

Albert and the Angels

You will find ancient churches dotted all over the landscape. Some are in the middle of the town. Others are in lonely places up rough tracks and quite hard to find.

Medieval churches go back to at least the 15th century some with towers that soar into the sky over 40 metres. That's almost half the length of a football pitch!

Churches are more special than museums because people built them to worship God and that's how they are used today. All those prayers have made them into sacred and holy places.

Some churches have roof angels, like Albert, that may have watched over people for more than 600 years. Can you imagine what life was like then? Albert knows and he'll show you what to look out for.



Halfway to heaven

Tall church towers made good look-out posts because you could see all over the parish and beyond. Some helped sailors spot land when they were at sea. And they made a great hiding place if someone was in danger.



Some towers have spires on top. Medieval folk said they were like a finger pointing up to heaven.



Before clocks were invented, bells were used to call people to worship. They were hung high in the tower so the sound carried for miles. Some bells have been rung for over 500 years so they are very old, just like the roof angels.



Look at the flint in the church walls.

Sometimes it is split to show the shiny black surface inside. See if you can find any flint on a ploughed field. It is knobbly so people sometimes built round towers instead of square ones.



The masons who built the walls had no computers and had to be very careful working out how thick the walls had to be or where the windows could go. They had to be good at maths! Stone had to be brought in by river to keep the masons busy and trees had to be cut down for the carpenters.



From west to east

Most medieval churches are built to face eastwards towards the rising sun. Use the plan opposite to find your way round your local church. Don't forget to take your binoculars when you set off. You don't want to miss anything.



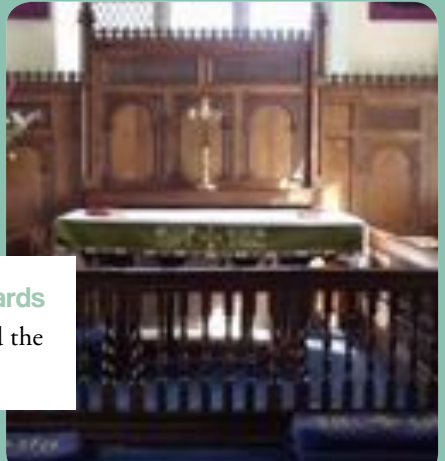
You'll need to look carefully to see me and the other roof angels. Mind you, angels are not always found in the roof. They can sometimes be seen in stained glass windows, on fonts where children are baptised, or even on tombstones in the churchyard.



The main part of the church is called the nave. It comes from the Latin word 'navis', meaning 'ship' so the Christian people journey together across the sea of life.



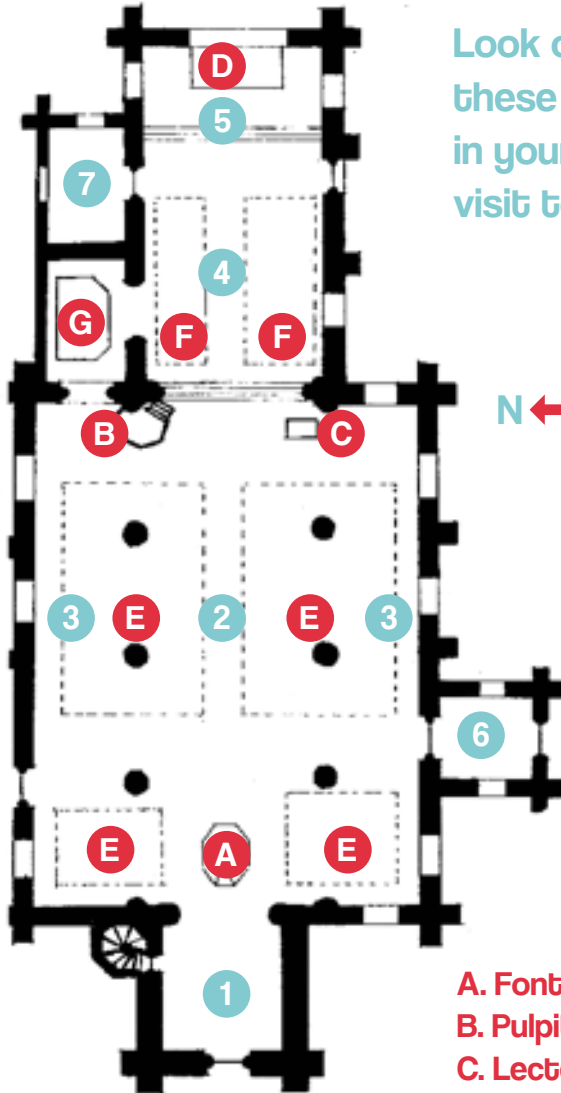
The congregation in the nave face east towards the chancel. That's where you'll find the priest and the most sacred part of the church called the Sanctuary.



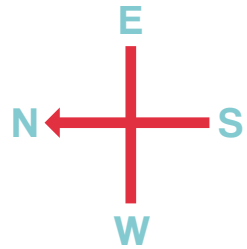
In the mid 16th century, rails were put round the communion table, most often to keep out dogs that would stray into church in those days!

Here you will find the altar or Communion table where bread and wine are blessed by the priest and shared with the congregation. They think of Jesus Christ before He died and call it Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, Mass or Eucharist.

Church floor plan



Look out for these features in your next visit to a church



1. Tower
2. Nave
3. Aisles
4. Chancel
5. Sanctuary
6. Porch
7. Vestry

- A. Font
- B. Pulpit
- C. Lectern
- D. Altar
- E. Pews or Benches
- F. Choir Stalls
- G. Organ

If stones could talk

When you look at the outside walls of a church, you can see how the stones reveal all the stops and starts. People extended their church when they had the money. You can get lots of clues about dates by looking at the design and shapes of windows and doorways.



And remember, walls have eyes and ears. See how many faces you can discover – beautiful, funny or just plain ugly. Faces can be corbels supporting the stonework, or they might be gargoyles that throw rainwater clear of the walls. Splosh!

Look out for little mass dials scratched in the stone that were used to tell people what time the mass or service started before they had clocks. They were always on the sunny south side. Can you guess why?



Churchyards are often beautiful and special places where wild flowers flourish. They contain many tombs and gravestones in memory of people in the community, some with angels carved into the stone. Look at the dates and see if you can work out how old people were when they died. You may even discover what they did for a living.



Outwards and upwards

As congregations grew, aisles were added to the nave with rows of arches or arcades in between. Can you see the row of windows high above the arches? This is the clerestory – a ‘clear storey’ of glass.



Often the east ends of the aisles became little side chapels, with their own altars. Carved wooden screens were made to enclose them.

In the olden days, the porch was a very important place. People met here to make business deals, the baptism and marriage services began there, and sometimes it became a court room or even a school room. Some porches have two floors with a little room above.



The cross is the symbol of Christianity and you will find many forms outside and inside the church. Many churches were once shaped or formed like a cross. The arms of the cross were called transepts and stick out at right angles near where the nave meets the chancel.

When churches were first built there was no heating. Brrrrhhh! And no seating so the weak people had to go to the wall for support.



An awesome interior

Step inside and you'll be amazed by the awesome height of the roof. Medieval masons wanted to build churches high and they soon discovered that pointed Gothic arches would make the buildings very strong and stable.



Church roofs often have beautiful carvings and colours. The best way to get a good look at the faces of us angels is to lay flat on your back with your binoculars. You won't find roof angels in every church but there's usually an angel or two around somewhere. You can have fun searching for them.

Did you know that the word holiday comes from Holy Day? People were given the day off so they could go to church.



Just imagine what churches would have been like 600 years ago full of stained glass and colourful wall paintings with candles flickering and brasses gleaming underfoot. Those were the days! Everyone went to Sunday Mass but it was in Latin which hardly anyone understood. Instead they learned from vivid pictures in the windows or on the walls.

Curious characters



Look at the big stone bowl near the main doorway. This is the font that marks the start of the journey of faith. Babies are baptised here with Holy Water to bring them into the family of the church. Many fonts have eight sides and are protected by lions, saints and – you guessed it – winged angels, all carved into the stone.



When medieval carpenters made benches in the 15th century, they often carved odd creatures and characters at the ends. You might see a bird, a walrus or even a pig with wings. What a cheek! Mind you carpenters carved real angels too.

Look out for 18th century box pews with little doors you can open.

You won't see many medieval stained glass windows because they were smashed almost 400 years ago by people called Puritans who wanted to 'purify' the church and make things more simple. Some of us roof angels were destroyed too so it was a bad time for us. When the Victorians came along 250 years later they liked us angels. Can you find one in the many stained glass windows they made?



The parish chest stored parish treasures and important documents. Some chests may be 700 or 800 years old and often hollowed out of a single tree trunk.



Most of the wall paintings were covered with limewash long before the Puritans arrived.

It is exciting to discover some of them hundreds of years later.



Discovering more

The lectern is used for reading the Bible. It is often made of brass in the shape of an eagle. People believed that the eagle could fly further than any other bird, showing that the Word of God must be read and spread! We angels are God's messengers too.



When the priest teaches people about the Christian faith, he or she stands in the pulpit. Many pulpits go right back to the 1600s. Some have three decks, including a clerk's desk and reading desk. They may even have a stand for a wig!



You sometimes enter the chancel through a carved screen as you would have done in medieval times. Above the screen would have been a huge figure of Jesus on the cross, known as the Rood. People climbed up to the Rood loft to look after the many candles that burned there. They used a small staircase. Can you find it?



You might see a large organ with many pipes that provides the church music. It works by wind blowing through the pipes.



Look for the King's or Queen's Royal Arms high up on the wall, often with lions and unicorns. George the Third would be written as G III. Can you discover whose Royal Arms are on the wall in your church?

The choir stalls in the chancel sometimes have misericords, with tip-up seats to rest your back during long services. You can often discover curious carvings when you tip them up. Always have a look. You may even find an angel.

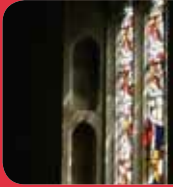
Holey moley!

When you walk round the church, you will see lots of holes in the wall. What are they all for?

A small opening near a door is usually a Holy water stoup for people to dip their fingers into and make the sign of the cross.



High up in the wall outside or inside the church you may see a niche that might have held a statue of a saint.



You might see a piscina to the south of an altar used to drain away the water used at the Communion service



Monuments and memorials on the walls or floor are often put there to remind us of the rich people who paid the bills. They tell us about their fashions, jewellery and hairstyles. Some of them were quite weird I can tell you.



Tombs sometimes have effigies that are statues of real people lying down on them.



Don't forget to look at the floor under your feet. You might discover slabs in stone or black marble to show where people were buried or simply put there to remember them. Some have shiny brass figures and sometimes the writing is in Latin.

Diamond-shaped hatchments on the wall are not for Kings and Queens but for other important families. They used to be hung outside a dead person's house before being displayed in the church.



I think you'll agree that it's quite an adventure exploring churches. Next time you go inside your own church keep an eye out for me and the other angels and see what else you can discover.

www.angelsandpinnacles.org.uk