

Saving St James's Priory, Bristol

by

SANDRA MANLEY

St James's Priory in Bristol is recognised as a building of outstanding architectural and historic interest and yet, until a recent major refurbishment scheme brought this beautiful building back to life, the future survival of an important remnant of pre-reformation history seemed uncertain. A long period of neglect and under-use had left the building in a perilous condition. The dedication of a team of people, some of whom were volunteers, together with a generous heritage lottery grant, saved the building for the foreseeable future. It is now a centre for the support of people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction and the church itself is used for regular worship. The use for this socially beneficial work and the continuation of its original function as a religious building seems particularly fitting for a former Benedictine monastery with over 800 years of history. The story of the way in which the building was saved is inspiring, but complacency is not appropriate, as challenges for the future remain, including how to find ways to fund its future maintenance to ensure that this remarkable building has a sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

St James's Priory is the oldest building in Bristol and the oldest church still in use in the city,¹ and yet, after it was decommissioned as an Anglican parish church in 1984, it lay empty and neglected for almost ten years.² The roof leaked. Damp and decay were present throughout the structure and the only residents were Bristol pigeons. Many people passed by the building on their way to Broadmead Shopping Centre, the hospitals or the central bus station, but its significance to the history and culture of the city as a remnant of a former Benedictine monastery, was virtually unknown to the public. The future looked bleak for this ancient building. This article is the story of how St James's Priory was rescued and brought back to life through an ambitious £4.2 million programme of refurbishment and thoughtful conservation that was mainly financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).³ The completed work represents an outstanding transformation of a neglected building into what is now both a beautiful and useful place (Figs 1, 2). While the focus is on the work undertaken, the challenges faced and the lessons learned from the process, it is fundamentally a story of human endeavour and how a team of people worked tirelessly to ensure that this important building had a secure and sustainable future. This sustained endeavour over a five-year period meant that the church and its new facilities were ready for the service of celebration for the re-opening in July 2011.

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To undertake this article and to provide a broad range of perspectives on the process involved, a series of interviews were held between October 2013 and September 2014 with as many of the individuals who were involved in the project as possible. These interviews, together with a review of relevant literature, have influenced the content of the article.

ST JAMES'S PRIORY: A BRIEF HISTORY

Robert, Earl of Gloucester, founded St James's Priory as a cell or dependency of the Benedictine monastery of Tewkesbury. It was the first of a series of religious houses on the open land to the north of the medieval city of Bristol.⁴ The precise date of founding the priory is not definite, but according to R. Jackson, 'there is good reason for accepting the date of foundation as 1129'.⁵ The priory church was probably cruciform, with a central crossing that divided the two main elements; namely the monastic church, which is now lost, and the western arm of the church for the laity that remains.⁶ The latter consists of a substantial twelfth-century nave, including arcades for north and south aisles and clerestories. It was completed by 1180. The west front includes what is thought to be the earliest oculus in the country. It has eight circular openings that frame a central octagon encircled by a chevron band. (Fig. 3).⁷ The west façade of the church was probably intended as the principal public-facing elevation and the decorative arcading would have been visible above the precinct wall. This façade includes what has been described as 'a

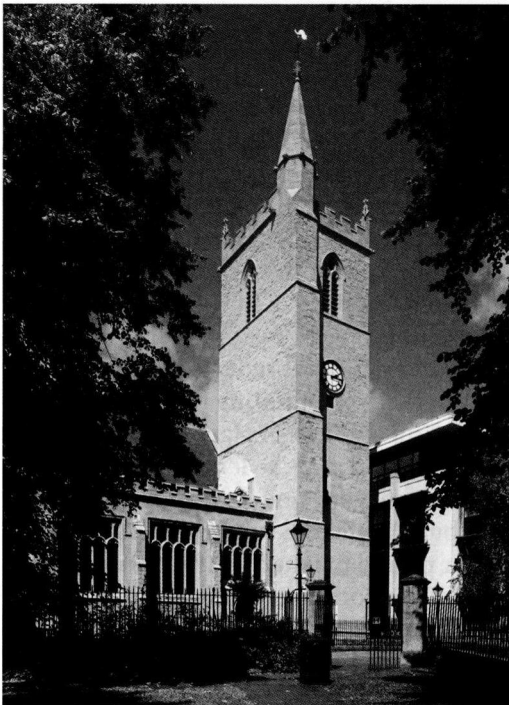


Fig. 1

St James's Priory, south elevation showing church tower after completion of the work.

Photograph, ©English Heritage 2011

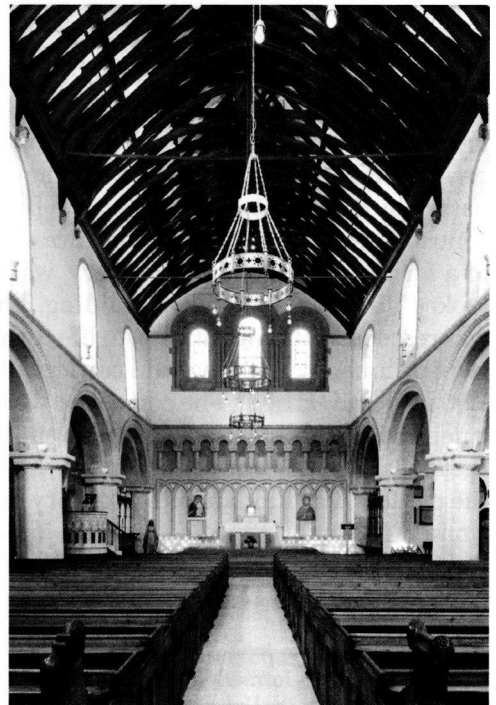


Fig. 2

St James's Priory, the nave and chancel after works.

Photograph, ©English Heritage 2011



Fig. 3

St James's Priory, west front oculus.
Photograph, © English Heritage 2011

clever device: an interlaced arcade with every third column omitted, and three round-arched windows in the wider intersections thus formed. The ends are resolved with lancet arches'.⁸ By the fourteenth century the priory fulfilled the role of parish church for the lay community as well as a place of worship for the brethren and an important image of the crucifixion, the Holy Cross, was situated in the outer church. In an indenture between the monks at St James's and the abbot of Tewkesbury and parishioners in 1346 the Holy Cross was described as 'almost ruined' and the agreement set out how the lay community and brethren should undertake repairs.⁹ Given that the chancel roof has now been dated to around 1346 it seems likely that other repairs, including work to the roof, were also carried out at about this time. In 1374 a further agreement was reached between the monks and the parishioners concerning the construction of 'a new and competently built belfry and a quadrangle of stone in the form of a tower with a sufficient roof in a fit place...within the bounds of the priory'.¹⁰ This work carried out at the expense of the parishioners, but with contributions from the priory, involved the erection of a new tower to replace the old belfry.¹¹ The tower was later extended to its present height, probably in the second half of the fifteenth century. Although no documentary evidence for this has been found, the ashlar masonry on the east and south faces of the top stage are of slightly different stone and the courses are differently laid and bear resemblance to the upper stage of the tower of Temple Church in Bristol which dates from 1460.¹²

Although Benedictine monks followed the Rule of St Benedict, that specified how their lives should be spent in prayer and worship, this did not negate the desire to make the priory economically self-sufficient.¹³ Undoubtedly, benefactors provided financial support, but evidence demonstrates that this was supplemented by other income. This derived from grazing land in Kingsdown to the north and letting pitches to traders following the establishment of St James's Fair, which was held during the monastic period on priory land during the week of Pentecost.¹⁴ The fair later became one of the leading markets of southwest England and according to Bettey, by the later Middle Ages it was held during the week after the patronal festival of the priory, namely St James's Day on 25th July.¹⁵ Bettey suggests that the date was probably changed from Pentecost because otherwise its link to the movable feast of Easter meant that the fair could occur on any of the thirty-five days between 10th May and 13th June, which created uncertainty for merchants and visitors. Additional income for the priory during the period of the

fair was obtained through the shipping of goods, including wine, through the port of Bristol. At the initiation of the Prior of St James's, a substantial amount of land was laid out as a suburb of Bristol and this yielded further income.¹⁶ The need to ensure financial support for the maintenance and running costs of the building was clearly as relevant then, as it is now.¹⁷

By the 1530s, at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, the priory probably comprised an extensive range of buildings, including cloisters to the north of the church, dormitory, refectory, chapter house, storage cellars, barns, guest rooms and a parlour. Archaeological investigations to the east of the church in 1989 revealed only seventeenth-century rubbish tips and eighteenth-century foundations, although medieval burials were found and interpreted to be part of the monastic burial ground. Subsequent archaeological investigations and documentary studies have not revealed the precise location of the monastic

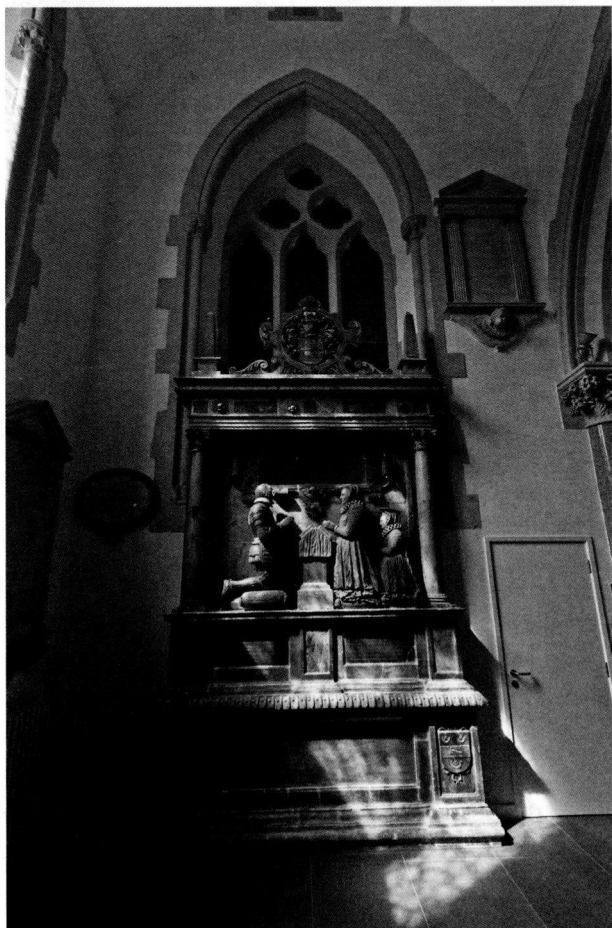


Fig. 4

St James's Priory, The Somerset Monument after restoration and re-siting.

Photograph, © Matt Sweeting

buildings but they were probably extensive.¹⁸ When the monastery was surrendered to the crown in 1540, the abbot of Tewkesbury, foreseeing the dissolution of the monastery, had already leased its lands and properties to Sir Anthony Kingston, who in turn assigned the residue of the lease to Henry Brayne. The crown later granted a lease of a great deal of Bristol property, including the priory, to Brayne, and he converted all the buildings, except for the nave and tower of the church, into a large mansion that included a great hall, long gallery and a number of bedchambers and other rooms.¹⁹ The eastern arm of the church and many of the monastic buildings were probably demolished at this time and alterations made to form a new east wall to the parish church.

By 1580 the property had passed to Henry Brayne's sons-in-law and was divided between George Winter and Sir Charles Somerset. A major monument in the church commemorates Somerset, who died in 1598, and his wife, Ann (Fig. 4). The trend of subdivision of the property was continued, so that by the 17th century it was further divided into several tenancies. Refurbishment of existing buildings took place and new uses were established. The building, now known as Church House, situated immediately adjoining the west front of the church, included the remains of the west cloister of the monastery. The front parlour of Church House has a particularly fine plaster ceiling (Fig. 5) that according to Martindale may have been inherited or installed by Thomas

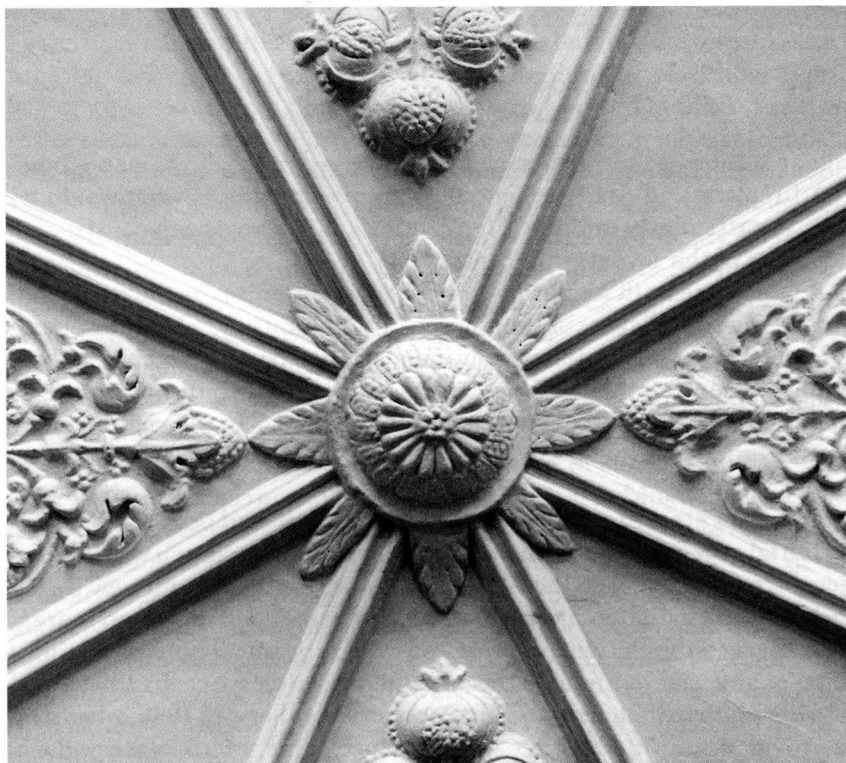


Fig. 5

Church House, detail of the plaster ceiling that it is suggested dates from around 1600.

Photograph, © English Heritage 2011

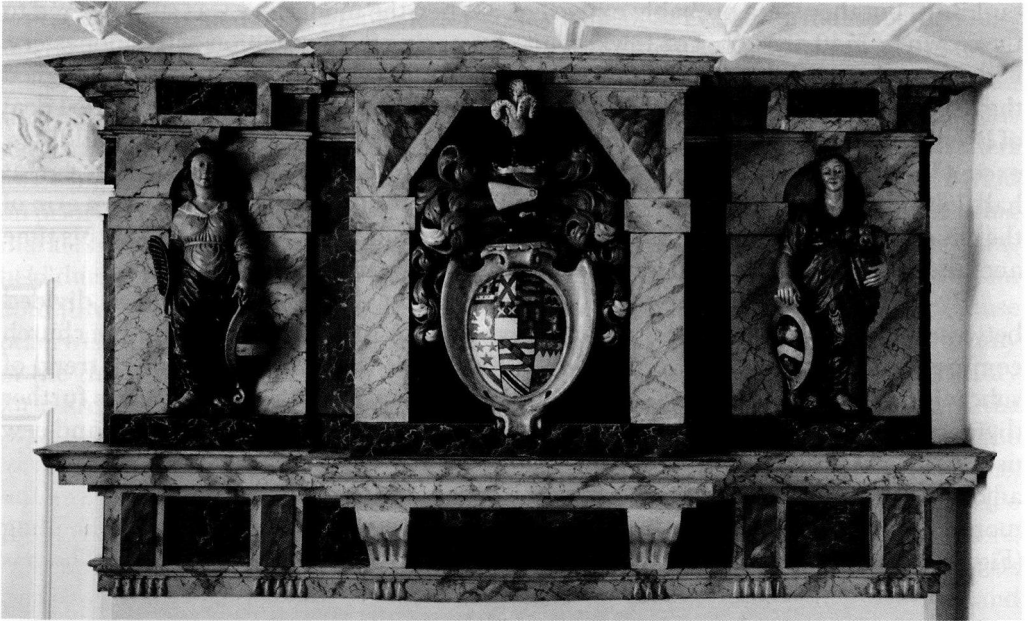


Fig. 6

Church House, Achievement of Arms overmantel.

Photograph, © English Heritage

Ellis, a sugar refiner, who transformed the building into a fashionable house of the period.²⁰ A fireplace and Achievement of Arms overmantel, in what would have been the parlour, is particularly striking (Fig. 6). It is likely to have been constructed during the first quarter of the seventeenth century.²¹

New houses were built alongside the industrial premises as the surrounding area evolved to become an enclave of the sugar refining industry.²² New development and redevelopment of existing buildings continued as time passed, and by the first quarter of the eighteenth century the medieval city became 'so close built', according to Daniel Defoe, that there was 'hardly room to set another house'.²³ In the vicinity of the former priory, new building continued and the church was concealed from view by a number of hovels.²⁴

By the early eighteenth century an east-west pathway had been established through the parish burial ground to the south, but the area around the church was fully developed. The general trend in the area thereafter was towards growth and new development; particularly as the population increases in the city demanded more and more building. Pressure for space in the church itself resulted in significant alterations, mainly through the addition of galleries to increase the amount of seating space. In 1804 a gallery was installed to the south to match the existing north aisle gallery. In 1846, when a new north aisle was provided, considerable repair and refurbishment took place and what Foyle describes as 'awkward looking' arcades, were added to the east wall behind the altar.²⁵ A more substantial enlargement of the church took place in 1864. In common with the

work to 'restore' many other churches at this time, the impact of the work on the historic structure was mired in controversy. The selection of the architect T.S. Pope to design the new work may have been at the root of the problem. Gomme and Jenner consider T.S. Pope's father to be 'an architect of very considerable gifts' but the son is described as 'of decidedly inferior talents, which he applied indiscriminately without either tact or judgement'.²⁶ T.S. Pope's scheme was submitted for approval to the Incorporated Church Building Society, a body founded in 1818 to provide grants for new churches and church enlargement. However, the expectation was that the schemes that were grant-aided should conform to the Society's principles, which included the need to preserve important historic features. The Society appointed John Loughborough Pearson as their consultant to advise on the suitability of the scheme, but he was not prepared to recommend grant aid. He criticised the proposals and raised concerns about the structural problems associated with the alterations. After an interlude, the church then approached George Gilbert Scott, without explaining that Pearson had already been consulted. Both these well-known Victorian architects had severe reservations about the scheme and different views about what should be done, but they compared notes and were aware that attempts to set Scott against Pearson had taken place.²⁷ Pearson, in a letter to Scott in October 1863, commented that 'it was singular to say the least that we could be called upon to sanction the destruction of old and interesting features'. Eventually, the scheme, which involved widening the north aisle with a second arcade, and extending it westward and partially damaging Church House was carried out and work commenced without approval from the society or agreement from the well known and respected architects of the day.²⁸ At this time the 'restoration' and enlargement of churches often involved attempts to mimic past styles, and in some cases, remove or re-model authentic ancient structures, as is the case at St James's. This approach ultimately led to the national protests of William Morris, John Ruskin and others and to the formation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877. Clearly the designers of the nineteenth-century alterations and extensions to religious buildings, including St James's Church, were not always in tune with the principles that eventually formed the SPAB Manifesto.²⁹

Stained glass memorial windows were added to the church in the first ten years of the twentieth century and a war memorial was erected in 1922. Other alterations included the removal of the west end gallery in 1930 and the rebuilding of the organ. World War II and its aftermath marked a significant change of circumstances for the church and particularly for the surrounding area. Large scale bombing of Bristol resulted in a dramatic decline in the residential population. The new Broadmead Shopping Centre and the construction of the inner circuit road completed the domination of the area by commercial activities and very few houses were left to provide worshippers. Nevertheless substantial repairs took place in the 1950s, which included roof repair and reinforcement of the west wall with steel girders. Tie-bars were also introduced with the intention of preventing further damage to the north wall. The north-east vestry was substantially remodelled at the same time and internal works to the church included the stripping of paint from stonework and laying an artificial stone floor in the nave.

However over the next thirty years the further reduction in the number of homes in the area continued, coupled with a general trend in the decline of church attendance,

meant that the church was declared redundant as an Anglican place of worship in May 1984. For almost ten years, with the exception of an occasional concert and the use of the building for a community play in 1985, the building lay empty and underused.³⁰ Residents in Kingsdown, an area of mainly eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century housing to the north, were concerned about the plight of the church and hoped that using the building for a community activity would draw attention to its condition and stimulate action, but this desire did not yield results. During this period of vacancy, although the Anglican Church had responsibility for the building, the general standard of maintenance of the buildings declined further to a worrying level. Attempts were made to find new uses, including a proposal for a museum, recital room, dining room and the development of some new houses on the south side of the courtyard in 1990, but the scheme was rejected on the basis that it failed adequately to secure the future of the church. Meanwhile water ingress, damp and general deterioration threatened the building's future. At the public local inquiry to consider the 1990 proposal Bristol City Council regretted 'that such a fine church, its associated setting and adjacent listed buildings should have fallen into such disrepair that their future is of such great concern'.³¹

A NEW USE IS FOUND

In 1991 the arrival in Bristol of the Little Brothers of Nazareth, a small Benedictine order of monks, marked a change of fortune for the church as the monks felt called by God to establish a drop-in centre to support homeless people in the city. The Anglican Church offered the monks the use of the church and in 1993 they signed a 99-year lease of the church and courtyard. To facilitate the provision of support services for homeless people, many of whom proved to be addicted to drugs or alcohol, the 1860s north aisle was partitioned off from the main body of the church. Gradually an addiction treatment centre was established. Church House was altered and a former almshouse block within the priory complex was converted to provide accommodation for recovering addicts. Roman Catholic services resumed in the church itself and some activities, such as support groups for the residents, took place daily. Although the organisers were motivated by religious faith, the provision of support for addicts was not predicated on the requirement to embrace religious teachings. Funds were raised for the erection of Walsingham House, a two storey building designed by Stone Ecclesiastical, which opened in 1996 as a hostel for addicts. There followed a period of almost ten years during which the buildings were being used for a socially beneficial purpose. The centre evolved into what is now known as the St James Priory Project and became a charitable trust.³² The buildings were not well suited to the new uses and were very difficult to heat, largely because of the amount of water penetration that had resulted from the neglect of essential maintenance. The building proved to be damp and cold. Substantial sums of money were spent on patching the leaks and undertaking piecemeal repairs, but it became evident that only a major refurbishment would make the building fit for purpose and ensure its future (Fig. 7). The building was placed on the English Heritage 'Heritage At Risk' register in 2004.³³

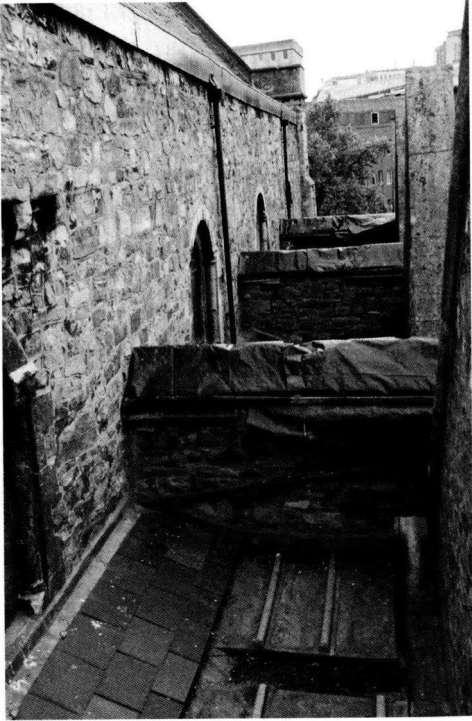


Fig. 7

St James's Priory, roof of inner north aisle showing remnants of temporary protection to parapets.

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THE HERITAGE LOTTERY BID

In 2005 the management committee of the St James Priory Project decided to submit a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to enable large-scale repairs and alterations to take place. Perhaps the most important part of the subsequent process was the preparation of an options appraisal to develop a business plan and ideas for new development that would generate an income to ensure long-term economic sustainability for the Project. Crucial to this development was the need to ensure that the historic and architectural integrity of the building was not compromised. Bristol-based architects, Ferguson Mann, carried out these appraisals and concluded that the least sensitive part of the building that could most readily accommodate change was the Victorian north aisle. However, sketch schemes and feasibility studies demonstrated that the narrow form and limited space did not facilitate uses such as the provision of residential units. This ultimately led to the

scheme to provide meeting rooms and a café as income generators.

Ferguson Mann's preliminary work led on to the first stage bid for a project planning grant from the HLF to enable further investigative work to take place. The award of a grant of £50,000 enabled the preparation of a series of reports, including a conservation management plan. This document included a clear layout plan showing the different periods of building (Fig. 8) and also provided a comprehensive history of the priory, which has extensively informed this condensed history.³⁴

The fact that the church is listed grade 1, which applies to only 2.5% of all listed buildings in the country, demonstrated that the church in particular is of at least national and possibly international importance.³⁵ Church House is listed Grade II*, and the walls, railings and gate piers are listed Grade II. St James's is also situated in the St James Parade Conservation Area designated by Bristol City Council in 1982 and the building's townscape significance as a landmark building is recognised in the conservation appraisal prepared subsequently.³⁶ The statutory designations in place established the church's architectural and historic importance, but the plan went on to define its cultural and spiritual significance as a remnant of the priory and its almost continuous use as a

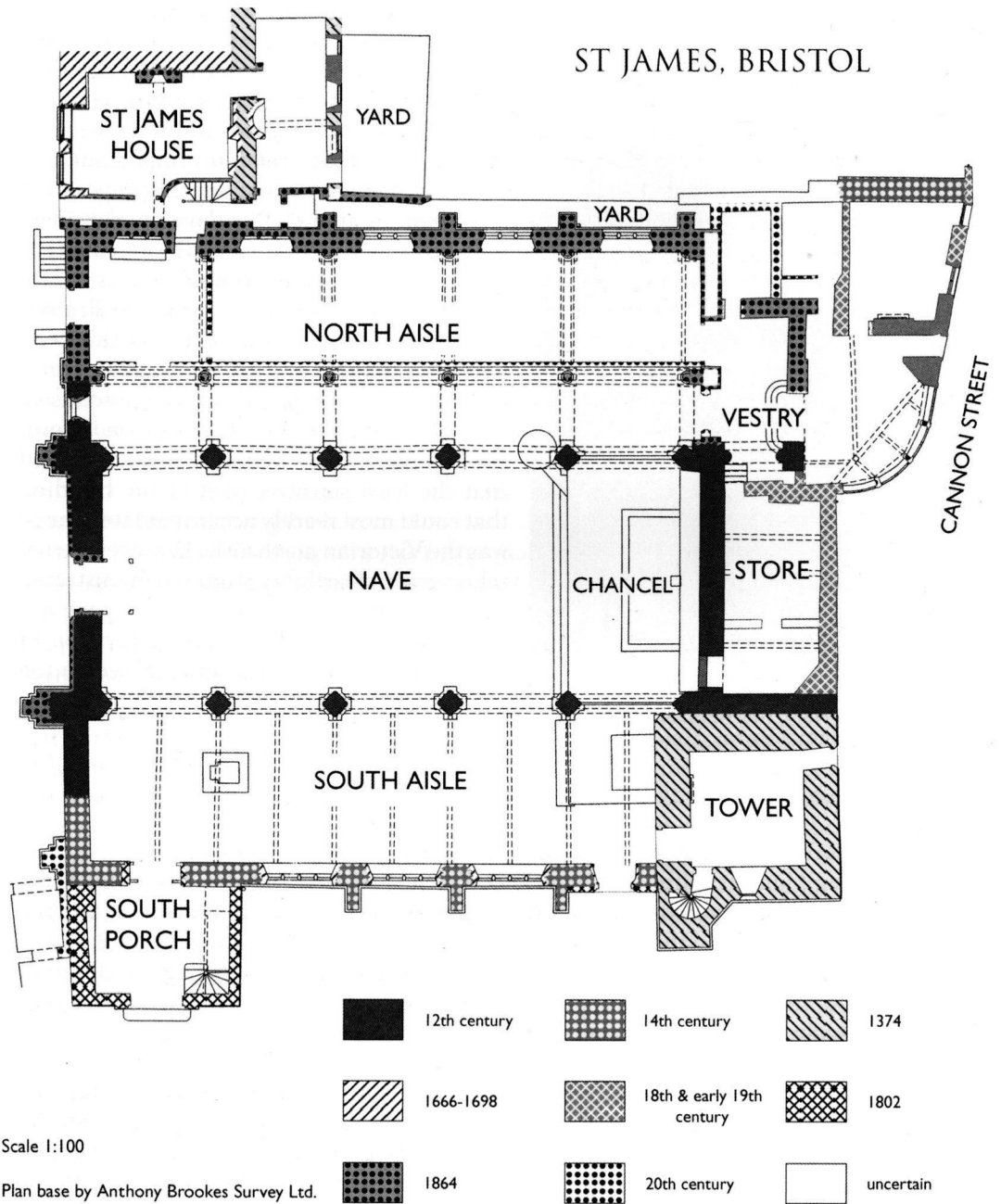


Fig.8
St James's Priory, the evolution of the building from 12th century to 2006. Plan, extract from Conservation Management Plan.
© Keystone Historic Buildings Consultants

place of worship for over eight centuries. It was also argued that the current uses as a place of recovery for addicted persons, of hospitality, religious worship and education related well to its past uses as a monastic centre and seemed particularly well fitted to continue the building's long standing traditional uses. The fact that the conservation management plan also pointed out aspects of the building that were not particularly significant in architectural or historic terms proved to be very useful as work progressed, as it facilitated the removal of some features that would have prevented other essential work if they had been retained. For example, it was agreed by the planning authority that a modest Edwardian fireplace, which had not been noted as a significant feature in the plan, could be re-sited when it proved to be in the wrong position to make best use of space in the new café. The written statement that recognised the relative value of the different parts of the building also helped to support the argument that the north aisle could be permanently partitioned off to create more usable space and new openings created to provide an improved pattern of internal circulation and access.

Other investigative works determined the condition of the building and established the extent to which the visible structural irregularities, such as a marked outward lean of the medieval west elevation and the internal colonnade, required immediate attention. Preliminary investigations by the structural engineers revealed that structural movement had taken place over a long period and that remedial work had been attempted on more than one occasion in the past. It was evident from these investigations that more work was needed to examine the need to stabilise the structure.

The HLF also required the preparation of an access audit as an essential aspect of the work. This was required to ensure that the buildings, once work was completed, were inclusive and accessible to the maximum number of people. In tandem with this study consideration was also given to ways of interpreting the building to facilitate greater public understanding of the heritage asset and an Audience Research Plan was prepared that was intended to provide guidance on how to maximise public exposure to the building and to secure long-term financial viability.³⁷

All these investigations provided the basis for more detailed studies by the architects and engineers and for the submission of the second stage of the bid to HLF. The HLF grant of £3.2 million that was eventually awarded required the trustees to raise a further £1.2 million. This led to a vigorous fund raising campaign led by the project director and project manager that was successful, as grants were obtained from English Heritage, the National Churches Trust, VanNeste, a Catholic charitable organisation and the John James Foundation. Other donations were received from organisations and individuals. The sum required was finally amassed just as the offer from HLF was about to expire.

The overall aim of the proposal stated at the time was to regenerate St James's Priory and 'enhance public access to the building and provide a suite of facilities for the use and benefit of the community'.³⁸ To achieve this it was evident that a considerable amount of repair and structural work was needed, particularly to address roof failure and water penetration, but in addition the final decision was taken to create a new café with a frontage to the pedestrian route from Broadmead to the bus station, which would extend hospitality to the travelling public and the local business community. The café would replace the north-east vestry; single storey early nineteenth-century buildings that

were extensively re-modelled in the 1950s. In addition the north aisle of the church, built in 1864, and the subject of the controversy between Pearson, Scott and the diocese at the time would effectively be partitioned off to provide a series of meeting rooms that could be made available to local businesses and used for educational visits. The areas chosen for the greatest changes were those of least significance that were not as vulnerable to change as the more historic parts of the ancient building. Other alterations proposed would improve accessibility and the scope for flexible use of the space. Work on site eventually commenced on 1st November 2009.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

One advantage of the programme of repair and refurbishment was the opportunity that it provided to gain access to the medieval church roofs, which are normally very difficult to access and had not therefore been the subject of much detailed investigation. Scaffolding was erected to the whole of the interior and exterior of the church and this enabled a full investigation to take place. The project manager commissioned the Nottingham Tree Ring Dating Laboratory to undertake dendrochronological sampling of the roof timbers. This established that the chancel roof dates from around 1346, and the nave roof from between 1411 and 1436 (Fig. 9). The chronological range of wagon roofs in south-west England has, according to J.R.L.Thorp, 'normally been placed in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries', but the firm dating of the two wagon roofs at St James's 'has pushed the conventional range back to the mid-fourteenth century'.³⁹ This seems to have established that this roof type, which is derived from a northern European carpentry tradition, is much earlier than had previously been thought. It is at the time of writing recognised as the third oldest roof structure in the south west of England.

The Bristol and Region Archaeological Service (BaRAS) carried out an archaeological watching brief during the building operations.⁴⁰ The most significant finding was a sundial, which is believed to date from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.⁴¹ Given that the Rule of St Benedict specified how the monks spent their time in considerable detail, it is not surprising that they had access to what was at the time a scientifically advanced form of timekeeping. The fragment of the sundial was found when three apertures under the 1864 north wall were opened up and it was noted that the interior of the wall included some pieces of worked Bath stone that probably originated from the demolished parts of the original priory. Davis and Mason describe this fragment of stone as 'part of an equinoctial dial for the local latitude, and showing equal hours in the summer half of the year, labelled with Arabic numbers', which they regard as a major find that advances understanding of the use of scientific equinoctial dials in early fifteenth century Europe.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

The condition of the building

By the time the first stage of the lottery bid was submitted the condition of the building was a cause for considerable concern.⁴² The Condition Report produced by Ferguson Mann in 2006 as part of the first stage HLF bid, comments on the fact that 'works to

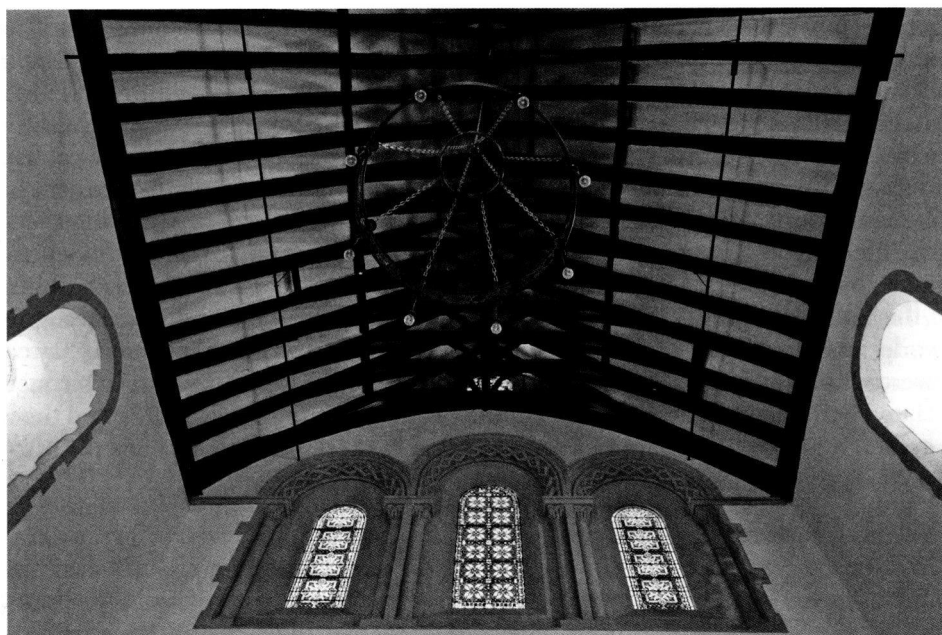


Fig. 9
St James's Priory, repaired wagon roof.
Photograph, © Matt Sweeting



Fig. 10
St James's Priory, south aisle, detail showing damage caused by damp penetration
Photograph, © English Heritage 2006

the general fabric have been minimal with the same issues being raised repeatedly over decades' and notes that particularly along the north side of St James 'damage extends from floor to roof level' (Fig. 10). The building had been placed on the English Heritage 'Heritage At Risk' register in 2004 as category C which implies that a building is 'very bad' and deteriorating slowly with no current prospect of solving the problems. The project director estimated that £30,000 was required annually to perform basic maintenance during this period. However, the operation of a well-organised inspection and maintenance regime was not possible until after the successful HLF funds were made available. Since the Little Brothers of Nazareth commenced the use of the building in 1993, the need to minimise further decay and make the building habitable was recognised, but work consisted mainly of patching the worst roof leaks and handling day-to-day crises that were mainly associated with water penetration. There were long standing concerns associated with the structural stability of the twelfth-century north arcade and the west end gable, but no action could be taken to remedy these innate problems prior to the award of the HLF grant.

Obtaining the necessary permissions

Listed building consent and planning and building regulations approval was required before the work could commence on site. After initial contact with Bristol City Council's planning and conservation officers, it was determined that most of the work would not require planning permission and listed building consent, but could be considered under the ecclesiastical exemption procedure as set out in the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Area) Act, 1990.⁴³ This was because the church was being used for religious purposes for Roman Catholic worship and the Roman Catholic Church is a religious body deemed to have its own satisfactory system of internal control in place. Instead an application had to be submitted to the Historic Churches Commission for the works that would normally have required listed building consent. This was ultimately successful. There is an assumption that the process of consideration of applications for development and alterations that would normally require listed building consent should be as rigorous as the stringent procedures followed in the secular heritage protection system. In practice a number of interviewees felt that the main concerns of the Historic Churches Commission related to religious matters rather than aspects related to the conservation of the heritage asset. For example, the proposal to move the altar was a subject of major discussion whereas other aspects were not aired in detail. The involvement of English Heritage in the process from its inception, the experience of the volunteer project manager, who was also an employee of English Heritage at the time of the project, and the sympathetic approach, knowledge and skills of the architects meant that no harm came to the building during the works. However, the apparent lack of rigour in considering this case could be seen as a cause for more general concern about the guardianship of significant buildings of this type.

An application for the erection of a two-storey café building on the former site of the single storey north-east vestry was submitted to Bristol City Council and planning permission was granted. The café was seen as an important part of ensuring the financial sustainability of the St James's Priory Project.

Constrained site

The buildings on the site are hemmed in by development and apart from a small courtyard there is very minimal space for storage of materials and essential facilities. In order to achieve some of the objectives of the scheme, such as the provision of a glazed link to facilitate easy access to the proposed meeting rooms and improve circulation, it was necessary to acquire adjoining land in the ownership of the bus station. This involved negotiations, but eventually the small strips of land involved were acquired as a gift to the project. The constrained nature of the site also created some difficulties during the building work as the contractors had to find ways of working in a very restricted amount of space. Extensive scaffolding was required over the entire building, both internally and externally, and possibly because scaffolding companies were not prepared to quote for such a large and complex job the commencement of work was delayed by almost two months.

Structural Problems

C.Fitzpatrick of Ferguson Mann Architects, noted that 'a dramatic and alarming feature of St James' is the marked outward lean of the west elevation and the internal colonnade structure'.⁴⁴ The structural engineers, in discussion with the architects, were faced with the difficult task of assessing these obvious structural problems. After studying the movement and stresses in the building fabric, Momentum Engineering decided that the outward lean was acceptable, but remedial action should be taken to decrease the risk of future problems. The solution primarily focused on making improvements to foundations, repair and strengthening of the roof structure, parapet repairs, crack stitching and timber engineering and involved both strengthening the foundations to arrest outward lean and reinforcement of the roof structure to prevent the roof spread pushing out the walls (Figs 11, 12).⁴⁵



Fig. 11

St James's Priory, Underpinning of foundations in progress.

Photograph © Rob Harding, 2012



Fig. 12

St James's Priory, roof trusses showing strengthening of bearing to halt damaging spread of timbers.

Photograph © English Heritage 2012

Conservation of stonework and monument restoration

The twelfth-century decorative stonework on the west front required particular specialist expertise. The notable oculus on the west front is believed to be one of the earliest surviving examples of its type in the country and decisions had to be made about how to handle the stabilisation of this important feature. A report on the condition of the west front, oculus and blind arcades was commissioned from Odgers Conservation Consultants. This report provided detailed advice on how to treat these features, including a careful analysis of the current condition of the arches and how to remedy previous poor quality restoration, especially of the west front, where replacement stone in the past had been cut to the wrong arc. The report contained a schedule of conservation and repair for every part of the building, including the Somerset Monument and over fifty-five other monuments.⁴⁶ This led to the decision to stabilise badly eroded stonework, but not to an attempt to re-create the badly eroded decorative features (Fig. 13). The architects commissioned P. Martindale to restore the Church House overmantel and this involved hours of careful work to clean the monument and remove layers of thick, discoloured varnish. Martindale was of the opinion that the 'polychrome scheme now on view is likely to date from around 1800 and (according to the results of paint analysis) is very similar to what was originally applied in the first quarter of the seventeenth century'. The completed result is certainly an amazing transformation (Figs 14, 15).

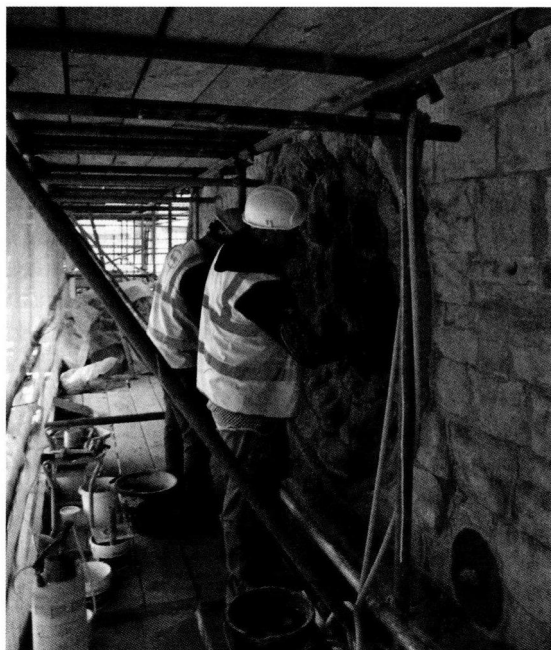


Fig. 13
St James's Priory, oculus, showing delicate
repair and stabilisation in progress.

Photograph © Rob Harding, 2012

Fig. 14 (below, left)
Church House, Achievement of Arms
Overmantel, detail showing the work in
progress to remove dark brown varnish from
female figure.

Photograph, © Peter Martindale

Fig. 15 (below, right)
Church House, Achievement of Arms
Overmantel, detail showing the work in
progress to remove dark brown varnish from
coat of arms.

Photograph, © Peter Martindale



FUTURE CHALLENGES

Building the audience

The need to continue to make residents and visitors to Bristol aware of the significance of St James's Priory to the cultural life of the city and the scope it offers for learning about history and architecture remains a challenge. The work carried out as part of the HLF project included, as required by HLF, substantial efforts to enhance public exposure to the building. The efforts to do this included interpreting the building's history in an accessible format through the provision of information boards explaining the significance of the building. The opening up of the new meeting rooms has meant that people who would not otherwise visit the building attend meetings and are exposed to the beauty of the building and its history. Business has recently improved after a slow start. The café is open to the public five days each week and regular church services are now held with a congregation of an average of forty-five people. Educational visits for students tailored to the curriculum requirements from primary school age through to university level have been organised and this has helped to increase visitor numbers and inspired some voluntary assistance. However, recent changes to the school curriculum have necessitated updates to the material available to schools and restrictions on school budgets have limited the take up of this opportunity by the schools. The annual 'Doors Open' day held in Bristol in September each year encourages Bristolians and tourists to the city to visit buildings of interest. For the last four years the Priory has been open and has been visited by up to 500 people on this day alone. Nevertheless, despite these efforts there remains scope to increase visitor numbers as many people regularly walk past the building on their way to work or to the bus station or hospital and have no idea that a valuable cultural and architectural historic building lies on their route. A project entitled 'St James's Priory and the Hidden History of Bristol' has recently received a grant of £59,800 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This project aims to build the audience during a secondary phase of audience development, which will attempt to bring information to Bristolians working in the area rather than waiting for people to find the building. This will involve a number of actions, including the provision of display information in a number of local offices and other businesses and a revival of St James's Fair that will also take place as a culmination of the activity.

Ensuring an adequate income to support the Priory

Just as the prior and monks of the original monastery had to find ways of obtaining an income for annual maintenance, repair and the cost of running the monastery, the funding challenge continues. The café and educational tours yield a small income, but funds remain in short supply. Unfortunately, because of recent government changes to welfare and housing benefit, the amount of money available for running the core activity of providing the addiction support centre has also diminished. The St James Priory Project continues to run a residential Supported House for people in early recovery from drugs and alcohol, but Walsingham House is no longer used by the project; St Mungo's, a charity that supports vulnerable people has taken over this building. Fortunately the

use does complement the core activity of the St James Priory Project. In addition to the café income, the meeting rooms are available for hire so some improvements to sources of income have been made.

Implementing the recommendations of the Maintenance Plan

The overall reduction in income does give rise to concern about the long-term maintenance of the building. The plan, prepared by Ferguson Mann, is an essential tool to ensure that the building is managed effectively and that day-to-day preventative maintenance is carried out. The inspection of roofs, flashings, rainwater goods, external drainage and the condition of external walls is particularly crucial. The need to monitor the structure itself to determine whether any further movement is taking place is also important. It is evident that obtaining finance to ensure that the building complex is subject to a systematic regime of annual inspection and maintenance is an ongoing challenge. There is never quite enough money available as a surplus from the core activities of providing support for people in early recovery from drug or alcohol addiction to ensure that the recommended Annual Maintenance Schedule prepared by Ferguson Mann can be carried out in full. Some limited inspection work has been undertaken, but at present there is no retained architect to carry out this work. However, there are some ongoing problems such as areas of damp that do need attention, although this may be attributed to the drying out of residual moisture given that most external walls are one metre thick. This does raise the question about how grants for HLF are administered and delivered. It could be argued that in addition to the core grant money for essential works, funds should be made available for on-going maintenance beyond attempts to improve economic self-sufficiency. This could help to ensure that public money invested in historic buildings would not be wasted because of a shortage of funds for maintenance.

CONCLUSIONS

The well-known and respected Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings continues to guide good conservation practice.⁴⁷ J. Earl sums up its basic tenets as:

1. We are custodians of the ancient buildings we have inherited. We should not regard ourselves as free to do as we please with them.
2. Effective and honest repair should always be the first consideration.
3. We should do no more than prudence demands. In particular we should not fall into the trap of allowing scholarly or artistic ambitions to dictate what is done.
4. Any permanently necessary new work should be clearly distinguishable from the old and should not reproduce any past style.⁴⁸

It is useful to use this Manifesto as a means of judging the extent to which the current round of work at St James's Priory might stand up to scrutiny in the future. Perhaps the Civic Trust award of 2012 offers an indication. Clearly there were some conservation dilemmas that had to be addressed as the work proceeded. The most significant was a debate about how to treat the lower part of the west front of the church and the city-facing south elevation. Both these areas had been replaced in the Victorian period by random rubble stonework (Fig. 16). The use of local Brandon Hill stone for these areas, which has



Fig. 16

St James's Priory, residents in conversation showing west front Brandon Hill rubble stone façade before the recent building works.

Photograph © Rob Harding

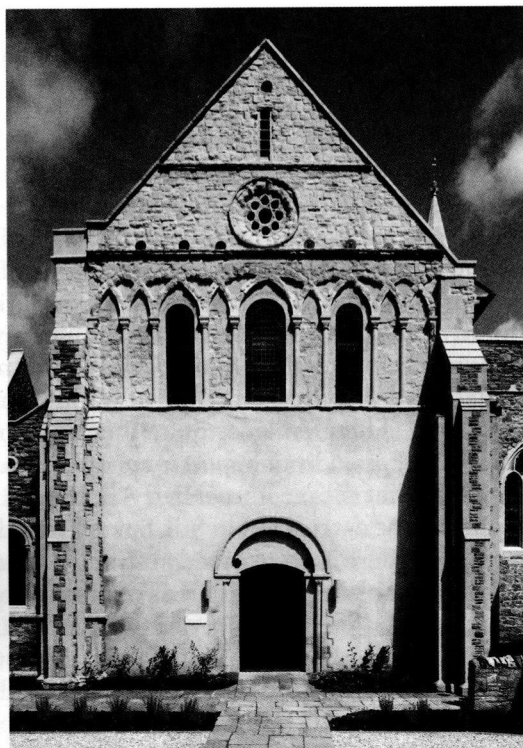


Fig. 17

St James's Priory, West front after conservation of the Romanesque arcading and the lime rendering to the lower part of the façade.

Photograph, © English Heritage 2011

strong colours, including purple, pink and grey, and a rough texture seemed inappropriate for a building of predominantly pale golden tones and smooth stonework. The addition of the rubble stonework had obliterated any evidence of how the west front would have been treated originally, although investigations on site did reveal some fragments of render. Corinne Fitzpatrick, the conservation architect on site and English Heritage staff were of the opinion that treating these areas with a colour matched hydraulic lime render would give a more authentic appearance. This decision has caused some debate locally and differences of opinion, but has generally been well received as the most sympathetic solution (Fig. 17). The softer tones of the lime render seem to give a sense of repose and unify rather than separate the two elements of the façade.

Extensive stonework repairs were needed throughout the building and the loss of detail in the stone carvings resulting from erosion and the passage of time created a dilemma about how the decorative elements should be treated. The way in which this has been done, which includes new carved stone alongside the eroded elements has been

carried out with sensitivity in a way that has not involved any damage to the original stone details and some previous poor quality work has been removed (Fig. 18). The advice of specialist conservation consultants proved particularly beneficial to this repair work, particularly in relation to the treatment of the west front of the church and the oculus.⁴⁹ The replacement stonework now visible merely replaces some much later repair work that was incorrectly aligned. There is no doubt that new work can be distinguished from the old and high quality stone carving has been used throughout.

The project's leaders have taken seriously the need to protect the building's integrity and have avoided any temptation to fall into the trap of allowing scholarly or artistic ambitions to dictate design decisions. It is true that new features have been added. The glazed link and interpretation area, joining the spiritual and secular uses of the building, acts as a quiet and reflective space where visitors can learn more about the building's history (Fig. 19). The new café replaced a building of minimal merit and the design of the replacement building is recognisable as new work, but it maintains a respectful subservience to the main building in design, scale and materials (Fig. 20); whilst used for a secular function internally it retains a dignity that is appropriate for its location in relation to the church (Fig. 21). The modern glass artwork, designed by Bradley Basso, was commissioned to add something new to the church with the idea of representing the work of the Project. The sequence of screens that have been created between the main church and the new meeting rooms start with an image of shattered blue glass fragments that gradually assemble and finally come together in a glazed arch at the eastern end. The significant Latin phrases refer to the aims of the Project in helping people whose lives have been broken by drug or alcohol addiction to rebuild their lives.



Fig. 18

St James's Priory, west front arcading showing new carved stone that replaced badly repaired and misaligned stonework.

Photograph, © English Heritage 2011.



Fig. 19

St James's Priory, link between church and café showing interpretation boards.

Photograph, ©Matt Sweeting

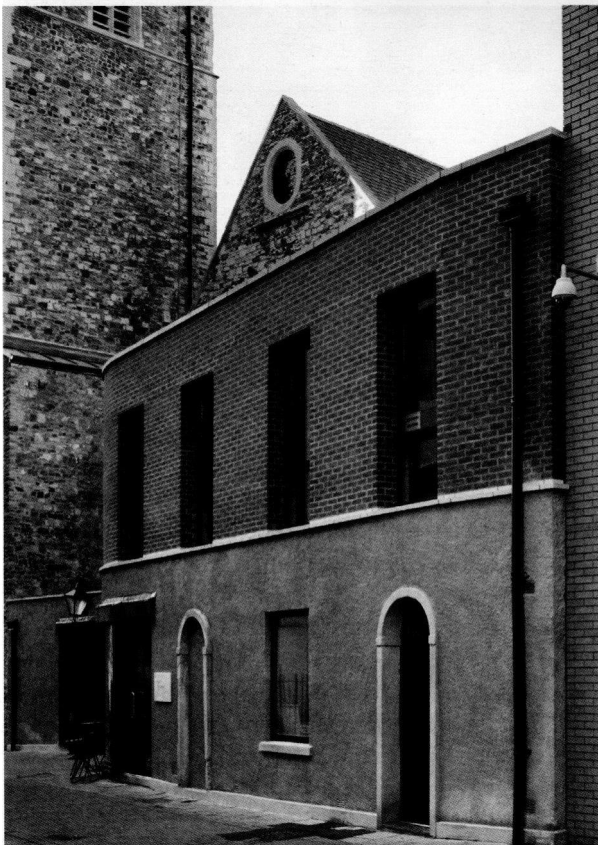


Fig. 20

St James's Priory, new café and ancillary accommodation to the east of the church

Photograph ©English Heritage 2011

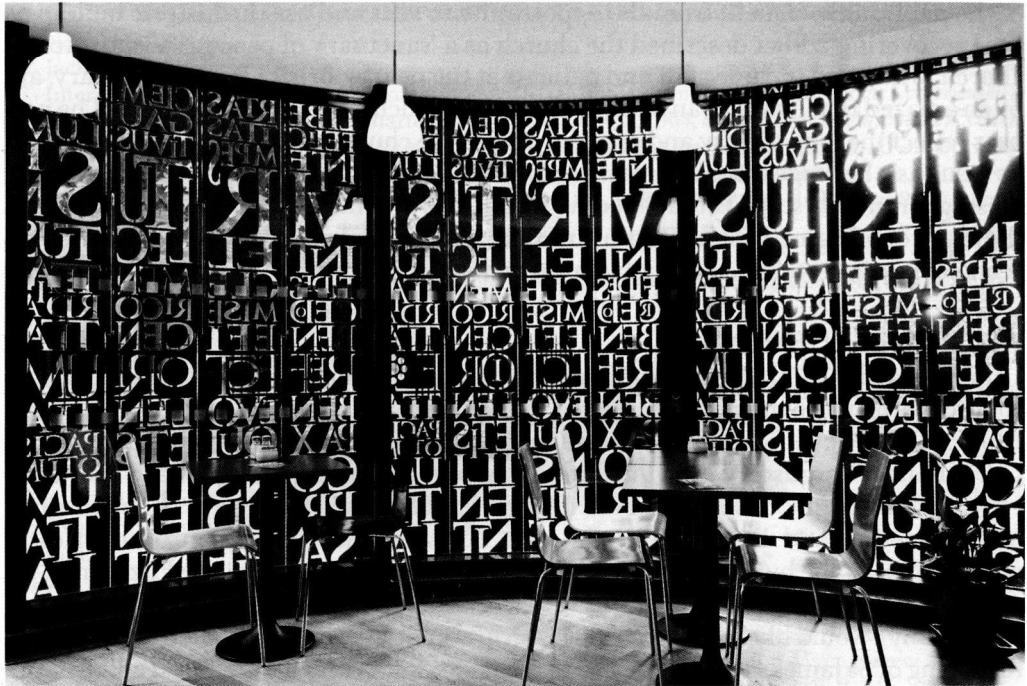


Fig. 21

St James's Priory, new café showing interior artwork.

Photograph © Matt Sweeting, 2011

It is a matter of opinion whether the new work meets the criteria of 'offering God the numinous and best' as proposed by Saunders as essential criteria for new work to churches to ensure that the artwork reflects and enhances the setting.⁵⁰ There is no doubt that the Project director had a spiritual intent in commissioning this work and the comments of the general public have been largely supportive of the finished artwork. The fact that the designers seem to have been strongly influenced by the special qualities of the building is probably part of the success of this work. The use of blue glass for the artwork reflects Bristol's link with this colour, but also infers the colour attributed in more traditional glass artwork to Mary, Mother of Jesus (Fig. 22).

Finally in assessing the success of the project it is interesting to note that there is evidence to suggest that recovering addicts and members



Fig. 22

St James's Priory, interior showing blue glass artwork designed by Bradley Basso.

Photograph, © St James's Priory

of the public alike benefit from the opportunity to visit and use the historic buildings. One recovering addict described the church as a 'sanctuary of peace'.⁵¹ Visitors to the church, who often include staff and patients at the nearby Bristol Royal Infirmary, are often amazed that it acts as an oasis of quiet within such a busy area of the city. The new uses reflect the long history and original uses of the church as a monastic building and its value as a heritage asset is at least secure for some years to come. One overwhelming message from this study is that effective leadership and huge amounts of dedication to the cause of bringing back a building into use are essential pre-requisites of a successful scheme. It was certainly the key factor in achieving success at St James's Priory.

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Finally I would like to acknowledge with gratitude all who contributed financially to the saving of St James's Priory, but also to recognise that without the endless enthusiasm, commitment and sheer hard work of Sue Jotcham and Rob Harding it is unlikely that the project would have been successful and a very significant building could have been damaged by neglect and disuse or even lost permanently.

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