



*St. James the Great
Syresham*



Welcome to St.James the Great, Syresham, Northamptonshire

The Saxon village of Syresham, or Sigresham as it was known, was a clearing in the forest of some 400 acres between Brackley and Towcester in Northamptonshire. It was taken over by the Normans after the conquest in 1066 and nearly a century later it appears that, to our good fortune, the two peoples, Saxons and Normans, collaborated to build this Church.

Besides the architecture, which suggests a date of around 1200 midway in the transition of style from Norman to the full Early English, there are two other historical pieces of evidence supporting the dating of the building. The first is a grant made by the second Earl of Leicester of land towards a 'Church' at Syresham while an earlier grant made by the first Earl had spoken only of a 'Chapel'. The grant was confirmed by King Henry II, 1154-89. The second is the record of the Institution of the first two Rectors of Syresham, the second known to have been appointed in 1222, and is to be found in the Registers of the Bishop of Lincoln. The Abbey of Leicester then provided successive Rectors up to the time of the Reformation. Lists of their names and dates are hanging on one side of the Belfry Arch. The tower was added during the 13th Century with a gargoyle supposedly to defend the Church from evil influences!

The Church is named in memory and recognition of St.James the Great. James was the son of a reasonably wealthy fisherman Zebedee living by the shores of Lake Galilee. James became one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus along with his brother John. Traditionally he is thought to have been the first Apostle to have been martyred for his faith when Herod the King ordered his execution by sword. The event is duly recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Ch12 v2. John Kurde, the resident shoemaker of Syresham, who was burnt at the stake in Northampton on the 20th September, 1557 for his stance on anti-Transubstantiation, is the other historically well-known martyr associated the Church.

The building of the Church has given Syresham its permanent reminder of the arrival of Christianity to these shores and of its importance to the welfare, physical and moral, of the local people. Largely owing to the missionary efforts of St.Paul, Christianity had rapidly become an independent organisation. Despite intermittent persecution during the time of the Roman Empire, despite differences between East and West over the status of Christ and the Trinity and the eventual schism in 1054 and despite the further fragmentation resulting from the Reformation in the 16th Century, the ecumenical movement in



recent years has sought to reconcile the divisions. Today this Church welcomes all visitors. Throughout all the many changes and ups and downs since the Middle Ages the Church of St.James the Great in Syresham and its Clergy have served the village well keeping it physically sound and one of the hubs of the neighbourhood. We do hope you will enjoy your visit and find the content of this pamphlet not only of some interest and assistance but also a reminder of your time here. The content is very much a précis of its fascinating history and we are indeed grateful to Rev. Reginald Osborn, one time priest-in-charge of this Parish, and to Dr. Philip Pettit whose research and writings are the source of most the information collected here.

Please, however, do record the occasion of your visit in our Visitors Book.

The bells were restored to celebrate the new millennium in 2000 and were rung for the first time since the 1930s. While substantial work was being undertaken in the tower area, a toilet was installed at its base and the ringing chamber previously at ground level was raised to a floor level above. Kitchen facilities were also installed in a cupboard behind the elegant wooden doors at the West end of the North aisle. A separate area for 'cremated remains' has been established to the North side of the church – our Garden of Remembrance. The organ has been re-sited moving from the chancel to the East end of the North aisle. This has allowed the creation of an area now used as a vestry and meeting room. This is particularly useful for work with children during the quiet part of our main Sunday services. An Audio Loop has also been added for the hard of hearing.



Much of the later work was made possible by the tireless energy of Rev. Eddie Palmer, a much loved and respected non-stipendiary curate who sadly died in the year 2000, and the very generous legacy of Madge Payne. Her sister Maud also made a legacy to the church creating Funds which will benefit the parish significantly. Madge's legacy has already allowed a considerable amount maintenance and development to happen and we hope that, with continued careful investment, the church will be maintained in good repair for the use of the people of Syresham and all who wish to worship in this delightful English village church. We are also forever grateful to all those who have made gifts and bequests to the church enabling it to carry its small but meaningful community commitments. We also acknowledge with considerable thanks the efforts made by the Churchwardens, the PCC and the numerous parishioners in organising and running such things as the annual fete and the Society of Friends. Without on-going help and dedication maintaining the Christian legacy of St.James the Great, Syresham, survival would very difficult if not impossible. We shall do our utmost to steer that legacy forward for future generations.

We do hope you have enjoyed your visit and, as you leave, look up the tower and you will see the gargoyle who guards it. Gargoyles were the representation of evil and it was believed that they would protect the church by keeping out any evil which might threaten it!

Please come again and, if possible, join us at one of our services.

The Victorians

During the time of Rev. Oswald Pattison Sergeant (1859-89) many changes were made to the church. New pews were added and the seating plan altered to its present position. The largest window on the south side is where the south porch would have been. The Bevington organ was acquired and an organ chamber provided. Stalls were placed in the chancel, a new pulpit, lectern and litany desk were also procured and heating apparatus was installed. The major change, however, was the addition of the spire to the church tower. This was originally made of oak shingles and a wooden bell frame was included. This bell frame proved to be unfit for purpose but the belfry and bells have since been restored.

In 1862 the parish acquired a Norman font from Turweston, a neighbouring village. It is decorated in a simple Norman rope design and is lined with lead inside. Sadly a crack appeared in its stonework requiring attention and appropriate repairs were undertaken in 2014.

Rev. Sergeant took the responsibility for so much for the church that when he died the people of Syresham made a spontaneous gift in his memory by putting two narrow lights in the window by the Rector's stall which are called 'The Poor Shepherd'.

The Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries

The 20th Century tells a story of economic and political challenges whose settlement was partially achieved through the most horrendous fighting, World War I and World War II. The effects were felt throughout the land and Syresham did not escape its share of casualties. The War Memorial to the participants may be seen

on the south wall and those who fell in the wars are commemorated by a 'Holy Table of Oak' in the chapel while an organ blower was presented to the church as a practical memorial. The Rector of these years was Rev. Thomas Horne, Founder and Chaplain of the Showmen's Guild. A sanctuary lamp was placed in the chancel in his memory.

Recent years have witnessed considerable expense to the church. The spire now has cedar shingles in place of the oak and a hot air heating system was installed after the 'big freeze' of 1963. The nave



roof has been re-leaded, the old boiler chimney removed and the vestry gulley rebuilt in 1995/6. In 1996 the chancel walls were lime washed in the hope that the rest of the church could be lime washed – allowing for some portions of the wall paintings to remain – and the cement dado was removed. This was before English Heritage stepped in and halted proceedings. We now await funds and the completion of current works before embarking on the remainder of the church.

Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans

The village of Syresham is sited in what was originally a heavily forested region. Archaeological evidence suggests that local Britons around the third Century AD had adopted much of the Roman life style. The area was probably thinly populated with the remaining Romano-Britons reluctant to move when the Empire collapsed. The arrival of first the Angles from the East to be followed by the Saxons from Wessex created what today we would call a 'multiracial' district. When and how this therefore multicultural society adopted Christianity is complicated by a further invasion namely that by the Danes. History records an agreement between King Alfred the Great and Guthrum, the then Danish leader, leaving Syresham under the control of the Saxons. The equilibrium was to be shattered by a further invasion, this time by the Normans. Syresham as a place had certainly existed before the Norman Conquest but the first mention of its name is in the Domesday Book of 1086. The Anglo-Saxons, who had done a magnificent job in clearing the forest and cultivating the land, became the 'surfs and villeins' of the new social order. However, the Norman passion for hunting stopped the clearing of the forest for cultivation and further development. It appears that Land ownership in Syresham moved over the years from the Earl of Aubrey to the Earl of Mortain, half-brother of William the Conqueror and then to one Thomas Sorel and the Earl of Leicester. The Earl of Leicester had made a grant for the building of a chapel in Syresham but most evidence of its existence has disappeared.

The second Earl of Leicester, Robert de Bossu, made a second grant which speaks not of a 'chapel' but rather a 'church'. Things were changing in England, for example, trial by jury was replacing the feudal trial by ordeal and the forest surrounding Syresham was beginning to revert again to agriculture. A church was built in Syresham giving clear evidence of a measure of reconciliation coming to the peoples, victors and vanquished, Norman and Saxon.

The Building of the Church

History suggests that in all probability the people of Syresham did most of the building of the Church and perhaps this is what gives it a rather special yet indescribable feeling of welcome. As you look round you will come across little details such as the faces carved quite spontaneously at various points and the nutmeg



decoration of the chancel arch. The nave is 55ft long and 17ft wide but the chancel may have been built just before the nave with the two aisles being added at a later date. At one time the walls were completely painted over with pictures but, except for a few traces, these have disappeared today. The piscina, the stone basin on the south wall, would have been painted inside and indeed a picture of a tiny brick wall has been uncovered there. A much more elaborate painting of 'The Last Judgement' was executed on the wall over the chancel arch.

Below this, in the second half of the Middle Ages stood a rood beam with the figure of Christ on the Cross on it. It is still possible to see where this beam fitted into the arch at either side. Statues more than likely stood on the empty brackets on each side of the east window above the altar. On the left side the aumbry, a place for keeping the reserved sacrament or just possibly an Easter sepulchre, is still visible.

During the Reformation the rood and the rood screen disappeared, the figures on the walls were either overpainted with texts or plastered over. The great painting of The Last Judgement was replaced with The Ten Commandments, traces of which can still be seen. Some of the texts were decorated with flowers like those that you can be seen on the right as you enter the Church. Pews would have been introduced for the first time and by the end of the 17th century there would have been a pulpit too. On the south side of the chancel there is an opening, blocked from the outside, for the priest's door. The outline of the north door, which was opened for Baptisms is still visible from inside and outside half way down the north aisle. The porch then stood half way down the south side of the church where today there is a window slightly larger than the others. The porch was used far more than it is today. Babies were brought into the porch for the first part of the Baptism service while the bride and groom stood there for the first part of their marriage service and the funeral service began there also.

The Diocese of Peterborough and the Civil War

It was at this time the parish became part of the new Diocese of Peterborough. The list of Rectors confirms that Thomas Todde, instituted in 1542, remained Rector of Syresham despite all the changes from the reign of Henry VIII until Queen Elizabeth was on the throne. It is difficult to get an accurate picture of the church when the Civil War began. In 1624 three of the bells were gifted and inscribed 'Robert Alton made me' and another parishioner gave a flagon for communion wine. In a report to the Bishop at the outbreak of the Civil War, the building was recorded as being in a poor state of repair, not, as some suggest, the work of Oliver Cromwell's men. In 1637 Samuel Evans became Rector and, despite the poor state of the building, he steered his flock through all the ups and downs of the Civil War, the Commonwealth when the Prayer Book was abolished and into the restoration of Charles II. A few years after his death repairs to the church began and a royal Coat of Arms was added.

Significant changes were happening throughout the period. It was in Henry VIII's reign that Latin was replaced by English as the language of the Prayer Book and the Bible with the consequence of a rebirth of the parishioners' enthusiasm and attendance. Even the fundamentals of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer were being taught in the language of the day. Two more 'Protestant' changes, namely

the forbidding of placing candles before images and the giving of wine as well as the bread to the people, were henceforth introduced. The turning of the 'Mass' into the 'Communion of the People' was accomplished in the reign of Edward VI and Thomas Todde had the responsibility of overseeing these changes in Syresham. Needless to say there was a violent reaction under Queen Mary in which



attempts were often successfully made to reverse all the changes. One of the issues was to create a martyr for Syresham and was that of the concept of transubstantiation. This doctrine was that after consecration the substance of the bread and wine were converted into the actual body and blood of Christ. This concept, amongst others, was challenged at the Reformation by an emerging group who came to be known as the Protestants. John Kurde, the Syresham shoemaker, in challenging the belief in transubstantiation was seen as threatening the very hierarchy of Queen Mary's Bishops. His cruel sentence was to be burnt at the stake in Northampton. When, however, Elizabeth came to the throne, Mary's harsh authority reverted to a continuation of the changes which brought Christianity back to all the people in a language which they could understand and independent of politically convenient doctrines. John Kurde's story has recently been recorded in a moving play written by a parishioner, Lance Lewin, and performed in the church using the step into the chancel as a stage.

The reformers appealed to simplicity and removed many of the decorations such as paintings on the walls. Syresham church despite being in need of considerable repair was one of many in the land which was to suffer a measure of desecration at the hands of the reformists but on the return of the monarchy and over the ensuing years meaningful attempts were made to restore the beauty and welcome of St.James the Great.

Transition to the 18th Century

Despite the constitutional turmoil of the Commonwealth, the Restoration of Charles II and the following years, the appointment and functions of churchwardens and to some extent the continued collection of Church rates appeared to proceed without too many dramatic problems. Loss of income undoubtedly affected the rate of essential repair but, despite all, the work of the ministry continued unabated. 1668 saw the beginning of Baptismal, Marriage and Burial registers, the earlier records having been accidentally burned. Their figures record a remarkably busy life for the Rector revealing a vibrant village although blighted by hurdles such as severe child mortality.

Monuments and Memorials

On the North side of the sanctuary is a stone memorial in memory of a knight called Peter Andrews. It carries his coat of arms and a Latin inscription which means 'In memory of Peter Andrews who departed this life on the 11th day of March AD 1612 and of Jane his wife. This Monument was placed here by Francis Sanders'.



The Sanders coat of arms is on the opposite side of the chancel; it consists of 3 elephants erased with the Latin motto 'outstanding in virtue and glory'. Adjacent to it on the South wall of the chancel is a memorial to Rev. Robert Style MA who was Headmaster of Royal Latin School, Buckingham, and also of Northampton School before becoming Rector of Tyringham and Preston Bisset. This gentleman had numerous children and on the chancel wall there is a moving tribute to five of them again inscribed in Latin 'In memory of 5 sons who sleep below, Jacob, second Jacob, Henry, William and Bernard, this tiny token of his immeasurable love set up by their deeply grieving father, Robert Style, 1718'. One son who survived became Rector of Little Billing.



The stained glass east window and the ornamental reredos were donated by Miss Fanny Cotterell Dormer, whose family still live in Rousham House near Oxford, in memory of her sister Elizabeth who died in 1880 on the eve of St.Philip and St.James. These two saints appear in the upper part of the window which is made of Victorian glass and, from left to right, shows Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane being comforted by an angel, Christ on the Cross with Mary and 'the beloved Disciple' and of Him being taken down from the Cross. The reredos is a carved oak frame containing three oil paintings showing, again from left to right, St.John, The Last Supper and St.James. St.James is depicted as a pilgrim with a cockle shell and Spanish hat, a tradition which originates from his shrine in Compostella in Spain where he is said to have preached before returning to Israel. Inside the belfry are the Charity Boards which list bequests to the Parish.

