

Churches in their proper place

CLIVE FEWINS

The next time you look at an old country church, ask yourself the question: "Why is it here, in this position, and not somewhere else?"

It is a question that many people who enjoy exploring old churches avoid. They are generally happy to accept that some ancient churches lie in the heart of settlements, where they have always been, while some lie on their own because of changing patterns of settlement in the past.

However, some church-building enthusiasts, like keen church explorer and ecclesiologist John Spargo, like to go a little further into these matters.

It is often very hard working out which came first, the church or the settlement. But John, who would usually put his money on the former, believes that many ancient churches were built very precisely to fit in with the celebrations of the saints' days to which they were to be dedicated.

Saints of many different kinds have been in and out of fashion throughout the ages. However, many people forget that before the Norman Conquest there were many ancient saints, dating

from as early as the fifth century, a lot of them Christianised versions of old pagan deities. Probably the best-known example of this was St Brigid, an ancient Irish goddess, who seems to have been merged with the personality of St Brigid of Kildare (c453-523).

John's theory goes that the early Christians were keen to position their churches in the best place to benefit from the powers to be derived from the spiritual influence of that saint, and also very often in places where people had worshipped before. These are places that today we would call 'sacred sites'.

In addition to this, he has come up with the theory that most medieval churches were deliberately orientated by their builders, using quite precise methods of calculation, to line up with sunrise on the day when they celebrated the festival of the saint to which the church was dedicated.

As if this is not far-fetched enough, he had come up with another theory: that, in some parts of the country, churches were deliberately built so as to line up with one another.



On his wanderings round ancient churches, John Spargo has also amassed information on strange little circular or semi-circular markings known as scratch (or mass) dials often found carved into the stones on the south side of ancient churches. Their purpose was to act as service markers, to help the priest measure the intervals between the sequence of services that made up the canonical 'hours'. He is seen here with an example on the church of St Bartholomew at Aldsworth in Gloucestershire.

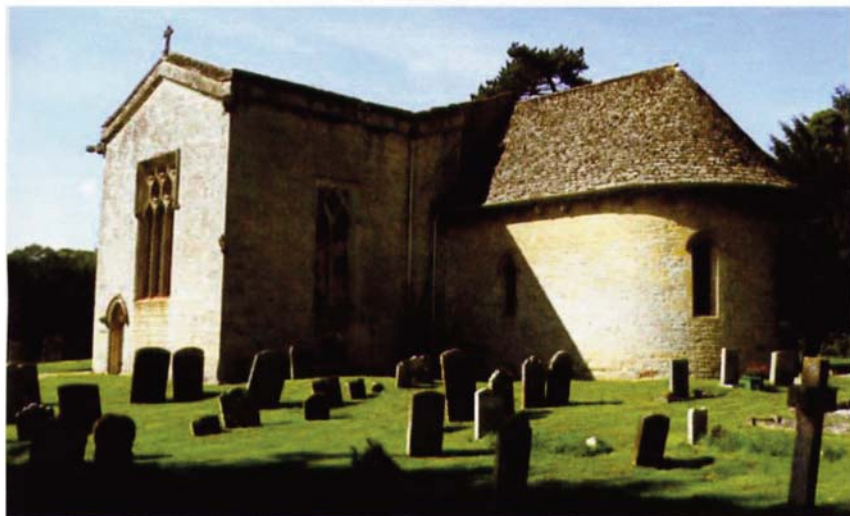
"I am certain the towers in these early stone churches had several purposes," he says. "They were undoubtedly lookout posts but I believe they were built both to see and because the builders wished them to be seen.

"There was an element of one-upmanship here amongst the church builders, many of whom, I believe, wished the buildings they had created to be visible from the new stone church in the next parish."

However, this is a very far cry from why or how builders should try to

ensure, when building a new stone church, that it somehow lay in a line 'connecting' it with churches that had already been established. He admits that he has tried to find groups of churches on exact lines in several parts of the country and failed.

However, he has identified one that passes very near the village where he lives, near Aylesbury. It starts at Kidlington in Oxfordshire and goes through the sites of seven ancient churches (one, Hogshaw, no longer exists) to Maiden Bower, an Iron Age



Kiddington Church is the first of a line of seven ancient churches, argues John Spargo.

fort and sacred site at Houghton Regis in Bedfordshire.

It is an extremely accurate line — to within a few seconds of a degree — and John is still at a loss to explain it.

“In different parts of the country I have found two or three churches that appear to line up, but absolutely nothing else like this,” he says. “I am convinced that it could not be accidental.

“I am also pretty sure that something of interest lies underneath all those churches. Perhaps they were the sites of a beacon or a signalling place? However, some of them are not on high ground at all. So again the mystery persists.

“I have no explanation of why this line of churches should exist. I am happy to accept that there were strong links between different churches, but I

think much of the explanation for this is lost in the mists of time and we may never arrive at the exact reasons.”

In the field of church orientation, John is far more certain that his theories have a lot of substance. Over the years many church-building enthusiasts have concluded that the early builders were well acquainted with the techniques of orientation. John has tried to clarify all this in a booklet, *Church Orientation Explained*.

The theory is that the Sun was as important to the early church-builders as it had been to their pagan forebears. Early church-builders had the technology of the solar wheel, based on the astrolabe, a primitive astronomical computer used for solving problems relating to time and the position of the Sun and stars in the sky.

They also had their calendars of saints' days. These were not precise written-down calendars, but a body of knowledge of where the Sun was in relation to the horizon on a particular day they wished to celebrate for some purpose or to venerate in relation to a particular saint.

Therefore, when they wished to dedicate a church to a particular saint they would position a man on the horizon at the precise point where the Sun rose and a man with a pole at the site where they wished to build the stone church. This way they would ensure that the altar was facing precisely the right direction to catch the sunrise on the day devoted to the saint to which the church was to be dedicated. Only then would they start work on the building.

What is the use of all this knowledge, assuming John's theories are correct?

Simple, according to John: it helps keen church explorers like him to learn more about a church's early history. The building's orientation will help tell you the date it was built, or rebuilt because of a factor known as 'Julian Slippage'. The Julian calendar was a legacy of the Roman occupation of Britain. It sought to reconcile observed celestial events with specific dates so as to regularise and 'fix' special days in the calendar.

The problem was that the Julian calendar did not accurately mirror the solar year: in fact it resulted in a progressive 'slippage' — a deviation from

the correct astronomical date — at the rate of about one day every 130 years. This meant that progressively the date given by the Julian calendar moved further away from the astronomical date, and by the time the alignment was finally restored in England with the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1752, the slippage had grown to eleven days.

By relying on the Julian calendar to plot a particular saint's day sunrise, masons unwittingly 'captured' the error caused by the slippage: the later the period, the greater the error.

However, the margin of error gives church-building enthusiasts valuable information: it can ascertain when the church — or at least the section (nearly always the chancel) that 'deviates' — was built. It is a technique known as 'dating by deviation'.

"Some aspects of all this can sound a bit new-agey at times," explains John. "But if you go back to what we know about many prehistoric sites, there is a firm body of knowledge nowadays about how many of them — Stonehenge is the best example — were solar calendars in their own right. If people were doing this in 500BC, why should the same not happen in the early centuries, when so many of these old churches had their beginnings?" ■

Church Orientation Explained
is available from John Spargo at
41 the Green, Quainton,
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price £3.50 including p&p.