English Parish Church Architecture – a Rough Guide

by

Jeremy Lander

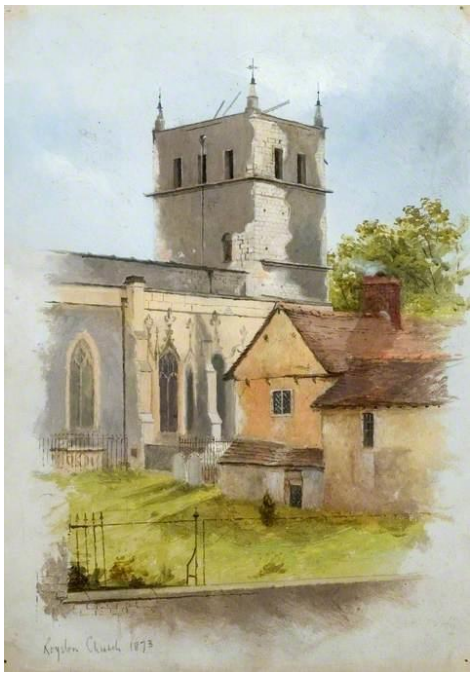
St Chads Saddleworth by John Holland 1826 (Showing a rushcarting ceremony)

'In former days the churches and great houses hereabouts did so abound with monuments and things remarkable, that it would have deterred an antiquary from undertaking it. But as Pythagoras did guess at the vastness of Hercules' stature by the length of his foot, so among these ruins are remains enough left for a man to give a guess what noble buildings were made by the piety, charity, and magnanimity of our forefathers.'

John Aubrey, Antiquarian and Archaeologist
April 1670

Introduction

This book started out as a short series of articles I wrote for a parish magazine giving a concise history of English church architecture. The parish was one where I had been appointed as 'inspecting architect' to the church, a church that was recently set ablaze, through an electrical fault probably, doing so much damage to the Grade I listed structure that some of the medieval structure may be irreparable. A different sort of damage was done to it in the late 19th century, no less catastrophic, when well-meaning 'restorers' clad the entire building in shiny black flint. The church is dear to my heart as it is the parish church in Royston, Hertfordshire, where I was born and brought up. One of my old school friends sent me this picture (below left) of the night of the fire, he is one of the firemen. The watercolour (below right) is a sketch of the church in 1873 showing the tower with its early medieval white stone facing (a local material called clunch) shortly before the restoration. Scaffold poles sit ominously on the roof top, waiting for winches to be attached I imagine. The artist probably wanted to get this down quickly before the view changed forever.



When I took over as church architect I was informed that my predecessor had recommended removing all the flint because he thought it was about to fall off. Flint

can do that because the Victorians fixed it with iron ties that corrode away, leaving little more than suction to hold everything in place. We checked it over with a hammer and all seemed fairly sound. Indeed the fact that a 1,000 degree Fahrenheit fire inside the tower has not dislodged a single flint is a good indication we were right not to strip it all off. It would have cost the church a lot of money and left a naked clunch tower, with all its detailing knocked off when it was encased 130 years previously. Sometimes we can't go back; we just have to accept that buildings, like people and landscapes, change over time.

I had been engaged by the church to add a meeting room and some lavatories, much in demand now for medieval churches. After many years of trying and failing for one reason or another to get permission to build an extension or put the facilities inside the ancient nave, we parted company and I let others have a go. Ten years on and they haven't succeeded either but what we, or our successors, might have done may well have been seen as just as much wanton vandalism as cladding it in flint. Now the church is fighting for its life for another reason and all this seems rather academic.

The church in Royston was one of forty or so churches that I inspect on a regular basis. I look for damp plaster, rusty bell frames, leaky roofs, broken rainwater pipes, cracked walls and such like. The Church of England stipulates that every church in their care must be inspected by an architect every five years and the report is called a 'quinquennial' inspection for this reason. It is not lucrative work but is endlessly fascinating and reintroduced me to a world of medieval church architecture that I had first learnt about at my secondary school in the same town. Our history teacher had insisted, much to everyone's bafflement, that we study medieval architecture for a year, for no reason other than that he found it interesting. I didn't know it then but his teaching set me on the track to become an architect, though I had no idea that I would later spend so much time working on churches.[1]

[1] The teacher's name was Colin Boyd

Putting in meeting rooms, kitchens, offices and lavatories is the sort of brief that church architects are now given fairly regularly, as parish (called 'parochial') church councils seek to update their medieval buildings and provide modern facilities. As my experience at Royston shows they can be extraordinarily difficult to turn into reality. The raft of legislation and conservation issues that must be negotiated, the chronic lack of funding for what is disproportionately expensive construction work, and just the darned awkwardness of housing such facilities in and around medieval buildings that were never intended to be used in such a way, make this type of project a real challenge.

A fellow church architect has just received approval for a scheme for building such facilities inside a church not far away from Royston, also a Grade I medieval building. The case was 'called in' by a Consistory Court, the Church of England's equivalent of a planning appeal. Some of the village marched, figuratively, on the church with pitchforks and burning torches and hurled brickbats (again figuratively) about the damage that would be caused to the medieval fabric muttering darkly about 'evangelical hubs'. Church architecture is never just about architecture and you are never far away from the old arguments, essentially between the 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' wings of the Church of England, about how churches should be used. The government's consultee in the case, Historic England, also objected, but in the end the Chancellor of the Diocese (the judge who has to decide on these things), in what is sure to become a landmark ruling, declared that the impact was justifiable, evangelical hub or no. Even so it remains on the drawing board.

My parish magazine article grew, as these things do, and now every time I pick up a scrap of information about church history, perhaps from a church I have just visited, I add it in. Consequently the result is a jumbled, highly personal, view of the subject. It relies heavily on East Anglian examples because that is my stamping ground and I have also limited it to rural parish churches. For most of the period of church building in this country 'rural' meant just about everything anyway (the population of England in 1800 was just 7.7 million). The growing towns and cities in the 18th and 19th centuries included some very beautiful and interesting Georgian churches, and

in some parts of the countryside non-conformist chapels began to appear in numbers, but the rural medieval parish church is what I have concentrated on.

I was brought up a Catholic (while I love the city of Rome I have always found the term 'Roman' Catholic slightly jarring) so I tend to see things in Anglican churches with something of an outsider's eye. The roots are the same of course and I sometimes imagine the Catholic rites (especially the pre-Vatican II mass that I dimly recall being mystified by as a child in the 1960s) being performed in their original setting, complete with incense, glittering vestments, candles and statues galore. It is easy to forget that pre-Reformation Britain was very 'Catholic' indeed. Henry VIII, although ultimately responsible for the near destruction of Catholicism in England, was himself no Protestant. He was named 'Defender of the Faith' by Pope Leo X in 1521 for, with double irony, upholding the sacrament of marriage and the supremacy of the Pope, and there is little sign that he had any kind of religious conversion. Like any tyrant he just latched on to whatever philosophy suited his political ends and the nascent Reformation offered him just such an opportunity.

In pre-Reformation Europe, England included, Catholicism was also 'catholic' in the literal sense of the word, but with a small 'c' as the saying goes. The word *catholic* comes from the Greek *katholikos*, from *kata* (throughout) and *holos* (the whole), and the term was used to define what was a 'universal' Christian church that included the entire population, though this etymology was questioned in 1990 by the Jesuit scholar Walter Ong. Why did the Roman (i.e. Latin) church use a Greek word when they had a perfectly good word for this already: *Universalis*? Ong suggested that this was a deliberate decision of some theological significance. The word "universal" derives from the two Latin root-words *unum* (meaning "one") and *vertere* (meaning "to turn"). So, literally, it means to take, or make, a turn, around "one" central point, evoking the circle made by a surveyor's compass. *Universal* thus bears a certain sense of inclusivity, gathering everything and everyone inside the circle's boundary but at the same implying exclusion for anything, or anyone, that falls outside the circle. Not like the astronomical universe but more Like Robert de Niro's 'Circle of Trust' from the film *The Parent Trap*. By contrast, Ong argues, *katholikos,* meaning

"throughout" the "whole", carries no notion of a boundary demarcating those who are "in" and those who are "out." An odd linguistic distinction perhaps, one might even say Jesuitical, but in a divisive and dividing world some Christian commentators have exhorted those within the church to be less *universal* and more *catholic*.

In pre-Reformation England there was no need for such distinctions, everyone was inside the circle, whether they liked it or not. Whether everyone actually *believed* in the Church, or Christianity, God even, is a moot point. People's lives revolved around the Church because a) there was nothing else to believe in, and b) they had an acute fear of hellfire. Most people would have had little or no knowledge of any other religion but the Roman version of Christianity. Perhaps in the west and north of the country some folk memory of the Celtic Church customs remained, and, prior to their total expulsion in 1290, there would have been a few Jewish merchants and money lenders here and there, possibly also the odd Muslim wandering trader or entertainer from the Ottoman east, but in rural England contact with other faiths would have been extremely rare.

These days things are very different. In England there are five main religions: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. Of the 50% or so who think of themselves as Christian only a tiny fraction (about 5%) attend church regularly and there are many different forms of Christianity to choose from: Catholic; Methodist; Baptist; Congregationalist, and all the different shades of 'C of E', from high church Anglo-Catholicism to low church evangelical. In addition there is a myriad of other Christian and quasi-Christian denominations, including many different charismatic, spiritualist, and evangelist churches, Jehova's Witnesses, Mormons and Pentacostalists. Attendance at many of these minority faiths' churches is believed to be on the rise while the mainstream Christian religions are in a steady, seemingly inexorable, decline.

The seeds of this decline may have been sown by Charles Darwin with the publication of his work *The Origin of Species* in 1859 although, if these were the seeds, the ground had been well prepared and fertilised by William Smith with his

geological map of 1815 which challenged the Creationists' literal interpretation of the age of the Earth. A further deadly blow was dealt by the horror of the First World War. The endless butchery, mostly pointless and carried out on an industrial scale, caused people to question, as never before, the role of God in human affairs and organised religion became an irrelevance for many people. Modernist and Humanist philosophers, and the huge increase in scientific discoveries in the 20th century, stoked the debate on the nature of the Universe, and humankind's place within it, that seemingly left less and less space for a divine creator. Then after World War II, in our western society at least, peace, prosperity and a vastly improved healthcare system brought huge increases in standards of living and the role of religion in comforting people in times of need, poor health and distress diminished. When you have enough to eat, all the creature comforts you can want, a ready cure for most diseases, to a point where death becomes not a part of everyday life but a rare inconvenience, what is God or religion going to give you that you don't already have? It is difficult to compete with what, to medieval eyes, would be seen literally as a paradise on earth, the occasional pandemic notwithstanding. Time travellers from even the recent past would also be shocked by the disappearance of something that underpinned many people's lives, a firm belief in the existence of Hell. It is much harder to get people to pray, let alone attend church, when they do not believe their souls are in imminent peril of everlasting torment. Even weddings and funerals are now largely secular.

In the face of this growing wave of agnosticism, not to say atheism, an attempt to win back church-goers was made in the 1960s. The Anglican and Catholic churches took a liberal stance and reformed. In Rome it was called Vatican II, widely replacing Latin with indigenous languages and turning the priest to face the congregation. The Church of England followed suit shortly after, modernising services and abandoning the language of the King James Bible and replacing it with new, modern translations. It made little difference. In fact some critics argue that this merely added fuel to the funeral pyre, decrying the wishy-washy liberalism and the replacement of traditional hymns and warnings of damnation with 'Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore', tea, and cake.

While new evangelical churches, and even some more conventional city churches, continue to thrive in the face of this decline, attendance at most Anglican parish church services is now at a catastrophically low level. Congregations on Sunday mornings in many rural churches, where services are still a regular event at all, often number fewer than 20 with an average age of over 60. It is seldom discussed in public circles but there is a very real chance that the Church of England will disappear from huge swathes of the country before the middle of this century. And with the upkeep of most churches being largely the responsibility of the people who attend their services, what will become of the buildings once they have gone?

The upkeep of any large building is a major responsibility and medieval churches in particular can be frighteningly expensive to maintain. There has been some recent publicity about the dire financial state of England's cathedrals, accompanied by warnings of bankruptcy and tales of them being shipped off stone by stone and rebuilt in Arizona like London Bridge, or being bought up and used (shock, horror) by *other religions*. Yet nothing much is ever said about the thousands of small parish churches that are heading for a similar fate with churches relying on the goodwill of a declining and ageing roll. In the past Government hand-outs have been crucial for their survival but these are increasingly hard to obtain since the political imperative now demands that funding, which comes via the National Lottery and is largely paid for by non-church going, generally poor, working class, people, needs to be seen to benefit whole communities, not just Anglican church-goers, who have often been dubbed the 'Tory Party at Prayer'.

Falling church attendances are not just a 20th / 21st century phenomenon. Parish churches faced a similar decline in the 18th century when the Church of England was seen as complacent at best, at worst completely corrupt. The ideas of the Enlightenment were challenging people's beliefs in new ways and there was fragmentation of the church through Non-Conformism. Dissent was not new, as evidenced from 14th century Lollardism to 16th Century Lutheranism, but the 17th and 18th centuries saw a huge growth in new movements and splinter groups: Puritans,

Diggers, Levellers, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, Unitarians, Quakers, Plymouth Brethren and many others, not forgetting a stubborn underground remnant of Roman Catholicism which surfaced from time to time, the Gunpowder Plot being the most famous example, as well as the various Jacobite rebellions. People deserted the Anglican Church in increasing numbers, and some of them deserted the country altogether to set up new religious communities in North America and elsewhere.

In the early 19th century things began to turn around. The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 was celebrated with a flurry of church building. Funded by the government, a hundred or so new 'Commissioner' Churches, also known as Waterloo Churches, were built, providing much needed space for worshippers, principally in the growing towns. These wars had a much greater effect on English society than most of us imagine, eclipsed as it has been by the two 20th century world wars, and their mystifying absence from most of Jane Austen. But the wars lasted 12 years and, at a time when England's population was only around 10 million, over 300,000 men were killed or went missing in action. By comparison the English population at the time of the First World War 33 million and about 700,000 men were killed, a considerably lower rate of attrition. The reaction however was quite different to that which followed World War I. The post-1815 feeling was one of 'God has saved us'. In defeat the French retreated from the humanist principles of the French Revolution and went back to the church under the Bourbon restoration, though its supremacy was never wholly re-established and France has remained a secular nation ever since. Even the mid-century Crimean War was proportionately more deadly to soldiers than the First World War but was fought at a time when church attendance was on the rise. The period was in fact a time of great religious fervent. The Victorians looked on what they saw as their Georgian forefather's lax moral standards - in public life, in literature, art, architecture as well as religion - and began making radical changes. Reformers such as the Tractarians and the Oxford Movement brought about enormous reforms and churches began to fill once again. Many even had to be extended with extra aisles and first floor galleries built to accommodate the increasing numbers of worshippers.

Could a war or some other cataclysmic event pack the churches once again, as they started to do in the 1820s? An existential crisis following a predicted asteroid impact, perhaps? A second Flood brought about by global warming? The experience of the First World War suggests otherwise. The feeling now is more that we control our own destiny, for good or ill. We get ourselves into messes and God is not going to get us out even if he did exist, no matter how hard we pray. Asteroid on its way? We can track it and send ballistic missiles to intercept. Climate change? The man-made aspect of it, by its very definition, excludes the actions of God. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, also largely man-made, has seen churches close, for safety reasons rather than disinterest, but even so it has been a cruel blow to an institution that could have benefited, and given benefit, in spades.

But while in modern Britain we may not treasure religion as we once did, we certainly treasure our historic buildings as never before. The safeguards that are now in place to protect our ancient fabric are unprecedented, as is the general population's appreciation of architectural history, underpinned by the activities of the National Trust, English Heritage (now Historic England) and a host of television programmes extolling the virtues of conservation and archaeology. The problem is that the huge gulf between this nodding appreciation and the practical help and funding that is actually available to conserve our stock of church buildings is growing every year. It is almost inevitable that in the end it will be left to the government to maintain our ancient religious buildings, no other body will have the resources to do this. They do their bit now of course, through Historic England and Heritage Lottery Fund initiatives, but these are only stop-gaps. Eventually it will take something much larger and more effective to stop our churches falling into ruin.

1

Principles

Our ancient parish churches have become such familiar objects that we take them for granted. These days they are seldom the largest buildings in the landscape they once were and sometimes they seem tucked away out of sight, behind tall trees or stranded in some isolated place, their village having long since moved to another, perhaps more desirable or convenient, location. Even when they do loom large over their surroundings they are often so absorbed into the landscape that they become practically invisible, time and weather have given them a chameleon-like patina of age and of agelessness, their stones seeming more like geology than architecture. Yet these extraordinary structures once towered, newly-built, over every settlement, dwarfing the cottages, inns, smithies, farms and workshops that huddled around them. In places where the church remains the dominant building you can still get a sense of how imposing these buildings were, and how awe-inspiring, quite literally, they must have been.

Churches are so much a part of the landscape they can sometimes resemble natural outcrops of weathered rock, yet they are a product of human workmanship and as such are subject to the fashions and mores of the period in which they were built. Some refer to this as the 'spirit of the age' (or *zeitgeist*) and no piece of architecture can escape it. This gives our churches the ability to tell the time. Not the hours and minutes of the day (although they can do that with their clocks too) but rather the deeper sense of time that buildings can convey. The architect and mystic Niall McLaughlin has said that if you want to know the time of day you look at a clock, if you want to know the season you look at the trees, if you want to know about the passing of generations you look at your grandparents and your children; but if you want to know about the kind of time that is measured in centuries you look at a building. And in most places this means the local church, usually the oldest building around.

Reading the kind of time that churches convey need not be difficult. Armed with a rudimentary knowledge of architectural styles extracted from one or two illustrated guides, and with a constant look-out for the fakery that can make things look older than they at first seem, the amalgam of stone, lime, clay, plaster, lead, oak and glass that make up our ancient church buildings can be dated, enabling the observer to pin down the age of the main parts of a church to within fifty years or so. This can also lead on to clues about other historical characteristics of the area, the changing levels of prosperity, how the settlement grew, whether it died out or relocated, and how religious and political attitudes have changed over the centuries. This is sometimes called above-ground archaeology because, without any digging, a wealth of historical information can be discovered.

The basic principles of this dating process lie in recognising the five main periods of medieval church building: Saxon, Norman, Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular. These changing styles, with jumps from one to another happening over the course of a generation or two, are like geological strata, sometimes clear cut and obvious, sometimes muddled together and confused, what geologists might call an unconformity. Yet somehow you know them when you see them. But where did these terms originate? Saxon and Norman are, fairly obviously, connected with the hegemony of the time; but the origin of the terms 'Early English', 'Decorated' and 'Perpendicular' that crop up in architecture books and church guides are less obvious. They were coined by an architect and antiquarian called Thomas Rickman in his *An Attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture from the Conquest to the Reformation*, published in 1817. Rickman went on to become a leading 'Gothic Revival' architect, but in typical 19th century fashion, Rickman began by cataloguing and analysing medieval architecture in a new and quite rigorous way. At a time when people were beginning to appreciate the 'gothic' medieval style in its own right, rather than dismissing it simply as a 'barbarian' form of architecture, Rickman's book was extremely influential. Published two years after the battle of Waterloo it is also interesting to note his efforts to distance what he saw as quintessentially English gothic styles from its French origins. When he tries to show

that Norman architecture grew virtually seamlessly from its Saxon antecedents we can almost see the somersaults being turned in his mind, but his system of classification was soundly based in observation and so it stuck. It is fascinating to think that William 'Strata' Smith produced his ground-breaking geological map of Great Britain only two years before Rickman's book was published and that Charles Darwin set out on his travels on The Beagle four years later. The need of this generation to order objects and phenomena in a spirit of scientific enquiry was a powerful driving force.

150 years after Rickman's book was published his terms were picked up again by another pioneer, the art historian Nikolaus Pevsner. He was a Jewish refugee arriving in England from Hitler's Germany in 1933 and he was fascinated by the culture of his newly adopted country, and had the benefit of seeing it with the eye of an outsider. After 1945 he threw himself into the production of his gargantuan work *'The Buildings of England'* a systematic cataloguing of all England's significant buildings, county by county. It began with Cornwall in 1951 and ended with Staffordshire in 1974, a staggering 46 volumes. Three appeared in the first year of publication. Like the Shell Guides of the same period it was a work that belonged to the new age of the motor car. Pevsner could not possibly have visited every building he did without his (variously unreliable) vehicles driven by his wife Lola and, after her death in 1963, a succession of assistants[2]. He also needed a handy and easily identifiable system with which to classify the periods of medieval architecture and Rickman's definitions proved an essential shorthand for the many hundreds of churches that Pevsner visited, dashing in and out again before driving on to the next one, sandwich in one hand, notebook in the other. In his manic rush they even become further abbreviated to *EE*, *Dec* and *Perp.*

Pevsner was also intensely interested in the 'geography' of architecture, the sense of place as well as time that is imbued in our buildings by the materials from which they are built and the local variations in style. Remarkably though, with one or two

[2] Some critics say that even then he must have fabricated some of the entries, or at best made only the briefest of appraisals, dubbed a 'drive-by'.

exceptions (the round towers of Norfolk for example), the periods of English church architecture translate from one region to another with great consistency making it difficult to say from a photograph: 'that church is in such and such a place'. Even without the ease of the mass communication techniques we rely on today - no newspapers, no magazines, no pattern books - a new style was grasped very quickly by the stonemasons and their patrons across the country in a matter of a decade or two.

This ease with which architectural ideas spread around the country is probably due to the fact that, in spite of the lack of the kinds of transportation and mass media we take for granted, people in Medieval England were rather more mobile than we might at first think. Accounts of the time are full of references to people travelling great distances. Geoffrey Chaucer's late 14th century tale of pilgrims travelling from London to Thomas a'Becket's shrine in Canterbury hints at a population which moved around, not just for pilgrimage but also for trade or for finding work. Chaucer is writing at a time of reasonable plenty after the dramatic fall in population caused by the Black Death of 1348 when leisure time became a commodity not just available to the rich. There was hard and back-breaking work for most of the population of course but in summer, during the long hours daylight, and especially when crops were waiting to be harvested, there would have been plenty of free time.

The condition of medieval roads was often appalling by modern standards but for someone on horseback, or for a person on foot who could skirt around the boggiest sections, this was not so much of a problem. Some routes changed with the season but using a corridor, as a way of navigation and of sharing a route with other travellers where some safety in numbers could be gained, was important, and along the route occasional wayside inns could be found for the night. To spend a week to travel 120 miles on foot, say, or 200 miles by horse would not have been considered excessive. Pilgrimages to places like Rome, Compostella in Spain, or even Jerusalem were commonplace. Wealthier people would travel huge distances to get medical treatment, for example to the eye-surgeons around Norchia in Umbria, over a 2,000 mile round trip from London. In 1066 King Harold II famously marched his army from

Kent to Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire some 250 miles in 4 days to meet the invading Viking army, returning just 18 days later to meet William, soon-to-be-the Conquerer, outside Hastings. Some of his army would have ridden on horseback or in horse-drawn carts but the majority would have walked or jogged, 'yomping', as their late 20th century successors in the British Army would call it.

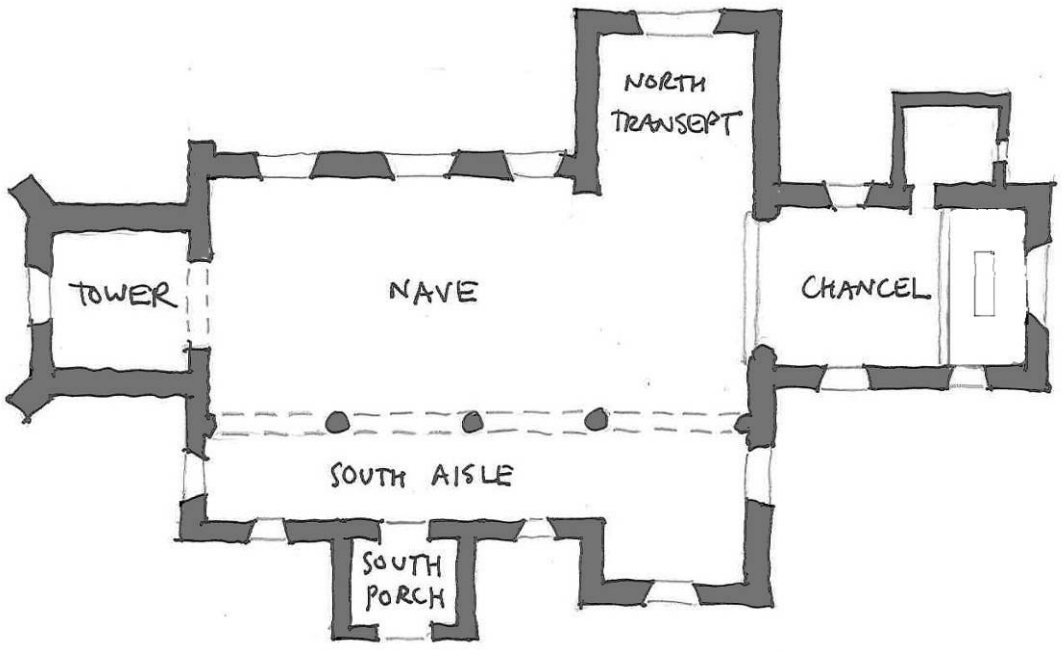
Some of the ancient routes are known by name and can be traced today, the Ridgeway and Icknield Way for example, but the imprint of many unnamed tracks lie in the patchwork of fields and villages that have remained fundamentally unaltered for a thousand years or more. The roads left by the Romans certainly formed the skeleton of the medieval road network and much of King Harold's route would have been on that famous Roman 'motorway', the backbone of Roman Britain, Ermine Street. And although we tend to think only of the major routes, like Ermine and Watling Street[3], there was also an extensive network of Roman 'B' roads, not as well-built as the main routes perhaps but still a good way of getting around. As they deteriorated wheeled traffic found the roads more problematic and the river network was more likely to be used for the transport of bulky items such as stone. Where the Roman Roads intersected with the waterways, such as at Waltham Abbey in Hertfordshire (where the River Lea meets Ermine Street), or Swavesey in Cambridgeshire (River Ouse and Via Devana) you could be sure of a bustling entrepot for the transfer of goods and services. The Car Dyke, the canal built by the Romans that skirted the western edge of the Fens in Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire, provided a route for much of the stone that was quarried in the Northamptonshire limestone belt to key medieval building sites in Cambridge and Ely.

[3] Chaucer's pilgrims travelled on Watling Street.

2

Naming of Parts

As well as the style or outward appearance of a church another underlying theme is its basic shape: almost all have a rectangular hall or 'nave' at their core, usually with a smaller space to the east called a chancel. The root for the word nave comes from the latin *navis* for ship (hence naval and navy) and the idea of a vessel for carrying souls. The word chancel comes from the old French *cancellus* or "lattice," from the Latin *cancelli* meaning 'grating' or 'bars' and so-called for the lattice-work that separated the chancel from the nave.



A typical medieval church layout

The basic shape for a small rural church in England is just a nave and chancel, known as a two-celled church. As congregations grew the church might be enlarged by the addition of one or two parallel wings known as aisles. This can lead to confusion when we talk of someone being 'led up the aisle' but this refers to the passageway down the centre of the nave between the pews, a later invention. Aisles can be on one or both sides of a church and, as well as accommodating increasing numbers,

they provided extra space for side chapels, of which there could be a great many. The word 'aisle' comes from the Old French *ele* meaning 'wing of a bird, or army' but also the 'side of a ship'. Cross wings at the east end of the nave could also be added. These wings are called transepts, from the Latin *trans*- "across" and *saeptum*- "fence, partition, enclosure" and produce a cruciform shape in plan which has obvious Christian connotations but, while considered *de rigeur* for any self-respecting cathedral are by no means an essential, or even a common, feature of parish churches.

The entrance for everyday use was usually, and still is in most cases, through a doorway on the south side of the church, though it might sometimes be on the north side if geography dictated (when the church was built on the south side of a settlement or roadway for example), often there is a door on both sides[4]. In either case they are invariably situated just to the west of the midway point of the nave or aisles. It is significant that, while there is quite often a door in the west end, the usual entrance is almost never on this east-west, ceremonial, axis of the church and curiously in this country west doors are rarely used. This is hard to explain but may have some connection with the desire for humility, an important Christian characteristic. Entering 'on axis', with an immediate and direct view of the Chancel was perhaps seen as being a little brash and reserved for special occasions like a wedding, funeral, or episcopal visit.[5] An alternative explanation is that it had more to do with British weather, which nearly always comes in from the west. A west door would allow the prevailing wind to blow in the cold, along with rain, leaves and dust, straight into the church and towards the chancel. What may slightly contradict this is the tendency, as the medieval warm period waned in the 15th and 16th centuries, for west doors to become more common, just as the weather was beginning to get decidedly colder.

[4] If there is no porch on the north side there is usually a simple door, seldom used and sometimes thought by the superstitious to be there to 'let the devil out' though what is meant by this is not at all clear.

[5] The entrance to the church of the nativity at Bethlehem, a huge church, has a door so tiny that visitors must bend almost double to get through.

The addition of a porch may also have something to do with the weather, screening the main entrance from the worst of wind and rain and also providing a welcoming sun trap on a sunny morning. But they also, for some reason, became politicised. While the chancel 'belonged' to the clergy and was sometimes paid for and maintained by a completely separate entity (the lay rector), and the nave was for the parishioners, traditionally the porch (south or north) was owned by the village community and formed a transitional space between the 'profane' life of the village and the 'sacred' world inside the church. Another outer door in the church would be located on the south side of the chancel. This was known as the priest's door and it allowed the clergy direct access to the chancel area without mixing with the hoi polloi. These doors are now almost never used.

If there is a tower it is usually at the west end, again a peculiarly English trope (in continental Europe the tower is usually in the centre, in Italy it can sometimes be a separate thing altogether.) The tower is sometimes topped with a spire (in East Anglia this often becomes a somewhat stunted affair a bit like a spike, called a spirelet) and it nearly always contains a set of bells. Although bells have been around in churches since the 5th century, they would usually consist of a single bell struck with a simple clapper or swung back and forth and were simply used to summon worshippers at various times of the day. Bells mounted on spindles and swung with a rope began to appear in the 13th and 14th centuries, but it was not until the 17th century that the invention of stays and sliders allowed bells to be swung full circle and in more and more complicated sequences known as 'changes'. This created an entirely new world of church music with bells used to announce and proclaim weddings, funerals, feast days and all kinds of different events. The bell ringers were fiercely independent (they still are), seeing themselves as something quite separate from the business of the church below them and the tower and belfry were off limits to everyone else, including the clergy, who quite often got into disputes with the ringers about their drinking and other nefarious activities. Another single bell was known as the sanctus bell and this was rung to alert the congregation to the moment in the mass when, by consecration of the priest, the bread and wine is said to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ. It was sometimes

attached externally so that any passers-by may also hear it and nod or genuflect accordingly.

The South Porch is particularly interesting because it is almost unique to English churches. It nearly always contains the main entrance to the church, at right angles to the main direction of worship for reasons already mentioned. As well as its role as the interface between the sacred world and the community it was where notices were (and still are of course) posted. It could be quite large, sometimes with a room above used for meetings and lessons for children. In the days before purpose built schools this may have been the only place where they could receive a formal education. The portal, or outer entrance arch, was the place where marriage ceremonies were performed because marriage was a lay contract rather than a religious one, with the blessing following inside. It was also where the 'churching' ceremony for new mothers took place when a blessing was given to mothers after their recovery from childbirth. The ceremony gave thanks for the woman's survival and was performed even when the child was stillborn or had died unbaptized- sadly a very frequent occurrence. It was also where penitents, such as adulterers, had to make their public penance, sitting on the bench and wearing a pointed hood.

3

Beginnings

Where did the typical church plan come from in the first place? To begin with early Christians used what spaces they could: usually in their own homes or, in Rome, in the underground complexes carved out of the soft tufa rock called the catacombs which also served as burial places. For the first three hundred years after Christ's death many Christians were hunted down and executed for their faith. Discretion was vital in such circumstances and building a church would have been impossible.

Early gatherings of Christians consisted mainly of two types of celebration: the *Eucharist*, literally a thanksgiving and a symbolic re-enactment of the Last Supper when Christ gave bread and wine to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion; and the *Agape Feast*. 'Agape' is one of the three definitions of love in Ancient Greek. It is almost untranslatable, but it represents charitable love as opposed to sexual love or brotherly, familial love[6]. Feasts were of course extremely important to the Romans and they were usually a pompous show of wealth on the part of the host and a flagrant demonstration of gluttony on the part of the guests. For the early Roman Christians it was no coincidence that their Agape feast, usually held in the dining room of a wealthy supporter was in stark contrast, it was a social gathering with little hierarchy, those present being bound together by a common faith and fear of persecution. There would be food and wine in moderation and letters would be read from other Christians around the Empire. It was of course not without abuses and it was easy for the Roman Christians to slip back into bad habits. Here is St Paul, in about 55 AD, writing to his friends in Corinth. He is clearly furious with them and we can imagine the stunned silence it was met with when it was read to them at one of their eucharistic gatherings:

[6] Hence what we think of now as St Pauls 'Faith, hope and love' was in the King James Bible 'Faith hope and *charity'*. It also led to misunderstandings about the Christians 'Love Feast' which critics were quick to condemn as orgies.

"I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? Those who have not been baptised stand at the edges of the room while the converted gather around the table". [7]

In very early Christianity the Agape Feast and the Eucharist were virtually indistinguishable, the one following directly from the other but for some reason in the 2nd and 3rd centuries they became separated with the Eucharist being held in the morning and the Agape Feast in the evening. As Christianity grew, and attitudes towards the Christians softened, the number of worshippers reached the extent where meeting in each other's homes was no longer possible and so new buildings were built or old buildings converted. Where buildings were adapted for use as churches the buildings that were readily available were those used by the Romans for their public gatherings: law courts, financial centres, army drill halls and the reception rooms of imperial palaces. The basic model for these public buildings was the *basilica*, the Roman building form that consisted of a rectangular hall with a pitched roof and narrow aisles built as lean-to structures on each side. They usually had a semi-circular projection at one end called an apse and, in a court building, this was where the magistrate would sit and dispense the law.

The other pattern for early Christian churches, and often adopted where Christians were able to build afresh, was the Jewish temple. The temple consisted of a series of rectangular chambers culminating in the 'Holy of Holies' into which anyone venturing, other than the High Priest, would be struck dead on the spot 'by God' - or

[7] St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians Chapter 11

more commonly someone armed with a sharp or heavy implement. Christians had a less dogmatic approach (their religion was after all based on non-violence) but the Jewish idea of a special sanctuary where God 'lived', and with access restricted to the clergy, was an extremely powerful one.

In this way the Jewish Temple and the Roman Basilica shared a similar architectural element, a separate space, semicircular or rectangular, that could be regarded as God's spiritual home in the church: the Sanctuary, from the Latin *sanctuarium* or holy place. The philosopher Richard Sennet has written about how, after three hundred years or so of Christians living secret lives, of being 'in the wilderness', the newly institutionalized Roman Church felt strongly that God 'needed a home once again'[8]. This is what the apse and the sanctuary provided for the nascent Church.

As the priestly business of tending to God in his new 'home' grew, so did the apse or chancel. In most northern European churches the apse became longer and more rectangular and in cathedrals an elaborate arrangement developed whereby a series of smaller chapels were gathered around the chancel with an 'ambulatory' between the two allowing access, the idea being that ordinary worshippers could reach these chapels without going into the forbidden area of the chancel[9].

Since the time of St Francis in the early 1200s most Christians have held the belief that God is 'everywhere' and lives in all things, but this has not always been the case and Christians of every kind have always struggled with the question of where God actually *is*? Does He live in heaven? Where is heaven anyway? Is it beyond the known Universe or in the sky, just above our heads? And if God is omnipresent how can He be said to 'live' somewhere like the sanctuary of a church? No Christian seriously believes that God is living solely in a particular place in a church, whether it be the chancel, sanctuary, or anywhere else, and yet somehow, when you visit a church, there is that feeling that, beyond the chancel arch, *that* is where God abides.

[8] Richard Sennet- *The Fall of Public Man*

[9] By way of contrast in Islam the apse got smaller and smaller becoming the *mihrab* indicating the direction of Mecca

In Roman Catholic Churches, and some high church Anglican churches, you can still get a sense of this. The sanctuary lamp (itself a descendent of the Jewish 'eternal flame') burns to indicate that the consecrated host is present in the tabernacle. In Hebrew the tabernacle is a *mishkan*, literally "residence" or "dwelling place" and was the portable dwelling place for the divine presence in the time of Moses and Exodus. In Christian churches this was, and still can be, represented by a small reliquary, often with a domed top, which in turn is derived from an ancient Roman ritualistic vessel.[10] Catholics and therefore, by definition, all pre-Reformation medieval Christians, believe that the consecrated host has - through transubstantiation - become the actual flesh of Christ and therefore God, quite literally, inhabits the tabernacle and the space it occupies.

Exceptions to the basilica or Jewish temple form were the round or polygonal baptisteries such as the Lateran Baptistry in Rome, a converted pagan temple, or 'martyriums' that were built around the place of an execution or burial, the apotheosis of which is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, built over what was believed to be the site of both the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The Pantheon, also a converted Roman temple, is a round structure with hemispherical roof that inspired the domes of many Renaissance churches.

The rounded apses that developed from the Roman basilicas never really caught on in England. British Christianity began with the Celtic Church and they preferred the box-like two-celled church with a square-ended chancel. Founded well before the withdrawal of the Roman legions in 410AD these Romano-British Christians were numerous and influential. It is difficult to imagine now but before the pagan conquests by the Angles, Jutes and Saxons Roman Britain was a decidedly Christian country, sending three bishops to the Council of Arles as early as 314AD. As the Roman forces departed and the Germanic and Scandinavian tribes settled the southern and eastern parts of the island, the largely Christian Romano-British moved steadily north and westwards. As they became isolated from Rome they were led by

[10] The word tabernacle is derived from Latin *tabernaculum* meaning "tent" or "hut.

missionaries who used the sea-routes and built themselves monasteries in Ireland and off the West coast of Scotland, such as on the island of Iona.

It was not until 595AD, when Pope Gregory sent a mission under the leadership of Augustine to convert the Saxons, that Christianity, in its Roman continental form, was re-established in England. There were tussles between the Celtic Church and the Augustinian Roman *arrivistes*, culminating in the Synod of Whitby in 664AD. Rome won this particular battle, at least for most of England, but the architecture of medieval churches probably owes more to the Iona tradition than the Roman one[11].

Another significant feature of English churches is that they are always aligned with the Chancel towards the east. If ever you are lost on an overcast day in an English village a good a way of orienting yourself is to find a church and see which way it points. In fact the verb *to orient* (sometimes *orientate*) literally means to face east and derives from this practice. The precise reasons for eastern alignment are now lost to us. Jewish temples were always aligned towards Jerusalem but the Christian church did not take this on board with any enthusiasm. Maps and compasses were extremely rudimentary so it is unlikely anyone knew in which direction Jerusalem lay in any case. It is possible that people in Western Europe believed 'east' was good enough. The Bible contains references to the Second Coming of Christ as being 'in the east', and there are references comparing Jesus Christ to the rising sun, but equally there are expectations that the Second Coming will happen in Jerusalem, specifically on the Mount of Olives. Most Christian graves (and those of early Roman Christians) face east[12]

There is some evidence that church builders aligned their churches to the point on the horizon where the sun rose on their saint's feast day. There is cause for scepticism about this, and the Virgin Mary (to whom most churches are dedicated) has a great many different feast days, but it may account for the slight variations in

[11] This was to have repercussions in the reformation of the 16th century when protestants claimed, not without justification, that the 'true' early church in Britain had been forcibly subjugated by Rome.
[12] 'Facing' usually means the head is at the west end of the grave and feet point east, but sometimes it can be the other way around.

alignment. In any case, for some reason the proportion of easterly aligned churches declines the further south in Europe you travel, and in many towns and villages in Italy, France and Spain churches face in the direction that best suits the lie of the land or the street plan. In Rome the early churches were often aligned with the apse at the west end. St Peters, when it was re-founded in the early 1500s, faces in this direction. In England it is more likely that orientation became bound up with earlier Druidic ideas involving sun-worship, ideas that may have transferred more easily from the Celtic tradition. What we do know is that the principle of having the chancel pointing east was vested with huge importance in this country, so much so that it is hard to find a medieval church anywhere that does not point within 10 degrees or so either side of due east.

3

Gothic

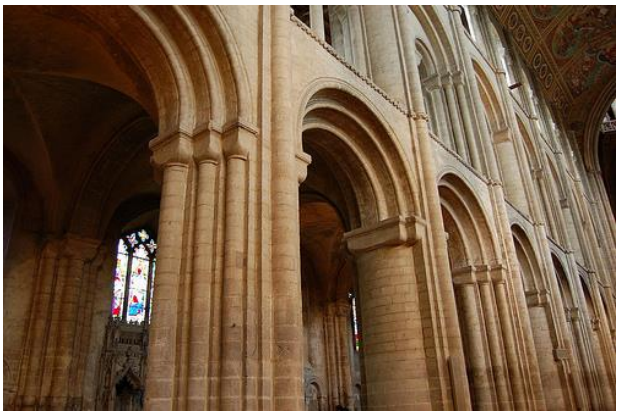
In the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ of the 7th – 11th centuries the Danes and the Saxons who took control of England from the departing Roman state built principally in timber and consequently most of their work has been lost, either rotted or burned away. Fragments have survived such as at Greensted in Essex where the nave walls of St Andrews Church consist of split oak planks. Dated at around 1050, just before the Norman Conquest, it is possibly the oldest wooden structure in Europe. Occasionally they built in stone or they converted abandoned Roman buildings, as the Augustinian missionaries did at Bradwell-on-Sea on the very eastern edge of England. Here the Chapel of St Peter is assumed to be that established by St Cedd, a Saxon monk, in 654, making it the oldest surviving Christian structure in England.

St Andrews Greensted

Stonework from the Saxon period that still remains (the towers of St Benet’s in Cambridge, Barnack and Earls Barton are good examples) shows a great solidity with tiny round-headed windows and narrow stones forming a characteristic ‘long and short’ pattern at the corners. Thin stones were also be applied as decoration, as seen in the latticework at Earls Barton, but their carving skills were limited.

St Benet's Cambridge- a Saxon Tower

1066 was of course a pivotal year for England. Its architecture, especially its church architecture, was just one of many aspects of life and culture that underwent a catastrophic transformation. The Norman invaders wanted to express the permanence of their occupation in solid stone. They had already developed their robust, muscular style in Normandy and Edward the Confessor; famously Francophile (or Normaphile anyway), had already used the style in his new foundation of Westminster Abbey before the Conquest. It became known much later as 'Romanesque' because its rounded arches bore a similarity to those built by the Romans. Its heavy and simple decorative mouldings in bold patterns such as chevrons and 'dog-tooth' patterns can be extraordinarily beautiful and moving, as can be seen in the great nave at Ely.



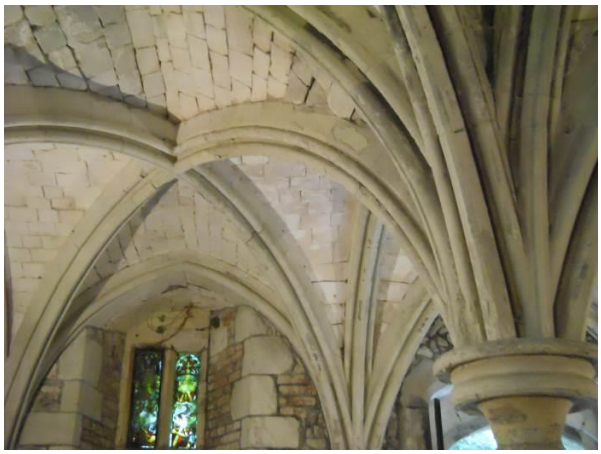
The Nave at Ely

As the masons' skills increased they fairly rapidly developed a lighter technique, reducing the amount of stone in proportion to the openings. In about 1140, at the Abbey of St Denis just north of Paris, this process was to take a sudden and dramatic leap forward where they built a soaring church with huge proportion of wall surface taken up with glass. Originally known in England as *Opus Francigenum* ("French work"), centuries later the new style became known as 'Gothic' to distinguish it from the classical architecture of the Renaissance. This was a puzzling choice because the Goths were a pagan East Germanic tribe not known for their architectural sensitivities, their main activity being the sacking of the remnants of the Roman Empire; but anyway the name stuck.

Gothic's trademark feature was the pointed arch, known geometrically as the three-centred arch. Stylistically this is perhaps the most distinctive feature of our medieval churches and this 'pointed' style is so unlike anything used in other building types (except when it was sometimes borrowed back from churches) that it immediately lends the buildings a characteristic *churchiness*. This is what we see reproduced on Christmas cards and what makes a church a church. Or at least it did from the 12th to the 16th centuries, and then once again in the 19th century when people began recreating the medieval style.

This was not simply an aesthetic affectation but an innovation of great genius for three main reasons. A pointed arch is exceptionally good at transferring load to either side of the opening it forms, guiding the weight of the structure in a way that flows easily towards the ground. It is also able to accommodate different width openings of the same height whereas a round arch must get proportionally taller as it gets wider or it becomes elliptical and looks wrong, as well as being structurally weaker. Thirdly the pointed arch version of a roof vault (called a rib vault and basically two or more pointed arches intersecting to form a roof structure), enables larger spans to be carried with stones of small sizes. The pointed arch allowed greater freedom of expression and roofs that previously had to be spanned with timber could be vaulted in stone with wider spaces below. Walls became more

window than masonry and the heavy muscular Romanesque style was no more. It was a paradigm shift and Gothic architecture's soaring verticality suited churches so perfectly that it survived for over four centuries, steadily evolving with increasing lightness and fluidity.



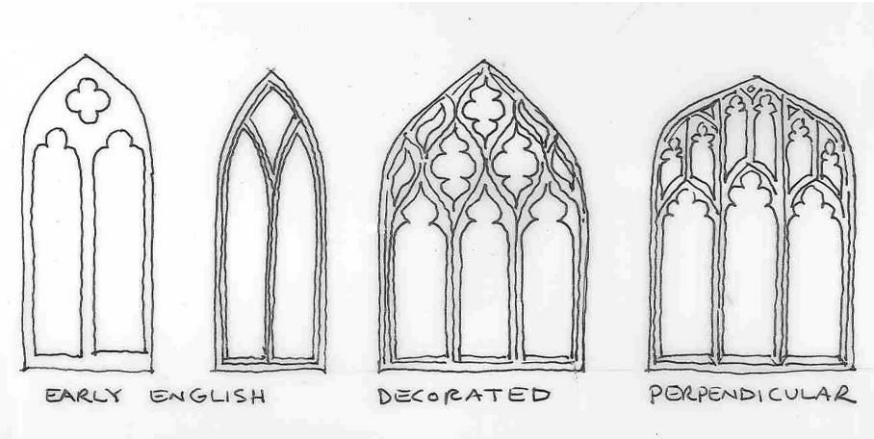
Early English Rib vaulting at St Osyth Priory in Essex

The gothic period is divided into distinct phases. 'Early English' came first and spans the period (roughly) from 1150 to 1250. It has fairly narrow windows, sometimes in single openings called 'lancets' or two or three openings with simple stone infill and round or quatrefoil (shaped like a clover leaf) openings filling in between the main openings and the arch above. This kind of division is called 'plate' tracery for its plain and solid look with openings that look as though they have been punched through the stone. Over the next few decades this heavy tracery became thinner and more refined resulting in so called 'Y' tracery which could also overlap to form intersecting flowing tracery in the apex of the arch making a series of diamond shapes. The tops of the stone piers had plain rounded 'capitals' like stacks of plates or were sometimes carved in what is known as stiff-leaf, a peculiarly English style that resembles an acanthus leaf.

Next came 'Decorated' (1250-1350) with wider windows and highly complex window tracery culminating in double-curved ogee arches and elaborate rib vaults which could be as complicated as cats' cradles. Columns became more intricate with clusters of shafts sometimes with individual different coloured shafts completely

detached from the rest. Capitals were still carved in leaf patterns but became much more elaborate and included flowers, animals and human figures.

The final phase of Gothic is unique to England and is known as 'Perpendicular'. Dating from about 1350 until the Reformation in the 1550s it had flatter arches that allowed windows to have enormous expanses of glass. Its trademark is the so-called fan vaulting which came along in the later part of this period with its multiple ribs projecting from each springing point and intersecting with the adjoining bays. The crowning glory of this type of vault can be seen at King's College Chapel in Cambridge.



The basic stages of English Gothic

Transitional Norman- Early English arch at Little Downham, Cambs, late 1100s.
The chevron carving is typically Norman, the gothic arch shape is Early English

Another distinctive feature of Gothic architecture is the buttress; a bulky protrusion from the wall, stepping inward as it ascends, that props up the thick masonry walls. (Flying buttresses, where the vertical part is detached from the main wall and only the top section connects to the building, are an expensive feature and are only needed on very large churches and cathedrals). The buttresses are there to counteract the sideways force of the sloping roof which, because of the absence of internal horizontal ties at eaves level, leaves a significant component of the downward force pushing the wall outwards. Buttresses are not very efficient at doing this job and, in some churches, finials (little pillars of stone on top of the buttresses) are put there to add weight and help stop the buttress moving outwards. All this weight has to be transferred to the ground and, as pre-19th century foundations are practically non-existent, the buttress often starts to lean out with the wall as the roof spreads, sometimes alarmingly so. Often there were failures and, although medieval masons were the undisputed master craftsmen of the day, what we see are their success stories. The less well-built structures, especially as masons experimented with new techniques, fell down long ago.

4

Fabric

Nearly all churches after 1066 are built of stone. But where did all this stone come from? Although bedrock is of course somewhere under us wherever we are, the kind of stone suitable for cutting and dressing and making into buildings is surprisingly rare. Good quality building stone that is near the surface where it can be quarried is even rarer, and it is something that gets taken for granted in England where we have the stuff in great abundance and in many different types. Nevertheless, as transportation of stone in the pre-industrial era was inordinately expensive (it's not cheap even today), the buildings in any locality tend to be made from the stone that is found nearby, and if stone is not readily available then other materials are used instead, with stone used only for the more important bits, and for prestigious buildings such as churches.

In the southern and eastern parts of England, churches are mainly built of limestone where one continuous belt of limestone stretches from Portland Bill in Dorset right across the country in a north easterly direction as far as South Yorkshire. Limestone is made almost exclusively of calcium carbonate, a mineral formed from the shell fragments of billions and billions of tiny creatures dying and sinking to the bottom of warm semi-tropical seas 150-200 million years ago. Some of it is pure white, like Portland Stone, quarried on Portland Bill in Dorset, and some is coloured by impurities like iron that give a golden tint to stones like the Hornton Stone of North Oxfordshire. Another, much older, belt of limestone created the Pennines 325 – 360 million years ago. It runs roughly north-south forming the 'backbone' of England from Derbyshire to the Scottish border. It is known as Carboniferous limestone and is much harder than Jurassic limestone. The position of these two limestone belts – Jurassic and Carboniferous - make them geographically a perfect natural distributor for building stone across most of England.

Between these belts of limestone large areas of sandstone occur. Sandstone is another excellent building stone, granular like limestone but with little or no calcium carbonate. Like limestone it is a sedimentary rock, laid down at the bottom of the sea in layers over millions of years. It too varies in colour though tends to be more orange than limestone. Again impurities, like iron or copper, give some sandstones a reddish or greenish tint.

Igneous rock is a different kind of rock entirely. Known commonly as 'granite' it was formed from molten lava of one sort or another, boiling out of the ground or being pushed up through fault lines and then solidifying as it cools. In England where volcanic activity stopped about 350 million years ago igneous rocks are much older than most limestones and sandstones and less common. They appear in the extreme south-west and north-west of the country, mainly in Devon, Cornwall and the Lake District. They are extremely hard and therefore very difficult to carve into anything very complicated.

At the other end of the scale is chalk, another type of calcium carbonate like limestone but younger (it dates from 140-65 million years ago) and softer. The amount of chalk in England is, of course, immense. The 'White Cliffs of Dover' and Beachy Head bear witness to this. A large expanse of it centres on Salisbury Plain and stretches north eastwards into East Anglia until it reaches the north Norfolk coast. Much of it is too soft for building but, along the lines of the Chilterns at various points, compressed at the bottom of the chalk layers, a harder form of chalk called clunch can be found. As long as it is well protected from the weather clunch can last for hundreds of years and, because it can be easily worked, it was much in demand for the decorative carvings and flowing window tracery of the 14th century.

It is interesting to see the age of stone in the context of our own human history. Geological time is very difficult for us to comprehend but if we think of the period since the Earth first formed into a ball of rock, with a hard crust and liquid mantle, approximately 3,700 million years ago as being one calendar year, and we imagine we are at a second to midnight on New Year's Eve, the Earth's crust formed in early

January, 365 days ago, and each day represents 10 million years. [13] Life in the form of uni-celled organisms appeared in June, and even as late as September it was no more complex than strands of blue-green algae. Vertebrates came along in early November; Dinosaurs arrived around the 8th December. Primates first appeared on Christmas Day. Our DNA diverged from that of chimpanzees about lunchtime today and our species (modern 'Man' or Homo Sapiens) appeared for the first time about half an hour ago. Most limestone was laid down in the Carboniferous period 350 million years ago (late November), the Permian 280 million years ago (early December) and the Jurassic, when the Atlantic Ocean began to form, about two weeks ago. The English Channel, edged with those white cliffs, was formed at the end of the last ice age, about one and a half minutes ago. If geological time could blink an eye then that would be our lifespan: about ¾ of a second.

The Jurassic limestone used in most in the south eastern part of the country comes from a long belt of limestone that runs from Portland Bill in Dorset, up through the Cotswolds, through Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, and Lincolnshire and terminating in the North Yorkshire moors. The best building stone is sometimes called 'oolitic' because it contains oolites, tiny granular forms of the sea creatures that make up the stone. These are still visible to the naked eye and make it easy to cut and shape the stone. Where the granules are hard and tightly bound the stone can be extremely strong and resistant to weathering. Barnack stone, quarried just west of Peterborough, was highly prized for its durability and can be seen in the oldest parts of most medieval churches in south east England (it became worked out in the 15th century).

By happy circumstance, the oolitic belt strikes through the middle of the lower-lying parts of England and is traversed by many Roman roads, making transportation of the stone in medieval times easier. Even so pulling carts laden with stone over such terrain cannot have been easy. River transport was used wherever possible and in

[13] The actual creation of the Earth is thought to be some billion years previous to this, but it took a while for the molten mass to settle down into a form broadly recognisable as a planet. The oldest rock yet dated is a pebble of volcanic ash in Greenland and is approx. 3,824 million years old.

the western parts of East Anglia the remains of the Roman canal system[14] proved extremely beneficial. Much of the limestone used to build the Cambridge colleges arrived by such means.

Most churches were covered with a thin protective coat of lime plaster known as 'harling', with only the surrounds to windows, the corners, and 'string' courses (horizontal bands designed to throw water off) expressed in dressed stone. This happened in the poorer rural parishes, or where good stone was prohibitively expensive because it would have to come from a quarry some distance way. For this reason, much of the stonework of medieval churches is fairly rough and ready, not much better than rubble, as it was never intended to be seen. Unfortunately nearly all of the protective plaster was removed by Victorian restorers, aided by the relatively modern idea that it was good to express the structure and 'honestly' expose the material the church was built from. To be fair, by the 19th century a lot of the render had fallen off due to neglect, but the decision to remove it all, rather than repair it, had major consequences for our church buildings. Because the stone behind often did not look quite how the restorers *thought* it should, and because it was poorly finished anyway, not being intended for face work, it was often refaced in new stone or flints giving a completely different impression to that intended by the original builders. Removing the render from churches has sometimes been compared to pulling the skin off a body. In either case it leads to unhappy consequences.

What is always worth remembering too is that there are no cavity walls or damp proof courses in medieval buildings. In fact these were not introduced until very late on in the 19th century and did not become commonplace until the 1930s. Instead walls rely on their thickness both to keep out the rain, which they do with varying degrees of success, and the cold, which they don't do at all. Rising damp is a common and vexing problem with nothing to prevent the water in the ground being drawn up the walls through capillary action like a wick, although the problem often

[14] The Carr Dyke, winding around the western edge of the Cambridgeshire Fens, being the most well-known of these.

lies in faulty rainwater drainage or roofing allowing water to seep down from above. In the 1960s and 70s many churches had their walls re-plastered at low level in cement to try and counteract this, but all it did was force the damp higher up the wall where it now bursts out in unattractive blisters.

In fact, modern methods devised for modern buildings are frequently useless, or worse than useless, when applied to medieval churches. With their massive masonry walls churches behave in an entirely different way to other buildings. They sometimes resemble more a mountain cave than a building, rising up out of the ground and consisting of very similar materials - rock and earth. They respond very slowly to changing temperatures, storing heat in their walls in the summer months and, more effectively it seems, the cold in winter. For this reason, the physics of church construction are very often reversed from normal modern buildings. For example, condensation is more likely to occur on warm days when the church walls are colder than the ambient outdoor temperature, and it can occur on outside surfaces as well as inside. Because of this, architects must think very carefully about how best to repair and conserve church fabric. Using impervious materials is always a mistake because it simply moves the damp problem to another place while traditional materials, like lime, allow moisture to escape naturally over the whole surface.

Lime is now vested by conservation architects with almost mystical properties. Abandoned by 20th century architects and engineers for its younger, and much stronger, cousin cement, the properties that now make lime appear so appealing - its weakness and flexibility - used to be seen as terrible flaws. It is a very simple substance that has been used as a building material for thousands of years. It is basically chalk or limestone that has been burnt to drive off carbon dioxide until it becomes highly reactive. After slaking this 'quick lime' with water it slowly returns to its original form, essentially calcium carbonate, by re-absorbing carbon dioxide from the air. The slaked lime is mixed with sand and water to make mortar for walls, or plaster for spreading over them. Because the re-carbonation process is slow, and calcium carbonate is a relatively weak crystalline material, the end-product remains

flexible and porous, ideal in old buildings that are often damp and where elements move around. The downside is that the softness and weakness of lime materials means they require regular maintenance and renewal. This was easy enough when labour was cheap and maintaining the church was often what local landowners did with their labour when the fields were not being worked. But industrialisation increased the cost of this labour and at the same time brought in tougher materials like cement that were labour-saving, or thought to be, because of their durability. Cement, in contrast to lime, is a complex compound consisting of many long chains of molecules that give it exceptional strength. This makes it wonderful for building motorway bridges but much too unyielding and impervious for use in old buildings.

Prior to the 1400s most churches were topped with a thick layer of thatch, the most common and most economical way of roofing a church and formed from readily available reed or sedge cut from the banks of watercourses or from wheat or barley cut from the fields. Thatch requires a steep pitch to throw the water off, and simple roof shapes. Thatch relies on each reed or piece of straw guiding the water down and outwards and this will only work at a pitch of 45 degrees or more. Valleys, formed by the intersection of two roof slopes, are particularly vulnerable as they concentrate the water and, by geometry, are of a reduced pitch so the water runs off less easily. It has no need, and cannot support, gutters but has instead over-sailing eaves to throw the water away from the walls. Still-born babies were sometimes unofficially buried beneath these dripping eaves so they could be 'baptised' by the water dripping from the consecrated roof.[15] You can often see the evidence for the change in roof pattern where towers meet the nave or above chancel roofs where the steeper line of the previous roof has left a visible 'scar'.

Slightly less economical but more durable are roof tiles made from fired clay but they also need a fairly steep pitch, 35 degrees being the minimum and are considerably heavier than thatch and therefore require more in the way of roof structure. The Perpendicular style of the 15th century made flatter roof pitches more

[15] Harold II and his common law wife Edith were berated for doing this at Canterbury

fashionable and the higher nave eaves parapets this created allowed space between the top of the aisle roof and the nave roof for more windows, known as a clerestory. (Or 'clear storey' as my school history teacher called it by way of helping us remember their function). Clerestories allow light to flood into the centre of the church which is very useful where aisles have deepened the plan. The aisle roofs also need to be fairly flat to maximise this clerestory space. The only roofing material available at the time that was suitable for these flatter pitches was lead, a dense but pliable metal that can be made into long sheets, making it the perfect material for roofing. Lead has the chemical symbol Pb (from the Latin plumbum) and an atomic number of 82, one more than gold, making it denser than most building materials in common use and extremely heavy. It is soft and malleable with a relatively low melting point. When freshly cut it has a bright silvery lustre but quickly oxidises to a dull grey on exposure to air.

Lead is toxic when ingested as a dust or inhaled as a vapour accumulating in soft tissues and bones damaging the nervous system leading to behavioural problems and brain damage but these disadvantages did not prevent it being used in abundance for building and craft work. Its extreme workability, durability and relative cheapness, plus the fact that it was often found in the ground alongside silver, meant it was used from prehistoric times. It is thought to have been first mined in 6500 BC in Anatolia in Asia Minor (now Turkey) then around the Aegean islands and in Laurion in Greece. These three regions collectively dominated production of mined lead until about 1200 BCE.

The Romans then used lead for their extensive water supply systems, lining the channels and aqueducts, as well as for many other accessories. Rome became the greatest producer of lead during the classical era with an estimated annual output peaking at 80,000 tonnes, leading to the Roman age being sometimes referred to as the Lead Age. Some modern writers have even suggested that lead poisoning played a major role in the decline of the Roman Empire, used as it was in so many drinking vessels and water storage tanks. When lead poisoning did occur the victims were called "saturnine", dark and cynical, after the ghoulish father of the gods, Saturn, but

lead levels in Roman drinking water, though undoubtedly higher than would be regarded as a safe limit today, were unlikely to have been significantly harmful to the general population.

In England lead mining on the Mendip Hills began in the late Iron Age. The Romans knew about this and were working these mines within six years of their arrival in Britain. Several large ingots of lead have been recovered from the region, one dated AD 49. Some of the ingots were stamped 'BRIT. EX. ARG. VEB' meaning 'British (lead) from the Veb lead-silver works'. Veb possibly being a Roman abbreviation for the Mendip region. It is possible that the village of Ubley may be derived from Veb-ley, a place where Romano-British miners lived.

Britain became the largest supplier of lead and silver in the Empire reaching such a level that the Spanish lodged a complaint with the Emperor as their lead trade suffered as a result. The Emperor responded by setting limits for Britain's production but lead was in such high demand that the number of mines actually increased and their output rose with new mines being opened across Wales and North-West England during the first century AD.

During the Saxon and Norman periods lead was used for the more important churches, probably taken from Roman buildings and re-smelted and it is hard to see, how (for example) the flat top of the Saxon St Bene't's Church tower in Cambridge could have been roofed in any other way. As the medieval period went on some churches and monasteries had extensive roofs of lead, with lanterns and spires that were sometimes gilded, painted or coated with tin to provide a dazzling display of chevrons and chequered designs. Most of this decorative work was lost during the Dissolution when priory roofs were stripped of their lead to be recast and used for the houses of Henry VIII's favoured courtiers. In fact the ease with which lead can be stripped, melted down and reused is something of a disadvantage for this most forgiving of materials. The black market in lead has always been a way of supplementing a meagre income, probably for as long as it has been used in

buildings, but the Dissolution saw the stealing of lead legitimised (for those with the right connections) and turned into vandalism on an industrial scale.

Now in the 21st century lead theft has again become a curse, aided by Google Earth and drone cameras. Churches have had their lead stripped on multiple occasions, often entire roofs have gone. Rural churches in out of the way locations are the most vulnerable but the brazenness of the lead thieves means that sometimes lead is stolen in broad daylight in the middle of towns and villages. The thieves wear hi-vis jackets and pose as contractors and people are either taken in or just don't want to be the ones to challenge them. Lead is sold for cash at scrap metal dealers or taken to the ports and shipped out of the country in containers. The 2013 Scrap Metal Dealers Act helped reduce the scale of the thefts for a while, preventing dealers from paying cash and forcing them to keep receipts but it has now returned with a vengeance. To make matters worse insurers have become unable to cover the cost of re-roofing, limiting compensation to a fraction of the actual cost. Parochial Church Councils' only redress is to fit alarms and CCTV cameras, paint the lead with a traceable chemical known as 'Smart-Water', and rainwater pipes with anti-climb paint, and hope for the best. Replacement roofs are however now more often done in stainless steel or zinc and, in a few decades, there may be very few lead roofs left on churches.

Lead's suitability as a roofing material suffered a further blow in the late 20th century when something called 'underside lead corrosion' began to cause several problems as churches were heated to higher temperatures and meeting rooms, kitchen and toilets were added creating higher levels of internal vapour. This caused condensation on the underside of the lead roof which crumbled away unseen as the lead quickly turned into lead carbonate. Now the need for ventilation is better understood and coatings on the underside of new lead help to prevent the corrosion taking hold.

Lead sheet is supplied in different thicknesses, specified by 'codes' indicating its weight in pounds per square foot. It is laid in bays to allow for thermal movement,

which can be very significant. Sand cast lead is the oldest form of lead sheet available and formed by pouring molten lead along a bed of pressed sand. The lead solidifies as it cools and forms a uniform flat sheet which can then be cut and rolled up for easy transport. Milled lead sheet began to replace cast lead sheet at the beginning of the 19th century. It is rolled flat to a uniform thickness in rolling mills. Sand cast lead is more expensive and is normally reserved nowadays for the most prestigious buildings and for conservation work.

Another feature of the late medieval church is the 'embattling' that often finishes off the tops of towers and parapets giving the building a curiously military appearance. Why were churches made to look like fortresses? There was no practical need for it and it was a detail that cost more to execute and needed considerably more maintenance, exposing the stone to frost and rain and creating gutters behind that are prone to blockages and leaks.

The reason for this new military look was probably cultural. When the churches were being modernised with the new Perpendicular style, and flatter roof pitches and clerestories were introduced filling churches with light, the national obsessions were war and chivalry. The so-called 100 Years War, which actually lasted 116 years from 1337-1453, dominated English thought, art and literature for most of the Perpendicular period and while the war ebbed and flowed a considerable proportion of the male population would have spent time in France fighting battles and building castles. When they returned to England and made alterations to their churches they naturally used the details they were used to. Battlements were fashionable; the equivalent of the steel and glass that might be seen as a bit of 'bling' on a 21st century building.

A 15th century embattled parapet at Southoe Church, Cambs added on top of a 13th century chancel (the beak line is still visible)

5

Interiors

Internally medieval churches looked very different to the calm, whitewashed interiors we are used to seeing today. They were instead a kaleidoscope of colour, extensively decorated with murals, stencils and gilding, and filled with statues and reliquaries containing the relics of saints. Terrifying 'doom' paintings told churchgoers of the judgement that awaited them in the afterlife while a giant St Christopher was often depicted opposite the south door to see departing travellers off safely. 'Jesse Tree' paintings depicted the biblical ancestry of Jesus and lives of the saints were everywhere, often painted one on top of the other. Most wall painting were lost or at least covered up by layers of plaster and limewash in the 16th and 17th centuries but the most remarkable set of paintings to survive, rediscovered in 1855, are at St Peter & St Paul in Pickering, North Yorkshire.

Part of the St Catherine wall painting, Pickering Church Yorkshire

Where funds allowed windows were glazed with stained glass illustrating scenes from the Bible and intermingled with stories of the saints and local legends. Although coloured glass had been used by the Romans it really came into its own in mediaeval churches. Glass was made by melting sand, potash and lime together in clay pots

and then coloured by the addition of metallic oxides - gold for red, copper for green, cobalt for blue and so on. This so-called pot-metal glass was often too dark to allow much light through and to overcome this glass known as 'flashed' glass was made by the blower dipping his blob of molten white glass into a pot of coloured glass. This applied a thin, more translucent surface layer of colour which could also be later removed by grinding with abrasives to produced different shades on the same piece of glass. This allowed modelling and shading to be depicted and details were added with iron oxide pigment. After painting, the pieces were heated in a small furnace to fuse the paint to the surface of the glass.

The pieces of glass were then assembled using H-shaped lead strips called cames which allow the glass to be slotted into the grooves on each side. The intersections of all the lead strips were then soldered, and putty rubbed into all the joints to make them watertight. Larger panels were held in place in the window openings by a grid of iron bars set into the masonry known as ferramenta. The whole procedure was enormously expensive and we have to remember that at this time even plain glass was too costly for all but the very rich. Most houses had their window openings screened with timber shutters or pieces of canvas. Sadly most medieval glass is now lost, destroyed in the religious and political purges of the 16th and 17th centuries. Their Victorian replacements, which are what we mainly see nowadays, can be very impressive but lack the subtlety of colour and the playfulness of the medieval designs.

A fragment of medieval glass in Royston Church Hertfordshire

In pre-Reformation churches, at the transition between nave and chancel, there would be a 'rood screen' and above it an elaborate structure of timber known as a rood loft, carrying a larger-than-life crucifixion scene which would be adorned with flowers and candles on feast days. The 'rood' referred to was the crucifix itself.[16] It was large enough to support a priest, sometimes several, who would sing from there, notably during the Passion in the week before Easter. An organ (smaller than those we see in churches today) could also be positioned in the rood loft and priests and musicians would access via a set of small steps known as a rood stair sometimes concealed within the thickness of the wall. You can sometimes see the remains of these, seemingly hanging in mid-air.

The doorway out onto the rood screen at Balsham Church- the screen still accommodated the village band in 1840!

[16] The word rood is derived from rod, or pole.

The effect of the screen was to obscure the chancel and sanctuary from the Nave where the common worshippers stood. This practice has its roots in the Jewish temple and Roman temples, even in earlier Syrian pagan temples, and has its modern counterpart in the *iconostasis* of Christian Orthodox churches which form a completely solid wall between priest and congregation. The fundamental purpose of these screens was to conceal, partly or fully, the eucharistic ceremony. This reenactment of the Last Supper, during which Jesus ate with his disciples on the day before His crucifixion and death, had its culmination when bread and wine was consecrated and consumed by the priest, and sometimes by other hand-picked communicants. Such was the ceremony's power that it was deemed far too sacred for ordinary worshippers to witness[17]. In Orthodox churches the iconostasis, while appearing like even more of a barrier, is seen symbolically as a link between the earthly world on the worshippers' side and the celestial world on the other, the icons of the saints helping to make the bridge between the two. In the less transcendental Western Christian tradition this meaning became lost and people began to see it simply as a symbol of alienation. With the Reformation in the mid-1500s rood screens bore the architectural brunt of this change and they were torn down and destroyed in their thousands; only a handful remain.

The idea of the chancel being a separate, priestly, world took much longer to disappear however, and in Anglican and Catholic churches the idea of the priest performing the ceremony alone or with other clergy, on behalf of the congregation but separate from them and with his back turned to them, continued until as late as the 1960s. Only after the Second Vatican Council in 1962-63 did Catholic priests turn around and celebrate mass with the congregation and Anglicans did not follow suit until the 1970s and 80s. Although many Church of England churches are now erecting Eucharistic tables on the Nave side of the Chancel arch this is still quite a new thing.

[17] As a Catholic child growing up in the 1960s I recall being taught not to look at the elevated host

In medieval times the ordinary churchgoers, largely illiterate and uneducated, having little understanding of the mumbled Latin drifting from the Chancel, drew heavily on all the spectacular imagery for spiritual nourishment and, in a world where the only man-made images anyone saw would have been in a Church, the impact must have been astonishing. In G. Lamb's piece about the effect of the Reformation on the parish church at Long Melford in Suffolk[18] he describes the lavishness of the decoration, stained glass and gilt in this so-called 'Wool' Church. Although, through the fortunes made from East Anglian wool, Long Melford was one of the wealthier churches, it gives an idea of the general level of ostentation that people strove to provide, proudly and willingly, for their churches. Lamb also draws from a contemporary account of a parishioner called Roger Martin who describes bonfires and all-night vigils on the eves of the feast days of St. James, St. Peter and Paul, and St. Thomas and Midsummer's Eve. At these, ale and food were provided for the poor and candles were lit before the image of St. John the Baptist.

Those of us used to church being a quiet and solemn place would have been surprised by all the commotion going on inside the church on an almost constant basis. Mass was celebrated every day and most of the day on Sundays, and regular attendance was considered compulsory. How this was enforced is not clear but a strong belief in hell, and the threat of withdrawal of poor relief (the only welfare available), was probably sufficient incentive. And, in a society with few other distractions apart from work (no cinema, TV, radio, books, newspapers or internet) and with only one religion to choose from, what reason was there *not* to be there? With the possible exception of the local tavern the Parish Church was *the* village gathering place, with all the local populace present on a regular basis, and not just to worship. Ordinary people did not normally take a central part in religious proceedings and Holy Communion was a rare event for the general populace, usually being restricted to the time of the great Christian festivals.

[18] http://www.hrgs.co.uk/index.php/local-history-articles-and-transcriptions/20-the-english-reformation-and-its-effects-on-a-suffolk-case-study

Katherine French in her book *People of the Parish* paints a brilliant picture of this by quoting a 1379 legal case where reasons are recalled by various parishioners for their attendance at a particular church service. We learn that:

> *John de Sothworth was at the church for a 'love day' between William Robinson and 'a woman'; John de Twys was there to hear mass before going to buy fish; Henry de Twys to hear mass before going to see a corpse and a wreck on the seashore; Robert de Eld was at the church to hear news from Ireland; Henry de Penketh was there to buy corn; John de Andern was there for a cock fight; and John de Bugard was at the church to see a man from Liverpool. Whether the cock fight was held inside the church -and during a service perhaps- is not made clear but we can see that churches were not just considered places of worship, they were the social and economic hub of the rural medieval world.*

So just how committed were people to religion amidst this hubbub, and how many attended church at all? With only scraps of evidence it is something that is very difficult for us to gauge, it may also have varied considerably over the centuries. In his Long Melford study Lamb quotes historian William Shiels who claims that 'many poorer people [were not] regular churchgoers [having] only the scantiest understanding of religious doctrine,' but historian Eamon Duffy counter-claims that 'the rhythms of the liturgy … remained the rhythms of life itself.' So before we get the idea that people were in church just to flirt and make business arrangements we also have to remember that ordinary people were very probably committed to their faith with a level of religiosity incomprehensible to most of us today. Lamb goes on:

> *Recent historiography has tended to agree with Duffy, suggesting that the laity, including the poorer members, understood far more than historians have previously given them credit for, and attended church regularly. Two pieces of evidence exist that demonstrate the attitude of the layman to his religion .. in the late-fifteenth century. Both are books, one of the compilers being poor, the other a gentleman, and neither portraying the kind of 'deep religious*

introspection' the monasteries or devotional writers at the time were encouraging. Both, however, display knowledge of basic theology, and attempts to learn the Creed and Commandments. Both were preoccupied with the material and fixed notions of religion, such as the observance of feast days and the liturgical calendar, rather than tackling theological concepts and theories. Themes included how to avoid Purgatory and the Devil, rhymed portrayals of saints' lives, the virtues of the rosary and devotion to the Virgin, and belief that Armageddon was near... Everyday religion seems to have been largely focused on working towards a positive afterlife, and one way to do this was by being .. a patron of the parish church and a devoted, orthodox member of society.[19]

The advent of printing in the mid-15th century saw a significant increase in literacy and the production of many small missals and prayer books around this time suggest a desire for understanding and participation that is easy for us to underestimate.

In any case we know that churches were busier and far livelier places than they are today. While people came and went mass continued in the chancel (and in larger churches in the various side chapels and chantries as well) in an almost endless cycle, virtually unseen but heard in plainchant, candles flickering and clouds of incense drifting from swinging thuribles. There were no pews (these did not appear until well into the 1400s) and people knelt, standing only for the gospel. Rushes or reeds laid on the earth floor helped to make them more comfortable and, as they became worn and filthy, they required regular renewal. This was usually carried out before major festivals such as Easter in an elaborate ceremony called a 'Rushcart'. Rushes would be gathered from around the parish and brought to the church in a big noisy festival with much drinking, feasting, music and dancing. Villages would try to outdo each other by building bigger or more elaborate carts (*see cover picture*) decorated with dried flowers and often hung with shiny kitchen utensils.

[19] G Lamb Ibid

The absence of any fixed seating meant that the spaces were highly adaptable and usable for festivals such as rush-carting or the 'church ale', a huge knees-up that was held on the parish's annual saint's day. It did mean that during the, sometimes very lengthy, services those who could not kneel on the floor stood up, while the weak and the elderly leant on columns or the side walls (hence the expression 'going to the wall' meaning becoming decrepit and useless). In fact the sight of a great many people kneeling in an open space would be familiar to many Muslims today. In his book *'From the Holy Mountain'* William Dalrymple describes worship at the Christian Orthodox monastery Mor Gabriel in Eastern Turkey:

> *The entire congregation began a long series of prostrations: from their standing position the worshippers fell to their knees and lowered their heads to the ground so that all could be seen from the rear of the church was a line of upturned bottoms. All that distinguished the worship from that which might have taken place in a mosque was that the worshippers crossed and re-crossed themselves as they performed their prostrations. This was the way the early Christians prayed and …in the sixth century the Muslims appear to have derived their techniques of worship from existing Christian practice .. it is the Western Christians who have broken with sacred tradition.*

Dalrymple does not at this point mention one important difference: the approach to the participation of women, which has always been viewed differently in the two faiths. Although for centuries the sexes in Christian churches were kept apart on opposite sides of the nave, women still worshipped in the same space as men, partook in the same rituals and entered by the same door. It is true that women have, until very recently, been denied any kind of a leadership role in Christian churches but, in the early church, there is some evidence that women, especially the wealthier ones, not only provided great patronage for the nascent church but may have played key roles in its ministration. Hilda of Whitby (c. 614–680) was a Christian saint and founding abbess of the hugely influential monastery at Whitby in Yorkshire which was chosen as the venue for the Synod of Whitby. She was abbess at several monasteries and recognized for the wisdom that drew kings to her for

advice. Many of the early saints were women and it is worth remembering that it was Helena, Emperor Constantine's Mother, who provided Christianity with its great leap forward in the early 4th century, persuading her son to adopt the religion she had converted to a few years before. It was this that propelled Christianity into being a world religion. Helena also made a remarkable pilgrimage to the Holy Land, searching for relics of Jesus and the first disciples, excavating many of the sites described in the New Testament (she is sometimes described as the world's first archaeologist), even discovering what she took to be remnants of the true cross of the crucifixion.

In Jerusalem, on what was assumed to be the site of Jesus's crucifixion, Helena had built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a magnificent domed structure that replaced a pagan temple on the site[20]. The church is an extraordinary multi-layered structure with the site of Calvary crystallized in marble on top of what was reputed to be the Golgotha rock that was the site of the crucifixion, and even said to be the last resting place of the first human Adam. Only a few metres away and lower down is the *Aedicule,* the site claimed to be that of the rock tomb hastily borrowed from Joseph of Arimathea's and where Jesus's body was laid.

The atmosphere inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is febrile to say the least. There is a mental condition known as 'Jerusalem Syndrome' involving hysteria and delusions brought on by the proximity of so much historical and religious significance and the Holy Sepulchre is probably Ground Zero for this syndrome. Passions run extremely high among the intractable Christian factions who lay claim to ownership: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Franciscans, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox and the Syrian Orthodox, and fights break out regularly; over a procession going slightly off course perhaps, a misplaced chair, or a door left open. Centuries of such disputes, under the baffled gaze of the Ottomans who controlled the city between 1516-1917 finally led an exasperated Sultan to force a compromise in 1853

[20] In a wonderful folk tale Helena is an Essex girl, the daughter of King Coel of Colchester (possibly the Old King Cole of nursery rhyme fame) and was married off to a Roman senator sent to negotiate a peace treaty with the Britons. If only all this were true!

known as the *Status Quo.* It keeps the peace, just, but the keys to the church are still kept to this day by two ancient Muslim families: the Nussaiba and the Joudeh Al-Goudia.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is also the culmination of a devotional procession known as 'The Stations of the Cross' which refers to the ceremonial procession that marks a number of events that happened during Jesus's journey on the day of his crucifixion. 40 years after the Crusaders lost control of Jerusalem to the Muslims in 1187 the Franciscans were allowed back into the Holy Land and one of the things they did was to re-create the path of this journey. It became known as the *Via Dolorosa*, or the Way of Pain or Sorrow, and the route was marked with a series of devotional images. During the 15th and 16th centuries the Franciscans began to build shrines elsewhere in Europe as a way of duplicating these 'stations'. The number of stations varied between seven and thirty and were often placed in small buildings on the approach to a church. In 1686 Pope Innocent XI granted the Franciscans the right to erect the stations inside their churches, extended in 1731 to all churches provided that a Franciscan father erected them, the number being regularized to the following 14:

1. Pilate condemning Jesus to death (presenting him to the crowds – *Ecce Homo*)
2. Jesus taking up the cross
3. Jesus falling for the first time
4. Jesus meeting his mother
5. Simon of Cyrene helping Jesus carry the cross
6. Veronica wiping the face of Jesus
7. Jesus falling for the second time
8. Jesus addressing the women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falling for the third time
10. Jesus being stripped of his clothes
11. Jesus being nailed to the cross
12. The death of Jesus

13. Jesus being taken down from the cross
14. Jesus being placed in the tomb

Some of the events are not strictly Biblical, the figure of Veronica for example, and the nature of the images has made them a prime target for iconoclasts. For this reason, while no Catholic Church has been without them since the 1700s, they are comparatively rare in Protestant Churches.

6

Anchorholds

A strong belief in purgatory and hell, and the possibility of saving souls from such trials through prayer, meant that a significant part of medieval church activity was tied up with the business of death. It created a huge demand for 'Chantry Chapels' where a priest was paid to 'chant' or sing prayers for a chosen relative. This went a step further in many churches where a male or female hermit would be 'enclosed' in a small chapel or cell attached to the church. These were called 'anchorholds' and are such a fascinating, and forgotten, part of our religious history that they deserve a fuller explanation.

From as early as the 7th century AD, and until the Reformation, a substantial number of religious people lived hermitic lives all over Europe. Separating oneself from society and material comforts was seen as a way of getting closer to God, perhaps as a result of the need to atone for past sins or inspired by visions. Any kind of separation was seen as a form of martyrdom by the Christians of the period and while the most extreme form of this was suffering violent death, the act of reclusion, of being 'dead to the world' as it was called, was seen as the next best thing. This gradation of martyrdom was even colour-coded as described in the *Cambrai Homily*, an Irish text of the late 7th century:

> *"This is the white martyrdom to man.. he separates for the sake of God everything he loves.. This is the green martyrdom…when by means of fasting and labour he separates from his desires or suffers toil in penance and repentance. This is the red martyrdom for him: endurance of a cross or destruction for Christ's sake as happened to the apostles"* [21]

Inspired by the desert ascetics, the solitaries, and in particular Anthony of Egypt, an early 4th century saint, some hermits wandered the land, lived in wild places or on

[21] As quoted in *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* by Nora Chadwick

remote islands, but some chose to live close to ordinary people yet closed off from them, often quite literally. This type of hermit was called an anchorite (*fem. anchoress)* from the Greek *anachoretes* meaning "one who lives apart". Many lived in caves or rustic huts but there were others who lived in cells known as 'anchorholds' built in the churchyard and often adjoining the church itself.[22] There were no rules as to the situation of the cell but it was often on the north side so the anchorite could "deliberately forego the sunshine with the rest of nature's gifts"[23].

Once the cell was ready, the anchorite would be 'enclosed' inside to spend the rest of their life there in constant prayer. The bishop had to vet all candidates carefully for the decision to be enclosed was an extremely serious one and it was an embarrassment if the anchorite left the cell early for some reason, as happened fairly often, notably at Shere in Surrey in the 14th century when an anchoress left her cell after three years and was ordered by the bishop to return 'on pain of death'.[24]

Because the anchorite was considered 'dead to the world' the enclosure ceremony was similar to a funeral service. The candidate would fast and make confession, keeping vigil throughout the preceding night. After the mass, and prostration before the altar, he or she would process with the bishop and clergy, carrying a lighted taper, to the cell.[25] In many cases the anchorite was then literally 'walled up', though they were usually locked in with the door locked or barred from the outside. In less extreme forms the anchorite was allowed to venture from the cell occasionally to dispense teaching and alms to the community, the amount of time they spent in the outside world being left as a matter of conscience rather than imprisonment. They might also receive visitors; children, for example, could be given lessons or a priest would enter to say mass or hear confession. Sometimes they had servants and in

[22] The appendix of Rotha Mary Clay's book *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* 1914 (RMC) lists nearly 300 anchorites and maintains this must be a fraction of the actual number as records are limited and few physical remains of cells survive. From this one can surmise that between the 12th and early 16th centuries virtually every parish in England would at some time have had an anchorite living in some part of the village.
[23] RMC p 81
[24] Matthew Alexander *Tales of Old Surrey*1985
[25] Rotha Mary Clay *The Hermits and Anchorites of England 1914* p 94

some instances there would be more than one anchorite with two or three lodged together, perhaps in one room or in adjoining cells.

More commonly there would be one solitary anchorite and he or she would remain confined in the anchorhold, out of sight from everyone. The cell was invariably connected by a small opening with the church, usually into the chancel, so that the anchorite could watch and take part in church services and pray to the Blessed Sacrament. These are very often visible as blocked up windows on the north side of present-day chancels. On the external wall there would sometimes be a small 'parlour' or 'world-side' window through which the anchorite could receive food and communicate with the outside world, though remaining hidden by a shutter or curtain, often a black cloth bearing a symbolic white cross[26].

It is difficult to imagine today what sort of person would submit themselves to such a life. In her book *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* Rotha Mary Clay describes a typical female candidate for enclosure: "The would-be anchoress might be some maiden .. who desired to devote herself to religion in the village where she had been brought up .. she might be one who affects the solitary life [and is] usually attached to a church in order that they might derive spiritual advantages from it and at the same time confer spiritual benefits on the parish."[27]

We must remember that ordinary life at this time was extremely harsh by modern standards and, in a world where life was short, without proper sanitation, warmth or a regular income, the life of an anchorite, supported and fed by the church and the local community for life might not have seemed so bad. Wealthy people in turn were only too happy to provide for the anchorite, in exchange for prayers or chanting (hence the alternative description *Chantry*) for the souls of the dearly departed members of their family who they believed were suffering in Purgatory. The bishop was careful not to license anyone unless he was satisfied that provisions

[26] Ibid p 79
[27] RMC p 73

like this were secure and permanent[28]. Alms from the local community and passers-by could also be received and by the 15th century this had become a lucrative source of income for some anchorites, attracting the disapproval of many commentators of the day.

Usually however anchorites lived in extreme poverty sustained by simple vegetarian meals passed to them through the window. The 'Ancren Riwle' (a rule book for anchoresses written by a 13th century bishop) warned anchoresses not to grumble if these were inedible. They might ask for more palatable food but reluctantly and tactfully 'less men say this anchoress is dainty and she asks much'. There was no regulation dress but a kirtle (one piece garment) with black head-dress and a veil was usual and in winter a 'pilch' or thick garment might be worn to keep out the cold. The one stipulation was that the dress must be plain.

There is little detail about how normal bodily functions were accommodated. It is likely that a simple latrine would be dug into the floor and, although extreme ascetics gloried in squalor, the various rules for anchorites did not encourage personal neglect. One directs "wash yourself as often as you please" another quotes St Bernard "I have loved poverty, but I never loved filth"[29]. The keeping of animals was also considered carefully by the manuals. The *Ancren Riwle* states charmingly: "you shall not possess any beast, my sisters, except only a cat .. Christ knoweth it is an odious thing when people in the town complain of anchoresses' cattle".

The Anchorites were warned to watch their health. Self-flagellation and the wearing of hair shirts was expected, but wanton self-neglect was seen as counter-productive; getting the balance right was clearly not easy. The *Ancren Riwle* says "let not anyone handle herself too gently lest she deceive herself. She will not be able to keep herself pure .. without two things: the one is giving pain to the flesh by fasting, by watching, by flagellations, by wearing coarse garments, by a hard bed, with sickness and much labour; the other thing is the moral qualities of the heart, devotion, compassion,

[28] Ibid p 103
[29] RMC

mercy, pity, charity, humility .. yet many anchoresses are of such fleshly wisdom and afraid lest their head ache and their body be too much enfeebled, and are so careful of their health, that the spirit is weakened and sickeneth in sin".

The *Riwle* also warned anchoresses not to think that enclosure would get easier as the years passed. It warns of the later years, with temptations unabated, when she might think that after such a long period God had quite forgotten her: "An anchoress thinks she shall be most strongly tempted in the first twelve months…nay! it is not so. In the first years it is nothing but ball play".

One fault was considered to be that of sitting too long at the parlour window. "Love your windows as little as possible", cautions the *Riwle*, "and see that they be small". It warns of bad women who will come to the window whispering soft words and putting wicked thoughts into the anchoress's head so she cannot sleep[30]. Putting out a hand through the window, to heal the sick for example, was frowned upon.

On the subject of servants Aeldred advised: "First choose an honest ancient woman .. no jangler, no roller-about, no chider, no tale-teller but such one that may have good conversation and honesty. Her charge shall be to keep thine household .. to close thy doors and to receive that should be received and to avoid that should be avoided. Under her governance should she have a younger woman to bear greater charges in fetching of wood and water and setting of meat and drink". The *Ancren Riwle* stipulated that the older woman who went about the village should be plain and the younger one kept inside as much as possible. It was inevitable that gossip would be brought back to the anchorhold by these servants and recycled to passers-by at the parlour window. A common saying was 'from mill and from market, from smithy and from anchor house men bring tidings'.

At the end of his or her life the anchorite was often buried in the anchorhold. Six skeletons were found at Compton in Surrey beneath where the anchorhold would

[30] RMC p 122

have been.[31] Sometimes the grave would be made ready at enclosure and kept open as a *memento mori*, the anchorite bidden not just to meditate on their own mortality by staring into their empty grave but, with their bare hands, to scrape up some earth from the pit each day.[32]

An Anchoress being 'enclosed' by a Bishop

The most famous English anchoress was Julian of Norwich (1342-1412). She prayed for illness as a penance and got her desire at the age of 30. She nearly died in her mother's arms but survived and lived for at least another 40 years. Her writings, the *Revelations of Divine Love*, describe in detail the "shewings" she experienced during her grave illness, and are thought to be among the finest contributions to religious literature ever produced in England. She is best known for her optimism with such words as "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well", and for a kind of early feminism insisting, as she did, in calling God and Christ "Mother."

When the Reformation came in the 16th century the practice of paying religious people, through alms or otherwise, to pray for and on behalf of their benefactors, became discredited. Prayer and devotion to God began to be seen as the responsibility of every individual and not something that could be assigned to others, however religious or selfless they may be. Hermits and anchorites became anachronisms and numbers began to decline. When the monasteries were dissolved

[31] Matthew Alexander
[32] Ancren Riwle

anchorites disappeared from the scene altogether and the anchorholds were either pulled down or put to other uses, such as vestries, the thousands of priests and mystics employed therein made summarily redundant. In 1548 Edward VI passed the Chantries Act sounding the final death-knell for anchorholds and chantries, ordering their demolition and confiscating the funding used to provide for them. Even Edward's successor, the Catholic Queen Mary, could not undo this and within a generation or two the very idea of an anchorhold had been expunged from the cultural memory.

7

The Late Medieval Period and the Reformation

The 14th century was a period of prolific church building in England. Nearly every parish church has large sections dating from this period. In a way this is surprising because the century was an extremely turbulent one with crop failures and civil war, the beginning of the 100 Years War with the French and, most catastrophically, in 1348 the Black Death during which anything between a third and a half of the population died. But belief remained strong amid this chaos; it may have even become stronger as a result. There was certainly a greater emphasis on personal faith with many more religious writings available to teach and inspire the increasingly literate populace. For survivors of the plague the laws of supply and demand meant their wealth increased dramatically – particularly in East Anglia where the wool trade boomed - and, with many more souls to pray for and much thanks to be offered for deliverance, church building went on with a renewed vigour in the exciting new Perpendicular style.

The Wars of the Roses in the late 15th century and then the Reformation of the 16th reduced church building significantly, particularly following Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1531. The major sources of funding for the Church had been the paying for indulgencies and, as we have seen, chantries were all swept away at a stroke. There was a brisk trade in reusing bits of pulled down monastery to aggrandize local churches but most of the timber and stone was destined for the building of the new manor houses. A new political class was in power and money was diverted from the Church into the coffers of the monarchy and their courtiers. To compensate churches began charging their parishioners for space, and the newly invented pews were very handy in this respect, but it was not enough to sustain the kind of building programme seen in the previous centuries.

Instead construction work was limited mainly to the remodelling of interiors; firstly in taking down traces of 'Popery' and then putting them back as opinions swung

violently this way and that. Although wholesale destruction of religious imagery and the whitewashing of interiors did not really begin until the Puritan revolution of the 17th century, parishes still struggled to keep up with the endless pronouncements and about-turns on what was acceptable in terms of decoration and furnishings and what was not. Banned items were often removed by frightened parishioners and hidden before being brought back when a new order established itself, smashed glass was buried in pots, fragments of statues kept in attics and priest's holes. Rood screens were a prime target and nearly all were lost (although Elizabeth I encouraged the installation of less elaborate chancel screens instead). There was much debate about chancels and whether altars should run north-south or east-west or be taken away altogether and replaced by a simple table. Bishop Ridley's injunction of 1550 intoned:

> *Whereas in divers places some use the Lord's board after the form of a table, and some of an altar, whereby the dissension is perceived to arise among the unlearned; therefore, wishing a godly unity to be preserved in our diocese, and for that the form of a table may more move and turn the simple from the old superstitions of the Popish Mass, and to the right use of the Lords Supper, we exhort the curates, churchwardens and questmen here present, to erect and set up the Lord's board after the form of an honest table decently covered, in such place of the choir or chancel as shall be thought most meet by their discretion and agreement, so that the ministers with communicants may have their place separated from the rest of the people; and to take down and abolish all other by-altars or tables..*[33]

Soon after this edict was applied to the whole country with the exhortation to every Bishop to 'give substantial order that with all diligence all the altars in every church and chapel [are] to be taken down and instead of them a table to be set up .. to serve for the ministration of the blessed communion'[34]

[33] Tudor Constitutional Documents 1485-1603- J.R Tanner
[34] Ibid

In the early 17th century Archbishop Laud tried to return the church to what he saw as its Catholic roots, reversing some of the alterations of the 1500s.[35] The Parliamentarians executed him for his trouble in 1645 and the cycle of destruction began once again with the Puritans attempting to remove every vestige of decoration, knocking heads of statues and whitewashing everything in sight. In East Anglia the particularly efficient iconoclast William Dowsing was named "Commissioner for the destruction of monuments of idolatry and superstition" and authorized by Parliament to carry out their Ordinance of 1643 which stated that "all Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry should be removed and abolished". Churches had to pay Dowsing for the privilege of surveying their church and then returning with his assistants to smash them up and whitewash the walls. They did a very thorough job and, to a large extent, the church interiors we see in East Anglia today are a result of their efforts. Similar destruction took place all over the country until very few wall paintings were left visible. Happily, layers of limewash have in some instances served to protect the paintings concealed below, waiting to be revealed by expert conservators, but all too often replastering has removed all traces. Acres of stained glass were also destroyed in this process, but if you look carefully you can sometimes still see fragments of medieval glass in the hard to get-at places the Puritans missed, or an abstract assemblage rather forlornly put back by parishioners who manged to salvage a few splinters from the floor or churchyard, but it is pretty much all gone.[36]

Painting of church interiors did not stop completely with the Reformation, and a fashion for decorating walls with Biblical or religious scripts continued through the 16th and 17th centuries. This was the era of the spoken word, of Shakespeare and the

[35] Charles I's wife Henrietta Maria was a staunch Catholic. She was only allowed to be the King's Consort and not queen, nevertheless she commissioned Inigo Jones to build two 'Catholic' Chapels in her palaces at St James and Whitehall.

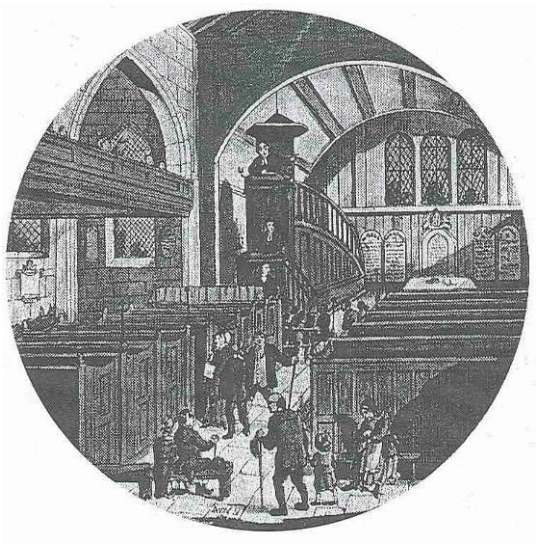
[36] William ('Basher') Dowsing is one of the better-known iconoclasts of the period- perhaps because he wrote all his exploits down in great detail. In Haverhill church we learn that he "broke down about a hundred superstitious Pictures; and seven Fryars hugging a Nunn; and the Picture of God and Christ; and divers others very superstitious; and 200 had been broke down before I came. We took away 2 popish Inscriptions with *Ora pro nobis* and we beat down a great stoneing Cross on the top of the Church"

King James Bible and the emphasis on words, combined with an absence of figurative imagery suited the post-Reformation English church quite well. Text decoration at first consisted of simple black lettering inside a painted framework which later developed into a style where the text itself became more elaborate and the frames more colourful and decorative. Because the script needed to be kept legible texts were frequently repainted and this resulted in a 'palimpsest' of layers, often of the same text but in developing styles. By the 19th century this style of painting became unfashionable in its turn and was often lime washed over, often to be replaced by what the Victorians believed to be the 'correct' medieval decoration illustrating the lives of the saints and bible stories.

The restored monarchy of the late 17th century did not attempt to reverse the iconoclastic process. Accusations of Popery were never far from Charles II's ears, even less so with James II who was eventually deposed for his Catholic sympathies, and taking on the Puritans was not something the established church particularly relished. In any case by this time there was very little left to salvage. But this was not enough to stem the tide of disillusionment caused by over a century of religious turmoil. Dissenters left the Church of England in increasing numbers, and not just from the church, many left the country altogether, shipping off to the New World on the other side of the Atlantic. This, and the steady drift to the growing towns, left country parish churches in steady decline. Church-building was largely confined to the cities, in the bold new Renaissance style pioneered by Inigo Jones in the early 17th century and taken up again by Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor in the great rebuilding of London following the fire of 1666. In the countryside there was little new church building and the external fabric of many medieval churches fell into a shocking state of disrepair.

In Catholic Europe the Reformation too had its consequences for church building. The counter-reformation was cleverly managed by the Jesuits who deflected some of the Lutheran criticism by encouraging new churches to be built without chancels, or at least with the smallest of recesses for the altar. This became known as the Baroque plan and was really a return to the Basilican model of the early Roman

church. In England the few new churches that were built went further. From the late 16th century onwards many church builders abolished chancels and transepts altogether and the old medieval chancels, now barely used, became sepulchral. Even before the Reformation Chancels were becoming more integrated with the Nave and something called a hall church was the result of this where the overriding feel was of one big space. Landwade church in Cambridgeshire, built in the late 15th century and unaltered since, is a good example of this. During the 17th and 18th centuries grand family monuments were erected to adorn the interiors but, in the countryside at least, the expenditure of local aristocrats on marble tombs for themselves did not extend to new church building, except perhaps where a landowner needed an inconveniently-sited church relocated to improve his view.



The Auditory Church

The emphasis inside churches was now on the spoken word and re-orderings were carried out to maximise the view of the pulpit, regarded as the centre of worship. Parishioners were not always enthusiastic about the idea of the so-called 'Auditory Church' and installed high-sided 'box' pews where they could hide from the lengthy sermons delivered from higher and higher pulpits.

17th century pulpit, readers desk and box pews at Little Hadham in Hertfordshire

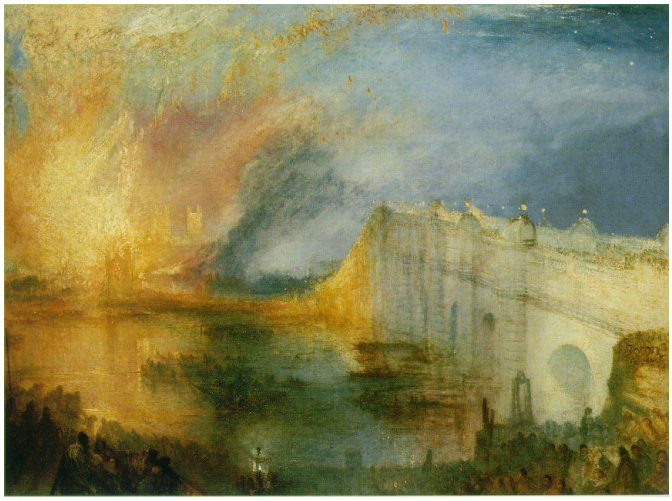
Another fascinating development in the 18th century was that of the 'West Gallery'. Music had been suppressed during Cromwell's time, and before that singing had been largely plainsong and the preserve of the clergy, but the Georgian period saw a great flowering of vocal music for ordinary people and the development of close-harmony singing. Churches everywhere put up galleries to create space for the new choirs as all the pews were rented out. Traces of these galleries can often be seen today in the slots and holes in the stonework where their supports once rested. And they weren't just there to accommodate choirs and musicians. At Litlington church in South Cambridgeshire (not a large building) the gallery put up in 1816 was said to accommodate 500 people. As with west galleries everywhere it was not to last very long.

The Village Choir by Thomas Webster

8

The Victorians

The wholesale demolition of west galleries was just one by product of a huge shift in philosophical and liturgical thought that occurred in the mid-19th century. In October 1834 the Houses of Parliament at Westminster burned down in a spectacular fire, caused by the overheating of a stove in the House of Lords used to burn the voting, or 'tally', sticks. The Houses of Parliament were a sprawling mass of medieval buildings altered, extended and refaced in a hotchpotch fashion over the centuries, especially in the late 18th century by the architect James Wyatt. The destruction was seen by many thinkers and artists of the day as a symbol of potential renewal, a ritual purification by fire. This was the true beginning of the Victorian era, even though it was three years before Victoria was crowned. The young generation, like many young people before them an dsince, thought that their parents and grandparents, the Georgians, had made a complete mess of things and they hankered for a new beginning. Some could already see the perils of rapid industrialisation and the divisions that were opening up between rich and poor, but they were especially concerned about the state of the nation's soul, its church buildings and what went on inside them.



The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons, 16th October 1834 by JMW Turner 1835

What was seen as a lack of moral purpose in the *laissez faire* Georgian times had sent the state religion into steady decline and the fabric of its medieval building stock had fallen into a shocking state of disrepair. The clergy were seen as complacent at best, corrupt at worst. They were viewed as career men interested only in their so called 'living', the income derived from the parish, which could be quite substantial. They also worried that parishioners attended church only to maintain their social status. A change was needed, they declared and, whereas in the 1960s young people might have sought remedy through rock music, drugs and a permissive society, what the young Victorians prized was something quite the opposite; something they called *Reality.* It became a buzz word which didn't really mean anything in itself, it stood for an idea. In Rosemary Hill's excellent book 'God's Architect' she describes this 'Reality' as 'standing for integrity, for solidity, for high seriousness, for everything the Georgians seemed to their children to have lacked…in religion, in architecture and in life'.

The painter JMW Turner watched the seat of government burn in 1834 and made it the subject of one of his great paintings. Another man watching the conflagration was the subject of Hill's book, a young architect and furniture designer named Augustus Welby Pugin. He said of the spectacle: "There is nothing much to regret and a great deal to rejoice in". Yet another in the same crowd was Charles Barry, already an established architect and 17 years Pugin's senior. He exclaimed "what a chance for an architect!" And of course it was. When a competition was announced for the design of the new parliament buildings Pugin and Barry joined forces and won.

Like many of the eminent young Victorians who were to change history during this momentous period Pugin seemed to have limitless energy. In his 40 short years he accomplished what most people would need two or three lifetimes to achieve. He was a superb draughtsman, architect, furniture designer, thinker, writer, and activist. While he was busy with the drawings for the new parliament in 1836 he published a short illustrated book called *Contrasts.* Its full title was *A parallel between the noble*

edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and similar buildings of the present day shewing the present decay of taste accompanied by appropriate text.

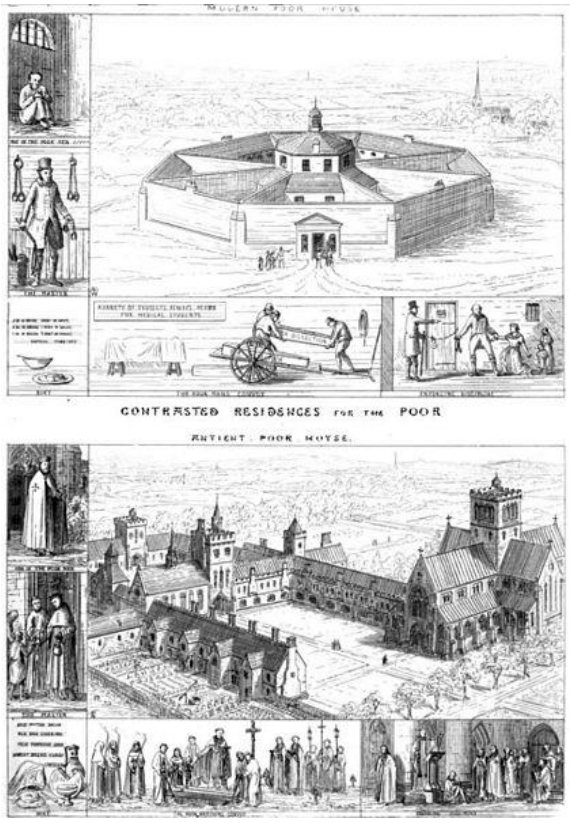


Illustration from Contrasts by ANW Pugin
(The classical world above, medieval below)

It set up a series of powerful arguments for the medieval way of life, contrasting it with the rational, classical world of the Enlightenment and showing that architecture must go hand in hand with a new order through the creation of a new revitalised gothic style. This did not come out of nowhere of course. As is often the case the ideas emerged out of literature and painting; from the works of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Scott and painters like Caspar Friedrich and JMW Turner, a body of work loosely termed the Romantic Movement.

Barry, some would say, went on to claim rather more of his share of the credit for the new parliament building, but Pugin certainly designed most of the interiors and furnishings and may well have had a significant influence on the exterior. More importantly it was his work in *Contrasts* that laid the theoretical foundation for the

design because the style they adopted was 'Gothic'. This was something new and revolutionary yet stolen directly from the past, a dazzling cultural leap 'Back to the Future'. Its palette was drawn from the pointed windows, spires, battlements and flying buttresses of medieval churches, castles and cathedrals and would sweep aside the classical porticos and pediments of Georgian and Regency England.

Gothic seemed to embody the new spiritualistic view of the world and it was rooted, people thought, in a style that was truly English and truly 'Christian'; never mind that the Gothic style actually originated in France. And never mind that original Christian architecture was in fact classical, as Roman converts adapted their temples and houses to the new religion. Logic did not really have a place in this - that was for the Rationalists - it was simply a welling up of feeling and emotion based on what many saw as a deep moral crisis gripping the country. In fact *feeling* was prized far more highly than knowledge by the Romantics. Another young Victorian, the brilliant Cambridge scholar John Mason Neale, announced: 'we have remarkable proofs that feeling without knowledge will do more than knowledge without feeling'. In these very different times to today religious issues mattered a great deal to many people and ordinary village folk even took to the streets and rioted about such things as the use of candles on altars and the wearing of vestments.[37]

In 1839 Neale and a few other Cambridge undergraduates got together and formed the Cambridge Camden Society, initially called the Ecclesiological Society. They began by just studying medieval church architecture and religious practice, and there were jolly trips out to look at parish churches around Cambridge, but it quickly became much more than an antiquarian society; it became a campaigning organisation. Within three years the society counted 16 bishops and 31 peers and MPs among its membership, not bad for an undergraduate society. With Pugin urging them on it began a vociferous, and sometimes quite vicious, campaign to re-medievalise the architectural style of England, in particular the architecture of its churches.

[37] The so-called Parish Riots

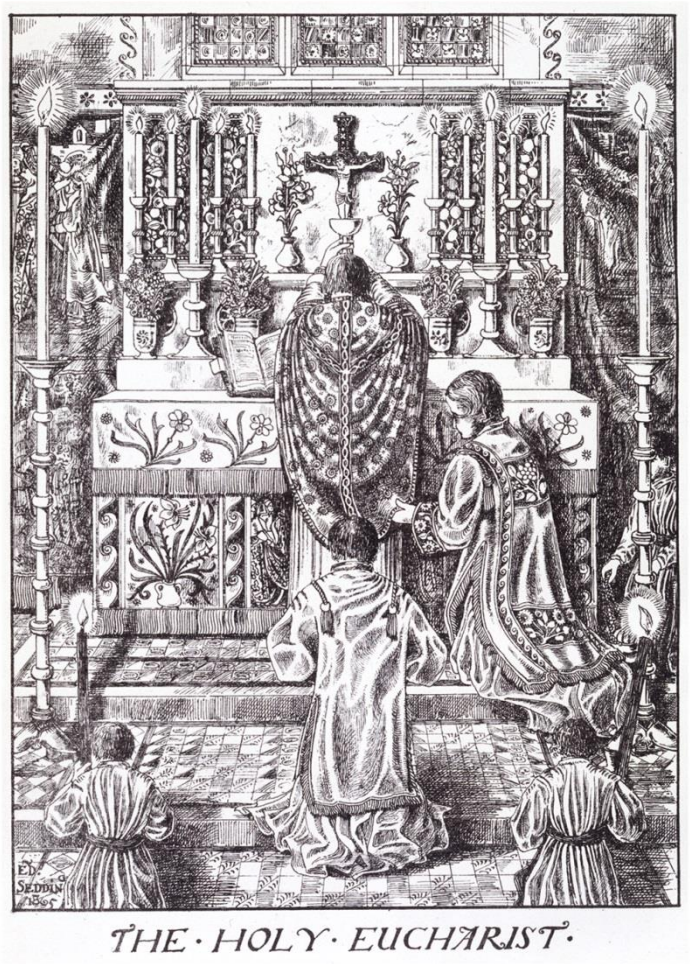
With the Cambridge Camden Society constantly nipping at the heels of parochial church councils and church architects all over the country medieval gothic became the chosen style for the massive rebuilding and repair of the nation's churches which were restored, sometimes quite brutally, in what was seen as the 'correct' style. This could be very specific too- the only appropriate style as far as Pugin was concerned was the 'Decorated' period of 14th century England, although for a while the equally influential critic John Ruskin favoured only the gothic of 15th century Venice. Architects faced the most extreme castigation if they strayed outside whatever was the favoured period of the day and could not hope to win a competition for a new building, the way most commissions and reputations were won.

In fact much of what is seen today inside and outside churches is a recreation of what these enthusiasts thought a church *ought* to look like. Occasionally churches were thought to be 'beyond repair' and were completely rebuilt. Chancel floors were raised once again (hence the ubiquitous presence of Victorian so called 'encaustic' tiling in these areas) and render removed externally to expose the 'honest' stonework. The hated galleries were torn down and the parish choirs and accompanying musicians disbanded, replaced by brand new machine-pumped organs and surpliced choirs[38].

[38] Thomas Hardy in his novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* recounts the ousting of the Mellstock 'quire', or church band, in favour of an organist.

Workers proudly bearing sledgehammers stand outside Therfield Church in Hertfordshire, a medieval church that was razed to the ground and rebuilt in gothic style in 1875

The destruction of so much authentic medieval architecture in this fashion appalled many and led to the formation of the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded by William Morris in 1877, heralding the beginning of the conservation movement. Nevertheless, it must be said that the Victorian work did sometimes recue buildings that were indeed in a parlous state, and also resulted in huge improvements, including much-welcomed heating installations.



An idealised view of an Anglo-Catholic service,
drawn by Edmund Sedding, a leading Goth in1865

Another thing the 'Victorians Did for Us' was sorting out our cemeteries. By the mid-1800s the condition of Britain's cemeteries was appalling. There were no municipal cemeteries or cremations and every dead body had to be buried in a churchyard. If you estimate that the average village population is 400 and the average life expectancy is 40 then about 10 people will die in that community every year. From Saxon to Victorian times that would amount to 10,000 dead bodies in any average churchyard. This is why the ground is almost always much higher around the church and the surrounding land. The bodies turn to dust eventually but the disturbed ground takes up much more volume than the natural subsoil. There was no regulation on how bodies should be buried or at what depth, with the result that graveyards could sometimes be scattered with body parts dug up by animals or

grave-robbers. As fears about cholera grew, and the belief that infection spread through smell, miasmas as they were called, many people began to see the situation as desperate, especially in the rapidly growing towns. Committees and pressure groups were formed and funds raised. Soon public cemeteries replaced churchyards as the main resting places for the deceased and within a generation or two cemeteries, and their church counterparts, became those places for quiet contemplation and a pleasant stroll that we know today.

And, while we may think that unregulated burials, without ceremony or memorial, stopped a century or more ago, an experience at a Hertfordshire church challenges this assumption. Excavations for a new extension brought more than one local resident out to enquire of the supervising archaeologists about the whereabouts of infant burials that must have taken place in the 1950s or 60s. One said their father went by night into the churchyard there to bury two of his stillborn siblings in nothing more elaborate than shoeboxes, as the family was too poor to afford burial fees; another approached to ask if the team had found any infant bones, as his first child had been stillborn and had been buried quietly by the verger, who had never mentioned the precise location. Understandably these exchanges were intensely affecting for the archaeologists and the troubled locals alike.

9

Epilogue

Today's towns and villages have inherited church buildings with thick solid walls, floors that are cold and damp and layouts based on a way of worship that would now be totally unrecognisable, even in Roman Catholic churches. Those responsible for their upkeep are faced not only with the huge task of maintaining and repairing these magnificent but unwieldy buildings, but also the need to adapt them for today's world with the provision of modern comforts such as lavatories, kitchens, meeting rooms, offices and effective heating. They are expected to address modern-day concerns such the control of energy use, and providing easy access for all, including bats.[39] Up to recent times this would not have presented a problem, walls would have been torn down or built up and new windows punched in where they were needed. This is not an option open to us today where the past is treasured and revered as never before. Diocesan and Planning Authorities, English Heritage and multifarious interest groups: English Nature, the Victorian Society, the Council for the Care of Churches and so on; must all be consulted and placated. Existing fabric must be examined minutely for what is called 'significance' and any traces of archaeology must be respected. This all right and proper naturally, but enormously time-consuming, challenging and expensive for the would-be church-alterer; especially in a world where the local landowners or philanthropists' first port of call for their charitable donations is no longer the local church.

To add to the problem we are now self-consciously aware of what does and what does not constitute 'appropriate' architecture without actually having any definitive answers because essentially it is an unanswerable question and always has been. Ironically it was Pugin and the young Victorians ideas of Reality, Integrity, Solidity, and High Seriousness that led to a belief that buildings should in some way be *honest*, that they must represent something in themselves and their own physicality

[39] There are reports of vicars taking shotguns to these precious mammals not very long ago—a procedure that, used internally must have created a fair amount of collateral damage, and is now frowned upon

and embody the spirit of the age in which they were built rather than an abstract idea. This in turn also led to the Modern Movement, form following function, flat roofs and Le Corbusier and, and like it or not, it is a theory that still underpins architectural thinking today. But what IS *honesty*? Do we match what is there? What do we mean by *'there'* anyway'? A piece of 14th century wall, or something built in the 1880s made to look like what they thought was 14th century? Do we keep everything *'as it is'* or do we express ourselves in the spirit of our own age using modern materials? With all this philosophical and historical baggage how do we adapt and extend our church buildings in the early 21st century, even if the money can be found to do the work?

Despite these difficulties there have probably been more re-orderings and extensions to churches in the last thirty years or so than in all the years since the great church building boom of the 19th century. And, despite all the hurdles, churches have adapted to far more difficult threats in the past, some of them life, even soul, threatening. Chancel floors were lowered and raised up again, altars demolished and rebuilt, pulpits removed and reinstated, rood screens torn down, and statues defaced and decapitated while people were imprisoned, tortured, and executed over such things.

What is the building of a new lavatory, or the installation of some photo voltaic panels compared to all this? The difference is that now buildings are seen as archaeology, they are vessels embodying and carrying historic *significance,* which tells us about our past and current lives, and our society. This short book is an example of just such navel-gazing of course. Why we have become like this is something a philosopher can probably explain. Could it be the cataclysm of industrialisation followed by death on an industrial scale in two world wars that made us so precious about what we now call 'heritage'? William Morris began the debate on conservation, but it was the machine gun and then the atom bomb that changed our view so completely.

And in the early 21st century the debate continues: should an extension or alteration be a seamless part of the building, or a distinct and obvious annexe? What style and what materials are appropriate? Is the work reversible so it can all be swept away by future generations as if it never existed, and if so, how can it still convey a sense of permanence? Do we provide facilities that have not been necessary for centuries and may be only a passing whim? Church committees and architects alike may despair sometimes at the seemingly endless machinations that this process requires but we can think ourselves fortunate that these days at least no one has to die for such a cause.

Jeremy Lander
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