

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 52:

All Saints Church, Burton Dasset, Warwickshire

Between Banbury and Royal Leamington Spa, just to the east of the M40, lies an area of unspoilt, rolling countryside known as the Burton Dasset Hills. For over fifty years it has been managed as a country park where visitors can walk their dogs, enjoy picnics, hunt for birds, butterflies and flowers and take in the breathtaking views towards the Cotswolds and Malverns to the west, Birmingham to the north, Coventry to the north-east and Oxford to the south. Walking across some of the 100 acre site I discovered the remains of a large windmill, ironstone ridges and deep combs, a small wood with a nature trail, and little rocky outcrops covered in purple thyme, yellow Lady's Bedstraw and other miniature wildflowers thriving on the poor soil.

One of the main built features in the area - and the object of my visit here - was All Saints Church. It's often called the "Cathedral in the hills", standing as it does on elevated ground not far from the summit of the rugged landscape. I expected it to be visible from quite a distance, as I knew it to be a large and impressive building, but in fact I had to walk to within a hundred yards or so of the church gate before it revealed itself. It has a short, squat tower and is set into quite steep ground, screened on one side by the high ridge, and on other aspects by tall, mature ashes, limes and chestnut trees bordering the graveyard. So it is something of a hidden gem in the rural landscape.



The church entrance is tucked away behind flanks of mature trees.



All Saints is sited on sloping ground

I entered the churchyard and walked around the exterior of the building, all of honey-coloured stone, mottled with a white lichen, under a shallow-pitched roof. The gradient from east to west end is quite remarkable, and became even more evident as I entered the nave through the south porch. From the large west door a flight of steps leads up to the nave, and between the chancel arch and the sanctuary another dozen steps accommodate the considerable rise in ground level. At the time of the Domesday Book there was a small church on the site, but the 13th century brought prosperity to the area and parts of the church now standing, including the north and south doorways, date from this era.

Standing in the nave looking eastward I was struck by the beautiful simplicity and plainness of the chancel, other than some attractive floral arrangements left from a recent wedding. The rising steps, lime-washed walls and large, plain gothic windows offer a stark beauty to this sacred space. On the wall above the chancel arch are fragments from a medieval wall painting showing parts of the Passion. A delicately detailed figure of the virgin Mary is still visible. There are male figures, possibly kings and remains of sections of text, including the Lord's Prayer and Creed, around other walls. The 13th century columns on the north aisle show a fascinating array of roughly-carved figures; I could make out a dog chasing a hare, as well as a squirrel, lion and sheep (see picture on page 3). High on the north nave wall some stone corbels roughly carved as human heads support the timber roof. Below, a table tomb serves as a repository for paper slips bearing intercessory prayers, behind which is a 13th century aumbry complete with its timber door.



The sloping site is reflected in the three flights of steps from the west door to the sanctuary



Above the chancel arch are remains of a larger wall painting depicting the Passion

The south aisle is now fitted out with attractive tables and chairs and a kitchen area, where refreshments are served after worship. There are well-kept notice boards in the nave, where I read something the chequered history of the church and neighbourhood. Edgehill, where the first battle of the Civil war was fought, stands nearby, and changes in worship, liturgy and ministers must have been unsettling for the local congregation. By the last decade of the 19th century the building was very run-down until a renovation project began and continued until the outbreak of World War 2. The entire building, following more recent restoration, now has an aura of welcome and peace. Traffic noise from the M40 followed me up the hillside to the door of the church, but as soon as I entered quietness reigned. This is evidently a well-loved and cared-for place with a beguiling simplicity and a treasure of interesting features and historical details to ponder.



Columns in the north aisle are decorated with a range of animals and plants