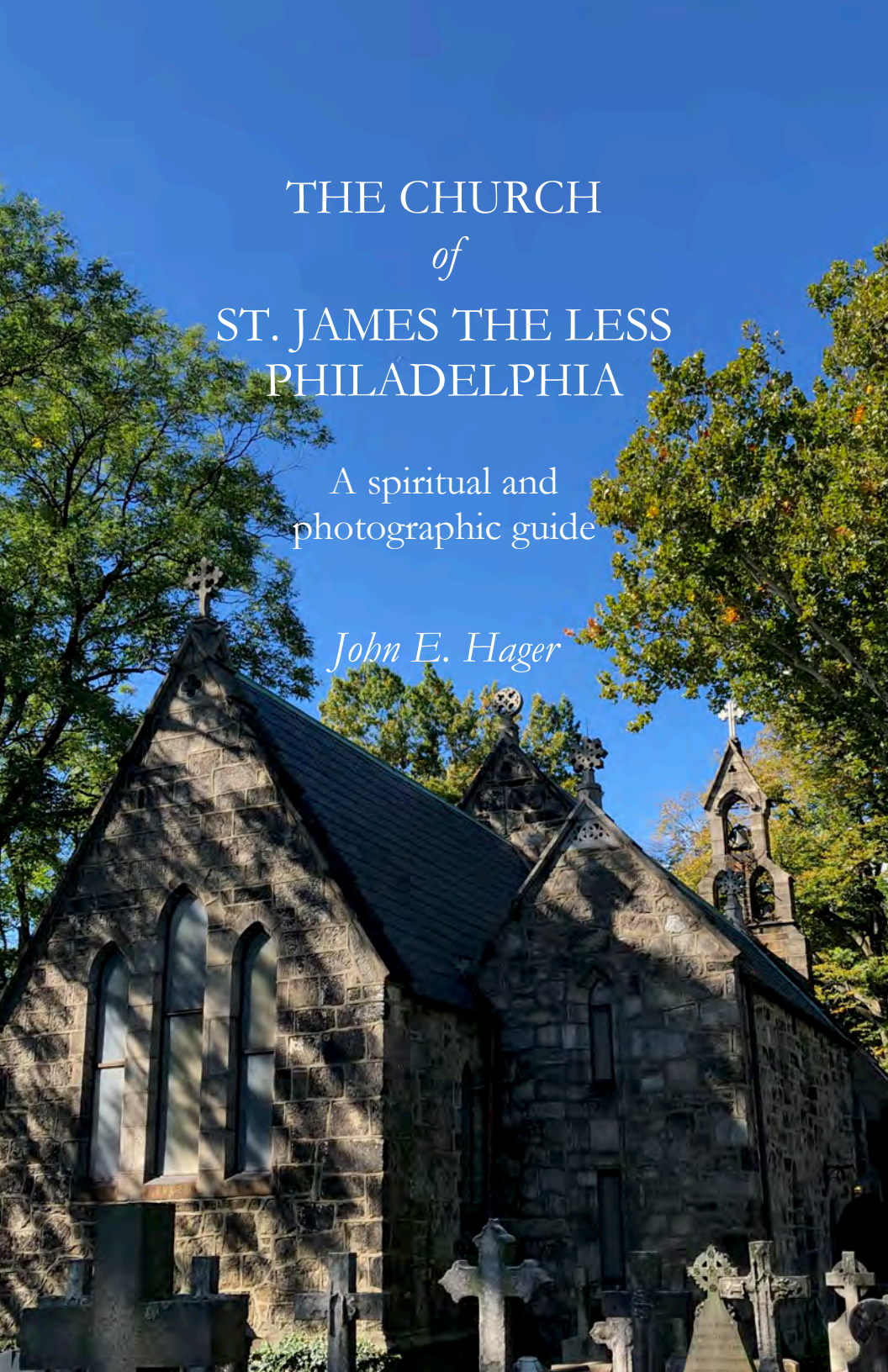

THE CHURCH *of* ST. JAMES THE LESS PHILADELPHIA

A spiritual and photographic guide

John E. Hager

THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE LESS

A SPIRITUAL AND PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE

John E. Hager

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All photographs by the author unless otherwise attributed.

CHURCH OF
ST. JAMES THE LESS

Community
of St·James

St. James is a faith-based educational community
deeply rooted in transformative loving relationships.

Dedicated to the students of St. James—past, present, future

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St. James the Less as depicted in a pair of English stained glass windows, ca. 1871, in the south aisle.

> [The Church of St. James the Less will be] a comely thank-offering for manifold and great mercies, and which if not a model of economy is certainly one of beauty and durability.[1]

THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE LESS represents the power and importance of church buildings generally; as places where the ministry of Christ finds a special nucleus, where the Incarnation can be seen, heard, felt, and lived in all its communal and individual diversity and unity. Within the walls of St. James the Less, gathered round the stone font, at the communion rail, under the bellcote, and through the lychgate are now over 170 years of stories. In our own time, students from St. James School regularly explore the old churchyard; I frequently held art clubs there, and students and I loved playing soccer in St. David's Field overlooking it all. At school Masses on Friday mornings, eighth-grade students preach sermons reflecting on their own spiritual lives from the stone pulpit. The weekly community market—the Welcome Table—comes to life early every Saturday morning under the great old trees in the lane leading to the lychgate (on very cold or miserable days, the market is set up in the church). And on it goes. Readers familiar with St. James will no doubt spill with examples of the stories that are cradled in the church and its special environs.

The last guidebook prepared for the Church of St. James the Less appeared forty years ago. And a fairly thorough history and catalogue it is of the church's founding, its architecture and its art. But in the last forty years great changes have utterly transformed again the meaning of St. James the Less. Not least of these—through the efforts of many, especially the people of St. Mark's Church, Locust Street—was the founding of City Camp (2009) and then the St. James School (2011). This mission of service has since deepened through the resumption of weekly community Mass (2016), Graduate Support (2016), the Servant Year program (2017), the Welcome Table (2018), and the Wellness Center (2019). How remarkable that a church built as a faithful, charismatic and deeply sensitive evocation of a Medieval English parish church should now come to enfold in its walls the budding lives of young students, their teachers, their families, volunteers, and visitors in a neighborhood of North Philadelphia that for so long would seem to many to preclude the possibility of Resurrection.

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[1] Vestry Minutes of the Church of St. James the Less (April 30, 1846-March 22, 1858): October 31, 1848, p. 54.

Detail of the Annunciation from the west window, by Alfred Gerente of Paris, 1852; an expert exercise in the Medieval spirit.

This guidebook is therefore infused with the serious consideration that the dynamic between the physical past and the alive present is an important part of how we understand our church buildings as Christians. Tradition and change, continuity and renewal, are the vital parts of that understanding. If we take seriously the sacramental life and the Incarnational power of God's presence as active in our world—in relationships, in communal worship, in private prayer, in the energy of children running through a churchyard, in the quiet exchange of story (the list is inexhaustible)—then we can be prompted to see every aspect of this old church as infused with that great spiritual experience of all those striving to know God and Jesus Christ in the past, present, and future.

This guidebook attempts to offer to readers a combination of historical information (aimed at a broader audience than solely those immersed in church architecture), spiritual reflection, and photographs to enrich our community's relationship with this special place. It is hoped that readers, both those familiar and unfamiliar with St. James the Less, will be invited to enfold their own spiritual experiences into this place. The stories in the stained glass, the worn spots on the wooden pews, the heavy iron handles of our doors invite both ready answers and, more often that those, deep questions.

The guidebook is not exhaustive, but rather is built around the series of reflections covering the art and architecture of St. James the Less shared on social media by the author between the autumn of 2022 and spring of 2023. Readers will also find a brief historical introduction of the church's early history emphasizing afresh the truly international project that was St. James the Less, as well as a short afterword (p. 55) discussing the Medieval parish church written by a dear friend of the author, Adam Hope. Mr. Hope's encyclopedic knowledge of Medieval architecture proved invaluable in this project. His essay provides a useful introduction to readers more-or-less unfamiliar with how the architecture of a Medieval English country parish reflected spiritual meaning and vice-versa.

View of the Church of St. James the Less, 1855. Photographic print on salted paper by J.E. McClees. *Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.*

Historical Background

THE FOUNDING of St. James School over a decade ago originated as a vision nourished by the active spirit of Christ's call to minister in the world. Such a vision—though of a different time—had also prompted the initial founding of the Church of St. James the Less in 1846. For in 1846, here in what was then the very fringes of the city of Philadelphia amidst the country houses of wealthy city-dwellers and the mills and workers of the new industrial economy, a splendid array of international energies collided thanks to the foresight of a local philanthropically-spirited tea merchant, Mr. Robert Ralston. Those energies were threefold: the spirit of the Oxford Movement, the work of the Ecclesiological Society (known before 1845 as the Cambridge Camden Society), and the High Church tradition and following in the Episcopal Church in the United States.

These three veins all found a common pulse in the deep seriousness with which they regarded the place of sacramental worship in the Anglican Church. Sacramental worship, especially in the regular celebration of the Holy Communion, united heaven and earth in a mystery through which humanity could receive, encounter, and share Jesus Christ.

THE OXFORD MOVEMENT

The general history of the Oxford Movement, also referred to as Tractarianism and its adherents 'Tractarians' after the series of *Tracts for the Times* they published between 1833 and 1841, is left to other sources.[2] It will suffice to comment that the Oxford Movement was always a movement nourished by both an inward and outward vision of the Church of God. John Henry Newman, that great light of the Movement, and all the exponents of the Movement for that matter, were concerned with a *visible* church that acted within society as nourished by that mystical symbiosis between the life of prayer, ritual worship, sacrament, and the Christian duty to minister to the world as we know it. This mystical understanding of the life of the church—which the Oxford Movement articulated with an often very Roman Catholic language—her worship, her priests, and her mission was not the dominant language of the Church of England in the first half of the 19th century, provoking the ire of more Protestant critics. Indeed, as well as reasserting the 'catholicity' of the Anglican Church in the language of scripture, the Church Fathers, and Anglican divines, the Oxford Movement looked back—usually with a highly romantic eye—to the Medieval, Roman Catholic past of Britain to revive an ethos of worship and mission that they believed to be distinctly 'Anglican' and that reflected their understanding of the ancient universality of the church's customs and beliefs: its catholicity (little *c*).

In many ways it was a reactionary movement, and certainly not without an often-unabashed political agenda to confront what the Oxford men saw as dangerous changes in British society and politics in the 1820s and 1830s that threatened the old legal-political status of the Church of England.[3] When the Oxford Movement looked back to the Medieval past, it did so not only to offer a vision of a refreshed Anglican Church true to

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[2] The *Tracts* being a series of essays (some long, some short) published between 1833 and 1841 covering everything, nearly, to do with the 'church': from sacraments, to the Church Fathers, to church and state relations, to worship, to fasting. The authors varied, but the most famous were John Henry Newman, John Keble, Edward Pusey, Hurrell Froude, and Isaac Williams.

[3] See Hager, J. *The Politics of the Oxford Movement* (The University of Edinburgh, undergraduate dissertation, 2023).

its roots that could sustain the blows of a 'modern' state and society. It also did so in order to offer visions of a socially active church that fostered community and offered meaning in a troubled, rapidly changing world.

It is this latter point—even amidst all the Romanticism and questionable politics of the Oxford Movement—that we ought to remember. The Oxford Movement asserted a vision of the church space, with the worship that took place there, as a sacred microcosm of Christian duties, behavior, and a way of being in the world itself. That way of being often concerned itself with ministering to those most in need in society, sourced in a church community where the dignity of Christian worship—in all its ancient richness—might transcend worldly distinctions. The Church of St. James the Less sought to reflect this notion from its founding in 1846, and it still strives to do so in a very different twenty-first century Philadelphia.

THE ECCLESIOLOGISTS

The Oxford Movement drew profoundly on interests in the revival of Christian Gothic and Medieval culture that were already churning in European society in the first half of the 19th century. The Oxford Movement's exhumation of this Medieval, Roman Catholic spirit was predominantly through theology, in writing, and in articulating a revived ethos of Anglican worship and mission—most importantly in the regular, sometimes weekly, celebration of the Holy Communion. But the writings of the Tractarians influenced students at the University of Cambridge already interested in the material culture of the Medieval past to lead the way in reviving a vision of Anglican church architecture and ritual that would give aesthetic, artistic expression to the sacramental ethos of the visible church the Oxford men advocated.

John Mason Neale and Benjamin Webb (both then soon to be ordained Anglican priests), with their tutor the Venerable Thomas Thorpe acting as president, formed the Cambridge Camden Society in 1839. In the decade or so that followed, the Society amassed prominent subscribers to their publications, especially their journal *The Ecclesiologist* and Neale's early manual on church restoration.[4] The Society counted many important churchmen and politicians in their membership, and nourished the work of talented architects and decorators like William Butterfield who were deeply sympathetic to the serious and worshipful approach to church

[4] Banerjee, J. 'The Cambridge Camden Society and the Ecclesiological Society' (The Victorian Web: 2012).

architecture the Society espoused. By 1847, Butterfield had compiled a collection of designs for churches featuring everything from font covers, to iron door handles, to headstones, to chalices, to Bible covers. In most cases, the designs were taken almost entirely from actual Medieval examples that Butterfield had studied and measured. The collection was published by the society as the *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica* and became highly influential.

Advocating for the 'correct' restoration of Medieval churches and the building of new churches in the English Gothic style based more precisely on actual Medieval prototypes, the Society aligned themselves with the spirit of the Oxford Movement by asserting that catholic truth had to be expressed visibly through the very layout and decoration of the church building. Spiritual honesty of purpose was reflected in every detail honestly conveyed in stone, metal, paint, and stained glass. The Ecclesiologists agreed with A.W.N. Pugin, that other giant of the Medieval revival in church architecture:

> [In the church] every portion of the sacred fabric bespeaks its origin; the very plan of the edifice is the emblem of human redemption—each portion is destined for the performance of some solemn rite of the Christian church.[5]

The Society (which by 1846 reorganized as the Ecclesiological Society) thus made a theological statement when they restored or erected churches with stone altars, vivid Medieval-inspired stained glass windows, and deep chancels separated from the main body of the church by a rood screen. Stone altars, long anathematized by more Protestant Anglicans, alluded to the sacrificial understanding of the Holy Communion that the Tractarians had vigorously articulated and the Roman Catholic Church asserted. Richly colored stained glass professed power and purpose in images of saints, Christ, and the Virgin Mary—seemingly reversing the destruction of such images that the English Reformation had witnessed in the 16th and 17th centuries. Deep chancels, with the altar set at the east end, created room for robed choirs to chant the Mass (as some sympathetic to the Oxford Movement now called it) in the mode of the Medieval monasteries. The presence of a wooden or metal screen separating the chancel and nave surmounted with a large crucifix or cross emphasized

[5] Pugin, A.W.N. *Contrasts: A Parallel between the Noble Contrasts: A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (London, 1836 ed.): p. 2.

the visceral nature of Christ's passion and death, reminding worshippers that they consumed the very body and blood of Christ at the Communion.

Due to the immense influence of the Society and the intimacy of the British-American Anglican world among some churchmen, all of these elements—an archeologically and spiritually 'correct' usage of the Gothic in its fullness—would be transposed to the Falls of the Schuylkill River in 1846. And so, it is now that we can return to Robert Ralston and the international creation that was the Church of St. James the Less.

ROBERT RALSTON & THE ORIGINS OF ST. JAMES THE LESS

The Ecclesiological Society, almost from their inception, was not only interested in promulgating a more correct Gothic church architecture in Britain, but also in the United States, where the Episcopal Church might be receptive to the trends in their Anglican sister church. In early 1845, the Society sent several sets of measured, architectural drawings of Medieval parish churches abroad as models of 'correct' designs for contemporary emulation.[6] One set of plans, those of the 13th-century parish church of St. Michael in Longstanton, Cambridgeshire, were sent to the Rev. Samuel Farmar Jarvis in Connecticut. After helping to found the General Theological Seminary in New York, Jarvis spent nine years in Europe absorbed in the study of church history, and it seems that during his time in England he became familiar with the Camden Society. Clearly, the Society felt that Jarvis was an influential churchman sympathetic to the goals of the Society who might further the cause of a correct Gothic church design in the U.S. Episcopal Church. Jarvis visited Robert Ralston in Philadelphia in March of 1846, and it is clear by that time that Ralston was contemplating building a new parish church near his house along the Schuylkill River to serve the residents of the area.[7] Doubtless, Jarvis' visit also encouraged Ralston to involve the Society in his project, whatever Ralston's prior engagement with the Ecclesiologists or the Oxford Movement had been.

By April 1846, Ralston convened ten other local, prominent men at his house at Mount Peace (it is no longer extant, but stood just north of St. James the Less) to form a vestry and devise a plan to build a church.

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[6] See Nau, A. 'English-American Identity and the Gothic Revival: The Episcopal Churches of St. James the Less and St. Mark's, Philadelphia' in *19: Nineteenth Century, The Magazine of the Victorian Society in America* (2013, vol. 33): p. 12.

[7] See Kayser, P. *A Brief History and Guide to the Church of St. James the Less* (1983) pp. 1-4 for a broad timeline of the events that led to the church's founding.

The west front at St. Michael's, Longstanton, Cambridgeshire, built originally in the first half of the 13th century. It is the archetypal country Medieval English parish church. *Photograph courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

The west front at St. James the Less, the Falls of the Schuylkill, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1846-1850. The dramatic triple bellcote is a spirited deviation from St. Michael's.

Having chosen the dedication of St. James the Less, Apostle of Our Lord, the minutes of the meeting record their desire to 'build a church which should be a country house of worship, as similar as possible to the best type of such a church that England could furnish, a veritable home of retirement and meditation, a quiet house of prayer.'[8] Over the succeeding months, land was purchased and funds raised through the various members of the new vestry. Ralston wrote to the Ven. Thomas Thorpe, then still president of the now-Ecclesiological Society, asking for plans approved by the Society that would suit the character of St. James the Less. By June of 1846, Thorpe replied suggesting that the very plans the society sent to Jarvis be used. Some confusion arose in all of this correspondence, as Ralston was not informed until December that the plans were those of St. Michael's, Longstanton. The vestry approved the plans, and agreed that the cost would not exceed $3,000. John Carver, a local architect and contractor, was chosen to oversee the realization of the plans in Philadelphia. The cornerstone of St. James the Less was laid on October 28th, 1846 by Bishop Alonzo Potter.

The south chancel doors, above, at St. Michael's (13th century) and below, St. James the Less (1846-1850). *Photograph of St. Michael's courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

[8] Quoted in Keyser, *A Brief History*, p. 2; I have not been able to find the original text in the vestry minutes.

By the time the stones of St. James the Less began to be laid, the Oxford Movement had indeed received attention—both favorable and critical—among many Episcopalians in the U.S., mostly in the northeast.[9] The Tractarians were wrestling with a renewed sense of identity for the Anglican Church founded in the spiritual authority of her apostolic succession and the mystical grace of her sacraments in the face of waning state support. Episcopalians had in some sense wrestled with this crisis decades before, and there was an often-commented spiritual sympathy between High-Church Episcopalians and the Tractarians. Just as with the Ecclesiological Society, correspondence among select individuals and exchange of written, published materials did carry the Oxford Movement's ideas to the Episcopal Church.

The extent to which Ralston and his friends engaged precisely with Tractarianism will be left to future research. But if the Church of St. James the Less—in its physical Medieval, Catholic revival completeness—and its history is anything to go by, Ralston at least was clearly deeply sympathetic to the spirit of the Oxford Movement. His involvement in the founding of the ever-high St. Mark's Church, Locust Street in 1847 is one broader testament to his sympathies for the Tractarian ethos.[10] It is also notable that the St. James the Less vestry minutes of June, 1850 include a brief thanks on behalf of the vestry to the Rev. Thomas Helmore, precentor at St. Mark's College, Chelsea, England and by that time Master of the Choristers at the Chapel Royal, St. James' Palace.[11] A leading instructor of church music, Helmore apparently provided 'valuable' advice for the early years of St. James the Less.[12] Helmore was particularly known for his use of plainsong, fresh translations of Latin hymns, and early English choral music in the daily sung services at the College—all musical manifestations of the Tractarian ethos and the Catholic revival generally. That quality church music following the example of men like Helmore was a priority at St. James the Less is clear: a paid organist and a music instructor at the parish school appear from 1850. One further detail also suggests Ralston's alignment with the Tractarians: St. James the Less was from its inception a pew rent-free

[9] See generally Nockles, P. 'The Oxford Movement and the United States' in *The Oxford Movement: Europe and the Wider World 1830-1930*, Stuart J. Brown & Peter B. Nockles, eds. (Cambridge, 2012): pp. 133-150.

[10] See Nau, 'English-American Identity' p. 13 for the founding of St. Mark's and Ralston's connections there.

[11] Vestry Minutes of the Church of St. James the Less (April 30, 1846-March 22, 1858): p. 78.

[12] Ibid. We do not know the specific nature of the advice he provided.

church (see p. 27), one of the key social teachings of the Tractarians that defined their visions of a Christian community rooted in catholic worship that might confront a secular world. Ralston and his friends certainly took a social risk in expressing their affinity for 'catholicizing' the Episcopal Church amidst an American Protestant culture that generally met Roman Catholic-looking worship with suspicion (see p. 43)—and yet, there is no period evidence that St. James the Less provoked anything but admiration and emulation.[13]

A Medieval Parish Along The Schuylkill River

The plans of St. Michael's that the Society sent represented a fairly modest and typical, but beautiful, rural English parish church of the early period of the English Gothic style. Built initially in the first half of the 13th century but reflecting stylistic changes through the early Gothic, St. Michael's shows those characteristics of a rural, early English Gothic: deep buttresses supporting thick walls, simple pointed arches, narrow lancet windows, straightforward geometrically derived moldings, a steep

Looking south towards the nave and porch from the chancel at St. Michael's, Longstanton. Note the deep buttresses, replicated faithfully at St. James the Less. *Photograph courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

[13] See Smith, R. *Gothic Arches and Latin Crosses: Anti-Catholicism and American Church Design* (Chapel Hill, 2006): especially pp. 1-18 for St. James the Less; see also Nau, 'English-American Identity', p. 17.

roof supported by sturdy oak beams, a simple bellcote. Despite the straightforwardness of its design, St. Michael's contained all that was needed for the celebration of the rites and rituals of the Medieval Roman Catholic church, especially a deep chancel with a stone altar at the east end for the priest to offer the Eucharist and lead worship and a nave for the faithful community to gather. Such a church—small but dignified—was within the means of a village congregation, and the care of its craftsmanship would serve as a lasting and sacred testament to the piousness of the community in which it arose.[14] The Ecclesiologists felt that such a church was an archetypal model of the sort of parish churches that could be built in the 19th century in Britain or America (especially in rural areas or where funding was limited), carrying the catholicity of the Anglican tradition forward.

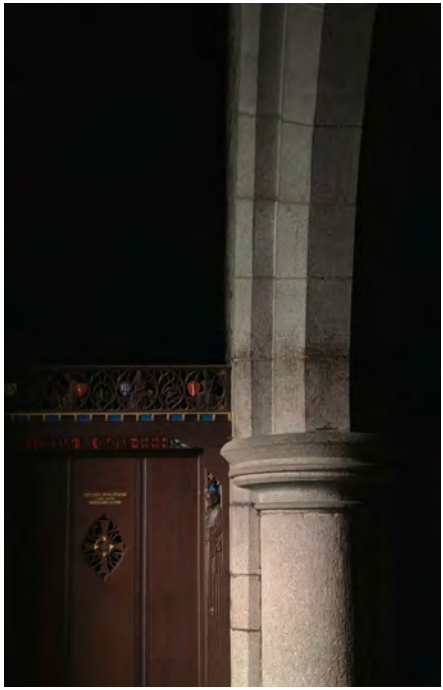
Looking from the south west corner towards the porch at St. James the Less. Compare to the similar view on the opposite page.

What is most extraordinary about the creation of St. James the Less is Ralston's intense correspondence with the Society through the years of construction and his adamance that their advice be followed as strictly as possible—even when his fellow vestrymen disagreed.[15] It is clear that Samuel Jarvis proved a key contact in the years of construction, acting as a liaison in Ralston's communications with the Ecclesiologists. The Rev. Benjamin Webb, secretary of the Society, was the primary contact in England, and his correspondence with Ralston seems to have played a role in Webb's goal to found an American branch of the Ecclesiological Society. The vestry specifically thanked Webb in 1850 for his frequent

[14] For the character of the Medieval parish, see Orme, N. *Going to Church in Medieval England* (Yale, 2021): pp. 85-139.

[15] See, for example, the preservation of the thickness of the stone walls and execution of stone moldings in the Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), pp. 13-14.

advice, 'so freely given', on the erection of the church.[16] William Butterfield, too, sent Ralston a copy of the *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica*. Having only been published in 1847, it is a testament to Ralston's energies that this influential collection of designs should make its way to Philadelphia to guide the construction of St. James the Less.[17] The *Instrumenta* influenced the creation of numerous details at the church, including the wooden pews and choir stalls, the font, and the iron-work on the doors (and eventually, various tombstones in the churchyard would be taken from or inspired by the collection).[18] All of this work must have been supervised by John Carver, and it is a reflection of his competencies, and those of the craftspeople involved in the construction of the church, that these details were rendered with such care and spirit.



Looking to the south west corner, showing one of the alternating round and octagonal pillars that line the nave, the design taken almost precisely from St. Michael's. The confessional, left, is a 1936 creation.

Ralston left no detail unaddressed. Sometime in late 1846 and certainly by 1847, Butterfield supplied designs at Ralston's request for silver for use in St. James the Less. Comprising at least a chalice, paten, and an offertory basin, these pieces of silver would have been considered essential for the celebration of the Holy Communion at the Church of St. James the Less once it was ready for worship. The offertory basin (discussed in more detail at p. 51) is all that survives of this initial supply of church silver.[19] The basin's beautiful Medieval revival decorative work is not only a testament to Butterfield's aesthetic sensibilities, but also to the craftsmanship of John Keith, who made the basin in his London

[16] Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), p. 77.
[17] See Nau, 'English-American Identity' p. 18; and Stanton, P. *The Gothic Revival and American Church Architecture: An Episode in Taste, 1840-1856* (Baltimore, 1968): pp. 101-104.
[18] Ibid. especially Nau, 'English-American Identity', p. 13.
[19] The basin is marked and dated 1847.

workshop. Butterfield also probably played a role in procuring the Minton-manufactured, Gothic revival tiles which would pave the church floor; Mr. Minton himself donating the richly colored encaustic tiles in the style of A.W.N. Pugin that still decorate the lower east wall behind the altar.[20] By 1849, Ralston and his friends had also engaged the services of two of the premier craftsmen of Medieval style stained glass in Europe to fill the three lancet windows above the altar, Alfred and Henri Gerente of Paris (see p. 53). The funds for the windows were given by Henry Farnum and the three east windows were installed by the autumn of 1850.[21] This stained glass—with its rich jewel tones and captivating panoply of saints and evangelists—was perhaps the finest, if not the only truly Medieval style-stained glass in the U.S. at the time. Ralston's ambitions were fulfilled that St. James the Less would represent the fullness of a spiritually honest and aesthetically beautiful house of worship drawing on the richness of the catholic tradition.

At last, on Trinity Sunday, 1850 the Church of St. James the Less was consecrated by Bishop Alonzo Potter. After morning prayer—during which an alms collection was taken up, using the Butterfield plate, amounting to $39.00—'the most Blessed Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ was administered to a large body of recipients, who were finally dismissed with the Bishop's Benediction.'[22] The total cost had exceeded $30,000—ten times the amount agreed upon in 1846. In those years of construction (aside from a steady growth of expenditures) the Church of St. James the Less had emerged as much more than a 'copy' or 'replica' *per se* of St. Michael's, Longstanton, and we ought to caution ourselves against referring to it as such. Certainly, the almost archeological attention to detail and proportion had, on the whole, created a church that transposed St. Michael's to the Falls of the Schuylkill River: the alternating round and octagonal pillars in the nave, the moldings of the doors, the depth of the chancel, the English-made fittings and so forth. And yet, details diverge: the south porch is markedly Victorian in feeling, the wooden sedilia are inspired by the stone piscina at St. Michael's (see p. 47), the bell cote is more elaborate.

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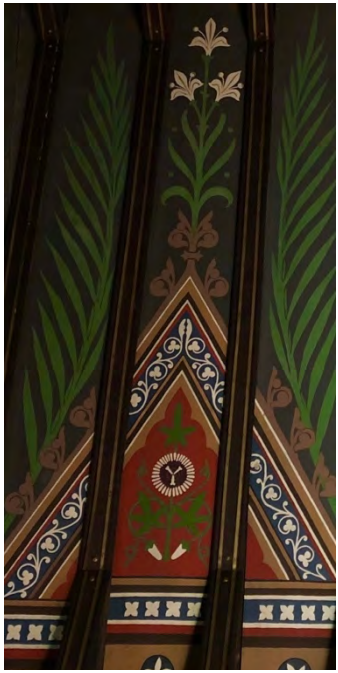
[20] Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), p. 24 for floor tiles, p. 78 for reredos and thanks tendered to 'Mr. Minton.'

[21] Ibid. p. 78. Thanks are tendered to Farnham for September 8th, 1850—we assume the window was only then recently installed.

[22] Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), p. 80.



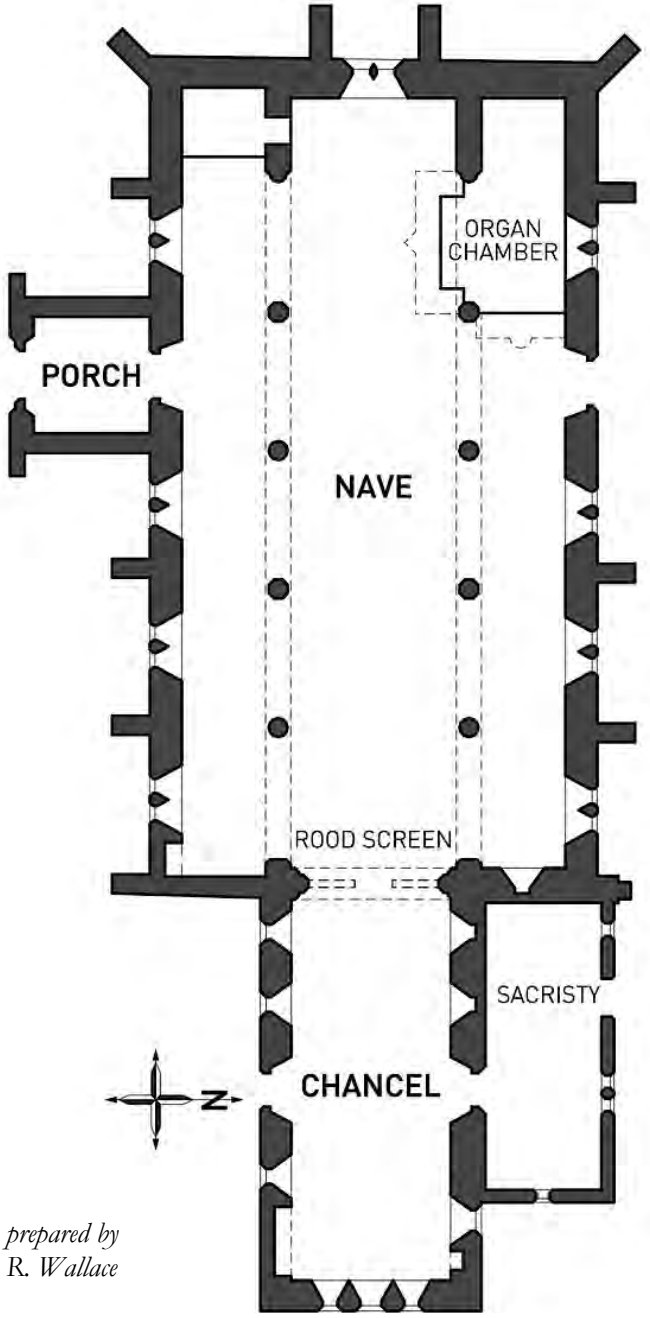
The chancel ceiling above the choir stalls showing palm leaves, lilies, and passion flowers. The ceiling paintings were an enrichment of the last decades of the 19th century, to designs by architect Charles Burns.

But the uniqueness of St. James the Less must lie in more than these details. In those years of construction, the natural differences of material (one really has to admire the church in all seasons to see the way the light affects the varying shapes and sizes of Wissahickon granite used in the construction), of location, of the entire experiment of transplanting the *spirit* of a Medieval, English parish church into the American Episcopal Church on the outskirts of Antebellum Philadelphia had nourished the creation of an edifice that became entirely its own.

Such was St. James the Less from its inception. And, as time went on, this 'quiet house of prayer'—as the vestry had called it in 1846—came to be shaped and shape the community from which it originally arose. Indeed, the landscape of rather compact row houses, businesses, and busy thoroughfares is entirely different to the setting of almost 175 years ago. The demographic, too, is entirely different: the nave of St. James the Less accommodates persons and stories that Robert Ralston may not have ever imagined. The church has witnessed change and challenge, especially just over twenty years ago when the parish's stance on the ordination of women and the acceptance of gay clergy left it at odds with the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania and the Episcopal Church at large. After a lengthy and aggressive Pennsylvania Supreme Court Case between the parish and the diocese, the parish was shuttered and its fate uncertain for a time. But now, the church is the quiet pulse of the St. James Community and its diverse ministries, whose history we have mentioned already. The dynamic the Church of St. James the Less sustains between its past and its present is a testament to its beauty, and to various persons of passionate energies well-known and less well-known. We may even venture to suggest that its storied walls sustain a microcosm of the kind of transcendent sustenance to the human experience that the Sacramental Life itself offers to all who seek Christ.

St. Michael the Archangel from a pair of English stained glass windows, ca. 1915, in the south aisle. Aside the Gerente glass, this window—and its companion showing St. Gabriel—is perhaps the finest stained glass in the nave.

PLAN OF THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE LESS

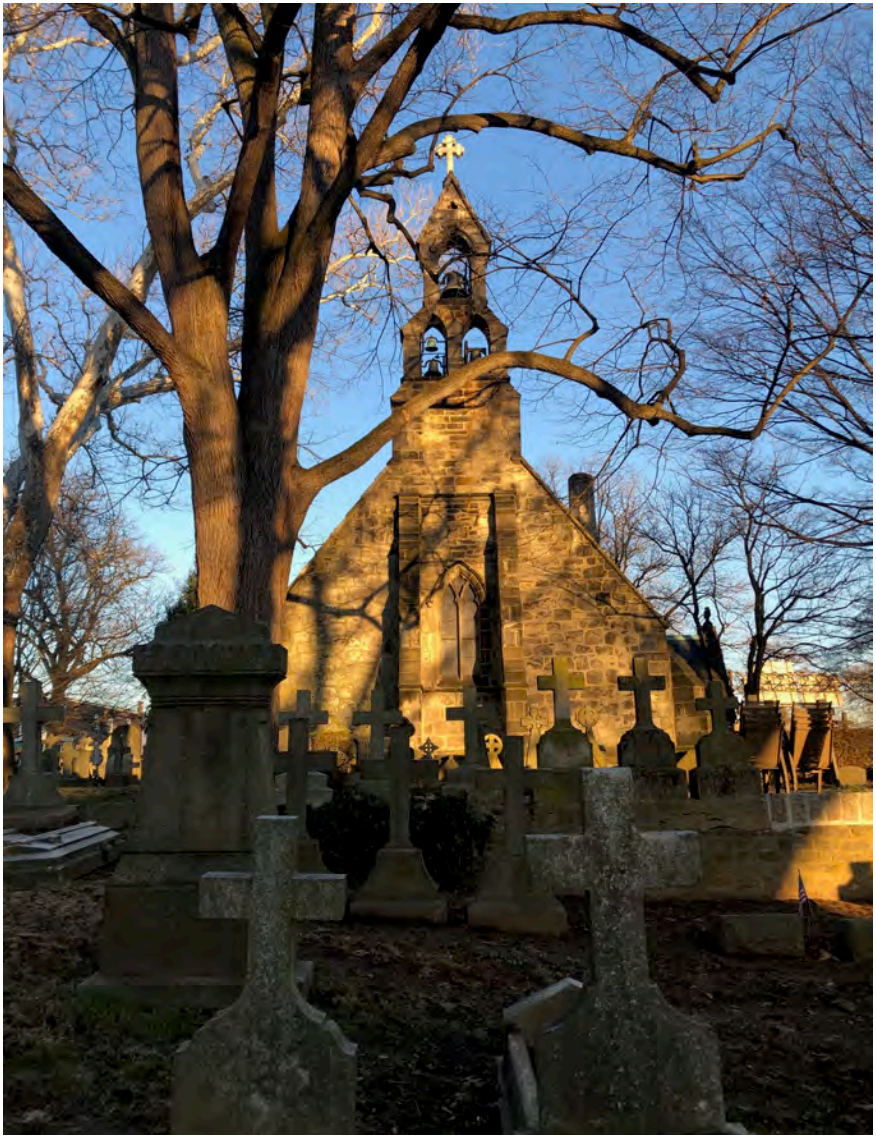


Plan prepared by
John R. Wallace

THE LYCHGATE

The lychgate (1886) defines one's entrance into the churchyard filled with its tombstones of various ages, styles, and sizes. Although added forty years after the construction of the Church of St. James the Less in 1846, the lychgate frames a view of the church perfectly. Given by women of the parish, its massive oak beams, deep sheltering eaves, and honest craftsmanship reflect the original aspirations of Robert Ralston and his friends when they first set out to construct a Medieval style church reminiscent of the best examples in England. Indeed, lychgates had been an almost ubiquitous feature of the Medieval parish in England.

The lychgate at St. James the Less marks an entrance physically, but it also marks an entrance spiritually: a lychgate was a shelter where the dead body was held before being brought to the church for the funeral rites. Here, the priest traditionally said prayers and mourners held vigil. It was a place of rest where the living and the dead met in Christ. Through their prayers for the eternal life of a fellow soul, living and dead were united in the hope of the Resurrection. Notice the empty wooden carved cross that humbly but prominently rests between the gables. Wood—the very material of the cross—is transformed with the lych-gate into a structure that calls us into a communion between the earthly and the heavenly.



The west front at St. James the Less gilded by the late-afternoon sun in winter, the forest of trees in the churchyard making the church to appear that it rises and grows with the earth itself.

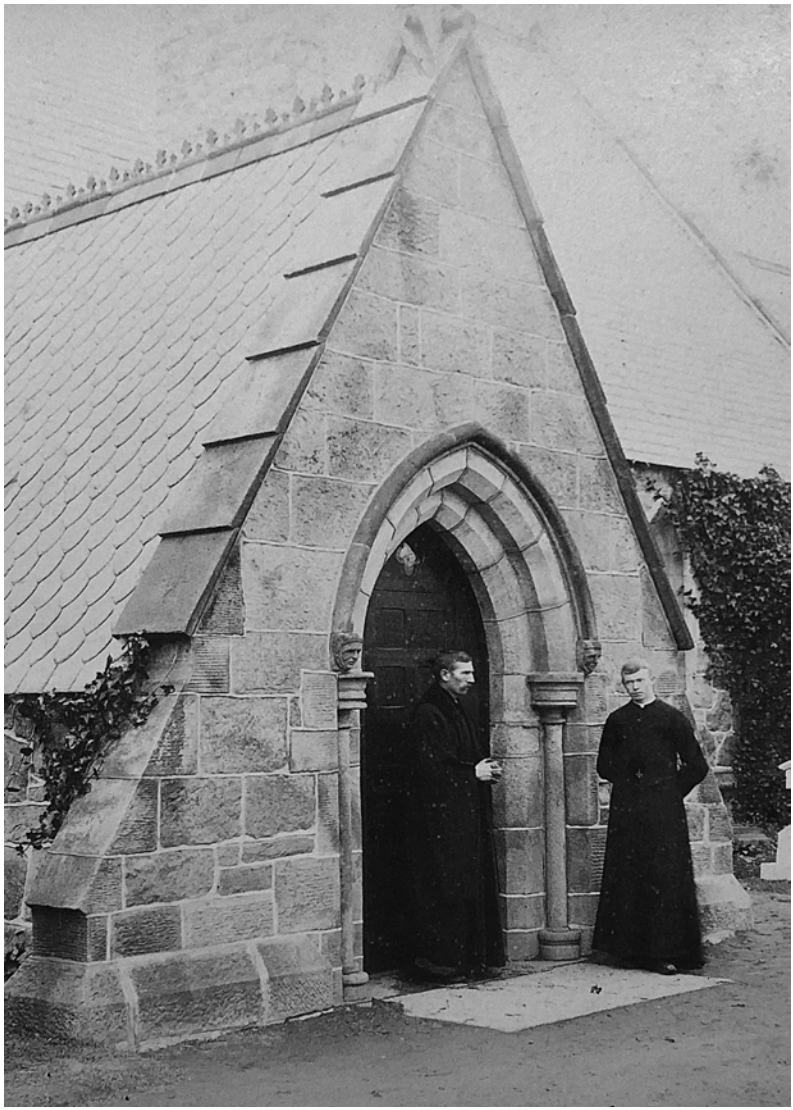
THE WEST FRONT

Notice the similarities and differences between St. Michael's, Longstanton, and St. James the Less. Preserved from the prototype at St. Michael's is the very steep roof, which seems to travel down almost to the ground. Ralston himself was insistent on preserving the extremely thick, low exterior walls and steep roof even when some members of the vestry suggested raising the height of the walls.

A heavy buttress at the south west corner of St. Michael's, Longstanton, in pale local stone. One really has to stand near the buttresses at St. James the Less to get a sense of their surprising massiness. *Photograph courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

Amplifying the dramatic pitch of the roof are the two chunky buttresses, set at angles, that frame the west front at each end. A second pair of tall, very deep buttresses frame a simple lancet window (a clear hallmark of the Early English Gothic, it is not fussy but simple in its organic forms) taken precisely from St. Michael's. The height of the church is dramatized by the triple bellcote that crowns the west front—a rather Victorian deviation from the original at St. Michael's—surmounted with a prominent cross.

The prospect, especially among the tall and beautiful trees of the churchyard, is that the church has emerged from the earth itself. In most ways it has: through the use of local stone (Wissahickon granite) and through the hands of local craftspeople. Honesty of material here coincided with the desire of the founders of St. James the Less to return to the catholicity of the Anglican Church in its teaching, ritual, and mission. A return that although deeply informed by the Oxford Movement and the Ecclesiological Society in Britain found unique expression in 1840s Philadelphia.



The south porch at the end of the 19th century, with two unidentified churchmen. The door is not the same one that welcomes worshippers in the 21st century—the door seen here may be the original.

THE SOUTH PORCH

A porch serves as an entrance space to the nave where the worshippers gather, and such porches started to appear on English churches from the late 11th century. In the Medieval parish, the porch came not only to function as entrance space to the nave, but it saw special use in a variety of Christian ceremonies, whether marriages, festivals, processions, and rituals for women after childbirth.[23]

Like the bellcote, the porch is not a precise copy of the prototype at St. Michael's. The south porch at St. James the Less is marked by another steeply pitched gable, which appears to extend all the way to the ground thanks to another pair of deep buttresses. The stone door surround features simple shafts, with capitals and mouldings taken directly from examples at St. Michael's; again, all stylistic hallmarks of the early English gothic of the 13th century. Notice the finely carved faces that terminate the stone hood, typical of Medieval ornament. One face maintains a handsome moustache even after 177 years. A stone cross surmounts the south porch. The point of every gable at St. James the Less is finished with a different stone cross, true to Medieval prototypes yet reflecting the individuality of the masons who worked at St. James the Less. Consider the symbolism of finishing the highest point of each architectural component with the Cross of Christ.

Above, a carved face terminates the stone hood mold on the south porch door. Below, one of six crosses that terminate the church's gables. Note the unusual chimney—a later 19th-century addition.

[23] See Orme, *Going to Church,* pp. 116-117, for example.

The east front at the height of springtime. Compare this photograph to the same view in 1855 (p. 3). The two-story sacristy, protruding from the chancel to the right, was an addition of 1929.

> The heav'ns are not too high,
> God's praise may thither fly;
> the earth is not too low,
> God's praises there may grow.
> *From 'Antiphon I',* The Temple*, George Herbert, 1633*

For the Ecclesiological Society, and those interested in the revival of Medieval English architecture for Anglican worship, catholic truth was to be expressed visibly. The various parts of the church building, inside and out, were to be physically reflective of their spiritual purpose. It is a deeply Incarnational architecture: taking physical materials and forms and suggesting that humans can, somehow, intensify that thin space between earth and heaven.

Looking at the east front, we can see that the various parts of the church are clearly defined. The long and deep chancel, the most sacred space of the church, protrudes forward with a trinity of lancet windows. Attached to it is the sensitive and characterful two-storey sacristy, designed by Wilfred Edwards Anthony and added in 1929 replacing a small one-storey vestry room.[24] The chief delights of the sacristy are the wonderfully vigorous stained glass windows by Valentine d'Ogries (see p. 28). Behind the sacristy rises the nave, the gathering space of the faithful community, surmounted by the triple bellcote which summons all to worship.

Consider this east-west axis, with the most sacred part of the church in the east. Even though the two primary architectural units, chancel and nave, get smaller and narrow down as they come towards us, they expand through their spiritual focus eastwards. Spiritual potential defies the smaller physical space. United through their focus eastward—to the rising sun, to Jerusalem, to the altar, to Christ—the gathered community in the nave is invited to contemplate the outward mission of Christianity as fuelled by the inward, spiritual experience of worship in the church space. The physical, architectural fact of this east-west axis of symmetry continues on the interior of the church. There, the use of the church-space revolves physically and spiritually around the altar at the east end and the three lancet windows above, acting together as a vanishing point that in turn opens the heart, mind, and body.

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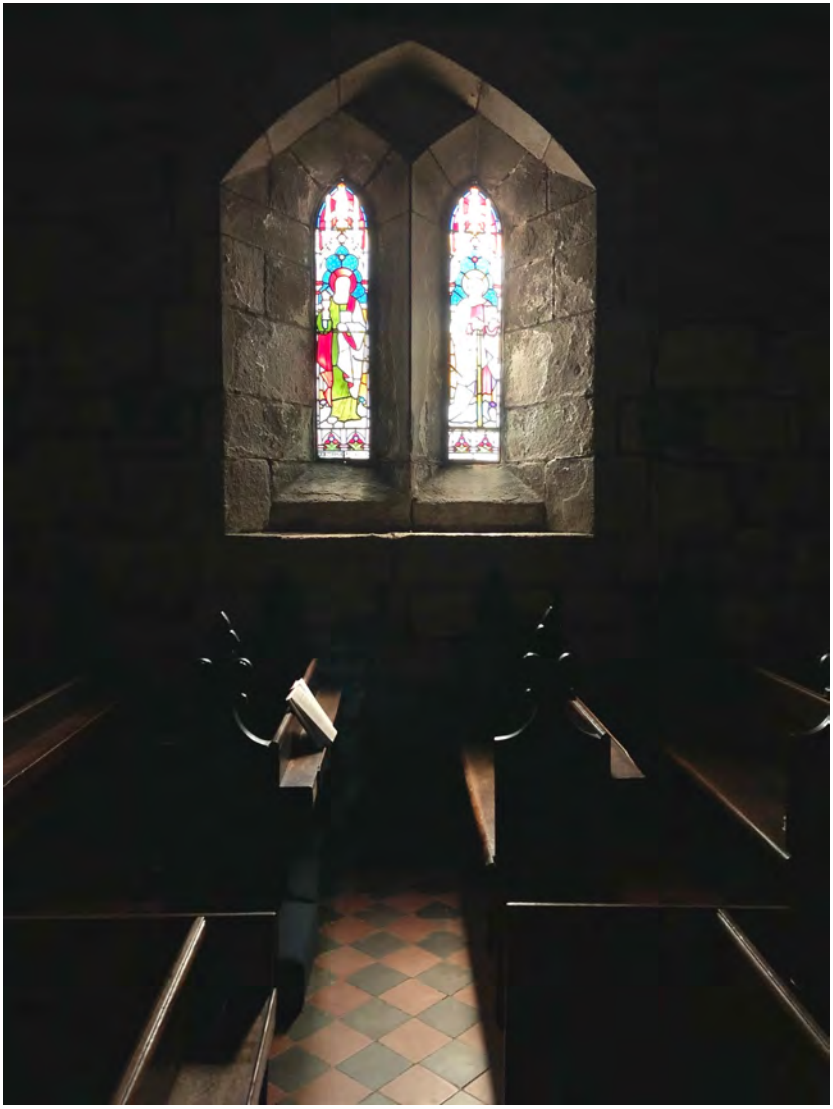
[24] Reference the photograph of 1855, p. 3, to see the original arrangement, noting the original diamond-pane window glass which once filled all the windows at St. James the Less.



The afternoon sun illuminates the tile floors and the oak pews in the south aisle. The pair of stained glass windows here—showing St. John the Evangelist and St. James the Less—were the first stained glass windows installed in the nave replacing the old diamond pane glass, ca. 1871. They were dedicated to Charles Thomas Adams, who is buried immediately outside below the windows.

THE PEWS

The pews are of finely carved oak and are original to the church. One design features carved poppy-heads, the other features an elegant pointed arch. Two interesting details emerge from something as seemingly straightforward as wooden pews.

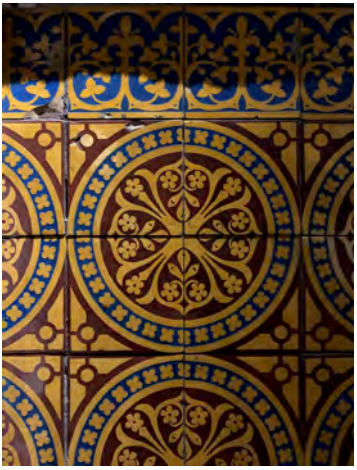
The two styles of pew: with poppy heads (above) and with tracery (below). Butterfield's work inspired many details at St. James the Less, including the pews.

The first is that the Church of St. James the Less, from its inception, did not employ the common Anglican custom of pew rents to fund the parish. Commonly associated with 'box pews', pew renting stratified the church-space socially. If you could not afford to rent a pew—or pews—for you and your family, you might be assigned to a small section of 'free' seats that had been generously sponsored by well-off parishioner. Or, you might well be regulated to a bench in some inconspicuous corner of the church. The Oxford Movement vehemently criticised the practice of pew-renting as inappropriately importing social distinctions into the church space in an already inequitable society. There was, in fact, at least one entire moralising novel by the Tractarian Francis Paget campaigning against pew rents.

Secondly, the designs for the pews were certainly inspired by William Butterfield's influential *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica*. We know that Butterfield sent Robert Ralston a copy of the book, and perhaps Ralston informed the supervisor-architect of St. James the Less, John Carver, to oversee the execution of pews suitable to the church's character and purpose. Similarly, the *Instrumenta* guided the creation of the wooden choir stalls, which are taken exactly from plate 43 of the 1847 edition.

Pope St. Gregory the Great from one of the exceptional sacristy windows by Valentine d'Ogries, ca. 1930—the color is exquisite and the almost sketch-like freedom of the black linework is wonderful.

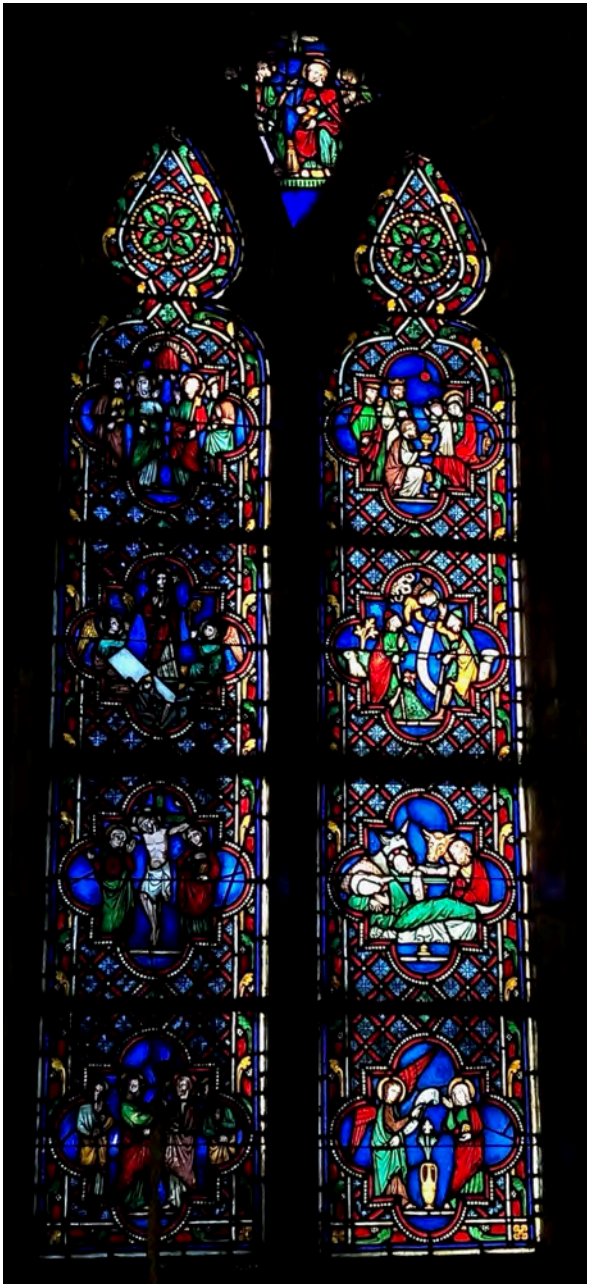
THE FLOOR TILES



Detail of the tile reredos on the east wall behind the altar, given by 'Mr. Minton' himself.

The beautiful clay tiles that decorate the floor of St. James the Less were made by Minton, the famed English manufacturers of pottery and porcelain. The tiles at St. James the Less represent very fine early Victorian examples of encaustic tiles in the Medieval revival style; encaustic meaning that the different colors come from different colored clays, not a glaze. In addition to the floor tiles, Minton supplied decorative tiles for the walls above the choir stalls, as well as a tile reredos for behind the altar. All these decorative elements are original and were in place by the consecration of the church on Trinity Sunday, 1850. The vestry minutes, which catalogue the early construction of the church in some detail, record that the parish tendered their thanks to Mr. Minton for his 'beautiful and acceptable present of a Reredos, and to his house for the liberal and careful execution of the orders for flooring tiles which have been universally admired.'[25] The minutes also relay that the imported tiles were chosen because they were more readily to be had—surprisingly—than seasoned oak planks for the church floors.[26] Decorative clay tile-work was a common feature in Medieval churches of all kinds in England, the most famous surviving examples probably being at Great Malvern Priory. As with nearly every element of the Medieval church, tiles were often decorated with Christian symbols. At St. James the Less you will find crosses, crowns, fleurs-de-lis and doves among other motifs. That nearly every aspect of the church's architecture and furnishings would point to some greater Christian truth was not only a defining feature of Medieval church design, but this spirit was revived by the Ecclesiological Society and its influencers and adherents. Decorative tiles in a more-or-less correct Medieval style were recommended by the Society as acceptable and dignified for the church space. Robert Ralston and his friends followed suit as they sought to build a spirited recreation of a Medieval parish for catholic worship in antebellum Philadelphia.

[25] Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), p. 78.
[26] Ibid. p. 23.



The west window at sunset, by Gerente of Paris: an exquisite display of craftsmanship in the sensitive execution of Medieval-style glass in vibrant colors.

THE WEST WINDOW

The west window, piercing through the dark high wall, was crafted in a splendid Medieval style by Alfred Gerente of Paris and installed in 1852. It depicts 9 scenes from the New Testament. The right-hand panels focus on the events that surround the birth of the Word Made Flesh, from the Annunciation to the visit of the Magi. The left-hand panels illustrate significant events in the narrative of Salvation, from St. Peter receiving the Keys of the Kingdom to Jesus' Ascension. At the very top—hardly seen from ground-level—between the uppermost arms of tracery, is shown the descent of the Holy Spirit to two Apostles.

In what ways can we describe this window as 'Medieval' in style? The appearance of the figures, their expressions, proportions, and gestures all resemble actual Medieval glass and illuminated manuscripts. In the figures, the emphasis is not so much on individuality or realism, but in conveying through gesture, stylization, and easily recognizable scenes and expressions various Biblical stories and messages. Distinctly Medieval, too, is the use of the quatrefoil (the four-sided shape created by the intersection of four circles), stylized plant motifs, and the geometrical patterns in blue and red glass known as 'diaper work.' The overall arrangement shows a composition rooted in the repetition of regular, geometrical shapes which contain the images. Even the color of the glass itself—especially the rich blue—follows Medieval examples famed for their jewel-like tones. The Gerente brothers were particularly known for their effective re-creation of the intense colors of much Medieval glass, especially the blue glass of French examples, and the effect is indeed a dazzling mosaic of color, especially at the time of sunset. [27]

The west window can be seen to display a collection of relationships of all sorts which reveal the Divine pulsing amongst Humanity. Some of those relationships are cursory but dramatic: such as the Angels greeting the shepherds in the fields to announce the Holy Birth (right-hand panel, second from top). Others are the sort of human bond that lasts a lifetime, companions in the fullness of Love: see the beloved St. John gazing towards the Crucified Jesus (left-hand panel, third from top). Each scene depicted reflects the transformative power of different kinds of relationships, yet all with their ultimate source in the Word Made Flesh.

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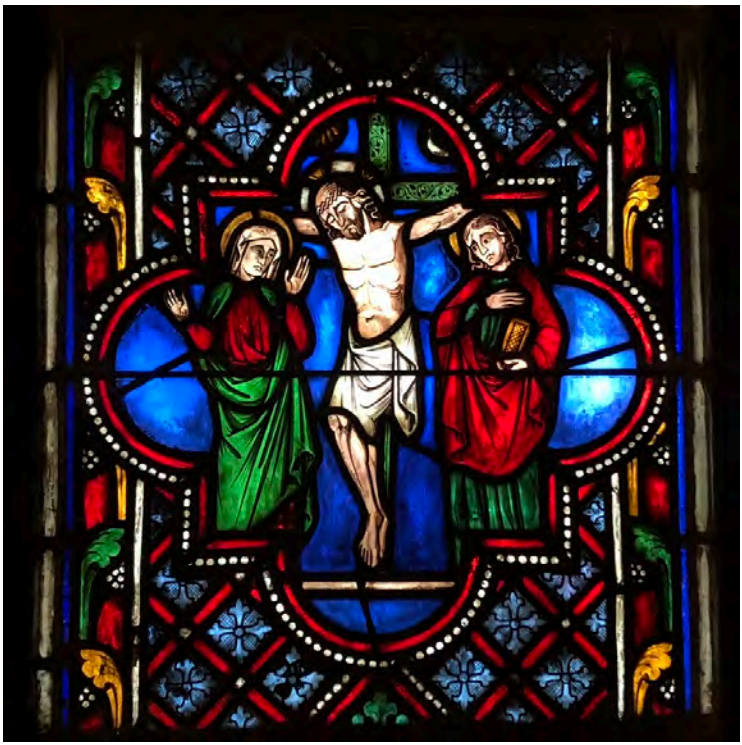
[27] See a comment from the *New York Ecclesiologist*, September 1851, as quoted in Kayser, *A Brief History,* p. 10.

Notice that the Cross of Jesus is depicted in bright green glass, with little vibrant vines running along its beams. The allusions are manifold: a Tree of Life, the vines of the New Covenant, the New Creation watered by the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' pierced side. They all have in common the fact that the Cross of Death becomes a Way of Life. Here, then, is an invitation into relationship with Christ himself, extended to us through imagery and symbolism in the loving attention to detail that Gerente paid even to details hardly discernible from ground-level.

The window itself is a poignant testament to the sacredness of relationship. As a plaque immediately beneath the window relays, it was given by 'attached friends' to the memory of Robert Ralston Cox, who drowned tragically in the Ohio River in 1851 on his way to Wisconsin to construct a church near Nashotah House Seminary.

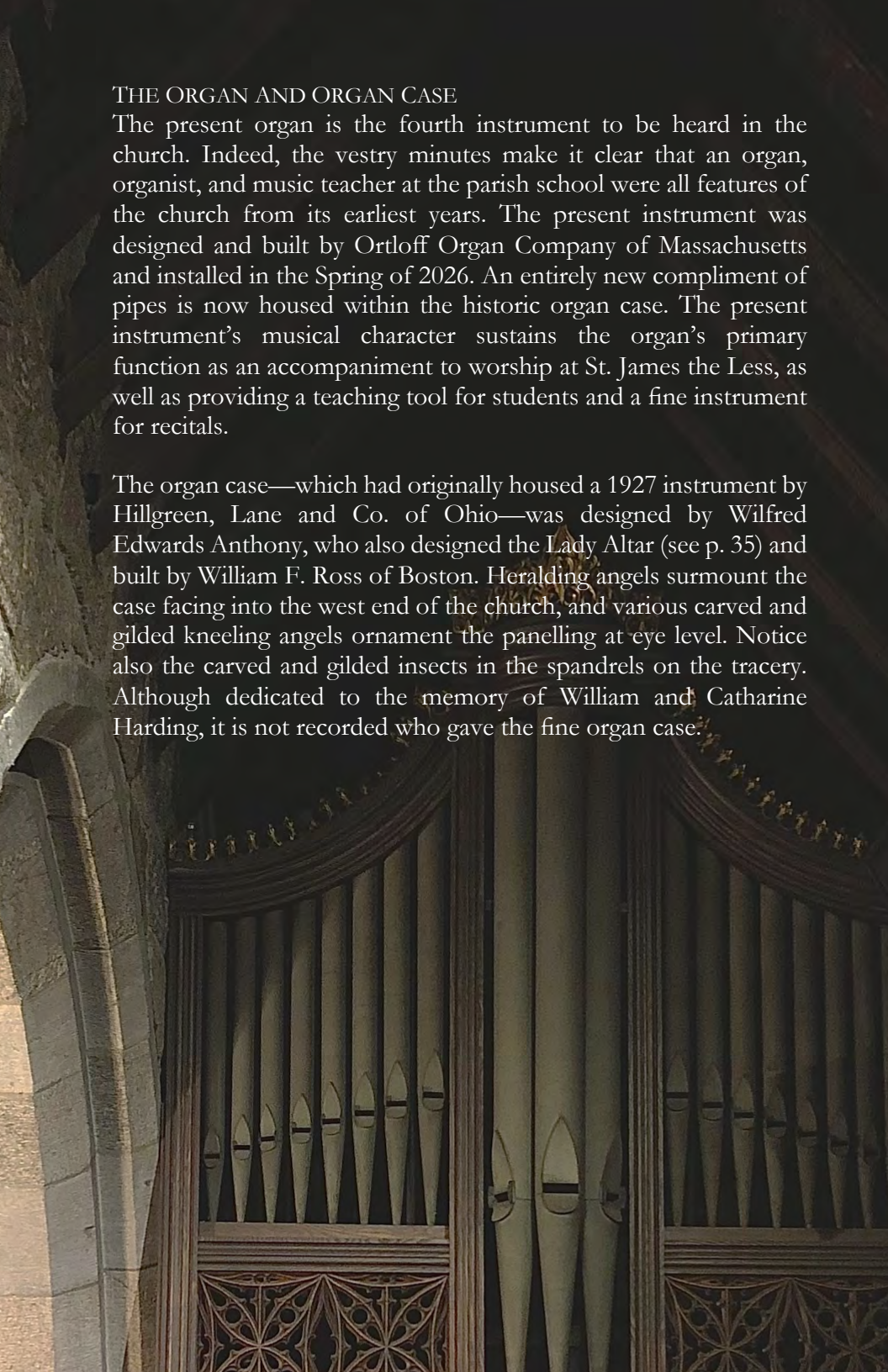


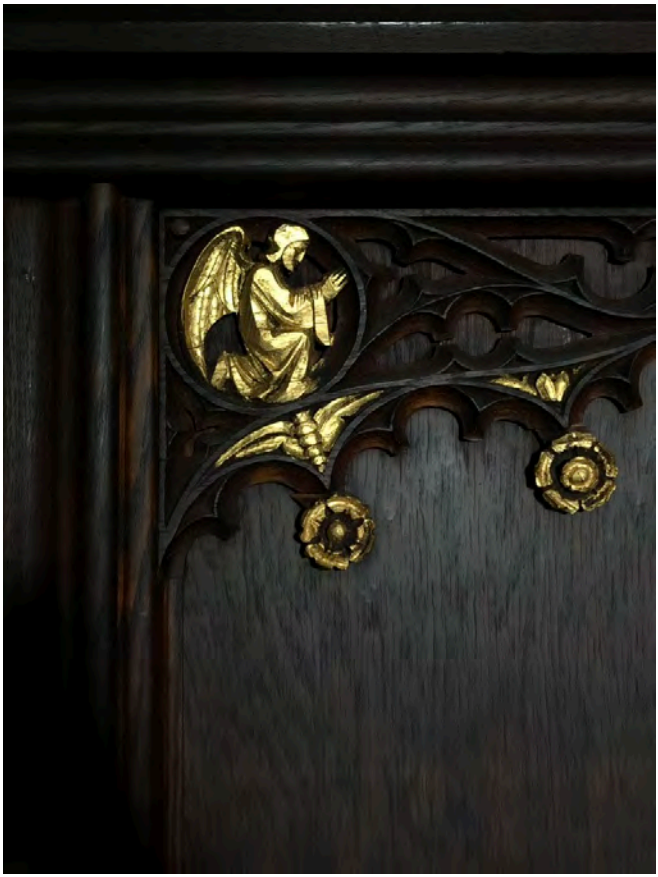
The crucifixion as depicted in the west window. The cross is bright green and ornamented with small vines: Christ's death is followed by Resurrection.

The Organ and Organ Case

The present organ is the fourth instrument to be heard in the church. Indeed, the vestry minutes make it clear that an organ, organist, and music teacher at the parish school were all features of the church from its earliest years. The present instrument was designed and built by Ortloff Organ Company of Massachusetts and installed in the Spring of 2026. An entirely new compliment of pipes is now housed within the historic organ case. The present instrument's musical character sustains the organ's primary function as an accompaniment to worship at St. James the Less, as well as providing a teaching tool for students and a fine instrument for recitals.

The organ case—which had originally housed a 1927 instrument by Hillgreen, Lane and Co. of Ohio—was designed by Wilfred Edwards Anthony, who also designed the Lady Altar (see p. 35) and built by William F. Ross of Boston. Heralding angels surmount the case facing into the west end of the church, and various carved and gilded kneeling angels ornament the panelling at eye level. Notice also the carved and gilded insects in the spandrels on the tracery. Although dedicated to the memory of William and Catharine Harding, it is not recorded who gave the fine organ case.





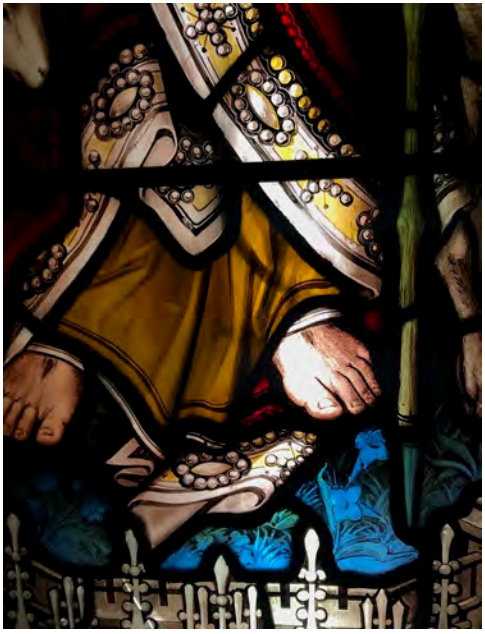
Gilded angels kneel in adoration, accompanied by insects and flowers. It is fitting that all creation joins in the swell of the organ in worship.

THE LADY ALTAR

Crafted from Italian marble, the Lady Altar of 1931 was designed by Wilfred Edwards Anthony and is copied from an ancient Christian tomb in Ravenna. Two sheep draw near to a cross from which hang the Alpha and the Omega. Fruit bearing palm trees springing nearby continue the theme of the Cross of Jesus as a well-spring of nourishment and life. The altar is a memorial to the Newbold family, six generations of whom are buried in the churchyard at St. James the Less along the west front of the church. The Empty Cross, in its hope and its love, is unity between time, space, and generation; a hope and love to which we are all called for communal nourishment.

Continuing the communion between living and dead through the Cross of Christ, every year at All Souls' Day the students and staff of St. James place a candle of remembrance on this altar in memory of past loved ones.

Above, the Lady Altar aflame with candles of remembrance at All Souls' Day, along with colorful paper tubes encasing prayers written by students. Below, a detail of the altar. The triptych above, showing Our Lady of Walsingham, is by Davis d'Ambly.



Top, the wounded feet of Christ appear beneath rich drapery in the window dedicated to the Rev. Robert Ritchie. Below, Christ as good shepherd bends to rescue a lamb ensnared, English 1870s.

WINDOWS—CHRIST AS GOOD SHEPHERD

Jesus as shepherd is a profound image to meditate on at any time, but especially in the seasons of Lent and Passiontide: for Jesus is both shepherd—embracing and seeking out the lost and lonely of all kinds, taking them into his arms, healing them, feeding them—and he is also sheep himself, the sacrificial lamb without blemish by whose 'stripes we are healed'. At the Church of St. James the Less there are two depictions of Christ as Good Shepherd.

One is an entire window at the east end of the north aisle, above the present shrine to St. James the Less. Christ stands amid rich Gothic architecture holding a lamb and with two other sheep at his feet. His crimson robe glorifies the blood of his passion, and the wounds of the cross are emphasised on his hands and feet. Two angels bear a banner announcing Christ's words: *Ego sum Pastor Bonus* or, *I am the Good Shepherd.* The window was made by the prolific manufacturer Hardman & Co. of Birmingham, England. Installed in 1907 (the stone wall being cut open especially for this window), it is a memorial to the Rev. Dr. Robert Ritchie, rector of St. James the Less from 1870 to 1907.

The second depiction is to be found in the south aisle, just by the Lady Altar. Here, Christ begins to bend down with his shepherd's staff to rescue a lamb trapped in a tangle of sharp thorns. We cannot help be see the Crown of Thorns in these harsh, dry branches that ensnare the lamb. How they contrast to the rich blue of the sky and the verdant green trees, towards which our eyes are led by the flowing drape of Jesus' blood-red garment. The pair of English-made windows were installed in 1874, a gift of George M. Conarroe.

THE ROOD SCREEN

The exemplary rood screen replaces an earlier wooden example which the Ecclesiological Society described in 1847 as 'well-intentioned though unsuccessful.' Continuing, they commented that 'the error will, we trust, be rectified.'[28] Early photographs indeed show a weighty and rather clumsy specimen, surmounted with a plain wooden cross rather small for the screen itself. The present, new screen was installed by 1878 and given by Mr. Moro Phillips as a memorial to his wife, Emily Louise Phillips.

Copper, brass, iron and a rich collection of semi-precious stones form a screen that is both splendid and perfectly suited to the intimacy of this little church. In a display of loving craftsmanship, vibrant flowers and foliage spring from the various parts of the screen, watered by the life-giving Blood of Christ's sacrifice flowing from the cross above.

Although in all previous literature the screen has been without attribute, it does bear a maker's mark on the base of the copper pillar to the left of the entrance gate, just above the stone parapet: FA SKIDMORE MERIDAN COV. Francis Skidmore (1817-1896) was in fact the most renowned metalworker of Victorian Britain. A member of the Ecclesiological Society, he worked almost entirely in the Gothic revival mode. He ran a highly successful workshop in Coventry under a scrupulous eye that received numerous important commissions. For example, Skidmore's firm crafted the extraordinary metal rood screen for Hereford Cathedral, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, to designs of that giant of the high-Victorian Gothic revival, George Gilbert Scott. Skidmore also produced railings and the cross and spire for the grandiose Albert Memorial in London. But by 1872, Skidmore had to close his larger manufacturing shop due to financial strains, moving to a smaller workshop at Meriden, near Coventry.[29] It is from this period that the screen at St. James the Less dates.

Stylistically, the screen's features–especially the character of the plant motifs and the rich inclusion of semi-precious stones–correspond rather precisely to examples seen in photographs from the firm's work now held at the Victoria & Albert Museum. And one cannot help but see the stylistic similarity to the details of the grand examples of rood screens at Hereford (1862) and Lichfield (1863). The extent to which Skidmore was involved in the details of the design is uncertain, as the vestry minutes of

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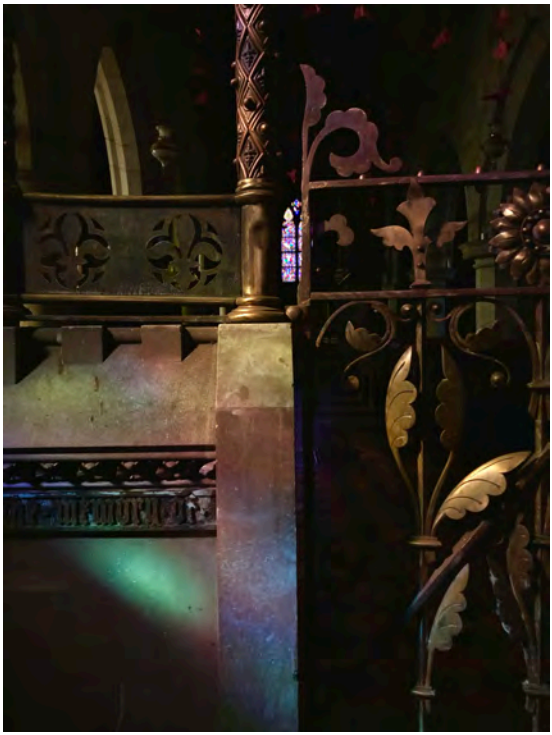
[28] Kayser, *A Brief History,* quotes the *Ecclesiologist* of May, 1847, p. 8.
[29] University of Warwick biographies, 'Francis Skidmore (1817-1896). Webpage.

St. James the Less from April, 1878 record that the screen was in fact designed by Charles M. Burns, an accomplished architect himself and member of the vestry of St. James the Less.[30]

It is tempting to believe that the high altar tabernacle and cross (discussed at p. 45) was also produced by Skidmore, since it was installed by 1880 and displays an exceptional quality of craftsmanship, as well as a skilled use of enamel-work that resembles other liturgical goods crafted by Skidmore. The screen at St. James the Less is a rare example of Skidmore's work in the United States, and all the more interesting for its late date. Ultimately, the screen—and perhaps the high altar tabernacle and cross—reflect the indefatigable pursuit even forty some years after the original construction of St. James the Less to secure the highest quality fittings that would remain true to the English, Medieval revival spirit that Robert Ralston had so insisted upon from 1846.



Detail of the rood screen parapet and gate.

[30] Vestry Minutes of the Church of St. James the Less (April 6, 1858-April 15, 1886): pp. 207-208.

WINDOWS—CHRIST RISEN

We should remind ourselves that the very crux of the Christian faith is in an event that absolutely no one witnessed. And yet silence, pause, mystery, and an invitation to faith have not dissuaded Christian artists from making visible the historical unseen. The point is not so much literalism, but a grasping towards the bodily and spiritual event of salvation.

From the west window—shown here—by Alfred Gerente of Paris (1851-1852), a majestic Christ stands in blessing from the tomb. Two angels in green swing thuribles of incense, and below two guards in their armour are asleep—oblivious to the cosmic event occurring around them. Notice that Christ is fully clothed, as is typical of Medieval depictions. Gerente's treatment of the Resurrection resembles very much one stained glass example at Canterbury Cathedral, of the ca. 1280s, where Alfred and his brother Henri had worked.

In a lancet window at the near-center north aisle, a similarly clothed Christ steps out of the tomb from a pair of lights by Mayer of Munich installed in 1874. Notice the wooden, woven fence in the background which tells us that we are in a garden. The artist has attempted at some drama by placing the lid of the tomb at a sharp angle in the bottom right.

Also in the north aisle, at the north east corner, a resplendent, transformed Body of the Risen Lord is finally visible as Mary Magdalene reaches for the Teacher in her love. And yet Christ raises his hand, gesturing to heaven, reminding Mary that her earthly love must now be transformed, too. The window is English, installed by 1876.

And in the south side of the chancel in the choir—nearest the rood screen—Christ rises like a marble pillar from a tomb now bursting with lilies, by Nicola D'Ascenzo, 1929. Beautifully colored, Christ's golden robes recall Thomas Kelly's words in the hymn, 'We Sing the Praise of Him Who Died': [The Cross]…gilds the bed of death with life.

The high altar tabernacle and cross, of resplendent tooled brass, blue enamel, and semi-precious stones. It was installed by 1880 and may have been produced by Skidmore, who manufactured the rood screen at St. James the Less. This little temple is the dwelling of the consecrated communion bread.

THE HIGH ALTAR AND CHANCEL ADORNMENTS

The original altar at St. James the Less was smaller than the altar you see now—but the original is still visible. If you look behind the gothic arcade of pointed arches and finely carved little columns, you can see the original red sandstone altar. Looking even more closely, you can see the original decorative tile-work on the floor wrapping around it. The elaborate enlargement of the original altar, in white marble with black marble columns, took place in 1880 and reflects the growing influence of a heightened ritualism at St. James the Less. The modifications were a gift of parishioner Mr. Moro Phillips, in memory of his wife, Emily Louise.

Detail of the high altar. Note the original red sandstone altar behind the arcade.

A stone altar—though as beautiful as this one is—may not seem like something exceptional. But when St. James the Less was completed in 1850, a stone altar in a Protestant Episcopal Church was seen by many as far too Roman Catholic (a wooden table being considered more appropriate). A stone altar suggested a deeply sacrificial understanding of the Holy Communion—after all, an altar is a place of sacrifice. Through this understanding, the gathered community would be drawn evermore into the visceral understanding that Christ's very body and blood were consumed at the Eucharist in an offering to God that pleaded for his mercy. Bishops, clergy, and worshippers in both the American Episcopal Church and the Church of England frequently riled against the stone altar; bishops in both countries even refusing to consecrate churches which included stone altars. The Ecclesiological Society had aroused indignation when they restored an ancient Cambridge church complete with a stone altar in the 1840s. And yet, Ralston and his friends at St. James the Less persisted. We have no period commentary suggesting that St. James the Less was the recipient of any anti-Catholic criticism (and, like most major American cities at the time, such criticism certainly thrived in Philadelphia). Indeed, Bishop Alonzo Potter faithfully consecrated St. James the Less—altar and all—on Trinity Sunday, 1850.

By 1896, a curious resolution appears in the vestry minutes regarding the altar which displays the tension between the old customs of St. James the Less and the fashionable increase of Catholic style ritual by the 1880s. Six candlesticks had been given by Mr. Phillips for the altar in 1887, and in 1896 they were replaced. It seems that some members of St. James the Less were bothered by the use of six candles on the altar (the style favoured by the Tridentine Roman Catholic Church, but becoming popular with ritualistic high Anglicans). The vestry thus passed a resolution that two candles must always stand beside the tabernacle, as 'Altar lights as in the primitive usage of the Church.'[31] Two candles on the altar had been an early, defining feature of the high Anglican ethos at a time when most Protestants rejected candles on the altar at all as too 'Popish.' The vestry's resolution of 1896 would have upheld the custom of two candles on the altar as apparent at St. James the Less from its inception, for Henry Farnum had given two candlesticks (now lost) for that purpose in 1849.[32]

Angels on the ceiling of the chancel above the sanctuary. The paintings are after designs by Charles Burns, architect, executed by an unknown artist. The background—described as 'sky blue' in 1880—has darkened considerably since.

The enlargement of the altar was part of a grander scheme of enrichment to the chancel that took place in the last decades of the 19th century, again mostly the result of contributions from Mr. Phillips. All of the enrichments suggest an increased interest in heightened, Catholic style ritual at St. James the Less. It was in 1880 that the elaborate tabernacle and cross were added; whether or not the Blessed Sacrament was reserved before this time we cannot say, but the splendid tabernacle assures us that the practice was firmly established by 1880. Also in that year the much-loved chancel ceiling paintings were executed to designs of Charles Burns showing angels in various attitudes of prayer above the altar, and above the choir palm leaves, lilies, and passion flowers.[33] A stone credence table

[31] Vestry Minutes (1858- 1886); and Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), p. 67.
[32] Vestry Minutes (1846-1858), p. 67.
[33] Vestry Minutes (1858- 1886), pp. 207-208.

(where the sacred vessels containing the water and wine, are placed for the Holy Communion) and piscina (for draining the leftover consecrated wine and water), both features regarded with suspicion by ultra-Protestant Anglicans, were added in 1887.

THE HIGH ALTAR TABERNACLE

The tabernacle—where the consecrated communion bread is kept—and its surmounting cross is crafted of resplendent brass and decorated with semi-precious stones and rich blue enamel (see p. 42). The center of the cross displays the traditional abbreviation of the holy name of Jesus, and each end of the cross terminates with the symbol of one of the four Evangelists. The tabernacle was installed by 1880, at the same time the original altar was enlarged. The design of the cross is taken almost entirely from plate 59 of William Butterfield's *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica* of 1847. Thus, although the present altar cross was crafted thirty years after the completion of the St. James the Less, care was taken to return to the sources that had first influenced the fittings of the church. Indeed, the plate in Butterfield's book which includes this cross did not appear in later editions, so special care was taken to refer to the edition that Robert Ralston himself would have known. It is possible that F.A. Skidmore, the renown Victorian metalworker, crafted the tabernacle and cross, as it dates from just two years after the metal rood screen was installed which had been made by Skidmore (see p. 39). The richness of the tabernacle reminds us of the Old Testament Temple as much as it does the splendour of the New Jerusalem. This little dwelling of the Holy Communion reiterates the visceral truth that our Incarnational faith brings: that God came and comes to dwell among and in humanity. Placed at the very eastern end of the church, we together can look east with anticipation and preparation towards the Jesus whose real presence is foretold by the Prophets, who walked in Nazareth, and whose message lives on through the Evangelists.

Plate 59 from the 1847 edition of the *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica*, which inspired the jeweled tabernacle cross of 1880.

View to the high altar at St. James the Less at the very end of the 19th century. The *sedilia* for the clergy are on the right. Note the elaborate *cathedra*, or seat for the bishop, on the left, now removed. By the time of this photo, the chancel had been considerably enriched, especially through the enlargement of the altar.

THE SEDILIA

Sedilia refer to the recessed seats in the chancel walls, near the altar, where clergy sit. These seats became particularly associated with Medieval architecture and worship, which St. James the Less attempted to transpose to the falls of the Schuylkill in 1846. In a wonderful adaptation, the wooden sedilia at St. James the Less are based very precisely on the stone double piscina–the basin used for draining sacred vessels–at St. Michael's, Longstanton. Architect John Carver of Philadelphia oversaw the construction of St. James the Less from the plans of St. Michaels, so perhaps this creative detail was his work.

Above, part of the oak sedilia at St. James the Less; below, the stone piscinia at St. Michael's, from the 13th century. *Photograph of St. Michael's courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

Photographs reveal that there was also originally an elaborate wooden *cathedra*, or seat for the bishop (from which derives the term 'cathedral'), on the north side of the chancel, now removed. It matched the style of the wooden sedilia, with thin columns supporting a pointed arch created by the intersection of a pair of sweeping, linear mouldings. The importance of the *cathedra* was apparent in the fact that the design extended almost floor to ceiling, and above the actual seat a carving of a large bishop's mitre was placed amongst various other emblems of the office. We can imagine that Bishop Alonzo Potter inhabited this seat at the consecration of St. James the Less on Trinity Sunday, 1850. In the Episcopal Church, the precedent had been set by Bishop White of Pennsylvania that wherever the bishop was, there was the cathedral. The impressive scale of the *cathedra* at St. James the Less testified to the visual gravitas conveying the Apostolic authority of the bishop as shepherd of a diocese. The spiritual authority

of Apostolic succession–the notion that the priests of the Anglican Church had descended in an unbroken spiritual line from the earliest of Christ's apostles–had been vigorously asserted by the Tractarians. Likewise, the Episcopal Church in the U.S. clung to the episcopal tradition of the church in contrast to other Protestant traditions, such as Presbyterians, who had eschewed the presence of Catholic-derived bishops. After all, the term 'Episcopal' denotes 'with bishops', itself deriving from the Latin and Greek terms for 'bishop'.

LANCET WINDOW—NORTH EAST CORNER OF THE CHANCEL

This is a small window but it offers a rich display of color and form, utilising a variety of glass-working techniques typical of its maker, Nicola D'Acenzo. He crafted the window in ca. 1925, several years after he was in Chartres studying from scaffolds the cathedral's famous glass. It depicts, from top-down: Daniel in the Lion's Den (associated with the virtue of Courage), David—harp behind—and Jonathan (Loyalty), and Abraham walking with Isaac to the place of sacrifice (Self-Control).

Through our varied human experiences in relationship—with God, with ourselves, with others—we are invited to consider the manifold ways that God's purpose and power are made known on earth. As Christians, we make choices to draw nearer to or further from God. It may be that whatever they look like for us, the genuine pursuits of faithful courage, loyalty and self-control can inspire us to see more clearly that piercing ray of the Divine source in our lives, illuminating as it does manifold experiences and relationships. Then perhaps we draw even nearer—as we do to this little hidden window—and see our own lives as knit together with those saints of old.

THE SILVER CHALICE

The splendid Gothic revival chalice was made by J.E. Caldwell & Co. of Philadelphia and was probably given in the last decades of the 19th century. Gilded roundels in low relief of various saints ornament the base. Shown are St. James the Less holding the club and to his right St. Paul with the sword. It is said that the women of the parish gave the jewels; a not uncommon tradition in those churches informed by the Oxford Movement's desire to reintroduce practices of Medieval piety. This is certainly entirely true, as the variety of mounts around the base of the chalice would reveal that pieces from jewellery—which include pearls, emeralds, diamonds, and rubies—were in fact attached to the chalice.[34]

We are told that magi from the East gave three gifts, including gold, to the infant Jesus. This beautiful chalice reminds us that all kinds of gifts given to God's greater glory are sacred when given from the heart and soul. Enfolded in this object of exquisite human craftsmanship is a small desire to offer something beautiful to the worship of Christ on his divine altar. It is but one of many of the kinds of gifts we might offer to Christ, but no less precious for that.

The chalice is used for all major feasts at St. James the Less, when the students participate in using and caring for these vessels.

[34] We are grateful to Mr. Davis d'Ambly for sharing his observations on the chalice.

The silver offering basin, crafted in London by 1847 by John Keith, silversmith to the Ecclesiologists, to designs by William Butterfield.

THE OFFERING BASIN

The silver offering basin was made in London in 1847 by John Keith, who was the favoured silversmith of the Ecclesiological Society. The basin was crafted to the designs of that other great Ecclesiologist, William Butterfield, but also shows the influence of A.W.N. Pugin. The offering basin was ordered, created and perhaps delivered almost three years before the Church of St. James the Less was completed. It demonstrates yet again the intense interest that Robert Ralston took in securing the highest quality, English-made or -inspired liturgical objects for the parish. Along with a chalice and paten, this offering plate would have comprised the first pieces of silver considered essential for the celebration of the divine service at St. James the Less.

The offering basin shows at the center a figure of St. James the Less holding the wooden club with which—according to one version of the story—the saint was martyred. He stands in a quatrefoil against a ground of rich, engraved diaper-work that, like the entire central medallion, was originally gilded.

The inscription around the edge of the basin is from psalm 65:13 as found in the Latin Vulgate Bible (psalm 66 in the King James Bible). It reads: *Introibo in domum tuam in holocaustis; reddam tibi vota mea.* Or, *With burnt offerings will I enter thy house; I will pay thee my vows.*

The taking up of an offertory collection from the assembled congregation was a practice the Oxford Movement encouraged enthusiastically within the Anglican Church, playing a role in their vigorous social teachings. Various reasons sustained their arguments, including the desire to inspire a culture of holy almsgiving and sacrifice amidst a greedy, secular world, and the refusal to sustain the parish or the priest's living through stratifying pew rents, which we have explored already (see p. 27).

The inscription on the basin makes it very clear that the money collected from the individuals is spiritually linked to the ritual offerings of the Old Testament, and thereby to the central, new Christian sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist. We are reminded that no matter what we give—or how much we give—our offerings to God are sacred, taken up into that greater sacramental life of the church. When you attend Mass at St. James the Less, you will notice that we still use this offering basin every Sunday. After a collection has been taken up, the plate with the offerings is placed upon the altar as the Eucharistic prayer is said.

The trinity of lancet windows at the east end of the chancel, crafted by Alfred Gerente of Paris in 1849 and probably installed at St. James the Less by the autumn of 1850, though the vestry minutes are not clear. Prophets and the four evangelists gaze towards the Incarnate Christ and his Mother.

THE EAST WINDOWS

The exquisite east windows show in the center lancet a Jesse Tree, flanked by four prophets (left) and the four evangelists (right). The Jesse Tree, like any family tree, is a depiction of the ancestors of Jesus and can appear with any number of figures, but always includes Jesse at the base of the 'tree'. As here, he is often shown lying down as if asleep and dreaming of the great lineage that followed him. Immediately above Jesse is his son King David, harp in hand, followed by King Solomon. The next, almost central panel seems to draw our keenest attention: an image of the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child enthroned. The passage from the prophet Isaiah that inspired the tradition of the Jesse Tree in Christian art speaks of a 'rod' coming out of the 'stem of Jesse' from which the Messiah will descend. The Latin for 'rod' or 'green twig' is very close to the Latin word for 'Virgin', and thus the centrality of the mystery of Jesus' virgin birth found its way into the Jesse Tree through the language of the Latin bible. It is fitting that our eyes are drawn inward to the Virgin and Child. For here at the very nucleus of our focus eastwards in the church is a depiction of the Incarnation: God made Human. All the more appropriate as Incarnation is the life-blood of the artistic tradition of the church. Above the Virgin and Child enthroned, Christ appears again as a glorious judge sitting on a stylised rainbow and holding a book in his left hand. Above him, emerging from the shadows of the high, shadowy chancel walls, is the white dove of the Holy Spirit.

Jesse of Bethlehem, father of King David, sleeps at the base of the central lancet window. The shield displays proudly the initials of the window's maker, Alfred Gerente of Paris.

The three lights were crafted by Alfred Gerente at his Paris studio in 1849 and installed at St. James by the autumn of 1850, a gift of parishioner Henry Farnum. There is absolutely no doubt that when installed in 1850 these windows were some of the finest—if not the finest—stained glass in the United States. Alfred Gerente left his initials—*AG*—conspicuously

on the shield above the reclined figure of Jesse. Alfred's brother Henri, who died in 1849, may have begun the project. Between them, the Gerente brothers had created Medieval-style glass for various French churches–including the Sainte Chapelle–and English cathedrals, such as Ely and Canterbury. The east windows at St. James the Less showcase the Gerente brother's intense interest in replicating as closely as possible the character and detail of the best Medieval stained glass. The incorporation of imaginative architecture and stylized patterns and arabesques (the curling floral vines) combine with rich use of color to captivate the spiritual imagination of the viewer, who gazes towards the Incarnate Christ and his Mother like the prophets of the Old Testament and the evangelists of the New.

A MEDIEVAL PARISH: ARCHITECTURE AND MEANING

Adam Hope, *University of St. Andrews*

It is no secret that the architecture of St. James the Less was closely based on that of St. Michael's Church in Longstanton, a village just outside the university town of Cambridge in England. But what can the architecture of the older church tell us about how it was used?

Looking east towards the chancel at St. Michael's, Longstanton. The church is now considerably brighter that it probably would have appeared in the Medieval period. *Photograph courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

Working from the east, St. Michael's has the long chancel typical of Medieval English churches, in contrast to the shallow or non-existent chancels of post-Reformation buildings. This was to accommodate not

just the altar, but features such as a sedilia (seats for the clergy, see p. 47), piscina (basin) for washing the communion vessels, and choir stalls. The piscina of St. Michael's survives (see p. 47), and is interesting for being nearly identical to those in two much grander Cambridgeshire buildings: the chapel of Jesus College, Cambridge, and the church of St. Andrew, Histon, the latter of which shared a patron (a sponsoring, genteel benefactor) with St. Michael's. The three are good evidence that Medieval masons were relatively mobile, and that architectural features of larger, more sophisticated churches influenced those of smaller, more rural ones.

The piscina is the principal surviving feature of the original chancel, which was essentially rebuilt in 1884—this means that the chancel of St. James the Less is *older* than that of the thirteenth century church on which it was based. This is typical of the treatment of Medieval English churches by the Victorians, who were motivated by the romantic desire to preserve ancient buildings, to make provision for more ritualistic forms of worship, and the simple need to make crumbling buildings watertight. At St. Michael's the original chancel had been turned into schoolroom; this was a relatively common practice, as the post-Reformation Church of England rarely used the altar, instead being focussed on preaching from the pulpit. The church of St. Mary in Whitby is a good example of a Medieval church adapted to this form of worship, as its chancel is still a dark space cut off from the nave by an 18th-century Georgian gallery.

A small amount of Medieval grisaille glass survives in one of the chancel windows. Grisaille is a technique in which pieces of grey glass, often decorated in black and grey with simple floral designs, are arranged into patterns. It was promoted by the Cistercians on aesthetic grounds, as they eschewed the perceived ostentation of the Benedictines. The lack of colored glass and complex

Window in the chancel at St. Michael's showing the grisaille glass. The darkened, upper glass is Medieval, ca. 1250s. It is among the oldest stained glass in a British parish church. *Photograph courtesy of Mr. Daniel McKay.*

figurative scenes also meant that grisaille windows were comparatively cheap, however, and therefore within the means of a modest parish like St. Michael's. With the exception of the east windows, all the windows at St. James the Less were originally filled with diamond-pane glass decorated *en grisaille* before the gradual addition of colorful stained glass through the 19th and 20th centuries.

While the church windows at St. Michael's may have been plain, there is documentary evidence that the interior of the church was painted. While it is true that literacy was not widespread in the thirteenth century, the laity enthusiastically engaged with their faith visually. What was depicted at St. Michael's is unknown, but surviving thirteenth century schemes give an idea of how the church may have appeared. At Hailes in Gloucestershire the decoration consists of biblical scenes, saints, fantastical beasts, everyday scenes, and heraldry related to the patrons of the church. It includes a large depiction of St. Christopher carrying the Christ Child, an image which was often placed within sight of the main entrance where travellers could see it. The effect would have been bright, dense, even chaotic, reflecting the important role imagery played in helping Medieval Christians understand their faith.

It is also likely that there would have been a Doom—a depiction of the Last Judgement—above the chancel arch, where parishioners would easily see it and contemplate the fate of their immortal souls. Beneath this there was a rood screen. Many English screens were destroyed during the Reformation, although that at St. Michael's reportedly survived until at least 1742; it may have been removed when the school moved in. The screen takes its name from the crucifix placed above it, 'rood' being an archaic term for 'cross'. No Medieval rood crucifixes survive in England, but they were originally the visual focus of the nave and framed all the activity of the clergy in the chancel, a constant reminder of the Passion. The rood also played a part in the physical character of worship, which again was important in a mostly illiterate society. One of the most dramatic moments of the church year was when a church's images were uncovered at Easter, having been obscured with dark cloths during Lent; the reveal of the crucifix was the culmination of this process.

Moving to the exterior, St. Michael's has a bellcote, but with space for only two bells—both were stolen in 1969—rather than the more elaborate three at St. James the Less. The bellcote is probably seventeenth century, as its openings have classical details, but it probably replicates the original arrangement. There is no equivalent to the Wanamaker Memorial Bell

Tower—which stands in the south west corner of the St. James churchyard—at St. Michael's, although freestanding bell towers did exist in Medieval England and a prominent example survives at Chichester Cathedral, probably built because the main towers were unstable. Change ringing didn't develop until the seventeenth century, so the bells in these towers and bellcotes were mostly sounded by being swung or chimed. They would have sounded not only before services, but to mark the praying of the *Angelus* three times a day, and at the moment the consecrated host was elevated during the Mass. This made all those not in the church—perhaps most often working in the surrounding fields—aware of these sacred moments.

In 2023 St. Michael's is no longer regularly used and is instead in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. The simple interior, time-worn furniture, and mellow stone lend it a quietude which surely would not be recognized by Medieval parishioners. For them, the church would have been a vibrant building, with vivid images lit by blazing candles. Indeed, perhaps nowadays Medieval men and women might feel more at home at St. James the Less. Their parish church was a center of worship and a nucleus of community life, with Christian ceremonies and festivals marking the seasons of their lives as much as the sound of the church's bells ringing out across the countryside.

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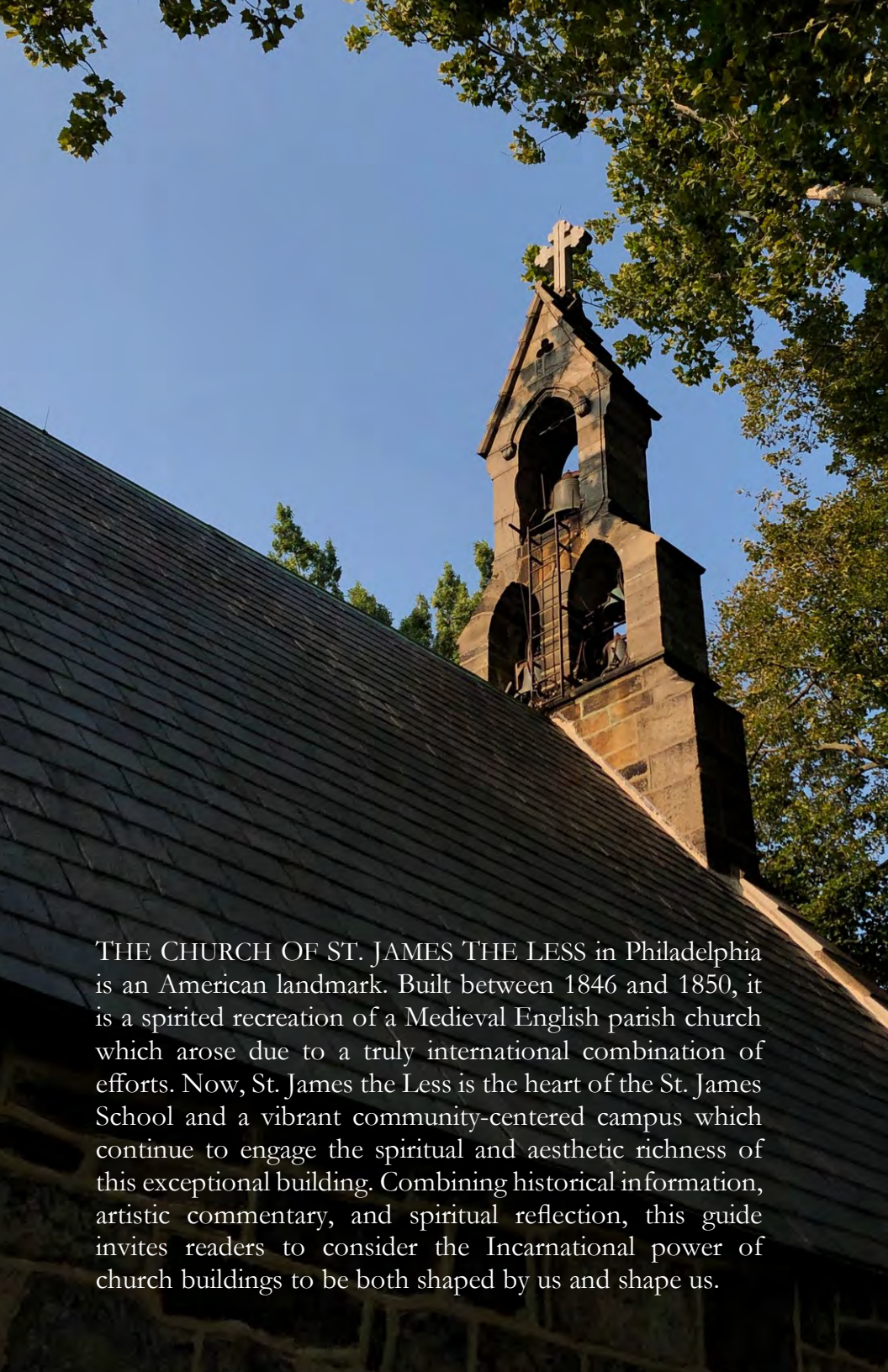

THE CHURCH OF ST. JAMES THE LESS in Philadelphia is an American landmark. Built between 1846 and 1850, it is a spirited recreation of a Medieval English parish church which arose due to a truly international combination of efforts. Now, St. James the Less is the heart of the St. James School and a vibrant community-centered campus which continue to engage the spiritual and aesthetic richness of this exceptional building. Combining historical information, artistic commentary, and spiritual reflection, this guide invites readers to consider the Incarnational power of church buildings to be both shaped by us and shape us.