



SPECIAL FEATURE

MYSTERY & HISTORY

CLIVE FEWINS IS ONE OF AN ESTIMATED 30 MILLION PEOPLE WHO HAVE TAKEN UP THE PASTIME OF CHURCH EXPLORING. HAVING RECENTLY WRITTEN A BOOK ON THE SUBJECT CLIVE PROVIDES AN INSIGHT INTO WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM THE 10,000 MEDIEVAL CHURCHES ACROSS THE NATION

WHEN YOU ARE NEXT ON your travels round England or Wales why not take in a church or two? It's a simple process: just try the door, and if it is open, go in and see what you find.

If it should be closed, don't just turn round. Stay awhile and contemplate the outside.

Look up and you may well see the lines on the tower where the original high pitched roof was lowered and high level (clerestory) glazing added in the prosperous times of the fifteenth century. At ground level, if it is a stone church, you may be able to discern, from a closer look, the points at which the church was added to or extended in times past. If, after this initial inspection of the outside, you like the look of the church, come back at a later date. Or if you have time, try to contact the keyholder. Hopefully there will be details of him or her on the church noticeboard.

If you think this a trifle unusual, just dwell on this fact. According to the Open Churches Trust (a body founded 13 years ago by the composer Lord Andrew Lloyd

Webber aimed at keeping the maximum number of our parish churches open to visitors), approximately 30 million people a year visit churches and cathedrals in this country. Many of the larger parish churches are manned by stewards and have bookstalls. And far more than half the parish churches in this country - or so I find, having been a keen 'church crawler' for 40 years - have explanatory guidebooks. There is even an organisation that exists to further the cause - The Churches Tourism Association.

Then there is the 'peace' factor. Even if you are not a Christian - or, like many, have no faith - a church is still a place of retreat where people can go to 'escape' for a few minutes; not only in times of crisis but whenever they should feel the need. Churches have, after all, been set aside by previous generations not only as houses of prayer, but as places where one can retire to in order to think, to contemplate, or to work out an important decision.

And they have atmosphere; huge quantities of it. They are, after all, buildings that were deliberately built to inspire people and to stir their senses. Hundreds of years later it is still possible to walk into a fine old parish church and feel a sense of awe. Even hardened agnostics sometimes admit to walking into a church and feeling the 'vibes' that are emitted.



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Church exploring, in other words, is a fast-growing pastime: not just among the retired but also the younger population, and also those who travel round this country working and use our network of secondary roads a great deal.

So why is this form of churchgoing on the rise so much, when in the average country church on a cold winter Sunday, there are usually so many spare seats that if the church mice were to all bound out from their holes, they would probably outnumber the congregation by several dozen to one?

Well, the fact is that even if people do seem less interested in organised religion nowadays they are realising, in large numbers, that if you want to learn about a place, you should make the parish church your

In addition to all this, churches are often full of objects of interest. Collectively the stone carving, woodwork, statuary, stained glass, wall paintings, brasses and bells in our parish churches form probably the greatest collection of vernacular art to be seen in its original setting, anywhere in Europe.

Take, for example, All Saints parish church at Faringdon, not far from where I live in Oxfordshire. Inside is a fine set of monuments to Elizabethan grandees, with rich classical forms, shellheads, slender columns and fine figuring. The memorials to the same families 200 years later, in the style of the 18th century, are even more self-congratulatory.

In other churches you will find monuments of a different kind. At the delightful thatched church at Bramfield in Suffolk a simple floor inscription, rather crudely carved, tells us that Bridgett Applewhaite, who died in 1737 "after the fatigues of a married life... borne by her with incredible patience..." decided four years later "to run the risk of a second marriage bed" only to die ("death forbad the banns") suddenly when she fell to the ground "in terrible convulsions, plaintive groans...without loss of her speech or senses"!

In the churchyard at Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire you will find a stone marking the grave of Hannah



Twynnoy, a servantmaid at a local inn, who met her end when she ventured too close to the tigers' cage when a circus visited the town in 1703.

And in the churchyard at Fairford, Gloucestershire, just outside the main south door, is a monument to Tiddles the church cat, who died aged 17 in 1980. Inside, a postcard is on sale commemorating him. Also inside this church you might happen to admire the most complete set of medieval glass in a church in Western Europe. Much of this glass tells us about the dress, aspirations and modus vivendi of our fifteenth century forbears.

Other elements of church interiors tell us of darker days in our national history.

Throughout the sixteenth century - the age of Henry VIII and the reformation - religious ferment was rife, and congregations were often forced to change their allegiances between Catholic and Protestant styles of worship several times, and at short notice. You can see the results of this in many an incomplete set of church windows, empty niches where once statues to saints stood, wooden screens that have been damaged, and fonts, where the images of saints have been hacked away at the sides.

One of the best evidences of this are the mysterious sets of steps, positioned high in the interior wall near the

chancel arch, which you see in many ancient churches. They are the steps to the former rood loft. A rood loft was a gallery that filled the space above the screen, and in late medieval times virtually every church would have one. The gallery was used by both clergy and assistants on special ceremonial occasions and large parts of services were conducted from it. It was also used by singers and musicians.

You will still find ancient wooden screens in many churches, but complete rood lofts are a rarity because they were ordered to be taken down during the Reformation in 1548. In a handful of churches you can still walk aloft on the rood loft.

A hundred years later Cromwell's men caused further great damage to parish churches. In 1643 Parliament authorised a massive onslaught on 'superstitious images and inscriptions in churches throughout the land.' It was the stained glass in particular that faced the onslaught this time, especially during the Civil War of 1642-9. If you visit the magnificent church of Holy Trinity, Blythburgh, Suffolk and gaze upwards at the huge timber roof, you will see that some of the angels have apparently pockmarked faces and the odd hole in their wings. The reason for this is that Cromwellian soldiers, billeted in the church during the Civil War, used the angels for target practice.

The church lies on a mound above the marshes that surround the slow-flowing river Blyth, just a couple of long miles from the sea. With its sturdy square tower and massed ranks of tall 'clerestory' windows, it looks like a great galleon about to sail out to sea. Its huge size reflects the economic importance of Blythburgh, when the





river was navigable, and it was a thriving port. Blythburgh is one of many hundreds of churches worth visiting for their magnificent situations alone. Other memorable ones include Brentor in Devon, Breedon on the Hill in Leicestershire, Bridgnorth in Shropshire, Cley in Suffolk, Culbone in Somerset, Edelsborough in Buckinghamshire, Knowlton in Dorset, which lies in the centre of a prehistoric earthwork, and Hoarwithy, in the Wye valley near Hereford.

One of the very finest is the church of St Mary, Whitby, North Yorkshire. It is not only situated in a magnificent headland position, but inside it is an eccentric affair that represents the best in Anglican whimsicality. It is packed with tall 'box' pews, and surrounded by galleries. It still retains its eighteenth century three-decker pulpit, complete with an ear trumpet, the relic of a nineteenth century vicar's deaf wife. Each generation seems to have added another gallery pew or extension, so the building appears bursting at the seams.



You will find many interiors similar to this if you try hard enough. Some are in small out-of-the way churches that were not altered by the Victorians. Some of the best of these have been preserved by the Churches Conservation Trust, a government-funded body that cares for 335 churches of outstanding historic, architectural or archaeological importance, that are no longer needed for regular worship. They are usually open and, when they are not, details of how to obtain the key are clearly displayed.

The Trust cares for churches of all ages and styles. Visiting them forms an excellent start for anyone wishing to become a church explorer.

Added to this are thousands of other church oddities, such as the money climbing up the 156 ft spire at St Mary's, Witney, Oxfordshire, or the columbarium - the priest's dovecote - above the chancel at the unspoilt 12th century church at Elkstone near Cheltenham. Or how about the collection of grotesque carvings round the doorway and beneath the eaves at the wonderful little Norman church at Kilpeck near Hereford, that have been there for nearly 900 years, that scholars are still trying to unravel?

There are also questions for the lesser scholars - that



is, most of us that love old churches. For example, Norfolk and Suffolk are between them home to around 1,150 medieval churches - well over 10 per cent of all the medieval churches in England. Norfolk alone, with 659 complete examples, has the highest concentration of medieval churches in the world. Why are so many still standing?

This is a question to get the keen church explorers going for a week or two. Visiting them all will take a lot longer than that!

Most - but not all - of the great East Anglian churches are in quite small villages. However we should not forget the amazing number of traditional English market towns with magnificent churches. Then there are the Victorian churches in the great industrial towns and thousands of magnificent Victorian churches that are being rediscovered and reinterpreted.

And finally to the capital where, in the City of London alone, Sir Christopher Wren rebuilt 51 in an assortment of styles after the Great Fire of London in 1666. A handful are ruined as a result of enemy action in World War II, but many are open to visitors daily.

Wherever you live there are parish churches of note to explore. However, it is also fun to view churches in parts of the country you know less well. Church exploring encompasses the best bits of many other hobbies. It gets you out and about, it involves a certain amount of exercise; it stimulates the mind, and it encourages you to visit towns and villages where you would probably not normally go.

Someone once calculated that if you were able to start church exploring soon after birth and see 100 fresh churches every year, then if you live to be 100 you might just about manage to see them all! It is quite hard to get to grips with the fact that there are some 16,000 parish churches to be explored in England and Wales. The 10,000 or so medieval churches amongst them are all treasure houses in one way or another.

They tell us about our history, our way of life, our culture - in fact why we are like we are in this country, and every one is different. As that great church crawler the late Sir John Betjeman said in one of his poems:

*"Our churches are our history shown
in wood and glass and iron and stone"*



Clive Fewins is the author of **The Church Explorer's Handbook**, published in 2005 by The Open Churches Trust in Association with Canterbury Press.

He is also the author of **Be a Church Detective, a Young Person's Guide to Old Churches** (also published by Canterbury Press).

The **Open Churches Trust** can be contacted via The Really Useful Group on 020 7240 0880, or visit www.openchurchestrust.org.uk.

The **Churches Conservation Trust** is on 020 7213 0678, or email central@tcct.org.uk or visit www.visitchurches.org.uk.

A leaflet: **"Welcome to over 330 Historic Churches"** is available free from the Trust

The **Churches Tourism Association** can be contacted via the secretary, Colin Shearer, at the Churches Conservation Trust, or email c.shearer@tcct.org.uk

All pictures courtesy of The Churches Conservation Trust