

THE DOWNLAND CHURCHES THAT DISTURBED THE UNBELIEVERS

Head north-east from Portsmouth on the back road to Midhurst and within ten miles you are lost in the western spurs of the Sussex Downs. Suburb and coast traffic disappear. The lanes close in. The valleys and hills become a dark, primitive landscape of beechwoods and flint, chalk clefts empty of streams, land that was always poor and is now mostly deserted. I know of nowhere so secret in all southern England.

Romans, Saxons and Normans penetrated these Downs. They sowed, reaped and mostly starved. They also prayed, and did so in churches of the utmost simplicity. You can go to Iona or Jarrow, to Cornwall or the Welsh Marches, and you will not find a more moving witness to early Christianity than here in the uplands of West Sussex. Idsworth, North Marden, Up Marden, Didling, Hardham, Combes and a dozen other churches feature in few guidebooks. They are too small, too undistinguished. No Dissenter chapel is more ascetic. A single space sufficed for the offices of the liturgy, one roof, one porch, one pulpit. These churches are little more than hermitages, cells of piety amid poverty. Centuries of patronage passed them by without alteration or embellishment. Most are described as Saxon-Norman. I would call them English Early Christian. They are first cousins to the pagan wood shrines whose sites they probably occupy.

The historian, Ian Nairn, directed me to Up Marden many years ago. He said - and wrote in Pevsner's Sussex volume - that it was among the 'loveliest interiors in England'. It sits alone in its clearing, amid yews and alders down a farm lane off a road that goes nowhere. I have never met a soul near the place, though somebody must walk through the wood each day to unlock it. Open the creaking door, and you enter a simple plastered double chamber. There are no chamfered arcades, no corbel heads or Perpendicular windows. Up Marden has no aisles, no transepts, no window tracery. Norman masons did not drag Caen stone from their barges up into these hills. The flints and limestone of Apple Down were all the builders of Marden had to hand. Yet their deep lancet windows fill the church with an even light. Tree shadows stir the sun gently over the brick floor.

A single arch, crudely buttressed by a Tudor builder against collapse, marks a sort of divide between nave and chancel. It separates farmers in box pews from the peasantry behind, putting them barely three feet nearer to the altar and to God. According to a local history, fights used to break out over seating in this church. For seven centuries, Up Marden had 200-300 parishioners. Today it has barely 30. The wattle and daub hovels of the departed have long melted back into the earth and woods from which they were wrenched.

We can imagine their ghosts still quarrelling over the empty benches and dancing round the decaying tombstones outside. The Payes feuded with the Colpas and the Tills, old Sussex names, like characters out of Montaigne. Their misdeeds are recalled in court records, but not the hardship of these desperate settlements. Visit Up Marden in the gloaming and the Middle Ages might have just left for the night, in rough-gartered leggings and jerkins, cursing the earls of Arundel in a thick Sussex dialect. A threadbare curate snuffs the candles and makes his way downhill to his home in neighbouring Compton. These were mean people as well as poor and their church shows it.

At the time of our conversation, Nairn was tiring of Pevsner's obsession with dry lists of architectural features. He was a sceptic and a rebel and loved his beer. He professed to find aesthetic quality in the most insipid 1960s office blocks and defended every Modernist outrage. Nairn was not to my mind a religious man. Yet Up Marden found its way into his soul. I believe he visited it when depressed and nearing his premature death. He declared that it moved him beyond religion. It had an atmosphere developed by 'slow, loving, gentle accretion, century by century'. No caving, no art or architecture could explain its effect. It was a work not of architecture but of humanity.

These places disturb us unbelievers. Great religious monuments and their builders we can take in our stride. We have the measure of Yorkshire's Cistercian priors, the wool tycoons of East Anglia and the guild princes of London, Norwich and Bristol. They raised their vaults to the glory of their vocation or the salvation of their souls. We open Pevsner and tick off their bosses and tiercerons like bird-spotters on safari. Their churches were for this world as much as for the next: it is in this world that we appreciate them.

But the Downland churches are different. They weave not neither do they spin, yet there is not a cathedral in England that has their power to move the spirit. This power does not respect belief or unbelief. For all I know, Up Marden church might have been a place of Popish authority and fear, coated in crude wall-paintings of damnation, like those at Hardham and Combes. I doubt if much liberal theology ever graced these rafters. Yet I trust Up Marden to have been a place of refuge. I see its parishioners finding a deep comfort in these walls, the comfort of certainty, a belief in a better life to come.

Is this what moved Nairn? Monuments of all faiths have this quality of reassurance: Stonehenge in moonlight, the tinkling stupas of Rangoon and Bangkok, the pilgrimage churches of Bavaria, the old synagogue in Amsterdam. All manage to be more than the sum of their architectural parts. And as Proust remarked before the church at Combray, we cannot tell how much more. A church says what it contains but not what it conceals. To fill the void, some of us fall back on memory, some on imagination, some on faith.

Sitting under the old yews of Marden, I can piece together Nairn's atmosphere from the history of the site. England's churches are its most vivid chronicles. They can be read like rings in a tree. From their roofs, hobgoblins and gargoyles will screech out their stories, warning us that we will surely die, but they and their glorious house will live forever (albeit courtesy of English Heritage). That history book is easy to read. But I am not just reading history. The spirits of Downsmen past may haunt Up Marden. They may gasp up the hill, tramp through the wicket gate and kneel exhausted before their God. But more than spirits seem to fill this clearing. More than dryads flit from tree to tree. The Downland churches have a stronger magic. The unbeliever departs them ill at ease.

Simon Jenkins writes for the Times.