

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 43:

St. Nicholas, Bromham and St Matthew, Rowde, Wiltshire



The exterior of St Nicholas from the churchyard

Having visited the unique timber-and-thatch church of St. Mary and St Nicholas at Sandy Lane and followed the pilgrim route to Bromham (Journal entry 42), I returned a few days later to Bromham to visit St Nicholas Church and then continue the pilgrim route to Rowde and St Matthew's Church, the third Small Pilgrim Place in this benefice in the Salisbury Diocese.

With its tall, slender octagonal spire and highly decorated exterior walls, the Grade 1 listed Church of St Nicholas makes an imposing landmark in the centre of Bromham, standing above the Avon Valley not far from Melksham. The present building dates from the 13th century, with some features from an older church on the same site

that it replaced. A south transept and spire were later added to the original linear structure of nave and chancel. Before approaching the churchyard gate I walked through a disused churchyard across the road that is now managed as a nature conservation area, making a pleasant short walk among mature trees with an understory of headstones amidst trailing ivy and long grass – no doubt a haven for local wildlife.

By contrast, the church is surrounded by a neat, mown churchyard, bounded by soft red-brick walls, dotted with evergreen trees and full of gravestones erected over several centuries. One of them marks the grave of close friend of Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the Irish poet Thomas Moore, who lived nearby. Pausing to admire the exterior of the church, I was struck by the size of the gothic windows. With their elegant tracery and slim mullions, I had the impression that the greater part of the south wall consists of glass, held in place by a minimum of finely decorated stonework. Stepping inside, I first noticed the lightness of the interior, as late-morning sunshine flooded through those large windows into the nave and south aisle, and bounced off the largely plain, creamy walls of the nave and chancel and the pale timber of the pulpit and reading desk, both 19th century additions.



A corner of the churchyard

Stepping through an oak screen on the south side, I entered a 15th century chantry chapel showing a mixture of decorated and perpendicular styles, lit by a large five-light window with Victorian stained glass in the east wall. A paddle board gives plenty of information about this chapel, described as "the most important feature of the church" which has inspired many historians to write of "its splendour and the richness of its decoration."



The tomb of Sir Roger Tocotes in the Bayntun chapel

Dominating the floor of the chapel is a table tomb bearing an alabaster effigy of Sir Roger Tocotes, who fought at the Battle of Bosworth Field (1485) with Henry Tudor. He is shown in full armour, complete with helmet above his head and a dog at his feet. The effigy is now covered in graffiti, acquired over several hundred years from the time of the iconoclastic attentions of Cromwellian troops onwards. The chapel also houses the tomb of his wife, Elizabeth, and of Sir Edward Bayntun, who as lord of the manor has lent his name to the chapel. He is depicted on a brass with his two wives and two of his many children. Above, the stunning 15th century panelled and painted oak ceiling is, according to the paddle board, the largest unrestored example of its kind in the country.



15th century painted oak ceiling

From the church I left the village and, following the pilgrimage route on the leaflet, walked past strips of market gardens, now filled with crops of kale and turnip. Some little squeals led me to a field of arcs housing young piglets and their mothers. I crossed a flat plain with few field boundaries, giving long views across to chalk hills on the eastern and southern horizons. To the west the land drops away toward the Melksham Plain and River Avon. The landscape soon gave way to small woods and fenced horse paddocks, then damp lowland greenways running between drainage ditches as I approached Rowde.

The village, with its scattering of red brick, timber-framed, Cotswold stone and thatched houses, lies between Devizes and Melksham, just a short walk to the north of the Kennet and Avon

Canal and Caen Hill flight, the series of 16 locks built around the turn of the 19th century to allow the canal to link Bristol and London. Restored after years of dereliction, it's now a well-used waterway for residential and pleasure barges.



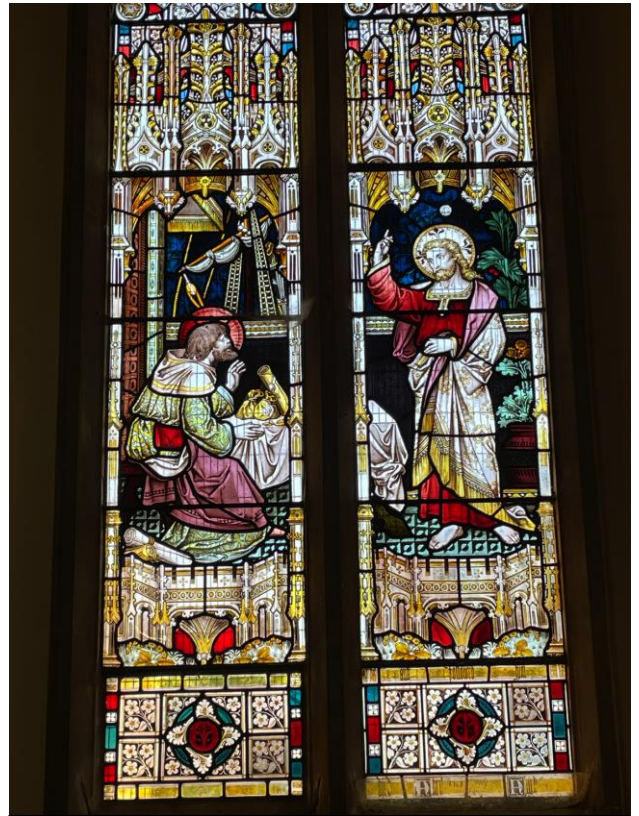
Central to the village, set in a large grassy churchyard crossed by several intersecting paths, is St Matthew's church, which dates back to medieval times, although a previous Saxon church was recorded on the site in the Domesday Book (1086). Some stonework in the chancel is among its oldest features. A tower was added around

St Matthew's Church, Rowde

1400. Much rebuilding took place in the 1820s and again in the Victorian era, when the font, north porch and organ were installed at various times. More recent additions include a kitchen, a children's area, new boilers and a toilet (always a welcome facility for the passing pilgrim as well as regulars).



The interior of St Matthew's showing the nave and chancel



Stained glass window showing the calling of Matthew

for, welcoming space, inviting a quiet, reflective pause for thought and prayer. And the linking of the three churches in the same benefice by a pilgrimage route, set out in a leaflet available in each church, offers an interesting and varied walk between these contrasting places of worship and their natural surroundings.

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