

St Nicholas Church Stevenage

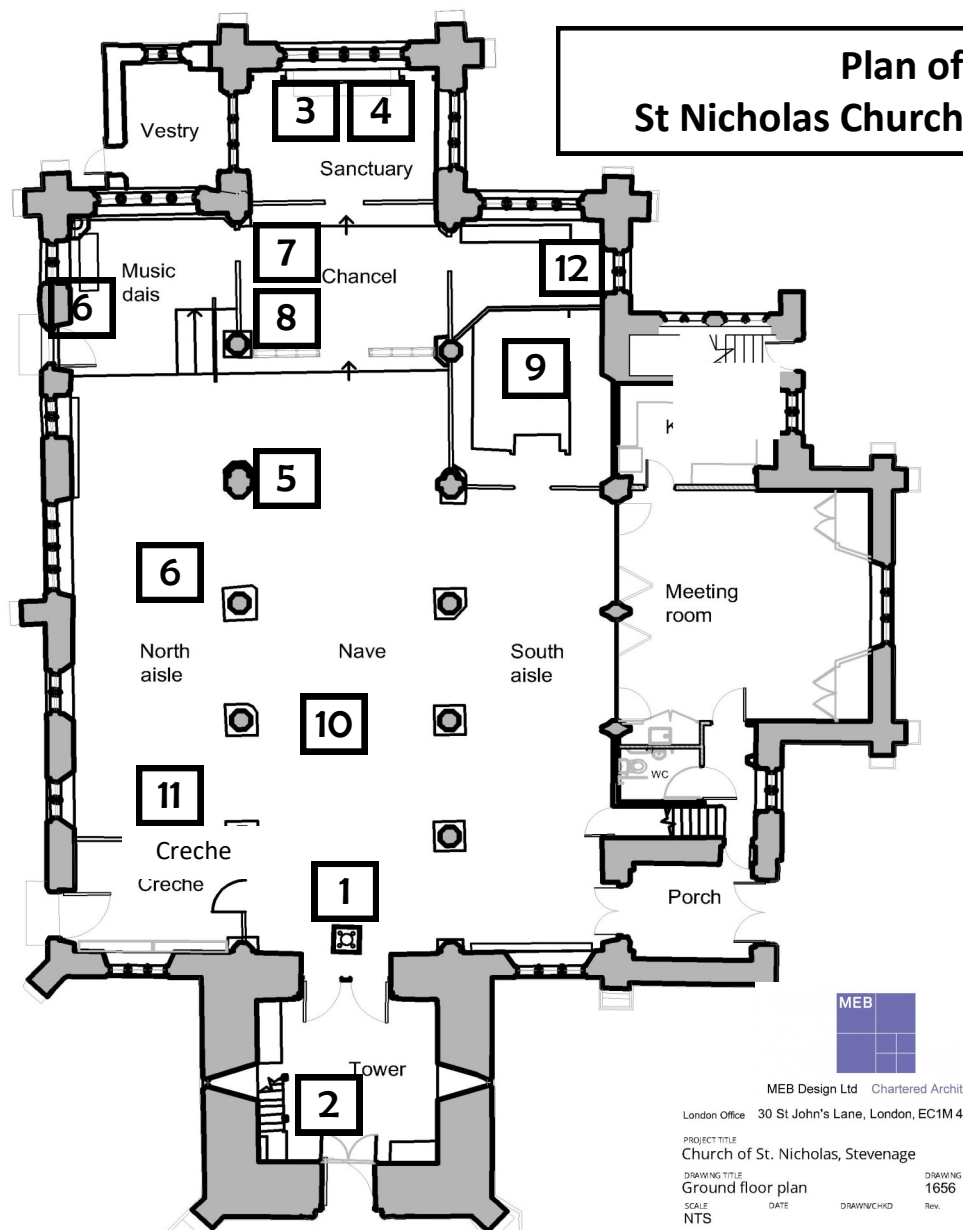
TOP 10 GUIDE



WELCOME to St Nicholas Church!

Whatever your reason for visiting us today, we hope you enjoy your time in this ancient and beautiful church. The aim of this brief guide is to introduce you to the church and its history, and guide you around what we think are the **TOP TEN** things to see in our church.

At the same time, we also want to point you to the God who is revealed in the Bible and who has been worshipped here for almost 1000 years.



KEY TO PLAN:

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|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| 3: Gospel Window | 4: The Reredos | 5: Ancient Graffiti |
| 6: Tombstones + Monuments | 7: The Wooden Screens | 10: Church Mice (get looking!) |
| 8: The Brass Eagle | 9: The Organ | 12: Oldest Window |
| 11: The Miserichords | | |
- 1: The Font
- 2: The Staircase

A bit of history to get you started...

As you walked up the path you no doubt noticed that this is a very ancient church. St Nicholas church was built in what was once the heart of the village of Stevenage, and there has been a church here for over 900 years.



The stone tower, some 16m high, is the oldest part of the current building, dating to the early 12th century. The spire which doubles the height wasn't added until 1500. In between those dates the main nave and chancel were added and modified to include the clerestory windows (*the ones high in the church just under the roof*).

Like most churches across the country, the Reformation brought a huge change to church decor. In medieval times the church would have been painted, at least in part, in bright and vivid colours and the church layout would have reflected a different theology from the one the Church of England holds today. But look hard enough and you'll see elements of the distant past as well as evidence of more recent changes.

The Victorian era brought the organ (1884), the restored rood screen and almost certainly the first pews—although the ones we have now come from the 1960s. The Parish Room, which now houses the kitchen and ground floor toilet, was also added around the turn of the last century.

As the history of the building demonstrates, each generation has introduced changes to take advantage of technological advances, in heating and lighting for example, or by adopting cultural changes in areas like music and presentational styles. That continued in our day, and in 2020 we completed a major reordering of the building. You'll find details of these changes, and some of the discoveries we made on the way, towards the back of this guidebook.

But all of these modifications have been done with the unchanging goal of proclaiming the same eternal truths in the same eternal God. And as long as there is a vibrant worshipping community here those changes will continue.

Enjoy your visit, and do come back to see us again soon.



THE FONT: Made out of Purbeck marble, the font dates from the 13th century. If you look very closely you will see some remnants of the bright colours with which the cover would once have been adorned.

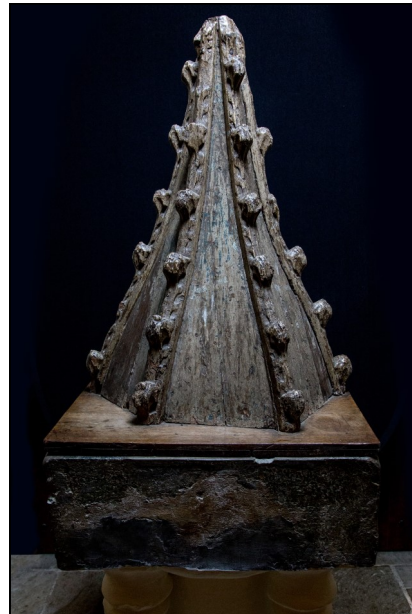
You might also notice that the font cover has been made to look like the church spire.

Although it is very old, the font is still used for baptisms today.

What is baptism?

Baptism is often seen as a time people begin their 'journey in faith,' but the baptism service is really a service of promises and declarations.

The water is not special, it comes from the kitchen, and it does not make anyone a Christian. Instead the water serves as a reminder of the washing away of sin and guilt which God offers to all who trust in Jesus and come to him in repentance and faith.





THE STAIRCASE in the bell tower is one of the oldest in Hertfordshire and dates back to the late 14th century. These stairs were recently dendro-dated and you can read about that process and the findings elsewhere in the church.

Two floors above you hang 8 bells which ring out the call to worship each Sunday and for weddings.



Are there stairs in the Bible?

Absolutely! For example, in the Old Testament Jacob saw angels ascending and descending from Heaven to earth.

But it's not just the lady in the Led Zeppelin song who thinks they can buy a stairway to heaven. Many people believe that we work our way up to God by doing good deeds.

But the Bible teaches that our access to God and eternal life in Heaven is not about our climbing upwards to God but about putting our trust in Jesus, God's Son, who came down to us. To find out more about his life, walk to the front of the church past the communion table, and look at the stunning stained glass window.





THE GOSPEL WINDOW: The accounts of Jesus' life are, of course, found in the 4 gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The window, which dates to 1841, shows each writer with his symbol: an angel for Matthew, a lion for Mark, a griffin for Luke and an eagle for John.

These four accounts of Jesus' life made it into the book we call the Bible because the men who wrote them were either eyewitnesses of all that Jesus did and said, or used eyewitnesses as their source. All four gospels were all written well within living memory of many who saw and heard Jesus, so that we can be sure they tell us the truth. The word *gospel* actually means '*good news!*' And that it is what it is!

Good news? *As you look beneath to the reredos and see some scenes depicting some of what Jesus did and said, I hope you'll start to see why...*



THE REREDOS dates from 1915 but the story it tells is 2000 years old. The first panel shows part of the Christmas story as the infant Jesus with his mother Mary receives the gifts from the wise men. The verse underneath from John 1:4 explains that Jesus is God come to earth as a man.

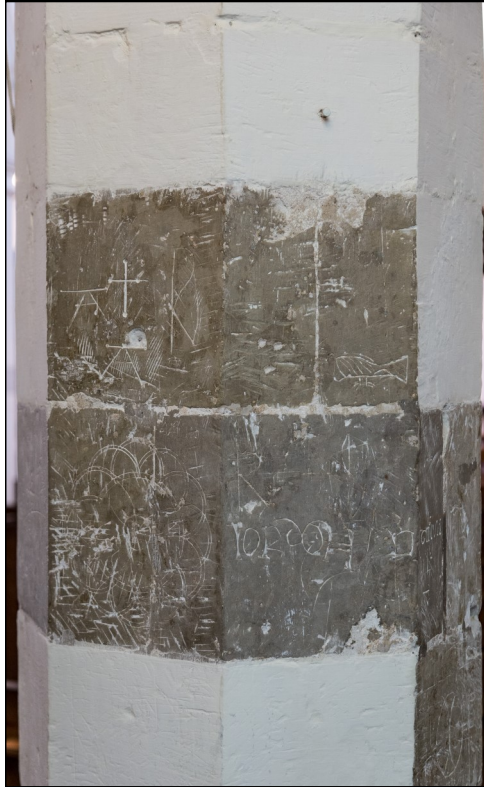
The middle panel depicts the reason for his coming - not simply as a great teacher - but '*to give his life as a ransom for many.*' The words underneath are words of Jesus speaking of his death (*being lifted up*) and its purpose (*to draw men back into a relationship with God again*)

The final panel shows one of Jesus most beloved parables- that of the good shepherd—who willingly lays down his life for his sheep and knows them by name. As a consequence we who are those lost sheep, can also know God through faith in Christ.



Read more...

You might want to pick up a free booklet or a copy of one of the gospels, to help you think more about this message and how it applies to you today. These are available by the entrance.



ANCIENT GRAFFITI:

Turn around and walk towards the rear of the church again and step into the musicians area on your right. In this space - formerly known as the Lady Chapel—you will find some wonderful examples of medieval graffiti. Graffiti would have been frowned on then- as it is today- but these ancient scribbles show how people tried to grapple with issues of faith when words weren't always easy to find.

As you continue around the church you'll see other examples of ancient graffiti on many of the other pillars. Just look for the panels which haven't been painted!



Words don't come easy... *If that's you, why not pause here for a while and sit in silence. Cast your mind back to the scenes on the reredos from Jesus' life, and ask that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, would seek and find you.*



TOMBSTONES AND MONUMENTS:

Around the church you will also see a number of tombstones or memorials- some laid into the floor and others fixed to the wall. Whilst they are all interesting in their own way, two are of particular note.

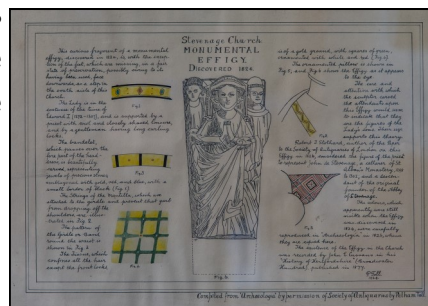
Monument Effigy in the Lady Chapel...

The identity of the lady whose broken effigy is found in the side chapel is unknown, but judging by her clothes she probably lived at the time of Edward I (1272-1307). For many years this

monument was placed face down in the church and was used as a step in the south aisle until it was discovered in 1824. More details about her can be found on the plaque on the wall—do have a read!

The Whittington slabs.

The two slabs in the south aisle are monuments to some of the descendants of Dick Whittington, the 1st Lord Mayor of London.



Life is short...

Monuments like these are reminders that however rich or famous we are, we are all mortal and one day we too will die.

But the Bible teaches that this is not the end and that there is life after death. What that eternity will be like depends, according to Jesus, on what we make of him, not what kind of memorial (stone or otherwise) we leave behind.

WOODEN SCREENS:

As you left the Lady Chapel you walked through a wooden screen that dates from the 1960s but the others are ancient: well over 500 years old.



Look closely at the central screen you will see that it has been extensively repaired. Although it may have been built for this church it was probably removed during the Reformation, a time when the church put aside many false practices and re-discovered the true teachings of the Bible.

For many years the screen was left in a hay loft before being restored to the church in the mid 1800s. Since then it has been placed in various positions,

Some things never change... *Church buildings do and must change - but the Christian message of God's love revealed to us in Jesus and eternal life being found only in His name remains the same. That's why the Bible is the foundation of the Christian faith and so vital in the life of the Church and the Christian. It's here we read of God's actions, commands, character and promises and how we should relate to him.*



THE BRASS EAGLE lectern which holds the Bible was donated to the church in 1871 by John Allen of Oldfield Hall, Allington, in memory of Revd. Blomfield, a much admired rector.

The eagle is a symbol of the apostle and gospel writer John whose gospel starts with a passage calling Jesus '*the Word of God*.' Because the Bible is literally 'God's written Word' - telling us the truth about God and how we can know him, the symbol for John found its way into many lecterns from which the Bible is read.

The bird itself is a helpful image:

The eagle soars upwards; it is strong, direct in its flight and inspiring in its overarching majesty. Just like good public reading of scripture or oratory!

Worth a look?

Did you know that the Bible is the world's best selling book? If you've never read much of it—why not give it a go! Remember it's a library of books, rather than just one. So start with one of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and pray that God will speak to you through it. He will!



THE ORGAN: The organ, originally installed in 1884, has recently been renovated and moved to this new position from where its wonderful sound can be fully appreciated. This move has enabled the church to update and improve the facilities in the Parish Room.



What's the point?

As with all things in the church, whilst they may have practical use or aesthetic beauty and value in themselves, the ultimate purpose is the greater glory of God.

That is certainly our aim as we care for this building and as we meet together week by week to hear from His Word the Bible, sing God's praises and gather in faith around the Lord's Table.

We hope that you will want to join us, but in any event we pray for God's blessing on you and your family.

THE CHURCH MICE:

When the pews were replaced in the mid 1960s the church bought the new pews from well-known craftsman Richard Thompson. His trade mark, found on all his pews, is a carved wooden mouse.

We think that there are 12 mice in the church—perhaps you'd like to spend some time checking to see if we are right. It's a challenge that many children (and adults!) have enjoyed over the last 5 decades.



Searching high and low...

In Matthew chapter 13 Jesus tells 2 parables about people searching for something too. In his case it's a pearl merchant and a treasure hunter who find what they are looking for. And when they do they realise that what they have found is worth far more than all they have, so they sell everything to possess it.

That huge pearl or greatest treasure is peace with God, forgiveness of sins and the certainty of eternal life which is found in Jesus Christ.

I wonder if you have found him yet?

Three other things worth seeing...



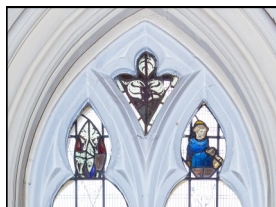
THOSE OLD SEATS:

The misericords in the choir were not originally part of the furniture of St Nicholas Church but may have come from a nearby Priory during the Dissolution of the Monasteries in Henry VIII's reign.

They are, however, lovely. Lift up the chair seats and you'll see some wonderfully carved figures. Monks would have been able to perch on these seats during long times of prayer—but if a tired monk had fallen asleep everyone would have known because they come down with a huge crash!

THE OLDEST WINDOW in the church is now tucked away behind the organ in what was once known as the Trinity Chapel. The glass in the window at the top is almost certainly more than 500 years old.

It might not look much but it's yet more evidence of the wonderful history of this ancient building.

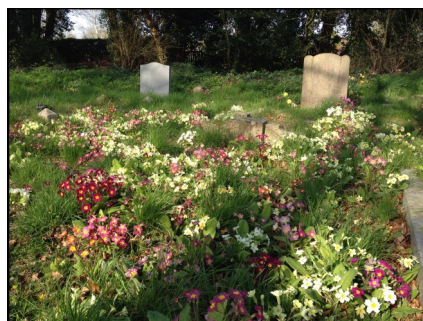




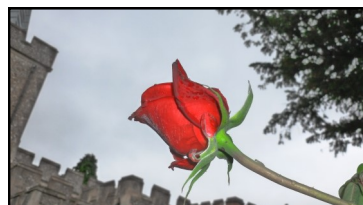
THE CHURCH YARD

When you've had a good look around the building, why not venture outside and take some time to explore the beautiful grounds of the church?

The church yard is extensive, with graves dating back many centuries. There are also several war graves from the first and second World Wars and plenty of beautiful trees, shrubs and, depending on the season, stunning flowers to enjoy. You might also be able to spot some quite rare lichen on the grave stones, and there's always plenty of bird life to listen out for as they nest and feed amongst the wide variety of trees.



At the north end the church yard joins with the Stevenage Borough Council cemetery on Weston Road, and a little to the west, there is a path which leads out into Forster Country with wonderful walks across to Graveley and beyond. Take your time and enjoy this beautiful and quiet spot in God's glorious creation.



THE 2018-2020 REFURBISHMENT PROJECT

Having looked around the church you'll have seen evidence of continual change. From adding windows to knocking down balconies, from building new aisles and changes to the floor, each generation has put its own stamp on the building to suit the work and worship of the church in its own day. The last major reordering came in the early 20th century, just before the sepia photo below was taken. And in 2018 (see colour photograph below) we felt that it was time for us to do the same.



We needed space for our growing congregation, and space to welcome even more people for weddings, baptisms and at Christmas. We needed more room for our children's work, a creche for our youngest children and the flexibility to change the layout of the church for school and community events.

There were also safety concerns with the state of the floor and lack of effective lighting in church. There was a lot to do!



Over the course of 2018-19 our project manager and architect developed plans and consulted with the Church Buildings Council and the Diocesan Advisory Committee of the Diocese of St Albans. After months of hard work, we applied for a Faculty* and this was granted in February 2019.

Before the work began, we undertook an archaeological survey to record what the church was like before we started. We then arranged to meet at the Leys School whilst the work was being done. We left the church in June 2019. We wouldn't be back for over a year!

*Formal permission to do the work!

How the plan came together...



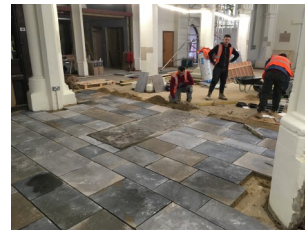
The building was cleared and a digger brought in to break up the floor.

The floor was dug out to a depth of around 50cm and all the rubble was removed. The arches into the Parish room were demolished and the false ceiling taken down.



Channels were built for pipes and cables, then the floor was insulated with about 40cms of insulation briquettes! Underfloor heating pipes were then laid out on top of a mesh frame before being sealed up under a layer of scree.

Once the scree had set, a new stone floor was laid throughout the church. The stone is a Purbeck limestone from a quarry in Dorset.



Meanwhile, a new meeting room was built over the top of the existing Parish Room, and a new lighting scheme was fitted across the church.

The Covid-19 pandemic delayed our return, and there was a lot of unpacking and cleaning to do, but we held our first service in the renewed and refurbished church on 5th July, 2020.

Archaeological Discoveries

Because the church is so old, a team of archaeologists was on site as the floor was being dug up and as ground works were taking place in the Parish Room.

St Nicholas is the oldest building in Stevenage, so it's not surprising that as the building work progressed, lots of interesting discoveries were made. Those included 4 crypts, (like the ones below) and perhaps the burial place of the Church's first minister.



The photograph on the left shows the crypt near the font. If the nearby ledger slab and the vault are associated, the remains within the vault are of George and Alice Crouch, Benjamin and Mary Kingman and the Kingman children. The photograph on the right shows 2 crypts near the organ which may be linked to either Anne Whittington whose ledger slab lay to the west of the vault or Anne Wilson whose slab is located to the east. There were also crypts under the Whittington ledger stones in the north aisle.

Perhaps the most interesting discovery was made in the centre of the church, at the western end of the grey ledger stone, where an anthropomorphic or body-shaped coffin was discovered. Coffins like this were used in the 9th century, but this one has been dated on stylistic grounds to between 1290-1320.

The remains were of an older male, quite possibly of Gerald de Standon who died in 1314, or his predecessor, Henry Borham whose place Gerald took in 1276.



Archaeological Mysteries



These photographs are of a skull that was discovered just in front of the reredos, at the far east end of the church.

It is unclear whether these injuries are the result of several events of interpersonal violence, or evidence of trepanation, a surgical procedure in which a hole is drilled, cut or scraped into the skull exposing dura mater, a tough layer of connective tissue that directly overlies the brain.



This dangerous procedure was sometimes used to relieve pressure on the brain caused by an injury or medical problem, but it carries a high risk of infection, direct injury to the brain and bleeding into the brain tissue.

Another group of disarticulated remains was exposed to the east of the row of ledger slabs in the north aisle, including the upper and lower jaws of an individual with perfectly aligned teeth but with one missing molar.



These may have belonged to Sarah Bowcock (d1660), who is buried nearby. Because of dietary changes and the increasing use of forks in the post-medieval period, the size and shape of the jaw changed, becoming smaller and less pronounced. However, as the remains found here had medieval traits and Sarah Bowcock died in 1660, it could be that this is actually an earlier burial.



Far less ancient, but just as intriguing, are these two pennies dating from the turn of the last century. They were discovered near the wooden screen that used to stand near what is now the musicians' area. One was on top of the screen, the other tucked underneath!



The full archaeological report wonderfully put together by KDK Archaeology is available to view on our website, and there is a hard copy in church.

Do ask if you'd like to see it.

THAT'S THE END of our brief tour. We hope you've enjoyed it and found it interesting. Do make sure you sign our visitors' book and leave some comments for us. For more on the history of the buildings, access to recent reports, and a virtual tour, do visit our the church website

If you'd like to know more about us as a church, there are some welcome leaflets by the door which explain a bit more about what we believe and the activities we get up to. Please take one.

You'll find much more information about us on our website www.saintricholaschurch.org.uk

If you'd like someone to be back in touch with you, please fill in one of the welcome cards and leave it on the welcome desk or pass it to a steward.

By the exit you'll also find copies of the gospels and booklets about the Christian faith mentioned earlier. Do take one to read. The building may be beautiful, but the God for whose glory it stands, is greater still.

May God bless you. We look forward to seeing you again.



Photographs (mostly) by Trevor Coultart Photography. Website: www.coultart.com