

A WALK ROUND THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY THE VIRGIN, TWICKENHAM.



As you approach St Mary's Church, you will notice that it overlooks the River Thames. It is one of many churches, nearly all dedicated to St Mary, close to the riverside along this stretch of the Thames Valley. They remind us that villages, which have now developed into suburban towns, grew up where transport by water was possible, where fish could be caught and where riverside meadows could feed domestic animals. Within a stone's throw of the Church, excavations have provided evidence that the heart of Twickenham was inhabited in prehistoric times.

As you look at the exterior of the Church you will also notice that its Nave and Tower do not match. The tower was built in the 15th century of Kentish ragstone, possibly matching the nave, but in 1713 the latter was so decayed that the roof collapsed, bringing down some of the walling. At that time Twickenham, a pleasant riverside village, was developing as a country residence for the London nobility and gentry, one of whom, the court painter Sir Godfrey Kneller of Whitton, was Churchwarden. Through his initiative a new, larger, nave was built to the plans of John James of Greenwich, a pupil of Christopher Wren. He made no attempt to match the surviving medieval tower but designed the red brick nave in the style of the period, similar to many churches in the City of London that had been destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666.

Inside the church

The Nave: When you enter the church by the north door, you find yourself in a rectangular building which is basically as it was designed in 1714, with galleries on

either side. In the days when preaching was more important than the sacraments, a pulpit on a tall stem stood centrally before the altar, and the sanctuary was small and comparatively unimportant. Successive generations have, however, changed the plainness of the interior by colouring and gilding, beautifying the sanctuary (on the advice of Sir Albert Richardson), improving the lighting, and adding new furnishings to make it the beautiful, cared-for place of worship you see today. The seating in the galleries was part of a major refurbishment carried out in 1859, and the seats downstairs were installed 150 years later in 2020.

The windows: Stained glass was placed in the windows in Victorian days, but all was destroyed by bombing in 1944. The present east window (1964) was designed by Brian Thomas and includes symbols of the Virgin Mary.

The side windows, designed by Jane Gray, now contain coats of arms, beginning (by the Vestry) with Walter of Saint Valery, awarded the Manor of Twickenham by his friend William the Conqueror, and including successive patrons of the living and other notable persons associated with the church.

The tower: The screen leading into the tower is in memory of the Leeson family and is a reminder of the links of the church with the Borough of Twickenham, now part of the Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames, whose Town Hall is neighbouring York House. The west window is in memory of Richard Campbell Feather.

In the base of the tower can be seen the ropes of the ring of eight bells, of which the oldest "John" dates from before the Reformation, and which were retuned and rehung in 1968. They are rung regularly, and the peal boards round the walls are a reminder of the long tradition of the call to worship.

Two splendid Jacobean monuments are also in the tower: one possibly from the studio of Grinling Gibbons, to Sir Joseph Ashe, and one to the Cavalier General Lord Berkeley of Stratton, whose brother Sir William Berkeley, Governor of Virginia, is also buried in the church and commemorated by a window.

Some memorials in the nave: leaving the tower, notice on the left the badly worn slab over the grave of the Countess of Elgin, who was governess to King George IV's daughter Princess Charlotte.

Walk towards the east end and, just before reaching the chancel step, you will see a brass plate given by three American scholars to mark the burial place of Alexander Pope, the poet who was perhaps Twickenham's most famous resident. He was actually buried under the next stone, which is marked by an incised letter P.

Turn right at the chancel step, and beyond the fine door into the Vestry you will find the oldest memorial in the church, a stone slab with a small metal inscription which

commemorates Richard Burton, principal cook to King Henry VI, and Agnes his wife, who both died in 1443.

In the north east corner of the chancel wall stands the marble monument to Lady Frances Whitmore, the wife of Matthew Harvey, notable for the poem by John Dryden in her memory.

On the other side of the chancel is a fine, though damaged, terracotta memorial to Francis Poulton (1642) and his wife Susan. Their portraits surmount the inscription.

The sanctuary: There are memorials to two Humble baronets (1686 and 1705), and to two curates of the parish: a tablet recalling the merits of John Addison Carr (1828), and an aumbry in memory of Rev. Archibald Raven who founded the Parish Scout Troop in 1908.

At the east end of the north aisle is a window with the arms of Sir Godfrey Kneller, who is buried here: the original monument to him was placed in Westminster Abbey as Alexander Pope would not allow it to take the position in our church already occupied by his parents' memorial.

Nearby is a case containing a book recording the names of those whose ashes are buried in the riverside Memorial Garden to the south of the church. Here, too, you will see a 17th century oak communion table

The galleries

At the altar end of **the north gallery** you can see a memorial to Alexander Pope's parents with a brief note to Alexander himself: Pope wished only his own date of death, 1744, to be added at the end of his parents' memorial, but in due course his friend Bishop Warburton thought something more impressive was called for, and in 1761 set up the large memorial with its medallion portrait. It originally had also a laurel wreath in stone, but workmen altering the church in the 1860s chipped it off and sold fragments as souvenirs.

Two other interesting memorials in this gallery are one surmounted by an elaborate trophy to Sir Chaloner Ogle, a gallant but peppery sea-dog who lived beside Twickenham Green and died in 1750, and a tablet under the memorial to Pope's parents, to the writer Richard Owen Cambridge, who lived for more than half a century in his house in east Twickenham, and died in 1802.

The most notable memorial in **the south gallery** is a sculpted figure of a woman by John Bacon junior, commemorating George and Anne Gostling of Whitton Park.

At the east end of the gallery is the organ, built by Messrs Harrison and Harrison in 1996. This new instrument replaced the 19th century organ when it became unreliable, carrying on a tradition of worship which past and present congregations at St Mary's have always valued.

The rebuilt 1714 church had a **west gallery** connecting the north and south galleries and providing a place for the first organ. Its removal in the late 19th century was one of many alterations made over the years.

The churchyard

This guide has touched on only a few of the interesting memorials and other features of this church. When you leave it, walk round the churchyard; there you will find other inscriptions recalling parishioners of the past.

Among those buried here are **General Tryon**, Governor of North Carolina and New York, and **Hannah Pritchard**, the famous 18th century actress. Another leading figure of the stage at that time, **Kitty Clive**, has a memorial tablet on the north-east corner of the church. Adjoining are tablets to Pope's old nurse, **Mary Beach**, and to **Thomas Twining**, founder of the tea and coffee business which for 250 years remained in his family. He built Dial House nearby in the 1720s and **Elizabeth Twining**, a local benefactor, who is recorded on the south wall of the church, bequeathed the property to the parish in 1889; it was used as the vicarage for a century, replacing the original house below the church which had fallen into disrepair, and later as the residence of the Bishop of Kensington.

The Vestry was enlarged in a style to blend with the outside of the nave in 1975 and was completely redecorated and provided with facilities for meetings, children's groups, etc. in 2018,

There are two other graveyards which were in use in the past once the churchyard was considered to be full: the **Holly Road graveyard** (used from 1782 to 1838) and the **Oak Lane Cemetery** (used 1838-1868). Both are peaceful places in the centre of Twickenham that are always available for the community.

For further information see:

The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Twickenham, Anthony Beckles Willson, 2000.

The Organs of St Mary's Parish Church, Twickenham, Adrian Mumford & Donald Simpson, 1996.

The Memorials and Ledgerstones, The Church of St Mary the Virgin Twickenham, Anthony Beckles Willson, 2015.

Twickenham Past, Donald Simpson, 1993, pp 46-47

The St Mary's Parish website www.stmarytwick.org.uk

The Twickenham Museum, 25 The Embankment, and www.twickenham-museum.org.uk