

# Obituary

## Christopher Dalton (1941-2008)

### Field Officer to the Friends of Friendless Churches

by

MATTHEW SAUNDERS

Christopher Dalton, who died in February 2008 at the age of sixty-six from multiple myeloma, was one of the greatest post-war photographers of historic buildings, a lover of churches and writer. He was born at Leigh, Surrey, into a family where a passion for churches seemed predestined given the blood tie with the great ecclesiologist and hymn writer, John Mason Neale. After school at Bryanston, which gave him personal friendships as well as a profound love of Dorset, his initial professional training was as an architect, centred on three years at Leicester School of Architecture. There was an overlapping apprenticeship with Victor Heal and Partners in London and the Lincolnshire practice of Bond and Read from 1958 until 1964. The latter, a small-scale provincial studio specialising in churches, both new and old, was much more to his taste than the blander corporate setting of the commercial office.

But a second profession, that of photographer, soon emerged. After a short spell with another Lincolnshire practice, Parker and Roberts, Christopher came to London into the employment of that doyen of conservation architects, Donald Insall, then newly established. Donald realised that Christopher's forte lay in capturing architecture on celluloid and encouraged him to return to academe, this time for three years at Ealing school of photography (1964-7).

From such a platform he developed a photographic studio, to which you came if what you wanted was romantic bloom as well as precise record. He became associated, above all, with black and white, and all the subtleties of mood and depth that can bring. It is no surprise that his most favourite photographer was Edwin Smith.

A profound understanding of buildings reinforced a natural empathy for composition, and he was chosen by the National Trust to compile the definitive records of Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire; Belton House, Lincolnshire; Canon's Ashby, Northamptonshire; Calke Abbey, Derbyshire; Chastleton House, Oxfordshire; and Croft Castle, Herefordshire. His is the principal photographic survey in the National Monuments Record of Stonor House, Oxfordshire, and Packington Hall, Warwickshire, while the scholarly assessments in *Country Life* of Warwick Castle, Bodrhyddan in north Wales, Thornton House in Cheshire and the churches of the Lleyn peninsula are brought to life by his photographs.

Three seminal exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert museum, on churches, gardens and country houses, incorporating many examples of his work, further helped to establish his reputation, as did scattered but regular appearances in the Shell Guides and Pevsner's *Buildings of Britain* series. All the photos in Timpson's *Country Churches* (1998) are his. And an initial exclusiveness to Insall among architectural practices soon developed into a broadened demand elsewhere, particularly from Rodney Melville and Partners.

By now the passion for churches had brought him to the attention of Ivor Bulmer Thomas and the offer of a job at the Redundant Churches Fund, latterly the Churches Conservation Trust, where he worked from 1976 until 1994. It was he who developed the concept of the Field Officer, the eyes and ears of the organisation, and went on to launch its programme of church guides, along with his wife, Susan. From there it was a natural move to become Field Officer for the Friends of Friendless Churches in Wales, a post he held from 1998 until his death, having been a member of that society for forty-five years and a trustee for twenty. His home diocese realised the talent in its midst too – he was a member of the Hereford diocesan advisory committee from 1987 and its chairman from 1996. He was made a lay canon at the cathedral.

One of the least appreciated byways of the English timber-framed tradition is the bell-frame hidden up the church tower. For Christopher it became an interest as all enveloping as the building itself. His three-volume *Bells and Belfries of Dorset* won the 2007 award for an outstanding contribution to the county's archaeology, and he was bells consultant to the National Trust and numerous churches. The bell fraternity is close-knit and occasionally riven, but the reaction on their various websites confirms the depth of the affection and respect in which Christopher was held.

He is survived by Susan and his sons, Richard and Thomas. They lived first at Everdon in Northamptonshire and then Upper Court, Ullingswick, with its pervading sense of ancient tranquillity. The family was the bedrock in his life for some thirty-five years, especially through the last four of increasingly severe and distressing illness.

Christopher John Neale Dalton, photographer, born June 14, 1941; died February 3, 2008.

*Reprinted with permission from The Guardian, April 15, 2008*

*The Photographs on the following pages are examples of Christopher Dalton's outstanding work.*

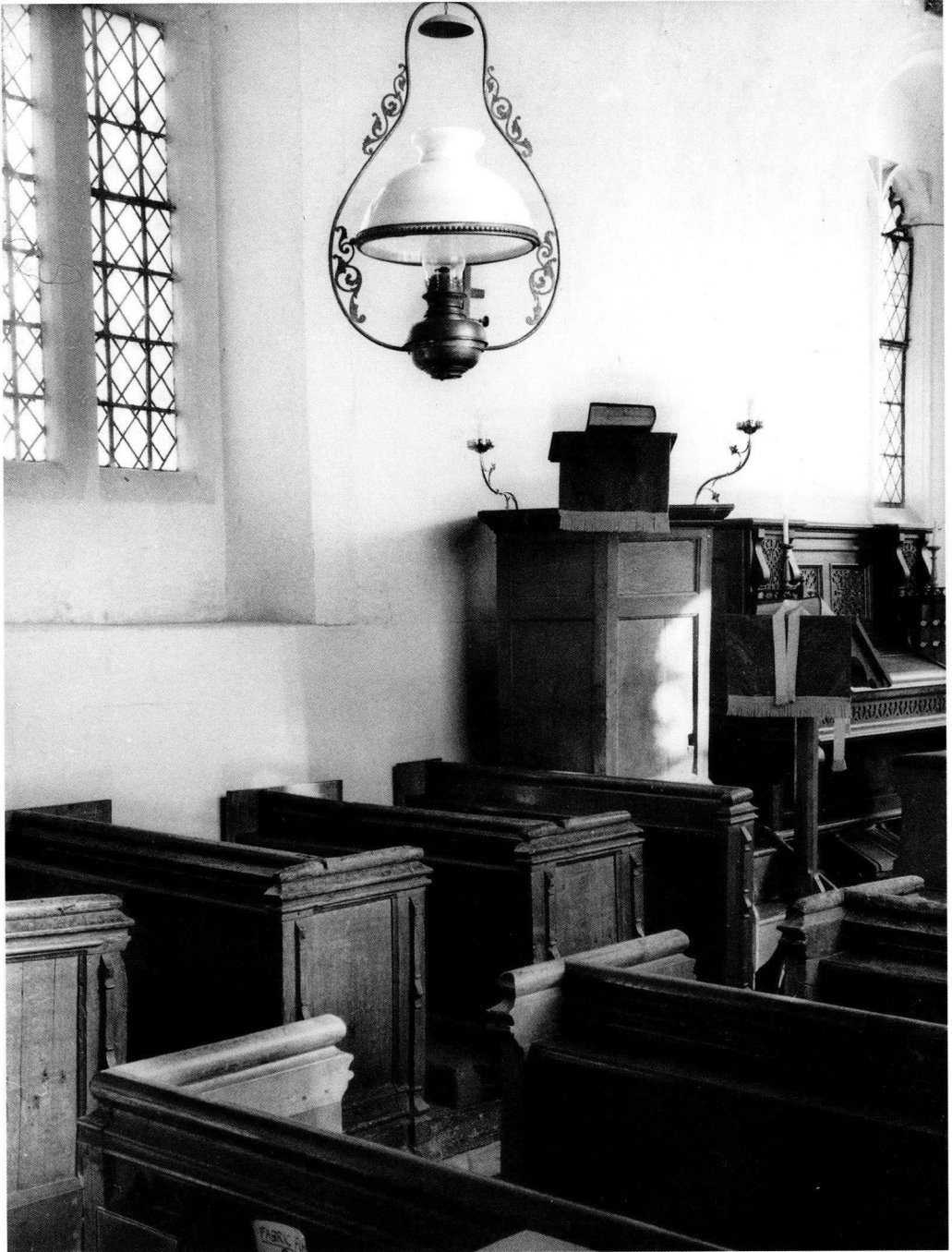


Fig. 1

St Mary Magdalene, Caldecote, Hertfordshire, now owned by the Friends of Friendless Churches

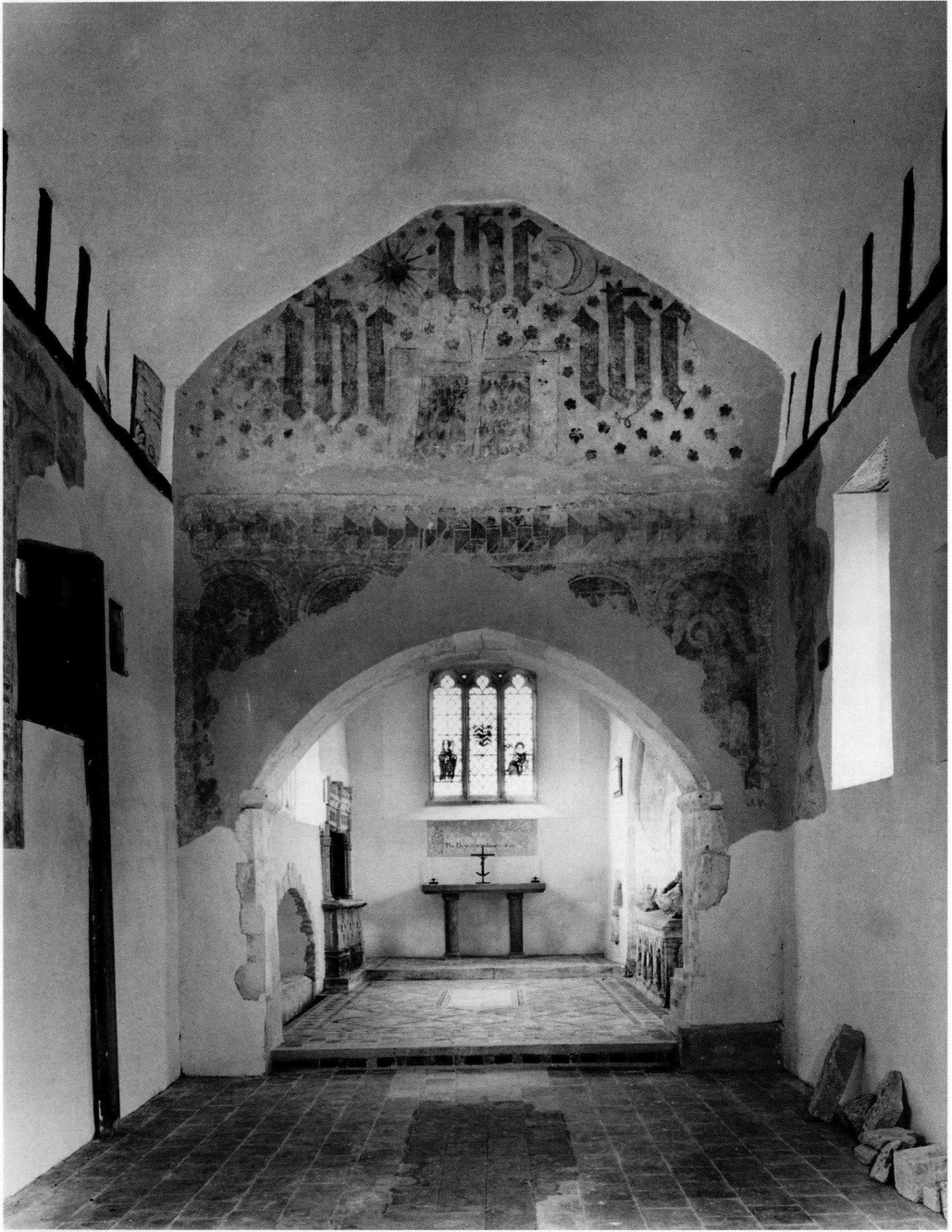


Fig. 2

The Old Church, East Shefford, Berkshire, originally owned by the Friends, but now vested with the Churches Conservation Trust



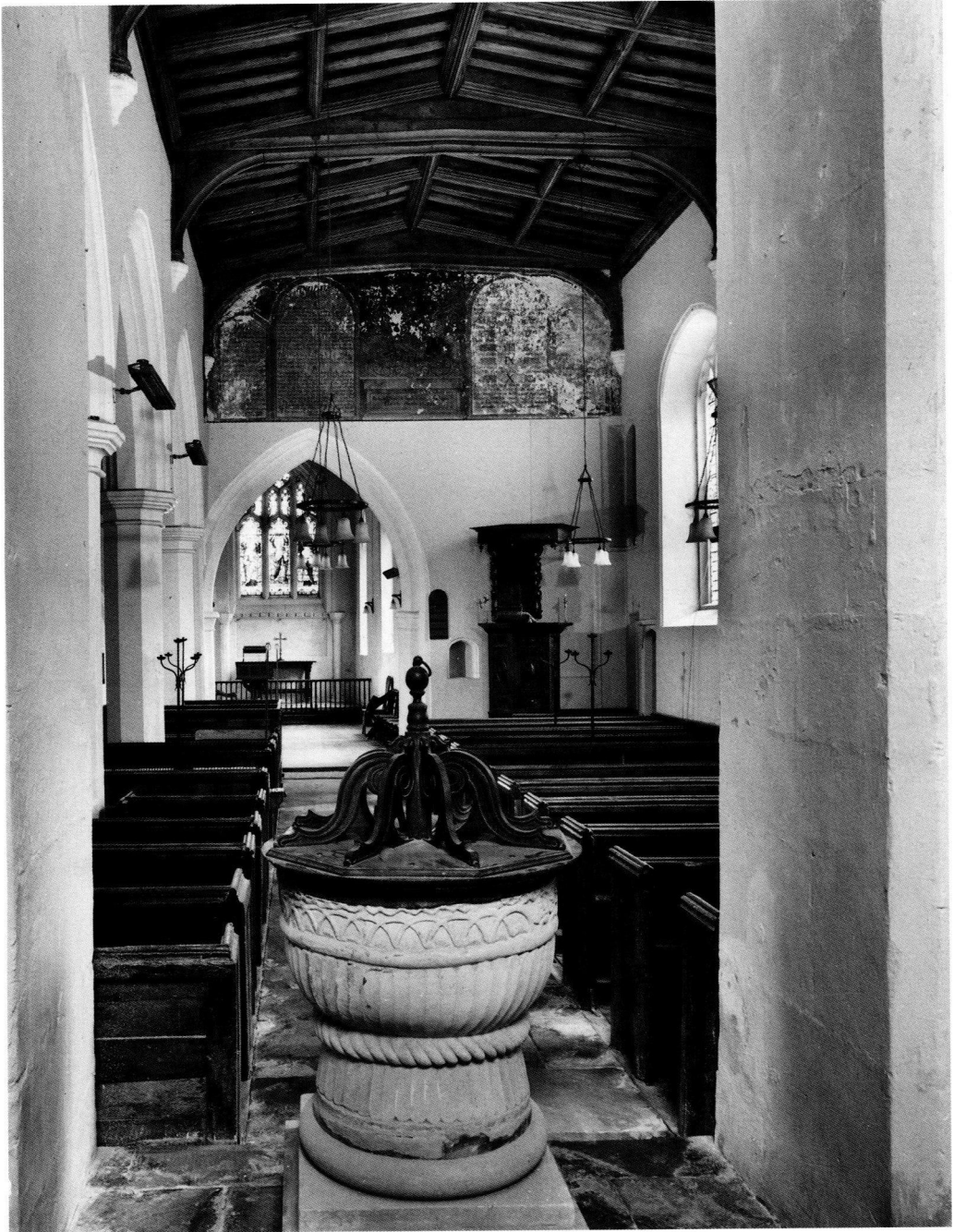


Fig. 3

St Mary, Pitstone, Buckinghamshire, vested with the Churches Conservation Trust. One of the ultimate tests for a photographer is to maintain all objects in focus – this is a lesson in how to achieve this



Fig. 4

St Peter, Wolfhamcote, Warwickshire. A pew end – very few photographs can capture texture like this, even the flight-holes of the beetles