

MEDIEVA

Medieval creativity, be it expressed in glass, paint, stone or wood, was set to the task of teaching the earth. Introducing his exhibition at Fenton House, Paul Hurst ARPS discusses his project of photographing



The county of Norfolk is blessed with over 700 medieval churches. There used to be a saying in Norwich, its capital, that it had a pub for every day of the year and a church for every week. While most of the redundant churches in the city have been given a second life as theatres and museums, unfortunately their sister churches in the countryside have had to be locked, which prevents people viewing their treasures.

On many of my visits to churches, I have been pleased to meet their guardians and trustees, people from everyday life who look after the buildings and care for the artworks within. They are often veritable walking guide-books, and will gladly point out the history of objects and items you might otherwise miss.

I always tend to investigate a church before my visit. There are some very informative sites on the web. One that I often reference is

www.norfolkchurches.co.uk, which has been compiled by Simon Knott, who has visited almost every church in Norfolk and Suffolk, making notes of the buildings, and taking images of interesting items.

My aim, through exhibiting work, is to encourage people to see what they are missing and visit these churches, which will in turn help to keep them open and secure. At a time when memorials and anything metallic seems to be targeted for scrap, it has been stated by the insurance companies that keeping the church open will reduce the possibility of break-ins.

In the medieval period, Norfolk was inhabited by an abundance of rich wool merchants who, in the hope of going to heaven, built churches in their villages and furnished them. They employed local craftsmen to build the screens, and artists from the relevant artisan quarters of Norwich to paint the images and

decoration. The artists travelled Great Britain and Europe, collecting images to build up a catalogue of work for the benefactor to choose from. It is from these that we can identify particular artists' work at different locations.

Ornate carved wooden rood screens were constructed to separate the nave from the chancel and altar, primarily to keep the mass and clergy separated from the common folk. The screen would have been brightly decorated, and had a cross (rood) and perhaps two figures (Mary and John the Baptist) across the spanning rood beam. This would have been accessible, via a small set of stairs, for someone to walk across the beam and illuminate with candles on high days such as Easter. Many of the stairways are still visible, either in part or complete, although some have been blocked in over the years.

The screens were predominantly painted

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bible to the illiterate people of the age, and also provided a glimpse of what heaven looked like from Norfolk's medieval churches



Above left: Barton Turf dado panel.

Above: Barton Turf seraphim.

with saints, from the bible and local to the region, although other characters like angels were also used. They can mostly be identified by the objects that they carry. For instance, St Peter would be depicted carrying keys. Lesser known, Saint Wilgefortis was a Saxon, who grew a beard as she was reluctant to marry her father's choice of suitor. She is depicted with a beard and on a cross, as she was crucified for refusing her suitor.

These images had to be strong in character and design, and easily understood: not so different from our aims when taking photographs today.

Rood screen art is in landscape format. My technique to reproduce it therefore is to make 10 or more images at a set distance from the screen, to allow the creation of a panorama. As well as preventing any distortion, this has the benefits of preventing shadows from the mullions [vertical structural

elements that divide adjacent window units] and producing a very large image.

Most churches face east, with the altar at the east end. This can create issues with the balance of light, as the sun will start from the east, and remain on the south side for most of the day. To overcome this, I choose a bright overcast day, that will balance the light more, and not have direct sunlight passing from the south side and hitting the north side, which will create burnt out areas on an image.

You also need to bear in mind that light conditions in churches can change every minute, every day, so it can be tricky when revisiting to match or blend with a previous day's shoot.

With a tripod and low ISO setting, there is no requirement for flash, and I would not encourage its use. The colours are as accurate and true as possible, needing very little adjustment to replicate the original artists'

palette. A sensitive use of Photoshop to compensate for the darkness levels in the church can improve the image, without over exaggerating the original artwork colours. On recent projects, I have taken a small printed image from a work in progress file to check that the colours are faithful to the original.

I have also merged the north and south dado panels into one image (illustrated in *Barton Turf dado panel*). This can have benefits, as it highlights different artists' work in some churches, and seeing all the angels or figures in one photograph makes for a far more interesting image.

A recent project has been to collect images of 250 roof bosses in the nave of Norwich

FENTON HOUSE EXHIBITION

Cathedral. Over 35 metres above the vaulting, they are some 300-500mm in diameter, which can be quite a challenge. Carved in stone, these bosses are positioned at the nodal points, where the rib vaulting intersects, and illustrate both the Old and New Testaments, forming a unique snapshot of medieval life.

They were photographed around 12 years ago by Julia Hedgecoe, who used direct artificial light to maintain consistency. My aim was not just to repeat the collecting of these bosses, but to record them in natural light, so as to allow shadowing to give a three dimension appearance. It took me up to three hours on three separate visits to capture a constant natural light. I found that conditions were optimum in mid-summer, when the sun was high, and it would enter the clerestory and reflect off the white Caen stonework up into the roof vault.

Most of the preparatory drawings for these bosses would have been created as a result of the master mason's viewing of mystery plays travelling around the country, as can be identified by the characters depicted, costumes, and records of plays.

The costumes and characters are very interesting. One scene shows a pharaoh and his armies being drowned in the Red Sea. The artist wasn't sure of what a chariot looked like, so he used an image of a Nor-

folk hay cart. The scene of the shepherds in the nativity meanwhile looks as if the artist just went out to the local fields and captured men tending their sheep.

Medieval creativity, be it expressed in glass, paint, stone or wood, sets out to enable the teaching of the bible to the illiterate, also providing a glimpse of what heaven looked like from earth, and where you would go if you attended church and believed. Fail to do this meanwhile, and there were plenty of scenes of the last judgement, and how you would be carried off to hell!

My latest study is of carved hammer beam roofs that have survived time, the beautiful images in the nave looking down on us mortals below.

Perhaps not as high and lofty as a cathedral, these parish churches nevertheless feature some of the most creative carvings of angels to be seen. As I study these further, it becomes clear that medieval parish churches were capable of funding carpenters and a wooden roof, whereas the cathedrals could fund stonemasons and vaulted roofs.

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Right: Wymondham Abbey hammerbeam roof.
Below: Norwich Cathedral nave bosses.

