



Late 17th-century carved panel of St Thomas Becket, from the Abbey of Oignies, in the chancel of St John 's church

Alien Woodwork in Two Bedfordshire Churches

Saturday 23 September 2017

St John's church, Cockayne Hatley, sits among fields in a remote corner of Bedfordshire. From the outside a fairly unprepossessing church, but inside, a startling sight, even for our small group who already had some idea of its contents.

In 1806 the Hon. Henry Cockayne Cust became Lord of the Manor and Vicar of the church. Over the ensuing twenty years he toured the Continent buying up fine

carvings and panelling. Much of this came from the Abbey of Oignies, wrecked by Napoleon's forces at the invasion of Flanders. This sumptuously carved panelling dating from the late 17th century and depicting various Saints was installed in the chancel and nave in 1820. Other acquisitions include the West screen, with its fake organ pipes, and the family pew in the North aisle. A large 16th-century pulpit from Antwerp formerly stood in the nave but is now in Carlisle Cathedral, where it is perhaps less overpowering.

Our hosts, Anthony and Gloria Crossley, were extremely knowledgeable about the church and most welcoming.

After lunch in the picturesque village of Old Warden we visited the Church of St Leonard's. Although, in theory, it had similar treatment to St John's, albeit later in the 19th century, the effect was somewhat less impressive. We all agreed with Pevsner's comment of a 'mass of woodwork indiscriminately got together'. There were many interesting carvings and features but Robert Henley, Lord Ongley, failed in his attempt to imitate the Reverend Cust's striking interior at nearby Cockayne Hatley.

Keith and Gill Pinn