

# The Angel Roof

## A Story for Christmas



## The Angel Roof

Trevor the caretaker loved his little church more than anything. Well, almost anything. The wife, and the fine children she brought with her, came first. Course they did, but they didn't need him the way the little church needed him.

His church, St Michael and All Angels, Stonden Parva,

was tiny,  
technically  
stood alone,  
Bedfordshire  
a film director



medieval and  
redundant. It  
midfield in  
and was owned by  
called Edmund

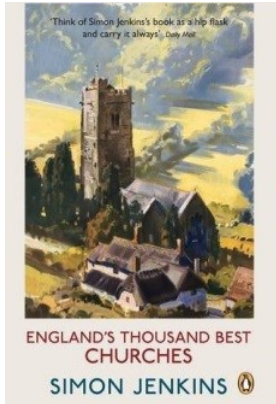
Grant, a man with a penchant for unconsidered trifles. As Edmund was *massively* occupied with filming, Trevor did the honours for weddings, funerals and the Christmas carol concerts. He trimmed the hedge and raked the path and swept the porch . He oiled the door and arranged the chairs. He greeted the visitors wearing his calf-length black coat, and afterwards he threw out the flowers.

But his principal care, and his waking nightmare, was the preservation of the Angel Roof.

In Pevsner's *Guide to the Buildings of Bedfordshire* it is stated that the "the angel roof is a minor miracle of



medieval craftsmanship, long overlooked due to



plastering and over-painting.”

Simon Jenkins in *England's Thousand Best Churches*, giving St Michael's an amazing four stars, says “Since the magnificent restoration, the small but flawless angel roof in the nave has been brought back to astonishing life. For this alone, the trek across the fields and the

struggle to find the key-holder (the pub in Stonden Magna is your best bet) is absolutely worthwhile.”

The roof cost Trev many perilous hours on ladders and many frustrating interchanges with church architects and restoration experts and art historical wallahs.

In *The Fortunes of War* Trev talked about the effing angel roof so much that Walter, who was sort of like a churchwarden, and helped him keep an eye on the place, reckoned he was haunted.

*No ghosts in there, then, Trev?*

But the strange thing was, Trevor often thought there might be . He would sit, sometimes, having a quiet fag (*I mean, was the boss ever going to know?*) and hear rustling sounds around him.



*Bloody rats. Bloody bats.*

But he never found bat droppings or rat droppings, and never saw the little buggers.

*Bloody ghosts, Trevor.*

*No, can't be ghosts, Walter. Ghosts haunt. These things just hover.*

*Bats, Trev. Must be bats.*



Trevor's other responsibility was setting up the Christmas crib.

Edmund Grant, our owner, had acquired the *presepe*, as he like to call it, in Naples. The figures were a quarter life-size, plaster, very finely moulded.



Every year after Christmas Trevor carefully wrapped each figure in its own cloths and put it in its own labelled bag and carried it to its hibernation pod under the organ . And every year before the first carol concert of the year, he laid new straw in the purpose-built stable, carried out and unwrapped each figure and set it up in the configuration Edmund had prescribed, in neat pages of handwritten notes, a detailed sketch in ink, and several photographs, all together in a ring binder. Trevor



knew better than to deviate from the plan. Edmund was not a successful film director for nothing.

Trevor was not particularly afraid of his boss, but equally he didn't want to lose his job. He knew that the precise deployment of the crib figures, and the angles of the lights must be just so, and there must be just the right quantity of straw, of a particular hue. Initially this obsessive attention to detail was the cause of much grumbling in *The Fortunes of War*.

*Pot and kettle!* cried the local joker.

Over the years Trevor had ceased to grumble and prided himself on getting the crib set up so there was nothing the boss could find to correct.

But on the year in question, Edmund's surprise visit was earlier than usual and the crib setup was in progress.

Edmund swept up to the church in his Jaguar.

"Gorgeous! But where is my favourite angel. The one right up the top?"

"Haven't got to him yet. Or her. Come back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I am in Milan. But dearest Trev, *aspetto!*"



Trevor laboured on. He visited The Fortunes of War for a restorative or three and laboured on. Setting up the crib was delicate stuff and the night was long. He was glad of the restorative pints. Or so he thought, until



disaster struck. He opened the bag containing Edmund's favourite angel, fumbled and the heavenly creature fell to the floor.

*O Jesus! Effing plaster.*

The angel, exquisite, lay on the floor, his or her or its hand divorced from its arm.

A hand raised to waft incense to heaven.

Broken on the floor.

Trev sits there.

*What the eff am I going to do?*

Above him he hears the bats, curses and packs it in for the night.



He couldn't go down to the church first thing next morning. He had to take his wife to the hospital for some routine tests. He sat in the waiting area trying not to twitch. Then arrived a fateful message from Edmund. *Plans awry. Back in Blighty. See you later.*

Trev was a man given to swearing rather than tears. And he sat in the waiting area, surrounded by worried and sick people, and swore and swore. Internally, of course.

There was no way he could get back in time to fix the angel. It was going to take ages to make a mend satisfactory to Edmund. It would need to be seamless, visible only on closest inspection. Not Trevor's strong suite. He'd have a go, of course, but really he should take it over to the big house in Stonden Magna and get the girlie there, Anya, who was a bit of a ceramicist, to fix it for him. But could he make it? He checked the time, the route, texted Anya. Waited. Checked the time, route. He reckoned if he could get the angel out of the church and over to Anya he could tell Edmund it just needed a brush up because the paint was a bit chipped. That should buy him some time.

Text from lovely Anya. *Happy to help. At Xmas fair in Edinboro. Back Xmas Eve – will burn m-night oil.*





Christmas Eve! Far too late! Three carol concerts were booked in, followed by Edmund's famous sherry and mince pie party, to which were invited the great and the good of the county. The angel must be fixed long before Christmas Eve.

Trev sat on in the grim waiting space, growing ever more gloomy. He'd lose his job for sure. Edmund often had reason to be sharp with him when the flowers were not quite so, or a candle guttering spilt too much wax. Trevor had gritted his teeth on many occasions, not because he cared about the nice retainer (*though he did*), but because he simply loved the church. To hand over the key to someone else! It was not to be endured.

He resolved he would spirit the broken angel away and tell Edmund that Anya had it, and blame her entirely for its non-appearance.

At last his dear wife reappeared and they set off.

"What *has* got into you, Trevor?" she asks as they speed along the lanes home.

"Edmund's back from Milan. Or didn't go. I have to finish the crib."

"Goodness, can't it wait till after lunch? It's only Edmund..."



But it could *not* wait. He tipped her unceremoniously out and squealed the van along the lanes to the church.

But he was too late. Edmund's Jaguar was parked right up in front of the church and himself was drumming his fingers on the dashboard. He did not have a key to the church.

"Sorry, mate," said Trevor. "Had to take the missus to the hospital. I haven't finished the crib yet. Do you want to come back later when I have? It's a bit of a mess still."

"No, no, I'd like to see how you're getting on. It's always such an excitement."

Trevor thought it was more excitement than he needed. He unlocked the big door, pretended he'd forgotten something and ducked back to his van.



He wasn't a coward in the normal course of things, but he needed time to come up with a new story.

Eventually, after scrabbling about in his van for a bit, he figured he'd deny all knowledge and say that the bloody bats must have knocked it over. Edmund would doubtless blame him for the bats being loose in the building, and then, later, start to doubt his story, but it might buy some time.

He sauntered back into the church, ready to feign surprise and extreme annoyance, braced for a blast of anger, borne on a wave of expensive soap.

Edmund was standing in front of the crib, his hands clasped behind his back, looking upwards, his mouth almost open in awe.

Trevor was fixed to the spot.

"Why, Trevor, my dear fellow, you have outdone yourself! I believe it's an even better design than mine."

For where Trevor had left a scattered mess of greenery and festoons and a broken angel, there was a swept floor. Weaving its way up to the top of the crib and beyond, right up to the angel roof itself, was a rope of greenery studded with berries, through which the plaster angels played and rejoiced, right up to the star, fixed in the roof itself, next to which, suspended by who



knows what artistry, flew Edmund's favourite angel, restored entirely to its glorious wholeness.

*How the effing hell do I pretend I managed that? Who the effing hell has done all this?*

"I had a bit a help," Trev said, shuffling his feet and scanning round for evidence of the culprits.

"Well, make sure you invite your helpers to the sherry party, so I can shake them by the hand, every one of them."

Trevor doubted his ability to do this, but nodded and grunted.

While Edmund was admiring and taking



photographs of *his* marvellous concoction, Trevor ranged around the church seeking out evidence of who could have been in and done this. His quest turned up no evidence. He found neither ladder nor paint brush nor a spot of glue.

Later in *The Fortunes of War*, he said to Walter, who was, if you recall, sort of like a churchwarden, and helped Trev keep an eye on the place.



“No-one else has a key, do they? Key to the church?”

“Not that I know of. Hard key to copy, chunky monkey. You been having trouble down there then?”

“Not exactly. Just wanted to be sure.”

“ I can have a look on the CCTV if you’re bothered. Got one set up on the door.”

Trevor then recalled that Edmund had paid handsomely for Walter, who was also a bit of computer enthusiast, to set up and monitor a camera to watch for thieves stripping lead from the roof (a common crime perpetrated against isolated churches at the time). Latterly, of course, Edmund had employed the very latest anti-theft paint and everyone had forgotten about the CCTV. Except Walter.

The evening of the sherry party duly arrived, and the guests glided across the medieval tiles and mingled among the lovely stone pillars. Edmund asked after Team Preseppe as he had now named them.

“I’m afraid they’re up in Edinburgh. There’s a Christmas Fair.”

Trevor wandered around, untouched sherry in hand, wondering how long it would be before he could lock up and go for a pint. Perhaps he could go for a pint and come back to lock up. This seemed like a better and



better idea as the chattering and exclamation over the crib threatened to overwhelm him.

Down in The Fortunes he met Walter, who, as you probably know, was sort of like a churchwarden, and helped Trev keep an eye on the place.

“You know, Trev, we really do have a bat problem in our church. I took a look at the CCTV footage. I’d forgot we had a camera set up inside as well. Just take a look at this.”



And getting out his phone he showed

Trevor various clips of blurry black and white footage.

“I mean look at this one! “ Walter said, as the screen filled up with indecipherable whirring and fluttering.

“All over the camera, can’t see into the church for them ”

The footage was indeed nothing but a flurry of motion in which nothing could be made out. It was as if a very large bat had positioned itself in front of the camera to obscure vision of the proceedings.

But Trevor could see. It was his church and he knew it, even in the dark and beyond the blur. He could make out what Walter could not.



“Well that’s interesting. Thanks, mate. I’ll take it up with the boss. Ping me those clips, will you.”

Trevor weaved his way back to the church where the party was beginning to wind down. He sat on his favourite pew and watched the video clips again. He froze the frames, enlarged the images, stared into the dark blur. He checked the dates printed on the bottom of the frames.

He sat back, with his arms stretched along the back of the pew, tilted his head up to the roof, and grinned.

“Thanks, mates,” he said, to the angel roof.

