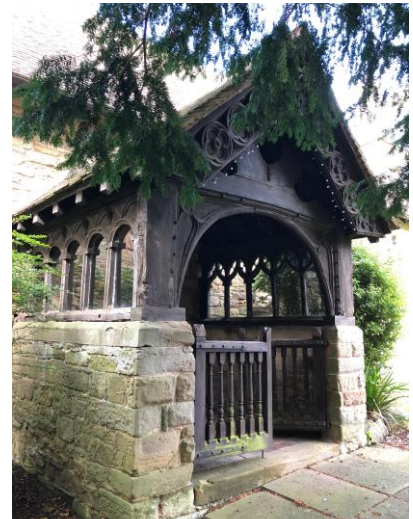


Small Pilgrim Places Journal 20: St Mary's Church, Billingsley, Shropshire

Billingsley is a small rural community a few miles south of Bridgnorth in the Diocese of Hereford. The Grade II* church that stands here was the destination for my 32nd pilgrimage around the Small Pilgrim Places Network.

I strolled through gently undulating farmland, along a shallow valley, following a stream lined with willows and alders. Spiders' threads gleamed silver in the low autumn sunlight, and ivy blossoms hummed with the attention of congregating bees. On each side of the valley were expanses of stubble left from the recent harvest. Climbing the hillside to a group of red brick houses and farm buildings I found a narrow track leading to St Mary's Church, not far from the road but hidden behind a belt of trees now beginning to shed their greenery.



The south porch, Billingsley



The blocked up Norman door

When this church was built around 1140, it was endowed with 12 acres of land and a mansion. It's now surrounded by a small graveyard that is managed for nature conservation. A couple of ancient, gnarled yews, a female and a male, guard the beautifully carved fourteenth century timber-framed porch – one of the best in the county, according to a leaflet I read. The original Norman door was blocked up some time in the fourteenth century, but its roughly-carved stone capitols and round arch can be seen to the east of the porch.

Stepping through the south door I entered the nave and noticed a couple of modern additions very welcome to both parishioners and pilgrims: a kettle and other provisions for refreshments, and a disabled-friendly loo. On opposite walls of the nave hang two tapestries, one depicting the church and local community in 1900, and the other in 1996. It was interesting to note the differences: the local colliery, sidings and rectory are

replaced in the later tapestry by disused mine buildings surrounded by trees, and a farmhouse overshadowed by silos.

I passed a fine Jacobean double pulpit, and stepped up to the chancel. Here, incorporated into the north wall, stands a fourteenth century Easter sepulchre (pictured right) where the consecrated host would be placed and guarded by parishioners through the Triduum until the first Mass of Easter morning. It is an unusual feature found only in churches in England and Wales.

Heading back outside, I found several inciting benches, and chose one where I could enjoy my picnic lunch in the warmth of the midday sunshine.

Ali Green

