

Sunday 6th June – 3.00 p.m.
@ St. John's Church Devizes

Architecture as History focusing on St John's
Jon Cannon

His book: "The Cathedral".

1000 year sweep of English history – finishing 500 years ago in 1540.

A lost world but a compelling world because it is all still around us in the English church. It is relevant, yet strange.

Faith was an assumption – the miraculous was taken for granted. People knew miracles happened but couldn't initiate them. However, the miracle of trans-substantiation was regular and real to them. It was catholic, in the old sense. It was very hierarchical. The ordinary people could only gaze through a screen at what was happening. They would take Holy Communion perhaps only once a year.

The Art within the high altar area was all encompassing – "mermaid striptease" and ploughman on the field.

This is a world where the religious buildings are extraordinary. By far the largest buildings seen anywhere were the cathedrals and abbeys that dominated the environment.

Rome in England c 600 – Starts with the sending of a monk from Italy to convert the English king. Augustine built 2 stone churches in Canterbury - one now underneath the cathedral and the other just outside the walls. Augustine worked out how to transliterate the Anglo-Saxon alphabet.

Wilfred built the crypt in Ripon. Wilfred went backwards and forwards to Rome to complain about the Kings of Northumbria and stopped enroute to convert the King of East Sussex – this was how Chichester Cathedral came to be.

The former cathedral of Sherborne was once the cathedral for our area.

Devizes – physical divide as well as the civic boundaries. Right on the edge of the chalk /green sand /clay divide – 3 very different geographical environments.

There are no Anglo Saxon cathedrals because of the political situation – 1066 and all that.

1070 William's new Archbishop of Canterbury flattened what Augustine had built in Canterbury (post fire) and built a new cathedral. In so doing, he gave carte blanche to others elsewhere to sweep away what was there.

1080s – Winchester – started a pole vaulting experience whereby England moved itself to the forefront of world architecture. It was the largest building under one roof anywhere in the world.

Durham – extraordinarily complex structure whose designer was the Brunel of the time.

1090s – by then there were 14 or 15 world class buildings going up under the Norman bishops.

Osmund probably built the castle at Devizes.

12th century – A forgotten revolution: forming of monastic communities, the crusades, recognisable upsurge in the planning and founding of towns etc. Devizes castle was first built in stone in the 12th century.

The Devizes that we inhabit was the bailey of the castle. The outer walls encompassed where the administration of the town took place. St John's was where this community worshipped. The second church, St. Mary's, was built for the lay people – the commoners without the walls.

In the 12th century priests were not celibate. Bishop Roger Poore built St. John's.

The nave didn't have aisles. It was built for a small community. It was far more ornate than St. Mary's. St. Mary's had aisles – it had to accommodate a larger congregation.

All over St John's are things that used to be outside and are now inside. It was a high status building.

At this time something remarkable happened to art and architecture. All kinds of image making changed – stained glass making etc. The pointed arch was new and started to take over architecture. Pointed arch means "Gothic". It was a style imported into England from France. Pointed arches of varying dimensions harmonize.

Early 13th century architecture changed to "Early English". Henry III came to the throne – a genuinely pious man and everywhere things changed into the triumphant high Gothic. Salisbury cathedral was built on a virgin plot – unusual in that most were built on pre-existing ecclesiastical sites.

14th century: 1310 – 1348. Every building was a one off – every building seemed to produce something that had never been done before. It was the Decorative period.

1390s – 1510. The Perpendicular style – which was unique to England. The style stood still between the two dates. It is very difficult to tell a church at the beginning of the period from one built at the end. The Nave of St. John's is Perpendicular in style.

1350 to 1540, there was a blurring between the castle wards and people came to live nearer the site of the castle itself.

The Chantry was where the priest said prayers for souls. Immediately after the Black Death, there was a great growth in the building of ornate chantries.

15th – 16th centuries: there is hardly a church anywhere in the country that did not have work done on them in this period. The power of architecture was moving downwards to those funding it – upper class professionals – all of which was ultimately to do with concern for their own souls. Some funded just a candle, others a complete church.

By the 16th century, in Devizes – the boundaries between castle and town had blurred. St John's became the main town church.

Rood screens were now created in great numbers all over England.

1540s Reformation – a whole new story unfolded.