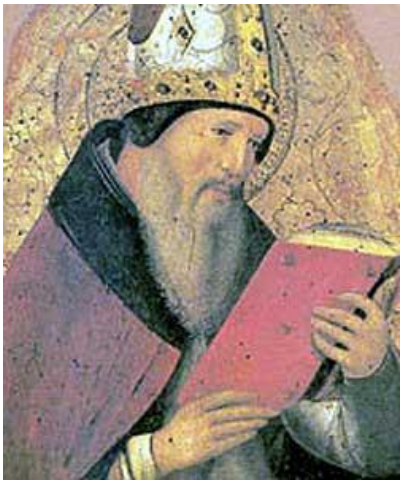


St James Church
TAUNTON

Changing Times

A Journey of Change at St James

Revised 2025

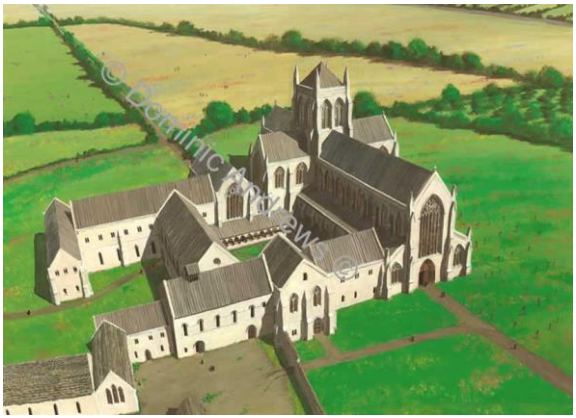
CHANGING CENTURIES CHANGING CHURCH

How many people does it take to manage change in a church? The answer is everyone! It is very easy to look at a historic building like this and feel that time stands still. In fact since the vison was established to build a place of worship on this spot there has been constant change.

There is good reason to believe that there was a church on this site in Anglo Saxon times. Records indicate that there were four places of worship in the area, and one may have been here given that when King Ine of Wessex became King of Wessex, Chrisitanity became established in his Kingdom. There is no remaining physical evidence for this, maybe because the construction would most likely have been wood not stone.

The first indication of a building here was confirmed by archaeological survey in 2001, which found the existence of **12th Century** "footings" at the base of the nave columns, delineating a stone building roughly where the nave is today. This date would put the construction roughly in line with the building of the Augustinian Priory in Taunton, founded by William Gyffarde, Bishop Of Winchester in 1115 and established in its eventual position by his successor Bishop Henry of Blois. The Priory church, as discovered by archaeological excavations in 2005, was much bigger than St. James or St. Mary's and is likely that these were subsidiary buildings or chapels serving the town and out reaches. The Augustinian order established by St. Augustine of Hippo was aimed at service to the community and the biblical rule they followed was as follows:

- *Living together and sharing their possessions in brotherly harmony*
- *Importance of sincere prayer*
- *Putting other people first*
- *Living a pure life*
- *Care for the community and treatment of the sick*
- *Being ready to forgive*
- *Being obedient to those in authority*



The building of the Priory would have been a project that went on for many years. This reconstruction drawing by Dominic Andrews gives some idea of the size of the undertaking. Building developments also occurred for both St James and St. Mary's. In the **15th Century** St. James was enlarged by the building of the nave, north aisle and tower (as also happened at St. Mary's). All the "machinery" would have been hand constructed and yet a magnificent tower similar in size to the one that exists today was erected. The skill of medieval masons cannot be underestimated.

Change in the **16th Century** was also monumental in a different way. At a stroke Henry VIII disestablished the monasteries and their lands and buildings were handed over or sold to wealthy favourites of the king. The old buildings were pillaged and probably used for building works on houses and some may even have been used for church repairs. The only building now left from the Priory is the Priory Barn (Cricket club Museum), and there is a small piece of stonework in Canon Street.

Probably the bigger long term impact for St. James would have been the Parliamentary Act for the Relief of the Poor 1597, created under Henry's daughter Elizabeth, which put the responsibility for dealing with the poor firmly in the hands of the Parish. Previously the monks would have cared for

the sick and poor, but now this responsibility was passed to the parish. The parish registers, much beloved of family historians, had as their main function a means of establishing which parish someone belonged to, and who would be responsible for them if they fell on hard terms. Local philanthropists built 'sheltered housing' for the poor of the parish – Grays Almshouses in East Reach is an example. There is also a building in Taunton Museum of a house that used to be in St. James Street. (It should be noted that these were likely to have been mill workers cottages originally). The parish system, which included the development and administration of workhouses (in the 19th Century), continued with ongoing refinements until the creation of the Welfare State in the 1940s!

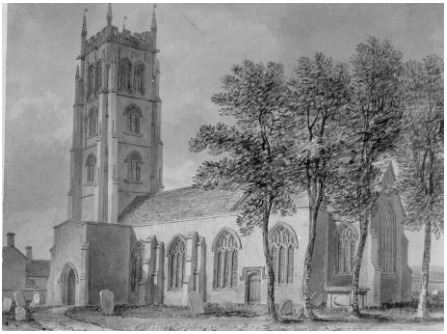
The 17th Century saw changes of a different kind with King against parliament. Taunton experienced battles between Parliamentary and Royalist forces; the Vicar of St. James was even ejected from his pulpit for supporting the King.

(Picture left is a reconstruction of the event by the Sealed knot in 1996, with our then Vicar being "ejected")

Later in the 17th Century, Taunton supported the Duke of Monmouth in his attempt to wrest the crown from his uncle James II. His failure led to the Bloody Assizes in Taunton under Judge Jeffries. Our parish records show entries for several of the rebels who were presumably buried in our Churchyard, so they may well have been people who lived in the parish.

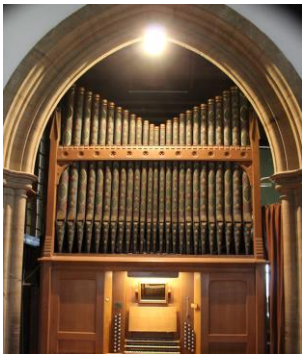
While the **18th century** appears to have seen less dramatic shifts, the **19th Century** was a massive period of change. Concern for the education of the "poor" was strongly felt and St James was no exception. In early 1828 there was a move to create a school and six months later the school was built, then enlarged in the 1870s when the government legislated for universal education.

The building too saw major changes, with the south aisle being added in the 1830s and galleries inserted to increase the capacity of the church, which was serving a bigger population as the town grew. The galleries were taken down in the 1880s, but at roughly the same time, the old chancel, a stubby little affair, was enlarged and the beautiful stained glass window was donated in memory of Louisa Liddon. This period saw much beautification of the church, virtually all the pictorial memorial stained glass dates from the late Victoian period. This must



have made a radical difference to the overall ambience of the church.

Another innovation was the installation of electric lighting. There was certainly a lot happening as in addition to these other developments, the 15th century tower was in a poor state of repair and had to be razed to the ground and rebuilt, in the 1870s. When the neighbouring swimming pool was knocked down in 2019 it happened very speedily, the tower rebuild would have been a much lengthier and more dramatic undertaking, and probably watched with much excitement by the pupils at the school, who were given a day off when it was finally finished. But still that's not all! The organ was also re-sited from the tower and a new organ which is used today was purchased to replace the old one and eventually placed in its current position in the newly rebuilt chancel. The pulpit and font have also been moved to different positions over the years. One wonders what sort of mutterings this all may have caused, but the Victorians were great ones for change!



The 20th Century also saw major changes. The school benefitted from the purchase of 18 St. James Street, next door which when demolished

became their playground (now our car park). The school was closed in 1976 as part of major governmental educational changes and the pupils moved to the former Priory school, renamed Archbishop Cranmer, (a former Archdeacon of Taunton). The church began fund raising in faith to purchase the school site from the diocese for use as a church hall. The church was only able to afford half of the site, the other half being bought by a medical practice formerly in Church Square. Subsequently money was raised to build the link corridor, office, toilets and additional rooms.

In the 1980s the choir stalls were taken out and the physical division between chancel and nave removed , with the creation of the wide apron area at the front of the church. Physical changes were also made to the entrance, removing the old forbidding iron railings to give the message that we wanted people to come in!

The 21st century began with another major development with the removal of rotten flooring, installing underfloor heating and the replacement of the pews (the 19th century ones were solid but not very remarkable) with chairs designed for comfort not austerity.

This means we now have a very flexible floor space, which is used for concerts, community events, blood doning, youth activities, holiday clubs, toddler church, and exhibitions as well as worship.

Our churchyard has reduced in size slightly due to selling a corner to Somerset County Cricket Club, enabling them to increase the pitch to International standards. Who'd have believed that could happen!

And then of course Covid happened! Churches had to close and traditional worship ceased in the building but didn't stop functioning. The church went online, delivering services, homegroups and meetings online; pastoral support achieved by telephone and doorstep visiting. When we did re-open it was a socially distsnced experience, wearing masks and no singing! A very bizarre experience for church goers. For everyone it was a difficult time but we have been seeking to respond by "doing church" differently. As with electric and petrol cars we learnt about hybrid worship and Zoom technology – and we are still learning.

These are just a few of the changes that have happened over the ages, there are many more. Worship has changed in style – from the Gregorian chants of the medieval period to the mighty organs of the 19th century to 20th century choirs morphing into music teams with guitars and drums, and now the mixed economy of live and recorded worship. However, the important thing that remains is that we are a worshipping community united by the love of God and each other and seek to show that love in tangible ways to our community.

It's very easy for any community to become inward looking; the early Augustinian monastic movement has given us a great example of lifestyle and service. So although post covid, the church is returning to being a busy place where the church proper (i.e. the people) meet for worship and fellowship, during the week you won't find us here. The church leaves the building and involves itself at work and play in the community as parents, grandparents, neighbours, employees, students, volunteers. chaplains ……. in short in whatever area of life we are involved with, seeking to follow Jesus where he wants us to be.