

A Pilgrimage to Small Pilgrim Places - chapter 4

It was the coldest day of the winter so far when I set off walking southwards from Crewkerne station. Travelling there by train I'd passed fields and woods glistening white under a hard frost. This was the fourth leg of my travels around Small Pilgrim Places, and my destination was the Church of St Mary, Netherbury.

It was the beginning of January, and I looked out (as usual on the first walk of the year) for any flowering plants. I had spotted very few around my neighbourhood, so wasn't hopeful of a high count. But keeping an eye on sun-warmed hedgebanks and farm gateways over the round trip of 28km I clocked up over a dozen species in flower, including the trusty gorse with its bright yellow, coconut-scented blooms appearing almost all year round.



I followed old tracks, footpaths and holloways, some turned to shallow streams and thick mud after winter rains. Where the sun's rays reached, the frost melted under a cloudless, bright blue sky enhanced by a pale half-moon. I passed no other walkers, but had the company of many robins, and other small songbirds making the most of the brief warmth, and also of a handsome fox who trotted across my path.

Passing through Mosterton I popped into the church and found a relatively modern stained glass window depicting Christ above a working tractor, its engine parts picked out in loving detail – a fitting benediction for this farming community. I picked up a sandwich from a local shop and half an hour later ate a picnic on a high ridge where my footpath crossed the Monarch's Way trail before descending the valley into Beaminster. By the time I reached the folds of the hills around Netherbury the sun was dipping below the horizon and the air quickly cooled. Shady tracks here had remained covered all day in ice-filled ruts and puddles.

I found St Mary's Church just in time to explore its location and admire its fine stone exterior in the lingering light. The churchyard is evidently being managed carefully, and a sign explained that it is part of the Dorset Wildlife Trust Living Churchyard Project, aimed at preserving and enhancing the nature conservation value of such sites. Inside, I found some interesting features, including an ancient font and an elegant Elizabethan wood-panelled pulpit with a gleaming brass stair-rail. An area is set aside for quiet prayer, and here a variety of prayer aids are available, including stones in a bowl of water, a pathway of footprints leading to a prayer tree, a prie-dieu, candles and

a host of prayer requests hung around an old tombstone. An arc of chairs on a soft carpet invites visitors to rest and reflect.

Leaving the churchyard some time later, I came across a trio of handsome dogs and their owner, who introduced herself as Jackie Bush, the hospitaller. How good to make her acquaintance. She directed me to a local farm, my

night's B&B. Later that evening, eating a fireside supper of home-reared lamb, I could hear the church bells up the valley as the ringers practised.

Next morning I left soon after sunrise, keen to keep ahead of threatening rainclouds. I took a more easterly route, passing through South Perrott under gathering clouds, but thankfully reached Crewkerne station before the first raindrops fell.

Ali Green

