

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 60: East and West Worlington, Devon

The small village of East Worlington, with a dozen or so dwellings, lies just to the north of the Little Dart river, about equidistant between Crediton in the south and South Molton in the north. Getting to the village by car is pretty straightforward, as it is between the A377 to the west and the A361 to the east. Finding St Mary's Church, however, is rather more challenging, as it's almost completely hidden from the nearest lane by screens of trees, farm buildings and the local primary school.

I found my way in beside the school by going through a gate next to the parish hall. Stepping into the churchyard, overhung by neighbouring trees and bushes, I could hear the children busy in their classrooms nearby. The grass sward was at its height, and at the far end a gap in the trees led to a patch of rough grass on which a labyrinth had been inscribed. On the day of my visit, St Mary's hospitaller, John, had brought some sawdust to spread along the lines of the labyrinth, where the grass had just been cut. John explained that the labyrinth was a relatively recent addition to the church grounds.



Passing through the south porch, I noticed the Norman inner doorway with its carved stone round-headed arch and delightful bug-eyed label stop. This is one of a few features surviving from Norman



times, and it is thought that a Saxon place of worship previously stood on the site. Over the centuries St Mary's fell into disrepair until it was rebuilt in the mid-Victorian era. The floor tiling in the chancel and the cast iron lattice windows in the nave and tower are from this period, as is the font and wood-panelled altar table standing below a two-light gothic style window of plain glass. On the chancel's north wall is a small single-light window, another feature that has survived from the Norman church. Next to it is a large wall monument, dating from 1704 and bearing a coat of arms and, at the bottom, a rather crudely rendered human skull, a reminder that we are all mortal.

John directed me to another St Mary's, this one about half a mile's journey downhill and then up again to the next small village, West Worlington. For hundreds of years East and West Worlington were separate parishes, but in 1885 they were united for civic purposes, with the livings later united also. In 1967 the two St Mary's became part of Little Dart Team Ministry of twelve churches. John told me to look out for the entrance to West Worlington Church through an archway between two houses.

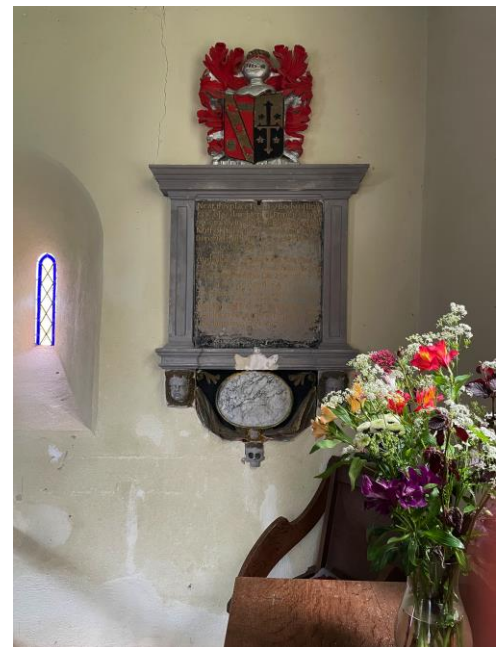


I was glad of his directions, as this church would also have been easy to miss. The round-arched, gated entrance is indeed delightful, piercing a row of thatched cottages and giving onto the grassy slopes of a graveyard graced with a magnificent oak tree. The most striking feature of the church exterior is the spire of oak shingles over a stone tower dating back to the 13th century. The spire is rather twisted as over time the medieval green oak, pinned with wooden dowels, shrank and closed the timber joints. John mentioned a lightning strike within living memory when the top of the spire and many of the shingles were blown off. He recalled how the shingles were saved and stacked in a nearby farmyard until villagers raised the funds to make full repairs.

Inside the church I found a nave with pews whose decorated bench ends are thought to date from the 16th century.

The simple

chancel has a Victorian patterned tile floor and a leaded 3-light east window allowing plenty of light onto the mostly plain walls, save for memorials to two members of the Stucley family. John told me that local landowner Sir Thomas, Colonel in the king's cavalry, had married the daughter of a Royalist, whilst his brother Lewis was a non-conformist minister and chaplain to Cromwell. Their family home, a fortified manor house, was attacked by both sides in the Civil War, and eventually all but destroyed. John mentioned that evidence of fighting in this neighbourhood is still turning up - a detectorist had recently found a musket ball nearby. The memorial, complete with a rather more elaborately carved skull than the one in East Worlington, records Thomas' death in 1663. He is buried in a vault below.



In the south aisle is a timber parclose screen from about 1500, with linenfold carving below and flowers and fruit in the upper spandrels. Above a barrel roof, complete with carved bosses, runs the length of the aisle. Among the stained glass are depictions of the Virgin Mary standing alone and, in another, the Annunciation, both with the symbolic lily.

Returning to the south porch I noticed the first swallows and house martens darting above the sloping churchyard, and the view to the green fields beyond. It was a scene no doubt enjoyed by generations of churchgoers that probably hasn't changed greatly over several centuries.

