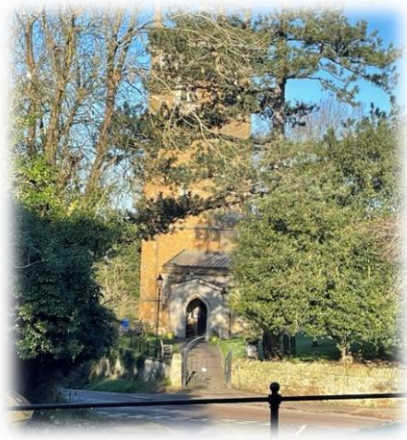
A Tour of St James's, Gretton

Inside the church

Gretton's oldest church, St James the Great, is a Grade 1-listed building on the northern edge of Rockingham Forest, a royal hunting ground dating to William I. The church sits atop a Jurassic limestone ridge overlooking the Welland valley, at the bottom of which the River Welland forms the border between Northamptonshire and Rutland.



A few miles along the ridge to the west, hidden by trees and a bend in the hills, but just visible from the top of the tower or from outside the churchyard gate as you look down Station Road, is Rockingham Castle. Originally built of wood under William I ('the conqueror'), it was rebuilt in stone under William II (William Rufus).

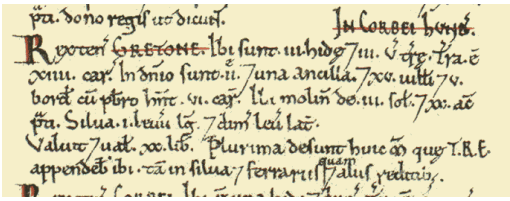
St James's church as we know it today, dates to very soon after the Norman invasion but has obviously evolved over the centuries. Much of the building was renovated in 1893, but evidence of the much older structures can readily be seen: from the early Norman nave (about 1100 – around the same time as the oldest parts of the castle), through medieval expansion and the addition of a tower, Reformation iconoclasm, Georgian and Victorian refurbishment, and up to the very recent repairs to the chancel in 2001 – this last revealing some of the old architecture and decoration that had been hidden for centuries.

What's in a name? There is evidence of pre-Roman Iron Age and Roman activity in and around Gretton, but the village's name comes from the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) for, according to your sources, a gravelly or a large settlement.

The Old English word *'great'* can mean 'big' (as in the modern word 'great'), but more usually meant 'course' as in 'rough', as do the related words '*greot'* and '*grot',* meaning coarse, grit or grain(y). Thus, in the 8-10th Century Old English translations from Latin of De Consolatione Philosophia by Beotius, there is the line: 'how can a man be righteous *gif he nan* ***grot*** *rihtwisnesse on him næfð*?' - if he hasn't even a grain/pebble of righteousness within him?

Most place-name history sources favour 'gravel' (but suggest great as an alternative), and in our case this may refer to the sand and gravel banks at the bottom of the valley, on the border with Rutland. And that there was a mill by the time of the Norman conquest might even suggest grain (for a discussion of the history of Gretton Mill, see Nick Balmer's blog). Whatever the precise meaning, as nearby place names attest, Gretton was on the very contested border between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (over time, Anglia, Mercia and Wessex) and later Danish settlements (e.g. Thorpe and Corby).

Even before the Norman Conquest, Gretton, or 'Gretone' was a royal manor. The Domesday Book, of 1086, states that the manor is owned by William 1 ('the conqueror') and was previously owned by King Edward ('the confessor).



The Domesday Book, written so that William and his administration had some idea of who owned what, and where the money was, tells us that 'Gretone' comprised over 20 households, which would put it in the top 40% of English settlements by population at the time (so maybe the name means great after all!). And it was worth around £20, based on farming – arable and grazing - and a (water) mill. Domesday also records a priest, but there's no record of a church.

This does not mean that there was no earlier Anglo-Saxon church, however. The Domesday Book records only 59 priests and very few churches in the whole of Northamptonshire, and this is thought to be a huge underestimate of what really existed. Afterall, Domesday's aim was a list of power, wealth and land not little chapels. Nearby Kirby ('Cherchberie' in Domesday), was much smaller than Gretton, even before it was destroyed to make way for Kirby Hall and its gardens. Its name, in both Old Danish/Norse and Norman French, means

settlement with a church, yet Domesday mentions neither a church nor priest there.

Although this is pure supposition, the position of the current church – on high and next to a year-round spring – and its being surrounded by a landscape rich with thousands of years of historical human activity, would make it a very likely site for not only an early church but maybe even pre-Christian worship.

The Normans soon set about building, or possibly re-building, a church, made from local stone, on the current site in Gretton. The oldest part of today's church is the Norman nave, built very soon after 1100, in the Romanesque (or 'Norman') style. This is the central part of the current nave, now bounded by the two rounded arches on each side leading through to the north and south aisles.

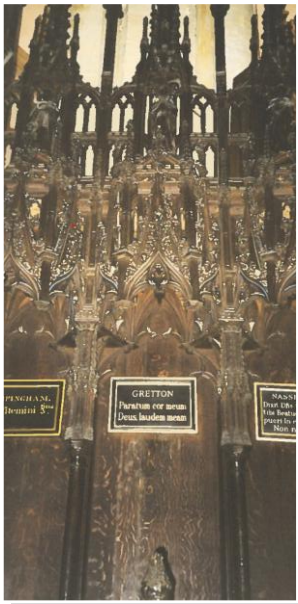
The original church would probably have been just this small, low, box-like structure, although maybe with a small semi-circular apse at the east end. However, aisles were constructed only a few decades later. Pevsner suggests the north aisle, and its arches and pillars (on the left of the picture above) date to around 1130 and the south aisle extension to a few decades after that. Building these aisles would have blocked out much of the light, so the nave was quickly also built higher, with

windows, creating a clerestory similar to that we see today (the current clerestory windows, however, are probably the result of Victorian renovation).

So, the original church was much shorter than now, and not so high. If

you stand in the middle of the current nave and look above these mid-twelfth century rounded arches on both sides of the nave, you can still see the remains of some of the original, early Norman church's windows (smaller, round arches) embedded in the walls, beneath the clerestory.

Having built churches and appointed priests, funded from their lands and local taxes, a pious Norman revival, which explicitly deemed the Anglo-Saxon church corrupt, led to local manorial lords gifting the churches they had built, along with land and its associated income ('prebends'), to local cathedrals or monasteries. Thus, around 1146, St James's, like many other churches, rather than being linked to the King and the local Manor, became a Prebend of Lincoln Cathedral. In the Anglo-Saxon period, especially following the Church of Rome take-over of the more informal Celtic church structures, diocese were large, changeable, and based largely on shifting Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. In 1072, following the Norman invasion, and major ecclesiastical restructuring enabling the appointment of Norman bishops, Bishop Remigius transferred his 'see' (from the Latin *sedes* = seat) to Lincoln, and his new Lincoln cathedral became the administrative centre for a huge diocese that covered much of central England. Some four hundred years later,



in 1541, as part of restructuring and the Reformation during the reign of Henry VIII, Gretton should have become part of the new Peterborough Diocese. However, until the nineteenth century, Gretton remained an 'ecclesiastical peculiar' Prebendary of Lincoln – within the geographic reach of Peterborough diocese but in the gift of, and (perhaps more importantly) paying tithes to, Lincoln (this is discussed further in our history of Gretton's clergy pages). You can still see the stall for Gretton's prebendary canon in Lincoln cathedral. The move to Peterborough seems to have occurred around 1846.

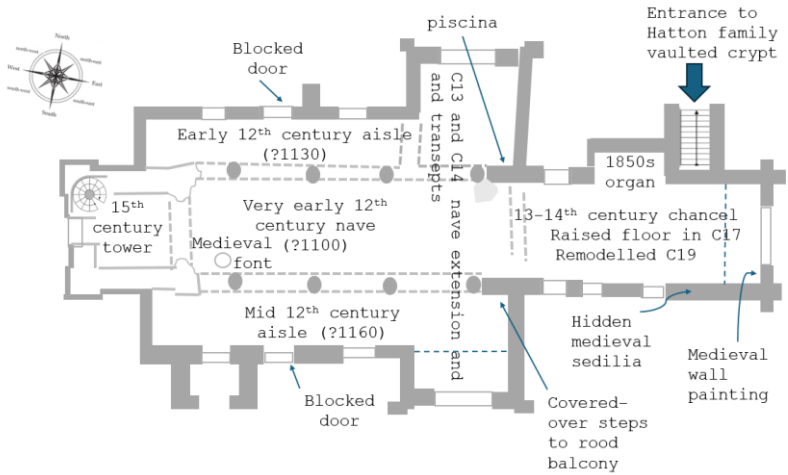
A copy of a memorandum written around 1870, states: '*The parish was enclosed and disafforested in 1839, and the tithe commuted into land, both for Gretton and Duddington [then part of the same benfice]. The land assigned in lieu of the Great tithes [ie the money that went to Lincoln] at Gretton was sold by the Eccles. Commissioners to the Earl of Winchelsea*…'

Although the title Prebendary of Gretton still exists, it is now an honorary title given to clergy and laity who have rendered particular service within the diocese rather than having a formal role in, or receiving income from, the parish. On Gretton's stall in the cathedral you can see the titles of two psalms, 107 (*Paratum cor meum*) and 108 (*Deus laudem meum*). The canons (prebendary or otherwise) of the cathedral are required to recite their allotted psalms each day 'if nothing hinders.' Thus, between them, all the psalms are recited every day. (Thanks to Derek Wellman, Lay Canon and Prebendary of Gretton 2008-2014 and assiduous reciter of his allotted psalms, for that and other insights.)

The current roof (along with the clerestory) is largely a Victorian rebuild of a much later, 15th Century, modification, covered on the outside with lead, aluminium and, in some places, Collyweston slate. In the mid-12th century it was probably steeply pitched, and likely thatched. It's also been suggested that there may have been a short tower at the west end of the old nave – completely hidden by later westward extension of the nave towards the current 15th century tower.

The aisles themselves support the church walls, but without the larger, and flying, buttresses typical of later churches, stopping the whole edifice collapsing depended (and still largely depends) simply on extremely thick walls. In our case, these were built straight onto the underlying limestone bed rock, with no real foundations. You can see the cracks and spread in the walls after nearly 1000 years of slow movement and settling. Nothing about the church is vertical or perpendicular to anything else.

The usual approach was to build the aisles, one at a time, and then knock through from the nave, in much the same way that you might build a kitchen extension nowadays, knocking through only after the extension is built.



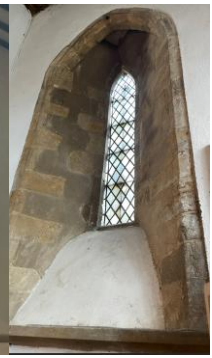
That the north and south aisles were built at different times can be seen from the slightly different architectural fashions in the columns that support the arches. On the earlier north side, the capitals on the

columns are square and have simple scalloped decoration, whereas on the slightly later south side the capitals are no longer square, and the scallops have extra decoration.


The windows of the aisles were renovated, and sometimes replaced, in the 19th century.

Extensions to the east end of the nave and aisles, with more pointed arches, were built in the early to mid-13th century, leading to what are now the north and south transepts – showing the development of the 'English Gothic' style.





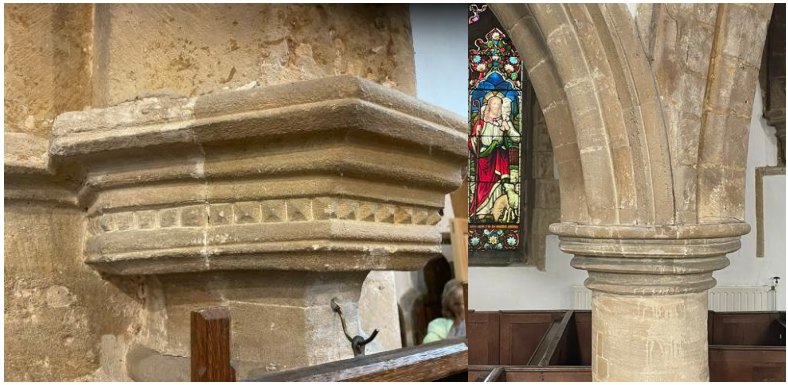
The two transepts, like the aisles, were built decades apart, the south later than the north, but the north was also part of the Victorian renovation.

Their columns and arches don't line up, further emphasising the asymmetrical nature of the church. The north transept has typical early-to-mid-13th century single and groups-of-three lancet windows, while in the south transept there is one existing and one blocked lancet window, and facing south, is a later curvilinear, tracery window with ogee arches, fashionable around the 1320s, but again renovated by the Victorians.

The building of the transepts was accompanied by a further eastward extension and a new, small chancel area. The remains of early 13th century chancel windows can be seen at the end of nave, just before the later grand pointed archway that leads to the larger 14th century chancel. While much of the roof was rebuilt by the Victorians, the beams immediately before the grand arch appear much older and were

likely re-used from the earlier medieval roof.

The taller and pointed 'Early English' arches to the transepts had to be supported by new or, at least, modified, columns and half columns, some round and some hexagonal, topped by the now more fashionable round or hexagonal rather than just square capitals with deep mouldings and decoration such as the nail head on the eastern-most column before the chancel on the south side.



The transepts would have originally housed chapels, perhaps to Mary, perhaps to other saints. While the north transept is pretty plain (a combination of early English and Victorian rebuild), the slightly later south transept contains what Pevsner refers to as 'sumptuous and baffling arcading', comprising deep mouldings with dogtooth and stiff-leaf carving, and a face with its nose cut off, thanks, presumably, to an enthusiastic 16th or 17th century reformer.

Pevsner suggests one of these small arches might have been a squint – a small window that allowed those in the side chapel (maybe nuns or priests) to observe the moment of the 'elevation of the host', which would have been hidden in the chancel from the laity in the nave by a now long-gone rood screen. Way up and above the decorated arches in the south transept is a blocked door that would have led to a balcony running across the top of this rood screen.

Near the mouldings, and by the new refectory built into the south transept, are two possibly 18th century decorative wall tablets of the decalogue or Ten Commandments. These were popular during the protestant revivals, as educational reminders to the increasingly literate congregations.

In the north transept, covered by a modern statuette of Mary, is a small piscina, with a drain to consecrated ground, that would have been used to wash Communion vessels.

A further extended chancel, with a large tracery east window and rectangular side windows, followed on during the 14th century. A fragment of a medieval wall painting of a figure and buildings can be seen next to the eastern window. More paintings were discovered during renovation in the early 2000s but were covered over to preserve them. It is, however, a reminder of how brightly coloured the interior of the church would have been pre-Reformation, the walls covered in such paintings and the chancel separated from the nave by a brightly decorated rood screen.

All extensions to the building, including this 'new' chancel, align neither east-west nor

with each other, as can readily be seen when looking down from the top of the tower.

The chancel floor was raised in the late 17th early 18th century to fit a vaulted roof over the crypt of the Hatton family of Kirby Hall. The large square south-facing windows were put in then. The Northamptonshire Historic Environment Record says that recent, 21st century, renovation showed on the south side of the chancel 'the remains of three blocked lancet windows dating to the 13th century. On the north side two similarily blocked windows were exposed, together with a third low level window possibly re-used as a funerary monument. Both walls exhibited clear evidence of rebuild or lift associated with the windows added in the 18th century.'

During this recent renovation, which involved temporarily stripping back much of the chancel, in the south wall, beyond the choir stalls and before the Georgian panels of the sanctuary, a brick-filled, medieval sedilia was found. This is where the clergy would have sat when officiating at services.

Slightly more comfortable wooden seats now stand in front of where those older (and colder) seats are now hidden behind a protective white-washed panel. The photo (from Gretton Local History Society's archives) is from when the chancel was repaired in 2001.

Most of the church is built from local limestone rubble, often rendered, but the 15th century, 'Perpendicular' style tower was built into the west end of the church from ironstone blocks, and linked to the nave by new, rather narrow, pointed, ironstone arches.


It was constructed in four stages, each divided by a horizontal string course, with each stage slightly stepped in, and the whole supported by slender 'clasping' buttresses.



St James's is said to be the highest (not, though, the tallest) church tower in Northamptonshire – it's certainly visible from miles around along the Welland valley. It has small, narrow windows, carved out of individual blocks, that let a little light into the stairs, larger ones for the clock-level floor, and also small squares of lighter stone, seen on the outside, possibly filling putlog holes, originally left for inserting wooden scaffolding poles that allowed for regular maintenance. The church tower can be seen on the earliest map of Gretton, dating from 1587.

It's likely that around the same time as the tower was built, the church roof's pitch was flattened and covered in lead with a plain surround. The clerestory was likely remodelled, with new stylistically Decorated period windows, around then as well – although todays windows are Victorian replacements, or at least refurbishments.

If you were rich enough, it was fashionable to build church towers in the 15th century, complete with battlements, gargoyles and pinnacles. This was partly to give thanks for having survived the plague of the previous century, and partly, of course, just showing off – what's more, it was affordable as the 'Black Death' had wiped out many families, concentrating wealth in fewer hands.

Entry to the tower's stairs is through a door, below floor level, in the northwest corner. It's kept locked as these stairs, embedded in the wall, are narrow, steep and, while repaired lower down, are often worn and with no risers higher up. Bell ropes go through a wooden clock-level floor, then up to the top of the bell tower.

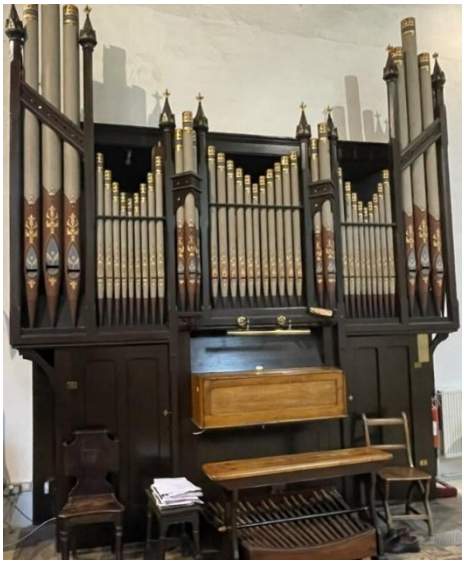



At the very top of the steps is a trap door that opens onto the tower's roof. Many villagers remember paying a small donation to the church on various holidays to climb up to the top and take in the view (which is great) – but the insurance costs would far outweigh any income that might be made from this nowadays.


Leaving the tower, and returning to the nave, most of the box pews, along with the pulpit, and the wall panelling and altar rail of the chancel and sanctuary are 18th century, Georgian, and the pews may have come from elsewhere. The hymnbook shelves on backs of the pews often have holes in them, which used to hold gas lamp poles. The choir stalls are much more recent, dating from the most recent refurbishment, around 20 years ago. The font, like the tower, is in the 'Perpendicular' style, perhaps 15th century.

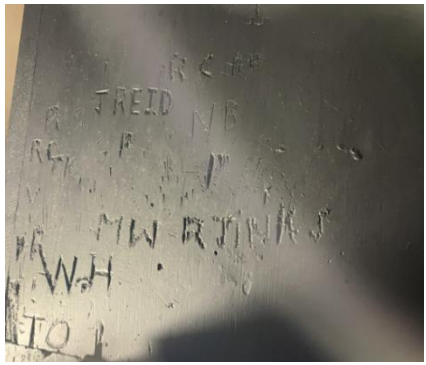


In the north wall of the chancel is an extension housing the church's organ. It is a two manual organ plus pedals, with 564 pipes (ranging from one inch to 16 feet long), and 13 stops, and, although it's been here for over 150 years, its origins are a bit of a mystery.



The Stamford Mercury of 3 December 1880 reported that the 'organ built by Bishop and Son of London was used for the first time'. However, a plate on the organ (old screw holes suggests this replaced an earlier plate) states that it was 'improved by Bishop and Starr, 1871' and Bishop and son have no record of the organ until after its arrival in Gretton. So it seems the organ was at least second hand, and that Bishop and Starr 'improved' another maker's organ This included adding at least one register and several stops, and removing the original builder's plate. The main two theories are that it came from St Luke's, Leicester, where it was already second hand, and was originally built by Joshua Porritt, or that it was originally built by '?Bevington c1860'. Whatever its background, it is a wonderful, beautiful and historic thing.

The northwards extension that makes the organ chamber, incidentally, officially dates to sometime after 1880, as that's when Faculty was issued by Peterborough Diocese - so at least one and possibly nine years after the organ's arrival. This perhaps illustrates a longstanding Gretton tradition of 'build first and ask permission later.'



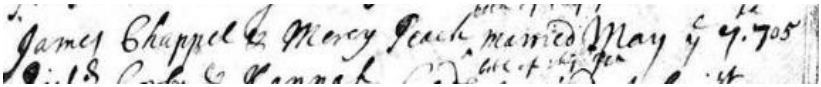
Hidden around the side of the organ, near to where the hand pump would have been, but an electric blower now sits, are some scratched names, presumably of naughty choir boys or girls, some of them recognisable as remarkably similar to those of current villagers. The electric blower was fitted in July 1942.

The organ seems to have replaced an earlier harmonium. In 1866 the churchwardens' accounts record, 'it was further agreed that Thomas Warner receive 50/- per annum for playing the harmonium' - and earlier still there are records strings being bought for a church band.

There are many 17th Century and later memorials in the chancel, for example to Leigh and Henry Clarke (1657 and 1664), the 'Ladies Hatton' (1684) and various other members of the Hatton family, who owned Kirby Hall.

James Chappell (spelled with varying numbers of p's and i's in different records) was a Black family servant of the first Viscount Hatton, who was Governor of Guernsey in 1672. James rescued members the Hatton family after lightning struck a gunpowder store at the Governor's residence, Castle Cornet, an event recorded in one of the

largest memorials in the chancel. Left a pension by Hatton, James settled back in Gretton, where after the death of his first wife Elisabeth, he married Mercy Peach in St James's and became a landlord - thought to be the first black landlord in England - probably of the nearby Hatton Arms, itself one of the oldest pubs in Northamptonshire.



Although there are records in the church of his marriage and the baptisms and deaths of various Chappell family members, no records of his or their graves have been found.

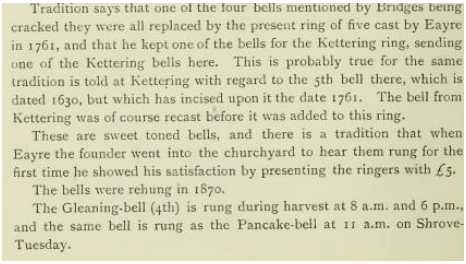
At the northwest end of the church is the mechanism of the original church clock. The plate says it was made by Robert Fox of Uppingham in1745. Although no record of Robert Fox can be found, other Foxes as either clockmakers or whitesmiths are recorded in the area and soon after this date.

The clock is also engraved with the names of the two churchwardens at the time, Thomas Boon and Robert Laxton – two local family names that appear in the village records back to the 16th Century and on some of the earliest gravestones in the churchyard.

The current clock and clock face date to the late Victorian refurbishment of the church. It was made by Gillett and Johnston of Croydon, and cost £135 plus fitting, the total bill of £155 being paid in 1897 by Mrs Gibbon of Gretton House.

Back in the tower, you can see the bell ropes that lead up to the mid-18th century bells. These were cast by Thomas II Eayre of Kettering in 1761, apparently recycling older bells. Thomas II was the son of the famous clock maker, bell founder and map-maker Thomas Eayre of Kettering.

Gretton's bells must have been one of Thomas II's final projects before he was declared bankrupt the following year. You can read a detailed account of the bells in 'The Bells of Northamptonshire' published in 1878 by Thomas North. The £5 apparently presented to the ringers in 1761 would be worth around £800 today!



Tradition says that one of the four bells mentioned by Bridges being cracked they were all replaced by the present ring of five cast by Eayre in 1761, and that he kept one of the bells for the Kettering ring, sending one of the Kettering bells here. This is probably true for the same tradition is told at Kettering with regard to the 5th bell there, which is dated 1630, but which has incised upon it the date 1761. The bell from Kettering was of course recast before it was added to this ring.

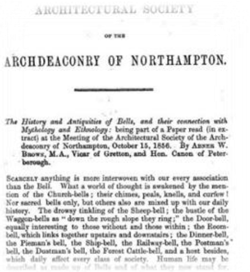
These are sweet toned bells, and there is a tradition that when Eayre the founder went into the churchyard to hear them rung for the first time he showed his satisfaction by presenting the ringers with £5.

The bells were rehung in 1870.

The Gleaning-bell (4th) is rung during harvest at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., and the same bell is rung as the Pancake-bell at 11 a.m. on Shrove-Tuesday.

The first bell has the inscription *TININTUS RAPIDOUS SCINTILLANS SPARGO PER AURAS* EAYRE KETTERING, the second *STATUTUM EST OMNIBUS SEMEL MORI* 1761, the third *LAUDATE DOMINUM CYMBALS SONORIS* 1761, the fourth *CREDE RESIPISCE MORI MOMENTO. 1761. MORTE BEATA NIHIL BEATIUS,* and the fifth MY SOUNDING IS EACH ONE TO CALL, TO SERVE THE LORD BOTH GREAT AND SMALL 1761. WILLIAM ROWELL & WILLIAM BOON C. W. The fifth bell, pictured here, also strikes the hour from the clock via a hammer (and is very loud if you are standing next to it at the time).

There is one further bell in the cupola at the very top of the tower and inscribed THOMAS NORRIS MADE ME 1636 RECAST 1922. Norris bell foundry was a family business in Stamford (their old foundry is now the Tobie Norris pub). This bell is now disconnected, but was used to strike the quarter hour, and originally was a 'priest's bell', a single bell rung by 'an officer of the church' in the five or so minutes between the tower bells being rung and the start of the service.



ARCHITECTURAL SOCIETY

OF THE

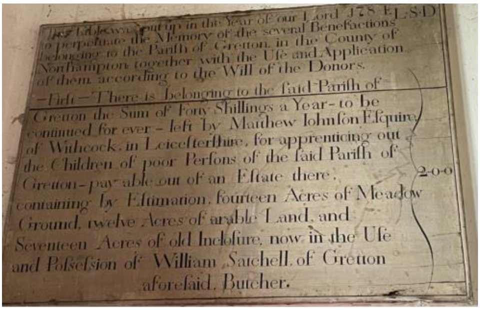
ARCHDEACONRY OF NORTHAMPTON.

The History and Antiquities of Bells, and their connection with Mythology and Ethnology: being part of a Paper read (in extract) at the Meeting of the Architectural Society of the Archdeaconry of Northampton, October 15, 1856. By ABNER W. BROWN, M.A., Vicar of Gretton, and Hon. Canon of Peterborough.

SCARCELY anything is more interwoven with our every association than the Bell. What a world of thought is awakened by the mention of the Church-bells; their chimes, peals, knells, and curfew! Nor sacred bells only, but others also are mixed up with our daily history. The drowsy tinkling of the Sheep-bell; the bustle of the Waggon-bells as "down the rough slope they ring;" the Door-bell, equally interesting to those without and those within; the Room-bell, which links together upstairs and downstairs; the Dinner-bell, the Pieman's bell, the Ship-bell, the Railway-bell, the Postman's bell, the Dustman's bell, the Forest Cattle-bell, and a host besides, which daily affect every class of society. Human life may be

Bells were one of several subjects close to the heart of Abner Brown, vicar of Gretton from 1851. He is buried just outside the south porch with his wife and daughter, so we will look a bit more at his life and works as part of our tour of the churchyard.

If the vestry is unlocked, then you will be able to see an interesting plaque on the wall inside from 1784 describing money left to the parish for 'apprenticing out the children of poor persons' payable by from arable land and 'old inclosure'. Investigating the enclosures in Gretton is an ongoing project. And above the door, on the way out, is a royal coat of arms, refurbished in the 1990s but originally probably early 18th century. We're not yet clear on the exact date of the original, but royal arms were introduced after the Reformation to make it clear that the king (or queen) was head of the Church of England, made a legal requirement in the late 17th century, and then rather ignored in the 19th.



The main door to the church is also probably 18th century and leads to the 19th century porch. On the way out, take a look at the wooden sign on the porch wall explaining how a grant of £20 in 1803 (worth around £1800 today) paid for some repairs to the church and the seats for 'the free use of the parishioners' - you might want to nip back into the church to make use of a seat before exploring the churchyard.

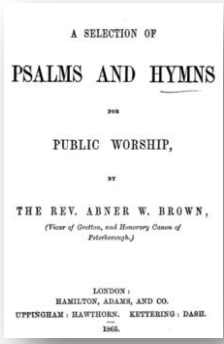
The churchyard

Technically this is the Upper Churchyard, closed for new interments since the mid 1990s. The current, open 'Lower Churchyard,' is a hundred yards or so down Station Road.

The Upper Churchyard is a Site of Local Biodiversity Significance and has areas carefully maintained for wildlife, recognised by a Bronze Award from the Northants Wildlife Trust. You can find more about this and the results of our wildlife surveys elsewhere on this website, and you will find several benches as you wander around where you can take in the views and contemplate both human and natural history.

If you stand facing the porch, then immediately to your right are the graves of Rev. Abner Brown, his wife and a daughter.

Rev. Brown was of Scottish ancestry, but born in 1801 in Jamaica, to a plantation and slave-owning father with a family seat in Melrose and a portfolio of properties in Edinburgh. Abner was brought up in Edinburgh, where his father died when he was only fifteen, leaving him an orphan but with a good income from his inheritance. He went to Edinburgh University and then married Maria in 1824. Always drawn to Anglican ministry, Abner was ordained at Peterborough Cathedral in 1831, and was the vicar of first Pytchley and then, from 1851, Gretton. While at Pytchley, both his young sons died of scarlet fever and are buried there. As the vicar of Gretton he set up the village school, the fire brigade, the allotment society and a lending library. He also wrote a series of books and articles on religious, archaeological, architectural and historical matters. His publications – his *Selection of Psalms and Hymns* is still available while is his '*History and Antiquities of Bells…*' can be read online. He died in Gretton vicarage in 1872, his only surviving daughter having married the new curate.



A SELECTION OF

PSALMS AND HYMNS

FOR

PUBLIC WORSHIP,

BY

THE REV. ABNER W. BROWN,

(Vicar of Gretton, and Honorary Canon of Peterborough.)

LONDON:
HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO.
UPPINGHAM: HAWTHORN. KETTERING: DASH.
1865.

Opposite the Brown family graves, to your left as you face the porch and near the bench, are the remains of a cross, said to date from the 14-15th centuries.

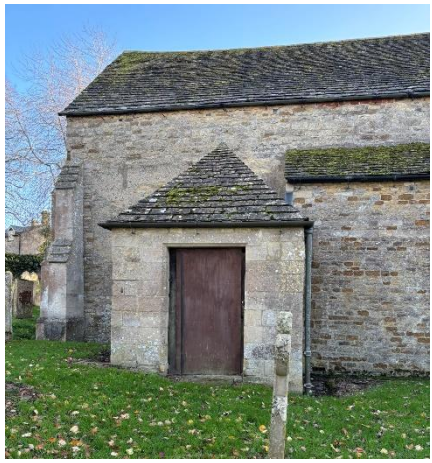
Walk clockwise round towards the northwest of the church, and just below a wooded, steep and walled escarpment, you might make out a cobbled track leading to a water trough, which collects water from a nearby spring.

The trough drains to a cobble-lined 19th century wagon wash, which in turn drains into some medieval fishponds. In front of the treed escarpment is one of several wildlife areas in the churchyard, home to many birds and small mammals, and a route into the churchyard for foxes, badgers and deer, often encountered on summer evenings. Helping wildlife wasn't always a priority at St James's - in 1853 the churchwarden's records state 'it was agreed by all that an allowance

should be made for the destruction of sparrows of sixpence per dozen for old sparrows and threepence for feathered young ones…'

You can get a better view of the wagon wash later by leaving the churchyard and walking down Church gap to below the escarpment. The track continues down to a footpath that goes across fields to the river and Thorpe by Water.

Close against the northern church wall, is a grave slab, much eroded but with evidence of carvings. This has obviously been moved from elsewhere in the churchyard and its history is unknown; its carvings comprise a cross with unusual side branches.



Further along the church wall, the locked door at the northeast end of the church leads down to the 17th century crypt for the Hatton family of Kirby Hall, of whose descendants (through marriage into the Finch family and assuming the name Finch Hatton) became Earls of Nottingham and Winchilsea. You can find several memorials to members of the Hatton family inside the church's chancel.

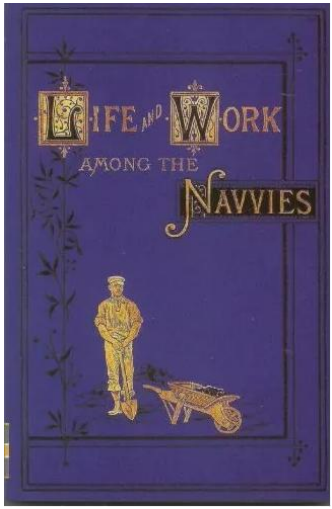
Continuing further around the churchyard, through gaps in the lime trees, you can see tree-lined hollows below the cart wash. These are the remains of several medieval fishponds, presumably linked to the long-demolished medieval manor house.

By the way – have you noticed how the ground now rises steeply across the churchyard, and the east end of the church appears to be below ground level. While some of this may always have been the case, mostly it's because of over 900 years' worth of villagers being buried there. The majority of graves are unrecorded; grave markers only really came into use in the 18th century. The oldest gravestone in our churchyard is from 1620 (Jane Laxton), but otherwise they start in the 1740s (Ann, William

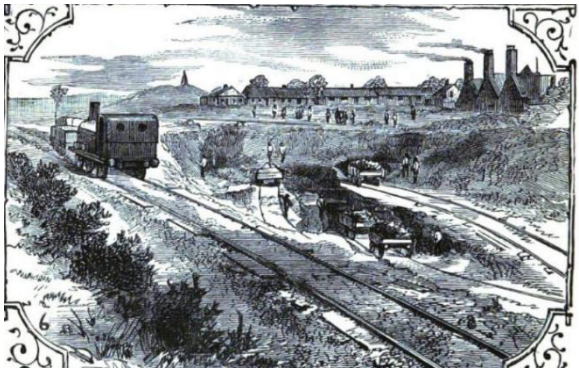
and Mary Pridmore, 1742, 1745 and 1749), all near the east end of the church.

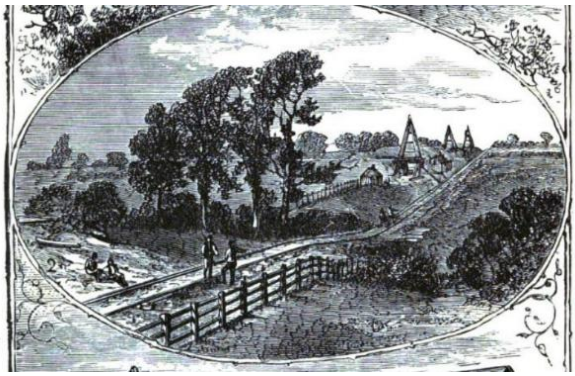
Beyond the fishponds is the railway embankment for the Kettering-Manton line, still used by freight trains and occasional passenger steam trains, although none stop at Gretton station (now a private house at the other end of the village). Built in just two years, 1876-78, the line includes the famous Welland, or Harringworth, viaduct. Gretton was the centre for the professional engineers, who rented houses in the village, while twelve formal huts to house the navvies and their families were built on Gretton hill. Around this developed various works, such as brick factories, and an informal 'shanty' village. Many people, labourers, their families and others, died during the construction and some are believed to be buried, unmarked and unrecorded, somewhere in the churchyard behind where you now stand, just north of the church.

'Life and Work among the Navvies', by Reverend D. W. Barrett, the vicar of Nassington, is a first-hand account, published in 1880, of the construction of the railway and the people involved. He describes how originally the railway was meant to pass closer to Gretton village than it does, but the hill kept slipping, forcing the embankment to be built further down into the valley.



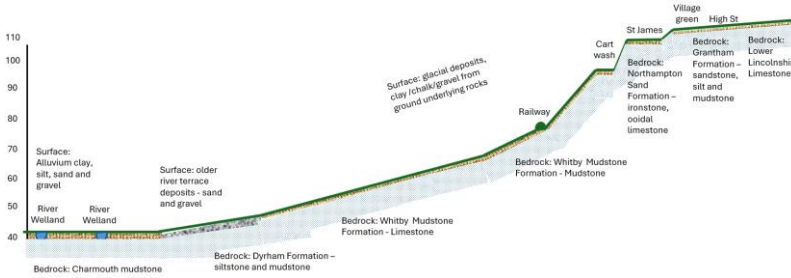
He wrote: '*Anybody who had any concern for the soul of his brother man, had he passed along the line in the early part of the year 1876, must have acknowledged that there was a pressing call for a separate and special organisation to supply the spiritual needs of the larger bodies of workmen who were beginning to congregate here and there at intervals along its course.*





The various clergy through whose parishes the line was about to pass became anxious as to the effect these new visitors would have upon their people, … but all at length saw the necessity of "something being done." Among the earliest efforts which were made, were those at Gretton and Corby… The Rev. A. White, Vicar of Gretton, was enabled in the latter part of 1875 to secure the services of an earnest-minded layman (Mr. W. Chapman), who began at once to act as Lay-reader, confining his ministrations to these parishes. Thus "The Gretton and Corby Mission" had its beginning. Whilst this effort was struggling into life, a similar movement was going on in other districts…' Eventually the various local Missions were amalgamated into just three, headed by Rev. Barrett, who for a while based himself in Gretton, that being the central spot, before shifting his headquarters to Seaton. The missions ran Sunday schools and church services for this huge new population in and around the village, and raised funds to look after the sick, attending the dying and organising funerals.

Beyond the railway is the River Welland – the border between Northamptonshire and Rutland. The river is divided into two separate streams here, although if you're local you will know that they often flood and join into one following heavy rain in winter, leaving Uppingham and Lyddington cut off from Gretton.



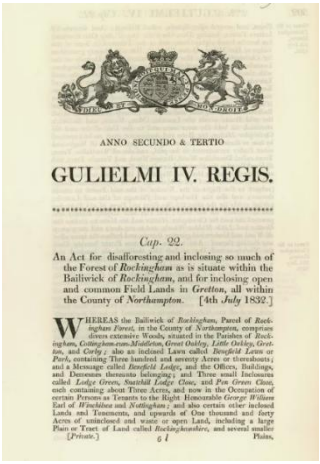
You are standing on a ridge of Jurassic limestones here, which stretches diagonally across England, down to the southwest 'Jurassic Coast'. St James's stands on an outcrop of ironstone, which can be clearly seen bulging from under the church as you walk down Church Gap. It has been mined for iron for at least two millennia but also supplied the darker building blocks of the church tower.

While some of the escarpments further to the east are a direct result of mining and the local iron and steel industry, you can also see evidence of a long agricultural history in the hills both sides of the valley.

The pre-enclosure, medieval field patterns of ridge and furrow are especially noticeable with the glancing sun at sunset. These views make a marvellous backdrop for wedding photographs.

As you continue round, through the line of lime trees, into the 'new' church yard, you will see an impressive head stone in memory of Reservoir Woods, who was born in a local gypsy camp and later lived in the village where she acted as nurse and herbalist. So well known and loved in the village was she, that after she died in 1911, villagers paid for this memorial.

Further on, there are more open views of the Welland valley. Although informal enclosures had happened for years, Gretton's situation and links with Rockingham Forest (plus anti-enclosure riots elsewhere in Northamptonshire) meant that '*An Act for the disafforesting and inclosing so much of the Forest of Rockingham… and for inclosing open and common Field Lands in Gretton…* was not approved until 1832. Although John Clare was a passionate defender of the commons (*Enclosure came and trampled on the grave / Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave…*), enclosure met with little resistance in Gretton by this time – not least as most landowners (including the clergy) did quite well out it.



ANNO SECUNDO & TERTIO

GULIELMI IV. REGIS.

Cap. 22.

An Act for disafforesting and inclosing so much of the Forest of *Rockingham* as is situate within the Bailiwick of *Rockingham*, and for inclosing open and common Field Lands in *Gretton*, all within the County of *Northampton*. [4th *July* 1832.]

WHEREAS the Bailiwick of *Rockingham*, Parcel of *Rockingham Forest*, in the County of *Northampton*, comprises divers extensive Woods, situated in the Parishes of *Rockingham*, *Cottingham-cum-Middleton*, *Great Oakley*, *Little Oakley*, *Gretton*, and *Corby*; also an inclosed Lawn called *Benefield Lawn* or *Park*, containing Three hundred and seventy Acres or thereabouts; and a Message called *Benefield Lodge*, and the Offices, Buildings, and Dovecotes thereunto belonging; and Three small Inclosures called *Lodge Green*, *Snuffill Lodge Close*, and *Pen Green Close*, each containing about Three Acres, and now in the Occupation of certain Persons as Tenants to the Right Honourable *George William* Earl of *Winchilsea* and *Nottingham*; and also certain other inclosed Lands and Tenements, and upwards of One thousand and forty Acres of uninclosed and waste or open Land, including a large Plain or Tract of Land called *Rockinghamshire*, and several smaller Plains,

[*Private.*] 4 I

We will add some pages on the history of church-owned land and the Gretton enclosures in the future – based largely on the excellent work done by Steven Hollowell).

At the eastern end of the churchyard, if you peer over the wall and through the trees, you might just make out lumps and bumps in the fields which are all that remains from the medieval manor house – the field is referred to as Hall Yarde in the C16 map mentioned above - and

it is believed that many of the stone houses in the village were built from its robbed-out walls.

Although very little of the house itself is left, the large 'pillow mounds' nearer the churchyard wall show there were medieval rabbit warrens linked to the manor house. Manor Farmhouse (with its banded ironstone and limestone walls and 1675 datestone) in the High Street was originally call Warren Farm as it overlooked these fields. Rabbits (or rather 'coneys' – 'rabbit' was originally the term for a baby coney) were introduced to England from southern Europe by the Romans, died out and then were reintroduced from the 12th Century onwards. In contrast to their modern reputation, they didn't do well in the English climate, and so they were an expensive luxury that had to be protected and guarded in man-made warrens, often with motes and a manned guard house. It was several hundred years before rabbits escaped and adapted to English habitats.

Near the south-east wall of the churchyard, beyond the trees, are two Commonwealth Grave Memorials from the First World War, to John Thomas Chapman and Arthur Coleman, both of whom died in 1918.

John Chapman enlisted in 1914, and was posted to France as part of the 1st Northamptonshire regiment. He was wounded three times, and lost an eye in the Battles of the Somme in 1916. After that, he was transferred to the Agricultural Company of the Labour Corps, set up to work the land in the UK, replacing the farmworkers called up for overseas service. He contracted pleurisy and pneumonia from which he died aged 35, while working in Cumberland.

Arthur Coleman volunteered in September 1914 and went overseas in May 1915 as part of the Pioneer Battalion, 12th Infantry Division. He was promoted to corporal in the field in October 1917. While doing stable duties in Armentieres, he was kicked in the face by a mule and suffered a fracture, and then developed TB. He was discharged from duty on medical grounds in June 1918, and he died from TB in December.

You can read more about both men, and others from the area buried elsewhere, in the church chancel. There are memorials to those who died in both world wars, and other conflicts, throughout the church, and, of course, the War Memorial on the village green.

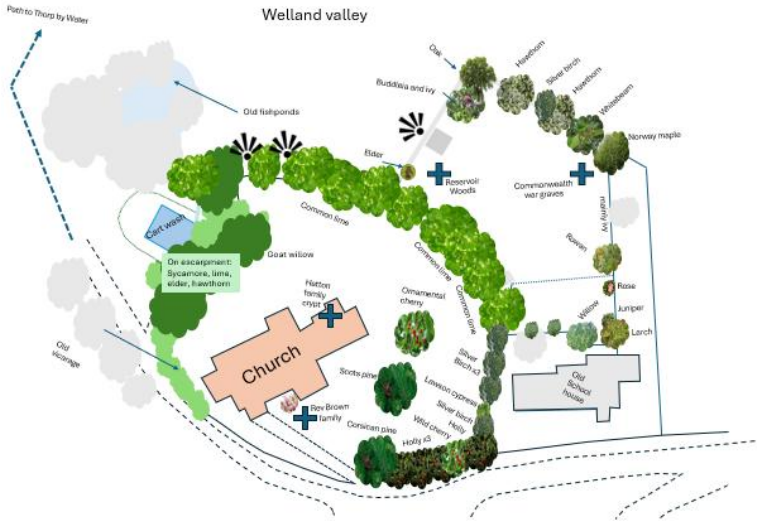
Beyond these graves, looking south-east over the churchyard wall, is the old village school, dating to Abner Brown whose family graves we saw near the church entrance, and now a private house.

Come through the lime trees again, to the south side of the church, and so the part of the churchyard with the earliest gravestones, and back towards the church entrance.

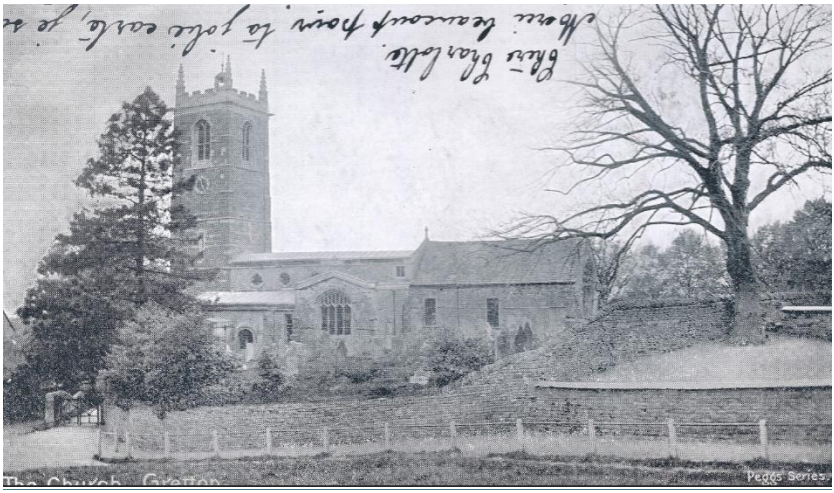
Make use of one of the benches as you go around for a rest, and to take in both the human and the natural history around you.

The churchyard is carefully maintained to be a haven for wildlife, with different lengths of grass and different habitats. The wildflowers and the trees support a diversity of insects, such as butterflies, moths and bees, which not only pollinate the wildflowers but provide food for birds, bats and larger mammals. It recently gained a Bronze Churchyard Conservation Award through a scheme run by the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust, and is part of a local network of nature-friendly sites.

If you nip back into the church porch before you leave, you might be able to see the bat droppings high up on the wall, produced by our summer colony of soprano pipistrelle bats.



If there's time, you might get a snack and something to drink at Lydia's, pausing to see the unusual village War Memorial, stocks and a whipping post on the village green. A walking guide to the history of Gretton can be bought from Lydia's.



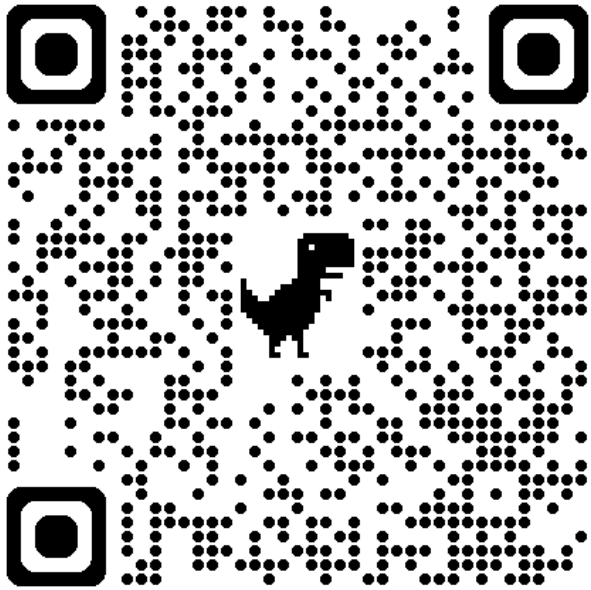
A postcard of St James's Gretton, sent to 'Chère Charlotte' in Berne, Switzerland, in 1905

Further information and reading

- The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture
- Historic England
- Buildings of England, Pevsner, revised Cherry 1973
- East Midlands Historic Environment Research Framework – Medieval Period
- Northamptonshire Historic Environment Record
- Aerial views of church with some history
- British listed buildings has photos of the church
- British History Online for maps and archaeology
- Gretton Neighbourhood Plan
- Finding graves in St James's churchyards (link to come)
- Gretton bell ringers
- A churchcrawler's guide to parish churches around Peterborough - Gretton
- Gretton Local History Society
- Trevor Yorke – English Churches Explained, Countryside Books, 2010
- Jon Cannon – Medieval Church Architecture, Shire Publications, 2014
- Andrew Ziminski - Church Going, A Stonemason's Guide to the Churches of the British Isles, Profile Books, 2024
- Collyweston slate: Collyweston Historical and Preservation Society and English Heritage video

We are constantly adding new information and links to this document.

To get an up-to-date, online version, complete with hyperlinks to other resources, go to https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/16602/page/96450/view/ or follow the link from the QR code below:



A tour of the church and churchyard, St James's, Gretton, Northants.

Version: March 2026 MB