

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 8: The Well Centre For Spirituality, Westbury-on-Trym

Ali Green writes:

I began the eighth leg of my pilgrimage by celebrating the Eucharist at St Laurence Church in Bradford on Avon – unique in boasting two Small Pilgrim Places. This one is known as the Saxon Church and is thought to have been built around the year 1000 AD as a mausoleum to house the bones of Edward, King and Martyr. Its purpose was to house his bones, should shelter be needed in the wake of Viking incursions into Dorset and Wiltshire, though the need probably never arose.

The building was later turned to other uses: the nave became a school and the chancel a cottage, along with fireplaces and windows. In Victorian times its original purpose was rediscovered and restored and the building reconsecrated, invested in Trustees as an Ancient Monument, and opened to the public.

St Laurence receives many visitors and pilgrims, standing only a short walk away from the centre of town. Services are held there regularly, especially in the summer months, when clergy and parishioners decamp from Holy Trinity Church nearby for services of Evening Prayer and Compline. It makes an ideal space for taking time out to pray, or simply be still, and many visitors stop for a while here. There are pews to rest on, and some interesting architectural details, including two carved stone angels hovering high above the altar – not in their original position, but nevertheless the guardians of this sacred space.

After the service my bike and I headed westwards, following the Kennet and Avon Canal to Bath. Here the canal ends at Widcombe locks, and I rode across town, alongside the River Avon, passing a stretch that I had always known as an industrial site with gasometers, stone masons and printing works and a string of pubs to serve thirty workers. But it is now a huge building project, an unfamiliar townscape of looming stone and glass residential blocks intended to accommodate students at Bath's two universities.

On the western edge of the city I joined the Bath-Bristol railway track, a 13-mile off-road route that was once part of the Midland Railway network. Part of it used to take wagons of coal from outer Bristol to the harbour, using a combination of horses and gravity. In the 1960s, judged uneconomic, it was closed. But with the efforts of Sustrans and many volunteers it re-opened in 1979, the first of this kind of network for cyclists and walkers. It was certainly being well used and enjoyed on the day I cycled it. For three miles the path runs parallel with the volunteer-run Avon Valley Railway, and runs past the railway station platform. I was obliged to stop here for a train before crossing the track, and had the pleasure of watching "Karel", a newly-refurbished Polish loco, build up a head of steam and quickly gather speed as it chugged out of the station and headed westwards along the three-mile track. As it passed, the air was infused with the smell coal smoke, engine grease and all the scents and sounds I associate with train travel as a child in the 1950s.

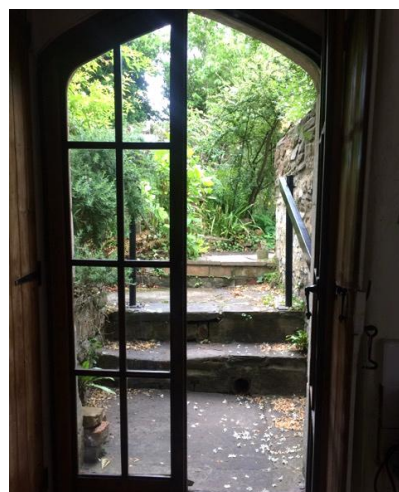


TKh 4015 'Karel' PKP TKh
Class 0-6-0T, Avon Valley Railway.

I left the cycle track as it wound through Fishponds, and crossed Eastville Park, relieved that there are so many green spaces and quiet roads in Bristol, even during rush-hour. At Bishopston I pulled

into my lodgings for the night – the home of my sister, who that very day had become a first-time granny (and I a great-aunt), an event we celebrated with take-away fish and chips.

From there it was only a short ride the following morning to Westbury-on-Trym and my destination, the Well Centre for Spirituality at Elsie Briggs House. This is a fifteenth-century house, bequeathed to the Diocese of Bristol by Dr Elsie Briggs in 1988, and now looked after by its resident warden, Frances Henley Lock. It was Frances who opened the ancient oak door and, after giving me a cup of tea, showed me around the house and its delightful garden (part of the Quiet Garden Movement). There is a prayer room overlooking the garden, and featuring a large granite fireplace. Upstairs is a meeting room where the night before a group had met to watch and discuss a film. There is also accommodation for retreatants to stay, with the offer of spiritual accompaniment from Frances. The programme of events this year includes meetings for meditation, multi-faith prayer, workshops and talks.



The Well Centre gardens

Just next to Elsie Briggs House stands Holy Trinity Church, whose members sometimes make use of the house for quiet days and other meetings. The church dates back to Saxon times and has undergone many periods of rebuilding and refurbishment, remaining a distinctive landmark in the area. I spent a while admiring its interior, particularly its unusual polygonal apse and some beautiful stained glass windows, before saying goodbye to Frances and starting my 30 mile return journey, stopping for lunch at Bitton railway station – although sadly this time there was no steam train to admire.



Elsie Briggs House stands next to Holy Trinity Church in Westbury-on-Trym



Another view of the Well Centre garden at Elsie Briggs House.