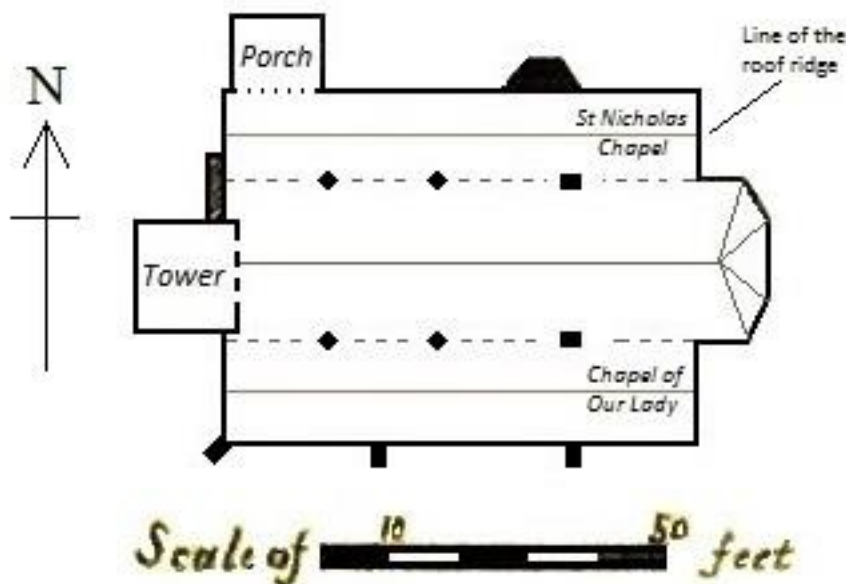


## Old St Giles 2: the church that burned down

The longer one lives with the present-day church of St Giles, the more solid and comforting a part of one's environment it becomes. It is thus not surprising that about the only thing most people know about its predecessor is that it burned down in 1841.

One difficulty perhaps is in the extant pictures of old St Giles, of which it has been correctly if somewhat gloomily written, "There are a number of prints of the former St Giles, but no two views are quite the same".<sup>1</sup> There is no single image of it to live in the public imagination. Indeed it is possible to look at two different images and find it hard to believe that they represent the same building. One reason for all the variation, not unexpectedly, is that in many ways it wasn't the same building. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it was repeatedly enlarged and "beautified". Later commentators have been unenthusiastic about all this "beautification", seeing rather the progressive spoiling of what had been a coherent and pleasing structure.<sup>2</sup>

By and large the texts agree that the old church reached a basic form in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and this lasted well into the 18<sup>th</sup>, but that the 16<sup>th</sup>-century building retained little of the earliest stone structure, that of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The ground plan as it had become by the 16<sup>th</sup> century is shown in Figure 1.



The nave and the N and S aisles each had a gabled (double-pitched) roof, so another of the difficulties in interpreting old pictures of the church is that none shows all three roofs and most show only one.

It is nonetheless possible to trace the development of the old St Giles building through the available images, with the help of extant archives and the works of those earlier commentators. In doing this I have not tried to select the most charming pictures, nor those that are best executed, rather those which are most effective in showing the changes that were made.

Figure 1. Groundplan of the old church from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1786.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest image of the church, as far as I have been able to discover, is shown in Figure 2. It depicts the building, or at least the north aisle and tower, more or less as we can imagine them to have been in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and still surrounded by fields in the early 18<sup>th</sup>, except that the cupola, of wood and lead, was added in 1718 in order to house a bell for the clock.<sup>4</sup>

The churchyard, with scattered gravestones, is surrounded by a wall which at first glance seems to lie in the distance. This impression doesn't survive enlargement of the image, or careful consideration of the perspective: in fact the wall is shown to surround a small churchyard.

<sup>1</sup> Friends of St Giles Church, *St Giles - the Parish Church of Camberwell* (1987). The comment seems to be due to Mary Boast.

<sup>2</sup> Allport, Douglas, *Collections, illustrative of the geology, history, antiquities, and associations, of Camberwell, and the neighbourhood* (1841), pp.115-16; Blanch, W.H., *Ye Parish of Camberwell* (1875), pp.196, 200; Johnston, P.M., *Old Camberwell* (1919), p.18.

<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 is based on a small sketch at the bottom of the 1824 engraving by Charles Burton reproduced in Figure 8, and a sketch in Johnston, *op.cit.*, p.5 (<https://tinyurl.com/h3k9ney>).

<sup>4</sup> Southwark Local History Library (SLHL), St Giles Vestry minutes (henceforth shortened to "Vestry minutes"), 9 October 1718; London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), St Giles Churchwardens' accounts (henceforth shortened to "Churchwardens' accounts"), P73/GIS/57 (microfilm X15/19), Liberty of Camberwell, 1718; see also Blanch, *op.cit.*, p.122.

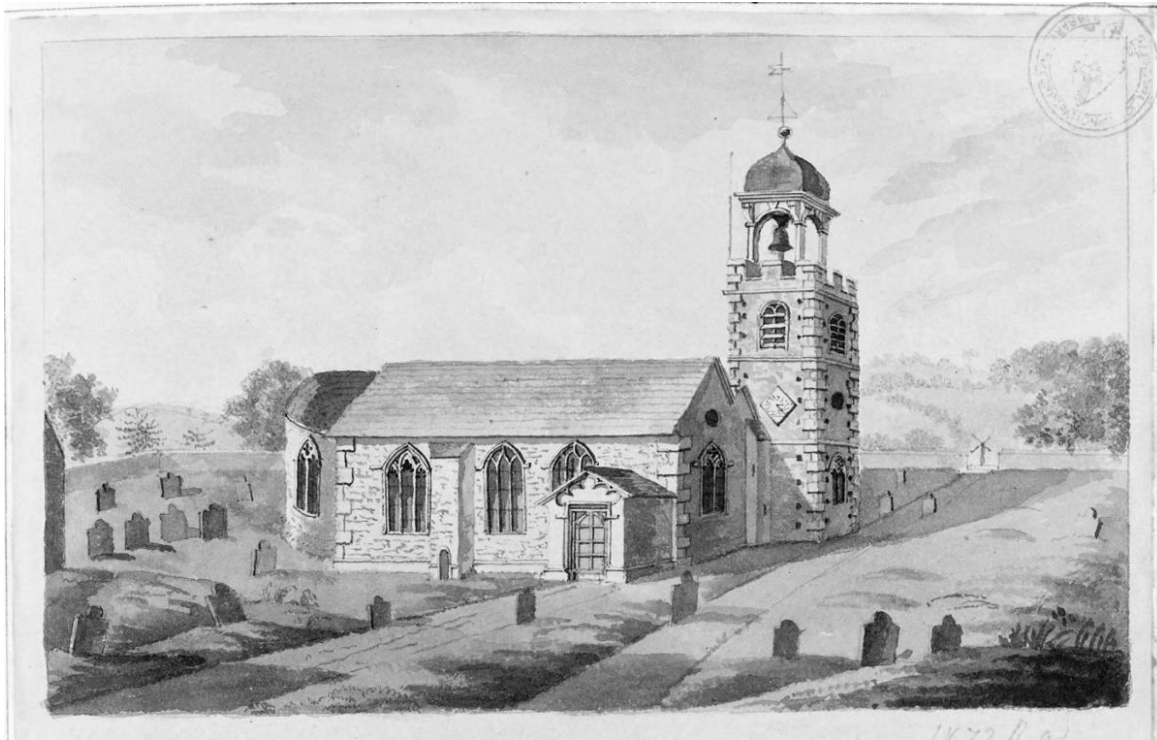


Figure 2. *Old St Giles, view from the NW, late 1720s* (London Metropolitan Archives, City of London) <sup>6</sup>

The path down beside the tower ends in what can be identified as a horse stile.<sup>5</sup>

The artist evidently had some difficulty with the apse, which looks as though it may be intended to be semi-circular, rather than semi-octagonal as in all later pictures, and as shown in Figure 1.

One author believed that the representation actually was of a semi-circular apse, taking such a shape to be a survival from the Norman structure;<sup>7</sup> but since any such major project as rebuilding the apse would have left a record in the Vestry minutes and churchwardens' accounts, and no such record is found, it is safer to suppose that the artist's evident difficulty with the apse is consistent with what he was trying to depict having in fact been semi-octagonal.

Despite the question of the apse, the picture gives the impression that it is an attempt at an accurate portrayal of the scene, including the hills in the background. The small roundish window at the west end of the north aisle was installed, or at least ordered, in 1725, so the earliest date for the picture is 1725 or a bit after.<sup>8</sup> A latest date is suggested by the absence of the tomb surrounded by railings that is prominent in Figure 3, and should have been visible in Figure 2, if it had been there. The tomb belonged to one Thomas Bourne, who died in 1729, and appears in many later images, and exists to this day. It is thus reasonable to conclude that Figure 2 shows the church before 1729.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A horse stile consists essentially of a double low barrier - this can be seen when the picture is enlarged. The additional function of the cross on the post is not known. The churchwardens' accounts report expenditure of 13s 5d on 1 January 1788 for a "new south gate to the churchyard to prevent horses getting in".

<sup>6</sup> <https://collage.cityoflondon.gov.uk>, Record No. 23813, Catalogue No. p5352695. It is taken from the grangerized version of Lysons, Daniel, *The environs of London: being an historical account of the towns, villages, and hamlets, within twelve miles of that capital: interspersed with biographical anecdotes* (1796), Vol.1, Part 1, facing p.72 (LMA ref. SC/GL/LYS/001/001).

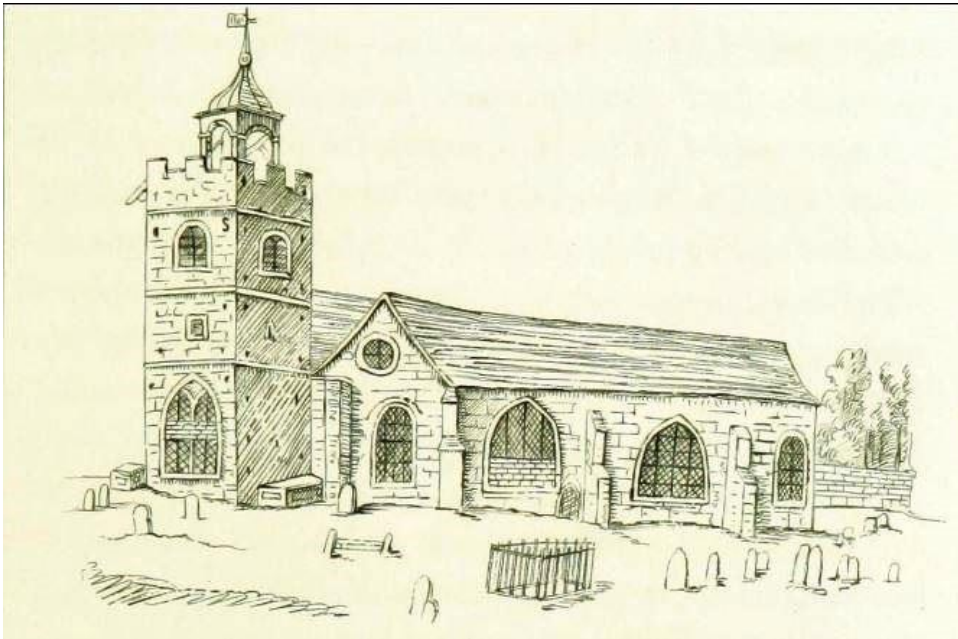
<sup>7</sup> Allport, *op.cit.*, p.112.

<sup>8</sup> Vestry minutes, 10 September 1725. The window was ordered to be "ovell" and appears from later drawings to have been possibly elliptical or possibly what we would now call "running-track shaped".

<sup>9</sup> It is in fact difficult to relate the picture satisfactorily to what is known of the development of the churchyard. There was certainly a stile of longstanding, since there is a reference to its being repaired in the churchwardens' accounts for 1671 (Blanch, p.114), and to a tomb being authorised "on a piece of ground on the south side of the church near the stile" in the Vestry minutes of 18 September 1703. The difficulty is in fitting in the gift by Johanna Cock in 1717 (see "Old St Giles 1 - the churchyard since 1717", CQ000). In Figure 2 there is no sign of a wall or the L-shape created by Mrs Cock's gift, while on the other hand the churchyard seems to extend further to the west that it would have done before the gift.



In Figure 3 we see the church from the other side a few years later, and glimpse the roof of the nave beyond that of the south aisle. It can't be very much later because, as in Figure 2, there are no trees inside the churchyard. This in



contrast to Figures 4 and 5, securely dated to 1750, which show mature trees. Even if they had been saplings deemed not worthy of inclusion in the earlier sketches, they would surely have needed twenty years or so to reach the size shown in the 1750 images. There are other points, in addition to the Bourne tomb, that suggest that the Figure 3 building is later than that shown in Figure 2: the west window of the tower has a horizontal division, apparently of brick; and there is an S-shaped anchor plate at the top of the same wall. It is also worth noting the (crudely drawn) windows of the south aisle, which have

Figure 3. Old church from the SW, 1730s (© British Library Board 10358.h.4)

lost their stone mullions. Of course we don't know what the windows of the north aisle looked like at the same time, but it is the case that the image in Figure 2 seems to be the only one in existence that shows aisle windows in what was apparently their 16<sup>th</sup> century state.

Figure 4 and 5 form a pair, both being by the artist, Jean Baptiste Claude Chatelain, and the engraver, James Roberts.

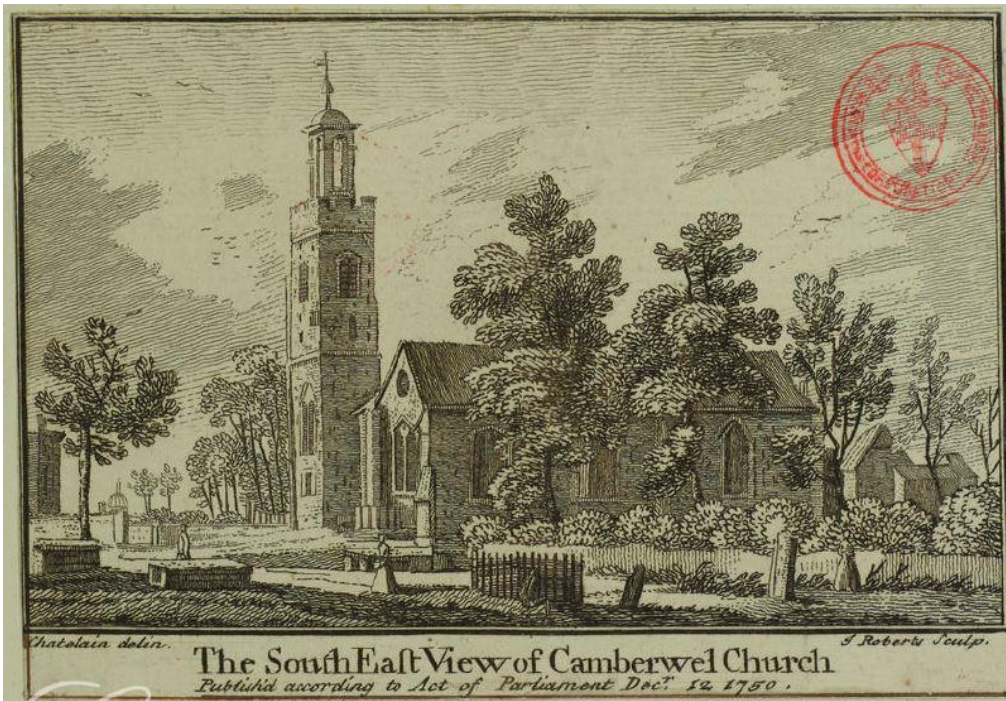


Figure 4 presents the same view as in Figure 3, and shows the church in much the same state. ("South East" in the original caption is a mistake.) But the trees have grown, and there is now a fence and hedge at the eastern boundary of the land added by Johanna Cock's gift, with the Bourne tomb well inside it. On the right we can see the buildings of Wilson's Grammar School, and on the left a charming glimpse of St Paul's.

Figure 4. Old church from the SW, 1750 (London Metropolitan Archives, City of London)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <https://collage.cityoflondon.gov.uk>, Record No. 23814, Catalogue No. p5352672. The engravings in Figures 4 and 5 belong to a series of the same date. The British Museum, which holds other members of the series, describes them as being by Roberts "after" Chatelain.



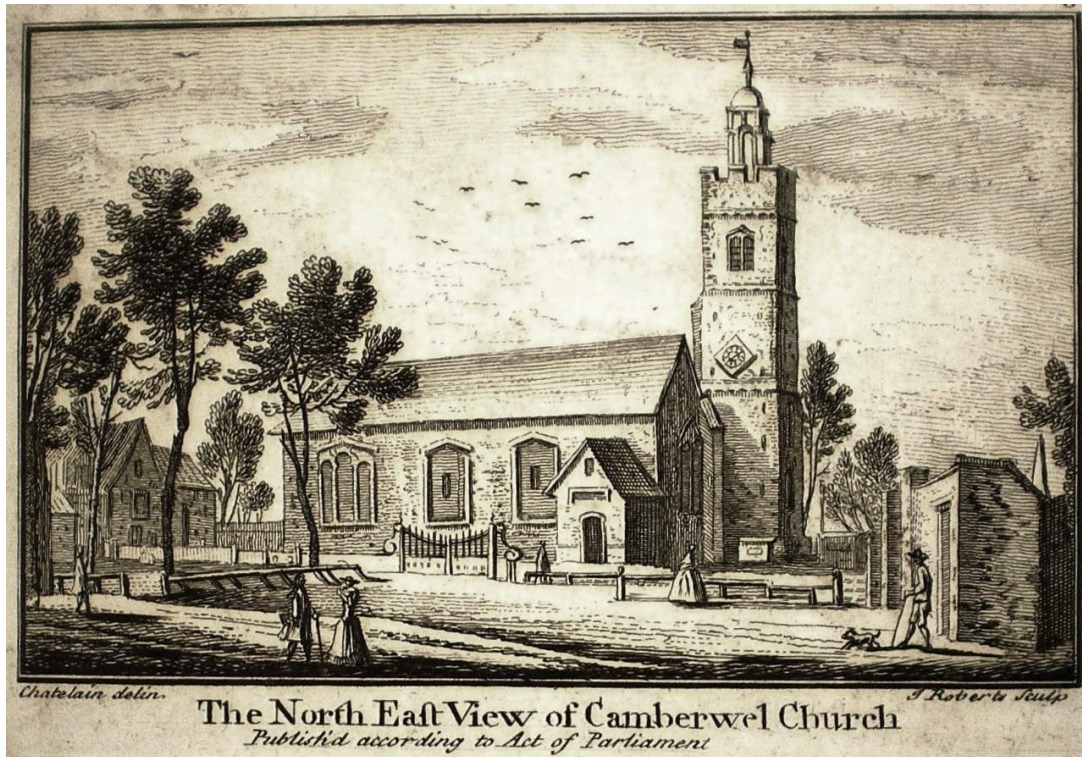


Figure 5. Old church from the NW, 1750 (courtesy Southwark Local History Library)

south wall of the south aisle, and then widening it and extending it to the line of the west wall of the tower. This created the ground plan shown in Figure 6. The new space accommodated enlarged galleries, and provided a new entrance to the west. The final building cost was £841.6s.<sup>11</sup>

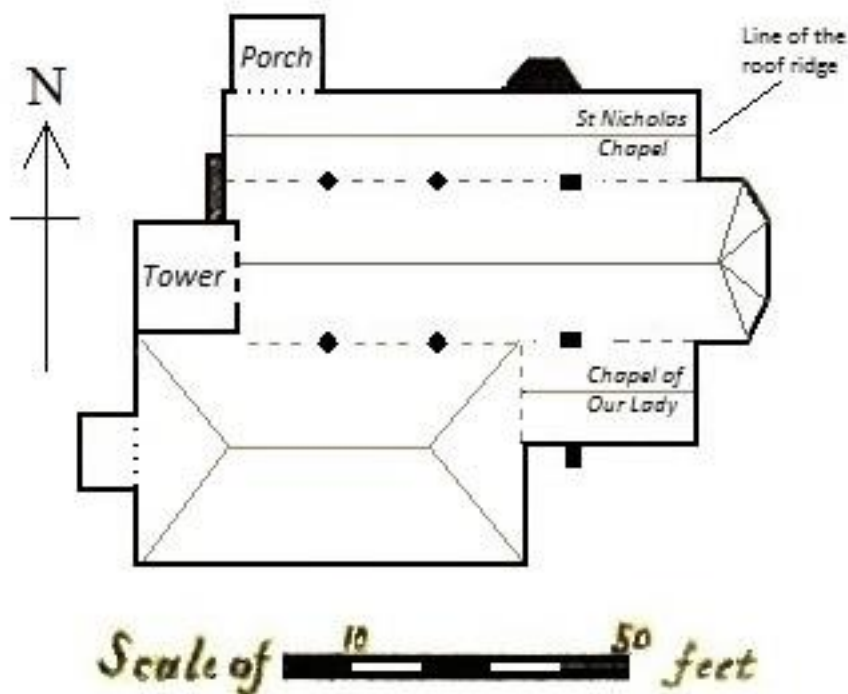


Figure 6. Groundplan of the old church from about 1786 to 1825

<sup>11</sup> Vestry minutes 29 June 1786; Churchwardens' accounts, P73/GIS/ 60 (microfilm X15/20), 13 November 1786, May 1787, 2 June 1787, 10 August 1787, 7 November 1787, 28 December 1787. The work was done by a Mr Drew.





Figure 7. Old church from the SW 1787-1798 ( courtesy(Southwark Local History Library)<sup>12</sup>

tower was rebuilt.<sup>13</sup> This included replacing the earlier housing for the bell serving the clock with a more slender and ornate wooden gothic structure. The accounts suggest that this was to do the same job as its predecessor but it seems that the actual bell housing was set lower down, more or less impossible to see from ground level.

In the following few years there is no record of major building decisions' being taken, but judging from the accounts there was nonetheless an ongoing programme.



Figure 8. Old church from the NW, early 1800s (courtesy Southwark Local History Library)

All the windows, including those in the 1786 extension were refashioned into a uniform style with plain gothic arches and mullions which, on the basis of the tradesmen's bills, must have been made of wood; and the outside walls were stuccoed and painted. By the end of 1801, including refurbishing the tower, the Vestry had spent more than £1,300, much more, that is, than the cost of the 1786 extension.<sup>14</sup> A year or two later an awning, or covered way, was built to join the north porch to the churchyard gate. Figure 8 shows the results of all this work. The remade windows are most clearly seen in the tower, which now has three crenellations instead of two. The 1786 extension can be seen in the distance and the grammar school building, again, on the left. The awning, which one might imagine to have been rather a pleasant feature, only lasted about twenty years.<sup>15</sup>

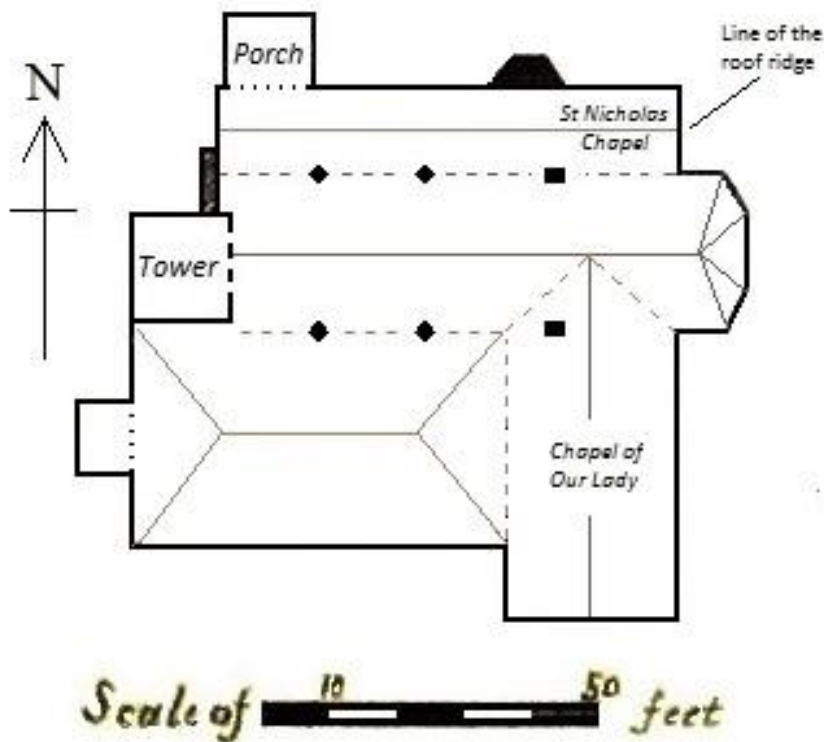
<sup>12</sup> This a reproduction of a watercolour by W. Summers.

<sup>13</sup> Vestry minutes, 20 and 22 June, and 29 September, 1797.

<sup>14</sup> Vestry minutes, 18 April 1799; Churchwardens' accounts, P73/GIS/64, 23 September 1797 – 2 June 1801.

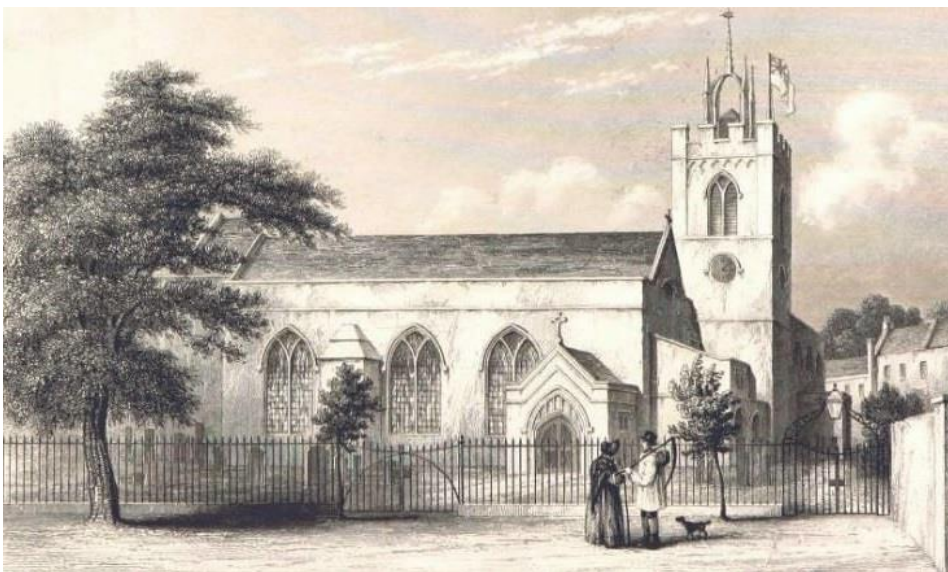
<sup>15</sup> Sketches in the Southwark Local History Library, which are apparently preliminary to the 1825 enlargement, don't show the awning.





The money recently spent had done nothing to increase the accommodation, which had been insufficient for some years. In the 1790s the Vestry had rejected both enlargement of the existing and building a new church, and rejected both expedients again in 1816.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in 1821, it was agreed to build a new church, St George's, on what became Wells Way, and in 1824, after J.G.Storie's arrival as vicar, to a further extension of the old building.<sup>17</sup> This entailed knocking down the old chapel of Our Lady and replacing it with a new building of twice or so the area, with its roof at right angles to that of the nave. The resulting ground plan is shown in Figure 9.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 9. Groundplan of the old church, 1825-1841



This was the end of enlargement, but not of beautification. Perhaps early in the 1830s the venerable semi-octagonal apse was made square, and the north porch was redone in an old gothic style to match the redone old gothic windows, as seen in Figure 10.

And that is the church that burned down.

Figure 10. Old church from the north, 1830s (© British Library Board 10358.h.4)

Donald Mason  
February 2017

<sup>16</sup> Vestry minutes, 26 June 1792, 9 August 1792, 14 November 1816.

<sup>17</sup> Vestry minutes, 17 August 1820, 13 April 1821, 8 July 1824.

<sup>18</sup> There is an illustration of the new extension, in prospect rather than as built in *The Gentleman's Magazine, and Historical Chronicle*, Vol.95, Part 1, January, 1825, facing p.295. The accompanying text is by Douglas Allport, writing as D.A.Briton.