

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 54: St Mary Orchardleigh, Frome

The lodge at the gates to the Orchardleigh Estate made a good starting point for my visit to the church of St Mary the Virgin. I had been in Frome, Somerset, to admire a set of stained glass windows by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, so it was only a short distance along the A362 to get to the lodge gates giving access to St Mary's.

The two churches formed an impression of striking contrasts. Holy Trinity is a large urban church that dominates a streetscape of terraced dwellings. St Mary's is small and so hidden away amongst fields and trees and that I only saw it once I was within a stone's throw of the churchyard gates. It lies about half an hour's walk from the main road, where I followed a metalled track through gently undulating parkland with big mature trees, their branches still bare against a blue early spring sky. Parkland gave way to golf links as I followed a signpost to the church, which lies on the far side of a little gated footbridge.

This Grade 1 listed church, standing on a moated island beside a tranquil, tree-lined lake, probably originates from the last quarter of the 13th century. The font dates from about 1300 and bears carvings of Green Men, with later figures of the Virgin Mary. Over the years the building has undergone two major refurbishments. The first was done in 1800 when the moat was dug, and the second in 1879 when George Gilbert Scott Junior was employed. It was Scott who designed the rood screen dividing the nave and chancel, in front of which stands a Jacobean pulpit.



The rood screen, chancel and east window

From the later gothic period are the east window with a tonsured figure flanked by angels, as well as lights showing eight figures of the apostles. I was interested to compare these apostles with the ones I had just been looking at in Holy Trinity Frome. Both characteristically show a winged ox and a winged lion accompanying St. Mark and St. Luke. Both churches have St John bearing a chalice, but whereas Burne-Jones' chalice depicts a rather bird-like creature emerging from the cup, the much earlier window in St Mary's shows a beautifully wriggly, poisonous mini-dragon possibly about to nip John's neck (which according to legend he survives without harm).

The chancel holds most of the earliest features of the building, including some stained glass windows. Here, above the priest's door dating from 1300, is a trefoil window of 1420 depicting the Holy Spirit. The piscina, aumbry and several carvings are all from this period.



Stained glass window showing St John with chalice and mini-dragon.

Returning to the porch, I noticed the carefully displayed information about the churchyard, including photos and lists of birds, trees, flowers and grasses that have been expertly recorded in the grounds. The commitment to nature conservation even extends to the provision of a compost loo conveniently provided behind a hedge.

There is no electricity or running water here – the organ is hand-pumped and in the churchyard is a compost loo – but despite these challenges, St Mary's is a favourite place in which to get married, no doubt in part because it is very picturesque, well-cared for and boasts such a romantic lake-side setting within a moat.



St Mary's stands on the far side of a gate footbridge spanning a moat