

YATTON CHAPEL - A HIDDEN NORMAN GEM NEAR ROSS

Some members will already know the disused Norman chapel at Yatton, but I suspect, because of its secluded site, many will not have come across it. It is reached by taking the road that leads from How Caple to the Weston Cider Factory and Much Marcle, branching off right towards Yatton and then right again down a farm track. You descend into a hidden valley, rising to a backdrop of woods with the only buildings in sight being Chapel Farm and the chapel itself.

It has been long disused — a new church was built up the hill in 1841 - and it fell into disrepair. At the time the Herefordshire volume of "the Buildings of England" was written in 1963 it had a corrugated iron roof. However it is now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, the body which looks after redundant churches, who have put on a new slate roof. Fortunately they have not smartened the church up too much and the whole site retains a wonderfully wild aspect.

Inside is a simple space with nave and chancel undivided and an earth floor. There are some 13th century windows with simple stone tracery and two fonts, one belonging to the church and the other brought in from elsewhere.

But the main treasure is outside - the Norman south doorway. This has sculpture dating from the mid-1100s representative of the so-called "Dymock School of Sculpture", named after the work in Dymock church across the Gloucestershire border. The work is not so fine or so complex as that of the roughly contemporary "Herefordshire School", to be seen at places like Kilpeck, but it has a simple charm that is very appealing.

The main arch of the doorway has the familiar Norman zig-zag motif and the shafts have odd, disjointed geometrical carvings, as if the stones have been taken down and re-assembled incorrectly. The best carving is in the tympanum, the semi-circular space between the lintel of the door and the arch above. It depicts a stylised tree, sometimes referred to as a "Tree of Life". Kilpeck has something similar. Is it a religious reference to the cross, or the true vine, or does it hark back to pagan fertility symbols, or perhaps a bit of both?

Do go and experience this evocative place; a crisp winter's day is the ideal time.