

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 23:

St Mary, Oldberrow, Henley-in-Arden

Henley-in-Arden, a small Warwickshire town, lies beneath the arc of motorways described by the M5, M42 and M40, a few miles south of Birmingham. Travelling homewards from Yorkshire to Wiltshire, it took only a few minutes to leave the busy motorway and drive through the pleasant countryside near Henley-in-Arden and find St Mary Church, the latest destination of my pilgrimage around the Small Pilgrim Places Network.

The church stands on its own on a corner plot, surrounded by iron railings, between the A4189 and a minor road where there is room to park a car. There is no village here, but the area is known as Oldberrow and is mentioned in the Domesday Book. The present church was almost completely rebuilt in 1875 on the site of a medieval church, but some old features have survived and are incorporated into the present building.



Above: The interior of St Mary's Oldberrow

I entered the churchyard through a timber lychgate under a tiled roof, from where there is a good view of an attractive (relatively modern) west bellcote, with a squat tiled spire. Rounding the corner of the west end, I entered the church through a little stone and timber south porch. Opposite the door, by the north wall, is an early medieval stone font, standing on four short, round pillars, and bearing some simple flower-like ornamentation incised into the outside of the bowl. The pews and other furnishings date from the Victorian rebuilding, as does the east window. Other windows are medieval. I was taken with the two-light west window, which dates from the turn of the twentieth century, and features a church and a house set in a well-kept garden. As attractive, I thought.



Above: The modern west window

As well as the interesting historic features and prayerful, welcoming atmosphere of the interior, St Mary's also offers another rich treasure, one that I nearly missed. As I left the church, I found my companion, Dave, in the churchyard looking rather excited. This was October, and the grass had been cut. But Dave, a botanist, had looked over the rough sward and declared that it was one of the richest he had ever come across.



Above: The hay meadow churchyard

Only then did we spot a notice in the lychgate explaining that the churchyard had in 2003 been designated a Local Wildlife Site for its high conservation value. It is managed as a traditional hay meadow, left to flower and then cut after seeds have set. It produces a profusion of wildflowers from Cowslips and Cuckooflower in the spring to summer Lady's Bedstraw and Betony. Seed from here has already been harvested to increase the biodiversity of an area of grassland in the Heart of England forest.

The notice explained that the meadow might look a little "untidy" at the height of summer, but it supports a great variety of fauna including many insects, reptiles, small birds and mammals. Indeed, a quick look round the grounds yielded a couple of slow worms sheltering in the longer grass between some headstones. The grassland must be a beautiful sight at the height of the flowering season.

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