ST. JAMES, KINGSTON

A Jewel in the Purbeck Hills

Terry L. Hardy
ST. JAMES CHURCH, KINGSTON DORSET.

The Church of St. James sits proudly above the village of Kingston on the Isle of Purbeck in the County of Dorset. This Father figure of the village is situated some five hundred feet above sea level and is one of the highest churches in the County.

On opening the heavy oak doors, each tied and guarded by a delicate tracery of iron work and with a characteristic bronze lions head with loop handle, and massive wooden locks, one is confronted by a church of unusual magnificence, size and splendour for such a small village and community. Although large the church interior exudes warmth and a feeling of 'Family' and this indeed underlines the very origins of the structure as a family church.

St. James was indeed a church for family, conceived and built at the expense of the Third Lord Eldon in memory of his grandfather, John Scott, 1st Lord Eldon. The first Lord Eldon was born in 1751 in Newcastle. He became Lord High Chancellor, having studied law at the Middle Temple and became Solicitor and a Parliamentarian and he was Solicitor General in 1788. John Scott, the 1st Lord Eldon, was created Viscount Encombe and Earl of Eldon by George IV in 1821 and he lived in Bedford Square, London for a time. The Estate house and buildings lies In the valley below Houns-Tout and Swyre Head and bears the name of 'Encombe', landmark of the village.

The Third Lord Eldon, born 1845, had the present Church of St. James built as a family chapel for family and Estate worker staff. The Church Architect George Edmund Street was commissioned to design the new Church. Street, born in 1824, was an architect of considerable renown. At an early
age he became deeply interested in Gothic Architecture and
studied in Europe, sketching examples of medieval buildings,
and he was acclaimed as a brilliant draughtsman. His first
commission was Biscoy Church, Cornwall in 1849 and he
published in the field of Architecture and the use of marble in
Northern Italy. Perhaps the finest or most well known and
recognised work of Street is the Royal Courts of Justice in
the Strand, London, but he died in 1881, before the
completion. However Street was also largely known for his
ecclesiastical designs including the nave of Bristol
Cathedral, and many theological colleges: he is credited with
having worked on 179 ecclesiastical designs. Street was
Professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy and was
one time President of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

The choice of Street as Architect may be considered
almost a stroke of genius as he has left behind the legacy of
a church, St. James of Kingston, as a magnificent example of
Victorian quasi Gothic Architecture. There are two unique
aspects to the building of the main fabric of St. James. First
there is the use of local, Purbeck, stone from very near by
and second is the pleasant fact that the craftsmen were
local to the area and the local quarries and Estate itself.

As soon as one enters the Church it is easy to be awed by
the craftsmanship and skill and it is easy to forget that the
delicate scroll work was undertaken without the benefits of
modern machinery, cutting gear and computer design and
intervention.

The main fabric of the Church and exterior is of the
familiar close jointed Portland bed stone; it is now richly
coloured with a ubiquitous red alga or lichen which gives
the appearance of a sandstone, just to confuse visitors.
The interior is fabricated with two of Purbeck's stones - the creamy white Portland bed and the grey to green / blue Purbeck 'Marble'. In fact, this latter is a sedimentary stone richly endowed with close set fossils. The marble is extensively used for the pillars which support the arches, the colonettes which guard the windows to the east and west of the nave, and, for example, the supporting stone work forming the base of the screen. The marble, though hard and difficult to carve, polishes well and fine examples are to be seen as in the four 'roundels' under the delicate wrought iron screen separating the chancel from the body of the Church. The screen itself is surmounted by a substantial and intricate iron cross. Each of the 'roundels' has, at the centre, a lobed trefoil motive and set within this is another leafy shape, exquisitely carved. The Purbeck so called 'marble' is believed to have been excavated from a now disused quarry and seam no more than a mile or so away to the north, at Blashenwell.
The fact that there is a screen separating the chancel from the nave and centre of the Church is a reflection of essential medieval practices. In the 21st Century this might be considered an attribute as it helps in the lending of the Church to general non ecclesiastical usage for the village inhabitants, and visitors, and increases the functionality of the Church.

The nave is encompassed by four arches on each side. The creamy coloured arches are supported by clustered shafts of the polished marble which give a distinctive colour 'cut off'. The shafts are eight in number, four 'small' and four 'large'. The polished shafts are set above composite substantial polished marble bases or plinths. The arches are a particularly impressive feature and tend to mimic an early Gothic style reflecting Edmund Street's particular love of this form of architecture. Set along the edges of the arches and below or integral with the soffits are delicately carved 'dog's teeth' with a minor, and not easily recognised, difference in the setting between those on the arches on the south side and those on the north side. Perhaps this was to recognise the impurity of the man made structures! Above each supporting pillar the capitals are remarkable for the delicate leafy carvings encircling them. Every carving is different to its neighbour and again this reflects the craftsmanship of local tradesmen. Milburn, the carver from York, was also 'imported' and lent his expertise.

Either side of the nave are the North and South aisles roofed in oak, which run the full length of the nave. On each side there are eight stained glass windows representing saints and biblical figures. The windows are attributed to Clayton and Bell. The colours, particularly in those on the north facing aspect where the sun does not ravage, are brilliant and yet subtle. Each window is guarded and set behind two
pairs of polished marble colonettes. There are also fine windows to the west of the nave and one of these is of particular note. It represents Noe (Noah) delicately cradling the ark. The ark itself is clearly representative of the cottages along South Street Kingston and they can be seen on exiting the Church and turning to the right. Also Noah appears to be 'winking' with his right eye and this window may well represent the artist's and designer's mark, signature and humour. Another notable window is the huge Rose Window with twenty one individual windows within its confines. Each principal glass window is set in a circular iron frame and the whole and the outer shell is of stone. Above the decorative windows along the north and south aisles are yet another series of more simple, stained windows.

_Windows Isaiah & Jacob, St. James Church, Kingston, Dorset_  
Photographs by Terry L. Hardy
The roof and all common rafters ridges and purlins are of oak. With the great height of the church the acoustics are among the finest in the South of England and so concerts are much sought after by performers from all over. Street may have had a vision, serendipity if you like, in that there are no pews in the church excepting those in the choir. This lack of fixed seating allows flexibility of use and increased possibilities in the modern age as it progresses into the 21st Century. There are some 100 chairs in the nave itself and another 40 or so in the adjacent aisles so that the Church can accommodate some 140 souls.

The Church is blessed with a fine organ and bells, both first dedicated in 1880. The three manual organ was created by the London company of Maley, Young and Milburn, again at Streets' behest. The organ keys and stop jams are of ivory and the organ case and console are of oak. The pipes are of so called 'spotted' metal (a mixture of tin, copper, lead and zinc) and tin. Irrespective of their principal function the great tubes make a fine backdrop to the choir which they face and more than 30 pipes can be seen from the choir stalls. The organ was extensively restored and reopened in 1994. Originally there was a peal of eight bells; the treble and tenor bells were re-cast and hung in 1921. In the year 2000 two more bells were added and these new trebles were cast by John Taylor, the bell founders of Loughborough. Bell ringers from far and wide, even from foreign parts, visit Kingston for the pleasure of ringing these magnificent bells for which St. James is famous.

One enters a small Chapel from the south facing aisle and through a simple arch on which there is more carving in Portland stone with delicate fluting. Underneath the wooden rails separating the chapel from the choir are six more 'roundels' each with a trefoil motive within which, again, is yet more
delicate carving of a 'leafy' nature. Situate in the chapel are a number of colourful stained glass windows.

The choir is of an impressive size and this underlines the importance of the church gatherings in bygone Victorian times. There is individual seating for eight choristers on either side and two pews which could easily accommodate another ten per side. The seating is of oak and robustly finely carved.

The Pulpit is guarded by a delicate tracery of iron work to match the screen and the lead lined font is also richly endowed with stone work. Hidden from view are the magnificent Altar Frontals also designed by Street.

One last item should not go unnoticed in this brief account and this is that which we walk on — the beautiful Victorian tiled floor.

This brief account of the background to St. James and its inception, and the building itself is intended only as an outline and more detail and references may be found elsewhere and in the museum at Dorchester. In particular the Author wishes to draw attention to the detailed description of the organ provided by the Revd. Robert Watton and to the additional information provided by the Revd. Judith Malins, Priest in Charge.

Terry L. Hardy, July 2009.

Our sincere thanks to Terry Hardy for allowing this booklet to be published on the Kingston OPC website at www.kingstonopc.org.uk - next time you are fortunate enough to visit the church it would be appreciated if you would give a small donation to church funds