



ST GEORGE'S
BRISTOL

History of St George's Bristol

St George's Bristol has been a concert hall for the past 30 years. Here is a potted history of the building's previous life as a church...

The first part of the following account is based on notes prepared by the Architectural Historian Dr Timothy Mowl MA DPhil FSA.

In 1821 the parishioners of St Augustine and their Vicar, Dr Luke Hislop, were considering the construction of a chapel of ease. Hislop planned to exploit the million-pound fund set up by Parliament in 1818 to provide new churches for the poor — though what he in fact envisaged was a classical church designed for his wealthy parishioners living in the terraces on Brandon Hill. The architect was to be Robert Smirke who, in 1810, at the age of 27, had given London its first Greek Doric building, the new opera house at Covent Garden.

In this plan, Hislop was at odds from the start with his vestry men, whose principal interest was the burial ground of 3100 square yards for which they had paid £2400 of their own money in 1820. They insisted on a design competition between Smirke and their own favoured candidate, Henry Hake Seward who had already designed four churches in the gothic style they preferred. Predictably, the competition was decided in favour of Seward and an angry Smirke was paid off with fifty guineas. But the Parliamentary Commissioners who were to foot the bill also called the tune: they overturned the decision, Seward was dismissed and Smirke was brought back to build what became St George's Brandon Hill, and later St George's Bristol.

St George's was thus a Commissioners' church — and the only one in Bristol to receive government money from the first grant under the Church Building Act of 1818. It was built between 1821 and 1823 and was the city's first building in the Greek Revival style. (The economically minded Commissioners used the same design again for St James in Hackney, paying Smirke half the usual fee.) St George's Bristol is often referred to as a 'Waterloo Church', though no churches were in fact built to commemorate that particular battle.

The Commissioners' brief was essentially practical and embodied only one significant architectural feature: 'to make a great show at the west end'. Smirke's response was an imposing tetrastyle Doric portico surmounted by a cupola, the whole thing raised above a grand flight of steps overlooking Great George Street. The most unusual characteristic of the building is that this main façade was not the front entrance of the church but its rear; the congregation entered by the Charlotte Street entrance. The cupola, though now overtopped by more recent buildings, remains a prominent landmark from the southwest and the southeast. Today the main entrance is through the side door (reached from either side of the building), and the grand façade now serves more as the building's 'front'.

The new parish of St George's was created on 1 August 1832. In 1871 its evangelical vicar, Rev. Lambton Hopper, was succeeded by a dynamic High Churchman, Canon Norris. Under his incumbency, GE Street created a 'chorus cantorum' at the east end, using much marble in the early Italian manner to transform the previously bare Protestant interior; a central aisle of red quarry tiles led to a similar style marble font at the west end. In 1881 Bloomfield's reredos was installed, together with elaborate decoration to the gallery panelling and, at about the same time, the original Georgian box pews were replaced.

Until the 1980s, there had been no changes to the building or the grounds since the erection of the War Memorial after the First World War. There was some minor bomb damage in the air-raids of 1940-42: the star-shaped light in the ceiling marks the point where an incendiary bomb – which failed to ignite – came through the roof and landed on the altar; the crypt was then used as an air-raid shelter. Much of the plain glazing was also broken at this time and was replaced by obscured glass in a simplified leading pattern. The wrought iron railings along the Great George Street walls were removed as part of the war effort in 1940 (and were finally replaced in 2005!).

The congregation dwindled following the death of the last incumbent, Rev Canon Percy Gay, and, by 1976, the church faced redundancy. It was rescued by a group of local music enthusiasts, who saw its potential as a centre for fine music, and St George's Music Trust was born.

Over the next 20 or so years, St George's Music Trust flourished, staging an ever-increasing number of concerts with top professional artists each year. The hall also became a regular venue for concerts by local amateur groups and schools, and the BBC produced many concert series and studio recordings in the building. Physical improvements included the addition of a professional concert platform (the altar was carefully dismantled and lies under the wooden stage), triple-glazed windows, two recording cubicles, offices on the first floor and a backstage artists' area. The crypt was gradually transformed from its air-raid shelter and mothers' meeting room days into a café and bar, complete with cloakrooms, meeting areas and art gallery. Lifts were added, externally and internally, making the venue fully accessible for wheelchair users (no small feat of engineering for a building nestling in the side of a steep hill!). The external fabric of the building was expertly cleaned, removing many years of city pollution and restoring the brickwork to its original colour.

In 1999, with funds awarded by the Arts Council and Heritage Lottery Boards and by English Heritage, St George's Music Trust underwent a multi-million pound refurbishment. For the whole summer that year, the venue became a building site; floorboards and much of the stage were dismantled, pews were removed from the hall for renovation, and much of the building was cleared out. The box office area was created (necessitating a complex re-design of the female artists' facilities backstage), the reredos expertly renovated, and a full redecoration programme planned in colours that were sympathetic both to the origins of the building and to its new life as a professional concert hall. New, state-of-the-art seats were designed and installed in the auditorium in place of the old pews of the 1880s, and the pews in the gallery, there since the building's construction in 1823 (complete with their narrow seats and bolt-upright backs), were miraculously transformed into extremely comfortable seating whilst keeping their originality intact.

The font, formerly located just inside the rear hall entrance, was donated to St Mary on the Quay, and the War Memorial was moved from its rather precarious position in what is now the car park, to a dedicated memorial garden, just to the left of the car park area. A significant part of the re-development, was to re-interpret the churchyard in terms of the new function of the building, as a place for music.

The Scottish poet-sculptor Ian Hamilton-Finlay was commissioned to fulfill this brief, and over the next three years he installed a variety of works in the grounds, including benches, plaques and posts made of Caithness stone, all inscribed with quotations from Virgil's Eclogues, Janacek's Letters to Kamila and Ovid's Metamorphoses.

The building re-opened in October 1999 with a new look and a new name – St George's Bristol. The venue's programme of events continues to go from strength to strength, known locally, nationally and internationally for its artistic excellence and diversity in the genres of jazz, classical, folk, world music and opera.