

SUSAN HEGEDUS

Paradise lost

This half-term, leafy Center Parcs will be popular destinations for families. Many of them would be surprised by the vision of its Catholic founder

THERE CAME a point in our holiday when the pleasures on offer began to pall. We had been staying in the Center Parcs holiday complex in Elveden Forest, Suffolk, with its woods, walks and pools. But we'd become weary of cycling uphill in the pouring rain to the launderette, and even our three children had lost enthusiasm for the pools, organised activities and fast-food restaurants in the central "Plaza".

It was then that I began to wonder whether there might be a church we could visit. With as many as 4,000 people here at peak time, surely there would have to be a provision? So between mouthfuls of chicken nuggets I enquired whether there was a church on the complex. The waitress in the restaurant was doubtful but went off to check.

"There might be a service on Sundays but we don't get a call for that kind of thing. Nobody actually knows," she said when she returned with the bill. We moved on to the gift shop. Through the array of scented candles and pot-pourri we were met with blank stares. Customer services told us that they weren't sure whether the church existed but if it did it was possibly sandwiched between the hotel and Treasure Island.

From the road we could see a round build-



A Center Parcs Zen garden. Only one village has a church where services are held

ing with a modern pyramid-type roof behind the fencing. It could have been a church but there was no sign of a cross. The gate looked stuck. I relished the prospect of a small adventure. What was behind that concealed gate? The silence of a wooded valley, a vineyard, a church ...

It took two of us to thrust the gate inwards. Our 4-, 6- and 7-year-olds looked agog, as if this was some new game they hadn't played before. We followed the overgrown path strewn with litter and hogweed, a sharp contrast to the grassy, bramble-free "village".

Two large glass doors with big white handles and a bicycle lock around them awaited us. We strained to see through the smudgy glass and spotted a plaque on the inside wall that read: "Emmanuel Church". We could just about make out the inscription below: "Piet Derksen, the founder of the Center Parcs organisation, is a committed Christian ..." So a church did exist after all, but why was it dilapidated and shut away from everyone?

I went home determined to find out more about Piet Derksen and his church. I discovered that he had been a successful Dutch multimillionaire businessman but in 1996 had died in poverty. He was a Catholic and had spent practically every penny he had on spreading the Gospel. His success story began when at the age of 40 in 1953 he left his job at a food company and set up a chain of camping shops throughout the Netherlands.

In spite of his business success he never forgot his love of nature, seeing this as an extension of God's presence in his life. He expanded his shops into Sport House Centres, which specialised in sports equipment and holidays. He made sure they were situated near lakes, slides and a swimming pool. This started a new trend among the Dutch who could now experience short breaks locally.

By 1978, he sold all the sports shops and concentrated on developing the "holiday villages". In 1986 Sport House Centres changed its name to Center Parcs. Derksen insisted that there should be a place of worship in each of his holiday villages. Some of the Center Parcs on the Continent were even equipped with a presbytery for a resident priest. Each was to open daily so that Christians and those of other faiths could worship freely. For those who had no faith the church could still be a place for peace and reflection. He chose to name all of these churches "Emmanuel", or "God with us". A traditional Catholic, he arranged that each day at noon an electronic Angelus bell should sound, prompting holidaymakers to recognise that "the word of God became a human being and pitched his tent among us" (John 1:14).

Derksen brought the Center Parcs concept to Britain in 1987 and set up Sherwood Forest Village. Elveden Forest Village was built in 1989. But in the same year he chose to retire from Center Parcs and sold his shares.

He had established an ethos whereby holidaymakers had a chance to experience God. He viewed this enterprise as a stepping stone to spreading the word of God even further. The money made from Center Parcs financed an evangelisation project, "Lumen 2000", out of which grew the foundation "Witness for God's love". Derksen funded the Robert Schuman School for the training of Catholic Journalists in Belgium. He invested in other Catholic media ventures in the United States, including Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) and a short-wave radio station which broadcast 24 hours a day. He was also a patron of many international charismatic gatherings. At one point he sent 10 guilders to a large number of Dutch people to buy Bibles. He died penniless in 1996.

In 2001, a fire at Elveden Forest Village

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caused millions of pounds' worth of damage. When it reopened in July 2003, there was no mention of the fact that Emmanuel Church, which had not been affected by the fire, was no longer in use. Local clergy protested and contacted their bishops but it was not in their power to do anything, as the church was the property of Center Parcs.

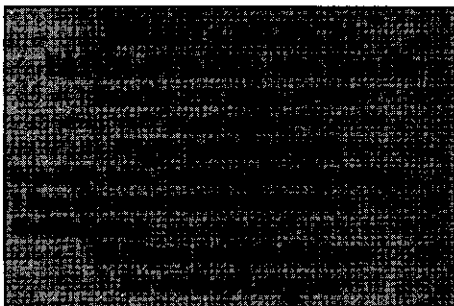
When Fr Ivan Rudkin, parish priest at St Thomas of Canterbury in nearby Brandon, went to Emmanuel Church to recover his belongings, he says he got a shock: "A statue of Our Lady had apparently been dropped and was smashed to pieces. The Stations of the Cross had vanished. We found the Cross but the corpus had vanished. The altar missal had vanished and the lectionaries. The place was completely filled with their things and ours had been removed."

THE REVD Sally Fogden, Anglican vicar of the Euston group of parishes that includes Elveden Forest, said Center Parcs had swept away the founder's original concept for the village. "Piet had this visionary idea of rest and relaxation and having fun but, at the heart of it all, there was this lovely little chapel. It's a shame and very sad that it's no longer in use. Emmanuel Church was never empty. At the carol service I held there in 2001 there was standing room only. There were many requests for prayers. I baptised several babies, blessed marriages, and had thanksgiving services for several couples' golden and silver wedding anniversaries. In fact, I was phoned up by Center Parcs in December 2004 asking me if I could conduct a Christmas service, but there was no church so I declined."

Simon Kay, press officer for Center Parcs, said that there was not the demand for a church. "I'm not religious but I think it's a shame because it is important to some people. But a lot of guests felt it was a strange place to have a church."

In spite of Emmanuel Church being used as a store room, this is still a holy place – a concept that appears to be lost on Center Parcs and at odds with its founder's ideals. But Elveden is not in isolation: all 18 Center Parcs on the Continent no longer have churches, and nor do the two others in England built after Derksen's death. But one, at Sherwood, in Nottinghamshire, has kept its church. I am told that it is well supplied with preachers from the Baptist and Methodist churches, and has a weekly Anglican service for all denominations. In the forest there are a number of crucifixes and a statue of the Madonna. Here, at least, Piet Derksen's spirit lives on.

* Susan Hegedus is a freelance journalist.



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