

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 49:

St. Mawgan in Meneage Church, Cornwall

Mawgan-in-Meneage is a small village near Helston at the bottom of the Lizard Peninsula, between the Helford River and Gunwalloe, a little cove that similarly boasts a Small Pilgrim Place. Mawgan-in-Meneage and its church are named after St Mauganus, a Welsh saint who also received dedications in Mawgan in Pydar to the north-east of Newquay, and in Wales and Brittany. The word 'Meneage' comes from Cornish for 'land of the monks', indicating the presence of an early monastic settlement linked to St Mawgan. It has been suggested that an original church may have been established at a very early date, perhaps at the time of Mawgan's mission to Cornwall.



The existing church building is Grade I Listed, with features dating back to the 13th century. It stands on slightly rising ground beside a lane, bounded by mature trees and hedges where, when I arrived in late April, white cherry blossom was in full bloom by the churchyard gate. Near the south porch is a sign welcoming visitors and giving information about not only the building but also the grounds, which contain some listed headstones and monuments, including two Commonwealth War Graves from the First World War, as well as an array of wildlife. There is a wildflower meadow and nature trail, and boxes for bats and birds.

The wildlife-friendly theme followed me into the porch where, as I approached the door, a sudden flap of wings surprised me and a jackdaw flew off the nest it had built in the rafters. When I came back out through the porch some time later the jackdaw was perched on a nearby tombstone, ready to regain its place amongst the fine surroundings of the 16th century porch roof.



Stepping into the nave, I found a 13th century eight-sided stone font next to the south door; its ornate lid is a Victorian replacement for whatever cover had protected the blessed water in the font in medieval times.



One of the most striking features of the 13th century nave is its waggon roof which extends above the rubble-stone walls towards the chancel where it gives way to a Victorian carved ceiling over the altar.

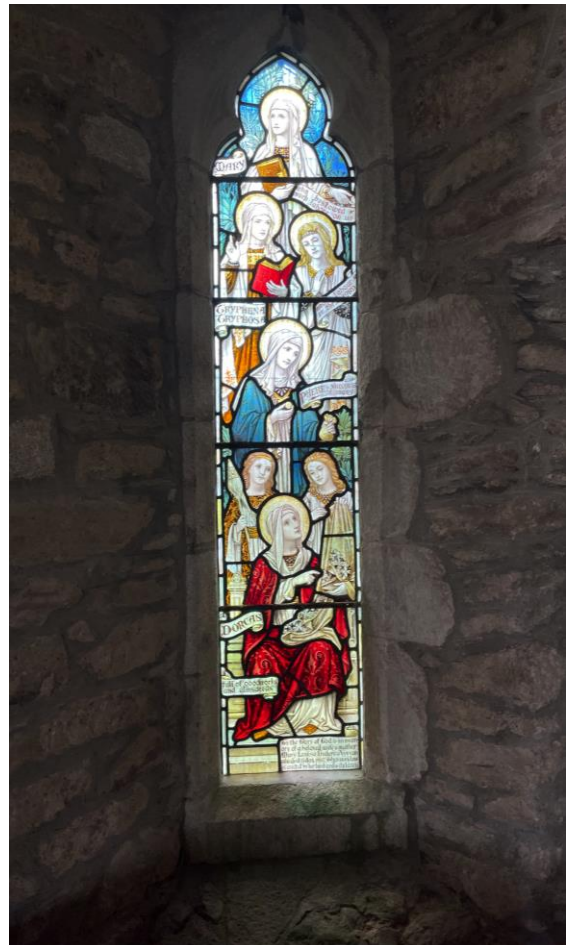
A leaflet on display informed me of a dramatic event that endangered the building almost to the day 141 years previously:

The church was described in the Cornishman newspaper as "an old and dilapidated structure" following a storm, when the porch and the south aisle lost much of their roofing on 29 April 1882. Subsequently the church was restored, with unusual sensitivity for the period, by E H Sedding in 1894.

It was Sedding who installed the carved diamond-pattern ceiling in the sanctuary, as it might have been in medieval times, although it would then have been painted a rich blue to represent a heavenly sky.

Looking around the windows, I found there were a remarkable number of female figures. A two-light stained glass window shows the woman anointing the feet of Jesus (Mark 14), and next to it the story of Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10). Beneath this window a table has been carefully set out with information and prayer resources, including the beautifully produced "Celebration of the Small Pilgrim Places Network".

Another single window (pictured right) depicts a seated Dorcas, "full of good works and deeds", inspecting a garment she has just made. Behind her a standing figure holds a spindle, and above are four other women, each mentioned by St Paul in his letters: Phoebe, deacon of the church at Cenchreae, Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa. This window was made in the early 20th century in memory of Mary Vyvyan, wife, mother and member of a family with a long and distinguished history in the local area. In the north aisle, an arrestingly simple, uncoloured east window was made in memory of the infant son of Sir Courtenay and Eva Vyvyan, who died in 1898 aged just five days. I wonder if the haunting simplicity of the design speaks of lament for unfulfilled hopes and longings. Above this window, just under the roof, hangs a helmet and half sword thought to have belonged to a predecessor, Hannibal Vyvyan (1577 - 1609).



Between the Lady Chapel and the nave, on a pillar with a primitive corbel carving of a head, is a small brass memorial to Hannibal Basset, dated 1708. Beneath a skull and crossbones an inscription is set in the form of an acrostic, so it can be read in any direction:

Shall we all dye
we Shall dye all
all dye Shall we
dye all we Shall

