

St Nicolas churchyard, Guildford (SU 99435 49335)

St Nicolas church lies on the west bank of the river Wey and the north elevation of the present church abuts the High Street pavement immediately to the west of the present Town Bridge, which almost certainly occupies the site of the medieval bridge. The present church, designed by S S Teulon and completed by Ewan Christian, was built in 1875–6; the church hall was added in 1879 and was built in the angle formed by the south wall of the chancel and the east wall of the Loseley chapel (fig 1). The Loseley chapel was built in the 15th century and survived the demolition of two earlier churches.

The church is within the Borough boundary shown on the *Ichnography or ground Plan of Guildford* of 1739. Most of the parish, however, lies in the Hundred of Godalming. Documentary sources are apparently silent upon the date of the foundation of the church and at the time of writing the earliest positive reference known to the writer is the *Ecclesia Beati Nicholai de Guldeford* in Pope Nicholas' taxation returns, 1291 (Taylor 1980, 2). Some writers have, however, referred to a church having stood on the west bank of the river since Saxon times.

The present spelling of St Nicolas without an 'h' is of relatively recent origin. The present incumbent, the Rev B Taylor, has discovered from the diaries of a predecessor, the Rev J T Jones, that the change in spelling was made, without explanation, on 14 May 1881. It has been adopted ever since by the church.

This is the third known church on the site, and replaced one completed in 1837, which was designed by Robert Ebbels. Brayley (1878–81, 148–9) describes the Ebbels church as a hand-

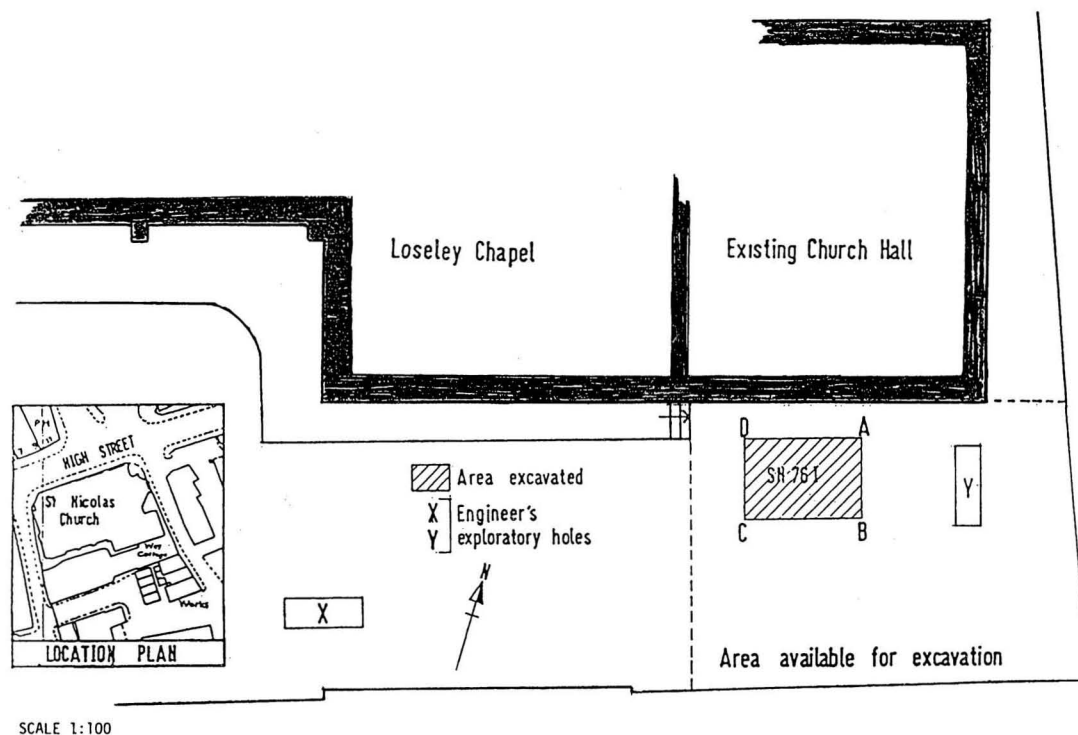


Fig 1. St Nicolas churchyard, Guildford: location of excavation and contractor's trenches

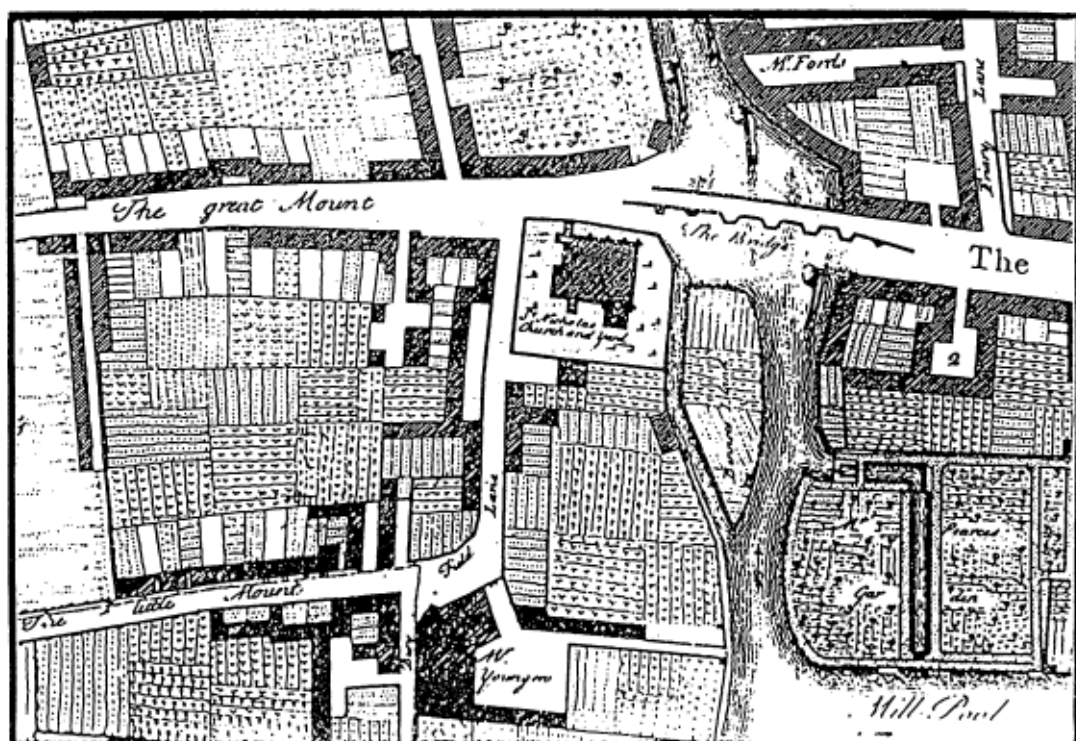


Fig 2. St Nicolas churchyard, Guildford: detail from the *Ichnography* of 1739

some fabric which retained the original church tower. The exterior walls were said to be faced with Bargate stone in thin layers of rangework, the stone coming from Mr Peacock's quarries near Godalming. The principals of the roof were 'moulded gothic tracery . . . springing from stone corbels'. The Ebbels church in turn replaced one demolished (except for the tower and Loseley chapel) in 1836, due to continual flooding. The date of this church is not known, but it is shown in block form on the *Ichnography* of 1739 (fig 2). Manning & Bray (1804, 64) describe the 'ancient building of chalk and flints, with an intermixture of stone rudely put together'. A 13th century capital, believed to be from the early church, used to be in the churchyard (Malden 1911, 568). The churchyard was last used for interments in 1856, when the new cemetery was opened on the Mount.

Manning & Bray (1804, 64) note that before the early church was demolished in 1836, its floor was raised by 2' 9" in 1799–1800. Brayley states that the level of the 1836/7 church was raised by a further 4 feet (1878–81, 149). The level of the medieval church must therefore have been c2.5m below the present ground surface. It was at this level that serious flooding occurred during the excavation. The Act to canalise the Wey at this point was passed in 1760, and it is interesting to reflect whether it was this which finally caused rebuilding of the church in 1836/7.

In 1976 plans to build a new church hall provided an opportunity to excavate a small area 3m×2m on the southern side of the church, with three objectives in mind.

- 1 To recover any masonry or other evidence which might indicate the structure and date of the church demolished in 1836.
- 2 To look for traces of foundations of any other earlier buildings on the site.
- 3 To seek evidence to support references to the Saxon foundation of the church on this site.

The excavation

The excavation was carried out, under the joint directorship of the writer and Barbara Blatchford, by members of the Guildford Group of the Surrey Archaeological Society, between October and December 1976, when work was abandoned due to flooding of the trench.

The results were disappointing: no earlier foundations were revealed either in our trench or in the contractor's trial holes, marked X and Y on the diagrammatic plan (fig 1), and no evidence was recovered to suggest a Saxon foundation or indicate a date for the church demolished in 1836.

The only archaeological feature of note was a layer of lime mortar(?) apparently laid on a rammed hardcore base, overlying an original ground surface. The lime feature was also visible in the Contractor's trial hole Y, and therefore presumably related to the building of the present church or the church hall.

The Contractor's trenches were watched by members of the Group during the construction of the new extension. No foundations were revealed, and nothing was seen to conflict with the results of the excavation.

The finds

Very little masonry or mouldings were recovered. None came from below the old ground surface. One form of moulding was found both above and below the lime layer, but it is not possible to draw any firm conclusion from this as the material recovered could equally well have been grave ornaments as architectural features from either of the demolished churches. Apart from modern debris, the only other building material of interest was one piece of lead came and a fragment of 17th century glass.

Two hundred and eighty six sherds of pottery were recovered, none of them worth individual illustration or discussion. Two hundred and thirty two were post-medieval and 54 medieval, the earliest being possibly late 12th century. There was also one very coarse Romano-British sherd or tile fragment. Six or seven ½d coins of the 17th and 18th centuries were recovered, all very worn or defaced.

The whole or partial remains of 12 burials were recovered, together with unrelated human bone. All were carefully set aside and then reinterred by agreement with the Rev Taylor, who conducted a short ceremony prior to back-filling. No investigation of the bones was therefore possible. The coffin furniture recovered has been retained and has been lodged together with all other finds retained and with the detailed report of the excavation, photographs, site notebooks, etc at Castle Arch.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Guildford Group wishes to thank all those who gave support and encouragement during the excavation, and especially Father Taylor and the Parochial Church Council of St Nicolas for allowing the excavation to take place. We are grateful to David Bird, Felix Holling and Eric Wood for their comments on some of the material recovered, and to Tony Clark for arranging the analysis by DoE (now English Heritage) Ancient Monuments Laboratory of some of the material. Also, thanks are due as always to Jac Cowie for support and encouragement throughout. The Group gratefully acknowledges grants from Guildford Borough Council towards the cost of the shoring, and from Surrey Archaeological Society towards the cost of producing the report.

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