

## Peak Forest Parish Church

The first chapel in Peak Forest was built in 1657 by Christiana, the Dowager Countess of Devonshire as a memorial to her son, Charles, who was killed in 1643 fighting for the Royalist cause in the Civil War. The chapel had to wait until the monarchy was restored after the Civil War before it could be openly dedicated to Charles, King and Martyr.

As the chapel stood on royal forest land it had an unusual privilege it was a 'Peculiar' that is free from episcopal jurisdiction. This meant that the minister could grant marriage licences and also prove wills without reference to the bishop of the diocese. This enabled couples to be married here at any hour of day or night without banns. The first 'foreign marriage' took place in 1665. This facility attracted so many runaway couples to Peak Forest to be married during the first half of the 1700s that a special register entitled 'Foreign Marriages' was started in 1728. An average of sixty couples came each year until 1753 when the 'Fleet Marriages Act' restricted the hours during which marriages could be performed. Only the names of the couples are recorded in the special 'Foreign Marriages' registers. An act passed by Parliament ended this practice in 1804.



In 1851 the population of Peak Forest parish was 596 which had declined to 562 by 1871. Despite this decline it was decided that a larger church was needed due to the strength of the Victorian religious revival. A new church was built in 1876 by the Duke of Devonshire and cost £6000 and on 1st November 1877 the new church was dedicated to Charles, King and Martyr.

The old and new churches stood side by side until 1880 when the old chapel was demolished. The stones from the chapel were used to build Peak Forest Reading Room which was built nearby. The Reading Room has a Venetian window facing the main road which came from the old chapel and also an old stone lintel which is over one of the entrances.