

OLD ST. NICHOLAS'S CHURCH, TOOTING-GRAVENEY

BY

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THE earliest record of a church in Tooting is in the charters of the Abbey of Chertsey for A.D. 675, and this implies that a church may have been in existence for some years before that, although the complete absence of late Roman remains in the area makes Roman origin improbable. The church is mentioned in Domesday Book, 1086,¹ and appears to have been served since the beginning of the thirteenth century by the brethren of the Holy Cross,² who had a small moated house near Ensham Secondary School in Franciscan Road. Much of the moat was filled up with the debris from the demolition of the old church in 1834, but a short stretch on the north side of Church Lane was not finally obliterated until 1848. The rapid growth of the village early in the nineteenth century rendered the little church too small for the requirements of the parish, and in 1829 the vestry met to discuss the question of increasing the seating capacity of the building. They agreed to raise one thousand pounds, but the following year the sum was found to be not enough, because the structure was too dilapidated. On the advice of the patron of the living, it was decided to build a new church,³ which was consecrated in February, 1833 by the Lord Bishop of Winchester, and the following year the old church was pulled down. The sale of the fabric and furnishings realized a mere one hundred and forty eight pounds, which helped to defray the cost of the new building. All that now remains of the old building, *in situ*, is the floor of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ledger stones in the churchyard.

The Building

The oldest part of the structure was undoubtedly the low round tower, adjoining the north wall of the north aisle. Although an analysis of the East Anglian round towers shows that with only three exceptions they are of Norman date,⁴ it may be suggested that the tower was of Saxon date, and the completely different

¹ *V.C.H.*, Surrey, 1, 310.

² Manvell, *Tooting Parish Church, 125th Birthday Exhibition brochure*, 1958, p. 16.

³ Cf. Brayley (*B. & B.*), III, 488.

⁴ The three round towers in Sussex (Southease, Piddlinghoe, and St. Michael's Lewes), are also Norman.

character of the elevation supports this. The tower windows were merely semicircular-headed slits, apparently of Saxon or, more probably, of early Norman date, with a wide splay on the inside, and lighting walls about six feet thick.

The tower was surmounted by a louvred wooden framework and a low shingled broach spire, probably added in the fourteenth

TOOTING: S. NICHOLAS' OLD CHURCH

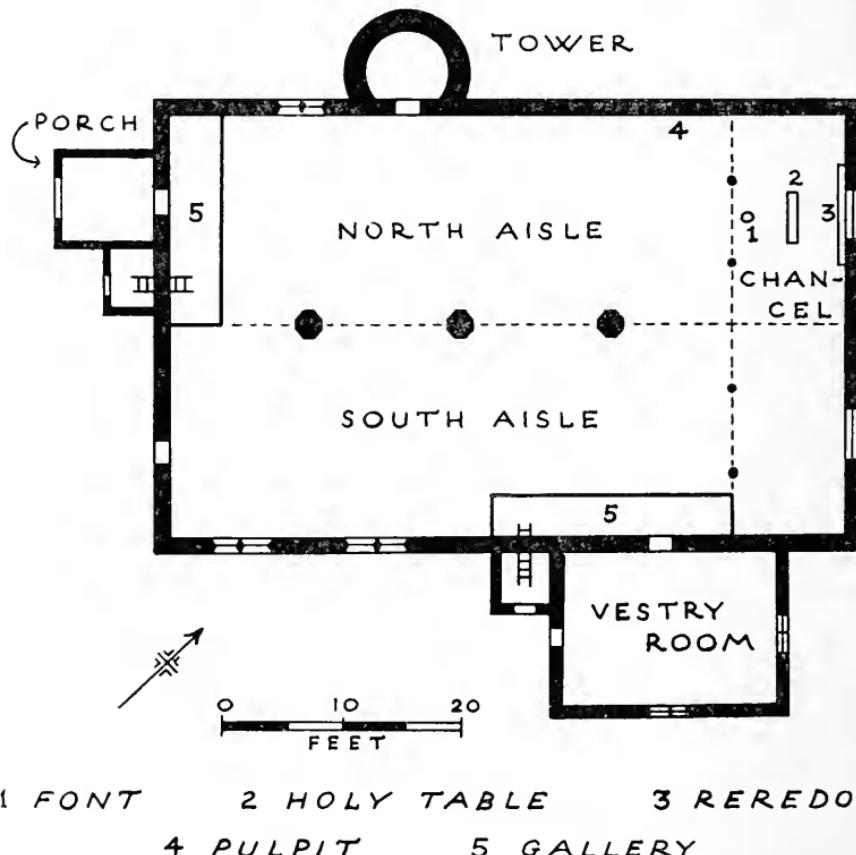


FIG. 1.—PLAN OF TOOTING PARISH CHURCH BEFORE DEMOLITION.

century, and similar to that at nearby Merton Parish Church. The adjacent north aisle was, like the south aisle, constructed of flint and rubble stones mixed together, and was very likely coeval with the tower, although the window on the west side of the tower appears to have been inserted in early Stuart times, and the west window is known to have been enlarged in 1747. The west doorway was inserted during the first half of the fifteenth century, and had a

well-moulded pointed arch with a dripstone. The roofs of the north and south aisles were practically identical, and at the commencement of the nineteenth century, appeared to be of a king-post construction throughout; but by 1826, only one tie-beam remained (possibly the old rood beam) across the east end of the north aisle. The south aisle was divided from the other aisle by an arcade of octagonal wooden pillars, and appears to have been added in the fourteenth century, judging by the evidence of the arcade and a couple of decorated two-light windows in the south wall.

The square-headed doorway in the west wall was apparently of early perpendicular date, but the window above was inserted in 1776 to match the already-existing window at the west end of the north aisle. The porch seems to have been added after the construction of the west doorway of the north aisle, very likely at the end of the fifteenth century; and at the beginning of the nineteenth century seems to have been in its original state as a timber structure with long traceried openings; as a whole, rather like the porch at Merton Parish Church. By 1834, however, the whole porch had been weatherboarded, only the original cusping remaining. The chancel was raised two steps at the east end of the north aisle, and was built by Sir James Bateman, Lord of the Manor, at the end of the seventeenth or beginning of the eighteenth century, and was lighted by a typical semicircular window.

In 1773, the parish decided to build an extension to the south aisle, adjoining to and corresponding with the chancel, with an identical window.¹ At the same time the villagers built a new chancel arch for the north aisle with a similar arch for the south aisle. These semicircular arches rested on cornices and friezes decorated with festoons and garlands in the usual classical manner, and these were in turn supported by four wooden columns in the Doric style. It was also decided to build a vestry room, and this was constructed like the chancel of brick, with a small window on the south and east sides, and a door opening into the churchyard on the west side. The little additions on the west side of the vestry room, and on the south side of the porch, with lean-to roofs, were added in 1785 and in the early seventeenth century respectively, to provide access to the galleries; and for a similar reason, a small dormer window was placed on the roof of the vestry room.

The Fittings

The old church contained an interesting variety of furnishings, and the interior was typically Georgian. Most of the furniture can be traced through the parish records, which consist of (i) the Parish registers (1555ff.) (ii) the Churchwardens' Books (1646–1826), and (iii) the Vestry Minutes (1709–1836).

In the chancel, against the east wall, stood an oblong wooden reredos, inscribed with the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the

¹ County Hall, Mument books, 1774–1787.



FIG. 2.—TOOTING CHURCH FROM THE WEST, 1834.



FIG. 3.—TOOTING CHURCH FROM THE SOUTH, c. 1825.

Lord's Prayer, and having an urn at either end. In front of this, which was probably erected in 1670, stood the communion table, an extremely distinctive production with finely turned legs. The Parish register records, "Matthew Couchman buried 1st day of June, 1642. Hee gave the new communion table." Well-turned

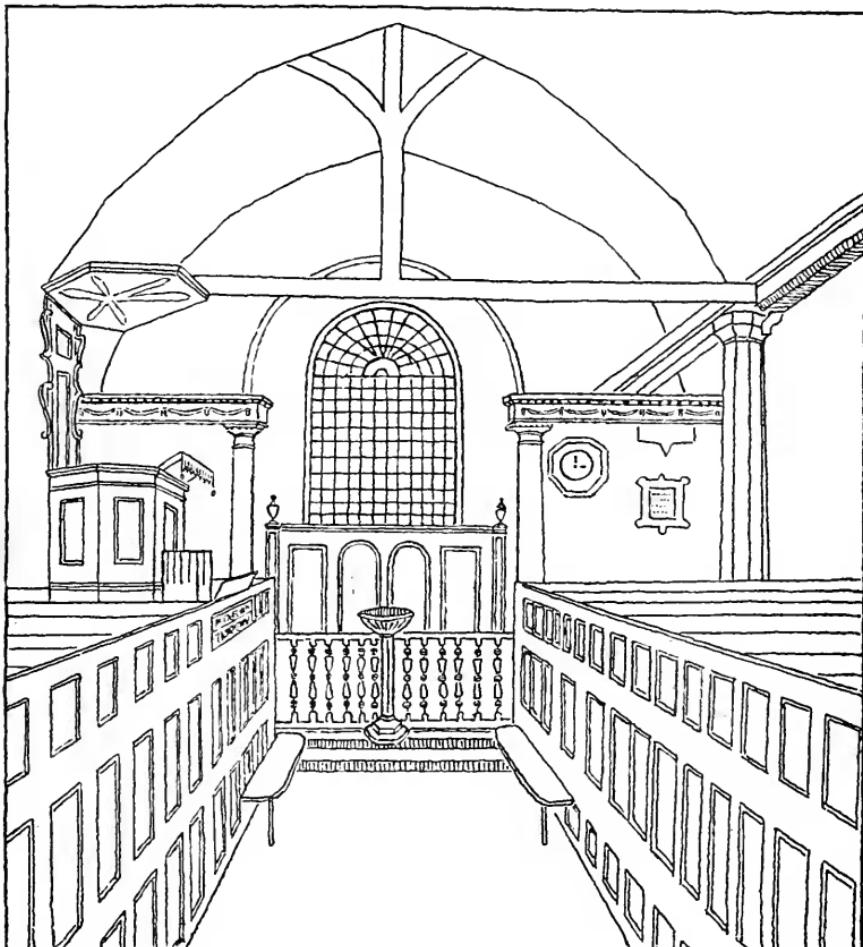


FIG. 4.—NORTH AISLE AND CHANCEL FROM THE WEST, 1826.

Jacobean communion rails stretched across the chancel just east of the chancel steps. The pulpit was of the usual Georgian style with a large sounding-board of hexagonal shape, and stood against the north wall of the north aisle, having been installed in 1734.¹ Beneath the pulpit was the minister's reading desk. Large box pews cluttered up every bit of available space in the little building, and in 1786, the font was moved from its place in the south-west corner of the

¹ Transcript of Churchwardens' Books, Morden, *History of Tooting*, p. 168.

church to make way for a new churchwardens' pew. This font was described in 1814¹ as octagonal with a rose carved on each side, and standing on an octagonal base and pillar having a niche carved on each side. This appeared to be of fifteenth-century date. The font which Sir Stephen Glynne saw and described,² had been installed in 1824 and was of black and white marble, and circular in form. It appears to have stood in front of the communion rails—a position in which the font of a Lutheran church was generally placed. As the available floor-space for pewing became less, galleries had to be erected, and the original gallery at the west end of the north aisle is

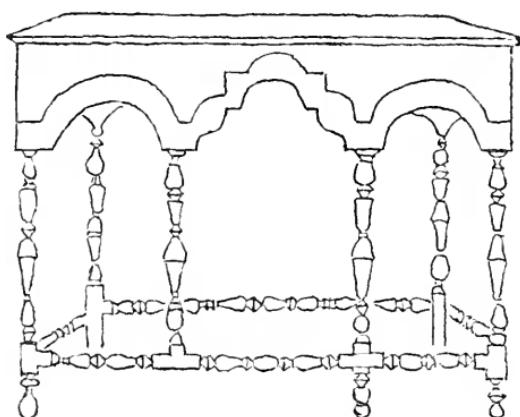


FIG. 5.—THE LORD'S TABLE.

first mentioned in the Churchwardens' accounts for 1659. In the Vestry minutes for 1739, we read, "that the benefactions to y^e parish of Tooting Graveny shall be registered in gould letters on the pannells of the gallery." Avarn's charity, founded in 1809, was among those inscribed on the gallery, and a bread-rack must have stood inside the west doorway for the distribution of loaves to the poor of the parish. The bread-rack rediscovered in 1958, with its miniature colonnade of wooden pillars, may well be the original.

The small west gallery, however, was not enough to meet the needs of a constantly growing population, and the Vestry minutes record that in 1785 Mr. Milne, the schoolmaster, wanted a gallery for his scholars, who led the singing on Sundays. He was allowed to erect it above the vestry-room at his own expense, and when an organ was introduced in 1820, it was placed against the south wall, next to the gallery. The coat-of-arms has quite an interesting story, which

¹ *M. & B.*, III, 376.

² *Sy.A.C.* LV, p. 112.

reflects contemporary politics; for in 1650 the bricklayer was paid 1s. 4d. for defacing the King's arms, but at Charles II's accession in 1660 it cost £2 15s. to replace them, and they were placed on the front of the gallery. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they had found their way to the top of the reredos. It is not certain whether the Royal arms in the present church were in the old building, but they are finely executed in plaster, and are definitely early Georgian in style, with the Hanoverian arms in the fourth quarter of the shield.

The round tower contained one bell, bearing the inscription "M.B. made me, 1705." The maker was Matthew Baddeley.¹ In 1547, King Edward the Sixth's commissioners found three small bells hanging in the steeple, and these were practically the only fittings which were allowed to remain in the church after the Reformation.²

Acknowledgments.—All facts for which no special reference is given, are from the Church documents. The author wishes to express his gratefulness to Mr. Sheppard S. Frere, M.A., and Mr. John Harvey, F.S.A., for much help and encouragement, to Mr. Martin Callingham for taking photographs, and to Mr. Clifford Manvell, lay reader at the Parish Church and the Rev. Arthur Dobb, A.R.I.B.A., Assistant curate of St. Paul's, Deansgate, Bolton, for much valuable assistance and advice.

NOTES ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

All the illustrations are tracings of original drawings or prints.

Fig. 2. *Tooting Parish Church from the west, 1834:* This sketch was made a few months before the church was demolished, and shows how dilapidated the structure had become. However it shows up the details of the tower and porch which other drawings do not. Notice the watch box next to the porch. It was built in 1819 to prevent body-snatching in the churchyard. (Original in Tooting Public Library.)

Fig. 3. *Tooting Parish Church from the south, c. 1825:* This print from Cracklow is useful, as it is one of the only original illustrations which shows the south wall of the church and the lean-to structures enclosing the gallery stairs.

Fig. 4. *The North Aisle and Chancel of Tooting Parish Church from the Porch, 1826:* This watercolour is the only good interior view in existence, and shows the extraordinarily high box pews which were painted fawn. Pulpit, reading desk, font, communion rails and reredos show up extremely well, but the Lord's Table is not visible because it was not stepped above the level of the chancel floor. Structural details such as the chancel arch, the tie-beam and king-post roof and the column of the arcade are drawn very accurately. (Original in the Minet Library, London, S.E.5.)

Fig. 5. The Lord's Table, given to the church shortly before 1642. The illustration is part of a drawing made in 1825, showing the Table with the Reredos behind. This was inscribed with the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, in accordance with the canons of 1603, and was put up in 1670.

¹ Stahlschmidt, *Surrey Bells and London Bellfounders*, 1884.

² P.R.O., Surrey Church Goods.