

Word from Wormingford -- *Church Times*, 26 May 2009

Ronald Blythe takes a sentimental journey to the village of Coxwold

MORE gadding. I have longed for ages to see my friend Patrick Wildgust, the curator of Shandy Hall in faraway Yorkshire. And now I am there, alongside other devotees of Laurence Sterne, Perpetual Curate of Coxwold and author of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*. The latter title suits me admirably.

Shandy Hall is so exactly as I imagined it that it is like running into Emily Brontë on the moor. Except that, as Haworth is the very spirit of *Wuthering Heights*, so *Shandy Hall* is still so as the Revd Laurence Sterne left it in the 1760s that I expected to find him weeding. Instead, Patrick gallops out to see me in.

A young man plays a viola da gamba in the panelled parlour. Swallows zoom in and out of the stable. Purple clouds hang over Byland Abbey. Polished, worn stairs take me to my room, the same stairs that Sterne climbed, the same rail that prevented him from sliding down.

I unpack my clean shirt and my sermon, which is the one on the Walking Christ which I take around with me, adding this and that. The accounts of Sterne's preaching do not agree. Some biographers say that half the congregation left the minute he began to speak; others say that at Coxwold one could not get a seat. Certainly, his sermons broke through what was expected. One on the Prodigal Son advocated the advantages of foreign travel.

In the morning, the Shandy Hall party walked the few steps to St Michael's, which is very beautiful and which only recently received Sterne's body plus his London tombstone.

Many literary priests — Robert Herrick was one — resented being stuck in their rural livings, but Sterne loved his. Yorkshire seems to have accepted his notoriety with ease. He was the master of sentiment, for whom the raffish and the delicate, or the humane, if you like, not to mention a delight in wit, could be put on the page. Even in the notes for the Sunday sermon.

I borrowed the curate's cassock, and preached from Laurence Sterne's triple-decker pulpit. The May sun glinted through the medieval glass. We had listened to my favourite Isaiah being perfectly read, and had sung the St Francis hymn. Ian, the young Vicar, had found some fine walking prayers. Folk had arrived from far and wide.

Outside, the steep churchyard ran down to a stream. There was a big dandelion square, containing a soldier who had charged in the Light Brigade. His grave, in all the wide churchyard, lay unmown. Sterne's was sideways on by the south wall, and could not have been more wryly accounted for had he himself written it.

He died from consumption in a room above a silk-bag shop in Old Bond Street in 1768. He was 55. He was buried in St George's new burial ground, and promptly dug up by resurrection men and sold to the medical school in Cambridge, where it was recognised by a famous physician and returned to Paddington for reburial.

There, two larky freemasons erected a tombstone that began, "Alas, poor Yorick". On 4 June 1969, Sterne's body was once again exhumed, because a developer wished to build a block of flats where he lay, and was returned to his loved Coxwold. Hilarious, unique in literature, he had once written: "I am positive I have a soul: nor can all the books with which materialists have pestered the world ever convince me of the contrary."

That evening, Patrick, Paul the artist, and the viola da gamba boy and I drove to Byland Abbey in the rain.