

# Churches in Worcestershire

Much of Worcestershire remained under Celtic Christian control at the end of the Roman period. The Pagan Saxons only entered the west part of Worcestershire at the end of the 6th and early 7th centuries and the area was converted to Western Christianity by the mid 7th century. The monastic cathedral at Worcester was founded by 680 and with other abbeys at Pershore and Evesham. The church was the focal point of the medieval village and dominated most aspects of life. As well as being the spiritual leader of the community, the church was a major landowner in the county and therefore wielded considerable economic power.

The earliest churches were built in timber but, by the Late Saxon period, were rebuilt in stone. Little survives of the early phases of development because the buildings were repeatedly modified and rebuilt. This in itself means that the surviving fragments of the various periods of church building can be interpreted to tell the story of the changing fortunes of their communities.

The following is a list of a few of the particularly interesting churches in the County, selected to illustrate all the principal styles of architecture, from Norman to 18th century.

Note that for reasons of security it may not be possible to enter all of these churches. Further details of opening arrangements are frequently posted within the porch.

## **NORMAN**

### **Elmley Castle (St Mary), Worcs. SO 982 410**



The chancel contains surviving stretches of herringbone masonry, probably dating to the 11th century (post-Conquest). The tower is 13th century, the south aisle is 14th century and the north aisle is 15th century.

### **Rock (St Peter and St Paul), Worcs. SO 7315 7116**



The largest Norman village church in the County, built c.1160. It is very tall, with windows high up the nave walls, above a string course, and typical Norman flat buttresses and corbels decorated with heads. The entrance is through a projecting portal with three orders of columns, decorated capitals, zigzag and crenellation on the arch. The chancel arch is of particular interest for its decorative sculpture, including a centaur, several human heads, entwined figures and a boat. Later work includes the Decorated style east window, the Perpendicular aisle, chapel and tower.

The font is Norman. In the chapel is a medieval stone altar slab carved with consecration crosses. Don't miss the stocks, the whipping post and the heavily studded chest.

**EARLY ENGLISH (13th Century)**  
**Pershore Abbey, Worcs SO 9470 4560**



The abbey was probably founded about 689 and rebuilt several times before the dissolution of 1539, when the nave and Lady Chapel were pulled down. Later the north transept collapsed so that all that is left is the chancel, the apse, the south transept and tower.

The chancel was built by about 1239 and is an outstanding example of the Early English style with piers of sixteen shafts, stiff-leaf capitals, Purbeck marble shafts and a rib vault over the chancel and aisles with large naturalistic roof bosses. Remains of Norman work in the south aisle and clues on the outside help to indicate how the Abbey appeared before the dissolution.

**DECORATED (14th century)**  
**Besford (St Peter), Worcs. SO 9109 4477**



This is the only timber-framed church in the County. The nave dates from the mid 14th century, the north doorway and the west window are ogee-headed. There was a major restoration in 1881, when the 14th century style nave windows and the thin bell-tower were added.

The rood loft has survived with its painted fascia. The communion rail is Jacobean, the nave paneling was taken from the early box pews, the chancel was rebuilt in the Early English style. Note the helmet, sword, gauntlets and banners hanging in the chapel. Monuments included an alabaster figure of a boy who died in 1576 and a painted wooden triptych of the 16th century.

**Chaddesley Corbett (St Cassian), Worcs. SO 8913 7359**



The chancel is a brilliant example of the Decorated style. The tracery of the east and a south window includes ogee-heads, triangles, a wheel, cusps etc. In the north chapel windows are Y tracery and stepped lancets. The chancel has sedilis, piscina and aumbry, ogee-headed with crockets and finial. The font is of the Herefordshire School of about 1170 with a band of four dragons with twisted tails set amongst interlace patterns.

### **PERPENDICULAR (15th century)**

#### **Great Malvern Priory (St Mary & St Michael), Worcs. SO 776 459**

The church originally served a Benedictine Priory, founded in 1085. It was largely rebuilt between 1420 and 1460 and is one of the most important pieces of Perpendicular architecture in the county. The crenellations and stone panelling were widely copied.

### **POST-MEDIEVAL (18th century)**

#### **Great Witley (St Michael), Worcs SO 7665 6501**



John Betjeman called this "the most sumptuous classic interior in England." It stands beside the enormous ruins of Witley Court, the mansion of the first Earl of Dudley, making an unforgettable group. The church was consecrated in 1735. In form it is a plain rectangle with two shallow projections at the east end. Inside is brilliant baroque plasterwork in white and gold. This is the most Italian church interior in England. The ceiling paintings and the painted glass of the windows came from an estate near London and were fitted into St Michael's church with 'stucco' decoration actually made of papier-mâché.

There is an enormous monument to the first Lord Foley who planned the building but died in 1732.