

RESEARCHING YOUR CHURCH'S HISTORY

Guidance note

from the Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches
February 2016



This guide is intended for the use of those wishing to investigate the history of the fabric or fittings of their church while preparing a Statement of Significance as part of the process of gaining a Faculty.

This need not be an onerous or complicated task and there are a number of readily accessible sources available, without necessarily going to primary documents. Some of the sources quoted will be available in many Devon libraries, but visits to the Devon Heritage Centre (Devon Archives and Local Studies Service) at Sowton, Exeter or the major libraries or archive offices in Barnstaple, Plymouth or Torquay (see list of addresses below) may well repay the trouble in accessibility and ease of reference. The Devon Rural Archive at Shilstone, near Modbury also has a good collection of church guides and comprehensive runs of Devonshire Association Transactions and other journals.

A very useful general introduction to local history research is by Ian Maxted: *In Pursuit of Devon's History* (1997), which should be available in libraries.

'PEVSNER' AND LISTINGS

The two indispensable sources for historic buildings are the volumes of the Buildings of England series, initiated by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in 1951, and the statutory 'lists' of historic buildings compiled by English Heritage, now Historic England.

Most churches will appear in both of these sources. *The Buildings of England: Devon* by Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner (Penguin Books, 1989), is still in print, and should be available in most libraries. As well as describing each important historic building in the county it also has an exhaustive bibliography.

The statutory lists are available on the comprehensive Historic England website <https://www.historicengland.org.uk/> and should also be available in local libraries or in the planning departments of district councils.

PUBLISHED SOURCES

County histories are another good starting place, particularly the great works of late 18th/early 19th century scholarship by Richard Polwhele (*The History of Devonshire*, 1797) and Daniel and Samuel Lysons (*Magna Britannia: Devon*: 1822), both of which have sections organised on a parochial basis, and describe churches.

J.M. Slader's *The Churches of Devon* (David & Charles, 1968), is the only general account of the fabric of churches, with useful lists of features which serve as a 'handlist' to the best and most important (towers, screens or fonts; fabric of different periods, etc.).

For older general accounts of church architecture and fabric see works by A. Hamilton Thompson, Beatrix Cresswell (1927) and G. Fryer Cornelius cited in the bibliography below. Another very useful book, with a parish-by-parish gazetteer, is W.G. Hoskins' *Devon* which was first published in 1954.

The volumes of the *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, published annually since 1862, contain many useful articles as do those of *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries* (1901 to date). Another valuable journal is the *Transactions of the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society*, founded in 1841 and published sporadically from the 1840s to the 1930s. These volumes, especially in the early years, have a wealth of useful information, including many fine engravings and lithographs of churches.

Other reference works are church guides, past and present, which may be available locally. If not, Exeter University Library has a special collection of church guides formed in the 1980s, which can be consulted in the Old Library; the Devon Heritage Centre also has many guides and other specialist publications. Parish histories can be found by consulting the catalogue and in addition there is a useful 'handlist' to parish histories prepared by the county library in 1994: *Abbots Bickington to Zeal Monachorum: a handlist of Devon parish histories*.

In recent years many of the furnishings in churches in the diocese have been recorded by members of the National Association of Fine and Decorative

Art Societies (NADFAS). Copies of these comprehensive and well-illustrated reports are held at the Devon Heritage Centre, along with a copy at the church itself. In 1905 the Devonshire Association resolved to record all the church plate in the Diocese, and their reports, arranged by Deanery, were published sporadically until the 16th and final Report was presented in 1927. They are an invaluable and accurate record with the more important items illustrated.

Inside Churches: A Guide to Church Furnishings by Patricia Dirsztay (1993) is an invaluable aid in accurately describing the furnishings and fittings of churches.



UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

The starting points are two manuscripts held by the Devon Heritage Centre and a third collection of papers in Oxford.

James Davidson kept manuscript notes on churches in the 1830s and 1840s, and these are especially useful for recording the state of the fabric before many major 19th century restorations. His notes are bound in five volumes, arranged by area.

Beatrix Cresswell was an observer of churches throughout the diocese in the first 20 years of the 20th century, and her work culminated in a series of volumes of typescript notes, arranged by Deanery, in the early 1920s. These notes are immensely useful for thoroughly researched material on churches, their fittings and furnishings, and notable memorials; they are often illustrated as well. It should be noted that photocopying from both the Davidson and Cresswell volumes is not permitted, although digital photography is permitted on payment of a fee (currently £5 per day). Miss Cresswell's work on churches in the Deaneries of Christianity (Exeter) and Kenn were published (see bibliography).

Dean Jeremiah Milles (1714-1784), was Precentor and then Dean of Exeter Cathedral (1762-84). Milles spent many years collecting material towards a history of Devon that was never published. His papers are

now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, but microfilm copies of the most important classes are available in the Devon Heritage Centre (please note that microfilm readers may have to be booked in advance at busy times). There are two classes of material: the returns to a questionnaire sent out by Milles to all the parishes in the county, to which about 250 parishes replied, invariably in the person of the parson, sometimes by the schoolmaster or other informed parishioner. The questions cover a very wide field, but ask about the church, dedications, chapels, ancient buildings, ruins, etc. The second class is of Milles' own notes arranged by parish, and these too can contain useful material, sometimes sketches, plans, and notes sent in by others. (For published accounts of these manuscripts see articles by Cresswell 1921 and Cotton and Brooking Rowe 1891 in the bibliography).

It is always worth browsing in the parish cuttings files available on request at the Devon Heritage Centre. These often contain original material as well as generations of press cuttings.

The Burnett Morris index can also provide leads and references up to the 1930s (advice on how to use this is available in the Centre). The Centre's indexes by place/parish are also worth consulting. For more detailed information (perhaps beyond the scope of most Statements of Significance, but of interest for research in greater depth), other documentation such as churchwardens' accounts and faculty petitions can be consulted; again these are mainly held in the Devon Heritage Centre.

SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

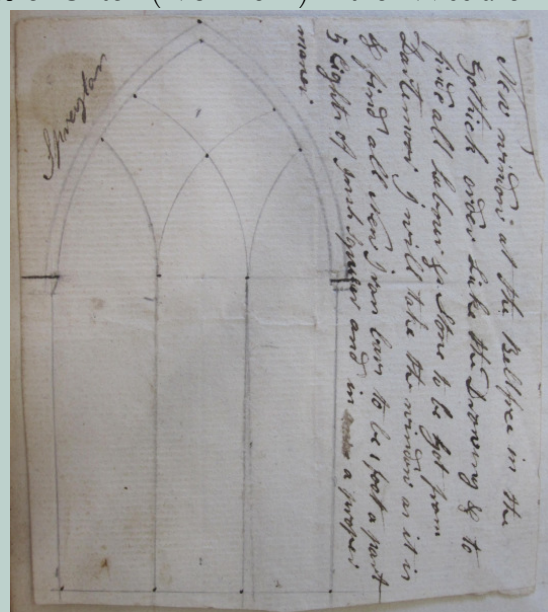
Among the many engravings and other prints the lithographs produced of many Devon churches by **W. Spreat** in the 1840s stand out both for their quality and informativeness (like Davidson, Spreat was working before many restorations had taken place).

The most accessible guide to printed images is the great catalogue produced by **John Somers-Cocks** in 1977: *Devon Topographical Prints, 1660-1870, A Catalogue and Guide*; this should give you an indication of what is available. Unfortunately there is no equivalent for drawings and paintings, although there are many such illustrations of churches in museums, libraries, record offices and private collections.

The wonderful travel diaries compiled by the **Revd John Swete** of Oxton (1752-1821) in the 1790s are illustrated with many watercolours, including numerous churches; these have been published (Gray and Rowe 1997-2000). Local knowledge is often helpful in locating images, as well as following up leads provided by other sources mentioned already.

For photographs one very useful basic source is the three volumes published by **John Stabb** between 1908 and 1916: *Some Old Devon Churches: Their Rood Screens, Pulpits, Fonts, etc.*, which contain hundreds of the author's photographs of churches. It is still possible to find these books second-hand, and Stabb's text and photographs are now available online at www.wissensdrang.com/dstabb.htm

The **Historic England Archive** has over copies of 9 million photographs which includes many churches in the Diocese, and is accessible on line at <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/archive-collections/>



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DEVON

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Boggis, R.J.E., 1922 *A History of the Diocese of Exeter*, William Pollard, Exeter

Cotton, R.W. and Brooking Rowe, J. (eds) 1891 'Third Report of the Committee on Devonshire Records' *Report and Transactions of the Devon Association* **23**, 150-70

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The Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association also have a useful reading list for general church history on their website: <http://www.easanet.co.uk/index.php/2013-11-20-19-19-06/menu-reading-list>

USEFUL ADDRESSES

Historic England

www.historicengland.org.uk

Devon Heritage Centre, (Devon Archives and Local Studies Service), Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter, EX2 7NL

01392 384253

www.devon.gov.uk/about_the_devon_heritage_centre

Devon Rural Archive, Shilstone, Modbury PL21 0TW

01548 830832

www.devonruralarchive.com

Barnstaple Local Studies Library and North Devon Local Studies Library and Record Office, Tuly Street, Barnstaple, EX31 1EL

01271 388607

www.devon.gov.uk/libraries/localstudies/barnstaplelocalstudies.htm

Exeter University Library, Stocker Road, Exeter, EX4 4PT

01392 723867

<http://as.exeter.ac.uk/library/>

Old Library: Prince of Wales Road, Exeter, EX4 SB

01392 723867

Plymouth Local and Family History room, Central Library, Drake Circus, Plymouth, PL4 8AL

01752 305902.

www.plymouth.gov.uk/libraries/history

Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Unit 3, Clare Place, Coxside, Plymouth, PL4 0JW

01752 305940

www.plymouth.gov.uk/archives

Torquay Local Studies Library, Lymington Road, Torquay, TQ1 3DT

01803 208300

www.torbay.gov.uk/localstudies

The Cathedral and Church Buildings Library, located at Church House, Westminster, has been described as the most important single collection in the UK of books and other material dedicated solely to ecclesiastical architecture, art, design and liturgy. The Library is usually open to external readers by appointment with the Honorary Librarian (Telephone 020 7898 1884 Tuesdays and Wednesdays). Parishes can also make enquiries via this number to see what information about their church may be held there.