

Misericords

You will often find me on my knees in churches. It's not that I'm prone to intense devotional fervour. It's simply that of many of the riches of church art are down at ground level.

The medieval brasses are usually hiding under a piece of old carpet up by the high altar, and the decorated floor tiles are, pretty obviously, down on the floor. Better still are the misericords, and they require even more prostration.

The misericord - derived from the Latin word for pity - developed as a means of lending the medieval monks or canons a little posterior support during those interminably long services. Obligated to stand for several hours, the misericord provided them with a little wooden ledge on which to lean, and yet to remain upright.

You'll find them in the chancel of the church, or the choir of an abbey or cathedral, tucked away under the seats. In most cases it's a case of getting down on your needs, removing the seat cover, and then peering into the gloom until your eyes get used to it. You'll need, I suggest, a very good camera indeed when you're down here. And I will, in a few years, have developed "misericord knee", a common and irreversible complaint among ecclesiologists.

In some cathedrals a forbidding rope, or an even more forbidding verger, prevents you from getting anywhere near them. But misericords are well worth the bended knee and buckled back. They have, as Alec Guinness said in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, "all the exuberance of Chaucer without, happily, any of the concomitant crudities".

Not so long ago I was introduced to the sole surviving misericord from St Bartholomew's church in Wednesbury. A member of the local history society proudly showed it me as a treasured secret, and a fragile yet tangible link with the old Wednesbury, the one before coal and steel and tool-making.

Some churches have more, of course. A lot more. I could send you to Great Malvern or Worcester Cathedral. But let me instead whisk you away to a quieter location, where there are less visitors and what could almost equate to "disabled access". At Ripple the chancel is clear, seats are already up and the misericords are waiting for inspection.

The village of Ripple lies in the shadow of Bredon Hill in Worcestershire, an area rich in pickings for church addicts. There's an ancient, rough-hewed, look to the church, which is also remarkably roomy for such a small village. The building dates from the late 12th Century, just as the Norman style was giving way to Early English, but there's plenty of evidence that it was not the first place of Christian worship in the parish, perhaps as early as the 7th Century. Certainly the presence of the misericords indicates a prestigious church with a college or team of resident clergy.

These little wooden carvings can come in a rich variety of forms, and in most cases do not look like religious art at all. There are green men, and folk tales, and carvings

of birds and animals, both real and imagined. Here, hidden away from orthodox religious eyes, the artists could let their hair down and hone their skills.

The misericords at Ripple depict the months of the year, a little wooden calendar to mark the passage of the seasons. The subject is a common one in illuminated manuscripts and books of hours, but is much less common as the theme for misericords. While many misericords elsewhere are flights of the carver's fancy, rooted in the realities of Worcestershire life.

The sequence begins with two carvings of the Sun and the Moon, thereby declaring that the progression of the months was determined by the celestial cycle. But the months themselves are very much set in the sublunary world, a place of hard graft and hard farming.

The December misericord at Ripple, for example, shows a man and woman sat beside an open hearth in their little cottage, their year's labours temporarily suspended. He stirs a cauldron of pottage over the fire, while she spins the distaff, with a little cat crouched behind her shoulder. You can almost feel the chill outside, and smell the hot soup.

May illustrates the blessing of the crops at Rogationtide. A little image of the Virgin Mary sits in the middle, bedecked with flowers, prior to being carried around the fields as part of the ceremony.

The July seat commemorates a ceremony on Lammas or Loaf Mass Eve with the gaping mouth of the manorial oven appropriately at the centre. There are two men in the scene, one of them appears to be an armed officer on hand to keep order. That, at least, is what it seems to show. Misericords are much like medieval cartoons, but without the caption, and not always easier to decipher.

And so the Ripple year passes ever onwards, with sowing and ploughing, reaping and pig-sticking. They were all familiar enough sights to the people of the village, but one wonders whether they knew that their cycles of labour had been set down for posterity, hidden away in a chancel they were rarely, if ever, permitted to enter.