

A Pilgrimage to Small Pilgrim Places - chapter three



South Zeal is tucked in the deep folds of the hills bordering Dartmoor. Its little church of St Mary on the main street sits next to a pocket-sized community garden, complete with benches, winding gravel path and well-manicured bushes.

Derelict after the Reformation, the building then served as a school, but is now once again a centre of prayer and worship, and part of the network of Small Pilgrim Places. This was my starting point for the third leg of my pilgrimage around such destinations in southern England. The interior is furnished with comfortable chairs, some circled around a table set with candle and Bible.

Windowsills hold items conducive to

reflection for those of any faith or none - a candle stand, an icon, pebbles for building mini-cairns. Light floods into the east window, where the altar is flanked by attractive modern hangings. Near the door is a box for food bank donations - a poignant connection with needs in the wider community. My overall impression was of a well-loved and valued quiet space. And many thanks, hospitaller David Youle, for the gift of book marks left by the visitors' book for the "Pilgrim from Bradford Avon"!



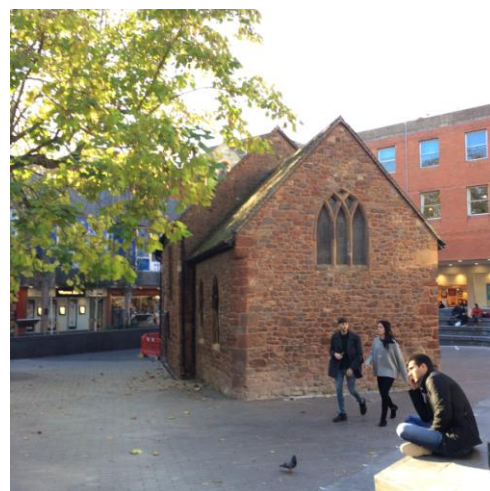
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From South Zeal I cycled eastwards along high-banked and tall-hedged lanes, dropping gradually towards Exeter, where I followed the river bank and headed to the city centre and the cathedral. Its impressive west front was bathed in autumn sunshine, and the spacious green was thronging with Saturday shoppers lunching outside cafes, listening to a busking guitarist and strolling across the grass. Inside the cathedral the nave resounded to snatches of "Messiah" as a choir rehearsed for an evening concert.

A short ride from the cathedral brought me to the bustling Guildhall shopping centre. Right in the middle is a small stone building - quite a contrast to the surrounding mass of modern concrete and glass. This is the church of St Pancras, probably the most ancient Christian site in Exeter and my fifth pilgrimage destination. Glass doors lead from the noisy mall to the quiet stillness within. The interior is simple, with unadorned stone walls, high gothic-arched windows and a few rows of modern chairs facing a cross on a plain table.

Regular services are held here in this peaceful haven amid the noisome busyness all around. By chance, as I was entering St Pancras I

bumped into hospitaller Joy Watson, who kindly gave me supper, a bed for the night and a packed lunch for my onward journey.



This was a cycle down the left bank of the Exe, following the railway that hugs the coastline and in many places borders acres of low marshy land now protected as bird reserves. The traffic-free route was busy with Sunday-morning cyclists, joggers, birdwatchers and walkers of every age, enjoying the balmy weather and the views across the estuary. On the northern outskirts of Exmouth I turned uphill to reach



Point in View church, set amid a hilltop field. Here I found a compact worship space, dominated by a preaching desk, and lit from above by windows set in a pointed, pyramidal roof. In a side room a small crowd was lingering after the morning service. I was immediately offered coffee and sat with it to eat my picnic in the little garden affording commanding views towards the coast.

I was joined by Rosemary Shirley, the hospitaller who has served as chaplain to the

church and the residents of its surrounding almshouses. She told me about Jane and Mary Parminter, who built the tiny church two hundred years ago, and who also created the resident community for needy women.



Leaving Exmouth I pedalled on to Otterton, and next morning followed the river Otter northwards, under leaden skies. By the time I reached Honiton station I was soaked to the skin and glad of the warmth and a hot drink on the homeward train.