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The English Parish Church through the Centuries

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The English Parish Church through the Centuries [2] is an interesting example of how digital media can be used to improve and enhance our understanding of the past. It is not without its problems, notably very patchy coverage of the post-medieval period, but overall it points the way forward for a much greater integration of visual and aural material into historical narrative.

This is the third in a series of interactive CD-Roms produced by the Centre for Christianity and Culture at York University. The other two cover *Images of Salvation* and *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage*, and like them *The English Parish Church* includes a broad range of material including: text by noted scholars; primary sources; a wide variety of images of buildings, art, and liturgical furnishings; and multi-media sources including 3-D models, video and audio such as music. It is sufficiently detailed to be of use to academics, but it is written so as to be accessible to students and those with little or no prior knowledge of the subject. The editor, Dee Dyas, has assembled a team of over 225 contributors, and done a good job of bringing together a very diverse range of material.

The CD is densely packed with goodies, and the reproduction quality of the visual and aural material is excellent. Links on individual pages allow the user to explore the full range of material, and there are both quick and full lists of contents to aid navigation. It works on both Mac and Windows, and runs directly (if sometimes a little slowly and noisily) from the CD, or it can be dragged onto hard drive and installed there. It loads easily, and I found it stable on my elderly and overworked Macbook.

The main text is organised into six chronological sections: ?The early centuries? (to c.600); ?Anglo-Saxon England? (c.600?c.1066); ?Late Medieval England? (c.1066?c.1534); ?The Reformation and beyond?

(c.1534?c.1689); ?The Church in England? (c.1689?c.1945); and ?Churches to the present day?. Each is further divided into subsections ? ?Introduction?, ?Context? (i.e. history), ?Daily life and worship?, ?Art and architecture?, ?Interaction with society?, and ?Interaction with culture?. Within the individual sections, there are numerous further subdivisions, each with authoritative text from scholars who are specialists in the field.

The individual pages can be read on their own, or sequentially as a narrative. The majority of the pages are illustrated, and colour coded links (red for the glossary; blue for hyperlinks to another page; green for primary sources; and purple for multimedia, which includes audio, video and 3D models) provide access to additional material. The quality of the individual contributions is generally high, and the authors have done an excellent job of making use of the range of different types of material available to them.

A link at the top of each page also provides access to the ?Resource centre?, containing the ?Encyclopaedia? (really a glossary), the (image) ?Gallery?, the ?Case studies?, and ?Texts & bibliography?. The ?Resource centre? homepage also has a link to the ?Saint finder?, which allows searching by attribute, type, and source as well as by name, thus allowing the identification of unknown saints. The case studies, which are available both from the main contents page and also from the ?Resource centre?, explore a range of issues as they relate to individual buildings.

With over 600 separate pages, there are too many to discuss here individually, but for the Anglo-Saxon, medieval, Reformation, and Civil War periods, the coverage is thorough and detailed. All the key issues are here. The role of the laity is extensively explored, and the parish clergy and the church hierarchy are also discussed in some detail. The exploration of liturgy and belief extends from church services right through to personal belief and piety in the home and family. Church architecture, art and imagery, and furnishings all receive their due, and there are extensive sections on the parish church?s interaction with society and culture.

The level of detail, and the number of individual pages, within each section varies depending on the period, the available evidence, and the extent of the existing historiography. Thus, there is far more on high and late medieval architecture than on that of the Anglo-Saxon or post-Reformation period, but overall the level of coverage for the period up to 1689 feels about right. The coverage for the period after 1945 is also good, and includes not only liturgical change and changes to buildings and furnishings, but also the way in which the church has adapted to innovations in the modern world, such as broadcast media.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the period between the Glorious Revolution and the Victorians. The sub-title ?Through the ages? is misleading. The period from 1689?1945 is covered in a single, patchy and problematic chapter that is by far the weakest of the six chronological sections. In particular, the 18th century is almost entirely neglected.

For instance, the literature section for this period begins only with Jane Austen and the Brontes, and while church structure, worship and belief in the late 17th and 18th centuries are discussed, the art and architecture of the period is simply ignored. The brief ?c.1689?c.1945? architecture section begins with the Church Commissioners in 1818, before moving swiftly on to Pugin and the Ecclesiologists. The short section on ?Furnishings? begins even later, in 1830?40, and the cursory section on ?Imagery? launches straight into Ninian Comper, born in 1864 and best known for his work in the early 20th century. Where are the '50 New Churches' of the early 18th century? Where are big provincial town churches beloved of the Georgians; the fabulous (and often very well preserved) private estate churches like Shobdon (Herefordshire) or Cottesbrooke (Northamptonshire); or the late 18th-century experiments in radical plan form like All Saints, Newcastle or St Chad, Shrewsbury? Where are the triple-decker pulpits, galleries and box pews that still survive in so many churches?

The supporting sections, including the case studies and the bibliography, follow the lead of the main text, with the 18th and early 19th centuries under- (or not at all-) represented compared to other periods. The case studies are also unevenly scattered around the country: Ashton (Devon) and the group of Sandwich churches, treated as a single case study, are the sole representatives of the area south of the Thames, yet there are five from Norwich, four from York with Skelton (N. Riding) bringing Yorkshire?s tally also to

five, four in London, three from Gloucestershire, and two in Oxfordshire among the 30 churches featured.

Neither the limited geographical spread of the case studies nor the neglect of the 18th century diminishes the value of the earlier, and later, sections, but it does have an impact on the value of the CD as a whole. Like it or loathe it, the late Stuart and Georgian periods were a crucial part of the history of the English parish church. Without the Georgians, the Victorians don?t make sense. The Ecclesiologists, with their radical reshaping of church interiors, need to be seen in the context of what they were removing ? and why. In comparison to the neglect of entire period from the late 17th to the mid 19th century, devoting an entire section to the church after 1945 seems disproportionate.

Nonetheless, the great advantage of an electronic resource compared to a printed book is that it is easily expanded. This is only the first edition of this CD, and new editions of the Centre?s other CDs have recently been released. Hopefully, subsequent editions of *The English Parish Church* will include a greater range of post-medieval content, and a wider geographical spread (and better chronological coverage) in the case studies.

A revised edition would also provide the opportunity to improve the search capabilities. The existing search engine does not search across the whole CD. The chronological sections and the case studies are on one search engine, available from the ?Full contents? page, but not from within the individual pages. The ?Encyclopaedia/glossary?, the ?Image gallery?, and the ?Bibliography? each have their own separate search engines that are not cross searchable, either within the ?Resource centre? or with the main text sections. Consequently, it is easy to miss things. For instance, a search for ?pyx? (the box used to hold the consecrated host) within the main section returns zero results, yet same search within each area in the ?Resource centre? returns no fewer than nine images of pyxes in the ?Image gallery?, all labelled as such; a definition of pyx in the ?Glossary?, and an article in the ?Bibliography? about pyxes. Even a simple link from one search page to another would make things easier. Other minor things that could be improved include re-coding some of the bibliography entries. For instance, Virginia Cheiffo Raguin?s *Catholic Collecting: Catholic Reflection 1538?1850* and Charles Oman?s *Caroline Silver* seem misplaced in the post-1945 section.

The primary value of this CD lies in its coverage of medieval and early modern parish churches, and it is undoubtedly for that that most people will want to buy it. As such, it is a useful addition to a library on the English parish church, and the diversity of the material and range of sources is bound to expand almost everyone?s knowledge, whatever their field of expertise. The section on the contemporary church is also very useful, as it is all too easy for historians to forget that parish churches are still (for the most part) functioning places of worship. The day-to-day concerns of the 21st-century church are often quite different to those of church visitors and scholars, and it is good to have them discussed in detail. The problem areas, such as the coverage, or lack thereof, of the pre-Victorian church will hopefully be remedied in subsequent editions.

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Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7797
[2] http://www.christianityandculture.org.uk/resources/epc