Kilpeck, The Golden Valley, And Hay-On-Wye - September 9

A rivetting ramble round rural churches with Ralph Richardson, featuring a Red Lion, ruins, a rude lady and a rood screen.

Sixteen people met at the Red Lion in Kilpeck for coffee and tea, taken outside in the sunshine while we made new acquaintances and decided what to order for lunch.

Down the road to the church, with a deserted medieval village discernable in the field behind, and hidden ruins of the castle owned by English Heritage. We scrambled up the hill to find two chunks of wall still standing. Some brave souls admired the superb view from the top of one chunk. The site was well chosen for defence.

Kilpeck was given to William fitz Norman in 1086. He built a wooden castle first, then a stone one, which stayed in his family until 1273. Back in 1135 it was one of numerous Norman motte and bailey castles built to subdue the local population and prevent invasion from Wales. It had a double moat: one ditch around the base of the castle might not have contained water, but the one near the church did. King John visited three times in 1211, 1212 and 1214. Kilpeck was granted a weekly Friday market and an annual fair in 1244. After that things went downhill with absentee landlords, famine and the Black Death taking their toll, so that by 1338 Kilpeck was no longer a wealthy settlement.

After the battle of Towton, Edward IV granted Kilpeck Castle to Sir William Herbert, later Earl of Pembroke. He was beheaded in 1467 by a band of rebels. It was used as a garrison for troops loyal to the king in the civil war, but when captured by Cromwell's men it was destroyed, leaving just the ruins we saw today.

The Parish Church of St Mary and St David at Kilpeck was finished between 1135 and 1142, and granted to the Abbey at Gloucester in 1143. St David is a local saint, not the patron saint of Wales. William's son Hugh, now styled de Kilpeck, built the

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church. It consists of a nave, square chancel, and rounded apse containing the altar. The church is justifiably famous for the fantastic carvings in sandstone which decorate the outside, and are attributed to the Herefordshire School. There are eighty-five corbels, three monster heads, a magnificent west window and stunning south door to admire.

The corbels go all round the church and include animals, human heads, warnings against sin and 'horrors' where animals are eating humans. Many of the animals are taken from 'The Bestiary', a book containing drawings of all known and imagined animals. There are two lambs of God, a phoenix, an angel, the rude lady, and a Disney-like dog and rabbit, just to mention a few. All the eyes are almond shaped with dots in the middle, a trademark of these carvers.

The three dragons' mouths near the west window protrude from the wall. As emblems of evil they are intended to scare evil away.

The west window is surrounded by interlaced straps with dots in between, another trademark of the Herefordshire School. Two heads face each other with foliage coming out of their mouths.

The Herefordshire School was founded by Oliver de Merlimond, steward of Wigmore, who was given the church at Shobden and decided to rebuild it. He travelled through France on his way to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela in Spain and was so impressed by the architecture there that he brought two master masons back with him. Shobden was even more elaborate than Kilpeck but only ruins survive.

The south door is surrounded by intricate carving. The tympanum, a panel of stone filling the space between an arch above and the door lintel below, shows a tree of life. The pillars each side show snakes writhing upwards to heaven on the right, and downwards to hell on the left, while biting each others' tails, symbolising the continuous cycle of life and death. In amongst all the foliage on each pillar are figures of men wearing trousers, the earliest depiction of men's trousers in this country.

Hardly any restoration has been needed for the sandstone carvings as they were so expertly carved, and the stone has developed a very hard patina.

Inside the church is a gallery for minstrels. They would play whatever instruments were available and only they would sing - the congregation didn't know the words and weren't expected to join in.

The chancel arch has six figures carved on it, some of whom may be saints. On the ceiling above the altar rail are four similar heads, all carved out of one piece of stone and acting as a keystone. Their identity is a mystery.

The middle apse window was designed by Augustus Pugin and depicts King David.

The oldest artefact is a holy water stoup, probably from a chapel in the nearby hunting forest of Treville. It is at least nine hundred years old.

After very satisfying lunches at the Red Lion we moved to Abbey Dore. The Golden Valley gets its name from the French 'd'or', meaning 'of gold', but it seems it should be called the wet valley as 'dwr' is Welsh for water.

Dore is the only English abbey founded from the Cistercian mother house of Morimond, and closely resembles this and other Burgundian abbeys in France, with Gothic painted arches and windows. It was founded in 1147 by twelve monks and their abbot (the usual number), and closed by Henry VIII in 1537 when it was bought by John Scudamore. Two monks remained to serve the parish.

Cistercian monks wore white habits of undyed wool and devoted their time to prayer and work. They usually chose very remote locations for their abbeys and were famous for their water and engineering systems.

Two effigies remain, both from the thirteenth century: Robert of Ewyas, who probably gave the land to the Abbot of Morimond, and Roger de Clifford. The two were step-brothers.

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All Cistercian churches are dedicated to the Virgin Mary so there is no Lady Chapel. It would have been very colourful inside, with wall plaster painted with red, cream, black and yellow lines, and chevrons, on a white background. The capitals and roof bosses were also painted.

In 1630 John Scudamore's great-great-grandson, John Viscount Scudamore, paid for its restoration. He and his wife had lost many babies, and he was convinced he needed to make amends for living off the proceeds of monastic land. Originally it was three times as long as it is now, with a range of monastic buildings, but the nave was abandoned in the restoration and a wall built to cut it off. Scudamore was friendly with Archbishop William Laud and redesigned Dore Abbey as a Laudian church. John Abel the carpenter rebuilt the roof and carved the oak screen in 1633 and choir stalls. The screen features the arms of Charles I, Viscount Lord Scudamore, and Archbishop Laud. Since Henry VIII became the head of the church of England the arms of the monarch have to be displayed in church.

Biblical texts are written on the walls and there is a huge painting of the arms of Queen Anne following the union with Scotland.

By the end of the nineteenth century Dore was in need of further restoration. Local architect Roland Paul supervised the repairs, and excavated and drew the foundations of the abbey buildings. Thanks to him early monastic glass and tiles were preserved.

The weather was now distinctly cooler than when we started and we'd had a light sprinkle of rain, but nothing daunted we returned to the cars and set off down the lanes to Bacton Church. Dedicated to St Faith, a third century French maiden roasted alive on a brass bedstead by the Romans. Such charming times!

Inside is an effigy of Blanche Parry*, one of Queen Elizabeth I's ladies-in-waiting, gazing at an effigy of the queen. Blanche was born in Bacton and served Elizabeth all her life. The queen is

wearing her full coronation regalia, holding the orb in one hand, the sceptre (now missing) in the other, and with her jewels of office round her neck. She is looking directly at the altar in the sanctuary. Blanche is looking east to the true cross and directly at the queen.

St Margaret's Church in St Margaret's, Herefordshire, our final church, stands in the middle of a field, eight hundred feet above sea level. It's a very simple church consisting of a nave, chancel and weather-boarded turret, in the Welsh style.

Inside the rood screen immediately catches your eye. John Betjeman raved about it, and no wonder. Carved of oak in 1520, it is now a wonderful silver colour. Henry VIII ordered the destruction of rood screens in 1547 when he founded the Church of England, so any which survive are treasures indeed. Fortunately he left the destruction to each individual parish and the residents of St Margaret's were obviously not vandals! When new it would have been painted and gilded.

Rood means cross and the screen divided the church into the area for the public and that for the clergy. Originally there would have been a Crucifix and figures of St John and the Blessed Virgin Mary in the two small niches cut in the supporting columns.

The wooden roof dates from the twelfth century when the chancel was rebuilt. It would have been very common in fourteenth century England, and is known as a 'Marcher' roof.

Next stop: Hay-on-Wye for much needed cups of tea and toilets! We were promised meringues by Ralph but something so delicious was naturally sold out by 4.30 pm on a Saturday! Fortunately The Granary still had lots of other wonderful cakes to tempt us. We didn't have time for the bookshops and the hills were disappearing into the mist as we set off home, with Ralph planning a return visit to include one church and **all** the bookshops!

An excellent day out with well chosen sites all brought to life by Ralph's extensive knowledge. Thank you for taking us and showing off these treasures.

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Pam Benstead

*More information on Blanche Parry can be found in the book called 'The Secret People of the Palaces' by Joan Glasheen, reviewed in "Dickon Independent" issue 31, pages 30 - 31.