

Handout

Exploring Your Ancestor's Parish Church and Churchyard.

A Talk by Celia Heritage

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I hope you enjoyed my talk. This handout aims to add a little extra information that I did not have time to impart in the talk and reminds of some of the key points discussed. Also see my new book [Cemeteries & Graveyards. A Guide for Local and Family Historians.](#)

Christianity in Britain

- Christianity well-established by 3rd century AD
 - trade with the continent & general religious tolerance in Roman Britain
 - 410 - Roman withdrawal from Britain – but Christianity remained
- 5th century - Teutonic invasions (Angles, Saxons, Jutes etc):
 - Pagan beliefs of the settling tribes were more popular
 - Christianity weathered these storms & took its place within what became Anglo-Saxon Britain - strongest in Cornwall Wales and western Scotland
- Christianity increased in popularity from late 6th century due to missionary work of the Celtic Christian based in Iona
- 597 - Augustine arrives in Kent – sent to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons
- Necessary to have one supreme united Church to convert the Pagan population
- Great Synod of Whitby 664 – gave pre-eminence to the Roman Church over the Celtic Church

Early churches in England

- Parishes evolved from minsters – religious communities of monks or secular clergy largely founded in the 7th century
- Minster churches also established – enabled teaching of Christianity among local population
- Minster churches were some of our earliest churches
- As were manorial churches – founded by Lords of the Manor
- Church encouraged local lords to provide religious example – they had more influence
- As Church grew in power – establishment of parishes from minsters.

Origins of the Churchyard

- Often much older than the present church - but few early documentary references – archaeology speaks more loudly
- Earliest churchyards were not places of burial – started in the eighth century and became the norm by the tenth century
- Sanctified by a special ceremony of consecration – not necessarily from outset
- 1229 the Bishop of Worcester, William de Bleys specified the churchyard should be properly enclosed

In medieval times the churchyard and church was convenient meeting place for the locals, and many non-religious, recreational activities took place there such as wrestling and archery contests and village fairs, village schools and from the late 16th century as the parish increasingly took on secular responsibilities the church became the place where the parish committee (the vestry) met and might also be used for itinerant probate courts. Poor relief would in some cases have been handed out in the churchyard perhaps using a convenient chest tomb or dole table.

In pre-Reformation times many churches would have had two or three side chapels with their own shrines often sponsored by local religious guilds who paid for their upkeep and donated gifts of statues and paintings depicting the various saints and candles to illuminate these images and to use as part of one's devotions. There would have been painted imagery all around our medieval parish churches. The chancel was the remit of priests and the nave for the congregation (who would have stood – no pews). The chancel was separated from the nave by the rood screen and above this was typically a rood loft on which the on which Crucifixion figures were carved (rood means cross in Anglo Saxon). The rood loft also acted as gallery where prayers were chanted and the remains still to be seen in many churches. You may spot an old staircase and blocked up doorway that once led to the rood loft

Many features of our medieval churches such as rood screens, wall paintings and images of saints (deemed to be “Popish”) were destroyed after Henry VIII's break with Rome and the Catholic church when the new Church of England became the established Church, and also in the later Puritan period. You may spot stoups (vessels for holy water) and piscine (stone basins set into the church wall for the priest to wash his hands) which have been deliberately damaged and occasionally rood screens which survive but where damage is obvious such as Eye in Norfolk.

The Rood and the paintings of the Last Day of Judgment (Doom paintings,) were replaced by what were considered to be more fitting features - the Royal Coat of Arms. Despite the Reformation still much symbolism in the church today some of it new some of it old -- few of us today realise what the symbols in a church mean. Look around and spot the symbols and learn what they mean. Symbols everywhere – check the walls, pulpit, lectern, pews, windows, kneelers etc. In many lecterns you will spot a phoenix - symbol of Christ and his resurrection while investigation of the pews is often rewarding.

Just as the church can tell us the history of political and religious changes for the community over the years, so the gravestones tell the story of the individuals who have lived and died there. Those memorials inside the church obviously relate to the better off classes of society and for centuries the church was the optimal location in which to be buried- as close to the holiest part of the church as possible - the high altar.

Intramural burial caused considerable disruption to the church floor and was expensive not just because of this, but because it required special permission from the church and payment of a large fee for the privilege.

There are several different types of grave – both inside the church and in the churchyard. Earth cut/brick lined or vaults – more in my book *Cemeteries and Graveyards*.

Gravestones start to become a feature in the churchyard from the 17th century onwards but it was not until the late 19th -early 20th century that they were affordable for a significant proportion of the population.

In Kent, many churchyard boundaries appear to have been marked out by what are today referred to as discoid markers. These round-headed stone markers are often incised with stylised crosses and there is some debate as to whether they are early grave markers or in my opinion probably more likely actually to be consecration crosses denoting the churchyard boundary and where it was originally consecrated. Many have clearly been re-sited in the churchyard over the course of history, and some may be spotted having been re-used as part of the later church fabric or occasionally found in piles of rubble by the side of the church. Keep your eyes open and if you see any outside Kent, please let me know

Meanings of Symbols Found in Churches and on Gravestones

Ape or monkey: represents lust

Bear: Evil power

Butterfly: the Resurrection

Circle or equilateral triangle or three identical images woven together: The Trinity

Crane: Vigilance

Dog: faithfulness

Dove: the Holy Spirit or peace.

Dragon: Satan

Eagle: Divine inspiration. Used to represent St John the Evangelist

Fish: Jesus Three interwoven fishes shows the Trinity.

Hand emerging from a cloud or a halo of light: God's presence.

Lamb: Jesus.

Oak: faith, strength and durability

Owl: Wisdom (often associated with St Jerome). Sometimes however it was used to represent evil because of its association with the night.

Peacock: In medieval times it was believed that the peacock did not decay after it had died and it came to represent immortality.

Pelican: The pelican was thought to feed its young with its own blood and is used to represent Jesus' sacrifice on the cross

Phoenix: The resurrection.

Rabbit or hare: Lust

Rose: purity. Also the sign for the Virgin Mary

Serpent encircling its own tail: eternity

Star of David: Two interwoven triangles creating a six pointed star represents The Creation and also the Trinity, which was present at the Creation.

Thistles: hardship or sin

Unicorn: Purity and strength. Likened to God's incarnation in Jesus.

Three interwoven symbols will usually represent the Trinity.

Organizations.

The Churches Conservation Trust

The Trust cares for redundant churches that are of historical significance and encourages their use by the local community. They are always on the lookout for volunteers to help care for churches and raise the profile of the Trust. If you don't have time to volunteer take a look at their website for a list of local churches to visit.

<http://www.visitchurches.org.uk/>

Online Databases of burials and gravestones

www.worldburialindex.com Thousands of inscriptions and images from gravestones in the UK and overseas.

www.gravestonephotos.com Free site.

www.billiongraves.com Bias is heavily American.

www.deceasedonline.com Growing Centralised database of statutory burial and cremation registers for the UK and Republic of Ireland. Coverage is not yet complete but covers many UK cemeteries and crematoria and very helpful for London research.

The National Burial Index is available at www.findmypast.com as part of its 'Parish Records Collection'.

www.findagrave.com Details and images of gravestones in cemeteries from around the world

Ancestorsatrest.com Mainly graves from USA and Canada but a number of Irish cemeteries are covered and a few from England and Scotland.

The Canadian Headstone Photo Project www.canadianheadstones.com Free site. Contains records of some 300,000 records of gravestones in Canada and these are also indexed on Ancestry.

www.namesinstone.com Free site offering Canadian and American gravestone details. It includes an estimated 900,000 records.

www.nmm.ac.uk/memorials Transcriptions of monuments commemorating British people with maritime related work or careers and the victims of disaster at sea.

<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk> (Kent Archaeological Society) Wonderful collection of nineteenth century Kent churchyard inscriptions.

Further Reading.

Celia Heritage – Cemeteries & Graveyards. A Guide for Local and Family Historians. Pen & Swords Books 2022 [click here](#)

Celia Heritage *Tracing Your Ancestors Through Death Records* Pen and Sword 2nd edition 2013 [click here](#)

More on Incised-cross Markers (discoids) <https://www.chfh.co.uk/blog/>

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