

Ecclesiastical Forays

Three medieval churches to the north of Bath

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There have been excursions to a number of fine religious buildings in the past two years. To see the best of medieval architecture, surely we must go to Italy or Spain, or perhaps to Oxford or Cambridge. But that is not so; throughout England, especially in the south west, and indeed on our very doorstep, there are beautiful examples. This year, our first ecclesiastical foray was to Wimborne Minster, yet another 11th century church built on the site of a Saxon one. Then later in the year on a July summer evening, the Society had an unusual tour of three local churches, all within a ten minute drive of Bath. Our guides were three doughty members who had agreed to become experts for a day.

St. Mary the Virgin, Swainswick

At Swainswick, we were intrigued by the church tower which had been built within the nave, having a saddleback roof and without buttresses. The south door has a particularly fine late Norman doorway with zigzag and dog-tooth mouldings with headstops. Above the porch is a pre-Reformation sundial with lines radiating to show the times of Mass. In the nave, within the door, is an ornately carved stoup for holy water in which medieval worshippers would have dipped their fingers to make a sign of the cross. Swainswick, St Mary, has the coat of Arms of Charles I, the board being said to have escaped the Commonwealth vandals by being discarded and found later in the Rectory garden in use for mixing mortar. The single aisle, to the north, has many early features and there is a small round-headed arch thought to have surrounded a stairway to a, now lost, rood loft.



Figure 1
St. Mary the Virgin, Swainswick.

St. Mary Magdelene, Langridge

A winding narrow lane leads us to the tiny village of Langridge where we visited St Mary Magdelene, having again a Norman West tower with a saddle-back roof. The delightful Norman south door here has spiral roll-moulding and scallop capitals. Much of the nave had been restored, described by Pevsner as 'over-restored', in the 1870's by our old friend Major Davis of Roman Baths renown. The rebuilt chancel arch retained its Norman features and above it was placed a charming carved figure of Virgin and Child, probably of the 13th century.

Holy Trinity, Cold Ashton

Finally, over the county boundary into Gloucestershire to see the later 16th century Cold Ashton Holy Trinity church. This was built by Thomas Key, the rector, and it has been asked how a parish priest in the reign of Henry VIII got his hands on what would have been the modern equivalent of several million pounds. Key's rebus, either a 'T' and a 'K', or more decorously a carved key, are on several hoodmold stops and some remaining 16th century glass windows. This time the Royal Arms were those of George I as a hatchment. The nave has fine clerestory windows.

The church is rightly proud of its carved oak pulpit with a carved stone surround, crocketed and pinnacled. Even more interesting perhaps is the spiral stairway by the pulpit which leads to a door above us in the wall, clearly an entrance to what was once the rood loft. Kindly taken from safety by the Church Warden and displayed for us, were two precious books. The first, a tattered original Authorised Version of the Bible published in 1611. The other, a record book with a variety of entries, in which an observant member of our party spotted a list of birds seen in the churchyard, including a corncrake and, amazingly, a hoopoe. She is determined to return there to find out the date of this list.