

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 48: Portscatho United Church, Cornwall

Of the nearly fifty Small Pilgrim Places I've visited, I can say that every location, or the journey towards it, has offered something unique or memorable. I've paused on a cycling pilgrimage to let a vintage steam train puff past in a cloud of billowing steam; in one little rural church I heard the haunting strains of a flute played by a professional musician; and I visited an ancient Welsh church protected from the encroaching waves of the ocean by means of hefty sand dunes.

On this occasion, for the first time my visit entailed a ferry crossing. The King Harry Ferry is one of only five chain ferries in England, and provides a scenic, leisurely and environmentally friendly five-minute crossing connecting St Mawes and the surrounding area with Feock, Truro and Falmouth.

My destination was Portscatho, a small coastal village on the Roseland Peninsula. A chapel was first built here in the 1820's, but the larger building that now stands overlooking the old harbour was opened in 1867. It is now a Local Ecumenical Project, following a merger of the local United Reformed and Methodist Churches. For ten years the mission of the chapel family has been to provide a seven-day-a week welcome into a place of peace-filled rest and prayer. To this end it is now known as The Retreat @ Portscatho.



I walked along The Luggar, the old road above the harbour forming a stretch of the South-west Coast Path, part of the National Trail that runs for 630 miles from Minehead in Somerset, along the coasts of Devon and Cornwall, to Poole Harbour in Dorset. Approaching the chapel, the second unique feature of this pilgrimage became evident. A building adjoining the chapel was undergoing renovation, and builders together all their paraphernalia, including the inevitable loud radio, were spilling across the chapel's front yard and entrance. But as soon as I entered through the porch, I became aware of the atmosphere of peace and rest that the congregation had envisioned and has worked hard to achieve.



The first thing the visitor comes across on stepping through the porch is a welcome station with comfortable armchairs and a sideboard where Fairtrade refreshments are on offer. In the opposite corner is a seating area with books and soft toys. The whole room is light and airy, carpeted and furnished with modern upholstered chairs.

Some years ago, the Sanctuary was turned at 90 degrees so that it now stands along one of the longer walls, in between two stained glass windows made in the 1950's. One depicts Jesus the Good Shepherd; the other, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock" (Rev 3:20). I enjoyed the depiction of English wildflowers among the figures - there were foxgloves and briar rose - and was intrigued by the subtle "shading" effect on these windows, especially on the clothing and lambs. I asked a friend who is an expert in such matters, who said:



"Modern designers have a much greater range of paints available and often use other techniques to create effects, such as using acids to remove painted areas, and fusing colours together. Moreover, often today designers leave more open areas of clear glass to let light pass through whereas medieval windows can be painted completely and block light penetration. If you look closely at the figures there is a light shadow effect on the clothing, rarely seen so delicately in C13-15 glass."

These lovely windows provide an attractive focal point in the church. Other walls carry posters and information about the church and its history and mission. Coming back out through the gothic-arched door, one is greeted with a magnificent, far-reaching view beyond the village, across Portscatho Bay toward the headlands beyond.

