

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 66: St Hilda's Church Lucker, Northumberland

At the time of writing, St Hilda's Church is the only Small Pilgrim Places Network location in Northumberland. It stands on raised ground in the small village of Lucker, bounded by farmland and by the Waren Burn which wends its way northwards to issue into the North Sea just to the south of Holy Island.

Taking its name from the founding abbess of the renowned monastery at Whitby, the present Grade II-listed Church of St Hilda is the sixth known to have existed on this site, the first dating back at least to Saxon times. There were then Norman and Early English incarnations before a Georgian church in a precarious state of dilapidation was demolished and new foundations laid for the building, completed in 1874, that exists today.



Passing through the church gates, I was drawn first to the glebe field beyond the churchyard. I was visiting in high summer and the grass sward here was waist high, no doubt a haven for a range of invertebrates, birds and small mammals. I learnt from Tim Binder (hospitaller) and Brenda Frier (Churchwarden), who met me at the church, that there are plans for the glebe field to become a memorial meadow with a community orchard. Nearby, a corner of the churchyard has become a delightful woodland area, where a path winds between old tombstones under a canopy of mature lime, horse-chestnut and sycamore trees, some supporting bird and bat boxes.



Brenda beside the pulpit

The church itself is of red sandstone under a slate roof, and is a Norman style construction, with round-headed windows and porch entrance. Brenda told me that the small refreshment area at the west end is soon to be updated with a servery and that the current organ, which obscures the west window, will be replaced with a smaller electric one.

In front of the chancel arch, carved wooden panels on the pulpit, as well as on the choir stalls, were made from an architect's design in 1904 by local craftsmen. This group, known as the Lucker Carvers, was taught by Florence Hedley,

daughter of Tyneside artist Robert Hedley whose workshop made the furnishings in the sanctuary.

The apsidal east end is illuminated by three single round-headed lancets that together form the crucifixion scene. Below, a carved timber reredos above the altar portrays the Annunciation and Nativity bordered by round-headed Romanesque arches. A lancet window on the south side of the chancel depicts St Hilda and another northern saint, Aidan of Lindisfarne. St Hilda is shown crowned, with a bible in her left hand and crozier in her right.



Tim and Brenda both spoke of the importance of a warm welcome at the church for all-comers, and of the opportunity the church offers as a place of calm and quietness. They find that many passers-by pause to visit the church, not least because of its proximity to important pilgrimage routes and destinations such as Bamburgh, St Cuthbert's Way, the Northumberland Coast Path, St Oswald's Way and Lindisfarne.

It was quite evident, in talking with them, how dedicated they are to this little church and its grounds, a well-tended place of prayer and worship with a heart for the natural world and a ministry for all those who visit.