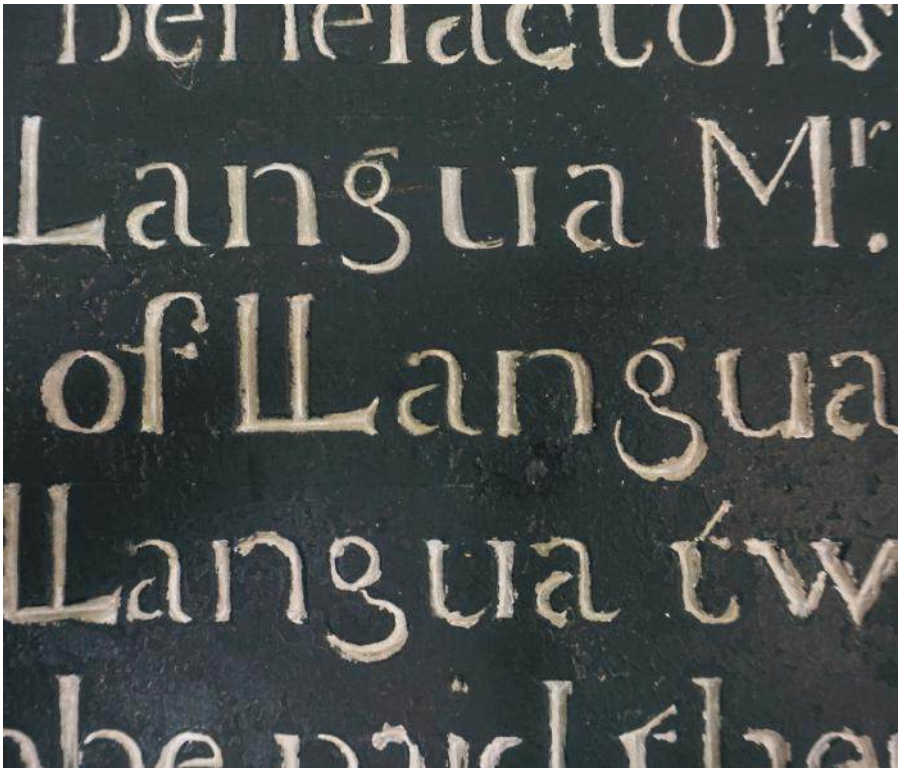
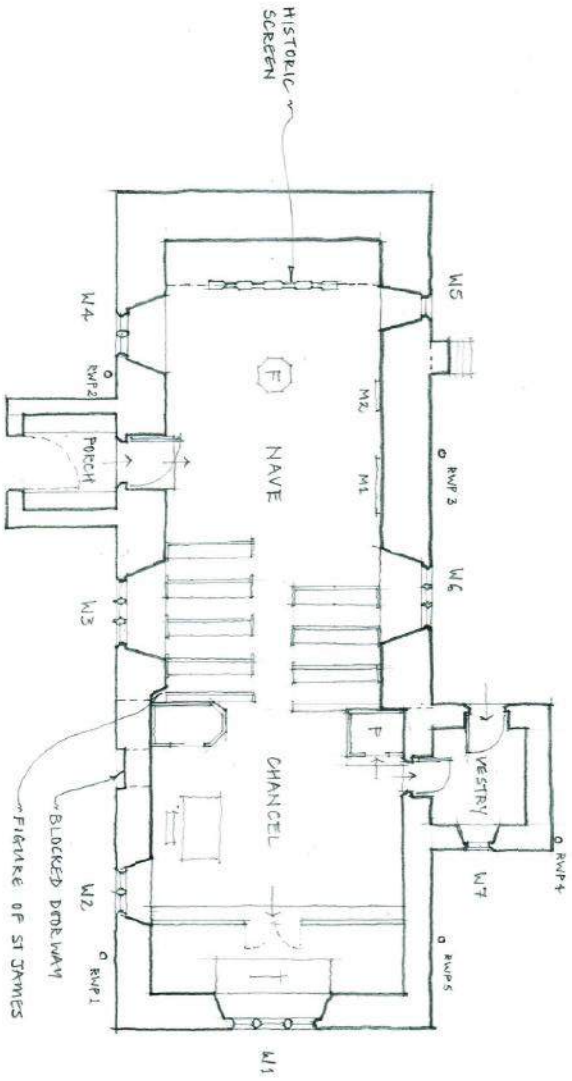
FRIENDS OF FRIENDLESS CHURCHES



Rescuing

St James's, Llangua, Monmouthshire



Site plan
Sketched by Andrew Faulkner

Four Seasons with St James's

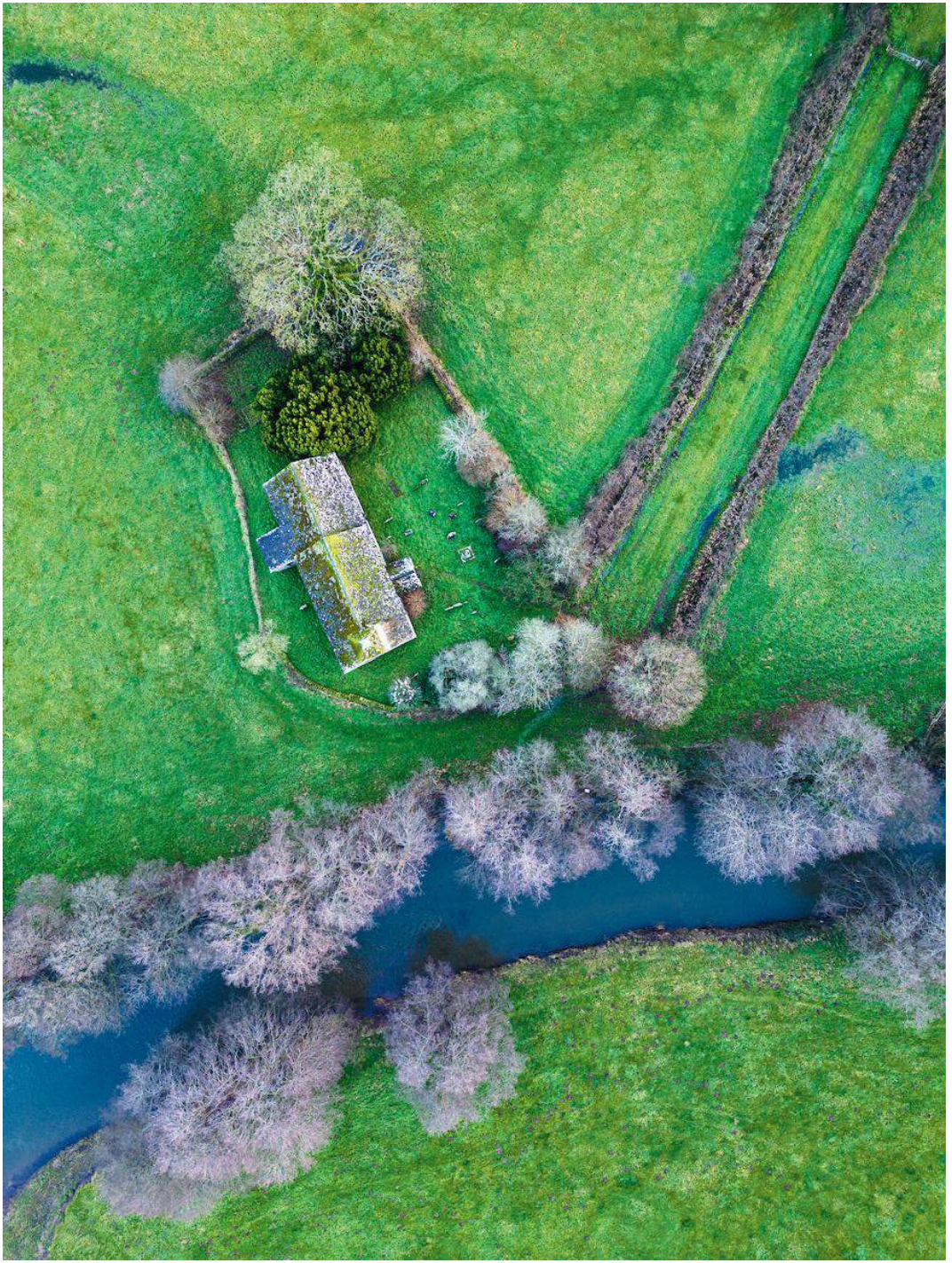
Rachel Morley

There's something about St James's, Llangua.

It gets under your skin. Maybe it's the silver shimmer of the river as it winds along the building with sand-martins spiralling over the banks. Or how the rubble sandstone walls bedded with lime and earth mortars enfold you.

I feel deeply protective of this little church. It really is no exaggeration that the roof was at the point of collapse before we started repairs. We were so worried about the contractors as they worked against the clock under the snapped structural timbers to install a web of scaffolding just to stop the roof from caving in.

After 13 months, the repairs are complete. It's been one of the most complex and most rewarding projects. This magazine is a scrapbook of sorts. A collection of memories, scribblings, ideas, u-turns and rabbit-holes, and of course, a record of what we found and learned, and the repairs carried out.



Origins

Rachel Morley

As is so often the case, placenames are rich and illuminating. A marriage of faith, farming, landscape and language, they remind us of the personal, poetic origins of a place. This is true for Llangua.

Llan is an enclosure usually associated with a church. The element which follows, most commonly a personal name, is mutated. Llangua is the church of St Cywa (English: Kew, Ciwa). Although there is no obvious physical evidence for a church being here before the 12th century, the survival of that placename is our first clue in understanding the development of the religious foundation on this site.

The medieval kingdom of Gwent was the first focus of the Norman Conquest of Wales in the late 1060s. The campaign was successful, and Gwent came under the control of the Norman lord, FitzOsbern. After the invasion, FitzOsbern granted the church and the surrounding lands at Llangua to Lyre Abbey, a foundation of the Benedictine order in Normandy.

The order established a small monastic cell at Llangua to house a handful of monks.

The architectural remains tell us that this early church was a

small stone building, constructed using local materials. Small windows cut high into the walls, created a dimly-lit, atmospheric interior. The roof was raised in oak. We know this because our archaeologist discovered two principal rafters of a 12th-century Romanesque roof truss that had been reused as a timber wall plate on the east gable of the chancel. In his words “a truly remarkable survival”.

In 1420 or so, as part of Henry V’s campaign to suppress alien monasteries, the monastic community at Llangua ceased to be part of Lyre Abbey and was passed to the Carthusian house at Sheen in Surrey. As the 1400s drew to a close, the church at Llangua was already 300 years old and probably showing its age. In about 1500, the church was dramatically altered with new roofs, windows and doorway. This medieval reconfiguring gives the church the character it has today — the most dominating feature of which are the 30 oak trusses which form the wagon roof. Intersecting oak ribs form the ceiling panels, which were then plastered. Our research has found that the oak used for the roof was well-managed and fast-grown; in the nave several of the wall plates are single lengths 13m long.

For the next 300 years, it seems like little happened to the church at Llangua — new windows were inserted into the south nave wall and at some point the roof covering changed from thatch to sandstone tiles.

In 1889 St James’s was restored by Thomas Nicholson of Hereford, who put new windows in the north nave wall and added a vestry.

Roof repairs in the 1950s

Dilysia was her name; faithful and true

Rachel Morley

By 1950, St James's was suffering - sagging under the weight of the roof, letting in water, overgrown and vandalised. In 1954 it was visited by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas.

This is where the story of the Friends of Friendless Churches starts: on a parcel of land caught between two bends. One in the River Monnow and one in the A465.

Ivor was then 49 but when he was in his early thirties, his young wife Dilys died shortly after giving birth to their first child. We will never know what it was about that little tumble-down church with its lop-sided bellcote that moved him, but we can be forever grateful.

In Dilys's memory, Ivor restored the building. He hacked back the brambles, cleared the debris and repaired the medieval roof timbers. He mounted a black plaque with gold letters on the north wall. When you push open the door, it's the first thing you see. It records, in Latin, that this church was restored in the memory of Dilys Thomas.

Less than three years later, Ivor founded the Friends of Friendless Churches. Ivor knew the power of church buildings — that even if they weren't used or needed for regular worship, they were still potent places that were architecturally, historically, culturally important. This was especially true in the wake of the World Wars.

Ivor's memorial to Dilys

In 1938, Ivor wrote *Dilysia: A threnody* – a long-form poetic lament. It was his way of processing his grief. Forty-eight years later, in 1986, Ivor published this poem in the hope that it might help others "when their heart is in my heart's stead".

The title on the preceding page is from this threnody

SAVING 'FRIENDLESS CHURCHES'

AIM OF NEW BODY

The formation of an organization called "The Friends of Friendless Churches" was announced last night by Mr. Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, of Edwardes Square, Kensington, W., and Mr. Lawrence E. Jones, of Coleman Street, E.C. The aim is to secure the preservation of churches and chapels of architectural or historic interest which are outside the scope of existing organizations.

The organization has taken powers to help to preserve these buildings, whether belonging to the Church of England or any other religious body, "as places of worship or for other appropriate purposes or simply as buildings of architectural or historic interest."

It has as its first objective the saving of the church of St. Mary-at-Quay, Ipswich, which was bombed during the war, and for which demolition proposals have been made.

In their announcement Mr. Bulmer-Thomas, who is acting chairman and honorary director of the society, and Mr. Jones, honorary secretary, emphasize that the society "is in no sense a rival to any existing body."

Other officers of the society are named as: Lord Somervell of Harrow, Mr. T. S. Eliot, O.M., and Sir Albert Richardson, vice-presidents; Lord Winster, treasurer; Canon C. B. Mortlock, chaplain; and Mr. John Betjeman, editor.

The Church that Changed History

Rachel Morley

St James's is pivotal in the history of heritage and church conservation in England and Wales. It was the first church ever restored by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas. After this, he would go on to manage the rebuilding of St Andrew's by the Wardrobe in the City of London – a Wren church, which had been destroyed in the Blitz, and to found the Friends of Friendless Churches: the first charity which protected redundant churches. A charity which believed old churches had an architectural, cultural, communal and spiritual value – even if they were not needed for regular worship.

At a time when places of worship were being demolished, abandoned, or just neglected, Ivor was often their only defender. Through his tireless work, he affected changes in the laws regarding closed churches (Pastoral Measure, 1968) in England, and the formation of the New Mechanism in Wales. In his lifetime, he saved and helped hundreds of churches.

And it all started at St James's in Llangua.

01 March 2019

Rachel Morley

This is the first time I set eyes on St James's, Llangua.

It was a soggy day, my boots weren't waterproof and my feet squelched as I ducked inside the porch. The plaster was black with mould, snail-trails of cement followed the path of cracks and a big glass bowl called out for donations.

After Ivor's work, St James's was restored to parochial use. He left a small pot of money so that the Friends of Friendless Churches could pay the church's annual insurance premium. One less thing for parishioners to worry about.

In 2019, the church was in use. What started as a social visit, quickly became much more serious. There were clearly structural issues. With permission, I commissioned Andrew Faulkner, architect, to undertake a full assessment of the condition. Andrew immediately advised that we prop the timber wall-plate on the north elevation of the nave, which barely had 20mm of bearing on the stone wall below.

We called in the structural engineer, Steve Swinbank, who examined the roof close up. It was not good news.

The ceiling before we started

Snapped trusses

Top: Scaffold poles supporting the wall-plate on the north side
Bottom: Showing extent wall-plate had pushed off the stone wall

Our architect, Andrew Faulkner, on site during one of the public open days. This project has benefited from Andrew's care, expertise, diligence and artistic eye from the earliest stages.

A Whistlestop Tour

Rachel Morley

St James's looks very different now. It's taller, lighter, safer and... pink. From here on in, this booklet will detail aspects of the projects, but first, to orientate ourselves with an overview of what has actually happened behind the hoarding...

Immediately, a series of props were installed internally to hold up the cracked trusses. Then the full scaffold went up externally, and the stone tiles were carefully stripped and set aside for re-use.

Using straps and props, the roof timbers, which had snapped, were lifted and squeezed back into an A-shape alignment.

The timber wall-plate, which was rotten in parts, was repaired and replaced as necessary. The stone wall-heads underneath these, which had been pushed and dislocated by the moving roof, were reset.

Stainless steel plates were bolted onto the trusses to increase their capacity to carry the weight of the tiles, and the timbers that could be salvaged were repaired using traditional joinery techniques. This included planing, by hand, metres of roll moulding, cutting new ribs, notching in new collars, and splicing new oak into old.

Believe it or not, back in its (almost) original shape, the roof is now 2ft higher than it was – it really had sagged and deflected that much.

When the roof was back in shape, riven oak laths were installed between the timber ribs. These were then plastered and limewashed – almost all of the complex timber repairs are hidden!

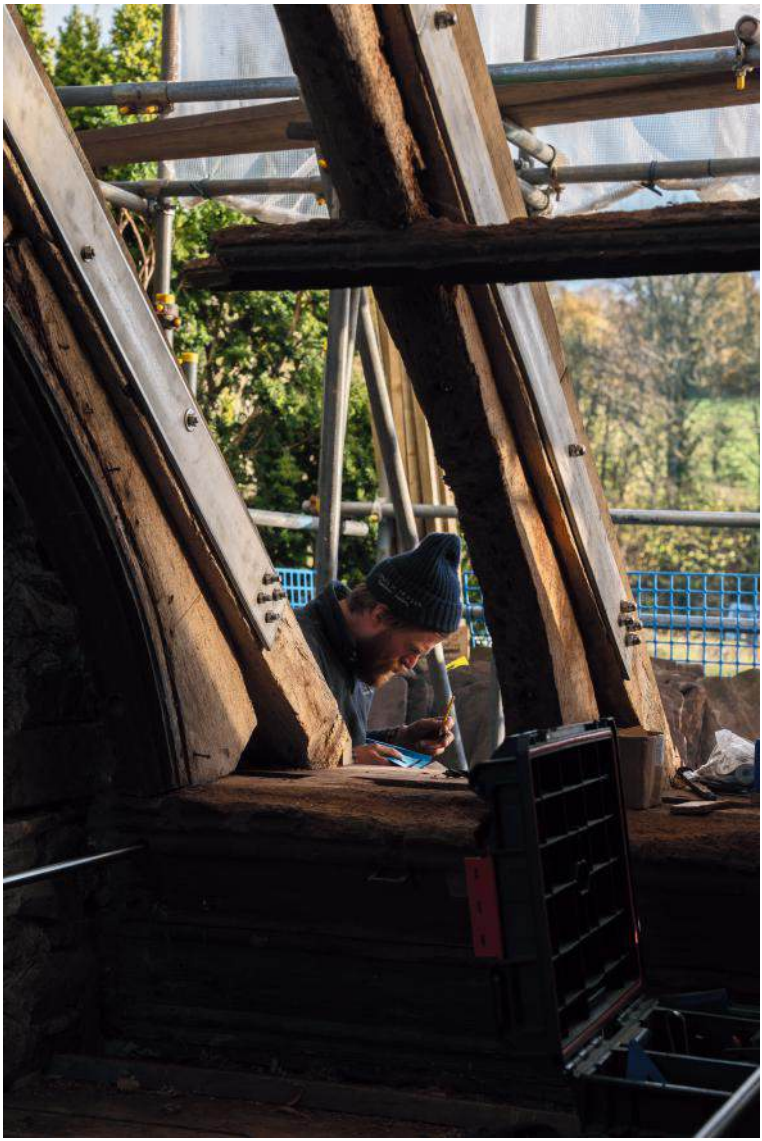
Internally and externally, all the cement pointing was raked out and the stonework was repointed in lime mortar. The walls were the plastered in lime. Inside, the walls were limewashed an off-white. Externally, we decided to go for a pale pink colour. This is intended to pick up tones of the orangey-pink in the local clay soil.

The stone mullions to the windows were repaired and one whole new mullion carved for the east window using Forest of Dean stone. This replaced a mullion of slathered cement.

Glazing repairs were completed on the windows where necessary.

Finally, the asbestos panels in the bell-cote were removed and the structure weather-boarded in oak. New louvre-boxes were created to given ventilation to the space. A stainless steel-frame had been installed to support the bell-cote at some stage in the 1900s. We had, however, pulled the roof back into a shape close to its original, medieval form – a form it hadn't known for centuries. As such, the 1900s steel structure was no-longer in the correct alignment, and this had to be altered to fit the new roof shape.

And we gilded the weather-cock.



NATIONAL HERITAGE MEMORIAL FUND

Holding Out for a Hero

These repairs would never have happened without the wonderful people at the National Heritage Memorial Fund. We started our grant application in January 2023, and throughout the process, the team at the NHMF have been patient, supportive, available and encouraging.

We can never thank the NHMF enough for enabling this project and for giving St James's a chance.

The NHMF grant covered 70% of the project costs – where the total works cost over £650,000.

The NHMF's History

The NHMF's predecessor, The National Land Fund, was set up in 1946 to purchase land and buildings as a 'thank-offering for victory, and a war memorial'. However, the fund remained largely unused and in 1977 there was public outcry over the sale of the historic Mentmore Towers and its contents.

The loss sparked the passing of a new National Heritage Act in 1980, which launched the National Heritage Memorial Fund as a 'memorial to those who have died for the UK'. It was given an independent board of Trustees and allocated the money remaining in the National Land Fund as well as an allowance of grant-in-aid.

This new fund was to build on, and expand, the legacy of its predecessor. It would make grants available to help UK organisations acquire, maintain or preserve any land, building or structure, or any object or collection of outstanding scenic, historic, aesthetic, architectural, scientific or artistic interest to the nation.

The word 'memorial' is retained as a reminder that the fund remains true to the original vision of creating the finest of memorials to those who have given their lives for the UK.

The NHMF continues to act as the fund of last resort, supporting some of our nation's greatest treasures when it matters most.

~ taken from the National Heritage Memorial Fund website

The rival billionaire technology bosses appeared to agree to a brawl in June when Musk tweeted that he was "up for a cage fight". Zuckerberg, the head of Meta, which runs Facebook and Instagram, screenshotted Musk's tweet and

time to move on. I offered a real date."

He said that Dana White, president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, "offered to make this a legit competition for charity. Elon won't confirm a date, then says he needs surgery, and

reach me. Otherwise, time to move on. I'm going to focus on competing with people who take the sport seriously."

Musk, who owns Twitter/X, appeared to suggest the fight would be held in an "epic location" in Italy. He outlined

Tensions have been high between the billionaires' companies after Meta launched Threads, a text-based conversation app, in July.

Twitter sent a cease-and-desist letter to Zuckerberg, claiming Meta had made

Zuckerberg, 39 is trained in mixed martial arts and posted about completing his first jiu-jitsu tournament this year. Musk, 52, said last week he was training for the fight by lifting weights. He wrote on X: "Don't have time to work out, so I just bring them to work."

£770,000 to help save friendless churches

In 1954, a grieving man came to St James's Church in Llangua, Monmouthshire. Ivor Bulmer-Thomas was not there to worship but to work and, in memory of his late wife, Dilys, he set about restoring the 12th-century church. A few years later, he set up the charity Friends of Friendless Churches (Jack Blackburn writes).

Almost 70 years on, the charity is coming to save St James's again but this time armed with a £769,000 heritage grant and a renewal of Bulmer-Thomas's mission to save many more of these little citadels of our history.

"It is a new era for church conservation," Rachel Morley, the director of the charity, said. There has been a surge in interest, a rise in membership, a new donor and, crucially, a change in the grants the charity receives.

New money from the National Heritage Memorial Fund is allowing the friends to expand their ambitions as they seek to preserve and reopen forgotten churches, many of which hold unique pieces of history and art emanating from our medieval past.

"They are these repositories of local history, national history, personal history, art and architecture," Morley said. She added that the change in the charity's funding was brought on by the pandemic. Before Covid-19 it had struggled to get any large grants, but the Cultural Recovery Fund was transformative. Grants of £1 million and £2.1 million allowed the charity to clear a backlog of work on the 60 churches it runs, and its members are now able to consider far bigger projects.

Now the scope is more epic and more urgent, beginning with the church that started the charity's work. Bulmer-Thomas, a journalist for The Times before becoming a minister in the Attlee government, came to restore the church in tribute to his wife, who had died in childbirth. Three years later in 1957 he helped to found the Friends of Friendless Churches with the poets TS Eliot and John Betjeman.

St James's is one of two churches that will benefit from the latest grant, both of which are in Wales and have tumbledown roofs.

The church has a 14th-century painted screen and elements dating from the 1100s, while its dedication to St Ciwa, a 6th-century female saint said to have been raised by wolves, suggests that it could have origins from before the Norman conquest.

The other church is St Lawrence's, Gumfreston, Pembrokeshire, which is ridden with damp and has medieval wall paintings that are facing destruction.

St Lawrence's, Gumfreston, and St James's, Llangua, far left, will have work done with the help of a Covid recovery fund

Grant success in the press. *The Times*, 14 August 2023

Enter Jones & Fraser

Following a competitive tender, the contract was awarded to Jones & Fraser, a traditional building company based in Radnorshire. Here in early May 2024, company directors, Tom Jones and Finn Fraser start to get to know the site where they will be spending the next year.

A Rare Opportunity

Paul Ellis & Tom Jones

As specialist conservation craftspeople we rarely get the opportunity to work on a building as a whole team. We are often brought in for the specific, tricky and nerdy elements of a project sometimes as a result of funding or otherwise. Tasks such as replacing the lead work on the roof, patching the plasterwork, repairing the timber doors and windows et cetera.

St James's offered us the rare opportunity to work on the building in every capacity. Requiring all of the skills from all of the team.

From the moment the tender inquiry came through it was clear this had the makings of a great project. The schedule of works and specification offered confidence from the outset: rich in relevant detail but concise enough to give a clear path to action.

Despite this initial excitement it was nonetheless a daunting prospect. What outwardly appears to be a modest, little country church hides some magnificent medieval craftsmanship and material. This beautiful and remote structure was for sure on the point of collapse.

The structural drawings showed a web of stainless steel, cranked beams, brackets, flitch plates, tie rods, Cintec pins, heli-ties, threaded bars, plates and turnbuckles. At first glance


AVAN

It might look heavy handed but one needs to remember this building and roof structure was initially designed to take the weight of a thatch roof, not 300 years of a 32 ton diminishing stone tile roof that now sits on it.

There was a large unknown element to this project which was a source of great excitement for us. One of the many joys of conservation is the constant necessity for discussions. What/why has been done, what/why has been used, to what/why is the best method moving forward and then justifying these proposals to the nth degree.

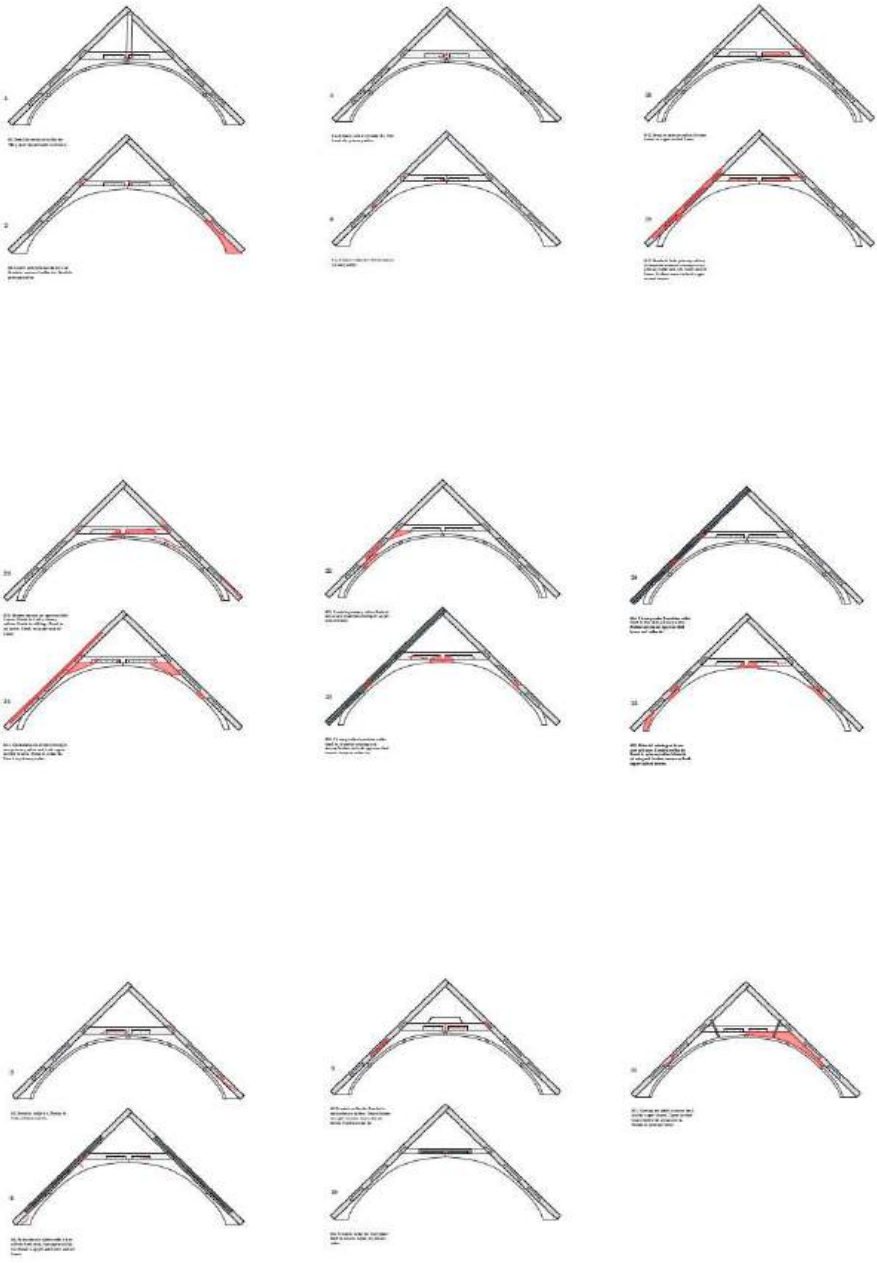
The starting months on site were a voyage of constant discovery. We all knew it was going to be a challenge but it was more than we expected. Good collaboration and dialogue between the engineer, architect and client was essential here as changes were sometimes daily.

Through their forward thinking professionalism, and hugely positive energy the client and architect have enabled us, without compromise, to enact some of our best work.

For us at Jones & Fraser the project feels a great success. The joys of working together toward a community goal have felt rewarding and especially fitting for a building with community at its core. As individuals and as a team we have had our manual competence challenged, enough so as to engage us beyond our conscious mind and into a place that connects us more richly to our work, the building and its beautiful surroundings.

The web of scaffold starts to be assembled...

And continues...



Detail from the survey of the roof trusses undertaken by Jones & Fraser

Raising the Roof

Tom Jones & Paul Ellis

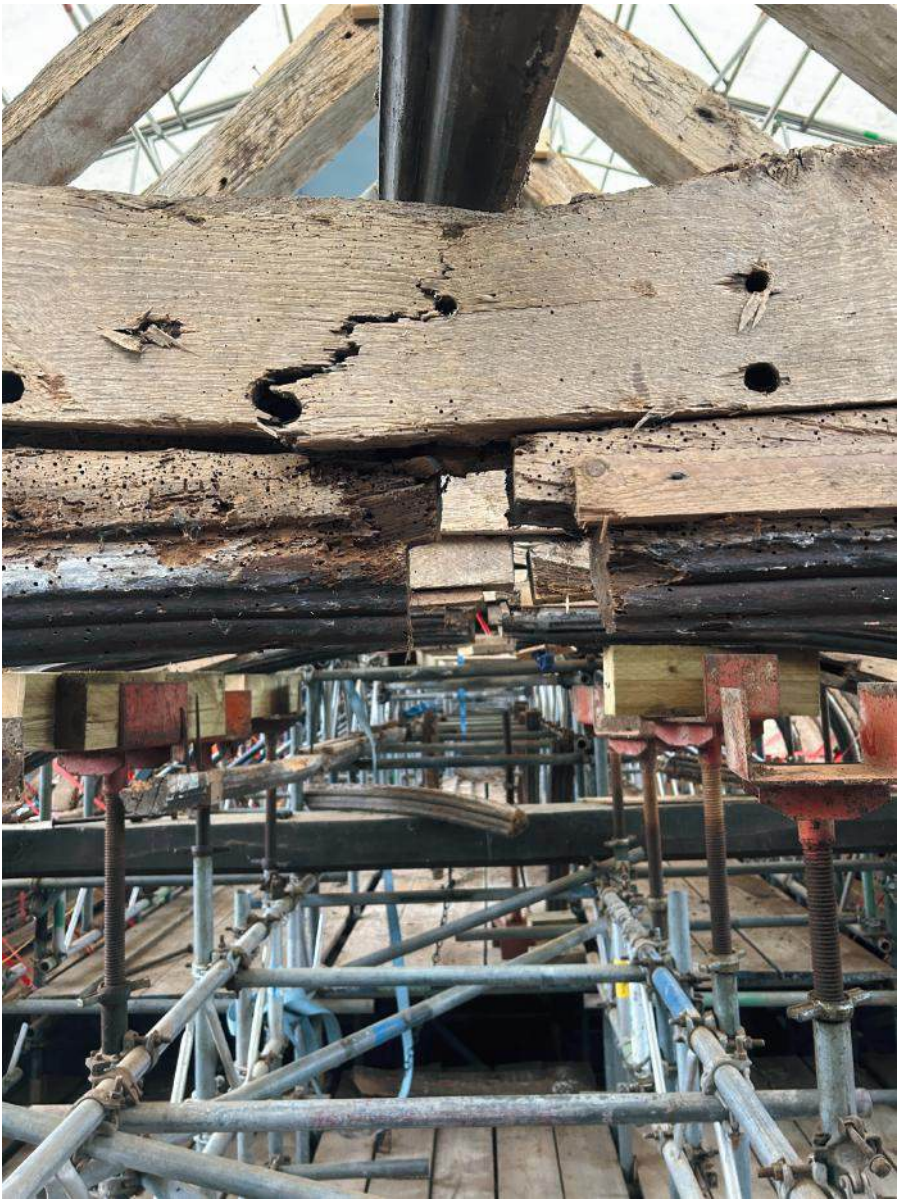
The roof is made up of 29 carved arched braced trusses. We started by supporting and jacking each of them in five places along their span. Whilst enabling safe access to the delicate roof this also allowed us to relieve the weight that had been pushing the walls apart and start the process of repair.

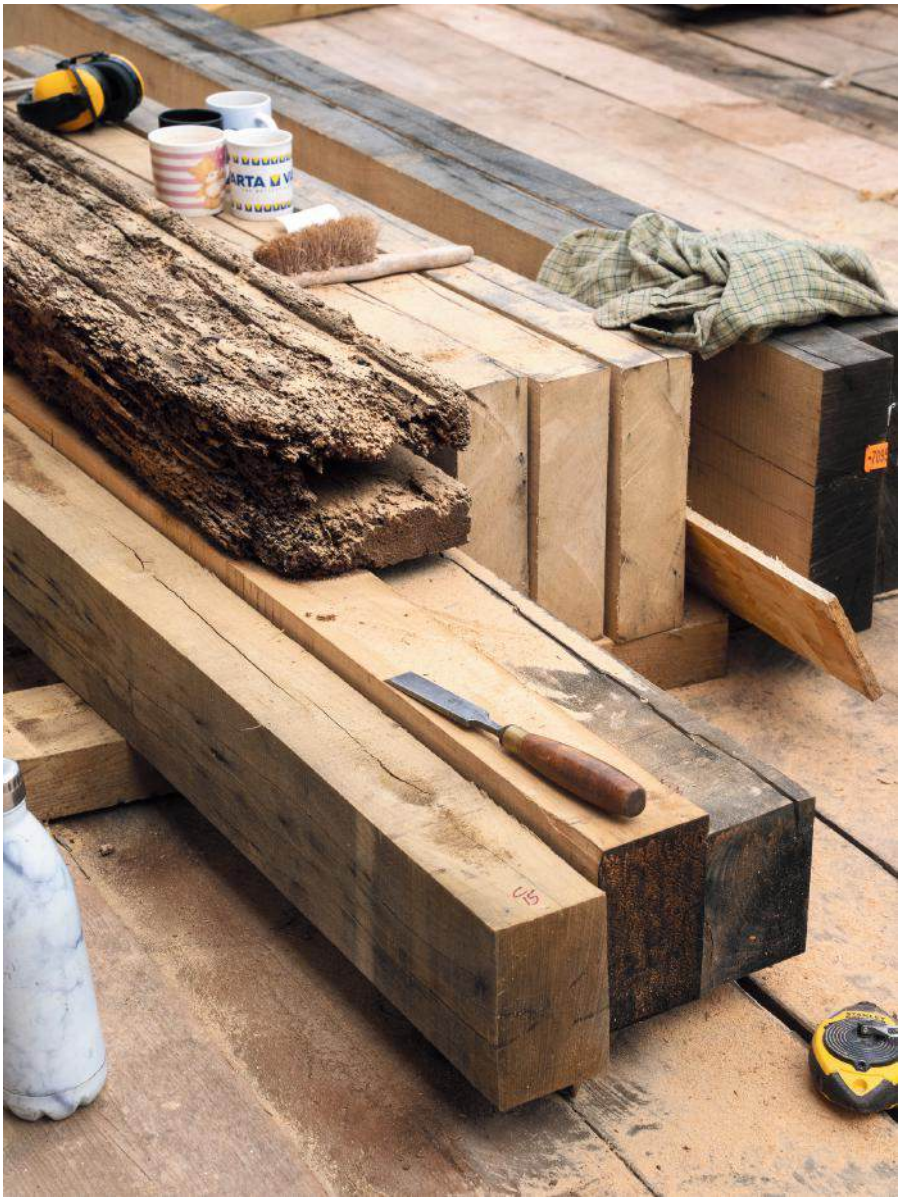
The initial focus was on the massive (in some places 12m long) moulded wall-plates and then moved onto the tricky trusses. After 300yrs of overloading the principal rafters had become hugely deflected – to the note of 200mm along their length - or in some case cracked completely. No jacking, strapping or encouragement was going to straighten these members back into their original shape. A decision was made to recut all of the inside web elements of the truss to fit the new angle at its vertex. This was no small task on an arch brace with joint shoulder lengths exceeding 1-metre. All this was made more tricky by the necessity to maintain a smooth tight barrel on the inside and a flat plane for a roof covering on the outside.

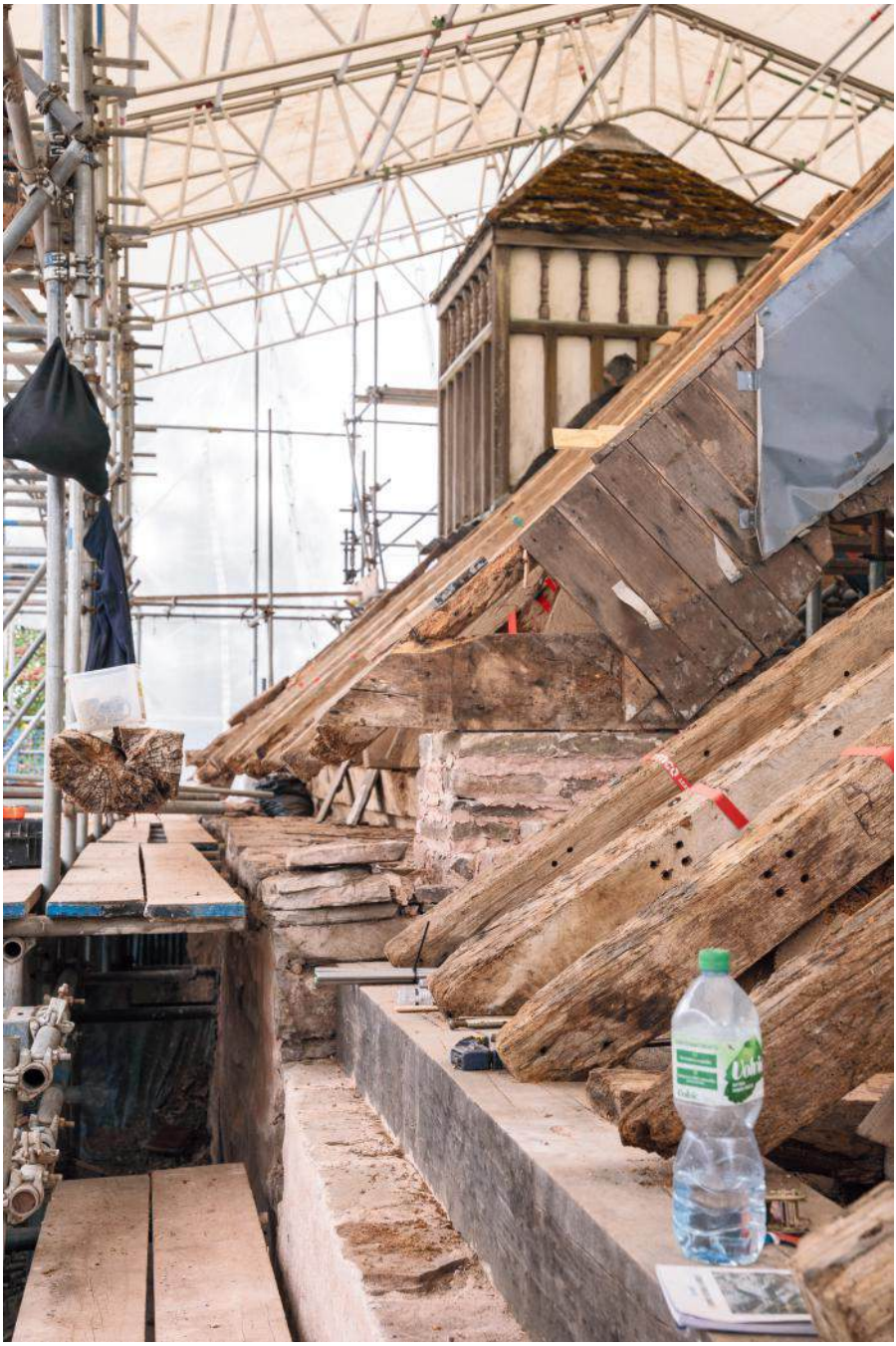
After 3 months of squeezing, jacking, sawing, splicing and plenty of replacement we had the trusses close enough to transfer the weight of the roof back to where it was originally intended. Each truss was them carefully templated in its entirety and strengthened with 10mm stainless steel along its side.

With the structure now completed the roofing team were free to proceed. Meanwhile the carpentry team's focus turned to the inside details of restoring the barrel vault ceiling ahead of the plasterers. The rib mouldings were hugely decayed and had years of failed repair and alignment attempts. Some of the curved mouldings required us to adapt and make our own beech block moulding planes in order to compass the mouldings to the correct radius.

In all, the timberwork on this project has been a wonderful reminder of why we are all drawn to this industry. Not a day went past when we did not need to collaborate ideas, work as a team and be fully engaged in the day to day challenges.



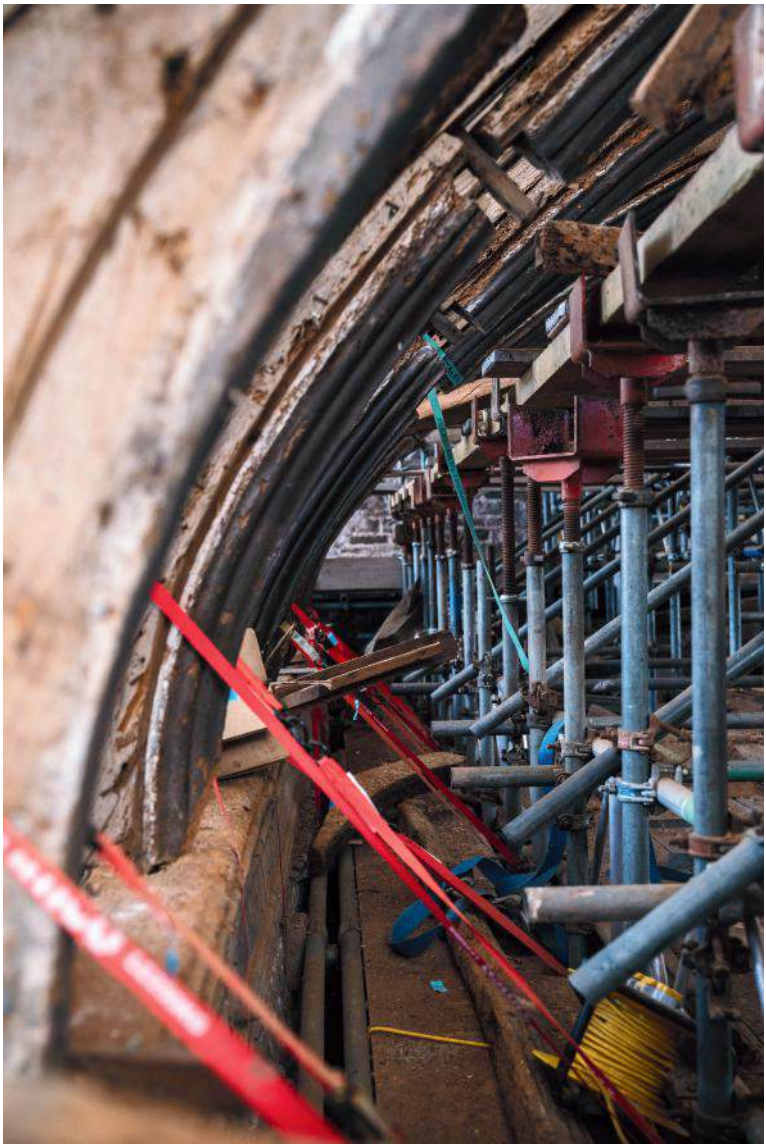




Ross Cook, archaeologist

Some of the old iron nails from the roof

A new oak wall-plate is delivered to site



Who built St James's?

Rachel Morley

Obviously, we have no idea of the identity or names of the people who physically built and rebuilt the church, but our archaeologist, Ross Cook, did find some tantalising clues in the 15th-century roof timbers.

Ross identified two principal rafters of a 12th-century Romanesque roof truss that had been reused as a timber wall plate on the east gable of the chancel. In his words "a truly remarkable survival". He found that the oak used for the roof was well-managed and fast-grown; in the nave several of the wall plates are single lengths 13m long.

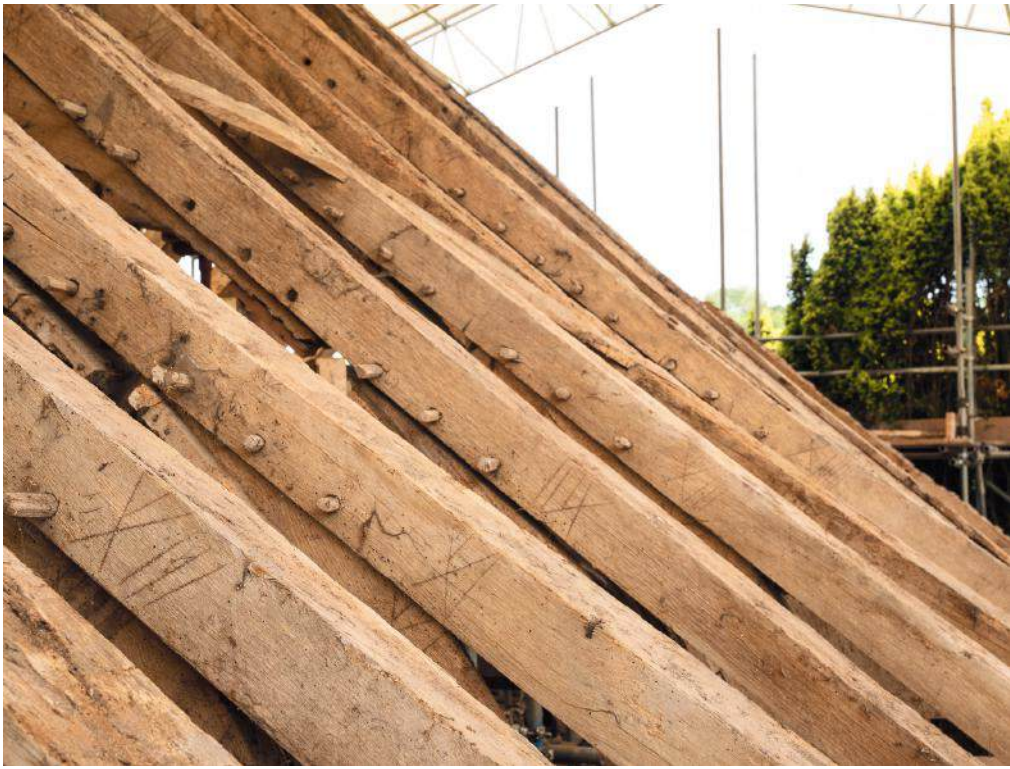
With the roof stripped bare, Ross could record the carpenters' marks on the trusses. He identified three different types of marks:

a race knife cut, forming a neat, hollow scrape

a scribe, forming a scrapped, rough mark

a chisel, forming punched or cut indentations.

The three distinct marks suggest the trusses were made by three different carpenters.



Carpenters' marks

Cushions of silver-threaded moss

Rachel Morley

We can't lie. When we were three years into a planning process to get consent to repair the church, the last thing we needed to hear was that the sandstone tiles, which were breaking the church's back (roof timbers), were home to not just one - but three rare mosses. The most significant of these was the super-rare byrophyte *Hedwigia Ciliata Var Leucophaea.*

This spongy inhabitant created an additional layer of ecological complexity. And of course, the mosses favoured the tiles with degraded surfaces – precisely the ones we didn't want to put back on the church roof...

Then we met Sam Bosanquet, ecologist. Through his expertise, passion and thoughtfulness we saw moss in an entirely new light – in particular, how the hoary byrophytes shimmered silver in the sunlight, and really just how nationally rare it is.

Churches and churchyards are havens for rare species like this, and we are proud that St James's features heavily on the The British Bryological Society's web-page for *Hedwigia Ciliata Var Leucophaea*.

Moss cushions on sandstone tiles

Caught Moss-Handed...

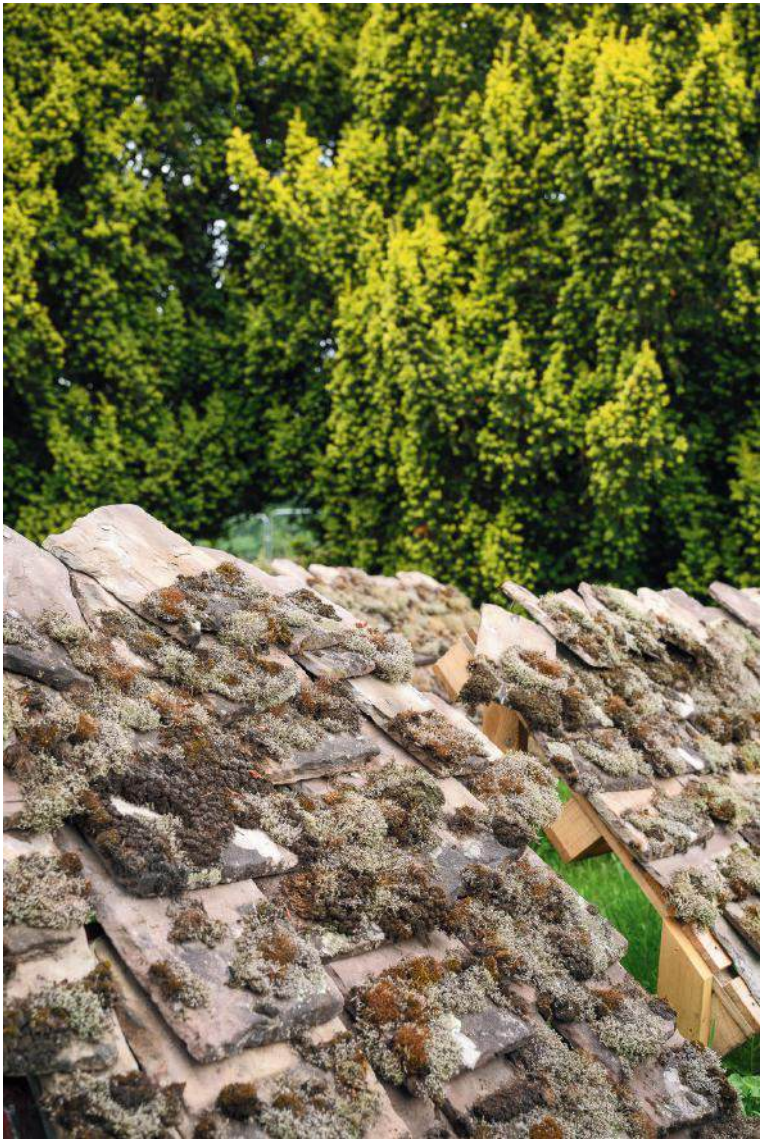
Rachel Morley

On Monday 23 July 1951 the Western Mail reported that two men had pleaded guilty to stealing lead from the roof of Llangua church.

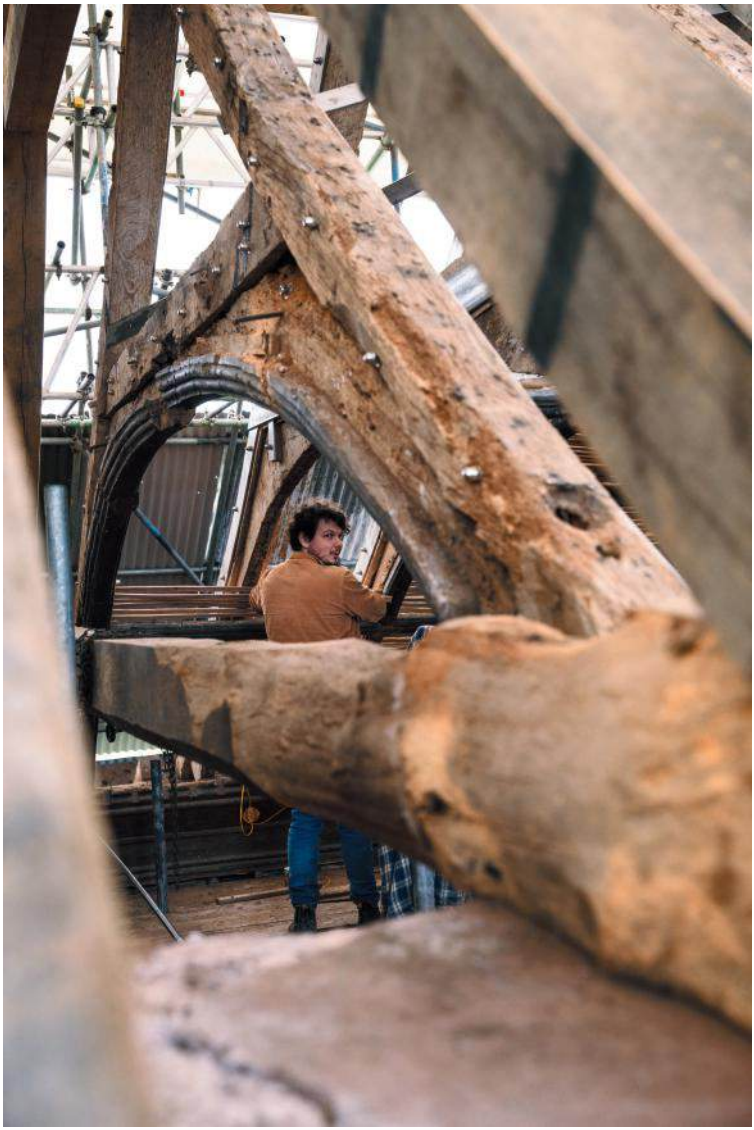
A local farmer spotted the brothers from Cardiff on the church roof at dusk. He called the police but the men had fled the scene by the time the authorities arrived...

Following a trail, the men were caught after stealing tools and car batteries in the area. Mr Emlyn Davies from the Forensic Department Science in Cardiff extracted particles from the men's clothing. Upon laboratory examination, it was found that the particles were moss – the same, nationally scarce moss that grows on the roof of Llangua church... The case was sealed.

Hooray for rare mosses!



The mossy tiles had to be protected on purpose-made panels to keep them alive during the re-rooofing



Louis manoeuvring riven oak laths into position

River sand, lime & hair

Joe ‘Louis’ Cartwright

Plastering St James's church was an incredible experience. I would be lying if I said I wasn't initially daunted at the magnitude of the project, There were ‘miles’ of cement pointed walls and gypsum ceilings to hack off and tear down before re-plastering using traditional materials and methods with the ambition to be as true to the history and character of the building as possible.

After the intensely dusty job of removing these modern materials was completed it was time to move onto something a bit more interesting; the choice of mortar mixes and finishes to be applied on both the interior and exterior.

In creating an appropriate mortar mix for St James’s there was an ambition with the client, the architect and ourselves to be respectful to the history of the building. We sought to achieve this by taking samples of the existing lime mortar and then through a process of weighing, dissolving, then weighing what’s left, sieving and weighing again for good measure arrive at an understanding as to which aggregates had been used and the ratio of aggregates to lime.

The analysis for the exterior render showed, unsurprisingly, the use of riverbed sand, most likely dredged from the river Monnow, mere meters from the church itself. The historic render samples were also full of lime inclusions which is indicative of a quick lime hot mix. The render was to be

completed with a bagged and lime-washed finish.

As a result of there being no remaining interior historic plaster it was agreed to use a lime putty and sand aggregate premixed plaster, this used local aggregate and also cut down on the hours of mixing. Historic plaster almost always contained animal hair, most commonly from cattle and came as a by-product of the tanning industry which was common throughout the country.

Today the majority of animal hair suppliers import the product from fur farms in Asia which have a reputation for not keeping animal wellbeing in serious consideration. It took some time to find a supplier who did sell ethically sourced horse and goat hair in the quantities that were needed. In addition we received a donation of a box of dog's moulted hair, which was new to me but surprisingly worked really well. I even donated some of the hair from my own head. It's nice knowing that this will always be part of the infrastructure of the building.

We wanted to be as traditional as possible with the finish inside so it was decided by the architect to plaster it with two coats and to use a wooden float for the finish. A wooden float is as basic as a tool can be, a simple flat block of wood with a handle attached. Using this proved a little bit trickier than its modern counterpart the sponge float.

The walls of the church, which have stood for up to 800 years, had warped and buckled - especially over the last three hundred years when the weight of the roof itself pushed down upon the walls, spreading them out from the top. A situation later exacerbated in the Victorian period by the interventions they undertook. This meant that following the wall contours with a flat solid object made it difficult to achieve a nice smooth finish.

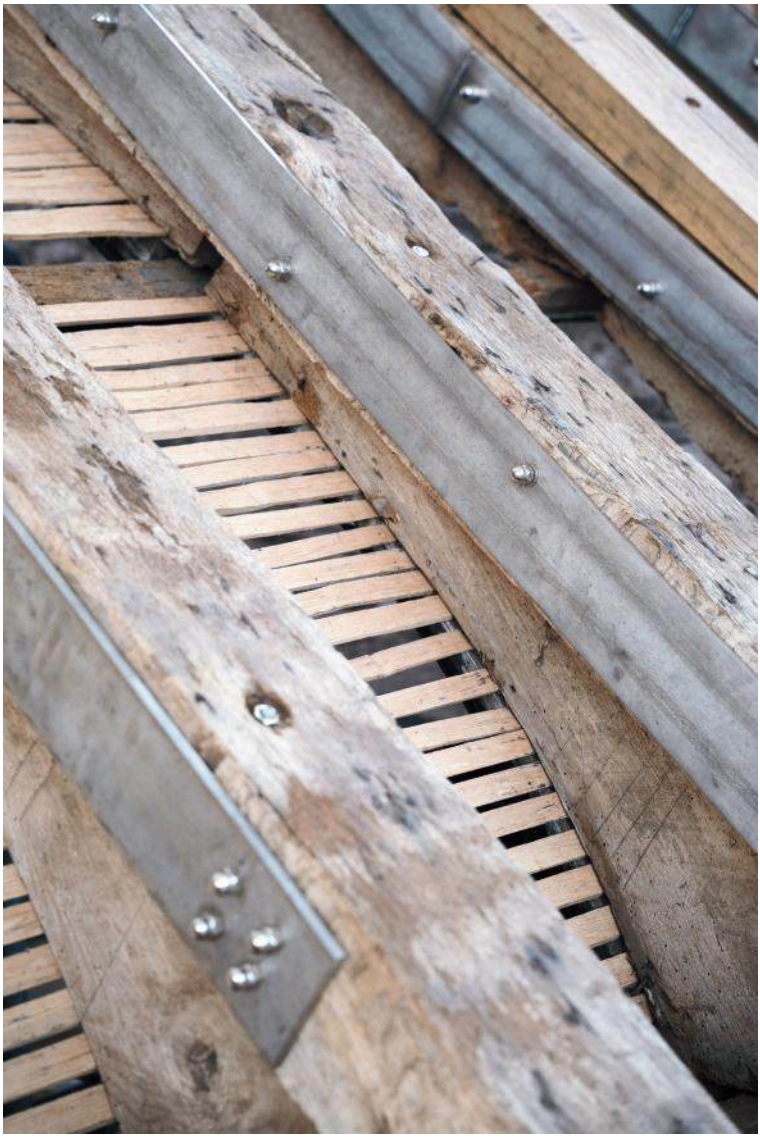
The ceiling was re-lathed using riven oak. Ingeniously the medieval carpenters who had built the roof had come up with a system where the laths could slot into a groove on every other truss, thus reducing the number of nails to be used by two thirds. We used stainless steel nails in order to extend the lifespan of the ceiling which was plastered using the same materials and methods as the rest of the interior.

In conclusion I am really proud of what we have all accomplished at St James's church and after laying on over 15 tons of render with the rest of the plastering team, I regard this as, so far, the highlight of my career.

In the wall-head we discovered the remains of two Fives balls. The more intact one to the top of the image comprises a small stone bound in thick fibres with a stitched leather case.

We also discovered fragments of a carved and painted rood screen from about 1500 which had been broken up and used as rubble infill in the wall-head.

The local authority insisted that we retain the sandstone tile covering. The roof timbers could not support a stone roof, even if repaired, so it was necessary to install stainless steel plates and ties.



Our project engineer, Steve Swinbank, who designed all the new steelwork for the roof

Jack assessing the shape the barrel

Joe carefully adjusting a newly carved rib

The roof is back in alignment and the laths have all been inserted, ready to be plastered. Jack adjusting a new stainless steel tie-bar.

Breaking banks

Paul Ellis & Tom Jones

The Monnow flows within feet of the west gable of St James's. For most of the year it is a shallow, fast-flowing trout stream spotted with shallows and deep pools. The trout are visible, they appear to be mainly brown, and there are enough of them to maintain an otter or two. The river meanders through the flat water meadows that are, for much of the year, grazed by sheep and cows. A colony of sand-martins inhabits the banks and there are kingfishers, divers and the occasional egret close by. There are always visiting geese.

During our year-long restoration project at the church, the river flooded several times. On two occasions water made its way into the building. One imagines that this has been a regular experience over the centuries; the building seemed to take it in its stride inches deep in a brown lake.

For us it was an 'oh look the river's high today' first thing one morning and then within two or three hours it was all sandbags and wellingtons being overtopped. The welfare wagon was towed back up towards the main road as the day turned into a waiting game; how high would this go, would the scaffold be damaged, when does this become dangerous?

We swam the river often enough though it would be fair to say that this was more by way of a challenge to see who would brave the cold. The river bank was a constant lunchtime destination and source of delight. It brought home the remarkable qualities of the site, the spirit of the place that is so much part of the importance of St James's.

The first flood - October 2024

Ancient Chimes

The
small bell-cote
contains two small
bells. Neither bell has an
inscription or an identifying
mark. The smaller bell to the north,
is long-waisted and round-shouldered.
Bells of this shape are the earliest form of bells
known in the UK. It's been suggested that the bell
dates from the late 12th to early 13th century. Stylistically,
it is very similar to the bells at our churches in Llancillo
and Gwernesney - both very
close to Llangua.

Given the
similarities in
style and date, it's
possible that all of these
bells were cast in the same
workshop. One bell expert has
suggested that they were cast
at Llanthony Priory, noting that "bell-
founding was largely practiced in monasteries
at this period". The bell to the north of the bell-cote
is larger and more traditionally bell-shaped. It also has
a deeper note than it's earlier companion in the bell-cote.
It's likely to date from about 1600.

With thanks to Chris Pickford for his expert advice and this information on the bells

Ringing the Changes

Rachel Morley

One of the biggest changes at St James's is the bell-cote. It really wasn't our intention to change it so dramatically, but circumstances led to a complete redesign.

We knew the water was getting into the bell-cote, that much was clear from the rotten woodwork. What our investigations revealed is that the attractive white panelling was made of asbestos. The turned timber balusters were, we assume, salvaged from a staircase and recycled into the bell-cote. The asbestos panels could not be safely repaired, and would present a problem for any person repairing the church down the line, so the decision was made to commission an asbestos contractor to remove it completely.

Redesigning the replacement however, was not straightforward. Andrew Faulkner, architect, was not satisfied that he could achieve an effective, weather-tight structure by following the existing design. So, in the interests of longevity, we, with appropriate consent, opted for a more traditional, oak weather-boarded bell-cote with louvres for ventilation. The old, recycled timber balusters are in-situ – just behind the weatherboards.

The decision was also made to slightly deepen the eaves of the bell-cote roof to help ensure rainwater is cast as far from the church building as possible.

And of course, we regilded the cockerel.

Break ins

Paull Ellis & Tom Jones

St James nestles into its landscape at the end of a drovers' way, access is through a field gate from the main road between Abergavenny and Hereford which is 150m metres back up that track. The church is visible from the speeding vehicles – if you're looking.

We'd been securing the road gate with a padlock and chain since the start of the job. There was also a locked Herras fence around the whole site, accessed near the welfare hut (essentially a metal container with reinforced security locks). The church was surrounded by a scaffold clad in corrugated tin sheeting. The steel door through this was padlocked. Once inside there was still the lock on the solid oak church door, one of the large key varieties, that needed to be negotiated.

We were broken into twice. The first time seemed like a spur of the moment decision. Brute force appeared to be the main tool used, with items picked up on site turned into levers and bludgeons. On the second occasion it was those areas that hadn't been accessed in the first raid that received attention. There was no evidence of making do with what was to hand.

It would seem that the robbers were after power tools because of their ubiquity, transportability and anonymity. Ironically as heritage builders the majority of our work requires traditional hand tools. from trowels through to beech-block moulding planes. These appear to be invisible to those intent on the robbing and were thankfully overlooked on both occasions.

In October, we held two site open days – a chance for members of the public to go behind the scenes, see the works up close, and even have a go at some repairs themselves...

Mark explains batten plans to a volunteer

Finn demonstrating mortar analysis

Volunteers using hot-mixed lime to repoint the west gable

Our youngest volunteer.
We may need to order hi-vis vests in smaller sizes!

Measuring and organising tiles to create a slope
of tiles gradually diminishing in size

Andrew setting out the scope of the repairs needed

Tom explaining the roof repairs

Lily Watts

Almost all of the images in this booklet were taken by photo-journalist, Lily Watts. When we announced that we were starting repairs, Lily contacted us and asked if she could volunteer to record the works from start to finish. Honestly, we couldn't believe our luck.

Lily did more than record the repairs. She captured the soul of this little building, the spirit of the Jones & Fraser team and the purpose of the FoFC. We are so delighted and grateful to have such a beautiful, intimate record of the works.

Documenting St James's

Lily Watts

Over the past year, I've had the unique opportunity to photograph the restoration of St James's Church with the Friends. From the initial site visit to the careful restoration of its original features, I've witnessed firsthand the delicate balance between preserving the building's history and ensuring it remains functional for future generations. The process has been a fascinating glimpse into the expertise, patience, and dedication required to breathe new life into a historic structure while maintaining its authenticity.

Drawing from my background in photojournalism and long-form documentary storytelling, I am driven to capture the often unseen realities of our society and present them in a natural and light visual style, highlighting the resilience and strength of the communities I'm photographing. My work thrives on creating intimate connections and building trust with the individuals I photograph. By employing a discreet approach, I strive to document their stories with sensitivity and respect, ensuring that their voices are heard while maintaining the integrity of the narrative.

Alongside my social-documentary work, I am particularly drawn to photographing traditional craftspeople and their practices. It was through researching this that I came across the Friends of Friendless Churches and their mission to rescue and preserve historic places of worship. The meticulous work involved in these restorations resonated

deeply with my appreciation for craftsmanship and heritage, and I soon embarked on documenting the restoration of St James's from beginning to end.

In addition to photographing the skilled team of Jones & Fraser at work, I found myself exploring an entirely new dimension of my practice – capturing the church itself as a subject. This was an area of photography I hadn't previously engaged with in depth, but as I spent time documenting the building's transformation, I began to appreciate the immense number of stories, and the rich history embedded within the walls of what, at first glance, appear to be modest buildings. From the worn stone steps softened by centuries of footsteps to the delicate carvings hidden in plain sight, every detail speaks of the lives that once filled these spaces.
This became the foundation of my approach – using photography not just as a means of documentation but as a way of uncovering and preserving the quiet narratives woven into the fabric of the structure.

In documenting the restoration of St James's, I have not only deepened my understanding of architectural conservation but also reinforced my belief in the power of visual storytelling to preserve and honour history. It has been a privilege to witness and capture this process, whilst working alongside the hugely talented team involved in the project. I hope that through this work, others can also appreciate the beauty, significance, and ongoing story of these remarkable places

Sensational

Paul Ellis & Tom Jones

The job fell nicely into place: the lime-washing of both the interior and exterior of the church. This was the sign that the overall project was coming to its conclusion and that we'd entered a phase where all the details, the finer points observed from the closer scrutiny of a brush-stroke by brush-stroke approach across nearly all the surfaces of the building would be revealed. There would be an expansion of what appeared on paper to be a straightforward single undertaking into a highly complex round of attending to a myriad of tiny tasks, and then more often than not re-visiting. You assume when you get the lime-wash job that you'll only need a paint brush but you end up using a whole workbox of tools as you remove nails, tidy up edges, fill in holes, re-bed wall tops and the like.

We began on the outside, six coats of white limewash. We pressed on, ticking off all the snagging jobs as we sought to deliver St James from building site to rural church. It was a job that people dipped in and out of as their workload, the weather, waits for materials, the pressure of deadlines etc gave them spare moments.

Nearing the completion of the third exterior coat we began work on the interior. This was to be five coats of an off-white lime-wash. Again that process of tidying up all the edges and not quite completed tasks.

There was a definite rush on and at times we worked in each other's pockets but coat by coat progress was being made.

In all of this focused activity the Friends introduced the idea that maybe the colour of the outside of the church should not be white, that maybe a shade of pink should be considered...

Samples were called for, painted onto test pieces and left out to weather (photo below). Discussion was had on site. Whilst it is a bold choice it is well to remember that it would only be a limewash coat and that this could be painted over. Limewash is a sacrificial material, its function is to protect the stone and lime mortar and a new coat needs to be applied on a regular basis in order to operate. Therefore any choice about the colour of the limewash is open to be altered at the next scheduled repainting.

So pink it is. And we at Jones & Fraser have received the benefits of the challenge of staying open minded. St James, in pink, looks sensational.


LIES LTD

Pink

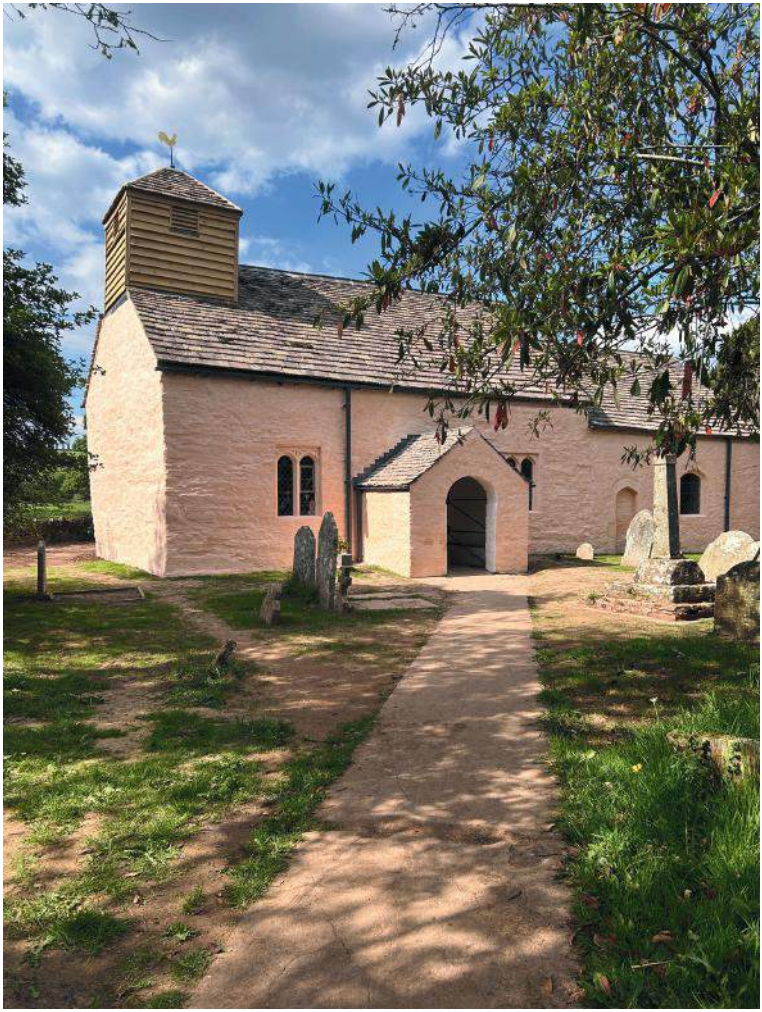
Rachel Morley

Was I mad for suggesting pink? Maybe. I'm sure some people will have no doubt. But I have always loved the sticky, red clays you find along the Marches. The ochreous dust, the saffron stain, the vitality of the rust and iron. This is the living soil from which St James's erupted. I wanted a limewash that looked like a handful of red sandstone sand had been thrown into into the mix, so the church would look alive, change its mood with the weather, and in harmony with churchyard, the riverbank and the tumbling hills around it. I am grateful to Andrew Faulkner and Jones & Fraser for humouring me...

Beyond pink, I know that some people prefer their churches with bare stone. However, we know that historically, most rubble-stone churches, like St James's, were finished with lime render and/or limewash. This additional outer finish gave the building greater protection against the elements and made the church a beacon. In fact, Gruffydd ap Cynan, King of Gwynedd (c. 1055 –1137) is reported to have 'made Gwynedd glitter with limewashed churches like the firmament with stars'.

In the post-medieval period, limewash, which weathers, was not renewed, or in some cases, Victorian restorers scraped the walls, under the misguided impression that bare stone was more historically accurate and authentic.

We're very glad to give St James's back a fabulous new coat.



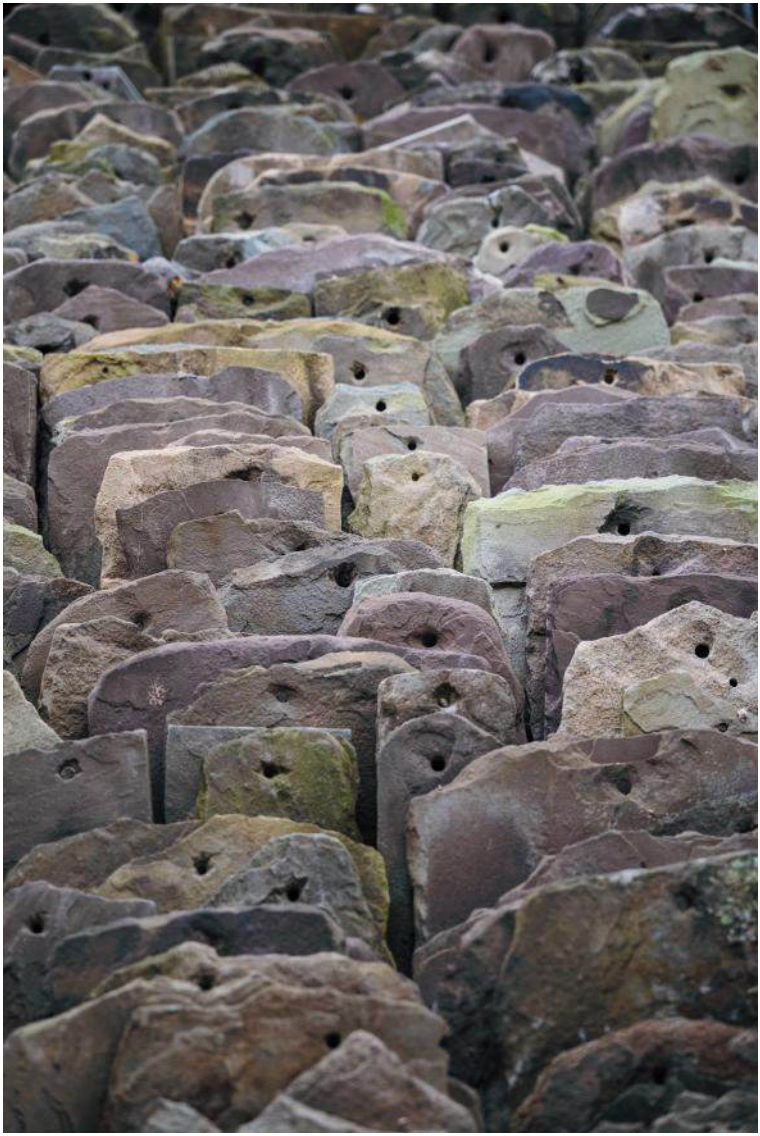
Here to stay

Andrew Faulkner

Since its origins as a monastic cell, built on a flood plain beside the Monnow, St James's has witnessed and withstood remarkable historical and societal change; the ravages of the elements, and the successive modifications demanded by numerous generations. It wears its scars lightly; its gently undulating walls and roofs speak quietly of its endurance, and its gradual settling into place.

The community now somewhat distant, its company are the wind-shuffled leaves, the flat fields and wildlife, and the trout leaping in the lazy river as it meanders through the valley. A quiet and gentle place, a stop-off from the busy road and railway, and a stop-off from our busy lives.

Restored once again, for the 'umpteenth' time, standing testament to the devotion and dedication of those who made it, and to the countless named and unknown hands that have contributed to its survival and development. Recent decades of deterioration have been a heavy burden but now, replenished, it is at ease – resting gently, but firmly – here to stay.



Roof tiles arranged ready to be re-used

Thank you

Rachel Morley

It's the greatest privilege to care for these buildings, to crawl around the timbers, to get to know them so intimately, and to know, as the scaffold comes down, that you'll be the last person to be up in the roof space with the old trusses for at least a generation, maybe more. Mending old churches is a creative collaboration between people separated by centuries, people who will never meet but who share a purpose.

This project wouldn't have happened without some key people, and to them we offer our heartfelt gratitude: Andrew Faulkner, Steve Swinbank, Rebecca Sheahan-East, Sam Bosanquet, Ross Cook, Tom Jones, Finn Fraser, Paul, Louis, Joe, Jack, Mark, Dixy, Lily Watts, Chris Pickford, and to the other many people who have given their time and advice along the way.

And finally, of course, without a grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Garfield Weston Foundation, and the generous donations from our supporters, donors and members none of this would have been possible.

Thank you.

NATIONAL HERITAGE MEMORIAL FUND

Garfield Weston FOUNDATION

Filming with ITV's *Coast & Country*

Tom Jones examines a reformed truss

With thanks to all who have contributed to this project scrapbook

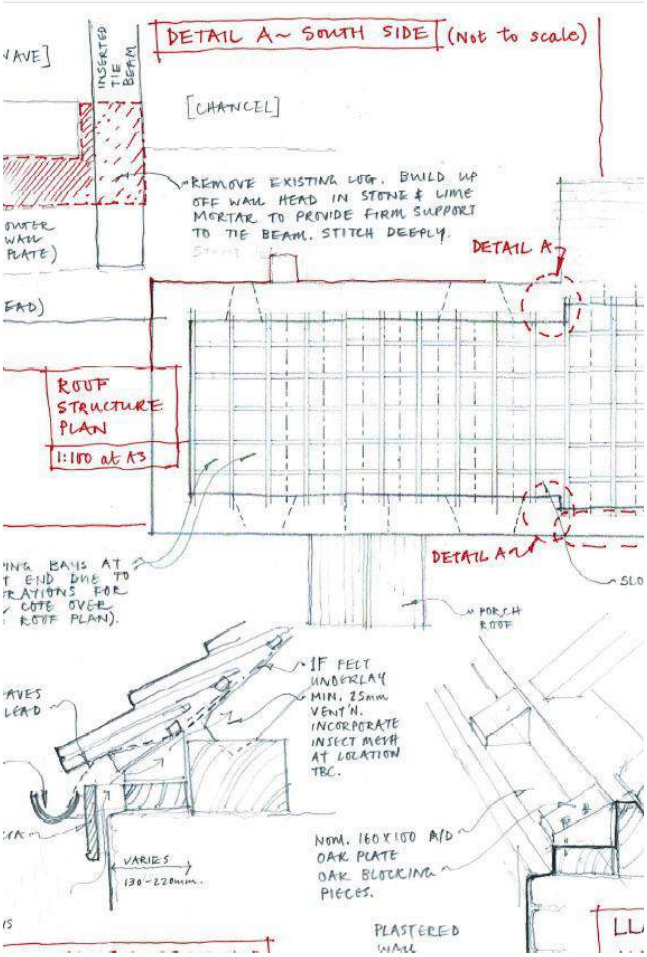
Joe “Louis” Cartwright, Paul Ellis, Andrew Faulkner, Tom Jones and Lily Watts.

Photo on page 4: Andy Marshall

Photos on pages 7,9,14,15,22,23,25,30,41,49,52,70,75,79,80,88: FoFC

All other photos: Lily Watts

Drawings: Andrew Faulkner



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