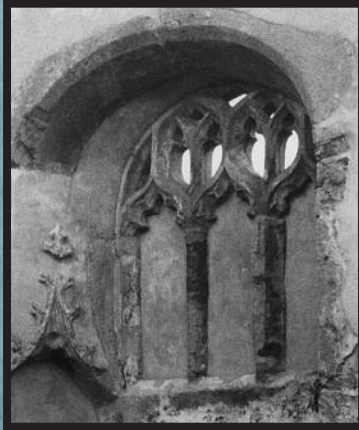




THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST



OLD CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS

Uphill, Somerset



THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST

1 West Smithfield London EC1A 9EE

Tel: 020 7213 0660 Fax: 020 7213 0678 Email: central@tcct.org.uk

www.visitchurches.org.uk Registered Charity No. 258612 Spring 2007

£1.50

Uphill, Somerset

OLD CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS

*by Henry Stapleton (Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, Dean Emeritus of Carlisle,
and Trustee of The Churches Conservation Trust 1976–98)*

HISTORY

It is tempting to find the origin of Uphill's name simply in its geographical position, up the hill overlooking the Bristol Channel. The church indeed is at the top, having collected the customary legends of angels intervening to bring the stones up to the top whenever the inhabitants attempted to build anything at the bottom, where the settlement had originated at the creek. Uphill, however, probably gets its name from the combination of a Scandinavian personal name *Hubba* and the Old English *pill* for creek.

*Front cover: Exterior from the south-east
(Neil Skelton)*

*Left: Exterior from the south-west
(Christopher Dalton)*





Left: Lithograph from John Rutter Delineations of the North Western Division of the County of Somerset (London, 1829) based on original watercolour by John Buckler (Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society)

Below: General view from the south-east

There is no doubt that this is an ancient site. A Roman camp stood on nearby Brean Down and a Roman road has been traced from as far away as Salisbury, through Glastonbury to Banwell, Hutton and Uphill. In fact this may well have been the port for traders buying silver and lead from the mines at Charterhouse on the Mendip Hills. There is evidence that the coastline has altered considerably thanks to draining carried out by Dutch engineers in the 18th century. In Roman and medieval times this would have been a port of no mean significance. Millennia before that, the island of Steep Holm had been part of the mainland. By historic times it was an island with a monastery built there dedicated to St Michael and caring for Uphill.

The connexion with the sea is to be found in the church's dedication to St Nicholas, patron saint of sailors. The west wall of the church was whitewashed in 1828 as a navigational landmark. The fabric and style of the building reflect an 11th-century foundation and much of the fabric is Norman; the central tower could even indicate an earlier, Anglo-Saxon, date. It is significant that Domesday Book records a

comparatively high value for the land in this settlement and it certainly had not suffered a loss like many other areas.

The port flourished through the 17th and 18th centuries. There was an attempt to use it to bring in reinforcements for the Royalist armies in 1645 and there are still signs of the prosperity of the community in what was the port area. This is reflected too in the number, size and quality of the gravestones in the churchyard – even in the community's later ability both to build a new church and maintain the old one. Prosperity too was to be found in a mid-19th century description of the Vicarage at Uphill:

Near the (new) church is the snug parsonage, thickly covered with roses, jasmine, myrtles and vines, and mantled with festoons of various plants; its russet-thatched roof relieved by luxuriant masses of foliage – a true picture of English home scenery, which in the wide world for comfort and tranquillity is not surpassed.

The patronage of the church is first recorded in the family of Longet in the 13th century and the earliest rector whose name is known was John de Gidding in 1318. The right to appoint the incumbent is now in the hands of the Church Society Trust.

When the size of the community at the foot of the hill increased considerably in the second quarter of the 19th century, the parish resolved

to build a new church more conveniently situated where the houses were being built. This was completed to the designs of the architect James Wilson in 1844. However, the old church was not entirely neglected but re-equipped as a burial chapel in 1847–48. In 1864 the chancel was restored but the roof removed from the nave; in 1890 the walls were rendered with cement; in 1904 the north porch was





rebuilt. Indeed in 1910 while the new church was undergoing restoration the old church was used for worship again. The parish continued to spend considerable sums through the 1930s, 1950s and 1960s. In 1930 most of the tower parapet was rebuilt. In 1956 the worn-out Cornish slates on the chancel roof were replaced with Cotswold slates. In 1961–62 the bells were rehung, in 1964 the north parapet of the tower was repaired and in 1965 a concrete ring-beam was inserted to hold the nave walls

together. However, the burden of maintenance eventually became too great for the parish; and on the first day of 1989 the old church was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund, now The Churches Conservation Trust. Since then much has been done, under the direction of the architect John Keeling Maggs, to ensure the survival of this historic and holy place, and occasional services are still held here in the summer months.

EXTERIOR

The church occupies a windswept position on its hilltop, reached by a steep footpath, with fine views over the surrounding area, the estuary of the River Axe and the sea. It consists of a nave with north porch, central tower without transepts, and chancel. The entrance is through the stone-roofed north porch, so placed because it was easier of access than the south side. Much of the fabric is still Norman (c. 1080–1130) in character, in particular the two simple nave doorways, the north wall of the chancel with its two original windows and corbel-table, the north wall of the tower and the south wall of the nave. The single stone over the north doorway is carved with a geometrical cross and that over the south doorway (now blocked) with a Maltese cross. Here and on the tower window are distinctive scratch-dials.

The tower has small but attractive 14th-century windows in its upper stages, a carved three-headed gargoyle on the south side and a smaller, blind, gargoyle on the west. The pretty pierced parapet and pinnacles were entirely renewed in 1930 and 1964 but the top of the north-east stair turret is still medieval.



INTERIOR

NAVE

From the positions of the windows and the stonework it is possible to imagine the arrangement of the pre-Reformation furniture. The north and south doorways would have been part of the liturgical way for the Sunday morning procession.

There would have been simple pews coming out from the north and south walls and a central passageway. Such a general seating scheme was no doubt replaced with box pews in the 18th century. In front of the western chancel (or rather tower) arch was a screen with rood loft above, which was reputedly not removed till 1864. Access to this loft, on which were the figures of the crucified Christ, Our Lady and St John, was by the top doorway from the stairs in the south-east corner of the nave. The canopied lower doorway evidently gave access to the pulpit. The 14th-century stone carving here is of considerable quality, comparable with that on the beautiful font now in the new church.

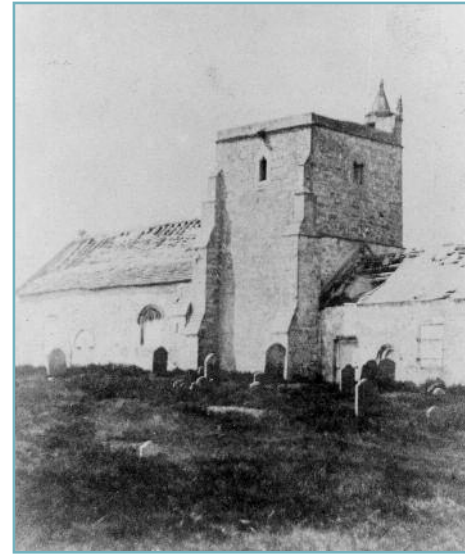
The 15th-century three-light window in the south wall, with rather elaborate tracery, may have been inserted to throw more light on the Rood figures or to enable preacher or lesson-reader to see his texts more clearly.

CHANCEL

In medieval times the chancel would have had for furniture little more than the high (principal) altar of the church at the eastern end. The east

wall has never been pierced with any window tracery though some supposedly 13th-century painted figures were once there but are no longer visible. Benches for a small choir may have been placed along the north and south walls; by the early 17th-century communion rails would have enclosed the sanctuary. Such an arrangement would probably have continued into the 17th and 18th centuries when the chancel was used for occasional celebrations of the Holy Communion. The congregation would leave their box pews in the nave and 'draw near' to receive the sacrament at a communion table at the east end of the chancel.

It appears that the furnishings were cleared out after the new church was opened in 1844 and the old church became a burial chapel. Thomas Tutton Knyfton, of Uphill Castle, restored the chancel in 1864 and the timber roof apparently dates from that time. In 1891 the new church swapped its 1844 font for the original medieval one and there is the curious arrangement of the Victorian font cut in half and set into the east wall. The refurnishing of the chancel dates from 1950 when Frank Powell and Dorothy Shipway presented the lectern, prayer desk and communion table in memory of their parents, Henry and Lucy Ann Powell. The reredos behind the table contains three paintings by a local artist and parishioner, Phoebe Sparrow. In the centre is Christ, on the north side St Andrew (to whom the Cathedral at Wells is dedicated) and on the south St Nicholas. In the base of the tower are



two more paintings by the same artist – King Arthur and Gildas, the 6th-century historian who was a monk at Steep Holm.

The two windows in the south wall of the chancel were constructed in 1891: the first replaced a doorway which had been built in 1848 to admit coffins, and the second was made to correspond with it. There is also a 15th-century priest's doorway which has been blocked since 1848.

On the chancel floor are two memorial stones with Latin inscriptions which, translated, read:

(North) *Build thyself a tomb; trust not to the affection of the heir. Samuel Baker, Rector of this parish, was buried here the 9th day of November, in the year of the Lord 1725, aged 60.*

(South) *Here lies John, son of Samuel Baker, Rector of this church, who died 29th day of January, in the year of the Lord 1706.*

On the north wall are a tablet commemorating Ann, wife of Benjamin Hancock, Rector, 1765, and a brass plaque to members of the Knyfton family and others.

TOWER

Further Knyftons are commemorated on two 19th-century slabs on the tower floor. Both tower arches are continuously moulded and date from the 14th or 15th century. On the south side are two late medieval carvings of angels bearing shields. A ring of five bells was cast by William Bilbie of Chewstoke in 1775 and of these four remain, one (the present fourth) having been recast in Bristol in 1840. A treble bell (given by CE Whitting of Uphill Grange) was added to make six, and the bells were rehung with cast iron stocks and other new fittings in an innovative steel frame, by John Warner & Sons of London in 1914. Taylors of Loughborough restored the bells and rehung them on ball bearings in 1961–62.

THE CHURCHES CONSERVATION TRUST

The Churches Conservation Trust is the leading charity that cares for and preserves English churches of historic, architectural or archaeological importance that are no longer needed for regular worship. It promotes public enjoyment of them and their use as an educational and community resource.

Whatever the condition of the church when the Trust takes it over its aims are, first and foremost, to put the building and its contents into a sound and secure condition as speedily as possible. Then the church is repaired so that it is welcoming to visitors and those who attend the public events or occasional services that may be held there (Trust churches are still consecrated). Our objective is to keep it intact for the benefit of present and future generations, for local people and visitors alike to behold and enjoy.

There are some 340 Trust churches scattered widely through the length and breadth of England, in town and country, ranging from charmingly simple buildings in lovely settings to others of great richness and splendour; some are hard to find, all are worth the effort.

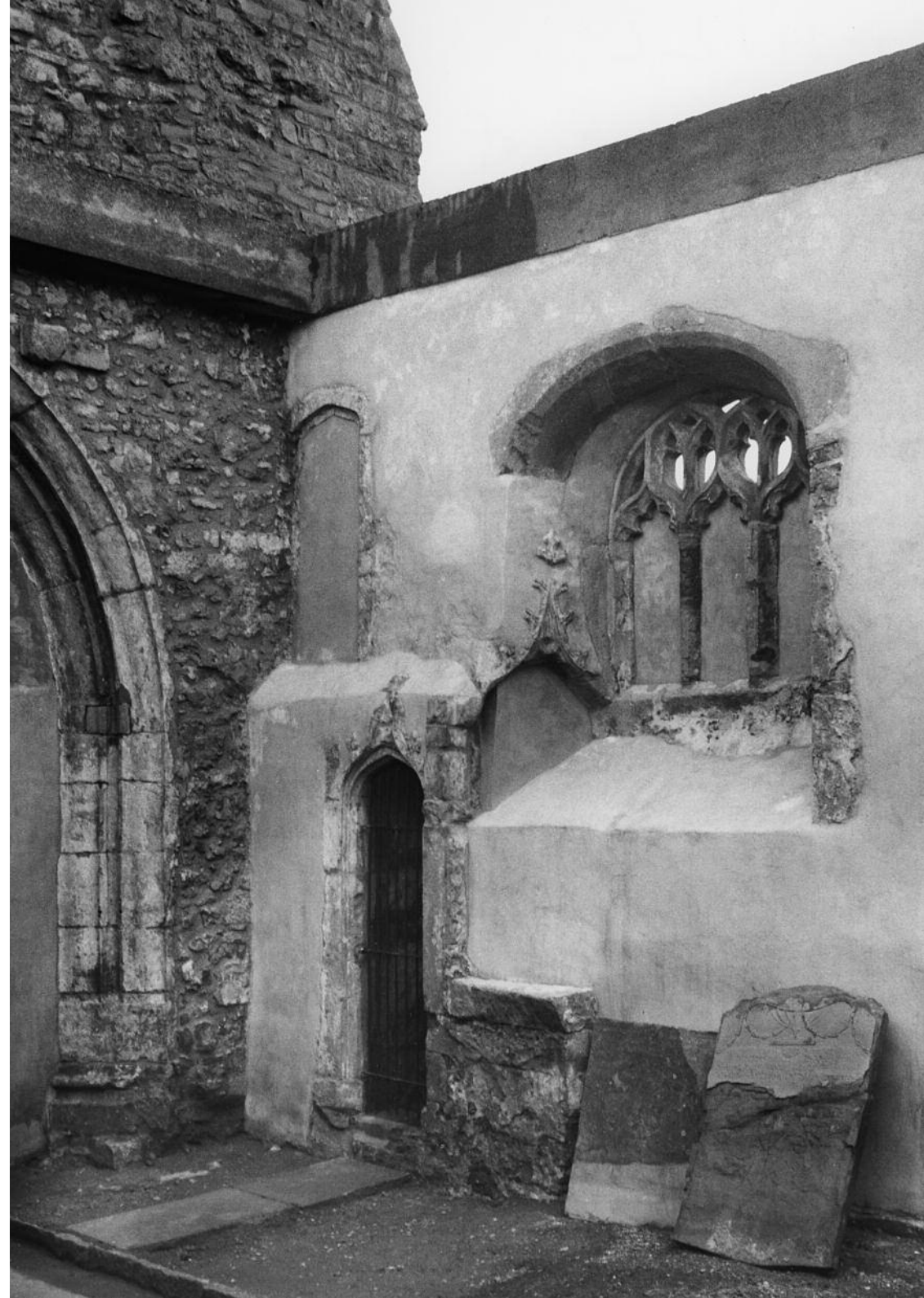
Many of the churches are open all year round, others have keyholders nearby; all are free. A notice regarding opening arrangements or keyholders will normally be found near the door. Otherwise, such information can be obtained direct from the Trust during office hours or from the website www.visitchurches.org.uk.

Visitors are most welcome and we hope this guidebook will encourage you to explore these wonderful buildings.

NEARBY ARE THE TRUST CHURCHES OF
St Nicholas, Brockley
9 miles NE of Weston Super Mare off A370

St Michael, Clapton in Gordano,
5 miles NE of Clevedon off B3124

© The Churches Conservation Trust 2007



*Right: Nave looking south-east showing the doorway to the former rood screen (Christopher Dalton)
Back cover: Partially blocked window at the east end of the nave south wall (Christopher Dalton)*