

Small Pilgrim Places 24: St Winwaloe, Tremaine

The church I was heading for on my 24th journey around the Small Pilgrim Places Network was St Winwaloe, one of half a dozen or so currently on the network in Cornwall. It lies a few miles to the northwest of Launceston, and about the same distance to the north Cornish coast above Boscastle.

I approached it on foot from the hamlet of Little Treburtle along narrow lanes hemmed in by tree-topped banks and flower-filled verges. It was mid-July and the colours of the banks had taken on the hues of the whites, pinks and purples of high summer: the milky, frothy heads of meadowsweet and clotted cream of honeysuckle; the pinky-mauves of bramble blossom and Herb-Robert; the darker tones of Hardheads and Rosebay Willowherb. A distant harvester was at work in the fields, but otherwise there was a distinct silence; it seemed to be the first day after the cessation of birdsong in this part of the world, and it was quite a shock after the symphony of birdsong so evident during the lockdown months and the reduction of air and road traffic.

The lane gradually wended its way uphill until, at the brow, the short church tower came into view. The building stands quite alone in a small churchyard, with far views eastwards along the Ottery valley towards Dartmoor. At one end of the churchyard is a coffin stile, a gap in the wall in which a series of stones are laid, rather like a modern cattle grid, to form an entrance for parishioners as well as a barrier to wandering livestock. At the other end of the churchyard I was pleased to see on the gate a



The first sight of the church tower



The coffin stile

notice explaining that, "The churchyard will not be cut until after the wild flowers have seeded", hopefully forestalling any complaints about an "untidy" sward. Indeed the churchyard evidently supports a diversity of grasses, ferns and wildflowers (I noticed Zigzag Clover and an orchid in seed). These in turn attract lots insects that provide food for small birds and mammals.

My first impression of the church building was that it emanates a kind of quirkiness, since although the walls and corners are more-or-less straight-edged, they never quite agree with one another. The tower, for instance, heads off in an upward direction slightly at odds with the nave, whilst the gravestones each lean at

disconcerting angles, giving the impression that you are walking rather unsteadily around a lifeboat at sea.

The church is said to be one of the smallest and simplest in the county, dating from the twelfth century when it was a chapel associated with Launceston Priory, founded by William Warelwast, Bishop of Exeter, in 1127 as a house of Augustinian



The south wall and porch

canons. Following the Dissolution of the monasteries the priory became a ruin (now on public view); but St Winaloe's survived over the centuries, with the original chancel and nave gaining a tower and a graveyard as later additions.

St Winaloe has lent his name to a number of churches not only in Cornwall (I had already visited another Small Pilgrim Place with the same dedication on the coast at Gunwalloe) but also in Devon, Wales and Brittany. He is said to have been born in Britain but became a monk in Brittany and returned as a missionary, founding possibly a wooden cell on this site some time around 500AD.

A narrow granite doorway leads into a small porch and then the nave, which according to the information provided is just twelve foot wide and forty-four feet long. At the west end is the tower and a very simple, low font. At the east end the altar is lit by a three-light square-headed window, a 16th century addition. Above is a simple and attractive barrel-vaulted roof with carved timber bosses. A curious flight of intimidatingly steep steps is set in the north wall, apparently leading originally to a rood loft, although it was difficult to imagine how the narrow chancel could accommodate it.



The font, nave and chancel

The church and its grounds all give the Impression of being well-loved and welcoming to visitors, and services are still held here (it's part of a benefice of four churches in the Truro Diocese). A bench beckons in the churchyard, overlooking the gaggle of old headstones, some listed. But just as I was thinking of resting there and breaking out my picnic rain started spattering, so the porch provided a dry spot for lunch and a fine view of the green rolling hills and fields across the valley.

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