

PLYMOUTH CHURCHES

ANGLICAN CHURCHES

CHARLES' CHURCH



Charles Church was situated in Vennel Street before the Second World War. It is now in the centre of the Charles Cross roundabout, preserved as a monument to those civilians who died in Plymouth during the Second World War.

Plymouth grew as a strongly Protestant town and having fought hard for the right to govern itself, it did not take to being dictated to, even by the monarch. Consequently, when King Charles I installed a "royalist" cleric at St Andrew's Church, then Plymouth's only place of worship, the Corporation was not best pleased. Thinking that there might be further royal interventions ahead, on April 25th 1634 the Mayor of Plymouth and its thirty Councillors petitioned King Charles for a new parish to be created on the pretence that St Andrew's Church was no longer large enough for its religious needs. The parish was to be named Charles so the King could hardly refuse, although he took seven years to make up his mind. [1]

It took some seven years and the intervention of Mr Robert Trelawny to persuade the King to agree and on April 21st 1641 the Letters Patent authorising the building was duly issued. Building started immediately on a site given by Mr William Warren, vintner, in return for which he received a place of burial adjoining the chancel and a seat from

which to 'hear divine service and the word of God preached'. [1]

Construction had reached roof level by the time the Civil War intervened in 1643. The first baptism took place in December that year. [1]

Work re-started after the Civil War but progressed only slowly. The tower was erected in 1657 and the Church was completed in 1658. [1]

Charles Church was consecrated by the Bishop of Exeter, Seth Ward, on September 2nd 1665 [2]. A wooden spire covered with lead was added during 1707/08. It was not replaced with a stone one until 1766/67. [1]

It should be noted that the Church was dedicated simply to Charles, not Charles the Martyr, as popularly thought, or St Charles. It is true, however, that after the fervour of the Restoration an attempt was made to get this dedication changed to Charles the Martyr but although the Bishop of Exeter was apparently in favour, the move did not succeed. Worth states that the unofficial use of the title Charles the Martyr 'was officially expunged in 1868' [1].

Built of stone, the Church in 1935 consisted of chancel, nave, aisles, south and west porches, and a lofty western tower with spire, containing ten bells. [3]

The first bells were cast in 1709 and presented to the Church by Mr Joseph Jory, who in 1719 also donated the clock and chimes. The clock only had two faces, one on the north side and the other on the south one [?]. [4]

The bells were recast in 1782 and two more added in 1856. Finally in 1898 the peel reached its complement of ten bells. Messrs Gillett and Johnston (Croydon) Ltd, who are still in business [5], re-hung the peel in 1936, when the tenor bell weighed 23 cwt 6lbs. [?]

Although a faculty was obtained in 1815 for the erection of galleries this was not done until the remodelling by Mr J H Ball in 1828-29, when a new pulpit and screen were also installed. The Church was again restored and renovated in 1864, when the porches were erected to replace the external staircases. [4]



The interior was described by Llewellyn Jewitt in 1873 as: '*The side aisles are each divided from the nave by a series of three arches, rising from clustered columns, and there are galleries on the north and south aisles and at the west end; the tall pulpit, with spiral staircase, stands in the centre. The altar screen, or reredos, is an arcade of nine arches, supported on marble pillars with foliated capitals.*' [4]

Amongst the many notable local citizens remembered on the memorials were [4]:

- Mr William Rowe, merchant and a great benefactor of the Town, who died on December 27th 1690; and his wife, Frances, who died on December 18th 1688;
- Reverend Sir Cecil Augustus Bisshopp MA, former patron of the living;
- Reverend John Bedford MA, vicar for 25 years;
- Reverend Septimus Courtney AM, vicar for 22 years, who died on March 7th 1843;

- Reverend Robert Hawker DD, died April 26th 1827 after serving as curate for six years and vicar for forty-three years; and
- Admiral Sir Israel Pellew KCB, who died July 19th 1832.

A Mission Room was opened in Camden Street, within the parish, on the evening of Tuesday March 12th 1878. The building was designed by Mr H J Snell and had a neat Gothic frontage. In addition to the mission room, which was capable of seating 100 people, there was a dwelling for the scripture reader of the parish, a Mr Wood; a kitchen to be used for parochial purposes when required; three large rooms for class-rooms and some committee rooms. The cost of the premises, some £600/£700, was paid for by Mr Jonathan Marshall, one of the churchwardens of Charles Church. He was helped in his endeavours by others, however, noteworthy among them being a Mr Oliver, who made and presented a reading desk, and a Mr Hammet, who painted the woodwork. The vicar at the time was the Reverend F G Head. [6]

A programme of meetings was announced. There would be a meeting in the Mission Room on Sunday evenings; a mother's meeting on Tuesdays; and there would be Bible classes for all. During the winter the kitchen would be used to provide hot food for the invalid poor, who would be given a cut off a leg of lamb or round of beef. Mr Marshall expressed the hope during the meeting that the parish could now find a permanent home for their vicar: it seems there was no vicarage at that time. [6]

Charles Church was destroyed during the night of March 21st/22nd 1941. [7]

It was City Engineer, Mr James Paton Watson who, when writing the "Plan for Plymouth" in 1943, first suggested that the remains should be preserved as a prominent war memorial. He was supported by the Old Plymouth Society, which gave £100 towards the £5,700 needed for partial restoration. [7]

However, the Council's Reconstruction Committee resolved on June 15th 1953 that the Council should acquire and demolish the Church. [8]

Despite continued cries for it to be demolished, it has been retained and on Saturday November 1st 1958 the Reverend J Allen James, vicar of Charles with St Luke, dedicated it as a fitting memorial to Plymouth's 1,200 civilian dead in the Second World War. The Lord Mayor of Plymouth, Alderman G J Wingett, unveiled a plaque on the north wall. The Bishop of Plymouth, the Right Reverend Norman H Clarke, pronounced the blessing. [7]

~ Charles Church. Built 1641. Consecrated 1665. Completed 1708. Named in honour of King Charles I. Ruined by enemy action, 21 March 1941. Partially restored 1952, by the City in co-operation with the Ministry of Works. The idea of restoration having been sponsored by the Old Plymouth Society, as a memorial to those citizens of Plymouth who were killed in air-raids on the City in the 1939-1945 War. ~

The remains of those who were buried in the churchyard that surrounded Charles Church have been re-interred at Efford Cemetery.

CLICK HERE to view the Charles Roll of Honour of those who gave their lives in the Great War (1914-18).

CLICK HERE for information about the Pitts' Memorial Hall, which was attached spiritually but not physically to Charles' Church.

Sources:

[1] Worth, R N, "History of Plymouth from the Earliest Period to the Present Time", *William Brendon & Son*, Plymouth, 1890; also "Calendar of the

Plymouth Municipal Records", Plymouth, 1893.

[2] Answer to "Do You Know", *Western Evening Herald*, Plymouth, February 6th 1982.

[3] "Kelly's Post Office Directory of Plymouth and District 1935, *Kelly's Directories Ltd*, London, 1935.

[4] Jewitt, Llewellyn, "A History of Plymouth", *Simpkin, Marshall & Company*, London, and *W H Luke*, Plymouth, 1873.

[5] My thanks to Mrs Jenny Coombes from Messrs Gillett & Johnston (Croydon) Ltd for drawing my attention to that fact.

[6] "New Mission Room in Plymouth", *Western Morning News*, Plymouth, March 13th 1878.

[7] "Shell of Charles Church Dedicated: Plymouth civilian dead memorial", *Western Morning News*, Plymouth, November 3rd 1958.

[8] City of Plymouth Reconstruction Committee minute number 941 dated June 15th 1953.

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