

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 65:

Chapel of St Mary Magdalen, Bath

Arriving at Bath Spa railway station, I had a brisk ten-minute walk to get to my destination, St Mary Magdalen's chapel. Crossing the pedestrian Ha'penny Bridge over the River Avon I headed up the steep slopes of the Holloway, a remnant of the Roman Fosseway, and later the pilgrimage route from Bath to Glastonbury. Nearing the top of the narrow road I found on the left a stone wall incorporating a horse trough built to provide refreshment for pack animals hauling coal and other supplies to the city. Above the trough I found the Magdalen Gardens, with its fine view of the Abbey in the city below and, across the road, the outer walls of the Chapel of St Mary Magdalen.



The interior of the chapel is reached from the road through a stone porch dating from the late 15th century. A separate door in the stone wall further uphill allows entrance to a small, enclosed garden, where seats offer a resting place among the foliage. In about 1100AD the house became a leper hospital with its own chapel and small community of Benedictine monks. It and an adjoining house originally belonged to Walter Hussey, who became Sheriff of Wiltshire and moved away.



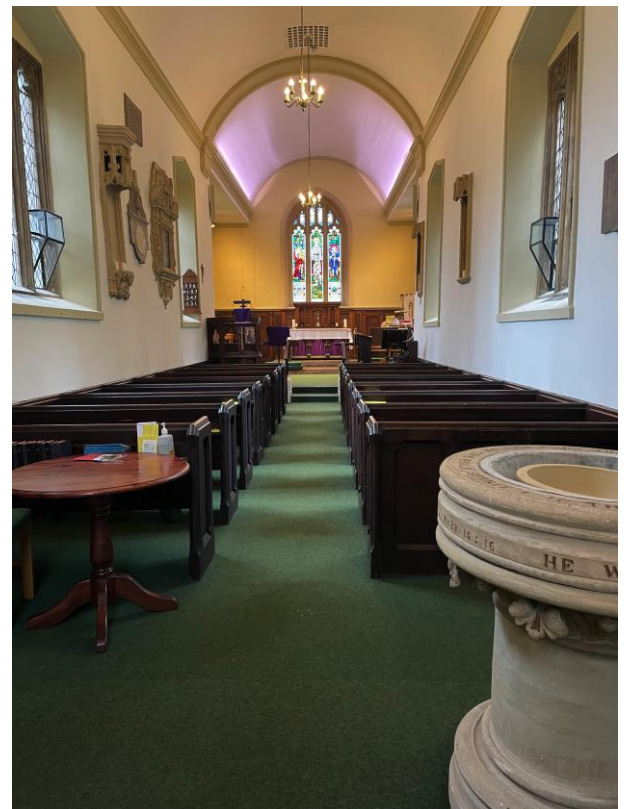
In a small, gravelled area by the chapel wall stands a group of sculpted figures by Martin Elphick. Titled "The Casting Out", the piece reminds the visitor of the history of this small, ancient chapel, and shows the different reactions of citizens to leprosy sufferers.



In subsequent years the chapel survived mixed fortunes, including a major restoration in 1495. In the late 16th century, cases of leprosy had diminished, and from the mid-17th century it was involved in the care of 'lunatics'. In the late 18th century, a much smaller, separate hospital was built just below the burial ground where it still stands. In the 1760s and 1820s further works were made to the chapel to cater for increasing numbers of local parishioners. Many of these were artisans and tradespeople living in closely-packed, terraced houses which were demolished for redevelopment in the 1960s.

Bath suffered much damage during the Blitz of World War 2. The chapel lost its chancel roof and stained glass. Repairs were made in 1947 and a new east window was commissioned showing Bath's three medieval hospitals. Designed by Michael Farrar Bell, who incorporated surviving fragments and images from the original window, it features three figures including St Mary Magdalen. I was interested to see that here she wears a richly coloured blue robe rather than the more usual red, symbolizing a repentant sinner (convention having assumed that she had worked as a prostitute). The Magdalen here carries a gold vessel, which probably contained the expensive oil that she used to wash Christ's feet, another reference to healing and relief. Under the figure of Mary is a little medallion of the exterior of the chapel.

Other than the east window the chapel is simply furnished and decorated, with timber pews below plain walls carrying a number of memorials and four medieval stone niches that would originally have held statues of saints. The



overall impression of the chapel interior is one of prayerful serenity and calm, in contrast to the noise and bustle of the busy streets and shops nearby.

A corridor near the font leads to a vestry and kitchen. A door here opens onto a churchyard and garden hidden from the road by the walls of the chapel and the adjoining house. The view from this elevated spot is wonderful: the city centre, dominated by the Abbey is spread out below. Above and beyond it is Bath's green, wooded skyline, the perfect backdrop to a World Heritage City.