

Susie West - The Church of St Michael

SUSIE WEST: My name is Susie West. I'm an architectural historian, which means that I study buildings. I specialise in English buildings from around 1550 to about 1830, but today I've chosen something that's not quite in either of those brackets, but it is something very familiar to me.

As an architectural historian, my object is the entire building. Now, obviously buildings are rather large, and so we've developed methods over time for breaking them down into ways that we can systematically have a good look at them, understand them, and come away with some conclusions. And that's what I'm going to show you today.

First of all, why is this building standing up, not falling over? What's the construction system? What's it made of? What shape is it? This is 'form', how the building is assembled, then allows us to look more closely at details, the design that's driving the overall building.

And then, moving inside, you can start thinking about the space that the building encloses. You get to use all of your senses as you move around and into a building, and that's what I'll be thinking about soon.

But for now, I'll tell you about the building I've chosen. It's very familiar to me because it's where I work. I'm on the University campus, and this building I see every time I come here as I go on my way to my office. So for me, it's a kind of personal landmark and that's a theme for what buildings do for us, as well.

As an architectural historian, I'm particularly interested in how people use buildings. We make buildings for a lot of reasons, but essentially, they are for some sort of use and that use will change over time. So that's something I can think about with you today.

But to introduce this lovely little building, it's over here. It's a very typical, small, medieval parish church. It's for the Christian faith. It's the oldest thing we have on campus because it was built, say, around 1350, puts that into the middle of the Middle Ages and it's still with us today.

It's dedicated to the Christian angel, Saint Michael, and that's been meaningful to a lot of people here over the centuries. But I think it's time to take a closer look.

The structure of this church uses stone for the walls, tile for the roofs, and as we'll see inside, timber for the roof structure. You can see that the stone in the walls is pretty roughly shaped, and there is a distinctive darker stone which is very local, called brick hill iron stone. The iron gives the stone its brown colour. This isn't expensive stone, and it can't be shaped into very precise blocks.

However, the stone that is shaped around the window and door openings is a different colour. This is limestone. This stone is fine grained and able to be carved with details.

The structural system is primarily the use of pointed arches as a strong way of creating large openings. You can see the pointed arch over the doorways and the window openings. This pointed arch system is called Gothic and it is the dominant way of making stone buildings in the Middle Ages in Europe.

Most people call Gothic a style of building, and the design details are part of what Gothic architecture is. But really, Gothic structural systems are what stop very heavy stone buildings from falling over.

Medieval Christian churches have standard forms, like a system of boxes, that create the basic shape and can be scaled up and added to if you want to make a very elaborate church with higher status, like a cathedral. St. Michael's Church is at the small end of the scale, and its form is made from two boxes joined to each other with a tower at one end.

The bigger box is called the nave, where people gather to worship, and the smaller box is called the chancel, where the priest would lead the ceremonies. The tower holds the bells, which would be rung to call people to worship.

Before we go inside, I'd like you to notice that there are two doors on this side. There's a third on the other side of the church. So how do I know which is the main door to use? Well, the clue is in the little room that is the porch, that has the larger door. This is to protect the main inner door, and that's the one that I'm going to go through now.

Well, now I'm inside and before I say anything else about what I can see, I mentioned that space uses all of our senses, and my hearing tells me I'm in quite an echoey space. My voice is bouncing off the top of the timbers above me.

The floor area is clear of seats. That's because this church is no longer in religious use, so it's been cleared and it's available for a whole range of activities on campus, from music performances to - last time I popped in - karate sessions.

But having it clear allows me to have a good look at the walls. I can see the detail of the inside of the windows, I can see a collection of memorials placed on the wall. Over here, I've spotted a disused feature, which is a little doorway leading to a stone staircase, and once there was a wooden gallery over my head.

Now I mentioned outside that the structural system based on the pointed arch is the one that transfers the weight of the walls above the opening very efficiently. It allows for a relatively high opening in a comparatively narrow width, and this is what you can see in this church. We're in the nave. As I look towards the chancel, you can see the arch behind me. That's known as the chancel arch, and look at its height compared to its width. That is the Gothic arch in action.

There are also details that have been added to the interior during the centuries that the church has been used. Most obviously, the plaques on the wall that commemorate the lives of past local residents. I walked through the graveyard to enter the church, but there are also memorial plaques on the inside. Historically, there should be graves under the church floor, as well.

My favourite memorial in this church is here. It's a husband and wife, and it was created in 1660. They are Mr and Mrs Beale, and the reason I'm interested in it is because a famous female artist, Mary Beale, and her husband paid for this to commemorate their parents. And it's at a time in the 17th century when it was very difficult for women to earn a living as artists, and here we are, in a very local context, just reminding us of the wider world.

The east wall has the largest window and also has unusual wall paintings. This wall has the most decoration because it was the most significant direction in the church, the place of greatest theological meaning where the altar or table held the most important object of the Christian religion, the cross.

Today, this building is both a historic church and also a lively space on campus for a whole range of different activities, from noisy music performances, karate, sports, quiet meditation, perhaps.

It is unusual in being a deconsecrated space, which means it's no longer in active religious use, but the graveyard is still being used and it's still a place where people make very personal memories. It is something of a landmark in a lot of different ways.

My wider research looks at how communities value these places of worship and are seeking ways to extend their use to wider groups in the community beyond their immediate faith group. I think this building is a lovely example of how we use buildings to make personal memories, but they also carry longer-term histories, the people that have been here in many past generations.

Today, our challenge is how we get these historic places to survive and thrive into the future.