

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 45: Parish Church of St Eadburgha, Ebrington, Gloucestershire

Planning a route to see friends living near Liverpool, I realised that St Eadburgha's Church in the village of Ebrington on the northern edge of the Cotswolds was a not too distant detour off the north-bound M5. Having parked near the pub and war memorial, I expected to catch sight of a spire or tower, but could find neither until I noticed a footpath heading uphill. This, I discovered, led past some very pretty old cottages and flourishing gardens to a gate opening into the churchyard on high ground above the village, edged in part with a picturesque terrace of thatched stone dwellings.

I followed a path over the churchyard, encircled by a number of mature yews and other trees, towards the tower and south porch, possibly the oldest features of the present building. In the south porch the visitor is greeted by an ancient stone coffin, thought to be of Saxon origin, and evidence that there was an older place of worship on this site.



The altar and east window



The eastern end of St Eadburgha's, cottages abutting the churchyard

The church's patron saint, Eadburgha, born in the 10th century, was a daughter of King Edward the Elder and Queen Eadgifu, and granddaughter of King Alfred the Great. As a young child she was dedicated to the Nunnaminster at Winchester, founded by Edward's mother. A 12th century account of her life records her as a young woman of virtue, humility, charity and miraculous powers. I hadn't come across Eadburgha before, but hospitaller Peter Satterthwaite, who came to meet me, mentioned another church of about the same age and with the same patron saint at Broadway, about eight miles to the south-west in Worcestershire.

I was intrigued by a little glazed quatrefoil window in the porch wall. Its purpose became apparent when Peter called it the beggars' or lepers' window, giving a view through to the interior of the church. An ancient oak door, fitted into a Norman doorway, round-arched and decorated with carved chevrons, opens into the nave. Opposite the south door is an eight-sided 13th century font, carved with a rose design. Above hangs a rather swanky modern chandelier, given in memory of a local villager.



The tomb of the "sinking Chancellor"

Walking up the nave, past a 17th century canopied oak pulpit, I found a striking 16th century stone tomb bearing a painted recumbent effigy. This is the resting place of Sir John Fortescue, who was Lord Chancellor and died in Ebrington in 1484. The effigy depicts a Lord Chief Justice in full fig: long red robe, upright collar and cloak with ermine tippet and hood. Peter told me he is known locally as the "sinking chancellor", since subsidence has caused the tomb to tilt rather alarmingly. Perhaps as an antidote to the ornate grandeur of the tomb and its lofty occupant, the modern glass in the east window depicts an irenic Jesus in a rural setting, surrounded by working folk, including a milkmaid, a carpenter, a shepherd, a fisherman and a farmer standing in front of his tractor.

Peter pointed out a tablet on the south wall commemorating the "cow charity", a 17th century bequest that milk from ten cows should be given to poor families. The charity continued until after World War II, when it was transferred to a trust that continues today.

I was fascinated by displays in the south aisle, where there are words of welcome to visitors of all faiths and none, leaflets, photos and prayer cards from other SPPs across the network, and also a place to leave a prayer request. There is information on wildlife in the churchyard, an interest echoed in a fabric wall hanging of the local area, showing bees, trees, rabbits and livestock among churches and cottages. Peter also pointed me to a wall map showing links that had been made between St Eadburgha's and about 140 church communities through the world. It was heartening to see that nature, the SPP network and fellowship with other Christians globally are all an integral part of the vision of the parish and the welcome that visitors receive here.



A windowsill holds prayer cards and information about the Small Pilgrim Place



*Peter in the south porch, viewed through the
"lepers' window"*

Footnote:

Very sadly, Peter Satterthwaite has died since Ali's visit. He was an enthusiast for the concept of the Small Pilgrim Place and it was always a joy to talk with him about it. We give thanks for that enthusiasm and for the support and encouragement that he gave to the Network.

May he rest in peace.