

## Small Pilgrim Places 27: St Mary The Virgin Church, Cockfield



Cockfield Fell

I had the pleasure of walking over Cockfield Fell on a warm and sunny August morning, across grassy paths and old railway tracks. Besides meeting dogs and their owners, the other local inhabitants of this fell were equally friendly: free-range horses, hens and sheep, with many racing pigeons flying overhead or resting in their lofts that are dotted across the landscape.

The whole area forms one of the largest ancient monuments in the country, by virtue of its long industrial history dating back two millennia. The outlines of at least three Iron Age farmsteads can be clearly seen. Since then, the landscape has seen Roman activity (some coins have been found here), then a fortified farm, then mediaeval bell pits, open-cast mines and quarries to railways, tramways and coke ovens. I had first visited Cockfield in 1978; it is a village on the edge of Teesdale, to the south-west of Bishop Auckland. Now, forty years later, I could see that many of the steep humps and bumps left over from mining and quarrying stone and coal on the fell were now filled, landscaped and grassed.

My destination was Cockfield Church on the edge of the fell, where I met Churchwarden Ali and parishioner Margaret, who showed me round and told me about the history of the church and village. The building originated in the 12th century, and a lepers' window, incorporated into the south wall, is still visible as a blocked opening on the exterior wall. At this window I lepers could see the altar and receive the Sacrament without entering the church. Other ancient features include a piscina, an octagonal medieval font and a large incised stone high on an interior wall, bearing a representation of the coat of arms of Robert de Cockfield, 13th century Lord of the manor.

A curiosity Margaret pointed out in the churchyard is the gravestone of what she called "the oldest man in Britain". The early Victorian inscription has him dying in 1834 at the unheard-of age of 171. Apparently the mason's mistake resulted in a century being added to this man's lifespan.



Margaret and Ali stand beside the lepers' window



In the Victorian period an increase in population, due to all the industrial activity, led to several alterations, with more in the early 1900s, including extensions to the nave westwards and northwards. Unusually, at the end of the First World War, a rood screen was installed. We are more used to hearing about rood screens being dismantled, but this one was added as a memorial by the parents of young local man, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut Herbert Walker Summerson, killed in action near the end of hostilities; his kneeling figure is carved into one of the wooden panels (see left).



St Mary's Church, Cockfield

Ample information about the history of the church, the village and the fell - as well as SPPN material - is displayed at the back of the church, where a table and chairs invite a pause for reading.

Before leaving I crossed the road and stepped into the Glebe Garden next to the modern rectory. This is a small, gated garden with views across the fell, designed to recall the industrial history of the area. Paths resemble tramway tracks and troughs planted with garden vegetables mimic the tubs that carried the coal from the pit down to the railway siding for grading. It's a delightful, quiet space, a peaceful haven that testifies to a history of ordinary, hard-working lives over many centuries.

Ali Green



The Glebe Garden, Cockfield