



Jerry Sampson has been professionally involved with church buildings as an archaeologist since 1978 and is currently the Cathedral Archaeologist for Wells and St. Davids.

Over a career spanning the last 40 years it has become apparent that close examination of the standing fabric of church buildings has much more to offer than has been realised and that the subtle traces left by destroyed or partially preserved fittings can teach us much about what has been lost the artistic heritage of the late middle ages. When this is combined with the documentary evidence a picture emerges of the richness and vitality of late medieval church art and activity. Visualising the results of this evidence can open a window into a lost world of colour, sound and liturgical theatre, destroyed by the cupidity and self-interest of the Tudor monarchy.

SOMERSET ARCHAEOLOGICAL & NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY



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ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

a series of six talks in North Petherton

by archaeologist

Dr Jerry Sampson FSA

Across the Great Divide: The archaeology of the Parish Church at the time of the Reformation

A series of six talks examining the process and extent of the destruction of late mediaeval ecclesiastical art: recreating the appearance of the sixteenth century decorated church from the traces remaining in Somerset and incorporating recent research and discoveries.

The 1530s and 40s saw the introduction of new forms of worship in which the rich medieval tradition of figural sculpture and painting no longer had a place and the liturgy replaced the religion of transcendent theatre with one of the book. The mass and the altars upon which it was centred, the complex liturgy and the processions and celebrations were no longer performed and the colour and display of the Catholic church of the middle ages gave way to a new Protestant austerity. With the denial of the existence of purgatory and the efficacy of prayers for the dead the cult of saints became irrelevant and the saying of masses for the dead in perpetual chantries was dispensed with and the crown confiscated the funds which had supported them. In the space of two decades religious activity and imagery changed irrevocably.

The talks will be largely based around the close study of the church fabric rather than concentrating on the documentary evidence and will draw upon the traces of late medieval fittings still remaining in the churches of Somerset.

Saturday 25th November 2.30pm

“Pre-reformation wall painting”

Mediaeval churches were extensively decorated with traces now sometimes apparent. Every parish church would have had a painting at least of the final judgement. Fixings for painted boards are sometimes in evidence and there are reconstructive examples of decoration such as that for the Lady Chapel at Glastonbury Abbey.

Saturday 20th January 2.30pm

“Liturgical arrangements of the pre-reformation church”

The ways in which mediaeval liturgy impacted on the architecture and fittings of the church with particular reference to rood screens and singers' galleries. The relationship of fittings and sculpture to the processions of the church year.

Saturday 17th February 2.30pm

“The pre-reformation altar and its fittings”

Altars were a prime target for destruction during the Protestant reformation. Richly decorated reredos or retables stood above or behind the altar. Particular reference will be made to recent work on St. Cuthbert's fragments (Wells) and the Wellington Reredos.

Saturday 24th March 2.30pm

“Figure Sculpture and the cult of saints”

An examination of the extent of loss of statues removed from niches in the late mediaeval church. Sometimes fragments were preserved by being used as packing. Sculptures on the outside of buildings were often ignored by the reformers and as can be seen at Wells Cathedral and Bath Abbey are evidence of this rich heritage.

Saturday 21st April 2.30pm

“The suppression of the chantries”

How chantries were established and how they operated from documental evidence. Particular reference to be given to the chantry of Thomas Tanner at St. Cuthbert's, Wells where traces of his lost tomb have been identified.

Saturday 26th May 2.30pm:

“The post-reformation church interior”

The destruction of images and erasure of figural decoration and its replacement with edifying texts. How churches were re-arranged to suit the new liturgy and the destruction of the reredos at Wells Cathedral.

N.B. The order of talks may be changed at short notice.

All talks to be held at;
North Petherton Community Centre
North Petherton
TA6 6QA

Booking is essential. Please book through the SANHS office at office@sanhs.org

The cost for SANHS members is £5 for each talk or £25 for all six; for non-members the cost is £8 per talk and £40 for all six.