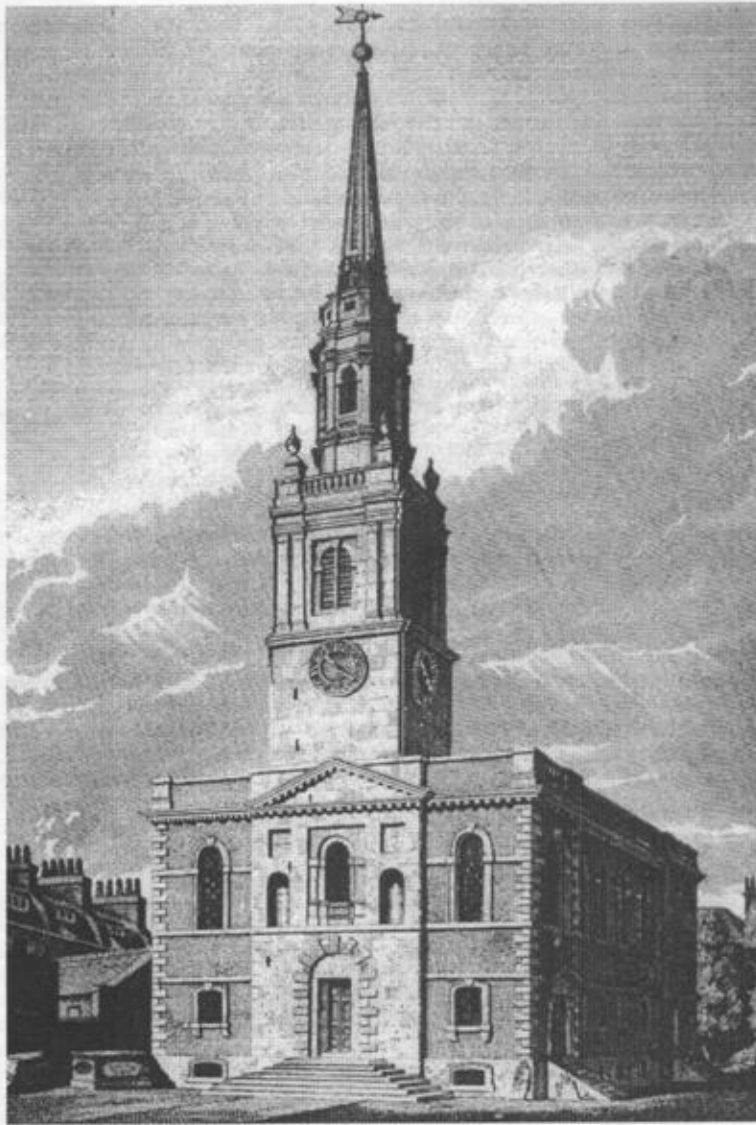


St James Clerkenwell



A short history

Introduction

The parish of St James, Clerkenwell, has had a long and sometimes lively history. The springs which give it its name are mentioned in the times of Henry II, and the parish clerks of London used to perform their mystery plays in the neighbourhood, sometimes in the presence of royalty. About the year 1100 a Norman baron named Jordan Briset founded a Benedictine nunnery dedicated to St Mary, which became wealthy and influential. It had a place of pilgrimage at Muswell Hill, and the parish kept an outlying tract of territory there until the nineteenth century.

At the Dissolution of the nunnery under Henry VIII, its church which by then, seems to have acquired a second dedication to St James, was taken into use by its parishioners; they had been using a part of it for some considerable time. The site of the nunnery was granted to Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, in 1540 but the freehold of the church passed through various hands until it was conveyed in 1656 to trustees on behalf of the parishioners, who at the same time obtained the right to appoint the vicar. Unlike other parishes, they retained it after the Restoration of 1660. Elections for this purpose were held, with all the excitement and paraphernalia of parliamentary elections, right down to the early years of this century. A distinctly Low Church tradition was thereby established, though this did not prevent a long struggle in the latter years of the eighteenth century with Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. This strong minded and evangelical lady had taken over a building in the parish called Spa Fields Chapel, and insisted on appointing her own chaplains to preach there. The vicar was furious, and his action against her in the ecclesiastical courts was the cause of her secession from the Church of England.

The most noteworthy vicar of the nineteenth century was the Rev. Robert Maguire, a prolific writer of Protestant pamphlets, who had enjoyed a peculiarly stormy and exciting election. He was responsible for much work on the fabric of the church and some rearrangement of the interior.

During the present century the parish of St John, which had been carved out of St James's in 1721, was reunited with us, as was the parish of St Peter. The latter had been established in 1869 for the Smithfield Martyrs Memorial Church of that name; our present church contains a memorial to the Martyrs as a commemoration of St Peter's, which suffered heavy war damage in 1941 and was finally demolished in 1955. The parish church of St John was a remnant of the priory of St John, which is now the headquarters of the Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, and the church became the chapel of the Order.

The building and its contents

The old church, which was a medley of seventeenth and eighteenth century bits and pieces in various styles engrafted on the remains of the mediaeval nunnery church, presented by 1788 an appearance of picturesque and dilapidated muddle. In that year an Act of Parliament was passed for the rebuilding, the money to be provided by the sale of annuities. The architect was a local man, James Carr, and he produced a building which is pre-eminently a preaching-house, but with carefully planned and harmonious detail. The new church was dedicated by Bishop Beilby Porteus in 1792. The upper galleries were added in 1822 for the children of the Sunday-School, founded in 1807 and still flourishing; the back parts of the upper galleries were for the use of the poor. Sir Arthur Blomfield restored the church and rearranged the ground floor in 1882. The tower and spire had been restored in 1849 by W.P.Griffith, but this work was also very well done. Carr's design is clearly influenced by Wren and Gibbs. Inside, the noteworthy feature is the curved west end; the east end originally had painted panels in the Venetian window frame. The stained glass in the east windows is by Heaton, Butler and Bayne, 1863.

The communion table and communion rail are part of the original furnishings. Both are curved toward the west. The table is of mahogany, inlaid with box wood, decorated with plumes of feathers and a dove - the emblem of the Holy Spirit.

The organ was built in 1702 by George Pike England to replace the one by Richard Bridge, which he took in part exchange. The new organ had three manuals, toe pedals and a Spanish mahogany case. This, together with much of England's pipe work, still survives. The rococo detail is noteworthy, specially the carved drapery over the pipes. The organ was rebuilt by Noel Mander in 1978, returning to the original style after some drastic alterations made in 1928. It now has 2 manuals and pedals and 22 speaking stops.

There is a fine peel of eight bells in the tower, dating from 1791, though all the bells were recast in 1928.

A wooden figure of St James which stood over the poor box in the former church is now over the west door of the Nave.

There are several monuments from the old church. These were neglected at the rebuilding, but during the nineteenth century were rescued by the church wardens and set up in the porch. In the church are the following:-

A wall tablet to William Wood, a noted archer who died in 1691 and whose memorial at the end of the south aisle was restored by the Toxophilite Society in 1791.

A large wall tablet with armorials to Elizabeth, Countess Dowager of Exeter, at the east end of the south aisle, it records her illustrious lineage and the brilliant marriages she made for her three daughters. Next to her lies Mico Wagstaff, ironmonger.

A sixteenth century brass to John Bell, Bishop of Worcester 1539-43, who lived in retirement in Clerkenwell and was buried in the old church in 1556.

Among the memorials in the porch are those to:

Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury and a well-known preacher and writer, who died in 1714 at his daughter's house in the parish; there is a floor slab to him under the communion table. The wall tablet was executed by Robert Hartshorne, to a design by Edward Stanton.

Henry Penton, who died in 1714, and developed the area now known as Pentonville.

Thomas Crosse and his wife, 1712, a sculpture by Roubiliac.

The porch also houses the benefaction boards, recording the numerous charities still being distributed among the elderly folk of Clerkenwell and going back to the reign of Elizabeth I, when the parish was a fashionable place to live. The royal arms of George III over the west door are made of Coade stone, dated 1792. They were formerly over the reredos.

The crypt was used for burials, but early on in the twentieth century 300 coffins were moved and stored under the main West entrance. The crypt was then excavated and equipped to form a large hall. The new hall was opened by the Princess Maria Louise of Schleswig-Holstein in 1912. It was later remodelled and opened by the Rt Rev Richard Chartres, Bishop of Stepney on 18 June 1994. The latest work created a dedicated youth space in part of the crypt and was opened by Rt Rev John Sentamu, Bishop of Stepney on 19 December 1999.