



THE CHURCHES
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Church of St Swithun

Worcester



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Church of St Swithun

by David Whitehead



St Swithun's is one of Worcester's eight ancient parish churches but was completely reconstructed between 1733 and 1735. Its external and internal integrity make it an important monument to Georgian taste and a tribute to the design skills of its creators, the master builders, Thomas and Edward Woodward of Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire.

Foundation and dedication

Between the 10th and 12th centuries parish churches proliferated in English towns, being the result of an earlier 'enterprise culture', whereby rich merchants and churchmen dedicated some of their new wealth to the work of God and the solace of their neighbours' souls. St Swithun's was given to the monks of the priory in the time of King Stephen (1135–54) by Simon Bishop of Worcester upon the petition of Eudo the Deacon, on whose free land it had been built. There was hardly any room for a new church in the north-east part of Worcester which was already well served by the churches of St Nicholas and St Martin, both of which also had extensive rural parishes. The dedication to St Swithun, Bishop of Winchester between 852 and 862, is difficult to account for as he

has no known connection with Worcester. Apart from his general popularity in the Middle Ages, there is possibly a specific explanation for his appearance at this time. The popularity of the cult of St Swithun grew a century after his death when St Aethelwold, one of his successors as Bishop of Winchester, translated the saint's body into the New Minster at Winchester. St Aethelwold was closely associated with two 10th-century bishops of Worcester – St Dunstan and St Oswald – in the revival of Benedictine monasticism in England. Thus, through this connection, a saintly bishop of Winchester may have received special notice at Worcester, being a suitable dedication for a church destined to be held by the Benedictine monks of Worcester Cathedral.

Setting

The parish of St Swithun's is the smallest in the City – with the exception of St Michael's, the parish of the Cathedral – and was literally squeezed into the burgeoning early Norman town, straddling High Street and The Cross. As this was the commercial focus of the City, where the rich merchants lived, St Swithun's became the parish of the urban elite and eventually the church of the governing body

of the royal borough. Thomas Habington, the 17th-century county historian of Worcestershire, noticed the ancient arms of the City set up in Old St Swithun's.

The cramped central city setting of the church also had its disadvantages. It was constantly besieged by bedlams. At one moment the 'herb' market was here;

at another, in 1619, the hosiery and liquor salesmen – an especially profane combination – were allowed to set up their stalls next to the church. The Worcester historian, Valentine Green's description of the setting of the church in 1763 'situate in the Dish Market . . . Goose Lane on its north and, Mealcheapen on its east' emphasises the

commercial context of the church. Today, the north walls of the church are still hidden by shops.

The sense of enclosure when approaching the tower entrance is intensified by the presence of the old Queen Elizabeth Grammar School on which a faded inscription records that the school was rebuilt in the

same year as the church, 1735. This 'dingy den... one of the worst conducted schools in the county' was abandoned as a school building in 1868 when the Royal Grammar School was rebuilt on its present suburban site in the Tything. The presence of the old school house, cheek by jowl with the church, once again serves to remind us of the pre-eminence of St Swithun's, as the church of the urban elite whose sons were educated in its shadow.

Until the 1960s, St Swithun Street (Dish Market) was lined with a magnificent range of timber-framed buildings. Their replacement with banal 'retail units' has damaged the setting of St Swithun's, which in every other respect is the epitome of the English urban scene. The church is in harmony with its surroundings; it does not dominate and, to be found, has to be stalked through the close-knit historic townscape.

St Swithun's also lacked a graveyard and thus the privileged parishioners quartered the floor of the church to create space for their family vaults. Regular but superficial interment through many centuries created a serious sanitary problem and John Noake, writing in the mid-19th century, comments upon the intolerable smell which the congregation had to endure during their services.



Left: East end of church from Mealcheapen Street
Right: West tower



Detail of west doorway of tower



The medieval church

A plan of rather obscure origins, which claims to show the 'Ground Plot' of Worcester in 1651, depicts St Swithun's as a large church with nave and flanking aisles, roofed separately. The value of this evidence is reduced by the presence of a square tower placed at the east end which contradicts all other evidence. Speed in 1610 shows the church with minimal detail but with the tower in its present position. This is supported by an internal examination of the fabric of the existing tower where the lower stages are constructed of sandstone which pre-dates the 18th-century rebuilding in an oolitic stone. Valentine Green remembered in 1796 that the old church had an octagonal tower with an embattled top and this is flamboyantly displayed in 1732 on S & N Buck's *South West Prospect of the City of Worcester*. This structure produced some problems for the craftsmen in 1734 who rebuilt the final stage of the tower in rectangular form reusing the sandstone mixed with brick and disguising their patchwork externally with smooth limestone ashlar. Viewing the main walls of the church from within the roof of the nave suggests that here, too, the Georgian craftsmen recycled the sandstone fabric of the original church and perhaps on the north side retained the original wall. Behind the shops in Goose Lane the coursed sandstone ashlar is still visible in the lower wall.

All this work is generally regarded as 15th-century; certainly, the octagonal tower would point to this sort of date. The 1651 plan, albeit of doubtful value, implies that Old St Swithun's had no chancel. It was, we may speculate, an auditory church with aisles divided by slender arcades, making it ideally suited for sermons. Such churches are especially common in towns in the late Middle Ages, providing the setting for a more auricular style of service for an articulate and educated congregation. In this regard, it is interesting to learn that, in 1647, the City Council established a regular Friday lectureship at St Swithun's. The old church was thus easily converted into a 'meeting house' for the citizens with puritan sensibilities and the Georgian rebuilding of a single-cell church took its cue from the medieval structure.

South side of nave looking east

Towards a new church

The faculties and acts of Parliament, required for the rebuilding of a medieval church in the 18th century, often recite the opinions of 'judicious workmen', who assert that the ancient fabric was 'ruinous' or beyond repair. No such claims were made for St Swithun's in 1733 when the churchwardens entered into an agreement with Thomas and Edward Woodward, masons of Chipping Campden, to rebuild the church. Diocesan inspections of 1674 and 1687 found nothing

wrong with the fabric and simply commented on the 'indecent' altar rails and the inconvenient placing of the font. Canon Buchanan-Dunlop, who wrote about St Swithun's in 1943, said that the tower had recently been rebuilt in 1733, suggesting perhaps that work on the nave had been deferred for a later campaign. The lack of churchwardens' accounts for the period is a considerable handicap in discussing the rebuilding process, although there is a



sizeable collection of financial material in the parochial collection in the Worcester Record Office.

As a small parish, which contained some of the richest burgesses in the City, the principal motive for rebuilding the old church was undoubtedly fashion. The churchwardens and vestry wanted a 'neat' and 'decent' structure, a building with architectural integrity built in the classical style. All over Great Britain, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the building of classical churches was predominantly an urban phenomenon, promoted by the *haute bourgeois*, who had few reservations about destroying the 'barbarous' fabric of their ancient churches. London had led the way after the Great Fire; St Philip's in Birmingham was completed in 1725, whilst less than a hundred yards (90 m) away from St Swithun's, the parishioners of St Nicholas in 1733 were just crowning their new church with a fine Baroque tower, based on an alternative design for St Mary-le-Strand in London, published in James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* (1728). This was clearly spur enough for a group of eminent residents of St Swithun's, including two woollen drapers, two clothiers, a hosier, a tobacconist and a surgeon who entered into an agreement on 10 July 1733 with the Woodward family to take down and rebuild their church.

Thomas and Edward Woodward

In choosing the Woodward family, the trustees of St Swithun's were demonstrating their discrimination and scoring points over their neighbours at St Nicholas. Whereas the latter church is decidedly Baroque in character and thus rather dated by the 1730s, at St Swithun's the Woodward family provided a Palladian design for the east end which was in tune with the new ideas of the Burlington school. A recent assessment of the Woodward family's style by Howard Colvin has shown that they were sophisticated craftsmen who appreciated the subtleties of Italianate design and detail and yet remained Cotswold masons, rooted in the traditions of their craft. As church restorers they replicated traditional mouldings, and buttressed and clamped walls in a timeless fashion, using stone from their quarries at Chipping Campden. The rib vault in the nave of St Swithun's and the Gothic details of the tower show how easily they could move from a foreign to a native style. Remarkably, this skill in reproducing Gothic buildings suddenly became a valued facility among their self-conscious gentry patrons, and at Preston-on-Stour and Alcot Park in Warwickshire between 1752 and 1764, Edward Woodward produced two buildings which mark the beginning of the Gothic revival in the West Midlands.

The Woodward family already had a well-established reputation for church restoration

Interior looking-west, showing box pews and west gallery

before Thomas and Edward were employed at St Swithun's. Their father, Thomas the Elder, had restored churches at Quinton in Warwickshire (1712) and Blockley, now in Gloucestershire (c.1726), whilst in 1729 his sons contracted for the rebuilding of St John's in Gloucester. This was an urban church in a similar cramped position to St Swithun's where they provided an east end with a Doric composition around an Ionic Venetian

window. The design also allowed for two flanking eastern entrances to the church, a convenient contrivance, perhaps borrowed from Inigo Jones' St Paul's, Covent Garden. This design was eminently suitable for St Swithun's where at least one eastern entrance was also highly desirable for the minister and the senior churchwardens. As there was constant communication between Gloucester and Worcester in the



18th century, both commercial and social, it comes as no surprise to find the architects of St John's repeating their design at St Swithun's.

An additional source of contact was perhaps provided by Martin Sandys, Town Clerk of Worcester and youngest son of Samuel Sandys of Ombersley Court, a few miles to the north of the City. Martin had been a leading light in the rebuilding of St Nicholas but was also called upon to lay the foundation stone for St Swithun's on 26 February 1734. Did he play a role in the choice of the craftsmen? Samuel Sandys had recently employed Francis Smith of Warwick to rebuild Ombersley Court. Smith was well known to the Woodwards, having surveyed their work on Alcester church, Warwickshire, in 1730. We can perhaps conjecture that the recommendation of the Woodwards came via Martin Sandys and Francis Smith. The prudent choice of craftsmen was certainly necessary after Humphry Hollins, the mason responsible for St Nicholas' tower, had run the churchwardens of that church into serious financial trouble. Significantly, St Swithun's cost a mere £2,500, compared with £3,800 for St Nicholas.

Architectural description

Attention has already been drawn to many of the key features of St Swithun's, namely the inspiration and purpose of the fine east façade, the mixing of Gothic and Classical styles and the survival of medieval fabric hidden in the walls of the church. Visitors should not fail to view the south side of the church, where the six bays are separated by giant fluted Doric pilasters linked by an enriched entablature. The design of the eastern façade is echoed in the clock which sits on the pediment. This is an original feature of 1734 and behind its own diminutive pediment there was originally a figure of Time, but this jolly sculpture was blown down and broken to pieces by a high wind in 1750.

The lower stages of the west tower are, as we have seen, basically medieval. Hence the buttresses break uncomfortably into the nave of the church behind the organ loft. All the external surface detail of the tower was added by the Woodwards, including the ogee Gothic windows which derive from the Perpendicular tower of their native church, Chipping Campden. The ogee was also used by them in the aisle entrances to Alcester church. The eclectic taste of the craftsmen is nowhere better displayed than on the tower, where a classical balustrade happily connects four Gothic finials.

The interior, as Pevsner remarks, is 'marvellous' a wonderful Georgian space,

never encumbered with side galleries and with some fine pewing, an enlightened afterthought which cost the parish an extra £60 in 1735. The uneven flagstone floor would have warmed the heart of William Morris, had he known the church. The Doric screens either side of the communion table create a mini-chancel but also provide side passages for the eastern entrances, noticed outside. The reredos also develops the Doric order and originally had a pediment, but this was probably removed in the mid-19th century when Henry Eginton redesigned the window for the painted glass executed by G Rogers. Again there is stylistic confusion on the nave ceiling with a Gothic rib vault rising from Gothic bosses but the spaces enriched with Classical roundels. The interior, looking west, is terminated by a panelled gallery standing on fluted wooden pillars upon which stands the organ.

Furnishings and monuments

The 'three-decker' pulpit, approached by a winding stair, is a most striking piece of workmanship and leaves one in no doubt that the preaching of the word was all-important at St Swithun's. The great tester hangs from the ceiling on feathery arabesques

View of the pulpit and mayor's chair



Monument to William Swift,
1688 on south wall of nave



wax, the pulpit and the tester are decorated with a star inlay which completes the iconography. The quality of the joinery is equivalent to anything that can be seen in many of Wren's London churches. More frilly swags enrich the mayor's chair and above it is a scrolly wrought iron sword-rest. Similar ironwork also appears in the front of the table with its top of Italian marble. The font stands in its own pew, on the south side. It has a mahogany cover said to be made of one of the first pieces of this exotic timber to reach Worcester. Among the embellishments, now lost, was a brass sconce presented to the new church by William Riley in 1736.

In 1796 Valentine Green listed the monumental inscriptions, visible in St Swithun's; they filled nearly four closely printed folio sides and read like a litany of the City's important tradesmen. Over the years many have been removed. In 2009 all the remaining monuments, together with floor slabs and pew plates, were recorded by NADFAS. They include:

- The great sculptural monument to William Swift (1688) with its cherubs resting languidly on the pediment. Swift was a grocer who owned three adjoining properties in High Street and was assessed for 14 hearths in the tax of 1679.

and supports a pelican feeding its young from its own breast. This is emblematic of the Eucharist with an anchor and serpent below representing the firmness of the church, resisting the wiles of Satan. A dove represents the Holy Spirit and the word of God preached from the pulpit below. Scarcely visible because of the varnish and

West gallery showing organ



- The monument to Joseph Withers, who lived outside the parish in Sansome Fields but was mayor of the City in the year of his death, 1741. It was erected by his son, Sir Charles, in c.1770 and has carved medallion portraits by John Bacon RA, who was responsible for the monuments to George III and Pitt the Elder in Westminster Abbey.

Less significant, but of local interest, is the simple classical monument to Henry Hope (1753), signed by Richard Squire. Squire was the mason/builder of All Saints' church (1739–42), the third of Worcester's Georgian churches, and his monuments and marble work are found in houses and churches throughout the West Midlands.

Bells, organ and clock

Green records that St Swithun's had a peal of six musical bells with a set of chimes and was the 'only church within the liberties of the City which can boast either of an organ or chimes'. Three of the six bells are the work of John Martin and were cast in 1654. The other three probably date from the 15th century and were made in Worcester. The bells were retuned and rehung in a new frame in 1972.

The first mention of an organ in the gallery

of the church occurs in 1687. The present organ in the west gallery is thought to be at least the third instrument in the church. It is contained in a simple but elegant casing and has two manuals, eleven stops and still retains some of its wooden reeds.

The organ was built by Robert and William Gray of London in 1795 with money gifted by

William Swift (d.1688) and his family – his memorial is on the south wall. Relatively few changes have been made to it, making it an important historical survival.

In 1844–45 Nicholsons organ builders provided enlargements including a primitive pedal organ, with the addition of a Dulciana stop in 1850.

In 2009 the Friends of St Swithun's, in conjunction with The Churches Conservation Trust, raised funds to restore this historic Gray organ with the work being undertaken by Goetze and Gwynn organ builders. In 2008 the British Institute of Organ Builders included the organ in their Register of Historic Pipe Organs (Grade I). Following its restoration the instrument offers a valuable research resource for scholars as well as providing for the authentic performance of a wide repertoire of 18th- and early 19th-century music.

The 18th-century clock on the east face of the church is driven by a shaft which runs the full length of the nave, above the ceiling, the mechanism being in the tower. The present movement is modern, by Smith of Derby, but its interesting wooden-framed predecessor remains in the room above, along with an old chiming machine.

Since the Second World War, many of the historic parish churches in Worcester have been closed, as their congregations moved to the suburbs. Only All Saints' and Old St Martins remain in regular use. St Helen's, though no longer in regular use for worship, is still used by the City parish. St Andrew's has been pulled down, except for the Perpendicular tower. St Nicholas' was closed in the 1980s and is now a restaurant. St Swithun's, because of its architectural and historic importance, was vested in The Churches Conservation Trust in October 1977. Since then a programme of repairs has been carried out, originally under the supervision of Neil Birdsall, RIBA, of Birdsall and Swash of Norfolk, and more recently of William Hawkes ARIBA, of William Hawkes/Cave-Brown-Cave of Stratford-upon-Avon. Minor modifications to the church were made when the old north-east vestry and the north-west vestry (formerly part of the Grammar School) were both sold for commercial purposes. The church itself is still used for occasional services and other events.

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