

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 46:

St. Peter, Poulshot, Devizes

Just after the autumn equinox, on an exquisitely still, warm and sunny September day, I made a walking pilgrimage to one of the newest additions to the Network. I had once before visited this little church in the village of Poulshot, to the south-west of Devizes and not far from the renowned Caen flight of locks on the Kennet and Avon canal. I'd been driven there by parishioners considering whether the building might be suitable as a Small Pilgrim Place. My first response then had been a resounding "Yes", not least because of the aura of calm, restfulness and welcome that was so palpable as soon as I entered. So I was pleased to see, a few months later, that it was listed on the SPPN website.



St Peter's church, a recent addition to the SPPN

This time I started my journey on foot near the village pub, the Raven Inn, and followed a well-marked, broad bridlepath towards Townsend on the southern edge of the settlement. It was at the end of harvest time, and barns were stacked high, fields were prickled with short stubble and hedgerows were packed with autumn nuts and berries. The wide paths offered a rich and varied wildlife corridor between mostly flat arable land receding into the far distance where the humps and dips of the Wiltshire Downs formed the horizon.

On each side I passed head-high stands of seeding docks, thistles, teasels, hogweeds and nettles – all

nutritious fare for late butterflies, bees, small birds and mammals. Behind this array, hedge trees and bushes were laden with crab apples, oak acorns, elderberries, blackberries, hazel nuts, hips and haws – a feast indeed for all sorts of wild animals feeding up before the leaner winter months.

I finally glimpsed, across a fence, St Peter's Church, surrounded by a large churchyard and flanked by a line of mature lime trees and neighbouring farm buildings. With its stone-tiled roof, squat tower, round-arched south door and mix of



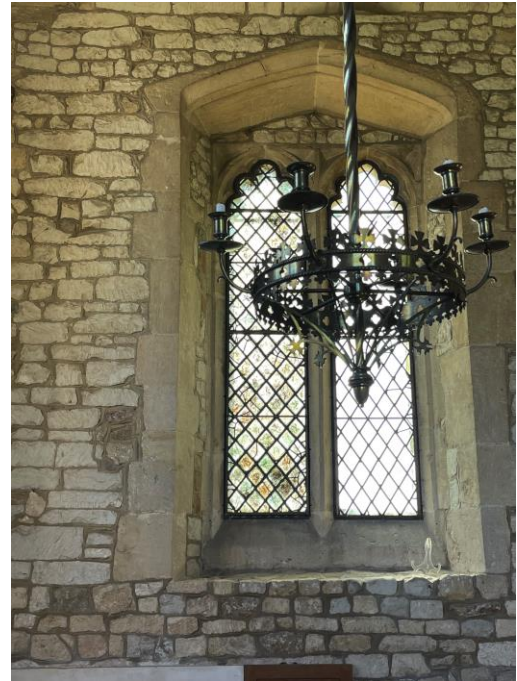
A first glimpse of St Peter's Church

what looked like gothic and perpendicular windows, it was difficult to age the building from its exterior. But once inside, I found plenty of information about its history in a series of photos and captions on display in the south aisle.

A church stood on this site in the 13th century, with additions and alterations made in the 15th century. Worship here came to a temporary halt when, in 1916, a fire caused by an overheated pipe destroyed much of the nave roof and other parts of the building. After restoration, services resumed on Whit Sunday, 1925.

One of the great treasures of the church that survived the fire is a window panel dating back possibly to the 13th century. and illuminating the south side of the chancel. One half of the window has been described by an expert as of "grisaille glass in the diamond quarry pattern, embellished with a painted floral motif" (pictured right). On the day I visited autumnal sunshine flooded through the window, casting diamonds of yellow and white to brighten the stone floor of the chancel and allow the whole interior of timber and stone to glow with warm hues.

Other features that I found interesting were the steep stone staircase that once led to the gallery, closed off since Victorian time; and, on the opposite side, a beautiful carved head with a beatific smile forming a corbel stone under the chancel arch. (Pictured below)



Looking eastwards towards the chancel, with the gallery stairs on the left

St Peter's Church , in the Wellsprings benefice in the Diocese of Salisbury, is within walking distance of another church of 13th century origin, St Matthew, Rowde, not far to the north of the Caen Hill locks. This is also a Small Pilgrim Place, as are two further churches to the north, strung along the A342 at Bromham and Sandy Lane. You can read about these in my journal entries 42 and 43. The four churches, all in the same Diocese, together offer ample opportunities for walking or cycling pilgrimages with plenty of interesting landscapes and other features to enjoy along the way. In fact a new leaflet has just been produced giving a 9 mile pilgrimage route linking all four churches, starting at and arriving at Poulshot.