Frequently Asked Questions about C S Lewis by Visitors to Holy Trinity Church

**Why is C S Lewis known as ‘Jack’?**

When he was 4 years old he announced to his family that he no longer wished to be called Clive and from now on would be known as ‘Jacksie’. This quickly became ‘Jack’; he achieved his aim by simply ignoring anyone who called him ‘Clive’.

**Is it true he became a Christian on a bus coming up Headington Hill?**

No; Lewis's road from atheist to committed Christian took several years and had distinct stages. He had a moment of revelation on the Headington Bus in 1926 when he became a theist – someone who believes in a distinct spiritual presence external to themselves. Some time later in 1931, following an extended night-time walk and conversation on Addison's Walk in Magdalen College, with his friends J R R Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, he slowly came to a point of full Christian commitment. On a trip to Whipsnade Zoo either in the autumn of 1931 or spring of 1932 Lewis records words to the effect that when he left Oxford he wasn't a Christian; by the time he got to the zoo he was!

**When did he start attending Holy Trinity?**

We don't know for sure. He started attending church after he became a ‘committed monotheist’ in 1929 or 1930, but where is unknown. If it was 1929 it's unlikely that it was Holy Trinity, whereas in 1930 it would have been as it was then his parish church. We know for sure that the first time he took communion at Holy Trinity was on Christmas Day 1931.

**Did the Lewis brothers always sit in the same pew – now known as ‘The Lewis Pew’?**

Not always: Jack sat next to the pillar with Warnie on his left-hand side. It’s said that Jack chose that spot as from there he could see every aspect of the service, but other members of the congregation couldn’t see him.

In a brief memoir by Charlie Kimber he indicates that after his marriage Jack would sit with Joy “at the back”. Recent research reveals that when he attended Evensong he sat almost at the front in the centre of the nave.

**Did Lewis enter fully into the life of Holy Trinity?**

To a degree. He found small-talk almost impossible and did not relate easily to non-academics he didn’t know well. Thus, he frequently left services before or as they finished – often immediately after receiving communion. He and Warnie were heavily-built men who were not light on their feet. With their steel-studded heavy boots their exit was seldom quiet!
Throughout his life Lewis profoundly disliked organ-music. In the early years of his time at Holy Trinity he also disliked hymns, although he mellowed somewhat with the passing years. He and Warnie thus usually attended the 8am communion service which was spoken. He occasionally came to Evensong – arriving late and leaving directly after the sermon was preached.

Lewis sometimes attended the (then) 11am service – most notably on 15 July 1940. He had been unwell and decided to have a lie-in. He found the sermon somewhat tedious – he did not get-on well with the then vicar – and his mind started to wander. By the time he got back to The Kilns the outline of what was to prove his first major popular Christian work – “The Screwtape Letters: Letters from a Senior to a Junior Devil” – was almost fully-formed.

Was C S Lewis an ‘evangelical’ Christian?

No; he was most at home with the form of High-Anglicanism that was characteristic of Holy Trinity for most of his worshipping life. However, he refused to be ‘labelled’ as being associated with a particular brand of churchmanship and was happy to meet with all Christians who espoused orthodox Christianity as described in the creeds. When away from Oxford he would worship at whichever church happened to be most convenient. Although much of Lewis’s theology has been embraced by evangelicals, there are certain aspects – most notably regarding the afterlife – where he is much closer to Roman Catholic teaching than evangelical.

Who was Mrs Moore and how did Lewis meet her?

When Lewis ‘came up’ to Oxford in 1917 it was with the express purpose of joining the University Officer Training Corps. He shared a room in his billet at Keble with Paddy Moore. The two became firm friends; each had a single parent – Lewis’s mother had died when he was 9 years old and Mrs Moore was estranged from her husband. Each promised the other that should either be killed in the Great War the one remaining would take care of the other’s parent. Paddy Moore was killed and Lewis stuck to the promise. Mrs Moore and her daughter, Maureen, moved to Oxford when Lewis ‘came up’ again in 1919 and the extended family lived in several locations in Headington before Mrs Moore and the Lewis brothers jointly bought ‘The Kilns’ in 1930.

Mrs Moore often treated Jack like a servant. He would come up to Headington from Magdalen every afternoon to carry-out household chores. As she grew older with increasingly poor physical and mental health she became even more demanding. Jack would sometimes decline invitations to speak away from Oxford “as I have a sick mother to care for”. Mrs Moore died in 1951 and is also buried in the churchyard – near the Western edge of the extension.

Did Mrs Moore attend church with Lewis?

No; although she was a nominal Anglican when she first met Lewis in 1917, she was an atheist by the time Lewis had become a committed Christian. She is buried in Holy Trinity Churchyard as was her entitlement as a parishioner.
The inscription on his grave “Men must endure their going hence” seems odd for someone who was such a committed Christian

Lewis’s mother Flora was the one who introduced him to the love of literature. She was a Shakespeare devotee who had a by-day flip-over calendar with each day having a Shakespeare quotation. ‘Men must endure their going hence’ is a quote from ‘King Lear’ and was on Flora’s calendar on the day she died. The Lewis brothers never forgot this, even though both were comparatively young at the time. Warnie chose this inscription for the grave, although many believe that the inscription on Jack’s memorial in Westminster Abbey is more appropriate: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

Why is Joy Lewis/Gresham/Davidman not buried in the same grave as her husband?

In the later stages of her cancer, Joy knew she was dying. She told Jack that she wished to be cremated. She died on 13 July 1960 and her ashes were subsequently scattered at the Oxford Crematorium’s rose garden. A memorial plaque is in the crematorium with a poem by Jack.

Was Lewis an ascetic academic?

Most definitely not! He lived life to the full, enjoyed cigarettes throughout his life and took great pleasure in his pint! His humour is illustrated in a story of Walter Hooper’s… One day Jack and Walter were walking down St Giles when they came across someone begging. Walter was aghast when Jack gave the man a 10-shilling note – quite a sum of money then. “But Jack,” exclaimed Walter “he might spend it on drink!” “Well”, said Lewis, “if I’d kept it that’s what I would have done!”

He also had a liking for slightly ribald schoolboy humour of the following type: “Why did the submarine blush? Because it saw Queen Mary’s bottom.”

Lewis’s books were very popular even during his lifetime. Did he earn much from them?

Yes; if he had kept the money he would have been a wealthy man. However, as the royalty payments became steady and profuse he started to give all the money away. He was not worldly-wise in this regard and friends had to urgently point-out that he had to pay tax on this income. He then established a charitable trust which disbursed the net income from his book and other royalties. This was often to needy individuals or small and relatively unknown charities for whom his gift would make a significant difference.

Lewis was aware that he could easily be seduced by the sin of pride. He took pains to guard against this throughout his life. He would probably be bewildered and perhaps a little annoyed that 50 years on Holy Trinity are commemorating his life and work and he is to be honoured in ‘Poets’ Corner’ in Westminster Abbey.