

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 50:

The Church of St. Mary the virgin, Snead, Powys

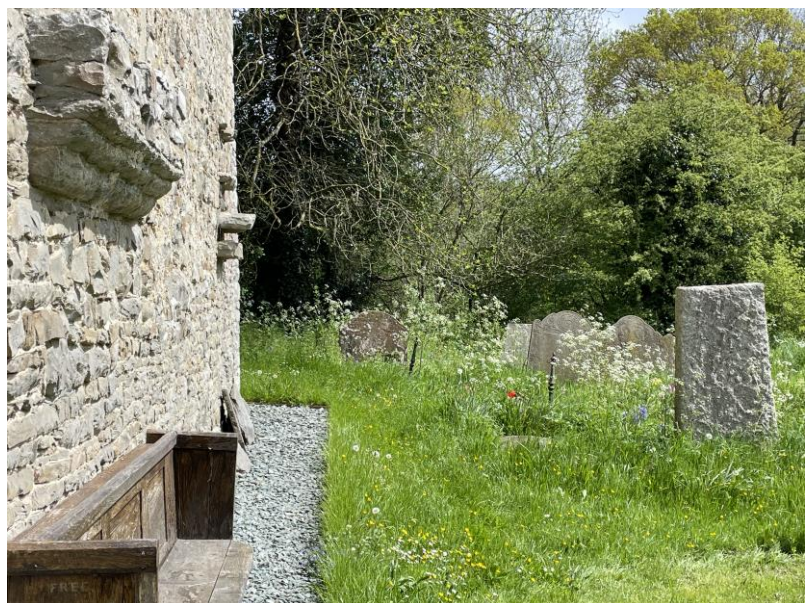
Some years ago I walked the length of Offa's Dyke, and stayed overnight at the small town of Montgomery, nearly half-way on my journey northwards from Chepstow to Prestatyn on the coast. So the landscape in this very rural region of rolling, steep-sided hills dotted with sheep and lush valleys where cattle graze, was a familiar one. My destination this time (the fiftieth in my pilgrimages around the Network) was a few miles to the east of Offa's Dyke, near the River Camlad that divides England and Wales in the small settlement of Snead (pronounced to rhyme with bed). A ha-ha with a pasture on the Welsh side runs down to the R. Camlad, whilst on the upper side is the churchyard of St Mary the Virgin.

I arrived there, having walked down a little lane off the A489, in early May 2023, shortly after the Coronation of King Charles III. The church, I knew, was tucked away somewhere along a footpath and not visible from the lane. But having got thus far it was easy to find: a jolly, smiling monk on a big board was pointing the way along a narrow hedge-lined track. As I got to the churchyard gate, it seemed apt that the feature I noticed first was a plaque attached to a well-grown oak, announcing that the tree had been planted almost exactly 70 years previously to commemorate the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953.



This being the no-mow month of May, the churchyard was happily left uncut other than for a few pathways among a buttercup-strewn sward and patches of Queen Anne's Lace and Lady's Smock. A notice board at the back of the church informed me that the churchyard is part of the Caring For God's Acre project; it gives details about the eco-friendly mowing regime as well as listing some of the wildlife to be found here, among them bats, toads and polecats. Here also is information about the Small Pilgrim Places Network, including a bilingual sign welcoming visitors to this Small Pilgrim Place - or, since I was standing a few yards into the Welsh side of the border, "Croeso i'r Pererindod Bychan yma".

The church building dates from the 12th century and was founded by Augustinian Canons; there is thought to have been an ancient priory and convent somewhere nearby, as well as a tithe barn and fish-pools. Some parts of the original structure, including the east and south walls, remain. Evidence has been found of nearby dwellings dating from the time the first church was built. On the outer north wall are two ancient carved faces above and to the side of the arched window. On the outer south wall are some odd projections sticking out from the stonework - perhaps suggesting a staircase, a preaching platform or part of a transept here at one time.





Just inside the nave by the south door is a font possibly belonging to the original church and now standing on a modern pedestal. A central aisle in the nave leads past rows of pews to the pulpit and a rood screen beyond which, in the chancel, the timber vaulted roof is decorated with a simple repeating leaf pattern. I imagine these features were all part of the restoration of the building in 1870, work which also included the addition of a bell tower.

The church gained Grade II listed status in 1999. The whole building and its grounds give the impression of a well-tended, well-loved place of prayer and quiet reflection. As I opened the south door, I was met with a lush, green view of meadow, ha-ha, and trees bursting into full leaf alongside the Camlad. A welcoming bench beside the south wall provided an ideal picnic spot where I raised an imaginary glass to celebrate a big 5-0 of pilgrimages to fascinating, historic and spirit-filled destinations.

