



THE CHURCHES  
CONSERVATION TRUST

# St MARTIN'S CHURCH

Exeter, Devon



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CONSERVATION TRUST

1 West Smithfield London EC1A 9EE

Tel: 020 7213 0660 Fax: 020 7213 0678 Email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

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# ST MARTIN'S CHURCH

*by JGM Scott (Prebendary Emeritus of Exeter Cathedral, retired country parson and amateur local historian with a special interest in Devon churches)*

## HISTORY

A visitor looking at this little church, with his back to the vast and splendid Cathedral, might well ask, 'Why is it here? So close to the Cathedral, with two other churches within 200 yards (183 metres), who needed a church here?'

Indeed, there were once even more churches clustered round the Cathedral; St Petrock's and St Stephen's are still there in the High Street, but St Mary Major, close to the west front of the Cathedral, St Lawrence's, almost opposite St Stephen's in the High Street, and All Hallows, Goldsmith Street, opposite the end of St Martin's Lane, have all disappeared in the last 150 years; and not much further away were St Paul's, St Kerrian's and St George's, as well as little St Pancras which is still there in the Guildhall Centre.

But two things need to be remembered: the Cathedral has no parish of its own – its 'parish' is the Diocese, which once covered not only Devon but the whole of Cornwall too; and, for most of the eight or nine centuries that these churches have been here, their parishes were filled with three- or four-storey houses in which people carried on their business, trade or industry and also lived with their families, servants and often apprentices and workers. St Martin's parish is no bigger than a fairly small

field or a large garden – 1.75 acres (0.7 hectares) bounded by the High Street, St Martin's Lane, the Cathedral Yard and Broadgate, and just two properties north of the High Street – but in 1821 it had 329 residents in 62 houses. In the countryside there are still thousands of parishes in England with fewer parishioners than this, but the population of St Martin's parish nowadays is tiny because the former dwellings are now shops and offices and there is no longer a community.

At one time, though, St Martin's parish had a strong identity of its own. For instance, every Ascension Day until 1843 the St Martin's people processed around the bounds of their parish, bearing rods to 'beat the bounds', sustained by £2-worth of rolls, 6s (30p) of cheese and 4s (20p) of beer and led by a 'Captain' decked in 18 pennyworth (7p) of ribbons. In those days even inner city parishes had a strong sense of community. For a long time St Martin's parish had its own fire engine too, housed in a shed beside the church; later it was housed in the Royal Clarence Hotel.

*Front cover: Monument to Philip Hooper (d.1715) on chancel north wall (Christopher Dalton)*

*Left: West front from the Cathedral Yard (Christopher Dalton)*



*Interior looking east with the chancel arch and 19th-century window above (Christopher Dalton)*

## The CHURCH

The church is oddly sited right at the corner of its parish, aligned at an oblique angle to adjacent buildings and the streets: the nave at least was probably built before the present streets existed. The site was so constricted that the parishioners had to build the east end of their church at a canted angle and their tower had to go on land which belonged to the Dean & Chapter of the cathedral: an annual rent of one shilling and eight pence (8p) was still being paid for it until 1931, when someone with a tidy mind but no sense of history decided to redeem it for a lump sum of £1 14s 2d (£1.71). For some time the parish also had to rent the ground for the 'engine house'.

Of particular note is that the date is known of the dedication of the first church here 'to the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Cross, and Mary Mother of Christ, and St Martin, Bishop, and All Saints'. It was consecrated on 6 July 1065 by Bishop Leofric, the bishop who had founded a cathedral in Exeter to supersede the earlier one in Crediton. Leofric was a Burgundian, which may explain the dedication of the church to a French saint; the first church founded in Canterbury, in the 7th century was also St Martin's. The building has been very much altered since then, but there is probably some of the original masonry in the walls of the nave. The material is mainly Heavitree sandstone with a small amount of volcanic 'trap' from Rougemont.



The windows all date from the late 14th or 15th century; the big west window facing the Cathedral Yard was clearly designed not only to provide light but to ensure that St Martin's presence in the Close could not be overlooked, and like the large window in the south wall of the nave is of the white Beer stone which was much used in the cathedral.

The tower forms a tiny transept on the north side; it is unbuttressed but has a bold stair-turret on its west face and a plain parapet without battlements; apart from the arch inside, which is of volcanic Thorverton or Raddon stone, it is built of the very friable red Heavitree stone – hence the iron bands which were added to hold it together. Like many Devon towers it was roughcast until the 19th century, and now is roughcast again.

*Nave looking west with the gallery and great west window (Christopher Dalton)*

## INTERIOR

Inside, the large windows fill the church with light and the white walls and ceiling reflect it.

The roof is a typical Devon 'waggon' roof, plastered between the moulded ribs which have carved bosses where they intersect; there is a dove near the chancel arch and on either side in the middle are a male and a female head facing one another: the rest are foliage patterns. The chancel roof has no ribs.

Under the tower is the font, unusual in having a small additional basin on its stem; the two parts of the font are not of the same stone and probably not of the same date. There are mediaeval fonts in other English churches with similar basins at the side: their purpose is not clear, though it has been suggested that they were for the holy oil of chrism used in baptism.

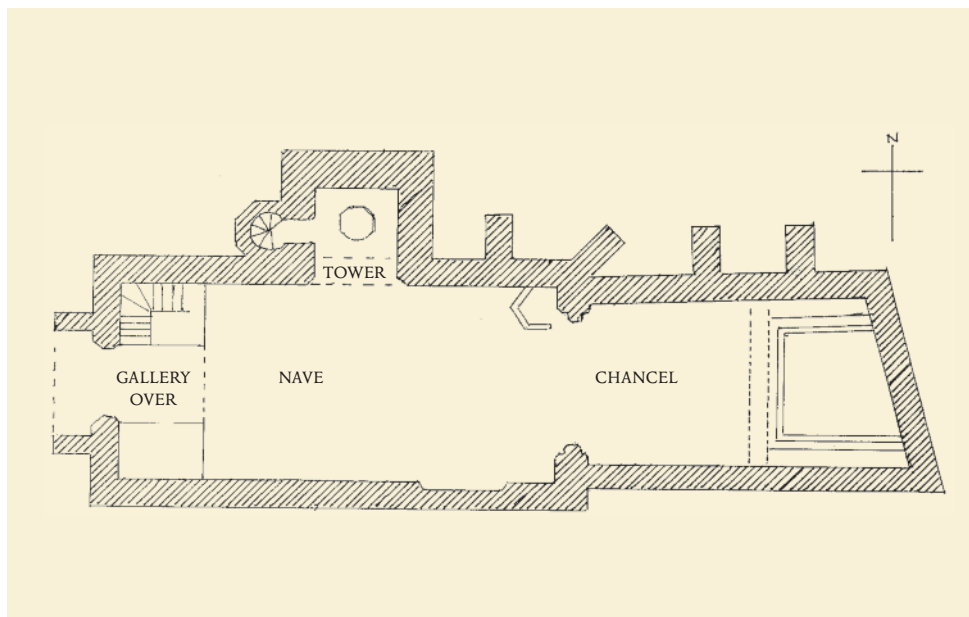
Between the nave and chancel is a tall arch of Thorverton or Raddon stone with a niche, probably for a statue of the patron saint, in the left-hand side; but the arch itself is low and does not fit the responds; it was probably lowered in the early 19th century to allow the window to be created above it. There was then still a rood-screen between the nave and chancel.

There is some mediaeval glass in the windows which may give a clue to their date; the west window has the arms of the see of Exeter and the Courtenay family, Earls of Devon; Peter Courtenay



was Bishop 1478–86. The window on the south side of the nave has the arms of the see and three 'shovellers' heads' for the Bishop Lacy (1420–55); the records show that he gave a window – presumably this one – to the church. The other arms are of Askewith (with three asses) and Southcote (with three 'coots' which look more like magpies), and in the top of the window is a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit.

St Martin's escaped both the Victorian refurbishing which transformed most of our churches, and the bombing which severely damaged the Cathedral and St Stephen's, so that it keeps a charming air of the Middle Ages and the 18th century. The gallery at the west end is painted with two angels and the arms of the City and Bishop Jonathan Trelawny, which dates it to late 17th or early 18th century: Trelawny was the Cornish-born Bishop of Exeter, one of the seven bishops who were imprisoned and tried for seditious libel by



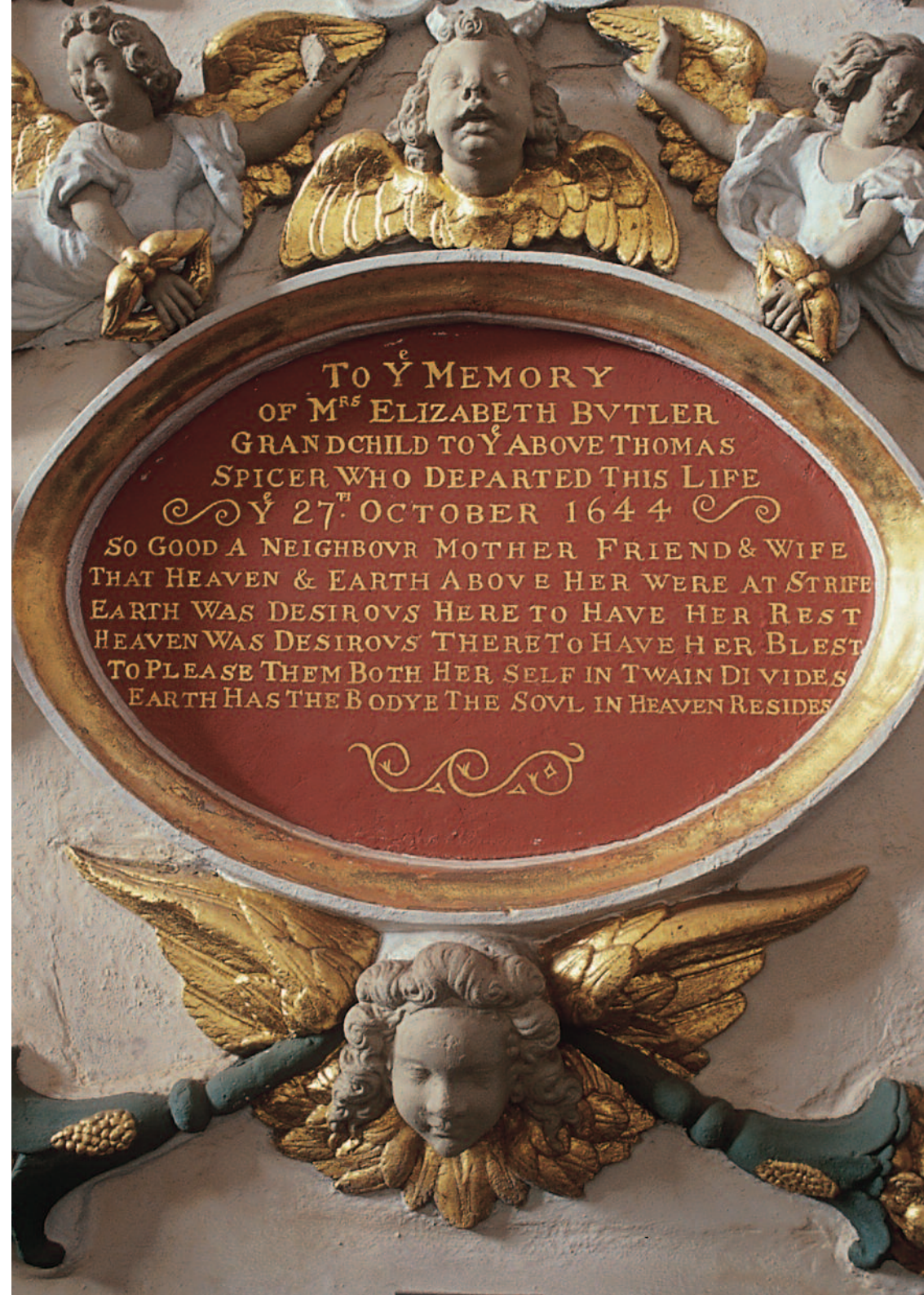
James II, and a local hero in Cornwall. In the centre are the arms of George III; the Hanoverian shield in the middle dates them between 1801 and 1816. The organ in the gallery is probably the one listed in an inventory of 1842 as a 'finger organ' at a time when many churches still had barrel organs. The painted royal arms of Charles I, dated 1635, are now on the south wall.

The box pews are probably of the same date as the gallery, and the pulpit is early 19th century; the communion rails and benches are a rare survival from the time the communicants moved into the chancel when the minister invited them to 'draw near with faith', and sat round the altar before kneeling for the Communion. The rails have twisted balusters, set closely enough together to keep dogs out of the sanctuary, as ordered by Archbishop Laud.

The east wall is at an oblique angle, suggesting that the chancel was added or extended after the adjoining site had been built on. Under the paintwork of the reredos are still inscribed the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Above are shields with the arms of Bishop Blackall who followed Trelawny in 1707,

and of the Hooper family. This reredos was probably given by Philip Hooper who died in 1715 and whose monument is on the north wall of the chancel.

*Right: Epitaph to Elizabeth Butler (d.1644) on nave north wall (Boris Baggs)*



Monument to John Codrington (d.1801) and family on nave south wall (Boris Baggs)

## MONUMENTS

The monuments are a notable feature of this church. One of the most prominent is to Philip Hooper, 1715, who is depicted by John Weston kneeling at a prayer desk with a skull and a pile of books. He is wearing a tremendous wig, and in the words of Beatrix Cresswell 'has a complacent smile as if he were occupied neither with books, nor skull, nor prayers, but was reflecting with satisfaction upon his improvements in the church, or perhaps on the legacies left for charitable purposes which are recorded in the not particularly legible inscription on the monument.' Above him is his coat of arms flanked by trumpeting angels, and a cherub mourns on either side. On the south side of the chancel are monuments to Jurgen Hachmeester, 1762 (formerly in St Paul's church, demolished in 1936); William Holwell, MD, his wife Elizabeth, son William and daughter Margaret; Annie Holwell, 1818, and William and Isabella Gater and their children; and Isabella Holwell, 1844, widow of a Rector of Plymtree.

On the north side of the nave is a tablet in a frame to Judith Wakeman, daughter of Thomas Spicer, 1643, with the verse:

*This is my dwelling, this my trewest home  
A house of clay best fits A guest of lome  
Nay tis my house for I p'ceave I have  
In all my life been walking to this grave.*



Below is another tablet to Elizabeth Butler, 1644, grandchild of Thomas Spicer, whose arms are at the top.

On the south nave wall are more memorials:

John Codrington, 1801 and his family, with a female figure mourning over a tomb; it was formerly also in St Paul's church, ordered by his one surviving child Maria Parr, who died before it was completed; Winifred Butler, 1673, with the arms of Butler and Prideaux; Thomas Spicer and his wife Elizabeth; and Richard Thorn, 1787, with his parents and his son.

In the tower are two more large monuments, both formerly in St Paul's church. On the east wall is a very showy one in white marble, reputedly commissioned from Italy, to Edward Seaward, 1703, Mayor and Alderman of Exeter, and his wife Hannah née Broking, with a long inscription in Latin and the arms of Seaward and Broking, cherubs bearing symbolic objects at each side and a pelican at the top. On the

Monument to Elizabeth Mary Mortimer (d.1826, aged 17) on tower west wall (Boris Baggs)



west wall is an angel bearing a female figure aloft, by Baily of London, to Eliza Mary Mortimer, who died in 1826 aged 17. There are a number of plain inscribed tablets on the wall of the stairs leading to the gallery.

The single bell of about 11 cwt (560 kg) in the tower was cast by Thomas Pennington III of Exeter in 1675, and hangs in its original oak frame. Its decoration includes the impression of a Protestant satirical medal; one way up it shows the head of a king, the other way a pope. It was described in 1841 as being 'of a deep note, and which is easily distinguished by its sound from every other bell in the city'. This is still true, though St Martin's bell is rarely heard nowadays.

Now that almost all the properties in St Martin's parish – indeed in the whole city centre – are devoted to commerce, St Martin's has lost its role as the worshipping centre of a community of people, and is no longer regularly used for worship, but it remains a consecrated building where many people come to find peace, holiness, beauty, charm and a sense of history. It was placed in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust in August 1995.

In 1996 the Trust undertook a programme of repairs which dealt mainly with the external fabric of the church. This work included repair of the rainwater goods and gullies, flush pointing of the west elevation stonework, and re-leading

of the window glazing in the north wall of the tower and east wall of the nave. During inspection of the tower, the stonework was found to be very friable. Following consultation with the city authorities, the tower and staircase turret were rendered to prevent further decay and to protect passers-by below. All the work was carried out under the direction of the Trust's architect, Mr John Bucknall, of Wells, Somerset.

# THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the national body that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that the church is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are over 330 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk).

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

## NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF

Holy Trinity, Torbryan  
4 miles SW of Newton Abbot off A381

West Ogwell Church  
3 miles SW of Newton Abbot off A381

The Trust has also published a free Educational Booklet for teachers' use on school visits, with ideas for educational approaches linked to the National Curriculum. For further details and to obtain the Booklet contact the Education Officer by email: [central@tcct.org.uk](mailto:central@tcct.org.uk)

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