

Preen, Rushbury, Tugford, Claverley



Martin visiting St John the Baptist church at Church Preen.

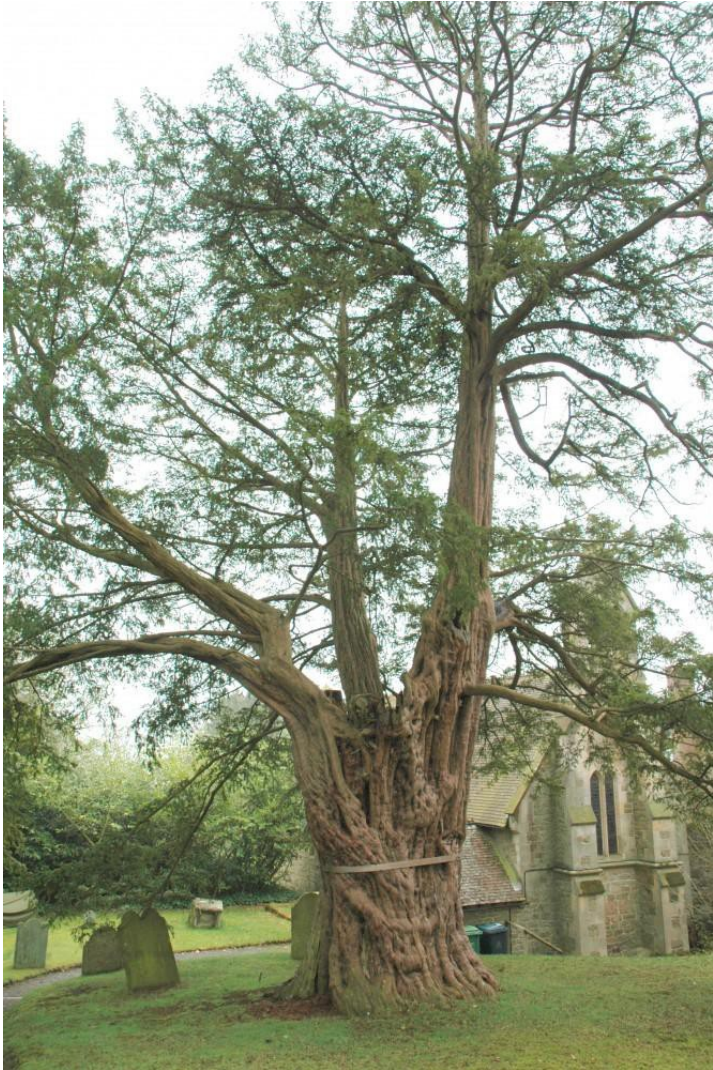
My third trip to explore the beauty of the churches in the Shropshire Hills was shorter than my previous ones, starting from Sedgley at 11am and returning at around 4pm.

My aim this time, having explored the eastern and western Hills on previous trips, was to cover some of the central area.

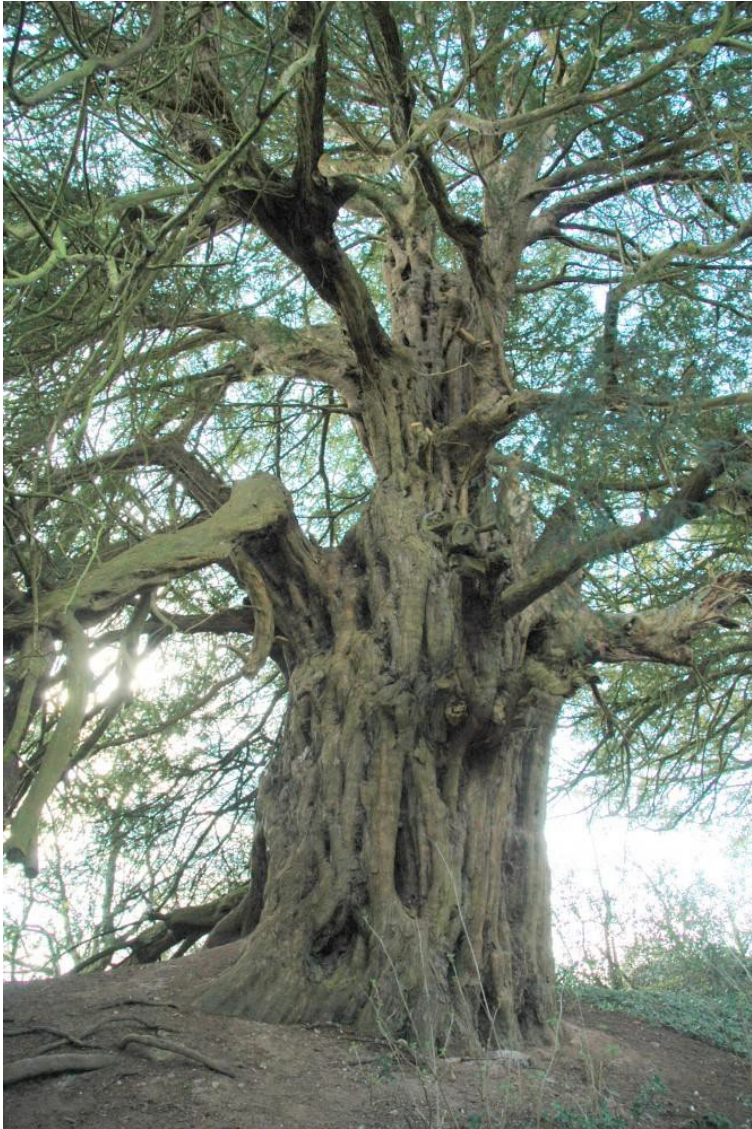
On this occasion I made for Bridgnorth, then on to Much Wenlock. The weather this March day was misty and cold, the promised sunshine never breaking through the whole day.



The lych gate at St John the Baptist, constructed to mark the Millennium in 2000.



The yew at St John the Baptist, Church Preen with steel belt holding the lower branches together - claimed to be '1500 years old'.



A '1600-year-old' giant yew tree at Hope Bagot that I discovered by their holy well on my last trip.

My first church was **St John the Baptist**, west of Much Wenlock at Church Preen. The most notable feature in the churchyard is the immense yew tree on the pathway directly in front of the church. It claimed to be the oldest tree in Europe (a claim also made by Hope Bagot and other churches in this area!).

It is a delightful small church with a very dark, narrow nave and chancel. On entering one feels immediately isolated from the world by a sense of serene holy quietude, a perfect place for spiritual contemplation.



Conservation Society/Country Living Yew Tree Campaign certificate declaring the Church Preen yew tree to be 1500 years old, signed by The Archbishop of Canterbury, actor Robert Hardy and botanist David Bellamy. (The Conservation Foundation is a national registered charity founded in 1982 by Prof David Bellamy and David Shreeve.)

There are several windows dedicated to the former occupiers of Preen Manor, who have either endowed or restored the church over the ages. Most interestingly there is a plaque on the wall, stating that in the opinion of the Conservation Society, the yew tree is **1500** years old, taking it back to the days before St Augustine's mission to Britain's Saxon kingdoms.

Leaving Church Preen, I pressed on southwards and as it was approaching lunchtime I stopped at the [Longville Arms Hotel](#) in Ape Dale near Rushbury. Asking for a humble cheese and pickle sandwich I was rather taken aback to be presented with two giant granary doorsteps with salad and vinaigrette dressing - which splendour prompted me to book a table there for Mother's Day lunch!



Distinctive herringbone-patterned masonry at St Peter's Rushbury



Churchyard slow worm: hiding from me!



Through the keyhole: door furniture at St Peter's Rushbury

My next visit was to **St Peter's Rushbury**. On entering the churchyard the herringbone-patterned masonry is most noticeable on the outside of the building. There are also reputed to be some unusual inhabitants in the churchyard: 'slow worms' which are 'legless lizards' (aren't those snakes?) said to love churchyards - but alas they must have been on strike or perhaps hiding when I visited.



Choir stalls, St Peter's, Rushbury.

Alas, the inside of St Peter's was something of a let-down by comparison with some of the other gems on my visit. I found nothing particularly remarkable about it apart from a sculptured font cover and intricately carved choir stalls, and didn't stay long.

My last scheduled visit was to **St Catherine's Tugford**, which is in a very remote part of the Shropshire Hills. My satnav took me on a very narrow winding route to my destination, beneath Brown Clee Hill.

Yet again the visit was something of a disappointment. The approaches to the church and indeed the church itself were something of a building site and the noise of renovation/conversion work taking place next door spoiled the ambience of this small Norman church.



St Catherine's, Tugford interior



Norman door, Tugford



Grotesque, exterior roof, Tugford.



Norman stonework, St Catherine's Tugford

Inside there was decoration work being carried out, and as with Rushbury, I found little of interest and unfortunately there was no information leaflet about the church, its history or architecture. The history would have been interesting.

Feeling rather despondent at this point, I decided to 'call it a day' and return to Sedgley. However, nearing home I saw signs to **Claverley**, and on a whim I decided to veer off route and have a look at the church there.



Former vicar of Holy Trinity Wordsley, Revd Garry Ward (left) is now vicar of All Saints' Claverley. (Pictured with me at the presentation of my Bishop's Certificate at the Chapter House Worcester in 2011.)



The beautiful old vicarage at Claverley. Garry doesn't live there though: it was sold some time ago and used to offer retreats by the owner. It is again up for sale (as of March 2012). Garry lives in a modern vicarage elsewhere in the village.

The incumbent at All Saints' Claverley is **Revd Garry Ward**, who was one of my tutors along with **Revd Colin Jones** on the Bishop's Certificate which I completed in 2011. Another reason for visiting was the church's reputation (in common with our own church!) for running successful Flower Festivals.

It was a real stroke of luck that I decided at that point to visit. As I entered the church there was a gathering of visitors whom Garry was showing round the church and they were relaxing after their tour, having a cup of tea and a biscuit. I told Garry that I was touring Shropshire churches and that it had been somewhat disappointing so far that day. ***"Well you haven't seen the best yet!"*** he told me and I must agree that Claverley is undoubtedly filled with some of the most extensive, intriguing collections of artefacts I've yet encountered.



The astonishing, totally original Medieval fresco, *possibly* a visual depiction of the 'Psychomachia', a poem by Prudentius, at All Saints', Claverley.

Talking of uniqueness, one of the most striking features is what, on first sight, appears to be a rendition of the Bayeux tapestry on the high north wall of the nave. Scenes of battle between duelling pairs of medieval knights on horseback are depicted.

The origins of the fresco are disputed but some commentators say that it dates from around 1200 and is based on an allegorical poem called the ['Psychomachia'* by the Roman poet Prudentius](#), (*meaning 'conflict of the soul') about the metaphysical battle between the seven Christian virtues, and the seven pagan vices.



The east window, Claverley



The altar, Claverley.

Another striking aspect is the magnificent east window and altar, both vibrantly coloured and lending a dash of pomp and majesty to the building, much as the Great Altar and window at Worcester Cathedral do.



Sir Robert Broke's tomb.

Being buried with your wives on public display in a place of worship seems to have been the thing to do in medieval times! Claverley has its own very fine example in the form of the alabaster tomb of prominent Elizabethan **Sir Robert Broke** of **Ludstone Hall**. He was Speaker of the House of Commons, and he is buried with his two wives in the South Gatacre Chapel. Actually he probably was 'broke', by the time he'd finished supporting two wives and paying for their tomb!



The **Gatacre** name is frequently seen at Claverley. The family has been associated with the parish since the time of Henry II or Richard I, and possibly even from before the Conquest. There are two alabaster slabs that were formerly on the floor, depicting Francis Gatacre of Swyerton (1599) and Sir William Gatacre (1577).



Wall mounted alabaster slabs of Francis Gatacre and Sir William Gatacre and wives.



Jacobean Pulpit.



Saxon, or Early Norman Font.



The ancient Claverley yew.



WJ's 1799 'graffito'

Not to be outdone in the yew tree stakes, Claverley too has a testimonial from the Conservation Society attesting that their yew tree is indeed very ancient indeed: **2,500 years old** - taking us even further back to pre- Christian times.

By the tree is All Saints' graffiti wall, where parishioners have inscribed their names for posterity. Some examples may be older, but there is one prominent graffito belonging to a 'WJ' that goes back to 1799.

Thank you to the ladies at All Saints' and to Garry who made me so welcome and I am glad to attest that All Saints' Claverley is indeed one of the very richest in detail and artefact of all those I've visited on my tours.

I'm sure most people don't realise just how much richness we have right on our doorstep and all the churches in this area are so beautifully treasured and maintained by their priests and parishioners.

I've really enjoyed travelling to and writing about the churches in Shropshire. We often struggle to define 'Britishness', but you could do worse than to look at the lives and histories of the people so faithfully recorded in the fabric of our parish churches.

Martin Jones, 16th March 2012 (Reviewed and updated March 2016)

Notes:

The descriptions above and the ones in other articles on the website are intended to give a flavour of the delights in store if you go exploring Shropshire churches. For accurate histories and more detail please refer to church guidebooks.

Information on All Saints' Church Claverley is based on information from Gordon Home's ***'Descriptive and Historical Notes'*** and the church welcome leaflet.

Information on Church Preen is taken from their ***'church history'*** leaflet.