

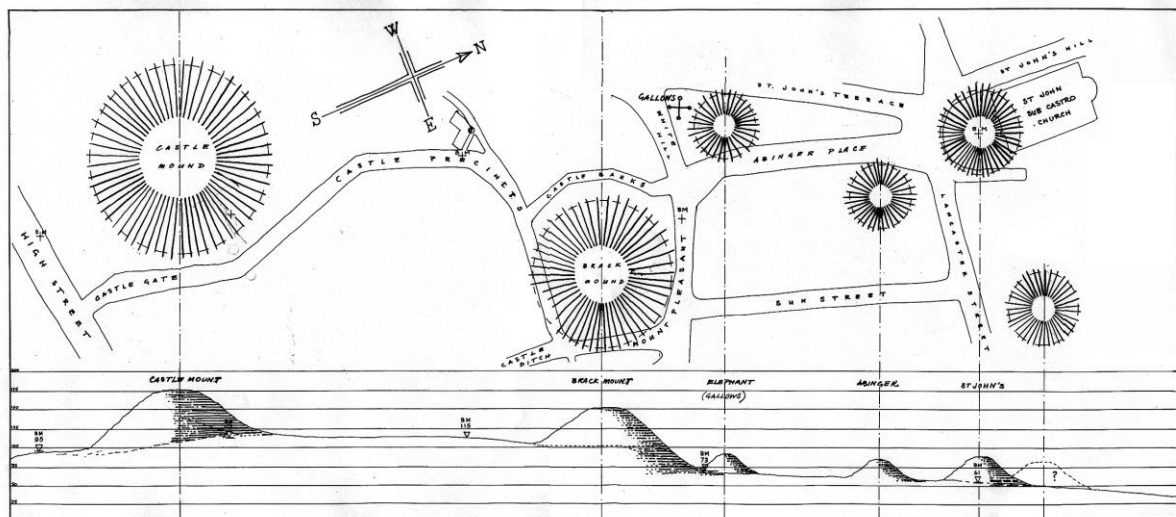
Teachers' Resources

A Brief history of St John Sub Castro

Prehistory

The time before written records is known as prehistory. This term covers an enormous period of time from nearly 1 million years ago until the Roman invasion of Britain in 43 AD. As there are no written records, we have to look carefully to find clues as to how people of these times lived. Archaeologists and others have found objects that can be dated to prehistoric times. Clues can also be found in the landscape, where there have been obvious changes made by humans. These could include ditches or earth walls.

The site of St John sub Castro Church contained two prehistoric mounds- neither of which still exist. There was a mound in the south eastern corner of the present churchyard which was dug out in 1779. The soil was used to raise the floor level of the first Christian church built on the site in Saxon times (probably in the 9th Century) The second mound was destroyed when the present church was built in 1839 as the ground needed to be levelled to allow for the building. As the diagram below shows, there were originally six prehistoric mounds in Lewes, including the two on the site of St John sub Castro.



These round mounds are also known as **barrows** and no-one can say for sure why they were constructed. They may have been burial monuments, as often human and animal bones are found inside, together with artefacts and pottery. However, the mounds may have been added to after they were originally built, so it is difficult to understand their original purpose. The main period of round barrow construction occurred between about 4000 and 3500 years ago (2000-1500 BC).

Although neither of the St John sub Castro mounds remain, we have an account from workmen in 1839 who were demolishing the mound situated where the present church now stands. This give some clues as to what the purpose of the mound might have been.

The article, from the Sussex Agricultural Express of 25th May 1839 says that the workmen: '...came to large piles of chalk, so arranged as to afford spaces ...for a human skeleton each, which were protected by a wall of chalk and filled up with ditch clay; presently they came to what the workmen termed an 'oven', or a rude construction of a steined vault; and when they reached the centre of the crown of the Mount they exposed a circle of burnt earth, of two rods* diameter, around the sides of which were a few burnt human bones and a large quantity of boars' and other animal bones also burnt. On the east side an urn of baked clay was found, also a spearhead or iron weapon; showing that the Mount was an ancient British barrow, and that long before Christianity was introduced into England, St John's church yard was a scite for Druidical sepulchres.'

(Sussex Agricultural Express 25 May 1839) *A rod is a unit of measurement, about 5 metres long

People in 1839 obviously believed that **Druids** were responsible for the mound and that they had used it for burials. Druids were the priests, healers and teachers in prehistoric times and their religion encouraged contact with the spirit world and nature. Druidism was revived in the 1700s and to this day Druids visit their sacred site of Stonehenge on the Summer Solstice (the longest day of the year). Interestingly the Summer Solstice is on June 21st and the feast day of St John the Baptist is very close to this on June 24th. Perhaps the early Christians chose John the Baptist as the patron saint of their church as this would tie in with the Druids' ceremony which could have taken place at the site on or near the same date.

Images and bones of wild boar have often been found in burial mounds. The wild boar was highly prized in prehistoric society. Many bronze images of wild boars dating from the prehistoric times have been found throughout Europe. Wild boars are fearsome and dangerous and represented strength, fearlessness and courage. Images of wild boar have been found on the helmets of warriors. Wild boars were also believed to be able to lead people into the world of the spirits.



So, there is strong evidence that there were people living on or near the site of the present church in prehistoric times, but we cannot say what their settlement looked like and only have a glimpse of how they might have lived.

Roman times

We know that people were living in this area in Roman times. Roman coins have been found in the churchyard of St John sub Castro and in other places in Lewes. Fragments of Roman pottery have been found in and around Lewes. Some historians believe that the St John sub Castro site housed a Roman military camp. A tablet fixed to the terrace of houses - **The Fosse** -built in 1903 just outside the southern boundary of the churchyard, also asserts this.



Archaeologists have, however, dated the ditch to the 12th century. The Romans left Lewes sometime after the year 400.

Anglo Saxon Burh

The **Anglo Saxon Chronicle** states that in 477 a Saxon warlord – Aelle- landed in Sussex from Germany and waged war against the Britons. By the year 600 Saxons controlled all of Sussex. The Saxons did not build castles but chose to build fortified settlements surrounded by walls and ditches for defence. These were called Burhs (or Burgh as still exists in city names such as Edinburgh) which means a defended place. There was often a church at one of the gateways.

The earliest recording of Lewes as a settlement comes during the reign of Alfred the Great (871-899) when Lewes became a burh in the network of fortified settlements constructed to defend the Kingdom of Greater Wessex from invading Danes.

The Saxon Church (800s)

Before the arrival of St Augustine, in Kent in 595, the Anglo Saxons were **pagans**. Christianity spread to Sussex by St Wilfrid in 680. The first church on the St John sub Castro site was built in Saxon times, probably in the early 9th century. It was much smaller than the present church and was situated in what is now the churchyard. Unlike the present church it was built with the **chancel** in the east, as is customary. It may have been built on the site of an earlier Saxon Druid temple. The church was dedicated to St John the Baptist whose saint's day is on the 24th June- very close to the Druid's ceremony for the summer solstice on 21st June. The church would not have had the name, 'sub Castro' when it was built as this Latin phrase means below the castle. Building of Lewes castle did not start until 1066 after the arrival of the Normans.



Little remains of the first Saxon church, which was demolished in 1839 to make way for the building of the church we see today. The original church was too small for the growing congregation. There are, however, two interesting relics of the Saxon church built into the walls of the present church.

The Saxon Door Arch



The original church was entered via a triple arched stone doorway which was set in the south wall. In 1779 this entrance was blocked, and an unrelated tombstone was set within the arch. At this time a new porch and doorway to the Saxon church were built into the tower. When the Saxon church was demolished in 1839 the Saxon door arch and tombstone were set into the north wall of the new church. The Saxon door arch is the oldest Christian relic in Lewes.

The Magnus Inscription (12th or 13th century)

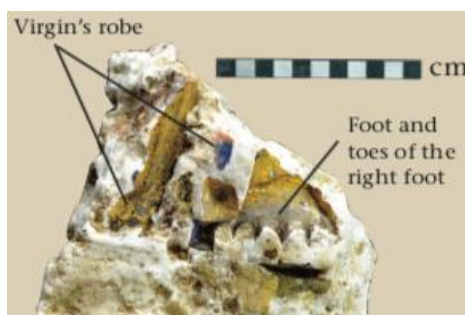
Set into the east wall of the present church is an arched stone inscription on fifteen stones commemorating Prince Magnus, a Danish warrior prince, who became an **anchorite** at the church in the 12th or 13th century. In medieval times people wishing to follow a strict religious life would be sealed into a small building attached to a church. Once they had been walled in, they would not leave the building. A servant would bring food and remove waste via a window and the anchorite had a narrow window or 'squint' that looked into the church and gave a view of the altar, so that they could participate in religious services. No one knows why Magnus became an anchorite at St John sub Castro.

The stone arch may have surrounded the entrance to the cell where Magnus was walled up. The inscription is in Latin and can be translated as:

There enters this cell a warrior of Denmark's royal race;
Magnus his name, mark of mighty lineage. Casting off his
mightiness he takes the Lamb's mildness, and to gain
everlasting life becomes a lowly anchorite.'

The chancel of the Saxon church was demolished in 1587 and the Magnus inscription was placed in the south wall of this church, surrounding an unrelated 13th century tombstone. When the present church was built the inscription and tombstone were set into the east wall.

Statue fragment (sometime after 1300)



Archaeology on the site has uncovered part of a painted **alabaster** statue. The fragment is a broken right foot, with gold and blue coloured draped robes above. It is believed to date from late medieval times and could have come from a statue of the Virgin Mary, as these colours are commonly associated with her. It gives a glimpse of what the interior decoration of the original church might have been.



Medieval Painting of an Anchorite

The Present Church

The population of this area of Lewes increased dramatically in the early 19th century. The original church could only seat 260 worshippers but by 1831 the population of the **parish** had risen from 659 in 1801 to 2 300 - the largest in Lewes. People were moving into Lewes from the outlying farmlands to look for work in the new trades. Peter Guerin Croft (the younger), vicar of St John sub Castro at the time, stated that his new parishioners were, "chiefly mechanics and labourers," who lived in the 'New Town' built from Market Street to Fishers Street including Sun Street, Abinger Place and New Road.

There was not enough room to extend the original church, which was in bad repair, so it was demolished. Building work on the present church began in 1839 when workmen levelled the remaining barrow in the churchyard (see above). The present church was built and paid for in a year with three quarters of the money needed coming from voluntary, local contributions. These are recorded on a board in the porch of the church.



In those days, many of the **pews** could be reserved for personal use on payment of a pew rent – the remainder being free. When the present church was consecrated in 1840, it is recorded that over half of the seats in the church were free. In 1851 average attendance at Sunday services was 800.

Most churches have the altar and chancel at the eastern end, but this new church had the altar at the north because there was no room to set it out in the usual way. It was the largest Anglican church in Lewes. The stone **font** (probably from the 13th century) was brought from the old church, as were the three bells, dating from 1734, which were re-hung in the new tower. Memorials to the Croft family (who had been vicars of the church over many years) were relocated in the east wall of the chancel. The church was built of red brick, with knapped flint ornamentation. Inside there were three galleries supported on cast iron pillars. Mark Lowther, a local historian, described it as, "a hybrid structure, half castle, half barn." The architect was George Cheesman of Brighton, who also built two churches in Brighton- St John the Evangelist in Carlton Hill (now a Greek Orthodox Church) and Christ Church in Montpelier Road (destroyed by fire in 1978). An **apse** was later added to the chancel in 1883.

The Stained Glass

When the apse was added in 1883, three stained glass windows by the celebrated artist Henry Holliday were installed there. The windows (from left to right as you are facing them) depict St Peter (with his symbol the Keys of Heaven and a book), St John the Baptist (wearing a camel skin to show how simply he lived), Jesus (walking on water), Jesus (as the

Good Shepherd), St Luke (holding a book and an olive branch) and St Paul (holding a book and a staff).

At the base of each of these windows are depictions of angels holding some of the **Instruments of the Passion**: the Crown of Thorns, the ladder, the nails, the whip, the dice the soldiers used, the seamless robe and the spear that pierced the side of Jesus and the sponge with which Jesus was offered refreshment.

On the west wall there are two windows dedicated to the Reverend Arthur Pearson Perfect who was in charge at St John sub Castro for 42 years from 1868 until his death in 1910. He championed education and poor relief and his sermons were noted for their intense human sympathy. The windows show the Virgin Mary with Jesus as a child holding a lily (the lily was often used as a symbol of the Virgin Mary, denoting purity) and St Elizabeth holding an open book, with John the Baptist as a boy wearing a camel hair skin and holding a wooden staff. The window was designed by J W Lisle of the Walter Tower company, whose trade mark of a black tower over a wheatsheaf is seen in the bottom left border.

The Parable of the Talents

Two windows in the west wall are in memory of Henry James Gibbins (1803-1877). They show the Parable of the Talents from Matthew's gospel, (Chapter 25, verses 14-30). In the parable a man decides to go on a long trip and calls together his servants to ask them to take care of his money (talents). He gives one servant five talents, another two talents and the last servant one talent. The servant with five talents uses them wisely and doubles his money as does the servant with two talents. The servant with one talent buries the money and does nothing with it. When the man returns from his travels, he asks the servants what they have done with the money. He is very pleased with the first two servants but chastises the last servant for his laziness in not using the talent as he could have.

If you look at the window you will see that the designer seems to have completely misunderstood the parable. The kneeling servant presenting the money to the master has a spade, which suggests he is the servant who buried the one talent and was chastised by the master. The phrase, "Well done thou good and faithful servant" was written about the servant who had doubled his money, not the servant who had buried it! The right hand window shows Jesus with the words, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

The window is in memory of Henry James Gibbins, who, it is suggested, used his talents to the full and so would enter into the joy of the Lord.



Henry James Gibbins (1803-1877) was an interesting man. He trained, in Paris as a hairdresser, wig maker and perfume maker. He married a French woman, Louise Victoire Alphonsine Marchand (see below) and returned to London to set up his business selling hair products, materials for embroidery, paintings, china, musical instruments, books and wines. Here is a picture of Henry Gibbins' hair restorer, which he sold from his shop. Gibbins never lived in Lewes but one of his daughters, Adele, married into a local family

She hath done what she could

Next to her husband's memorial windows are two windows dedicated to Louise Victoire Alphonsine Gibbins. The windows show a richly robed female saint offering food to needy people. Some have suggested that the saint is Dorcas, who was a woman of good works referred to in Acts Chapter 9, verses 36-43. The words, "She hath done what she could." come from the gospel of St Mark (Chapter 14, verse 8). Jesus speaks them about Mary-sister of Martha- who has anointed his head with expensive oil. The disciples chastised her for wasting the oil rather than selling it and giving the money to the poor, but Jesus praised her for honouring him, "...for the poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body to prepare for my burial."

Louise Victoire Alphonsine Gibbins (1809-1894)

Louise was the daughter of a French wig maker, who married Henry James Gibbins in 1829. Her brother, Isidore, became hairdresser to Queen Victoria. Louise had five daughters. One of her daughters- Adele Victorine Uridge - had a choir stall in the church dedicated to her memory. Adele's daughter (Louise's granddaughter) has the stained glass windows in the east wall dedicated to her.



A photograph of the Gibbins Girls (we don't know which one was which!)

Adele Aphonsine Holman (1854-1885) daughter of Aldele Victorine Uridge and granddaughter of Louise Victoire Alphonsine Gibbons

The stained glass windows dedicated to her show two female saints.

On the left:

"Faith" dressed in a green robe and holding a cross. Green is often used as a symbol of new life as the green shoots of spring follow the dark of winter.

On the right:

"Hope" dressed in a blue robe and holding an anchor. Blue is the colour of the sky and used to symbolise heavenly love. The anchor was an ancient symbol of safety and hope for the future. Both figures are surrounded by a beautiful border of flowers.

The Churchyard

The Finnish Memorial (1877)

In 1854 France and Britain were fighting a war against Russia. Much of the fighting took place in Crimea (annexed by Russia from Ukraine in 2014) and so the war is known as the Crimean War. The most famous people we know of from the Crimean War are Florence Nightingale and Mary Secole. At this time Finland was part of Russia so, although it was a long way from Crimea, the British and French sent ships to attack naval ports in Finland. The Finish soldiers and sailors did not want to fight but they were **conscripted** by the Russians. After a long battle they were defeated and captured by the British and the French. Four hundred prisoners were brought to Lewes where they were imprisoned in the naval prison. (A wall of the prison with a plaque still exists on the corner of Lancaster Street, near the ambulance station). The officers in charge, who were mostly Russian, were sent to stay with local families.

At first only one of the prisoners, Lieutenant Bolfras, spoke English. The prisoners were treated well. They had three meals a day and had a pound of bread a day and chocolate for breakfast. Many of the men could read and write. The prison turned one room into a library and there was also a laundry, barbers, shoemaker and tailor. The men slept three to a cell but the doors to the cells were taken off so they could wander around the prison as they wanted. Many were allowed to go out of the prison and go for walks on the Downs.

People were not used to seeing men from another country and so many came to visit the prison. Five hundred people came in one day! The men started to make wooden toys and puzzles which they sold in shops in Lewes and Brighton (some are in Anne of Cleves Museum). They made quite a lot of money from selling the toys. In fact, the Tsar (or Emperor) of Russia sent them an Easter gift of sixpence each to buy hot cross buns but they didn't need it as they earned so much money from their toy making!

They could even have forgotten that they were in prison if it wasn't for a particularly unpleasant bacteria which causes a disease called tuberculosis (TB). Many of the men were ill with this disease when they arrived in Lewes.

Nowadays tuberculosis can usually be cured using antibiotics, but these hadn't been discovered over 150 years ago. The disease affects the lungs and can spread to the spine and the brain.

By the time peace between Russia and Britain came in 1856, 28 prisoners had died of TB and were buried in the graveyard of St John sub Castro. Their fellow prisoners put up a simple memorial stone to them. At the end of the war in 1856 the people of Lewes were sad to see the prisoners go.

In 1877 (21 years after the end of the war), The Emperor of Russia, Alexander II, commissioned a new memorial for the men. This monument has the names of all the men (and the Tsar). It was repaired in 1957 (over 50 years ago) and again in 2013.

The Finnish Memorial



Plaque on Lancaster Street



Richard Davis' Gravestone

Richard Davis and the Charge of Light Brigade

At the far eastern end of the churchyard is the grave of Richard Davis who rode in the **Charge of the Light Brigade**. This was the most infamous encounter of the Crimean War and took place in 1854. One hundred and eighteen British cavalry men were killed, 127 wounded and 60 taken prisoner. Richard Davis was one of the few survivors.



Mark Sharp d.1747

To the right of the entrance is the grave of Mark Sharp, who was a carpenter. He made his own gravestones, carving the tools of his trade onto the back of the footstone.

Mark Sharp's gravestone



Charles Dawson -The Piltdown Man Fraudster

Near to the Finnish Memorial is the grave of local solicitor, Charles Dawson. He gained fame in 1912 when he claimed to have found, in the village of Piltdown, pieces of skull proving the missing evolutionary link between apes and humans- '**Piltdown Man**'. However, in the 1950s, advances in dating techniques revealed the skull to be a hoax, made from an orangutan jawbone and pieces of medieval skulls.

Charles Dawson's gravestone

The Creation of Trinity

Although major structural repairs were carried out at the time of the 150th anniversary of the present church (in 1990) the building continued to deteriorate. The congregation was dwindling, becoming older and were unable to maintain such a large building. In 2010 the parish was joined with St Michael's in South Malling. At around this time the Rector of St John the Baptist Church in Southover put forward a plan to join his church with St John sub Castro and St Michael's in South Malling to create a new church and parish to be called, '**Trinity**'. He also proposed a complete remodelling of St John sub Castro church so that it could be used for both services and community use. In 2017 agreement to proceed on this scheme was reached. A massive programme of structural repair and redesign of the interior was undertaken with grant funding, including from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The work took three years to complete and resulted in the church you see today, complete with community café and children's play room. The church is now a vibrant part of the local community and the whole of Lewes.



Glossary

Alabaster – is a light coloured, translucent rock often used for carving.

Anchorite – a very religious person, mostly in medieval times, who was sealed into a small building attached to a church. Once walled in the anchorite would not leave the building. They had a narrow window or ‘squint’ that looked into the church and gave a view of the altar, so that they could participate in religious services. A servant would bring food and remove waste via another window. Anchorites were treated with great respect and pilgrims often came to ask for their blessing.

(The) **Anglo Saxon Chronicle** – is a collection of seven manuscripts about the history of the Anglo Saxons. The original manuscript was created in the late 9th century during the reign of Alfred the Great (871-899).

Apse – is the rounded end of a building, particularly a church. The end of the building is curved in a semi-circle and the rood of the apse is like a half dome. In a church the apse is behind the altar. Some churches have more than one apse.

Barrow (prehistory) – mounds of earth and/or stone created in prehistoric times. They may have been burial monuments as often human and animal bones are found inside.

Chancel – is the part of the church near the altar.

Charge of the Light Brigade – was a disastrous charge of British cavalry against Russian forces on 25th October 1854 as part of the Crimean War. 640 cavalry men and their horses charged unprotected along a valley towards a Russian encampment. At the end of the charge 118 men were killed, 127 wounded and 60 taken prisoner. 335 horses were killed in this action. The Poet Laureate at the time, Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote his famous poem, ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ only 6 weeks afterward.

Congregation – a group of people who assemble for religious worship in a church.

Conscripted – forcing people (usually men) by law to join the armed forces. This happens when there are not enough people in the armed forces or volunteering to fight, such as in times of war.

Druids- an ancient religion that believed in contact with the spirit world and nature. The druids were the ancient priests and teachers.

Feast of St John the Baptist - Most saints have an official Saint's Day or Feast Day. The Feast Day of St John the Baptist is the 24th June and celebrates his birth.

The Fosse – an archaeological term meaning a long, narrow trench used as a defence feature.

Font – a large basin, on a plinth, that holds water used in Baptisms (or Christenings).

Instruments of the Passion – these are a set of objects that symbolise the Passion. The Passion is the suffering and death of Jesus. The instruments are all referred to in the accounts of the crucifixion. The Instruments that are depicted in the stained-glass windows in St John sub Castro are: the Crown of Thorns, the Nails, the Dice, the Seamless Robe, the Ladder, the Sponge, the Lance, the Whip.

Pagans – people holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism).

Parish – the geographical area served by the church. The parish of St John sub Castro stretches down to the River Ouse and includes the Landport estate.

Pews – church seating introduced in late medieval times (16th century). Usually long benches with a back, placed in rows in the main body of the church. Often the best placed pews were paid for by the rich who then had the right to use them.

Piltdown Man – one of the biggest hoaxes of the 20th century. In 1912, Charles Dawson- a local Lewes solicitor- claimed to have found the skull of a prehistoric man in the village of Piltdown. The skull was claimed to prove the missing link between apes and humans, which made Britain the birthplace of the human race. However, in the 1950s advances in techniques for dating fossils revealed the skull to be a hoax, made up of an orangutan jawbone and pieces of medieval skulls.

Prehistory- the period of time before we have written records. This covers a period of time from nearly one million years ago until the Roman invasion of Britain in 43 AD.

Rector – is the priest in charge of a church. Historically the Rector was paid out of funds raised by the church itself, whereas a vicar was supported financially from the outside (i.e. from the Church of England). Nowadays the terms are often interchangeable.

Rod (item of measurement) – an ancient unit of measurement. Rod was equivalent to just over five metres.

Sepulchres – burial vaults, tombs or graves.

Summer solstice - in the Northern Hemisphere the summer solstice occurs on 21st June. It is the longest day of the year. It was considered a special day in prehistoric times (before there was a greater understanding of how the earth moved round the sun) and is still celebrated by modern day Druids.

Trinity – Trinity means three in one (tri=three, unity=one). Christians believe that there is one God who is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is the Trinity because He is all of these in one being. The linking together of the three churches – St John’s Southover, St John the Baptist and St Michael’s South Malling is also a group of three things joined together as one.

Vicar – is the priest in charge of a church (see **Rector**)

TRINITY
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St John sub Castro Education Resources



What are Symbols?

Symbols are objects that we can see, feel or touch that are used to represent things that we can't see such as ideas, feelings and emotions. An example of this is the shape of a heart which is used to symbolise love.

The church is full of symbols which are used to give a sense of complicated ideas, such as the specific qualities of a person. These might include strength, kindness and wisdom. In this church animal and flower symbols are often used. In many of the stained glass windows the person in the window is holding an object, such as an anchor. This does not mean that the person was a sailor, but the anchor symbolises stability.

Some of the figures in the windows have a yellow or white circle around their head. This symbol is called a halo. A halo is a circle of light shown around or above the head of a saint or a holy person to represent their holiness. The word halo means glory or majesty.

Entering St John sub Castro

At the entrance to the church explain that churches are special spiritual places. Lead the children into the church in silence, encouraging them to look around.

Explain that the next activity will only take 3 minutes but they need to do it on their own and in silence.

Activity

Send the children individually to find a place on your own in the church and sit, without talking and look around you. There are many things in a church to make you think. What do you notice in particular?

Ring a bell at the end of the 3 minutes.

Come back together and share what you noticed.

