



# ST GEORGE'S CHURCH

REFORNE, PORTLAND  
DORSET

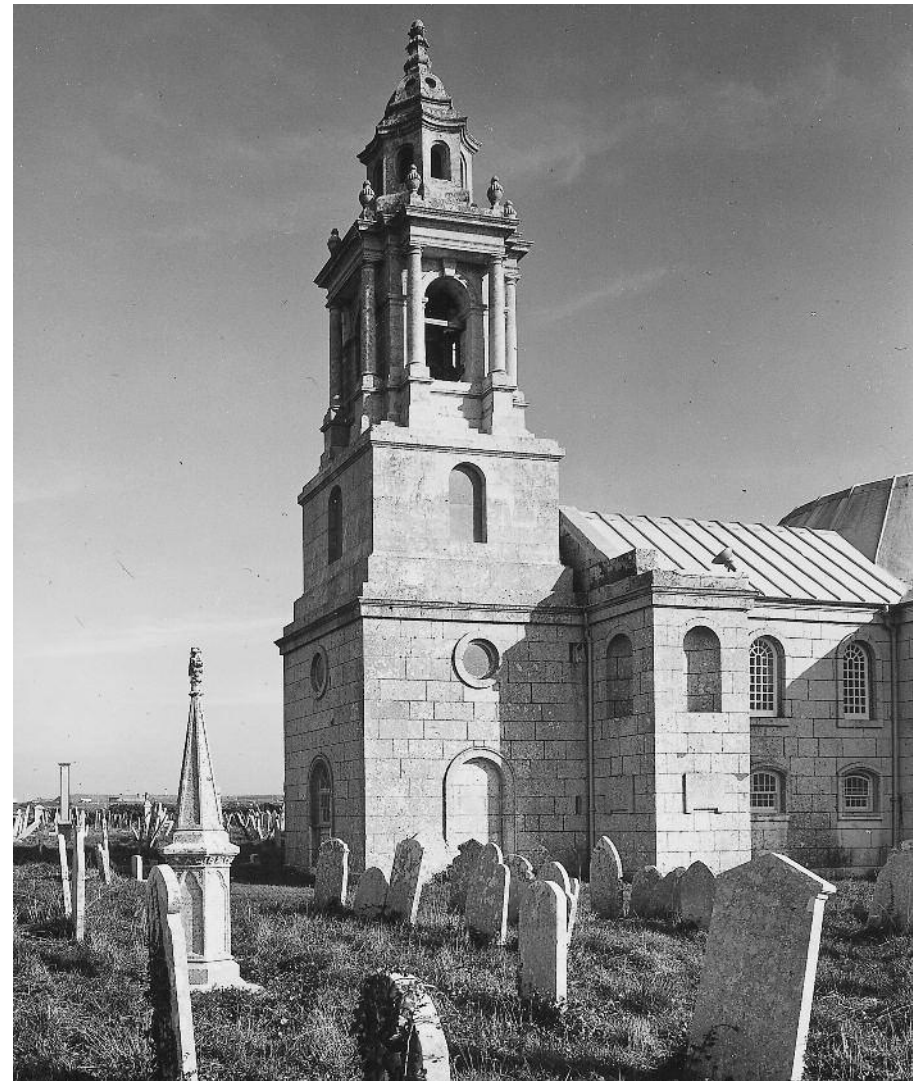


THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

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THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
ST GEORGE'S CHURCH  
REFORNE, PORTLAND, DORSET

*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.*

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## ST GEORGE'S CHURCH

REFORNE, PORTLAND, DORSET

by RALPH POSTON, R L WEYMAN AND OTHERS, REVISED AND EDITED BY  
CHRISTOPHER DALTON

This is a fascinating Georgian church of cruciform plan, with a central saucer dome and a western steeple with cupola, built to replace the mediaeval church of St Andrew on the other side of the island. The interior of the church is an almost perfect period piece with box pews, galleries and twin pulpits in the middle. Altogether this is a church of great – even unique – architectural and liturgical significance.

St George's was designed by a local man, named in the church records as its 'architect and master builder', namely 'Thomas Gilbert of this Island, Gent', who died on 25 July 1776, aged 70. His name appears on the ceiling of the vestry in the ground stage of the tower, and also on a boss in the belfry ceiling. The foundation stone was laid in 1754 and the church was finished about ten years later, King George II subscribing £500 towards its erection. It was consecrated by the Bishop of Bristol in 1766.

In 1849–52 the church was completely reordered internally so that what appear to be Georgian woodwork and other arrangements are actually Victorian.

### FOREWORD

The church of St George, at one time the only parish church for the whole island, had a sad history of decline and neglect following the consecration of the present parish church of All Saints in Easton in 1917. Services became less and less frequent, except for burial services, and eventually even those ceased to be held here. With increasing disuse came diminishing interest and upkeep. Bomb damage in the 1939–45 war played its part and, coupled with the collapse of the guttering, turned the inside of a lovely church into a place of damp and mould used only by the undertakers as a storage place for their tools. Vandals played their part by the theft of lead from the roof and pipes from the beautiful little organ. How to rescue the church, a notable part of the island's and the national architectural heritage,

was a difficult problem. The Salisbury diocesan authorities were, understandably, not able to help, their task being to preserve and provide churches which serve the needs of a population. Portland with four other Anglican churches on the island (All Saints', Easton; St Andrew's, South well; St John's, Fortuneswell and St Peter's, Grove) had more than enough places of worship to cater for the population without St George's.

Mercifully, a small group of lay people led by Captain and Mrs A B Chibnall started to take action in 1968. Some hard work removing rubble and fallen plaster showed what could be done and it was decided to found a society of 'Friends of St George's' to raise interest in the preservation of the church and money to enable essential work to be done by stages. As the church is an island heritage and not merely an Anglican one, an inter-denominational committee was formed with a Methodist as chairman. The first action of the committee was the issuing of an appeal, together with the drawing up of a practical programme of restoration. At that time, the Pastoral Measure of 1968 was about to become law and it was hoped that St George's would become the responsibility of a new organisation to be set up under the measure, known as the Redundant Churches Fund. However, it seemed certain then as it does now that there would always be a place for voluntary help, and the Friends are still very active.

On 16 April 1970 the church was duly declared formally redundant, under the provisions of the Pastoral Measure. On 20 October 1971 it became one of the first four churches to be vested in the Redundant Churches Fund, known since 1994 as The Churches Conservation Trust, for its future care and preservation. Initial repairs to the fabric were carried out under the supervision of the architect Kenneth Wiltshire of Salisbury, and the church was completely redecorated by Campbell Smith and Co. of London. Occasional services are still held in the church, including on St George's day and at Christmas.

## HISTORY

In the first edition of this guidebook, R L Weyman wrote as follows. 'Once having set eye on St George's one can hardly fail to be impressed by its striking architectural appearance and wish to know more about the history of so obviously notable a church, finished with such superb craftsmanship by the now long-dead masons who built it for the worship of God and to

His glory some two [now two-and-a-half] centuries ago.' It was erected to replace the mediaeval St Andrew's church on the other side of the Island, a building with a chequered history.

### **The old church of St Andrew**

The remains of St Andrew's church – now one of Portland's ancient ruins – lie on the grassy wooded bank above Church Ope (church opening) Cove. It is believed that in Saxon days there was a smaller church here which was destroyed by Earl Godwin, and on the same site was later built a Norman church, dedicated to St Andrew the fisherman apostle. This church, erected possibly at the expense of the monastery at Winchester, the then owner of the Island, was burned and severely damaged by the French in the year 1339. Afterwards, however, what was practically a new church was built – of very indifferent workmanship and material – on almost the exact site, though all available portions of the substantial Norman building were fortunately incorporated. This church was consecrated in the year 1475.

The original Norman church had been erected near to Rufus Castle so that it could enjoy its protection. It was built mainly in Portland stone, although that great historian Coker, in his *Survey of Dorset* in the year 1630, states that some of the stone came from Caen. There are one or two carved Norman fragments which are indistinguishable from that famous stone of Normandy. Judging from the ruins, the church was a long, narrow edifice, extremely well built in Norman style, consisting of a square-ended chancel with an east window, a nave with a porch and doorway on the south side, together with a small narrow side aisle also on the south side. The chancel arch – portions of which, and of the original chancel east window and south exterior wall, still exist – appears to have been of transitional Norman work. It is a matter of infinite regret that much of what remained of this building and the churchyard was further extensively damaged by enemy bombing in 1940.

In the 13th century the plain and moderately high tower of the church was built in the Early English style on slightly raised ground at the west end of the nave, but detached from the church itself by nearly three feet (0.9 m). This tower was standing as late as 1732, and there are records which show that in that year it was extensively repaired. The tower doorway is even now still in existence and serves as an entrance to the southern

portion of the churchyard. At one time, the tower contained two pre-Reformation and two post-Reformation bells, but these all disappeared during Portland's stormy Cromwellian days and were never replaced. The floor of the old church was composed of thick, brick-coloured tiles and similarly-glazed bricks. The roof was covered with tiles, but with thick slates seemingly intermingled with them. There were wall paintings in the church, and the glass of the windows is said to have been of a transparent mother-of-pearl tint. The seating of the church in its latter days consisted of moveable high-backed settles in the nave, which ultimately became very decayed, and a gallery. The lectern Bible dated 1634 and the Prayer Book dated 1706, which belonged to the church, are in the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester. The latter book was presented to the church in 1708 by Queen Anne and contains her autograph.

The ruins of the church show that it underwent many repairs during the later centuries but, even so, by the year 1753 the walls and roof had fallen into such a decayed state that the parishioners decided not to make further repairs, but to think about a new church, ultimately to be dedicated to St George, and in the year 1755 services in the old church ceased. The last recorded burial at St Andrew's church was that of Shadrach Stone in 1752. (See *Proceedings of Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, Vol. XIX, 1898, and *The Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 140, 1983.)

### The new church of St George

On 30 August 1753, a most important meeting of the Vestry (as church councils were then known) was held for final consideration as to whether funds should be raised for repairs to the fabric of the old church, or for erection of a new one. John and Richard Tucker (of Weymouth), Mr John Cooth (Rector of Portland), Mr Edward Pearce, Mr Colpas Attwooll, and Mr Thomas Gilbert (architect) were called to inspect plans, estimates and designs, so that a final decision could be made. At a subsequent meeting, held on 8 November 1753, it was decided there and then that the Vestry should not consider any further repairs to the old church but go ahead and build a new one. It was resolved that the scheme be put into execution and that the first money applied towards carrying out the same be the £250 out of the parish stock of tonnage (a levy made on stone quarried from common lands). In the meantime a petition should be prepared humbly beseeching His Majesty King George for his bounty towards finishing the



*St George's from the north*

(PETER DE ROUGEMONT)

work. Eventually recourse was had to an Act of Parliament. The chief provisions of the Act included the designation of a plot of 'waste ground' to the west of Reforne – this was actually a piece of common land – as the site of the new church and the power to raise £840 by a rate assessed upon the amount of quit rent paid by landowners of the Island. The Act also provided for the use of, or the proceeds of the sale of, the stone from the old church, the assignment of tonnage money for a period of not more than 31 years to secure an advance of £2,000, and permission to sell the freehold of sittings in the new church. It appears that the price of a whole pew ranged from £25 downwards according to the number of seats and their position.

While St George's was being built, between the years 1754 and 1766 when it was consecrated, the parishioners worshipped in a large temporary structure known as the Tabernacle. It is supposed that this stood somewhere near the back of the *Mermaid Inn* at Wakeham. Holy Communion was celebrated occasionally in the Tabernacle, and the altar table from the ruins of St Andrew's church was brought up each time for this purpose and then returned to the old deserted church. It appears that unfortunately the communion plate – the chalice of silver and some pewter – disappeared at about this time. St George's church was built of stone taken from the large quarries in the northern part of Portland, incorporating also some stone from the old St Andrew's church. It is strongly built of good solid roaches, a top bed of stone containing many marine deposits. It is very hard and durable, resulting in a church which may well last as long as St Paul's cathedral in London, which is also built of stone from the Island.

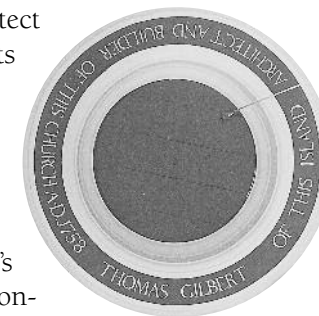
In due course the church was consecrated, on 29 July 1766 by the Right Revd Dr Newton, Bishop of Bristol, in whose diocese Portland then lay, along with the whole of Dorset. In the parish accounts for the year 1766 is the following item: 'Paid to the people for assisting and carrying the Bishop, over the Passage as by his desire, 5s.' This refers to the passage of water at the Ferry Bridge which in those days was called Small Mouth. It was somewhat narrower than it is today and the ferry merely consisted of a boat kept at the passage and drawn from side to side by a rope tied between two wooden poles. This seemed safe enough for the Islanders, but to his Lordship it probably appeared rather dangerous, as it is recorded that at his request he was carried across this place on the shoulders of some of the stalwart Portlanders. It is further recorded that when the Bishop had safely arrived on this side, farmer Lowman's plough (cart) was hired for two days for carrying his Lordship to and from the ferry.

At the time of its consecration, the church had a fourth gallery over the chancel with a flight of steps outside leading to it, but there still remained much work to be done internally. The music in the church was supplied by an organ, a clarinet, and a 'cello. There were also paid 'singing men', as they were then called, and expenses are recorded in connection with the 'Wyke singers'. It may be supposed that they came over to Portland to assist in the services on the day of the consecration.

In the year 1776 Thomas Gilbert, the architect and builder of the church, died. The Gilberts were perhaps one of the most important families on the Island during the 18th century. Theirs is one of the very old Island names which can be traced back through a period of more than 500 years. Although strong structurally and striking outwardly, St George's was never a model of interior comfort or convenience. Cold and draughty, the straight-backed pews, each with its door and latch, served for many years, but it was not long before large sums of money had to be spent upon the church. In 1794 the timbers of the roof were found to have become so decayed that four years later the roof was taken down and rebuilt.

There had always been a very close connection between the parish church and the general life of the Island. For centuries the only really representative body in most parishes was the Vestry, presided over by the rector and churchwardens. But Portland, being a royal manor, also had its own peculiar form of local government known as a Court Leet and its work and that of the Vestry appear to have been closely connected. The accounts of each show that they dealt with much the same things, and Court Leet, with its fund of tonnage money, came to the rescue of the churchwardens in the matter of repairs. As security for the large expenditure to be made on the roof of the church, the tonnage money due from the Stewards, a respected family of quarry owners intimately connected with the Island, on stone taken by them from the common lands, was allowed to remain unpaid from 1792 to 1798. The sum thus accumulated, nearly £500, was then accounted for to the churchwardens. Mr Steward also obtained from the king a further donation of £200 towards the church expenses. Again in the years 1849 to 1852 numerous payments were made by the trustees of the Grant Fund for repairs and alterations to the church. Repairs such as draining the churchyard, new paving, sundry repairs both to the interior and exterior, purchase of seats, doors and pews, and graining the interior, amounted in total to over £1,500.

Being a royal manor with its Court Leet dating back to Saxon times, Portland naturally had many old traditions and interesting customs, one



of these being the conveyancing of property. This was known as Church Gift, in which the vendor or transferor of property attended at the parish church and in the presence of two witnesses signed the document. Many such transactions were carried out at St George's. On 3 June 1833, a Vestry meeting was called by the churchwardens requesting the inhabitants of Portland to meet on Thursday to consult on providing a book to register all property conveyed in the church. This was signed by Robert Spencer and John Stone, churchwardens, and at a subsequent meeting it was resolved that the sexton or clerk of the parish be present at the church to see all property conveyed and registered.

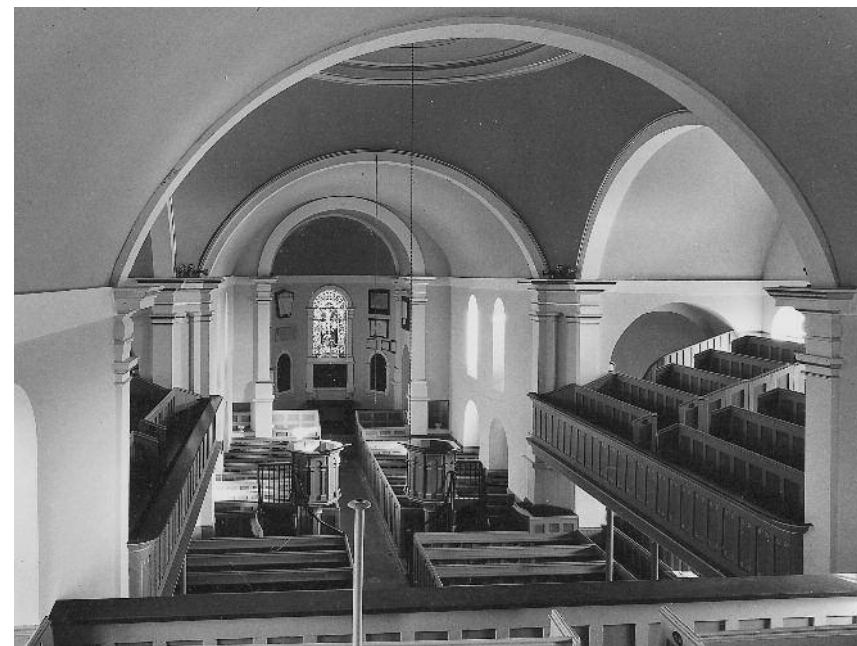
When in 1851 a national census was taken of the population, it included an account of all places of religious worship. It listed the accommodation available in St George's as 'Free seatings, 20, other seatings 622', making a total of 642. It will be recalled that as early as 1753 it had been decided to sell the right to sit in a particular pew as a means of raising funds for the building. This decision proved to lead to constant difficulty over accommodation in the church, particularly bearing in mind that in 1801 the population of Portland was 1,619 and by 1901 had increased to 15,199. By this time also, the church was again sadly in need of repair and restoration which called for more heavy expenditure. Many schemes were discussed and estimates obtained, but there was a growing feeling that the very strength and solidity of the building were adverse factors where restoration was concerned. Added to this was the complication caused by the fact that many of the pews were freehold property, some of them under the old Portland Law of inheritance in the joint ownership of countless people, many of them untraceable. For many years too it had been felt that the site was no longer convenient to the majority of the parishioners.

### **The new church of All Saints**

It was not until the second decade of the 20th century, however, that there came the proposal to build another church on a more generally acceptable site. By the zeal and devotion of the then rector, the Revd David Barnes Griggs, a sum of £14,000 was raised for a new church. In the difficult early years of the First World War the beautiful church of All Saints, Easton, was built (less the projected tall tower) to the designs of Crickmay & Son of Weymouth, and consecrated in 1917 to become a worthy successor to the already long line of parish churches in Portland.

## ST GEORGE'S CHURCH

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner described St George's as 'the most impressive 18th century church in Dorset, partly owing to its solitary position on the top of Portland, partly owing to its singular – and by no means faultless – architecture.' Few would disagree. It is a large building, about 112 feet long and 52 feet wide (34.1 x 15.8m), with broad, shallow transepts, apsidal chancel and a large west tower surmounted by an open belfry and steeple. The classical style, particularly of the elaborate belfry and steeple, certainly suggests that Thomas Gilbert, the designer, was not unfamiliar with what was going on in London – the recipient of so much of the stone being quarried by his family and others on the Isle of Portland at that time – and the work of Wren and Hawksmoor and their many followers. Indeed, the belfry and steeple have some slight affinity with those on the west towers of St Paul's cathedral. To quote Pevsner again, 'his [Gilbert's] conception has true grandeur'.



*View looking east from the west gallery*

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)



The twin 'pulpits' (one is the reading desk)

(CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

The ecclesiologist the Revd Basil Clarke wrote of the church that 'the plan is unlike [that of] any other church that we know of: a short aisleless nave, filled with a gallery, with small chambers at north-west and south-west, very wide transepts and a saucer dome in the centre (with a rather shapeless covering of lead outside); twin pulpits under. Then a long eastern limb filled with pews facing west; small chambers like those at the west and an apsidal sanctuary. There can be few churches so completely filled with pews.'

The present-day historian Dr Julian Litten adds that this is 'an unusually large, no-nonsense masculine church... The treatment of the roof over the crossing is exquisitely eccentric and, whilst it amply exhibits Gilbert's failure as an architect, it does have an endearing quality which is uniquely St George's; a professional architect's advice, had it been sought, may well have resulted in a steeper pitch from east to west, thereby concealing all evidence of the saucer dome. The interior is singularly complete: north,

south and west galleries, supported on slender columns and accessed via elegant, curving staircases (access to the west gallery, though, is via a stone spiral staircase), and box pews whose seating arrangements are such that everyone faced the twin "hour glass" pulpits – situated where one would expect to find a chancel screen in a mediaeval church.'

The walls of the church are of course built of Portland ashlar stone and the roofs are mostly covered with lead, with plastered vaulted ceilings inside. The windows all contain clear glass apart from the east window; this has stained glass depicting the Crucifixion given by a parishioner, Richard Lano, in 1878. The elegant font, in the form of a baluster with a fluted bowl, is signed by William Gilbert, brother of Thomas the architect. Some of the woodwork, including the communion rails and the pair of box pews nearest to the east end, appears to be original to the church. However, most of the fittings, including the north, south and west galleries, the twin pulpits (actually a matching pulpit and reading desk) and – ownership problems notwithstanding – nearly all of the pews, appear to be much later and to date from the earlier part of the 19th century. Certainly this was the view of the investigators for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments' *Dorset Inventory* (Vol. II, Part 2, 1970).

The actual date was evidently as late as 1849–52. Dr Nigel Yates points out that the work carried out at that time included the complete reordering and refurnishing of the church (*Buildings, Faith and Worship*, 1991,



The font

revised 2000) and writes as follows: '... the liturgical arrangement is so old-fashioned that several previous descriptions of the interior have assumed that the furnishings were contemporary with the building, ... when they are, apart from the baluster font and the altar rails, considerably later. Notice of the reordering of the church was given by the churchwardens on 30 August 1849. ... The pulpit and reading desk, of equal height, were placed on opposite sides of the middle of the nave so that the seating, still in the form of box pews, between them and the exceptionally cramped apsidal chancel faced west rather than east'. The notice, preserved in the Dorset Record Office, reads as follows: 'The churchwardens beg to inform the Pew-owners that the Contract for REPEWING THE CHURCH has been taken, and a considerable part of the work completed. That every precaution has been adopted to render the church dry and comfortable, and to guard against decay in future. The seats will be of a comfortable height; and are to be painted, grained, and varnished, in the same way as those of St John's [Fortuneswell]. The total expenses will be eleven shillings and sixpence for each sitting. This sum will cover every charge; and will be collected in three instalments. Any person wishing to have their seats exchanged, so as to have them in one pew – or to sell them – are [sic] requested to apply as soon as possible.'

The organ in the west gallery was originally built by G M Holdich. The single bell was cast by Pack & Chapman of Whitechapel in 1777 and weighs about 8 cwt (406.4kg). A crack which had developed in its crown was welded in 1994 when the bell was refitted and rehung by Andrew Nicholson of Bridport.

The church stands majestically in a vast, treeless churchyard covering some one-and-a-half acres (0.6ha) and containing literally thousands of tombstones to Portland people. (See the separate booklet *Interesting Headstones of St George's Portland* and a paper entitled *An Assessment of the Significance of the Churchyard and its Monuments* written by Dr Julian Litten in May 2000.) There are also some memorials on the walls inside the church, including one on the north wall of the apse to Thomas Gilbert, designer and builder of the church. Another commemorates John Penn, a one-time governor of Portland (and grandson of William Penn who founded Pennsylvania), who died in 1834.



*St George's church and churchyard from the air*

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*Front cover: The tower* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: Interior looking east* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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