

Great Witley Church

I feel sorry for churches attached to great country houses. Their message of humility before God, and the meek inheriting the earth, are somewhat drowned out by the loud demonstration of worldly opulence going on next door. As a whole, then, they keep themselves to themselves, and whisper their architectural secrets rather more quietly.

Such deference, however, could not be laid at the (west) door of the church at Great Witley. True enough, the grand mansion adjoining it has been taken down a peg or two by the devastating fire that tore through it exactly 75 years ago. Witley Court stands a roofless ruin today, and the wild birds of Worcestershire nest in its balustrades.

But the church next door would have stood toe-to-toe even when Witley Court was brimming over with wealth. Pevsner calls it unforgettable, stately and self-assured. Going inside, one might be forgiven for thinking that one's sense of direction (or the sat nav) had gone wildly astray. The road from Droitwich, it seems, has headed straight for Naples.

It was the Foley family - ironmasters by trade and origin - who turned St Michael's into the most striking church in all of Worcestershire. Thomas, the first Lord Foley, swept away the original medieval church, which stood a little further to the west of his house, and planned a new creation in the baroque style. The design has been attributed to James Gibbs, and its closest neighbour, in style and form, would probably be St Philip's in Birmingham.

What happened inside the church, however, could not have been anticipated by Thomas Foley, who died in 1733, just as building work was beginning. It was a remarkable bit of wheeling and dealing by the second Lord Foley that transformed the interior, an architectural triumph born out of tragedy.

Most of what catches the eye inside Great Witley church - the stained glass, ceiling paintings and organ case - were never meant to be here at all. They were meant to be in Middlesex.

The man who commissioned the art was James Brydges, Duke of Chandos, Marquis of Caernarvon and patron of Handel. Brydges emerged from the minor aristocracy in the early 18th Century to become Paymaster General, banker to the king, and perhaps the first cash millionaire in British history. He purchased a house near Edgware - Cannons - from his wife's uncle, and set about turning it into the most lavish and palatial house in England. They compared it to Versailles. It is of Cannons that Alexander Pope is said to have written:

To compass this his building is a town,
His pond an ocean, his parterre a down...

The ceiling of Brydges' private chapel at Cannons was adorned with religious paintings - three large ceiling paintings and twenty smaller ones - by the Italian

master, Antonio Bellucci. The stained glass - the finest of its date in the country - was the work of Joshua Price, again to Italian designs, and coloured with a combination of enamel painting and staining. The cherub in one of the painted lunettes, incidentally, is said to be the earliest depiction of someone with Down's Syndrome.

Shortly after completing the chapel, however, the Duke of Chandos lost everything. He invested heavily on the future profits of the South Sea Company, and the speculative bubble burst spectacularly, pulling down many a fortune with it. Within a matter of months in 1720 Brydges went from being England's richest man to a bankrupt. Only a judicious second marriage brought money back into the family.

When the Duke died in 1744, however, his successor found Cannons so crippled with debt that the simplest solution was to demolish the lot, and to sell off the contents, including the fixtures and fittings in the chapel. The second Lord Foley was on hand with his chequebook.

The arrival of the newly acquired fittings from Cannons necessitated a degree of nifty adaptation at Great Witley. The Chandos glass was not quite tall enough to fill the church windows, so a not-very-pleasant decorative border, nine inches long, had to be added to the bottom. As for the paintings, a false ceiling needed to be installed to accommodate those.

The organ and case appear to have fitted pretty well enough, and as this the instrument once played by George Frederick Handel himself, it must have had a particular cache. Not that seems to have meant much to the Earl of Dudley, who purchased Witley Court from the Foleys in 1837. He had the keyboard stripped down and largely rebuilt, though some of the pipes may still be original.

The Earl changed much at Witley, the house in particular, but he left the Chandos paintings and stained-glass as he found them. And having come through one demolition, the chapel and its fixtures also survived the fire that raged next door in 1937.

Ironically, it was the period after that, when the house was a neglected and empty ruin, that St Michael's was most at risk. With no wealthy patron living beside it, the cost of upkeep, repairs and restoration have fallen upon the parish instead. That the interior today glows so magnificently is a tribute to all that hard work.

Now, how to find one's way back from Naples to the A38 ?