

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 11:

Little Baddow URC to St Mary The Virgin, Great Henny, Essex

Being asked to deliver a lecture at Chelmsford cathedral gave me the chance to make a pilgrimage in the area, between two more Small Pilgrim Places in the area. My starting point was the village of Little Baddow, a short distance to the east of Chelmsford, along a quiet country lane. My destination was Great Henny near Sudbury, a cycle ride of just over 70 km.



Little Baddow URC Church

As I arrived at Little Baddow, Barbara (a church elder) was tending the church grounds, managed for wildlife conservation. Mown pathways meandered through long grass and wildflowers, soon to receive an autumn cut. Inside the brick-built church I met Elizabeth, the hospitaller, who was setting out information about the Small Pilgrim Places Network. In another corner was a display recounting the history of several leading women in religious life, including 16th century scholar and writer Lady Anne Bacon, mother of Sir Francis Bacon.

Elizabeth explained that the building was first used by Dissenters – nearby Colchester was a Puritan stronghold in the 17th century – and more recently it had become a United Reformed Church. We shared a cup of coffee in the kitchen with the gardening team, and I then walked next door to the History Centre and its exhibition and archives of local interest, from churches and wildlife to regional surnames and Roman roads. One showcase houses a display of church and chapel china; I learnt that in years past, congregations offered refreshments in tea services stamped with their own denomination, village and crest.



Above: Sharing a cuppa with Barbara and Elizabeth

Left: Chapelware on display at Little Baddow History Centre

From Little Baddow I cycled northwards, following national cycle routes past harvested arable fields and picturesque villages in gently rolling countryside, then through Braintree and onto the Flitch Way. This is a disused railway line running westwards from the town, whose name is said to derive from a local ceremony whereby married couples who could show that they had not argued for a year and a day were awarded with a flitch (side) of bacon. A few miles down the line I came across an old carriage and a ticket office now serving as a café – a welcome pitstop.



St Mary the Virgin Church

Turning off the Flitch Way I headed north to Shalford, then eastwards, threading my way on tiny lanes where acorns, fallen from overhanging oaks, crunched satisfyingly under the bike's wheels. I passed through Sible Hedingham and on towards Great Henny. St Mary the Virgin Church stands atop a headland overlooking a tributary of the R Stour just to the east. Hospitaller Margaret King, rector of this and over a dozen other churches, had warned me that St Mary stood on the "Essex Heights" so I wasn't too surprised at having to push the bike up a steep cart track leading to the back of the churchyard. I was very glad of the cup of tea offered by members of the congregation who had just finished a meeting at the nearby parish rooms.

The flint and brick building, dating from Norman times, has an imposing cedar shingle spire that has suffered from the attentions of woodpeckers – hence a small "decoy" spire perched on a pole in the churchyard. Inside the church is a sanctuary complete with double piscina and sedilla, and some jolly 15th century corbel carvings on the supporting arch braces of the nave roof. The simple side chapel is

furnished with prayer material, candles and seating. A notice-board near the door displays articles of interest to visitors, including newspaper cuttings about those infamous woodpeckers, which evidently made headlines in several national dailies.



Above: A quiet corner in the side chapel, St Mary's
Right: Piscina and sedilla, St Mary's

