



# THE CHURCH OF ST THOMAS THE MARTYR

BRISTOL

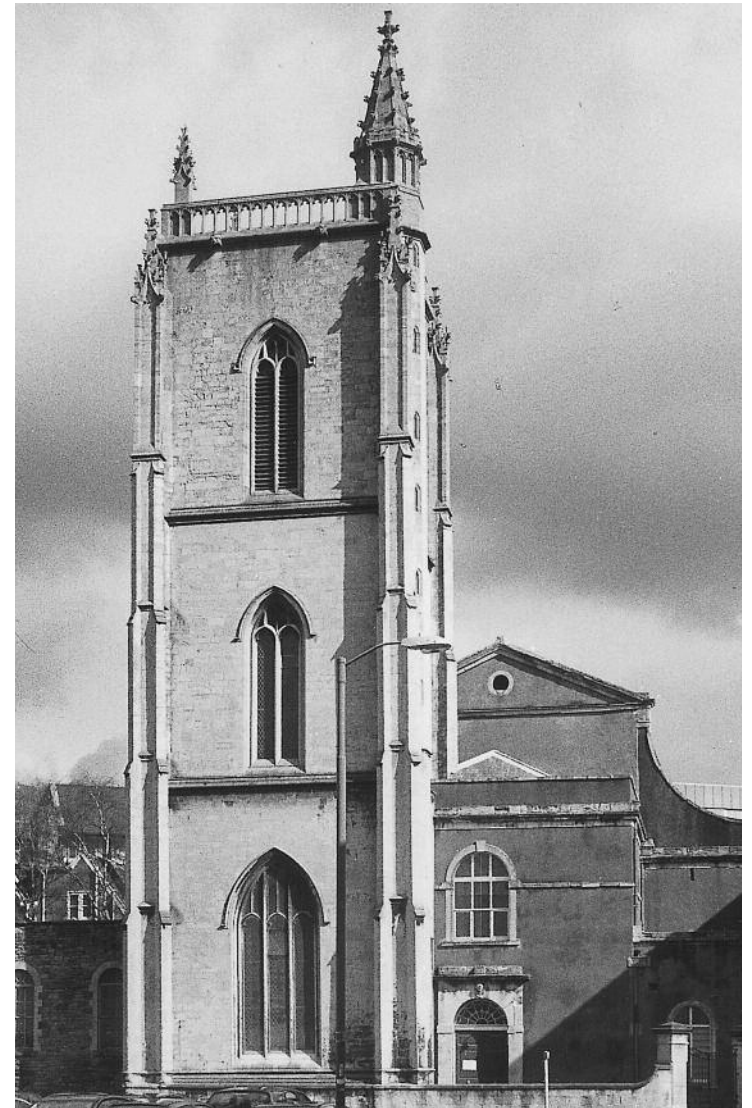


THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

LONDON

*Registered Charity No. 258612*

PRICE: £1.00





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
THE CHURCH OF ST THOMAS  
THE MARTYR  
BRISTOL

*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 more than 325 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 until 30 September 2002. We will be moving to new offices in the autumn of 2002, so please look out for announcements in our churches or visit our website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk) for details of our new address.*

*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:

**BRISTOL, ST JOHN THE BAPTIST**

*Tower Lane*

**BRISTOL, ST PAUL**

*Portland Square*

*(Not open to visitors)*

## THE CHURCH OF ST THOMAS THE MARTYR

---

BRISTOL

*by* JOSEPH BETTEY

Situated in a busy commercial area of central Bristol, St Thomas' church is a fine example of classical design, with an elegant interior, 18th-century furnishings and an impressive 15th-century tower which survives from an earlier church. The first church on the site was founded at the end of the 12th century, during a prosperous period in Bristol's history, when the town expanded south of the river Avon and new churches were built to serve the rapidly-growing population. The whole district was part of the large parish of Bedminster, and the two churches of St Thomas and St Mary Redcliffe remained as chapelries of Bedminster throughout the Middle Ages. This became the industrial area of Bristol and for several centuries was occupied by weavers, fullers, dyers, smiths, tanners and carpenters, as well as by several wealthy merchant families whose ships lay in the nearby river Avon. The church was originally dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, whose cult became popular after his murder in 1170. After the Reformation, Henry VIII forbade the veneration of Thomas Becket and the dedication was changed to St Thomas the Apostle.

### THE MEDIAEVAL CHURCH

Since several wealthy and pious merchant families, including the Canynges, resided in the area, both St Thomas' and St Mary Redcliffe received numerous endowments. This enabled both churches to be rebuilt and furnished in the grandest style during the later Middle Ages. St Thomas' church was on a restricted site and could not be enlarged like St Mary Redcliffe, but by the end of the 15th century the original Norman church had been transformed into a spacious and beautifully-decorated building. The Bristol surgeon and historian, William Barrett, writing during the 1780s shortly before the mediaeval St Thomas' church was demolished, named it as second only to St Mary Redcliffe in the excellence of its architecture and the splendour of its furnishings. Evidence for the

wealth of the church and the opulence of its fittings can be seen in the two pairs of 13th-century candlesticks belonging to the church which are now in Bristol City Museum. They were made in Limoges, and the copper base is richly inlaid with enamel and decorated in bright colours. A fine mediaeval Bible also survives, together with some pages from an illuminated missal. The latter escaped destruction during the Reformation because they were used as covers for Elizabethan churchwardens' accounts.

No illustrations of the mediaeval church have been found, but on Jacob Miller's plan of Bristol dated 1673 St Thomas' church is depicted with the western tower which remains, and with a nave, chancel, two aisles and a small tower or cupola over the chancel arch with large windows to throw light on the rood-screen which divided the nave from the chancel. Surviving mediaeval wills show the endowments which were made to the church by wealthy merchants, many of whom were buried within the church. Several chantries were founded in the church including those of Robert Chepe, Richard Wells, John Stokes and John Burton. John Stokes was a merchant and burgess who died in 1381. In his will he requested to be buried by the altar in the Lady Chapel of St Thomas' church. He left money for rebuilding the Chapel and for bringing a water supply to the church in lead pipes. He endowed a chantry for two priests to celebrate masses in the Lady Chapel for his soul and for the souls of his wife, Joan, the King, the Queen, Prince of Wales and numerous friends and relatives. His executors included two prominent Bristol merchants, William Canynges and Walter Derby. John Burton was a cloth merchant who traded with many parts of Europe, including Iceland. He was Mayor of Bristol in 1448 and 1450 and he died in 1454. The well-endowed chantries and generous bequests to the church meant that it was served by at least six priests and that the interior was filled with statues, lights, carved screens and richly-coloured paintings.

A notable feature of the church is the amount of documentary evidence which survives from the later Middle Ages onwards. This includes numerous wills giving details of bequests and chantry foundations, deeds of church properties, churchwardens' accounts from 1544 and parish registers from 1552. Late-mediaeval wills contain references to several altars in the church. As well as the high altar, there were others dedicated to the Virgin Mary, St John the Baptist, St Nicholas and St Catherine. An altar

which stood in front of the rood-screen was dedicated to the Holy Cross. There was also a guild or fraternity of St Thomas associated with the church. Those who could not afford the fees for burial within the church were interred in the small cemetery on the north side, by the north porch. As well as making bequests to the fabric of the church, many testators left money for the almshouse which had been founded nearby during the 13th century.

Churchwardens' accounts and parish registers for St Thomas' church are now in the Bristol Record Office. They provide detailed information about the religious and secular activities which revolved around the church, and about the colourful appearance of the interior. The accounts also record the destruction of the statues, stained glass, screens, lights and wall paintings during all the changes of the Reformation. Most of the silver vessels belonging to the church were confiscated by Edward VI's government in 1552, although the Limoges candlesticks escaped, having no doubt been hidden from the royal commissioners. A small sanctus bell (recast by Thomas Bilbie in 1764) and two other mediaeval bells also survive.

One bell is dedicated to *Sancta Maria*, the other to *Sancta Anna*. Later further bells were added or recast, making the present heavy ring of eight in the tower. Details of the present bells are as follows: 1 and 2 – Thomas Bilbie II of Chewstoke, 1756; 3 – Thomas Bilbie I of Chewstoke, 1743; 4 – Roger Purdue I of Bristol, 1627; 5 and 6 – mediaeval, Bristol; 7 – Richard (or Roger) Purdue II of Bristol, 1666; 8 – Llewellyns & James of Bristol, 1894 (formerly as 7); sanctus – Thomas Bilbie II of Chewstoke, 1764.

Among the many hundreds whose baptisms are recorded in the parish registers was William Penn in 1621. He was to be a famous admiral in the Dutch wars, and when he died in 1670 he was buried in St Mary Redcliffe where his armour is still displayed. His son, William Penn, achieved even greater fame as the founder of Pennsylvania.

The area around the church remained crowded with houses, workshops, warehouses and all the busy trade of the dockside. As well as merchants, mariners, clothiers, smiths and innkeepers, the 17th and 18th centuries saw an influx of other tradesmen such as soap-makers, chandlers, glovers, glass-makers, wine importers and timber merchants. Writing in 1710 the vicar remarked that he could not hold any services on Thursdays because of the large cattle market in the surrounding streets which 'hinders the

people that they cannot come conveniently to church'. Many of the sailors engaged in the slave trade lodged in the inns and taverns in St Thomas' Street, and in 1786 it was in the *Seven Stars* tavern, which still exists beside the church, that Thomas Clarkson collected much of the evidence about the barbarous trade which eventually led to its abolition.

The church possessed a good income derived from the numerous wealthy parishioners and from the rent from houses, shops, an inn called *The White Horse*, and tolls from the cattle market. The churchwardens' accounts show that during the 18th century there was considerable expenditure on maintenance of the building and additions to its furnishings. New furnishings included an altar, an elaborate reredos, altar rails, organ and organ gallery. Two local carpenters, Joseph Llewellyn and John Harris, were employed to install a new floor of English oak and to provide a complete set of box pews. In 1757 the churchwardens spent the large sum of £600 on repairs to the church. This sort of regular expenditure by the churchwardens makes it puzzling why it was decided during the 1780s that the church was in such bad condition that it had to be demolished and rebuilt. Part of the reason may be that the parishioners wanted a modern building better adapted for contemporary liturgical practice and for the delivery of sermons to large congregations. It is impossible to know the truth of the matter, but the result was the destruction of the mediaeval church.

## THE BUILDING OF A NEW CHURCH

The account of the demolition of the mediaeval church and its replacement by the present building can be found in the churchwardens' accounts, vestry minutes and other church records in the Bristol Record Office. Routine repairs to the church in 1786 were said to reveal serious faults in the structure, and three people were called upon to report on the condition of the building. The principal expert was James Allen, an architect and carver, who lived close to the church in St Thomas' Street. He was joined by 'Mr (James) West the Mason' and 'Mr (Edward) Stock the Carpenter'. They reported in 1788–89 that the whole building was in a dangerous condition, and that the roof and most of the walls would have to be taken down. There is no evidence to suggest that the three experts had exaggerated the problems in an attempt to secure work for themselves. The churchwardens and parishioners obviously took the report seriously,

*The altarpiece of 1716 which is made of Flemish oak by William Killigrew of Bristol, and cost £170 (ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)*



and moved rapidly to carry out the recommendations. In February 1789 the vestry meeting decided to close the church, and in view of the amount of work required, they asked James Allen to draw up plans for an entirely new building. Little is known about James Allen. He trained as an architect under the Paty family, and was involved in various building projects in Bristol and Clifton. Like many other Bristol architects, he was made bankrupt by the rapid collapse in property prices and building work which followed the outbreak of war against France in 1793. Allen's plans were approved in June 1789, and the cost was estimated to be £5,000. Early in 1790 the vestry obtained a private Act of Parliament enabling the necessary money to be raised by loans, parish rates and the appropriation of parish funds. During 1791 the mediaeval church was demolished except for the tower. Some of the carved roof bosses from the former north aisle

were also preserved. At the same time many of the monuments and memorials were destroyed. Most of the materials were sold. The foundation stone of the new church was laid in July 1792, and by 21 December 1793 the first service could be held. Work continued for several years and by 1796 more than £5,855 had been spent. The rebuilding accounts continue until 1825, recording the gradual repayment of loans and mortgages.

Since the site of the church was surrounded by buildings on three sides, Allen designed a plain exterior, with cement-rendered rubble walls, broken only by a stone string-course, and with simple arched windows. It was only at the east end that he provided a dressed ashlar wall, a Venetian-style window and a pediment decorated with carved garlands, which was probably made by Allen himself. The demolition of the buildings which formerly crowded up to the west end, gives a view of that elevation which was not intended by the architect. The mediaeval tower survives in its original design, with buttresses at the corners, pinnacles and a stair turret at the south-west corner topped by a small spirelet.

The dignified interior has a large entrance lobby at the western end, which means that the church itself is 32 ft (9.8m) shorter than its mediaeval predecessor. The arched windows and clerestory provide good light for the classical interior. The 18th-century Church laid much emphasis on preaching and accordingly the chancel is relatively small, while the pulpit was designed as a prominent feature and was originally a 'three-decker'. The square pillars with plain shafts and Tuscan capitals support a vaulted ceiling with transverse arches which rest on corbels in the form of cherubs' heads on folded wings.

Allen retained many of the fine furnishings from the old church, and these provide much of interest for the visitor. The striking large altarpiece made of Flemish oak was purchased by the vestry in 1716 and cost £170. It was made by William Killigrew of Bristol, joiner. This is the best and



*East wall showing the decorative stonework. The circular window was installed in 1879* (RCHME)

grandest reredos surviving in Bristol. The carving of the classical columns, the seven candlesticks, the pediment with a Pelican in Piety, and the carved decorations of wheat, grapes and flowers are of high quality. Originally the panels were filled with the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments, in the best Georgian tradition, but these were replaced in 1907 with paintings of Biblical scenes by Fritz von Kamptz of Clifton. The paintings depict The Sermon on the Mount in the central panel, The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan on each side, and The Last Supper in the upper stage.

The artist provided a lengthy description of his paintings and of the message he wished them to convey. This may be summarised as follows:

**The Sermon on the Mount** – Christ is depicted addressing the multitude assembled to hear him. The rocks behind might have provided a seat, and the olive tree would earlier have provided some shade. In the distance is the Sea of Galilee. 'I have tried to render the probable impressions of the sermon upon those gathered round him'. The disciples are at the front, including St John who lies at Christ's feet. On the extreme left is a Pharisee, eager to gather evidence which can be used against Jesus.

**The Prodigal Son** – The father represents God in this parable, and is depicted as a dignified old man. Seeing his son he rushes to greet him with joy, as does the prodigal's sister. The servants at work on the roof are a reminder of the son's petition to his father 'Make me as one of thy hired servants'.

**The Good Samaritan** – The Samaritan is shown arriving at the inn in Jericho. In the distance are the hills infested with robbers. The wounded victim of the robbers is greeted by the kindly landlord who will now care for him.

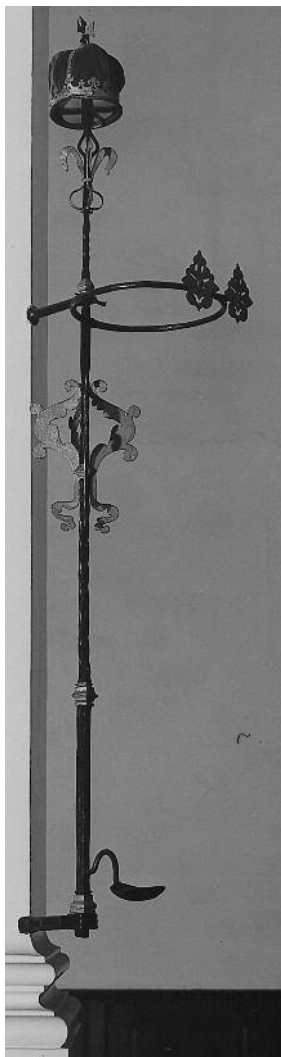
**The Last Supper** – This picture is based on careful reading of the descriptions in the New Testament. Christ is shown standing to break bread 'explaining the meaning of the institution which he asked his friends to observe in remembrance of himself', Judas has already left, but the other apostles listen intently to Christ's words.



*One of the carved cherub heads which support the church roof, probably carved by the architect, James Allen* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

Also kept from the old church was the organ gallery, which was re-erected at the west end. Well-proportioned and of excellent workmanship, its fluted columns and elegant pediment provide a good example of solid early Georgian church furnishings. The carved organ case itself now fills the eastern arch on the north side of the nave. The organ was originally made in London by the well-known organ builder John Harris in 1728. The cost of the organ and case was £360. Also surviving from the old church are the royal arms of Charles I, dated 1637, two 17th-century wooden chests, the carved oak pulpit of 1740, the pews and the Jacobean sword-rest which was used to display the ceremonial sword carried before the Mayor whenever he attended a service in the church. The small carved figures of St Thomas and St John the Baptist which are on each side of the western entrance to the nave came from the nearby Long Row almshouses. They are a reminder of the church's dedication to St Thomas and of the former altar dedicated to St John the Baptist. James Allen intended that the mediaeval tower should be 'raised and modernised' in a classical fashion, but this work was never carried out.

Several alterations to the church were made during the 19th century, most notably during a comprehensive restoration of the building and reordering of the interior carried out in 1878–80 by the architect WV Gough, of St Nicholas' Street, Bristol, at a cost of more than £3,500. Allen's semicircular east window was replaced by the present rose window. The tasteful decorative scheme for the interior, devised by Allen and shown in early views of the church, was replaced in 1878–80 by a less attractive stencilled decoration. At the same time the original 'three-decker' pulpit was reduced



The early-17th-century sword rest (RCHME)

to its present size, and the fine box pews were refashioned. When Joseph Leech, the editor of *The Bristol Times and Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, attended a service at St Thomas' church in 1849 he commented on the square, high-sided pews in which 'people have a sociable and most neighbourly way of looking in one another's faces'. He also noted that he could not see the chancel 'as the pulpit, the reading desk, a row of red curtains and a lofty churchwardens' pew literally shut it out from view'. The high pews and other obstructions to the view were cut down during the alterations in 1878–80. The organ was moved from the west end to its present position and substantially rebuilt by Vowles of Bristol. The chancel area within the church was enlarged and a new altar and choir stalls were provided. The mahogany font which had been purchased in 1793 was converted to a lectern and a new font of stone and marble was provided. Central heating was also installed at this time.

St Thomas' church survived the bombing during the Second World War, although many nearby churches were totally destroyed, including St Peter's, St Mary le Port and the Temple churches. St Nicholas' church, just across the river Avon, was extensively damaged. After the War, the programme of slum clearance coupled with the decline and eventual closure of the City docks, meant that few residents remained in the vicinity of St Thomas. Although it continued to attract a large congregation, the church ceased to be used as a parish church in 1956 and became a centre for Social and Industrial Mission. Faced with numerous changes in services and music, and with a succession of 'liturgical experiments', the congregation gradually declined and the church was finally closed in 1979. In 1988 it was formally vested in The Churches Conservation Trust. Essential repairs, including those following a fire in 1990, were carried out under the supervision of John Keeling Maggs; the current inspecting architect is Paul Richold.

*Front cover: The 15th-century tower which survived the demolition and rebuilding of the rest of the church in 1791–93 (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).*

*Back cover: The east end of the church, showing the elegant pillars, fine vaulted ceiling and the altarpiece of 1716. (RCHME).*

© The Churches Conservation Trust 2001

Series 4 no. 152

January 2001