

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 39:

St Andrew's Church Oddington, Oxfordshire



The preaching cross in St Andrew's churchyard

A few miles to the north of Oxford and to the west of the M40 is the village of Oddington, close to the River Ray on the edge of Otmoor. In the 13th century a Cistercian monastery was founded here, possibly close to an existing church. Although the monks moved to another location, the order retained the land attached to the monastery.

The monastic buildings and medieval village have now all disappeared save for the ancient fishponds, but the Church of St Andrew's has stood here for many hundreds of years. Its tower dates from the 13th century and the chancel and preaching cross from the 1300s. This large cross was the first feature mentioned to me by hospitaller Nigel Lambert when he showed me around the churchyard. He also pointed out the magnificent views across Otmoor, one of the most treasured natural habitats in the country. This remote wetland and grazing floodplain, valued by those medieval monks and farmers, is now home to 1,000 acres of nature reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest, supporting over sixty rare species, where no roads have crossed since Roman times.

Inside the church I could see the influence of the Oxford Movement and the incumbency of a leading Anglo-Catholic priest, Rev Drane-Scott, in the early 1900s. Nigel told me that much of the ornamentation had now disappeared, but some highly-decorative brass candlesticks, candelabra and a crucifix remain, along with statues and paintings in gilded frames. In the chancel Nigel lifted a carpet to show me a rather macabre brass depicting an early 16th century rector and Fellow of Merton College. Installed before his death, it shows him as a skeletal corpse on which fat worms are feeding, apparently demonstrating his spiritual humility (although he apparently had five such brasses of himself installed at various Oxford colleges, thus possibly putting his humility in question).



The altar furnished with brass candlesticks and crucifix. The piscina dates from the 14th century



Nigel lifts a carpet in the chancel to reveal the 16th century brass

A remarkable monument, of some surprise in this rural English location, was a painted wooden pieta on a plinth bearing carved Maori figures. Behind it is draped a piu-piu, the traditional bamboo ceremonial skirt. The monument was installed here in the 1920s by a Maori princess, Maggie Papkura, in memory of Maori troops killed in World War I. She had lived in the village during her marriage to an Oxford don, and is buried in a simply-marked grave near the church door.

The pieta and piu-piu



Nigel and I were joined by Rev Lisa Holmes, the current rector, who talked to me about the parish's plans for developing St Andrew's as a church of pilgrimage. This started in 2012 when Nigel walked the Camino Francais to Santiago de Compostela to raise funds for the restoration of the church. Since then he has walked four other camino routes to Santiago. Recently, following an initiative to encourage pilgrimage in the Oxford diocese, the church has joined with the local Deanery to develop pilgrimage routes between churches in the area. Although plans have been stalled during the pandemic, Lisa is hoping soon to get these going again, so that the many visitors to the village and to Otmoor will have a chance to pause and reflect on their spiritual as well as physical journeying.

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