

Watching the bats of Pershore Abbey

During 'Lockdown' I spent time going through papers relating to the repairs of Pershore Abbey over the centuries. In the past ten years there have been problems at the east end of the church - amongst the documents I found reports of two Bat Surveys. I was absorbed trying to imagine what I was reading, and eventually decided to go and see for myself! So on the evening of July 6th, near the SE corner of the Abbey I stood and watched from sunset until darkness was complete. As darkness increased, the sky was gradually taken over by a variety of bats darting to and fro, around the Abbey building and into the trees in St Andrew's garden – back and forth, here and there. There were little ones, lights shining through their wings, darting about, probably pipistrelles; sometimes larger ones, their flight more purposeful and lower than the others (Leisler or Noctules). I could not tell where any of these bats had appeared from, nor how many of them – I counted about 90 but I must have been double counting or even treble! Tired and cold I returned home wondering where the Abbey bats had emerged from – to find I might have seen them had I waited longer as they are late risers and fly out an hour after sunset!

So after some sleep, I got up and returned to the Abbey at 3.30am, again at the south east corner – once my eyes had adjusted to the dark, and shielded from street lights, I became aware of first one, then 2, 3, 4 bats 'swarming' – dancing round and round the apex of the roof ridge, passing the top of the louver window over the Wick door, and off up again, repeating again and again until one entered and the others followed one by one. About 10 minutes later this performance was repeated but this time with 10 bats swarming, collecting, and then entering following a leader bat. Then another larger group of around 20 bats, swarming earnestly then entering one at a time just after 4.00am. A late comer at 4.10 slipped in alone! As I walked away at 4.15, the dawn chorus began with a lone blackbird.

Pershore Abbey has a colony of about 30 families of Daubenton bats who live in the roof above the south east chapel and the apse (central chapel). These bats have furry bodies and short ears. Sometimes referred to as the 'water bat', the bat forages for small flies, such as midges, caddisflies and mayflies, just above water; it can even use its feet and tail to scoop up insects from the water's surface as it forages. Every night they fly to the wetlands or the river to feed. They hibernate during winter months and breed in the early summer – no building works can take place at these times!

