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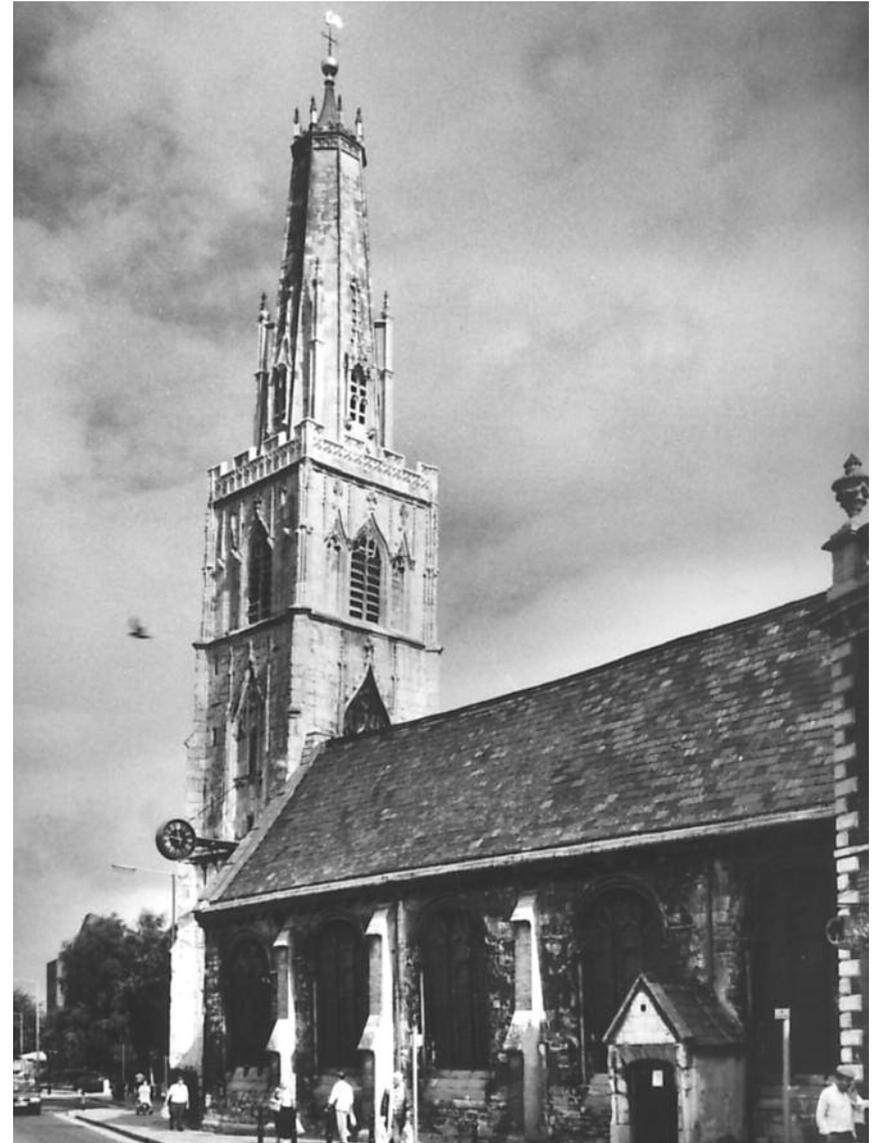
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PRICE: £1.00



ST NICHOLAS'S
CHURCH

GLOUCESTER





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
ST NICHOLAS'S CHURCH
GLOUCESTER

Many years ago Christians built and set apart this place for prayer. They made their church beautiful with their skill and craftsmanship. Here they have met for worship, for children to be baptised, for couples to be married and for the dead to be brought for burial. If you have time, enjoy the history, the peace and the holiness here. Please use the prayer card and, if you like it, you are welcome to take a folded copy with you.

Although services are no longer regularly held here, this church remains consecrated; inspiring, teaching and ministering through its beauty and atmosphere. It is one of 300 churches throughout England cared for by The Churches Conservation Trust. The Trust was created in 1969 and was, until 1994, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. Its object is to ensure that all these churches are kept in repair and cared for, in the interests of the Church and Nation, for present and future generations.

Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH (Registered Charity No. 258612).

We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.

Nearby are the Trust churches of:

LASSINGTON, ST OSWALD TOWER

3 miles west of Gloucester off B4215

LITTLE WASHBOURNE, ST MARY

6 miles east of Tewkesbury off A438

ST NICHOLAS'S CHURCH

GLOUCESTER

by ANDREW PIKE

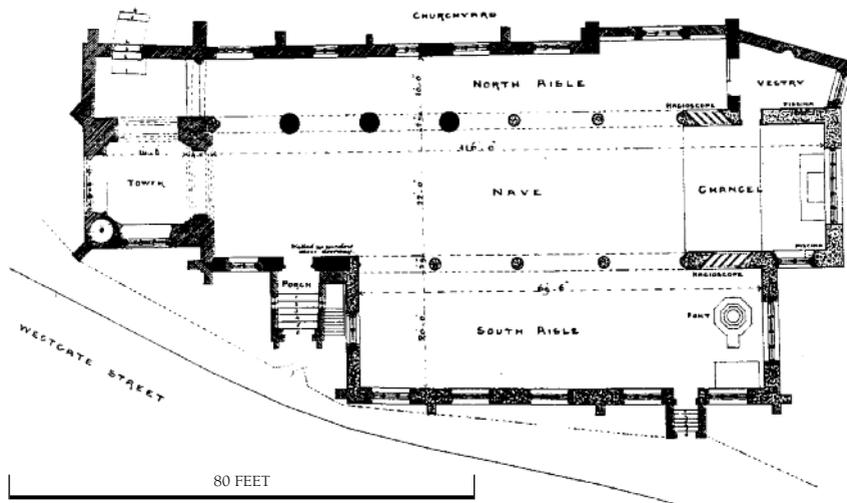
THE ORIGINS OF GLOUCESTER can be traced back to the building of a fort by the Romans about AD60. In the 70s AD a Roman fortress was built at a crossing of the River Severn and in about AD99 this fortress became a *colonia* (a town for retired soldiers) called Glevum. It had stone walls, gates and a quay, together with the usual Roman buildings including a forum and basilica. After the Romans departed in the early 5th century, little is known about the town, although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle compiled in the later 9th century cites a reference to it in AD577. A minster church was founded on the site of the present cathedral about 679.

In the 10th century the town, which appears to have become largely ruinous, was established as one of the Mercian *burhs* or defended towns. There was also a royal palace here. Also in the 10th century, the foundation of the New Minster (later St Oswald's Priory) marks Gloucester's growing status – not least because it was given the valuable relics of King Oswald of Northumbria and a grand building to house them in.

By the time of the Norman Conquest in AD1066, Gloucester was a royal borough and a commercial centre of some importance. It had a mint and was establishing its influence as the shire town. It had been receiving royal charters since 1155 – one in 1200 made it self-governing and another in 1483 gave it county status and authority over a much larger area; a charter in 1541 made it a city. Industries such as ironworking and clothmak-

ing gave Gloucester a sound trading position, which were helped by the town's growing importance as a port on the River Severn. A new port with its own custom house was built in 1580–1581. In the Middle Ages there were no less than three bridges over three separate channels of the Severn: Foreign Bridge over the 'Old' Severn (its earlier course), Westgate Bridge, near St Bartholomew's Hospital and Over Bridge on the other side of the flood plain which crossed the river's westernmost channel.

The large Norman abbey of St Peter was dissolved in 1540 and in 1541 its church became the cathedral of the new Diocese of Gloucester. Like many important towns in the period immediately after the Norman Conquest, Gloucester had several parish churches within its boundaries: 11 have been recorded, together with a number of dependant chapels.



HISTORY OF ST NICHOLAS'S CHURCH

When the relics of St Nicholas were removed from Myra in Turkey to Bari in southern Italy in 1087, the saint became a popular patron for new churches; his cult spread rapidly throughout Western Europe. In addition

to St Nicholas's Church, the chapel of Gloucester's royal palace at Kingsholm was also dedicated to the saint.

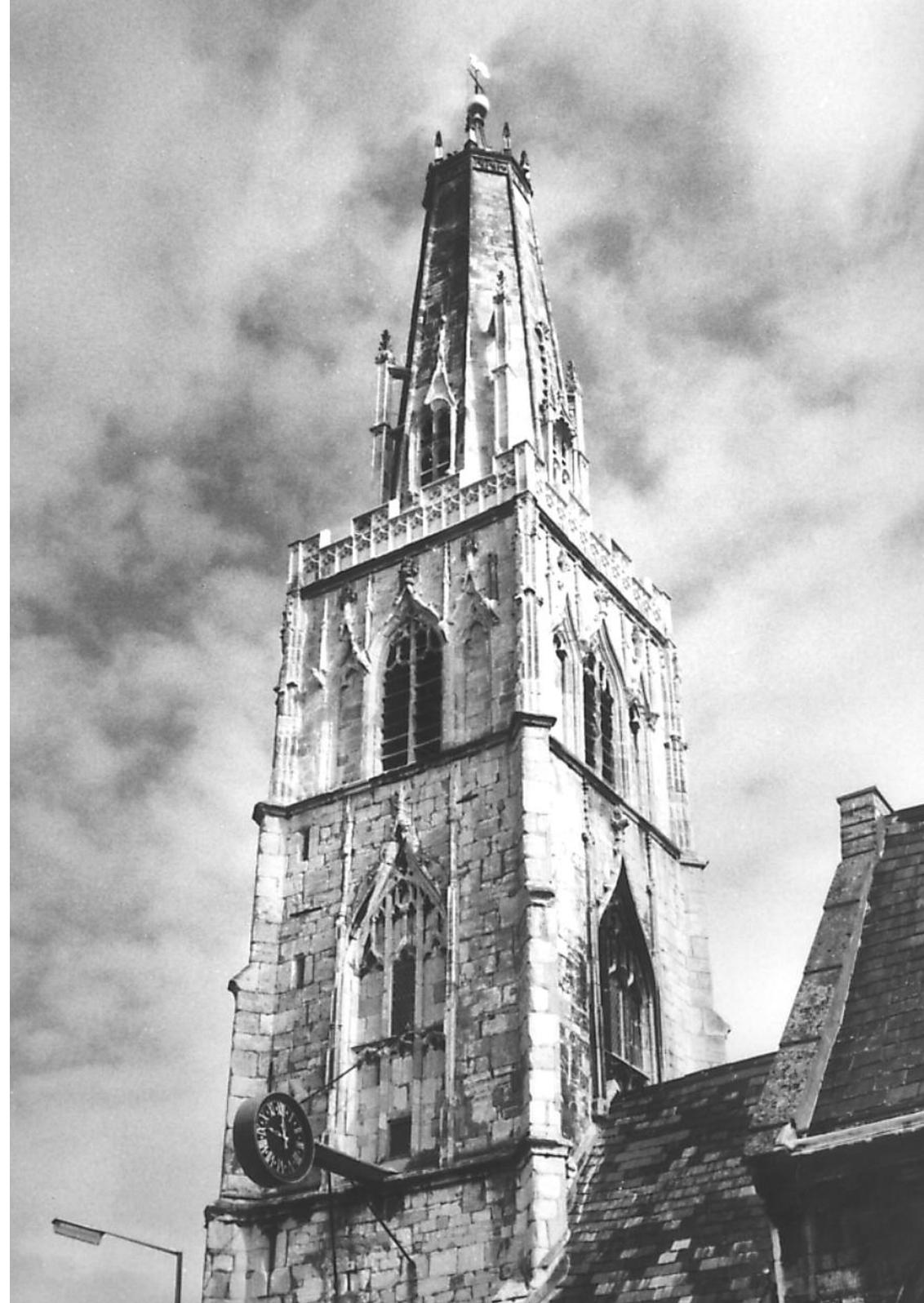
The church of St Nicholas is first mentioned by name in a charter of about 1180, together with one Sigar the priest. In 1203 it was known as 'St Nicholas of the bridge of Gloucester'; at that time the church belonged to the Crown and it is likely to have been a royal foundation. Some time, probably in the 12th century, a new channel of the Severn, either natural or artificial, came into being necessitating the building of new bridges, such as Westgate Bridge and the endowment of lasting institutions such as churches to look after them. In 1356 it was said that Westgate Bridge had been built in Henry II's reign (1154–1189) by a priest called Nicholas Walred, who lived in a house later to become St Bartholomew's Hospital, a hospice for poor people who were ill or dying, and we know that in 1229 the church was given to St Bartholomew's Hospital. So although the early connection between the church and hospital have become slightly confused with the passage of time, the two institutions were always closely associated with each other. The Annals of Tewkesbury Abbey refer to the building of a bridge in 1119, but this might be Foreign Bridge (the 'pons magorus' or great bridge) over the 'Old' Severn rather than Westgate Bridge. Westgate Bridge itself would have been instigated by the castellan or governor of Gloucester Castle, the powerful Walter of Gloucester. And the founding both of the Hospital and of St Nicholas's church were clearly associated with the building of the bridge, almost certainly for the purpose of collecting money for its maintenance. Medieval bridges were regarded as holy places, with travellers giving alms as they crossed them. Many had chapels: a function St Nicholas's may have provided. Throughout the medieval period, the fortunes of St Nicholas's Church, St Bartholomew's Hospital and Westgate Bridge are all inextricably linked.

ST NICHOLAS'S CHURCH

The Hospital was situated further along Westgate, between the church and the river and was to become the largest and wealthiest of Gloucester's three medieval hospitals. In 1535 it supported a master, five priests and thirty-two almspeople. It was re-founded in 1564 and in the later 16th century it was mostly rebuilt by the Corporation of Gloucester. It was rebuilt again in the Gothick style by William Price of Gloucester between 1787 and 1790 and housed twenty-four men and thirty women. Despite amalgamations with other almshouses during the 19th century, the hospital continued in being. But in the 1980s, having become somewhat marooned on a traffic island, it was sold and converted for use as a shopping and craft centre.

St Nicholas's Church was built outside the centre of the Saxon *burh*, and a number of building plots were cleared to accommodate it. This would explain its awkward and cramped siting right on the street frontage and the fact that the churchyard behind the church fitted exactly within the boundaries of the burgage plots, laid out by the Saxons. Despite this the church is aligned more or less east-west – a characteristic of later Norman churches; most of Gloucester's other medieval churches are not so orientated. The new parish was probably carved out of the older parish of St Mary de Lode, whose church lies only 200 yards/180m or so to the north of St Nicholas. In a survey of July 1563 St Nicholas's parish, with 146 households, was the largest in the city and included the homes of several aldermen as well as inns in Westgate Street and hovels on the 'island' of the river (the island was that part of Gloucester between the Westgate and Foreign Bridges crossing the former channels of the Severn). The parish, in fact, extended eastwards to the cathedral close and south-west towards the castle and also included meadowland across the river.

The church was situated on one of the main thoroughfares of Gloucester and its proximity to the wharves on the river has led to the suggestion that the church was dedicated to St Nicholas, since he was the patron



saint of sailors. It became the Corporation church and until 1870 the City Corporation was the patron of the living. Thereafter the patron was the bishop. In 1415 the curate or chaplain lived in the church. Later he had lodgings in St Bartholomew's Hospital.

The original Norman church seems to have consisted of a nave, chancel and north aisle, but was subsequently much rebuilt and enlarged. Several chantries were founded in the church including one in honour of St Thomas of Canterbury and another to St Mary. There were side altars dedicated to St Catherine, St John the Baptist and the Holy Trinity. The living was a perpetual curacy rather than a rectory or vicarage: the minister also had duties at St Bartholomew's Hospital. It became a vicarage in the mid-19th century. In 1836 the church became one of the first in Gloucester to be lit by gas. It seems to have flourished during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but by the 1920s people were beginning to desert the city centre for homes in the suburbs. And because of flooding near the Severn, the new residential developments tended to be to the south and east of Gloucester. In addition, traffic on the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal and through the docks declined rapidly after the Second World War. The decrease in the number of inhabitants living near St Nicholas's led to the benefice being united with the nearby church of St Mary de Lode in 1951 and in 1967 St Nicholas's church was closed, the congregation moving to St Mary de Lode's. St Nicholas's was officially declared redundant in 1971 and was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust) in June 1975. Since then the Trust has carried out an extensive repair programme to the church and the monuments, most recently under the supervision of Philip Hughes of Somerset.

DESCRIPTION

The church is built of oolitic limestone and comprises a chancel, north chapel, nave, north aisle and transept, south aisle with a porch, a larger

south porch at the west end of the nave which formerly had an upper storey (the subject of a dispute between St Bartholomew's Hospital and the parishioners in 1440), a west tower and spire. The south doorway is Norman as are parts of the nave arcades. Most of the rest of the church is 13th century, with a 15th-century tower and spire, the latter partly remodelled in the 18th. It is a fine, spacious building notwithstanding a description of it in 1819 as 'a waggon loaded with projecting goods, of which the tower and part of the nave form the horse and shafts' (Fosbrooke p.181).

Of the 12th-century church, three piers (each 3ft 6in/1.07m in diameter) and two arches of the north nave arcade, the south wall and doorway with carved tympanum containing the Agnus Dei survive; the church was extensively rebuilt and enlarged in the 13th century, perhaps when it was appropriated to St Bartholomew's Hospital. The size and shape of the first Norman church are not known, but it was probably a large one. The pointed nave arcades with their stiff-leaf capitals belong to the 13th century rebuilding. The 13th-century south aisle may originally have been the chantry chapel of St Mary. The altars of the other chantry chapels were probably situated at the east end of the north transept and the north-east corner of the church, where the present vestry containing a piscina in its south-east corner is situated. There is a large piscina with credence on the south wall of the chancel. Another piscina is visible halfway along the south wall of the south aisle; and the probable outline of a fourth was revealed when plaster was removed from the south wall of the south aisle behind the Wallton tomb. Both doubtless mark the sites of former chantries.

In 1347 the south-west porch was added to the nave and about the same time a window in Decorated style inserted in the south wall of the chancel. Later in the 14th century a Perpendicular window replaced a 13th-century one at the east end of the south aisle. The east window of the



chancel and the other windows of the south aisle are Perpendicular replacements, probably of the 15th century.

In the early 15th century the north aisle was reconstructed and extended westwards alongside the tower, which itself was rebuilt with a spire; the very marshy ground on which it is built has caused the tower to lean some 2ft 6in/0.76m from the perpendicular. The tower is 23ft/7m square, of three stages and 90ft/27m high. A high arch divides the lowest stage of

the tower from the nave. This lowest stage has an elegant four-light west window and a fine lierne vaulted ceiling. Next is the ringing chamber which has, on each side, a very fine three-light window with a crocketed ogee canopy supported by thin buttresses and decorated with pinnacles. The third stage is richly decorated with windows and niches. When complete, the tower and spire are likely to have reached 150ft/46m in height, if not more. Pinnacles, 12in/0.3m square, formerly stood at the angles of the parapet. Various illustrations of the spire when standing to its full height exist: the earliest is a marginal illustration in the Rental Roll of 1455; others include a view by Kip of about 1710 and another by S. and N. Buck of 1734. The spire had suffered during the Civil War siege of Gloucester as well as from settlement; and from the early 18th century the churchwardens' accounts contain numerous references to surveys and repairs of the tower and spire. Finally, in 1783 it was taken down as far as the coronet 'for fear of its tumbling'. The coronet itself received battlements and pinnacles and was surmounted by a copper ball and weathercock. The work was undertaken by John Bryan, the cathedral mason, at a cost of £110. A fire in the spire in 1891 caused by lightning was fortunately rapidly extinguished and caused little damage. The tracieried parapet of the tower was removed in 1969, having become unsafe, and restored in 1994 through the efforts of the Friends of the church. The Friends are currently (1996) raising funds to provide replica pinnacles on the corners of the parapet. The tower staircase is situated in the south-west angle of the tower.

In the 16th century hagioscopes or squints were inserted into the north and south walls of the chancel, in order to afford a view of Mass being celebrated at the high altar from the chantry chapels. A small doorway and porch were added to the east end of the south side of the south aisle at about the same time. The north-east corner of the church, containing the present vestry was rebuilt probably in the early 17th century and a



west gallery was erected in 1621 extending right across the west end of the church, originally entered via external stairs. A blocked opening above the south-west porch may be associated with this gallery. The font is of plain octagonal shape, dating probably from the 14th or 15th century.

A combination of soft ground and inadequate foundations had also caused the western part of the nave arcade to lean alarmingly. The 17th and 18th centuries saw a period of decline for St Nicholas's: in 1786 the bishop was petitioned for permission to demolish the church and rebuild it on a different site 'for the true interest of the parish'. There seemed to be general structural failure of the building, many of the fittings were removed and services temporarily ceased. But a survey undertaken in 1787 suggested that things were not so serious as previously thought and repairs did eventually get under way towards the end of the 18th century. In 1812 the external stairs to the gallery were removed and internal ones installed. Further work to the tower after storm damage was carried out in 1843 under the supervision of Fulljames and Waller, architects.

A restoration in 1865 by John Jacques led to the rebuilding of the main south porch and the renewing of several windows, especially in the south aisle and in the tower. The nave arcades were partially rebuilt. New pews were added and the west gallery removed: its wooden front was subsequently cut down to fit into the tower arch; it now hangs on the west wall of the south aisle. The floors were renewed and the levels raised – probably in an effort to counteract the ever present damp problem. The chancel and sanctuary received their present appearance, with tiling, pulpit, lectern and stained glass, at the same time. The west end of the south aisle was also refaced. It was during this restoration that the shallow recess above the Norman south doorway, containing the Agnus Dei, was discovered.

After a fire in 1901 the church was further restored. There was work to the chancel in the 1920s and in 1925–26 the tower was strengthened: 30 tons of concrete are said to have been pumped in to strengthen its foundations. The consulting engineer was Sir Francis Fox of Freeman Fox and Partners. Re-roofing took place in the 1930s together with extensive repairs to the east walls of the chancel and south aisle. The dormer windows – at least in their present form – seem to date from this period. A wall tablet to Elizabeth Wheeler in 1935 records the restoration of the north aisle in her memory, when the masonry arch braces and strengthening walls were inserted. At the beginning of the 20th century a small room was added to the north-east corner of the church and a doorway pierced through the east wall of the north aisle. This room was demolished in the 1970s.

The tomb of Alderman John Wallton



St Nicholas's having been the Corporation church, there are several fine monuments to aldermen and other city officials. Particularly noteworthy is the large tomb-chest in the south aisle to Alderman John Wallton, sheriff of the County of the City of Gloucester in 1613, and his wife (died 1626): the effigies give a good idea of contemporary costume, he with his red robes and she with her broad-brimmed hat. Some original colouring is still visible, especially in the folds of the garments. In the chancel is a memorial, probably of local manufacture, to the Revd Richard Green, who died aged 22 in 1711. John Deighton, whose memorial can be seen on the north-east wall of the south aisle, was an eminent surgeon of his day (he died in 1676). The inventory of his surgical instruments survives. He also possessed an extensive medical library. The Friends of St Nicholas's Church have produced a 'Tomb Trail' describing all the tombs and monuments in the church. Above the main south door is a royal coat of arms of Charles II's reign, dated either 1680 or 1685 (the date seems to have been overpainted at least twice).

On the main south door was formerly a bronze 'sanctuary knocker'. It depicted the head and part of the body of a large demon-like person with long hair and ears, wings and hairy forelegs, with a large ring in its mouth and the head of an old woman on its back. Of 14th-century date, it may have been a pun on the dedication of the church and the popular name for the devil 'Old Nick'. It is now on view in the City Museum in Brunswick Road. Traditionally, such knockers were used by 'offenders [who] dyd come and knocke, streightwaie they were letten in at any time of the nyght' (Rites of Durham). The City Museum also displays a silver flagon given to the church in the will of Alderman Richard Massinger in 1668 and made by William Corsley. Massinger is buried in the cathedral; his son (also Richard) is buried in St Nicholas's.

The bell-frame in the tower is of oak and dates from the later 17th century. There are six bells: (1) 1608, probably by John Baker, (2–3) 1636, by Roger Purdue I of Bristol, (4) 15th century by Robert Hendley, a Gloucestershire founder, (5) 15th century, from a Bristol foundry, (6) 1725 by Abraham Rudhall II. A sanctus bell, provided by John Pytte of Gloucester about 1550, was given to the Cathedral in 1973. The clock is 18th century – the first reference to a clock in the churchwardens' accounts is in 1715 – although the present mechanism is modern; remains of what is probably the original movement survive in the tower. In 1786 its chimes are said to have played the tune 'Britons Strike Home'.

The ringing chamber in the tower once contained a set of doggerel verses about ringing. They have been reproduced by Ellacombe (pp 26–27) and include the lines 'He that plyes his Rope aright/And guides his bell by eare, not sight/He is (be it by day or night)/A ringer'.

There was formerly a fine organ in the church with a striking mahogany case. It was built or rebuilt in 1831, when it was situated in the west gallery. Subsequently it was moved to the east end of the north aisle and, after the church's closure, was acquired by St Mary de Lode's church and re-erected there.

The parish registers date from 1558 and are now at the County Record Office in Gloucester, together with many other documents relating to the church and its property.

The churchyard was closed in 1854. Most of it has been subsequently cleared and developed and some of the tombstones have been brought into the church. The iron railings in front of the church on Westgate Street were installed in 1825.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Grateful thanks are also due to Mr Michael Hare for loaning his transcripts of the various documents concerning St Nicholas's Church in the Gloucestershire Record Office and for his help with the early history of the city.

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Photographs by Christopher Dalton

Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England

Drawing: Photograph by J.K. Claydon LRPS of an old drawing showing the original height of the spire

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