

10 of the best Surrey churches

In the 1950s, the poet and architectural campaigner Sir John Betjeman embarked on a nationwide tour to pick out the best of the country's parish churches. Last year, **Michael Ellis** worked on an update of this book with the writer **Richard Surman**, and found that what Surrey's churches lack in grandeur, they make up for in rustic charm, as these ten treasures testify

PHOTOS: MICHAEL ELLIS

Compton: St Nicholas Church 45 The Street GU3 1EB

The finest Norman church in Surrey, heavy round-arched arcades dominate the nave, leading the way to the chancel and small vaulted sanctuary beyond – the only one in the country with a gallery above it, presumably for singers or musicians. The Norman stone-carving is excellent, the oak beams above impressively sturdy, and overall this is one of Surrey's best-preserved and most atmospheric early churches.

• *Opening:* usually daylight hours



Stoke D'Abernon: St Mary's Church Stoke Road KT11 3PX

This church has a bit of everything, from a Saxon south wall to Jacobean monuments to 19th-century restorations. Here, it's all about the details: set into the chancel floor are the D'Abernon brasses – that of Sir John, portrayed with a lance and dated to 1277, is thought to be the oldest surviving brass in England; the Norbury Chapel is crowded with monuments, including the crudely carved but colourful figure of Lady Sarah Vincent in bored repose; while the vast heptagonal walnut pulpit with tester above dominates the nave.

• *Opening:* March to October weekends, 2pm to 4pm

Merstham: St Andrew's Church Gatton Park RH2 0TG

Glance about you at the English vista of the chalky downs and grounds of the Royal Alexandra and Albert School before immersing yourself in the thoroughly Continental interior of St Andrew's Church. The principal woodwork here – the choir stalls, collegiate-style, with expressive misericords and figurative arm rests – is from a monastery in Ghent, with canopies behind them from Louvain and an altarpiece and pulpit from Nuremberg.

• *Opening:* February to October, first Sunday of the month

Blackheath: St Martin's Church Blackheath Lane GU4 8RA

An Arts & Crafts church with a pronounced Italian accent, St Martin's sits well in Blackheath, a village that celebrates the cheerful, slightly whacky architecture of Charles Harrison Townsend (see his toadstool-like former chapel at the start of the one-road village). It was Townsend who built the church (1890s), in his trademark ground-hugging style. Inside the simple, barrel-vaulted building, the walls are covered with paintings in a Pre-Raphaelite style by Anna Lea Merritt.

• *Opening:* usually daylight hours

Chaldon: Church of St Peter and St Paul Church Lane CR3 5AL

Remotely set in a small, sheltered copse, this church is a boxy little thing, with a tower that looks as if it has slipped down the roof to land on the oversized porch. Inside is one of the best and most complete early wall paintings in all of England. It dates from about 1200 and is an emphatic expressive of the medieval Christian mindset, depicting with gusto trials and punishments for the souls of the dead. Demons enthusiastically torment the condemned, while other figures climb a ladder in hope of heavenly salvation.

• *Opening:* usually open approximately 10.30am to 4pm daily





Holmbury St Mary: Church of St Mary the Virgin

Horsham Road RH5 6PF

In the crook of a bend in a shallow valley, St Mary's fits perfectly into its fine setting, with woodlands above and a triangular village green at its feet. Its architect, GE Street, lived in the village, and built the church in memory of his wife. The interior is orderly and not the most charismatic of Surrey's churches, but it does contain rather a good reredos behind the altar – a Mother and Child triptych attributed to the early Renaissance Italian painter Jacopo de Sellaio.

• *Opening:* usually daylight hours

Compton: Watts Memorial Chapel

Down Lane GU3 1DQ

Peculiarly tall and narrow, this Byzantine-influenced chapel looks as if it has been squeezed through a funnel. The narrow windows allow insufficient light into the interior, but what gradually emerges from the gloom is an amalgam of Art Nouveau, Romanesque and Celtic imagery. Impressively, this is the collective work of the old villagers of Compton, who came together under the direction of Mary Watts, who built the chapel for her husband, the painter George Frederick Watts, whose works are in the neighbouring gallery.

• *Opening:* 9am to 5pm, or sunset during winter months



Esher: St George's Church

Esher Park Avenue KT10 9RQ

Sir John Betjeman calls this church 'most loveable', and it's easy to see why. It's one of those hodge-podge churches: crumbling clunch (a traditional building material) approximating a chequerboard pattern on the outside, wonky galleries and curious details within. Most peculiar among them is the private pew created by Sir John Vanbrugh for the Duke of Newcastle in 1726. With its crisp Corinthian columns and chiselled pediment, it is a delightfully awkward classical intrusion into this barn of a church.

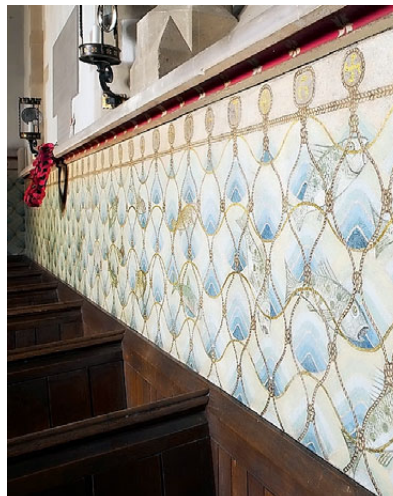
• *Opening:* usually daylight hours

Hascombe: St Peter's Church

Church Road GU8 4JD

Built in 1864 in the local honey-coloured Bargate stone, St Peter's stands on the site of a much older church. The architect was Guildford-born Gothic Revivalist Henry Woodyer, and the chancel is a riot of greens, golds and reds, recreating a medieval colour scheme; the chancel screen is from the Middle Ages, in fact, repainted and with panels of saints inserted into it. The nave is a contrast: light, aquatic and unique. A depiction of the *Miraculous Draught of Fish* covers the wall – 153 of them being drawn into the net of the disciples.

• *Opening:* usually daylight hours



Albury: St Peter and St Paul's Old Church

Albury Park GU5 9BB

The Old Church is situated in Albury Park. Close to a babbling brook and surrounded by long grass, trees and sometimes sheep, this ramshackle church has one of the most bucolic settings imaginable. To the Norman tower and Gothic aisles was added an additional chapel in the 1830s, lavishly decorated (he knew no other way) by Augustus Pugin, pioneer of the Gothic Revival.

• *Opening:* open daily, 10am to 5pm

Michael Ellis' book, **Betjeman's Best British Churches**, is published by HarperCollins and is widely available in print and also as an app. Many of his atmospheric church photographs shot for the book can also be seen by paying a visit to his website: thamesidephotography.com, where you can also see his other work.