

4 Midsomer Norton Audio Trail – The Church of the Holy Ghost

[Ambient sound: medieval farming, chickens, dogs barking, pigs, clopping horse steps, church choral singing]

Up a small lane to the right of the High Street, as it curves up to the church, is the great Tithe Barn – a hidden gem of a building, dating back to the 1400s. Both the Priory and St. John’s Church predate it by centuries, but they’ve changed so much over time that only the Tithe Barn would be recognisable to a medieval time traveller visiting Midsomer Norton now.

Tithe barns were built to hold the harvest which local farmers owed to the Church, known as tithes. This barn was built by the Norton Friars at a time when they were probably at their wealthiest. It had a high, wide entrance on one side and matching exit on the other so that farm carts could drive in, drop off their produce and then drive straight out without having to turn round in a tight space that was needed for storage.

Over time the barn wasn’t just used for storing agricultural produce, but for various other purposes; a chicken run, for kennels, as a coach house and for storing timber too. By Victorian times, it was in a bad state of repair and was due to be sold off by its owners. It was sold on the condition that...

Voice 1: It shouldn't be converted into school buildings for fear of destroying its identification as a historical ruin...

Voice 2: It shouldn't become a Working Man's Club...

Voice 3: It definitely shouldn't be sold to the butcher to keep pigs there or to turn it into a slaughter house!

Eventually it was sold to a private buyer, who used it for storage before selling it again.

Later, the barn came into the hands of Downside Abbey, a Catholic monastery three miles away. Their plan was to rescue the barn from ruin and turn it into a church. A famous architect called Giles Gilbert Scott – who is best-known for designing iconic British red telephone boxes – was employed to do the work. The weather-beaten roof had to be removed, but lots of the old timbers were reused. Inside, it was richly furnished with recycled materials from various sources – the Pulpit was once the priest's desk in the Old Study Room at Downside. With the work complete, the old barn was consecrated as the Catholic Church of the Holy Ghost in 1913. It's a wonderful piece of history which Midsomer Norton is fortunate to have, and well worth a visit if you get the opportunity.