# Sandwich 1000-1520: the history of the 'completest medieval town in England' seen through its buildings

Before the end of the Middle Ages Thanet was an island separated from the rest of Kent by the Wantsum Channel, at the east end of which there was a large natural harbour, used from Viking times onwards to gather fleets of ships. Sandwich commanded the narrow way into the River Stour which was the main shipping route to Canterbury and the north coast of Kent, including London, thereby avoiding sailing round the dangerous North Foreland. In 1023 Cnut gave rights to various tolls in Sandwich to Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, including the right to charge tolls on the waterways through the Wantsum Channel.
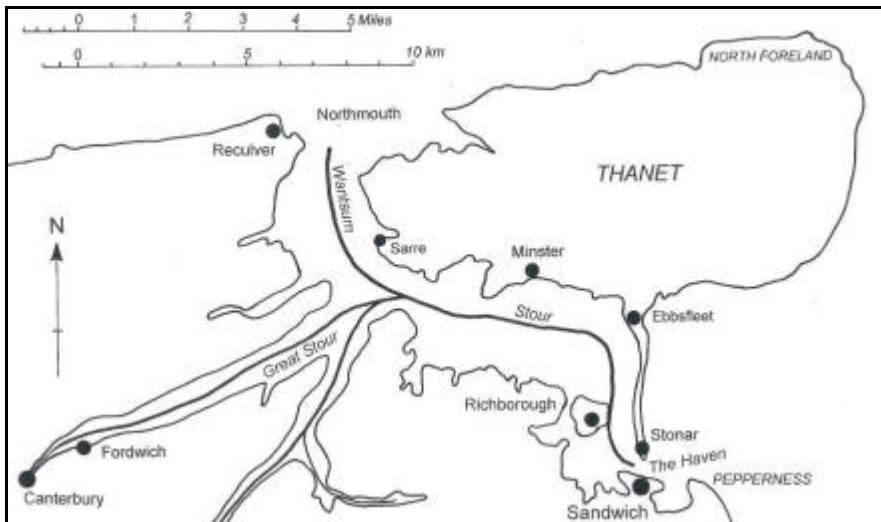
Map showing the original line of the Wantsum Channel

The highest point in Sandwich, c.7m above sea level, lies to on the east side of the town and was occupied by a royal site, later incorporating a castle, with St Clement's church to its west. The church, almost certainly with a tower, commanded the narrow strait through which ships had to pass. It has the earliest surviving masonry of the three parish churches, and a few features indicative of its eleventh-century origin remain. There was a cruciform plan with a long, low nave, indicated by roof scars at the east end and early stone quoins marking the original corners at the west end. There is also evidence for former low 'porticus' on the site of the

later transepts. The church is documented by c.1050, but may be considerably earlier, for the nearest comparison to its form is St Mary-in-Castro at Dover, which is generally accepted as erected *c*.1000, and was possibly a royal foundation built by Aethelred or Cnut.

Sandwich was a place of strategic importance to both these kings, and the gathering place for their fleets, although there is no direct evidence for either of them patronising the church. Churches dedicated to St Clement tend to be early, to be associated with defence, are often royal foundations and are often located near ferries; this one being near the ferry to Thanet.

At the time of Edward the Confessor there were 307 inhabited dwellings, by 1086 there were 386 or possibly more, indicating rapid growth and suggesting a population of around 2000. Although there is no written evidence for a market, it is certain that there was one, and its site was probably west of St Clement's in the High Street, which has the tell-tale cigar shape of some early market places. There is little archaeological evidence to back this up, almost certainly because most excavations have been concentrated further west where the late-medieval centre developed.

By the end of the eleventh century the town occupied the whole area it does today. St Peter's church, in the centre, is documented in the late eleventh century. Christ Church Priory, which held courts and owned much property in Sandwich, built an administrative centre in the second best position, at the far west end of town, almost certainly because the higher land around St Clement's was not available.

St Mary's parish church, near the Priory's site, has no remains earlier than the twelfth century. It was badly damaged by the collapse of the medieval tower during the seventeenth century, but the west end has enough original work to permit the reconstruction of a twelfth century church with aisles and a central tower. The presence of aisles, particularly with a clerestory, is not common in Kent before *c*.1160-80, e.g. St Nicholas, New Romney. On the basis of its sculpture, the closest analogy to St Mary's appears to be Prior Wibert's work at Canterbury Cathedral, of the 1150s. The archbishop was patron of St Mary's so there was ready access to high-level expertise and perhaps resources. Much later, we know that a cathedral mason was summoned to help with rebuilding the tower of St Mary's.

Fig. 1: Twelfth-century arcading on St Clement's church tower (photo author)

Fig. 2: Stone wall of c.1300 house in Harnet Street (photo author)

The archbishop was also the patron of St Clement's and the closest comparisons to work on its twelfth-century tower (Fig. 1) are also with Canterbury Cathedral work of the 1160s. These two churches are the only material remains which provide evidence suggesting the wealth and importance of the town and port during the twelfth century. The third church, St Peter's, is a much plainer affair, although it has fragments of both eleventh- and twelfth-century work.

By the twelfth century the centre of the town seems to have been moving westwards and the Fishmarket (Market Street), which had probably already existed in the eleventh century, was growing in importance. It seems likely that originally this street followed the contours like all the streets on the higher land, with St Peter's built at right angles in a classic relationship between church and market place. But during the twelfth century the nave of the church was extended, causing a kink in the original line of the street.

By the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there is more documentary evidence and buildings other than churches start to survive. By 1300 it has been estimated that the population may have reached a peak of 5000 souls, which would imply something in the region of 1000 households.

The stone walls and earthern ramparts were not built until well into the fourteenth century. They are not mentioned in the town's written custumal of 1301 which goes into great detail about all sorts of aspects of urban life, including the gateways on the roads into town. The first references to any but ephemeral defences occur in the 1320s; rather late in terms of defences in other towns. When they were built they divided the castle from the town, one of the earth ramparts clipping the edge of the castle ditch that had probably dug in the late thirteenth century. This stretch of rampart also cut off the main road from Eastry, so that a new road further west, known as Newgate, had to be created. One result was probably to turn the east end of town into something of a backwater, largely given over to the seafaring community. During the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) the castle and its surrounding land became the national embarkation point for armies bound for France.

Sandwich was the first Cinque Port to have a written custumal (1301) largely composed by the town clerk, Adam Champneys, who shortly afterwards became rector of St Peter's church. The custumal makes clear that civic elections were held in St Clement's and St Peter's and that the town courts were held in St Peter's. This was relatively common practice especially in the Cinque Port churches. In the early fourteenth century an earlier north aisle of St Peter's was rebuilt to form a huge east-west space as tall as and wider than the nave, flanked by fine fourteenth-century tombs. Although there is no direct evidence for where the courts were held, it seems likely that they were here, and that the tombs were those of town worthies who had served the community during their lifetimes.

The first surviving stone houses were constructed during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, followed shortly by the earliest surviving timber buildings. They are to be found in the centre of town, the part that became the heart of late medieval Sandwich. Most are located near to the waterfront and none of them lie south of the Delf, a man-made watercourse, probably constructed in the eleventh century, which supplied the town with fresh water. To its south were located a Carmelite friary, a couple of hospitals, a third market place, and gardens, orchards and barns.

The earliest stone buildings included a great open hall in the High Street, of which only half survives today. Another possible stone hall, now only a finely constructed flint garden wall with openings and dressings of Caen stone, remains in Harnet Street (Fig. 2). The owners of these buildings were among the elite of the town. A second type of stone structure occurs

at the rear of large plots whose front ranges have gone. They are relatively small, two-storey buildings with well-lit domestic accommodation above poorly lit undercrofts which probably served as storage areas for valuable goods. Three examples remain, originally entered from internal courtyards, suggesting they were private ranges accessed only by members of the household (Fig. 3).

Only one vaulted undercroft of the type familiar from Winchelsea is known (27 Strand Street). The doorway faces the waterfront but is set back from the street line. It was probably connected with the wine trade, which thrived in Sandwich, as in Winchelsea, in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Most wine was probably transhipped by water to Canterbury or London, and insofar as wine cellars were required on land, all trace of them has gone with the exception of this one. Vaulted undercrofts of this type have also been associated with taverns selling wine and there is evidence that this could have been the site of the Black Tavern.
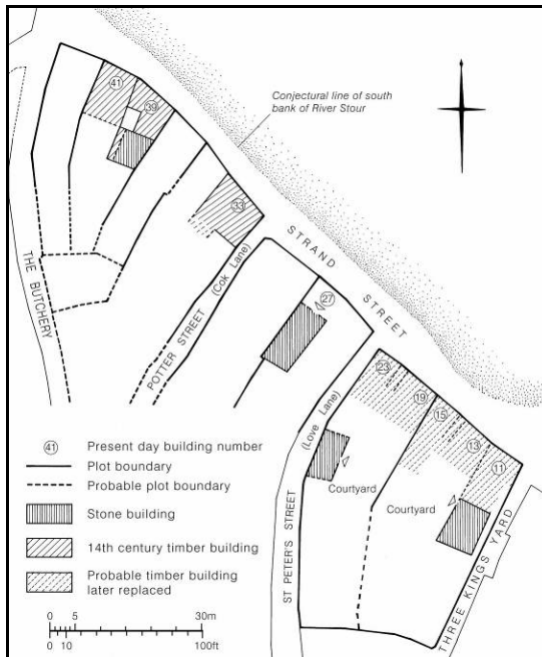

Fig. 3: Locations of thirteenth and fourteenth-century small stone rear ranges and timber buildings on the south side of Strand Street (Allan T. Adams)

All these buildings occur in the central waterfront area of Sandwich on the south side of what is now Strand Street. It seems that the north side of the street only developed in the fifteenth century when, as in other ports, the waterfront was consolidated and pushed further out. Thus when built, the properties to which these early stone ranges belong were probably large merchant establishments facing directly onto private wharves.

The first surviving timber-framed houses were built before the 1340s. Three large buildings remain on the south side of Strand Street, with open halls behind three-storey front ranges. No. 39 has been tree-ring dated to 1334 and has space for a small internal courtyard (Fig. 4). The front range probably contained shops or workshops below and either storage, office or domestic accommodation above. The immensely tall hall behind rose through all three storeys, and seems to have been reached only from the courtyard, suggesting that the front was wholly self-contained and could be occupied separately. Behind the hall lay a four-storey range with a storage undercroft, probably private chambers, and evidence for the storage of heavy goods on the top floor. While wine may be stored in cellars, it is more likely that wool, another important commodity traded through Sandwich at this date, was stored at roof level.
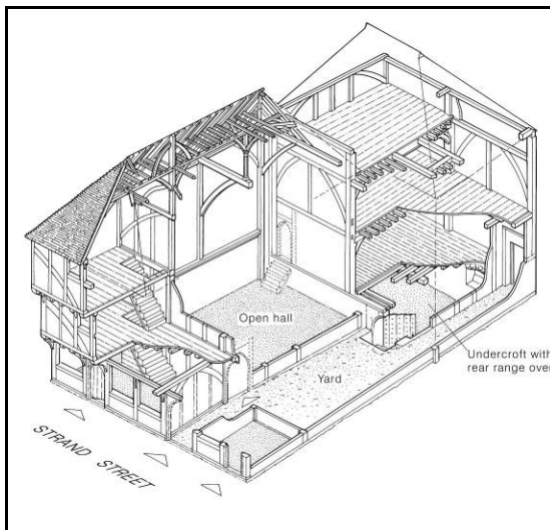

Fig. 4: Reconstruction of 39 Strand Street (Allan T. Adams)

Two other houses of similar date, albeit with slightly different layout, survive in the same stretch of street, and may be compared with

fourteenth-century merchants' houses in Southampton and other important towns, for at this time Sandwich was still a port of national importance. But the population was probably halved in the plague of 1348-50, dropping from *c.*5000 inhabitants to *c.*2500. Although the economy and town life in general revived at the end of the fourteenth century there is little evidence of houses with the distinctive structural and decorative features of late fourteenth-century buildings elsewhere in Kent.

As noted above, Sandwich was defended by earthern ramparts probably built in the first half of the fourteenth century. They are unusual in not having evidence for timber palisades above, nor were they ever replaced by masonry. Two short stretches of stone wall, built later than the ramparts, survive along the east and west extremities of the waterfront. A central, undefended, section was filled with merchants' private quays with access to the waterfront by small gates between their properties. Money was spent on the defences throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The last murage grant was as late as 1483, the same date as Dover but over a hundred years later than at Rye (1379). The late dates for Dover and Sandwich probably reflect the importance of both in the defence of the English Channel, even when the Hundred Years War was over.

Fig. 5: Davis Gate (now known as the Barbican) (photo author)

Where the roads entered the town through the earth ramparts, there were fine masonry gates, all of which were demolished in the 1780s. They are known only through drawings and a little excavation. Two gates, however, survive on the waterfront. Fisher Gate, which opened onto the

public quay, was first built of stone in the late fourteenth century with upper parts added or altered in brick in the sixteenth. Davis Gate, now known as the Barbican, was first recorded in 1300 but the drum towers of the lower part of the present structure date to the later fifteenth century, reinforced in the early sixteenth (Fig. 5). The main town crane was closely associated with this gate which marks the site of the ferry to Thanet and the market street (High Street) originally leading out of town towards Eastry. Its important position possibly means it was erected as much as a symbol of civic pride as a defensive structure.

Few new domestic buildings seem to have been built before the mid or later fifteenth century. When they appear, many in the town centre were open-hall houses not dissimilar to those found in the early fourteenth century, with storeyed ranges at the front and open halls behind, often with galleries across the open hall (Fig.6, on page 14). In the Fishmarket and along Strand Street they were of three storeys, containing perhaps nine rooms (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: A row of medieval houses hidden behind late eighteenth-century facades in Market Street (medieval Fishmarket) (photo author)
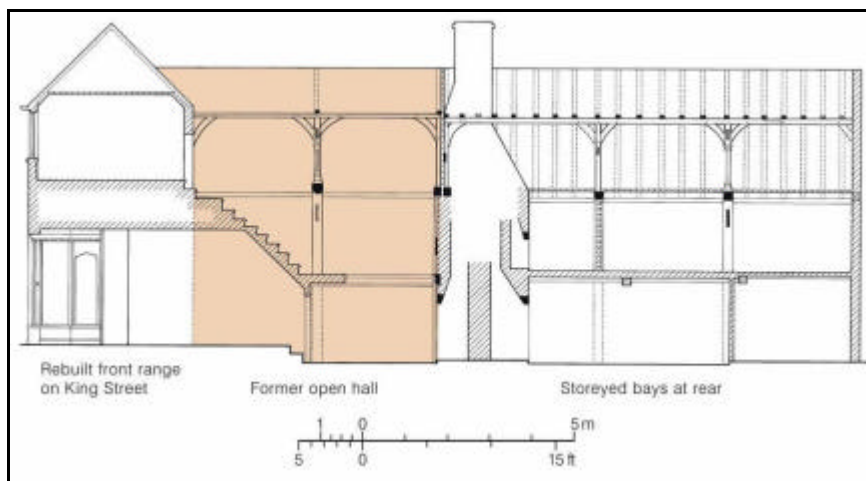
Fig. 8: Long section of 38 King Street (Allan T. Adams)

Slightly further out the same arrangement applied to two-storey buildings, and 38 King Street (Fig.8) not only has part of its open hall and gallery, but is one of the few houses in which accommodation survives at the back. Behind the hall there were three bays creating a large and a small chamber on each floor, and indicating a dwelling of about seven rooms.

During the fifteenth century information about buildings with special functions becomes available: viz. inns, shops, and warehouses. The Bull Inn, owned by the town and used for civic functions, is the only fifteenth-century inn known to survive. Documentary evidence suggests it occupied 11-15 Strand Street, one of the large courtyard properties that had an early stone range at the rear. No large or finely decorated rooms survive and the ground floor may have been used as stabling or storage but there could have been better rooms at the back, now demolished.

The houses in the Fishmarket and the Butchery almost certainly had shops on the ground floor at the front although no evidence for their fittings survives. Most of the survivors had open halls behind but it is possible that one or two were of the type that had no open hall, just a small ceiled room behind the shop and living quarters on the upper floors. By the fifteenth century this was a type of building known in large town centres elsewhere but is not certainly known in Sandwich.

The street range of the Bull Inn contained four shops, two each side of a central archway to the courtyard. Enough of the framework survives to

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reconstruct the frontages with a small doorway to each shop, a large window, and windows upstairs. Behind the shops were small dark rooms with no access to the rear and stairs to single upper chambers. Thus the shops were tenanted entirely separately from the complex behind; a practice which is known in other urban inns. Whether the upper chamber was storage for the shop or was an unheated room where the shopkeeper dwelt is debated by building historians.
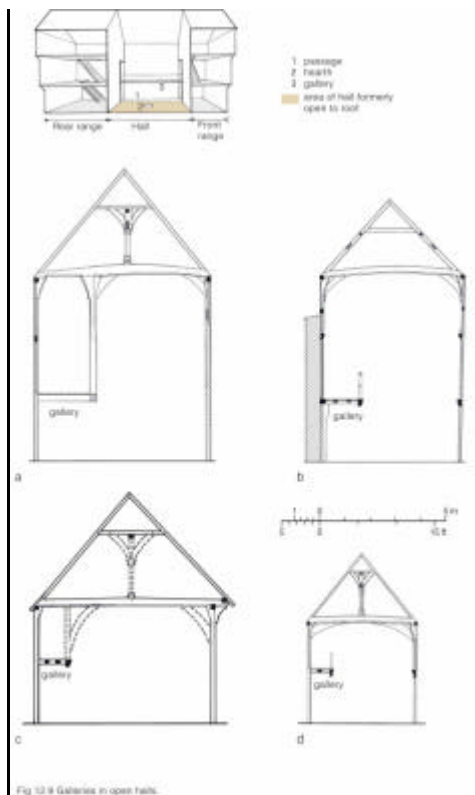

Fig. 6: Late medieval galleried open halls
(Allan T. Adams)
a) 10 Market Street, mid-late 15th cent.
b) 3 Strand Street, *c*.1500
c) 72 Strand Street, mid 15th cent.
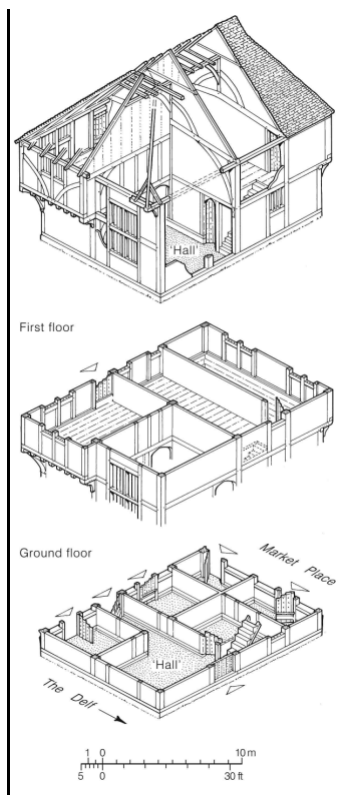d) King Street, mid 15th cent.

Fig. 9: Plans of shops, hall and storage at The No Name Shop, off Cattle market (medieval Cornmarket) (Allan T. Adams)

The Cornmarket (now Cattle Market) the town's third market place, was established south of the Delf, the town's water supply, in the late

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thirteenth century in a large open space suitable for bringing in both cattle and corn from the countryside. By the mid fifteenth century butchers' standings are recorded, which makes sense if some animals needed to be killed on the spot. There was also space for selling butter and, round the edge, several buildings were occupied by smiths (as occurs in several towns) some of whom made household goods such as pewter. It was also the place for the stocks and in the sixteenth century a new court hall was built here. One surviving building, erected on market infill (Fig. 9) had four little lock-up shops reached only from the street, plus an open hall, and an inner room with stairs to the first floor.

Here there were two chambers, and a third apparently reached only by an external loading doorway. Because this house is built between the market place and the Delf, with a street on one side, it is identifiable in the documents and was almost certainly tenanted by smiths throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The main tenant probably sublet the other shops and the hall may have been a forge with access to water from the Delf. It is probable that no one actually lived here and the upper rooms were used for storage.

Fig. 10: Loading doorways on the top floor of 23 Strand Street (photo author)

Storage in upper rooms was common in Sandwich from the fourteenth century onwards. Sometimes buildings were warehouses pure and simple; sometimes the upper storey of a dwelling house has evidence for heavy ceiling joists suggesting attic storage. Only one example of loading doorways survives (Fig. 10) in the early sixteenth-century house of one of the wealthiest men in the town. It is probable that by this time that corn was being stored before being exported. This is one of the few central Sandwich houses to have been largely rebuilt at this time.

In the outer parts of Sandwich most of the fifteenth and early sixteenth-century houses were smaller and, since there was more space on the outskirts, the hall tended to be sited along the street rather than behind it (Fig.11). Houses running along the street frontage are found everywhere in Rye and Faversham, suggesting that the centres of smaller towns never had the same commercial pressures as large towns.
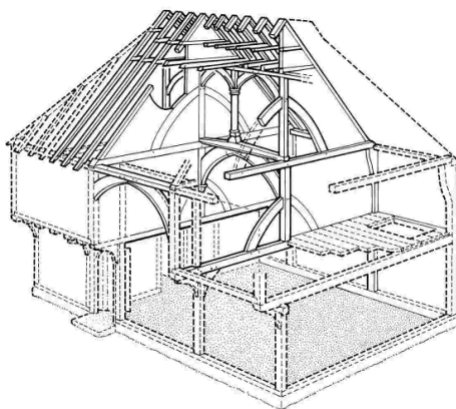

Fig. 11: Reconstruction of 22 & 24 Upper Strand Street, arranged parallel to the street (Allan T. Adams)

The larger Sandwich houses had two-storeyed bays at either end, as occurs in several Rye houses, but others are smaller with a tiny hall entered by a wide passage with a small chamber above. There is some evidence that such houses may have been owned by moderately wealthy individuals who owned just a couple of houses, perhaps living in one and renting out the other. Some of the owners were carpenters or masons, suggesting that they may have been indulging in speculative development on a modest scale. This type of house occurs in the eastern part of town where there is evidence for people connected with the sea, so, while they may have been built by small entrepreneurs they could have been intended to house seamen who were seldom wealthy enough to own their own property.

By *c.*1500 houses were built in which the hall was ceiled over from the start. These had continuous jetties across the front (Fig. 12) and the hall and other rooms were heated by fireplaces in proper chimney stacks. In Rye this trend began in the last twenty years or so of the fifteenth century and that may be true here too, although the surviving buildings may be a little later. On the whole they do not occur in the centre of town, where the older houses were simply adapted to modern needs, but are found in the outer streets placed along the street frontage like the earlier open-hall houses in those areas.

Fig. 12: Exterior of 27 & 29 King Street (photo author)

By the late fifteenth century the town was in trouble. The growth of London and the silting of the haven and the Wantsum waterways meant that the international trade had gone. The population had diminished; from a possible 500 households in 1471, to 380 households in 1513 and to only 290 households by 1560. The evidence from both buildings and documents suggests that as the population contracted people moved into the centre of town, abandoning areas which we know were populous earlier but where no medieval dwellings survive. The authorities tried to penalise people for pulling houses down but the repeated threats suggest they did not have much success. The centre, however, remained popular; largely occupied by medieval, gable-end to street buildings, many of which were never rebuilt. Little new building occurred in the early sixteenth century and what there is lies in the outer areas, especially to the east where most of the population got their livelihood from the sea.

It has only been possible to date two buildings precisely using dendrochronology; the house of 1334 and one of the late sixteenth century. Between these dates, houses have been assigned date ranges by more conventional, and therefore less precise, means. None are dated very closely but it is fairly certain that most were built in the middle and later years of the fifteenth century, with the fully-storeyed houses continuing to be erected into the early sixteenth century. Given the picture of declining

prosperity and population by the second half of the fifteenth century more than one historian has challenged this dating.

So why did people go on building when the town was declining? In the first place it is likely that the inhabitants still had confidence in the future; they thought things would get better and had no idea that they would not. Secondly, the increase in the number of houses surviving from the late fifteenth century is not unexpected; it happened everywhere in south-east England. It seems likely that those who survived the Black Death and subsequent epidemics were individually better off than their forbearers. There are signs of increasing materialism throughout the country during the fifteenth century with people demanding better wages, better food, more possessions and better and more durable houses. While society was by no means equal there was less disparity than before, leading to the erection of considerable numbers of small but well-built open-hall houses of types which seldom survive from an earlier period. The inhabitants of Sandwich shared this growing prosperity and exhibited the same rising patterns of consumption as their fellows elsewhere.

This paper concentrates on buildings, indicating how they can be used to elucidate aspects of the town's history. The details of the early churches help us to understand the developing topography of Sandwich and the richness of the twelfth-century churches is one of the few clues we have for how wealthy and populous Sandwich had become by that time. Shortly before the Black Death the stone and timber houses of Sandwich stand comparison with those built in larger and more famous towns across England. Later, despite the silting of the waterways and the decline in economic status, many new houses were built and it is from this late-medieval period that the size and types of houses and their distribution, combined with documentary evidence, provide insights into the wide range of late-medieval society.

<div align="right">Sarah Pearson</div>