



# ST NICHOLAS CHURCH

The former parish church of St Nicholas is sandwiched between Saint Nicholas Street and Baldwin Street, with High Street closing off the east end. It is listed Grade II\*. Saint Nicholas is best known as the patron saint of young people and mariners.

## Early history of the site

The church of St Nicholas was built over the line of the Norman town wall, including the gate to Bristol Bridge. This may have been around the end of the 11th century (c1100). St Nicholas may have begun life as a chapel rather than a full parish church. Being cut into the hillside resulted in a church with both a crypt or lower church and an upper church, the latter as the principal worshipping space. It was probably not until the outer town wall was built in the mid-13th century that the lower church was directly accessible from the south. St Nicholas was mentioned in a charter of St Augustine's Abbey dated to no later than 1154. Walter Filomena is the earliest vicar whose name we know, holding the post from 1240 until 1286.

At the far end of the north crypt aisle is an arch rib with a boss decorated with a bearded head, clearly not part of the main vaulting. In the room behind, known as the charnel house and now below the High Street pavement, is the base of a column. These features are thought to date from c1250 and are the earliest surviving fragments visible. Possibly the arch represents the full width of the crypt at that time: the town wall ran down the mid-line of the present two-aisled space and the church site may then have sat fully within the wall.

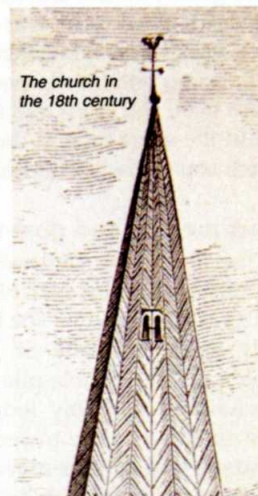
Three further phases of medieval construction may be seen within the present crypt. The two eastern bays of the north aisle date to c1325, the other pair to perhaps 1350. The south aisle is of a single construction of c1400, now four bays in length but originally at least one bay, possibly two bays, longer at the west end. Between them the eight surviving vaulted bays display a variety of decorative bosses, showing foliage, flowers, faces, figures and the Crucifixion. St Nicholas played an important part in the life of medieval Bristol, not only ringing the town curfew from its tower each night (as indeed it has continued to do into modern times) but also setting the standard time for the town. Late medieval documents mention the church clock, and 16th-century council records list a payment of 26s 8d. annually to the church clerk for maintaining the clock.

of chantry chapels in 1547, but we do not know its dedication; it may have continued after 1547 in alternative use.

A visitor to St Nicholas in 1669 made notes about monuments in the crypt. Of those described, only that of John Whitson has survived intact, although the matrix stone for Richard Hentley's memorial has been rediscovered in the south wall. Hentley, a draper, died on 1st September 1571, surviving his first wife Ann (d. 7th August 1557), by whom he had three daughters. He remarried, to another Ann (née Bull), who outlived him and died 12th February 1603. Also described was a stone in the floor "near ye Stayres yt go up into the Church on ye West", i.e. the main staircase that linked the upper and lower storeys. This was inside the main church entrance in St Nicholas Street: archaeological evidence for its existence was discovered a few metres behind the Whitson monument in 1983-4 during remediation works. At that time several coffin burials of possible medieval date were found between the stairs and monument.

Smith's 1568 map showed a western tower with a spire and the church extending over the city gate. Millerd's 1673 map had a broach spire, drawn to the north of the nave roof, also a south aisle. Four tall arched windows lit the aisle, with a doorway below the easternmost one; two narrower windows lit the chancel above the gate; the east chancel window was also shown. Rocque's town plan of 1742 showed the south aisle as stopping short of the gate. An unknown artist drew the north elevation of both church and gate in detail in the 18th century prior to their removal. Unfortunately there are no known illustrations of the church interior, although it is known that the chancel was reached by climbing about 20 steps.

Structurally, by the 1730s the condition of St Nicholas was causing concern. James Padmore and John Wood the Elder were consulted about the condition and some repairs and rebuilding carried out. In the late 1750s it was proposed to replace Bristol's narrow bridge with one of rather more generous proportions,



## The 18th century church

James Bridges, who had designed the new bridge, proposed a complete renewal of the church, replacing it with a hall-church that was apparently based on a building that he had seen in Pennsylvania. Since the church lost its east end to the widening of High Street, the opposite end was extended westwards in compensation. Demolition of the old church and the new commenced in late 1762, the last service having been held on 29th August. The medieval lower church was retained, but its slightly tapering shape was encased in a rectangular Georgian rubble frame that supported the larger new parish church above. Seven large Gothic windows in each long wall lit the principal worshipping space; there was no east window, instead a wide, shallow recess that accommodated the 18th-century reredos or altarpiece retained from the old church. Bridges left Bristol soon after the rebuilding commenced, and the job was left to Thomas Paty to complete the job, which included a new tower. Three sides of the building were finished in Bath Stone ashlar. It must have been at this time that the old staircase was taken out of use and the western end of the south crypt aisle destroyed. The new edifice was completed at the end of 1769. Thomas Stocking designed a fine plaster ceiling for the main worshipping space, otherwise we do not know exactly how the interior appeared, since there are no known illustrations of it prior to the Victorian alterations.

Early in the 1820s the crypt was restored and a small tower created, connected with the church upstairs by a small staircase. Also installed in the 19th century was the clock tower on the south face of the tower, originally by Paine of London but later overhauled by Langford Brothers, who added the second hand, making it reputedly the only public clock in Europe of its kind. Extensive refurbishment in the main church in 1882-83 saw the Georgian pews replaced, and the organ moved from the west gallery to the chancel. Decorative floor tiles were laid in the nave. Downstairs was not forgotten, and in 1893 the crypt itself underwent a major refurbishment. Quarry tiles were used as flooring, brick walls inserted in the four recessed bays of the north wall, and walls and the webs in the vaulting rendered about the same time as the work inside the crypt, a new porch was added to the old Baldwin Street doorway.

## Wartime loss and post-war restoration

The first major Luftwaffe raid on the city occurred on the night of Sunday 24th November 1940, running into the early hours of the Monday. The historic heart of the city was particularly badly hit, with St Nicholas amongst the victims. The building had a double-pile roof with a central valley gutter. incendiaries probably lodged in inaccessible positions. Fire spread into the tower, which apparently acted as a chimney and further aided the conflagration. Fortunately the high level of the roof held firm, which was just as well as the