

## SHORT HISTORY OF ST JAMES PRIORY

- The Priory was founded c 1129 by Robert First Earl of Gloucester who built Bristol's stone castle and made donations to a number of religious orders. He was the illegitimate grandson of William the Conqueror.
- St James was the first of a number of religious establishments founded in an arc on the north side of the city.
- The Priory was a daughter Priory of the great Benedictine Abbey at Tewkesbury.
- Building work would have started with the now lost monk's church to the east of the present church, there would then have been a crossing and then the church for the laity to the west.
- The west end of the present church is believed to have been completed c 1170 and contains what is thought to be the earliest oculus or round, wheel window in the country.
- The church is listed grade 1 of exceptional architectural and historic interest largely on account of the very substantial remaining Norman period Romanesque architecture. The nave arcades and clerestories above as well as the west front all date from the church's original construction.
- In addition to the monks' and lay churches, the Priory had a cloister to the north incorporating the monk's accommodation and courtyard to the west with buildings which would have been used by the laity and pilgrims. There were also burial grounds to the east and north-east for the monks and special patrons and to the south and south-west for the laity.
- The Priory benefited from substantial landholdings to the north of the then city, from the proceeds of the St James Fair and a tax on the import of wine during the festival of St James.
- The roof to the chancel has been tree-ring dated to the second quarter of the fourteenth century, making it the third earliest dated church roof in the south-west, while the nave roof dates from the first half of the fifteenth century.
- The present tower was started in 1374, the cost being shared between the monks and the parish, and extended upwards in the second half of the fifteenth century. The original narrow Norman south aisle was extended in the fourteenth century and then remodelled with new windows in the 1690's.
- **Note:** there is a small dragon-like creature above the capital to the western column to the south arcade and interesting corbels to both the nave/chancel and south aisle roofs.

- The Priory was dissolved in 1540 as part of Henry VIII'S dissolution of the monasteries. The monks' church was demolished and Priory buildings sold and used for secular purposes. The present church remained in use by the parish.
- One of the owners of part of the former Priory was Sir Charles Somerset who died in 1598 and whose fine wall monument can be seen in the north aisle entrance lobby.
- The recent conservation works have restored the fine plaster ceiling and fireplace overmantel to the ground floor of Church House. The coat of arms is believed to represent one of the wives of George Winter of Dyrham House. The fireplace has been dated to the first quarter of the seventeenth century and the ceiling is thought to be slightly earlier, probably around 1600.
- Church House passed into the ownership of Thomas and Anne Ellis whose initials and the date 1666 can be seen over the entrance to the house. Thomas was a sugar manufacturer and a Ruling Elder in the early Bristol Baptist community.
- Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was much reordering of the Church. The south porch was added in 1802, the present east end of the Church was refaced in 1846 along with the glazing to the west and east ends. The decorative glazed memorial windows to the north and south aisles date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- The outer north aisle, where the meeting rooms now are, was added in 1864 and is by a Bristol architect, T.S Pope. The work was roundly condemned at the time by George Gilbert Scott and John Loughborough Pearson, two of the most eminent Victorian Gothic revivalist architects.
- The Bristol blitz and post-war planning drastically reduced the number of local parishioners and the church was declared redundant in 1984. In 1993 it was taken over by an organisation called the Little Brothers of Nazareth, the forerunners of the present occupiers, the St James Priory Project Charity.
- The renovation, conservation and development work was completed between October 2009 and July 2011. The building work cost £4.2million and was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Priory's own resources and a range of other grant giving bodies.
- Currently the Project operates residential housing support for drug and alcohol recovery on site in St James House. Walsingham House provides mental health crisis support for men - managed by St Mungos. The church is open Monday – Friday for quiet prayer and contemplation and Mass is celebrated on Sunday at 8am and at 1.05pm Tuesday to Saturday. There is also a Café at the east end and Meeting Rooms for use of the Project, related groups and also for hire.