

8th May 2020

Stones

“Sermons in stones and good in everything.”

William Shakespeare, As You Like It

The 12th century church of St Mary's Whitekirk in East Lothian is one of the few mediaeval parish churches still in active use in Scotland, parts of the existing building dating from 1439 when Adam Hepburn of Hailes built the vaulted stone choir. The layout has survived largely intact since then, though everything but the stone walls and vaulting were destroyed by fire in 1914 – by suffragette protestors, so we're told! Restoration began in 1917, with the wagon roof, communion table, pulpit, lectern and font designed by Scottish architect, Sir Robert Lorimer.

From the 1300s, miracles were being reported by people drinking at the nearby well (reputedly dedicated to St Baldred), and Whitekirk quickly became a major centre for pilgrimage. By 1413, there were thousands of visitors to the village, and King James I placed the church under his protection, building hostels to shelter the growing number of pilgrims. Among those pilgrims was the future Pope Pius II, who, it's recorded, walked there barefoot through snow from Dunbar to give thanks that he'd survived a shipwreck there in 1435. The exact location of the holy well isn't known. It was probably filled in during the early 19th century, but all efforts to find its location have come to nothing.

A holy well, pilgrimage, a Papal visit, miracles, a fire, restoration – and suffragettes! All part of the life of this beautiful church. If only the stones could speak, what stories, what “sermons in stones”, they could tell. If only the stones could speak ...

But they can't! So we'll have to do the speaking for them: in welcoming new pilgrims and visitors – Popes included, if they want to come; offering holy sanctuary; sharing worship and praise; being the people of God as folk have been for nearly 700 years. The stones can have their say, but the faithful people of God will have their say too.

A prayer for today

“Loving God, there are big stones and little stones built into the walls of your Kingdom. Help me to play my part to let these walls speak of your Love. Amen.

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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