

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 62: The Church of St. Mary, Sticklepath, near Okehampton

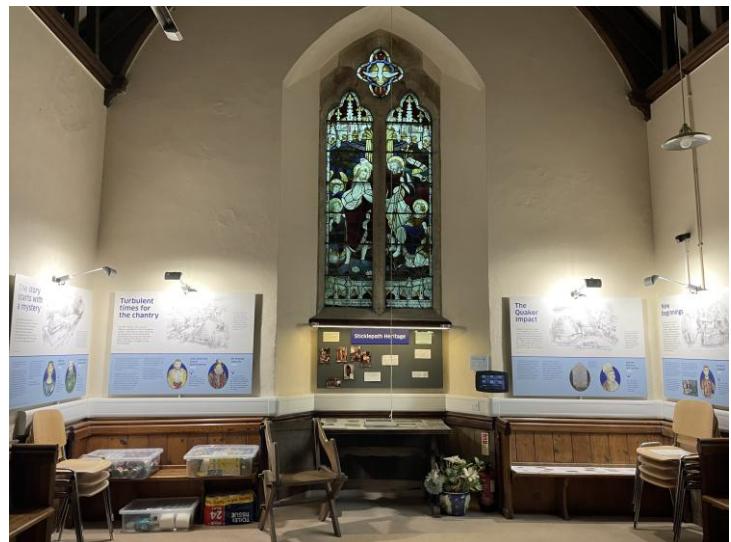


Some years ago I cycled through Sticklepath, a small village of less than 500 residents just off the A30 on the northern edge of Dartmoor, and a few miles to the east of Okehampton. I took the opportunity on that October day to drop in to St Mary's Church, towards the western end of the village and set in a grassy space back from the street, for many centuries the main route to the west from Exeter. I learned from

hospitaller Carol that the church grounds are not consecrated, and is known as St Mary's garden. The village does, however, have a Quaker burial ground; there was a strong early Quaker presence in this area, and John Wesley, who had Quaker friends in the village, preached here on several of his mission journeys round the south-west.

A few years later I was in Sticklepath again, staying overnight in a local inn, and revisited St Mary's. I found a number of changes had been made both inside the building and in the churchyard. My second visit was in the spring, when primroses and other wildflowers were blooming on each side of the path leading from the main road. I noticed a picnic table and a couple of rough-hewn benches set invitingly on the grass. Behind the church a small area had been dug over to create a bed planted with lavenders, currant bushes and daffodils. Carol informed me that, following my last visit, there is now a flourishing soft fruit bed and various fruit trees which have been donated.

The simple church is built of stone under a tiled roof. Inside, at the west end, I found a fine set of interpretation boards explaining the heritage of the church and the village, and a display of photos showing recent alterations, with a view to the church being available for wider community use. A place of worship on this site dates back at least to the 12th century, and the church is thought to be possibly the oldest chantry in the diocese. The chapel may have been destroyed during the reign of Henry VIII and the dissolution of monasteries, and was later replaced by a chapel of thatch and cob. A fire in the 19th century destroyed this building, and the present structure is the result of rebuilding in the Victorian period.





The interior of St Mary's is made up of a nave with a central aisle between rows of pews, leading to the font and pulpit. A gothic stone arch separates the nave from the chancel with its patterned tile floor and apsidal east end. This is lit by three single lancet windows of stained glass depicting the crucified Christ and St Mary Magdalene, flanked on each side by the Virgin Mary and St John. A large two-light stained glass window on the west wall shows the Baptism of Christ, with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove in a quatrefoil above.

Recent additions to the interior, Carol tells me, are some beautifully crafted pew cushions/runners, using local wool. "This task", Carol said, "was undertaken voluntarily by one of our villagers, who is an expert spinner. The added comfort to the rather stern Victorian pews is wonderful". She also told me about commitment of the community:

"Some 14 years ago, St Mary's came close to being sold, but the village rallied. Following the closure of the nearby Methodist Chapel within the past decade, St Mary's now remains the only dedicated place of worship in Sticklepath.

A Friends of St Mary's Group are active in organising events - folk, jazz, talks, reflective gatherings to name but some. We also house the Sticklepath Pantry, which offers provisions to anyone in the locality: 'give what you can, take what you need'. We join with our friends from the Community Church each month for Village Praise, so St Mary's resounds with singing and music.

We are currently fundraising to replace our aged heating system, installed in the 1960's, and checked for safety regularly. It is past a well deserved retirement!"

Another development was the formation of the The Archangel's Way, a 35-mile pilgrimage route launched in July 2021 which crosses the impressive Dartmoor landscape and takes in 12 historic churches, beginning from St Michael's. This and St Michael de Rupe, Brent Tor, Christ Church, North Brentor St Mary, South Zeal and St Mary, Throwleigh, all on the Small Pilgrim Places Network, are among the churches included on the Way.

All these recent additions have certainly added to the value of St Mary's as a destination of historical and community interest, as well as offering a quiet, welcoming space for reflection and prayer.

