

An open and shut crawl near Bristol

This feature has been written by Neil Marchant from Thornbury, South Gloucestershire, a member of the online Churchcrawling Yahoo group and a graduate of St David's University at Lampeter. He works in Mental Health Nursing and is an enthusiastic amateur churchcrawler.

Sometimes you find a church open and sometimes locked. It is always a dilemma whether to hunt down a key, especially when the church outside appears rather uninteresting. After going through the effort, I am usually pleased to have done so but occasionally the external impression is confirmed by an equally dull exterior and you feel returning the key after only a couple of minutes is a little insulting! I recently did a trip around South Gloucestershire, which proved these points to some degree, although I will say I found each and every church enjoyable. I had visited all of these churches before, many as a schoolboy cycling out during the holidays.

St Peter, Dyrham, South Gloucestershire

This churchcrawl turned out to be a near-circular trip, which I began at the Bath junction of the M4 motorway, turning south



Dyrham: The west tower with a glimpse of the house at Dyrham Park to the right

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Dyrham: Interior with the “unrestored” feel that pervades the building



towards Bath. I started by visiting the National Trust property at Dyrham Park, and like a good proportion of visitors made my way up the path to the church overlooking the formal gardens. At other times I have approached along the long tree-lined path from the village. St Peter's church was open, and has much of interest without being great architecture. The Georgian plastered ceilings to the nave and aisles make the church appear rather dull but also add to the “unrestored” feel that pervades the building, spoilt only by the pine benches. Some of the latter have been removed in the south aisle to display the oddly-sited brass of Sir Morys Russel d1401 and his wife d1415, the figures being almost life-size. There are other monuments too, including a bulky tomb chest with effigies and heavy superstructure to George Wynter d1581; the children are on panels behind the effigies, most kneeling sideways with their heads unnaturally turned towards the spectator. The pulpit is a gorgeous Jacobean affair with back-plate and elaborate tester, and the church has two fonts, one Norman the other 17th-century. Medieval stained glass figures appear in the tracery of the east window and below there is a 16th-century Flemish triptych. A collection of hatchments adorn the south aisle.

Holy Trinity, Doynton, South Gloucestershire

From Dyrham I headed to the village of Doynton, nestling under the mighty Tog Hill. Holy Trinity church was open, but is mainly a rebuilding of 1865 and 1893. The tower however is of 1644, and the north chapel late Perpendicular with an original roof (now the organ chamber). To the west of the tower, with its one



surviving angle pinnacle, there is herringbone masonry. I walked in and surprised a W.I. meeting gathered at the west end of the nave. In common with many churches today, the church is used for a variety of functions, and there are kitchen facilities screened off at the west end of the north aisle. The arcade has crude blocks of stone in the capitals and spandrels, still awaiting for some foliage to be carved. I almost missed the ancient carving above the east window (outside) and remembered to search for the brass to William att Wode d1529 and his wife Margaret which I had never seen. I was worried this was under the chancel and sanctuary carpeting but I found them covered by a mat by a radiator. The inscription is in English.

Doynton: Note the tower with its one surviving angle pinnacle

St James the Greater, Abson, South Gloucestershire

From here I took the A420 through Wick and turned off towards Abson to visit the church of St James the Greater. The Perpendicular west tower is uncommonly handsome but the formerly fine sculptures are weathering badly, in stark contrast with the pristine SW pinnacle, replaced recently after a storm brought down the original. The church was locked but a couple

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Abson (above): The Perpendicular west tower is uncommonly handsome

Abson (below left): The rare and rather surprising sculpture incorporated into the chancel east wall

Abson (below right): The ornate altar table of c1600

of places are listed to get the key. The church is large but aisleless, and apart from the handsome font of c1400 and the ornate altar table of c1600, there is not a lot to detain you for very long. In fact the exterior is more interesting, with the tower, two Norman doorways, and a rare and rather surprising sculpture incorporated into the chancel east wall.



St Anne, Siston, South Gloucestershire

Passing through Pucklechurch, to where I would return later, I headed to the small church of St Anne at Siston (Syston). Brown tourist signs point the way, so it is a surprise to find this one locked. No information is displayed either about keyholders. I recalled finding the church locked on my last visit here in 2000 and getting the key from the house to the right of the car-park entrance and so it was today. From the outside it is a church which does not promise much, picturesque, the south porch larger than the transept, but hiding much of interest. The key unlocks a cashbox at the porch entrance; in here the keys to the porch and the inner door. The outer door swings open to reveal a Norman doorway with a crudely-sculpted tympanum displaying the “Tree of Life.” I instantly recalled the John Piper window at All Saints church in Clifton, Bristol, some 800 years or so newer. Another lock, another key, and I am inside this rather special building. Immediately you see the wall paintings, although most of them



Siston: The south porch is larger than the transept

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Siston (above): One of the six surviving Norman lead fonts in Gloucestershire



Siston (above right): Paintings done by two ladies from the big house

are actually on canvas. These are of course not old, and have been here in situ for just over 100 years. They were done by two ladies from the big house, Siston Court, just up the hill from the church. They cover the east wall of the nave, the inside of the chancel arch and the east wall of the chancel. The other treasure is one of the six surviving Norman lead fonts in Gloucestershire, the figures almost Saxon in style, but the architectural surrounds betray a later date.

St Thomas a Becket, Pucklechurch, South Gloucestershire

Retracing my route I next stopped at St Thomas's church in Pucklechurch. The grey stone and lack of ornamentation makes



Pucklechurch : The lack of ornamentation makes this a rather foreboding building from the outside

this a rather foreboding building from the outside and the fact it is normally locked without keyholder information does not encourage you in pursuit of the key. However a quick call at the vicarage next door and I was inside. The church has a lengthy nave, chancel and a north aisle. The fittings are principally Victorian (like the fancy font by R C Carpenter), and there is a recent boldly coloured millennium window by Mark Angus, but the east end of the aisle is something special. Here William and Eleanor de Cheltenham founded a chantry in the 14th century, and here is where they are buried. She lies in an ogee recess beneath the north window, where a beautiful cusped ogee canopy rises up into the window behind as a rere-arch. Opposite is his monument, a chest with matching openings making a pair. Surprisingly at some point these two effigies have swapped recesses.



Pucklechurch : William and Eleanor de Cheltenham founded a chantry in the 14th century



Westerleigh: The tower has an almost chequerboard appearance with random stone replacements of worn stone

St James the Great, Westerleigh, South Gloucestershire

A couple of miles further on, and on the other side of the motorway lies the village of Westerleigh. It lies within a network of rail lines and the church of St James the Great is quite a feature on the trains from or to Birmingham and London. The tower has an almost chequerboard appearance with random stone replacements of worn stone. It is crowned by an ornate openwork embattled parapet with eight pinnacles, the NE one over the stairwell, bigger and taller, being a local feature called a “Bristol spirelet.” The church was open, a fairly recent reversal of practice, and consists of a long nave and S aisle, a north porch and chancel with a south chapel, now an organ chamber. Opposite the entrance the arcade incorporates a single image niche in the spandrel. The tower screen is dated 1638 but the west gallery above is of 1771. The font is the subject of much debate, the *Buildings of England* call it “Neo-Norman but said to be 17th-century but more likely 19th-century.” However the bowl is of a slightly different stone, and the design is quite crude and could be original Norman work. There is no dispute over the elegant 15th-century stone pulpit although the stairs are obviously Victorian,



Westerleigh: The font is the subject of much debate

and the window alongside has suns, roses and a single crown in the tracery heads from the same century. The other feature to note is the huge Royal Arms of George II in the south aisle.

St Peter, Wapley, South Gloucestershire

My final stop was at the church of St Peter at Wapley. Set back from the road with the former rectory for a neighbour, this



Wapley: This church was the only one that defeated me on this trip

church was the only one that defeated me on this trip. I found it locked, with no information on where you can get the key. So on this occasion I did not get to see the panelled arches and tomb chest dividing the chancel from the south chapel, nor the Jacobean and later woodwork from Bristol Cathedral that is incorporated into many of the fittings. Maybe if I hadn't been inside before and if I felt I had a bit more time left in my day I would have tracked down a keyholder through knocking on doors! Random, but it does work sometimes.



When I first visited all of these churches, as a schoolboy on my bicycle, I found them all open. Over time several of them now keep their doors locked, a couple have never done so, and one has reversed its locking policy. Sadly only one of these locked churches displays a keyholder notice, leaving the casual visitor disappointed, although the more determined enthusiast will try other avenues to get inside. Today, a vital tool is a mobile phone, preferably a Smartphone with internet access. Often an internet search (assuming you can get a signal deep in the countryside) will find either the church website or the "A church near you" website which can have contact phone numbers for that church. If all that fails, then there is "ask a local" or random door knocking as mentioned above.