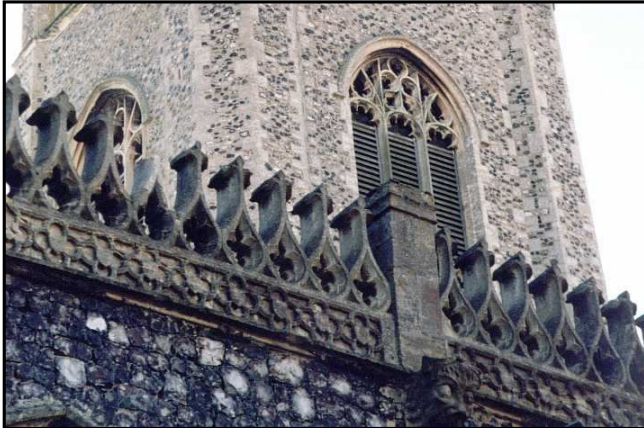


Signs & Symbols: Parapets



When you get closer to one of our older parish churches, there are aspects of the building, particularly some of the decorative features, that make you wonder why they were added.

Have a look at the top of the tower or the top of the wall where it joins the roof. Often you can't see the join because they've put a decorative wall of a couple of feet tall there (0.6 m). So why is it there?

There's lots of these walls - parapets - in London on ordinary houses dating from early 1700s. They were introduced because the Building Act of 1707 banned projecting wooden eaves in the cities of Westminster and London. They were considered a fire risk. Instead an 18-inch brick parapet was required, with the roof set behind.

But churches much older than this have them and they can help to date the building. In the fourteenth century they were plain, while towards the end of the fourteenth and then into the fifteenth they were crenellated – in other words they look like castle battlements. (The rising parts are called merlons or cops and the separating spaces are called crenels, embrasures or loops.) From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries they were often pierced with carving or of a balustrade form.

But the question, as you can imagine, is why? Why were they built like they are? Some experts suggest that their primary purpose was to hide ugly flat roofs. But many of them are not with a flat roof, so that can't always be right. Others suggest that they are there to give the building a pleasing design for the eye. That makes sense. But why are so many crenellated?

This month:

Keep an eye out as you travel for churches, and then go and find one with battlements. What battle do you think is going on there? What are they protecting themselves from?

By The Rev Dr Jo White a vicar in Derbyshire

The image is of St Mary's, Bungay, Suffolk and is taken from www.suffolkchurches.co.uk

**The Bible is a letter God has sent to us;
prayer is a letter we send to him.**