



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST



# ST JAMES' CHURCH

Cooling, Kent



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CONSERVATION TRUST

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# ST JAMES' CHURCH

by Roy Tricker (Field Officer with The Churches Conservation Trust 1991–2002, church enthusiast, historian and lay canon)

## COOLING *and its Past*

'Cowling is an unfrequented place, the roads of which are deep and miry, and it is as unhealthy as it is unpleasant'.

So wrote the Kentish historian, Edward Hasted, in the 1770s, when Cooling, situated at the back end of the peninsula and Hundred of Hoo, must have been a very bleak and lonely place. Today it is still a small and scattered rural community, its population over the past two centuries having fluctuated between 100 and 200 people.

The Hoo peninsula is bounded by the Thames Estuary on its north side and the Medway Estuary to the east and south. Cooling is one of its northern parishes, the small village centre lying along the winding lane between Cliffe and High Halstow. To the north of the village stretch two miles (3.2 km) of Cooling Marshes, reaching to the River Thames.

The place-name suggests that this was originally the settlement of Cul or Cula's people. It is an ancient place, which existed as far back as AD808, when Coenwolf, King of Mercia, gave land in 'Culinges' to his servant. In 961 Queen Ediva gave land at 'Culinge' to Christ Church Canterbury. The manor belonged in the 1060s to Earl Leafwyne, King Harold's brother, who perished with him at the Battle of Hastings, and William the Conqueror fittingly gave it to his own brother, Odo, Bishop of Bayeux.

*Front cover: The tower and porch from the south-east (Boris Baggs)*

*Left: Interior looking east (Boris Baggs)*







In 1241 the de Cobham family became lords of the manor and the Cobhams held this manor (either through direct descent or through marriage) until the late 1600s. In 1381, the 3rd Baron, Sir John de Cobham, disturbed because French ships had sailed up the Thames to Gravesend, obtained a licence to fortify his manor house and so had Cooling Castle built. It was completed c. 1385 and was designed by Henry Yevele, the architect of several fine buildings, including the cathedral nave and West Gate at Canterbury, Bodiam Castle, Sussex and the outer walls of Windsor Castle. Sir John also built a bridge over the Medway at Rochester; he restored and beautified Cobham church, where he founded a college of priests and where he is commemorated by a fine brass.

Some future occupants of the castle were to achieve notoriety. Sir John Oldcastle, who had married a Cobham, was a keen supporter of John Wycliffe's revolutionary (and highly illegal) Lollard preachers. He was hanged and his body burnt on Christmas Day 1417. In 1554, during

the turbulent years of Mary's reign, Sir Thomas Wyatt and his men, in their efforts to overthrow the Queen, stormed the castle with cannon, breaking down its gate and part of the wall, because Lord George Cobham would not march with him to London.

In 1603 George Brooke and his elder brother, Lord Cobham, together with Sir Walter Raleigh, were involved in a conspiracy, resulting in George being executed and Lord Cobham dying in prison. Already scarred from the events of 1554, the castle continued to crumble and decay during the 1600s and Sir Thomas Whitmore built the present manor house between 1650 and 1670. It was purchased by the Comport family in 1795.

The church of St James dates mainly from the late 1200s and early 1300s, although there may well have been a Saxon church on this site. It consists of western tower, nave and chancel, with a south porch to the nave and a 19th-century vestry to the south of the chancel. The nave, chancel and the lower part of the tower were



gradually erected between c. 1280–1320, and form a complete village church of this period. It appears that the tower was heightened and completed later in the century, perhaps by c. 1400. The porch was rebuilt in the 19th century.

Until 1950, Cooling had its own rector, who lived in the tall Victorian rectory (now Cooling House and Cooling Lodge), along the road to the east of the church. For much of the 20th century the parish was of the Evangelical tradition, the patrons being the Church Association. The Revd Joseph Pratt, who came here from St Michael at Coslany Norwich in 1935 and left for St John's Ashbourne in 1950, ministered to a total population of 165 souls. Upon his departure the rector of Cliffe became also curate-in-charge of Cooling.

With five parish churches, all within about two miles (3.2 km) of each other, on this side of the Hoo Peninsula, there was a need for pastoral reorganisation and this resulted in Cooling church being declared redundant in 1976. Its parish became part of Cliffe, with St Helen's

church Cliffe as the parish church. Because of its great interest and associations, St James' church was vested in the care of what is now The Churches Conservation Trust in 1978 and, as a sacred and beautiful building, continues its ministry to hundreds of visitors each year. Since vesting, an ongoing programme of repair and conservation has been carried out under the direction of the Trust's architects for this church, initially Patricia Brock and more recently Alan Greening.

*Left: The south side of the church in 1801*

*Right: The same scene today (Christopher Dalton)*



Below: The first page of *Great Expectations*, Hogarth Press (Courtesy of the Dickens Museum)

Right: 'Pip's' graves in Cooling graveyard (Roy Tricker)

## ST JAMES' EXTERIOR and CHURCHYARD

The winding lane from Cliffe passes the remains of Cooling Castle, with its wonderfully preserved gateway, built to Henry Yevele's designs c.1385 by Thomas Crump, a Maidstone mason. A short distance further east, the church of St James stands guard to Cooling's western approach, the road bending twice to go round its churchyard.

It is Cooling **churchyard** which draws many visitors to this place, because we believe that it was here that Charles Dickens, who lived about 5½ miles (9 km) away at Gads Hill Place, Higham, was inspired to set the opening scene of his novel, *Great Expectations* which he began to write in September 1860.

*'...Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered*

*cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.'*

### CHAPTER I

**MY** FATHER'S FAMILY NAME BEING PIRIP, AND MY CHRISTIAN name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the authority of his tombstone and my sister—Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above*," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine—who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle—I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

[1]



In those days this churchyard must have been a wonderfully wild and eerie place and just the right setting for Magwich, the escaped convict, to appear out of the mists and terrify the young Pip. We can imagine the road as a rutted track, hardly a house to be seen and two miles (3.2 km) of marshes to the muddy foreshore of the Thames estuary. Today it is less wild, although not always less windy, and has more signs of civilisation. Where Pip looked across bleak marshes, we now look across meadows to the Thames. He would have seen the same distant hills of Essex but not the oil refineries and terminals at Thames Haven and Shell Haven, the sprawl of Canvey Island and, to the east, the distant tower-blocks of Southend-on-Sea.

To the south of the church tower is the handsome **chest tomb** of John Comport, of Cooling Castle, who died in 1827. Nearby is a worn headstone, with 13 little body stones, marking the last resting places of 13 children, from two families, all of whom died in infancy. To the west

of the headstone are Ellen (1854, aged 5 months), Sarah (1837, aged 3 months), and John (aged 1 month), the children of John and Sarah Rose-Baker, the son and daughter-in-law of Michael Comport of Decoy House. The row of 10 graves east of the headstone include seven Comport children, all born at Cooling Court or Cooling Castle. These are William (died 1771, aged 8 months), William (1773, aged 7 months), James (1777, aged 4 months), Francis (1775, aged 1 year and 5 months), William (1779, aged 8 months) and Elizabeth (1779, aged 3 months). Beside these are Sarah Elizabeth, daughter of George Comport of Gattons (died 1779, aged 3 months), Thomas, son of Michael Comport of Decoy House (1880, aged 3 months) and Mary, daughter of Michael and Jane Comport of Cooling Court, who died in infancy in 1767. It is Michael and Jane who were commemorated on the now illegible headstone. These are now known far and wide as **Pip's Graves**. Although there is no documentary proof and despite the fact that Dickens reduced their number to fit his

story, many people believe that it was these little graves that prompted his hero, Pip, to relate:

*‘... To five little stone lozenges each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their (i.e. his parents) graves and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine – who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle – I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trouser pockets and had never taken them out in this state of existence’.*

Because of its very special associations, this churchyard is also in the Trust’s care. It is bordered by mature trees and has a large and ancient yew to the south of the chancel.

A variety of **building materials** may be seen in the walls of the church, including flints, ragstone and other stones which were probably gathered from the local fields. In the bottom stage of the tower is a little of the distinctive banding of flint and stone which is used in a most spectacular way in the walls of the nearby churches at Cliffe and Higham.

The **tower** appears to be the final part of the 13th–14th-century church to be completed. Its west window has cusped intersecting tracery of



c. 1310 and the wide west doorway may be of similar date, although the identity of its arch has been lost beneath cement render. Simple rectangular apertures light the chamber above and the belfry windows are single, rectangular and trefoil-headed, possibly dating from the late 1300s. The western corners are strengthened by diagonal buttresses, reaching about half the height of the tower, which measures 52 feet (15.9 m) to the top of the plain parapet and about 56 feet (17.1 m) to the apex of the staircase turret which rises above the south-east corner. The small four-sided slated spirelet which caps the tower brings the total height to c. 62 feet (18.9 m).

The north and south walls of the **nave** and **chancel** are punctuated by sturdy buttresses and are pierced by two-light windows in a style which was fashionable c. 1310–30 within the Decorated period of architecture 1250–1350. Clearly their original stonework had weathered badly, causing the 19th-century restorers to

## INTERIOR

cover them with cement render, although preserving their original style and shape. In 1993–94 the east window of the chancel and the window east of the porch were renewed in stone. In the masonry of the south nave wall, to the east of the latter window, is a mediaeval mass dial scratched in a piece of stone. This was used to calculate when services were due to begin before the days of clocks.

The north nave doorway has long been blocked and its southern counterpart is sheltered by a rustic **south porch**, which was rebuilt here in the 19th century. In a print of the church in 1801 there is no south porch visible, nor a south doorway, because at that time it was the south doorway which was blocked, whilst the north doorway was used and was sheltered by the porch. This was certainly so in 1535, when John Braibroke’s will gave directions for his burial,

*‘in the churchyard without the north porche’.*

The present south porch does show signs of having been rebuilt, although it retains its 14th-century entrance arch, the outer side of which is very worn but the inner side still retains its original moulding.

Although the building is very simple in plan, the worship area comprising just a nave and chancel, its interior is remarkably spacious and well-proportioned, with a broad nave and a long chancel. The chancel, measuring 40 feet by 19 feet (12.2 m x 5.8 m), is almost as long as the nave, which is 50½ feet (15.4 m) long and 27 feet (8.2 m) wide. The base of the tower measures 11 ft 9 ins (3.6 m) north-south by 11 feet (3.4 m) east-west and its walls are about 3 feet (0.9 m) thick.

The **tower arch**, with its half-octagonal responds and moulded capitals, dates from about 1400 and is particularly tall and elegant. Fixed to the north wall in the base of the tower is part of the ancient **bell-frame** from High Halstow church, which was brought here for preservation in the late 1980s. A staircase of 65 steps gives access to the tower roof and to the three **bells**. The treble bell was cast by John Hodson of London in 1675, the second by John Palmer of Canterbury in 1614 (although it is wrongly dated 1641) and the tenor by an itinerant bellfounder named Michael Darbie in 1651. The bell-frame in which these bells rest is mediaeval, and has had little subsequent alteration.

The interior shows many signs of the restoration work which took place here in the 1870s and 1880s. The nave was restored in 1869–70, to the designs of Henry Robins (Jr) of Rochester, and at a cost of £333 16s. 11d. This included the provision of new floors and benches to replace





Left: The east end of the church (Boris Baggs)

Right: Mediaeval benches, west of the entrance (Boris Baggs)



the old box pews, which were sold. Further restoration was carried out through the efforts of the Revd Joseph Monk (rector from 1881–88). 1882 saw the restoration of the chancel exterior and vestry roof. Then in 1885 the chancel interior was restored at the expense of the rector and his wife. They, with the help of parishioners and friends, restored the interior of the nave in 1888. A plaque fixed to the eastern side of the organ records this.

The work included major refurbishing of the **roofs**. In the nave roof, the moulded cornices at the tops of the walls are partly mediaeval, along with the wall posts, the three tie beams that span the nave and maybe some of the carved woodwork of the arch braces linking the tie beams and the wall posts. The timbers above the tie beams, including the crown posts and the unusually long braces, are all of 1888. The chancel has a panelled wagon roof which,

with the exception of parts of the cornices, appears to be entirely 19th century, including the tie beam, made to match those in the nave, which rests upon carved stone corbels showing a pomegranate (south) and ivy leaves (north).

Although the north doorway is blocked, its mediaeval **door** still remains in place. This is a fine piece of 14th- or 15th-century timberwork, which still swings on its ancient hinges and carries the massive timber stock containing its former lock. On the wall above it may be seen the Royal Arms of Queen Anne. These were commissioned by the Trust in 2004 from Mr Gerald Fleuss to replace the original Royal Arms which had been stolen from the church in 1993. The frame, which was not taken, is the original.

Towards the west end of the nave, near the entrance (symbolising the Christian's entry into the family of the church by baptism) is the **font**, which dates from the 13th century and is

probably the oldest feature to be seen here. Its square ragstone bowl rests upon a central circular stem and four corner shafts. On the north, south and west faces of the bowl are carved shallow trefoil-headed arches, whilst on the east face, between two arches is a primitive cross on a stepped base, with four circular discs above and below the arms. The meaning of these is not clear, although they probably conveyed some item of Christian teaching and symbolism.

In the nave, to the west of the font, are six worn and rugged mediaeval **benches**, with small and simple fleur-de-lys-shaped terminations to their ends. Their rather primitive nature may suggest that these were the original benches, provided for the nave in the early 14th century, making them over a hundred years older than most of England's mediaeval benches. The rest of the nave is fitted with benches of 1869, the design of which was clearly influenced by the mediaeval originals.

On the wall beside the south door are details of Comport and Rose-Baker children who are buried beneath 'Pip's graves'. This was researched by the late Mr Whitebread.

The **pulpit** is constructed of 18th-century panels, although it was remade in 1888 and placed upon a new stone base, in which is a small door, revealing a lower (and older) floor beneath. Nearby is a plain **parish chest**, in which parish documents and valuables were stored. It is equipped with the customary three locks, to which the rector and two churchwardens had keys, so that all three had to be present for the chest to be opened.

In the south-east corner of the nave is a 17th-century **communion table**, which served as the main altar in the sanctuary until 1885. There was a side altar here in mediaeval times, because in the wall nearby is a 15th-century **piscina** for use when the Mass was celebrated here.



*Arcading over wall seats in the chancel (Boris Baggs)*

Cut through the east wall of the nave is a small **squint**, which enabled a priest celebrating at this altar to observe the priest at the main altar.

This side altar would have been one of two which flanked the chancel arch, in front of the carved rood screen which once stood here. Above the screen was the rood loft, along which it was possible to walk, to tend the candles burning before the great rood (the figures of the crucified Christ, flanked by his Mother and St John) which would have stood on the rood beam. Evidence of where some of this woodwork fitted can be seen in the sides of the **chancel arch**, although the notches were carefully filled in by the Victorian restorers. The Revd Joseph Monk was clearly aware of their significance and had the places where the rood beam fitted inscribed with the words 'Holy Rood'.

The spacious chancel is a noble piece of late-13th- and early-14th-century design. Although the present **choir stalls** date from 1902, the original **arcaded wall seats** remain in the north and south walls and form a rare survival of Early English craftsmanship, although they do show signs of judicious restoration which took place in 1902, when the altar rails were also provided. The 1902 work was the gift of Mr Assheton Leaver as a memorial. There are six stone seats each side, set beneath plain pointed arches resting upon circular shafts of Purbeck marble. Those on the south side continue eastwards to form a set of three

**sedilia** (where the Celebrant, Deacon and Subdeacon sat during parts of the mediaeval High Mass), which are set beneath trefoil-headed arches, and finally a superb **double piscina**. This feature helps to date this work, because double piscinae (with two drains) were fashionable only during the brief period around c. 1272–1307, when it was thought that there should be separate drains for the disposable water from the ceremonial cleansing of the Communion vessels at the end of the Mass and for the water from the washing of the priest's hands before consecrating the bread and wine. From that time onwards the water from the cleansing of the vessels has always been 'reverently consumed' by the priest. Here the two drains are set beneath a pair of handsomely-moulded trefoil-headed arches, with a trefoil (i.e. three-lobed design) above. Set into the recess is a stone **credence shelf**, upon which the cruets, containing wine and water, were placed.

The east window contains **stained glass** by Clayton & Bell and a plaque nearby records that it was given in memory of the Revd William Henry Arome Leaver. He was Rector here from 1889 until his death (at the early age of 43) in 1897; his grave is in the churchyard just to the east of this window. He had served three curacies in Somerset and one in Fulham, and Cooling was his first and only living. The glass shows the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, with his 11 apostles beneath (one has only the top of his head and his halo visible). Two angels with

*The shell-lined vestry (Boris Baggs)*

inscribed scrolls hover above and in the tracery are angels carrying an orb and a crown, with the 'IHC' emblem of Our Lord's name at the top.

The **north-east nave window** also contains 19th-century memorial glass. This shows scenes of the Good Shepherd and of Jesus carrying his cross to crucifixion. A brass plaque nearby records that it was given in 1884, in memory of John and Sarah Murton of Cooling Castle.

The **organ** – a single-manual and pedal instrument by Alfred Kirkland of Holloway – was probably placed here c. 1880.

Visitors to the tiny **vestry** to the south of the chancel are rewarded with something which is extremely rare, and possibly unique in any English church. The walls of this small 19th-century room are lined from top to bottom with thousands of cockle shells. Above the doorway is an inscription in small shells which is difficult to read and parts may well be missing. It records '*I.M. I.C. C.WARDENS*' (possibly John Murton and John Comport, Churchwardens) and the date 'AD 1833' (or maybe 1888). One could be forgiven for suspecting that the Revd Joseph Monk may have had a hand in this novel innovation, because it is clear that these were not just for decoration, but that the scallop shell is the emblem of St James the Great – the patron saint of this church. It was also worn in the hats of pilgrims to his shrine at Santiago de Compostela.



## MEMORIALS

There are several memorials, in addition to those already mentioned, on the walls and in the floors of the church, commemorating people who were once part of this community. The following may be seen on the walls:

- Brass inscription (originally on a slab set in the floor) to Sybell, daughter of Gilbert Thurston of London and wife of the Revd Nathaniel Sparks, who was rector here for 28 years. She died in 1639. (Chancel, south)

- Stone plaque to Mrs Rhoda Pickering (d.1722), wife of the Revd Robert Pickering, who was rector here and also vicar of Lamberhurst. The tribute to this 'follower of Holy and Godly Matrons' is worth reading. (Chancel, south)

- A plaque of white marble on black, with a chain and anchor, to John William, eldest son of John Murton of Cooling Castle. He died, aged 28, in 1852, having fallen overboard from the *Monarch*, off Rio de Janeiro, on a voyage to Calcutta. The inscription quotes from the log of the ship's Captain – 'And so perished one of the finest and best hearted seamen who ever trod a ship's deck. I have lost a trustworthy officer and a valued friend. Peace be to his remains'. (Nave, north of chancel arch)

- Small brass plaque to Fanny Muggeridge JP (1943). (Nave, near north-east window)

- A plaque, by Flack of Strood, to George Comport (1824), of Gattons House, Cliffe and Sarah his wife (1847), who are buried in a vault in the churchyard. (Nave, south)

- A brass plaque to George Willoughby, who died in 1899, aged 36. (Nave, south)

In the nave floor, working from east to west, are the following:

- A slab with the brass effigy of a lady. She is Feyth Brook (d.1508), wife of John Brook, Lord Cobham, of Cooling Castle.

- A plain, uninscribed burial slab.

- A slab with indents for former brasses of four figures, with an inscription and a small badge above. This is the memorial to Richard Brown, who died in 1530 and in his will asked to be buried in 'ye mydyll alley' and bequeathed a cow for his burial fee. The presence of four indents suggests that he had three wives, although his will does not make this clear.

- A slab with a brass inscription to Thomas Woodyear, who died in 1611.

## THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 330 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk).

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

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The Trust has also published a free Educational Booklet for teachers' use on school visits, with ideas for educational and community approaches linked to the National Curriculum. For further details and to obtain the Booklet contact the Education Officer by email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In compiling this brief guide to Cooling church, the author acknowledges the earlier research of Mr Jack Redsall and the advice of Iain Foreman and John Vigar. He also pays tribute to those who have tended this sacred spot over the centuries and those who continue to care for it today.

*Back cover: The tomb of John Comport (1827) in the churchyard (Boris Baggs)*