

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 9: St Paul West Wycombe to St Laurence West Challow

About half way between Oxford and London, West Wycombe was the starting point for the ninth leg of my pilgrimage around Small Pilgrim Places. The village is dominated by the elegant Palladian home and grounds of the Dashwood family, and overlooked by a steep hill on which stands St Lawrence Church. It was built around the same time as the Dashwood house, and has some fine 18th century plasterwork.

I paid a modest £2 to climb up the tower, which is topped off by a prominent golden ball. From this vantage point I had far-reaching views across the house and grounds and beyond, and at my eye level, several red kites, wheeling effortlessly across the landscape in the warm breeze. Below I could see the enormous hexagonal, roofless mausoleum built by the Dashwoods. Further down the hill is the Hell Fire Club and caves, said to have been the venue for drunken aristocratic high jinks in the 1700s, and now a place for family visits and children's parties.

At the foot of the hill stands the object of my visit, St Paul's Church, built in the 1870s by Lady Elizabeth Dashwood to save villagers the arduous climb to St Lawrence in the winter (the modest red brick structure was built with a hot air heating system). Its Anglican congregation now share their church with a Serbian Orthodox community, and an iconostasis behind the altar screens off the apsidal east end. Although only a few paces from the main road, St Paul's has an atmosphere of calm and stillness, inviting any visitor to pause and rest. There is even the thoughtful provision of a table with a kettle and tea and coffee. Visitors are invited to leave prayer requests on a prayer tree.



Above: St Paul's SPP, West Wycombe

Below Left: The East end of St. Paul's Church



From West Wycombe I cycled west, climbing and descending the Chiltern Hills, travelling long quiet lanes and pretty villages of red brick and flint. The colour theme for the high summer flora along the verges was mostly shades of pink and purple: bindweed with the palest hint of rose, brambles in a slightly deeper shade; mauve scabious and thistles; magenta fireweed and loosestrife; and the purple of ornamental buddleias. I passed deep-shaded beech hangars, then arable farmland as I left the Chilterns for the wide plain beyond.

At the Thames at Wallingford, I turned north and cycled up the west bank, crossing a busy weir and lock to reach Shillingford where I stayed the night, overlooking the river and its slow-moving traffic of pleasure boats. The following morning I headed through sleepy hamlets of timber-framed cottages with low-eaved, thatched roofs. Ahead was Didcot, whose looming cooling towers are a landmark for many miles in every direction.

Didcot is a busy town, but I was able to cross it in less than half an hour on a well-marked, largely traffic-free cycleway that ran through the suburbs and under the main railway line to Paddington. I was soon in the countryside again, on an elevated cycleway atop an old railway embankment, crossing fields of ripe wheat baking under a sultry summer sky.

The cooling towers of Didcot



The north porch and bellcote, St Laurence Church, West Challow

Passing through Wantage I travelled on narrow lanes and farm tracks to reach the little village of West Challow. Here, sandwiched between a leafy lane and a narrow brook, stands St Laurence Church, originating from the twelfth century. I noticed the stone shingle roof, with no spire or tower but a bellcote housing two bells, and a 15th century north porch with an attractive, carved bargeboard. Opening the porch door, I found a simple nave and chancel, divided by a carved timber screen, a tiny pulpit and a stained glass window featuring St Laurence. There is also a statue of him near the altar, characteristically holding a gridiron, the instrument of his martyrdom. On a hot summer's day, I found the little churchyard an equally inviting place to sit and rest, on a seat under the shade of a spreading yew tree. As I was enjoying this peaceful spot I was joined by hospitaller Ann Brown, bringing fresh flowers to decorate the church. She told me that St Laurence's had joined the SPP network relatively recently, and that as far as she knew I was the first such pilgrim to sign the visitors' book. I do hope others will find their way to this beautiful and peaceful sacred space.



Above: The interior of St Laurence Church

Right: Figure of St Laurence with gridiron

