

# Church of St James

Cameley, Somerset

The Churches Conservation Trust



## Historic context

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In the late 18<sup>th</sup> C the building of a main turnpike road through Temple Cloud, and now the A37, refocused the parish away from the tiny village of Cameley to the area around this main road, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the east of St James Church. In 1924 the building of the Church of St Barnabas in Temple Cloud compounded the isolation of St James Church as the parishioners now chose to regularly worship in the new building. Further neglect of St James Church during WW2 led to the building's closure when the roof became structurally dangerous. The building was re-roofed in 1961 and a Group of Friends established to raise money for its upkeep. In 1981 the Redundant Churches Fund were made responsible for the building, this organization subsequently becoming The Churches Conservation Trust.

## Exterior

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The church has a simple plan form, a western tower, a nave, a chancel and a south porch. The oldest parts of the building date back to the 12<sup>th</sup>C, although the double window in the nave was completed about 1400, and the windows in the north elevation date from the 18<sup>th</sup>C. To the west of the porch there is a flight of steps leading to the doorway that was built in 1819 that leads to the galleries within. The grand design of the tower contrasts with the humble scale of the main church, and this difference is further enhanced through the materials used, the tower being of warm red Mendip stone, and the nave and chancel formed from blue lias. At 62 ft the tower's height exceeds the combined length of the nave and chancel to further mark this difference in scale. The porch was restored in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and has helped to preserve the late Norman doorway. The door has detached shafts with capitals of different designs supporting an arch with rope pattern embellishments. Medieval cornices remain in situ, and the floor is paved with burial slabs. The chancel was probably rebuilt in the 15<sup>th</sup>C as indicated by the window design. There is a priest's door in the south elevation reminding us that maintenance of the chancel was the responsibility of the Rector whereas the rest of the building was maintained by parishioners.

## Interior

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The 'atmospheric' interior of the church reflects the work of several periods; the floors are lined with burial slabs, the nave walls lean outwards, ancient frescoes line the perimeter and the church is full of wonderful fittings. The church reflects both pre- Reformation and post-Reformation traditions. The ancient frescoes, the structure of the building, the font and the remains of the chapels that flanked the former rood screen all remind us of the pre 'Reformed' church. After the Reformation in the mid 1500's church interiors were altered to cater for the liturgical needs of the 'Reformed' church, with its services in English, its English Bible and its emphasis upon the preaching of the Word, and its new identity as '*The Church of England*'. Symbolic pictures and statues were deemed unnecessary and were removed by the reformers or by Puritans in subsequent generations. In the period between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the galleries, box pews, pulpit, communion table, sets of royal arms and Ten Commandments were all provided. It is quite common for Victorian restorers to do away with such items and replace them with adapted fittings, but here at St James much has been left as it would have been over more than a century and a half ago, excluding the lectern, choir stalls and chancel roof that are all typically Victorian.



From outside it can be seen that the nave roof was lowered slightly and the resulting reconstructed plastered ceiling has been dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> C. There are several fine wooden bosses at the intersecting points including a face, a mitred bishop and a foliage carving. When the roof was repaired in 1960 a Romanesque 'beak-head' was discovered and loaned to the British Museum. A blackened late 14<sup>th</sup> C carved head was the westernmost boss and has been sent off for analysis.

The font dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> C and has a square bowl with a base moulded like a Norman scalloped capital with cable moulding at the top of the stem. The wooden cover has radiating scrolls and dates from 1634.

The tower has a Georgian era timber partition that disguises a set of earlier balusters that are on the tower side of the opening. There are lead pieces displayed on the partition that were autographed and dated by the installers. There is also a list of Rectors of Cameley dating back to 1297. The building's patron from this time up until the Reformation was the Abbey of Bath, and subsequently the lord of the manor.

There is a door in the north wall of the tower that leads to an 85 step spiral staircase that takes you up to the different stages of the tower. New steel supports for the bells were installed in 1966 and the earlier 17<sup>th</sup> oak bell-frame was left in situ. Two of the church bells date from 1450 and were cast in Bristol.

The nave presents an array of interesting seating types. The medieval benches have flat-topped ends, their timbers worn to a shine through long use, and probably date from the 1400's. The box pews are from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> C and were either owned or rented by their proud occupants. The tall pew nearest the entrance door was probably the church warden's, and has a high panel for draft protection. The grander pew with a step up was probably the one used by the lord of the manor.



The pulpit, reading desk, and the pew next to it have fine characteristic woodwork of the 1600's with the desk and pulpit inscribed with the date of 1637. The main service would have been led from the reading desk with the pulpit kept for the sermon. This has a fine sounding board to help project the preacher's voice. The pew behind the reading desk was intended for the parish clerk, and as there is a range of seating this was probably for the rector's family. There are 18<sup>th</sup> C hat pegs on the long walls of the nave.

In the early Georgian era the capacity of the church was extended by providing a musician's gallery that extends across the west end of the church, with turned balusters to front and back. A hundred years later in the early Victorian era another gallery was built with a panelled frontage on the south side of the nave. A framed painted panel of the Royal Arms of Charles I is displayed on the front of the older gallery reminding parishioners that the monarch was the temporal head of the English Church.

There is a small section of medieval stained glass in one of the nave windows on the north side (east end window), and also in the window on the west elevation of the tower.

The medieval nave structure has some interesting features. The chancel and nave are separated by the low and narrow chancel arch which is probably a late medieval reconstruction. It contrasts with the tall and elegant tower arch at the other end of the nave built in the Victorian era. The walls to either side of the chancel arch have been greatly altered. There would probably have been a rood screen with a rood loft spanning across the nave in front of the chancel arch and with altars to either side. Such screens were often provided in the 15<sup>th</sup>C. Both the north and south arches appear to have been infilled at about this time, and provided with trefoil-headed niches to contain the statues to whom the side altars were dedicated. The north wall has a door for the rood loft staircase, and the south wall has a piscina. The chancel has a 19<sup>th</sup>C roof but still retains the 15<sup>th</sup>C corbels high up on the walls that would once have supported the wall posts of the medieval roof frame. The communion rails may well date from the 1630's when the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, decreed that church altars should be provided with rails to avoid the sanctuary becoming defiled.