

# MARCH MEETING

First Speaker

## Some Peculiarities of Kent Churches

A Talk by Derek Leach

Reported by Alan Lee

After his retirement Derek followed in the footsteps of his local hero, Ivan Green, and between 2000 and 2008 visited every village in Kent. Armed with Pevsner he visited some 600 villages. Paying particular attention to the parish churches he made copious notes and took some 2,000 photographs. Of these he used about 50 to illustrate his talk.

He noticed some eye-catching early windows at Speldhurst, designed by

Victorian William Morris, they feature six angels.

The Otford hatchments are heraldic paintings. They were originally hung above the dead person's doorway. After burial they were then hung on the church wall until a memorial or tomb was erected, many were never removed. This custom has been around since about 1700.

A number of churches display royal coats of arms, a rare James II one appears at West Malling.



Heart Shrine Leybourne 1271

Memorial plaques abound. At All Saints Church, Biddenden one commemorates two local martyrs burned at the stake, in Bloody Mary's reign for standing by their faith, William Waterer (at Canterbury 15th January 1557) and Thomas Stephens (at Wye 16th January 1557). *Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs' quotes, they "were committed unto the fire, and there consumed to ashes, by Thornton, called bishop or suffragan of Dover, otherwise called Dick of Dover, and by Nicholas Harpsfield, the archdeacon of the said province."* At Teston Rev James Ramsay and his black servant Nestor are commemorated. Nestor, who died before the rector is also commemorated in the name of nearby Nestor Court, a little cul-de-sac of modern houses a few yards from the church. Hothfield has a plaque to Sir Arthur Sullivan, composer of *The Lost Chord*, first played on their organ.

Numerous churches contain wall paintings, originally a means to get the biblical message over to the illiterate. Over the years these became more diversified. Unusually at Snargate is a painting of a ship, c1500, and at Challock Millenium paintings depict life in the village.

Wall items include, at Smarden, a wafer oven for baking unleavened bread for communion. At Leybourne two crowns given by Edward I in 1286. Also here is the heart shrine of 1271, the left casket contains the heart of Sir Roger de Leybourne, the right one, meant for his wife's heart, is empty as she remarried after his death and is buried elsewhere.

At Staplehurst is an Anchorite cell. Used by a priest who wanted to lead a life of isolation he would be given the last rites before being walled up for the remainder of his life. The opening or squint allowed him to still see the altar, a small exterior opening allowed food to be passed in and waste removed.

At Kemsing Derek came across the only tester, a sounding board, he found over an altar. While Cranbrook has a vertical baptistery, rare in an Anglican church and dating from 1725.

He found a rare altar tomb, for the Scott family at Brabourne dating between 1290 and 1562. At Cranbrook from the Middle Ages a Chrysom child. This is an effigy of a swaddled infant who died within the first few months of life.

At Hythe in the 13th century the chancel floor was raised to build an ambulatory (a vaulted passage) beneath the sanctuary. For centuries used as an ossuary (bone-house) it was found to contain about 8,000 thigh bones and 590 skulls from the 14th and 15th century.

A most unusual notice was spotted by Derek in the church at Teynham, this allowed the wearing of hats by men in the church.

Discovered at Acrise was the grave of the 34th Chief of the Clan MacKinnon, William Alexander (lands on Mull and Skye) was MP for Lymington and home was Acrise House. Another notable grave found, at St Mary in the Marsh, was that of E. E. Nesbit author of 'The Railway Children'.

Derek finished his talk with 'Pips graves' at Cooling. These 10 children's gravestones (all died between 1771 and 1780 and all under 17 months old) are arranged around their parents (Michael and Jane Comport) graves. The 3 gravestones together (died aged 1, 3 and 5 months) are the children of John and Sarah Anne Rose-Baker (daughter of Michael and Jane). The children all apparently died of ague (malaria). The graves are said to have inspired Charles Dickens to write 'Great Expectations'.



*Pip's Graves Cooling*