Church Going

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A Stonemason's Guide to the Churches of the British Isles

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To my Ambrose Chapel Donkeys

Every time I pass the church
I stop and make a visit
So when I'm carried in feet first
God won't say, 'Who is it?'

Evelyn Ryan

Destroy all shrines, covering of shrines, all tables, candlesticks, trindles or rolls of wax, pictures, paintings, and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition: so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass-windows, or elsewhere within their churches or houses.

Injunction 28, *The Royal Injunctions of Edward VI to the Church of England* (1547)

Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into
are awake through years with transferred touch, and go on glowing for long years.
And for this reason, some old things are lovely
warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them.

D. H. Lawrence, 'Things Men Have Made' (1929)

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Introduction

The corpse path wended its way through stubbly, flint-filled fields, all the time focused on the church's great bell tower, black with winter rain. The mud that stuck to my boots made me understand how difficult the path could be over the winter for pallbearers as they carried their burden toward St Mary's, which looms reassuringly over the Wiltshire village of Steeple Ashton. Its pinnacle-crowded heights make it one of the finest medieval church exteriors – and a suitable place for the 'Way of the Dead' to end.

I took a turn around its high stone walls, going clockwise for good luck, and studied the church's decaying pinnacles, flying buttresses, battlements and gurning gargoyles, green with moss. These architectural terms are all familiar to me, as I've spent the past thirty-five years working as a stonemason. Together with my business partner Andy, we are very much in the 'journeyman' tradition; our small team at Minerva Stone Conservation travel from job to job repairing medieval churches. St Mary's was to be our next job, so I had come to assess the condition of its crumbling stonework.

As well as repairing masonry and monuments, I've spent time in every part of the church, working with specialist

craftspeople as they replaced stolen lead, rehung and tuned the bells, or with conservators as they worked to reframe stained-glass windows or prevent the surface of wall paintings from further flaking away.

For many years, I thought it a great shame that the churches we were working on – many of which represented the finest architecture in their area and are filled with the most remarkable arts and craftwork – were taken for granted by locals and only given a cursory look by visitors. Recently, I've noticed a change; increasing numbers are interested in finding out what's happening behind the 'Closed for Repairs' sign hung on the porch door, and I often act as an informal guide. As we progress around the nave, or if I invite them to climb our scaffolding, they are keen to learn about the meaning and symbolism of the architecture and artworks – what the furnishings and features were for, how they were used and what they can tell us about the lives of past parishioners.

Noticing how most were unfamiliar with what they were seeing, I put together a handout explaining what the parts of the church are for. As the years rolled on, its contents grew from the obvious things that you would expect to see – the lychgate, font and pews – to more idiosyncratic items, from the prehistoric standing stones that were repurposed into crosses and now stand in churchyards to the meaning of how saints and devils were portrayed in the doom paintings and stained glass that depict the Day of Judgement. But it is the marks left by ordinary parishioners, such as the work of a local carpenter who might have crafted the pews centuries ago, and the graffiti, both sacred and profane, that covers them, that fascinate visitors the most.

Working on churches in this way has got under my skin. Some people 'go to church'; I 'go to churches'. I probably spend more time in places of worship than the Archbishop of Canterbury – alongside my day job, I have since the late

1980s been on an unending 'church crawl' (to borrow the phrase coined by Sir John Betjeman), during which I've visited over half of Britain's approximately ten thousand churches of medieval origin and many of Ireland's.

This mania deepened when, in 1998, I was awarded a William Morris Craft Fellowship by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (affectionately known as the SPAB), which meant that I could travel the country visiting ancient churches to learn about the importance of tradition in their repair from other craftspeople, architects, surveyors and artists.

I often thought that some sort of handbook on a church's architecture, features and furnishings would have been helpful during my travels. Unfortunately, none seemed to exist, and so now, some 120 entries later, here it is. To avoid the book becoming a list, and to give it some colour and personal insight, it is based on my own experiences.

Church Going is not a history of church architecture; plenty of other works cover that aspect (including my first book, *The Stonemason*). *Church Going* instead tells the story of medieval churches by exploring their often overlooked physical parts. As pre-Reformation churches were built and decorated to a formula, what I've seen in Devon, say, will also apply (with some regional differences) to the churches of Yorkshire. In undertaking this epic journey, I seek to explain how the history and evolution of churches throughout our islands and the lives of the people who used them are interlinked.

I progress through a series of vignettes, first around the graveyard and the church's exterior, and then up the spiral staircase to the top of the tower. A walk through the people's part of the church, the nave, will lead the reader through to the area around the chancel arch that will often be church's richest and most interesting part, with its rood screens and doom paintings that mark the division into the chancel's hallowed space.

It is hardly surprising that most readers will be unfamiliar with the meaning of a church's artworks and furnishings; many of the features that I list were used as part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church, before the waves of Protestant reform of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that have come to be known as the Reformation made their use redundant, and they have been ignored ever since.

Many churches are less well used than at any other time in their existence, and their quietness often gives the impression that they have always been sleepy and out of the way. In reality, they were anything but. For many centuries, they were the most prominent and busiest building in their community, as the indents of musket- and cannonballs from the Civil War that pepper the walls of St Mary's testify, and so offer as close an encounter with the past as it is possible to get.

Most churches were built, at a time of great artistic vitality, in the Gothic style and would have brimmed with light and life. Their golden age was 'the long fifteenth century', which only ended when the Reformation kicked off in the 1530s; everywhere, it seems, there were people making glass, cutting stone, painting artworks onto wet plaster, or carving and gilding wood. It was the most extraordinary explosion of creativity our islands have ever seen, when something almost radioactive seemed to grip the earth.

Much of this was destroyed within just a few years by the asteroid strikes of the Reformation, revolution and Civil War, when Protestant iconoclasts sought to reverse what they thought of as superstition and set about the dazzling – but now lost – Catholic world with a zeal only matched in modern times by the Taliban.

Despite the terror and destruction that was unleashed, however, an astonishing amount has survived. Some of this art and sculpture, such as the Mercers' Hall Christ in the City of London or the tremendous recumbent likeness of Jesse, the

father of King David, in St Mary's, Abergavenny, are of international importance, as are the various screens, pews, pulpits and benches that elsewhere form the finest collection of medieval church woodwork in Europe.

A recurrent theme of this book is how much was hidden away by churchwardens when soldiers or iconoclasts in the guise of government commissioners came. It's not unusual, as we go about unpicking a church wall or roof, to discover some part of a smashed carving of a saint or crucifixion scene. Few new churches were built – or old ones fitted out – before the country settled down politically with the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660. This slowly led to the great rebuilding of medieval churches in Victorian times. I've included very little work from the nineteenth century in *Church Going*. Although undoubtedly skilled, much of it was (with a handful of exceptions) overconfident and not respectful of the original work. Often it will be little more than a fantasy medieval facsimile of what the architect and vicar thought a medieval church ought to look like. The materials the Victorians used tend not to match well with earlier work and are often alien to the local area. Pews or roof joists may be of pitch pine from North America; blockhouse-sized pulpits in depressingly dark-veined Italian marble will feel overwrought. Encaustic floor tiles look machine-made and over-coloured, as does so much stained glass, which, except for the output of a handful of gifted studios, have filled windows with overbearingly pious and sentimental subject matter.

All of this is a far cry from the subtlety of materials used to build such churches as St Mary's, Steeple Ashton, in the pre-industrial age, where everything I could see of its walls and roof had been brought by ox-cart once it had been cut out of the local bedrock or felled from the woods of the surrounding parish. This localness will give a church a particular *terroir* (to steal a term from winemaking) and atmosphere.

In my work and travels, I've been careful not to forget that churches are holy places for Christians who come to them to worship or have their own private conversation with God. But for many others, churches have become sacred in a new way. They often find the interior moves them beyond religion and want little more than the reassuring presence of a hard old bench to sit on and a quiet atmosphere to take in.

'Atmosphere' should have its own entry in this book – it's usually been as tangible a presence as anything else I've seen in my church crawls. Now and again, I've felt this atmosphere fuse with some other unexplained agency to bend the doubts of this particular faith fence-sitter. It was immediately apparent as I entered Steeple Ashton's nave on the first day of our project. The early morning was still dark, but the church was already open. Even in the gloom I could sense how grand the medieval interior was, with its fine starburst-like vaulting and Gothic arcade. It was not just the architecture that made the place feel revered. Dawn was strengthening to warm the east window, which filtered a mist of soft golden sunlight into the chancel; I felt the essence of something unknown loosening from its walls, like the warmth of a night storage heater. In some way, this fused the synaptic with the momentary to fill that small space between my head and heart. I didn't feel that the building's architecture, art or sculpture could explain the effect; it had perhaps more to do with the embodied emotion and devotion left by many generations of parishioners.

I've limited my explorations to parish churches, no two of which are the same. Each will have its own personality, but there are two in particular that I will return to time and again, as they are the churches I know best, having worked extensively on them: St Mary's at Steeple Ashton, Wiltshire, to which I have already introduced you; and St Mary's at Hemington in Somerset – which I also return to because it has a nearly full repertoire of the features and furnishings you

would expect to see in a typical country church. Cathedrals are largely absent, but I have included the abbeys and priorys that became parish churches following the Reformation. Since more pre-Reformation features survive in remote rural areas, where the reformers' influence was less intense, there is an unintended bias towards these humbler country churches.

The photos were all taken by me, and the drawings and illustrations are by my wife, Clare Venables, and our daughter, Violet Venables Ziminski. To further help guide the visitor, directions to each feature mentioned can be found at www.church-going.co.uk, which includes a map of where all the churches mentioned can be found.

Church attendance is in huge decline; some are at the point of crisis, with tiny congregations and limited funding to keep them maintained and open. To survive, they need to inspire more people to visit, and locals, both religious and

St Mary's, Steeple Ashton, Wiltshire.

non-religious, to use them for worship and community use. Many are put off because they feel that churches are unapproachable and unfamiliar. I hope that a reader who once might have been baffled by 'what rood-lofts were', as Philip Larkin puts it in his poem 'Church Going', will, after reading this book, look at their furnishings and features with new eyes. Churches are still a 'serious house on serious earth', but if one person feels more inclined to beat that old corpse path to the churchyard, push open the porch door, and find something of interest within, I will have succeeded in my aim.

Part One

In and Around the Churchyard

Outside

I like that ancient Saxon phrase, which calls
The burial-ground God's-Acre! It is just;
It consecrates each grave within its walls,
And breathes a benison o'er the sleeping dust.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1842)

As well as the 'churchyard', the area that encloses any ancient church may also be known locally as 'God's Acre' or the church litten (from the Anglo-Saxon word *lych*, or 'corpse'). It is a space that will have been in constant use, generation by generation, for over a thousand years, and where the dead patiently wait below the turf for the Day of Judgement.

I seldom find churchyards morbid or bleak, as they teem with subject matter as curious as it is interesting. Prehistoric standing stones, ancient yew trees and stand-alone medieval crosses, rich with esoteric carving, all vie for the visitor's attention. Early headstones are not just markers for the dead, but windows into the lives of ordinary people, and will be skilfully decorated with religious symbols, depictions of the tools of their trade, and inscribed with poignant or entertaining poems.

Intriguing structures abound; charnel houses that were once repositories of bones that became school rooms, and detached bell towers that also served as refuges in times of trouble.

Before the first English Reformation, churchyards were where the sacredness of the church and the secular lives of the parishioners met through fairs, markets, and even the boozy celebrations known as 'church ales', where profits from the brewing and consumption of beer helped to keep the parish church in repair. Most churchyards have never been ploughed or treated with chemicals, making them refuges for wildlife and a genetic bank that originates from whatever the surrounding habitat was eight hundred years ago. All this is just sitting there undisturbed, waiting to be discovered.

Lychgates

Derived from the Anglo-Saxon word for 'corpse', lychgates are covered gateways over a churchyard's main entrance. Their construction began in the thirteenth century, and many were later restored, some to war memorials in honour of the fallen in the Great War.

The entrance into many churchyards is through a roofed gateway that may look little more than a simple shelter, but as with nearly everything you will see when you push open the gate, its role is laced with symbolism. Lychgates marked the transition from unconsecrated to consecrated ground and acted as a portal between the world of the living and that of the dead. When the body of a deceased parishioner was brought to their church, it would have been laid on a central lych-stone, or trestle, while the pallbearers sat down to rest on the side benches. There, everyone would be sheltered during

wet weather while waiting for the priest to come out from the church – the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* directed that the priest meet the corpse at the 'church stile', i.e. the lychgate. There, once the legalities of death were established, the first part of the burial service was conducted before the body was taken to the grave. A reminder of this often-forgotten use might be visible to those passing under the lychgate in the inscriptions cut into the roof timbers. The lychgate at Llantrisant in Monmouthshire bears the inscription 'Teach me to live that I may dread / The grave as little as my bed'.

The lychgates of Kent surpass those of other counties in their quantity and beauty. The most handsome is also one of the most ancient and vulnerable, being exposed next to a busy road at St George's in Beckenham, South London. It may

Lychgate, St George's, Beckenham, Kent.

look like a typical example, but it is anything but. According to the plaque, it is the oldest in existence. Hard as stone, its roof timbers made of silvery black oak are over seven hundred years old. The bottom parts and sill are newer and are fixed to heavy side timbers in an X-shape that supports a satisfyingly proportioned tiled roof, lending it the air of a miniature Japanese temple.

The survival of a lychgate so close to London is a surprise; in 1857, a ban was placed on burials in cities, after which they lost their role, and so most disappeared. The lychgate's original purpose as a gateway between life and death was once commonly known, but few today who hurry past Beckenham's lychgate on a road that was formerly lined with banks will notice this little structure that still acts as a threshold between the material and the spiritual.

Churchyard Enclosures

A 1603 edict demanded that all churchyards be 'duly fenced', but such enclosures may be far older than the church itself.

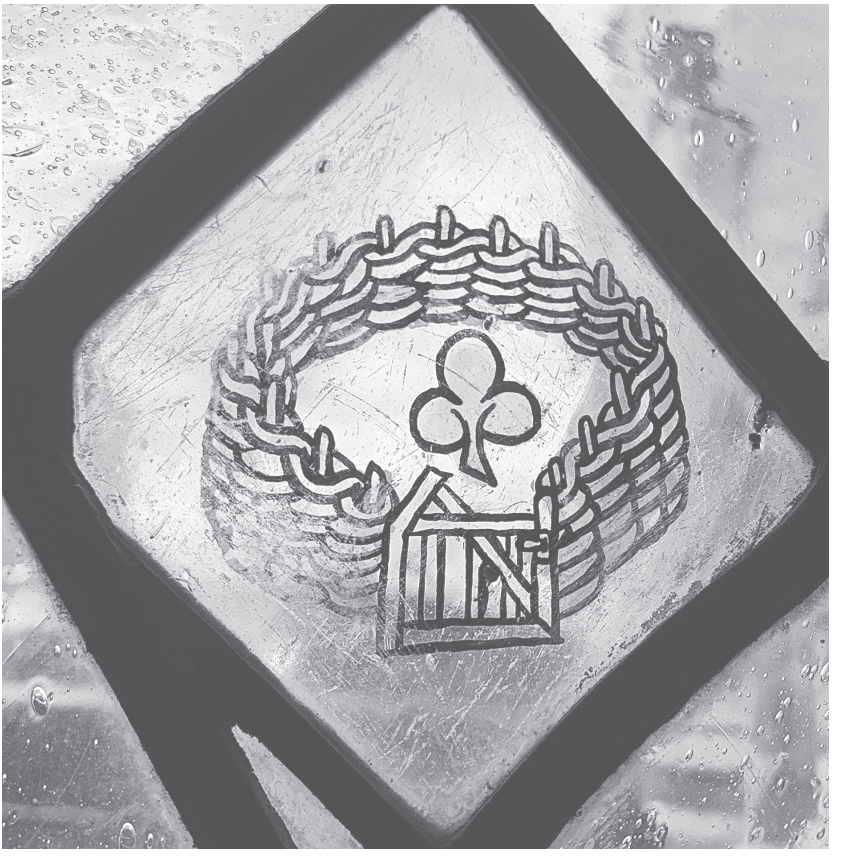
Today, the path into a churchyard will likely be through a wall made of stone or brick rather than the hedge that would have surrounded the first 'mission churches' of the sixth century. These missions were often established on a newly cleared site, known as a 'thwaite' in the north-west of England, or a 'worth' in forested Sussex. Pre-existing sacred spaces were thought to be ripe for conversion – perhaps a holy tree, spring or standing stone. The first enclosures were probably little more than an easily defendable stockade that protected the church, which would itself have been little more than a good-sized wooden cabin next to a wooden cross.

A quick look at a map of Cornwall or Wales reveals a landscape that is still populated with the spirit of the saintly founder of a parish in its placename. Over six hundred parishes in Wales begin with the prefix 'Llan-', to which the founding saint's name has been added. *Llan* is akin to the English for 'land' or 'lawn', adopted in Cornwall as *Lann*, or *Rath* in Scotland, meaning the enclosed land around the church. The names of some better-known saints can often be seen translated into Welsh: Llanbedr for St Peter, and Llanfair from Mair, or Mary, which gives us the most famous Llan- place name of all: the parish of St Mary in the hollow of the white hazel near the rapid whirlpool in the parish of St Tysilio with a red cave, or 'Llanfair-pwllgwyngyll-gogery-chwyrn-drobwll-llan-tysilio-gogo-goch'.

Something of the integration of these early compounds into their surroundings can still be seen at Knowlton, in the rolling downland of Cranborne Chase in Dorset. Within the circular ditch and bank of a prehistoric henge monument, the rectangular outline of an Anglo-Saxon graveyard contains a ruined Norman church. It is often said that this was a pagan place that was converted for Christian use, but this just cannot be. The length of time that elapsed between the ritual use of the henge and the establishment of a church on the site in the tenth century was over three and a half thousand years. There is no evidence that it was used for religious purposes in the Iron Age or by Romano-British or Anglo-Saxon settlers. It is likely that the builders of the church and churchyard saw the prehistoric henge as little more than a ready-made enclosure and were probably as baffled by the mystery of Dorset's already ancient landscape as we are today. That said, Knowlton's sense of empty otherness cannot be ignored. As the archaeologist Jacquetta Hawkes wrote, 'There lingers in the air some flavour of the sinister and macabre.' I've never seen anything more sinister than shadows gathering at dusk, but there's something

in the way the hopping crows and jackdaws pause to take in the ruin that makes me think they can see something I never will.

A glimpse into a church enclosure's unknown early past emerged in 2021 during archaeological excavations at the site of St Mary's, Stoke Mandeville, Buckinghamshire, when a sequence that dated back into prehistory was established. The church had been demolished in the 1960s, and the site lay on the route of HS2, the proposed high-speed rail link between



A painted medieval glass fragment from Bristol Cathedral, showing a 'hurdle' enclosure, with a tree that represents the Trinity.

London and Birmingham. St Mary's was a known Norman establishment, and as they dug, the archaeologists discovered a circular ditch enclosing the foundations of a square platform on which the Normans or Saxons had built their church tower. Finds included three Roman stone busts of a woman, man and child, as well as a glass jar full of cremated bones. Two of the busts had been decapitated before being shoved into the ditch; this, together with the accumulation of Roman material around the platform, suggested that the Saxons had demolished a Roman mausoleum before building their church. The mausoleum had, in turn, been positioned on a mound and might have been a round barrow for Bronze Age burials. Now swept away, this place that had long been an important point in the landscape, and is likely typical of many church sites, will have been in use for as long as Britain has been populated.

The Churchyard

An area, often known to locals as 'God's Acre' or the church 'litten', from the Old English 'līċ tūn', meaning 'corpse ground', that encloses a church and is used as a burial ground.

As the poet John Clare put it, churchyards are spaces 'Where crowds of buried memories sleep', and a climb to the top of a church tower will give the best understanding of what he meant. I did a bit of mental arithmetic as I leant on the tower battlements of St Mary's, Steeple Ashton, Wiltshire, during a break from repairing its fraying stonework. If the parish had received just forty interments every year since AD 500, there would be over forty thousand burials laid to rest here. If we multiply this by the ten thousand or so churches of medieval origin in the British Isles, at least four hundred million souls are interred in God's Acre. I wondered if this was where most of the people who had ever lived in Britain had ended up.

In the nineteenth century, churchyards were becoming so full that soil was sometimes imported to provide greater depths for new burials. This explains why the ground level is often much higher within the churchyard wall than the enclosing lanes and footpaths. The older tombs and most burials can

be found on the south side, near the entrance, where parishioners traditionally prayed for the deceased as they passed by. The north was where unbaptised infants were buried, often at night, for 'the cost of a shilling and a pint of beer to the sexton', alongside 'notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned', as Thomas Hardy wrote in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

The parson and naturalist Gilbert White complained in *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, his famous work of 1789, that his parishioners 'wish to be buried on the south side, which is become such a mass of mortality that no person can be there interred without disturbing or displacing the bones of his ancestors'. He went on to remark that there were 'none till very lately on the north side; but, as two or three families of best repute have begun to bury in that quarter, prejudice may wear out by degrees, and their example be followed by the rest of the neighbourhood'.

The absence of burials on the northern side of churchyards meant it was a valuable public space for markets, fairs, plays and church ales when the sale of strong local beer helped pay for the church's repair costs. Inevitably, things tended to get out of hand. Thomas of Chobham, a subdeacon at Salisbury Cathedral in the 1220s, wrote that 'on any holy feast day wanton women and youthful fools gather together and sing diabolical songs the whole night through in the churchyard and the church to which they lead their ring dances and many other shameful games'.

Insects and Plants

Churchyards have long been havens for the natural world, providing a range of habitats within a protected space.

As churchyards will generally be the oldest enclosed space in a parish, they will be a sanctuary for the local flora and some of its fauna. If they have been left to nature and not overly mowed or sprayed with weedkiller, the enclosure of God's Acre exists in a sort of ecological time warp that will reflect something of the ancient woodland or flower-rich meadows they were carved out of.

Since the Second World War, as the land beyond the enclosure was denuded by the plough, chemical fertiliser, tarmac and concrete, the graveyard will have become an increasingly important protector of biodiversity. In the same way the church has preserved architecture and artworks, the churchyard will be a haven for a long-departed world. The isolation of the churchyard from modernity means it will be a diverse habitat for flora and fauna. Fallen headstones provide places for toads, slow-worms and perhaps an adder or grass snake to bask in the sun. Wooded areas are important for birds, bats and invertebrates. They may hide a badger's sett, and they also provide cover for hedgehogs and foxes.

Chalky or limestone areas may have colonies of the luminous beetle whose Latin name is *Lampyris noctiluca*, commonly known as the glow-worm. I've seen churchyards illuminated by their golden-green specks on summer evenings, and some churches have even been known to turn off their floodlights to help them find each other. In every old tomb I've taken apart, I've found inch-long churchyard beetles with a protective shell that's as black as a newly polished shoe's toecap, but they are nowhere to be found outside the churchyard boundary. These

creatures burrow in their dozens in the soil and debris between the gravestones – and when they are disturbed, they emit an evil-smelling liquid from their rear end as a means of defence.

The perfect miniature hillocks built by the yellow meadow ant can also be seen in most old graveyards. They will have built up over many generations and be hundreds of years old, especially if protected behind the railings that enclose an eighteenth-century obelisk or box tomb. The range of grasses and flowers that cover them will allow other insects to thrive. The soil dome protects their nest and controls its temperature and humidity. They are the target of the green woodpeckers that tug at the turf and gorge on the attacking ants.

The longest I've ever worked at a particular church was at St Marys, Hemington, in Somerset. We were there from one winter to the next, and over the course of the year I kept an informal note of the progress of its churchyard's wild flora. Many plants are connected with the Church Year, which begins on 2 February when the heads of Candlemas bells – today better known as snowdrops – would have been collected to decorate the church for the festival from which they took their name. These flowers symbolise purity; the ancient Candlemas festival, when church candles were blessed for the year, celebrates Mary's rite of purification forty days after Christmas. The superstition held that one should never pick and bring them home, however: since the white outer sepals were reminiscent of the woollen burial shroud, to do so was thought to indicate that someone there would die within the year.

Spring quickly comes into its own, and with a run of sunny days it was as if some divine power had fired a starting pistol from the top of the tower to signal 'Go!' – and with that, everything rushes in. Large crowds of spring's yellow harbinger, the Easter flower, its Latin name (*prima rosa*) reflecting its status as the 'first rose' of the year. They are joined by the daffodils, or Lent lilies (so called as they are meant to fade on the last day of

Lent), and by cowslips, which are also known as 'herb Peter' or 'keys of heaven' because the one-sided flower heads resemble a bunch of keys. (It was said that cowslips grew where St Peter momentarily dropped the keys to the kingdom of heaven with which Christ had entrusted him.) The now aromatic air is filled with the fluty timbre of blackbirds, which they have been saving for spring. Beds of crocuses blanket the turf beneath the ancient chestnut; the space between their tiny purple vases is filled with sweet, dog and white violets. Then there is the lily of the valley, also known as 'Our Lady's Tears' after their small, white globular flowers, said to resemble the tears that sprang from the weeping Virgin Mary as she watched Christ's agony on the cross.

As the days get longer, this botanical diversity slowly grows, as does the colour variation, away from yellow to the snow-white of the meadow saxifrage, the mauve of the cuckoo flower and the many shades of purple of the native orchid. Hidden among the taller grasses is the frothy-flowered, honey-scented lady's bedstraw, traditionally used to stuff mattresses to deter fleas. It is often accompanied by germander speedwell – a name that comes from 'speed thee well', after the greeting that was often stitched into clothing to ensure a safe journey. Its genus, *Veronica*, is named after the saint who gave Christ her veil to wipe his forehead while carrying the cross. It was thought that the speedwell took on the appearance of this relic and became known as Veronica.

The lace doily-like cow parsley flowers bloom in profusion around the boundary through to July, when the tall grass would have been scythed to reveal St John's wort, knapweed and purple betony. An Anglo-Saxon book of herbal cures suggested that drinking a tea made of wood betony will prevent 'frightful nocturnal goblins and terrible sights and dreams'. The purple spikes of rosebay willowherb accompany the tiny daisy-like flowers of common fleabane, which spring in large

clumps from the stone walls, accompanied by tumbling blue aubrieta. The spear thistle's purple flowers bloom among the teasels that grow unnoticed until August. It's pleasurable to run a thumb over a teasel's young soft spikes and watch as the tiny pineapple-like form hardens over the weeks. These grow in great abundance in wool-producing areas, and they were widely used in a frame to raise the nap of the woven cloth.

In late summer the Michaelmas daisy provides a last flash of colour before fungi take over as autumn draws in and fairy rings and puff balls come and go. The reds, yellows and orange umbrellas of the waxcap mushroom indicate that this land, apart from the burials that have taken place over the centuries, is old and undisturbed.

The best churchyards will have an area where the living will be excluded and nature has been left to run its course. These will be corners where tottering gravestones, surrounded by tall grass, will be ignored instead of being uprooted and where the ivy is not pulled from the tombs or the walls that they are likely holding together – something the young poet John Clare understood when he wrote in 'The Fate of Amy' (1807):

And where the sickly alder loves
To top the mouldering wall;
And ivy's kind encroaching care
Delays the tottering fall.

Yew Trees

The European yew is the longest-lived native tree species in Europe, and churchyards are refuges for them.

Evergreen yet toxic, when one is stood under the tremendous dark canopy of a churchyard yew, they can feel like natural temples in themselves as they leave the church path and graves roofed in shadow. One of the yews in the churchyard of St Brynach's, Nevern, Pembrokeshire, is famous for the red sap that oozes from it with a blood-like consistency. As the chap mowing the grass when I visited put it, it's 'in sympathy with Christ's crucifixion'. He went on to say morbidly that, as a yew grows, 'its roots grasp the bones and skulls of the old parishioners'; Thomas Hardy conveyed the same idea in his poem, 'Transformations':

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.

Yews are more often found on the south side of a church; they were thought to absorb the vapours emitted from the ground by the corruption of corpses. The Ancient Greeks believed that sleeping or eating under one could lead to drowsiness and death, the first symptom of which is something that I experienced as I sat among the old brown needles eating a sandwich under the great sheltering bough of a churchyard yew. I can't remember falling asleep, only being woken by a mighty headache, and the high-pitched call of a goldcrest that

flitted above me in the darkness of the canopy. All around the space between the boughs was opaque. As I got up, I brushed against the green needles that produced a billowing cloud of spring pollen that I realised had caused my drowsiness.

Although yews are not native to the Scottish Highlands, in the kirk-garth (or churchyard) of St Coeddi, Fortingall, Perthshire, at the foot of the north slope of the glen of Loch Lyon, sits what is likely to be the oldest tree in the British Isles. The glen is an ancient landscape, where standing stones abound. A Neolithic stone engraved with small dimples known as 'cup-marks' was found buried deep beneath the tree in 1903, suggesting the existence of an earlier cult centre. Was the tree perhaps its focus? The stone still sits in its shadow.

The tree looks its age, a tremendous dark beast from where bats flick and weave at dusk, like distant voices about its rust-red limbs. It was a bother to see a passing couple tie a strip of cloth to a low-hanging branch, perhaps as a prayer or to show respect for the land spirit; if it was the latter, they did not extend the gesture to the tree spirit, as they then furtively plucked off a sprig as a souvenir. This yew has been suffering from its popularity for many years. I sought out the churchwarden, who recounted that in 1804, some village boys had damaged the tree while 'kindling their fire for the pagan festival of Beltane among its trunks'. The tree is male, but a branch on the crown has changed sex and begun to bear a small group of berries, a sign that the tree was under stress. It's possible that the protective wall the Victorians built may have created a detrimental microclimate.

Uniquely among trees, yews hollow out as they grow, leading to a cylindrical shape that can withstand storms that will bring down younger specimens. Theoretically, they have no known upper age limit: they can endlessly regenerate by sending down aerial roots that take hold in the soil before fusing with the main trunk. The boughs tend to bend towards

the ground, where they can take root as separate but connected trunks, a kind of satellite tree.

Estimates of the tree's age at Fortingall are based mainly on its gigantic girth. The consensus is that it is between two and three thousand years old. Some say, without much evidence, that it is much older, but I'm not convinced – surely there would be a village of Yewchurch somewhere if a new church was built next to an old tree. I prefer the idea that the saint associated with the church, St Coeddi, planted the tree, which would make it a mere 1,300 years old. Further evidence of the link between yew trees and the establishment of early churches can be seen in a document from AD 927 detailing the laws of King Hywel Dda of Dyfed; the punishment for destroying a 'Saint's Yew' was a fine of sixty sheep.

It was a common belief that churchyards were not grazed to protect cattle from the yew's poisonous berries, but this is contradicted in John Gay's eighteenth-century poem *The Shepherd's Week*, which records how:

> *With wicker rods we fenc'd her tomb around,*
> *To ward from man and beast the hallow'd ground,*
> *Lest her new grave the parson's cattle raze,*
> *For both his horse and cow the church-yard graze.*

Early Churchyard Standing Sculpture

An Introduction

That something of the old heathen ways continued to linger as early churches were established in long-standing sacred places can be seen in the law decreed by the Christian king Canute, who in the eleventh century forbade the 'barbarous worship of stones, trees, fountains, and of the heavenly bodies'.

These pagan temples were probably little more than natural places or standing stones that were converted into Christian use by the first priests who cut the sign of the cross into them. One remarkable example is at All Saints, Rudston, in Yorkshire's East Riding, which was built next to a 25-foot-tall prehistoric gritstone monolith in the eleventh century. A clue that the monolith was converted for Christian purposes can be seen in Rudston's name, which is Anglo-Saxon for 'rood-stane' or 'cross-stone'. In Brittany, in northern France, the worship of standing stones carried on into the nineteenth century

as priests anointed the menhirs (standing stones) with holy water.

There must have been many more churches placed next to standing stones than we can see today. From the seventh century, the founding missionaries' monumental wooden crosses planted in the churchyard were replaced with stone as they rotted, and it was only natural that the mason would repurpose the nearest useable material. In Cornwall, the local granite was so unyielding that crosses were only embellished with simple patterns and carvings, but in areas where stone was freely available and easier to carve, churchyards filled with free-standing stone crosses decorated with designs of great originality. No two crosses are the same, but their faces are generally carved with Bible stories accompanied by Celtic spirals and Anglo-Saxon detailed geometric designs, stylised animals and a sprinkling of the classical motifs that their art form replaced. This style, known as 'insular' (derived from the Latin word for 'island'), was different from the art in the rest of Europe and perfectly encapsulates how interconnected it was within our islands at the end of the world.

Between the eighth and eleventh centuries, there was a sculptural golden age. According to an archaeologist I met on the island of Iona, these free-standing crosses were the most significant sculptures created in the thousand years between the demise of the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance. They are unknown to most people but deserve to be as famous as other highly decorated artworks of the time, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells.

Church crawling is the only way to appreciate these artworks. Although their carvings may be faded, the following examples from the early medieval kingdoms in Britain and Ireland still crackle with a frenetic, abstracted and occasionally pagan energy. Even though they may be out of the way, each of the following examples is well worth the effort to get

there – but it can take a bit of time, so do make sure you take a packed lunch.

Wales and Cornwall

Dating from between AD 900 to 1300, the 'Celtic' crosses of Wales and Cornwall, though not extravagant in their design, stand out for their sheer number and distinctive character.

Welsh and Cornish crosses are either plain or simply ornamented. In Cornwall, they are invariably carved in granite, the hardness of which reduces the scope for carved work. Over four hundred survive in Cornwall, and there are some five hundred of the wheel-headed Celtic type in Wales.

That every Cornish parish has at least one of these granite personages helps to set the duchy apart from the rest of the country. One of my favourites stands guard by the entrance to St Buryan's, which dominates West Penwith. Only the cross-head remains, cut in the tenth century on the order of King Æthelstan. Its wheel-head holds a rudimentary carving of a shoulder-less Christ on the cross on one side, and its reverse side is cut with five projecting hemispheres, a common symbol for Christ's five wounds. What makes it so appealing is how it has been planted at the top of an unnecessarily broad, five-stepped pyramid-like base, where the stunted ring-cross was fitted in the eighteenth century at its top that in the mist gives it the look of a frozen jack-in-the-box.

Evidence that they still have a powerful resonance with the locals can be seen at a cross near to St Buryan's that I had been asked to take a look at as the curate was concerned at its condition. I suspected it was a prehistoric monolith converted by some early saint or devotee who instructed a mason

to cut a simple cross into the head. Around the back lay a heap of black-and-white speckled granite-like aggregate. I was worried. Had the old fracture that ran through the menhir opened up, and was this the debris? I poked it, and its softer than expected crunch told me that it was some other material. I took a shocked step back out of respect when I realised the pile was someone's cremated remains. This, however, was just the tip of a heap of ash that the grass had crept over, suggesting it had been privately used by many generations. The locals still revered the totem, and would no doubt continue to use it to commemorate and remember, something they had been doing intermittently over the last four thousand years.

One of the most important centres of early Christian culture in the southern part of the Celtic world was established in the early 600s at Llantwit Major in Glamorganshire by St Illutyd (or St Twit, as the locals still affectionately call him). It became a college for the creation of holy men and women who went south by sea to spread the gospel in Cornwall and Brittany. Its sacredness lingered, and Welsh kings came to be buried in the Llan. When their fallen monuments were discovered in the eighteenth century, they were moved inside; today, they greet you as you enter the whitewashed – and recently restored – Galilee Chapel.

The six-foot-high 'wheelstone' is particularly captivating. Its base has an inscription that records it was commissioned by Houelt to remember his father, Hywel ap Rhys, a local king who died around AD 864. Cut from a single gritstone slab, with a solid circular sun disc that tops its highly decorated base, the cross is precisely cut with an interlace pattern of triangular fretwork. This motif can also be seen in the decorations of the Book of Kells and Lindisfarne Gospels, and many monuments in Ireland, including on the underside of Muirdach's Cross, the most famous of Irish high crosses.

Anglo-Saxon Crosses

The high cross is the most typical churchyard monument of Anglo-Saxon Britain. They date from the eighth to the tenth centuries and are common in northern England and southern Scotland.

Anglo-Saxon standing crosses share many attributes with those in Ireland and Scotland, but also drew upon a cosmopolitan sculptural language from the Roman Empire. Among the best are a pair, probably cut by the same hand in the eighth century, at Ruthwell near Dumfries, Scotland, and twenty miles to the east in the kirkyard at Bewcastle in what were known as 'the debatable lands' north of Hadrian's Wall. Nikolaus Pevsner captures how remarkable they were when he wrote: 'Art in Cumberland started its course through history at its climax. It never reached higher than with the . . . crosses of Bewcastle and of Ruthwell.'

I've known Ruthwell my whole life. It was where my interest in all thing's 'church' began, being near my aunt and uncle's farm, where I would be packed off during the school holidays. Even as an eight-year-old, I knew the church was the most exciting thing in the parish when my uncle told me the cross was covered in Viking runes. I remember like it was yesterday, stepping across the threshold of the eighteenth-century kirk in 1975 to the tang of lilies and furniture polish. The dim stillness of the interior was filled with bench pews that focused on the cross. Flicking a switch that turned on a spotlight seemed to startle the huge tapering red sandstone pillar that rose eighteen feet to fill the church's apse. Flecks of mica glinted in the glare. The 'Rune Stone' felt like an alien entity, and I could somehow sense its deep antiquity and an almost supernatural power. I climbed over the railing surrounding the pit and descended into what felt like the earth's bowels, from where

the cross rose, five or six times my height.

During later visits I learned the meaning of the carvings. The front and back faces are carved in deep relief, with scenes depicting Christ's life. The most dominant carved panel (that can also be seen on Bewcastle's cross) is of a robed Christ standing on the heads of two beasts that reflect his forty days in the desert. The Latin inscription around the panel explains its meaning: IHS XPS: JUDEX AEQUITATIS: BESTIAE ET DRACONES COGNOVERUNT IN DESERTO SALVATOREM MUNDI ['Jesus Christ: the judge of righteousness: the beasts and dragons recognised in the desert the saviour of the world']. A vine filled with birds curls up both sides, a feature commonly seen in early Christian art around the Mediterranean that alluded to one of Christ's teachings: 'I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.'

The cross stood outside in the kirkyard for a thousand years, where some finer details had been eroded by wind, rain and frost until 1642, when it was taken down on the orders of the Puritanical Covenanters and buried within the kirk. In 1842, it was rebuilt in the purpose-built apse in which it still stands.

I shone the torch along the margin that encloses the carvings where my uncle said I would see the runes, and it lit a faint line of scratched characters; I couldn't have been more excited when I read in the guide that the runes were not cut by Vikings, but by Anglo-Saxons. The section at the margin at the top of the vine scroll read: ᚴᚱᛁᛋᛏ ᚹᚫᛋ ᛟᚾ ᚱᛟᛞᛁ. I looked up the transliteration: 'Krist wæs on rodi', or 'Christ was on the cross', the start of a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, which reveals that the runes were cut after the cross was erected. The poem tells the story of Christ's crucifixion, from the perspective of the tree cut down to make the cross (known to the Anglo-Saxons as a 'rood').

The guidebook went on to tell how the poem cut into the cross is the longest surviving Anglo-Saxon runic inscription,

and perhaps the oldest English poem. What is remarkable is that its inscription into the red sandstone of Galloway predates the poem's earliest full surviving manuscript by two hundred years. The poem tells a macho, Germanic version of the crucifixion, where Christ is portrayed not as a sacrificial lamb but as a warrior like Beowulf, where the hero faces his fate and embraces death for the good of his kinsfolk. I imagined the story being told in a firelit beer hall, as hunting dogs chewed on sheep knuckles and smoke collected beneath the thatch.

Irish and Scottish High Crosses

The high cross is one of the outstanding achievements of early medieval Irish art, along with illuminated gospel books, due to their gigantic scale and astonishing carving.

Ireland's free-standing high crosses first appeared around the ninth century; about 250 await discovery, either protected from the elements within churches or still *in situ* in churchyards and monastic ruins. These iconic cultural landmarks are known for their gigantic size and distinctive design, with the four arms of the cross encircled in a ring, the well-known symbol for anything considered 'Celtic'. This loop may well symbolise eternal life, but its role is more practical. The arms, which can be up to a metre long, are so heavy that they cannot take their own weight, and the wheel provides extra support.

High crosses were never memorials that marked places of burial; instead, they were used as boundary markers of sacred land or as monuments to the political power of a local high priest. Although they are covered in Christian figurative imagery, much of their decoration draws on a much older

Irish tradition of inscribing stones. The faces of the enormous stone slabs used to construct the Bronze Age tombs at Newgrange in the Boyne Valley are carved with geometric spirals that, in around 500 BC, entered the highly organic, flowing curvilinear style of the Iron Age La Tène, the 'Celtic' culture that influenced the emerging design of the high cross form.

The most remarkable high cross was erected only a few miles from the Boyne Valley in Monasterboice, County Louth, by Abbot Muiredach in around AD 924. It stands proud under the shadow of the ruined monastery's round tower and is surrounded by modern graves. It's the best surviving example and has a considerable height and girth, meaning that it was carved with more iconography and patterns than any other cross in Ireland. I've visited in all seasons and have seen how the faded but still decipherable carving varies according to the time of day and time of year. A frosty winter morning is best, when the low sun introduces a dramatic contrast of light and shadow across the carvings, which reveal themselves in sparkling sequence as the sun's rays pass from east to west.

The stone's surface is covered with roundly modelled figure carving. The Last Judgement panel at the centre of the wheel is packed with forty-five other figures alongside Christ in judgement. On the right, angels accompany the harp-playing King David, while on the left side lost souls are prodded towards hell by a little devil with his trident. The religious stories depicted on the cross would have been known to their audience; they were not carved to educate but to impress and act as a point of devotion. The unsurprising Bible stories are accompanied by anecdotes that tell something of early medieval life: hunting scenes are full of warriors, some trotting along in chariots while others swing swords, drink beer from horns and tug at each other's beards.

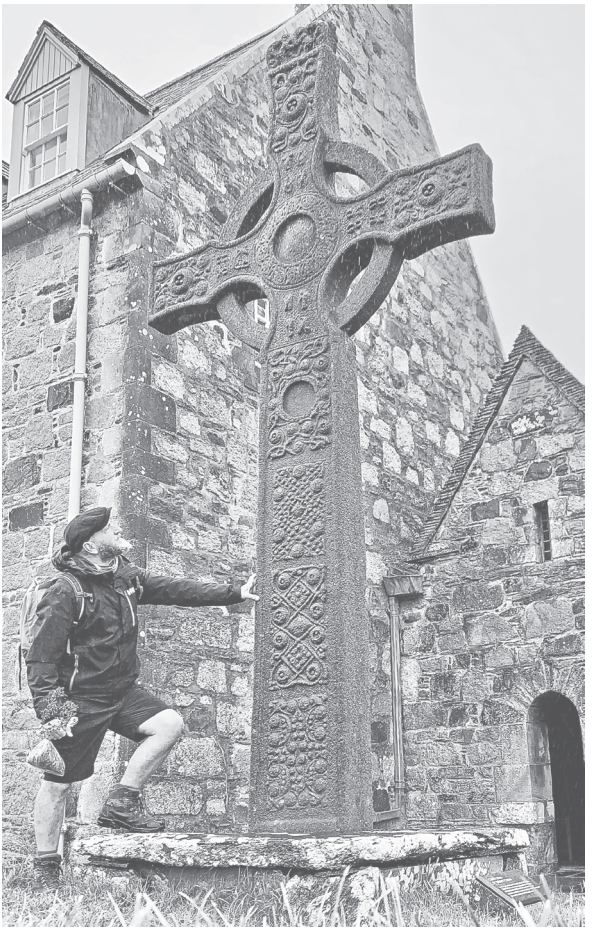
There is also strangeness in the carving. Why do the entwined snakes have cats' heads? On the outstretched

High cross, Monasterboice, County Louth, Republic of Ireland.

underside of the arms of the ringed cross there is a curious motif: a divine hand with yet more snakes entwining human heads. I have a hunch that the palm faces down and that the carver was right-handed; during the carving process, they would have put down their chisel in their left hand to study the hand's shape – the wrist is at the right angle for this. Could these crosses be a point of blessing? A place for a spiritual recharge when sat beneath the 'Hand of God'? The carver would use the same tools today: a hammer and punch for roughing out (the process of cutting away most of the waste material before the carved area is reached), and a mallet and chisel for finer detailing. Much of the work was undertaken

with a bow-operated drill, which helped form the depths in the gaps between the looping, knotted and interlaced forms.

Irish influence spread across the Irish Sea to Cornwall, Wales and western Scotland, where the collection of high crosses at Iona Abbey is full of designs, symbols and stories that will be familiar to anyone who has seen one of their Irish cousins. Of the three high crosses erected by the shrine of Iona's founder, St Columba, in the ninth century, only one



St John's Cross (concrete replica), Iona Abbey, Iona, Scotland.

– dedicated to St Martin – survives *in situ*. The other cross, dedicated to St John, is even more monumental in scale, but this is a skilled replica, cast in concrete, of the collapsed original that can be seen in the abbey's museum.

St Martin's Cross, cut from a single block of grey-green epidiorite, a stone that's volcanic in origin, towers to twice my height and is covered with carved panels blurred by time and the elements. Its east face is decorated with motifs that convey many Christian messages in a small space. The jelly-mould-like hemispherical boss at the centre of the cross represents God, with the arms connected by a circle of stone in the Celtic way. Spirals and interwoven serpents abound; in the shedding of their skin, they represent rebirth. The labyrinthine interlacing symbolises eternal life and is interposed with the symbol of Christ's majesty, the lion. Vines in the Roman style run down the side.

The west face is populated with biblical scenes cut in relief and strapwork decoration: Daniel is flanked by a pair of lions, then a tiny figure with a sword raised – perhaps Abraham about to sacrifice his son Isaac. King David plucks his harp. At the centre of the cross-head is Mary with the infant Jesus. It was a surprise to see how similar in style it was to a carving of the same age I'd seen built into a church wall five hundred miles away at St John the Baptist, Inglesham, Wiltshire. Both carvings would most likely have been copied from a gospel book; there is a similar likeness in the Book of Kells, its composition finding close parallels in paintings of the Virgin and Child thousands of miles to the east in the churches of the Byzantine world. The Iona carving of the Virgin and Child may only be small, but it indicates how well connected this outpost at the end of the known world was during the period that used to be stereotyped as the 'Dark Ages'. As we can see, it was anything but.

Pictish Crosses

Unlike the crosses that we see elsewhere, the Picts of remote north-east Scotland carved their cryptic Christian symbols, intertwined motifs and strange creatures, into free-standing slabs.

With a rich prehistoric stone-carving tradition, the Picts continued their focus on sculpture even after their conversion to Christianity by Saint Columba in around AD 565. This led to the creation of their enigmatic and highly refined crosses, which can still be admired in eastern Scottish kirkyards today.

Pictish cross, Aberlemno, Angus, Scotland.