not-quite-urban' because they had coalesced from two or more rural settlements (Blair 2018: 350).

Methodology

Somerset has been used as a case study to explore a number of research strategies and theories about how the Church developed. In progressing the research it became clear that the approaches previously adopted by other researchers were inadequate and would not enable the research questions listed above to be answered. A new approach was therefore developed and the first step was to choose sources of evidence which could be used systematically. Furthermore, it was essential to use evidence derived from the physical landscape using a landscape archaeology approach as used for example by Calder (2004), Corcos (2002), Hase (1994), Klingelhöfer (1992), Pickles (2018) and Turner (2006a). Effective use of data derived from the physical landscape, but also from historical sources, is dependent on asking the right questions of the evidence (Blair 2005: 2). In addition, it is necessary to accept that it is not possible to make assumptions based on a limited number of examples and that there may be no 'typical' place (Blair 2005: 2). It was therefore critical to identify the questions that needed to be answered and then to identify the evidence required to answer them. To date there has been no robust approach capable of identifying important early medieval churches, partly because the available evidence in each county is

variable but also because the question being asked of the evidence is, which of these 'important' churches in a county were minsters when the question which should be asked is, which churches could have been minsters? The premise on which the assessment process used has been constructed is therefore, how can the minsters which are no longer important churches be identified?

A key element in completing this research has been to ensure that all possible sites of early churches in Somerset were identified before any conclusions were reached as to which were early medieval minsters. It was critical to begin by considering all the known 19th-century churches and chapels, rather than just those named as minsters or possible minsters by other researchers.

Therefore, to achieve this a wide range of primary and secondary sources was used to establish a baseline data set for all the churches and chapels for which there was evidence up to and including the 19th century. As the research progressed it was possible to identify those churches which were probably in existence prior to the 11th century. This facilitated the identification of the churches most likely to have been important in the early medieval period. The multi-disciplinary data set thus collated then enabled an assessment of these churches to be completed. It is this comprehensive and inclusive approach which distinguishes this research into the early Church from that completed previously, when the starting point was frequently the 'known' or presumed minsters, rather than starting from first principles. The approach adopted echoes that previously recommended by Jeremy Haslam (1984b: xvi-ii) for identifying proto-urban places in southern England; that we need to ask: what do we know about the history of all the churches that may have existed in the early medieval period? To understand how the Church developed it was necessary to adopt this approach, only then was it possible to identify the distinguishing characteristics of the churches in existence prior to Wessex taking control of Somerset. However, as already stated, it was only possible to identify the minsters after reconstructing the geographical framework within which they were sited, and critically, assessing the overall location and site of each church within the wider landscape.

An important source of evidence which assists in identifying the early parochial boundaries are the 19th-century parish boundaries derived from the Tithe Maps (Kain and Oliver 1995). However, it cannot be assumed that these boundaries equate to those existing in the 10th-11th centuries when parish boundaries were probably first established (Rippon 2012: 160). Prior to the 10th century the landscape in the South-West was divided into large parochiae, and before that into even larger early great estates. The first step in

identifying these was to identify the medieval parishes as they facilitated the reconstruction of the pre-11th-century divisions within the landscape, including those of the early parochiae. This follows the process adopted by Rippon (2012: 151-64, 199-200) and Turner (2006: 109-13). It was the identification of the probable early parochial boundaries which has enabled the organisation of Somerset's early medieval Church to be understood.

Understanding why, when and how other researchers have used topographical evidence enabled it to be fully utilised in completing this research. The term 'topography' can describe various aspects of the landscape. Sometimes it simply refers to the layout of enclosures and settlements in relation to a church but it can also be used to reflect how a church is sited within the physical landscape; is it on a hill or in a valley? It is also important to consider whether discussions about the topographical setting of a church are purely descriptive or whether its setting is utilised as part of a systematic assessment process so that the topographical setting of several churches can be compared. This research uses the term 'topographical' in relation to how a church sits within the landscape and as part of a systematic assessment process to facilitate the identification of the topographical criteria which can be used to evaluate the origins of churches. This is the major differential between this research and the majority of earlier investigations into the post-Roman and early medieval Church. Topographical evidence has been key, without using it to establish the boundaries of the early great estates and their constituent early parochiae, and also as part of the assessment of individual churches, it would not have been possible to successfully answer the research questions on which this book is based.

The intention in developing this methodology has been to ensure that it could be adopted elsewhere to facilitate a comprehensive and more robust understanding of how both the post-Roman and the early medieval Church were organised. The methodology has been tested by looking at a sample of churches in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset; these case studies are discussed in Chapter 7. Researching these churches has shown that the multi-disciplinary assessment process used could be utilised across the South-West. It is hoped this will enable all the early medieval minsters in these counties to be identified for the first time as they have been in Somerset. The extent to which the same process might be adopted elsewhere, for example in Norfolk and Yorkshire, will be determined by the evidence available in those counties.

Importantly, the outcomes from this multi-disciplinary research are such that it will be possible to utilise a similar approach to complement research into the early

medieval Church which has already been undertaken. As more of the early *parochiae* are mapped and the parochial minsters identified across the British Isles the more it will be possible to understand when, why and how decisions were made about the provision of pastoral care in the early medieval period.

Significance of research outcomes

When considering the pattern of ecclesiastical development, it is very tempting to think in terms of a systematic progression; a church was possibly a post-Roman church, then an early medieval minster which subsequently became a mother-church after the 10th century. Indeed, Blair (2005: 158) found that on the Gloucestershire / Warwickshire border only two late mother-churches had not been recorded as minsters. It is all too easy make assumptions about how the Church developed but churches were established for a variety reasons at different times and without establishing a comprehensive set of criteria it is impossible to reach a robust conclusion as to the origins and role of an individual church.

This research demonstrates the importance of using criteria based on a comprehensive inter-relational set of data which embraces evidence drawn from different disciplines: archaeology, architecture, geography, landscape archaeology and history. All these sources of evidence were important because they enabled a range of different types of evidence from the 19th century to the 11th century, and indeed earlier in relation to topographical evidence, to be systematically collated in relation to individual churches. In constructing this data set the starting point was the 1840's Tithe Maps (Kain and Oliver 1995) coupled with the first edition Ordnance Survey maps. It was then possible to demonstrate, as the data set was systematically created, that the parish boundaries existing in the 19th-century had remained stable since the 11th-12th century.

A weighting system for various evidence or elements of the data set using different types of data as counter balances to one another enabled a methodology to be created which enabled comparative assessments of churches to be made. For example, whether there was physical evidence which could date a church to the 11th-12th century coupled with documentary evidence of churches in 1066/86. This particular collation of data enabled the identification of early medieval minsters which had lost significance.

Inevitably there were gaps in the data set because specific items of evidence for some churches was not available. Petts (2009), after exploring the development of the Church in early medieval Wales, sums up the issues which needed to be addressed. He makes the crucial point that it is necessary to view the Church as evolving through a variety of trajectories which differed widely according to the religious, social and political context in which it developed (Petts 2009: 51). He sounds a warning note to all researchers by reflecting on the difficulties of using scant and diffuse evidence:

> Whether looking at variation across time and space, we should not necessarily see such apparent 'patchiness' in the evidence as an inherent problem or weakness, but instead as a phenomenon which needs explaining and understanding. We need to be constantly aware that the underlying causes of this variation in the spread of evidence are important in themselves, and that this variation should be explored and understood rather than silently ignored or glossed over (Petts 2009: 51).

This statement by Petts exactly sums up the problems, and crucially the opportunities, inherent in the paucity of evidence that can be advantageous in understanding the development of the early Church. Indeed, it is the 'patchiness' and variations in the evidence, which includes 'patches' of similarity as well as of contradictory evidence, which has proved to be key in unlocking the multi-stranded trajectories underlying Church development in Somerset.

In conclusion, to be able to distinguish the minsters, mother-churches and lesser churches from each other in Somerset it has been necessary to systematically collate and document a wide range of information in order to explore the links and relationships between the different types of evidence. Therefore, to identify the pattern of Church development it has been essential to continually ask the question: how many churches can we expect to find? This has meant looking chronologically and systematically at church, not just minster, development on a site-by-site basis across the county as proposed by Corcos in 2002. The robust methodology developed for this research is such that it can be used to understand how the Church developed in other counties or regions and to test the conclusions already reached about how the Church evolved elsewhere.

Overall objective of research

The overall objective is to establish the structure of the early medieval Church in Somerset by understanding when sites were initially chosen as religious focal points and how the role of the churches on those sites changed over time and it has been possible to meet that objective. Chapter 2 details the sources and methods used to complete this research, including how the baseline data set was collated. Chapter 3 explores the

evidence relating to mother-churches and their chapels by providing a retrogressive review of the historical data that has been used from the 11th to the 19th century. Chapter 4 details the systematic evidence-based process which enabled Somerset's pre-eminent early medieval churches to be identified by enabling any church or chapel to be scored for importance against a standardised list of evidence. Chapter 5 details how royal *villae* can be identified and how their importance can be assessed. It then considers the relationship which existed between minsters and nearby royal *villae*. The chapter concludes by using the area around Yatton as a case study. Chapter 6 sets out the process by which Somerset's early great estates were identified and then looks at the relationship between the early great estates and their constituent *parochiae*. Finally, it looks at how the medieval pattern of archdeaconries and deaneries

relate to the early *parochiae*. Chapter 7 then explores how churches are sited within the landscape and their relationship to nearby settlements through a series of case studies. Lastly, Chapter 8 includes twelve case studies of early medieval *parochiae* in Somerset.

The major conclusion from the case studies is that there are different trajectories of Church development across the county for a variety of reasons. These include political decisions to establish new royal *villae* and to demote others and pragmatic decisions by the major landholder within a *parochia*, for example Glastonbury Abbey. It is essential to accept that there is not one model that fits all churches or all counties, but a variety of interconnecting patterns of Church development. Whether this multi-stranded development process is mirrored in other counties is still to be determined.

and early-5th century were in, or within the vicinity of, the Roman towns of Exeter in Devon, Dorchester in Dorset, Ilchester in central Somerset and Bath in north Somerset (Pearce 2004: 336).

Historical and archaeological research in Devon, Dorset and Somerset to date has not conclusively identified the sites of any post-Roman churches, although a handful of sites have been inferred (Hall 2000; 2003; 2009: 155; Pearce 2004: 133-4). Hall (2000: 83) reached the view that in Dorset there was little evidence of continuity between the post-Roman [British] Church and the early medieval Church. However, Hase (1994: 51) concluded from his study into the Church in Wessex that its foundations in the South-West were based on those of the post-Roman [sub-Roman] Christian Church. Hase was also quite clear that when the kingdom of Wessex took political control of Somerset the bishops would have taken over a well-established Church 'of some vigour' which included rural churches providing pastoral care (Hase 1994: 51). Furthermore, he concluded that many of the sites would have continued in use into the 8th and 9th centuries; no reconstruction of the Church being thought necessary. Hase used archaeological evidence including burials and cemeteries, historical evidence including the 6th-century writings of Gildas, the 9th-century Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the 11th-century Domesday Survey and 19th-century parish boundaries. Despite this wide range of evidence, it appears that no overall systematic process was adopted to assess it.

Nicholas Orme (1991b: 9) in his brief history of the post-Roman [British or Celtic] Church in Cornwall and Devon was clear that the religious sites established before the 6th century at Braunton and Hartland were included within the structure of the early medieval Church in Devon. The relationship between Church development and post-Roman [British] churches in Devon and Cornwall has also been explored by Robert Higham (2008: 98). He proposed that in Devon some *Dumnonian* churches continued in existence while others, with their presumed early dedication, were either replaced, demoted or disregarded (Higham 2008: 98-9). However, in Cornwall, the *Dumnonian* churches survived in much greater numbers, together with their traditional dedications to Celtic saints, and many became minsters and some local churches (Higham 2008: 98-9). For example, it has been proposed that by the late-7th century a minster was established in Exeter, Devon adjacent to where a possible post-Roman church existed on the site of the Roman basilica (Pearce 2004: 130; see also Higham 2008: 98, 100). This is likely given that graves dating between the 5th-7th centuries have been found in the cathedral cemetery (Orme 1991b: 2). Higham (2008: 98) in effect posed the same question as Richard Morris (1985: 49): is there any reason to suppose that *Dumnonian* Devon, or indeed Somerset,

possessed fewer churches than have been identified in Cornwall? Prior to this research only a handful of *Dumnonian* churches had been identified in Somerset (Costen 2011: 177-85; Hall 2009). Overall, no progress has been made in establishing a set of criteria by which early church sites might be identified.

There is a lack of consensus as to which churches in Devon were minsters and after reviewing the lists of minsters compiled by others the archaeologist Robert Higham (2008: 95) refrained from reaching any conclusions and reflected on the difficulties inherent in 'hunt the minster'. Importantly, Higham noted that identifying Devon's early medieval minsters would not provide a full understanding of the county's ecclesiastical organisation and expressed the view that 'some Devon minsters may have developed from *Dumnonian* [post-Roman] churches' and others may have become parish churches (Higham 2008: 95). In so speculating about the development of Devon's early medieval Church Higham raised the possibility that it was founded on churches established during the post-Roman period. Higham's statement is significant given that it is clear that the Church in Somerset had its roots in the post-Roman period.

After discussing where churches are sited in Wessex, Hase (1994: 54) points out that it is important not to extrapolate a hypothesis, to explain how the Church developed, based on a few disparate examples drawn from across England. Instead, it is important to study the topography of the churches within a defined geographical area so that a view can be reached as to the overall development of the Church. Hase (1994: 54, 58) is quite clear that there are regional differences in how the Church evolved and where important early medieval churches were sited. He concludes that until a 'scientific' topographical study of important Wessex churches has been completed it is impossible to understand how the Church developed (Hase 1994: 58; see also Turner 2006a, 44-8). It is therefore only by establishing a systematic approach to understanding the topography of church sites that the wider pattern of Church development can be understood. A major strand of the evidence discussed below is the systematic topographical categorisation of Somerset's early churches, how they relate to their surrounding landscape and its physical topography. Whether, for example, a church is sited on a high point within the landscape or within a low-lying area close to a royal *villa*; these topographical categories and how they facilitated the development of the hypothesis arising from this research are detailed in Chapter 7.

Parochial boundaries

In order to identify early medieval minsters it is essential to first establish the local area, or *parochia*, served by each minster. It has been widely proposed

that the early minster churches were founded within the secular royal *villae* or centrally within the *regiones* defined as small geographical administrative areas (Croom 1988: 67; Haslam 1984b: xvi; Sawyer 1983; Yorke 2006: 59-60). However, this view has increasingly been challenged as more historical research into the organisation of minsters has been undertaken (Blair 2005: 266-8; Morris 1997: 130-1). It has been argued that it is possible to identify correlations between the early great estates, the early *parochiae* of minsters and the hundredal structure (Rippon 2012: 198-200). In Surrey, Blair (1991: 104) identified a close link between the later hundreds and minsters and in Wiltshire Simon Draper (2006: 66-69) came to the view that the hundreds were related to the core territories of the early estates. However, Klingelhöfer (1992: 74-5, 84, 87-91) concluded that in Hampshire the hundredal system post-dated the ecclesiastical administrative structure which was based on earlier topographically defined land units. Similarly, Pitt (2003: 61-2, 67) found in his study of churches in Wiltshire that the establishment of the hundreds was relatively late and can probably be dated to the mid-10th century, while Probert (2002: 51) has shown that around Exeter many of the hundredal boundaries have a loose geographical coherence and follow topographical features such as ridges of high land. However, this would also be the case if they followed earlier topographically defined ecclesiastical boundaries.

In 1994 Hase used historical and geographic evidence to consider how the pre-Conquest Church was territorially and geographically organised across Dorset, Somerset and neighbouring counties. Consideration has also been given to the administrative boundaries of early estates and parishes, for example by identifying the detached portions of parishes (Blair 1991; Draper 2006; Hase 1988; Silvester and Evans 2009). Turner (2006a) demonstrated the importance of understanding how churches in Cornwall, Devon and Wessex relate to the wider South-Western landscape. Similarly, Stephen Rippon (2008: 254) came to the view that in Somerset the landscape of nucleated villages and open fields had developed within 'the context of estates that were larger than post-Conquest manors and parishes'. These were smaller than the early large estates which were probably in existence long before the 6th century, although there is no dateable evidence for this assumption. Rippon's conclusions are paralleled by research elsewhere. For example, Hase (1988) with regard to Hampshire and Stephen Yeates (2006) with regard to the Severn valley considered the extent to which a minster dominated the territory around it, and whether the minster was the fixed point in the landscape, rather than the territory. In doing so Yeates (2006: 62-3) demonstrated that within certain localities it was possible to identify relationships between a minster church, a nucleated Romano-British site and one or more significant Iron Age settlement sites. Recent archaeological research

by Adam McBride (2018: 439-41) has emphasised how the 'corporate power' exercised by 6th and 7th-century kings was legitimised and embedded in central royal places linked to public assembly sites and the building of large hall complexes such as at Yeavering, Northumbria. This site is important because it was recorded by Bede as being both a royal *villa* and a significant Christian site. Excavations at Yeavering have also shown that it was an important pre-Christian ritual site (Blair 2005: 55, figure 7; Hope-Taylor 1977). The archaeological evidence relating to large hall complexes is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Costen (2011: 92-3) has reviewed how the medieval hundreds were organised in Somerset and concluded that the hundredal boundaries were not fixed in the early medieval period and were frequently moved to suit important landholders such as Glastonbury Abbey. In addition, he does not believe the boundaries 'were particularly old' but implemented for pragmatic administrative reasons (Costen 2011: 92). This implies that in Somerset the hundredal boundaries post-date the boundaries of the early *parochiae*. Overall, the indications from other studies are that the hundredal boundaries were grafted on to the earlier parochial boundaries. Therefore, in order to identify Somerset's early *parochiae* it was essential to define the topographical boundaries of the county and its constituent early great estates.

Pastoral care

In reconstructing and exploring the ecclesiastical structure of the Church in Somerset no consideration has been given to the 'minster model' debate (for discussions on these issues see Bassett 1998: 3-6; Blair 1995; 2005: 4-5, 153-5; Blair and Sharpe 1992; Cambridge and Rollason 1995; Cubitt 1992: 205-6, 208; 1995: 116 - 8; Palliser 1996;). This academic dispute was between a number of historians each of whom developed a standardised model to describe how pastoral care was provided to communities across England. The debate has been analysed in detail by Probert (2002: 8-15) during his research into South-Western Britain from AD 400-800 and he concluded 'that the debate remains unresolved' (see also Bassett 1998: 20). Difficulties elsewhere, for example in Wiltshire (Pitt 2003: 68), in identifying the provision of pastoral care have continued to prompt discussion of the 'minster hypothesis' which underlies the 'minster model'.

In 2005 John Blair, who wrote the article in 1995 which began the debate about pastoral care, reviewed the outcomes from it and concluded that until more research has been completed to the 'point of mapping the parochial geography of all England ... revisiting of the debate is unprofitable' (Blair 2005: 153). Therefore, developing a systematic process to identify Somerset's

parochial minsters is key to understanding how the Church was structured from the mid-7th century and how pastoral care was provided.

An important issue which needs to be considered in relation to the early *parochiae* (Blair 2005: 153-65) is whether it can be demonstrated that they provided pastoral care across the whole of a specific area or county as Blair (1991: 104) has identified in western Surrey. Hase (1994: 46-7) has identified a series of early *parochiae* around Southampton, Hampshire and consequently he concluded that there is a correlation between the 'ancient royal estates' and early medieval churches with 'jurisdictional and religious districts which were essentially coterminous' covering the whole area by about AD 700 (Hase 1988: 47). However, in Dorset, Hall's (2000: 40-1) research indicated that the *parochiae* which she identified did not cover the entire county. Blair (2005: 153) is clear that it is possible to discern a framework of 'obsolete, often near-invisible' larger parishes within which the later pattern of smaller parishes evolved. This has been shown to be the case in Somerset where, within the early great estates, a pattern of large early *parochiae* has been identified which covers the entire county. However, despite a central minster church being identified within each early *parochia* it cannot be assumed that pastoral care was provided across the whole of each *parochia* as there is no contemporary evidence to indicate this.

In researching the early Church in Dorset Hall mapped the boundaries of the early large *parochiae* and critically reached the view that frequently they correlated with major topographical features. She concluded that there is unambiguous evidence in Dorset that the *parochiae* boundaries were topographically defined to a greater extent than those of the parishes into which they later divided (Hall 2000: 40). In addition, she established that many of these early large *parochiae* included river basins. This was also found to be true in Hampshire by Klingelhöfer (1992: 87).

The evidence used by Hall (2000: 31) to reconstruct the early large *parochiae* was mainly that provided by relationships between later mother-churches and their chapelries and by 19th-century detached areas of parishes. She acknowledged that this approach was problematical due to limited understanding of the origins of many churches. This may explain why Hall (2000: 79) was unable to identify the overall pattern of *parochiae* in Dorset. Probert (2002: 320-4), using mainly textual evidence, such as early English land charters and 19th-century Tithe Maps and other evidence for parish boundaries, was also unable to identify the definite survival of early-medieval land units in Devon and Cornwall.

In looking at the early medieval Christian landscape of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, Turner (2006a:

13) adopted the 'long-term perspective afforded by a landscape archaeology approach' to facilitate investigation into how land use shaped the organisation of the Church. In doing so he considered the spatial relationships between rural settlements and ecclesiastical centres. He used an interdisciplinary approach that took account of place-names, historical documents, archaeological evidence and Historic Landscape Characterisation (Turner 2006a: 13, 15-33). The latter is the retrospective deconstruction of the landscape in order to understand how, within a delineated geographical area, the fundamental features of the landscape developed (Rippon 2004). However, the landscape archaeological research completed by Turner (2006a) using this approach contributed little to understanding how the Church was organised. Therefore, in order to recognise the overall pattern of development and to fully understand the transition from the late post-Roman period to the 11th century it is essential that more focussed research is completed.

Case study: Somerset's early medieval Church

Prior to this research there was no definitive understanding of how the early Church developed in Somerset, nor whether an early parochial structure could be identified. In 1975 when Robert Dunning completed his history of Christianity in Somerset, he felt unable to say a great deal about the origins of the Church and noted that the number of churches in existence at the end of the 'Saxon' period was unknown (Dunning 1975: 3-5). Since then several scholars have considered the development of the Church (for example Aston 1986a: 54-8, 74-6; Calder 2004; Corcos 2002; Costen 1992a: 143-57; 2011: 177-224; Hall 2003; 2009; Hase 1994; Hill 1989: 155-7). They have all considered the available evidence in diverse ways, sometimes from a mainly historical perspective, sometimes from an archaeological one and only occasionally from a landscape archaeological point of view.

The paucity of physical evidence in Somerset is striking. Out of hundreds of churches only a handful including Wells Cathedral, Glastonbury Abbey and Muchelney Abbey, contain definite in-situ pre-Conquest fabric. There is also a lack of historical evidence apart from that derived from post-Conquest sources; the Domesday Survey, the *c.*1291 *Taxatio* and the 14th-century bishops' registers. There are many pre-1066 charters but they very rarely refer specifically to a church. This severe lack of pre-Conquest evidence necessitated the development of a research strategy based on the systematic evaluation of all churches in the county which included using topographical evidence, how churches are sited within the landscape.

Previous studies utilising a landscape archaeological approach are restricted to studies of individual

Somerset churches, for example, that into Holy Trinity church, Street by the landscape archaeologist Michal Calder (2004: 4-11) who used archaeological, topographical and textual evidence. Therefore no systematic assessment of church sites in Somerset has been completed and there is no consensus as to which sites had immediate post-Roman origins, nor indeed, which churches should be classified as early medieval minsters. This lack of a consensus has constrained the development of a detailed history of Somerset and its Church, as has the paucity of post-Conquest evidence relating to its churches and chapels since the first complete source of evidence about them dates from 1791 when John Collinson published his history of the county.

Review of previous research in Somerset

Important research into the development and history of Somerset, which included investigating Somerset's early monasteries and churches, has been completed by Mick Aston (1986a; 1988; 1994; 2000a; 2000c; 2003; 2007; 2009) and Michael Costen (1991; 1992a; 1992c; 1994; 2011; 2015a; 2015b). The profound difficulties in relation to identifying Somerset's early monasteries have, for example, been discussed by Aston (2003). Most of the above research was based on archaeological, morphological, historical and place-name evidence.

The historical and archaeological research by Aston (1986a), Corcos (2002), Costen (1992a; 2011), Hall (2003; 2009), Hase (1994) and Hill (1989) into the early medieval churches of Somerset has provided us with much detailed information using retrogressive analysis; working backwards from the known to the unknown. This technique, as proposed by Thomas (1980: 135), has been used elsewhere to beneficial effect, for example by Blair (1991) in Surrey, Hall (2000) in Dorset, and Hoggett (2010a) in East Anglia.

Costen (2011: 223-4, 233-5) listed the Somerset churches in existence in 1066 based on place names and written sources, primarily charters, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Domesday Survey. In addition, he used 11th-century architectural evidence as detailed by Cramp (2006), and the post-Conquest 'free chapels' which were not under the jurisdiction of the bishop. However, although Costen (2011: 234) concluded that the minster system must be seen as 'an integral part of the social and political structure of Somerset' in the 7th-8th centuries, the lack of available evidence meant he was unable to identify all of its minsters or the parochial framework within which they existed. To resolve this issue, it is necessary to ask how the minsters can be distinguished from other churches that were in existence during that period. For example, Costen (2011: 223) lists Ilminster as having a minster in 1066, based on its name, and Kilmersdon as only having a church in 1066, based on

its very meagre reference in the Domesday Survey (*DB* 16,14). The evidence he used to make these distinctions is severely limited and therefore provides no insight into the actual importance of these two churches. However, the comprehensive and systematic assessment process used for this research has meant that it is possible to identify both Ilminster and Kilmersdon as early medieval parochial minsters and also the likely extent of their *parochiae*.

Costen (2011: 177-201) was able to summarise in general terms the broad pattern of Church development in Somerset and raised several key issues. For example, that 'the new Church was perfectly prepared to accommodate the existing post-Roman churches where they were relevant' so that in parts of the county, but not everywhere, it is possible to identify the relationships 'between early settlements and their religious functions' (Costen 2011: 201). Costen (2011: 185) has argued that by about AD 750 there were 'plenty of local churches' in Somerset organised within an episcopal organisation and that there were monastic sites linked with royal *villae*. He believes these churches are lost to view because 'the loose structure was easily adapted and overlain' by the much more comprehensive approach to Church organisation by Wessex. The extent to which these statements, including the use of the term 'loose structure', can be verified is considered in Chapter 9.

In 2004 Calder considered the problems associated with identifying early ecclesiastical sites in Somerset and discussed the paucity of historical evidence for many churches. However, he, like Nick Corcos (2002: 3-24, 192), recognised that the topographical location of churches is a key strand of evidence in relation to the likely origins of a site. This approach had previously been suggested by Steven Bassett in 1991 regarding the topographical settings of churches in the vicinity of Shrewsbury. It has also been used by Turner (2006a: 37-48) in relation to the South-West, by Masters (2001: 1) in relation to West Sussex and by Pickles (2018: 135-43) in relation to Yorkshire. However, Masters' (2001: 26-8, 76) 'topographical' assessment of churches considered how they relate to sources of water and their relationship to 'burial grounds, enclosures and manorial buildings' rather than how they relate to the surrounding topography which is the approach used for this research.

There are inherent problems in identifying and dating early churches in Somerset which have been discussed by Calder (2004). The situation in the county is broadly similar to the lacunae in the historical records for churches across medieval England as identified by Morris (1985: 49). Therefore, according to Morris (1985: 49) a key line of inquiry that should be considered is the 'matter of quantities: how many churches can be reasonably expected to have been in

existence at different times?'. This research does not explicitly address this question, but its implications are considered, particularly in relation to identifying post-Roman sites.

Research objectives

The presumed historical context for this research is that Christianity was the predominant religion in Somerset during the 5th and subsequent centuries, and that churches were in existence across the county. The overall research objective being addressed is to reconstruct a chronology of Church development in Somerset. There are two strands to this objective: to identify Somerset's early medieval minsters and their original *parochiae* and to investigate the trajectories by which the Church evolved from the post-Roman period. How that is defined is open to question because it is dependent on which region of Britain is being discussed and the paucity of reliable written evidence (Harrington and Welch 2018: 1-8; James 2001: 91-9). In Somerset it would have been in the mid-7th century when the kings of Wessex gained jurisdiction over the county thereby ending control of it by the post-Roman kingdom of *Dumnonia* (Costen 2011: 25-9).

Critically, despite an extensive review of existing research into the early medieval Church, no methodology was identified which could, given the paucity of evidence, be used to understand how Somerset's early medieval Church evolved. In addition, there was no consensus as to which churches should be named in the county as medieval minsters. It was therefore not possible, as many studies have done, to start with a list of known minsters. This was viewed as an advantage in planning this research in that it provided the opportunity to rethink how to identify evidence of early churches because there was no obvious starting point. The initial issue to be addressed was deciding what methodology should be adopted in order to identify the minsters which had already lost importance pre-Conquest when there was a lack of early historical evidence about these churches.

Therefore, a systematic, multi-disciplinary assessment process was constructed to enable the origins and roles of early medieval churches to be identified. The intention in doing so was to establish a methodology that could be used in other counties which would overcome any local shortcomings in the available evidence, and in particular, identify which minsters had lost significance. The aim was to construct a classification system, which would reflect both the changing status of churches and how each one fitted into the overall Church hierarchy.

It is essential to review all the available textual evidence, drawn from pre-Conquest English charters to the post-Conquest bishops' registers. However, the relatively few surviving charters which provide the only source of contemporary early medieval evidence include virtually no information about Somerset's churches. The Domesday Survey is a valuable source of information for 1066/1086 but it only contains limited evidence about the churches which were in existence. Therefore, most of the historical evidence about Somerset's churches dates from between the 13th and 19th centuries.

So how can these early churches be identified? A retrogressive analysis of all available historical, architectural and archaeological evidence was the first step so that all the churches across Somerset could be systematically assessed as to their importance in the early medieval period. This is the major difference between the approach adopted here and previous research into the early Church in Somerset where the starting point was a shortlist of possible, or probable, post-Roman religious sites and early medieval minsters. The decision to adopt a retrospective systematic assessment process means that all the available evidence has been collated from each source. Therefore, data was recorded for all the churches and chapels mentioned by Collinson (1791). No distinction was made between them as to which might be deemed more important in the early medieval period. Similarly, all the details and information about churches and chapels mentioned in the early bishops' registers and bishops' *Acta* were recorded. This approach proved to be successful, but the sheer paucity of historical, architectural and archaeological evidence prior to the 11th century made it necessary to adopt a different methodology for the next stage of the research. Therefore, in order to progress the analysis of how the pre-Conquest Church developed, a landscape archaeological approach embracing topography has been used; how a church is sited within the landscape, and morphology, how it relates to nearby settlement.

This is the approach used by Nick Corcos (2002: 192-3) to understand the structure of Somerset's early medieval Church. He stressed the need to look at the relationships between churches, how each one relates to the territory within which it is sited (Corcos 2002: 192), and whether the overall territorial framework was based on earlier divisions in the landscape. Corcos (2002: 192-3; see also Blair 1991) stated that it is important to be aware of the 'persistent and tenacious thread of earlier [territorial] arrangements' and the extent to which they reflected shared access to natural resources. Importantly, Corcos (2002: 192) outlined how a comprehensive analysis of Church development in Somerset might be achieved. He makes two further important points: first, that churches should be looked at in their topographical context; and secondly, that the area around Carhampton, and

possibly elsewhere, contains churches which may have post-Roman origins (Corcos 2002: 192). Corcos (2002: 192) was quite clear that until a topographical survey of large numbers of Somerset churches was completed it would be impossible to understand the 'role of the Church, especially in its wider territorial sense'. This, he considered, should be central to understanding how the Church developed. It was his conclusions that led directly to the research on which this book is based.

Research questions

The initial questions considered were as listed earlier: what was the geographical framework within which Somerset's early medieval Church was organised; were the early churches sited on pre-existing post-Roman sites and how could Somerset's early medieval minsters be identified? It soon became clear that a new approach was required to answer these questions and a methodology was developed which involved the construction of a relational database to enable the evidence to be collated and explored. The database was initially populated with a list of all the 19th-century churches and chapels that could be identified in Somerset to which was added all the historical, architectural and archaeological information relating to them. As the database was populated and it was possible to correlate and compare the evidence between churches, in particular that relating to where churches were sited within the landscape, this resulted in more specific research questions being identified. The final list of research questions was:

- To what extent can the physical characteristics of where a church is sited in the landscape (its topographical setting) be related to when the site was originally adopted as a religious focal point? This question explores issues raised by other researchers, particularly Turner (2006: 44-8) in relation to the siting of churches in Wessex.
- Was Somerset's early medieval Church founded on the pre-existing network of post-Roman Christian sites? In addressing this question the the extent to which these post-Roman sites had a long-standing role as sacred focal points within the landscape is explored and whether they continued as central places of power as proposed by Hase (1994: 51).
- What was the relationship between the royal *villae* and the minster churches? Blair (2005; particularly 275-9) extensively addresses this question and he notes that it is not possible to 'perceive a clear-cut category' of royal *villae* and discusses how they can be identified. Turner (2006: 61-70) considered how royal *villae* can be identified in Wessex but importantly he also considered the spatial relationship between royal *villae* and nearby minsters.

- Is it possible to identify the large early *parochiae* associated with minsters throughout Somerset? This is an important issue given the evidence from elsewhere. For example, in Surrey (Blair 1991: 103-5) and around Southampton, Hampshire (Hase 1988: 46-7) early medieval *parochiae* have been mapped across the whole area, whereas to date in Dorset the evidence shows only partial coverage (Hall 2000: 40-1).
- To what extent did Somerset's minsters develop into proto-urban settlements between the 9th-11th centuries and later into medieval towns? Blair (2005: 246-90 particularly 290) has discussed at length the concept of the 'holy city' and that during the late-8th and 9th centuries the natural role of minsters as central places within the landscape became more evident. Using archaeological evidence Blair (2018) has revisited this issue and specifically considers it in relation to Somerset. His conclusions are that the minster at Glastonbury is the only one associated with significant evidence of settlement dated to AD 600-850 and that none of the defensive *burhs* established by Wessex had developed urban characteristics between AD 870-950 (Blair 2018: 157, figure 49, 162-3, 275, 326, figure 120, 333 figure 122). However, many pre-Conquest settlements should be described as 'not-quite-urban' because they had coalesced from two or more rural settlements (Blair 2018: 350).

Methodology

Somerset has been used as a case study to explore a number of research strategies and theories about how the Church developed. In progressing the research it became clear that the approaches previously adopted by other researchers were inadequate and would not enable the research questions listed above to be answered. A new approach was therefore developed and the first step was to choose sources of evidence which could be used systematically. Furthermore, it was essential to use evidence derived from the physical landscape using a landscape archaeology approach as used for example by Calder (2004), Corcos (2002), Hase (1994), Klingelhöfer (1992), Pickles (2018) and Turner (2006a). Effective use of data derived from the physical landscape, but also from historical sources, is dependent on asking the right questions of the evidence (Blair 2005: 2). In addition, it is necessary to accept that it is not possible to make assumptions based on a limited number of examples and that there may be no 'typical' place (Blair 2005: 2). It was therefore critical to identify the questions that needed to be answered and then to identify the evidence required to answer them. To date there has been no robust approach capable of identifying important early medieval churches, partly because the available evidence in each county is

variable but also because the question being asked of the evidence is, which of these 'important' churches in a county were minsters when the question which should be asked is, which churches could have been minsters? The premise on which the assessment process used has been constructed is therefore, how can the minsters which are no longer important churches be identified?

A key element in completing this research has been to ensure that all possible sites of early churches in Somerset were identified before any conclusions were reached as to which were early medieval minsters. It was critical to begin by considering all the known 19th-century churches and chapels, rather than just those named as minsters or possible minsters by other researchers.

Therefore, to achieve this a wide range of primary and secondary sources was used to establish a baseline data set for all the churches and chapels for which there was evidence up to and including the 19th century. As the research progressed it was possible to identify those churches which were probably in existence prior to the 11th century. This facilitated the identification of the churches most likely to have been important in the early medieval period. The multi-disciplinary data set thus collated then enabled an assessment of these churches to be completed. It is this comprehensive and inclusive approach which distinguishes this research into the early Church from that completed previously, when the starting point was frequently the 'known' or presumed minsters, rather than starting from first principles. The approach adopted echoes that previously recommended by Jeremy Haslam (1984b: xvi-ii) for identifying proto-urban places in southern England; that we need to ask: what do we know about the history of all the churches that may have existed in the early medieval period? To understand how the Church developed it was necessary to adopt this approach, only then was it possible to identify the distinguishing characteristics of the churches in existence prior to Wessex taking control of Somerset. However, as already stated, it was only possible to identify the minsters after reconstructing the geographical framework within which they were sited, and critically, assessing the overall location and site of each church within the wider landscape.

An important source of evidence which assists in identifying the early parochial boundaries are the 19th-century parish boundaries derived from the Tithe Maps (Kain and Oliver 1995). However, it cannot be assumed that these boundaries equate to those existing in the 10th-11th centuries when parish boundaries were probably first established (Rippon 2012: 160). Prior to the 10th century the landscape in the South-West was divided into large *parochiae*, and before that into even larger early great estates. The first step in

identifying these was to identify the medieval parishes as they facilitated the reconstruction of the pre-11th-century divisions within the landscape, including those of the early *parochiae*. This follows the process adopted by Rippon (2012: 151-64, 199-200) and Turner (2006: 109-13). It was the identification of the probable early parochial boundaries which has enabled the organisation of Somerset's early medieval Church to be understood.

Understanding why, when and how other researchers have used topographical evidence enabled it to be fully utilised in completing this research. The term 'topography' can describe various aspects of the landscape. Sometimes it simply refers to the layout of enclosures and settlements in relation to a church but it can also be used to reflect how a church is sited within the physical landscape; is it on a hill or in a valley? It is also important to consider whether discussions about the topographical setting of a church are purely descriptive or whether its setting is utilised as part of a systematic assessment process so that the topographical setting of several churches can be compared. This research uses the term 'topographical' in relation to how a church sits within the landscape and as part of a systematic assessment process to facilitate the identification of the topographical criteria which can be used to evaluate the origins of churches. This is the major differential between this research and the majority of earlier investigations into the post-Roman and early medieval Church. Topographical evidence has been key, without using it to establish the boundaries of the early great estates and their constituent early *parochiae*, and also as part of the assessment of individual churches, it would not have been possible to successfully answer the research questions on which this book is based.

The intention in developing this methodology has been to ensure that it could be adopted elsewhere to facilitate a comprehensive and more robust understanding of how both the post-Roman and the early medieval Church were organised. The methodology has been tested by looking at a sample of churches in Cornwall, Devon and Dorset; these case studies are discussed in Chapter 7. Researching these churches has shown that the multi-disciplinary assessment process used could be utilised across the South-West. It is hoped this will enable all the early medieval minsters in these counties to be identified for the first time as they have been in Somerset. The extent to which the same process might be adopted elsewhere, for example in Norfolk and Yorkshire, will be determined by the evidence available in those counties.

Importantly, the outcomes from this multi-disciplinary research are such that it will be possible to utilise a similar approach to complement research into the early

medieval Church which has already been undertaken. As more of the early *parochiae* are mapped and the parochial minsters identified across the British Isles the more it will be possible to understand when, why and how decisions were made about the provision of pastoral care in the early medieval period.

Significance of research outcomes

When considering the pattern of ecclesiastical development, it is very tempting to think in terms of a systematic progression; a church was possibly a post-Roman church, then an early medieval minster which subsequently became a mother-church after the 10th century. Indeed, Blair (2005: 158) found that on the Gloucestershire / Warwickshire border only two late mother-churches had not been recorded as minsters. It is all too easy make assumptions about how the Church developed but churches were established for a variety reasons at different times and without establishing a comprehensive set of criteria it is impossible to reach a robust conclusion as to the origins and role of an individual church.

This research demonstrates the importance of using criteria based on a comprehensive inter-relational set of data which embraces evidence drawn from different disciplines: archaeology, architecture, geography, landscape archaeology and history. All these sources of evidence were important because they enabled a range of different types of evidence from the 19th century to the 11th century, and indeed earlier in relation to topographical evidence, to be systematically collated in relation to individual churches. In constructing this data set the starting point was the 1840's Tithe Maps (Kain and Oliver 1995) coupled with the first edition Ordnance Survey maps. It was then possible to demonstrate, as the data set was systematically created, that the parish boundaries existing in the 19th-century had remained stable since the 11th-12th century.

A weighting system for various evidence or elements of the data set using different types of data as counter balances to one another enabled a methodology to be created which enabled comparative assessments of churches to be made. For example, whether there was physical evidence which could date a church to the 11th-12th century coupled with documentary evidence of churches in 1066/86. This particular collation of data enabled the identification of early medieval minsters which had lost significance.

Inevitably there were gaps in the data set because specific items of evidence for some churches was not available. Petts (2009), after exploring the development of the Church in early medieval Wales, sums up the issues which needed to be addressed. He makes the crucial point that it is necessary to view the Church as evolving through a variety of trajectories which differed widely according to the religious, social and political context in which it developed (Petts 2009: 51). He sounds a warning note to all researchers by reflecting on the difficulties of using scant and diffuse evidence:

> Whether looking at variation across time and space, we should not necessarily see such apparent 'patchiness' in the evidence as an inherent problem or weakness, but instead as a phenomenon which needs explaining and understanding. We need to be constantly aware that the underlying causes of this variation in the spread of evidence are important in themselves, and that this variation should be explored and understood rather than silently ignored or glossed over (Petts 2009: 51).

This statement by Petts exactly sums up the problems, and crucially the opportunities, inherent in the paucity of evidence that can be advantageous in understanding the development of the early Church. Indeed, it is the 'patchiness' and variations in the evidence, which includes 'patches' of similarity as well as of contradictory evidence, which has proved to be key in unlocking the multi-stranded trajectories underlying Church development in Somerset.

In conclusion, to be able to distinguish the minsters, mother-churches and lesser churches from each other in Somerset it has been necessary to systematically collate and document a wide range of information in order to explore the links and relationships between the different types of evidence. Therefore, to identify the pattern of Church development it has been essential to continually ask the question: how many churches can we expect to find? This has meant looking chronologically and systematically at church, not just minster, development on a site-by-site basis across the county as proposed by Corcos in 2002. The robust methodology developed for this research is such that it can be used to understand how the Church developed in other counties or regions and to test the conclusions already reached about how the Church evolved elsewhere.

Overall objective of research

The overall objective is to establish the structure of the early medieval Church in Somerset by understanding when sites were initially chosen as religious focal points and how the role of the churches on those sites changed over time and it has been possible to meet that objective. Chapter 2 details the sources and methods used to complete this research, including how the baseline data set was collated. Chapter 3 explores the

evidence relating to mother-churches and their chapels by providing a retrogressive review of the historical data that has been used from the 11th to the 19th century. Chapter 4 details the systematic evidence-based process which enabled Somerset's pre-eminent early medieval churches to be identified by enabling any church or chapel to be scored for importance against a standardised list of evidence. Chapter 5 details how royal *villae* can be identified and how their importance can be assessed. It then considers the relationship which existed between minsters and nearby royal *villae*. The chapter concludes by using the area around Yatton as a case study. Chapter 6 sets out the process by which Somerset's early great estates were identified and then looks at the relationship between the early great estates and their constituent *parochiae*. Finally, it looks at how the medieval pattern of archdeaconries and deaneries

relate to the early *parochiae*. Chapter 7 then explores how churches are sited within the landscape and their relationship to nearby settlements through a series of case studies. Lastly, Chapter 8 includes twelve case studies of early medieval *parochiae* in Somerset.

The major conclusion from the case studies is that there are different trajectories of Church development across the county for a variety of reasons. These include political decisions to establish new royal *villae* and to demote others and pragmatic decisions by the major landholder within a *parochia*, for example Glastonbury Abbey. It is essential to accept that there is not one model that fits all churches or all counties, but a variety of interconnecting patterns of Church development. Whether this multi-stranded development process is mirrored in other counties is still to be determined.