

## Small Pilgrim Places Journal 25:

### Escomb Church, Bishop Auckland, Co Durham



Escomb Saxon church from the churchyard entrance

The village of Escomb stands on the southern bank of the River Wear in County Durham, just to the west of Bishop Auckland. The destination for my pilgrimage journey this time was the Saxon Church on the northern edge of the village, surrounded by a roughly circular stone wall, where the land slopes down over the flood plain to the shallow, meandering R Wear.

At the south porch I met hospitaller and Churchwarden Gill Beddow, who told me some of the fascinating history of the church and its surroundings. As we sat together near the chancel arch, decorated with painted medieval 'scrollwork', I noticed the height of the roof and the length of the whitewashed, airy nave. Gill explained that the original date of the building is unknown, although likely to be late 7th century. Some of the stones used in its construction bear Roman cross hatching; there were settlements and industrial works, including a lead mine, in this area in Roman times. I could clearly see many of these hatched stones as I walked around both the interior and the outside of the building.



The altar and East window

A stone slab bearing an incised Celtic style cross stands behind the altar below the plain east window; another window on the north wall incorporates a stone with a roughly-carved inscription, perhaps originally part of a Roman statue or mile post, placed on its side. The south porch houses remains of more Saxon stone crosses and other

historical artefacts, well displayed and interpreted, and there are postcards and guidebooks on display.



View of the interior

Walking around the churchyard to the north side, I was struck by the long expanse of wall with only two small windows high up and a small door below. This wall, Gill said, most nearly reflects the church's Anglo-Saxon origins, although now without the

original lime rendering except for a few fragments here and there still adhering to the stonework. A Saxon sundial, believed to be the oldest in the country, is still in its original position built into the south wall. It depicts a beast's head and a fishtailed serpent above a dial with three marks, giving the early monks' three principal times of worship. There is also a 17th century sundial on the wall of the south porch.

The position and surroundings of this Saxon church (this is how it is known; its original dedication has long been lost) reminded me very much of the Church of St Laurence in my home town, Bradford on Avon. They share a shallow fordable river close by, evidence of a Roman settlement and continuing human presence through the Anglo-Saxon and medieval period, the rise in population and huge changes from the time of the Industrial Revolution, the advent of a railway steaming nearby, and now a small but active community valuing its historic and spiritual history.

Like St Laurence, the Escomb Saxon church also lost its identity for a period, and then had it restored. A new church built to accommodate a burgeoning population left the Saxon church to fall into disrepair and it was derelict from 1867 until 1880 when it was restored after a clergyman interested in history and archaeology garnered enough support to plan repairs. Escomb church wasn't quite swallowed up by later buildings as St Laurence was, but the perimeter walls were breached until the 1960s by a shop and a terrace of houses.

Escomb church is much bigger and taller, but it shares with St Laurence and other ancient churches a similar sense of almost continuous prayer, worship, welcome and quietude through an enormous stretch of history spanning many centuries, a solid presence through periods of political and social upheavals, plagues, wars, feast and famine, to the present day.

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