

THE SPELL OF THE PRIORY CHURCH

By Doug Armitage

There it stands, foursquare, at the end of the little street with its 1450 – built row of cottages, silhouetted against the sky as it has been for nine hundred years, bordered by a fringe of trees and fronted with scattered ancient, lichen covered gravestones.

The town noises recede on approaching the building to be replaced by bird song and the cries of seagulls and these, too, fade on entering the porch. For me this is a calming experience, preparing me for entry to a world of living history.

The Priory church was once part of a monastery that flourished in a former Saxon based society until King Henry VIII dissolved it, along with all the other monasteries in England. The Priory church itself was spared and given to the townspeople. Because of a miracle performed by Jesus in the role of a carpenter, the town's Saxon name of Twyneham (meaning betwixt the rivers Avon and Stour) became known as Twyneham Christchurch. Over the centuries the Twynham name fell into disuse to give the town its present name of Christchurch. This history lives on because much of the monastic cloistering can still be seen.

So the living history begins visually from the outside: the inside is much as it was nine centuries ago and I am awed by thoughts of those generations of men, women and children who have touched the same pillars that I can touch, who have breathed the same kind of air that I breath and who enjoy the same kind of music and song that I enjoy. I even reflect on the kind of footwear worn by these generations.

While the weekday level of noise is hushed, almost to the point of non-existence, there are many times when there is quiet conversation among the various church workers and animated whispers and low voices of the countless numbers of visitors to the building – couples, tour groups, primary school children, and others.

The spell falls on many, especially those from foreign lands.. The volunteer greeters and guides hand out explanatory pamphlets in 17 different languages. The religious services that I attend are full of music and song and it is a joy to hear the choir in full voice – at times inducing frissons of delight. The vestments and robes contribute to the total experience of the service. As I wallow in the sound and look upon the fabric of this old place my mind slides back over the centuries as I attempt to conjure up, from where I am standing or sitting, the view of one hundred, two hundred, five hundred years ago.

From an historical perspective dress reflects a mix of current and past attitudes – all part of the spell – the clergy and choir in their traditional robes and the congregation in whatever takes its fancy, or so it seems. Men, shirts, ties, suits, open necked shirts, casual slacks or even shorts and women smart hats and Sunday dresses, to Jeans and shorts and bird's nest hair styles. No longer social stratification by dress of the well to do and the poor.

It's been my good fortune to have been given a minute role in the maintenance of the Priory appearance. As with many old churches memorial plaques abound on the inside walls. Some are of marble, others of stone and yet others in copper or brass. It is the latter which from time to time I bring up to a sparkling state. All of them make interesting and poignant reading.

The spell that the Priory has cast on me stays with me. Its tower on the skyline as I drive home affirms that.