

Tour introduction

COVID briefing

In 1863 the Nicholsons, a family of gin distillers from London, purchased the nearby Basing Park estate. During the following 30 to 40 years this thinly-populated village underwent a period of extensive building by the family, including this church. This created a village of significant architectural and historic interest, interest that has been formally recognised by the designation of the Privett Conservation Area.

The Conservation Area comprises clusters of buildings, linked by a network of narrow, single-track lanes bounded by high hedgerows, trees and copses. It is the consistent form and style of the buildings built by the Nicholsons which gives Privett its character, a distinctive local vernacular architectural style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Characteristic features of these buildings are gables, flint with brick dressings, and decorative stones displaying the Nicholson crest and initials. One of the earliest Nicholson buildings, one which displays these characteristic features, is the Grade 2 listed former church school and schoolmaster's house next door dating from 1867.

Forty years ago, in 1980, this church came into the ownership of the Churches Conservation Trust, a charity which cares for churches of particular historic, architectural or archaeological merit. But what makes the church special enough to be protected in this way, and to have been listed as grade 2 * so that it ranks amongst the top 10% of the 400,000 listed buildings in England?

The answer is that Holy Trinity is an unaltered and largely complete example of Victorian Early English architecture. It is somewhat unusual for any church, and not just those from the Victorian era, to be both complete and largely unaltered. Most other churches built around the same time were subsequently altered extensively or else were simply never finished. A new church would often be consecrated structurally incomplete and with only basic furnishings in place, to be finished, if at all, as funds and donations allowed. Few Victorian churches for example ever achieved, like Holy Trinity, a full complement of stained glass. So how is it that a tiny village has ended up with such an enormous, complete and largely unaltered church?

In February 1876 the churchwardens of Privett informed the Bishop of Winchester that their most recent meeting had concluded;

That the ancient parish church of the said parish of Privett had become greatly dilapidated and was in an unsafe condition

That.....it was unanimously resolved that the offer ofWilliam Nicholson, to rebuild the parish church in accordance with the plans produced and adopted at the said meeting at his sole cost be thankfully received

That it was proposed to build the new Church partly on the same site as the old Church'

Barely more than two years later, in the spring of 1878, invitations went out to the great, the good, and the pious of Hampshire and the diocese of Winchester. The invitations said:

'Church of the Holy Trinity, Privett – Consecration Thursday April 25th - Service with Holy Communion 11 a.m. – sermon by the Lord Bishop of the Diocese – Evensong at 6 p.m. – Sermon by the Very Reverend The Dean of Winchester – The Clergy are requested to bring their surplices and to meet at the Privett School house at 10.30 '

The new church is said to have cost £22,000. In present day money that is between £1.8m and £2.6m, depending on which internet calculator you use. The architect was one of the go-to architects of the day, Arthur, later Sir Arthur, Blomfield.

The outstanding external feature is of course the massive spire. It is 160 feet high (49 metres), not the tallest in Hampshire as that accolade belongs to St Michael's in central Southampton which is 5 feet higher, but impressive nonetheless and a wholly unexpected structure in the middle of the countryside.

Whilst the church is owned by the CCT the churchyard remains in the ownership of the parochial church council. There is a project in hand to renovate and improve it, with some of the funds from today's opening going towards that initiative. The church remains consecrated and is used for a couple of services a year.

Holy Trinity's Architecture

Privett is a rare example of an unaltered church in the Victorian Early English style. This was the second of four styles of Gothic architecture in Britain, the architecture that dominated church architecture between the Norman Conquest and the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1540s.

The first of these Gothic styles was Norman Gothic a style characterised by thick pillars, rounded windows, and simple vaulting and decoration, with little sign of the elaborate stonework to come.

It was in the Early English period of the 13th century that the Gothic style became truly adapted from its French origins by English craftsmen/architects. This period is also called "Lancet", referring to the pointed lancet windows that characterize it, singly or in groups. Form is still fairly austere and proportion is 'magnificently simple'.

There was a movement in the 19th century to build and restore churches in an ideal medieval form. This was due in part to a growth in scholarly understanding of medieval architecture. The movement coincided with a religious, nationalist and Romantic revival which meant medieval architecture and furnishings became a unifying symbol of these revivals. English Gothic architecture became increasingly revered as a precious but often neglected inheritance, and the Middle Ages were widely idealised on social and aesthetic grounds, sometimes as a critique of the failings of contemporary Victorian life.

By the time Holy Trinity was built however its Early English style was already on the way to being somewhat old-fashioned. Many of the new generation of church architects were increasingly influenced by the later Decorated and Perpendicular styles of Gothic architecture.

Sir Arthur Blomfield - Architect

The architect of this church was Sir Arthur Blomfield. He was the fourth son of the Bishop of London and was actually born at Fulham Palace, the home of the Bishops of London. His practice specialised in restoring and building churches, work no doubt considerably aided by his father's connections and influence.

Sir Arthur's work and name is not well-known outside of architectural circles. And it is fair to say, as the church's guide puts it, 'he was a typical Victorian church architect.....not one of those whose work has been increasingly appreciated in recent years'. He was however well-regarded amongst his contemporaries for a basic competence and confidence when entrusted with prestige buildings, such as the Royal College of Music and the first buildings erected to form Selwyn College in Cambridge.

Sir Arthur is not to be confused with his nephew, Sir Reginald Blomfield, who similarly benefited from connections and influence to win commissions to design numerous buildings either side of the First World War, most notably the Menin Gate in Ypres.

A Literary Connection

In the summer of 1856 a 16 year-old boy started work as an apprentice architect in Dorset. Six years later, on 17 April 1862, with a return ticket in his pocket he headed for what was to be 5 years in London pursuing what he described as 'the art and science of architecture on more advanced lines'.

He arrived in London with no job or accommodation. Being, as he himself said, 'a young Gothic draughtsman', a contact thought of him when he heard about an opening for a young draughtsman with experience of church architecture in the architectural practice of an up-and-coming architect. The young man applied for the position; his name was Thomas Hardy, future author and poet, the up-and-coming architect was Arthur Blomfield, the architect of this church.

Although Hardy and Blomfield became life-long friends, Hardy stayed only a couple of years in Blomfield's practice. He found the work monotonous, involving as it did mostly copying out senior architects' designs.

The sapping 'enervation of London' and the fitful, mechanical, monotonous existence slowly drained Hardy of his hopes and left him physically much weakened, so much so that in 1867, some 10 years before this church was designed, he left London to return to his first employer who was after an assistant with experience of church restoration.

Nicholson's Gin

In 1863 William Nicholson, a director of the east London gin distillers J & W Nicholson and Co, bought the Basing Park estate in Privett. He embarked upon a 30-year programme of building and other improvements that saw the parish transformed into a model estate. Given the notoriety of gin at the time as the alcoholic opiate of the poor the less-generous described the more-than-generous spire of his new church as 'Nicholson's fire escape to heaven from the flames of hell.'

The firm that was the source of William Nicholson's wealth had been founded in 1802. It prospered during the 19th century, adding fruit and spice cordials and a chain of pubs, the still-existing Nicholson's pub group, to its business. The company was one of those that developed what became known as London Dry Gin.

The short-hand way to define London Dry Gin is that is the product of a defined method of production which produces an unsweetened (i.e. 'dry') neutral spirit with a flavour that is provided by natural plant materials during, not after, distillation. London Gin does not have a legally-protected designation of origin; it is called 'London' simply because originally that was where most of it was made.

The company name survived until 1982 when the firm was sold to Allied Lyons. However, the Nicholson gin brand was revived in 2017 by a couple of descendants of the original founders and so Nicholson London Dry Gin can once again be enjoyed.

Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC)

The paper seal on today's bottles of Nicholson's London Dry Gin is striped yellow and red. These colours were the Nicholson brand colours back in the 19th century. They are also the colours of the Marylebone Cricket Club, better known as the MCC, a combination of colours referred to by MCC members as 'eggs and bacon'.

It is not thought to be coincidence that the brand and the MCC share the same colours. William Nicholson, the man who bought Basing Park in 1863, was a renowned cricketer and prominent member of the MCC. In 1864 the MCC was offered the chance to buy the freehold of Lords, its London home. William Nicholson lent them the money to do this. Twenty five years later he lent them a further large sum for a new Pavilion, a pavilion which seems quickly to have been nicknamed 'the Gin Palace'.

The MCC's website notes that:

'Common consensus leans to the Club taking on its colours as a personal thank you to William Nicholson who assisted in purchasing the freehold of Lord's Ground. Nicholson, an MCC Member, was also the owner of the Nicholson's Gin Company, the colours of which were red and yellow – in what was perhaps an early example of corporate sponsorship.'

The red and yellow stone used in the church is suggestive of the Nicholson family colours.

The Geology of Holy Trinity

There are throughout the church bold combinations of different materials, chiefly stone, to achieve effects of pattern, emphasis and expression. This is known as 'structural polychromy', and took its inspiration from medieval Italy. A lot of Victorian churches at this time used a variety of stone, reflecting the increasing interest in geology. This interest was very likely prompted by discoveries made by the engineers and navvies making the cuttings and tunnels of the burgeoning rail system. The stone used comprises:

Corsehill - A band of Pink Corsehill stone round the walls gives warmth to the interior and provides a contrast with other stone. Corsehill Quarry is located in Dumfries and Galloway.

Ham Hill stone - honey-coloured limestone, named after Ham Hill near Yeovil which contains the only source of Ham Hill stone in the world. Soft enough to be used for carving.

It is the combination of these two stones, the pink/red Corsehill, and the honey Ham Hill stone, that are used to evoke the yellow and red colours of the Nicholson family.

Flint for the walls – locally sourced, since flint occurs in chalk, and very much in fashion in Victorian times for cottages, churches, fortifications and even great country houses

Bath stone – the limestone that built Bath

Mansfield stone – This stone, used for the font, occurs around the Mansfield area where it has been worked for many centuries. The limestone can vary in colour from white to cream to yellow brown, largely depending on the proportion of iron present.

Black Belgian marble - used for the altar steps

Caen stone - is used for the reredos, the screen behind the altar

Douling stone - named after the village near Wells in Somerset where it was quarried. Used in the exterior walls.

Purbeck marble – used for the pillars of the windows, and base and shafts of the font. It was a highly-prized building material in the 11th through to 16th centuries. It can only be obtained from one place and that is in the area of Corfe Castle in south-eastern Dorset. The vein of this limestone is only between 18 and 24 inches thick and is worked from the surface. It's not a marble technically speaking but rather a polishable limestone.

Mosaics - were laid by a band of Italian craftsmen brought to Privett for that purpose.

Sir Edward Bradford, 1st Baronet

Colonel Sir Edward Ridley Colborne Bradford, 1st Baronet, GCB, GCVO, KCSI, ADC (27 July 1836 -13 May 1911) was a British Indian Army officer who later served as head of the London Metropolitan Police from 1890 to 1903. His second wife was Emma Mary Nicholson of the Nicholson gin family.

He was the son of the rector of West Meon, a village 4 miles from this church, and was educated at Marlborough College. He was commissioned into the East India Company's 2nd Madras Light Infantry in 1853 and served as a soldier for over 30 years although his active military career came to an end just 10 years later when he was mauled by a tiger during a hunt and lost his left arm.

In June 1890 Bradford was appointed Head of the London Police. His military background gave him authority and experience of command while his experiences in India gave him knowledge of administration, criminal investigation and the workings of the civil service. His years in control of the Met were generally as peaceful, stable and innovative. He visited every one of his police stations and talked and listened to his men, becoming the first Commissioner to do so. He varied the beats to ease the tedium of patrol duty and attempted to improve the educational standard of new recruits. He ensured that all police stations were linked by telegraph, extended the use of bicycles, encouraged sporting activities among his men, and introduced a lighter summer uniform.

Bradford died aged 74 and is buried 8 miles away in the churchyard at Chawton next to his first wife who had died 15 years earlier. He was survived by his second wife, Edith Mary Nicholson, whom he had married in 1898 when he was 62 and who lived until 1951.

Decline and then....

What happened in Privett during the 19th century epitomised some of the significant changes in rural England at that time. The population, some 185 in 1801, grew slowly during the first half of the century. It was given a fillip by new money from the Nicholsons. The Nicholsons represented the increasing number of people whose wealth came not from land but from business and the nascent consumerism, who nevertheless aspired to emulate the lifestyle, position and taste of the still socially superior landed classes.

The population peaked in 1901 at 315 but the disruptions of war saw that figure decline by 40% in only 20 years, and a further 10% in the next 10. The fortunes of the Nicholson family followed a similar path, with decline in the 20th century mirrored by the decline of Basing Park house and estate. The estate was split up in the 1940s and Basing Park house was demolished in the early 60s. It was replaced with a much smaller house, leaving this church as the major legacy from the time of the Nicholsons.

With the Nicholson's gone, the disparity between the size of the church and the needs and resources of the parish became acute. Accordingly, in 1962 the Bishop of Portsmouth approved 'the enclosure of the south transept for the purposes of making a small chapel, partially heated and lighted, of adequate size to meet the needs of the congregation during the winter months'

It appears that this proposed work was never carried out and six years later in May 1968 a letter was sent to the Diocesan architect by the churchwardens saying: 'We have today received the long-awaited Faculty authorising us to close the main body of the church, to carry out alterations to the chapel and to sell the organ, bells, pews and all other fittings which may be of use of other churches....and to put the structures of the Church in a safe and water-tight condition with money available from the sale of fittings, etc.'

In November 1980 the church was acquired by the Churches Conservation Trust.

Helping Hands

The Nicholsons owned and operated a gin distillery in Bromley-by-Bow, not far from Olympic Park. On 12th July 1901, Godfrey Maule Nicholson, Managing Director of the distillery, one of his foremen and two workers opened up a sealed well on a corner of the site to see if it could be used again.

A ladder was put down and one of the labourers descended with a measuring pole to test the water level. As he climbed back up and passed the pole to his foreman, he suddenly collapsed and fell back into the well. Without thought, 29 year old Godfrey Nicholson quickly descended the ladder and was trying to pull the man clear of the water when he too was overcome and fell in. A third and then a fourth workman descended to try to recover the men but they too were overcome and fell into the water where they drowned like those who had ventured into the well before them.

The exact cause of the tragedy was not discovered but it is assumed gas from rotting weeds had accumulated after the well had been sealed several years before and that this was disturbed by the measuring pole.

The tragedy and these acts of self-less courage are today marked by a memorial in this church, and also by Alex Peever's 'Helping Hands' sculpture near the Olympic Park erected in 2001, one hundred years after the tragedy.

New for old

Few materials or monuments were re-used in the new church. This was not unusual as architects like to translate their own vision and ideas into a built form unsullied by anything which, in their eyes, compromises that vision. If it was felt that something simply had to be retained then it would often end up, as here with these few monuments, under the tower, well-away from the most important eye-line, that along the nave towards the altar.

Here the surviving monuments are of the Parry family, one of them being for Caroline Martineau, sister of the Arctic explorer Admiral Parry.

The Churches Conservation Trust

Over 14,000 listed buildings in England are places of worship; 353 of them are owned by the Churches Conservation Trust (the CCT), a charity established in 1969 as a successor organisation to the Redundant Churches Fund. The Church of the Holy Trinity, Privett is one of the 353, having been given to the CCT in November 1980, 40 years ago.

The CCT cares for churches of particular historic, architectural or archaeological merit which have been given to it by the Church of England. Some CCT churches remain consecrated, as does this church, with occasional services, others do not.

Despite the CCT having patrons and supporters such as Jools Holland, Lloyd Grossman, Dr. Bettany Hughes, Simon Jenkins and Dave Stewart of Eurythmics fame, it has an annual income of just £8m to look after its 353 churches. The shortfall between what needs to be done, and the resources available to do what needs to be done is partly bridged by hundreds of volunteers up and down the country. These volunteers are the local eyes, ears, cheerleaders, key holders and event organisers for each of the 353 churches.

CCT churches nearby are:

- St Peter's ad Vincula in Colemore, which is some 2 very twisty miles down the lane outside;
- St Mary's, Itchen Stoke, near Alresford, a small Victorian church that pays almost complete homage to the French origins of English Gothic, and;
- In Preston Candover, between Alresford and Basingstoke, a medieval chancel, the only remaining part of a church that was demolished in the 1880s having been replaced by a new parish church designed by one Arthur Blomfield.