

TALES FROM THE HILLS

(Ashmansworth and Crux Easton)

*"At no time in my life have I felt nearer to God than
in the little church at Ashmansworth".*

These moving words were spoken by an American priest, the Revd Johnson, in 1969. He was over here on an exchange visit: the rector of Highclere, the Revd Lewis, whose responsibilities included Ashmansworth church, had taken up the Revd Johnson's duties in New Jersey.

DH Moutray Read, the travel writer, also described our church in his Macmillan Guide to Hampshire. He wrote: "I can recall no other church in the county that gives a greater impression of agedness, and there are few unvisited by me."

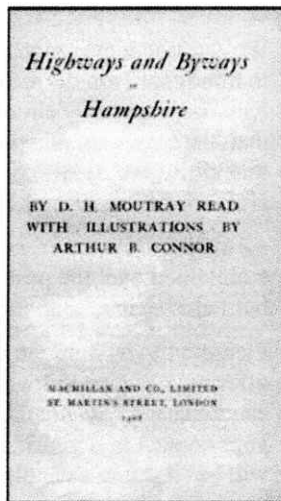
A more recent visitor noticed that the walls have been extensively lime-washed since the Revd Johnson and Moutray Read were so moved, and wondered, "Would they be so moved by it today?"

After all, it might well have been the discolouration of the old walls (that subtle ageing, which had testified to 800 years of Ashmansworth people worshipping God), that had affected our visitors. By painting over it, do we weaken the spiritual effect? Perhaps we should just polish the brass and leave the rest!

The wonderful fact remains that our church was built by people who believed. For that reason, few churches can ever match the truth of Ashmansworth church. And most of the agedness, the evidence of that truth, is still there. It still makes the list of the top parish churches in England. It's all in those 800 years, and it's still in use as a village church.

Spiritual effects like these are notoriously fragile. The Vatican received a deluge of complaints over its restoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. People say that Michelangelo's masterpiece, cleaned and patched up, now looks like a cheerful children's cartoon, with much of its spiritual power gone.

We need go no further than Sussex where they've painted a copy of the Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Catholic Church at Goring-by-Sea. Ironically, they claim the Goring version is now older than the Vatican's restored version, and coach-loads flock to see it!



Agricola