

Stanton Long and Holdgate, Shropshire

On the first truly pleasant day of 2013 - when it was in any way sunny and agreeable to be out and about - Magda and I set out to complete some unfinished business.

We had curtailed our exploration of the southern grouping of Much Wenlock Team Ministry churches earlier in April, without visiting what was reputed to be one of the most beautiful examples in the whole of Shropshire, **Stanton Long**.

STANTON LONG



Both Stanton Long and Holdgate are south of Much Wenlock, off the B 4378/ B4368 route, midway between Much Wenlock and Craven Arms.



Walking through the village to the church at Stanton Long, one passes a relic of a bygone age - a magnificent Tithe Barn. It has now been sensitively converted into a private residence.



The idyllic church at Stanton Long is in a dip, approached by a long pathway - the first glimpse of the church is framed in an arch by ancient yew trees.



Walking down the path, there are wonderful views of Corvedale.



The church is in a dip with the magnificent Corvedale valley in the distance.

The church of **St Michael and All Angels** didn't disappoint us – from our first glimpse we knew it would be a winner. Set in the beautiful Corvedale valley, this small 13th century church has a weather-boarded belfry with pyramid roof. The church is set in a dip, approached down a long slope, guarded by yew trees. In the near distance nesting rooks circled around a tall tree - beyond lay the magnificent landscape of Corvedale.



Magda at the oak door, St Michael and All Angels, Stanton Long.

The main entrance door is an important feature at St Michael's. Dating from around 1200 it has attractive iron scrollwork, a closing ring and hooks for a notice board.



The beautiful nave and chancel at Stanton Long.



The altar and reredos at Stanton Long.



The reredos at Stanton Long.

On entering, the nave and chancel have a very pleasant aspect. The altar is well lit by several stained glass windows. The **reredos** behind the altar was carved by **Robert Clarke of Hereford** and donated by the Cocks family in 1888. The communion rails and the chancel floor tiles also date from this time.



The filled-in so-called 'leper window' may just have been used for ventilating the chancel.

There is a low-side window in the chancel, similar to the one we found at **Acton Burnell**. This would originally have been provided with grille and shutters. At one time low-side windows were believed to have been leper windows through which lepers could follow the service and receive Communion. It is now thought their purpose was to provide ventilation for the chancel when accumulated smoke from candles and incense became overpowering.



The roof at Stanton Long showing wind braces and quaterfoils.

The roof is a notable feature of the church. It dates from the later Middle Ages and has wind braces forming quaterfoils.



The font at Stanton Long.

The font has a plain bowl and an octagonal stem, thought to date from the restoration of the church in 1842.



The weatherboarded belfry at Stanton Long.

The weatherboarded belfry has a pyramid roof. It contains three bells arranged for full circle ringing. The bells were recast in 1893.

HOLDGATE

Driving southwards from Stanton Long we made for **Holy Trinity Church, Holdgate**, which received a grant of £150,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund's **Repair for Places of Worship Scheme** in 2012. It's a very ancient building - there are cracks in the tower and the chancel which need addressing, and all the roofs need retiling.



Holy Trinity Church, Holdgate.

The Grade 1 Church is hunched on a crest in the Corvedale Valley. It enjoys stunning views, particularly of Brown Clee Hill, and stands in the south west bailey of what was once Holdgate Castle.

The former motte, swathed in trees, can be seen east of the churchyard. The church nave dates from the early 12th century; the chancel and tower were added in the 13th century.



The impressive font at Holdgate.

The parish is now one of the smallest in the Hereford diocese and only about thirty-five people live within its boundary.

There are usually services on the 4th Sunday of each month at 9am.

The **Shropshire Way Footpath** passes the churchyard gate; a steady stream of walkers rest there on the leg from **Wilderhope** to the **Brown Clee** summit.



The inside of Holy Trinity, Holdgate. There is much restoration work needed.

Alas the interior of the church shows why the restoration funds are so sorely need. Unlike some similar churches, there does not seem to have been a 19th century Victorian restoration, hence the appearance is very much as it would have been in the 18th century when the box pews were installed.



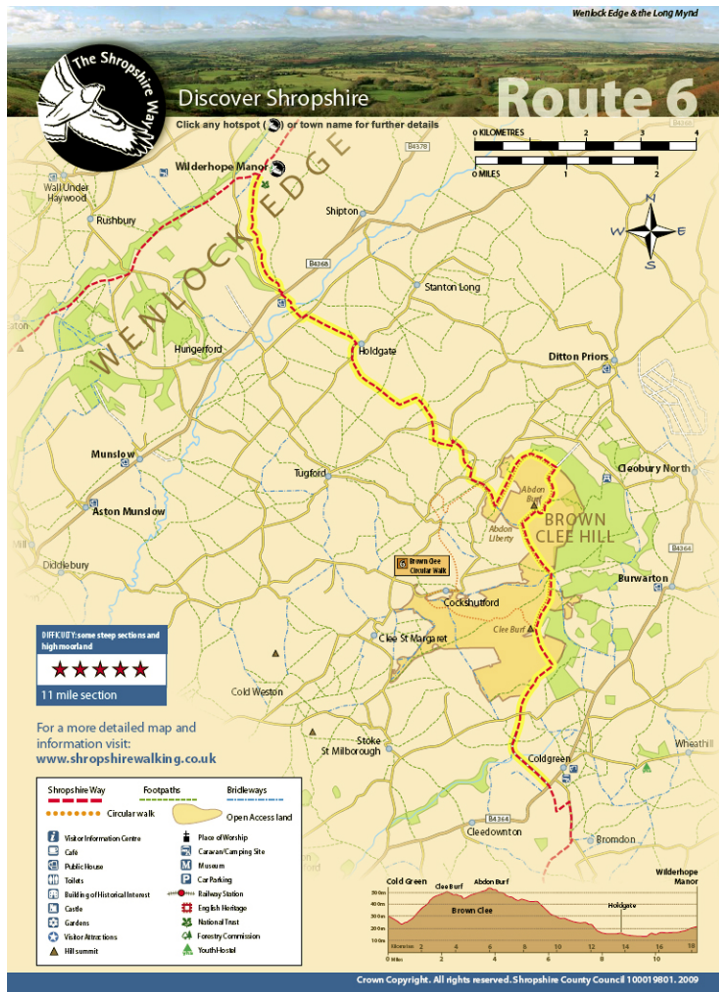
The chancel and altar at Holdgate.

Nevertheless the chancel is attractively well lit and tiled - and the sanctuary well lit. The parish itself raised £50,000 towards the restoration costs and together with the Lottery award, they are near to their target of £225,000. Work was due to begin in Spring 2013.



Sheela na Gig fertility symbol at Holy Trinity Holdgate.

Outside on the south wall there is an example of an ancient fertility symbol set into the stonework - a 'Sheela na Gig'. There are various thoughts on their origins; they appear on many Norman churches of the 12th century. They may have been pagan fertility symbols adapted by Christians to ward off evil - in the same way that grotesques are used.



Holdgate is a popular resting place on the Shropshire Way, for walkers travelling between [Wilderhope Manor](#) (National Trust) and Brown Clee Hill. Wilderhope itself is open on Wednesdays and Sundays from 2-4pm during the summer.

On leaving Holdgate we turned north to Much Wenlock and stopped at Holy Trinity, the mother church for the Wenlock Team Ministry, before following the Olympic walking trail around the town, to the field that was the venue for Much Wenlock's games organised by Dr William Penny-Brookes in 1850 that inspired Baron de Coubertin to organise an international event on the same model.

The event eventually gave rise to Olympic Games of 1896 and thence the modern Olympic movement.

Martin and Magda Jones, April 2013. Reviewed and updated March 2016.

References:

Stanton Long: Church guide leaflet: 'A Brief Guide to St Michael and All Angels Church, Stanton Long, Shropshire'

Holdgate: <http://holdgatechurch.weebly.com/>