

Small Pilgrim Places Journal – 5

Amesbury to Stratford sub Castle

On an early February morning I set out on a day's walk, the fifth leg of my pilgrimage around Small Pilgrim Places. This time I had a companion, a merle collie called Frankie who often comes with me on long hikes.

We started out at Amesbury, crossing a footbridge over the meandering River Avon, where a swan was gracefully sailing past a heron, stock-still on an islet, waiting to seize a hapless fish. The footpath took us southwards through fields where sheep were munching contentedly on a fodder crop of mangel-wurzels. We climbed to high ground above the left bank of the river, where the hilltops were shrouded with a thick mist, then on through the little villages of Great Durnford and Netton. This is flint and thatch country, where even some walls have thatched tops. On the high plain above the Woodbridge Valley we paused to rest at a well-placed memorial bench, and noticed that behind us, a swarm of tiny piglets had lined up behind an electric wire to watch us with unabashed curiosity.



Frankie encounters some inquisitive piglets

We kept on southwards, past woods and banks where carpets of snowdrops were in full flower, and fat catkins hung overhead. As we approached the northern outskirts of Salisbury, the massive ancient earthworks of Old Sarum hove into view, dotted with walkers climbing its steep banks. Skirting round to the west, I glimpsed the spire of the distant cathedral looming in the thinning mist. The faint sound of bells drifted across the valley, coming, I suspected, from our destination in Stratford-sub-castle. Sure enough, as we reached the church gate, a wedding party was assembling for photographs at the south door, accompanied by a celebratory peal of bells.



St Lawrence Church, Stratford-sub-Castle

Frankie and I discreetly crept around to the graveyard to eat our picnic as the first rays of weak sunshine penetrated the mist. It was a chance to pause and appreciate this green and quiet space, which includes forty-seven World War One Commonwealth war graves and the graves of two servicemen from World War Two.

The Church of St Lawrence shares the same Roman patron - the martyr St Lawrence - as a church and Small Pilgrim Place in my own town. Indeed, there seemed to be several similarities:

both have a history dating from at least Saxon times, with a distinct possibility of Roman activity and very early Christian worship. Both are close to the site of a Roman villa and an Iron Age hill fort – although Old Sarum is very much in existence whilst the site in Bradford on Avon is largely lost.

St Lawrence Church Stratford-sub-castle is today a village parish church of flint and ashlar, dating from the thirteenth century, with a western tower and organ loft, a small nave and a chancel where a small enclosed area is set aside for visiting pilgrims. Here the floor is carpeted, there are attractive pew cushions on show and a basket holds various leaflets with prayers and information for the visitor, as well as a visitors' book inviting a signature and comment. From here I was able to see the altar and 15th century east window.

As I was looking around the interior the priest who had conducted the wedding introduced herself. This was Tessa Mann, who explained the steps the congregation were making to welcome the many visitors who pass by on their way to Old Sarum, Salisbury and Stonehenge just along the road – including having the church doors open during the day and plans for toilets and other facilities nearby.



The altar and east window of St Lawrence from the pilgrims' area

Saying farewell to Tessa, Frankie and I turned northwards along the riverside lane heading up the Woodford Valley, eventually climbing back up through woods onto high ground. We rejoined our outward path on the hilltop, where the inquisitive piglets again raced down their field to keep an eye on us. This time, on our homeward walk across the hills, the mist had burnt away, the sun shone, and in the balmy afternoon warmth the landscape of fields, woods and river valley came into clear view for the remainder of our six-hour, 22 kilometre journey.

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