

A Pilgrimage to Small Pilgrim Places chapter two

The destination for the second leg of my Small Pilgrim Places pilgrimage was the village of King's Nympton, Devon, and the church of St James. My starting point was Taunton, where bike and I headed westwards, for a few miles following the NCR 3 before turning northwards towards Wiveliscombe. The journey took me along narrow, high-banked lanes, past hedges dotted with the colours of early autumn –blackberries and hosedhips, eldeberries and bright red bryony. There was a blanket of cloud and a fine, misty drizzle that developed through the morning into persistent rain, making me wish that someone would invent micro screen wipers for bespectacled cyclists.



I was entering hill country – quite a contrast to the levels and canals of the previous part of the pilgrimage. I climbed steadily, struggling up and rattling down one hill after another before crossing the River Barle at Brushford where a sign announced that I was entering Exmoor National Park. The road followed the river to Dulverton, where All Saints Church perches on the hillside, approached via a handsome lychgate and steep footpath. At this and two other churches I had popped into on the way I was delighted to find the doors open and visitors welcomed with useful

information on local history, architecture and so on. Each had a porch, lychgate or bench for the comfort of weary visitors.

The next morning I stocked up with a picnic lunch at a friendly organic farm shop by Dulverton bridge, and began the toil up and out of the valley, until eventually, crossing a cattlegrid, I was suddenly into the wildness of Exmoor. Here, the strong green of sheep and cattle pasture gave way to the muter greens and browns of tussocky expanses of rush and sedge, gorse and ling. On the undulating track across the hills I saw more wild ponies than human travellers. Linnets darted low across the heath, and on the highest peak I looked up to see a flock of swallows, lingering to catch some insects before heading south for the winter. I turned south too, down an unnervingly steep lane to Molland, where I stopped to visit St Mary's with its shoulder-high box pews rising up around the pillars like high tide round a pier. At the valley floor I crossed the River Mole and then another hill before finding a field with a view for my picnic. Several more steep climbs and drops brought me to King's Nympton where, tucked away amongst a tangle of narrow lanes and cottages, I followed the beacon of the newly restored copper-shingled spire.





Inside I found a beautifully light and open space, with pews at the rear of the nave raked like a theatre. This was a good place to sit and take in the historic features – the fan-vaulted rood screen, the roof bosses carved with human faces, the curious painted chancel ceiling. John, the local SPP hospitaller and churchwarden, gave me a guided tour of the church, and pointed out the small quiet area inside one of the square box pews where a few parishioners meet weekly for prayer. He also explained the source of a scent that pervaded the south end of the rood screen: he had started feeding the ancient timbers with

linseed oil, and intended to carry on round all the pews. What a labour of love! I noticed the Small Pilgrim Places sign on the wall, and found a visitors' book, conveniently placed next to a well-cushioned basket chair near the south door. The whole building gave the impression of a well-loved and cared-for place of worship, with every opportunity to pause, rest and reflect. Thanks to John and his wife Sue, I enjoyed a welcome meal and a good night's rest before the long climb northwards, with a speedy descent to cross the River Mole and on into Chittlehampton. John had recommended that I stop here to have a look at the Church of St Hieritha with its fine tower – and inside its colourful addition of Millennium embroidered kneelers. The last few miles took me over several more hills before the descent into Barnstaple, where I rejoined the NCR 3 to reach the railway station and a train ride home.