

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 40:

St. James, Clapton on the Hill, Cheltenham



A pause by a stile on the footpath approaching St James' Church

The little Cotswold village of Clapton-on-the-Hill stands on a ridge in South Gloucestershire that slopes down towards the Windrush River to the east. The Church of St James is a chapelry of Bourton-on-the-Water, about three miles upriver to the north.

With my puppy Alfred the Small, I started a short walk to St James from the west, having travelled up the Fosse Way Roman road that cuts across the rolling landscape of mostly arable fields, patches of woodland and scattered farms buildings of Cotswold stone. Alfie and I passed through fields of tall, almost-ripe canary seed – a crop grown for birdseed that UK farmers are currently favouring, but the first one that I had come across. We made our way along gradually rising footpaths and eventually came to the ridge, where a local farmer directed us across his land and onto a narrow lane that took us through the centre of the village where, at a crossroads, a gate made from horseshoes forms the entrance to a large, grassy churchyard where I could hear a lawnmower at work.

Unusually, the grounds hold no yew or holly trees as one might expect around a medieval church; but a mature, handsome beech tree stands in solitary splendour on the path leading to the south porch, providing some welcome shade on the sultry summer day of my pilgrimage. Its lower branches had been lopped to allow wedding and funeral processions unfettered passage, whilst the sward beneath its branches had been spared the mower's blades, and butterflies and other insects were gathering amongst the grass and wildflower heads.

Entering through the south porch, where SPPN literature was clearly on display, I met hospitaller Patricia in the nave. She told me that services were again being held twice a month, albeit as yet with masks and without singing. The parish is part of a joint benefice with four other churches, all of similar antiquity, in the local area.

St James, a place of worship for over 800 years, is one of the smallest and simplest churches in the Cotswolds. Serving a village that may never have exceeded many more than a hundred or so souls, it seats about 45 worshippers. The existing building dates mostly from the 12th century, and comprises a south porch, nave, chancel and a north vestry added in 1910. Standing underneath the west window I first noticed the font, a plain Norman bowl standing on an octagonal shaft.



Looking east to the font, ledger stone on the nave floor and the chancel beyond



Hospitaller Patricia at the south porch

Looking eastwards along the central aisle, past the rows of box pews and several ledger stones on the floor, I could see some faint inscriptions on the walls on each side of the chancel arch. One of these grants an indulgence of 1000 days to those who kneel and say the Our Father and Hail Mary three times. Through the chancel arch, where a single bellrope hangs, a gilt cherubim looks down from the first crossbeam. Made in Germany, it was a gift to the church at a time when a major restoration took place in the 17th century.

The small, airy chancel is simply furnished and lit by a single, narrow lancet with stained glass unusually depicting Christ crucified on a lily, an image recalling the calendrical coincidence that, several times in any century, Good Friday falls on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, a happenstance that led to a number of stories and beliefs in the Middle Ages. A much more recent decoration, on a window in the north wall, is glazing engraved with a garland of strawberries containing the Queen's cipher, made to commemorate her Diamond Jubilee (Clapton was historically known for its locally-grown strawberries).

Beyond the inscription, the window gives a fine view of traditional stone-built village houses. Stepping back outside into the churchyard I sat on a sunny, grassy bank by the church wall to enjoy the far-reaching views across the high Cotswolds above the Windrush valley.

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A view of village houses through a leaded window



St James churchyard