THE CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

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Part One
Introduction

Mankind has always sought to understand the forces of nature. Religion provided explanations for flood, plague, famine, life and death; it also provided positive ways of mitigating future catastrophes. If the gods were angry they could be placated by sacrifices; if generous they could praised. As man gathered knowledge so he tailored his gods to suit his needs and understanding; spirits that lived in rocks and trees might be replaced by pantheons of gods represented by man-made images, or by single supreme beings. Sometimes the god was unchanged but the rituals of worship were changed. Sometimes those changes, whether fundamental or purely ritualistic, were violent, sudden and accompanied by revolution and destruction.

Such deliberate destruction of past ways of worship, together with the forces of natural decay has removed much of the evidence of past religious life in Bunwell. However there are parish records dating from 1550, there are manorial records and there are important clues to be found in the fabric of the parish church.

Pre-Norman: Saxons, Leylines and Folklore

There is very little evidence available on which to construct a history of pre-Norman religious life in Bunwell. We do know from archaeological finds that there was a Saxon community in Bunwell, and we know that on the instructions of St Felix, Christianity was brought to East Anglia by Bishop Honorius in circa. 630 A.D. In 668 Theodore of Tarsus became Archbishop of Canterbury and set about reorganising the Church[1] in England, increasing the number of Bishops from seven to fourteen, with the result that by 672 a bishop had been installed in Norfolk at North Elmham. In those early days of Saxon Christianity, before the building of churches, it was the custom to erect a cross at an appropriate site at which to carry out religious rites; these were performed in the open air using the services of a peripatetic Minister sent out by the Bishop. It is part of Bunwell village folklore that a Saxon cross could have been the 'holy stone' that translated to Haddeston, which later gave its name to one of the communities of the parish of Bunwell.[2]

The site of the present church would have been a logical place to erect a cross, being in a commanding position on a ridge of high ground between two of the streams feeding the River Tas, adjacent to a trackway from Norwich to the Buckenhams and Thetford, and also close to patronage in the form of a large land-owning (now Banyards Hall). One of the ways Theodore extended the hold of the Church was by granting patronage to those landowners who

[1] Church, when capitalised refers to the organisation, not the building, e.g. the Church of England
[2] For a more plausible explanation of the derivation of Haddeston, see Peter Day, *Topography and Geology,* pp. 1-2.

constructed churches, and, continuing the conjecture, it is likely that the then owner of the Banyards estate provided the land and means for the construction of a Saxon church on the site of the present 15th century church of St Michael's and All Angels.

The westerly of the two streams rises north of Barhams Lane and flowing past the northern boundary of the churchyard could have been used for baptisms, since it was the Saxon custom to conduct baptisms in rivers or streams. It is likely that the other stream, which also marks the eastern boundary of the parish, is the original 'good stream' or 'bune well' that provided the parish with its present name.

If credence is to be given to those believing in the existence and meaning of leylines, then the site of Bunwell church becomes significant indeed. According to Devereux and Thomson, Bunwell church lies at the easterly end of a leyline some 17 miles long ending at a barrow at Elder Hill south of Thetford on the A1088. [3] In between and exactly on the same straight line are four other ancient sites; a tumulus south of Old Buckenham, a tumulus at Quiddenham known locally as Boudicea's Grave, a moat and the now redundant church of St Andrew at West Harling. If the leyline theory is correct, then prior to any Saxon cross or church at Bunwell, there may have been a mark stone for the terminus of a leyline. This mark stone provides another possible explanation for the origin of the name Haddeston

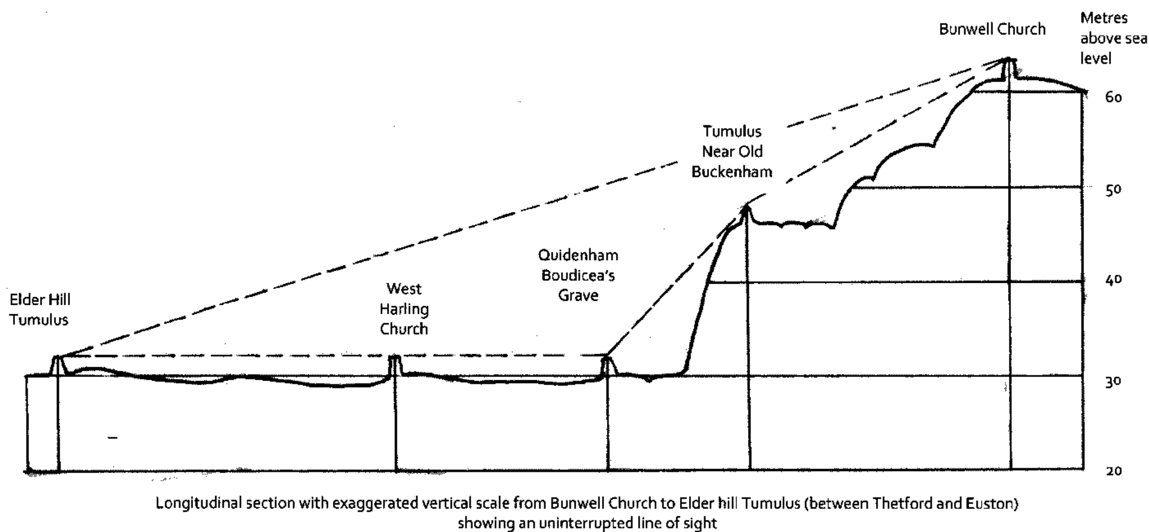

Figure1 Longitudinal Section along Leyline

Alfred Watkins, who 'rediscovered' leylines in 1921 and wrote up his findings in *The Old Straight Track*, believed that leylines were ancient trackways which their constructors had marked by stones or mounds. These sites, often on raised ground, achieved an important status within the communities and their folk lore, to the extent that they were 'colonised' by later peoples for their own significant purposes, i.e. for the construction of burial mounds or Christian churches. Watkins's ideas met with a degree of opposition from conventional archaeologists who were uncomfortable with the lack of material proof to back up his theories. However in the case of the Bunwell to Thetford leyline, Figure 1 does demonstrate that topographically the line worked. One would have been able to physically see from the Thetford barrow to Bunwell church, if not by day then by means of a beacon at night. If the leyline had been constructed from Thetford working towards Bunwell, then every marker

[3] Paul Devereux and Ian Thomson, *The Ley Hunter's Companion,* (London: Thames and Hudson 1979), pp.170-171

could have been sighted and lined up. If one remembers that in the Bronze or Iron ages, when these lines would have been constructed, Britain was covered in forest then the advantage of a straight trackway to prevent travellers becoming lost can be understood.

Figure 2 Carved Green Man Motif on Front Panel of Pulpit

John Timpson, in his book *Timpson's Leylines,* includes an illustration of a small carved green man on the church pulpit (Figure 2) and cites it as an 'intriguing link' with ancient times.[4] Intriguing perhaps, but not connected with the leyline theory since the pulpit, was donated by Lady Buxton in ca 1890. It was carved in the Victorian Gothic Revival style popularised by Pugin and Ruskin, a style that made frequent use of the medieval foliate man as a decorative motif for church restoration work. There are other green man carvings on the choir stalls, (see Figure 3.) but again these are Victorian. They are unlikely to be a link to the supposed terminus of the leyline since the leyline theory was not published until 1921, some 30 or so years after they were carved.

Figure 3 Carved Green Man on Front of Choir Stalls

There are however other, more plausible links with ancient times, this time connecting the patron saint with a pagan site. It is often the case that sites now used for Christian worship were previously used by older religions. The venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* mentions a letter from Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus sending a message to Augustine that

[4] John Timpson, *Timpson's Leylines*, (London: Cassell 2000), p. 12

'pagan temples ought not to be destroyed but purified and converted to churches'[5] Bunwell Church is dedicated to the Archangel Michael who is often depicted weighing the souls of the dead at Judgement Day. The counterpart in pre-Christian Greek religion was Hermes or Mercury who guided the souls of the dead to the underworld. As James Hall notes, 'another connection between the two is to be found in the sites dedicated to St Michael, frequently on mounds and hill-tops, where formerly a temple of Mercury is known to have stood'.[6] It is not suggested that such a temple stood at Bunwell, however the archaeological finds at Little Green do provide evidence of a possible Roman Settlement in the Parish, and taken all in all; the associations with the name Michael, the position of the church, the Haddeston 'holy stone' and the terminus of a leyline, there is a wealth of circumstantial evidence to suggest that the church was indeed built on an ancient site.

To return to the Saxons, almost all early Saxon churches, built of timber and thatch, were destroyed by the Viking invaders. From 917 when Alfred's son Athelstan reconquered the Danelaw some stability was restored, but with the monasteries (which had been at the heart of the church) in ruins, the Christian church was at a low ebb. This situation continued until the mid-tenth century when Dunstan and others brought about a monastic revival which resulted in the restoration of the monasteries at Ely and Peterborough. With this revival came the construction of the few Saxon churches that we see today. Few remain because later masons, particularly those of the perpendicular period, assiduously obliterated all traces of earlier construction. Such was probably the case at Bunwell.

Patronage and Power

The present church at Bunwell is in the perpendicular style and was constructed in stages between about 1450 and 1520. Before that date there is very little evidence to suggest what kind of building existed. The arrival of the Normans in 1066 would almost certainly have precipitated a wave of church reconstruction; and that a church did exist at Bunwell is known from the records dating from 1201 when the first rector Alan de Beccles was appointed. The way in which Alan de Beccles and subsequent Rectors of Bunwell were appointed raises the general issue of the relationship between church and state, and this requires a short digression before returning to the specific issues of Bunwell church.

Today St Michael's church is still at the centre of village life and used by many families to mark their important rites of passage. In today's secular society, for those who choose not to worship there, the church makes few demands upon them. They pay for its services in much the same way as they would for an accountant or a garage mechanic, by the extent of the task. After settling their account for the wedding or the funeral they walk away from the church with no further obligation. That is now; but it was not always so.

Before the Enlightenment[7] the Church wielded immense power, it levied its own taxes in the form of tithes and it policed its congregation by its unique position as the gateway to everlasting life and the only way to avoid a very unpleasant spell in purgatory or worse. At a time, prior to say 1800, the villagers would have believed if they did not attend church, pay their tithes, and conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the Church's teachings, then they might indeed rot in hell. Before Isaac Newton demonstrated that heavenly bodies moved

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[5] Bede, 'Ecclesiastical History', in Alfred Watkins *The Old Straight Track* (London: Abacus 2005), p.117.
[6] James Hall, *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art,* (London: John Murray 1996), p.208.
[7] The period from 1750 to 1800 when the discoveries of Newton, which enabled science to explain nature's mysteries, led to a weakening of the power of the clergy.

according to mathematical laws, the unexplainable had to be put down to the work of god, and the clergy were God's instruments. The common people respected the clergy for the influence they had with an all-powerful god, and the clergy used this position to keep their flock from straying from the fold. Present day cynics may argue that the clergy exploited their position to govern by superstition and fear, but the reality was that the clergy, even with their superior education were just as concerned about hell-fire as were their parishioners.

It was then a matter of some concern to government that this very considerable power of the Church over the people should be exercised in a way that would not conflict with its own objectives. Government recognised that the church was a useful agency for managing certain domestic arrangements. Looking after the poor, burying the dead, and keeping records of marriages were all tasks that it was happy to leave to the local clergy. The Church was also a force for good order in that its religious celebrations and feast days kept the workers busy during their limited leisure time leaving less time for anti-social and sinful activities. All this activity was valuable provided always that the clergy did not become ambitious for extra-parochial control bordering on political interference. To ensure that the church did not become too powerful, the appointment of the clergy was made by people or authorities loyal to the state.

To return to the Parish of Bunwell, according to Blomefield,[8] following the Norman conquest in 1066, the advowson for Bunwell[9] was held jointly by three manors, those of Roger Fitz-Peter Fitz-Osbert, Walkeline de Bosevile, and Sir Robert Banyard. Subsequently Walkeline sold his interest in the advowson to de Bosevile leaving the power in the hands of two manors, who seemingly took it in turns to appoint rectors. The first record of a rector of Bunwell dates from 1201 when Alan de Beccles was appointed by Fulk Banyard.

Although Alan de Beccles owed spiritual allegiance to the Pope via the Bishop of Norwich, his income derived from the taxes levied upon his parishioners in the form of tithes. That income stream was the gift of the Lords of the Manor who appointed him, and who themselves held their manors by grants from the Crown. In this way the power of the Pope was kept under control. If a rector over-reached himself by preaching against the state, he would quickly lose his living and be replaced by another more loyal to the Crown.

This well-established balance between church and state came to an and in 1534, not through subversion from the clergy but because the Pope would not grant Henry VIII an annulment to his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, thereby validating his marriage to Anne Boleyn. Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy severed the connection with Rome making him head of the Church of England, free to grant annulments, and free to get his hands on the wealth of the Church.

The subsequent dissolution of the monasteries was accompanied by a wave of state-sponsored destruction that swept across the cathedrals and parish churches of England, leaving them, Bunwell included, stripped of some of their greatest architectural and sculptural treasures.

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[8] Francis Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk,* 5 vols (London: William Miller, 1806), v 5, pp 131-141.
[9] The right to appoint a person to a benefice.