

Chelmarsh, Sidbury, Stottesdon, Farlow and Hope Bagot



A ewe with her lamb, on the Shropshire Hills in early March

The excellent map produced by the 'Caring for God's Acre' charity, and the fascination of fiddling with a new Satnav (a Christmas present from my daughter), set me on a second expedition to sample the delights of a string of 'picture postcard' Shropshire churches, this time on the eastern side of the county, on a bright sunlit day in early March.

My starting point this time was Bridgnorth. I travelled south from there, parallel with the River Severn to my first port of call, St Peter's Chelmarsh.



Carved decorations on the porch at St Peter's Chelmarsh



Crocuses in the churchyard at St Peter's



Lych gate at St Peter's inscribed: "Give unto the Lord the glory unto His name, bring an offering and come into his courts" (Psalm 96:8)

Alas my lack of advance planning meant that the church was closed (it's very much pot luck at these rural churches, and indeed anywhere during the week) and I could only wander round the charming churchyard and take photos of the outside, but that in itself was worth it. The crocuses were out, vying with the snowdrops in nature's grand spring beauty contest. The wooden lych gate bore devotional inscriptions and the wooden arches to the porch were carved into delicate patterns.



Holy Trinity Church, Sidbury



Herringbone patterned masonry at Holy Trinity, Sidbury

Next on my route was Holy Trinity Church, Sidbury. Once again the church was shut but the churchyard and the distinctive herringbone masonry of the exterior more than made up for the disappointment. I sat on a bench in the churchyard, underneath a yew tree, in absolute peace and solitude. In fact I only saw three people in all of the churchyards on my trip that day.



The vivid blue altar cloth in the Lady Chapel at St Mary's Stottesdon



Christ leads the armies of righteousness against the forces of evil - World War I memorial window, St Mary's Stottesdon



The eagle lectern at St Mary's Stottesdon

My third church was St Mary's, Stottesdon. The original church is said to date from 850 and the current church from 1050. It was the first church I was able to go inside and it was a sheer delight. The lady chapel has the most impressively vivid altar cloth I have ever seen; the eagle lectern is most unusual, and the memorial to the fallen of the first war shows Christ leading the army of the righteous against the forces of evil in front of what appears to be the walls of Jerusalem, an image I hadn't encountered in that context before.



The Way - en route to Farlow



St Giles, Farlow, a church on top of a very high hill



Rural idyll - panoramic views from Farlow churchyard

Moving south west, in the direction of Brown Clee Hill, I tried in vain at first to locate St Giles' Church, Farlow. It was actually at least two miles away from where the Satnav declared was "my destination", on top of a very steep hill and next door to the local school. From the churchyard there were superb views of Brown Clee Hill. Alas, once more I was unable to go inside but the views from the churchyard were breathtaking.



St John the Baptist, Hope Bagot interior



Lectern and bible, St John the Baptist, Hope Bagot

The last church on my itinerary took me over Brown Clee Hill to St John the Baptist, Hope Bagot. I had a feeling that I might find the best church last and indeed I wasn't disappointed. The church is tucked away in a hollow with steep hills on three sides. You park in the parish hall car park and walk up a steep flight of steps to the churchyard. Inside is one of the tiniest churches I have ever encountered (and there are some small ones in the Hills), but the most exquisite.



1600-year-old giant yew tree at St John the Baptist, Hope Bagot



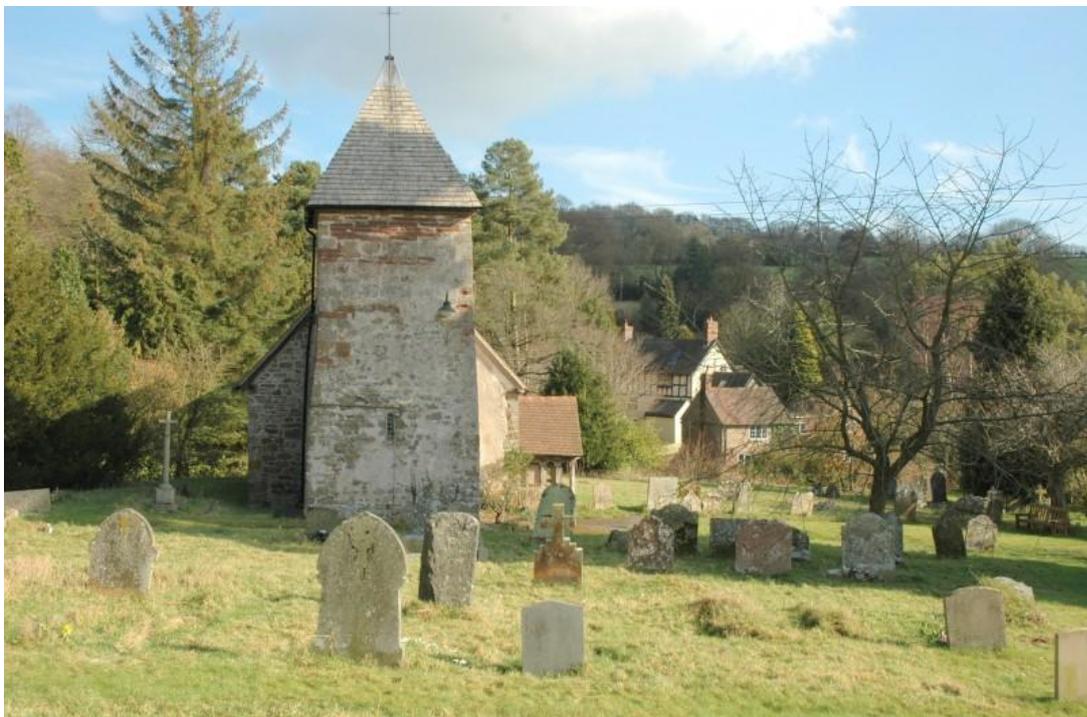
Holy well in the shade of the ancient yew tree at Hope Bagot

As I strolled through the churchyard I noticed a sign to a Holy Well and followed a tiny path to a natural spring in the shadow of a giant yew tree, said to be over 1600 years old. The water from the well is reputed to be "good for sore eyes!". I bought a guide to the church and a calendar published by the Shropshire Historic Churches Trust.

This time my route back took me from the outskirts of Ludlow on the A 4364 to Bridgnorth. Once again my route northwards was bordered by Brown Clee and Titterstone Clee to the east. There are many more gems to explore in this area of Shropshire - but five was more than enough for one day. The richness and beauty of Man's devotion to God in the villages of these hills quite overwhelming - and it's all on our doorstep to explore.



A time for quiet contemplation in the churchyard at Hope Bagot



Hope Bagot church and village lie in a deep hollow in the Shropshire Hills

Martin Jones, March 2012

