THE CHAPEL OF ST GEORGE

KING STREET,
GREAT YARMOUTH

Figure 1. St George’s from the North West. 1960. Hallam Ashley. BB59/150 © English Heritage. NMR

An Architectural History

Stephen Heywood FSA
Heritage and Landscape
Norfolk County Council

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THE CHAPEL OF ST GEORGE, GREAT YARMOUTH

Summary
This paper is prepared in the context of the regeneration project in the King Street area of Great Yarmouth. This involves the repair and conversion of St George’s Chapel and this report aims to provide a history of the building including later alterations to inform the process of repair. The brief also requires an analysis of the significance of the building within the historical framework of English Baroque church architecture of the late Stuart and early Georgian period.

The building was constructed in 1714/15, consecrated in 1715, completed in c.1721. The building became officially redundant as a place of worship in 1971 having ceased services in 1959 and was converted into a theatre in 1972/3. The plaster vaults and the timber framework which defined the main lines of the ceilings were taken down leaving the skeleton of the structure. As part of the conversion into a theatre the galleries were under built in block work on the south side and the timber columns removed.

Introduction
The 18th century would not be described as a high point in the history of church architecture in this country. The notable exception is the City of London where the towers of the many churches rebuilt following the fire still characterise the skyline. Sir Christopher Wren is most famously associated with the rebuilding and for finding a suitable type of building to meet the requirements of the reformed church of England – the right setting for Anglicanism. The ‘auditory’ church was the word used by Wren in his oft quoted treatise on churches.1

St George’s is a church of considerable size but was called a chapel because it was not a parish church but just an outpost of the parish church of St Nicholas and properly known as a chapel of ease. Its form echoes the development of the type experimented by Wren in the city of London. In plan it is almost as broad as it is long and has galleries surmounting the aisles on three sides bringing the congregation as close to the pulpit as possible according to the principles on auditories spelt out by Wren. However, the basilican plan is not abandoned completely and has a nave and aisles, a separated chancel and a west tower flanked by a pair of staircases leading to the galleries (Fig. 2). The most distinctive aspect of the plan is the double exedrae at each end of the nave.

It was in the aftermath of the 1711 Act of Parliament to raise money for the building of fifty churches in the rapidly expanding suburbs of London that the Mayor, Aldermen and the Commonalty of the Borough of Great Yarmouth made a petition to Parliament for the purpose of providing an additional place of worship in the crowded town. In 1714 they obtained the Act of Parliament enabling them to collect a tax on the import of coal. The agreement between the borough and the architects John Price the elder and John Price the younger of Richmond specifies the size, the provision of a tower (cupola) and that it should be completed by 29th September 1715. It also specifies the Wren church of St Clement Danes on the Strand (begun 1680) as a model at least for the vaulting or possibly the exedrae where the brief says that the aisle roofs ‘be arched or coved in the same manner as those of St Clement Danes….’ (fig. 3).2 In the event the only elements of the St Clement plan copied at St George’s are the admittedly effective and distinctive double exedrae at their liturgical east ends and the entailing narrowing and lowering of the nave vault to accommodate the smaller chancel area (figs 2. 3 & 38). These have the effect of enabling the gallery to encroach on the nave and thus orientated towards the pulpit and lectern (Fig.4). This is very much in the spirit of the auditory church described by...
Wren where the altar, now termed the communion table, is not as much of a focus as the pulpit and lectern.

Fig. 2. Plan at gallery level (Anglia Land Surveys. 2009. Corrections in red SRH)

Fig. 3. Plan at gallery level of St Clement Danes, The Strand, London.
The design of St George’s is dismissed by Summerson as ‘a crude imitation of St Clement Danes’, but the Prices followed the brief and were able to develop it by repeating it at the west to house the gallery staircases and by giving the chancel a completely different treatment. At St Clement the central exedrae join to form an apse with the flat area on the axis for the east window and on the interior a semidome. At St George’s the flat area on the axis was much wider and emphasized on the exterior with flanking Corinthian pilasters (Fig. 5) and, instead of joining the exedrae to form an apse, a pair of opposing apses were formed by extending the line of the segmental curves to form semicircles (Fig. 2). This left a greater space for the great east window which, to the detriment of the whole composition, was blocked soon after having been completed in 1732 on the order of the Corporation. The reasons for this may have been structural but there is no sign of instability or settlement and there is a possibility that the blocking may have been the result of liturgical considerations. The Borough records give no reasons for it but, as part of the same operation, the inclusion of a doorway was specified. This means that the position of the communion table could not have been against the east wall and it is possible that it was felt that the window gave too much importance to the chancel when the Eucharist was considered less important than the pulpit and there was a tendency to depreciate the altar. A puritanical attitude amongst the leaders in Great Yarmouth may have objected to the prominence given to the chancel by the Prices’ design and harked back to the days of Puritanism during the Commonwealth.
Fig. 5. Blocked east window and doorway contemporary with the blocking of 1732.

**Exterior**
The building is of brick with a finer quality of brick used for the rubbed brick arches and the jambs which they surmounted. The ordinary brick has black or vitrified ends resulting in the varied and sometimes patterned quality of black headers alternating with red stretchers. This is typical of 18th-century brick work and sometimes used to decorative effect and at St George’s the parapets are treated in this manner. The exedrae are faced entirely with headers and are not arranged with any particular scheme resulting in them having large areas of black masonry. The finer quality brick is necessarily softer and
more susceptible to wear. The windows of the building have depressed three-centred arches to the ground floor openings to accommodate the galleries and semicircular arches above. The rubbed brick arches are punctuated by stone impost blocks and keystones. The glazing has been repaired and replaced at different times but it is fairly certain that the windows in the exedrae at both ends had radiating glazing bars as well the windows on the west face of the tower above the entrance (fig. 10) whilst such refinery was denied the nave windows. All the windows were sliding sashes except for those on the exedrae and the second floor of the tower. The latter, obscured on the outside by clock faces to north and south, have leaded glazing fixed to strong iron saddle bars and glazing bars of heavy sections (fig. 6).

Fig. 6. One of the second floor windows in tower. Heywood 2009

Various attempts at repairing and replacing the soft rubbed bricks have been made. The earlier repairs have simply replaced the thin damaged rubber bricks with typical late 19th-century brick voussoirs with filed joints (Fig. 7). Repairs are mentioned in the records for the year 1887.
More recent repairs have used special thin bricks as replacements. On balance they are less successful and stand out (Fig. 8) and the joints are thicker than the original. These were carried out as part of the 1972/3 works. All the brick arches of the eight upper nave windows have been replaced by one method or the other. The ground floor windows with the three-centred arches have retained more original work except for the jambs of a pair of inserted doorways to the easternmost bays of the nave of 1972/3. The great east window retains most of its original voussoirs in a graceful 3-centred arch spoilt somewhat by some bright white repointing undertaken in recent years. The best preserved soft brick work are the arches which were hidden by the clock face on the tower (fig. 9).
Fig. 8. Bay 1 south side. Replaced voussoirs, spandrels and east jamb. Heywood 2009

Fig. 9. North side of tower with window revealed by the removal of the clock face. Heywood 2009
Good quality ashlar of limestones from different quarries is used for the prominent plinth and for the openings in the exedrae where the windows or doorways are linked by slightly raised vertical bands of stone. Stone is used also for the giant order pilasters supporting open pediments which enhance the monumental openings at both the entrance end and the east end (Figs. 5 & 10). There is an interesting hierarchy of orders with the east window and the gallery columns at the east end on the interior being the only examples of the Corinthian order whilst all the others are Roman Doric. This was, no doubt, in order to emphasize the chancel, which may not have gone down well with the more Protestant members whose views may have remained in the days of the Commonwealth. Giant order pilasters divide the nave into four bays and surmounting each pilaster is a section of entablature with triglyph. The corners of the nave have alternating brick and raised ashlar quoins in a form of rustication and the platbands are of stone. The west end has a pair of stone-dressed pedimented doorways which lead to the aisles identical to the western entrance except for an additional raised keystone (figs. 10 & 11).
The Tower

Fig. 12. West tower. Detail of fig.1. 1960. Hallam Ashley ©English Heritage. NMR
The tower rises in brick above the main entrance pierced at ground floor level by the east and west doorways and supported on lintels or hidden relieving arches to the north and south to allow for the staircases. There is an inserted first floor which cuts across the west window. The upper level, braced and reinforced with RSJs from the 1972 repairs, is visible from here. The exterior of this top floor (fig 12) reveals that the walls to the north and south are reduced by a considerable thickness. The stage was originally enlivened by pairs of stone pilasters with Ionic capitals supporting an entablature with pulvinated frieze and modillion cornice. This survives untouched to the west but the north and south faces have suffered from the easternmost pilasters having been truncated by the roof line in the first instance but more importantly by the insertion of a pair of clock faces set within a pedimented frame for which the stone and brick work had to be cut back (figs 13 & 14). One of the clock faces is stored inside the building (fig.15).

The truncated pilasters must be put down to a mistake in the design. The continuation of the pilasters inside the roof are short lengths of uncarved stone. As regards the clock and its housing a documented date for it has not been found but on stylistic evidence the tiny, closely spaced, shaped modillions in the pediment make a late 18th-century date likely. Part of the original design was a sundial fixed to the parapet on the south west exedra. It was gilded lead and now stored in the building, folded (fig.17).

The brick part of the tower finishes with a balustrade and the timber tiers are supported on double columns standing on stout timbers spanning the corners of the masonry tower. The bell is housed at the top of the lower tier which is a square with projecting corners supported on roughly Tuscan double columns. Above this is a faceted cupola on an open octagon which in turn supports a tiny lantern surmounted by a lead covered ball (fig. 16) from which emerged the iron bar carrying the weather vane and the four outline iron shapes depicting wild dogs or dragons. The iron has been cut off and the pieces of iron work are stored in the building (fig.17).
Fig. 15. One of the removed clock faces. Heywood 2009

Fig. 16. The lantern and ball on cupola. Heywood 2009

Fig. 17. The stored weather vane, flanking ironwork and the folded sundial. Heywood 2009
The tower has been compared with Wren’s church of St James Garlickhythe (fig. 15). The church was built between 1676 and 1682 but the tower was not completed until 1717 which implies that the Prices’ tower was being erected at the same time. Although St George’s was consecrated in 1715 work continued and was not completed when a fresh act of Parliament was issued in 1721 to finish the chapel and to carry out street lighting. However, it is only the low tier with its double columns supporting the projected corners which bears comparison with St George’s and in general terms the lack of a spire is comparable as spires were the rule amongst the city churches despite its pre Reformation overtones.

Fig.18. St James Garlickhythe. Tower completed 1717

The flat roof of the building is covered in copper replacing the original lead. It is surrounded by steeply pitched aisle roofs partly hidden by parapets in brickwork with decorative black headers.

**Interior**

As in most auditories the barrel-vaulted nave with groin-vaulted galleries is a most readily recognisable and aesthetically important characteristic (fig. 20). However, the revealed structure shows that the technique

Fig.19 Nave looking south west. Heywood 2009
employed would have been readily recognisable to a carpenter living in the 15th-century as an aisled timber frame. The series of massive posts support a pair of arcade plates which have braces to the post and to the tie beams. Supported by the arcade plates are the rafters over the aisles and the common joists of the flat roof. The tie beams are the main supports for the roof which is directly borne on them (Figs 21, 22 & 23).
The vaulting was of plaster on lathes. The shape of the nave ceiling was a barrel the curve of which is defined by the iron bars which cross the nave (fig. 21). Corresponding to each opposing pair of columns the barrel vault was punctuated slightly by raised transverse arches. The vault was penetrated by the arches of the arcade (fig. 24). The easternmost bay of the nave is reduced to a narrower and therefore lower barrel vault differentiating the nave from the chancel. The vault which covered the penultimate bay had to reduce the span with a conical
hollowed vault transferring from the full span of the nave down to the width and height of the narrowed bay. As demonstrated above the chancel consists of opposed semi-domed apses with a barrel vault connecting them, confirming the separation of spaces (Figs 2 & 24).

Fig. 24. Chancel roof with former semi-dome to north apse and position of connecting barrel vault. Heywood 2009

Fig. 25 Organ loft. Hallam Ashley Detail of fig. 30. 1960 ©English Heritage.NMR Arrows indicate springing of former semi-dome
The vaults at the west end of the nave are difficult to reconstruct owing to alterations made in order to incorporate the organ (Fig. 25). The 1960 record makes it clear, however, that a shallow semi-dome was intended and that it was partly cut away in order to incorporate the organ which was installed in about 1733 and enlarged in 1887. The arrows indicate the base of the semi-dome where it cuts across the corner. It is supported on rather clumsy pendentives. The semi-dome had to accommodate the entrance lobbies to the gallery and the effect of this is alleviated by the rounding-off of the corners of the entrance projections.

The aisles had sloping ceilings in order to provide for graded seating at gallery level and to clear the windows (fig. 26). The galleries had fine groin-vaulted ceilings which became difficult when trying to find a suitable way of covering the exedrae. This is achieved by providing extra springing points on the curves of the exedrae (Fig. 26.)

The columns at gallery level are of the Roman Doric order with the exception of the four columns supporting the former narrow barrel vault entering the chancel. These have more decoration and are of the Corinthian order with channelled shafts in the correct manner (fig. 27). The use of this order here and on the exterior of the east end emphasizes the chancel and adds support to a sacramental attitude to the liturgy which may have met with disapproval from some more Protestant circles.
The gallery fronts have survived and have raised and fielded panelling. The former graded seating and the sloping floor have been removed but there is abundant evidence of its existence.
apart from the photographs from the National Monuments Record. At the west end the gallery housed the organ and the gallery front projects to accommodate the organist. The projection precisely fits the panelling to the sides and suggests that it was executed from the first (figs 28 & 29). The galleries were supported on massive timber stanchions which were panelled over (fig. 30).

Fig. 28. Filled-in aisles yet surviving gallery front and organist’s balcony. Heywood 2009

Fig. 29. Similar view in 1960 Hallam Ashley. BB59/150. ©English Heritage. NMR
The central supports for the organ loft were a pair of Roman Doric Columns. The timber gallery stanchions survive to the north but have been removed and replaced with masonry to the south (fig. 28). There were fears of instability in 1960 just after the church had closed when extra timber supports to the gallery were added (fig. 30).

The staircases so elegantly accommodated within the western exedrae are fine and in tact with open strings to the inside with shaped tread ends, panelled dados to the outside and three turned balusters per tread. Where the staircases pass the windows the stair reverts to balusters. The handrail is swept around the bottom tread (figs 31 & 32). The architraves to the doorways leading onto the gallery had paterae at the top corners. One of these, to the north, survives in situ.
Fig. 31. North stair. 1960. Hallam Ashley. BB59/152. ©English Heritage. NMR

Fig. 32. Detail of south stair with heavier baluster. Heywood 2009
The doorway which lead into the nave from the tower porch has an elegant segmental or three-centred fanlight with thin glazing bars linked by cusping and a secondary fan lined with miniature paterae. It probably belongs to an alteration of the 1790s (fig. 33).

Fig. 33. Entrance to former nave beneath organ loft and through east wall of tower. Heywood 2009

**Furnishings**
The pulpit, reredos, font, organ and pews have all been dispersed following the redundancy of the church. The pulpit with its tester was the principal focus of the building and as such deserves illustration (fig. 34). It was situated immediately adjacent to the south east gallery stanchion at the point closest to the centre of the church and orientated towards the body of the congregation. Standing on a single timber column it was reached by a staircase with open strings and intricately carved tread ends. The box is decorated with marquetry. The tester was suspended from the roof and steadied with twisted ironwork attached to the pulpit. The tester, in the form of a hexagonal cupola is surmounted by an eagle with outstretched wings. The pulpit is now at the parish church of St Nicholas in the town and the tester is used as a font cover. The royal arms and other panelling have also gone to St Nicholas. The organ has gone to St John’s Smith Square, London and the pews have been removed. The latter were installed in 1887 replacing the box pews of which one photograph survives (fig. 35). This shows the pulpit with
Fig. 34. Pulpit. 1960. Hallam Ashley BB59/151. ©English Heritage. NMR
the reader’s desk still in situ having since been moved to the north aisle. Apart from the curtained box pews the painted decoration of the chancel vault will be noticed as well, the pride of place being given to a hatchment.

Finally there survives in situ a pair of well carved niches flanking the returned last bay at gallery level (Figs 36 & 37). They have curved backs and a semi-domed head flanked by baroque foliage. (The upper section of the northernmost niche has been removed in recent times). They clearly served as seats possibly for dignitaries well-placed close to the pulpit.¹⁰
Conclusion

It is interesting to return to the connection with St Clement Danes and Sir Christopher Wren. The exedrae which presumably impressed the mayor of Great Yarmouth and inspired the Prices was forced on Wren owing to the constrictions of the alignment of the church determined by the existing remains of the medieval building of which the already rebuilt tower was to remain. By rounding off the aisles at the liturgical east end he was able to fit a larger church on the small site. The result is a most satisfying and Baroque solution to the problem. This is without parallel in any other of the city churches. The Prices’ use of the exedrae and having repeated them at the west end and making them more prominent is worthy of praise. The difficulties in reducing the vault height and width were treated successfully and if the funds had stretched to employing plasterers such as Powell and Goudge they would have made use of the bay as at St Clement’s (Fig. 38). It seems highly likely the same bay at St George’s would have had at least a painted Royal Arms.

In terms of its place in architectural history St George’s Chapel is a large monumental Baroque church embracing the new principles as defined by Wren and taking its cue from the Wren churches of the late 17th-century. As such it remains one the most important examples outside London with the advantage of having an unrestricted site. It cleverly retains a basilican plan yet
the exedrae at both ends can give the impression of a centrally planned structure and reflects the pulpit based liturgy. The building is far superior in terms of scale and completeness to the other tiny early Georgian church in Norfolk at North Runcton by Henry Bell of King’s Lynn (c.1710-13 nave. 1720 chancel) and indeed, provincial early Georgian churches, as rare as they are, are normally of smaller scale and less ambitious. There are of course important exceptions in provincial towns such as All Saints, Derby (now cathedral) by James Gibbs of 1723-5 or more in the Wrenian tradition St Thomas, Stourbridge (1726) which has giant order columns with suspended galleries.\textsuperscript{11} St George’s originality in terms of its design is far greater than these but as regards decoration and plaster embellishment it falls behind and perhaps reflects a surviving puritanical attitude or simple lack of funds.

The building demonstrates the passionate struggle to find a form suitable for Anglicanism in the period following the desecration of churches during the Commonwealth and the reaction against the Laudian reforms and their slow reintroduction at the Restoration. It is a rare privilege to have a church built at such a time reflecting the churchmanship debates and arguments which may have raged over the position of the altar or the emphasis on the chancel.

Stephen Heywood FSA
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NOTES


2 See Norfolk Record Office *A History of St George’s & St Peter’s. Copies from original acts and documents*. PD 28/290 and *building agreements* etc. Y/C 38/2. The transcript in I. Preston, *Picture of Yarmouth:being a compendious history and description of all the public establishments within that borough*, Great Yarmouth, 1819 reads *covered* instead of *coved*. The modern sense of ‘cove’ as a concave moulding covering the joint between a ceiling and wall overtook the earlier more general meaning as ‘arching’ in the mid C19 (Oxford Historical Dictionary).


4 The curves were extended with a plastered screen which survives in situ on both the north and south sides. Also it is plain to see on both stories. The survey drawings have omitted this important detail and it has been drawn in by me.

5 See Addleshaw & Etchells *op.cit.* Chapter IV ‘The Altar and the Chancel 1559-1660’ and Chapter V ‘The Altar and the Chancel 1660-1841’.

6 Some drawings form the Borough Architect’s Department of 1972 and ’73 specify repairs, only some of which correspond to the repairs actually carried out.

7 The faculty book refers to materials from the demolished west parts of St Nicholas to be re-used for the construction of a Chapel of Ease. Norfolk Record Office DN/FCB 1 p.502 (1714)

8 The clock mechanism is a modern electrically powered replacement

9 See Kelly’s Directory 1927/8.

10 See Addleshaw and Etchells *op.cit.* Plate IV p. 80 and p.87 note 1.

ADDENDUM

Archaeology - below ground

- In order to build St George’s Church the Mount, which was a mound of earth straddling the town walls on which cannon were placed, had to be levelled. The mound was built in 1569 and levelled in 1714.

- In c.1940 a bomb shelter was excavated beneath the square to the south of St George’s. Photographs show a stair in the south west corner of the square and vents further towards the middle of the square.

- The Norfolk Historic Environment Record No. 4336 mentions medieval and post medieval pottery sherds in Great Yarmouth Museum labelled St George’s Church.

- The area around the church is shown as gardens and open ground on Faden’s map of the late 18th century.

As the site is within the walled town there is a likelihood of medieval and earlier deposits being present. However, the air raid shelter will have destroyed any potential early deposits in part of the area to the south of the chapel.

Norfolk Landscape Archaeology (part of the Museums Service of Norfolk County Council) will be consulted during the planning procedure and will probably recommend to the Borough Council that there should be a degree of archaeological involvement during excavation.

SRH.