

The ecclesiastical parishes of Umeå have a long history, from the 1500s through to the present day. The region is full of interesting buildings, objects and graveyards. They are designed and decorated with great architectural and artistic ambitions, often by the most skilful architects, craftsmen and artists of the time. The symbolically-charged settings tell us about the lives of different generations and about the role of the church in society. The ecclesiastical settings represent a priceless cultural heritage, which is explored in a series called "KULTURHISTORIA, Svenska kyrkan i Umeå"/"HISTORICAL CULTURE, the Swedish Church in Umeå".



The Medieval stone church of Backen has an eventful history. Today, this modern parish church has strong links with the history of the local area and the history of the building. There's plenty to discover!

Svenska kyrkan 
UMEÅ LANDSFÖRSAMLING

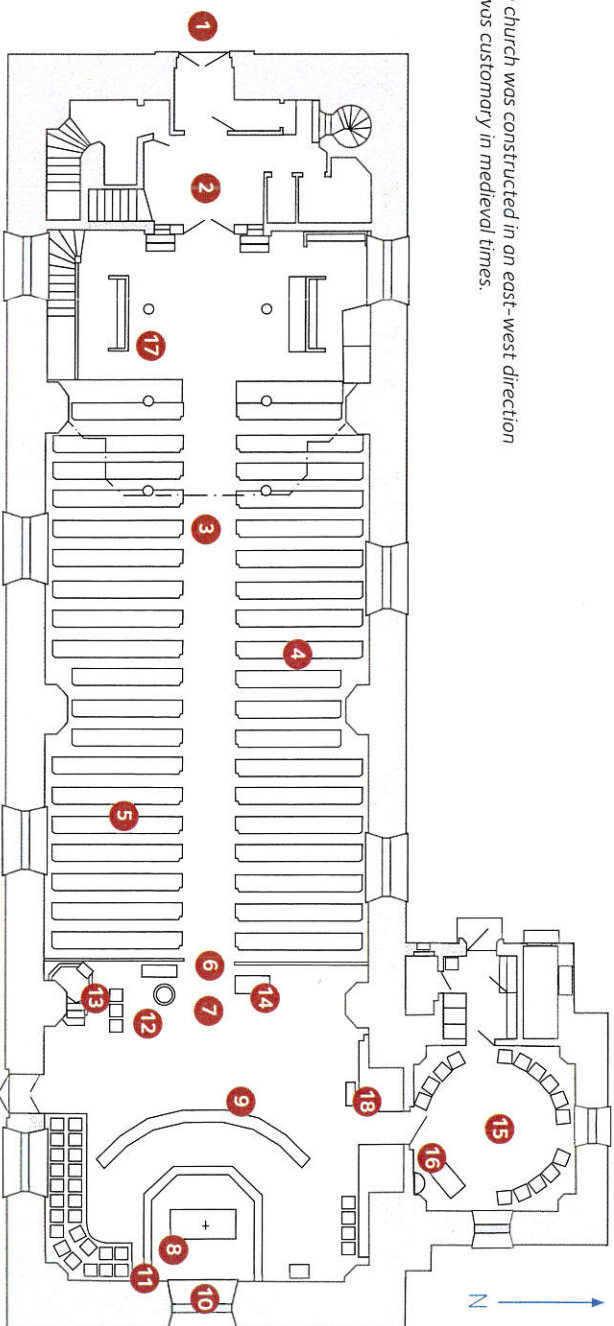
Backen Church

a brief description

Inside the church

- 1. Church door.** The 17th century style door has massive decorative panels. Its appearance corresponds with information from archives about a door being moved in 1805, when the former southern entrance porch was torn down and replaced by a west-facing entrance. Traces of the old doorway are still visible in the wall today.
- 2. Porch.** Churchgoers in bygone days would leave their weapons in the porch, or vestibule, of the church. The stairway in the north-west corner leads up to the loft and has remained intact since the Middle Ages.
- 3. Nave.** The nave is where the congregation gathers. The floor is covered with limestone quarried in Jämtland (north west of Sweden). The present vaulted ceiling was constructed in 1952, fashioned after the Vadstena style. The paintings decorating the star-shaped vault and the murals on the front wall of the chancel are by Pär Andersson, who used techniques and colours similar to those employed in the Middle Ages.
- 4. Chandeliers.** The large brass chandeliers in the central aisle are newly-crafted in antique style. The pendulous four-leaved brass lamps and wall sconces are designed by the architect Jerk Alton.
- 5. Pews.** For the first hundred years of the church's history, the congregation had to stand throughout the entire service. In the 17th century, boxed-in pews with doors were built. Today, the church has open pews in neo-Gothic style, traditionally decorated with tempera paint and varnished.
- 6. Triumphal crucifix.** The crucifix stands in the chancel arch (or triumphal arch) between the nave and the chancel, depicting Christ suffering on the cross, his head fallen on his right shoulder. The crucifix is the work of Pär Andersson. The cross is one of the most common and most ancient of the symbols in churches, depicting the death of Jesus as well as new life.
- 7. Chancel.** The chancel, with the altar, is the most sacred part of the church. Just as in days gone by, the chancel is the area where the choir sits during services.
- 8. Altar.** The altar, designed by Jerk Alton, stands away from the wall to enable the celebrant to stand behind the altar facing the congregation ("versus populum"). The legs of the altar are whitewashed brick. The mensa, or top of the altar, is a ten-centimetre-thick slab of limestone from Jämtland. When the cloths and chalices are placed on the altar, this is the sign of the New Covenant, the presence of Christ. The altar crucifix is made of silver and, like the silver candlesticks used during services, was handcrafted by the silversmith Erik Gardfors.

The church was constructed in an east-west direction as was customary in medieval times.

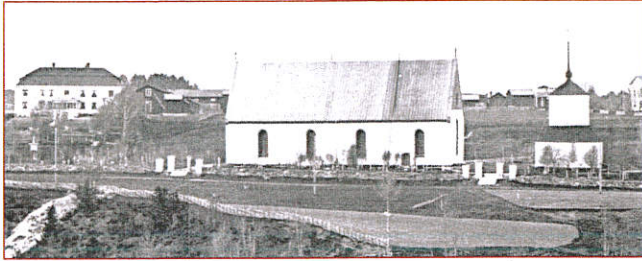


- 9. Altar rails.** Like the first communion benches, the altar rails consist of movable sections. These were introduced in the 17th century to make it easier to receive communion in a kneeling position.
- 10. Chancel window.** The theme chosen for the interior of the church when it was redesigned after the fire in 1986 was "Resurrection", which is also clearly reflected in the chancel window by Astrid Theselius. The leaded stained glass window depicts the scene where Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus in the herb garden after the resurrection.
- 11. Fresco.** The chancel window is surrounded by a painting of a vigorously growing vine, which symbolises Christ and is a motif that the artist Pär Andersson, like his medieval predecessors, often used. The doves may be symbolic of the Twelve Apostles, or purity, or virginity, as well as peace and harmony.
- 12. Baptismal font.** The foot of the font, made of limestone in the 14th century, is the oldest item in the church. The bowl-shaped upper section of the font, the baptismal basin, was added in 1955.
- 13. Pulpit.** The pulpit has a simple design without figurative motifs. Semi-columns flanked by trefoils in colours of green, gold ochre, caput mortuum red and gold leaf. The pulpit was designed by Jerk Alton, who decided on the colour scheme together with Pär Andersson. The dove beneath the ceiling of the pulpit was designed and handcrafted by Bergt-Erik Nilsson.
- 14. Ambon.** The ambo, the predecessor of the pulpit, is used for readings and occasionally for preaching sermons.
- 15. Sacristy.** The sacristy used to be the room where the church silver and furnishing were kept, and where the clergy would prepare before the service. Today, the room is used for smaller gatherings and for prayer and meditation. The star-shaped vault dates from the Middle Ages and the chandelier is from 1720.
- 16. Piscina.** The piscina or sacarium is used for emptying the communion vessels.
- 17. Gallery.** The first organ gallery was built facing west in the 17th century. The gallery was extended down both sides of the church to accommodate more seating. In the 1800s, there used to be a two-storey gallery with pews in the chancel. The present west gallery serves as an assembly hall.
- 18. Pipe organ.** The church acquired its first organ in 1535. Since then, the organ has developed greatly and the parish commissioned the construction of new organs in 1649, 1779, 1844, 1895 and 1953. They have all been installed on the west gallery. The present organ, with its 33 stops and 2000 pipes, stands in the recess facing the sacristy and is one of the largest choir organs in Sweden. It was built by Grönlunds orgelbygger/organ makers Grönlunds and was inaugurated in 1996. The iris decoration on the front of the organ was designed by Jerk Alton and Stig Robertsson in partnership with Grönlunds. The painting is the work of specialist painter, Erik Jakobsson.

Large Medieval Church

Centuries ago, Backen was already a convergence point for people living in the valleys of Umeå and along the Vindel River. It was a hub in this large parish, which stretched from the coast in the east to the wilderness regions of Lapland in the west. The river was navigable and there was a harbour and ferry quay here. Paths and riding trails fanned out in different directions. Farmers, craftsmen, Lapps, hunters and fishermen all came to the harbour area to exchange or buy goods and to attend church.

Originally, a wooden church stood on the site where the granite church was erected in 1501. When it was completed in 1508, the new church was 45 metres long and 16 metres wide, making it one of the largest Medieval stone churches in northern Sweden. Backen Church is a single-nave, granite, hall church. Its outer and inner unhewn stone walls are filled with smaller stones and gravel. The outer walls are 1.4 metres thick and the gable walls are even more solid. The exterior and interior are plastered with lime mortar. The roof used to be covered in shingles. Inside, the church probably originally had four star-shaped vaults made of bricks. The pressure and weight were carried through the ribs and arches in the four corners of the vault to supporting pilasters – all according to the principles of gothic ecclesiastical architecture.



The church has undergone changes over the course of time. In the mid 18th century, the original windows were widened to admit more light to the church. The old pulpit dating from 1645 was replaced in 1749. In 1805, the entrance porch with a door in its south-west corner was taken down and the west doorway was constructed. The windows were enlarged again (to their present size) and remodelled with rounded arches. It was probably at this time that the northern door, the Door of Mary, through which women entered the church, was blocked up. A two-storey gallery was constructed in the chancel. In 1893, the church was damaged by fire and the vault was replaced by a wooden roof. However, the sacristy's medieval roof vault was spared.

Major renovation work in 1953 included the construction of new brick vaults with a medieval design – so skilfully crafted that they survived the fire in 1986, when the entire church, organ, art treasures and fittings were destroyed. The church silver, textiles and other items that were kept in the sacristy were fortunately protected from the ravages of the fire. The medieval stone walls withstood the heat incredibly well and the parish decided to rebuild the church. Jerk Alton, the Swedish architect, was commissioned to design the new building. The aim was not to reconstruct the medieval church, but to achieve the emotive effect that the builders of the Middle Ages achieved using traditional materials and colours.

The church should be a glimpse of what is beyond words – a place in which people may find repose and tranquillity as well as fortitude and strength. A paradise on earth.

