

## Small Pilgrim Places Journal 67: St Laurence Church, Hallgarth, Pittington, Co Durham

I travelled to County Durham in 2020 to visit several Small Pilgrim Places, but was unable to access St Laurence Pittington at the time because of COVID restrictions. So I was glad to have the chance to see it on my way back to Wiltshire from a trip to Scotland.

After driving down the busy A1(M) and through a very built-up area to the north-east of Durham, the satnav took be abruptly to a quiet, leafy road with glimpses of fields behind mature trees. Imposing ironwork double gates led into a large churchyard and the west-end tower of the church, a site of worship since about 1100AD and possibly even earlier. The tower is covered in an array of buttresses, evidence of work over the centuries to keep the stone structure upright and stable.

Hospitaller Sylvia Hope took me through the south porch into the west end of the nave, the oldest part of the building. She showed me the wall above the nave arches, where on each side two small windows remain from what was part of the 12th century building. Around two of the windows, on their inner splays, are painted depictions from the life of St Cuthbert, whose body lies in Durham cathedral; 19th century copies of these images now hang on the west wall.



*Sylvia at the south porch of St Laurence Church*



At the far west end, at the base of the tower, surrounded by a collection of carved stone fragments, stands a simple Norman font. It was used in the 1800s, Sylvia told me, as a farm cattle trough before being re-found and reinstated in the church. It now stands under the west window of stained glass showing St Laurence with the instrument of his martyrdom, a gridiron.

Other single lancet stained glass windows include one of St Cuthbert holding the head of King Oswald of Northumbria. The head is said to have been placed in St. Cuthbert's coffin for safekeeping when the monks fled Viking raids in the 9th century, and was rediscovered there in 1104. Each stained glass is given an explanatory texts on the window sills.

The remarkable north arcade is the result of the addition of a north aisle in about 1180, when decorated Romanesque pillars and arches were installed. I was amazed at how well-preserved the carved stone is, no doubt because the arcade has never been exposed,

through damage or neglect, to the elements. The bold zigzag ornament over the arches (first used in Durham Cathedral) are still sharp and well-defined. A marble slab near the pulpit is the grave cover of one of the masons, Christian.

The eastern end of the church was extensively restored and extended in early Victorian times. The wood-panelled chancel, lit by three lancet windows on the east wall, is entered through a delicately ornate timber rood screen under a high gothic style arch.

In front of the north wall are several small tables and chairs, where Sylvia served tea in fine china cups from a small servery. I noticed a number of well-kept information boards, including one containing SPPN literature. There were also little glossy leaflets, attractively designed, with a guided walk or cycle from Durham Cathedral to St Laurence Church, a distance of 5 1/2 miles. It was produced in partnership the Durham County Council.

A recent addition is a YouTube video produced by a local visitor and keen photographer giving a tour around the church.

I came away very thankful that I had eventually managed to make acquaintance with this very attractive church, rich both in history as well as in the warm welcome and inviting space it offers for all who visit.

