



West Country Churches

Medieval art and architecture in the south west

3–7 July 2023 (MJ 790)

5 days • £1,460

Lecturer: John McNeill

Bristol, Wells & Exeter cathedrals and a cluster of architecturally eminent parish churches.

Based in Wells, a lovely country town.

Led by renowned architectural historian and tour leader, John McNeill.

The medieval architecture of the English West Country, particularly in the great arc of land between Bristol and Exeter, is rightly celebrated for the regional distinction and inventiveness of its major monuments, qualities which endured throughout the Middle Ages. This imaginative originality was also extended to its parish churches and, most remarkably, can be traced back to a period from which little survives in south-western England, the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The buildings we visit range from the late Anglo-Saxon to the early Tudor, though it would be foolish not to play to the region's strengths, and the majority belong to the later Middle Ages.

The pre-eminent buildings are, of course, Bristol, Wells and Exeter cathedrals, each of them variously extended, refurbished and embellished between the late thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries, each of them retaining much of their medieval statuary, furniture and stained glass. Each also belongs to wider precincts, that at Wells exceptionally well preserved, in whose vicar's close and various gates one might glimpse some of the most influential structures of medieval England.

Wells is in many ways the ideal place to stay, for it sits towards the middle of an unusual concentration of parish churches of national importance, a significant theme of the tour. And with the buildings of the calibre of Lullington, Isle Abbots, Compton Martin and Steeple Ashton we will not want for masterpieces of parish church design.

Itinerary

Day 1: Bristol. The coach departs at 2.00pm from Bristol Temple Meads railway station for the short drive to Bristol Cathedral. A breathtaking hall church which stands among the most innovative early 14th-century buildings in Europe. Cross the river to the great mercantile parish church, St Mary Redcliffe,



Exeter Cathedral, steel engraving c. 1850.

a dazzling amalgam of eye-catching porches, fancy vaults and decorated detailing.

Day 2: Exeter, Ottery St Mary, Glastonbury. South-west to Exeter Cathedral, a building whose contemporary liturgical furnishings and western image screen constitute one of the most complete ensembles of medieval work still to be found in a north European city. Visit Bishop Grandisson's collegiate foundation at Ottery St Mary and the stunning 12th–14th-century ruins at Glastonbury Abbey.

Day 3: Wells, Compton Martin. A morning at Wells Cathedral beginning with the cloisters, progressing through the nave, west front, chapter house and that marvellous sequence of contrasted spaces that make up the east end; architecture, sculpture and stained glass to the fore. The afternoon is spent at St Cuthbert and then over the Mendips to visit the Romanesque church of St Michael at Compton Martin.

Day 4: Isle Abbots, Muchelney, Huish Episcopi. Isle Abbots is an unusually heterogeneous and satisfying late medieval parish church; Muchelney, an important ruined Benedictine Abbey with surviving abbot's lodging; Huish Episcopi, greatest of the Somerset church towers. A free afternoon.

Day 5: Lullington, Steeple Ashton, Bradford on Avon. The morning is spent hugging the borders of Somerset and Wiltshire. Lullington, a virtually intact Romanesque parish church

with exceptional sculpture, Steeple Ashton, superb late 15th-century church with extravagant wooden vault and Bradford on Avon, accomplished and enigmatic late Anglo-Saxon chapel of St Laurence. Return to Bristol Temple Meads station by 4.00pm.

Lecturer

John McNeill. Specialist in the Middle Ages and Renaissance – lectures for Oxford University's Department of Continuing Education. He is Honorary Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for whom he has edited and contributed to collections of essays on medieval cloisters, chantries, Anjou, and King's Lynn and the Fens. In 2010 he established a biennial series of international conferences on Romanesque visual culture. His most recent effort in this field – *Romanesque Saints, Shrines, and Pilgrimage* – was published in 2020. He is also author of the *Blue Guides* to both Normandy and the Loire Valley.

Practicalities

Price per person. Two sharing: £1,460.
Single occupancy: £1,585.

Included: travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 3 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

West Country Churches
continued

Accommodation. The Swan, Wells

(swanhotelwells.co.uk): 4-star, in a building of 15th-century origin in a narrow street close to the cathedral.

How strenuous? This tour would not be suitable for anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking, getting on and off the coach regularly and who cannot stand for the many church visits. Average distance by coach per day: 60 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.

Combine this tour with: *Music along the Rhine*, 23–27 June 2023; *Lincolnshire Churches*, 27 June–1 July 2023.