

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 53: St Mary's Church Bitton, South Gloucestershire

When I heard that a church near Bristol was looking to join the Small Pilgrim Places Network, I envisioned a location surrounded by an urban sprawl of crowded streets, closely-packed houses and industrial buildings, accompanied by the constant background noise of traffic and human busyness. What I came across as I approached this church was something rather different.

Bitton lies to the east of the Greater Bristol area, just inside the southern border of South Gloucestershire. With a population just under 10,000, it straddles the A431 running between the cities of Bath and Bristol, but the village Bitton itself has quite a quiet, rural feel, encircled as it is by gently rolling agricultural land and plenty of footpaths for access to nearby countryside.

The Church of St Mary is surrounded by an extensive churchyard containing a large number of table tombs. It is also populated by many mature trees, rendering it a very pleasant green space to stroll around. Many of them were planted by Canon Henry N Ellacombe, vicar here from 1850 to 1916. A keen botanist and gardener, well remembered by naturalists today, he grew a great variety of plants at Bitton and exchanged plants and seeds with Kew and other botanical gardens across Europe.



A notice on the lovely lychgate, erected in Ellacombe's memory at one of the churchyard entrances, explains that St Mary's is an Eco-church, and parts of the grounds are managed for nature conservation, with wildlife-friendly plants such as brambles and nettles left to grow and provide shelter and nourishment for wildlife.

It was in the churchyard that I met the current incumbent, the Revd Jeremy Andrews. Jeremy showed me around the church interior, pointing out features of interest. Helpfully, there are a number of QR code stations around the building, so the visitor can use these to find out about the history and heritage of the church when no personal guide is available! Jeremy told me that there are plans for developing the interior to improve its use for worship and for community use. Part of the project is to fit the box pews with castors so that they can be moved easily when necessary.

There has been a place of worship on this site since about 500 AD, and the original church may have been built on the site of a Roman temple. Features in the present structure, a Grade 1 listed building, are thought to date back to Saxon times. There are Norman archways and doorways, whilst the Lady Chapel, built in 1299 and dedicated to St Catherine, contains a canopied sedilia, where priest, deacon and subdeacon would sit during the Mass.

The round chancel arch appears at first glance to be Norman but is actually Victorian, as is the hammer-beam roof with angels on gilded stone bosses. Above the arch are the remains of a Saxon



rood screen. Many interior changes and additions were made by the father of Ellacombe the botanist – H.T. Ellacombe served as curate then vicar here from 1817 to 1850. He designed the pulpit and also a system of ropes, the “Ellacombe chimes”, which allowed one person to ring the bells from the porch. In the fine 15th century chancel is a reredos installed by H.N. Ellacombe and dedicated to his sister Elizabeth who died in 1910.

So in all, the Saxon, Norman, Medieval and Victorian eras are each represented today. And one modern feature here is the Millennium patchwork, whose making was a project that involved the whole village, and which is now displayed in the Chantry Chapel.

Lots of interesting walks can be had to or from St Mary's, many taking in the industrial history of the local area, ranging from an old brass mill, turnpikes, paper mill and, not least, Bitton station, where steam trains run along the Avon Valley heritage railway.



