



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



THE CHURCH OF ST JAMES

Luffincott, Devon



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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Luffincott, Devon

THE CHURCH OF ST JAMES

by JGM Scott (Prebendary Emeritus of Exeter Cathedral, retired country parson and amateur local historian with a special interest in Devon churches)

EARLY HISTORY

Luffincott lies some six miles (9.6 km) south of Holsworthy, on the river Tamar which forms the border between Devon and Cornwall. Almost hidden behind the farm, at the end of its long lane, the church of St James must be one of the remotest and least known in Devon, and one of the most modest; but it possesses much charm and some interesting and intriguing history. Its former parish is very small, lying between Tetcott to the north and St Giles-on-the Heath to the south, and containing only a handful of farms; until the last century it was even smaller, as part of the present parish was formerly an enclave of Tetcott. The Domesday Book survey does not mention Luffincott by name, but Peek (now West Peek) was then a manor, and it is likely that the church was built on one of the holdings in Peek and took its name from it: the Saxon version of the name means 'the 'cote' of Luhha's people'; one assumes that Luhha was the first Saxon settler here. Today Luffincott has a population of less than 50, and the network of field paths which led from the various farms to the church has vanished, so that most of the people can more easily get to church in Tetcott or Ashwater. There has never been any village as such; 'Luffincott Shop' at the head of the lane was a blacksmith's forge.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-east with the Gothic windows which replaced the Georgian sashes in 1893
(© Crown Copyright. NMR.)*

*Left: Interior looking east
(© Crown Copyright. NMR.)*



EXTERIOR

The outside of the church is almost all of local rubble masonry, a simple rectangle with a slate roof, a south porch and at the west end a low tower with battlements and short obelisk pinnacles; on the tower a slate tablet records its rebuilding in 1791 by Richard Sillifant, Mason. A stone just east of the porch bears the date of 1761 and the initials I.S. – probably one of the Spettigue family of West Peek. Indeed the body of the church was rebuilt in 1761 and it was much reduced in size by the demolition of a side aisle; evidence of this can be seen on the north side where the carving on the oak wall-plate, which is now outside, was clearly once inside the building. The church is curious in that the roof is mediaeval but the walls are 18th century: either the roof was dismantled and reassembled on the new walls, or it was propped up while the new walls were built beneath it.

In the churchyard are several slate headstones and the large granite tomb of the Revd Franke Parker, a bachelor who was rector here for 45 years until his death 1883, to whom we will return later. The doorway inside the porch is a 15th-century arch in grey Polyphant stone, with a Georgian-style panelled door. A stone low down to the right of the outer arch seems to have scratched graffiti including a man holding a bow and arrow.

INTERIOR

Inside, the church gains a charmingly innocent, domestic atmosphere from the Georgian sash windows on the north side. A visitor in 1849 described it as having sash windows all round, with a flat ceiling and 'communion table, rails, pulpit and pews of oak and deal, quite plain', but a modest restoration in 1893 saw the ceiling removed to reveal the fine 15th- or 16th-century moulded timbers and carved bosses, the furnishings largely replaced and pine benches installed, and simple Gothic windows replacing the sashes at the east end and on the south side. The font is plain granite, octagonal with an octagonal stem. On the floor are three fine ledger slabs; to the east is one to James (his name is now obscured by the chancel step) son of the rector Joseph Whiteborne; he died in 1707 at the age of 21. A verse in Latin reads:

*In ipso Flore juventutis meae morior
In the very flower of my youth I die:*

*Nemo scit quod Futura proferat dies
No one knows what the future day offers:*

*Parcite Lachrymis parentes et amici
Spare your tears, my parents and friends;*

Praemittor non amittor.

I am sent ahead of you, I am not lost.

*Quem diligit Deus moritur juvenis
He whom God chooses dies young.*

*Nemo ante obitum faelix
No one is happy before death.'*



The next stone is only partly legible, but was transcribed in 1849; it is to Arthur and Samuel, the sons of Samuel Langford of Worden farm near the top of the lane which leads to the church: Arthur died aged 2 in 1719; Samuel aged 40 in 1754. The westernmost slab is the earliest, finely carved in Delabole slate, to

*Mrs Elizabeth Slader the wife of John Slader
Gent*

*& the datter of Baldewyn Malet Esquier
who dyed a faytheful Xrian,
to the compforte of her beholders & friends,
the ixth of may 1587.*

Ihc [Jesus] is my only savyour'.

A fourth ledger slab, to Grace, daughter of Thomas Seymour, the rector, who died in 1654, is no longer visible; it may be under the raised floor of the sanctuary.

The stained glass in the middle light of the east window was installed as a memorial to the Revd Franke Parker, and there are two late-19th-century stained glass windows in the south side of the church, one commemorating the Spettigue family who farmed at West Peek for nearly 200 years, and one given by the Lippincott family, which took its name from Luffincott and became prominent in the publishing business in Philadelphia, USA.

The bells were removed in 1950 when the bell frame was found to be in danger of collapse.

There were three: the treble was an 'alphabet bell', with a cross and the letters *A B C D E F G H I*, cast by an Exeter founder in the mid-16th century – those were dangerous times and an inscription in either English or Latin could cause trouble from one faction or the other. The second was cast by the Bristol foundry about 1380, and inscribed: *SANCTA MARIA ORA PRO NOBIS* (Holy Mary, pray for us) with the mark of a ship. The tenor was by Thomas Pennington of Exeter, dated 1625, with the names of Edmond Arscot Esquier Churchwarden and I. Abbut. In 1967 the tenor was hung in Tetcott to replace a cracked bell, the treble was scrapped, and the inscription was cut off the second and preserved at Tetcott.

LATER HISTORY

The Rectory stood about a quarter of a mile (0.4km) away beside the Tamar. Old postcards show a single-storey cob house with a thatched roof and a bow window looking out over the river. One visitor in the early 1900s described it as a lovely spot, surrounded by daffodils – but its last years were sad and strange. After the death of Franke Parker, who had rebuilt it and whose tomb is in the churchyard, it was occupied in turn by four rectors. T.W. Morris stayed for nine years and restored the church; he was followed by Samuel Haines who stayed only one year; he in turn by a Mr Collins who lost his reason after a few months. The last, in 1895, was Thomas Ward Brown, who from 1888–91 had been perpetual curate of Clawton,



five miles (8km) to the north, and had lodged there in the farm called Clawton Town.

After eight apparently uneventful years in the Rectory, he arrived at Clawton Town at 2 o'clock in the morning, asking to be taken in and saying that he was never going back to the Rectory – which indeed he never did. The churchwardens rescued the church plate and the current registers, and from that time until he left the parish, the rector lived at Clawton and walked, or drove in a trap, to Luffincott every Sunday, bringing his lunch which he ate in the porch between morning and evening services. He later alleged that he had seen the ghost of Franke Parker in the Rectory and, whatever he saw or thought he saw, there is evidence that Mr Brown had an experience from which he never fully recovered.

In truth, in the 1960s when the present writer was rector here, strange stories about the behaviour of Parker were still being told in Luffincott and Tetcott; certainly he seems to have been a somewhat eccentric scholar, publishing among other works a book entitled 'A Light upon Thucydides, with remarks on Dr Pusey's *Daniel the Prophet* and Dr Temple's Essay *On the Education of the world*'. Local tradition reported that he had ordered his body

'to be buried six feet down, that I may not rise again', which certainly seems unusual for a clergyman. For several years the Rectory had some celebrity as a haunted house, as it gradually fell into ruin and Thomas Brown's furniture mouldered away, but in 1911 it was burnt to the ground: the site (which is private property) is now hardly identifiable, though still a beautiful spot. In 1914 the parish was united with Tetcott, which now forms part of a group with Clawton, Ashwater, Beaworthy and Halwill.

After some years of only occasional use for services, the very small attendance, coupled with the cost of maintaining the fabric, led to the church being declared redundant. In December 1979 it was put into the hands of the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust, which maintains it as an example of rural simplicity and tranquillity. During 1981–82, under the direction of GE Barnaby of Fleury Manico, Plymouth, the main roof was strengthened and reslated, windows were repaired, new drainage was installed and the tower parapet rebuilt. Interior repairs, inclusive of replastering and limewashing were carried out during 1983. In 1992, under Paul Bedford of Architecton, Bristol, the tower was rendered and limewashed, and the walls of the church were repointed.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

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Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

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