

# *A Guide and History of St. James Church Taunton*



Drawing by Pat Preater

**Please do not  
remove**

# An Introduction to St. James Church

By Mike Gillingham

Revised by Jenny Wakefield additional Photography by Joe Gentile

If you are a visitor to the church then you are welcome and it is the hope of the Church that this guide will help you to understand what you see around you. The building is very much what it always has been, a place in which to worship God and in which to learn more about Him. We hope we may be able to welcome you to our services.

The St. James who gave his name to this church is the brother of John, St. James the Greater, the first of the apostles to be martyred at the hand of Herod in Jerusalem In AD. 44 (Acts 12 vs. 1-2). After the execution, his body is said to have been taken to Spain, eventually to rest at Santiago de Compostela. Although this is highly unlikely, the legend arising only in the seventh Century, St. James became the patron saint of Spain and Compostela, an important centre of pilgrimage. Those who made the journey successfully, (as people did) from all over Europe, were given a shell as a memento. The canons of Taunton Priory would have been encouraged to make the pilgrimage, and that is why the pilgrims' symbol of a scallop shell occurs frequently in the building. A staff with a gourd is St. James' symbol, and both the East and West windows show him.



*The Shell Symbol of Santiago de Compostela situated in the screen at the entrance of the side chapel. Other examples of the shell symbol can be found around the church.*

# The Origins of St. James Church



*A painting by Henry Fryer of St. James Street and the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

The parish church of St. James was recorded as in existence by 1175-1186. It is one of the two medieval churches of Taunton, the other being St. Mary Magdalene. Which of them was the oldest has often been the subject of quite heated debate. St. James lay outside the medieval defences, just west of the site of the Augustinian Priory that was refounded to the Northeast of the town in 1158. St. James was the church that was associated with the Priory. Recent excavations on the Priory Site however indicate that the Priory itself had a substantial church building, which would have been substantially larger than St. James. This was situated in the area between Canon St and St. Augustine Street

In its original 12<sup>th</sup> Century form it seems likely to have been a simple rectangular building, which was enlarged during the later Middle Ages. (See diagram below).

Over the centuries its use as a place of worship has been changed with extensive rebuilding and enlargement in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In autumn of 2001 there was a unique opportunity to discover the physical evidence of these changes. The Victorian wooden flooring of the nave had become so rotten that there was an urgent need to replace it, before someone fell through the floor!. The removal of the floor meant that it was possible to conduct an archaeological survey of the early foundations. This was carried out by Alan Graham B.A M.I.F.A. aided by members of the congregation, young and old, who eagerly took up trowels and brushes to discover what lay beneath.



*“Although the archaeological deposits had been truncated to form the sub-floor ventilation cavity, those, which remained, contained important evidence of the form of the medieval church as well as later developments in the plan of the church.*

*In line with the present day pillars, the excavation uncovered evidence of a continuous wall footing, comprising closely packed chert cobbles. It seemed likely that these cobbles were the footings of the medieval 12<sup>th</sup> century nave. During the cleaning of the area a single sherd of pottery was recovered from the top of the subsoil. This sherd, with its fabric tempered with close quartz grit, is typical of the earlier medieval walls found in Taunton and probably has a date of 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century”. (Alan Graham)*

### **Excavations in September 2001**

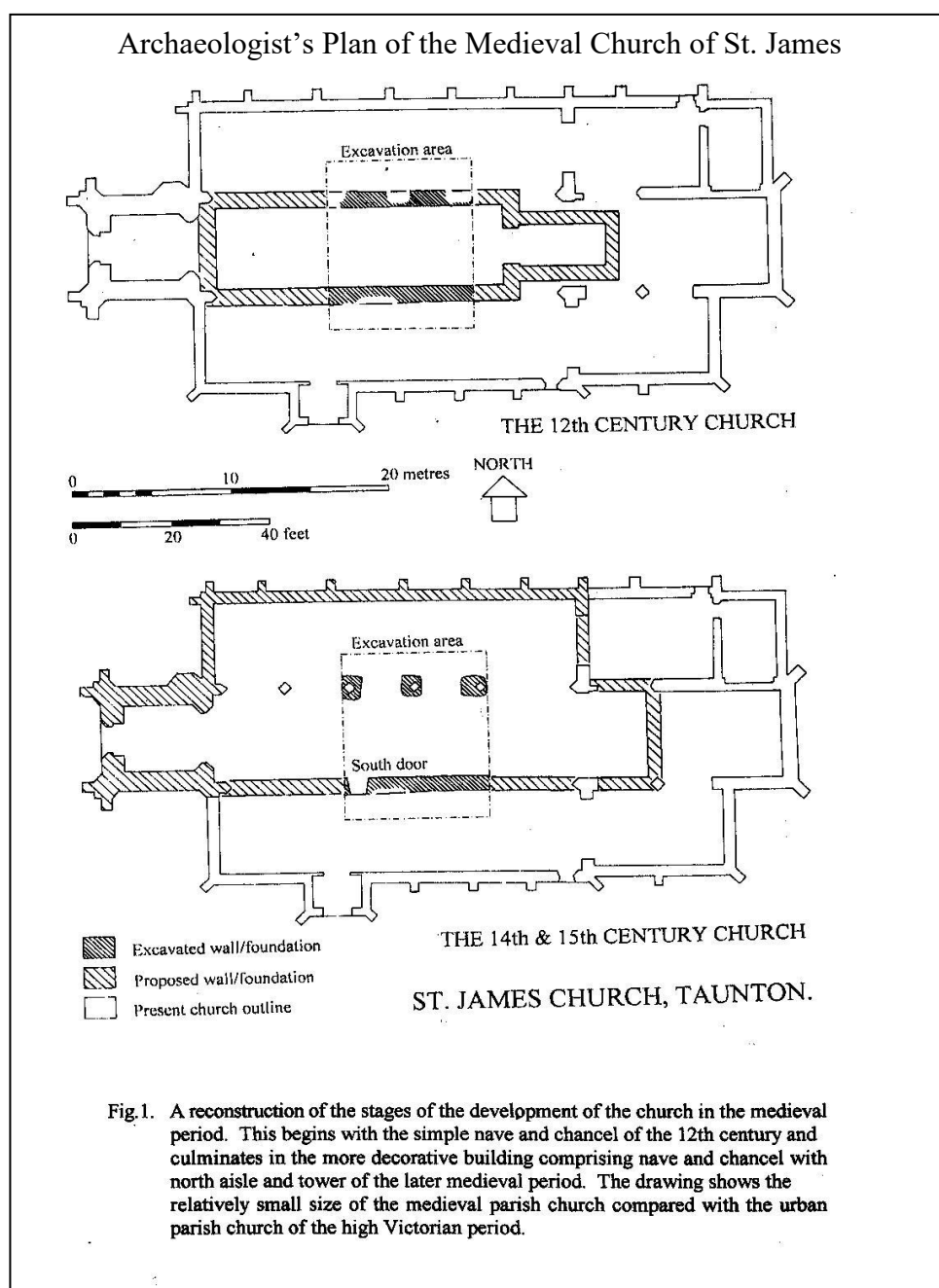


*Views of St. James during the archaeological excavations. They show the walls that had supported the Victorian flooring, and in line with the pillars the chert foundations of the medieval church. ‘Finds’ included pottery, bones, and 20<sup>th</sup> century collection money that had dropped through the floor boards.*

It was known from previous church histories and records that there had been further extensive building in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century, at which time the chancel, North Aisle and tower had been added. This was confirmed in the Archaeological excavation in that the mortar of the pillars and the building of the North wall were consistent with such a conclusion.

*“The archaeological examination revealed evidence of two events that can be dated to the medieval period – the construction of the North Aisle and the insertion of a doorway in the existing south wall of the nave. Neither event can be precisely dated but seems likely to be 14<sup>th</sup> Century. This is also the probable date of the original West Tower. It would seem that the 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries saw very significant enlargement decoration”. (A. Graham)*

This period in history was one in which much wealth was invested in the fabric of churches, to the greater glory of God and of course the patrons of the day. According to one guide to Taunton (McMillan 1858) it was Henry VII, father of the destroyer of the monasteries, who ‘founded their churches and rebuilt their towers’, in recognition of the South West’s support against the house of York. St. James is however a poor relation when it comes to grandeur – a fact much remarked on in 18<sup>th</sup> century guide books, where considerable space is given to the description of St. Mary’s and little to St. James. “It is a strong, plain, ancient structure, of oblong form...” (McMillan) another guide describes it as “inferior in every way”.



From the 15<sup>th</sup> there appears little archaeological or documentary evidence for major changes in the church until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when there were significant developments. These included the widening of the South Aisle in the 1830s and even more significantly the existence of galleries on the South and North Aisles. Solid evidence was found for the latter when the base plates for the galleries were uncovered on both sides of the church. There are numerous references to these galleries, which may have been accessed by an outside door way. However they were relatively short lived in that they were taken down in the 1880s. It is possible that this coincides with the building of St. Andrews to cater for the growing population in the Rowbarton area.

The archaeological excavations also unearthed the existence of a large number of burial vaults under the surface, some of which still contained intact (or semi intact) coffins of varying quality. It raised the question of how well ventilated these would have been in the heat of summer, adding to the sanitation problems of mid Victorian Taunton. These and the various memorial slabs, which paved the aisles of the church, left a fascinating insight on previous worshippers of St. James – a reminder that at the end of the day the church is about the people who worship there and not merely the building.



*Plaques from the coffins of Thomas & Susannah Foy,  
Thomas was a former mayor of Taunton*



*Ken Jamieson looking into the vault uncovered by  
builders near the pulpit.*

The 1880s was a major period of change in the church, for while the galleries were being taken down, in 1884 the chancel was being enlarged, to which there was a significant degree of opposition, which was somehow overruled.

There was a further period of extensive refurbishment in the early 1900s, and it was during this time that the pews were replaced among other changes. The decision to remove these same pews during the 2001 re-ordering was therefore not such a philistine act as some might imagine, as it was only removing furniture that had been there since about 1906. (Most of the graffiti carved in the pews was from the 1930s and 40s and may well have been the handiwork of scholars from a certain school that shall be nameless)!

What stands out from these developments is that St. James has undergone many changes over the years, as the situation has demanded. As the size of the parish grew (or as in the 1880s contracted) there was a need to adapt the building to accommodate the changes. The building project that began in the late 1970s, when the chancel area was opened up has now been continued with the replacing of the floor, the installation of under floor heating and the removal of the pews. It provides a more flexible and comfortable building that can accommodate different needs of the worshipping community of St. James.

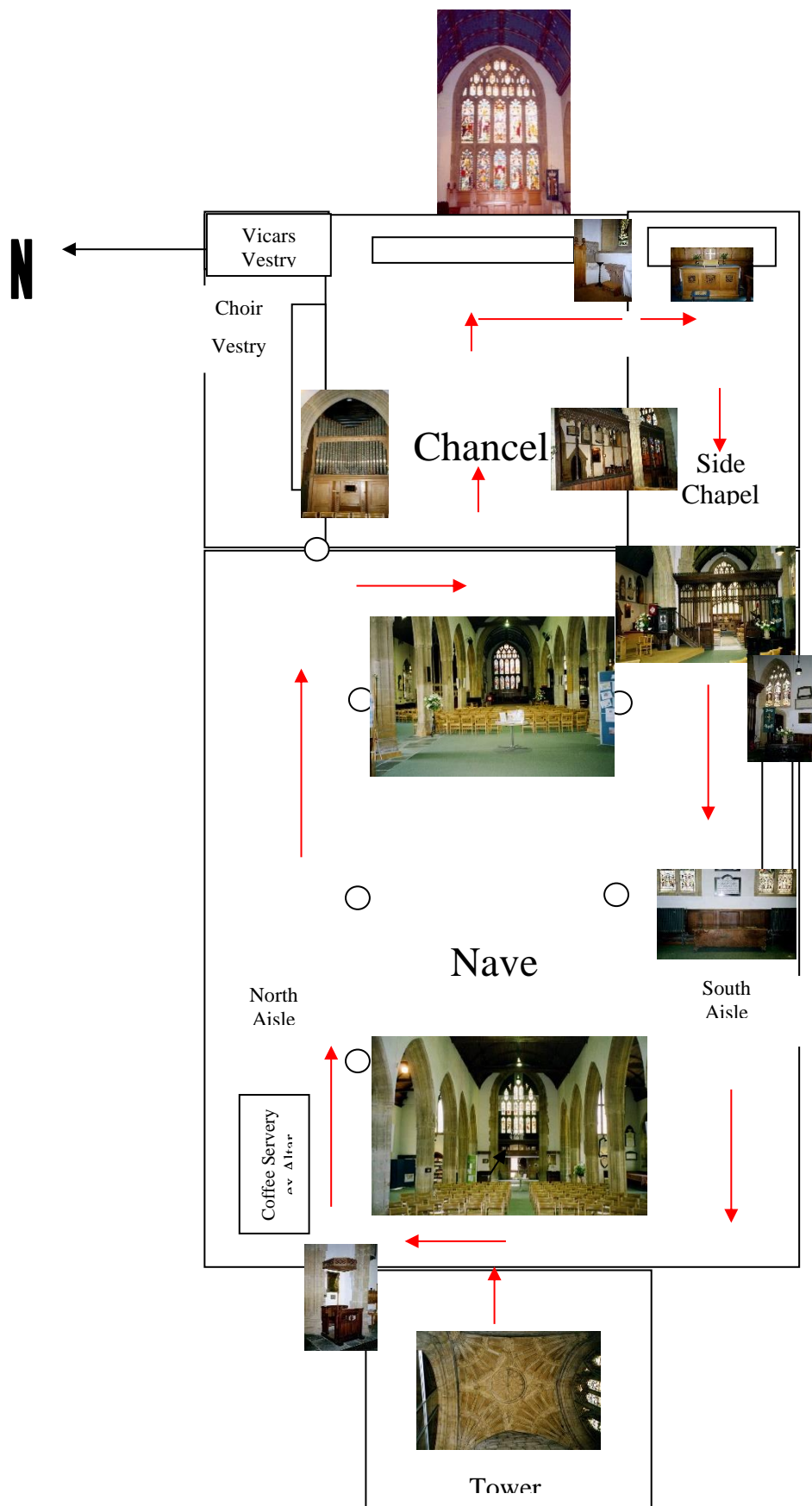


For essentially a church is a place of worship, where people can come on their own or together with others to pray, worship, learn and engage with God. Comments in the visitor's book reflect in general people's appreciation of the building for this purpose. A guidebook written earlier this century comments: *"On entering the church two things impress themselves on the mind. First an "atmosphere", in which the soul can be aware of the presence of God, secondly, a spaciousness in which it is possible to move"* . This was written before the church was reordered in 1981, when the whole chancel was opened up to the nave, extended in 2001 when the pews were removed creating a much more flexible and spacious area for worship. The photographs below illustrate how all ages can use this space in the service and worship of God.



*Photographs taken during holiday club 2002, when children were able to set up 'camp to re-create the experiences of the Hebrews escaping from Egypt.*

# A Tour around St. James Church





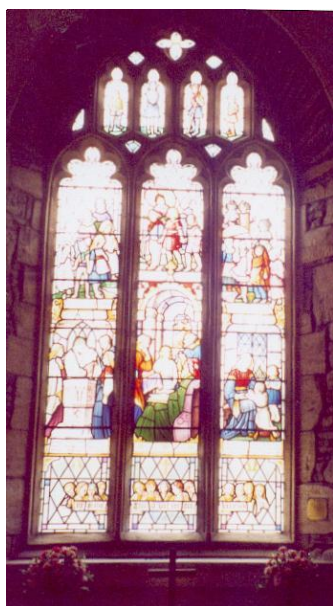
## The Nave and North Aisle

We begin our tour by entering the church through the West Door directly under the tower of the church, rebuilt in 1870, when the old 15<sup>th</sup> century tower was badly in need of restoration. The niches on the outside of the church are empty, the earlier tower would have had statues of saints in them, but during the reformation these 'symbols of idolatry' would have been removed or defaced. The only part of the old tower remaining is the fine example of barrel vaulting, which you can see if you look up. If you were to ascend up the tower, you would find a narrow spiral stairs leading to the ringing bell chamber, and finally the roof. The bells, of which there are six dating from 1610 - 1897, are reminders of a past when the church was a vital and central part of the town's community. The bells would be rung in times of danger as a warning or rallying signal and they would also be rung in times of National, local or personal jubilation or sorrow. The Churchwardens accounts indicate that the bell ringers were quite busy people who could claim a fee for the task.

Entering into the church, we go to the left past the churchwarden's chair with its staff, the symbol of the office and a reminder that earlier churchwardens had a role in keeping order in the church. We move into the North Aisle built in the late medieval period. At the back is a coffee area. During the 1970s restoration a sink unit was put in to facilitate the congregation meeting for fellowship after the service. Note the unusual coffee servery – it looks perhaps a little ornate. It was in fact previously used as the altar at the far east end, which in the 1970s was replaced by a communion table. This is an important indication of the style of worship that is practiced in the church. St. James is an Evangelical Anglican Church, and communion is an important part of the worship, as a commemorative act reminding us of Jesus' death and resurrection. A once and for all act. An altar rather than a communion table speaks for of ongoing sacrifice.



Near the coffee table above the North door is the Royal Coat of Arms, a reminder that the Church of England has as its head, the reigning monarch, as established, during the Reformation by Henry VIII and endorsed by Act of Parliament following the Restoration of Charles II.



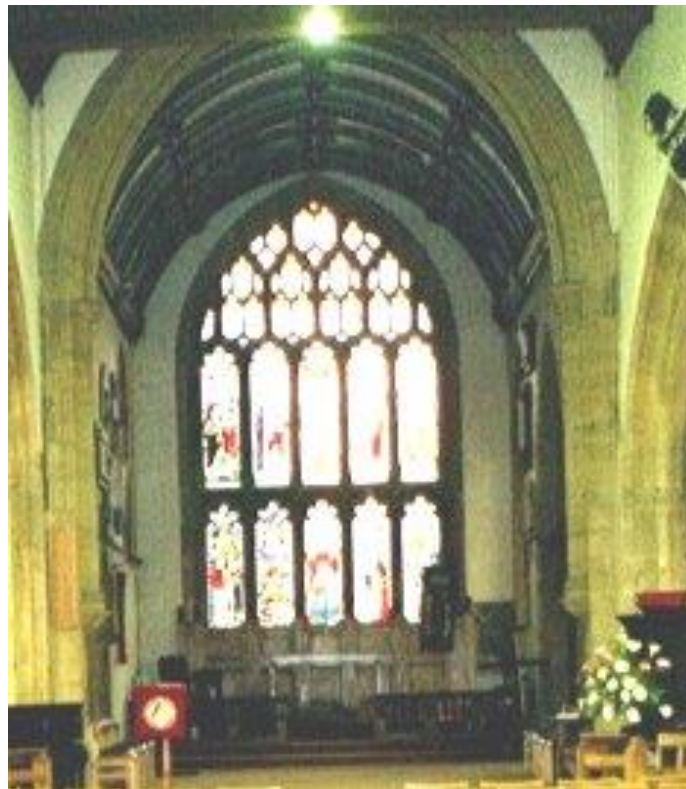
As we walk along the North Aisle, we pass memorial plaques to people of the past who were associated with the church, and each gives tantalizing insights into the lives of a previous generations. The last window is an unusual one, for whereas most of the stained glass of the church depicts Saints or Prophets or Scenes from the life of Christ, this one is the Children's Window. It was donated by John and Jessie Spiller in grateful thanks for the return of eleven nephews from the Second World War. The two were sitting in the church with Rose Richards, a member until her death, and discussed their plan with her. She, having even then served a long time in Brownies, Guides and the Sunday School, suggested the theme of the children. It is most appropriate that the font shown on it is now in the same corner. The children's figures include the uniformed organizations, while others recall the old chorus; "Jesus died for all the children".



The font is one of the major features of the church, It has stood In many parts of the building, under the tower, to the East of the tower, near the communion table, near the organ, In the South West corner and even where it was found in the 1840s, half buried In the West wall. This was probably when Dr. Cottle, the vicar of the time widened the South Aisle between 1839 and 1841. In many churches fonts stand at the entrance to symbolise the entry into the church. However in St. James it was moved to its present place in 1981 to make it more easily visible during the baptism services, so that the congregation can join in more easily, and welcome new members.

After being found, the font was restored by an Italian artist and is a fine example of 15<sup>th</sup> century workmanship. This restoration only involved 3 of the 8 faces (Including the crucifixion scene), the rest being in a fair state of preservation, despite years of Victorian neglect. It has carved panels on its eight sides. Eight is a symbolic number, being one more than the perfect seven; and being the day of the new creation by Christ, after the seven of the original. Two of the figures, those of St. Peter and St. Paul (or St. James) correspond with those on the original tower. The saints depicted can be recognised by their traditional symbols.

### THE CHANCEL



*The communion table stands at the end of the chancel – on it is a simple brass cross, a reminder that Christ is risen. Unusually for an Anglican church there are no candles or other symbols or furnishings.*

*This reflects the fact that St. James tends to use a minimal of ceremonial and symbolism. At communion services the table is brought down to the nave end of the chancel, covered with a white cloth to celebrate the communion as a remembrance of Christ Death and*

We have now come to the point where the chancel meets the nave. At one time there would probably have been a rood screen dividing the two, making a clear distinction between chancel and nave, clergy and people and creating an impression of the chancel being an inner sanctum, a holy of holies more akin to the temple style of worship. As late as 1912 a dwarf wall was erected between nave and chancel and this was removed during the alterations in 1981.

The original chancel of the building was very short. During the 1839-1841 building works the chancel was considerably lengthened. It is difficult to say now why this was done. In old churches the long chancel completed the cross shape of the building and so reminded worshippers of Christ's death even in the ground plan. St. James is not such a shape, and indeed the side chapel added at the same time kept the rectangular shape. It is possible that the lengthening resulted from a wish to remove the table from the main body of the church to heighten the mystery. It is impossible to decide now.

The 1981 alterations continued a trend of opening up the two areas and the impression of the church on entering is of one of space and openness. Again this is a reflection on style of worship at St. James where there is an emphasis on the church as the body of Christ. There is a good deal of lay involvement in the worship, both from the lay readers and also church members, both young and old.

It is a feature of present worship at St. James that at communion, the Communion Table, which was made by John Parslow, a member of the congregation, is brought down to the chancel steps, for the service, thereby illustrating that the whole congregation joins together as the body of Christ. The communion rails, also crafted by John, are movable and are usually removed for family and other services where there is a need to make greater use of the space.

## THE ORGAN

The Organ is a relatively modern addition to the worship of St. James having been Built in 1861 by Messrs. William Hill and Son and enlarged by Messrs. Minns of Taunton in 1903. Following the First World War some of the collected monies collected to create a memorial to the fallen was used to refurbish the organ further. In 1965 Messrs. Osmond Brothers of Taunton carried out more renovations.

The Organ has three manuals and thirty-one speaking stops.

There is no doubt that this addition at a time when hymn writing was coming in to its own must have added greatly to the worship of the church, making good use of the excellent acoustics offered by the building and its barrel vaulted roofing.

Church records indicate that Bass viols and presumably a small orchestra of wind instruments previously provided music.





The chancel also contains a number of interesting features, which are reminders of a different era.

On the North side of the chancel is a copy of a picture by Rubens. The original is in Antwerp museum. It is called "le Coup de Lance" And the copy was made in the eighteenth century by the Flemish artist R. Du Vany. Many have remarked that this rather hidden picture of the crucifixion is particularly moving and contains a depth of meaning which repays a close study.



There is a piscina on the South side of the East Wall. This would be traditionally used for holding water to cleanse the communion ware. It fallen into disrepair until restored by Mr. and Mrs. Spiller and was rededicated on January 25<sup>th</sup>. 1948. The original bowl had been half hacked away. Despite the restoration it is no longer actively used.

The reredos behind the communion table dates from 1963 when the old one, which blocked the lower lights of the window was replaced.

## THE SIDE CHAPEL

To the right of the chancel is the side chapel.



The screen, which separates the chapel and the chancel, is of Burmese Coco wood and was originally exhibited at the Wembley exhibition of 1925. It is based on the old rood screen, which is in the County Museum, and was removed in 1812. The present screen was designed by the local artist W.D. Caroe. This gives an indication of what the main chancel would have looked like when divided. A rood screen is so called because originally on top of it would have been a figure of Christ on the Cross (Rood) or a larger Calvary scene.

The chapel is on the site of an old chantry (or prayer chapel), which was removed in 1836-1837. The South East door may have lead to this chantry.

Much of the furniture, glass, credence table as well as the war memorial are relatively modern having been installed after the second world war. As in many churches the memorial is a powerful reminder of the horror and sacrifice of war. The memorials for first world war have recently been researched and books containing information are on display.

The side chapel now tends to be used for small communion services and private prayer. The screen and also the altar or communion table have shells carved on them, denoting a connection with St. James of Compostella. Pilgrims who travelled to this Shrine in Spain would have been given a shell as a commemoration of their pilgrimage.

### **THE SOUTH AISLE**



Again and again in the history of St. James' Church building we come across Dr. Cottle, Vicar from 1836-40, and the South Aisle is no exception. As was mentioned earlier the church was enlarged between 1836 and 1841 when the south aisle was doubled in width. At the same time the clerestory windows on the South side of the Central Aisle were walled up and galleries built on both the North and South Aisles to accommodate the growing population of Taunton

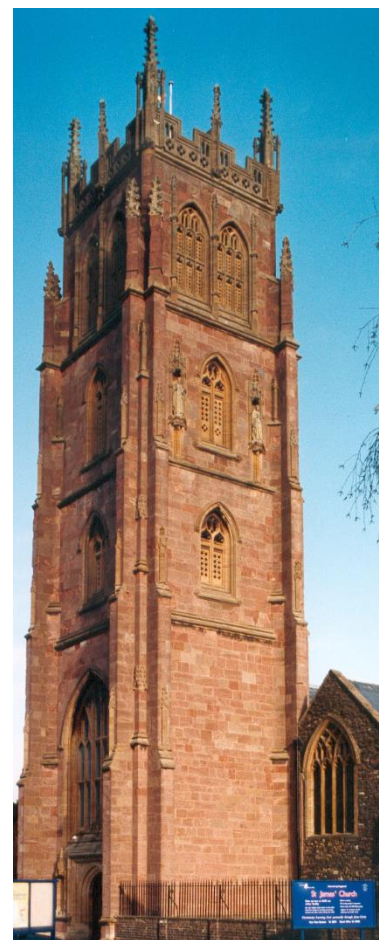
When these alterations occurred, the pulpit was lowered and moved to the North side. In the foundation stone at the time there was a parchment deposited by Rev. W. Kingslake of West Monkton, written in Latin in fifteenth century characters, it is not known whether it is still there. It was described as being at a "dizzy height" so perhaps it is as well for our necks that it was moved! The pulpit was made in 1633 and is unusual in being decorated with a frieze of mermaids and suns, one on each of the seven sides. When the front of the church was altered in 1981 the pulpit was moved to its present site and the congregation had to get used to looking to their right instead of their left. The pulpit emphasises the importance of the preaching the word of God. It is however significant that in recent times the majority of sermons are given from the chancel steps, rather than the elevated pulpit, moving away from the "6 foot above contradiction" tradition.



## THE TOWER

If you have ever stood by the entrance doors when the bells are being rung for the services, you will have noticed a creaking noise. This is caused by the tower rocking as the bells are swung. The British method of change ringing is unknown outside this country, and places a great strain on the tower. The bells are set in wheels which turn through 360° on each ring. The bells are extremely heavy and are laid in pairs at right angles to each other to relieve the effect of the swing. They are prevented from turning completely over by wooden stops.

If the tower did not give, it would crack and fall down, and this was no doubt part of the problem with the previous tower. The damage was noted and the present tower was built to replace it. The original tower also showed signs of bad workmanship in that the stone was laid at the wrong angle so that the bedding plane was vertical and the weather could peel layers off. The original tower was similar to the present one, except that limestone was used throughout, and not the present sandstone; and also the present spiral staircase has been extended to reach beyond the balustrades. It is possible that there was in the beginning a central tower, and this may be one of the reasons for the extra width of the East arches in the nave.



The foundation stone of the new tower was laid on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1871, near St. James' Day, by the wife of William Gore-Langton, the MP. The same lady opened the tower on 9<sup>th</sup>. June 1875. The stone for the new tower is Williton red sandstone from the estate of Sir Alexander Acland Hood who made a present of it to the Church. Mr. J.H. Spencer, the architect who examined the old tower after it was demolished said, "Speaking generally, throughout the principle part of the structure, the mortar was found to be of an inferior character and the 'bond,' or putting the stone together, was unsatisfactory," Let us hope that the present tower is better put together. The cost of the rebuilding was £3,072.

The bells; which may have caused the problems, were increased to a peal of eight. They are:

5<sup>th</sup>. 1610 Inscribed "Come when I call"  
recast in 1891

6<sup>th</sup>. 1626 Inscribed "Soll Deo Detur  
Gloria"

Tenor 1626 Inscribed "Robert Gad.Osmond  
Wlther Churchwardens"  
(This weighs an imperial ton)

4<sup>th</sup>. 1721 Inscribed "Mr. J. Reed, Mr. John Strickland, Churchwardens"





- 7<sup>th</sup>. 1749 Inscribed "William Hartnell Gent and John Perrian Esquire  
Churchwardens"
- 3<sup>rd</sup>. 1874 Inscribed "R.H. Pearse, H.T. Penny Dennis Churchwardens"
- 2<sup>nd</sup>. 1897 Inscribed "In commemoration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee  
1897 Rev. G. Kingdon, Vicar. C. Loveday, C.E. Clemow, Churchwardens. Mears  
and Stainbank, founders"
- Treble 1897 inscribed as the second

They are hung in opposite directions so that the four in the middle swing north south and the two on each side swing East West. The last two bells were hung in time to be used for a peal on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, hence the inscription.

In the ringing chamber are various commemorations of previous triumphs of the bellringers. The first peal of Treble Bob rung West of Bristol was rung here on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1898.

We have also had peals of Bristol Surprise Major (1935), Grandsire Triples c.1953) and many other methods with equally strange names. There is also a list of rules in the tower beginning with, "Every ringer shall regard his or her ringing as an act of praise to Almighty God". Another rule is that each session shall start with prayer. The bells have needed rehanging at least twice, in 1891 and 1954. There is also a set of handbells in the tower.

On the top of the tower, 120 feet from the ground, there is a triple pointed lightning conductor. There is also a weather vane of gilded copper, regilded in 1991. The cock's wings are engraved,

***A native I am and my name is Tom,  
A jolly, gay bird, but I have no song,  
I watch the wind, I keep events,  
Which always have been by Intent's."***

He certainly has the best view possible of the cricket pitch, and is it by accident that all the windows on the tower stairs, face that way? It is interesting that in the accounts for 1897 J.M. Chapman was paid £2 for keeping the churchyard in order and watching in the cricket season.

Despite its rebuilding, some of the features of the tower seem to be original. The fan vaulting dates from 1440-1450, except for the central piece and the supporting angels at the sides, and it is always worth a look up as you enter. The entrance door is also original, although much repaired. On either side of the door is a niche, both of which no doubt originally contained figures. The figures in the niches of the South side of the tower are those of St. James and St. Mary Magdalene. The old figures were donated to the museum. The screen with the cross in Perspex was a tribute to a former warden, and was designed by J. Foster-Turner, one of our Readers at the time. It was dedicated in 1970. The tower door was opened up to be used as our main entrance In 1980-1981. The canopies over the churchwardens' chairs date from 1946.

## STAINED GLASS

The church contains many fine examples of stained glass, depicting New and Old Testament themes. In early times when few members of the church were literate they would have been part of the rich visual imagery that was contained in the church building. Most of the current glass dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century but it remains an important part of the atmosphere, colour and ambience that is St. James.



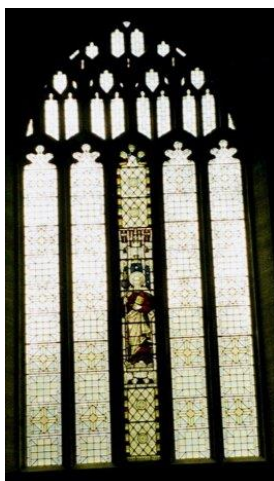
*The West End window seen through the perspex cross. It has fragments of 15<sup>th</sup> Century glass.*



*This window on the Northside flanked by memorials, has masonic symbols in the design. These have been taped over with the sign of the cross because of earlier concerns about the association with Free Masonary.*



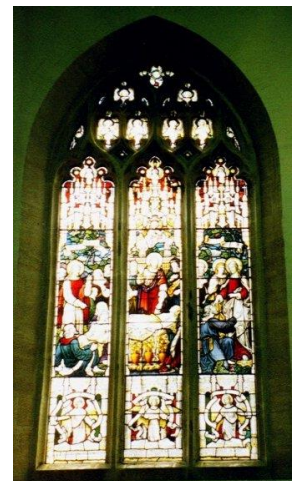
*The East Window which depicts the Crucifixion, Nativity and an array of Saints*



*The East window of the side chapel, the single panel depicts St. James*



*Window on the Southside Depicting prophets of the Old Testament. These are 19<sup>th</sup> Century additions put in after the galleries were removed.*



*Another south window depicting scenes from the life of Jesus*

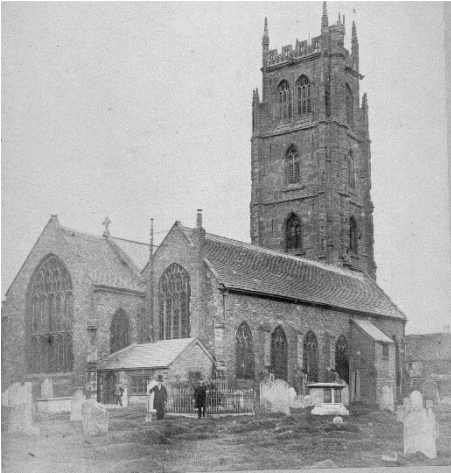




## The Churchyard

The churchyard is now closed, and being ancient contains a number of unmarked graves. One mound, near the door from the North Aisle, is said to contain the remains of the unfortunates who were condemned by Colonel Kirke under marshal law after the Monmouth rebellion, but it is perhaps more likely that this is a mass grave for plague victims.

Grave markers have been moved to the sides of the churchyard over the years and a survey of names was undertaken in 2007 when a part of the churchyard was sold in recent years. The picture on the left shows church in 1870 and shows the old tower, vestry and gallery entrance.



## The Church Hall

Attached to the Church via the Link Corridor, is the Church Hall. The main structure is the hall and Kitchen, which until 1977 was the site of St. James School. Built in 1828 it was enlarged in 1875 to respond to an increased demand for places following the 1870 Education Act.

The original proposals were made in January 1828 when a committee was proposed to establish and build the school it is remarkable that by the Autumn of that year the school was in operation, with 150 pupils installed. Such speed would be hard to imagine today with all the regulations that need to be adhered to. Pictured left are pupils in about 1900.



On the school's closure in 1977 part of the building was sold and is now St. James Surgery. The Church bought the remainder and has since added a link corridor, offices, toilets and additional rooms. The Church Halls are now used for many church and community functions.

### **School Connections today**

The old School attached to the church remained in constant operation until 1977, when it was closed and the pupils transferred to the newly established Archbishop Cranmer Church of England VC School on the site of the former Priory School in Cranmer Road. This school became an academy in 2013 and comes under the Bath & Wells Multi Academy Trust. It was re-named St. James School at that time. The school maintains close links with St. James Church. The current Vicar takes assemblies there and runs a weekly after school club with the Children and Family Coordinator. Children visit the church for services and learning events in the church. Pictured below are pupils taking part in the Christmas Experience in 2014



## **Bibliography**

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Archaeologist Report	Alan Graham
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