

ST JAMES CHURCH SWIMBRIDGE

A guide by Fr David Chance





Welcome!

The people of Swimbridge and the Church Family of St James Church, warmly welcome you to this church where, as the poet T.S. Eliot says in his poem Little Gidding, 'prayer has been valid'. This is a Holy Place and Place matters. It has mattered in the past. It matters today. We pray that it will matter in the future.

To get a good impression of the church you may like to start by looking around outside. If you stand by the tower you will be beside the oldest part of the present church. It is built of local stone which may have been quarried from the little quarry you see as you look across the Venn stream towards the conical Hooda Hill. Swimbridge gets its name from Sawin, chaplain of William the Conqueror's wife Queen Matilda. According to the Domesday Book, Sawin had a manor here called 'Birige'. Beside the Venn stream we have a church garden. On Good Friday local folk assemble at the church tower and carry a large wooden cross up Hooda Hill as a reminder of our Christian origins. These origins may have begun with the visit of Celtic Christian missionaries from Wales and Cornwall 1,500 years ago. The neighbouring village of Landkey gets its name from the Cornish Saint Key.

Above the stone tower we see the spire made of local timber and covered with local lead. Lead and silver have been mined in North Devon for many centuries. This spire has two sisters, St. Peter's Barnstaple and St Brannock (another Celtic saint) Braunton. Do look at the way the spire has been constructed with several sides and angled joints known as 'priests'. The tower houses six bells which are regularly rung for Sunday worship. Several of them originated in the 1400's.

Now walk towards the porch and south door. You will see that the stonework is very different being well cut with battlements above indicating a later building date when more money was available to aggrandise the church. There are several examples of this beautification of the south side of West Country churches. A good example is St. Neot in Cornwall. If you want to look further around the outside, follow the path past the church porch towards the gate. Turn left before the gate and you will have a fine view of the east end of the church with its beautiful windows. Among the graves

you will find the 'bed' slab stone of our famous Victorian priest, Parson John 'Jack' Russell and his wife Penelope. Around you are the gravestones of parishioners, farmers, workers at the tannery and land owners. Near Russell's grave is the grave of a gipsy king and queen who were befriended by Russell.

Having got an idea of the outer shell of the church, return to the south porch and open the door. You are entering the Holy House of God. When your eyes have become accustomed to the change of light you see a feast of ancient architecture. You are in the nave, so called after the Latin name for 'ship'. The roof looks like the inside of an upturned ship and the Church is often called the Ark of Salvation. The nave is the people's part of the church and for hundreds of years it would have been the largest covered space in the area. Hence it was used for all sorts of things, including processions and fairs. We have concerts, talks and bazaars in the nave today. On Sundays and Feast Days the faithful would gather in the nave to hear, and see, the parish priest celebrating the Mass behind the screen.

Seats, called pews, were introduced in the early 1500's. At the Tudor Reformation the government legally demanded that all those living in the parish must attend Sunday worship and listen to the preaching of the sermon. They were fined a shilling if they did not attend. We have some old pew ends at the west end of the nave. Most of the pews are Victorian and have prayer kneelers made in 1993.

As you enter, on your left is the font. It is placed near the door to remind the faithful that this is where they were Baptised/ Christened and so entered the universal family of Jesus Christ. Like many fonts, ours has eight sides. The symbolism is that we live in a seven day week and the eighth day is the day of Heaven which we enter at our Baptism. Our font is medieval, made of stone with a lead lining. It has an incredible wooden covering which is very rare in a country church. It has been suggested that the doors protecting the font were carved in Henry VIII's reign, when Italian and French Renaissance work was popular. It is worth looking at the details of the faces, hats and beads coming out of their mouths. The eight panels may originally have been painted. Above is a canopy which is like sounding boards over pulpits. The question is, 'why such an elaborate font cover?' In the Middle Ages baptisms took place at Easter and the blessed water





MEDIEVAL PULPIT

was left in the font for the year. In order to protect it from misuse the font was often given a lockable wooden cover. Our font cover does have a lock but the whole construction seems to be later than the Middle Ages. We just don't know why we have this splendid work but we can treasure and enjoy it just the same.

Our eye now leads us to the pulpit – a large stone box in the shape of a wine glass. This is the place for preaching and teaching. Bible passages are read from the lectern and then the message from those readings would be explained and made real for the congregation from the pulpit. Our stone pulpit was constructed in the late Middle Ages before the Reformation. We think that pew benches would have been provided by this time for the people to sit and listen to the priest preaching. It is high above the people, has statues of early Christian teachers, and still has some of the original colouring. So the preacher looking down on the people would be supported by the teachers of the Faith, Saints Peter, Paul and the early theologians, Saints Augustine of Hippo, Ambrose and Jerome. There are plans to restore the pulpit. Conservation experts have carefully examined the pulpit and confirmed that the stonework was originally brightly painted in red, green and gold. Over the centuries it was repainted many times. It is hoped to create a visualisation to show how it once may have looked, – with, for example, the saints' names painted on the scrolls they are carrying.

Next we must explore the screen. It is a great feature of our church and is world famous. It divides the people's nave from the sanctuary where the priest said the Mass. It was probably multifunctional. It divided the secular from the sacred, enhancing the sense of holiness at a time when the Real Presence of Jesus in the elements (bread and wine) of the Mass had become a major feature of Catholic belief. It is called the Rood Screen, the Rood being a Saxon name for the Cross of Jesus. It was designed to carry the statues of Jesus being crucified, with his mother Mary and his closest disciple John on either side. This sculptured scene facing the people was designed to help their devotions. The screen is big enough to allow the priest's helpers to walk along its top, light candles and sing parts of the service. Maybe there was a stair in the stone projection on the exterior south wall. The whole dramatic and artistic effect of this highly coloured screen through which the people could glimpse the priest in his

colourful vestments, to hear the chanting and smell the incense, must have been an extraordinary and exciting event for people who, in the main, lived very simple and hard lives. It was heaven on earth, in the same way that Orthodox Christians today enjoy their religion. It is not surprising that when the Tudor governments brought an end to all of this there were uprisings in Cornwall, Devon and the north of England. During those troubled times it is estimated that two thirds of England's art was destroyed. In puritan times many screens were cut down, altars were destroyed and a wooden table was placed centrally so that the faithful could gather around to receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion. How did our screen survive? Some say that we were too far away from the troubles. This is unlikely. The main road into north Devon ran through Swimbridge. Nearby churches did suffer iconoclasm. Perhaps our screen has a hidden answer. Many screens were destroyed because they had sculptures and paintings of the saints and the puritan governments were determined to eradicate what was thought to be worship of saints by uneducated folk. Our screen lost its crucifixion and statues (what we now have were placed there in the 1930's) but never had icons of the saints. The carvings are full of interesting designs but no saints.

If the screen door is open, you may enter the choir area. Look at the wide arches on either side of you. Similar but larger arches and carvings may be seen at Saint Mary Magdalene's church in South Molton. On your left is a rich stone carving of leaves, angels and St. Lawrence holding the gridiron on which he was thought to have been martyred. Further on the left there is a large sculpture of a king's head. The organ was given by the Smyth family who owned the Swimbridge tannery. Behind the organ is the large chapel dedicated to Saint Bridget. She was a popular saint in the South West although her origins were in Kildare, Ireland. The flat late medieval ceiling has interesting roof bosses with badges of local wealthy families.

To the right side of the choir is the Lady Chapel, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of our Lord Jesus. The ceiling above the altar is coloured in blue and gold, indicative of Mary. These colours have not been restored. The chapel is said to have been founded by the Dennington family who first appear in records in AD 1285. It is often known as the Dennington Chapel. Behind the altar is a carved plaque of the Nativity which came from the chapel



MEDIEVAL ROOD SCREEN



RENAISSANCE WOODWORK ON FONT COVER

founded by Parson Jack Russell at Traveller's Rest, Cobbaton (now deconsecrated). Above the altar is a glass window of Christ's Glorious Ascension given in memory of Parson Jack.

Return to the middle of the choir and look at the High Altar. You are looking east which is the traditional alignment of a medieval church. It was believed that looking east was the direction of Jerusalem, the place of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and that he would return on Judgement Day from this direction. You notice that there are several steps up to the altar. It has seats for the clergy and altar-servers on the right, called sedilia, and a stone basin for washing the sacred vessels known as a piscina.

Behind the altar is a white marble and alabaster carving called a reredos. It has carvings of the crucifixion with the three Marys and Saint John, then on the sides, Saints James (holding a shell used by pilgrims who travelled to his shrine at Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain) and Thomas. Finally, there are angels adoring Jesus. The whole scene was made in Exeter in the mid 1800's and given by the Smyth family in memory of John and Mary Smyth. Above the reredos is a large Victorian stained glass window of the Last Supper – this is also a memorial to the Smyths. Notice the details of the scene, for example Judas's purse with the 30 pieces of silver (the price he was given to betray Jesus). Nowadays the High Altar is used on Feast Days and a small nave altar for ordinary Sundays.

Returning to the nave, you may be interested in several of the memorials. At the west end is the wooden screen protecting the ringing chamber. On the right side is a collection of bell clappers which give an idea of how large church bells are. If you are interested in Devon's church bells you can look up works by the best authority, Rev Prebendary John Scott.

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Friends, we hope you have enjoyed your visit to our church. Do feel free to sit down for a quiet moment and maybe offer a prayer for yourself, your family and friends, for our priests and the people of this sacred place. You may find the prayer overleaf helpful.

Thanks be to you my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which you have won for me,
for all the pains and insults you have suffered for me.
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. Amen

Saint Richard of Chichester, 13th century

You may like to visit towns and villages in North Devon with churches which have similar work to ours: Atherington, Branton, Chittlehampton, Landkey, Pilton and South Molton.

FURTHER READING

Philip Dalling, *The Book of Swimbridge: A North Devon Village in the 20th Century*, 2015

Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England*, 2021

Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 1992

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