

ROBERTSBRIDGE CODEX



A set of documents that, according to the British Library, includes the earliest known entabulated music for keyboard

Some background to the Codex and the pages of music that it contains – along with some links to modern transcriptions of the pieces to download and playback

John Shuttleworth

Robertsbridge

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ROBERTSBRIDGE CODEX

The Robertsbridge Codex is a bound manuscript comprising a set of documents relating to Robertsbridge Abbey from its formation in 1176 to its dissolution by King Henry VIII in 1538.

The Codex was unknown until the chance discovery of a large number of documents at nearby Penshurst Place in the mid-19th century.

The Codex is now housed at the British Library in London - catalogue reference: "*MS Add 28550*".

Two of its leaves are "*estamperies*". These musical pieces have been dated at 1360. According to the British Library, this makes them the earliest surviving music written specifically for keyboard in the World. They are written in a format called "*mensural notation*".

Other music in the Codex includes three vocal motets and one more estampie from a later period.

A discovery in 2021 of a variation on one of the later motets, "*Flos Vernalis*", in Karlsruhe, Germany included some opening lines that are missing from the Robertsbridge Codex.

The 1360 Estamperies

- The two early estampies are thought to be based on a "*Tricento*" – a dance form imported from Italy. One is in 3/4 time and the other in 6/8 time;
- They are for the most part written for 2 "voices" - with an occasional third note added;
- "Estamperie" is French for stamping – which neatly fits with the 3 beat rhythms of the two dances;
- "Mensural notation" predates written modern music. It includes symbols that indicate rhythm and pitch. The style of notation was similar in form to that used in choral and vocal music at the time. True "tablature" – which also specifies the fingering and positioning for keys – was developed in the 15th and 16th centuries and was later adopted for fretted instruments such as the lute;
- The most likely keyboard instrument of the period would have been a small table-top pipe organ. St. Cecilia is pictured playing a medieval portative organ of the time.





4 of the music pages in the Robertsbridge Codex

Robertsbridge Abbey

The Cistercian abbey at Robertsbridge was founded in 1176 by Robert de St. Martin or by his kinsman Alvred de St. Martin, Sheriff of Hastings and 'dapifer' to King Richard I - Steward to the Royal household.

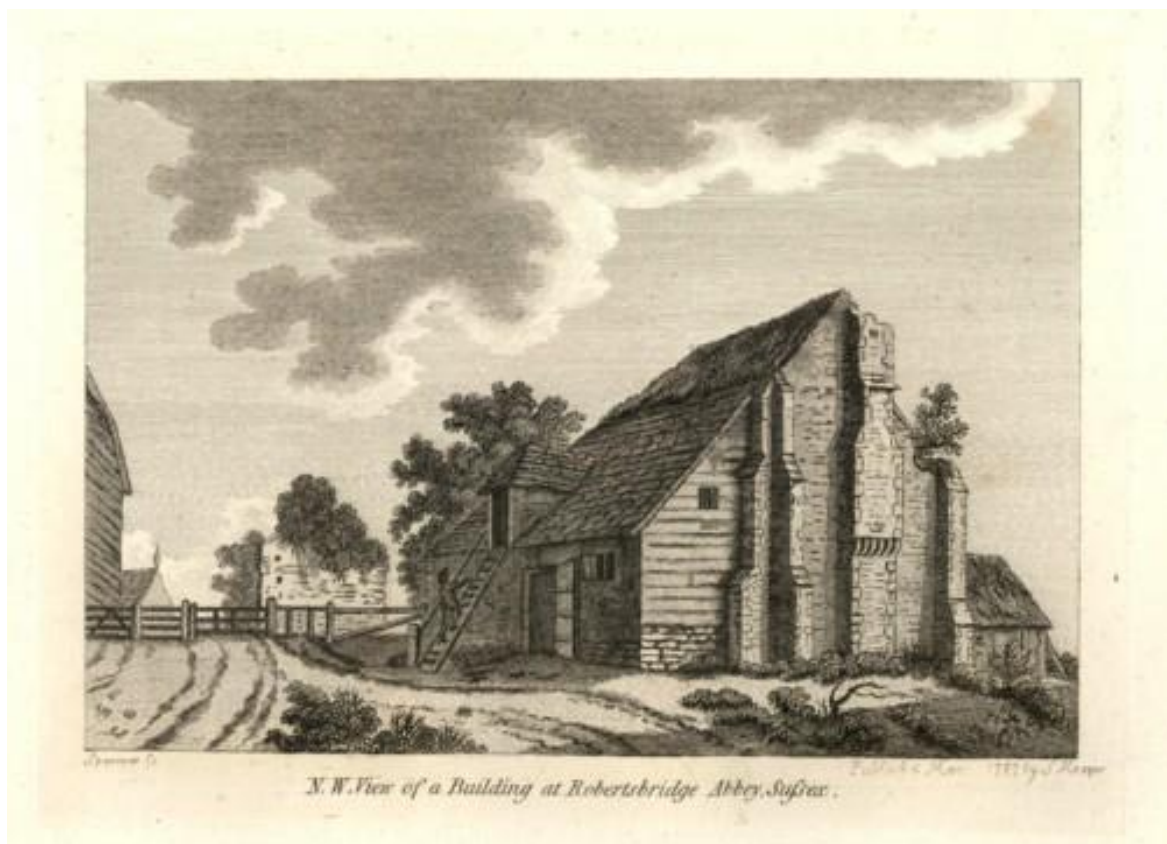
It was the only Cistercian abbey in Sussex and was settled by monks from its "mother" abbey of Boxley in Kent .

Cistercians were known as the "white monks" because of their use of undyed wool for their habits.

The abbey had an abbot and 7 monks when it was dissolved in 1538 – during the reign of King Henry VIII.

Shortly after the Dissolution, the abbey was acquired by Sir William Sidney, of Penshurst, a short distance north of Robertsbridge. The building and grounds stayed in the Sidney family until 1720.

What remains of the abbey is now in the grounds of a privately owned house.



The Abbey pictured in a 1787 copper plate engraving

The Music of the Robertsbridge Codex today

A number of early music specialists from across Europe have attempted translations of the mensural notation into music notation as we know it today.

Some “infilling” was needed as damage to the manuscripts meant that the pieces were incomplete. Some further adjustment to the timings was necessary to make the pieces scan “playable”. 14th Century players must have been skilled enough to adjust to such inconsistencies as they were playing through.

A discovery in 2021 of a variation on “Flos Vernalis” - one of the later motets - in Karlsruhe, Germany - included some opening lines that are missing from the Robertsbridge Codex. This allowed a complete version to be recreated – although the Karlsruhe variation had more ornamentation.

6 of the pieces, including the two early estamperies, have now been transcribed into MuseScore and are available to download and print and play - or simply to hear how they might have sounded. An absolute minimal number of adjustments were made in order to even out the number of beats in each bar.

The electronic version is set to play as a pipe organ – however, be warned, there is no “sway” in the rhythm that you would expect from a live performer accompanying a dance.

In 2025, Robertsbridge is celebrating 800 years since the granting of a charter to establish the village. The Codex pieces that have been transcribed - including the two 1360 estamperies – will be played during the afternoon of 14 June on a modern keyboard.

Several of the pieces would work re-set for small groups. Mediaeval instruments would have been mostly made of wood – including recorders, sackbuts, cornettes and tambors. It is more likely that we will play on modern instruments – but arrangements can be made to cover any combination relatively easily now that there is a digital version on MuseScore.

I took at face value links to transcriptions of pieces associated with the Robertsbridge Codex. 2 “voluntaries” that I originally included are in a very different style to the earlier - and fully accredited by the British Library – “Estamperies” and “Sonnets”. As their authenticity has been challenged as more likely dating from the 18th Century, I have removed from this set.

John Shuttleworth

ROBERTSBRIDGE

February 2025

MuseScore: “Quatre-Cinque”

Links:

MuseScore transcriptions into modern form - for playback and download:

[Robertsbridge Codex: Estamperie 1 – Anonymous ' Sheet music for Organ \(Solo\) | Musescore.com](#)

[Robertsbridge Codex: Estamperie 2 – Anonymous ' Sheet music for Organ \(Solo\) | Musescore.com](#)

[Robertsbridge Codex: Felix Namque – Anonymous ' Sheet music for Organ \(Solo\) | Musescore.com](#)

[Robertsbridge Codex: Flos Vernilis – Anonymous ' Sheet music for Organ \(Solo\) | Musescore.com](#)

Background and Reference:

[Robertsbridge Abbey | About Robertsbridge](#)

www.aboutrobertsbridge.org.uk/files/audio/codex.mp3

[Robertsbridge Codex - Wikipedia](#)

[Category:Robertsbridge Codex - Wikimedia Commons](#)

[This is the oldest known piece of keyboard music - Classic FM](#)

[La Trobe University - Library: Medieval Music Database - Annual cycle of feasts of liturgical chant, liturgical polyphony and secular music of the late middle ages.](#)

[The flores of Flos vernalis: Robertsbridge Codex, Lichtenthal Codex, and the creation of intabulation in the 14th century - Medieval Organ](#)

[GB-Lbl Add. MS 28550 - DIAMM](#) (British Library)

["Estampie" aus Robertsbridge Codex - YouTube](#)

[Stream Adesto Firmassimo Alleluia \(Robertsbridge codex ca. 1320\) by 64-FEET | Listen online for free on SoundCloud](#)

Robertsbridge Codex is held in British Library



Sample Image with acknowledgement to British Library

[illegible]

One of the 6 reconstructions that reference the tablature – and used as an input into the MuseScore playable versions

Postscript

I have been a keen amateur musician my whole life. I moved to Robertsbridge in 2014 knowing nothing about its history and that of the Abbey, let alone the Robertsbridge Codex.

A posting on the Robertsbridge family Facebook page in 2023 mentioned the Codex and that it had been found locally...which triggered an interest...which led to discovering the pieces.

Collating them and transcribing into MuseScore is, I hope, the next phase in ensuring their posterity.

The music and harmony is relatively simple by today's standards – probably due to limitations of the instruments around in the 14th Century – and the amount of time needed to note down the tablature scripts. We can only imagine what it must have been like to hear music played on instruments - and that the earliest known manuscripts (the estamperies) are to accompany dances also says something about the social life of the time.

Whilst collecting materials, I discovered the likely source of the name for Robertsbridge. It had puzzled me since first coming across the village. "Pons Roberti" (Latin) was documented in the granting a market charter in 1198 by King Richard I to the village. Pons Roberti - or Robertsbridge - probably refers to the then Abbot, Robert de St Martin, who founded the Cistercian abbey in 1176 and around which the village developed.

Robertsbridge Codex
Estamperie 1
c. 1360 - The oldest known pieces for keyboard

Anonymous
Quattro-Cinque



Robertsbridge Codex: Estamperie 1

Estamperie Number 1 as transcribed into MuseScore.

Click the link, below, press 'play' and listen to the oldest known written music for keyboard

[Robertsbridge Codex: Estamperie 1 – Anonymous ' Sheet music for Organ \(Solo\) | Musescore.com](https://musescore.com/user/12345678/score/12345678)