

St John the Baptist (1897) was effectively the private chapel of Louisa Sophia Harris (née Leacroft) (1851-1908), built in memory of her uncle and aunt, from whom she inherited £10,000 in 1880. She had lived from her teens with the widowed aunt at 'The Rocks', the house down the hill. There was no need for a church: it seems almost an indulgence on Louisa's part.

Her architect was the young Guy Dawber (1861-1938), later to be President of RIBA (1925-7), President of CPRE (1926), and knighted in 1936. This was only his fifth new build: Mrs Harris probably knew his parents, who had retired to Matlock. (How odd she did not engage Percy Heylyn Currey (1862-1942), Derbyshire's up-and-coming church architect, who was married to her cousin Emily). Apart from the chapels at Enfield Crematorium (1938), Dawber built no other religious building.

St John came to the Friends in 2002. There was an extensive conservation programme in 2012, revealing the original colours in the chancel. It is listed Grade II*.



The church today: exterior

The chapel is perched on a massive, rusticated wall, and romantically turreted, as if on a Bavarian mountain. Below, a horse trough is fed by a natural spring. From the lane it all seems daunting; but from the churchyard gate, it is suddenly, playfully, Hansel and Gretel. On Dawber's plan, the covered passage from the Vestry is labelled "ambulatory" – Mrs Harris had High ideas. He provided for a presbytery – you can see the stonework at the northeast corner awaiting completion. It never materialised.



Arts & Crafts craftsmanship

Dawber engaged artist-friends to furnish the buildings. *The Builder's Journal* (3 April 1901) records, "The coloured east window is by Mr Louis Davis, the figures round the pulpit by Mr Cecil Fabian, the plaster ceiling by Mr George Bankart, the decorations and painted altar-piece by Mr John Cooke."

Louis Davis (1860-1941) – who also coloured the plaster fruit and flowers in the ceiling – trained under the premier Arts & Crafts glass artist, Christopher Whall. The theme of the east window is "water": left to right – baptism, "the waters of Death", communion, the Water of Life (with an angel dressed as John the Baptist!)

George Bankart (1866-1929), a regular Dawber collaborator, wrote *The Art of the Plasterer* (1908), still the standard work. He revived decorative lead-work and later joined the Bromsgrove Guild.

Cecil Fabian (1873-1911) has left little other work: he died in London a poor man, leaving just £5. His pulpit figures were destroyed by vandals in the 1990s.



Figures by Cecil Fabian



John Cooke could either have been John Percy Cooke (fl. 1892-1939), born Cape Colony, lodging in Matlock in 1901, who executed several oil portraits of members of the Art-Workers' Guild in the 1910s; or John Cooke of Wirksworth (three miles south of Matlock), house painter and joiner, with three sons – a cabinet-maker, a painter and a carver: more likely, if less exalted, interior decorators; and perhaps responsible too for the woodwork, for which otherwise we have no maker's name.



Stained glass (left) and original design by Louis Davis

In 1929 the church was closed for "Painting and Re-decoration under the Direction of Mr E Guy Dawber": the present colour scheme may date from then.

As well as memorials to the Leacrofts, and to Mr and Mrs Harris (designers unknown), there is a tiny plaque under a side window, to Vida – Mrs Harris's dog. The Stations of the Cross are all that survive from the original complete set – the others were stolen.

The Friends care for other “Arts & Crafts” churches

St Mark, Brithdir, Dolgellau, Gwynedd (LL40 2RN) Atmospheric masterpiece (1895–8) by Henry Wilson (1864–1934) for a wealthy widow, newly returned to Wales from Florence, in memory of her clergyman husband. Glittering metal craftwork on altar and pulpit, naturalistic animals on bench ends, dramatic painting scheme. Grade 1.

St Mary, Llanfair Kilgeddin, Usk, Monmouthshire (near NP7 9PE) Medieval church restored (1875–6) by John Dando Sedding (1838–91), then lavishly embellished with sgraffito wall panels by Heywood Sumner (1853–1940): the Benedicite, in multi-layered coloured plaster, set in the contemporary Monmouthshire landscape.

St Eloi, Llandeloy, Pembrokeshire (SA62 6LJ) Tiny Welsh chapel revived and renewed (1926) by John Coates Carter (1859–1927) using local methods and materials, and SPAB principles to ‘restore’ it to a pre-Reformation framework. Striking woodwork, and reredos of almost childlike directness.

St Mary of the Angels, Brownhill, Gloucestershire (GL6 8SW) Late work (1937) by W.D. Caröe, for an order of nuns, now moved away. Influenced by his travels, especially to Cyprus and Scandinavia. Windows by Douglas Strachan, Scotland’s greatest Arts & Crafts glass exponent.

Brithdir, Brownhill and Llandeloy are open daily.
For Llanfair Kilgeddin, please call the office for keyholder details.

Postcodes provide approximate locations for navigation.



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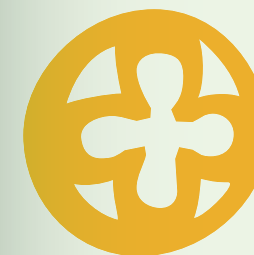
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*Chapel of St John the Baptist
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