

THE GUILD CHURCH OF ST BENET, PAUL'S WHARF

A Brief History

A Church has stood on this site since the year 1111 A.D., dedicated to St. Benet (an abbreviation of St Benedict, 420-480 A.D. – founder of the Benedictine Monastic Order). Paul's Wharf – recently excavated to reveal its Roman Foundations – was close by on the riverside, and over the centuries was the main landing stage for this part of the City. A little to the west stood the Watergate of Baynard's Castle, frequently mentioned in church records, and part of the sad story of both Queen Anne Boleyn and Lady Jane Grey. Both Church and Castle were destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666.

The present church by Sir Christopher Wren was built by his Master Mason Thomas Strong and completed in 1683. It is a particularly valuable example of Wren's work, for it is one of only four churches in the City that escaped damage in the 1939-45 war, and remains basically as Wren built it. From the outside it is seen that it is built of red and blue bricks (unusual for Wren) with stone quoins, and with carved stone garlands over the windows. It has a hipped roof on the north side. The Tower, built on the site of the original, contains the base of the old Tower to a height above ground of some twelve feet, but encased by new brick and stone. This is surmounted by a dome and cupola, topped by a Ball and Weathervane, and rises to a height of 115 feet to produce an elegant and attractive edifice.

The interior of the church is practically square, and it still retains its galleries, west and north on the sides of the tower. The Reredos, the Altar (very baroque and of Dutch origin), the pulpit by Grinling Gibbons, originally marked on its panels with the Royal Cypher and "Donum (given) 1683", the Altar rails, the attractive marble font and its carved wood cover, are all part of the original furniture of the church. The magnificent carved door case is unique with the Stuart Coat of Arms given by Charles II above it. The set of sanctuary chairs was given by Sir Leoline (Llewellyn) Jenkins, Judge of the High Court of Admiralty, later Secretary of State to Charles II. (Stolen in 1972)

Vandals set fire to the interior of the church in 1971 but damage was confined to the north-east corner. The

whole of the interior was however affected by the intense heat. During the ensuing restoration the organ built by J.C. Bishop in 1833 was rebuilt in its original position in the west gallery by Messrs Hill Norman and Beard, and is a fine example of a small organ of the period. The church was reopened in May 1973.

In 1652 Inigo Jones 'the king's architect' was buried in St Benet, with his father and mother. A copy of the inscription on the original memorial, which perished in the Fire, has been placed above the site of the original vault.

In St Benet Henry Fielding, author of Tom Jones, married his second wife in 1747. The church is mentioned by Shakespeare (who once owned a house nearby) in Twelfth Night, Act V, Scene 1. The clown having received two pieces of gold from the duke says;
*"Primo, secundo, tertio, is a good play;
and the old saying is, 'the third pays for all':
the triplex, sir, is a good tripping measure; or
the bells of;'* Saint Bennet, sir. may put you in mind;
one, two, three.
*But the duke replies – "You can fool no more money out
of me at this throw"*

Today there are two bells, one dated 1633 and the other 1685. St Benet was the Parish, Church of Doctor's Commons – which stood at the north-west corner of the churchyard where Faraday House now stands – a legal institution which amongst its many and complex activities could provide facilities for hasty marriages.

This probably accounts for the fact that there were 13,423 marriages solemnized in the church between 1708 and 1731. The Commons occupied the north gallery, paying five pounds per annum per household for its upkeep, as well as paying for the Lector (a curate)

On the front centre panelling of the gallery can be seen a Cartouche of the Royal Arms, with an escutcheon of the arms of the Kingdom of Hanover (painted in 1837) – the last time it was used in this country, to the west of it the fouled Anchor of the Court of Admiralty, representing Civil Law, and to the east of it the Pallium of Canterbury, representing the Ecclesiastical Law of the Realm. Doctor's Commons came to an end and was demolished to make way for Queen Victoria Street in 1867.

St Benet has been the Church of the College of Arms since 1555, when Phillip and Mary gave Derby House standing, at the north-east corner of the Churchyard, to the Heralds. Since that time they have had their own seats in the church. The burial of at least twenty-five Officers of Arms, starting with Sir Gilbert Dethick in 1584, is recorded in the Registers, together with a large number of Domestic Staff. There are several Memorials in the church – one to the memory of John Charles Brook, Somerset Herald, who was one of sixteen people crushed to death when George III and Queen Charlotte visited the Haymarket Theatre in 1794. It was to this church on 2nd March 1984 that the Kings, Herald and Pursuivants of Her Majesty's College of Arms, together with the Duke of Norfolk, Earl Marshal of England, the Earl of Arundel, Deputy Earl Marshal, and the Heralds Extra Ordinary, processed from the College to give thanks on the occasion of the Quincentenary of their Incorporation as a College in 1484.

The Flags hanging in the church are the personal arms of the thirteen members of the College with the Duke of Norfolk's Banner completing the set. On the east wall (there is a seventeenth century carved and painted Coat of Arms of the College, while on the north wall can be seen the Garter Board – the personal Arms, of each Garter Principal King of Arms since the inception of the Office in 1398.

The church of St Peter Paul's Wharf, or St Peter Parva (the little) stood at the south-west corner of what is now the International Headquarters of the Salvation Army. It was destroyed in the Fire of 1666 and was not rebuilt. The parish was amalgamated with St Benet, but the congregation maintained their own services, service books, churchwardens and parish clerk and their separate records until 1867 and their own burial ground until 1838.

The Parish Records, which go back to the reign of the First Elizabeth contain many references to the Welsh, and there was a considerable presence here, stretching back probably to about 1320 when they were evicted from the Tower Hill area by a Papal Bull. Elizabeth settled her “Imbroyderers” in the parish, and they had their Alms Houses here. The Broderers City Livery Company probably started here, the Dyers also were strongly connected with the church, and later the Royal College of Physicians came into being in the parish.

St Benet is the Metropolitan Welsh Church. The Welsh Anglicans had as long ago as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries arranged for services in the Welsh language to be held from time to time whenever a priest was available, and it is on record that such a service was held at St Paul's Covent Garden in 1715. They obviously

longed for a church of their own where Prayer Book services in the Welsh language could be held regularly, and some correspondence on this question appeared in The Record, a church weekly publication, in the 1830s. In 1843, owing to the zeal of Lord Powis and another eminent London Welshman, Mr William Jones, a Barrister, St Etheldreda, Ely Place, Holborn, was obtained from the National Society for the use of the Welsh Anglicans at an annual rental of £105, and a full-time priest was appointed. There they remained until 1876 when St Etheldreda was sold by public auction. The Welsh congregation failed in their attempt to buy the church, and so once again they were without a home, although the vicar of St Nicholas Cole Abbey kindly allowed them the use of his church for one service each Sunday. At that time, several city churches were scheduled for demolition, among them St Benet. The Priest in Charge, who had remained with his flock, sought and obtained support for his suggestion that St Benet be not demolished but given to the Welsh congregation for their use.

An Order in Council signed by Queen Victoria removed St Benet from the list of churches to be demolished and granted the use of the church to the Welsh Anglicans for the conduct of services “according to the Rites of the Church of England” in perpetuity. The first Welsh service was held in St Benet in 1879 and they have continued to be held ever since.

The Anglican Church in Wales at that time was part of the Province of Canterbury and remained so until the Welsh Church Act was implemented in 1920 when the disendowed and disestablished ‘Church-in-Wales’ came into existence. There had been a great deal of objection to the Act, parades and demonstrations, some of them in London, were held, Members of Parliament were lobbied, and on one occasion the bishops of the then four Welsh Dioceses, St Asaph, Bangor, St David's and Llandaff, were in London together to show their disapproval. They attended a service of Holy Communion in St Benet, and their signatures appear in the church register, St Benet, however, remained as it always had been and still is – attached to the Church of England in the Diocese of London. In 1954, in the reorganisation of the City churches and parishes, St Benet became one of the City Guild Churches.

This brief history was written by The Late Reverend Canon Alfred Pryse-Hawkins whilst he was vicar of St Benet