

A Little Church Crawling in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. 11th/12th April 2001

Fitted in around a day visit to the NMR in Swindon, a visit to a handful of ancient churches, Elkstone, Daglingworth, Duntisbournes Rous and Abbots and Winstone (in Gloucestershire) and Highworth and Inglesham (Wiltshire)

Elkstone, St John the Evangelist

A glorious building, full of features both unusual and outstanding. Big late medieval tower, but the remainder is much earlier - a Norman nave and two-part chancel, the western part of which was originally a central tower. When this was removed in the 13th century a high-level chamber was constructed instead, extending the full length of the chancel. Where to begin? The south porch has 12th-century grave covers, all with splay-armed crosses within circles (obviously a common Gloucestershire form), one in the outside of the west wall and one as the lintel of each of the little windows in the side walls. Once into the porch however, all attention is seized by the spectacular Norman door and its tympanum, Christ in Majesty, holding the book of judgement in one hand and blessing with the other. All the carving is in high relief and wonderfully preserved, but as usual some past iconoclast has aimed a hammer blow at the face. The arch has a variety of 'beakheads', and on the left a little man appears upside down with outstretched arms clutching the snouts of the beasts on either side. Inside there are Norman chancel and sanctuary arches, with vaults to both parts, and a newel stair on the north leading to the upper chamber-cum-columbarium with its medieval roof and walls now filled with pigeon boxes. In the base of the tower are two medieval grave slabs, one elaborate much-worn example with a foliate stem and the other with strange high-relief straps or bands crossing and ending in volutes; it lacks obvious stylistic affinities - is it Saxon, or might it even be an early post-reformation monument? On the jambs of the door to the tower stair are various incised circles, maybe just a mason playing with a pair of compasses - but on the jambs of the outer arch of the south porch are more, varying in size with neat little hollows at the centre. What do they mean?

Highworth

In an attractive little hilltop town, the parish church is set back from the streets on either side behind their old buildings (a happy mix of the 17th and 18th centuries, real and in use without a whiff of spurious heritage or prettification). Quite a big cruciform church with the usual big western tower. Outside old rubble masonry and shallow clasping buttresses show that the transepts and chancel retain something of the 13th century. Inside all is plastered, and the arcades and arches all look over-scraped and restored; it is difficult to tell what is genuinely medieval and what is Victorian. Over the south door is re-set a splendid Norman tympanum showing Samson killing a lion.

Inglesham, St John the Baptist

This one took a little finding; two or three miles north of Highworth, it is not in the signposted hamlet but beyond, nearer Lechlade, down a lane on the west of the main road, beside a farm. Now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, it leaves an impression rather than a detailed memory of architecture or monuments. Outside it is largely rendered, with a big low-roofed south porch; inside, in the dim light of a late afternoon, is a gloomy warren of high box pews, medieval screens, mouldering plaster and everywhere fragmentary remains of successive generations of wall painting; below an uneven floor of old slabs, bricks and in places bare earth, above medieval roofs. Unlike many round here, this church that seems to have escaped

the 19th and 20th centuries); William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings had a lot to do with this in the late 19th century, with the result that, although the building was only declared redundant in 1979, it has the feel of having been abandoned for two centuries. An atmospheric relic, but one cannot imagine it being in use in the worship of anything other than a departed rural past.

Holy Rood, Daglingworth

This one did not escape the Victorians, and their hand was heavy upon it. What is left of a fascinating Saxon building is thus rather scraped and renewed; nevertheless it retains more than its fair share of structural puzzles and architectural bits and pieces to delight the passing antiquary. For a start, wonderful long-and-short quoins to nave and chancel, even if the later were re-set by the Victorian re-builder, who added the north aisle and vestry. Those at the south-west corner of the nave rise from a chamfered plinth; is this original? Then the south porch is oddly set east-of-centre; its outer door seems Saxon, but its quoins, whilst large and irregular, are pretty nondescript and nothing like those of the nave. The guide-sheet suggests that this was the Saxon west door before the Perp west tower (notable for its over-large mask stops to the belfry openings) was added??? Or might it have been brought in the 19th century from the north side of the nave? Inside another scraped Saxon door (wheat-ear ornament to its imposts) and a sundial above, showing the porch must be an addition. The odd placing of the porch is explained by the fact that within, the western part of the south nave wall can be seen to be much thicker. Before the Victorians there was in fact an arch spanning the nave, and evidence of a high-level chamber above the western part. The chancel arch looks Saxon, with an odd variant of billet ornament to its imposts; its lower jambs are later; they had been made up of large blocks with Saxon relief carvings - a Crucifixion, Christ in Majesty, St Peter - which had been 'turned round' so the carved face was concealed. They are now set in around the internal wall faces, and are quite notable pieces. Then in the rebuilt chancel, on the north, is a Norman altar slab in two little columns with scallop capitals. This comes from the former high-level chamber over the western part of the nave (it was in the west face of the wall above the removed arch). On the north of the vestry a strange little two-light window, cut in a single slab which bears remains of a Roman inscription.

Duntisbourne Rous, St Michael.

The various Duntisbournes straggle along a valley north of Daglingworth, a place of narrow leafy lanes, old villages and fords tucked away below the eye-levels of the travellers on the busy A dual carriageway that ceaselessly hums its way parallel to the valley only a few hundred metres to the north-east. Duntisbourne Rous has a small but remarkable church; the first thing one notices is that it is built at right angles to a steep valley side, with the result that the little western tower with its gabled 16th-century top is far lower than the towering east end of the 12th-century chancel. The nave, or at least its western parts, may be Saxon, although the western quoins, chunky side-alternate, are a far cry from nearby Daglingworth. At the head of each quoin is a big block projecting westwards, presumably to carry a tie-beam or a timber gable - shades of some early Irish churches here. The masonry of this western part of the nave is a rough approximation to herringbone. The north door has a plain square head but the south one, inside a later porch, a triangular gabled top. The chancel has remains of 12th or 13th century mural decoration, a simple scheme with the common simulation of ashlar in red lines, some arches below and stylised little flowers. Below the chancel is a crypt chapel; the original newel stair down, set centrally under the floor at the west end, is now sealed over, and access is from the outside by a later doorway punched through the south wall. It has a simple vault, an east window with a roll-moulded surround, and a north-east aumbry with a simple cross-

slab or headstone re-set at its rear.

Duntisbourne Abbots

In a big churchyard surrounded by beautiful old village, but this is one that the Victorians ran riot on; the only old part evidence outside is the west tower, again gable-topped with Norman windows below and 14th century? belfry openings with a picturesque stone grille of pierced quatrefoils. Locked, with no information as to key whereabouts.

Winstone, St Bartholomew.

Another intensely picturesque church, with gable-topped tower, and overshadowed by an immense yew, its branches forming a canopy over rows of elaborate 18th-century headstones and the remains of a medieval churchyard cross. The Victorians (1876) rebuilt the chancel (re-setting old quoins and windows, along with seven simple grave slabs or headstones in the external walls); they also added two big buttress to the side walls of the nave. This seems Norman rather than Saxon, although both north and south doors and chancel arch have some early characteristics such as monolithic jambs (Taylor & Taylor include this as a Saxon church). The chancel arch has the remains of raised stripwork on the jambs, but the incised diaper pattern on the south door tympanum looks thoroughly Norman. On the north of the nave is a monolithic round-arched window (re-set?) which again looks early. On the north of the sanctuary is an ambury which, like that in the crypt chapel at Duntisbourne Rous, has a re-set cross slab or head-stone at its back.

The relationship between the church and its west tower is interesting. Externally the tower has a 19th-century door on the west; the small square-headed window in its side walls are set quite high off the ground. To the church there seems only to be a small square-headed window, now blocked, although there is a larger timber (lintel?) some way above. In the Borders this would be cited as a highly-defensible structure; was that its intent?

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