

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 68: Cranshaws Church, near Duns, Scotland

Cranshaws is a village near Duns in the Scottish Borders area to the north of Coldstream. It is surrounded by farmlands on the wide valley floor and conifer plantations and moorland on the upper slopes. Not far from the village hall, between the lane and the small river known as Whiteadder Water, stands the parish church, surrounded by fields and with a backdrop of larch and other conifers.

I visited Cranshaws Church on a warm August afternoon when the cereal crops were being harvested, bare fields being ploughed, and flocks of gulls were following the machines to feast on a free buffet of worms and insects.



Built of sandstone under slate tiles, the walls and roof have accumulated an extensive covering of pale lichens since the church was built, thanks to a local benefactor, in 1898. It replaced an earlier church that had fallen into disrepair, having itself replaced a medieval building. There is evidence that the first church on this site might have been built as early as the 7th century.

The present church is in the Romanesque style, with a round-headed south porch entrance carrying a chevron design, round-headed windows and chancel arch and an apsidal east end.

Entering the nave I met Bill Landale, who made me a cup of tea using water from a large flask (no running water here). Any visitor to the church is invited to help themselves to refreshments. There is talk of removing a few pews to allow the west end to become a more spacious area for gatherings and social events.



The nave, under a dark barrel-vaulted ceiling, is simply decorated with white walls pierced by several single lancet windows. Just in front of the chancel arch is a dark timber pulpit to the south side and, opposite, a stone-carved coat of arms, said to be a reminder at each service to pray for the monarch. In the chancel a single lancet east window behind a plain timber altar depicts the Crucifixion.

Bill showed me some interesting features outside, including a stone sundial on the wall, under which crouches a grinning figure of "Old Man Time". On the north wall, under a rose window, is an extraordinary curved timber door that opens to reveal steep steps leading up to a small gallery where, Bill explained, the Lord of the manor could sit with a clear view of the chancel and the congregation.

Opposite the north wall is a strip of land that has been planted with a variety of bushes and sapling trees. At one end of "The Wee Forest" is what Bill called a gathering table with benches each side. During my visit a young family was enjoying a picnic here.



It is regularly used by the Forest Church group that meets here each month. Bill plans to leave spaces in the growing copse where visitors can pause for meditation and reflection. At the upper end is a newly installed pond which in time will become a valuable resource for local wildlife and for Forest Church activities.

The overall impression of church and surrounding land is of welcome quietness amid an expansive rural landscape of tilled land, trees and natural heather-topped moors.