

Hereford Kilpeck Rowlestone Peterchurch Hay Symonds Yat and Ledbury



Broad Street, Hereford

The wonderful weather at the beginning of April was the perfect encouragement to explore some of the outstanding church architecture in Herefordshire.



Front of Hereford Cathedral - Cathedral Close is undergoing improvement work.

On Day 1 of our short break my wife and I drove to Hereford city centre, making for the tourist information office by the cathedral where we picked up several useful maps and guides. As with many cathedrals, improvement work was being carried out to the exterior but this didn't present too much of a problem although the lower part of the front of the building was obscured by scaffolding.

Having visited Lichfield and Worcester recently, Hereford is in fact relatively small in scale and not quite so overpowering on first entering as its Midlands neighbours.



Stained glass window light by Tom Denny



The central space with suspended crown sculpture

However the charm of the building is in its smaller spaces: the one that really sticks in the memory is a chapel containing four contemporary stained glass 'lights' designed and created by Tom Denny, inspired by the writings of Thomas Traherne. The images are reminiscent of *A Pilgrim's Progress* but they in fact are based on extracts from Traherne's work 'Centuries' and some of his other works. The most stunning artwork in the cathedral is the crown of thorns suspended in mid-air over the central altar.



Tomb and effigy of Sir Richard Pembridge, a 14th century Knight of the Garter

Cathedrals wouldn't be what they are without the tomb-top effigies of knights, past bishops and worthy/wealthy local merchants and there are many of these in free standing spaces and set into the walls around the building. The garden area is very pleasant containing some beautiful flowers and sculptures.



The Mappa Mundi - a medieval map of the world with Jerusalem at its centre.

One negative aspect of the visit was the price now being charged to get into the Mappa Mundi and Chained Library - £6 per person. I felt that this was excessive and declined to pay that amount. I realise that a great deal has been done recently to enhance the visitor experience but also feel that at £12 for two visitors, the cathedral risks pricing themselves out of the market - others may feel differently of course.



The riverside park walk

After visiting the cathedral we took a stroll across St Martin's Street bridge over the River Wye and had a pleasant walk with distant views of the cathedral and city from the far bank. We then explored the central shopping area and finished up in an al fresco cafe drinking Fair Trade tea and coffee and watching the world go by before finding our Travelodge which was located on the A49 Ross Road, south of the city.



Hereford Grafton Travelodge, built in Hereford Barn style

Unlike most Travelodges the local planners had insisted that this new build was in keeping with local architecture and the hotel accommodation was built in the style of a Herefordshire barn. Opposite was the Grafton Arms (rather than the customary Little Chef) which offers very reasonably priced evening meals.



The south door at Kilpeck church



The altar at Kilpeck

On Day 2 we headed north (for breakfast at an Asda!) and then south on the Abergavenny Road. Our first visit was to Kilpeck Church which is reputed to be one of the finest Norman churches in the country. It was built by Hugh fitz Norman in 1140 and is particularly well known for the carvings on the exterior of the church and its 'three in one' design. The south doorway is perhaps one of the best known examples of Norman church architecture with its ornate carvings around the archway. There is a motte and bailey castle adjacent to the church of which only part of the keep wall remains.



The mandoria at St Peter's Church, Rowlestone



Candle holders by the altar at Rowlestone

We then travelled further south to Rowlestone in search of the famous 'Rowlestone Tympanum' at St Peter's Church, which is a carving inside the entrance portico above the main door to the church depicting Christ in Majesty. His left hand is raised in blessing; his right holds a book. Four angels surround him as he sits in an oval mandoria - a medieval symbol conveying heaven and earth coming together. This is another delightful church, built around 1130 but not quite on the same scale of ornate decoration as Kilpeck.

Going back to Pontrilas, we drove along the beautiful and tranquil Golden Valley to Hay on Wye, visiting first Eyewas Harold, then Dore Abbey, Vowchurch, Peterchurch, and finally Dorstone churches, all of which are very different in style from one another. (Note: these churches are covered in detail in a separate article about the Golden Valley.)



The nave at Peterchurch has been converted into an all-purpose laminated floorspace and is used by a SureStart Children's Centre during the week.

Peterchurch is very surprising because the PCC has gone into partnership with a SureStart to convert the inside space into a centre for families with children under five. There are laminated floors, activity rooms, a balcony area and toilets, all of which add greatly to what the church offers the local community quite apart from SureStart. The altar and higher nave area are unaffected and it is a great example of how the church can reach out to local people in a very practical way. Our last visit in the valley was to Arthur's Stone, a neolithic monument which has panoramic views over the head of Golden Valley.



Outdoor castle bookshop at Hay on Wye



Richard Booth bookshop, Hay-on-Wye

We ended Day 2 in Hay-on-Wye, the small Welsh town that is host to a world- famous annual literary festival. We visited the famous outdoor bookshop at Hay Castle and a really amazing cavernous brightly coloured Richard Booth shop where you can sit on leather settees and drink coffee, perusing books at your leisure. We returned to Grafton Travelodge south of Hereford for our final night in the area.



The view of the River Wye at Symonds Yat as depicted in the film Shadowlands about CS Lewis's love affair with American poet and writer Joy Gresham.

On Day 3 we travelled south towards Monmouth in search of the location where CS Lewis and Joy Gresham viewed the Wye Valley at Yat Rock, Symonds Yat. We made the mistake of going to Symonds Yat West first, before realising that the Rock was at Symonds Yat East. After a steep climb, there is a large car park by the Rock, and you then walk up a

Heritage Lottery-funded wooden walkway to the vantage point where you can survey the U-shaped bend in the Wye below.



The market hall on stilts at Ledbury



Church Passage at Ledbury



Ledbury Church



The reredos at Ledbury contains a mural of the Last Supper, after da Vinci

We then drove back northwards via Ross on Wye to Ledbury. This is a wonderful small town whose centre piece is the black and white market hall on stilts. There is also a Harry Potter-style 'Diagon-Alley' passageway up to the church, which is unusual in respect of church and tower being separate. There is an impressive mural of the Last Supper behind the altar.

The three photography-packed days (I used a complete 1 gigabyte memory card) were a very enjoyable pre-Easter experience, exploring the very best in English church architecture. I would imagine that I will revise this article several times as I discover more and more detail and symbolism in the images.