

A Pilgrimage to Small Pilgrim Places - chapter one

The little church of St Mihangel (St Michael) in Llanerchymedd on Anglesey is easy to miss. Rather squat, and shaded by trees, it is surrounded by a graveyard set among lush sheep-grazed fields. A footpath connects it to a narrow country lane winding its way from rolling coastal land to the highest point on the island, a great plug of rock called Mynydd Bodafon which dominates the local landscape.



Having toiled up and over this dramatic landmark, I was glad to freewheel downhill and glimpse St Mihangel ahead, relieved to have found my destination after cycling 32km across the island in driving rain. The main reason for my journey was that, in my home town of Bradford on Avon, two buildings had recently joined the growing network of Small Pilgrim Places across England and Wales. At the time I had been intending to walk one of the routes to Santiago de Compostela, but browsing the SPP handbook, it occurred to me that I could make my own pilgrimage around this network of sacred spaces. Reading the description of each Small Pilgrim Place, with all the details on its history, the opening times, facilities and so on had made me want to visit every one. But gradually a manageable plan emerged that would take in a number of destinations in southern England, beginning and ending almost at my own front door.

While these plans were progressing, I happened to be visiting Anglesey and took the opportunity to do a day's "trail run" – hence my journey to St Mihangel. The church is separated from the lane by a gate and a short footpath. Inside I found a welcome dry, quiet space, with visitors' book and information about the SPP network on display. The building dates from the 14th century and continues to be used regularly for worship. Perhaps the most intriguing historical feature is a large, rough-hewn stone carrying a 6th century Latin inscription, "HIC IACIT MACCUDECETI" (translated as 'Here lies Maccudeceti'). It is a memorial stone, commemorating a revered leader in Western Britain at the time. I spent much of the afternoon here in solitude, uninterrupted except for the sounds of birdsong and passing showers outside. This was a rather special place to commit myself to the pilgrimage, since the initial vision for the network developed in north-western Wales.

My pilgrimage started in earnest a few weeks later on an August morning in one of the two Small Pilgrim Places in Bradford on Avon, a chapel known as St Mary Tory. Perched above the old town and approached from several directions via footpaths and worn steps, its windows and small adjoining garden afford commanding views across the town and beyond for several miles. An ancient pilgrim chapel between Malmesbury and Glastonbury, it has undergone various states of disrepair over its long history, but is now a beautiful little space, regularly used for prayer and silence, and with a splendid east window designed by local stained glass artist Mark Angus. The chapel is used regularly for an evening hour of silent meditation, when through the year the window's colours change as the sunlight waxes and wanes and gives way to candlelight in winter months.



From St Mary Tory my bike and I - plus 10lbs of essentials in a backpack - headed to the Avoncliff aqueduct, and then followed the Kennet and Avon canal westwards. It was a journey I'd made often enough. But this time it was the beginning of the first leg of a route that I hope will take me around eleven Small Pilgrim Places dotted across the south-west of England. The final destination, after eight legs of cycling and walking, will be back at St Laurence Saxon Church in Bradford on Avon.

On this first day I was heading for a little chapel in Glastonbury. My first fleeting glimpse of the landmark Glastonbury Tor came as I was cycling along high ground approaching Wells. My journey thus far had

taken me through miles of deep green late-summer corridors – first on the canal towpath, then old railways now turned into cycle tracks, then quiet lanes, all overshadowed by dense banks of the mature, fully-clothed broadleaf trees of late summer. I was glad of the shade they offered on a hot day. I free-wheeled down the final hill into Wells, in time to pause for a drink before choral evensong in the cool of the Cathedral chancel. I was delighted to find that leading the service was a woman I had known thirty years ago, and we renewed our friendship over a shared supper.

The next morning, I soon found the well-signed NCN 26, the cycle route taking me off the main roads and past field of golden corn and another snatched view of Glastonbury Tor, now looming much larger on the horizon. I circled south of the town and pushed the bike up the steep hill beside the Tor, then whizzed down to Magdalene Street, humming with market stalls, buskers, cafes and tourists. The crowds thinned towards the western end of the street, and it was here that I found a narrow passage leading down to the next Small Pilgrim Place, St Margaret's Chapel.



On the path to the chapel is a large wooden finger labyrinth, almost too hot to the touch on the day I visited, but satisfyingly deeply grooved. The interior of the chapel, now restored and listed as an ancient monument, is simply furnished and comfortable for reflection and prayer. As I entered it was refreshingly quiet and cool, with doors wide open to let light flood in from the delightful garden outside. A neat lawn is edged on one side with an herbaceous border, and on the other side stands a row of almshouses, possibly originating from the 13th century. The first of these is furnished to suggest the home of one of the men who would have lived here in years past. The garden and buildings seemed to be popular with passers-by – several, of different nationalities, wandered in and out during my time there, the guestbook showed frequent entries and all the tea lights had been used. The whole complex makes a delightful and restful sacred space.

Leaving Glastonbury I headed on across the Somerset Levels towards Shapwick through the "Willow Walk", a series of tunnels of arching willows giving welcome shade, and on past a series of rhynes, lakes and peat moors, now nature reserves supporting many bird species. I pedalled through a series of villages on quiet roads, with a night's lodging at Chilton Polden. Over dinner on a terrace I enjoyed the view towards Cheddar and the Mendip hills across a great patchwork of hedges and fields, where farmers were still busy with the harvest well after sundown.

The NCN 3 took me on the following morning to Chedzoy, and a pause at St Mary the Virgin Church, whose doors were hospitably open, then parallel to the great King's Sedgemoor Drain running along the southern flank of the Polden Hills, where anglers were setting up for a day's fishing. Crossing the River Parrett at Bridgwater, the route brought me mostly along canal towpaths into Taunton, from where bike and I made the return trip by train. Taunton will be the start of the second leg of the pilgrimage, in search of the third Small Pilgrim Place of my journey.