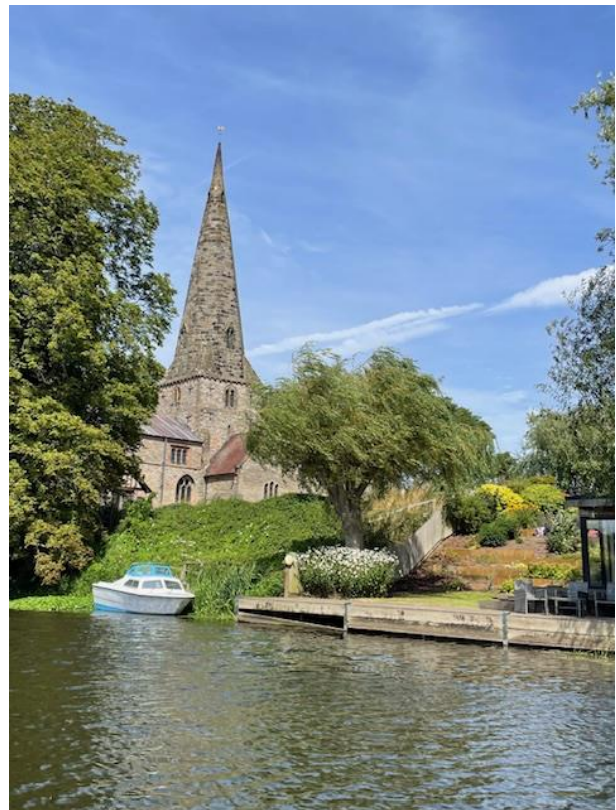


Small Pilgrim Places Journal 63: Church of St James, Normanton on Soar, Nottinghamshire

I began a short pilgrimage walk to St James at a light industrial complex on the outskirts of Loughborough. Hardly a very promising beginning, but within a couple of hundred metres I was entering a playing field which led to a string of fields, at the time all golden stubble from crops of wheat, now baking in the heat of a late summer morning. To my right was a lake - Dishley Pools - then the River Soar, where my cockerpoo companion, Alfie, enjoyed a refreshing dip. We followed the river, lined with willows, Himalayan Balsam and Hairy Willowherb, as it wound through flat farmland, passing only the occasional dog walker and cyclist, and following a couple of boats on the lazily flowing River Soar.

As the tall spire of the Grade I listed church came into view, we stopped to wait at the river and had the unique experience of being ferried to our destination on the opposite bank. Here we were greeted by hospitaller Sue who, with her husband Brian who had operated the chain ferry, accompanied us on a short footpath to the church.



St James is surrounded by a large churchyard fringed with some tall, mature broadleaved trees. The sward is close-cut in parts whilst some sections are managed for nature conservation and support a variety of wildflowers. A church has been recorded on this site from at least the 12th century. The present building, much of it constructed of locally-quarried blue lias limestone, has features of Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular Gothic styles covering 300 years. The tall sandstone broach spire, a striking landmark, is known to have been added to an older square tower in the 13th century.

Entering through the south porch, decorated in readiness for an imminent wedding, I found a neatly-arranged notice board announcing the church's membership of the SPPN, welcoming visitors and inviting them to help themselves to water and biscuits, light a candle, spend some quiet time and enjoy the music. Once in the nave I was greeted by recorded Taizé music, a fitting accompaniment for stillness and reflection.

At the west end, in front of a 14th century stone font, chairs are ranged around an attractive display



of flowers and information, and plenty of soft toys and books are on hand. The nave walls are of bare stone, lit by large plain windows on ground level and a clerestory above. A gothic arch leads to the chancel where, rather than choir stalls, single chairs are arranged on each side. Sue explained that this is where a short meditative evening service is regularly held. On the north wall are two alabaster memorials. One (pictured left), from the 17th century, shows a kneeling woman in a fine gown with a large ruff at her neck. This is Frances Walkeden who, the inscription says, was married twice, bore a dozen children and died in 1606.

The chancel is well lit by a large east window as well as smaller windows on the north and south walls, all fitted with plain glass. I could see only two windows of stained glass in the nave, one showing St Catherine, with hints of the wheel on which she was martyred, and the other of the Apostle Paul holding his writings and a sword, the instrument of his death.

When Sue took me to the vestry, formerly a south transept, I spotted more stained glass. Two lovely small depictions of angels playing musical instruments are incorporated into a window here.

These came from a neighbouring church which donated them to St James' in 1986. In this room Sue had laid out a feast of bread and cheese, with cups of tea made in a small kitchenette cleverly fitted behind the organ housing. We sat at a table with the door to the churchyard left wide open, light flooding in as we enjoyed our lunch.

Two small stained glass pieces in the vestry window

