Intriguing insides

from the National Churches Trust

An introduction to Church Architecture

It is said that all architecture has its origins in religion

Most of the oldest structures erected by man are interpreted as being places of burial and as holy places.

The first hunter/gatherers set up large standing stones as they roamed the countryside, even though they had no permanent dwellings. With agriculture came the need for permanent homes. Sacred areas were surrounded by stone circles.

When the first permanent dwellings were built by humans, they built even more substantial homes for their gods. With the coming of Christianity and permanent churches, the same principal applied. The splendid medieval churches we now see were originally surrounded by crude wood and thatch dwellings.

An ancient parish church has usually undergone a series of redevelopments through the centuries, to take account of new architectural styles, growing congregations and necessary repairs. The evolution of old churches can be estimated from the style of arches, doorways and windows, as these features were most commonly changed.

The main architectural styles are Saxon (597-1066); Norman (1066-1200); Early English (c1200-1290); Decorated (c1290-1350); and Perpendicular (c1350-1530).

The oldest surviving parish church in England is St Martin in Canterbury, and dates to about 590AD.

Since the 1500s, the principal parts of an ancient church have usually remained basically unaltered. Stonework weathered over the centuries may have been replaced, and in some cases vestries have been attached, but essentially the structure is the same.

Characteristics through the main architectural styles:

Saxon : 597-1066

Characterised by semicircular arches over doors and windows. Doorways are usually tall and narrow. Windows usually have small external openings but are deeply splayed through to the inside. Walls are usually no more than 2’6” thick. Herringbone style stonework can be found in the late Saxon / early Norman period.

Norman : 1066-1200

Has been described as powerful and masculine. It has semicircular arches, deeply recessed doorways, thick walls, massive round pillars, and ornaments such as zigzag moulding and bird & animal forms.

Early English: 1200-1290

Nothing quite like this style exists anywhere else. It marks the beginning of the three Gothic periods; Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular. Rounded arches gave way to lighter, pointed arches in windows, doorways and arcades.

Perpendicular: 1350-1530

This style has been termed the architecture of vertical lines. Intricate shapes gave way to more regular and rectangular shapes, which somewhat resemble a gridiron.

Features within the church

Nave

Derived from the Latin word 'navis', meaning ship. It was thought that the nave roof resembled an upside down ship, or the Ark of Salvation.

The nave is the main body of the church. Originally, the nave was unconsecrated and its maintenance was the responsibility of the congregation. The nave was used for many functions. In early days it was the scene of trial by ordeal, storage space for the arms which every parish had to provide (the regimental colours found in many churches

remind us of this) and a venue for guild plays, processions, church ales and business.

Font

Every medieval church contained a font. It was close to the main entrance of the church in an area known as the baptistry. Today, fonts may be found elsewhere in the church. The word font is derived from the Latin word 'fons' which means spring.

The font contains the holy water used in Baptism. They were originally large enough to allow the infant to be fully immersed, but in the middle ages it became the practice to baptise by partial immersion or pouring water over the head.

In 1236 it was ordered that all fonts should have a lockable lid. The water was generally only changed once per year, on Easter Sunday!

Wall painting

In the middle ages, the interior walls of churches were like picture books of painted plaster. They were used as visual aids for the illiterate congregation. Walls were covered with murals depicting saints and scenes from the scriptures.

Clerestories

In larger churches, the upper level of the nave wall was often pierced by windows to increase the amount of light. When aisles were added in medieval times, many churches raised the nave wall, so that a clerestory could be installed.

Arcade & columns

An arcade is a range of arches supported on piers or columns. The term is also used to describe the arched division between the nave of a church and its aisles.

Arcades rest on columns. The first columns would have been made of wood. They are like trees and remind us of ancient pagan beliefs and practices.

Capitals, the top part of columns, are often carved with leaves or other similar decorations, reinforcing the connection with trees.

Chancel arch

The arched opening in the east wall of the nave, providing access to the chancel. The chancel arch is often decorated with carving, which may once have been painted.

Chancel

Chancel derives from the Latin 'cancelli', meaning grating or lattice.

The term is used to describe a presbytery which is separated from the nave by a rood screen. From 1215, it was considered necessary to enclose the chancel by a screen - 'to preserve the mystery of the Eucharist' and to separate the holy part of the church from the sometimes rowdy secular activities of the nave.

Aisle

The word aisle comes from the Latin 'ala' meaning wing.

An aisle is a sideways extension of a nave, from which it is divided by an arcade of arches. Some churches were built with aisles, but they were usually added to earlier buildings, perhaps to accommodate the growing population.

Seating

For centuries there was no seating in the nave, although a stone ledge was sometimes provided for the elderly and infirm; 'the weakest go to the wall'.

With the increase in preaching came the need for seating. By the late 16th century an increasing number of churches had installed permanent benches.

Rows of benches are often erroneously referred to as pews. Pews are actually enclosed structures, and of a much later date and had doors to protect from drafts. These ‘box pews’ were sometimes provided with armchairs and cushions and perhaps even a stove and curtains.

Gallery

A gallery is an upper storey constructed to provide additional seating for the church.

Side galleries, to the north and south of the nave, were erected in many churches in the 18th and early 19th centuries to accommodate the greatly increasing population

of the industrial revolution, and later taken down when church congregations began to decrease.

Many churches also have west galleries, in the space beneath the tower, which were intended to accommodate choirs and musicians. Later, church organs were often placed in the west gallery.

Pulpit

The oldest mention of a pulpit in England dates from the 12th century. The oldest example still in existence is believed to date from about 1330. In the 15th century, only a fifth of churches had a pulpit, but in 1603 they were made compulsory.

Lectern

The lectern is a reading desk on which the bible rests.

It is usually made from brass or wood, and is moveable. Brass lecterns are usually in the shape of an eagle with outstretched wings. The eagle often stands on a ball which represents the world, while the bible on the eagle's back symbolises the gospel being carried to the corners of the earth.

Hatchment

A hatchment is a diamond-shaped board made of wood or wood and canvas.

It bears the arms, crest or motto of a deceased person.

Hatchments were carried in front of funeral processions to the church, and afterwards hung on the gate of the deceased person's house. After it had been hung on the gates for several months, it was taken down and hung in the church.

Rood screen, great rood and rood loft

Rood screen:
In medieval churches, the rood screen was a decorative stone or wooden screen which separated the nave from the chancel, and had a central gate. Most were pierced with a lattice work of carved wood and richly decorated. Other screens were used to separate chapels from the chancel or aisles.

Great rood:
A rood is a carved image of Christ on the cross, made of wood or stone. The medieval 'great rood' was a carved and painted crucifix, erected on a pedestal above the rood screen. It had the figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist on either side of Jesus on the cross.

Rood loft:
Many medieval churches had a rood loft, or singing gallery, on top of the rood screen. It was often supported by a coving. In most cases the only evidence left that these existed are the blocked up doorways that led to them.

Altar and reredos

Altar:
The altar is the heart of the church. It usually stands at the east end of the chancel or presbytery, in an area known as the sanctuary. The altar has two principal symbolic meanings. First, it is a sacrificial altar. Christian writers saw Jesus as a sacrificed lamb in his crucifixion and the altar remembers that sacrifice. Second, it is a table for a communal meal, remembering the last supper. The altar is frequently marked by five crosses, referring to the five wounds of Christ.

Reredos:
Behind the altar may be a reredos screen. It can be a curtain, a picture or carvings in stone or wood. Sometimes it has niches containing figures of saints.

Sedilia & piscina

Sedilia:
These are recessed seats, usually three, for priests. They are usually set into the south wall of the chancel, are made of stone and may be canopied.

Piscina:
The Latin word 'piscina' literally means fish pond.

The piscina is a niche containing a shallow stone basin with a drain hole. It was used for disposing of the holy water used to wash the communion vessels during the service. A double piscina also has a bowl for the priest to wash his hands.

Easter sepulchre & aumbrey

Easter sepulchre:

Easter is the most important festival of the Christian year. An Easter sepulchre is a recess, usually in the north wall of the sanctuary. At Easter time it is symbolic of Jesus' burial in the tomb following the crucifixion.

Aumbrey:

An aumbry is a small, secure chest or cupboard in a wall, usually the north wall near to the altar. It houses the sacred vessels used during the service and communion. Today, aumbries are often used to store the Blessed Sacrament.

Stained glass

Stained glass is used to add beauty and colour to churches. Often windows show biblical scenes.

Most medieval stained glass was lost following the Reformation and during the Civil War, when it was smashed by the iconoclasts.

There was a revival of interest in stained glass during the Victorian era, and much of what we see today is from that time. Victorian stained glass was usually installed as a memorial to local people or to commemorate significant events.

Memorials

The ‘great and good’ of society enjoyed the privilege of being commemorated within their parish churches. It should be remembered that monuments do not necessarily mark the place of interment, which may be some distance away.

Monuments can provide a wealth of information concerning those remembered; wealth, fashion, their appearance, the way people lived, and how they hoped to be remembered. Memorials vary in size from large, elaborate, canopied monuments to modest tablets fixed to the church wall. From the beginning of the 13th century the image was often placed on a tomb chest and carved in the form of a three dimensional effigy.

Outgoing outsides

Churchyards are much more than just the green space around a church.

They are spaces for quiet, natural habitats and places to explore your history and heritage.

Until the 19th century churches and churchyards were the only places where people could be buried, and as such, are very important places for history and archaeology, revealing evidence of the past and of the lives of people who have lived and worked in the parish.

They also provide a sanctuary for a rich diversity of trees, plants, animals and insects and some are classed as sites of special scientific interest.

Lychgate

Lych is derived from the Old English 'lich', meaning corpse. They were meeting places and shelters for the party bringing a corpse for burial, and for the priest to receive the corpse.

Although some had been built earlier, the 1549 Prayer Book required the priest to meet the corpse at the churchyard entrance. This encouraged the provision of lychgates to shelter the corpse and the funeral party for that purpose.

Medieval lychgates were made of timber and most have long since disappeared. However, many new lychgates were erected in Victorian times, sometimes as memorials to prominent local people or as war memorials.

Churchyard

Graves in the churchyard should face east. Christians adopted the old Jewish custom of burying the dead with their feet towards the rising sun. It is also to face the Lord, who will approach from the east at the final Day of Judgement. Vicars are buried with feet facing the church. One reason for this is to symbolise that they are still attending their flock.

Traditionally, most burials took place on the south side of the church. The north side was sometimes used for the burial of suicides, criminals, and infants who had not been baptised.

Yew trees

Renowned for their longevity, yew trees are found in many church yards.

Because of their great age, yews were associated with pre Christian burial grounds. Recent research shows that Bronze Age round barrows were encircled with yews. In symbolic terms, yews do not only represent death, but also resurrection. Their evergreen foliage was highly valued, and used for religious and secular festivals.

Even today, yews are still being planted in church yards, and serve as a reminder of an earlier, pagan age.

Burial

For much of history, the church or churchyard were the only places for burials. The great and the good could be interred inside the church, hence the term 'stinking rich' from the smell). All other members of society were buried in the churchyard.

Individual plots and headstones were not common until the 17th century. With the increase in population brought about by the Industrial Revolution, and very high mortality rate, churchyards became unsanitary.

Legislation enacted between 1832 and 1906 gave local government the power to act and privately run cemeteries were established.

Churchyard path

Early Christian missionaries preached to the villagers at the side of the preaching cross. Inevitably, some of their congregation died and were buried at the side of the preaching cross before the first village church was built. Therefore, many churchyards are older than the church that now serves the community.

Until the opening of the first public cemeteries in the 19th century, churchyards were the only place people could be buried. Over the centuries countless thousands of burials took place, and repeated burials raised substantially the level of earth above that of the churchyard paths.

Coffin

The word probably derives from the Saxon 'cofa' meaning cave.

The wooden coffin is of comparatively recent origin. Numerous stone coffins exist which appear to be 11th and 12th century. They are a single block of stone, hollowed out to receive a body. Stone coffins were never buried deeply. They were sealed by a stone lid, usually with a cross and a symbol denoting the persons rank or profession. These included a broadsword for a knight, or a chalice and bible for a priest.

Poorer members of the community were not buried in coffins. Their bodies were wrapped in a cloth shroud. Later, they may have been placed in the 'parish coffin' and then taken out and placed in a communal grave.

Preaching and churchyard cross

In the 6th and 7th centuries, wooden crosses marked the spots where priests or monks preached to the local community. The wooden cross was replaced by a more permanent stone cross, around which services were held. Later still a wooden church might well have been erected.

Large crosses are found in many churchyards, and were intended to sanctify the churchyard and provide a communal memorial to all the dead of the parish. At the top of the shaft was either a cross or a tabernacle. Many survive only as a base and part of the shaft, because the cross was often destroyed by iconoclasts.

Tower or spire

Many parish churches have a tower at the west end of the nave. Some are topped by spires.

The tower may have been part of the original building, or added or enlarged at a later date. Some churches have a tower between the chancel and nave, with a transept at either side. In this case, the space inside the church at the intersection of nave, chancel and transepts is called the crossing.

The tower often contains the church bells. Church bells are pulled up from ground level, usually with the assistance of a form of treadmill.

Today the tower also often contains the clock workings.

Porch

Ancient churches usually stand to the north of the original village, and the south door is the main entrance. From the 12th century many had a porch.

Some had porch altars, where marriage contracts and legal agreements were signed. In some places the coroners court and the first school met here.

Gargoyle

The word gargoyle derives from the Old French 'gargouille', meaning throat.

A gargoyle is a projecting waterspout, usually incorporating a lead pipe. They were often carved in the shape of grotesque faces, beasts or figures. Gargoyles appear to have been first introduced around 1200.

Celtic warriors were known to chop off the heads of defeated enemies and display them in public. This may account for the popularity of gargoyles.

Sundial

Most medieval churches have a sundial.

It is usually situated above the porch or on the south face of the tower. Its main purpose was to ensure that the bell was rung at the correct time to mark daytime canonical hours. In many places, the sundial was the only reliable public timepiece until the early 19th century.

Eventually sundials developed into church clocks.

Devil's door

The Devil's door was in the north wall of the church.

This door was traditionally left open during a baptism to let out any evil spirits in the child. Following the reformation, many devils doors were removed or blocked up.

Corbel stones

Corbel stones are projections of stone, brick or wood designed to support an arch or beam.

A corbel table is a series of corbels immediately below the roof eaves, and can be found both externally and internally. The Normans were especially fond of corbel tables, which were often elaborately carved in the form of monsters and other grotesque creatures.

Church school

By the 17th century, many churches had schools, using the porch, rooms above the porch, or in the tower.

In some villages, parish or charity school rooms were built in the churchyard. In these, some fortunate local boys learned the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. However, the schools depended on the availability of an enthusiastic curate or qualified layman, and many of the schools were short lived.