

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 58:

St Sampson's Church, Callington, Cornwall

Sampson was a 5th century Welsh boy who, as he grew up, travelled to Ireland and then Cornwall as a preacher and possibly founder of a monastery, and later established an abbey at Don, Brittany, where he became a bishop. A site of worship has stood ever since on the site thought to have been his Cornish monastery.

The church now occupying this site at South Hill, Callington, to the east of Bodmin Moor about half way between Tavistock and Liskeard, dates from the 14th century. I approached it on foot on a May morning when the road verges were ablaze with May blossom and red campion, frothed with Queen Anne's lace and scented with the last bluebell blooms. I found the church on the brow of the hill amongst a small group of houses and farm buildings.

The notice board at the gate explained that the churchyard is managed for nature conservation, mown annually at the end of summer but otherwise left for the benefit of wildlife. The results were stunning: a swathe of bluebells, buttercups and pignut graced the sward, with butterflies and bumblebees busy amongst the flowers. Amid the graves I noticed a plain upright stone, bearing a plaque. It told me that this was a Romano-British monument discovered in the rectory gardens at the end of the 19th century.



The Romano-British monument with the church tower behind



Stepping through the barrel-roofed south porch I found a group of parishioners chatting over coffee following the Sunday morning service. Among them was Judith, Church Warden and Reader who had led the worship, and Mike, who was visiting from his home in Texas. He is a descendant of the Manaton family who gave their name to the chapel in the north transept. Mike informed me that the patrons of St Sampsons during the gothic construction of the church in the early 14th century were probably the Ferrers, whose head manor of Bere Ferrers is in Devon.

A stained glass window in the Manaton chapel shows St Sampson with his bishop's mitre and crozier, flanked by two archbishops of Canterbury more contemporary to the date of the window's creation in 1912. On the left is Frederick Temple, shown holding a crown, since he

The church interior looking to the east end



Above: Stained glass window in the Manaton chapel

Below: Crudely carved figures on the font



officiated at the coronation of Edward VII; and on the right, Edward Benson with a model of Truro Cathedral whose construction began when he was the first bishop of Truro. A 17th century monument commemorates a Manaton child who died in 1663. From the Manaton chapel a squint pierces through the thick wall to the chancel, affording a view of the altar.

Dedicated to St Sampson in 1333, the altar stands below a three-light east window of stained glass showing the Crucifixion. It is dedicated to "Rear Admiral Samuel Thornton, who was drowned at sea May 16th 1859". It was poignant to read this in the same month exactly 165 years after his death. On the south side stands a Norman font, with a round bowl featuring a carved tree of life and held up by four pillars topped with crudely carved faces. Below a window on the south wall is a table with attractively displayed prayer resources and information about the Small Pilgrim Places Network.

As I walked back down the nave, sunlight poured down through the south windows, whose decorated panes lent a golden glow to the floor and pews. Several benches in the garden beckoned, and I chose one in the shade of neighbouring trees for a picnic lunch where I could admire the beauty of the churchyard in all its nature-filled glory.