

CHURCH RECORDING

Parishioners of St. Mary's may know that the Cotswold Church Recorders are about to start work recording their church. They may be asking why this is happening when the local history society has already carried out a comprehensive survey in the church. The brief answer is that they are undertaking a different job.

In England there are about 16,000 parish churches. Of these 13,000 are mediaeval and 9,000 listed buildings. Along with period houses and historic industrial sites they form a huge and rich part of our cultural heritage. On average 12 to 14 are robbed or vandalised every day.

About 30 years ago NADFAS (National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies) offered to assist the Church of England by recording parish churches to a standardised pattern, and the 1000th record is due any time now. The purpose of this standardisation is to allow all the information collected to be put on to a national data base, available for consultation by bona fide researchers. For reasons of strict security, only five copies of the records are produced. These are presented to the parish church, the diocese, the Council for the Care of Churches (a small Anglican organisation based in Church House, Westminster), English Heritage archives (in Swindon) and the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The records consist of text, photographs & drawings. Each record is arranged into nine major sections covering everything associated with a church – memorials, windows, books, textiles and so on. The main fabric of the building and the tombs in the churchyard are not included, as these are surveyed by other means. Recorders have to be as accurate as possible and are allowed to record only facts. They are not allowed to make any guesses or to state their personal opinions.

This is quite a tough discipline. It also means that a Church Record is not 'a good read'. It is not meant to be. But everything is recorded, down to the last hymn book and kneeler. Records are consulted extensively by the Church authorities when questions of restoration or re-organisation arise. Sadly, they are also used a good deal by the police.

Church Recorders are not – or are seldom – specialists in the section they are recording. But over the years many build up considerable knowledge from experience or from research. Research is usually into the history of the church contents. Church Recorders are, however, fortunate in being able to consult a very large panel of national experts, volunteers like the recorders themselves, who help to solve, if they can, the innumerable problems which arise over dates, artists, historical figures, heraldry and so on. But, especially in older churches, a surprising amount has to remain unknown and is so recorded.

The Cotswold Church Recorders are currently about two dozen in number. They meet in the church for field work in the morning of the first Monday in the month. They are always glad to welcome interested parishioners, who often bring local knowledge. The work on St. Mary's will probably take about two years .

Bruce Chalmers. Group Leader.