

St James Church

North Cray

1. THE CHURCH

St James Church, which is in a Conservation area, is situated at the end of a short but wide approach road on the East side of the North Cray Road. North Cray Road was a tree-lined country lane leading from Ruxley Corner to Bexley but was converted into a dual carriageway in the 1960's. The church, set in a churchyard ringed by ancient trees, is situated in the meadows beside the River Cray.

The church was once a private chapel for the owners of North Cray Place. Lord Vansittart lived here, and several members of his family are buried in the churchyard. He was the British Ambassador in Berlin and his funeral service at St James was one of the best attended on record.

The present simple but beautifully proportioned building dates from 1852 when the then existing church was enlarged and rebuilt. The chancel was enlarged in 1870 in memory of the Western Wood family and damage by enemy action in world war two was repaired in 1953.

The building is stone faced with pitched wooden roof and tiled. The steeple is of wood, shingled.

The church is currently used for Sunday and mid-week services as defined by the Rector and Parochial Church Council. However, occasionally concerts are held in the church to which the wider-community is invited.

2. INTERIOR

The origin of the church is unknown but a reference to it appears in 1120. The list of Rectors goes back to 1538. In 1557 Cardinal Pole closed the parish church of Rokesley (or Ruxley) and united the parish with that of North Cray. From 1575 the Rectors were referred to as being of the parish of North Cray-cum-Ruxley.

Although the building is Victorian, many ancient features have been transferred or built into the fabric. With the dark 'horsebox' pews it gives the impression of being a much older building.

3. ALTARS

There are three altars in the church; the main altar is in the Sanctuary in the east, the two others are in the Nave - Lady Chapel in the North East, and the Ruxley Chapel in the South East.

4. MEMORIALS

Major memorials in the church are to:

- a) William Wiffin who died in 1636 and his wife
- b) Octavia Lady Ellenborough. This was sculptured by Chantry and equal to many in Westminster Abbey.
- c) Elizabeth daughter of William Bowes (who was Lord Mayor of London in the early sixteenth century), co-heiress, wife of William Buggins, Mother died 29th September 1659 aged 79 years'.
- d) Dwine Josias Bull who died in 1650 after twenty-four years as 'painfull pastor of the parish'!

5. WINDOWS

- a) The East window, which represents the Glorified Christ surrounded by Apostles, was replaced in 1952 as the original was destroyed by bombs during the war.
- b) The West window has five lower panels, the upper panels being shaped by the tracery. The general theme is Te Deum Laudamus. It dates from the re-building of the church in 1852.
- c) The three windows in the South wall and the two in the North wall are plain diamond leaded glass with sixteenth century 'Rendels' inserted.
- d) In the South West corner, in the West wall is a window in plain diamond leaded glass with three lower and two upper panels, each panel having a small figure in the centre, except the middle panel, which has two figures one above the other.
- e) In the North East aisle (Lady Chapel) the window has three panels of 'The Nativity' and was erected in 1953.
- f) The window of the South East aisle (the Ruxley Chapel) having three lower panels, the centre showing the Patron Saint of the church, St James, the left-hand panel a view of the church, and the right a view of the 'Five Arches' bridge over the River Cray. This was also erected in 1953 having been repaired after damage by enemy action.

6. CARVINGS

- a) The fronts of the choir stalls are beautifully carved with ornamental and pictorial panels. The four pictorial panels, two on each side, represent scenes of the Nativity; they are "the visit of the Virgin to her cousin Elizabeth", "Nativity scene", "the visit of the Magi", and "the presentation of Christ in the Temple". There is also an ornamental panel in front of the clergy stall.
- b) Behind the choir stalls on the North side is a mediaeval carving having nine panels representing the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy. This was given to the church by Canon H W Johnstone who was Rector for over 50 years from 1864 to 1919.
- c) The carvings on the side of the Sanctuary were given by F C Capel of North Cray Place in memory of his parents.
- d) In the Sanctuary the carved reredos is of Flemish origin of the fifteenth or sixteenth century and may have been carved by a pupil of Albrecht Durer. Beautifully carved on dark oak, in very high relief with great detail, the left-hand panel represents an Epiphany scene and the right-hand panel the Flight into Egypt.

7. FURNITURE

- a) The lectern, of Eagle design, is a copy of a Belgian original.
- b) The organ, more functional than decorative was played by Sim Reeves, the Victorian tenor, when he was a boy of fourteen.
- c) The octagonal stone font is thought to be over 600 years old.
- d) The oak Jacobean pulpit has the date 1637 carved on it. It is richly carved and originally had a sounding board above. It is not known when this sounding board was removed.
- (e) The Royal Arms in the North aisle is of cast iron, being the arms of James II. Its purpose is not known but it may have been a fire-back.

8. CHURCHYARD

Three sides of the churchyard are bounded by walls – the fourth is bounded by a fence and hedge. The one on the west side contains an 18th century wrought iron gate. This was repaired in 2001 following extreme damage caused by a fallen tree.

At the East entrance to the churchyard is a Celtic cross in memory of those who gave their lives in the wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45. In the South West corner of the cemetery is a striking modern memorial to Honoria Edith Vansittart who was born on the 20th July, 1883 and died on 3rd February, 1962. Close by, other members of the family are interred, including Capt. Robert Arnold Vansittart of the 7th Dragoon Guards (died in January 1939) and his wife Alice (died 10th February 1919).

Also in the churchyard can be seen three notable heraldic monuments. Two of these commemorate members of the Frith family from 1701 onwards, including a Rector of North Cray, the Revd Edward Cokayne Frith. The other is to Edward Moberley and his wife and son.

In an enclosure surrounded by an iron railing are memorials to members of the Holt family, who occupied a nearby Elizabethan house known as Mount Mascall which is now replaced by a block of flats. The family have died out. Inscriptions are over the graves of Sir Vesey George Mackenzie Holt, KBE (died 6th December 1923 aged 69), his wife Mabel Mary (died 10th August 1930 aged 76), Martin Drummond Vesey Holt (died 1st April 1908 aged 18) and Geoffrey Vesey Holt (died in action 2nd September 1917 aged 19).

An interesting link with Ruxley is the Bedell family monument. They were tenants of Ruxley Manor House and farm from the last quarters of the seventeenth century.

The churchyard was closed by Order in Council on 29 May 2000 and is now maintained by Bexley London Borough.

There is a cemetery (churchyard extension) in Parsonage Lane, North Cray, which covers approximately 2.5 acres – this is still open for burials. Part is used as a memorial garden for interment of cremated remains.

9. THE BELFRY

In the belfry are three bells, one dated 1727 and the other two 1857, one of the latter having been recast. They were made by Means and Company at Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London. The bells were re-furbished by Whitechapel Bell Company in 1999 and re-hung for dead-ringing.

10. OTHER PEOPLE CONNECTED WITH ST JAMES CHURCH

A short distance north from the church is Loring Hall, which was the home of the statesman Lord Castlereagh. After his suicide in 1822 he was buried in Westminster Abbey.