

The Church of St Andrew, Coston, Leicestershire: A Brief Guide



The small village of Coston, in north-east Leicestershire, lies on the B676, 7 miles NE of the market town of Melton Mowbray. Now part of the civil parish of Garthorpe and Coston, Coston was a separate civil parish before 1936.

St Andrew's church, a Grade I listed building and still an active place of worship, occupies a prominent raised site adjacent to the main road. To the passing motorist, the church's most distinctive feature is its slim tower, which rises from within the body of the church and is topped by a spire. The fabric is a mixture of ironstone and limestone, both of which could be quarried within a few miles. Like most churches of medieval origin, it contains architecture and fittings from many periods. Key features include a west wall of c.1070, two panes of 14th-century stained glass, the earliest 19th-century Gothic Revival chancel fittings in Leicestershire and a memorial to an actor who lost his life in a tragic accident on a London stage. The dedication of the church is not recorded until the 16th century, but may always have been to St Andrew. The earliest evidence is from 1523, when William Greyn in his will requested burial 'in the church yard of saynt Andrew of coston'.

The building comprises a nave with a clerestory above, north and south aisles, west tower (largely within the nave) and chancel (Figure 1).

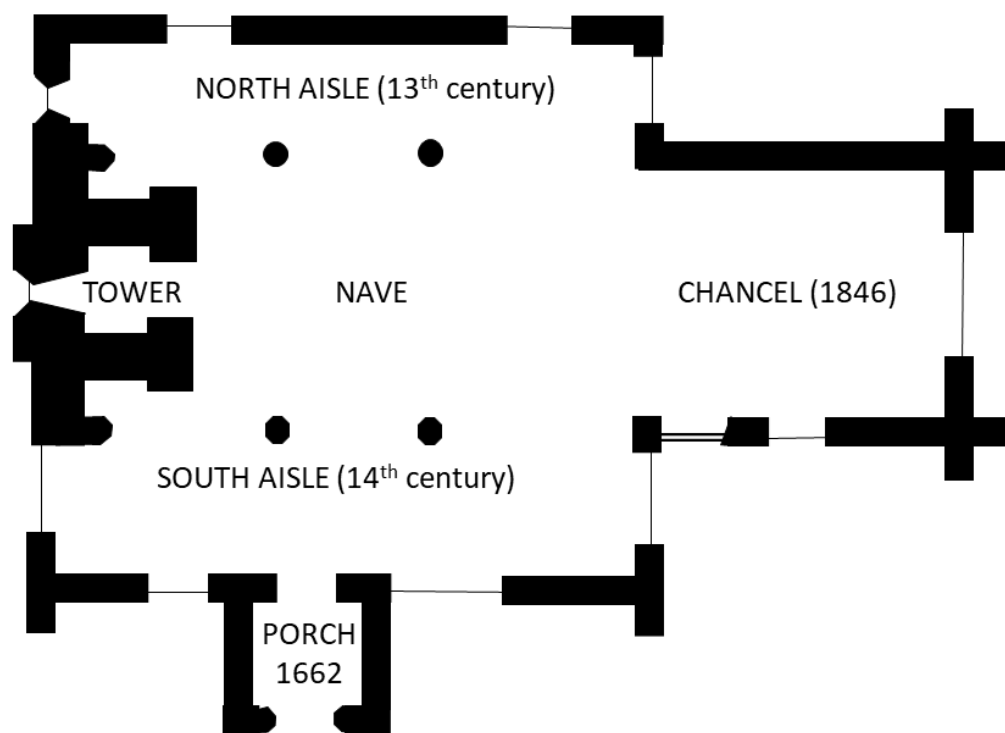


Figure 1: Plan of the church

The oldest part of the church is the west wall of the nave, which contains a window with a round head which is deeply splayed inside. This was almost certainly part of a church built in the 1170s by William de Ferrers, the lord of Coston manor. He founded a priory at Tutbury (Staffs.) c.1080, and mentioned a church at Coston in its foundation charter. The slight projection to the west at the centre of the current tower suggests the church may have had a bellcote before the tower was built.

A north aisle was added in the 13th century. Its west wall is limestone, with a single-lancet window which was heavily restored in the 19th century. The north and east walls are of ironstone. The arcade between the nave and the north aisle is of three bays with Romanesque (round-headed) arches resting on octagonal capitals, supported on cylindrical piers (columns) with incised bases. The aisle roof sits on four carved stone corbels on the north side, including one with an angel holding a shield, which was probably once painted with the arms of the donor, and (at the west) an exhibitionist monkey. Some original carved roof timbers survive at the top of the aisle wall on the north side. The stained glass was added to this aisle in the 1880s, with the west window showing a biblical scene of Jesus welcoming children to him, and the windows on the north depicting two pairs of saints, James and John, and Peter and Paul.

The south aisle was built in the 14th century. Externally, this is the most elaborate part of the building, with two carved stone gargoyles, to throw rainwater away from the wall, a carved frieze of vine leaves, a parapet running along the length of the aisle and stumpy pinnacles with carved niches on the two buttresses. It was clearly built by a prosperous community or wealthy donor. The easternmost of the buttresses includes a mass dial for calculating the time. The top of a single lancet window, visible externally near the porch, may indicate that this aisle replaced one built in the 13th century.



Figure 2: Piscina and sedilia in the south aisle



Figure 3: The 14th-century glass in the east window of the south aisle (L), with detail (R)

Inside the church, the south arcade of three bays has pointed arches set on octagonal piers, with carved heads on the nave side of the two westernmost arches. The east end of this aisle (Figure 2) contains three sedilia (seats for priests) and a piscina (basin), indicating that elaborate services were once held at an altar here. This aisle may have functioned as a chantry chapel, where prayers were said for the soul of the donor, and perhaps also as a Lady Chapel. A moulding to the right of the sedilia suggests there was a tomb here. The floor was substantially raised in the 19th century. The east window of this aisle contains two panels of 14th-century glass, depicting the crucifixion and the

Virgin Mary (Figure 3). The frieze seen outside the church also appears internally. A stoup for holy water survives just outside the door, now within the later porch.

The font, in the south aisle, is of the late 14th or 15th century, and would have replaced an earlier font. Two sides show evidence of locking points for a bar which would have secured the cover before the Reformation, to protect the consecrated baptismal water from theft.

It is not known when the tower was constructed, but the church stands on sloping ground and there may have been sound structural reasons for building it inside, rather than outside, the existing church. The top stage of the tower and its spire were added in the late 14th or early 15th century. There were three bells in the tower in 1552 'of a corde' [chord].

The clerestory above the nave was added in the 15th century. Its roof rests on three carved stone corbels on each side. The central corbel on the north is of a man playing pipes (Figure 4), and shows traces of red paint, which is probably part of the original colour scheme. The other carvings on the north are an owl and a man's head, and on the south a crowned bearded head, an angel (now headless), and two heads on one corbel with a strange creature above them. Parliamentary troops were in this area in 1646 and the angel may have been deliberately defaced at about that time, in accordance with a parliamentary ordinance of 1644, that any image of an angel or saint in a church should be demolished.



Figure 4: Medieval corbel showing traces of paint

In the late medieval period there would have been a screen between the nave and chancel, with the rood (a figure of Christ on the cross, flanked by St Mary and St John) above a loft (horizontal beam wide enough to walk along, where candles would be placed). There is no trace of a rood stair, so access to the loft was probably by ladder. William Marshall, Coston's rector who died in 1535, left 6s.8d. (33p) in his will for the rood screen to be gilded, perhaps in a few key places. The rood and its loft would have been removed c.1547 as part of the changes of the Reformation.

A description of the church survives from 1639, probably written by archdeacon William Warr. It reads:

"The Church and Chauncell want paintinge. The seate belonging to the Hall to be Cutt and made but 4 foote high, Mr Thomas Michells seate to be removed nearer the dore one foote and a halfe, the seates to be amended and made handsome, the Church yard mounds to be Rayled round 5 foote high, the partition betwixt the Chauncell and the Church to be made newe. A new pulpett to be made and the deske to be ioyned [joined] to it and painted greene, new seates to be made in the South Ile [aisle] of the Church, the cover of the faunt [font] to be made with a spire and painted like to the pulpett. Erasmus [a translation of the New Testament] wanteth byndinge [binding], there wanteth a scarlett hood and Tippett".

The Hall was the manor house, and the manorial pew probably stood in an aisle or the chancel. Thomas Mitchell was a wealthy freeholder who owned land in Coston, South Witham (Lincs.), Harston, Knipton and Sproxtton. If a pointed canopy was ever made for the font, it does not survive. Coston's rector, Edward Heron, was a Doctor of Divinity whose qualification entitled him to wear the academic hood and tippet, the latter being a silk band worn round the neck, or hung from the hood.

The Revd Edward Heron supported King Charles I in the English Civil War. He stayed within the royalist garrison at Belvoir Castle for 'about two years', employing nine curates over that period, named as Tompson, Thory, Muston, Wright, Boston, Colby, Silverwood, Hewitt and Houlton, to attend to his duties at Coston. He escaped from the garrison when Parliamentary soldiers stormed the stables in 1646. Heron was called before the county parliamentary committee in 1646, where he stood accused of staying in the garrison, spying on parliamentary supporters and plotting against them, and employing 'scandalous' curates, including a wheelwright, a tanner and the father of an illegitimate child which was murdered by its mother. Heron denied everything except staying at Belvoir Castle. He was fined £70 (about four years' income from the parish).

The porch was rebuilt in 1662, as indicated by the inscription outside (now badly worn) 'IR WL CW 1662'. IR (or JR, as the capital letter I was often substituted for a capital J in this period) and WL were probably the CW (churchwardens) when this work was done. It was rebuilt again in the 1830s.

John Lowthorp, instituted as rector in 1686, was one of a small number of clergymen known as non-jurors, who resigned their livings in 1689 following the exile of James II. They refused to swear allegiance to the new monarchs William III and Mary II, believing that the oaths they had taken to James II could not be broken. The Revd Timothy Thorp was installed in his place. The entry in the parish registers for the Revd Thorp's burial in 1736 noted that 'He was about 80 years old, and his Death was very much regretted by all that knew him. In his Life-time he was Charitable without Ostentation; Courteous without Guile; and Pious without Hypocrisy'.

Archdeacon James Bickham commented in 1777 that the King's arms, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments needed to be displayed on the walls. The churchwardens spent three guineas (£3.15) in 1780 for a painting of the King's arms on board, with another shilling (5p) paid for carriage. It continues to hang in the church, above the south door, and was restored in 2020.

St Andrew's church in 1845 had a combined 'double-decker' pulpit and reading desk near the northern side of the chancel arch, the font was towards the west end of the north aisle and there was mixture of seats, many facing east, but others arranged in squares, with two further pews in the south-west corner facing north. The chancel included, at the east end of the south wall, a piscina and triple sedilia of the late 13th century, with a low moulding to their right, probably over a tomb, similar but earlier than those still surviving in the south aisle. There was also a stove in the chancel,

suggesting this may have been where the lord of the manor had his family pew. The fabric was described in 1842 as 'good or fair', but the windows and fittings were in poor condition.



Figure 5: Coston church, from an engraving by James Douglas, published by John Nichols in 1795

The church was restored in 1846, under the leadership of the rector, the Hon. and Revd John Sandilands, second son of 10th Baron Torphichen. The changes he made are noteworthy for Coston and in the history of church restoration in Leicestershire. He employed Sheffield architects Weightman and Hadfield, then among the leading architects of the Gothic Revival and principally known for their commissions to build Roman Catholic churches. In the nave, the plaster was stripped from the walls, a door in the north aisle was walled up, the floor was probably made level by raising the floor of the south aisle, and was reboarded and paved with black and red tiles, patterned quarries were added to some of the windows, a stone cross was added to the gable at the east end, the font was moved to a position by the south entrance, a new pulpit and lectern were installed, a gallery was taken down and new seats were fitted. These provided seating for 186 people, including 155 free sittings and 31 rented seats for those who could afford a regular contribution. An application for a grant from the Incorporated Church Building Society was withdrawn when they raised questions about the modest size of the population and the lack of specific seats for children, but a grant of £30 was provided by the Church Building Society of the County and Town of Leicester.

It had long been established that any costs relating to a chancel were the financial responsibility of the rector. Alongside the restoration of the church, Sandilands personally paid for the old chancel to be demolished and completely rebuilt in the Gothic Revival style. Over the next 40 years this would become the predominant style for church interiors, but it was radical at the time, and Coston's chancel includes the earliest 19th-century sedilia and piscina installed in an Anglican church in Leicestershire. There are also encaustic floor and wall tiles, oak stalls, an aumbry in the north wall (small cupboard space for valuables), a sanctuary raised by three steps and a stone cross on the gable end. The walls were plastered, presenting a contrast to the newly-scraped nave and aisles, and there was a plaster ceiling under the slate roof. The stained-glass artist William Warrington, whose

early work had been under the direction of A.W.N. Pugin, the pioneering architect of the Gothic Revival, produced the centre and upper panels of glass for the new east window, which depicts the life and death of St Andrew. Oak 'desks for the choir' completed the fittings. The Revd Robert Molesworth, rector here from 1865 to 1871, gave a harmonium (small pump organ) to accompany the choir. Another organ was purchased for the church in 1898, following fund-raising efforts by the parish.

The north window of the chancel contains a memorial to the Hon. and Revd Sandilands, who died in 1865, and shows Jesus, St John the Baptist, a sentence (the *Agnus Dei*) from the communion service and the Sandilands arms. This theme is echoed in the unusual carved and painted altar and the reredos behind it, which were given to the church in 1888 by the 11th Baron Torpichen (Robert Sandilands), the son of Coston's late rector, in memory of his parents. He also gave the altar rail, in memory of his brother, Commander Francis Robert Sandilands RN, who had died in 1887. These were dedicated at the same time as a new tenor bell, given by the then rector, the Revd Arthur Rendall, in memory of his wife, Helen Bliss Rendell, who had died in 1887 aged 36. This joined two existing bells in the tower, dated 1671 and 1729, which were rehung. Unfortunately, the total weight of the bells and the stresses they created when rung proved too much for the slim tower, and two of the bells were removed in the 1930s on the advice of the church architect. These were later sold, and only the bell of 1671 remains in the tower.

A large bronze memorial in the chancel remembers Temple Crozier, an actor who was fatally stabbed in a tragic accident on a London stage in 1896, aged 24, when a real blade was substituted for a theatrical prop. This memorial was given by fellow members of his profession. Temple was the son of Coston's rector the Revd James Crozier, who presented the brass eagle lectern to the church in 1902, when he resigned the living upon losing his sight.

The other prominent memorial in the church is the stone fixed vertically near the door to James Phelp, the lord of Coston manor, who died in 1814, aged 60. This stone probably originally lay horizontally on a tomb placed against the wall, which was railed on three sides, accounting for the marks around the edge. This was moved in 1846 to provide room for more seats.

The village has shrunk on several occasions over the centuries, most notably in the mid 14th century, as a result of the Black Death, then through enclosure of the land for pasture c.1600, and again during the agricultural depression of the late 19th century. The Church of England decided to unite the parishes of Coston and Garthorpe in a single benefice in 1929. Further changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have created ever larger benefices, and the church is now part of the benefice of South Framland.

St Andrew's church remains an active place of worship, a community building and a heritage asset, as it had been for nearly a thousand years. It was a major blow to such a small parish when lead was stolen from the church roof in 2017, but through the efforts of parishioners and supporters of the church, funds were raised to enable a new roof to be put in place, the east window and painted royal arms to be restored and changes made to the seating at the west end of the south aisle to meet community needs, there being no other public building in the parish. As part of a national Bats in Churches project (a partnership between Natural England, Historic England, the Church of England, the Bat Conservation Trust and the Churches Conservation Trust), bat trays were suspended over the south aisle in 2021 to help ecologists gain a better understanding of how the church is used each year by a maternity roost of Natterer's bats, with the longer-term aim of helping the bats and church users to share this building in harmony.



St Andrew's church, in Spring 2020

Coston church would like to thank the following organisations for supporting the restoration work of 2017–20, and their help in securing the future of St Andrew's church:

National Lottery Heritage Fund
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Leicestershire Historic Churches Trust
Garfield Weston Foundation
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Bats in Churches Project

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