

THE HISTORY OF

S A I N T
G E O R G E
T H E
M A R T Y R

WELCOME

WISDOM

WORSHIP

WITNESS

BEGINNINGS

Until the late seventeenth century, the area now covered by St George's parish was still rural, but new residential developments were stretching out the arms of London away from the City, in new directions.

Built 1706, in the days of Queen Anne, St George the Martyr began life as a chapel-of-ease of St. Andrew's (Holborn Circus), which was the parish church of the area. Inhabitants of the City of London were accustomed to having the parish church close to them, as at that time there were about 100 churches squeezed into the square mile. As London grew West, so the chapel-of-ease of St George was established to make worship more accessible to those parishioners whose new homes were further from the main church than was convenient. It had none of the dramatic craftsmanship of famous contemporary churches like St Mary-le-Strand, Christ Church Spitalfields, or St George's Bloomsbury. However, prints from the mid- eighteenth century show a building which, had it survived in its original form, would have been highly prized now as a splendid example of simple Queen Anne taste.

Into this building went furnishings, including pews, Holy Table, font, reredos and plate. The last three are still in existence. The font is in excellent condition, oval in shape, fluted, made of white marble with a black marble stem. The original reredos can be found in its original position on the east wall (there are many of similar style in the City).

The original and very fine communion silverware, by London silversmith Samuel Wastell and dated 1705, spent a long time on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Recently returned, it can now be seen here today.

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The best-known rector of St George the Martyr was the Revd William Stukeley who led the church from 1747 until his death in 1765. He had a wide-ranging and enquiring mind, studying many aspects of science, medicine and anatomy. He was a medical practitioner before taking Holy Orders at the age of 42. As an antiquarian he undertook tours to visit ancient sites and made some of the earliest maps of Stonehenge, as detailed in the book he wrote in 1740.

During his ministry it happens that the career of one of our great English poets coincided with the life of the parish for a short time. In 1749 William Cowper (1731-1800) came to live with his uncle in Southampton Row while he unsuccessfully pursued both a career at the Bar and his cousin Theodora. This was a time considerably before his conversion to the Christian faith, which happened during 1763-4, but he records in his memoirs that during this period of his youth his only contact with spiritual things was his visits to St George's with his uncle's family. Stukeley could not have known and would not have dreamed that the amorous, poetic, rather unstable young man was to be author of many of the finest hymns in our language, including:

“Hark my soul, it is the Lord”, “O for a closer walk with God”, “God moves in a mysterious way” and “There is a fountain filled with blood” as well as secular poetry including “John Gilpin”, the “The Task”, and a translation of “The Odyssey”.

THE ORGAN

On 13 November 1772, a “faculty” (church permission) was granted for the installation of an organ. It was built by Crang and Hancock. Although subsequently the organ was restored, enlarged and altered, the present instrument has its basis this original organ.

The quality of the Crang and Hancock organ is testified by the fact that no changes were made to the organ during major repairs to the church in 1819 funded by an act of Parliament. One of the most picturesque occasions on which the organ could have been heard was at the annual Christmas service for 100 chimney-sweeps’ boys, which was held from 1834 until chimney sweeps’ boys were outlawed in 1875, having been brought to public attention in part by Charles Dickens, who lived for many years in the parish, across the road from the present rectory in Doughty Street.

The Crang and Hancock organ, like most organs of that period, had no pedals and a short-compass Swell manual. When, in 1832, Mandelsohn played several of Bach’s organ works at St Paul’s Cathedral, whose organ did have a pedal board, a whole generation of English organists arose, especially in London, who became Bach specialists and required “German system” organs capable of playing the continental repertory.

In 1867–1868, the church was reordered and re-orientated by SS Teulon, who lived in the parish of St George’s. Following on from this, in 1869 Robson rebuilt the St George’s organ in the new style, but retaining a large amount of pipe work from Crang and Hancock’s instrument. His engraved plate is still on the organ console. By coincidence, in 1868, the College of Organists (renamed the Royal College of Organists in 1893), Great Britain’s professional body for organists, made Queen Square one of its early homes, and “a commemoration festival in connection with the College of Organists” was held at St George’s on 25th November 1869 including the choirs of St Paul’s Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and the Chapel Royal.

THE SWEEPS CHURCH

St George's is sometimes called "The Sweeps Church". This name derives from the benefaction of Captain James South who in 1834 bequeathed £1000 to the rector and the church wardens to apply the interest in providing "a Christmas dinner for one hundred poor boys" apprenticed to chimney-sweeps in the Cities of London and Westminster. Each Christmas the sweep's boys came to the church and after the service had their dinner. The terms of the will provided that each should receive half a pound of roast or boiled beef, half a loaf of bread, half a pound of potatoes, half a pint of ale or porter, half a pound of plum pudding and a new shilling.

After sweeps' boys were abolished in 1875 the Court of Chancery determined that the money should be applied for providing prizes for children in the day school.

THE SCHOOL

There was a firm intention from the first that the church would involve itself in the education of children. This work started in the church's vestry around 1709. By 1839 the girls were still in a room over the vestry, but the boys had moved meanwhile to Devonshire Street where there was a schoolhouse. At this time there was a total of 140 pupils, compared with 90 in 1735. In 1854 the buildings in Devonshire Street (now Boswell Street) were replaced by the new buildings for girls and infants in Old Gloucester Street. There was a boys' school in Theobalds Road which continued on at that site until the 1870s.

Children's education was not the only branch to flourish in those days. This area was the site of one of the pioneering projects in adult education. In 1854 the Working Men's College was founded in Great Ormond Street, The Revd F.D. Maurice was one of the founders of the movement: an early Christian socialist and brilliant scholar he had been professor of theology at King's College, London, until being dismissed for holding heterodox views on the afterlife. He lived at number 24, Queen Square. He is recognised by many as a pioneer of the liberal tradition of Anglicanism. In the Episcopal Church of the United States of America his life is commemorated on 1 April.

At the same time as the redevelopment Teulon built a boys' school next to the church and a girls' school opposite. The buildings still exist though the school has moved. In the 1970's the church school moved from its old buildings near the church to take up residence in new buildings in John's Mews.

THE RESTORED CHURCH - 1800'S

In 1867-8 Reverend John Back employed the English Gothic Revival architect S.S. Teulon to remodel the church. Teulon lived for some time in the parish and his children were baptised in the church. His remodelling of St George's is certainly unusual. John Betjemen described it as brutal, and in the context of the former style of the building, that judgement has some force behind it. The alterations included:

- all furnishings save the font and the east reredos were removed;
- pews, galleries, Holy Table, railings and coat of arms all disappeared.
- New furnishings were fitted to face south instead of east, leaving the east reredos redundant, as it still is.
- The organ was rebuilt by Robson and moved to the south-west corner – at the front of the church instead of the back.
- Choir stalls were placed in the newly created chancel, at the front of which was placed a stone and mosaic reredos depicting (from left to right) Abraham, Moses, Solomon, St Peter, St John and St Paul.
- Stained glass was put in the south window, made by the firm of Heaton, Butler and Bayne (this was destroyed by bomb damage in the Second World War and substituted).
- A new pulpit was installed and a new gallery at the north end.
- Externally, all the windows were altered – either enlarged or new ones made
- The original doorways and the portico were removed entirely or completely
- refashioned
- The present tower and spire was put up.
- The total cost was around £4000 and was largely paid for by the rector.

The influence of Victorian restorers on earlier church buildings has been a controversial subject ever since. The work of Teulon at St George's does not lack admirers, even though most perhaps find it to some extent unsatisfactory. At the same time Teulon built a boys' school next to the church and a girls' school opposite. These original buildings still exist, now in private ownership: the parish primary school has moved several streets away to John's Mews.

In 1878, the St George the Martyr Temperance Society was formed. This organisation was typical of thousands of such groups which existed throughout the century for fellowship and mutual support. The Society had two classes of membership – the General section and the Abstainers section. Any member of the first declared that:

“I recognised my duty as a Christian to exert myself for the suppression of intemperance and... will do my utmost, both by example and effort, to promote its objects”.

Those making the lesser promise could add riders to it if they wishes, namely:

- 1. I will abstain from intoxicating liquors except at mealtimes*
- 2. I will do my best to discourage the use of intoxicating drinks in conducting business transactions and treating and in payment for work*
- 3. I will drink no spirits except by medical advice*

A member of the Abstainers section promised:

“With the divine assistance to abstain from alcoholic drinks as beverages so long as I retain my card of membership.”

Members of this order were fortified in their endeavours by the existence of the “Ormond Coffee Tavern” at 49 Great Ormond Street where a Friendly Society called the “Ormond Division of the Sons of Temperance Benefit Society” met on Wednesdays at 8.30pm. The Ormond Coffee House was managed in 1884 by Miss Dunkerton, and had an amusing approach to advertising at election time:

HOLBORN DIVISION, BOROUGH OF FINSBURY

THE COMING STRUGGLE

Electors of all shades of opinion, you can consider the merits of the candidates for the Holborn Division whilst taking your refreshments at the Ormond Coffee Tavern where from the fact of its being a Licensed Victuallers Establishment selling victuals without intoxicating liquors, the chances are you will be clearer in the head to decide whom to vote for!

In 1931 St George's Parish made its first expansion in size, amalgamating with Holy Trinity, High Holborn, which was demolished.

With bombing, evacuation and the impossibility of proper maintenance, by the time the WW2 ended the church was in a precarious position. For a time the future was in considerable doubt, but great support was found for keeping the church and restoring it to its former state. Help came in the form of gifts not only from Great Britain but all over the world. This view eventually prevailed over another plan which would have meant the end of the building. As a result the outstanding repairs were done, the ceiling was renewed, new glass installed, including a study of St George in the chancel window, and all the other fittings were overhauled. The whole process was completed by 1953 when the Bishop of Stepney came to dedicate the new windows in the chancel.

Meanwhile in 1950 the patrons underwent a change of name. The National Church League, amalgamating with the Church Association, became the Church Society, which remains the patron of the living to this day.

In 1959 most of the parish of St Bartholomew's Gray's Inn Road was added to the parish – their building had been destroyed in the war – thereby giving to our parish the dimensions it had today. The present boundaries run (approximately); Southampton Row, Woburn Place, Tavistock Place, Regent Square (south side), Sidmouth Street, Frederick Street, Kings Cross Road, Calthorpe Street, Rosebery Avenue, Clerkenwell Road, Theobalds Road.

In the 1970's the church school moved from its old buildings near the church to take up residence in new buildings in John's Mews. This move has proved highly successful: the Church of England primary school of St George the Martyr is today considered "excellent" by Ofsted and the relationship between the church and the school has never been stronger.

A NEW DAY DAWNING

In partnership with three other local parish churches (together comprising “The Camden Four”) St George the Martyr Queen Square now stands on the verge of a hugely exciting new season in its long and fruitful history.

The sincere hope is that Heritage Lottery funding can be secured in the coming months so that extensive and necessary repair and development work can be undertaken.

Meanwhile the worship of God and the loving care of the local community, both of which have been at the heart of this significant heritage church for over three hundred years, shall continue undaunted.

The prayer is that you feel at home in this place and find a deeper relationship with God as a result of being here.



SAINT
GEORGE
THE
MARTYR