

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 17: Hawkwood Woodland Sanctuary, Stroud

What an honour to find I was the first to visit a new Small Pilgrim Place, just added to the Network! I was told the news by hospitaller Katie as we sat drinking coffee in a sunny courtyard outside the reception area, all decorated with bunting.

The latest annual SPPN handbook had arrived in my letterbox a few days before. I'd been delighted to find that several new locations had appeared since the last publication, including Hawkwood Woodland Sanctuary, near enough from home for a day's outing. So here I was, together with both a canine and a human companion, to explore a pilgrim place that is neither a church nor a garden, as my previous 29 destinations had been, but a delightful room in a woodland on the steep slopes above Stroud and the deep-cut River Frome.



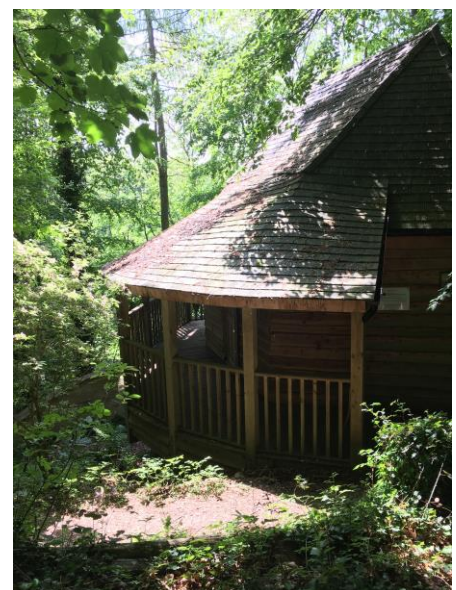
The main building at Hawkwood Centre

The Woodland Sanctuary is part of a larger complex of buildings, farmland and gardens that make up Hawkwood Centre for Future Thinking. Originally set up in 1948 as a centre for promoting the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, it now runs as an educational charity with a vision for creativity and a sustainable environment.

Following Katie's directions to the woodland, we skirted round the elegant Cotswold stone country house that forms the heart of this 42 acre estate, all looked after with an organic approach to land management. From

the front gardens we had a breath-taking view stretching away toward the Severn Estuary and the Welsh mountains beyond. We passed through a walled kitchen garden: those on residential courses here get to taste the produce. I had to linger here for some time to admire the enviably thriving vegetables, flowers, herbs and fruit trees, no doubt a favourite haunt for the bees whose hives I had spotted further down the valley.

A gate in the wall led us to an upward path winding through the wood, largely of mature beech and ash. We soon came across a timber building under a more-or-less conical shingle roof, set into the hillside, and completely surrounded by trees. A balcony leads to the door, and inside is a single large room bathed in greenish light filtering through the foliage. Simply furnished with a carpet, chairs and cushions, it makes an inviting, quiet space for stillness and contemplation. I noticed blankets thoughtfully provided for extra warmth and comfort on chilly days. A vase of wild flowers made a simple decoration, and a table held the familiar leaflets you find in all Small Pilgrim Places. A notice on the wall explained that



The Woodland Sanctuary is set deep in the woodland



The interior of the Woodland Sanctuary

the room regularly hosts meditation groups, which any visitors – whether attending courses or passing through - are free to join. There are no specifically religious symbols on display - Hawkwood, Katie explained, aims to be fully inclusive for everyone of all faiths and none (I could easily imagine bringing my own holding cross, icon or yoga mat here, and feeling equally at home with any of them).

We carried on through the woodland on a well-marked path that led to a meadow blazing in the spring sunshine with buttercup blooms. It brought us back to the main house and drive, and several outbuildings accommodating workshops where we could see people busy at blacksmithing and sculpting. A range of courses are offered at Hawkwood, from textile workshops to creative writing, storytelling and music.

The view from the woodland



I had first met Katie when she came to our SPPN national gathering at Bradford on Avon. This, she said, had encouraged her to make the Woodland Sanctuary a Small Pilgrim Place. I'm so glad that, through the Network, others may find and enjoy this inspiring and delightful place.

Ali Green