



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



CHAPEL OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST

St John's Street,
Chichester, Sussex



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

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CHAPEL OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST

by Alan HJ Green (local historian and Chairman of the Friends of St John's Chapel)

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 18th century the cathedral city of Chichester had a population of some 4000 souls whose spiritual needs were met by the established Church in six tiny parish churches within the city walls. It was not for nothing that these six were known as 'the little churches' since together they offered insufficient accommodation for all those who wished to attend divine service. As early as 1723 Dean Sherlock, under whose jurisdiction the Chichester churches came, proposed to abolish them and build one new and large parish church. Needless to say this met with heated opposition, both from parishioners and the Corporation, and so the scheme was dropped.

By the end of the 18th century the problem had worsened and the solution finally adopted was that of building a 'proprietary chapel' – a chapel which, although firmly part of the Church of England, was outside the parochial system and built and run as a commercial venture. This may sound a strange concept today but proprietary chapels were numerous in Georgian times; the first one was built in London in 1730 and in Bath no fewer than six were provided to meet the needs of the growing hordes of visitors. The money to construct a proprietary chapel came from share issues and the income to run it – including paying the minister's salary – from sale and rent of pews. One great advantage of a proprietary chapel was that, with no new parish to be created, it could be built practically anywhere a convenient site could be found.

On account of their extra-parochial status these buildings were *chapels* rather than *churches*, and their incumbents *ministers* rather than *rectors* or *vicars*.

Front cover: The frontage of St John's Chapel (Boris Baggs)

Left: The ground floor of the interior from the rear (Alan Green)

HISTORY

Construction of the proprietary chapel of St John the Evangelist, Chichester (to give its full title) was authorised by an Act of Parliament passed on 5 May 1812. The act also set out the way the chapel was to be run, including forbidding its use for weddings and baptisms since those remained the perquisites of the parish priest. The act also required the trustees to provide at least 250 free seats for the use of the poor in addition to the commercial sittings.

The site chosen was in the area known as Newtown that was then being developed by Major General John Gustavus Crosbie on land once occupied by the Blackfriars. In 1811 several meetings of potential shareholders were held, and all those who subscribed £100 or more became trustees; one such was John Marsh, a wealthy barrister who moved to Chichester in 1787. Marsh's estates in Kent yielded him an income of £1100 per annum which was more than enough to ensure that, instead of practising his chosen profession, he could use his time to indulge his passions for organ and viola playing, composition, writing, astronomy, mathematics and philanthropy. He became the first chapel warden and remained so until his death in 1828. Marsh was also a prolific diarist and from his journal we can glean much about the construction and running of St John's.

The architect appointed was James Elmes (1782–1862), a London man who, between 1811 and 1814, secured a body of work around

Chichester (including the post of Surveyor of the Cathedral) sufficient to warrant his taking a house at nearby Shopwyke. Elmes is best remembered for being the first biographer of Sir Christopher Wren whom he idolised. The foundation stone was laid with due ceremony on 25 May 1812 after a procession of the Mayor and Corporation, the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral and the trustees had wound its way from *The Swan Inn* in East Street. Construction, at a total cost of £7158 10s. 7d, was completed in August 1813 and the chapel was consecrated by the Bishop of Chichester on 24 September following.

Prior to the consecration John Marsh had organised the traditional bun-fight that marked the opening of any Georgian public building, in this case with two days of music making (his 'music meeting' as he called it) on 12 and 13 August 1813. The organ had only just been completed in time, and Marsh engaged musicians from London and along the south coast to perform works including Haydn's *Creation* and Handel's *Messiah*. The singers at these concerts included two named John Goss – one the celebrated counter-tenor, and the other a 13-year-old treble who was later to become Sir John Goss, organist of St Paul's Cathedral and composer of the famous tune to the hymn *Praise my soul the King of Heaven*.

Unfortunately the music meeting ran at a loss and the Trustees had to fund the deficit.

The exterior in 1871. The railings and gates were removed in the 1940s as part of the war effort (West Sussex Record Office)

This was to prove to be something of an omen for throughout its life the chapel was dogged by financial problems and was even forced to close between 1871 and 1874 when there was insufficient money in the bank to pay the minister. In Victorian times the ministry of St John's became zealously evangelical and this saw off the High Church Oxford Movement, with its concentration on ceremonial and the sacrament of Holy Communion, and ensured that the typically-Georgian layout was retained,

with no chancel and sanctuary being created as happened at most churches of this type.

In 1955, after a long struggle by the trustees to retain independence, St John's Chapel was united with the benefice of St Pancras, the parish church. By 1973, being little used, it was declared redundant, and in 1976 passed into the care of the Redundant Churches Fund (now The Churches Conservation Trust). On account of the rarity of its surviving features it had been listed Grade I in 1950.





EXTERIOR

St John's Chapel is a good example of Georgian ecclesiastical design: classical, lit by two rows of large round-headed windows and perfectly symmetrical. It is octagonal in plan of maximum dimensions 50 x 80 feet (15.2 x 24.4m) and built of white brick under a shallow-pitched slate roof with a wide, modillioned eaves-cornice. The detailing is Greek Revival, derived from James 'Athenian' Stuart's *Antiquities of Athens* published in 1762, and the crowning glory is the Portland stone **campanile**, a Corinthian peristyle based upon the 4th-century BC choragic monument to Lysicrates that Stuart had surveyed in Athens. Lysicrates had erected this monument to mark the success of his choir in a competition. The campanile contains a single **bell** bearing the legend

'T Mears of London, Fecit 1813'

which, after over a quarter century of silence, was rung at midnight on 31 December 1999 to mark the millennium.

Beneath the west window is a balustrade, also in Portland stone, but the finely-detailed door surround below is formed in Roman Cement, stained and scored to resemble the real thing. It is a tribute to the craftsman who made it that it has survived for over 190 years with little need for repair.

There are three entrances to the chapel; the main central one giving onto the area containing the free seats for the poor, whilst the two side

entrances, with their canted porches, gave onto the commercial accommodation.

The forecourt was separated from the road by **iron railings** with three sets of handsome gates which, regrettably, were taken away in the 1940s as part of the war effort. The cut-down **piers** remain and the burnt-off stumps of the ironwork can be seen in the kicker. This was not the only effect the Second World War was to have on St John's; in May 1942 a loaded American Liberator bomber crashed onto the electric laundry in Whyke Lane and the resultant blast travelled across the cattle market and blew in the windows of the chapel. The present **steel windows** are replacements for the iron originals wrecked by the blast.

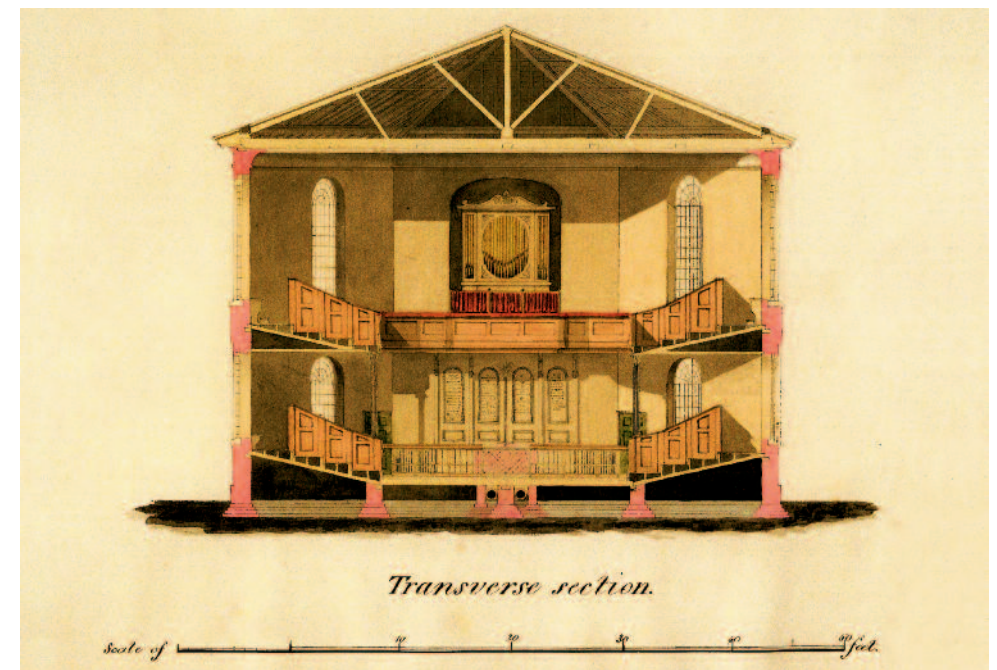
Elmes' drawing of the transverse section of the Chapel from a bound, colour-washed set of drawings that he presented to the trustees on completion (West Sussex Record Office)

INTERIOR

GROUND FLOOR

On entering the chapel the visitor is immediately struck by the impressive **three-decker pulpit** which dominates the east end of the building. At first sight there appears to be no **altar** and this, together with the fact that there is no **font**, leads many visitors to assume that St John's is nonconformist rather than Anglican. Another striking feature is how light and airy the interior is, the windows being large and having no stained

glass in sharp contrast to a typical mediaeval church. A **gallery** runs round all sides of the chapel and is lit by its own row of windows. The remains of the **organ** will be seen in the **east gallery** above, an unusual location for an instrument that traditionally would be sited in the west end. The reason for this is that the trustees, in trying to reduce costs, had decided against having an organ and so Elmes used the west end to house the bell-ringing floor.



The interior in 1871 prior to re-pewing. The box pews can be seen beneath the galleries; the open-backed benches in the middle are the statutory free seats for the poor (West Sussex Record Office)



When John Marsh finally persuaded them to change their minds the bell-ringing chamber had been completed, so an east-end organ loft was built above the vestries with an opening created in the east wall to suit.

With this layout St John's reflected what was the norm for Georgian church buildings. The *Book of Common Prayer* placed more emphasis on the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer than on the sacrament of Holy Communion (most churches only celebrated Holy Communion once a month) so the congregational focus needed to be on the pulpit rather than the altar, which here was tucked away, almost out of sight, behind it. The layout of the accommodation also reflected the strict social divides of the Georgian age.

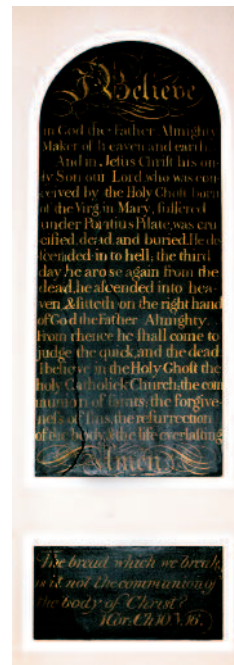
The downstairs **pews** are Victorian and represent the only major change made to the interior of St John's since it was built; they were donated by Douglas Henty, a brewer, in 1879 and a **plaque** commemorating his gift can be seen over the main door. The original layout had spacious, inward-facing box pews beneath the gallery and these could be either purchased

outright or rented by the chapel's proprietors. They could only be reached via the side doors in the porches. The central downstairs area contained the statutory 'free seats for the use of the poor' in the form of open-backed benches that could only be reached via the central door. There was no internal communication between the two classes of accommodation – if you made a social 'gaff' by using the wrong entrance you had to go back outside and re-enter. The Victorian re-pewing kept the new commercial pews under the gallery, but internal communication between the classes was now possible.

The **three-decker pulpit** is made of American black birch and has its three desks on a north-south axis. However, as first built the three desks were in the more traditional east-west arrangement, and close examination of the middle desk will reveal that its panelled north side was once a door. It is not certain when – or why – this alteration was made but it was certainly carried out before the re-pewing as the 1871 photograph proves. The elegant curving staircase to the top level has a polished mahogany rail and the cylindrical pulpit has a

Right: One of the painted panels above the altar dating from 1815 (Alan Green)

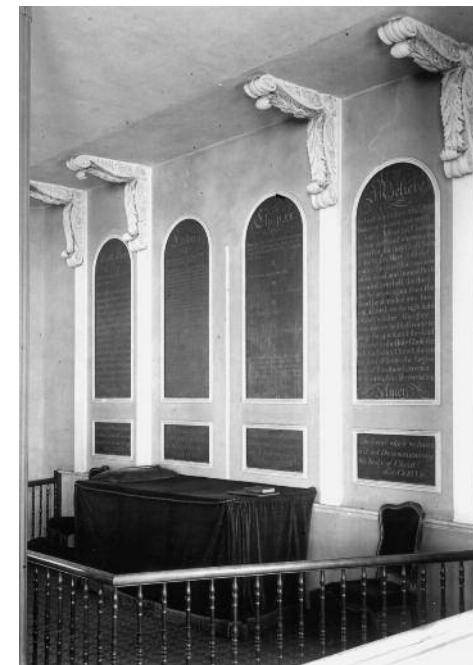
Far right: The altar and communion rails in 1943. The altar has a plain crimson frontal and is laid out for northwards celebration of Holy Communion; the cushion carries the *Book of Common Prayer*. Note the absence of candlesticks and cross (English Heritage. NMR.)



hinged door. The clerk, whose duty it was to lead the singing of the psalms at Morning and Evening Prayer, occupied the lower desk. During these offices the minister would use the middle desk but, after the third collect, he would mount the stairs to the top pulpit to preach his sermon. Georgian sermons were traditionally very long (seldom less than an hour) and from this elevated position the preacher could see everyone, including those upstairs, and also keep an eye on the clock set into the parapet of the west gallery. This clock, of which only the dial now remains, was made by Thomas Wilmshurst whose premises were in East Street, Chichester.

The chapel has no **chancel**, again common for a Georgian church; instead the **altar or communion table** is placed on a dais against the east wall within simple mahogany **communion rails**. The oak altar, being gothic, is rather out of character with its classical surroundings but appears to be original. It was dressed with a simple crimson frontal.

On the east wall above the altar are four round-headed **painted panels** carrying the



Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. Each of these panels has below it another panel carrying a quotation from scripture. Most apposite is that from *Proverbs, Chapter 22*:

'The rich and the poor meet together: the Lord is the maker of them all'.

At St John's they *did* meet together – but separately. The lettering was painted directly onto the plasterwork of the wall and John Marsh records in his diary his first sight of them on 9 September 1815 :

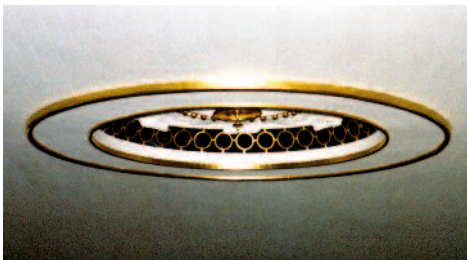
'I went into St John's Chapel to see the Commandments which, with the Lord's Prayer & Creed, had during my absence been handsomely painted over the Communion Table with gilt letters upon a black ground'.

The reason for the two-year delay in applying the lettering was to allow the lime plaster of the walls time to dry out. The red-baize doors either side of the communion rails, now blocked off, led to the vestries.

St John's was one of the first public buildings in Chichester to be lit by gas which was installed in 1836. Argand burners, which are visible in the 1871 photograph, hung from the gallery and the holes marking their positions can still be seen. The incandescent mantle had yet to be invented; instead the Argand burner provided a lambent flame inside a glass tube. Fluctuations in gas pressure could cause these flames to leap, which must have made winter evensongs rather exciting for those sitting in the front rows of the gallery.

Elmes designed an under-floor heating system using earthenware ducts supplied by coal stoves, one under each staircase. Unfortunately it was woefully inadequate, Marsh recording in his diary that on 7 January 1814 the oil in the chapel lamps froze. It was replaced in Victorian times by a huge gas-fired radiator in the middle of the building which is the reason for the short pews half way down the aisle.

The central ceiling rosette; the gilding was added during the 2003 restoration (Alan Green)



There are only two **monuments** in the chapel, largely owing to the fact that the Act of Parliament forbade burials in the chapel grounds. On the north-east wall is a simple marble tablet recording the 31-year ministry of the Revd J H Monti who died in 1901, whilst on the south-east wall is a brass plate fixed to a marble tablet in memory of the Revd William Cowley who died in office in 1893. Curiously, the first minister, Stephen Barbut, whose incumbency lasted for 45 years, went unrecorded; perhaps his having resigned after a dispute with the trustees had something to do with this.

The vast expanse of the ceiling was originally plastered and sported three large rosettes along its main axis. When this began to collapse in 1927 it was taken down and replaced with varnished pine matchboarding, though fortunately the centre rosette was retained. The ceiling has subsequently been painted.

THE GALLERY

[On account of vandalism, it is necessary to keep the gallery locked, but it can be viewed by prior appointment with one of the keyholders whose telephone numbers are displayed on the notice board outside]

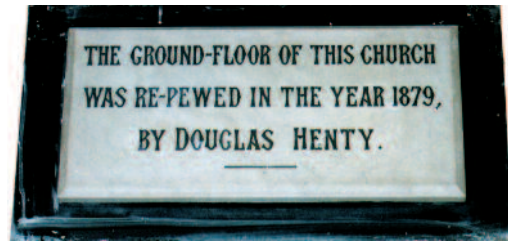
The gallery is reached by two separate staircases rising from vestibules accessed from the outside via the porches. Each softwood, cantilevered staircase is of elegant geometric form, rising in a well with semicircular ends, and has a mahogany handrail carried on plain stick balusters.

Half-way up a niche can be seen in the wall; this was to take an oil lamp rather than – as has often been assumed by visitors – a statue. At the top of each stair the gallery is entered through a screen fitted with Georgian sliding doors.

The accommodation in the **gallery** was entirely for the proprietors, consisting of spacious **box pews** of varying sizes which face inwards and are numbered. The magnitude of the purchase or rental price reflected both the size of the pew and its proximity to the pulpit. The box pews



Plaque over the main door commemorating the gift of the new pews in 1879 (Alan Green)



have survived and serve to give an impression of how the ground floor would originally have appeared, although they have all lost their original doors. The act required a register to be kept of the pews and their owners/tenants and John Marsh was given the task of working out the pricing. Unhappily for the trustees he got this badly wrong, thereby initiating the string of financial difficulties that was to beset them. Pew rents frequently had to be raised but even those people who owned their pews were not exempt from further charges – the act allowed rates to be levied on them in times of hardship. Worshipping in a proprietary chapel was an expensive alternative to the parish church.

It can be seen that the joinery of the box pews is not of the highest quality (which is undoubtedly the reason for the demise of the doors) and, although the gallery fronts and the front bookrests are of American black birch, the rest of the wood is of cheaper deal which was stained to resemble the birch. Closer examination reveals that some of the pew ends have been moved around over the years as the former hinge and lock positions are now on the wrong side. Some of the pews still carry their owners' names whilst others have labels bearing the legend 'this pew to let'.

Once bought or rented, the pews could be furnished with cushions and carpets by their occupants to afford greater comfort and convenience, and a number of differences in

fittings can be seen in the form of bookshelves and hat pegs: one – No. 25 at the west end – even has a drawer under the seat, though its purpose is unclear.

Running the length of the north and south walls are benches. These were provided for the use of servants who accompanied the family to service. Servants were above the humble poor – both socially and spatially – in the free seats below, but were not deemed worthy of sitting in the family pew. In 1820 the trustees, sparing a thought for the servants' Sunday-best clothes, resolved that 'rush matting of a suitable width should be fixed above the servants' seats against the walls of the chapel'.

The reason for the siting of the **organ** in the east gallery has already been given. The original instrument, provided by John Pyke England for £295, had only 12 speaking stops, two manuals and no pedal board. It was rebuilt four times between 1813 and 1950 and the frame that is now seen reflects its final size when it had 17 speaking stops, two manuals and a pedal board. In 1980, after a serious outbreak of dry rot, the decision was taken to demolish the organ loft and so the instrument was dismantled and its frame (the original case having already been lost) was pulled forward onto the gallery. The outline of the now **blocked-off opening into the organ loft** can be clearly seen on the wall behind.

RESTORATION

Following its closure in 1973 St John's slumbered for nearly 20 years with practically no public access. A major outbreak of dry rot led to the demolition of the organ loft and structural works were undertaken to stabilise the campanile. During this period the people of Chichester, supported by the Duke of Richmond, campaigned to bring the chapel back to community use, and this was achieved in 1992 when the building became a temporary concert venue as part of the annual *Chichester Festivities*. Public support for the building continued to gain momentum and the chapel was subsequently opened daily.

The appearance of the interior however was still somewhat shabby and so, commencing in January 2003, The Churches Conservation Trust embarked upon a major package of works including elimination of yet another outbreak of dry rot, repairs to the roof and complete redecoration. For this last, paint scrapes were taken to establish the original colour of the walls and columns, which is reflected in the use of the present warm stone colour. It was also decided to paint the matchboarding of the ceiling white, thus eliminating the oppressive effect of the varnished pine. The electrics were renewed, but reusing the 1950s light fittings below the gallery, so that for the first time since 1976 the chapel could be used after dark.

St John's Chapel is a rare surviving example of a Georgian proprietary chapel which, despite its Victorian part re-pewing, still contains most of

its original features, having escaped the attentions of both the Oxford Movement and late-20th-century modernisers. Now restored to its former glory, this architectural and ecclesiastical treasure offers a peaceful haven to those seeking refuge from the bustling city outside, whilst its superb acoustics make it an ideal concert venue.

THE FRIENDS OF ST JOHN'S

The Friends of St John's was founded in 2005 to support the work of The Churches Conservation Trust, and work in partnership with the Trust to encourage greater use of the chapel for community events and to increase public awareness of the building and its history. Membership application forms are available in the chapel.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity 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 and community 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 it 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 335 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.

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

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF
St Wilfrid, Church Norton
6 miles S of Chichester off B2145

North Stoke Church
5 miles N of Arundel off B2139

St Mary Magdalene, Tortington
1 mile SW of Arundel off A27

The Holy Sepulchre, Warminghurst
10 miles N of Worthing off A24 at Ashington

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

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Right: The three-decker pulpit (Boris Baggs)

Back cover: Staircase leading to the top level of the three-decker pulpit (Boris Baggs)