

## *The Commandery and Ansty Church*



Window detail in St. James Church

From the year 1211 the Knights Hospitaller settled in Ansty forming a small Commandery comprising the Commander or Preceptor, two Knights, a Chaplain, three minor clerics, the Commander's Esquire and six servants. This small group and their local helpers began to build the present church. It was completed in the year 1230, more than a quarter of a century before the main part of Salisbury Cathedral was finished, and dedicated to St. James. Quarters were built near the church for the serving men, and a large fishpond was constructed; this pond is now stocked with rainbow trout and is the home of several different species of duck, and in some years, a family of swans.

Close to the church, but on the east side of the fishpond, the members of the Commandery built a hospice, probably begun in the year 1230, where they tended travellers and pilgrims on their way to the Abbey of Shaftesbury or to more distant shrines. A part of this building was used as a refectory and guesthouse. The building that stands on that site now measures 110 feet by 30 feet. Inside, set into the west wall, are two pairs of stone seats with stone canopies above them, each side of the large fireplace; raised stone mouldings, still to be seen on the walls, were probably the frames for murals. The original steeply pitched roof of the hospice was destroyed by fire in 1922. A watercolour in the porch of the church shows how it looked before the fire. The building was used for many years as a wheelwright's workshop and for the repair of agricultural machinery. Its purpose has not yet been established conclusively. It was substantially repaired in 1986 when the present windows were inserted.

Ansty Manor, a fine stone house on the west side of the pond, was probably the domestic building of the Commandery, and although much of it was rebuilt after the Reformation, some massive stone walls inside the house may be a part of the building given to the Knights Hospitaller in 1211. Recent alterations of the interior disclosed a well under the floor of a room that had originally been a courtyard. The Commandery probably comprised eight buildings in addition to the church for, by charter, Richard 11 confirmed to the Hospitallers their possession of "the Hermitage of Ansty" and "of eight dwellings built thereon".

The Knights Hospitaller, who were exempted from Episcopal control by Papal authority, held independent ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Ansty church and the surrounding buildings of the Commandery for over 300 years. Their successive chaplains conducted daily services in the church which the members of the Commandery were obliged to attend.

The Ansty property of the Knights Hospitaller, with its church, hospice and manor house all grouped by the pond, is considered to be the finest example of a Commandery of the Order of St. John that has survived in England.

*Extract from "St. James Ansty" by P.W. Freston, September 1963*