

St Mary the Virgin, Pilton, North Devon

Pilton is now a suburb of Barnstaple on the north slopes of the River Taw. The church formerly belonged to a Benedictine priory, c. 925 AD, and was a cell of Malmesbury Abbey, Wiltshire. It is adjacent to Bull Hill House (see below) and the entry to the churchyard is through an impressive range of imitation Tudor almshouses built in 1849.

On the north side of the church the roof line of previous adjoining monastic buildings can still be seen, the cloister running along the nave, hence the high sills of the north aisle windows. The church tower is on the north side close to the east end, which is characteristic of this part of North Devon. On the exterior wall of the south side is a sundial made by John Berry in 1780.

The interior has generous proportions with a boarded wagon roof and is rich in its fittings. The font is unusual as it had a canopied tester above. The ornate font-cover was counterbalanced by lead weights set in the canopy support (similar to those used for sash-windows). The support is an extravagant affair that includes linenfold panelling set below carved 'romayne-like' renaissance panels with one depicting an angel above a devil. Opinion suggested that it was French in style; due to the way the panels were grooved into the frames. Unfortunately it had been given a later coat of cream paint, obliterating much useful evidence. Nearby is the medieval stone pulpit with a Jacobean sounding board. Unusually the pulpit has an arm for holding an hourglass (see *Newsletter* 62 Tilney All Saints, King's Lynn Conference, Ed.).

The rood screen is an impressively elaborate piece of tracery carving and covers ten bays; some colour remains and the figures are unusual. Each of the four light sections has a different tracery pattern, including three mouchettes in a circle. The coving and cresting have now gone. The spandrels, where the coving should start, are filled with flamboyant bits of carving including an isolated arm and hand. The later parclose screen is just as rich and has the letter R, possibly for Raleigh.

The draw-leaf communion table is thought to be late 16th century and is, unusually, made from walnut. It has a scrolled leaf frieze and bulbous turned legs, but is missing its stretchers and plinth and the bottom of the legs have been restored.

There are exuberant 16th- and 17th-century monuments to the Chichester and Lethbridge families. Dated 1569 the tomb of John Chichester is a fine sandstone monument with columns and strap-work that is extraordinary for its early date, quality and for such a setting. In the chancel is

the 1627 tomb of Sir Robert Chichester and family. The almost life-sized figures of Sir Robert and his wife Frances are at prayer and have mournful expressions while their children kneel behind them. The broken pediment has reclining figures strongly reminiscent of Michelangelo's figures of 1526–31 on the tomb of Lorenzo de Medici in Florence. On the south wall is a huge 1713 monument to Christopher Lethbridge possibly made by one of the Jewell family.

David Hannah