

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 29:

St Andrew's, Aycliffe Village, Co Durham



St Andrew's from the south

Dave Blair has been attending St Andrew's Church in Aycliffe Village, Co Durham, since he was four years of age - sixty-six years ago. The day I met him he was busy strimming in the large churchyard before vacuuming in the nave. In between these jobs he paused to give me lots of information on the history of the place - more than I could keep up with as I jotted in my well-worn notebook, this being the 41st destination on my pilgrimages around the SPP network, and my fifth in this county.

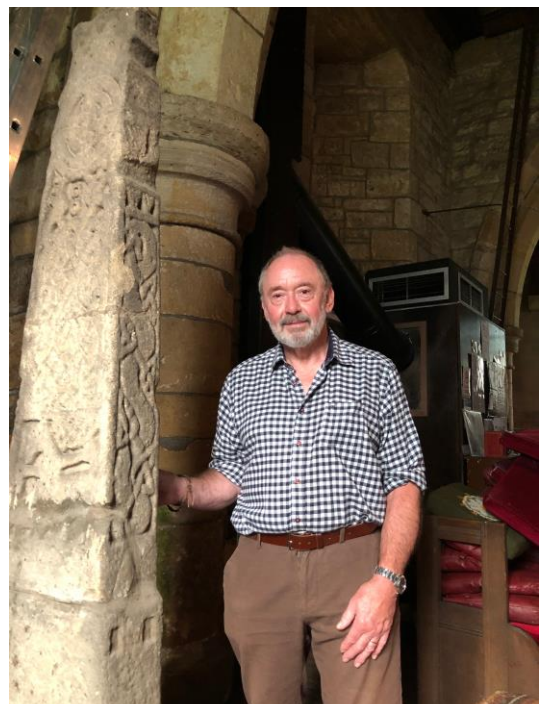
Aycliffe is a small village lying between the A1(M) to the east

and, just to the west, the main railway line running southwards from Bishop Auckland to Darlington and beyond. Dave pointed out that the first railway, the Stockton and Darlington line, started in this area when George Stevenson ran his steam-powered Locomotion 1 along the new track in 1825. To the west of the village an ordnance factory was built during the last war, where Dave's mother and grandmother worked serving meals to the munitions workforce, mostly women known as the Aycliffe Angels.

The site is now given over to industrial buildings, as is the land between the village and the larger Newton Aycliffe to the north. So the church and its grounds provide something of a peaceful retreat in the midst of busy road and rail routes, factories and offices.

There has been a church on this site for over 1200 years. It was originally dedicated to Northumbria-born St Acca, who accompanied St Wilfred to Rome in 692. When Wilfred died in 709, Acca succeeded him as Bishop of Hexham, and was buried at Hexham Abbey following his death in 742. A church dedicated to St Acca was subsequently built here, the dedication transferring to a new church built on the site in the tenth century.

Dave showed me a collection of ancient carved stones at the back of the nave. Two Anglo-Saxon cross shafts date from the 9th-10th century. One bears the intricate interlaced knotwork of a Celtic design; another showed a roughly-carved image of St Peter crucified upside down. A third bears images of a



Dave Blair with one of the Celtic carved stones

chalice and book, indicating it to be a priest's gravestone. Carved oak leaves on this stone show he served in this church, Aycliffe meaning the lea or place of oaks. Nearby is an effigy of a 14th century knight, the little dog at his feet indicating that he was a crusader.

The primitive font is undecorated, a simple square above and circular below. It is no later than 12th century and could be much earlier. On either side are slots that at one time held a cover which would have been kept locked to prevent baptismal water from being taken.

The Jacobean pews date from 1630 and survived an excellent Victorian refurbishment largely intact. It was during the works of 1882 that remains of an original Saxon structure were found. Further discoveries continue: Dave said that a few years ago in a corner of the churchyard wall he had noticed an octagonal stone, probably part of an ancient font. We went together to the wall, and hidden behind some flourishing nettles and brambles was the stone, clearly cut as an octagon, still in the wall.

I left the church by the priest's door, near which was a bench where I sat in the warm sunshine and ate a picnic lunch to the faint drone of the busy main road, while Dave finished his caretaking chores for the day.

Ali Green



Arches in the nave with Norman chevron design and pillars alternatively round and octagonal