

WELLS CIVIC SOCIETY: Meeting of 10 May 2023 in St Cuthbert's church



Antonia Gwynn speaking to the society in St Cuthbert's church

A day in Wells should include St Cuthbert's. So said Antonia Gwynn, parish administrator and churchwarden, as she spoke to Wells Civic Society at their May gathering, which was held in the church. If anyone was in any doubt about this, they surely weren't after a fascinating evening of listening about and touring the church, and please note, touring means many of the group ascending the 166 steps and out onto the top of the tower.

The church once had another, central tower which either collapsed or was removed in 1561. This present ascent included a stop in the ringing chamber, which also houses the mechanism of the clock, which is now wound electronically, as well as more than a glimpse of the eight unusually heavy bells, the oldest of which dates from 1683. The group was surprised to hear that when the bells are in full flow, the tower can be felt to sway. It was a perfect evening for the view: gentle sunshine, a cloudless sky, crystal-clear light and the vista of the greenness of a Somerset spring. The guide for the tower part of the evening was the vicar, the reverend Sam Denyer who, apart from warmly welcoming the group at the beginning of the evening, made two trips up the tower in order to accommodate realistically the numbers.

Sam's name is to be found as the present incumbent at the bottom of a rather long list of previous vicars, fully chronicled, with the one at the top dated 1239. The date of the first recorded church warden is 1348.

So numerous and interesting are the features of St Cuthbert's that there was a further choice of

tours. One, led by Patsy Barrow, concentrated on the north reredos, a reredos being an ornamental screen covering the wall at the back of an altar, although St Cuthbert's actually has a south reredos, too. In the sixteenth century, in accordance with religious practices either in vogue or being imposed at the time, they were hacked down, used to fill in niches, and plastered over until discovered, still with much of their original bright colour, in 1848 by workmen engaged in a general renovation.

Something else that St Cuthbert's also has two of is royal coats of arms, Charles I and Charles II. This was pointed out by Antonia as she took a general tour of the church. She remarked at how the visitors who do not know the church at all are amazed when they notice the high and colourful ceiling, with its intriguing angels. We owe the ceiling's striking colour to the vision of the then vicar's wife in 1963. Antonia pointed out particularly the wooden pulpit of 1636, with at least one or two remarkable carvings, and the Treasury, which has been used for various purposes, not the least noteworthy of which was garaging the town's fire engine, which made for an interesting diversion if it had to be put to use and exit the church while a service was taking place.

Antonia surmised that the name of the church, bearing in mind that St Cuthbert was a Northumbrian monk of the 600s who never visited this part of the country, harks back to the Anglo Saxon period and previous churches either on or very close the site of the present church, which dates from the 13th century. St Cuthbert's is the civic church of Wells, and the vicar is always the mayor's chaplain. But even more, it is part of the tradition of the lives of generations of citizens of Wells. It is the largest parish church in Somerset, a fact which leads to the frequent question from tourists as they come upon it from a car park or the coach station and ask if it is the cathedral.

It had been a fascinating evening, well led by Antonia with the keenness of her commentary, her glimpses of a dry humour, and above all, her love of St Cuthbert's. Antonia, Patsy and Sam were warmly thanked on behalf of the society by the chair, Chris Winter, who clearly appreciated that events such as this do not organise themselves.

The next meeting is also something of a departure, and in two ways. It is the time of year for the society's Summer Social. Weather permitting, but inside if wet, this will be in the garden of the museum, Cathedral Green on Wednesday, 14 June at 6.30pm: please note the time. This year, though, there will also be a speaker, local stained glass artist, Edgar Philips. For further details or information about any aspects of the society's work, please e-mail Chris, chris.f.winter@btinternet.com or visit wellscivicsociety.org.uk

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