

## The Parish of the Ascension, Cambridge

### SAINT GILES' CHURCH

#### A Brief History

The recorded history of Saint Giles' begins in 1092 when Hugolina, the wife of Picot, the Norman sheriff of Cambridge, founded or endowed the church as a thank-offering for her recovery from serious illness.

At that time the church was small, and it was served by a group of six Augustinian Canons, who were at Saint Giles' for twenty years after which they moved to the riverside at Barnwell and settled around a hermit's cell and an ancient chapel of Andrew. Various reasons for this move have been suggested; that the rule had become lax at Saint Giles'; that Picot's son turned traitor and lost control of the castle and its surrounding, so losing the rights to Saint Giles'; that the site by the castle was small and water scarce. The church of Saint Giles' continued as a small and fairly primitive church for several centuries, outside the walls of the ancient town of Cambridge.

It is only if the visitor climbs Castle Mound, reached through the car park of Shire Hall, that it becomes apparent that Saint Giles', if not actually within the curtain wall of the Norman castle, must have been nestled right up against it, though the present church is built to the north of the mediaeval building.

For some centuries Cambridge has had too many churches. It is a clear indication of both population and privilege that so many churches still exist even though some were allowed to become redundant and some are gone. Across the road from Saint Giles' on its west side stands the redundant church of Saint Peter, now maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust, and there too once stood the Church of All Saints by the Castle.

This area to the north of the river Cam was extremely hard hit by the Black Death, in fact it is recorded that all the population here, and it can be assumed that it was an area of dense, primitive habitation, was wiped out by disease. So the first Saint Giles' continued its existence as a largely unaltered building right through to the eighteenth century, though one researcher claims that a second Saint Giles' was in existence in 1570. It seems likely from the description that it was simply old Saint Giles' with a few modest additions.

*"in 1574 the second church consisted of a nave and chancel ... with five windows on each side of the nave, with no tower, but a small transept on the north and a southern porch .. A description of 1742 speaks of a wooden bell house being erected in the churchyard next the street, but this seems to have lasted until 1790 only."*

At any rate, Saint Giles' cannot have had the wealth of burgesses and merchants to throw out its walls and raise its roof and fill it with chantries and beautiful glass but it did have some sort of continuing group of worshippers for, without them, it would simply have tumbled down as Saint Peter's has done on several occasions or, indeed, disappeared as has All Saints'.

## 1800 – The First Major ‘Improvements’

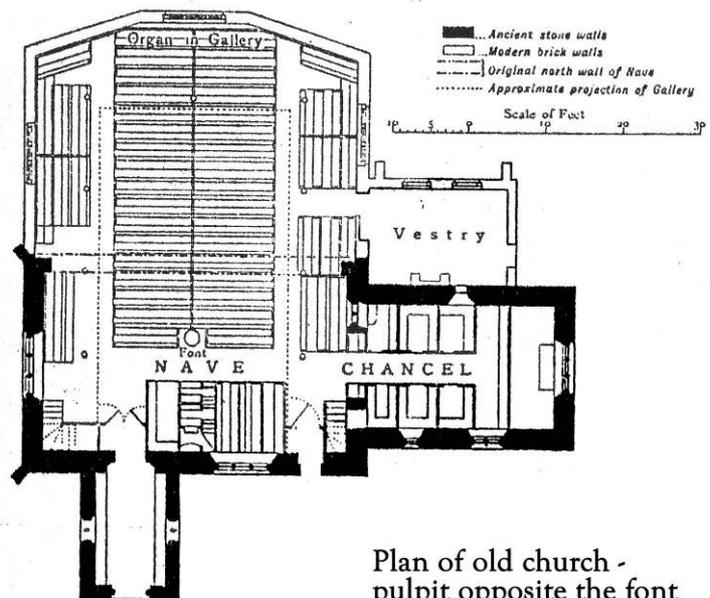


The first major change in Saint Giles’ fortunes occurred in 1800 when Magdalene College just to the south of Saint Giles’ became the incumbent. This was the time of one of the Church of England’s mighty revivals, the time when preaching, with its attendant three-decker pulpits, was king of the liturgy.

Farish, like many churchmen before him, had no hesitation in making major changes to suit the current fashion. He had the north wall of the old church torn out and a great square addition built on in its place, so that the seating

for the congregation went from accommodating about one hundred people to accommodating about six hundred. The great pulpit he had installed, with a specially designed sounding board above it to enhance his wispy voice, was placed against the old south wall of the nave. The chancel of the church, unimproved and in its ancient position, was almost entirely hidden from view. This cavalier redevelopment was not universally welcomed, or perhaps went out of fashion rather quickly, for in 1820 a local writer compared it, indignantly, to a non-conformist chapel:

*“The nave of this church is one of these new brick edifices, which is to transmit the taste of this age to future wondering generations. The plan is singular: the seats rise behind each other as in the pit of a theatre, an arrangement of which neither the beauty or the utility is evident. It may be very right, and, since it is allowed, no doubt it is, to pull down, or to suffer to fall, those old fashioned things called churches, and to build in their places something like meeting houses ...”*



Plan of old church - pulpit opposite the font

## 1875 – The New Saint Giles'

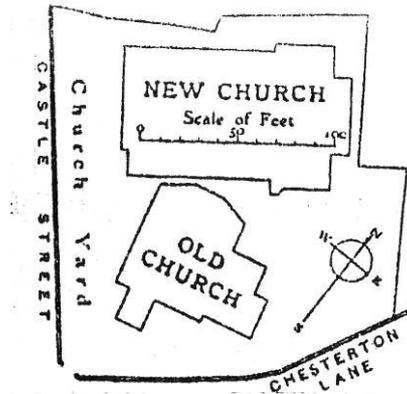
The fashion, however, was not of long duration at Saint Giles' for by the 1870s Saint Giles' was in the hands of the Tractarians, those members of the Church of England who believed that all too much of the Church's good mediaeval forms of worship had been thrown away at the Reformation and the years that followed it, and that order, and beauty and the centrality of the Holy Communion to the Christian Faith were supremely important.



An appeal was launched in Cambridge to build a worthier Saint Giles'. The published appeal speaks of the invisibility of the chancel to five sixths of the congregation; of the pews being so high and so narrow as to make kneeling impossible; and of its mean and unsightly appearance both inside and out. The new church, they calculated, would cost £8,000, without a tower, and this included £1,000 for the site, for the church was built to the north of the old Saint Giles' which continued in use while the new, greater edifice was under construction. It was calculated that the church would hold 800

people, and it was designed to be in the newly fashionable Early English style, with a large and lofty nave, (the height of which has been a trial in both maintenance and heating ever since).

The new church was completed in 1875 and consecrated by the Bishop of Ely on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1875. It incorporated the former chancel arch of the first Saint Giles' and also a former entrance arch. Also moved into the new church were some memorials, though the stones, which had formerly held brasses, were left behind. The old church began to be demolished in September of the same year, though its foundations were ordered to be left in place and are presumably beneath the grass of the present churchyard.



## Saint Giles' Today

Visitors to Saint Giles' generally approach from the path leading through the former churchyard to the south porch. The churchyard is rather smaller than it used to be, for the widening of Chesterton Lane involved a reduction of its size and burial have not taken place there for a great many years. The cemetery is further out of town, down All Souls' Lane off the Huntingdon Road.

The present building was designed by Healey of Bradford and it is constructed of brick with Doulton Stone dressings and a Westmoreland Slate roof. It was built originally without a porch, and when first built, the High Altar was not reached by quite so many steps as it is today. There have been a number of cosmetic



changes since the present church was built: the stained glass has all been added, the rood screen, the choir stalls and the altar rails have all been gifts of one sort or another. It is a church of surprising beauty, given the plainness of its exterior, and it continues to function week by week in a tradition of worship established over 900 years ago.

### The Chancel



There is no doubt that the most eye-catching aspect of the church is the beautiful chancel with its carved oak choir stalls, given in 1901, and the great east window with its lovely rose window depicting worshipping angels. The three main window lights show Christ in Glory, the Apostles receiving the Holy Spirit at the first Pentecost, Saint Giles with his attendant hart and Saint Peter. They were designed by C. E. Kempe and put in place in 1899-1900 as a memorial to the first vicar of the new Saint Giles', Canon Francis Slater.

The original reredos of the High Altar can be glimpsed behind the current trioptich. It shows the resurrection appearance of Christ to the apostles on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Peter kneels at the foot of Our Lord who hands him the keys to heaven and hell. The trioptich which now stands in front of this, and which is closed during Lent, was installed at the turn of the century. The altar rails, popularly believed to have been designed by Sir Christopher Wren, came from the English Church in Rotterdam in 1913. The chancel walls were formerly painted in a brilliant red with gilded monograms stencilled on them, and above it all there is, much blackened by over a century of incense and candle and lamp smoke, a panelled and painted ceiling that was worked by an amateur gentleman of the town within a year of the building of Saint Giles'. The rood screen, which marks the entrance to the chancel, was designed and fabricated by Kett in 1896.

## The Lady Chapel



The windows of the Lady Chapel are also by Kempe and show, as is fitting, the Annunciation, the Visitation of Mary with Elizabeth, and the Adoration of the Shepherds. The painting over the altar which shows the Adoration of the Magi, and of which a former parishioner commented that he always had a notion that the kneeling king was about to bite the baby's toe, is an eighteenth century copy of a work by Veronese (1528-88). It was bequeathed to Saint Giles' in 1803 and at that time was hung as a reredos above the old High Altar. The Lady Chapel is used for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and Holy Communion is celebrated there on Thursday mornings. The archway which leads into the Lady Chapel was moved into Saint Giles' from the old building and it is the chancel arch from the Saint Giles' Church of 1092. It is very primitive

in style and may very well be an indication that Hugolina and Picot did not build the church but rather restored it and endowed it. Its span is only eight feet, which gives some indication of the size of the original church. A student of architecture might like to compare this chancel arch to those of Escomb or Jarrow in County Durham, to Bradford on Avon or Goodmanham, near Beverley, in pursuit of evidence as to the actual age of Saint Giles' arch.

## The Nave and Aisles

Within the nave, all is very plain. It is filled with light from the high clerestory windows. The aisles are richer; a series of windows showing a representative saint or worthy Christian from each century add glowing colour to the church. They are quite charming examples of Victorian glass work. The name of the designer seems not to be known but the London firm of Heaton, Butler and Payne supplied them. Those on the south side of the church were given in memory of Mrs. Langton of Sunnyside by the Reverend and Mrs. Walter D. Challice. Those on the north side are individual gifts and each has a plaque stating the name of the donor(s).

On the north side is an arch corresponding to the one that leads into the Lady Chapel on the south side. This leads into the vestry and it is said to be made up of twelfth century fragments from the south doorway of the old church.

Also within the church, you will find the fifteenth century font, two seventeenth century chests (restored), a copy of the Taddei Tondo by Michelangelo and the one bell we still possess dated 1629. It was taken down a few years ago when its housing was deemed unsafe, but plans are in hand to rehang the bells within a new, external bell tower.

The screen at the extreme west end of the church is by Ninian Comper as is the memorial window to Bishop Gore.



## The Memorials

The memorials brought from the old church are mostly in the north west corner of the north aisle and are mostly early nineteenth century. The older and more decayed seventeenth century monument in the Lady Chapel is to Nicholas Carr, M.D., 1568, Regius Professor of Greek, to his daughter Catherine Carr, and to William James:

*“a much restored freestone monument with skulls over the inscription panels, side columns, entablature, obelisks and elaborate strapwork cresting, with shield of arms of James impaling a blank shield and achievement of arms of James impaling Carr.”*



Like so many churches, Saint Giles' is no longer a parish in its own right but is instead part of the Parish of the Ascension with an ecumenical team ministry. The other churches in the parish are Saint Peter's, on the opposite side of Castle Street, now maintained by the Churches Conservation Trust, Saint Luke's (URC and C of E) Church in Victoria Road, which was built a little later than Saint Giles' and Saint Augustine of Canterbury in Richmond Road which is housed in a converted school building.

You are welcome to visit us, to join us in any of our services and we ask you to remember us in your prayers.

If you are interested in learning more of the history of St. Giles' and the area, the Cambridgeshire Collection on the top floor of the Lion Yard Library in central Cambridge has extensive records and very helpful staff.

*Photographs by kind permission of Mark Wills and Stephen Day*

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