



About St James'

The 18th-century historian Edward Hasted called Cooling 'an unfrequented place, the roads of which are deep and miry, and it is as unhealthy as it is unpleasant'. Even today it seems a place time forgot overlooking the wide open skies of the Thames estuary. The first record of a village here is a mention in a charter of AD 808, but by far the most important point in its history came in 1241 when the de Cobham family became Lords of the Manor. Under their patronage the present church was constructed and the great neighbouring building, Cooling Castle, built.

Most visitors to this remote place come because of the association with Charles Dickens, who loved to walk here from his home at Higham and who set the opening scene of *Great Expectations* (1851) in its windswept churchyard. It is also believed by many that the forge which formerly stood immediately to the east of the church featured in the same work. The group of 13 small lozenge-shaped graves south of the tower belonging to two local families are now commonly called 'Pip's Graves', although Dickens reduced the number in the book to five to make it more believable.

St James' church is a simple building consisting of west tower, nave with south porch and chancel with tiny vestry. The tower has, in its lower levels, some horizontal bands of flint work which are a familiar local feature of 14th-century design, whilst the wall arcading in the chancel of about a hundred years earlier shows that the church was more or less built in a single campaign. It closed for regular worship in 1976 and was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust.

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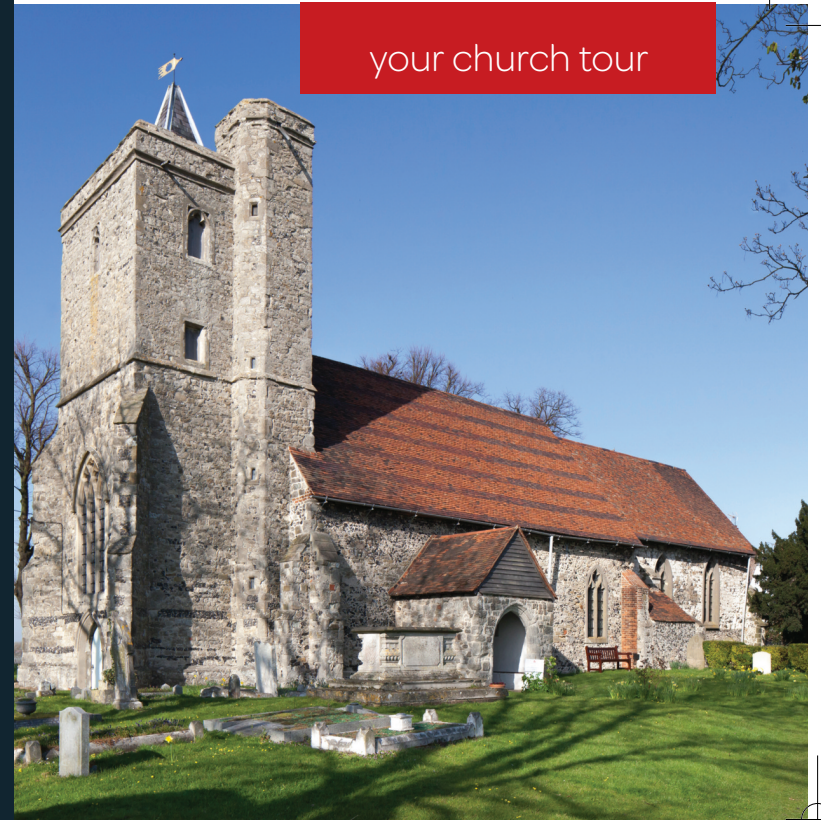
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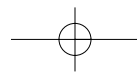


Church of
St James

Cooling, Kent

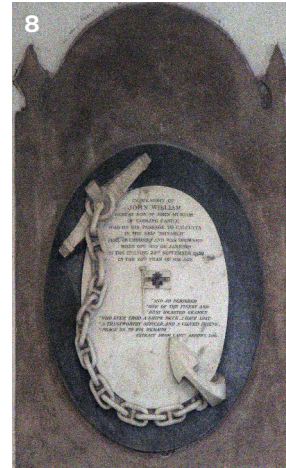


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- 1 The **porch** is deceptive. Although it looks as if it has always been here it was, in fact, built in the 19th century, having been moved from the north side of the church where it had stood since the 14th century.
- 2 At the rear of the church are two sets of **medieval benches**. These were probably installed when the nave was completed in the 14th century. Uncomfortable to the Victorian frame, the rest of the church was given new benches in 1869 based loosely on the original design.
- 3 The great **west window** is unusual in that the brightly coloured glass survives from the late 18th or early 19th century, before the great revival of stained glass manufacture under the Victorians. The small classical rosettes are probably copied from an 1820s pattern book. The two IHS roundels below are of later date.

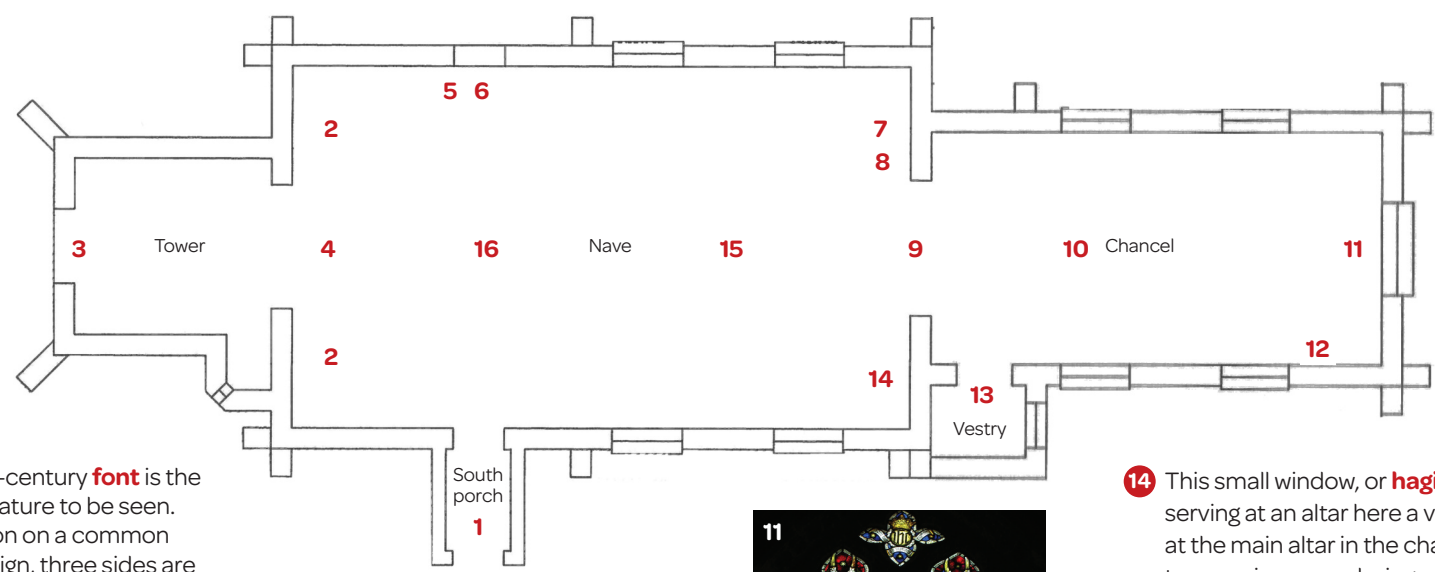


- 7 The Victorian **pulpit** is constructed of panels from former box pews. A small door at the base can be opened to show the original floor level – the present, higher, church floor dates from the 19th century.
- 8 Above the pulpit is a striking **marble memorial** to John Murton of Cooling Castle who died in 1852 having fallen overboard whilst off Rio de Janeiro. The chain and anchor frame an inscription from the ship's logbook.
- 9 The **chancel arch** displays the filled in notches that would formerly have supported the Rood Beam carrying the statues of Christ, Our Lady and St John. A Victorian priest marked them with the words 'Holy Rood'.

- 12 To the south of the altar, and en-suite with the wall arcading, are the **sedilia** and **piscina**. The sedilia is a set of three arched seats for the priest, deacon and sub-deacon to use during medieval Mass. To the left is the late 13th-century double piscina for the priest to wash his fingers and to rinse the sacred vessels.
- 13 The tiny **vestry** must not be missed. This small structure was added to the church in the 19th century and its walls decorated with thousands of cockle shells, probably as a reminder that the patron saint of this church is St James – the shell being his symbol. Above the door – and difficult to pick out – an inscription is incorporated in the design with initials and a year... possibly 1833.



- 4 The 13th-century **font** is the oldest feature to be seen. A variation on a common local design, three sides are carved with delicate arcades and the fourth with an unusual cross with pairs of discs.
- 5 The original 14th-century **north door** still hangs on its medieval hinges, although the doorway itself was walled up when the entrance was moved to the south side in the early 19th century.
- 6 Above the north door are the **Royal Arms** of Queen Anne. These were painted early in the 21st century by Gerald Fleuss to replace an original set stolen in the 1993. The frame is 18th century.

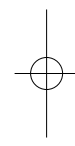
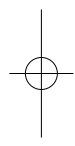


- 10 The 13th-century **chancel** is one of the glories of the church, its walls lined with blank arcading. This is purely decorative and reflects the wealth of the de Cobham family.
- 11 The **east window** glass, by the famous designers Clayton and Bell, depicts the Ascension, and is late Victorian.

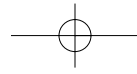


- 14 This small window, or **hagioscope**, gave a priest serving at an altar here a view to his colleague serving at the main altar in the chancel, to ensure that when two services were being conducted simultaneously, the priest here mirrored exactly what was going on in the chancel.
- 15 In the centre gangway is the **brass** of Fayth Brook who died in 1508, the only named medieval memorial in the church. She lived in Cooling Castle.
- 16 Further west is an **indent** – a stone in which medieval effigies were once fixed. It had four figures and it is likely that this marks the burial place of Richard Brown who died in 1530 and his three wives. His will requested burial in 'ye mydyll alley'.

Photographs by Dr John Salmon
Front cover photograph by Andy Marshall



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