Ladies and Gentlemen,

I begin with a word of apology – “I’m sorry!” Sorry that I am not Rory Stewart. Noone but Rory can be Rory. He has made his regrets and apologies to you – I now add mine. By way of extenuation, I can say that I have known Rory since I carried him as a babe in arms. None of his aura has rubbed off; but I do know what you are missing.

How can I make it good for you? By showing that the activity for which you work means a huge amount to me too. I choose the title “My Life with Parish churches” because churches have been a constant element in our lives. Let me explain how far back the experience, the atmosphere of being in a parish church goes for me.

Take the small, part Norman church of St Catherine in East Tilbury on the Thames marshes in Essex. It stands on a slight rise at the northern edge of the Tilbury marshes, a plain nave, good Early English chancel, a small tower, a modest graveyard. It is the last civilian building in the village; the C19 Tilbury Fort comes next; then the full sweep of the Thames Estuary. Sixty years ago when we lived nearby, Christmas involved a visit to St Catherine’s often for Evensong on Christmas Day. It was invariably cold and damp, but I expected that; it was dimly lit, but I knew that it would be; the organ was modest and wheezy and that was no surprise. What sticks in the memory was not the usual fog and mist rising from the marshlands but the tolling of the bell on the buoys marking the shipping lanes in the Thames estuary. Surrounding mist, churchyard lights tingling from the frost in the air, the reproachful and haunting tolling of the bell – these will always remain in my mind as a perfect experience of Christmas at winter.

My most intense and sustained period of parish church life came during the Second World War when my boarding school was evacuated to Ashburton in South Devon. The parish church of St Andrew’s saw the tiny school of 36 boys and 4 staff – evacuees from Cambridge - walk down the High Street in crocodile for matins every Sunday for 38 weeks in the year. St Andrews is a decent, medium size rather Victorian-ised building but we weren’t to know that or care about it at the time. What I remember is the respectable size of the town congregation; the excellent organist, Mr Jones who also taught the school piano; the soaring - but tuneful – voice of Mrs Jones, a generous, buxom lady universally known as “Amy J,” who more than made up for the weakness of the choir.

Matins seemed long – it was. The tedium of the “Te Deum” was just acceptable. Those Sundays – one in four was it? – when we had to endure the entire “Benedicite” were a misery. Hymns were cheerful enough even when singing for those in peril on the sea – what a jolly tune it seemed, first and foremost. It was at St Andrew’s that I first experienced that true characteristic of musical Anglicanism – the “Anglican Drag”, that is to say when the organ plays the first note of the hymn, a kind of challenge, the congregation then draws a collective breath, comes in a good beat later and stays a beat late throughout the hymn despite the organist’s best efforts.
Noone taught us how to point psalms – we just got on with it experimentally. Noone told us how to navigate the book of common prayer and work out where the gospels and epistles of the day came from. Certainly no one thought fit to explain to little boys the meaning of “Thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb”, every word of that phrase a potential minefield of adult embarrassment. But we just got on and sang it. In the longeurs of sitting in hard pews before matins began, I got a working knowledge of the Tables of Kindred and Affinity and the robust curses and condemnations of the Commination. “Cursed be he who moves his neighbour’s mark!” Citizens Advice Bureau please note. In such a childhood mish-mash of impressions, ignorance, innocence, boredom and occasional wonder I am perhaps surprised that the lasting appeal of the church, especially the parish church, lodged itself. Somehow, it has never gone away.

These instincts were deepened by public school days in Holt, north Norfolk at Gresham’s School. Weekly chapel going – in a decent early C 20 building in dressed flint, with a big, steeply inclined roof - was a key part of the school routine. Luckily we had two excellent organists, the music master, a composer called Hubert Hales, whose voluntaries were of the more careful kind, often Bach, and the English master, a brilliant teacher and flamboyant musician, H.D. F.Taylor, whose dashing voluntaries – Widor, Saint-Saens, Karg-Elert - sent us out of Sunday chapel with a spring in our step. We sang hymns at chapel on four mornings out of five in term time. The great benefit of singing hymns is not the spiritual uplift but the opening of the lungs. In fact I have always thought that the English public school system was based on two kinds of morning opening – first the bowels, then the lungs.

With great churches such as Cley and Blakeney on our cycling doorstep, even recalcitrant adolescents could be encouraged to believe that these were very special places and worth visiting. I love them to this day. A school choir visit to Binham Priory totally failed to engage me. Happily, a long delayed return visit three years ago allowed the scales to fall from my eyes and to wonder at it in all its spectacular grandeur.

In adult life the experience of the church crawl has been a precious part of my wife’s and my leisure time. What is its appeal? For two people brought up in essentially densely urban environments, myself near London, my wife in Salford, part of the pull came from the countryside, from village life, from the idea of the village, its community, its variety, its antiquity, its combination of domesticity and almost accidental grandeur. For to our eyes and minds villages grew, they accumulated, they absorbed, they were organic, connected, a far cry from the stern demands and practices of modern urbanism. The village church lay at the heart of such a world. It was beautiful, fragile yet resilient, demanding yet accepting, long lasting but evolving. We wanted to know it more.

Where should we look to find out more? There was only one conceivable source, Dr Nikolaus Pevsner, who was then in the middle of his heroic work, “The Buildings of England” first published by Penguin Books. This was the Dr Pevsner who gave a weekly public lecture at Cambridge on European architecture; this the Dr Pevsner who introduced us to the possibility that Hagya Sofya in Istanbul might be the greatest building in Europe which we should hasten to see; this the Dr Pevsner who as a refugee from war torn Europe caught sight of Durham Cathedral from the train on his journey north and decided that the country which contained such a Cathedral was where he wished to live. Then the Buildings of England. Cambridgeshire was published in 1954; our copy of Suffolk, in paperback only, came out in 1961 and cost 12/6. It is frail now. The Norfolks appeared in 1962, but the price had increased to a demanding 16/-.
Why did we, do we love Pevsner? He will never let you down; he tells the truth; there are no cheap putdowns; thorough, detailed, academic of course, to a fault some would say; no facile enthusiasms, but not a stone of significance missed; no crowd pleasing gasps of “Ooh, I say!” as if that conveyed anything to anyone but the breathless gasper – usually on television – amazed at the beauty of his own self-indulgent enthusiasm. No, none of that. But you could always tell what was really worth seeing and what was just mildly interesting. How many pages did the good Doctor give to a particular church? How much did he have to describe, to convey? And then the occasional carefully dropped adjective of admiration, approval even. You knew – “Vaut le voyage!” Pevsner has never led us astray.

Above all, Pevsner made you read what he had to say; you sat down in a pew to take it all in; if he identified a particular piece of carving you searched for it; if he said the nave had eight bays, you jolly well counted them. With Pevsner, you take time and it is always time well spent.

Our first significant church crawl started when we were at Cambridge, east along a string of Suffolk villages. Clare first, then Cavendish, and here we started to penetrate the Pevsner vocab of “Perp” and “Dec” and many such like. It unlocked mysteries, conveyed explanation and meaning. The mini tour was accidentally wonderfully shaped for Lavenham came next. As our breath subsided from our first amazement at its site, we needed to know: “What did Pevsner think?” We fumbled through the pages. “One of the most famous of the parish churches of Suffolk – rightly so for it is as interesting historically as it is rewarding architecturally.” What was this? “Most famous, interesting, rewarding?” Was that all? Then half way down the description, this: “Lavenham makes a perfect picture. The W tower is as mighty as the nave is noble!” Ah that’s it, we were not just looking at the same building we were feeling it too.

But the day was not over. Long Melford was still to come. Dazzling, brilliant, spectacular. And Pevsner goes straight in to the heart, to the core. “Long Melford is one of the most moving parish churches of England, large, proud and noble”. Yes. What a conclusion to a day. What a day. It would not be the last.

Later our church crawls took many different forms determined by opportunity, income, curiosity and friends. As young marrieds in the early 1960s we weren’t well off. But we were living in London. Using buses we decided it was time to get to know some of the Wren churches, an astonishing treasure trove of architectural creation and invention. Two stood out; St Stephen Walbrook for sure, so austere, so intellectual, so harmonious, so perfectly conceived and assembled, so balanced in its architectural proportions. The most majestic of Wren’s parish churches according to Pevsner. For people largely brought up in the medieval in all its forms St Stephen Walbrook represented a startling new language, a new spirit of architecture, a new understanding of the notion of the holy.

We found ourselves on more familiar grounds at St Bartholomew the Great though the shock of its discovery through the small gate by Cloth Fair off Smithfield never goes away. It is a great urban church – look at the way the surrounding city has built up at least five feet below the pavement, the living city indeed. And the tiny streets of Cloth Fair and its adjacent narrow lanes offer a strikingly different experience from the rural idylls of the country church, the village green, the pond, the pub and cricket pitch. The houses are small along Cloth Fair, the pubs tiny, the vistas cramped and limited. In their midst is this – by comparison – huge building redolent of splendour, power and authority. The church dwarfs its surroundings, its
neighbours, it defines the place and area. You cannot take the church as a building or as the home of a great institution lightly.

But it was the interior that struck us even more strongly. A C 12 foundation, with many alterations four centuries later and considerable adaptation and modification in the early C 20. The detective work keeps the good Doctor busy for pages. That wasn’t why my wife and I fell for it. Strictly speaking we fell for it for the wrong reasons, because it felt Norman, it felt medieval and it was deeply expressive of accretion, addition and the lived life of a great building in a great city. Perfect architectural statements are wonderful. Buildings that have changed, aged and aged with use and faith are something quite different and particularly precious. That is what we responded to on our cheap, almost free holiday church crawl of the City of London. We knew then – if we needed reminding – that parish churches would be part of our lives and would never let us down or leave us disappointed. I saw much more of St Bartholomew the Great when I was at the Barbican around it affording engaging diversions en route to lunch time gatherings. The surprise of its interior never became less.

The back of each volume of Pevsner used to have a dozen blank pages headed simply “notes”. How much we regret that we never used them to record what we saw. Recreating our numerous church crawls or one off visits relies on memory and the recognition of church names which suddenly emerge with a flash of familiarity. I was delighted when while thinking about a particular church crawl in Cornwall, four postcards fell out of the back of the Pevsner – (second edition 1970, price £2.00, post decimalisation.) We knew nothing of Cornwall’s churches. Our route that day was given to us by a friend and distinguished historian of Cornwall. First St Bridget, Morvah, with a modest pitched roof but attracting an entry with a touch of mystery to it: “The interest of this church is less its humble, two staged, unbuttressed W tower of the C 14 than its nave and chancel of 1828”. Fair enough. Then: “In spite of their date these are not in the Commissioners’style: rough granite, unaisled and certainly meant to be Cornish medieval from outside but the window tracery does odd things.” Just that, no more. But the questions flood in from those six lines. How was the iron grip of the “Commissioners’ style” avoided? Did some enthusiastic local antiquarian slip in those elements of “Cornish medieval?” And exactly what “odd thing” does the window tracery do? How we longed to have the actual Pevsner at our side to tap further into the bottomless depths of his knowledge and research.

These four precious postcards from that church crawl include St Just in Penwith – a large church including a wall painting carrying a warning to Sabbath breakers, of what kind is not stated – St Buryan – one of the proudest Cornish churches – and St Paul, in Penzance with a very tall tower and a much lower single storey nave.

We probably saw other churches that day – but the postcards do not exist, no notes were made and memory has faded. What does not fade is the Cornish landscape that we took in en route between churches in all its austere beauty. Was the weather kind that day? Nondescript, I would guess. But visiting churches does not need glorious weather to be worth visiting.

In Cornwall we usually stay in St Clement on the very edge of Truro. Regardless of the weather, my early excursion is to its parish church involving a downhill walk of some three quarters of a mile to the edge of the Tresillian estuary and the main part of the village. I count the numbers of wildflowers in the steeply banked hedgerows. But it is the church I am after, part of a very modest
personal pilgrimage. It is in most ways not remarkable, I mean not in an architectural sense. All it has is a lychgate under which you pass to enter the church yard; gravestones from the C 5; an inscription in ancient Irish; and all around the houses of the village cuddle and protect. Inside a wood painting listing the Ten Commandments, always good for the soul. Why do I love it? Because it has been made over six centuries. It makes no claims. It does not need to. It just is.

And do not underestimate the joy of the rediscovered fragment, like my Cornish postcards. Nestling in my Cadogan Guide to Italy I found a blank post card containing the names of five churches in Rome – San Luigi Francesi, Santa Maria del Popolo, San Agostino with the name “Caravaggio” exclamation mark afterwards. Then two more: San Prassede, and Santa Pudenziana, followed by “lovely early mosaics”. How good to have an agenda for our next visit to Rome.

What is extraordinary is how churches stay in the memory. What of St Peter and St Paul in Salle in central Norfolk, “One of the most beautiful in all England” enthuses the Rev C L S Linnell in Betjeman’s Collins Guide to English Parish Churches. (I gave that book to my wife in 1960.) Linnell was Chaplain at Gresham’s School, a sweet man but deemed by the boys to be a hopeless preacher. But we might have realised that he knew his East Anglian churches. He continues about Salle: “Standing alone in the fields, superbly placed on the highest ground in the district it is the great offering of the families who owned the land”. As I recall, standing outside the west door and scanning the horizon, you see church after church after church. Of the farms, buildings, villages, manors that built and supported the churches little or nothing remains. For churches are durable, they are memory, they are history, they are landscape, they are monuments, they stand for a once peopled landscape. They are unique.

For churches are still the places where many of life’s milestones are marked from christenings, not so frequent, to weddings, still frequent enough, to funerals, increasingly frequent. Churches, parish churches have something to say, something special, something unique that mundane, civic buildings simply do not. When an infant’s lightly covered head, its tiny body dressed in what may be a family baptism dress, is blessed in holy water, when the stone Baptismal font is several hundred years old, with luck – the child’s cry confirms that the devil has been driven away, this is not just a routine Saturday afternoon event.

For weddings, give me the country kind every day, every week, every year. My favourite feature is where the simple, wheezy organ is played by a professional organist who coaxes and commands sounds from it of an unexpected scale and majesty. Then the church really comes alive.

So churches really do stick up in the memory. St Catherine’s East Tilbury where our sons were christened; St Cross, Winchester where our niece was married; xxxx where a nephew was married; (Sadly my wife and I were married in a mere college chapel.) And some for no better or worse reason than what they are and where they are such as Norham lying below magnificent Norham Castle on the River Tweed in Northumberland which Turner painted. When our twelve year old son saw it he gazed at the scene and said he would like to be buried there. He and his partner are now avid church crawlers with a special soft spot for East Anglian round towered churches of which there are a large number.

And a further personal memory: when we took our teenage grand-daughters to Torcello they both announced they wanted to be married there, interestingly not in Santa Maria Assunta but in the late
Byzantine octagonal Santa Fosca. The reception of course at the Cypriani hotel adjacent. We await keenly the event and the occasion.

Over the years too, my wife and I have visited churches across Europe from the baroque of Germany and the Czech Republic to the great Renaissance masterpieces of Venice and Florence, the Norman cathedrals of Puglia. More recently we looked closely at the extraordinary C 16 painted churches of the Bukovina in north east Romania; this was followed by the masterpieces of the C 12 Golden Age in Georgia, and this year the spectacularly sited and minutely inscribed churches of the Armenian renaissance. Each is a unique treasure trove of architecture, painting and national and spiritual devotion.

In even mentioning them I do not for a moment invite the expectation or fear that I am about to compare them with the English church heritage. Each is extraordinary, each is wholly expressive of their nation, their people, their culture. Each contains masterpieces of artistic creation. But – and this is a very cautious but – the English tradition contains a longer, more sustained experience of historical and architectural growth. My instinct is that it is more deeply rooted in life as it has been and is being lived. But my cautious instinct may merely be sentimental prejudice and for that I offer no apology or regret whatever.

End