

The Church of St James – A Potted History

12th Century

Stirchley church is of Norman origin. The chancel is the oldest part of the building and dates from about 1150. It is almost square and has small round-arched windows. The work may have been financed by the first recorded lord of the manor, Osbert of Stirchley who was under-tenant here from 1167 to 1180. The ornate late 12th-century chancel arch is set in a larger and earlier arch made of local sandstone. This fine chancel arch has three orders of arches with chain-link, floral and zigzag patterns.

Walter, described as the chaplain of Stirchley, is the first Rector whose name is known. He was the priest here from c1220-1230 during the reign of King Henry III. The church was almost 100 years old by the time Walter conducted services here.

13th Century

When **Robert de Acton** left Stirchley in 1254, his tenure as Rector of Fitz was disputed and only resolved by a wager of battle between the champions of Shrewsbury and Haughmond Abbeys.

Richard, Parson of Stirchley, was also involved in a dispute. In 1283 the Prior of Repton charged the Prior of Wenlock and his accomplices with coming by night and seizing goods to the value of 1000 marks. One of those accomplices was Richard of Stirchley. The defendants did not appear at the trial. However, local brothers, Elyas and Roger de Ketley agreed to stand surety for Richard.

14th Century

Rector **Walter de Perton** was born into a wealthy landed family. In 1330 he was sued for a debt of 9 marks. However, his bishop ignored the request to produce him to answer the charge. The following year Walter was also charged with the murder of one John de Derleye of Derbyshire. However, the Sheriff appears to have made no attempt to arrest him.

Richard le Bret was admitted to the living by the Bishop on 10 March 1349. However, he died just 3 months later on Monday 22 June 1349, almost certainly a victim of the Black Death which was then at its height.

15th Century

About 1410 during **William Spark's** time a bell was cast and hung in the tower by John de Colsale. **Richard Withgys** was Rector here from 1416 to 1474, a tenure of 58 years.

16th Century

John Poyner was the Rector at the time of King Henry VIII's split with Rome in 1533.

Thomas Banes was Rector from 1554 to 1573. He became Rector in the second year of the reign of Queen Mary who re-established Roman Catholicism as the state religion. Thomas is likely to have been born in Roman Catholic England, witnessed Henry VIII's break with Rome and the radical Protestantism of Edward VI, and now he was a Roman Catholic priest again. Mary's short reign ended with her death in 1558 and her successor, Queen Elizabeth I restored the Church of England to a more moderate Protestantism in 1559.

17th Century

Robert Bell, was described in 1603 as having '*no degree*', and being 'no preacher'. And yet he served 47 years as Rector. It was during Robert's long incumbency that the tenor bell was cast in 1594 and installed by Henry Oldfield II of Nottingham. Was it in celebration of Elizabeth I's 60th birthday?

There is no record of a Rector here between 1638 and 1658. This may be due to loss of documentation or it may explained by the troubles of the English Civil Wars 1642–1651 and the establishment of the Commonwealth 1649-60 when many clergy, who were thought by the Puritans to be either inadequate or unsympathetic to the cause, were expelled from their parishes.

George Arden, Clerk, was Rector from 1658 until his death in 1679. His name is on the first page of the first Parish Register of Stirchley, a vellum book which survives. He was buried here 23 March 1679.

George Arden Junior became the Rector in 1662 and served for 60 years, Stirchley's longest serving incumbent. A graduate and schoolteacher, he was described as '*an ordinary man, no preacher*'. During his incumbency a third bell was made for the tower by Thomas Clibury II of Wellington in 1660. This may have been to celebrate the Restoration of the Monarchy that same year. After the Restoration the Act of Uniformity re-established the pre-Civil War features of the Church of England abolished by the Puritans during the Commonwealth. The Act prescribed the form of prayers, sacraments and rites in line with the Book of Common Prayer and required episcopal ordination. Ministers were required to conform. As a result some 2400 clergymen chose to leave in what became known as the Great Ejection. George Junior may have been a nonconformist sympathiser, for he received and helped Jonathan Lovel, the ejected curate of Alveley, in 1667. However, as both Ardens were still in holy orders after this date, clearly they chose to conform. In 1655 George also became curate of Dawley Magna, and, until 1831 both parishes were served by the same priest. In 1705 the Rector's living was valued at £30, some £50 000 pa. at current values.

18th Century

About 1740, during the incumbency of **William Banks**, the stone nave was encased and remodelled in red brick with sandstone dressings in the contemporary neo-classical style. It was a scenario taking place all over the country at that time. A new roof was erected and a plaster ceiling installed. The stone tower was also encased in brick and heightened by one stage, the wooden bell frame dates from 1748, although the three bells are much older being dated 1410, 1594 and 1664. The nave was refitted in the style of the time, with high box pews and a two-decker pulpit with an overhead sounding board. The emphasis of church services at this time was on the Bible and on preaching rather than the ritual of Holy Communion which took place in the chancel. A large pew in front of the pulpit was reserved for the sponsor of the rebuilding, the lord of the manor. From 1683 to 1748 the manor of Stirchley was in the hands of the Clowes family of Stirchley Hall. The last member of that family, Thomas Clowes had no successors and it may be that it was he who instigated and financed what must have been expensive alterations to the church. The dedication to St James is known from this time, though whether a new dedication or continuing one is not known.

19th Century

Hugo Moreton Phillips, Rector from 1827, was described as '*genial and popular*'. He served for 50 years. His name is recorded in the National Census of 1841, living here with his wife Maria and two sons. Although many other rectors must have been buried in the churchyard, Hugo is the first to have a monument which still stands in the south-east corner of the churchyard. In the early 19th century one of the two Norman east windows was replaced by a single larger one. In 1838 the local ironmasters, Thomas, William and Beriah Botfield provided 120 new sittings by building a north aisle with a gallery for their workers which extended into the nave. The new east window was replaced by a small one similar to the original Norman windows, reflecting the Victorian enthusiasm for restoring churches to their medieval state. The 18th-century nave ceiling had become unsafe and was removed in 1877 at the end of Hugo's incumbency. However, the box pews and the two-decker pulpit remained. In most 19th-century churches these were removed.

Charles Mousley was Rector here from 1879. He married at the age of 50 but died ten years later leaving his widow, Anne with two daughters aged 8 and 9. The younger died just two years later. His widow later remarried but on her death was brought here to be buried with Charles. The grave can be seen in the churchyard close to that of his predecessor.

William Hunt Painter, Rector from 1835, was a keen amateur botanist specialising in mosses. He discovered a rare plant species at Ironbridge. Painter's fumitory is one of the very few plants considered to be endemic in Britain, that is to say it exists nowhere else in the world and in only a single location in this country. The plant is believed now to be extinct. William was responsible for restoring the fabric of the church building. He died in 1910 and is buried in the churchyard with his wife, Jane near the Rectory wall.

The church choir led the singing accompanied by a bass viol until a harmonium was bought in 1865 by Hugo Moreton Phillips. This was replaced by **Rev H Penkivil** with an organ in 1919. In the same year the front of the gallery was set back into the north aisle to be less obtrusive.

With the creation of Central Telford parish in 1975 St James' Church became redundant, and was sold in 1978 to the Telford Development Corporation, who restored it in 1979 as a museum. During restoration work the plaster was removed from the east wall of the nave, and small areas of medieval wall painting were exposed. The church was handed over to the Churches Conservation Trust in 2006 and the roof and rainwater goods were made sound. The building is now in a very good state of preservation.