

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 69: The Little Chapel, Rodborough, South Gloucestershire

The valleys alongside the course of the River Frome in South Gloucestershire form a landscape of high commons, patches of woodland, quarries, small settlements and old industrial sites clinging to vertiginous slopes or perched on the few bits of level ground.

Much of the higher land is in National Trust hands, including Rodborough Common, between Nailsworth and Stroud. Just below the common, next to a narrow, winding lane, stands Rodborough Tabernacle URC, with its imposing Georgian facade overlooking the valley below. On the opposite side of the lane is a much smaller building that is known as the Little Chapel. Built in about 1835, its original purpose was as a coach house and stable for the Church. In the early 20th century the building accommodated large meetings for many young people, and a local businessman financed the conversion of the building into a chapel.



Stained glass showing the Nativity

The work was designed and carried out by exponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the results are still there, unchanged, today. I noticed the evidence in the pews, the green glass hanging light shades, the leaded windows and oak panelling. An aisle between the pews leads to a simply-furnished, raised Oriel bay lit by three windows, each carrying stained glass made in the 1930's. The central window depicts the Nativity, with a very sweet-faced infant Jesus being hugged in his manger by Mary. The window on the left shows Christ the "Light of the World", after Holman Hunt's painting. The delightful detail of a bat flying above the door suggests that this window was based on the painter's third and final version, finished not long before his death in 1910, and which, after a world tour, found a permanent home in St Paul's Cathedral.



The Arts and Crafts interior

The third window shows Jesus the Good Shepherd, appropriately in memory of a long-serving and well-loved pastor. At the back of the church, a large blue enamelled cross, decorated with vine leaves and grapes, hangs

on the bare stone wall. A helpful printed leaflet told me, among many fascinating details, that this cross is of Italian origin.

Stepping back outside, I could see that the simplicity and elegance of the chapel interior is evident here too, with its solid timber doors supported by typically Arts-and-Crafts large iron hinges, its arched windows and doorways and fine limestone blockwork. The chapel's understorey accommodates a scout meeting room, whilst opposite is a large churchyard, long unmanaged and not open due to safety concerns, but currently receiving the benefit of some trimming and tidying.

To one side of the chapel a short corridor leads from the chapel to a meeting room. After hospitaller Kim had greeted me and shown me round, she took me into this room, furnished with armchairs, for a welcome cup of tea. I saw that the large window carried the sign of the Tri Sigma Guild whose growing membership had in part prompted the building conversion.

Kim, whose main job is as Church Development Leader for the Rodborough URC, told me about the work she was involved in, both in the main church nearby and at the Little Chapel, where she regularly holds services and other events. She explained, "People who don't go to the main church often feel more at home here". I could understand the attraction of this special little place with its atmosphere of quiet serenity and intimacy. With Kim's passionate vision for the two buildings and their mission, including an inclusive welcome for allcomers, I have no doubt that both will thrive.



Kim outside the Little Chapel



The Little Chapel stands on a steep-sided valley