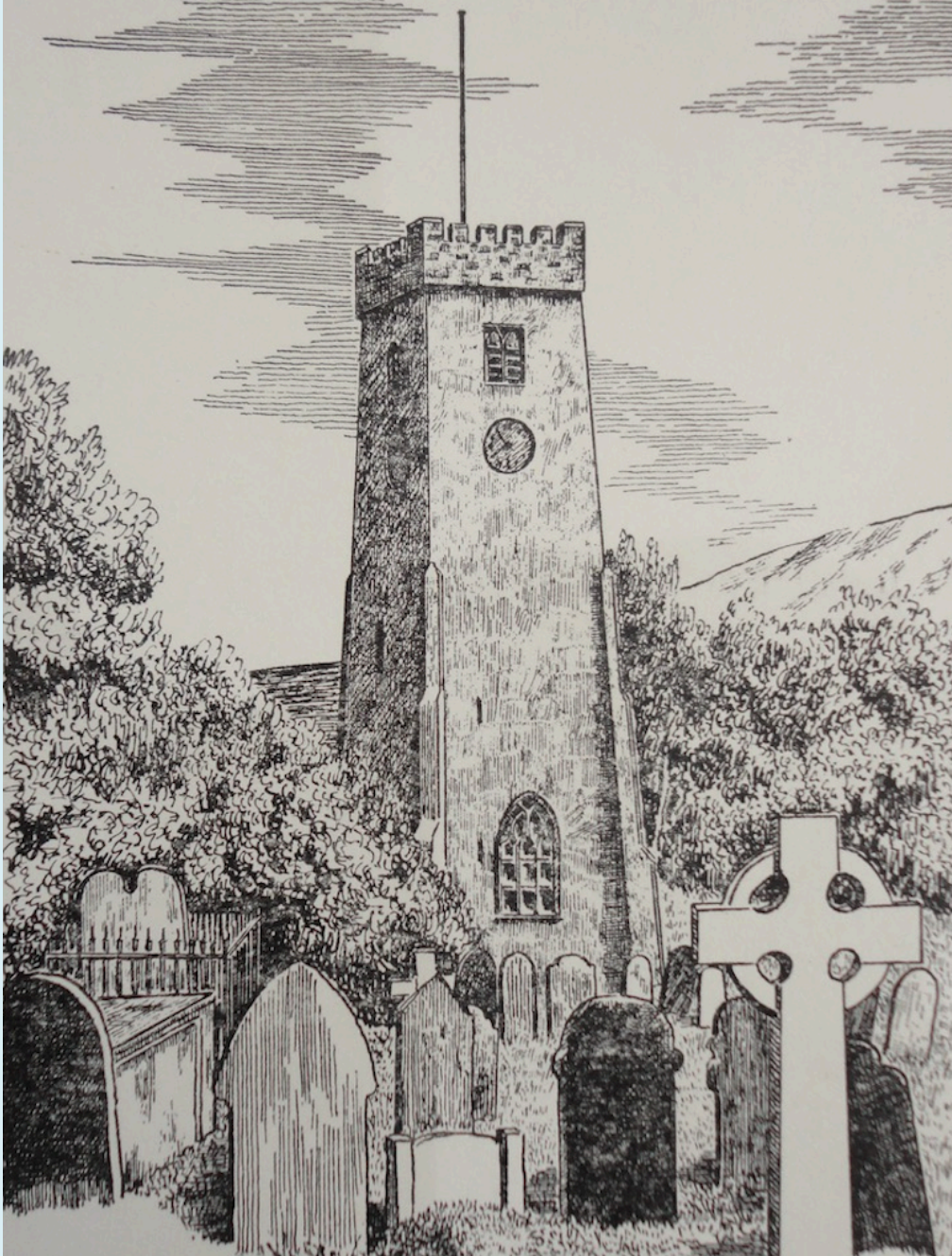


Church Guide



**Church of St Mary and St Gabriel
Stoke Gabriel**



A Guide to the Parish Church of St Mary and St Gabriel

Stoke was the Anglo-Saxon word for a place - a holy place - and it is safe to assume that there has been a place of worship on this spot, overlooking the river and mill pond, for well over a thousand years. The church and the river are still today the centre of village life.

From earliest times, Stoke was part of the Ecclesiastical Manor of Paignton and the Bishop of Exeter was the Lord of the Manor. In 1086, twenty years after the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest, Stoke was included in the Domesday Book, which was a comprehensive survey of the towns, villages, and shires of England for the purpose of levying taxes.

In the mid-13th century, the bishop dedicated the church to St Gabriel, following which the village acquired the more distinctive name of Stoke Gabriel. The dedication of the church survived until 1846, when it was changed to St Mary and St Gabriel. It was the Archangel Gabriel who announced the forthcoming birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary.



The approach to the church is along Church Walk, a picturesque cobbled walkway leading from the Church House Inn at one end to the church lychgate at the other. Walking towards the lychgate, one passes the Verger's Cottage and the Old School Room on the right and the parish orchard and children's play area on the left.

The Tower

Approaching the church from Church Walk, the extent to which the tower dominates the view of the village and the mill pond can be appreciated. It was built in the 13th century in the Norman style and tapers to a height of 65 feet. It is at least a century older than the rest of the church.

The clock is a comparatively recent addition to the tower, presented by Frederick Churchward in 1906. There is a blue clock face on two sides of the tower, the sides facing north and west. It was fully restored and automated in 2022 and 2024 respectively.

Change ringing of church bells is peculiar to England. It is most popular in the west country where Devon leads the way with 370 bell towers, while Somerset has 328 and Cornwall 146. Most churches in England with bell towers have a ring of six or eight bells.

In the tower at Stoke Gabriel, four bells were registered in the Edwardian inventory of 1552, all of which survived the iconoclasm of the era. In 1845 the number of bells was increased from four to six. The two oldest date back to 1648 and 1674 and were probably re-cast from one or more of the earlier bells. In 1889 the bells were re-hung in the current oak bell-frame by Harry Stokes & Son. In 1906 Frederick Churchward funded the re-casting of the third bell. The heaviest of the six bells is called the tenor bell, which weighs about 865 kg, and is the bell that is tolled at funerals. Fittingly the inscription on it reads:



*I to the Church the living call
and to the Grave do summon all*

The belfry and ringing chamber are locked when unattended, as serious accidents are likely to occur should a bell rope fall into unskilled hands.

The Building

By the early 15th century, the main body of the church had fallen into disrepair and had to be completely rebuilt. It was done in perpendicular gothic style, the classic architectural style of the period. Much of the original workmanship is still there to be admired, although there have been many subsequent restorations.

By the early 19th century, many churches had once again fallen into disrepair and government grants were made available for their restoration. The church of Stoke Gabriel was thus able to install a tiled floor, bench pews, windows, ceiling and roof. A vicar's vestry was built on the south side of the chancel with a room directly below to accommodate a furnace for heating the church. The church was also provided with a lychgate.



The Victorians built the floor of the building on three different levels. The lowest level is in the nave, the middle level is in the chancel and the highest level is in the sanctuary. All the memorial tablets that were part of the original floor before it was tiled were moved to other locations including in particular the floor of the choir vestry at the west end of the

building.

As a result of increasing the height of the sanctuary floor, the threshold of the priest's door dropped several feet below the raised floor level on the south side. It was walled up and plastered internally but the original doorway can still be seen from the outside. In addition, the piscina, a stone basin used for pouring away water that had been used in rinsing the chalice following communion, is now at floor level also on the south side.

The Nave

The nave or body of the church extends from the base of the tower to the rood screen and is separated from the north and south aisles by columns.

Having entered through the north door, the pagan figure of the 'Green Man', also known as 'Jack in the Green', appears just inside at the top of the column towards the chancel. There is a second such figure on the corresponding column on the south side of the nave. The Green Man was the mediaeval

spirit of the trees and woodlands who protected travelers. As far as country folk were concerned, old pagan traditions and beliefs did not die but were readily integrated into their Christian faith.

Towards the Rood Screen, on the north wall, a tapestry with twenty-four panels depicts all aspects of church and village life, each individually signed and presented by ladies of the village in 1988.



Located just in front of the Rood Screen is a magnificent spread-winged eagle lectern, which was presented to the church in 1879 by the Churchward family. It is used to rest a Holy Bible from which passages are read during services. The eagle is the symbol of St John the Evangelist, witness to the light and divinity of Christ.

After the Reformation, churches in England had to show their allegiance to the monarch by displaying the Royal Coat of Arms. Hanging high up on the south wall of the nave is that of Queen Anne, the last of the reigning Stuarts.

The south porch is reached through the door opposite the north entrance. The porch was re-developed in 2018 to provide a kitchen galley and WC. A very fine oak door, presented to the church in 2003 by Lady Pontin in memory of her husband, Sir Fred Pontin, allows access to the churchyard.



The Chancel

The chancel is the eastern part of the church, reserved for clergy and choir, and divided from the congregation by the rood screen.



The chapels to the sides of the chancel were originally called the Waddeton Chapel (to the north) and the Sandridge Chapel (to the south), named after the two large estates in the parish, Waddeton Court and Sandridge Park. The Waddeton Chapel is now the Lady Chapel, restored in 1957 for the Mothers' Union and beautifully refurbished and re-dedicated in 1996 by the Bishop of Exeter, thanks to the generosity of the Churchward family.

Incorporated into the Sandridge Chapel is an additional choir pew and pipe organ, the installation of which also necessitated the sacrifice of some of vicar's vestry behind. The present organ was installed in 1996. It was originally built in 1920 by Harrison and Harrison of Durham City, one of England's foremost organ builders, and purchased from the Royal School of Church Music. It was dedicated at the same time as the Lady Chapel.

The sanctuary refers to the area around the altar behind the altar rail. Church sanctuary as a legal right was abolished in this country in 1623 during the reign of King James I.

The fine oak barrel roof and the reredos behind the altar are part of the extensive restoration of the church carried out by the Victorians. Above the chancel, the roof beams have been covered with painted wood panels, while the symbols on the carved oak bosses, such as the Greek signs of the Christos, and Alpha and Omega, are highlighted in gold. The reredos illustrates the signs of the four evangelists, Matthew by a man, Mark by a lion, Luke by an ox or calf, and John by an eagle. In the centre, the Star of David and the Christian Cross illustrate the Old and New Testaments.



There are fine 17th century memorials on both sides of the sanctuary, in particular the chronogram and poem on heart-shaped marble to Tamosin, beloved wife of Peter Lyde. Next to the organ, there is a wall memorial with

skull and cross bones, dedicated to the Iohan Pomeroy, wife of Roger Pomeroy, another benefactor and former resident of Sandridge Park.



Above the rood screen are two inwardly projecting metal hooks from which a Lenten veil would have been suspended in front of the Rood during Lent. The Victorians omitted to remove the hooks and today they survive as evidence of the rich Catholic liturgical drama that took place in the church before the Reformation.

The Windows

The original church windows were of clear glass. The majority of the stained-glass windows that are now seen in the church are memorial windows. There are three beautiful windows above the altar. These date from the Victorian period and depict the Annunciation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. The glass in all the windows is 19th century or later.

Although the Churchward family is no longer resident in the parish, they have a memorial window and brass plaque on the south wall above the box pew which they used to occupy.

The Font

The start of one's Christian journey, the octagonal font used in baptisms is original and dates from the 15th century, the period of the rebuilding of the nave. It is the receptacle for baptismal water and is in regular use at Christenings throughout the year. It was carved from local stone and contains its original lead lining. At the base of the font, there are the remains of mediaeval paint that was used for its decoration.



The Rood Screen

The rood screen separates the nave from the chancel across the full width of the church. It is a fine example of a carved oak screen dating back to the early 15th century.

The screen was restored in 1931 by Herbert Reed of Exeter in memory of Alfred Winston Front Martell (1848-1928) by his wife. The painted wood panels are mediaeval and are still in their original location, depicting New Testament saints and Old Testament prophets, the saints having halos and the prophets wearing Tudor caps. The iconoclasm that characterised the reign of King Edward VI and the rise of Puritanism is evident in the defacing of these panels. The wood screen with its rood arch in the centre aisle is 35 feet in length, and is now substantially complete in all its original detail.



Carved in the oak moulding above the priest's stall, there is another 'Green Man' in the form of a face sprouting branches and surrounded by leaves. A symbol of rebirth, it represents the cycle of new growth each spring.

The Pulpit



The pulpit is used for preaching, connecting Bible passages to our everyday lives. It is carved in oak and pinned together with wooden pegs. It dates from the early 15th century. It is typical of what is known locally as a Devonshire wine glass pulpit, supported from the ground by a central stem. Retaining much of its ancient colour, it is full of exquisite detail. Note the fine carving of the grapes and vines running up the pulpit on all sides.

I am the vine, ye are the branches (John 15.5)

The pulpit was restored in 1931 in memory of Thomas Edward Studdy (1855-1924) of Maisonette (now Stoke Gabriel House).

The Pews

Pews were not common in churches until the 16th and 17th centuries. However, three original 14th century carved bench ends remain, which would have formed part of a limited seating arrangement. All are at the west end of the church with one being next to the font although none is likely to be in their original location.

In the early Victorian period, the seating took the form of box pews with poppy head bench ends. The social hierarchy of the parish was reinforced through the allocation of pews according to gender and social status. In this way, the more well-to-do parishioners tended to occupy (and thus “appropriate”) the more popular pews at the front while the poor stood at the back of the church.



All the pews were removed during the re-ordering of the church in 1855/6 and replaced by pine bench pews. At the same time, oak bench pews were installed in the chancel for use by a newly-established male voice choir and bench pews were also installed at the west end of the church specifically for the poor. All seats in the church are now, and have long been, free and unappropriated.



Victorian brass oil lamps are located throughout the church and were used to illuminate the pews. Nowadays they are lit only on a few special occasions, such as Midnight Mass and the Service of Lessons and Carols when there is often standing room only in the aisles.

The Church Plate

There are three items of church silver which are of particular interest. They are an Elizabethan communion cup, which was manufactured in 1575 probably by melting down a smaller and decorated silver chalice that had been used by the church before the Reformation. There are also two Queen Anne pieces - a tazza inscribed 'Gilbert Pomeroy, 1708' and a flagon inscribed 'The gift of Roger Pomeroy of Sandridge, April 1708.' These items are only withdrawn from the bank to display on festival occasions. The rest of the silver plate is in use every Sunday.



The Parish Documents

Most of the ancient documents of the parish have been conserved at Exeter Heritage Centre. This includes a set of Churchwarden accounts from the early 17th century and a complete set of parish registers from 1539, the year after Henry VIII ordered church records to be kept for tax purposes.

The church has a Book of Martyrs (c.1600), a Book of Homilies (1683), a Black Letter Bible (1634), and the Vinegar Bible (1717). The last is so-called because of a misprint; the parable of the vineyard is described as the parable of the vinegar, in the heading of St Luke's Gospel. This bible was produced by Queen Anne's printer, a man called John Baskett (1665-1742), and is so full of mistakes that it became known as 'a Baskett-ful of Errors.'

The Parish Priests

The living of the parish was a vicarage since earliest times. Under peculiar jurisdiction, the Bishop of Exeter was the rector and the recipient of parish tithes. By 1282 he had transferred the rectory as an endowment for the newly created office of Chancellor. The rector diverted a portion of his tithed income to fund a priest to deliver a 'vicarial' ministry to the parish on his behalf. The vicar of the parish was the incumbent until the parish joined the Totnes Mission Community in 2013 at which time the Team Rector became the incumbent. An Associate Priest was appointed to reside in, and provide a focused ministry to, the parish.

On the column near the north porch, there is a Priests' Roll, that is a list of the vicars who have been admitted to the living of Stoke Gabriel. The venerable list spans a period of over 700 years, starting with Robert de Crydetone in 1281. However, it is incomplete because the information was sourced from the Registers of the Bishop of Exeter which only commenced with Bishop Bronescombe in 1260.

The vicars, Samuel Bellfield (1733-77), Hugh Northcote (1777-87) and Finney Bellfield (1787-1845), were all absent from the parish for substantial periods of their term of office and relied on curates to carry out a ministry on their behalf. Two vicars of particular note are Daniel Getsius (1636-72) and John Henry Napper Neville (1881-1916).

An emigrant from the County Palatine in present day Germany, Daniel Getsius came to England as the 'safe haven of Protestant Orthodoxy'. He was the vicar of Stoke Gabriel during the turbulent period of the Civil War and the rise and fall of Puritanism. He survived the challenges of the time until his death a decade after the Restoration but he was not unscathed. In particular, at the request of his fellow Palatinate countryman and nephew of Charles 1, Prince Maurice, he delivered a sermon in Dartmouth in 1646 which was unequivocally Royalist. The Parliamentarians subsequently took Dartmouth from the Royalists and Daniel Getsius was imprisoned. He was threatened with deportation but was later released on appeal by his friend and Presbyterian, Sir Arthur Lupton, with an admonition that he live quietly and restrain himself from expressing Royalist sentiments in future. He thus escaped eviction and was one of the first to subscribe to the re-established Church of England following the Restoration.

An Irishman and principled social reformer who courted controversy throughout his life, John Henry Napper Neville was a Victorian eccentric much loved by his parish. In 1912 he was called upon by the local fishermen to help remove a gate erected by a local landowner across a footpath they used to gain access to the river beach. Vicar Nevill obtained a saw and, in front of the angry owner, destroyed the gate. The action was greeted with loud cheers from the fishermen who marched back into the village waving flags and singing the national anthem.

The Churchyard

The churchyard surrounds the church and is bounded by stone wall on the north, west and east sides and by local flora and wood fencing on the south. Entering the churchyard through the lychgate, there is an 8-foot coffin-stone immediately on the left-hand side. Coffins were placed on this stone prior to burial. Now part of the wall, it was moved there from the centre of the lychgate in the 1850's.



The churchyard is on two levels and the higher level is the original mediaeval churchyard and is at least as old as the church itself. The higher level is the location of the ancient yew tree and a chapel which pre-existed the church but which no longer remains. Expert opinion has estimated the age of the yew tree to be between twelve and fourteen hundred years old, making it one of the oldest trees in England.

The churchyard contains graves marked by memorial headstones and cremation tablets as well as many older graves, probably in the order of thousands, unmarked by any memorial. The oldest headstones date from the

18th century and are located around the yew tree and to the east of the church. Many of the graves have multiple occupants, one containing six infants of the Narracott family reflecting the high level of infant mortality in past centuries. The south-east corner of the upper level of the churchyard is marked by an absence of headstones. It is the burial ground of many parishioners who died in the 1830's from cholera.

For a visitor to sit on one of the benches in the churchyard on a fine summer day, and to look out over the mill pond and across the quayside towards the River Dart, is to witness one of the loveliest views in all England.

The Old School Room

For centuries it was a duty of the parish vicar to teach the village children and schools were often part of church life. The school room in Church Walk was acquired by the church in 1842, along with the Verger's Cottage, and was the seat of learning until a new purpose-built non-denominational school was opened in 1876. The old schoolroom is now the church hall, but still called the Old School Room.

The Church House Inn

The Church House Inn is at the entrance to Church Walk and dates from the mediaeval period. It was formerly the Church House and is believed to have been built to feed and house the stonemasons working on the church, while offering rest facilities to weary travellers. In the 17th century, the downstairs was used to accommodate the parish gunpowder and weaponry. Later, in the early 19th century, the upstairs was used by the village school before it moved into the Old School Room, and then by the vestry, the local governing body that existed before the creation of parish councils.



There are many church houses throughout England. Most were later converted to public houses and account for the great number of pubs bearing the name Church House Inn, especially in Devon. Whereas many such inns have been sold, the Church House Inn of Stoke Gabriel is still owned by the church.

Inside the Church House Inn, there is a mummified cat, which was discovered in the Verger's Cottage three doors away by a local builder in 1987. In the Middle Ages, it was common practice to leave a dead cat in the roof space to ward off evil spirits. To date it is only the sixth such cat to be found in the west country, and the best preserved. It may be as much as 300 years old.

The People

While the church building is set within outstanding natural beauty, the church is much more about people. Led by the Team Rector and Associate Priest (Stoke Gabriel), the PCC is fully engaged with church and parish life. Church members help with church services and its pastoral and spiritual



ministry to the parish. The church has a fine choir with excellent soloists and

an enthusiastic team of bell ringers who ring for church services as well as compete in local competitions.



For at least the last four centuries, the church has been served by the Narracott family as sextons and vergers. Norman Betts took over the duties when his cousin, George Narracott, died in 1987. George had been the verger for 51 years, and prior to that the post had been passed down from generation to generation among members of the Narracott family for 450 years. Surely this must be a unique record in the history of English parish churches.

People of note who have been born in the parish include the well-known mechanical engineer of Great Western Railway, George Jackson Churchward, and the seaman and explorer, Captain John Davis.

George Churchward was born in 1857 at Rowes Farm. After attending Torquay Grammar School, he worked for South Devon Railway at Newton Abbot and then for GWR at Swindon where he spent the rest of his working life. He designed the *Star* and *Saint* classes of locomotives and especially *The Great Bear* and is much revered today by steam enthusiasts. He was knocked over and killed by an express train in December 1933 and is buried in Christ Church, Swindon.

John Davis was born at Sandridge in October 1543 and was Christened and married in the parish church. He discovered and named the Davis Strait between Greenland and Baffin Island while searching for a north west passage to China. In August 1592 he discovered the Falkland Islands while on a voyage to the Pacific. He was a scientist, writer, and skilled navigator and became famous as the inventor of the quadrant. He was murdered by pirates in December 1605 while on a voyage to the Far East and Singapore.

Through the ages there have always been devoted men and women whose love of God has led them to adorn and care for the church. Local benefactors of note include the Pomeroyes and the Churchwards.

The Churchward family had lived in Stoke Gabriel since the 15th century. Their principle residence was at Hill House which became the Gabriel Court Hotel and which more recently was developed into a small housing estate. The parish registers reveal no fewer than 310 Churchward baptisms; 100 Churchward marriages; and 220 Churchward burials.

The Pomeroy's were direct descendants of Ralf de la Pomerai who came over from Normandy with William the Conqueror, and fought at the Battle of Hastings. The family lived at Berry Pomeroy Castle for well over four centuries until Sir Thomas Pomeroy sold the castle and lands to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset in 1548. Sir Thomas Pomeroy's great grandson was Roger Pomeroy (1629-1708) who lived at Sandridge Park and was the MP for Dartmouth.

Preaching at the consecration of the restored pulpit and screen in December 1931, the Rev'd Harvey Royse said:

These men who we remember today have gone from amongst us, called to a higher service. But these beautiful memorials will keep their memories green. When we look up at the pulpit and screen in years to come, we must give thanks to God for all His servants who have departed this life. There is no sure strength in life or support in death, except the old faith that has sustained generations in the past, faith in Jesus Christ. Let it be a sure comfort to those whose minds and hearts are full of thoughts of dear ones departed, that we have entrusted them into the hands of a loving and merciful Saviour.

We hope you will carry away with you not only the memory of a beautiful church but also a sense of its purpose, as a focus for the worship of God and the teaching of the Gospel.

This guide was revised and updated in November 2024 by Mike Stott, based on a previous edition produced by David Williams.

For more information about the church and its services, please refer to our notice boards and web site: www.stokegabrielchurch.co.uk.



