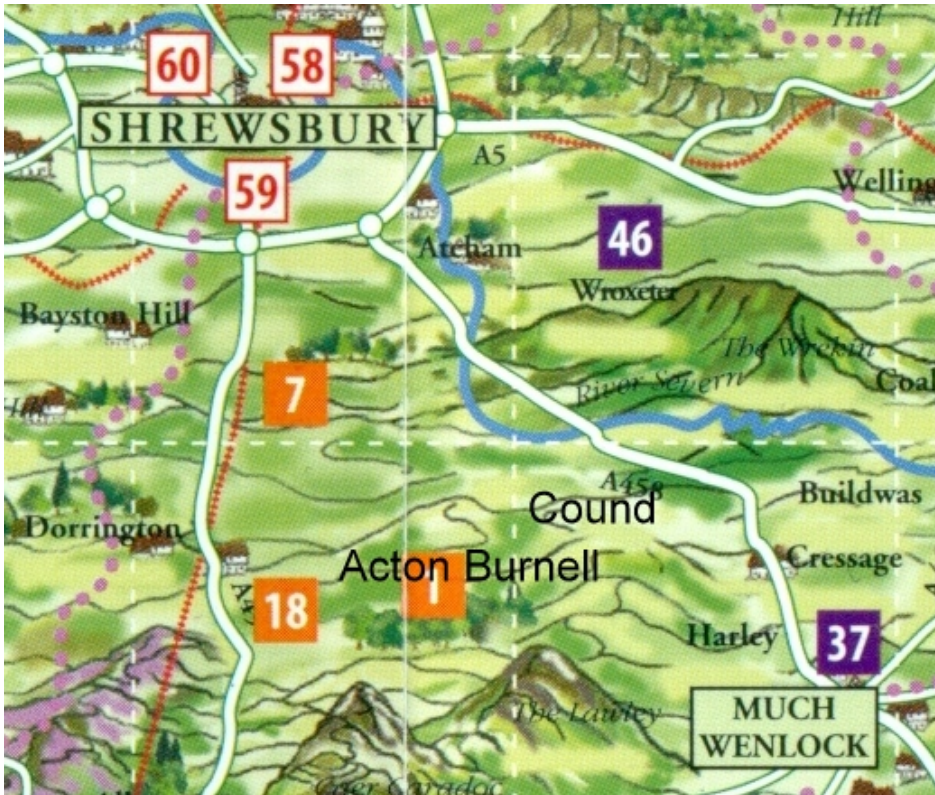


# THE ROAD TO SHREWSBURY ABBEY Acton Burnell, Harley, Cound, Shrewsbury Abbey.



The route we followed, from Much Wenlock to Shrewsbury on the A458.



**St Mary's, Harley was our first destination on the road to Shrewsbury - alas it rained!**

You may have read the first article we wrote over Easter 2013 - an exploration of the churches to

be found between Much Wenlock and Craven Arms/Church Stretton; in this article we travel north-west, from Wenlock towards Shrewsbury.

Our original intention was to visit the churches within the Wenlock Team Ministry, but the day didn't quite work out like that - although our first visit, to **St Mary's at Harley**, did go to plan.

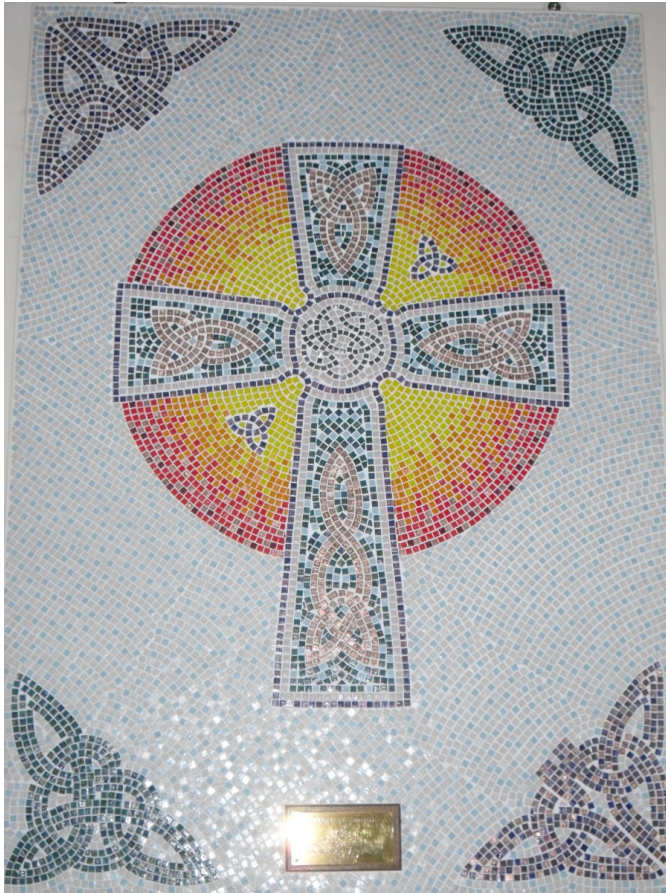
## **HARLEY**

The village of Harley is off the A458, a short distance from Wenlock Edge. In pre-Saxon days the inhabitants of Harley were called the 'Wrocen seatna' - ie people dependent on the nearby Wrekin, referring to the days when the land lay in the territory of the **Cornovii** whose tribal headquarters was in the hill fort on top of the Wrekin.

The village name is derived from the **Harley family** mentioned in the Domesday Book, who held it until the 14th century, when the oldest part of the church was built. Eventually the Harley's holdings passed to the Lacon family.



18th century wainscot box pews at Harley.



The community mosaic at Harley made by Harley Sunday Club in 2003.



**The nave and chancel at Harley.**

Rebuilt in Elizabethan times, the main parts of the church survived until 1845, when it was demolished and the present structure built - the architect was **S. Pountney Smith** of Shrewsbury. One noteworthy aspect in the nave of the church are the wainscot box pews from the 18th century. You can imagine families with all their brood fitting cosily into their appointed boxes, and merrily worshipping together as a clan!

## COUND



**An ancient yew tree at the entrance gate to St Peter's, Cound.**



### **The approach to St Peter's, Cound**

Our next church was further north-west along the A458 at **Cound** (we still aren't sure whether that should rhyme with 'round' or 'wound!'). The church has its own car park by the village hall, and a beautiful approach framed by a pair of ancient yew trees either side of the pathway.

As with most ancient churches, there have been several stages of building. The first tower was built in 1300, the south aisle widened in 1330, and the south porch added later. A later tower incorporating some of the original one was built in 1500, with battlements.





**The wonderful weathered and tactile door at Cound - an attraction in its own right!**



Medieval 'Doom' fresco at Cound, featuring The Last Judgement.



In Doom murals Christ was frequently depicted with a two-edged sword coming from his mouth - a reference to Revelation 19:15 (This is merely an example, it's not at Cound.)

In the middle ages the walls would have been plastered, limewashed and decorated with wall paintings. Part of one of these has survived above the chancel arch in a late 15th or early 16th century '**Doom**' painting. The remains include the outline of the now vanished great 'rood' - the crucifixion scene. The figure of Jesus may have been made of wood, as in other Doom paintings found elsewhere in the country. The figure of Our Lady sitting by the Cross still partly survives. Above the rood, Christ sits in majesty upon a rainbow with a two-edged sword issuing from his mouth, a reference to Revelation, 19:15 : "And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron..." (King James version.)



The chancel arch and chancel at Cound.



**The Parish Chest at Cound.**



**A similar parish chest made from a single log - we found this one on a previous trip to St Gregory the Great in Morville.**

The church at Cound is one of the prettiest you are ever likely to come across and it's filled with special features and memorials.

For example there is a 'Parish Chest', in which registers and other important documents were stored before the advent of metal safes. It was usual for the vicar to have one key and the wardens another - just to make sure no one was up to anything!

Many were cut out of a single tree trunk. It meant that the individual components of a conventional chest couldn't be prised or cut apart. They were sometimes chained down, but they are immensely heavy which would deter theft.

*(Thanks very much to Christine Buckley for identifying the object and giving me this information.)*



The bellringing area at Count.





**An Easter flower display at Cound**

At the west end of the church is a ground floor area at the rear of the nave, where the bellringers' ropes are located.

Finally, when we visited after Easter, the church had a proliferation of wonderful Easter flower displays, including one that had chickens and nests fashioned from straw. The floral displays themselves were arranged around giant egg shapes.

## ACTON BURNELL



**Acton Burnell castle. It is believed that the first Parliament of England at which the Commons were fully represented was held here in 1283.**

At this point we diverted from our plan, alas missing out three of the Wenlock Team Ministry churches we had intended to visit. Instead we followed the brown tourist signs to **Acton Burnell**, the home village of **Robert Burnell** who rose to a position of great power and influence as **King Edward I's Chancellor**. Robert was a man of wealth and influence and it is to him that the village owes its church, (St Mary's) and the castle next door.



**St Mary's Acton Burnell**



**Lepers' peephole (often called a hagioscope or squint) at Acton Burnell.**

This is another gem of a building, with some really idiosyncratic hark-backs to the medieval age. One of these is a small square window low down in the chancel. Such windows are not rare, but often found where lepers gathered in communities. The window enabled them to see the blessing of the bread and the wine at services from outside the building, which they were not allowed to attend. Architecturally these are referred to as 'hagioscopes' or 'squints'.



**Memorial to Sir Humphrey Lee.**



**Memorial to Sir Richard Lee**

There are two remarkably ornate medieval tombs in the north transept at St Mary's, for the Lee family. **Sir Humphrey Lee** is shown at prayer facing his wife; and **Sir Richard Lee** who died in 1591 is portrayed as a knight with his wife beside him, 3 sons at his head and feet, and 9 daughters behind him!



**Face on the wall of the north transept at St Mary's, Acton Burnell.**

Other features to look out for are the whimsical stone carved faces distributed throughout the building.

The village of Acton Burnell is dominated by **Acton Burnell Hall**, now used by Concord College, an independent college for 13-19 year olds, catering for boarders and day pupils. The college has many overseas students and boasts a superb record for gaining students admission to Britain's top universities.

## SHREWSBURY ABBEY



**Journey's end at the Abbey of St Peter and St Paul in Shrewsbury.**

Our last port of call was the wondrous medieval **Abbey of St Peter and St Paul in Shrewsbury**. The abbey has been through many changes in 1000 years, not least of which at the time of the Reformation, when much of the monastery surrounding it was knocked down.





'Cadfael' book display in the abbey shop.

The early part of its history features in the popular novels of **Ellis Peter's Brother Cadfael**, which are celebrated in the abbey shop with a display of **Cadfael** novels. They were based around the life of Brother Cadfael, a medieval monk at the Abbey, who was also the Abbey's herbalist and detective/crime solver.

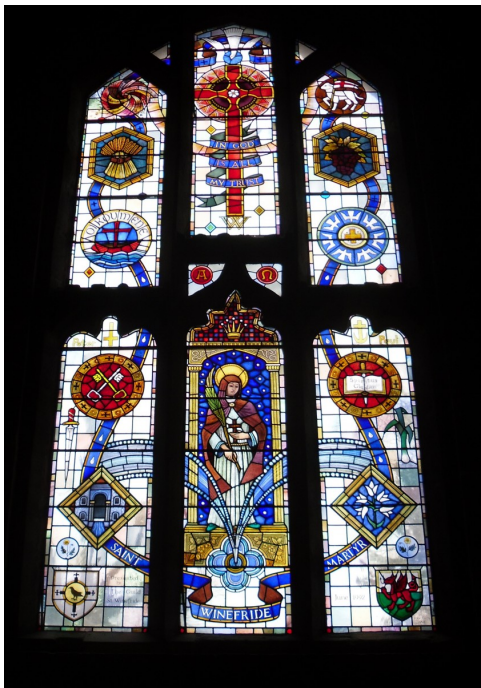
The abbey was founded by **Roger de Montgomery**, a relative and strong supporter of **William the Conqueror**. Roger ruled Normandy in place of William while he was invading England in 1066. In 1094 Roger fell ill and was taken to the Abbey, where he died. 100 years later the tomb slab now in the Abbey was carved in his honour.



**Tomb of Roger de Montgomery, who founded the Abbey.**

The monks at the Abbey followed the **Rule of St Benedict**, who had developed a model for communal monastic living in the 6th century in Italy.

**Odelirius**, a Saxon priest of the wooden Saxon church that preceded the Abbey, made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1082 and was so impressed by the churches dedicated to St Peter and St Paul that he inspired Roger to establish a religious house dedicated to the Benedictine monastic way in Shrewsbury. Originally the buildings included not only the church but community buildings including cloisters, dormitory, chapter house and refectory.



**St Winefride's window**

On one of the most celebrated Cadfael stories tells of Prior Herbert's mission to collect the sacred bones of **St Winefride** from the Welsh village of **Gwytherin**. St Winefride was a simple Welsh girl who had been beheaded by a rejected suitor and then miraculously brought back to life and her head restored by her uncle **St Bueno** - she is often depicted carrying her head in her hands. She led a religious order in Gwytherin in North Wales until her (second) death. Prior Herbert ordered that her bones were to be brought to Shrewsbury so that she could be properly revered - and to attract pilgrims to the Abbey.



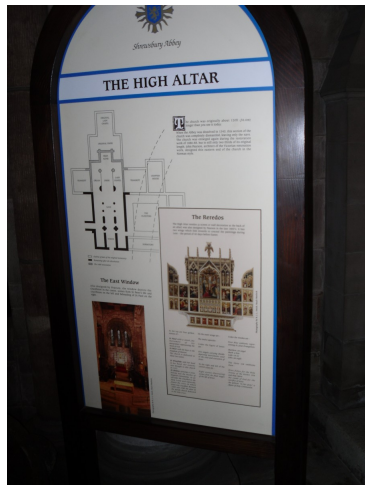
**The tomb of Richard Onslow and his wife.**

There are a host of fascinating tombs and memorials in the Abbey, although surprisingly many of these originated in other churches in the town that had either fallen down or were pulled down. For example the tomb of Richard Onslow was originally at **Old St Chad's Church**. His memorial is particularly striking - he and his wife are depicted larger than lifesize in the fine clothes they would have worn. He was **Speaker of the House of Commons** during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.



### **The High Altar and reredos**

However for me the most striking feature is the reredos at the High Altar of the Abbey. It is absolutely splendid and even from the far end of the building dominates the entire abbey space. Details from the reredos include gold statues of four saints associated with the Abbey: **St Paul, St Winefride, St Helena and St Peter**. Eight panels portray scenes from The Passion and Resurrection of Christ and twelve painted figures represent the apostles.



### **An information panel in the Abbey**

The visit was a satisfying conclusion to the trip north-west from Wenlock. I spent over an hour in the Abbey reading the information panels - which are well presented and clearly written. I fully agree with the prophecy of St Wulfstan who wrote in the 11th century:

***"...the time will arrive when it shall be the most glorious place of religion in all Shrewsbury and a joy to the whole country..."***

**Martin and Magda Jones**

**April 2013**

**Reviewed by Martin Jones, March 2016**

## **MUCH WENLOCK TEAM MINISTRY CHURCHES**

**Here is a list of churches on the north-western route from Much Wenlock to Shrewsbury, some of which we regrettably missed on this trip but intend to cover in the future. All belong to the Wenlock Team Ministry:**



**Holy Trinity, Much Wenlock**





**St Mary, Harley (visited)**



**Christ Church, Cressage.**



**St Peter, Cound (visited)**



**All Saints', Berrington.**



**St Margaret, Betton Strange.**