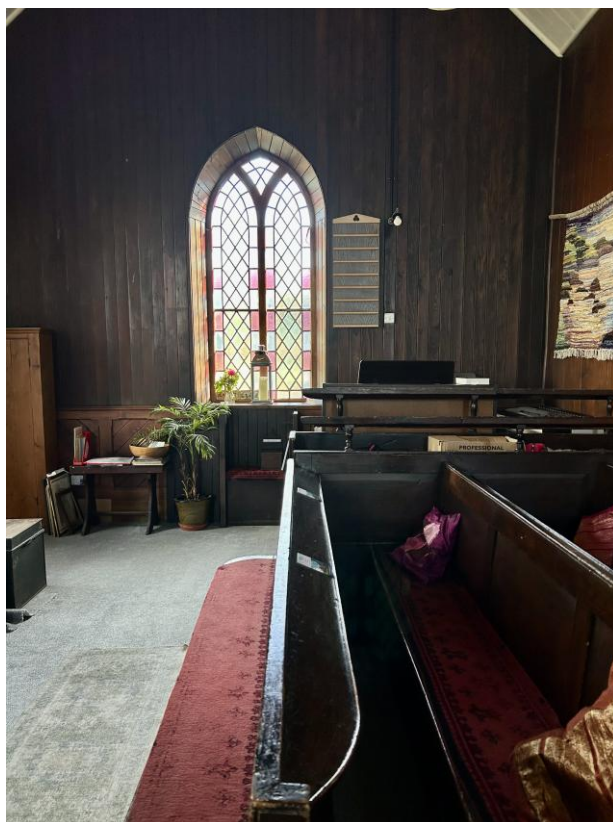


Small Pilgrim Places Journal 78: St James Dalby, Isle of Man

The year 1839 saw the opening of a new building overlooking the sea in Dalby on the Isle of Man. It was built to serve two purposes: as a church for local families who were mostly poor crofters and fishermen, and as a school to educate the children, who were largely illiterate. The sloping ground allowed for accommodation in the undercroft for a schoolmaster. Fast forward to the 1980's, and the school was no longer in use, the congregation consisted of just three elderly parishioners, the undercroft housed only sheep and the building was in danger of closing.

Today tells quite a different story. The undercroft, now known as The Bunkhouse, provides overnight accommodation, often used by walkers, weekenders and, during the annual TT races, motorbike enthusiasts. Many visitors pause here, especially campers and hikers following the coastal footpath nearby. Attractive interpretation boards on the walls inform visitors of the history of the dual purpose school and church. A cupboard holds a large community freezer for the use of residents needing extra freezer space, and a small room serves as a community shop. Local Minister Cheryl Cousins, who showed me round, explained that all the local villagers know the code for getting into the shop, take what they want and pay into the honesty box. St James is a silver award Eco-church, so many products are Fair Trade, refillable and eco-friendly.



Above, the old school rooms are now a community meeting space that can hold up to 80

people, with kitchen facilities, chairs and tables at hand. The church section, lit by gothic style arched windows, recently double-glazed, and furnished with pews, is wood-panelled and remains largely unchanged. As I entered this sequestered space, a sense of welcome, quiet stillness and long-held prayer was immediately evident.



Services take place here regularly, although on the day I visited, a Celtic-style evening Communion service was held "in the round" in part of the community space, warmed in the winter months by a log-burning stove. There is a twice-monthly Christian meditation

session and a monthly gathering for folk to reflect on their spiritual journeying. Members of the congregation have recently been working to develop a series of pilgrimage walks from St James to nearby sacred places and spaces.

The community space hosts monthly gatherings that raise funds for the building; events include a choir, a band and illustrated talks, all accompanied by a two-course home-cooked supper. Other activities include “posh” afternoon teas and a May Day fair with stalls for collectors. People drop in for refreshments, taken inside or in the gardens where there are seats overlooking the hills above and the coastline below. A strip of land has been managed for wildflowers where over sixty species, including Marsh Orchid, Yellow Rattle, Water Figwort, Meadowsweet, Oxe-eye Daisy and Brooklime now thrive.

Cheryl neatly summed up the transformation when she said that the community saved the church, but the church also saved the community by bringing people together to work for a common vision. The building continues to be dual-purpose; where once it served as both church and schoolroom, it now serves as church and community hub - or, as one resident put it, as “a living room for the village.”

