

# St James's Church, Swimbridge

Apart from its early 14th-century tower, topped with a leaded broach spire like Barnstaple's, most of the church was rebuilt in the 15th and 16th centuries, with a variety of wagon roofs and ceilings. Its particular interest lies in its lavish furnishings, perhaps because the patronage of the living belonged to Exeter Cathedral. It also survived its Victorian restoration of 1880 with a comparatively light touch, possibly due to the famous incumbent at the time, the Rev. 'Jack' Russell, who gave his name to the eponymous terrier.

It was generally agreed that, like the font canopy at Pilton, the structure here is a confection, perhaps of the 18th century and fortuitous in its similarity, bringing together the canopy, the elaborate Gothic/Renaissance rising font cover (much renewed), the simple lead bowl



Fig. 4 Carved oak 16th-century bench-end. The dog looks suspiciously like an early form of Jack Russell terrier

and its octagonal casing panelled with finely carved 16th-century Renaissance work perhaps of Continental craftsmanship with one later panel. It certainly fits together neither physically nor stylistically.

The 44 ft long by 10 ft high, early 16th-century, traceried rood screen across the nave and aisles is a dazzling *tour de force* of carving with hardly a space left between the fleshy motifs, and the fan vaulting completely preserved – still almost completely Gothic in style. It was interesting to compare the rather coarser work on the east side to that facing the Nave. Where the screen crosses the arcades,

openings were made for small altars, each with a reredos (the southern one is a replacement). There are also a number of traceried bench ends of typical North Devon/Cornish type incorporated into later pews (Fig. 4) and a good 17th-century three-panelled chest carved with flowerheads and lunettes which might fit into a group

In contrast to the superb woodcarving, the late 15th-century hexagonal Beer stone pulpit is much cruder, if exuberant, in its execution, carved with saints beneath nodding (three-dimensional) ogee canopies. Unlike that at Pilton, it belongs to the work of a local Devon school of carvers of which several examples remain. It was good to see considerable traces of red and green colouring still apparent to give some idea of how colourful the stone and woodwork originally looked.

The church contains several monuments of the Jewell/Barnstaple School in need of a good clean, including that to Tristram Chichester (d. 1654), the demi-figure portrayed with head in hand, of 'melancholic adolescent' type (as Clive Easter put it). Pevsner more curtly summed it up as 'deplorably bad'!

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