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DUNWICH, SUFFOLK

AN ENGLISH ATLANTIS

By Duncan J. D. Smith

“Unlike those ruined cities whose fragments attest their former grandeur, Dunwich is wasted, desolate, and void”

(Alfred Inigo Suckling (1796–1856), Suffolk clergyman and historian)

In the late 1950s, the publishing house Methuen commissioned my maternal grandfather, P. G. M. Dickinson, to pen a county guide to Suffolk. Recently, whilst flicking through his *Little Guide to Suffolk*, I was intrigued to find a generous page and a half about the coastal village of Dunwich – intrigued because Dunwich today comprises little more than a row of cottages, a Victorian church and a pub. Reading on, I discovered that the importance of the place lies not in the visible but the invisible: the great medieval port that once stood here has vanished beneath the waves.

EARLY DAYS

What’s left of Dunwich can be found half way between Aldeburgh and Southwold, at the end of a winding lane branching east off the A12 at Yoxford. The main road divides East Suffolk’s inland clay country from its coastal heaths, tidal rivers and low sandy sea cliffs. It was on one of these cliffs that Dunwich was long ago founded.

With most of Dunwich now submerged, it is difficult to elucidate its early days. It has been suggested that the Trinovantes, a pre-Roman Celtic tribe, were here first. They are thought to have been one of only two British tribes who knew of Caesar’s plans to cross the Channel, and

so sent ambassadors to guarantee their safety. If they were here then their settlement was probably on Dunwich’s fatally sandy cliff, which at that time stretched over a mile out to sea but is now entirely lost.

Demonstrating a Roman presence at Dunwich is almost as problematic although some artefacts, including reused clay tiles, have been found. Secondary evidence exists in the form of Roman roads farther inland, one of which most likely connected Dunwich with Bury St. Edmunds. Additionally, a glance at a map of Roman East Anglia reveals that naval bases were built at Bradwell in Essex, Felixstowe in Suffolk, and Great Yarmouth in Norfolk. Designed to keep marauding Jutes, Danes and Saxons at bay, it would have made strategic sense to complete the chain with another base at Dunwich. Some historians believe this base was called Sitomagus, a documented but so far unidentified Roman settlement.

After the Romans came the Saxons. We know from various histories that around 630 CE Saint Sigebert became King of the East Angles and began trading with ports around the North Sea. Saint Felix of Burgundy soon joined him

Right, top: The village sign at Dunwich recalls its heyday as a medieval port

Right: The sea cliffs at Dunwich continue to be eroded



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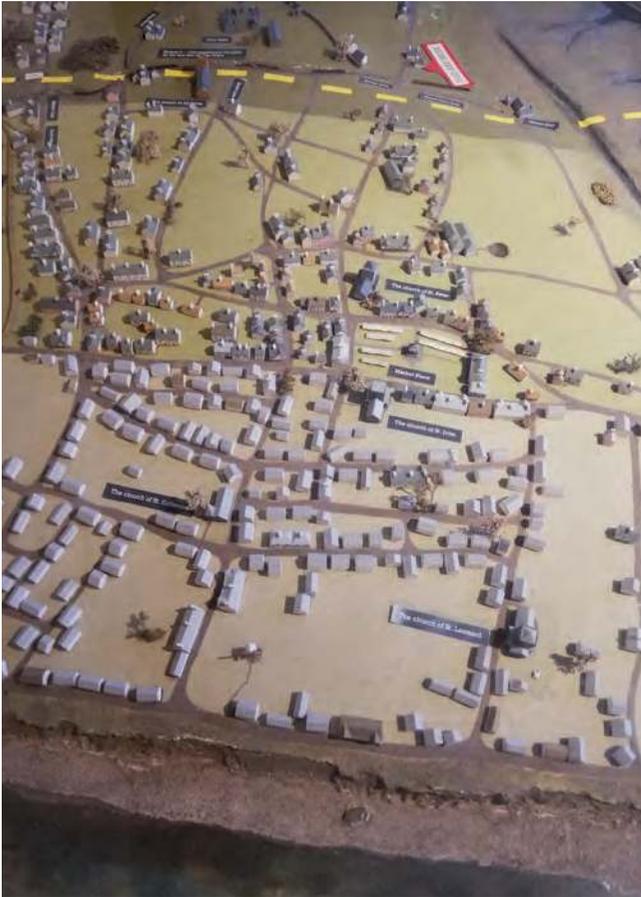


as Bishop, establishing his see at ‘Dunmoc’ (meaning ‘deep water town’), which historians take to be Dunwich. Together they set about converting the local populace to Christianity. Only in the last few years though actual Saxon remains been found at Dunwich. They consist of pot sherds retrieved by television’s *Time Team* from the bottom of the Pales Dyke, a 15-foot-deep ditch and rampart that protected the medieval town on its landward side. Known as ‘Thetford Ware’ and dating from 850–1100 CE, the sherds demonstrate that Dunwich did exist in Late Saxon times.

NORMAN HEYDAY

It can be safely assumed that by the time of the Norman Conquest (1066), Dunwich was of a considerable size. Twenty years later, the *Domesday Book* confirms a population of 3,000 souls and three churches. A series of royal dispensations followed taking Dunwich into a golden age: it was made a mint town by Henry II (1154–1189), given two borough charters by John (1199–1216), and under Edward I (1272–1307) not only contributed eleven ships of war to the king’s navy but also boasted a fleet of over 50 “great ships” for its own trading activities.

A fascinating scale model in Dunwich Museum shows the layout of the town in its Norman heyday. Based on old maps and documents, it clearly depicts Dunwich protected on one side by the sea and on the other by the Pales Dyke, with four town gates giving onto roads radiating outwards into the surrounding countryside. Most importantly, the town’s quays and warehouses are shown, where the River Dunwich and the much larger River Blyth once joined the sea. As a port, Dunwich was noted for its wool, grain, cheese and butter exports, with imported goods including fish, furs and timber from Iceland and the Baltic region, cloth from Holland and wine from France. Remarkably, Dunwich in the mid-13th century was England’s third most important port after London and Bristol, and from the time of Edward I it sent two MPs to parliament. It is also recorded that it paid its taxes in herring.



No less than nine parish churches were eventually required to serve the town's burgeoning population, most of whom earned a living from the sea. There were also two monasteries (Franciscan Greyfriars and Dominican Blackfriars), several chapels, and a Preceptory of the Knights Templar (later passed to the Hospitallers). A Leper Hospital with its own Chapel of St. James was located outside the town for health reasons. The museum model depicts them all, as well as various non-ecclesiastical buildings, including a large market square and cross around which a weekly market was held, a guildhall, a jail and several windmills. There was also a so-called Maison Dieu just outside the Bridge Gate, which housed six poor people and probably served as a hostel for weary travellers.

SWEPT AWAY

Dunwich may have been thriving during the

13th century but the *Domesday Book* shows that it was also waging war with the sea. Ominous mention is made of a carucate of land (an old English unit of land covering 60–160 acres) having been carried off by the waves. Beginning in the 1280s, a series of terrific storms began battering the fragile sea cliffs of Dunwich. Each year between 1284 and 1287 they came and each time they wreaked havoc. The waves breached the town's inadequate sea defences sweeping away several hundred houses and blocking temporarily the harbour mouth. Further storms are recorded in 1326, 1328 (when the nearby village of Newton was entirely erased) and 1347 during a period of extreme weather known as the Little Ice Age. This time, as well as many more houses, three churches were lost.

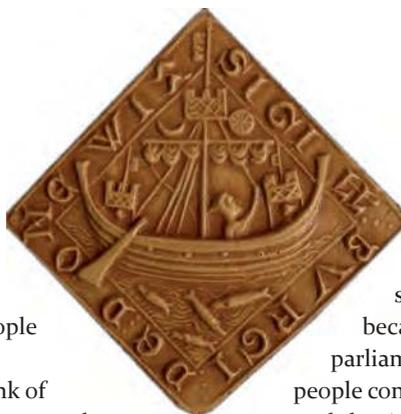
Then, on 16th January 1362, the Saint Marcellus' flood hit. Known in Low German as Grote Mandrenke (Great Drowning of Men), this ferocious European wind storm swept

Above, left: This model in Dunwich Museum shows all that has been lost

Above, right: Modern Dunwich has exchanged ships and churches for quaint cottages and telephone box

Top right: The medieval seal of Dunwich depicts a ship and a sea full of fish

Right: An old photo showing All Saints in 1903 sliding gradually over the cliff



across Northern Germany, Denmark, the Netherland and Britain leaving 25,000 people dead in its wake. In Dunwich, the surge tide piled a huge bank of sand and shingle in the harbour mouth, preventing access to shipping once and for all. Unable now to empty into the sea, the River Dunwich altered its course to join the River Blyth farther north at Walberswick, where a new port was established. The golden age of Dunwich was effectively over.

With half of Dunwich now lost, it was only a matter of time before the rest followed suit. Subsequent erosion and flooding destroyed the town's parishes one by one. The inhabitants knew what was coming and stripped the lead from the market cross in advance. They also removed the church bells although this hasn't stopped tales of bells peeling from beneath the waves whenever a storm is due.

DUNWICH REDISCOVERED

As the livelihood of Dunwich was killed

off, so its population shrank. The town eventually became a Rotten Borough, a parliamentary district with so few people compared to when the seat was created that it was all too easy for election results to be manipulated. As a result, in 1832 the now largely submarine borough was disenfranchised.

Despite all this, the legend of Dunwich persisted and inevitably attracted writers and artists. First on the scene was Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), who in his *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–1727) described Dunwich as “a testimony of the decay of publick things”. Later the artists J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) and Charles Keene (1823–1891) painted and drew Dunwich respectively, and Algernon Swinburne (1837–1909) was inspired to write his poem *By the North Sea*. Also moved by the desolate scene was the poet Edward FitzGerald (1809–1883), translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, and the authors Henry James (1843–1916) and Jerome K. Jerome (1859–1927).



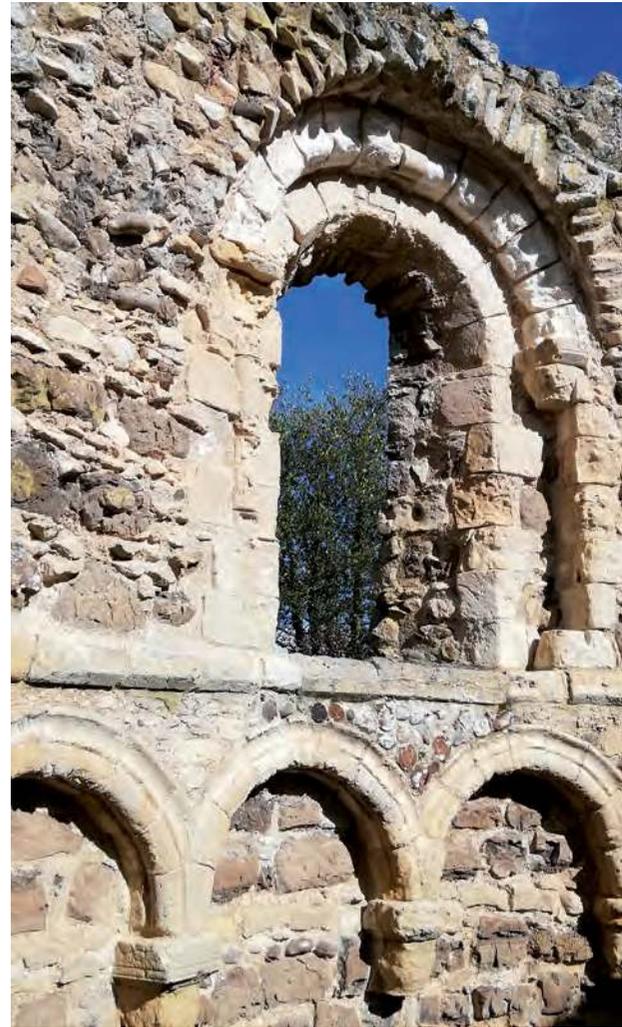
...there is a reason why these ruins have been spared. They are all that's left of Greyfriars Monastery, which was rebuilt here in 1290 after its original location on the seaward side of medieval Dunwich had been swamped by storms

M. R. James (1862–1936) was here, too, gaining inspiration for his popular but unsettling ghost stories on an antiquarian theme. In his *Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad* an introverted academic happens upon a curious whistle while exploring a Knights Templar cemetery on the East Anglian coast. When blown, the whistle summons a supernatural force that terrorises its discoverer. A television adaptation of the story filmed partly in Dunwich in the late 1960s stars a perfectly-cast Michael Hordern as the spooked professor.

WHAT REMAINS

Dunwich today is a place that has the power to move the visitor in a manner out of all proportion to its physical remains. The tiny modern village with just sixty five permanent residents gives little away about its illustrious past. A row of early 19th century cottages line the only thoroughfare, St. James' Street, their uniform latticed windows and ornate chimneys typical of Victorian estate architecture, built in this case by one Frederick Barne. His family's association with Dunwich started in the mid-18th century, when the estate was purchased to





St. James' Street, where the village sign bearing the image of a ship echoes the town badge. Alongside it stands the Victorian Church of St. James completed in 1832, at a time when Dunwich had been without a parish church for fifty years. Of far greater interest though is the little ruin in the churchyard. An arcaded apse, it is all that remains of the Chapel of St. James, once part of the town's medieval Leper Hospital. Its survival is down to it being located away from the town to prevent the spread of disease and, unbeknown at the time, sufficiently inland to escape the predations of the sea. Also in the churchyard is a freestanding buttress, the last piece of All Saints, retrieved just in time from the cliff edge and rebuilt here for posterity.

At the seaward end of the street is The Ship inn beyond which the street splits in three. Turn left past the Flora Tea Rooms to reach

an immense shingle beach, where it is easy to imagine how the mouth of the medieval harbour became blocked centuries ago (the enormous field behind the car park was once part of the river estuary). Dead ahead would have been one of the main roads into the medieval town but today, of course, it leads only into the sea. Turn right, however, and the street leads up to a large, wind-swept meadow on the cliff-top south of the present-day village. The ruins here provide a real sense of medieval Dunwich.

Like the Leper Hospital, there is a reason why these ruins have been spared. They are all that's left of Greyfriars Monastery, which was rebuilt here in 1290 after its original location on the seaward side of medieval Dunwich had been swamped by storms. Even so, not much remains beyond a part of the south walk of the cloister, which probably had a refectory above, and a flint perimeter wall with two

Previous pages: The enigmatic remains of Greyfriars Monastery on a spring morning

Above, left to right: The ruined Leper Hospital Chapel, with the Victorian Church of St. James beyond; A detail of the arcaded apse of the Leper Hospital Chapel; A modern building teeters on the edge of the cliffs at Dunwich

Far right: The last remaining gravestone in All Saints' churchyard



Further Information

Darsham is approximately six miles away with train services by Abellio Greater Anglia running to Lowestoft and Ipswich and on-going connections to London Liverpool Street and Cambridge.

Dunwich Museum is open in March at weekends, 2–4pm and between April and October daily, 11.30am–4.30pm, www.dunwichmuseum.org.uk.

The Ship at Dunwich is open Monday to Saturday 8am–11pm and Sunday 8am–10.30pm www.shipatdunwich.co.uk.

The Flora Tea Rooms are open between March and October, Monday to Friday 9am–2.30pm, Saturday 9am–3pm and Sunday 9am–4pm www.facebook.com/Flora-Tea-Rooms-Dunwich

gates. Of the almost 200 foot-long monastery church on the north side of the cloister there is nothing above ground, its stone having been robbed following the Dissolution in the 1530s, although its sturdy foundations have recently been detected. Near the cliff edge, the monastery precinct adjoins the last vestige of All Saints' churchyard, which today consists of a solitary gravestone, that of Jacob Forster, who died in 1796. From the beach below it is still sometimes possible to see human bones sticking out of the crumbling cliff face.

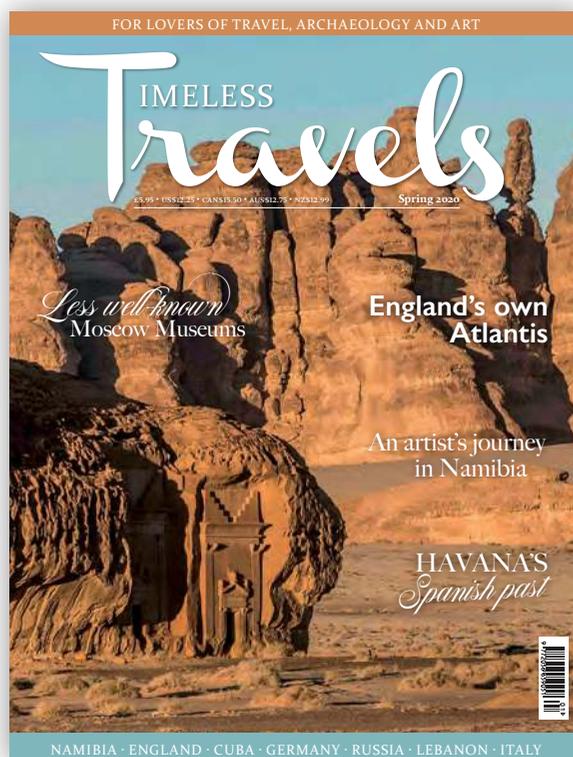
Of course, most of medieval Dunwich now lies ten or more metres down beneath the murky waves. Here, recent technological advances have meant that archaeologists using sonar devices have been able to map what remains of the sunken town. Piles of masonry have been identified as specific parish churches and in conjunction with Google Earth's satellite



imagery, parts of the old street plan, river course and quays have been reconstructed.

Those intrigued by the Dunwich story should visit sooner rather than later. It is estimated that the ruins of Greyfriars and even the modern village could be gone within a century. Then there will only be memories to tell the tale of this English Atlantis – and the occasional tolling of those sunken church bells.^{TT}

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