

St James Church

A guide for Visitors



A BRIEF HISTORY

This Church was built between 1837-1840 from designs by A.W. Pugin. Its founder was James Wheble who owned the grounds in which stood the ruins of Reading Abbey. The major portion he sold to Reading Corporation; this portion is now the Forbury Gardens. Part of the grounds he reserved for a new Catholic Church.

The original church was built in the Norman style and extended as far as the inner porch doors. The foundation stone was laid on 14th December 1837. Wheble desired that the church be opened on 5th August 1840 but a fortnight before this he died. His wishes were nevertheless respected and 'Divine Service was first performed in the Church' by Bishop Thomas Griffiths, Vicar Apostolic of the London District on 5th August 1840. Later that year, Bishop Griffiths returned to consecrate the altar on 28th November; no records exist to verify whether the church itself was consecrated. The first rector of St James' was Rev. John Ringrose who remained in charge until his death in 1874. In 1925, the south aisle and the ambulatory round the apse were added; in 1962 the church was further extended by a north aisle into which was relocated the Baptistry.

THE SANCTUARY

The **altar** is made of Portland stone. Its frontispiece depicts a crucified Christ and six angels. In the altar are contained the relics of Saints Fortunatus and Generosus. The **tabernacle** sits on one of two intricately carved blocks of limestone excavated from the Abbey ruins. It may be a carved capital from the pillars of the old Abbey. The **ambo** was installed in 1962 and is also of Portland stone. The **Presider's Chair** made of English oak dates from 2006. In the sanctuary floor on the bottom step there is a brass plate in memory of Rev. Francois Longuet, a French émigré priest who served the local Catholic community from 1802 until he was robbed and killed in 1817.

The three **stained glass windows** above the sanctuary are Victorian and include small representations of the Crucified Christ, the Madonna and Child and St James in the centre panel and various heraldic devices in the two side panels. The **windows in the ambulatory** behind the sanctuary were designed by Elizabeth Laskey in 1926. She was still attending mass at St James in 1985 and explained how the architect of the 1925 additions had stipulated that the colours in her windows should be pale so as not to detract from the older windows above. Amid the 1962 renovations this stipulation was forgotten and the glass was replaced with the much brighter versions seen today.

THE NAVE

The **Clerestory windows** depict four male saints (SS. John the Apostle, Joseph, John the Baptist and St Michael the Archangel) and four female saints (Virgin Mary, SS Anne, Lucy and Clotilda). St Anne is included because of the church's proximity to the medieval shrine of St Anne's Well in Caversham and St Clotilda is a reminder of the French émigré priests who served the local Roman Catholic community until 1820.

The **statue of St James the apostle** is a reminder of both the church's patron and its links with Reading Abbey, built in 1121. King Henry I's daughter, the Empress Matilda, brought back from Germany the uncorrupted hand of the apostle when her husband died. The relic is now kept at St Peter's Catholic Church, Marlow, Buckinghamshire.

The **organ** was made by Tamburini Organs of Cremona in Italy and installed in 1975. Behind it is visible the original Pugin high rose window.

THE LADY CHAPEL (South aisle)

The **windows** above the Lady Altar were installed in 1925 and made by Clarks of Dublin. They depict the grotto at Lourdes, France, with the Virgin Mary appearing to St Bernadette watched by the local people. The **window** at the west end of the Lady Chapel was installed in 1990 and designed by Lyn Clayden. The theme of the window is 'the tree of life' depicted as an alder tree found locally among the banks of the River Thames. Roundels depict the four seasons of the year.

THE SACRED HEART CHAPEL (North aisle)

The **windows** were installed in 1987 and designed by Barbara Batt and Lyn Clayden. They depict saints and others associated with the church and town. Included are St Thomas a Becket, who consecrated Reading Abbey in 1164, Blessed Hugh Faringdon, its last abbot, together with those martyred with him: Blessed John Rugg and Blessed John Eynon—parish priest of the nearby St Giles Church—and Blessed Dominic Barberi, an Italian missionary priest who in 1849 suffered a heart attack on the train near Reading and was taken to a nearby tavern where he died. The **font** was formed from an intricately carved block of limestone found in 1835 during excavations of the Abbey ruins. It may be the remains of a carved capital from the pillars of the old Abbey. Among those baptised here was Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Archbishop of Westminster.

St James Church is today a much loved local place of worship. To its Sunday masses come a community drawn from many nations and proud to worship God on this historic site. We hope you have enjoyed your visit to the church. Please remember us in your prayers and be sure of a mention in ours.