

ABC of a medieval church: Excerpts from the Introduction



St Buryan, Cornwall

LONG AGO, every Sunday the parish priest stood in the medieval pulpit and asked for prayers for all those ‘that have honoured the church with light, lamp, vestment, or bell, or any ornaments by which the service of Almighty God is the better maintained and kept’.

It is very laudable to cultivate and perpetuate the memory of the past in this way, especially of people and their good deeds. But when these weekly bidding prayers fell silent, only the church buildings themselves remained; these instead became the memory banks of the communities that built and used them.

How to go about finding that capital invested in those banks, in order to borrow against it wisely in the future, is part of the aim of this book. It tries to distil some of the results of a ten-year investigation which started as research into the documents of the medieval church and then widened out into visiting, measuring and photographing over 800 medieval churches in England under the banner of ‘soundsmedieval.org; finding the sources of English music’. To help us carry out this research, The Society of Antiquaries of London very generously granted us three years’ bursaries for expenses. Employing a unique and novel musical- archaeological approach to church buildings, our research tried to discover what physical infrastructures of medieval music still exist in churches throughout England, and in parts of Wales and Brittany.

The immediate reason for writing this short book has been the appearance of the long-awaited report of the Taylor Review of the Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals. This was finally published on the 20th December 2017...

It seeks to explain what is the essence of a fully-functioning medieval building. It cannot explain every single thing that can be found by careful search in every medieval church in

Britain, but it can explain the basics. Every church was there to do the same job in its daily life, musically and socially. Each church followed much the same regulations and each church was provided with the same tools to carry out its work.

But there any unity stopped – each church also did these things in its own local way according to its own resources, material and intellectual, and did them at a faster or slower rate according to the wealth of its community...

During the hundred years that followed the accession of Edward VI in early 1547, medieval church buildings were in an almost continual state of change to comply with orders from central government or local bishops. However, since 1660 English and Welsh churches have rarely been the objects of sweeping central ecclesiastical edicts and political or revolutionary interference, in sharp contrast with churches on the continent. This fact plus the general abandoning of their chancels until the mid C19 has meant that many more physical and discoverable signs of their former use are preserved in England and Wales than anywhere else in western Europe. It is still therefore uniquely possible to see why medieval churches were designed in the way they were, if we take the time to look.

What were the needs that inspired and directed the building of these churches up to possibly 900 years ago - about thirty-five memory-spans? We should take some time to find out, because if we want to preserve a building and adapt it for new purposes it is wise to find out all we can about it and what it contains. It is equally important to appreciate what it no longer contains, because in every church many things that were there in 1530 are no longer there. But traces of them remain, and these traces need to be found, understood and preserved for future interpretation. If we do not find and understand these unique artefacts sheltered by every church, we risk destroying or degrading them. Especially if church buildings are going to become (again) in any real sense the focus of community activities – and this aim is woven into the texture of the Sustainability Review – we need to be aware that each and every stone, every piece of woodwork and glass has an historic community value: they are the capital in the parish’s memory-banks...

This long essay tries to use a new, previously almost unexplored, mix of music and social archaeology in an attempt to understand why churches were designed in the way they were, and the consequences that such an understanding might have for their future use.