

## Small Pilgrim Places Journal 26: St Michael and All Angels, Witton Gilbert, Co Durham

I felt rather disappointed that, on my 26th pilgrimage journey around the Small Pilgrim Places Network, COVID precautions would not allow me to walk around the worship space at St Michael and All Angels in Witton Gilbert, Co. Durham. But having reached my destination I soon realised that much of the energy, inspiration and vision for this place is happening outside, around the churchyard and surrounding land.



View through the lychgate to St Michael and All Angels

Arriving at the picturesque lychgate I noticed the sandstone walls, round-headed late Norman windows and double-arched gabled bellcote and stone cross finials on the steeply-pitched roof of Welsh slate. Originally a chapel of ease, a place of worship has existed here in some form since the late 12th Century, when a hospital for lepers stood nearby.

Several people were dotted around the grounds, all deep in discussion or busy with some task. Soon Penny the hospitaller joined me and took me to what now doubles as a vestry and kitchenette, alongside the Sanctuary. From here, through a serving hatch, I could glimpse a little of the interior of the church: the north arcade with its round pillars and octagonal capitols supporting three arches.

As well as a regular worshipping congregation, the church here also has a much wider connection to the local

community, thanks to its large churchyard and the adjacent densely-wooded valley known as The Dene, where a beck runs down towards the River Browney. Originally planted in 1828 with beech trees as a 'wilderness' for the rector's family, it is now a local nature reserve and amenity space for the village.

The church, churchyard and Witton Dene are the home of the Breathing Space Project, a charity that operates from the church, with dedicated office space there. Its aim is to use this idyllic rural location to explore and improve participants' health and well-being. I met project officer Gillie in the churchyard where she was preparing to make a video with colleague Pat, a forest school facilitator. They explained that the project offers courses, activities and events around the church and The Dene, with the aim of responding compassionately to the needs of local people.



Gillie and Pat preparing some craftwork

Gillie, for example, leads mindfulness walks around the church grounds and the Dene. There is a circle of seats made from tree-trunk sections in the churchyard where the Forest School groups can gather round a fire bowl. Pat and Gillie showed me samples of friendship bracelets they would be making with one of their groups.

Nearby were two men sawing small branches into wooden discs for the bracelets. Denis Daggett, of Friends of Witton Dene (whom Penny called the 'lynchpin' of the project) showed me their Men's Shed packed with all forms of useful equipment, including tools for teaching woodcraft in a workspace in the churchyard. The men told me that they work with people who are homeless, enabling them to engage in managing the woodland, for instance by clearing paths, planting trees and making bird nesting boxes. There are also educational activities for children, such as litter-picking sessions, and a pre-school group visit once a week, in addition to Forest School activities in holidays and at half term for 5-8, and 9-11 year olds, which teenage Forest Rangers help to run.



Denis Daggett, of Friends of Witton Dene, with colleague, preparing materials for the forthcoming Forest School



Exploring the Dene

Saying goodbye to Penny and the others I had met, I explored the paths that wander through the Dene above the beck. I could see plenty of evidence of the Men's Shed at work, from bird nesting boxes to timber steps and platforms. I came away full of admiration for the way this church community had envisioned and developed a purpose and ministry incorporating both an ancient building, a large churchyard and a wooded valley - not as a liability but as a life-affirming treasure for the whole local community.

Ali Green