

The Rectory

My dear Nephew,

I was sorry to hear of the dawn call by the police because your church had been broken into, although the theft of tambourines, books of choruses and banners proclaiming "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam" are likely to have a limited market! But you are fortunate that those are the only unexpected call-outs you receive.

Those of us with ancient churches are resigned to receiving telephone calls from people living in remote corners of the globe who happen to be on holiday in England and want to trace long-lost relatives who were married or buried in our parishes. They invariably seem amazed when they find you are not personally familiar with someone who died 400 years ago, what family still exists, where they live and what interesting anecdotes you know about their ancestors - preferably something criminal. Any attempts to put them off will be deflected by being told that they fly home tomorrow and since they are booked at a show in London that evening, could they come round early afternoon?

Once inside the church, they will expect a conducted tour. I have a competition with myself to see how outrageous I can make our history, yet still be believed. One family now thinks that the conical tomb in the churchyard is the last visible tip of the spire of the famous cathedral which once stood on this spot but sank into the ground when cursed by a bride who was jilted at its altar.

A second couple now know that a locked safe contains a set of pagan gods which were worshipped by an obscure sect in the parish during the time of the Tudor monarchs. They were removed by the incumbent of the day and locked away. Only the Rector is allowed a key and is only permitted to look inside at the contents on the day he leaves office, as the sight is too terrible.

Yet another are convinced that several dozen mediaeval gold chalices are buried in the rectory garden, where they were hidden from Cromwell's soldiers and their exact location has been forgotten (I told that story when I was looking for volunteers to dig over the rose beds).

Should they get as far as the vestry to inspect the registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, you know that the afternoon is lost. It can occasionally hasten their departure by casually telling them to ignore the mice which will be running round the floor - although hardened visitors are likely to set up their tripods to catch them on film.

The ultimate deterrent is to suggest they stay to pray and attend mass which I am about to offer. That is guaranteed to remind them that they have an urgent appointment back at their hotel.

Your loving uncle,

The Rector

