

Report on

**ST GEORGE'S
PRESBYTERIAN CHAPEL**

Borough Road, Southwark

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Historical Analysis & Research Team
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Nature of Request

The former Presbyterian chapel of St George, at Nos. 109–12 Borough Road, SE1, is now part of a large ‘brownfield’ site owned by South Bank University. It currently stands isolated and shrouded in scaffolding (fig. 1). The chapel is a grade II listed building. The university authorities wish to pull it down to create a new campus ‘worthy of their enhanced academic status’.

Further information is required to ‘flesh out’ the brief account of the building given in the statutory list description. In particular, is it possible to discover who designed it, when did it become part of the ‘printing works’, and who designed the extensions?

The Historical Analysis & Research Team is part of the Architectural Investigation section of English Heritage, based at Savile Row, London

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Historical Context

In essence, Presbyterianism is a form of church government in which the life of the Christian community is regulated through a division of responsibility between professional clergy and lay members. In the case of an individual church, the minister is one of a number of elders presiding over its local membership. Above this, the normal pattern of government is founded on a hierarchy of courts, in each case a body based ultimately upon popular election. The 'presbytery' itself consists of a group of representative elders controlling the churches within a prescribed area. In 1638, Scotland established the Presbyterian form of government in its national church. In 1972, the Presbyterian church of England joined with the Congregational church of England and Wales to form the United Reform Church.¹

The origins of a Presbyterian community in the London borough of Southwark can be traced back to 1823. Towards the end of that year, the 'New Scots Church, Prospect Place, Surrey', appealed for assistance to the Scots Presbytery in London.² The request was turned down, though the individual members sought to foster the infant cause. A year later, the congregation was apparently on the increase and money had been spent on repairing and fitting out the place of worship. However, for reasons which are not entirely clear, the building was closed and abandoned in 1842.

Meanwhile, not without some connection, in 1840 a congregation had been formed close to the south bank of the Thames, temporarily occupying a building near Blackfriars bridge. The presbytery eventually found a schoolroom off Borough Road, belonging to the British and Foreign School Society, and which they occupied on Sundays for the annual rent of £30 (fig. 2).³ Despite this promising start, by December 1844 the church finances were in a difficult position. The number of seats 'let', under the normal 'pew rent' system, and in what must have been a makeshift conversion, had fallen from 108 to 64. It was agreed that this place of meeting 'had exerted a most prejudicial influence on the increase of the congregation'. For all this, a building fund had been established and it seems clear that there were plans to build a new church.⁴

If not already, then within a few weeks, the committee of management had acquired the services of the Revd Joseph Fisher in an attempt 'to keep the cause alive'. Although by April of 1845 the community was still meeting in its 'former place of worship', building must soon have been set in hand on the new chapel situated at the junction of Borough Road and Mansfield Street (fig. 2).⁵ It was the first purpose-built Presbyterian church to be established on the south side of the river, and was eventually opened on Sunday 7 June 1846. Later information reveals that, shortly after the opening of the church, the congregation raised a sum of money from a building society to 'discharge the account of the builder'. The closure of the building society in 1857 led to a general appeal for £800

- 1 There is a useful summary on Presbyterianism in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second edition edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford 1974), 1120–21. Presbyterian doctrine is traditionally Calvinistic, ultimately derived from the Swiss religious reformer, John Calvin (1509–64).
- 2 For the background, see Black 1906, 240–42. Prospect Place has since been incorporated as part of St George's Road, SE1.
- 3 The site on Borough Road can have been no more than 200 yards (183m) east of St George's chapel. The British & Foreign School Society's Training College occupied the site of the later Borough Polytechnic, and its successors.
- 4 The minister at this time was a Revd John Thomson. These details are derived from what appear to be brief minutes of meetings, part of a very small collection of notes and clippings at Southwark Local Studies Library.
- 5 Mansfield Street has since been renamed Rotary Street.

to pay off the outstanding mortgage.⁶

There were clearly aspirations for a large and thriving community, with up to 800 sittings provided in St George's. A school room was located 'underneath the church', and the music class and choir were to establish some local notoriety. In no small part, much of the early successes was due to the Revd Fisher, who continued to serve as minister. A newspaper report of January 1862 noted that both the church and school room were 'thoroughly repaired and beautified' in the previous year at the cost of £161.⁷ And yet, once again, the Presbyterian congregation in Southwark soon found itself in financial difficulty. At the root of this was the number of actual sittings taken up. The membership returns show that already by 1869 there were no more than 140 members. Ten years later the figure had risen to 183, but by 1890 it was down again to 130. In 1899 the roll was as low as 54.⁸

Indeed, by this last date closure of the chapel was imminent. The lease was to be sold and the congregation dissolved in 1901. The London Post Office official directories for 1901 continue to list St George's Presbyterian church on Borough Road between Nos. 108 and 113. By the following year, however, the building had been taken over by R. Hoe & Co., printing machine makers. The company was to remain here until the early 1980s (fig. 3).⁹

The Building Described

The overall form of the chapel was in part determined by its location, with the façade aligned to Borough Road, but with the angle of the chapel proper following Rotary Street, formerly Mansfield Street (figs. 2 and 6). Allowing for this idiosyncrasy, the building as a whole is essentially of rectangular plan, orientated north-west to south-east. Apart from the stucco frontage, the walls are all of brick with very few additional decorative details to the exterior.

To begin with the stucco, or plaster, façade (fig. 1 and 4) on Borough Road, it is probably best read as two storeys with a tall parapet above. Although in its present condition much of the paint coating is flaking from the surface, the underlying stucco work remains in essentially good condition. The detail is crisp, with clear indications of attention to detailing in the original construction. The parapet, which gives the appearance of being set back, is rather plain apart from its simple panelling. The two principal storeys are arranged in three bays, defined by four giant Doric pilasters rising from individual plinths to the capitals set below a well-proportioned entablature. On each plinth, the pilaster bases are of the 'correct' Doric form (fig. 7). At the entablature (fig. 8), above a plain architrave, there is a triglyph frieze surmounted by a relatively deep, moulded cornice, where once again the detailing appears to be 'correct'. The pediment, which in a grander building might be expected to span all three bays, is restricted to the wider central section; it breaks part way into the otherwise rigid lines of the parapet.

The central bay is further accentuated by the banded rustication which frames a full, two-storey, round-headed recess with a bold keystone at the apex (fig. 8). The main door into the chapel sits in the lower half of this recess, framed by a moulded architrave (fig. 9),

6 The congregation had been paying an annual sum of £246.

7 The clipping is part of the collection at Southwark Local Studies Library.

8 The figures can be determined from the point in time when they were requested on an annual basis. The information is from Mrs Margaret Thompson, administrator at the United Reformed Church History Society.

9 By 1950, the Post Office directories list the company as Hoe and Crabtree. According to Cherry and Pevsner (1993, 592), the printing machine manufactory was demolished in 1983.

with a console-bracketed, beak-fronted pediment above. A Diocletian window, now blocked but retaining its mullions (fig. 8), fills the topmost part of the recess. The flanking bays, including reveals to both doors and windows (all currently blocked) are much plainer.

The two lower storeys of the western façade, that overlooking Rotary Street (figs. 5 and 10), are arranged in seven bays here defined by shallow brick pilasters crowned with moulded stucco capitals. The five central bays are of similar design, though the pattern changes in the narrower end bays. Grey bricks were used at the plinth level, and in the segmental heads of the lower-storey windows. Much of the other brickwork is mottled, though with a good deal of yellowish fabric. Above the second-storey windows there is a moulded cornice (fig. 5), continuing the line of that on the main façade. The form of the cornice reveals further attention to detail during design and construction. It survives over good stretches (fig. 12), but is beginning to weather and fall away. Without access to the interior of the building, and given the present covering of scaffold, it is difficult to reach any firm conclusion on the third storey. The cornice may have supported no more than a parapet, as on the main façade. If so, the full upper storey presumably relates to the building conversions made after 1901.

These later conversions are more apparent at the southern end of the chapel (fig. 13). In fact, as built, St George's was a freestanding structure, and a small area of open space is depicted on the south side on the Ordnance Survey map of 1872 (fig. 2). It seems likely that this was the position through to 1901, after which a moderate extension was added to the gable wall (fig. 5). The most likely purpose of this extension was to provide office space and services for the Hoe & Co. works. The recent demolition of the extension has left a number of ragged scars, difficult to interpret accurately without the benefit of plans, though with several blocked window openings, with segmental heads, belonging to the original chapel.

The eastern façade (fig. 14) is not easy to inspect at present, though the large blocked window openings in the middle storey presumably belong to the chapel phase. There is no trace of the moulded cornice seen on the opposite side, though the complexion of the brick at the upper level does suggest additional or replacement building.

Context and Interpretation

As the outpouring of Nonconformist religious enthusiasm continued to grow through the early to mid-nineteenth century, there was an enormous growth in chapel-building. In London, as in other large towns and cities, the process was further fuelled by population increase and by urban development.¹⁰ In Southwark alone, the population rose from 63,000 in 1801 to 174,000 by 1861.¹¹ Yet even allowing for such growth and its impact on new ecclesiastical building, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the construction of more and larger chapels was as much a reflection of fashion and enthusiasm as it was a matter of real necessity. It is suggested that in Islington — that one London borough for which a systematic study of chapels has been published — that they were often built in a burst of confidence, with far too little regard for practical considerations.¹² In these circumstances, chapels might easily be designed on a much larger scale than their potential congregation would merit. Expensive to maintain, they all too regularly became a burden to later generations of worshippers. Indeed, from the evidence available, the

10 The population of Inner London rose from just under 960,000 in 1801 to a little over 2,360,000 in 1851. Source: *The London Encyclopaedia*, second edition (London 1993), 632.

11 Cherry and Pevsner 1994, 69.

12 Temple 1992, 11. For a brief note on south London, see Cherry and Pevsner 1994, 63–64.

circumstance at St George's Presbyterian chapel would appear to be very much a reflection of this general trend.

Before the nineteenth century, the concept of a Nonconformist religious community employing an architect to design a chapel and oversee its construction was rare. In remoter rural areas of England, and across much of Wales, this remained true through into the 1850s. Gradually, however, the wisdom of commissioning a respected architect became more commonplace. As a result, certain practices even began to specialize in chapel architecture. In London, of course, and also in other large urban centres, it was inevitable that such developments would take place earlier; architectural practices with experience in chapel building can be identified by the third quarter of the century. One of the more significant London exponents of good chapel design was James Cubbit (1836–1912), who might truly be regarded as a specialist in this area of work.¹³

Earlier in the century, in the wake of the so-called Greek and Gothic revivals gaining pace as parallel movements, it was almost inevitable that chapel designers would be influenced by one or other of these two models. In very broad terms, up until the 1850s, the Classical proved more popular; Gothic was early seen as more appropriate to the established Anglican church. Ideas spread, principally as a dissemination downwards from greater and more prestigious architectural works. But there were also denominational conferences and gatherings where news of contemporary chapel-building might be exchanged. Moreover, the occasional publication — like the nationally distributed *Congregational Year Book* — might comment on trends in chapel design. In fact, the 1847 issue of this particular publication carried a leading article about chapel architecture. The editor concluded that there had only been two architectural forms in common use, both of which he wrote:

'... were associated with two potent systems of false religion; the Grecian architecture identified with the temples of Minerva and Jupiter and all the abominable idolatries of classical mythology; and the Gothic or pointed architecture adopted to the shrines, high altars, sacristies and Lady chapels of Popish superstition'.¹⁴

As at St George's, virtually all of the architectural expression in Victorian chapels was expended in the façade. In urban terraces, where space might be at a premium, a bold front might muscle in to an otherwise restricted or less distinguished streetscape. Beyond the façade, there was almost always a 'barn-like' rectangular space, relatively cheap to build, yet providing the simplest means of accommodating a maximum number of worshippers with a clear view of the minister and other preachers.

In all essentials, the façade at St George's follows neo-classical ideas, but although certain elements are well executed and 'correct', others are mangled and less convincing. On the whole it seems to betray an artisan or builder approach to grander architectural concepts, though in the absence of original documentation it is difficult to be certain just what the specific influences might have been.

The internal arrangements were apparently swept away during the conversion to factory uses after 1901 (fig. 15),¹⁵ and it is again rather speculative to try and reconstruct any of the practical and liturgical arrangements. Nevertheless, it is known that there was a school room 'underneath the church'. Music recitals were held here, and in a report of one such occasion in 1865 it was said that the effect of the voices was to some extent

13 Much of Cubitt's persuasive writing on chapel architectural matters was published in the *Building News* between 1863 and 1912. The best articles were gathered in two significant books: *Church Design for Congregations: Its Development and Possibilities* (London 1870), and *A Popular Handbook of Nonconformist Church Building* (London 1892).

14 Quoted in Jones 1996, 95.

15 The interior of the building has not been inspected for this report.

marred 'on account of the lowness of the roof'.¹⁶

The two-storey elevation seen in the north and west side façades was presumably reflected inside by seating at both ground and gallery levels. It might be assumed that a gallery would almost certainly have been required to contribute to the documented 800 sittings St George's is known to have had. Galleries were generally, though not exclusively, made of timber, often supported on thin iron columns, and featured balcony fronts of panelling or ornamental ironwork. Typically, galleries ran around three sides of a rectangular chapel, with stairs located in lobby spaces.¹⁷ If St George's did indeed feature such a U-shaped gallery, on the basis of the plan it would be most likely to be situated around the west, north and east sides. In fact, such is the level of detail on the 1872 edition of the 5 feet to 1 mile Ordnance Survey map, just such a gallery can be seen depicted (fig. 16). It was indeed located around the assumed end, and appears to have been supported on five lateral columns east and west, with one further column supporting a near mid-point on the north side. Of yet more interest, it might be noted that the map includes the caption: '*Sittings for 1000*', two hundred more than the documented records suggest.

In the construction and fitting out of all chapels, large or small, the design would have been driven by the need to focus attention on the pulpit. Congregations gathered to see and hear the preaching minister. Indeed, galleries assisted in this aim by allowing more of the congregation to sit closer to the pulpit. If the assumption on the positioning of the gallery at St George's is correct, then the pulpit would have been located adjacent to the southern wall. An organ might well have been positioned above. Only through the recovery of further archival material, coupled with close inspection of the fabric, might it be possible to say more of the original internal arrangements.

16 This was on 15 April 1865: Details from a newspaper clipping at Southwark Local Studies Library.

17 Jones 1996, 106–17; Temple 1992, 13.

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Unpublished

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Collections at Southwark Local Studies Library, Borough Road, Southwark, SE1.



Fig. 1 St George's Presbyterian Chapel, first opened in 1846, currently sits isolated on a brownfield sites at the junction of Borough Road and Rotary Street. The surrounding land is owned by South Bank University.

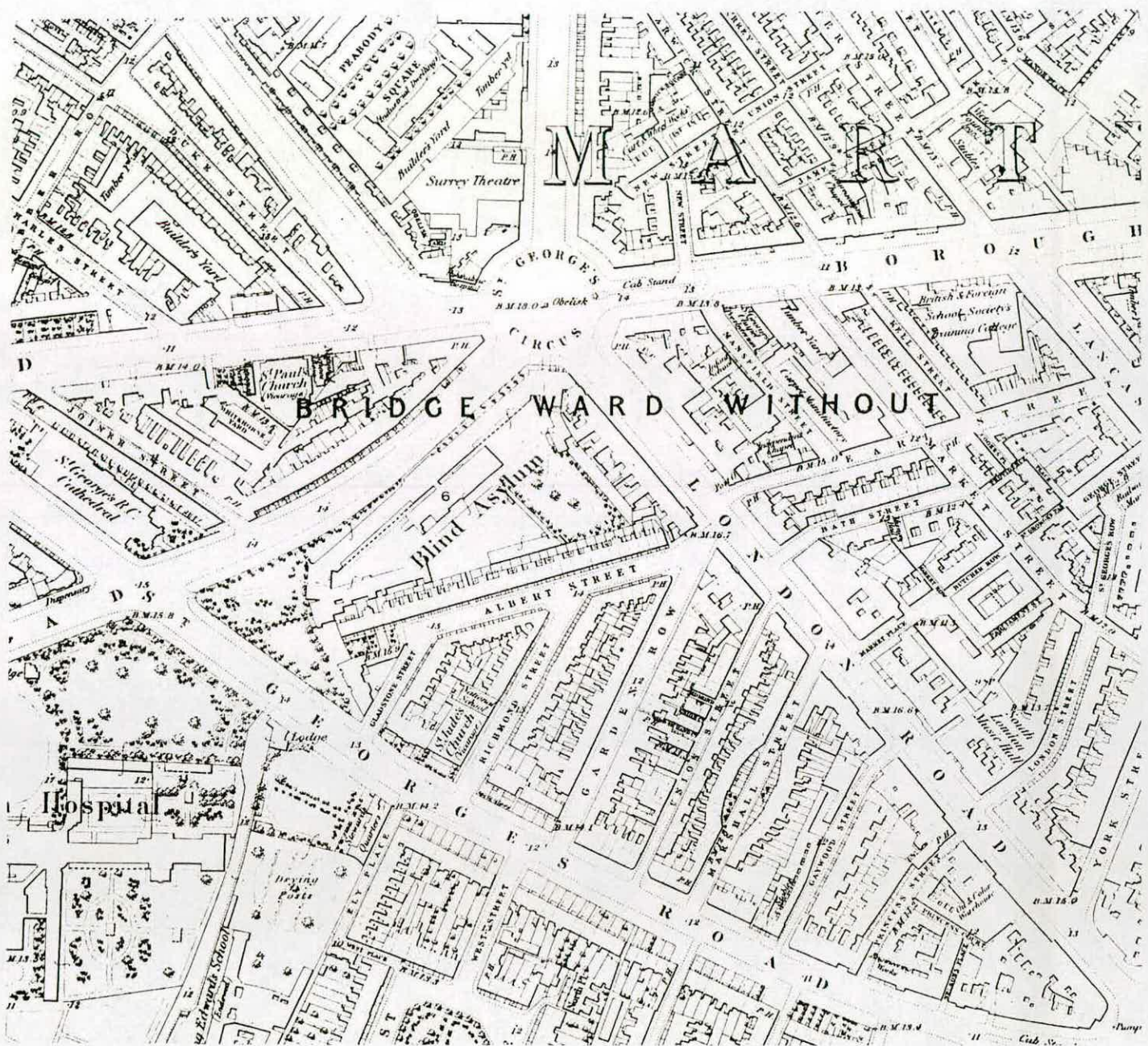


Fig. 2 Ordnance Survey map of 1872 showing the location of St George's chapel at the junction of Borough Road and Mansfield Street.

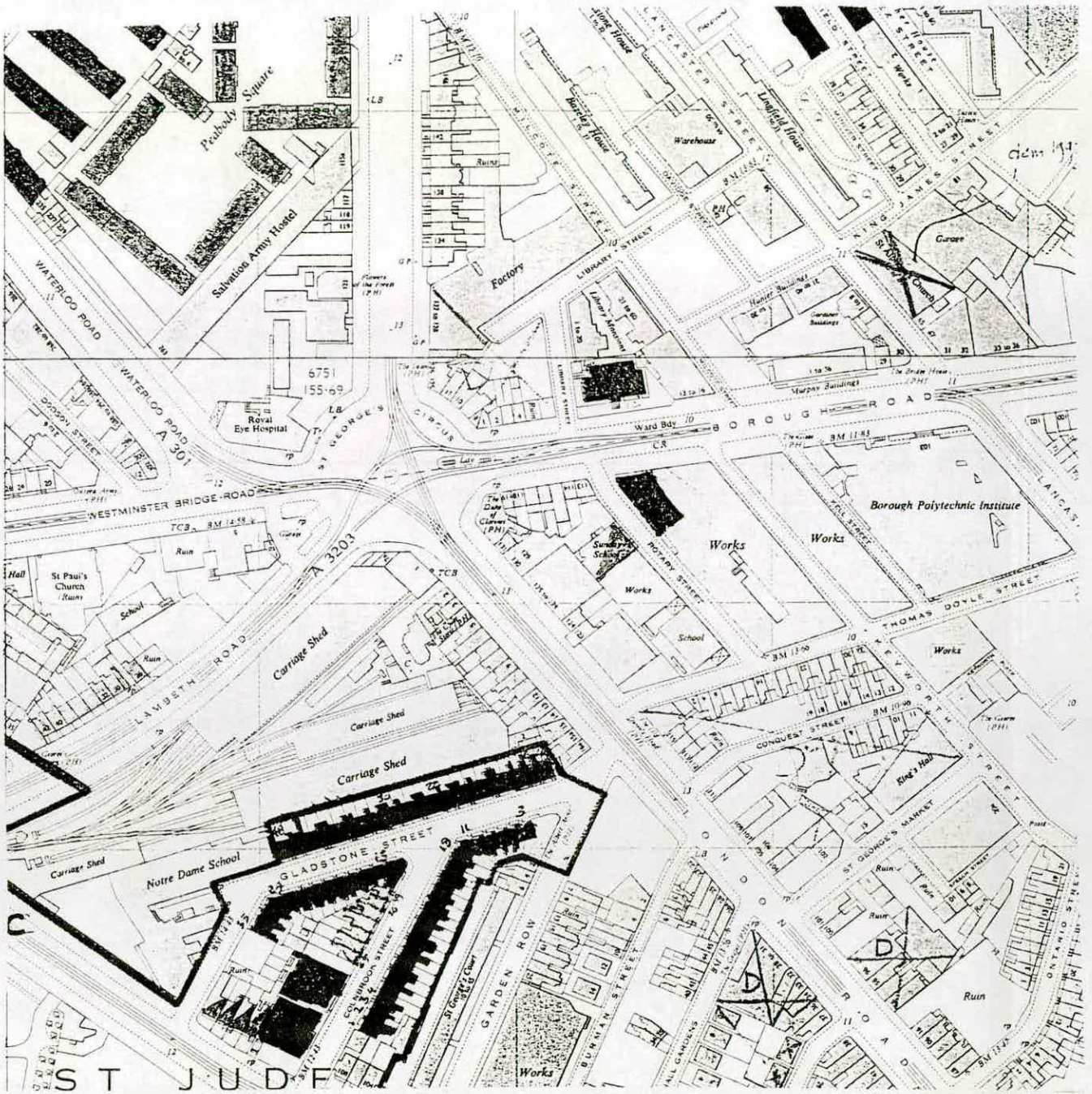


Fig. 3 Ordnance Survey map of 19?? showing the location of St George's chapel, at the junction of Borough Road and Rotary Street, with adjacent printing machine works expanding over the now brownfield site.

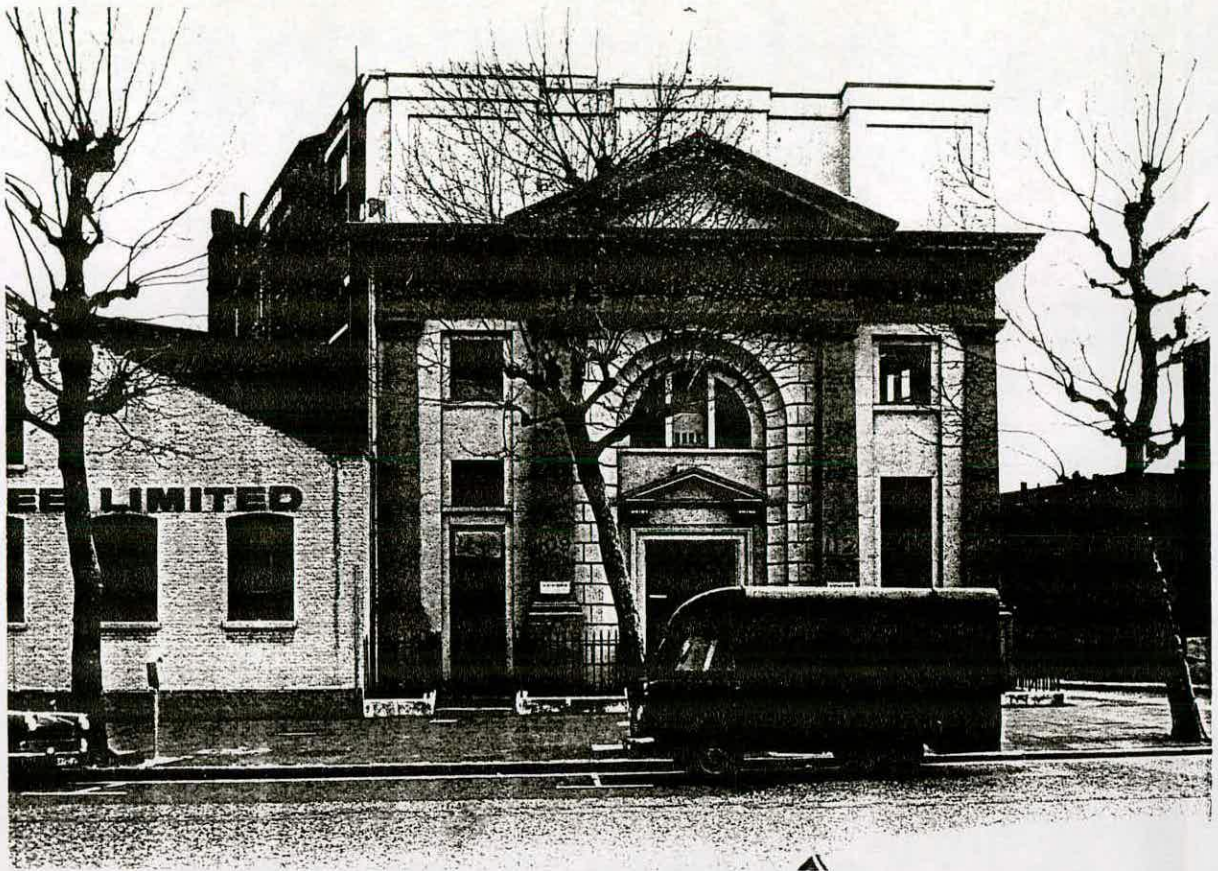


Fig. 4 The Borough Road façade of St George's chapel in 1971 before the demolition of the Hoe and Crabtree printing machine works.



Fig. 5 The Rotary Street side of St George's chapel in 1978, with post-1901 additions of the printing machine works to the south (right). The former chapel windows, at least in the ground floor, appear to have been retained in much their original form.



Fig. 6 Detail of the north-west corner of the chapel, showing the change in angle between the main Borough Road façade (Left) and the west side side on Rotary Street (right).



Fig. 7 Corner pilaster plinth and base at the north-west corner of the chapel. The base is of perfectly correct Doric form.



Fig. 8 Detail of the triglyph frieze and pediment on the main façade. The banded rustication of the central recess appears below.



Fig. 10 The west side of the chapel in 1999.



Fig. 11 Detail of window openings on the west side of the chapel, showing the narrower bay at the northern end. The brick used in the segmental heads was the same as that in the plinth.



Fig. 12 Detail of the moulded cornice on the west side of the chapel. It may mark the upper stage of the original building.



Fig. 13 The south side of the chapel showing scars marking the removal of the post-1901 extensions. At the centre and to the right the large blocked openings are presumably windows of the original chapel.



Fig. 14 A general view of the chapel from the south-east.



Fig. 15 The interior of the 'chapel' looking south, as it appeared in 1977. It would appear that all trace of the original fittings had been removed by this time, with the heavy uprights supporting an upper floor in the later factory. To the sides, gallery-like features cannot be too far removed from the position of the chapel originals.

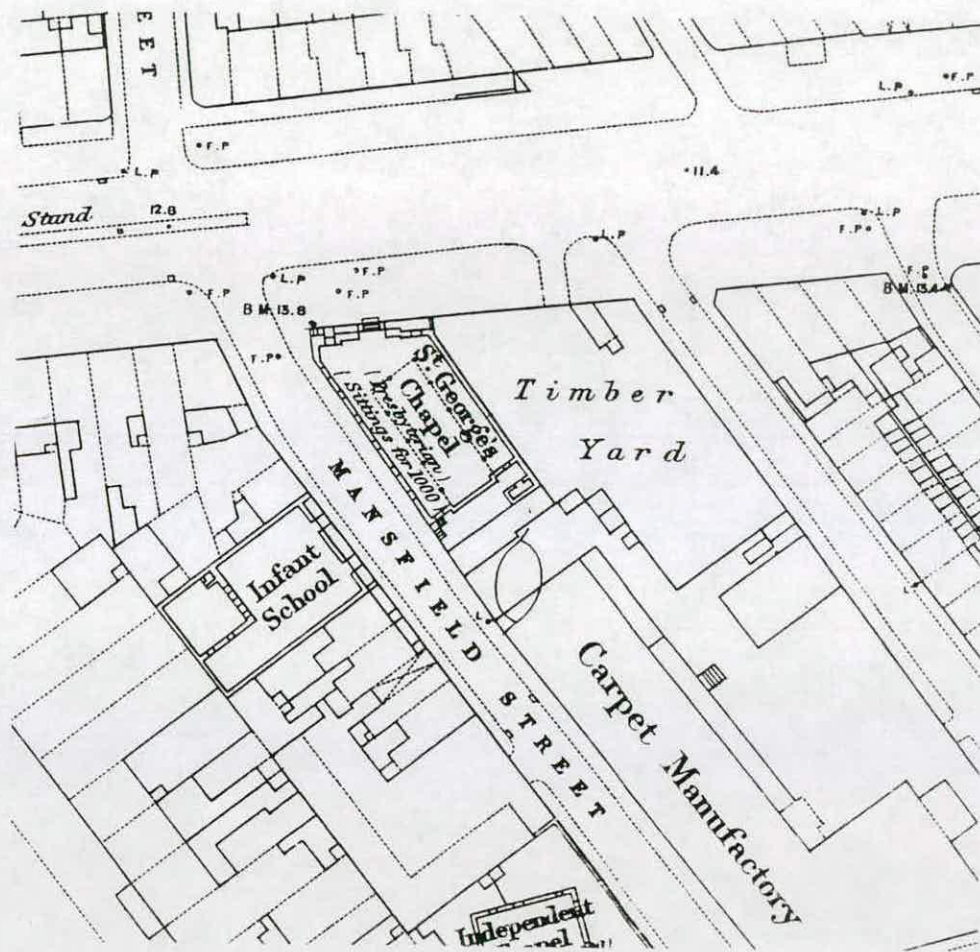


Fig. 16 Detail of 1875 edition of the 5 feet to 1 mile Ordnance Survey map of the Southwark area, showing an enlargement of St George's chapel. The positions of the gallery and its supports are shown, together with the caption 'Sittings for 1000'.