



Barfrestone church, perhaps the finest Norman parish church in England, consisting of a simple nave and square chancel.



Patrixbourne church, showing the tower with the south doorway beneath, the chancel and the narrow south aisle.

## TWO REMARKABLE NORMAN CHURCHES

By Michael David Mirams

East of the Canterbury—Dover Road, and approximately seven miles apart as the crow flies, are the tiny villages of Patrixbourne and Barfrestone. Both are isolated, separate communities despite the near proximity of larger villages. Barfrestone consists of a few houses and a pub on a hill; Patrixbourne, situated on the nail-bourne of the Little Stour, has several quaint old houses, but — an almost unique occurrence in a Kent village — no local inn. But in the heart of these quiet settlements are two aesthetic gems, the parish churches.

Norman architecture survives in a greater or lesser degree in many of the county's medieval churches. Much was obscured, damaged and even destroyed during the zealous epidemic of restoration which swept mid-Victorian England. It is true also, that some previously hidden Norman stonework was uncovered by the removal of plaster from church walls at that time. St Mary's at Patrixbourne and St Nicholas at Barfrestone both underwent some restoration in the middle of the 19th century, but the world-famous Norman carvings and masonry survived intact. Indeed, Barfrestone Church is little altered from the time of its construction in the 12th century and has been described in recent years as the finest complete Norman building in the country. Both churches are well worth a visit, even for those with only a passing interest in church architecture, although finding the two villages can be an adventure in itself.

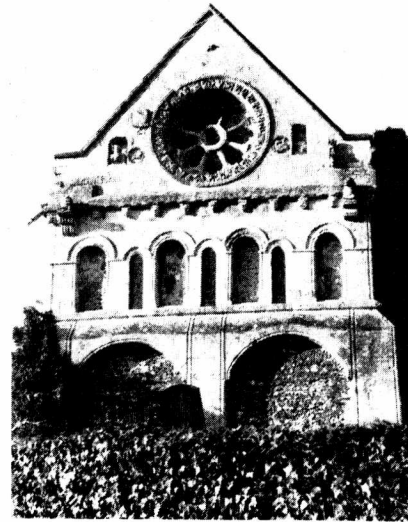
### St Mary's, Patrixbourne

There was a church at Patrixbourne before the Norman Conquest. It is mentioned in Domesday, which describes the village thus: 'In Borowart lathe, in Bridge hundred, Richard, son of William, holds of the Bishop, Borne.' The prefix was added later; it originated from a Lord of the Manor called William Patrick, who held the land in the reign of King Stephen (Patrickeburn, 1228). The early Saxon church may have had connections with the Jutish cemetery of Bifrons in Patrixbourne, the earliest Saxon settlement in the area, and probably stood on the site of the present church.

The building consists of a nave, narrow chancel and north and south aisles, with the tower placed above the south west doorway. It dates largely from the reign of Henry II, although the north aisle was not built until 1827. The tower, complete with spire, was largely restored by Marchioness Conyngham in the 1850s and the clock was added twenty years later by the Marquis. The Conynghams had long associations with the little church and their family vault is beneath the chancel.



The decorative Norman doorway of Patrixbourne church, showing the triangular canopy enclosing an arch niche.



Barfrestone church. The splendid rose or wheel window in the east wall. Note the flint construction in the lower part of the building.

In the east wall can be found recessed Norman windows, including a 'wheel window' similar to the one at Barfrestone, this one resembling the shape of a marigold. A priest's doorway in the south wall contains a figure above the decorative stonework. This is believed to be St Thomas a'Becket, which lends weight to the theory that the church was built shortly after his martyrdom.

The south-west doorway is rivalled in detail (in Kent at least) only by the ones at Barfrestone and Rochester Cathedral, and all were probably the work of the same craftsmen. The ornate carving is in five stages of various designs, including the familiar Norman chevron pattern. The central tympanum has a representation of Christ in Majesty, surrounded by angels and fantastic creatures.

Inside the church is a beautiful collection of Swiss stained glass, which was installed at various times between 1540 and 1700, reflecting a strong connection between the noble families who lived in and around Patrixbourne and their contemporaries in Switzerland. There are eighteen panels contained in the chancel and the Bifrons Chapel (south aisle). The figures depicted are largely of Biblical characters, with backgrounds representing various Swiss and German towns.

To reach St Mary's Church from the A2 Canterbury-Dover road, follow the signs into the village of Bridge. Take the turning beside the Red Lion pub, opposite Bridge Parish Church. The road passes under the A2 and continues into Patrixbourne. St Mary's is on the left after the first bend.

### St Nicholas, Barfrestone

If Patrixbourne Church contains some fine examples of Norman workmanship, then the one at Barfrestone can be rightly considered a masterpiece of the 12th century mason's craft. Externally, the building is a near-complete, uncorrupted specimen of a Norman church.

Like Patrixbourne, Barfrestone was mentioned in Domesday, but the small church which preceded the present one was probably pulled down soon after the completion of the Survey. St Nicholas' Church was an early Norman construction, believed to have been remodelled in Henry II's reign. The Caen stone thus utilised probably came from a demolished building in the area, perhaps from an unfinished monastery at Hackington. The masons who laboured at Barfrestone were almost certainly those responsible for the other fine Norman doorways still surviving in Kent, or some of them at least.

The church sits high on a hill surrounded by the few houses which comprise Barfrestone in its entirety. A small building, it consists of a short nave and square chancel, the simplest of Norman places of worship. There are no aisles, side chapels or tower, but in its simplicity lies the church's beauty. As with Patrixbourne, the highlight of the building is the splendid south doorway.

The outermost semi-circle of the carvings on the doorway shows scenes of manorial life in the Middle Ages, and may have been based on the activities of Adam de Port, who held land at Barfrestone in the 1190s. Three Biblical figures, Elijah, John the Baptist and King David, are interwoven with those of minstrel, villein and steward. On the inner semi-circle are several animals featured in strange poses. Two monkeys are evident, one riding on a goat's back, another blowing the pipes of Pan. A bear strums a harp, while a hare shares a cup of wine with a partridge. The tympanum, like that at Patrixbourne, contains a Christ in Majesty, and the head of Becket is also in evidence here.

The church was built in flint with Caen stone dressing, but much of the elaborate carving, including that on the blocked priest's doorway in the south wall, is badly corroded, a process probably accelerated by the advent of chemicals from the nearby Snowdon Colliery during the last half-century. St Nicholas' was restored by Edward Blore in the 19th century, when the village was known as Barson or Barfreston. Fortunately the Norman work was left in its entirety, but the plain interior is a disappointment after viewing the wonders outside, with the exception of the delicate moulded, twisting shafts of the chancel arch.

Barfrestone is reached from the A2 by taking the B2046 Aylesham road at Barham crossroads. Then take the first turning right and follow the road through Woolage Village and Frogham into Barfrestone. Parking space is extremely limited in the narrow road, but there is a car park at the Yew Tree Inn next door.