

# **Parish Churches of the Cranborne Chase National Landscape.**

## ***Introduction***

The Cranborne Chase is a very special place. The landscape is diverse with downland hillsides and chalk river valleys and includes areas of rare chalk grasslands, scientifically important ancient woodlands, and chalk escarpments. It is also an historic landscape, in that whilst all landscapes are historic, within the Cranborne Chase evidence of thousands of years of human habitation is met around every corner. Whether you are looking at Neolithic burial mounds or mysterious constructions such as the Dorset Cursus, evidence from the Bronze Age or the Anglo Saxons, or subsequent developments in agriculture which saw the enclosure of land and the growth of wealth from sheep, in particular their wool, and the establishment of the large landowning estates, it is to be found in here.

For many it is also a spiritual landscape in which people can connect with nature and possibly feel the presence of a creator in whatever form that may take. Within this, we have the parish churches, some of which date back over 1,000 years and may have been built on sites where people had sought connection with creation for thousands of years before that. When I enter one of these churches, I feel connected to the many people who have entered through that door to worship and to celebrate the many transitions in life, as well as a special presence of God.

This article looks at those parish churches in the context of the National Landscape and then goes on to examine aspects of their history, some of the specific features of the churches, and briefly looks at the way that the churches interact with the natural environment, before finally looking to the future.

## ***The context***

The Cranborne Chase is a National Landscape (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) covering 380 square miles, within the boundaries of Wiltshire, Dorset, Hampshire and Somerset. One hundred and thirty-three parishes have land within the National Landscape. It must be borne in mind that the designated area does not follow parish boundaries but theoretically follows landscape features. Having said this, at times it is difficult to understand how the boundary was drawn up, given that at one point it transects a Neolithic hillfort!

It is also important to remember that the concept of a parish is fluid, in that over time parishes merge and in terms of local government several distinct parishes may come under a single 'parish council'. Overall, in the 133 parishes that have land within the National Landscape there are 138 churches. Of those, 38 lie outside the boundary

leaving us with 100 parish churches. Four parishes have two churches within their parish.

### ***Churches in the Landscape***

One feature of the churches in the Cranborne Chase, which I think reflects many other areas, is that the churches do not stand out in the landscape. In many ways this is counter-intuitive as churches were meant to stand out to celebrate the glory of God, the church, and the local landowners, though not necessarily in that order! At one time they probably did stand out, but the increase in the density and size of trees in village settings (again counter-intuitive?) has gradually hidden the churches, at least on the roads leading into the villages. Often, they will be totally hidden until you are very close and then the building emerges, often in great splendour and mystery.

A second observation is that the churches tend to be, on the surface, very similar in appearance. A prevalence of dressed limestone and flint has been used in construction. Eighty-two have towers varying from 6m to 33m in height with a mean (average) height of 15m, though this is complicated by the fact that ten of those churches have towers with small spires attached, often at one corner, **The Church of St Mary, Kingston Deverill** (Photo 1) being an example. These mini spires are variously called spirettes, spirelets, or even spikes. Nine churches have full spires from 23m to 49m in height, the highest being the **Church of St John the Evangelist, Sutton Veny** (Photo 2). The spires have an average (mean) height of 34m. Six churches have no tower. Two have bellcotes (a small framework and shelter for one or more bells).



**1 The Church of St Mary, Kingston Deverill**





**2 Church of St John the Evangelist, Sutton Veny**

So, in many ways most of the churches look very similar, but on closer examination all are unique. This similarity is not surprising. Churches have been built in every century during the last thousand years, though the majority (68) were built in the High to Late Middle Ages (1066–1485). The other significant period for church building was the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when 15 churches were built. This was largely the Victorian era, a much-maligned period for those that harken back to our medieval churches given the effect on some medieval interiors of ‘Victorian restorations’. Having said this the Victorians seem to have drawn inspiration for many of the exteriors from that earlier time given the prevalence of finely dressed (ashlar) limestone and flint used in construction.

## ***The origin of churches***

The current churches represent part of the history of the spirituality of the people of the Chase and need to be viewed in that context. What we see today in the churches are buildings that in some cases may be over a thousand years old, but during that time, to a greater or lesser extent, they may have been altered or rebuilt. They may have been built on the site of a previous stone or wooden church. The Christian churches may have been built on sites that were used for 'Pagan' worship. Certainly, the ruined Norman church at Knowlton is built within a Neolithic henge that, according to Historic England, is "just one part of a landscape which is one of the great Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonial complexes in southern England". Indeed, the early Christians did have a reputation for 'borrowing' from other faiths as is seen in the celebration of Christmas and Easter.

One way of thinking about this fluidity is to ask how many Saxon churches are there in the Cranborne Chase? I would have three equally valid answers to this:

1. Not many: I think that Historic England indicates that two churches have significant Saxon features in their structure.
2. Quite a few: Historic England indicates that many have some Saxon features.
3. Probably the majority: there are quite a few references in church guides and other sources to there probably being a previous Saxon (wooden?) church on this site or nearby. I think that it would be reasonable to assume that there were previous places of worship that are no longer physically immediately evident, because we would expect them to be there or thereabouts.

The two churches listed by Historic England as Saxon are Breamore and Burcombe Without parish churches. The **Church of St Mary Breamore** (Photo 3) is listed as a notable Saxon building of the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, with minor changes during the medieval periods. The church is very rich in terms of Saxon features. One example would be the rood as you enter the church. A rood or rood cross, sometimes known as a triumphal cross, is a cross or crucifix, especially the large crucifix set above the entrance to the chancel of a medieval church. Alternatively, it is a large sculpture or painting of the crucifixion of Jesus. In this case it is a carved rood. The **Church of St. John the Baptist, Burcombe Without** (Photo 4) is in private ownership and is Saxon in origin but has been substantially remodelled.





**3 Church of St Mary, Breamore**



**4 Church of St. John the Baptist, Burcombe Without**



Other churches that are listed by Historic England as containing Saxon features include the **Church of All Saints, Broad Chalke** which has a fragment of a Saxon cross shaft on the south wall of the nave, and the **Church of St Peter, Codford** (Photo 5) which has a very well preserved 9<sup>th</sup>-century Saxon cross shaft with a fine carving of a man with an alder branch, against the north wall of the chancel. According to the church guidebook, between the tower of the **Church of St Mary, East Knoyle**, and the church cottage (built on part of the site of the Saxon Hall) “stands a roughly worked Saxon cross, shaped on three sides with its back to the cottage, which is being dated by the noted archaeologist Alison Borthwick, to the early Saxon period (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century). This predates the church itself, of which the earliest surviving portion is the 'blind arcading' on the outside north wall of the Chancel, pre-Norman conquest in style”.



5 Church of St Peter, Codford, Saxon Cross shaft

The **Church of St. Mary, Kingston Deverill** contains a Saxon font which was originally found in the churchyard. The **Church of St Margaret, Knook** has a limestone reredos with Anglo-Saxon interlaced carving behind the altar. In the organ chamber and vestry of the **Church of All Saints, Steeple Langford** (Photo 6) can be found part of a Saxon cross from Hanging Langford. Finally, to the left of the south door of the **Church of St. Edward, Teffont Evias and Teffont Magna** is reset a fragment of a Saxon cross with fine interlaced carving.



**6 Church of All Saints, Steeple Langford, part of Saxon Cross**

This discussion has focused on Saxon features, but I could similarly talk about every century of the medieval period and later. The richness of each of the churches is awe-inspiring.



## ***Special features***

All churches have specific features which are unique for different reasons. For example, the stories that memorials tell give vivid insights into the lives of parishioners over centuries. All churches bear record to conflict. The west door of **The Church of St John the Baptist, Bishopstone** bears bullet holes from when a man was shot during the Civil War. **The Church of St Leonard, Semley** bears witness to another sad loss of life. There is a beautiful stained glass memorial window to PC Yvonne Fletcher (Photo 7) who lived in Semley until she joined the Metropolitan Police. While she was on duty outside the Libyan embassy in St James' Square during a siege in April 1984 she was shot and died on 17 April.



**7 The Church of St Leonard, Semley, Yvonne Fletcher window**

The cost of recent conflicts is recorded in lists of those who have died and also tangibly in the war graves to be found in the churchyards. The Commonwealth War Graves



Commission is dedicated to commemorating the 1.7 million men and women of the Commonwealth who died during the First and Second World Wars. Fifty-four churches in the National Landscape have Commonwealth War Graves, 353 graves from the First World War and 48 from the Second. **The Church of St George, Fovant** has 63 graves from the First World War (associated with the former Fovant military base) and one from the Second World War.

**The Church of St John the Evangelist, Sutton Veney** has 168 war graves from the First World War and one from the Second World War (Photo 8). The church has a strong connection to Australia and New Zealand. Each year before the Sunday nearest to 29 April which is ANZAC day (the date set aside to commemorate the actions of Australian and New Zealand auxiliary corps during the landings at Gallipoli in 1915) children from the local primary school lay flowers on the Commonwealth War Graves. There is an ANZAC memorial service on the following Sunday. In 1982 the Australian Government and the Australian Returned and Services League contributed to the re-roofing of the church. In 1992 a further grant of money enabled the transformation of the southern transept into the ANZAC Chapel (Photo 9).



**8 Church of St John the Evangelist, Sutton Veney, war graves**





9 Church of St John the Evangelist, Sutton Veney, ANZAC Chapel

Each church has multiple things that make it distinctive, whether this is something big, for example a Neolithic monument (**Knowlton**), a cock fighting pit (**Church of St Margaret of Antioch, Chilmark**: adjacent, not in the churchyard!), or the presence of a village pound (**Church of St Michael, Coombe Bissett**), or something smaller such as the beautiful tributes to those who gave their lives to the service of their community. What is difficult to describe is the beauty of the buildings themselves, the silence within, the peace, and the feelings of the presence of God that these inspire. Such things need to be experienced.



## ***Churches and the environment***

It is also worth mentioning the relationship between the churches and the natural environment. As discussed by Horton (2024) churchyards are potentially a haven for wildlife, and there are many examples where they are being managed in order to provide valuable habitats. Churchyards are also a refuge for yew trees within our landscapes, though many yew avenues have disappeared, there are often still isolated trees.

There are, however, a number of tensions. Firstly, many people like churchyards to be neat as a mark of respect to those who have died. Unkept churchyards might provide valuable habitats, but at the same time may cause feelings of sadness. There are some good examples of churchyards that are maintained in a way that provides rich wildlife habitats and at the same time graves are maintained in a way that reflects love and care.

Another significant tension relates to trees. Whilst trees are valuable stores of carbon and habitats in their own right, the wrong tree in the wrong place is a concern and the fact that many of our parish churches are now obscured in the landscape by the growth and proliferation of trees is also a concern.

There are two other areas that may be overlooked. The surface of churches provides an extensive habitat, and patina often reflects, not only wear and tear but a micro living landscape. The second thought relates to the glorious dark night skies of the Cranborne Chase and its designation as an International Dark Skies Reserve. Whilst churches can look beautiful lit up at night, that light does affect God's creation, and I was slightly sad to see that one church had received funding to be lit up at night. Hopefully this is limited, and we are able to perceive the churches as our Saxon and medieval ancestors did.

## ***Conclusions***

The parish churches are one of the jewels of the Cranborne Chase National Landscape. The churches are places of beauty, peace and spiritual intensity, as well as places that capture elements of the lives of the local population over a period of more than a thousand years. This article has looked at the context of the churches, their position in the landscape, their origin, some special features, and their relationship to the natural environment.

When visiting the churches I developed a feeling that it is not the fabric of the churches that is in future doubt, as money seems to be available for their maintenance. The great worry, for me and many others, is the dwindling congregations. As illustrated by a recent article by Jenkins (2024) this is a widely held concern. There is a danger that in the future the churches will become 'shells', as opposed to living entities. How the Church of England and the local population address this should be of great concern. There is

considerable evidence of congregations reinventing themselves and the space in which they worship, for broader use and inclusiveness. If a path cannot be found, we are in danger of losing places that are very special.

## **References**

Horton, H., 2024. Churchyards are vital havens for rare wildlife including dormice, bats and beetles, according to an extensive audit of burial grounds around the UK. The Guardian Online. Thursday 26 Dec 2024. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/dec/26/uk-churchyards-are-havens-for-rare-wildlife-finds-conservation-charity> [Accessed 12.02.2025].

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## **Notes**

Dr Sean Beer is an academic, Visiting Fellow to Bournemouth University Business School, shepherd, and dry stonewaller amongst other things. He led a team of colleagues in undertaking a survey of the churches of the Cranborne Chase in 2023. This article is based on some of the data that they gathered.

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