



## FOREWORD

Sitting in the pews in the Abbey at Dorchester-on-Thames, during the English Music Festival, is hard to beat as a cultural all-rounder – a feast for the eye and the ear, an invitation to reverie. And that is just one church and one occasion in a county that can also boast Rycote Chapel; paradigm Norman at Iffley; the medieval glories of Bloxham, Adderbury and Yarnton; sweet little Chislehampton, the sort of eighteenth-century export that was often at home in the colonies; Swinbrook, tucked into the Windrush Valley, the oasis of calm where Jessica, Unity and Pamela Mitford all chose to be buried; Kelmscott where Morris laid his head under a tomb designed by Philip Webb; Pearson's jewel box at Freeland and, as a more esoteric pursuit, John Newman's settlement church at Littlemore. And where else can equal the poetry of the grouping at Ewelme of church and almshouses? In the quadrangle itself it is possible to believe that an Oxford college has pupped whilst the church has the most poignant of all *memento mori* – the beauty of Alice, Duchess of Suffolk, grand-daughter to Geoffrey Chaucer, reduced to a worm-eaten cadaver. And it is a county where one need not be afraid of the modern – there is great power in Nicholas Mynheer's polyptych and elongated chairs in the Wilcote Chapel at magical North Leigh and the reordering at Charlbury shows how it can be done with grace.

The resource of record for churches has to be the volumes of Nikolaus Pevner, but the most enticing of all combinations is authoritative, individual text interlaced with photography that saturates you in the colour and atmosphere of the given church. That is the Wheeler Way. A key model undoubtedly is (Sir) Simon Jenkins' guide, *England's Thousand Best Churches*. Richard Wheeler does for one county what Jenkins does for a nation.

Everybody who loves Oxfordshire is in his debt.

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