

STEEPLECHASE

Paul Hurst ARPS has produced a distinctive body of work, photographing the lofty heights of the country's churches and cathedrals. Here, he talks about the development of his photography, and the particulars of photographing religious structures



Above: Canterbury Tower.

My fascination with photographing the great buildings of England stems from the many years I was employed in cathedrals, during which I had time to let my eyes wander and study the buildings in great detail. In addition, as a part of my working life, I prepare plans for design and construction, so architecture is integral to what I do.

Although I owned a film camera before the days of

digital, it sat gathering dust and I seldom used it. The advent of digital photography has enabled me the freedom to study and experiment. I started participating in conversations on The Society's website forum a couple of years ago. At the time, my sights were set firmly on a Licentiate'ship, and feedback from other forum users was enthusiastic and welcome, while assistance from a committee member



Left: St John's Nave.

guided me toward setting out my panel.

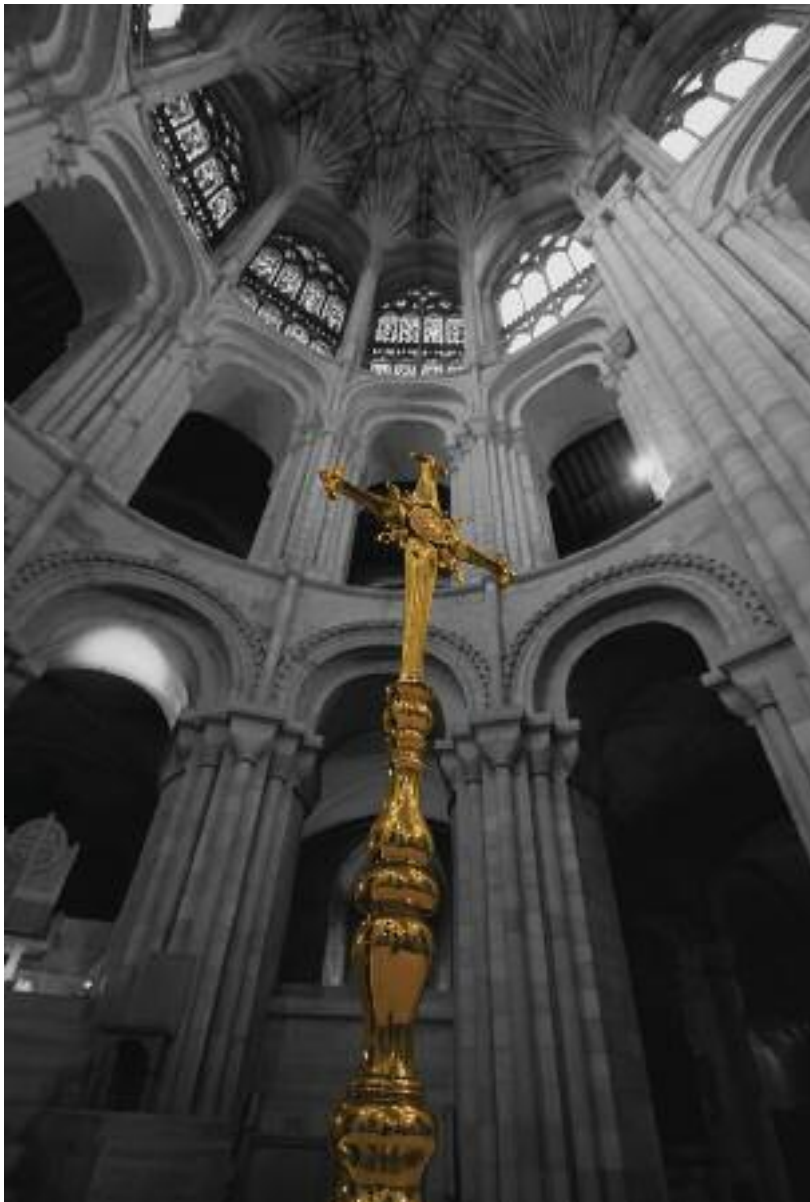
I presented my photographs in print form, feeling that this gave the work closure, as well as providing a great sense of satisfaction when looking at the final mounted prints.

I passed my LRPS, and the following year, again with help from the forum, as well as from the Applied and Professional Panel Chair, I was once again on the

journey to Bath, this time in pursuit of my Associateship.

I am most fortunate to live in Norwich, the county city of Norfolk – which is blessed with over 700 fine churches, and a city with two cathedrals. (Norwich was known in the past as having a pub for every day of the year and a church for every week!)

Photographing churches and cathedrals over the



Above: Norwich High Altar Cross.

years, I started to develop my own style, concentrating on interiors and upward shots. It's a view which visitors can rarely take in for long periods, due to chronic neck ache!

The structures can look quite distant from the ground, but were originally intended as a link to, and representative view of, heaven, which people could understand and relate to in a time when not many could read. My aim is to enable people today to reconnect with this vision, using photography to bring the work and form down to eye level.

A lesson in stonemasonry from RPS forum member Sean Hepburn, has proved invaluable in giving me greater insight into skills which have barely changed over centuries.

There are lots of interesting books on churches and cathedrals, and it's a good idea to have a look at them before you set out to photograph this subject matter. For cathedrals and large churches, you'll probably also find a website, which will list areas of significance. It's important to remember however that you're going there to find something new.

Start off by visiting your local church. This can pay dividends when you want to return to improve on a picture's composition, or to work in more favourable

weather conditions. Most churches will allow photography, although you should be wary of using flash near early paintings. They exist in the subdued interior light of the church, and their delicate pigments can be damaged and faded by exposure to the intense light of flash.

If a photo permit is required, a cathedral may state this on its website. Any charges levied will be used towards the cathedral's upkeep. Cathedrals can get busy with tourists, so carefully choose the time of your visit, avoiding weekends.

Due to concern over the possibility of other visitors tripping over them, cathedrals can be sensitive about the use of tripods. You can however get away with not using one. I have had many successful results from setting the camera's timer and placing it on the stone floor, using architecture to align the shot, and autofocus to obtain clear, sharp pictures.

For an angled shot, I again place the camera on the floor, but this time leant against my shoe. A warning for wide angle though - lean back! (My head appears in my wide angle shots as ubiquitously as my thumb in my childhood photographs!)

A recently acquired angle viewer has proved very useful, as it allows you to view perpendicularly without craning your neck to the ceiling. For looking closely at distant subjects, I have a small pair of binoculars, which are especially useful for viewing stained glass.

Most cathedrals and churches are built with the altar facing east and the entrance to the west, so for a composition directly down the nave or toward the altar, you want to go in late afternoon, when the sun is behind you.

Best results for large interior or roof shots are achieved on days with a light, well balanced sky. Strong sunlight will fall to the south side, which may unbalance symmetry and burn out windows above. Sun can however play its part and generate emotive results: think of shafts of light hitting stone through stained glass.

I have discovered that, to capture a large east- or west-facing window at a level of detail high enough to print with clarity at A3, it's best to shoot in sections and stitch together in Photoshop. Look for overcast weather, as direct sunlight will burn out any detail.

Churches have collection boxes - if you feel the building has helped you create some new work or ideas, give a donation for its upkeep. If you intend to use your photography commercially, contact the church or cathedral prior to visiting to find out its policy.

Permissions are always a minefield. While you are the owner of the copyright in any work you make, you are shooting inside on private land, so you need to look carefully at any by-laws which may pertain.

Commonsense is required. If the images are for commercial work, then you have to obtain permission, preferably in writing. But most cathedrals run shops, and are quite keen on commercial ventures, which could develop into a good outlet for your work. In practice, most churches will react positively in exchange for good images.

Architectural photography has taken a back seat in recent years, or has been focused on new buildings and structures. With DSLRs however, classical subjects can be revisited to bring them alive once again.

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Recommended reading
England's 1000 Best Churches, by Simon Jenkins, Penguin Books, £22, ISBN 0140297952.