

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 56: Wiggonholt Church near Pulborough, West Sussex

Wiggonholt is a small settlement on the northern edge of the South Downs, to the north-east of Amberley and the village of North Stoke, where seven years previously I had made a pilgrimage across the South Downs Way to the twelfth century church of St Mary the Virgin, now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust.

Since then I have visited another fifty or so Small Pilgrim Places. Another of these was my current destination.

I set out on foot from Pulborough, heading for the RSPB nature reserve at Pulborough Brooks. Following a footpath leading off the main road, I walked down to the wetlands covering a large, wide floodplain next to the River Arun. This being an exceptionally wet spring, the ground was saturated and I was glad of my walking pole as I squelched through ankle-deep mud. There were plenty of swans, geese and ducks on the lakes, and overhead in the newly-green hawthorn bushes a nightingale sang out.

Climbing out of the valley onto higher ground, I passed a few horse paddocks and, on the brow of the hill, found Wiggonholt Church at the end of a narrow lane leading past a farm to the A283. A footpath opposite the church leads to the visitor centre and café of the RSPB reserve.

This church, like St Mary's North Stoke, is said to date from the 12th century. Built of stone under a roof of tiles and stone slabs with lime plaster on the internal walls, it has a shingled bell-turret giving the impression of a rather squat, sturdy sacred space rising up amid surrounding tall trees and lush grass.



Passing through a small lychgate, I came into the churchyard where a notice amongst the thriving primrose-covered grass explained that the sward is left unmown until summer each year so as to allow early wildflowers to seed.



A relatively modern porch gives entry to a 13th century south doorway and the nave. A striking feature at the west end is a great tie beam, thought to be from the 12th century. Below is the churchwarden's pew from where the two bells, suspended in the turret, can be rung.

There is little ornamentation in the nave or chancel, the main focus of attention being the Victorian stained glass windows showing, at the east end, the figure of Christ walking on the water and, at the west end, Christ feeding the five thousand and raising Lazarus from the dead.

I was taken by the kneelers displayed amongst the pews. A notice explained that there is an ongoing project for congregation members to donate a kneeler in memory of a loved one, with the added intention of making the little church more comfortable for worshippers. Many of the new kneelers, I could see, showed native wildlife - adder, bat, fox, kingfisher - which seemed so fitting for this little church nestling in a beautiful rural landscape.

