

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 82: St Peter and St Blaise, Somersal Herbert, Derbyshire

The small settlement of Somersal Herbert lies in the folds of the Derbyshire Dales, a few miles to the east of Uttoxeter in neighbouring Staffordshire. The Grade II listed church here, St Peter and St Blaise, was the next destination for my pilgrimage around the Small Pilgrim Places Network.

I began my walk under a magnificent, very tall oak tree at whose base was a stone bearing the inscription “Vernon Oak”. The narrow lane took me past a farm and down a steep valley, where a footpath, barely visible among the rampant foliage of late summer, took me across a bridge and upward through a couple of sheep pastures. Reaching another lane, I passed some rather grand wrought iron gates in a high brick wall, behind which I could see a timber-framed Tudor hall. A few yards further on I reached an attractive lychgate, made of timber under a tiled roof. A noticeboard nearby showed that this church is one of seven in the South Dales Benefice.

A path through the churchyard took me past an ancient standing cross, possibly of Saxon origin. Another

feature to note was a simple labyrinth of grass cut to form a spiral. Reaching the south porch, built of red brick with large stone quoins, I found a notice explaining that parts of the churchyard,



surrounded by trees and dotted with bushes, are managed for nature conservation, including a large “bug mansion” of layered pallets. Another notice told me that the site had held a church since medieval times, and that the current building had been rebuilt in 1836. The south porch dates from the time of Queen Anne, while the tower, complete with battlements, louvred bell openings and clock faces, was added in 1912.

Stepping into the nave, I found a striking lead-lined gritstone Norman font, decorated with interlocking Romanesque pillars and arches below a pattern of knots round the rim. On the wall nearby is a simple wooden cross holding prayer requests. I also found well-displayed literature about the SPPN next to the visitors’ book.

The view from the font towards the chancel, past rows of bench pews on a plain red-tile floor, is one of uncluttered serenity; bare stone walls of a warm sandy hue under a timber roof are lit by mostly plain windows. Of the stained glass, the west window, made in 1896 by Kempe, shows Jesus blessing the children. Another, in the chancel, shows St Peter with the Virgin



Mary and Child. The other patron saint, St Blaise, figures in a modern icon nearby. Aptly, since Blaise is the patron saint of those suffering from throat diseases, the church has a strong ministry of healing, retreats and quiet, meditative services.

A low bench of weathered timber near the south porch provided a handy resting place with a view across the churchyard and a chance to soak up the sunshine on a fine summer's morning in this beautiful, unspoilt corner of rural England.



