

Introduction

Another book on Norfolk churches? Yes. But this is a revised edition of the first one which, we believe, combined a straightforward guide to every 'living' medieval church in the county, with a substantial reference back-up in encyclopaedic form to a host of questions and queries which may tease the church visitor. All technical terms are pinpointed in the main body of the text by being printed *in italics*, indicating that they will be found in the Glossary and Appendices.

This book, moreover, is not written by specialists, but by enthusiasts, whose declared object is to share, as widely as possible, their own lively pleasure and fascination with the subject in hand. To us the real appeal is that once you have broken the code and learned the language, then every church is different; every single one, be it ever so humble, has something of its own to offer.

The essentials of a good building, wrote Sir Henry Wotton, early in the seventeenth century, are 'commoditie, firmness, and delight'. Lovely! But what he did not mention were the delights to be found inside these commodious buildings – spelled out, in our churches, in centuries of additions and oddities, glories and disasters, eccentricities and ornamentations, which can turn a simple visit into a voyage of discovery.

At random: Why does that painted saint hold a *scallop shell*? – or that one have a couple of deer skipping round her feet? (See *St James the Great* and *St Withburga*, one of Norfolk's own saints.) South Walsham's medieval *screen* reminds us that there was serfdom and slavery hereabouts. At Great Snoring, a 1710 memorial records the death of three brothers who all 'fell to the same shaft from the quiver, namely smallpox', bringing

home the epidemic horrors of that time. And who occupied the three seats in the the *three-decker pulpit* at Warham St Mary, or the *sedilia* beside innumerable Norfolk altars? On a grand tomb effigy at Ashwellthorpe, a nobleman has a *Collar of S's* around the neck – an introduction to an ancient world of rank and favour. In Norwich, the church of St Giles has a curious iron basket in the s. aisle – so what was that for? And so the questions go on – and we have tried to answer as many of them as we can.

But a church is not just a building, constructed to specific architectural patterns, interesting though they often are. It is, much more importantly, an enduring witness to faith, a mirror of the community it has served for centuries, and a microcosm of the history of England itself. In a moving, indefinable way, it is a living thing, an ageless symbol of continuity, the links of its chain formed through the years by the countless good souls who have worshipped there, loved the place and have, at last, been buried in and around it. Sister Hilary Markey once said of a country church: 'The very stones can speak, causing hearts to open in this holy place, where prayer and worship ceaselessly offered for centuries are part of the fabric'.

If, by chance you walk into a church that is neglected, damp, dismal, unloved, the sadness you feel is much more than regret at seeing the beautiful work of men's hands being neglected. Rather, the sadness is contained within the stones themselves, as though the very place mourns its desertion. In Norfolk there are a number like that. But there would be many more if it were not for the splendid work of the Norfolk Churches

Trust who keep many churches open, for worship and for visitors, which would otherwise have closed their doors forever. Added to that, the tremendous work being doing by the *Churches Conservation Trust* across the country have saved over a score of Norfolk churches and guarantees their presence for future generations to use and enjoy.

Not that problems of upkeep are a modern phenomenon. In 1562 *The Second Book of Homilies* talks of ‘. . . sin and shame to see so many churches so ruinous and so foully decayed in almost every corner . . . suffer them not to be defiled with rain and weather, with dung of doves, owls, choughs . . . and other filthiness.’

It our good fortune that so many of our heritage still remains to us. Especially so in Norfolk, with its rich profusion of well over 600 medieval churches individually detailed in this book. Our policy has been to include only medieval churches (plus some later buildings of merit and interest, and the number of these has been significantly enlarged in this edition) which are ‘in use’, including buildings used only occasionally.

Almost all church towers contain bells, but unfortunately quite a number of them cannot be rung for a variety of reasons. For those that are in use, brief details are appended to the entries, giving the weight of the tenor and an indication of the quality of the best.

A final point. That so many churches are kept locked today is an unhappy reflection on our society and its rising numbers of thieves and vandals. We have visited every church listed and the matter of obtaining keys was sometimes a challenge. Leafing through an 1846 copy of *Sketches for an Ecclesiology of the Deaneries of Sparham, Taverham and Ingworth*, one realises that this is another age-old problem: ‘It is very tiresome when one has travelled so far – in our case 12 miles – to see a church, to find that the *parish clerk* lives a mile off: and on reaching his cottage to hear that he has gone out, and has taken the key in his pocket . . .’

Could we make this appeal to todays clergy: That a clear notice should be sited where it is easily seen, saying not only who has the key, but where they live and giving a telephone number if at all possible.

To all those incumbents, church-wardens, key-holders and the countless people who have extended to us their help and kindness, we return our warmest thanks, and a special thank you to Michael Daley for all his assistance in the preparation of the illustrations for this edition.

D.P.M. & C.V.R.

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