

History of the Musical Tradition of Stoke Gabriel Church

“Speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:19)

The use of sacred music in Christian worship can be traced back to the mediaeval period when the Roman Catholic church was the dominant and unifying force. The church developed, established and codified a repertoire of plainsong chants used in the mass and daily offices. As the chants spread through Europe, they were embellished by regional and local influences. They typically comprised a single melody but by the later Middle Ages multiple melodic parts were sung in polyphony.

After the Reformation, the liturgy changed from the Western Latin Church to the Book of Common Prayer but the singing of hymns, anthems, metrical psalms and prayers continued as an integral part of worship. Singing was accompanied by musical instruments and occasionally performed by minstrels. During the Republican Commonwealth, much of the musical repertoire was suppressed but, following the restoration of the monarchy and the re-establishment of the Church of England in the 17th century, it was quickly restored. At this time, cathedrals and some larger minsters employed trained choirs of men and boys, but choral singing was virtually unknown in parish churches and remained thus for over a century.

While parish churches had no choirs, singing still remained an integral part of worship. At the centre - at least since the Reformation - was the singing of metrical psalmody unaccompanied and in unison. The psalm would be intoned by the parish clerk and then repeated by the congregation, needing neither psalter nor familiarity with the tune.

During the 18th century, a large body of hymnody was developed in musical styles that reflected the diversity among the Christian denominations. The use of simple rhythms and melodies ensured the popularity of these new hymns. Led by the non-conformist churches, the century witnessed a transformation of congregational singing, inspiring people to sing from their hearts with faith.

In the early 19th century, a combination of events led to a rapid, nationwide expansion of choral music in parish churches. The country was experiencing an increase in wealth and prosperity, substantially derived from the Empire, and a rapid expansion in industry and population. This coincided with the Oxford Movement, a high church campaign to reinstate the Catholic liturgy and its musical customs into Anglican worship. Alongside the Oxford Movement, the Ecclesiological Society encouraged the re-ordering of churches and the introduction of a robed choir of men and boys in the chancel. The churches embraced these changes, responding with a massive programme of restoration and new building, for which the government made grants available.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries witnessed a proliferation in the number of choral societies, resulting in a significant increase in the number of choristers and in their musical competence. At the same time, a substantial body of sacred music and hymns had been assembled from European composers of different backgrounds. The Church of England gave its official approval to the production of the first hymn book in 1820, following which the number of hymn books increased enormously, culminating in 1860 with the first publication of Hymns Ancient and Modern.

Major advances had been made in the industrialization of book printing. The mechanisation of printing presses allowed large runs of church music to be produced at affordable prices. The congregation was thus able to have individual prayer and hymn books and the choristers could have their own anthem and music books.

Organs had previously been designed and built individually by small firms of craftsmen; they were expensive and available only to the few richer parishes. However, organ building had also become industrialized and, through the factory assembly of standardised parts, much cheaper organs were available. The harmonium (reed or pump organ), invented in 1840, provided instrumental accompaniment for choral and congregational singing but by 1900 the pipe organ had superseded it in many parish churches. The pipe organ was a much larger instrument and required an organ chamber but, if there was no space or funds available, the smaller harmonium continued to present an affordable, space-saving alternative.

All these disparate developments came together to propel a nationwide expansion of parish church choirs. Generally all-male and numbering about 20 boys and 10 men, the choirs (and the accompanying organ) required accommodation within the church building. Promoted by the Ecclesiological Society, the idea of seating the choir in the chancel took hold. Some felt that it was a proper location for those assisting in divine service, but others objected to having large numbers of laity in the chancel. Even the relative juxtaposition of the organ, choir and congregation was a matter of much local and national debate. But the idea of using the chancel was quickly accepted and, whereas in 1830 no parish church had a choir seated in the chancel, within a few decades it was common place. The organ was typically installed (or relocated) to one side of the choir either in a transept or a special organ chamber.

Founding of Stoke Gabriel Church Choir

Having been inducted into the vicarage of Stoke Gabriel in 1845, Rev'd Robert Bowden was the parish vicar at the time of the earliest record specifically mentioning the church choir. It was 1867 and a choir festival was held in Paignton parish church involving the church choirs of the Moreton and Ipplepen Deaneries. At that time Stoke Gabriel was part of the Ipplepen Deanery and the church choir attended the festival (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 9th August, 1867*)¹. This was the fifth such festival and if, as seems likely, it was an annual event then the first such festival would have taken place in 1863. There would have had to have been enough choirs established by this time to justify holding the festival but would Stoke Gabriel church choir have been among their number?

On 11th May 1852, there was a visitation by the Rural Dean to Stoke Gabriel church, the record of which includes the Rural Dean's comment that "one or two additional moveable seats for children in the chancel are needed" (*Devon Heritage Centre, 1981A/4/PV/1*). As shown in the 1855 plan of the church in Appendix 1, which was used to support a government grant application to pay for the installation of new nave pews, there was no fixed seating in the chancel at this time². It was an open area defined by the two chapels, one on each side, the

¹ Stoke Gabriel had been one of the peculiars of the Bishop of Exeter but its status as such was abolished in 1840 at which time it became part of the Deanery of Ipplepen within the Archdeaconry of Totnes.

² The government made grants available to allow more people to be seated in church. The size of the grant depended on the number of additional parishioners that could be seated and the extent to which the additional parishioners were the poorer inhabitants of the parish. The application was successful and later that year two blocks of pews were installed at the west end, either side of the central aisle, where no fixed seating had previously existed. As the plan itself indicates, the pews were earmarked for the poor and, in contrast to all the

altar and the rood screen, and the need for seating in the chancel, whether fixed or moveable, would not have arisen but for the existence of a choir, which evidently included children and was growing in size.

In the following year, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (now the Church Commissioners) were centralizing responsibility for the chancel repair obligation for those churches where the Church of England held the rectory, that is the right to receive the tithes. Stoke Gabriel was indicated as one such church and a survey of the chancel was undertaken to identify what repairs might be needed³. The surveyor's report dated 11th June 1856 includes a statement that "The seats are new and not quite finished, they are put in ... at the expense of the Rector" (*CERC, ECE/7/1/10079/1*)⁴. Funded by the rector and not by a government grant or public subscription, there is little doubt that these seats are choir pews. Made of oak - in contrast to the nave pews which were made of pine - the choir pews comprised two rows on both sides of the chancel in an east-west orientation. The provision of fixed pews in the chancel as a replacement for the moveable chairs substantiates the existence of a choir and the permanence with which choral singing had become a characteristic of worship in Stoke Gabriel church by the middle of the 19th century.

Towards the end of Vicar Bowden's term of office, the south side of the chancel was re-developed to provide a vestry for the vicar and a stove room to heat the church, as shown in the 1879 plan of the church in Appendix 2, which was used to support a faculty application for the works (*Devon Heritage Centre, 1981A/PW8*). An additional three choir pews (also shown in the plan) were installed directly below the east window of the Sandridge chapel in an east-west orientation⁵. The faculty was granted on 20th March 1879 and the works completed in 1880. The installation of the three pews suggests that the provision of additional seating for a choir of increasing size was a pressing demand. The new pews were of the same length as the pre-existing choir pews and would have seated another 12 men or boys. As a result, the size of the choir probably numbered some 25 to 30 members in the late 19th century.

With some confidence, it can be concluded that Stoke Gabriel church choir was founded in or around 1850 shortly after Vicar Bowden had been installed as incumbent of the church. The choir grew rapidly in size and first sat in moveable chairs before sitting in fixed pews. The choir was one of many hundreds that were founded in parish churches across the country at about the same time. It would have existed for some ten years before the first Deanery choral festival, which it probably attended.

pre-existing pews, were not appropriated by any family (*Lambeth Palace Library, ICBS 4833*). The grant application did not however extend to the installation of any pews in the chancel.

³ The chancel repair obligation arose from the earliest times and was initially held by the Bishop of Exeter until he transferred the rectory - and the associated repair obligation - to the Chancellor of the Cathedral in the 13th century. Until 1833, the Chancellor continued to be the rector of Stoke Gabriel parish even after the Manor of Paignton and the advowson for the church had passed into lay hands in the 16th century.

⁴ In 1833, the former curate of Stoke Gabriel, John Finney Belfield, who resided at Primley Hill, Paignton, leased the rectory from the Chancellor of the Cathedral in return for a regular cash payment (*D&C3581, pp 48-49*). Sometimes known as Finney Belfield Jr, he was the son of Finney Belfield and grandson of Samuel Belfield, both of whom were former vicars of Stoke Gabriel. Having acquired the right to receive the tithes, he thus became the rector and the Commissioners took the view that he had thereby acquired the chancel repair obligation. At first, he refused to accept their view, contending that the obligation continued to be vested in the Chancellor but he eventually conceded ground and paid for the choir pews and other chancel repairs "rather than subject himself to legal proceedings".

⁵ In about 1970, the need for more space resulted in the removal of the three pews, one of which - the bass pew - was relocated behind the two rows of pews on the south side of the chancel.

Consolidation of the use of Choral Music in Stoke Gabriel Church Worship

Following the 5th Deanery Festival, the choir combined with other local choirs to sing at a Harvest Festival service at Dittisham (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 4th October 1867). In the afternoon, a combined military band and church choir concert was held in the rectory grounds at which some 400 people attended. In 1869 another Harvest Festival service was held at Dittisham in which Stoke Gabriel church choir again participated. Several of the choirs wore a surplice but its use was not employed by Stoke Gabriel church choir at this time. It was the custom for the vicars of the churches, including Vicar Bowden, to attend such festivals (*Totnes Times and Dartmouth Gazette*, 4th September 1869). Vicar Bowden was clearly committed to the establishment of a church choir in Stoke Gabriel and to supporting its participation in Deanery choral festivals but there is little evidence of the extent to which the choir was used in church services.

In 1881 Vicar Bowden resigned and was succeeded by the Irishman, the Rev'd John Henry Napper Nevill. He was a high churchman who remained in office until his death in 1915. During his 30 plus years in office, the choir adopted the use of the surplice and was fully integrated into Stoke Gabriel church services, as evidenced by numerous contemporary local newspapers which report:

- that the principal Sunday morning and evening services were choral;
- that funeral services were choral and that it was the custom for the vicar and the choir to meet the hearse at the lychgate before processing into church at the head of the cortege⁶;
- that festival services were choral and would take place on the actual day of the festival rather than the nearest Sunday, for example in 1898 Harvest festival took place on a Wednesday with a morning service of Holy Communion intoned by the vicar and a service of choral evensong with an augmented choir (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 8th October 1898); and
- that thanksgiving and commemorative services were choral, the most significant of which was the memorial service for Queen Victoria that took place at the same time as her funeral in Windsor (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 9th February 1901).

Within the parish of Stoke Gabriel, Waddeton Court Chapel held regular services that were led by Vicar Nevill with choral support from Stoke Gabriel church choir. In 1904, due to some (unspecified) altercation with Mrs Edith Mary Studdy, wife of Colonel Studdy, the owner of Waddeton Court, the vicar was told that he could no longer officiate there. The choir had been using the chapel for practice while works (probably associated with the recently enlarged organ) were ongoing in the parish church. They were told that they could not sing there anymore and that in the future only the inhabitants of Waddeton hamlet could be members of the chapel choir⁷. The death of the vicar in 1915 and the sale of the Waddeton Court estate to Sir Alfred Goodson the year after allowed a resumption of friendly relations among the parties. In 1925 the choir gave a "Sacred Concert" at the chapel with organ accompaniment provided by Mrs Lensman, following which they were entertained by Lady Goodson (*Western Morning News*, 22nd December 1925).

⁶ The custom continued after Vicar Nevill's term of office and extended to his wife, Emma Burleigh Nevill (*Western Times*, 19th March 1920).

⁷ The altercation resulted in an action being brought by Vicar Nevill against the Studdy family in the High Court, which was unsuccessful. (See: John Henry Napper Nevill, Vicar of Stoke Gabriel 1881-1915, in Stoke Gabriel church history web site: <https://stokegabrielchurch.co.uk/history/>)

In 1898, the recently re-established Moreton and Totnes Deanery Choral Association held its inaugural festival at Totnes parish church before a fully seated and standing congregation⁸. With orchestral accompaniment, over 150 choristers took part and Stoke Gabriel contributed 17 voices (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 29th October 1898).

Vicar Nevill appreciated the organist's and choir's commitment, recording his gratitude in the minutes of the annual vestry meeting, an unusual event given the nature and scope of these meetings (*Devon Heritage Centre*, 1981A/4/PV/1; *Vestry Minutes*, Easter Monday, 1906)⁹. He and his wife also provided evening supper and entertainment for the choir, organist and other members of the church at the vicarage on several occasions (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 7th January 1899 and 9th January 1904). Around the turn of the century, the vicar also established a tradition of annual choir outings to local resorts such as Dawlish, Exeter and Exmouth. Transportation was a challenge at the time and something of a novelty, which probably accounts for the use of a boat, train, large break, steamer, motor and char-a-banc on different occasions. The motor, which was used in the trip to Exeter in 1908, was most telling. It took 4.5 hours on the outward journey and 3 hours for the return journey, giving an average speed of about 6-8 miles per hour (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 5th October 1895, 27th July 1907, 8th August 1908 and 14th August 1909). A controversial and eccentric man, Vicar Nevill shared a warm and respectful relationship with the choir. At his funeral in 1915, the choir gave a floral tribute as a token of their admiration and esteem (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 3rd September 1915).

The foundations of a choral tradition having been established by Vicars Bowden and Nevill, the post-war years followed a similar pattern with few changes. Sunday services continued to be choral and wedding and funeral services were optionally choral. At some point, the custom of the choir meeting the hearse at the lychgate ceased but a new custom was established in which the choir led the bridal procession into church. With the exception of Christmas, festival days were moved to the nearest Sunday for celebration. Choral services of thanksgiving and commemoration, especially for the lives of our monarchs, the end of major conflicts, and the annual Royal British Legion service of Remembrance, all continued to be popular and well-attended.

Recent Developments in the Choir

In more recent years, two key changes have occurred with the choir¹⁰. The first was that



A photograph of the choir in about 1968, together with the Rev'd Watkins, Herbert Cook, churchwardens and vergers

female members were admitted to what had been an exclusively male preserve. In the late 1960's, the incumbent was Vicar Watkins and, having discussed the matter with the headmistress of the local primary school, Mrs Sargent-Thomas, decided to admit a number of girls into the choir. Unfortunately, the vicar failed to consult the then organist and choirmaster, Herbert Cook, who

⁸ The parish of Stoke Gabriel was transferred from Ipplepen Deanery to Totnes Deanery in 1875.

⁹ Vestry meetings occurred once a year, typically on Easter Monday, their main, and often only, purpose being to receive the churchwarden accounts and to elect the churchwardens for the ensuing year.

¹⁰ With grateful thanks to Susan Massey (nee Scadding) for providing this information.

nonetheless was accepting of the decision. One of the girls was Janet Dietz (nee Scadding) who in due course was to become organist and choirmaster herself. Several years later, two ladies also joined, namely Rosemary Scadding, who was Janet Dietz' mother, and Jackie Shepherd, the wife of the existing chorister and PCC Secretary, John Shepherd. Over the last 50 years, the number of ladies has increased and they now outnumber the men. While there are no longer any boys or girls in the choir, the number of adult choristers remains a healthy twenty or more, many of whom have given decades-long service and all of whom reside within the parish. In particular, Norman Betts, who is the Church Verger, has been a member of the choir since he was 10 year's old and has given in excess of 60 years' continuous service while two of the ladies, Susan Roach (nee Baker) and Susan Massey (nee Scadding), celebrated over 50 years' service in 2019.

The second key change was the introduction of harmony into the singing. The change did not happen overnight but over a period of years. The alto line was introduced when the ladies first joined the choir in the late 1960's and was reinforced by the addition of Anthea Scholefield, the wife of the incumbent and vicar, John Scholefield, who succeeded Vicar Watkins in 1970. Even before this time, there was a long-standing bass line, the mainstay of which was William (Billie) Ford. In the early 1970's Dennis Cornish joined the choir and he introduced the tenor line, which another long-standing chorister, Royston Baker, quickly learnt. Within several years of the choir being open to members of both genders, it had also transitioned into a choir capable of singing all four harmony parts.

In the last half century, numerous choral works have been performed in the parish church. Some are organised as community events for which the choir has been augmented by local singers. Recent years have seen liturgical performances of Faure's and Rutter's requiems, Schubert's Mass in G Major, and a performance of Karl Jenkins' The Armed Man, which was undertaken as part of the parish's commemoration of the centenary of the end of the Great War in 2018.

Stoke Gabriel Church Organ

A harmonium was first used to provide organ accompaniment for the choir. Whether it had been used to support congregational singing before the choir was founded is not known¹¹. Requiring limited space, it was kept in the chancel even after a pipe organ had been installed.

The date of installation of the first pipe organ is unclear. What is known is that in 1880 the south side of the chancel was re-developed to provide a vestry for the vicar and, directly below, a stove room to heat the church, as shown in the church plan of Appendix 2. The relevant faculty was granted on 20th March 1879 (*Devon Heritage Centre, 1981A/PW8*) and makes no mention of an organ chamber. Nonetheless, it is clear from the minutes of the vestry meetings of the 6th June 1878 and 27th February 1879, chaired by Vicar Bowden, that the installation of a pipe organ was very much part of their thinking, the plans allowing for the division of the vestry into a smaller vestry and organ chamber (*Devon Heritage Centre, 1981A/PV1*). Having funded the works through public subscription, a pipe organ may have been acquired at this time or at a later date.

Then in 1903 it was reported that Mr John Guest of Exeter had "enlarged" the organ, which suggests that a small pipe organ had already existed, having probably been installed in the

¹¹ A number of contemporary hymns had a melodic quality that was both simple and memorable and could have been sung by the congregation without any instrumental or choral accompaniment.

late 19th century which is about as firm a date as can be obtained from the available evidence. A large congregation had assembled to witness the opening of the organ by Mr F G Shapcott and to hear a musical program of organ and vocal solos (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 3rd October 1903).

In about 1960 the organ was restored by Rodney Pearce of Saltash but by 1996 the organ had had its day and, at the behest of the then organist, needed replacement. A suitable pipe organ, built by Harrison and Harrison of Durham City, one of the country's foremost organ builders, was found by Michael Farley, and was purchased from the Royal School of Music, Addington Palace, Croydon. It was a much larger instrument and part of the adjoining vestry had to be sacrificed for its installation. It was the subject of a major rebuild in 2010 by Henry Willis & Sons of Liverpool and continues in use to this day.

Stoke Gabriel Church Organists and Choirmasters

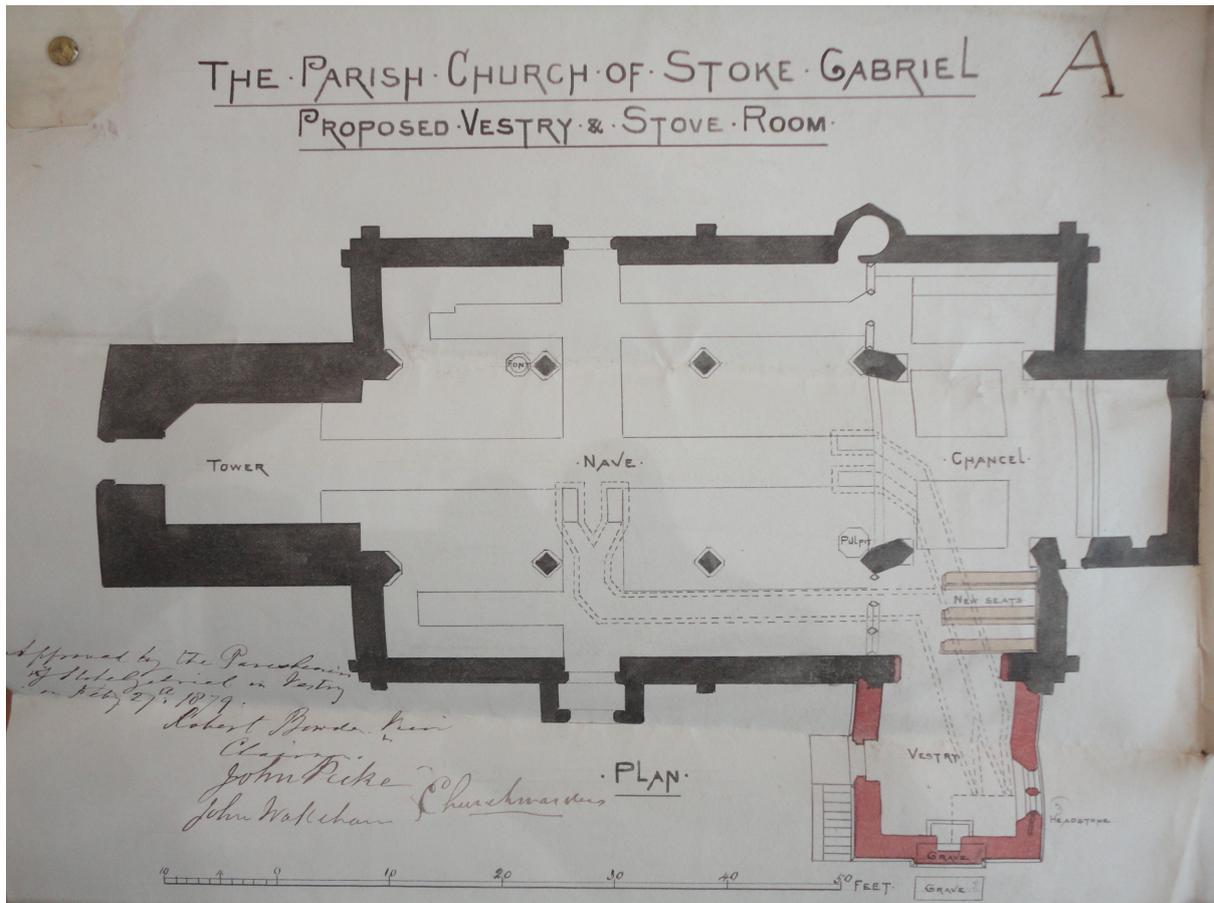
The organists of Stoke Gabriel church were also the choirmasters and some were also the organists of Waddeton Court Chapel. The identity of the very first organist and choirmaster is not known. The earliest record refers to Mr T M Brimblecombe of Paignton who held the office from 1890. The names of the subsequent organists and choirmasters are included in the Roll provided in Appendix 3¹².

In summary, Stoke Gabriel church choir was founded in or about 1850 during the incumbency of Vicar Bowden. Its formative years were characterised by rapid growth to some 25 or more men and boys, the installation of new pews in the chancel for the choir to be seated, and by its participation in many Deanery choral festivals. The use of the choir in church services was consolidated under Vicar Nevill, during whose term of office the church was equipped with its first pipe organ. Over the following years, the choral tradition was not only maintained but reinforced by the number of willing and able choristers of both genders, the committed and talented leadership of a succession of choirmasters and organists, and also by incumbents who fully embraced the use of choral music in the act of worship. It is due to this combination of factors that a strong musical tradition flourishes in Stoke Gabriel church to the present day.

Mike Stott
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¹² With grateful thanks to Ena Baker, Norman Betts and Susan Massey for help in compiling the Roll.

Appendix 2 - 1879 Vestry & Heating Plan



Appendix 3 - Roll of Organists & Choirmasters

Pre-1890	Unknown
1890-1899	Mr T M Brimblecombe of Paignton
1899-1907	Miss Marian Roberts of Yarde Farm, died 1909, Grave 614
1907-1908	Mr Lombardini of Newton Abbott
1908-1912	Miss Hanchet-Parker
1912-1919	Mr E S Hawkins
1919-1934	Mrs Lensman (nee Matthams) of Flood St
1934-1978	Mr Herbert H Cook, died 1979, Grave 345A
	Mr William Lunn, died 1971, Grave 356A
	Mr Taylor
1978-1986	Mrs Janet Dietz (nee Scadding)
1986-2009	Mr Mike Ball
	Mr Don Riddle
	Mr Martin Stanley
	Mr Gareth Perkins
	Mr John Hopwood
2009-2014	Mr Peter Gutteridge
2014-2018	Mr Michael Keast, died 2018
2014-2018	Mr Cyril Rider
2014-	Mr Wyn Turner
2014-	Mr Brian Apperson
2018-	Mrs Janet Dietz (nee Scadding)