

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 42:

St. Mary and St Nicholas, Sandy Lane, Wiltshire



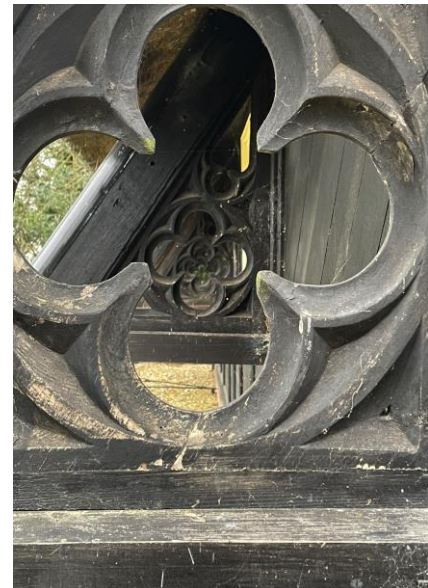
The Church of St. Mary and St. Nicholas viewed from the lane

On a grey, chilly January morning I set off to visit one of the newest additions to the Small Pilgrim Places Network. The Church of St Mary the Virgin and St Nicholas is one of three churches in the same benefice that have joined the network; all of them are strung along a stretch of the A342 between Chippenham and Calne that runs southwards towards Devizes. St Mary and St Nicholas is the most northerly of the three, tucked away just off the main road at Sandy Lane. This small village is close to the route of a Roman road still discernible in places as an earth bund running east to west across the elevated greensand plateau between the chalk strata of Beacon Hill and the low-lying clay soil of Melksham Plain.

Having now visited over forty SPPs, I've found that every one of them has its own special character, something that makes it uniquely attractive – and in this case it is immediately obvious, for it's built entirely of timber under a thatched roof. It is said to be the only existing thatched, wooden structure in England that was built as a place of worship. The almost-black exterior walls are constructed on the old principle of an A frame, so that on the north and south walls beams extend like the hypotenuse of a triangle down to the ground. On the north side these are infilled with carved timber quatrefoils. The building is set in a small area of trees, gravel and grass, with a short driveway and small parking area. I noticed snowdrops in bloom along the embankment above the lane, and daffodil leaves promising a good show of flowers in the near future.

I entered the church through the thatched south porch to find that just about everything in the interior, from the font to the organ, the rood screen, the candlesticks and the tracery on the east window, are all of a warm, rich timber that gives the church that particular woody aroma and a feel of welcome and comfort. The church was originally built, at a total cost of £220 including fittings, in the early 1890s to serve as a mission church on the Bowood Estate. A note near the door told me that in this wooden building even the insulation material is timber-based: sawdust was packed in the wall cavities to keep the interior and the congregation warm.

By the door is a modern welcome desk holding useful information as well as service books (an 8am Book of Common Prayer Sunday morning service is held here twice a month). On the wall is a poignant Roll of



Carved timber quatrefoils on the exterior wall



Interior showing the pipe organ, font and rood screen

From here I set off with cockapoo companion Alfred the Small to cover the first part of the pilgrimage trail that, as shown on the leaflets in each location, runs to the SPPs at Bromham and then Rowde. I followed the lane leading southwards to cross the A3102 just where it converges with the old London-to-Bath Roman road. I passed several attractive houses of ironstone under thatched roofs, beyond which are a few farmsteads amid large, flat arable fields, now in winter mostly stubble populated by occasional drifts of rooks and gulls.

Passing a farm gate I heard a telltale call and looked up to see a lone Red Kite gliding effortlessly above the bare field. I had time to get my binoculars focussed and caught it making some arial tumbles before plummeting earthwards, no doubt with its prey in view. A couple of these majestic raptors kept me company through most of my walk, wheeling and calling overhead. Alfie and I passed through Chittoe Common and a more wooded landscape, then emerged into into pasture land. The folded combs of the chalk scarp of Beacon Hill, illuminated by late winter sunshine, came into view. To the east, the slender spire of St Nicholas Church at Bromham served as an excellent landmark beckoning us to our destination.

The route took us down a quite steep cobbled path, perhaps an old route for beasts of burden wending between scattered settlements, then on to the outskirts of Bromham and the second port of call; more about this church, and the third one at Rowde, in my next journal entry.

Honour of those local men who fell in service to king and country – not carved in wood, but done in calligraphy decorated rather like a medieval illuminated manuscript, with delicate and rather beautifully painted flowers and emblems in rich hues and gilt. Opposite the south door is a pipe organ, originally housed in a nearby church and installed here in the 1980s.



Roll of Honour

Ali Green