

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 72: The Church of St James, Weethley, near Alcester

In Warwickshire, between Worcester to the west and Stratford-upon-Avon to the east, is Weethley, a tiny settlement near the small town of Alcester. It is made up of a few red-brick houses and a church surrounded by a landscape of farmland, woods and a network of small rivers. Cockerpoo Alfie and I walked towards Weethley along one of a number of footpaths crossing vast fields still quite soggy from a long, rainy winter. But the early spring sun shone hazily in an almost cloudless sky, whilst a couple of buzzards drifted lazily over the fields and rooks called as they gathered in still-bare treetops.



At the end of a small lane taking me past a cluster of dwellings, I came to the Church of St James, standing beyond a large pond edged by primroses, summer snowflake and cowslips. In the churchyard I was greeted by Kelvin, a member of the congregation here, who explained that, although the site has a very long history as a place of worship, the current church was built as a chapel of ease for farm workers who would otherwise have had to walk to Alcester for Sunday worship.

It is a compact building of Lias ashlar under a tiled roof in the gothic style, with an attractive timber porch and an apsidal east end. Surrounding it is a graveyard where families have been buried over several generations. Standing on the south side is the long-dead, skeletal tree trunk of a large yew - perhaps an indication of the presence of a much earlier sacred building on the site. Beyond the churchyard to the south are far-reaching views across a gently-rolling rural landscape towards the northern edge of the Cotswolds.

The interior of the church is simply furnished and decorated, a dominant feature being the exposed timber trusses supporting the roof at the apsidal east end. Below, three single lancet windows depict the Christ, Alpha and Omega, flanked by St James and St John.

In one part of the nave are a table and chairs. Kelvin explained that once a month, this is where the Breathing Space participants meet for refreshments and conversation before moving to the chancel for a period of mindfulness and meditation. I heard that this group is open to those of any faith and none. Another resource for meditation is a leaflet offering a guided walk around the churchyard with reflections on Psalm 23. The footpaths





around the church are also used for prayer walks through each season of the year.

During my visit I noticed several Lent-based installations, including a “Penny for your thoughts” corner where visitors are invited to write thoughts and prayers on a card, post them into a penny-shaped container and take away a small ‘coin” to keep as a reminder. By the churchyard gate was a basket of pebbles. Visitors were invited to pick one up and place it as a prayer offering at the foot of a simple cross by the porch.

I noticed, among the literature kept by the door, some leaflets about a local food bank and about Eco-church; I wasn’t surprised to find that the church has a bronze Eco-church award acknowledging its care for the natural environment, for its community and local engagement, its teaching and its lifestyle. There is an abundance

here of resources for reflection and inspiration to satisfy any visiting pilgrim.

