



A walk through St Peter's Churchyard

This beautiful and historic churchyard is full of secrets waiting to be discovered. A number of leaflets offering a variety of churchyard trails are being developed to enable visitors to explore further something of the history, wildlife, and sacred nature of this place. This brief introductory leaflet seeks to open a further window on to the ancient landscape upon which you stand, on to what the past has to say to the present, and on to the special nature of this “sanctuary in the city”.

Signpost 1 - History

As the ancient parish church, St Peter's has always been at the heart of the town's life. Our present day Cathedral and Abbey Church was originally the town's Benedictine monastery, holding the shrine of Britain's first Christian Martyr – as it still does today. There the monks lived out their rule of life, whilst the lives of many of the ordinary, (and not so ordinary), townsfolk were lived out within sight of St Peter's walls. Here is where they came to be baptised and married, and where many were buried.

St Peter's was also a “gateway church”, standing on one of the three main routes into St Albans. It was built at a time when many pilgrims came to visit the shrine of St Alban at the Abbey, and the church would have welcomed and prepared them for this. Whilst aspects of medieval pilgrimage might now seem rather strange to us, pilgrimage is still very much alive today. People still come to visit the shrine or to take part in the colourful Alban Pilgrimage and procession around 22nd June.

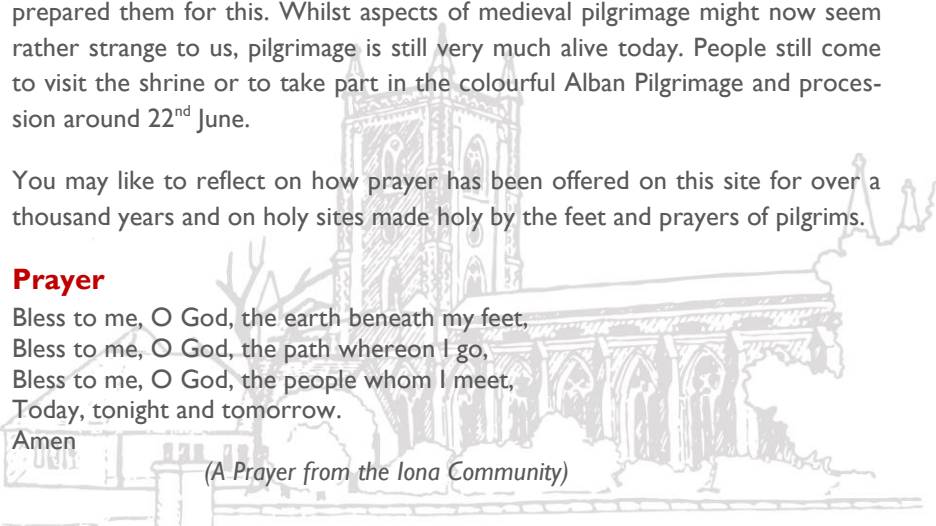
You may like to reflect on how prayer has been offered on this site for over a thousand years and on holy sites made holy by the feet and prayers of pilgrims.

Prayer

Bless to me, O God, the earth beneath my feet,
Bless to me, O God, the path whereon I go,
Bless to me, O God, the people whom I meet,
Today, tonight and tomorrow.

Amen

(A Prayer from the Iona Community)



Signpost 2 - The Garden of Hope

“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17)

There are some places on earth that we experience as “thin” places – where the veil between earth and heaven seems more transparent, where we feel more in touch with the depths of our world’s reality, with a sense of the sacred, with our deepest selves.

Ancient churchyards like this one can be such places. The beauty of nature has a voice and presence of its own, whilst many of the grave stones that surround this garden are full of symbols which echo another voice – that of earlier generations who used images to speak of their own reflections on life and death, nature and immortality. They were the work of local craftsmen-masons. Using local stone from parish quarries, or imported stones, they sought to convey a message which could be understood by a largely illiterate population. In the 18th Century in particular, there was an evolution in the decoration and detail of headstones and inscriptions.

In addition to those depicted on the panel in the Garden of Hope, there are many other symbols. You may like to stray from the footpath and see which you can find in this churchyard. Other symbols include: an **anchor** – hope; **bee/beehive** – a long life well spent in useful activities, and the hope of sweet reward; **ivy** – sincerity and faithfulness; **rope** – emblem of helpfulness; **sundial** – passage of time; **sword** – justice and honesty.

Prayers

Lord, we remember with gratitude all those people whom we have loved – and those who have loved us. May that love be a link between this world and the next, and may their souls rest in peace.

Marjorie Bereza

We give thanks for places of simplicity and peace.

Let us find such a place within ourselves.

We give thanks for places of nature’s truth and freedom, of joy, inspiration and renewal, places where all creatures may find acceptance and belonging.

Let us search for these places in the world, in ourselves and in others.

Let us restore them.

Let us strengthen and protect them and let us create them.

May we mend this outer world according to the truth of our inner life and may our souls be shaped and nourished by Nature’s eternal wisdom

Michael Leunig

Signpost 3 – The Living Churchyard

“The land you walk upon, the miracle of fresh water and the glories of nature are all sacred gifts; they are the other Book of Revelation of the Creator and the meaning of creation itself. They should be respected, treasured and protected, because they protect us in return”

Martin Palmer: Sacred Land

The protected space for wildlife, flora and fauna that the churchyard has offered over the centuries, means that it is home to some of the oldest living things in Britain – trees. Their sacred significance can be found in both pre-Christian and Christian Britain.

The common **Yew** is a native of the British Isles and the earliest fossil record dates from 140 million years ago. The yew has been seen as sacred by people long before Christianity, possibly because of its extraordinary ability to survive. Yew branches have been found in both Neolithic and Christian burial sites as symbols of life after death. Many churches with ancient yews were built near standing stones or stone circles

The **Oak** and **Ash** were also sacred to many ancient peoples. Tall oaks, sometimes split by lightning, were associated with Zeus, or Thor the god of thunder. Some parishes still have a Gospel oak at which the Gospel is read at Rogation-tide. The ash was seen as protective and is often found near holy wells.

There are thirty **Western Red Cedars** in the churchyard, and one **Cedar of Lebanon** to the east of the church. It was in the nineteenth century that non-native species such as the cedar were introduced.

A **Walnut** on the east side of the Garden of Hope was planted in the memory of Dr Cotton (see signpost number 4). The walnut was introduced to the British Isles around 1400 and has since become naturalised.

Prayer

Almighty God,
you who are in the wind,
that breathes on the sea,
and the waves of the ocean;
the seal on the rocks;
the lark in the heavens;
the rays of the sun;
and the glittering rocks in the valley;
you who are in the whole of creation
and in your loved ones,
we give you thanks and offer praise.

(The Society of Our Lady of the Isles)

Signpost 4 – Historical Memorials

*“For a life to be beautiful, extraordinary abilities or great expertise are not required.
There is happiness in the humble giving of oneself”*

Brother Roger of Taizé

There are many historic characters associated with the churchyard. Some are well known, some are less so. One such was **Dr Nathaniel Cotton** who died in 1788. The poet William Cowper’s account of his illness suggests that “the little physician” was making tentative moves towards the development of clinical psychology at a time when public asylums offered “lunatics” only restraint. He was clearly ahead of his time and deserves to be a better-known resident of St Albans, but this is probably his own fault for he was a private man. In his 'Epistle to the Reader' which prefaces his book 'Visions in Verse for the Entertainment and Instruction of Younger Minds' published anonymously in 1751, he writes "*all my ambition is, I own, to profit and to please unknown.*"

Although medieval records for St Peter's have been lost, events were sometimes recorded in the abbey chronicles and an **anchoress** is mentioned several times. In addition to the one in 1258 noted for her vision, we know that in 1479 Elizabeth Holsted was admitted as anchoress. This was clearly a sought after position. It was no less than Edward IV and his wife who asked Abbot Wallingford to admit Elizabeth.

Although a vocation to the solitary life, an anchoress’s cell usually had in addition to a window looking into the church, one which faced outwards. People could come here to ask for her prayers and for advice. Since many wills include a legacy to St Peter’s anchoress, it seems likely that they did come. One of the best known of our medieval English anchoresses is Julian of Norwich.

Prayer

Lord, you are God,
Lord, you are in all things.
Lord, you do all things.
You never remove your hands
from your works,
nor ever will, without end.
You guide all things
to the end that you ordained them for,
before time began,
with the same power
and wisdom and love
with which you made them;
how could anything be amiss?

(Based on words of Julian of Norwich)

