

The Horse House at Wixford

The rule of church visiting is that every old church has something of interest, something peculiar to it. It drives us into the most obscure of places.

Tucked away in the rural hinterland between Alcester and Bidford-on-Avon lies the little village of Wixford. The population of the place has changed little over the decades, and currently stands at just 110 people.

Were it not for two pubs with a reputation for food and drink, few would come and few would go. The little railway station closed many years ago.

Nevertheless, Wixford has a weight of history behind it. A Roman road - usually known as Ryknield Street - passed through it, and its importance as a crossing point of the River Arrow is testified by its name. There was a mill on the river at the time of Domesday, which paid rent, partly in the form of eels, to the monks of Evesham Abbey, who owned the manor until the Dissolution.

The modern visitor would notice a string of timber-framed cottages which lie between the two pubs, and probably decide, at that point, that they had paid due attention to the village's charms. Only the truly dedicated would turn off the straight and onto the narrow, and head for the church.

The chances are the church will be locked, as it has been on my two visits. That could easily be the case, even if you turned up on a Sunday morning. There are only two services a month in the summer, and one in the winter. All the churches and chapels in these parts - Bidford, Wixford, Exhall, Temple Grafton, Binton and Salford Priors - share the same vicar. Pluralism has today become an economic necessity, not a clerical luxury.

So - confronted by a locked door - there's a moment of frustration, and a fist waved at the Almighty. Inside (I'm led to believe) is the finest medieval brass in all of Warwickshire, commemorating Thomas de Cruwe and his wife, the owners of nearby Moor Hall back in the 15th Century.

The dedication to St Milburga, a daughter of King Penda of Mercia, also has promise, suggesting a church with roots back in Anglo-Saxon times. There are certainly a couple of Norman doorways. The little church offered a place for travellers to pray on their way into and out of the Forest of Arden.

Grudgingly I have to admit that locked churches are sometimes good for me. They force me to pay proper attention to the exterior and to the churchyard, rather than marching straight to the high altar.

So let's concentrate on Wixford churchyard, then. First you will see the base of a medieval preaching cross, of roughly the same date as the De Cruwes. Then there's an ancient (and famous) yew tree, propped up like a frail pensioner, which spreads across much of the south side of the church and.

How old this is I can't say for certain. There's a record of a yew in the graveyard being cut down (against the villagers' wishes) and replaced in the middle of the 18th Century. That would make the tree only 250 years old, and (for a yew) more of a youngster than a old lady.

It's only then, turning away from the yew and the cross, that you see Wixford's USP - its unique selling point - and I have to confess to having overlooked it on my first visit here. In the corner of the churchyard stands the most unusual of houses, more like a shed than a house, in all honesty.

The house seems to have grown organically up from the ground. The roof is thatched, and the walls are covered in dry gorse, several inches thick and intertwined with hurdle. It is, undoubtedly, one of the most unusual structures you will ever see.

A nearby notice explains what the building is, and why it was deemed worthy of being listed (at Grade II). Dating back to the 18th Century, it was renovated in 1997 with help from English Heritage.

The building in question is known as a "horse house". In that century, as today, Wixford was not an independent parish with its own priest, but a chapel-of-ease, sharing its vicar with nearby Exhall.

Perhaps it was the absence of a resident priest that led to the hamlet's local reputation as "Popish Wixford", out of sight of the Anglican Church.

When the vicar of Exhall rode across to Wixford to conduct a service, then, he parked his trusty nag in the horse house. There the beast remained, snug and ticking over, until the service was done.

The current priest-in-charge of these several parishes - Rev. Anthony Walker - tells me that he takes a car from Bidford to Wixford, and therefore has little need of stabling. And until the oil runs out on us, so it will remain, loved but unused.

You can, just about, peer into the old stable and imagine the vicar's horse, snorting and listening for the last hymn, and the ride back home.