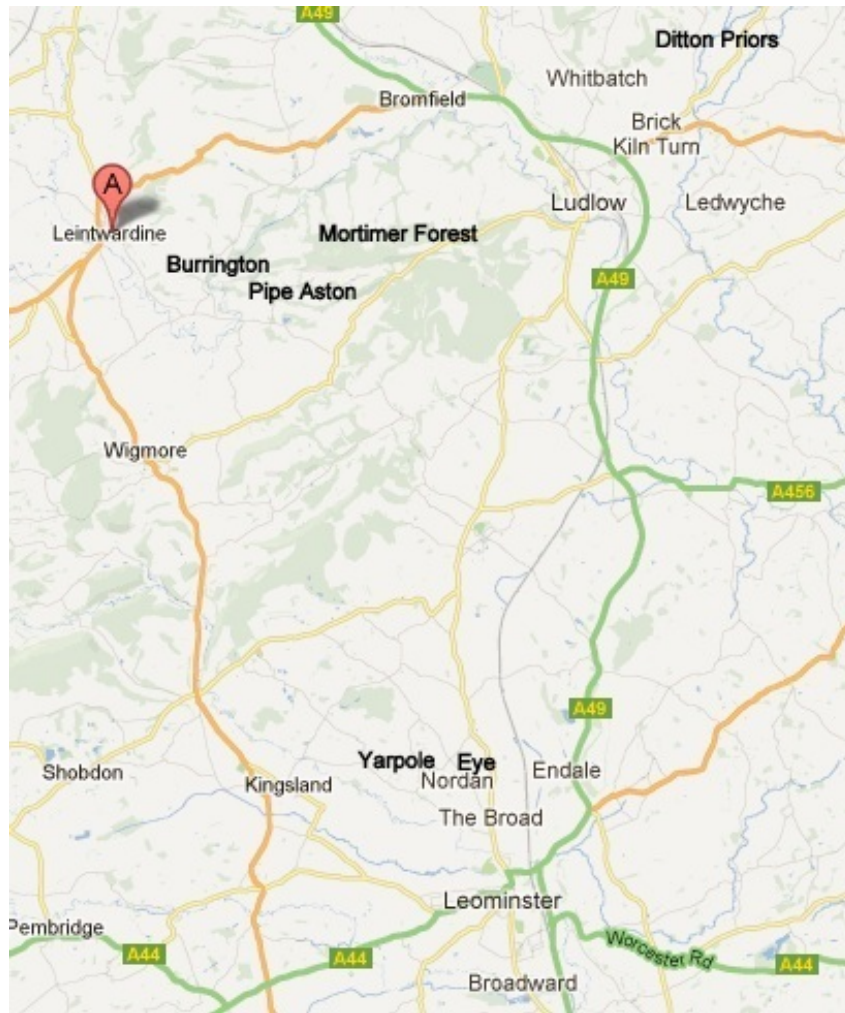


Brown Clee, Mortimer Forest, Leominster and Ludlow

Martin and his wife Magda enjoyed a short break in January 2013, visiting some of the most beautiful churches in the Shropshire Hills and northern Herefordshire.

The visit took in Brown Clee Hill, Mortimer Forest and Leominster, finishing with a long walk around Ludlow and a visit to St Laurence Church.



Locations of churches visited on the trip: Ditton Priors, Leintwardine, Burrington, Pipe Aston, Yarpole, Eye, Leominster and St Laurence, Ludlow.

You may have read previous articles on this site about day trips and short breaks to visit churches in Shropshire and Herefordshire. This article unashamedly returns to the same areas - thankfully there is such richness left by centuries of worship there that you could easily visit a hundred times and still discover something new.



Martin's wife Magda Jones took the photos on the trip!

We headed out from Sedgley on the road to Kidderminster, Bewdley and Wyre Forest, taking the Cleobury Mortimer turn towards Brown Clee. Our intention was to explore the small secluded churches within 10-15 miles of Ludlow.

We set our satnav for Clee St Margaret - it took us down some very wet, muddy, narrow lanes with high hedges, mostly wide enough for only one vehicle, so from time to time we had to draw over to allow others to pass, or where no space existed, reverse down the road.

Somehow we managed to drive straight through Clee St Margaret without stopping as there was traffic behind and no convenient stopping place! We ended up in Ditton Priors near Brown Clee Hill.

Yet sometimes mishaps are no bad thing! Around every turn on this unintended route we encountered breathtakingly beautiful landscapes, well off the beaten track, that we would not otherwise have seen.

Our first church, **St John the Baptist, Ditton Priors**, is mostly 13th Century although some parts are earlier. It contains some very attractive stained glass and some Jacobean wooden seats, with pews dating from 1666. There is a fascinating engraving of the Ten Commandments with some Old Testament biblical figures.



St John the Baptist Church at Ditton Priors, near Brown Clee Hill.



The decorative font cover at Ditton Priors.

After a picnic lunch at **Ditton Priors** we made our way to Ludlow. We'd booked two nights at the **Travelodge** for £15 - yes only £15 per night! - on the Travelodge website.

From a cost point of view, midweek in January is a great time to visit places if you can manage it! The hotel is on the main Shrewsbury to Leominster road next to a Marston's pub called **The Squirrel**, and near **Tuffin's supermarket/petrol station**.

(Note: the nearby Travelodge at Woofferton on the Ludlow to Leominster Road that we normally stay at has recently lost its Little Chef, as well as an adjoining pub, so it's now much more isolated from the point of view of finding somewhere to eat in the evening.)



We stayed overnight in the picturesque Marches town of Ludlow - country hats were on sale in the Market Square.

On the second day of our trip we decided to explore the area between Ludlow and Leominster. Our first port of call was **St Mary Magdalene church at Leintwardine** in **Mortimer Forest**.

The area is an ancient hunting ground owned by the **Mortimers** who were **Lords of the Marches** (the areas on the borders of Wales) and was used for centuries as a ready source of timber by the garrison town and castle at **Ludlow**.

Leintwardine



St Mary Magdalene church in Leintwardine.



The Lady Chapel at Leintwardine, formerly the Mortimer Chapel.

St Mary Magdalene church's foundations are Saxon and Norman but the main part of the church is 13th and 14th century.

Roger Mortimer, the Earl of March, paramour of Edward II's Queen Isabella and usurper of the young Edward III's kingship, founded a collegiate chantry here and built the Mortimer Chapel at the church, now known as the Lady Chapel, where prayers could be said for the souls of his family.

It was to the chapel that in September and November 1353 Edward III made pilgrimages, laying a cloth of gold at the feet of the statue of the Virgin Mary on the occasion of his September visit.

A dramatised version of the part Mortimer played in this era of English history is to be seen in a Channel 4 mini-series based on Ken Follett's book '**World Without End**' - although Roger only lasts one episode! (shown in 2013)

The church contains fine early 15th century oak choir stalls, benches and misericords which came from Wigmore Abbey after the **Dissolution of the Monasteries**.



Martin encounters lion trouble in the children's corner at Leintwardine!



The imaginative children's corner at Leintwardine has been built as a mini-church.



Leintwardine's rustic solution to Junior Church in less enlightened times? This intriguing cage can be found in the narthex at St Mary and St Magdalene.

Some enterprising handyperson at Leintwardine has filled the children's corner with stimulating and colourful toys, and built round it on three sides with wooded walls in the form of a miniature church.

The top is open for parents to keep an eye on their charges.

Our next church was **St George's in Burrington**, a mostly Victorian rebuilt church of 1864 with a spire, in a very pretty setting. At the east end are eight cast iron grave slabs dating from the early 17th century. They are rare examples of early ironwork. They were made during the period when iron was worked at **Downton Gorge**.

After Burrington we went on to **Pipe Aston** which has a wonderful **tympanum** above the front door to the church, depicting the **Lamb of God and two evangelists** surrounded by **foliage-spouting dragons**.

Burrington



The second church on Day 2 was St George's in Burrington - with its wood-encased spire.



A set of unusual iron graves at Burrington - probably cast at nearby Dowton Gorge.

Pipe Aston



St Giles, Pipe Aston has a famous Tympanum inlaid with intricate religious motifs above the front door.



The relief carving of the Tympanum at Pipe Aston depicts the Lamb of God at the centre, with the eagle of St John and the bull of St Luke to either side. Dragon figures spouting foliage form a semi-circular frame.



Surprising Norman patterned wall paintings resembling wallpaper, at Pipe Aston.

Yarpole

The next church we visited is one that every church committee with an eye to the future should visit and learn from - it serves the affluent yet relatively isolated village of Yarpole.

To outward appearances it's similar to many of the charming village churches we have visited in Herefordshire and Shropshire. The key difference is that someone has had the foresight to plan well ahead with the needs of the village community in mind. In so doing they've created a unique blueprint of how churches may be able survive an uncertain future yet remain the heart of the local community.

Gone are the traditional pews in the nave, to be replaced with an open yet versatile space that can be used for any number of community activities during the week. The choir, chancel and altar remain untouched yet upstairs in the gallery can be found a charming coffee shop; and beneath it is not only a village shop, but also the village Post Office.

Opening hours are planned to give the public daily access, whilst retaining times when the normal business of the church such as weddings, funerals and baptisms continue unaffected.

Laid out (almost literally on an wheeled coffin bier!) are books of pictures chronicling every stage in the church's redevelopment, which involved some major construction work.

Surely this is the way forward for our isolated country churches with falling congregations, who are experiencing severe financial pressures. It would be interesting to discover a lot more about the processes by which this was achieved and what financial support they were able to draw down for the purpose.



Yarpole Church was full of surprises - it housed a Post Office, village shop and cafe whilst preserving its traditional ambience for worship .



The cafe in the gallery; beneath are the village shop and Post Office.

Eye

The next church we'd planned to visit was **St Peter and St Paul in Eye** near Leominster. An unusual name - indeed so unusual that the satnav hadn't heard of it and would have taken us to an 'Eye' in Suffolk if it had had its way!

Eye is a Norman church that has several intriguing memorials including the effigies of important people of the day, and some very vibrant stained glass.

It lies in tranquility, next to a very striking manor house. The church dates mainly from the 13th Century, though the tower was a Victorian addition.

The oak porch with its carved bargeboard is 600 years old. There is a fine 17th Century pulpit with panels depicting two men and a woman between carved arches.

The font is 15th Century and on the chancel wall is a figure of an angel with a shield.



Medieval tombs caught the 'eye'...at Eye Church (St Peter and St Paul) near Leominster which is situated next to the impressive Eye Manor (not open to the public).



Beautiful stained glass at Eye Church.

Leominster

We'd always passed through Leominster on the way to destinations further west in Herefordshire or in Wales - and never stopped to walk round the town or investigate its churches.

On this occasion we made for the Priory Church of **St Peter and St Paul**. Even for a church that serves a large town and rural population in the market town, it is still surprisingly cavernous inside and contains some beautiful new areas and historical gems.



The Priory Church of St Peter and St Paul in Leominster.



The nave at the Priory Church, Leominster.



An exhibit inside Priory Church is reputed to be 'the last ducking stool ever used in England' inside.



A delightful raised side chapel area within the Priory Church.

After a good look around Leominster we returned to Ludlow for our second night in the area. We decided to finish our short break with a walk around the areas of the town we don't normally manage to see.

Starting in the Coop car park (cheaper than the central one off Castle Square) we walked to the River Teme which was still angry and swollen after the floods of recent weeks.

We crossed Ludford bridge by the Charlton Arms to Whitcliffe Common (a former medieval common maintained by a Friends Group), and walked along the 'Bread Walk' by the banks of the river, pausing from time to time to look back at the magnificent views of town, church and castle.



An unusual information panel in the form of a water wheel at Dinham Mill by the River Teme.

Crossing back at Dinham Bridge, a display by Dinham Mill shows the history of the former Castle Mills that ground the town's corn in medieval times, later giving way to iron and brass foundries.

What is now Millennium Green was once the town's open air swimming pool. The baths were demolished, the Millennium Green laid out, and the old mill building renovated into what we see today.

The former mill houses the Green Cafe (serving hot and cold drinks, ice creams and snacks) and a workshop and meeting room. A hydro-electric waterwheel, which can be viewed free by the public, generates a portion of the power used by the mill building.

We walked up the long slope by the side of the castle, back to Castle Square. Our last port of call was St Laurence Church, described by Simon Jenkins in his book 'England's Thousand Best Churches' as '**the cathedral of the Marches**'.



Dinham Mill from Dinham Bridge across the Teme: the last day was spent in a perambulation of the picturesque town of Ludlow itself, moving beyond the well trodden tourist areas in the centre of town. This bridge crosses the River Teme and provides wonderful views of the castle and Millennium Green.



The steep walk up from the river takes you by the dramatic walls of Ludlow Castle.

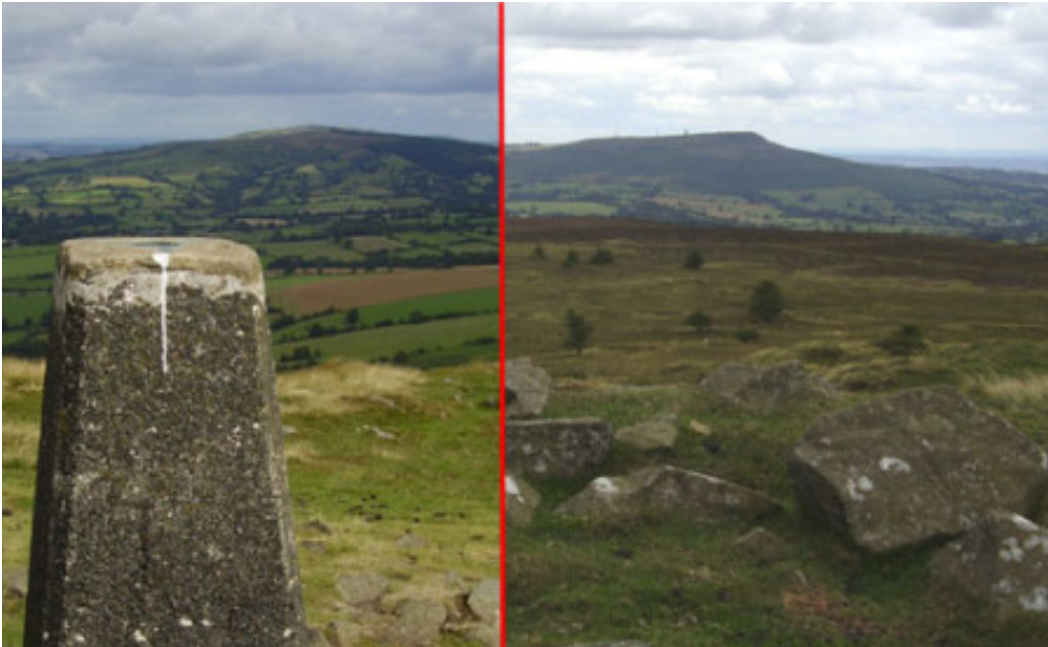


The final church we visited was St Laurence, Ludlow, the 'cathedral of the Marches'. The interior has been recently rearranged and there are ambitious plans on show to extend the church - including building a new cloisters.



By the bookshop in St Laurence Church are two 'Tardis-like' units - a toilet and a kitchen, offering excellent new facilities to visitors and groups using the church.

At the end of our trip, we chose to return to Sedgley on the attractive route from Ludlow to Bridgnorth, passing through the gap between **Titterstone Clee** on the right, and **Brown Clee** on the left.



Brown Clee Hill from Titterstone Clee, and the reverse view.

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