

Signs & Symbols: Chancel Screens

Next time you are planning a holiday, or just fancy a short break, why not try Devon? It's the county that is noted for its magnificent fifteenth century wooden chancel screens.

Last month this series looked at altar rails and how they replaced chancel screens. But what were chancel screens, anyway, and why were they used? In one church in Derbyshire there is no longer a screen but there is a column at the start of the chancel where there's this funny little door opening on to a short set of stairs that don't go anywhere. There are also some stone supports high up that have nothing on them. These are signs that tell you that it used to have a screen with a loft above it where the musicians and choir, and possibly the organ and organist, would have been.

But first, let's just go back a step. You'll remember that church porches had been used for lots of civil administrative work when churches were pretty much the only community building in most villages. Well, porches were built, in large part, to take those activities out of the church itself. In medieval times the body of the church - the nave - was used for many secular purposes so it was usual to erect a screen to divide the nave from the chancel, which was the 'Holy' part of the church.

The screen defined the boundary between nave and chancel; the parishioners being responsible for the repair of the nave and screen, and the rector that of the chancel. Once you know that you can see why the two parts of a church building can be so different - in size, date, style and general maintenance. Some of our church buildings today have been re-ordered and divided into a similar arrangement: community use at the back of the church and a worship area in the front and chancel. You can almost feel the wheel of time turning round!

This month - See if you can visit a church which has a screen, whether an original or a modern one. What use is the church making of that screen today? If you could put up a screen in your building what would you keep on the other side?

by The Rev Dr Jo White

The Guarding of the God of Life

The God of life with guarding hold you,
The loving Christ with guarding fold you,
The Holy Spirit, guarding, mould you,
Each night of life to aid, enfold you
Each day and night of life uphold you.

From Poems of the Western Highlanders

