



# THE CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS

FREEFOLK, HAMPSHIRE



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

89 Fleet Street · London EC4Y 1DH

*Registered Charity No. 258612*

PRICE: £1.00



THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION  
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO  
THE CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS  
FREEFOLK, HAMPSHIRE

*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 300 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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## THE CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS

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FREEFOLK, HAMPSHIRE

by CHRISTOPHER DALTON

### HISTORY

The settlement at Freefolk is very ancient and its name is thought to mean either 'the free people', i.e. a settlement outside the feudal system, or 'Frig's people'. The latter could signify worshippers of the pagan goddess Frig; indeed, it is possible that the church occupies the same site where Frig's temple originally stood. It is a delightful spot, tucked away between two houses and their gardens just above the infant River Test but with open fields to the south.

Freefolk church is a simple and very small single-cell structure, with walls of flint rubble and a tiled roof, standing in a tiny churchyard. Following a Papal Bull of 1265, it was built by William of Chabegrave, then owner of the manor, as a chapel to serve a small population; and it has never subsequently been enlarged. In the 15th century, however, the building was completely re-fenestrated and re-roofed, and provided with the fine oak screen which is now at the back of the nave but previously separated nave from chancel.

About 1703 there was another remodelling, marked by the oval plaque bearing that date above the door outside. A new, tall wooden bell-cote was constructed, the 15th century roof was covered by a plaster ceiling with deep cornices, the screen was moved to enclose a new family pew at the west end, and the church was entirely refurnished in the fashion of that time. This work was almost certainly promoted by the Deane family, who owned the manor of Freefolk from 1682 to 1766. Most notable among the furnishings (the pulpit and pews have gone) was the ensemble at the east end: this included the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer and Creed, all painted on wood in a grand but endearingly rustic manner, and a quatre-foil-shaped window which can be seen in old photographs of the church.

When in 1904 the east wall was rebuilt, the 18th century window was replaced by the present east window; and the Ten Commandments were

moved to the south wall. Of similar date are the buttresses which strengthen the leaning walls – two at each end and three on the north and south sides – but they are built of old bricks. Later, the ceiling was taken down, revealing again the mediaeval roof timbers but retaining the early 18th century cornices.

Freefolk was united with the adjoining parish of Laverstoke in 1872: the old church of Laverstoke, which stood in the park, then became a mausoleum for the Portal family (but was largely dismantled in 1952) and St Nicholas' became for a short while the church for the combined parish. In 1896, however, a new Laverstoke church, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, was built a stone's-throw from St Nicholas' and that then became the parish church. It is a modest design by the well-known Victorian architect J.L. Pearson, perhaps best known as the designer of Truro Cathedral.

By the 1970s the local community was finding the maintenance of two places of worship too heavy a burden; and in October 1976 St Nicholas's came into the care of what was then known as the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust. A programme of repairs was immediately put in hand, initially under the direction of the architect Robin Freeman of Winchester but more recently under that of Mrs Penelope Adamson of Guildford. Major items were the repair and re-covering of the roofs, reusing as many as possible of the old tiles, and the reconstruction of the severely decayed bell-cote.

## EXTERIOR

Outside, the white-painted, boarded bell-cote is the most distinctive feature. Though extensively renewed it retains its characteristic early 18th century form. The rubble walls of the church remain lime-plastered and limewashed, as they have always been, and the roof is covered with mellow red tiles. Apart from the east window, all the windows are 15th century, retaining their original ironwork (ferramenta) and glazed with mostly 18th century clear glass in rectangular panes. The west window is of two lights with a square head and the others are each of a single cinquefoiled light. The east window, though 15th century in appearance, was made in 1904 to replace a small 18th century window; it is said that stones found then provided the evidence for an accurate reconstruction of the pre-1703 window.

The simple south doorway is probably 15th century like the windows, though its pine door is much more recent. The low recess, apparently also 15th century, in the north wall opposite is unexplained: it seems much too low to have been another doorway.

## INTERIOR

The inside of the church takes its character largely from the remodelling of 1703; but the mediaeval framework of walls, windows, roof and screen is still evident.

The fine **stained glass**, by J.C.N. Bewsey, in the east window is 15th century in style to match the stonework. It depicts in the main lights Christ in Majesty, flanked by St Swithun and St Nicholas. St Swithun reflects the ownership of the manor of Freefolk by the Priory of St Swithun in Winchester until the Dissolution of the Monasteries; and Nicholas is the saint in honour of whom Freefolk church is dedicated. The glass was given in memory of Wyndham Spencer Portal (1822–1905) of Laverstoke House by his son William Wyndham Portal in 1913. The Portals were originally a Huguenot family and became well known for the manufacture of watermarked paper and, in particular, banknotes.

The **Lord's Prayer** and **Creed** of 1703, shown on banners each held by a pair of cherubs, remain on the east wall; but the impressive 'reredos' portraying Moses and Aaron holding the **Ten Commandments**, flanked by pilasters and with a serpentine pediment, was displaced by the new window in 1904 and moved to a new position against the south wall.



*Ten Commandments now on south wall* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON)

At the back of the nave is the 15th century **rood-screen** which originally formed the only division between nave and chancel – there being, of course, no arch – but was utilised in 1703 to form the front of the squire's **family pew**. It is a good piece of mediaeval carpentry, divided into 17 openings with simple tracery, and boarded below. The boarding in particular retains much of the original red and green colouring, long concealed under later white paint such as still covers the back of the screen.

Above the squire's pew is the belfry, containing a single small **bell** cast by John Cor of Aldbourne in 1729.

On the west partition wall of the nave, above the screen, are hung the **royal arms** of William III dated 1701 and two funeral **hatchments** thought to belong to members of the Pearse and Portal families.

The octagonal **font**, the six plain pine pews and the elaborate **reed organ** all date from the latter part of the 19th century. However, the white-painted **communion rails** with simple balusters survive from the 18th century.



*Hatchments and royal arms on west wall*

(ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND)

On the western part of the north wall are the remains of three layers of **wall paintings**. The uppermost layer may have been either an 18th century royal arms or a frame for a biblical text; below this is an earlier text and frame, likewise fragmentary. The earliest layer is a large, late mediæval subject on a pinkish background: it is much damaged, but what is left shows the upper half of St Christopher.

## MONUMENTS

A striking feature of the church is the fine Jacobean monument to **Sir Richard Powlett** of Herriard, dated 1614. Sir Richard was the son of John Powlett and his wife Catherine, daughter of Richard Andrews, lord of the manors of Freefolk and Laverstoke. The monument is now set, behind its contemporary iron railings, against the north wall between the two windows; originally it stood on the north side of the sanctuary where background painting on the wall still shows its outline. The monument was moved from there to the new church in Laverstoke but later brought back again. It is a large and colourful structure with Corinthian columns and entablature, surmounted by a coat of arms. The stiffly composed figure of Sir Richard lies on a tomb-chest and his two daughters are portrayed below.

On the south wall near the door is an attractive memorial to **Thomas Deane**, who had bought the manor of Freefolk in 1682 and who died in 1686, and his wife Anne who survived him by 20 years.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The writer acknowledges with gratitude the help of Mr Dennis Walmsley of Laverstoke and the anonymous author of the previous guide.

*Front cover: The church from the south* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

*Back cover: Interior looking north-west* (CHRISTOPHER DALTON).

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Series 4 no. 77

Revised August 1997