

Thursday 11 July

Collegiate Church of St Bartholomew, Tong

It is hard to better Arthur Mee's description of this church full of treasures.

It has been called the Westminster Abbey of the Midlands, and though the description is extravagant the church is full

of age and beauty in carved stone and sculptured marble, richly wrought wood, and delicate glass.

It was built in 1410 by Lady Isabell de Pembrugge as a tribute to her husband Sir Fulke de Pembrugge, and their effigies, along with many effigies of members of the Vernon family (builders of Haddon Hall) and the Stanley family are one of the main features of the church. Sir Fulke has an extravagant moustache escaping from his chainmail bassinet, and his head rests on a helmet in the form of a head with a beautiful long plait of hair. By his side Lady Isabella's realistically flowing headdress has been topped by a chaplet of red roses and ivy leaves, gently decaying since being placed there on Midsummer's Day; this continues a local custom dating back to 1200. The carving of all of the effigies is exquisite in its detail, and one could spend hours studying the changing fashions. Equally beautiful is the carving of the three screens separating the nave and aisles from the chancel and chapels. The south aisle screen has oak leaves and acorns on the west side of the cornice and a vine trail on the east, and much surviving colour. One gate of the chancel screen has a cross-looking green man carved on the top rail, while the choir stalls have misericords with green men, primitive heads, and a rare crucifixion topping a lily in a pot, flanked by an angel and the Virgin Mary. There is a small seventeenth-century chest with inlaid panels, a large chest with trident-like strap hinges, and a large churchwardens' chest with the locks numbered 1, 2 and 3 in white paint. Moveable items have notices saying 'Please do not disturb alarmed item', which could perhaps have been better phrased! The tracery-covered medieval vestry door is pierced with three large circular holes, a very strange feature, while the pair of entrance doors each has a rectangular opening high up, with two iron bars and closed by sliding panels on the inner face. The rarest treasure is an Elizabethan red velvet pulpit fall embroidered with stars, clouds and cherubs in gold and silver thread, bequeathed by Dame Elinor Harries of Tong Castle in 1635. Its description says it was cleaned and conserved in 2018 after hanging 'un-noticed in the vestry' for many years, but Arthur Mee had noticed it in 1939; he thought it was a medieval altar cloth, 'said to have been made by the nuns of Whiteladies near



Tong Church, the south aisle screen, showing the cornice finely carved with oak leaves and acorns. *Photo Linda Hall*

Boscobel'. Dame Elinor also gave the pulpit, dated 1629. One visit was not sufficient to see everything, and we shall return for another look.

Linda Hall