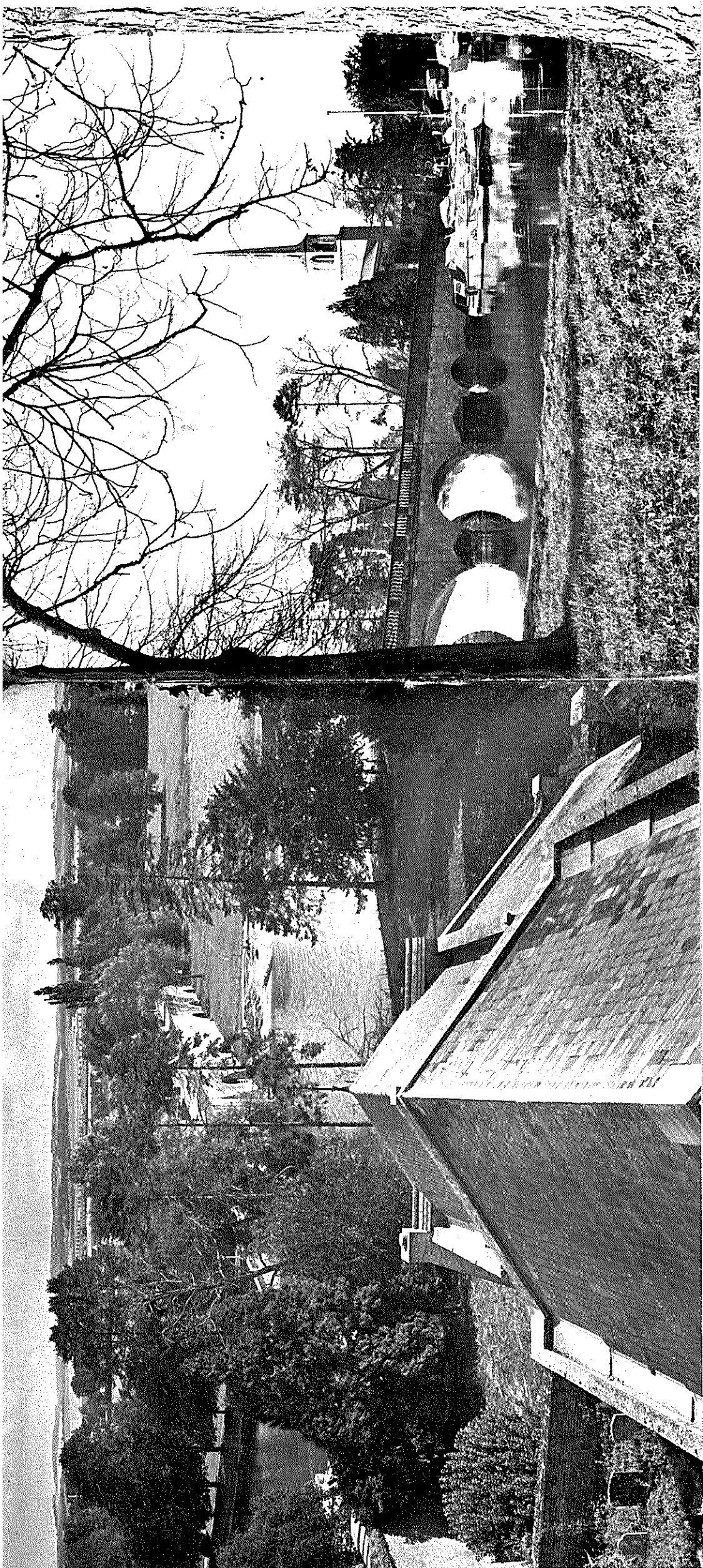


REDUNDANT  
CHURCHES  
FUND

ST PETER  
WALLINGFORD  
OXFORDSHIRE

40 pence



25752  
125103  
125159

## THE CHURCH

'At a vestry then legally held by us the Churchwardens and Overseers and Inhabitants whose names are here under inscribed. Whereas it is intended to apply for and sue forth his Majesty's Letters Patent under the great seal to ask collect and receive the charitable contributions of all manner of persons in order to raise money to rebuild the Parish Church of St Peter's within the Borough aforesaid and whereas it will be necessary to appoint and empower a committee of persons inhabitants of this parish. Therefore we the said parishioners do nominate and appoint Mr Wm Toovey, Mr Rbt Baker, Mr Cudworth Bruch, Mr J Toovey, Mr Joseph Tuckwell, Mr Nath Cresswell and Mr Jn Cox, the present churchwardens in order to do and transact everything necessary to carry the said intended application into execution.'

(Vestry Minute, 12th May 1759)

The parish church of St Peter, the rebuilding of which the Vestry had met to discuss, had been destroyed over a hundred years previously during the siege of Wallingford by Parliamentary forces in 1646. The old church, one of fourteen in medieval Wallingford, was probably founded by Robert D'Oilly, builder of the castle and founder of the Benedictine Abbey. By 1646 only four churches remained in the town: St Mary the More (the present parish church), St Leonard's, St Peter's and All Saints. Both the latter churches were destroyed in the siege but All Saints was never rebuilt.

£252.1s.3d. was collected on the Brief and with a further £1,294.7s.0d. raised by a private Subscription List in 1763 the building of the church was begun. The name of the architect is not now known but the contractors were the Mr William Toovey and Mr Joseph Tuckwell mentioned above. By September

1767 the church was ready to be paved, pewed and stuccoed and estimates for this were obtained from Mr (later Sir) Robert Taylor.

When St Peter's was opened for worship on 29th June 1769, it consisted of the present nave and tower only, and its appearance was typical of many small country churches of the period. The east end would have been dominated by the three-decker pulpit and a plain altar table stood below the elegant Venetian window. Both were draped with crimson velvet. Under the small wainscot gallery at the west end was a simple vase-shaped marble font and in the centre of the nave hanging from a brass chain was the brass chandelier presented by Mr Cudworth Bruch, an alderman and mayor of the town. In the opinion of John Man of Reading, writing in 1818, the church was 'one of the neatest and best adapted to this northern climate of any of our country churches, which are in general gloomy, cold and damp, and calculated to inspire those who attend them rather with horror than devotion'. The nave was filled with numbered wainscot pews and according to the practice of the time these were allocated to the householders of the parish who paid rent for them. The front pew on one side was assigned to Mr William Blackstone, Patron of the living, and that on the other side was reserved for the Rector. A few were set aside for the use of the Corporation and the rest of the pews, including those in the gallery, were distributed among the remaining households.

The church was not yet finished. In the early 1770's more money was raised by Brief and Sir Robert Taylor was commissioned to design a spire. Work began on this in February 1776 and it was completed the following year. At the same time the thirty-hour clock by Messrs Dutton & Thwaites was installed and a bell was hung. Ten years later two panels inscribed with the Lord's Prayer, the Belief and the Ten Commandments, at a cost of 1s. per foot of script, were put up and the final touch was given to the church in 1821 when 'a very handsome and elegant organ fitted in the gothic style built by Davis of London' was erected in the west gallery and the pews in front of it taken by the singers.

Despite the proximity of Oxford to Wallingford, St Peter's seems to have been largely untouched by the liturgical developments of the 19th century, probably because the parish could not afford to make many changes. The pulpit was dismantled and the gallery taken down in the 1850's but it was

not until early in the 20th century that more drastic changes were considered. In 1904 Mr Sydney Stephenson of Nottingham was employed to draw up plans for alterations involving the addition of a chancel with a vestry on the north side and an organ chamber on the south side with heating apparatus and an open timber roof to the nave. Fortunately lack of money prevented the 'improvements' from being carried out in full. Work was begun on the chancel only in 1904 but an anonymous donation later in the year made it possible to build the organ chamber too, rather than brick up the arch temporarily. In the following years the parish found it increasingly difficult to afford even necessary repairs and the church became more and more dilapidated.

Few of the fittings mentioned by John Man in 1818 now remain in the church, although most of the pews and panelling in the nave date from the 1760's. The pulpit is part of the original ensemble and the sounding board was used to form the top of the present altar table. The bell by Pack & Chapman installed in 1776 still hangs in the tower. The organ comes from the redundant church of St James, Toxteth, in Liverpool and incorporates parts of the previous organ which was moved to Axminster before the church came into the hands of the Redundant Churches Fund.

## THE SPIRE

Sir Robert Taylor was Architect of the Kings Works and later Surveyor of the Admiralty and of Greenwich Hospital. At the time when he was commissioned to design the spire for Wallingford he was drawing up plans for the rebuilding of the church in Long Ditton, Surrey, for which he had prepared two schemes, one for a classical building and another in the Gothic style. The Gothic building was rejected and so he reproduced the design for its spire for St Peter's with the addition of crocketed corner pinnacles to the tower that were never built. Two estimates were given, one for building it in freestone for £480 and the other in Barrington stone for £560. The former was accepted. Whilst there is no doubt that the spire looks better without the pinnacles, from a structural point of view they might have prevented some of the movements in the walls of the belfry below which have had to be tied together.

The spire has caused comment ever since it was first built. John Man gave a full description of the 'elegant light and lofty spire' and comments on the long narrow openings 'which add much to the lightness of its appearance, though, perhaps, not quite consonant to the rules of architecture'. Later generations were less flattering and even John Kirby Hedges in 1881 notes that 'the nondescript spire has given rise to a good deal of architectural criticism'. The Victoria County History in 1921 was more non-committal, regarding it as 'an interesting essay in the Gothic "taste" of the Batty Langley school' (Batty Langley was one of the early exponents of the Gothic style), but it is now accepted that the spire is the chief glory of the building and an important element in the view across the fields from Crowmarsh Gifford and from Wallingford Bridge.

Mr Justice Blackstone, patron of the living and author of the influential 'Commentaries on the Laws of England', lived at Castle Priory, the second house on the south side of the church, from the time of his marriage in 1761 until his death. He was born in London in 1723 and was educated at Charterhouse and Pembroke College, Oxford. He entered the Middle Temple in 1741 and was called to the Bar in 1746. He came to Wallingford in 1749 when he became Recorder of the town and was instrumental in ensuring that the turnpike road from Oxford to Wantage came through Wallingford, so bringing back some small part of the prosperity it had known in the Middle Ages. In 1758 he was appointed the first Professor of English Law at Oxford University. He entered Parliament in 1761 as the Member for Hindon, a rotten borough in Wiltshire, and became Solicitor General in 1763 and Justice of Common Pleas in 1770. He was knighted in 1770.

Sir William was always interested in the church. In 1767 at the request of the parish council he obtained estimates from Sir Robert Taylor for the furnishing and decoration of the church. He was very appropriately elected Churchwarden from 1768-70, the period covering the re-opening of the church. At that time he lent a bell from his own house to hang in the tower until a new bell was obtained and he lent the parish money to cover their outstanding debts free of interest. Sir William seems to have been particularly interested in the building of the spire, keeping accounts of the money obtained by Brief and subscription and obtaining designs and

estimates from Sir Robert Taylor. So energetic was he that he gave the impression that the spire had been built entirely at his own expense, an impression that the Judge himself does not seem to have corrected. A clock was installed in the tower at this time with clock faces on the east side towards the river and on the west towards the town. Sir William paid for an additional dial to be added on the south side of the tower which would be visible from Castle Priory. Sir William's final gift to the church at Easter time in 1778 not long before his death, was a handsome chalice, paten and plate of silver gilt which were used by the parish until 1969 when services ceased.

Sir William died in 1780 and was buried in the vault he had had built for his family below the east end of the church. Members of the Blackstone family buried in the vault are recorded on the black marble slab at the foot of the chancel steps and a more elaborate memorial to the Judge can be seen outside on the south wall of the nave beneath a Gothic canopy.

The last service held in St Peter's as a parish church was on 29th June, 1969, two hundred years to the day after it was first opened. It became officially redundant in April 1971 and was placed in the care of the Redundant Churches Fund in July of the following year.

Mr Emil Godfrey was asked to undertake the repair of the church and one of the major tasks was to restore the fine plaster ceiling and cornice, which had been badly patched and repaired over the years, to its former glory. The tower which Sir Robert Taylor had considered was not strong enough for more than one bell if the spire were added had proved itself unable to support even a lesser weight and had to be tied together. The repair work was carried out by A Brown & Sons of Nettlebed.

*Imelda Taggart*

As you will have read in the text, this church is now in the care of the Fund. This body was set up by Parliament in 1969 to preserve churches of the Church of England no longer needed for regular worship but which are of historic or architectural interest. The Fund's main income is provided by Church and State, but the constantly increasing number of churches entrusted to it (220 in March 1987) means that its resources are severely stretched. Contributions from members of the public are therefore gratefully received, and if there is no money box in the church or the keyholder is not available, please send any contributions you feel able to make to the Fund at the address shown.

Published by the Redundant Churches Fund  
St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe  
Queen Victoria Street  
LONDON EC4V 5DE

March 1987

Photographs by Christopher Dalton

Back cover: Looking east from tower

Printed by Direct Design (Bournemouth) Ltd., Printers  
Sturminster Newton, Dorset

