

# Parish Churches

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



## Introduction

Most parish churches in the South Devon AONB originate between the 12th and 13th centuries. They continued to develop up to the mid-16th century Reformation, which changed England from the Roman Catholic to the Protestant faith. After this date, few alterations were made: Christians of the mid-16th to early 19th centuries spent little on church building. Many alterations were however

made in the period from circa 1830 to 1920, sometimes involving the complete replacement of church buildings.

Study of the architecture, layout and fittings of parish churches can tell us a great deal about the way people worshipped in the past. They are important for their contribution to our overall understanding of past religious practices and social history. There are over 40 parish churches of medieval origin in the South Devon AONB



*Church of St Thomas à Becket - Dodbrooke*

## Distribution

Churches are usually located near the centre of ecclesiastical parishes, which came into being in two main periods: the first occurring in the 12th-13th centuries; the second during the Reformation in the 1530s. They were usually tied to landholdings, such as those controlled by medieval manors. In many cases, the new parish church had formerly been a private chapel belonging to the manor, whose house was usually nearby. In addition, several new churches and parishes were created in the 19th century to serve towns which had recently grown up, such as Salcombe in 1840, or isolated settlements in large parishes such as Strete in 1830.

## Function

The parish church acted as a central place of assembly for social as well as religious purposes. Parish churches developed at a time when rural settlement was on the increase, after the Norman Conquest of 1066-1068 altered the ownership and control of land in England. Many English rural settlements originated in this period.

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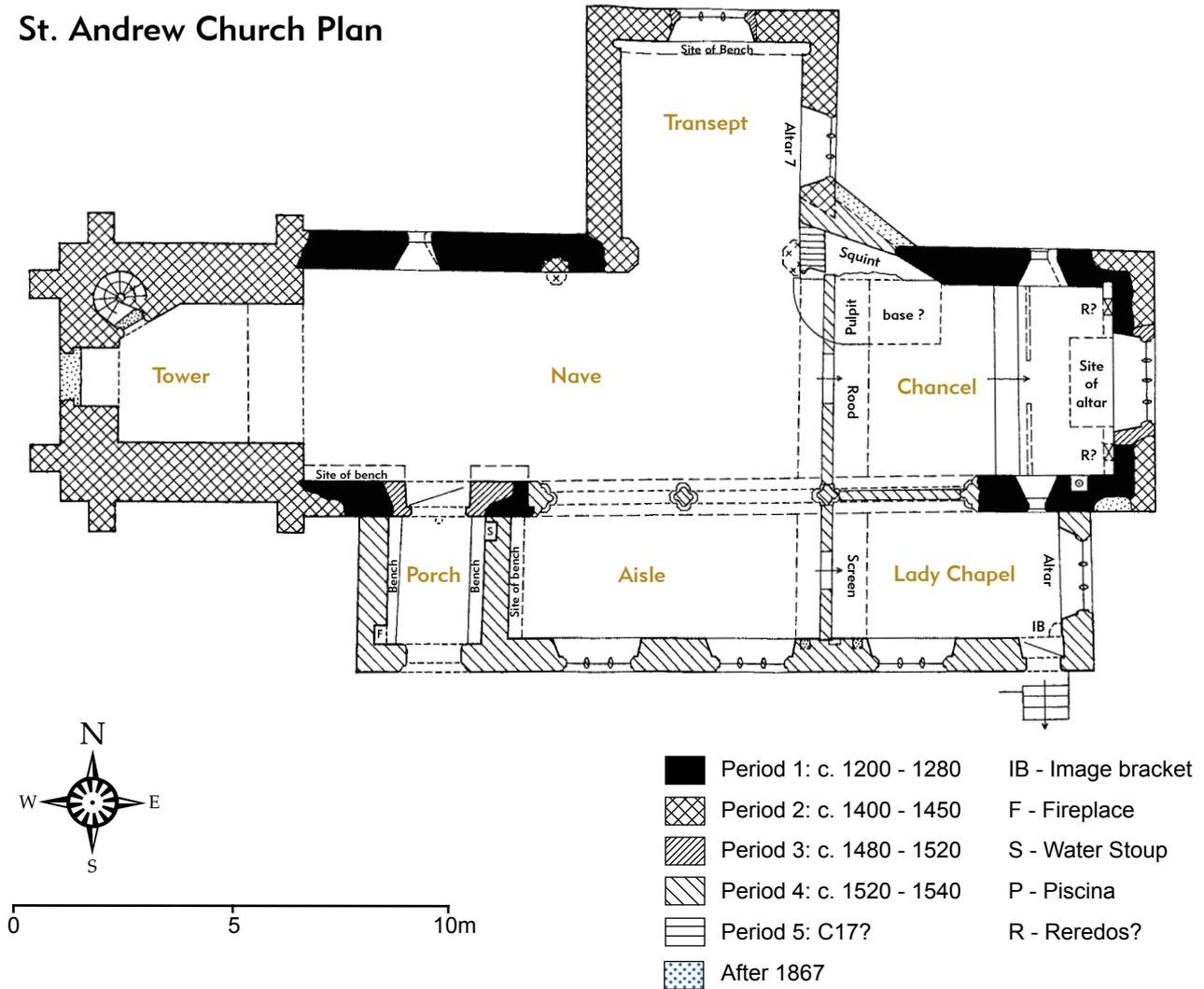
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## How they worked - internal detail

St. Andrew Church Plan



The layout of a typical South Devon parish church is illustrated here by the ruined church of St Andrew at South Huish.

The largest part of a church was its **nave**, where the parishioners stood or later sat to worship and observe the activities of the priest in the chancel.

The **chancel** was where the priest celebrated mass and where the high altar was located. Before the 15th century, a stone archway gave access between it and the nave; later there was a wooden screen. The parishioners could not go beyond this point. For this reason, the priest was required to pay for repairs to the chancel, while the parishioners had responsibility for the nave. This is the reason for the often considerable difference between the architectural quality of the two areas.

**Transepts** usually date to the 12th-early 15th centuries, the earliest examples having a pair, projecting to north and

south at the east end of the nave. This gives the church a cruciform plan, presumably symbolic of the cross. Later alterations to churches often mean that one or both transepts have been lost.

Before the 16th century, transepts usually contained private **chantry chapels**, paid for by a wealthy person, usually the Lord of the Manor. They often employed a priest or clerk to sing or 'chant' regular masses to God at an altar in the chapel on behalf of the donor's family, who were usually buried beneath its floor. This ended in 1547, when chantries were suppressed and their assets confiscated by the Crown.

**Aisles** were usually added in the 15th and 16th centuries, but in some larger churches, such as Modbury and Kingsbridge they could be earlier. They were often necessary when congregations had grown due to population increases.

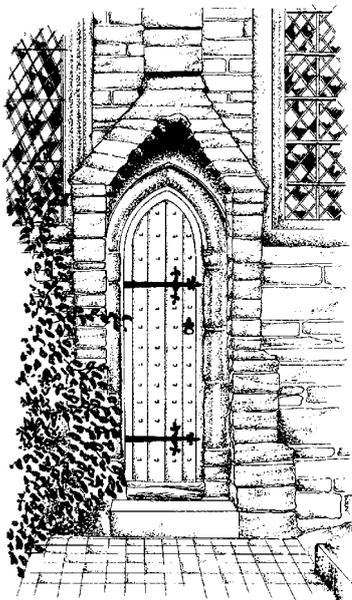
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**Bell towers** were added to churches from the 13th century onwards, sometimes being adorned with pinnacles or spires, several of which survive in the South Devon AONB. Those at Malborough and Modbury are thought to date from the later 13th or 14th century, but the main period of tower building was the 15th century, when spires were uncommon. Very tall tapering towers with multiple buttresses were built in the mid to late 15th century, those at Stokenham, Chivelstone and Totnes being classic examples. Despite this grandeur, most examples only had a small number of bells, four being a typical number. Many examples of bells from the 15th to 18th centuries survive in Devon churches, most of which are still rung.

Chancel Door - St Edmund King & Martyr



A church could have up to four **doors**, each having a different function. All had a door in the south wall of the nave, which was the main entrance for all the parishioners. This sometimes had a porch added to it at a later date. Most churches also had a west door, through which the bride and groom would pass prior to their wedding; it would also be used on special occasions for the choir to enter by, and sometimes by the Lord of the Manor and his family. A small door is sometimes found on the north side of the church, opposite the font. An old superstition required that this door be left open during christenings in order that the Devil could be banished that way. The north side of the church was always seen as the less favoured side for that reason.

Another small door is often found on the south side of the chancel, or in this case, the Lady Chapel. This was for the priest to enter and leave the church.

**Chapels** were often found at the east end of aisles, with the rood screen brought across them. They could also contain chantry chapels, but that on the south was usually a public chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Saints such as Mary were prayed to before the Reformation to make intercession with God on your behalf, in the same way as Christ has been prayed to since the 16th century. In addition to Mary, most churches had a saint, sometimes a local one, to whom they were dedicated. In this way, they echoed the Celtic and Roman religions, which had many small gods, presided over by a supreme deity.

**Stained glass windows** are rare survivals from before the 19th century as many were deliberately broken by religious zealots in the 16th and 17th centuries. They could contain decorative glass, showing the shields of local Lords of the Manor, or pictures of angels or saints. Sometimes, scenes from the bible were shown and are thought to have been used in teaching scripture, at a time when church services were given in Latin, unintelligible to most people.

**Screens** included the rood screen which divided the nave and chancel, and parclose screens, which divided the chancel from chapels in the ends of the aisles. Above the rood screen between the nave and chancel, a carved representation of the Passion of Christ (the 'rood') was fixed until the Reformation, when most were removed. Screens were often lavishly carved in imitation of church window tracery, and were painted in bright colours. Lower panels often had images of saints on them and their upper parts were vaulted to support a gallery, on which choirboys would stand to sing on special occasions. A stone staircase accessed the gallery from one side of the church, and this often survives when the screen has not. A photograph of the well-preserved rood screen at South Pool is shown here.



Screen in South Pool Church

Originally, churches would have had no **seats** other than a few benches against the walls for elderly or infirm people. The phrase 'the weakest go to the wall' refers to this practice. Pews began to be added from the late 15th century onwards and were often funded by local benefactors.

The **font** was used for christenings and storage of holy water, and was normally placed on the north side of the nave opposite the south door. When churches have been wholly rebuilt at a later date, the font is often the only remaining indicator of an earlier church. Several carved red sandstone tub fonts from the later 12th century survive in South Devon churches, such as that at South Milton.

**Tombs** of wealthy people were often placed in the chancel or chapels, sometimes in vaults beneath the floor. The dead person was commemorated by an inscribed slab, sometimes with an engraved brass insert, or even with a carved stone **effigy**. Wall memorials began to appear in the 17th century and were common in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Most of the common people were buried in the **graveyard** outside, stone memorials beginning in the late 17th century, replacing wooden ones which do not survive. The great height of graveyards above the surrounding land is due to centuries of burials. Graveyards were often used for fairs and revels, although this was stopped in the 17th century by the Puritans.

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## History & development

Typically, churches grew in size and complexity over time, although in a few cases they shrank, if the population of a parish fell. The development of St Andrew's Church at South Huish is typical of many small parish churches in the South Devon AONB, and is used here as a case-study in church development.

It began as a simple manorial chapel, with a nave and chancel, in the first half of the 13th century. In the 15th century the north transept and west bell tower were added. In the early 16th century it gained parochial status, celebrating this by adding a south aisle. A carved and painted timber rood screen divided the nave and aisle from the chancel and a new Lady chapel alongside, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. An additional storey was added to the tower at this time, to increase the number of bells to three.

In the early 17th century, a pulpit was added: the practice of giving sermons began at this time, after English replaced Latin in church services in 1549. Other than this, no major changes took place until 1866, when the decision was made to abandon the old church and built a new one at Galampton, 1km to the south.

## Other types of church

Between the 17th and early 20th centuries, other ways of worshipping grew up. **Non-conformist** chapels are common in South-West England, many sects beginning here, such as the Baptists and the Plymouth Brethren. Non-Conformist chapels are typically very plain, with biblical texts painted on their walls, and with upper galleries as some did not approve of women and men mixing during services. Some are aligned north-south instead of the traditional east-west. In these and other ways, they did not 'conform' to the established ways of the Protestant church, hence their title. Such chapels often grew up in industrial areas, such as ports and towns. Kingsbridge (see below) had a remarkable number of different churches and chapels in the 18th and 19th century. The Roman Catholic church, despite severe persecution in the 16th and 17th centuries, never died out, and several congregations still continue.

## Where can I visit parish churches in the South Devon AONB?

There are more than 42 parish churches in the AONB, and many more outside it. All are publicly accessible, but some are kept locked for security reasons, although there are usually contact details for keyholders displayed in a prominent location, such as the porch.

The following churches are well worth a visit:

## ■ St Sylvester, Chivelstone

This delightful little church was a chapel in the parish of Stokenham until 1530, when it gained full parochial rights. The site is however much earlier; the chancel centring on a circular enclosure visible on old maps, which may be an early Christian graveyard of the 5th-7th century AD. The tower is mid-late 15th century, of the tapered multiple-buttressed type, but the remainder of the church was rebuilt in the early 16th century, with a fine rood screen stretching across the nave and two aisles. The lower part has 22 fine paintings of saints, but the rood loft has failed at some point and the remains of its carved work have been glued to the spandrels between the arches of the screen. In the chancel is an unusual tomb, recessed into the north wall, which is known as an Easter Sepulchre, used in the rites surrounding the festival of Easter.

### How to get there

Chivelstone is just off the lane from Stokenham to Start Point. Parking is possible on the lane just east of the church. Grid Reference SX 783 388



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## ■ St Andrew, South Huish

The ruins of the church, roofless since 1866-67, stand in its graveyard on the edge of the hamlet of South Huish. The site is administered by the Friends of Friendless Churches. It is a very beautiful and peaceful place.

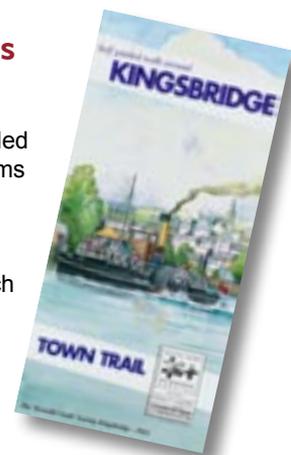
### How to get there

Take the lane north from Galmpton Cross on the Malborough to Hope Cove road, and turn left at Waterlears Cross. The church is almost immediately on the right, with parking on the roadside. Grid Reference SX 695 411



## ■ Kingsbridge churches & chapels

**Kingsbridge Town Walk** This guided walk leaflet, produced by South Hams District Council, takes you round a selection of places of worship, including the parish church of St Edmund, the Roman Catholic church and a number of non-conformist chapels, including the earliest surviving Baptist chapel in Devon, dating to 1702. The leaflet is available from Kingsbridge Tourist Information Centre on the Quay



## Where can I find out more?

Most churches have a guide book, although the accuracy of the information in them varies.

Good books on the subject include: Church Archaeology, by Warwick Rodwell, published by English Heritage, but currently out of print.

Discovering Church Architecture, by Mark Child, No 214 in the Shire 'Discovering' series, contains a useful illustrated glossary of features.

Churches and Chapels: Investigating Places of Worship by David Parsons is published by the Council for British Archaeology and is a must for students of churches.

## About this factsheet

This factsheet was written by Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA. He is a freelance archaeologist & architectural historian and has lived and worked in South Devon for most of his life. This websheet was produced in March 2005 and is one of a series about the special features of the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty - see [www.southdevonaonb.org.uk](http://www.southdevonaonb.org.uk) It may be reproduced for private (non commercial) use

