

The Early Modern Parish Church and the Religious Landscape

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Landscape & Environment



Even in today's largely secular society parish churches are still readily identifiable (and often popular) landmarks within the rural and urban environment. Their towers and spires serve as markers identifying religious sites within the wider landscape. This was even more so during the early modern period when the parish church was frequently the only stone building and often the tallest and most substantial structure within any given community. Parish churches formed the bedrock of the local landscape, responsible for the 'cure of souls' but also being a centre for social activities within their own specific geographical area or parish. The parish church was only one centre within the religious landscape, which itself was full of signs of the holy, such as wells, shrines, crosses and pilgrimage sites. This project will examine the relationship between the parish church and these religious sites, which were within their parochial jurisdiction. This religious landscape as well as the place and appearance of the parish churches were fundamentally challenged as a result of the European Reformation. The consequences of these changes, as well as the impact of religious warfare, will be considered as part of this research. The early modern period also witnessed the development and exploitation of the environment: agricultural change, drainage and land reclamation, proto-industrialisation, mining and quarrying. This had an impact on the religious landscape, for example with the construction of new parish churches, which will also be investigated. To understand the place of parish church in the wider religious landscape, this project will focus on four case studies - the dioceses of Cambrai, Le Mans, Oxford (with Dr Louise Durning (Oxford Brookes)) and Schleswig (with Dr Margit Thøfner (UEA)) - which reflect the confessional diversity of early modern Europe as well as the changing environment. Drawing on the disciplines of History and History of Art, archival sources as well as visual and physical evidence will be employed to analyse the parish church within the landscape against the background of not only religious upheaval but also profound economic and environmental change during the early modern period.