

# A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

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## Episode 7: THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

How would a small medieval church have looked? With a bit (quite a bit) of imagination, our Old Church can be as good as most at conveying an impression of how a late medieval church might have appeared. Try standing near the communion rail in the Old Church after dark with all electric lights out and candles flickering in the darkness.

The medieval church was, like ours, divided between a chancel and a nave. Indeed, by the end of the thirteenth century, there would have been an even more pronounced division between nave and chancel than there is today. The chancel was the domain of the priest, and the nave "belonged" to the parishioners. Each was responsible for the upkeep of their domain (which helps to explain why in some early parish churches the chancel is built of carefully squared stone, and the nave of much cheaper flint).

The development of an ever more lavish chancel in the thirteenth century reflected the primacy of the Mass, especially after Rome's enunciation of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation in 1215. Many of the features of the late medieval chancel are present at Holy Trinity:

- piscinas were used to wash the vessels that contained the "blood of Christ", with special drains to prevent the water being misused (such as for witchcraft) afterwards. The piscina in our Old Church chancel has a drain hole running through the wall to the ground outside.
- aumbries were built in which to store the sacred vessels.
- priests' doors enabled the clergy to enter and leave the chancel without having to pass through the nave.
- round these features were set the carved Easter Sepulchre, the tombs of earlier priests and wooden stalls for the clergy. (I will return to the Easter Sepulchre - of which we are said to have one of the best examples in Essex - in a future article.)

The distinction between chancel and nave led to the development of rood screens to mark the division between the domain of the priest and that of his parishioners. These screens, usually of wood, but sometimes of stone, became extremely elaborate. The "Rood" itself was the Crucifixion group of Christ flanked by the Virgin and St John, usually carved, sometimes painted, and carried either on a beam or on a complete screen. A loft was often built above the screen, from which singers and musicians would perform the Holy Week rituals; the screen's base or dado was painted with saints. The priest would have had a duty to see that candles in the loft constantly illuminated the Rood.



The old church, Holy Trinity

Like many medieval churches, Holy Trinity had such a screen and loft. The rood loft was probably destroyed in the sixteenth century, with the wooden screen following in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The only reminders today are the stone steps - apparently leading nowhere - on the north side of the Old Church.

There would have been no seating in the nave of the medieval church: people attending a service stood. Parish churches were usually plastered inside and out. Vivid pictures were painted on the interior plaster to illustrate Biblical scenes for the illiterate population. Statuary was also richly painted. Sadly, very little of the original plastering or painting remains today, so it does require a strong imagination to picture how a medieval church would have looked.

Sir Simon Jenkins offers the following thoughts on this in his book *England's thousand best churches*:

“We find it hard today to imagine either the appearance or the atmosphere of these places. The closest parallels are the churches of eastern Orthodoxy or the Easter ceremonial of Latin America. The tiny painted churches of Romania's Carpathian Mountains come closest to showing how a Norman church might have seemed, dark, dank and thick with icons, screens and murmured Masses. I once attended Easter Mass in the Peruvian Andes. The small church was crowded with Indians who had come down from the mountains in thick shawls and hats, laden with offerings for the altars of their favourite saints and for shrines to the dead of the previous year. Walls and furnishings were encrusted with old Spanish paintings, carvings and dirt. Candles were everywhere.”



A Moldovan painted church

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