

St Mary's Church, Puddletown and Briantspuddle

Friday evening, 15 July

Puddletown is a picturesque village with narrow streets and thatched cottages, where cars look out of place: it was Weatherbury in Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. The church is thought to be 12th century in origin, but was extensively renovated and rededicated in 1505. The Norman font, of unusual beaker shape, has an impressive, if plain, wooden cover dating from the 17th century. The three-tiered pulpit, west gallery and the communion table, with a three-sided communion rail, are of a similar age, and the splendid oak box pews were also installed in 1635. Two oak chairs in the chancel were of great interest, and were upturned in traditional RFS manner to be examined thoroughly. One is the subject of an additional note.

The south transept, known as the Athelhampton Chantry, contained the most interesting alabaster chest tomb of a knight and his lady, dating from 1460. The side panels,

showing the 12 apostles, have been fixed to the walls and are causing serious damp problems, as the water cannot evaporate from the interior of the walls. One curious feature is the squint from the chantry to the chancel: it is of exceptional size, giving a view of the high altar.

During our visit we enjoyed some readings from the works of Thomas Hardy by Furze Swann, sometime chairman of the Hardy Society, who had selected descriptions of the interiors of cottages, with references to the furniture. The poem, *Old Furniture*, showed that Hardy valued furniture for its association with the people who made it and handled it. In another passage he described the 'shining dirt' removed by cleaning furniture in preparation for a wedding.

We left Puddletown, appropriately in the rain, to visit the village of Briantspuddle and the model hamlet of Bladen Valley, built in the early 20th century for Sir Ernest Debenham's experiments in self-sufficient farming. The evening ended with a splendid meal at the Tea Room, Moreton, a former village school.

Jim and Mary Green