

Life in Medieval New Shoreham

By the Revd Victor Standing

Shoreham was a busy port and a prosperous town in medieval times. It was also an important religious centre with, in addition to its great parish church, a Priory of Carmelite monks, and houses of the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. The presence of these Knights, half-monk, half-warrior, in the town suggests that some of those who had ‘taken the cross’ passed through the Port of Shoreham on their way to the Crusades.

But there would also have been Pilgrims embarking to perform their devotions at some of the greatest religious centres of the Christian world, probably including Rome and the Holy Land and, quite definitely, Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain with its famous shrine of St James (there is a record of a ship of Shoreham called the *Trinity* being licensed in 1422 for this pilgrimage route). Before their departure and upon their return these pilgrims may well have gathered together for prayer in St Mary de Haura, and there were also religious foundations in the town where they could be accommodated, including a ‘Hospital of St James’, whose dedication suggests a connection with the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. It was probably some of these pilgrims who incised the crosses we find on the columns in St Mary’s, perhaps as a prayer before setting out on the sea voyage or a thanksgiving for their safe return.

Merchants would also have been much in evidence at the Port and in the streets of Shoreham, and some of them may also have ‘left their mark’ in the carvings on the columns in the parish church.

The medieval New Shoreham Borough Seal depicts a passenger boat, for such was the importance of the town as a point of embarkation for France and also of the shipbuilding which took place in Shoreham (and which was to continue long after the decline of the port). The Seal is reproduced on the dark oak screen at the entrance to St George’s Chapel in St Mary’s, and it inspired the carving of the boat on the new roof boss installed to commemorate the completion of the reconstruction of the church’s stone vaulted ceiling in 2002–2006.
