

Within, without

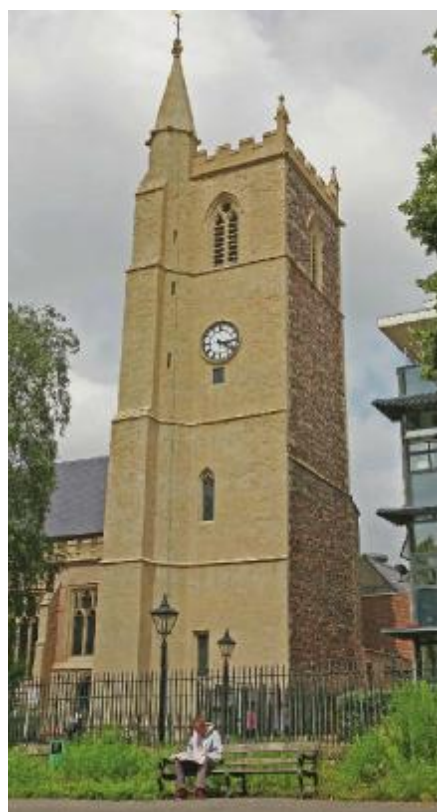
Bristol was one of the great medieval cities. Though grievously wounded in the Blitz, much of its ancient glory survives – if you know where to look. [Andrew Ziminski](#) was part of a team which recently completed repairs to the Priory Church of St James. He reflects on this enigmatic survival, and wonders whether Wesley had a hand in covering up some of its womanly charms. Photographs [John Lawrence](#)

When John Cabot embarked from Bristol on his little ship, the *Matthew*, on the first of his voyages to the New World he would have headed out from the great medieval engineering marvel that is St Augustine's reach. Setting off, probably in 1496, in search of the brazilwood tree and its valuable red dye, he caught the outgoing tide west down the Avon gorge. At the other end of the Harbour cut, any visitor arriving by boat would have observed the constant ebb and flow of people passing under the gatehouses of the new city wall and the Norman Priory Church of St James.

For those heading south through the orchards that hugged the Gloucester Road – some with carts laden with local coal, others with livestock or fleeces from the Cotswold or Welsh uplands, destined for Bristol market – the first glimpse of journey's end, in the guise of the new tower of St James, would have lifted the spirits.

In what was once open country, the Priory now had a new position squeezed between the line of the city walls and the bustling Frome river. The rapidly disappearing remnants of the old city wall still existed around the southern perimeter of the monastic site – hence its curious name, The Priory Church of St James "Within Without". Approaching from the northern

Facing page, recent paint conservation has brought a pair of ripe, Cornucopia-bearing ladies back to life. For centuries one had been partially covered by a specially-fashioned cuirass. A case of early Methodist modesty? This page, the church now



countryside, St James's would have gained a reputation as a double-faced church; the Perpendicular tower, with its plastered and limewashed east and west elevations, were economically constructed from red oxide-coloured rubble and would have been easily viewed through the coal and wood smoke from a good distance away. By contrast, the south and west elevations, which face the prevailing wind, presented a far more impressive and expensive vision of cut ashlar block from Dundry Hill. The church authorities were perhaps aiming to attract visiting worshippers or benefactors from the Frome, busy with traders in their curious boats capable of navigating the murderous shoals of the River Severn.

This church held a longstanding tradition of presenting its best face to the harbour. When the southern aspect of the nave clerestory was built 350 or so years earlier, it would have been possible to easily see the impressive blind arcading. This signature of local Romanesque architecture, where the springing point of the arch could be said to form one continual moulding, was much seen in Bristol and elsewhere in the West Country. As with the tower, this extra expensive detail does not exist on the austere north elevation, above the site of the cloisters. It is now largely obscured from view by the construction of the later south aisle.

BRISTOL retains much architecture from the early middle ages. Barely a mile or so away from the cathedral's gateways and its important chapter house, down one of the rivers that formed part of the vital trade and arterial traffic routes (now covered over with the dual carriageway of the A38), stands St James. Built around 1139 it is the oldest and one of the most unregarded of the city's religious buildings.

After two years of scaffolded and shrouded obscurity, the arcaded Romanesque finery of the west front can again be enjoyed. Its unique, embryonic rose window (or oculus) again looks down on the urban ants rushing to the new bus station, with its clean, modern lines, next door.

My firm was one of many contractors engaged with the HLF-funded refurbishment of St James. We handled the specialist re-plastering of the external and internal walls, as well as the nave and chancel ceilings. It was particularly nice to be conserving the ceiling, with its riot of strapwork, in the adjacent church house. During



our 18-month period working at the church, we found that it offered a glimpse of the lamp-lit world of pre-war Bristol.

One diary entry we came across relates the destruction of the area and adjacent church during the Blitz of 1940: *"Christening of William Duncan at St James Presbyterian Church The Barton, Bristol. ... Church completely burned out that night. ... This evening a tremendous air raid began about 6pm – ended about midnight – Bristol was demolished in parts and fires started over a tremendously wide area."*

Doris Ogilvie, 24 November 1940

ST JAMES is an anonymous but miraculous Blitz survivor. Its ancient roof structure still bears much evidence of the terrible events that occurred between November 1940 and April 1941, when nearly 1,300 citizens were killed and thousands of Bristol's old buildings were destroyed. Unrepaired areas of charred sarking board were evidence that incendiaries had burned on the roof; evidently, hose-wielding parishioners had somehow extinguished the flames.

Inside, the north and south arcades and clerestory are original work of the 12th century, and in the chancel and elsewhere there is much sympathetic Victorian fakery. The impressive timber wagon roof covering the nave is early, but probably not Norman. As the faces of the timbers have the remains of nail holes for fixing laths, it would previously have created a plastered tunnel vault. The plaster vault was taken down, and the nails removed, probably in the 1860s. The replacement infill panels followed a new line between the rafters.

Outside, the upper gabled tier of the west front is built of Oolitic Dundry stone, sourced from below the lonely tower of the ancient Merchant Venturers' Guild church that sits atop the tor-like hill of the same name, a few miles outside the city walls.

The lower section of the west front was of red sandstone rubble construction, extracted from Brandon Hill a few streets distant. This rubble was formerly rendered. This was removed in the 1860s, and the decision taken during the recent work to reinstate this covering with a trowelled hydraulic lime render of the same colour as the remaining render fragments.

Compared to what was going on at that time in the rest of Europe, developments in provincial Bristol were rather low key. I am sure that the austere St Bernard of Clairvaux – who wrote in 1125 about the new craze of sculptured adornment as this "ridiculous monstrosity, this shapely misshapeness, this misshapen

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Above, the St James's beauty and her leadwork cuirass, before conservation. Too earthy for 18th-century Methodists? Right, Andrew Ziminski inspects conserved fine Jacobean plasterwork in the church house. Right, below, intricate Romanesque blind arcading, which would have been more visible, confidently and ostentatiously modern, when built in the 13th century

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shapeliness" – would have approved of its lack of embellishment. Ironically, Bernard, in his enthusiasm for the Second Crusade, indirectly assisted in introducing Islamic architectural forms to Northern Europe.

Provincial or not, the sea-borne traffic to the great port would have exposed local thinkers to the influence not only of Rome but also of distant Islam in the form of these abstract architectural remnants. This influence may also be seen in a more developed sense in the scalloped opening of the famous nearby 14th-century North Porch of St Mary Redcliffe, which Pevsner felt may have been the first expression of Orientalism in Western architecture.

OVER the centuries St James's position by the wharf, and the famous annual fair, ensured that it

would have continued to attract visitors and congregants. Indeed the 15-day fair became so well known that merchant ships sailing in the Bristol Channel were often attacked by Turkish pirates, well aware of the increased number of lucrative cargoes to be found during the festive period. Attractions at the church recorded in the 18th century included a shaved monkey exhibited as a genuine fairy. I haven't even seen one of those at Glastonbury. The area developed rapidly in the 18th century, and St James continued to attract souls from around the world. One such arrival, who had returned recently from the American colonies, was preacher John Wesley.

Before John Wesley built his first Methodist Chapel in 1739 (the nearby New Room), St James was Wesley's parish church. I am sure he would have known the west elevation well, as

st james bristol



Left, a sound building once again. Thanks to the combined efforts of specialist conservators, the future of ancient St James's is secure. Below, finishing touches in the interior. Bottom, the tomb of eminent Tudor Bristolian Sir Charles Somerset, who died in 1598 at the age of 64. Facing Sir Charles is his wife, Emma, who died in 1590, and a daughter, whose name is not known



it also served as the parish church of his Horsefair Community to which in the early days of his time in Bristol Wesley brought his congregation for Holy Communion. Prayer meetings were held in the Jacobean splendour of the church house next door. Wesley's children were baptised here, and five of them lie buried in the churchyard.

CHURCH houses survive all over the country, as they played an important economic role as breweries for church ales and other celebrations. Many evolved into pubs, and as they funded the construction of many medieval churches, they often have older origins than their crenellated neighbours. Inside the church house at St James, we had been working on a particularly fine panelled room where Christina and Nell have repaired the sagging, coffered, pomegranate-laden strapwork ceiling which dates from the Jacobean period.

In the corner of the room, is a fireplace and overmantel consisting of Doric entablature beneath a central cartouche with helm and rocaille. The uniform and camouflaging modern, brown-painted finish meant that I had hardly noticed the overmantle was balanced on either side by a limestone caryatid.

Paint conservation carried out by Peter Martindale to remove modern brown paint has revealed them to be a lush pair of rouged, Cornucopia-clutching, 17th-century, overpainted ladies, one of whom was bare-chested. And Peter's work has also exposed the lengths that past incumbents went to protect their modesty.

Prayer meetings were, and still are, held in the room, and the uncovered lady must have proved quite a distraction, as not only was her exposed bosom later decorated with a rather low-cut piece of underwear – a specially whittled lead cuirass was affixed to her shoulders and had remained there for many years unnoticed. Could Wesley have had a hand in covering her up?

Thanks to the efforts of Sue Jotcham's team, English Heritage and the architects Acanthus Ferguson Mann, St James is saved. I think all involved are proud that the St James Priory project now has a secure future and will continue to offer support to people dealing with the problems of homelessness and drug and alcohol dependency. It was good to be working again with main contractors, CS Williams of Taunton, and some old friends at Nimbus Conservation who carried out stone repairs at the church. ■

The writer is a partner in Minerva Conservation, and a former SPAB William Morris Craft Fellow.