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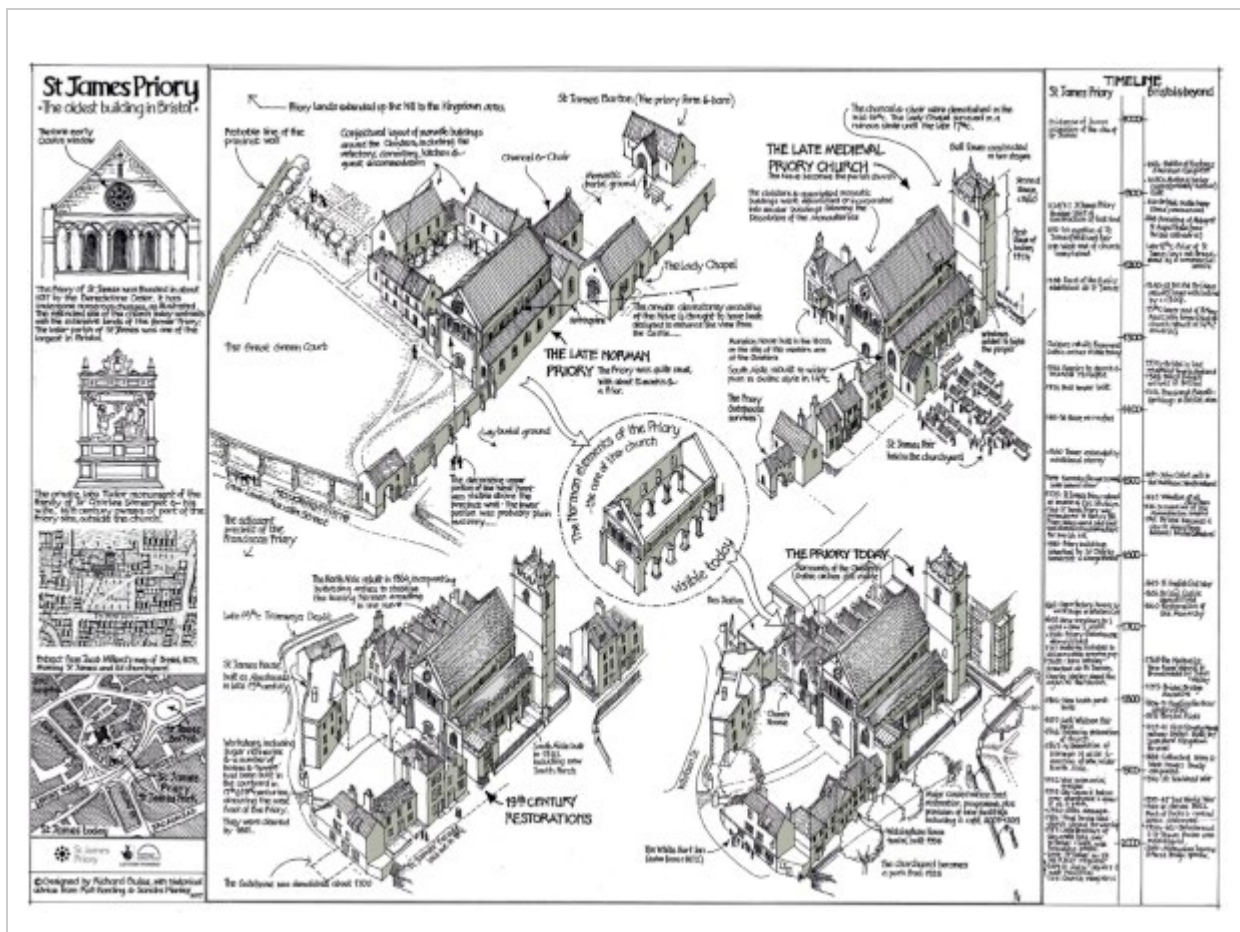


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St James's Priory, Bristol

The remains of St James's Priory constitute Bristol's oldest [building](#) in everyday use. Surviving as a parish church until 1984, major [structural works](#) and a new [function](#) have brought it back to life.



The stages of the [development](#) of St James's Priory ([Drawing](#) by Richard Guise, [Context](#) 4D, Bristol).

Situated just to the north of Broadmead, Bristol's post-war shopping centre, St James's Priory is almost completely hemmed in by [commercial properties](#) and the bus station. Sadly, many [visitors](#) and Bristolians alike pass by the [building](#) completely unaware of its Grade I listed status, and its special [qualities](#) and significance to the history of the [city](#).

The church and the adjoining Church [House](#) are remnants of St James's Priory, founded by Robert Earl of Gloucester in 1129 [1]. The monastery probably consisted of a cruciform church with a central crossing that divided the monastic church from that of the laity. There is also evidence of [cloisters](#), bell [tower](#),

chapter [house](#), [parlour](#), dormitory and other [outbuildings](#). [2] The monastery was surrendered to the crown in 1540 at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, but the abbot of Tewkesbury, perhaps foreseeing the coming desecration of monastic [buildings](#) under Henry VIII, had already leased most of its [lands](#) and [properties](#) to a wealthy landowner. This saved some of the original [buildings](#), as they were converted into a mansion, but others were probably demolished. The western arm of the cruciform [building](#) was saved and became the parish church, a role it fulfilled until it was decommissioned in 1984.

St James's then suffered almost 10 years of neglect. Pigeons, with their particularly unpleasant habits, were the only [residents](#); [damp](#) and decay were present throughout; and the [roof](#) leaked badly. It is surprising that a group of Benedictine monks, the Little Brothers of Nazareth, agreed to [lease](#) the [building](#) from the Anglican Church in 1991 for use as a drop-in centre for homeless people in the [city](#). The neglected church, although cold and [damp](#), was the best option at the time. Some [temporary works](#) were undertaken to reduce [water ingress](#). Decay of this significant [historic building](#), although not halted, was warded off for a few more years. This date can be seen as a turning [point](#) for the building: from then on there was somebody to care about it.

Nevertheless, the need for [maintenance](#) and [repair](#) soon became critical and in 2004 the [building](#) was placed on the [English Heritage at-risk register](#). The St James's Priory [Project](#), providing support for people with addictions, had emerged from the monks' original attempts to help homeless people. Better [facilities](#), including meeting [rooms](#), were needed. A successful bid to the [Heritage Lottery Fund](#) followed. The [architects](#) Ferguson Mann undertook [preliminary work](#) on the bid, and Keystone [Historic Building Consultants](#) produced a [conservation management plan](#) [3] that explained the history and significance of the [building](#). Ultimately, [work](#) costing £3.8 million was undertaken. The [professional](#) input was of great [value](#), but the [work](#) would not have happened without the tireless efforts of the St James's Priory [Project director](#), Susan Jotcham, and huge amounts of passionate voluntary effort, not least by Rob Harding.

The award of funds enabled [structural work](#) to be done. The failing [roof timbers](#) were pushing the [walls](#) outwards, causing major [water ingress](#). The outward lean of the west [elevation](#) and the internal [colonnades](#) needed [foundation underpinning](#), but [reports](#) by Momentum [Engineering](#) concluded that there was no danger of collapse. Dendrochronological analysis of the [roof timbers](#) revealed that the [structure](#) of the wagon [roof](#) in the chancel dated from around 1346, and that of the nave from between 1411 and 1436. Considerable [work](#) was needed to stabilise the [roof](#) and protect these ancient [timbers](#).

Once the major [structural works](#) had been carried out, it was possible to look at some of the more detailed aspects of [stonework conservation](#) and the [restoration](#) of the 56 significant monuments. A detailed [report](#) by Odgers [Conservation Consultants](#) advised on how to stabilise the west front, oculus and [blind arcades](#), and correct past, poor-[quality restoration](#), without losing the essential [qualities](#) of the decorative features. Very delicate [work](#) had to be undertaken to achieve this in a thoughtful and careful way as the [stonework](#) was badly eroded and had been repaired in the past with little understanding of its significance. It was important to ensure that new [work](#) was sensitively inserted and that no attempt was made to age the [stone](#) artificially. The monuments inside the church and in the adjacent Church [House](#) were cleaned of the thick brown Victorian varnish that had obscured both [colour](#) and [detail](#), and the same care was taken to respect past [work](#) without resorting to artifice. There were some amazing transformations.

One significant matter was how make the [building's main](#) use economically viable. After exploring a range of possibilities, the decision was taken to create a new cafe with a frontage to a busy pedestrian route to the bus station. A series of meeting [rooms](#) were created for the St James's Priory [Projects](#) to use in supporting people in

recovery from addictions, and they could also be available for [rent](#) by the many local businesses in the [area](#). [Good practice](#) in considering how to alter and extend this [listed building](#) to provide these [facilities](#) led to the [conversion](#) of the Victorian north aisle of the church. This, the least desirable part of the [building](#), had been roundly condemned by George Gilbert Scott and JL Pearson when it was built in 1864. Indeed, the separation of this aisle from the [main](#) body of the church could be said to have restored, at least to some degree, the original proportions of the ancient [building](#). The simple elegance of the church following the [completion](#) of the [work](#) in 2011 demonstrates that this decision was well judged.

Part of the original [Heritage Lottery-funded project](#) was to improve [public](#) interpretation of the [building](#) and ensure that people had [good access](#). While this was achieved to some extent in 2015, it was decided to undertake a further [project](#) to open the [building](#) up to the [public](#) more effectively. This included [work](#) to explain the [building](#), organising events to bring people into the church, arranging guided tours of the [building](#), and preparing leaflets and [drawings](#) to explain the [building](#) and the monuments. [Work](#) continues to make sure that Bristolians and [visitors](#) to Bristol alike know the [building](#) and come to [value](#) it.

Despite these efforts, the [building](#) remains under threat. [Maintaining](#) its [economic viability](#) is a challenge. New food outlets opposite the cafe mean that the financial [environment](#) is extremely competitive. Bookings of the meeting [rooms](#) remain strong and are helping to keep the St James's Priory [Project](#) just about afloat, but this leaves little money for [maintenance](#). Ferguson Mann produced a phased [maintenance](#) plan as part of the HLF documentation, but so far it has not been possible to fulfill all its recommendations.

The lack of [maintenance](#) is the first of three significant challenges faced today by this important [building](#). A second threat relates to [proposals](#) for the [development](#) of nearby [buildings](#). [Alterations](#) and [extensions](#) at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, close to St James's Priory, have resulted in the release of the old hospital [building](#) to the open market. Unite, a [developer](#) that concentrates on providing [student accommodation](#), wants to convert the existing [buildings](#), but it also proposes a 20-[storey block](#) of student [flats](#).

Bristol [City Council](#) refused [permission](#) on the [grounds](#) of inappropriate height, [scale](#) and massing, poor [design quality](#) and the overbearing impact of the proposed [building](#) on the [amenity](#) of St James's Priory. The applicant lodged an appeal, but the matter is now on hold because of a recent decision by [Historic England](#) to list part of the old hospital [buildings](#), including the chapel. It is clear that the pressure for commercial [development](#) in the [area](#) is unlikely to disappear. While it is true that St James's Priory is already hemmed in by commercial [development](#) and that new [buildings](#) nearby have already overshadowed the smaller [scale](#) of the courtyard, it could become much worse.

A final challenge is to find successors to the individuals who put their hearts and souls into the [work](#) of saving and restoring the [building](#). The personal characteristics of the members of the St James's Priory [Project team](#) who worked to establish a [place](#) to provide support for people struggling with addictions have been applied also to the [building](#) itself. The result is a haven in a busy commercial [area](#) of the [city](#) that is appreciated by many, including [office workers](#), shoppers and [visitors](#) to the nearby hospital. It is to be hoped that new [champions](#) will emerge.

This article originally appeared as 'Saving St James's Priory' in [IHBC's Context 153](#), published in March 2018. It was written by Sandra Manley, visiting [research](#) fellow in the faculty of [environment](#) and [technology](#), UWE, Bristol.

References:

- [1] For a fuller account of the history of the [building](#) see Manley, S, 'Saving St James's Priory', in Transactions of the Ancient Monuments [Society](#), 2015, [Volume](#) 59, pp109–134.
- [2] R Jackson, [Excavations](#) at St James's Priory, Bristol, Oxbow Books, 2006.
- [3] Keystone [Historic Building Consultants](#), 'St James's Priory, Bristol: [Conservation Management Plan](#)'(unpublished) 2006.

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