

### Old St Giles 3: blue plaques and history



Figure 1. The building in Benhill Road

In December 2016 the *Southwark News* reported a small ceremony in Benhill Road – the unveiling of a blue plaque for the “862-year-old porch door of St Giles Church”. The article was full of references to history, and to the importance of preserving historic sites. Amen to that.



Figure 2. The blue plaque

Regrettably, the central statement of the plaque is not true. The small building was never the porch and doorway of the church; and while, improbably, it may have been used as a summer house, that is not the reason why it was erected.

Those responsible for the plaque did not have far to look for the true story, which has its own plaque in plain view, preserved inside the building:

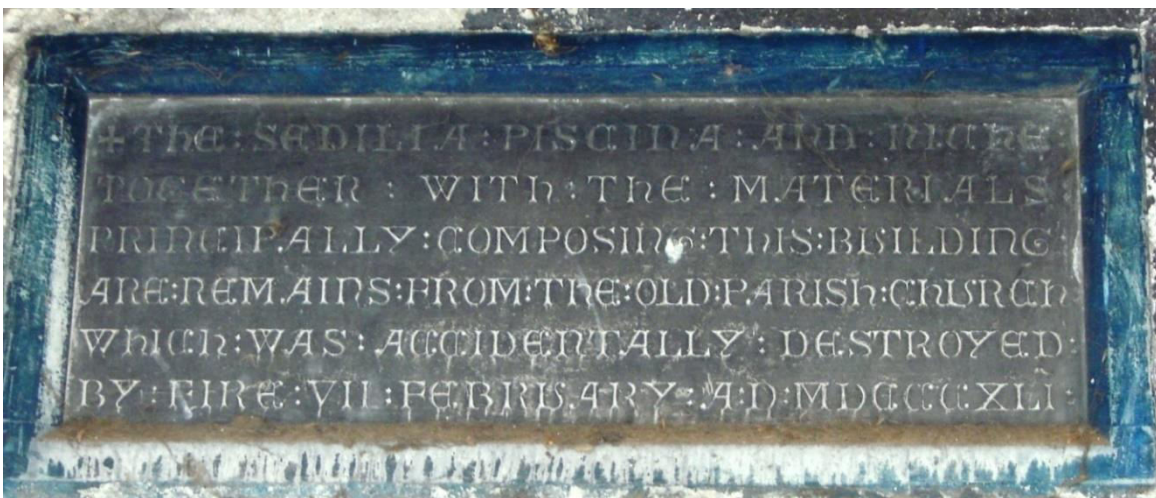
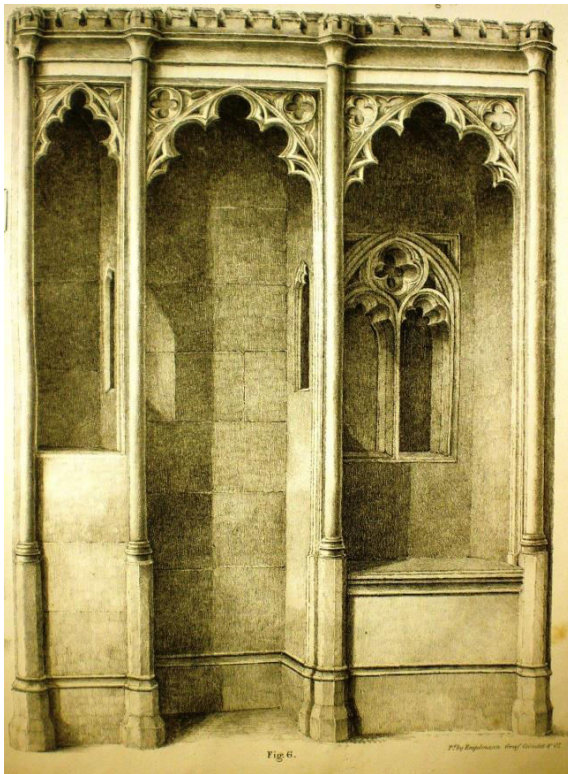


Figure 3. The original plaque inside the Benhill Road structure

It reads: “The sedilia piscina and niche together with the materials principally composing this building are remains from the old parish church which was accidentally destroyed by fire VII February MDCCCXLI”

The sentence, “the materials principally composing this building are remains from the old parish church”, bears repetition. There is no mention of a porch, far less of a porch’s being relocated.

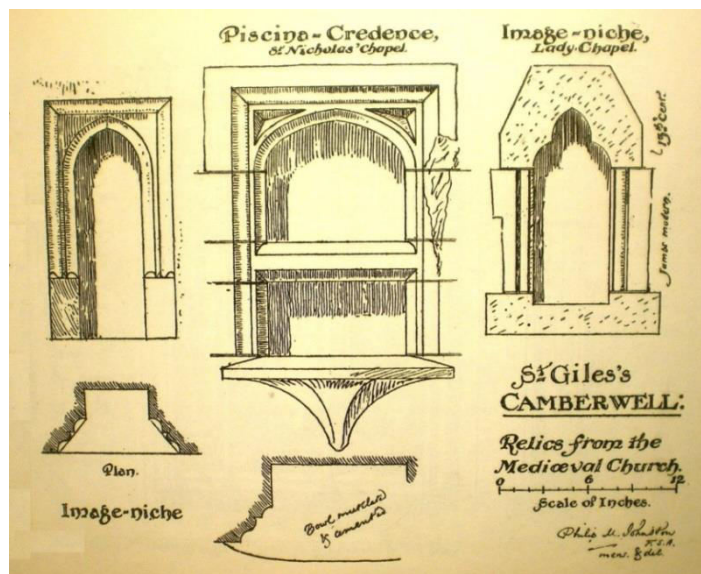
The church burned down. The part of the structure that didn’t collapse in the fire was demolished, yielding considerable quantities of building materials. Some of these were used for the building in Benhill Road. They might have included material from the north porch which, it will be recalled from the previous article in this series, dated from the 1830s. That is all that can be said.



But why was the little structure built? The answer to this question comes from the opening words “sedilia piscina and niche”, words tolerably obscure to the majority of us who are not historians of ecclesiastical architecture. Obscure to us, they were of great interest to commentators in the past. And the purpose of the little building was to house the objects referred to.

Figure 4 is from G.F. Prosser's 1827 work, *Short Historical and Topographical Account of St Giles' Church, Camberwell*. On p.4 he wrote, “In the south wall of the chancel is a very beautiful specimen of Gothic architecture, consisting of two stone stalls and a piscina or basin. Whether these were intended for the purposes of confession, or for the use of the dignified clergy, is a matter of great doubt ... These sedilia, which constitute one of the most striking objects of the church, were concealed behind the wainscoting for many years, until the late alteration, when they were, by the care of the present vicar, brought to light and restored.” The “two stone stalls” (*sedilia* is the plural of the Latin *sedile*, a seat) are on the right, one with a stone bench. The waist-high stonework in the left-hand compartment contained the basin, or piscina.

Figure 4. *Sedilia and piscina*



As to the niches (there were three of them), they were depicted a century after Prosser by Philip Johnston in his 1919 work, *Old Camberwell: Its History and Antiquities* (see Figure 5). These niches, each a foot or two high, originally held images of saints. Johnston dated the one on the right in his drawing, from the Lady Chapel, to the thirteenth century. In the middle one the upper shelf, the “credence”, was to hold the elements used in Holy Communion. Johnston dated this one and the one to the left to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and the sedilia to around 1380.

Figure 5. *The niches, from Johnston, p.27*



The sedilia and the niches were thus the only elements of the old church that had survived from the middle ages.



Figure 6. The burnt-out interior of the church (© British Library Board, Crach.1.Tab.1.b.1.)

They can be seen in position in a sketch of the burnt-out interior of the church done immediately after the fire. The sedilia in the chancel and Johnston's "piscina-credence" in the St Nicholas Chapel are clear. We don't get a view into what remains of the Lady Chapel (at the back left) but two other niches can be seen, one (possibly) on the west wall of the nave, the other on the west wall of the north aisle. The latter, from its appearance, could well be the one that Johnston did not give a location for, the one on the left of his drawing.



The structure in Benhill Road, then, was built as a home for these medieval survivals, and that is where Johnston saw them. The remains of the niches, dreadfully eroded, are still there: the one from the Lady Chapel outside above the entrance, the one probably from the north aisle inside to the left, and the piscina-credence inside to the right.

Figure 7. The three medieval niches, arranged as in Johnston's drawing

The question immediately arises as to why all this was necessary. Why were these precious medieval elements not incorporated into the new church? We do not know. But if I may drift for a moment from history into speculation, I would suggest as follows. We know that the vicar, J.G. Storie, had long cared for the sedilia – he had had them “brought to light and restored” not long after entering the living in 1823. And it was of course in a structure in his garden that the remains were preserved. It is hard not to think that he would have preferred them to be incorporated into Scott’s new church. Scott later made clear that he had had serious disagreements with Storie – could one of these have been about the medieval remains? Here another possibly relevant circumstance must be considered. The 1840s were a time of great controversy within the Church of England, with adherents of the “Oxford Movement” tending towards an interpretation of Anglicanism that brought it closer to Roman Catholicism. This included trying to bring the physical aspects of worship closer to their medieval antecedents: stone altars, saints’ niches and so on. But what might be precious relics to some could be the work of the devil to others. It is the case too that Storie left St Giles in 1846 as a very unhappy man. I know nothing of Scott’s doctrinal tendency, nor of the make-up of the St Giles Vestry. But it seems to me quite plausible that the banishment of the sedilia and the niches was the result of a doctrinal dispute.



When Johnston saw the sedilia in the early twentieth century he was surprised by how well they were preserved. In 1916 they were retrieved from Benhill Road by William Isaac Shard, and installed in the chancel of Scott’s church, where they are to this day, having left their still-visible, clear outline on the back wall of their previous shelter.

We are left with an irony. The little building in Benhill Road, which is of no architectural or historical interest, gets a blue plaque. Its remaining contents, the niches, of great interest, are ignored, and continue to deteriorate towards complete unrecognisability. If we were truly interested in historical preservation, we would knock down the little building and put the niches somewhere safe.

*Figure 7. The sedilia and piscina as they are today*