

St James the Great, Claydon

The Parish Church of St James The Great stands on the highest ground in the parish. Sections of the Church predate 1100, though it was much restored from 1861. Claydon or 'Clay Hill', is the most northerly parish in Oxfordshire, and in a field just to the north of the Church are the three Shire Stones, where the counties of Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire and Warwickshire meet. Originally, the Church was a chapelry of the Mother Church of Cropredy; and in 1851 became a separate benefice with Mollington.

The oldest parts of the Church are the **pillars and arcading** on the north aisle, being Transitional Norman-Early English, and date from about 1100. The central part of the Church is probably older, and the aisle added to give more room, especially for the processions so loved in medieval times. On the cornice of the pillars can be seen a design in the early stiff leaf foliage sculpture; while on the pillar nearest the tower is a doodle which might be a bee, similar to early stopped ends of label moulds.

The **south (main) door** bears the date 1640, the year of the summoning of the Long Parliament, and two years before the outbreak of the Great Civil War, and the Battle of Edghill. It appears to have its original wrought iron hinges. The doorway, much restored, is Norman. **The font** dates from 1861 and replaces a wooden one. It is in the style of a Norman font, but the basin is much smaller.

The **aisle** opens out into a beautiful Early English Chapel, dating from about 1200. It is surprising that a tiny village church should have such a chapel; it is presumably a chantry chapel where some lord, or knight, or rich lady was buried, and where a priest was paid to say masses for his/her soul and probably also to teach the boys of the village. The chapel is called 'The Lady Aisle', in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The arch under which you enter the chapel is painted (Early English style).

The windows of the chapel are slit windows of single lights, the top being pointed and not round. **The east window** (1861) replaced a perpendicular window, possibly itself replacing an earlier lancet window. There is a door leading from the chapel to the **chancel of the church**, and the stones on the chancel side seem to have been weathered, suggesting that this was once the outer door of the chapel before the present chancel was built. In the south wall of the chapel is a huge squint, and it seems as if it was made when the chapel was built so that people in the chapel could see the **Norman main altar** which would have been some six feet from the choir step. Around 1400 the chancel was lengthened to extend beyond the end of the chapel, and the outer door of the chapel became a door leading from the chapel to the chancel. On the left of the sanctuary is a piscina - a drain where the sacred vessels in use at the Communion are rinsed. On the right of the **Sanctuary** is a **sedilia** (1861); three seats for the Ministers at Communion. Above the sedilia is a Perpendicular window of three lights, dating from about 1450. The window is the latest of the medieval work in the Church. It has still, as it had before 1861, quite a domestic touch - the people who built the Church were no doubt the same men who built the village houses.

The **stained glass** is modern. The window over the sedilia depicts (looking from left to right) St James, the Less, son of Alphaeus, depicted holding a club; St Peter, crucified according to legend, upside down at his own request; and St John, young and beardless, holding a cup from which a tiny dragon peeps. St John was said to have been given a cup of poison to drink, and to have suffered no ill effects.

The next window shows the patron saint of the Church, St James the Great, brother of John. He was the first of the twelve apostles to be killed, and was executed by King Herod Agrippa about 44 AD. He was beheaded with a sword, but is depicted here as the Patron of Pilgrims who visited the shrine of Santiago de Compostela. According to legend, his body was translated there. His symbol is a 'shell'; four of them pictured at the top of the window.

The tower dates from about 1450, and has a saddle-back roof. Before 1861 the door was on the outside, but in that year the doorway into the Church was opened up, or more probably, reopened. There are three bells: the treble bears the inscription "Be yt known to all that doth me see that Newcombe of Leicester made me 1611". The second was made at the same foundry in 1609. The Tenor was cast in 1756 by Roger Bailey at Chacombe, and re-cast in 1910. The weights are Treble, 4 cwts; Second, 5 cwts; Tenor 6 cwts 31lbs. It seems there was once a fourth bell, a sanctus or sacring bell, hung in the now walled up aperture at the top of the eastern side of the tower.

The tower also contains a very unusual ancient clock. It is thought this may be as old as 1512, and has never had a dial. For many years it was wound daily by Les Fox and Erik Bates; a group of volunteers took this over and eventually villagers found this commitment could be kept up. In the fairly recent past, the PCC looked into having the clock automated, but the cost was prohibitive. To our delight in 2024, a hugely generous anonymous donation was given for the purpose of restoring the clock to working order. The clock now chimes on the hour between 7 am and 10pm daily.

A **medieval tomb slab** in the form of a cross is built into the outside of the wall of the aisle.

The registers of the Church date from 1569. Among the Church's other possessions are the Churchwardens account books, 1746 - 1861, and the constable's and overseers' accounts from 1700 - 1850. It has a Baskerville Bible (1769); forms of prayer during the War of Austrian Succession (1848); Abundant Harvest (1854); against Cholera, and a Penny Black postage stamp of July 24th 1840. Most of these are preserved at the County Archivist's Office at Oxford. The Church also possesses a silver chalice and paten, dating from 1856, a handsome solid silver flatten (1939); and two pewter plates, dating from around 1749, one of which is still used as an alms dish.

WE HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED YOUR VISIT TO OUR CHURCH. WE ARE ALWAYS GRATEFUL FOR ANY CONTRIBUTION, NO MATTER HOW SMALL. THERE IS A BOX FOR DONATIONS IN THE WALL.

THANK YOU.

April 2024