

I NEVER KNEW THAT ABOUT  
**ENGLAND'S  
COUNTRY  
CHURCHES**

‘CHRISTOPHER WINN HAS DONE US ALL A GREAT SERVICE...  
HIS BOOKS ARE SO INFORMATIVE AND INTERESTING!’

SARAH KENNEDY, BBC RADIO 2



CHRISTOPHER WINN

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## About the Book

**Discover hundreds of facts you never knew about England's country churches.**

Bestselling author Christopher Winn takes us on a fascinating journey across England in search of the hidden stories, forgotten pasts and secrets that lie within the nation's country churches. Travel through England and learn how the churches were host to some of the nation's biggest events; unearthing the battles fought, won and lost around them, the births - and deaths - of royalty, the legends that are laid to rest in the grounds, and the momentous historical changes that happened with church spires as their backdrop.

Illustrated throughout with pen and ink drawings, this book will have you saying time and time again, 'I never knew that!'



## About the Author

CHRISTOPHER WINN has been a freelance writer and trivia collector for over twenty years. He has worked with Terry Wogan and Jonathan Ross, and sets quiz questions for television as well as for the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*. He is the author of the bestselling *I Never Knew That About England*. Books in the same series cover Ireland, Scotland, Wales, London, Yorkshire, the Lake District and New York, and he has written further books on the English, Scottish, Irish, and the River Thames and Royal Britain. He is also the Associate Producer for a TV series by ITV about Great Britain. He is married to artist Mai Osawa, who illustrates all the books in the series.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

I Never Knew That About England  
I Never Knew That About Ireland  
I Never Knew That About Scotland  
I Never Knew That About Wales  
I Never Knew That About London  
I Never Knew That About the English  
I Never Knew That About the Irish  
I Never Knew That About the Scottish  
I Never Knew That About Britain: the Quiz Book  
I Never Knew That About the Lake District  
I Never Knew That About Yorkshire  
I Never Knew That About the River Thames  
I Never Knew That About Royal Britain  
I Never Knew That About New York





Christopher Winn



*I Never Knew That  
About*

ENGLAND'S  
COUNTRY  
CHURCHES

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

Mai Osawa



EBURY  
PRESS

This book is in memory of two people who loved their  
churches and who helped and inspired me so much in life.

Basil Guy, Bishop of Gloucester,  
and  
Diana de la Rue

And for Mai  
You inspire me every day





## Preface

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As the historian A.J.P. Taylor was wont to say, 'The (country) churches of England constitute its greatest treasure'. And, indeed, England's country churches have something for everyone. Fortress, refuge, lighthouse, landmark, mausoleum, museum, market-place, school-room, court-room, concert hall, theatre, House of God. England's country churches are, and have been, all these things.

They are England's most visible and tangible links to the past. They are England's timeline, present since the dawn of England itself, witnesses to historic events and everyday happenings, births and deaths and marriages, triumphs and sorrows. Through the centuries they keep watch over the memories and monuments of England's sons and daughters, the grand and the modest, the noble and the disreputable.

They are galleries of the very best of English craftsmanship and design, in wood and stone, in carvings, sculptures and stained glass. They reflect the tastes and skills of generations of England's artisans and architects. They guard treasures that would grace palaces and museums.

England's country churches are as integral to the English landscape as the rose bush or the oak tree, the chalk down or the hedgerow, and even more varied. Some churches achieve beauty from their location, some are a thing of beauty in themselves; some live in legend and literature.

There are Saxon churches, reflective of simple faith, Norman churches with rugged arches and powerful pillars, stamping their authority, Gothic churches with their soaring arches and huge windows, Puritan chapels, plain

and honest, Georgian churches, spacious, galleried, filled with rich oak furnishings, Victorian churches, resplendent with imperial pomp, eccentric Arts and Craft churches – every one of them with illuminating wonders to show and remarkable tales to tell, wonders and tales that will move you to exclaim, again and again ... I never knew that!

# England's Country Churches

## County by County

John Betjeman wrote of churches that are 'worth bicycling twelve miles against the wind to see'. For me, all of England's ten thousand country churches can justify that ride but I can only find room in this book for some three hundred of them. So, how to choose?

To begin with I have featured only village churches or those that stand alone in the countryside – there are some glorious churches in country towns, but these must wait for another book.

Next, I have ordered the book by county. England's counties are almost as ancient as her churches, and since each county's churches are distinctive and different, not just in style and building materials, but in accent and feel, using counties ensures variety.

In respect of the counties, I have elected to use, as far as possible, England's traditional counties, as they existed at the time the churches were built (other perhaps than some of the earlier Saxon and Norman churches). However, Cumberland, Westmorland and the Furness district of Lancashire I have combined into the present-day Cumbria. I have treated the three Ridings of Yorkshire as the one county of Yorkshire. Huntingdonshire has its own chapter separate from Cambridgeshire. Rutland, of course, has been reborn. Poor Middlesex has been largely subsumed by London and has lost most of the churches that could once have been described as country churches – only Harefield could perhaps still qualify – and so, sadly, does not feature in the book.



Otherwise the choice of church has been purely random. It may be a church I know personally or happen to have read about or has been recommended. There is nothing calculated or wilful in my choice – how I wish I could have included all ten thousand.

# **BEDFORDSHIRE**



*Elstow Abbey – John Bunyan’s church*

## **Cardington**

St Mary the Virgin



*A Heady Brew*

Much of this stately 15th-century Perpendicular church was rebuilt in 1898 but it still retains an abundance of interesting features old and new, such as the SAXON SUNDIAL on the outside south wall of the tower. Such sundials are extremely rare and this one is in exceptionally good condition.

Inside, the church is full of monuments, the oldest being two beautiful canopied tomb chests that sit beneath 16th-century arches on either side of the chancel. One is to SIR WILLIAM GASCOIGNE, Comptroller of the Household of Cardinal Wolsey. He died in 1540 and his brass portrait is set between those of his two wives. The other is to SIR JARRATE HARVYE (d.1638), THE FIRST MAN TO ENTER CADIZ in the siege of 1596. He was married to Dorothy Gascoigne and the two of them lie here together.

### *Whitbreads*

Everywhere there are monuments to Cardington's most famous family, the WHITBREADS, who settled in Cardington in the 1650s in a house called The Barns, and many of whom lie beneath the church in the family vault. The finest of the Whitbread memorials is a splendid marble sculpture in the north transept, completed by John Bacon in 1799 in memory of SAMUEL WHITBREAD I, founder of WHITBREAD'S BREWERY.

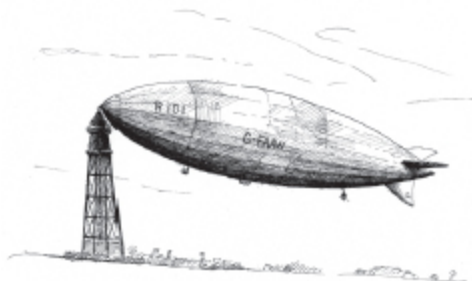
Standing on a plinth beneath the monument is a BLACK BASALT FONT MADE BY JOSIAH WEDGWOOD in 1783, ONE OF ONLY FIVE SUCH FONTS IN EXISTENCE AND ONE OF ONLY TWO TO BE FOUND IN AN ENGLISH CHURCH, the other being in St Mary's, Essendon in Hertfordshire.

### *World's First Major Air Disaster*

In the south aisle there is a memorial to the 48 men who lost their lives in the WORLD'S FIRST MAJOR AIR DISASTER, when the *R101* airship crashed in France, on 5 October 1930,



while on its way to the Imperial Conference in India, with the Air Minister, Lord Thomson, on board. The *R101* was constructed in one of the enormous Cardington Sheds that can be seen across the fields on the edge of the village, the largest building in the world when it was put up by Shorts Brothers in the First World War, and it was from here that the airship departed at the start of its fateful voyage.



Above the memorial in the church, hanging in a glass cabinet on the wall, is the torn and scorched ROYAL AIR FORCE ENSIGN that flew proudly from the stern of the airship. It was salvaged from the wreckage and brought back to Cardington. The funeral of the men who died was held in St Mary's, and they are all buried together in the graveyard across the road from the church, beneath a fine monument designed by Sir Albert Richardson.



SAMUEL WHITBREAD (1720–96) was born in Cardington into a Bedfordshire farming family. He invested a modest inheritance from his father in a small brewery at a time when beer was being promoted as a healthy

alternative to the demon gin, which was wreaking havoc among the poor. The business flourished and in 1750 Whitbread opened BRITAIN'S FIRST LARGE-SCALE PURPOSE-BUILT BREWERY, in Chiswell Street in London. It soon became THE BIGGEST BREWERY IN THE COUNTRY.

Whitbread was one of the first people in Britain to make a fortune through trade, much looked down upon by 18th-century society, but he was also one of the first great philanthropists who believed in using the fruits of his success for the benefit of everyone. He was always concerned with the welfare of his workforce and his great contribution to the Industrial Revolution, of which he was a pioneer, was the template he created for honest business practice and good relations between owners and workers. In 1768 Whitbread was elected as MP for Bedford, a post he held for over 20 years. He is particularly remembered as THE FIRST MAN TO SPEAK OUT IN PARLIAMENT AGAINST SLAVERY.

The company Whitbread founded in 1742 is today a multi-national concern that owns a number of well-known names in the hospitality business including Costa Coffee, Premier Inns and Beefeater. The Whitbread family still live in Bedfordshire, 5 miles from Cardington, at Southill Park.

## Cockayne Hatley

St John the Baptist

*Quite Continental*



This is Bedfordshire's far east, a landscape of big skies, open fields and distant views. The tower of St John's peeps above a bower of trees standing on a gentle hill at the end of a lonely lane. From the outside this unassuming, 13th-century brownstone church creates a picture of England at its most tranquil and serene. Step inside, however, and you are suddenly in continental Europe.

Before you is a feast of heavy, dark, elaborately carved woodwork, THE MOST WONDROUS AND UNEXPECTED COLLECTION OF ECCLESIASTICAL FURNISHINGS TO BE FOUND IN ANY COUNTRY CHURCH IN ENGLAND. It was all was accumulated by HENRY COCKAYNE CUST, lord of the manor and rector here from 1806 to 1861, at a time when the monasteries and churches of northern Europe were selling off their treasures in the aftermath of the Napoleonic occupations.

The choir stalls that fill the chancel date from 1689 and come from the Abbey of Oignies, near Charleroi in what is now Belgium. They boast exquisite misericords, and the backs of the stalls are carved with the garlanded busts of popes and saints – an extraordinary display of Roman Catholic papal imagery to find in an Anglican country church. There are more of these stalls, with misericords, facing each other in the nave.

The Communion rail, decorated with carvings of harvesting cherubs, was bought from a church at Malines

in Belgium, and the impressive screen under the west tower came from Louvain.

A quite lovely small window in the north aisle contains GLASS DATING FROM 1250, showing four saints of Saxon England, Edmund, Ethelbald, Oswald and Dunstan. This came from a demolished church in Yorkshire.

### *Cockaynes*

There are also a number of fine brasses to the Cockayne family, including one to SIR JOHN COCKAYNE, Baron of the Exchequer, who bought the manor of Hatley in 1417, enlarged the church and built the hall next door. The Cockaynes held the manor until 1745, when it passed by marriage to the Custs, and they adopted the name Cockayne Cust. LADY DIANA COOPER, the actress and socialite who was regarded as the most beautiful woman of her day, spent a part of her childhood at Cockayne Hatley Hall, the home of her natural father Henry Cust, and wrote of it in her autobiography as 'a house in Bedfordshire that must always be remembered as a place where the clouds cast no shadows, where grass was greener, taller, strawberries bigger and more plentiful and above all where gardens and woods, the house and family, the servants and villagers, would never change'.

### *William Henley*

As a poet, Henley is best known for his poem 'Invictus', which includes the famous lines, quoted by Nelson Mandela while a prisoner on Robben Island,

*'... Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody but unbowed  
... I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.'*

---

## *Long John Silver and Wendy*

Cockayne Hatley holds one more surprise. Standing under a tree in the windswept churchyard is the austere grey tombstone of the Victorian poet WILLIAM HENLEY (1849–1903) and his family, friends of Henry Cust. As a boy Henley caught tuberculosis and had to have one of his legs amputated. While he was recovering in hospital in Edinburgh he got to know a sickly young writer called Robert Louis Stevenson, who later in life would model one of his most famous characters, the peg-leg villain from *Treasure Island*, LONG JOHN SILVER, on his boyhood friend William Henley.

On the reverse side of the tombstone it says:

*‘Nothing is here for tears  
Nothing to wail or beat the breast  
Nothing but what is well and fair ...’*

These words refer to Margaret, Henley’s much-loved daughter, who died at the age of five. Known to everyone as the ‘golden child’, with her flaxen hair, bright eyes and merry laugh she captivated all who met her, including Henley’s good friend J.M. Barrie. Margaret noticed how her father referred to Barrie as ‘my friend’, and whenever he visited she would fling herself into his arms crying ‘Fwendy! Fwendy!’ And so Barrie came by the name WENDY.



# Elstow

Abbey Church of St Mary St Helena

## *John Bunyan's Church*

ELSTOW ABBEY, once THE THIRD LARGEST ABBEY IN ENGLAND, was founded in the 11th century by William the Conqueror's niece Judith. In 1539, during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, most of the gigantic abbey church was demolished leaving just the nave to serve as the parish church of today.

The east end of the church is supported on massive round Norman piers, while at the west end there are two Early English bays, added in the 13th century. On the floor of the south aisle there is a brass portrait of an ABBESS OF ELSTOW, ELIZABETH HERVEY (D.1527), ONE OF ONLY TWO BRASSES IN ENGLAND OF AN ABBESS WITH HER CROSIER. Down some steps and through a door in the south-west corner of the church is a beautiful 13th-century room, now used as a vestry, which has a vaulted ceiling of stone ribs resting on a slim central pillar of Purbeck marble.



*Immortal Tinker*



But Elstow Abbey's greatest treasure is JOHN BUNYAN (1628–88), author of the first English bestseller, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He was born, the son of a tinker, in a little cottage outside the village and was baptised in the font that stands in the north aisle of the church, on 13 November 1628. The font is still used today. Bunyan's two daughters were also baptised in this font, Mary, who was born blind, in 1650, and Elizabeth in 1654. The small chapel at the end of the south aisle is called the Bunyan Chapel and preserves the rails and altar table before which Bunyan knelt and received Communion. Victorian windows in the north and south aisles portray scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and also the fight between good and evil from another of Bunyan's books, *The Holy War*.



Outside the church there is a small door in the west wall which is thought to have been the inspiration for the 'Wicket Gate' through which Christian, the main character in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, flees in search of deliverance.

To the north-west of the main church is the 13th-century DETACHED BELL TOWER, one of only two in Bedfordshire (the other is at Marston Mortaine). As a young man, Bunyan came here to ring the bells, gazing nervously upwards in case they fell down on his head as punishment for his sins.

To the south-west of the church are the remains of a house built in 1616 by Thomas Hillerson out of the abbey

ruins. Hillerson lies in the church, and his house, which was still standing in Bunyan's day, became the House of the Interpreter, where Christian found a good man who could explain the mysteries of life to him.

Across the road, on the village green, is the 15th-century timber-framed MOOT HALL where Bunyan went to school. It was built by the nuns from the abbey as a stall for the Elstow Market Fair and is now a museum in Bunyan's memory.

Everywhere in Elstow there are memories of England's 'Immortal Tinker'.



## BEDFORDSHIRE CHURCHES

**Bletsoe - St Mary the Virgin.** A mainly 13th and 14th-century church of Norman origins, much restored in the 19th century, St Mary's, Bletsoe would have been familiar to some of the pivotal characters in the dramatic story of the great Tudor royal dynasty, for here worshipped LADY MARGARET BEAUCHAMP, grandmother to Henry VII. She lived in BLETSOE CASTLE, which still exists next door to the church at the core of a 17th-century manor house. In 1443 she

gave birth there to a daughter, Margaret, who would grow up to marry Edmund Tudor, son of Henry V's widow Catherine de Valois, and half-brother to Henry VI. Margaret and Edmund had a son, Henry, who defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and ascended the throne as Henry VII. Perhaps we owe our Tudor monarchs to the prayers that Lady Margaret Beauchamp put up in Bletsoe's country church.

**Felmersham - St Mary's.** Best approached via the old stone bridge across the Ouse, St Mary's Church stands proudly on a bluff above the river, a supreme example of Early English Gothic architecture and one of the most beautiful buildings in Bedfordshire. Built in just 20 years between 1220 and 1240, it has an imposing Early English tower, with a Perpendicular upper stage, and a simple interior of marching pointed arches, those of the crossing being impressively tall and set upon ornate, multi-shafted pillars. The superb 15th-century rood screen still glows brightly with its original colouring. But the glory of Felmersham is its dramatic and decorative west front, a gallery of Gothic arches and blind arcading in three tiers. Any cathedral would be proud of such craftsmanship.



**Northill - St Mary's.** High up on the tower of this church is a one-handed clock made by England's first and greatest clockmaker, THOMAS TOMPION (1639-1713), who was born in a tiny thatched cottage, still standing, in the next-door

village of Ickwell Green. Tompion, whose clocks and watches are among the most valuable timepieces in the world, was christened in St Mary's in 1639.



# BERKSHIRE



*St Mary's, Aldworth - where giants sleep*

## Aldworth

### St Mary's

*'They shall grow not old,  
as we that are left grow old  
Age shall not weary them,  
nor the years condemn  
At the going down of the sun  
and in the morning  
We will remember them'*

LAURENCE BINYON, 'For the Fallen'

The ashes of LAURENCE BINYON (1869-1943) are scattered in the churchyard here and he is commemorated, along with his wife Cicely, by a slate gravestone under a hedge. He was born in Lancaster and for most of his life worked for the British Museum, as an expert on Oriental art. His book *Painting in the Far East*, published in 1908, was the first

book ever to be written on the subject. 'For the Fallen' was composed in 1914, while Binyon was walking on the cliffs of North Cornwall, in response to the appalling number of casualties suffered by the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front, and his poem is recited every year at Remembrance Day services. Binyon was too old to enlist himself, but in 1915 he went to France as a volunteer hospital orderly.

Also in the churchyard is a railed enclosure containing the tombs of a number of ALFRED LORD TENNYSON'S IN-LAWS, THE SELLWOODS, who lived at nearby Pibworth Manor. Tennyson and Emily Sellwood were married not far away at Shiplake in June 1850, and they often stayed in Aldworth and worshipped at St Mary's. Tennyson obviously liked the village, for he gave the name Aldworth to the house he built for himself on Blackdown, near Haslemere in Surrey.

The attractive little church sits, quite alone, on an undulating hilltop at a fork in the road. A little further on is the village well, 365 feet (111 m) deep and said to be THE DEEPEST WELL IN ENGLAND. The yew tree on the south side of the church is anything between 600 and 1,000 years old. The oldest part of the church itself is the late Norman tower, which is 12th-century and sports a quaint, red-tiled Bavarian-style roof. Most of the rest of the building is 13th and 14th-century. All quite straightforward so far.

### *Aldworth Giants*

But wait until you go inside. Here is a sight so spectacular and so astonishing that Queen Elizabeth I herself commanded the Earl of Leicester to ride with her the 15 miles to Aldworth from Ewelme, where she was staying, so she could see what everyone was talking about.

What they were talking about was the ALDWORTH GIANTS, a remarkable collection of nine huge stone effigies, all of the DE LA BECHE family, and all dating from between 1300 and

1350. They are unsurpassed in England and constitute THE GREATEST NUMBER OF MEDIEVAL MONUMENTS TO ONE FAMILY IN ANY ENGLISH PARISH CHURCH. Queen Elizabeth was fortunate to see the giants intact, for they were later defaced by Oliver Cromwell's iconoclasts.

Even so, what is left is magnificent. The de la Beche family came over with William the Conqueror and built themselves a castle at Aldworth, where Beche Farm now stands. They rose to prominence during the reigns of Edward II and Edward III, and the effigies here represent five generations of the family of that period. Six of the effigies lie under ornate Decorated canopies along the north and south walls, while two more are located under the arches of the arcade.



The biggest and most striking is that of SIR PHILIP DE LA BECHE (d.1336) on the north side. He was valet to Edward II and appears to have been over seven feet tall. The dwarf at his feet was his page, who accompanied his master everywhere to emphasise Sir Philip's height and importance. Sir Philip is seen reclining, a most unusual pose for a medieval effigy.

The earliest monument is that of Sir Philip's grandfather, SIR ROBERT DE LA BECHE, who was knighted by Edward I in 1278 and died around 1298. The latest one is that of SIR NICHOLAS DE LA BECHE (d.1345), who rests under the arcade and was the third son of Sir Philip. He was Constable of the Tower of London and tutor to the Black Prince, eldest son of Edward III.

The villagers of Aldworth nicknamed three of the giants John Long, John Strong and John Never Afraid. Another,

John Ever Afraid, was buried inside a niche cut into the church wall because he was afraid that the Devil would come and claim him if he was left exposed. Alas, his hiding proved futile and he has vanished, no doubt seized by the dark forces.

All in all, Aldworth is an exhilarating place to visit. Fit, one might almost say, for a Queen.

## Avington

St Mark & St Luke



### *Norman Chancel Arch and Font*

Here is BERKSHIRE'S MOST COMPLETE AND LEAST SPOILED NORMAN CHURCH. It lies in a field beside the River Kennet, in the grounds of a great house, and is shaded by a magnificent cedar tree. The building is a simple two-cell structure, entirely Norman except for the Tudor south porch, which was added in the 16th century to protect the splendid Norman doorway, with its two orders of traditional chevron carving. The wooden door itself is also 16th century.

Inside, one's eye is immediately drawn to the marvellous CHANCEL ARCH, garnished with flowers, zigzags, various animals and beak-heads. It covers the whole width of the church and sags delightfully in the middle as if about to buckle under the weight of ages. There are truncated pillars on either side of the chancel, which suggest that it