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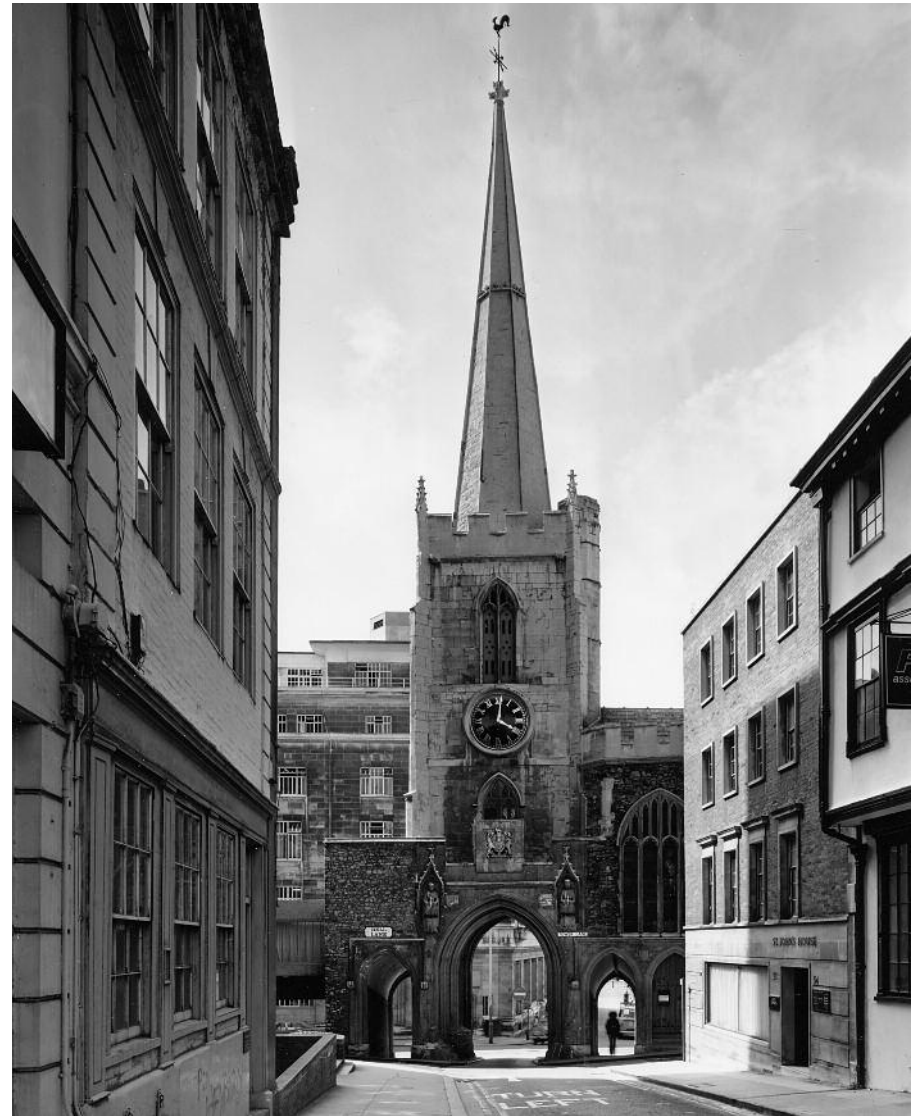
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PRICE: £1.50



ST JOHN THE
BAPTIST'S CHURCH

BRISTOL





THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION
TRUST WELCOMES YOU TO
ST JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CHURCH
BRISTOL

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.

Please help us to care for this church. There is a box for donations or, if you prefer to send a gift, it will be gratefully received at the Trust's headquarters at 89 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH until 30 September 2002. We will be moving to new offices in the autumn of 2002, so please look out for announcements in our churches or visit our website www.visitchurches.org.uk for details of our new address.

We hope that you will enjoy your visit and be encouraged to see our other churches. Some are in towns; some in remote country districts. Some are easy and others hard to find but all are worth the effort.

Nearby are the Trust churches of:

BRISTOL, ST PAUL
Portland Square

BRISTOL, ST THOMAS THE MARTYR
St Thomas Street

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CHURCH

BRISTOL

by MICHAEL NORMAN

HISTORICAL SETTING

Gates and walls were favoured locations for mediaeval town churches because they offered opportunities to travellers for prayers before a journey, which could be turned to profitable advantage by the incumbent. Forming part of the town or city wall these churches could also be seen as forming 'saintly bastions' in the defensive system.

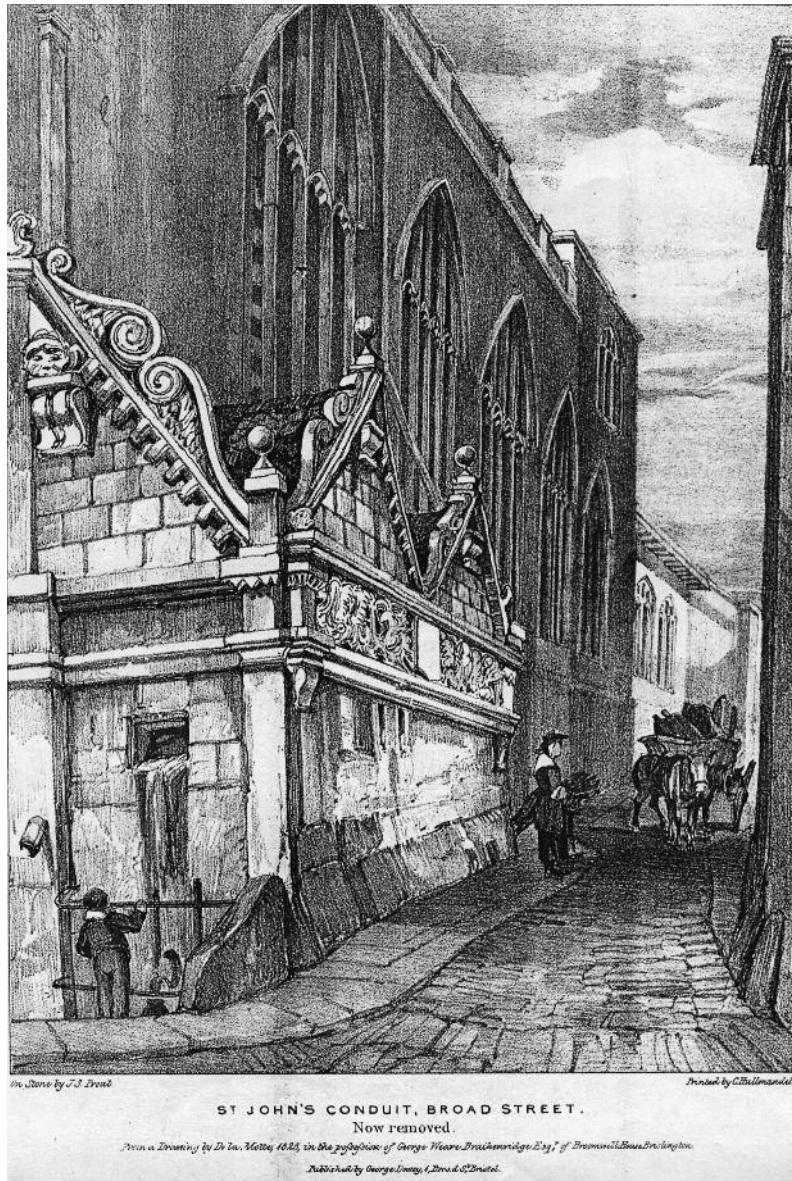
There can be few better examples of such a church than that of St John the Baptist in Bristol, now in the care of The Churches Conservations Trust, and an excellent example of an early Perpendicular church in its own right.

Broad Street itself is bounded by characterful buildings of all ages ranging from mediaeval to modern, including the Guildhall, which is in the parish. Approached from here down the convex slope which once led to the ford over the River Frome (now covered over), the sight of the church with its tower and spire superincumbent on the only surviving gate in the inner city wall is an unforgettable *point de vue*.

St John is the only survivor of four such churches in Bristol which were built on the Saxon inner town wall in the 12th century. St Leonard and St Nicholas stood over the West and South gates respectively and St John and St Lawrence, sharing the same tower, on either side of the North gate. The latter was deconsecrated and sold in c.1580 and had been demolished by 1824.

The earliest record of the foundation appears to be in a deed dated 1174 which states that William, Earl of Gloucester, gave to the priory of St James and the monastery of Tewkesbury, the church of St John which was his fee. William Beind appears to have been the first rector, having been appointed in 1285.

The east end of the church extends beyond the original east wall and appears to have been built on land belonging to the Corporation of Bristol in consequence of a deed dated 15 April 1395 'in recompense for the gift of a piece of land 12 pence yearly to the Mayor and Commonalty'.



Drawing by De la Motte, lithographed by JS Prout (1825). Print from the Braikenridge Collection by kind permission of the Bristol Reference Library

There is circumstantial evidence that the patronal name of St John the Baptist was selected in view of the then proximity of the ford over the River Frome (e.g. 13th century St John de Bradforde), though the church has also been known as St John the Evangelist and St John On The Wall. Leland refers to St John's Gate, and St John's Bridge later spanned the ford.

The churchyard, a pretty oasis in the surrounding masonry, is in St John's Street and approached from Broad Street via Tailor's Court. Deeds of 1390 transferred Hasardy's garden to the borough and thence to Richard Wormbrugge, parson 'by the payment of 1d landgable for a cemetry'. Stephen, Bishop of Ross, consecrated the ground in 1409: burials hitherto had been in St James' churchyard.

The Merchant Tailors, whose hall is off Tailor's Court, were also known as the Fraternity of St John the Baptist and this was established in 1392. However, despite the proximity to the church of that name, the guild had their own chapel in St Ewen's church.

The establishment of St John's almshouses in John Street was attributed to Robert Strange, three times mayor, in c. 1491. However they were eventually rebuilt further east in the parish of St Ambrose.

Before the church was vested in the Redundant Churches fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust, the parish of St John was linked with that of St Mary-le-Port whose church was destroyed in an air raid in World War II. In common with other mediaeval cities where the population has moved away from the city centre, Bristol has found other uses for a number of its churches. Because of the outstanding quality of its architecture and fittings, St John's was vested in the Trust in 1985. Repairs were carried out under the supervision of Mr John Keeling Maggs, RIBA.

THE CHURCH STRUCTURE AND CRYPT

The present building of St John dates from 1350–1500 with extensive modifications in the 19th century. It consists of a two-storey structure with the crypt extending almost the whole length of the nave and chancel. The aisleless nave consists of six bays and is unusual in having at the east end a one-bay upper window. This feature is echoed in St Mary Redcliffe, which was under construction at the same period, and, from the outside, gives the appearance of a rudimentary transept. The chancel has two bays with

a half-bay vestry beyond, all under the same roof. Construction is of rubble with dressed limestone for the parapets, tower and spire.

Because of the steep surface slope, south to north, the so-called crypt (perhaps more properly, the lower church, as will be seen later) is only partially below the present ground level. The north wall of the church forms the inner town wall and portals of the gate at this point. The tall, slender tower is in three stages, the lowest of which has a tall moulded arch, forming the city gate, flanked by two smaller arches built in 1828 for use by pedestrians. The portcullis channel is clearly visible in the main arch, as are the jamb stones of the former entrance to the church. The present south entrance replaces the conduit house for the mediaeval water system which was resited on the external north wall of the crypt in Nelson Street.

Figures of Brennus and Belinus, the legendary founders of Bristol, are mounted on the south side and may antedate the present gate. Between the figures are the arms of the City of Bristol and the Merchant Venturers. Above the centre arch the window on the south face of the ringing chamber is partially hidden by a stone carving of the Stuart coat of arms with supporters. Also facing up Broad Street is the large black clock face. The belfry has slender two-light windows and the parapet is embattled.

The spire is especially elegant with roll mouldings running up the angles. A small moulding, about half-way up, encircles the spire and emphasises its slender proportions. A weathercock rises from a finial at the summit, presumably the replacement put up in 1676 after its predecessor had blown down.

The nave is lit by 12 large windows and the chancel by two smaller ones. A door on the south side leads into Tower Lane. The vestry is lit by an oriel overlooking Nelson Street.

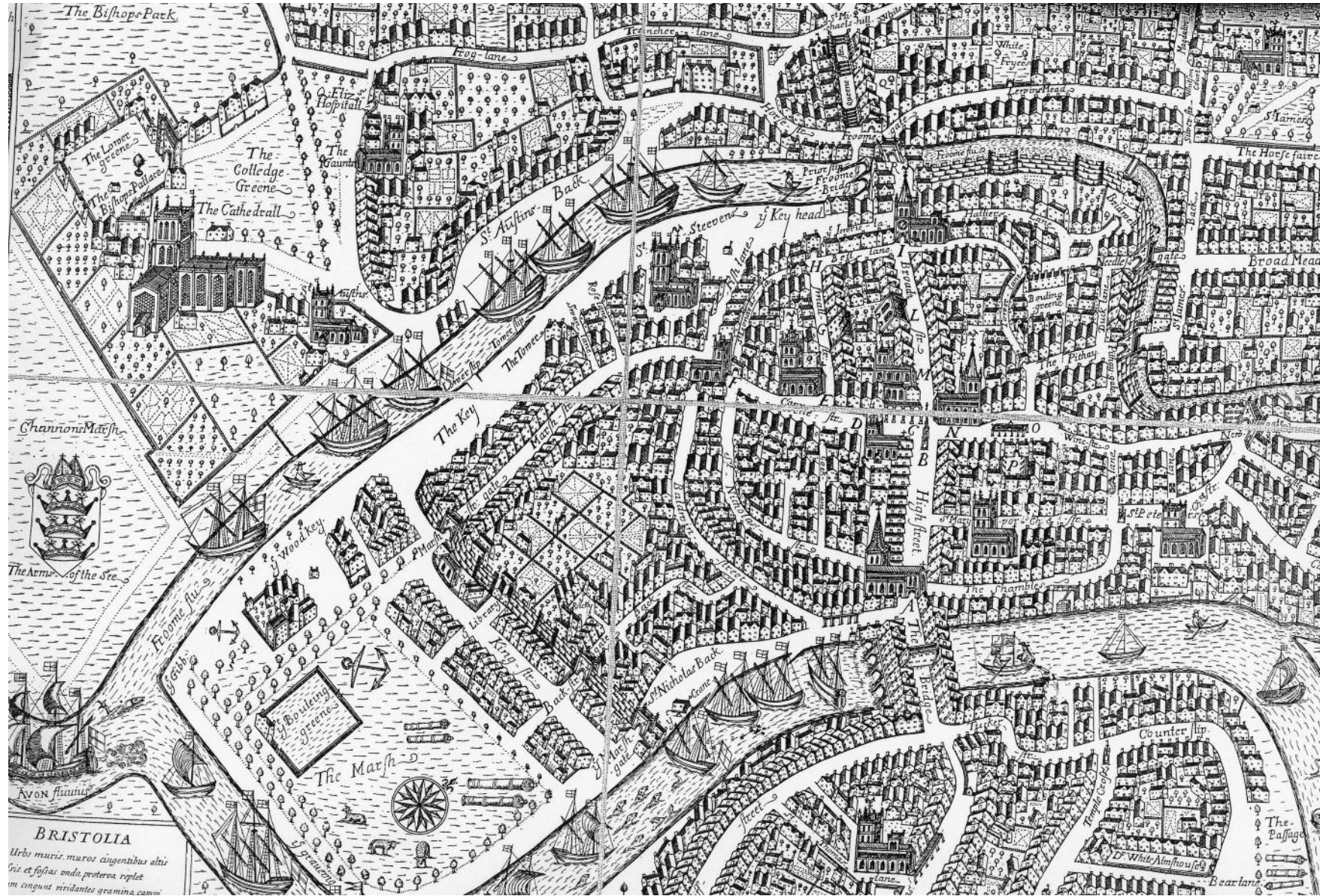
The crypt was dedicated to the Holy Cross and had close associations with the guild of that name instituted in 1465: indeed William Worcester calls it the Chapel of the Holy Cross and his description of the building is (curiously) of the crypt alone. The crypt was evidently a prestigious place for burial and certain lands and tenements listed in the churchwardens' books were definitely allocated 'for the sustenance of a priest to pray for all the Britheren and Sisteren and Benefactors of the Crowde' (crypt), as distinct from the church above. Further evidence for a degree of independence is a legacy in 1541 for the restoration of the pews in the crypt and the probability of there having been a screen and piscina.



Crypt of St John's church. Lithograph by JS Prout

The original entrance was from within the south-west corner of the church but since the re-ordering in the 19th century, the crypt is entered from a door in Nelson Street (formerly Grope Lane) and is lit by windows on the north side where the ground level is markedly lower than on the south. The eastern part of the crypt, the oldest part of the structure and dating from the earlier part of the 14th century, is vaulted in three bays, the ribs resting on wall shafts with moulded decorated capitals. The western part of the crypt is wider and vaulted in two larger bays in a slightly later style, corresponding to the church above. Here the vaulting ribs continue to the floor instead of resting upon wall shafts, and the windows have four-centred arches rather than the two-centred types at the eastern end.

There is a good unknown merchant's alabaster tomb chest with ten children represented in the panels, the recumbent figures of the man and his wife above. Next to this, under an ogee canopy with crocketed pinnacles



Millerd's plan of Bristol 1673. Print from the Braikenridge Collection by kind permission of the Bristol Reference Library. St John's is near the top of the map just right of centre. St Thomas', also in the Trust's care, is at the bottom of the map just right of centre



Print by E Blore (1823) from the Braikenridge Collection by kind permission of the Bristol Reference Library

and finial, is the tomb of Thomas, churchwarden 1533, mayor of Bristol 1530, died 1542, and Chrystina White with a fine incised cross. On the east wall are four memorial tablets (mostly 17th century) and there are some ledgers with armorial bearings along the stone flags on the floor. The long stone bench along the south wall is interrupted by a tomb chest under a canopy. The figures of a man and his two wives are incised on the top of the slab. Next to it is a defaced piscina. Two burial vaults are at the west end.

THE INTERIOR AND FURNISHINGS

The long nave consists of six tall bays. Five are of a similar design with large windows set in arches, giving a sense of width and spaciousness. The bays are separated by thin attached columns which may have been intended to support a vaulted roof but they actually terminate without fulfilling any obvious function. It is possible that buttressing such a structure was precluded because of the constraints of the site itself. The timber roof is open, with gently curving moulded cross-beams.

The font has been dated 1624 and is supported on four large claw feet. The bowl is of cruciform section with 20 panelled faces carved with cherubs' heads on the bowl and rosettes on the projecting arms. The cover is contemporary and has curving wooden stays supporting a gadrooned pedestal on which is a dove.

Until the re-ordering of 1828 the late-17th-century gallery with the organ had occupied two bays at the western end, but the gallery screen was then moved west by one bay. The gallery is supported on square fluted pillars with minimal capitals. The front of the gallery has seven arched panels separated by fluted pilasters with carved decoration in the spandrels. On the panels are painted representations of Saints Peter, Matthew, Luke, John the Baptist, Mark, John the Evangelist and Paul. The painter is unknown but the style is thought to be Dutch. The screen below has, between the pillars, an extremely fine pair of late-16th-century doors with stylised carving in low relief within arched panels on the lower part and paired arches in the upper. On each side the screen consists of panels round two richly detailed frames of larger size flanked by Corinthian pilasters. These incorporate later panels, one painted with a list of mayors connected with the church from 1530, and the other with the 18th-century Great Sword of the City of Bristol, the City Mace and the Water Bailiff's Oar. At

the north-west corner of the church, but now obscured by the gallery, is said to be a manacle and stage where people under sentence of the ecclesiastical court were exposed to view during divine service.

The organ is a two-manual instrument by Vowles of Bristol, installed in 1883 and replacing earlier instruments. The nave pews are of oak with panelled sides and date from c.1621. They were lowered in the re-ordering in the 19th century. Two almsboxes are carved with strapwork round a cartouche containing a flower and supported on a pilaster. A pair of large reading desks have fronts of two arches below a carved panel and with finely carved supporting consoles in the style of c.1630, though altered subsequently. The arches have been reused from the crypt screen.

The sixth bay of the nave, adjoining the chancel arch, has a section of higher walling which contains a clerestory window. It is roofed crosswise, almost in the style of a small transept, the roof itself being carried on moulded wall ties which run up at each corner from corbels carved and painted as angels. It is known that this church had an unusually elaborate rood and rood-loft and it is possible that this ingenious arrangement was developed to direct additional light upon it in a most dramatic manner. The rood and loft were destroyed at the time of the Reformation in 1561.

Fragments of mediaeval glass fill the upper lights of the four easternmost pairs of nave windows and the high clerestory windows, or form a border round the windows – a narrow band of stained glass composed of portions of figures, drapery, old English inscriptions, heraldic bearings, feathers, leaves and other ornaments; they are presumably remnants of former windows destroyed at the Reformation.

The chancel arch is tall, wide and particularly elegant with its continuous moulding sweeping from floor to apex without interruption. Above it hangs a hatchment with Brunswick quarterings and on each side the royal supporters stand on brackets, the lion holding a shield with the arms of George I and the unicorn a shield with the royal cipher GR. The 18th-century sword rest (or possibly a mace rest) is of wrought iron with gilded foliage as an applied ornament and is very elegant.

The 19th-century pulpit is of stone, octagonal with panels carved with exuberantly crocketed decoration. It antedates the alterations in 1850 and is approached though a doorway in the southern respond of the chancel arch. Beside it was the decorative iron hourglass and stand (now in the

City of Bristol Museum) which has been described as an exceptionally fine example of 17th-century craftsmanship. The stand in which the glass is fixed is in the form of a bracket, which formerly extended from the wall to the pulpit, and the glass has attractive balusters around it, with pierced strapwork finials at each end.

The late-17th-century lectern is placed, collegiate fashion, in the centre of the floor below the chancel arch, perhaps displacing an earlier pulpit. Its baluster stem supports a revolving reading desk with incised acanthus decoration.

Dating from c.1480, the chancel consists of two-and-a-half bays, the arched recesses for the two windows on each side reflecting those in the nave. The early-17th-century panelled dado (some of which has been made up into stalls in the chancel and fragments elsewhere in the church) which encircles the nave continues along the north wall until it is interrupted in the eastern bay by the polychrome tomb chest, decorated with carved and painted heraldic shields, and the recumbent effigy of Walter Frampton, dog at feet, the benefactor of the church. The tomb was formerly in a railed enclosure in the centre of the nave.

A brass, formerly on the floor adjacent to Walter Frampton but now reset in the south wall of the chancel, commemorates Thomas Rowley and his wife c.1478, who was co-founder of the guild in the crypt. The remaining monuments commemorate other families connected with the history of the city and parish.

The 19th-century Minton encaustic tiled floor becomes more colourful as it proceeds eastwards, principally through the introduction of blue. In the sanctuary the tiles contain attractively executed symbols of the evangelists. The steps are of white marble.

The lower part of the east wall, built c.1570 to form a vestry where once the high altar stood and behind the present communion table, is faced in stone, ending in a line of castellation about ten feet (3 m) from the floor. A rococo reredos was removed in 1850 and the wall behind it is painted with faded remnants of the Ten Commandments.

One stained glass window by Bell of Bristol represents Christ flanked by St John the Baptist and St Lawrence. The figures are set in plain glass. This replaces mediaeval stained glass, damaged by bomb blast during World War II.

The 17th-century communion rails are wooden, with moulded plinth and square uprights between which are spiral turned columns. The front panels of the uprights have carved surrounds, those by the gates having swags of fruit within them. They were moved to their present position from the crypt in the mid-20th century.

The communion table was purchased in 1635 for £3 14s. 0d. as recorded in the churchwardens' accounts, and is especially handsome, having six legs and square moulded stretchers. The top rail is decorated with gadrooning and the legs take the form of tapering pilasters with cherub heads at the top of each. The centre front leg is in the form of a figure holding a chalice.

A doorway on each side contains a beautifully panelled door, that on the south side leading directly to the vestry. Together with the external door to St John Street they have four-centred heads and six panels decorated with lozenges. That to the street has stylised foliage carved at the top and an interesting iron handle.

The vestry is lit by a three-light window on the south side and the oriel over the conduit outlet.

William Worcester mentions bells in 1370 but the current ring of six bells and additional small bell date from the period 1649–1785 and are in good ringing condition. The founders were Richard and William Purdue, 1649 (2, 5 & Tenor), Abraham Rudhall, 1706 (Treble, 3 & 4) and Jonas Hill, 1785 (Ting Tang). The bells were rehung in a new frame by Thomas Blackburn of Salisbury in 1895.

MEDIAEVAL WATER SYSTEM

The 13th-century conduit system was built in 1267 to supply the Carmelite Friary, on the site of what is now the Colston Hall, from a spring on Brandon Hill about a mile away. In 1376 the parishioners of St John were granted a feather (the measure of the pipe diameter, it is said, equating to a goose quill) as an extension to the system. The Friary is no more but the water still flows to the north wall of St John's crypt as it has done for over 700 years.



View from the north-east showing present-day setting
(NEIL SKELTON)

Front cover: St John's tower and city gateway from the south
(© CROWN COPYRIGHT. NMR.)

Back cover: Interior from the north (© CROWN COPYRIGHT. NMR.)

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