

Serving Us

Cosy whodunnits, romantasy, mythological retellings, and a 'renaissance' is underway, I'm told, in horror fiction. All these have been publishing trends in the UK recently. None of them, quite honestly, appeals to me in the slightest. But over the last few years another, perhaps surprising, trend has emerged: books about church buildings and their histories.

I loved Peter Ross's *Steeple Chasing* (May 2023) and Andrew Ziminski's *Church Going* (October 2024) likewise. And then there's Luke Sherlock's *Forgotten Churches* (March 2025) and Fergus Butler-Gallie's *Twelve Churches* (August 2025). And Rachel Morley's *Church Crawling* is due out in the autumn (I'm thoroughly enjoying my review copy).

These books are full of fascinating architectural and historical detail. Each in its own way recognises that our parish churches are a physical record of our nation's story. Made of stone and flint and oak, they are palimpsests onto which the account of 'who we are' has been inscribed, effaced, re-inscribed over and over again. To 'read' a church is somehow to read our own national biography.

And yet, for all my enjoyment of these books, there's an aspect of the trend that worries me a little. The emphasis on the fabric of the buildings and their history can leave out something vital. Us. Let me explain what I mean with an example close to home.

In the last couple of years two individuals have made extraordinarily generous donations to St Mary's Great Bedwyn. Thanks to one bequest, the roof has been repaired, and the bells of St Mary's are ringing again. Another donation has made possible the glorious restoration of the South Transept and parts of the Chancel. If you haven't yet been to see the work of Sam MacArthur and his expert team, do go and look. It's extraordinary. The generosity of the donors, the support of the Friends of Great Bedwyn Church Trust and the dedication of Sue Challen has made all this possible.

But my point is: this loving, careful work was not carried out on a museum piece, on a 'heritage asset', an historical artefact. St Mary's is a living, working space for the whole village, host to weekly community lunches and teas, a much-loved concert venue, the setting for packed carol and crib services at Christmas. The school makes regular use of St Mary's for Leavers' Services, Harvest Thanksgiving, and at Easter and Christmas.

And Sunday by Sunday, the congregation at St Mary's is growing, at Family Services, Choral Matins, quiet Evening Prayer, and Holy Communion services. Perhaps the best witness to this change is the humble Baptism Register kept in the safe in the vestry. Looking back through the register, you can see there's been a steady flow of baptisms at St Mary's. Perhaps three or four a year. The baptisms listed for 2025/6 are already taking up a whole page. And more are in the offing.

Our parish churches aren't just serving an historical, heritage function; they're serving *us*. And they're doing it now.

Colin Heber-Percy