

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 13: Llanymynech to St Aelhaiarn, Guilsfield

During the blisteringly hot, dry days following the summer solstice I was with a group of botanists who were visiting the area between Shrewsbury and the Welsh border. While they were studying the plant life in a disused quarry, I made another journey to a Small Pilgrim Place - the 24th destination so far on my visits around the Small Pilgrim Places Network.



The Montgomery Canal

The bike and I set off from the village of Llanymynech, whose main street forms part of the English/Welsh border, early enough to benefit from the longer shadows and cool breezes of morning. I followed the

Montgomery canal towpath that is part of the Offa's Dyke route (which I had earlier walked during my time in Wales). On this high summer's day the canal was largely coated in a bright green carpet of pondweed, dotted with yellow water lilies, and bordered by shoulder-high hogweed and meadow-sweet with their candyfloss heads of creamy white flowers.

The canal crosses the River Vyrnwy via an impressive aqueduct, then meanders through flat arable fields and pastureland. Birds were plentiful on this stretch where there are no boats: herons fished, moorhens and swans swam with their growing broods, and a buzzard wheeled overhead.

I turned off the canal to head along an old farm track that ended at my destination, the village of Guilsfield, and the church of St Aelhaiarn (meaning "iron brow"), named after a 6th century deacon who studied under St Beuno and who has two other churches in Wales named after him. The



The nave of St Aelhaiarn's Church

present church, mainly dating from the 14th century, stands in a spacious, yew-studded churchyard. I entered though a large porch, to the side of which is a bier house in matching stone, added in the 18th century to house the village hearse. A 15th century wooden door, said to weight a ton, gives access to the nave.

My immediate feeling as the great oak door closed was one of a quiet, light and peaceful space, a well-cared for place made comfortable and welcoming by polished brass and furniture, carpeted areas, thoughtfully placed information booklets, notices and seating, and a children's area. Interesting

details I spotted included the wide nave spanned by an unsupported wooden roof. Above the chancel the ceiling features highly decorated and boldly painted bosses, 140 in all. The grooves I noticed in the stone vestry door jambs were apparently made by 14th century archers sharpening their longbows. The Lady chapel was equipped with votive candles, prayer request slips and bible verses to take away.

I ate my picnic lunch on the grass in the shade of the church wall, and helped myself to a drink, as pilgrims are invited to, from the small kitchen area at the back of the nave. And I even had the novelty of using a loo housed in the bier house where once the old hearse had rested.