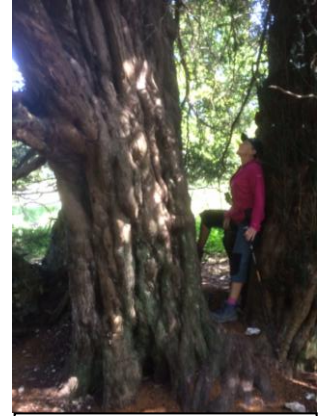


## Small Pilgrim Places Journal 7: St Mary the Virgin, North Stoke, West Sussex

On this section of my travels round Small Pilgrim Places I planned to walk to my destination along part of the South Downs Way – but I first made a detour to Kingly Vale nature reserve, north-west of Chichester. At Kingly Vale is a rare climax yew wood, possibly dating from the end of the last Ice Age, which clothes a steep-sided combe. Some of the trees here could be nearly 1,000 years old. Their long branches bend to the ground, sending up new offspring to grow out in ever-expanding circles. In odd glades where sunlight can penetrate, Early Purple Orchids bloomed. Emerging from the gloom of the wood I spotted a sleek brown hare approach a lone crow in a field, and after what seemed like a little conversation between them, the hare unhurriedly loped away.



Yews at Kingly Vale



On the South Downs Way

I picked up the South Downs route just north of Hooksway, passing on my way Devil's Jumps, where several circular barrows attest to the life and culture of Bronze Age tribes some 3,000 years ago. Did they, I wondered, leave flowers and other offerings in that yew grove, as I noticed people were still doing there today? I climbed on up to a high ridge where, under a sunny sky, fields of green wheat and sheep pasture interspersed with woods and conifer plantations. I left the path in the late afternoon to enter Cocking, my overnight stop. By now the village church was locked, but wandering in the churchyard I

notice a dozen or so mysterious, regal figures holding court in the gardens next door. These were the work of renowned sculptor Philip Jackson, whose home and studios stand next to the church.

Next morning I regained the South Downs path, heading up through a beech hanger edged with bluebells and lingering cowslips. My route crossed the Monarch's Way, which marched away to the south-west on what had been a dead straight Roman road heading to Chichester. The chalk and flint path was dust-dry after a long, rainless spring. In the still air, woods echoed with birdsong and from above the featureless arable fields came the sweet call of skylarks. As I crested a high ridge the views opened up to a vast panorama of sinuous ridges, steep valleys and glistening, faraway lakes and reservoirs. A couple of sharp showers dampened the ground and brought out fresh scents from grasses and flowers along hedgerows and verges.



Philip Jackson sculptures, Cocking



The interior of St Mary the Virgin Church, North Stoke

Descending to the wide, flat plain of the river Arun, I reached Houghton bridge where a lane led to the little village of North Stoke and the church of St Mary the Virgin. A church has stood here since the twelfth century, and the present building is now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. Amongst the serene, light-bathed bareness of the building I found some fascinating architectural details: a wide-eyed ram's head corbel in the south transept; some small fragments of ancient stained glass, depicting the Virgin Mary; and three sedilia (niches for clergy) and a piscina in the chancel. After a time enjoying the tranquility (enhanced by the strains of clucking hens taking a dustbath on the lane outside) I

was joined by Phil, a musician, who told me he saw this place as his second home, and loved its quietness and excellent acoustic. He sometimes makes music videos here. As I left I could hear him playing the low whistle (like a metal recorder), an instrument he had designed. It made an enchanting farewell as I left the churchyard for the nearby railway station and my homeward journey.